

CHAPTER 12

Endings and Beginnings

For the next few days I spent much of the flight avoiding Ged, which could be a hard to do on a spaceship but since it was my ship I knew all the best places to hide. I spent a great deal of time going over and over again what had happened on Coruscant, that Ged could stir me up and make my heart race with a kiss made me both angry at myself and worried. Even worse that he had pulled me into a situation which could have gotten us both killed. I didn't know how I was going to explain any of this to Thrawn and it ate at me like a wamp rat gnawing on a bone. I would have avoided Ged for the entire trip but he wasn't having any of that and eventually he cornered me in the cockpit.

"I thought you could use a cup of tea." He said handing me the cup before sitting in the co-pilot's chair.

"Thanks." I said. "I figured you were sleeping. I didn't want to disturb you."

He shrugged one shoulder, "Sleep is overrated and what I really want to do is talk to you."

I sighed and stared at the cup in my hands wondering if he would just get the hint and go away. He didn't. The silence between us hung in the air until seeing that I wasn't going to breach it he decided he would.

"Are you mad at me?" He asked bluntly.

Surprised, because it was actually the last thing I expected him to ask, I turned to look at him. "No." I said and was a little shocked to discover it was the truth. I wasn't mad at him at all, I was mad at myself.

"Then why are you avoiding me?"

Even if I had wanted to I could not have stopped the blush that coloured my cheeks.

"Oh." Ged said with a slight smile. "I see."

I wasn't sure he did. I sighed again, hating the fact that no matter what I did every emotion I felt showed on my face. The new silence in the cockpit felt heavy and he had made certain I had nowhere to run so I just sat there avoiding eye contact staring at my cup of tea which had suddenly become very interesting to study.

He watched me for a long, quiet moment and then he asked. "May I ask you a very personal question?"

I mulled it over, wary. "How personal?"

"Personal enough that I'm sort of concerned you might hurt me, but I need to ask it anyway."

I wasn't sure what to expect but I nodded cautiously. "Okay, but I reserve the right to hurt you."

“I’ll take my chances,” He said with a slight smile, “In all the time you have been with Thrawn have you ever slept with another man?”

“What!” I had not been expecting this and nearly coughed up my tea. “Excuse me?”

“It was a straight forward question.” He said calmly, “So have you?”

“No!” I replied sullenly hating this conversation long before it even really got started, “No, of course not.”

He considered this answer for a second then continued, “Have you ever wanted to? Really wanted to?”

I shook my head. “No.” I didn’t even have to think about this answer.

“But you’ve had ... chances? There have been other men interested in you, aside from me” He asked studying my face with great care.

“I suppose so.” My answer was tentative which made him raise an eyebrow in question. “I take it we’re not counting the ones who tried to take me by force.” I replied.

An expression flashed through his eyes that I had never seen before and wasn’t sure I ever wanted to again. “Take you by force? Are you telling me that someone....?”

I didn’t let him finish. “They have tried.” I said tightly and then because there was more concern and anger in his face than I liked I gave him the very quick and dirty rundown of some of my less than stellar encounters with the men who had thought I was an easy mark.

He sat very still for what felt like a very long time and when he finally did speak there was fury laced through his words. “I don’t even know what to say to that.”

I shrugged with one shoulder. “Some men seem to think they can just waltz in and take whatever they want whether it’s theirs to take or not.”

He blew out air noisily and shook his head. “Yes, sometimes men do and for that I apologise.”

“I can take care of myself.” I replied a little more hotly than I should have because it was not entirely the truth.

“I’m sure you can but this explains why the Admiral was so angry and why you reacted the way you did when I took advantage of the situation on the *Virulent*. You must think I am an absolute bastard.”

I managed to smile. “Maybe just a little.” I said jokingly but he didn’t return my smile. I sighed loudly and then because I felt the need to I said, “Really, it’s fine.”

“No Merlyn it’s not. I got quiet an earful from the Grand Admiral after you flew out of the *Virulent* in what can only be called fine dramatic style and trust me, now that I know a whole

lot more about what has happened to you, it's not okay. He was so angry and while he held it in check I have never seen him like that before, ever. I thought he was overreacting but now I see he wasn't, he was being protective and rightly so."

I sighed noisily. "I forget sometimes that Thrawn is not human, he doesn't always react the way I expect him to. He *was* being protective and even though he claims he has all of his emotions tucked away nice and neat he doesn't. He can be passionate and jealous, a mix which is something he doesn't always handle very well, and it makes him..." I searched for the right word but couldn't really find it, "...abrupt. He's not always nice or polite about his reactions to some of the stupid situations I seem to find myself in." I sighed and thought *sometimes I don't mind that from him, oddly enough* but I didn't say that last part out loud.

For a moment Ged didn't say a word. I could tell he was angry but not at me. His jaw clenched and there was a hardness to his expression that hadn't been there before. When he did speak his voice was tight. "I am sorry never the less."

I shook my head at him. "Don't put yourself in the same box as men like Zaarin because you are not like them at all." I couldn't believe we were actually having this conversation, "I like you, you're a pretty decent guy for an Imperial Admiral but you complicated things at a time when things didn't need to be complicated."

"Complicated?" He asked. "How?"

"You gave me an option that had not been there before." I said honestly. "It cause a bit of a stir." Which was putting it mildly.

"An option?" Ged's eyebrows raised a notch in surprise.

"Yes. Once I realised you thought about me in that way it was an open possibility for something I had never considered before, that maybe I could like another man in a similar way." I nibbled on my pinkie nail, "As you see, I don't have a lot of good experiences with men and Thrawn... well he was different. I had never been courted before. I don't think he meant for things between us to become so serious but they did and then, suddenly, you came along and I like you, we get along so..." I shrugged again and tried to sort out my words before they became all tangled up. "Up until you no other man had managed to make me feel anything other than revulsion. Thrawn didn't like seeing that very much, he isn't used to having to vie for my affections like that and he didn't deal with how that made him feel very well, though to be fair neither did I." I sighed. "Thrawn gets a little unpredictable when his emotions become riled up whereas I tend to run away and hide. We had one hell of a fight after you showed up at my quarters that night and it was kind of embarrassing, you know. I pushed all the wrong buttons and so did he. We tend to do that to each other when we're insecure. You made him insecure; you made me rethink my view on men. It scared the hell out of me as well as pissed me off, seriously you men you can be such morons some times. My response was to get as far away from the both of you as possible and hoped things sorted themselves out. I've never had the experience of dealing with two men that I actually like a lot who liked me back at the same time, in the same place. It was easier to avoid you lot altogether."

He sat back in the co-pilot's seat hard enough to make it rock a little. "Is that why you did not want to return to the *Virulent*?"

I smiled and shook my head, “No, I didn’t come back because I found out I was pregnant and given the high risk nature of that pregnancy I wasn’t going anywhere and please don’t ask me for details it’s still too difficult to talk about.” I took a deep steady breath.

“I’m sorry.” He shook his head and I could see a bunch of emotions written on his face that didn’t need to be there.

I glanced at him. “You keep saying that but I wish you wouldn’t.” I set my teacup down and scrubbed at my face with both hands. “Had I not been pregnant I probably would have returned. I like working with you, I like you. I just didn’t know how to react to you liking me in *that* way but now I do.” I said plainly, “I’m not exactly useful on Nirauan anymore and I tend to do stupid things when I get bored. Thrawn felt I’d be safer on the *Virulent* with you.”

“After what happened he trusts me enough to send you back?”

“No Ged, he trusts me.” I said then thought *and I blew it...again*. I sighed heavily and Ged read the expression on my face correctly.

“So after all this time, Thrawn really is the only man you have ever...” He paused, for just a second, so I helped him.

“Had sex with?” I suggested bluntly.

“Yes.” Ged nodded.

“Yes, he is the only one.” I replied hating the embarrassment I felt. I was more than a little puzzled as to where this conversation was going. “Why are you asking me this Ged?”

He looked at his cup for a moment then at me. “We’ve hardly spoken since we left Coruscant air space. You avoid me like the plague and I don’t like it. I feel as though we have committed a crime when, in fact, that is not the case. I see guilt when you look at me, in your body language. I’m betting you’ve spent a good chunk of the time in here fretting about how to tell Thrawn about what happened on Coruscant, especially what happened in the detention cell, getting more and more worked up about it all until it’s this huge terrible thing when it is not.”

“And your point?” I asked.

“Well my point is that you have nothing to fret about. I told you there was a reason for doing it that way.”

I scowled at him. “I think your exact words were *this was better than the alternative*.”

His grin was charming. “You have many force talents but you don’t throw force lightning do you?”

I shook my head. “My talents lie in other places and the darker arts never appealed to me much. They tend to give me a headache.” This was a big understatement.

“Does using the force tire you? When you read objects does that drain you?”

I nodded.

He drew a deep breath. “Using force lightening is very difficult at the best of times and it requires a hell of a lot of energy to call up, especially if one wants to direct it in specific directions. You showed me that you could transfer force energy with that little mind trick which meant we could work together and that I could pull more energy through you without hurting you.” He paused to make sure I was following him.

I made a *get on with it* gesture.

“Okay, well three of the most powerful energy drives that I know about are lust, hate and anger and I figured it was easier to go with the lust and it’s a lot more fun. I didn’t want to waste time trying to make you angry enough and I don’t want you to hate me. I knew after what had happened on the *Virulent* that there was enough chemistry between us that I could kiss you and that would stir you up enough to get the job done. While anger and hatred have their place desire is a lot easier to manipulate.”

I sighed. “Being manipulated into sucking face with you and then enjoying it doesn’t make me feel better about it.”

“Enjoyable as it was, it was a means to an end.” He replied simply, “Look, both you and the Admiral have made it quite clear to me that you are spoken for and I don’t have to be told twice to back off.”

I made a face and was about to argue that point but he waved a hand to stop me from interrupting.

“I don’t need to be a genius to know who it is that has your heart. Your loyalty to him is admirable and, quite frankly, amazing especially given the amount of time you two are apart and yet still you are his. Now I know nothing can change that, especially not a single kiss from me, for goodness sakes your whole being lights up whenever he’s in the room and you don’t do that for me.” He took a deep breath, “Look, I’m sorry Merly, about what happened when you were on the *Virulent* before. I pushed even though I knew better, I pushed anyway.”

“Why?”

“Are you really that blind?”

I glared at him.

“How is it that you can’t see it?” He sighed. “You’re lovely and unique and it isn’t as though there’s a dearth of beautiful, intelligent females in the Imperial Navy. I just...” He shrugged unable to finish his sentence.

“You just let the wrong brain think for you?” I asked snarkily.

“You could put it like that.” He chuckled. “If you could only see yourself through the eyes of

those who adore you then you would be overwhelmed and very surprised that not more of us male idiots try to steal kisses from you in the hanger bay.”

“Good that they don’t, there’d be a lot of people in the med-lab.” I grumbled.

“You are such a passionate person that I am guessing you have some pretty strong empathy talents lying hidden deep inside. It’s easy to get physical and be stirred up by a kiss and, not meaning to boast or anything, I’m pretty good at what I can do in that department, however, it’s a whole other thing to take it further than a bit of flirting.”

“Is there a point to this speech?” I asked sulkily.

“Yes,” He sighed, “Just because there is an attraction between us doesn’t mean there is anything more.”

“Are you so sure?” I asked cautiously.

“Yes.” He replied without hesitation.

“Why?”

“Because I’m not the man you are in love with.” He said simply.

Much to my dismay I blushed again and when I didn’t have anything to say he continued with a shake of his head, “Merlyn, you are wonderfully chaotic and I would be lying if I said I had not considered the possibility of us together. You really have no idea the effect you have on us foolish men.”

“I’m just an ordinary girl from Tatooine, Ged. I look in a mirror and see only me, usually with grease on my nose and my hair looking like wamp-rat tails. I don’t see myself the way you or Thrawn do. I don’t even know what it is I do that makes you men act like idiots where I am concerned.”

“Perhaps that is the reason.” He said gently.

My shrug was self conscious and I made a point of studying my hands closely. “So men like clueless, untidy and unpredictable women?” I said making a half hearted joke.

“Men like women.” He replied. “Some men, smart men, will tend to gravitate more towards complicated and intelligent rather than vapid and beautiful. Except for vapid you are all of these things and to top that off you don’t even seem to know you are all of these things so we can add naive to the list as well which is a pretty heady mixture. You are a temptation that is hard to resist.”

I hated being described out loud and the look I gave him told him I was not happy with this conversation. “You know if you have a point do you think you could get to it any time soon?”

He sighed, “Maybe, just maybe, if I seduced you hard enough you’d fall into a moment of madness and sleep with me but that’s all it would be, a moment. Then after that there would be a lifetime of regret, guilt, resentment and eventually even hate. Betraying the man you

love for a night of pleasure with another would break you and that's a guilt I don't want." He paused for a moment, "I see it already starting you know, I reach for your hand to comfort you, to express my thanks and you pull back all wary and mistrustful. You do your best to avoid me which is no mean feat in a small ship. I don't like that very much. I liked it better when things were easy between us, when we were friends and I screwed that up not you."

There was nothing I could say to this that wouldn't come out wrong so I kept my mouth shut.

He drank some tea then looked at me. "What happened on Coruscant was necessary. What I did takes a lot of energy, far too much for me alone unless I want a lot of wrinkles or an early grave, which I don't, so I used you as well. I. Used. You." He paused to let the words sink in and then continued, "You've never been really trained to contain your emotions so you are like an ungrounded power coupling; all I did was direct that energy in a way I could use it quickly. It was the easiest way to get out of that situation with minimum risk. You can tell the Admiral if you feel you must but I don't think you need to." He sighed. "I know there is a spark between us and I enjoy it greatly but in this lifetime, in this universe your heart belongs to someone else, a man that, in spite of how it may seem, I respect greatly. I do not need to make enemies out of either of you simply over my libido."

"But that...." I started but he kept on speaking so I shut up.

"Men sometimes do stupid things and now I know you've experienced more than your fair share of this sort of stupid. What I did on board the *Virulent* was stupid and now that I see what it did to you I am really sorry." He said firmly, "I have never coerced a woman to my bed against her will in my life and I am not about to begin now. I overstepped my bounds on the *Virulent* and for that I apologise for that but what I did on Coruscant was just a fun way to get out of a bad situation. It won't happen again."

I stared at him feeling a bizarre sense of loss. He was right with everything he was saying and yet it made me sad. I fought back sudden and unwanted tears because I also felt insanely relieved and grateful. He just watched me in silence waiting for me to process it all.

"So now what?" I eventually asked.

"Well you try to forgive me for being an ass, I'll forgive you for being a royal pain in the rear and we leave what happened on Coruscant behind."

"Okay." I said after a moment of weighty quiet. "I guess I can do that."

He grinned. "And I have a favour to ask of you."

"What?" I asked crossly.

"Will you please stop avoiding me?" He said as though it were the most obvious thing to ask in the galaxy.

I sighed, trying to decipher my feelings and nodded. "Okay I think I can manage that as well."

"So we're friends?" He asked.

I looked at him. “Friends...?” I asked not quite believing this entire conversation had even happened, “Isn’t that supposed to be my line? I thought most men hated that word.”

“Well in case you haven’t figured it out yet, I am not most men.” He chuckled. “Merly, I’ve said this before but it bears repeating, you are gifted force-sensitive and that alone makes you special. You lived and worked in the same Imperial world I did but you are not under my command so I am free to talk with you about anything I wish which is rare, believe me. We have a lot in common. So yes, I hope that we can stay friends because believe it or not I could use a good friend and I think that you could too.” He said sounding very un-Ged like, “If you’re okay with that?”

I bit my lip and nodded feeling inexplicably relieved as though somehow he had managed to lift a huge weight off my back. I didn’t know what to say to him so I said the only thing that made sense to me. “Thank you.”

“Now, for the love of Palpatine stop brooding.”

“I don’t brood!”

“Oh yes you do and it’s very tedious. I honestly do not know how Thrawn puts up with you sometimes.” He said getting up. “I’m going to make us some supper now, care to join me?”

“You’re cooking?”

“Yes, new rule on this boat, I cook and you stay away from the stove.” He said. “That stuff you call food would kill a hutt.”

I laughed, which felt good, and just like that the rift that had been between us closed. “I’ve heard that before too but you can’t banish me from my own ship’s galley.”

“Try me.” Was his tart reply.

I decided it would be wiser not to.

The rest of the journey was relaxed, nothing blew up, no one tried to kill us and nothing went wrong with my ship. In the quiet of the galley Ged taught me how to play seven card comet, a complicated and annoying game. After losing to him about a billion times finally I turned the tables around and taught him how to play Hutts and Scoundrels which was even funnier because the rules allowed for cheating and Ged was not nearly as good at that as he would have liked to believe.

“This is a crazy game, are you sure you’re not making it up?” Ged laughed as he finally won a round.

“Nope it’s real. I used to play it at Jabba’s palace sometimes with Boba Fett. Actually I learned it from him.” I smiled at the memory.

“Isn’t that one of the bounty hunters Vader used to hire?”

“Yeah.” I grinned grateful he didn’t get all weird about me knowing Fett the way so many people had. “I knew him from before that though; he’d show up at the docking bay my father owned from time to time to get his ship fixed and then sometimes we’d meet up at Jabba’s.”

“Do you miss it?” He asked suddenly, peering at me from over his cards.

“Miss what?”

“Tatooine, Jabba’s Palace and all that stuff?”

I shook my head. “Tatooine sometimes but not Jabba’s palace, I don’t miss that at all. It was another life in another time and when I think about it I wonder who that girl was because she’s long gone. What I miss more is Coruscant and how it used to be, before Endor, when there was still some sort of normal.” I smiled, “I miss my friends, the clothes, the excitement and a bunch of other things I never thought would matter to me. I know it’s not the same now, and I couldn’t go back there to live but for a while it was home and I loved it.”

“Well it was a glamorous life, even if it did mean putting up with Darth Vader.”

I smiled as I discarded one card and picked up another, “He wasn’t so bad once you got to know him.”

“Is that so?” He said with a teasing smirk.

I nodded. “He was brilliant. Did you know he built his own protocol droid when he was just a kid?”

Ged stared at the cards in his hand for a second and then took another card from the deck, “No I did not know that.”

“Or that he had a wife who had once been the Queen of Naboo? That they got married in secret because the Jedi didn’t allow love and that she died in childbirth but everyone who knew that lied about it to keep him away from his kids. I mean no wonder he went bonkers.”

This time Ged stopped looking at his cards to look at me. “I didn’t know that either. I mean I guessed there had to be a woman involved somewhere; he had a son, but a queen of Naboo? That’s news even to me and I thought I knew a lot about that man.”

I nodded, “My point is that most people never really saw him as a man. They saw him as some sort of evil monster and he wasn’t, well okay he could be but he was more than that.” I sighed returning my focus to my own hand of cards. “I hope that when this is all said and done people won’t see Thrawn the same way.”

“Well the Grand Admiral isn’t dressed from head to toe in scary black armour and he doesn’t force choke those who displease him, I’d say he’s off to a much better start, wouldn’t you?” Ged asked and then laid down a hand of cards that trumped mine winning a round.

“Hey!”

I watched as he gleefully removed a couple of cards from his sleeve and tossed them on the table. "I'm a quick study and you are easily distracted."

I laughed. "I suppose a secret agent should be good at slipping cards up his sleeve though I never did learn the trick of it."

"Make some tea and maybe I'll reveal some of my secrets."

I got up to put the kettle on and stood with my back leaning against the small counter while he reshuffled the cards.

"So what about you?" I asked.

"Oh there's not that much to tell." He gave me a one shoulder shrug.

At that comment, I grinned. "Which means there is lots to tell, so give it up fly-boy."

"Well let's see, my family has called Coruscant home since the dawn of the Old Republic. I grew up there when I wasn't trailing around with my father in space. We have an estate out in the Sah'c Town area, two apartments in the coco district, and one not so far from the flat where your friends live. I used to call that home when I was on planet."

"So we were actually neighbours of a sort."

"Yes, I suppose so, though I wasn't there very often." He replied.

The kettle boiled and I busied myself making a pot of tea. "Do you miss it?"

"I used to but then, when I would be back on Coruscant, I would miss being onboard an ISD and it turned out that I missed space more in the end. I still have the properties though, I rent them out."

"Nice." I said with a nod. "Thrawn is like that you know, happier in space than on world."

He nodded, "The navy is my life. The intelligence stuff came later. But for as long as I can remember I wanted to be a pilot, I wanted to fly."

"I heard you got started young." I said sipping my tea. "They called you the Emperor's Boy Wonder, did you know that?"

"I did. I used to find it annoying now I just shake my head at the fuss." He said with a grin, "I can remember pretending to be a TIE pilot as a little kid, playing make believe with toys and then later I graduated to simulators which I had access to when I travelled with my father." He smiled at the memory, "I was good too, I even managed to outscore some of my father's best pilots in the simulator. It was only natural that I end up at the Academy. I know a lot of people thought that I was given a free hand because of who my father was but that wasn't the case. My father would never have had a man serving under him who had not pulled his weight at the Academy. I passed with more than flying colours because I worked at it. It was my passion."

“You’re force sensitive that must have helped.”

“Perhaps it did but I never used it intentionally.” He said thoughtfully.

“Did they know about your talents? Your family, did they know?”

“The majority of my force abilities manifested much later in life and the small talents I did show we didn’t speak of it much.” His reply was quiet. “My parents lived through the Clone Wars, the Jedi purge. I had gifts that should have gotten me killed so we kept it”

“...dark.” I finished for him.

He nodded, “Yes, well you would know that wouldn’t you.”

“So if you kept it a secret then how did Palpatine find out?”

He drew a long slow breath and folded his hands around the cup of tea. He stared at the contents of his cup as though it held all the answers to the universe and then he looked at me and smiled slightly in that beguilingly boyish manner that I was sure made teenage girls weak in the knees. “Because I lost it.” He said with a shake of his head. “I just lost it.”

I frowned, not following. He swallowed and I suddenly understood that I wasn’t the only one carrying around battle scars. “If you don’t want to talk about it I understand.” I said.

He gave me another smile but this one was softer, held a hint of sadness and was far more intimate. “After all those terrible secrets you’ve shared with me, I think you deserve to hear at least one of mine.”

“Well then tea just won’t do it.” I stood up and dug two glasses and the emergency brandy out of the cupboard, then sat back down. Without asking him, I poured a generous shot and we touched glasses.

“Impressive! This is really good stuff.” He said savouring the taste.

“It should be I steal it from Thrawn and he’s a snob when it comes to this stuff.” I said with a tentative grin.

He nodded and then became serious. “It was unusual but not unheard of for members of the same family to be assigned on the same ship. When I graduated from Carida I was lucky. I got to work under my father on board the ISD *Thunderer* as a Commander and a flight leader. It was great, the Old man was cool about it and I pulled my weight, did well and got promoted. Things were good. Things were really, really good.” He studied the glass in his hand, “I’m guessing you know all too well that just when the world seems perfect things tend to go very wrong.”

“That’s generally been my experience.” I nodded.

“We had a good crew, a great ship. We had a decent sector to patrol in and my father was a well respected man. We had all heard about the rebellion, that there was unrest and fighting

but it hadn't really touched our lives in any great way. Then one day we were patrolling a non hostile sector, just a routine patrol, and suddenly things weren't so routine anymore." He stopped to down the rest of the brandy in his glass and didn't refuse when I refilled the glass.

For a long moment he studied his glass thoughtfully. "I thought we were the good guys. I thought that the galactic worlds loved us. We kept space safe; we kept a lid on the smugglers and the war lords and made life easier for everyone. We did our jobs and we risked our lives every single day and for what? So a small group of ungrateful haters could swoop in and rewrite history?" He shook his head and sipped his drink. "I liked history so I read all about the Clone Wars, about the Jedi and what happened. I read about how the Old Republic Senate had become so corrupt that they would not even help planets being blackmailed by thugs like the banking clan unless it was in someone's best interest and the credits were high enough. Did people just forget all of that?"

"Yes." I nodded, "They did."

He shook his head and continued, "I also read reports that some people thought that Palpatine had engineered the entire thing, the war, the breakdown of the senate, his rise to power just so he could destroy the Jedi but you know what? That's garbage. People are corrupt and all Palpatine did was show it. He didn't start the war, he ended it. My mother was in the senate the day he declared us a galactic empire. She told me it was one of the most glorious things she had ever seen, that everyone cheered because they wanted Palpatine to lead. He was a good leader." He looked at me. "I know things were not perfect but nothing ever is but these rebels, they came in thinking they were going to save the universe and in the process they destroyed so many lives and they called themselves heroes for doing it." He stopped to consider his next words carefully. I could feel his anger and his sadness all around him and it made me ache with an all too familiar sorrow. This memory was painful.

"It was just another ordinary patrol. They came out of nowhere, a fleet of 5 MC-90 Heavy Calamari Cruisers and seven corvettes all carrying full compliments of squadrons. They jumped out of hyperspace practically on top of us. Oh how they must have congratulated themselves, a lone Imperial Star Destroyer with no reinforcements within a hundred light years, it was a gift, even armed to the teeth as we were, we were no match for their numbers."

"My father didn't waste any time. We launched the TIEs and we fought back with everything we could, we gave them a damned good fight. My father was brilliant, he used every trick in the book plus a few more that hadn't been written and he held them off for a long time but in the end he was out numbered, we were outnumbered. The *Thunderer's* shields eventually failed leading to a catastrophic hull breach." He clenched his teeth against the bitterness of the memory which he could still see clearly in his mind. "When she exploded it was the most extraordinary and the most horrific thing I had ever seen. This huge, beautiful ship so full of people, so full of promise was suddenly gone in a brilliant flash of light and a shower of sparks. I watched it from the cockpit of my TIE, too far away to do anything else. That explosion took out three quarters of the rebel fleet along with my father and a good many of my friends." He stopped and swallowed hard. "A part of me died that day and another part of me woke up."

I sat with my hand covering my mouth and tears welled up in my eyes, I blinked them away to roll down my cheeks without me even realising it. "Oh Ged, I am so sorry. I had no idea."

He reached over and touched my face, his fingers tracing the tracks my tears had made. "Tears for a man you never even knew, you really are extraordinary." He spoke softly, as though he were talking more to himself than to me.

I brushed my tears and his hand away roughly, I was angry but I didn't know why. We stared at each other for a very long moment and then he remembered he was telling a story, gathered himself and sat back against the back of the chair, distancing himself from me with a shake of his head. I understood then that, even with his pretty words and fine intentions of just being friends with me, it wasn't quite so easy to completely shut off the feelings that lay beneath the surface. I wanted to reach out, take his hand to somehow give him comfort but I didn't. He drew a breath and continued.

"They told me, after it was all over, that it was like watching a man gone mad but I don't recall it much to be honest. I remember the explosion and that bizarre sense of disassociation. It wasn't real, how could such a thing be real? My father, one moment he was there giving orders, the next he was stardust. How was that even possible? So I did the only thing I could, I stuck with my training and we went after the rest of the rebels with a vengeance. We shot them down like animals, every last one of them. By the time the battle was done the first of the reinforcements had begun to arrive. The next thing I know I'm back on Coruscant being awarded a bloody medal for my *valiant effort*." He spat the last words with distaste and shook his head, "They said the Empire needed to see its heroes, but I didn't understand. How could I be a hero when so many good people had died? Later, after the ceremony, the Emperor sent word he wished to speak with me alone in his private audience chamber, the small one, you know the one I mean right?"

I nodded. I knew it all too well and the memory made me shudder.

"He seemed so benevolent, like a kindly old uncle and not at all like the powerful man I had been used to seeing give speeches and so on. He told me he had heard about what had happened and he was curious as to how a mere boy could have done so much damage. I told him that I could barely remember what had occurred after my father's death but he managed to get it out of me in that strange way of his. It was painful when it all came flooding back."

I sighed loudly and drank a large gulp of the brandy. I had been on the receiving end of the Emperor's ability to pull information out of thin air and I hadn't enjoyed it very much.

"It turned out I had an aptitude for the darker side of the force. I had fed off my fury and hatred and let the force take over. I had been guided by it and because of this power we had managed to destroy our enemy or what was left of them." Ged said with a slight shrug, "I resigned my commission after that meeting and I took some time to figure things out. I travelled, met people, studied and when I returned, well let's just say the Emperor saw to it that my education did not get left by the wayside."

"He trained you personally?"

"He had a hand in it." Ged replied evasively. I didn't push instead I let him continue; "He promoted me, gave me my own commission and sent me to take care of business in the Ryloth system, at least officially. Unofficially I began my work with the Bureau and followed in my mother's footsteps."

“Your mother?” I asked in surprise.

He nodded, “I thought for the longest time that she was some low level bureaucrat but it turned out she was working with intelligence as a signals expert. I used the front of being an Admiral and having an ISD at my command for missions and that was that until Endor. I should have been there but we had been delayed on another mission, perhaps if we had been there things might have gone a different way.”

“Everything changed at Endor.” I whispered.

He nodded. “I felt it you know, Palpatine’s death. I was on the bridge of my ship and it felt as though someone had suddenly sucked all the air out and I was suffocating. It was painful and bitter and I knew, in that moment, I knew that he was dead.”

“I think the whole galaxy felt it.” I shivered.

“Probably they did.” He nodded and we both sipped our drinks in silence.

“So, you studied the dark side of the force.”

He nodded, “As I said, I had an aptitude for it. Once I had broken through that barrier I was able to tap into it whenever I wanted and once I got the training I needed I could control it.” He studied me for a second, “You know, I don’t understand, why Palpatine didn’t just take you into his fold as soon as he found you what you were? He took many young force users and helped them to discover their full potential, so why not you? You would have made a perfect agent, one of his Emperor’s hands, with that gift that you have.”

“I grew up on Tatooine thinking I was the daughter of Docking Bay owner and an Alderaanian art historian. Who the hell comes to Tatooine looking for force sensitive children? Certainly not anyone from the Core. I kept my talents hidden and so did my family. It wasn’t until I got drafted to be Lord Vader’s office girl that it came to the forefront and by then I suppose I was too old and it was too late for the Emperor to find me of use.”

Ged shook his head. “No, I don’t buy that. You’re too good at what you do and you have too much talent for him not to want to put it to use.”

I thought about it all for a long moment. “I don’t know, to tell you the truth, really I don’t. It was Lord Vader who figured out what I was and he didn’t tell his master. Palpatine probably knew anyway but he liked to play games with Lord Vader and somehow I was caught up in the middle of that.” I shrugged. “The first time I met Lord Vader there was a connection, I don’t know how else to describe it. We connected. I wasn’t terrified of him, more curious at first. The fear of his temper came later and even then I didn’t mind so much. I suppose I imprinted on him the way a baby bantha will on the first being they see after birth, he was the first person not to treat my talents like some awful dirty secret. He embraced it, he nurtured it, he taught me and I guess I saw myself as his. He used to try and teach me the dark side, push me into anger, get me all riled up but it didn’t quite work the way he wanted to. I wasn’t interested in being powerful. It used to piss him off, eventually he got fed up and Palpatine saw that as well. After that it was the Emperor who guided me, nudged me in a different direction but it was done so subtly that at first I had no idea it was even happening. He didn’t even try, he knew couldn’t safely break whatever bond it was between Lord Vader and

myself, and yes I know how ridiculous that sounds but it's true. I suppose looking back now the truth of the matter was that I liked Lord Vader. I didn't like Palpatine and when I don't like someone I can be pretty stubborn about it."

Ged laughed. "Stubborn is putting mildly."

"I think that Palpatine figured he could wait it out, whatever it was. He even told me once that to try and break this connection I had forged with his apprentice would damage me and he was right. It took a long time to recover from Lord Vader's death and sometimes it still hurts. I know I came very close to madness on the Death Star at Endor. I'm sure that Palpatine's methods eventually would have broken me completely but that didn't happen and in the end it was my connection to Lord Vader that saved my life." I stopped for a moment remembering the exact second Lord Vader had died. "It still hurts, you know, I still feel it the moment when he severed the mental link between us with the force, letting me go, it felt as though someone sliced through my brain with a rusty knife. I suppose that given enough time Palpatine would have bent my mind to his will but I'm glad he didn't get the chance. I might not have been a good dark side adept but I am sure he would have found other ways to twist me. I know he used me and my relationships in a subtle sneaky way to get to Thrawn and even to needle Lord Vader on occasion. I'm not sorry he's dead, I hated him."

"Funny how we can see the same person in such different ways."

I nodded thoughtfully then after a lengthy silence I said. "I am really sorry about your father."

"Thank you." He replied and I suddenly found myself wondering, just for a moment, what a life with Ged would have been like.

We had so much in common, and were alike in so many ways that in spite of our differences I felt sometimes as though I had known him all of my life. He was both handsome and intelligent, not to mention interesting and perhaps if I had met him before Thrawn things would have been radically different. My life would have changed and maybe he would have been able to deal with Jyrki better and less people I loved would have died but then I shook the thought out of my head. You cannot live a life on what ifs, my father would have said. And if I had thought tying my heart to that of a navy admiral was difficult then what would life be like with someone who ran an entire intelligence and black ops division. Being with Ged like that would be fun for a while but eventually all the secrets and the lying would drive me crazy. As if he could sense my thoughts he looked up at me questioningly.

"I'm sure he's fine, you know." He said and I was grateful he had misread my expression, or at least pretended to.

I took a deep breath and nodded. "I hope so as well because so much is riding on it."

"Do you have reason to believe otherwise?"

I paused for a moment and swirled the brandy in my glass around and around. "Sometimes I have dreams where I see him dead."

Ged snorted and set the cards in his hand down on the table. "I would think that this is normal given the job he does."

“Probably.” I agreed. “But sometimes my dreams come true.”

That caught his attention. “Force visions?”

I poured two cups of tea and then sat down across from him again. “Maybe, I’ve had them for years. Thrawn brushes them off as nonsense.”

“Really? Describe them to me.”

I opened my mouth to refuse but the look on Ged’s face told me that would not work and he wanted to hear these dreams described. So I told him about the vision I had seen while in the Nona Shyr Gallery. Ged listened and when I was done he rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Are they all like that?”

“Mostly.”

“And the Admiral brushes them off? Really?”

“Well not so much brush them off, he keeps telling me he has it all well in hand.”

Ged rolled his eyes at me, “So you’re being a drama queen.”

I couldn’t think of a suitable retort fast enough so I resorted to sticking my tongue out at him.

“Seriously, you should trust him a whole lot more than you do. I’ve never known him to ignore good advice or stay a course that would get him or his people killed. That’s part of what makes him such a brilliant leader.”

“Me either but there is always a first time.” I was feeling particularly gloomy after this conversation.

“Don’t suppose you dream about me do you?” He teased to lighten the mood.

“You wish!” I gave him a grin and hoped it came out mysterious. He just laughed and picked up the forgotten deck of cards.

“Pour me another shot lady and I’ll teach you how to play Aces High, one of the TIE pilots favourite games.”

He made it easy to forget about everything that had happened and by the time we rendezvoused with the *Virulent* I no longer felt as though the world would end. I was no longer laden down with guilt and although I would probably still tell Thrawn about what had taken place on Coruscant, because he definitely would want to know about what happened to Jarack, I no longer feared the consequences, after all he didn’t need all the details. I was just really looking forward to seeing him again.

We reached the rendezvous point slightly ahead of schedule and I was almost sad when we landed on board one of the *Virulent's* smaller docking bay. Once we had established boundaries, I had enjoyed getting to know Ged better and having someone to share stories and secrets with. I had forgotten what it felt like to have a friend like him. There were precious few people left who knew what life had been like at the height of the Empire it was almost a relief to be able to share my tales with him.

“Will you be okay on your own for a while?” He asked as he packed his things. I was loitering in the doorway to the small cabin he had used. “I mean do you have something to keep you occupied and out of trouble?”

“Funny.” I made a face, “Yes, I need to sort my ship out.” I told him. “I have learned not to trust anyone when it comes to taking care of my baby.” I patted the hull beside me for emphasis. “I like to give the engines a good looking at after a run like this and the ship needs to be cleaned.”

“This bucket of bolts is not at all what she seems to be.” Ged smiled. “Just like her owner.”

“Everyone underestimates my ship, even I did at first.” I grinned ignoring his dig at me. “She takes care of me so I take care of her right back.”

“I would expect no less.” He nodded, “You’re a damn good pilot. Any pilot worth their salt takes care of the ship first before and after the run. The deck officer will make sure you get whatever you need. If you have any problems just let me know.”

I followed him to the ship’s exit, “Thanks.”

He hesitated for a moment then said, “I will be very busy for the next little while, I’m afraid. I have a great deal to catch up on and I...”

I raised my hand to stop him. “I’m not going to suddenly start acting all clingy just because we called a truce and played cards. It’s okay, I know the fly-boy drill.” I told him. “Anyway, I’m also exhausted. And you should get the ship’s medic to look at the wound.” I gestured at his chest. “While it’s healing okay I’d feel happier if Dr. Pakhia gave you the okay.”

“Aye aye.” He grinned giving me a mock salute. “As soon as I hear anything I will let you know but don’t hold your breath. The Grand Admiral isn’t always very forthcoming about his plans and right now the holonet is not the place to be broadcasting them.”

“I’m used to that as well.” I replied making a face, “Really, I’m fine Ged, stop acting like a mother bantha.” I flapped my hand at him, “Go command something and get off my ship. I have stuff to do!”

He laughed, “Very well, I’ll leave you to it.”

I nodded, watching him disembark, and then got down to business with my ship. We had a good relationship and I wanted to keep it that way so my first order of business was the engine room. Time passed without me knowing it and by the time I was done it was late. I

headed back to my quarters feeling at ease but filthy. I was deeply grateful to have peace and quiet to soak in a hot bath and then go to bed. I was more tired than I thought and I slept for nearly thirteen hours straight. If there were nightmares I didn't remember them, if there were any emergencies I slept through them. When I woke up the ship was well on its way to Bastion, the Imperial stronghold and we were in a communications lockdown with Ged running ship wide drills. Some things never changed and oddly enough I was glad for it.

I spent most of my time in the hanger fixing anything I was allowed to get my hands on just to pass the hours. If there was one thing I had learned it was that time on an ISD passed slowly if a person had no specific tasks. While I had been taught to do many things in my life nothing was more useful than being a certified mechanic and I had Jyrki and my father to thank for this. Working on the ships and being in the pits meant I picked up tidbits of gossip from the pilots and the other mechanics but there was nothing concrete. It was all just supposition and rumours. Ged, true to his word, kept me up to date although, according to him, there wasn't much to tell but two days out of Bastion we received word that Thrawn's fleet had come out of hyperspace near Coruscant and the battle for the planet had begun. I learned more details over a late dinner with Ged.

"He has cloaked asteroids in low orbit around the planet, creating a hazard that forced the planet to put up their defence shield. Right now nothing can get in or out." Ged told me after the steward had poured the stim'caf and discretely left the room.

"A siege?" I asked as I nibbled on a piece of sweet ijnalla fruit. "What does he hope to accomplish by that?"

"Keeps them busy." He laughed. "The cloaked asteroids are undetectable to Coruscant's sensors, it's impossible for the New Republic to distinguish an actual asteroid launch from a false one."

"A false launch?"

"Over two hundred to be more exact." He replied with a brilliant smile that lit up his whole face.

"Oh," I grinned. "That's so clever." Thrawn's ingenuity never ceased to amaze me.

"They can't drop the energy shield around the planet and run the risk that an asteroid might hit any part of the cityscape and they cannot allow space traffic near the planet in case of collisions. So now you see why we had to get the hell out of there when we did?"

I nodded, "So what is next? Do you know?"

Ged shrugged slightly, "My last report said the next move is to head to Bilbringi but we are on a communications black out so I have no idea how that's going."

"Why are we not joining them in the fight?"

"We are protecting the rear line." Ged replied. "Defending Bastion is important." He added

although he didn't seem very happy about it.

"Why?"

"Because it's the Empire's greatest kept secret and it is vital it remains that way."

"So let me guess, the data you took from the mainframe on Coruscant will now be housed here?"

"One copy at any rate." Ged acknowledged.

I nodded and sipped my drink thoughtfully. "But what if Thrawn needs more ships?"

"Then we'll be called to the fray but according to my last briefing with him he has enough ships and he doesn't expect a large amount of resistance. The New Republic are already stretched thin it isn't likely they'll suddenly come up with a new found fleet to add to what they already have. They are already beaten. They just don't know it yet is all."

I didn't say anything to this because it seemed to me that the rebels had been beaten at every turn for the last ten years or more and still they had managed to claim victory against all odds. Those small odds worried me but I kept my fears to myself.

"So when we reach Bastion, then what?"

"Then the really difficult part begins, I'm afraid."

"Oh?" I asked.

"We wait and there is nothing harder than that."

"My favourite thing, hurry up and wait." I sat back against my chair and toyed with my cup.

"It's the mantra of the navy fly boy." Ged said with a grin.

"Well at least I can keep busy in the pit." I replied with a slight shrug.

He leaned back and regarded me with an expression I couldn't quite read, "You could return to Nirauan if you wanted to, if it's too dull around here."

I shook my head, "There's nothing to do there but sit and brood. Even Syal isn't there right now and Thrawn must have had a reason for wanting me here. While I don't always like it, he usually knows what he is doing and when he wants me safe there's usually a good reason for it. He usually has a plan set in place. He wanted me here with you not on the base and not with him." I sighed. "So here I am."

"Well I, for one, am glad of your company." He said truthfully.

I looked at him and then I gave him a smile, "Me too." and I meant it. There was a moment of

comfortable silence and then we moved on to other less weighty topics. I was grateful for whatever wisdom or reason had made Thrawn send me back to the *Virulent*. I would have gone crazy on Nirauan and I would have driven everyone there up the wall.

We reached Bastion quietly. There would be an exchange of supplies and information and a dinner with the Moff in charge which I had politely declined to join. I knew the Moff by reputation and I didn't want anything to do with him at all. Ged had not pushed and I had been grateful. Three days after we had arrived, word came that the *Virulent* was to head to a set of co-ordinates at the edge of the Unknown Regions to await further instructions. If Ged knew more he wasn't saying and I didn't ask.

The journey out to the meeting point at the edge of the Unknown Regions was fraught with tension. Rumours had started flying around the ship that Coruscant had fallen and Thrawn had reclaimed the core world in the Empire's name, other rumours whispered that he had defeated the New Republic's fleet near Bilbringi but nothing had been confirmed. When I was able to get some time with Ged I asked him if any of it was true but he just shook his head.

"The orders were short and to the point. Rendezvous at the given co-ordinates and await further instructions. We've not heard a thing since and the entire holonet grid in this sector is out. Even if we wanted to learn more long range communications are down."

So we waited, the hours passed slowly turning into days which dragged by. Ged sensing the general mood of the ship ran surprise drills and spot inspections. He kept everyone so busy that they didn't have time to think let alone start yet more rumours. I stayed out of his way exhausting myself with work and sport so that I would sleep. Even then, rest didn't come easily. The nightmares which had left me alone returned with a vengeance and I found myself waking up screaming in terror and shaking with an inexplicable sorrow which left me sobbing for no reason at all. Strangely enough I could not recall what I had been dreaming about but I suspected they had to do with Thrawn and were brought on by stress. I was driven to distraction by the waiting. It made me waspish and snappy so I generally tried to stay out of the way of people. So, I worked in the pits repairing anything I was allowed to touch or I hid in the upper gantries of the ship's massive landing bays, it was amusing to observe the comings and goings on of pilots and mechanics alike. In an odd way it reminded me of home.

I was under a skiff, trying to sort out its faulty repulsor when the news came that the *Chimaera* had just jumped out of hyperspace and was on its way to meet us. I scrambled to find Ged.

"Is it true?" I asked after eventually tracking him down in one of the smaller war rooms.

He nodded not looking up from the data-pad he was studying. "I don't know any more yet, but their ETA is a couple of hours"

"Wow." I had not been expecting that. I had expected to hear days not hours.

"They came out of hyperspace a lot closer than expected." He looked up at me and then he

grinned. “You have time to go get cleaned up which you really should do because you have grease on your nose and you smell like a pit monkey.”

I wiped at the offending grease spot in annoyance and surreptitiously sniffed near my armpit, wrinkling my nose in disgust. He was right I smelled bad.

Ged chuckled. “See? I think more girl less mechanic is in order.” I scowled at him but he was right, I probably looked like a refugee off a garbage transport. “Go, I’ll send someone for you as soon as they arrive.” He shooed me out of the ready room. He had long given up trying to reach me by comm because I usually had it turned off or I’d forgotten it.

I returned to my quarters and ran a bath. It was a wonderful luxury to be able to soak in a tub full of hot bubbly water and I was deeply grateful that my quarters came with a bathtub. I was excited and nervous and tired all at the same time. Thrawn could still make me quiver like a silly teenager and I marvelled at the sandjiggers which wriggled in my belly as I stepped into the almost too hot water.

I lingered in the water until it turned cool then I got out and dressed in something long, sleeveless and pretty but not too special. I did my hair up with the beautiful Zenji sticks, his first ever gift to me, added one of my favourite ma’arilite pendants and then sat restlessly waiting to hear from Ged but I didn’t need to be told when Thrawn’s ship had arrived because I got a perfect view of her as she slid into formation above the *Virulent*. It was almost as if he had known I would be watching for him and had approached the Ged’s ship this way to make sure I saw him return to me safe and sound. I gazed in awe at the *Chimaera*. She was beautiful.

Much to my surprise my heart thumped painfully in my chest setting me abuzz with anticipation. I hoped that we would be able to have even a small amount of time alone with each other and I hoped that he would be happy to see me. While the last time I had been with him had been sweet, this past year had seem him shift moods, becoming distant and strange with me, almost as if he had two different personalities, mercurial and unpredictable. He had blamed it on the stress of running this campaign but I blamed part of it on myself. For a second, my thoughts went to the child we had lost, absently I touched my belly but then I shook the negative thoughts from my head. After all we had been through he had proven again and again that he cared deeply for me. Whatever doubts or worries I had they needed to be pushed away. In the end I was just grateful that he had returned safely.

I hoped that we would finally get to hear about how the campaign was going but as I made my through the ship rumours where whispered that Coruscant was not the great victory it was supposed to be. I ignored them, there had been no confirmation and we were still running on a communications black out. I had wanted to press people for more news but I was certain that if anything had gone wrong Ged would have let me know, so I waited which wasn’t easy.

I knew it would take a while before all the formalities were sorted out and that bugging Ged would only annoy him so instead I made my way to the secondary landing bay and sat in my favourite spot up in the gantry to watch the comings and goings. When Thrawn arrived on board the *Virulent* it was here where his shuttle would land. It was here I could lose myself in

thought without driving myself frantic with the entire constant ‘what ifs’ that ran through my head. I was at home with the sound of engines and the smell of fuel fumes in the air. It was a comfort and it always had been.

The upper gantry perch was my second home and Ged knew this so the crewman he had sent to fetch me found me without a problem. I didn’t need to be told twice to go with the young man and he was hard put to keep up with me as I all but flew to Ged’s ready room. I tried to calm down a little. It was unseemly to feel and act like the skittish young girl I had been when Thrawn and I had first met. We had known each other far too long and far too well but still my heart fluttered and it made me smile.

I allowed for a moment of giddy joy and then fought to calm down a little. I didn’t think that Ged needed to see me act like a love sick bantha but the anticipation of seeing Thrawn again was overwhelming. I marvelled at the sensation and then swallowed it back. While I was certain Thrawn would be amused with my jitters the rest of the people who would probably be in the room did not have to witness this side of me.

“You can go in now Miss Gabriel.” The young officer said.

I grinned, “Thanks!” I said and I walked into the ready room. I expected to see Thrawn and most likely Captain Pellaeon but I was surprised to see only Ged.

“Wow, there’s a real person under all that grease! You clean up nice.” He said with a slight smile, “However, it seems that any meetings are to be held on board the *Chimaera*. Apparently the *Virulent* is not secure enough any longer.”

I smoothed my hands on my dress trying to mask my disappointment. “You could have told me this via comm, you know. I had it with me.” I assumed this meant I wasn’t going with him.

He smiled and shrugged, “I could have but as they wish you to accompany me I figured this was just as easy. It was requested that we use your ship. It is only the two of us so I have no objection although it’s highly irregular. Whatever is going on is very hush hush.”

I rolled my eyes, “This is so typical. Thrawn’s probably planning on sending me to Nirauan or somewhere else which is why he’s insisting on my ship. Why does everything with that man have to be cloaked in secrecy?”

“When you get an answer can you pass it along to me?” He asked as we left the ready room and made our way down to the landing bay to my ship.

“For a small fee, I’ll think about it.” I grinned.

I started up the ship’s engines while Ged cleared us through the *Virulent*’s traffic control and then contacted the *Chimaera* to let her know we were on our way. It was a short trip and the *Chimaera*’s people were ready for us when we arrived. I landed my ship as daintily as I could, showing off, and Ged just shook his head at me. I gave him a smug smile.

“You are incorrigible Merly.” Ged said getting up and brushing imaginary lint off his uniform.

“And you wouldn’t have it any other way.” I retorted back.

“Probably not.” He said as he waited for me to open the ship so we could leave.

I followed him down the ramp from the ship and smirked at the fuss the men waiting for him made. There was a lot of saluting and some curious glances at me before we were escorted swiftly and silently to what I assumed wrongly would be Thrawn’s ready room.

“Captain Pellaeon is waiting inside for you Sir, Ma’am.” The pinched faced young man said as he opened the door.

“Thank you crewman.” Ged said and there was some more saluting. As soon as we walked into the small but comfortable room I knew instantly that this was not Thrawn’s. I looked around expecting him to be there but instead there was only Captain Gilad Pellaeon.

I remembered how kind and warm he had been to me at that disastrous dinner where Ged had pushed and Thrawn had not taken too kindly to it and found it funny how far away that all seemed now. I looked at Pellaeon and smiled as though I were seeing an old friend again but he didn’t return the smile, instead there was a sadness in his eyes that I had not noticed the last time we had met and suddenly I felt a chill run down my spine.

“Admiral Larsen, it is a privilege to meet you again.” The Captain saluted Ged smartly and I rolled my eyes as Ged saluted him back. All this military formality was getting on my nerves. “And you as well Miss Gabriel, it is lovely to see you again.” He said, and then he paused for just a second before continuing with, “I just wish it were under better circumstances. Please, I think perhaps you had both better sit down.”

Ged ignored his suggestion and remained standing so I did the same. I looked from one face to the other trying to decipher what wasn’t being said.

“Where is the Grand Admiral?” Ged asked, breaking the terrible silence.

I watched as he stared at Captain Pellaeon who shook his head almost imperceptibly. My heart started to pound in my ears and my mouth was suddenly dry. Something was terribly wrong.

Pellaeon drew a deep breath, looked at both Ged and me and then said bluntly, “I regret to inform you both that Grand Admiral Thrawn is dead.”

White noise.

There was white noise in my head.

There was only white noise all around me.

The room spun violently and I lost my sense of balance. Ged moved quickly, his hand warm around my waist, anchoring me to his side as gravity twisted bringing the floor up to meet with me with a sickening blur.

“Okay, you’re okay.” He spoke quietly, gently, as he eased me backwards to sit on the small couch near the wall. He put his hand on the back of my neck and guided my head down between my knees. “Breathe deeply and push back against my hand.”

I did as he instructed. When I no longer felt as though I would pass out I moved his hand off my neck but I gripped his fingers tightly. He looked at me for a moment then he let go of my hand and turned around.

“What happened?” Ged, suddenly all business, asked Captain Pellaeon.

“It was Rukh.” Pellaeon replied, “He stabbed the Grand Admiral with his knife, through the back of his command chair. The blade punctured the heart. The Grand Admiral was dead in seconds. There was nothing we could have done.”

I shook my head slowly. I heard his words and I watched his lips move but nothing he was saying made any sense. I had seen what he was describing in my dreams but I couldn’t grasp the reality of it at all. “No.” I said quietly because saying this word would undo what I had just been told.

Ged looked at me, touched my hand to still my voice and then turned back to Pellaeon. “Captain, when I ask what happened I am requesting a full report not an obituary or a litany of excuses.” He ordered coldly. “Where is the rest of the fleet? What the hell went wrong?”

“Yes sir, of course.” Pellaeon nodded, collecting his thoughts, “At the Grand Admiral’s command we arrived at Bilbringi to set a trap for the enemy. Thrawn had instructed the Interdictor Cruisers and Interdictor Star Destroyers to activate their gravity well projectors in anticipation of their arrival. As he predicted the New Republic assault fleet jumped out of hyperspace outside the system perimeter. Once he saw this, he had the Interdictor Cruisers *Constrainer* and *Sentinel*, who were stationed the farthest from the main fleet to prevent anyone from escaping the trap to return to the demarcation line, where they would be protected. Then, the Grand Admiral gave the word and we engaged the enemy.”

“Go on.” Ged ordered.

“We had them sir, we had them hemmed in and we were winning the battle but suddenly an entirely new fleet of ships jumped in and began an offensive against us.”

“A new fleet? Who were they?”

“I believe they refer to themselves as the Smuggler Alliance, sir.” Ged nodded and Captain Pellaeon continued.

“They turned the tide, managed to overwhelm and breach the defensive line. I thought we should retreat but the Grand Admiral assured me that the battle was far from over. Perhaps he might have been right, sir, but we’ll never know because he was murdered before he could give any further orders, just as I received word that the cloning facility on Wayland was also being attacked.” He swallowed, “That alien, Rukh, struck the back of my neck before he stabbed the Grand Admiral; I was incapacitated, unable to do anything to stop him.” The Captain paused to catch his breath. He shook his head in denial, “It was chaos, complete and utter chaos, so I did the only thing I could think of to keep as many of our ships from being destroyed as possible. I ordered a tactical retreat and we jumped to a secure location. We locked down the bridge and I’ve tried to keep the news of his death contained but it’s a difficult secret to lock down, word will get out that he’s gone and I’m afraid I don’t know what to do about it.”

He stopped speaking and the sudden silence in the room pushed at me, taking the place of the white noise in my head. I looked up at both men who were staring at each other in an almost hostile manner. “How...why?” I struggled with my words. I couldn’t think straight.

Ged turned to look at me as if suddenly remembering that I was also in the room and the hardness around his demeanour fell away from him like rain off a stone. “Oh Merlyn.” He murmured and sat beside me. “I am so sorry.”

His words hit me like a sharp backhand to the face and I reeled inwardly from their impact, shaking my head I just kept saying, “This is not...it’s not possible.”

Captain Pellaeon looked at me. “I assure you, Miss Gabriel, it is. Grand Admiral Thrawn is dead. He was stabbed through the heart from behind by his bodyguard, Rukh. I saw it with my own eyes. There was nothing I could do; there was nothing anyone could do. It was over so fast. He is dead and I am so very sorry.”

His words made me angry, “Shut up!” I hissed through clenched teeth. “Just shut up!” I could feel the force shift around me as my emotions began to spin out of control.

“Shhhh, Merly.” Ged said gently and it was enough to bring me back from the brink, the touch of his hand on my shoulder grounded me.

“Why?” I demanded again, “Why would Rukh do this? He swore to protect Thrawn not murder him!” I could not wrap my head around what I had just been told. I had trained with Rukh, learned to even like him in spite of his fierce warrior nature. I could not imagine what would make the Noghri turn against the man he had sworn to give his life to keep from harm. “Thrawn trusted Rukh!” I cried.

Pellaeon shook his head. “We don’t know yet. The Noghri was killed before we could get any immediate answers.”

“Rukh is dead too?” I asked in utter disbelief. Tears blurred my vision and coursed down my face. I didn’t know how to react. I didn’t know what to do. I had never imagined for one moment that it would be Thrawn’s trusted body guard who would kill him. I had not seen

this coming. My head swam, I couldn't catch my breath and my stomach rebelled. I clapped my hand over my mouth and tried to recall how to breathe but that wasn't working suddenly I needed to vomit.

"Fresher?" I heard Ged ask urgently and then he all but carried me to it just in time. I made it to the toilet where I violently threw up the contents of my stomach which thankfully wasn't much. I knelt there, trembling, trying to remember what my lungs were for while Ged poured me a glass of water.

"Here." He said placing it in my hand as he crouched down at my side. "Drink," He ordered, "slowly."

I did as he instructed, rinsing out my mouth a couple of times before drinking the rest. When I was sure that I wasn't going to vomit again I let him help me up. I know he wanted to comfort me, to hold me but I stepped back from him. I didn't want his kindness or his pity. These things would break me, make me even more useless than I already was. Drawing a deep, shuddering breath, I washed my hands and face in the small sink. He wordlessly handed me a towel which I used then handed back. He tossed it on the counter and watched me without a word. I braced myself against the sink fighting to keep from falling apart, my knuckles turning white from the effort of it.

"Merlyn...?" There was a question in Ged's voice but he didn't finish it.

I turned around to look him in the eyes, shaking my head as I did so. "Don't." I said raising my hand in a gesture to keep him back, to keep him from getting too close to me. "Please."

There were a myriad of expressions that flashed across his face, but the one that cut me to the core was compassion. He nodded and swallowed down whatever words he wanted to say and stayed where he was letting me have my space. We stood like that a few moments until I couldn't stand the silence any more.

"This isn't real." I said with my heart aching. I was freezing cold and I couldn't stop trembling. "It just can't be real."

Ged didn't answer me instead he just wrapped an arm about my shoulder. When I didn't fight him this time he led me back to the couch. "You're in shock." He said. "Sit."

I kept waiting for someone to tell me this was a sick, cruel joke but all Ged did was to ask if the Captain had anything to drink that was stronger than water.

"Brandy." Captain Pellaeon said and he poured a glass from the small bottle he had procured.

"This will help a little." Ged offered me the glass.

I gulped the drink down but it didn't make me feel any better. I set the glass down on the table shaking my head when a refill was offered. Captain Pellaeon paced the room, he was uncomfortable and also mourning the loss of his mentor and friend but he didn't know what

to do with his own grief let alone mine.

“There are instructions, he left ... well he was prepared. You know the Grand Admiral always ready for any contingency.”

I looked up at him, frowning. “Instructions?” I asked dumbly.

The Captain stopped pacing and looked at me directly. “Yes Miss Gabriel, for you, which is why you are here.”

“What instructions?” Ged asked.

I laughed and cried at the very same time as I looked from one man to the other. I felt as though I had suddenly been transported into a mad house. “He left instructions? He died and left instructions?” I sounded hysterical.

“Yes, very precise orders in which he made it clear that you and only you are to return his body to his home world.” Pellaeon placed a large sealed courier pouch on the table in front of me. I just stared at it. I didn’t want to touch it. I didn’t want to see what memories it held. Ged, understanding this, picked it up for me. “It was his last request.” The Captain said. “There was a file; it was activated after his death stating that this was to be given to you.”

“He what?” I whispered, wiping away the tears that would not stop rolling down my cheeks. “Give this to me?” I asked stupidly. I stared blankly at the Captain. His mouth was moving but all I heard were sounds I couldn’t decipher.

I felt as though someone had eviscerated me. The news of Thrawn’s murder left me empty and breathless in the worst possible way and I shuddered under its weight. Looking up at Ged and then back to the Captain I despised the pity I saw in their faces. I knew that I was not the only one reeling from this terrible loss but how could either of them understand mine?

Captain Pellaeon watched me for a moment, reading my face and then he said more gently, “I am so sorry to bring you this terrible news. He was such a private man, he rarely spoke of anything personal but I do know that he cared for you.”

I blinked at that statement in surprise. “Cared for me?” I asked, “He cared for me?” My jaw clenched as I gritted my teeth as hard as I could. Suddenly, amidst the terrible shock and emptiness, I knew an anger so ferocious it threatened to choke me. “Cared for me?” I asked for a third time shaking my head in utter disbelief. “If he had cared for me he wouldn’t be dead.” I growled.

“I don’t think he could have known....” Captain Pellaeon started to say but I didn’t let him finish.

“No!” I snarled through tightly clenched teeth, “No, he did know, he did!” I shut my eyes tightly, fighting it because part of me wanted to simply let this fury go, to give in to its madness and destroy everything around me. I wanted to tear the world apart. It was a rage

unlike anything I had ever experienced before and it was terrifying.

Ged crouched down in front of me, “Merlyn look at me.” He spoke gently.

I shook my head unable to meet his eyes. He used gentle fingertips to raise my chin, bringing my focus to his face. “Look. At. Me.” He commanded as he took my hands in his. His touch was warm and I could feel it as he drew the fury out of me. His eyes met mine, holding my gaze. His handsome features were made hard by the new weight upon his own shoulders and I had an overwhelming desire to reach out and offer some comfort but instead I stayed very still on the couch. He was worried, worried for me and worried for the Empire.

I shook my head and took a deep breath, “I’m okay now.” I said even though it was very far from true. “I’ll be okay.” He needed to hear this from me even though we both knew it was a lie.

He nodded, accepting my answer with a squeeze of his fingers. I pulled my hand from his, wiped the tears off my face angrily and then I stood up. Ged mirrored this action and stepped back from me, waiting.

“I want to see him.” Both men just looked at me as though I had just spoken in a foreign language and no one moved so I repeated my request.

“I hardly think...” Captain Pelleaon started to say clearly uncomfortable but I cut him off.

“Where is he? I want to see him now, right now!” I snapped with as much command in my voice as I could muster.

The Captain looked to Ged who nodded slightly. I might have been insulted but I understood. Ged was Pelleaon’s superior officer so he had the final say in this matter, not me.

“As you wish.” He said quietly after a moment’s hesitation, “His body is being held in cold stasis under lock and guard. I’ll take you both there myself.”

I knew that the word had spread and as we left the ready room all eyes turned to watch us. Curiosity mingled with uncertainty was starting to spread around the ship like sand in a storm. I walked stoically, never glancing left or right. I dared not look anyone in the eye; I did not want to know their sorrow because my own was so great I had no room left for more. I needed strength not kindness or sympathy because those things would break me into a thousand shattered pieces. Only hardness would get me through the next moments. After that it was anyone’s guess.

The way to the ship’s med-lab was too long and we travelled there in heavy silence. There were no words to be said and the grief was too great. The morgue was cold, colder than I had expected and I was wearing a light dress with no sleeves. I shivered as we entered the sterile

looking room faltering amidst the scents of cleansers and disinfectant as well as the remnants of other chemicals I couldn't identify that were strong enough to make the gorge rise in my throat.

Once Captain Pellaeon had made the request to view the body, the doctor, pale faced and tired looking, unlocked the doors and led us through to the small, secure cold room where Thrawn had been placed. I watched as he punched in the code for the magnetic seal and we walked in shivering as a blast of almost icy air caressed my skin. The doctor keyed in another security code and the lid to the cold-stasis body box opened. I swayed and Ged's hands steadied me. I was surprised at how warm they were against the bare skin of my arms.

"You don't have to do this." He told me quietly but he was wrong, I did.

The doctor stepped back allowing me to approach the cold-stasis box alone. Completely naked, Thrawn lay as though asleep. His eyes were closed and his face had a slack expression that I had never seen before, as though someone had stolen all his personality away and left an empty shell behind. His hands had been folded over his abdomen below the fatal knife wound which seemed far too tiny to have caused his death.

Rukh had been a trained killer. He had known exactly where to strike, driving his long knife directly through Thrawn's command chair right into his heart from behind, stabbing Thrawn in the back quite literally. There was no blood because everything had been cleaned and if it hadn't been for the small wound on his chest where the knife tip had pierced through I wouldn't have believed he was dead at all. I covered my mouth with both hands and forced my grief down. Then because I had to, I reached out to his body and ran my fingers through his beautiful blue black hair. It was still silky and soft.

"Merlyn..." someone spoke my name but I ignored them.

I stroked Thrawn's face, following his jaw line with my finger tips. His skin, an even paler shade of blue than usual, was ice cold. A sob burned my throat but I did not make a sound as I cried. It was as though I were in a different world. When I blinked tears splashed onto his body, tiny sparkles of warm salty liquid on his cold blue skin. I picked up the hand nearest to me and traced the length of his fingers with my own.

His hands, which had once been so warm and gentle, which had known and caressed my whole body, bringing me to life in a way I could never have possibly imagined were cold and limp. I traced over the palm of his hand that I held and stroked up his arm stopping at the crease of his elbow. I laid the arm back down and caressed the length of the other one feeling the subtleties of his skin. Once upon a time these arms had held me tightly, comforted, and cradled me. Never again. I took up his hand again, as if to be certain of his death, and for a moment I stood holding it against my cheek, trying to warm it while my tears ran over his lifeless fingers. I shut my eyes tightly, squeezing out the overwhelming sense of loss that engulfed my soul. This wasn't fair, it just wasn't fair.

It was Ged who moved first, touching my shoulder but I shrugged him off. I got the message that it was time to let go. I set Thrawn's hand back to its resting place and then with a deep breath I leaned over the edge of the cold-stasis coffin and I laid one last kiss on Thrawn's icy

lips, tasting the salt from my own tears.

“Ariathe’ka Ia.” I whispered in Cheunh.

It was the very first time, the only time, I had ever told him that I loved him and now it would also be the last. In all the years we had known each other, been with each other, laid with each other we had never once said these words out loud. I thought I had understood our reasons for this but now I wondered why.

“Merlyn, we need to go now.” Ged said softly in my ear, “The cold-stasis chamber must be resealed.” And before I could answer him he pulled me back letting the doctor move back into to reseal the chamber and lock the doors.

I stared at Thrawn’s body through the clear dura-glass until Ged put his hands about my shoulders and led me away.

“Wait.” I said as I pulled away from Ged’s grip. “Where are his things? His clothes?” I asked.

“Why?” Ged asked puzzled.

“Where are his things? What he was wearing?” I repeated. “Please?”

“Doctor Evram?” Ged asked knowing there would be no peace with me until I had an answer.

“As per the Grand Admiral’s last request they were destroyed.” The doctor replied.

“Destroyed? Why?” Surprised, I blurted my questions angrily.

“His instructions said it was in accordance with his people’s customs. All that he was wearing at the time of his death was to be incinerated, his body was to be cleansed and then sealed. The only exception to this was that if you requested to see his body you would be allowed to do so.” Captain Pellaeon said softly from behind me.

I shook my head in disbelief. “Everything he was wearing? Everything?” I asked not caring that it came out sounding more like an accusation.

The doctor didn’t like me very much and I wasn’t making it easy for him. “I assure you Miss that everything was done according to the Grand Admiral’s wishes. Everything he was wearing at the time of his death was removed from his corpse and destroyed. His body was examined to determine the cause of death, cleaned and laid to rest in the stasis chamber exactly as he requested be done in the event of his death. We run a tight ship and nothing was done without the Admiral’s request and Captain Pelleaon’s authorisation, now do you mind telling me who you are and what this is all about?”

I opened my mouth to speak, to say something indiscrete and stupid but Ged stepped in front of me and pulled rank. “That will be all Doctor. I am sure that everything was done according to regulation. Thank you.” He manoeuvred me towards the door, signalling Captain Pellaeon to come with us. “Captain I think Miss Gabriel could use some quiet, could

you please take us to the Grand Admiral's quarters?"

"His quarters Sir?"

Ged nodded, "If you would, Captain." He said in such a way that Captain Pellaeon understood it was not a request but an order.

"Of course sir, it's this way." He nodded and began to walk in the direction of the turbo lifts. "When the Grand Admiral came on board he had the luxury entertainment suite converted for his personal use. It was his secondary command room. He meditated there and it was where he would display holos of art so that he could study it."

"He did love art." I said softly to no one in particular.

"He used to tell me that if you understood a species' art you understood the species." Captain Pellaeon replied to me.

"I know, he has..." I corrected myself, "... had an amazing art collection. It used to be in the flat on Coruscant but he moved it," and my mind flashed back to the exquisite ma'arilite stone carving he used to have there. "Some pieces were on Nirauan and now I guess the rest ended up here." I was babbling now but no one seemed to mind.

"Oh he only had one real piece that was not in hologram form. I wasn't aware he had an entire collection." The Captain replied. "Right now his command center is in command lock-down because of the nature of information stored in the data banks, I'm sorry Miss Gabriel but you cannot have access to that however right next to it is his personal living space."

I nodded. "I understand."

He didn't say anything else as he unlocked the door to what had been Thrawn's private sanctuary and let us in just as him comm beeped. "I'm afraid I am needed on the bridge, there is too much to do and we have had little time to deal with this crisis." He said. "Admiral? I would be grateful for any assistance you might care to provide."

Ged looked at me. "I need to attend to this, do you mind if I leave you here on your own?" He asked as he glanced around and set the courier's pack that he still carried down on the nearest table.

"Go, I'm fine." I said, repeating the earlier lie but the numbness that had spread through my body made it an easy lie to tell. "They destroyed his things." I added to no one in particular.

"Why are you so upset about that?" Ged asked in a hushed voice.

I just shook my head. "It doesn't matter. He's gone, so now it doesn't matter anymore." I shook my head. Ged was puzzled but he didn't press.

"I will have a crewman stationed outside if you need anything." Captain Pellaeon said. "All you have to do is ask."

“Thank you Captain, you’re very kind.”

He nodded and then he paused, weighing his next words with great care. “I don’t mean to be forward but you were in a serious relationship with the Grand Admiral weren’t you, I mean the two of you had something remarkable?”

I nodded, unable to speak.

The Captain watched my face for a moment and then he said, “The Grand Admiral was an incredibly private man but he had a holo-capture of you which he kept on his desk. It’s an exquisite image. He caught me staring at it one day, sometime after the dinner we all attended on board of the *Virulent*, and told me it had been taken at your first Grand Ball on Coruscant. I asked him if you and he were close, because I recalled how familiar, how at ease you both seemed to be with each other at that dinner but did not want to presume anything. I suspected there was much more to your relationship than met the eye but it isn’t my way to ask about his personal life. I wasn’t certain he would answer me but he did.” Pellaeon paused and the room became very still. Lost in memory he spoke softly. “Thrawn picked up the holo capture and looked at it then he said to me, *‘She is the most extraordinary creature in the entire galaxy and she graces me with her presence, reminding me that not everything is war or strategy and that sometimes even men, such as myself, may know what it means to be touched by such grace in spite of our faults.’*”

I looked up at the Captain who had the beginnings of tears in his eyes and I had to look away for fear of losing the little amount of self control I had on my own emotions. My fingernails dug into my palms, the pain helped to steady me. He took a moment to collect himself and then continued.

“He was the most brilliant tactician and strategist I have ever had the fortune to know. I watched him forge such bonds with the men and woman under his command that not one of them would hesitate to give their lives for him but until that moment I never saw the man beneath the uniform or the rank. That moment was a gift, Miss Gabriel, and I have you to thank for it.” His voice wavered for a second and he breathed deeply to steady himself. “I don’t claim to understand the exact nature of the relationship between the two of you but I do know this, he cared deeply for you. I don’t have to be a genius to know that you felt the same for him. I am sorry, truly, truly sorry for your loss.”

All I could do was nod, covering my mouth with my hand because I didn’t want to fall apart, not here, not now. I just looked at Ged and hoped he understood.

“Captain, I think it’s time you showed me to the bridge.” He said.

“Of course Admiral.” Captain Pellaeon replied.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.” Ged told me.

I just nodded and without further conversation the two men left me alone so that they could attend to the business at hand. The silence left in their wake was heartbreaking.

Thrawn's living quarters on board the *Chimaera* were surprisingly sparse. I walked about the small suite of rooms aimlessly, careful not to touch anything at first. The place was kept spartan and impossibly tidy, nothing was out of place. I stared at the rooms and took note of the lack of decoration, there might have been art here once but nothing was here now. He had worked here, and slept here but he had not lived here. Gingerly I opened some of the drawers in the bedroom but they were mostly empty aside from the basic items of clothing that were neatly folded. Nothing I touched spoke to me.

On the desk in the small ready room sat a holo-image in a plain frame. I guessed it was the one that the Captain had spoken about. I looked at it not knowing who that girl was anymore. She seemed impossibly young and far too happy to be me and slowly the shock which had stripped away my ability to feel receded leaving unbelievable grief in its wake.

I had known death my whole life. Each loss had brought with it a pain so great I had not believed I could ever find my way back from it and yet I had. I had nearly lost my sanity when I had miscarried my baby but even that nightmare had passed into a strange kind of strength I never knew existed. Each death had been a shock to my system yet I had somehow been able to work through the darkness but not this one, not this time.

This one I should have been prepared for and this made it all the more terrible. From the very first waking vision at the Nona Shyr gallery until this moment I had subconsciously known this day would come and yet I had not, and could not believe it would ever happen. I had been warned over and over and still I had dared to hope. Now I had to cope not only with the fact that Thrawn had been murdered by his trusted bodyguard but also the loss of all hope that he had somehow found a way to prevent it all from happening and I didn't know how.

Alone and not knowing what else to do I made my way to the small couch and sat down, hugging my knees close to my chest. I tried to bring Thrawn's face to mind but all I could picture was him lying in the cold stasis box. The ache in my gut grew so unbearable I thought it would choke me to death until finally I broke. Deep ugly sounds wrenched from my throat and I was powerless to stop it. I could not wrap my mind around a galaxy without him and it broke me completely.

I cried so hard it almost made me ill. I was grateful in this moment to be alone and when, eventually exhaustion took over from grief, I fell into a dreamless sleep until Ged woke me gently.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled as I sat up slowly, "I must have dozed off. How long have you been gone?"

"About six maybe seven hours." He said. He looked shattered.

I sat up feeling like something a bantha had dragged in. I was stiff and achy from sleeping in a strange position. My eyes were swollen, sticky and sore from crying, my throat was raw and I was quite sure something had died in my mouth. He had a cup of tea in his hand, when he offered it to me I took it and sipped the warm, sweet liquid gratefully.

“I’m sorry, things took a lot longer than I thought they would but you slept, that’s good.” He said. “I had them bring you something to eat as well.” He gestured to the tray on the table in front of me, beside it sat the unopened courier packet from Thrawn

“Thank you.” I nodded knowing I wouldn’t touch the food. I wasn’t hungry. “How are you holding up?” I asked as he sat down beside me.

He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Honestly? I’m exhausted, angry and frustrated.” He replied after a moment. “We lost one of the greatest military leaders this galaxy has ever seen and we lost one of the single most important battles ever fought. Now we have to decide what to do about it. It won’t be easy.”

“Was he wrong to withdraw?” I asked. “The Captain, was he wrong?”

Ged shook his head slightly. “No. Under the circumstances he did the very best thing he could do and he saved a lot of lives as well as ships. Thrawn always knew when to withdraw and it seems he taught his protégé well.”

“What happens now?”

“Now you and I will have some food and drink some tea and then you will open that.” He indicated the pouch on the table. “I know you don’t want to but you have to. That’s why I felt it would be better for you to have some quiet space. No one will come in here.”

I stared at it for a long moment then put my cup down and picked the sealed pouch up. I braced myself for a barrage of memories but nothing happened. I put my thumb on the seal to open it and emptied the contents on the table, four small sealed packets and another envelope, this one smaller and made from fine paper tumbled out.

I picked up the envelope as it had my name on it also expecting to see the memories it contained but again nothing happened and then I understood that when he had put this package together Thrawn must have worn gloves. He had known what would happen to him and he had known about my gift so he had protected me as best he could. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

I opened the letter and sat back to read it but there wasn’t that much to read. His last instructions were clear and concise. When I was done I handed it to Ged so that he could read it as well. Thrawn had written in basic.

I looked at the four slender packets, all secure-sealed, identified and encoded for the person they had been designated for. I picked up the one for Ged and handed it to him. One was for me, one for Navaari and the fourth one was to be delivered to a member of the Chiss Aristocra named Chaf’orm’bintrano with whom I was to meet with when I returned Thrawn’s body to his home world of Csilla.

“I can’t allow this.” Ged said as he set the letter and the data-disk case down on the table.

“You don’t get a choice in the matter.” I told him wearily.

“It’s dangerous and stupid to travel right now.” He replied angrily.

“Thrawn’s instructions are very clear. Timing is everything to the Chiss and I’m the person he has given this task to, no one else may interfere. Not even you.” I was amazed at how detached I sounded.

“I won’t let you.” He was fierce and I understood he was just being protective.

I looked up into his face. “You have to.” I said gently, “I need to honour his last request and you have work to do here. He’s given you the fleet, now you need to decide what to do with it.”

Ged sat back hard against the couch and ran his fingers through his hair. “Oh, I didn’t sign up for this.” He said with a short bark of a laugh. He reached out to pick up the packet marked for his eyes only, turning it over and over with his fingers. “All I ever wanted to be was a pilot.” It was a half truth but I let it slide.

“You mean you don’t want to be supreme warlord of the Empire?” I asked with a small, tight smile. It wasn’t a job I would ever have wanted and I understood Ged’s reticence to take on the mantle himself, though I thought he would probably be good at it. “You could always give the job to Captain Pellaeon and go back to being Ged the super spy in charge of the Imperial Order.”

He looked at me for a second and then he leaned over and kissed my cheek. “You know, you’re brilliant. Who better to lead the fleet right now than Gilad Pellaeon, Thrawn’s protégé? I can promote myself to Grand Admiral and then do the same for him. It’s not as if anyone is left to argue about this is it?”

I just shook my head and fought the immense lump of sadness that had suddenly welled up to the surface. “No, not anymore.” I said and finished drinking my tea. I set the cup down and looked around me, then picked up the pouch and stuffed the remaining packets in it along the Thrawn’s letter. Ged never took his eyes off me and I knew what he was thinking.

“Don’t say it.”

His jaw clenched. “You should return to the *Virulent* and rest, properly. Make the decisions on a clear head.”

“There is no decision to make; it’s already been made for me. Now I have to prepare for the journey to Csilla. I need the cold stasis chamber taken to my ship. Do you think you can arrange that? I’m not up to arguing with anyone or explaining the intricacies of Chiss mourning rituals and ceremonies plus you out-rank them all.”

“Right now?” He asked. “Merlyn it’s...”

I cut him off, “I have a deadline to meet. The Chiss have a strict burial code and if I am to

comply with that I need to leave as soon as possible. Please don't argue with me on this because you won't win and I don't want to have to fight with you." I paused to get a grip on my grief. "Please Ged, just don't..." My voice wavered and I had stop and take a deep breath to get myself back under some sort of control.

"I'm sorry, Merly, I'm sorry. Just tell me what you need, I'll see to it. "

I nodded, pinch-faced and utterly bewildered at how calmly I was able to make the requests. "Do you think you can get the *Chimaera's* crew to fuel my ship and set me up with food and supplies as well?"

"I'll arrange for everything including an escort." He answered.

"No escort." I told him firmly.

"I insist!"

I shook my head. "No. Trust me, you need all the pilots you've got and I am far safer travelling in my own ship alone than with a formation of TIEs at my side. Such an escort might be seen as an act of aggression and believe me when I tell you do not want a war against Thrawn's people. Please, you have to do this for me. You have to trust me and you have to let me go."

"Let you go...." He murmured and then swallowed hard. "How can I do that knowing you might be killed?"

"I don't know, you just do." I said quietly.

He shook his head and sighed. "This is against my better judgement so you had better return in one piece. Don't make me come after you just to tell you I told you so."

My resolve gave out and I couldn't answer him so I gave him a kiss on the cheek before laying my head on his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around me and when I broke down and cried he just held me more tightly without saying another word. We sat like that for a very long time.

Eventually I pulled away from him. "I had better get ready; I have a lot to prepare for and not much time." I said wiping the last of my tears from my face. "Once Thraw...once his body is on board my ship I have to head over to the *Virulent* to pack my things. I'll take you back over, if you like."

"Let me know when you're ready to go." He said, "I will have to brief my people on what has happened and then need to start making some plans for the future.

And because there really wasn't anything else to be said about it I nodded and with that we set into motion the last journey Thrawn would ever take; his journey home.

The *Virulent's* docking bay was cold and I didn't want to linger making sorrowful farewells. It was hard enough to go without the pain of saying farewell to one of the few friends I had left in the galaxy.

"You don't have to leave for good, Merly."

I gave him a look. "It won't be for good. I might have cleared out my quarters on board this ship but I still have a life of some sorts on Nirauan. You make it sound as though I'm dead too." I instantly regretted the words as soon as they were out of my mouth but he just shook his head.

"That's because I'm concerned for you." He said. "I don't like you going off all alone to do this thing. You shouldn't be alone."

"It's what he requested and I'm sure he had his reasons." I gestured vaguely towards the cargo hold of my ship and we both knew what was stored there. "I'll be fine. I'm not as fragile as you like to think I am." There was strange anger in my words and I didn't understand where it was coming from.

"That doesn't stop me from worrying." He took a step closer and brushed away a lock of stray hair which had fallen into my face. His gentle gesture undid the angry knot in my gut and tears welled up in my eyes. I nodded, feeling that awful sensation of loss rush through me like a freshly open wound, raw and full of pain.

I didn't like saying goodbye so instead I said. "Thank you. You're an extraordinary man and I am grateful to have you in my life." We stared at each other for a second too long then I looked away and the moment between us wavered and vanished.

"Once you do this thing, once you've completed this task then what?" Ged asked after taking a deep breath.

"I don't know." I shrugged. "I really have no idea. First I just have to get through this. I can't think beyond that." I looked at him, "I'd like to say maybe I could go home but honestly I don't know what or where that is any longer." For such a long time now my home been with Thrawn and now that he was gone I wasn't sure where I belonged anymore.

Ged moved suddenly, cupping my face in his hands, "There will always be a place for you with me wherever I am no matter what, no matter where, no questions asked. Always. So when you have completed this task, delivered his body and passed on his secrets and have done whatever it is that you need to do then come back. Come back."

I didn't know how to answer that so I flung my arms around him and held onto him as tightly as I could hoping he would understand all the words I couldn't say to him. I didn't care what anyone looking at us might think. He kissed the top of my head making me all the more terrified of what was to come. I didn't know how I was going to do this task Thrawn had set out for me, I had no idea how I was going to face it on my own and just for a moment I seriously considered taking Ged up on his offer but that moment also passed. I was tired, scared and beyond sad and Ged was a light in the dark. I didn't want to let him go but in the

end I did.

“Merly....” He started but I stopped him with a fingertip on his lips.

“Don’t...don’t say it. I know you want to wrap me up in a protective blanket but you can’t. It’s done. He’s dead.” I shook my head and blinked fresh tears from my eyes, “You have to let me go. I have to do this and you just have to let me.”

He took a really deep breath and nodded. “It’s against my better judgement.” He said unhappily. “I hate him for making you do this.”

“I know.” I nodded. I understood because I also felt the same way.

“I’m here for you, whatever you need you only have to ask.” He stroked my face gently.

“Thank you.” I said again blinking tears out of my eyes. “Just promise me one thing.”

“Anything.”

“Please, please stay alive.”

He smiled ever so slightly, “That’s my plan.”

“It was Thrawn’s plan as well and look at how that turned out. Stay alive Ged Larsen I mean it.”

This time his smile was genuine. “I shall do the very best I can Merly I can’t promise more than that.”

I nodded.

He paused for a second, “I meant what I said, no matter what ship I am commanding you have a home on board it. You have pass codes from Vader use them and I will find you. No matter what, remember this!” Then suddenly there were no more words to say. We stared at each other just a little longer before I turned to go up the ramp into my ship without looking back. It was bad luck to look back and I had already had more than my fair share of it.

The trip to Csilla was long and lonely. Time stretched out the way uncharted space did and it never seemed to end. I spent much of the journey in the cockpit, staring out into the whirling void while paying attention to Thrawn’s last instructions which he had carefully laid out on the data-disk that had been in the packet for me. He explained in excruciating detail how I was to approach Chiss territory, what I should tell them and what I would most likely expect. I listened to his words over and over again with a dull sort of rage that ate its way through me. When he had told me again and again that he had taken care of things, that he had planned against the visions I had seen and had warned him about this was not what I had

imagined and I was angry, so very, very angry. It was an unexpected emotion mixing into my grief making me almost ill.

When I wasn't gazing mindlessly out of the cockpit window, or sleeping fitfully I spent time in the cargo bay sitting on the floor leaning against the cold-stasis box which held Thrawn's corpse. I had triple checked that the seal had not been reopened since my visit to the morgue. There could be no mistakes. Alone and beyond caring I often found myself talking to the body in the box and, when I wasn't holding angry, one sided conversations with the dead, I wept. The sense of loss was overwhelming and where I hadn't been able to cry for the death of my child it seemed I could not stop when it came to the death of my mate.

I had plenty of time to think about all the people I had loved and lost but none of their deaths compared to this. There were so many things I had wanted to say and should have said to this man which would now never be voiced, never be heard. Never in my life had I known so many regrets or so much unfinished business. Why was it we did not say what we felt to one another when we had the chance? Why was it we did not take more time to be with the ones we loved? Duty, honour, war what were these things compared to love?

Our lives, from the moment we had met, had been wound together like threads on a Dantassi blanket until I could not fathom a life without his presence in it. From that very first meeting on the balcony of the Imperial palace we had connected in a way that had been magical and terrifying. I had known even then that he was dangerous to me, that he could and probably would break my heart I had just not ever imagined he would do it in this way. I could not come to terms that he was dead even though I stared at his body for hours on end and I didn't know what to do with the knowledge that he really was gone. With no idea how to think or feel all I could do was cry. This was a sorrow that knew no end and by the time I finally came into Chiss space I was nothing more than a shell of a human being.

Csilla was well guarded and not at all easy to reach. Thrawn had left specific instructions on how to enter Chiss space, what to broadcast and where to send the proper signals when I came into contact with his people. I followed his instructions to the letter. I was met by Chiss Defence Forces and my ship was escorted to a landing pad in the capital city of Csaplar. That I had spoken to them in their native language had confused them, the news I brought with me had only seemed to make this worse. In the end I didn't really care. I wanted to carry out Thrawn's last wishes and then somehow try to salvage what was left of my life.

I did as I was instructed by the small defence task force that had been sent to escort me and marvelled at the sheer beauty of a world totally hidden by ice and snow. The Csilla sun gave off a cold light with little warmth and in turn bathed the planet with a pale bluish tint. Three moons, Arista, Cserce, and Scerac, orbited Csilla, each with their own legend. Thrawn had told their stories to me once in the quiet of the bedroom we had shared on Coruscant, weaving their tales for me as he caressed the pale of my naked skin with his gentle fingertips. I could still hear his voice, warm and husky, in the aftermath of our love making. The memory was as painful as it was sweet.

I knew a great deal more about Thrawn's home world than most people. He had made certain of that through his stories and gifts of books containing legends and histories but none of these things had prepared me for actually being on the planet. The Chiss were a stoic

race, bound up in formalities and traditions. Their strict non aggression policies were something Thrawn had disagreed with and it had gotten him exiled in the end, although he had hinted that this had been an outcome he had desired. Being exiled allowed him to work for Palpatine with no political repercussions from his own home world and I sometimes wondered if there were not people on his planet who also welcomed this.

The Chiss were governed by an oligarchy of extended Ruling Families. The actual seat of power was a building known as the House Palace, located in the city of Csaplur, and headed by leaders known as Aristocra who wore particular colours to indicate their clan and family loyalties. The system of clan colours was complex and intricate and I had not managed to memorise them all.

Their system of rule was democratic; day to day decisions were made by a democratically elected parliamentary body from each of the twenty-eight colonies. When things became more complicated they were channelled up through the parliament to a cabinet of appointed governors, and then to the ruling families, where a decision made by the parliament and or the cabinet could be approved for action. It took a while for things to get done on Csilla with each decision being carefully considered. The Chiss did not like their politics messy nor did they like to make mistakes. They were an exacting and careful people.

Each of the extended ruling families were responsible for a set of government affairs to manage and the house that Thrawn had been adopted into, House Nuruodo, was responsible for military policy and foreign affairs and was considered to be the second highest in their ranking system. They had an amazing, well trained military and in spite of the non aggressions rules which governed them, the Chiss were a force to be reckoned with but as long as you left them alone they would not attack first. They were enigmatic and mysterious to the rest of the galaxy. No one even knew the Chiss origins although it was a popular belief that they had descended from a colony of humans lost thousands of years prior and Doctor Thracar had once told me there were enough genetic markers to indicate this might well have been the case. The planet had once been lush and warm although just like the stories that Tatooine had once held oceans I kind of found it hard to imagine.

Careful not to deviate from the instructions I was being given by the escort ships who had accompanied me as I set my ship down. The landing pad was on the surface of the planet but it didn't stay there. I watched with some fascination as the whole landing deck sank under the ground, into an enormous cavern like structure. I followed the instructions given to me and when I had shut down the engines and opened up the ship I was given leave to disembark.

I walked down the ship's gangway and was met by black uniformed, well armed military guards who did not say a word. From behind the armed guards came a tall elegantly dressed man, a little older than Thrawn and from his clothes I guessed he was a member of the eighth ruling family. I executed a bow and remained silent. Thrawn's lessons and discussions about his people and their formalities had not gone amiss.

The man did not smile but I sensed a small amount of surprise in him. Tired, gaunt and drawn looking, I was not what he had been expecting. He studied me for a few moments and then in a rich voice he spoke to me in Cheunh. "I am told you speak our language."

“I endeavour to do so but I hope you will forgive my errors.” I replied. His accent was far stronger than Thrawn’s and I suddenly became self conscious of my own.

He nodded but made no further comment on my language skills. “I am Aristocra Chaf’orm’bintrano. You will follow me now.” he said.

I hesitated for just a second, looking back over my shoulder at my ship’s entrance ramp which was wide open. He followed my gaze and answered my unasked question.

“I assure you no one will enter without your permission but leaving the entrance hatch open will signify you have nothing to hide.” Aristocra Chaf’orm’bintrano said. “Please, if you will come.”

I let him know I understood with a nod of my head and did as he had requested. None of this felt real. I was led down through a series of wide, open and well lit tunnels to a small but comfortable room. Two guards stationed themselves outside the door way and two more entered with us and took a place to stand behind the Aristocra. While I may not have been treated as an enemy, I was also not a friend.

He was graceful in his hand gesture as he motioned to one of the two comfortable chairs by a low ornate table. “Please sit. I understand that your journey here has been long and arduous, that you come under the most grievous of circumstances. I know that you must need to rest and refresh but we must first talk. May I offer you something to drink, tea perhaps?”

I sat as ladylike as I could and perched on the edge of the chair. “That would be very kind.” I replied.

He took note of how tense I was but said nothing. I watched as he keyed a small comm device to make the request. We waited in a neutral silence until tea had been brought, served and I had taken a drink. It was sweet and soothing. I cradled the delicate cup in my cold hands grateful for its warmth.

The Aristocra nodded and spoke. “Shall we get down to business?”

I nodded and without further ado or fuss I told him everything that Thrawn’s data disk had instructed me to tell him.

The Aristocra listened without interruption and when I was done he merely nodded and then said. “Do I have permission for my people to retrieve the cold stasis casket from your hold?”

“Yes.” I said swallowing my sadness down hard, “Of course.”

He nodded again and with a slight hand motion signified to the two guards behind me that they could go. His instructions to them were clear. *Go in, remove Thrawn’s body and leave the rest of the ship untouched.* They would obey him without hesitation and only once they were gone did I feel a slight lift of the tension in the room. The guards were uncomfortable with my alien presence but the Aristocra, surprisingly, was not.

“Please, be at ease. No harm will come to you here.” He said gently once more gesturing to the chair I very nearly wasn’t sitting in. He waited patiently until I visibly relaxed and sat back into the comfort of the chair.

“More tea?” He asked, breaking the silence. I nodded and let him refill my cup. Once that was done he looked at me carefully as though I were a book or a work of art to be studied. I had seen Thrawn regard me in much the same way sometimes and my heart ached sharply. I held his gaze for a moment then with a deep, deep sigh I looked away and still the Aristocra studied me.

“Do you fear me?” The Aristocra asked after an eternity.

It was not a question I had expected. I glanced up at him. “No, do I have cause to?”

“I have already assured you of your well being.” He replied. “If you are unafraid of me then I can expect the truth when I ask you a question?”

I frowned a little. “The truth?”

“It would be appreciated.” The Aristocra nodded.

“Do you *expect* me to lie to you?” I asked more than a little surprised.

“My experience with humans has been interesting with regards to their abilities to bend the truth to their advantage.”

“Ah,” I said quietly. “Then I shall endeavour to be honest.”

“Did you know Mitth’raw’nuruodo well?”

I drew a deep breath. “Yes, probably better than most people,” I replied carefully, “Although, he was not one to share himself easily.”

For a moment the Aristocra regarded me. “You must have been close for him to teach you our language and customs.”

He was digging for something specific but I wasn’t sure what. “I had an aptitude for it and he felt it was a talent worth exploring.” I said. “I think that he was ... happy to have someone to share a little of his private life with.”

He nodded, “And what of your relationship?” He asked, again dancing around what he really wanted to ask me.

I sighed and swept imaginary lint from my dress. “Our relationship was...complicated.” Now who was dancing around the topic I wondered.

He nodded slowly and studied me some more, trying to read underneath my words and when

that didn't work he decided it was time to be more direct. "It is perhaps impolite of me to ask this but duty dictates I must, were you mate-bound to him?"

I wondered where this was going so I gave the standard line that Thrawn had used so often on me, "Not in any official capacity." It was the truth. Thrawn may have bound himself to me under Dantassi law but he had left me free to do whatever I wanted and he had made certain to tell me this many, many times.

"I see." He replied with a satisfied nod. "Then you are not his wife in legal terms?"

"No, Aristocra, I am not." I said frankly. "I am not his bound mate or wife by Chiss laws or my own. Thrawn was quite insistent on that." I decided to leave any reference to the Dantassi out of it. "May I ask why this is relevant?"

"Especially as a non Chiss, had you been his legal wife, there would have been some difficult complications that I do not think you would have liked or have been prepared for." He did not elaborate and I didn't ask. "I am grateful it is an avenue we will not have to contend with and perhaps with this we shall let this particular matter lie." He added.

Once again I was left in awe at Thrawn's ability to plan many steps ahead. He had never made me his wife and although I had never asked or expected it, I had sometimes wondered why. All this time, he had known, had foreseen this as a possible path and he had prepared for it. A tiny part of me hated him for it.

"Does he not have any family here?" I asked wondering if I would get to meet anyone related to him.

Aristocra Chaf'orm'bintrano watched me steadily. "He had a brother who went missing in action many years ago and is presumed dead. His birth parents are also long dead and his sister passed away from a sudden illness last year. His ties as trial-born to the House Nuruodo were severed when he was exiled. He has no other family that I have been made aware of." He paused for a moment then went on, "Under normal circumstances it is usually a member of the family by blood or by marriage who accompanies the body of a fallen one to the hall of remembrance and speaks on their behalf. You are neither so this rule does not apply. I hope you will understand."

I felt a pang of sorrow on hearing about the death of Thrawn's sister and wondered if he had known about it. He had said nothing to me if he did. "I see, yes, thank you." And once again the room was silent as we sipped our tea politely until the comm. on his desk peeped softly and a voice let him know that Thrawn's body had been transported off my ship.

He looked at me and said, "Once the body is certified to be that of Mitth'raw'nuruodo through simple DNA testing we can proceed with the formalities that will end with the remembrance ritual. It will be a small affair, with far less ceremony because he was exiled, but he is still of the Chiss, his life will be honoured as is our way. You returned his body to us so you will be granted leave to attend but you will not to speak on his behalf. You are not Chiss and you have no marital claim to him so it is not permitted."

“Of course.” I replied deeply grateful not to have to get up in front of Thrawn’s peers and talk about him. There was a moment’s hesitation then I took the package I had carried with me in my small satchel out. “I apologise, I do not know the correct formality here but Mitth’raw’nuruodo left instructions for me to give this to you.”

I handed him the sealed packet which he took from my hand and studied for a moment before opening the packet and to pull out several data discs.

“Are you aware of what information these hold?” he asked as he studied each disk with great care then slipped them back into the little hard-shell packet.

I shook my head. “No, my task was to deliver that packet to your hands not to open it.”

He regarded me for a moment then sat back, relaxing slightly. “While you are not the first outsider I have ever heard to speak our tongue, you are the first to speak it almost flawlessly and your accent is not at all what I would have expected.” He said. “It is quite remarkable.”

“Thank you, that is gracious of you to say. I had a very good teacher.” I said suddenly having to control the unexpected surge of sorrow that welled up in me like a tidal bore. I set the tea cup I had been clinging to down on the table and rested my hands in my lap so he would not see how much they had started to tremble.

Another long silence settled over us again and then the Aristocra rose from his seat. “I apologise for the awkwardness of the questions I had to ask.”

I looked up at him and nodded. “I understand, I was briefed on how matters would be handled here.” I replied also getting to my feet.

A slight smile touched the Aristocra’s lips as if I had confirmed something he had suspected but not asked about. “Of course.” He said, “I’m afraid I have work I must attend to. Preparations for the remembrance service will take some time. If you do not mind me saying so, you look a little fatigued.”

I sighed and nodded. “That is very polite of you to say, I’m quite sure I look like death warmed over, Aristocra. It has been a difficult...” I stopped for a moment to quell the sudden wave of aching sadness that rushed through me. “...a difficult time.” Gritting my teeth I fought my emotions back and then realised that it had been almost three weeks since I had been given the news that Thrawn was dead. The journey from Bastian to Csilla had taken that long but I had no idea where the time had gone.

“I understand. Please allow us the honour of providing you with some comfort. We have prepared guest quarters for you in one of our finest suites.”

“That is very gracious, thank you.” I said, looking forward to sleeping on clean sheets and having a really hot shower.

“I am afraid I must ask you to remain in the guest quarters and not wander around this facility. If you require anything there will be someone ready to aid you. If you require

anything from your ship then I suggest you retrieve it now and after, if you still need anything, one of the guards will be happy to accompany you, I am sure you understand our need for security.”

“Of course.” I had expected this as well and, oddly enough, welcomed the chance to do nothing, to be free from any responsibility. “I am most grateful for your kindness and hospitality.” I replied relieved that I no longer had to deal with any of this and that it was now out of my hands.

The Aristocra raised an eyebrow and gave me a slight smile “He did indeed teach you well.” He said softly not bothering to hide his surprise.

I acknowledged the compliment with a slight nod but it made me sad. With the interview at an end, the Aristocra summoned one of the guards who stood outside. I was escorted by to my ship and allowed to fetch my travel pack which held some clean clothes and toiletries among other things, after that I was taken to a different part of the vast complex and shown to one of the most elegant suite of rooms I had ever seen and then I was left alone. The Aristocra had been right, I was exhausted. I unpacked a few items of clothing and then I found the ‘fresher and was grateful to see a deep bathtub. I ran the water and pulled out the half full bottle of brandy from my pack and found a glass. As I sank into the too hot water I felt a bizarre sense of déjà vu but I drowned it away with a large gulp of my drink. I laid my head back against the rim of the bathtub and closed my eyes just grateful to be somewhere where no one expected anything from me.

Waiting in an unfamiliar place was difficult at the best of times but now I also found myself in a strange netherworld between despair and depression. I was listless. I picked at the food that was brought me, causing concern amongst my hosts that it was not to my liking and I had no way to assure them this was not the case. I tried to eat but I simply had no appetite. If I had thought I had no more tears to shed I was wrong and when I wasn’t crying, I was sleeping fitfully, too weary and heartbroken to care about anything else at all. The time passed strangely.

The remembrance service was held the morning two days after my arrival on the planet. It was a small sombre affair with only a handful of people in attendance. I kept forgetting that here Thrawn was in disgrace. I wore one of the dresses that had once belonged to Navaari's daughter. It was a deep, dark blue colour and it had felt right. I had wrapped a similar coloured shawl about my shoulders because I was freezing cold. If my clothes were out of place I didn't care, no one had given me any indication of what was appropriate to wear. When I entered the hall I was silently escorted to a place up front. I ignored the stares and the whispers as I passed by people. Now I just wanted to get through this so I could leave.

They had moved Thrawn’s body from the stasis box I had transported him in to an elegant rounded coffin. It was opaque except for where his head and shoulders were so that everyone could see his face. They had dressed him in a black uniform and I guessed this was also tradition, a cloth of house colours had been draped over the rest of it, even though he had been exiled. I didn’t ask why but I was grateful, after all he had done it felt only right he should have some honour amongst those who stood on ceremony. The mood in the room was solemn. It was hard not to break down but I used every ounce of training I had ever been

given and managed to keep a hold of my emotions. If anyone took insult at my tears well that was their problem not mine. It was unusual enough that I, a human, was allowed to be here and view this, tears were just part of the package but I wept as silently as I could.

The entire ceremony was formal and aloof. A spiritual guide spoke over the body and after that there was a listing of Thrawn's accomplishments. They ended with his exile which made me even sadder because he had done so much more. I listened to what was being said but it was meaningless to me. An accumulation of words that had nothing to do with the man I had known and loved. When the death rites were done I was grateful it was over. We all stood to honour him as the Spiritual Guide walked with the repulsor lift that held Thrawn's coffin to leave the hall. As it passed me I reached out to almost touch it and said goodbye for the last time to the man I had loved more than anyone else in the galaxy.

The small reception afterwards was held in a warmly decorated room. There were delicate finger foods and drinks served by silent, aloof wait staff. The chatter amongst the attendees was appropriately muted and sombre. I declined the offer of food but took a glass of what tasted a lot like ice-wine and sipped it politely. A few of the Chiss glanced at me and there were hushed whispers as I walked past them but no one came near me and no spoke to me either. I didn't belong here and it painfully obvious. Eventually Aristocra Chaf'orm'bintrano took pity on me came over to where I stood gazing at a live-time view screen of the outside world.

"It was a ... lovely... ceremony." I said for lack of anything else to talk about.

"I am grateful you feel we have honoured him appropriately." The Aristocra replied, looking around the room, "You must forgive my people; they are not used to outsiders and are very wary of humans who return our dead."

"There is nothing to forgive, Aristocra I understand." I said quietly.

"I want to thank you for all that you have done. The information on the disks you delivered to me is most... invaluable and will be of great use. I am also grateful to you for bringing Mitth'raw'nuruodo's body home. We may not appear to be a caring race but we honour our fallen just the same. He served his people well in his time."

I nodded. "More than most will ever know I suspect."

The Aristocra raised his eyebrows in slight surprise at my forward statement, "Indeed."

"What will happen to him now?" I asked suddenly.

"As we speak his body is being cremated and his ashes will be scattered in space, as you can imagine burial is difficult on this planet."

I had to swallow down the sharp sting of grief that washed through me, "How fitting an end for a man who had stars in his blood."

“You certainly do have a way with words.” The Aristocra said quietly, regarding me for a long moment before asking. “If you do not mind me asking, what will you do now?”

“I have one last task to complete for Mitth’raw’nuruodo and then, well, then I do not know but I have a friend waiting for me to return, perhaps I can begin again working with him.” I answered with a slight shrug. I knew Ged would be there for me as he had promised and it was a small comfort in time that felt bleak and empty but I wasn’t sure I was ready to return to the Empire’s service or what was left of it, not yet at least.

“One last task?” The Aristocra raised an eyebrow, “I would have thought there would be no more business to conclude and traditionally once the body of the deceased is brought home for the remembrance ceremony it signifies the end of anything unfinished.”

“Well, Thrawn never did anything the traditional way.” I retorted more sharply than I had intended to, forgetting my manners for a moment. The Aristocra let it slide.

“If I may inquire, what it is you must do?” He asked, genuinely interested.

This open curiosity was not, according to everything Thrawn had ever told me about his people, a trait usually common in the Chiss, it made me regard the man standing at my side with new eyes. “I am to travel to the planet of Hjal.”

The Aristocra raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Hjal?” He asked. “That is home to one of the colonies of Mathäd’antass’Iyantha, is it not?”

I smiled at hearing the formal use of their name. “Yes. It is.”

He paused to consider this information for a moment. “That is most unusual, why, if I may ask yet another personal question, would he send you there?”

I faltered trying to answer the question diplomatically, “We...I have family there, people who will need to be told what has happened to him if they do not already know. I also have a data packet to deliver. I think he planned it this way so I would end up in a place where I would not be alone or considered an outsider, a place where I could grieve in peace.” I answered not knowing how else to describe what Navaari was to me.

“Family?” He asked taken aback. “He, you belonged to a clan there?”

I nodded. “It is a very long story Aristocra and it is not all mine to tell.”

He regarded me quietly for a long moment then nodded more to himself than to me, “There were whispers that he had strong connections to the Mathäd’antass’Iyantha here but he never spoke of it to anyone that I was ever aware of. It would explain a great deal about a great many things surrounding him and his ideals.” He said more to himself than to me, then he returned his gaze to me and continued, suddenly understanding a piece of the puzzle I was to him, “And it explains your name. You did not give a Basic name when you were asked to identify yourself but one that had Chiss syntax and yet was not a Chiss name. You must be a remarkable woman to have been adopted into a clan of the Mathäd’antass’Iyantha.”

“Being remarkable had very little to do with it.” I replied with a shrug. Using my Dantassi name had been something Thrawn’s instructions had been very clear about and although I hadn’t understood why I had done as he had suggested. As with almost everything else he seemed to have mapped out how things would fall into play. Why should this be any different?

The Aristocra was silent for a moment and then said, “You are free to leave Csilla whenever you wish but I would very much appreciate it if you would share my evening meal with me. I have not met many of your kind and my experiences have been less than stellar. Humans are remarkable in their wide range of emotions and temperaments most of which we Chiss find unpleasant. You have been a rare gift, with your knowledge of our manners and customs and I should very much like to learn a little more about you as well as your time with the Mathäd’antass’Iyantha if you would acquiesce to this small request it would please me greatly.”

What he was asking was an immense honour and I could not turn it down. I felt almost as if the future of something great depended upon it so I nodded. “I would like that very much Aristocra. Thank you”

“Then I shall make the necessary arrangements. Now I am afraid I must leave you, I have unavoidable business to attend to and forgive me for saying this but you do look as though you could use some rest.”

He was not wrong in his assessment and I gratefully accepted the escort back to the guest quarters where I was staying. I showered and then I decided to lie down but I couldn’t sleep or still my mind instead I lay there pondering everything that had happened. It felt as though a lifetime had passed and I had lost track of time since I had been given the news of Thrawn’s death. The days had blurred together strangely but now that the memorial service was over his death felt final, not real, but final. Now I was facing my life without him and it was all I could do to put one foot in front of the other, living from breath to breath and moving forward because there could be no going back but I would never be the same. I discovered that I had no more tears to cry, at least not now. I didn’t know what to think but I knew how I felt and I was inexplicably furious at Thrawn.

He had made all of these plans for his death knowing it would happen because I had told him over and over again. He had known and yet he hadn’t done a damn thing to prevent it, instead he had simply made all the right arrangements to get me to cart his body to his home world, planning meticulously each step of the way. The instructions he had left for me had been clear and very precise yet somehow cold and devoid of anything personal. I suppose he that while he had known of his death the exact timing was not anything he could foresee. If he had left me any personal messages of love or farewell I hadn’t found them and I was grateful for it. All the instructions he did leave made me feel like a puppet and I hated him for it. I wondered how he could have done this to me and then I wondered if he had ever really cared for me at all or if our time together had all been some convoluted elaborate ruse to get me to be a part in some greater scheme he had mapped out. I had no answers only far too many questions.

I would be glad to leave here and be with Navaari. On Hjal I could express my emotions freely, whatever they might be, and there was a support network there for me. Maybe one day I would take Ged up on his offer but for now all I wanted to do was hide from the galaxy, hide from my pain and grief and be with people who would keep my life simple and expect nothing from me. Until then I was trapped on a planet far from anything familiar with a people who saw me as utterly alien and treated me as though I were both dangerous and beneath them. I lay on the bed, sad, bewildered and angry, staring at the ornate ceiling until I was sent for to dine with the Aristocra.

It was a nice meal and I tried very hard not let my emotions leak out. I was surprised when he broke with standard Chiss protocol to talk with me while we ate and the discussion all throughout the meal was lively and interesting. He asked me a great many questions about the Core worlds and my life and he seemed genuinely curious about the fall of the Empire and all the events which had led up to it. I did my best to fill him in without getting too bogged down in the details. I also tried to be as impartial as I could but it was hard not to spit some anger when speaking of how the rebellion had managed to unhinge everything I had known.

In turn he told me about some of his earliest encounters with humans and learned how Thrawn had captured a smuggler's ship that had somehow found its way into Chiss space.

“Dubrak Qennto, the captain of the ship, was not a man I would like to spend much time with ever again. I found him rude and abrupt. His greed ruled him and he was a most disagreeable example of humanity. His first mate and I believe also his, how do you say...girl-friend; Maris Ferasi was far too idealistic to be entangled with such a rough man. I believe she was rather attracted to Mitth'raw'nuruodo which also might also have caused some friction.”

“Really.” I said flatly. “Thrawn failed to mention that.”

The Aristocra smiled. “It was a many years ago, I'm sure Mitth'raw'nuruodo had long forgotten about it, he had many other things on his mind at the time. The only member of the crew who seemed to be in any way truly interested in us was a young man by the name of Jorj Car'das. He was instrumental in teaching Mitth'raw'nuruodo basic and he was able to somewhat learn our language although I must admit it was painful to listen to him sometimes.

“Jorj Car'das?” I smiled at the name.

“You know this man?”

I shook my head, “By name only I'm afraid. He is a well known smuggler with a reputation for being quite ruthless, the other two I've never heard of.”

“Given their personalities I am not very surprised. They did not seem too interested in much beyond their own needs and comforts. They were our first real contact with your kind though and for us they are known as the Visitors. It is through them that we learned basic although most Chiss choose not to study it, some have, finding it of use every now and then.

Mitth'raw'nuruodo was one of these people and I see his foresight served him well, as it always did."

"Yes, if there was one thing Thrawn excelled at it was thinking many steps ahead." I agreed.

"It was a gift of his, I think. I have not seen too many others who have been able to do what he could with such accuracy."

"You sound as though you admire him but he was an exile to you and your people."

The Aristocra looked at me for a moment and then he smiled. "Is that so strange?" He asked. "He was a brilliant man but he was unconventional and he disregarded our rules. While I am capable of admiring his skills in the areas of tactical and strategic thought I am also honour bound to uphold the laws of my people. He broke the law in such a blatant manner that it could not be forgiven or ignored. Now I have a better understand of why and that makes my admiration for him all the more great."

"He was one of the very few people who dared to go against the wishes of Emperor Palpatine. I think he enjoyed the jax and mouse games but he didn't like court life very much although he was also very good at it." I said.

"No, I do not imagine he would enjoy it much, he never had much patience when it came to political intrigue although, yes, he played it well enough when it suited his purpose. Whatever else he was, first and foremost, he belonged in space. We knew this about him from a very early age which was why he was chosen to join house Nuruodo as a merit adoptive. Had he not been exiled he would have added to the house bloodline with a suitable marriage and eventually offspring." The Aristocra then smiled, "Perhaps this is another reason he wished to leave Chiss society. Arranged marriages are not always to the liking of the people involved and he was never one to do something just because he was ordered to. For many love plays a significant role when it comes to choosing a bond-mate and not all arranged parings ever have that aspect."

I gave an uncomfortable shrug. "This is not a topic he discussed with me much. In fact, he rarely spoke about his life before working for the Empire. Although he did teach me much about the Chiss in general I know very little about his life here." I said by way of an answer, "And I don't think that love ever influenced anything he ever did. I am quite sure that had it been required, had he not been exiled, he would have complied with your traditions in this matter." I had trouble keeping the sudden flare of bitterness out of my voice and shut up before it got the better of me.

The Aristocra raised both eyebrows at my words. "I would not presume to know better but I think both he and I would disagree with you on this point. That you are here, that he taught you so very much about us and our ways speaks volumes. I think he must have cared a great deal for you."

I clenched my teeth, still angry. "Well if he did, Aristocra, he had a funny way of showing it."

There was a lengthy moment of weighted silence and then the Aristocra sat back in his chair.

“Perhaps if I might ask, how did the two of you meet?”

I was surprised at his question and for a moment I wasn't sure how to answer but then, because he had asked, I told him about my very first meeting with Thrawn on the balcony at the Imperial Palace. It seemed a lifetime ago. He listened without interruption, prompting further memories and stories from me as though by hearing my accounts of Thrawn's life in Empire somehow gave him a much better understanding of the man his people had chosen to exile. He smiled when I was done.

He seemed to weigh his next words with great care before speaking, “There were several women here who found him attractive, you know, who vied for his attentions and affections. Young, handsome and in a position of authority, he was a very desirable candidate for marriage but he refused them all. I am sure, as with all young men, he had dalliances on occasion but he was discrete if that was the case and nothing further ever happened as a result. We, who watched his career with great interest, assumed it was because he was concentrating on that career and when the time was right he would accept a mate and breed but of course that did not happen.” He paused, “I now understand that he was looking for something extraordinary, someone who could both learn from him and teach him much at the same time, someone who complimented his personality instead of blandly standing at his side. I believe he found it in you.”

I gave him a slight smile. “He always told me that I was a complication he didn't need in his life.”

“And he was probably right about that yet here you are. From all that you have told me you were closer to him than anyone else.” He said mildly, “And I for one am grateful.”

I had to swallow down the sudden tears that sprang to my eyes and I was thankful that the Aristocra ignored it when I brushed them away discretely. I didn't really know how to answer what he had just said so instead I gave him a polite nod and smiled, relieved when the wait staff returned to clear the dinner plates allowing me to change the direction of the conversation in a less difficult direction. When I commented on the various paintings that decorated the walls the Aristocra seemed only too happy to discuss them at great length taking delight in the fact that I enjoyed art and even understood a little about it. When the desert came I found myself liking this man who did not match the short description that had been on the data disk Thrawn had left for me. Over tea he asked me, finally, about my time with the Dantassi.

“They are a people of great mystery for us.” He explained. “An intriguing dichotomy of wildly primitive mingled with technologically advanced. They do not have much time for us, I'm afraid. They see the Chiss as soft, weak because we chose to hide from the ice rather than learn to live with it.”

I smiled. It was a strangely apt description. “What would you like to know Aristocra?” I asked.

“Everything you can and are allowed to tell me.” He replied.

So I did as he had asked and I told him as much about my experiences with the Dantassi as I dared beginning with my first encounter with one on my father's ship, to my naming on Myrkr and then my first encounter with Navaari without revealing Thrawn's story or giving any of the Dantassi secrets away. He listened intently only interrupting to ask a question or get me to clarify some detail. When I was done he smiled a little and let the silence between us settle for a few moments.

He sat and regarded me with an expression I couldn't read for a long time before he spoke. "Mitth'raw'nuruodo did indeed choose well when he requested that you be the one to return his body. You are the perfect bait."

My eyebrows shot up. "Bait?"

He gave me another enigmatic smile, "Yes. If he intended to prove that not all outsiders, not all aliens are barbarians then he has accomplished his mission. How could I resist you? You are, as I said, the perfect bait."

I didn't know what to say to this. Had Thrawn been grooming me all these years just for this? I would never know. It was probably a good thing he was dead because in that moment I wanted to kill him myself. "I'm sorry Aristocra," I said trying to get a grip on my anger, "If I have offended I meant no..."

He cut me off with a slight hand gesture. "Please, you misunderstand me." He folded his elegant hands on the table and paused for a moment. "We are a terribly remote race of peoples and we eschew contact with other alien races as a matter of course. It makes us appear xenophobic and cold both of which we are. We teach our children the value of all things strategic and logical. This makes us insular and I wonder some days about the wisdom in such a way of life but it is incredibly difficult to get the Chiss people to change their ways or see things from a different perspective. We feel very superior to the rest of the galaxy and I fear sometimes this will one day be our undoing. When Mitth'raw'nuruodo was a young man, still living here, he questioned these things as well. He felt that what we considered our strengths to be were also our greatest weaknesses. It was the opinions of those who outranked him at the time that he was wrong. So he found a way to escape the chains we placed up on him."

He paused for a second and then said, "We felt that no one could learn our customs, our language to our great satisfaction. Yet here you are. An alien who has not only mastered our very difficult tongue to speak it beautifully, eloquently even, but one who has also been adopted into an offshoot of the ancient Chiss society that we ourselves are shunned from. Thus he has proven us wrong. We are not the perfect race and if we could open ourselves up a little we would perhaps learn a great deal more about our galaxy and all of its various peoples and in turn learn more about ourselves." He stopped and regarded me for a long silent moment. "I know that he had Chiss working with him and for him somewhere out in what you call the Outer Rim but they are considered renegades. They have sided with an Exile and are seen as also being exiled but perhaps things will change and maybe one day the knowledge they have gained will be of great use and we shall have need of them. Perhaps even, at some point we will allow outsiders to live among us. I know now that it is possible for a non Chiss to learn our ways so perhaps it is possible for the Chiss to learn how to

become less rigid in these ways as well. Certainly I see that possibility when I sit here and converse with you.”

I just watched him not knowing what to say. I had taught many of the Chiss warriors he had called renegades how to speak basic, some of them I even counted among my friends.

The Aristocra continued, “As I said before you must be a remarkable woman. I can see why Mitth’raw’nuruodo would desire you to be his companion. He chose well and I am deeply saddened by your loss. He was a most resourceful man and had he not gone against our basic rule of non aggression he might very well have gone on to be a great military leader of our people, instead he became a great leader to yours. His ability to adapt, accept and learn from all things new and different astounds even me. If he were alive today, and still you and I had managed to meet and speak as we are, knowing what I now do I, for one, would welcome him back without question. I think that we will need men such as him and we will suffer for our own lack of vision. I think his death is one of our greatest losses but of course I can only say this here in private to you. He was a remarkable man and the galaxy is a lesser place because of his death.” I detected a note of regret in the Aristocra’s voice and once more the ache of loss overwhelmed me.

I nodded sadly, “Yes he was, although he was also greatly under utilised by my people as well. The Chiss are not the only ones who have issues with alien races and in the end he was betrayed by someone he thought of as trustworthy.”

“Did you know his murderer?”

I nodded as words choked in my throat. “Yes, I suppose I did, though not as well as I might have liked and he is also dead.”

“Such a betrayal must cut you deeply.” He replied, “It is a sad ending to what was a rather unique career for a man we exiled and one whom your Emperor desired to have work for him.”

I could only nod slightly in agreement. “Indeed.”

Perhaps it was my sorrow or maybe he was just tired of talking about Thrawn but whatever the reason the conversation drifted to small mundane things and when the evening was over I declined a tour of the great library in favour of finishing the last of the tasks Thrawn had given me.

All I wanted to do was leave, go to Hjal to be with Navaari and An’jast’a, to be somewhere safe with people who loved me unconditionally. The Aristocra did not protest and made certain that my ship was refueled and well stocked for the long journey across the galaxy. I packed up the few things I had with me from the guest quarters and was escorted by two silent Chiss to the landing bay where the Aristocra was waiting for me.

“Your ship is ready. I hope and trust you will find everything in order.” He said politely.

“I am quite sure I will.” I told him. “Your people have a reputation for being exacting.”

He smiled and then much to my surprise he switched to Basic and said. "I do have one question to ask you."

"Anything."

"Why did you not ask to use my core name? I was under the impression that your kind did not like our rather long complicated names?"

I smiled. "And I was under the impression that the Chiss did not offer the informality of such an honour to non family members or outsiders until a deep bond of friendship has been formed. I was waiting for you to offer as is your custom, is it not?"

"Yes, yes of course." The Aristocra nodded with a sigh, "He taught you so very well. Your manners are indeed perfect, how could I ever resist?" He said with an expression that bordered on sad and then he switched back to his native language so that everyone nearby and listening could understand him, "Know this, you are welcome here, Akiana'myshk'apavjäska, should you decide to come again to our world or our territories. You and your kin would be granted all the privileges afforded an honoured visitor, you would be my personal guest under my protection and it would honour me greatly if you were to address me by my core name. I hope that you will take these words to heart and that you will return one day."

I was so surprised at these words I didn't know what to say. I gave him a small bow instead, it seemed fitting.

The Aristocra placed a hand on my shoulder and I could have sworn I heard someone gasp from behind me, "Perhaps next time when you visit it will be under much better circumstances and we will have more time for discussion. I hope that your sorrow will have eased and the loss you feel now will have lessened. I have greatly enjoyed your company and I hope the feeling is mutual."

"Thank you." I replied touching his hand lightly with my fingertips. He had just given me a great honour and I wasn't sure why but I was grateful none the less. "Thank you for everything. Until the next time we meet may you know only serenity and peace."

He smiled at my use of very traditional parting words, "The same blessing upon you also." He inclined his head slightly and I returned the gesture then I boarded my ship. It was time to leave and I did not want to over stay my welcome.

So, I left the planet, just as I had arrived, with an escort of Chiss making sure I did not deviate while in their space. I made sure to follow their instructions to the letter and when they turned around at the edge of Chiss territory I was not sad to see them go. It was a little unnerving to have a fighter escort that was purported by Thrawn to be even better than the Imperials.

The journey from Csilla to Hjal was very long and meant jumping hyperspace lanes more than once. I considered stopping at Nirauan to pick up some of my things but in the end

decide not to. I wasn't moving to Hjal, I was just visiting. I knew that the base would be in turmoil over the Grand Admiral's death and I didn't want or need to be in the middle of it all. I was quite certain that either Ged or Captain Pellaeon would fill them all in and I would return eventually to get my stuff although what I would do next was anyone's guess. I was sure that Voss would not throw anything of mine or Thrawn's away but it occurred to me it might happen. It seemed like such a strange thing to worry about in the midst of all that had happened but it was still my home, in a way, and many of my favourite books were there. However, the few things I considered truly precious were with me. I kept them on my ship. Thrawn's letters, my Dantassi clothes and mask were all here.

Perhaps another person would have spent the time re reading the letters from their loved one but I couldn't bear to even look at them. It would have torn me apart to touch these letters, to feel his presence and read his words knowing he was gone forever. I just wasn't ready for that yet. Instead, I spent a lot of time in the cockpit just staring out into space. On a small ship there was nowhere to escape from one's own self and I had a lot of time to think and to mourn. By the time I reached Hjal over four weeks had passed since I had left Csilla but it felt like years.

Several hours before entering the planet's atmosphere I sent a message to Navaari using the comm he had once given me and let him know I would be arriving soon. When I finally landed on Hjal it felt surreal. Thrawn had been dead for well over a month and I was utterly wrung out. I had gone from denial of his death to finally understanding that he was gone. I wasn't sure how to move beyond this point. Each day I woke up the same way, I lay with my eyes still closed trying to bring to mind his face, his voice, his scent and his touch but these memories slipped away from me and all I could call to mind were fragments of the whole.

I remembered how I had felt after Lord Vader's death and now, while I could recall those feelings they seemed muted and distant somehow. I wondered if I would ever feel that way about Thrawn's death but doubted it. I had known only pain and loss when Lord Vader had died, it had hurt and I had grieved the loss terribly but I had never been angry at him for dying. As I sat thinking about Thrawn's death I wondered if I would ever be free of the hurt and as much as I tried to center myself and let all the grief go I could not. There was, it seemed a huge difference between stillness and emptiness. I could not center, I could not find stillness and underneath the empty place his death had left I was surprised to discover that more than anything else I was just incredibly angry with him. This was an emotion I didn't really know how to cope with very well so it festered.

Once I was safely on the planet's surface, I changed into the appropriate clothes and slipped on my mask, it was the start of spring on the planet so bad weather was to be expected. Navaari was there to meet the ship when I landed and for a moment I stood in the open hatchway and just stared at him. I had no idea how I was going to give him the news of Thrawn's death. Fortunately for me I didn't have to because the weather interfered.

"Quickly, we do not have much time before we are not being able to travel!" Navaari yelled above the howling winds. "There is a big blow coming in from the south. It will be bad so hurry up."

I smiled at his gruffness. It was familiar and oddly comforting.

The weather was terrible. I had arrived right at the edge of a massive storm front. There was no time to waste with sad stories or explanations as to why I had come on such short notice. I shut the ship up and waded through the snow drifts to where he stood. Navaari hugged me fiercely but let me go quickly so that we could get back on the sled to head to the enclave before the weather became too bad to travel in. I lost myself to the swaying rhythms of the sled as we sped to the only place I could feel safe. When we finally arrived at the enclave I was cold and exhausted. He saw this right away. I never could hide anything from him.

“An'jast'a is visiting her daughter in the neighbouring clan so she is not here or else she would have made supper for you. Go inside put the kettle on for tea and get warm, I am taking care of the sled and the wolves. I will not be long, we will have lots of time to speak and there is much to speak about.”

I didn't argue with him. I hoisted my pack and trudged my way inside. I was looking forward to a hot shower and a cup of tea not necessarily in that order.

On autopilot I opened the front door and dumped my pack on the floor then shrugged out of my heavy winter clothing, hung it up in the closet, slipped off my boots and then took off my mask which I put inside the satchel where I kept it and hung that up with my coat. Then I made my way to the kitchen to put the kettle on for tea, I waited until the water had boiled and then poured it into the tea pot savouring the scent of the tea as it mingled with the boiling water. This was such a familiar action that for a second I almost forgot why I had come here so that when the memory of why came rushing back it brought with it an ache so painful I stopped breathing to try and get past it.

While the tea brewed I decided to go and shower then change into something more comfortable. I picked up my pack and headed to the room Navaari kept just for me. I had clothes here, I had a home here and somewhere deep in my exhausted, grief riddled brain I was grateful. I trudged across the dimly lit living room lost in thought to my bedroom. I dumped my pack on the bed and rifled through it for toiletries and clean underwear, then stood in front of the closet trying to decide what to wear when I heard the front door open and close I smiled because it meant Navaari had finished with the sled and the hounds.

“I'm just going to shower and then get changed because I smell worse than a bantha. I made tea already!” I yelled, when he didn't answer I assumed he was already in the kitchen.

I stood under the powerful stream of water which was little too hot and leaned my forehead against the wall. I was beyond tired but the water felt good. Suddenly a rush of emotion swept through me again but this time I didn't stop the tears. The crying jags always took me by surprise but I had learned to just go with them and let the grief pass through me. I waited until I was done sobbing and then finished my shower. Wrapped in big fluffy towels I made my way back to my bedroom and changed into the most comfortable dress I could find.

I felt a little more human but I was utterly exhausted. In the full length mirror I stared at the reflection of the person I had become. I had lost so much weight that the dress I was wearing hung loose on me instead of fitting as it once had. I now looked ill, wasted away and the dark circles about my eyes were not helping matters. I towel dried my hair but left it down. I did

not know this girl in the mirror. She looked like a broken doll. With a sigh I turned away from the dreadful reflection and turned my attention to the little packet that Thrawn had requested I give to Navaari and wondered if this contained more than just the instructions on what to do that mine had held. Perhaps he had left some sort of message for us both knowing that it would be better if I were not alone to hear his final words. I picked it up and stared at it but there were no memories, no insights and no sensations that he had even touched the thing let alone left any words of comfort behind. Disgusted I tossed it back on the bed and decided it could wait, first I wanted a cup of tea and then, if Navaari had not already been told, somehow I had to break the awful news of Thrawn's death to him and I wasn't looking forward to it one bit.

I wrapped a warm shawl around my shoulders and then because I couldn't put it off any longer I made my way to the living room which was now cozy and cheerful with a fire in the fireplace and candlelight dancing against the walls, Navaari's way of welcoming me home.

I looked up and saw Navaari vanishing into the kitchen, "Hey, did you pour the tea?" I yelled, "Don't put too much milk in it like you usua..." and then I stopped dead in my tracks as Thrawn, or a man that looked an awful lot like him, got up from the chair in the shadows of the corner of the room and stepped into the light.

"Hullo A'myshk'a." He said.

The galaxy stood still and held its breath. So did I.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Navaari appear from the kitchen with a tray which he quietly and quickly set down on the nearest table before taking a step closer to me. I looked at him helplessly and shook my head ever so slightly believing, foolishly, that were he to touch me this spell would break. I turned back to stare at the ghost I was seeing.

"Za'ar?" I whispered, frowning.

He nodded ever so slightly.

I wondered if I had died because I was completely and utterly numb. Even my heart felt as though it had stopped beating. Then sensation and feeling returned in a rush, blood pounded in my ears and my legs buckled. Had Navaari not moved swiftly and caught me I would have landed ungracefully on the floor.

"It is okay little pup." His gentle voice reassured. "I have you."

I clung to him tightly because he was solid and I had no bones. I looked at him as though I had never seen him before in my life and then looked back at the dead man whose body I was certain I had transported to Csilla to be cremated so that his ashes could be spread amongst the stars. None of this could possibly be real but apparently it was.

Of all the emotions that coursed through my body the one that clawed its way to the top first was anger and it hit me like a wall of white hot rage. I let it have its way. It made me solid and whole again, giving me strength. I tore out of Navaari's grip and before anyone could

think to stop me I hauled off and hit Thrawn across the face so hard he stepped back from the force of it.

Still nobody moved or said a word and then, finally, Navaari broke the silence. “This was not what we had agreed to. I do not understand why you think that doing things in this way is clever.” He glared at Thrawn, “She does not like to be surprised in this manner, you are knowing this but still you insist. Now you have only yourself to blame for the aftermath”

I whirled about to stare at Navaari, “You knew?” I could not keep the incredulity from my voice. “You knew he was alive and you didn’t tell me?”

“No, Kycsi’i I did not.” Navaari said. It was the truth. “We heard word of his death a week ago. I expected you would come here sooner or later so I waited for you instead of leading the spring hunt.” He sighed and shot a look of disgust at Thrawn, “He arrived on the planet earlier today although the first I knew of this was shortly before I set out to fetch you. The discussion we had about how best to inform you of what he had done, that he was not dead as you had been led to believe was not productive.”

I just shook my head in disbelief.

Navaari continued, “There was no time to talk about these matters by the landing, you were in no condition for such discussions in such cold, bad weather. I saw in your eyes that haunted look, when I hugged you I knew you were nothing but skin and bones. You look now the same way you did the very first time you were here, a ghost.” He said sounding terribly unimpressed. “I would not have kept this from you and I wanted to be the one to break the news gently but the journey here was an inappropriate place for such a conversation. I wanted you to be somewhere warm and safe.” And I understood that he had been afraid I might do something stupid again, like run off into the storm. He was never ever going to let me forget about that. I scowled but he ignored me and continued. “I did not wish for you to be shocked in this manner but it seems that what I wanted for you played no role in any of this. I am sorry.”

I went to speak but discovered I didn’t know what to say. I made hard fists with my hands, the pain from my nails digging into my palms kept me sane for the moment.

Navaari sighed, shook his head and then he kissed the top of my head lightly. “Try to forgive him, little pup, he had his reasons although I was not agreeing with any of them.”

I clutched Navaari’s hand tightly pulling him to me. “Is this even real?” I asked him in a whisper.

He clasped my face between his hands nodded. “Yes.”

“Merlyn...” The dead man spoke gently but a hand gesture from Navaari shut him down immediately.

“You have done more than enough damage with your ways here, do not make it worse.” Navaari shot a look at Thrawn that would have wilted a lesser man. “This was very poorly

played.” And with that, before I could stop him, he was gone.

The silence that settled about us was deafening. Thrawn rubbed his jaw slowly all the while never taking his eyes off me. He didn’t say a word and it angered me even more so I went to hit him again but he caught my wrist mid strike.

“Once was enough.” He said gently.

I just stared at him. My head was so full of white noise that I couldn’t think straight and it blinded me to the fact that I was standing in front of the man I loved and thought I had lost to death forever. For a moment everything stopped while he waited watching me and then all the anger I had been holding inside exploded.

“You bastard! Do you have any idea of what I went through, what you put me through?” I yelled at him, “Do you have any idea at all?” Still holding my wrist, he waited silently and suddenly the rest of my fury unleashed. “You died!” I shouted, and to punctuate my anger I beat him on the chest with my free hand, curled up in a tight fist. “You were murdered! I saw you in the morgue, stabbed through the heart. Your body was cold and lifeless and I was the one who had to drag it back to your home world, me all alone with your corpse in a box on my ship for weeks. I had hoped it wasn’t really you but they confirmed it with DNA, undeniable proof! I sat through your memorial service, the only human there and it was awful! Do you have any idea what that was like? DO YOU?”

When I finally stopped to take a breath he just stood there letting me hit him and still he said nothing. His strange silence infuriated me more. “I thought you were dead! You let me believe you were dead! How could you do this to me? How Could You?” I would have kept on hitting him but finally he caught this wrist as well. Trapped, hysterical, I struggled and flailed against him, screaming at him. He just held me until my rage ran its course and something else, something less violent and less full of anguish took its place.

I stopped dead and stared into his eyes trying to put all the pieces of this irrational puzzle together but I couldn’t. Then, bereft of anger, I sagged against him and gasped, trying to recall how to breathe, how to stand, how to even think straight only to discover I couldn’t do any of these things well. He let go of my wrists to wrap his arms tightly around me all the while remaining silent, letting me cry. At some point he had managed to pull me back so that we sat on the couch together and when the crying had given way to hiccuping breaths he just held me.

“Are you calm now?” He asked, brushing still damp hair from my face.

I nodded but it was a lie I wasn’t calm at all I was confused, exhausted and numb. If I had been thinking properly I would have smacked him again for asking me that question.

“I’m sorry.” He said. “I know that what you experienced must have been difficult and I’m sorry.”

“Difficult?” I jerked my head up to stare at him in disbelief, beetling my eyebrows together, trying to unravel this new logic. “You were dead and I have been living with this for weeks

dead but now you're not and you think it must have been *difficult*?"

He shook his head and a slight smile graced the corners of his mouth. "I am not dead but Grand Admiral Thrawn is."

I drew a deep raggedy breath and pulled out of his hold to hug my knees tightly to my chest. "But you are Grand Admiral Thrawn." I said slowly wondering if had suddenly started to speak a foreign language neither us had in common.

"Not any longer."

I rested my head on my knees. He stroked my back with the tips of his fingers while he waited for me to catch up. When I finally raised my head to look at him he smiled.

"Then who are you?" I asked.

"Nikätza'arth'pavjäska."

"Za'ar?"

He nodded.

"I don't understand." I shook my head. I was too tired to try and unravel this new turn of events.

He got up and poured two cups of tea from the pot on the tray and handed me one. I welcomed the warmth of the cup and the tea which was heady and sweet. He sat back down at my side and regarded me for what seemed an eternity. When he caressed the side of my face with the back of his hand I didn't respond to it and just watched him warily without moving. He withdrew and sipped from his own cup.

"You pack quite a punch, you know that?" He said instead of answering me right away.

"I should have hit you harder." I growled, the anger was still there lurking beneath the surface.

"I am grateful that you didn't." He replied evenly.

"How is this possible? You're dead, I saw you dead. I carted your corpse halfway across the galaxy."

He nodded, "Well, that was a version of me."

"A version? What do you mean by a ver...." and then the penny dropped. "A clone? The body I took to Csilla was a clone? I've just spent these past many weeks grieving for a clone? You put me through hell for a clone?" I could feel my anger resurfacing again.

"It was the only way."

“The only way?” I asked slowly. I had absolutely no idea how to react to this.

“I always told you that I would do whatever it takes to serve and protect my people. This included dying if necessary.”

“You can’t take care of anything if you are dead.” I told him crossly, slithers of anger resurfacing.

He caressed my face gently. “No, I can’t.” He agreed. “But you made it possible so that I could perhaps use the possibility of death to my advantage. You gave me enough information that I was able to extrapolate a probable where and how and possibly when my death might happen. This made it possible to take precautions against it.” He paused for a moment then said, “When I showed you the cloning facility on Nirauan I was showing you the future, my future. The clone in that tank, the one you asked about was me.”

“You lied to me?”

He shrugged ever so slightly, “I omitted certain facts.”

“That is the same as lying.” I growled.

“I suppose it is.” He replied offhandedly, “It was necessary and the ysalamiri made it possible, given your lovely little gift in that area. You couldn’t know what I was doing, what I was planning, because there was a possibility that none of it would work and given the strange truth your dreams seem to hold I didn’t want to give you false hope based on an experiment that, as far as I am aware, had never been done before.”

I suddenly remembered something Ged had mentioned in passing. “You were transferring your consciousness to your clone? And it worked?”

“Partially.” He arched one eyebrow slightly and smiled. “I wanted to create clones that would not only follow orders but think strategically, logically and be able to lead without the issues that clones seem to have. I wanted to take the best aspects of the donor’s personality and infuse a clone with them to make a better leader.” He studied me for a moment then continued. “I used myself as the first template, I could not ask anyone else to take part in such an experiment if I first did not know what the risks were or even if it was possible. There were other men I wished to use as possible templates for clone leaders, good men with great minds but first I needed to make sure I could transfer specific parts of a conscious mind, the useful parts, the knowledge and the ability to think in many directions first to see if it worked at all.”

“And did it?”

He smiled, “You tell me, you met my clone on several occasions.”

I frowned trying to remember when this could have been and then it suddenly occurred to me. I grabbed his arm and pushed up his sleeve, choking back on a sob when I saw the bond-

bracelet around his wrist glinting in the candlelight.

I traced the wound metal with a trembling fingertip, "I looked for this but it wasn't on your...his...its... body and the *Chimaera's* doctor told me that all his...your... things had been destroyed as per your wishes. I thought maybe it had also been destroyed, lost or taken somehow...." my voice trailed off and tears welled up in my eyes again. "He never wore it, he said it was against regulations and duty forbade it but you...you never took it off." I wondered how I could have missed this.

"No one but I can wear this, no one, not even a clone of me. You know this I've explained how the bio-linking works before, it's based on complete body chemistry not just DNA alone. It should have been your first clue."

His arrogant words infuriated me but I restrained myself from slapping him again. "So when you, he, that man was on base and didn't want to touch me, seemed so cold and unyielding and wasn't wearing this that really wasn't you?"

"No. It wasn't. When have I ever refused you?" He asked.

I gave him a look that could have killed a hutt. "You used me." I stated flatly, "You used me as an experiment?" I shook my head, "A test? You wanted to find out if I could guess which was real and which one wasn't? If he could pass by me then he could pass by the rest of the galaxy is that it?" I would have said more but I found myself bereft of words as my anger at him grew. I could have killed him for what he had done but luckily for him I had learned some self control over the years.

The room felt oppressive and too hot with my anger pushing at every which corner looking for an excuse to fly. I stared at him, waiting for an answer, waiting for words that would make sense out of a situation my brain wasn't handling very well.

He drew a deep breath and began to explain patiently, "I wanted to see if selective memory and conscience transference would work. I wanted to see just how accurate I could make a clone and one of the things I didn't want was anyone discovering the truth of what I was planning. What better way to do this than to involve you? No one knows me as well as you and if the clone could fool you then I knew he would fool the galaxy and if you figured it out then I would have to revamp the process. If he could pass the test and you accepted him as me then I knew this plan had great possibilities. If you discovered that he was an imposter, a clone well..." He gave a slight indifferent shrug. "Then I would have to rethink the process."

"But I didn't see the differences as anything wrong. I just got angry at you...him for being an ass." I snapped remembering back to those strange days when he had seemed so distant, so alien to me. As though he had become a person I didn't really know at all. I had put his strange behaviour down to the stresses of war and combat but now when I thought about it I should have seen it for what it really was.

"I know." He nodded with a slight smile as though this had amused him highly, "The clone knew who you were, had back ground and was aware of the relationship between us, enough to play the part, but he did not have any emotional bond with you nor did he share all of my

memories of everything we have been together so he wasn't interested in you in that way."

"In *that* way?" I just shook my head in bewilderment. "You couldn't even share me with your clone, could you?" He stared at me and I glared right back at him not giving an inch. Eventually he backed off because he knew I was right. Then he made an elegant gesture with his hand as if to dismiss this thought and it reminded me so sharply of the Aristocra, blending the reality that was with this new one, that I felt sick.

He gave a small one shoulder shrug and continued, "I felt it was a risk I was unwilling to take. I would wager that you would have known for certain he was not me if he had taken you to his bed. Even a clone is not exactly the same in personality as the original, he would, I wager, have done things differently. I couldn't risk that and no, to answer your question, I did not want to share you with him." He paused for a moment, "And if you had slept with him I think now you would have been even angrier with me than you already are."

I doubted that last statement very much because I wasn't sure it was possible to be any angrier but didn't say it out loud, "So what, now you're telling me you were protecting me?"

"In more ways than you will probably ever know." He replied cryptically.

I shot him a look. "You let your clone, with only a partial memory transfer run your flag ship during a crucial battle? I have a hard time believing this."

He sighed and I could tell I was trying his patience but I didn't much care. "The only parts of my personality the clone was not given was my relationship and emotional bond to you. He had all he needed to be every bit a leader as I am. What better way to test his abilities as a commander?"

"I'd say he failed the test."

He arched an eyebrow at me.

"He died." I said flatly.

Thrawn shrugged ever so slightly, "So he did but not due to an inability to command. His strategies were flawless, he did the same things I would have done and neither of us could have completely foreseen what happened with a hundred percent accuracy just," he added carefully, "as I have never been fully able to plan for your erratic and unpredictable actions."

He may have been right but it didn't matter. "You must have been planning all of this for a very long time." I said coldly, ignoring his dig at me.

"Yes, but only because you made it possible." He said moving closer to comfort me.

I shrugged his hand off and curled up into myself as far away from him as I could be, making myself small and untouchable. Suddenly another terrible thought occurred to me.

"That's why you stopped taking the evexelhan. It wasn't you the drug was interfering with it

was the cloning process wasn't it?" I shook my head in complete disbelief and when he didn't say anything I pushed. "Tell me the truth! I lost a baby because of that screw up so you damned well better explain this to me!"

The muscles on his jaw clenched. "Yes. Evexelhan had some negative side effects that showed up while trying to start the clone. It inhibited the clone cells' growth."

"Well of course it did," I snarled, "It's a form of birth control." I just stared at him. I wasn't sure I knew this man at all.

"I had no idea you would become pregnant." He said with a touch of sadness in his voice.

I just stared at him as all the grief of that terrible nightmare rushed back to me. My hand went to my belly and tears welled up in my eyes.

He reached out for me, "Tekari..."

"Don't you dare call me that!" I snapped slapping his hand away from me with a surprising savageness. "Right now you do not get to use pet names for me. What you did, what you planned, you left me out of it all and you have no idea of the hell I have been living in these past weeks so you do not get to call me that name. I am not your *beloved one* because no one treats someone they care about like this. No one!" I brushed the tears off my cheeks angrily.

"You're wrong about that." He replied quietly but I ignored his comment.

"When did you ..." I struggled for the right word, "...activate him?"

"Just after you miscarried." His answer was flat and devoid of emotion. We could have been talking about a shopping list.

I blinked at him bringing to mind that awful time and then I recalled the snippet of conversation I had overheard between him and the doctor. "The Wayland project?" I whispered.

He nodded, "Yes."

"Doctor Thracer knew? He knew what you were planning and he never said a word and he knew."

"Yes but he was under orders and sworn to the utmost secrecy."

I shut my eyes tightly and struggled to think in a straight line. "I remember he was so angry at you, I remember he was worried about me but I thought it had to do with the baby...." I could bring to mind the conversation I had overheard with such clarity it almost made me ill. I recited it back to him now flatly, angrily, "The Doctor said, '*And Merlyn, is she part of that business? Have you told her what is going to happen? What you have planned? What about her future? She needs you now more than ever.*' and you replied with: '*I am aware of her needs and her future is not your concern at this time, her health is. When the time is right*"

she will be apprised of the situation.” I paused, “Let me tell you this, your idea of the right timing really sucks.”

His jaw muscles clenched as he heard the words, “He was in charge of the medical aspects of the project. I could not have done all of this without his help.”

“Sarlace’s teeth, I am so stupid! How the hell could I have been so stupid and so blind?” I spat, more hurt than I thought possible.

“No, you are not stu...” He began but I shook my head at him and something in my expression or my abrupt hand gesture shut him up.

“You lied to me! You lied to me all this time and I never even suspected, of course I’m stupid or blind or both! How could you do this to me? how could I not have seen any of this?” Words failed me.

He watched me for a second and then, ignoring my question, continued, “You made a lot of it possible as well, you know. Your visions of my future, the discovery on Myrkr and even your dreams about a reborn Emperor, they all went into helping me formulate this plan of action. I had hoped it would not be necessary to utilize a clone like this but several occurrences in the last few months made me realise that no matter what I did certain events had already been set in motion leading to only a few conclusions, many of which ended badly. There were a few which culminated in my death and the failure to achieve the goal of reuniting the Empire and these were the possible outcomes I planned against.”

“So you know what happened at Bilbringi then?”

He nodded, “Yes, I have my sources and they’ve kept me well informed. I am well aware of what occurred on board the *Chimaera* and how it all played out.”

“I take it that means there are others who know you’re not really dead?”

He let his silence answer for me and I knew a sliver of hate for him in that second. “And you know who it was that murdered you... I mean murdered your clone.”

“I do know and although it was somewhat unexpected it was not a complete surprise.” He nodded. “Well, that is I suspected that there was discord within the clans of the Noghri, so I had a feeling about their loyalty, but nothing indicated that Rukh would actually assassinate the person he was honour bound to protect. The Noghri were allowed to roam with relative ease due to their status, so in the end it could have been any one of them.”

I opened my mouth then closed it again. “If I didn’t know any better I would say you have some latent force ability to see into the future.”

“Not at all, my dear, as I have said, it was you who told me everything I needed to know.” He replied and when I frowned he explained. “Your first vision of my death, the one you had at the art exhibition on Coruscant told me possibly who and probably where. You saw me sitting in a white uniform, which meant I would be a Grand Admiral, on a command seat in a

star destroyer. You also told me there was blood running freely down my chest which meant some sort of bladed weapon would be used. Blasters and your lightsaber do not create wounds that bleed. The only beings I would allow on board of my ship who have bladed weapons would be the Noghri, so that is how I came to these conclusions.” He sipped some of his tea, “I had suspected that it would only be a matter of time before the Noghri saw through the deception of Vader and the Emperor that was keeping them bound in servitude and when that happened I would be the one chosen to pay the price for the destruction of their home-world as I was the figure of authority representing the Empire. It wasn’t difficult to put the clues together. The only real question was when everything would take place.”

I sat still, silently trying to process everything he was telling me, everything that had happened. It all seemed so inevitable when he put into words. “So now what happens? Is the Empire is really dead?”

He drew a deep breath and stared thoughtfully at my face for a moment before answering, “The Empire as we knew it, yes, I believe it is. The New Republic fought harder with less resources than even I gave them credit for and that Jedi master I was using was, well, let us just say it did nothing to renew my faith in that mystical force of yours. I had hoped he would be able to do what the Emperor had done and add a great cohesion to the fleets across light years but his madness was stronger than anything else and he eventually failed me in so many ways.”

He gave a small shrug. “When I returned to normal space from the Unknown Regions after the Emperor’s death it was to unite the people in this galaxy under one rule, one leader not because I wished to replace the Emperor but because everyone will need to work together if they are to face a worse enemy who, make no mistake, will come. When I realized that no matter what I did, no matter what course of action I took the Empire would not return to its former strength, that there would be resistance at every turn and that this campaign of mine might fail, I decided it was time to put one last plan into action. I drew up, along with my clone, the idea for placing Coruscant under siege so that the New Republic’ fleets would be divided and then the battle at Bilbringi for the ship yards should have been easy. I did not take into account that the smugglers and thieves of the galaxy could be united. I underestimated Talon Kaarde’s strange version of loyalty and your little friend, Mara Jade also made some rather surprising choices which helped to shape this outcome. This was, perhaps, my biggest mistake but I had already left the *Chimaera* and was no longer in direct contact with my clone so no matter what happened he was on his own. Even so, ultimately everything we were attempting to do ended with Rukh. My death, or rather to say, the Grand Admiral Thrawn’s death and the leadership vacuum his death left decided everything else. In the end it doesn’t really matter any longer. The Empire, as we know, it is truly gone and what will replace it, I fear, will be so mired down in politics and bickering that if and when an invasion eventually comes no one will be prepared.”

“Except for you.” I said snarkily.

“Perhaps, although it is difficult to prepare for something I know very little about.” He said carefully, ignoring my sarcasm “However, I swore an oath to protect my people and now I am free to do so in any manner I choose. The man the galaxy knew and feared as Grand Admiral Thrawn is dead which leaves me free to do what I can for those who are willing to listen.”

“Your people do not care about you. I was at your remembrance ceremony. You are a disgraced soldier to them and nothing more.” I spat.

“When I say my people, my dear, I am not only speaking about the Chiss.” He replied patiently. “And there are those among my kind who do not see me as an exile or feel I disgraced the name of our people.”

I sighed remembering my conversation with the Aristocra. “So Grand Admiral Thrawn is dead and now what, now you are Nikätza’arth’pavjäska?” I said.

“Yes. It will be easier to move about under the guise of Dantassi warrior.”

“Just like that you switch identities?”

“Yes.”

“But they are just names; you’re still the same person.” I asked a little unsure.

“Yes.” He smiled just a little.

I got up, no longer able to sit still, and paced around the room. It was so much, too much to take in that I didn’t know what to do or say. He let me work through the information without saying another word all the while never taking his eyes off me. Finally, after a very lengthy silence, I stopped pacing to stand in front of the fire. It was warm and comforting but I noticed neither. Tears welled up in my eyes again and I let them fall. I was so tired of weeping for the death of the man I had loved with all my heart but now I didn’t know why I was crying, he was alive and well and I should have been relieved and happy instead I was angry, hurt and very confused. Eventually the silence became too much, he got up and came to me, turning me around gently raising my chin with the crook of his forefinger so that our eyes met but I wouldn’t hold his gaze.

“I am sorry. I did not think it would be so difficult for you to accept this.” He said and he meant it.

I just shook my head at him, speechless. Simple apologies were not going to cut it.

“A’myshk’a...?”

I still didn’t answer him because I didn’t know how to feel or what to say instead I pulled back from his touch and turned away.

“Look at me.” He commanded gently.

I shook my head, “No, this isn’t real, you can’t be real....” I told him while I tried to remember how to breathe. “You were murdered, I saw.. it felt.. no, just no....” words scrambled in my head and tumbled out of my mouth, jumbled and confused. I fought with the dizziness that threatened to engulf me as two vastly different realities crashed together in

an ugly way.

He caught me as I swayed and held my shoulders with warm, strong hands. “Merlyn, look at me, Look. At. Me. I am here and I am alive and I promise you I am very, very real.”

I did as he requested. Tears ran down my cheeks. My heart beat painfully in my chest and there was a rawness deep in my body I couldn't define, couldn't explain. His voice was gentle as he repeated what he had already said so that maybe, just maybe his words would sink in, “I am so sorry you had to go through all of that but there was no other way.”

“No other way? There is always another way. You did not have to do this to me.” I lowered my gaze and stared at the ground shaking my head. News of his death had been a terrible shock, one that I had lived with for long enough now that it was deeply embedded in my body and mind but suddenly seeing that he wasn't dead at all was beyond surreal. I wasn't coping with it very well and this surprised him. Gentle fingers guided my head so that once again I looked into his unfathomable, unreadable eyes.

“Yes, yes I did. You, of all people, had to believe I was dead. You had to believe it absolutely and without question. There are some things that cannot be faked no matter how great of an actress one is and for all your amazing talents being a great actress isn't one of them. You do not do a good job of hiding your emotions. Pellaeon had to see and completely believe in my death so he could retell the story, a credible eye witness to the entire galaxy and you had to believe because without your honest and real grief there was always the chance that someone might start to suspect something wasn't quite right and begin investigating further. The risk was too great. Everyone needed to think, without question, that Thrawn was gone for good.” He sighed. “His, my time with the Empire is at an end and that is for the best for all concerned.”

“Why all the theatre, the whole song and dance about me bringing your body back to Csilla?” I asked unable to stop crying.

He cupped my face with both hands and wiped away my tears with his thumbs. “You speak my people's language; you know Chiss customs and you are a neutral party. You also had your own ship so it made sense that I would choose you to do the honour of bringing the body of Mitth'raw'nuruodo home. No one would question your right to do this or that it should be done and no one else knows enough about Chiss death rites to even consider questioning this action. I needed the body brought back to my home world because on Csilla all they would do is a simple DNA scan to verify it was who you said it was and nothing more. I had been exiled and disgraced, there would be no further investigation into my death and the body would be cremated. I could not risk anyone discovering that this Thrawn was a clone, something that would not have been too difficult if anyone had cared to look deeply enough. I needed a way to get the clone's body out of prying hands and eyes without raising suspicion. I knew that Captain Pellaeon would honour my wishes as I knew you would as well.”

I twisted away from his touch as my anger surfaced again. “There is so much more to that, you used me somehow to bridge a gap on Csilla, you used me for some political gain with the Aristocra. He called me bait. Is that what I was?”

His jaw tightened and I knew I had hit a mark. "I had hoped," he said carefully, "that through you he would see there were advantages in becoming slightly more open to learning about other cultures. I know how good you are with bringing people together, your openness and honesty disarms even the most stoic of creatures. You bridge the gap between humans and Chiss so well it appears effortless and I hoped he would see this and perhaps it would do some good for future relations between our peoples, there was no other motive than that I swear."

I felt numb and when I didn't answer or add to what he had just said he continued, "The man known as Grand Admiral Thrawn needed to be dead to the rest of the galaxy in order that I may continue with what must be done next in peace and on my own terms and so that the rest of the galaxy could move forward. I fear the storm which is coming will be beyond all reckoning." He spoke with such utter conviction that I shivered. "This galaxy no longer wants an Empire, they want something softer, easier and it will be their undoing. If I remained alive I would always be seen as a great threat regardless of I tried to do and, as a threat, no matter what my intentions I would be dismissed and fought against. It would be a pointless waste of time. The New Republic is so wrapped up in their idealistic view that once the Evil Empire is destroyed everything will be perfect that they completely miss the boat, so to speak." He sighed heavily. "Now they will perhaps concentrate on building something up rather than jumping at shadows and, as I said, I am free to live my life and do my work without the constant need for the strategic planning of a war I cannot win. If this galaxy does get invaded then my skills will be required by people who are happy to have them unfettered by bias and prejudice."

I stood still for a long time trying to absorb his words and somehow make sense of it all but I wasn't doing a good job of it. "All of this, all of this elaborate ruse to fool the galaxy into thinking you're dead. You could have let me go on believing you were dead too. I would never have known. You always said I was a complication you didn't need so you could have vanished to live your life without me ... you cou..." but before I could find more to say he stopped me by placing his forefinger gently on my lips.

"I could have," He agreed, "a life without attachments would be easier and for a one single moment that thought did occur to me." He told me carefully.

"But you didn't." I said stupidly, returning my gaze to his face.

His whole expression softened. "No, I did not."

"You could have gone anywhere but you came here."

He nodded, his lips curved into a slightly bemused smile. "I knew you would be arriving here after your time on Csilla."

"The package I had for Navaari made that a given." I said flatly.

"You probably would have come here anyway, I just wanted to make certain of it."

“Why?”

“So that I would know exactly when and where to find you.” He replied.

I just shook my head, “Why?”

“Is it not obvious?” He asked with a frown.

I looked away from him, shaking my head because nothing he did was obvious or easy to understand.

For a long moment the silence between us lay heavy, oppressive and then he gently lifted my chin so that our eyes met once again. Whatever he had to say next he wanted to make certain I not only heard it but that I believed it as well.

“Because I love you,” He caressed my face with the backs of his fingers, “and I am not willing to let you go or live a life without you in it.”

It was the most honest answer he could have given. It was also the one I least expected but most needed to hear. I opened my mouth but before I could argue, counter or contradict him he kissed me as though his life depended on it and, because perhaps my life did, I kissed him back. His kiss was sweet. His body, which pressed tightly against mine so that I could feel the beating of his heart, was very real and warm. His hands touched my face so gently that one would have thought I was made from glass. Pulled back from him and rested my forehead against his chest. He stroked my hair and said nothing. I stood there, crying, unable to come to terms with anything that had happened in the bitter weeks that had passed.

Something inside of me had broken when I had been told of Thrawn’s death but finding him suddenly alive and well had not miraculously fixed it. I leaned into his body, and his arms tightened around me as if he also knew that I was no longer the same girl he had left behind.

“I believed you were dead. Hearing that you had been murdered was the worst moment of my life and I have spent all the time since then trying come to terms with a life without you. Now I find out this was not the truth and I don’t know how I am supposed to...” I couldn’t find the right words.

“There really was no other way to do this.” He replied quietly.

I shook my head because I didn’t believe that. “You broke my heart.” I didn’t think he really understood what it had done to me. “I thought you were dead. Do you not understand this? Don’t you remember what that felt like? Because when you thought I had died you sure as hell were not happy about it when I clawed my way back from the dead zone I was in. Did you think somehow I would not believe it was you? That I would guess what you had done? That I would see all these clues you laid down and figure it out for myself? I wish I was as clever as you are, I wish I was as clever as you seem to think I am but I’m not. I did exactly what everyone else did I believed it was you because in essence it was and there was nothing except your missing bond bracelet to prove otherwise and even that had an explanation of sorts. Now you’re surprised by my reaction? What the hell were you thinking?”

He looked at me carefully, as though it finally dawned on him that for me, learning he was dead, dragging his body to Csilla and then sitting through his funeral and then learning it was all a ruse might have been a tad more difficult than he had thought it would be. "I am sorry, tekari, I am so sorry for everything I have put you through."

But I couldn't look at him. His few words of apology were just not enough.

When I said nothing he bent his head to my ear and whispered, "It was never my intent to cause you so much sorrow. Forgive me."

I understood then, in that single moment, that nothing would ever be the same between us, not as it had been before. I wasn't sure I would ever be able to forgive him for what he had done. When I didn't answer him he sighed and kissed the top of my head. It was enough that I was there and for the moment it was all I had to give.

In an ideal galaxy he would have led me to the bedroom and we would have reacquainted ourselves with each other's bodies until we were too exhausted to do anything else. In an ideal galaxy I would have forgotten that I was grieving, full of unspeakable anger and sorrow in favour of the utter joy in finding him still alive and not dead. In an ideal galaxy none of this would ever have happened at all but if there was one thing I had learned in my life it was that I did not live in an ideal galaxy.

It was incredibly and surprisingly difficult to adjust from grieving over Thrawn's death to rejoicing in the fact that he was very much alive. His physical presence did nothing to help this along, if anything it angered me even more. He shared the same space, he breathed the same air, and he slept in the same bed as me but the distance between us had never been greater.

I felt awkward and uncomfortable around him, wondering how he could have planned such an elaborate ruse in such a way that I had not even thought to suspect that something was up, after all, once he pointed them out to me, all the signs had been there for me to see. I also wondered how he ever could have thought that I would take his sudden return to life all in stride and not be upset by everything that had happened. Perhaps because he had not been the one having to go through all the motions of grief he simply did not understand how deep my feelings in this matter were and I forgot that he was not human. I forgot that he came from a culture that eschewed emotions for logic and rational thought. I was not rational about any of this and I really didn't understand how he could be.

It felt peculiar to watch him drink 'caf or eat lunch knowing at the same time that not so long ago I had sat leaning against the cold stasis box talking to what I had thought was his corpse. My anguish was still very real and very raw. When I hoped no one was around I cried a lot, still feeling that gaping maw of loss and not even his physical presence in my world could ease it. While he slept I would lie awake listening to him breathe, watching his chest rise and fall terrified that he would vanish at any given moment. I knew this was stupid behaviour but I could not help it. Wounded, heart sick and resentful I shied away from him.

During the day, as much as I could, I avoided him because I was irrationally angry at him and when that wasn't possible we tried to act as though everything was normal but it wasn't it was awkward and strange. I no longer knew where I fit in his world and I wouldn't let him touch me. The tension between us pulsed and grew making everyone around us uncomfortable. Eventually I took to hiding from him as much as possible, losing myself in small mundane jobs around the enclave and pretending to be asleep when he would join me in bed.

I spent a lot of time with Navaari who seemed almost terrified to let me out of his sight. When he decided that the sled gear, harnesses and tack all needed to be cleaned and mended thoroughly I was happy for the job which gave me something to do with my hands. I spent time with his sled-wolves, brushing out their winter coats, collecting the wool and generally hanging out with them and was grateful for their uncomplicated company.

As was the way of things eventually news of what had taken place made its way through the enclave and the fall out was even greater. Most of the people who knew me well felt much like Navaari, they were angry at how things had taken place but there wasn't much they could do. Everyone had an opinion about it which, whether or not I wanted to hear, they shared with me anyway. I was glad to have a place to hide from the prying questions and the strangely annoying sympathy.

Not many people spent a great deal of time with the sled wolves, they were working animals not pets as Navaari's friend Kerrjan was fond of telling me but that didn't stop me from spending time with the animals or finding comfort in their uncomplicated company. I had grown up with wild creatures almost on my doorstep and had gotten used to my uncle's jaxes and their ways of showing affection for food.

"You be careful!" Kerrjan admonished one day when he found me sitting with one of the pregnant wolves grooming her carefully. "She's like to bite them as get too close."

I just shrugged. The wolves seemed to like me, there was a strange kind of trust and while I wasn't quite sure where it came from I was happy to accept the fact that they neither snapped nor snarled at me when I was with them. I wondered sometimes if my connection to the force had something to do with this.

"I've experienced worse." I told him wearily and we both knew what I meant. If he had anything to say about the whole Za'ar come back from the dead thing he kept it, thankfully, to himself but it did not escape my notice that he, too, kept a watchful eye on me especially when the weather was bad.

"All of the whelps from this season are spoken for." He said unexpectedly.

I looked up at Kerrjan in surprise. "What made you think I was wanting a pup?"

"Might be good for you start learning how to train one, for when you are wanting to run your own sled."

It had not occurred to me that I would be staying on Hjal long enough to earn or train my

own team of sled wolves. “I don’t think that will ever happen.” I said. “I don’t plan on being here forever.”

“Is this not your home now?” Kerrjan asked, clearly surprised by my answer.

“I don’t know where my home is any more.” I answered with a shrug.

“Is not your mate here?”

I just shrugged again causing him to look at me carefully, speculatively. What could I say to that?

“As you wish.” He had eventually said in his usual taciturn way. “But be careful around the bitches they get snappy when they are pregnant.”

I nodded that I heard him and then ignored his warning completely. Being with the wolves gave me a sort of peace I could not find anywhere else in the enclave.

If Thrawn was hurt by my avoidance he never said anything about it. I had the impression he was giving me space to find my own way back, much as he had tried to do on Nirauan after the miscarriage. He hadn’t really learned from that mistake or maybe he just didn’t know how to make amends. Perhaps he felt that it was enough he had found a way around the terrible visions of his death which had plagued me for so long. In the end it didn’t matter. What was done was done and I could no more undo the damage than I could bring back Lord Vader and so the gulf between us widened.

What surprised me more was that Navaari wouldn’t even speak to him unless he had to and then when they did talk it was usually in hushed angry voices which didn’t help matters at all. I was glad An’jast’a was not around because the current state of affairs in the flat was uncomfortable at best and downright unpleasant at worst and as we were both guests in her home she would have not taken too kindly to the terrible atmosphere we were creating. Eleven days after returning to Hjal, sometime in the early hours of the dawn things came to a head.

I woke up with a gasp disoriented and half caught in a dream, or at least what I thought was a dream until the man who lay in the bed beside me stirred but did not wake. I stared at Thrawn, sitting for a long time hugging my knees to my chest, looking at him but seeing, superimposed over his sleeping face, the face of the version of him I had seen dead. I could not shake this image from my mind and the grief I had lived with for the past weeks came flooding back like a slap. I got out of bed and made my way to the kitchen to put the kettle on. I wasn’t sure how to proceed with my life as it currently was but I knew how to make tea and the familiarity of this action was soothing.

I poured a large cup and then slipped on my heavy coat and fur lined boots to head out to the south door to my swinging bench, a special place that Kerrjan had made just for me. I brushed off the snow and sat down, cradling my heavy pottery mug in my bare hands for warmth. It was still mostly dark out but dawn was not far off. The storm that had ravaged the enclave on my arrival had long tired itself out and left perfect stillness in its wake.

The tea sent wisps of white steam dancing in lazy swirly into the bitterly cold air but it was still too hot to drink. With the tips of my boots I swung the heavy wooden bench back and forth trying to make sense out of my world but it was just too much like hard work. I was exhausted from all of it. Adjusting to the fact that Thrawn was alive and not dead was far more difficult than I could have ever imagined and I didn't understand why. The fury I had first felt upon seeing him had gone into hiding and what had replaced it was still to be determined. At the moment I was in a strange sort of limbo and I didn't know how to move forward.

When I heard the door open behind me I smiled and brushed off the rest of the snow from the bench to make space for Navaari. The wood creaked as he sat down and pulled out his pipe, tapped it against the side of the bench to knock out the ashes and then set about filling it with fresh tobacco. When he lit it the air filled with the sweetness of the smoke. It was a comforting scent.

"You should be asleep." He said mildly.

"So should you." I replied sipping my tea slowly.

"It seems I have grown accustomed to An'jast'a at my side and her absence leaves me restless. What is your excuse?"

I gave him a sad little smile. "I just can't sleep. When I sleep I dream and in my dreams I still see Za'ar dead. I know he's alive but in my head I still see him in that horrible cold stasis box. Now I'm so scared that if I do fall asleep I will wake up and he really will still be dead, that all of this is not real. I am so angry at what he did that I can't be happy he's alive. I'm terrified to breathe. I can't go through that again, I can't and I'm so scared that I will never be able to get past this moment in time. I don't know how to live with him anymore." I said looking up at Navaari, "I love him so very much and I should be deliriously happy that he's alive, that he found a way to cheat his death but I'm not and I don't know why."

"Oh that's not so difficult to unravel." Navaari replied taking a long draw from his pipe.

I raised my eyebrows at him.

"Little pup, he kept you in the dark about his plans, he lied to you about what he was doing and he put you through one of the worst possible traumas that a person can go through by making you experience his death, carry his body to his home world and sit through his memorial service. You mourned his loss as though it were real because for you it was real. It has torn you apart; I see it every time I look at you. He made you an unwilling accomplice to what has to be one of the greatest deceptions your galaxy has ever known placing a burden on your shoulders which no one should have to carry especially not a bond-mate. No wonder you do not know what to think or feel. Your grief is very real and your body remembers this even if logically you are knowing it is no longer true. You, especially you, cannot switch off these emotions easily; it will be taking a lot of time for you to come to terms with all that has happened and perhaps even longer to forgive him and heal."

I shrugged. I didn't think I would ever be able to forgive him or heal. "What am I supposed to do?"

Navaari, who knew me just too well, gave me a speculative look and took another draw on his pipe sending sweet scented smoke into the air with his exhale. "Well, I have some thoughts on that if you would like to be hearing them."

"I'm all ears." I said making a face.

"Come tracking with me. You still have much to learn and I think it will be doing do you good to get away, be putting some distance between you and your mate. You will have time to think and come to terms with all that has occurred and perhaps even learn to forgive him." He replied.

I stared at my tea for a moment and then nodded. I wasn't so sure about the forgiving part but the getting away part sounded just fine. "Okay."

He raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. "Okay?"

"Yes, I will go with you or were you expecting me to argue?"

He chuckled. "I was but only because you always argue with me but good that you do not, you would lose in this case anyway. You cannot be staying here with things the way they are, all this tension and anger, one of you will break irreversibly and I am worried that it will be you."

"I am already broken Navaari." I told him with a slight shrug.

He took a very deep breath and wrapped his arm around my shoulder, pulling me close to him, holding me tightly. "Not yet little pup, not yet but this impasse you are both at will eventually shatter and I fear that he will not be the one to pick up the pieces. You believed you had lost him forever and he is a part of who you are. You have been living in a place where he is neither alive nor dead, the in between with ghosts you cannot let go of but you cannot stay there forever and you know this. Right now you hate him just enough that given the slightest push it will darken your spirit forever. I would not see that happen to you, after all that you have been through, I would save you from that. I would not see you become bitter and angry, broken and forever tainted by a love that was lost then found only to be lost again because neither of you know how to move beyond this moment."

"You sound like Ma'kehla." I grumbled.

Navaari just smiled. "I am much older than you I have learned a few things in my days. Ma'kehla is not the only one who understands the ways of the heart. I have already lost one child I don't aim to lose another."

"I'm not your child Navaari." I sighed.

He shrugged and made a dismissive sound. "Perhaps not by blood but in here you are." He

tapped his chest, above his heart. "Love is love Kycsi'i; do not underestimate my love for you just because we are unrelated by genetics."

"I'll keep that in mind." I said with a small smile. "You know I love you too, right?" I added because it somehow needed to be said.

"I do but it's nice to be hearing it now and again."

I just nodded and drank my tea and when my cup was empty I rested my head on Navaari's shoulder to enjoy the silence and his presence for a while.

"How soon can we leave?" I asked eventually.

"As soon as you are packed and ready to go." He said.

I sighed and then got up. "Okay then, I will be ready in an hour." And before he could say anything I had vanished inside.

I had learned from my time with Navaari that one did not need much on a tracking and hunting trip. There wasn't much room on the sled for extras and packing light was a must. As I hurried about the bedroom, quietly gathering my things Thrawn woke. He watched me silently but I didn't explain what I was doing and he didn't ask. It was pretty obvious anyway.

Once I had packed what I would need I left to shower, while there were a few lodges along the ways Navaari hunted they were far and few between. Such creature comforts as hot showers were not something that occurred daily while on a long trek.

When I was done I could hear Navaari and Thrawn arguing loudly in the kitchen with hard, angry voices. I knew it was about me but I didn't really care. I slipped quietly into the bedroom and got dressed, grabbed my pack and made my way to the kitchen but stopped short of entering to listen.

I heard Thrawn sigh. "I do not need another lecture Kirja'navaar'inkjerii."

Navaari snorted. "You think I am wanting to lecture you? We are so far beyond that."

"You do have that look on your face." Thrawn replied airily.

"Do I indeed? There are no words for what you have done and I am so angry with you that I am unable to voice my feelings on this matter, not that you are caring about this anyway. You do what you will and the emotional well being of others does not enter into it. I understand this but she does not so it is not me you must make your peace with."

I shivered at the underlying fury in Navaari's voice. It was like listening to a disappointed father berate his son and I had never heard anyone speak to Thrawn this way before.

"She will get over this and come around to see that I had the right of it." I heard Thrawn say softly.

Navaari snorted. "If you believe that then you are as stupid as you are insensitive."

"And you are being insulting." Thrawn said with a touch of annoyance finally lacing his words.

"There will be no debate on this. The decision has already been made. She is...."

"You do not have the right to...."

I took a deep breath and walked into the kitchen. Both men stopped mid sentences and looked at me, one with love and compassion the other with more questions than answers.

I hoisted my pack over my shoulder, "I'm ready. Let's go." I said to Navaari.

"Merlyn..." Thrawn began but Navaari cut him off.

"You have no say in this matter Nikätza'arth'pavjäska. She is my adopted kin and this is my house. I have the last word here not you and she has made her decision."

I watched them both with wary eyes. I had never seen things so tense between them.

Thrawn's jaw tightened in anger as he spoke, "She is my mate so I think ..."

"Do I have a say in this?" I asked interrupting before it got out of hand. "Or do you two just want to fight over me like sled-wolves over a bone all day?"

Navaari took a deep breath, clenching his jaw to bite down on his anger and Thrawn just folded his arms across his chest. I took both gestures as a yes.

"I'm going hunting with Navaari. I need to time to think about everything and I can't do that here in this flat. This is not my home it belongs to Navaari and An'jast'a so Thra... I mean Za'ar do us all a favour and stop acting like you own the place, you don't. You are a guest here just like me." I watched as a myriad of expressions flashed across his face not the least of which was shock at the bluntness of my words.

For a moment I thought he would argue with me but he stayed very still and waited so I continued. "Navaari is right you know, it is his house and even though you named me and brought me into the Dantassi world, this is his enclave, his home and under the Dantassi rules we both swore to abide by I am his family. You don't have a say in what I do." As I spoke I felt a strange sense of coming into my own. "Especially now."

"Merlyn you cannot ..." Thrawn began but I stopped him from speaking with a sharp flick of my hand.

"Shut up!" I told him firmly, "Just shut up." I took a deep breath to try and quell the sudden anger and hurt that had flared up in my gut then to make sure he really understood what I was about to tell him I stared him straight in the eyes.

“I love you, I love you more than anything in the galaxy but right now I can’t look at you or bear to be in the same room as you. No one should have to experience what I did and I don’t care if you thought I would handle it better than I am. I also don’t give a wamprat’s ass what your reasoning behind it all was. You put me through hell. I believed you had died and that I had lost you forever but it was all just a huge lie. I’m still trying to come to terms with Grand Admiral Thrawn’s death never mind the complication of his sudden rebirth with a different name. Maybe it’s easy for you to switch like that but I am having a really hard time so no, you don’t get to say a word to me about what I can and cannot do right now or about what you think is best for me or any other life shattering decisions you feel you need to make on my behalf.” I could feel tears well up in my eyes and I sighed, trying to fight off the unwanted emotions that washed over me, “You have so much to answer for that I don’t even know where to begin and do not get me started about what happened on Csilla. When you refused to allow me to bond with you in any official capacity you gave me the right to choose what I wished to do with my life so now I am exercising that right and you have to respect it.”

He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. His face told me he did not like this sudden turn of events, it was not going according to his plans but I really didn’t care as I waited for him to answer me.

“If this is what you wish then I will abide by it but I don’t think that running away from your emotions will solve the issues at hand.” He replied carefully and the uncertainty he now felt was so strong I could taste it. He had really believed that I would just accept his miraculous return to life without blinking an eye. I shook my head in disgust. Sometimes men, no matter what species, were incredibly stupid.

“Really? I said shaking my head. “Well maybe it isn’t, but it’s my choice to make. You cannot stop me and you cannot protect me by lying to me to cover up the truth.”

“I am bound to you, protecting you is my duty.” He replied as if that somehow explained it all.

I stared at him for a long moment and suddenly tired of those words, tired of this argument, tired of everything I said, “Then I release you from your bond and you no longer have to bother with my protection anymore!”

I heard Navaari suck in a breath but he didn’t say anything.

Surprise and hurt flashed briefly across Thrawn’s face and he took a step towards me, “Tekari, please you need to rethink wha...” he started to say something but I cut him off.

“We’re done.” I shook my head. “If you are still here when I return then perhaps we can begin again but I can’t do this, or live here as we are right now. I can’t bear to be with you. I am still walking with your ghost every day and yet you live. How am I supposed to deal with that? How?” I brushed angry tears from my face, “You are free to do what you want. I release you from the promise you made to me because the man who made that promise is dead. I carried his body to Csilla and I sat through his memorial service. Perhaps he was just a clone but I believed he was someone I loved and trusted. I don’t know who you are anymore but I

know you are dead to me.”

My words left perfect stillness in their wake and when no one spoke to break the awful spell I turned to Navaari and nodded. “Whenever you are ready, I’ll be with the wolves getting the sled and the gear.” And with that I spun around and left them to finish whatever remained of their angry discussion.

We travelled far the first few days, not saying much beyond what needed to be said. The weather was fine and the wolves ran happily. I wasn’t sure where Navaari was leading us and I didn’t much care. Broken and sad I sat on the sled as counterbalance and swayed with its odd rhythm as though I were caught in a far away dance with a ghost who never really existed. It wasn’t hard to withdraw especially as Navaari was also quiet and brooding. I let time pass by without notice and enjoyed the subtle changes that spring was bringing to the world. Eventually, Navaari let me know that we were headed northwards near Chjelahn. There would be less thaw and more snow as well as better weather in the area. We would end up at the enclave situated close to the North Range Mountains where An’jast’a was staying there, helping her youngest daughter who was in the late stages of a difficult pregnancy.

I wasn’t sure how she would feel about Navaari bringing me along but I kept my mouth shut. According to him I was family and if anyone had anything to say about it they would be dealing with him. He wasn’t in the mood for big discussions and I didn’t want to argue with him so I said nothing and did as he instructed. I was happy not to have to think about anything or make major decisions. It was nice to have instructions and guidance that were clear and concise. It was a long trek by sled especially as we deviated often so he could show me places of interest as well as instruct me along the way. We fell into a routine which did us both good. The hours became days and the days shifted into weeks. Time passed easily which surprised me a little.

I soon discovered that if I had thought I had learned a lot from my time on Hjal under Navaari’s tutelage before it was nothing compared to now. He seemed hell bent on teaching me everything he knew as though jamming my head full of knowledge about tracking and hunting skills would chase away the demons we both knew lay in waiting for the right moment to pop out. I was grateful for the distractions and mostly by the time we were done for the day, had put up the shelter or made it one already existing I was flat out too exhausted to do more than eat and sleep.

When I had last been on Hjal for a long period of time, after I had recovered from my brush with death after Endor, Navaari had taken me trekking to teach me Jhal’kai skills but we had never gone too far from the home enclave. Now as we travelled northwards through parts of the planet I had never been to before I understood more and more why the Dantassi had chosen this world to colonize all those years ago. It was extraordinary.

I marvelled in sights I had never seen before, tracked creatures I had only ever heard tales of or read about and learned a great deal about myself but still we did not discuss the one thing we really needed to, Thrawn. I had never known Navaari to hold a grudge or be so angry at any one person for so long but it wasn’t as if I was in any fit shape to talk to him or council him about any of what had happened. So we danced carefully around the subject and tried very hard not to bring Thrawn up at all.

I carried the terrible grief around like a too heavy pack. It weighed me down and made me melancholy. The memory of Thrawn's death mixed with the knowledge that he was actually alive and well was strangely difficult to process. I felt betrayed and relieved all at the same time. I was furious at being left out of his plans, feeling as though he not trusted me to keep his terrible secrets but underneath it all I grudgingly understood that he had done exactly what he had promised he would do. He had taken all my advice, my dreams and visions of the future and he had managed to cheat his own death very cleverly. I tried not to let this thought worm its way into my anger but it did.

Navaari allowed me my space. I know he worried that I might do something crazy but I had learned that lesson a long time ago even if he did not think this was the case. So that he would not fret I kept my feelings to myself, working through the now unjustified sorrow to try and come to terms with reality. It was a slow and difficult inner journey. Still, as was the way of most things, the passage of time made the anger less sharp and one night nearly two months after we had left the enclave the damn of pent up emotions finally broke.

We were staying at one of the many permanent hunting lodges that had been built across the planet's main trade and track routes. These were small, rustic buildings with the basic amenities such as hot and cold running water, heat, a place to shower, sleep and cook if needed. All Dantassi who tracked, hunted or even just traversed the planet knew where to find these shelters. Navaari, who had learned from past experience, knew how far I was willing to go without at least being able to shower and had planned the trip accordingly.

We stayed longer at this one because we had been caught by an unexpected spring storm which had been too vicious to try and set up a temporary shelter so he had driven hard to reach this place and I had been grateful for it. For four days straight the blizzard raged about us and with each passing moment I had felt the pressure of words and emotions bubble upwards until the damn finally burst.

I woke up crying and had been unable to stop the flow of tears or sadness, which seemed to pour out of me like bitter poison. I had been dreaming, oddly enough, about Lord Vader as well as my birth mother but I couldn't quite recall what the dream had been about, just that it had been very sad. Not wanting to wake Navaari, I wrapped myself up in my warm coat and snuck out to sit by the entrance. He found me there sobbing uncontrollably. I thought when he opened the door he would yell at me for bugging off but instead he just joined me and held me tightly until the tears stopped then he motioned for me to come inside and get out of the wind and blowing snows. He made tea and poured me a cup knowing that now the topic we had both kept so close to our chests was now open for discussion.

We talked for a long time. In the end it was good to get all the feelings out into the open and discover that I wasn't quite as furious as I had been. Mostly I was just incredibly sad but even that emotion was shifting into something else as the grief I had felt for the death of a man who wasn't really dead at all receded slowly.

I had been given plenty of time to think about all that had happened to me eventually coming to the conclusion that the universe hated me just a little. Navaari only laughed when I told him this, reminding me of all the good things that had graced my life. It was hard to be self

indulgent and melancholy for long around Navaari. He had a way of disarming self pity that was effortless.

“I’m not very good at this relationship thing.” I said crossly, “I seem to incite men to do crazy things.”

“Love does that Kycsi’i not you.” He replied. “And you are a remarkably wilful creature which can be quite confusing to men.”

“Love!” I snorted ignoring his other comment completely because I couldn’t refute the statement at all.

“You do not agree?”

I had only made a face because he was right.

He watched the play of emotions across my face. “Do you truly no longer love him? Is it really your wish that you go your separate ways now?” He asked, concerned.

“No and no.” I grumbled, “The stupid thing is I do love him. I love him so much it seems impossible. I spent so much of the time we had together terrified that I would lose him and then suddenly I did. The worst thing that could happen happened. I dreamed it, then I lived through it and now I don’t know what to do because none of it was real.”

“It was very real.” Navaari countered. “Do not ever think it wasn’t. You believed him to be dead and you grieved. You saw his corpse, you returned it to Csilla and you sat through the funeral. That is about as real as it can get. Nothing can undo what you experienced and you will carry this for your entire life and should anyone ever ask you about it, question it, you will be able to tell them this truthfully.

“But?” I asked because there had been a “but” at the end of Navaari’s words.

“But he is not dead.” He replied simply as if this explained every single mystery in the world.

“So what? Are you saying I shouldn’t be angry with him? But you were furious with him...you were...”

He held up his hand for peace and I complied. “I was and I still am. He treated you with great disrespect. He is your Ta’kasta’cariad, he knows you so he should have known better than that. He acted without taking into consideration your emotional attachment or the fact that your species is not as well schooled in suppressing deeply anchored feelings. I told him to wait, to allow you some time to get used to the idea first but he said it would not matter, either way you would probably feel the same. You would be angry and resentful and no amount of softening the blow would change this. Perhaps he was right. You can be incredibly stubborn when you set your mind to a thing.” He stopped to drink his tea and then continued, “My own feelings in this matter are irrational because my attachment to you is irrational and I would not be having this any other way. Simply put, he hurt you and that angered me. But I wonder how much deeper and irreparable your grief would be if he had

not managed to plan this elaborate scheme and survive.”

I watched the contents of my cup for a really long time then said, “I don’t really know why he went to all that bother.” There was petulance in my words which made me sound surly and childish mostly because I knew Navaari had hit the mark dead on.

He made a noise of disbelief. “Pshh, of course you do, he loves you more than he ever wants to admit, he found a clever way to avoid death to be with you because he made you the promise that he would listen and honour your wishes for him to, how did you put it, take care of himself? He is not a man to break his word easily. I do not like how he dealt with you in his plans, his lack of empathy for your grief is astounding, but his reasoning was pure and simple. He had to choose which world he wished to be in. He had to decide what it was he was willing to give up and leave behind. In the end even if we are not liking his methods, he chose you over everything else. I know you would have eventually found a way to move beyond losing your mate but I am grateful you do not have to. Now you must find a way to forgive him his lack of communication skills with you in this matter and try to remember that he acted out of love as well as self preservation.”

When he put it like that I wasn’t sure why I was angry at Thrawn anymore but I wasn’t quite ready to forgive him yet either.

“How much further until we reach An’jast’a?” I asked after a long silence.

“A week, maybe two. Depends on the weather. Why are you tired of me?” He asked with a teasing grin.

I made a face. “No, but I really, really want a very long, hot bath.” While I was deeply grateful that the small hunting lodges we managed to find along the way had some semblance of warm water and showers nothing compared to soaking in a bathtub full of really hot bubbly water.

Navaari shook his head. “Too soft and spoiled you are.” He teased.

Maybe he was right but I didn’t care. “Well it’s good that you love me anyway.” I told him as I got up to go to bed, kissing him on the cheek before I turned in. “Thank you.”

“For what?” He asked in surprise.

“For everything but mostly for letting me be with you and listening.”

Navaari just nodded and smiled then shoed me off to bed as though I were a six year old. The next day we made a significant dent in the journey to the nearest enclave and somehow I felt lighter and more free than I had in a very long time.

We arrived at the enclave a week later just in time to celebrate the birth of An’jast’a grandchildren, twins, which was something of a rare occurrence among the Dantassi. It was cause for a great celebration so for a time I forgot about all my worries and small problems to celebrate new life. An’jast’a had come out early to help care for her daughter because the

pregnancy had been a difficult one and everyone was very concerned for both the mother and the children. I was relieved to hear the birth had gone better than expected but the unexpected wash of memories it brought back made me melancholy. If anyone noticed they didn't say anything and I hoped they would just put it down to me being an irrational human.

On the third day I was introduced to An'jast'a's daughter E'mirji, her husband and their babies. For a moment I knew a terrible pang of sadness at the loss of my own child but I covered it up and it passed quickly so that when I was offered one of the twins to hold it was an honour I accepted happily. The tiny being seemed content cradled in my arms and I was more than willing to oblige him, rocking him gently humming some long forgotten lullaby. While I had no connection by family or birth to An'jast'a or her daughter I felt welcome just the same. Her bonding to Navaari had not given him any familial rights to her children or their children but the legalities of it all didn't seem to matter. Family was family and love was love and for the first time since I had left Thrawn standing alone in Navaari's kitchen I missed him. The ache of that emotion surprised me.

Oddly enough it was An'jast'a who ended up being the one I poured my heart out to. She found me late one night sitting in a quiet corner of the living room of the guest quarters we shared crying softly. I had always assumed that Thrawn would have told Navaari and An'jast'a about the miscarriage but that was not the case and when the words came tumbling out of my mouth in a messy jumble she just did what all mothers do, she held me and gave me comfort.

Slowly, with just the right questions, she drew out the whole story of what had happened between Thrawn and myself from the time I learned I was pregnant until the moment I left the enclave with Navaari. From the look on her face, while Navaari might have explained some of it he had not told her everything and she was none too happy about how Thrawn had behaved. It felt good to talk about it with someone who wasn't directly involved and when I was done talking she made tea and gave me some advice of her own which I listened to carefully and took to heart.

"I am sorry about your child." She said after a lengthy silence had passed. "Had I know I would have been more careful..."

I stopped her quickly, "No, it's fine, I'm fine really. I love seeing the twins, they're beautiful. I am so grateful you let me be a part of all of this. You've all made me feel so welcome, so loved and such a part of the family that I can't even begin to express how good that has been for me. She had a hard pregnancy but she made it through just fine and now she has two beautiful babies. It gives me hope which I suppose is silly but..." I shrugged not finishing my sentence because what I wanted to say seemed now beyond my reach.

"Hope is never silly, dear, and you have overcome far too much to give up on what it is you know you have."

I looked at her in puzzled at first and then in wonder as the reality of it all hit me. I nodded that I got it, that I understood what she was trying to tell me without actually voicing it out loud. It all came down to a single action and for the first time ever I put it into words, "He

cheated death to be with me.” I said quietly.

She smiled and nodded. “Yes, child, he did.”

And suddenly I knew who I wanted to be with and where I wanted to be and neither of those where here.

We stayed for a month helping out where we could and I enjoyed the time I had with the babies as well as getting to know An’jast’a’s daughter but I grew restless and it did not go unnoticed.

One evening, while we were eating, An’jast’a told Navaari he had to take me home, “It’s time for you to go back and I’ll not be here for much longer now, E’mi is doing fine and soon enough I’ll be underfoot. Besides, she has many here who want to help out including her husband’s mother.” She looked at me. “You’re done with your ghosts now aren’t you?”

I nodded.

“Take her home before it’s too late.” She said to Navaari and with that the matter was closed. The next day we packed, said our goodbyes and headed back.

The return journey took a lot less time because we didn’t deviate from the straight line or stop as often on the way. It was early summer. Or what passed for summer on Hjal at any rate which meant long days and very short nights. Even though it was nearly midnight when we returned it was still mostly light. The sky had taken on that strange eerie half light quality of early summer colouring the world in dusky shadows. The snow was crunchy from thawing during the day’s warmth and then re freezing as the temperatures sank down to the freezing mark after the sun had sunk low in the sky. In a couple more weeks there were be no more snow on the low lying grounds and for a very short time much of the tundra around the enclave would be filled with all manner of wildflowers and vegetation. If we had waited any longer to return we would not have been able to use the sled and as it was we could only travel late in the evening when the temperature cooled the snow enough so it wasn’t too mushy. We were lucky and the weather held so that in just three weeks we crossed the threshold of the enclave and we were home. We had been gone just over four months but it felt more like four years.

I helped Navaari clear the sled and get the wolves settled in their respective stalls in the large barn like building. They were shedding their winter coats which made them look scruffy since they scratched and great patches of fur fell away to reveal a soft, lighter summer coat. It would be my job to comb them so that most of the winter fur could be saved, spun and used for clothing. The wolves’ fur was surprisingly soft once it had been washed, carded and spun. Once I had housed and fed the wolves Navaari told me I could go and that he would see to the rest of the work. He knew I was dying to shower and find Thrawn not that I had said anything but he knew me well enough by now that words were not needed. It was a reunion I looked forward to but this feeling was mixed with great trepidation.

I made my way across the large quad to the main entrance and found myself oddly nervous. I knew it was quiet because it was so late but it felt deserted and strange to be back after so

long under the open sky. I opened the door to Navaari's flat and knew instantly no one else was there. There wasn't anything unusual about that, Thrawn was a part of the enclave and summer was the time for many projects and meetings, repairs and new building. He was probably off somewhere helping out.

I stripped off my heavy gear and hung it up then went straight to the 'fresher to strip out of the clothes I had been wearing for several days, wrinkling my nose in disgust at myself. Navaari was right I was soft but it made me smile. I rejoiced in the kiss of the hot water on my skin as I stood under the shower. I felt as though I were washing away the past not just sweat and grime as I scrubbed my skin clean so hard it turned pink. I relished the process of turning myself from scruffy, unwashed tracker into a clean girl again but it took a while. I was deeply grateful that the enclave had an unlimited supply of hot water.

It was only when I had finished my shower and returned to my bedroom wrapped up in a large towel, did I realise that not only was Thrawn not at home but all traces of him were gone. The bedroom was clean and devoid of anything he had ever owned. For a moment I stood looking to see if he had left anything behind but there was nothing. I shouldn't have been surprised after what I had said to him the day I had left with Navaari but I was. My heart sunk. Just for a second I shut my eyes tightly, squeezing away the unwanted tears that had suddenly found themselves there.

We had taken too long to return and I guessed he had decided that he had waited for me long enough. I couldn't really blame him given the circumstances, after all I would not have wanted to stay with someone who had told me they no longer wanted me around, but it was still a shock. I wasn't certain what was worse, the grief I had felt with the news of his death or the emptiness I felt now. We never seemed to catch a break. For a moment I let the reality sink in and then, because there was nothing else I could do, I picked out some clean clothes and got dressed. I had let him go and it was foolish of me to expect him to wait for me to find my way back even though part of me had hoped he would.

With a deep sigh I went to the kitchen and set the water to boil. Halfway through making tea I realised, to my annoyance, that I'd left my pack on the floor near the main kennels. So before Navaari could find it and give me a lecture on leaving my stuff lying around I slipped on a pair of shoes and headed back across the main quad to the barn to find my pack right where I had dumped it. I looked around for Navaari to let him know that the tea was brewing but he was already gone. Instead, to my surprise, I found that one of the young wolf pups had managed to escape the holding pen and was trying to dig his way into the feed store.

"You little bugger!" I told him off as I dropped my pack to pick him up. He struggled and wriggled, half snarling, half licking my face. I knew he wasn't really a threat in spite all the growling because he was too small and he was wagging his tail. For a moment I forgot about everything as I cuddled the little animal, burying my face deep into his still soft puppy fur. I was so lost in thought I didn't hear Kerrjan walk in to stand near me.

"Here you are." He said causing me to nearly jump out of my skin, giving the puppy I held a big enough fright that he nipped at me with sharp teeth. "Huh, I see you've met our newest escape artist."

“He was trying to get into the food. He got out of his pen, I think.” I explained as I soothed the animal wriggling in my arms into more or less staying still for a few seconds.

“He’s a pest.” Kerrjan said tartly. “Always getting into things he shouldn’t. Can’t keep him locked up, he always finds a way to escape. Good that you found him when you did or he’d have wrecked havoc trying to get at the feed bin.”

I smiled and gave the pup in my arms a kiss. I felt a strangely powerful sense of kinship with the small animal in my arms but for the life of me I could never have explained why. “He’s adorable.” I said.

“Hrmpf,” Kerrjan snorted studying me for a moment. “You are the first person I’ve seen that he allows to hold him like that. Usually he goes for anyone that comes near him with a surprising amount savagery for one so small. He was the runt of Gisch’s litter. He’s around seven weeks old now though he looks younger and he’s into everything. I didn’t think he’d make it because he was too small, too sickly when he was born but your Ta’kasta’cariad had a hand in keeping him alive. Turns out the pup survived against the odds and even thrived although he’s still under weight and too small for his age. It was suggested you might like to train him.”

“Oh?” I said careful not liking the way my heart skipped a beat at the mention of Thrawn.

“He felt, when you returned, that you might be needing something to keep you occupied. Now I see he was right. The whelp has taken to you.”

I sighed and put the puppy down where it sat strangely quiet at my feet as if to prove Kerrjan right. “Keep me occupied?” I asked.

“Looking after something has a way of taking a person’s mind off their troubles, I suppose, and this one will definitely keep you busy if you want to train him right.”

I frowned. “I thought you said we couldn’t make pets of the wolves, they are too wild.”

“Since when have you ever listened to anything anyone says about such matters?” Kerrjan retorted. “And even I am mistaken on occasion. It seems you won’t be getting rid of him any time soon. He’s been trained for indoors but he’s still young and he has quite the mind of his own, you’ll have to keep an eye on him.”

I was a little confused at the direction this surreal conversation had taken but the pup had laid his chin across my foot and stared up at me as if to say *‘you are mine so don’t even dare think about saying no’*. “An’jast’a won’t be happy to have him in her house.” I remarked with a frown.

Kerrjan just gave me a look and shrugged. “Oh I don’t think she’ll be too concerned as other living arrangements have been made for you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked a little alarmed.

“I’m not the one to be putting this question to.” He replied, “He is.” And he gestured with his head to the figure standing silhouetted in the doorway.

“Wait, what?” I began but Kerrjan just flapped his hand impatiently at me.

“Turn the lights out when you leave and either take the whelp with you or make sure his kennel is well secured. As I said he’s good at getting out.” He turned to go but paused and then said, “And for goodness sake keep the yelling down to a minimum and try not to kill each other, you have both put this enclave through more than enough nonsense as it is and to be perfectly honest about it we’ve all had enough drama from the pair of you to last us a life time.” And before I could even think to reply he was gone.

I stood holding my breath as Kerrjan left and Thrawn walked into the light. The pup at my feet growled softly in a way that meant business. I didn’t think that such a small creature would attack a grown man but I picked him anyway and hushed him, grateful to have something warm to hold onto so that no one could see how much my hands trembled.

“Hullo A’myshk’a,” Thrawn said carefully, “Welcome back.”

“Za’ar?”

“Were you expecting someone else?” He asked taking a step closer to me. The little wolf pup in my arms raised his hackles so I held his muzzle gently until he stopped and licked my hand instead.

I shrugged trying to sound nonchalant and failed spectacularly. “I thought you’d left the enclave. All of your things are gone from my room at Navaari’s. And after what I said to you before we left... well I thought you had gone for good.”

He cocked his head to one side. “Why would I leave?” He asked genuinely surprised at the question.

“I broke our bond. I told you I no longer wanted to be with you?”

“Ah,” He smiled ever so slightly and nodded, “You were angry with me and rightly so but only the Elder could officially undo a bond and only I could request he do so. I am the one bound to you under Dantassi law not the other way around. Even then, I doubt he would, in this case, comply. Didn’t Kirja’navaar’inkjerii tell you this? He knows the rules as well as I do.”

I shook my head. Navaari had failed mentioned this to me but then again I had also never really asked him either.

“I see.” He said thoughtfully, “Well, I felt it would be prudent to wait a little and see if you still felt the same way about me, about us, when you returned.”

I swallowed down the sudden fear I had felt and replaced it with a strange sense of relief so vast it nearly made me sick. “I don’t.” I told him honestly, “Although I could still kick your

ass for what you did to me and if you ever lie like that to me again you won't have time to make a clone to save you from the hell I'd put you through."

Thrawn chuckled. "Of that I am quite certain." He replied as he shortened the distance between us even further. "But I am hopeful that I will not ever need to use such deception with you again."

I raised my eyebrows at this statement. "You hope...?" I asked, "No, no. You only get to pull that card once in our lifetimes and it's done."

He studied me for a moment and then nodded ever so slightly. "I see I was right about the whelp." He said gesturing to the wolf pup I was still holding, changing the subject deftly.

I looked at the small furry bundle of growl and teeth in my arms. "It would appear he likes me but he's not so sure about you."

"I seem to have that affect on certain creatures," He said never taking his eyes off me, "But he'll warm up to me in time after all," He added, "You did."

I ignored the comment and asked, "Why did you ask Kerrjan to keep him for me? You know his stance on sled wolves being pets. And what ever made you think I would want a pet at all?"

He regarded me with an expression I couldn't decipher and took a very deep breath. "Were I to be completely honest I would say that really, I don't know. I was here helping when Gisch was giving birth, and he was a bit of a surprise, the last to be born. The scanner had indicated she would have a litter of seven not eight. When he was born he was cold and not breathing. Kerrjan said he was not worth trying to save, too small, too runty but I managed to warm him up and his lungs began to work. We were not certain the whelp would make it through the night but he did, against all the odds he survived. He has a very strong will for one so tiny. I suppose he reminded me a little of you. It's not been an easy road for you but you managed to come through everything stronger than ever. I thought that maybe he should have a chance at life, I thought that maybe you would be the right person to train him and give him that, after all everyone deserves a chance or two." He said carefully.

I buried my face the pup's fur and sighed. "You're getting soft in your old age."

"Death will do that to a man." He joked. It wasn't funny.

I made a face, "According to Navaari it's love which makes men do stupid things."

"Perhaps a little of both?" He suggested. "But for now you should put him back in his kennel as there is something I wish to show you without a pup underfoot."

I did as he asked making triple sure the kennel was locked tightly. I felt a deep pang of attachment as the pup began to whimper and then howl when I turned to leave.

"I see I was not mistaken." Thrawn remarked cryptically. "He'll quiet down when the lights

are off.”

I nodded, used the force to flick off the lights and then followed him out into the still light night, across the quad to the main enclave entrance but instead of turning to head to Navaari's he took a completely different route and led me to a older part of the enclave that was now seldom used. At the end of a short corridor he opened up an ornate wooden door.

“It was once a meeting area but it has since been renovated.” He said as he stood to one side and let me enter first.

When I gasped in surprise he smiled. I had been here once before, a long time ago, when Navaari had shown me all over the complex and back then this had been a disused large open hall with a fire place and a small set of stairs off to one side that led to storage rooms. There were six offices or smaller council chambers, three to either side of the main hall, but they had been dimly lit and somewhat dusty with disuse. Navaari had explained that due to the ever growing size of the enclave new council chambers and meeting halls had been built, deeper underground and more modern. What I saw now was a far cry from that memory and the beauty of it reminded me, on first glimpse, of the flat Thrawn and I had shared on Coruscant.

“What is this?” I asked.

“This is the reason I am no longer taking up space in your bedroom in Kirja'navaar'inkjerii's home.” He replied as if his words explained everything.

I just looked at him in question.

“Come, let me show you.” He signalled for me to go with him so I did and what I saw took my breath away.

The main hall had been divided into an open plan living area, a semi walled in kitchen and dining room. I recognised some of the furniture and the art work that adorned the shelves and walls. Most of these things had been on the base at Nirauan or placed into storage when we had left Coruscant for good.

I followed him, speechless, as he showed me the rooms off the main area, one had been turned into a study with a library for him, and there was a training room along with a small but serviceable 'fresher. Two of the remaining three smaller rooms were still empty and one was full of storage containers. The whole place was cleverly lit to simulate day light and was airy enough that I didn't feel as though it were under the ground which in reality it was.

For a moment I just stood looking around me unable to comment and then it crossed my mind something was missing. I opened my mouth to speak but before I could ask he gestured at me to follow him so I did and was surprised to find him leading me up the staircase which I had recalled being plain and small but was now wider and ornately made out of a dark hard wood leading to what had once been a dimly lit, claustrophobic archive storage area.

“I know how much you hate being shut indoors so I asked for some help in rethinking this

place. There was more than enough workable space for our purposes. We had to build up the walls some, add the side rooms, redesign the roof and open it up quite a bit but I think you will like the results. Kerrjan is the one you mostly have to thank for this.” He said as he led me to the second floor. “He’s really quite brilliant when it comes to working with design and materials here and he has a soft spot for you.”

I found it hard to imagine Kerrjan having a soft spot for anyone especially me but I didn’t comment on this. I was too busy trying to process what was looking at. This was one large room with high open sloped ceiling with two smaller rooms off to one side and a door to what looked like it could be a large closet on the other. This was the master bedroom and I covered my mouth with my hand when I saw that bed taking up center position against the far wall was the beautiful antique one from Coruscant. Before I could ask any questions he took me by the hand and showed me the master ‘fresher and smiled at the reaction on my face.

“We designed this room especially for you. I have my own ‘fresher so this is all yours.”

I just stared at the beautiful craftsmanship that had gone into the room, the bathtub was deep enough and, I noted with a smile, large enough for two to fit with ease. The floors had been made of a deep grey polished stone and I feel the warmth from the floor heating under my feet. There was a large, well lit vanity and the rest of the utilities were all elegant and simple in design. There was a lot of room for plants and a shelf that ran the length of the bathtub built into the wall for books and candles and other things. I gazed around in wonder. It was perfect.

“How? When did you do all of this?” I asked as I walked around the room caressing the surfaces and fixtures with my fingertips.

“While you were gone and as I said, I had a lot of help. Many people here were only too happy to make sure this project would be finished before you returned but you missed something. Come.” He said leading me back into the bedroom. “Look up.”

So I did and gasped. “Skylights? You had windows put into the roof?” I almost got a crick in my neck looking up at the fairly large sloped windows that showed a deepening night sky streaked with colours from the slow setting sun. Windows were not something the Dantassi generally used, too wasteful when it came to design especially as most of the buildings were below the ground to help preserve heat.

Thrawn smiled. “It took some work, and we needed to raise the roof up so that it would be above the ground which meant some special engineering to make the room completely insulated but there are plenty of talented architects here and the transparent durasteel is strong enough to withstand the worst of the weather here and when it’s too bad they have shutters that slide over them to protect them as well as for some semblance of darkness during the summer. I told Kerrjan you would live in a place without windows but I would rather we found a way around that because I never wanted you to feel boxed or shut in.”

I took a deep breath and looked around but I didn’t know what to say. He had done all of this in the four months I had been gone and it took my breath away.

“Is it to your liking because we could change it if you wa...” He started to say, uncertainty lacing through his words, but I made a little hand gesture to shut him up and was grateful that he complied.

“You did all of this for me?” I asked softly. “Even after what I said to you?”

“Did you really believe that a few words said in anger would be enough to drive me away from you?” He asked genuinely puzzled.

I made a face because that’s exactly what I had thought. He chuckled and caressed my cheek with the back of his hand. “I had the plans in mind for quite some time knowing that you and I would need our own space if things worked out with the clone the way I hoped they would. It did not matter whether he lived or died, either way he would have taken my place so that I would be free to choose a different life. My time with the Empire was done. I accomplished what I set out to do, for the most part and now being Imperial would only serve as a hindrance not an advantage.” He paused for a moment. “It is equally important to know when to withdraw from something as it to know when to advance. When I first met Palpatine the galaxy, the rules were different. Working under him made certain things easier to do. I had a goal I was working towards and for the most part I accomplished this goal.”

“Nirauan?”

He nodded. “Yes, and it isn’t going anywhere. What has been built out there will last and grow.”

I digested this for a moment then asked. “So you haven’t retired to settle down completely then?”

There was a very lengthy silence while he chose his words carefully. “When I was taken in as a merit adoptive under house Nuruodo I swore an oath to serve and protect my home world, my people and Chiss space. Everything I have done has been with this oath in mind. I felt I couldn’t effectively do my job bound by the constraints of Chiss laws so when the opportunity came along to work outside of these constraints I took it. I have said this many times, you were an unexpected deviation in my path. My focus was on my work not women. Yet there you were a mystery waiting to be unravelled, like a work of art I could not quite decipher. By the time I realised I was in over my head it was already too late.” He looked around him and sighed. “I knew I had lost the battle of keeping myself distant from female distractions the night Jyrki stole you away after the Grand Ball. The way I felt as I realised what had happened to you made me realise that I cared deeply for you and it wasn’t just a passing fancy. It was especially unnerving to discover there was little I could do to find or help you and the way I felt in that moment shocked me because I would have torn down planets to find you if I could. I understood right then and there, that you had become a part of my world so that my oath to serve and protect now also included you. When you began to tell me about the dreams you were having of my possible death at first I was sure they were just dreams but I soon learned that your force talents are remarkably strong and one would be a fool not to pay them heed. I planned for a variety of possible outcomes all of which included you.”

I bit my lip and stared at him. "You never tell me this."

His face softened, "Oh sj'iu tekari I tell you this all the time you just haven't deciphered the language yet to realise this." When I didn't answer he continued, "Originally I had thought you and I would both build this together, that you would want to have a say in the plans but," He paused, "I had not reckoned on the depth of your anger although in retrospect I should have. After you left I decided that no matter what you felt for me upon your return you should have a place of your own. As much as you love them you cannot live with Kirja'navaar'inkjerii and An'jast'a forever. So yes, it was done for you but I had hoped we would share it." There was hesitation in his voice.

I looked up at him sharply in question.

"The last time we spoke you were not exactly happy with me and with good reason. I was not certain that when you returned you would still wish to even be with me. You were right when you said I had underestimated the level of pain and sorrow the death of Grand Admiral Thrawn would put you through and I honestly thought that you would see through some of my cleverness."

"You give me way too much credit." I said a little crossly.

"No, no I do not, I am certain that once you got over the shock you would have asked the right questions and unravelled it all but what I did underestimate was the power of your sorrow to cloud everything else." He shrugged ever so slightly and I got the distinct impression that his failure to gauge my grief was something he felt ashamed of. "I may be able to plan a war down to its finest detail but dealing with the depth and the intricacies of human emotions will always be somewhat of a mystery to me. The Chiss, as I am certain you have noticed, simply do not feel the same way humans do. I think that our upbringing and the evolution of our kind has somehow wiped away some of the intensity of the emotions we have and I do seem to constantly underestimate yours."

I didn't think this trait was restricted to just arrogant Chiss males but I bit my tongue.

"You're just figuring this out now?" I asked instead, walking about the bedroom to look at everything. I smiled inwardly when I saw the ma'arilite sculpture that I loved so very much.

He made a face, "Yes, no, well, perhaps. I had not realised just how deeply hurt, how much pain you were in and I honestly thought the very act of actually seeing me, of seeing that none of it was true would counter that grief."

"You really thought that?" I shook my head in disbelief. "Really?"

He looked at me for a moment then admitted, "Yes, but then I realised I had made a rather large error in judgement."

"What was your first clue?" I asked tartly giving him a look.

"Well you hit me for one thing." He shot back.

“You deserved it!” I told him flatly, “In fact you’re damned lucky I didn’t do worse.”

“I will not dispute that.” He relented and then sighed deeply. “The extent of the damage became clear to me when time passed and you could still not even look at me. I understood that I had completely miscalculated your reaction and the depth of your grief for what you thought was my death.” He frowned. “I had no idea, truly, no idea but when you were willing to release me from the bonding promise I had made to you then I understood the hurt must have gone very deep. After you left the enclave with Kirja’navaar’inkjerii, Kerrjan had a few choice things to say about the whole matter as did the enclave’s council and several of your rather over protective girlfriends made sure I knew exactly what I had done wrong, I would be forever grateful if you would ask them nicely to stand down now.”

I grinned. “It does serve you right you know.”

“Indeed.” He arched an eyebrow and drew deep breath. “Needless to say I have had some time to consider just how hard it must have been for you and that you saw everything I had done as a betrayal of trust for which I am sorry but I maintain it had to be done this way and now I hope you can forgive me.”

I looked around the bedroom once more and took in all that he had done to turn unused council rooms into a beautiful place to live. I thought about how much we had lived through and all the windy twisted paths that had led us to this moment. “I think given the right incentive I could be convinced to do so.” I told him while giving him that under the lashes stare which said even more than my words. “But you understand things are different between us. What you did, what I went through, it changed me. I am no longer the same girl I was before all of this....” I struggled to find the right words, grateful when he interrupted me with words of his own.

“No,” A slight hint of a smile touched the corners of his mouth as he took a step towards me. “No you are not.”

I frowned wondering if this was something he found distasteful but before I could voice this concern he beat me to it.

“Every time you go through some sort of emotional or physical trauma you manage to come out of it stronger. You are so fierce and yet at the same time so incredibly vulnerable, it is a seductive mix. When I first met you, you were a lovely, feisty young girl on the verge of discovering her place in the galaxy now you have become this extraordinary woman whose strength through adversity awes me at every turn. You are both fragile and strong and this strange dichotomy makes you unbelievably attractive. You have no idea how truly beautiful you really are.” He paused for just a second then said, “I am certain that were I to try anything like this again you would kill me before I could ever apologise. But just this once forgive me for not telling you the whole story. I had my reasons and one day these will become clear to you.”

I made a face. “I reserve the right to use it against you when we fight.” I told him and I was only half kidding.

His smile broadened. "I would expect no less." I let him caress my face with gentle hands, smiling when he pulled me to him and held me tightly as though that very act would make everything that had happened between us go away. He wasn't right but he wasn't wrong either.

I looked up into his face to find him staring intensely at me. My heart skipped more than one beat and I welcomed the familiar and wonderful sensations which sent heat flooding through my body. I waited for him to move but he didn't and for a second I wondered why then I decided the why didn't matter. There had been too much back and forth, too many misunderstandings and, above all, too much time apart. I had spent far too much time letting him take the lead, letting him set the pace and allowing him to make the rules and now I decided that it was my turn. This moment wavered, fragile and delicate, as though everything between us hung on my next words. I wanted to make them count.

"I think this is the part where you kiss me." I whispered never taking my eyes from his.

He raised an eyebrow in question.

"Now." I prompted.

I could see relief and something else in his face. The sweet smile on his lips turned feral and hungry but he hesitated for a moment so I clasped his face between my hands and drew him to me so that I could kiss him making sure that if my words were unclear my actions were not.

When we pulled apart he went to speak but I shut him up with my forefinger upon his lips. "No, no more words. We've had enough words to last an age. You told me you loved me now show me just how much."

"As you wish." He replied, his voice suddenly husky and brandy warm.

I just smiled and then I let him undress me slowly while I took great delight in removing his clothes with equal care. I let my fingertips explore every inch of his skin, seduced by the sensations his own hands created as they reacquainted themselves with my body.

I had thought this was lost to me forever and suddenly the enormity of what he had done so that this moment was possible crashed down on me much like an avalanche. I rested my forehead against his chest and gasped at the whirlpool of emotions which clouded my thoughts.

"What?" he whispered, guiding my face upwards so he could maybe figure out my sudden change in mood just from looking at me, "What is it?"

I wanted to tell him but I couldn't find the words and perhaps he read some of this in my expression because he didn't ask any more questions he just kissed me instead until the strange sad dizziness passed into something filled with hungry need and heat. This, too, he saw and he did not argue when I pulled him to the bed, yanked him to lie on top of me so

that for a short time he could complete me. But I was hurried and breathless. I wanted too much too quickly, but this was not really what he had in mind. I growled at him when he moved away.

“Not so fast tekari, not so fast.” He murmured, slowing everything down to an agonising crawl. He shifted and moved so that he could kiss my body gently. I writhed under his touch. When his mouth, his tongue, warm and wet, found my breasts I arched my back involuntarily and whimpered as he teased. He left me shuddering with need and it was annoyingly wonderful.

There had been a time when such intense passion had scared me but not anymore. Now I found myself willing to follow him into this abyss and drown in the desire which made my heart beat so fast I thought maybe it would burst out of my chest. He chuckled as I snarled at him when he moved away, tormenting me in a way I had utterly forgotten about. I could have, if I had wanted to, turned the tables on him but for reasons I could never have voiced I was happy to have him lead. His hands found all the right places to touch, his mouth on mine was sweet yet needy and I responded exactly as he knew I would.

We had danced this dance so many times that his guidance was more of an afterthought than a direction, a variation on a theme that had an unlimited amount of combinations. He led. I followed. I knew what pleased him but he knew me better and this time he took great care to direct the action so that my lack of self control would not get the better of us both. He wanted this moment to last a very long time and it made me nearly sick with a sexual hunger I had never quite known before. For this moment in time this was his dance floor and upon it he owned me body and soul.

Just when I thought I would pass out from want he shifted again, nudging my knees apart, sliding his body between my legs. The weight and warmth of him made him real, made him solid. I wrapped my limbs about him but I wanted more so I grabbed his hair, which had grown longer, and pulled fiercely. The growl which came from somewhere deep in the back of his throat gave me an odd sense of satisfaction. He pulled in tightly to my body as if that would quell my need to hurt him but it only drove my need higher. I nipped his shoulder with my teeth and dug my nails into the skin of his back.

“Sheath your claws and fangs, tekari.” He whispered, “You can punish me later if that is your wish but you asked me to show you how I feel, allow me to do so without drawing blood.” He reached up and threaded his fingers through mine to push my hands back up over my head pinning them there against the pillow. “Please.” He added.

For a second we lay there face to face, almost joined as one, pausing to savour the moment, utterly aroused and incredibly vulnerable. The galaxy held its breath just for just a moment, waiting. There was so much pleasure that it was almost painful and when I could stand it no longer I gave in to his request and relinquished control. He smiled as my body which had been tense suddenly relaxed into his touch, moulded to fit against him, water over ice, a second skin.

His hands grazed across my breasts, then trailed across the flat of my belly to pause there. An expression I couldn't quite decipher flashed across his face as he kissed where his hands had

lain but before I could ask about it his fingers found something else to occupy them. Whatever question had been on my lips was cut short by his caresses and deep, exploring kisses which sent me into a tailspin almost nudging me over an invisible edge into that madness which only lovers know.

I growled at him and he chuckled softly.

“Keep this up and I will have to hurt you.” I gasped, “Again.”

“A delight I shall look forward to at a later time but for now allow me the illusion that you are mine and let me pleasure you in my own way.” He said so possessively that it made my heart skip.

It wasn't an illusion though, I thought idly. After all we had been through there never was and never would be anyone else but I didn't say this out loud. Instead I just gave him an enigmatic smile which he returned with one of his own then he eased himself into me with agonizing slowness. I gasped at the delight every centimetre of him gave me.

My entire body reacted quite of its own accord to each thrust and all I could do was ride with him. The pace he set was slow and he moved with a deliberate, languid grace all the while watching my face, keeping eye contact as if he were afraid I would somehow vanish. I smirked at the knowledge that he needed me too and then because I didn't really have a whole lot of options I followed the path his rhythm created. It was a deep, deep place and I felt my mind slip backwards into it, surrounded by love and pleasure, strength and power as well as something elusive and indefinable. I sighed as sensations stripped me of my senses and I let my mind go.

Stop holding on to your fears someone had once said and that advice had never felt more apropos than right at this very moment. I called up the force and felt it shift around us, a subtle misty veil which threaded through all living things. It wound between us and bound us together sparking like fire on resin soaked wood and I knew he felt it too because his eyes widened in surprise. I pushed it through us both and he gasped with my name on his lips.

When I tapped into it in this way I could see it dance over us, forming a living breathing arc of magic illuminating everything that breathed. I followed this thread of light as far as I could into my body, into my soul, into that place where we joined. In this moment we were truly one and just possibly we were also creating life. Suddenly I understood his earlier expression as he had caressed my belly. There had been such sorrow in that loss but it would not always be the case and I smiled with a secret joy then clung tightly to him while we rode through the storm our coupling created as it reached that point of no return.

For a very long time we just lay wrapped about each other until the racing of our hearts slowed down. Sweat soaked, satiated and boneless, I nuzzled his neck and kissed his salty skin only half aware of the world around me. When he pulled back from me, separating us, I complained about it, as I always did, which made him smile. When I shivered, he drew the large blanket over us both.

“Za'ar?” I spoke his name out loud and asked a thousand questions with this single

utterance.

“I am here.” He murmured in my ear. “I am not going anywhere and you are safe.” It was an old, familiar mantra.

“And will you still be here when I wake up?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Promise?” I asked too drowsy in the aftermath to move.

I could feel him smile as he answered. “I promise.” He said then he shifted so that he could curl himself protectively around me stroking me absently until I fell asleep and if there were dreams, good, bad or in between I didn’t recall them when I woke up the next morning.

He had kept his word and when, still caught up in the remnants of sleep, I rolled over he was there lying on his side with his head propped up on his palm wide awake and watching me. For a long moment we just stared at each other and then he broke the spell by caressing my face.

“And she who dances as sunlight upon snow finally awakens.” He murmured.

I grinned and stretched in a jax like manner. “You’re still here.”

“I promised I would be.”

“Did that promise include ‘caf?” I asked hopefully.

“It certainly could be arranged.” He replied, moving a stray lock of tangled hair from my face as I just watched him, then something in my expression made him ask, “What is it?”

“I was just wondering how long we can stay like this?”

“In bed? I think it would get a bit uncomfortable after a day or so.” He teased.

“No, I meant, like this, in general, together and alive at the same time in the same place with nothing to do that will keep us at opposite ends of the universe or do you have some new plans for galactic domination that I need to know about?”

“Ahh.” He cocked his head slightly to one side and the corners of his lips curled into a smile. “No, currently my schedule is clear for the time being. Perhaps at a later date more pressing issues will intrude but for today I had rather thought you might like to unpack your things and settle in. I had all of our belongings shipped from Nirauan and from storage.”

“You did, how?”

“I made arrangements in secret with Thomas to sort all of that out prior to coming here. Once this place was finished and habitable I had everything moved here and what I didn’t get

around to or belonged to you I placed in one of the unused rooms downstairs.” He said. “Even if you did not wish to be with me I imagined that you would prefer to have your things here rather than return to Nirauan to deal with all of that on your own.”

If I ever saw Doctor Thracer again I was going to have words with him about keeping such massive secrets from me but for now I was happy that he had been able to help. “So everything is now here?”

He nodded. “Unless you still have belongings on the *Virulent*.”

I shook my head, “No, I didn’t know if I would be returning to that ship so I cleared my quarters out completely. I think Ged knew I wouldn’t be coming back even though he told me I could.” I answered feeling an odd flash of sorrow as I recalled that moment in time. “Even if I had wanted to I don’t think I would have returned to that life.” There had been something horribly final about that moment in the *Virulent’s* hanger bay. It must have shown in my expression because he reached over and caressed my face gently.

“I am sorry.” He said.

I opened my mouth then closed it again and then I said finally, “I know you are and I know you mean it. You keep saying those words but you should stop.”

“Perhaps.” He didn’t sound so sure. I guess he had been given quite an earful by several people after I had left and being told off by Kerrjan alone would have been enough to send me scurrying away like a frightened durni. Here, in this enclave as Nikätza’arth’pavjäska, he was not in charge of anything and while he might have been respected and have a place on the council he was not considered terribly important in the overall scope of things. It must have been weird for him to make such a switch. I suspected there were many things going on to keep his brilliant mind occupied that I did not yet know about. It occurred to me in that moment that maybe the Aristocra had known the body I had returned to Csilla wasn’t actually the man I thought it was, and then I wondered if Ged also knew the truth. Thrawn was many things but a man to settle down and be happy with a quiet family life was never going to be one of them and I was a little surprised to discover I was okay with this.

I inhaled deeply and let the air out slowly while I thought about what I wanted to say, and then deciding that thinking was overrated I ploughed ahead. “Listen to me.” I said, “I used to have nightmares about your death a lot and I lived with that knowledge for a really long time. Then the very thing I feared and dreaded the most happened and thought I’d lost you forever but that was not the case.” I brought my knees up to my chest and hugged them tightly. “I don’t like being lied to and it was a hell of a shock to see you alive and well after what I had just gone through, sitting with your corpse, sitting through your funeral. I needed time to deal with that shock, that grief, your ghost, as well as my own anger.” He watched me with an intensity that was a little unnerving but I needed to finish my thoughts.

“You hurt me.” I told him plainly, “I thought you were dead and grief sits deeply with me which you should have known. Maybe part of you did but the logic part of you ignored this fact and the result was not very pretty. You really did put me through hell and I still don’t know what to make of it all but I worked through the worst of it and came to understand that

no matter how mad I may have been it doesn't compare to life without you in it."

He nodded but before he could say anything I added. "Navaari knew, he knew I needed time to think and he did as well, like me, he was pretty pissed off at you, you know."

"That would be an understatement if ever there was one." Thrawn said with a sigh, running his fingers through his hair to brush it back off his face.

I nodded, "We both just needed time and once we'd sorted through all the grief and the anger to discover that having you alive was much better than thinking you were dead it was time to come home. When I saw the room cleared of all your things I thought...well I thought we just never seemed to get a break that, no matter how much we tried, the universe was determined we should not be together. In that moment, when I thought I had lost you for good a second time I knew that no matter what you had done or how you had done it I wanted you alive and I wanted you with me. I didn't think I would ever be whole again until the moment you stepped into the barn."

"I had hoped to catch you when you arrived so that I could explain why I had moved everything from your room but you had already gone to change and then I missed you again because you had come to the barn. I ran into Kerrjan who wanted to see what all the fuss was about, suspecting that the pup had escaped. He got to you first. "

I nodded. "I had forgotten my pack and you know how picky Navaari gets when I leave my stuff lying around."

That made Thrawn smile. "You are a little chaotic."

"It's part of my charm." I replied airily.

He reached over and caressed my cheek. "You were not the only one who was concerned about the state of our relationship."

"That's good to know." I told him. "But now you're here and you're alive. I feel as though we've been given a second chance. You don't have to plan a war, you don't have to command a battle fleet and there's no Emperor to meddle our fates. I may have been pretty pissed off at you but now I am just grateful. Stop saying you are sorry. I accept your apology, okay?"

He gave me a slight almost uncertain nod. "Okay."

"And I forgive you." I added after a moment.

The air in the bedroom was still as he just watched me and then he let out the breath he had been holding slowly. "Thank you." He nodded and I understood that he had really needed to hear these words.

"So that leaves me to ask what happens now?" I looked at him.

For what felt like an age he said nothing. He just stared at me as though I were some great

mystery he had yet to untangle. Then he leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. “Now I make stim’caf and we begin.” He replied, getting out of bed and nudging me to do the same

“Begin what?” I asked taking the warm, floor length robe that he handed me and slipping it on.

“Begin the rest of our lives.” He answered with an enigmatic smile.

I stood very still, watching him slip into a pair of soft trousers as the enormity of his words sank in slowly. I wondered, for a moment, if we could actually have a life with each other that did not revolve around some sort of personal conflict, or a galactic war, or some other major disaster. If we could live together for longer than a few stolen months at a time and not end up fighting or hating each other. I had believed, in the past, that such a life with this man could never happen because he was too tied to his command and his ship but now that the possibility stood before me and I suddenly found myself scared at the prospects of one way of life ending so that another could begin. Perhaps he sensed my thoughts because he looked at me with a slight frown and came to stand in front of me.

“Credit for them.” He said as he circled my waist with his hands.

“I was just wondering if a normal life together was even possible.”

“I think, given all that we have been through, we have earned the right to try, don’t you?” He replied touching his forehead to mine.

I just stood there for a moment not answering him then I looked up into his face trying to read the expression in his eyes and nodded. “Yes.” I said, “I suppose we have.”

“Right then, come with me so that I can feed you.” And he led me downstairs.

I sat at the kitchen counter and watched as he prepared ‘caf and breakfast. I believed then that, maybe just maybe, it was possible to be loved, happy and content all at the same time. I wrapped my hands around the hot mug of ‘caf he handed me and sipped it with a smile. I had no idea what our future would bring but in that moment I also didn’t care. I sipped my ‘caf slowly and thought briefly about the last ten years of my life. I had come a long way from the mechanic pit in our docking bay on Tatooine to being here. I had experienced more than I could possibly ever dreamed of although I had not planned for any of it. Certainly I would not have believed I would fall in love with a man like Thrawn but now I could not imagine a life without him although that had very nearly occurred. I wasn’t a person generally given to long periods of introspective thinking but it occurred to me that in this moment I was content. I also knew it wouldn’t stay that way for long but that was also okay.

“So,” he said suddenly breaking into my thoughts, “have you considered a name for that whelp of yours yet?”

“A name?” I laughed, surprised at his question. “No.”

“Kerrjan has been calling him Ka’lü’biri and if you are not careful that name is going to

stick.”

I grinned, Ka’lü’biri meant little pest who is nosey. “It’s an apt name though.” I replied.

“You like him then.” It wasn’t really a question.

“I do, thank you he’s very cute.” Then I said, “You understand that he will be living here with us and not stuck out in the barn, right?” It had been heart wrenching to hear the little pup yowl for me as I had left him alone in his kennel. That was not going to happen a second time.

“Kerrjan warned me you would want that and I have no objections as long as he is well behaved. He also said the pup won’t be a good sled-hound but that he has the makings of a fine tracker. He’s very intelligent. You will have to start training him soon though.”

“I’ll talk to Kerrjan about it later.” I said. “One more day of relative freedom won’t hurt the pup. I want to spend the day here, unpacking and...well... being with you.” There was a quiver in my voice which made him stop what he was doing and turn around. “I still can’t quite believe everything that’s happened but I’m grateful you’re alive and....” I added, “I am really glad you’re here.”

He turned to look at me thoughtfully and when our eyes met I felt the world stop and my heart flutter. After all this time, after all we’d been through he still had the power to suck my breath away with a single glance. The sudden blush that coloured my cheeks did not go unnoticed and his smile was seductive and pleased all at the same time. I didn’t need to ask what he was thinking because I could see it written all over his face.

“No, no, no,” I wagged my forefinger at him, “breakfast first, I’m hungry then I really, really want to try out the bathtub because I think every muscle in my body hurts and after that ...well I’m sure you can think of something since diversionary tactics seem to be a speciality of yours.”

He arched an eyebrow and smiled. “Indeed.”

Perhaps if we had been an ordinary couple in the galaxy he would have said something romantic to fill the silence that followed his words or maybe taken my hand in his and gazed lovingly into my eyes but we were not an ordinary couple and he did none of these things. Instead he refilled my cup and then he made breakfast which we both shared in an easy silence reminding me of that single morning on Coruscant when everything had seemed perfect.

There were a billion things I wanted to ask him and he knew this but all of my questions could wait. Right now I was content just to be here in this moment with him because I knew from personal experience that moments like these were rare and precious. We could never go back to what we had been before but I was glad for this too. Now, at least to me, it felt as though we were on more equal footing, as though we had both passed some sort of test of character and managed to survive it intact, more or less. We had been given a second chance to share a life together unfettered by all the constraints that the Empire, duty and

expectation had laid in place. I had never known or loved anyone the way I knew and loved him; it was a daunting thing to face. He was a lot of work, but then again so was I and it was this last thought which made me smile.

I looked up to find him staring at me. His eyes glowed with a soft red heat which made me shiver. "You have that look on your face." He remarked casually as he began to clear away the dishes.

"Oh? And which one is that?"

"The one that usually means you're planning some sort of mischief." He replied.

I shrugged as I got off the stool and headed towards the stairs. "The only thing I plan on doing right now is running a bath and giving that swimming pool you called a bathtub a try. There is nothing mischievous about that," I said looking at him over my shoulder, "Unless you'd care to join me."

And then it was his turn to smile.

The End