

Daughter of the Empire

Book 3

by Fiona Messer

Chapter Eight

Between Sand and Stars

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This story contains spoilers so you have been warned!

The funeral for my father was well attended. It felt as though half the planet had come from as far away as the Core; many people had liked and known Kit'gar Gabriel and he would be sorely missed. That so many pilots, spacers, mechanics and traders had come to pay their last respects was almost overwhelming and my father would have been surprised as well as touched had he known how many beings cared about him.

"He had a good reputation for being fair and honest." One of the older pilots told me. "You always knew that Kit would treat you right when you landed at his dock or needed repairs."

"Your father was a great pilot in his day, Merly. We were all surprised when he suddenly decided to get married and settle down. Never saw him happier then when he was talking about his family." A pilot named Kirtis told me.

I could only nod in reply, too choked up to reply.

People gathered in the morning in Bestine and then, in hired multi carrier speeders, we drove, in single file out to the dunes near the house my mother had loved so much. The black ribbons that had been attached to the speeders fluttered in the created wind as we travelled reminding me of Jyrki's hair being whipped by the storm on Ando Prime. Even here I could not escape the images that had been indelibly carved into my memory. I was grateful when we reached our destination.

My father's body lay wrapped in the traditional black burial cloths and was laid on a repulsor lift which was escorted to the site where he would be buried. At Bedi's instance my father was to be laid to rest next to my mother's grave.

"She was the love of his life." Bedi had told me through her tears as we discussed this surreal subject of where to bury him after I had arrived home. "I knew that, I always knew that. It's why I had to leave when I did."

I had only nodded. I knew a little about unrequited love and the havoc it could wreck. I also knew that my father had loved Bedi as well and I had been glad they had been able to find each other again so many years after my mother had passed away.

The funeral was led by Merl Tosche, who, when he had learned of my father's death, had asked for the honour. He had known my

father a long time and they had been good friends. As neither Bedi nor I felt up to the job and Uncle Vahlek was still too weak, I was grateful he had taken on this task. He was a man of few words and the actual ceremony itself was fairly short and to the point, something my father would have appreciated as he had never been a man for long flowery speeches.

Once the official eulogy was given and the body lowered into its final resting place then covered first by stones so that it could not be dug up by scavenger animals and then with sand, people were given time to bid my father farewell in their own way. As family we had the right to go first but I chose to ignore this in favour of being the last. By the time my turn came a heavy silence had fallen over everyone and everything. I stood for a long time staring at the mound of newly piled sand. I was certain the most people who knew me were expecting a speech of sorts about how much I had loved my father along with a story or two about him but no words that made any sense came to mind. Instead, I simply wept silently, tilting my face forward so that my tears dotted the desiccated sands with their precious moisture. I stayed silent too long and I could feel the tension shift in the air as people behind me began to get uncomfortable. Grief, as ugly as it was, also had its own decorum and I was breaking the rules.

"Merly?" Bedi's hand touched me lightly on the arm, reminding me that I was not alone and people were waiting.

I nodded, feeling my throat close and that terrible ache in my chest threaten to choke me whole. "Good bye daddy." I whispered, "I am so, so sorry." I had to cover my mouth with my hands to stop from saying more, to stop from sounding like a very little girl rather than a grown woman.

It was Bel who brought me back into the world by hugging me tightly. "It wasn't your fault." She whispered in my ear but I knew better.

Once I was finished speaking the last part of the funeral rites could begin, the laying of small tokens at the grave stone. Chulpas, carved from Jappor snippets or small stones, strung on a leather thongs where wrapped about the grave marker.

It was a man named Gaelyn Scharr who had carved the grave marker from a hard stone which could only be found in the strange cliffs that ranged far out beyond the Jundland Wastes. The Sand

People called these strange rocks Heart Stones because they survived centuries of scouring sands and winds. They believed these peculiar stones had once been a part of the very soul of the planet and they considered them sacred, that they were powerful and full of magical properties. Settlers had picked up on this and had long ago begun to use the stones to mark the graves of their dead with them. What the sand people thought of this no one knew but the Tusks never touched or disturbed any grave marked with Heart Stone.

One by one we stepped forward to lay these tokens of love and respect at my father's feet when I set mine down I thought it ironic that the symbol I carved on mine said exactly the same thing as the one that Lord Vader had given me to lay on his wife's grave.

Forgiveness.

I saw people's questioning looks as I set the snippet face up so the symbol could be read but no one dared ask what it meant. I almost lost it then, faltering a little as I went to stand up. Thrawn, hidden behind the clothes and the mask of the Dantassi, laid a hand upon my shoulder giving me a touch of strength and understanding. He knew what I had carved and although he had disagreed with it, he respected my feelings. I had let my father down and he had died because I had not been fast enough or clever enough to see past the trap which Jyrki had set for me. I had told Jyrki that I had forgiven him for what he had done to me but I could not forgive him for my father's death, I couldn't forgive myself either. No matter what anyone said I would always feel responsible for what had happened even though it had been beyond my control. I wept then, tears coursing unabashedly down my face. I had loved my father dearly, despite our sometimes rocky relationship and now he was forever gone leaving a hole in my heart that I wasn't certain would ever completely heal.

When the rites were complete we returned to Mos Eisley for the reception which was held at the docking bay. It seemed appropriate as this was the place my father had seemed the most alive. I wandered amongst the crowded rooms of the house and landing bay half aware that people spoke to me, nodding absently at their sympathetic touches and murmured words of condolence. Bedi had decided to have the affair catered so there was more food and drink than anyone knew what to do with but I couldn't touch anything, I had no appetite and the very thought of eating made me ill.

Because there were so many people, the reception went well on into the evening. As family I was considered a host and required to remain for the duration for the entire event, just as were Bedi and Bel. I was grateful that all of the people who worked at the docking bay had offered to stay and clean up, making the work go faster than expected. When the last mourner left I let out a deep sigh, as though I had been holding my breath since I had first opened my eyes in the morning. It had been an utterly exhausting day and both Bedi and Bel, after much cajoling from me, retired to their respective bedrooms leaving me on my own to contemplate everything that had happened.

It had been, as funerals go, beautiful, at least this was what everyone had told me. I didn't remember much of and had I been pressed for details the only thing that came sharply to mind was the scent of the hot sand and the haunted look in my uncle's eyes.

Uncle Vahlek had been stoic and calm though his sorrow was plain to read on his drawn face. His wound, the one he had received saving my life, pained him greatly and he moved with a stiffness I wasn't sure he would ever lose. The doctors on board the *Judicator* had been loath to let him attend but he had insisted to the point of being obnoxious and Thrawn had told them to let him go, promising that he would be returned promptly after the ceremony.

Navaari and Thrawn, dressed as Za'ar, had stayed near me, silent, imposing figures in full Dantassi clothing, even more impressive given how hot they must have been beneath the layers of clothing and their masks. Thrawn had felt it best to keep his face hidden and I had not disagreed. There were rumours that an up and coming art auction slated to happen in a couple of months might draw in prominent members from the New Republic so for Thrawn, the last Imperial Grand Admiral, staying out of sight seemed like a good idea. The New Republic had spies everywhere and it was no secret that Tatooine was home to their most famous member, Luke Skywalker.

If anyone had thought to question the Bone Traders' presence at my father's funeral they had kept it to themselves, after all my father had known many, many people, but I felt a certain easing of tension from the crown when neither of the Bone Traders had come to the reception. It seemed surreal to me that so many people would fear the Dantassi and I had to keep reminding myself that once upon a time I had been terrified of them as well. Most people had assumed they had

gone off to hunt but I knew that their lack of presence at the reception was because, by then, they were in a shuttle on their way back to the ISD with Uncle Vahlek so that he could continue his healing treatments. I had not seen them leave and I wasn't sure when or if Navaari or Thrawn would return. During the funeral there had not been any time to discuss what I or they would be doing next. I had assumed that Thrawn would get in touch with me when things had settled down. He knew when to give me the space I needed.

With house now oddly silent in the wake of the mass of people who had been there earlier, I stayed awake, sitting in the kitchen staring at the walls cradling a cup of tea in my hands. The tea had gone cold without me even taking a single sip. I was exhausted but I couldn't sleep. This house and the docking bay were too full of memories. Everywhere I looked I saw either my father's ghost or Jyrki's shadow and I wasn't sure which hurt more. It seemed strange to know that everything I was looking at belonged to me now because my father had left all he had owned to me. I had just shaken my head at Bedi's words as she had told me this. I didn't want the docking bay, or the houses that went along with it. I didn't want any of it and I told her that.

"Wait a while before you make these decisions, Merly, you might change your mind." Bedi had said.

But I knew I wouldn't although I hadn't argued with her. "Will you stay and run it?" I had asked instead.

"If you want us to."

"It's Bel's home. It's your home too." I had countered. "I can't live here or work here any more. I have a life away from this place now. I'll have the papers amended to make you both co-owners then there is no more discussion about it." I had spoken in such a way that she knew I was neither joking nor would I take no for an answer. Papa had not updated his will since after my mother's death and I had been certain he would have wanted me to make sure that both Bedi and Bel were taken care of.

She had nodded, her expression a mixture of relief and sorrow. She had thought it was because of my grief for my father's death that I had felt this way but the truth was that Jyrki's ghost haunted me here more so than anywhere else and I couldn't bear to be near any of it.

I had not told her what had happened on Nar Shadda or Ando Prime; all she knew was that papa had sent both her and Bel to Corellia to pick up a shipment while he had stayed at the dock to take care of some business. *Call it a small holiday with some work on the side*, he had told them, *you could both use a little get away*. He was gone by the time they had returned but it wasn't unusual for that to happen so neither of them had thought much about it. He never told them the truth; that Uncle Vahlek had sent a warning that Jyrki had something terrible planned and they should all vanish for a while. I had guessed that my father had decided enough was enough and that if no one else would take of Jyrki, who was hurting his little girl, then he would. He hadn't wanted to worry them but maybe he should have. When Jyrki had come to the docking bay to wreck havoc, he had found only my father and I guessed that papa had gone without much of a fight because the place had been left undisturbed giving no clues as to what had really happened.

I had learned from Navaari that Thrawn had told Bedi that papa had died from a heart attack while on Nar Shadda, brought on by what looked like a mugging and that the med team had not been able to save him. When pressed for details he had said he did not know, which at the time was the truth. Bedi and Bel had both had accepted this because the medical report had backed up the basic information. It hadn't seemed necessary to go into the graphic, terrible details and now that Jyrki was dead, I wouldn't have to worry about him going after the rest of my family. So what had happened on Nar Shadda and Ando Prime would stay a secret only four people would know. I wished it was as easy to forget as it had been to hide the truth.

Every time I closed my eyes to try and sleep I saw Jyrki's face as the lightsaber's blade pierced his body or my father tied to that awful chair in that terrible room. I didn't know how to get past these images or the terrible nightmares that had me bolting awake, screaming almost every night. On Nirauan Thrawn had been there to comfort me when I had woken in this manner but on the ISD *Judicator* I had been alone because Thrawn was onboard his flagship, the *Chimaera*, a ship he would not let me board for reasons he would never quite explain. In the end I had not argued with him because I had wanted to be near my uncle who was still in recovery on the *Judicator*. Only after security had come running two nights in a row to see that I wasn't being

murdered in my quarters did I take the doctor up on his offer of sedatives but they didn't really work as intended, they had just made me glassy eyed and vacant.

I sat for a long time in the kitchen of the house in Mos Eisley before finally making up my mind to get the hell out and go some place where I could think without interference from all of the ghosts which trailed around. I left a note to say where I was headed and why, packed enough things for a few days and caught the shuttle out to Wayfar. From there I walked to my uncle's house where I was greeted by his little bearded jaxes who, although had been fed by the little caretaker droid, pretended they were all starving.

I spent the rest of the night half dozing with Khavi purring contentedly on my lap. It was oddly comforting to be in the company of the little furry creatures my uncle doted upon. Since I had last been here their numbers had increased because Khavi had given birth to kittens that were now all grown up. Maddy and Mayhem still owned the house but now they had to contend with Nixi, Eira and Sja. If the little feline like creatures found it difficult living so far away from their natural home of Rori, which was the swampy moon orbiting Naboo, they never let on. Jaxes, my uncle had told me could also be found on Endor but the species on Rori were easier to tame. They made good house creatures, keeping away small rodents and bugs with their natural hunting abilities and they were affectionate companions when they chose to be. I was always happy when Khavi jumped delicately onto my lap and made herself at home, taking it as a sign of acceptance. I woke before sunrise and despite the fact that I had not really slept well, I felt more at ease and more refreshed than I had since Jyrki's cryptic message had arrived on Nirauan. Grateful to have the place to myself, the day passed easily and I spent much of it crying or dozing intermittently.

Cleansing the spirit, Ma'kehla would have called this, I didn't know about that but it felt cathartic to just cry with no one else around even though the comfort of another was a good thing. This time I understood that having time to say farewell to the ghosts of the dead was necessary. Grief was a terrible thing and I had experienced it from a very early age all the way through into my adult life. It seemed to me that half of the lessons I had learned were about how to cope with loss, not that I did a very good job of that, but for reasons I couldn't explain

it hadn't dampened my own love of life any, in fact, if anything it had made me understand that life was fragile and precious.

I loved my uncle's house; it was a place of peace and quiet. Out past Wayfar it sat at the edge of the sands near the rocky bluff. In the distance I could see the towers of Jabba's palace and it was an impressive sight, especially at suns set. A few other hardy people had built out here but it was mainly still deserted and I was grateful for this. During my time on Tatooine when Lord Vader had banished me from his sight, I had spent a lot of time in this house and it had become my second home. My uncle had long ago given me a key-code so I could come and go as I pleased and given me free reign to decorate the lower bedroom as I saw fit. I was never been more grateful for this than now. When the day drew to a close, I sat outside on the stone veranda and watched the twin suns set. The last rays peeked over the hills behind Jabba's Palace and lit up the sky in fierce colours of reds and oranges and for a moment it reminded me of the mountains, laced with drifting snow, on Ando Prime. The ache of what had happened on that planet returned and I wondered as I sat there in the quiet of the desert's twilight if I would ever be able to get past what had taken place, what I had done.

Taking a life changes a person, Thrawn had once told me and he had been right. I had killed and I wasn't certain I would ever be able to come to terms with all that had happened. As the last of the day's light had vanished giving way to the night I looked up into the sky, searching for the first star and was surprised to realise that it wasn't Jyrki or my father who were on my mind but Thrawn and suddenly I had missed him most of all.

When the air turned cool I went back inside to make something to eat and maybe watch some old Holo-Dramas that my uncle liked to keep around. The jaxes bugged me for food and, after both they and I had eaten, I lounged on the couch, dozing rather than watching some old Holo about unrequited love that I had stuck into the player.

Sometime after midnight I woke up, startled by a vague nightmare that involved Thrawn but I couldn't remember it clearly once I was fully back in the world again. As I made tea to take outside so that I could sit on the carved sand-stone veranda and watch the night sky I wondered if I would ever be free of these nightmares which

clung to me. Probably not, I thought as I wandered outside, wrapped in a thick poncho to keep the night's chill at bay.

Chenini, a slender silver crescent, began to climb into the sky following her sisters into the dark blue, star covered blanket. It was rare to see all three moons in the sky at once and I knew that all over Tatooine the Sand People and the Jawas would be holding their various rites to celebrate the rare celestial occurrence. Both peoples were superstitious and the moons held their sway. For me it was as if Tatooine was finding its own way to say farewell to one of her fallen sons.

I sat, leaning back against the house outer wall, watching the third moon of Tatooine rise, cradling a cup of mint tea in my hands. The night was cool and the soft hiss of sand upon sand as grains snaked over the rolling dunes was a lullaby I had almost forgotten. Somewhere in the distance I could hear a herd of banthas lowing and it carried through the air like some mournful lament. I got up and wandered to the edge of the steps to see if I could catch a glimpse of them in the moons' light but they were too far away, instead I watched as a lone figure walk through the sands towards the house, moonlight reflecting white where his face should have been. I stood stock still and waited, the cup of tea in my hands sending steam into the air like a beacon. I knew who it was without even thinking about it. I knew his walk; I knew the mask he wore and what he looked like underneath it. What I didn't know was why he had come all the way out here in the middle of the night when he was supposed to be on board of his ship trying to re-establish the Empire's rule on the galaxy.

I did not speak as Thrawn, dressed in his Dantassi clothes, his face hidden by the antique bone mask, with a small pack slung across one shoulder approached the house. If the trek from Wayfar had tired or even winded him he showed no signs of it. Keeping himself in shape was something he took seriously and for some reason this made me smile. I waited and watched as he untied his mask and held it in one hand. When our eyes met there was a moment of electricity but also a moment of uncertainty. Then after what felt like an eternity he spoke.

"Should you not be asleep?" He asked.

I stared at him and shrugged. "Sleep is overrated." I told him as I sat back down, my legs dangling over the edge of the veranda. "Did Bedi tell you where I was?"

He shook his head. "You're still wearing the necklace with the tracking chip. It made it easy to find you and I did not wish to wake your household up. It is quite late by the time I arrived on world."

My hand went to the small, carved bone pendant slung on a slender leather thong. For a moment I played with it then with one swift sharp pull I tore it off and flung it as far away from me as I could. It disappeared in the sand. Thrawn's expression as he watched me do this was unreadable but then he smiled and set his pack on the ground, coming to stand beside where I sat. We stayed like that for a long time not saying a word. In the moons light his face was all shadows and lines, more handsome than ever before and the glow from his alien red eyes even brighter than I remembered. He took my breath away, even now.

Eventually he broke the easy silence. "Kirja'navaar'inkjerii will not be impressed when he learns you threw away his clever little track A'myshk'a-where-ever-she-goes tool." He said.

I shrugged. "He doesn't need it any more. I don't need it any more either." I said, half expecting him to be cross, instead he just nodded. "So to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit out here in the middle of nowhere?" I asked.

Thrawn pulled off his gloves then reached for his pack out of which he pulled a small box. "I thought you might like to have this returned to you." He said as he handed it to me. I did not need to open it to know what lay inside of it. My ma'arilite necklace, the one I had left behind when I had gone off in search of Jyrki and my family.

I sighed as I opened it, biting my bottom lip as I just sat staring at the small pendant, made luminous in the moons' silvery light. Thrawn watched my face carefully misreading my expression. "Do you not wish to have it back?"

I shook my head and handed him the necklace, shifting and pulling up my hair so he could fasten it around my neck. "Yes, of course I do. I took it off because I was afraid to lose it but..." I said with a sigh. "It's just ... well... we seem to do this a lot."

I felt rather than saw him nod. "Yes we do. I sincerely hope this will be the last time that I have to return it to you after some

unfortunate circumstance.” He said gently, kissing the nape of my neck to let me know he was done. I was surprised that his small kiss made me shiver.

I moved to face him, my fingers brushing the small stone that now sat at its rightful place about my neck. “Thank you.” I said after a long pause looking up into his face.

It was his turn to draw a deep breath. I could see a thousand questions flash through his eyes but he didn’t ask any of them. Instead he just smiled as he stood there, his arms folded across his chest, his face raised to the sky, his eyes closed, as though he were basking in the sunlight not that of the moons. Then as if deciding something he turned to look at me and asked, pointing at my cup. “What are you drinking?” He asked.

“Mint tea, would you like some?” I got up before he could answer and turned to go in and fetch him a cup but before I could take a step he reached out for me, catching my free hand in his.

“Wait.” He said as he jumped up on the veranda to join me, making the distance between us small. Suddenly, where there had been an air of quiet melancholy was now the decided tingle of something else, something electric. He watched my face carefully as if he could get all the answers he sought from simply looking into my eyes but when that failed he said, “We need to talk.”

“Talk?” I asked carefully taking a step back from him. “No, I don’t think so.” I told him, wrongly assuming he meant he wanted to hear the details about what had happened on Ando Prime. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

His fingers brushed a strand of hair which the breeze was playing with back from my face. “Oh yes, I think there is. We have much to discuss, my dear, especially about what will happen in the future.” He said with a slight smile, speaking in such a way that I no longer knew what sort of conversation this was supposed to be.

I frowned at this familiar game. “So you came all the way out here, in the middle of the night to give me back my necklace and have a little chat?” I asked.

His lips curled into a lazy smile. “Can you think of a better reason to come to Tatooine in the middle of the night?” He countered, taking a step towards me. This time I didn’t move.

“I hear the suns’ rise can be quite spectacular.” I countered.

“Hmmm, well perhaps our talk can wait until dawn then.”

I shrugged and glanced away from his gaze. “Shouldn’t you be on board your ship plotting the New Republic’s overthrow?” My words sounded a little sharper than I had meant them to.

“I am taking some leave time.” He replied, his words cool and business like. “You and I have some unfinished business and I wish to deal with it before things get too busy.” He spoke casually but there was a hint of need under his words. He moved forward again backing me up against the wall.

With the sandstone wall of the house at my back, I glanced up at him casually with just my eyes, “Unfinished business?” I asked.

His gaze on my face was intense. The air between us pulsed. “Call it reconnaissance if you like. I wish to find out more about this supposed art auction Bedi was telling you about and who better to ask than you?”

“Who indeed.” I murmured, understanding that, while maybe he did want to talk about serious things, this was his way of saying we needed time with each other and we didn’t have much of it left before he began the full push of his current campaign. Duty would always come first but I was grateful that sometimes I came a close second.

I suppose he saw these thoughts plainly written on my face, he was better at reading me than anyone else and he shook his head as if to tell me I was the one who was wrong. “You truly have no idea, do you A’myshk’a?” He said softly as he cupped my chin with one hand, raising my face up to meet his.

“Probably not.” I said with a slight shrug, not all that sure what he meant but not wanting to ask either. “But does that matter?”

There was a lengthy pause while he considered his answer, “No and if I were to be honest, perhaps it is part of your charm.” He replied thoughtfully then, before I could say anything else, he kissed me as though he had not seen me in a hundred years. I was surprised by the sudden ache of need which shot through me. Grief, it seemed, could be overruled after all and I ignored the cup of tea which fell from my fingers to shatter on the stone floor beneath us in favour of returning his passionate kiss.

On Nirauan, although we had slept in the same bed, there had been no physical intimacy between Thrawn and me. I had been so wrapped up in my grief and guilt that I had not even wanted to be

touched. After that first reunion in his private study, I had backed away from him, shunning any contact. I had felt tainted somehow, as if the residual violence of all I had done still clung to me and I was afraid I would go mad all over again. He had left me alone letting me know he was there should I need him, never pressing me to speak about what had taken place on Ando Prime even though I knew he wanted very much to learn all the details. I didn't have the words to describe what had happened and I needed time to sort everything out. He had understood this and had given me space. I suppose he and Navaari had figured out that I wasn't going to go off the deep end or try something insanely suicidal but I needed time to mourn without interference from another.

It was a hard thing to come to terms with, the death of my father, he had always been there for me no matter what even when I didn't that that was the case. A presence that was as solid as he was strong and now, in what seemed like the blink of an eye he was gone and I hadn't even been able to say good bye or tell him that I loved him as well. It had a devastating effect on my soul and I had not wanted to be near or touched by anyone, but now, after the funeral, after the final goodbye I found that I wanted only Thrawn along with all he had to offer and nothing else. It was almost as if I understood that sometimes in order to get past the bad one had to also find the good, and he was definitely good for me.

He did not fight when I grasped him by his coat and pulled him into the house, down the stairs to the bedroom that was mine. For far too long I had been surrounded by death now suddenly I needed confirmation of life. I hoped he understood this, I suspected he did. My fingers trembled as I tried to undress him as fast as I possibly could without actually tearing off his clothes. So far all I had managed was the removal of his long coat. His boots he had kicked off himself. The buttons of the shirt he wore were frustrating me, small and fiddly they fought with my trembling fingers making me swear like a true spacer and seriously consider ripping the shirt apart with my bare hands.

His bemused smile was that of someone who knew me just far too well. He took my fingers in his and stopped me. "Slow down, Sji'u tekari, I am not going to vanish."

I bit my bottom lip and looked up at him without moving my head. "I don't know," I replied, "That seems to happen to people around me."

He sighed, caressing my face with his fingertips. "Well, I am here now and we have a moment's grace. I do not plan on leaving you or this plane of existence for a very long time."

"What you plan and what tends to happen is not always the same thing." I retorted.

His eyebrow arched and then he smirked. "On that I would disagree with you, my dear. My plans are carefully laid out and it is rare for them to fail." His finger traced from my chin, down the side of my neck across my collarbones. "You, on the other hand, never plan; you act on impulse without considering all the possible outcomes. Hence the never knowing how things will turn out."

I took a deep breath and, slowly this time, began to unbutton the shirt he was wearing, finding it easier now that I wasn't rushing. When the last button came free, he shrugged the worn fabric off his shoulders and tossed it on the chair near the bed. "There are some things you just can't plan for." I told him.

"Yes and I am looking at one of them right now." He countered easily undoing the dress I wore, smiling appreciatively as it fluttered to the floor to pool at my feet like water. I stepped out of it pushing him a little towards the bed. He resisted and he was stronger. When I made a face he threaded his fingers through my hair, drawing my head close to his mouth, "Patience, tekari, patience." He murmured in my ear. His breath, warm upon my skin, made me gasp with a need so sharp it was almost painful. I whimpered then, and raked my nails not so gently down his back.

"Play nice." He said easily, catching my wrists with his hands. "Or I will make you wait even longer." The thread of threat made me shiver, it would not be the first time he'd said or done such a thing.

I swallowed and glared at him. "I can hurt you."

The corner of his mouth twitched, "I know and sometimes, my dear, I even find that pleasurable, but for now let me have my way, there has been enough pain for the moment." His smile turned decidedly feral. "You may bite later, if you still feel the need."

I stared at him for a second but backed off because he was right. His answer to my retreat was to kiss me again, lips and tongue

exploring my mouth as though I were something to be savoured ever so slowly. He tasted sweet, like honey in warm sunlight. My heart skipped a beat as his fingertips continued to traverse my body. How many times had he charted out the curves of my breasts, my belly, my hips and everywhere else? I had long since lost count but every time it was as if he had found something new, something delightful and precious.

I reached up to touch his face. His skin seemed impossibly blue under the white of my own fingers. He smiled and followed the motion of my hand with his head as I stroked along his jaw to his lips. When my fingers rested there he kissed them lightly. My heart pounded against my chest, the rapid movement was visible and it felt as though it was beating loud enough for the entire galaxy to hear. His smile softened as he took note of this.

“Like an avian beating its wings against a cage.” He said as he rested his hand above my heart. He leaned forward and said, “It is good to know I can still stir you up like this.”

His eyes had gone that eerie deep glowing red I had come to associate with desire; the hint of blush which graced his cheeks and other tell tale signs let me know I wasn't the only one being stirred. For another moment the galaxy paused, waiting to see what would happen next and then Thrawn moved his hand. My back arched involuntarily as he ever so lightly brushed my breast with his fingers. The barest of touches seemed to ignite a storm and I growled at him. I wanted more but he wasn't giving it, at least not right this minute. His way with me was elegant and slow, showing me what his carefully thought out methods could lead to, though all it did was stir me up until I felt as though I would burst into flames from the inside out. I guessed this was also part of his plan.

“So, you were calling me unpredictable?” I asked, switching the conversation back to the earlier topic of planning for things as I undid his trousers, sliding them over his hips and buttocks with the flat of my hands so that I could feel his bare skin. I watched him step out of the crumpled fabric and nudge them aside with his foot.

“Would that be so far fetched?” He asked as he deftly removed the last of my clothes.

“Navaari would disagree with you, I think.” I said as I admired his naked body, lithe and strong, stroking that dark line of hair from

his navel to his groin with my fingertip and smirking at the positive reaction my touch created.

Thrawn shrugged ever so slightly, “Kirja'navaar'inkjerii has had many long days with you on Hjal to get to know how your chaotic mind works. I, on the other hand, am still exploring all the possibilities. You are a fathomless mystery, my dear, and I would prefer to take my time unravelling all of your secrets.” There was something else beneath the sensual words and casual foreplay, something I couldn't seem to put my finger on. I glanced up to find an answer in his face and he smiled at me, one of those rare and brilliant smiles no one else ever got to see. He continued his work of mapping out my body but he had not missed the questioning look in my eyes.

I shivered under his touch. “Why are you here, really?” I asked as he closed the gap between us, the warmth of our naked bodies rivalling the desert heat. He was intoxicating and I was now starting feel drunk with the desire I felt.

He stopped for a moment and regarded me carefully, “Because you need me to be here and because I need to know that after all that has happened you are really alright.” He answered.

The plain truth of his words took my breath away far more than even his erotic touch. I glanced away suddenly afraid, suddenly sad without actually knowing why. He drew my face upwards with the crook of his finger and when I looked up into his eyes there were tears in mine. He brushed them away with his thumbs. Time paused for just a moment as we just stared at each other and then, because it was the way of things, the moment passed giving way to the next.

When, finally, he decided he had toyed with me enough I did not protest. He lifted me onto the bed and lay over me, covering my body with his. I loved how his skin felt against mine, warm and velvety, but now I wanted more than his gentle touch. My own patience, such as it was, had long ago left me in favour of giving way to my desires and since I, as he had often enough said, was a creature of passion, I decided that there had been enough foreplay. He did not resist when I hooked one leg around his hip, pulling him to me, into me and when we joined, the way all lovers join, I let the real world and all its sorrows slide sideways with a gasp.

He moved with that sense of surety which only came when one knew the terrain one was mapping out well. His hands completed the

ritual of exploration and his mouth, teased and tasted all that lay underneath him, sealing the claim as his. I did not mind the powerful sense of possessiveness that rolled off him in waves as he slowly, deliberately thrust his weight into my being; in fact I rather liked it. Belonging to him in this sense gave me a place in the galaxy I needed. I dug my nails deep into his skin; my own way of telling him that, while I might be his, this ownership thing went both ways. I knew when he hissed between clenched teeth that with the bite of pain I had made my point.

“Sheathe your talons, tekari.” He said gently, “I already wear your token. No need to make Rukh think that my being with you is dangerous.”

“You mean it isn’t?” I teased.

He smiled. “Not in a way I’d have anyone else know about.” He brushed a lock of hair from my face.

I loved how the light caught the bracelet at his wrist, the one he wore which marked him as mine. As far as I knew he never removed it. I stroked it with my fingertips and the gesture did not go unnoticed. I grinned at the mention of his Noghri body guard and wondered just what magic Thrawn had used to ditch him this time. Rukh had the most annoying ability to stick to him like glue, taking his job as the Admiral’s body guard very seriously. I did as he asked and un-dug my nails from the flesh of his back, glancing to make sure I hadn’t actually drawn blood and smiled as he caressed my face gently, all the while moving inside me with a slowness that was both agonizing and tantalizing.

I decided to up the ante a little and tapped into the force, making him remember what I had done to him on Myrkr, making him gasp with the sudden sensation, making his eyes narrow and his smile turn animal like. Not playing fair he would have said but I would have countered that nothing was fair in love or war and this was always a little of both. We had danced this routine many times so the words no longer needed to be said out loud but I could read them well enough in his eyes.

Suddenly, the need to couple as though we had never seen each other before and perhaps never would again was maddening. I could not get enough of him and at some point, when we rolled over so that I rode him and not the other way around, I felt as though all the power

in the galaxy resided in this one simple act. I had often wondered if Palpatine had loved someone the way Thrawn and I loved each other then perhaps this galaxy would be a vastly different place. While possession and passion had been damned by the Jedi, love I understood could save us all from falling. Straddling his body, I felt like a goddess and he raised his eyebrows at me as I laughed out loud.

“Do you know how truly beautiful you are?” He asked as I leaned forward to kiss him. The scent we created was a perfume I found heady and breathing it in made my head reel as though I were completely intoxicated.

I shook my head in answer because the truth was I didn’t. I only knew how I looked to me and my opinion on that wavered from day to day. He reached up and brushed my hair back from my face again, more a gesture of affection than actually useful. For a moment we stopped and just stared at each other, then driven by something far more primal than love he placed his hands on my hips and pulled me deeper onto him. His want was infectious and as it mingled with mine it spiralled out of control. Still, he had taught me the rewards of taking my time and because he had tortured me often enough with his infinite ability to go slow, so I moved my body at a languid pace in rippling undulations like rolling waves on the dune sea or pale moon’s light on cool, blue water. I smiled victoriously as he growled with an urgency he very rarely showed. I could feel his control give way to his ever rising need which echoed my own.

With my head tipped so that I bared my throat to him, I arched my back in a deep crescent mimicking the little moon that had risen in the sky earlier on. I opened myself up then to the full power of the living Force, its magic and mystery swallowing me whole. It flooded us both the way rays of light poured down onto the ground and I felt my body give way to his, shuddering with an intensity that almost drove me mad. How it was that he could do this to me with taste and touch was a little mystery I hoped would never be solved.

Not quite done yet I moved until I heard his own voice cry out as he finally lost that measure of self control which made him so vulnerable. I knew in that moment that I would never, ever love any man the way that I loved him. It scared me to death to give away so much of myself but at the same time it was also a freedom I would never completely understand.

When the moment passed and the last vestiges of pleasure gave way to a good kind of weariness, sweat soaked and satiated we parted, the one becoming two, and lay silent, entangled in each other's limbs, basking in the sudden calm that washed over us both. Only after our hearts had slowed down and our breathing had returned to some semblance of normal did he break the quiet in the room.

"Do not ever leave like that again." He said.

"I won't." I replied knowing exactly what he was talking about.

"Promise me." He insisted.

I looked up into his face, a little puzzled by the pain hidden behind his words. "I promise." I whispered.

My answer satisfied him because he nodded in a way that said this matter is now closed.

"But you knew..." I said after another long silence.

"How could I not?" He asked with a sigh.

"And yet you still let me go."

"Could I have stopped you?" He asked. "Would you have forgiven me if I had?"

I sighed and moved away from his embrace. When I didn't answer him he shifted to his side, leaning his head on his elbow to look at me better. "It was only a matter of time before Andando tried something else to get you to come to him; you were his obsession and your father was his trump card."

"I never thought Jyrki would go after my family, I thought he was better than that. His fight was with me not them." I swallowed down the sudden wave of grief that speared through me with a deep breath.

"Which is part of what makes you so unique, Tekari; in spite of everything you see the good in people not the bad."

I shrugged. Navaari had said much the same thing but it didn't ease the grief or the guilt any. Anger and something else flashed through me. "I slaughtered him, Za'ar. I plunged my birth mother's lightsaber straight through his chest, I watched as he died and I saw the look on his face! He didn't think I could do that to him, he didn't think I would." I poked the exact spot on Thrawn's chest so he would know where I meant. He wrapped my fingers with his and placed my hand over his heart but I pulled away and sat up, hugging my knees tightly to my chest.

I was a little taken aback at the sudden expression of exasperation which crossed Thrawn's features quickly giving way to anger. "You did what you had to do." He said firmly. "Stop agonising over something that was inevitable."

I looked away from him but he reached over and grasped my arm making me turn back to face him because he wanted me to feel the full force of his next words.

"He would be alive if he had he stayed away from you and your family but he didn't. He may have been a good man once but he turned ugly and his obsession pushed him to a place most men never go. He was cruel and vicious, caring only for his needs not yours or anyone else's. Stop thinking he was something he wasn't. I don't need to list all his crimes against you but let me remind you of what he did to you when he kidnapped you. Let me remind you of the mess you were after you managed to escape. You still cannot speak to me of what happened there, what he put you through but you wake up screaming sometimes yelling for him to stop, to let you go. Someone who loves you would not have done that to you, no matter what. Jyrki put you through all manner of hells and lied to himself to make doing so okay. He would have killed you and fabricated some sort of story to tell himself it was for the best and not regretted it."

I did not want to hear these words. "Stop it."

But Thrawn just shook his head. "No, you will listen to me. I am tired of seeing you hurt especially at the hands of that man. Now he's dead, and that's the end of it. Jyrki Andando knowingly backed you into a corner you had no chance of escaping without either him or you losing your lives. It was and is that simple." He said plainly. "This guilt you're shouldering is pointless self pity and it's beneath you. I won't placate you in this useless waste of energy. Yes, he's dead and yes, you killed him but what choice did you have?" He shook his head in frustration. "By the same token, I won't pretend that everything is alright because it is not, I understand that but you have to stop thinking you are to blame for your father's death because you are not. You need to stop feeling guilty for killing Jyrki, because personally I wonder if, perhaps, that wasn't what he really wanted all along. Yes, taking a life marks you and you know that, he's not the first and he might not be the last but you did not instigate this fight nor did you continue it. You did not set out with the single goal of murdering him

and in the end it was self defence which cause his death by your hand nothing else. This little war he started is done and over with. He pushed you and you ended it but it could just have easily gone the other way and we would not be having this conversation. Then you would have been killed, many more people would be mourning including me and, had that been the case, I absolutely guarantee you that Jyrki Andando would still be just as dead.”

His words stung but they were also true. I scrubbed at my face with my free hand, tried not to cry and failed. He wasn't being unkind so much as he was being honest and while I didn't want to listen to these words I desperately needed to hear them. He was right and I knew it but that didn't make it any easier to swallow.

“Tekari,” He relented a little, “I wish to Da'hajn that I could have saved you from this nightmare but I could not. You and that man were bound together by a thread stronger than anything anyone else could have severed. I know what he meant to you but I also know what he did to you, even if you are willing to forgive him for that I am not. I am grateful he is gone because I don't believe, given his relentlessness in stalking you, that he would have ever let go of his obsession with you. I know you feel guilt for what happened but you need to let that go.”

“It's so damned difficult.” I said between clenched teeth, angrily wiping my tear away. I was so tired of crying.

Thrawn drew a very deep breath and let it out slowly. “I would worry greatly if you found it easy.”

I made a face at him and shrugged out of his hold on my arm. “He should have left my family alone, his fight was with me.”

Thrawn nodded, “Yes it was.”

There was a long moment of silence then, heavy and full of sorrow, Thrawn said, “I am so sorry that we could not be in time to save your father. I would have had my people there sooner but we were engaged in combat at the time.”

“It wasn't your fault.” I said automatically, finding it odd how I seemed to say the same words over and over again. “It also wasn't your fight.”

He looked at me. “Perhaps not but that doesn't ease my regret any.”

I shrugged slightly and got out of the bed, suddenly too restless to lie still any more. I picked up the robe slung across the chair and

slipped it on. “Papa would have said that regret is for people who don't have anything better to do than look backwards and wallow in the what-if.” I stood staring at him for a moment. “I thought I had lost everyone, so when you look at it from a certain point of view I was lucky. It could have been much, much worse.” I said bitterly because while it could have been worse, the grief was still the same. More tears sprang to my eyes this time but I just blinked them away.

Thrawn nodded, got out of the bed and slipped back into his trousers. “I brought a bottle of brandy with me, so why don't you and I go upstairs and watch the dawn? I am told that sunrise on Tatooine is quite spectacular.”

With glasses in hand, we sat out on low wall of the roof top deck of my uncle's house and watched as Tatoon I and Tatoon II began to illuminate the sky with their brilliance. I rested my head against his shoulder and sipped at the Corellian Brandy he had thought to bring with him. This was ours, this moment in time, like so many others we had shared. Sitting together watching the dawn and while it may have been a different planet the sensation of it never changed.

“How long are you here for?” I asked as the first true rays of Tatoon I's light began to dance across the dunes making the sand sparkle.

“Just long enough.” He replied cryptically then added on a more serious note, “You and I need to discuss how things will proceed between us for the next while because there will be little time for this relationship and lengthy conversations of any kind while I am running this campaign.” He said then added, “And I wanted to speak with you face to face so you wouldn't get any funny ideas.”

“You want me out of your way.” I said without any reproach.

“Yes, well there is that, although if I really wanted you tucked away someplace safe, I'd ask you to return to Hjal with Kirja'navaar'inkjerii. No, I would like you close. Nirauan still has need of a translator. Plus, I want your help but in a behind the scenes capacity and I would like you to do some work for Ged Larsen, act as a liaison for his people and mine. You have some remarkable talents which are being wasted; I have need of those skills but I want you safe and I will make no excuse for that.”

I nodded. “Okay, but I want to stay based on Nirauan.” The thought of trying to fit in on another ISD did not appeal to me.

He smiled, "That was the idea, though I am quite certain you would not mind piloting every now and then? Kirja'navaar'inkjerii flew in your ship to Nirauan so it has been returned to the base. I thought that a private transport vessel would be of use for undercover missions, provided you feel up to this of course. "

"I think I could handle that." I agreed, swirling the brandy in the glass I held. "Will we have any time together?" I asked hated that the question sounded needy but what I wanted to know.

He shrugged slightly, "That I cannot guarantee. If my plans go well it will be a busy campaign but hopefully short. However if things do not go according to plan then I cannot say how long it will take. I can tell you that I will do most of my work from the *Chimaera*, because the last thing I want is for anyone in the New Republic to discover the base on Nirauan so I won't be there all that often and you will absolutely not step foot on board the *Chimaera*." The sudden firmness in his voice made me glance at him sharply but before I could protest or say anything he continued, "It is my hope that with the tasks assigned you will be far too busy to miss me that much. However, it would not be the first time that space and duty have separated us and we've survived it before."

I nodded, reaching out to touch the bracelet he wore possessively; it made him smile. I didn't like this arrangement and he knew this but I had accepted it for what it was and he knew that as well.

"I will only get one chance to set this right, tekari; there is no room for any error, no room for distractions as pretty as they may be." He brushed the side of my face with the backs of his fingers to stress what he meant, "Once law and order have been re-established and the reigns of the Empire given over to someone capable of leading it without falling prey to his or her megalomania then, I assure you, I have plans for you and me."

I smirked a little at the perceived subtle innuendo in his words and downed the last of the brandy in my glass. The suns had both fully arisen and their light was almost blinding. A heat haze had already begun to shimmer off the sands, making the silhouette of Wayfar in the distance seem more like a wavering mirage than a real town. The wind had picked slightly and I could hear the snaking sands hiss across the dunes. The scent of pasha spice, which came from a small

scrub plant that grew on the rocky areas of the desert, was heavy in the air. I could feel the subtle pressure of a sandstorm even though none had been forecast and smiled. By the end of the day we would be enfolded in the fierce embrace of ferocious winds and I looked forward to it. I kicked my legs back over the edge of the wall and slid off it back onto the deck. Thrawn watched me, the expression on his face unreadable until I tugged him by the waist band of his trousers. The slight smile that turned up the corners of his mouth was feral and full of promise.

"Has enough time passed?" I asked, coyly tilting my head to one side.

"You are insatiable, you know that? We have a lot to talk about, to plan in a short amount of time and we should be getting some rest before doing so." He said knowing exactly what it was I wanted from him.

I just arched an eyebrow and my smile never changed. "And here I was thinking the Chiss had incredible stamina."

His slight smile turned suddenly dangerous and he got off the wall to join me with an ease that was as graceful as it was beguiling. He slid his fingers under my hair and drew my head close to his face so that when he whispered in my ear his breath on my skin made the small hairs on my neck stand on end. "Are you challenging me, my dear?" he asked.

I drew back from his hold to stare him squarely in the eyes and grinned. "Yes, Admiral, I do believe I am."

"Well then, tekari," He said, "It's your move."

For three days I had both the house and Thrawn to myself. I cherished every moment of it knowing that soon enough I would see very little of him and there would be a chance maybe I would lose him to the campaign he was planning. It was bittersweet. We spent as many hours talking about what was to come and how to deal with the possibilities as we did in the bedroom working on our tactile conversational skills. His plans were extensive and the tasks he had set for himself and his people were daunting.

In the moments were he wanted to be alone and had sequestered himself in my uncle's small, private work room I had strayed outside and let the quiet of the desert sweep over me, as

though the winds which shifted the grains of sand across the dunes could somehow scour the pain and the hurt from my own skin. Over the course of the three blissful days we had together I healed. I was more than sad when they had come to an end, marked by the arrival of an unmarked shuttle returning my uncle home early on the morning of the fourth day.

He looked better than when I had seen him at the funeral, less drawn, less pain ridden. He had not said a word as he had wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into a slow, solid embrace which stole my breath and made me remember what it had felt like to be a child in his arms. His sorrow was plain to see, the loss of my father had hit him hard. They had been close friends for a very long time. I suspected that Uncle Vahlek had always believed of the two of them, he would be the first to die and not the other way around.

Thrawn had greeted my uncle solemnly in the manner of a Dantassi warrior which had surprised me but neither man had offered any explanation. Instead there had been some sort of silent understanding which had passed between them, shutting me out. I recognised this sensation from my time on Hjal, where the males, especially the warriors and hunters had their own language and codes. There were just things in the galaxy of men that no matter what, women were excluded from.

There had been banter over a late breakfast and then my uncle had passed on to Thrawn the dispatches he had carried with him for the Admiral to deal with before the shuttle returned shortly after sundown to take Thrawn back to the *Judicator*, from there he would return to the *Chimaera*. I did not want him to leave but kept silent about my feelings. I was quite certain he knew and even understood what was going through my mind but how I felt was irrelevant in this matter. He was the leader of the Imperial navy and he had work to do. I might have been bound to him by word and mark but in the end it would always be his work, his mistress who held his sway. My uncle who had sensed that restless unease which comes with a parting between lovers, retired to his bedroom to “take a nap” so that Thrawn and I might spend the last hours of our time together alone.

In the quiet of my bedroom we had shut the rest of the galaxy out and loved as though the end of everything we knew was about to crash down upon us like a terrible storm. Only after the frantic

passion of coupling passed and I lay, quiet and melancholy in his arms did we talk in hushed tones about the what ifs to come. I was scared and I didn't bother to hide it. I had lost too much too soon and the prospect of losing him as well frightened me to death. I was grateful that he did not try to coddle me with lies by telling me, as he stroked my hair, the skin of my back and the curve of my waist, that everything would be alright and that this story would have a happy ending. He was preparing for war and death was always his ghostly dance partner waiting in the wings for her turn on the floor. He knew it and I knew it but we didn't speak of it. Instead we spoke of inconsequential things, small talk to fill the enormous gulf which was widening by the minute as he pulled away to concentrate on the tasks at hand.

“You greeted my uncle like a Dantassi warrior but he's not part of the clan.” I said, breaking the heavy quiet which had blanketed us.

“Yes, I did.” He said with a slight smile.

“You've never done that before, did something change?” I asked.

Thrawn's expression was warm. “That is something you will have to ask the Tze'yusha'Jin. It is not my story to tell.” He said.

I nodded. Men and their secrets, I thought, there was no end to them. I sighed and twisted about so I lay on my stomach to look at him, my chin resting on crossed arms.

“I will return for the art auction.” He said after a while, as if that made his up coming departure easier to swallow. “Especially if the painting listed is genuine.”

“And I will get to see you then, yes?” I asked.

“If time allows for it.” He shrugged casually, teasing.

I glared at him. “You will make time.” I said.

He just smiled without dignifying my words with an answer and instead asked, “So you've decided to remain here for the next two months then?”

“Yes. I need to be with my family.” I nodded.

“And they need to be with you, my dear.” He finished for me, “I would feel better knowing you had spent time with them instead of heading straight back to Nirauan. There's nothing on the base that requires your urgent attention.”

“There is a lot of paperwork to sort out here, with the docking bay and stuff plus I need to help Bedi go through papa’s things.” I explained.

He nodded. “I am quite certain she will be glad of your company while going through what must be a painful experience. I am relieved to know that you won’t be alone either.”

“Well...that and Uncle Vahlek will need someone to baby him even though he won’t admit it.”

Thrawn smiled. “Your uncle is a strong man but I am quite sure he will appreciate your company, just don’t cook for him.”

“Ha very ha!” I said, pinching him. There was another moment of quiet then I changed the subject away from my cooking, “Uncle Vahl brought you good news today didn’t he?” I asked.

Thrawn nodded. “The warlord Zsinj has been defeated by the New Republic which means one less predator in the pool to deal with. The dispatches he brought carried that information.”

I frowned and picked fluff from the blanket I was lying on, “I thought that he was an Imperial Admiral.”

“He was until after Endor, then he decided his chances were greater if he struck out on his own. He gathered his fleet and took on the galaxy, he did very well.”

“That doesn’t surprise me, he is a clever man.”

“Was. He’s dead now.”

“Oh?”

“Mm.” Thrawn nodded, “Seems tangling with the New Republic did not agree with him.”

“How did he die?”

“If the information I received was correct his ship the Iron Fist was obliterated by concussion missiles.”

I rolled back over onto my back with a sigh. “Did you know he spoke over sixty different languages?”

“No, that I did not know.”

“He told me once at one of the palace parties. We had a very long conversation about the nuances of linguistics. He was very clever.” I said smiling as Thrawn reached to run his fingers through my hair and then wincing as he caught a knot. “So now that he’s dead...does that mean it’s your turn to step up and scare the rebels into submission so we can get back to some semblance of order?”

“I would not call what I am doing scaring so much as worrying. They don’t know who I am, they don’t know who it is that is causing the problems they think they do but really they do not. They are aware that someone is stirring up things in the Outer Rim, and the Unknown Regions and they have heard rumours of a few battles that have been quite decisively won. They are concerned, they are worried but they are not scared, not yet.”

Zsinj had kept the New Republic hopping for at least the last four years. He had taken his fleet and waged a private war on them, declaring himself a warlord and forsaking the Empire, or what was left of it. I had heard bits and pieces about his escapades but had not paid much attention. I had had other things to worry about and for the most part I didn’t really care. He had been just another greedy megalomaniac trying to get his piece of the galactic pie and he had been fairly successful as well, by all accounts.

At one time he had been a so-so graduate of the Imperial Academy and, as he had told me himself, had been told that he should go into support where his tactical genius could be of use because he would never have what it took to be a real leader in the Navy. He showed them all how wrong they were in thinking this way and when he managed to effectively deal with a Nightsister threat for Palpatine the Emperor had taken notice and promoted Zsinj to Admiral, giving him his own ISD to command in the process. After the fall of the emperor, Zsinj had stayed quiet and out of the spotlight, not wishing to cross Isard. I don’t think he feared her so much as he was biding his time and when that time came he jumped at the chance to take over as leader of the galaxy. From the accounts I had read at the time, Zsinj’s attacks were quite clever and well thought out and he harassed the New Republic for several years. I was a little sad to hear of his demise but not all that surprised.

“So what happened to his fleet? To his men?” I asked.

“They scattered and joined up with various smaller warlords.” He answered thoughtfully. “And continue to pick at the New Republic’s fleets.”

“Why don’t they join with you?”

“They do not know I exist.” He said matter of factly.

“So now the stage wide open for you.”

He smiled. “Yes, in a manner of speaking.”

“So you could recruit Zsinj’s left overs?”

He laughed and shook his head. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“So what is your way?” I asked.

“You know more about that than you should.”

I frowned, “Well it’s not enough.”

His expression changed. “Don’t.” He warned.

“Was this part of your plan?” I insisted. “Waiting for him to be eliminated?”

“Not at all, I simply have my own agenda,” His lips tightened.

“Why are you pressing me about this?”

“So will you go to Wayland now?” I didn’t answer him instead I got straight to the point.

Thrawn’s sigh told me he was tired of this question from me. “I have told you before, I will go to Wayland when the time is right and not before. One does not simply drop into the Emperor’s top secret storage facility to scavenge through the bones left behind without planning first.” He chided, “And first I have to find the exact location, your instructions on how to get there were a little vague.”

It was my turn to sigh. “I want to go with you when you do head out there.”

“No.” Thrawn said coldly, “I have said this before and I shall say it again. I do not want you anywhere near that place. I have my reasons so do not push the matter or you will not like the consequences. It is dangerous and there are a myriad of precautions that must be taken before even I step foot on that world.”

I glanced at him sharply. “What do you know about it that I don’t?”

His red eyes fixed on me with a hard, almost unforgiving stare. “Plenty.” He said sharply letting me know that any further discussion on this subject would be met with much resistance.

“Fine!” I snapped back.

He sighed and continued to stroke my hair, “Listen to me, tekari, do you think I say these things simply to order you around? Have you not realised by now that when I ask you to stay away from something it is because I wish to protect you from harm? Wayland is a place that is dangerous. When you were there you were under the protection of both Vader and the Emperor, if you were to show up at the facility tomorrow that would not be the case and if I recall

correctly being there scared the hell out of you. Do you think that Palpatine would not have defences in place to protect this fortress of his, especially one full of his secrets? Do you think you are a skilled enough warrior or force user to go up against what ever he left in place to protect these secrets?”

I blew at the lock of hair covering my eyes noisily. “No, probably not.”

He nodded. “There are forces at work you know nothing about.”

I glanced at him. “Then explain it to me.”

“No.” He said, then relented speaking more gently, “Your curiosity will be the death of you. So I am asking you, as your mate, as the person who shares your bed with you, to please, please leave this alone.”

I sighed, “Okay.” I finally said after a very lengthy silence.

“I have your word you will not go there at all, ever.” He pressed.

I made a face and hesitated but the look in his eyes and the expression on his face told me there was only right way to answer this request. “Okay, damn it, Yes, you have my word.” I mumbled but I wasn’t sure I was telling the truth.

He nodded, however there was a wariness in his eyes I rarely saw. He didn’t believe me. “I mean it Merlyn, leave Wayland be. It is not for you.”

A moment wavered between us then, something angry and stubborn. I didn’t like being told what to do and I didn’t like the fact that he was keeping secrets from me even though I knew he kept many things from me and it had never bothered me before. This time it did, but I wasn’t sure why. There was something beneath his words which scared me as though the spectre of the Emperor had suddenly reappeared.

“What about Myrkr?” I asked as though that topic would be any different.

He sighed. “What about it?”

“We went there for a reason.”

“Yes, we did.”

“I heard you were keeping a close eye on all activity on that world.”

A frown crossed his face and for a moment I thought he would not answer me. “It is a place of interest, as you well know, and it is also

a place which is a haven for a variety of smugglers as well a people who deal in information. I am keeping an eye on things there.”

“Since when have you ever needed to go to the underworld for information?” I asked.

He frowned at me. “There is a lot about my work you do not need to concern yourself with and, as it does not involve you, I do not feel the need to share every detail with you.”

“I don’t ask you to either but I am tired of not knowing...!” I was starting to get cross although I wasn’t sure why.

His jaw clenched. “Listen to me carefully A’myshk’a, I am a high ranking official in the Imperial navy and you, my dear, are not a part of that. I will not divulge sensitive information to you simply because we share a bond and a bed. Why are you suddenly pushing so hard on this? You know better, you’ve never done this before so why now?”

I swallowed. “I don’t know.” I said half believing it to be true.

“Do not lie to me.”

I gave him a filthy look and said nothing.

“Hm.” He made a little noise and made a come here gesture and only after I was leaning against the warmth of his bare skin did he continue, “Look, I understand that you are afraid. You’ve lost a lot in a short amount of time and no matter how much you think you’re putting on a brave face the death of your father cut deeply. I know you’re scared to lose me as well but you won’t. However, making me angry by doing something stupid is not a very good way to maintain this relationship. You need to trust me; you need to let me do my job without having to worry about you as well.”

I made a face. “You’re keeping secrets from me.”

“Of course I am and for your own protection.”

“Big secrets.”

He lost his calm, “What the hell do you think would happen if for some reason it got out that the last Imperial Grand Admiral had a mate who was as headstrong as she was foolish? Do you think that the various factions all vying for a chunk of the galaxy would just smile and say how cute? No, they would come after you and all the people you love to get to me. The less you know about my business the better off you are. The better off what is left of your family are so leave my business alone.” His words were as hard as glacial ice and just as cold.

I stared back at him not budging.

He cocked his head to one side , “I have said this many times before but you don’t seem to get it. I did not plan on becoming involved with anyone in this empire. I wished only to serve my people and protect them, this was a route to get what I wanted, but instead Da’hajn had other plans and you, chaos incarnate, are a part of my life whether I want it or not. I did not need such a distraction but now that you are in my world I would not have it any other way, however, you need to put aside your own wants and your own headstrong, somewhat selfish desires to meddle in my affairs and listen to me. I have everything well in hand, all the possibilities are covered. So listen to me, while running this campaign I cannot be worrying about you, it is that simple, I have enough to think about with being concerned that my bond mate is off trying to get herself killed over phantoms and dreams.”

His last sentence caught me off guard and I looked up at him sharply.

His eyebrow arched. “Do you really think me so blind that I cannot see what is really at the heart of this?” When I didn’t answer he continued. “You have nightmares about my death. This is not a secret as you’ve told me about it at least twice now but what you don’t tell me is how often you see this same vision and quite frankly I don’t need to know that. What I do need you to know is that I can look after myself, I have been doing it for a very long time and despite your feelings to the contrary I have managed to evade death many times.”

I didn’t say anything and looked away but he wasn’t going to let this matter drop so easily. He took my chin between thumb and forefinger to lift my face up so we stared at each other squarely in the eyes.

“Merlyn there are safeguards in place already to assure my safety.” He repeated, “You cannot save me or the entire galaxy from evil and that is not your job.”

“Then what the hell is my job?”

“To stay alive.” He said gently. “And to remind me that there is more to life than simply leading an armada against the New Republic, to remind me about the possibilities of life beyond the bridge of an Imperial Star Destroyer and to remind me of what is good and sweet in this galaxy.”

“That’s a sappy reason.” I eventually conceded.

He smiled. "It's the only reason worth mentioning, my dear." He said, "Your work may be on Nirauan and while it is important, your place in my life is not about that work so please stop meddling."

I lay against his warmth silent for what felt like a long time. It had not ever been my plan to fall in love and bind myself to a man such as him either. I had known from an early age what men with stars in their blood were like and had sworn up and down never to get involved with one. They were too much of a heart ache, too much of a headache. Yet, here I was cuddled in the arms of just such a man, a man who had the potential to become the most powerful person in the entire galaxy. It made me think back to a conversation my uncle and I had once had.

I twisted around to look at him. "If you win against the New Republic and succeed in re-establishing the Empire will you become emperor?"

"Would you wish to be empress and rule at my side?" he asked with a slight smile.

"No, not really." I replied, surprised by the absolute conviction of the word, surprised to discover it was the truth.

Thrawn made a satisfied sound. "It is not my wish to rule as Emperor, it is only my wish to re-establish law and order. I am not certain that I would make a very good Emperor and you are far too wild a creature to be the consort to the ruler of a galaxy. To tie you down in such a role would be to break your spirit." He said and before I could launch into a protest he explained, "You would feel responsible for everyone under your rule. You would wish to help each and every being and that burden alone would tear you to pieces. Palpatine made such a good leader because he did not personally care for his subjects he cared about the whole and about power. The problem was his love of power made him blind to those who wanted more for their own peoples, more freedoms and rights. Instead of giving some of these things up to placate a growing dissent he clung even more tightly to them. That is why he eventually died he lost sight of the bigger picture. I do not wish this role for you or for myself, for that matter. I am content to lead the navy; I do not need to rule the galaxy as well."

"Do you worry about becoming like him? My Bunduki master used to tell me that to fear a thing is to become it." I said, puzzled by

his apparent hesitation in the matter of ruling the galaxy. It almost sounded as if he had someone in mind already but I didn't ask.

His answer was sharp. "No. I do not fear that. Becoming Emperor simply is not my destiny nor was it never a job I wanted and," he added thoughtfully, "I hope that it will be one I should not have to do. I am not Palpatine, my dear and I do not aspire to be as he was either."

"If that were the case I would have left you long ago. As you have no desire to be as Palpatine I have no desire to bed him." I said tartly suppressing a shudder.

Thrawn chuckled and stroked my skin with the tips of his fingers. "The truth is that I am first and foremost a strategist, a tactician. Being ruler of the Galaxy is about politics and while I enjoy the occasional foray into this world for the most part it gets tedious rather quickly. Being Emperor is all about being a master politician and that is not something I aspire to, at least not yet. I am quite certain that the right person for that job will come along."

"You'd miss space."

He smiled. "I would."

I nodded and glanced at the chrono by the bed and sighed. "Speaking of space, you should get ready and your ride will be here soon unless you plan on heading back to your ship in the nude. While I don't mind seeing you in this state I do think your men might find it uncomfortable"

"The only person who sees me completely undressed is you." He replied airily. "And please stop making it sound as though I am leaving you forever. I'll be returning in two months."

"And will I get to see you naked then?"

He moved to get out of the bed, "If you behave." There was mischief behind his words.

I lay on my stomach, watching as he wrapped a robe around his body. "Good behaviour is overrated." I told him.

"I know, you keep telling me." He leaned over to kiss the top of my head. "You should also consider getting dressed. Or do you wish to shower with me and save water?"

I smirked and rolled off the bed. "That's the best thing you've said in the last hour." I said and went to join him because usually our conversations in the shower were a little less tense and a whole lot

more fun. When he pulled me tightly to his body under the streaming water I understood that, while he had fenced with words and been stern about his wishes, my presence would fail in his world and this was his way of saying goodbye. This passionate side of him, which only I ever saw, was his way of telling me how he felt and my body's answer was my way of reminding him what he would miss. I loved it when we showered together and I made quite certain he would not forget what it was like to be with me for the next two months.

As he dried himself off he grinned at me. "You are a menace." He said.

"And you would not have it any other way." I retorted.

I didn't say anything else and we got dressed in silence. My uncle was up and pottering about the kitchen when we appeared. He gave Thrawn a nod and me a smile. "I made some 'caf, spiced." He said, gesturing to the carafe on the stove.

I didn't ask, I just poured two cups and handed one to Thrawn who was dressed from head to toe in his Dantassi gear. He took the offered cup and smiled his thanks. None of us spoke, there were no words to be said and none of us were people who needed to fill in the silences. When the shuttle arrived, we heard the engines.

"I will say my good-byes here. Do not follow me outside, tekari." Thrawn said as he set the empty cup on the table.

I nodded.

"Tze'yusha'Jin, I thank you for your hospitality." Thrawn turned to my uncle and bowed slightly as was Dantassi custom.

My uncle mirrored the action and the two men clasped each other by the wrists. "You are always welcome in my home Nikätza'arth'pavjäska."

I watched the formality with feigned disinterest which made Thrawn smile. He turned to me, cupping my face with both of his hands. "Stay safe and remember what I said to you." He said softly and kissed me tenderly. Then he placed his mask over his face, drew up the hood of his cloak and left the kitchen, moving down down the hall, through the front door and then stepped out into the desert. My uncle said nothing and we both waited, straining to hear the sounds of the shuttle, and sighed as the ship lifted off. Thrawn's departure left behind a void.

It was the small hours of the night when I woke up bathed in cold sweat with a scream on my lips. My heart pounded in my chest as though I had just been chased through Beggar's Canyon by Tusken. For a long terrible moment the nightmare, which had me shaking, sank its claws deep into my brain refusing to let me go but the raspy tongue of a jax licking my hand brought me back into the real world. I sighed and sat up, reaching to scratch Khavi between the ears and smiled as she purred softly, rubbing her head against my hand. She always seemed to know when I was in distress and it was always she who was first at my side when I woke from a bad dream.

I got out of bed stiffly dislodging the other jaxes who had curled up around my body. I was still tired but I knew there would be no going back to sleep so I decided to go make a cup of tea instead. Khavi and Sja followed me up the stairs, their tails high, making little chirping sounds which meant they hoped to be fed.

"It's two am." I told them as I wandered into the kitchen, surprised to see my uncle there.

He smiled. "Jaxes know nothing of time, Lei'lei they know only love and food. You can give them a little as a treat."

I nodded stifling another yawn and dropped a handful of food in their bowls.

"Bad dreams?" Uncle Vahlek asked as he poured me what looked like a brandy.

I nodded again as I sat at the table across from him and cupped the glass in my hands.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

With a shrug I said, "It won't help."

"Are they about Jyrki?"

"No. I don't dream about him anymore, at least not that I remember." I said. "No, now my dreams are about the Emperor and sometimes about Za'ar."

"The Emperor?"

"I see him sometimes, but he's not the same man, I mean he is but he's different as well. I know it's Palpatine the aura is unmistakable but the face and the body are younger, changed." I sighed and downed a mouthful of the brandy.

Uncle Vahlek watched me for a moment then nodded. "Cloned?"

“Maybe, I don’t really know. It’s possible. Using the force the way he did destroyed his physical body. There were rumours that he used to change bodies, transferring his consciousness into a new cloned body but that always sounded so very far fetched to me.” I shrugged and toyed with the glass, “The dreams are fragmented and when I wake I don’t actually recall a lot of the details. I just know that he’s as powerful as ever and he keeps telling me he will find me and finish what he started.”

“I can see why that would keep you up.” He nodded.

“Why are you up? You should be resting, Zte’sa.”

“Can’t sleep.” He said, “Time in the bacta tank has messed up my internal clock and I keep thinking about Kit.”

I watched his face for a moment. It seemed to me as though he had aged and he looked every bit as tired as I felt. “I miss him too.” I said after a long moment of silence had passed. “I keep thinking about how I could have changed the outcome, about how I could have....”

He put up a hand and silenced the run of thoughts. “It wasn’t your...”

“...Fault.” I finished for him, “I know that, really I do, but I still go over and over it all in my head. Wondering if there was anything different I could have done.”

He sighed. “Lei’lei sometimes very bad things happen. It’s just the way it is. I hope that this will end the string of bad things that have happened to you. You need to let this go before you become obsessed with the past and turn into Jyrki. You cannot turn back time and no amount of ‘what ifs’ will change things.”

I scrubbed my face with my hands. I was so tired and the mention of Jyrki’s name brought a flash of anger which scared me a little. I took a deep breath to get that under control. Jyrki was dead. I had killed him but it didn’t lessen my fury at him any.

“How are you feeling?” I asked switching the subject.

“The wound has healed well enough but my body isn’t what it used to be you know. It takes longer to get back to where I was. I’m not twenty any more.”

“Are you in any pain?”

He shook his head, “Not really. I am mostly just stiff.”

I made a face. “I’m grateful for what you did but it was stupid.”

“Well, we all do stupid things.” He said with a wry smile.

“Why didn’t you wear armour?”

The question surprised him. “Armour?”

I nodded. “Navaari was wearing armour weave under his clothes. Why weren’t you?”

He frowned, “I never use armour, Lei’lei. It hampers my movement and I don’t, as a rule, need it.”

I frowned. “Well that’s a silly reason. It would have saved you the dip in the bacta tank.”

“Perhaps but I don’t wear it, I never have. Part of the Bunduki training is to not rely on such things, you should know that. The Tze’yusha’Jin do not rely on armour, they rely on craft and training. We are supposed to move like shadows and be faster than those who would do us harm.” The expression on his face told me he meant those words with a touch of irony.

“Navaari wore armour weave and he’s part of your brotherhood.” I said crossly.

“Yes, he is.” My uncle agreed, “But he came to Nar Shadda looking and prepared for a fight. I did not. I came to Nar Shadda to eliminate Jyrki Andando by means of stealth. I had hoped to get to him before you arrived.”

I gave him a look which said *I don’t believe you*.

He sighed. “The truth of the matter is I have never needed body armour, I have never used it and to be perfectly honest it didn’t occur to me to do so.”

“So pride almost got you killed?” I grumbled.

“If that’s how you wish to see it, I suppose so but I don’t see you wearing any either.”

“Well, do me a favour next time wear armour. I almost lost you and I don’t want to go through that again.”

My uncle laughed. “I hope to hell there will never be a next time for something like this. And if there is I am certain your Ta’kasta’cariad will throttle you long before I have anything to do with it.”

I let out a noisy sigh. “I’m sure he would and if he didn’t Navaari would.”

“Yes, Kirja’navaar’inkjerii did mention something about keeping you safe on Hjal.” There was a catch in his voice when he spoke Navaari’s name.

There was a long pause and then I asked, "How do you know him? From before I mean, because you do know Navaari from before, right?"

"It's a long story, Lei'lei." He said quietly as if that would end the conversation right then and there.

I drew a deep breath and let it out slowly as if that would ease the frustration I felt. "You know what I have learned Zte'sa? Saying an explanation is a long story is another way of avoiding having to explain it. You understand Cheunh, you know of the Dantassi and their ways and you know Navaari from before. Thrawn greeted you like a member of the clan, something he has never done before, he said things had changed but he also said it was your story to tell. I never actually told you about Navaari, only mentioned his name once or twice and I haven't said that much about my time with the Dantassi yet you know things about them no one else outside their kind does including some of the more obscure bonding rituals. Stop keeping secrets from me, especially about my friends and family, it's what got us all into this mess in the first place." This wasn't exactly true but close enough that he winced when the words tumbled out of my mouth.

"We keep these secrets to protect you."

"And a fine job it's been doing at that." I snapped. I was tired. "Did you know Thrawn from before as well?"

He shook his head. "No.

"So tell me how you met Navaari." I pressed.

I didn't think that he would answer me because he was silent for a very long time. "It was a very long time ago." He said quietly.

"Why did you never tell me you two knew each other?"

He sat back against the chair and drew a deep breath. "Because I swore never to reveal to anyone what I knew about the Bone Traders and up until I actually laid eyes on the man I was not sure your Navaari and the man I knew were one in the same."

"Sworn to secrecy? How come?"

"Because it would have endangered Kirja'navaar'inkjerii's life if any one ever found out what he had done."

I frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

Uncle Vahlek's stare bored into me and when I didn't budge or look away he sighed. "If we are going to speak of this then let's move

to the living room where it is a tad more comfortable." He said with a frown. He poured brandy into both glasses and with a move that dislodged Maddy from his lap he got up and headed for the comfort of the next room.

I settled on my favourite chair and before I had finished dragging the spare blanket over my lap Khavi had made herself quite comfortable as if she too wanted to hear the story my uncle was about to tell. Uncle Vahlek sat adjacent to me and propped his legs on the table in front of the couch. He sat still for a long time, contemplating his drink. I had learned enough to know it was best not to say anything while he gathered his thoughts.

"By telling you this story I am breaking a promise to Navaari, you understand this yes?"

I nodded, meeting his pale green eyes with mine. "I need to know, he's family for me and I don't think he'll mind."

For a very long moment my uncle held my gaze and then he nodded. "I know." He said. "He dotes upon you as though you were his own. You are as precious to him as you are to me but I don't think you understand that do you."

"I have some idea." I replied a little crossly. "But he is important to me too, as are you. Now you are all connected and I need to know how, I need to try and understand it because it is just too weird of a coincidence."

"The Dantassi say nothing ever happens by chance."

"I know, but still... it's a huge galaxy and still some how, in spite of the odds, you know Navaari."

"Well, it seems to me that your life is full of such strange coincidences." He replied with a shrug, "The galaxy works in odd ways, I stopped questioning it a very long time ago. Now do you want to hear this story or not?"

"I want to hear it."

He smiled and then began, "When I met the man you know as Navaari we were very young, in our teens, and what happened, what took place did so long before I met your father, long before I met the woman who would give birth to Jyrki Andando and long before Darth Vader became the second most feared man in the galaxy." He said. "I was in training, on my way to becoming an apprentice to the Brotherhood of the Tze'yusha'Jin and part of their initiation rites was

survival training. Initiates in the brotherhood were taken individually to a planet that was harsh and unforgiving, essentially dumped on the surface with nothing and told to survive for a given time period and if they accomplish this then they will be picked up at the end of the trial. There are no rules just a lot of frustration. So, there I was, alone on a planet whose name I didn't know with nothing except the clothes on my back and the knowledge in my head."

"That sounds a bit....cruel." I told him, frowning.

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Perhaps but this fraternity is selective and exclusive. Only the very best are ever accepted into its fold. I wanted to be the best of the best. After what my father had done, how he had treated me I desired to become the one thing I knew would hurt him, which was an assassin for the most secretive organization in the galaxy." He paused for a moment, considering his words with great care. "I had witnessed the death of the man I had loved as a child, the man who had taught me the foundation of the Bunduki arts and had become in many ways a father figure for me where my own father remained a stranger." He shrugged ever so slightly, "I came from a wealthy family and as the eldest legitimate son I was expected to follow in my father's footsteps and learn the family trade, to become like him. So you can imagine the outcry when I walked away from it all." He smiled slightly at the memory, "I don't tell you this to gain sympathy. Everyone has hardships in their lives Lei'lei and their childhoods mark them, scar them forever. In my case mine made me hard, made me learn to hate everyone and everything for a very long time and it was because of that desire that I wished to join the brotherhood. What better way to get back at the galaxy than to sign on with the most notorious killers around?"

I had a hard time seeing the man I adored so much in the role of a cold hearted killer and I began to understand a little better why he had never wanted to speak to me of his past, of his profession. I nodded to let him know I had gotten the point.

"The Tze'yusha'Jin tend to find those who truly wish to become one of their kind. Word of mouth, the right questions asked in the right places eventually reach the right ears. One day they found me in a tavern on Malastare betting on pod racing. I never saw them coming and no one noticed when they removed me from the tavern right in the middle of a crowd. They were and are that good. I found myself in

an interrogation room, where I sat for what felt like days. I saw no other person, was given no food and no instructions. I understood that I was being watched and it became a battle of wills. Eventually I suppose I passed this test, though by the time I was released I would have welcomed death. This was the beginning of what would turn out to be the hardest training I had ever done in my life. I loved every moment of it because through the pain and the punishment I understood I was becoming the very thing my father hated."

"Why did you hate him so much?" I asked unable to stop from interrupting.

Uncle Vahlek sighed. "That is also along story, Lei'lei and one I don't much wish to talk about. Will it suffice to say that he was a cruel man and that what he did in the name of power and profit disgusted me to the core? What he did to his family was inexcusable and when my mother killed herself to get away from him because he had sworn he would never let her go I understood that even though this man had fathered me, I wanted nothing to do with him. I left home and I never looked back." He stopped to glance at my face for a moment and when I didn't say anything he continued. "I drifted around for a while, got into some things better left unsaid and eventually was found by the brotherhood. The training I had undergone as a boy served me in good stead, word got around I suppose and before I understood what had happened I found myself marooned on a planet with just the clothes on my back."

"And that's where you met Navaari?" I pressed.

"Yes."

"So what, he saved your life?" I asked.

He chuckled, "No, quite the contrary, Lei'lei. I saved his when I was supposed to kill him."

"What?" I could not keep the shock out of my voice and my exclamation made Khavi jump and dig her claws into my thighs. I hissed in pain and gritted my teeth until she settled back down, glaring at me in the process.

He smiled. "We were supposed to survive when I found Navaari he was wounded. I should have just killed him but instead I saved his life."

"That doesn't sound like a cold hearted killer to me."

He laughed, “No not really but partially it was a reaction against my own father’s xenophobia which was rampant and destructive. I knew it would have annoyed him greatly if I, his son, saved the life of an alien rather than took it simply because he was at a disadvantage.” He made a face, “I know how silly this sounds and believe me, looking back it feels just as ridiculous but then I was passionate, stupid and determined to be as different from my father as I possibly could.”

“And becoming an assassin was different how?”

“Ah, well my father hired members of the brotherhood on occasion to eliminate some of his competition. I remember one time after a meeting with one of these men how he had scorned them, ridiculed them even saying they were scum and worse than bounty hunters. Paid thugs with no brains were his exact words. It was something I did not understand. He hated them but he hired them to do the work he would not touch. When I asked him about this he told me *never let your own hands get dirty, boy, if you don’t need to*. I was puzzled by this so the next time he hired one of these men I made it my goal to speak with the man and find out if they really were as my father had said. The man, a Zabrak named Sohli seemed amused at my clumsy attempt to follow him and had granted me an audience. After answering my questions honestly and intelligently I had come to the conclusion that my father was very wrong and that the reason he had scorned members of this assassin’s guild was that in fact he was scared to death of men like them. The conversation I had with Sohli lasted no more than five minutes, ten at the most but it was enough. He saw in me potential and I understood that my father, as ruthless and as brutal as he was, was also a coward completely without any honour. He hired these men to eliminate his competition because he feared losing to them. He brutalised my mother to terrorize her into staying at his side, she was the daughter of a wealthy shipping magnate and she brought status to my father who was common born. When it was discovered that she would be unable to bear him any more children after me he was unspeakably cruel to her, all the while having affair after affair with various influential women who bore him children willingly. I was his legitimate son and heir but I wasn’t the only child to carry his bloodline. When I ran off he had me disowned me and I was happy for it.”

“No offence, Zte’sa but this sounds like a really bad Holloway story.”

To my surprise, he laughed, “Yes I suppose it does at that. I am so grateful you never knew a home that was like mine which was part of the reason when we found you I wanted to take on the role as guardian.” He sighed. “My father, he was a bad man in every sense of the word, it happens sometimes. I don’t get too broken up about it but it is what it is. I did not want to be like him so I decided to become like that which he hated and feared. When I asked Sohli about the brotherhood all he said was they watched out for potential candidates and I would know if I was worthy.”

“So they watched you?”

He nodded, “It would appear so.”

“And you saved Navaari’s life?”

“Yes.” He said. “Although we didn’t know it at the time, he and I were tracking the same animal and unluckily for him he missed his first shot at it. The beast came after him and was in the process of mauling him. He would have died had I not killed it first. Seems somewhat anticlimactic to speak of it in this way but trust me at the age of seventeen it was a big deal.”

“You were only seventeen?”

He nodded. “As I told you, I was young and stupid.”

“And Navaari?”

“Not much older I don’t think but he never told me his exact age and it’s hard to tell with his kind, they age differently from humans but he, too, was quite young.” He sighed and sipped his brandy thoughtfully. “The beast we had been hunting had raked him pretty good and he lost a lot of blood. I should have killed him right then and there, eliminating the competition, making it easier to survive but I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

He drew a deep breath. “Because when I looked into his eyes I saw myself in more ways than I could count. I swore I would not kill just to get ahead, that was what my father had done and I had sworn I would not be like him, so instead of taking Navaari’s life I dragged him to my camp, treated his wounds and took care of him. And,” He added, “I wanted someone to talk to.”

"I find it hard to picture Navaari getting mauled by any creature." I said quietly.

That made my uncle smile. "You've seen him undressed, yes?"

I nodded.

"Have you ever asked him about the scars on his chest?" He dragged his fingers in a claw like fashion across his chest above his heart.

"I never asked but I always wondered." I murmured. The first time Navaari had stripped off his clothes in front of me I had stared in shock at the vivid scars which were almost white across his pale blue skin. The look on his face had told me not to ask so I hadn't, I assumed an animal of some sort had done it but the story remained a mystery. He wasn't the only one with scars on his body he didn't want to talk about so I had let the matter lie.

"He was lucky his heart wasn't torn out." My uncle said.

I sat back in the couch and stroked Khavi absently. "So you saved his life, why all the secrecy?"

"He is Dantassi and is supposed to be masked to strangers. I saw his face. He thought he was alone on the planet so he stopped wearing his mask. By being seen he risked being shunned by his tribe or worse being put to death should it ever be known that he had not only shown his face but had shared his clan's knowledge." He said, not telling me the entire truth. There was something more behind this but I didn't press because I suspected it had more to do with the Tze'yusha'Jin's rules than Dantassi law.

"Navaari likes to bend the rules when he can." I said. "You saved his life, which meant he would have felt you were now responsible for him in some way."

"Yes but I waved that right." He said, "I didn't want that responsibility or what it meant. So he taught me his language and some of his people's customs in return for my silence. That was our deal. He teach me as much about his kind as he could and I kept it a secret. I had always known about the Bone Traders, who does not know of their kind, and had always been fascinated by them so to learn from one meant a great deal to me."

"How is it that he was even in this brotherhood trial thingy anyway? I thought he was in training from an early age to be Jhal'kai."

"That is his story to tell you, Lei'lei but as you pointed out; he does not always obey the rules."

"So this all happened before Thrawn ever went to Hjal?"

"Yes, the invasion of his home world was some years later and we had mostly forgotten about one another. It was only when I saw your mask did I think of him but even then I didn't know it was the same man, I wasn't sure of that until I met him in person on board the *Judicator*."

"How did you recognize him? I mean it's been years right?"

He chuckled, "Yes it has indeed been many, many years still one does not forget. We spent almost seven months on that damned planet together and an awful lot of things happened to us. There are some things about a person you never forget, no matter how much time has passed."

"So how is it that Za'ar can greet you as one of the clan warriors now, he never did that before?"

"You." My uncle said warmly, "Apparently you bind everyone together."

"Huh?" I said making a face. "How do you figure that?"

"I don't know Lei'lei but somehow you manage to bring people together. If I understood it correctly this is because you and your Ta'kasta'cariad are bound and Navaari is part of that because he fostered Thrawn and then you. I believe some of the rules are relaxed because Thrawn is actually tied to a different clan, one on Csilla if I am not mistaken. I, by virtue of being your guardian and having saved your life, am now included in that circle as well because I am responsible for you, peripherally at least. Dantassi rules are complicated as is their clan structure. I always wanted to be a part of it and now, to some extent I am. I owe that to you."

"Now this really does sound like a bad Holloway novel." I grumbled.

"Perhaps it does at that." He nodded with a smile, "But it isn't as if your life, till now, has been dull and quiet either."

I only shrugged in response, "So do you get to wear a mask?"

"That has not been discussed as of yet but it does allow Navaari to bear his face in front of me and for me, should I ever go to Hjal to be allowed to see as well as be seen within the confines of the enclave once it has been approved by an elder. As I said, Dantassi laws are

complex but between you and that Admiral of yours you have managed to bend them in some interesting ways.”

“Yeah, I get told that frequently.” I said with a sigh. “Do you think Navaari told Za’ar this story?”

My uncle shook his head. “No, I know he has not nor would your mate ask, unlike you, he understands that some things must be kept hidden. I have a place in your tribe, in your other world because of what happened very recently not because of what I did all those years ago and should that particular tale ever make it to the wrong ears then the fallout for Navaari would be messy.”

I nodded. “Then your secret will stay safe with me.”

“I appreciate that.”

“So how did you learn Cheunh because the Dantassi version of that language is different yet you understood Thrawn and me when we spoke with each other when you brought him the Mandalorian Armour?”

My uncle gave me a slow smile. “You think you are the only one who has ways of getting such information?” he asked. “Part of my later training was to infiltrate the Unknown Regions and spend time learning the ways and customs of the peoples who lived out in that area of space. I knew enough Dantassi to understand the Chiss, as you well know the two languages are very similar, so learning Cheunh was not that hard.”

“Can you speak it?”

“Not as well as you but I would get by.”

I sighed. “That’s a hell of a story, Zte’sa.”

He gave a short laugh. “I am quite certain when your children ask about your life and you tell them all that has happened to you they will reply in much the same way.”

“Maybe, though right now it doesn’t seem as fantastic as it does insane.” I nodded thoughtfully. “So what will you do now? I mean now that the hunt for Jyrki is over? Did you ever find out if he was your son or not?”

Uncle Vahlek looked at me for a moment. “Even if he was born of my seed he was never my son and no I don’t know but I also no longer wish to either.” He sipped at his drink, “As for what I will do next, well I have work. In fact work that will take me away fairly soon

so if you plan on staying here until that art auction Bedi was mentioning, I’d be happy if you’d look after the kids for me.”

“What sort of a job?” I asked.

“The sort of job I do not discuss with nosey young women no matter how much I may love them.”

“Are you working for Thrawn?” I pressed.

He sighed. “I will say no but you will know I am lying so you have your answer.”

I stared at him for a second while pieces of a puzzle suddenly clicked into place. “He’s asked you to go to Wayland for him hasn’t he?”

There was a very long moment of silence and then my uncle downed the last of his brandy. “It’s late, I’m tired and I am not discussing this with you.”

“Wayland is dangerous.”

This statement earned me a hard stare. “You never answered my question about looking after the jaxes.”

I heaved a very large sigh and gritted my teeth then nodded. “Yes, I will take care of them.”

“Thank you.”

“We’re not going to talk about this at all?”

He got up and cupped my face with his hand. “No.” He said as he kissed the top of my head. “I have divulged enough secrets for one night. Go to bed and get some sleep, child.”

I watched as he left the living room but I stayed where I was. My head was buzzing with everything he had told me and this last little piece of information was like a knife dragged through my chest. Wayland was a bad place, it had been cropping up in my dreams and I didn’t want my uncle going there. I didn’t want anyone I loved going there but I didn’t think that what I wanted played any part in what was going to happen and I didn’t know what to do about it.

It was the same dream over and over again.

I knew I was dreaming but I couldn’t stop it from unfolding. I found myself in the facility in Mount Tantiss in the waiting room where the painting called Palpatine Triumphant hung. The sand jiggers in the pit of my belly were worse than ever and I was scared

but I didn't know why. The Emperor was dead, Lord Vader had killed him, thrown him down a shaft on the second death star. I didn't know how I had come to this place or why I was here. Suddenly, out of nowhere one of the Emperor's advisors appeared, sour faced and sallow skinned. I jumped when he spoke.

"Come with me Miss." He said in a voice that was like sandpaper on metal.

Without word or protest I followed the man and marvelled at how his feet made no sound on the polished stone floor. We walked for what seemed like forever through a maze of hallways and winding stairwells. I knew this could not be right because the Emperor would never have bothered with stairs, he only ever used turbo lifts. We descended further and further going deeper and deeper into the belly of the mountain until I was sure we would reach the core. I could feel the pressure change on my ears and my heart pounded in my chest. I was frightened but also curious.

We reached our destination, a set of doors at the end of a long dim corridor, the advisor whose name I didn't know stopped and pulled open the great set of double doors, gesturing for me to walk through them. I stepped hesitantly out on to the large platform and gasped. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting but what I saw was not it. As far as my eye could see the walls were lined with large tubes of transparasteel, each one held a body, a clone. The sight made my stomach turn. I closed my eyes because the images that flooded through my head were painful and made me dizzy. When I turned around to tell the person who brought me to this place that I wanted to return home I came face to face with the Emperor. His face was a wrinkled wreck and his laughter felt like claws down my back.

"I told you if you wanted to learn more you would have to come to me." He said reaching out to caress my face with gnarled fingertips. "And here you are, too curious to stay away. I knew you would return to me. It is your destiny."

I took a step back from him. "You're dead." I whispered, shaking my head in denial at what I saw.

He laughed. "I am never dead, child." He said and for a moment he seemed to blur out of existence and then shifted back, changing his appearance from that of decrepit and old to that of a

handsome, virulent man. He was powerful and young but in his eyes I saw him as he really was, malevolent and ancient."

"How is this possible?" I whispered taking another step back.

"The dark side is a path to many abilities, child. You have no idea but I could show you. I could teach you so much. You have talents that could be of use." He said. "I told you that you cannot escape me."

"Why are you doing this?" I asked gesturing to the clones below me.

"I want my Empire back." He hissed.

"Grand Admiral Thrawn is working on that." I burst out.

His smile was cruel and terrifying. "Yes, he does my bidding well, does he not?"

"Your bidding?"

"Do you think, child, that he starts this war on a whim? Nothing in this galaxy happens without my knowing about it."

I shook my head. "No. He never does anything on a whim." I murmured softly. Wondering if Thrawn really did know about that the Emperor was alive.

The Emperor cackled, "Except for you, child." He said snidely. "You were unexpected. His attachment to you was very unexpected, but useful." He took a step towards me. His face kept shifting from old to youthful and back again as though he could not decide which phase he should stay in.

I stepped back one more step and felt the railing of the platform at my back. "Unexpected?"

Palpatine's grin was full of teeth and malice. "Such a pretty distraction, no wonder he doesn't want you to come here. My guardian would have such fun with you."

"What guardian? Why are you hiding here anyway, why are you not helping him win back your empire?"

"I will return when the time is right and Mitth'raw'nuruodo will pave the way." He snarled. "You will be the incentive to make sure he succeeds!" He added and reached to grab me but I pushed him away. "You cannot hide, little one, I can feel you through the force, did you think I could not?" He snickered.

"No." I said shaking my head, suddenly terrified. I thought that I was free of him; I thought that with his death I no longer had to

worry about the Emperor and his terrible plans. I took one more step away before he could touch me. The railing at my back gave way and I fell backwards into the abyss of cloning tubes, screaming as I went.

My screams echoed about the room as I woke, soaked from sweat shivering from fear. I wept then, something I hadn't done because of a nightmare in a very long time but these dreams scared me even more than the ones in which I saw Thrawn die. For three days the tension in the house had been uncomfortable and the dreams had been far more vivid than normal. My uncle had been distant and I had been cranky. The subject of Wayland lay between us, a rift that made being in the same room difficult because I wanted to ask and he refused to speak of it. Since our late night conversation I had woken each night from the same terrible dream stifling my screams with my fists. I sighed and got out of bed and went to shower. By the time I was dressed my uncle was awake and making 'caf. It was just past five in the morning.

"You're up early." I mumbled.

"You are a hell of an alarm clock, child." He said looking at me with worry.

I sighed as stood leaning against the wall in the archway between the kitchen and the living room, "I'm going to Mos Eisley today." I said after an uncomfortable silence.

He nodded. "Bedi will be glad to see you and it will be good for you to stop putting off dealing with the task at hand. The sooner you get all of Kit's things sorted out the better I think. Maybe your nightmares will stop then."

"I've told you, my nightmares have nothing to do with going through papa's things." I said sulkily.

"I hear you screaming, Lei'lei." He said softly, "If the dreams are not about what happened to Kit or what took place on Ando Prime then just what are they about? Are you dreaming of Palpatine again?" He poured the 'caf, and placed two cups on the kitchen table. He fed the jaxes and sliced some fruit which he set in a bowl on the table. I remained silent and sulky, my resentment and anger exacerbated by the terrible images that haunted me in my sleep.

"Sit, eat and listen to me." He said in a tone of voice he rarely used. He was fed up with my moods and a little worried although he didn't come out and say it.

Too tired to argue I did as he asked and picked a piece of fruit out of the bowl to nibble on.

"I know you are cross with me but my business with Admiral Thrawn has nothing to do with you. You are his bond mate not his second in command, no matter how much you might like to think so. He keeps his work separate from his private life and that is exactly how it should be. He told me you would get yourself all worked up if I told you what I was contracted to do for him so I didn't but you are getting better at putting the pieces together and I wonder if even he's figured that out yet." He said as he sat down and pushed a cup of stim'caf towards me. "What is it about this place, Wayland that has you looking like death warmed over every time the name gets mentioned?"

I eyed him with a scowl and sipped the 'caf. It was very strong and unusually bitter. "It's a bad place." I mumbled as if that explained everything.

He gave me a small smile. "Yes, I gathered that, which is why you have been asked to stay away from it. Now tell me everything you know about it and why you are so obsessed with it."

I chewed my piece of fruit slowly, trying to organise my thoughts. "It was the Emperor's private store house, his personal fortress for all the things he wanted kept private. I only saw a very small part of it."

"It was obviously enough to make you go a little crazy." He retorted.

"I see it in my dreams sometimes." I replied carefully.

"The ones that have you screaming awake in the early hours of the morning?"

I nodded.

"I thought you did not recall what they were about?"

I made a face. "I lied; sometimes I do remember although I wish that wasn't the case."

"Ah." He said happy to finally be getting to the heart of the matter. "And that's reason enough for you to want to go tearing across the galaxy into almost certain danger in spite of being asked not to?"

I shrugged. "It's a terrible place. Being there was like having bees burning in my brain but these dreams, they mean something;

they are trying to tell me something, and whatever that is, it's important."

He shook his head, puzzled. "What exactly do you mean?"

"I feel as though I am forgetting something, a detail that is part of a larger picture, like the last piece of a puzzle." I said with a sigh, "It's always this way with these types of dreams. It's a message but this time I don't understand it. He's dead, the Emperor, he's dead. The empire fell apart, it's been over eight years and the New Republic has control over nearly two thirds of the Empire so if he has the ability to clone himself with all his power and all of his memories intact then why would he wait so long to come back and re-establish his right as ruler? Why?"

Uncle Vahlek looked at me for a second as though he were trying to decipher a new code. "Honestly, Lei'lei I'm making allowances because it's so early but you're really not making much sense. Tell me everything you remember about the facility, everything and do not leave a single detail out." He said.

"Wayland's in the Ojsoster Sector but I don't know exactly where. Lord Vader punched in the coordinates himself. The actual fortress is deep in a mountain and it's some sort of a store house, I think, for all of his treasures that he didn't have at the Imperial palace." I said evasively.

"Treasures?" He asked.

I shrugged. "I was stuck in a waiting room and it was full of rare and precious arts works. I got the impression this place was where he kept all the things he coveted and didn't want to share with anyone else. I was forbidden to move outside the room under pain of death and when I was called before the Emperor, I was taken directly to his audience chamber. I didn't see much else. But I can tell you this even Lord Vader was afraid of that place. He would never say it or even show it but I felt it. We were tied by something, a bond, which allowed me to know things about him occasionally and I could sense his fear. Wayland held secrets that worried him, made him nervous. I haven't thought about the place I a long time but now it's the only thing on my mind and I don't know why." I was rambling.

For a long moment my uncle just regarded me and then he said, "Stop avoiding the real issue. Tell me about these dreams."

I took a large gulp of 'caf and thought about how to unravel the weirdness of the nightmares which had been plaguing me. Even bringing the memory of them back made my stomach turn. It must have shown on my face because Uncle Vahlek's expression softened as he reached over and placed his hand over mine, saying; "Lei'lei, you're sitting my kitchen and you're perfectly safe. What do you see in these night terrors?"

I drew a deep breath and began to describe my nightmares as best I could. He sat, listening without interrupting and frowned when I finished.

"What do you think it all means?" He asked.

I shook my head. "Nothing, maybe everything. I don't know." It was the truth. I was missing something and it was driving me crazy.

"You've mentioned this idea of him cloning before. Do you think that the cloning facility is real?"

I shrugged. "I don't know that either, Zte'sa, maybe. There was a rumour around the palace that the Emperor had the ability to clone, but I don't know if it's real. I told Thrawn about it because he was searching for answers, for ways to increase his numbers. It was just a possibility; I saw something when I was running around Coruscant, you know before all hell broke loose, and I thought it may be what he was looking for, but it is all just bits and pieces and what-ifs, nothing concrete. Whatever it is that is there is bad and I am dreaming about it, drawn to it. The answer to something is there I just don't know what exactly."

"Maybe the place is not the key, maybe it is something else. You just dream of this particular place because you associate it with Palpatine, you associate it with a bad experience."

"Maybe. It was the first time he used my talent for reading the memories off objects." I shuddered.

"Then step away from it for a while and maybe the answer will come to you sideways."

"I am so tired of this. I thought the emperor was gone for good and now I can't get him out of my head." I spat. "He died at Endor, I felt it and now he haunts me in my dreams as though nothing ever happened." I shook my head. "What the hell does this ghost want from me?" I yelled, thumping the table crossly with my fist.

Uncle Vahlek stared at me and then at his cup for a very long time. “How much time do you think you will spend in Mos Eisley?” He asked abruptly changing the subject.

“I don’t want to overnight at the docking bay if that’s what you are asking.” I said quietly. “There are too many memories, I don’t want to shock the hell out of Bedi by waking the entire house up with my screams, and...,” I shrugged, “...and I don’t feel at home there any more.”

“So just for the day?”

I nodded. “If we can get what has to be done in that time frame yeah.”

“I will let Bedi know to expect us then.”

“Us?”

“Yes, us. Given your current state of mind I don’t think I am letting you out of my sight. I, too, made a promise.” He said with a sigh, getting up to refill our cups. “I intend to keep it. So there will be no arguments about this from you, besides Bedi has been wanting us both to come to dinner ever since she heard I returned home safe and sound.”

I just nodded. I had been dreading going back to the docking bay because it meant having to help Bedi go through my father’s things and his papers. I didn’t want to deal with it; I didn’t want to deal with any of it.

“If you hurry up and get ready we can catch the early shuttle out and be in Mos Eisley by eight.” He said, a not so subtle hint to get up off my behind and get moving.

The trip to Mos Eisley was quiet and uneventful. The shuttle was full of the usual commuters but we had arrived early enough to get a seat. The walk from the shuttle port to the docking bay was a painful reminder every step of the way that I was going back to a home that no longer had my father. The sudden ache of loss was painful. I sighed and Uncle Vahlek wrapped his arm around my shoulder as we jostled our way through the morning crowds. It felt as though I had not been in Mos Eisley for centuries, as though everything had changed even though it was exactly the same as it had been a few days ago.

Bedi was waiting for us and her hug was warm and loving. “Bel will be so sorry she missed you all, she went to visit her sister for the

week.” She said. “She needed to get out of the house and ...well...you know how it is.”

I nodded. I knew and understood. Bel had been a part of the family for almost as long as I could remember, in many ways she was like a sister to me. She had loved and looked up to my father and his death had torn her apart. Though she would never voice it I got the feeling that a little part of her blamed me for what had happened and I wasn’t sure that she was wrong either. I turned down Bedi’s offer of tea in favour of getting straight to work and headed to papa’s office. I had not reckoned on the flood of memories which assaulted me when I walked into his room, nor had I been ready for the sudden tears which sprang to my eyes unwanted and unstoppable. I was grateful that Uncle Vahlek and Bedi were still in the kitchen, giving me some time alone. Grief had a terrible way of slapping me in the face and I never got used to it. Once I got over the crying jag I went to work and began the task of dismantling my father’s life.

When Bedi knocked on the door to tell me lunch was ready I was a little surprised that so much time had passed and even more surprised to find out that I was hungry. Over lunch we all spoke of inconsequential things and then once there was no more to eat and no more small talk to make I went back to sorting out the paperwork in my father’s office, this time Bedi came with me to help and I was grateful.

“Why did papa keep all of this junk?” I asked looking at the piles we had sorted out.

Bedi sat back against the desk and smiled sadly. “He was such a pack-rat. He never threw anything out.” She said. “He kept receipts for things that were destroyed or lost ages ago.”

“Well most of this rubbish can get thrown out or taken to the recycle plant.” I said gesturing around the room. “I found the deeds and I’ll get the changes done so the properties are all in yours and Bel’s names.”

“I’ll agree with this only if your name stays on the leases as well.” She said with a sigh. “You will not shut us out. I know you want to, I know you think if you do it will help heal the hole in your heart but trust me it won’t. I need you and so does Bel.”

I stared at her for a second and then nodded. "I think I'd like a cup of tea." I said quietly. "I'll send the additions to the paperwork tomorrow. I can do that from Uncle Vahlek's house."

"You won't stay here? I've kept fresh linens on the bed for you."

I shook my head. "It's too soon, Bedi."

"I understand." She said quietly but she was disappointed and sad.

"I will, I promise, but..." I stopped as more tears welled up in my eyes. I sighed angrily as I brushed them away.

"But it's too soon, I understand." She nodded. "When you are ready, it will be waiting for you." She said. "You can always return here, it's your home Merly, no matter what you think." She patted my knee and got up from the floor. "I'll go make tea shall I?"

"Please, I'll be there in a moment." I said and watched as she left the office quietly.

I stood up and walked around my father's desk, brushing my fingers across its smooth surface. Memories of my father bubbling into my head, making me miss him all the more, images of him sitting at his desk, sorting through papers, reading, and doing ordinary every day things. These memories hurt and I sat down hard in the chair. If I closed my eyes I could almost see him, bring his presence into focus but he ache of loss overrode my desire to remember and I opened my eyes again quickly. I had loved this room as a child; the walls were lined with shelves full of books and strange souvenirs from all over the galaxy. Each item had a story to tell and my father had loved to tell them. I didn't need to touch them to remember. I sighed as I stared at the shelves, my thoughts drifting to the small library that the Emperor had given me access to in the palace on Coruscant. He had emptied the room out so that when I had returned only a few items had remained including the memory of him. Unwanted, his voice whispered in my mind;

"If you wish to further your education about the force and its intricacies you must come to me little one."

I shivered at the echo of his voice. He had known I would come back to Coruscant, come back to the library and he had planted this memory for me to find. You must come to find me... he had said but where? Coruscant was in the hands of the New Republic now and I had promised I would not go to Wayland. Thrawn's insistence and the

fear underneath his words scared me enough to want to honour my promise, for now, which meant that if I wanted an answer to my question then I had to find another way, another place to look, but where?

"Merly, tea's ready!" Bedi called, breaking my train of thought.

I sighed as I got up and went to leave but as I did a small, holo capture tucked between two books in the bookshelf by the door caught my eye. I picked it up and stared at it. It was of my parents sitting by water on a beach but I had never seen it before. I took it with me to the kitchen and showed it to Bedi as I sat down to join both her and my uncle at the table. She smiled as she took the picture from my hands.

"They went to Naboo for their honeymoon." She said, "This picture was taken by the beach at the resort, she taught your father to swim there."

"Swim?" I asked.

Bedi nodded, "Your father was Tatoine born and bred and he couldn't swim so she taught him on their honeymoon."

Uncle Vahlek chuckled, "I remember her talking about that, she said that teaching Kit to swim was a little like trying to teach a bantha to fly."

I laughed but my mind was buzzing. I had been so focused on Wayland that I had forgotten about one of the Emperor's most important retreats. It was a place that I knew well enough but that had most likely been forgotten by almost everyone else, the Imperial retreat on Naboo. Palpatine had left a trail for me to follow, he had enjoyed games and he was playing one with me now. Even after his death at Endor his touch, cold and cruel remained. As I sat in the kitchen drinking tea with what was left of my family I realized that if I wanted some answers to the questions flying around my head then I would have to go and look for them. I had promised Thrawn I would stay away from Wayland and I would honour that promise if I could, but I had not given my word to stay away from Coruscant or Naboo.

Two days after we had returned from Mos Eisley, when I told my Uncle I wanted to go to Naboo he didn't have much to say about it. Naboo was not on the list of dangerous places I was not allowed to visit. I had used the excuse of wanting to get away for a small holiday and that seemed to appease his worries a little.

“I’ll be back before you leave so I can look after the jaxes. I need to be here before the art auction anyway, I promised Za’ar I’d have information ready for him about it before he makes planet side.” I had said as I had packed.

Uncle Vahlek had nodded. “Where will you be staying so I can reach you if I need to?”

“I booked a room in the main hotel in Dee’ja Peak. I’m told the waterfall there is something everyone should see at least once in their lives. Bedi said it’s where my parents spent the first week of their honeymoon.”

He had smiled. “Yes it is worth seeing and it was something your mother was bound and determined to show your father. She loved Naboo a lot, I think she spent a fair amount of time there as a child with her own family.”

“I’ll have my comm with me.” I had added as I finished my packing. “I just need to get away for a while and Bedi put the idea in my head to go to Naboo. I liked the planet the last time I was there; I felt a sense of peace. I need to get away and think and I can’t do that here.” I had said as if that explained it all and had hoped that he would accept this without digging further.

He had walked with me to the shuttle port in Wayfar and had kissed me on the forehead as I had hugged him before departing.

“Whatever it is you are looking for,” He had said softly in my ear, “I hope you find it with the minimum of bloodshed.”

“Me too.” Had been my reply and I had boarded the small shuttle to the Mos Espa Space Port without looking back.

The transport to Naboo was quiet. This did not surprise me because it was, I had been told by the travel agent I had booked the flights through, the off season for holidaying on Naboo. It felt odd to be using a public transport but my ship was on Nirauan and I had not wanted to take my father’s old cargo runner even though Bedi had offered it. It was easier to blend in and be anonymous by taking public transportation and I had wanted to attract as little attention as possible. I had booked a small cabin for the trip which would take longer on the transport ship than had I flown in my own but I didn’t mind, it gave me time to think. I had not really been joking when I had told Uncle Vahlek I needed to get away, that part had been true and surprisingly enough my first night on board the *Narmle Pearl III*

slept all the way through with no nightmares at all. When we landed at the Theed spaceport, several days later, I felt better rested than I had in ages. It was early morning and raining when I disembarked.

The shuttle to Dee’ja peak was busy with people commuting to work. It felt surreal to be on this world after so many years away from it. I had forgotten how lush and how green it was, especially when compared to the barren deserts of the planet I had just left. I was surprised to find myself shivering because I felt so cold and was glad I had brought along a long, warm coat. It was too easy for me to get used to Tatooine’s shimmering heat.

The town of Dee’ja Peak was stunningly beautiful and I gasped at the sight of it when I stepped off the shuttle stopping mid stride to stand in awe at what I was looking at. My awe was short lived as the person behind me shoved into me cursing while trying to get past. Early morning rush traffic and I was in the way, holding things up. With a sigh I moved forward with the rest of the people pouring into the town from the small shuttle port and went in search of the hotel. It wasn’t hard to find and it was not busy. The droid who was working at the check in counter gave me a package with tourist information as well as my key card once I had signed in.

“I’m afraid the official tours only run once every two days Miss Gabriel, this is the off season and it is quite quiet this year.” He explained almost apologetically.

I smiled. “That’s fine, I’d rather explore on my own. Is there anywhere to rent a speeder around here?” I asked.

“Oh yes, you may rent one from the hotel if you like. We have a nice selection of vehicles for you to choose from, if you would... and I can charge that to the room bill.”

“Great.” I said and picked out the smallest, least expensive two seat vehicle, an AB-one land-speeder. It would do for what I wanted even though it wasn’t the fastest one offered. I thanked the droid again as he handed me the key to the vehicle and wished me a pleasant stay. I took my bags and went in search of my room. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the room I had been given was not only airy and spacious but also had a stunning view of the Dee’ja Peak waterfall.

Dee’ja Peak was nestled in the Gallo Mountains of Naboo which mean the town had great views and incredibly beautiful scenery surrounding it. The main attraction was the waterfall which was

considered a very large point of interest for visitors. It was impressive to look at although not quite as impressive as the waterfall in Theed. Dee'ja Peak had been one of the earliest human settled places on the planet but unlike Theed or Kaadara it had never managed to obtain the growth or stature and had remained small and unobtrusive. During the Emperor's rule it was the center of all things imperial and most of the civilians who worked at the retreat but who did not want to live there had found apartments in Dee'ja Peak.

I sat on one of the small comfortable chairs in the room and sighed noisily. I was tired from the long trip although I had slept well on board the transport. After a small one sided debate with myself I decided on having a bath, a luxury I had sorely missed on Tatooine and then maybe some breakfast that didn't all taste the same, after that I would start the real reason I came out here. By mid after noon it was sufficiently warm for me not to be huddled in a thick sweater. I had eaten lunch in my room while browsing the HoloNet but I didn't find anything of use and if Thrawn was out there creating havoc for the New Republic the HoloNews nets were not talking about it. I changed into traveling clothes and packed a small satchel with things I might need then went down stairs to go and find my speeder. It had been many years since I was here and I hoped that my memory of the location for the Imperial Retreat was accurate other wise I'd be driving around the planet for no good reason at all.

I wasn't sure what I would find out at the Retreat, I wasn't sure if it was even still there so I was very grateful when I came up over the hill to see the main building still standing. I slowed the speeder and manoeuvred it around the trails which had over grown until I came to the small house that I had once stayed in. La'yalla creeper had taken over one of the walls completely and I didn't have to use any force sense to know it was deserted. When I tried the front door it was locked so I left it alone. My memories of this place were happy ones; I didn't feel the need to see the decay which had set in. I sighed as I started the speeder's engine up and headed towards the main Retreat building. At the height of the Emperor's reign this had been a busy place but towards the latter years he had frequented it less and less leaving the bulk of the imperial administrative work to his advisers especially Sate Pestage. When I had last been here the compound had

been full of workers and navy personnel now the place was deserted and ghost like.

I parked the speeder a little ways away, half hidden by trees and scrub bushes which had long been left to over grow the once cultivated gardens and made my way around to the back of the building to the lake side where I knew of a small set of stairs which would lead me to the balcony and hopefully a way in. I stopped on the wide sweeping balcony and stared out over the lake. It was every bit as beautiful as I remembered it to be and a wash of memories, mostly concerning Thrawn, made me smile. If I closed my eyes I could picture him standing next to me, whispering his seductive words in my ear, a thought which sent a wave of warmth shoot through my body. It seemed like an age since that moment and I sighed as I turned away from the view of the lake to try and find a way into the building without setting off any alarms. I considered using the lightsaber, the one that had once belonged to my mother, that I had brought with me on a whim but then I decided to try one of my imperial personal codes instead and much to my shock this actually worked. The side door snicked opened softly and I slipped in quietly like one of my uncle's jaxes.

The retreat was dark, silent and smelled of disuse. It seemed strange that the building was completely intact and abandoned but then again maybe it had been overlooked and forgotten by the New Republic who had better things to do than look after an old Imperial hideaway. I made my way through the quiet hall until I reached the main foyer. The building had been built in Old Nubian style, with high, ornate ceilings and polished stone floors had been beautiful but now signs of neglect were creeping in. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust and decorated with lacy cobwebs. No one had been here in a very long time.

First I made my way to the library; it seemed the best place to begin a search especially since I wasn't even sure what it was I was looking for exactly. The large door slid open silently for me and I stepped through it cautiously. The huge room was full of shadows and floor to ceiling stacks which had once been full of data-books and chips but which now stood empty. The scent of decay was stronger in here than anywhere else I had been so far, probably due to the damaged electronics which lay strewn about carelessly. I looked at the

shelves which had been stripped bare, this had once been one of the best information centers in the Empire, now, the data-files which had been left behind had been destroyed beyond repair and everything else was gone, wiped clean. I bit my lip as I found an access terminal, hoping that the main computer system was still online even though I doubted the databanks would be intact. It would have been fool hardy for any imperial to leave a place such as this accessible to the Rebels, especially the data. I tapped into the computer and was not surprised to find nothing remained on the public data core. No matter what code I typed I got the same response, <>. I was certain the data core had been wiped. There wasn't much else in the library that I would find useful so I left. For a moment I hesitated and then headed down the long hallways to the turbo lift which would take me down to the subbasements and the hidden suite of rooms which had been Lord Vader's.

The turbo lift doors opened onto darkness and for a moment I felt a wave of panic sweep through me but I squashed it quickly. There was nothing here and no one had been here in a long time. I dug out the small hand held light from my satchel and made my way to the small set of doors at the end of the corridor. The door was locked but I had access codes which Lord Vader himself had given me and they overrode the universal lock out. I stepped into the dark room holding my breath and only let it out when the door closed behind me. I fumbled for the light switch and was pleasantly surprised when one of the small side lights flickered on. Using the keypad I locked the door so that even if someone else was here they couldn't get in.

It felt odd to be in his rooms because even though he had never spent much time here a sliver of his presence remained and suddenly I missed him sharply. That terrible sense of loss rode up and made me sad in a way I could never seem to quite understand. Lord Vader had never liked being on Naboo, it reminded him too sharply of his long dead wife, Padmé Amidala. These memories made his already legendary temper even more volatile and violent so he had usually sequestered himself down in these isolated rooms when he was here, it was the safest thing for all concerned. The Emperor had taken a perverse delight in making sure that Lord Vader had spent time on the planet, knowing it made him edgy and peevish. Palpatine liked to unbalance people and this had been a sure fire way to rattle Lord

Vader's cage. I went to the desk on the far side of the wall which had once been mine to use and sat down. I probably should not have been surprised when the screen came up blank regardless of what access code I typed in but I was. I sat back in the chair and sighed because this meant there was only one more place to go to find information here and it was the last place I wanted to visit.

I made my way back through the hallway to the narrow corridor at the end and stepped into the turbo lift. The Emperor's private chambers were on the highest floor as usual. He had had a penchant for being above everyone else and here at the retreat had been no different. I half expected the lift to be on lock-down but it responded to my touch, my fingers tingling as I brushed against the control panel. There were no real memories but an after image of Sate Pestage came to mind and absently my fingers retraced the pattern he had made over the keypad. When the turbo lift lurched upward my stomach lurched with it.

I stepped out of the lift when the doors opened, half expecting to be challenged by members of the Royal guard but the hall was as empty as the rest of the building. It was eerie and disorienting. I walked silently down the dark empty hall, unsure of where I was headed exactly. Unlike the Imperial palace, I did not know the lay out of the Retreat that well and I didn't have a set of blue prints to help me along. I tried each and every door I came across but either the door was locked or the rooms were empty. It seemed that while the retreat had been left standing intact who ever had been in charge of it last had not been asleep and had made sure the place had been stripped of all that was important. I suspected that Sate Pestage had taken care of this. If this were the case, it would not have surprised me; he had been Palpatine's right hand, Palpatine's shadow he had been called, taking care of all the day to day aspects of running the empire and essentially acting as Palpatine personal assistant. Everyone thought that Pestage would take over leadership of the Empire after the Emperor's death but Isard had not allowed that to happen. If Pestage had been a force user I had never felt it but he had been clever and the Emperor had trusted him. I sighed loudly out of frustration because I felt as though I was getting nowhere.

Palpatine's audience chamber was on the top floor of the complex. The aura of power that had surrounded him in life had not

diminished any in this place and I shuddered as I stepped out of the turbo lift. The chamber was vast, darkly lit and sparsely furnished, designed this way to instill a sense of awe and fear. I walked to the throne and stared at it for a moment before laying my hand on one of the arm rests. If I had been expecting a barrage of images and memoirs of the man who had once sat in this chair I was sadly disappointed. All I felt was a cold caress of a papery hand across the back of my neck. *“Not here, child.”* I shivered and sat down on the cold stone floor in frustration. I had been here for hours and found nothing, yet I had felt pulled to the Retreat and usually these feelings held some truth so the fact that there was nothing here puzzled and annoyed me. I looked at my chrono, it was late and the last thing I wanted to do was take the speeder back to Dee’ja Peak in the dark, driving oalong unfamiliar paths through wooded areas of Naboo but I didn’t particularly want to spend the rest of the night in this complex either. I made my way back down to the main rotunda and slipped behind the concierge’s counter. I smiled when I found what I was looking for, the entrance key for the small house I had once lived in tucked at the very back of the drawer where no one could find it.

The small residence was dark and still as I opened the door. No one had been here in a long time, in fact I doubted anyone had used this place since I had been here. No one liked this particular building because they believed it was haunted and because it was so far away from the main Retreat complex. I had been given it as a place to stay while working here because there had been no other housing available but I had not been unhappy about it. It had been a blessing to live so far away from the main complex and the little house which had been designed for two people had been completely mine, I had not had to share it. It was in a quiet area, surrounded by trees with a nice view of the lake.

Without turning on the lights, and being as quiet as I could I moved through the place quickly. Once I had done a cursory sweep through to make sure I was really alone and not sharing the house with any creatures that might have found a way in I breathed a small sigh of relief. Everything was exactly as I had left it, at least that is what my cursory first glance told me and touching furniture confirmed that no one else had come here since I had lived in it, at least not to stay for any extended period of time. Once I felt secure

that there really was no one else here, I turned on the lights and began to dig through the kitchen cupboards hoping to find the half bottle of brandy I had left behind by mistake. I was not disappointed. Grabbing it and a glass I made my way to the living room and plunked down on the small couch. It was only then that I noticed a book on the small table in front of the couch and it sent a shiver down my spine. The book was old, ancient in fact and I had not left it here which meant someone else had. I knew without touching who that person had been and the knowledge turned my stomach. *Let’s get this over with shall we,* I thought to myself and reached over to pick the heavy book up. The memory was short and to the point. Palpatine’s voice shot through my mind like a slap and it was painful.

I have not forgotten you child. I have not forgotten any of those who have served me. You came here too seek out knowledge but nothing remains. There are no vast libraries of information save that which I choose to create and in order to find them you will have to come to me. When the time is right you will know where and then you will be ready to begin your internship under my guiding hand.

I shuddered as I let the book fall back on the table. Even from beyond the grave he could still scare the hell out of me. I sighed as I poured a generous glass of brandy and sat back against the couch. The drink’s bite and burn was a welcome distraction against the internal cold that Palpatine’s touch created. Is this why I had come here, to find this book with its cryptic message from a man now eight years dead? As I rested my head on the back of the couch and closed my eyes Thrawn’s words about ascribing Palpatine too much credit came back to haunt me. Was I, I wondered. Palpatine had been the most powerful force user in the Galaxy for as long as I had been alive and for as long as he had known of me he had been a subtle and occasionally a not so subtle guiding hand, pushing me towards a place in his coterie of force users but that had been interrupted when Lord Vader and his son, Luke, had destroyed Palpatine at the battle of Endor. How much had Palpatine really foreseen? I was certain the Emperor had taken steps to protect himself and his empire but had he really been able to come back from the grave?

I took a large gulp of brandy and let out the breath I had been holding noisily. Exhaustion was slowly creeping over my body the way the brandy’s warmth crept down my insides. What would Palpatine

want with me anyway? My talents, such as they were, were limited and small. Even the gift of reading memory from objects would have been a parlour trick in comparison to his skills and abilities. If he had managed to somehow survive and now lived then why had he not returned to claim his empire? Why had he not at least shown himself to Thrawn and sent him aid on the task which now lay ahead of the last of his Grand Admirals? I was certain that if Palpatine had made plans to come back from the dead he would not be doing so without military might to back him up, so where was it? None of this made sense to me, least of all these not so subtle clues left behind for me to find, suggesting I go off on some mad search across the galaxy so I could find and be trained by the man I feared the most, a man who was dead or supposed to be. Yet, he had removed all the libraries, his libraries of knowledge. Every place I went in search of answers had been stripped of them, only a single memory left behind for me to find. It was jarring and annoying.

I kicked at the book on the table with my foot, sending it flying to the floor where it landed opened paged, like a wounded bird. Something small and shiny tumbled out of the spine, which had cracked, and rolled under the table. Curious, I picked it up examining it carefully. It was an identity chip, something often used to tag and bind objects to a particular place, person or building. Somewhere in the chip was a code which gave the location of the origin of the object so that it could be returned to the owner but this one was old, a lot older than I had ever seen used within the Imperial Palace and it lacked the typical palace markings. I clutched it in my fist and willed it to give me a clue, give up some memory of where it had come from and when it did I was beyond surprised because it had nothing to do with the Emperor at all and everything to do with finding information. This book had been stolen by the Imperials from the great library on Obroa Skai, a world I had forgotten about but one my mother had mentioned often enough because it was purported to be the largest and most complete repository of knowledge in the entire galaxy.

I picked up the book, an old copy of fantastic tales about force users in the time before the Empire, and set it back on the table. I flipped through it carefully looking for other clues but found nothing of interest, not even the stories it contained held any sway. Whatever he had been thinking Palpatine had underestimated my hatred of him

as well as my own disinterest in becoming one of his dark adepts. I smiled at this thought, because Palpatine had underestimated many things including Lord Vader's love for his son and that had been the Emperor's undoing.

I finished my brandy and lay down on the couch. When sleep came it was dreamless and when I woke up in the morning with the sunlight streaming through the windows making the dust in the air sparkle and dance I smiled. In a backwards way the Emperor's attempt to sway me had actually helped me find a part of what I was looking for and now all I had to do was get the information to my uncle and Thrawn because, while it wasn't an exact pinpointing of Wayland's location, I was sure that somewhere in the vast data collection of the galaxy's largest library of information the coordinates where there, somewhere, and all one had to do was find them. I was pretty certain that this would be an easy task.

I left the house as quietly as I had come, taking the speeder back to the Dee'ja Peak hotel. After I showered and packed I was anxious to leave I had no reason to stay here any more. The desk droid was annoyed when I checked out two days early but didn't complain when I paid in full. I managed to make it to Theed in time to book a passage on a fast shuttle to Tatooine and was grateful to be leaving Naboo and its memories behind. The Retreat and the small house had been places I had enjoyed while I had been there but, like the Empire I had once known, they were now just shadows of memory and I was tired of memories haunting me. It was time to move forward and look to the future, which for now meant preparing for the up and coming art auction, because if Thrawn had been right and the major attraction, a moss painting was really going to be on the auction block then things were going to get interesting.

I was in the middle of my morning 'caf when my uncle returned home. He had decided to try and get some more detailed information about the upcoming auction and had gone to see his Ithorian friend, Baraq at the local archives in Mos Espa. I poured him a large cup of 'caf while he shed his coat, shaking the last of the sand off before sitting at the table and handing me a data pad.

"Thanks," He said wrapping his hands around the cup gratefully. "Bloody big storm coming in. That's the second one in the last two

weeks, unusual for this time of year.” He took a sip of ‘caf, made a face and then reached for the honey. I always made it too strong for his tastes.

Baraq asked after you, sends his condolences about Kit.”

I smiled. Baraq had helped me find information on Anakin Skywalker many years prior and it always surprised me that he actually remembered who I was but really, it shouldn’t have, Ithorians had long memories and Baraq was no exception. “That’s kind of him.”

Uncle Vahlek smiled. “He took a shine to you, it seems.”

I nodded absently while I scanned the datapad’s contents. “Wow, there’s going to be a lot of people at this auction.” I commented, “And Killik Twilight is definitely the star piece.”

“Yes, Baraq said he has been inundated with information requests about both the painting and the auction.”

“Has the painting been verified?”

“Apparently it is the genuine article; your mother would be saddened to see it auctioned off like this.” Uncle Vahlek replied. “You know it used to hang in the palace on Alderaan? It was on loan for an exhibition on Coruscant when Alderaan was destroyed and then it vanished from sight now it’s reappeared only to be auctioned off in Mos Espa. The painting is priceless really since the techniques for growing moss paintings of this kind were lost along with Alderaan.”

“Mmm.” I said as I took a mouthful of ‘caf. I had seen images of the painting in some of my mother’s art books and it had given me the willies for some strange reason. I didn’t like it very much but I could never have said why. Although, as I thought about it, my reaction to Killik Twilight had been much the same as to the very odd painting that Thrawn had once shown me in his flat on Coruscant. I wondered what had become of that because it had never been hung in the flat and we had never spoken of it again.

As if he could read my mind and know who I was thinking about my uncle said, “By the way, I received a message last night from Thrawn while you were asleep, he said not to wake you; he wanted to let you know that he will be returning to Tatooine four days prior to the auction. He had some pretty choice words about your running off to Naboo by the way.”

I looked up at my uncle crossly, “You told him about that?”

“He said he’d been trying to reach you on your comm. I merely explained why you might not have been answering as I recall you said it had accidentally been turned off?”

“Naboo was not on the list of planets I am forbidden to explore list.” I retorted a little too hotly.

My uncle chuckled. “No, but he is not stupid Lei’lei, he knows you just too well and he also knows that you never seem to do anything without some sort of risk involved, danger follows you around like a hungry jax .”

“Yeah, because visiting Naboo is so darn risky.” I said flatly.

That remark earned me a stare from my uncle which usually froze his prey in their tracks, I wasn’t impressed and just went back to staring at the data pad.

When I didn’t answer him he pressed, “And where was it you decided to go sight seeing while on the lovely, safe home world of our late emperor?”

I blew out a noisy breath. I had told him after I had returned home where exactly I had been but not what I had found there, I didn’t want to run the risk of him up and vanishing to go Wayland hunting before I got a chance to tell Thrawn as well. “I told you, the Retreat was completely deserted.”

“Uh huh. Well I will let you explain that to your Ta’kasta’cariad when he returns. I am quite sure he will be equally as understanding as I was.”

That remark made me sigh and roll my eyes. Uncle Vahlek had hit the roof when I had told him what I had done and where I had been. All of the jaxes had gone running for cover because he had yelled at me so loudly.

“I doubt it, Thrawn doesn’t shout at me.” I mumbled.

Uncle Vahlek shook his head. “Maybe he should start; it might get some sense through to that thick headed skull of yours. You still have not told me what you found there, if anything, which was worth the risk you took.”

I shrugged. “It can wait until Thrawn gets here.”

“It won’t soften his anger you know.”

I shrugged, “I’m used to that.” I said with a little smirk; while the fights were unpleasant the making up part was always fun. “Do you want breakfast?” I asked quickly changing to topic.

“Only if I cook it, the last time I let you near the stove you damn near burned the kitchen down.”

I laughed. “Navaari always says the exact same thing!”

He shook his head at me, making his long silver hair ripple about his face. “How is it, child, that you can fight like a crazed rancor, pilot like a maniac smuggler and survive working with the most feared men in the galaxy but you never learned to cook?”

“Talent can only stretch so far...?” I suggested.

“Maybe if you spent less of your talent getting into trouble and more time learning how to work a stove...”

I just shrugged I didn’t have an answer for that and I was quite content to let others, much better at cooking than I would ever be, do the job and eat well. I went back to reading about the auction while my uncle potted about making my favourite breakfast. The jaxes mewed loudly as they wound their way around his legs in figure of eight patterns until utterly distracted he looked at me.

“Did you feed them?”

“Yep.” I nodded. “But it seems they have learnt the art of deception well.”

“Well, give them a handful each then.”

“That only encourages them to beg, you know.” I retorted but got up to do as he asked. With their tails high the jaxes stopped pestering Uncle Vahlek and sat happily in front of their bowls munching on the small treats.

“This thing is being held at Mawbo’s Performance hall?” I said with some surprise.

“Only place large enough for the crowds this particular auction is going to draw and she has the best security if you discount Imperial Stormtroopers but Baraq thinks it’s got more to do with Mawbo doing a favour for one of her old flames.” He shrugged slightly. “I take it you are planning on attending?”

It was my turn to shrug then, “I guess that depends on Za’ar but I’d like to see it. I am betting it will be interesting to people watch, if nothing else.”

That earned me raised eyebrows from my uncle as he put food filled plates on the table and sat down to eat. “As I said...you and trouble seem to go hand in hand.”

“Well we’ll find out soon enough, won’t we?” I remarked happily, munching my breakfast in contentment.

Thrawn, true to his word, arrived on the planet four days before the art auction was scheduled. He showed up at my uncle’s house in the middle of the night dressed in his Dantassi clothes which hid his identity as an Imperial Officer. He had sent a cryptic comm in Cheunh so we knew to expect him and we were both waiting in the kitchen for him to show up.

In the confines of the base on Nirauan or onboard an Imperial ship I had always been restrained in showing my joy at seeing Thrawn after a separation, we had made it a point to keep our displays of affection very, very private but in the quiet of my Uncle’s kitchen I had no such inhibitions. Once Thrawn had come in, taken off his long coat and mask I made it quite plain just how happy I was to see him again. He suffered my squeal of delight with a smile returning my kiss unabashedly before he untangled himself from my arms in order to greet my uncle.

“Tea or something stronger?” My uncle asked not quite able to wipe the smirk from his face in time.

“If you have brandy that would be most welcome.” Thrawn said, “I take it you won’t mind if I change out of these clothes before we sit?”

“You know where the bedroom is.” I told him with a grin.

“Indeed.” He replied with a bemused smile, picking up his backpack and leaving the kitchen to regain some of his composure.

Once he had washed and changed, then come up to join us in the living room the conversation began in earnest. The first topic on the table was my foray into the Imperial Retreat. I had half expected Thrawn to be angry but instead he listened with his usual quiet calm. I told him everything I could remember including the part about finding the strange book in the little house at which point he frowned and sipped at his brandy thoughtfully.

“So there was nothing on the Retreat Databanks at all?”

I shook my head, “No, even Lord Vader’s secret files were all wiped out. My guess is that Pestage took care of it because he needed to concentrate all of his efforts working from Coruscant. He had consolidated his power and abandoned the smaller, lesser imperial command centers.” I said, “The Retreat was Palpatine’s personal play

ground because he loved Naboo and wanted to spend time there. It would have been a terrible blow if the rebels had found it and managed to raid the computer core for information.”

Thrawn nodded slowly. “For all his faults Pestage thought a lot of things through and he was closer to Palpatine than anyone else, closer perhaps than even Lord Vader.” He paused to take a sip of his drink, “What about this mysterious book you found?”

I shrugged, “I left it there but I have the small ident chip and that came from Obroa-Skai.”

That earned me an arched eyebrow.

I nodded at the unasked question. “I know that Palpatine had the great libraries raided for all materials concerning sith and jedi subjects. It’s my guess that this book was part of that. And before you say anything I didn’t want it. I don’t want anything that has Palpatine’s touch on it. He may be dead but he still scares the hell out of me.”

“So you think that the Obroa-Skai facility will have the location of Wayland?” It wasn’t so much a question as it was a confirmation of something he had already considered.

“Don’t you think that’s possible?” I asked, “Palpatine had the power to have the star maps changed and all information pertaining to the location of planets he didn’t want people to know about removed but Obroa-Skai was never part of the Imperial rule, they remained neutral, he actually had no real power over the Obroans no matter what he liked to think. He only managed to take the jedi related stuff by force but the repositories of information on the planet are vast and even he was smart enough to let well alone. Attacking the Obroans flat out would have been a very big political mistake.”

“Yes, I think I will find what I need there.” He replied thoughtfully then turned to look at my uncle, “So, you mentioned getting more information about the auction?”

My uncle smiled and handed Thrawn the same datapad he had given me to read and the conversation switched to the topic of the art auction. About an hour into the discussion about the dance hall’s lay out I fell asleep, my head resting against Thrawn’s shoulder. When I woke up I was in bed and he was asleep beside me.

I watched the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed in and out, resisting the temptation to stroke the graceful lines of his body. ‘Caf

first I thought and got out of bed to slip upstairs along with the jaxes, who always knew when someone was up. They gathered around me mewling and purring their undying affection in the hopes of food. I started the process of making ‘caf and then shoved food in their bowls, watching with a sleepy smile as they all ran to their dishes, chirping their appreciation. When the caf was done I poured two cups and made my way back down to my bedroom to wake Thrawn up. I didn’t really care what time he had finally gone to bed or gotten to sleep, if he complained about it I would simply remind him about his famous Chiss stamina. I didn’t really have to worry though; he was already awake and waiting for me.

He cupped his hands around the warm mug I offered and sipped the steaming hot drink carefully. “Before you ask, you have me to yourself until after dark tonight then I have to return to the Chimaera and prepare.”

“Do you think that someone from the New Republic will show up for this painting?” I asked, sighing at the shortness of his visit but not saying anything about it.

“Don’t you?”

I shrugged, “I think it would be a pretty risky thing to do.”

“And if I were to tell you that this piece hung in the Palace of Alderaan?”

“I know that already.”

“And who grew up in that palace and saw that painting every day?” He prompted without a trace of sleepiness in his voice.

I yawned. “Ah... you think that Leia Organa will come.”

“Leia Organa Solo.” He corrected.

“Oh yeah...right”

He smiled. “She married Han Solo and not the Hapan prince remember.”

“The galaxy’s most famous bachelor got hitched. How could I forget?”

Thrawn chuckled. “How indeed, any way I suspect they will show up in one disguise or another and I wish to be ready for that.”

“They’ll probably come in the Falcon then. Solo doesn’t trust any other ship, at least he didn’t the last time I saw him which was a very long time ago, and that wookiee he travels with won’t fit in anything

else, the Falcon was specially outfitted for him. He'll have a dozen false transponder codes for sure." I said thoughtfully.

Thrawn nodded, "Yes, I have already taken care of that possibility."

"You plan on blowing them out of the sky?"

"Hardly my dear." He said tartly, "I plan on allowing them to pay for that painting and then I shall apprehend them."

"Oh." I frowned.

"The painting is priceless and it would look very nice in my private war room." He said with a shrug letting me know he wasn't telling me the whole story, but I didn't much care.

"So do you want me there?" I asked looking up at him from the over the rim of my cup.

"Yes, I will have my people there and I have no doubts that they will be made easily enough, in fact I am counting on that but they will not suspect you. Do you have any contacts in the organisational group?"

"No but my uncle might. He spends way more time in Mos Espa than I ever have." I replied. "Do you want another cup?" I asked pointing to the empty cup he held in his hand. He nodded as he handed it to me. When I returned with refills he took his cup from my hands and stared at it thoughtfully for a moment.

"After the auction I'd like you to return to Nirauan, unless of course you wish to remain here." He said.

"No, I'm just hanging out here because of this stupid auction. Most of the time I feel as though I am in Uncle Vahl's way or worse. I need to get back to work before boredom makes me do something crazy." "Crazy?"

I nodded, "Yes crazy like try to find Wayland, try to find out if the Emperor really has come back to life, that sort of crazy."

That annoying eyebrow of his arched about as high as it could. "And you think that me putting you to work on Nirauan or under Ged Larsen's watchful eye will counteract this destructive behaviour?"

I gave him the sweetest smile I could muster and nodded.

"I wish I could believe that." He said with a shake of his head. "You seem to delight in taking risks at every turn why should that change now?"

"Because there are no more people trying to hunt me down and turn me into some sort of elite jedi producing baby factory?" I retorted.

"So you decided to head off to the Imperial Retreat to change that?"

I rolled my eyes and made a face. "It was perfectly safe."

"Lucky for you." He quipped.

"You didn't seem too worried about it when I told you last night?"

"You were expecting fireworks?" He asked coolly. "It seemed a bit pointless to display my displeasure, the deed was already done and, as you so smugly pointed out, Naboo was not forbidden to you. I did, however, think you might have a little more common sense than to go charging off to a place that could have been very unsafe on a whim."

Suddenly I found my nails very interesting to look at. "It wasn't a whim."

"Oh?"

I sighed. "I can't explain it, I can't."

"Try." He insisted.

So, as best I could, I told him about all of the dreams I had been having concerning the Emperor, some of the details he already knew and some of them I had never spoken of before. When I was done he was quiet for what felt like too long and I shifted uneasily in the bed, picking at invisible lint from the blanket.

"If, and I stress this part greatly, if Palpatine is alive why in Da'hajn's name would you want to seek him out?"

"I don't but it doesn't seem to matter what I want, I get sucked into it anyway."

"That's the worst excuse I have ever ..." He began but I cut him off.

"No, it isn't." I countered crossly.

His mouth tightened into a thin line of displeasure but he refrained from arguing with me on a point he knew I would not concede instead he switched tack somewhat and asked. "Very well then what do you suppose will happen should you happen to have the misfortune to discover you are right, he has returned from the dead?"

I shrugged miserably. "I don't know, I hadn't thought that far ahead and anyway if he is alive and he really did want to gather up all the force users around the galaxy to twist them into his dark little minions there wouldn't be much I could do about it would there?"

For some reason this made him laugh. "You have the most vivid imagination of anyone I have ever met. Do you want to know what I think?"

I nodded reluctantly.

"I think you're avoiding the real issue which is for the first time in a very long time no one is chasing you, trying to kill you, abuse you or use you in some underhanded way and you have no idea what to do with yourself."

I opened my mouth but he placed his forefinger on my lips to silence the string of protests he knew would tumble out.

"From the moment you left your home and started to work at Jabba's palace until you eliminated Jyrki Andando, it's been one crisis after another and you haven't had time to breathe, let alone find some measure of peace. Working with Vader put you on a blade's edge you have not yet managed to step off, so now you go looking for danger because for the last ten or so years it's all you've really known with maybe the exception of the time you spent on Hjal and you were far too messed up to realise what peace and quiet meant at the time." He paused and studied my expression for a second. "I don't say this to hurt you or to anger you but honestly, tekari, you have to stop hunting danger down, given enough time I am quite sure it will find you but for the love of what ever deity you regard as important stop looking for it at every turn." He emphasised this speech by caressing the side of my face gently.

I sat back against the headboard of the bed noisily, feigning annoyance and anger but really I was stung by the deep truth in his words. He was right but I had absolutely not seen it. I swallowed hard against the tears that wanted to come, as if crying was a release for the anger and fear I had been hold inside of me since forever. Instead of allowing that to show I snapped at him, petulant and scared.

"And working for you isn't dangerous?"

"Perhaps it has some level of risk but not to the extent you have been placing yourself in as of late."

"What about having me attend this stupid art auction then, isn't that risky?"

His smile was disarming. "It's an art auction, sj'iu tekari, what could go wrong, a disgruntled buyer running amok and rampaging through the hall? I hardly think so and even if that were to happen as I understand it the local security will be tight and I am sure there will be an Imperial presence as well. So, in all seriousness, just how dangerous do you think it will be?"

How indeed, I thought. "This is Tatooine, remember...anything can happen." I said, jabbing him in the ribs.

"Then perhaps," he said with a smirk I wasn't sure I liked, "I should have you confined to a cell and make Rukh stand guard."

I just gave him a dirty look and finished my 'caf. "So, tell me what you want me to do at the auction."

"Attend and observe." He replied casually.

"That's it?"

"What did you think I wanted you to do, my dear? Steal the painting?"

I rolled my eyes. "That's not very exciting you know, you can get one of your minions to do that for you."

"Yes but one of my minions, as you so amusingly put it, will be spotted by the rebels within a few moments as they will no doubt stick out like a Hutt at an ewok convention, you will not. You are to observe what happens and those who are attending, nothing more."

"I see." I wasn't impressed but Thrawn wasn't going to let me get around him on this either.

"Would you rather I forbade you to attend at all?" He asked, arching one eyebrow.

"Well if you put it that way...."

"I do." He cut me off before I could finish then reached over to take my empty cup out of my hands and place it beside his. "Now, are you going to waste the short amount of free time I have with you on an argument you won't win or would you like me to show you some of the more pleasurable aspects of a non combative conversation."

He stroked my bare shoulder and smiled as I shivered. "I would not call these types of conversations non combative, you know, sometimes they get very... uh... physical."

“That’s because you insist on fighting against me.” He murmured in my ear.

I didn’t really have much to say in my defence and what he was doing with his hands and his mouth had more or less rendered me speechless anyway. I decided that he was right and the easiest thing was to let him have his way, this time, it was certainly more enjoyable than arguing. Who knew what would happen at the auction and if he wasn’t actually going to be there then he would not be able to control what happened either.

The day of the auction arrived along with crappy weather. Uncle Vahlek has insisted on walking out to Wayfar as it wasn’t that far from the house much to my annoyance. Fine sand-grit whipped up by strong winds stung any surface of skin not protected and somehow managed to find its way underneath all protective clothing to scratch and irritate. I hated it most of all when it got in my mouth. Fine grit that crunched on my teeth when ever I bit down or spoke sent unpleasant shivers up and down my spine so that by the time we had reached the shuttle-port at Wayfar I was more than ready to turn around and go home. I was happy when the shuttle arrived and we could get out of the misery of the sandstorm.

“You’ve gotten spoiled, Lei’lei.” Uncle Vahlek said with a grin. “Living away from Tatooine has made you soft.”

I just glowered at him as I tried to discretely brush sand off myself.

The shuttle ride was bumpy and unpleasantly full. The air smelled of sweat and sand mingled with all the other odours from all the various beings which permeated the air. Usually I enjoyed shuttle runs but this was an exception and by the time we landed in Mos Espa I was quite nauseous. I had to cup my hand over my mouth and practically ran off the shuttle.

“What’s wrong?” my uncle asked. “You look positively green; you don’t usually get travel sick. You’re not pregnant are you?”

I gave him another fifthly look. “No.” I said shaking my head, trying to breathe slowly, willing the queasiness in my stomach to settle down.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, I am quite sure.” I snapped, grateful when the waves of nausea passed. “I just don’t do well in crowded spaces, especially when they stink like that.” I explained. “It reminds me of Mattri and of Nar Shadda too much.”

“I see.” Said my uncle sadly. “Even though he’s dead Jyrki’s actions still have their effect.”

I nodded. “So, where are we going?” I asked, changing the subject, “And will we have time to stop for something to drink? I could use a cup of tea, my mouth is full of grit.”

My uncle slung his arm around my shoulders and we headed in the direction of auction following a group of laughing Rodians who seemed to be headed the same way.

Mawbro’s Performance Hall was not nearly as glamorous on the inside as it’s name made it sound. Once we had been allowed to pass by the Weequay who was guarding the door, making sure people checked their sand covered wraps and weapons we wandered into a large spacious hall.

Scattered throughout the huge room were several stages where I assumed dancers generally performed on while customers sat and drank, enjoying their evening. Clean circles on the dark floor gave away that usually the place was littered with tables and chairs surrounding the stages. Currently these stages were occupied by food and beverage stalls selling all manner of things to eat and drink, filling the air with an assortment of aromas.

“How’s your stomach?” My uncle asked as we rounded on a stall that was selling pastries and cha’rae, a sort of milky spiced tea.

“Hungry.” I answered, “When does this stupid auction start anyway?”

“Probably after everyone has had a chance to view the painting and validate it. Do you want to see it?”

I nodded. That was one of the reasons Thrawn had wanted me to come, he had felt I should look at this work of art seeing as how the method and materials to make more were long gone and never coming back. It was considered a priceless one of a kind and seeing in person was a chance that might not come around again. He had other reasons for me getting a first hand viewing as well but I didn’t want to think about them at the moment.

“Food first and we can see what else is up for auction then go stand in line.” Uncle Vahlek said as he ordered two zucca fruit pastries and two cups of cha’rae, one of each he handed to me.

We wandered around the hall looking at the booths that were situated along the walls. I was surprised at the variety of stuff people were auctioning off, most of it was junk. We idled past a stall selling glitter-glass panes that were supposed to have been owned by Jabba the Hutt. I giggled. “Usually Jabba likes his art a tad more realistic, by realistic I mean way more uhm....crude and erotic.” I told my uncle, “This is a bit more abstract than he would understand. He has a thing for twi’leks not this.”

Uncle Vahlek just made a face. “I won’t ask how you know these things.”

I just grinned and we continued to look at the wares up for auction. I stopped briefly to look at some sort of sand-sculpts cast in abstract shapes which reminded me a lot of some of the eerie rock formations that could be found in the North West of Beggar’s Canyon. Next to the stall with the sand sculpts was a stall being run by squibs, small furry beings who were as annoying as they were persistent. My uncle tugged at my arm making sure I didn’t go near them. I looked over my shoulder and watched as they sucked in a Devaronian and a twi’lek to look at their stuff, making them pay to do so.

“Oh Lei’lei, you will want to see these!” With his hand around my wrist, my uncle led me over to a stall run by a Barabel. What he was showing took my breath away. Colourful bowls made from some sort of material so delicate that light showed through them.

“Alas! bowls found in the Judland wastes, made by Tusksens.” The Barabel said. “Very rare.” They were beautiful and they took my breath away.

“If you really want one I can bid for you.” My uncle said quietly.

I nodded, “I would love at least one, and I am certain that Za’ar would also like one as well. It’s the sort of thing he likes to collect.”

“No one will bid against the Tze’yusha’Jin if they are being smart.” A voice said from behind me.

I turned around to come face to chest with Baraq, the Ithorian archivist from Mos Espa. Without thinking about it I threw my arms around him and much to his surprise gave him a hug which made my uncle laugh.

“Baraq what are you doing here?” My uncle asked, “I thought you could not come.”

The Ithorian shrugged, “And be missing a chance to see a galactic treasure as well as my good friend, Akosh, here? For today the archives can be closed.”

“We were about to go and view it, want to join us?” I asked.

Baraq shook his head. “I have already seen it. It is a thing of wonder. You would be liking it I think.” He said. “But you should be lining up now, already it is taking almost an hour for a viewing.”

At Baraq’s advice we set off, meandering around the rest of the auction stalls before standing in line to view *Killik Twilight*. Halfway around the hall I spotted the Imperial officer that Thrawn had sent, quite literally, to do his bidding. I didn’t recognize the man’s face but the air of contempt he had for us as we passed him was unmistakable. I smirked a little knowing that he would have been more than polite had he known who I was, who I had worked for and who my mate was but wisely I kept my thoughts to my self.

“Where there’s one there are more.” Uncle Vahlek said softly making me look around to play spot the Imperials in disguise. It was pretty straightforward. They were the people who looked very obvious because they were trying so hard not to look obvious.

“Guess he’s expecting things to get interesting.” I mumbled as we waited in line for our turn to view the painting.

It took over forty minutes before we were allowed to step through the mirrfield straight into a gaggle of Mawbro’s thugs dressed in the ugliest clothes I had ever seen all pointing blasters at us.

“Security.” Said a Rodian as blindfolds were placed over our eyes and we were led on a somewhat convoluted trip to a room that stank from thaq smoke which made me sneeze. Once our blindfolds were removed we were directed to the wall where the painting hung, flanked by two Gamorreans. It was smaller than I had imagined it would be but also more vibrant.

“You can verify it if you want, but only brush samples. No clipping. You got two minutes, don’t waste ‘em.” A voice said from out of the dimness.

The technique of moss painting creation had been lost when Alderaan had been destroyed. There weren’t many of these paintings left in the galaxy and as far as I knew the ones that had survived were

mainly in private collections. It was eerie and beautiful but it left me feeling cold with a slight sense of dread for no good reason at all. The strange stormy sky and the insectoids turning to stare into the storm was melancholy.

Killiks had been the inhabitants of Alderaan but had vanished long before humans had colonized for no reason anyone could ever figure out. They were one of the great unsolved mysteries of the galaxy

I glanced at my uncle who nodded slightly, this was what I was here for, and then I reached up and brushed my fingertips ever so lightly over the mossy surface of the painting. It felt like a lifetime as the images from the painting's memories shot through me even though it was only seconds. Images like that of the artist painstakingly creating the image, the memory of his hands lovingly cultivating each piece of moss in exactly the right place. There were lingering images of the many people who had touched the painting's frame while it hung in the palace in Alderaan including the princess as a small girl and much to my surprise my mother as well. But the images that stunned me the most had nothing to do with the painting and everything to do with the Rebellion. I sucked in a breath involuntarily and staggered back slightly. My uncle stood behind me placing his hand on my shoulder, an anchor back into reality.

"I know...." I began in an urgent whisper.

"Shhhh." Uncle Vahlek put a finger to his lips and shook his head ever so slightly. "Not here."

A sense of urgency washed through me. "I have to tell...." I pressed.

My uncle gave me a tight smile and repeated his previous statement.

I was about to argue when the same gruff voice told us our two minutes were up and that we were holding up the ever growing queue.

"Let's go and get something to drink shall we?" Uncle Vahlek said, taking my arm and leading me out of the room.

The main hall was more crowded when we stepped back into it and the line up to see *Killik Twilight* had more than doubled since we had stood in it. We left the performance hall and I trailed behind my uncle as led me to a small café which was far enough away from the main strip that it wasn't hopelessly crowded. A tired looking waitress took our order and then returned a few moments later with drinks.

"Do you want to hear or not?" I asked crossly after a long silence had passed.

He shook his head. "Yes but not here, not in any language, too many people around and there is no telling who can speak what. Besides if our friend wins the auction you can tell him then. It will be an added bonus to the prize."

I scowled. "And if he doesn't win it?"

"Do you think that is likely with all the resources he has at his hand?"

I shrugged. "No one thought the Emperor would be killed or that the death star battle station would be destroyed but the rebellion has had remarkable luck in turning disadvantages to their advantage. At this point I would say anything is possible and I never take anything for granted any more, not when it comes to the rebels anyway."

My uncle nodded and conceded the point. "Well the auction is supposed to start in an hour so I guess we'll see how it all turns out then, won't we?" He sighed and looked at his chrono, "Do you still want those bowls you were looking at earlier?"

I nodded remembering the eerie beauty of the delicate bowls the barabel was displaying.

"I'll bid for you, just let me know your limit. Most of what was on display is junk, but you know that anyway. The main attraction is the moss painting. I wonder is actually auctioning it off."

I replied without thinking, "Some guy named Threkin Horm."

My uncle blinked at me in surprise and then made a face, remembering my talent. "That guy happens to be the president of the Alderaanian Council."

I raised my eyebrows, "And he's auctioning off this priceless work of Alderaan art here?"

Uncle Vahlek nodded over his drink.

"Bet that will go over well with the New Republic types." I said quietly.

"Probably not."

I just shook my head. "Guess he better hope that no one finds out." I said as I finished my drink.

"It's not something I would advertise out loud Lei'lei. The last thing you need is to make a new enemy; your mate would never

forgive me if that happened while I was supposed to be keeping an eye on you.”

I made a face even though he was right and in the end it wasn't any of my concern anyway.

“Come on, we should be headed back. If you want me to bid on some of those bowls the barabel was auctioning for you then we need to get a decent spot on the floor.”

I finished my drink and nodded, lost in thought about how I would get a hold of Thrawn to tell him what I now knew. He wasn't going to like it much.

The tension in the hall had ramped up to the point where the air seemed to shimmer. The last lot up for auction had finally finished and when Mawbro had announced the winner a collective sigh had run through the hall.

Most of the lots had gone for nominal prices, mostly junk which many of the off worlders were not interested in but one item had fetched a surprising price and that had been a holograph of Anakin Skywalker. We had seen it on the table and it had made me smile. The image had been taken of him just after he had won the Boonta Eve Classic. Baraq had spoken softly about that day, he had watched the race. I had stared at the holo image of the smiling young boy, with bright blue eyes full of joy and bright innocence. It still amazed me that this young boy had twisted and turned into one of the galaxies most feared and cruel leaders.

I had wavered for a moment about bidding on the holo but in the end I decided not to. I had memories of Lord Vader and many of them were also of him before the suit, before the mask. I didn't need a holo to remind me of my time working for him the memories were more than enough. The holo had made me sad, dredging up an ache of loss which I thought I had buried. The only thing that countered this was the fact that here, on Tatooine, Anakin was still regarded as a hero. I had watched that auction with interest and had smiled when the holo had fetched a hefty price, thirteen hundred credits to a very pleased looking Gotal.

As he had promised, my uncle bid on several of the glass bowls for me and just as Baraq had predicted as soon as people saw who it was they were bidding against the bidding dropped off a bit. In the

end Uncle Vahlek managed to win three at a reasonable price. I am not sure the Barabel was too pleased but in the end I thought the prices I ended up paying were fair because without any expert there to verify the Barabel's claims it was hard to say if the bowls were authentic Tusken artefacts or not. I just liked them because they were extraordinarily beautiful and would look good in my rooms on Nirauan. I stayed put to keep our places while my Uncle went to finalise payments and pick up the bowls he had won.

When the last auction was cleared from the main stage and Mawbro announced the auction for *Killik Twilight* would now begin a subtle change fell over the hall. With a gesture that struck me as overly majestic she waved her hand and the crew of Gamorreans who had been doing guard duty earlier marched onto the stage surrounding the Codru-ji who carried the painting in carefully in all four arms, setting it down carefully on an easel that had been set up just for this purpose. It looked much smaller and more fragile than I remembered from the viewing but of course on a large stage the painting which was only fifty centimetres wide was tiny. All heads tilted to look at the giant holo projection of it that was now being displayed. We were standing further back in the hall because we were not bidding and I wanted to see the crowd as well as the painting.

Mawbro got the bidding underway by asking the Imperial officer who identified himself as Commander Quenton if he was willing to start it. He did so at a quarter of a million credits. There was a moment's pause and then a squib over bid him and the whole show was off and running.

It was like watching some weird sport and even couldn't help but get caught up in the excitement being generated between the squib, Commander Quenton and a few other bidders. The bidding war seemed to last forever until suddenly the price shot up to five million credits and things got a bit tense when people were asked for funds verification. It looked as though quite a few people had suddenly lost their fund transfer chips. There were some scuffles and some protests but soon enough the bidding began again and the price jacked up to Thirteen million. I gasped at the sum, which was a lot of money. When the bidding climbed to fourteen-nine I glanced at my uncle who was watching the entire thing with a bemused look on his face.

“Your mate said it might get expensive but I doubt he was expecting this.” He murmured.

I nodded. “Well I am not surprised. The rebels want this painting pretty badly.” I whispered back smugly.

Just as the bidding reached the ridiculous price of fifteen million credits Mawbro appeared in the stage. I watched the Imperial officer closely, he had begun to suspect that something wasn’t right and things were not going to go his way. I could see him communicate with his people and then he upped the bid to fifteen-five but Mawbro ignored him. I glanced at my uncle who was slowly backing us away from the majority of the crowd.

“What are you doing?” I hissed.

“The Commander just called for back up. My guess is it’s about to get ugly in here and I don’t want to have to explain to your Ta’kasta’cariad why you were in the middle of it all.”

I made a face and was about to argue when Mawbro who had continued to ignore Commander Quenton’s bids began to speak. “The owner has decided it would be an outrage to sell the painting to the same empire that destroyed Alderaan.” She said loudly enough for all to hear.

I opened my mouth in surprise and then all hell broke loose, just as Uncle Vahlek had predicted. He was in the process of trying to pull me further away from the crowd which had gone nuts to someplace a little safer when blaster fire sheared through the noise.

“Oh crap!” I hissed. “This is really going to piss Za’ar off.”

“Come on, time to go.”

I didn’t resist when Uncle Vahlek yanked on my arm to get me to safety just as someone set off a thermal detonator. The explosion was loud and violent but had taken place right up front by the stage where the painting was. The shock from the blast ripped past me but there was no serious harm done. Still holding onto my arm my uncle managed to navigate us through the chaos and get us outside to someplace fairly quiet as well as safe.

“Did someone just blow the painting up?” I asked in utter disbelief.

“They tried to.” He nodded looking around.

“So much for Thrawn’s theories that the auction would be safe.” I said a little crossly.

“Why is it that where ever you go something insane happens?”

“No my fault, I swear.” I retorted. “Are my bowls still in one piece?”

Uncle Vahlek grinned and pulled the wrapped bowls from under his coat. “Yes.” He said as he handed the bowls all wrapped up in some sort of soft paper to me to hold on to.

I grinned at him. “I’ll have the credits transferred when we get home which I hope we are doing now, or is there more excitement still to come?”

Uncle Vahlek just shrugged as we headed in the direction of the spaceport to try and catch a transport back home.

The Spaceport in Mos Espa is busy and usually full of people. Mos Espa was a large city and today was no exception; if anything it seemed even more busy than usual. My guess was the auction had brought a lot of off worlders and even more of Tatooine’s inhabitants. Now that it was over, everyone was trying to go home or on to their next destination. I sighed as we nudged our way through the crowds to the ticket vendor. My uncle had just started to punch in the destination code when a stormtrooper approached and clapped his hand on my shoulder.

“Miss Gabriel?”

I nodded.

“Would you please come with me?” The trooper said calmly.

My uncle gave the stormtrooper a look which said ‘why?’ but before he could utter this thought the trooper added, “The Admiral wishes to speak with you, it is a matter of urgency.”

For a moment no one moved. I wondered if my uncle would try to fight this but something about the trooper’s manner calmed me. I nodded, “I’ll be fine, Zte’sa.”

My uncle didn’t really like it but in the end relented. “I will expect her back in one piece.” He said as he took the package from my hands again.

The stormtrooper nodded curtly. “Yes sir, those were my orders.”

Without further argument I followed the stormtrooper to a private dock and a waiting shuttle. Without waiting for a sign from the trooper I entered the shuttle and waited until the door had shut before I asked for an explanation.

“If you would take a seat Miss Gabriel, I am certain the Admiral will explain everything once we reach our destination.” Was all the reply I got.

“And that would be?”

“Sir,” The trooper said into his comlink, ignoring me and my question, “We are a go.”

“Where are we headed?” I asked again, phrasing it a little differently this time.

“I am not at liberty to say.” He replied.

I made a face, sighed and did the only thing left to do, strap in and wait to see where I ended up. The stormtrooper strapped him self in opposite me and in silence we stared at each other as the shuttle lifted up from the ground, freeing itself from the grip of Tatooine’s gravity. I smiled to myself as the shuddering came to an abrupt halt once we left the last vestiges of the atmosphere behind us. If the stormtrooper seated across from me noticed he gave no indication.

I was tired and the sudden turn of events at the auction had done nothing to improve that. I sighed and closed my eyes allowing the sensation of motion from the ship to flow through me. Time always seemed to slow down when I left a planet’s surface and headed into the space. There was something magical about being in the black and despite the ship’s artificial gravity I still felt the lack of a planet’s pull, especially my home world. Without meaning to I fell asleep.

The journey took roughly forty minutes and the shuttle landed with enough of a bump to wake me up. Without being asked I unbuckled and got up, waited for the ramp to unlock and release before following the Stormtrooper onto the deck of a Star Destroyer. I looked around for the waiting Deck Officer but there was none.

“This way, Miss.” The trooper said as he walked across the unusually quiet deck to the turbo lift.

I did as he asked and followed him without saying anything else until we arrived at guest quarters in a quiet end of a deserted hallway. When the door closed and folded my arms across my chest. “Can we dispense with all the cloak and saber stuff now?” I asked.

The trooper waited a split second and then removed his helmet, revealing blue skin, blue-black hair and glowing red eyes that held just a hint of amusement in them.

“You knew.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.” I said.

“How, your force powers?”

I shook my head. “Your voice gave it away for me. No one else speaks Basic quite like you do.”

“The Tze’yusha’Jin did not appear to know.”

“Maybe not, hard to say with Uncle Vahlek sometimes, and I think he was more interested in just getting out of Mos Espa since he just saved us from a thermal detonator and a stampeding crowd. I don’t think he was expecting you to be running around the place dressed as a lowly stormtrooper. The comm unit in the helmet disguises your actual voice well but it’s how you say certain things and the cadence of your speech that gave it away. And really, Za’ar, I knew it was you how could I not?”

“Thermal detonator?” He asked removing his gloves and gesturing for me to sit down on the couch in the living area of the quarters.

“Someone blew up the painting.” I said, remaining standing.

“Well, they tried.” Thrawn nodded, setting his helmet down on the table and pouring two cups of something hot and steaming from the carafe that had been set out. I had been expected.

“Tried?”

“Actually the painting was stolen before the detonator could do any damage. A man named Kitster Banai, if my information was correct.” Thrawn handed me a cup of tea and motioned for me to sit and this time I did smiling a little as he sat beside me awkwardly in the armour he was wearing. It looked decidedly uncomfortable.

“So my dear, what is it about that painting that has someone trying to destroy it rather than let it fall into Imperial hands?”

“It carries a shadowcast code key, what ever that is.” I said simply. “An old one by the memory of it.”

Thrawn’s eyebrow arched as he smiled slowly. “Ah, well now that explains many things. I had suspected as much but it is always nice to have these things confirmed. Shadowcast is a code one we suspect the rebels have been using for years but without the keys to slice it is virtually impossible to break. Even an older one would allow my slicers insight into how it works and breaking it would be a huge step into discovering where the Rebels have spies.”

“Well I guess that explains why they’d rather destroy it than have it fall into Imperial hands.” I nodded.

What else did you learn?”

“Nothing unusual aside from the code key. It hung in the palace on Alderaan until it had been taken off world for an exhibition, on the return journey it was stolen by a guy named Threkin Horm who hung on to it until he thought it was safe to unload it. I saw lots of little flashes but nothing extraordinary.”

Thrawn nodded and then said. “And what is it you’re not telling me about the painting?”

I sighed. “You mean aside from the fact that I didn’t like it one bit and touching it made my skin crawl, or that the artist took months to create it at the expense of his health, or that Princess Leia was fascinated by it or that my mother had touched it once because she had wanted to see what the mossy surface really felt like?” I sipped at the tea. “I am not keeping anything back.” I added crossly.

“Well hopefully we can retrieve the painting before the Rebels manage to remove the code key, if not then I hope to still obtain the painting, it would go well with my collection.”

I made a face, “Sometimes I think you do these sorts of things out of spite, just so that Princess Leia can’t have it.”

He raised his eyebrow at me again, disdainfully. “Tekari, really....”

I just rolled my eyes. “Why the big show to get me here. I could have told you all of this stuff on a secure line.”

“I need you to do a job for me.” He said casually.

“What about the painting?”

“Don’t worry about that, it is all being dealt with.”

I sighed noisily. “You hauled me off planet just to tell me this?”

“I wanted some privacy.” He said studying his fingernails for a moment. “I need you to courier information to Ged Larsen. I did not want to risk anyone on the ground hearing his name.”

“Oh?” I said flatly letting him know I had sensed the lie.

“Just as no one knows who I am at the moment outside of a very small circle, neither do many know that Admiral Larsen is still alive and building up his own Imperial fleet. I have vital information for him concerning the up coming campaign I will embark on and I do not wish to trust it to just anyone, not even my own people.” He took a

small sip of tea. “You will be flying a non Imperial ship, you have underworld connections and you have certain skills that”

I held up my hand. “I get the idea. You want unofficial and harmless.”

“You may be unofficial, my dear, but you are anything but harmless.” He quipped. “And perhaps I just wanted to make sure that you were still in one piece after that somewhat unusual auction.”

“You were there.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, though not actually in the main hall, the weequay was quite firm about allowing no troopers inside. Very shortly I will return to the planet so let me brief you on what I need done.”

“You make it sound as though playing courier will be dangerous.”

He smiled and reached over to caress my face. “Anything you seem to be involved in turns somewhat dangerous. Now shall we get to work? I do not have much time.”

I nodded and then listened as he briefly outlined what he needed from me. By the time he was finished I wasn’t sure who was nuttier, him for the plan or me for agreeing to follow through with it.

When he was done I sat back and stared at him. I wasn’t overly happy with the idea he had presented to me. “Why am I not using my own ship?” I asked, “It would save time.”

“Because I am not sure you’d forgive me if it was damaged during this mission.” He replied, “And it is possible that your ship is known to the rebels, on this I am taking no chances. You will travel on board the frigate Tornado. No arguments.”

“A frigate?” I made a face. “How much time do I have to make sure she actually flies then?”

“You don’t need to do that, you will not be piloting you will be a liaison on board. I’d like you to be ready to leave as soon as I am done with Tatooine and this ridiculous art chase. In the mean time I want you to stay here, study the plans and the information on this.” he handed me a data disk.

“Why do I need to stay here? You can use my skills on Tatooine.” I asked staring at the datadisk in my hand.

“I will have all the help I need, my dear. The Tze’yusha’Jin is more that willing to aid in the search for *Killik Twilight*.”

I gave him a look. “You are keeping me here to keep me safe?”

His smile was slight and not overly friendly. "I need you to be very clear on what I am asking you to do. You need to study the information on the disk and I doubt very much that you will concentrate on Tatooine. Knowing you, you will find some excuse to come running after me and the painting and maybe get yourself killed in the process."

"You don't trust me?"

"No," He smirked. "Not in this instance, no and your uncle more than agrees with me. When I have the painting secured I will return, it shouldn't take that long and then we can discuss in more detail what this job entails."

"I don't have clothes here for an extended stay! I don't have anything here that I need!"

He pointed to a large bag that was sitting on the floor. "That has been taken care of."

I opened my mouth then closed it again. "You know...." I began but he held up his hand.

"I do, but you won't win this argument." He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, the armour clacked as he did so. "Do not make this complicated. You went to the auction at my request and if I had known they would be trying to blow the painting up I would not have made that request. It is part of my job to keep you out of harm's way which is what I am doing now."

"What's on this disk that you don't want it going off the ship?" I asked sensing another lie underneath his truth.

"Very sensitive data on Ged Larsen for one thing and some details about the up coming campaign which I think you will need to know in order to pull off the ruse."

"Ruse? What ruse?"

He did not answer my question, "The Tornado is currently in orbit around Chenini on a survey mission. Captain Daurma knows to expect you. The official story is that you are there as a liaison from Captain Pellaeon to make sure the courier drop off to Larsen goes smoothly."

"And the unofficial story?"

"You are working for me, top level security."

I frowned, "And just how is this supposed to work?" I asked. "No one will believe that I am anything other than your mate."

"Actually you would be surprised at how few people on my fleet know about your more intimate relationship with me and those that do either think it is a rumour or know enough to remain silent about it." He said, "There is a reason why I have not allowed you to travel with me and keeping our relationship private is one of them."

"So I am not on the *Chimaera* then?"

"No you are currently on board the *Death's Head*."

"Can't you come up with better names for your ships?" I asked trying not to get more annoyed than I already was.

"I did not name her, for that you would have to discuss Imperial ship naming policies with Palpatine and that might be a tad difficult at this time. Merlyn, really it is just for a short while."

I made a face. "So just why will the captain and crew of the *Tornado* believe any of this story?"

"Because, my dear, they will all believe you are one of the dreaded Emperor's Hands. That knowledge alone will terrify them into believing what ever you tell them."

"But I'm not an...."

Thrawn held up his hand. "I know that and you know that but the official data which is available to those with high enough clearance will say otherwise."

"You're using Uncle Vahlek's ruse to get me in close to Ged Larsen so you can spy on him?"

He laughed. "Oh Sjiu tekari you really do read too many Holloway novels. I don't need you to spy on him at all I need a liaison who is, shall we say, able to cut through the"

I interrupted, "Ged's force sensitive you know, he'll soon see through any games." I sighed, "And I don't want to lie to him. I won't lie to him."

"Perhaps if I were playing games that would be something I would worry about but I assure you, there are no games. I need his help as much as he requires mine. It is a mutually beneficial relationship which you will help facilitate. He liked you, he'll work with you, which will make my job easier, and because you will not be someone the rebels will immediately watch out for, you can move back and forth a lot easier than any imperial could. Plus, I don't trust anyone else with this." He regarded me for a moment, "You won't have any reason to lie to him from me."

I digested his words, sifting through them for any untruths but I found none. “The dispatches I will be carrying, will they be real?”

He nodded. “Very, so be mindful of this.”

“Navaari will be so pissed about you using me like this.”

“Yes, well I will deal with his wrath should it ever come up and you can say no. I am not forcing you to do this job. You have a home and work enough waiting for you on Nirauan if you want it but I got the impression that you were a little bored there as well as on Tatoonie and when you get bored I start to worry, when you get bored....”

I sighed deeply and let the air out noisily. He was right and he knew it. I was curious about all of this and he knew that as well. “Okay, you win.” I said cutting him off.

He smirked in a fashion which said, Yes, I usually do.

I waved at the Stormtrooper helmet, “This disguise...you’re using this whole painting thing as a training exercise for the fresh meat on the *Chimaera* aren’t you?” I said changing the subject while shaking my head slightly and finishing my tea.

“How well you know me my dear.” He said with a tight smile and before I could comment back or make some sort of retort he shut me up with a kiss that was too short and left me wanting an awful lot more. I didn’t like this, any of it and I let him know with a look. He just smiled and stroked my cheek with the back of his fingers.

I nodded. “How long do you think it will take? This painting thing I mean?”

He gave me a slight shrug as he pulled on the armour gloves and reached for the helmet. “I do not know, hopefully not long. While I do enjoy spending time on your planet, running around after known criminals in this uniform is not the most efficient use of my time but as you pointed out it is a good way to initiate some training and to evaluate the ground troops, something I do not often get the opportunity to do. They will have to be ready to face a hell of a lot in a short amount of time, many of the troops we have are far too young and inexperienced for my taste and even Pellaeon will not argue with me on this point. We’ll just have to see how this plays out. Now that I know why the rebels want the painting so badly it gives me a better idea of what they’ll do to get it.”

“You don’t think that this Kitster Banai was working with them?”

“No.” He said but didn’t elaborate. When his comm peeped he made a slight face. “Time to go.” He said as he picked up the helmet and stood up. “In this armour I am simply a squad leader escorting you back to the planet. Try not to give the game away my dear.”

“Have I ever given your games away?” I asked following him to the door.

He didn’t answer my question instead he reached for me, cupping my chin with one hand. I didn’t resist when he drew my face upward and gave me another kiss, this one a little more intimate than the last one had been. “Do not doubt your importance in my life, tekari but do not doubt the importance of what I now must do and the campaign that lies ahead. I can just as easily shut you out and send you to Nirauan for the duration or perhaps Hjal which ever you’d prefer. I thought you might like to take a slightly more active role, but perhaps I was mistaken.”

I shook my head. “You know me too well and I’m not sure how much I like that.”

“It’s part of being bound and you should know that by now.” He chided gently “Now will you do as I have asked and stay here until I return, study the data and try to relax a little?”

There was a second of tension as he waited for my answer and then I nodded. “I will.”

“if you get particularly restless I have assigned Rukh to spar with you and you’ll find everything you need in the bag over there.”

I shook my head, “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“No you don’t but I was thinking you might enjoy some time in the training suite with my Noghri body guard. You might want a diversion from reading for a while and I have no use for Rukh on Tatoonie.”

“Bet he’s just as happy about this as I am.”

“Actually he said he was rather looking forward to teaching you some more Noghri moves.”

I rolled my eyes; I knew what that meant, me spending a lot of time spent flat on my ass while he laughed in that husky creepy way of his. “Okay, have it your way, just come back in one piece and keep my uncle out of trouble while you are at it.”

He kissed my forehead and smiled, “I shall endeavour to do so. Wish me luck.” He said as he slipped the helmet over his head and then vanished without waiting to hear my reply.

The soft richness of his voice had been swiftly transformed behind the helmet’s microphone. He sounded just like every other stormtrooper I had ever heard except for the ever so subtle and unusual cadence in his voice which I doubted many others would even notice. It made me smile, his penchant for dressing up in disguises. Thrawn was like no other Imperial leader I had ever known. As the door shut softly leaving me alone, I wondered if any of his men really knew just how lucky they were.