

# **Daughter of the Empire**

## **Book 3**

by Fiona Messer

Chapter two

### **Playing the Game**

Disclaimer:

This book is not affiliated with or endorsed by Lucasfilm or Twentieth Century Fox or any other entity connected to the Star Wars franchise in any way.

It is a work of fiction intended for enjoyment only. All Lucasfilm characters remain property of Lucasfilm. My characters are mine.

\*pls note this is a work in progress, changes and corrections will occur frequently.\* This story contains spoilers so you have been warned!

Living on Hjal had changed me. I hadn't felt it happen or really noticed the subtle differences as they had occurred but as my time on the planet with the Dantassi drew to a close I realised that I had grown up in more ways than I could count. This did not escape Thrawn's notice either and although he didn't come right out and say it I knew he welcomed the change. We had spent nearly all of the day talking to each other about pretty damned near everything. Some of the conversation had been pleasant, some of it had not but through it all there was no yelling or temper tantrums, no hurling of half full tea cups and no storming off in tears. We had simply talked. What had started off in the kitchen had ended in the underground gardens which supplied the Dantassi with all of their fresh produce because while we could talk a lot, sitting for hours was another matter. I had always found it easier to think and talk while walking rather than sitting still and Thrawn did not complain.

The garden cavern was beautiful and I had often spent time here alone when I needed to think. It was the only warm, humid place on the entire planet and it reminded me of Naboo a lot. Created in one of the largest caverns deep underground, the Dantassi had managed to simulate sunlight and harness the geo-thermal properties of the planet to create an enormous botanical style gardens, much like the Emperor had owned on Coruscant. The difference between the two was that the Emperor's gardens had been a selfish indulgence only for him and invited guests to enjoy, filled with rare and beautiful plants, many of which the cost for one alone could have fed entire families for years, the Dantassi gardens were designed to feed the enclave as well as be a place of peace and harmony, filled with fruit bearing trees and plants as well as greens and vegetables. Everything that was grown in this cavern could be harvested and eaten or used for other purposes, not a single thing went to waste. Dantassi technology never ceased to amaze me, it was as clever as it was invisible and the fact that when one walked into the massive cavern it was as if one had walked out into another world only heightened this sense of wonder.

Our day long discussion had come to a quiet close by a small waterfall which was part of the complex irrigation system. The roaring sound it made echoed about us, reminding me a little of the winds in the desert or thunder rumbling about the hills on Naboo. I found it hard to believe that meters above us was a planet mostly covered in ice and snow, where a raging blizzard scoured the surface making it impossible for traffic to land or take off and where every living thing cowered in its shelter for fear of being devoured by the storm. I sat on the grass and breathed in the

sweetness of it deeply, while Thrawn lay down and rested his head on my lap, allowing me to run my fingers through his hair. I wondered what the rest of the galaxy would think if they knew that such a place as this existed on this sarlacc forsaken planet. This huge cavern was a miracle of sorts and I felt blessed to have been able to see it, to walk in it when ever I wished to. The silence between us was comfortable. I could not remember the last time I had felt so carefree, so at ease with everything. When Thrawn glanced up at me I just smiled.

"So, you'll come back to Nirauan with me?" He asked after a long period of quiet.

I nodded. "I already said I would." I said. "That's the second time you have asked now, did you think I would change my mind?"

"Well, one never knows with you." He teased and caught my hand before I could swat him lightly on the head.

"Where else do I have to go and what, in sarlacc's name, would I do?" I asked, freeing my hand from his to pluck at the grass idly.

He drew a deep breath. "You could return to Tatooine and work for your father again. Mechanics, especially good ones, are always in high demand."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I would drive everyone crazy there just as I would drive Navaari crazy if I stayed here. You're stuck with me, so deal with it." The truth of the matter was I didn't know how to go back after everything I had experienced. Going home to work at the docking bay would be like Thrawn asking me to go back to just being his friend. I had changed too much. I had not realised it until this moment but I had outgrown my home. The thought made me a little sad but it also made me smile.

"Good." He replied watching my expression, "We should arrange a trip to Coruscant so you can pick up some of your things. I also know that Siavaan would love to see you again. Every transmission I receive from him, he asks how you are. I understood that you did not want to write to me, but why did you not reply to your friends or family, Tekari?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. It was as if I needed to just shut out everything from my past. It was just all so painful. I knew that papa would understand because we went through all this when my mother was killed. I just needed time, a lot of time. It was selfish; I guess I will have a lot of explaining to do when I see him again." I had no idea how to put this all into words but I knew that it had been the right thing to do. In order to get past the terrible things that had happened I needed to cut myself off from

everything I associated with that life. It was only now, after passing through the ritual of Sju'ru'arwy'kha did I understand how appropriate such a mourning period really was. It was difficult enough to part with the ghosts of the dead as it was, but to have constant reminders around me of how everything used to be would have made the transition that much harder.

"I doubt that Siavaan will think it selfish. He seemed to me to have a remarkably clear idea of what was going on in that pretty little head of yours after I let him know you were still alive. He knows you very well and much to my surprise he wasn't past giving me an earful either." He paused to smile. "Still, you should go back to the core sooner rather than later and when you do you need to give him my heartfelt thanks."

"Why is that?"

Thrawn sat up and looked at me. "Because he gave me some advice which helped me through a difficult moment."

"It had to do with me?" I asked, digging a little.

He gave me a look, "Not everything in the galaxy is about you, my dear."

"So what was the advice?" I pushed.

He just smiled. "I will let you ask him that when you see him, if he wishes to tell you then you will know." He replied.

"Hey, no fair you having secrets from me with my friends."

Thrawn smirked a little. "I do believe we now share friends, tekari and I am certain that you have secrets with Kirja'navaar'inkjerii that you would not wish him to divulge."

I sighed letting him know he had won this round. "Is Shiv okay? I mean in the data discs he sent he babbles about life as usual but I wondered if he was just being all happy because he didn't want to worry me."

"Things have changed a great deal on Coruscant and I think that he made the best of a bad situation. He still works in the same position he did before the Emperor's death but the job itself has changed a great deal." Thrawn said quietly. "I think that Siavaan does what he can to survive under the circumstances."

"Isard is making things hard for him then isn't she?"

"Isard makes life hard for everyone, my dear. She is as ruthless as she is beautiful."

"You think she's beautiful?" I asked, failing to keep the twinge of envy and surprise out of my voice.

He answered with a smile. "She is a very striking woman, even you could not deny that but she is, of course not nearly as beautiful as you are."

I pinched him on the arm. "I wasn't fishing you know."

"I know, I just enjoy the pain you tend to inflict on me when I tease you." He said, "You do know that she was rumoured to Palpatine's lover...."

"Eww, just stop right there! These are pictures I don't want in my head!" I said. I could not imagine anyone wanting to bed with the Emperor and the very thought made me shudder with repulsion.

He laughed and then sighed. "I have not been on Coruscant in such a long time. My information that comes from there is not as complete as I would like. Siavaan helps, of course but he needs to be careful with what he says. I do have other sources but again it is all bits and pieces."

"Sounds like you need a spy in the palace."

"Are you volunteering?"

"No, I make a lousy spy." I said thoughtfully. "But you know, there might be other ways."

"I'm listening."

"Lord Vader had a vast spy and information network set up. He and Price Xizor spied on each other all the time, hell even lord Vader's spies had spies. I wonder if there would be something of that network worth salvaging that you could use."

"I would imagine that Isard and the Intel division would have dismantled most of that."

I shook my head. "I would not be so quick to assume that. Lord Vader circumnavigated Isard many times. He felt she had too many fingers in too many pallies. He didn't trust her, hell he didn't trust anyone."

"He trusted you, my dear."

"I wasn't any sort of a threat to him." I replied. "I am sure that there would be a way to tap into his surveillance network in the palace, I am certain Isard and her sweepers didn't catch all of it. I would have to go back and look for this stuff though, probably at his house or his office."

"I doubt there would be much left of his office and I don't know how comfortable I would be with you wandering around the palace trying to look for ways to secure me a covert Intel network."

I gave him a slight smile. "Lord Vader was super paranoid just as the Emperor was. They had so much covert security systems in place that I

don't think either of them could have told you were all of it was and what all of it did. I'm betting I'd find something to use in Lord Vader's office and I am sure it hasn't been touched. Isard may be brilliant but she doesn't know all the secrets of the palace. I am also sure I can move around the palace without alerting security or causing trouble. I should also check his home on Coruscant as well, maybe there is something there of use as well."

"How would you get into Vader's Coruscant fortress?"

"I have a key?" I replied giving him a *'what did you think?'* look.

"He gave you a key to his private sanctuary?"

"It saved him from hearing me bitch about the length of time it took for someone to let me in every time he hauled me out of bed to work from his home. I still had to pass through his security but at least I could open the damned doors for myself. I didn't poke my nose where I wasn't supposed to. I respected his privacy and that earned me his trust on this matter." It had never occurred to me to consider this unusual but looking back in retrospect it was.

He sighed for a moment and was very quiet, lost in thought. "I am not happy about you even considering this and if you were to get caught you could and probably would be tried for treason."

"Well, then probably it would be best if I didn't get caught." I joked. "Seriously though, you need information and I could probably get something to work for you. I would just have to plan it out very well."

"You mean no rushing in head-long?"

"No." I confirmed. "It's either that or we could take a secret holiday to the Core posing as newlywed Dantassi and initiate a spy network of reprogrammed mouse-bots."

He shook his head in dismay. "Still under the influence of Jeb Holloway I see."

"Entirely your fault." I said poking him in the arm. For a moment we just grinned at each other.

He nodded then went back to the topic at hand. "Would you want to return to the Core as soon as we leave Hjal?" He asked.

I thought about this for a moment. "No, let me get settled on the base first. I would need to study the plans of the palace before I went back in and find some of the more quiet ways to get around."

"You still have the blue-prints?"

"There is a copy on the *Ahnkeli Su'udelma's* main on-board computer." I confirmed. "Plus I don't think that the little library the

Emperor allowed me access to would have been discovered or disturbed, so there are also copies of the plans there."

He nodded. "As soon as you wish it, I can arrange to trip back. Isard will not trouble you if she thinks you are harmless and I will make certain that you still have high enough security clearance so that no one will question your return to the planet or hinder you from at least entering the Palace. After all, you are still working for the Empire. There is no reason why that should change." He said thoughtfully. "You would have to be very careful though. This is a dangerous game you are planning."

"I know." I said. "But you need eyes and ears in the Palace. I can't believe Isard lies to you and keeps you out of the loop. She should be taking advantage of your brilliance not shoving it away in the farthest corner of the galaxy."

He smiled slightly. "Your faith in me is heart warming, tekari but she sees me as a threat nothing more and nothing less."

"Then she's an even bigger egotist and even more stupid than I ever imagined." I spat, sounding very petulant.

He made a *tsk* sound and shook his head. "An egotist perhaps but she is not stupid and you should never make the mistake of thinking this. Do not underestimate her. She is very dangerous and very unforgiving. I do not want you ending up being held prisoner in the Lusankya facility."

I shivered. The Lusankya Correctional and penal facility was the most feared Imperial prison next to the Spice mines of Kessel. People who were sent to Lusankya almost never came out and those few that did were never the same. No one knew where it was not even the people who worked there. If people had thought Lord Vader's interrogation methods were cruel, they had obviously never heard stories about Isard's methods.

Thrawn watched my face carefully and drew a deep breath. "If I tell you that this is too risky and I won't allow such a thing will you go all stubborn on me?"

"No, I would not go all stubborn on you. It is risky, but I think it could be done." I said sounding a lot more sure than I actually felt. It was one thing to have worked day in and day out with Lord Vader and his constant mercurial temper, it would be quite another to try and circumnavigate the Director of Imperial Intelligence.

"Let me think about it for a while, tekari. We have time to consider this option which makes planning easier."

I nodded, it wasn't a *yes* to my idea but it wasn't a *no* either. "Is the shuttle I flew from Endor in still at Nirauan?" I asked changing the subject.

The *Sigiri*?"

I nodded.

"Yes, and no one has touched her by my express orders."

"Not even to repair her?" I was surprised by this. A damaged shuttle taking up hanger space was a waste.

"No." He said carefully. "I thought that you would want that job when you felt up to it, when you came back. She is, after all, your ship now."

"Technically she belongs to the Empire." I said.

"Actually she was part of Vader's personal fleet of shuttles which he paid for out of his own money, so she is now yours, unless you don't want her?"

I shook my head. "Of course I want her." I said and swallowed the sudden sadness that had rushed up from my gut to greet me. That ship had managed to get me to Nirauan safely and I was kind of attached to her though until this moment I had not realised how much. "There are a lot of files on her on-board computer as well which might be useful." I said by way of explanation.

He just nodded and I could see the worry in his eyes. I knew he was not happy about the suggestions I had made but he was considering them, which was a start.

"Look, I won't be rushing off to go track you down a spy network any time soon and I have no intention of tangling with Ysanne Isard and getting on her bad side. First I need to get my life sorted out with you on Nirauan. I need to settle down and make a home for myself. Once I know what I need there, I can see about getting my things from the Coruscant flat and then decide if it would be worth while looking into a way to get you more intel. So if I do go back and try to dig about, it would be considerable planning involved, planning which would definitely include you."

"I see your time on Hjal has curbed some of your impetuosity." He said softly.

"I don't think it was being on Hjal that did that, Za'ar, I think it was nearly dying and nearly destroying everything I held dear and loved."

The look he gave me was tinged with a sorrow that seemed fathomless. He understood something about loss and regret. "A hard

lesson to learn in the hardest possible way." He said stroking my hair possessively.

It was my turn to sigh, but he was right. He wrapped an arm around my shoulder and hugged me close. "We'll head back to Nirauan in a day or so, as soon as this storm is over. Kirja'navaar'inkjerii has made it clear there will be no sneaking off, so there will be a big gathering to say farewell. He tells me you have managed to win over the enclave's heart and that you will be greatly missed."

I smiled but didn't say anything more, what was there to say to that anyway? I would miss everything here but I had learned this was the universal truth about living in more than one place. No matter where one was currently something else was always missing. *'Everything changes,'* Lord Vader had once told me, *'Even the galaxy will eventually change as the stars die out.'* Lord Vader had been in a particularly melancholy mood when he had told me this but for all intensive purposes, it was the truth. I just wasn't sure it was such a bad thing because there had to be change, without change everything stagnated, just as without goodbyes, there would be no hellos, and hellos could be very sweet indeed. Still, the prospect of saying good-bye to Navaari weighed heavily on my heart and I thought I had no more than a day or so to prepare for this but Hjal's weather had other ideas about that.

\*\*\*

The storm which had begun the day Thrawn had arrived was far worse than either Navaari or I had predicted. It lasted nearly eight whole days. Thrawn enjoyed his enforced holiday for nearly four days but after that he became restless, itching to get back to work, to get back into space. He didn't actually say anything and if I hadn't known him so well I might not have noticed but I had long ago learned the tell tale signs of planet locked spacers. I had seen it in my father when he had been on-world too long, he needed space-room he would say and my mother would shoo him off, sending him out on some convoluted shopping trip to another planet so he would get out of her hair. As I got older and spent more time working at the docking bay I learned the tell tale signs in others, pilots, smugglers and drifters. It was as if the air around them shimmered with the anxiousness, the edginess of being planet bound which they felt after a certain amount of time.

In Thrawn, because it was tiny little things that gave him away, most people would never have noticed. He hid his restlessness well but I knew him better and it made me edgy, rubbing already worn emotions in entirely the wrong way. It did not help that I knew my time on Hjal with Navaari and all the friends I had made was coming to an end and it made me sad. I was torn by this, I didn't want to go but on the other hand I couldn't stay. At times such as these the apartment I shared with Navaari and now Thrawn seemed too small and claustrophobic even the enclave, which was by normal standards huge, felt oppressive and boxy.

I didn't like the feeling of being caged indoors at the best of times but ever since Jyrki's kidnapping it had been worse rather than better. I had a deep seated aversion to being in windowless places. So four nights into the bad weather, when I finally could no longer stand being cooped up and I could sense that the brewing tension would lead to a boiling fight, I threw on warm clothes and went to the South gates to be alone and get outside for a while. Growing up on Tatooine had taught me to appreciate solitude. The planet which was mostly desert was a very lonely place, unforgiving in its vastness. There was small solace in the cities and towns that clung tenaciously to its surface, where the difference between those that lived here and those that were just passing through was a look about the eyes. I could still recall the very first time I had spotted that look, the one which said I have what it takes to live here and you don't. Being from Tatooine, living on Tatooine was like wearing a badge which said *I survived the wrath of Darth Vader*.

Some of my earliest memories were of the desert which we could see easily from our house outside of Bestine. My mother, a native of Alderaan had fallen in love with the place the first time she had laid eyes on it and my father, who was still a transport pilot and not a docking bay owner had bought it for her as a wedding gift. Long after her death, when he was able to bring up memories of her without bitterness or anger and sorrow, my father would talk about her love for Tatooine and how unusual it was.

"She came from a world as lush and as beautiful as this one isn't. Most folks who visit this place take one look and high tail it out of here again. This place scares people but it didn't scare your mother." He had said one day. When I had asked him why he had replied, "Because Tatooine makes a person look deep inside to see if they have what it takes to survive here. Most don't, it's that simple."

The things I missed most about my home world were the wide open skies, never ending vistas offered by the vast deserts and the exotic, dry spice scented air which swept off the Dune Sea. I had travelled to many planets in my life, enjoying each one for what it offered but noticing also that there was always something missing. It had taken coming to Hjal for me to figure out just what the missing thing was the scent of the world itself.

Where Tatooine smelled like warm pasha spice, Hjal smelled like cold, ground pepper, the scent of snow, Navaari has said when I had commented on it. This had led to a lengthy discussion about the differences and the similarities between our two home-worlds, both were places of great extremes which tested the body and soul of all those who visited them for any length of time. This conversation had to led to Navaari had given me a very large piece of his mind about just running off without first letting him know that I was heading outside, saying that if he ever caught me even thinking about just leaving the enclave like I had the last time I was on his home world, well, the consequences would be *interesting*.

I had only nodded sullenly at the time, not happy about being reminded of my own stupidity, but once we had landed on Hjal and after being shut in for a few days, defiant and angry at everything in sight, I had ignored his warning completely. I suppose he knew I would, given the mood and the frame of mind I was in at the time.

I had no intent to run away or go for another death defying walk through a blizzard, in fact just the opposite but my need for wide open spaces outweighed any fear I might have had of Navaari's anger and the consequent punishment for not being obedient. He was, after all, I had pointed out in the several arguments that ensued, not my father and could therefore not tell me what to do. This argument was illogical and the barb was meant to hurt him, this was me lashing out in anger because my own pain was too big, too bewildering for me to acknowledge. With a calmness that was infuriating, he allowed me to rail against the wind all the while persisting in laying down some rules which I took great delight in ignoring. From the moment I had begun my strange exile with him on Hjal all I seemed to do with Navaari was fight. I was angry at everything and he caught the brunt of it and while he was good about it most of the times sometimes I pushed him too far.

The first time I had left the warmth and safety of the enclave, shortly after my arrival on Hjal, Navaari had been beside himself with

anger, thinking I had run off on another crazy death walk. I had not bothered to let anyone know what I was doing; I had just dressed in my warmest clothes without wearing the mask and buggered off. His relief at finding me huddled by the South entrance had been almost as palpable as his anger. It had taken me nearly an hour to try and convince to him that I had not been planning on venturing from the doorway and that I had definitely learned that particular lesson and that I just really, really needed to get outside for a little while. It was a rare thing for Navaari to lose his patience but I had managed to make this happen when I had not told him I was heading out for some fresh air. It was a good job the discussion had been held outside where the winds could sweep most of the loudness away.

The story of my first and last little hike into the heart of a raging storm had become a bit of a legend in the enclave and not a particularly good one at that, so he had been anxious to make sure history did not repeat itself. In the end, it had been his friend, Kerrjan, who had solved the *stop A'myshk'a from going stir crazy and Navaari from killing her* by offering to build an addition onto the south door of the enclave.

Kerrjan was considered the master builder in the enclave. His skills at designing and creating structures from the materials at hand were almost magical. He was as old as Navaari was and he was also Navaari's closest and oldest friend. When Navaari needed to talk with someone he sought out Kerrjan and vice versa. They had grown up next door to one another and, as Navaari had once told me, were like brothers.

For the longest time Kerrjan had intimidated me. He was a tall, slender man almost wiry in stature but there was this thread of icy durasteel that ran through him which said no messing around here. When ever he came to visit Navaari I usually found reason to be elsewhere. I always had the impression that he disliked me and disapproved of Navaari having me live here so it was a huge surprise when he came by the apartment one day and instead of asking to speak with Navaari, he had simply told me to follow him. I was too dumbstruck to argue or think twice about it and I had done as I was told.

He had invited me into his studio where he drew up and designed architecture for the enclave. There he had shown me the plans he had created, with Navaari's help, for an addition on to the South side entrance. I had fallen instantly in love with what Kerrjan had designed. It was elegant and beautiful, like a room with one wall missing so that I could see the outside world but was sheltered from the worst of the weather. I had

simply stood and stared at it without saying a word, unable to take in what I was seeing.

"We'll start tomorrow, if that's alright with you." He had eventually said breaking the silence.

"You want me to help?" I had asked in total disbelief. I had never helped build anything like this in my life. The only thing I knew how to build was an engine.

"Wasn't my plan to be building this all on my own." He had replied tartly. "You need to be doing something purposeful not sitting around staring at the walls."

"I thought that was the idea behind the period of mourning." I had muttered sullenly under my breath. Instead of annoying him this had made him laugh.

"Seems to me, little pup, that you could use something to take your mind off everything that has happened to you. Sju'ru'arwy'kha is about letting go of the past, setting your ghosts free, but sitting alone day in day isn't healthy for you." He had given me a little shrug, "I never did hold with the idea of leaving the person in mourning to sort it all out on their own, but then again I was never much one for holding with most traditions either, just ask your Pa'tjad'cu-sjä." He told me, using the word that meant honoured grandfather for Navaari. "Besides, after what you did the last time you were here, he felt it wise to give you a place to be going that would indulge your need to be outside."

"This was his idea?"

Kerrjan had smiled. "Sometimes it is easier to walk with the wind than against it." He had said somewhat cryptically. "We'll start tomorrow morning, dress warmly."

The next day, a lot earlier than I was used to, Navaari had hauled me out of bed, fed me breakfast and sent me to Kerrjan who put me to work. While I had grumbled about the cold, the early hours and anything else I could think of I was deeply grateful to have something constructive to do with my time. It had taken us nearly a month to build the addition and in all that time he had rarely spoken except to give me instructions, ask for tools or correct me when I made a mistake. It had been a welcome change to be with someone who didn't expect me to be conversational especially when I didn't know what there was to say.

Once we had finished the work on the porch he began to work on a place for me to sit. "You don't need to be huddled out here like a pup on

the snow.” He had told me. He worked on the bench in his workshop and I was allowed to sit and watch him as he cut, shaped and joined the wood.

There had been something peaceful and cathartic about sitting there watching him work with the hand tools and create something ornate and beautiful out of the deep dark wood pieces he had found for this project. Where we had been silent and almost taciturn with each other outside, in this small sanctuary we talked to each other. He drew me out of my self imposed shell little by little and I had not even realised it was happening. He always seemed to know when I had had a bad night or when I had fought with Navaari. I had been almost sad the day he had finished the bench and I hadn't known what to say or how to thank him but I guess he had understood. Together we had carried it through the quiet halls to the South door and I had watched with mixed emotions as he put the finishing touches on it. He had smiled with a certain satisfaction at the expression on my face as I trailed my fingers across the smooth wood he had shaped.

“This is not an easy time for you, I understand that and it may surprise you to hear this but so does Navaari, more than you realise.” He had said after what seemed like an eternal silence.

“It doesn't feel that way.” I had replied. “It feels as though we are at odds with each other all the time. I don't know how to get past it. I don't know how to get past anything any more.”

He had nodded. “Well Ma'kehla will help you with that when you go to talk to her.”

My response had been to nibble nervously on my little finger and sigh, wondering if the weight I felt on my shoulders could get any heavier. I had been avoiding the enclave's healer even though I knew I was expected to go and see her.

Kerrjan had studied my face carefully for a long moment then as if he had decided on something he began to tell me a story. “You remind me of a snow wolf I once raised. I found him on the south ridge half dead cuddled by his mother who had been killed by some other creature. He wasn't more than eight or nine weeks old, and I should have killed him rather than save him, born wild and too old to socialize usually snow wolves like that are feral, wild and hating everything but right from the very start that pup and I bonded. I could no more kill him than I could have left him there to die so I bundled him up, brought him back and hand fed him. For a very long time I was the only person he'd let get near him, I suppose he knew I had saved his life but he wasn't terribly sure about

anyone else. It took him a long time to stop hating the rest of the world and calm down. I began to train him up to run on my sled. I had lost my lead runner several months before and had not found a suitable replacement. He would do almost anything I asked but he hated being caged, hated being locked up in anything that had four walls, he'd bite and fight and make a terrible racket to get out of where ever it was he had been put in. Most people thought he was too savage, unusable as a sled-hound but he just hated being locked up no matter what size the room was.”

“So what happened?” I'd asked.

“I built him a kennel with a swinging door to the outside. Oh, he ran away a few times and people were convinced he was gone for good, I suppose testing to see if his freedom was real or not but after a day or so, when I didn't chase him down, he always came back to the warmth of the shelter and promise of steady food.”

“Weren't you afraid he'd never come back?”

“Yes, but sometimes to let a thing go is to hold onto it forever. You cannot cage a living thing against its will.” Kerrjan had smiled at the memory in his head. “Once he knew he had the freedom to make the choice of inside or out, well he settled right down and was the best lead on a sled I ever had. All it took was figuring out what he really needed which was a door to the outside world. He didn't like being boxed in, he was never what one would called tamed anyway but he was as loyal as they came and a good friend. Still that didn't stop him from being stubborn and disobedient from time to time just to point out that he was still his own wolf and not mine. Navaari just hasn't quite figured out yet that you're a lot like that snow-wolf. He is afraid that if he lets you go he'll lose you. He worries too much you'll just up and vanish like you did the first time you were here, not because you are being foolish or thoughtless but because you feel that you have nothing left to live for.”

“I don't feel now the same as I did back then. I keep telling him I won't do that again but he doesn't listen.”

“Aye, but the threat is always there when you just up and vanish from the enclave and he still blames himself for not seeing the signs of that coming the last time. He felt he should have known, felt he should have been able to read what you had one your mind.”

I had answered hotly. “How can he blame himself for something I did? That wasn't his fault. He can't read my mind and know what I am going to do before even I know?”

“Of course not, you are quiet old enough to be responsible for your own idiocy.” He had replied with a shrug. “I’ve known him since we were children and he was always the one to take the responsibility for everything on his shoulders. He was always the one who noticed things first; it’s what makes him such a good Jhal’kai. He knows more about loss than many of us will ever dream about. He has passed through more than his fair share of grief. He knows something about letting the ghosts of the dead go, first it was his twin sisters, then it was his wife and then he said goodbye to his daughter when she fell in love with a Chiss who didn’t want to live here, knowing that he would rarely, if ever, see her again. He knows about letting go, but you... well you he is afraid to lose.”

“Why is that? I mean it isn’t as if I am really family, I am not even really Dantassi or Chiss.” I had frowned as I had asked this question, a question that had long been on my mind.

“Well that’s the true mystery isn’t it?” Kerrjan had replied carefully. “You and he, you bonded, just like I did with that wolf-pup. No one here is quite sure how that happened, not even Navaari but you are his family now and better you start thinking that way, behaving that way.”

“He doesn’t speak to me about these things.” I had said with a sigh.

“No, I don’t expect he does. Navaari was never a particularly open man nor does he let many people get that close to him, even less so after his daughter left home.”

“So what happened to change that?” I asked because the Navaari I knew wasn’t withdrawn or closed, but always seemed to me to be loving and wide open.

“You happened, little wolf pup.” Kerrjan had said, looking at me as though this should have been as obvious as night and day. “You gave him something to care for, to look after and love. He was talking about you long before the first time you ever showed up here damaged and broken. He was mystified by what Nikätza’ar had done but at the same time he was also completely baffled by how protective he had felt over you on Rothana.”

I nodded, remembering how Navaari had helped me, how powerful the sense of connection with him had been. That feeling had not lessened any when Thrawn had brought me to Hjal after what had happened with Jyrki. If anything it had made it stronger, more intense. “Did he tell you what happened there?”

“He did eventually.” Kerrjan had nodded. “And that tale was almost unbelievable to hear.”

“Meeting him felt like a derjak game with all the pieces moving in the right places at the right time.” I said. “Though at the time I was way more annoyed at Za’ar about it all because I figured that he had set the whole thing up, but he hadn’t. It really was chance. I remember Navaari telling me that things always happen for a reason and that his people did not question destiny.

Kerrjan had made a short bark of a laugh, “Most of the time we do not, although Navaari has been known to fight against it from time to time, much good it does him.” He had stopped what he was doing to look at me. I had held his steady gaze for a moment then looked away. It had felt as though Kerrjan could see into the deepest part of my soul which was unnerving. For a very long time there was a silence between us, then he said, “You are a gift. You arrived at a point in his life where he felt empty, like you do now.”

I had looked at him for an explanation and Kerrjan had sighed. I could see by the expression on his face that he was debating what he should say next and exactly how to say it, as if he were about to unveil a great dark secret.

“There is a lot you do not know about your Pa’tjad’cu-sjä,” He had started. “He went through a very bad time in his life, shortly before he found you. While he will never admit to this, he had gone to Kerest with the intent of maybe not coming back. He did not think it would be noticed, but I knew. Before he had left he had said goodbye in a manner that had sounded final and he had put all of his affairs in order. He had not expected to survive that hunt which is always a sure way to ensure one doesn’t.”

I had given him a startled look then. “I don’t believe Navaari would do that. He would never give up, he would never ....” I bit off the words that had started in my brain before I could speak them out loud.

Kerrjan gave me a long speculative look. “I am quite certain that many people would have said the very same thing about you, but you gave up everything when you decided to head out in a blizzard. Loneliness and sorrow do strange things to people and Navaari had carried his sorrow around with him for a long time. While he may preach about letting go of ghosts, he was not always one to be practicing the same thing. He went to Kerest to lead the most difficult and the most deadly hunt we know of, knowing that the chances were very good he would not survive it. Dying

while on a hunt would have been an honourable death. Navaari saw that as preferable to dying alone in his sleep like an old wolf long past its usefulness.” He said plainly, stating out loud what I could not.

I had shaken my head in utter disbelief. “But he wasn’t alone, the entire enclave loves him, he had you, why didn’t he talk to you?” My voice had sounded so plaintive, so small, echoing the terrible ache in my heart. The rawness of the loss I still felt seemed to double with the knowledge that Navaari had felt the same way. It had taken all my concentration not to cry. I could not believe that Navaari, who was like a mountain of strength for me would have felt he had nothing to live for.

Kerrjan had sighed. “That’s not something most men will ever talk about. We tend to be taciturn at best about our feelings and stupid at worst. Navaari was over seventy eight years old, he had outlived his family with the exception of his daughter whom he almost never saw or spoke with, he had lost that vital link which seemed to make him whole and he did not know how to get it back. Sometimes that sort of loss and disconnection does funny things to a person and you of all people should understand this.”

“I don’t believe it. I don’t believe he would ever give up like that.” My words had been fierce and angry. I had not wanted to know this, not wanted to believe it but Kerrjan was not lying, I would have known if he was.

“Well, little pup, belief on your part is not required. Your Pa’tjad’cu-sjä went through very dark times of his own. He understands about wanting to be walking into a storm alone. That’s what makes him fear for you so deeply.”

When tears had welled up in my eyes I had not fought against them. It had never occurred to me that Navaari would understand me so well and I had been more than cruel with my words to him during many of the bitter arguments we had had since my arrival. Suddenly, I had felt a deep sense of shame at my own selfishness and it hit me like an avalanche. Kerrjan had watched me as I had brushed away my tears angrily and had nodded with a grim air of satisfaction before continuing to tell me his story.

“There comes a point when a man needs to face himself and that was what he was doing when he went to Kerest. He went without a reason to return but then, on the way, he met you.”

My memory of my first meeting with Navaari was so sharp, so clear but not once did I recall getting the sense from him that he was

getting ready to face his last hunt. What I really remembered the most was his quiet calm strength, the way he had guided me through the fight which had occurred and helped me to come out of it alive. I also remembered his frustration and slow building anger, a fearsome thing, at my own ignorance of all things Dantassi. Yet underneath that anger had been something else, a kindness, a tenderness one sometimes feels towards strays and children but I had not seen this until now. Then I remembered the way he had looked at me and the way he had said *‘you have given me much.’* when I had told him that I had nothing to give in return for the amulet he had placed around my neck. I had thought he was simply being polite but now I understood. Kerrjan must have noted my revelation on my face because he had smiled then.

“When he returned from Kerest he had changed. It was as if he had found a purpose but for a very long time he would not speak of it except to say that something remarkable had happened, that he had met someone who had given him hope. It was only after Nikätza’ar had come to pay him a visit just after you had been kidnapped did he finally open up and tell me the whole story.”

“Za’ar came here?” I had asked. “I knew he had asked Navaari to ‘keep and eye out for me’ but I had not known he had actually come to Hjal.”

Kerrjan had nodded. “He came to ask the Jhal’kai Order to look for you. It was only then, after it became public knowledge that something truly extraordinary had happened did Navaari tell me the whole story. I know that he had confronted Nikätza’ar about you before but that had been in private. When your Ta’kasta’cariad came here to ask for help what he had done was out on the open, no more secrets to hide. Navaari had known about you since Rothana but he had said nothing. I suppose the situation was so unusual he was unsure how to proceed so he kept it to himself trying to find a solution or an answer but once your existence was common knowledge, well then he came to me.”

I had sighed. That I had been the cause of so much turmoil seemed unreal.

“We were most impressed to learn that you had managed to free yourself and find your way home.” Kerrjan had continued. “It was then that Navaari made known to the council that he wanted you to come to the enclave and be taught the Dantassi ways. He felt you had earned that right by surviving what must have been a difficult trial.”

I had shivered. “It was an awful time. I don’t like thinking about it.”

“Of that I have no doubt.” Kerrjan had nodded. “It was not a surprise when word came that Nikätza’ar was bringing you here. We all knew that you would be brought to stand before the elders so that there would be no need for masks, but no one had expected Nikätza’ar to ask for a soul-binding ceremony and the look on your face told everyone he hadn’t even spoken of it with you either. I suppose we all put down your quietness that night to being shy and maybe even surprise at Nikätza’ar’s actions. No one expected you to simply vanish off into a blizzard but in hindsight it was not such a surprise that you did.”

“It was a stupid thing to do.” I had said crossly. “I was an idiot.”

“On those two points I don’t disagree but you were also in so much pain, too much pain with no way to let it all go. That sort of anguish makes people do foolish things. Navaari, to this day, regrets that he did not see it coming because he knew the signs. The first time you left the hall he followed you, fearing you might get lost but the second time he figured that you were just exhausted and needed sleep.”

I had shaken my head angrily. “How could he have seen that coming? I didn’t even know I was going to do what I did before I did it.”

“You asked the right questions.” Kerrjan had said carefully. “You asked Navaari how to survive the cold because somewhere in that head of yours you had already decided on what you were doing later. He thinks he should have known. He was trained to see the smallest signs for tracking, so he thinks he should have been able to foresee your actions. Though, after getting to know you it doesn’t surprise me that he didn’t. You are a bit chaotic and unpredictable.”

I had just made a face but didn’t interrupt him.

“Now, after what happened here the first time, he doesn’t want to lose you to a repeat of that so he tries to hold you close. You fight this because you don’t want to be feeling trapped, backed into a corner you cannot get out of. But I have to tell you, neither Da’hajn’s hand nor unconditional love is a trap. He’ll figure it out eventually and so will you but until then, consider this place we’ve made here to be a room with a door to the outside and use it to compromise before the two of you wake up the whole enclave with your shouting.”

My cheeks had flushed red with sudden embarrassment. “You can hear us fight?”

“I live only a short ways from you and yes, I can hear you fight. You, little pup, have a very loud bark.”

I could only mumble an apology which had made Kerrjan laugh. He had me help him hook the seat he had finished to the chains that hung from the roof of the addition and that had been the end of that conversation.

I loved the bench he had made because I could sit with my feet barely touching the ground and swing back and forth. I liked it even better because it was broad and large enough for three of me, which meant that when Navaari came out to join me we could both sit on it comfortably.

What Kerrjan had told me about Navaari I kept to myself but from that time onward I always left him a note, letting him know where I had gone. Often he would join me outside somehow understanding that while I needed to be out in the open I didn’t necessarily want to be alone. He never asked what had prompted my change in behaviour but he had let me know in his subtle way that he was relieved not to have to fight with me about it. I had not ever really thought about my own actions or their broader implications before, but the conversation I had had with Kerrjan had shown me that what I did had consequences and I touched other people’s lives in ways I could not even begin to imagine. Thrawn had been trying to tell me this for years but I had just been too wrapped up in my own little world to listen.

“Sometimes, little pup,” Kerrjan had said to me when I had spoken to him about this one day shortly after our earlier conversation, “you need to learn to pull with the team instead of against it.”

I had only nodded, acknowledging his words, hoping that this was a lesson I had finally, finally learned.

\*\*\*

I sat bundled up in furs and warm clothes and watched the swirling snow from my sheltered place as the storm continued to howl. After five days of being cooped up inside the enclave I had decided enough was enough and done my usual disappearing trick. Thrawn’s restlessness was infectious and he had begun to grate on my nerves. After a year or more of sleeping alone, I wasn’t used to sharing my bed or my space and I was finding the adjustment a little difficult, though I suspected it had more to do with his edginess than his presence. He had accomplished what he had come here to do and now he wanted to return to work in the

Unknown Regions but the weather, which was some of the worst I had ever seen on Hjal, was making it impossible for ships to land or take off.

It was twilight and the sky had turned an eerie purple colour as the last of the day's light filtered its way through the storm. I was grateful for the clever design of Kerrjan's addition which sheltered me from the worst of the frigid wind and blowing snow. This was not weather I wanted to go walking in but my need to be outside and breathe the fresh, icy air was far stronger than my love of warmth and being indoors. I sensed rather than heard the door behind me open and smiled at Navaari's presence, shifting on the bench to make room for him.

"Impressive weather this, I expected it would be dying down this morning but I see that isn't the case." He said as he sat next to me and began to clean out his pipe. "Thought I'd better come and make sure you weren't planning on spending the night out here again."

I grinned. The bench that Kerrjan had made was just wide enough for me to lie down on and wrapped up in the warm furs of my long coat and my other outdoor clothes I had actually fallen asleep on a couple of occasions. Something about the warmth of the clothing and cold bite of the air relaxed me, I knew I was safe and so when the drowsiness had crept over me I had not fought against it. It amused Navaari to no end that I could do this in the middle of a howling gale, even though I had pointed out I wasn't actually in the middle of it at all.

"Wasn't my plan." I answered.

"Your Ta'kasta'cariad was asking where you were."

"I left a note." I said defensively.

"Yes," Navaari chuckled, "but '*Gone hunting*' is not very informative and while I know what that really means but he does not. He was thinking that perhaps you might be doing something ... foolish."

"As if I'd dare!" I retorted.

Navaari nodded. "I was telling him not to be worrying. You were not going anywhere." He said. "I explained to him that you would not be making such an error in judgement again but he was not so convinced." That made me grin. Navaari allowed you the grace to make a mistake once and learn from it but repeating the same error often provoked his ire.

"Huh, then I'm sort of surprised that he didn't come looking himself." I replied.

"He was asked to join a meeting that will be taking place shortly and I told him I would take care of finding you. I was thinking you were needed some breathing space, yes?"

"Something like that." I nodded.

I felt his smile and watched as he lit his pipe, the warm red glow of the burning tobacco was a strange contrast to the white of the snow in the dark of the night. I inhaled deeply the scent which I would forever associate with the man sitting next to me. Although Navaari never smoked the pipe in the apartment, the scent of it clung to his clothes anyway, sweet and almost apple like.

"This need you have for the wide open always makes me wonder how you can love being in space in a tiny ship so much, Kycsi'i."

"Well, it's awfully hard to be in space without one." I grinned at the nick name. He had long ago stopped calling me Tjällh. He said I was no longer a small, silly child so the name no longer applied but it hadn't taken him long to find a replacement for it though. Kycsi'i was the shortcut for a word that when roughly translated into basic meant wolf-pup. It was a soft word, pronounced through closed teeth so that it sounded like ka-yey-shh-eh. I had Kerrjan to thank for it. He had taken to calling me 'little wolf pup' all the time and the name had somehow spread and stuck. It never ceased to astonish me how quickly some nicknames managed to stick to a person but I took it as a sign of affection and it was way better than the last one Navaari had given me. A comfortable silence settled between us again and I closed my eyes, listening to the sounds the wind made as it moved around us. It was slowing down and the mournful howling was giving way to a grating whine. I wondered if the storm was finally starting to die off but it didn't have the usual feel of a storm's end. I smiled at the hissing sound the snow made as it snaked across the frozen ground because it reminded me sharply of sand in the desert. That my two homes which were so vastly different had so many similarities never ceased to amaze me.

"What is on your mind?" Navaari said after a long silence. "I noticed that the two of you were quiet at breakfast this morning. Is something wrong?"

"Nothing in particular, just restless." I said, then after a moment I added, hoping it would be enough of the truth to placate his curiosity. "Za'ar was driving me nuts."

"He is missing space." He said carefully, turning to give me a speculative look.

Up until a few days ago Thrawn, as a topic for conversation, had been absolutely off limits so Navaari was testing the waters. I couldn't blame him for being cautious, Bringing up Thrawn in any kind of

discussion before now had usually resulted in shouting matches, angry silences or me walking out of the room. Just hearing his name had hurt and had stirred up my anger at everything I had felt he was responsible for. Now that had changed and for the most part my reasons for being so angry no longer existed, still my reply to Navaari's answer was cross. "I am well aware of that but does he *have* to make us all suffer for it?"

That made Navaari chuckle. "It will be over soon enough and then you will leave here to be with him where he is at his best." He said with sorrow lacing his voice. It made me ache with a loss that had not even happened but would come as sure as the day followed the night. My departure lingered over everything now, only the storm's violence had delayed the inevitable from happening. I knew I had to leave, and that staying would be the wrong move to make but knowing this did not make it any easier to deal with.

I heaved a large sigh. "I don't want to go!" It came out sounding petulant but I didn't care.

Navaari wrapped his arm across my shoulders and pulled me into a hug. I rested my head on his shoulder. "I know that." He said, "But you cannot be staying here forever, you would eventually go stir crazy. Hjal has served its purpose."

"My father said almost exactly the same thing about me leaving Tatooine when I got the job working for Lord Vader."

"Then your father is a wise man and he was right. All pups must be leaving the den sooner or later. You have a destiny that is not here. I will be missing you sorely but I am certain you will be visiting me on occasion, yes?"

"Of course!" I said, hoping it was true. I loved Navaari with a ferociousness that seemed almost unreal at times and the very prospect of leaving him brought a lump to my throat. For over a year this had been home. He had become family to me, strong, solid and kind and in some ways I felt closer to him than I did with my own father. I often thought about this while living on Hjal because the blood ties between the families here meant so much that I wondered how I could feel so strongly for all the people I considered family in my life when I was not tied by genetics to any of them. I had asked Navaari about this one day after we had made up from a particularly loud and spectacular argument. His reply had been short and simple but its implications had weighed heavily on my shoulders for days after wards. "Love does not have blood ties, Kycsi'i," he had said, "Love only knows love." I had not understood this then but over time it

dawned on me that I chose my family not the other way around and in some ways I was blessed to be able to do so without the obligations that being bound by the same blood line often seemed to create.

"Why can't I be two people?" I asked him.

"Two of you?" he shook his head, "I don't know what to be doing with just one of you..."

I made a face which he couldn't see. "Oh you sound just like Za'ar."

His warm, booming laughter was carried away by a sudden gust of wind. Despite my warm clothes I shivered.

"He was speaking with one of your students this morning and was most impressed with the progress you have been making. He had no idea that you would be such a good instructor." Navaari said after a lengthy silence. "He was telling me he hopes that you will make the same progress on Nirauan."

I sighed. "I can't think of a job I want less, you know." I said. "I don't have fond memories of that place and the people on the base were not the friendliest in the galaxy. The Chiss seemed to resent the humans and the humans don't really like the Chiss. I don't want to be stuck in the middle."

"You will be doing just fine and those who you teach will warm up to you." Navaari said.

"Maybe." I said. "I feel as though I am going back there because there is no where else for me to really go and that's not really a good reason is it?"

Navaari's answer was surprisingly blunt. "You are going because he needs you and you need him. Without you, your Ta'kasta'cariad is half a man though he would be hard pressed into actually admitting this to anyone. You make him whole, Kycsi'i, you complete him." It had taken Navaari all of a second to see that things between Thrawn and I had worked themselves out, more or less. He had come back from his meetings to find us in the living room playing the Dantassi version of dejarik. The atmosphere between us was decidedly less tense than it had been twenty or so hours previously.

I snorted a little. "Za'ar was never half a man with or without me."

Navaari's chuckle made the swinging bench jiggle. "Do not be underestimating your importance to him or your place in his life."

"And just what makes me so important?"

Navaari turned his head to look at me, both the soft glow of his eyes rivalled by the warm red embers of his pipe burned brightly against the dark of the on coming night. "Love, Kycsi'i, unconditional love." Navaari said quietly. "As I said, he came back because he needs you. You bring light into the darkness. Kerrjan was very apt in likening you to a wolf-pup, you know, you are just like one. You give your love and your loyalty so freely, and I have never seen you ask for anything in return except to be loved back. It is a very rare thing and it's precious beyond belief. Both Nikätza'arth'pavjäska and I are blessed by your presence in our lives."

Love. I thought about this for a moment because it was a word that held so many meanings and so much promise but at the same time it also caused so many problems and it did so much damage. I sighed, retreating back in to an almost sullen silence.

After a while Navaari asked, "What's really on your mind, Kycsi'i? Are you unhappy? Do you not wish to return to Nirauan with Nikätza'arth'pavjäska? Did you and he have a fight over something?"

I shook my head, thinking about the strange turn the discussion Thrawn and I had had as we had lain in bed the night before. "No, we didn't fight exactly." I answered his last question. "It's more about things which haven't been said."

"What do you mean?"

I drew a deep, deep breath and let it out slowly. "He never told you he was going to use the unmasking ceremony to bind himself to me before it actually happened, did he?"

"No." Navaari replied.

"Did he ever tell you why?" I pressed because I was certain that Navaari would have asked Thrawn this.

"I did not ask him because I knew the answer." Navaari said after a lengthy silence which let me know I would probably not like the reply to my next question.

"And that is?"

"He knew I would try to stop him."

A myriad of emotions flashed through me all at once not the least of which was surprise. The was the very last answer I had expected to hear Navaari give and it brought back a flood of insecurities which surfaced in my mind every now and then about belonging to and being part of the Dantassi culture. I was so alien among them and sometimes, despite assurances to the contrary, I truly felt as though I had no right to be there.

For a long moment I did not know how to respond to this and then when I found my voice I asked the only question I could.

"Why?"

\*\*\*

The wind which had howled about the enclave like an enraged bantha had stilled to almost nothing and it felt as though all of Hjal including my self was holding its breath waiting for Navaari to answer my question.

"You have to understand, what he did...."

"I know what he did!" I cut him off. "At least I know what he has told me, which isn't very much. I asked a few times what that all meant but he was vague about his answers, evading the question. Everyone evades this question and now you tell me you would have stopped it?" This was what Thrawn and I had discussed the night previously while lying in bed, talking long into the early hours of the morning. The discussion had never turned ugly nor had it become an argument, both of us were still being too careful with the other for that to happen, but I had questioned him about what he really meant by being bound to me and what the strange little ceremony which had taken place at my unmasking rite had truly been about. His answers had been evasive at best and at worse he had lied. When I had called him on it he, in much the same manner as my uncle did, had asked me to back off and let the matter be. "What is done is done, Tekari," he had said, "I am bound to you, is that not enough?" I had backed off because to take it further would have meant a fight and neither of us was ready for that yet. But this secret thing he had done to me in public without anyone else's knowledge before hand was biting at my curiosity. There were whispers about it within the enclave but no one would speak to me of it and when I had tried to learn of it more I got told off. I looked at Navaari knowing that if I was ever going to find out, this was the time and the place for it and I asked my question again. "What I want to know is why? Why would you have tried to stop him?"

"Because, such a thing should be discussed and both parties should know about it not just one but he seemed to feel this was the best way. I never agreed with that but, like you, he is wilful. I let it go because your acceptance was only to allow him to bind to you, not the other way around. Never- the-less, you should have been told of his intent, especially as you did not understand anything that had been said, or the agreement

he had made and the implications that went with it, which in itself was unusual and remarkable.”

I frowned, “Just about everything he does seems remarkable or unusual, how was this any different?”

Navaari’s reply held an undercurrent of anger in it that I did not often hear from him. “He has bent every rule we have about outsiders when it comes to you and no one quite knows how to deal with that.” It wasn’t an answer.

“I don’t know how to deal with it.” I told him tartly. “I don’t know why he does anything he does most of the time, especially when it comes to me!”

“Ahhhh Kycsi’i, that is because when it comes to you, he is ...well... cautious.” Navaari replied sounding tired.

“Cautious? Why?” This was the eternal question I never seemed to be able to find satisfactory answers for. I kept asking it over and over.

“Well, I suppose in order to know the answer to that you need to learn a little about his past. There are some things you don’t know, things I am sure he won’t tell you because maybe he is ashamed, maybe he is afraid you will think less of him.” Navaari shrugged a little.

“How could I think less of him? I love him.” I murmured in a whisper.

“That is what I told him but he doesn’t always listen.” He said with a snort. “When I first met him, he was brash, idealistic and full of himself. His work with the CEDF had made him well known amongst his people and not always entirely for the right reasons. He was arrogant even then, thinking his way better, and so defiant, always arguing his reasons for being right using his logic and tactical genius. When he came here to help in the defence of this planet it was against his people’s wishes, but he came anyway and it was a blessing for us that he did. His brilliance saved us and our home.”

“I know this Navaari.” I interrupted.

“Mmmm,” Navaari nodded as he took a slow thoughtful draw on his pipe. “What you don’t know is that during this time, he was courted by several women here who saw in him the potential for a perfect mate. Yirnika, Mechele, and Torvai to name just three of the girls who nearly clawed each other’s eyes out to be with him but he would have none of it, he would not even bed with them simply for pleasure even though they made it abundantly clear they were his for the taking should he wish. He always politely declined their offers and invitations, each and every one,

until the rumours began to fly that he was already married or that perhaps he was more interested in men than in women.”

“Yirnika? Tanika’s mother?” I asked.

“The very same.”

“Oh! Well, that explains a good few things then.” I said ruefully.

“Been giving you a difficult time has she? I was wondering why you were liking to avoid her when ever possible, it is a good thing that daughter of hers doesn’t take after her mother.” Navaari nodded. “She took Nikätza’arth’pavjäska’s refusal of her affections very hard. To this day I think she is bitter and angry at him because of it. He swept into this enclave like a storm stirring things up, though that was never his intention. It would be no surprise that she would be passing these feelings on to you, after all you have managed to obtain that which she could not.”

I glanced up at him, meeting his eyes which glowed softly in the darkness and waited for him to continue. I know he read my ‘why?’ on my face but I bit my lip to keep from uttering it out loud.

“He bound himself to you in an ancient ritual, made it plain and public that he would never give this promise to another. It must have galled her, after all those years, to see that he chose you, an outsider to this enclave, and an alien, and a slip of a girl who was half his age over her. She has never forgiven him for rejecting her offers, despite the fact that he really did make it plain he was not interested. I thought she had mostly forgotten him until the two of you showed up here the last time. The fuss that stirred up was most amusing to watch, of course everyone waited until you were both gone from here before they were saying anything about it.”

“He’s never mentioned if there were women in his past to me.” I said with a small shrug, not doing a very good job of hiding the strange and sudden flare of jealousy I felt, “but then again he hardly ever mentions much of his life before he came to work for the Empire and I don’t like to press him.”

Navaari nodded. “He was a young, handsome, eligible man and when I had asked why he refused to even consider the attentions of these young women, he’d told me that it did not feel right to encourage them, he knew he could not be what they wanted. He spoke of his career and said that he could not be with anyone who did not understand that duty came first, that his love of space and ships would never allow him to be tied down and he was quite right in these things when he spoke of the women here. While we are being a somewhat nomadic peoples in the past, we

have settled here and even though we travel off world to hunt, to track , when we are done, we come home. The women who chased him wanted a mate who would not only provide a comfortable living but also be around to warm the bed and father offspring. He told me it would have been wrong to give them false ideas and false hopes, that there were reasons for his decisions that would become clear in time. ”

“Well he was right about that. I think that Za’ar and I have been together a lot less than we have actually been apart, but I never expected anything else.” I said as I sat back against back of the bench and looked out into the night. “He is a man with....”

“...stars in his blood.” Navaari finished for me. “I am certain that, because you understood this, is part of what drew him to you in the first place.” He said thoughtfully, “You did not chase him but you did not reject him either. I think that intrigued him into wanting to learn more about you and the rest came later. What began as a desire to satisfy his curiosity grew into something he could neither back away from nor totally control. This was and is a precariously interesting situation for a man like Nikätza’arth’pavjäska to find himself in.”

“How so?”

“He, as with most Chiss, has been trained from birth to acknowledge the feelings he has but to tuck them away allowing reason and logical thinking to lead and direct his path. He was never a man to allow his emotions to get in the way of his, ambition, duty or his analytical skills. However, where you are concerned this is not the case.” He paused for a moment. “He can be ruthless if the moment demands it and not hesitate to kill if that was called for. Yet, this is a side of him I suspect he has not allowed you to see, he cares too much for what you think of him and I have never known him to be this way with any other being. He recounted to me a story once about having to destroy an enemy ship despite the fact that he knew it was full of prisoners, captured beings bound for slavery. He said the humans who were with him at the time this occurred were horrified. But, he told me, if he had to make the same choice again, he would have and I believed him. When he spoke of this incident he did so without emotional attachment at all but when he speaks of some of the things that you have endured he cannot hide how he feels. For a Chiss to be so emotionally attached is difficult to say the least.”

I shivered. Navaari was wrong about Thrawn not showing me his ruthless side. I could still hear the sharp crack of bone as he broke the neck of the man who had tried to rape me on Myrkr. He was just careful

not to show it all that often, but I knew it was there. I didn’t say anything so Navaari continued.

“This was all a long time ago, when he was a young man in the CEDF and he first had contact with beings from your part of the galaxy, humans, a woman and two men. Smugglers, he said. They were on the run and had somehow managed to hyper into Chiss space. Instead of destroying them he brought them on board of his ship as his guests, though I expect they did not see it in this way. It is how he learned to speak basic but it is also around the time he lost his brother.”

“Thrass.” I whispered.

“You know about this.” It wasn’t a question.

“I only know a little, that his brother vanished along with a jedi woman trying to prevent the ship from getting into the wrong hands. It had to do with maintaining balance of power within in the Chiss Ascendancy, but I don’t know much more than that.” I shook my head.

Navaari nodded. “It is a wound that runs deep. He feels responsible for the loss of his brother. There were dire consequences for him because of his actions. He does not speak of it because guilt makes it painful and difficult. He knows a thing or two about hiding from the truth, about shoving things that hurt deep down inside and about loss.” He spoke gently but there was also anger in his words. Anger directed both at me and at Thrawn. In Navaari’s opinion we both kept far too many emotions and secrets locked up inside our hearts. It wasn’t something I could disagree with either. “I am not one to be believing strongly in fate but I will tell you this, your life, his life and mine are wound together in more ways that we could ever be imagining. I had thought that once he left us after the defeat on the Ninlial and returned to his own world that I would not be seeing him again but that was not the case and over the course of many years our paths crossed time and time again. Not too often, mind you, but enough that I knew our threads were woven into the same story. And then there was you.”

He paused for a moment and looked at me, I returned his stare and didn’t look away until he nodded slightly, “When I met you on Rothana I was angered that one who was not us would dare to take on the mask of the Dantassi so boldly, so brazenly but when I saw the amulet around your neck I knew that this was not an accident and that something bigger than simple chance was at work. When you openly told me your story without guile or lie I understood that I had been sent to that planet for the single purpose of meeting you there. The connection I felt to you as

we sat and spoke that day was not something I ever thought possible with one who was not of my kind. It puzzled me how Da'hajn could tangle her threads so badly and I was convinced this was a mistake. However, I was wrong. Meeting you was something I needed, I just did not understand that then. It had not been my plan to go to Rothana although it was often used as a stop over for my kind, you understand, I was on my way to Kerest and had booked a passage on a ship that was heading straight there. It was a broken hyperdrive and a very odd twist of circumstances that brought me to Rothana and kept me there for two days. I did not understand why until you told me who it was that had named you in Dantassi fashion. Then, as you like to say, the last piece of the puzzle felt as if it had fallen into place." The scent of sweet smoke mingled with the icy cold air as Navaari stopped to suck on his pipe and consider his words.

"When I saw him next I challenged him about you, but we only had a little time to speak and there was so much that needed to be said. What he had done, well there was no precedent for that. You are one of a kind among our enclave, perhaps even amongst all the Dantassi. There have been one or two other 'Traeth who have wished to join us, become one with the clan but it was forbidden. Nikätza'arth'pavjäska could get away with it because while he was under my protection, taken into my family he is not of the blood and bears the name of another clan. He was in a very unique position to circumnavigate our rules without actually breaking them, which, incidentally, is why neither he nor you bear my name." He sighed. "I was so angry with him over you. You, a slip of a 'Traeth who knew nothing of our ways, ignorant and innocent should not have been given the key to our world, yet there you were and no one, not even the elders could deny his right to do what he had done with you. When I asked him why, he simply said, '*Because my thread is bound with hers.*'"

"What did he mean by that?" I asked, leaning into Navaari's warmth. The wind was definitely dying down and still chill had begun to creep over everything.

Navaari looked at his pipe and tapped the dregs of the ashes out. "I am sure that you have heard some of the stories about Da'hajn, yes?"

"A few." I nodded thinking of the bedtime stories Tanika told her two small children.

"It has been a long time since the Dantassi or the Chiss have been worshiping any gods but their stories remain in our world, touching our culture in more ways that even we know. One of the surviving tales likens

life to a giant, endless tapestry forever in motion. Threads, which represent lives, weave in and out to create the pattern of the galaxy, some threads are short while others are long. Some are single and separate and others are wound together making one colour out of two, blending, becoming stronger. Long before the Chiss hid underground to cuddle against their planet's inner warmth they believed that this giant tapestry was woven by a goddess who plucked these threads from the trails of stars and the tails of comets, colouring the bright white light with the red of giant stars, the blue of planets' skies and the fiery green of the dancing lights and so on. Each thread is a life force and she weaves their singular and separate tales into the never ending tapestry we call life. It is a simple tale from a simple time when no one understood where we all came from."

He glanced at me and continued, "While in this enlightened age this myth is now relegated to the status of a bedtime tale parents tell their small children, we still talk about fate in terms of the Great Weaver, Da'hajn. By telling me what he did in the manner that he did, Nikätza'arth'pavjäska was letting me know how important you were to him. The idea that Da'hajn weaves two beings' threads together, joining their lives is a powerful one, even today. We symbolize this union by exchanging tokens that remember her and her weaving skills." He lifted his arm and pushed back his sleeve showing me the slender torque bracelet that encircled his wrist. It was made with three different kinds of metal wire twisted together to make one single cord. It was an incomplete circle the two ends finished in stylized snow wolves' heads facing each other. It was beautiful and while I had seen it many times before I had never thought about it having any meaning.

"Why are there three different strands and not just two?" I asked as I studied the beautiful piece of jewellery.

"The silver strand is for moonlight, representing the female, the gold represents the sunlight and the man, twisted together they represent the couple being given to each other and the third strand, the blue one which is made from metal only found on a few planets, Csilla and Hjal among them, represents Da'hajn who binds all lives together on the great tapestry. It is to her magic that we pay homage with this token. You have seen this ceremony; you were at Belljani and Karhek's bonding."

I nodded remember that joining and how beautiful it was. I had been to weddings before on Tatooine but somehow the fairly dull civil ceremony that passed for a wedding on my home world seemed lacking in beauty and meaning that the Nai'da Rite of the Dantassi had. I knew that

what Thrawn had done with me and the Rite of Nai'da had been two different things. The wording had been different and the meaning behind it also was not the same but I had not been able to unravel just how this was because I could not remember everything that had been said and no one would tell me now. I had the feeling that if I let him, Navaari would ramble on about everything except the one thing I really wanted to know so I decided to push.

I let out a slow, angry breath, "Get to the point, Navaari. Tell me what he did to me and the reasons behind it."

\*\*\*

Navaari withdrew his hand from mine and studied the bracelet on his wrist for a long moment. Then he pulled his coat sleeve back down and began to refill his pipe, slowly thoughtfully. I wasn't sure he would answer me but I stayed silent and waited. He regarded me for a very long time, searching my face as if that would give him answers to the questions I had asked. When he took a deep breath and lit his pipe I knew we would be outside for a while longer. When he began to speak I felt a great sense of relief.

"Nikätza'arth'pavjäska was never one to show much emotion about any one person in particular although, on occasion, he has shown a small amount of affection but this was the exception rather than the norm. In all the time I have known him, I had never heard him speak about anyone in the way he spoke about you when I confronted him after meeting you on Rothana. I see the two of you together and I know I have never seen him look at anyone else the way he looks at you. Nor," He added thoughtfully, "have I never seen him look the way he did when he told me that you had been abducted by the man who was your childhood sweetheart."

I shivered at that memory. Jyrki's madness had almost killed me and it had been Thrawn who had saved me by bring me to Hjal. "That was a very bad time."

Navaari nodded. "Yes and you did not help it by trying to walk to your death in a blizzard."

I sighed. Navaari was never, ever going to let me forget about that. "Za'ar was so angry and I do seem to excel at making him angry." I said quietly.

"Anger covers up fear." He said knowingly then turned to glance at me. "Fear causes us all to do stupid things." There was so much more

behind his words than what was actually spoken and it reminded me of the Jedi creed which talked about fear and anger and hate. No wonder the idea of attachments and love scared them to death; the fear of losing these things was enough to drive anyone mad.

"Do you think he did not tell you or me what he planned at the unmasking ceremony because he feared someone else in the enclave would protest it or stop him?" I asked wondering who might have done that. While Navaari was right and I had made a place for myself in the enclave not everyone was happy with my being there, some were more vocal than others but I knew that I had not been and was still not universally welcome.

"That would also have been a possibility, as I have said his actions with you were unpopular and unheard of." He conceded, "Although it does not excuse his silence to you. Still, I said my piece on it and let him know what I thought." He said. "I would have been more vocal but what he did was one way, only tying him to you formally and not the other way around."

"Maybe I need to remedy that, Navaari." I said quietly.

His gaze was intense. "Such a thing is not to be done lightly." His tone of voice suddenly hard.

"I am well aware of that." My reply sounded crosser than I had intended.

Navaari only shook his head speaking to me as though I were still an unbedded girl whose infatuation had caught the better of her. "Nai'da cannot be performed without both people's consent and I do not think he would give his."

"Why not?" I asked.

Navaari sighed. "That answer is complicated."

"*Complicated* is another way of saying I can't be bothered to explain it to you!" I retorted hotly. I knew this because I used it the same way all the time when I didn't want to speak about something or explain an action.

Navaari bit back the annoyance I know he felt. "I do not think you would want to push him about it. He has chosen you, he beds you, he loves you is that not enough?"

"What if it isn't? What if I am tired of all this keeping of secrets from me for my own good? Why, for once can't you all just be straight with me about why you do the things you do? I am not an idiot!"

Navaari snorted. "No but sometimes you act like one!"

I punched him, without malice, on the arm and he smiled then said thoughtfully. “Nai’da is a life bond, A’mysk’a, permanent and binding with serious consequences if you were to decide to back out or seek another to lie with on a whim. Requesting to be bound under this rite in this enclave would be restricting for both of you so please do not push for that because you would not be happy with his answer and you are smarter than that.”

“I know what a life bond means in Dantassi terms, Navaari. I also know that what Za’ar did was different. It was not Nai’da, not even close. Did you think I wouldn’t ask? Did you think I would not discover some of the truth behind what he did? Did you think I would never find out what neither you nor Za’ar nor anyone else would tell me?” I didn’t bother to try and hide some of the frustration I felt.

Navaari’s shoulders slumped a little as he sat back against the back of the bench. It was as if the terrible secret he had been holding onto now suddenly weighed too much and I knew that finally we would get to the real truth. “It was not my place to tell you, little one.”

“Yes it was!” I said hotly. “You were the one who found me in the snow and saved me from freezing to death, you were the one who gave me a home here, helped me heal when no one else could. You took on responsibility for me when no one else wanted to, not even Za’ar so if not you, then who else would have, should have, told me the truth of this thing, who?”

“Nikätza’arth’pavjäska.” He replied with the only answer he could.

“Gah!” I let out an exasperated breath, tipping my head backwards rest on the bench’s backrest. I stared at the ceiling of the porch shelter for what seemed an age before speaking. “Last night Za’ar and I discussed this thing he did, or better say talked around it. All he would ever say is that he is bound to me, he never really explains what it truly means and I don’t understand why. So, I went to see Ma’kehla this morning. I pleaded with her to tell exactly what had happened at the unmasking ceremony to me.”

Navaari was very still as he asked. “And did she?”

“She told me that what Za’ar had done wasn’t ordinary, she called it Pen’nai Da’ataith. But the way she acted when I asked, it was as if the entire thing was some sort of dirty secret.”

“I wondered if she would be the one to eventually break the silence. She hates keeping secrets like this even more than I do.” He said with a heavy sigh.

“So...?”

“Pen’nai Da’ataith is a very old version of the Nai’da binding ceremony...” Navaari replied.

“Well, I’ve witnessed the Nai’da and I know that what he did with me was different.” I interrupted, pushing because while Ma’kehla had told me the name of what Thrawn had done she had not gone into any details about the consequences. That, she had told me tartly, was either Navaari or Za’ar’s job but not hers.

Navaari looked at me steadily and bit on the stem of his pipe then, making a decision, he tapped it against the side of the bench letting the last of the tobacco embers fall out, and black ashes swirled briefly upon the white of the snow then, scooped up by a slight gust of wind, vanished. He took his time as he began to refill his pipe, mulling over his words as he did so. “Listen to me Kycsi’i, if you want to hear this then stop interrupting or else you will never learn what I know and think about this thing he did.” He raised his eyebrows in question and I nodded in agreement.

He began again, “Pen’nai Da’ataith is an ancient Chiss custom that dates back many, many, many centuries. It was drawn up as a way of putting a stop to the practice of arranged pairings in order to solidify power and wealth, giving all people the right to choose their mates, to choose love over lineage obligations. It protected the lovers involved by disallowing their families from disowning and banishing them and was a way of preventing blood feuds and unions of convenience. Once the right of Pen’nai had been called the person who claimed it was, to put it crudely, off the market and not even family could alter this or punish them in any way for what they had done. In centuries, as customs changed, it has been mostly forgotten, considered an antiquated law that no one needs to use any longer as arranged marriages have long gone out of fashion, at least officially any way. However, the Rite of Pen’nai Da’ataith still exists and it has deep meanings as well as great power, it was never removed from the list of laws so technically it can still be used and must be upheld. In my life, until he invoked it I had never seen the Rite Pen’nai Da’ataith performed. The enclave still whispers of it.”

“Why does he always make things so complicated? He could have just asked if I would marry him.”

“Perhaps,” Navaari shrugged, “but to be honest I don’t think that is what he had in mind when he called for the Rite of Pen’nai. He was still courting you and he had not yet taken you to his bed and you, well you were still unsure of your place in his world. I think, in his eyes, he felt you were too young, too untried to be asked to make such a choice....”

“Well then he gave me no credit at all!” I interrupted angrily.

“Perhaps, perhaps not, but there were also other reasons as well, Kycsi’i.” He chided gently. “More pressing reasons.”

“Such as?”

“To look after you in part, I suspect. Because he claimed the rite of Pen’nai, he is duty bound to protect you in all things. His duty is also the enclave’s duty. This means he has the right to call upon the enclave’s clans people to aid him in matters which concern you if needs be. All his belongings and holdings pass to you should he die before you do and no Chiss or Dantassi law can deny you this. It grants you many rights and a certain status within his people’s culture as well as with the Dantassi as it was one of the few laws that survived the splitting of our peoples. He would have known all of this. He took great care to see that you were protected not just by your own family but by all that is his as well. Being joined under Nai’da does not grant the same rights as under Pen’nai.”

“But why would he do that?” I asked, my brow wrinkling in utter puzzlement.

“Can you think of no reason?” Navaari nudged.

I closed my eyes and remembered back to the conversation Thrawn and I had had after Jyrki had broken in and destroyed my old flat in the Imperial palace. *‘After your kidnapping I thought about it carefully then I had your name added to the papers on this flat. Should anything ever happen to me, ownership will be transferred to you.’* He had said. I sighed and as if it answered everything I whispered Jyrki’s name.

Navaari nodded slightly, “In part it was a reaction to what happened to you the night you were taken from Coruscant by your mechanic friend. I believe that having you snatched away from under his nose like that frightened Nikätza’arth’pavjäska more than he was willing to say. As soon as he was able to, he came to us asking for the help of the Jhal’kai to find you. He was refused outright. I often wonder if what he did was also a direct reaction to this simple act of refusal on our parts. If we had said yes, perhaps he would not have felt forced to invoke the Pen’nai Da’ataith.”

“What?” I could not keep the surprise out of my voice.

“He did not tell you that did he?” Navaari said sounding unimpressed and not the least bit surprised.

I shook my head. “No, he said that he had asked you to keep an eye out for me.”

“He came here asking for the Jhal’kai Order to actively search for you because your Emperor would not allow him to do so but the council turned him down.”

The sudden hurt I felt at hearing this surprised me more than I could have ever imagined. “Did you say no as well?”

“I did not vote, I was forbidden to because I had known about you long before Nikätza’arth’pavjäska came to ask our aid and I had said nothing about it. That alone was grounds enough for me to be removed from the council although it never came to that because I stepped back from my place in it myself. I told you, what he did with you has no precedence in our enclave. He damned near caused a riot at that meeting and I had never seen him or the enclave’s council members and elders so angry. The Jhal’kai were well within their rights to refuse him and as angry as he was, he understood. All the same, it was not an easy parting. He did not lie to you when he said he had asked for my help, he did and I gave it to him as much as I was able to but council law forbade me from actively searching for you and even I have lines I will not cross, to do so would have meant being shunned and this is my home.”

I nodded that I understood this but because I needed to know I asked. “If you could have voted how would you have done so?”

“I would have said yes.” His answer came easily and there was no lie in it. “But for reasons that I would have been hard pressed to explain to the council. Sometimes there are ties that go beyond blood lines and race. I knew that from the first moment I saw you something larger was at work even though I was unwilling to admit it at the time. They would not have understood this then.”

“Do you think they understand now?”

Navaari snorted. “Yes I do but getting certain members to admit this would be an impossible task. Do not underestimate the power you have for getting inside people’s hearts Kycsi’i. You worked hard to earn your place in this enclave and you have given a great deal to this community, teaching basic, learning our ways, and becoming a part of who we are, adding to our stories. We have Nikätza’arth’pavjäska to thank for this, without him invoking Pen’nai you would never have been allowed sanctuary here and that would have been a great loss for us in so many

ways, especially for me but not everyone is happy with a 'Traeth in the enclave. That is their problem and not yours. You have a home here no matter what." I looked up at him and his eyes met mine. The sense of love and honour and so much more that I felt from coming him was overwhelming and I had to blink away my sudden tears. I suppose he knew and understood that I felt the same way as he drew me close with his arm about my shoulders. "Do you understand better why he did this now?" he asked.

"You still should have told me what he had done, I don't get why you didn't, you know."

To my surprise he just laughed. "Oh Kycsi'i, you want it all, you know that? You are sometimes impossible to please. What was I supposed to do or say? Every time I tried to talk with you about Nikätza'arth'pavjäska you shut me down faster than a Toydarian trader does a beggar. For the last year you would not speak of him with me, nor about your family on Tatooine or much about your life on Coruscant. It was as if you wanted to erase all pre existing memories of your life before you came here away and start all over again. I did not talk to you about these things because I did not know how to broach the subject without you getting hugely upset. I figured that when you were ready you would come to me and we would discuss it but you never did, not until tonight. Even if I had tried, would you have been willing to really listen?"

I made a face because he was right. "Probably not." I conceded. "It's weird, you know that he did this to me in this way. It is almost as if he knew I would need some place to vanish that was safe and out of the way. It's down right spooky how he plans things sometimes."

Navaari just made a noise. "His strategic thinking, tactical skills and his ability to plan ahead are the reasons I stopped playing dejarik with him. Sometimes I used to wonder if he could simply see the future but the truth of it is, this is his gift. He plays this game like no other I have ever seen and he is brilliant at it. It is how he thinks all the time, what moves can be made, when and how and then how to counter each and every one of them. But honestly, I don't think he saw what happened to you coming at all, I just think he wanted to be prepared for anything. He has told me several times that you are one of the few people who truly frustrates him with your unpredictability so I suppose he was making sure all angles were covered. It was a very clever move in the end."

"So how do I balance out what he did without backing him into a corner?"

Navaari was quiet for a few moments and then he said. "You learn to play his game, Kycsi'i."

This made me laugh, my breath coming out in white puffs of air. "If only it were that simple." I snorted.

"Well, it might be." Navaari said giving me a look which said he had something in mind.

"How?"

"Patience, little pup, patience." Navaari just smiled. I had nothing to add to this and the silence between us seemed all the more still because the wind had finally died completely down.

"Strange storm this was, it looks all clear now but it feels wrong." I said casually getting up to look up at the night sky. It was surprisingly clear; at least the area above us, but when I looked to the south all I saw was a thick darkness.

"Not seen a storm like this in over six or so years." Navaari said with a grin, coming to stand beside me. "Seems to me that Hjal is not wanting to be losing you just yet. Look out towards the South Ridge." He pointed to where he wanted me to look.

"Can't see anything." Which I realised was unusual. Normally on a clear night the mountains stood out white against the sky.

"This is a koj'l'wynt." He said as if that explained everything. The word meant demon's wrath. He made a circling motion with his fingers to show me what he was talking about. "A storm that turns back on itself. The wind's changed, she'll come back now from the south now and be twice as bad as before. Feel the breeze on your face?"

I lifted my face and closed my eyes. He was right it was coming from the south, south west and that was not all, its scent had changed. There was a needle cold sharpness, an almost cruel hint in the way the wind smelled. Storms from the North East always brought a touch of salt and brine because they swept over the sea flats. This new wind was coming straight down off the mountains and in order to do that, to maintain the cold and be as strong as they were this storm had to be very bad.

"Well," I said, "This won't make Za'ar very happy."

"No, but it does give us a little more time together." Navaari just laughed.

I winced as a sudden gust of bitterly cold air swept snow into my face. It felt like a thousand tiny cold needles pricking my skin. I made a face, winds from the southern direction made sitting outside impossible. Glancing back over my shoulder I saw a wall of snow heading towards us.

It reminded me greatly of the massive sandstorms that sometimes swept in from the desert. When the first real blast of wind found its way into the small shelter, I shivered and huddled closer in my heavy clothes. Now I was starting to feel the cold keenly which didn't escape Navaari's notice. He cleaned the ashes from his pipe and tucked it carefully away in his pocket. He activated the force field that had been installed for Southern storms, preventing the build up of snow drifts against the South doorway and slung his arm around my shoulders.

"Come inside before you freeze to death. Enough of this fresh air nonsense! Your Ta'kasta'cariad will be embroiled in conversations with the council now so we will have peace and quiet to continue talking if it is what you are wishing to do."

I nodded, grateful to be back in the warmth of the enclave. As much as I loved the outside and the wildness of the terrible storms, I love being inside where it was warm even more.

\*\*\*

If there had been one thing I had learned from my time in the enclave it was that the Dantassi did not need much prodding to have a celebration. What I had hoped would be a quiet going away dinner turned into an enclave wide affair, much to my chagrin.

"You have a lot of friends here Kycsi'i." Navaari had chided when I had grumbled about it. "They all wish to say goodbye properly."

Saying goodbye properly was really an excuse for a night of revelling, although I didn't mind as much as I seemed to. It was the prospect of leaving that made me sad not the party to say farewell. After all the Dantassi enjoyed life to the fullest. 'We feast, we dance and then we couple to celebrate living!' Navaari had once said. This was no exception but the reason for it made me a little melancholy.

Thrawn had been in contact with the *Grey Wolf* and because the storm which had grounded him was finally starting to taper off. Satisfied that there would be no safety issues, he had arranged for us to meet with his ship as soon as the weather cleared enough. I was fairly certain that after the farewell celebration I would not be in the mood to pack so I decided to do it before rather than after, I was in the middle of trying to decide what to take and what to leave when Navaari knocked on my door.

"If you are looking for Za'ar he's speaking with Ma'kehla." I said without turning around.

"Actually it was you I was hoping to find." He said closing the door behind him.

I sighed as I stopped what I was doing to look at him. "Have I ever mentioned how much I hate packing?" I asked.

He just chuckled. "Often." He said. Then he looked around at the room and I saw a flash of sadness cross his face. "What ever you want from this room is yours to take, Kycsi'i."

I nodded feeling the lump in my throat grow. "I don't think I will be wearing much Dantassi fashion on Nirauan though." I told him trying to lighten the mood a little.

"Well now, you never know what you'll be needing and when it might be of use." He commented, his fingers casually caressing one of the dresses I had laid out on the bed.

I nodded. "What did you want to see me about, Navaari?"

He smiled. "Ah, I thought we might talk about what will happen tonight." He said with a smile.

"You found something?"

He nodded. I believe I did, so do you want to hear it?"

I heaved a huge sigh feeling some of the tension I had been holding inside dissipated. "Will he go along with it?"

"I think so, but it needs to be done right." Navaari said with a nod, then he sat on the bed and motioned for me to sit beside him. "So, listen carefully."

And I did.

After our conversation outside Navaari had told me he would look through the laws, the ceremonies and rites to see if there was anything that I could use to essentially get back at Thrawn for what he had done in invoking the Rite of Pen'nai Da'ataith that would not have any negative repercussions for either of us. The Dantassi marriage ceremony of Nai'da had too many restrictions on it because it had been designed with growth of the Enclave in mind. Marrying under this ceremony would mean that both Thrawn and I would have to give up our other lives and come to Hjal and settle down for good. That was never going to happen in a billion years and since I had no reason to invoke the Rite of Pen'nai we needed to find another way for me to effectively and publicly bind myself to him.

I had never given marriage much thought before and as far as Thrawn was concerned it had actually never really entered my mind. It had always been enough to know he was there, but now I wanted to let him know that I had meant what I had said when I had told him I was his

and only his. If this meant getting married well I was happy with that but both Navaari and I agreed that if Thrawn had wanted marriage he would have asked for just that. So it had to be something symbolic and meaningful but not legally binding which was the tricky part. Just about everything ceremonial or official which happened in the Dantassi world had some sort of deep significant meaning and usually came attached with a bunch of obligations. As Navaari explained to me what he had found out and how I was to go about it I grinned. It was perfect and I hoped Thrawn would not see it coming.

“It is not often I get to surprise him, so this will be worth it.” He said with a smile. “Now let’s get this mess sorted out, we have a celebration to attend in a few hours

With Navaari’s help I managed to finish my packing in time to have a bath and decide what to wear. By the time Thrawn returned to the apartment I was ready and waiting for him, curled up on the sofa with a book.

“We’ll be late if you don’t hurry.” I told him.

He just arched an eyebrow at me and vanished to change. I envied the fact that it took him less than ten minutes to get ready. It had taken me nearly two hours. When he appeared from the bedroom, changed into fresh clothes he looked so handsome that it took my breath away. Dantassi clothing suited him and he had chosen to wear black which set off the colour of his skin perfectly. I tried to picture him with hair as long as Navaari’s was because that would complete the outfit and the image but I had difficulty doing that. For as long as I had known Thrawn his hair had always been short, military short but he had told me that at one point in his life his hair had been very long and that if I did not believe him then I should ask Voss Parck.

I stood up, smoothing the long skirt of the dress I had chosen down, brushing away non-existent dust and wrinkles. I was nervous and he could see that but I hoped he would put it down to the size of the gathering rather than anything devious.

“I have never you seen you wear that dress before. It is most becoming.” He said as he circled my waist with his hands, pulling me to him.

“Thank you.” I replied, making a half-hearted attempt to move out of his hold. He simply tightened his grip so I didn’t resist when he leaned in to kiss me either.

“Do not be too sad, Tekari. We will come back here again, you know.” He murmured, nibbling on my ear, making my stomach drop.

“We’ll be late if you start that.” I replied as his mouth moved from my ear to my neck.

“It is acceptable for the guest of honour to be a few moments late, it allows everyone time to be seated first.” He said. I knew that tone of voice well, that honey laced *I think I could forget about attending any celebration and just whisk you off to the bedroom* sort of voice.

“Plenty of time for this later.” I said.

“Only if you stay in the enclave this time.” He teased.

I rolled my eyes. “Then we should go before Navaari sends out a search party.” I said pushing back from him. He just grinned and let me go, by the time we arrived in the great hall everyone was waiting.

As Navaari had suggested I waited until after the feast but before the revelling really got underway. It was during this time that the enclave Elder would call me forward to give me the traditional farewell blessing. When the moment came I felt as though all the eyes of the galaxy were staring directly at me. I made my way to the dais and stood in front of the High Elder. For a long moment he stared into my face and then he smiled. I knew that he had been one of the few of the enclave’s high council members that had not disapproved of me being here and I was grateful for his support. He was a powerful member of the enclave and everyone respected him greatly whether they liked or agreed with him or not. It had been he who had presided over my unmasking and as I stood in front of him now I could not help but recall that moment in my life. Somehow it seemed pivotal now looking backwards but at the time I had been too overwhelmed to even think about it.

When he spoke the entire hall stood silent. It was almost unnerving; you could have heard a grain of sand drop. I listened while he recounted my history with the enclave and wondered at the person he was describing. The things he said had done did not seem real to my ears yet they were true, he spoke of my contributions and he spoke of Navaari and Za’ar. When he was done he laid placed the tips of the first three fingers of his right hand against my forehead and he spoke the traditional blessing for those departing on a long journey. When he was done, I had to fight the tears that threatened to escape as he placed around my neck a bone amulet carved in the shape of a seated wolf pup. He smiled at me when he saw my expression. I did not have to ask who had made it. I knew Navaari’s work too well for that.

When he asked if there was anything I wished to do I nodded and told him. It was not a surprise to the rest of the enclave when he called both Navaari and Za'ar to come forward. As my appointed guardian and my Ta'kasta'cariad it was expected that I should thank them both publicly for all that they had done for me. I did this gladly. I had so very much to be thankful for and much of it I owed to these two men. They both accepted the small token that I had for each. Thrawn smiled as he took the small bone carving from my hand. I turned to face Navaari who nodded when I gave him his, passing to me the small bracelet he had made for this occasion.

"Now, Kycsi'i." he whispered.

I turned to face the elder who looked at me with a smile. He knew because Navaari had cleared this with him first, it was never a good idea to surprise the enclave Elder with ancient rituals in the manner that Thrawn had once done. I stood up on tip toe to whisper in his ear and handed him the bracelet in such a way that no one else could see it. The Elder regarded it for a moment and smiled. I could feel all eyes bore into my back and I knew that Thrawn was staring at me with curiosity.

"Are you certain?" The Elder asked softly.

I nodded. "Absolutely." He smiled at my answer.

The Elder nodded and motioned for me to step back and then he looked at the sea of faces watching us puzzled, waiting, expectant. The air crackled and everyone knew that something different was going on. There was a very long, pregnant pause and then the Elder spoke.

"Akiana'myshk'apavjäska, in accordance with the rite of Pen'nai Da'ataith, has chosen to give her Ta'kasta'cariad a token as an answer to his request." He said.

Thrawn glanced sharply at me then to the bracelet that the Elder now held up in his hand for all to see. The expression on his face was unreadable.

"It has long been said that Da'hajn weaves lives together without us knowing why and so it is with the lives of Akiana'myshk'apavjäska and Nikätza'arth'pavjäska. The Rite of Pen'nai Da'ataith has tied him to her but with this token she now affirms that there is no other in her life but him." He continued. "Do you Nikätza'arth'pavjäska accept this token? Do you accept this woman, past, present and future and the bond-gift that she now offers, to publicly acknowledge your request of Pen'nai Da'ataith?"

I turned to look at Thrawn. For as long as I had known him I don't think I had ever seen him rendered utterly speechless before. A

myriad of emotions rippled across his features and for a second I thought he might refuse. He stared at me for what seemed like forever and then he turned to address the Elder.

"I accept her gift, past, present, future, and all that it entails." He said clearly. My knees nearly gave way with the relief that flooded through me. Navaari had said that there was a chance he would refuse even though this little rite was purely ceremonial and had no other significance or repercussions. In essence it was a formal reply to what he had done the very first time we had been here and nothing more than that but I knew better and this had deep meaning for both of us, more so than either of us could ever put into words, still...he could have refused it but he did not.

The Elder gave me the bracelet and I looked at Thrawn. His face was expressionless as he held out his right arm to me. With trembling fingers I slipped it on his wrist. It was a beautiful piece of work, similar to the Nai'da wrist torque that Navaari wore except instead of three strands of wire twisted together there were only two and silver one and a gold one, closed at either end with caps of pale blue metal.

As I clasped the slender metal band and tightened the gap so that it would not slip off I whispered "My heart to your heart is by Da'hajn forever bound." It was an ancient line from an even older myth and although I had spoken it softly because of the acoustics in the great hall just about everyone had heard it. Everyone knew the story and murmurs of approval rippled through the watching crowd. Everyone loved a happy ending to a complicated love tale; it seemed it was even better when it happened in front of one's eyes.

Time stopped for a nano second and then Thrawn reached out and pulled me to him. He cupped my face with both his hands and shook his head but before I could ask what that he had meant by that, very slowly and deliberately, he kissed me with such reckless abandon that had he not been holding on to me I would have crumpled to the floor felled by the muddle of emotions I felt coming from him in waves. His kiss lasted forever, languid and explicit in a way I had never known him to show in public. If anyone had any doubts about how he felt for me this was his way of shutting them up. It shut me up as well and once I got over my initial shock I did my very best to kiss him back. I knew then, in that moment I was whole again. When he finally, almost reluctantly drew back from me and held me at arm's length his expression was so open it brought tears to my eyes. It was as though everything I had ever felt for this man was crashing around me and I opened my mouth to tell him that I loved him

but he placed a finger across my lips and shook his head ever so slightly in a 'don't' motion.

"Deeds speak louder than words, Tekari." He whispered as he looked at me intently and I nodded that I understood. It would have been too much all at once. I didn't need to say the words, not here and not now because he knew anyway, exactly how I felt, saying it out loud would have been redundant somehow. Before I could think to speak he kissed me again and this time the enclave erupted in a cheer so deafening I hoped it would not bring the building down about our ears. The Elder grinned and clapped us both on the shoulders, then gave the word for the party to begin.

I thought I had seen the Dantassi celebrate with abandon but anything I had witnessed before this paled by comparison. As the music started and people began to dance, and move about Thrawn simple held on to me, the whole world swirled and blurred around us as we stood very still. He brushed the tears that had escaped from my eyes and were sitting on my cheeks away with his thumbs. I was certain he was about to say something but Navaari intervened by pulling us both in a bone crushing embrace. I could not remember the last time I had seen him look so pleased. When Thrawn untangled himself from the huddle Navaari had created I laughed at the expression on his face. He truly had not seen this coming and while it had pleased him, it had also annoyed him, just a little.

Navaari gave him an enormous grin and clapped Thrawn on the back so hard I saw him wince. "Now we are even, Nikätza'arth'pavjäska!" He grinned.

"Indeed, I had suspected that she might try to initiate something but this did not occur to me. I take it I have you to thank for this elegant piece of jewellery?" He lifted his right wrist to show off the slender silver and gold metal band that glinted in the light.

Navaari nodded. "Wear it well, kej'son." He said. The two men regarded each other for moment and what passed between them I could not say but they clasped each other's wrist and touched foreheads which I knew was sign of great honour and deep affection.

"And you little pup, are you happy?" He asked sweeping me up in a huge embrace, swinging me off the ground in a wide circle.

"Yes. Thank you, Navaari, thank you so much!" I told him as I buried my face in his neck and held onto him as tightly as I could wondering if it was possible to explode from loving someone so much. When he set me down on the ground again and I had to hold onto

Thrawn's arm because I was so dizzy. He just laughed but before he or I could say any more An'jast'a had come up and tapped him on the back.

"Let them be, you old fool, after that display I do not think they have standing around, chattering to you on their minds. So come and dance with me instead!" She said grinning at me. I liked An'jast'a a lot and I was glad that Navaari had finally let her into his heart. I had hoped to see them bound before I left but I guessed that would be a little while yet. I just watched as she dragged him into the middle of the dancing crowd and then turned back to face Thrawn. He stared at me and drew a deep slow breath in and then let it out even more slowly.

"That was very well played, my dear." He said softly.

"Are you cross?" I asked, still uncertain about his feelings in this particular matter.

His eyebrow arched and a slight smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "No, not at all." He replied shaking his head to emphasize this, and then he added, as he caressed my cheek with the backs of his fingers, "You honour me greatly."

"That's what you said the last time as well, but I didn't know what it meant then."

"And do you know now?"

"No," I conceded, making a face, "not really."

"Well, consider it something for you to puzzle out on your own then." He replied, giving me one of those smiles which said everything and nothing all at the same time, driving me crazy. I just sighed and shook my head, he enjoyed getting the last word in and sometimes it was better just to let him win. I didn't protest when took me by the arm and began to lead me away from the dais. "So... shall we dance?" He asked.

"I though you'd never ask!" I replied and laughed as we were swept up into the crowd.