

# Daughter of the Empire

## Book 3

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Chapter Seven

### The Madness Divine

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## CHAPTER 7 The Madness Divine

Jyrki's eyes, even more blue than I remembered, bored into mine as though by doing so he could see past my face and into my soul. I did not back down or look away. I had learned in the last few years a thing or two about myself and he no longer intimidated me instead he made me angry and anger was easy to use. I had loved this man once, the very sight of him had made my teen aged heart race and my knees weak but over time things had changed and it never ceased to astound me how quickly love could turn to hate.

He had aged and the last couple years had not been kind to him. His once handsome face was now etched with the lines of battle and stress, worry and something else I could not define, something I had not picked up on when I had seen him at the med-lab after Cati had died. A fresh scar ran down the side of his right cheek and there were fresh bruises on his knuckles. He had been in a fight recently and it had been a hard one. His long hair, which had once been blacker than a Hutt's heart was now peppered with strands of white. It had not escaped my notice that he still had a slight limp as he had walked into the cantina to make our meeting. That limp had been my doing from our fight on Rothana, although at the time he had not known who I was. I wondered absently if his limp reminded him of me, then decided I didn't really want to know the answer to that one.

"Yer look well Mouse." Jyrki finally said, breaking the strangled silence between us.

I arched an eyebrow at him. "Where are they?" I asked pointedly. I did not have time for niceties and I wasn't about to sit and make small talk with the man who was holding my family against their will for reasons I still did not know.

"Safe." He replied after a terse minute of quiet. "Mouse, yer need to understand..."

I waved a hand abruptly at him, cutting him off mid sentence. "I don't have to understand anything!" I hissed through clenched teeth, leaning into the table to get closer to him. "You kidnapped my family to get to me. Now I am here so get to the point, what do you want?"

He sat back in his chair and toyed with his glass. "I need yer help." He finally said.

I could not have been more surprised than if he had told me he wanted to marry me. "What?"

"I need yer help." He repeated.

There was a lengthy pause and then I replied carefully, "And for that you took my family hostage?"

"Would yer have come if I hadn't?"

I glared at him and shook my head. "I'm done with you." I told him. "You chose your side and you made your position clear. You hurt me, damn it, you very nearly killed me and not just once and for what?" I pressed, "Because you cannot let go of the past." I bit back the words that threatened to spill out of my mouth angry and vicious. Ranting at him would be pointless, my words would fall on deaf ears so I drew a deep breath, swallowed my fury at him down to answer the original question. "No, I would not have come, not for you alone." I said. "Now...my family...."

He nodded and again we stared at each other. "They're safe, if that's what yer need to know."

"What do you want in exchange?" I asked. He had not lied but something was not quite right in his words. I might have been able to sort it out had I opened up to the force but I did not want him to see my strengths in this area. My force talents, since he had first met me, had become far stronger than I wanted him to know. My talents had been honed and sharpened by both Lord Vader and the Emperor and while I had not become what either man had wanted I had still learned. I was certain that even Jyrki would be concerned by what I could do were I to let the full extent of my training both in the force and the combat arts fly. It was a hidden weapon and I wanted it to stay that way until I absolutely needed it.

"I told yer, I need yer help." He was being deliberately evasive.

I waited him out instead of pushing, giving him a *get to the point* look.

He leaned into the table, his body language letting me know he did not want anyone else to hear what he had to say. "I need yer to help me kill Luke Skywalker." He said.

For a moment all I could do was stare at him, unsure if I had actually heard him correctly. Then with a shake of my head I simply said. "You're mad."

He leaned back in his chair again, anger flashing in his beautiful eyes. "Perhaps," he said carefully, "but hear me out."

I folded my arms across my chest, sitting back against my chair back and waited.

"He is the son of Anakin Skywalker...." He began, trying to find the right words to explain his plans.

"I know that!" I interrupted.

"Anakin turned to the dark side...."

"I know that as well." I said bluntly, annoying him.

He drew a deep breath. "Mouse...yer must see it, the connection?"

"You think the son of Anakin Skywalker will turn to the dark side." It was not a question.

Jyrki nodded. "I know he will."

I cocked my head to one side. "Know? How?"

"I've seen it." He said quietly. "I've had force visions of the future. He takes on the mantle of Emperor; he turns to the Dark side to rule the galaxy."

I shook my head slightly. I, too, had seen this vision but I wasn't about to tell Jyrki this. "How can you see the future?" I asked putting as much disbelief into my words as possible.

His shoulders heaved with the sigh he made. "It's a force talent. Sometimes some people who are force sensitive receive visions of the past or the future." He explained, slumped over with the burden of it all. "I was trained from the time I was a baby to trust in the force and all its ways. I have had visions all my life Mouse."

I shook my head. "But how can you see the future if it hasn't even happened yet? And if you can how do you know that is exactly what will happen? The future can change."

He nodded. "Master Yoda used to say that the future was fluid and always in motion but even so there is still truth in the visions. A few weeks before Anakin Skywalker came to the temple with the five-oh-first I had a dream about him. I saw him dressed all in black and where his face had been was emptiness, like a black hole, swallowing all the good all the light in the galaxy. In my dream he was destroying the jedi temple stone by stone."

"It was just a dream." I countered playing devil's advocate. I knew enough about these sorts of dreams to fill a book but I wasn't sure I wanted to share that with Jyrki. Jyrki snorted. "I had spoken about my dream with one of the masters and he had looked worried as I did so.

Anakin Skywalker was controversial at best amongst the council members of the Jedi Temple and even we children knew that. I grew up knowing him, admiring him but also being a little scared of him. He was the Chosen One. He was so strong in the force that it was almost as if he shimmered in it, but there was a terrible darkness to him as well. Whispers of his temper, his impatience and his attachment to his mother as well as other people, all the things we are taught from the very beginning to avoid were in him. Even Master Windu did not trust him."

"I thought it was all harmony and love at the Jedi temple." The sarcasm in my voice made me sound petulant but I didn't care.

Jyrki made a face and shrugged. "They were troubled times, Mouse. The galaxy was at war. The jedi were supposed to be keepers of the peace not warriors but Anakin was the best there was. He and his master Obi-Wan were heroes to us, they almost always won and they always came back alive but I heard the whispers when the adults thought us children were not paying attention. They thought Anakin was unpredictable and dangerous, that he relished the fights he lunged into too much and he killed too easily. There were also the rumours that he was having an affair with Senator Amidala. Towards the end, just before all nine Corellian hells broke loose; there were even rumours that she was pregnant. I didn't understand then, I was just a small boy at the time, but now I do, she carried Anakin's child, well...children."

"How does this make Luke evil?" I asked, trying to unravel his insane logic.

Jyrki gritted his teeth and glanced away. "I've seen him turn, just like his father. He will find the spirit of Palpatine and take it into himself, turning to the Dark Side to rule over the galaxy. I've had the same dream over and over again. History repeating itself all over again and I cannot let it happen. I cannot let anyone else suffer the way I suffered, the way all the children and people in the Jedi temple suffered or the way the galaxy suffered under the rule of a sith master."

"Okay, so you've seen him in a vision, that doesn't mean you have to kill him." I countered, frowning. "I thought he was the hero of the rebellion, how can someone who has done so much for your side of this conflict suddenly be so bad?"

"He is a hero. Without his skills as a pilot we would never have won, without his help at Endor Vader and Palpatine would still be alive but that doesn't change the fact of what will happen if I don't stop it." He said flatly, "Which is why I need yer help."

“What the hell can I do?” I asked. “I don’t even know him.”

Jyrki smiled and I didn’t like it much. “Yer are force sensitive, Mouse.”

I snorted. “My powers are nominal at best.” I lied.

Jyrki raised both eyebrows. “Yer underestimate yerself. Even as a child yer powers were strong. If ye’d had been trained properly yer’d have been a powerful jedi, I am sure of that.”

“Well I am grateful that never happened. I hate the idea that I would have been brainwashed into a weapon for the Jedi masters to use.” I shot out before I could censor myself.

Jyrki shrugged. “Yer had so much potential, Mouse. I wish I could have done more to save yer.”

I sighed and shook my head. “I still don’t see how you need my help in your quest. You are quite capable of killing Luke Skywalker yourself, hell you’ve shown me how violent and vicious you can be.” I snapped. “I will not kill him for you.”

“I am not asking yer to kill him for me, I need yer to distract him for me.” He tried to explain.

I shook my head. “You’re asking me to be the bait and that makes me an accomplice. You’re asking me to swap my family’s life for Skywalker’s. I can’t do that Jyrki. If I do that I am no better than Anakin or for that matter, you.”

Jyrki clenched his jaw. “I will get what I want. I need yer help, I have yer family in a place yer will never find and they will die if yer don’t help me.”

He wasn’t lying and fear rippled through my heart. I didn’t know what to do and I was certain he meant every single word he had just said. He was nuts and hell bent on doing this terrible deed.

“I need time to consider this.” I said after a long pause.

His smile was nasty. “Yer mean yer need time to wait to see if yer can get help. Well if that’s the case, forget it, he won’t help yer.”

“He?”

“The Tze’yusha’Jin.” He replied.

“Uncle Vahlek?” I asked as my heart skipped a beat. I hadn’t actually been thinking about him but something in Jyrki’s smirk scared me.

“Yer uncle...” Jyrki snorted. “He’s not related to yer at all!”

“I know that but he’s family all the same.” I bit back, “What about him?”

“He won’t be coming to help yer out this time because he’s dead.”

I suppose my face must have blanched because Jyrki automatically reached forward to touch my hand, some measure of comfort for the bad news he has just dumped on me. I snatched my hand away from him as though he would burn me and he scowled. I tasted his words and knew that he was not lying to me. He really believed Uncle Vahlek had died. My heart seemed to stop and I held my breath as though in doing so I could make his words go away.

“How do you know this?” I eventually whispered.

“I watched him die.” He said simply.

I shook my head in disbelief. Uncle Vahlek was Tze’yusha’Jin, one of the best in the galaxy if all I had ever been told was correct. He was a well trained assassin and hunter, killing him would not have been an easy task. “How?”

Jyrki sneered. “I told yer to warn him that I’d deal with him if he did not back off. I knew he was following me I knew what he was after. Did he think I was stupid? He’s not the only one who has received training at the hands of the Anzati. He came after me here, would have succeeded except he’s not a force user and I am. We fought not too far from here on one of the gantry-ways. He lost his concentration just long enough for me to kick him over the side and he fell. No one could have survived that fall and I have not felt his presence since.”

I could not stop the tears that welled up in my eyes. Jyrki had not lied and as he had spoken I could almost see what he was describing in my head, as though he were force projecting the images to me much the way Lord Vader used to do. “You bastard.” I whispered, anger welling up from deep inside my gut. I had to fight from reaching across the table to grab him and smash his head with my fist. “You have no idea...no idea at all.” I half babbled, wanting to tell him that he had just murdered the man who might very well be his father. I clapped a hand over my mouth to keep the secrets from spilling out. Hot tears ran over them and I was trembling.

“He came after me.” Jyrki said sounding sulky.

“You tried to kill me with an Anzati blade.” I spat, “He’s my sworn guardian. What did you expect him to do?”

Jyrki stared at me. “That was an accident, Mouse. I didn’t know the blade still held poison.”

I shook my head. “You’re as stupid as you are vengeful.” I was too angry now to watch my words or care if what I said triggered his temper.

“You want me to help you kill Luke Skywalker because you’re afraid he’ll turn to the dark side and use his powers in anger but you are just as bad.”

“I never used my force abilities in rage, Mouse.” He spoke so softly it caught me off guard. “I have never once done that but you have, haven’t you?”

I was about to retort but realised he was telling me the truth and as I thought back to every encounter we had ever had including the time he had saved me from being raped I understood it was the truth. He had never used rage to fuel strengthen his powers, although I was certain that sometimes anger had tainted his motives. He had perhaps seen what he could gain from that but he had never used it. He had watched what turning to the Dark side had done to Anakin Skywalker and it had stuck with him forever, this terrible memory which had become Jyrki’s greatest fear. He was also right about me. I had tasted that surge of power driven by anger and hatred. The Emperor had seen to this personally. I knew that taint of blackness and how easy it would have been to open up and allow the anger to rule but it was a choice that was made consciously and I chose not to use it. However, it seemed that, unlike Jyrki, I wasn’t scared stupid by it either.

“That’s why you want me to do this for you isn’t it.” I asked quietly.

“Yer’ve touched that darkness, I feel it Mouse. I sense yer anger and I can feel yer desire. Yer ruled by yer passions, even now I sense it in yer.” He shrugged almost arrogantly, as though he were somehow better than I was because he had never succumbed to that dark side of human nature and I wanted to slap him, proving him right which infuriated me even more.

“That may be so but at least it doesn’t make me act like a frightened durni, kidnapping people and using blackmail to get what I want!”

He avoided that topic by saying, “It’s a simple thing. I need yer help to get to Luke Skywalker.”

“Why don’t you just go to him yourself? If you tell him you’re force sensitive he will take you on as a student and then you will be as close as possible to him. I heard he was trying to rebuild the Jedi order, isn’t that what you want?”

“Only a Master could rebuild the Jedi Order and Skywalker doesn’t have the training. He’s the son of a Sith Lord and he will walk his father’s path, I have seen that much. I will not allow him to know that I have this power because he will try to corrupt me if he learns of it.”

There would be no arguing with him about this. How could one argue with insanity? “How do you expect me to help you then?” I asked switching to a less confrontational tack.

“I know where he will be in seven day’s from now. Yer will find a way to meet with him in private and I will deal with him when yer do.” He said.

“By deal with him you mean kill.”

“It is the will of the force, Mouse, I have seen it. Why else would I have been sent these visions if it were not?”

I didn’t think he wanted to hear my answer so instead I stayed quiet thinking about how I could possibly circumnavigate this mess. “Where will he be?”

Jyrki smiled and it sent a shudder down my spine. “Yer must think me stupid to give up that information.” He said.

“You’re asking me to be an accomplice to murder. Stupid is not the first word that comes to mind.”

“Yer haven’t agreed yet.”

“I want assurances my family are safe and well. You could be lying for all I know.” I spat.

Jyrki smiled slightly. “Still have not honed that particular skill yet? I would have thought that Palpatine would have taught you better.”

“A lot of what you thought was wrong.” I said through gritted teeth. At least he had no idea of just how much better my force powers were which would be a small point in my favour.

He sighed and dug out from his pocket a small holo recorder. He set it on the table and pushed it to me. “There is a message from yer father on it but I suggest yer open that up in private. Yer’ve got two days to decide his fate and that of the rest of yer family. I will be here at the same time two days from now and if yer answer is yes then I give the word to set them free if yer not here I will have them killed and a bounty placed on yer head as a traitor to the Rebellion. Yer may have erased all records of who yer worked for but I know and I have ways of getting information. It would be a shame if yer face were to be plastered all over the HoloNet as Vader’s protégé.”

“I was never his protégé!” I yelled. People turned to stare at us and I felt a hot flush creep into my cheeks.

Jyrki smiled nastily knowing he’d found a sore spot to dig at. “I beg to differ on that point, Vader liked yer, he trained with yer, and he taught yer things. I know because Antygra told me all about yer relationship with that man as well as how Palpatine favoured yer. I have data stored away

that wasn't erased, enough to condemn yer and yer family forever. I even know about yer alien lover, what was he called... ah yes the Grand Admiral Thrawn, also dead, by all accounts. There is no one from the Imperials left on yer side Mouse. I'm all yer've got. Do yer really want to lose the last people who care for yer for the sake of the Sith? Yer will help me destroy the Skywalker legacy and end this reign of terror forever. It is that simple and yer have no choice."

I managed to look away, feigning sorrow at his words when really I was angrier than I had been in a long time. My shoulders shook with the weight of it and it took all my strength to shove it down as deeply as I could. By the time I looked back at him I had my emotions under control. "Alright." I said, "I'll do as you ask but my family goes free and after this you will leave them alone forever or I will make sure you regret it for the rest of your life."

He smiled. "Smart girl. I knew yer would see reason sooner or later." He ignored my threat, he did not think of me as all that dangerous.

"Reason has nothing what so ever to do with this." I spat.

"Everything I have ever done was for yer Mouse, don't yer understand that? Yer have no idea how terrible the Dark Side can be and yer have no idea how much I want to protect yer from that evil path."

I shook my head. "You are completely insane."

"Perhaps, but if that's what it takes to end the reign of the Sith then so be it."

"Luke Skywalker is not a Sith Lord." I said, surprised at the words coming out of my mouth.

"Neither was his father until he was turned. It only takes one thing to do the job." Jyrki countered.

"It was the brutal torture and death of his mother by Tusken that twisted Anakin Skywalker. Would you do the same to me?"

That surprised Jyrki, I read it in his eyes. He had not known this but in the end it changed nothing. He blamed Anakin for destroying his life and now he was going to get even. No matter what he told me his reason underneath it all it was still revenge. I glared at him as I stood up to leave, reaching to grasp the holo recorder from the table but as I did so he grabbed my wrist. "Don't try anything stupid Mouse, yer not that good. I should know I taught yer."

I just stared at him until he let go of me, picked up the recorder and left the cantina without looking back. My hand was shaking as I slid the recorder into my satchel and for a moment I thought I would be ill as a

wave of dizziness washed over me. I had agreed to help assassinate one of the Galaxy's most beloved members to save my own family. Never mind what I thought of him, Skywalker was a hero and by helping to murder him I would go down in history as reviled as Palpatine and Lord Vader were or die in the process of trying. Neither outcome was something I wished for.

I stumbled back to my hotel room, unaware of my surroundings. The sensation of being followed was there but I had felt someone watching my every move ever since the first time I had left the Cantina, now I did not care any more. It was most likely one of Jyrki's people, I know they had followed me before and had even searched through my hotel room when I wasn't there but anything of value I had I kept on my person. If he had hoped to find out anything more about me he was mistaken.

I got back to my room and all but flung myself down on the bed too wound up to think, cry or sleep. I had two days to come up with a way out of this situation as well as how to rescue my family and I wasn't sure I could do this, especially not alone. When I suddenly remembered what Jyrki had said about Uncle Vahlek the tears came. I could not believe he was dead; I didn't want to trust the news Jyrki had given me but I knew he had told the truth. The ache of loss hit me hard and sudden. I curled into a little ball on the bed and wept.

I woke up in darkness with a gasp momentarily uncertain of where I was. The nightmare that had gripped me fled and all that remained were remnants, fleeting images of the Emperor and Luke Skywalker melding into one. I did not need to remember all the details to know what it had been about. With a sigh I heaved myself out of bed, sleep still numbing my brain, and stumbled my way to the 'fresher.

For what seemed an age I stood in front of the mirror, ice cold water still dripping off my face and stared at my reflection. I looked like a speeder wreck. My eyes were still puffy from sleep and crying and the dark circles that were etched into my skin scared me. In my heart I felt sick. My deal with Jyrki did not sit well on my soul but I did not know what else to do to help my family. I did not know how to circumnavigate what Jyrki had done, what he wanted to do. I shook my head at my self, dried off my face, switched off the light and made my way back to the darkened bedroom. I didn't want to even consider all the possible, terrible outcomes of Jyrki's insane plans.

On the bedside table sat the little holo recorder Jyrki had given me. It contained a message from my father, a sign of life, but I had not opened

the file to watch it. I was terrified of what I would see. The flash of memory the recorder had given me as I had picked it up in the cantina had been bad enough. Jyrki or his partners had beaten my father, that much I had seen, and I had no desire to see any more but somewhere in the message would be a clue to his whereabouts, I was sure of that. However until my mind was a little more focused, all looking at the message would do was anger me further and anger, while useful also clouded my thinking.

I went over to the window and pushed the slotted blinds apart with my finger to stare out into the city. Lights shone and signs blinked, traffic moved in a never ending stream and for a small moment I felt as though I were back on Coruscant. A pang of homesickness for something that had never even existed ripped sharply through my chest and I found myself crying again, silently.

Somewhere out there my Uncle lay broken and dead. Somewhere out there the people I loved were being held against their will by a man they had once considered part of the family. I did not know how to move forward and for one of the few times in my life I felt a terribly sense of helplessness and hopelessness. I drew a deep steadying breath and shook my head to myself. I should have talked to Thrawn before rushing off, I should have asked for his advice and maybe gotten some back up. He would have had a plan or even several plans because he always knew what to do and just how to do it. My hand went to place at my throat where my necklace would have lain, its comforting weight gone because it was on Nirauan where I had left it.

For a moment I rested my forehead against the frame of the window. The sickly sensation of utter inevitability crawled across my skin, the hair on the back of my neck stood up and I slowly realised that these sensations were not due to my feelings of helplessness but rather because I was not alone in the room but before I could move, turn around or grab anything that could be used as a weapon, one strong arm had wrapped itself around my upper body pinning my arms to my sides while the other hand cupped, with surprising gentleness, over my mouth.

The moment stretched and fear, along with anger, shot through me. I had been so wrapped up in my own little world I had neither sensed nor heard the intruder. I forced myself to calm down and to breathe slowly. As I did so I realised that I knew the scent of the man that was holding me and the voice that whispered in my ear was as familiar to me as my own.

“Screaming would be a very bad idea.” He said softly, sensing the moment I recognised him because I went from rigid to relaxed as his

words tickled the skin on my neck. He released his grip, allowing me to spin around and fling my arms around his body.

“Navaari.” I whispered, so astonished, so relieved to see him here instead of some stranger hell bent on doing me some sort of bodily harm that I did not even think to question his unnoticed presence in my hotel room at all.

He stroked my hair as he had done so often on Hjal, letting me cry, letting me pull myself back together. When I drew a deep breath he pushed me back from his chest, a hand upon each of my shoulders so that he could study me with his fierce red, glowing eyes. He shook his head and frowned. “You are an idiot child. You are knowing this, yes?” He said but there was no anger in his voice, only sadness and frustration. “Impetuous and headstrong, you do not think, you simply act. How many times will you be racing headlong into danger without thinking first?”

I shook my head pulling away from him to turn back to the window, peeking out through the small crack in the blinds once again. “How did you find me?” I asked after what felt like forever, careful to avoid his question.

Navaari snorted and moved away from me to sit on the edge of the bed. “I am Jhal’kai, you forget. You are not so difficult to track.”

I nodded, absently remembering that the tracer chip in my Dantassi mask, still on my ship, would have led him straight to me. I had forgotten about that. “How long have you been hiding in my room?”

“Long enough to be knowing you are troubled.” He replied cryptically. “I have been watching you for some time, waiting until you were awake and this seemed the best moment to make my presence known to you without alerting the others who also keep their eyes on you.” He nodded towards the door. “That lock was easy enough to undo.”

I gave him a look. “That’s a little creepy you know.”

He simply shrugged, half amused at my annoyance.

“What are you doing here, Navaari?” I asked quietly.

“Your Ta’kasta’cariad was feeling it would be beneficial if someone backed you up in what ever snow crazed plan you had rushed headlong into.”

“I didn’t tell Thraw.... Za’ar where I was going, so how the hell did he know?” I asked, surprised at the anger lacing my words.

Navaari snorted. “You were thinking that message you received was known only to you?”

I drew in a deep breath and let it out with a noisy sigh. “He made a copy and decoded it himself.”

“He was telling me the look on your face was as if your world had collapsed, he knew it had to do with the Andando boy. Before you had even left the base he had word sent to me to come here. He is knowing you even better than you know yourself sometimes. You seem to think you must face all these terrible things by yourself but that is not the case and one of these days you will be learning to ask for help instead of help having to seek you out. It would be saving much time and difficulties, you know.” Navaari chided.

I sighed. “Jyrki is hardly a boy, Navaari, he’s years older than I am.” I snapped trying to hide the fact that no matter what I thought I was unable to hide anything from Thrawn. I couldn’t decide if that made me angry or relieved.

Navaari shrugged. “In his head Jyrki Andando is still the wounded, terrified child who has never forgiven the galaxy for its wrongs to him or his kind. He cannot let go of the past which is haunting him. Unlike you Kysci’i, he has never had the chance to go through sju’ru’arwy’kha. He still walks with all of his ghosts and they have had a long time to whisper their poison in his ears.”

I could only glance at him in agreement, unable to speak as emotion choked me. I had seen what Anakin had done, felt it as though I had been there. If anyone in the galaxy understood Jyrki’s pain it was me but that did not mean I could forgive him for what he had done, for what he was now doing, no matter what his reasons were.

“Is Za’ar very angry with me?” I asked after a while.

Navaari’s shrug was nonchalant. “No more so than usual.” He replied honestly, “He understands that sometimes certain things have to happen no matter what and that the past must be faced before the future can be met. This boy is bound to you, I have said this before. You will not be free of this until you sever this bond. It is a terrible destiny that ties the two of you together.”

I nodded miserably and sat at his side burying my face in my hands trying not to let the terrible wave of sorrow I felt engulf me.

Navaari, who had nursed me through hell and back and knew me better than probably anyone else with the exception of Thrawn, frowned. “Kysci’i what is it you are trying to tell me without saying the words?”

“He killed my Uncle Vahlek.” I whispered, not wanting to say the words out loud, not wanting them to be true.

Navaari was surprised. “Tze’yusha’Jin Akosh is dead?”

I nodded again, the lump in my throat making it difficult for me to speak.

“How?”

My shoulders heaved as I drew in a deep breath and then recounted to Navaari everything that Jyrki had told me, leaving out nothing. When I was done he was silent, lost in thought, considering what to do next, what to say next.

“Did he see where the body landed?”

I frowned at the question and shook my head not even wanting to consider the images that flashed through my mind.

Navaari gave me a little nod and let the matter drop.

“I don’t know how to help Jyrki any more. I don’t know how to make him see that what he wants to do is beyond insane.” I said trying to fill the sudden gulf the quiet had created. My voice trembled, making Navaari look at me.

“A’myshk’a,” He began patiently, “you must be understanding, Jyrki Andando is so haunted by his past he will never be free of it. That is his madness, being trapped in this terrible thing that happened to him with no way to escape.” He finally said, breaking the awful silence. “You loved him, you gave him your heart freely and for that he is tied to you. He doesn’t understand it but he cannot let go of it either.”

“He refused me, when I told him how I felt; he pushed me away, shut himself off and vanished.” The words, as I spoke, were surprisingly acidic on my tongue, the hurt as fresh as ever. Jyrki was not the only one who had unhealed wounds. I wondered then, did we ever really get over these things, these terrible rites of passage?

“This is because your love frightened him; it was pure, innocent and unabashed. This is the one thing he could not understand because it is the one thing he has never truly known or learned. It was easier to turn away from you than face his greatest fear.”

“But why? What is so frightening about love? About being loved?” I asked.

“Nothing unless you feel you are unlovable. To accept that this was untrue would have meant letting go of the past.” Navaari explained.

I sighed and frowned. “How can he think he is unlovable?” I whispered.

Navaari shrugged, “Only he can answer that and it is something of this man you will never understand because it is something you have never

known. You have always been loved and cared for no matter what you have done, no matter what befalls you. This has shaped the woman you are today and he does not understand how someone such as yourself could ever have loved someone such as him. He does not think he is worthy.”

Suddenly I understood. “He blames himself for what happened at the Jedi Temple, he feels responsible somehow, even though he was just a small boy, even though there was nothing he could do, he blames himself.” I whispered. “He feels guilty because he survived.”

“What a terrible thing for a child to have experienced.” Navaari said quietly.

I looked up at Navaari in surprise. “You sound as though you feel sorry for him.”

“That is because I do.” He replied without explanation and before I could say anything more, or tell him that he was not exactly alone in this emotion, he abruptly changed the topic. “Now, what are your plans?”

“Plans?” I shrugged, “I have no plans. I have no clues, no ideas, no nothing! He has my family, he wants me to help him murder someone for something they have not even done yet and his bargaining chip is my family’s life. How can I plan around that?”

Navaari shook his head, his long silver hair rippling across his shoulders with the motion, catching in the sliver of light that made its way through crack in the blinds. “Silly pup, have I not taught you better than this? Do you give up so easily to this pash’kja’anta.” He stood up, slipped off the satchel that had been slung over his shoulder and shrugged off his long, full coat. “Do you have nothing to guide you or is your head so clouded by fear that you have forgotten how to track?”

His rebuke stung but he was right. I leaned back to grasp the holo recorder off the night table and winced at the images which flashed through my head as I did so. While Jyrki might not have turned to the Dark Side with his powers he had become cruel and hurtful. I described what I saw to Navaari as the visions unfolded in my head and he listened without interruption. When I was done he made me go back into the memories and pick out tiny details in the room I had seen, the sounds I had heard and every little thing no matter how small it might seem that I could pick apart. When he was satisfied he allowed me to play the recording. The small blue hologram shimmered as it displayed from the small recorder-player. I had to cover my mouth to stifle the whimper that threatened to escape.

*My father sat, bound to a chair, his face beaten and bruised and stared at the recorder which Jyrki had held in his hand.*

*“Tell her.” Jyrki said. The coldness in his voice scared me. The madness behind it frightened me even more.*

*My father raised his head slowly, obviously in pain and began to speak. “Merlyn, what ever he asks don’t do it...” He began and someone, whose back was to the recorder, stopped the rest of the sentence with a vicious back hand.*

I looked away but Navaari touched my shoulder. “If you are wanting to help your father you must bear to see his pain. Watch and detach yourself from your emotions and see with a hunter’s eyes. There are clues in this waiting for you.”

I bit back the angry retort that threatened to escape my mouth and did as he told me.

*My father’s head rocked with the blow but if it hurt him further he did not show it. “Go to hell!” he spat, blood running from his already swollen and bruised lips.*

*Jyrki snorted and turned the small recorder on himself. “Yer see Mouse, he is very much alive. If yer want to save him then yer will do as I ask. If yer do not then my friend here will take care of Kit and the rest of those yer love.” The holo recorder swung around to show me the man Jyrki was talking about, the one who had hit my father. It was the same man I had met my first time in the Cantina. The man I knew as Lorano Dek inclined his head ever so slightly to the recorder. “Yer see, Mouse, I have the situation in control. Do as yer told and all will be well.” He said and then he swung the recorder around to show me my father and the image shut off.*

I trembled with the rage I felt. Power crackled around me and I had to fight the urge to smash the small recorder against the far wall. Navaari wrapped his arm around my shoulders and the boiling fury which burned my gut diffused into something else, something manageable. I released the heavy breath I had been holding and leaned against his shoulder.

“So, pup, what will be your first move?”

I glanced up at him and sighed. “I don’t know, I don’t even know if there is a solution that doesn’t involve someone dying.” I told him.

Navaari shook his head, “Well then, let us be making sure that you are not the one who dies.”

I made a face. “The first thing I would try to do is find out where he’s holding papa, but I don’t know where to begin.”

“Hmm.” Was all Navaari said letting me that he too was going to have to think about this a little then he asked, “Why have you not returned to your ship since you landed?”

I looked at him. “You are the one who has been following me?” I asked not answering his question.

“Yes, although I am not the only one. You were right to be cautious in your comings and goings.”

“Why did you wait till now to talk to me then?”

“I wished to observe the meeting between you and Jyrki Andando without you knowing I was there.”

I shook my head. “I knew someone was watching me, I thought it was one of Jyrki’s pals and that’s why I didn’t go back to my ship. I don’t want him to know about it.” I said and I explained to Navaari why I feared Jyrki finding my ship.

“So you think he will have a ship of his own?”

I nodded. “It makes sense. He will want to have complete control over the situation and using a ship he was not completely familiar with would not fit into that plan. He knows what I can do, hell he taught me most of it.” I said crossly, “He knows me well enough to anticipate some of the counter moves I would make. Having his own ship would ensure he was prepared for that. Even if he knows about mine, he would be reluctant to use it but that would not stop him from sabotaging it anyway.”

“Tell me how to bypass your security measures and then I can fly it for you, follow you to where he wishes you to go, to meet this son of Vader.”

I nodded then frowned, “But I think that he has my family here on Nar Shadda, at least papa is here. He keeps saying family but I have not actually heard him say anything about Bedi or Bel and they are not in any of the visions I have seen or the recording he made. That man in the holo recording was at the cantina to meet me the first time I was there.” I said. “It would not make sense if they were being held on a different planet or moon. They might be in a different city but I don’t think so, I think they are close by, close enough to be able to watch me as well. He won’t have that many people involved. Jyrki is a loner, he doesn’t play well with others and especially not for something like this.”

“It would be making things a lot easier if it was only your father to find and free.”

I nodded, realising the implication of my words. I wasn’t sure that Bedi and Bel were safe but the more I thought about it the more I began to

get the feeling they were not on Nar Shadda and that Jyrki didn’t have them captive. It was just a feeling but it was so strong I could not ignore it.

“Tell me about the second man.”

“He’s a killer.” I replied without having to think about it. “He moves the way Uncle Vahlek does... did.” I stopped and corrected myself, “He hides his power, his edge behind a front of feigned indifference and indolence but he moved like a gurreck. I think he’s had training like Jyrki maybe from the Anzati. He has an easy smile but it never reaches his eyes. I think he felt he had me summed up inside of five seconds but he missed a lot of things as well. He underestimated me once. I saw that in his face.”

“How?”

I recounted when I had told Lorano Dek ‘no I would not meet with Jyrki that day’. “He was surprised and that was not faked. He’s a big man and he’s all muscle but he isn’t hampered by it. Right handed but I think he could wield a weapon in his left if he had to. There were calluses on both his palms. Jyrki told him about me, as much as he knows and he watched me drop a spacer who would not take no for an answer so he is aware that I am not just fluff.”

“Could you kill him?”

I nodded. “Yes.” I did not hesitate on my reply. “But it would be a difficult fight.”

Navaari gave me a little nod of approval. “So how do we go about finding them?” He asked, testing me just as he used to Hjal while teaching me the tricks of the Jhal’kai trade.

“Use the clues in the recording and the memories.” I replied.

Navaari sat still, allowing me to think the problem through, then when he sensed I was ready we walked the problem step by step, looking for the tiniest of signs which would lead to the quarry, just as he had taught me and he had taught me well. At some point between the billionth viewing of the holo recording and dawn I fell asleep, slumped against Navaari’s shoulder, exhausted beyond caring. When I woke up on my bed with a blanket draped over me, it was broad daylight and Navaari was gone.

For a moment, caught between sleeping and waking, I knew a sort of despair and wondered if Navaari’s visit had all be another figment of my already addled imagination but when I saw that he had left behind something I knew he was real and here on Nar Shadda, sent by Thrawn to save my ass yet again. I reached over and picked up the tiny bone amulet and studied it with a smile. It had been carved in the shape of a wolf’s paw

print from the bone of a grellett which was hard, smooth and deceptively heavy. The snow wolf was apparently my spirit animal so Navaari's friend, Kerrjan, had said; noting the ease with which the sled hounds had taken to me.

"They recognise kin." Kerrjan had said.

"I am not related to sled wolves!" I had retorted completely missing his point so he had spelled it out for me.

"They recognise your spirit is the same as theirs, free and wild. You are kindred spirits. That is why they are happy with you, why you find solace when you are with them." He had explained.

His answer had made sense and I had just smiled.

By carving this for me, Navaari was giving me the strength of the sled wolf, reminding me that I was no longer the little girl I had once been. That Jyrki only held sway over me if I let him. I clasped it in my hand for a moment and a flood of images melted into me. What Navaari had really given me was his strength and his love. I slipped the leather thong over my head and tucked the tiny wolf paw pendant under my shirt, then rubbing the last of the sleep from my eyes I went to the fresher to shower and begin to put into place some of the plans Navaari and I had made the night before. Now that I understood I was not alone, that I was never truly alone I felt better about the terrible tasks that lay ahead.

The tap-caf was busy and I was glad I had been able to snag the small table outside all to myself. Situated in one of the Corellian Sector's prime locations, The Jumping Nuna was perfect for people watching and had the added bonus of making the best Zabraki stim'caf around. I sat with the latest flimsiplast news magazine, pretending to read while sipping a 'caf blend that was spicier than I had bargained for but nice all the same. To the casual observer I was nothing more than one of the billion inhabitants of Nar Shadda going about my daily business. To the man who was following me I was probably boring the hell out of him, which was my intent because if he was bored then he might not figure out what I was really doing.

I had spent the morning meandering with a purpose through the core of the Corellian Sector. The routes I took were convoluted and would, I hoped, appear random but they were anything but. I had a specific destination in mind that I didn't want my ugly, short shadow to figure out. Around lunch time I decided to stop and get some food. Grabbing a bite to eat would give me time to sort through the plans Navaari and I had made

the night before. Thinking about him made me smile, just knowing he was out there made me feel better even though we had agreed the night before that it would be to stay out of contact, no com-links or any other methods of communication because Jyrki wasn't stupid and it would be a really bad thing for all concerned if he found out I was no longer alone.

It was pleasant to sit and it allowed me time to stretch out into the force side of thing to tag this man so that I could easily find him again, a little like finding the signature engine wake ships left behind. Unlike Jyrki, the man following me was not force sensitive or else he might have felt what I was up to. This was one of those rare times when I was grateful for my strange force gifts; they meant I did not have to keep looking at the man following me to know he was there. I wondered how long we would keep this dance up until something interesting happened because I was not the most patient person in the world and sooner or later this was going to end. It was making me cross.

I was a little surprised, at first, that Jyrki had hired this guy of the job, he seemed nervous and out of his depth but then as I observed him better I saw this was all a ruse. Like Lorano Dek this man was a pro and equally as dangerous. While Jyrki may not have known the extent to which I had trained and become far better at the art of combat or the craft of using this unwanted power of mine he was not about to underestimate me, at least not as much as I would wish for. So I waited, playing jax and mouse with the ugly man. I had an end goal in mind but, as Navaari had said, it must be played out subtly.

"You must become the hunter not the hunted." Navaari had said. "Lead him without him knowing you are doing it. He is the one following you. He is not the one in charge."

From watching and listening to the holo recording Jyrki had made of my father for me as proof of life, I had managed to puzzle out, along with Navaari's help, that he was being held somewhere fairly close to The Burning Deck. Jyrki had been careless and there had been a very distinctive warning siren that could be heard clearly in the background sound of recording. I had heard it several times while sitting in the cantina both times I had been there and when I mentioned that to Navaari he made a call to the cantina to ask what it was.

"The very nice bartender informed me that this sound you are hearing is the warning siren for the Redbock Heights Hotel's shuttle bay which is situated on the lower south side of the hotel. She tells me they have complained about it but the hotel insists it is necessary for its

customers as well as the pedestrians who walk there. Apparently when the shuttle Bay door opens the pedestrian concourse also raises. When this happens, she said there was a second less annoying alarm that goes off for that.”

We had watched the recording again, boosting the sound, listening for the sirens as well as anything else.

“I can’t hear the second alarm or any mechanicals lifting the concourse.” I had said.

“Perhaps the room is too well sound proofed for that. But it is a beginning, now we are knowing the area of the place this man has your father.” Navaari had said. “So, we study the images again and find more signs.”

The room my father was in, as far as I had been able to see from the recording, was small and had no windows on any of walls that had been shown. The light in the room was dim and completely artificial. All the shadows indicated a single light source, leading us to think that there were no windows at all which meant the room was either in the middle of a building, not very likely given the area which was all cafes, cantinas or hotels, or it was a part of an area no longer well used like a basement or subbasement.

Its sparseness had reminded me sharply of a utility room except it was far too large for that, and given the lack of furniture, junk or usable fixtures in the room, as far as we could see; I surmised that it was a place no one had been in a long time. Empty rooms on Nar Shadda were rare, space was at a premium, especially in the Corellian District, so this room had to be in a building that was either no longer used which meant condemned to be demolished or it was in one of the subbasements of one of the hotels. Because of the clarity of the warning Claxton it had to be very near the Redbock Heights Hotel, probably on the same side which narrowed down the field a lot.

After looking at a grid map and a tourist guide to this part of town Navaari and I had come up with three possible places. Now I wanted to check these places out. I had one day to figure this out before I had to meet with Jyrki again after that the game became more interesting and a lot more dangerous because chances are it would be taken off world. In space, on his own ship, Jyrki would have the advantage but down here it was equal footing, more or less, plus I had Navaari on my side.

I ordered lunch and ate the spicy soup slowly while pretending to read my magazine. In reality I was studying technical readouts of the

buildings I wanted to look at. At Navaari’s urging I had logged into the public archives and had been utterly surprised to find the building plans on file available for download for a small fee.

Navaari had shrugged, “Too long you lived under the shadow of secrecy and lies. Information such as this is usually not hidden but is open and accessible to the public.”

I had made a face but had not argued with him, then had paid with my cred-chip and downloaded the files on to my small hand held data-pad and studied them until my eyes burned. We had narrowed it down to three buildings and then had gone back to watching the recording until I had quite literally crashed asleep on Navaari’s shoulder.

It was a warm day for Nar Shadda and beings of races, types and colours were out enjoying the day, ignoring the pollution and the general stench that I would forever associate with this place. The Concourse was busy and many of the shops were having sales to try and pull in more customers. Shop owners barked at potential customers as well as each other trying to make more credits and on the whole the scene was raucous and lively. I set aside my magazine for a moment to watch the strange, unchoreographed dance and let my mind drift. The swirl of people moving along the sidewalk by the tap’caf swirled into a strange blend of liquid colour. I could feel the vision coming but I could not stop it. I could count on one hand the number of times I had been on the receiving end of a waking dream and none of them had been happy.

*The room was dimly lit and bare save for a chair in the center. It stank of stale urine and vomit tainted with the sickly coppery scent of blood. Something bad had happened here but it had happened a very long time ago, ‘ancient history’ a voice whispered in my mind. ‘Mass murder, a moment in time gone bad, very, very bad. You don’t want to look, girl. You don’t want to look now, or ever....’*

*There was moment of peace then it was shattered by the sound of a warning siren, the shuttle bay door of the adjacent hotel opening. That hotel must have sound proof windows I thought absently other wise no one would stay there ever.*

*Suddenly the room which had been empty and badly lit almost burst with light and action. Navaari moved like water, fighting someone I could not see. There was fresh blood and lots of it on the floor and the walls but I didn’t know where it was coming from. I frantically looked around for my father but all I saw was a body lying on the floor. I couldn’t tell who it was.*

*“Go!” Navaari shouted, “Go now!” but he was too late and as his form vanished into dimness I felt rather than saw the person move behind me. When I turned around I came face to face with Jyrki Andando, hatred blazing in his eyes.*

*“Why, Mouse, why?” He hissed between clenched teeth. “Why must you always take the difficult path?” He reached out for my hand but I pulled away, shaking my head, not understanding what it was I was seeing over his shoulder. The room had erupted into a mass of writhing, screaming beings most of them twi’lek but none of them were real. Their bodies were translucent, and ghost like and I could see through them. It looked for a moment as though I had stumbled into a night club during the busy dance time but to my horror I realised they were not dancing, they were all being slaughtered. Suddenly the searing pain of a knife slicing through my shoulder, the same shoulder he had stuck the Anzati blade into, brought me to my senses. I reeled with agony, far too much agony for the wound that had been caused and dropped to my knees. I was grateful when the scene around me swirled into darkness.*

*I blinked and found myself on a Star Destroyer, kneeling on the floor cradling a body in my arms, at first the face, covered by hair matted with blood, was Jyrki’s but then it changed to my uncle’s which then morphed into Navaari’s. I tried to clear the sticky hair from his face but when I did so it was not Navaari I was staring at but Thrawn. I opened my mouth to scream but no sound came out.*

*Hands touched me then, pulling me back from the floor pulling me back from Thrawn’s lifeless form. I tried to hold on to him but he was too heavy and I was not strong enough. I tried to back away but I could not move properly, as though something had bound itself around my lower legs. I looked around and realised I was up to my knees in snow, freezing cold and very much alone. All around me a blizzard howled and in my hand I held my mother’s lightsaber hilt. I had no idea how it came to be in my hand and as I slowly turned around to try and figure out where the hell I was, the whiteness from the swirling storm blinded me.*

As suddenly as this vision had descended down upon me so it receded and I realised I was not stranded on a planet full of snow and ice in the middle of a howling gale but seated in a pleasant tap’caf on Nar Shadda at lunch time. I looked at my hands hastily but there was no lightsaber and no blood only a bored sounding waiter asking me if I was alright and if there was anything else I wanted to order.

“I’m fine, just daydreaming.” I said as I shook off the remnants of the vision and nodded, mindful that I was being watched.

The waiter gave me a sceptical look and asked again if I needed anything else, the underlying threat being that if I wasn’t going to order I should leave so that another paying customer could have the table.

“Bring me another of these, please,” I added tapping my empty stim’caf cup, “with a shot of brandy on the side.”

The waiter nodded, picked up my empty cup and vanished into the dimness of the tap’caf. I sat back against the chair and drew a deep steadying breath. Puzzled by what I had seen and more than a little annoyed with it. I didn’t like that in more and more of my dreams and visions I saw Thrawn and I hated that he was usually dead or dying. This vision was particularly bizarre because there was a second story going on in it that had nothing to do with my current situation. I closed my eyes to bring back the images of the screaming mass of people, mainly young female twi’leks who had been ghost like in the back ground of the room I had seen myself in. It was the same room as the one in the holo recording Jyrki had made, windowless but large, too large to be a storage room, it had been meant for something else, something grim and unpleasant if this vision was anything to go on.

‘Ancient history’ the voice in the vision had said. ‘Mass murder, a moment in time gone bad, very, very bad. You don’t want to look, girl. You don’t want to look now, or ever....’

When he came back a few moments later my head was clear and as he placed the ‘caf and the brandy on the table I asked. “Excuse me but have you worked here long?”

“Yes miss, almost fifteen years now.”

“So you know the area well then?”

“I’d like to think so.” He replied in a *get to the point* tone of voice.

“I heard that near here there was some sort of a terrible murder which happened around this area. Someone was telling me that it happened in the Redbock Heights, a very bloody slaughter?” I asked in that voice tourists sometimes used when they are unsure about a local urban myth and want it conformed.

The waiter, an older looking human male, furrowed his brow. “You’d be talking about the Dibbson slave ring murder but that weren’t at the Redbock that were at the Grish’mín Inn and no one stays there any more. Inn’s been shut down for maybe going on ten years now though the council won’t tear it down on account that the owner still pays his taxes

and everything. People says it's haunted, and most people stays away from it, says they hear the screams of the dead coming from it still." The man said in the hushed voice of a co-conspirator telling a story.

"You seem to know a lot about it." I said mildly surprised.

"I aughta," he said, "I was working here the night it happened. Right mess it was too. Woulda never happened before the Empire, let me tell you, things was different in them days. Them jedi would have taken care of it before it got out of hand but the storm troopers, they was clueless." He shook his head, "It was a slaughter pure and simple, they say the room was red from all the blood that was shed. There were so many dead that they had to farm out the bodies to some of the mortuaries in the nearby sectors, not enough space for 'em all in the Corellian Sector. Place was crawling with stormtroopers and the like but even they was not man enough to handle what they saw inside. I remember clear as day one of 'em hauling off his helmet and throwing up his lunch. Put the customers right off, it did."

I shook my head in disbelief. "What happened?"

He snorted. "Slavers fighting over slaves is what happened. There was an auction, secret like, being held in the Inn's lower rooms. The story goes that the slaves had been taken from all over the galaxy, though it was mainly twi'leks and most of them were female and young at that, younger than you even. The shipment of slaves was supposed to head over to someone in the Duros sector but they was stolen and the owner, a nasty piece of work named Merken, wanted them back. When he heard that his slaves was being auctioned off here and by his arch rival no less, he went ballistic, called in his people and the next thing you know there was a bloody war going on. Instead of being able to work it out with money and spice like they usually would the two warring factions turned on each other and the slaves in the room. It was a blood bath from start to end. Sixty three slaves plus the owners and their gangs were all dead, torn to shreds. Only one to survive was a little twi'lek girl who saw the whole thing and testified, told the HoloNet news and everything. Don't know what ever became of her though. Big scandal for the Inn, seeing as how auctioning slaves outside of a proper auction arena ain't exactly legal though usually everyone turns a blind eye to it, you know. The inn closed down after that."

"Sounds awful." I said letting the breath I had been holding in slowly out.

"It was, them pictures was splashed all over the HoloNet, nightmares for months afterwards. Why you so interested anyways?" He asked suddenly a little suspicious.

I shook my head. "Someone on the shuttle I came in on mentioned something about a haunted hotel is all. I am staying at the Redbock; I asked about it there but they won't tell me anything, said it was not a story for lady-like ears to hear." I said with a nonchalant shrug, "I didn't want to stay in a haunted hotel and I don't think they wanted to lose my business."

"Don't imagine they would be wanting to discuss that seeing as how they is situated directly across from the Grish'min Inn. He nodded knowingly. "Don't blame you either but the Redbock is alright, though you might like to look over your bill carefully when you checks out, they has a habit of making expensive mistakes with their billing." He said with a wink. "If you know what I mean."

"Oh really, thanks I will make sure to keep an eye on that." I beamed a delighted and relieved smile at him.

The waiter nodded then seeing a frantically waving hand from another customer he gave me a polite shrug and went back to work. I had to fight from grinning like a mad thing or worse jumping up and down with excitement. I was certain that this place, this Inn the waiter had told me about was the place Jyrki was holding my father. It was one of the three buildings I had narrowed my search down to. It fit the profile and now it fit the vision I had just had.

I dumped the shot of brandy into my stim'caf and sipped at it thoughtfully. The trick would be how to get rid of the guy who was following me and get into the condemned Grish'min Inn to search it. I had technical readouts to the building so finding a way in should not be that hard to do. A little voice whispered in my ear to wait until I could talk it over with Navaari, who had given me several stern warnings against taking matters into my own hands, but another part of me felt that time was running out for my father and that if I didn't act now I might regret it more. So, I sat and waited, trying to logic my way around this situation, the way Thrawn did, hoping to find a solution that did not end up with me or my family at death's door.

Thinking of Thrawn made me melancholy. I missed him terribly and despite all of Navaari's assurances, I was certain he would not forgive me for running off in the manner that I had. I had reasoned out that he, of all people, would understand the need to do everything I could to save my family, after all he had lost his brother and I know he still mourned for

Thrass even though he rarely spoke about him. I was certain that if he could go back and change things, he would have done everything he could have to save his brother's life. I knew he understood my reasons for coming to Nar Shadda I just wasn't so sure he would forgive me for the way in which I had carried out my plan. We had agreed no more secrets and I had completely ignored this in order to come here at Jyrki's command.

Now I was wasting time, letting Jyrki to set the pace and make the rules. I drummed my fingers on the table and sighed, this waiting around was becoming tedious and I had had enough. It was time to turn the tables; it was time I took the offensive. Instead of being the hunted I was about to take on the hunt. I drained my stim'caf, the shot of brandy in it burning as it slid down my throat. As nonchalantly as I could I got and headed into the dimly lit tap'caf to use the 'fresher. This was one of the most useful pieces of advice my father had ever given me. *Eat, drink and use the 'fresher when ever you get the chance because you just never know what will happen next and it sucks if you end up someplace thirsty, hungry and desperately needing to pee.*

I stood in the dimly lit fresher staring at my reflection as I splashed cold water on my face. I took a very deep breath and nodded to myself then I found the waiter and paid my bill giving him a generous tip on top. I lingered inside the tap'caf a few moments under the guise of watching the HoloNet feed they had on display and when the waiter had left the inside again I moved quickly to find the back entrance, which as luck would have it was through the kitchen.

I used all the force talents I had to make sure the cook and his helper did not notice I was there. Mind tricks, Lord Vader had called this talent and while it wasn't my strongest talent it was good enough to get me through the somewhat dubious looking kitchen and out through the back entrance into a small ally. I glanced around and reached out with that sixth sense. The man who had been sent to follow me was still sitting at his table, expecting me to return no doubt. I breathed a little sigh of thanks because this gave me a head start. The ugly man was not stupid; it would not take him very long to figure out what had happened when I didn't come back to my table.

I glanced around the ally to see how best to proceed and spying an escape ladder decided that since most people thought in two dimensions the very best way to elude being followed again was to go up. Gathering my courage and ignoring the little voice in my head telling me this was a

very bad idea I grabbed the first rung of the ladder and began to climb up it. It was time to go find my father, meet up with Navaari who was probably trying to figure out how to get into my ship and then get the hell off this planet. If Jyrki wanted to kill Luke Skywalker he was going to have to do that without my help.

Nar Shadda, also known as the Vertical City, The Smuggler's Moon and Little Coruscant, was a mess of buildings and durasteel. Situated in the Y'Toub system it was a moon that orbited Nal Hutta, the Hutt's home planet. When the Hutts took over occupation of Nal Hutta, thousands of years prior to the rise of the empire, they made the native species, the Evocii, their slaves and forced them into slave labour building up the Moon's infrastructure until it became a place that rivalled Coruscant for importance in the trade routes. The Evocii built from the ground up, and soon space ports and fuelling stations reached high up into the atmosphere. In between these massive ports and docking stations the rest of the city grew as well, because along with the prosperity and industry came the beings who lived and worked, hoping to gain a little of the wealth the moon was quickly amassing. All of this changed when the main trade routes shifted and as quickly as it had risen in status so it soon fell in to a back water state and was abandoned by the Republic.

Shortly after this the Hutts aligned themselves with the Honourable Union of Desevro and Tion and for a while managed to regain some of its former prosperity but this ended with the Tionese War and Nal Shadda sank back into obscurity becoming a haven for smugglers and other underworld acts. Law and order had long since ceased to exist and crime flourished. It became snidely known as The Smuggler's moon and in contrast to Coruscant's gleaming, luxurious looks Nar Shadda slowly slipped in polluted, congested cities surrounded by urban decay.

There was no law on Nar Shadda. After the Republic had left it in favour of more convenient worlds along better trade routes the moon's fortunes had turned to the seedy side and it had been left to its own devices in the area of government and law enforcement. The sectors were ruled by various crime syndicates and turf wars occurred frequently between these factions.

It was on Nar Shadda that the smuggler turned hero Han Solo first began his career working under such famous smugglers as Salla Zend and Shug Ninx. Names I knew by reputation only and whispers overheard

while I had worked at Jabba's palace as a dancer. Solo had done a lot of work for the Hutts smuggling spice and other valuable cargos and had been one of Jabba's golden boys before he had been caught and boarded by an Imperial patrol and forced to ditch a cargo that was worth more than most people made in a year. After that Jabba had placed a sizeable bounty on Solo's head which was how he had gotten involved in the Rebellion somehow.

I thought about all of this as I scrambled up ladders, across walkways and sky-lanes. At one time this moon had been beautiful but now it was a decrepit mess which smelled just as bad as it looked.

I squatted atop one of the gantry ways I had discovered and watched the flow of movement below me. The area I had ended up in was a warren of ally ways, streets, covered over passes and walkways. It never stopped moving and the air was constantly full of traffic which only added to the noise and the smell that forever permeated the place. At any given time this madness was a distinct disadvantage but right now I thanked whatever gods were watching over me for the chaos because it made blending in that much easier. I sighed as I dropped down from my perch to the walkway below it and continued towards my goal.

In a round about manner I had made my way via some fairly long and unorthodox routes to get to the area where the Grish'min Inn was situated. It was easy to blend into the crowds and dressed as I was no one even gave me a second look. A few times I stopped, slipping into a store under the pretext of browsing, to stretch out with my force abilities and see if I could catch the scent of anyone following me but as far as I could tell I had shaken the man Jyrki had set to tail me. By the time I had reached the backside of the Grish'min Inn it was dusk, the sun's light fading into a hideous canvas of violent reds and purples.

The building was as ugly as its history and I wasn't sure if it was because of the story the waiter had told me coupled with my vision or if I was projecting my own fears on to it but I thought the Inn was also malevolent. I stood in the shadows and contemplated my next move. According to the city plans I had looked at there was a warren of small service tunnels which led under the buildings in this area, connecting one to the next making easier for city workers to address any issues that may occur with the infrastructure which was dodgy at best. The Evocii had created them while they were building upwards, it saved time on getting from one place to the next and no one had ever bothered to close them down afterwards because the underbelly of Nar Shadda was a place most

sane beings never wanted to go.

I slipped into the Redbock Heights and tried to look as though I belonged there as I made my way through the lobby to the turbo lift. I went up three floors and got out alone and went to find the emergency stairs so that I could head down into the sub levels. Most people did not use the turbo lift to go down and I didn't want anyone to remember seeing me head in that direction. The stairwell was badly lit and smelled of stale urine. I was grateful I had not chosen to stay in this particular hotel after all and wrinkled my nose as the stench increased the further down I went.

I stopped briefly to check with my data pad that I was still on the right track because none of the doors had any markings on them and several that I had tried has been locked. When I did find the right one, I was very relieved to find it unlocked and without an alarm. I slipped through it into a dirty looking service corridor and began to make my way down it to where the exit should have been.

For a long moment I stood staring at the thick durasteel door with its great lock and frowned. I used the force to see if I could discern if there were any sort of alarms attached to it but couldn't find anything and it wasn't as if I was particularly proficient this area of sneaking around anyway. With a shrug I withdrew my lightsaber, the one that had once been Jyrki's from my satchel and used it to slice the lock open. The noise alarmed me in the quiet of the deserted hall and the stink from the melting duraplast and steel almost made me gag.

The lock, no match for the lightsaber's blade, gave way and I nudged the door open with my foot. Careful not to touch the still red-hot durasteel I slid through the opening into a completely dark passage way. I looked back at the door, debating whether or not to seal it shut behind me then decided not to. This place had not been visited in a long time judging by how undisturbed the dust on the floor and the cobwebs all around me were and it was entirely possible that I would need an escape route.

I consulted my little data-pad to try and figure out where I was going. According to the plans I had this tunnel led under the Redbock heights to its neighbouring building, a somewhat run down apartment block, from there I would have to find my way across the main concourse to the Inn and then somehow get inside of it to find my father. I made a face. It was dark, somewhat damp and it smelled exceptionally bad, as though something had died here and been left to rot. I put my lightsaber away and pulled out the small pocket lamp I had brought with me. Its yellowish light was a small comfort in a place that was said to be inhabited

by savage feral creatures.

Navaari was going to be so pissed when I didn't show up at my hotel room at our agreed on meeting time and I was beginning to think that perhaps he had been right in his statement about chaining me to the bed to make me stay put. The hotel cleaning staff might have looked at me a little funny but at least I would not be here in this situation now. The smell and the darkness were getting to me. Ever since Matri I had difficulty being in dark confined spaces and the stale air this tunnel held was not helping the growing sense of panic I was feeling. *Just breathe.* I heard my Bunduki master's voice in my head. Easy for you to say, I thought but I did it anyway and began to navigate my way through the darkness to the next exit.

The next door was not locked but it squealed horribly when I opened it making me cringe. No one had come down this way in a while. The small corridor I found myself in lacked the stench of the first but was no less dirty. I scowled as I brushed away cobwebs from my face. According to the data pad I had to go up into the main building to get down to the exit that would lead me under the main concourse to the buildings across it. Essentially I was walking in a great big huge U shape. I sighed and continued, keeping my senses open for anyone following me but as far as I could tell I was completely alone. This was a part of the Corellian Sector that few people ever got to see and I was betting even fewer knew about it. I kept going until I found what I was looking for and stepped into the small service tunnel that would lead me to the building I really wanted to get into. It was a convoluted route and it was taking up way more time than I had thought it would. Navaari would know now that I had gone off on my own and he would be furious. I wasn't sure what scared me more, this tunnel or his anger.

The thick durasteel door that led into the Grish'min Inn opened easily. Too easily, I thought, given the difficulty I had with the doors leading to the other service tunnels which I had entered earlier. It made me wary but I sensed no danger when I reached out with the force only a sense of sadness and a lingering sensation of violence. Given the story the waiter had told me that was not so surprising. There were a lot of old, unhappy ghosts here and they were not overly happy about being disturbed.

I switched off the small torch I had with me and placed my palm on the door as it began to swing shut, letting it close quietly. It held no memories for me, which I thought was a little odd. I had seen flashes from

the a couple of the other doors, nothing significant, more small snapshots of tired city workers called in to fix something. I waited for a few moments in the dark trying to get a feel for this place. I searched with all of my senses for any sign of my father but if he was here I could not find him. I drew a deep breath, turned the little torch back on and continued along the small service corridor which was supposed to end up in the boiler room. The Inn felt the same way the Jedi Temple had, as though I were being watched by wary, malevolent spirits, it made the skin between my shoulder blades itch. It wasn't a good sensation. I concentrated on my task, which was to find my father and tried to ignore the unease which was beginning to make me tense and jumpy.

After what felt like forever I found myself in the Inn's old boiler room. I could only stare at the huge antique machinery in awe. It must have been built long before the Clone Wars had started it was so old looking. It was almost beautiful, the way ships engines were beautiful and for a few moments I lost myself to marvelling at it then, shaking myself out of my reverie, I made my way through the forest of pipes and valves to get to the other door, the one that I hoped would take me into the main corridor in the Inn's basement.

I breathed a small sigh of relief as I left the boiler room behind and found myself in the basement proper. I shone my light around and took note of the place. It was in a sorry state. The walls were damp and any paint that had been on them had long flaked or peeled off. I could see the droppings of animals all over the floor and the stench of decay and rot was powerful. I found it hard to believe the owner of this place still paid for it and refused to let it be torn down or renovated, the place was a wreck.

I stopped to consult the blueprints I had to see if I could locate the large room in which the slave auctions had once been held but there was nothing listed on the plans I had. This didn't really surprise me much; such a place would not have been well advertised and in the time the building had been drawn out and built there could have been substantial structural changes made. I felt a wave of despair wash over me and for a second I truly wondered what I was doing. How could I ever hope to find my father, best Jyrki's men and live? It all seemed so hopeless. It was as if the melancholia of the building was seeping into my skin turning me into one of its sad ghosts forever trapped in this awful place.

I leaned with my back against the wall and scrubbed at my face with the palms of my hands. I was tired and coming here alone had, as usual, been a very bad idea but, I rationalised, it had to be done. Jyrki was my

problem and what he had done to my father made me angry beyond belief. I could not ask anyone else to risk their lives to help me in this thing because it was my problem alone to deal with. It was easy to rationalise my stupidity in this manner but a small part of me knew I was wrong and going off alone would only serve to make things worse not better. Thrawn had been right, I was reckless but this was Jyrki's fault, forcing my hand and it made me furious.

I felt that thread of anger and used it to stave off the terrible sense of doom I was feeling. I could almost hear the various teachers I had had in my life telling me to buck up and get on with it, to stop feeling sorry for myself and use all the lessons I had been given to the best of my advantage. In the dark I made a face at these unseen nagging voices and pushed away from the wall to study the blue prints once again.

*There are always clues, you just have to see them,* Master Kjestyll had once told me so studied the plans again, looking for the unusual. I found it by looking at what was not there and once I saw it I shook my head at the simplicity of it all. A hidden space made to look as though it were part of the foundation. A room without windows, large enough to contain a lot of beings, near enough to allow the sound from the warning siren across the street to sound through and difficult to find. I traced the only possible rout to it on the data-reader, memorised it and then, slipping the reader away, began with more determination to get this over with. For a moment I considered turning back to find Navaari and get help but then decided against it. This was my fight and Jyrki was my problem, I just hoped he wouldn't be my death as well.

I found the passage easily enough and stretched out with my senses as much as I could. I could not feel any danger but there was a presence, a familiarity lurking beyond the wall ahead of me. For the first time in my life I wished I had thought about getting a blaster. The only weapon I had on me was the lightsaber and that was tucked away in my satchel. I hadn't even thought to bring a knife of some sort, then again I had not really thought at all.

From the passageway I was in, there was only one way into this room and that meant if Jyrki was beyond the door I would be more or less defenceless when I entered. I looked around to see if there were any other options and noticed an air vent opening covered by a grate. A room without windows had to have some method of ventilation and I was annoyed with myself for not thinking about this earlier. I back-tracked until I came to a place I figured no one would hear or see me. Took out my

lightsaber and carved hand and foot holds in the wall. The metal grill was heavy and didn't want to come off with any ease. When I finally did manage to yank it out of its socket the sudden momentum sent me backwards off the wall to land on the floor on my back. The grate went flying and clattered loudly enough that had there been anyone around to watch for intruders they would have heard it. I lay on the filthy floor, winded as well as a little stunned, and swore with a savageness that would have made Jabba blush.

I waited until I was sure no one was coming before I got up, trying to brush off the dirt that had clung to me. Between the cobwebs and the dust I was starting to resemble an oversized jawa and I felt as though I would never get clean again. Once more I climbed up the wall and then with a great deal of effort managed to squeeze into the ventilation shaft. It was dusty and small. I had enough room to crawl forward using my arms to drag me along but I couldn't turn around so if there was no way out I would have to wriggle backwards again. I didn't relish this thought and for a moment panic overwhelmed me. I fought to get my pounding heart under control, thinking of my father, thinking of Navaari and thinking of Thrawn. How pissed would he be if I died getting stuck in a ventilation shaft I thought, not to mention embarrassing, especially after all I had gone through in my life? I took a gulp of air, fought my fear down to a manageable roar and began to crawl forward as quietly as I could.

It seemed to take forever, though in reality was less than ten minutes, until I found the place I was looking for. I inched forward as silently as I could and peered through the slats of the ventilation grill. Sure enough, in the center of the large, decrepit looking room sat my father tied to a chair, his head slumped forward. For a moment my heart stopped, I thought he was dead but then I noticed the soft rise and fall of his shoulders as he breathed in and out, still alive, just not conscious.

As much as I could I scanned the room but neither saw nor felt the presence of anyone else. They had left my father alone here to die and it made me furious. My guess was that Jyrki was off doing other things and figured there wasn't much chance of my father getting out of this by himself. I considered getting out by opening the vent but when I tried to push on it the thing wouldn't budge so that meant worming my way backwards to get out the way I came. It was even more difficult that I had bargained for and by the time I slithered out of the shaft and back into the hall I was utterly covered in grime, cobwebs and goodness knew what else. Quickly I made my way back to the door and tried it. It opened quietly,

easily but touching the handle left me shaking with the memories it spat into my head. I squeezed my eyes shut and blocked them, a mixture of past and present, terrified slaves and Jyrki's insanity.

I slipped into the room, grateful it was not that well lit and after making sure there were no unseen enemies hiding in a corner someplace, I made my way to the center of the room and crouched down by my father's unconscious form. When I touched him he moaned and I could see he was in a lot of pain. His face was swollen and bruised, blood had dried and crusted around his nose and mouth. His lips were cracked and very dry looking.

"Papa...papa." I whispered as I began to untie the complicated knots which held my father to the heavy metal chair. My fingers trembled and the knots were tight.

My father stirred and tried to open his eyes. "Who..."

"Papa, it's Merlyn. Papa, you have to wake up. I need your help to get out of here, I can't carry you." I whispered hoping he would surface enough to be able to get out of here without me having to half carry him along.

"Merly?" My father whispered hoarsely.

I realised as he tried to speak that his mouth was bone dry, and when I looked at him more carefully I understood that he had not been given food or drink for some time. I had been on the receiving end of Jyrki's hospitality once; I knew what my father had gone through. I fumbled in my satchel for the small water bottle and gently put it to his lips. He drank some but spilled more, still it helped him. I hated Jyrki for this. I hated him with a fury that was almost blinding.

"Papa, it's going to be okay, I'm going to get you out of here." I told him resuming my work with the knots.

"No, pet no...you need to leave...Jyrki..." He struggled against the ropes and when I got the last knot undone he slid gracelessly to the floor.

I pulled him to a seated position and then squatted in front of him to hold his face in my hands. He groaned in pain. "Papa, you have to try and stand." I told him and then I used my shoulder to brace him as I helped him get up off the floor. He was heavier than he looked and I struggled with supporting him.

"Merly...it's Jyrki he's the one..." My father despite his condition became agitated. "You need to leave me...trap... he plans..."

"I know papa." I said gently, trying to calm him down. "What about Bedi and Bel?" I asked.

"Safe." He breathed. "Got word from Vahl, sent them to Corellia before Jyrki and his friends came..." His voice trailed off as he sagged in my arms again. I had no idea how I was going to do this; he was too heavy for me to lift. I wrapped my arms about his waist and tried to hoist him up so that he stood but Jyrki's treatment had left him weak. For a moment, I just stood there holding my father tightly, my head against his chest, listening to the sound of his heart. He lifted his head and our eyes caught. I saw tears glisten in his.

"So sorry Merly, so sorry." He said and I felt my own heart break. "Couldn't stop them...."

I put the water bottle to his lips again and this time he drank most of it down when he was done I drew a deep breath and found strength I never knew I had pulled his arm over my shoulder and took as much of his weight as I could. "We have to go now papa." I whispered and twisted so that we face the direction of the door. It was slow going, my father's legs were weak from sitting and being tied for so long, from lack of food and water. It was more like trying to drag a bantha carcass through the desert sands than helping a living man walk to freedom. I prayed to whatever gods were out there to get us through this but they had decided to take the night off.

As soon as we got through the door, before I had gone four steps a powerful arm grabbed me. I stumbled, squeaking in surprise, hampered by the weight of my father who was leaning heavily on me. Dek hit my father on the jaw and he dropped to the floor in a semi-conscious state just as I spun around. I came face to face with Dek and felt the bite of a vibro blade snick my throat as I blindly fought to be free of his hand which held me fast. My struggles lasted only a few seconds before I was slammed violently against the wall face first. All the air in my lungs left with a single woosh and I saw stars. I felt the power in the arm that braced itself across the base of my skull and knew if I even tried to move the owner of the arm would break my neck without even trying. I had not even seen this coming.

"You're a bloody pain in the arse, just like he said you would be." Lorano Dek hissed in my ear as he used a set of stun cuffs to bind my arms behind my back. "Too bad you didn't figure out that there is an observation cam in that room." He taunted. "Clever enough to find this place but not clever enough to figure out the trap. He said you were smart but blinded by your attachments. He said to wait, that you'd come to us. He's madder than a spice addict but he knows you right well enough." He eased the weight off my neck slightly.

I reached out through the force to see if I could sense Jyrki near by but there was nothing, all I sensed was the dull thud of a headache starting in my shoulders. I wondered for a moment if I had suddenly gone head-blind but when I moved a small piece of rubble that lay at my feet I knew that was not the case. The noise caught Dek's attention and he smashed my face back against the wall with his hand.

"Do that again and I'll hurt you. He doesn't want you dead but he didn't say anything about not being in pain." He hissed in my ear as he wound his hand through my hair pulling on it so hard it brought tears to my eyes. "If you struggle I'll scalp you the hard way and then I'll kill your old man. So be a lady and play nice. Put the trickery away." He spun me around by my hair so that I face forward and I had to grit my teeth against the pain. My father was flat on the ground too weak to move but still alive. With his other hand Dek grabbed my father's inert body from the floor and dragged us both back to the room we had just come from.

A meter beyond the doorway Dek stopped, shoving my father forward as hard as he could. I winced as I watched him sprawl across the floor with a dreadful thud. He didn't move afterwards. "Should I kill him?" Dek asked the man who was seated in the metal chair in the center of the room.

Jyrki shook his head and sat back against the chair, one leg over the other, his ankle resting on his knee. He was dressed in black and it made his pale skin luminous. His hair which had grown long and shaggy was loose instead of tied back and shadowed his angular face. His hands draped on the chair's armrests like dead animals and for a split second I saw the image of the Emperor seated upon a throne of bones.

Nausea suddenly swept through me like a heat wave, my stomach heaved and I retched. Dek spun me away still holding my hair while I threw up the contents of my stomach on to the floor. When I was done he hauled me back around to face Jyrki. I tried to wipe my mouth with my shoulder but that was ineffectual. The smell of fresh vomit did nothing to improve the room or the situation any.

Jyrki watched this for a moment and then got up and came towards me. "Yer never learn, do yer Mouse?" He said, cupping my face in the palm of his hand, cleaning the remnants of spit and vomit from my lips with his thumb. I stared into his eyes and saw nothing of the person I had once known, all I saw was a deep, dark madness. In that moment I was terrified. I shivered even though it wasn't that cold and Dek tightened his grip in my hair. Jyrki patted my face in a tender, loving fashion and walked over to

where my father lay. He crouched down by my father's side and put two fingers to the artery on his neck.

"Stronger than he looks, yer father," Jyrki commented, "Fought harder than he should have, all for yer Mouse, all to save yer. He wouldn't tell me where yer were so I had to make him. Still he wouldn't break but the drugs we gave him did the job, I got enough out of Kit to know how to get the message to yer. Then the Tze'yusha'Jin interfered, had to be dealt with which wasted time. But yer got the message and yer came."

I just stared at him. "Why?" I whispered.

"I told yer," Jyrki said, "I need yer to help me eliminate the son of Anakin Skywalker."

I just looked at him. His truth was mixed in with lies. He wanted something else, something that had been too hidden for me to pick up on before. "Let papa go." I spat. "He's never been anything but kind to you. He took you in, he gave you work...."

Jyrki just smiled and got up slowly. "Attachments, Mouse, they will destroy yer every time." He sighed as though speaking to me were a huge effort. He got up slowly, trying to hide the wince of pain. His knee still hurt, I knew that from how he moved, it made me smile which didn't go unnoticed.

"Lack of love and forbidding attachments is what cause the downfall of the Jedi Order!"

"Yer trouble Mouse is that yer never learned to let go." He told me as he paced.

"I never learned to let go?" I spat, "You're the one who won't let go of me!"

"Yer need a teacher, Mouse, someone who can show yer the ways of the force, someone who can show yer the path."

"Path? What path?"

He smiled, "The true Jedi path."

I struggled against Dek's grip on my hair and it hurt. "The true Jedi path? The Jedi are dead Jyrki, they don't exist anymore. They died when the Emperor activated Order sixty-six. He wiped you all out, decimated the Order so that he could have power. It's gone and it's never coming back."

"Yer and I will change that." Jyrki said turning his back to me. "Yer the daughter of a powerful Jedi, her blood runs through your veins, yer told me so yerself. I am also strong in the force so together yer and I will

have force sensitive children. We will make the jedi strong again; we will take our rightful place in the galaxy once more.”

I was too shocked to speak but when Dek chuckled behind me I found my voice. “You...you want to mate with me?”

Jyrki turned his head to look over his shoulder at me. He eyes burned into mine and I felt my heart skip a beat but not from desire from fear. “There was a time when yer would have come willingly to my bed Mouse. There was a time when yer would have given yer soul to have me strip yer naked and make love to yer.”

I opened my mouth then closed it again, repulsion shuddered through me bringing a cold sweat and fresh bout of nausea, when I got that under control I whispered, “I thought the Jedi were not allowed to have children, were not allowed to have attachments.”

He shrugged and turned back away from me. “Things have changed, the rules have changed. We need to start a new Jedi Order, one that will not fall to darkness. Luke Skywalker must not be allowed to live; he must not be allowed to breed. Yer and I will stop this. This has nothing to do with attachments, Mouse; this has to do with practicality.”

I shook my head despite the pain it caused. I could not believe what he was telling me, I could not believe what he wanted to do. “You honestly think I will sleep with you so that you can propagate force sensitive children? Do you really think I would let you near me? After all you have done? You really are mad, completely and utterly out of your mind.” I spat, “There is no way in all the nine Corellian Hells I will let you touch me in that manner.”

Jykri shrugged. “Of course yer will Mouse,” he said softly, his voice almost a caress, “yer have no say in the matter and if yer don’t do it willingly then yer will be forced. It isn’t as if yer are innocent in the ways of mating any more, is it?” He watched my face closely and smiled in satisfaction when he saw the expression in my eyes. “I know a lot about yer and yer lover. The blue skinned alien who fancies himself the Empire’s new saviour. I know more about him than yer think. Antygra told me all about him, the Emperor’s favoured alien tactician, Chiss brilliance, isn’t that right? I know he was sent into exile but that was just a ruse. The lies about his death may have fooled most but not me, I know that he lives still, I just don’t know where but I am betting yer do, don’t yer. Yer share his bed now just as yer did when yer were a palace doxy whoring yerself for the Emperor. Don’t think I don’t know about yer, because I do. Yer will

breed with me and that’s the end of it. Yer not an innocent any more and if I have to force yer then so be it.”

The sudden despair which washed over me was almost overwhelming but I bit it back and concentrated on breathing, concentrated on the force. In my head I felt the subtle brush of a familiar, gentle touch. I wasn’t sure which of my ghosts had come back to aide me but it was soothing. I drew a deep, calming breath and relaxed into it. The force flowed around me, it flowed around the room and I could now sense Jyrki in it even though he cloaked himself very well. I opened myself up to this ethereal power completely, letting it shine through me. It felt like the Tatooine sunlight and I welcomed its warmth. I could have sworn I heard my mother’s voice whispering in my ear to be patient, whispering in my ear to let go of the anger and the fear. I projected these things into the force directly at Jyrki. He felt my touch and turned around in surprise.

“How did yer...?” He began but trailed off as he stared at me, at least I thought he was staring at me but then I realised he wasn’t, he was actually looking past my shoulders. I frowned and tried to twist from Dek’s grip watching Jyrki in horror as he began to move, to draw a weapon, a blaster.

All of a sudden, at the very same time, I sensed another presence in the room but before either of us could say another word I felt Dek’s body twist. The sickening crack that followed the motion told me Dek’s neck had just been broken. I felt the fingers that had held on to my hair release and jerked away to see Navaari out of the corner of my eye but at the same time I could see Jyrki move to stand over my father, a blaster in his hand. It was pointed directly at my father’s head.

“Stop or he dies.” Jyrki said quietly.

Ignoring Jyrki’s threat, Navaari reached down and picked up the control for the binders from Dek’s inert body and I felt the locks release. The binders fell to the ground with a clatter that sounded too loud. I rubbed my wrists and glanced at Navaari. He had a small, single handed Dantassi bowcaster style weapon trained on Jyrki. The deadly looking quarrel glistened so I knew it was laced with poison.

“Are you whole?” Navaari asked me in Dantassi Cheunh never taking his eyes off Jyrki.

I nodded. “Tja.”

“Put the weapon down or I will kill her father.” Jyrki said again.

Navaari cocked his head to one side. “Are you that fast?” He asked, his Basic heavily accented.

Jyrki sneered. "Are yer willing to risk it Bone-Trader?"

"Are you?" Navaari played the bluff back into Jyrki's hands. They never took their eyes off each other.

I watched as Jyrki considered his options. Navaari was large, masked and fierce looking. The Bone Traders had a terrible reputation which Jyrki well knew and he was weighing this now against his odds of survival. I watched, holding my breath, as Jyrki stepped back from my father's body but he never lowered the blaster and I could see the hatred blazing in his eyes. How weird it was, I thought, that sometimes we become the very thing we feared the most.

"A'myhsk'a, bring your father here." Navaari told me switching back to his native tongue.

I hesitated a moment then warily did as he asked, grasping my father under his arms and began to pull him towards Navaari. I had only gone two steps when all the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. I twisted around to see a flash in the doorway.

"Navaari! Behind you!" I yelled but he was already turning. I saw it all in slow motion, the short, ugly man who had been following me fired his blaster just as Navaari shot at him. Navaari's aim was true and the quarrel thudded deeply into the man's chest. He was dead before he hit the ground but he had gotten a shot off and I watched in horror as a bright blue blaster bolt hit Navaari squarely in the chest sending him flying backwards. I screamed and dropped my father to run to where Navaari lay. He was not moving, I wasn't sure he was breathing.

I didn't see that Jyrki had also sprung into action and as fast as I was so he was faster. He took the butt of the blaster he held and slammed it against the base of my skull. A blinding white light shot through my head accompanied by a moment of perfect stillness. Then, as my brain caught up with the body, pain exploded all around me making me suck in my breath as I slid into unconsciousness.

*My head pounded and for a moment I wasn't sure where I was, moving was painful but the need to know where I had ended up overruled than the maddening headache. Slowly the scene unfolded and I found myself on the planet I had been born on somewhere, it seemed, out in the Dune Sea. The desert stretched out wide before me. The sand had turned a warm reddish-gold colour in waning suns' light, shadows and light exaggerating the ripples created by the waves of the wind as far as the eye could see, sloping up and down into crested dunes looking like a sea of honey coloured water. The twin suns hung low in the sky and the heat*

*haze shimmering off the still burning sands made the horizon look watery and ethereal but I shivered in spite of the warmth in the air. I felt the tell-tale breeze that whispered a storm was coming and frowned, something wasn't quite right because the air smelled like cold pepper not like warm pasha spice.*

*"You always pick the most difficult path to follow." Said the soft voiced man my Uncle had named Qui-Gon Jinn.*

*I turned around to face him. Gone was the old farmer's poncho I was used to seeing him in instead he was clothed in full Jedi robes and his long brown hair, only partially tied back, flowed around his lined face catching the fading light of the suns.*

*"Why do you come to me?" I asked him.*

*"I knew your mother very well; she was one of the gentlest beings I have ever met." He replied.*

*"Gentle?" I asked crossly. "She, like every other Jedi, went to war. They fought; they killed and in turn were killed by those they were trying to protect."*

*The sorrow which passed across his face made my heart ache, made me sorry for my unkind words. "War changed the Jedi Order in ways we could have never imagined." He replied. "Your mother was special and I cared for her very much. You are her legacy Merlyn Gabriel. I would not see you fall to the darkness which both hunts and haunts you."*

*I sighed. Sometimes I felt as though my ghosts were at war over my soul tugging it from one side to the other and back again. "You haven't answered my question." I said.*

*"I come to you because I owed your mother a debt, because when she needed me to listen to her the most I did not. She knew she would have a child, she knew that for a long time before you were born. I have tried to be a guide to where she could not." He said.*

*"She knew?"*

*He nodded, "She had a vision, she told me this but it was right before I left with my Padewan to go to Naboo. I told her we would speak of it when I returned."*

*"You died on Naboo." I pointed out. I remembered a dream I had once of this very thing but it seemed very far away, a half remembered memory.*

*“Yes, I was arrogant and the young Sith Zabradi I fought was faster, stronger than I was.” He said. “I failed in many respects not the least of which was the training of Anakin.”*

*“You blame yourself for his failure?”*

*“He did not fail us,” Qui-Gon said, “We failed him. It was the arrogance of the Jedi Council coupled with their fear of his powers which drove him away, drove him to seek guidance from someone who seemed to care for him. He turned to Palpatine and Palpatine used the boy’s need for love, need for acceptance to create Darth Vader. It was Palpatine who showed Anakin what we could not, trust and affection. By the time the boy realised what had happened it was already too late. The Jedi Order let Anakin Skywalker down in every way possible, so yes, we failed him,” He sighed and looked away from me, “I failed him.” He added softly.*

*“Dying isn’t exactly failing.” I pointed out.*

*“It was the ultimate failure caused by my own arrogance but I found a way to bridge the gap between worlds, a way to come back and communicate to the living. Where I failed him, I could help you.” He said, “You have a hard journey before you, child.”*

*I laughed. “I stopped being a child a long time ago; even Navaari no longer calls me that. And as far as difficult journeys, when has that not been the case?”*

*He smiled slightly and shrugged one shoulder. “Yet you choose to walk this path. You could have done things very differently but that is not your way.” He chided. “You choose to face your destiny but you fight it also and that is what makes it so difficult.”*

*I made face. He was, after all, right.*

*“It will be a terrible, difficult road you now have chosen to walk but use the force; it is stronger with you than you believe.” He reached out to place a hand on my shoulder.*

*“I am not a Jedi and I don’t ever want to be!” I snapped, tired of all this Force business, shrugging away from his touch.*

*He chuckled, “Indeed you are not and had you been taken in by the Order you would have been a storm in the calm.” He said. For a moment he said nothing and I thought that he was finished but then he continued with a voice laced with sadness. “You do not ever have to be a Jedi, young Merlyn, that particular path was never yours to choose and now that way is closed to you but that should not stop you from sensing and using the living force around you, let it be your guide. Do not let fear and anger cloud your judgement, look past the lies and the desire for revenge. You*

*have already seen what lies at the end of such a path and it is not a place such a spirit as yours should be.”*

*I frowned. “That sounds like a lot of Jedi mumbo jumbo to me.” I told him.*

*He laughed and it was beautiful sound, rich and warm, “Perhaps the words are but the sentiment behind them is not. You will find your way, you are strong and smart. Your mother would have been proud of the woman you have become.” He smiled. “I am proud of you. You are ready to face the hard way ahead of you and the terrible trials yet to come.”*

*“Terrible trails?” I asked not liking the sound of the words. “Have I not gone through enough already as it is?”*

*“Through hardship we learn strength.” He replied cryptically.*

*I sighed. “Then at least tell me what to expect?”*

*“You already know; you have been shown many times. You have been given the tools to survive and you have the strength to persevere.”*

*“That’s not terribly helpful.” I told him.*

*“No perhaps it is not.” He replied, reaching out to lift my chin with the tips of two fingers. “But it is not my job to make the way clear to you, it is my job to be a guide, I cannot fight this battle for you child, I can only offer you wisdom and guidance.”*

*The world around me shifted and the air thickened with the sudden moisture of a terrible storm. I realised I was no longer on Tatooine but somewhere on Coruscant or perhaps Nar Shadda. Suddenly a huge thunder clap tore the air around me and the ground shook violently.*

*“You should wake up now, child and be ready.” Qui-Gon said just as a second, even louder thunderclap tore through the air and this time the shaking was so bad I lost balance and fell, waking up in the process.*

*I opened my eyes slowly; my head hurt and everything swam in a blurry haze. For a second I thought I was in the cockpit of the shuttle I had flown from Nirauan to try and find Thrawn after the fall of the Emperor. My heart skipped a beat and a moment of panic swept through me but as my vision and my thoughts began to clear I realised I was not sitting in the cockpit of a lambda shuttle but was actually lying on a bunk in a small cabin on what sounded a lot like a YU class ship. I reached up to touch the base of my skull and felt the spot where Jyrki had hit me. There was a large, painful lump but the skin had not broken. He had known exactly how hard to hit me to knock me out but not cause any serious harm. I got*

up from the small bunk slowly, wincing at the pounding at the base of my skull which seemed to get worse a second after I moved.

Time paused as I sat and looked around. The cabin was designed for a single person, probably the Captain but Jyrki had never used it. It was utilitarian, sparsely furnished and the only belongings in it were mine. I pulled my satchel and searched through it not surprised to see my lightsaber missing but everything else was there and for that I was grateful. I sighed as I took out an analgesic patch from the tiny first-aid pack I had brought along and slapped it on the back of my neck then I pulled out the bottle of water and drank, thinking of my father and then Navaari as I did so.

I replayed the last few moments in the Grish'min Inn's hidden room, the sound of Dek's neck breaking as Navaari killed him, the blaster bolt hitting Navaari square in the chest, my father lying, half dead from the abuse at Jyrki's hand, on the dirty floor and then the smash of pain from the blaster hitting me on the back of the head. I bit back the tears which threatened to come. My impulsiveness had cost Navaari his life. I didn't know how the hell I would ever begin to tell Thrawn this and I didn't think he would ever forgive me for it either.

Despair wrenched through me. What had happened, what I had caused to happen, was so awful that I couldn't bear to think about it. I couldn't believe that Navaari was dead but I had seen him shot, I had seen him fall and I had not seen his chest move with his breathing before Jyrki had rendered me unconscious, but no one survived a blaster bolt to the chest. I swallowed back my tears which made my throat ache. Crying would not do me any good now and it certainly wouldn't do my pounding head any good either. What was done was done and I couldn't turn back to the chrono to fix it, I could only hope to somehow end this fight once and for all.

After a few moments, when the pain in my head began to subside, I took stock of my situation. I tried the door but it was locked with a security code I couldn't crack and there was no other way out. I sat back down on the bunk and listened to the sounds of the hyperdrive. The ship had a slight shimmy and the hyperdrive sounded old but healthy enough. Jyrki may have been a complete nut job but he was a hell of a mechanic and I was quiet certain that, in spite of her age, this ship's engines were solid which is why, when a few moments later there was an almighty bang and I was thrown violently to one side, I was more than a little shocked. I was even more surprised when the lights went out plunging me into total

darkness and the ships engines went completely dead. Panic swept through me but I squashed it down quickly, while I could afford to lose it on the ground, in space, panicking meant the difference between living and dying and I had been trained better than that. I took a few deep breaths and waited, a few seconds later the dim red emergency light flicked on giving me enough light to see by and the dull throb of the sublight engine kicked in. I sat still, trying to figure out what had just happened. For sure we had come violently out of hyperspace but it hadn't been so bad that the ship had blown up. I listened carefully to the sounds the ship was making. The sublight engine was slow and struggling, Jyrki had push started it and the engine had not liked that very much.

I tried the comm panel by the door but it was dead, the main electrics on the ship seemed to be out. I tried the lock on the cabin door again but nothing happened and the small indicator light stayed red. Frustrated and angry I began to pound on it yelling for Jyrki to let me out. It was one thing to be locked in while the ship was running properly but quite another to be locked in when something went wrong. When my fists hurt from banging on the door, I kicked at it with my foot, shouting at the top of my lungs. I was pretty sure he would be in the engine room and wouldn't actually be able to hear me so I was surprised when the security light suddenly went from red to green and the locked snicked open.

I opened the door manually and took one step out of the tiny cabin. The corridor was pitch black not even the emergency lights were on which was really unusual. I couldn't see anything beyond the dim radius of the red lamp from my own cabin nor could I sense anyone in the corridor. I wasn't sure what sort of YU ship we were on so I didn't know her lay out well enough to just walk around in the dark blind. I turned around to get my satchel which still held my small hand torch when someone silently clapped a hand across my mouth and pushed me back into the cabin. The door behind me shut softly and before I could struggle the person who had silenced me released me. I spun around ready to fight but stopped mid motion when I saw who stood before me. For a second I wavered unsure if who I was seeing was real or a ghost.

"Zte'sa?" My voice sounded small, child like to me ears. My uncle nodded making the gesture for silence and gathered me into his arms, holding me tightly.

"Are you okay?" He whispered in my ear.

I nodded, too stunned to speak. When I found my voice all I could think to say was, "How? He told me you were dead, he told me he had killed you."

"I wanted him to think this was the case, we can discuss the details of 'how' later. Suffice to say he saw what I wished him to see and thought what I wanted him to think" He replied quietly. "The ship is a YU-four-ten model so you should be familiar enough with the layout and the comm-panel. Can you get to the cockpit and unlock the controls?"

I nodded. "I think so but what are you going to do?"

"Take care of Jyrki."

"He'll probably be in the engine room trying to fix the hyperdrive."

"That was my intent." My uncle said tersely.

"You sabotaged the engine?"

He nodded, "Unless he has a spare motivator, the main hyperdrive won't be functioning any time soon. I disabled the back-up as well." He said holding out his hand so that I could see the small engine part he had removed from the spare making it impossible for Jyrki to start the secondary hyperdrive. I made a face at him and he slipped the tiny part back into the satchel he wore slung across his body.

"Do you know where we are?"

"Somewhere in the Ando System, I believe." He said. "Do you have a weapon?"

I shook my head and he pulled out a small, sheathed vibro blade and handed it to me. "As I recall you are a tad inexperienced with blasters.

I took the blade from his hand and slipped it into the waistband of my skirt at the small of my back under my coat. I retrieved my satchel and slung it across my shoulder. "He took papa." I said quietly, "Navaari is dead, shot with a blaster."

My uncle looked at me sharply. "Is Kit still alive?"

I nodded, "He was still living when Jyrki knocked me out, but ..." I wavered, "he was in bad shape."

"Kit is a strong man Lei'lei; he's survived far worse than Jyrki Andando." Uncle Vahlek said quietly but his voice was filled with sorrow. "You are sure the Bone Trader is dead?" He asked.

"I saw him get shot, a blaster bolt to the chest at point blank range, saw him fall but I didn't see him breathe." I felt tears well up in my eyes and brushed them away; we didn't have time for crying.

"We can mourn later." He said, the expression on his face was grim and angry, "Right now we have work to do." He handed me a small

personal comm unit. "Don't use it unless you have to and then only click it don't speak. When the ship is secure I'll come to the cockpit, lock yourself in and unless you hear me give you four clicks do not open the door, do you understand?"

I nodded and he kissed the top of my head. "Be careful, Lei'lei I'm not sure he is alone and he may not be in the engine room anymore."

I didn't want to leave my uncle now that I found him alive and I held onto him tightly, burying my face in his coat, breathing in his scent deeply. "I thought you were dead. I thought everyone was dead."

"You give up on us too quickly." He peeled himself away from me and stroked my hair. "I'm not that easy to kill." He said lifting my chin up so that I stared into his pale green eyes. "Look at me Lei'lei, I know you're scared, tired, in pain and sad but I need you to get past these things right now because our survival depends on your courage and ability to bypass Jyrki's security." He sighed, "Everything will be fine, just remember all that you have been taught, you can do this. Now go and don't worry about me." Then he vanished into the darkness, moving without a sound.

I fished about my satchel for the small hand torch and turned it on, then headed towards the cockpit. My uncle had been right about the ship type, an old YU-Four-Ten, and it was in rough shape. If Jyrki had bought it then he had probably gotten it from a salvage yard, if it was stolen then chances were the previous owner was grateful to be able to claim insurance on it.

The YU-four-ten series were interesting ships in that for a light freighter they had a lot of cargo space, more than most ships of the same class, but the extra cargo space meant the ship was slower and less manoeuvrable than the YT series, which most smugglers preferred. This was a good hauling ship if speed wasn't an issue and my father had flown one long before Jyrki had started to work for him, I knew the lay out of the YU-Four-Ten well so it didn't take me long to get to the cockpit. I was grateful to discover that Jyrki had not locked the door and I slipped inside quietly, relieved to find it empty of nasty surprises.

I glanced around and saw that the comm station had power so my uncle must have found a way to disable the emergency lights on the main ship. Clever really, the dark gave him an edge. I closed the cockpit door and then locked it using the manual override. I sighed as I sat in the pilot's seat and began to unravel Jyrki's security to the system. He was every bit as clever and as tricky as I remembered and it would not be an easy job, lucky for me I had learned a few more things about slicing since my time

training under him and he had not varied his techniques much. I managed to slice the main helm and nav controls faster than I expected which left a little nagging worry in my belly that I ignored for the time being. After that it didn't take long to get back helm control and pull up the nav charts to see exactly where we were.

My uncle was right we had come out of hyperspace in the Ando system in the Dulfilvian Sector which was part of the Mid Rim. I traced the flight plan Jyrki had tabbed into the nav computer and frowned, it was convoluted and erratic designed to throw anyone following us off the trail. I wondered if anyone had been tailing us or if someone had managed to put a tracking device on the ship but the proximity reader showed clear space. Out of curiosity I pulled up the charts for the area, just to see if staying here was a good idea or not, until we could get the hyperdrive back online and make sure Jyrki was either dead or at least subdued, a job I was happy my uncle had taken on.

The Ando System had three planets, Ando, Ando Prime and Andando. I found it ironic that we had popped out of hyperspace near a planet with the same name as the man who was trying to destroy my life. I called up the charts for it and grimaced when I saw it was nothing more than a molten ball of rock with the closest orbit around the single star also called Ando. The planet Ando, which had the most temperate climate of the three orbiting bodies, was home to the Aqualish and as far as I knew they were sympathetic to the rebels. I had no desire to end up there especially since almost all the planet's surface was covered in water, something that would make finding a decent landing zone next to impossible. The third planet, Ando Prime had the largest orbit and was mainly a glacial world.

There wasn't much information on Ando Prime. The indigenous species, the Talid were quiet, nomadic hunters and little was known about them although they had been known to trade from time to time most off worlders steered clear of them. Ando was also home to some Aqualish and human settlers and the planet had seen a rise in population due to growing mining colonies but for the most part the thing Ando Prime was best known for was its pod races. At sublight speed, Ando Prime was our closest, best bet and I liked it because it was sparsely populated, had a climate I understood and vast open areas of emptiness where I could land the ship for repairs if it came to that but I hoped it wouldn't.

As I sat waiting for my uncle to hurry up and join me I began to sift through the onboard controls looking for hidden traps which Jyrki might

have laid in case he lost control of the ship. He had taught me to never take anything for granted and that if something felt too easy then chances are that was because it was too easy. I was in the middle of unravelling a complicated little trap which would shut the sublight engine down when my comm clicked four times making me jump in fright.

I let my uncle in and sat quickly back down, locking the door again. "So?" I asked as he strapped himself into the co-pilot's chair.

"He went to ground. I didn't want to waste time searching for him and risk leaving you alone up here. It will be better to let him come to us. Can you make sure he cannot access any major controls except from here?"

I nodded but I didn't feel quite as sure as I looked. Jyrki was full of tricks and this was his ship. I sighed. "I can try and get us to Ando Prime, find a decent docking bay?"

"Yes. If you think you can nurse us that far." He said, "I would prefer we got out of space and finished this fight on the ground."

I nodded and revved up the sublight engine, listening to it complain as I did so. "I have no idea where he got this tub but we'll be lucky if she holds out long enough for me to find a place to land." I grumbled.

Ando Prime slowly grew larger and larger as we got closer and closer. It was a big ball of white surrounded by a thin haze of blueish atmosphere. I tried to scan the surface for a decent landing area but the scanning system was not being cooperative. I swore and my Uncle looked at me.

"Jyrki's managed to lock out most of the secondary control systems and I am having a really hard time digging through his coding." I growled.

My Uncle nodded. "He always was good at that sort of thing, though I thought he taught you all of his tricks?"

"I wish that were the case." I sighed as I punched the consol in frustration.

My uncle shook his head. "That won't help Lei'lei."

I was about to reply when the proximity alarm started shrieking.

"We've got company."

"What sort?"

I glanced at the screen and made a face. "Imperial, TIE fighters, four of them." I tried to get the comm system to work. I had imperial codes that would get the TIEs off our back and maybe even allow us to land on what ever transport had brought them out here to patrol.

I flipped the shields on and nothing happened. I swore again and smacked the control panel with the heel of my hand twice. "For the love of the Almighty Sarlacc does nothing on this bucket of bolts work?" I yelled, hitting the panel a third time. Much to my surprise the shields came online.

"Can you signal them?"

I shook my head. "I have helm control and the nav computer but nothing else is working properly. The comm is dead, jammed by something either external or by something that Jyrki had done. Either way we can't tell them we're not the smugglers they seem to think we are. Bet this blasted ship was registered to someone in the rebellion or something dumb like that!"

The ship rocked as we were suddenly hit by blaster fire. I growled and pushed the sublight engine to max, winced as it whined like a dying dewback and hauled on the helm to try and dance away from the TIEs. "Can you see if you can...." I was about to ask my uncle to go and work one of the two working guns on board but suddenly we were shooting back at the TIEs. "Never mind, Jyrki beat you to it. Fine let him kill good Imperial pilots I don't need that on my conscience anyway."

More shots blasted at the shields and as I swung the ship to starboard. "Ktah!" I swore in Cheunh, "It's like trying to steer a pregnant bantha! Better strap in Zte'sa, this is going to be a hell of a ride!"

"Head down to the planet, Lei'lei TIEs are less manoeuvrable in atmospheric flight. You might be able to dodge them in the North East mountain range." My uncle said as he punched up Ando Prime's nav charts.

"Hang on!" I pushed the helm down and we began the sharp nosedive towards Ando prime's atmosphere. Another blast hit us aft and warning peeps loud enough to wake the dead screamed from the helm control. "Well, we just lost the hyperdrive, good thing it wasn't working anyway." I said with a grim smile.

"They'll go for the back up next; probably think we're trying to bounce off the atmosphere to get away from the planet's gravity well." Uncle Vahlek explained.

I kept swinging the ship in a side to side motion, making it almost seem to scoop the stars. The inertial dampers were not the best and the motion was making me queasy. I felt the shudder as Jyrki fired back at the TIEs following us and hoped that maybe he could convince them we were unimportant but that was not the case and just as we were about to head

into the upper atmosphere of Ando prime they shot out the back up hyperdrive leaving me with sublight engines only and shields that were beginning to fail.

I switched extra power to the rear shields and got the ship ready for a hard entry into the planet's atmosphere, hoping what was left in the forward shields was enough to take the re-entry heat. This was not a good way to land anything, especially not a ship that was half shot to pieces and already wobbly on power. We hit the atmosphere with a bang. The ship bucked, shuddered and fought the sudden resistance of gasses as it plunged inward on an angle of approach most pilots would never have dreamed of using.

"Pull up Lei'lei!" Uncle Vahlek yelled through gritted teeth. The gravitational forces of the planet were now in effect and I felt as though my teeth were going to fly through the back of my head. "Pull up now!"

"I'm trying!"

"Try harder!"

"Damn it, if you think you can fly better you're welcome to take the helm!" I throttled back and slower than I would have liked the ship began to respond to me yanking on the yoke as hard as I could. All I could see was white from the clouds and they never seemed to end. "What's on the radar? Anything in our way? I can't see a thing!" I yelled, "I'm flying blind here!"

"Pull up more or we'll smack straight into one of the mountains!"

I screamed at the ship as it sluggishly began to curve upwards instead of downwards. She moved like an over weight Hutt. "This ship is a piece of ...!"

"Those TIEs are still on our tail!" My uncle interrupted and suddenly we broke through the thick cloud to stare into the ugliest, sharpest mountain range I had ever seen.

Another round of blaster bolts hit the shields making us buck and rock. I heard Jyrki return fire but there were still four blips of light on the radar. The shields dropped to seventy percent.

"Try to shake them in the mountains!" Uncle Vahlek suggested.

I glanced at him. "Are you nuts?" I asked. "What do you think I am, a bloody pod racer?"

"No but you can tap into the Force and use that. Anakin Skywalker used to do that and it enhanced his skills greatly. You have the same abilities, use them."

“Don’t remind me!” I hissed through gritted teeth. I barrel rolled the ship and headed towards the closest and largest of the mountain ranges Ando Prime had to offer. The steep and jagged peaks looked ferocious and cold. Wind picked up the powdered snow from the tops of the mountains and swept it high into the air. Plumes of white, wispy snow danced around the mountain peaks like lace wedding veils flying in a breeze. It would have been a beautiful sight had it not been so deadly. As we swept downwards I could feel the strength of the howling winds that were sweeping around us, working against us. The only consolation I had was that it would make it tough for the TIEs following us as well. The ship wallowed and rolled as winds caught her under the belly and I struggled with the helm to keep us both straight and up right.

“Head through that passage!” Uncle Vahlek pointed to where he thought I should go. “North East from here there is a storm brewing, might give us some cover!”

I glanced at the radar and saw what he was talking about. “That’s not a storm that’s a bloody full out blizzard!” I said. I’d seen enough on Hjal to know the difference.

“Great cover.” He said, raising both eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes and headed in the direction he had suggested, sweeping lower towards the mountains until we had to negotiate between the peaks, looking for the valley channels to swing through that would be large enough for me to still out manoeuvre the TIEs. The winds picked up and every now and then a large gust would catch the ship from underneath, pushing her sideways hard. I wrestled with the controls to get her back on course but it was the hardest thing I had ever done. I was fighting gravity, wind and trying not to smash into the side of the mountains we were flying past at break neck speeds. I swept through a smaller pass and flipped the ship sideways to fit through the narrow opening. One of the TIEs wasn’t fast enough and suddenly there were only three blips on the radar.

I felt Jyrki fire from the starboard turret and watched with sadness as he hit the TIE closest to us. The ship exploded in an impressive ball of fire but I didn’t rejoice in seeing it.

“Lei’lei!” My uncle yelled, “For Sarlacc’s sake watch what you are doing!”

I hauled on the yoke and managed to miss the sharp outcrop of rock by centimetres, rolling the ship sharply to starboard. Adrenaline coursed through my body and my heart hammered so hard in my chest that I

thought it would explode. I took the ship upwards again and headed into the dirty looking weather front my uncle had pointed out. The ship bucked hard as she hit the front face on. Wind and snow came at us from all sides and suddenly I could see nothing but white. Now I had to fly by radar and I hated it. Another blast hit us and alarms started to scream on the comm.

“We’re going to lose the shields.” I said. “I can’t see a thing in this crap!”

My uncle didn’t comment and for the first time since this whole chase began I saw a glimmer of fear in his features. He glanced at me hiding away all traces of his worry and looked me straight in the eyes. “Use the force, child, it’s a gift not a curse and it might just save your life and mine.”

I looked at him and nodded. I took a deep breath and tried to get past the screaming comm alarms, the bucking ship, the terrible sense of doom and my own fear to tap into that one part of me that knew peace, to become the stillness. It was like being bathed in sunlight and for a second I let it engulf me. My Uncle’s voice, the alarms and even the presence of the remaining two TIE fighters rolled away leaving me calm, leaving me serene. I breathed it in and let it flow through me and suddenly I could see the path that the storm had hidden, as though the force was lighting it up like a landing bay.

The ship moved, for me, as though she were in slow motion. I could see what was about to happen before it occurred. I knew the location of the next curve, the next outcrop the next surprise and could dodge the obstacles accordingly but it was tiring to keep the concentration up all the while fighting with the ship for control. I sensed rather than saw the third TIE explode as it smashed at full speed into the out jutting cliff face we had just skimmed by. I knew a sort of sorrow then as I felt the life within the TIE’s cockpit vanish as though it had never existed. The momentary sadness was a distraction and my concentration slipped. The last TIE took advantage of my mistake and the twin ion blasts caught the sublight engine squarely. There were sparks and explosions and then everything went dead.

I swore and closed my eyes, reaching out for the threat of light that touching the force brought me. It was there but tenuous and I had never been trained for this. “Hold onto something, we’re going in hard!” I said through gritted teeth. If Uncle Vahlek replied I never heard him because I had sunk back into that strange nether world which using the force seemed to bring up. Keeping the ship straight and flat without the use of

any engines was one thing but doing it through a blizzard was quite another.

We skimmed through the long narrow valley and I was greatly relieved to see it open up as the range of mountains we had danced through gave way to barren looking foothills and lower, flatter snow covered ground. The ship rocked and bounced like a badly behaving ronto but I kept her as straight as I could. If we flipped or landed in any position other than on her belly we were all dead.

We bounced as we hit the ground, like a flat stone on still water. The movement made me think of Thrawn skipping stones on the lake by the Imperial Retreat on Naboo and for a second I giggled. It wasn't a good sort of sound and my uncle looked at me sharply while he gritted his teeth against the terrible forces and motion of the ship. I could hear the screaming of metal as it ripped apart and hoped that at least most of the ship would hold together. Crash webbing bit into my body as it held me tightly against my seat. Without it I would have been sent flying, without it death would be painful and probably messy.

Gravity was not being friendly and the ground was hard as well as unforgiving. We bounced again making snow spray in a wide wave as the bow of the space ship tore up the ice field we were crashing onto. Bits of the ship came apart and sparks showered us as more of then remaining electronics fried. It never seemed to end and all through it I never let go of the helm, in spite of the fact that now it no longer mattered what I did, the ship was dead and the only way we were going to stop was when gravity, snow and what ever else we hit prevented the ship from moving.

The end, when it came was hard and sudden as we smashed into the edge of a rocky outcropping. A piece of rock chipped off and flew at the cockpit screen smashing through it, flying between my seat and my Uncle's to thud loudly against the cockpit door. Tempered transparasteel shards showered through the cockpit, stinging as they cut into skin. I flung my arms up to protect my face and my uncle did the same thing. The only thought that went through my head was *'Blast, how the hell are we going to get off this damned rock now?'* because a smashed view-port meant the ship was completely wrecked. We sat for a few seconds in shock before realising we had stopped and had lived to tell the tale. I undid my crash webbing and struggled to get up, brushing shards of transparasteel off me as I did so. I had superficial cuts on my hands and my face which bled a little. The wounds stung as icy air blasted at them through the open cockpit.

"Are you alright?" I asked my uncle who was trying to do the same thing but the fastener of his crash webbing was jammed so he was stuck in the co-pilot's chair. My breath laced the air in small white puffs. It was freezing outside and it would not be long before the ship inside was unbearably cold.

He nodded, watching with a frown as I drew the vibro blade from its hiding place in my belt and unsheathed it. "What are you doing Lei'lei?" he asked, struggling with his crash webbing.

I gave him a hard stare. "I'm going to go find that son of a bitch and I am going to finish this dance once and for all." I said through gritted teeth. My uncle reached out to try and grab my arm but I pulled away from him, shaking my head as I did so. I was furious beyond belief and the only thing I could think of was how much I hated Jyrki. I saw worry, then fear flash in my uncle's eyes but I no longer cared. I wasn't scared of Jyrki anymore I wanted him dead, the look on my face told Uncle Vahlek everything he needed to know. For a single moment we stared at each other and then I left the cockpit ignoring my uncle as he shouted for me to wait.

*Enough messing around!* I thought bitterly. *This ends now, one way or the other.*

I made my way slowly through wreckage of what had once been a perfectly serviceable freighter. It was bitterly cold. My breath misted the air in lace fine white which vanished as quickly as it had appeared. I could feel the gusts of icy wind sting my cheeks as it blew snow into what was left of the YU four-ten's hull. My father used to joke that any landing you walked away from was a good landing but in this case I wasn't so sure I'd have agreed with him. As I took stock of the damage done I was astounded that both my uncle and I were still in one piece. The ship's cargo holds, port and Starboard, had been wrenched off leaving gaping holes on either side of the ship's hull. The aft end of the ship, where the engines had been, was also a mass of torn and twisted durasteel. Only the midsection and the cockpit of the ship had actually survived more or less intact. What hadn't been welded to the deck or attached firmly to the bulkheads had gone flying and lay smashed beyond recognition.

The air was rank with the cold, peppery smell of snow and the greasy, sweet stench of hyperdrive fuel, burnt durasteel and electronics. It made my eyes sting and my throat burn. I did my coat up and was careful not to touch the freezing metal with my bare hands. The temperature had dropped so rapidly that a white frost had settled on the parts of the ship which had been warm prior to the landing; the condensation had frozen in

an instant. During my time on Hjal Navaari had taught me everything he knew about cold weather survival and as I looked around at what we had landed in I understood that unless help came, sooner rather than later, our chances of survival were slender.

I picked my way gingerly through the mess towards the aft section of the ship. If Jyrki had been in one of the lower gun stations he would be dead but I was certain he had chosen the mid section gun turret and chances were good he was still alive because it was still intact, although the ladder leading up to it was a mess. I tapped the rails with the vibro blade listening to the hollow clanking sound I made but there was no answer. I sighed and shivered. There were not that many places left intact for him to hide and if he had gone outside in this weather he would probably be dead inside of an hour. Turning away from the turret hatch I made my way further aft to see just how badly wrecked the ship was and sucked in a breath when I took in the sight. For as far behind us as I could see there was a trail of blackened snow, ship wreckage and fuel. It looked every bit as ugly as it had felt and I silently thanked what ever gods had been watching out for us because we shouldn't really have survived this crash at all. The YU-four-ten were hardy ships used for long heavy cargo hauls but crash landings on a glacial planet during a blizzard after being shot to hell by Imperial TIE fighters was not a part of the specs. This ship had gone above and beyond the call of duty.

A noise from behind me made my heart jump and adrenaline surged through me. I turned around but there was nothing there, just flakes of snow as they swirled in through the various hull breaches. My heart pounded in my ears and in my chest so loudly I was certain it would wake the very dead. *Fear will kill you faster than anything else* Master Kjestyll had once told me and I could feel it work through my guts like maggots through a rotting carcass. I drew the deepest breath I could and the cold air made my lungs ache. I could feel the slow beginning tell tale tingle of ice burn in my fingers and my cheeks and I wasn't sure what scared me more, the prospect of Jyrki killing me or the cold doing the job for him.

*Keep moving, Navaari's voice whispered in my head. The worst thing you can do in the terrible cold is stop moving. Your body starts to protect itself by withdrawing blood circulation from the extremities, your feet, your hands, and your face. These will feel the ice-burn first and if you wait too long you'll lose them all together because without blood circulating through them the flesh dies.*

I whapped my arms around my body and jumped up and down to get blood moving through my extremities. Women, by nature, tended to have poorer circulation in their hands and feet because the body wanted to keep the reproductive organs warm. In extreme cold this became even worse as the body tried to protect all the vital organs from freezing. Sometimes, I thought crossly, being a girl had its down points.

Again I heard a noise from somewhere behind me. I stopped moving and stood still for a moment trying to sort out the various sounds I was hearing, metal slapping against the hull of the ship and wind moaning through the cracks and breaches. *Use the Force child*, a familiar voice murmured in my ear. I jumped but no one was there. My ghosts, I frowned, they followed me everywhere but I did as the voice had commanded and opened myself up to the living force.

The power of the Force never ceased to astonish me. It filled me up the way water filled a cup to a thirsty man. It tingled as it rippled through and over my body and I felt as though I could almost reach out and touch it even though it wasn't anything tangible. If Jyrki had survived the crash he would feel me now, know where I was and, I hoped, come to me. I was tired of playing Hide and Hunt games with him and the cold was wearing my already raw patience to a razor thin edge. Gripping the vibro blade too tightly in my hand I turned to head back towards the cockpit, back towards my uncle.

When it happened it happened too fast for me to realise what was going on. He moved into my view, ghost like and pale. His black hair was flecked with flakes of snow and his blue eyes blazing with a fire that could outshine Tatooine's twin suns. In his madness he was glorious, even beautiful but also terrifying. For a moment I forgot he was just a man, a man whom I had once loved and adored, who had taught me how to fix engines and believed in me, a man who had once saved me from being raped and shown me how to defend myself. He had been my whole world and I could not have imagined being without him. Now I could no longer imagine him being in my world at all, in fact I had set out with the notion of removing him from my world all together.

"Hullo Mouse," Jyrki said softly, "Nice landing." The blaster in his hand was pointed at the floor.

I stared at him unblinking. Flakes of snow fell on my eyelashes, obscuring my view of him. I looked at the knife in my hand and almost laughed. It seemed so pointless against the weapon he held, white

knuckled, in his hand. He advanced towards me, his limp prominent, and I took a step back.

“Did yer call the TIEs down on us?” He asked

I shook my head. “If I had, do you think they would have been firing on us?”

His smile was cold. “Imperials have no loyalty. Not even to their own. Yer not that important no matter what yer think.”

There was another long silence which I broke. “So what happens now?” I asked keeping eye contact with him.

He shrugged slightly with one shoulder. “Now we dance, Mouse.” He said, “Yer always did like to dance so let’s see how good yer’ve become.” and he drew the blaster up to point at my heart but before he could shoot a blur from my right caught my eye and just as Jyrki fired the gun my uncle shoved himself against me violently. I fell, crashing against the bulkhead near a gaping hole, twisting my head in time to see the blast, which had been meant for me, hit my uncle on his right side. His body arced backwards gracefully, slowly. Pain contorted his features.

I ducked before Jyrki could fire at me again and swept my leg around in a move that Master Kjestyll had taught me, catching Jyrki at his bad knee. His second shot went high as he fell, the bolt bouncing off the bulkhead and ricocheting past his own head.

“Lei’lei!” I heard Uncle Vahlek cry and I turned to see him pull something out of his coat pocket. The movement was painful and he was as pallid as the snow around us. He tossed the thing he had kept in his pocket to me before passing out. I caught it in my hands without thinking wincing as a myriad of images burst through my brain. My birth mother’s lightsaber gave its knowledge violently. I had a moment’s grace to let the barrage of memories wash through me while Jyrki regained his balance and, momentarily distracted by my uncle’s voice, halted for a second before realising what I held in my hands. There was utter hatred in his eyes as he brought the blaster up to shoot at me. The lightsaber ignited with a dull pop and a deep throbbing hum filled the silence. Snow hissed against the brilliant green blade and as Jyrki fired his blaster I deflected the bolt back to him without thinking about it. The bolt caught the gun squarely, destroying it completely.

For a moment Jyrki held the dead blaster in his hands and stared at it then at me in disbelief. “Yer have no rights to wield that weapon.” He hissed, reaching at his belt to unclasp the one he had taken from my satchel.

“I have as much right as you do.” I told him sharply. “At least my mother made this one with her own hands; the one in your hands was just a training weapon, your training weapon. Master Yoda himself handed it to you.”

For a moment the madness that had swept him away seemed to leave and I saw the little boy he had once been, the man I had known and loved but the moment passed and whatever had been left of his soul was swept back up inside the terrible rage that was eating him alive.

He swung high as he ignited the weapon and it hissed through the air like an angry hornet. Snow sizzled in the wake of the blade’s passing but he missed his target because I had already moved away. Backing towards the gaping maw in the side of the ship I wanted to take this fight outside, away from my wounded uncle, away from the deadly durasteel debris and out into an environment I knew and understood far better than Jyrki realised.

The wind was savage. Snow blasted like needles at us both, so cold it felt like fire upon my skin. I was grateful to feel solid ice beneath my feet, here the wind had blown most of the new snow away and what we stood on was hard packed and firm on an ancient glacier. I could see him fight with the cold on his hands and face. His hair, like mine, was being whipped about, the ends stinging the skin they struck. For a moment we stood like two statues to a timeless, never ending theme, good against evil, black against white, our arms and weapons raised just like the heroes and villains of stories old and past except once upon a time we had been on the same side. It broke my heart but I pushed my sorrow aside. The storm howled about us as if to urge us on, covertly trying to bring us into its own form of madness, to drown in the swirling snow and seductive cold.

It was Jyrki who moved first, swinging his lightsaber in a single sweeping arc leaping towards me so fast that I almost didn’t block it in time. The gritty sound of blade upon blade set my teeth on edge as it had so many times before but I was used to seeing red on blue not blue on green and for reasons I could not identify this made me sad.

*Use the force girl!* This time the command was stern and familiar. “*I taught you better than this!*”

This voice, his voice, stirred up too many emotions but I did as he told me and opened up to the powers that surrounded everything and found a little warmth in its strange guidance. Memories that were not mine seeped into my brain, into my body. My birth mother’s embrace through a weapon she had not touched in over twenty years. This was her

legacy to me, her gift, knowledge of fighting in way I had only ever seen one other person do and he, too, was dead. I twisted the blade with my wrist so that Jyrki's slid away and move around him, a pirouette on one foot to sweep my blade in a deep semi circle that, had he not blocked, would have cut him in two.

Surprise flickered through his features. "How did yer learn to fight in this manner?" he whispered.

"You would never believe me if I told you." I said, gritting my teeth against the unrelenting cold. I could feel the death kiss of ice burn and knew that we were not only fighting each other but time and the environment as well.

He swung his blade in circles with one hand, warming his hands, fighting the chill. He wasn't used to this sort of weather and I could see the tell tale signs of cold fatigue in his movements. It was his anger, our anger which was keeping us going. I drew a deep steadying breath, allowing the force to flow through me, and giving up the rigid fire of hatred that was burning in my gut. There wasn't enough room for both.

Jyrki stepped forward and pushed his lightsaber towards my face, I blocked and parried but he never stopped moving, swinging at me again and again. Now the fire which burned in his soul burned through his eyes as well and I could feel the force ripple through him as it did me. He wasn't using his anger to give him more power in the force but it was there, just as mine was, waiting like an alluring mistress in the wings.

I blocked and swung. The lightsabers crashed together, their grating sound adding to the cacophony of the storm. The glow from the blades lit up the area around us in an eerie blend of blue and green which made the scene surreal. It never seemed to end, the back and forth of offence and defence. I could feel my limbs tire from working against Jyrki's strength as well as the cold but I could see he, too, was tiring. We struggled in the drifting snow; some places on the glacier were clear others were not. It hampered our movement and changed the dynamics of the fight. I could tell that the cold made his knee ache just as my shoulder felt as though it were on fire. Old wounds which we had given each other or helped to worsen, the legacy of two lives entangled forever.

"Why won't yer stop, Mouse?" He yelled above the howling winds.

"You stop! You were the one who couldn't leave things alone, couldn't leave me alone!" I answered smashing my blade towards him, sweeping low to try and cut his legs out from beneath him. He saw the move and countered it so quickly I barely had time to react to him,

swinging my saber up just in time to prevent my own head from being sliced in two. We stood there for a moment his blade perpendicular upon mine which I held parallel above my head. "I loved you!" I yelled at him feeling my strength wane.

"Then yer only have yerself to blame!" he hissed. "I never asked for yer love."

His words made me suddenly angry. It gave me a burst of strength and warmth allowing me to flip his blade with mine, to dance out of his range and gather my energy for the next blow.

"You're a bloody idiot!" I told him. "You've spent your whole life running away from a ghost." I swung at him, the hiss of the blade through the blowing snow sounding like sand across the desert of the Dune Sea.

Hatred crossed his face as he caught the edge of my move and countered it with his own. "And yer served my ghost as handmaid!" He screamed. "Why, Mouse, why?" he asked, pleading, "Why did yer never leave him?"

I understood then, his fears, his deepest darkest secret. It wasn't Lord Vader or even Palpatine he had spent his entire life running away from it was himself. It was his terror of turning to the Dark Side of the force and becoming like Anakin, so consumed by his lust, his greed and his fear that he would eventually become the monster he had had nightmares every night about.

Oh Jyrki had kissed this dark side of the force, even danced with it a few times but unlike Anakin, he had never truly coupled with it, never lain in bed and thrust himself whole and forever into the sweetness of its seduction. Even now, even in his madness, he understood that this was a line he could never, ever cross because if he did he would be truly lost. I watched his ice blue eyes stare at me, demanding an answer, demanding a counter attack but when it came it was not what he expected, it wasn't what I had expected to say either but it was the truth.

"Because I loved him too." I said softly, so softly that I wasn't sure he had heard above the winds until I saw it in his eyes. His sudden disbelief and utter repulsion physically hurt to watch.

"No, Mouse." He whispered. "That's not possible, he was a monster..." I did not hear the words only saw them form on his lips, lips that had gone blue with the cold, lips I that had ached to kiss with mine once upon a time.

"Yes he was," I agreed quietly, "But I loved him anyway."

His hatred was fanned by my words from a spark to a flame, contorting his once handsome face into something ugly and twisted. I watched in silent horror as finally he stepped over that line which he had drawn and plunged headlong into the darkness he had feared for so long. I knew this dark lover's touch. I had felt its caress when I had fought in the Rite of Tet' against the Griff boy. I knew the sweetness of its voice, the power its embrace gave because Lord Vader had encouraged me to do so but I also understood it was a choice one made and I had stepped away from it, choosing consciously not to feed its never ending hunger. Jyrki did not see it this way, he had been taught it was absolute with no way back. When he fell into the dark side's open, waiting arms I watched helpless and in awe.

He blazed.

The fight blossomed then. He used his anger well and was ferocious. I drew upon the living force, as well as my birth mother's gift of memories, to stave off the terrifying flurry of attacks. He was relentless and fighting him took all my strength. It didn't matter that I had been well trained and become proficient in various combat styles, he had been my first teacher and he knew me too well. I was cold as well as beyond tired, these two things working against me. Where his anger warmed him, I felt only icy fear.

Our lightsaber blades crashed together again and again, sending the stench of ozone and steam into the ferocious air around us. The light from our weapons caught the snow as it whirled about, making it twinkle in greens and blues, tiny stars swirling around us, beauty in darkness. Ghosts whispered in my ear so that I found a measure of strength in the memories passed on to me from my birth mother through her lightsaber's touch, showing me how to fight, each step and counter step, each thrust and counter thrust. She had been very good at her craft and had I followed in her footsteps so too would I have been.

We waltzed in the terrible cold, fighting as only embittered lovers could. Our emotions flaring about us like the corona of a sun. I no longer felt the sub zero temperatures or heard the winds. I no longer cared that I could not feel my fingers any more or that my feet had gone numb in my boots. All I knew was the sweetness of perfect movement and counter attack as Jyrki and I danced through the snow in a duet only one of us would walk away from. When I faltered, stumbling backwards, betrayed by snow which had drifted, I thought it was I who was lost.

Jyrki raised his blade high, the gleam of victory in his eyes, and swung it with all his might downward to cut me in two but instead he met only snow and it hissed as the blade sliced through the place I had managed to roll away from. Coming to my knees I knelt there, my birth mother's lightsaber in my hands between my legs, its blade barely above the ground. I understood what true weariness was. Cold beyond belief I watched as Jyrki staggered, trying to recover from the momentum of his previous move, trying to catch his breath. He saw me on my knees and without a pause he lunged towards me. I looked up at him, staring directly into his face. Our eyes met and for one single, perfect moment we shared everything, a second of clarity in the midst of the tempest, like the stillness in the eye in the storm and then he raised his arms. He began to arc his blade downwards in a movement that was almost perfect but before he could complete the motion and slice me in two I rose up on my knees and thrust my own blade deep into the heart of his chest. His back arched involuntarily and his arms reversed the movement he had started. His fingers splaying in unexpected pain, allowing the lightsaber he held to drop behind his back, its blade vanishing with the automatic switch off before it hit the ground.

In slow motion I watched as he sank to his knees never taking his eyes away from mine. I mirrored his movements because my blade, which had pierced straight through his body at his solar plexus, was still ablaze. *This was how Qui-Gon Jinn had been killed*, I thought absently. For a moment I thought I saw Qui-Gon's body superimposed over Jyrki's but shook the hallucination away. As though seeing it for the first time I yanked the lightsaber backwards out of his flesh and sat back on my knees, his mirror image before him. The fierce green light from my birth mother's weapon illuminated Jyrki's ashen face and he stared at me in disbelief.

"Mouse...it hurts..." He whispered, his hand reaching out but never managing to touch me.

I shook my head. "Why?" I asked, "Why did you do all of this? Why?"

But he opened his mouth but no words came out, puzzlement crossed his features as if he had suddenly woken up from a terrible dream only to discover it was not a dream at all. The madness in his eyes receded and I saw only the man I had adored once upon a time.

"I loved you so much, Jyrki, more than you will even know, more than I will ever understand in spite of everything." I gulped a deep breath, the cold hurt my lungs. My voice trembled as I told him these things but

they seemed hollow because there were no words to describe what I felt. I wasn't sure if I actually felt anything at all. Tears formed in my eyes now and I wished that this was one of my terrible nightmares and I would wake up to find that none of the events had taken place. "I forgive you for what you did to me." I whispered but I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to forgive myself.

His face was whiter than the snow, making his pale blue eyes seem more brittle, more fragile than ever before. He didn't speak but a strange serene expression passed across his features. His hands clasped over the wound and he gasped in pain, exhaling his last breath slowly, the white of it misting the air and fading as though it had never truly existed. I watched silently as he died. It was mercifully fast. He didn't fall but stayed on his knees, slumped over like a Bunduki Master in deep meditation. Blowing snow landed upon his head and stopped melting, turning his black hair white. I switched off the lightsaber I held in my hands and realised that the day was waning.

The storm which had raged around us was slowly dying off and it had stopped actually snowing. I looked up and saw the mountains behind us back lit by the edge of the storm clouds as they gave way to the light from the setting sun. The jagged mountains seemed to me to be on fire. The fine, powder snow being swept of the peaks looked like macabre wedding veils flapping in the wind. I drew a slow, deep breath and the tears that had welled up in my eyes now ran down my cheeks freezing to the skin before I could wipe them away.

*Get up child, before you freeze to death!*

I felt the subtle brush of a ghostly hand across the back of my neck. The touch was warm. I struggled to get to my feet realising now how cold I truly was. I staggered back towards the wreck of the ship to find my uncle. He was unconscious and nothing I did could wake him. He was cold to the touch and I could not feel a pulse. Suddenly it was all too much and I had no strength any more. I curled up beside his body, trying to share what little body heat I had left with him.

"I'm so sorry." I whispered over and over again as I wept into his coat. When the false warmth came, bringing its seductive drowsiness with it, I didn't fight against it. As I drifted into the no man's land Navaari had called the snow siren's kiss I could have sworn I heard voices, shadowy figures moving around us but I was too tired to fully open my eyes, instead I surrendered to the cold and was grateful that its embrace was painless.

I sat on the floor of the medlab with my back against the bacta tank in which my uncle was suspended. I could feel both the steady throb of the ISD *Judicator's* hyperdrive engines and the soft rumble of the machinery which kept the bacta circulating and the oxygen pumping through the breathing mask on his face. *Touch and go*, I heard the whispered prognosis for my uncle's recovery. The blaster wound from Jyrki had done a lot of damage and the cold hadn't helped either. He had suffered severe iceburn to his hands and no one seemed sure if the bacta would save them or not. I could not bear to look at the thickly swollen and oddly coloured fingers but I wouldn't leave his side either. He was hovering between life and death because he had taken that blaster shot and saved me. *'I am sworn to protect you Lei'lei,'* he had once said, *'no matter what the cost.'* Now his words haunted me.

*'Well, this cost was too high,'* I thought bitterly.

I wasn't sure how the landing party that came in search of us had found us and since no one would answer my questions about it I gave up asking. In the end I didn't care. All that mattered was someone had come in time to rescue Uncle Vahlek and me from freezing to death on Ando Prime. I had guessed that the last TIE that had not been destroyed in the chase which had brought the YU-four-ten down had returned to the ISD and reported our location but why a rescue party had been sent out for a downed rebel freighter was another mystery altogether.

I had been in a barely conscious state of shock when they had brought us onboard and taken us to the medlab where a med droid had treated my own iceburn injuries which were painful but not nearly as severe as my Uncle's. After being given a clean bill of health I had changed into warm, dry clothes that did not stink of death and wreckage. I had refused the bed they had offered and had taken up vigil at the base of the bacta tank they were sliding my uncle into. No amount of cajoling or stern lectures could make me move and eventually the med-techs had given up. It was too much work or effort to argue with me and they had other things to do.

I couldn't face the food they brought, the thought of eating made me ill. It was an effort to drink the water that was pushed into my hands but the threat of an IV line for fluids made me compliant. Someone had placed a blanket over my shoulders but I wasn't sure who because at some point I had drifted into that half awake - half aware state where everything seemed very surreal. Time expanded around me like hyperspace until I no

longer knew when or where we were, nor did I much care. For the second time in my life I had killed another human being only this time it had been someone I knew, someone I had cared about. The consequences of my actions left me hollow.

I became aware that we had reached whatever our destination was because the sound of the hyperdrive engines changed and eventually shut down to give way to the sublight engines instead. I leaned back against the bacta tank and closed my eyes. Through the Force I could sense my uncle's wavering thread of life and I whispered silently for him to hold on. If he heard me or if it helped I never knew but it was the only thing I had left. I heard the murmur of voices talking around me but this was nothing new. I had become invisible to the med-techs who had decided that it was best to just leave me alone in what ever miserable hell I had wrapped myself in. *Catatonic* was one of the words they used a lot but they were wrong I wasn't catatonic at all I was just empty. It wasn't until I realised that amongst the unfamiliar voices there was one I knew intimately did I look up to see who it was.

Thrawn's features were a mask set in stone and I couldn't read him. He glanced at me for a moment, our eyes meeting briefly before I looked away and he turned his attention back to the doctor who was speaking to him in hushed tones.

"She hasn't left that spot in seventy-six hours except to use the fresher, we've tried to get her to lie down but she refuses to listen, when we tried to sedate her she became... violent." He sighed, "It was easier to let her be where she seemed the calmest." The doctor said, his voice was a mixture of frustration and worry, "She won't eat and barely drinks anything we give her. She won't speak to us, she hasn't said a single word since coming on board so we have no idea what happened to her. We think she is in shock but aside from treating the ice burn there isn't much else we can do for her, there were no serious external injuries. We thought it best to leave her be until we got word from you."

Thrawn nodded and glanced at me again before turning his gaze to the man floating in the bacta tank that I was leaning against. "What of the Tze'yusha'Jin? Can he be moved yet?"

Shaking his head the doctor said, "I would not advise it. His condition is stable but critical. He was brought onboard with hypothermia and severe ice burn. He was shot and the blaster bolt did a lot of internal damage. To be quite frank, I don't know how he survived it. His will to live is very strong but moving him right now could kill him."

Thrawn nodded then turned to look at me again. His red eyes pierced through the haze in my brain but I said nothing. There was nothing to say. He sighed slightly as if deciding something difficult and then turned back to the doctor. "Sedate her and get her ready to be transferred. Doctor Thracer is familiar with her medical history perhaps he will be able to do more."

"Yes Admiral" The doctor said. He gave the med-tech who had been quietly standing by me a curt nod and before I understood what they were doing I felt the pressure and slight sting of the hypospray at my neck. A tingling warmth spread underneath the skin and I realised what had been done.

"No!" I protested wanting to stay by Uncle Vahlek but there was no strength left in my body, no real fight left in me and the last thing I remembered before the medlab tilted backwards into oblivion was Thrawn's steady, unreadable gaze.

I

woke up in a bed but it wasn't in the med lab and it wasn't the one I shared with Thrawn either. Guest quarters on Nirauan near the main medlab, I realised. The world entered back into my brain slowly, bit by bit and each single step was painful as the memories of what had happened flooded through my mind, drowning out everything else. I didn't want to be awake. I didn't want to be alive but in spite of my own wants the universe had other plans. I lay staring at the ceiling of the small, unfamiliar quarters I was in wondering if it was possible for a human being to feel so devoid of any sensation what so ever and still be alive. I decided that it was because I seemed to be living but I could feel nothing. I got up for lack of anything better to do and went to the fresher because despite everything I had been through my body still worked as usual and I had to relieve my bladder.

For a long time I stared at the face reflected back to me from the mirror over the wash basin. I didn't know this girl who had deep dark hollows under her eyes and cheeks, whose hair looked like wamprats had nested in it, whose eyes looked as though they had been stolen from the dead. Every time I closed those eyes I saw Jyrki's face as he had died. I couldn't shut it out, nor could I forget the terrible anguish in his voice as he had whispered his last words. "*Mouse...it hurts....*" He had said but I was never sure what it was he was describing. Was it the pain of being speared to death by a lightsaber blade? Being betrayed by everyone he loved, turning to the dark side which had been my doing, my fault or

something else. A myriad of emotions had flashed through his eyes as his life had ebbed away and I had not been able to read any of them. His death had given me no answers only more questions and the guilt which rested on my shoulders was so heavy I thought I would break from the weight of it but I didn't.

I shuffled back into the bedroom and dressed mechanically then I left to see if I could find out how my uncle was doing but instead I found myself face to face with Thrawn who had just been about to come in through the door. I backed up letting him enter and pass me but I didn't know what to say. What was there to say? Because of me Navaari and Jyrki were dead, my father terribly injured and my uncle was hovering in the in-between. I didn't know how to cope with what I felt and nothing had done in my life had wholly prepared me for this, even though I thought it should have.

Thrawn stared at me with an expression that wavered somewhere between sorrow and pity and I wasn't certain which I hated more. The emptiness I had been feeling was inexplicably replaced by anger. "What?" I finally asked sullenly, breaking the awful silence, hoping he would lose some of his impeccable Chiss cool and rail against what I had done.

"A'myshk'a," he began, "I have some terrible news...."

I waved my hand at him to stop. He wanted to tell me about Navaari but I already knew what he was going to say and I didn't want to hear it. I felt guilty enough as it was. "I know he's dead, Za'ar. I saw him being shot!"

Thrawn frowned. "Shot?"

"Navaari. I saw ...." I started the sentence but let the words trail off because Thrawn was looking at me in a way which suggested that we weren't talking about the same thing.

"Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is alive, tekari." He said carefully.

My eyebrows bunched together. "Alive?"

Thrawn nodded. "He is the reason the *Judicator* was able to find you. That bone necklace he gave you had a tracking device implanted it. Kirja'navaar'inkjerii was able to transmit the code and the frequency to the ship so they could come after you. The TIE squad only had orders to disable the ship, no one expected things to get so out of hand." There was anger in his last sentence.

My hand went to the small pendant which still hung around my neck. I hesitated for second not able to take in this new information. "Navaari is alive? How? I saw him get shot."

"Armourweave," Thrawn explained. "He wore a form of Chiss armourweave under his clothes. It's very effective. The blast only stunned him but it didn't kill him.

My brain raced through the possibilities then and came to a single, terrible conclusion. "Then...then who...my uncle...?"

"The Tze'yusha'Jin is in stable condition. His recovery will be slow but he will live." Thrawn said interrupting me. I could see he was still trying to find the words for what he needed to tell me.

"So what is the bad news?" I asked. "Am I going to be charged for murdering Jyrki or something?" The anger in my voice surprised me but he understood it was covering up my sudden fear.

Thrawn drew a very deep breath. "Perhaps you'd better sit down."

"Just tell me!" I told him crossly so he did as plainly and as quickly as he could.

"Your father is dead."

It was like being slapped hard across the face. For a second I forgot how to breathe and the world swam about me. Thrawn moved, catching me by the arm and gently pulling me to sit down on the side of the bed.

I looked up at him but I wasn't sure I had heard him right. "That's not possible. He was alive when I was there...when Jyrki knocked me out, papa was still alive."

Thrawn nodded. "Yes he was but his condition was grave. By the time Kirja'navaar'inkjerii was able to get him to a medical facility it was too late."

"No." I shook my head slowly. "No."

Thrawn's shoulders heaved as though the weight of his own words pushed down upon him so much he was almost unable to bear it. "His heart gave out. He was too long without food or water and the torture he endured under Jyrki's hand as well as the cocktail of drugs pushed into his system were all too much. He died in the medical facility."

"He was alive!" I yelled at him, my body trembling with anger and fear.

"Tekari, please...." Thrawn started but I shook my head.

"No. I don't believe you, no!" I was shouting even though I knew that he was not lying to me but, irrationally, I couldn't seem to accept the truth because accepting this truth meant I had failed my father in every way possible.

Thrawn stayed silent as he reached out to comfort me but I pulled away, springing up from the bed and backing out of his reach. “Don’t touch me.” I couldn’t look at him, “Please....”

He withdrew his hand. “I am so sorry.” He said. The expression on his face was heart breaking but all it did was make me angry although I didn’t know why. He was not the one responsible for any of this, I was.

“Go away.” I said softly, so softly that when he didn’t move I thought he hadn’t heard me.

“Merlyn, I don’t think you should be alone....” He started but the look in my eyes, when I met his gaze, stopped him cold.

“Get. Out. Now.” I hissed between clenched teeth. The rising fury that was beginning its journey from the depths of my gut blazed in my eyes and for a split second I thought I saw fear in his but maybe I was mistaken, maybe it was worry. He gave me a small nod and then, without another word, he left.

I stood in the middle of the silent room feeling like the center of a terrible storm. Anger boiled over and I could feel it flood my veins with fire that burned like the gut rot my father had loved to brew. It spilled out becoming something that I couldn’t control. I had never truly understood how Anakin could have succumbed to the Dark Side of the force until this moment but now I knew it was easy. I laughed as I felt the tidal wave come, welcoming its touch and gave in to its own brand of insanity.

It was like watching a HoloDrama from the inside out. I didn’t think I just moved, grabbing a hold of the nearest piece of furniture, a chair I think, which I hurled with all my strength against the wall. For a second I watched as it flew, almost in slow motion, to smash against the duracrete. It felt good to hurt something, anything. Time wavered and paused as if it could still be turned back, as if the onslaught of what would happen next could somehow be prevented but then, like a mass of water too long held back by a damn that can no longer keep it at bay, the rest of my anger roared through me.

I stopped thinking.

Whatever I could lay my hands on I destroyed, venting the terrible anguish within, only made worse because I tapped into the force. Unnatural strength flowed through me and it was intoxicating but it was also painful. A part of me knew this was wrong and from someplace deep inside my head I heard the whisper of someone begging me to stop but I didn’t. I screamed at the top of my lungs as I tore at the world around me, no longer sure who this creature that I had become was.

I wanted to annihilate everything. If it could break then I broke it, if it could be lifted then it was thrown, if I could rip it apart with my bare hands, I did so until my fingers bled and when there was nothing left to destroy and my fury was completely spent I crumpled to the floor in the middle of the room, like a broken doll, kneeling amidst the wreckage that my divine madness had created.

The blinding white noise in my head receded leaving me alone to wonder in a sort of awed shock at the damage I had done. I wasn’t certain what unnerved me more the fact that I was capable of such terrible dark passion or the fact that I had welcomed it. In the aftermath of the rage I felt only cold and began to shiver uncontrollably. This was how Navaari found me. He didn’t say a word as he entered the room, he didn’t look at the terrible mess my wrath had created he simply looked at me. He was masked and it made him seem fierce.

“Go away.” I whispered, my teeth chattering.

“No.” and he stepped over the carnage of broken furniture to crouch at my side when he reached out to touch me I slapped his hand away.

“Go away.” I said again trying to put some push behind the words but I had nothing left in me to be forceful.

He simply sighed and shook his head. “No.” he repeated and that was when I looked up into his eyes. I had expected to see anger, contempt even hatred for what I had done, for what I felt I had become but instead all I saw was love and compassion.

“Go away Navaari, please.” I whispered, pleading. My body was trembling, shock replacing the anger. I couldn’t fathom the terrible emptiness I felt as I spoke and my voice sounded strange and very far away. “Papa is dead because of me, I thought you were too. Everyone I care about gets hurt so, please, go away.”

Surprise flickered across his features. “This was not your doing. You did not kill Kit Gabriel. Jyrki Andando did that. None of what happened was your fault and you cannot take that burden on your shoulders.” He said gently.

Bringing up Jyrki’s name was a raw wound reopened, his face framed by black hair and snow swam in to my mind. “I killed him Navaari, I killed him in cold blood.” I sat staring at my hands; I didn’t recognise them, scratched and bloody. These hands, my hands had held the lightsaber which had taken Jyrki’s life.

Realising the topic had been switched he frowned at me and shook his head. “That I am not believing, little one, that man pushed you until

you had no place else to go, until there was no other choice but to end it once and for all. You were doing what you were forced to do but it was not in cold blood.”

“I killed him.” I whispered shaking my head. “It doesn’t matter why or how or whose fault it was. In the end I took his life away. I tried to hate him for everything he did, I tried but in the end I failed because I loved him but I killed him anyway. I just wanted to help papa and now they are both dead.” I realised I was rambling and stopped. There didn’t seem to be any logic in what I was saying but somehow Navaari understood.

“The person who was Jyrki Andando died a long time ago he just did not realise it.” He replied. “You gave him something he never expected to find which was love, hopeful, unconditional love. It is not your fault he was not accepting this gift you give away so freely. It was not your fault he was so damaged he could not return it and be happy. Do you know how rare this is? Do you know how precious you are?”

I swallowed down the tears, shaking my head in denial. As I opened my mouth to say something all that came out was an ugly sob. I fought it down, almost choking with the effort. Jyrki was dead because I had killed him. My father was dead because I had not been able to save him, I had not been fast enough or smart enough, even with all the training I had gone through, and now because of this he was dead. I looked around the room and for the first time realised what I had done.

“How can you say these things?” I asked, “Look at what I have become?” I gestured around the room.

He reached out again and stroked the sweat soaked hair from my eyes. “Better to be unleashing your rage on ugly furniture than on a living thing, I am thinking.” He replied. “All that passion and pain, it has to be going somewhere, you cannot be holding it all inside of you even though you try. You are far too small a vessel for so much emotion.”

I turned away from his gaze and looked at the wreckage again. “What if the next time it is someone I love? If I could kill Jyrki I could ....”

He pressed his fingertips to my lips shaking his head. “I am thinking there will not be a next time, pup; you would not let that happen and this has been a very long time coming.” He spoke gently, “And I am thinking that after all that you have been through, you are to be forgiven for redecorating a room in this manner.” He paused and then said, “You control your temper and your strange power, not the other way around. You would not knowingly hurt or harm any living being without just cause.”

“How do you know?” I asked in disbelief.

He smiled. “Because I am knowing you.” And before I could protest or say anything to the contrary, he picked me up from the floor as though I really were still a small child and cradled me close.

I could not stop my whole body from shaking. This cold seemed to come from the inside out and since Ando Prime it was all I had known. I wondered if I would ever feel warm again. I held on to him, my arms around his neck as he carried me out of the wrecked room down the corridor to a small study that Thrawn sometimes used late at night when he couldn’t sleep. He set me down on the small couch and sat beside me, removing his mask as he did so. His words were the absolution I had not understood I had needed to hear and as terrible as my anger had been so my grief and my guilt were even worse. When I buried my face in my hands he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me to him, letting me cry.

I have no idea how long we sat like this, time had become irrelevant but eventually I became aware that I had stopped crying and was just clinging to Navaari as though he were some sort of life raft and perhaps he was. He stroked my hair and hugged me closely as though to let go of me would be to lose me and he wasn’t about to risk that again. Only after there was a very lengthy silence did he speak.

“Your father was a good man, little one. The doctor at the med clinic told me his last words were for you, to tell you he loved you, to tell you he was proud of you. They tried everything but his heart was just too weakened.” Navaari’s voice was full of sorrow, “I was there, pup, I watched them work to save his life but it was not enough, sometimes no matter what we are doing, it is never enough and I am so very sorry that I was not fast enough to help him in time.”

I moved then, lifting my head so I could look at him. “You’re sorry? You didn’t do anything to be sorry for I was the one who rushed in head long and screwed it all up. I was the one who didn’t think or plan. I just dived in and everyone suffered because of it.”

Navaari’s smile was kind. “You were simply being you and I was expecting nothing different which was why I made that pendant for you, easier to find you when you go running off if you can be tracked.” He said. “I should have taken that pash’kja’anta who had been following you out of the hunt as soon as I saw him the very first time but I did not and that was my mistake. Perhaps if I had done so there would have been enough time.” The regret in his voice was painful to hear.

I laid my head back down against his shoulder. I didn't know what words to speak, how ease his own terrible guilt and pain. "It wasn't your fault either." I said at last, "It was Jyrki's. He made a choice and it was a bad choice."

He kissed the top of my head. "Are you calm now?" He asked.

I nodded although I wasn't sure calm was the quite right word, sad, empty, lost, riddled with guilt may have been better ways to put it but Navaari knew me well enough see past my lie.

"Then you should perhaps be finding your Ta'kasta'cariad and letting him know that you are in one piece." He said with a small smile. "He was worried about you."

"Worried?"

Navaari grinned. "You are fierce beyond belief sometimes especially when your emotions are choking you. He was concerned you would hurt yourself out of guilt and anger."

"Why didn't he stay and stop me then?"

"Because he also understands that sometimes storms need to be unleashing their fury before they can find calm again. You, little pup, are being a very, very wild storm when you choose to be."

And for reasons I could not fully comprehend that statement made me smile but my sorrow overrode it. "Where is papa's body, Navaari?" I asked after a small silence.

"His body rests on board of the *Judicator* in cold stasis." Navaari replied. "Nikätza'arth'pavjäska felt it the best course of action. He believes that you would be wishing to return to your home world for the death rites."

I felt tears well up in my eyes again, but there was no anger behind them, only an aching grief. "Has anyone told Bedi yet? She is...was his wife."

"I believe it has been taken care of."

"Za'ar?" I asked.

Navaari nodded. "He was thinking that while this was a job you would feel duty bound to do, it was one you should not have to but he can tell you more when you speak with him, and you need to speak with him. He worries far more than he lets on and you are having a very bad habit of being the cause for great worry, so please go and speak with him. Let him see that it is just bad furniture he must replace and not his bond-mate. He is waiting for you in his private study."

I nodded and got up slowly. I was surprised at how much I ached, how much my physical body hurt. "Thank you." I spoke quietly, almost shyly.

Navaari gave me a look I equated with an oncoming lecture and I wasn't wrong. "You are thinking that you are all alone but you are not. There are so many who love you dearly who are wanting to be there for you when you fall, when you need help. You need to learn this lesson and stop shutting everyone out. That does not protect them nor does it help you. You are not alone Kycsi'i, not now not ever. Remember this."

I bent down and kissed his cheek. "Ariathe'Ia-te'ka Pa'tjad'cu-sjä." I told him. *I have great love for you, honoured grandfather.*

"And I for you, child." Navaari said wearily, slipping on his mask again. "Now, enough sentiment. I have to be eating something and then I must rest; you are quite tiring you know. Go and make peace with your Ta'kasta'cariad."

He watched me leave without following.

Thrawn, just as Navaari had said, was waiting in his private study. I opened the door and slipped into the dimly lit room. He was standing facing the window, he wasn't wearing his uniform and it somehow made him seem less austere more vulnerable. When he stayed where he was, not turning to look at me, I went to him and wrapped my arms around his waist. I laid my cheek against his back, closing my eyes when his hands covered mine, his warmth replacing my cold. After a long moment he turned to face me without breaking the circle my arms had made. He didn't say a word, he didn't have to. He just pulled me to his body, one hand cradling my head against his chest, the other around my waist and holding me tightly as though I were the most valuable thing he had ever held.