

Daughter of the Empire

Book 3

by Fiona Messer

Chapter Four

The Shattering Tide

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If there was one thing that drove me crazy it was the terrible sense of impending doom countered by the fact that nothing terrible or out of the ordinary happened. Although I woke up almost every night bathed in sweat, stifling screams with my fists, the next day brought an eerie normality. It was so normal in fact that sometimes I even forgot the Emperor and Lord Vader had died. It was eerie to spend time in my old office going through old business, getting my affairs in order and sifting through three years worth of interoffice nonsense. Every now and then I would look up from my desk half expecting to see Lord Vader walk through the door way, barking orders in his usual acerbic manner. I missed him still although the ache had lessened but it was enough that I still had not gone to his Coruscant mansion to search the Imperial Data base from his computer there.

I took my time when it came to dealing with the office stuff. My droid had been destroyed when the Executor had blown up and I was saddened by his loss. While he had been an annoying chatterbox he knew his job and had done it well. I did not feel like training a new one in so this mean I did all the sorting out myself and this was far more time consuming than I had imagined. In between the work, Shiv made certain that I was not left alone much and whenever he had the time we went out to lunch and met with friends. It was so good to sit amongst people who knew me almost better than I knew myself, to laugh about mundane stuff and forget the terrible things that had happened. I was never sure if Shiv had told everyone not to bring the subject up or if enough time had passed that no one really thought about it any more, but what ever the reason I was glad not to have to talk about Endor or my own stupidity afterwards. Even my relationship with Thrawn seemed to be a topic that was kept quiet until Cati joined us for dinner. Once we had settled at the quiet table to chatter about everything she had asked the one question no one else dared to.

“So, how is your gentleman doing?”

Everyone had stopped and stared at me, then at Cati then at me again. She had just grinned and given me a look that only a rodian could which said...*so are you going to answer me or what?*

After a careful and considered sip of my drink I told her and everyone else about my adventures with Thrawn and what had happened between us, in an abbreviated form. After I had finished the questions never seemed to end but it was Ynyth who had the presence of mind to raise her glass and propose a toast to the ‘happy couple.’ It felt a bit odd to

say the least but I had smiled anyway, accepting their congratulations and good wishes with a blush.

Cati was always a welcome addition to our small gatherings. Her bright cheerful curiosity always made for fascinating conversations and this time was no exception. She knew even more gossip than Shiv and imparted it with a cheerful glee. It was interesting to hear how many things had changed but also to see that things had stayed the same. Despite the death of the Emperor and Lord Vader things, on the grand scale, had not really changed all that much.

We met often and I was grateful for the company. My uncle sporadically vanished, saying he had business to attend to, leaving me to my own devices which would have been spent alone had Shiv not seen to it that this was not the case. Before I knew it almost three weeks had passed and I was no closer to finding a way for Thrawn to get more information than before but I was fairly sure he would not mind so much. It had occurred to me after the first letter from him had arrived that he had half expected me to forget about my self appointed mission and settle back into a routine on Coruscant again. He understood, I was sure of it, that seeing my friends again was be good for me and I suspected that a break from me would do him good as well. By the end of the third week my life on Coruscant had almost become routine and only the terrible holo-news casts about the outbreaks of the mysterious disease that was killing aliens seemed to disrupt the day to day comings and goings but even this, like most other news which did not directly concern me, eventually got pushed into the back ground. I probably would not have given it much thought at all had it not been for the continuing dreams that woke me up almost nightly.

Gasping for breath and soaked in cold sweat I had gotten up and showered because I knew there was no going back to sleep from that. The nightmares were disjointed and made no sense, more often than not simply a collection of terrifying images that I could not put any meaning to. More often than not I had woke up as a crowd of alien beings surrounded me, their skin sloughing away from their bodies, craziness in their eyes crying for me to help them. In my dreams I could smell the rotting of their flesh and the memory of this stench often made me sick upon waking. My uncle got used to my screams shattering the still of night and had long since stopped running to see if I was being murdered in my sleep. Instead he would sometimes come to stand hesitantly at the door way to the main bedroom before I alleviated his fears by telling him I was okay. If I asked,

he would keep my company while I got up to get a drink, sitting with me as we sipped brandy listening when I wanted to talk about the nightmares and keeping his peace if all I wanted was not to be alone. It was during these times that I missed Thrawn desperately. I spent a lot of time at the Palace in my office. I was a place I felt comfortable and safe, though I was never sure why. Time slipped away from me there and without Shiv badgering me to join him and Ynyth for supper or going out to meet up with the gang I had a tendency to forget the passage of time and work until I was almost falling asleep. I always had an excuse to not go home it seemed and this time it was because at the last minute Cati had called off the get together we had planned due to a headache.

During our last get together, I had been describing my time with the Dantassi when she had asked about the clothes they wore. Despite her high fashion designs she maintained a keen interest in the traditional clothes from other worlds. I had told her I would bring my Dantassi clothes over for her to see. Since both of our schedules were fairly flexible I didn't mind her putting this off till later. I had told her I would drop by the next day and that had been fine with her. She had sounded exhausted but that was not too surprising as she had been busy with a large order that had her going a bit frantic and the last time we had all been together Shiv had commented that she ought to take things easier because she looked tired. She had told him tartly that he should try making ten dresses in four days and he had backed off but I had had to agree with him, she looked tired so I wasn't too surprised when she messaged me to let me know she was making an early night of it. I, on the other hand, was not. I was almost done with the major sorting out and I wanted to finish it so I ignored the fact that I was yawning my face off and continued to work despite the late hour.

I suppose I should not have been shocked when a letter arrived for me from Thrawn but I was. I was even more taken aback that it was Jarack who delivered it because I had not seen or heard from him in ages. He found me sitting in my office going through the last of the paperwork which I felt I had to sift through. He grinned as he walked in but before he could say anything I had surprised him by jumping up and flinging my arms around him in a huge hug.

"Thrawn had told me you were still alive but until now I hadn't believed it." I said in a rush as he gently and somewhat embarrassedly untangled himself from me.

"I could say the same about you Miss Gabriel." He chided as he pulled out a letter from his satchel and laid it on my desk.

"Cup of spiced coffee?" I asked.

"Don't mind if I do." He said and then, with his hands wrapped around the small cup for warmth he chatted to me about the latest news to come from Nirauan.

"So he's busy?" I said after Jarack had finished telling me about the work to expand the Empire's presence in the Unknown Region.

"Especially in the last week. They began the push out past the Braxant Sector but of course it is slow going. You know the Admiral, he likes to make sure that all his dejarik pieces are in place before he sweeps the board."

I nodded, that certainly sounded like Thrawn. "I didn't think that I had a way to send mail to him so I didn't write anything." I said as he finished his drink and handed me back the cup.

"He expected as much." Jarack replied. "He told me that he would enjoy surprising you for a change." When I rolled my eyes at him he grinned. "Well, I will not be leaving for twenty hours or so, my ship needs some repairs and I have some other business to attend to here, so if you can write something for me to take to him in that time I can swing by tomorrow to pick it up.

"I can do that." I nodded.

"Good then, I'll see you tomorrow." He said cheerfully then added. "It is good to see you again Miss Gabriel."

"You too." I replied, meaning every word.

Only once he had left did I pick up Thrawn's letter and allow the barrage of images that flowed with it to wash over me. They made me smile. He knew I would see these pictures and had planned accordingly. I loved him for it but would wait until I was done here before I opened the envelope to read what he had to say. As usual, I got home later than I had planned. I had decided to stay and finish up so that in that in the morning I could close all the open files and essentially be done. This meant that I could then begin the clear out of Lord Vader's office which would be both short but painful. I still was not quite ready to face going into his house.

The flat was dark and quiet when I arrived. My uncle had left early in the morning the day before and had not yet returned. I had long since given up on questioning about his mysterious ways and accepted that he came and went much the same way the wind did. I showered, dressed for bed, made a cup of tea, settled down to read Thrawn's letter and then once

I had read his news I wrote him back, telling him everything that had happened so far not leaving anything out. I described the nightmares I had been having, similar to the ones I had had on Hjal when he had come back and wondered if he would have any interpretations for me. Once I was done, I sealed it and then went to bed but I couldn't sleep.

Thrawn's letter had been cheerful and chatty but underneath the banter was something else. He was busy with the expansion into the Unknown Regions, even more so than prior to the Emperor's death but he was also preparing for his return to the core, a long term plan that would take several years and he was looking for a way to increase his military numbers. The word Clone popped into my head, although he had not written it and I knew it was on his mind as well as mine but the problem of how to get clones grown fast was the hurdle that seemed impossible to overcome. There was also the issue of where to find reliable cloning facilities. I wished that Lord Vader was still alive, because I was sure he would have some answers for me on this, and then I smiled because if he was still living this problem would not be on the table to begin with. Still this problem weighed on my mind and I wrestled with it as I fell asleep.

I walked down a long dark corridor flanked on either side by doors with transparasteel windows which showed into small padded cells. The corridor seemed endless. As I passed each door I glanced in and saw that these cells were inhabited. Without thinking about I started to look inside each cell. Alien eyes looked back at me, blank and staring. Some of them were screaming and clawing at the walls, others were simply sitting and staring, their skin sloughing off their bodies and faces. Despite my horror I could not look away.

"Tragic, isn't it?" asked a voice from behind me.

I wheeled around to stare directly into the face of Ysanne Isard. "What is wrong with them?"

"They are dying." She stated as blandly as if she were speaking about the weather.

"But you're working on a cure." I said.

She simply looked at me, her mismatched eyes boring right through me. "A cure?" she asked. "Bacta is the cure."

"Bacta? Then why are so many dying?" I asked as we walked down the corridor some more. I tried to shut out the screams of agony which wailed all around us.

"Perhaps you should ask the rebels that question, after all, it is they who keep interrupting our supply line." She replied calmly.

"Why don't you stop them?"

"It is all a matter of numbers and force and I do not wish to leave Coruscant unattended in the event of an attack."

I shook my head. "Grand Admiral Thrawn could help you." I said.

Her lips twitched in a slight smile. "He too, is alien." She said gesturing to the door we had stopped in front of.

I could not help myself as I looked into the room. Gorge rose in my throat as my eyes met those of a Chiss male, writhing in agony as he lay twisted and bent on the floor. I could not tell who it was because his skin, including his face was full of broken and oozing sores and pustules.

"Who is he?" I whispered, sure it was not Thrawn.

"Why don't you go in and ask him?" Isard asked as she opened the door and pushed me in.

I fell on the floor, hands sprawled out before me. The first thing that hit me was the stench of decay and waste. The second thing that I realised was that there were suddenly more beings in this room than the Chiss. I got to my knees and looked around me. I saw faces that seemed familiar but were so badly distorted and destroyed it was impossible to tell. They all stared at me and then before I could move or do anything they began to close in on me, their ruined hands outstretched calling my name until I knew that these had all been my friends once upon a time. I tried to back away but there was no place to go and I ended up backed into a corner, curled up as small as I possible could.

It was the Chiss who reached me first, his hands cupping my face before I could stop him. I looked up into his eyes because there was no place else to look and realised that I knew him as well but I could not be sure if I was looking at Thrawn or Navaari because his eyes kept changing from one to the other.

"Help us." He said and puss oozed out from cracks in his lips.

"Help us tekari." And he leaned in to try and kiss me. I went berserk fighting him off but he was strong and the others, their faces so familiar to me, were at his side, their hands reaching for me, clawing at me all the while moaning for me to help them. I could not get away from them and from outside in the corridor I could hear Isard laughing as she ignored my screams.

I woke up so suddenly that there was not even time to think before I bolted to the 'fresher to vomit. I sat with my head resting against the lid of the toilet bowl catching my breath. A soft knock on the door let me know

that at some point in the night my Uncle had returned and I had woken him up. When he knocked again I yelled that I was okay and he came in, I heard running water and then accepted the glass he offered gratefully.

“These nightmares, Lei’lei, they’re getting worse.” He said after a few moments, helping me get to my feet and watching while I brushed my teeth.

I nodded although he had not actually asked me a question.

He sighed. “Come on, I will make you some tea and you can tell me about what you saw.”

I shuddered I followed him into the living room and once he had brought tea recounted the dream that had made me sick to my stomach. When I was done he sat back in the chair and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“I don’t envy you, these dreams are terrible.” He said, “But you know that Thrawn is alright and not any where near this planet and as far as I know the outbreaks are all contained to Coruscant.”

I nodded glumly. “I know he is fine, I got a letter from him today. This wasn’t about him, it’s about something else but I can’t seem to define it or put my finger on exactly what it is. Half the battle is trying to unravel what the hell these dreams are really about.”

“How do you know they mean anything at all? News of this virus is all over the holonets. It is in your subconscious and you are particularly sensitive to your surroundings, something which comes with the territory of the force sensitive I’m afraid.”

I sighed and cupped the hot mug of tea in my hands grateful for its warmth. “Because firstly, they have that feel to them and secondly, it is virtually the same dream every single night.” I sighed. “Ever since I returned to Coruscant I have been dreaming the same thing over and over again. It doesn’t make sense and it’s driving me crazy.”

He regarded me for a moment then nodded. “Maybe there is no direct message. Perhaps you should stop looking so hard at the dreams themselves, try not thinking about it and the answer will come to you sideways.”

As odd as that sounded, he was right. We talked until I began to doze in the chair.

“Go back to bed and get some sleep, Lei’lei.” My uncle said nudging me to get up. “As you keep telling me they are only dreams and if bacta is the cure then there is nothing to worry about is there? Not even the rebels would stop bacta from getting through if they knew that beings were dying from lack of it would they?”

I had nodded at him, too shattered to speak but I wondered if he was right. Then decided I was too tired to try and sort it all out. I needed to sleep I had a dinner date with Shiv, Ynyth, Cati and the others. The last thing I wanted was to be told I was starting to look like I was back working for the Emperor again.

My uncle was right. I worried too much about things I could do nothing about and the days passed one after the other without me doing much at all. I supposed that the time I had spent working so closely with Lord Vader and under the Emperor’s piercing gaze had made me a little paranoid. It was a hard habit to break. I had gotten used to being wary, always getting a sense for Lord Vader’s current mood in order to dodge when necessary. I remembered the ever increasing sense of doom when the Emperor showed up or requested my presence, although I could hardly be blamed for feeling that way especially after my very last meeting with him. I still shuddered involuntarily when I thought about what he had planned to do. However, these two men were no longer alive and the galaxy had moved onwards for almost three years. I wondered why I could not seem to let go of some of my past. When I had voiced these thoughts to my uncle had had nodded and then suggested I stop avoiding the job I had come here to do and simply get on with it. I had explained that my biggest issue was that I did not really want to go into Lord Vader’s home on my own. Uncle Vahlek’s solution had been simple. “*Well Lei’lei, if that’s all that’s stopping you then I will come with you.*”

The truth was that I wasn’t exactly sure what it was that was holding me back but I couldn’t exactly argue with my uncle’s logic and accepted his offer of help. He had also wanted to return to the old Jedi temple and had been genuinely surprised when I had explained to him that Palpatine had removed everything of use from the building shortly before heading off to Endor and I had no idea where he had hidden it all.

“He didn’t want it to fall into the wrong hands, he had told me.” I had said.

My uncle had made a face. “What about your little library?”

I’d shrugged. “I haven’t been there yet, either. There are just too many memories here and I don’t know what to do with them all.” As I said this, I realised it was a terribly lame excuse for not actually wanting to get on with the task of cleaning out my life here so that I could really move to Nirauan. I had discovered that I liked being back on the Core world, I liked

being with my friends who knew me almost too well and accepted me anyway. I liked the constant availability of shops and culture and everything else that went along with being on a highly populated planet with huge cities. I had stopped mid sentence as I had explained all this to my uncle realising that the place I had always thought of as too loud and busy had now become a place I felt I had missed terribly. When had that happened?

My uncle had simply laughed then. “Lei’lei you know what you are?” he had asked with a grin.

“What?”

“A jax who is always on the wrong side of the door.”

I could not argue with him because it was sort of true. I had lived in so many places now that none of them really felt like home, yet at the same time, all of them felt like home. It was strange. No matter where I was I now missed being some place else.

It was decided after this conversation that we would go into the library together and then to Lord Vader’s home and get the tasks at hand done. Then, my uncle had told me, I could decide what I really wanted to do.

The Imperial palace was quiet when we ventured in through the mostly disused south entrance. Isard, Shiv had told me, was away at the moment. Not that I thought she cared a Jawa’s damn about what I was doing. I was, on the scale of people she thought of as important or dangerous, somewhere around a minus one hundred, which was fine by me.

We walked in silence through the vast and empty corridors, our footsteps echoing around us in a manner I found almost melancholy. Once upon a time this building had been full of people, working and living here. Now it seemed more like a shell full of ghosts who couldn’t let go. It was interesting that both the Emperor and Isard had terrible reputations for being cruel and strict but the Emperor’s charisma had some how counteracted his mean side. He had brought a sense of majesty and glamour to the Imperial court which had carried out into the rest of the palace daily life. Isard on the other was like a black hole that sucked away anything that smacked of frivolity. Under her rule the Imperial palace had become a place of quiet fear and drudgery, Shiv had told me. Most of the extraneous jobs had been eliminated and over half the staff fired or moved to different, more useful jobs. The sparkle of the court had gone along with the courtesans and courtiers as well as the rest of the hangers-on. I could

not blame her for wanting to shake up the place but the atmosphere her changes left was one of quiet impending gloom and it made me a little sad.

“That is the difference between a military leader and a political leader, Lei’lei.” My uncle had explained when I had voiced these thoughts. “The one sees only the bare essentials, paring down to nothing to get the job done. The court finery and all the trappings that go along with it are distractions and are therefore removed. Strong military rule and obedience keeps the workers in line not the promise of more wealth and a better life. The politician, on the other hand, dresses his will up in glamour and glitter to bespell the public into towing the line. He makes you want the better things and more things and promises you will have this life if you do as he asks.”

“People loved Palpatine’s court.” I said.

“Of course they did, it was stunning but underneath all the twinkle and glitz, people were lobbying, manoeuvring themselves into better positions through the currying of many favours and buying their way to the top. Did you never notice these intrigues going on while you were here?”

I nodded. “Yes, Thrawn often pointed it all out to me but I thought it was stupid.”

My uncle grinned. “Well, you never did like playing games. You always were rather direct in things.”

When I opened the door to the little library the Emperor had long ago given to me I was not very surprised to see that it too had mostly been cleared out. I wandered around the now empty room and sighed. Brushing my fingertips along the various dust filled shelves I sighed with a resigned sense of loss I could not explain. When the sudden and short image of the Emperor flashed into my mind I was unprepared for it. He had known about my talent and I suppose he had known I would return here. Once I got over the shock of seeing and hearing him again I was just angry.

“What is it?” My uncle asked as I sat down hard on the ground to catch my breath.

“He took everything away.” I said. “He didn’t think it was safe here any more.” Which was partly the truth. I had seen him, standing almost exactly where I sat now, and as if he were actually speaking to me and not to thin air he had said. *“If you wish to further your education about the force and its intricacies you must come to me little one.”* My hatred for this man knew no bounds and I had to fight to get my heart rate back down to normal.

The books that were left I gathered up and put in the large pack I had brought with me. There were not that many but I wanted them anyway. My uncle took the heavy pack from my hands and slung it over his shoulder. With one last glance around the now empty and abandoned room we left and I wasn't sorry to say goodbye to this part of my life.

As we made our way back through the palace it suddenly occurred to me that part of the reason I found the place so gloomy now was that many of the really beautiful works of art and precious sculptures were gone. I found this very odd and wondered if the Emperor had foreseen something that everyone else was over looking. I had been going to suggest heading to the small private room he had once shown me to see if the little statue of the dancer was still there but I knew it would not be. He had coveted that sculpture, and his glee in learning its little mysteries convinced me that he would no more leave that behind than he would his soul if he even had one of those. Instead I urged my uncle to leave with me and we headed over to Lord Vader's home. Once I was done here there would be no more real reasons to stay on Coruscant and I wasn't quite sure how to deal with that but I couldn't put this off any more.

Getting into his home was effortless. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting, after all I had a key and the security code passes, but still the ease of it all surprised me. Perhaps it was because I was very used to seeing the Dark Trooper guards he had stationed there and the many other people he had employed to keep unwanted people out. Now the place was deserted.

The silence around me was deafening and the sadness which engulfed me felt a little like drowning. Surprisingly enough, while getting into Lord Vader's home had been effortless, actually standing in it was more difficult that I could have imagined. I had not really been prepared for the sudden ache of loss that I experienced and it caught me completely off guard.

"Lei'lei, are you alright?" my uncle's voice was surprisingly gentle.

I nodded as I wiped away my tears, now grateful he had insisted on coming with me. I wondered if this dreadful sensation of missing someone ever truly went away. I took a deep breath and swallowed the rest of the sadness down. I had not come here to mourn. I had come here to do a job and crying would not help me at all. We walked through the lonely halls to my old office, the sense of gloom dissipated when I turned on the lights and I was grateful I had my own space to return to. I went over to my

desk and sat down. I let out the breath I didn't even realise I had been holding noisily and switched the computer system on.

It did not surprise me that all access from this particular terminal was denied. I stared at the annoying words on the screen and then typed in the set of codes which I knew would get around the security lockout without letting the system watchers know. I had not used this ability I had been granted all that often while Lord Vader was still alive but occasionally he had wanted some information retrieved which had required bypassing the standard security protocols. I had never dreamed that I would be using it after his death to spy on the Empire for another Imperial. While it was one thing to log into the system it was quite another to find what I wanted to and my annoyance grew exponentially as I was stonewalled at every turn.

"What exactly is it that you are looking for?" Uncle Vahlek asked after about an hour of listening to me sigh in frustration.

"That's the trouble, I don't really know and the system is huge." I replied staring at the screen. "I suppose I am trying to find a listing of spyware that transmits long range or something that would help Thrawn get a handle on what is going on here but I have no idea where to even start looking."

My uncle shooed me out of the chair. "Here, let me." He said.

I got up and let him sit down, then stared in surprise as he waltzed through the system as though he had used it his entire life. What had taken me the better part of an hour took him no more than fifteen minutes. A complete listing of all the listening devices and their transmitter codes in the palace.

"How did you know how to do that?" I whispered in amazement.

"Evidence of a misspent youth." He replied cryptically. "Do you have a data-disk to download this onto?"

I nodded and gave it to him, watching as he initiated the information transfer like a pro. He asked for a second one to make a backup copy, something I might not have thought about doing.

"Shall I encrypt them?" He asked.

"Might be a good idea." I nodded.

I watched as he began the encryption process. "How with Thrawn know how to decode this?" I asked.

"I am using a Dantassi cipher he'll recognise it as soon as he sees it but it is insanely difficult for someone who does not know it to slice." He said.

There was a moment of silence while I digested this information and then I asked, "How do you know so much about the Dantassi, Zte'sa?"

He glanced up at me. "There was a time in my life when I wanted to join them." He replied.

"They don't let outsiders in." I said.

"I know that but at the time I had hope to prove my worth and become the exception to the rule, seems that you have that honour instead." He said and there was no mistaking the odd mixture of sorrow and pride in his voice. "But that did not stop me from learning all I could while I was allowed to. The Admiral will know how to decrypt this when he gets it." And with that I knew he would not talk any more about his past. He was too full of secrets and mysteries. When I was a child he had both scared and fascinated me now I just found his mysteriousness vaguely annoying.

The downloading seemed to take forever even though it was no more than a minute. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to reach out with my force sense, looking for danger, looking for the mass army of Stormtroopers coming to shoot us as infiltrators for slicing into the main frame but there was nothing. The place was quiet and as far as I could tell no one had discovered what we were up to. It surprised me that these back door pass codes were still good but then again if even Isard had not known about them who would have ever changed them. While no one knew I was rummaging around the system if they actually bothered checked the logs they'd know that this terminal had been accessed recently but they wouldn't know who had done so or for what reason.

"I'm done, is there anything else you need from here?" Uncle Vahlek asked breaking into my thoughts.

"I don't think so." I replied with a shrug, then a sudden thought came to me and before I had even thought about why I would ask for such a thing I said, "Wait, can you wipe all traces of me from the system?"

He glanced up at me. "What do you mean?"

"I want to disappear from official records the same way Thrawn has."

"Why?"

"If Coruscant falls and the palace is taken over then I don't want my name on any lists that people can call up. I don't want the fact that I worked here to come back and haunt me or my family." I said. "It seems to me that getting labelled with a faction that isn't the one in power could be a death sentence for us all."

"What makes you think that the New Republic will be able to take Coruscant?" He asked stopping to stare at me.

I swallowed. "I don't know, Zte'sa it's just a nagging feeling that something big and bad is coming. I've had it ever since we landed and I can't seem to shake it."

"Does this have to do with these dreams you are having?"

I shrugged slightly. "They may be part of it but there are other things going on here. The rebels took Borleias even though that world was supposed to have been well protected by the Imperials and from the report I just read it fell far too easily." This was not a very plausible reason but the truth of the matter was I had no concrete answers except the Emperor had removed everything of beauty, importance and wealth. He had taken away anything that could be used as teachings for people who were force sensitive and I knew that Lord Vader's son considered himself a Jedi. What was more valuable to a would-be Jedi than a room full of information about the history and the use of the force? It felt to me as though the Emperor had prepared for an invasion and now, more than ever I was sure Coruscant would fall it was a question of when not if. I wondered if Isard suspected or knew this as well and if she did then why was she not doing more to protect the planet.

For a moment Uncle Vahlek regarded me and then he nodded. "I can probably set that up so that your name is impossible to find, make you obscure and invisible but this will take a little time. If I erase you completely from the system you'll lose all access, among other things, and I don't think you want that do you?"

"No, losing access would be bad. I just want to vanish from all the records." I said quietly.

He nodded. He understood the need for anonymity and secrets. "Okay, but keep an ear out, this might raise a few flags if I touch the wrong thing."

I nodded and as he began the process of making me disappear I wandered around my office, restless and bored. Then because I had nothing else to do I vanished into the little kitchen area that Lord Vader had ordered built just for me and rooted around to see if there was anything left I could maybe make something to drink with.

My uncle accepted the cup of tea I had made him with an absent nod. I sipped from my own cup, watching the computer screen through the steam that curled into the air. My uncle worked the system with a slicer's

ease that puzzled me. I knew that as Tze'yusha'Jin he was essentially a well trained assassin but slicing was a smuggler's tool.

"The Emperor once told me that papa was a smuggler. Is this true?" I asked suddenly, remembering Palpatine's biting statement as he had once tried to coerce me into doing his will.

Uncle Vahlek glanced up at me, his pale green eyes boring into mine. "Do you believe him?"

"Why would he lie about that?"

His shoulders heaved as he looked at me. "Your father has done many things in his life, Lei'lei." He said evasively.

I rolled my eyes at his non answer. "Oh for goodness sakes Zte'sa!" I hissed in exasperation.

"Yes, he was a smuggler." He admitted after a moment's stare down. "He was actually very good at it and for a while we worked together in this area but if you are asking if this is when and how I learned to slice the answer is no it isn't."

"Why did he stop?"

That made my uncle smile. "That answer is easy, your mother." He said. "He met her and his world changed. Her one condition for marrying him was that he find work that was legitimate. It took him longer than expected but eventually he bought the docking bay in Mos Eisley fulfilling his promise to her."

"So were you all on a smuggling run when you found me?"

"No, that was a legitimate transport run, unless you call moving people from one star system to another, smuggling." He smiled at the memory.

"What do he smuggle?" I asked suddenly curious about this part of my father's life I had never known before.

"What ever was in demand and what ever he was paid to move. Smugglers don't generally choose their cargo unless they want to get blacklisted as picky and difficult to work with." He explained. "He didn't ask too many questions, he just did his job."

"Did he ever get caught?"

"No. Your father was very good at that job just as he is good at the one he does now."

I nodded feeling a sense of pride, wondering why no one ever told me any of this before. As if he had read my thoughts my uncle continued.

"Once he left that life behind it was in the past. He never saw any reason to talk about it because it wasn't relevant and he did not feel you needed to know and perhaps he was worried you would think less of him."

I shook my head. "That's not likely to happen Zte'sa."

"I know but maybe you should write home more and let him know that yourself?"

I grimaced at his suggestion but nodded anyway then, sipping my tea, allowed the quiet to slip back into the room so when my seldom used, private comm went off shattering the silence I jumped slopping tea on the floor. It was Shiv.

"Merly?" He asked, "Where are you? I've been trying to reach you at the flat for hours! I couldn't remember this comm's blasted code!"

"What's up?" I asked ignoring his question because something in his voice put me on alert.

"It's Cati." He said, "I think you'd better come."

"Cati?"

"We're at the Naberrie Medical facility in the Co-co district." He said and his voice wavered.

"Shiv, what is going on?" I asked.

"Just get here." He replied flatly. "Now." And then he shut the comm off.

I looked at my uncle who nodded that he was finished with what he was doing. He shut the system down and wordlessly we left as ghost like as we had come. Worry and fear gnawed at my gut as he drove us to the medical centre.

Shiv along with Ynyth was waiting for us in the lobby of the Medical Facility and from the look on his face what ever he had to tell me, it was terrible news.

"Shiv, what the hell is going on?" I asked before he could speak.

"It's Cati..." He paused, "She has that virus that's been killing non humans. They don't think she'll last the night." He said not mincing words.

"What?" I asked not believing what he had just said. "She was fine we all had dinner together not that long ago!"

He shook his head. "That was over two and half weeks ago, and since then she's cancelled every time for headaches and such. I know it doesn't seem long but this virus works very fast and she never told anyone

how ill she was. Now it is too late.” His voice trembled and he was close to tears.

“I thought bacta treatments cured it?”

“If it is caught in time.” He said miserably. “They say she is too far gone and there isn’t enough bacta to spare for a patient in her condition. The medical centers have been overrun with new cases in the last couple of months and there is just not enough bacta to treat them all.”

I was too stunned to speak. Not enough bacta, since when? I shook my head to clear it. “Can I see her?”

He nodded, “She asking for you. She knows what is happening to her so I guess she wants to say goodbye.” He swallowed down his emotions as he began to lead the way down to the Isolation unit. Both my uncle and I were silent as we followed him through the dimly lit sterile looking hallways. “And Merly, it won’t be pretty.” He added as we stepped off the turbolift into the isolation unit which felt about as creepy as it could get. There really had not been much of an attempt to make it welcoming or comfortable to the relatives and friends of patients. The dull, pallid green walls were covered with warnings and safety protocols. The waiting area was small and aside from the small reception desk, everything else was hidden behind door of thick durasteel with no windows.

“How bad is it, Shiv?”

“Bad.” He replied. “The authorities were alerted when one of her neighbours heard strange sounds coming from her flat, they had the building admin open the door and then they had to call in the medics. I was called because I am her emergency contact.”

I heard Ynyth sobbing behind me but I didn’t dare to look at her because if I did I would start crying as well and it seemed to me that someone had to hold it together, this was my turn. I nodded my understanding too choked up to speak. I had seen the reports and heard the holo-casts about this virus which they had still not found a reason for, or a vaccine against. It was virulent and deadly, sweeping through the planet’s alien population like sand in a wind storm. The demand for bacta had been so heavy that the suppliers could not keep up with it and now there was a shortage of the stuff which was the only known cure. The rumour I had heard was that the Rebellion was interrupting the flow of bacta from Thyferra in order to hoard it for their own people and word on the street was that if things didn’t change soon things were going to get ugly on this planet very soon, very fast. The news reports hinted that Rebels had already infiltrated the Core, and that there were spies on every

corner. I never paid these reports much attention because the news casts whispered of these things constantly, urging loyal Imperial citizens to be ever wary of suspicious characters.

Internal Imperial memos had suggested another theory, that the virus was a biological weapon most likely engineered by the War Lord Zsinj to gain a foothold on Coruscant by dividing the loyalties of the population. Zsinj was an Imperial Admiral turned rogue and he had declared independence from the Empire shortly after the battle of Endor. He had created an elite military force and set about dividing to conquer. I found it strange that Isard did not consider him much of a threat or at least that is what one of the reports I had read told me, because he was quite powerful. I thought about this now, wondering if it had been he who had some how managed to set this all up, introducing some viral agent into the air or water supply to kill indiscriminately and cause mass panic.

If Isard was indeed hiring specialists to find a way to vaccinate against this virus, or another cure that worked as well as bacta she was dragging her heels about it. The numbers of dead rose daily and what had started out as nothing more than a few casualty reports was turning into a pandemic. Already star-ports were flooded with aliens trying to get off Coruscant and that in itself surprised me because if this virus was as contagious and as deadly as it was being reported I did not understand why a planet wide quarantine had not been put into place. There were too many questions and not enough answers and now one of my best friends was dying from this virus no one seemed to know anything about.

Shiv stood at the reception desk and spoke with the droid on duty after about ten very long minutes one of the doctors came out to meet with us. I knew right away from the set of his mouth and that look in his eyes that there was absolutely no hope. This place smelled like death and this doctor had seen a lot of it. The beings that came in here never left.

He came into the small waiting area looking haggard and much older than he should have. He repeated what Shiv had said, that she was too far gone and even if the bacta could help her she would have to have several organ replacements and there simply was not enough time or bacta or anything now that would help her.

“What exactly does this virus do?” I asked, my voice sounding far away and oddly calm to my ears.

The doctor shook his head. “That is the trouble, no one can agree on the path it takes. It is almost as if it were many viruses all bundled into

one. It attacks each alien race slightly differently but the results, if left too long, are all the same, death.”

“Differently.” I asked him. “How is that possible?”

He sighed and suddenly looked so weary that I wanted to tell him to go home and get some rest. “It jumps from one species to another and as it does so it seems to mutate, tailoring itself to attack that specific alien immune system. Gamorreans become dehydrated in the initial stages, with boils covering their flesh to the point that their skin cracks open...” he paused and looked at me wondering how much details to give.

“Go on doctor.”

“The end-stage disease makes them restless, they cannot lie down but their skin opens up with sores, their internal organs break down and liquefy, essentially they bleed to death through every orifice. The Quarren patients we have seen so far differ in that instead of boils, their skin turns black as the decay sets in, their immune system seems to go crazy and ...well...dissolve to death.”

I had to take a deep steadying breath as for a moment the world swam about me. “And rodians?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know, Miss Akami is the first Rodian we have treated here at this facility. We had hoped the virus was simply a Gamorrean and Quarren disease but now we know it is worse than we thought. I have been in contact with the other facilities on the planet and there are now reports of three more separate alien races that have contracted it. We still don’t know how it is spread and it seems to be getting worse as it jumps from one species to the next.”

I nodded. “If she had been brought in sooner would that have saved her?”

He sighed and shrugged ever so slightly. “I don’t know. This virus has a short incubation time and patients can be asymptomatic until, for what ever reason, it breaks out then the decline is very rapid. It could be that she thought she had Rodian flu or maybe food poisoning. From what I have been led to understand the initial symptoms can feel like normal, treatable every day illnesses. We think, that as a general rule of thumb, the virus incubates for several weeks and then takes approximately seven days to fully break out but it is only in the last seventy-two hours that most patients realise something is very wrong with them by then for almost all of the infected it is simply too late. I am truly sorry.”

“Just how long has she got?” I asked astonished at how business like my voice suddenly sounded. I could have been talking about the timer on a parking metre.

He gave me that *I wish I had better news for you* look and said “It is hard to say at this point. At this stage it can take anywhere from a few hours to a day. As I said before, we have no experience with Rodians having contracted this virus. She might last the night but not much longer than that.”

“Can I see her?”

“Miss Gabriel, we don’t know how this virus travels yet and I cannot risk you becoming a carrier.” He shook his head.

“I won’t let my friend die alone, doctor.”

He looked at me for a second then said. “I will be honest with you, this is a terrible virus. I have never seen anything like it in my entire career. It isn’t something you will want to see and I am sure it is not how you will want to remember your friend.”

I stared at him for a long moment, suddenly realising that I had not noticed how blue his eyes were, reminding me sharply of Jyrki. It seemed strange to me that I would consider the doctor’s eye colour while Cati lay dying not more than a few metres away from us. It took me a few more seconds to understand that he was still waiting for an answer. He looked at me in that pitying way doctors sometimes had and for reasons I could never explain it suddenly made me angry. Sorrow and pain I knew well enough but anger I could use.

“Listen to me and listen good,” I began, my voice a low edgy growl, “Cati is my friend, one of my best friends. She doesn’t have family any more so we are all she has got and I will not let her die alone! I don’t care how you do it but make it so that we can be with her, am I making myself clear?” I had gathered the force around me and added a push of suggestion with my words. I felt him give in.

He nodded almost absently. “There is an observation room but you will have to cover your clothing and footwear as well as masks. Once you have seen her you can decide if one of you wants to go into the isolation room to be with her. In order to do that you will have to wear a hazmat suit and I have to warn you, they are not very comfortable.”

I looked at him. “Well I doubt they are worse than wearing an EVA suit and going for a walk in zero G.”

Oddly enough that made the doctor smile. “You’re a spacer?” I nodded.

He looked at each of us and shook his head slowly. "Our quarantine and safety procedures are in place for a reason so do not break them or else you will find yourselves locked up in an isolation ward yourself."

We nodded and then followed him through the thick doors which separated the Isolation ward from the rest of the planet.

The first thing that I noticed was the smell, or rather the lack of it. There was a soft *whumph* sound as the doors had opened and the doctor had explained that the Isolation ward was on a different ventilation system and the rooms were kept under negative pressure. As we walked through the eerily silent sterile corridors I could feel the sense of horror prick its way through me, starting at the base of my spine and working its way upward until my heart raced with a sudden terror I could not identify.

In the small dressing locker room we were given clothes to wear and a pale faced medical assistant helped us with the protective gowns which went on over our own clothes. I felt as though I were a well wrapped Tusken by the time we were done, it seemed a bit of over kill at least that was what I thought until we were shown into the observation room.

I had thought that my nightmares were beyond bad but they were nothing to the reality of what I saw now. Ynyth made a muffled sound and turned away from the viewing window into Shiv's protective embrace. I felt my uncle move towards me but I held up my hand to stay him. If he showed me any sort of kindness, compassion I would break down as well. I saw when I glanced at him that he understood.

The isolation room was small, sterile looking and empty except for a bed and an Em-D droid. At first my brain could not decipher what I was looking at and then I realised that the small, foetal curled heap on the bed was actually Cati. The bed was a mess of smeared blood and other darkish looking fluids. I could see that her skin, which was usually a pretty green colour, had turned a vile, pallid yellow hue.

"I can't stay in here." Ynyth whispered and Shiv nodded, looking at me as he held her.

"Go, there's nothing either of you can do." I told him answering the question he hadn't actually asked.

"Merly?" His voice shook.

"I'm staying." I said surprised at the determination in my voice. "I won't let her die alone." I looked at the doctor who was watching us with an expressionless face. "I want to be with her."

"Are you certain, Miss?"

"She's aware isn't she?" I asked, avoiding his question, turning back to stare through the observation window. I could sense her through the transparasteel and I could feel her pain.

He drew a deep breath. "As far as we have been able to discern all the patients we have seen infected with this virus have been aware of their situation right up until the moment of death."

I whirled around to stare at him. "She knows what is happening? She feels everything?"

His nod was slight and resigned. "We do what we can but the pain is great. We understand so little about what this virus does or how it attacks the body that there is really very little we can do for our end stage patients except to try and make them comfortable and even that is difficult. It is as if her body is eating itself and we are powerless to stop it."

I glanced at my uncle but his face was impassive. Shiv stared at me, still cradling Ynyth protectively in his arms. "I won't let her die alone." I said again but even I could hear the small shiver of fear in my voice.

"You don't have to do that. She will hardly know you are there." The doctor said. He was lying.

"I will know. You said she is aware of everything then she will know too. No more discussion about this." I said. "Shiv take Ynyth home, I will call you when it's..." The words caught in my throat, "When it is over." There was a long moment of silence while he weighed what I had said then he nodded and without a word he and Ynyth left.

Lei'lei..." My uncle began but I interrupted him.

"I won't leave her to die all alone horribly, not like this." I kept saying the same words over and over again.

He put his hands on my shoulders and looked me directly in the eyes. "Child, what I wanted to say was that I will be here for you."

I swallowed. He had not called me that in a very long time. It was always his way of punctuating something he wanted me to pay great attention to. I just nodded and followed the doctor into the next room hoping I really did have the strength to do this and that it wasn't all talk.

The hazardous environment suit was a lot like an EVA suit but lighter and a little easier to move around in. I had to take a deep breath when the aid slipped the hood over my head and sealed it. The air in the suit hissed and my ears popped a little as the positive pressure made the suit puff out.

"You have your own air, separate from the room in the pack in your back, enough for four hours. Once it is depleted you will have to go

through the decontamination room and be fitted with another pack.” The young man who was fitting the seals around the suit said.

The doctor looked at me. “I will be close by if you need me and the Em-De droid in the room will administer pain killers, what ever she needs. Hit the large red button by the door when you want to come out.” He told me. “And what ever you do...do not throw up in your suit.”

This statement made me laugh but not in any good way. I was suddenly very scared. “How infectious is this?”

“We don’t know. The current theory is it is transmitted through the bodily fluid and the water system. We know it doesn’t affect humans but we don’t know if humans can be carriers so we are not taking and chances.” The doctor replied.

I nodded again and then after going through the strange double door system they had in place, I was allowed into the sterile, safe room where Cati was lying on a bed. Despite the single bed sheet that covered her small body, I could see that the ravages of this virus were worse than I could have ever imagined, making my nightmares seem like pleasant dreams by comparison. I swallowed down bile and the desperate urge to flee and went to her bedside.

“Cati?” I said, my voice sounding odd inside of the suit. I had to speak loudly to be heard through the clear mask that covered my face. “It’s Merly.”

She turned her head to look up at me and tried to smile though the sores on her decaying skin made this task both painful and difficult. “Guess... I won’t be making you... any more pretty ball gowns to go dancing in.” She said in a horse whisper. I was grateful the suit had a way of amplifying the ambient sound.

“Oh Cati...” I whispered but I couldn’t finish because I had to gasp for air as I tried not to break down into sobs right then and there. Tears welled up in my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. I blinked, then absently going to wipe them from my face I realised that I couldn’t do that wearing this suit. I pulled up a chair to sit at her side. She reached over and put her hand on mine. It was covered in small open oozing sores but I was wearing gloves and I didn’t pull away. Her eyes had lost their bright mischievous shine instead they looked dull and cloudy. I did not need to be a medical genius to see she was in terrible pain.

“Don’t cry.” She told me but I couldn’t help it. How had this happened to her? What had she ever done to deserve such a terrible death and it would be terrible, there was no stopping this now. “I just wanted to

say goodbye properly to one of my best customers and... best friends.” She said slowly, carefully, because it hurt her to speak. “You don’t have to stay... I know it is bad, hell I can’t bear to look at myself either.”

I glanced up to the transparasteel observation window where my uncle watched with concern and sadness. It gave me strength to know he was there and I turned back to look at my friend or what was left of her. “I’m not going anywhere, Cati. A few sores don’t scare me, I used to work for Jabba the Hutt remember, I’ve seen far worse than this.” I told her and was relieved to discover I meant it.

Cati turned her head to smile at me as best she could. “You never were one to shy away from much. I always liked that about you.” She said and then winced in agony as a spasm wracked through her tiny body. I shook my head, swallowing down my sorrow feeling that awful prickle of tears again. How had this gotten so bad? Why had she not told anyone she was sick? Why had we not noticed because as I sat there watching my friend die I realised the signs had all been there and we had just been too blind to notice.

“I’m sorry, Cati.” I said quietly.

“Not your fault.” She said as fiercely as was possible. “I should have come to the Med centre sooner, I knew I was sick, I just thought it was the flu.”

We should have done a lot of things I thought but it was all too late for those now. I just nodded.

“I don’t think I have long so please listen...” She said urgently, gasping in between each word with pain.

So I nodded and leaned in as close as I could and she began, haltingly to tell me what it was Shiv and I were supposed to do once she was dead. She had no family so it would be the two of us who would take care of her affairs once she died. I sat there as calmly as I could, almost business like, wondering if I had suddenly found myself in hell. I puzzled at how it was that Cati could be so accepting of her horrible fate when I could not. I wanted to scream and shout, rail against the powers that be for what was happening to my friend instead I sat at her bed-side, stifling in the protective clothing with the imagined stench of decaying flesh and death so strong I did not think it would be possible to ever escape from it. I listened to her carefully and after what seemed forever, but was really only a short time, she stopped speaking. It had become too painful for her and she had said all she had wanted to. The room seemed smothered in silence then, the passing of time every bit as slow and as agonizing as when I had been

kidnapped by Jyrki. Shortly before she slipped into the delirium that would steal her from the world forever she turned to look at me.

“Thank you.” She said.

I frowned, uncomprehending. “For what?”

“For coming.” She whispered.

She went to touch my arm but her own hand was a mess of puss and fluids and it slipped off the slick material of the hazmat suit. It took all my self control not to burst into uncontrollable sobs. I simply reached out to lay my gloved hand flat on the bed where she could rest her own on top of it. I watched in silent horror as the person who had been my friend and confident slowly slipped away, her body disintegrating before my eyes. She said nothing more, only moaning as her body seemed to dissolve into itself. The Em-D droid hovered by her bed to administer more medication but even I could see it was doing little good. In the end there was nothing any of us could do to help her, nothing any could do to ease her excruciating pain and over the course of hours I stayed at her side, watched her die a terrible, slow and painful death.

When the alarm on the suit beeped letting me know that my air was about to run out I dutifully left the room. If Cati was still aware of my presence she made no sign of it but she was still clinging onto life. I stared in morbid fascination as her tiny chest heaved up and down with the effort of each breath. I knew that once I left this room I could not come back a second time.

“Goodbye, Cati.” I whispered. The words sounded weird and tinny in the protective coverings I wore and suddenly I was overcome with a terrible sense of claustrophobia.

The decontamination process was not over soon enough for me and I almost panicked trying to get out of the suit which was had been hosed down, disinfected twice and then sprayed with bacta mist. Once I was out of the suit and pronounced clean and safe I was allowed to dress in clean hospital wear and go back into the observation room to rejoin my uncle who had been watching the entire time.

“That was a very brave thing you did.” He said quietly as he gathered me into his arms. I just held onto him tightly and tried to remember how to breathe.

I didn’t know if it was brave or not. I only knew it seemed as though time had somehow slowed down for me but for the rest of the galaxy it went on as normal. The doctor came in briefly and told us that she

was in the end stage it would not be long and it would not be pretty. I wasn’t sure it could get much worse but I nodded anyway.

Together my uncle and I watched and waited until an hour or so before dawn the Em-D droid pronounced Cati dead and I was grateful it was over for her as well as for me. For the first time in my life I hoped there was some sort of all encompassing deity and that it was vengeful beyond all belief because who ever had come up with this virus deserved to die by it.

The doctor, whose name I had forgotten and who looked even more exhausted than before, came into talk to us about what would happen to her remains but I only half heard his words. There was not much of her remains to do anything with, I thought, but what was left would be cremated to prevent any possible spread of infection. Cati was no longer a being; she was now simply a bed full of hazardous waste. I was in a state of shock. It felt as if I were only half there and that the world was very surreal. When the doctor finished we were allowed to go. As though I were on auto pilot I followed my uncle into the changing room where we dressed into the street clothes we had worn to come here.

“Lei’lei, let me take you home.”

I glanced up at Uncle Vahlek uncomprehending and shook my head. “Not yet.” I whispered. I didn’t know how to explain that I needed some time to shake away the images in my head. I did not want to bring this terrible death which I felt sitting on my shoulders into Thrawn’s beautiful flat. I did not want to contaminate the only place I had ever truly felt safe.

Uncle Vahlek seemed to understand. “The doctor mentioned to me there is a small quiet room on the fourth floor. Why don’t we go there?”

I nodded and followed, trailing behind him as he wound his way through the medical facility like a lost puppy. The meditation room, as it had been oddly titled was thankfully empty and I let out the breath I felt I had been holding all night slowly. I suddenly realised that I hadn’t cried, I could not seem to cry at all. There were no tears and that felt strange to me.

“Do you want a cup of tea?” Uncle Vahlek asked.

I nodded absently.

“I’ll see if I can find a cafeteria.” He said, he was giving me time alone to think, to come back to myself.

I nodded and watched as he left as quietly as he had come in. I waited a few moments then paced around. The room had been designed for exactly this sort of occasion, a comfort to worried or grieving relatives and friends of patients. It had been tastefully decorated, trying very hard not to

look as though it were a part of the medical facility. It failed miserably. Everything looked slightly shabby and a little sad. I stopped pacing and stood by the large window, watching as the sun rose slowly over the cityscape of tall elegant buildings, the morning sky a blaze of angry looking reds and oranges. Watching the early morning traffic increase as thousands of beings went about their daily routine not knowing, not caring that some one I had loved had died. How was that possible? I thought. Why had the world not ground to a screeching halt?

As the sun's pale yellow rays slowly crept between the spaces of the buildings, I realised I would never see Cati again, never hear her teasing voice ask me about my love life, never see her create something beautiful to wear out of a simple piece of fabric and worst of all never again get to share laughter with her. She was gone forever. Suddenly I felt as though I couldn't breathe, grief engulfed me and it was as though I were drowning in it but I did not want to let go, not here, not in this awful sterile public place so I stifled the sobs in the back of my throat, swallowing it down with my hand covering my mouth. The ache from the effort was nauseating and hot tears fell of their own accord. Too wrapped up in my struggle to not cry I did not hear the door to the room opening, I neither cared nor noticed who came and went and I was far too lost to my own thoughts to realise it wasn't Uncle Vahlek. Trembling with a sadness I had not thought possible, I didn't even jump when the person behind me spoke.

"Hullo Mouse." Said Jyrki quietly.

For a moment I simply stood facing the window unmoving, wondering what terrible wrong I had done to deserve such a day as this and then after taking a slow, deep breath I turned around to face a man I had hoped never to see again.

I had known Jyrki Andando for a long time. He had been my friend, my teacher and the first man I had ever fallen in love with but somewhere along the line things between us had gone terribly wrong. For reasons I was still trying to sort through he had decided that my working for Lord Vader and the Emperor was terrible and that I had to be rescued. His idea of rescue and my idea of rescue were very different and the results of his attempts to bring me back to what he considered the right side of things had been pretty disastrous. The last time I had seen him had been long before Endor. To that this had not been a very pleasant meeting was a huge understatement. Since then, a long time had passed and I had not reckoned on seeing him ever again especially not here and now. He had

aged. His once beautiful face was now etched with the battles he had been fighting and I guessed that being a rebel had its difficulties.

"I'm sorry about yer friend." He said after a lengthy pause.

I regarded him for a moment trying to decide what to do. My experiences with him the last few times we had met had not really been very happy and despite my calm demeanour my heart was racing. I knew that if he tried something here it would be pretty stupid and that my uncle would be coming back at any moment but Jyrki was dangerous and unpredictable. When I didn't say anything he sighed and moved towards me. I stepped back involuntarily, not even realising what I had done. I was scared of him and I had just shown him this.

He looked at me for a second and then nodded. "It is good to see yer alive. I thought that yer had died at Endor when the Executor was destroyed."

"Sorry to disappoint you." I said.

"Mouse..." He began.

"Don't!" I held up my hand. "You've done too much to pretend to be my friend now."

A puzzled look crossed his face, "I never stopped being yer friend." He said.

"So, why did you want to hurt me then?"

"I didn't want to hurt yer, I wanted to save yer." He explained.

"Save me from what?"

"From being turned into a tool for the dark side, being turned into another one of Palpatine's toys." He replied. "But none of this matters any more, they are no longer alive and yer no longer work for them."

I nodded. What could I say? Every thing he had just told me, at least as far as he was concerned, was true. "So why are you here?" I asked.

"Y'are not the only one who has lost a friend today." He replied coldly. I felt rather than saw him swallow his own grief down. It had been someone he had cared deeply for and for a single moment a flash of jealousy sliced through me, surprising me more than I could have ever expressed in words. I looked into his eyes for a moment and acknowledged his hurt hiding my own unexpected and unwanted feelings.

"I'm sorry." I replied and I meant it. Having just seen what this horrible virus did to its victims I did not know what else to say and silence fell between us again until I broke it. "What do you want with me, Jyrki?"

He seemed to weigh his words carefully. "I had thought yer were dead, Mouse. When I saw what happened at Endor I mourned for yer. I

could not believe it when I caught sight of yer in the hallway just now and I don't want to lose you again so I came in here to warn yer."

"Warn me?"

"Yer should get off Coruscant, go home to Tatooine."

"Why? Are you going to hound me to death for living here now?" I sounded tired, even to my ears.

He shook his head. "The Empire's days are numbered, Mouse. The government here will fall much sooner than anyone thinks." He said.

"Isard won't fight for this planet. She can't because she doesn't have the numbers to keep out both the rebellion and the others who want to carve Coruscant up for their own. We have people in place already and it won't be long now before we prevail. Once the New republic reclaims its place here things will not be pleasant for people still loyal to the late emperor and his corrupt regime."

"People like me you mean." I said with an edge, wondering where the hell my uncle was.

"Yer worked closely with Vader and I have been told yer were also a tool of Palpatine's. Yer will be brought in for questioning and I am trying to help yer."

"Well, I don't work for either of the many more, you and your people saw to that." I said nastily. "Thanks to your rebellion I am out of work!" While this was not exactly true it was close enough to use.

He shook his head making his long black hair ripple about his face. "Mouse, I know y'are hurting right now so I know yer don't mean what yer say but yer should know that y'are not unknown to us." He told me. "Yer should get off Coruscant and go back to being a mechanic; it was something yer were good at."

"Just when is this so called change of regime going to happen?" I asked with a sigh.

But Jyrki simply shrugged. "Soon." He replied cryptically. "The sooner the better. If we were already in charge then maybe yer friend would not have died."

I glanced directly into his eyes and frowned. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Did yer think that this virus magically appeared all on its own?" He asked.

"No, I think that it was engineered by your people."

"My people?" He asked in surprise, "Yer actually think that we would create something this terrible?" he shook his head. "Yer should take a closer look at yer xenophobic government!"

"Why should I not believe you would do something like this? You're terrorists; you are capable of anything I know I've experienced first hand what you do when you don't get your way!" A not so subtle jab at when he had done to me, "You created this virus and your people are blocking the supply lines of bacta!"

His eyebrows beetled together as he tried to make sense of my words. "Yer blame the death of your friend on us?" He sighed, "Oh Mouse, we are not the ones halting the bacta."

"Oh really, and I suppose you destroyed the base at Borleias just for the fun of it?"

"Do yer know what was being produced there?" He asked and when I didn't answer he continued, "Alderaan goods that were being sold on the black market for a premium to fill the pockets of Evir Derricote and his minions." He shook his head. "The Empire's finest and greediest are profiting off the worst case of mass murder even known to fill its own pockets!"

"You have no right to talk about murder!" I snapped back. "Millions of innocent people lost their lives at Yavin and at Endor, people who were civilians working on the space stations and had nothing to do with your little terrorist actions!"

He was getting angry but he calmed himself down. Like me he had learned some measure of self control over his temper. "It is a war mouse, people die." He said softly.

I nodded. "Yeah, people die." I said bitterly, tears suddenly springing to my eyes as I thought about Cati, Lord Vader, Jorae and all the other people I had known and lost. "This is a war you started, you and your rebellion. People die because you murder them. Hell your people even murdered the Galactic Emperor and you all got away with it!"

For a moment I thought he would be angry but he looked at me as though he were seeing me for the first time. "Don't yer know what happened at Endor?" He asked quietly.

"I know enough." I snapped as Jyrki shook his head. "You blew up the space station and you murdered them both!"

To my surprise Jyrki didn't get angry instead he smiled just a little. "We didn't kill the Emperor, Mouse. Darth Vader did that himself to save his son."

I searched for lies in what he had just told me but found none, none at all, but I shook my head against his words anyway. “No, I don’t believe that.” I told him but part of me did.

Lord Vader had hated the Emperor as much as he had feared him and I knew that, no matter what anyone said, blood was thicker than water. His son was a part of him and a part of the woman he had loved so fiercely he had sold his soul to save her. I was sure that in the end if it had come down to a choice between the Emperor or Luke, Lord Vader would have chosen his son every time.

Jyrki shrugged. “Believe what yer want, in the long run it makes little difference, that evil old bastard is dead and it were Vader who killed him.”

For a moment I just closed my eyes. The last few moments of my last meeting with the Emperor flashed through my memory making me shiver. “How?”

“According to Master Skywalker, Vader picked Palpatine up and threw him down a shaft.”

“Why?”

“I told you, to save his son’s life.”

“Then how did Lord Vader die?” I whispered.

“The force lightening the Emperor was using to kill Master Skywalker damaged his suit’s ability to maintain his life support. I was told he died in his son’s arms and was cremated on the Endor moon. I suppose the irony is that in the end he and the Emperor killed each other.” He said. “Master Skywalker wanted people to know that at the very end, when it mattered most, Anakin Skywalker chose the right side.”

I could only gasp for air. I felt as though I had been sucker punched. When I could breathe again I simply nodded. Somehow it was a fitting end and it explained why the last few moments of the connection between Lord Vader and I had felt so strange. He had felt at peace when he had released me from the tie that had bound us together. Now I understood why.

My reaction was not what he had expected and he watched me puzzled for a moment. “Yer were glad when the Emperor died. I see the relief all over yer face.” He whispered softly, as though he had just uncovered the galaxy’s biggest secret.

“Palpatine was sometimes...unkind.” I said choosing my words very carefully.

“Did he hurt yer?” Jyrki asked in surprise. The pity in his voice was the last thing I expected or wanted to hear so instead of nodding I lashed back.

“No more than you did.” I said cruelly and watched as my words hit home.

Being compared to the most evil being in the galaxy did not suit Jyrki well. He must have seen the satisfaction in my expression but he saw something else as well, he saw the hurt and the bewilderment that I had tried to hide and obviously failed at doing so. More out of habit than perhaps anything else he moved towards me his hand outstretched to comfort me in a gesture that was as familiar to me as it was frightening but I jumped away like a terrified durni before he could touch me.

Hurt flashed through his eyes followed by anger. “Yer fear of me is unwarranted.” He said, crossness lacing his calm voice.

“Oh, is that so?” I shot. “May I remind you that you kidnapped me, held me against my will, brainwashed me, physically hurt me and damned near killed me not once but twice!”

“Twice?” He asked puzzled.

“That Anzat blade you used to try and sedate me had residual snake venom in it. I very nearly died because of it and if you had managed to drag me off with you I would have because you wouldn’t have had a clue what to do!”

He stared at me for a long terrible moment then nodded contritely. “That was never my intention, Mouse. I’m sorry.”

“No I don’t suppose it was, Jyrki.” I said quietly. “What did you hope to accomplish?”

“I wanted to talk some sense into yer but yer weren’t listening, and yer weren’t going to listen.” He explained. “But I don’t need to now, yer are free from the grips of the Sith.”

I shuddered. “You know nothing about the Sith except what the brain washing Jedi told you at the old Temple!”

His eyes narrowed to icy slits of blue. “And just how would yer know what I learned there?”

“Did you think the Emperor’s interest in me was simply for my looks?” I asked angrily. When he said nothing I continued, “Not at all, he taught me about your jedi training and he also told me about the Sith teachings. I learned more about the force from Lord Vader and from Palpatine than you could ever hope to know!”

“So yer turned to the dark side then.” The statement was flat, cold and full of fear.

I shook my head in disgust. “No! I didn’t turn to any side!” I said. “I just learned how to control and make the best out of the gifts I have. There is no dark side or light side. There are only the choices that we make.”

“That is a lie!”

I shook my head. “Anakin chose his destiny and so did you. Do you think your Jedi teachers would have been proud of what you did to me? Your means do not justify the ends!”

“I do not use my power in anger!” He said and the taste of his lie was so strong I almost gagged on it.

“Yes, you do.” I told him softly, “But that isn’t the problem, the problem is you feel guilty about it which eats you up from the inside out and that isn’t your fault.”

“Shut up!” he hissed between clenched teeth.

“I know you did not have choice that you were brought to the temple as a baby and you never knew your real parents. You cannot help that you were brainwashed into the believing only one thing! I know how lonely you were and what that did to you! Jedi rules and Jedi ways...! You were a small, frightened little boy when the clone soldiers came; you saw the only family you had ever known slaughtered in front of you. No wonder it twisted you so much! No wonder you couldn’t love me, you never learned to love at all.”

He regarded me with a look that bordered on hatred. “How do yer know this?”

I swallowed realising that maybe I had said too much. “I found records,” I spun the half truth and hoped it would be enough.

He took a step towards me. “Where?”

“In the Jedi Temple.”

“How is that possible? Everything was destroyed.” He shook his head against my words.

“Not everything. The place was sealed off, but there were ways in and out. Palpatine saved most of it, the books, the records, the holocrons and the archives.”

Jyrki opened his mouth and then shut it again. His expression of anger was swiftly replaced by one of relief, almost joy. “Master Luke will be so pleased to hear of this. He has been searching for Jedi archives and records, anything that will help him in his teachings!”

“Well good luck then.” I snorted.

“What do yer mean?”

I shrugged nonchalantly. “It is all gone now.”

“Where?”

“I have no idea. The Emperor removed everything before he left the planet to go to Endor. When he died he took all his secrets with him.”

Jyrki frowned. “Yer must have some idea, yer worked for him.” He said. “I must know where those archives are.”

I shook my head. “No. Everything is gone, even the mainframe was wiped clean.”

“Yer lying.”

I looked directly into his eyes. “No, I am not. The Emperor removed everything of value from the Jedi temple. The last time I was there it was completely empty. Even the ghosts have vanished.”

“How were yer there? No one can get in there, the security is far too tight.” He said, implying that he had tried and failed.

“I know. It is sealed off and a good thing too!” I said not actually answering his question. I did not want to tell him about the secret passage, the small library or anything else.

“But you have some of these archives? You have Jedi artefacts?”

I backed away from him, shaking my head and didn’t answer. What I had I knew I never wanted him to touch. For a moment he wavered and then seemed to come back to himself. “If yer get caught after we take over this planet I cannot help yer.” He said coldly. He stepped closer to me and I could see traces of the madness in his eyes that had scared me so much on Mattri.

“I never asked for your help and I never will.” I hissed. “I know why you ran from the Empire and I understand it, I know why my father agreed to have you work at the docking bay, why you were too scared to love me back but things have changed. I am not that infatuated little girl any more and you are not that little boy fleeing from the Clone troopers through underground passages to be farmed out all over the galaxy to strangers. That war ended Jyrki, it ended when Anakin slaughtered the children in the council room and turned to the dark side. It ended when Palpatine became the Emperor of the Galactic Empire and it ended with the destruction of the Jedi which I don’t think that was such a bad thing considering the lies they told.”

His face paled visibly. “How do yer know all these things?”

“I have gifts you never understood. My mother, my birth mother was a Jedi and she was killed in the Clone wars! She left me a diary describing her life at the temple, she even knew you! You are not the only one who lost everything because of Order sixty-six. You don’t have the corner on the market of bad luck stories!”

The myriad of emotions and expressions which flickered across his face were as revealing to me as though I had managed to pull the living memories from him by touching his skin. “Who was she?” He asked quietly. I could hear both disbelief and sudden understanding in his voice, as though one of the little mysteries about me that had bothered him all these years had finally been cleared up.

I turned away from him then.

“Mouse...I...” he began but I held up my hand for silence and turned back to face him. The full force of my anger hit him like a wave and he took a small, involuntary step back.

My voice sounded cold and cruel even to my ears. I spoke slowly and carefully so that he would not misunderstand anything I had to say. “You hurt me in more ways than I care to count. You do not get to ask me these questions and you sure as hell don’t deserve any answers from me. You made your choice when you sided with the Rebellion and engaged in acts of brutal terrorism, slaughtering innocent people for the sake of a cause most of the galaxy doesn’t even care about or understand. You chose your side and I owe you nothing. I do not love you any more, but I pity you too much to hate you. You’re pathetic.”

For a single moment I thought he would let his temper get the better of him, I could feel it writhe around him like I had been able to sense Lord Vader’s but then he backed away and gave me a curt nod. “Yer should know, it is the Empire that has a monopoly on bacta, keeping the supply limited and restricted. Go look that up, it is public knowledge. The Empire’s ties with Thyferra are deep.” He said coldly. “And perhaps yer should ask Isard where this Krytos virus came from because our investigation points in the direction of the Empire. Do some digging on a man named Derricote and find out what he has been doing here on Coruscant. Go ask yer precious Imperial leader why yer friend had to die so horribly. I don’t think yer will like what she has to say.”

I didn’t answer him and we stared at each other at an impasse. The anger flaring up between us caused the force to crackle. The air felt electric, oppressive and then quite suddenly I was exhausted beyond all reason.

“Go away, Jyrki.” I finally whispered backing down, backing away, tears glittering in my eyes. “Go away before I call security. This world is still imperial and you are still a wanted criminal.” I should have alerted security the moment he had walked through the door but I hadn’t and we both knew I wouldn’t now, although I would have been hard pressed to explain these actions if I been asked to.

He nodded. “Get off this planet and go home.” He repeated. “Go find some nice mechanic to marry and settle down with. Yer were a sweet kid once, Mouse, maybe yer can get some of that back again. Get out of this place before all hell breaks loose.” He said and then almost as an afterthought he added, “And tell the Tze’yusha’Jin if I catch him following me again I will kill him. I know who he is and what he has done and I do not forget.”

I could only stand and stare numbly at him, digesting the news of what had really happened on the second Death Star along with everything else he had told me. He had not lied about these things, not once and I wasn’t sure what scared me more that fact that he had told me the truth or that I considered believing him.

For a moment our eyes met again and then with out another word he left as quietly as he had entered. The door closed with a soft snick and I crumpled to the floor, sitting like a broken doll trying to digest the events of the last twenty six hours. I was beyond tired, beyond tears and beyond feeling anything at all. And this was how my Uncle found me when he finally came back holding two cups of tea.

He set the cups down on the table and then, bending heel to haunch, sat at my side. He said something so I looked at him uncomprehendingly. I could hear him speak but the words didn’t register. The sun had managed to crawl high enough into the sky that its rays streamed into the room making the dust in the air sparkle as it danced about. It played off my uncle’s long, straight white hair making his head appear to glow.

Concern flickered across his features but I just sat there staring at him, wordlessly. He cupped his hands around my face and made me look up at him. I saw sorrow, sympathy and concern in his expression but in his eyes I saw only love, deep and ever lasting. This was what broke the spell. Tears welled up in my eyes and I couldn’t stop them from rolling down my cheeks onto his hands.

“What is it, Lei’lei? Are you ill?” He asked.

When I didn't answer he stood up pulling me to my feet, sliding his arm around my waist. "Let's go home and I will make tea there. What I found here is probably disgusting and cold as I had to track through half the facility to find the cafeteria." With that we left the medical facility and in the glorious morning sun with Coruscant rushing all around us on just another ordinary day, we went home.

Grief comes upon us like a shattering tide. This line from one of the books of Chiss poetry that Thrawn had once sent me stayed in my head as I sat sobbing in the dark of the living room. My own grief threatened to swallow me whole and it was all the worse for having been shoved down, shut up and stifled deep inside of me. When my uncle and I had returned home I had said nothing, simply gone to bed tired beyond all belief but somewhere in the dark of the night I had woken to a violent nightmare which had shattered my cocoon of calm.

My sadness poured out of me like vomit. I cried so hard I couldn't breathe and I suppose that was what woke my uncle up. He came to me as he had done when I was a child and gathered me protectively in his arms, holding on tightly as my sobs wracked through me violently. He spoke to me in the same tone of voice he had always used to calm frightened animals and he waited until the storm had subsided.

"You need to learn to let go, Lei'lei." He chided gently.

"How?" I asked like a petulant child. I hated being told this same thing over and over, no matter how true it was.

"Just let it go." He said. "Stop holding on so tightly to what has already passed. You cannot do anything about it, except let it go."

"How the hell can I let go of my past when it keeps coming back to haunt me?"

He frowned. "How do you mean?"

"Jyrki." I said through hiccups.

My uncle shook his head, clearly puzzled by the sudden twist the conversation had just taken. "What does he have to do with Cati's death?"

"He was at the medical facility. He came to me, he said this was Isard's fault, he said that Lord Vader killed the Emperor, he said tha...."

Uncle Vahlek held up a hand and silenced the jumbled tumble of words instantly. "Jyrki was there?" He asked in a low hiss.

I just nodded.

"In the quiet room at the Med center." He confirmed.

"Yes."

"Did he hurt you?"

"No."

"Then what did he want?"

I shook my head. "I don't really know." I told him.

He sat back, pulling away from me and gave me a look. "I'm going to get us a drink and when I come back I want you to tell me everything that happened."

I nodded

"You should have told me right then and there." He said as he got up, his rough callused hands curling into fists as he did so. "I don't know why you didn't." He was angry.

I huddled into myself and looked up at him. "Zte'sa....?"

"What?" He said out of crossness more than curiosity.

"I didn't tell you because he said he'd kill you if you followed him again."

My uncle raised both his eyebrows. "Did he." He said flatly, in a tone of voice that sent a shiver down my spine and then without another word vanished to the kitchen.

I sat back on the couch, huddled under the Dantassi blanket for warmth, wishing, not for the first time, that Thrawn was with me. I missed him terribly and suddenly, when compared to what was going on this planet Nirauan didn't seem like such a bad place to be any more. I watched Uncle Vahlek come back from the kitchen and took the glass of brandy from his outstretched hand.

"Now then, Lei'lei," He said in a matter of fact manner, "tell me everything Jyrki said to you and do not leave anything out."

And because I was exhausted, wrung out and beyond caring any more I did exactly as he asked. He listened with that eerie calm I had begun to associate with that side of him no one would ever speak about. His eyes had gone durasteel hard and the set of his mouth told me that he was anything but pleased to hear what I had to say. When I had finished recounting my conversation with Jyrki all Uncle Vahlek did was nod grimly and then get up off the couch to pace to the large window and stare out of it.

"What did he mean by if *I catch him following me again*, Zte'sa?" I asked, resting my head on my knees which I had drawn to my chest.

"I have been tracking him ever since the incident with the Anzati blade." My uncle replied as if that explained it all.

“Why?” I frowned.

Uncle Vahlek’s glance at me spoke volumes. “The Anzati do not take very kindly to having one of their sacred weapons used in such a demeaning manner. They asked me to track the weapon and return it to them.” He had evaded my question neatly but at the same time opened up a new avenue for conversation.

“It’s probably in an evidence room or something.” I snorted.

“Thrawn gave it to Intel.”

My Uncle sighed slowly. “It was. It has since been returned to its rightful owner.” He replied.

I glanced up at the silhouette of my uncle shadowed against the early dawn’s light cascading through the window. “How...?”

“I am very good at what I do Lei’lei.” He said slowly, choosing his words with great care. “The Tze’yusha’Jin pride themselves on the arts of not being seen. Obtaining the blade from the place in which it was being kept was child’s play.”

“So if you got the blade back then why are you still after Jyrki?”

“There is a price upon his head for what he did with the blade, for what he did to you.”

I frowned. “I thought that you said you were not a Bounty Hunter.”

“I am not.” He agreed. “But the price for Jyrki is not a bounty, it is an Anzati death mark. There is no monetary payment for his death.”

I shook my head in ignorance. I knew next to nothing about the ways of the Anzati. “So what does that mean, exactly?”

“It means that I am required to right a wrong.” Came his cryptic reply.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and sighed, willing patience to come. “And what *exactly* does that mean, Zte’sa?”

“It is my job and my job alone to kill him.”

There was a pocket of stunned silence that suddenly enwrapped us in its bubble. Then like the touch of a pin, my voice broke it. “But he might be your son....”

“Perhaps. That is still undetermined and even if it is his life, his safety is no longer my concern.” The ice in my uncle’s voice made me shiver. Something had happened between him and Jyrki that he wasn’t telling me, and most likely wasn’t going to tell me.

“But...” I began only to be silence by a minute gesture from my Uncle’s hand.

“Lei’lei, I have told you this before but I will repeat it. I am sworn to protect you under oath and to the death if that is what it will take. No matter what else comes up in my life, no matter who else comes into my life you, and you alone, have priority for my absolute protection. Jyrki Andando has not just once, but several times, harmed you, perhaps that was not his intent but never the less he has done so. The last time he did this he brought you to the brink of death with a weapon he had no rights to possess and that is unforgivable.”

There was another long silence which again I broke. “So... you are an assassin?”

This time my uncle nodded. “It is sometimes part of what I am required to do.”

“And you are going to ...uhm... really kill Jyrki?”

“That is the task I have accepted, yes.”

The room was still as I digested this piece of news then I said, “Well I guess, if Boba Fett were alive I could tell him not to worry about his promise to do that for me then.”

Uncle Vahlek turned away from the window to look at me. “Fett promised to deal with Jyrki for you?”

I nodded. “Ages ago, shortly before the Battle of Hoth actually.” Feeling a wave of sadness as I thought about him.

“What did you tell him when he offered?”

“That you had the situation well in hand.” I replied. “He wasn’t so convinced.”

That made my uncle smile, “No, I don’t suppose he would be.” Then he asked with a puzzled look. “What makes you think he is dead Lei’lei?”

I recounted the images of his fall into the Sarlacc pit that I had drawn off the lightsaber the Emperor had forced me to read shortly before the destruction of the second battle station at Endor. When I was done my Uncle nodded and then looked smug. “Well, it would appear that you saw only half of the truth because Fett is still alive, at least he was the last time I ran into him.”

My jaw dropped open. “Alive? Boba’s alive?”

My uncle nodded. “Apparently the sarlacc did not find him all that appetizing; at least this is what Fett told me when I asked about the rumour of his demise.”

I sat back against the couch and felt a sense of wonder wash over me. Fett was still alive. He hadn’t died as I had thought. It was a tiny piece

of good news in what had otherwise been a terrible day. I felt as though I had found a small piece of my family again and the relief made me weep. My tears did not go unnoticed.

“I had not realised you and Fett were close.” My uncle spoke gently. “I would have told you sooner, were that the case.”

“Not so sure I would call it close, but he was a part of my life, Zte’sa. He helped me a lot when I was working at Jabba’s. He said he didn’t like seeing Kit’gar’s girl working for the Hutt in the way I was. He said it made him worry that papa would not give repairing his ship his full attention.”

My uncle smiled ever so slightly. “Lei’lei, you do pick up the most unlikeliest of friends and allies. Rest assured, Fett is very much alive.”

There was a moment of silence and then I asked, puzzled. “Zte’sa, if you are so good at what you do then why is Jyrki still alive?”

Uncle Vahlek gave me one of those rare smiles, similar to the smiles that Thrawn would occasionally give when I had solved a particularly intricate piece of palace intrigue all by myself. He sighed as he replied. “Because he is also very good at what he does.” He said. “He has had some Anzat stealth training, among others, and he is a Jedi or as near a thing to a Jedi as one might find these days. His skills at evasion are remarkable and while I have come close on several occasions, I have yet to actually make my mark.”

“But if you do catch him how could you kill him, he might be your son, you told me that yourself.”

Uncle Vahlek gave me a smile which was undecipherable. “Perhaps that is so but I did not watch him grow up from a baby to adulthood. I never shared his world the way I have shared and known yours. If he were to be my biological son that is all it would be, biology. There is no bond there Lei’lei, not in the way I am bound to you. It was I who found you on that transport ship that day, I who held you first and loved you from the moment I laid eyes on you.”

I bit my lip but he continued before I could say anything.

“It is not in the way for the Tze’yusha’Jin to marry and have families but by the grace of some greater working I was granted one through my connection to you and the people, my friends, who became your parents.” He paused to look out of the window again and then continued, “You were special little Lei’lei, we all felt it, we all knew it from the very first time we saw you and that has never changed. You have faced insurmountable challenges that would have destroyed or killed most

people. You survived these terrible events and held on to the light and the laughter in your heart that you had as a child. While your world has shattered around you, you remained the same, full of compassion, trust and love. You are remarkable and after what I watched you do for your friend yesterday I have never been more proud to know you and be a part of your life than I am at this moment. So I ask you, how could I choose Jyrki Andando, a man who has proven himself to be capable of cruelty and malice, a man I barely know and, to be honest, now dislike over you? Even if he were my son, he is not my family, you are.”

It was probably one of the longest speeches my uncle had ever given on this subject and I had no idea how to respond to it. I was struck by the utter honesty in his words and the deep sense of love that surrounded them. It was such a vast thing that I felt tiny against it. I never thought about or even tried to understand my place in other people’s lives. I was just me and it never occurred to me that other people might feel differently or that I actually made a difference to them in a way that was good. Kerrjan had tried to tell me this when he had explained why Navaari worried so much but I did not comprehend it fully then or now.

My uncle took my silence as leave to say more. “We thought, when we heard the news about Endor, that you were dead. It was a terrible time for the galaxy but for your family it was beyond all imagining. Your father was devastated.” He explained. “It was easily two months before we got word that you were alive. Thrawn sent a courier, a man named Behl, with a very detailed letter about what had happened and this news was a gift beyond hope.” He drew a deep breath and I watched him struggle with the emotions these memories brought back. “Suddenly the black hole which had swallowed the light in your family vanished and we were whole again. I think that the courier must know you quite well because he spoke about you as though you were friends. He seemed surprised though, at being treated as a hero and one of the family.”

I smiled. “I don’t know if Jarack and I know each other so well but I hope I can call him a friend, he has been playing postman for Thrawn and me for years now.”

My uncle nodded. “This was how I kept in touch with Thrawn while you were finding your way back, through correspondence delivered by his courier.” He nodded, “Thrawn has a very elegant way of communicating, his skills with Basic are astonishing and his knowledge of other languages is vast, isn’t it?” He added as an after thought.

I nodded. “He’s brilliant.” I agreed which made my uncle smile.

“We were kept appraised of your condition which never seemed to change. Then, nearly a year later, Thrawn came, in person, to tell me that you were not only awake and out of that terrible death-sleep but that you were very much alive and recovering on a planet called Hjal and that the Dantassi were looking after you. I have never been ...”

“Wait,” I interrupted, “Thrawn came to Tatooine?”

Uncle Vahlek nodded. “He wanted to let your family know in person what had happened to you and what he was doing about it.”

I shook my head. “He never said anything about this to me.”

My uncle gave a slight shrug. “Your Ta’kasta’cariad is a man full of many layers and many secrets, Lei’lei. Perhaps he felt this piece of information was not important for you to know. I got the distinct impression he wished to see me in person again as well as your father. While he never mentioned how close your relationship had become, he hinted in its direction.” He said.

“I don’t know why he would do that. We were not speaking to each other at that pointing time.” I mumbled.

“He was hurt beyond belief by what had happened to you although he hid it very well.” Replied my uncle.

“Hurt?” I asked shaking my head, interrupting, “More like he was angry.” I countered.

“He almost lost you.” My uncle explained. “Grief does odd things to men such as he and as I understand it showing emotion does not come easily to him or his people.”

I made a face, nodded and then let it go. No point in rehashing this old discussion. I could no more go back and undo my mistake than I could bring back Cati to life.

My uncle gave me a small smile. “He arranged a meeting with me and your father and came to Mos Espa.”

“I am surprised he would risk coming into the Core like that.”

“He arrived heavily disguised in Dantassi clothing.”

“Then how did you know it was him?”

The corner of my uncle’s lip twitched. “The Dantassi wear their histories written on their mask. His mask and yours share several of the same symbols, it was easy to make the connection and the Dantassi are rare, especially these days.” It was a half truth and I gave my uncle a look which told him I knew this. He replied. “I knew who it was the moment our eyes met, Lei’lei. We have met before, remember.”

“So you took him to the house near WayFar?”

“It was the safest, most secure place to talk.” My uncle nodded. “He had asked for our discretion in the matter because not only was his life at risk but also yours and ours. The fact that he was willing to come at all in person to deliver the news of your recovery told me all I wanted to ever know about this man and his place in your life.”

“Is that why you weren’t very surprised by my news about him and me still being together and that we had been bound officially, well as official as it gets with him?”

He nodded. “It was not difficult to read his affection for you despite his anger and frustration at the situation you had managed to get yourself into. I don’t have to be a genius to know when someone cares deeply for you. I certainly didn’t need to be a genius to gauge your reaction when I brought the subject up on Corellia. You do not hide your affections for him well at all.” He smiled.

“So what exactly did you and he talk about?” I asked changing the subject and tentatively digging.

My question amused him. “Only the essentials, his time on Tatooine was very limited and he did not stay long. About you he would only give the medical facts and the story behind what had happened to you, as much as he knew. He is not a man to speak openly about his private affairs Lei’lei, and you should know that.” I made a face but he continued before I could protest, “He wanted us to know you were safe and that you needed time to recover in a place that was out of harm’s way. It was a noble gesture which spoke volumes about his character. He requested that neither of us tell you we had spoken to him; he felt it would only serve to fuel your anger at him at the time. Your father was less understanding about the situation and wanted to come out to be with you but in the end Thrawn’s logic was undeniable, especially given that it was not safe for you to come home at all.”

“Papa would not have been welcome on Hjal. That would have been difficult for all of us.”

“Yes, this is what Thrawn said as well. I was able to get your father to back down but he wasn’t happy. It was good that you wrote, hearing from you yourself helped him.”

I nodded wondering how this tied in with Jyrki but my uncle was one step ahead of me, as usual.

“Anyway, the point I was trying to make before we got sidetracked was this; I thought you had died. For two months we could get no information what so ever from the Imperial Palace and then when

Thrawn's courier came through I knew a relief like nothing else I have ever known. I realised then, that it did not matter if Jyrki was my biological son or not because you were the person who mattered. So I will do what ever it takes and what ever I can to protect you and if that includes dealing with Jyrki Andando in the way the Anzati have requested me to do then so be it."

There was coldness in the last few words my Uncle uttered that made me shiver. I almost felt sorry for Jyrki, but not quite, though I wasn't certain I wanted him to die and I sure as hell wasn't certain that I wanted my Uncle to kill him. There had been enough death in my life and I didn't need more. What I really needed was peace and quiet.

I suppose some of these thoughts were as plain as day on my face and Uncle Vahlek relented some in his manner. "Jyrki Andando is no longer your concern and you should rest Lei'lei, you look exhausted."

I shook my head. "Not really." I said and it was oddly true. I would crash hard later on but in this moment as I sat in Thrawn's living room with my uncle watching the morning's light slowly illuminate the world around us I felt calm, though I half suspected it was more a dull numbness rather than peace of mind.

"Good enough," He said heading for the kitchen, "I suppose you'll have no objections if I make some 'caf then?"

I looked up at him. Uncle Vahlek's fierce love and powerful presence were like the Dantassi blanket I had wrapped about my shoulders, warm and comforting. I never wanted to lose this sensation. He waited for me to answer him so I did. "None at all, if you make enough for me as well."

"I think that can be arranged." He said with a little smile and left me to my own thoughts while he potted around in the kitchen. I watched the dawn's colours paint across the sky and my heart ached with loss but I took some small comfort in the fact that I was not alone and felt lucky that this was the case.

I stood at the transparasteel doors which led to the balcony and watched as the blood red sunrise flooded the cityscape with colour. I hadn't slept, I couldn't sleep. Plagued by terrifying dreams and even more terrifying memories, the bedroom had now become a place I feared. More often than not I ended up dozing on the couch until the quiet hours just before dawn. My uncle watched this behaviour with silent concern but he

knew well enough to leave me alone. What could he do? What could anyone do?

My friend was dead and even though over two weeks had passed since I had watched her die with my own eyes the reality of it all had still not sunk in. I half expected to hear from her telling me about her newest creation or the latest bit of celebrity gossip but that would never happen again. She, as well as her apartment and shop, were now gone.

After her death decontamination crews had quite literally destroyed everything she may have touched to erase any traces of virus from her home and her shop. Everything else had been taken care of by Shiv and I in accordance with her last wishes. It had been a painful, numbing experience and I know Shiv had felt the same way. His normally boyish good looks had been marred by grief and exhaustion and his usual cheerful countenance was gone and in its place was a melancholy that was so unlike him I wondered if he had been replaced by a bad clone.

"Ynyth doesn't sleep well at the moment, nor do I." he had told me by way of explanation. "And from the looks of it neither do you."

I did not have an answer for that because he was right. "You should take Ynyth off world, get away from here." I had told him as we had sat in Thrawn's flat drinking wine.

"Where would we go?" He asked with a shrug. "This is our home, we were both born and raised here. Everything we know and own is here"

"What about Naboo? What about the Emperor's retreat there?"

He had just shaken his head. "Ynyth needs the familiar and she needs time. She and Cati became close friends after you vanished at Endor. We thought you had died and mourning your death had brought the two of them closer. When we got word you were still alive you can't imagine the relief and happiness we all felt. You are the glue that holds our group together, Merly. Sending Ynyth away will not help her, spending time with you talking about Cati and what happened will. She needs your strength."

I had looked at him in surprise because that I was considered strong was the very last thing I had thought of myself as. Shiv had smiled at the look of shock on my face.

"After all you have gone through and survived, you are still the same good, sweet Merly I knew when we first met. You could have turned into a bitter, angry person lashing out and hurting everything in sight but you didn't. Instead you stayed hopeful and kind. You cared enough to stay at Cati's side so she would not be alone. No wonder Thrawn loves you so much, you're magical. Aside from Ynyth, you are the best thing to come

into my life and considering what I thought about you when we first met, that's pretty cool."

I had just stared at him after he had finished this speech then reached over and clasped his hand in mine. "I love you too, Shiv." I replied and that had made him smile which was nice because there was precious little to smile about on this planet right now.

Beings were dying all across Coruscant from a virus no one understood and for which there was no vaccine. What had begun quietly and unnoticed was now rapidly turning into a nightmare from which there was no waking up. An eerie, surreal quality had settled itself on the every day life of Coruscant and it felt as though the entire planet were holding its breath waiting for a storm to break. Calls for a cure and more bacta seemed to fall on deaf ears and Isard had vanished. Two days after Cati's death I had gone to see her only to be told she was not available to speak with me. When I pressed about her whereabouts I was told that she had returned to the Lusankya facility to over see general operations from there.

My fury knew no bounds when I heard this and my first instinct had been to lash out and destroy everything in sight but common sense and the nagging voice sounding an awful lot like that of Qui Gon Jinn in the back of my head had held me back long enough to find my way to my old training room where I had spent several hours destroying combat training remotes until I was almost too exhausted to stand. By the time I had returned home it was more early in the morning than late at night and my uncle, who worried more since he had learned about Jyrki's return, had waited up for me. He was not pleased at me for not letting him know where I was and made no bones about it. We had clashed then, our respective frustrations and fears coming together in one of the worst fights I could ever remember having with him.

Like Thrawn, Uncle Vahlek tended to argue with a cool headed logic which drove me absolutely crazy. I wanted to scream and be screamed at in return. I wanted all the fury and passion and anger to pour around me like a Hjal spring storm because it was how I felt inside, but Uncle Vahlek wasn't like that and his ability to remain level headed infuriated me beyond reason. He understood better than I could have imagined what I was going through but I didn't want to hear it or believe it. He battled my white hot rage with compassion and concern until, over tired and over wrought, I had burst into tears like a little girl and stormed off into Thrawn's library, slamming the door behind me.

This room had always been Thrawn's. Even when he had not been on planet I had rarely ventured into what I had always considered his private sanctuary but now I needed this space because it was as close as I could get to being with him. Tired beyond belief and wracked with a guilt and grief I couldn't come to terms with, I had curled up in Thrawn's favourite chair and wept bitter tears. Uncle Vahlek knocked on the door only once and left when I yelled for him to leave me alone. This room still seemed to hold Thrawn's scent and presence which comforted me somehow. I missed him dreadfully and this only compounded my current misery. I sat for a long time in the darkness nursing my pain until, contrite and exhausted, I emerged to apologise for being such a bitch. My Uncle had simply nodded, enfolded me in his arms, told me he loved me and then poured me a glass of brandy.

We sat in silence for along time until he finally broke it by asking, "Why do you stay here Lei'lei? Why don't you return to Nirauan to be with your Ta'kasta'cariad? I am quiet certain he misses you as much as you miss him."

"Because I am afraid to." I had replied after a long, serious silence. "Afraid of what?" he had asked genuinely puzzled.

"Taking this virus off world. Humans may not catch it but it is possible we can carry it." I had admitted. "Thrawn is not human, Zte'sa. If he were to catch this and..." I could not even finish my sentence because to voice what I was thinking was simply too awful.

His sigh had told me that he thought I was right to be concerned and his kiss on my forehead told me that he did not take my frustration or my temper tantrums personally.

"Well," he had said after a while, "I guess we are both stuck here until they figure out how this disease works and then we can both go home. In the mean time you should find something to keep you occupied, especially as you've done the job you came here to do."

I had nodded. I had accomplished the task at hand but I had no way to get the information to Thrawn. I had not seen or heard from Jarack in what seemed like forever and the data I had was not the sort of thing I wanted to risk sending as a holo-message not even fully encoded. The rebellion had Bothan spies who were very adept at picking up transmission and they also had slicers who were good at their jobs. Dantassi code or not, I couldn't risk the information that I had falling into the wrong hands. So we waited and it was the waiting that drove me crazy. Luckily I wasn't alone.

When they could, Shiv and Ynyth spent much of their free time with me in Thrawn's apartment. They lived in an area of town that was near to one of the alien districts and was now, as Ynyth had said, scary as all hell to walk through alone. I was grateful for their company, especially as I had precious little to do to keep me occupied especially when my uncle was off on one of his mysterious haunts.

We talked about everything, usually over good take out food and with more than one bottle of Thrawn's wine. I was grateful he had left most of the wine collection behind though I suspect it had not been on purpose. He had left thinking he would return but fate had other ideas on that.

When we were tired of talking we watched holovids and passed the time together. The days passed one after the other, blending together like some sort of surreal dream and it felt a lot as though I was waiting for something else bad to happen but I couldn't quite put my finger on what.

Jyrki's sudden reappearance had not helped either, knowing he was on Coruscant made me edgy and restless which in turn made me even harder to live with. My uncle's solution for this restlessness was to insist that we go to the Imperial palace and burn up some of that unwanted energy sparring in the training room that Lord Vader had given to me. I had not been unhappy with his suggestion.

The first couple of times we had trailed into the palace I had been worried about getting stopped and arrested for trespassing or something but that never happened. The entrance I always used was in a mainly disused part of the palace, it was quiet and relied more of surveillance than guards. My ID cards were still good and my uncle had arranged for my access to remain despite theoretically wiping me from the system. I was surprised by the fact that no one bothered to challenge me, to challenge us as we came and went. When I had asked about this he had tried to explain it to me but it was so confusing I had just stared at him like an idiot child.

"You are a ghost in the machine." He finally said. "I left your clearances intact but you, as Lord Vader's assistant, no longer exist at all. I though it would be useful to maintain your ability to move around this building unimpeded."

"How the hell did you do that?"

He had given me a slight smirk. "I left traces that would suggest to people who actually know what they are looking for that you may have been one of the Emperor's favourite courtesans."

I glared at him. "What?!?"

He sighed. "There was a belief in the inner circle which was allowed to circulate outward and downward that the title *favoured courtesan* was a euphemism for an agent or hand of the Emperor himself."

"How the hell is that supposed to make me invisible?" I asked crossly, not liking the idea of being thought of as an Emperor's hand.

"Because most people not in the know will think simply think you were a part of the decorative fluff Palpatine littered his court with, the worst they will do to you is spit on you at best they will leave you alone. Those who do understand will leave you alone because they will think you are dangerous and beyond reproach. Palpatine's agents had the highest clearance and the deadliest reputation. It seemed the best way to deal with your dilemma."

"And this is your idea of safe?"

He nodded. "Yes. There is no actual proof that you were an agent of the Emperor, it is simply playing on assumptions and allegations. Trust me on this. It was the best way to make you invisible yet keep your access viable."

The whole discussion had left me shaking my head feeling very glad I had not gone into the espionage-slicer side of things. Still, we were never bothered when we entered the palace and once in the older part, in my training room no one came near us.

Despite the fact that he was probably old enough to be my grandfather, my uncle was in remarkable shape. He was well versed in many forms of melee along with other styles of hand to hand combat and he kept himself fit. He had once joked, when I had asked about this, that a fat assassin was usually also a very dead assassin. I had just made a face, I could not picture my Uncle fat or old or even dead for that matter.

While Lord Vader and the Emperor had lived I had been trained under the watchful eyes of a Bunduki Master named Taisto Kjestyll. I had long suspected there was much more to my Bunduki master than ever met my eye but now I would never get to ask him because after the Emperor's death, he as well as the rest of the Bunduki teachers had seemingly vanished into thin air. When I had been sent to Tatooine as punishment by Lord Vader and had spent time at my Uncle's house my training in these melee arts had not escaped Uncle Vahlek's notice. He had continued my education by teaching me slight variants of the moves Master Kjestyll had begun, much to my own master's surprise and delight.

I loved the art form of movement in this manner, it was so much like dancing yet at the same time it was deadly and I knew that first hand

as well, having been forced to kill once. That had been a lesson I had never forgotten and to this day I could still feel the rising sensation of the force as I had allowed my anger to consume me. In the end I had fought against it and I suppose won, but my opponent had died by my hand so really, in the end, I didn't consider it a win at all, merely a matter of survival. My shoulder, the one that had been dislocated violently and then badly relocated during that fight, still ached when the weather turned. There were some wounds that bacta could never heal.

In the quiet of the training room my uncle and I sparred with each other. He was better than I was but I had learned much and I had been well taught by some of the best melee fighters in the galaxy, Lord Vader included so I gave as good as I got. Occasionally I was able to teach my uncle a new move or two, especially when I used some of the tricks Thrawn's Noghri body guard, Rukh, had taught me.

At first, my uncle had gone lightly on me, taking it easy not wanting to hurt me but after I had decided that the jax footing around was tedious and had planted him on his ass a couple of times all bets were off. I knew that in the back of his mind he worried about hurting me or perhaps even setting me off on some disastrous downward spiral into the dark side of the force but that was not going to happen.

After one particularly frustrating session where I could feel him holding back and being careful I had stopped the fight and asked him about his concerns. "You were afraid I had turned to the dark side weren't you?" I had asked as we paused for a moment to catch our breaths.

He had looked at me for a moment. "I had wondered if Palpatine had done more than just break your trust." He had said very carefully.

"You have had some bad experience with this dark side before?"

He had drawn a long, deep breath and then let it out slowly. "Yes, this power can be channelled through anger, through hate and passion and when it is done so with malice the results are terrifying and terrible for both the victim and the aggressor."

I had given him a look but hadn't pushed him to explain further. I had not only seen but felt what it had done to Anakin Skywalker. My uncle didn't need to tell me any more. "Well, you need to trust that I know better than that." I had told him simply, "You would have felt it by now if I was all dark and sithy."

"Sithy?" This had made him laugh.

I had nodded. "Plus," I had added with a contrite look, "I also know you'd have given me what for if I did." That had made him smile then

I added quickly, before he could interrupt. "I don't like how it feels. It is like being painted on the inside with something sour, with something rotten." I had shivered.

"You've touched it though, this side of your powers?"

I had nodded as a memory of sweeping anger and then a sense of shame washed over me. My Uncle watched the play of emotions on my face without word or comment for a moment then he had asked me to explain.

I wavered for a moment because despite the time that had passed, these memories were still fresh, still painful and difficult to bring up. He remained quiet, all the while never taking his eyes from my face until slowly, carefully recounting every detail, I had told him what Palpatine had done to me shortly before Lord Vader's death.

He had sat back on his haunches and sighed. "Oh Lei'lei, I am sorry."

I had shrugged. "It was like going mad, Zte'sa and it wasn't a very good sensation. I could see myself lose it but it was like I was some where far away watching it happen. No wonder Anakin was so twisted; because that's what letting this power have control does, it twists you up in your soul until you don't know how to find your way back. I could feel that happening and it was exactly what Palpatine wanted."

"What brought you back from it then?"

"I'm not sure." I shrugged, "The voice of the dead Jedi I sometimes see in my dreams maybe, perhaps the thought of being turned into something Like Lord Vader, I can't really say. I do know that I would have killed the Emperor myself right then and there if I could have. I was consumed by anger and hatred and it was terrible. I think that given a choice I would rather take the grief of loss than living with that hatred any day."

"So it is a choice then? A conscious thing, to go from one side to the other?" My uncle had mused.

I had given him a small shrug. "I think it must be. How can there be a light side or a dark side to something that has no sides? It is not a switch. One day you are light the next you are dark, it just doesn't work that way at all. As Master Kjestyll once explained it to me, the force works just like everything else in the galaxy, it's a tool and you decide how to use the tool. A blaster doesn't kill people the person holding it does, making that choice a conscious one. I think that by defining a line of Dark against Light the Jedi were trying to terrify the children they taught into towing the line but they took that control too far. How can you control emotions

into nothing? How can you forbid love or even hate? All that does is confuse the issue so instead of being taught to confront these negative emotions and the dangers of using them they were all taught to fear them and this led to the feeling of guilt when ever that line was crossed. It really was a stupid way to teach control no wonder the jedi eventually failed.” I said.

For some reason this had amused my Uncle greatly. “I remember reading theories about this line of thought when I was much younger and the Jedi were still the main peace-makers in the galaxy but the doctrine of the time called this way of thinking heresy.”

“All religions cry heresy when people begin to veer from the given line of doctrine.” I had snorted. “They get scared when new possibilities of thought come along because they get scared they will lose their power but power doesn’t really exist so how can you lose something you don’t really have. I never understood that ever.”

“You must have some fascinating conversations about these things with your Ta’kasta’cariad.” My uncle had commented.

I had nodded, “He also has some very interesting thoughts on these topics.” I said quietly the added, “And yes we do have many interesting conversations.” Not all of them verbal either.... I had thought with a smile which my uncle had pretended not to notice.

“Well Lei’lei, I, for one, am glad to see that your common sense has managed to keep you from going off the dark end.” He had grinned at his own joke and with that we had gotten back to the work-out we had taken a break from. I was relieved to have a way to let go of my energy in a more productive albeit sometimes painful manner.

I looked forward to our training sessions, they had become a pocket of normality in what had become a very abnormal time. I could forget about everything else while I combat-danced around the beautiful training room Lord Vader had given me, trying to avoid my uncle’s punishing moves. I think he also enjoyed the physical release of pent up energy and as if it were mirroring our lives, as we sparred on this particular day, Coruscant let go of its energy also in one of the worst, most impressive lightening storms I had ever seen.

It was raining heavily when we left the flat and by the time we made it to the training room what had started as a mild micro storm was beginning to show its teeth. It was dark enough outside that I had to turn on the studio’s lights, something I rarely ever did given the amount of ambient light that usually poured through the room’s lancet windows.

With a cursory glance at the weather outside my uncle had made let’s get on with it noises. Once we had changed and were ready, we warmed up together side by side in a graceful dance that I had missed without even knowing it. Sparring with my Uncle was not like sparring with Master Kjestyll or Lord Vader. Fighting Uncle Vahlek was a little like fighting smoke and he reminded me a little of Rukh.

It was fun, after a fashion and it kept me on my toes because he varied his methods and his techniques enough I could not usually predict what he would do next. After many such lessons and sessions together I had begun to discern patterns but still he could usually best me and today was no exception.

“Come on Lei’lei, if you are going to fight me then fight me. Quit messing around.” My uncle taunted as I circled around him, now wary after several sharp knocks with his combat stave had caught me by surprise. He was trying to teach me some of the more aggressive Anzati moves but it wasn’t going terribly well.

“The Anazti have the reputation they do because they are fearless and cunning warriors. This method I am teaching you is called Gh’zjann. It is a one of the five assassination lines. This is the defence line. I have taught you the mechanics of the moves now use them.” He said patiently.

I flew at him and the sound of wood on wood reverberated around the room followed closely by the sound of all the air leaving my lungs as I was caught by my uncle’s foot in a move which sent me flying across the floor.

“You leave yourself wide open when you attack like that, what have I told you before? This is how Jyrki gets past your defences, now do it again!”

So I did as I was asked and while this time I saw his attack I was still too slow to avoid the blow but I was able to deflect it a little so that it hurt less giving me more time to move away and regroup for the next attack. He fought with an earnest that surprised me, goading me into fighting him back with everything I had to give. He feared that if Jyrki and I were to face off again, I would not be prepared for it. I understood this fear because it was mine also but I’d hoped that Jyrki would just leave me alone, after all he could have attacked when he had found me alone in the med center quiet room but he had not done so. Still I was grateful for the chance to better my skills and regain some of the edge I felt I had lost and my uncle was a good teacher. By the time two hours had passed we were both breathing heavily and soaked in sweat.

“Do you use the force when you fight me?” He asked as we stopped to take a breath.

“Not consciously unless I am pushed.” I admitted. “It seemed a little like cheating.”

That had made him laugh. “What if I were your mortal enemy and this was a fight to the death?”

“Well...” I hedged, “I would probably be more open to the Force’s suggestion that I let it fly and try to kick your ass.”

“I want to see you do this, I want to see how much better it makes you.”

“I don’t want to hurt you Zte’sa.” I said cautiously.

He grinned. “You won’t.”

So with a deep breath I opened up that part of me which touched that unseen world and felt that magic everyone called The Force flow through me. It was like being poured all over with sunlight and it made me smile. Thinking that I was not paying attention my uncle swung and me but I saw his move before he could even complete it and without having to think I blocked, moved and attacked taking him down to the mat, the end of my staff caressing his throat. He smiled and swept the staff away with the back of his hand.

“It makes you sharper, faster. You should utilise it more. As you have told me it is just a tool, a very useful one at that. Just keep listening to that little voice in the back of your head.” He said getting up, reaching over to ruffle the top of my head. “Okay again...”

But before either of us could move a particularly loud clap of thunder shook the palace violently and the lights flicked off plunging us into darkness for a second. Lightening seared through the windows making everything in the room a brilliant blue-white and then somewhere a back up generator kicked in and the lights sputtered back on. We both went to the window to look out over the city at the storm which had started when we had arrived. I could see that in parts of the city were still in black out. As far as I knew, this had never happened before, at least not in my lifetime.

“Wow, this is very bad.” I whispered.

My Uncle studied the dark sky carefully. “Yes, most unusual for Coruscant. The weather grid must be malfunctioning.” He murmured then something outside caught his eye. “Turn off the lights Lei’lei!” He commanded.

With a flick of my hand I summoned the force and did as he asked. Once again the room was plunged into darkness. I moved to stand close at my Uncle’s side, sensing his worry as he watched the storm at that was gathering above us.

“We should leave this place and get home.” He said and before I could ask why he had started to put away the combat staves and gather our things together with an urgency that made my heart begin to race. “Hurry, I don’t think we have much time.”

“Time for what?”

“To get home before all hell breaks loose.”

“What?” I looked at him. “How...?”

“This is no ordinary storm. I think that the New Republic is finally making its move.” He said. I was struck dumb by what he had said to the point of not moving. My uncle grabbed my arm. “Now, Lei’lei move, before it’s too late and we get caught in the middle of it all.”

“In the middle of what?” I asked exasperated.

“In the middle of a battle for Coruscant.” He replied tartly and still with his hand around my wrist he dragged me out of the palace just as the alarms had started to wail, through the pouring rain to our speeder. It wasn’t often I saw genuine worry on my uncle’s face but I saw it now and it scared the hell out of me. I glanced upward into the bleak storm and was suddenly blinded by a huge explosion high up in the atmosphere that lit up the sky. “Come on!”

“What the hell was that?” I yelled, stopping dead in my tracks, pulling out of his grip, to follow the huge flashes of light that scarred the night sky.

My uncle grabbed my arm again and dragged me forward. “I think that one of the orbital planetary defence platforms is going down, come on!” He growled all but throwing me into the passenger side of my speeder.

Fear made me obedient and I buckled myself in without further protest. As soon as he could he drove off through the chaos of the panicking traffic, heading for the safety of home.

“What will happen if the Empire fails to drive them back?” I asked as the speeder skidded to a shaky halt at the private docking area.

My uncle glanced upwards at the sky. The terrible storm boiled over the planet, searing the dark with violent flashes of lightening but it was impossible to see anything clearly. “I don’t know, Lei’lei. But the last time there was a battle over Coruscant things got messy and a lot of people died.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth there were multiple

explosions coming from the direction of the Imperial palace. I glanced at my uncle who had stopped to stare at the flashes of light. We were getting soaked.

Hearing his answer was not exactly comforting and as the door to the flat shut behind me I wondered if it had been a wise thing to come here, after all, I rationalized, at least the palace had safe places deep in the under-belly to go. I wasn't too sure how safe Thrawn's flat would be if the New Republic started hurling area bombardments from the upper atmosphere.

As if he read my thoughts my uncle said "They will try to take the planet as peacefully as they can. They want to be seen as the good guys, as liberators not invaders. The palace will be the first place they will wish to overrun. I do not want you anywhere near it when this happens. I know there are places there which might be from damage. I would not want to have to explain what we were doing there to either side involved in this conflict. We are safer here and if things get very bad we can get to a shelter. I assume this building has one?"

I nodded dumbly, clutching my arms around my sodden body, shivering with cold.

"You're soaking wet, go and get changed before you get sick and I will make us some tea. As long as the power holds we might as well use it." Uncle Vahlek said and because there was nothing else I could do I followed his suggestion, welcoming the idea of dry clothes and something hot to drink.

We stood at the window with the lights in the flat off, the HoloNet on, cups of tea in hand, gazing at the light show which unfolded before us in stunned silence as Coruscant fell to the New Republic.