

# **Daughter of the Empire**

## **Book 3**

by Fiona Messer

### Chapter Six

## **Beginnings and Endings**

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The Hand of Thrawn reached up into the night sky, surrounded by the lush world of Nirauan on which the base was situated. The hand was actually a nickname for the five towers that made up the base where Thrawn had set up command for his campaign into the Unknown Regions of Space in order to extend the reach of the Empire. All of this had begun years prior to the Emperor's death and had continued well after as well. The base was extensive and had been built long before Thrawn had ever explored this world by beings unknown and long gone so he had taken it over and adapted it for his use and his people. My first experience with this place had not left me with happy memories but this time around things were different, the situation was different and after almost a year I had come to think of it as a home of sorts.

The strangeness of the planet itself never entirely vanished and the night was full of eerie sounds, animal and avian calls which were still to be identified and catalogued. The air had a slightly sweet scent on it, which I suspected was carried from a certain flowering tree that grew near the compound and occasionally mingled with the smell of lush, wet undergrowth, rich and loamy; utterly foreign to someone who had spent most of their life on a desert planet.

In the solitude of the early evening, after the sun had vanished but before the chill of the night descended leaving everything damp with dew I had made my way up to this place to be alone. While the base was large sometimes it felt as though it were tiny and far too crowded. Like most people who had grown up on desolate worlds filled with vast wastelands which stretched out in never ending vistas, I was unused to being confined and it made me restless, edgy and occasionally melancholy. Today had been a particularly bad day for a myriad of reasons and the sorrow I had felt had put me on the verge of tears for most of it but I had bitten them back in favour of trying to get my jobs done. The Chiss were not fond of messy human emotions and they considered them a sign of weakness. Once my work day had finished I had needed to find a quiet place to remember and mourn.

Leaving the compound had not been forbidden but there were enough known and unknown dangers out beyond the base that it meant if one wanted to go out one took an armed guard with them. It sort of defeated the purpose of getting away from it all to be alone so I had found a compromise everyone could live with. The key people on the base knew enough to leave me be when I disappeared because they knew I had made a

promise to Thrawn that I would not endanger my life or those of his people by bugging off and just to get away from it all. There were a few places on the base which were generally considered of little use and those, by default, had become mine.

"I thought I might find you up here." Thrawn's voice broke the quiet silence which made me smile. I wiped the tears on my face away because I didn't really want to let him see that I had been crying even though he would know anyway. When I didn't turn to face him he walked up to stand at my back and wrapped his arms around me. I had not seen him four months so this reunion was sweet.

"Did Park tell you where I was or did you just use deductive reasoning?" I asked leaning into his body, welcoming his warmth. The nights on Nirauan were chilly and the observation deck was open to the outside.

"No, he did not tell me where to find you. He did mention you received mail from Siavaan this morning and that you seemed very sad today but that you would not speak about it."

I sighed and turned around to face him without breaking the circle of his arms and rested my head against his chest. The letters which had arrived from Shiv, despite being full of good and cheerful news, had only served to remind me of everything that had happened in the last year and of how much I missed my friends, how much had been lost.

The terrible things that Ysanne Isard had done in her attempt to break the power of the New Republic had left their mark on my soul but it was the terrible death of my friend Cati which hurt the most. Isard had vanished, and the last I had heard of her she had taken up residence on Thyferra, becoming the leader of that planet and overseeing the production and distribution of Bacta in order to further ruin the New Republic's reputation but that plan had failed. The New Republic had found an alternative to bacta to cure the Krytos virus and for every move Isard made against them they counter moved to win.

At first, after I had arrived on Nirauan I had tried to follow the news of what was going on in the Core but after a few months even I lost interest. It had seemed to me that Isard's plans to destroy the New Republic got more and more convoluted and to my mind stupid. She was grasping at sand and the harder she tried to hold on the more it ran through her fingers. I had talked with Thrawn about it often when he was on the base because he too, was at a loss to try and sort out her thinking. When the news came that she had lost her hold on Thyferra and that she had

been defeated I had not taken any care to hide my pleasure but Thrawn had tempered my good mood by warning me Isard was only presumed dead.

“For such an intelligent woman, she did some remarkably stupid things.” He had said. “But she has more lives than you do. Do not count her gone yet, not until a body is found.” He had warned and while I had not disagreed, I had not been happy either.

Now, as I stood on the darkness on the observation platform, I found it hard to believe that I had been on Nirauan for almost a year and some days it seemed like only yesterday that I had arrived here with my uncle to bring Thrawn the information he sought and the news of Isard’s treachery.

“It’s the anniversary of Cati’s death.” I told him simply, explaining my mood and the reason I was up here.

Thrawn stroked idle fingers through my hair gently. “I know.” He replied, “Which is why I thought I might find you up here.”

I nodded and sighed. For a long moment we stood there in silence until I broke it by asking, “When did you get back? I wasn’t expecting you for another week.”

“About three hours ago, we finished the set missions early and I saw no reason to remain in space when I did not have to.” He said casually then he glanced at me, “Given what day it is I felt I needed to be here today. I would have sought you out sooner but the debriefing was extensive so it took longer than usual.”

I nodded my understanding. While duty came first and even though sometimes I wasn’t always happy about it I understood it but in this case, because it was possible to do so, he had returned early for me. He had known today marked the first anniversary of Cati’s gruesome death and the effect it would have on me. When it mattered the most, he was there for me. I took one of his hands in mine and brought it to my lips to kiss, letting him know I was grateful. “How long is the turn around this time?”

“I am not sure. I have some things to do here and some details to work out. As much as I can do from the *Chimaera* sometimes I also need to be on the base. Thanks to the information you were able to provide we are a lot further ahead now than we were this time last year but there is still much to plan out before I begin the major campaign which includes obtaining more information about the New Republic’s fleet activities and so on.”

“Is Delta Source not as useful as you had hoped?” I asked.

I felt his smile. “It is indeed of great use but the information retrieved from that spy network is sporadic and it takes time to disseminate the useful from the nonsense. I owe you and your uncle a great debt for finding it and for keeping it a secret.” He said, “But there is more to this campaign than simply using pieces of information gathered from an Imperial listening device in the Palace. Retaking the galaxy will not happen over night and without proper organisation it will not happen at all.” He sounded tired.

“Are there problems?”

“Nothing insurmountable but of course along the way to victory there are always hurdles one must overcome. Currently mine have to do with equipment shortages and lack of fully trained personnel. The Imperial ship yards cannot supply me with the number of vessels I have requested and reunifying the fleet is a tedious process, more so than I had previously imagined. It would appear that not every Imperial out there wishes to return to the fold, especially under my command. Many of the new recruits under my command are too green to take into any sort of conflict and there needs to be extensive training still. This isn’t a process that will happen over night although many seem to think it should. Bad planning, over confidence and greed is what cause this current situation, believe me, I will not make the same mistakes that Palpatine did.”

I just sighed and rested the flat of my cheek against the rough fabric of his white uniform jacket. I had heard this speech many times before. “What about Mount Tantiss?” I asked.

Thrawn shrugged ever so slightly. “It will keep.” He replied vaguely. He did not like this question and I asked it often.

“Don’t you worry that someone else might discover it?” I pressed.

“No.” He replied, stroking my hair absently. “The New Republic has other issues taking up their attention at the moment and I am quite certain that Palpatine left the place very well guarded. A little trust, my dear, I do occasionally know what I am doing.”

“I do trust you and you know this!” I said poking him in the chest. “I would not be here if I did not.”

“And I am grateful for this fact.” He replied, catching my hand in his before I could poke him again. “But you push on this particular matter and I do not know why. You said so yourself it was one of Palpatine’s best kept secrets and that there was no overt evidence of the facility in the Imperial database or palace system. The rebels will not go half cocked on some mad search looking for Palpatine’s mythical storehouse of treasures

even if they do know about it, which I think is highly unlikely. I am quite certain they find more than enough to keep them occupied on Coruscant as well as the rest of the inner Core and the outer worlds, all of which are jockeying for a position of power within the new government. With each system they bring into the new republic so too do they increase their political problems. They have enough to worry about right now.”

I sighed crossly which made him chuckle. “Tekari, I understand that you want to find out exactly what he hid there but you need to learn some patience. I had told you before, when the time is right and that is exactly what I mean. Curb that overly inquisitive nature of yours; it’s what gets you into so much trouble. To be honest, I am still astounded that you stayed put here and did not try to go rushing off to Wayland on your own when you and your uncle first arrived and I suppose I have the Tze’yusha’Jin to thank for that.”

I made a face but he was right. When I had arrived on Nirauan with my uncle, Thrawn had not been here. He had been continuing the work he had started out in the Unknown Regions and that work had been impressive. I had seen the star map which showed the areas of this part of space which were now under Thrawn’s control. *The Empire of the Hand*, his people had secretly called it behind his back until the name had become so ingrained in every day usage that with a wry smile he had started to use it himself while referring to the vast area of space he and his people controlled which stretched out over nearly two hundred and fifty sectors.

My arrival had been met with a huge sense of relief that I had found almost amusing and Voss Parck had all but hugged me as I had stepped of the *Ahnkeli Su’udelma*. What was even more amusing had been his almost panicky statement that he was under orders to not let me out of his sight until the Grand Admiral had returned from his current mission. No matter how often I had tried to tell him that I had learned that particular lesson and would not be dashing hell bent after Thrawn alone in a ship again, Parck still kept a watchful eye on my whereabouts on the base. Most people would have probably found it annoying but I was touched by the concern and did what I could to try and alleviate it.

My uncle, who had all but threatened me with death should I try to bugger off and explore Wayland on my own, had stayed on the base until a few days after Thrawn’s return, stating there were things he needed to discuss with the Grand Admiral. The day after Thrawn’s return, nearly two weeks after we had arrived on the base, Thrawn and my uncle had spent almost the entire evening talking alone. Neither of them would tell me

what they had spoken about but after Thrawn’s ever so slight smirk when I had asked if any of it had to do with me had told me all I needed to know.

Uncle Vahlek left the day after that with one of the Imperial transport ships headed back into the Core Regions for supplies. I had been sad to see him go but at the same time a little relieved. We had spent too much time in too close quarters together and as much as I loved him he had driven me crazy.

“Give my love to papa, Bel and Bedi when you see them.” I had asked him as we had said our goodbyes.

“Will do. Stay out of trouble Lei’lei! You know how to contact me if you need anything.” He had said giving me an avuncular kiss on the forehead before leaving.

Thrawn had returned to the base in the middle of the night and I had been in bed when his shuttle had landed. He had arrived in his quarters sometime in the early morning. He had tried to not disturb me up but after such a long time of sleeping alone his presence rather than his absence was a disruption in my normal routine.

Still half asleep I had yawned and stretched in jax like satisfaction. “What time is it?” I had asked.

“Just after three in the morning. I did not mean to wake you, tekari.” He had murmured. I had watched as he had undressed and before he could get into his night clothes, had stopped him.

“Well now I am awake.” I had grasped his hand and had pulled him to me, rolling him so he lay on his back and before he could protest or counter my attack I had moved to straddle his lap. The look on my face had challenged him and for a moment he had considered it then he had smiled as he had surrendered.

“So I see, “He had replied arching that eyebrow in that smug, annoying manner of his, “And just what did you have in mind from this position, my dear, because right now you have the advantage?”

My fingers had traced down the centerline of his chest, past his navel and the line of dark hair that led to magical things. “I thought I would see if you had missed me at all.”

His unspoken reply had been swiftly obvious and he had smirked at my reaction to his arousal. “I would say that you have your answer, the question is now what do you plan to do about it?”

“I thought I would welcome you back properly.” I had breathed in his ear, delighting in feeling him shiver for me.

“Well then, my dear, I am all yours.” He said just before I could shut him up by engaging him in a different sort of combative conversation.

In spite of the length of time apart our passion for each other had not changed, if anything it had only increased. His talent and skill in conversing with me using nothing but his hands, his mouth and his body never ceased to astonish me. It was exquisite torture to once again be on the receiving end of his tactile genius and I know he enjoyed being reminded of just how well I could apply my own gifts and skills. We knew each other so well but time and distance always seemed to make this exploration of territories known a whole new adventure.

I had delighted in hearing the sounds of his pleasure as I plied my own tricks of the bedroom trade. We had rippled together like wind over water, stirring each other up until the storm within, reaching its desired crescendo, crashed down upon us both leaving us stunned and breathless. In the aftermath of the madness of lust and passion, tenderness took over and his gentle touch had said far more than words ever could.

After a lingering, comfortable silence he had spoken first. “When I got word you had returned I cannot tell you how relieved I was. I was even more so to hear you had decided to do as you were asked and stay put.”

“Well Uncle Vahlek did threaten me with serious bodily harm if I were to go tearing off so I felt it wise to just hang out here and not risk his ire... or yours. The last time that happened you sent me away so it seemed safer just to wait and be, as my uncle put it, a good girl.”

That last remark had made him smile. In spite of the fact that I was a grown woman, my uncle still usually treated me as though I were still a child of six. Most of the time I tried to ignore it but Thrawn, for some strange reason, found this very amusing much to my annoyance. “I would have been up here sooner but I had business to take care of that could not be put off, not even for you, sj’iu tekari, no matter how much I might have liked to do just that.”

I had stroked the smooth skin of his chest with my fingertips. “I know that. It wasn’t so bad in the end. I have been kept occupied well enough.” This was quite an understatement because in actual fact I had been kept remarkably busy.

His eyebrow had arched. “So I have heard. And just how are the Basic classes going this time around?”

I had smiled. A few days after my return, much to my great surprise, one of his Chiss warriors had approached me somewhat shyly and requested that I continue the language classes for Basic that I had started

before I had left for Coruscant. I had not thought anyone had cared about the language learning but the need to communicate had turned out to be greater than the need to remain closed off from the humans. I ended up teaching both Basic to the Chiss and as much as I was able to Cheunh to some of the humans.

“Better now than before. They actually want to learn to speak basic and it seems that now they all know that I speak Cheunh fluently I gained a measure of respect with your people, or did you have something to do with this?” I asked as the thought just occurred to me.

Thrawn had shaken his head slightly. “While I command these men and women I cannot and will not order them to give their respect to anyone. Respect must be earned, my dear, so if they offer you theirs now then it is entirely of your own doing not mine.”

“Well my students are doing well, much better than I had expected actually, though I think the extra material you provided them with helped a lot.” I had nodded. “The Cheunh classes are quite another matter but at least the humans will be able to understand the Chiss language even if they cannot seem to speak it.”

“You have achieved much and I am proud of the work you have done.” He had said.

This was high praise from him and I had glowed under it. “I’m not sure what the difference is now, but I feel more at home here and that helps.”

He nodded. “The time you spent on Coruscant has tempered you.” He ran his fingers through my hair, untangling the knots we had created with our bedroom antics. “You have experienced some of the most terrible things this galaxy has to offer and yet you have somehow managed to retain that sweetness of nature and delightful optimism that never ceases to amaze me but you have also changed and I sense it.” He had traced a line with the tip of his finger, starting from my lips to the hollow of my throat, then down across to my left breast which he had cupped with his hand, pressing my chest, feeling the beat of my heart beneath the pale skin. “Do you know how very precious you are?” He whispered.

The moment had been so suddenly poignant that tears had welled up in my eyes. I opened my mouth to speak but suddenly I didn’t want to break the moment so I simply kissed gently him instead. For a second time hung like a drop poised to fall and then it moved forward as he had broken back from my kiss, stroked my cheek tenderly and then he had rolled onto

his back, pulling me onto my side to curl around him, with arms and legs pressing close.

I had rested my head in the hollow where his shoulder met his chest and sighed in contentment. I had opened my mouth to say something else but he had stopped me with two fingers laid gently on my lips. "Sleep, sj'iu tekari. I am not going anywhere for a little while so we have plenty of time to catch up in the days and nights to come but now I need to rest and so do you."

I had not argued with him because I, too, had been tired. I had just been so grateful to have him back, his warm body next to me, and the familiar scent of his skin filling my lungs. The aftermath of spent desire had made me drowsy and his physical presence was comforting.

*Home, I had thought, to be in his arms, wrapped about his body, and satiated by his touch was home.* And in that moment I had known that I never wanted to be parted from him for such a long time, through such a vast distance again even though I knew that, inevitably, this would be the case. Some of these thoughts must have leaked out because he had reiterated his previous statement, brushing sleep into my hair with the tips of his fingers. He had been true to his word and had stayed on Nirauan for nearly four weeks before heading back out into space again.

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My debriefing with Thrawn had taken place the day after my uncle had left. In his private office he had listened without much interruption as I spoke. The news of all that had occurred on Coruscant had made his jaw clench and his eyes turn hard. Even though I had mentioned some stuff in the few letters I had been able to send, he had not known the half of what had been really going on. Isard had lied to him about so many things so that when he had finally learned the truth he had been furious, more furious than I had seen him since the day he had shipped me off to Hjal with Navaari. When I had described Cati's death and what the terribly Krytos Virus did he gotten up out of his chair to pace the room, a sure sign that what he was hearing from me upset him and for a long moment after I had finished this part of my story an awful silence had hung in the air.

"Your letter on this matter did not even come close to describing the horror of the situation. I am so very sorry I was not there for you." He had said simply after the silence had gone on for too long.

Brushing the tears from my face I had merely nodded. "I don't think there are any words in the galaxy to describe adequately what that was like." I had replied. "And it is a good thing you were not there because you might have contracted the virus yourself."

He had only nodded in response and I had continued telling him all that I had learned, all that had happened right up until my last minute on Coruscant. The entire story sounded absurd even to my ears and I had been there to witness the things that had happened, including the *Lusankya's* escape from its planetary cradle which had wrecked havoc on the planet. He had not spoken after I was done recounting my time on the Core world and the terrible stillness that had settled around him had been more frightening than any fury the Emperor or Lord Vader could have unleashed when they were alive. I had sat in the chair which faced his desk in nervous silence and had wondered how to read him because I had been unable to gauge his reaction to what he had been told at all.

"What will you do?" I had asked as I watched him toy with the data chip I had given him, the one that held the information my uncle had pulled off the computer in Lord Vader's palace on Coruscant.

For a very long time I had not thought he would answer me, then he had drawn a deep breath. "I need time to consider my next move but first I need to sift through all the information you have given me." He had said. "It is a great deal to digest and much of this information is new to me."

I had sighed then, letting out the breath I had been holding. "I don't understand why she lied to you."

His smile had been cynical. "She feared I would charge in and take over."

"And that would have been a bad thing how?"

"She was reluctant to give up the power of being the Emperor's supreme ruler, tekari, and it has been my observation that people who have power will go to great lengths to retain this power."

"Billions of beings died just so she could maintain her precious power and even then in the end she lost Coruscant."

He had drawn deep breath as though to steady against the anger he himself also felt. "Indeed. Well, now have something to work towards and I have much to prepare. I must assign a flag ship and get a fleet battle ready."

"Will I get to go with you?" I had asked.

"No." His reply had been decisive and without hesitation. His answer not surprised me but the hurt I had felt did. It had showed on my

face so he explained coolly, “I cannot have any distractions that might interfere and you, my dear, are the biggest distraction I know of. I need you here, there will be things I will require you to do, jobs that you are uniquely qualified to carry out and I also want to know you are safe. If this is not a suitable place for you then we can discuss alternatives but you will not accompany me on board my flag ship during this campaign. It would be extremely unprofessional.”

I had only nodded, swallowing down my disappointment. As usual he had been absolutely right.

He had looked at me for a moment then had turned away, his hands clasped behind his back in a stance that had reminded me sharply of Lord Vader. He stared out of the window in his office that looked out over the forest. “The Imperial Fleet is spread all over the galaxy. It is in pieces. First I will need to reunify the Navy and then devise the best plan of attack on the core to retake Coruscant, if that is even possible now.”

“I thought that you had already been planning for this?” I asked puzzled by his manner.

He had turned his head to glance at me then had gone back to staring out of the window. “I have but while I could speculate and make educated guesses about what they would do next without concrete information making specific plans has not been possible. I did not wish to tip my hand that I exist by rushing into the Core and allow the New Republic time to consider me a threat which must be dealt with before I was ready. I wish to deal with them on my terms not theirs. So far I and what I am doing have remained a secret, I wish to keep it that way until I attack. The element of surprise is a great advantage, one I hope to use well.”

My sigh had seemed to fill the room. I had not known how he was able to remain so patient in light of everything had happened. According to the news nets and numbers being bandied about the New Republic now dominated about fifty percent of the known galaxy. Taking it back from them would not be easy. “The longer you wait, the more systems fall under the New Republic’s rule.”

He had nodded. “I understand that but this war will not be about numbers it will be about strategy and wits.”

This had made me smile. I had yet to meet anyone who could outwit Thrawn. He really was brilliant. “Then they are sure to lose.”

“Your confidence in me is touching but make no mistake this will not be an easy campaign.” He had replied. “I have been running through

various simulations but now I have more facts to better base these simulations on and a reliable source of information that will invaluable.” He had paused then went on, “The New Republic is no longer a rag tag fleet of lucky rebel misfits. They have proven themselves to be a formidable enemy and I will not make Palpatine’s mistake of underestimating them.”

“I’m sorry.” I had said after a length silence.

This had surprised him. “Why?” He had asked glancing over his shoulder at me.

“I should have come back earlier, brought you this information sooner.”

He had shaken his head. “The few months’ time difference would have changed nothing, tekari. You had valid reasons for staying; do not second guess yourself now. If you had returned earlier then perhaps Siavaan and his mate would not be alive. Everything has its place in time and you played your part accordingly.”

My sigh had told him that I did not think the same way as he did. For a moment he had stayed silent and still then, after turning back to face me, had said, “I need you here. Believe me, you will have more than enough to do and I do not mean simply teaching language classes either.” His expression had softened and then he had filled me in on all that had taken place at the base while I had been away. A lot of things had changed including some new additions to the base that I had not known about until I had arrived, children being among the most surprising of all which had taken some getting used to.

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Since receiving my news and information Thrawn had worked swiftly to gather his existing fleet and get them battle ready so more often than not he was on board the *Chimera*, his new flag ship, running training simulations. There was new blood at the base and I had been very surprised at the increase in the numbers of both humans and Chiss up on my arrival but for what he now planned he would need far more than what he had here. Isard’s treachery had handicapped him but that in no way diminished his capabilities to get things going. If there was one thing Thrawn could do and do well it was to win in games of strategy and if anyone could out-think and outsmart the rebels it was him, but planning for this offensive now took up much of his life, making our time together rare and precious.

Thrawn's touch broke into my thoughts and I looked up into his face. His eyes glowed in the relative darkness of the observation platform on the top of the second highest tower. He smiled at me and it was a smile that reached those strange eyes, making the light in them almost seem to dance. He didn't need to say how he felt because he showed me through his actions. It was a small, sweet moment and I was just happy to have him back for a while, safe and in one piece and that he had come back on this particular day just for me meant even more.

I always knew a strange sense of relief when he returned to Nirauan because in spite of the fact that he was a brilliant tactician and not reckless in the way Lord Vader and the Emperor had been with either his men's lives or his own, I still worried. It was, I supposed, a natural aspect of caring for someone but sometimes that was hard to deal with, especially on a base mainly full of human men and male Chiss, where showing such emotion was not a good thing.

On Coruscant or when I had been with Lord Vader I had often been too busy to worry or at least had been with friends, like Shiv, who listened and placated my fears but here...in this place was an entirely different matter. I was quite happy that now there was another woman on the base to commiserate with and thinking about her reminded me of news which I had to share.

"Did you hear? Syal is pregnant." I asked, breaking the silence.

He cupped a hand about my cheek and stroked my face with his thumb. "Is she now? Soontir did not mention that to me when I saw him last."

I smiled slightly. "He might not have known, he's been away for a good while now. She is just past her first trimester. I only found out yesterday and only then because I caught her almost passing out in the mess hall around midnight last night. When I insisted she go see Doctor Thracer she just laughed and told me there wasn't any cure for what she had except time."

Syal Antilles was Baron Soontir Fel's wife. She, her children and her husband had been relocated to the Unknown Regions of Space when under mysterious circumstances Fel who had defected to the rebels suddenly came back to work for the Imperials, particularly to work with Thrawn. Fel had not been on Nirauan when I had woken from my death sleep, he had been someplace deep in Unknown Space and his presence and whereabouts kept a secret but once he had settled on the base, he and Thrawn had arranged that his family should join them. By the time that

this had taken place I was already on Hjal. The rest of the Galaxy assumed that Fel had been killed in battle and that his wife, Wynssa Starflare, Syal's stage name, was dead as well.

Thrawn chuckled. "Well, this will make life interesting around here and they will need larger quarters if they keep this up. Their two boys already create enough mischief to cause great consternation to everyone stationed here. How human children survive their first ten years of life is beyond me."

"Well, good that you missed last week's drama which had them trying to climb the pwazch trees outside. Chak was almost two thirds of the way up the tallest one when he got stuck, part of his clothing snagged on a branch and when he realised he couldn't get down well you should have heard the racket. I've never seen anything funnier in my life than your men trying to figure out how to get a small boy from a tree without them going up it to unhitch his clothes first. When they began to suggest shooting at him I thought Syal was going to have kittens. All the brilliant minds that reside in this place and not one of them could come up with a better plan than trying to aim a blaster at the branch which had snagged Chak's clothes."

"So how did they manage to get him down?" Thrawn asked.

"They didn't, "I said smugly, "I did. I climbed up, unhitched him and then helped him get back down." I smiled. That had been an adventure well worth the effort. Both Syal's boys thought I was very cool and had taken, at Syal's insistence to calling me Aunty Merly which I found to be very weird and Thrawn found very funny.

Thrawn kissed the top of my head gently. "Fearless." He said with a mixture of pride and bemusement.

"More like idiotic." I answered. "But the tree's branches wouldn't support the weight of a full grown man and Syal wasn't going to climb after the boy so the only way he was going to come down was if someone went up to unhook his tangled clothes."

"So tell me, when did you learn to climb trees, tekari?" Thrawn asked with a smirk. "I have yet to see trees on Tatooine."

I just smiled at him. "You'll find I am just full of surprises."

His answer had been to nibble on my neck. "Yes, indeed, you are."

I shivered and grinned. "If you keep that up it will be desert before dinner and you won't have time for a shower first."

That remark earned me the trademark raised eyebrow, “Always in a hurry to get to the main event. How many times must I remind you, my dear, it is the journey that counts not the destination.”

I smiled sweetly and closed my eyes for a moment allowing my powers to build up and sweep over him. I heard his sharp intake of breath and raised my eyes to meet his without moving my head.

“Temptress.” He whispered, tucking a curled finger under my chin to raise my head. The brush of lips across mine was subtle and seductive. “But we both know that my self-control far outweighs yours, so if you want this little skirmish to escalate, forcing me to show you just how well I can out manoeuvre you and leave you in a state of ...need, then please continue your current plan of attack.” He whispered in my ear.

I shivered as the warmth of his breath tickled the sensitive skin of my neck, considered his threat for a moment and then backed off a little. He won at this game for the same reasons he always beat me at Dejarik, almost infinite patience.

“I see you have learned when to retreat.” He smiled all the while his fingers danced across the line of my clavicle, leaving me breathless. He wasn’t playing fair and when I had nothing to add or say he continued the earlier conversation, “So once again the Fel boys managed to keep you busy. I am indebted to them; they keep you from charging off and doing silly things.”

“So the truth comes out and you really wanted me back to help baby-sit.” I finally found my voice.

“Not true, I wanted you back so that I might have my wicked way with you in the small hours of the night. If I thought I could get away with it I might consider chaining you to the bed for safe keeping” He punctuated that statement with a small kiss but then added, thoughtfully, before I could retort to his comment. “You are good around those children, though. I am quite certain that Syal is grateful for your assistance with them, especially while Soontir is away.” He countered.

I had just given him a small shrug and the sudden, subtle shift in my mood had not gone unnoticed.

“Some day you will make an excellent mother for our children, tekari. And some day we will have children, if that is your wish. It is not an impossibility, simply a challenge.” His words were meant to sooth but they made me a little melancholy.

The topic of children was a little touchy, mostly because I knew that the chances of us ever producing offspring to be nearly impossible and it

seemed that there would never even come a right time to try for a family. I had never been more aware of this than when I was with Syal and her two boys. I had never really given having a family much thought before but now, here in this place so far away from the Empire that we had once served, it was something that could be within reach. It was a nice dream but the reality was something utterly different. Even Doctor Thracer had not been very optimistic when I had asked him about it one day. Although Chiss and human physiology were similar we were also vastly different, different enough to make a child a virtual impossibility. Mostly I didn’t think about it but because we now had kids on the base it was a topic that came up every now and then and it made me a little sad.

I shook off the moment and smiled. “So, now you are home and we have some time, what did you have planned for this evening or do you still have work to do?”

He smiled, “I always have work to do but I set aside time for us tonight. I thought we would have dinner together and then perhaps... converse.”

“So we’re not eating with the officers tonight then?” I asked a little surprised.

Thrawn shook his head. “Voss strongly suggested I give him and the officers a night off from our standard dining ritual in favour of allowing them some down time. Then he mentioned something about me spending some time with my...how did he put it... incredibly patient and long suffering mate.”

I laughed. “Was he talking about me or you?”

The raised eyebrow was my only answer and then Thrawn changed the subject. “So how are Siavaan and Ynyth doing?”

“Surprisingly well.” I said. “Shiv changed jobs though, about three months ago. So he’s not working at the palace any more.”

“Oh? What prompted that change?”

“He said the level of bureaucracy was too insane. He said that at least working under the Emperor’s rules one knew more or less where one stood but the New Republic was like working in a mad house. I also think that people couldn’t get past the fact that he used to work for the Empire, while he didn’t say anything directly I picked up a few images and some harassment in the work place was among them. Now he is assistant manager of the Coruscant Grand Hotel. He makes twice what he did at the palace with half the work. He loves it apparently and says that any time we wish to visit he has a quiet suite set aside for us.”

Thrawn's smile was sunlight warm. "That would be a good thing considering we no longer have a place to live there."

"Do you regret that now?" I asked.

"Not at all, tekari, do you?"

I shook my head. After I had come back and Thrawn had returned I had told him what had happened to Shiv and Ynyth's home because of the *Lusankya*. He had been suitably horrified at what Isard had done and pleased at my reaction in letting Shiv and Ynyth use of our flat. After a short discussion we both decided to give it to them and be done with it because we both knew that no matter what happened in the future we most likely would not live on Coruscant again and if so we could always buy another place. So three months after leaving Coruscant I had gone back with all the paperwork needed to sign the flat over to Shiv and have the furniture and belongings which Thrawn and I wanted to keep moved out to the base or placed in storage.

The situation on Coruscant after the *Lusankya's* disastrous exit had left a planet wide housing shortage and the rebuilding wasn't happening quickly enough. The gaping maw in the Coruscanti landscape was still ugly and fresh as we had flown over the area. Millions of beings had died that day, most of their bodies had never been recovered. Through Shiv's correspondence I had learned that reconstruction was slower than usual because of the number of people lobbying to have at least one section of the decimated area turned into a memorial. The New Republic had taken this request to heart and it was being discussed to death in the senate. In the meantime people were still homeless either living in shelters or government sponsored hotels. It wasn't a good situation for anyone and the longer it continued this way the more unhappy people became, that coupled with the bacta crisis and the lingering effects from the Krytos Virus left many people wondering if the Empire had really been so bad after all. At least under Palpatine's rule crazy stuff like this never happened, unless you counted Alderaan and most people, it seemed, did not.

Shiv and Ynyth had been furiously trying to find a place they could afford but due to so many people all looking for housing at the same time there was nothing decent to be had at the price they were willing and able to spend. Since neither of them would accept the flat as an outright gift Thrawn sold it to them for a token amount and the matter was resolved.

My trip out and back had been quiet and uneventful. I had taken one of the older cargo ships which had been disguised as a civilian ship

along with a small crew of Thrawn's finest, including Jarack, who had been made to travel in civilian clothes. We had managed to do all that needed to be done quickly without fuss. It seemed that the New Republic had other concerns than the comings and goings of the Courescanti elite, which was what I was disguised as, much to my amusement.

Running around the galaxy pretending to be someone else was usually Thrawn's game not mine but I had enjoyed the role of spoiled rich girl despite my misgivings that it wouldn't work. Customs and immigration had not blinked twice at my forged papers and the moving company had been paid handsomely so they had dealt with the off world permissions paperwork without blinking an eye.

It had been so great to see Shiv and Ynyth again but at the same time Coruscant held too many bad memories for me to ever want to come back and live here. I was mostly glad when I said my goodbyes and left the planet behind. The government might have changed but the planet itself had not and it remained a glittering, single sun, ball of light filled with beings who felt superior by virtue of living on the Jewel of the Core. As I had headed back with Jarack and the crew of the small transport ship to the Unknown Regions I had realised that my upbringing on Tatooine had never prepared me for the savagery that I had found on Coruscant. The endless one-up-man-ship and the constant need for wealth and power wore me down. Coruscant never stopped moving but it was all artificial, even the weather was pretty much always controlled. It had occurred to me that what I had loved about the Core was pretty much all gone and I had been happy to leave it all behind.

I turned around again, leaning with my back against Thrawn's chest and stared up into the sky. The constellations in this part of space were unfamiliar to me but that did not diminish their beauty, especially on a night such as this, crystal clear and cold enough that I could see my breath. These intimate moments were so rare outside the confines of our quarters that I tried to make them last as long as possible, treasuring them when they occurred.

The night wind picked up and rustled through the forests that surrounded the base. If I closed my eyes it almost sounded a little like the hiss of sands shifting in the desert but the smells the breeze carried with it reminded me constantly I was very far away from my home world. I shivered a little as the temperature dropped slightly and Thrawn picked up on that quickly.

“Are you chilled enough to want to come inside with me? I would like to shower and change clothes before we have dinner.” Thrawn asked, brushing the side of my neck with the backs of his fingers.

“So what’s on the menu tonight?”

“I thought I would surprise you.”

“Desert?”

“That would also be a surprise.” He murmured in my ear sending chills down my spine and warmth flooding up through me from within. This was an old game we played but I enjoyed each variation of it never the less.

“And after desert?”

“Oh I am quite certain there will some very interesting conversation going on. You and I have a great deal to catch up on.”

I smiled to myself and then allowed him to lead me to the stairs which led back inside of the tower out of the cold, away from the dark of the night and into the warmth he provided.

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Living on Nirauan was quite unlike anything else I had experienced. It was quite unlike life with Lord Vader on board his various ships or living on Coruscant with all that Imperial court life had to offer. While the base itself was run like any Imperial military operation it wasn’t quite the same because at least one third of the population were not human and the Chiss had vastly different ideas on how things should be done, as well as, how people should behave than humans did and the two styles of military operations sometimes did not work well together. Thrawn along with Voss Parck found themselves mediators in some rather interesting disagreements on how things should work. Yet, in spite of the differences, most of the time things ran smoothly.

At first I had been a little worried that my relationship with Thrawn would get in the way of having some sort of normal life at Nirauan but it was, for the most part, politely ignored. Neither Thrawn nor I were fond of public displays of affection and our years of keeping the fact that we were seeing each other a secret from the Imperial Court on Coruscant seemed to carry over into the way we conducted ourselves here as well. Our private lives were very private and in public we remained distanced and professional. It had always been the way our relationship had worked and

now I was so used to it now that anything else between us would have been unusual.

My place had been established when I had begun to teach language classes to both the Chiss and the humans. It was an odd job and never one I would have thought of doing when I was younger but I enjoyed it. However, teaching language classes only took up some of my time so when I was not teaching, I was working in the docking bay. Word had gotten around that I was a qualified mechanic and there had been no resistance when I had asked if I could help out. Once the chief engineer had figured out that I was actually pretty good at this job he welcomed my presence in the pit, especially since I could not only fix ships but act as translator between Chiss and human at the same time.

These two things filled up each day making my life fairly busy and when I wasn’t working or sleeping I was usually being badgered to death by Syal and Soontir Fel’s two little boys who had decided that I was a lot of fun to be with, though I could not for the life of me figure out why.

I enjoyed the boy’s company, their bright and mischievous countenance made a stark contrast to the often serious military feel to the base. They were at an age where they made their own fun and still young enough not to realise how far away and isolated they were from the rest of the galaxy. I would have thought that they were lonely for company their own age but they seemed to relish the company of adults and rather enjoyed having the run of most of the base to themselves. There were many places that were off limits to them, though sometimes that did not stop them from going there anyway and after a few months people mostly got used to seeing them run around when they were not in lessons or with their mother.

Syal was also wonderful company for me, another female who was not a member of the military and who had lived the court life, albeit from a slightly different perspective. We had a surprising amount in common despite our vastly different upbringings and lives. I greatly enjoyed the time I got to spend with her, talking with her about pretty much everything much to Thrawn’s consternation. I was unused to having a close female friend and apart from Cati and the girls on Hjal I had mainly spent my time in the company of men. It was a whole other experience to sit with Syal in her living quarters, with the two boys racing around, sipping stim’caf discussing men, fashions and pretty much everything else in between. Often we discussed our time on Coruscant during the time of the Empire, while the Emperor still lived and the life at court was at its height. It

seemed that while we had never actually met before we had crossed paths many times and attended many of the same events.

“I remember that!” Syal had exclaimed as I had told her about my first ever Grand Ball, the one where then Captain Thrawn had swept me off my feet onto the dance floor. “He astonished many people with his grace on the dance floor and of course everyone wanted to know who you were.” She had said with a smile. “People whispered about that dance for a long time afterwards. He perfected it with that back bend he forced you in to.”

I had grinned. “He was showing off.” I had told her.

That had made her smile. “I find it hard to believe that the Grand Admiral would stoop to showing off, he seems so....” She had searched for the right word and couldn’t find it.

“So Chiss?” I had offered.

She had just nodded and smiled.

I had shrugged. “He was a captain then and he was trying to impress me I think. It seems like such a long time ago.”

“And did he manage to impress you?” She had asked with a smirk.

“He scared me to death, if you want to know the truth, and yes, he impressed me with his prowess on the dance floor.” She had glanced at me for a second, the question she longed to ask burned in her eyes but never made it to her lips but I had answered it anyway, “And yes he shows the same prowess with *everything* else he does as well.”

That had made her laugh which had made the boys curious and they had decided enough girl talk it was time for boy-talk and we had spent the rest of that afternoon amusing them.

As hard as the adjustment of leaving home, living on Coruscant and now living on Nirauan had been for me it was even harder for Syal. She had given up everything to be with Tir including her family which included the famous Wedge Antilles, her younger brother.

“They think Tir and I are dead.” She had explained to me. The sorrow in her voice was unmistakable. “What else could I do, it was either their world or his and I wanted to be in his. He is the love of my life, the father of my children. Perhaps one day things will change enough that we could all be reunited but right now this is impossible. I would not do anything to compromise the safety of my husband, our children or this base. If Tir thinks that Thrawn is worth serving then the Grand Admiral must be a remarkable man. Tir doesn’t give his loyalties lightly no matter what anyone thinks.”

It had been a sobering conversation and I had lain awake that night thinking about it until Thrawn, tuned to my restlessness, had asked what was on my mind. When I had recounted the conversation he too had stayed silent for a long time afterwards, thinking about how to answer.

“You are lucky in many respects but that your family has managed to remain more or less neutral throughout the entire galactic civil war conflict is a great advantage to both you and me.” He had finally said thoughtfully. “Our relationship was tricky enough under Palpatine’s ever so watchful eye without familial complications adding to it. Had your family been in any way connected to the Rebellion at the time I have no doubt that things in your life would have been quite different.”

That had made me smile a little. “Well according to Palpatine my father was and probably still is a smuggler, Bel is a hopelessly romantic Rodian accountant, Bedi is a crazy pilot, my uncle is some sort of mad assassin spy and sarlacc knows what I am anymore. I don’t think there was any room for rebels in the family because honestly we have enough issues as it is. I don’t think the word dysfunctional even fits and if you count the Dantassi side of things then life begins to get really interesting.”

Thrawn had nodded. “You are lucky.”

“Zte’sa Vahlek calls me spoiled.”

That had made Thrawn chuckle. “Well you are that as well but I try not to let it worry me too much. If you get out of hand I can always ship you back off to stay with Kirja’navaar’inkjerii.”

I had pinched him painfully. “No, you cannot. You promised me you’d never do that again.”

His chuckle had been soft. “Why so I did, foolish me.” Then he had replied after a moment’s quiet, “You told me once that you make your own family, tekari, and that is what Syal has done. Soontir and the two boys are her family now; she understands that in order to live in his world she had to leave hers behind. That happens sometimes and usually it is the woman who must make that choice although not always.”

“I can’t imagine doing that. I can’t imagine life without my home, my family on Tatooine.”

“And you do not have to, but you still made a choice when you came out here to be with me and this life cannot be easy for either you or Syal, so far away from civilization.”

That had made me laugh. “You’re calling Tatooine civilized? That’s funny.”

He had made a face. "In spite of all the complaining you did, you enjoyed your time on Coruscant far more than you ever let on. Like a mynock to a power cable you were drawn to glitter and the glamour even though it drove you mad. Now you are here all the way out at the edge of the galaxy on a planet with nothing. I often wonder what holds you here."

I had rolled over on to my side to look at him then. "That's not true." I said calling him on what I knew. "You know exactly what holds me here and a tiny part of you relishes this, you just don't understand why I am so happy."

He had reached over and stroked my face. "I keep forgetting you are impossible to lie to and yes you are right. I suppose I don't understand why you seem to love it here so much."

"Well for one, no one is trying to kill me and two it reminds me of home."

He had just raised an eyebrow and waited for me to explain.

"It's quiet and isolated and I seem to spend a great deal of time working in a mechanic's pit." I had told him. "I have a place here, you're here...well..." I amended, "some of the time, and I have friends here. I don't need bright lights and a big city, nor do I need glittering parties and lots of money. It was sort of fun to play dress up and be a part of court life but that life came with a price, it always comes with a price. I am perfectly happy doing what I am doing now, being where I am." That had earned me one of his rare smiles, he had wrapped his arms possessively around me and sleep had come swiftly without dreams or nightmares in its wake.

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Time passed easily for me on Nirauan. Compared to the constant stress of even being near Lord Vader and under the ever present threat of being swallowed whole by the Emperor, my days at the base seemed almost blissful. The only disturbances in my otherwise almost dull routine were the Fel boys, Davin and Chak. I grinned to myself as soon as I heard the pounding of small feet on the stone floor. The Fel boys had found me.

"Aunty Merry, Aunty Merry!" Dav's small voice echoed loudly through the corridor as he ran as fast as his little legs could carry him.

"You always say her name wrong it's Aunty Merly!" Chak, who had stopped to let his little brother catch up, chided.

Dav had trouble with saying the letter r and he had mangled my name and pretty much any other words that had an r in them making that

letter sound more like a w than anything else. This amused Thrawn greatly who thought that Mewwy was a fairly accurate nickname for me. I had retorted that his being dubbed Gwand Admiwal Thwawn was equally amusing and no more had been said about it.

I stopped and let them catch up with me. Dav flung his arms around my legs effectively rooting me to the spot whereas Chak, who considered himself almost a grown up carried himself with a lot more dignity, copying his father's style of standing in military at ease. I hooked Dav under the arms and swung him up to my hip and carried him as I continued my way down the corridor. He was still small enough to be able to do this and still young enough that he didn't mind being held or cuddled. Chak on the other had took great affront at any female sort of affection but he didn't mind if I ruffled his hair because that's what his father sometimes did as well.

"And what are you two up to this afternoon?" I asked Chak who was now walking at my side, still trotting to keep up with me even though I had slowed my pace down by half.

"Well, we were playing hide and hunt." Chak said.

"And why did you stop?"

"Well we were told to go play somewhere else." He replied a little sheepishly.

"Where were you playing?" I asked hefting Dav from one hip over to the other, he was heavy.

Chak shrugged slightly, "In the hanger bay but we got into trouble with Commander Rossler."

"Ahh, well, the hanger bay isn't exactly the safest place to play hide and hunt, you know." I told him.

He made a face and nodded. "I know that but it's the *best* place to play."

I grinned. "I won't argue with that, I love the docking bay, though I've never played hide and hunt in one."

"But you can fix ships can't you?" Chak asked. "My daddy says you're a damned good mechanic for a sand-rat!" His imitation of his father would have been almost perfect save for the boyish tone of his young voice.

"Did he now?" I smiled at the nick name, "That's high praise from Commander Fel. So what are you doing here if you were playing?"

"We came to find you, will you play with us?" Dav asked. "It's boring with just us two!"

"What did you have in mind?" I asked.

“Hutts and smugglers?” Chak suggested.

I laughed. Hutts and smugglers was an odd variation of hunt and hide where the smuggler hid an object some place and the Hutts had to find it, who ever found it first became the next smuggler. “Sure, but first I have to talk with The Grand Admiral.” I told them both. “He asked to see me, that’s where I’m going now.”

Dav’s face darkened. “Are you in trouble?” he whispered.

“I don’t think so, why?”

“Grand Admiral Thrawn is scary.” Dav whispered and buried his face in my hair. This was all show, while Thrawn intimidated the boys somewhat they both adored him because he never spoke down to them or treated them as though they were in the way.

“He just thinks that any time a grown up says they want to see you it means you’re in trouble.” Chak explained.

“Well as far as I know I am not in trouble though I might be if I don’t hurry.”

“Are you going to come to dinner with us tonight?” Dav asked.

“I hadn’t planned on it, why?”

“Because I heard mommy telling daddy that you and the Admiral and a guest were coming to eat with us and that we had to behave and that we would have to go to bed early.” Chak explained without stopping to take a breath.

I gave him a raised eyebrow look. “Oh? I have not heard anything about that.”

“Will you come? If you come we might get to stay up a bit longer, mommy says when you come to visit the house is finally quiet.” Chak asked, looking at me with big hopeful eyes. He mostly resembled his father and I could see that Fel earnestness in him.

I just smiled and shook my head. “I see, so you only want me there so you can stay up past your bedtimes?”

Dav nodded, his blond curls bobbing about his cute little face. “yes!”

“No!” Chak countered at exactly the same time. “I want you to teach me how to read Cheunh and tell me stories about the Dantassi again.”

That made me smile. I had been telling the Fel boys about the Dantassi ever since they had seen my mask one day in my office and wanted to know what it was. Now the Dantassi were a great source of fascination for the two boys and they loved to hear stories about them. I enjoyed telling them stories and I found it almost strange how much I

enjoyed my time with the two little boys. Thrawn had also been right in his summation that my spending time with them gave Syal a break, the two kids ran her ragged and now that she was pregnant with their third she was finding it hard to deal with their never ending, boundless energy.

“So you aren’t bored of hearing about the Bone Traders yet?” I asked.

Both boys shook their heads and I had to stifle the urge to laugh because their expressions were priceless.

“Will you teach me how to be Jhal’kai like the great Navaari?” Chak asked.

I raised my eyebrows then stopped walking because we had come to the entrance to Thrawn’s office and looked at him.

“Well you know that takes years of practice and you have to be very patient, very quiet and stay very still for long periods of time.”

“I can do that! I can be still!” He said. “Watch, look see, I am being still!” and indeed he was standing stick still as well as holding his breath.

I was trying to set Dav, who was struggling to stay in my arms, down while at the same time pointing out to Chak that breathing was an essential part of being Jhal’kai. Thrawn opened the door to see what the ruckus outside his office was. Dav stopped struggling and clung to me nervously, giving Thrawn a wary look. Chak, still holding his breath, side stepped to move slightly behind me.

Thrawn opened his mouth then closed it again, giving me that arched eyebrow look which said, *care to explain this?* The little smirk at the corner of his lips did not escape my notice.

“Voss said you wanted to see me?” I asked simply, still trying to untangle myself from Dav. It was a little like trying to hold water.

“Yes, I did but you seem to be a little busy at the moment.” He replied glancing down at Chak whose face was starting to turn red.

“He’s decided to be still like a Jhal’kai.” I explained.

“And Davin?” Thrawn asked.

“I’m protecting Auntie Merry!” Dav spurted out.

“Against what?”

“You.” Dav said proudly.

Thrawn glanced at me, I just shrugged. “You sent for me, they think you are mad at me and I am in trouble.”

The twitch of his lips increased into a smile. “Ah I see. Well, Davin Fel in this instance you would be incorrect in your assessment of the situation.”

“Huh?”

I grinned and translated. “He means he’s not mad at me and I am not in trouble so you don’t need to defend me.”

“So, if you could perhaps free Miss Gabriel from your protective clutches I have need of her for a short while.” Thrawn told Dav.

There was a moment of silence while the boy considered it and then he let go of his death grip on me and allowed me to place him back on the floor beside his brother whose face was now a very bright shade of red.

“Jhal’kai do not hold their breaths when they hunt, Chak Fel, so you may wish to reconsider your current action before you give your mother even more cause to worry about you than she already does.”

Chak suddenly exhaled loudly then gasped for air behind me and Thrawn had to turn away so as the two boys would not see him try to stifle a laugh.

“Will you play with us when you are done?” Dav asked, holding onto my hand with his.

I glanced at Thrawn because I actually had no idea what he really wanted to see me about or how long it would take. He was about to say something when Syal suddenly appeared down the corridor.

“There you two are!” She said sounding more worried than angry.

“But Mommy we told you we were going to look for Aunt Merly.” Chak protested. “We were going to play Hutts and Smugglers!”

“I am quite sure that Merlyn has more important things to do than play with you two and besides, you both have chores to do before your father comes home from work.”

The boys’ expression were priceless, looking as though they had been condemned to a fate worse than death.

“Awww mom!” Chak protested but it was falling on deaf ears.

“Now, young man!” Syal said sternly, offering her hand to her youngest son who let go of mine happily.

“I’m sorry Grand Admiral, I try to keep an eye on them but they will slip away.”

“Indeed.” Thrawn said failing to hide his amusement.

“I also wanted to ask if you and Merlyn would care to join us for dinner this evening? Fel suggested it might make a nice break from the usual routine, especially with the visiting Admiral.”

“We shall be there.” Thrawn said, in an unusual move speaking for both of us.

“Very well, at eight o’clock.” She answered looking at me with a smile. Then, with a sigh and two little boys in tow, she headed back to her quarters.

I followed Thrawn into his office and sat when he waved his hand at the chair in front of his desk. “Those two keep you well in hand, I see.” He said with a slight smile before I could speak.

“They’re little boys. They produce enough energy between them to power this entire complex twice over. It’s a pity we can’t harness it somehow.” I replied. “What did you want to see me about?”

There was a lengthy pause and I immediately knew something was up. “This was in the courier package that arrived in the supply drop this morning.” He said holding up a data card.

“What is that?” I asked, not taking it from his fingers.

“I do not know. The message is encrypted in a way I have not seen before but it has your name on it.”

“Who sent it?” Now I was puzzled.

“No one knows. It seems it mysteriously made its way in with the rest of the dispatches and no one I asked has any recollection of it being handed to them.”

I glanced at the little data card still in his fingers. “You’re concerned.”

“Someone managed to bypass all security and slip this in with intel dispatches. Yes, that concerns me.” He said. “The number of people, not a part of this base, who actually know you are here and exactly where here is, is limited. The courier drops are kept highly confidential but someone managed to intercept them and add this data card along the way.”

“How is that possible?”

A momentary flash of disdain passed across Thrawn’s face. “Anything is possible if one tries hard enough.” He said with a touch of annoyance.

I took the data card from his hands. He watched me carefully for any change in expression but I had learned to mask my reactions to the memories some objects gave me a long time ago. I turned the small card over in my fingers.

“I don’t want you to use it in the central system; it may carry a slicer code.” He said pushing a hand-held reader across the desk to me.

I slipped the card into the reader slot and watched the screen. The message was encoded but I recognised it immediately.

"I think this might be from Uncle Vahlek." I said carefully. "But it will take me some time to decipher it. He's used an encryption that he taught me as child and it's one that uses a system of layers."

Thrawn stared at me and the silence in the room was heavy. "I want to know what that says, tekari. No secrets. If the Tze'yusha'Jin is sending you encoded messages without revealing himself then I want to know why. He has direct methods of getting in touch with you." This was Thrawn's round-about way of saying he felt something was very wrong with this whole thing and he didn't like it. Neither did I.

"When I get it decoded I will let you know." I told him.

He sat back in his chair and nodded, his eyes never leaving my face. He knew me well enough to sense when I was hiding something but he also knew when to step back and give me some room. "You'd best go find something decent to wear this evening. We have a dinner engagement to keep. The Baron is actually trying to make the new Admiral feel more at home." He said then added as an afterthought, "Best not to mention this at dinner until we know more."

"New Admiral?"

"Ged Larsen is here for a short reconnaissance trip. We have been discussing how best to consolidate our forces as he also has ships at his disposal but does not wish to leave his current base undefended."

I nodded. "I remember him; you introduced us at your induction into the canted circle."

"He arrived on base late last night and Fel thought a small dinner which included the company of females would not hurt in courting the Admiral's cooperation."

"He's balking at helping you?"

Thrawn smiled. "Not at all but Larsen plays his sabaac cards very close to his chest and that makes Fel uneasy, since the two will be working closely together I am not adverse to this small get together."

"Oh, well this really will be interesting as I recall the Admiral was quite a charmer." I said with a slight smile which never quite made it to my eyes. I was tired, this message had made me tired and I didn't want to deal with it but I was going to have to. I got up out of the seat, cupping the data disk in my hand.

Thrawn studied my face carefully then, after a few seconds had passed he asked, "Is there something about that disk you have not told me, tekari?"

The corner of my mouth twitched as I shook my head. Then, staring him straight in the eyes, I lied. "No. You know as much as I do right now." And with that I walked out of his office, the sensation of spiders crawling down my back worse than ever.

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The small dinner party that Syal had arranged went well. Admiral Ged Larsen, just as I had remembered, was a real charmer and the conversation had flowed with an ease that had surprised even me. The meal had been traditional Corellian food and how Syal, pregnant with her two boys underfoot, had managed to pull it off I would never know but it had been amazing. We sat eating the lovely meal, drinking a very fine wine that Soontir had magically produced, while discussing topics that normally Thrawn would have disdained from holding while dining. Only when the conversation turned to Ysanne Isard and what she had managed to do with the Empire did the tone of the evening turn serious in spite of Thrawn's subtle attempts to guide it in a less negative tone.

"She was always ruthless. She arranged for her father to be executed so that she could take his place." I said as I answered Syal's question about Isard. "But after the Emperor's death she turned mean and things got worse which is why Coruscant fell."

"I don't understand why, though." Syal said. "She had the backing of the Imperial troops and the navy so she could have held Coruscant easily." "It was her obsession with your brother that did her in." Ged told Syal as he studied his wine glass carefully.

Syal smiled but there was a touch of bittersweet in it. "Wedge always did have a knack of getting under people's skin."

"Wedge Antilles is a man who, in spite of his alliances, should be admired for the very fact that after all these years fighting a war that was deemed by many to be unwinnable is still alive. Your brother is an admiral man, Syal." Thrawn said carefully.

Syal nodded her head gracefully, accepting the compliment that was given and Tir placed his hand gently over hers, a small gesture of comfort. "I still don't understand why she did what she did." She murmured.

Ged sat back in his chair, “She lost sight of the original goal of the Emperor, to bring peace and order to the galaxy and took on the mantle of Goddess, ruling the galaxy with her judgement. Goodness knows how many had to die needlessly because she poisoned Coruscant with that virus simply so that it would be rotten fruit for the New Republic to have to deal with.”

My expression had darkened and Thrawn had not missed it. “That virus was an abomination. Thankfully Derricote’s design was flawed due to her impatience.” I growled.

Ged cocked his head to one side, studying me the way Thrawn sometimes studied his art. “I heard you lost a good friend because of it.”

I opened my mouth to spit vitriol but Thrawn, who knew me far too well, held up his hand. “We do not need to hear the details at the table, my dear.” He chided ever so slightly, reminding me this was supposed to be a friendly evening not a battle ground to bring up old wounds and reopen them.

I bit back the words that burned in my mouth and took a less than polite sip of my wine. Ged watched the exchange between Thrawn and me carefully, still trying to decipher the relationship between the Grand Admiral and myself then he gave me a small nod. “Forgive me, Miss Gabriel, I had not realised how painful mentioning this topic would be for you. I am sorry for your loss.”

I accepted his apology gracefully. “We’ve all lost people we love, Admiral. While the methods of warfare might change, the outcome never does.” I paused. “This disease she had created was terrible beyond all imagination. No one deserved to die that way, no matter what they had done and most of the beings that died were innocent civilians. That was not the act of a leader, that was an act of a coward. No wonder the galaxy shudders at the word Imperial.” I locked eyes with Thrawn for a moment then glanced away.

There was a murmur of agreement from everyone at the table and silence descended between us until Ged said. “Well, let us hope that this new campaign we are planning will change some of that.”

I toyed with my napkin for a moment. “Do you think,” I asked, “do you really think that people who are now enjoying life under the benevolent rule of the new Republic, with its senate and democracy, will welcome Imperial rule again?”

It was Thrawn who answered me. “I think that people crave law and order. If the system of government is fair and able to maintain the

infrastructure as well as provide security and strong leadership it is my belief that the majority of the people in this galaxy will not care one way or the other who is actually in charge. If we can avoid the rampant xenophobia of the Emperor and curtail the propensity for corruption then, yes, I think that people would welcome Imperial rule.”

Ged nodded his agreement. “Part of the issue has been the tendency toward megalomania, if that can be avoided then I don’t see why re-establishing an empirical style rule would fail.”

“And who would get to be Emperor?” Syal asked.

“If an emperor as leader would be the chosen way to go then that remains unknown.” Thrawn said archly. “But clearly it would have to be a person of great character, able to get past the power of the position and do the job.”

“An emperor without an ego.” I snorted. “That would be a first.”

“Perhaps some sort of democratic process that allows the people to have a say in the leadership?” Soontir suggested.

“As I recall it is was democracy that actually gave us Emperor Palpatine in the first place.” Ged reminded. “The people applauded his move to take over and form an Empire, if the holo-archives of that event are to be believed.”

“My uncle was there. He said it was a momentous occasion, people celebrated. He said that the Palpatine’s move to eliminate the Jedi was one that was widely approved by most of the galaxy. Most people felt the Jedi were over powered and far too arrogant. They were happy to have someone step in to end the Clone Wars and bring back peace to the galaxy, and for all the complaining about how he did this it is exactly what Palpatine accomplished until the rebellion began a civil war.” I said.

“So what changed?” Syal asked.

“The Empire did.” Soontir replied. “Somewhere along the line it ceased to be about protecting the galaxy and it became about self aggrandisement and power mongering.”

I glanced at Soontir. “It was always about power, but most people never knew it.” I said quietly, “The cruelty, the greed and the in-fighting came later.”

There was a moment’s silence at the table while everyone considered my statement.

“You don’t have much love for our late Emperor, do you?” Ged asked carefully.

“I have my reasons.” I said softly before Thrawn could interject hoping to avoid a tired from me about Palpatine.

“Perhaps one day you would tell them to me. My own experiences with his Excellency have left me with fond memories.” Ged countered.

“Then I doubt you would wish to hear what I have to say, Admiral.” I said coolly. For a moment Ged and I locked eyes and stared at each other, there was a strange flash of sensation between us and I looked away. Thrawn watched the exchange carefully, deciding whether or not to intervene but before he could say anything Tir spoke.

“What about Lord Vader? He was every bit as cruel and you did not seem to mind working for him.” He asked, more curious than accusing.

My eyes flicked to Thrawn to see if he would divert me from answering this question as well but he merely inclined his head ever so slightly. “Lord Vader was made cruel and, by definition, evil, but Palpatine was born that way. He manipulated people to his benefit whereas Lord Vader just vented his anger.” I shrugged, “If you knew how to circumnavigate his temper, you stayed alive, the Emperor on the other hand would kill you without blinking for no reason other than he felt like it.”

“So you justify Vader’s behaviour then?” Ged asked.

I shook my head. “Far from it, he chose every time he did something cruel and he knew it was wrong but his anger won over every time. In the end, he was still made that way, twisted by Palpatine who used Lord Vader’s love for his wife and his fear of losing her to his own advantage. Palpatine encouraged Vader’s cruelty because every step made in that direction condemned his soul to the dark side further.”

“Yet it was Vader, so I have heard who killed the Emperor in the end.” Soontir added.

I nodded. “So I have been told and given what Palpatine did to Anakin to turn him into Vader that would make sense. I don’t know too many parents who would choose the master they loathed above the child born from the woman they loved. In the end Padmé’s love for Anakin won not Palpatine’s manipulations of Vader.”

Ged gave me a smile. “Why Miss Gabriel, you’re quite the romantic.”

I shrugged nonchalantly to hide the sudden and unexpected blush that burned my cheeks. “It has been my experience, Admiral, that romance and the Empire don’t tend to mix all that well.” This earned me a sharply arched eyebrow from Thrawn and a smothered giggle from Syal.

“Ah well,” Ged said leaning back in his chair, “I am not sure that romance and anything mixes all that well but life would be awfully dull without it, would you not agree?”

Again our eyes locked for a brief moment . I knew in that second that he was baiting me and that he had not been told of my relationship with Thrawn but he suspected. “Yes Admiral, on that point I can agree, life without romance would be very dull indeed.”

And seeing an opportunity to divert the conversation in a less allow- Merlyn- to- vent- about- Palpatine- direction Thrawn lifted his glass and toasted to romance, breaking the combative mood which had managed to settle over the table but I had not missed the look that Ged had given me nor his smile which was predatory and neither had Thrawn.

The conversation turned to different, inconsequential things allowing Syal to suggest we move to the more comfortable surroundings of the living area. Our chatter steered away from the sombre topics of Isard and the Empire and laughter eased its way back into the evening as Syal, prompted by Ged, told some stories of her time as an actress. The two Fel boys had behaved and stayed in bed but sometime shortly after we had all retired to the living area for brandy and cake, Chak poked his nose out and it had not gone unnoticed. When Soontir caught him for a moment I thought the boy would dive back into his room but instead he waited until his father motioned for him to come and join us.

“You should be asleep, young man.” His father admonished.

“I was waiting for Aunt Merly to tell us a story about the great Dantassi. She promised.” He said with a sly glance at me because this wasn’t exactly true, I had not actually promised anything but I held my peace.

Soontir smiled and explained to Ged that somehow I had become the champion teller of Dantassi stories.

“I thought the Bone Traders were a myth.” Ged replied, looking at Chak.

“Oh no Aunt Merly’s seen them!” Chak protested, “She even lived with them for a while.”

Ged looked at me. “Oh really? You become more and more of an intriguing mystery with each passing moment, Miss Gabriel.”

I arched an eyebrow and sipped my drink. “It’s a long story, Admiral, perhaps if there is time some day you will hear it.”

“I certainly hope so.” He flashed his charming smile at me. “So they are not the wild savages the rumours make them out to be?” He pressed.

I got up, smoothing my dress as I did so, “No indeed, sometimes they make us look like the savages.”

“Merlyn you really don’t have to, the boys are spoiled enough as it is.” Soontir began, giving his son a look which said he wasn’t impressed but Syal placed her hand gently over her husband’s and gave him a look which said *let them be children for a little while longer before you start turning them into soldiers to fight your wars.*

Tir relented and I vanished, grateful for the excuse to escape, from the circle of grownups to the bedroom Chak and Dav shared, settled in my familiar spot on the floor beside the bunk beds and wove them a tale about a young Dantassi hunter who had gotten lost while tracking and found something quite remarkable along the way.

This tradition of telling Dantassi stories had started one day when the boys, bored and fractious had driven me mad with requests to play Hutts and Smugglers. I had bargained a story for peace and quiet and had told them one of the traditional Dantassi mythical tales. This had naturally led to many questions eventually ending in my telling them a little about my time with the Bone Traders. I never gave them all the details of Dantassi life and they never knew that Thrawn had anything to do with it at all but they did know that I had stayed in an enclave and that some of the stories I told them were about real things that happened. It didn’t really matter to the boys if the tales were real or not, a story was a story as long as it was told.

By the time I had finished my tale, Dav was sound asleep and Chak was that on the edge, drowsy but fighting it. I planted a little kiss on both of their foreheads but before I could leave Chak caught my hand in his.

“Are you going away on a dangerous mission?” He asked softly.

“Now what would give you that idea, Chak Fel?”

“You have that same look in your eyes that daddy gets when he goes away on a dangerous mission. You are all worried but you are trying not to show it.” He murmured as sleep began to steal him away.

I stroked hair from his forehead. “Well, if I am it’s only for a little while.”

“Promise?” He mumbled.

“No, no promises this time.” I told him but he didn’t hear, he had already fallen asleep. I had stared at him for a long moment, amazed at how perceptive children could be then with a sigh, I rejoined the conversation with the adults in the living area.

Shortly after one in the morning we had called it a night. Thrawn and Ged retired to Thrawn’s private office to continue a conversation which had started shortly before we had left the Fel quarters, having to do with ship numbers and strategic placements. I thought they would be at that for hours so instead of heading to bed, I went to my own office and set about decoding the data chip Thrawn had handed me earlier.

Once I unravelled the message I sat staring at the data pad, its blue light was the only illumination in the dark room. I was no longer even seeing the words on the screen, let alone reading them. The encryption had been easy for me to break as it was based on an old code that my uncle had taught me as a child’s game. Like every riddle it was fairly easy to decipher once you knew how although whoever had written this had twisted the encryption slightly making me work at it, making me sorry once I had unravelled it.

A cool breeze shifted through the room from the open window and the sounds of the night animals broke into my silence reminding me that I was still on Nirauan and still safe. I could smell the odd, tangy scent of the trees which were currently blooming and for reasons I could never explain, it reminded me sharply of Tatooine. Homesickness washed through me so violently that I had to blink back the tears which had sprung to my eyes unwanted. A knock at the door made me jump.

Thrawn, who always knocked instead of using the chime, entered before I could answer. He did not turn on the light because he could see well enough in the dark. I glanced up and met his glowing red stare; we held each other’s gaze for a second then he moved to the window, standing with his back to me, arms clasped behind him, to stare out into the night. In that second I thought he knew I had not told him the truth and he had come to find out why not. I should have guessed that after all this time there was not much I could hide from him. Unravelling the lies and the tangles other people made was something he excelled at, why should I be exempt from this? But he surprised me.

“Tekari, what could possibly be so important that it keeps you from joining me in bed this late?”

“Lesson plan for tomorrow,” I said as I shut the data pad off and the room was plunged into darkness. “I thought you and Admiral Larsen would be up all night plotting your overthrow of the New Republic.” I said getting up from my chair to perch on the desk edge closest to him.

I sensed his smile. “He’s quite brilliant, you know.” He said, “But he’s human and the journey here was taxing. He was quite exhausted,

although I think that had more to do with Syal's lovely meal, Soontir's fine wines and your ability to charm the twinkle off a star."

"I am quite sure my charm had nothing to do with it." I shrugged. "Though I did get the impression he enjoyed baiting me."

"Yes, that did not go unnoticed. You intrigue him."

I shrugged and made a face. "Perhaps I should tell him what I did to Zaarin. I intrigued him too."

Thrawn chuckled. "I do not think that Ged Larsen would try to force himself on you and I would ask you not to damage him, I am in need of his assistance."

"Well seeing as how you asked so nicely." I quipped. "How long is he staying on Nirauan?"

"We will leave tomorrow morning."

"We?" Both my eyebrows went up.

"He has invited me to view his base of operations in the Ryloth System and after some consideration I have accepted the invitation. I feel it would be advantageous to see how he runs things."

"How long will you be away?"

"A few days, perhaps a week." Thrawn shrugged. "This is more about being seen, about rallying the troops, as it were. He has ships and men; I am in need of both."

"And having him on board would not be detrimental either, would it?"

"Larsen is quite brilliant in his own way." Thrawn agreed, "Having him help in this campaign would be very beneficial."

"I heard that he was clever." I nodded. "The Emperor favoured him greatly."

"Tell me," Thrawn asked thoughtfully after a moment, "is he like you?"

"Like me?" I frowned.

"Does he have this same force power you have?"

"That was the rumour but if he's a force user he keeps it well hidden." I said. "What I did get from tonight's show was that he admires you greatly."

"Yes and that will be advantageous."

"So does Tir." I said. "I told you if you led, people would follow. We would not need an emperor when we have you. You draw people's devotion with such ease and you don't even seem to know it."

Thrawn smiled as he turned to look at me. "As do you with Fel's children. Which story did you tell them tonight?" He side-stepped the topic more neatly than he dressed but I didn't mind so terribly much. There had been enough politic talk for the evening as it was.

"Ekash'kah's tale, you remember the one about the lost hunter finding the wind's voice."

"Ah yes, Kirja'navaar'inkjerii used to tell his daughter that one often, I believe it was one of her favourites."

"It's a lovely story, full of hope and magic." I said, remember how I had felt upon hearing it for the very first time.

I stifled a yawn and got up from my desk. Relieved that he did not ask anything about the strange data card he had given me earlier. I went to him gratefully and wrapped my arms around his waist. He returned the embrace, stroking my hair and kissing the top of my head. "It's late. Shall we finish this conversation in bed, my dear?"

"Sounds like a good idea." I grinned and followed him out into the empty corridor to the quarters we shared. "And I can't wait to get out of these shoes, they are killing my feet."

"So, remove them. As I recall you used to wander around the *Executor* barefoot more often than not." He answered and then waited for me to slip the delicate, high heeled shoes off. "By the way, Larsen mentioned he was looking for some office personnel and asked if you might be interested in working for him as his personal assistant. He said you came highly recommended."

"Now why would I be interested in doing that?" I asked carefully, "Or is this your way of trying to get rid of me?"

He let me enter through the door to the quarters we shared first and waited until it had closed to continue. "After that fine display of charm this evening I was not certain if it was perhaps you that had decided to switch allegiances." He purred.

"Jealous?" I asked turning around so that he could undo the fasteners on the back of the dress I wore.

He brushed the slender straps of my dress off my shoulders as though he were brushing dust of a priceless sculpture and the silk I had been wearing slithered to the floor. "No, merely curious." He said as his fingertips grazed up and down the bare skin of my back. I let him finish the undressing job and sighed under his touch.

I turned around to face him, helping him with the removal of his own clothes, "Curious?"

“If you wished to work for him? It could be an interesting job, he is an interesting man.” The casual tone of his voice belied a sliver of concern. He had noticed the Admiral’s interest in me over dinner and he was letting me know this in his usual subtle manner.

“Not really, I have had my fill of being someone’s personal assistant.” I shrugged, “I am quite content where I am actually.” Even as I spoke those words I tasted the bitterness of them. Every time I found a measure of happiness something came along to change it. He caught the edge in my tone of voice and looked at me sharply. “It was simply a question and I doubt his offer was in earnest. Is something else wrong?” He asked.

I paused for a second then said “Yes.”

His eyebrow arched.

“You are talking to me about a job I do not want offered by a man I do not know while I’m standing here naked. I’m cold.” The lie was told well enough and he accepted it.

“Well this is easily enough changed, my dear.” He said, scooping me up. “Is there anything else I can oblige you with?” he asked as he lay me down on the bed and then lay over me.

“Yes,” I reached up to pull him to me, “remind me why staying with you is a good choice.”

“As you wish, my dear.”

I was grateful that our passion countered my sorrow and hoped he would not notice the one hidden beneath the other. I let him sweep me up in his world, this world only the two of us knew about and I tried to forget about everything else. In the morning he would be gone and then shortly afterwards, I thought ruefully, so would I.

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I ran through my pre flight check and tried to ignore the tiny flutter of sand jiggers that danced in the pit of my belly. I had done this many times before and today was not going to be any different except this time I wasn’t coming back when I was supposed to, but it would take them a while to figure that out and by then it would be too late to track me.

“*Ahnkeli Su’udelma*, you are cleared for go.” The voice of the young man on duty said.

“Roger that Flight.” I smiled as I answered. Taking my ship out for a burn had become a common enough thing that no one raised any eyebrows about it any more. I liked to keep my ship in perfect running order and everyone knew that but the first time I had requested flight clearance there had been a discussion over it. In fact there had been a rather loud argument on the flight deck about it until finally Thrawn, who had been on the base at the time had been called in to intervene. The silence in the hanger had been almost eerie as he had stood between the deck officer, whose very stance said he was not budging an inch and me, who had been about to bring some violence into the fight.

While being Thrawn’s bond mate and bed partner had some advantages he was not about to show me any favouritism when it came to the rules and the safety of the base and I had to not only ask nicely to get what I wanted but explain why I wanted it in a clear and concise manner.

“The ship’s engines need to be run and that won’t happen in the hanger. I need to keep her calibrated and for that I need to be in space, and sometimes I need to open a hyperspace window and jump in a lane. It takes time but in the end it will save time.” I had said trying to keep my temper in check.

“I can have one of my more qualified pilots do that for you Miss Gabriel.” The deck officer had said.

The air must have sparked because before I could hurl any insult or answer back Thrawn had held up his white gloved hand. “Mister Rhastlen, I assure you that Miss Gabriel is a very qualified pilot. Both the *Ahnkeli Su’udelma* and the *Sigiri* are her ships and she may take them out when ever she sees fit...,” He had glanced sharply at me stopping my smirk of victory, “However there are some rules and restrictions.” He had continued, his words directed at me, “You will be allowed to leave the base when we are on stand down with no alerts, you will produce a flight plan prior to leaving the base, and you will give a time of return, if you do not comply you will be grounded. If you fail to return by the time stated and have not radioed in a good reason for this failure to return and I have to send someone out to find you, the consequences will not be pleasant, do I make myself clear?”

I had felt as though I were in my teens again asking my father for the codes to the family shuttle but I had backed down and nodded because in the end Thrawn’s demands were reasonable. The deck officer, Jonas Rhastlen had been a new addition to Nirauan and he wasn’t finding it easy to settle in. He did not like the Chiss all that much and he especially

disliked having females around. Women, according to him, belonged in the home with the kids not up in space. I could see in his face that he did not agree with Thrawn at all but he would not argue with the Grand Admiral in front of everyone in the hanger bay. He had done that later, in private and it had been the reason he was transferred to one of Thrawn's ISDs. Even though I had asked, Thrawn would never tell me what Rhastlen had said to him, but I knew it had not been good because when ever the man's name had been mentioned Thrawn's mouth tightened just a little. However, since that particular day there had not been any further incidents about me not being allowed to leave the base and I had followed Thrawn's conditions to the letter. The replacement deck officer knew his stuff and had no issues with woman at the helm, especially since his wife was an exceptional TIE pilot.

I throttled the engines up as the hanger bay doors opened and styled my ship upwards towards the blue of the sky, which was crystal clear.

"*Ahnkeli Su'udelma* what is your ETR?"

I smiled at the voice coming over the comm. Just because they were used to me coming and going did not mean they stopped following the rules. "I thought I would head out over to Iridonia. I want to test the hyperdrive upgrade. I submitted my flight plan this morning and it was approved. My estimated time of return will be this time tomorrow, approximately, over."

"Roger that *Ahnkeli Su'udelma*, watch your tail and keep in touch."

"Copy that Flight, *Ahnkeli Su'udelma* out." I let the sensation of riding through waves on an ocean wash through me as the ship kicked its way free of the planet's gravity, the silence that followed the noise let me know when we were in space and flew in the direction of Iridonia. Flight would track me until I opened a hyperspace window and jumped, just as they did all departing ships. I had picked the Zabraki home world as my destination for registering a flight plan because it was on my way.

I set the coordinates into the nav computer and let it sort out the details while I looked at the rout map. I was going to cut clear across the known galaxy which meant some rather inventive route planning to avoid some of the more heavily populated areas and New Republic held territory which would require papers and travel documents to be shown. Even though I had valid documents which stated I was a cargo pilot out of Mos Eisley, I didn't want to run the risk anyway. As had been pointed out to me many times, I knew enough about Thrawn's operations to be a real

problem should the New Republic or worse, one of the War lords currently vying for galactic domination catch me and figure this out. Luckily, where I was headed, Nar Shadda, did not require such things, it was owned by the Hutts and I knew my way around it well enough.

I would have to plan a series of hyperspace jumps because I was not using a standard trade route and that meant avoiding gravity wells formed by some of the major planetary system in my way but by skirting the edge of the Mid Rim territories I could do it in four days, if all went well. I certainly had enough fuel and supplies for that amount of time with enough to cover a few days more. It was funny what one could sneak aboard one's ship without anyone actually noticing.

Once the hyperdrive engaged I unstrapped and went back aft to the galley to make some tea. The first jump would take me near Agamar, from there I would turn towards the Roche Asteroid belt which lay on the Perlemian Trade Route but because I was crossing it and not travelling along it I wasn't worried about patrols. From the Roche Asteroid belt to Nar Shadda would be a straight jump, hopefully without any complications. If all went well I would be on The Vertical City with enough time to scout out the area.

It had been a long time since I had visited Nar Shadda, a planet that was often dubbed Little Coruscant because of its vast infrastructure and city sprawl which covered most of the surface. It glittered just as Coruscant did from a distance but travellers who knew better never let that deceptive twinkle fool them. Nar Shadda was probably one of the worst places to be in the entire galaxy and that was saying something. The entire planet made Coruscant's under belly look tame by comparison. It was a great place to hide and an even better place to set up an ambush.

I sighed as I sat at the small galley table, one hand curled around the hot cup of tea the other hand holding the data reader. I had known instantly who it had come from the moment Thrawn had handed it to me. The memory it had given up had been violent and full of fury. Unravelling the encryption had simply given me more information.

"*Come or they die, Mouse.*" The message had said. The single line, which spoke volumes, had been hidden under layers of an encryption which Uncle Vahlek had taught me as child to amuse me. As well as the threat, there had also been set of coordinates, a meeting place and a date. That was it and it was enough. Jyrki had not needed to sign his note because he was the only person who had ever called me Mouse. I sat and stared at the words bewildered by their significance. He had broken that

last taboo between us and gone after my family, what I didn't understand was why?

Thrawn had once called Jyrki mad and while at the time I had not wholly believed him, I did now. My uncle's theory was that Jyrki loved me to the point of obsession and I wasn't sure what to make of that. I didn't have a theory, I just had questions.

It had been over a year since my path and Jyrki's had crossed on Coruscant at the medical facility where Cati had died. He could have killed me then, the opportunity had been there but instead he had chosen to leave quietly, although not without a warning but that had been directed at Uncle Vahlek, not me.

I stared at the small screen on the data card reader without really seeing it any more. Something had made Jyrki cross that line because he had wanted to draw me out, wanted to see me again or wanted something from me. By going after my family he was making certain that I not only come to the rendezvous point but that I come alone.

I closed my eyes, bringing up the memory I had gotten off the data card. Jyrki backhanded my father across his face while yelling "Where is she?" The closed fist which has struck my father violently had held the data card at the time; it had been a deliberate move on Jyrki's part and my stomach churned at the thought of it. No matter how hard I tried to make it do so, the data card would not give up any more of its secrets or divulge any more information leaving me angry and frustrated.

He had given me two weeks to meet him at a cantina on Nar Shadda called *The Burning Deck*, in the Corellian sector. It was a favoured hang for bounty hunters and other members of the under world. Jyrki liked it because it was dimly lit, easy to get an over-view of and most people rarely wanted to start any trouble in it because trouble makers were dealt with swiftly and usually permanently. He had chosen it because it a place we both knew.

When I had been learning the pilot and mechanic trade, Jyrki had once taken me to Nar Shadda on a run. It had been a huge thing for me and my father had not been easy to convince, I wasn't much more than fifteen at the time but Jyrki had reassured papa nothing would go wrong. It was a routine drag and drop run, delivering a small shipment of parts for one of the suppliers my father sometimes worked with. The deciding factor in the reasons for letting me go was me learning to fly different ships to different places with different pilots. Jyrki didn't pilot runs often, he was the head mech not the Bay's pilot but everyone else was out on a run and this was an

emergency with good money being paid out. I had been delighted and the trip, to my young eyes, flying under the tutelage of the man I had fallen madly in love with was an utter wonder.

Jyrki had been a good, patient teacher who had never once spoken down to me or made me feel as though I were wasting his time. I had learned a lot on that particular run about things my father would never have taught me because they were underworld skills. I had not known then that my father had been and probably still was a smuggler and Jyrki never gave that particular tidbit of information away, instead he had gone about teaching me some rather interesting ship manoeuvres as part of the *let's do something fun because this run is dull as hell* excuse. When we reached Nar Shadda I was a lot more confident at the helm of a larger transport ship than I had been before leaving Tatooine.

Once the cargo had been delivered and payment sent, Jyrki had taken me out for a drink at *The Burning Deck* and while it had not been the first time I had ever been in a cantina it was certainly an eye opener to be in one that was not the Mos Eisley Cantina. I had never felt quite so grown up as when we sat at the bar and he ordered two ales so we could to the trip.

"Yer'll make a good pilot, Mouse." He had said. "Yer got skills and instincts that most of the pilots in here would kill for."

I had beamed under his praise and blushed so hard I thought that the whole bar could see my skin glow from the heat of it. Jyrki had pretended not to notice. He had thought I was a cute kid with some talent, to me the entire galaxy revolved around him. The moment had been made all the more sweet when one of the locals had come up to us.

"Hey, Andando robbing the cradle now are we?"

Jyrki had simply smiled. "Boss's daughter, Keiggs, learning the ropes."

The man who was scruffy around the edges but whose eyes told me he had more sense and brains than was apparent looked me up and down. "You want to be a pilot, missy?"

I had nodded, glancing cautiously from one man to the other.

"Well, I dunno, a woman in the cockpit is usually a bad combination in my books." Keiggs had said, half teasing half serious. "And you look a bit young to be tossing around in a runner."

Jyrki had shaken his head. "Yer too old fashioned, Keiggs, little Mouse here just did a Reynolds' manoeuvre without even batting an eyelash. I'd sooner have her as my co' than yer any day of the year."

“No kidding? A Reynolds?”

Jyrki had shaken his head, his long, black hair rippling like obsidian water around his pale face. “No kidding, and it was nicely done. The girl has a gift, yer’d do well to learn a thing or two from her. Last I heard yer’d smashed up the *Kayty II* trying to dodge imps.”

Keiggs had managed to look sheepish and annoyed all at the same time. “Yeah well,” He shrugged, “You know how it goes sometimes. Managed to deliver the cargo tho, not like some chumps who dump and run at the first sign of trouble. Like I said, you know how it goes.”

Jyrki had smirked, his pale blue eyes twinkling in the cantina’s lights. “Yeah, I do which is why I’d take my Mouse here as co pilot any day.”

Keiggs had grunted something about Jyrki having all the luck and then sauntered off to bother a bored looking female pilot who was sitting at the other end of the cantina bar. I had just been beside myself with joy and aside from not being able to finish the ale which I secretly thought was awful, it had been a perfect day. The run home was more of the same and even after we had landed back on Tatooine my feet had not quite touched the ground.

As I sat now in the galley of the ship I owned I wondered what either of us would have done if we could have seen what the future held in store for us. After all the terrible, terrible things Jyrki had done to me some small part of me still loved him, still felt as though I owed him something and I couldn’t seem to let any of that go. For the very first time since leaving Nirauan I wished for Thrawn’s guidance in this matter because in my heart I knew the outcome would not be a good one.

It made me unbelievably sad to think about how things had ended up with Jyrki. I did not understand obsession and I certainly didn’t understand his. It also surprised me that he had not joined Luke Skywalker’s crusade to rebuild the Jedi order. Jyrki had been trained as a child in the Jedi Temple, I was certain that Luke would have welcomed him with open arms because force users were far and few between. Then again, maybe that was exactly the reason Jyrki had not joined Luke. The night Anakin Skywalker had come through the Jedi Temple and annihilated the children was about the worst moment in time I could ever imagine and for Jyrki as a small boy during that time the nightmares must still have haunted him. I wondered if Jyrki would ever trust another Jedi ever again, especially the son of the man who had hunted him down like an animal. The visions I had seen of that time still haunted me. There were

still nights when I woke from reliving that nightmare, a scream on my lips, bathed in a cold sweat calling Anakin’s name, begging him to stop. Thrawn who had shared this memory with me understood and on nights such as these he would simply hold me while I wept for the lives of small children I had never met and the soul of a man I wondered if I had ever truly known. I could understand if Jyrki was hesitant to serve with and learn under the son of Anakin Skywalker, in his shoes I would be as well.

I had searched often through the holocron diary my mother had made, looking for answers to questions I didn’t even know I had. Being a Jedi was part of my heritage but it was a thing I did not understand. This strange power had not brought me much in the way of happiness and, had he lived, Palpatine would have found a way to twist my gifts to his advantage, turning me into a creature of his design or killing me in the process. This was the thing Jyrki had feared, the reason he had come charging back into my life to save me but I had not believed him. In the end he had been right but I could not forgive him for how he had tried to enforce his point of view. I still had bad nightmares from my time as his captive. He had accomplished nothing with his brutal methods of trying to get me out of the Empire’s clutches except to make me hate and fear him almost as much as I had feared Palpatine.

It was a strange galaxy sometimes, I thought.

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Flying into the Corellian Sector on Nar Shadda was a little like flying into the past. It brought back many memories and I smiled as the ship broke through the outer atmosphere into the dirty air that covered the moon like a thick blanket. I knew this place well enough to know how the system worked, and unlike the galactic government, this had not changed since the last time I had been here. As I navigated my ship down through the dirty looking buildings which towered high up into the moon’s atmosphere I wondered how the hell anyone in their right minds could actually live here. It was every bit as rank, dirty and depressing as I remembered, in spite of the bright flashing neon lights and myriad of gaudy advertising that half blinded any pilots skimming their way dockside.

The bored sounding flight controller at the second largest space port directed me to my assigned docking berth as though he were doing it in his sleep, which might very well have been the case. I waited while he

processed my papers and hoped that Thrawn's people had been as good as he had promised they would be. Although the ship's name had stayed the same, I had docked under the name of Amyshka Pavjäska, a human trader based out of Corellia. It was a false identity we had come up with before I had gone to Coruscant, just in case I had been stopped by a New Republic control but I hadn't needed to use it. Having multiple identities for both me and my ship was not terribly legal under the Imperial system of rule but it would have looked odd for a freelance smuggler not to have some back ups, even if I didn't use them it was still something I needed. Now I was grateful and Amyshka was a name I would actually answer to so using it wasn't difficult. I was pretty certain that Jyrki didn't know I had a ship of my own and if he did he most likely did not know her name. If he went looking for me in the Starport registry he wouldn't find me.

I styled the ship into the holding area and then winced as the automated docking clamps seized her roughly, hauling her into the resting cradle. It was a good job I didn't mind some scratches and dents because I was pretty sure after this there would be some more. I listened and waited while the dock side umbilicals attached and began feeding the ship power, air and water as well as extracting the waste. I plugged my cred-chip into the onboard and paid for two week's worth of dock fees up front. Payment up front meant I and my ship would be left alone. I would slip the dock master in charge of my sector a bribe later on, just to make sure I was not harassed and my ship was not touched. As I undid my harness straps I sighed, this was a homecoming of sorts but it didn't bring much joy.

Two hours later, after arranging for fuel and supplies, doing a thorough run through of my ship and adding some additional security in case the bribes I had given the dock master were not quite enough, I sat at the galley table with a cup of tea in hand and a holo map of the area I was in.

The Corellian Sector was one of the largest and most populated on Nar Shadda. It was my hope that even if Jyrki was watching star ports the sheer volume of traffic would make it difficult to spot me. I was pretty sure that Jyrki did not know what my ship actually looked like and even if he did, in the large star port docking bay it would be fairly hard to find.

I had debated whether or not to disguise myself with my Dantassi clothing but while wearing the mask would make me anonymous it would not make me invisible. The Bone Traders were a curiosity even here and dressed as one I would be noticed. It was easier to dress in non-descript clothing as the trader I was pretending to be and blend in with the rest of

the crowds rather than stand out and be remembered. When I left my ship to go exploring it was the stench and heat of the air that hit me first. I had forgotten that as well, after the clean air on both Hjal and Nirauan, the air here tasted thick and foul. Nar Shadda was a filthy place in more ways than one.

The crush of beings walking along the concourses was almost overwhelming. I had forgotten what it felt like to be in such crowded places full of alien beings, bounty hunters, smugglers and criminals of all sorts. Moving through the crowds was a little like dancing and once I had found the rhythm of it I made my way to The Burning Deck to scope it out. I had plenty of time before the meet with Jyrki and I wanted to be ready for anything he had to throw at me even though I knew that would not be the case. He had my family, at least he had my father and that already made it personal and difficult. My gut boiled with anger just thinking about it.

The Burning Deck was surprisingly busy and as I made my way through the dimly lit main room I was glad I had not worn my Dantassi gear. It would have been insanely warm in the stuffy cantina and people would have stared, as it was I attracted little to no attention, or so I thought, as I pushed my way to the bar. As I was about to order a drink a gruff male voice interrupted.

"Not seen you in here before."

I didn't look at the owner of the voice. "That's because I haven't been here in a while." I said with just enough intonation to let the man standing behind me know I wasn't interested. He didn't get the message.

"So, what'll you have, little lady?"

I looked up to see the rough face of a man I didn't recognise and the undisguised leer in his eyes told me everything I needed to know. "I'm fine, thanks" I said politely, flagging the bar-droid over.

"Didn't ask you how you were, asked you what you wanted to drink."

I sighed and turned around to face him again. "Right, my mistake. I was planning on having a stim'caf, not that it is any of your business."

His expression turned dark. "That's not very polite. I was just offering to buy you a drink."

"Again, kind of you but unnecessary I have enough creds to purchase my own." I shifted slightly to move away from his presence which had somehow managed to become annoyingly close to my body. He needed a shower in the worst way.

“You know, a slip of a girl like you could get hurt in a place like this.” His voice was a low growl.

I nodded with an expression of feigned boredom. “So I’ve been told.” I said and went to move to a different spot altogether but instead of allowing me to leave he grabbed my arm.

“Let go.” I spoke quietly. If he had been smart he would have picked from my voice as well as the look in my eyes just how close he was to dying. Over the years I had been grabbed and man-handled more times than I cared to mention and I wasn’t about to take it with a smile any more.

“I think you’ll have that drink with me and then maybe I’ll show you my ship.” He said firmly as though I didn’t have any choice in the matter, “You look like a girl who enjoys seeing the inside of ships lying down.”

It took me two simple moves to put him on the ground, with the third one I hurt him. I crouched by his side as he doubled up in agony and whispered in his ear. “Do I still look like a girl who could get hurt in this place or do I look like a girl who could hurt you in this place? Do yourself a favour, flyboy and leave us strange girls alone. You don’t know where we’ve been or what we’ve been taught to do to desperate, pathetic men like you.”

He nodded his head, rendered speechless by pain and I moved away to a different spot at the bar to order my drink. A few of the patrons close enough to see what had happened shook their heads and whispered to themselves but in a place like this, that had been a mild discussion and the fact that no blasters had been drawn was disappointing. Everyone loved a good fight, even if it had them diving for cover under the tables. I had not wanted to draw attention to myself so I had dealt with my new friend as quickly and as quietly as I knew how. There were a couple of bounty hunters in the shadows who had watched the scene with marked interest and one of them had given me the nice job nod. I paid for my stim’caf and made my way to the upper gallery, found a shaded table with a good view of the whole floor and sat down to think and observe.

Even as a child I had loved to watch people and growing up in a place like Mos Eisley had been perfect for that, even better was working at a docking bay. I had long understood that I was different and that I sometimes saw things about people and beings other did not but I had never really known why and simply accepted the fact. Now, after my years of working for the Empire and being trained in some of the ways of the force, the Bunduki arts and Jhal’kai I saw just how much I had leaned. It was eerie in some ways, like watching a strange dance whose choreography

was constantly being changed and reconfigured all the while the dance was ongoing.

Most people assume that everything is random but that is never really the case. There are patterns all over the place, even in crowds full of strangers there are patterns. As I observed the cantina I began to notice some of these reoccurring patterns, I could tell who was a stranger in town, and maybe first time to the cantina itself, I could point out the regulars who had their niche carved out and their piece of cantina territory claimed. It was easy to spot the smugglers and the legitimate traders, just as it was easy to pick out the bounty hunters look for their mark or waiting on a deal. Little things gave people away, my father had taught me. Gamblers called it a tell he had said. At the time, as a child listening to my father speak of these things I had just thought him clever but now I understood that as a smuggler himself he needed to be able to read people, read crowds and situations in order to save his own hide from being caught.

I saw him before he noticed that he had been made. Subtle and sly he was good at his job but the strange tingle that rippled down the back of my neck said that his feigned indifference was a ruse and that he was on guard, as it were and waiting, watching for me. I was not here for playing games and tired of the messing around. This was one of Jyrki’s men, I was sure of it but I wanted to be one hundred percent sure and it was time to get the show on the road. When our eyes met, for split second he understood and made no pretence about why he was there, instead he got up from his chair in a lazy, beguiling manner and made his way through the crowd, up the side wall stairs to join me at my table. I didn’t know who he was but I didn’t have to.

“You’re on Nar Shadda early, Miss Gabriel.” He said conversationally, signally one of the floating droids for a refill on both our drinks.

“And you have me at a disadvantage, while you seem to know who I am I have no idea who you are.”

His smile was thin. “You may call me Lorano Dek.”

“And you’re keeping tabs on me because...?” I asked.

“Because I was paid to do so.” He replied.

I nodded. It had crossed my mind that maybe Jyrki would pull something like this but I had hoped for a day or two without a watchdog. “Well now you see me.” I said. “I was in the neighbourhood and didn’t feel like hanging around in space waiting for the due date. So get to the point.”

“We have a mutual acquaintance, Miss Gabriel, he is anxious to meet with you.” He toyed with his drink, I didn’t touch mine.

“Mr. Andando is the one who set the meeting date, Mr. Dek, why should he be anxious?”

“He was not sure you would come.”

I gave the thick set man a small nod. “Well, he has something of mine I would appreciate being returned...unharmd.”

“He would be willing to see you now to discuss the terms of reimbursement.” He said letting me know that he had contacted Jyrki the moment I had been seen entering the cantina. At least I thought, this meant they had not found my ship or figured out which port I had entered in from. I had not felt as though I had been followed prior to entering the cantina.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t think so. I’m tired from my trip and I need to find a hotel to stay in.” Implying that I had not come in a ship of my own.

That caught the mercenary’s attention. “As you pointed out he has something belonging to you.” He said pointedly. He had not expected me to refuse him flatly and I wondered what Jyrki had told this man about me.

I nodded and shrugged. “So he does but I would not be here if I did not also have something he wants. So we will meet on my terms. If he is disagreeable to this then tell him the deal is off.” What ever it was that Jyrki wanted from me he had wanted it badly enough to go after my family which had meant risking a lot, if not everything. I wasn’t sure where Uncle Vahlek fit into all of this but I was damned sure it wasn’t good. I was, as Thrawn would say, stalling for time, though I wasn’t exactly sure why. It was a gamble and I was hoping that whatever it was Jyrki wanted or needed from me it would be enough to make sure the cards were stacked in my favour, which would be a first.

Lorano Dek nodded slowly, “Would you be amenable to meeting Mr. Andando here tomorrow at the same time?”

I nodded. “I can agree to that” I said then added, “Only next time keep your friends out of my face.” I said, nodding to the man who had offered to buy me a drink earlier.

Dek laughed. “Him? He’s not one of mine. Herden is exactly what he appears to be, Miss Gabriel, a down and out spacer. I didn’t bring any friends with me, I was told that would be unnecessary with you although after that lovely little performance I can see that Mr. Andando did not over estimate your ability to bite.”

I regarded the square jawed man who sat opposite me and inclined my head slightly at his compliment. “Then it’s a date Mr.Dek. Please tell your employer not to try anything funny.”

“I’ll be sure to pass along the message.” He got up from the table with all the languid grace of a gurreck and I understood that this was his way of letting me know he would not be so easy to put down as the spacer named Herden. I stayed seated and watching him leave, waiting until I could not see him any more before I took my leave of the bar.

The main concourse was crowded but even so I knew I was being followed. I wasn’t sure who it was and I wasn’t about to take any chances or let them know I was aware of their presence so I led them on a merry dance all over the sector until I came to small but fairly decent looking hotel. I did not want to lead whoever was dogging me to my ship especially if it was one of Jyrki’s people. While I had learned a few things since Jyrki’s tutelage he was still the man who had pretty much taught me everything I knew about ships and ship security. I did not want him playing with mine.

Once I had checked in and paid for a room, I went back out to do a little shopping again I had the sensation of being watched and hoped that who ever it was that was tailing me was enjoying the show because I was shopping for some clothes, some snacks and general hygiene products like a new toothbrush and shampoo. Once I was done with shopping, I returned to the hotel, dumped all my stuff and went down to the reception to ask about local food delivery services. I was in the mood for something hot and spicy. The petite Rodian at the reception desk gave me her recommendations and I went back up to my room to order food and pass the time watching the HoloNet.

As I lay in bed much later I tried to run through every possible scenario that could happen. I would have been lying if I had said that the prospect of meeting with Jyrki didn’t scare me because it did. My fingers grazed my neck looking for the necklace that Thrawn had given me but it wasn’t there. I had taken it off before I had left Nirauan and left it on my bedside table. I knew Thrawn would see it and I hoped that he would understand that I planned on coming back to claim it. That I planned on coming back to him and not ending up in a bacta tank, losing the precious pendant due to someone taking it off and not giving it back to me. He had kept it safe for me before and I hoped that would be the case now.

It was a strange bed in a strange place and sleep did not come quickly. I lay half awake for a long time with images of the past, present and possible future running through my mind. When I finally did drift off

to sleep it was full of vivid nightmares which lingered long after I had awoken early in the cold dawn reaching for a man who was thousands of light years away, weeping without fully knowing why.

For a long time I simply lay in the bed, staring up at the ceiling wondering what the hell I had done in coming all the way out here alone to confront someone I no longer really knew or understood. When I could lie there no longer I heaved myself out of the bed, showered and went to get some breakfast. There was no point in meeting with Jyrki on an empty stomach; it only made me grouchy which made negotiating difficult. As I sat in the hotel's dingy breakfast room cradling a cup of the worst stim'caf I had tasted in ages I wondered what the meeting would bring. Things were slowly building to a head and it was like watching a very bad speeder accident happening in slow motion. I could not more stop it than I could turn away from watching it.

I had hoped to begin a new life on Nirauan, to put my past behind me but Jyrki seemed determined not to allow me that. Like a bad dream he kept coming back to haunt me. Unfinished business a friend had once said, it comes back when you least expect it. This, I thought morosely as I sat staring into space, was one strange little love story that while it might have begun sweetly enough, was going to have a very bad ending.