

# Daughter of the Empire

## Book 3

by Fiona Messer

Chapter five

## Aftermath

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We knew when the HoloNet came back on line, after going dark for many hours, with the announcement that Coruscant had been liberated by the New Republic and that the populace of the planet should remain calm that it was mostly all over. I had buried my face against my Uncle's chest and wept, terrified of this new change and the events that it might bring. All of my life I had only ever known the Galactic Empire and for the most part peace and prosperity, now all that was gone, swept away in a night's worth of wild weather, savage fighting and lives lost. I had never lived through anything quite like this before and I had no idea what to expect. Uncle Vahlek, on the other hand, had become suddenly and almost eerily calm. This was not the first planetary attack he had ever experienced.

We had sat in the living room glued to the HoloNet watching as holo-cam crews and reporters had raced to the battle fronts and shouting above the noise of the fray giving the denizens of Coruscant the blow by blow of what was happening, at least as far as they were able to see. It was both terrible and fascinating all at the same time and while I felt a sense of horror creep over me I was compelled to watch it all unfold live before my eyes

Of all the fighting reported, it was the battle for the Imperial Palace that was the worst. 'Of course,' my Uncle had said, 'this is the place they need take fully: it is the symbol of power.'

I had simply sat in the darkness of the room, tears streaming down my face as I watched the brave men and women of the Imperial army make their stand against the rebels but it was a slaughter. The Rebels bombarded the Palace and although the Elite Force that was guarding it stood their ground it was of no use against the air strikes.

Holocam crews captured it all and even though I had known it was all happening in real time, the surreal quality never went away. It was like watching a holodrama but the people dying were not actors who would get up after the scene was cut, they were real people and they laid down their lives to try and hold the enemy at bay.

The palace grounds were full of the carnage of war and the news crews captured it all, the broken bodies, the tangled wreckage. There was blood and gore everywhere. When a strike hit the AT-At that was on the front line, in charge of directing the ground troops I had known a terrible sinking feeling in my gut, that feeling I had come to associate with very bad things.

The reporters who were dodging blaster fire and trying to vie for the best capture shots managed to record the survival of a general I would learn later was called Tal Ashen. He quite literally crawled out of the wreckage of the AT-AT to get back up and command the storm-troopers who were still alive, all the while firing with his hand pistol to keep the rebels at bay. I had watched in absolute horror as he was shot dead. Shortly after that someone from the rebellion side must have decided that the news crews were giving out too much information and all feeds had been abruptly terminated. The scene cut to the studio but was swiftly replaced by the emergency broadcast signal which told everyone to remain calm and stay tuned for further instructions. After ten minutes my uncle had switched it off. I had sat on the couch trembling. My brain trying to take in what had just happened but it was too much, too vast, and too unbelievable. Occasionally an orbital strike would hit something close enough to make the apartment building shake but apart from that and the infrequent flash from something exploding there were no more signs that the planet was under siege.

When the city wide alarms had stopped wailing and the distant tremors and rumbling of shelling had ceased my uncle had turned the HoloNet back on. Some time shortly after that a very tired looking woman I had never seen before had come on line and given the message that Coruscant had been liberated from Imperial tyranny and that the populace of the planet were requested to remain safe in their homes and not to panic, all was well. She had looked scared, her eyes kept darting to someplace off camera and her hands trembled. Sadness and exhaustion washed over me.

"What do we do now?" I asked when my crying jag had come to an end.

Uncle Vahlek gave me a tired look. "Now we wait." He replied. Puzzled, I frowned. "Wait? Wait for what?"

"We wait to see what happens next, to see if there will be more fighting or if the battle we watched was it. We wait to hear what the new government's terms for its people are and how things will be run. We wait to see how this new government will act or if it will even hold. This is a fragile time and there are several other powerful factions out there wishing to carve up a piece of the Imperial pie, Coruscant is a very large and very important piece of that pie. It may be that, while this invasion has been

successful now, in a few days we will see another turn around.” He said wearily.

“Do you think they will send armies out to round up everyone who is still loyal to the Empire?” I asked. The memory of General Ashen’s death was still vivid in my mind.

My uncle’s green eyes flicked to my face for a moment. “No.” he said with a slight shake of his head. “They have neither the man power nor the inclination. I suspect the biggest hurdle these people have now is creating a viable governing body that can maintain and control this planet along with all the other systems they hold.” His shoulders heaved as he sighed. “If my guess is right they will try to be as quiet and as calm about this take over as possible. They do not want to be seen as aggressors but as liberators. The next few days and weeks will tell us more but for now there is nothing much to be done except wait it out and maybe get some rest.”

“Was it like this in the Clone Wars?” I asked, getting up to follow him to the kitchen.

For a moment I didn’t think he would answer me then he said carefully. “In some small way I suppose so, although my memory of that time is that the fighting was far worse, the armies that clashed were larger, more violent and far better equipped and that neither side wanted to give in. In some ways what you saw tonight was the ending of a battle that has been raging for the better part of two and a half decades.” He told me. “With the exception of the troops at the Palace, the Imperial forces did not put up as much of a fight as I thought they might.”

I looked at my uncle in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“The fight was over too quickly, and the Empire has better defences, better ships than the rebellion does. This planet’s shields and orbital defences far out weigh anything the New Republic has. This battle should have gone on longer, should have been more ferocious but it wasn’t.”

“You think they just gave up, that Isard surrendered?” I asked in utter disbelief, almost dropping the teapot I had been emptying into the sink.

“I don’t know, Lei’lei.” He said thoughtfully. “You told me that when you went to speak with her she was not available. I find it unusual that the leader of the Empire and ruler of this world chose not to be here when she was needed most. It is entirely possible that she knew this was

going to happen and was not even on the planet because she had already decided the outcome.”

I opened my mouth to say something and then closed it again when I could not find the right words. I could not fathom her giving up Coruscant without so much as an honest fight and the very thought of it made me suddenly angry. People, good people had died and for what? She had abandoned it to be taken over by the rebels but given her lust for power and the importance of the Core planet this made little sense to me so that meant there had to be another reason. I tried to logic out her thinking behind these actions the way Thrawn had taught me to, back tracking through everything I had seen and heard. My dreams, the events that had been happening day by day, Cati’s death.... I sucked in my breath as though all the air in the room had suddenly vanished.

It was as if a holo-drama unfolded right before my eyes and I wondered for a second how I could have been so blind to miss the subtle and not so subtle hints that had been thrown my way. Horrified, I suddenly understood the pieces of the puzzle that had been laid before me over the last few weeks. I felt as though I could not breathe and I must have gone as white as Hjal snow because my uncle’s reaction was swift and full of concern.

“Are you feeling alright?” My uncle asked in alarm, reaching for my arm.

“I was right.” I said softly giving him a look that made him stop mid move. “And so was Jyrki.”

My uncle’s eyebrows went up in question. “In what way?”

“She left the way she did because she knew that even if the rebels took this world it would not be the victory they had hoped for.” I whispered.

There was a terrible, long moment of silence while my uncle searched my face for answers. “You think she was the one who had this Krytos virus manufactured.” It was a flat statement not a question and I understood that this thought had also occurred to him but he had not wanted to voice it.

I nodded grimly. “Jyrki told me as much and I know he was speaking the truth but I didn’t want to hear it, not right then and there. The dreams I had, all the signs led in that direction but I did not want to believe it, then you offered a different angle, that she was looking for a cure

but that's not the case, is it?" I stopped as tears filled my eyes. My friend had died horribly because of this virus and all because Isard had decided not to launch a full scale defensive attack. "How *could* she?" I asked my Uncle. "If she really did this, if she was the one who is responsible for this terrible sickness, then she's killed hundreds of beings and will continue to kill even more." I trembled at the sheer scale and horror of this concept. "How could she do such a thing?"

"You do not for certain that she did." Uncle Vahlek said softly, carefully.

I looked into my uncle's pale green eyes. "Yes," I said, "yes I think I do." And I told my uncle everything that I suspected including all of the dreams, the fact that Jyrki had named Derricote who was more than capable of such biological engineering.

There was another very long moment of silence and then my uncle spoke. "Some people are very sore losers, Lei'lei. They would rather destroy everything than let it go to someone else. Isard is such a person and as long as I have known of her, she has never fought fairly or in the interest of others, only her own."

"She is a coward." I spat, angrier than I had felt in a long time. "Using innocent civilians in this way is ...," I searched for a word that fit what I wanted to say but there was nothing in Basic that came even close so I chose a Cheunh word instead, "...*nja'cht'Vagaari'njen*."

My uncle nodded. I knew he understood Cheunh well enough to know what I meant, although I didn't know how he had learned to do so or when. The word *nja'cht'Vagaari'njen* meant *to be as base as the Vagaari* and in Cheunh it was a terrible insult, perhaps even the worst thing you could call someone in the language of the Chiss.

The Vagaari, Thrawn had explained to me, when I had asked about the peculiar meaning and syntax of this somewhat unusual word, were a race of nomadic aliens that mainly lived in the Unknown Regions near the Chiss Ascendancy. For the most part they were a warrior race who thrived off acts of piracy and destruction, with a penchant for cruelty to all the races they enslaved. They were fierce, savage and utterly without any honour what so ever. Thrawn's distaste as he had spoken of them had been a palpable thing.

"When I first encountered them I was quite horrified to learn that their main method of defence was to use the slaves they captured as living

*shields for their ships. They locked their prisoners inside small, transparent bubbles on the hulls of their ships so that potential enemies would see that they were killing innocent civilians in order to destroy the Vagaari themselves. It was most effective as well as being disgustingly vile. When the Chiss learned of this despicable, cowardly method of defence the name Vagaari became synonymous with acts so atrocious we could not speak of them without placing them in the same context as these aliens."*

What Isard had done ranked as the worst thing I had ever heard of. I swallowed hard against the rising nausea that threatened to send me running to the 'resher, my heart pounded and a wave of dizziness swept through me. People dying in wars and battles were one thing, as awful as it was, I understood that at least both sides had a chance and those that entered the fight had usually done so of their own volition but to set a lethal virus amongst a civilian population simply to sabotage the rise of the next government was beyond vile. I did not even realise that I was gripping the handle of the tea pot so tightly that the blood had drained from my fingers until my uncle pried it from my hands gently. He wrapped his arm about my shoulders and tugged me tightly to his body in a protective hug.

"Why Zte'sa? Why is this happening?" was all I could think to ask.

"It has been a long time coming Lei'lei." He said.

"Well explain it to me, because I do not understand."

I felt rather than heard my uncle's deep voice rumble in his chest as he began to speak.

"When the Old Republic came to an end most people welcomed it. They saw in Chancellor Palpatine a man who would save them from the war that had been raging for several years. A war, incidentally that many felt the Jedi had initiated when they had interfered with the Trade Federation's blockade of Naboo. The downward spiral which began with that event and led the galaxy into the civil war which you know as the Clone Wars was the end of the Old Republic although most of its supporters would not see it this way. With the annihilation of the Jedi Order and the Republic senate in a state of chaos, Palpatine formed the Galactic Empire and took on the title as Emperor. I still recall his exact words to this day; *'We stand on the threshold of a new beginning. In order to ensure our security and continuing stability, the Republic will be reorganized into the first Galactic Empire, for a safe and secure society,*

*which I assure you will last for ten thousand years. An Empire that will continue to be ruled by this august body and a sovereign ruler chosen for life.”*

His speech and this decision were met by such applause that you would have thought the senate building would collapse under the sheer volume of it.” He spoke quietly, lost in the memory. “He did what he set out to do, he brought peace and he brought stability but it came at a price and that price was personal freedom and some civil rights. In the beginning many were willing to give up some of these things and, for the most part, in all honesty, many members of the Empire never noticed a massive change in how things ran on a day to day basis but as with all change it had its opponents and this was the start of the rebellion.”

“The rebellion has its beginnings in a group of senators who did not like this new change. They had created a petition, the Petition of the Two Thousand it was called, begging him to step back from the powers he had been granted in the Emergency Acts rule but he refused, stating that the issues which had brought about the need for extra powers to take care of the issues at hand still remained. He also maintained that their issues with the newly created Moff system, which they said destroyed the actual power of the senate, were baseless fears. Shortly after this he changed the Republic into an Empire and many of the senators who had signed that petition retracted their signatures for fear of reprisal. I don’t tell you this lightly. Those were difficult times and many senators, whose names remained on that petition, vanished without a trace or were killed under somewhat dubious circumstances.”

“But the Empire had senate rule as well, at least until the senate was dissolved.” I said, trying to recall my history lessons from school.

Uncle Vahlek nodded. “Yes it did, after a fashion, but the newly create Moff office actually did strip much of the senate’s power away although at first not many people noticed this right away. In the beginning it all appeared to work out well, but as the rebellion grew in size and strength, gaining sympathies and support and as the honeymoon phase of the new style of imperial government wore off, people suddenly began to realize just exactly what and how much they had given up.”

“Palpatine saw the need to switch the style of rule to an outright dictatorship. When he implemented the Tarkin Doctrine I suspect that was the beginning of the end. For many worlds and many people who had, up

until that point remained loyal to the ideal of Palpatine’s empire, the idea that they were now under the thumb of a single governor or Moff was distasteful at best and terrifying at worst. While some of the governors were actually good people with good intentions many were mostly power hungry and tyrannical, Tarkin being the supreme example of this.” He paused.

“Ruling by fear, while effective for a time, has its down sides and you can only subjugate people to that sort of thing for so long before they will eventually get fed up and fight back. This added much needed fuel to the small fires the Rebellion had been starting from even before Palpatine actually declared himself Emperor. I think it was the creation of the Emperor’s Battle Station, that some smart ass dubbed the ‘death star’ which pushed things over the edge. With a weapon like that Palpatine ensured he could do as he wished and the peoples of the galaxy who opposed him feared not only sanctions but destruction as well. Alderaan was the prime example of this, despite the propaganda about what caused the planet’s destruction I happen to know for a fact it was destroyed by that battle station and that Tarkin was directly responsible. Had that incident not occurred who is to say how things would have turned out? And while the Emperor did a bang up job of covering the truth up, it was enough to push the Rebellion's cause from being one most people didn’t care about to one they suddenly did.”

I sighed. These words sounded so familiar to me and I recalled the many conversations Thrawn and I had had on this topic. It led me to another memory, one which sent a little shiver down the back of my spine. I pulled out of my uncle’s embrace and hugged my arms around my body, watching while he poured the water which had boiled into the tea pot. “Thrawn told me once that Palpatine feared a great threat from outside of the galaxy and that this was partly why he chose to create the Empire. He wanted the galaxy to be united so that its defences and military capabilities would be enough to fight off these far outsiders.”

That made my uncle’s eyebrows rise up in surprise. “Is that so?” He said quietly.

I nodded slightly, “These aliens Thrawn spoke of, they must be terrible because even he was worried about them and it isn’t often he gets noticeably concerned about things like that so when he does, I get scared.”

“Well, that little piece of information sheds some interesting light on a few of Palpatine’s actions, but make no mistake Lei’lei, Palpatine wanted power as well. His motives were not purely selfless.”

*That was an understatement*, I thought. “Does it matter? I mean in the end, what if he was right? And what happens if there is such an invasion and this galaxy no longer has the superior military defences it once had?”

“Difficult questions to answer and I guess this new government will find itself in a rather precarious position should that ever happen.” Uncle Vahlek said quietly. “But I don’t think that it is something you or I have to immediately worry about just yet. If there were such a threat at the edge of the galaxy we would have heard something of it by now.”

I looked up at him and nodded but I wasn’t so sure he was right. Space was vast and, for the most part, pretty empty. It would be easy enough for an enemy to covertly sneak its way in, if it really wanted to, especially when we were at our most vulnerable, like now. I thought it was utter arrogance to assume that we were safe, tucked away in our own galaxy away from alien threats just because we couldn’t see them.

Perhaps my thoughts showed on my face because my Uncle gave me a tight smile and said, “Even if such an invasion force is on its way there is little you or I can do about it right now anyway.” He handed me a cup of tea and nodded in the direction of the sitting room. “So for now we will go into the living room, watch what the HoloNet news has to offer, drink this tea and get some rest. Invasion or no, neither you nor I will be of much use without sleep and you, child, are exhausted.”

I could not argue with this logic even if I had wanted to and, he was right, I was far too tired to try. We sipped our tea in silence as we watched the HoloNet unfold the edited, politically correct, play by play version of what had occurred. After seeing how the battle for the Imperial palace was portrayed when told by the winning side I wondered if I had stepped into an alternative universe. I was thankful for my uncle’s presence of mind to get us out of there when he did and I was never more grateful for Thrawn’s gift of this apartment than now. If I had still been residing in the palace I would have lost everything. I shuddered to think of it and marvelled, once again, at Thrawn’s uncanny ability to be prepared for any and every eventuality.

At some point in the middle of an interview with an eye witness who definitely had not seen the same things I had seen, I closed my eyes and fell asleep. I didn’t dream and when I woke up I discovered that I had been carried to my own bed with the Dantassi blanket I loved so much draped over me. I was a bit shocked to realize that I had slept for nearly fifteen hours straight, even more stunned when the memories of what had just happened came rushing back. In the space of a day everything I had known had changed.

Still groggy, I got up and went in search of my uncle. I wasn’t as surprised as I should have been to see him in the living room speaking with Shiv and Ynyth. I gave them a cursory wave and then decided I would not function properly until I had spent at least fifteen minutes under a very hot shower so that was what I did. By the time I reappeared stimcaf had been prepared. I accepted the cup I was offered gratefully and then sitting on my favourite chair, tucking my feet under me in a very jax like fashion, I let Shiv and Ynyth recount their versions of what they had seen and the latest news that had been spread by the HoloNet, then I told them about my suspicions about Isard and the Krytos virus.

There was a long heavy quiet after I had finished speaking and then Shiv asked me. “Do you think that Thrawn knew about any of this?”

I shook my head. “He would have found the idea of a biological weapon used in this manner ...unthinkable.” I said softly. “I’d like to think if he had known he would have tried to prevent her from doing it at all.”

“What about the rebels taking Coruscant?” Ynyth asked, her normally cheerful eyes marred by dark circles and worry. “Do you think he knew about this?”

“I don’t think he would have been too surprised. Retaking the Core was the next logical step for the New Republic.” I answered thoughtfully. “When we got word that Borleias had fallen he told me Coruscant would be next.”

“Do you think he will come and try to take this planet back?”

I went to speak but it was my uncle who answered. “That is unlikely at this time.” He said. “And it would be unwise.”

I nodded my agreement with his assessment. “Thrawn doesn’t have the man power or the ships needed to launch such a full scale attack and to do so undermanned would invite the risk of letting all the other factions out there who would gladly have Coruscant for their own to come

out of the woodwork. It would mean a dirty war that would go on forever between multiple factions. That's not his style. If he were to retake Coruscant he would want to do so swiftly and decisively. If it meant high civilian casualties and an unacceptable loss of men and ships he would not take the risk."

There was a long, heavy silence while everyone digested this. These were uncertain times and none of us, except for my Uncle had even the slightest inkling how to cope with the massive and violent change.

"Do you think we should start hiding or destroying all our holo-captures of the Emperor or Lord Vader?" Ynyth asked timidly.

I looked at Ynyth. "Why?"

"Well... I heard that the rebel army was searching people's homes and looking for evidence of those still loyal to the Empire and... doing things...." She said, managing to look both embarrassed and scared all at the same time.

My uncle looked a little puzzled. "Doing what?"

She swallowed, "I heard that they were arresting people to put in to labour camps or worse...."

The expression on my uncle's face softened a little and his tone of voice was the same with which he used to sooth nervous banthas. "Ynyth, there are nearly one trillion beings on this planet I am certain the New Republic has neither the man power nor the inclination to search every single home nor," he added, "do they have the facilities to intern every single being who has holo captures of the Emperor sitting on a bookshelf somewhere. I don't know who has been filling your head with this nonsense but I can assure you this won't be happening on this planet this time."

"*This time?*" My glance asked, catching his eye but the subtle shake of his head said don't ask.

"I wonder if they even know about Thrawn." Shiv said looking at me. "He is the last of the Grand Admirals."

That made me shrug. "I don't know." I said. "His promotion to the Circle of Twelve wasn't that well advertised and then he all but vanished from the Imperial spotlight. I am not sure that anyone really knows about him outside of the inner High Command circle which is a good thing because if they knew he was still out there or had any idea of just how brilliant he is, they would go after him with everything they have." I sighed.

"Honestly, I think that anyone who actually recalls his existence will just assume he is dead."

"Well you should get rid of any holo-captures you have of him in his white uniform." Shiv cautioned.

I shook my head, not voicing that I thought he was being a bit paranoid. "The only capture I have of him is on Nirauan and he's not wearing his uniform in it. Besides in the Imperial computer system almost all traces of him have been purged. I read in a back issue of Coruscant weekly which said he was thought to have been killed at Endor and most people believed it."

Shiv's mouth tightened in a thin line. "It is a sure bet if they connect him to you, it would be a bad thing for you." He said pushing his point.

"That has been taken care of Siavaan." Uncle Vahlek said in a tone of voice that brooked no more discussion on the matter.

Shiv stared at my uncle, lines of annoyance and frustration marring his usually handsome face but when my uncle did not back down, he then glanced at me.

My eyes flicked to my uncle who gave me the tiniest of nods. "We erased most traces of me and my position as Lord Vader's assistant from all of the archives. All anyone will think if they searched for my name was that I, like so many others, was just a courtesan in Palpatine's court." I explained. "I don't exist in the Imperial Records any more as Lord Vader's office girl." It felt weird to say that out loud and it made me sad, as though a valuable part of my life had suddenly vanished.

The relief on Shiv's face was almost comical. He sighed and sat back against the couch. "So now what?" he asked.

"Now we wait and see what happens next." I said echoing my uncle's words.

Shiv snorted, "Well I know one thing for sure...."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I'm damned well not going into work today and if they don't like it they can fire me!" he said and that made us all laugh, breaking the uneasy tension that had wrapped itself around the room.

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If the New Republic had thought that taking Coruscant had been relatively easy, then by comparison, establishing their foot hold on the planet was anything but because Coruscant was a mess. The Krytos virus was causing mass panic and the supplies of bacta had all but run out. Beings of all species were rushing to get off the planet and as far away as possible causing absolute chaos at all the star ports and shuttle terminals. There was no control because the Imperials had more or less stepped aside and the New Republic was utterly clueless about how to deal with the mass panic and wide spread dissension so the tension mounted.

Banks closed because just about everyone had tried to withdraw their money, unsure what would happen with the Imperial currency, food shopping was damned near impossible due to the line ups and the insane hoarding that was going on and the general infrastructure kept going down due to sabotage. I had never in my life experienced this sort of planet wide chaos before and it scared the hell out of me. It was Uncle Vahlek who kept me from going stir crazy. He took the entire situation in stride, remaining calm when everything around us was falling apart.

“Give it time Lei’lei.” He said, “Things will calm down once the majority of the planet realises the world is not about to end.” And because there was nothing much else I could do I followed his advice.

The first week had been bad and for a great deal of it Shiv and Ynyth stayed with us, sleeping in the guest room while my Uncle slept on the couch, but soon enough, just as my uncle had predicted, things slowly wound down and life began to get back to some semblance of normal.

The HoloNet schedule programmes returned, with a few exceptions, to their normal times and gradually the news of the Emancipation, as it was now being called, gave way to news of the Krytos virus and other, less catastrophic, things. I found it interesting to watch how quickly people settled down, accepting the new government once the essential things like power, food and commerce were all back on line. Thrawn had been right that as long as we were fed, warm and felt safe we were pretty easy going about who actually ran things.

Still, just because the majority of the populace had settled back into their routines did not mean the whole planet had and all over the place small resistance pockets were breaking out, causing havoc with minor acts of terrorism and vandalism. The worsening problem due to the Krytos virus was also not helping to stabilize the planet either. It became

apparent very rapidly that the New Republic, despite their attempts to appear so, were not the saviours of all. There was not have enough bacta to serve the growing need and the new government could not afford to buy more at the sky rocketing prices to save everyone who had been struck with the deadly illness. This was causing a great deal of resentment between humans and non humans and the seeds of unrest, which Isard had so cheerfully sowed, were now growing into full scale civil unrest.

It did not help matters much that many planets had banned all inbound travel from Coruscant for fear of the virus’s spread which only heightened the growing sense of planetary claustrophobia and panic. The unease which had settled over Coruscant was palpable and this tension was making me stir crazy, which in turn drove my uncle nuts. To counteract the cabin fever that had infected me, he had come up with a solution but I wasn’t especially happy with it.

I sighed as I put on my long heavy coat. “Why are we going to this thing again?” I asked.

“Because I think you need to get some fresh air and I wish to take a first hand look at the heroes who will no doubt be attending this ceremony.” He told me as he dressed for going outside. “Now get a move on, I want a decent seat. It’s going to be very busy.”

I was not happy about getting dragged to the memorial service being held for dead rebel pilot named Corran Horn. His name had been splashed all over the HoloNet as a hero who had given his life for the worthy and noble cause of retaking the Core planet. He had apparently been crushed to death when a building had collapsed on him. I thought that this was a somewhat ironic death for a heroic rebel pilot saving the galaxy from the evil empire. When word began to circulate about this memorial service, interest in attending it grew exponentially. It didn’t hurt that his face and his deeds were being touted at every single opportunity so that by the time the day of the memorial rolled around I was thoroughly sick of hearing about him.

My uncle, who had decided it would be a good opportunity to get to see the faces of the New Republic up close and personal, ignored my grumblings telling me that I should take more of an interest in the new government of this world. I had just made a face at him but despite my annoyance, my curiosity had gotten the better of me.

The service was being held at the place where Horn had died. The building which had become his tomb was to also be his memorial. A large stage had been erected and large grandstands had been built up all around the rubble of the collapsed building and then, because of the huge amount of interest and the unusual amount of spectators expected, extra places to sit had also been added onto the surrounding buildings, walkways and all available areas of space. It was going to be exactly as Uncle Vahlek had said it would be: a spectacle of over blown proportions.

It was good that we had arrived early and managed to get decent enough seats, although I noticed with wry amusement the best seats closest to the podiums had all been taken up by what looked like dignitaries and politicians.

“They want to keep their new friends close.” Uncle Vahlek had said by way of answer to my comment.

Despite the amount of beings that were gathering in this place I felt a sliver of unease ripple through me although I couldn't put my finger on why. Jyrki was still a round and I wasn't sure if he really had given up on me or if he was still in stalking mode. I was half afraid that someone would somehow recognise me from my days in the Imperial court and tell the entire planet about my past associations so I had worn a long heavy coat with a hood, my hair tied back in a braid and clothing I could easily move in. My uncle thought I was being a little paranoid and had shaken his head at my attempts of disguise.

“Lei'lei, trust me no one will be looking at or for you.” He had said not doing a very good job at hiding his amusement. I had just shot him a glare, but he was, of course, right.

By the time the ceremony was underway it felt as though half the planet was actually in attendance and the rest would be glued to the HoloNet watching live feed casts being sent across the galaxy. It was great publicity and a much needed opportunity for the shaky new government to show its face. They were playing on the equality of all beings and species bit, touting, not so subtly, their ability to work together against the xenophobia of the Empire. For the most part it was a lot of hot air and pretty words about a dead pilot and how he had become the symbol of hope in a world that had previously been blanketed by evil and gloom. I was amazed at how politicians could say little with so many words. My

uncle remained silent as we listened to these speeches, ignoring me as I let him know through sighs and looks that I was bored out of my skull.

The last person to speak was Commander Wedge Antilles. As my uncle handed me the tiny pair of micro-binoculars he had brought with him so that I could get a good look at the man who had brought Coruscant down. He was older than his purported years and he looked exhausted although he was making a brave front of it. When he stepped up to the microphone a deep hush had rippled across the crowds as everyone waited for him to speak. His voice was gentler than I had imagined it would be and he sounded like a man who had lost too many friends in one too many battles.

I listened with interest to the speech he gave because it wasn't like any of the others. He did not mince words or try to sooth ruffled feathers by speaking in terms that were metaphysical and almost unreal. To hear how some of the speakers talked about Corran Horn one would have thought the dead pilot was a god not a man. Instead of going this route, Antilles spoke plainly which surprised me. I understood from his tone of voice, from his body language that he had been more than just Horn's superior officer, they had been friends and Horn's death had touched him deeply.

*“...You must do what Corran did: fight anything and everything that would give the Empire comfort or security or a chance to reassert itself. If you trade vigilance for complacency, freedom for security, a future without fear for comfort; you will be responsible for shaping the galaxy once again into a place that demands people like Corran Horn fight, always fight and eventually fall victim to evil. ...”*

I sighed. *The Evil Empire*. I wondered at how easy it was to stick simple descriptions on such a vast and all encompassing thing. I tuned back in to hear the last of Commander Antilles' speech.

*“...He has done everything he could to fight the Empire; now it is up to you to continue his fight. If he is ever to know peace, it will only be when we all know peace. And that is a goal every one of us knows is well worth fighting for.”*

He stepped back from the podium then and all around me the crowd applauded loudly but as I watched the officials and dignitaries who were seated closest to the stage I understood they had not been inspired by the commander's speech, if anything he had pissed them off. That made

me smile a little, this new government was already experiencing dissent and unrest. Good, I thought, serves you right.

Contrary to just about everyone else around me, Commander Antilles words had angered me, instead of inspired. This assumption that everything associated with the Empire was evil annoyed me to no end. It was the same old lies each opposing side told its allies and friends. We are right because they are wrong, but who defined right and wrong? The Emperor had often spoken on this very dilemma to me but only now did I begin to understand what he had been trying to get at.

Admittedly, I thought as I watched Commander Antilles speak with a Bothan who did not seem terribly impressed with the commander's words either, there were things done in the name of the Empire which I whole heartedly disagreed with and Isard's latest move had helped to improve that reputation but not everything which had been done during the Emperor's rule had been bad.

Palpatine, for all his megalomania, had brought an entire galaxy more or less together at a time when it was about to rip itself apart. Many, many worlds had prospered under his rule, the might of the military and the navy could have challenged any threat from outsiders, spice dealing and smuggling had been drastically cut and commerce had flourished throughout the trading planets. It amazed me how quickly the good things were forgotten in favour of the negative, even though I knew that the negative was pretty major. Still, it was all about spin and good PR as well as who had the power to weave the glamour to cover up the unwanted truths.

"Who is the Bothan that's speaking to the Commander, Zte'sa?" I asked, switching from basic to minnisiat, a trade language mostly unknown in the Core. Once I had learned that Uncle Vahlek knew this language we had taken to speaking it while in public because so very few people actually spoke or understood it. I had not thought much of it when Thrawn had encouraged me to learn it but as with most things he had given me, it was a gift I silently thanked him for every day. I handed the binoculars back to my uncle so he could take a look.

"If I am not mistaken that would be Borsk Fey'lya." He said carefully, "One of the main politicians in the provisional government although I am unsure of his exact role."

"Well, who ever he is he doesn't like the commander much at all."

Uncle Vahlek turned to give me a glance and a small smile. "No, Lei'lei he doesn't." He said. "I see your ability to observe has greatly increased."

"Navaari taught me well." I told him with a nod.

For a moment he looked as though he wanted to say something about that but then changed his mind. My time with the Dantassi was something he was interested in but he never pushed for information. He nodded slightly. "So what did you think of the speeches?" He asked me, switching tracks.

"Lies and propaganda." I spat, "A crass attempt at trying enlist sympathy for the New Republic and the rebel thugs who murdered the Emperor."

A slight smile pulled at my Uncle's lips. "Perhaps it was at that, but you are now looking at the new government. One, I might add that has been formally recognised by many worlds." He said. "They are no longer rebels, they are now leaders."

His words hit home, like a knife through the heart. I opened my mouth to say more but a sudden, almost overwhelming sensation of panic engulfed me. Cold sweat prickled across my skin and my heart thumped with the surge of adrenaline that was so painful I gasped at it. I grabbed my uncle's sleeve. "We need to go." I hissed urgently.

"Hmm not yet," he said still watching the stage, "I wish to observe the dignitaries as they leave...." My uncle explained.

The terrible sensation that crawled under my skin worsened. Agitated beyond normal I fidgeted and chewed at my pinkie nail. The memorial was over and people around us had gotten up and were leaving. When I could stand it no longer I, too, stood up to go.

"Lei'lei..." My uncle glanced up at me, annoyed. He had mistaken my persistence for impatience, thinking me rude for pushing to get my own way but I wasn't having it. I knew this sensation and while I didn't get it all that often I knew enough to pay attention to it.

I yanked at his arm violently. "Now, right now. We need to get away from this place!" I was still speaking minnisiat but the urgency in my tone and the volume at which I spoke made the people close to us stop and stare.

"Lei'lei, stop it you are drawing attention ...."

I shook my head with impatience and the terrible sense of danger that was crawling all over my skin like maggots on rotting flesh. I grabbed his collar and pulled his head close to mine. “We must get the hell away from here now.” I said slowly and quietly in his ear, “something very bad is going to happen very soon.”

It only took a second for him to suddenly understand that I wasn’t messing around with him and without further fuss or protest he followed me as I hurried my way across the crowded stands to get away from this place. The Memorial service had come to an end and I could hear the echoing words of the master of the ceremony as he officially closed the event by wishing everyone stay safe and vigilant.

I grew more and more anxious as the people leaving had surrounded us in a slow moving crowd that only went in one direction. Gripping my uncle’s hand in mine, I dragged at him as I wove my way through the throng annoying crowds. My persistence and pushiness earning me angry stares but I simply ignored their rude comments about my lack of manners. It was like trying to walk quickly through the snow fields on Hjal without snow-shoes and the slower we moved the more wound up I got. We were getting nowhere fast.

My uncle was about to comment when quite suddenly from behind us there was an enormous explosion followed by several more. For a split second nothing moved then the docile crowd had become a panicking monster. In the blink of an eye, my uncle had wrapped himself around me like a shield and moved us off to one side where we were safe from being trampled or hit from falling, flying bits of wreckage. I felt the wind from the shockwave of the blast but, with his arm curled around my head, my uncle protected my face from it. When some of the dust had settled I could see the damage that had been done and it made my heart stop cold.

The stands where we had previously been seated were now a mess of twisted durasteel and duraplast. Half the concourse we had been sitting above was gone, swept down into the Coruscant’s deep along with the falling stands and all the people who had remained seated to avoid the rush of the crowds. If we had stayed there we would most likely have been caught up in the majority of the explosion and killed. Luckily, who ever it was who had done this had mistimed it. All the important dignitaries and New Republic members had already cleared the area and most people had

already begun to leave as the memorial had finished, so casualties were not as high as they could have been but still, as I glanced all around, there had been casualties and it wasn’t pretty. I fought the wave of nausea that swept through me, gagging back the bile.

“Are you alright?” asked my uncle, his hands biting into my shoulders as his eyes swept up and down me, checking for any injury. I nodded noticing the cut on the side of his forehead where a piece of flying debris had caught him but it was superficial.

“I *told* you we had to leave!” I spat crossly, angry as well as scared.

Uncle Vahlek looked at me and drew a deep breath. “So you did.” He eventually said by way of acknowledgement.

Shaken up, I asked “Can we *please* go home now?”

He nodded absently, still looking over the area which had been blown to bits. “Well,” he said as he wrapped an arm around my shoulder protectively, “This is going to make things interesting.”

“Interesting?” I squeaked. “Your definition of that word definitely isn’t the same as mine Zte’sa.” I muttered under my breath.

My uncle smiled grimly and hurried up his pace so that I had to trot to keep up with him. “We can discuss semantics over a drink when we get home.” He said.

I wasn’t about to disagree with that.

We later found out that the Palpatine Counter Insurgency Front had claimed responsibility of the bombings at the memorial service. The Holo-News showed the captured scenes over and over again until I was numb from them despite the fact that I had been there.

“If they had wanted to kill the new government and its hangers on, they missed.” I snorted as a young twi’lek reporter wearing too much make up over emphasised the drama of it all.

“I don’t think that was the intent, Lei’lei.” Uncle Vahlek said as he curled his hands around the hot tea cup.

“Oh?”

“Assassinating the heroes and government officials by such a cowardly act would only serve to swing even more people to sympathise in favour of the New Republic. No, this was a wilful act of terrorism meant to scare people.”

“From what?”

“From gathering in public.” He answered. “These sort of acts of random violence create an atmosphere of fear which will make it harder for the provisional government to convince everyone that things are all nice and safe now.”

I sighed heavily. “Great, we swap one group of terrorists for another.”

“Maybe, but as far as I can recall the Rebellion never randomly blew people up as a scare tactic. They picked their fights quite carefully.”

“So who would then?”

“People loyal to the Empire, judging by the name of this particular group.”

“Great sarlacc’s teeth, no wonder people in this galaxy think the Empire was evil!” I snapped.

“Oh Lei’lei, the Empire itself wasn’t evil. But many of its leaders were at the very least, too power hungry to think straight and, at the very worse, megalomaniacs with xenophobic tendencies bordering on psychotic.”

“Like Ysanne Isard.”

My uncle gave me a small nod. “For example.”

I made a face. “I should have stayed on Hjal with Navaari.” I grumbled which made my uncle smile.

“I am quite certain, given enough time, this new government will find it has its fair share of problematic politicians out to serve their own purposes rather than the worlds they claim to care about. Power attracts the greedy and the corrupt and it doesn’t matter what side you are on in this regard.”

“In other words they will end up just like the last Republic.” I retorted.

My uncle just raised an eyebrow and took a sip of his tea.

“Everything is cyclical, Lei’lei. History repeats itself all the time. You should have paid more attention in school instead of sneaking out to follow Jyrki around like a little love sick bantha.”

“Well, contrary to popular belief what I learned from Jyrki has actually saved my life on a few occasions...so far history from dull school lessons hasn’t.” I told him tartly.

He had no answer for that but the small smirk that tugged at the corners of his lips had not gone unnoticed.

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It was late and although I was tired sleep would not come. Between nearly being blown up and the never ending nightmare over the Krytos virus, it seemed that my waking life was every bit as frightening as my sleeping one. The violence on Coruscant continued and its effects were beginning to take root. People were scared to go out, or gather in groups. The repercussions from the bombing at the memorial service rippled out like rings from a stone tossed into a still pond. The fear did not lessen with time but rather seemed to worsen and it was as stifling as it was unnerving. Never before had I lived for so long with the ever present sense of doom, not even while working for Lord Vader. Unless I had a damned good reason, I did not leave the flat.

Uncle Vahlek, on the other hand, had vanished for a couple of days, *off scouting*, he had said as I had silently watched him ready for this latest excursion into the underbelly of the planet. I had long since given up asking for details and I worried about him despite his great skill and prowess in all things scary and assassin-like. I suspected he was hunting for Jyrki but he had not been forthcoming on any information and I had not wanted to ask. Jyrki was a sore subject between us so I left it alone.

As much as I enjoyed the peace and quiet when Uncle Vahlek wasn’t in the flat I missed his presence as well. Without his quiet company Thrawn’s flat seem empty as well as lonely and because I could not stand the silence the HoloNet babbled quietly in the back ground. I had gotten used to having it on as company when Uncle Vahlek wasn’t around and had gotten hooked on the nightly reports about the trial of Tycho Celchu.

I felt sorry for the poor bastard. He was an Imperial Pilot who had deserted the Empire after the destruction of Alderaan, blaming that event squarely on the shoulders of the Empire. He had turned to the Rebellion seeking retribution for his family’s death only to be captured by Ysanne Isard and incarcerated in her Lusankya facility and then to a lower security prison on Akrit’tar where he would eventually escape to return to the service of the New Republic. His service to the New Republic in Rogue Squadron was a matter of public record but the fact that everyone believed he was really an Imperial agent working as a spy and a saboteur behind the scenes had the entire galaxy watching the court drama with baited breath. He was suspected of being the person responsible for the Corellian hero,

Corran Horn's death. I was happy not to be in Celchu's shoes. According to the latest poll he was the most reviled man in the galaxy at the moment.

Holocams were not allowed in the courtroom but the late night news did a featured update on the day's events every night and it wasn't looking so good for the hotshot Imperia-turned-rebel pilot. I watched absently as the young reporter wearing far too much lip-shine babbled her way through the latest proceedings, the camera crews trying their best to capture Celchu as he was ushered away from the court room. They had shown stock file images of him and I wondered if I had ever met him at one of the Emperor's shindigs because his face looked vaguely familiar to me but then again I had met hundreds of men like him during my time as Lord Vader's Assistant, and after a while one face tended to blend into another.

He was being accused of treason against the New Republic and I found the whole matter of the trial almost laughable. A traitor of the Empire turned traitor to the Rebellion he had run to. It seemed comical at best and utterly stupid at worst but the New Republic was determined to set an example of him. If Celchu was found guilty he would be put to death and if he was innocent then the New Republic had tried one of its own in the largest publicity stunt ever. It smacked of politics and behind the scenes power mongering to me. *Spin...* no matter what government was in power this was a part of the deal. I wondered what Thrawn would have made of it all and then decided it would disgust him as much as it intrigued me because he had no time to waste on this sort of thing. Regardless of what the truth behind it all was, it did make for good HoloNet drama and I enjoyed the nightly news cast with a drink of some sort and snacks.

I was half way through my second cup of tea when the door chime rang making me jump. It was too late for visitors and Shiv always called first to let me know he was coming. I was wary as I went to the door and pressed the intercom-cam but after a quick indent scan had been performed and I knew who it was, I grinned. A few moments later a very surprised looking Jarack did his best to untangle himself from my hug and before he even had time to speak I had dragged him into the living room.

"It's nice to see you too, Miss Gabriel." He grinned, straightening out his jacket, looking both embarrassed and pleased at the same time. It took me a second to realise he was not wearing his usual Imperial uniform and then another second to notice how tired he was.

"Sit!" I ordered and he did. "What do you want to drink?"

"What do you have?" He asked.

I listed off everything I could think of that was actually in the flat and was more than surprised when he settled for a brandy. I watched as he accepted the glass and sipped the drink slowly as though he were cherishing the very essence of it on his tongue.

"Are you hungry?" I gestured vaguely in the direction of the kitchen, "I could make you something...there are some leftovers...which didn't cook, I promise."

"No, thank you, I ate a little while ago, some Zabracki dinner not too far from here; luckily for me they also serve plain Corellian dishes."

I grinned. I knew that place well. Thrawn and I had often ordered take-out from them. They made excellent food and they were fast.

He sighed and sat back in the chair I had all but shoved him in. "The Admiral will be relieved to hear that you are alive and well." He said after what seemed like forever. "We got word of Coruscant's fall and even I didn't need to be mind-scanner to see his concern."

I looked at him, deciding what to say about that. "We were here in this flat and the rebels kept orbital bombing to a minimum." I said. "But I have to admit, it was a tad scary and I don't want to go through that ever again."

"Understandable. I heard it could have been much worse, and that casualties were kept to a minimum."

I gave him a little one shoulder shrug. "People die in war. This is still a war; it's been going on for so many years that hardly anyone even thinks of it that way any more. What's worse is this in-between time; no one knows what to do, so it's chaotic and crazy. At least the Emperor kept law and order while he was around, now...." I let my voice trail off. What was there to say that Jarack didn't already know?

"Well, Miss, I am certain that when he is ready the Grand Admiral will make his move to restore that order. It is what he excels at, you know."

I nodded. "So...how is he, really?"

Jarack gave me a one sided wry smile. "As always, Miss. He's well and doing what he does best. The work in the Unknown Regions is keeping him busy and we make advances comparatively swiftly. The Admiral has a way about him that allows for seemingly effortless campaigns and he never ceases to amaze me with his brilliance."

It was my turn to let out the breath I had been holding. “Well thank Da’hajn for that.” I murmured. “We could sure use his brilliance here, that’s for sure.”

Jarack gave me a small smile and then dug out his satchel and from it pulled a package. “I apologise for not getting this to you sooner but I thought I was being followed and the last thing I wanted to do was lead anyone to this location.”

“How long have you been on planet then?” I asked motioning him to set the package on the table.

“Over a week doing some Re-Con for the Admiral.” He answered. “It has been an interesting time, I will give it that.” He shook his head. “Listen, if you have anything you want me to take back to Nirauan then you’d better give it to me now, I am not sure when I can get back again. And to be honest, Miss I think you should come back with me.”

I got up and slipped into the bedroom, gathered all the letters I had written and handed them to Jarack. He took them and slid them in to a small plain, single envelope and slid it into his satchel.

“I can’t come back just yet.” I told him.

“May I ask why?” He gave me one of those looks that people give you when they know what you are going to say but they need to hear it anyway.

“Because I have been exposed to people here who had the Krytos virus. It attacks aliens I don’t want to carry it to Nirauan.” It wasn’t the whole truth but I didn’t think that Jarack would accept me saying *because I still have unfinished business here* as an answer. I got the distinct impression that Thrawn had strongly requested Jarack bring me back with him.

“Oh, I see.” He sighed. “Well I can see how that would complicate things for you but according to his research so far it only affects non humans and while he is not human he is also more human like than not, if I can use that phrase. He doesn’t think it will affect him and if that were to happen he assures me his bacta stores are more than enough to handle an outbreak on the base.”

*Typical Thrawn*, I thought, *ready for any and all eventualities*. “Look I know he told you to bring me back to Nirauan but I can take care of myself.” I said plainly, “My uncle is here and things are fine... for the moment.”

“Oh really?” Jarack replied not bothering to hide his scepticism. “I was under the impression that things here are a bloody mess.” He sighed. “And yes he did ask me to escort you home. He doesn’t think it is safe for you here.”

I ignored his use of the word home, Nirauan wasn’t home. I shrugged. “Is any place safe right now?” I asked. “Coruscant is not the only planet that has been experiencing outbreaks of the Krytos illness, or for that matter, riots and dissent. The whole galaxy has gone mad it seems.”

Jarack gave me another one sided smile. “Well, Nirauan and the unknown regions will seem fairly docile by comparison then.”

“I promise,” I said as calmly as I could, “I promise I will come back safe and sound to him when I am finished here.”

“If you have information for him, I can bring it to him you know.”

“I know, it’s just that....”

He held up a hand, “It’s just that you don’t trust what you have with anyone except yourself.” He sighed. “He knew you would feel this way as well.”

“It’s got nothing to do with you.” I said a little defensively.

“I know that and so does the Admiral.” Jarack nodded, “He merely indicated that he was concerned about your well being, said he felt you might *wish* to return.”

“I doubt very much those were his exact words.”

Jarack smirked, “No his exact words were *‘I want her off that planet alive and in one piece, and if you have to carry her over your shoulder to get her out of there yourself, you have my permission to do so although, to be honest, I doubt that will do any good. When she makes her mind up about something she can be quite stubborn you know.’*”

I opened my mouth then closed it again, making a face. Jarack’s imitation of Thrawn’s cultured voice was almost perfect and it certainly did sound like Thrawn in one of his more determined moods. The look on my face must have spoken volumes.

“He just wants you safe.” Jarack explained.

*Safe...* I thought...what meaning did that word even have for me any more? I sighed. I wasn’t finished here yet but I didn’t exactly know why. It was just a gut feeling. “And I promise that will happen, I just need a little more time.” I knew from the expression on Jarack’s face that he did not relish the thought of returning to Nirauan without me. I also knew that

he had expected my answer because I was betting Thrawn had also expected it. If there had been no reason for me to remain on Coruscant I would have returned to Nirauan ages ago but Thrawn was testing the waters as well as letting me know my time was running out.

“It’s late. Do you have a place to stay?” I asked after a lengthy quiet had settled about us.

He shook his head. “I am heading off world tonight; I didn’t want to stay after making the drop and if I did have to smuggle you out I wanted to do it quickly. Either way, I have arranged for transport in a couple of hours. It’s a bad time to be discovered as an imperial operative and I have no desire to let that happen.” He studied his brandy as it swirled around the glass. “It was good to see you alive and well, I am not joking when I tell you he is worried. He wants you back with him and if you don’t come on your own soon he will take this matter into his own hands and it won’t be me asking you politely it will be that Noghri body guard of his sneaking in here in the middle of the night and snatching you away in your sleep.”

I grinned. “He and they can try.”

Jarack shook his head. “I would not push him on this point, Miss Gabriel. The Admiral is not a man to make idle threats and, no offence, but you carry vital information about his operations in the Unknown Regions, the exact whereabouts of the base, as well as the knowledge of his very existence. If you were to get caught the implications for him could be drastic.”

I nodded soberly. “I am well aware of the risks but I am not coming back until I am done here and I am not done here.” I said. “Tell him I am well, the Tze’yusha’Jin does his job and when I am finished with this place, found everything I need I will return to Nirauan, alive and in one piece.”

He blew out the breath he had been holding noisily. “This won’t make him happy.”

“I don’t care.” I lied. “The letters I wrote explain things as they are and he needs to trust me a little.” I didn’t like the feeling of pressure even though part of me knew Thrawn was right, I was pushing my luck, even with my uncle at my side. “He knew I wouldn’t return with you. He would not have given you letters for me if that had been the case.”

Jarack shook his head. “If you ask me, the two of you deserve each other.” He said as he got to his feet and drained the last of his brandy. “Now I have to go and get back so that I can give him the bad news.”

I walked him to the door. “Be careful out there.”

“You too.” Was all he said as he left quietly.

I sighed as I leaned against the door. Jarack and Thrawn were both right, my being here was a risk, a big risk but only, I reasoned, if I got caught, if the people who caught me even knew who I was and if I actually said anything. I didn’t want to consider these options so I poured myself a brandy and settled down to open my mail. He had sent me a slender book of Chiss myths and stories along with two letters. The first letter was short, mostly cheerful banter about his day to day life at the base. Reading between the lines I understood he was busy and that the advancements made into the Unknown regions were great. Thrawn was pleased with the progress so far. The second letter, however, was of quite a different nature and I knew he had been both angry and worried when he had written it.

*A’mia Tekari,*

*What am I to do with you? I allow you to go to Coruscant with the understanding it would be a quick in and out reconnaissance trip and months later you are still there caught in the middle of a war zone.*

*By now you will have no doubt sent Jarack on his way alone and he will ponder the entire journey here how he will explain what I already know. I should never have allowed you to go to Coruscant but what I want and what you do have, more often than not, always been two entirely different things. Now it is I who must wait for news and worry when it doesn’t come. Believe me when I tell you that this is a position I do not enjoy much and the sooner it comes to an end the better.*

*I received word of Coruscant’s fall about three days after it had occurred. News footage and other information have since been brought to my attention and I can only hope that for the New Republic’s sake you were not in the palace when it was attacked. I knew General Tal Ashen fairly well and he was a good, decent man. I watched his death with great sadness and deep regret that I was powerless to do anything about it.*

*I feel much the same way about you still being on Coruscant and I do have to wonder why that is. If it is fear of bringing back this dreadful virus that has been sweeping across that world and subsequently making its way across the galaxy planet by planet then you may rest assured. As*

*it is well known that bacta is the cure I have made certain we do not lack for this invaluable substance despite the apparent rarity given there is only one reliable source. I have also been told that although not being human places me at some risk, I and my kind are 'near enough' so that we are not in any immediate danger, so if this is your worry then you can let it go.*

*My understanding of the virus is limited but Doctor Thracer tells me that due to the speed at which it infects, and its apparent short incubation time in all likelihood it will burn itself quickly rather than slowly by killing the hosts too swiftly to allow enough time for further infection. He also informs me that all the information he has been able to find on it so far suggests that infection methods are limited; suggesting the vectors as being direct bodily fluid contact with an infected person in the end stage or through the water system which means you would not be a carrier. I do not need to ask you if you have discovered the source of this terrible plague, you and I both know who is behind it and it is my hope that at the appropriate time I will be able to deal with her. As I understand it she went to ground shortly before the planet fell and has not been seen or heard from since. These are difficult times for those of us who still maintain loyalty to the ideals the Emperor had. Everything is clouded by uncertainty, even I am unsure at this point on how exactly to proceed.*

*I do not have the man power necessary to win back the Core right now and even with the recruitment we are currently doing in the Unknown Regions, there would never be enough time to find and train all those we would need in order to retake and reorganise all that has so far been lost. To arrange for such a full scale attack of this nature I would require many more ships, skilled pilots and the ground troops to do so. In short I would need the Emperor's clone army, just as he had when he was still senator and needed to defend the Old Republic. I am truly surprised that he did not keep a store of clones on hand, it seems to me that man of his power and nature would have some set aside to be ready for just such an eventuality as invasion, especially as he was aware of such a possibility, a threat from beyond this galaxy's borders. Unfortunately, I have been backwards and forwards through all the data, files and secret documents which I have been able to gather and I can find no clues as to the whereabouts of such a facility, if there ever was one to begin with. In*

*light of this I will not come charging in to the rescue as it were, but instead remain out here a hidden, dark secret, until the time is right for my return and make no mistake I shall return and bring back some order out of this current chaos. In the meantime I continue the work I began out here.*

*I am currently working to build cordial ties with Csilla with regards to an alliance between myself and the Ascendancy. It is an interesting process, long and often tedious especially when a great deal of it is in secret. I sometimes wish you were here for your translation skills alone. I could use another who can speak both basic and Cheunh fluently as well as the myriad of other languages you have been gifted with. Trying to act as both mediator and translator does get wearying at times and, aside from that, I miss your company.*

*I will not dance around this subject, my dear; I want you to leave Coruscant. You do not need to stay on Nirauan with me; you may go where you please although I would prefer that not be the case. Remaining on Coruscant is tempting fate and I think, like the little jaxes you adore so much, you have used up your nine lives. I am worried about you and it is distracting.*

*So what will it take to get you off this single minded and dare I say it, misguided mission you have taken on? Shall I write you love letter to tell you that I miss you? I do. Or try to find the words to let you know that my bed seems too large and far too empty without you in it with me? It does. Should I, perhaps, describe to you the longing I find I have in the quiet hours of the night for softness of your skin under the touch of my fingers, or the seductive power that your own caresses have over me? Would it be wise to mention how the scent of your perfume, which lingers in the air like a ghost, creating a need that can only be satisfied by the heat we generate when we mate, makes me restless and edgy? Perhaps this is not enough....*

*What if I were to say that you offer me insight and a point of view which helps me to see a greater picture? That it is not only your physical presence, or the liveness of your body, naked next to mine, but also your thoughts and your rather unique way of looking at the galaxy that I find myself longing for. These things, these thoughts, so private, so intimate that only you will ever know of them, lie heavy in my heart, a distraction I can ill afford yet would be loath give up. I have to ponder*

*upon the wisdom of getting involved with a wild and unpredictable sprite such as you are and then, having become involved, I wonder about the decision to let you go. Not that I believe for one moment I could keep you safely locked up here if you did not wish it.*

*My people would say you have bewitched me my dear, but the Dantassi have better words for it than that. Kirja'navaar'inkjerii would lecture that this is what it means to be bound and he would also add, somewhat smugly, that it serves me right for tangling with a desert witch whose beauty, powers and passion have quite intoxicated me.*

*These are uncertain times and for reasons I cannot fathom and have long given up trying to understand, you anchor me to something I cannot define but most definitely need. Please, leave whatever it is you think you must accomplish on Coruscant and return to me, nothing you could learn there, even for my campaign, is worth risking your life for. Ilat'h'mera'talshti'Ja,  
Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

I sighed, read his letter again and sighed some more. Deep within my soul an ache of need and longing had welled up, threatening to drive me mad because there was no release. How he could elicit such emotion, such sensation from mere words was beyond me and a little part of me hated him for this talent. While I had no doubt he had meant ever single thing he had said, he knew exactly the effect it would have on me; the not so subtle manipulation to drive me back to where he felt I would be safe. Even so, Jarack could have badgered me until he was blue in the face and I wouldn't have budged a centimetre.

Despite the fact that this letter was almost enough to make me pack up my things and leave right now without even saying goodbye to anyone, I wasn't ready yet. Thrawn could be persuasive in this way and I missed him terribly. His letters, an exquisite form of torture, made me remember why I missed him in excruciatingly painful detail. Now, knowing that the virus probably would not be a huge threat to him made staying here seem all the more ridiculous but a part of me whispered to do just that all the same. I had unfinished business here, I just didn't know quite what it was yet.

I had not been lying to Jarack when I had said I wasn't done here and leaving now would be a mistake. Something nagged at me, the way a

half remembered name slithered around the back of one's brain, itching and prickling enough to be annoying, enough to make sitting still impossible. I re-read Thrawn's letter a third time stopping at this passage... *I am truly surprised that he did not keep a store of clones on hand, it seems to me that man of his power and nature would have some set aside to be ready for just such an eventuality as invasion. Unfortunately, I have been backwards and forwards through all the data, files and secret documents I have been able to gather and I can find no clues as to the whereabouts of such a facility, if there ever was one....* I closed my eyes and sat back in the chair. I was missing something but I couldn't find the thread. It niggled at the back of my mind like a half forgotten dream. I should know the answer to this, I thought, I should know, but the more I thought on it, the more I lost the tiny inkling.

I stopped concentrating and let out the breath I had been holding slowly. There was nothing else to do but go to bed and sleep except I knew that was never going to happen. I was edgy, restless and missing Thrawn more than I ever dared to admit. His letters had stirred me up and sleeping was the very last thing on my mind. It was too late to call Shiv and I had no idea where my uncle was or when he'd be back. Sitting around Thrawn's flat on my own was difficult enough but coupled with the incessant and annoying sensation that I was missing something important was driving me insane so I decided to head out to the Imperial palace and see if I could sneak in. Maybe, I rationalised as I shoved a few things in my satchel, whatever it was I was trying to find would reveal its self to me there.

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It was raining hard, something that was unusual for Coruscant but the weather grid had been screwy every since the night the Rebels had taken the planet. I didn't mind. Rain made everything anonymous somehow and it fitted my pensive, gloomy mood. It was difficult to see and, despite the fact it was just past two in the morning, the speeder lanes were still busy with traffic which meant I didn't stand out.

I took a convoluted route to the Imperial Palace and when I arrived close enough to get a good look at it I was stunned to see the damage that had been done. Shiv had warned me that this was the case but

I hadn't actually taken his words to heart. I had been too upset with the fact that he had decided to return to his old job and was now working for the enemy to pay much attention to his descriptions of the destruction. He could have gotten a job with anyone and had, in fact, been offered several interesting positions with a variety of hospitality companies and hotel chains but he had turned them all down when he learned he could return to the palace. At first I had been so angry with him for making this decision that I had refused to speak to him for several days even though he had pointed out defensively, it was a job and Coruscant was an expensive place to live. I had been surprised that the New Republic even allowed him to continue working, although his job had changed significantly.

He had shrugged. "What were they supposed to do, instantly replace every single person on the staff? That would have been disastrous, they don't have a clue how a lot of the things work in the palace. After hours of interviews and some background checks, they decided that mostly it would be okay if many of the civilian staff returned to work, with certain conditions of course."

It was easy to be mad at Shiv because I wasn't in his situation and I didn't have to work. Thrawn's flat was paid for and I was, by current standards, considered wealthy. My salary, which had been paid directly to a bank account, had accumulated over the years and since I had been given an expense account for clothing, a ship with fuel included for my transportation it wasn't as if I had ever actually spent much of the money I had earned. My uncle, having been through galactic upheavals before made some investment suggestions and with his advice and help I soon had most of my earnings and wealth shifted into precious metal commodities. He assured me that while currencies had a tendency to come and go like fashion, the commodities I now owned would only ever increase in value, especially in times of civil unrest. The whole discussion of money had left me somewhat bewildered, it was never something I had worried much about because I had never wanted to be rich and I had never been truly poor. As long as I could pay for ship fuel, buy food and water and clothe myself, money wasn't something I had ever thought about. On Tatooine credits meant nothing compared to the value of water.

Finally I stopped giving him the silent treatment and had asked why he had gone back to his old job and not chosen to do something new.

"It's what I know Rim-girl and I know it very well. This makes me valuable." He had said with a small shrug. This had been a half truth but before I could call him on it he clarified it for me. "Plus, it will allow me to get a handle on what this new government is all about. Maybe it won't be so bad. I need to understand them and their way of doing things. I can't spend the rest of my life hating them because they took a stand against Palpatine's rule and let's face it, Merlyn, Palpatine was evil." I had been more than shocked to hear him say this, even though I agreed with it, but before I could argue with him he had added, "You don't know the half of the stuff that went on in the palace. You didn't work for the Empire that long and Vader kept you sheltered whether you want to believe it or not. You had his protection and you had his favour. When you hooked up with Thrawn that became two very powerful men who made it quite clear to the rest of the scyks in their circles that you were off limits. You, yourself told me that Palpatine had plans for you and that they were not good plans. He would have twisted you and used you until there was nothing left but a shell and now that won't happen. Now you don't need to be scared to use your force powers or explore the different paths and options. If you wanted to you could seek out Vader's son and ask him to teach you in the Jedi arts."

It was a long speech for Shiv and his tone of voice had been both bitter as well as pleading. I didn't need to use any of my witchy ways to know he was torn by what had happened and during his time working at the Imperial palace under Palpatine's rule he had seen many terrible things happen but he had rarely spoken of them, maintaining an appearance of fluffy and even simple-minded cheerfulness. I had had no idea he had felt this way up until now and the really frustrating thing was that he was right.

"Merly, you got lucky. Palpatine left you alone for a long time, choosing instead to subtly manipulate you rather than force you down a path that could and probably would have broken you. Vader liked you and you did your job well. As weird as it sounds you meant something to him and that saved you a world of grief. I could tell you horror stories that would make you vomit about things which were done behind the scenes. And for all the good things the Empire did for this galaxy, there are enough negative aspects that I, for one, am relieved to see some change."

I had just stared at him and then glanced at my uncle who had watched and listened to this exchange with his usual guarded quite. Uncle

Vahlek had nodded in agreement but a little part of me had still felt as though Shiv was betraying something I could not define or let go of and that had shown on my face.

“The Empire, as you knew it, doesn’t exist any more Lei’lei.” Uncle Vahlek had chided. “Don’t you dare judge your friends for wanting to adapt and survive.” He had said with an edge to his voice I seldom heard. “You have no idea how lucky you truly are. Thanks to Thrawn’s generosity you co-own property on Coruscant outright, and because of him you also have a mate who will provide you with everything you would ever need, should you but ask. You have never known poverty or faced the threat of losing your home in your life. You are both spoiled and lucky and it is only your unusual nature that has kept you from turning into the kind of person you yourself despise.”

He had spoken so sharply that tears had sprung to my eyes but he had been right. What did I know of these things? I *was* spoiled and I *was* lucky and above all I had never known the sort of uncertainty Shiv and Ynyth were now facing before in my life. No matter what happened Thrawn had seen to it that I would be provided for and until my uncle had so bluntly pointed this out I had never really given it much thought.

When I had begun to work for the Empire one of the things that had struck me the most was the wealth, the opulence and the arrogance that went along with it. Money and power, the two were inexplicably linked, but I didn’t understand why that was. What had amazed me even more was the disparity between the very rich and the very poor especially on Coruscant. Tatooine had its share of wealthy people, most notable were the Hutts, but none of them came even close to the money I saw wasted on Coruscant. What my wardrobe alone had cost could have purchased a docking bay and several houses on my home planet.

I had talked with Thrawn about this at great length because it was a subject that sometimes worried at me. I felt guilty for the amount of credits spent on frivolous things, like the pretty dresses I wore to the Imperial events, especially when I knew that other people struggled to get by. In the end I had donated a portion of my salary to a charity and left it at that because I hadn’t known what else to do.

“You cannot change the way the galaxy works, tekari.” Thrawn had told me somewhat exasperated one day. “Greed and commerce will rule it. There will always be those who have and those who have not.

Credits, like anything else are just a tool. Damned annoying when you don’t have enough, but having too much can also be problematic.”

“How do you figure that?” I had asked crossly. I hated it when he lectured, especially when he was right and I knew it.

“What do you do when you have everything you could ever hope for and more? When there is nothing more you hunger for? What happens to your soul?”

I had sighed. “You end up like Prince Xizor.”

Thrawn’s smile had been sunlight. “Exactly.” He had said. “Be happy that you live well and can experience some of the finer things this planet, this galaxy has to offer, give what you can when you can but do not feel guilty for what you earn from a job most people in this galaxy would not do even if it made them billionaires over night. Personally, I do not think you get paid enough to take the abuse you do.”

I had made a face then and his reply, a not so gentle kiss, had been a pre-emptive strike against what would have been a tirade on my part about how I liked my job, an argument we had often and one which was usually settled in the bedroom where we would agree to disagree and leave it at that.

Once I had gotten over my prejudice of Shiv’s decision to work for the New Republic, I welcomed his tales of the comings and goings in the palace. Mostly he delighted in telling about the reconstruction work that was being done to repair all the damage that had been inflicted upon the building during the battle for the planet. He had also said it was a damned good job none of us had been in the building during that time or shortly after it had fallen because New Republic loyalists had broken in to the palace, looting everything in sight and murdering anyone they suspected of being even remotely connected to the Empire. Once all that nonsense had been stopped and some sort of normalcy had been reinstated, many people had gone back to work as though nothing much had changed.

“They are renovating much of the buildings back to the style it had been before the Emperor took over. I have the connections and the experience to deal with the contractors and the workers. I can broker the best deals. I know how the system here works they don’t, so they need me.” He had said a little smugly, “They have explored but not touched much of the old part of the palace yet. Security is limited at best, and the internal surveillance system was shot to poodoo when the palace was bombed. Your

old apartment was hit as was your office but I am not sure about your balcony or your old training room.”

“Maybe I’ll have to explore a bit.” I had grinned.

“Like bloody hell you will, Lei’lei!” My uncle had interjected with an explosive growl that had made even Shiv raise his eyebrows. “You will stay away from that place or else!”

At the time I had just made a face and rolled my eyes because I really had no intention of going back to the palace. Now, as I manoeuvred my speeder around the enormous complex to survey the actual damage done I felt a strange sense of sadness mixed with apprehension. This had been home once. Not that I had ever really felt at home here but I did have a strange attachment to the place and it was distressing to see parts of it reduced to piles of shattered rubble. I flew as close as I dared to the area where I had once lived, Shiv had been right, it had pretty much been obliterated. Then I steered to look over what had once been my favourite place in the world to go. What I saw made my heart ache.

The balcony where I had first met Thrawn was gone, sheered off leaving only ragged stone and duracrete behind. Despite the damage to the outer wall the doors to the balcony had remained intact so my guess was that part of the palace had managed to escape major internal damage but through the darkness and the rain it was impossible to say for sure.

That the balcony was gone made me sad. This place had been special. It was here that Thrawn had kissed me for the very first time. I closed my eyes for a second, bringing up that particular memory. He had seemed so dangerous and he had made me so very nervous yet at the same his manner had been beguiling and his seduction had been so very full of promise. “*Working for the Empire may not always agree with you, Miss Gabriel,*” he had said in a voice that reminded me of fine, warm brandy, “*but I get the distinct impression that being with me does.*” Neither of us had reckoned on how much that single kiss would change our lives or just how right he was.

For a moment I was lost in thought and then realised that mourning the past was a waste of time. This building was no longer my home and until Thrawn came up with some bold and daring plan the Empire would never rule from it again which meant I had to find something to help him. I wasn’t going to do that sitting in my speeder

weeping for an old stone balcony on a building that was never mine to begin with.

I veered away, making it appear as though I were just another nosey passer-by and then doubled back to where I originally wanted to go. When I found the perfect spot, I carefully landed my speeder on one of the lower maintenance landing pads and hoped that Shiv’s unwitting intel on the state of palace security had been correct.

At the height of the Empire these areas were mostly used by service personnel and maintenance droids. It was dark, quiet and the surveillance equipment which the Empire had used to maintain security in this area was now no longer working, at least this was what Shiv had told me.

“They had to shut off most of the power to these old maintenance areas because of the damage from the bombing. Apparently the entire internal surveillance and security systems were completely messed up, probably something Isard set into place should the Palace ever be taken. The Republic’s slicers still have not figured out how to bypass the old codes so they had to shut the whole system down and use droids or guards as watchmen, but they don’t have the manpower to do this job adequately.” He had said. “It’s sad actually because looters get in all the time and steal anything that isn’t permanently fixed in place and aside from trying to patrol the major problem areas there isn’t enough people to watch all the entrances all the time, bad for the palace and the New Republic but good for me.

I made sure to park the speeder where it could not easily be seen or found, using the slot furthest away from the building to look as though I was just someone abusing the parking space to avoid paying fees. As I glanced around I saw I was not the only one doing this. Parking was always an issue on Coruscant and in the Imperial center it had, for as long as I knew, been outrageously expensive. There were a number of bars and clubs situated around the area so it would be a plausible explanation for leaving the speeder here without drawing too much attention. I figured the New Republic had enough on its hands without worrying about illegal parking and getting a citation for that violation would be a whole lot easier to deal with than getting caught trying to break into the Palace. Although, I had reasoned to my self, was it actually breaking in when I had a valid key-code and used to actually work here?

The rain was coming down in sheets and I was grateful for the heavy over cloak I wore which was both dark and waterproof. Not only did it keep me dry, as well as hide my body from view making me look like a shapeless shadow, but with the hood pulled up and low over my face all that anyone looking would see was a dark figure trying to escape the gloomy weather. I was anonymous and almost invisible which was just the way I wanted it, especially as I was actually trying to get into the palace not run away from it. The entrance I came to was half hidden by an overhang and had been a small service entrance used mainly by droids and technical personnel with a specific clearance. When my uncle had erased me from the Imperial databank he had managed to do so in a way that had maintained my security clearance and kept my codes intact. To this day I still wasn't sure how he had managed this feat but I wasn't going to complain.

Taking a deep breath and hoping that I wasn't about to set off a billion alarms I punched in one of the few codes I knew which had given me access to the majority of the palace entrances. While working for Lord Vader had been dangerous and often painful, it did have its up sides and one of them was almost unlimited access. The door-lock's light blinked from red to green and with a soft hiss it opened for me. I slipped inside like a shadow and held my breath as the door closed gently behind me, waiting to see if anyone came running to arrest me or worse. When, after what seemed like an hour but was really only a few moments, nothing happened I heaved a sigh of relief and began to make my way into the palace. I had no idea what I was looking for only that something had drawn me back to this place and the nagging sensation had grown more intense now that I was actually inside the building. Of course getting in had been the easy part, the hard part was now to come...actually figuring out what it was I was here for and how to find it.

The small corridor was dimly lit and I could by the dust build up tell that it had not been recently used. I knew that if I kept walking straight I would eventually hit one of the main service areas and the likelihood of bumping into a watchman or guard was much higher so I wanted to find an alternative route towards the core, towards the areas the Emperor would have used. I was certain that what I wanted to learn was hidden deep within his chambers and I had been to a part of his private area once before so I had a vague idea of where I needed to go.

Once I was absolutely certain no one had discovered my break-in and no one was coming to get me I rummaged around my satchel and brought out the data card with the palace blue prints on it and the hand held reader I had brought with me. I had hoped that it would help me orientate myself because the palace, with its over twenty thousand rooms and chambers, was an enormous place and I knew only a very small portion of it by heart and those were well used areas which had been busy and populated by palace staff. Now I wanted to use the service tunnels and perhaps even secret tunnels to stay out of anyone's way. I did not want to have to explain what I was doing in the palace in the early hours of the morning without the appropriate clearance from the current occupying force.

According to the technical readout I was on the south west side of the main building, near a service area primarily used to deal with power routing and back up generators. This would have been an area deemed Cresh-clearance, important but not vital. Most C-class technicians would have had mid-level access which meant I should not have problems bypassing any security I came across. The big problems with that would come later when I delved deeper into the Emperor's secrets; at least I hoped I would make it that far. I studied the data for a long moment trying to get my bearings and then fairly certain of where I had to go next, I tucked the reader and the data disk back in my satchel, pulled out a small hand torch and set off.

The service corridors ran parallel to the main corridors, sort of narrow passages large enough for droids and humans to walk through without having to interrupt the daily routines or the prettiness of daily palace life. Who among the Palace elite wanted to see technicians at work? These corridors allowed day to day maintenance to be done without anyone knowing it was being done, maintaining the illusion of perfection within the palace confines. I also thought that it was partly to keep the maintenance guys from being hassled by everyone who had a problem but didn't feel like going through the appropriate channels to get it fixed. In some ways these passages were very much like secret tunnels in that most of the palace population never knew about them and the entrances to these service ways were hidden from view to keep from ruining the beauty of the palace interior, only accessible by code key clearance and labyrinth like without some sort of a map, for while they often ran parallel to the main

hallways they also deviated when rooms, stairwell and turbo lift shafts got in the way. It would have been very easy to get lost in one of these tunnels and I was grateful I had a map.

Palpatine's main audience chamber was atop the highest point in the palace complex. While I knew that he had spent time in this place I also knew that he had built, for himself, secret chambers else where. When he had taken me to see the small statue that my mother had posed for when she was a child, we had been mid level and on the east side. The room with his treasures, including *The Waiting Dancer*, had been in a part of the palace which had remained untouched since before the fall of the old Republic, old and stunning its architecture and it was to this place I now headed, drawn without even realising it. He had told me it was a part of the palace that few ever visited and at the time I had assumed this had been because he did not allow it but as I slowly navigated my way through the labyrinth of services corridors and turbo lifts, drawn partly by instinct and partly by guess work using the technical plans I had, hoping no one would notice me, I began to wonder if it was because people had been led to believe that part of the palace was no longer usable or somehow had the idea it simply didn't exist.

The Emperor had been strong enough with the force to create such an illusion, after all he had manipulated the entire fleet through the force, and it would have been a hell of a lot easier to assert this sort of will over a small area of the palace he did not want trespassers in than setting up elaborate security which would have called attention to a place he wished to keep secret. Palpatine had been a master at illusion and hiding in plain sight, why should this be any different?

I walked for a long time and even with the use of some of the service shuttles and turbo lifts it took me the better part of an hour to get to where I thought I wanted to be. It wasn't just help from the data I had that led me to this place, I was also following my gut because on some level I was being led to the place I wanted to go. If this had not been something I had experienced before I would have been unnerved by it, now I was just worried that whatever it was I was being drawn towards would be as awful as the time I had found the Jedi Council room.

After a few wrong turns and some tense moments where I thought I heard someone in the tunnel with me but actually turned out to be a stray hawkbat I came to the exit I needed. For a long moment I stood at the

access door with my ear pressed to the cold metal and listened for any sound or sign of life on the other side. I closed my eyes and stretched out with my force powers but there was nothing unusual or dangerous there as far as I could tell. I punched in the same access code I had used before and a quiet snick let me know the lock had released. I touched the panel and it slid sideways opening to a hallway I immediately recognised. I stepped out into the hall and was suddenly overcome by a strange sense of repulsion and fear all at the same time.

My initial instinct was to bolt straight back into the service tunnel and run for home but then a voice in the back of my head cut through my panic and I understood that I had been right about the Emperor and his protection of this place. I swallowed back my rising fear and steadied my breathing, allowing my senses to shift and move around me. There was no one here, but that made sense. There was such an overpowering sense of unwelcomeness, of fear here that most people would simply turn away without even realising they had done so and never question why. I drew a steadying breath and let the force flow around me, through it I could sense the power Palpatine had left here and it was an awe inspiring thing, so simple yet so effective.

I walked towards the ornate doors that hid the room where the little statue I had been allowed to see and touch had lain. A ripple of apprehension slithered across my back. What if the Emperor wasn't actually dead? What if his death had been a ruse and he lived, and was here? What if, what if, what if? The pervasive sense of fear that pressed upon my shoulders was terrifying. It reminded me of some of the nightmares I had been having. The closer I got to the ornate doors, the worse the fear became until I thought it would drive me mad. Logically, a part of me knew that there was nothing here which would harm me but the feelings I had were a whole other story. I had not experienced this when I had been here before but of course, then I had been a guest of the Emperor and had been protected from this rather unusual security system.

I was certain anyone else who had ventured into this part of the palace had also experienced this unnamed dread and unless they had been really well trained to overcome their natural instincts to run or were a super power in the force it was my guess no one had actually managed to step beyond these doors since the Emperor's death. I bent my own will

against that of the now dead Emperor and forced myself to ignore the screaming sensation of danger which pounded in my skull and reached for one of the door handles. Without even thinking about it, I shut my eyes, gritted my teeth and I tried the door. To my great surprise it opened, allowing me to slip through unharmed. As soon as the doors had closed behind me, the feeling of utter dread vanished leaving me bathed in a cold sweat and shaking but otherwise unharmed. I exhaled loudly, then opened my eyes and swore in disbelief.

For a long still moment I wondered if I had somehow stepped into the wrong room. I was certain that this was the same place Palpatine had taken me to when he had wanted to show me the small statue by Tarkannull but the room I now faced was empty. I just stared around me not knowing what to do next. I had been certain that the answers I sought were here but it seemed that was not the case and I felt a flash of annoyance at the unseen guide who was determined to lead me on some annoying wild bantha chase to find answers I was pretty certain I already knew but just couldn't figure out.

Once the shock and the last vestiges of fear had worn off I walked around to see if there was anything at all which would suggest what had happened to all the art that had once been here. It was entirely possible, I thought that it wasn't the same room at all, but when I shone my torch on the floor I could see where heavy objects had once stood, scratch marks and a slight difference in the colour of the wood, marking the places of the display pedestals and heavy sculptures. It was the right place but everything had been removed and while I should not have been surprised, I was.

Palpatine had coveted the treasures he had hidden here so that only he could view them when ever he wished to. His delight at owning the priceless and rare works of art had been as blatantly obvious as his desire to unravel *The Waiting Dancer's* secrets. So where had all the pieces of art gone. More to the point, when had they been removed and why?

I switched off the small hand torch and stood in the darkness, suddenly realising that this room had no windows. I had not noticed this when I had been here the last time as it had been dark and I had been far too wrapped up in the moment to notice much else. Now it seemed to stand out, no windows meant that either the room was not on any outside wall or it had been deliberately built this way so as to be hidden from

outside view. I suspected the former was more likely. Palpatine had loved his treasures and had hoarded them jealously, owning these priceless works of art so that only he could sit and view them had been a source of glee for the man. He had been selfish that way, sharing was not in his vocabulary unless it meant he gained from it.

I sat down on the floor and pulled out the data core reader, switching it on to view the technical readouts again. The eerie green glow seemed to make the empty room more forlorn and all the more deserted. I scanned through the plans searching for this exact room, because I had managed to find the service corridors that led to the hall outside but the room itself did not exist on these plans, according to what I was looking at on the screen I was sitting in a dead end. I sighed and leaned back against the wall. *Think, think, think...* I chanted softly, I had been drawn here for a reason I was certain of that but the cryptic methods by which I was being led often meant I had to unravel a huge puzzle. Nothing, it seemed, that had to do with the force, ever came easy. So I closed my eyes and let my thoughts drift, trying to sort out the answers in the darkness.

When I had been going through training in what Thrawn had called The Center, one of the exercises I had been put through was how to find one's way in the dark. This training facility which was deep down in the lower levels of the Imperial palace had been set up to train the Emperor's elite agents among others so a lot of the exercises had been created with force users in mind. As I sat on the floor in the dark I remembered some of my experiences in this place, one of which was to find secrets embedded in the walls, floors and just about any other place a person could think of by using the force. They had been frustrating exercises which had more often than not had me stamping my feet in annoyance and anger.

*"Merlyn,"* Master Kjestyll would say, *"you cannot unravel these mysteries by pounding on the walls with your fists, these are subtle drills designed to train your mind and your unique gifts. Stop fighting against them and allow the answers to flow to you."*

His voice was so clear in my mind that for a second I thought he was with me now and I knew a pang of sorrow that I would probably never see him again. I owed him so much more than I cared to even think about.

With a sigh, I drew a deep breath and began the job of concentrating, just as I had been taught. This ability to find things through

the force was not one of my strongest talents and I had neither excelled at it nor particularly enjoyed it. During the time I had been training under the Bunduki master, more often than not it had both frustrated and eluded me but I understood the principle behind it and hoped that now some of this training would finally pay off because I needed it more now than ever.

I could feel the lingering essence Emperor's power as I opened myself up to the force. It was a taint that I didn't anyone would ever be able to rid this part of the palace of and it tasted like sour milk. It made me shudder but I found the thread I was looking for and followed it, surprised that I had not noticed it on my own.

*The best place to hide things is often in plain sight.* My uncle's words echoed in my mind now as I got up from the floor and made my way over to the spot on the wall that appeared to radiate a soft light. I placed the flat of my hand against it and the large panel in the wall slid smoothly and without sound to reveal a passage way. I didn't even consider the consequences; I simply walked into the blackness and hoped that it wouldn't kill me. I just about jumped out of my skin when a light flickered on and for a few seconds I stood there half blind and very confused. This was not another tunnel at all but a turbo lift.

I glanced around the lift and frowned in puzzlement, wondering why there would be a lift only to a room in a part of the palace that no one else could get into except the Emperor, then decided I would learn the answer to this question probably sooner rather than later. There were only two options on the small panel, up or down. When I tried up it asked for a code. I was about to punch in the access code I had been using but a ripple of uncertainty made me change my mind. I lightly touched the down button and felt a small jolt, shivering as the brief flash of an image zapped into my head.

The Emperor had been the last person to use this turbo lift and when he had left it the code was still active. He had not returned to the lift so I figured he had left the room via the doors and the outside hallway. I took a chance and pressed the button, holding my breath as I did so. The turbo list hummed and then in a motion that was both smooth and silent it began to descend. As it zipped downward I felt my ears pop and realised I was headed deep into the under belly of the palace. When the door opened I was not at all prepared for what I saw there and shook my head in disbelief as I stepped out of the lift.

The Imperial palace was an enormous complex and often to get from one side to the other people used small private tunnel shuttles. I had known of and used a few but many were considered off limits and solely for the private use of the Emperor or very high ranking officials, Moffs and courtiers. People of my station, despite the privileges afforded me by Lord Vader usually walked, took the main turbo lifts or hopped a lift on the small service vehicles that were used to ferry larger items from one place to another.

The small shuttle that stood opened before me was so opulent that I knew it had once been owned by the Emperor. He had spared no expense for his desires and I wondered, a little grimly, that had majority of the galaxy's populace known just how much wealth the Emperor had squandered on luxuries such as this if they would not have tried to overthrow him earlier. I hesitated a moment.

"Go." A subtle voice whispered urgently in my ear.

I glanced around to see if there was someone else there but the space around me was empty. Feeling both ill at ease and curious I stepped into the shuttle-car.

It had been designed as private and worked without a driver or operator and it was, by comparison to some of the ones I had heard about minimal in its space and features. Some shuttles, so I had been told, came complete with fresher stations and sleeping compartments. Those, I had assumed were for tunnels that traversed the Imperial Center and went long distances. This one was not quite so fine so I figured it either stopped along the way or the end destination was not so far that someone would feel the need to take a nap in between.

I glanced about. This place had Palpatine's touch and I felt his presence strongly, like the residue of fine dust left in the wake of a desert storm he was everywhere. I sat on a seat and felt the ghostly memory of his caresses across my face, his beguiling, avuncular kindnesses that had been laced with a subtle malice and his satisfied laughter when he finally had what he wanted from me. His voice, his life force and this vile laughter now seemed to echo around me, and for a moment I wondered if he were somehow right there in this car along side of me.

"He's dead!" I told myself firmly but the presence that lingered here was malevolent and very real. Suppressing a shudder I studied the

control panel and tried not to dwell on the fear which threatened to make me turn tail and go back home.

Like most of the tunnel shuttles this one only went two ways, to a destination point and back again with stops along the way, much like some of the monorails on a few planets I had been to. I glanced around and thought that I would gain nothing by sitting here all alone so I hit the red start button and hoped I would not attract any unwanted attention. On the display there were five stops listed, two were actually in the palace, one was Prince Xizor's now destroyed palace and two were not given specific names, just destination numbers. I blew the air that I had been holding in my lungs noisily and decided to let the shuttle go to the final destination point, it seemed logical to start at the very end and work my way back.

It was an odd thing to be sitting in a place that once only the Emperor had used. I was quite certain that not even Lord Vader had known about this shuttle and at first it seemed a little unlikely that the Emperor would go anywhere without his Royal guardsmen but then I realised he had not always been the Emperor, at one time he had been playing a dual role and the need for secrecy had been great. I marvelled at how he could have done that's o well, portrayed the kindly, caring benevolent senator as well as the deadly Sith Lord Sidious. No one had figured it out and it was only because Palpatine revealed himself to Anakin at the boy's weakest moment did the Jedi council finally learn that Palpatine had played them for dupes all along. Not even the great and powerful Master Yoda had seen it coming and to my mind it had served them right for the arrogance and narrow minded viewpoints.

Thinking about this history made me curious and I began to touch the surfaces of everything I could see. I was astounded to realise that no one except Palpatine had ever used this vehicle and that he had done so long before the Empire had even existed. This shuttle dated back to a time when most people had believed him to be a benevolent elderly senator with only the best intentions at heart.

I saw images of him in stately robes as well as a large, hooded cloak. He seemed to meld from one personality to the other with the ease of a shape shifter. I shivered. His powers had been so great and he had been so patient. No one had even suspected him at all and how he had laughed at the Jedi, scattering themselves to the four corners of the galaxy in search for of the Evil Sith Lord when all along he was there right under

their noses. I sat, lost in thought and so completely engulfed in the memories and images I was seeing, half dozing in the process, that I lost completely track of time and very nearly yelled with fright when the shuttle suddenly stopped and the door slid open. Well, I thought, whatever it was I was looking for had better be here because I had almost fallen asleep on that stupid shuttle and that would have been a bad thing.

The first thing that hit me once I made my way into the building the shuttle had stopped at was the smell. *The Works District*, I thought. Puzzled, I wondered what the heck the Emperor would have wanted in this area of the city because then as now, it was primarily industrial and not a very desirable place to live. Of course I reasoned he probably had not actually lived here and then I wondered if coming here was such a good thing to do after all. I set the shuttle to hold so that it would wait for me and not automatically return to the Palace leaving me stuck in the worst parts of town alone, without the means to get home then I turned to explore.

In contrast to the Imperial palace, this building was both ugly and dirty. The stench that permeated the air was rife with toxic chemicals and the remnants of decay both bodily and metallic. Long after many of the factories had been abandoned they continued to work, producing fumes and waste. If one listened carefully enough one could hear the strange sounds of machines at work. With the never ending supply of repair droids it was more than likely parts of this area of Coruscant would continue to function long after the end of the galaxy itself. I made a face and walked along the corridor towards a turbo lift door.

I suspected that this building was uninhabited now, except for maybe droids and creatures I didn't even want to think about. My chances of meeting another sentient being here were slim but I was very glad I had brought my lightsaber anyway and getting it out of my satchel then gripping it in my hand was both reassuring and strange at the same time.

I stepped into the turbo lift and without me doing anything the door closed softly then it began to go upwards. The lift door opened after what seemed an eternity and I stepped out into a corridor that was dark and made from polished stone similar to the later additions of the Imperial Palace. I shivered; this place had all of the Emperor's subtle touch.

The first room I came to was an office of sorts, long abandoned and mostly empty aside from a desk, a chair and an old Holo transmitter

that looked as though it had seen better days. I stepped inside and touched the desk lightly; it was covered in a thick layer of dust. It did not give up any specific memories except for some vague images of a tall, stately man named Dooku who mean nothing to me. There was nothing else in the room to suggest I would find anything of use here so I stopped touching things, wiped the dust from my fingertips and took a moment to look out of the window. I was a little surprised at how far away the Imperial Palace was and also at how late it now was. I had left the flat just after two in the morning and now I could see the faint stripes of dawn starting to cut the night sky. I turned and left quickly wondering whose office this had been and what exactly this place I had found was, and more importantly why the Emperor had a secret tunnel shuttle to it.

I quickened my pace, walking down the dark corridor to the next door. It was locked but my lightsaber made short work of the lock which sparked and fizzled when I sliced through it. The door opened partially. I slipped through the space into what reminded me of a torture chamber from some of the terrible horror holos that Shiv occasionally liked to watch on closer inspection I realised it had once been some sort of med lab but the equipment in it had long been smashed and mangled. I brushed my hand along some of the counter tops and broken droids but there was nothing of note until I touched what looked like a rather nasty operating table.

Assaulted by a barrage of images so violent and so painful I physically tried to ward them off, I staggered back and fell on the floor landing on my rear with a painful thump. Winded and shocked I tried to sort through what I had just seen, crying without even realizing it. "Anakin...." I whispered out loud. "Oh Anakin what did he do to you? What did you do to yourself?"

I had seen this scene in a dream once. The Emperor's secret medical facility where he had put Anakin Skywalker back together again after his disastrous fight with Obi Wan but I had not really understood it to be true. I had thought my dream metaphorical not real. The medical droids had attached the prosthetic limbs to Anakin's burnt stubs without any anaesthetic or pain killers. He had writhed and screamed throughout the entire procedure and Palpatine had watched with a sickening glee. When the procedure was finally over and the table tilted to raise him to his feet, covered in the new and uncomfortable body armour, his face completely

hidden by his mask, and his burned body still wracked with pain, his first question had been about Padmé.

Feigning sympathy, the Emperor had told him she was dead that in his haste and anger, Anakin had killed her. The surge of force fury which Anakin or rather Lord Vader had unleashed had been so violent that it had crushed most of the medical machinery in this room and with that his slide into the dark side was complete. With Padmé dead there was nothing to hold him in the light any more, no one left to believe in the good. I fought to catch my breath and fought down the gorge that rose in my throat.

'You vile old bastard.' I thought bitterly. 'No wonder Lord Vader hated you so very much.' The thing that I had not understood until that very moment was that Palpatine had fed off this hatred. I sat huddled on the floor a fresh wave of loss washed over me. The deep wounds of mourning reopened. I covered my face with my hands and wept silently for the shattered soul of man who was now long dead. I did not feel the presence of another until a soft voice broke the silence around me.

*"This place holds much evil."*

I glanced up to see the ghostly image of a woman in old fashioned jedi robes shimmering before me. "Akali L'uanna." My voice sounded small in this bleak place.

She gave me a single, slight nod. I could not think of this young woman who had not been much older than I was now when she had died as my mother.

*"Daughter, you will not find what you are looking for sitting on this floor weeping for the soul of the dead."*

I sighed with impatience and frustration at her serene manner. "Well then why not just tell me what I need to know and stop all this game playing?"

*"Because, daughter, you must see for yourself in order to fully understand."*

"To fully understand what?"

*"The perils of giving in to your anger and to your hatred. The dangers of the dark side of the force."* She replied.

"Don't you dare lecture me on the ways of the force!" I spat. "I did not ask for this nasty little gift you've given me and I do the best I can with it under the circumstances!"

*“Do not give in to your base emotions, they will blind you and it is not the Way of the Jedi.”*

“Well, it’s good that I am not a jedi then isn’t it?” I shot back, my ire getting the better of my tongue.

Her expression turned sorrowful and she shook her head. *“Sitting here mourning for Anakin’s past will not help you find what you seek.”*

I stared at her for a moment. “If you are not going to be helpful then go away and leave me alone.” I told the bluish ghost. “I don’t have time for these games any more.”

*“Be mindful of your passions, daughter, they blind you to the truth.”* She said and the chiding tone of her disapproval did not go unnoticed. I looked away from her and wiped the remnants of the tears from my eyes. When I didn’t answer her ghost image shimmered and she vanished slowly, her last words lingering in the air. *“Use the force, it will guide you always.”*

I glared at the space where she had been. “Yeah well so far the force has done a bang up job of guiding me into all sorts of trouble.” I muttered.

I shook my head and looked around. She was right despite my reluctance to agree. This was not what I had come here for and there was nothing in this place except for terrifying old memories of anguish and pain. I took on last glance around and left quickly.

There were a couple more rooms on this floor, a rehabilitation or training room and another office like place, neither of which had anything I wanted to see or touch. At the end of the hallway was another turbo lift and I stepped into it quickly because now I was anxious and eager to be done with this endless, wild bantha chase. The door closed and the lift slid downward without me having to push anything. This entire facility had been automated to Palpatine’s will it seemed. When the lift reached its destination I stepped out and found myself in another small, dimly lit corridor. There was only one door so I went to it and was not very surprised that it did not open automatically open. I looked for the control panel and found it cleverly hidden. It was code activated and my clearance didn’t work so I used my lightsaber again, the universal door opener. The room I stepped into was both a nightmare and a mess.

“What the...?” I whispered quietly as I stepped gingerly around pieces of shattered equipment and transparasteel. The room resembled a

war zone. The floor was strewn with the smashed bits of what looked like bacta tanks along with other unfamiliar medical equipment and all the data banks that lined the walls had been seared and burned with an energy weapon I assumed had been a lightsaber or perhaps something even more powerful. What ever had destroyed them had done a thorough job; no one would ever recover any data from these machines again. I stared around me and wondered why someone would go to so much trouble to destroy such valuable and expensive equipment. It made no sense. I knew what I had to do but I didn’t want to do it. Touching the operating table in the med-lab had been bad enough. I was certain that whatever these fragments of the past had to offer would be much, much worse but I also knew this was what I had come to find. I took two very deep breaths and reached out grasp one of the largest shards of what had looked like a bacta tank.

The images that came were terrible beyond belief and of something I could never, in my wildest dreams, have imagined. I was so utterly unprepared for what I saw that once the flood of memories the fragment of shattered transparasteel had slashed their way through me, I dropped to my knees and retched violently, grateful I had not eaten in many, many hours. Once the nausea and the cold sweats passed, I sat on the ground next to but not touching any more of the broken equipment for a long time trying to catch my breath and sort out what I had just seen. It was too astounding to comprehend yet it made sense and confirmed something I had often wondered about after my terrible dream on Hjal after Thrawn had returned for me.

I had my answer and the simplicity of it had stunned me. I should have known all along and it angered me that I had not seen it on my own. All of a sudden I was weary beyond belief. All I wanted to do was go home and crawl into bed and forget everything I had ever seen or learned about Palpatine. I got up, my legs shaking, and backed out of the terrible room that had once been the Emperor’s private cloning facility to make my way back. I didn’t stop to explore anything else; I just wanted to get out. I felt that now I was pushing my luck and I didn’t need to run into a spice or deathstix dealer or worse here. It would be just my luck to end up on the wrong side of a fight and find myself in a med-lab again.

When I finally reached the tunnel shuttle I heaved a sigh of relief and slipped into its quiet safety, unlocking the controls and pushing the return button. I had hoped to rest while the shuttle zipped its way under

the city back to the Imperial palace but the machine had other ideas and one stop later it came to a complete halt, refusing to move forward without giving me a reason why no matter how many buttons I pushed.

I swore loudly in Cheunh and kicked at the side of the shuttle as I got out wondering where I was now and just how the hell I was going to get home because if my uncle had come back and found me not there he'd worry and then after a certain amount of time worrying he would simply come after me and that would be a bad thing.

Once I got over my annoyance and began to look at where exactly I was, my curiosity over came my weariness. This building wasn't like the last one, dirty and abandoned, and it wasn't in The Works either. I had come out into a storage facility of some sort and as I walked slowly through the stacks I realised it wasn't just a storage facility it was more like a catalogue room. Rows upon rows of tagged, covered objects lay neatly arranged on the shelves. This place had remained untouched in many years judging by the amount of dust that lay over everything. It did not seem like a place where the Emperor would visit but I supposed, as I wandered through the stacks, that he had to store some of his treasures someplace.

I stopped and unwrapped one of the smaller pieces. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before but it wasn't a force artefact it was just an antique work of art. The smattering of memories it gave me had more to do with excited archaeologists than the Emperor's greed. The next piece I unwrapped was the same only this piece I actually recognised; if I recalled my art history correctly it was a hand carved statue from a dig on Iridonia and it was close to nearly four hundred years old. It too held vague memories and none of them had to do with Palpatine. Now more curious than ever, I uncovered several more pieces and realised that they too were famous, I had studied some of them, seen holo images of them in Thrawn's collection as well as from some of my mother's books and had even spoken about one of them at great length with Thrawn. Suddenly I understood, I was in a storage room in the basement of the Galactic Museum. Now I was really intrigued. What did the Emperor do or keep here that he would design a shuttle to stop at this specific location?

I looked around the room and saw two main exits, clearly marked and well lit. It was a safe bet that both of those doors led to populated places or main corridors and the last thing I wanted was to get caught. I swept my eyes around the dimness again and then noticed, off to one side,

a small, unobtrusive almost invisible door. It had been designed to be missed and ignored so that was the one I chose to use. The hallway I slipped into was dimly lit by emergency glow-rods and unused. I moved down it carefully and quickly until I came to a narrow stairwell. I sighed. I was getting tired of this endless chase but I had gone too far now to simply give up and go home.

I ended up in what seemed like a dead end but was in fact one in a series of rooms which had not been used in a very long time. I slipped through an open door and wrinkled my nose at the stale smell which permeated the air.

The rooms that I snuck through were filled with crates and shadowy things I wasn't sure I wanted to stop and look at. There was a subtle pressure here, a malevolence that lingered letting me know that this place was the reason the Emperor had come here. Cobwebs and dust covered most everything but some of them had been disturbed recently. I pulled out my lightsaber but didn't ignite it and walked cautiously through the eerie storage room, sensing someone nearby long before I heard him. My heart pounded in my chest. For a brief second I wondered if it was Palpatine himself truly come back from the dead but when I shook off the panic and allowed my senses to reach out I understood it wasn't him at all. Still, who ever it was could be dangerous and I did not need to be caught in this place. I needed a place to wait safely until who ever was in the room beyond this one was gone.

Glancing around I noticed an odd looking ventilation shaft opening on the side of the wall that was adjacent to the next room and with some effort to stay quiet I moved a box to stand on, carefully eased off the grating and hoisted myself up into the opening. It was as I had suspected a ventilation shaft. I could feel the slight push of air as I crossed the main shaft which ran perpendicular to the one that went from this room to the next like the top of a T, then carefully crawled along it to the grate opening at the other side. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim light but once they had, I looked down into a room that on first glance seemed to be full of people. For a split second a new wave of fear washed through me then I realised none of the figures were moving. Museum mannequins or statues, I thought, shaking my head in annoyance at my own reaction. I was about to try and back out of the shaft when flicker of movement caught my eye.

I held my breath as I watched the tall, somewhat slender man skulk his way through the statues and dust covered display cases. I nearly jumped out of my skin with fright when all of a sudden a small light from one of the statues blinked to life and a small holo recording announced something too muffled for me to hear. I watched with a mixture of puzzlement and nervousness as the intruder slipped about stopping to look at more of the statues and the display cases. He wasn't acting like a curator or a worker from the museum, in fact he seemed more like a criminal of some kind and my suspicions that he was a petty thief were confirmed when he smashed one of the display cases, the sound of glass shards hitting the floor reminding me of icicles shattering on Hjal.

I couldn't see what he had picked up clearly but when a sound that was as familiar to me as my own voice hummed through the stillness I nearly squeaked out loud in surprise. That was a lightsaber, I thought. What would a lightsaber be doing here? In the bottom of the Galactic Museum in a room that had obviously not been entered or touched in a very long time. The weapon was old and it sounded as though it was losing its charge but the silvery white light of its blade was enough for me to see the man who held it clearly. I nearly choked on the dust that I inadvertently sucked in with my shock. I had seen his face plastered all over the HoloNet too many times not to recognize him despite the facial hair and dirt. That was Corran Horn! The dead rebel pilot whose memorial service I had gone to and nearly been killed at. What in the name of all nine Corellian Hells was he doing here alive and stealing stuff from the museum?

I watched as the pallid light from the weapon he had ignited danced about the room making shadows leap and flicker. The scent of burnt dust drifted upward tickling my nose. I tried to fight off the oncoming sneeze to no avail but just as I made a muffled sneeze into my hands a loud popping sound came from someplace behind hiding the noise of my sneeze. A breeze lifted the dust in the room and I heard others enter, the brilliance of the lights on the blasters they carried made the dancing dust sparkle as they moved into the large storage room. Who ever they were they were not friendly. They wore some sort of armour and they were hunting someone, probably they were hunting Horn, I thought.

I made myself as small as I could and watched as Corran Horn startled then hid amongst the mannequins. Standing as still as the statues

did while the three figures, dressed in black, made their way non too stealthily into the midst of the silent mannequins and display cases. I eased back a little from the grate of the vent I was hiding in; I did not want to be caught by what looked a lot like professional soldiers or mercenaries.

"Nothing here." Said one of the newcomers.

"Then we wait." Said another.

There was more conversation and I watched as they idly swept the room then the second man who had spoken commented on how odd it was that one of the mannequins still had a face at which point Corran burst to life and quipped that he would prefer to keep it that way. For a moment there was a stunned silence and then the room burst into action.

I caught only some of the fight, blaster fire and lightsaber blade created dancing shadows in the creepy room. One man died almost instantly as Corran sliced him in half. I had to fight the urge to throw up at the sound the bisected parts of the man's body made when the pieces hit the ground. The other two took off and there was a chase. I heard nothing for a long time and then bursts of blaster fire rang through the stillness followed by the sizzle of a lightsaber's touch. I knew when it was over because there was a cold silence. I reached out with my force senses and found Corran's presence. I could sense his relief and then heard the faint crackle of a comm link giving out the local time. I made a face in the darkness, it was eight hours and forty-five minutes which meant it was well into the morning and I had been away far too long. I waited a bit to see if any more people came tramping through this area and sighed softly when nothing else happened. Whoever the three men had been, they were now dead. I searched for Corran's presence again but couldn't find it and guessed that he had found a way out.

I waited for what seemed an eternity before completely backing out of the ventilation shaft and dropping back down onto the floor of the smaller storage room. Taking a chance I slipped into the large room that Corran had been exploring and began to look around as well.

It was a strange place and I could see why Corran Horn had been so fascinated by what he had found. The faces of all the mannequins had been vandalised in some way and it had been deliberate, hateful destruction. I didn't need to wonder about who could have done such a thing I already knew. His presence was so strong in this room that it was as if he were still alive and standing next to me, his avuncular tone laced with

a subtle layer of malice and spite. Palpatine had kept his true feelings for the Jedi well masked behind his benevolent senator face but underneath that façade he had burned with hatred. I shivered, the beam of my small flash light catching the dancing dust, still swirling around the air from the fight that had taken place here earlier.

I stepped around the sliced body parts of the man Corran had killed gingerly. Luckily, I thought, a lightsaber cauterized the wound as it sliced and the floor was not slippery with blood. The air was rife with the stench of burnt flesh and singed dust. It made me gag so I moved away from the body and went to look at the display cases.

This place, aside from recently had not been visited in a long time. For the most part the dust lay thick and undisturbed over everything. The display case that Corran Horn had shattered was empty. I knew he had taken a lightsaber but I wasn't sure about what else. Shards of glass crunched loudly under my feet as I walked about carefully. After a few moments of nervously touching things and setting off more than one of the annoying holograms which told a little about the now long dead Jedi the mannequins represented I understood that this had once been part of a Jedi Exhibit to show off Jedi heroes, if there were such a thing.

I searched amongst the damaged mannequins and touched as many holo displays as I dared but I did not find any reference to my birth mother at all. Either she had died too late in the Clone Wars to be given any such honour or the Jedi Council did not bestow immortality through statue-ism on Jedi who got themselves knocked up by their Arc Clone Commanders.

I dusted off some of the other display cases but mostly what lay under the glass was some sort of commemorative coin and a lightsaber. I needed neither so I left them alone. As I wandered around, forgetting the time and forgetting where I was, I realised that all of this Jedi memorabilia made me sad. These displays which had probably once been public were of an era long gone. Despite their odd doctrine and often strange ways of doing things for the most part the Jedi had been keepers of the peace. That much I had learned from the holo-diary my birth mother had kept.

The Clone Wars had broken out because Palpatine had neatly arranged for that to happen and I knew that because Lord Vader had once explained it to me in bitter, angry detail. Not for the first time did I wonder what life would have been like to live in that time, of course, I reasoned I

would not have lived at all because it was war that had brought my birth parents together in the first place so when I really thought about it, I actually owed Palpatine my life. The thought made me shiver and I could have sworn I felt a subtle laughter echo softly about me.

I was about to whisper out loud that I hated him but then I realised as I stood amidst the silent, mournful mannequins that I did not hate Palpatine anymore. I pitied him. It was one thing to bring down a government single handed and set ones own self up as supreme ruler of a galactic empire but to come down here and then vandalise these statues but a whole other thing. It made me think of the way bullies will destroy the things they cannot have just so that no one else could have them either. Palpatine hated to lose. He had hated the Jedi even more. While bringing about peace to the Empire he would rule may have been a small part of his agenda in the end it was all about revenge, revenge on the Jedi who had shunned him and the Sith ways, who had taught that the Sith were evil and were to be reviled. The thought made me snort. In essence Palpatine had been the outsider who had not been allowed into the cool kid's club and had taken his revenge for being left out to the extreme.

I glanced around, the sense of being watched made the space between my shoulders itch. Time to go, I thought. Even if I could spend more time here going through all the display cases and storage boxes to find something of interest, what would I do with it? I had no desire to become a Jedi, to learn the Jedi ways and follow Luke Skywalker in his quest to restart the whole Jedi order. I had never asked for the strange powers I had been born with and as Thrawn had often pointed out, they didn't bring me much happiness.

As I stood amidst the ruins of what had once been a proud display of the Galaxy's heroes I understood I was at a cross roads making my choice. If Lord Vader's son had taken up the task of rebuilding the Jedi Order then I wished him luck but he'd be doing that without me. I had had enough of both Jedi and Sith doctrine to last me a life time and I was pretty sure that my talents would be better used elsewhere, elsewhere like on Nirauan with Thrawn and thinking about him made my heart ache with longing. I missed him and all I wanted was to be with him again.

I glanced around one more time, Palpatine's evil presence lingered, mixed with the melancholy of an era long gone. I was done here and it was time to go. With a sigh, I left the way I had come in heading back

to the Imperial Palace without further stops or hiccups. By the time I reached home it was almost lunch time and my Uncle was waiting for me, so were Shiv and Ynyth.

“Where the hell have you been? We were just about to go and search for you!” The words that came quietly out of my uncle’s mouth were taut and laced with concern as well as anger.

I shook my head, too tired to think straight. “I went to the palace to get some answers.”

“And did you find what you were looking for?” Uncle Vahlek asked tartly.

I nodded, suddenly feeling exhausted and filthy. “I know you are mad but I need to shower and eat something so can I do these things first before you yell at me?”

There was a moment of quiet then I saw Shiv’s lip twitched in amusement and I could feel my uncle’s anger and worry recede.

“Well, seeing as how we no longer have to go on a Merlyn hunt I guess I can fix us some lunch.” Uncle Vahlek said. “When you are not wearing half the dirt on this planet you can tell us where you were exactly and what you found.”

I nodded, wondering how to even begin to describe the things I had seen in the space of a night and then gratefully went to the ‘fresher.

Showered and dressed in clean clothes I joined the others at the dining room table. My uncle had prepared some sort of stew and I had to bite down on a snigger when Ynyth eyed it dubiously. My uncle was a good cook, but his food was never very fancy. I knew it would taste great but it looked a little like something a bantha had yakked up.

Unlike dining with Thrawn, dining with my uncle mean there was no relief from the conversation about where I had been and what I had been doing while we ate, so in between mouthfuls of stew I recounted as best I could my adventures in the underground of Coruscant. I left out some of the more nauseating details of some of the visions I had seen because Ynyth had a tendency to pale visibly and look as though she would loose the lunch she had just eaten if I got too graphic.

Shiv and Ynyth listened in rapt attention but my uncle’s face was expressionless which usually meant he was not terribly impressed. When I was done with both eating and telling my story the tension at the table was

suddenly far higher than before and Ynyth rapidly began to clear the dishes to escape to the safety of the kitchen. She did not like domestic disputes, Shiv had once told me.

“You really are the most reckless, thoughtless idiot of a girl I have ever had the misfortune to know,” Uncle Vahlek began, “If your mate were here now....”

“He’d tie me to a desk under the watchful eye of a stormtrooper battalion, I know.” I finished for him. “But I had to go, I had to!” I said.

Shiv watched the back and forth with a bemused smile on his face. “You always did do things the complicated way, Rim-Girl.” He said and for some reason this seemed to lighten the mood.

I sighed and shook my head. “It was in my mind all along I just couldn’t see it now I have my answer.”

“So what will you do?” Uncle Vahlek asked.

“Tell him what he wants is on Wayland, why?”

“I just want to make sure that you don’t decide to go charging off to this Mount Tantiss place looking for clues on your own.”

I made a face. “I have been there once and that was enough. Thrawn’s on his own with *that* place.”

That answer seemed to placate my uncle and for a moment there was peace.

“So now what happens next?” Ynyth asked me as she rejoined us with desert and began the process of serving it.

I shrugged. “Not sure about you guys but I will head back out to the Unknown Regions and find Thrawn to give him the information, I guess.”

“I don’t think that....” My uncle started his sentence but he never got to finish it. Suddenly the whole apartment began to shake and tremble as though there was a sudden, violent ground quake, except Coruscant did not get ground quakes.

“What the hell is going on?” Shiv asked and we all left the dining table to run to the windows and see if we could find out. Along the way my uncle had the fore thought to turn on the HoloNet and what we saw displayed on the screen stopped us all dead in our tracks.

“We interrupt this broadcast to bring you this special news bulletin!” The harried looking news reporter said. “We just received word

from an eyewitness that an Imperial Super Star destroyer is breaking its way free from the planet's surface and heading towards space."

I looked at the screen which had suddenly switched to a live feed of the scene the reporter had just described but even though I was watching it unfold before my eyes I simply could not believe what I was seeing.

"How the hell did the Empire manage to hide an SSD on the planet's surface?" I whispered.

"Oh my..." Ynyth whispered in horror.

"As you can see the ship suddenly tore its way out of the ground just a few moments ago. It is destroying everything in its path. The civilian death toll is catastrophic!" The on scene reporter yelled to the recorder as from behind him the unmistakable wedge shaped nose of the SSD shed itself of the cradle that had held it on the ground and smashed everything in its path. People, buildings, vehicles, it did not matter whatever was there in its way was destroyed.

Ice cold fear shivered down my spine. "Isard!" I hissed through clenched teeth. "That has to be the *Lusankya*."

"What? No way!" Shiv countered still staring at the screen.

"How do you know that Lei'lei?" My Uncle asked calmly.

"There was a rumour that Isard's prison was really a ship and I knew they had built two super star destroyers but only one was ever unveiled. How they managed to hide that ship on the planet's surface and then build over it I will never know but I am betting that who and what that is."

No one seemed inclined to disagree with me and we watched the rest of the scene unfold in silence until Ynyth realised exactly what part of the city the ship was ripping apart. She turned to Shiv with tears streaming down her face. "That's where we live." She whispered. "Our apartment is in the middle of that zone."

Shiv nodded, he had already figured that out but had not said anything.

Ynyth turned to look at my uncle. "If you had not called us because Merly had gone missing..." she whispered then looked at me, "If you had not vanished, Shiv and I would have been at home right now...we'd be dead..." Her voice trailed off and Shiv put his arm around her protectively. I glanced at my Uncle. The shaking in the flat was bad

enough that I could hear glasses fall on the floor and break but we were far enough away that I didn't think the damage would be bad or permanent.

Huddled in front of the holo screen hoping the rest of the flat would hold together we watched the *Lusankya*, now officially identified, began to climb through the sky, shooting the planetary shield as it did so. Ships buzzed around her like small flies at a carcass but I was damned sure the tiny fighters would do the SSD no harm at all. When it was all over we sat without speaking in the unnaturally still quiet, the HoloNet still babbling and now showing replays of what had happened.

"I have to go." I said quietly. "I have to go now."

This time there was no argument from my Uncle, just a nod of agreement.

"Our home..." Ynyth whispered. "We have no place to stay..."

I turned to her as if seeing her for the first time since this almost surreal incident began. "Stay here. Thrawn won't be needing it. He won't be coming back here to live I am almost certain of that and neither will I."

"Merly..." Shiv began but I shut him up with a wave of my hand.

"I have to leave. I have information Thrawn needs and it can't wait any more. That woman..." I shook my head because the words to describe what Isard had done, what she had escaped me, "He needs to know and I need to tell him." I finished. "He made me co owner of this flat so I am telling you as co owner to stay here for as long as you need. I would feel better knowing someone was looking after the place anyway. There's food and some clothes and everything you will need until you can sort yourselves out. I know it's not much and it's not yours but it's better than nothing and you'd do the same for me if the situation were reversed."

Ynyth was about to protest I could see it in her eyes but Shiv stopped her with a subtle gentle touch to her arm. I knew that gesture well, it was a gesture that all couples used to communicate without words and for reasons I could not explain it made me long so desperately for Thrawn that had it not been for my Uncle's presence I probably would have tried to bolt off world in that very second just to be with him again.

"Thanks." He said giving me a look that said *how can I ever repay you?*

"You should pack what you need Lei'lei. As soon as they clear off world traffic we should leave."

I looked at Uncle Vahlek sharply. "We?"

“Yes.” He nodded. “I am coming with you. As I recall the last time you went charging off into the Unknown Regions of Space it didn’t end very well for you.”

I went to protest but then realised his presence would be welcome, so instead I simply nodded.

“Well,” Uncle Vahlek said after a very long silence. “I don’t know about anyone else but I think I would like a brandy to go with desert, would anyone else care to join me?”

We all glanced at each other and since no one had any better ideas about what to do next, we joined my uncle at the dining room table. As I sat there toying with the cake with my fork I wondered if I would ever return to this planet again or if this would be the last time I would see Shiv and Ynyth. I hoped not but there was an air of finality to this meal, to this moment in time that I could not seem to shake.

Shiv glanced at me as if reading my mind. “What ever happens we’ll find a way to keep in touch even if I have to hand deliver messages to you all the way out in the backwater edges of space.” He said gripping my hand tightly in his.

I just nodded and grinned despite the tears in my eyes. “I love you too.” I whispered too choked up to speak loudly.

My uncle simply nodded and raised his glass. “To the future.” He said and we all touched our glasses to the one he held outstretched, echoing the phrase he had spoken. As we sipped the brandy there was a long moment of silence and I wondered about what the future would bring because, now, especially now everything and anything were possible. Then as with all melancholy moments it passed as Shiv made a joke and Ynyth punched his arm. The silence was broken by laughter and I understood that out of the sorrow came hope and as long as there was hope nothing else mattered.