

Daughter of the Empire

Book 3

by Fiona Messer

Chapter three

Foundations and Factions

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How often, I wondered as I quietly wiped tears off my face, would I be saying goodbye to the people I cared deeply for. This parting was especially bittersweet. I had come to love Navaari and Hjal in a way I had never known possible and it was heart wrenching to leave. Thrawn, after having said his own goodbyes to Navaari had left us alone so that I might say mine. I had watched miserably as he vanished inside of the *Ahnkeli Su'udelma* and begun the start up sequence. I hated this and I wasn't making it any easier when I flung my arms around Navaari and clung to him, half sobbing in to the fur of his hood.

"I love you." I told him, "I love you so much...." These words, which were so powerful, which I could not seem to say to Thrawn but came so easily to my lips for Navaari to hear, sounded small and child like.

He just held me tighter. "I know that Kycsi'i. Don't cry, it isn't forever and you will always have a home here, always." The last vestiges of the wind from the storm made the powdery snow on the ground drift around us, hissing as it snaked across the flats. It was bitterly cold, freezing my tears on my cheeks and eyelashes. My breath decorated the air in lacy white puffs.

I didn't fight when he pushed me back. "Now, you should go, best not to keep him waiting. You know how to find me if you need me." He said.

I nodded.

He smiled at me. "Go, and don't look back. It's..."

"...bad luck." I had said finishing the sentence for him. He had placed the tips of three fingers on the middle of my forehead. I understood this gesture now. *My life, your life, by the will of Da'hajn are forever joined.* I slipped on my mask which was now decorated in even more carvings, the story of my life as a member of this enclave.

He nodded, letting me go. I had just stared at his face, committing it to memory, too choked up to speak and then because there was just no other way I turned abruptly around and walked into my ship without looking back. I made my way to the cockpit to find Thrawn was seated in the Pilot's seat. I was grateful that he had decided to take charge and let him know this with a small smile as I sat in the co-pilot's seat and strapped myself in.

Once we had broken free of the planet's atmosphere the trip to where the *Grey Wolf* lay waiting would be less than twenty minutes, barely enough time to sit back and enjoy the flight. I watched with detached interest as we approached the ISD and manoeuvred into the landing bay

situated in the ship's underbelly. Thrawn put her down with a soft touch. Underneath the heavy Dantassi over coat he had now removed he wore his uniform and now, as he shut the engines down, he seemed an entirely different man, shedding the role of my Dantassi bond mate to that of Imperial Grand Admiral. I wondered, as I glanced out of the cockpit window, what these men who all stood to attention on the deck of the landing bay would think if they had seen him as I had seen him the night before, carefree and laughing. I could not help but smile at the memory of what had come after he had taken me by the hand after many hours of dancing and whispered in my ear, *'I believe this counts as later.'*

I followed Thrawn silently as we exited the ship, mindful of the surreptitious looks I was receiving from the men on the deck. Clad from head to toe in Dantassi clothing, my face hidden by my mask, my hair hidden by my hood I was an unknown, a primitive. Hiding behind my mask had been my idea but he had not argued against it. I watched as Thrawn returned the salute he was given and then spoke with the officers who were waiting there. A few more salutes and everyone scurried off to fulfill their duties and do what ever jobs it was he had asked of them.

When he was satisfied with his men Thrawn turned to me. "Come, Akiana'myshk'apavjäska I will show you to your quarters." He said in his native tongue. I nodded compliance. He issued orders in basic and my bags were picked up and brought by a stormtrooper whose face was just as hidden as mine but I could feel the curiosity and slight sense of superiority that came from him. That would have changed fast, I thought, if the young man in the white armour had known who I had worked side by side with two years previously. I stayed silent and followed Thrawn to the quarters that would be my home for the next few days while we travelled to Nirauan.

I did not think it was a coincidence that I had been placed in the VIP quarters and that once my bags had been dropped on the floor Thrawn waved the stormtrooper to wait outside. Once the door closed I removed my mask and looked around. The stark contrast of the Dantassi home I had been in to the cool Imperial design was almost night and day but there was a familiarity to it that made the transition easier.

"I thought you would appreciate a spacious cabin and some privacy." Thrawn said watching as I discarded my coat. He understood that sometimes it took a little time to adjust from one world to the next. I had been away from the Imperial one for a very long time now.

I nodded. "Thank you." I said. The words came out sounding cool and formal. I hated these transitions. On Hjal he was relaxed and more open. Here he was reserved and distant. No one would have even dreamed to think of the two of us together in bed let alone the dancing. It seemed so far away, yet the memories of the night before were still very fresh in my mind. Perhaps he read these thoughts on my face because he lost some of the stiffness in his posture and reached out to brush stray hair from my eyes.

"You should get some rest, you must be very tired." He said gently.

"No more so than you." I answered glancing up at his face. For a moment our eyes met and that familiar flash of heat seared through my gut.

His hand lingered to cup my jaw, his thumb stroking my cheek. "Hmmm." He replied with a smile that vanished when he added, "I shall be busy this evening I am afraid. There is much I need to catch up on. Shall I arrange for you to eat here or will you find your way to the guest mess hall?"

"I'd rather eat here." I said. The last thing I wanted was to be the topic of conversation and sitting eating alone in the small guest dining hall was never fun.

"Very well, I will have that taken care of. I also thought you might like this." He said handing me a data pad. I took it from his hand with a questioning frown. "It is essentially a run down of everything that has happened since Endor. I thought you would like to catch up on recent history. There is a fair amount of classified information on that so try not to lose it, my dear."

"As if." I snorted setting it on the nearest table. "I'd like to speak with my father if that is possible."

Thrawn nodded as if he had expected it. "I have arranged for you to have access from here. Operating it will not be hard, you know how the system works and nothing has changed. Your clearance codes should still be active, if not let me know." He paused and then said. "There is a training room available for you and Rukh was asking if you would wish a sparring partner when you returned. I think he rather missed you."

"Good. It took me a long time to get my conditioning back I'd like to keep it. I am betting Rukh will enjoy some of the moves the Dantassi taught me."

"No doubt. I am afraid I do not provide him with much of a challenge in that particular arena." Thrawn smiled.

For a moment we just stood facing each other and then his comm went off.

"I have to go. There are things which require my immediate attention." He said.

I just nodded. All the things I wanted to say to him I had already said the night before. It seemed sort of pointless to create dialogue for the sake of it. He smiled and pulled my chin upwards with the crook of his finger. "It will not always be this way, this much I can promise you." He said as he leaned in and kissed me gently.

"Better not be or else there might be a war between us." I told him, and then stepped back to let him go and solve what ever issue it was that needed to be solved.

"Well, when there is some quiet time we can discuss your terms and demands for a peaceful settlement but for now I am afraid I ..."

"...Must go to save the galaxy from evil, I know." I said finishing for him, flapping my hand in that *go away* manner that Lord Vader used to do to me. "I'll be fine. I am, as you pointed out, tired. I am going to have a bath, then I am going to order supper and then I will go to bed."

He smiled, planted a kiss on my forehead and then without any further comment he left me on my own. In truth I was grateful, I was exhausted and even if he had forsaken all of his duties to sit and chat with me he would have been talking to himself because I would have fallen asleep instantly. So I did exactly what I told him I was going to do and I ran a bath.

Navaari had slipped, among other things, several bottles of Crackerberry liqueur in my bag. "*So you have something that reminds you of us.*" He had said. I dug a bottle out and poured myself a drink; I wasn't prepared for the sudden wave of homesickness that washed over me as the scent of the liqueur drifted into the room. I grabbed my glass, picked up the data pad Thrawn had given me and went to soak in the bath. It took me all of five minutes to realise that reading about what had happened in the last two years would only put me to sleep even faster than lying in a tub full of hot bubbly water and drinking Crackerberry liqueur would so I set it aside on the little table, lay back in the tub and closed my eyes, my thoughts drifting to the night before.

We had danced. It had been a blur of motion and laughter, the music every bit as captivating as the first time I had ever heard it. I could

not recall the last time I had felt so free. Many hours later Thrawn had tugged at my hand and we had slipped through the crowds only stopping once while he spoke to one of the Elders talking to Navaari. In the quiet of the apartment we had initiated another kind of dance, to music that only we could hear and to which only we knew the steps. We had woven our bodies together the way Da'hajn wove her threads and with each caress, ripple and thrust we had twined ourselves together in a tangle of limbs until it felt as though we had become one. In the languid aftermath we had lain in the bed settled and drowsy curled around each other and as we so often did, we had talked.

I had traced my fingers along the winding metal threads of the bracelet he wore, the silver and gold contrasted brightly against the pale blue of his skin. For such a simple design it was beautiful. Navaari's hand work was always stunning, he was not just one of the best of the Jhal'kai he was also an extremely talented artisan.

Thrawn had watched my face and ran his fingers through my hair. "Why did he choose gold and silver, usually such a piece would be silver and blue?"

I had grinned, I knew the answer to that. "Well, we didn't get officially married under Dantassi laws, did we?" I asked although it was more statement than question.

"No. That would have meant too many complications that neither of us can afford at the moment."

I nodded my understanding. I had always been more about ship's engines and flying rather than I do and happily ever after. "Well, then Navaari was free to use what ever colours he wanted when he made this, and gold and silver are the male and female. You told him once that your thread and mine were bound together, so this is you and me, "I said as I traced my finger along the twist of the metal strands, "But this isn't a marriage band just a pledge bracelet so Da'hajn's thread is not required. He made it different so that it was special. Do you not like it?"

"It is beautiful." He agreed. "I was simply curious." He had said with a smile that told me he had been deeply touched by the thought that had gone into the bracelet.

"Well then, make sure you don't lose it!" I had told him.

He had chuckled. "No fear of that happening."

"You never know, it isn't closed it could slip off, and then someone else might decide to wear it."

He had shaken his head. "You live with the Dantassi for over a year and you still do not unravel all of their secrets." He'd chuckled. "It is designed not to come off and even if I should remove it no one else could wear it, it is bio-linked to me alone, much in the same way as your bone mask."

"Bio linked?"

He had smiled then had slipped the bracelet off his wrist handing it to me. "Try to put it on."

I had taken it from his fingers and had done as he had asked trying to slide my wrist through the space between the two ends. I was surprised to discover I could not do it. Much in the same way a magnet repelled the like pole, the bracelet was pushed back from my wrist, making my fingers tingle a little to hold it. "How do they do this?"

"Nano technology embedded in the molecular structure of the metal, another Dantassi mystery. No one but I can wear this now. I knew that as soon as it was slipped on to my wrist. I felt the recognition as it made my skin tingle as the bio link process began."

"So you are bound to my bracelet." I had laughed, it sounded funny. "Does it code just to a person's DNA?"

"Mostly, but also to a person's particular cellular structure, recognition through all the chemical patterns in the individual's cells the unique bio entity it has been linked to. It is a clever and intricate process, one the Dantassi keep quiet about. They do not use it for many things because the process is complex but bonding jewellery and the bone masks are good examples of places where it is used. He made quite certain that I and only I could ever be the one to wear this particular piece."

"So do you think he put a tracer chip in it as well?" I had asked with a grin.

Thrawn had laughed. "I very much doubt it. Unlike you, my dear, I do not get lost and therefore do not need to be found."

I had just given him a look as I handed him back the bracelet, watching him slid it back on his wrist. I liked how the white-gold metal contrasted with his skin and it was small enough, slender enough to be mostly unobtrusive. Navaari had designed it that way, designed it to be worn under the sleeve of his Imperial Uniform so that no one would see it. Jewellery was considered non regulation and with one or two exceptions was not allowed to be worn while on duty, but many people still wore things like pendants that could be hidden underneath the clothing and for the most part no one said anything.

Thinking about uniforms and regulations made me think about Jorae. I knew that he had worn a necklace his mother had given him, a Corellian good luck charm. He had shown it to me once, telling me its history of having been passed down through the family for several generations. Thinking about Jorae made me realise that I did not know what had happened to him. I heaved myself out of the bath before I fell asleep in it. Drowning would have been a bad move on my part anyway. Wrapped in my favourite robe I sat at the desk in the small living area and accessed the computer. I was relieved to see that all my access codes still allowed me to get into some of the classified areas and with a deep breath I called up the reports on the Battle of Endor, specifically the casualty list.

There were thousands of names on this list. So many people had died at Endor that it seemed almost surreal. I went down the ship by ship listing until I found the *Executor*. For a brief moment my gut knotted but this was an old wound known and although it still hurt it was a dull ache rather than a sharp one. I was not surprised when I found Jorae's name amongst the listed dead. He had been on board the flagship at the time it had plunged into the Emperor's Battle station probably on duty at his listening post in the communications room. He had loved his job and had been so proud when he had been posted on board the *Executor*. Sorrow at reading his name there flooded through me. He had been my first friend after I began working for the Empire and although we had rarely seen each other once I was no longer working on board the Flag ship he had still kept in touch. He had been a kind likable young man with a sweet smile and a good heart and now, like so many others he was dead.

I sat reading through the names, almost all of them I did not know scanning for ones that were familiar to me and feeling a sense of loss and pain each time I found one that I could put a face to. I was grateful to realise that I had not seen C.J.'s name but when I did a data base search on him, nothing came up. I wondered where he was now and how he was doing and how he had felt about the Emperor's death, after all he had been a part of the Royal Guard. Thrawn had told me that after the death of the Emperor, the Guardsmen had added a strip of black to the bottom of the red cloaks as a sign of mourning and respect. Isard had tried to make them take it off but they had simply ignored her. The Emperor's Royal Guard were not easily intimidated and who could blame them, after all next to the Emperor, Isard was a pale imitation of a ruler despite her cruelty and deviousness. While we were on Hjal, still stuck indoors due to the storm,

Thrawn had talked about her taking over and the slow downward spiral that the Empire had taken under her command.

"She does not see the bigger picture." He had said as we lay awake in bed talking. "She looks for ways to gain revenge on an event that has irreversibly changed the course of history without realising this is like battling the wind. She would be much better off trying to work out a plan to consolidate the Imperial powers and gain better control over all the various factions out there now gearing up to fight for a piece of the Empire than trying to get back at the rebels for winning at Endor."

"Why does she not recall you to the Core?" I simply did not understand this at all.

He had given me a small laugh. "The short answer is that she fears I will wish to step in and take over, become the next ruler of the galaxy and claim the title of Emperor for myself." He had explained. "Personally that is not really a job I would wish to take on, I am more a war lord if anything and even that is a stretch. I have started to work on a plan that would hopefully bring the separate factions back in line and restore law and order to this very chaotic galaxy but I do not have the man power to execute it yet. We lost too many good men at Endor, and there have not been enough new recruits to fill the spaces left by the dead."

"I suppose this is where a clone army comes in handy." I had said as a joke but the sudden arching of his eyebrow told me that he had considered this idea and he wasn't laughing about it.

"Indeed." He had said. "The trouble with this idea is the amount of time it would take to grow a fully battle ready cloned army and the other problem is where to find the cloning equipment to do this. The Kaminoans could grow a clone to maturity in ten years but Kamino's cloning facility is no longer available. The Empire used Spaarti technology, cutting this growth time down to a year but where the Emperor placed the spaarti facilities is still unknown. He and a few trusted aides who are now all dead were the only ones who knew the locations of these facilities. The Emperor did not trust anyone lightly with his cloning information. I am still searching for locations but until then, our military numbers are too small to do much about the rising attacks of the various factions that want a piece of the Galactic pie. If things stay as they are I can foresee Coruscant falling, if not to the rebellion then to one of the other larger factions out there and that would be most undesirable."

I could not imagine Coruscant under the rule of someone else. It would forever be linked to the Emperor in my mind. He had imposed his

will, his personality on that planet the way a sandstorm shapes the desert and undoing all that he had achieved would be a monumental task. Our conversation had drifted on to other things and sleep eventually overtook us both, but the thought of clones and where the Emperor would have created them nagged at me and, like the title of a half forgotten song, the answer was on the tip of my tongue.

Now as I sat staring absently at the computer screen I wondered about the idea of clones and where the Emperor might have hidden such facilities. The Emperor had been full of secrets and lies. I was certain that there were answers to be found on Coruscant, but exactly where and how to find them would be a whole other story, one I would have to think carefully about.

The journey to Nirauan was a slow, uneventful and once I had caught up on my sleep, I spent the rest of it catching up on what had gone on in the galaxy. During the trip I saw Thrawn only a few times, usually when he was able to join me for dinner. Our discussions were mostly centered around the events of the last two and a half years. One of the biggest surprises had been reading about the capture of Soontir Fel at Brentaal IV.

Brentaal IV, a small, dry world, was the fourth planet in the Brentaal system of the Bormea Sector of the Core Worlds and sat at the strategic intersection of the Perlemian Trade Route and the Hydian Way. It was a wealthy world, with a thriving economy making it attractive for investors and traders. During the Emperor's rule it was governed by a man named Lon Isoto, a weak minded leader who was known mainly for his ineffectual leadership style and his greed for pleasurable things.

Thrawn's lip had curled in disgust when he had spoken of Isoto and I could not blame him. It was primarily Isoto's fault that Brentaal IV had fallen to the Rebellion, now calling itself the New Republic, as he had essentially given up the planet without much of a fight. It had only been the 181st, under the command of Soontir Fel that had offered any hope of protection from the raiding rebels but even they had not been able to win. The debacle discredited the ruling Cabal and Sate Pestage which, Thrawn had postulated, had been Isard's plan all along.

"What happened to Isoto?" I asked as we sat in the quiet of the small dining room eating supper.

"He was apparently shot by one of his concubines." Thrawn replied. "At first he was reviled as a coward but the Imperial propaganda machine marches onward but now, part in thanks to the rumour that Fel actually defected to the New Republic and Rogue Squadron, he is considered a hero."

"Fel? Did he really defect?"

"Yes and no." Thrawn answered carefully. "I do not believe that he would have allowed himself to fail deliberately in order to join the other side, but I believe once he realised that he and his men had been sent in on what was essentially a suicide mission in order for Isard to gain more power from Pestage he decided the Empire was no longer upholding the same ideals it once was and that corruption was not an honourable master to serve. I am quite certain it did not hurt him any that he is married to Wynssa Starflare who happens to be the sister of Rogue Squadron leader Wedge Antilles. I believe that part of his reason for the defection was to gain safety for his wife." Thrawn paused to stare at his glass, "Men often do foolish things in order to protect the people they love and care for, especially their families." He added, giving me a pointed look. "Isard was trying to overthrow the Cabal. She felt that as the current ruling body of the Empire it was useless and riddled with counterproductive bickering and politics. She was vying for power that would set her up as the next Empress, so to speak. Perhaps she does not use this title for herself but she wanted to be the sole ruler of the Empire and she was willing to do what ever it took to have this power even if that meant sacrificing the best pilots we had at the time to do so."

I sighed. Why did it always come down to this petty bickering about who had the bigger title? "Well now she has what she wants and the Empire is still being eaten away bit by bit." I grumbled.

"A leader who is only concerned about their own power gain is not a leader at all." Thrawn replied tartly. "Power is not taken but given and no one gives her anything freely."

"So why don't you just remove her then?"

"All in good time, my dear. All in good time."

Sate Pestage, accused by Isard of treason after the debacle at Brentaal, had fled Coruscant to seek refuge from her and the Cabal. He was arrested by Leonia Tavira, a Corsair ship captain and held pending the arrival of Admiral Krennel who had been given the job of bringing Pestage back to Coruscant to stand trial. The details of what happened are somewhat sketchy but there was a fairly large battle between the Imperials

under Krennel and the New Republic's Rogue Squadron who it seemed felt that rescuing Pestage would be a good thing to do. When all was said and done, Pestage was dead along with Tribune Caller and Plumba, two members of the Cabal ruling council. Once the last member of the Cabal was captured and imprisoned, Isard was free to assume full command of the Empire, which she did so with no let or hindrance from anyone else, making her the most powerful woman in the Galaxy.

Some months after this incident rumours began to surface that the Pestage Isard had killed was not the real one and was in fact a clone. Around the same time other more strange stories about the Emperor began to surface from the Deep Core which led to whispers that he was still alive. These stories led to Thrawn's old supervisor, Dark Jedi Inquisitor Jerec to be charged with finding the secret Valley of the Jedi, a place of supposed great power and secrets. If the Emperor had found a way to clone himself and revive his spirit I did not sense it and as no one actually ever saw him I suspected the stories were the fabrications of pilots who had spent too much time in Deep Core space and who were now no longer quite right in the head. Still this did not stop the publications of books that were supposedly the works of the long dead emperor himself.

"Do you happen to have a copy of these works?" I had asked Thrawn.

"I thought you might ask. I have managed to procure the first volume." He had smiled and later on had handed me a small pile of data chips. "It is wordy and mostly rambles about a long dead religion and its many permutations. You might find it of interest given your talents in the areas discussed."

I had looked at the data pads with a mixture of distaste and disbelief. "Do you think it is true? He really is not dead and has just vanished off to some remote world to become an author instead?"

Thrawn had arched an eyebrow. "You were the one having dreams of him being reborn in a different body, you tell me."

I had just shrugged. "If he is alive some how I don't understand why he doesn't announce it and come back to take his place as Emperor again."

"I cannot answer that, but perhaps those might." Thrawn had answered, nodding to the pile of data pads I touched gingerly. "If nothing else, reading all of those will keep you out of trouble for the duration of the journey to Nirauan."

The book was indeed lengthy and it did ramble but as I had read through it goose bumps had rippled up and down my spine. I did not think there was another being alive in the universe with his knowledge of the Dark side of the force. If these were forgeries and fakes then they were very, very good. I could almost hear the Emperor's voice whispering in my ear as I read words so familiar it was as though he were sitting next to me reciting them rather than me reading them. The Emperor had often lectured me on how he saw the Force and its uses. He had provided for me a secret library so that I might learn more and become better skilled in my own small force abilities. He had had plans for me and I had shivered at the terrible memory of our last meeting. If he was truly still alive, and had somehow managed to cheat death, I did not want to know about it. I was not so sure that if he were still around I would be able to escape him a second time.

In the two and a half years after the Battle of Endor the power that held the galactic empire together had fractured. Isard's power base was constantly being challenged by Moff's and war lords who felt she was neither strong enough nor deserving enough to lead the once mighty Empire. The petty squabbles and bickering were more to blame for the advances the New Republic made in heading towards Coruscant than anything else. The Empire's forces were divided, its troops spread thin and the once vast and powerful fleet reduced greatly in size.

"They will come for Coruscant, make no mistake." Thrawn said. "Some months ago there was an attempt by the New Republic to liberate Borleias which failed. There has been another subsequent attack which was also unsuccessful. I believe that the fight for the core has begun in earnest."

"Why don't you go and try to stop this?" I had asked this question so many times I was beginning to feel like a stuttering holovid.

Thrawn only sighed. "I have told you, I do not have the man power and I will not waste what precious resources I do have to save a world that Isard should have taken care of." He said. "And even if I did have all I needed, Isard would only see this as an attempt on my part to usurp her power. I have other plans and I am hoping that she is smart enough to see what might happen were she to let her guard down."

"If Coruscant falls to the New Republic it would mean the end of the Empire all together."

Thrawn's smile had been nasty enough to send shivers down my spine. "Hardly, my dear. The Empire is an idea. One may occupy a planet

to remove the current governing body but it is more difficult to replace an idea. I have said this before, this fledgling New Republic will not find governing an entire divided galaxy so easy. Forming a coup and bringing down a ruler is relatively easy in comparison to setting up the next government that functions in its place. I know for a fact that they will have serious problems getting along with each other well enough to form any sort of coherent ruling body based on a democracy. The Bothans alone will make this job almost impossible.”

I nodded. Bothans were a race of beings known for their ability for subterfuge. Officially they had remained neutral during the primary conflict with the Empire but unofficially they were the reason for so much information trafficking. It was a well known fact that Bothans made excellent spies and politicians. The problem was that they not only excelled in this area they let everyone know about it as well, constantly reminding anyone who would listen that they were willing to sacrifice everything to help out. I had never had many dealings with Bothans but the few encounters I had unfortunately had with them had left me angry and frustrated. Bothans were amongst the most bureaucratic and officious beings I had ever encountered, able to twist words and deeds until they always came out looking like the victims or the good guys depending on which situation suited them better. After a particularly frustrating encounter with a Bothan working at the Ministry of Pilot licensing and Applications Division I swore to stay the hell away from them for the rest of my life. Now it seemed that Bothans had managed to make themselves an important part of the New Republic’s ruling body. Served the Rebels right, I thought nastily. Dealing with Bothans was a pain in the rear and I didn’t envy the New Republic this job one bit.

“So what do you think is going to happen next?” I asked.

Thrawn shrugged ever so slightly with his left shoulder. “My guess is that the New Republic will make another attempt to take Borleias and if that happens they will advance forward to the Core. Ultimately they have to retake Coruscant if they are to have any validation as the seat of power for the galaxy.”

“Do you think that will happen?”

“I hope not but that will depend on Isard. I can only hope that she has devised a plan that will keep Coruscant out of the hands of the New Republic but even if the Core World falls, it is not the end of things.” He said. “The New Republic wants Coruscant. They see having dominion over this world as a sign that they are meant to take over rule of the galaxy. It is

a symbol more than an actual power base. Coruscant has always been considered the center of the galaxy, and as such, the seat of power for the ruling body. To have ownership of this planet would give the New Republic the advantage of perceived power but again, they are divided amongst themselves and weak in terms of military might. Even in its lessened state the New Republic is no match for the Imperial navy. The bigger problem for us is lack of true and insightful leadership. Too many good men and women were lost at Endor and insufficient funds and time have gone into training new leaders. The current ones are too focused on personal gain to be effective in their positions and until this changes I do not see us winning against the New Republic’s current push towards taking Coruscant which they see as the foundation for a new era of rule.”

“I still think you should just go and take over.” I said crossly. This whole discussion annoyed me. It was all sneak attacks and back room politics.

Thrawn smiled, “I know you do and the thought is not without its appeal but in reality it is simply not as easy as that. Isard lies to me about the status of things hoping it will placate me into staying where I am. I know she lies she is aware of this but we play the game never the less. I send her requests for more troops and she denies this on the grounds that they are spread too thin as it is, I send requisitions for supplies and somehow the requisitions get lost in the shuffle. Fortunately for us I am resourceful and have established a solid base out in the Unknown Regions. I do not need supplies from the core when I have what I need out here. The manpower shortage will be dealt with as soon as I find a way to re-establish cloning without all the subsequent problems that arise from this method of growing troops quickly. In the end it all comes down to numbers and strategy and time. The first item on that list is a problem the second two things I have in abundance.”

“I wonder if there is anything in the Imperial Palace Archives about clones.” I had said softly. “There must be information in the Emperor’s files somewhere.”

“I am certain there is, my dear, but getting to them would be most difficult.”

“But not impossible. I *could* probably do this you know.” We had also had this conversation before as well.

Thrawn regarded me with a steady gaze. “You are not a spy and such a mission would be highly dangerous.”

“I know my way around the palace better than most, probably even better than Isard does. I have been well trained in the art of Jhal’kai and I can fight to the death if I have to, though really I’d prefer not to do that. I know some of the secrets the Emperor kept, I’ve seen some of them myself. I remember the way to get to these rooms. You know I would do this for you, if you’d let me.”

His stare burned but I did not look away and in the end he simply nodded. “I will consider it.”

We had discussed this before and the last time his answer had been the same. I backed down knowing that the memory of almost losing me was still fresh enough that he wasn’t about to let me go charging off on my own without a fully formed plan to follow first. I hoped he would not take too long to consider what I had offered. I was fairly certain, given the reports I had read, that we were running out of time and that Isard was going to do something more stupid than smart. That was the trouble with megalomaniacs, they were so busy worrying about how to hold onto their power they didn’t notice it trickling through their fingers, like sand, one tiny grain at a time.

“Don’t look so worried, Tekari,” Thrawn said breaking into my thoughts by reaching out to caress the side of my face. “I have things well in hand.”

In that moment I believed him. He was a man who could do just about anything in near impossible odds; I had seen this before with my own eyes but the sense of unease remained.

“We have plenty time to plan on how to hold Coruscant and turn this tide back again.” He added as he turned his attention back to his spiced coffee.

Sadly, this was not the case and by the time word would reach him of what Isard had done it was already too late.

Nirauan was every bit as odd and as cold as I remembered it to be. An arboreal world which orbited a weak red giant it was primarily covered in jungles and lakes. The base, which Thrawn had set up, was located in a pre existing building that had been made from a stone which absorbed energy. It had been Voss Parck who had initially called the base ‘the Hand of Thrawn’ as a joke, a play on the fact that the five towers which made up the stone structure vaguely resembled the fingers on a hand reaching for the sky. Over the years the base had been added to and

modified to be a formidable hideout, with the highest tower serving as the command center. It reminded me greatly of the bridge of Lord Vader’s Super Star Destroyer, not from a size point of view but from a technical standpoint. Had anyone from the New Republic managed to sneak a look at this base they would have shuddered in fear. What the base lacked in man power it made up for in technological advantages. Thrawn’s ability to use and combine other species’ technology was astounding and the engineers he had working under him had worked miracles.

The last time I had been on Nirauan I had not been in a particularly good state of mind. This time I saw it with different eyes and had been more than impressed as Thrawn had given me a fairly in depth tour of the entire facility. The base itself was remarkable, if the Empire had been as well run as this place was it would never have fallen. The end of the tour had coincided with the Med-lab where much to both my surprise and Thrawn’s Doctor Thracer had greeted me with a surprising enthusiasm.

“Well, Miss Gabriel, Look at you!” He exclaimed as he clasped me by my shoulders. “I see that planet he shipped you off to suited you well. Welcome back. I hear you will be staying with us for a while now.”

I nodded.

“Good,” He said, “now I have someone to play dejarik with who won’t always beat me in three moves!”

I wasn’t sure if that had been a compliment or not but that he was happy to see me made it perfectly okay either way. I had not expected his warm welcome and for the first time since stepping foot on Nirauan I felt as though I might have a place here after all. At least, I had thought as we had left the med lab so he could show me my quarters and my office, I have one friend here already.

The rooms designated for me to use as an office and a language classroom were located on the other side of the compound in the South East tower. The office was nice and the class room suitable to teaching a group of people up to ten or so. I was dubious about the whole language teaching thing but I kept my doubts to myself.

“You have computer access and there is a library as well. What you need will be provided for you within reason.” Thrawn said, breaking the silence as I stood just inside the small room staring at it, trying to imagine me as a language instructor. The image was coming to mind. While I had taught basic to some of the Dantassi it had been an informal thing, this was going to be a whole other game and I wasn’t sure I liked the

idea of it. I suppose he read my uncertainty on my face because he smiled. "You will do fine." He said.

I just glanced at him and shrugged in a way that said 'what ever'. "So how about you show me where I will actually be living." I said which made him smile again.

Thrawn's personal living quarters were located in the North West tower, separate and quiet from the rest of the habitat areas of the base and far away from his official work area and offices. He had decided that it would be best if I were to live in the same place and I had been surprised to see that my rooms, though separate, adjoined his.

"You are my bond mate, Tekari." He said frankly. "While I do not see any reason to actively advertise this fact, it is not a secret and sooner or later people here will figure out that you and I are a couple if they have not done so already. There are others here who have their mates with them and, although at the moment it is not exactly a desirable thing due to circumstances, perhaps there might even be a place for families here one day."

His explanation surprised me a little but it also made sense. On board his ship he was distant, always on duty but being on Nirauan allowed him some personal time and I supposed that made the difference. I was not going to complain. I had not come here simply to be a language instructor or anything else, for that matter, I had come here to be with him.

The rooms I had been given were surprisingly spacious and light with a view that over looked the forest to the West. While sparsely decorated I could see it was a place I could come to like, and perhaps, given enough time, even call home. Though, I thought ruefully, really where ever Thrawn was, was home to me. I noticed that my belongings had already been brought to my rooms and all that remained for me to do was to unpack and settle in. It would take me a little while to adjust to Nirauan local time, unlike on all the Imperial ships which all ran on Coruscant Standard Time this planet had a twenty-nine hour day and a six day week. The planet had a steady, circular orbit which allowed for little variations in seasonal changes. According to Thrawn at the moment it was autumn, or as close to it as was possible. The temperatures were a little cooler and it rained more often. I didn't mind rain. It was still a novelty for me to see water fall from the sky and I loved the scent of damp foliage and wet soil which always accompanied such weather. I glanced at the chrono

on the wall, it was the middle of the afternoon planet side but for me it still felt like early morning. I was in desperate need of stim'caf.

"The training facility is open to you and there is a swimming pool in the subbasement." He continued and then added with a sly smile, "You still remember how to swim don't you?"

"I think I can manage not to drown, if that's what you are asking." I said as I began to open my bags and unpack my clothes. "I don't happen to have any swim wear with me though. I don't suppose this planet has a ladies wear boutique near by?"

"No I am afraid we are rather lacking in a viable commercial district but we do have a passable tailor who might be able to create something suitable for you. He is no Cati but he is skilled in his craft."

"You have a tailor here?" I asked.

Thrawn nodded. "Yes, it was easier than trying to continually requisition clothing supplies from the Core. We acquire the materials from local systems to produce most of what we require here on the base. It saves time and makes us more efficient. Ordering and obtaining many supplies from the Core was next to impossible not to mention an enormous waste of time and resources before the Emperor's death, now it is an impossibility so we became self sufficient."

It made perfect sense. Reliance on the Core for supplies was time consuming. I just had not really given it much thought before. "Well, I guess I will have to meet with him then."

"That can be arranged, my dear."

"What about going outside?" I asked.

"Well," He said carefully, "I will not restrict you if that is what you are asking but this world is wild for the most part and we have not yet been able to catalogue much of the indigenous life forms so I would not recommend leaving the base unarmed and alone." He turned to look out of the window. "There are some avian creatures, mostly considered a pest, which dwell both in the underground caverns and on the cliffs near by. As far as I have been able to asses they are non threatening and for the most part stay out of our way. There have, however, been incidents with an insect that also makes its home in the caverns. They travel in swarms and devour just about anything living, as far as we can tell. We lost several good men to them so I would prefer that you stay out of the caves."

"Insects? Swarms of flesh eating insects?" I shivered. That sounded like something out of a really bad horror holovid.

He nodded.

“Is there anything in these caves worth seeing that would make ignoring your request worth while?”

His lip twitched in amusement. “Not especially.”

“Then I suppose I can give them a miss.” I said.

“I would be grateful if you would.” He said. “Please do not go out alone. While I trust that you can take care of yourself I’d prefer not to have to waste time or man power on a search party should I be wrong in this.”

I nodded. Surprisingly enough I had learned my lesson in that particular arena. “This teaching thing won’t be full time will it?” I asked.

“No, depending on what schedule works best for you, perhaps a few hours a day or every two days.”

“Then I will need something else to do in between.” I said. “I don’t suppose you need a personal assistant, do you?”

Thrawn smiled. “From time to time, I dare say I could use your skills in this area, but this would also not be a full time job. However I have given some thought as to how to keep you occupied and out of trouble. I have told my chief grounds mechanic of your skills with ships and engines; he assured me that should you wish a place on his staff you would be more than welcome. He can always use a certified mechanic and you are more than qualified, my dear.”

I smiled at that, somehow it felt as though I had come full circle. I had been working as a mechanic when I was handed the job working for Lord Vader and now, after nearly seven years I felt as though I was right back to where I had started from, well almost. It was a good thing I liked working on ships’ engines.

“Well, I will go and speak with him; I’d like to get the *Sigiri* sorted out.”

Thrawn nodded, “Yes I thought you might. It would be of use to have another Imperial shuttle in operation; although she is your ship I am sure you would not mind occasionally doing some flying for me, would you?”

I glanced up at him, “That would depend on where you wanted me to fly to I suppose.”

He paused for a moment giving me a look I could not decipher then replied carefully. “Well at some point soon you will be returning to Coruscant to pick up some things from the flat there as well as your old place in the Palace. Perhaps along the way you might also need to clear out your old office as well.”

I regarded him carefully for a moment and then said. “So you’re going to allow me to go back there after all to do some digging?”

“Yes, I thought about it and decided that your idea has some merit. I will send a message to Isard letting her know that you might be returning to clear your office there so that you might work full time for me. This way, when you decide to return to the Core, she will not have any reason to impede your stay there.” His answer was casual but his stare was not.

“Do you think she will be suspicious?”

“Of course she will be, she is suspicious everyone and everything. She did not get to be the head of Intel and the leader of this Empire by being naïve and trusting, but you, my dear, have certain talents that will aid you in alleviating her of these suspicions I am sure.”

“If you are talking about twisting her mind, that won’t be happening. Being able to give suggestions to a person only works on the weak minded. She is not weak minded.”

He nodded his agreement. “No she is not but I am sure that after working in close proximity with Darth Vader a face to face meeting with Isard will not prove terribly challenging to you. And, I am sure there is enough for you to do to keep your reasons for returning to the Core straight and believable.”

“How much time do I have to prepare?”

“As long as you need.”

“That is not very specific.” I chided.

He sighed. “Well, I want you to design a lesson plan for teaching basic so that I can get it added to the duty schedule and I thought it best if you repair your shuttle as that would be the ship I think you should fly to Coruscant in.” He said, “So I guess it will depend on how long it will take you to repair the *Sigiri*.”

“Well, I haven’t seen her yet. So that depends on how badly she was damaged and the availability of parts.” I shrugged, “I got the impression from Voss that she was in damned bad shape but at the time, to be honest I was not thinking very clearly so I don’t know what needs to be done off the top of my head.”

Thrawn nodded slowly. “Well, let me know when she is space ready.”

I just stared at him for a long moment. “You are not happy about this idea are you?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why are you letting me go do it then?”

“Because I need your help in this matter and you are the best chance I have to obtain information that is not tainted or simply Isard’s propaganda.”

“Don’t you have any spies on Coruscant at all?” My curiosity was getting the better of me.

“Yes I do, but I assure you none have the vast knowledge you have of the palace layout and none have the opportunity you have to simply waltz in the front door more or less welcome.”

I nodded, toying with my necklace. “I have some ideas about where to find information she might not know about.”

“I trust that you will be subtle and professional, that you do not wish to end up incarcerated or worse. The Lusankya Detention Center is not a very welcoming place.” He warned.

I nodded. It was not my plan to end up in prison or dead. “I will be careful, I promise.” I said then added, “You won’t be sorry.”

He made a face which said *I am not so sure about that* and then tilted his head slightly to one side. “I will be giving you dispatches to take to Isard, updates and information she has been asking for. It will make this trip seem more legitimate. When you are ready, I will be sending the ISD *Fearless* to Bilbringi for supplies, you will travel with them and once they are in orbit, you may fly the *Sigiri* on to Coruscant with an appropriate accompaniment,” he held up his hand before I could protest, “It would look odd if I were to allow you to fly solo with no protection at all, you will be carrying Imperial dispatches with valuable information, armed guard is a must so there will be no discussion on this. Do not try to talk Captain Grayson out of this either because he will be under orders to make sure this happens or else shoot you.”

“Okay.” I agreed after a moment unsure if he was actually joking about the shooting part or not.

“We can discuss the details of this mission once you have settled in a bit.” He replied the hardness in his voice softening a little. “Will you feel up to joining myself and Voss for dinner this evening?”

“That would be nice.” I said. “I need to speak with him anyway, I owe him an apology.”

“Yes, you do.” He said a little more tartly than I expected he meant to but it hurt anyway. I suppose it showed on my face because he reached out and caressed my cheek in a way that said *I didn’t mean that to*

sound so harsh. I just smiled and leaned into his touch. It felt good to be so close after the cool separation on the *Grey Wolf*.

“I’m sleeping with you in your bed tonight, you know.” I told him as I pulled away to finish up my unpacking.

His smile reached his eyes. “I had expected as much.”

“As long as that’s settled. What time is dinner?”

“Oh nineteen hundred hours in my private dining room.” He replied. “Wear something nice but it’s not formal.”

“I think I can manage that.”

“Very well, my dear. I will leave you to settle in. If you need me I’ll be in my office. If you need anything else just ask the Quarter Master, he knows you’re here and he’s been told to assist you in anyway he can.” He said giving me an absent kiss on the cheek before he headed out.

I sat down on the bed, amidst the remnants of my unpacking and let out the breath I felt I had been holding since forever. Coruscant, I had not been there in over two years and now I would be going back not just to pick up the remaining pieces of my life there but to hopefully set up some sort of spy network for Thrawn so that he could obtain information from the Core without Isard censoring it first. The prospect was a little daunting. I was certain this could be done but I would need some help. I hoped that Shiv was up to the job and then smiled. His last holovid to me had been light hearted and full of news from everyone I knew but I had read between the lines easily enough and I knew he was worried. He did not like Isard and he did not like what she was doing as leader of the Empire. With a sigh I heaved myself off the bed and put away the last of my things. I had not actually expected Thrawn to allow me to do this and now that he had I had needed to think about it, because this would require some planning and some work. I was glad we had brought the *Ahnkeli Su’udelma* from Hjal, she contained a copy of the exacting blue prints of the Palace and the old Jedi Temple that I had once found in the small, secret library the Emperor had granted me access to. Thrawn did not have to tell me twice to be careful or consider well what I was going to do, if he though I would find a face to face meeting with Isard easier than working for Lord Vader then he was sadly mistaken, I was terrified of Iceheart and with good reason where Lord Vader had been hot headed and bad tempered she was cold and cruel and unlike Lord Vader she saw no value in me what so ever. She would not hesitate to have me shot or worse if she thought I was going against her will.

I shuddered at the prospect and then, because I really didn't know what else to do, I went off in search of some stimcaf and the docking bay to check out just how much work the *Sigiri* needed. At least that was something I could do to keep me occupied and out of trouble until dinner time.

It was just past four in the morning when Thrawn's comm went off waking us both up. He got up with the ease of those used to being woken up to deal with situations that required instant awareness and answered the comm.

"Yes?"

"Grand Admiral, I am sorry to disturb you but the news could not wait." It was Voss Parck and there was an edge to his voice that suddenly had me also on alert.

"What is it?" He asked.

"Sir, we just got word that Borleias has fallen."

There was a moment of weighted silence in the bedroom and then Thrawn moved. "On my way." He said crisply. I sat up, hugging my knees watching him. Light from the low moon filtered into the room illuminating his body as he dressed. "Go back to sleep, sj'iu Tekari, there is nothing you can do."

"This is sooner than you predicted." I commented, ignoring his instructions. I was also wide awake now, even if I wanted to I could not return to sleep.

He nodded. "Yes. I am guessing that incompetence on the part of whoever was in charge of the garrison on that planet is in part to blame."

"What will you do?"

As he fastened his white uniform jacket he glanced at me, the red glow of his eyes seemed brighter, sharper in the dark. "I do not know yet."

"Coruscant will be next?" I asked although it wasn't really a question and I already knew the answer I just wanted to hear him confirm it.

"I am certain of it." He replied, "It is simply a matter of when and how."

I nodded. Hearing him say this made it real and suddenly I was afraid. "I have friends on Coruscant, people I care about." I said quietly, thinking of Shiv and Cati.

"I know."

"If you want me to go to the Core using the *Sigiri* I still need"

He held up his hand. "I know that as well, but even I cannot make space travel any faster." He said with a touch of impatience. "Go back to sleep. There is nothing you can do to help this situation."

"I could make you spiced coffee." I said swinging my legs over the edge of the bed to sit up. I wasn't even remotely sleepy now.

His gave me one of his rare smiles. "I retract my statement then, that would be a help indeed and I am certain that Voss would not complain either. We will be in the command briefing chamber." He said giving me a light kiss on the cheek before heading out.

Borleias was considered an important planet in terms of the fight for the Core. Now the New Republic fighters would push for Coruscant, just as Thrawn had predicted and I was scared for my friends. If the battles I had seen had been anything to go by, an invasion of Coruscant would not be pretty. I sighed as I got up and headed for the shower, this was going to get ugly, I could feel it in my bones.

Once I was clean and dressed I made my way to the small kitchen and prepared a large carafe of Spiced coffee. It had become something of a treat for Thrawn and the officers who enjoyed it and I didn't mind making it since I liked to drink it as well. Once I had delivered the tray to the briefing room, I went to the hanger.

"Morning Miss, you're up early." The deck officer on duty said as I walked into the hanger bay.

I smiled. "Couldn't sleep, figured I'd get some work done here." I said nodding to where the *Sigiri* sat.

He grinned back. "No matter how hard you stare at her, Miss, that ship's hyperdrive will not magically come back to life."

I returned his grin. It had become a running joke that if I could have created a new hyperdrive just by wishing alone it would have happened a dozen times over. I had known that her engines were shot, it was a wonder that she had made it to Nirauan at all considering the extent of the actual damage. I had hoped I could repair them on my own but as it turned out, while the sublight engine could be fixed with a lot of work, the hyperdrive was completely beyond repair and I needed a new one. There were no spare class one hyperdrive engines to be had on Nirauan so that meant waiting on a supply ship from Bilbringi. The waiting was driving me crazy.

"I know." I told him. "But miracles sometimes do happen."

He just shook his head. "If you are looking for something to do there are a couple of TIEs that need attention." He said breaking into my thoughts. I laughed. TIE fighters always needed attention.

"Well, I guess it is a good thing that I can't sleep then." I said and I went to pick up my tool kit. Thrawn had been right about the need for mechanics and the Chief engineer had been more than happy to have me onboard as part of his pit crew.

I had been on Nirauan for almost four weeks and for the most part things had been relatively quiet. Once I knew that I couldn't fix the *Sigiri* and that I would not be allowed to rip the hyperdrive out of one of the other shuttles I settled down to a routine of teaching language classes three times a week and the rest of the time helped out in the pit. As I had feared, teaching basic to a small group of taciturn Chiss was not a lot of fun. At first they had not really wanted to be taught but were there because Thrawn had ordered them to be there, however things changed a little once they found out I could speak their language. I had not let this secret out of the box, hoping to teach Basic by simply speaking it. Sometimes total immersion was the best way to go but the Chiss, as well as being brilliant, were also incredibly stubborn and while they attended the classes they did not go out of their way to learn a language they considered to be beneath them. They were fluent enough in many of the Outer Rim trade languages so learning basic was not high on their list of priorities. They all did just enough work that I could not bitch about them to Thrawn and for the first week we got nowhere fast. During the second week's classes I got fed up of the whispers in Cheunh, and when one snide comment was made, just loud enough for me to hear it I lost my temper and hurled an insult of equal nastiness right back at the young man who had made the joke. The silence in the room was deafening and then one of the others broke it.

"You speak and understand our language?" He had asked in utter astonishment.

I had nodded.

"Why did you not say this?" Another had asked.

"Why should I have to, I am here to teach you Basic, not chit chat in Cheunh."

"Why should we learn Basic at all?"

"Because all knowledge is worth having and the more languages you speak the more knowledge you will accumulate." I replied. "The Admiral believes that by learning the most common language spoken in

this Galaxy you will have a distinct advantage. Not learning it because you don't like it is foolish." I had told them all tartly. My temper had gotten the better of me and I was too annoyed to consider the fact that by Chiss standards I was being rude.

"Most non Chiss do not even try to speak our tongue, it is too difficult for them but you have learned well."

"I had a very good teacher and I wanted to learn more about your culture. In order to do that learning the language was tantamount. No language is beneath me, all serve to teach. Your prejudice against Basic does not serve you or Grand Admiral Thrawn well at all."

The younger one who had made the joke in the first place had nodded. "Well, if you can learn our tongue then I will try to learn yours."

After that things had gotten easier and I was greatly relieved. Still, I was glad when the class was over and I could head back to my favourite place, the engineering pit, and relax by fixing ships. It was the one thing in my life that felt uncomplicated.

About four hours after I had begun working on one of the TIEs that needed some repair, hunger and the need for stimcaf got the better of me. I had just finished putting my tools away and was about to head to the mess when my comm peeped.

"Miss Gabriel? The Grand Admiral wishes to see you in the briefing room right away."

"Roger." I nodded although the person that belonged to the voice could not see it and made my way to the other side of the compound.

Thrawn stood with his back to the door, arms behind his back, staring out of the window reminding me sharply of Lord Vader. For a split second a wave of sorrow flashed through me and I was surprised that after all this time I still felt his loss so keenly. In spite of his temper and his violent nature I missed Lord Vader and his strange force presence in my life. It still felt as though he had yanked a piece of my soul from my body when he had severed the tie between us. Sometimes I dreamed of him but these dreams were mostly incoherent jumbles made up from memories rather than the eerie flashes into the future that I sometimes got.

"The *Dark Wing* will arrive in twenty seven hours. I have confirmed she is carrying a class one hyperdrive for the *Sigiri* and some spares as well as two back up engine, class ten. How long will it take you to refit the shuttle?"

"About twelve hours if I have some help." I said, and then added. "And if there are no complications."

“This includes a test run?”

“No.” I told him.

“So how long before she would be space worthy?”

“In theory, two days if all went well, longer if there are problems.”

“You’re hedging.” He said coolly.

“Well, that’s because a hyperdrive is a pain in the rear to replace with all the right dock equipment which we don’t have here so it will take longer. I have already been through one ship disaster I don’t think you or I want another.”

He sighed, I watched as his shoulders heaved. “I have the ISD *Fearless* on standby and as soon as you are ready to go I would like you to leave.” He still had not turned around to face me and I could hear both anger and worry in his voice.

“The news from Borleias is that bad?” I asked.

There was a moment of silence and then he turned around. “I believe it will not be long before the New Republic push to take Coruscant and I am concerned that Isard has not done enough to secure the core planet or the Imperial Palace. If it falls I would prefer to have more information rather than less. You tell me you can help and I believe you.” He was furious. Now that I could see his face I could read just how deep the anger went but that didn’t make sense. The capture of Borleias had been expected so there was something else which had stirred his ire.

I nodded and for a moment we just stared at each other. “What is it?” I finally asked.

He picked up a data pad off the desk and handed it to me. “You should read this.”

I sighed as I sat down in the chair in front of his desk and trigger the data pad. I read through the report puzzled, there was nothing out of the ordinary here to make Thrawn so angry. The planet had fallen surprisingly enough to a small squadron of X-Wings. The now infamous Rogue Squadron. According to the report, they had come at the planet from the moon’s side using one of the system’s meteor showers to hide their approach and then had destroyed the main power supply conduit which allowed the rebels to gain control of the base. I glanced up at Thrawn wondering what it was that had him so riled up but he said nothing instead he gave me a look that said *come on find it, you are not so stupid that I need to spell it out for you*, so I scanned back to the start of the report and began to read it again.

I found what he wanted me to but I couldn’t believe it. “This report is dated almost two standard weeks ago.”

His jaw clenched in anger.

“How is this possible? You should have been given this information as soon as it this happened. I know that the holonet system is not that reliable out here but a runner could have delivered a message in less than two days.”

“Isard obfuscates the truth at every turn, hoping to keep me from interfering in her pursuit of galactic domination but she is throwing it all away. This information was deliberately withheld long enough to make it of little use to plan any sort of retaliation.” He spat the last few words out and I tried to recall the last time I had seen him this angry, if I recalled correctly it had been shortly before he had sent me away with Navaari.

I looked at him and set the data pad on the desk. Time was running out and we both knew it. Waiting for a hyperdrive seemed pointless to me, especially since any information he received from official channels seemed to be falsified or worse withheld until it was too late. “I can fly the *Ahnkeli Su’udelma* to Coruscant.” I said. “Go on world as a civilian. Isard doesn’t have to know *how* I arrived on the planet does she?”

“The HWK is a fine ship but I would much prefer you had some back up in terms of fire power, it is not the best time to be flying solo in the galaxy at this time.” He countered.

I shook my head. “I disagree. Imperial ships are now prime targets, and a lambda shuttle, even one with teeth, is no match for a rebel cruiser or a battle ship. I could probably out run an X-wing, maybe two but not a whole squadron. I’m not a trained combat pilot and I would not want to try and test my skills against those who are. I understand you are worried about me going off alone but I think I’d be safer in a civilian ship, especially one as antique as mine instead of an Imperial ship with an over abundance of fire power. I am, after all, a civilian pilot, I have the papers to prove it.”

He stared at me for a moment then turned back to the window. He knew that I was right and I was certain that this idea had also occurred to him, he just didn’t want to use it, or me. Attachments... they sure had a way of bugging up well laid plans but I knew that Thrawn could set his aside and see the bigger picture at work. The situation had changed significantly since we had devised the original plan for my return to the Core. An Imperial escort would be a hindrance now, not an asset and he knew this. I was just saying out loud what we were both thinking.

“I do not like you going alone.” He said after a long, weighty silence.

“I could get help.” I countered.

“Who?”

“My uncle Vahlek.” I said thoughtfully.

“The Tze’yusha’Jin?” Thrawn’s eyebrow arched in surprise, he had not considered my uncle at all.

“Can you think of anyone better suited?” I asked mirroring the raised eyebrow with one of my own.

When he pursed his lips I knew I had won. “Alright if you think you can convince him to aide you then I suggest we discuss a plan because if I know you, you haven’t exactly thought this through.”

I smiled a little. “What is there to think through? I make it up as I go along.”

“Yes and that is what scares me the most.” He retorted.

I sighed. “Okay, but can we do this over breakfast?”

“Haven’t you eaten anything?” He asked in surprise.

“No, someone got me up at four a.m. which isn’t exactly breakfast time.” I retorted making a face. I wasn’t the biggest breakfast eater anyway and the thought of food at such an early hour was repulsive. I had to work up to the thought of eating first thing in the morning.

“I did tell you to go back to sleep.” Thrawn replied smugly.

“As if that was going to happen! Anyway, I am in dire need of decent stimcaf, the stuff they make in the pit could be used as coolant fluid!”

His lip twitched in an almost smile. “As well as a shower. As usual, you are covered in engine grease.”

I frowned, wiping at my nose, making the grease spot worse. He shook his head in the manner of those who had long given up. “Go and get cleaned up, my dear and we will discuss these matters over breakfast in my private dining room. While I think your ideas have merit I want more than just spur of the moment making it up as you go along. If you are going to do this for me you need to have a well thought out plan and some back ups in case things go wrong because knowing you, things will go wrong.”

I just grinned and nodded. While the idea of heading back to Coruscant for a possible face off with Isard was worrisome, the idea of getting away from frustrating language classes and a planet full of flesh eating insects to seeing my friends again was exciting and if I was brutally

honest I could not wait to go. I loved being with Thrawn but Nirauan was not exactly the center of the universe and I could feel the edges of boredom slowly nibbling away at my soul. I suspected he knew this and even understood it and while he tried to give me work to do we both knew it was not what I was used to. Thrawn needed a personal assistant the way Lord Vader had needed bone china dinnerware. I was glad to have the chance to do something that at least felt useful.

As I made my way back to my quarters to get cleaned up I began a mental list of the things I would need to take with me and just exactly how to word a message to my uncle so that he would get the point but no one else would.

I landed in Kor Vella with the minimum of hassle. It was easy enough to pretend to be just another transport ship heading back to the Core, after all my papers were in perfect order and Corellia had not officially joined the New republic and was, to the best of my knowledge, still following Imperial Law. Once I cleared through planetary customs, paid the landing and docking fee and got the ship’s papers sorted out I made my way to the starport lounge. I ordered a Corellian ale, then found a dark, quiet wall-side booth and sat down to watch the holo-screen that was playing mindless music vids on the far wall. I was a little early so I had some time to relax. It was mid day local planet time and it was raining outside. Corellia was a beautiful world by most human standards, with a temperate climate and varied landscapes ranging from large wild mountain ranges, forests and grassy flatlands to sandy beaches which edged wide bodies of fresh water.

Kor Vella was a small city that sat on the hillside which over looked wide flat grasslands, there was a branch of most governmental office here but the main place of commerce and the primary destination for most travellers was Coronet, the capitol. The starport had been built at the foot of these hills and seemed sleepy and quiet more because of its location than lack of traffic. Enough off-worlders passed through Kor Vella that no one would really notice me and because it was, more often than not, a transit star port, one person sitting alone waiting for someone was not out of the ordinary.

I nursed my ale which was disgusting so drinking it slowly wasn’t hard to do. The message I had sent Uncle Vahlek had been short and

cryptic. I wasn't even sure it had reached him but since the only way to find that out was to show up at the designated meeting point I had come anyway. Thrawn had not been happy about it but he had no better ideas. When I had left early in the morning, Nirauan time, due to something that had come up at the last moment which required his attention he had not been at the docking bay to see me leave. Just as well in the end, long drawn out goodbyes were not our thing and even less so given the current circumstances we lived in. He had made his feelings for me plain enough the night before and I much preferred his method of showing me how he felt in the privacy of the bedroom to than stiff and formal farewells in a public area.

I smiled at the memories thinking about him brought up and toyed with my pendant. His way of communicating, without actually speaking, never ceased to astonish me. His hands became words, his lips became expressions and his body had spoken entire paragraphs telling me how he felt. Together, it seemed to me, we wrote entire books on the art of physical communication.

"Do you know how beautiful you truly are?" He had whispered in my ear as his fingertips trailed over the skin of my belly. I had shivered under his caress; goose bumps had rippled across my flesh the wake of his touch. Warmth had flooded through me making me whimper for more. It had made him smile, knowing his touch could reduce me to the role of supplicant whispering his name with a need so intense it threatened to swallow me whole.

When I had had enough of his games I had wrapped my legs around him and pulled him to me, feeling the shape of him mould to me, become a part of me, gasping at the wonder and sheer pleasure such a simple act could bring. He had made it last, despite my urging, ignoring my pleas in favour of the rules he made up as we went along, using his weight, his strength and his often astonishing stamina to play for time. He knew me too well but this worked both ways, after many years I now knew him as well. I had dug my nails into his back leaving dark indents, like little crescent moons in his beautiful blue skin, marking him as mine through pain and pleasure, smiling at the moan of need that escaped from the back of his throat. In the bedroom, in our bed we shed the masks we wore day in day out in front of everyone else on the base. Only here could we share openly and I could not love him more for this stolen time, these precious moments, where I was allowed to see into his soul with no holds barred. With our hearts pounding against our chests, breast to breast we

reached that place where time seemed to stop, where a universe imploded and the pleasure so intense it was almost painful. Then that moment sprang forward and swept through us both like a raging storm, leaving us panting and exhausted in its wake. Wrapped around each other, speechless and languid we finished what we had begun with kiss and caress, his fingers tracing ice across the heat of my flushed skin.

In the quiet of the aftermath we had talked about the journey I would take the next day. Originally I had wanted to travel in Dantassi guise but he had talked me out of that saying it was unusual for the Bone Traders to be seen so far into the Core so the disguise would actually call more attention to me than draw it away. Still, I had packed my Dantassi clothes anyway; everything was on the ship just in case I'd need it, hidden away in case some one actually could bypass my security to get in and toss the ship. In the end it seemed pointless to travel in disguise. After an fairly extensive and interesting search of the New Republic's most wanted lists I discovered much to both my chagrin and relief that I was a nobody, considered just another of the palace public servants and utterly unimportant in the over all galactic scope of things. While a part of me was a little perturbed that I didn't even warrant a mention in the end I was glad. It made travelling a whole lot easier when one was not on the list of the Republic's most wanted. I wondered what any of the CorSec patrols I had passed by on my way out the Starport would think if they had known who I had worked with. It seemed surreal to me that Lord Vader was dead and that Coruscant loomed under the shadow of invasion by the very forces his own son was a part of.

I sighed, shaking myself out of the reverie of memory. "*Be careful.*" Thrawn had murmured in my ear just as we were falling asleep. "*I don't want to have to come chasing after you.*"

I had only nodded and burrowed into the warmth of his body to fall asleep. When I woke he was already gone, on duty and working.

I sipped at the ale which was bitter and too warm for my tastes then pulled the news flimsies I had bought at the small tourist shop out of my bag to read the latest gossip and news. I had been away from the core for long enough that I didn't recognize half the names in the scuttlebutt section and the news of the Fall of Borleias was either too old or the government had censored it because there was no real mention of it in any thing I read. The only thing that really caught my eye was a small news blurb about random pockets of strange illnesses showing up on Coruscant being blamed on rebel terrorism or faulty water processing depending on

what news agency was doing the reporting. It was a peculiar sort of virus though as it only seemed to target aliens because so far no human had been struck down with it. For some reason these stories made the skin prickle and my stomach knot but I shrugged the sensations off and went on reading.

Mostly the gossip seemed to center itself around the general antics of Luke Skywalker and his sister Princess Leia Organa as well as that of Han Solo which made me smile. Leia Organa was unknown to me but Luke had been a whiney Tatooine farm boy that his friends had once nicknamed Wormie. His friend, Han, had been an Imperial Academy dropout turned smuggler. Now, according to the flimsies, the three of them were the heroes of the Galaxy, running around doing great deeds.

I wondered if Lord Vader had known that he had also had a daughter. I also wondered if that would have made any difference to how things had eventually turned out in the end. I doubted it, sometimes fate just did what it wanted to and you had to make do with the hand you got dealt. In spite of the fact that the New Republic consisted of many people and species, it was Leia Organa who seemed to be the most prominent figure head of the new government, although she didn't exactly rule it was her everyone seemed to turn to for answers. I stared at the holo image of her embedded in the flimsy and sighed. I couldn't see any family resemblance to Luke but I had seen images of her mother and she was definitely Padme's daughter. I wasn't too sure what side of the family Luke took after though; in the images of him he looked haunted and worried, as though the entire fate of the whole galaxy rested solely upon his shoulders. The last of the jedi, the reporter had called him and it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Maybe that he was the last of the jedi but he wasn't the only Force user around. I wondered how he planned to start a new movement of jedi knights and set them up as the galactic peace keepers, as was mentioned in the article I read. I wasn't sure how this was possible seeing as how he was supposed to be the only one around and I sure as hell wasn't about to apply for membership. That sounded an awful lot like indoctrination for my tastes. While I did not believe everything the Emperor had told me about the Old Jedi ways I knew for sure that some of it had been based on truth. I had my birth mother's diaries, and I did not want to lead the same sort of life she had led, running around the galaxy doing the bidding of some noble minded council forsaking any chance of a life of my own. I wondered what Luke would do if I were to go to him and tell him I was the daughter of a jedi and a clone, that I had been trained to

use my force powers by his dad and the Emperor. My guess was it would scare him silly and he'd brand me as some sort of a Dark Side heretic and have me shot on sight. That thought made me laugh out loud.

"Now just what is so funny?" A voice from behind me said softly in my ear, making me jump, just a little.

"Zte'sa! I wasn't sure you got my message. You're earlier than I thought." I said folding the flimsy away, not turning around to look at him.

"You let your guard down. I thought you had been taught better than that." Uncle Vahlek chided softly.

I just shrugged to hide the fact that he was right. "I knew who you were." I lied as I got up to face him and then after a staring at him for a second, I flung my arms around him. He hesitated for a moment then returned my embrace, but I could feel his uncertainty.

He pulled back from my hug, holding me by my shoulders at arms length and looked at me as though he were trying to place the memory of the face he knew with the one he was actually staring at. "You look well, a little thinner than I remember, but well." He said after a bit.

"You sound surprised."

"Well, the information we got was that you had almost died at Endor then you essentially vanished off the radar for over two years. I am wondering if you are who you say you are." He said coolly.

I sighed. "When I was small you gave me a toy fambaa. I named it Boo. It still sits in my bedroom in the Mos Eisley house on Tatooine on a shelf next to a box which holds things that belonged to my mother, the woman who raised me, not the one who gave birth to me. While we still lived in the house near Bestine, the doll got torn one day, when I tripped and fell, running with it in my hand coming to see you when you returned to visit from some trip you had taken. I cried so hard that everyone thought it was because I had scraped my left knee but really it was because Boo was hurt. You carried me and Boo into the house and while my mother took care of my bloody knee you sewed up Boo for me and the stitches look like little exes. There are five of them." I said.

For a moment he stared at my face, searching my eyes for signs of deceit and then, when he could not find anything to make him think I was a spy or worse, he relaxed. "We missed Lei'lei. Everyone has been so very worried." He said pulling me back into another hug, one that was bone crushing and genuine. I breathed in his scent deeply. He smelled of sand and wind.

“I sent news and letters.” I protested, my voice muffled in the folds of his coat.

“Visiting would have been better.” He scolded, letting me push back from him.

“Well there were reasons for not doing that!”

He backed down a little. “Yes, there were and your Admiral friend explained them to your father but still, you should have come home.”

I looked at my flat, warm disgusting ale on the table. How was it that no matter how old I got my Uncle could always make me feel like a four year old. “Well, it was complicated.” I finally said which made his lips twitch, just a little.

“Well, if there is time perhaps you can uncomplicated it for me.” He said in a tone of voice I knew only too well.

“Well, if you feel like taking a little trip to Coruscant with me, I am sure there’d be time enough.”

My uncle raised both his eyebrows and gave me a look which said “*Are you out of your mind?*”

“I have to go back.”

“What are you playing at Lei’lei?” he hissed.

I glanced around. The starport cantina was starting to fill up, it was evening now and people were getting off work, stopping in for a drink before shuttling home. “I have a friend I need to visit.” I said by way of explanation.

Uncle Vahlek looked around and assessed the room, then returned his gaze to me. “When was the last time you ate?” He asked suddenly changing the subject.

“This morning, by planet-side time.”

“Well then, I guess we should order some food because if I recall you are a terrible cook and I know a place not too far from here where they make great food. It’s quiet and we can catch up.” He said and before I could protest he had all but dragged me by the arm to the ticket terminal and before I knew it we were shuttling out to a nearby city I had never been to before.

Pax was more of a small town than a city and was nestled between the foot hills of the Bra’d’orian Mountains and the river Rye’sa. My uncle had occasionally spoken about this place, he had worked here for a while at one point in his life, but it was not a popular spot on the destination map of most tourists. Like most small towns it had a few shops, some pretty houses, a med center, its own shuttleport and a town hall but the

majority of the people here commuted to work elsewhere on the planet. My father would have called it a sleeper town, a place for those who didn’t want to live in the hustle and bustle of big city life; I probably would have called it boring.

It was still raining when we stepped off the shuttle. My uncle tugged my arm and we walked swiftly to the local watering hole, a little cantina called the Laughing Svelt. It was homey and quiet inside and more importantly warm and dry. We shed our wet coats and I followed as Uncle Vahlek made a direct line for what I guessed was his favourite table.

“Sit, I’ll go order us some food and something to drink.” He said and before I could protest he had vanished to the bar. When he came back he was holding two drinks that did not resemble the horrid ale I had been nursing at the Star port bar. “Selnia, the cook here, makes a wonderful meat pie, so I ordered that as it is on the menu today.” He pushed a glass at me and I sniffed at it suspiciously. “Forvish Ale, try it. Much better than that swill you were trying not to drink in Kor vella.”

I did as he suggested and was pleasantly surprised at the slightly sweet taste the cold ale had. “Much better.”

He nodded. “Aye, most Corellians will never admit it but Corellian ale is not exactly the best of beers in the galaxy.” He sipped his own drink and then settled back in his chair, looking at me. “You’ve changed, Lei’lei, you look...grown up.”

“It’s been a while since you saw me last, that was bound to happen.” I said gently.

That earned me a look. “Well, like I said, you should have come home sooner.”

I sighed. “I couldn’t.” I said. “I thought that Thrawn told you all why.”

“The messages we got were simple and without detail. The first one which arrived about a month after the battle of Endor essentially said you had been injured badly, that you were alive but in critical condition. The second one said that you were still recovering but were unable to be moved. The third message said that you were well but were being transferred to a safe place for rehabilitation. After that the only news we got were the small and, I might add, cryptic letters from you along with the very occasional update from your friend, the Admiral.”

I made a face and drew a very deep breath and then as plainly as I could I told my Uncle everything that had happened from my meeting with the Emperor until I woke up in the med lab on Nirauan. It seemed

surreal to talk about it, to place it in some sort of context with a coherent time line. I had lost many months in the coma and speaking of it just made that seem all the more bizarre. When I was done my uncle just stared at me, his eerie pale green eyes searching into my soul for answers to questions that I wasn't sure he'd ask out loud.

"We never knew how bad it really was. If I had known I would have come out there and so would your father no matter what the danger or what your friend said."

"I think that was why he never told you. He was so angry with me and so many other things were going on. The medlab were I was recovering is in a place that is secret, almost no one knows about it. He was not going to risk that even for me." As I said these words I knew it was only partly the truth. Thrawn would have told them if I had been dying, I was sure of that. He had other reasons for his secrecy, I just hadn't quite figured them out yet.

"Perhaps." Uncle Vahlek said quietly then he shook his head, "Honestly, Lei'lei, you are sometimes remarkably stupid though. What ever possessed you to go charging off into unknown space alone?" Uncle Vahlek snapped then bit back on his obvious anger.

"I wasn't thinking clearly at the time. Now I just don't know what I was thinking." I said wearily, this was a question I could not answer to anyone's satisfaction, not even my own and I was getting tired of it cropping up every time I spoke with someone.

Uncle Vahlek made a face but backed down. I suppose he knew a thing or two about spur of the moment actions that had long lasting consequences. "So where did he send you to heal then?"

"With the Dantassi on Hjal."

Uncle Vahlek smiled a little. "Your enclave?"

"Yes." I said. "I spent a long time recovering there and learning under a master Jhal'kai. What had happened to me, what the Emperor had done...." I shook my head. The horror of Palpatine's plan for me and my awful force talents still made me shiver with fear. "Healing was a painful, difficult process, Zte'sa and I couldn't have done it on Tatooine, not with the warrant Isard had out for my arrest, not with worrying that at any moment the Empire I had worked for and been loyal to would break down my door to drag me off to a detention Center just because of who I had worked for.. Thrawn was right to send me with Navaari. There was no other place for me to go. I found peace on Hjal."

He looked at me steadily for a moment, then gave me a curt nod and looked away. He understood these things, I was certain of it. "So, are you and your Admiral still together as a couple?" He asked carefully.

I couldn't help my smile. The flash of memory from the night before and thinking about the bonding ceremony on Hjal made me miss Thrawn as well as the Dantassi. "Yes, despite my idiocy, he is my chosen bond mate and I am his." I said looking into my uncle's eyes so he would get the full impact of my words.

"Bound? Officially?" He asked in surprise.

I shook my head. "As official as it will ever get without difficult clan legalities getting in the way. It's complicated."

"With you, everything is complicated." He said, shaking his head. "Did you just pledge to each other then, privately?"

I shook my head and told him about what Thrawn had done and then how I had answered him after the fact.

"I have not heard of that being done in many years." He said softly, more to himself.

I was taken aback. "You know about this?"

"Lei'lei, you are not the only one who has experienced other cultures besides human." He reached out to pat my cheek. "He makes you happy?" He asked steering the topic away from him and the barrage of question I suddenly wanted to ask.

I nodded. "I suppose papa will want him to marry me properly?"

"Marry you properly? Lei'lei what in sarlacc's name do you think he did?" My uncle chuckled. "That he bound to you in a public ceremony will suit your father well enough." His pale green eyes bored into mine. When I didn't get the message he shook his head ever so slightly. "Foolish child, you don't need papers and officiates to make a binding true. Marriage, in the way you think of it, is just a contract to protect rights and property. In some cultures you would have been considered wed the moment he bedded you." He said with a gentle expression I didn't quite understand. "As I recall, the Pen'nai Da'ataith is an old and powerful rite in Dantassi lore but I have never heard of it being used to bind a 'traeth before now. Your admiral is a very clever man to have pulled off what he did with you and the Dantassi. He must love you very much to have done things this way." He spoke thoughtfully, considering his words with care.

"Perhaps." I said with a shrug that I hoped came across as offhanded.

“Or perhaps that should be rephrased; he loves you enough to put up with you for life.”

I made a face. “Well, I think that works both ways Zte’sa.” It occurred to me that Thrawn was not exactly the easiest man in the galaxy to cleave to permanently either.

“Aye, so it does.” He replied thoughtfully.

We were quiet for a moment, stopping to sip the ale and it seemed strange to me that I would feel as though I had to reacquaint myself with someone that I had known my whole life, but I had hurt him, hurt my whole family by staying away for so long, by almost dying and not giving them a chance to say goodbye. Navaari had told me that I would pay for the error in judgement I had made for a long time because it had such far reaching emotional consequences. Up until now I had not really believed him. When I couldn’t stand the silence any more I broke it. “Have you heard anything from Jyrki at all?”

If my question surprised him he did not show it. “No, but I did not expect to. For quite some time we thought you had died at Endor. I assumed he thought the same if he did not also fight in that battle and die himself. If he thinks that you are dead, he has no reason to come near me or your family.”

I nodded. I had not heard anything from or about Jyrki since before I left Coruscant, long before the battle of Endor but I couldn’t say it made me sad. “I don’t think he was at Endor, at least not in the middle of the battle and I don’t think he’s dead at all.”

“What makes you so certain?”

“I would have felt it if he had died, I am certain of that.”

My uncle simply stared at me with raised eyebrows for a moment then nodded gruffly, if he had anything more to say on the subject it was interrupted by the arrival of our food. It was surprisingly good and we ate, for the most part, in silence. After finishing our supper which included a very nice desert, we shuttled back into Kor Vella Spaceport and boarded my ship without any hindrance or problems. As I started the engines, my uncle strapped himself into the co pilot’s seat without a word. Once we had cleared Corellia’s atmosphere and headed out towards the Corellian Run hyperspace route he turned to look at me. It was an expression I had long come to associate with patient lectures and being told off.

“So, Lei’lei, why don’t I go make us some tea and when you’ve set the auto pilot you can come back and join me and perhaps explain what I am doing here and why we are headed to Coruscant?”

I just looked at him and nodded. Tea sounded good but conversation didn’t. He wasn’t going to like what I was going to tell him, and he would like it even less when he learned why I was doing it. Still, I was grateful he was with me and I had missed him and the rest of my family more than words could actually express. When I was done giving him the gist of my plans and he was done telling me how stupid and rash I was for attempting this I would nag him for news from home. One of these days I hoped I could go back and spend a well earned holiday on Tatooine, though I was certain most of it would be spent either explaining and apologising for what had happened or filling Bel in on all my romantic stories. At least, I thought ruefully, as I set the auto pilot she would be happy for me because that was one part of the story that was mostly a happy end and Bel loved happy endings.

Coruscant never changed, I thought, as I guided my ship down through the thick fog to land on the private landing pad that belonged to Thrawn’s apartment. It was as full and busy as ever, even in the early morning. The spires of the tall buildings poked through the fog looking a little like long nailed fingertips reaching to the sky, the hands of the condemned raised up looking for rescue. It felt odd to be back here, and the weight of the past which crept its way into my gut made me sullen and quiet. I guess Uncle Vahlek understood this because he didn’t say anything as I shut the ship down and gathered my things. In many ways this was a homecoming for me because I had been happy in this flat with Thrawn for a while. It had been a place of safe refuge and love. As I entered the lock code opening the door I felt a terrible wave of sorrow and of loss but I didn’t understand why, it made me hesitate at the entrance of the flat.

“Are you alright Lei’lei?” My uncle placed his hand on my shoulder, his concern was genuine and palpable. I had to fight the urge to turn around and burrow myself in his arms and cry like I had done as a small child. Instead I just drew a deep steadying breath.

“Old ghosts, Zte’sa.” I said with a shrug and we stepped over the threshold.

The flat smelled unused but clean. The faint scent of Thrawn’s soap lingered in the air reminding me sharply of him but his presence was no longer here and the flat felt empty, despite the furniture and décor. I suppose I understood in that moment that no matter what happened in the future I would not live here again with him as I had done before

Endor. I think that Thrawn had known this too when he, exiled and publicly shamed, had removed his most treasured possessions and art work, many of which now adorned his private quarters on Nirauan.

I sighed as I dumped my bag on the floor, ignoring my uncle, and went to the kitchen to look in the cupboards and cold-box to see what I would need to buy. I had no idea how long we'd be staying here but I didn't plan to starve or order out. I was surprised to find a note on the kitchen counter and even more surprised to read it was from Shiv.

Hey Rim Girl, I heard you might be paying us a visit so I stocked up on the essentials for you. Word came that you needed to tie up loose ends here. I have looked in on the place from time to time as the Admiral requested so there should not be any nasty surprises, like Dathomir spiders hiding in the bathroom. Buzz me when you get in, we have a lot to talk about. Missed you tons. Love Shiv.

My uncle vanished into the spare room and dropped off his small pack. His ability to travel so light never ceased to amaze me. I set the water cooker on to make tea and searched the freezer for something we could use for breakfast. When I had left this flat to go with Lord Vader to Endor it had never occurred to me that I would not be coming back for well over two years so there had been food in the fridge and things left about. I looked around and knew that Shiv had taken care of everything. That Thrawn had trusted him enough to give him the access codes made me grateful. I found some pre-made breakfast scones, heated the oven and shoved them in to cook.

I needed to wrap my head around the fact that I was actually back on this crazy world and that a huge chunk of time had passed since I was last here, because for me it felt as though I had only been gone for a couple of months not a couple of years. I wasn't sure I understood how this was even possible, but I guessed as I set breakfast things on the counter it was to be expected when one slips into a coma and then vanishes to a planet on the edge of the galaxy where time just moves differently. While my Uncle showered and changed I made stimcaf and reacquainted myself with the place I had once called home. I knew that the very first person I should probably try to see was Ysanne Isard but she could wait instead I decided to see if Shiv was awake.

"Merly?" said a sleepy looking holo of Shiv.

"Surprise!"

He yawned and ran a hand through his tousled blond hair.

"Surprise? Where are you?"

I nodded. "Just got in, wanted to say thank you for taking care of the flat."

He was still half asleep and I could see him trying to wake up. "Wait, you're here on Coruscant in your flat?"

I nodded again. "Listen, you feel like having breakfast with us?"
"Now? Us?"

"My uncle is with me and yes now, though if you could pick up some cream and some butter on the way that would be good. I'm baking scones."

"Uh...okay...be there in about fifteen minutes." He said. He was still not quite awake. I signed off and went back to taking care of breakfast, waiting for my uncle to finish so that I could take a quick shower. Shiv arrived twenty minutes later to the scent of freshly backed scones and stimcaf. I heard him come in and went to greet him, unable to say even one word before he had swept me up in a huge hug.

"We thought you were dead." He whispered in my ear holding me so tightly I thought I heard ribs crack.

I just hugged him back and nodded. What was there to say? When he finally let me go to look at me I could see that he had aged a little and that worry and stress had eaten into his boyish good looks.

"Siavaan, it is good to meet you." My uncle said from behind me.

Shiv grinned and shook my uncle's offered hand. Then he handed me a bag of groceries. "I bought cream, jam, butter and some fresh fruits."
"Well breakfast is done, so let's eat. I'm hungry." I said.

As we sat and ate I told Shiv my story before he could bug me about it, this time I did not leave much out so there were a lot of things that my Uncle had not heard before as well. When I was done both he and my Uncle just looked at me in stunned silence.

Shiv sighed. "We heard about Endor but the news was censored. The backlash from Lord Vader's and the Emperor's death was pretty awful. Coruscant was in total martial law and people were being shot if they were out after curfew. Of course, that all settled down after the memorial service and once Pestage was recognised as the official leader. It was chaos, internally but from the outside things seemed to carry on as usual. When Pestage was killed and Isard took over things began to get a little odd but even that settled down into some sort of normal routine. She doesn't interact much with people like me so it isn't as if I have much contact to the inner circle any more. All the Emperor's concubines and consorts were given severance packages and told to go home, most of the

palace is quiet as the work force has been cut down by nearly a half. Isard tends to run things on a tight military style schedule, she doesn't have time for civilian bureaucracy."

"I need to see her." I said. "I have updates from Thrawn for her."

"Well if you are lucky she's here but most of the time she's not on Coruscant that much these days. Theory is she spends most of her time at some secret base of operations, though I don't know much about that. If there is a hidden base some where it is really a well kept secret. I do hear a lot of whispers about the Lusankya Facility, which she heads up. People go in but they never come out. She had a lot of her own staff members taken to that detention center and no one and I do mean no one knows where it is. The latest theory is she has some ISD in space but no one really knows for sure." He said with a sigh. "I don't do much work at the moment, it seems she has little use for the fineries that the Emperor did, but they haven't actually fired me yet either."

"What about this sickness I've been reading about?" I asked.

Shiv shrugged. "No one is really certain about that either. It breaks out in pockets, mostly in the alien sectors and it is pretty deadly but because no humans have contracted it yet and it isn't wide spread there has been very little said or done about it as far as I know. At first they thought that it was an issue with the water purification system but that checked out all right now they think it is some bacterial thing brought in on imported fruits. The word around the palace is that the rebellion has been testing some biological weapon but personally I don't buy that. They wouldn't target aliens for a start and I don't think they have the facilities to create weapons like that." He sighed. "So really no one knows, but I can tell you this, bacta apparently cures it so as long as there is enough bacta to go around, no one seems too worried."

I blew out the breath I had been holding and sipped at my stim'caf. "I need to get into the palace."

Shiv shrugged one shoulder. "Well that won't be difficult, you have active clearance, you still work for the Empire and you carry official documents from a Grand Admiral."

"How easily will I be able to move about in the palace?" I asked.

"Depends on where you want to go."

"My old flat, Lord Vader's office, the Emperor's inner sanctum."

Shiv made a face. "Hmm, your old flat won't be an issue. That part of the palace is hardly ever used any more. Not sure if Lord Vader's office will be accessible or not and the Emperor's inner sanctum won't be

accessible at all. Isard had all his rooms restricted and shut off, but left untouched, which was odd. It was as if she expected him to come back. There are armed guards posted at all entrances to his quarters and offices and the whole area is under constant surveillance, you'd never get by any of that without being detected."

I nodded. I didn't tell Shiv that there were ways of bypassing the security and I had alternative routes to gain access to some of the rooms I wanted to go to.

"Well, my first order of business is to see Isard or at least get Thrawn's dispatches to her. After that, my time is my own."

Shiv looked at me and then at my uncle who had remained very quiet through out most of the conversation. "Why are you really here?"

I stared back at him for a long moment then said. "I need to set up a reliable information network for Thrawn."

Much to my surprise instead of being shocked Shiv just nodded, "I thought it might be something like that."

"You did?"

"No one, absolutely no one, seems to know that there is a surviving Grand Admiral out there, it's weird. I mean Thrawn was sort of a secret to begin with but Isard squashes all talk or mention of him. The rumour is that he is dead or was a myth to begin with. He was exiled and he vanished, remember? But even weirder is all holo news or gossip mention of him has been erased, you too for that matter. It is as if the pair of you never really existed." He said. "I thought this was very strange given how good your Admiral is with strategy and planning so I did some quiet digging. Seems Isard is scared to death that he will come back and remove her from power to take over as galactic emperor. So she has essentially wiped all traces and information about him off the system. As far as the outside galaxy goes he does not exist."

I nodded slowly. "She's been lying to him about how things have been going between the Empire and the rebellion. He needs a way to gain information that hasn't been censored or altered by her and her people."

"Spying is considered treason and is punishable by death, if you get caught you'll be shot." Shiv warned.

"I know that, I don't plan on getting caught."

"No one ever does." Shiv said with a snort. My uncle laughed.

"Well I don't plan to rush in and rummage around her drawers!" I replied. "I have other possibilities."

They both nodded and the three of us lapsed into silence as I poured more stim'caf.

"So, give me the gossip!" I demanded after a few moments. "How is everyone, Master Kjestyll, Cati, Bobbyn, Maxxi and Ynyth?"

Shiv drew a deep breath. "The Bunduki masters vanished shortly after the Emperor's death. In fact the entire school seemed to disappear. No one knows where they went but I can tell you they were not killed." He said.

My uncle nodded. "They would have relocated the school to a planet that was remote and outside the reach of the Empire and the rebellion. It is possible that they went to Anzat." He said. "I had heard that all the Bunduki schools had suddenly vanished after the Emperor's death. The news that a new Jedi had returned to the galaxy may have been enough for them to wish to return to their underground ways of teaching. The Bunduki form was founded on the premise of beating force users without having to be force sensitive or a trained jedi."

"Why Anzat?" Shiv asked looking at Uncle Vahlek.

"People fear the Anzati but some of the best assassins come from there. It is a good place to have an underground Bunduki school, though I suspect that there are many worlds the masters would have gone to. They spread their training out and they are mobile. Anzat is just difficult to explore or invade. The Anzati can be quite deadly, you know."

"You don't think they were killed do you? I mean, that is possible." I asked.

Shiv shook his head. "No, they vanished. One day there were classes and teachings and all the equipment was still there, the next it was as if they had never existed and Isard was not happy about it, I can tell you that for nothing. No, they were not suddenly wiped out or secretly eliminated, they left of their own accord right under her nose without her knowing."

I felt a small amount of peace knowing that Master Kjestyll was safe and teaching some place else but also a certain amount of sadness that in all probability I would never see him again. "What about Cati and the others?"

"Well, I told you in the last letter that Bobbyn went home. I haven't heard from him since. Personally, I think he was glad to get out of Coruscant while he could. His family owns a hotel so he could just go and work there. Maxxi vanished. I think he joined the rebellion if you want my honest opinion but who can really say for sure. One day he just didn't

show up for work any more. I know that Antygra's death really changed how he felt about the Empire so it makes sense he would want to fight back. Ynyth and I are still together. It is a lot easier now that she got a job in the civilian sector but our schedules clash more than they used to, she's at work right now but she'll be thrilled to hear you are back safe and alive. Cati is still the same. I know she'd love to see you. She asks about you whenever I get the chance to talk with her. Her work keeps her busy. It doesn't seem to matter to the rich and bored that the Emperor is dead and Isard is in charge, they still live as though nothing bad had happened. So the demand for fine clothes has never gone out of style. Cati is as busy as ever."

I smiled and looked at the Chrono. "I should get ready and go see if Isard is home. The sooner I get this over with the sooner I will be able to do what I came for." I said.

"I'll come with you. They know me so it will help you with security, even with your clearance they'll ask questions. You are unknown to most of the guards now." Shiv said, helping to clear away the breakfast dishes.

"What about you?" I asked my uncle.

He just smiled. "I have some friends to look up and need to buy some things for your father. You have your comm, when you need me use it or else I will see you when you return here for lunch or supper, unless there are other plans?"

"No plans, at least not yet." I said. "First I need to reacquaint myself with the Palace and make sure Isard doesn't think I am anything other than a dumb assistant."

My uncle laughed. "I do not think she even cares about you, Lei'lei. I am certain that the only reason she will even blink your way is because of the disks from Thrawn that you carry. If you had been on her mind she would have had you hunted down and murdered a long time ago."

"That's very comforting, Zte'sa."

"He speaks the truth though." Shiv agreed.

"She had an arrest warrant out for me!"

Shiv nodded. "Yes, you and dozens of others because she thought you might come back and try to somehow contest or threaten her position but as soon as that idea was squashed you became no more important to her than I am. It was only because the Admiral actually requested it that the arrest warrant was rescinded, mostly I think she just forgot about it. In

the few months after the Emperor's death, Isard went nuts trying to get rid of any would be threat. One of the few people she was truly worried about was Mara Jade. She had her arrested but in the end Jade escaped and Isard hasn't seen or heard from her since."

"You both make me feel very unimportant." I said half pouting, half relieved.

"Good, be thankful that you are unimportant in the eyes of this new regime. It will make the job you plan to do a lot easier." My Uncle said gruffly.

I sighed, knowing they were right. In the over all scope of things, as far as the Empire was concerned, I was an office girl whose boss had died. It was long enough ago that most people would not really remember me if at all. I glanced at Shiv who just nodded and smiled. It was time to go and test this theory out.

"Be careful Lei'lei." My uncle said as I slipped on my long coat.

"We will." Shiv replied with a grin, making my uncle smile.

I checked my satchel to make sure the data disks with Thrawn's messages to Isard were still there then slung it over my head and followed Shiv out. I hoped it wasn't a sign of things to come that the weather grid had somehow decided to anoint my homecoming with a deluge of rain.

The palace had not changed much, though it did seem a little run down, darker, gloomier somehow and there were not nearly as many people wandering around as there had been during the Emperor's reign. I guessed Isard had slashed departments and staff to save credits. It was strange to be back, as though nothing had ever changed but the atmosphere was definitely different. During the Emperor's reign, while he had been a powerful leader, people who worked at the palace on a day to day basis did not fear him, it was more like they were in awe of him. Now as I walked along the corridors with Shiv I sensed fear and lots of it. Isard terrified people and she both knew this and used it. With every step that brought me closer to her office I considered just how risky and how stupid what I wanted to do here in this building really was. If I got caught I would most likely be condemned to death for treason or something along those lines. Thrawn's advice to me as I had mentioned this possibility had been to tell me dryly "*Well then, my dear, don't get caught.*"

We were stopped three times and asked for ident cards and clearance codes. All three times nothing happened except some off hand conversation between Shiv and the one guard he knew by name. For the most part everyone seemed a little bored. What ever Thrawn had done with my security clearance had worked, there were no raised flags or cause for alarm and the only comment that I did get from one of the guards on duty was 'Welcome back, Miss Gabriel.'

"It would appear you are either lucky or unlucky." Shiv told me after speaking with the receptionist droid, in the waiting area outside of Isard's Palace offices.

"Why's that?"

"She's actually here today so you will get to see her when she has a few minutes, but it will mean waiting." He explained.

I rolled my eyes, made a face and nodded. While I didn't like sitting around much, at least I knew the data disks Thrawn had given me would be placed directly into her hands and not those of some lackey who may or may not give them to her. Shiv walked with me to the austere waiting area.

"I'm not sure how long this will take and I have some things to do so I'll be in my office, comm me when you're done." He said.

"Okay." I replied. "Thanks Shiv."

He gave me a smile and a nod and then left. The waiting area was designed to appear comfortable and welcoming but as I sat there I noticed that in fact it did just the opposite. It was clever really, how the chairs were just uncomfortable enough that one could not relax while sitting on them, that the lighting was somehow irritating and the room after a few moments began to feel oppressive and claustrophobic despite its spaciousness.. As I studied my surroundings I was surprised that the lessons I had learned in the past began to come in to play. Thrawn, Master Kjestyll and Lord Vader had indeed taught me well. This room was created in such a way to make the person waiting ill at ease so that by the time Isard called them in for their meeting she had the advantage and they were completely off balance without ever even knowing why. It made me shake my head, this subtle art of power play and in some ways it diminished Isard's aura for me. Lord Vader had never needed parlour tricks to make people uncomfortable or ill at ease nor had the Emperor or even Thrawn for that matter.

I smiled to myself as I sat in the quiet and it did not go unnoticed by the young guard standing by the main office door. I had not forgotten

the calming techniques I had been taught and I used them now as I sat, fining my center, becoming the stillness. I had nothing to fear from this woman. The worst she could do was to kill me, although unless I gave her reason to I didn't think that she would and I had already met death a few times in my life anyway so this possibility didn't scare me all that much any more. I watched with feigned disinterest at the people who came and left her office. Primarily military officers bringing reports, I assumed. Eventually she found time for me and after what seemed hours a young man, an aide, told me my waiting had come to an end.

"The Director will see you know, Miss Gabriel." He spoke crisply and gestured for me to go into the office through the door that had just opened silently. I nodded my thanks, and walked in to my first face to face meeting with Isard since the fall of the Emperor. I would have been lying to say I was not a little nervous but I worked at not showing it.

She was standing, her hands clasped behind her back, staring out of the large window into the morning fog. Her posture, this scene were so reminiscent of how Lord Vader often stood that I wondered if it had been a deliberate move on her part to put me off balance. Then I wondered with a rueful smile if I was not giving her too much credit. She was smart and she was cruel but in the end I was unimportant. I stood a polite distance away from her and said nothing. I was used to this manner of treatment, meant to discomfort and intimidate, it actually had the opposite effect. Lord Vader had done this with me for years, I was used to it. I waited until she turned around to look at me before speaking.

"Miss Gabriel, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?" She asked. Her voice was rich and deeper than I remembered.

"Grand Admiral Thrawn sends his greetings, Madam Director and has asked me to personally deliver this into your hands." I said retrieving the data disc from my satchel and holding it out to her.

She stared at me for a moment and then after too long a pause had passed she gingerly took it from my hand and glanced at it disdainfully before setting it on her desk. "Thank you." She replied.

I did not back down from her stare but I didn't challenge her either. She had aged since I had last seen her and the tell tale signs of stress from holding what was left of the Empire together showed on her face. She was still beautiful in a strange, austere sort of way, wearing her long hair loose so that it framed her face and fell over her shoulders to contrast starkly with the blood red uniform she had on. Her eyes, which bored into mine were mismatched. One was an icy blue, reminding me

sharply of Jyrki, the other was blood red, like that of an albino animal. It was said they were exact mirrors for the two aspects of her personality, cold and unforgiving, fiery and unpredictably violent. None of which were exactly comforting. For a moment in time it seemed as though she were trying to delve into my very soul to unravel any duplicity I might have locked away in there but she was not a force user and in the end all she could do was read my expression which I hoped said *I am just doing my job, as I have always done*. After what seemed forever she gave a small nod and then turned to look at her desk and the data disk that lay there.

"I see you have fully recovered." She said. "I was informed that you very nearly lost your life at Endor."

I nodded slowly. "Yes." I said. I wasn't sure how much of the details she knew but she hadn't asked so I didn't feel like giving her more information.

She paused to draw a deep breath. "I am curious as to how you ended up in the Unknown Regions and not with the rest of the fleet when they jumped to hyperspace."

"My shuttle was damaged in the explosion from the space station. I had no time to plan a course or try to find the rest of the fleet I jumped blindly in to hyperspace. I did not realise at the time that there had been significant damage to the hyperdrive and when I came out of hyperspace, Nirauan was the closest known Imperial base to my current location."

She paused for a second, digesting what I had told her then gave another curt little nod. Thrawn shown me the report he had sent her concerning this so she already knew what I was telling her. "You served Lord Vader well, Miss Gabriel, he spoke highly of your work for him. I trust you have returned to full active status and are now ready to continue serving the Empire?"

I nodded. "Yes, Madam Director."

"Grand Admiral Thrawn has asked that you be allowed to remain on Nirauan to assist him in ...various duties. I see no reason to deny this request; I have no need of a civilian such as your self working here for me." She spoke coolly and as she did so picked up another data disk that had been sitting on her desk. "You may take this to the Grand Admiral, confirmation of your transfer to his office."

I took the disk from her hand and slipped it into the small pocket in my satchel made for exactly this purpose. There was a sudden flash of memory from the disk which caused me to suck in my breath hard. I hid

my surprise at the disjointed and frightening images which smashed their way into my head for a split second with a half feigned coughing fit.

“Is everything under control, Miss Gabriel?” She asked with disdain but I heard something else underneath her words that I could not quite read.

I nodded and stopped coughing. “Yes, thank you, I will see that the Grand Admiral gets this.” I patted the side of my satchel which now held the little disk.

“Be sure that you do.” She bit back sharply and for a second I saw the creature that everyone feared underneath the polished veneer of civility. She stared at me, her eyes moving up and down over my body. While I could not read her thoughts but I sensed the question she was about to ask, in her position I would have asked it as well.

“What happened at Endor, Miss Gabriel?”

“Ma’am?” I asked.

“You were there, an eyewitness. You were one of the people closest to Lord Vader in all things. I want to know what happened.”

“Are you asking me if the rumours are true? That it was Lord Vader who betrayed the Empire and murdered the Emperor?”

“I am asking you to give me your version of what went on at the Empire’s biggest military disaster.”

“Well, there isn’t much to tell from my version.” I said carefully wondering if the two officers the Emperor had sent to baby-sit me had actually told the truth of what happened.

“Tell me what you do know.” Her voice had gone ice cold and the expression in her eyes reminded me of some bounty hunters I had met, empty and soulless. She gestured for me to sit and I did without thinking.

I closed my eyes for a moment, calling up from memory images of that moment in time. Then with a sigh I told her what had happened. I told her how the Emperor had revealed to me his plan to capture Luke Skywalker and destroy the Rebellion once and for all. I did not tell her how the Emperor had dumped this information on me, she did not need to know this. I told her the little I knew about the Emperor’s plans to use the deception of a half completed battle station to lure the Rebels out into an all out space battle that they could not possibly win. I was certain that she knew most of this but I had some details to give her that would satisfy her curiosity.

“So they actually captured Skywalker?” She asked.

“It was my understanding that he gave himself up to save his friends. He was on the battle station at the time the space battle began.” I replied.

“How did he defeat the Emperor?” She asked.

I couldn’t help the shrug I gave and I sense the wave of annoyance it created from her. “In truth, ma’am, I don’t know. By the time that occurred I was no longer on the battle station. The Emperor had sent me on an errand and I was in the middle of my run when, if you will forgive the term, all nine Corellian Hells broke loose.” In my mind’s eye I watched the sequence of events unfold like a flower to the sun. I described to her the fall of the *Executor* as it crashed into the battle station, the warning cries over the comm about the explosion that was to come only moment later. I described as best I could what happened in the minutes that followed up until the part where I got the hell out of Endor space. My words were calm and cool but it did not escape her notice that my fingers trembled and I suppose this added credibility to my tale, after all I was recounting the death of the Emperor of the galaxy.

“How did Skywalker escape?” she asked after a very long silence.

I looked up at her in surprise. “I have no idea. I only know that he was with Lord Vader and the Emperor just as I left the Battle station. In order to know what really happened in that room you would have to ask Luke Skywalker.”

She snorted and I guessed that this had already crossed her mind. “I am surprised that you do not know more.” She said a little too casually.

“Why is that?”

“I was led to believe that you were force sensitive. Is it not the nature of your kind to be able to sense more?” She asked. She was digging, she didn’t know for sure and I was surprised by this. I guess Lord Vader had kept my abilities more to himself than I had thought. I suppose it made sense he hadn’t told the Emperor about so why would he tell Isard?

“My talents are small and limited and my ability to sense things of that nature is non existent. I don’t read minds or see the future.” I said blending truth with lie. “Lord Vader often commented on how useless I was in this area. He called me disappointing.” My uncle had once told me that a touch of truth will add credence to more lies than straightforward lying.

“Yet he kept you at his side.” She said snidely.

“While I may not have much use in other areas of service to the Empire, I am a very good personal assistant.” I said coolly. “I always assumed this was why Lord Vader kept me on.”

“That and you had the favour of the Emperor.”

I glanced up into her mismatched eyes. “The Emperor favoured many young women he considered pretty and decorative, he also let me know that I was useful because I kept his pet alien amused.” I retorted.

She smiled and it was cruel. “As you still do, I see.”

I played along and sighed, bowing my head as if I carried shame in my heart for my liaison with Thrawn. She underestimated him in all things just as she also underestimated me. “There was no where else for me to go, Madam Director.” I said in a quiet voice.

“Just so.” She nodded. I could feel the sense of smug satisfaction coming from her in waves. She did not like or trust Thrawn, she feared him. She also thought that he had bought her lies and was securely tucked away in the Unknown Regions doing his thing far away from her. She had wanted to see me to get a sense of whether or not he was planning to return, my demeanour and remarks allowed her to believe she was, for the time being, safe to continue her own way. She was hiding something terrible but I could get no real sense of it at all.

“I am sure that Grand Admiral Thrawn will find suitable work for you and being in the Unknown Regions will offer you a unique perspective on the Empire.” She said coldly.

I merely nodded unable to reply because at that second the inter office comm buzzed.

“What is it?” Isard asked.

“Kirtan Loor is here to see you Madam Director.” The droid said. Her whole body posture changed. “Here?”

“He requested to tell you that he has urgent news about progress with the”

“Tell him I’m busy, he’ll have to wait a moment.” She snapped cutting the droid off. She was angry at this Loor person and she had not expected his visit either. I watched her in silence, pretending to be bored, and wondered what it was about this man that had rattled her cage.

“Is there anything else?” She asked me after a moment, as if she had momentarily forgotten I was there.

“I would like to request permission to spend some time to pack up my belongings from when I lived here and to sort out the mess in my previous office before I return to Nirauan, the Grand Admiral gave me leave time so that I might set my affairs in order, he wished there be no reason for me to have to return here and deal with any unexpected issues that might occur in the future.”

The expression on her face was peculiar and I couldn’t decipher it yet it sent shivers up and down my spine. “Yes, getting your affairs in order is a wise move all things considered. Take all the time you need. You are Thrawn’s responsibility not mine, if he allows you to slack off in this manner then that is his choice.”

“Thank you.” I said ignoring her barb about Thrawn. She feared him, I could taste that in her words every time she spoke his name. Me, she thought of as nothing more than office fluff. I had been known as Vader’s Handmaid and most people had assumed that he had kept me around because I was simply good at my job as his assistant, among other things. The rumours that the Emperor had taken a liking to me had not hurt this any either. If Isard had hoped to glean new information from me about what had happened at Endor she had been disappointed. I offered nothing new, just a different spin on the story she had already heard a dozen or more times. She knew that I was force sensitive, just not how deep my talents went or exactly what I could do and she did not really place any faith in something she considered a dead religion. Her worries were about Thrawn and about something else I could not figure out. I had come here expecting to be challenged or worse, instead it was as my Uncle had said, I was nobody and Thrawn was not coming to overthrow her from her place of power. Once she had confirmed these two things I was of no more interest to her, if anything I bored her and my visit to her office was a mild inconvenience in her otherwise busy day. She had other things on her mind.

I waited for a few seconds then asked. “Will there be anything else, Madam Director?”

She flapped her hand dismissively at me. “No, you may leave.”

And just like that my meeting with her was over. I stood up and gave her a small polite nod then left her office. On the way out I brushed past a harried, gaunt officer who for a split second reminded me a little of Grand Moff Tarkin. As I stared at him for a moment our eyes met then the reception droid told him he could go in to Isard’s office. He stomped in as though the entire galaxy owed him everything and before the door had even closed he had started the conversation with a terse “Derricote is complaining! You are rushing this project....” He began.

She cut him off. “Is it ready yet?”

“No. He says it will take time to”

I watched as the door closed shutting out anymore conversation wondering what they had been talking about. I waited until her door

closed then asked the droid about the man who had an eerie resemblance to a long dead Moff.

“That was Kirtan Loor, Miss.” The droid answered not really telling me more than I already knew.

“What does he do?”

“Oh he works for the Director.” The droid said promptly then added in a quiet voice, “He hunts down rebels.”

“Oh.” Was all I could think to say. “What about Derricote?”

“Evir Derricote?”

I nodded assuming there was only one.

“He is doing biological research for the Director.” The droid answered. I guessed that so far I had not asked any questions that would be considered classified because usually protocol droids were easy to programme against giving out such information.

“If I needed to see him where would I find him?” I asked.

“At the biological and chemical research facility but I believe he is very busy Miss, I could try to make an appointment for you?”

I shook my head. “No thank you I was just wondering why his name seemed so familiar to me.”

“Perhaps because he was once the commander of the one-eighty-first and then in charge of Borleias before it fell.” The droid answered.

“Ah of course. Thank you.” I said, more confused than ever. If he had been in charge of Borleias when it fell why wasn't he dead? It made me wonder what he did that was so important that Isard save his life. I wondered where the research facility was but didn't dare ask. If Isard caught wind that I had been pestering her reception droid for information that was considered classified she might be less inclined to think of me as harmless. I walked out of the reception area feeling as though I had overlooked something important or forgotten something but I could not for the life of me figure out what it was so I shrugged it off. If it was important sooner or later it would come to me. In the mean time I had things to do.

“I don't know.” Shiv said looking from me to my uncle then back again. We were in the middle of supper, discussing Derricote and Loor.

After my meeting with Isard I had not felt much like doing anything else. The journey to Coruscant had been tiring and mostly I just

wanted to relax a little and think. I had swung by Shiv's office to find him mostly bored, convinced him to come home with me, stopping along the way to pick up take away food. My uncle was at the flat when we arrived, if he had gone out and run his errands I didn't ask. I was glad we had bought enough food for three.

I drummed my fingernails on the counter top until my uncle gently clamped his hand on top of mine. I was annoying him with my impatience. “Lei'lei why do you think this is important? It has nothing to do with why you came here?”

I sighed and sat back a little, picking at the Zabradi food with my food sticks. “Isard is hiding something, something big. She was almost nice to me and that's just plain weird.” I fiddled with the cup of stimcaf. “Why would she keep this Derricote alive? If he was responsible for the fall of Borleias he should be dead. She doesn't tolerate failure.” I hadn't spoken about the flash of memory from the datadisk. I was still trying to make sense of what I had seen.

“Well he must have a use then.” Uncle Vahlek shrugged.

“The droid said Biological and chemical research facility. Shiv do you know anything about this place?”

“No. But you might be able to access Derricote's file you have high enough clearance.”

I shook my head. “Even with my clearance a query on something like that would be flagged and she'd be able to back track it unless...” I stopped mid thought.

“Unless what?” Uncle Vahlek asked carefully. He didn't like the expression on my face. He knew it far too well.

“Lord Vader's Coruscant city home had direct access to the Palace mainframe that bypassed Intel security. I used to work from there a lot so he made sure I could get in without all the annoying security stops.”

“Wouldn't Isard have had that shut down?” Shiv countered.

“I don't think so. I don't think many people actually knew about it to be honest” I said. “Lord Vader pretty much had the run of the system though most people would never have guessed this. He did a lot of things without going through official channels.” I said.

Shiv gave me a look.

“I could go in and look at classified personnel files if I wanted, I don't think anyone except maybe the Emperor knew just how deep into the system Lord Vader had my access allowed.” I clarified.

“How did you get that?” Shiv asked in surprise.

“Lord Vader got fed up of me bothering him every single time I needed to do a deep core search, he went in one day and upped my security level, bypassed the usual Intel application and poof, suddenly I could go anywhere in the system.” I answered with a shrug. “He jokingly used to call it emperor mode.”

“How the hell did he do that? I thought there were security systems in place to prevent that?”

I made a face. “Oh please, he built a pod racer and a protocol droid by himself before he was even twelve years old, do you think he didn’t get to know his way around the Imperial computer system? Spying was an art form and Lord Vader did it remarkably well. He used to say in order to stay ahead of the Emperor’s game one had to know how to bend the game rules.”

“Oh.” Shiv said.

Uncle Vahlek nodded. “Anakin Skywalker was a very talented pilot and engineer; I do not think it is such a leap of faith that, as the Emperor’s second in command, to think he could not bypass the system here. You think this clearance is still open, Lei’lei?”

“I am sure it is.” I said. “Lord Vader made sure that when I needed to retrieve information for him I could do it without having to ask for permission and more importantly without anyone knowing. He didn’t tell any one about it and neither did I. I didn’t think it was prudent to let that sort of information slip.” I looked at them both. “Not even Thrawn knows about this.”

“And you think you can do this safely from his Coruscant residence?” Uncle Vahlek asked thoughtfully.

I nodded. “I think that in the madness that followed the Emperor’s and Lord Vader’s deaths no one has even thought about his home and all the stuff that was there. He had several residences on this planet and most people never even knew about them. No one... well almost no one, could get in without going through the security checks. It was very heavily guarded and the security system was impenetrable, well mostly.” I amended thinking of Jix, wondering briefly what had happened to him.

“I thought you wanted to clear out your office in the Palace and see about trying to set up some sort of information network for Thrawn. He did not send you here to spy on Isard!” Uncle Vahlek said not liking the direction I was starting to go.

I looked at him. “Isard is up to something. I need to figure this out so I can pass on the information to Thrawn and maybe he can stop it and bring back some sanity to the Empire.”

“You are not one of the Emperor’s agents. Saving the galaxy from Isard is not your job.” He countered.

“The difference between setting up a way to pass on information and actually doing some digging for actual information myself is minimal. It would not be the first time I have done something like this” I said, although the last time I had tried it had nearly ended up with Zaarin having his way with me but I didn’t think they needed to know that. I grinned and added, “And besides, it will be fun.”

Shiv glanced at my Uncle. “Fun?”

My uncle frowned, “Do not encourage her, Siavaan.” He turned to me and pursed his lips. “Concentrate on the job you came here to do Lei’lei. Isard’s machinations are not your concern and I am certain your bond-mate would not be happy if you were to be incarcerated or shot for treason.”

I sighed and rested my chin on my fist. “Well I am not about to do anything crazy right now anyway.” I said looking at the chrono on the wall. “I want to wait till tomorrow evening before I head back to the palace. It will be quieter then and since I told Isard I would be packing up things it won’t be unusual for me to be there.”

Shiv’s eyes followed mine. “Damn, this has been fun but I have to get home.” He said getting up. “Will you be free to have lunch tomorrow? I can get a hold of Cati and Ynyth if you want?”

I grinned. “That would be great!” I said as he pulled me into a hug.

“It’s good to have you back, Rim-Girl.” He said quietly in my ear. I just nodded and watched him leave with mixed feelings. So much had changed, even he had changed. I sighed as the door to the speeder parking area closed. The sky was streaked with red and purple as the last light from the setting sun painted the sky. It was beautiful but not quite as impressive as the sunsets on Nirauan were. I shook my head and made my way back to the kitchen. My uncle was staring at me thoughtfully when I returned to sit at the breakfast counter.

“What?” I asked.

“So, what was it you were not telling us that has got you suddenly tied up in knots?” He asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it just yet.” I said as I began to clear up

the dirty dishes.

“Did Isard say something to you?” He dug.

I shook my head. “I saw something when she handed me a data disk.” I told him. “But I am still trying to make sense out of it. Lord Vader once told me that sometimes if the images I saw from an object were jumbled and without meaning that it was better to allow the visions to sit for a little while and not think on them. To let the subconscious mind work them out.”

Uncle Vahlek nodded. “Very well. So now what do you want to do?”

I smiled. “Nothing. I’m exhausted. I thought I would make some tea, curl up on the couch and watch some HoloNet and then go to bed early. I have stuff at the palace I want to do tomorrow that doesn’t have anything to do with Isard.”

For the first time since arriving upon the planet my Uncle seemed to relax. “Tea and HoloNet sounds wonderful.” He said. “I didn’t feel much like chasing you all over Coruscant tonight anyway.” He added with a slight smile. He looked as tired as I felt.

The HoloNet News showed an increase in the number of strange deaths from the mysterious illness that seemed to find its way into pockets of the planet. It was virulent and deadly. The images they showed scared me. They were graphic and terrifying. It was not a pretty way to die at all and apart from complete immersion in bacta early on there was nothing anyone could do. The report hinted that contaminated water was to blame and that anyone seeing suspicious behaviour should report it. The planet was apparently crawling with rebel spies trying to eliminate the population to take over. I was curled up on the sofa, the Dantassi blanket wrapped around my shoulders. My uncle sat in the large comfortable chair, his ankle resting on his knee. His face was expressionless as he watched the images but I could sense his own anger at what he saw.

“This isn’t natural, is it” I asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think it is the rebels either do you?”

He glanced at me before answering. “It is not their style, but there are other factions out there who would love to bring down Isard’s government who do not have the lofty ideals of the New Republic and I am quite sure they’d not be so hesitant about using biological warfare to get what they wanted.”

“You don’t think that Isard would have anything to do with this

do you?”

“Why would she poison her own planet Lei’lei? That makes no sense at all. How would you even come to that conclusion?”

“She is cruel and evil?” It wasn’t really an answer and Uncle Vahlek knew I was stalling. He gave me a look which said just spit it out.

“I saw her in a medlab, an observation room watching someone infected die, it was terrible.” I said carefully. The image had been momentary and almost too quick to really understand at first but allowing myself time to unwind it, slow it down I understood better what I had seen. “She asked the man standing next to her if it was ready? He told her no, he needed at least another month. She told him to hurry up that they were running out of time.”

“That could mean any number of things, least of all that she is to blame. It could be she is trying to find a cure to prevent this disease from spreading further, after all if the planet succumbs to a pandemic she does not gain anything by it and everything to lose. Things won’t get out of hand unless there is a bacta shortage.”

I nodded, feeling both a little relieved because this answer was the most plausible and a little foolish that I had not come to this conclusion first. I had let my fear and my dislike of Isard cloud my judgement. It certainly made sense and it would explain why she had kept Derricote alive. He was some sort of a biological engineer who could probably come up with a cure. No wonder she wanted to keep this a secret though. If word got out for certain that this virus was planted there would be mass panic on the planet. “Why doesn’t it affect humans?”

“If it is an engineered virus it would have been made that way. Xenophobia is not new to this galaxy and the Empire is not the only ruling body that is prejudice against non human races.”

I sighed. “Everything is such a mess. If the Emperor had never died none of this would be happening.”

“Perhaps.” Uncle Vahlek replied cryptically. “But Palpatine was no saint either.” He reminded me. “He had no problems with such tasty little things as slavery, genocide or even wiping out entire planets if it helped him achieve his goals.”

My uncle’s not subtle reminder about Alderaan was not lost on me and the Emperor had been number one on my top ten most evil beings in the galaxy list but somehow I could not help shake the feeling that were he alive there would be less chaos and more order. I wasn’t sure what was worse, a dictator who kept the peace at any cost or a democratic

government that allowed a free for all, leading into a descent into anarchy.

“Lei’lei, the whole foundation of Palpatine’s rule was fear. It was how he rose to power in the first place. He played one faction off against the other using their weaknesses and their insecurities to boost his stature and seemingly benign nature. No one knew what had happened until it was too late. He played everyone to achieve the ultimate goal, galactic domination. He had the entire jedi order eliminated in such a way that the majority of the beings in this galaxy thought they were the ones who had tried to over throw the very government they had sworn to uphold in the first place. People are nerfs, especially in a herd or a mob. They follow where ever they are told and whom ever they are told without thinking that maybe, just maybe something isn’t quite right with the picture at hand. When Palpatine told the galactic senate that the jedi Order had attempted to assassinate him to take over the government there was not one voice that day which opposed him. If people had risen up against him at that moment you would be looking at a very different galaxy today.”

“How do you know this?” I asked.

He drew a deep breath. “Because I was there when he made that speech.” He said. “I was working for the Old Republic at the time and I snuck into the gallery to hear what he had to say. I know that there were people who opposed what he had done but no one spoke up, not one. He managed to fool them all and they let him do it gladly with a thunderous applause, thinking that he had saved them all from a fate worse than death.”

I swallowed. If this had never happened my birth mother would never have been hunted down and killed and I would never have had the life I had known. I would never have come to work for the Empire and worst of all I would never have met Thrawn. “So this is why the rebellion began?”

He nodded. “The galaxy was at war and they saw Palpatine as a way to end that war, which he did. He had the military might and once the jedi were no more he had the freedom to do as he pleased without any major opposition. People don’t really care who rules, for the most part as long as they are fed, clothed and can make a decent living. A few disagreed with his policies and his taking of absolute power under guise of uniting the galaxy. They saw it as an infringement of their rights and freedoms, but they were too afraid to fight him openly and they were vastly outnumbered so they began an underground rebellion which became what you now know as the New Republic. They fought against Palpatine

because they thought he was evil and to some extent they were right but the majority of peoples and planets did not see it this way.”

“And Isard took over where he left off.” I muttered.

My uncle snorted. “Isard is a pale imitation of Palpatine. She is nothing more than a power hungry megalomaniac without vision. She will lose because unlike Palpatine she does not have the charisma or the manipulative skills to hold this galaxy together and she has made enough enemies that few would wish to fight for her if they think she would fall easily enough.” He shook his head. “The Empire is not what it once was and she is not the leader to bring it back.”

“Thrawn could.” I said quietly.

For a moment my uncle regarded me his head tilted slightly to one side. “Your faith in him is admirable Lei’lei but it would take a miracle for him to pull such a thing off. Perhaps had he moved in directly after the death of the Emperor this would have been the case but now, there are so many divisions and so many factions all fighting for a piece of the galactic pie that he would not only have to have a brilliant plan but a whole lot of luck as well.”

He was right and I sighed with the knowledge but it didn’t shake my faith. I had seen what Thrawn could do and unlike Lord Vader or the Emperor who had ruled by fear, Thrawn inspired people to follow him. The men and women under his command would die for him and never think twice about it because he would do the same for them.

“What would happen were he to some how accomplish the goal of winning back the galaxy for the Empire? Do you think he would hand over the power to Isard without a say in the matter? What if he chose to rule the Galaxy instead of leading the military? Would you stand at his side as his queen or his Empress?” Uncle Vahlek asked breaking into my thoughts.

I looked at him, not wavering under the questioning gaze of his pale green eyes. “It wasn’t something I ever thought about, Zte’sa.” I sighed. Being queen of the galaxy had not ever been on my list of things I wanted to do with my life and somehow I could not see me in that role ever but as his bond-mate I would stand at his side no matter what he chose to do.

“Perhaps you ought to give it some thought. If he were to win and take over as supreme ruler of this galaxy things between you would change, he would change.”

I shook my head. “I don’t believe that he would.” I refused to

believe this even though I suspected what he was telling me would be true.

The smile that graced my uncle's lips was sad, almost pitying. "Power always changes people, no matter what. It is simply a question of how they are changed by it and how well they are able to use it rather than be corrupted by it."

"You make it sound like something terrible."

"That is because it can be. Although we are speaking theoretically here since the task we are discussing is a damned near impossible one."

"That may be so but I think he will try anyway, although when you put it this way I don't really know why he would want to."

"With a man such as he, it is not a question of want; it is a question of must." He said thoughtfully. I sighed because I wasn't quite sure what uncle Vahlek meant by that and I was too tired to ask and this just made him smile at me. "Though if you do somehow manage to become empress, or queen, or princess of the galaxy you must promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"You will write more than once every three months to your father!"

I laughed. "I guess that's a promise I can make and maybe even keep." I said as I stifled a yawn. It was late and it had been an incredibly long day.

"Go to bed and get some sleep." Uncle Vahlek said after watching me try not to yawn again. "You have no deadlines to keep and you be far better off being well rested if you are going to go sneaking around the Imperial palace behind Isard's back than beat out like an over worked ronto."

As usual he was right and before I fell asleep on the couch I decided that bed was a far better choice. Thrawn's couch was very nice but it wasn't the most comfortable in the galaxy and I knew this from first hand experience. With a kiss goodnight on his stubbled cheek I left my Uncle to his own devices and went to bed.

It seemed strange to slip between the clean sheets of the beautiful antique bed that Thrawn and I had shared all on my own. Lying awake in the dimly lit bedroom I missed his presence and his guidance more than ever before and wondered, self pityingly, if he missed me at all. As tired as I was I couldn't sleep. My uncle's words kept marching through my head over and over driving me crazy. He was right about everything he had said, which made it worse. I desperately wanted to be able to talk to Thrawn

about it all but he was more light years away than I could count in a place where the HoloNet did not reach so relaying a message was the only way to get in touch with him, or by courier. I sighed feeling very alone.

Eventually, some hours later, I slipped into an uneasy, nightmare filled sleep that had me waking up sweat soaked and crying out in the early hours of the morning. I could not recall the images that had spiralled around me but the terror they had left in their wake remained. There was no going back to sleep after that so I got up. Wrapped in the warmest robe I could find I made my way to the kitchen, found the bottle of Corellian Brandy and poured a generous glass then headed out to the balcony only to find my Uncle had beaten me to it.

"Bad dreams?" he asked, turning his head to look at me. He was standing at the railing staring out over the city.

"Did I wake you?"

"No. It seems that sleep eludes us both tonight." He said sounding weary.

"What is bothering you?" I asked.

"How did you put it earlier? Old ghosts." He replied.

I came to stand beside him and sipped the brandy slowly. "Why did you come with me? You didn't really have to."

"You are not the only one with unfinished business here, Lei'lei." He answered cryptically, taking the brandy glass that I offered and sipping from it.

"Jyrki?" I asked.

But uncle Vahlek did not reply instead he turned back to continue staring out over the city skyline as if that would give him the answers he was looking for. I followed suit and as I watched the never ending stream of lights from the traffic I hoped that coming back here had not been a colossal mistake. If the truth in my heart were to be spoken out loud, I had a terrible feeling about it all and the desire to haul tail and go back to the safety of Nirauan and be with Thrawn was far greater than I could ever have admitted to. For the first time in a very long time I was afraid but I didn't know what it was I was scared of. My uncle must have sensed this because he put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me into a hug.

"Whatever you are worrying about hasn't happened yet." He said.

And before I could sensor myself I said. "I know but it will and that frightens the hell out of me."

At a loss for words my uncle just glanced at me then nodded grimly. I suppose he had known enough jedi and force users in his time to

know when to accept a bad feeling for what it was and leave it at that. Somehow it was comforting to be with someone who wasn't trying to sugar coat the truth. I just hoped that when whatever it was that I was sensing finally came, it wasn't as bad as I imagined and I was ready to deal with it.