

Daughter of the Empire

Book 3

by Fiona Messer

Chapter Nine

The Delicate Lie

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I stifled a groan as the alarm klaxon shrieked through the air of my quarters waking me up from a deep and dreamless sleep. With a curse that would have made Thrawn blush I glanced at the chronometer and then grabbed my pillow bunching it around my head, trying to block out the noise. It was four am, Coruscant standard time. Even with my pillow shoved as hard as I could around my head the alarm still made its way into my brain, shredding any hope I had of getting back to sleep to bits. For the past six weeks Admiral Ged Larsen had been running battle drills on his ISD, to keep his men in top form he had told me. This was fine if one were a crew member on board and had a specific job to jump up and run to, all pumped up on adrenalin, but for me it was just an annoyance that kept waking me up at inopportune times. I was starting to hate him for his perfectionism and Thrawn for sending me here in the first place.

Ged ran a tight ship and his crew both respected and feared him, there was tension here that reminded a little of the tension on any ship that Lord Vader showed up on. I didn't think that Ged ran around force choking any one who disobeyed him but I was betting the punishment for not following orders and screwing up were both swift and severe. This was the Imperial navy and failure was not an option, especially now with the stakes so high. He ran drills constantly, at odd hours for unpredictable events and attacks. I couldn't decide if the man was trying to impress Thrawn or if he was really just nuts either way it didn't make my time here fun.

Just as the klaxon stopped wailing a banging on the door of my quarters coaxed me out of bed. I grabbed my robe and had it wrapped around me as I opened the door.

"What?" I growled. I had long since given up being polite, especially as no one expected it of me anyway.

"Admiral Larsen requests your presence on the command deck in his briefing room." Replied the young man without giving any thoughts away.

I rolled my eyes and stepped back, "Fine, I'll be there as soon as I've dressed."

"I was told that you were to come immediately, ma'am." He said calmly.

I made an impatient gesture with my hand. "Very well then, lead on." I sighed.

If anyone found it utterly unusual to see me having to trot, barefoot and in my night clothes, after the swiftly moving young officer they wisely kept their mouths shut. It was not the first time this had happened. By the time we arrived at Ged's briefing room, my feet were cold and my mood was about as foul as it could possibly be. I slipped into the dimly lit room and barely waited for the door to shut behind me before giving Ged a piece of my mind.

"Ged, what the hell is so important that it couldn't wait five minutes for me to get dressed?"

"I see the last few weeks have not curbed your temper any." A voice that was like dark brushed velvet, which always made my heart speed, up spoke from the dark corner of the room. "I did tell you she does not like to be woken up or summoned in this manner." Thrawn said to Ged, who was watching my reaction with a smirk.

I looked from one man to the other then back again and shook my head and went to the side board to pour myself some stimcaf from the carafe that Ged always kept there. I was thrilled to see Thrawn but I didn't dare show it, at least not how I really wanted to so I kept up the pretence of being annoyed even though really I was more delighted, as well as curious. I leaned back against the sideboard and sipped at the 'caf slowly.

"So," I said glancing at each man in turn over the rim of my cup, "I'll ask again what was so important that it couldn't wait for me to get dressed?"

"I think I will let the Grand Admiral brief you Miss Gabriel. In the meant time I'll be on the bridge if either of you require anything." He said, giving Thrawn a salute which was promptly returned. He brushed past me as he left the room and whispered in my ear, "Don't be too hard on him, Merlyn, it was actually my idea to get you up, I know how much you enjoy surprises." I just rolled my eyes and Ged chuckled as he went out of the room leaving silence in his wake.

The silence in the room settled into something both familiar and tense all at the same time. In the last six weeks I had come to think of Ged Larsen as a friend, despite the mutual mistrust we had held for each other at the start of my time on board his ship. I suppose part of it was the force gifts we each had. It wasn't easy to meet people who truly understood what being a force user meant, especially someone who understood what life must have been like working under the Emperor

and for Lord Vader. I had found a sort of solace in Ged's friendship much to my surprise but due to the current non communication circumstances, I assumed Thrawn knew nothing about this. I sipped at the caf without tasting it and watched his face carefully.

An eyebrow arched as he walked towards me, "I see you've settled in well."

I smiled and shrugged. "I adapt to the circumstances handed me. You wanted me out of the way and safe which I am but you never said I had to be alone and miserable." I replied, "Besides, it makes my job easier when I actually get along with my superiors."

Thrawn smiled and stopped a few centimetres shy of where I was standing, stroking the side of my face with his fingertips. "Is he aware of the exact nature of our relationship?"

I followed the motion of his hand with my face, closing my eyes at the tenderness of his touch. "Not in so many words but he's not stupid. Outside of official business we don't actually discuss you all that much but I am certain he sees my reaction to your name. He's a force user who was trained by the Emperor. I don't need to tell him what is probably very obvious to his eyes."

"I see." He said shifting away from me slightly.

"If you're concerned about..." I started but an abrupt gesture from his hand quelled any more words from my mouth.

"I do not worry on that account, Tekari." He said.

I nodded slowly then after a moment's silence said, "I did not expect you for another two weeks."

"Yes, I know but something came up that required I speak to Larsen face to face."

"I see." I sighed and sipped the remains of the now cool 'caf. "Well that explains the battle drill then, but it doesn't explain why I got hauled out of bed at four am."

Thrawn smiled slowly. "Perhaps I just wished to see you. My time here is quite short, I requested your presence but it was a misinterpretation of the young man sent to fetch you which led to you running around in your night clothes, though, my dear, you should be used to that by now from your time working under Lord Vader."

"Well, you've seen me." I said far more tartly than I meant to. There was something he wasn't telling me. "How long are you here for?"

"No more than forty-eight hours, I have ... issues of my own to deal with onboard the *Chimera*."

"Issues?"

He nodded slightly and suddenly I saw the weariness on his face which he had worked very hard to hide from both Ged and myself. "The Chimera has a young, fairly untried crew and I am having certain renovations done to parts of the ship. There are not many experienced officers on board to help teach the somewhat green crew how to do things in the appropriate Imperial manner. We run simulations and battle drills as well as some real engagements but training a crew of this magnitude in so short a time is a difficult process. Most of the bridge crew are younger than you and many have never seen real combat before. Pellaeon works them as hard as he can but it takes time and experience to make a seasoned crew. I, unfortunately, have neither."

I digested this bit of news and nodded. "So you and Ged are running simulations then, one fleet against the other."

He nodded. "It seemed a viable solution to one of the issues at hand."

"Ged's big on battle simulation drills." I said making a face. "This isn't the first time I've been woken up at some hellishly early hour of the day this week."

Thrawn laughed and the sound warmed my soul. I had missed him much more than I ever dared to allow myself to admit. I guess it showed on my face because he gathered me in his arms and just held me close. "Forgive me for getting you up then but I wanted to see you." He said quietly into my hair, "I wanted to make sure you were well."

I just nodded in to his chest. "You're forgiven." I said with a yawn.

"I have some work for you if you would be interested but we can discuss that later." He said, pushing back from me.

The moment between us passed and I nodded. "I figured as much. I will be happy to do something that doesn't involve office work."

"Office work?"

"Ged thought I should make myself useful while I was here and he asked if I would act as his personal assistant, so I've been doing office work for him. It's a lot less exciting here than it was with Lord Vader but it does keep me busy."

“It’s also probably a lot less dangerous than working for Vader was.” He said.

“So far no one has died.” I retorted. “Are you planning on any more battle drills tonight or can I go back to bed?”

Thrawn arched his eyebrow and smirked. “As far as I know that was it for the evening but Admiral Larsen and I are running these drills concurrent to each other and we don’t divulge when they take place so....” He gave me a slight shrug.

“So in other words chances are good that because both fleets are here there will be more than two a night?”

“He’s done two in one night?”

“Seven is the record.” I said. “He runs a tight ship.”

Thrawn arched an eyebrow, “Indeed, seven?”

“Yes.” I said.

“And did these drills accomplish anything?”

“You mean aside from making everyone tired and not boosting moral, yes the efficiency rate went up on the battle ready times. Ged made his point and achieved his goal.” I said with a shrug, remembering the very heated discussion I had had with him about it all. “He’s a perfectionist and his people both respect and fear him, but they love him too and they’d die for him is he asked.”

“As it should be.” He replied.

I glanced up at him, wondering how it was on the *Chimaera*, if the men and women serving on board that ship would lay down their lives for Thrawn or if there was still the issue of his being an alien to make things difficult. “So what is on your agenda for the rest of what’s left of this watch?” I asked glancing at the chrono on the wall, it was nearly five in the morning.

“I have a debriefing session with Captains Pellaeon and Morrish about the *Virulent’s* and the *Chimaera’s* performance on this last drill and then I should get some rest, why?”

“When did you wish to discuss this job you have for me then?” I asked.

His smile was slow. “If you wish I can discuss it with you later, perhaps over an early breakfast?”

“Is that allowed?”

“I outrank Larsen and I am sure he won’t object. After all, my dear, you are here at my discretion.” He replied airily.

I sighed. “Fine, I will talk to you later then. I need to get some sleep.”

He nodded. “Let Larsen know we’re done in here. I should be finished in a few hours so expect me at around oh-seven hundred hours.”

I left the ready room and made sure that Ged knew then headed back to my own quarters. I lay down hoping to get at least an hour or so sleep but it wasn’t happening so instead I had a bath, got dressed and made a cup of tea. I was in the middle of reading a book when the door chime rang, making my heart leap as well as me nearly spilling what was left of my tea.

Thrawn smiled as he walked into my quarters, looked at the cup in my hand and said, “Is there any more of that?” Then he sat down on the small sofa and watched as I busied myself with making a new pot of tea.

Only after I had finished, brought over tea things to the table, poured him a cup and then sat down beside him did he break his silence.

“I want you to go to Obroa-Skai.” He said quietly.

I just blinked at him for a second, digesting this and then said. “When and why?”

“As soon as possible. I need you to obtain access codes for the main frame so that we can sweep their data banks.”

I sighed into my tea. “This is a make work project, you have slicers far more capable of this than I am.”

“I do but I need them on board my ship and you, my dear, have a talent for slipping in and out of places without attracting too much attention. All I need is an access code into the system, after that the rest of the job will be easy.”

“Still can’t find Wayland, huh.” I shot.

A flicker of annoyance danced briefly across his features. “No and you are not to go looking for it either.”

“Why not?” I asked crossly, this argument now so familiar to me that I could dance it in my sleep.

Thrawn sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He was tired and for the first time he did not give me the standard keeping me safe answer. “I have been led to believe that the facility is protected by a Dark Jedi Master.”

“How did you...?” Thrawn raised his hand slightly and I shut up.

“I have been doing an inordinate amount of research on this mythical place, Tekari. Everything I have discovered so far, which isn’t as much as I would like, has led me to believe that the Emperor had the place guarded by force users specifically trained in the darker nature of this power. You would be no match for such a creature would you?”

I bit my lip wanting to bravado through the answer and say yes but my experiences with the Emperor and Lord Vader had left me with enough wits to know Thrawn was right. “No, I couldn’t beat a dark jedi master, an apprentice maybe but not a master.”

He reached over and caressed the side of my face with the backs of his fingers. “So now do you understand why I would very much like you to stay away from Wayland? If a dark jedi master found you....”

“I get the picture.” I said softly. “I have no wish to be trained in the dark arts, especially not by one of the Emperor’s minions. How exactly are you planning on getting past such a creature? You don’t have any defences against a force user.”

Thrawn gave me a wry smile. “You have already long ago provided the answer to that, my dear.”

I raised both eyebrows at him, “I have?”

“Yes.” He said setting his cup down on the table.

“How am I supposed to go to Obroa-Skai? Ged doesn’t have a civilian ship in his fleet and the Obroans did not side with the Empire, they will not trust someone arriving in an Imperial ship.”

“I had your ship brought here. I brought it on board when I arrived.” He said smugly. “It was part of the training event Ged and I planned.”

“You used my ship in a training mission?”

“I did, she was unharmed I assure you. I am quite a decent pilot when I need to be.” He teased. “it was necessary to get your ship on board without raising too many questions.”

“And once I get there I am just supposed to ask for access codes to the mainframe?”

“No, just access to the archives, once we have one access code, even if it is a public one we’ll be able to do the rest. It is a simple plan, Tekari. You are a civilian and there will be no reason to refuse you access especially if you are searching for something innocuous. A’myshk’a, you’re a smart woman, you’ll figure something out.”

I made a face and went to pour more tea but he placed his hand over mine, stopping me. “My time here with you is limited; I think we have better things to do than sip tea.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You’re getting risqué in your old age.” I teased, a little surprised. “You usually do not like to mix pleasure with work.”

“True enough, but perhaps, my dear, I just miss you and chances such as this will be extremely far and few between.” He said. “Admiral Larsen, it seems, is aware of the nature of your relationship with me and commented that perhaps it might make you a little less, how did he put it, difficult to work with if I spent some time with you.”

“Ged doesn’t really miss much.”

“He likes you.”

“Everybody likes me I’m harmless.” I retorted, pinching his arm.

He smirked. “Only to those who do not share your bed or incur your wrath.”

He was right and our time together, private like this was precious. As he removed his jacket and shirt I stroked the skin of his arm, my fingers tracing the fine wound metal of the binding bracelet he never took off. “So, for a few stolen moments you’re mine?”

“Yes,” He murmured in my ear, starting the process of undressing me.

“And we’ll have time to discuss this little trip of mine afterwards?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” I said, satisfied with this answer I let the rest go and allowed him to remind me why I missed him so much as well as make sure he knew why he should miss me.

The small, lesser used hanger bay where the *Ahnkeli’Su’udelma* was docked was deserted and very quiet. I glanced at the chrono on the far wall and sighed. It was late and I hadn’t even noticed the time slip away. Despite Thrawn’s assurances that my ship had been well looked after on Nirauan I wasn’t taking any chances and had spent much of the day into the early evening making certain she was in top condition. I was in the engine room when I felt a presence and heard a soft knock

against the bulkhead by the hatchway.

“Permission to come aboard?” Ged asked stepping into the small space as I nodded. “I cannot believe you’re willing to fly anywhere in that bucket of bolts.”

“Don’t be insulting my ship. This bucket of bolts has teeth.” I replied wiping the grease off my hands with a rag.

“Really? I didn’t think these things still flew, to be honest.”

“When I was given her she was outfitted with all the best equipment. She may look like a wreck on the outside but she’s got it where it counts.” I smiled, “I’m not sure how many are still running but this one is in good shape, if it wasn’t Thrawn would never let me fly it.”

Ged raised an eyebrow. “Oh really? I was under the impression that telling you to do something was a lot like trying to herd wild kimas.” He stepped over the open tool box to look down at the engine.

“Ha very ha.” I replied. “Is there a reason for this visit or did you just come all the way down here to harass me about my ship?”

“Actually I came to invite you to have dinner with me, the Grand Admiral and the captains of both our flag ships but if you’d rather play with your toy here....” He let his sentence trail off, glancing around my ship.

“I thought Thrawn had returned to the Chimera.” I said not masking my surprise or delight.

“Our debriefing session went on far longer than planned and we’ve decided to stage more drills rather than rush into anything. He, along with his fleet, will remain here for another two days, standard time.”

I couldn’t help my smile and it did not go unnoticed. For a second our eyes met and something sparked between us making my heart skip a little beat. As though someone had sent a small jolt of electricity through me.

It puzzled me, this sensation because I was not in love with Ged Larsen and I certainly had no plans to change my current love life situation, but never the less....there was something there and I did my best to ignore it. I looked away, breaking the contact as well as the moment and made sure there was a little more distance between us. This also did not go unnoticed. The silence seemed suddenly heavy and oppressive.

“Merlyn,” Ged said after a too long a pause, “may I ask you

something personal?”

I nodded cautiously, not liking the sudden seriousness of his mood. “Sure, I guess.”

“You’re close to Thrawn. It’s more than just a working relationship, I mean.”

I nodded but didn’t elaborate.

“Just so we’re clear, you and he are lovers.”

“Yes.” I said quickly.

“Why did you never mention the exact nature of your relationship with him to me?”

I drew a deep breath and frowned. “You’ve never asked about it until now.” I said honestly.

“Well, I’m asking about it now. Why have you never said anything before?”

I shrugged, “We got so used to keeping it very private that I never think about it any other way. Under the rule of Palpatine it was forbidden for an Imperial officer to fraternise with members of the Palace staff. Shouting about it from the palace rooftops would not have been a smart thing to do.”

“That did not seem to stop you from having an affair with him though.”

I frowned. “Well it was something Palpatine encouraged, actually, unofficially of course. I think he saw it as some sort of grand experiment, what would happen to his brilliant alien tactician if he fell for a lowly office girl from Tatooine.”

“And what did happen?”

“Palpatine used the relationship as part of an excuse to have Thrawn exiled to the Unknown Regions. It was an ugly thing.”

He nodded, letting me know that he had heard about that particular incident. “So, when I first met you at the reception for Thrawn’s induction into the canted Circle, were you and he together then?”

I smiled at the memory of that day. “Yes.”

“He was the reason you wouldn’t go out to dinner with me?” He said slowly, also remembering that day.

Once again we stared at each other and the air between us shimmered. “Ye..e..es.” I said slowly.

Ged shook his head. “I pride myself on being able to read people

really well but I have to admit I never saw that you and the Grand Admiral were an item. I thought you were hung up on that blond haired palace fop you spent the rest of the event talking to.”

“Shiv? You mean Siavaan?” I asked in disbelief relieved to talk about somebody other than Thrawn. “Good grief no! Shiv’s just one of my best friends.” I laughed at the very thought.

“He seemed very close to you.” Ged pressed.

“Well, he is close to me. He was being protective.” I said, nodding. “He thinks he’s my big brother. I love him dearly but we’re just friends, really.”

“So, if I may ask, how long have you and the Grand Admiral been together?”

I stopped to think about this. “I’ve known him for about as long as I’ve worked for the Empire,” I paused to do some mental math, “But actually together-together...probably around eight or so years I guess.”

Ged did not bother to hide his surprise. “Really?”

“Mmm, really.” I said, “To be honest it surprises me that you’re so shocked; I mean the tabloids were full of stories about us, people knew or at least I think they did. I assumed you knew.”

“I don’t read that nonsense and I don’t pay much attention to the gossip mongers either.” He shrugged. “I assumed the rumours were false, especially since it seemed the entire Core was trying to find some sort of story to tell about the Emperor’s pet alien.” He paused, “And how would I know? I’ve seen you two together, what, twice and both times, while you appeared to have a decent working relationship I would never have said you were anything more than simply colleagues who got along. You both hide it very well.”

There was an edge to his voice I wasn’t sure how to decipher. “Why are you asking this Ged?”

“I like to know how things stand before I put my foot in it and say, ask you out on a real date... again.”

I looked at him steadily for a moment. “Is that the sort of thing you are likely to do... again?”

He smiled in a decidedly feral manner. “You are a lovely young woman, smart, well read and incredibly talented. You are force sensitive which is something quiet rare, you seem to understand me and you are a civilian, so therefore not within the realm of business mixing with pleasure. Yes, asking you out had occurred to me many

times, especially in the last few weeks.”

“So what stopped you?” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

He gave me another smile, “I couldn’t put my finger on it exactly, even though it was quite obvious you find me attractive and you enjoy my company, there was always a bit of a distance. I thought it was because you were shy or perhaps intimidated but”

“Well now you have a more concrete answer.” I shrugged ignoring his last statement.

“Ah well you did not exactly hide your feelings very well this morning when you burst into my ready room half dressed.” He replied. “You saw the Grand Admiral and your entire face lit up like a star going Nova.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, “And the reason for me being half dressed in my night clothes was the command to come to your office right away.” I hissed, ignoring his description of my expression.

“I enjoy watching you flit through my ship looking like some Nubian fey.” He smirked, teasing me. Something he did more frequently than when I had first come on board. “And your delight at seeing the Grand Admiral did not go unnoticed but it was the first time I’ve really paid attention to it. I just assumed you and he were friends.”

I shrugged. “I try to keep my feelings private; usually I do a better job.”

“Well I know you better now than I did before so I can read your expression and body language better as well.” He replied softly. “As I said I just wanted to know the lay of the land so to speak and not embarrass myself in front of my superior officer during dinner this evening.”

I laughed. “I hardly think you’d do that.”

He shrugged with a boyish grin which I found charming, “There is always a first time.” He said then added, “Does Pellaeon know about you two?”

“I doubt it. Thrawn has made sure to keep me well away from the Chimera and her crew. He’d never discuss his private life with junior officers unless he considered them very close personal friends and I don’t think he’s anywhere near that stage with Captain Pellaeon or his crew.”

“Then I shall refrain from making obnoxious innuendos at

dinner. Do you think you can be cleaned and ready to join us in say, an hour?" He asked, "While I find the pit monkey look endearing it's not exactly the appropriate dining at the Admiral's table wear."

"Well I am sure I can find something suitable as long as it's not too formal."

Ged shrugged, "Well, it will be as formal as it gets for spur of the moment."

"And here I thought engine grease was the height of fashion." I grinned and once again our eyes caught and another spear of something unwanted shot through my body. He stepped towards me and I edged back as nonchalantly as I could. "I need to finish here if you really want me to dine with you all." I said.

Ged smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. "Merlyn, this mission he has you going on...."

I cut him off. "It isn't dangerous if that's what you're asking me." I drew a deep breath and looked at him.

He glanced around my ship and made a face, "If you need anything for this tub, the Quartermaster knows to give you what ever you ask for, within reason."

I nodded. "Thanks."

"Dinner is at twenty hundred hours, so try not to be late." He said turning to leave but then he paused. "I know you say you've been with the Grand Admiral for a while now but you might want to let him know he should not take you for granted, that he has competition for your affections."

I just stared at him for a moment not sure how to take this unexpected statement then nodded. "Maybe you should tell him that yourself, Ged." I said softly.

He seemed to consider this and then without warning he strode back to where I stood and before I could stop him he cupped my face with his hands and kissed me as though we were lovers starving for one another and without even thinking about it I kissed him back. Through the force I could feel his passion, his desire and something else I could not decipher, it left me breathless and shaken but before I could come to my senses and shove him away he stopped, pulling back to stare at me intently. There was a long heavy, silence broken only by the sound of my heart which pounded in my ears.

"No, sweetheart, I think that you should be the one to tell him. I

am not the one with conflicted emotions. I know exactly what I want." He said very softly.

"My emotions are not conflicted!" I snapped.

Ged's only answer was a slight smile which tugged at the corner of his lips. For a moment I thought he was going to try and kiss me again so I put my hand up in a stop gesture then tucked it quickly behind my back when I noticed that it was shaking.

"Please do not ever do that again." I said very quietly.

"Why not? Are you afraid you might enjoy it too much? Because I know you enjoyed that, I could feel it. You think you can hide everything you feel from me but that simply isn't the case with many things. You're like an open book most days and believe me when I say this, you're interested. Why else would you want to spend so much of your spare time with me? So stop pretending otherwise." He leaned into me and whispered in my ear, his breath warm against the skin of my neck. He smelled good and the thought made me feel guilty.

I shut my eyes tightly, willing the world to get back to normal. Part of me wanted to slap him but I held back because a very tiny part of me wondered if he was right, as kisses went it had not been unpleasant. However, I was never going to let him know that. "No because if you do that again I will hurt you. Ask Thrawn about what happened to Grand Admiral Zaarin when he tried the same thing with me." I stepped back from him wondering what had brought this on because up until now we had been just friends, at least that is what I thought. I had completely missed any signals indicating otherwise. "You joked to Thrawn that his spending time with me would make me less difficult...I don't get why you suddenly...."

He held up his hand. "What I said was 'Perhaps if you spend some more time with her while you are here and discuss this job you have for her it will make her less difficult to work with as she seems to miss working for you and I have very little to offer such a smart young woman.'" He said. "I meant that you don't seem to be particularly challenged by any of the tasks I set you and that maybe he had found something for you to other than be here on my ship without a real reason to be other than to act as his spy."

I scowled at him. "I am not his spy!" I snapped resenting this. "The reason I am here is because he wanted me out of harm's way but at the same time thought I might be of use."

“So that’s the truth. He sent you here because he wanted to keep you safe?” Ged asked in disbelief. “What does he think I am a glorified babysitter for his mistress?”

“I can actually look after myself!” I shot back, now fully angry, “How dare you....”

“What do you see in him Merlyn?” He asked suddenly, cutting me off mid-sentence. I held my breath waiting for him tell me Thrawn wasn’t human so that I could bite his head off about being xenophobic but that was not the case. “Really, he’s old enough to be your father, he’s never around and he’s about as emotional as a dead bantha.” Ged’s words came out angry, almost petulant.

“Age has nothing to do with it nor for that matter does race, colour or creed. You don’t know him, you have no idea. All you see is the Imperial façade he’s been putting on for years. Just because he doesn’t show what he feels doesn’t mean he doesn’t have emotions or that he never shows them. You have no idea of what he is capable of!” I shot back, now that the shock had dwindled and the adrenalin had receded only anger and uncertainty were left in their place. I seemed to have a thing for older men but I didn’t say this out loud.

Ged just stared at me. Then he leaned in to kiss me again and I seemed to watch it all unfold in slow motion. When his lips brushed against mine I felt as though my entire world had suddenly tilted sideways upending everything I knew to be good and true. This time instead of kissing him back, as my body wanted me to do, I moved my head aside and looked away from his face. “Why the hell did you do that? I told you to stop!”

“I wanted to see if I was right.”

“About what?”

“About you.” He said quietly, brushing a lock of hair away from my face with his forefinger.

I swallowed. “And your conclusion?” I asked pushing his hand away.

“I’ll leave that up to you to figure out.” He said stroking my face with his finger tips.

I pulled back from his touch, shaking. “Admiral, I think you should leave now.”

He just smiled. “Dinner, my private dining room in half an hour, do not be late. That is an order.” He said and then he left.

Shaking from the inside out, I slid down to sit on the floor wondering what the hell had prompted this turn of events. I wracked my brains trying to remember if I had done or said anything to allow Ged to believe I was free for the taking.

My first week on board his ship had been strange, tense especially after the dinner where he had all but interrogated me on my reasons for being there. He had been deeply suspicious of Thrawn’s reasoning and had called me on the whole Emperor’s hand thing.

“Miss Gabriel,” He had said after a very lengthy silence, “You and I both know you were never one of Palpatine’s agents so cut the crap will you and tell me what you are really doing here?”

I had given him the answer Thrawn had told me to, which was that I was there working as a liaison between the two fleets, nothing more and nothing less and that if he didn’t like it he could take it up with the Grand Admiral. Needless to say it had been a somewhat terse and awkward meal and I was more than happy to be shown to my quarters and leave Ged alone to his thoughts.

For the rest of the week he had completely ignored me and with nothing else to do, as well as no access to any place other than the public areas on his ship I had spent much of my time either in my quarters reading or in the small exercise room working out my demons. I didn’t dare contact Thrawn and complain and since I didn’t have my own ship I couldn’t just leave. Things had changed, though, when he had found me, very late one night, running through my bunduki forms.

“I was not aware that you were trained, formally trained in this martial art form.” He had said watching me from the doorway.

I had ignored his comment because I was angry with him and had kept on practicing as if he were not there at all.

“The Emperor once told me that you would have made a great candidate for his adept training programme had it not been for your stubborn, wilful nature which had you so bound up with Vader. I start to understand what he meant.”

I had stopped what I was doing to stare at him. “You talked with the Emperor about me?” I had asked surprised.

“No, he mentioned you because he saw us speaking together at the Canted Circle ceremony.” He had replied.

I had just nodded and begun a series of stretches to cool down.

“Merlyn, look, I’m sorry if I offended you but you must

understand a man in my position cannot take chances on ...well you could very well be a rebel spy.”

I had just glared at him then turned my back on him. “The last person who accused me of being a traitor died.” I had said flatly.

“I am not accusing you of anything but I wanted to make certain you are who you say you are. It’s been my experience that the rebels are very clever when it comes to infiltrating and information gathering.”

“Well, Admiral, let me put you at ease I am not now nor was I ever aligned with the Rebel Alliance. I am exactly what Thrawn says I am, a civilian pilot who once worked as Lord Vader’s personal assistant. I sometimes work as a mechanic when I am needed, I occasionally do some translation work for him and fly on delivery runs for him when he wishes to go someplace in a non military capacity. Sometimes I act as a courier and occasionally, like now, I am asked to do some liaison work between fleets. You are quite right when you say I am not an Emperor’s Hand, that is a lie but a necessary one to keep people who would normally ask questions from doing so. So if you would do me the kindness of contacting the Grand Admiral and letting him know the current situation so that either he or you can arrange passage off this ship for me I would be most grateful.”

“Actually, I already have and he indicated to me that while my caution was admirable it was also not necessary and that I was being foolish to throw away your talents.” He replied. “While he was polite about it the underlying command for me to deal with you and the situation was there. No matter what, he is my superior officer and his orders will be obeyed.”

I had glanced up. “What talents would they be?” I had asked snarkily.

“He did not elaborate and I did not argue the point.” He had replied. “Look, as I said before I wanted to make sure you were who you said you were and it seems that my worries were unfounded. I apologise for the treatment you have received and would like to try and make it up to you, if I may?”

I knew a peace offering when I saw it and I had also known in this case it would only ever be given once and if I wanted to actually enjoy my time on board the *Virulent* then I had damned well better take it so I had nodded. “Apology accepted Admiral.”

“Please, call me Ged, seeing as how you are not actually a

member of the Imperial navy I see no reason why we cannot be informal at least in private.”

And that had been the start of what slowly blossomed into a very pleasant friendship, or so I thought. Over the weeks that had followed we had spent a lot of time talking in private, sharing stories about our various experiences during the Emperor’s rule and eventually talking about what it meant to be a force user, especially one that Palpatine had taken an interest in. It turned out that we actually had a lot in common, including a love of Jeb Holloway books.

I had been given a small office space and computer access. Ged had also allowed me to work in the mechanic’s pit because I had begged for something other than mindless paperwork to do. I got used to meeting him for a ‘caf in the mornings and then we began to share supper together more often than not when he had time. So when, I wondered, had this turned into more than just a decent working friendship without me noticing?

There had been an evening two weeks prior to Thrawn’s arrival when after dinner we had moved to the living area of his quarters, sat on the couch and shared a particularly good brandy. The conversation had been funny and warm and above all comfortable but I could not recall there being any more to it. I had not gotten drunk and there had been no physical tell tale signs that I had actually noticed to say he was remotely interested in me, but when I thought back I saw I had been wrong. I shook my head in disbelief at how I could have missed these signs, the mimicking of body language, the slightly too long held gazes, his utter attentiveness and the occasional contact when he would touch my hand or shoulder to emphasis a point he was making. What was worse was I hadn’t backed away from this, I had enjoyed his attention. It had been nice, almost normal.

I sighed and banged my head against the bulkhead of my ship in frustration. I had not thought about this because it had not occurred to me that any other man might find me attractive let alone act on the desire. In my head I was so utterly Thrawn’s that I automatically expected the entire galaxy to know this, but that was not the case. As Ged had pointed out, it was something that had been kept well hidden. How could he or anyone else be expected to simply know? I had been an idiot.

All this time he had interpreted my actions as interest in him

and there had been no reason for him to think otherwise. I drew a deep breath remembering the sheer thrill that had accompanied the anger and surprise of his sudden and not so subtle kiss. My experiences with men over the years had not been the best, when they were not trying to rape me they were trying to kill me. It wasn't as if I had ever had a lot of experience with male attention that was positive, with the exception of Thrawn. So few had ever really made any sort of positive play for my affections that I didn't actually recognize it for what it was and I had been with Thrawn for so long it had never occurred to me to even consider anyone else but I had to admit I liked Ged. What I didn't want to admit was my body had also liked what he had done and I certainly didn't like the guilt that flooded me when I thought about this.

I sighed and looked at the chrono. I had fifteen minutes to get dressed so that I could sit through a dinner which I knew would be uncomfortable and awkward for me. Suddenly frustrated beyond all belief I threw the spanner in my hand across the room and swore loudly. Then because I didn't really have a choice I got up and headed to my quarters to get cleaned up so that I could sit between two men who both had the capacity, it seemed, to make my heart race.

When I entered the small, private dining room all conversation stopped and all eyes turned to look at me, as well they should. I had taken extra care to pick out a dress that was both flattering and revealing yet tasteful at the same time. I had made sure my make up was perfect and styled my hair in a way that was coquettish and pretty. If I was going to be hunted I might as well look the part, I had thought angrily at the time but as I walked into the room I wondered if maybe it was simply to show Thrawn what he had and Ged what he could not.

"Miss Gabriel, here you are at last, we thought perhaps you had gotten lost." Ged said. "I was just about to send a search party out after you."

I tilted my head to one side and smiled. "Admiral, you should know by now that it takes time for a woman to change from grease pit monkey to presentable dinner companion."

Thrawn arched an eyebrow in my direction but said nothing.

"Well," said Ged, "The results were worth waiting for. That

dress is quite ... stunning." He managed.

"Thank you." I replied failing not to blush. Thrawn didn't miss this either.

"Miss Gabriel had a very adept dress maker on Coruscant." Thrawn said.

I smiled at him and nodded. "It was one of the advantages of working for Lord Vader and being based in the Imperial palace. Dressing up was required by the Emperor so the appropriate clothing was provided." I explained.

"Well," said Ged, "Whatever the reason I am more than grateful that you are here to brighten things up."

I inclined my head and took his offered hand so he could show me to my seat. Grateful that Cati's dresses still served me well.

Once I had been seated everyone else took their places so that at the Head of the table was Ged, despite being a lower rank than Thrawn it was his ship, I sat to his left and Thrawn to his right. Next to me was seated Gilad Pellaeon, the *Chimaera's* captain and next to Thrawn sat Benjamin Morrish, the captain of the *Virulent*. Once the aperitif had been poured and beautiful plates of tastefully arranged appetizers set down on the table, Ged toasted to the Empire and the meal began.

One of the finer things about being asked to dine at the Admiral's table was the food. It was almost always excellent, especially when compared to the standard chow that was served in the regular mess. The meal was perfectly served by silent junior officers who wore their finest uniform complete with white gloves. Over the actual meal the conversation was kept fairly light, mostly by Thrawn who deftly steered it in the direction he wanted despite Ged's attempts to pull it in other directions. It was like watching two alpha males vie for territory and it would have been amusing had it not been for what had occurred earlier. Instead it just made me feel uncomfortable and guilty. The two captains joined in when it was appropriate and when I was asked I offered my opinion. It was pleasant until desert when Corellian spice cake was served. I stared at the beautifully decorated slice of cake and glanced at Thrawn, then as politely as I could I ignored it. After about two minutes this aroused curiosity especially as everyone else at the table seemed delighted with the desert choice but were waiting for me to go first.

"Is there a problem with the desert?" Ged asked, "Our chef is

trained to make it to the high standards I'm sure you have become accustomed to." There was reproach in his voice.

"I'm sure it's lovely but I can't eat Corellian Spice cake." I said. "I have an adverse reaction to it."

Ged cocked his head to one side, "Is that so? How unusual." He motioned for one of the servers to come and remove the offending plate and I could tell from his manner that he was unimpressed. He had thought I would be delighted by this rare treat and he was disappointed in my reaction.

"Miss Gabriel was very nearly killed when she ate from a Corellian Spiced cake that had been poisoned while on board Lord Jerec's ship working for me a few years ago." Thrawn said quietly, explaining what I had not wanted to.

Ged looked at Thrawn and then to me. I nodded to confirm what Thrawn had said. "It was not an experience I ever wish to relive." I said quietly, glancing under my lashes at Thrawn.

"No I dare say not. Was anyone else affected?" Ged asked, looking from Thrawn to me.

I shook my head, "The cake had been laced with glow-spice which doesn't have an adverse effect on most people. I am very allergic to glow-spice, I was the intended target."

"Why would anyone wish to harm you?" Captain Pellaeon asked gently, genuinely shocked.

I gave a slight shrug, I didn't wish to get into it.

"She was the unfortunate target of someone who wanted to attack me." Thrawn interjected, "It was hoped that by ending her life while on my watch I would come into disfavour with Lord Vader and the Emperor."

Gilad Pellaeon shook his head. "Such an act is the work of a coward." He said, "I hope that the person responsible was caught."

"He met with a suitable end Captain." I said quietly. "However, one of the unfortunate side effects of this is that I cannot face Corellian Spiced cake, no matter how well it is prepared. I apologise, meant no insult to your chef Admiral Larsen." I shuddered slightly at the memory of that incident which had very nearly claimed my life.

"No need to apologise my dear," Ged said. "Allow me to have the kitchen prepare something else for you? It would be rude for us to eat while you sit there without anything."

I knew if I refused it would be an insult so I nodded. "A small bowl of fruit would be most welcome, thank you."

Satisfied that he had somehow made everything better Ged nodded at the young man waiting by the wall and the request went out to the kitchen, five minutes later I was staring at one of the most beautiful displays of cut fruit I had ever seen.

"I must admit, Miss Gabriel, I am grateful that the attempt on your life was unsuccessful, you are delightful company for a group of men who have long forgotten what it is like to be in the presence of non military females." Gilad Pellaeon said with a smile, his eyes met mine and I felt the sudden and unexpected pang of tears in my eyes. His open kindness and acceptance of my strange place in this Imperial man's world was unusual and I was touched by it. He was a good deal older than Ged or Captain Morrish and his looks made him seem older than Thrawn as well. I had heard many good things about him but our paths had never actually crossed.

"Thank you Captain. Though to be honest it was one in a long series of moments where I wasn't sure I'd live."

Thrawn chuckled. "Miss Gabriel has a rather nasty habit of facing death on a regular basis, luckily for us she also seems to be blessed with as many lives as that of a bearded jax."

"I suppose that was a plus for someone working under Lord Vader." Captain Morrish said.

I grinned. "I guess you could say that."

Captain Pellaeon smiled, "So Miss Gabriel, I'm curious. What was it like working as a civilian under Lord Vader?"

"It was a very interesting experience, Captain." I said diplomatically.

Thrawn smiled enigmatically and Ged laughed.

"Well what do you expect me to say, Admiral Larsen?" I asked him point blank. "We all know what Lord Vader was like, his temper and his passion were... legendary. People still talk about him in whispers as if conjuring up his name will suddenly bring a bad case of force choke. He was a complicated man with a very complicated past that haunted him until the day he died. Bureaucrats hated him and the men who served under him both feared and loved him at the same time." I toyed with my napkin ring. "I, for my part, admired him however working for him was anything but easy."

“Yet you survived where so many didn’t, how did you manage to avoid his wrath?” Morrish asked.

I shrugged. “I really don’t know.” I answered, “Though it wasn’t so much that I survived his wrath but rather dodged it more often than not.”

“Perhaps he simply enjoyed having you around.” Ged suggested with a smile. “After all you are quite delightful company.”

I glanced at Thrawn who held my gaze a moment too long with a stare that held questions in it I didn’t feel like dealing with. I shook my head ever so slightly then I replied, “I did my job well. If there was more than that he never elaborated.” I said. “What I do know is that he is missed and not just by me.”

“That’s true.” Captain Morrish replied. “I often hear my men speak of him positively despite the fact that he could be an absolute monster.”

I nodded, “He was often cruel and difficult. He could be very sarcastic and more often than not his temper ruled him. His reputation as difficult was well deserved. I do not defend him on that but he was also brilliant and brave. He would often personally lead his pilots in a battle and he never shied away from facing danger. He was very smart and he was also very good with his hands, building things and with general mechanics.”

“Did he know he had children?” Captain Pellaeon asked.

“He knew he had a son, though not until after the battle Yavin but that he also had a daughter, I believe was unknown to him.” I said.

“It must have been a terrible shock for him to discover he had a son and that his son was a traitor.” Morrish said.

I drew a deep breath. “You know, I don’t think he saw it that way.” I replied.

“Oh?” Ged asked.

“He was proud of Luke.” I said quietly.

“Really?” Morrish asked, “If that had been my boy I’d have skinned him alive.”

I smiled. “Well Lord Vader would never have admitted this but sometimes when he spoke about his son, which was rare, there was a sense of pride in his voice. I mean, the boy was raised on Tatooine as a moisture farmer and ended up being one of the rebellion’s biggest heroes, as a father how could he not be proud.” I said remembering

some of the conversations we had had about Luke. “I think that he felt it was one of the only worthwhile things he had accomplished as Anakin Skywalker and it was a link to the woman he had loved and lost.”

Thrawn smiled at me and it warmed my heart. “One of the more unusual things about Miss Gabriel is her rather amazing ability to see the best in even the worst of people and situations.”

I shrugged, dropping my gaze to the table. “You kind of have to be like that growing up on Tatooine.” I said with a shrug.

“I heard that this Skywalker was a bit of a trouble maker.” Morrish said after a moment, “Someone commented that he apparently whines a lot. That doesn’t sound like you at all, my dear.”

I laughed looking at Thrawn who could not prevent the smile that lit up his face, “I assure you captain I can do my fair share of whining when I have to. It’s a pity Lord Vader is no longer around he would have given you a long list of my whines and rants.”

Thrawn chuckled and Ged glanced sharply at the two of us. We had just shared a private joke and he hadn’t liked it much. I sighed inwardly at the fragility of the male ego. Ged caught my eyes and held my gaze. “You must find working under the Grand Admiral here to be a refreshing change then.”

“How so, Admiral?” I asked blushing without wanting to. If the other two men at the table caught his insinuation they made no sign of it. Thrawn’s eyebrow twitched just a notch.

Ged smiled and with a nod to Thrawn said, “Well if Vader was passionate, unpredictable and cruel, Grand Admiral Thrawn must be the exact opposite if all I have been led to believe by Palpatine about his favoured tactician is true, which means working for him must be quite... uneventful.”

There was a barb hidden deep within the truth of Ged’s words. I glanced at Thrawn whose features gave nothing away. He simply sat, his expression neutral, his manner attentive and like everyone else waited for me to answer.

“Well, I would not say that working for the Grand Admiral is uneventful, after all he is the leader of the Empire at the moment.” I said sweetly, sending a little barb right back, “And to be honest, everyone I work for and with offers me new and interesting challenges, Admiral. Each have their own peculiarities and their own positive

points. Working under the Grand Admiral is very different from my time spent working with Lord Vader. The two working relationships are nothing alike and comparing them would be like comparing living on Tatooine with living on Naboo. I would also not say that the Grand Admiral lacks passion or emotion, he simply has a much better control than Lord Vader ever did, you just need to know what topics to bring up to engage his ...enthusiasm. Working with and for these two men brings me experiences that are entirely different, one is neither better nor worse than the other, just different and each brings its own unique lessons to bear. However, I can tell you that working with the Grand Admiral is far less stressful than under Lord Vader's somewhat volatile command."

Captain Pellaeon smiled. "Bravo, Miss Gabriel, that was a very good answer."

I beamed at him, absolutely liking this man who seemed to have taken a liking to me.

"Well, it seems you have a fan Grand Admiral." Ged said lightly but his words were heavy, weighted.

Thrawn arched an eyebrow and smiled enigmatically, his face and expression remaining unreadable. "Indeed, Miss Gabriel is not shy about stating where her loyalties lie. Her openness is a trait I have very much come to appreciate." He said and I inwardly sighed. Whatever undercurrents Ged and I had brought to the table with us had not gone unnoticed by Thrawn.

"I have noticed that she is not shy about a great many things." Ged remarked. "She is a remarkable force of nature."

I glared at both men and said. "I am sitting right here. Stop talking about me as if I were not in the room."

"My apologies, my dear." Thrawn said. "Although Admiral Larsen is correct in his observation, you are indeed a force of nature."

I shook my head and let out a noisy sigh but before I could further the conversation in its very odd direction Ged raised his glass. "To interesting work environments, then." He said and everyone sipped politely to the toast, hoping the moment and all its underlying awkwardness would pass quickly.

"So am I to gather that you actually liked working for Lord Vader then?" Morrish asked, coming back to a topic he assumed was safe.

I nodded. "Very much so. I mourned his passing greatly, I still do." I said honestly. "But I cannot go back and change what has happened so now we all need to look forward and I cannot think of a better man to lead the Empire into a new age than the Grand Admiral here."

For a moment there was stillness as everyone turned to Thrawn, leaving me grateful to be out of the spotlight for the time being.

"How fortunate you are Grand Admiral to have such a loyal member of the Empire working for you." Ged added. "If only we were all so lucky to have such unadulterated admiration from such a beautiful woman."

Captain Pellaeon chuckled, "It would appear that you have an admirer my dear."

"It's a burden I think I can live with." I said with a grin.

Ged smiled, "I find that as a naval officer I must steal little pleasure where I can. Being in the company of a beautiful woman is one such pleasure, would you gentlemen not agree?"

There was a consensus of nodding and I blushed again, unused to being the center of such scrutiny. Thrawn glanced at me and the second our eyes met, desire mingled with guilt shot through me. I had to fight the urge to look away in haste for fear he would see something was wrong, or see what had happened between Ged and I earlier written all over my face.

"You will have to forgive Miss Gabriel she is rather enthusiastic in her praise and very passionate in her ideals, both traits of the young and somewhat naïve." Thrawn said with a smile, his eyes never leaving mine. I bit back any retort I might have had about him calling me young and naïve, we'd been down this road many times before. He waited a second then continued. "But the sentiment is not unappreciated." He held my gaze a second more then looked at each of the others seated at the table in turn. "I do not joke when I say that winning back the ground we have lost will be no easy feat. The New Republic has gained much respect since they took Coruscant from the Empire and while they are still experiencing teething problems, many worlds now choose to align with them rather than stay loyal to an Empire they see and feel is past its prime and filled with nothing more than power hungry petty crooks. Isard did not do us any favours with her decision to poison Coruscant with the virus that slaughtered

millions. We will have to work hard to regain our standings but I believe it can be done.”

Everyone nodded to this but Thrawn wasn't finished.

“I understand that we both have untried crews and that with the destruction of the Executor at Endor we lost far too many mid level experienced naval officers and crew but as Miss Gabriel said, the past is the past and we must look forward. In doing so we must be patient but firm in our resolve and training of these green recruits. But this is not enough, we lack the numbers needed which is why I am hopeful that with Merlyn's help I will be able to local a cloning facility and boost our numbers quickly enough that the New Republic will not know what hit it.”

There was a sudden, tense silence at the table as Thrawn's words sunk in. It was Ged who broke it.

“Clones?” He said carefully. “Do you really feel that is necessary?”

“I do.” Thrawn replied coolly. “Do the math, we have neither this ships nor the manpower to retake the territories lost and while I think it is possible with stealth and guile to do a great deal of damage to the New Republic without the numbers to hold it, this will not be enough. Aside from press-ganging able body beings into naval service I know of no other suitable way to boost numbers without affecting moral severely. It has been my experience that forced conscription does not make a better military might, it simply boosts numbers and adds to problems.”

“And do you have a source for these clones?”

Thrawn's mouth twitched in a slight smile at Ged's question. “Not yet Admiral, but I am hopeful.”

“And in the meantime I suppose that means I will get little to no sleep due to all these crazy drills you keep running.” I muttered. My comment had the desired effect breaking the heavy tension that had built up between Ged and Thrawn, making everyone smile.

“Grand Admiral if I may, as we are speaking of passions, I have heard that you have a great interest in art.” Captain Morrish asked, while the desert plates were removed, a bowl of fresh fruit was laid down and a very good stim'caf was served.

“That's an understatement.” I blurted with a smile. “The Grand Admiral is probably one of the most knowledgeable art historians I

have ever met.”

“Really?” Ged asked looking at Thrawn with interest. “I would not have thought art to be something that would interest such a brilliant strategist as yourself.”

“I study art as a means to an end, Admiral.” Thrawn said giving me a smile. “I find that by learning about a race's art and culture one can learn a great deal about how they think and, by inference, how they will act.”

“So you use art as a form of tactical espionage?” Ged asked. “As opposed to just enjoying it as the rest of us do?”

Thrawn shrugged ever so slightly, “That is one way to put it, I suppose, though I would not have described it so crassly.” He said, his tone now cool and distanced. “Loving art is nothing to be ashamed of but when one understands the nuances that go into creating the art, the architecture and so on of a particular culture then one has a far greater insight into that culture. I do not mean that by looking at a work of art from a particular peoples I can discern all there is to know but the insights I gain help me to form a larger picture of who and what I am up against and every bit of information goes in to helping with a strategic solution to a problem presented.”

“The late emperor was also an art connoisseur.” I said. “He had vast stores of priceless works tucked away where only he could enjoy them but I think he just liked having them.”

“Palpatine was not terribly fond of sharing.” Thrawn said evenly.

“That sounds as though you and our Emperor did not get along.” Ged said carefully.

“Palpatine and I often did not see eye to eye, Admiral, but that made our working relationship extremely interesting. He found me to be infuriating because I was one of the very few people who would tell him exactly what I thought of his plans when he asked for my opinion. When I felt he was wrong or making a mistake I did not try to pander to his ego I told him what I thought. It was, I believe, a sort of game for him but there were days when I sensed he did not enjoy it much. He did not like being told he was wrong and he disliked being shown he was wrong even more.”

“So do you think he was a bad leader?” Morrish asked quietly.

“Not at all Captain, on the contrary. One only has to see the

state of disrepair the Empire fell into after his unfortunate and untimely demise to see just how well he ruled. He was a brilliant statesman and a consummate politician who not only had the love of the people on his side when he first took on the role as Emperor but also had an incredible power, one which I have no personal understanding of, but that helped him rule absolutely.”

“You are not force sensitive then, sir?” Morrish asked.

“No.” Thrawn said.

“What about the rest of your people?” Ged asked, genuinely curious.

Thrawn shrugged slightly. “To the best of my knowledge no Chiss has ever been a force user but that is not to say there has never been one who could use or sense it. Such powers would have been seen as weakness among my people and would have bred imbalance in our delicate ruling system. Therefore anyone possessing such powers would more likely have kept quiet about it.”

“Weakness? How so?” Ged stared at Thrawn as if to challenge him. I wasn’t sure if Ged knew that Thrawn was aware of Ged’s own force sensitivity.

“The Chiss rely on their power to think logically and clearly. Our strengths come from this, not from some strange power that seems to be about as predictable as a Tatooine sandstorm.” He said with an arrogant wave of his hand, “While I understand it can give the user a great strength, as well as some other unusual talents, I do not see it as a tactical advantage necessarily. I think it could easily be something that detracts from a person’s ability to think on their feet or with a clear mind, especially if a person who held this power was untrained and used it wildly and without thought. It seems to me that when you rely on any one tool for long enough you become so dependant on that tool. You lose the ability to function without it. Palpatine had exactly that problem, he was so reliant on the force that he utterly failed to see how the simple power of love could over throw him.”

“So you are saying that love is stronger than the force?” Ged pressed.

I glanced at Thrawn, catching his eye, wondering how he would answer this. He held my gaze a fraction of a second too long and smiled slightly. “Yes.” He replied quite simply. “Love over came everything else when Vader killed the Emperor rather than watch his son die at his

master’s hands.”

“I had no idea you were such a romantic.” Ged said in a bemused manner, “I can only suspect that Miss Gabriel here is in part responsible.”

All eyes turned to me and I tried to keep my expression as neutral as possible, unsure of who knew what and how much about my relationship with Thrawn but I could not prevent the soft blush that coloured my cheeks, all I could do was ignore it and hope that everyone else would as well.

Thrawn arched an eyebrow. “I would not call it romantic to have the ability to see how a very human emotion influences and, more often than not, wins out over everything else time and time again.” He countered, then glancing at me he said, “I also do not underestimate the power of love to corrupt and destroy either. I have seen first hand what love turned into something else can do to people and the results are often devastating.” He added casually. “Would you have me believe that you have never come under the influence of love and have been positively or even negatively swayed by it?” He asked neatly sidestepping Ged’s underlying implication.

“I have had my share of that particular folly, Grand Admiral.” Ged smiled, looking at me as if to say something more. “However some women are worth the effort, don’t you think?” I looked away from Ged’s gaze feeling a renewed flush of heat and guilt mingled into one. I bit my lip and that small tell tale sign did more damage than anything else. I felt the weight of Thrawn’s curiosity rest on me, the unasked questions which no one else would notice flickered briefly through his eyes.

“I think,” I said carefully, “That the biggest love of any Naval officer’s life is his ship.” I glanced at the two captains seated at the table and smiled when they nodded in agreement. “I think that any woman who falls for an Imperial Navy lifer is more of a mistress than a wife in any true sense of the words because space and duty will always come first, as it should.” I allowed myself a smile, “It’s a rare relationship that can survive the long separations, the constant fear of death and the never ending presence of that other, more demanding, space worthy, woman. I do not think it is an easy life but I do believe it is a rewarding one.”

“You have a remarkable insight into the mind of military men.”

Pellaeon said with a smile. “We do indeed love our ships and both duty and space are often referred to as our mistresses by lonely wives and girlfriends.”

“My father was a spacer, Captain. He flew transports and then when he settled down he owned a docking bay on Tatooine. I grew up with ships and pilots, I knew how to fix an engine before I was legally allowed to fly and I could fly before I was legally allowed to do so.” I grinned, “I learned at an early age that a man with stars in his blood was about as tameable as the desert winds.”

“That sounds like a rather lovely way to grow up” Pellaeon said with a smile.

I laughed. “You’re one of the very few who have ever said that and yes I suppose it was though at the time I did not realise what I had.” I paused for a second and then dared to ask a personal question of the man seated next to me. “Are you married captain?” I asked.

“Only to my ship but I certainly do enjoy the occasional foray into the world of female company often enough to be well aware that women are far more dangerous than any enemy I have ever faced and twice as devious to boot, yet we men do love you, we can’t help ourselves, you are a delicious distraction and the lie we tell ourselves about how we don’t actually need you is a delicate one to be sure.” He said with a laugh that somehow managed to clear the tension which had slowly been gathering in the room.

After this the conversation turned to other, lighter subjects and once again I became an observer rather than a participant and was more than grateful to be out of the spotlight. When all the desert dishes had been cleared and no one wanted anything else to eat or drink from the servers, they were dismissed. I politely excused myself before the usual brandy and cigar moment came not wishing to be an intruder in what was traditionally a man’s moment to talk shop without the flirty distractions of female company. Unlike some women I had known in my life I did not feel the need to be a part of every single thing in this Imperial world. Men needed their secrets just as women needed to have their mysteries. Thrawn, before anyone else could, got and politely pulled my chair for me, offering me his hand as he did so.

“I wish you a pleasant evening, my dear.” He said and the others murmured the same sentiments. He escorted me to the door and very quietly whispered in my ear in Cheunh before I left the room, “I think

you and I need to have a little chat before I head back to the *Chimaera*.” He wasn’t angry, not yet but there was a tension in his words that let me know he wasn’t overly impressed by this evening performance either and that he had questions. All I could do was nod and smile, wish everyone a good evening and then leave.

I was tired, tense and more than happy to escape the testosterone filled room. The conversational fencing and Ged’s earlier sudden declaration of open hunting season on my affections had left me restless as well as on edge. Despite what Ged might think, Thrawn’s instincts were well honed when it came to me and my moods and the strange tension which had manifested several times through out the dinner had alerted him to something going on, the fact he felt we needed to talk only jammed this home further. He would eventually come and look for me to explain and that was a moment in time I hoped to avoid for as long as I could so I decided to try and relax with a nice hot bath, a glass of brandy from the bottle I kept with me. The hot water and the fine brandy helped to ease some of the tension that had settled in my shoulders. By the time I was done soaking I reckoned that the dinner must also be over and sooner rather than later Thrawn would show up.

Waiting for an argument to happen...it wasn’t much fun, I thought. I changed into a comfortable dress and settled on the couch with a book in hand but I didn’t get much reading done. When the door chime sounded I nearly jumped out of my skin before waving my hand, using the force to open it. Thrawn walked in and removed his jacket; his way of letting me know that what ever went on, what ever would be discussed it was without the formality of his rank. I refilled my brandy glass and poured a second for Thrawn, then got up and offered it to him. He took it from my hand without a word, touched his glass to mine and we drank in silence.

“Nice dress. Not quite as nice as the one you had on earlier but still...” He said after what felt like an eternity. His eyes swept up and down my body.

“I was told it was a formal dinner, that is the only real formal dress I have here, everything else I own is on Nirauan.” I said

defensively, avoiding his eyes and concentrating on my drink which had suddenly become incredibly interesting.

“Probably a good thing since I’ve seen some of those dresses and given the reaction the one you had on this evening caused I would have hated to see what would happen if you had worn one of those.” His words were tart and annoyed me.

“So you’d prefer me to dress down and not look my best?” I asked sipping my drink, glancing at him from over the rim of my glass. I refrained from reminding him that I was here because of he had all but insisted I come here instead of returning to Nirauan or staying on Tatoonine.

He reached over and caressed my face, “I’d prefer that other men did not look at you as though you were not wearing a dress at all.”

I opened my mouth to reply then closed it again, then said with a shrug. “I can’t help what men think.” I replied. “This includes you.”

He sighed and sat down, gesturing for me to sit next to him. He sipped his drink thoughtfully and I watched, noticing he looked more tired, perhaps more stressed now than he had as I had left the dining room. I wondered what had transpired after I had gone. Both Ged and Thrawn could be incredibly bloody minded when they wanted and I didn’t really want to be around when the two of them locked horns.

“I heard you spent most of the day working in your ship, is everything in order?” He asked after a few moments of quiet had passed between us.

“The ship is fine,” I nodded. “You know me sometimes I just need to tinker.”

“That’s usually a sign that you’re bored, troubled or unhappy though.” He countered, contemplating his glass and its contents.

“Not this time.” I said which was mostly true.

“I take it you heard I will be here for a day or so more.”

“Yes, the Admiral mentioned that earlier.”

There was another long silence between us and I glanced up to find him staring intently at me.

“What?” I asked with a frown.

“Is there something wrong, Tekari?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I detected a rather tense undercurrent at that dinner this evening and it hasn’t dissipated any.” He said carefully.

I nodded, “It’s nothing.” I lied. I had no idea how to tell him about what had happened in the docking bay and it was making me miserable. I swirled the brandy in my glass and took another gulp.

Thrawn watched me for a moment then asked, “Did you and Larsen have a fight about something?”

I glanced at him too quickly and then looked away, shaking my head. He frowned and reached to stroke my face but I pulled back from his touch. He watched me for a long, difficult moment then asked, “Have I done something to offend you Merlyn?”

This time I met his eyes. “No, of course not . It’s just...” I began but I stopped unable to find the words to tell him what I knew I should. I didn’t want to lie but I was confused and he had a jealous streak which I didn’t want to bring forward.

“If it is not me then what is going on because I know that something is on your mind.” He asked carefully, “You’re acting as though you’ve been caught skulking around where you shouldn’t have been. Did you do something you were not supposed to on board Larsen’s ship? Is that why I detected such a peculiar tension going on this evening?”

“No!” I said crossly. “You know me better than that!”

“Yes,” Thrawn said archly, “I do and that’s why I am asking.”

“No, I have not done anything!” I replied hotly.

He sat back on the couch and nodded, “So then what was going on at the dinner this evening? The strange innuendos, the furtive glances....”

I huffed out my breath, feeling the weight of my guilt as well as my anger at Ged for placing me in this situation, finished my brandy in a single gulp then reached for the bottle but Thrawn, placing his hand over mind, stopped me.

“Okay, now I know there is something going on because you only drink like this when there is something on your mind you don’t want to talk about or deal with. Out with it, Tekari, no more secrets, you know what happens when you bottle things up.” He commanded.

I sighed and was about to pour out the whole story to him when the door-chime to my quarters rang. I frowned. It was far too late for casual visitors. I waited a second to see if who ever it was would go away but the chime rang again.

“If it was for me they would have reached me by comm.”

Thrawn said, "You'd better answer it, it may be important."

I made a face and got up, opened the door and sucked in my breath. "Admiral Larsen..." I started as I came face to face with Ged, holding a bottle of wine in his hand.

"How many times must I tell you to call me Ged when we are alone?" He teased.

"Not enough, obviously." I mumbled, "What can I do for you Admiral?"

"I thought I would see if you felt like a night cap Merly." He said with a grin I was sure he meant to be both boyishly charming and seductive all at the same time, "Since dinner was a pretty stuffed shirt affair."

"Thank you but I'm afraid that's not a very good idea right now."

He frowned. "Why not, I thought we could continue where we left off earlier."

I bit my lip and closed my eyes knowing that Thrawn, who was seated just out of the line of sight, could hear every word. "No thank you." I said more firmly. I had his entry blocked to my quarters but he decided to ignore my body language which said please go away and moved past me to walk into the room. He was so focused on me that he did not see Thrawn at first.

"Ged, you need to go..." I tried to stop him but he just smiled and reached out to touch my face but then stopped half way when he saw Thrawn.

"Good evening Admiral Larsen." Thrawn said, his voice was frosty.

Ged's expression changed from playful to serious in an instant. "Sir!" He said in his crispest military manner. "Grand Admiral, I didn't realise you were still here. I was under the impression you had returned to the *Chimaera* with Captain Pellaeon." There was a rebuke under the formal tone and both men knew it.

"Indeed, though as you can see this is not the case." Thrawn replied.

"Yes sir. May I ask what kept you behind? Nothing serious I hope?"

"I have business to discuss with Miss Gabriel in private. Why are you here at such a late hour?" Thrawn said coolly and glanced at me

in a way that let me know he was definitely starting to get the wrong idea.

Ged looked from Thrawn to me and then back to Thrawn again. The tension which had eased somewhat earlier on had returned and somehow managed to double. I wanted to crawl under my bed and hide there. "I wished to let Miss Gabriel know that the requisition she placed with the Quartermaster has been filled and set by her ship for pick up." It was a lie and I frowned as soon as I heard it, Thrawn who had been watching my face knew this from my expression and his own darkened slightly.

"I am sure this news will be of great relief." He said. This was something that Ged could have told me by comm. and showing up at my quarters this late at night with a bottle of wine was not exactly proper procedure. For a moment there was absolute stillness then uncharacteristically Thrawn looked at me and spoke in his native tongue. "Do you care to tell me what is going on here?" That streak of jealousy he kept well hidden, well in check, the one I had really hoped to avoid was beginning to rear its ugly head.

"There's nothing going on and you're being rude." I chided back in Cheunh. I felt the spike of his surprise and anger like a slap and the tension in my quarters ramped up another notch.

"Merlyn," Ged interrupted, "There are some unfinished reports that need to be dealt with before you depart on your mission. I would appreciate it if you would meet with me to deal with them at your earliest convenience."

"Yes sir." I said quietly. "I'll get to it first thing."

Again there was another lengthy silence and then Thrawn asked coldly, "Will there be anything else Admiral Larsen?"

Ged looked at Thrawn but kept his expression neutral. "No sir." He replied.

"Then that will be all." There was no mistaking the curt and not so polite dismissal in Thrawn's words and I watched as Ged's jaw clenched for a second. He had a lot of respect for Thrawn but this was his ship and he did not like his authority being usurped, especially over me. However, deciding that perhaps this was not the time or the place for any sort of showdown he gave both me and Thrawn a curt, polite nod then exited my quarters and left us to our own silence. It was a long and uncomfortable one which eventually Thrawn broke.

“Do I have a reason to be concerned now, Tekari?” He asked. “Because what I am sensing between you and that man wasn’t present when you and I met this morning.”

I felt a stab of desire at the memory of our love making from early in the morning. It had been a sweet and gentle reunion which had been, above all, uncomplicated. “No!” I said fiercely then stammered, changing my answer, “Maybe...damn it... I don’t know, I don’t think so!” I stamped my foot and turned away from him, pacing towards the wall a few meters away. I heard him follow me but ignored him until, frustrated, he grabbed my arm and spun me around to face him.

“What in Da’han’s name is going on here?” He hissed.

“Nothing!” I said far more loudly than I had intended. He didn’t believe me even though it really was the truth.

His eyebrow arched sharply. “Oh really? Well it certainly does not feel like nothing.” I wavered and he pushed. “That man shows up at your quarters unannounced at an inappropriate time, with a bottle of wine and wants to, how did he put it, finish what you started earlier and you tell me it’s nothing?” He shook his head as if he couldn’t quite get a grasp on the thoughts running through his head, “Out with it! Now! No more of this nonsense.”

“It’s nothing! He kissed me! That’s all!” I blurted.

Thrawn let go of my arm as though it had burnt him and the sudden silence between us was like a kick in the gut.

“Za’ar?”

“Ged Larsen kissed you?” His words came out quiet and precise. “And you call this nothing.”

I nodded.

“Is this another Zaarin incident?” He asked carefully.

I shook my head, “No, it was not like that at all.”

Thrawn looked at me, his glowing, red eyes drilled into my soul like burning needles. “So this man kissed you but you don’t feel threatened by him and it wasn’t totally against your will, what does that mean exactly?”

“It doesn’t mean anything.” I said petulantly. “And before you totally get the wrong idea I certainly did not initiate it either.”

“Before I get the wrong idea.... I think it is a bit late for that, my dear.”

“Then rethink your ideas because there is nothing going on.”

“That’s not what I am sensing. If it was so meaningless you would not be having this much difficulty talking about it.”

I sighed. “He came to see me before diner. At first it was just conversation but then it got all strange, before I knew what was going on he was kissing me and then saying that I should tell you that you have competition for my affections.”

“And do I?” He asked coldly.

I paused just a little too long before shaking my head. “No.”

He frowned just a little, looking more hurt than angry, “Do you have feelings for this man?”

I drew a breath so deep it made my lungs shudder. “Maybe, no, I don’t know.” I said miserably. “I didn’t think so but I’ve been stuck here on this tub for over six weeks and up until this morning not heard a single word from you, he’s been kind to me, I thought we were just friends and...but...I don’t know. I didn’t think so until....” I stopped before I dug this miserable hole any bigger.

“He kissed you and it stirred you up.” He said softly, more to himself than to me. “Do I no longer...”

“This has nothing to do with you Za’ar.” I said wishing I didn’t feel so confused. “I would think that after this morning you wouldn’t have to ask this question!”

“Then explain to me why all of a sudden I feel as though I do.” He said, “What the hell is going on?”

“I don’t know what the hell is going on, I didn’t expect this from him, it came out of the blue. He must have misinterpreted signals from me because I sure as hell didn’t intend for him to think I was free for the taking. But to be fair he didn’t actually know about you and I and he wasn’t lying when he told me that...I wanted to tell him but....”

An impatient wave of Thrawn’s hand cut me off mid sentence. “He misinterpreted? I somehow find it hard to believe that a man as clever Ged Larsen would manage to misinterpret signals of that kind over a period of what, six weeks?” He snapped. “You must have been....”

“I must have been...?” I interrupted loudly, “I did nothing wrong!” I yelled, realising that the more I protested my innocence the worse it all sounded, but his accusation that I was somehow to blame annoyed me. “Stop insinuating that this is all my fault!”

“If that is the case then why are you acting as if you have

something to be guilty about?" He asked, his cool logic infuriating me.

"I am not!" I shot back, knowing full well I was, "I had no idea what he was feeling and I certainly wasn't giving him mixed signals! I don't know why he had to make it so complicated!" I yelled.

Thrawn made a small gesture with his shoulder and looked away from me for a moment, as if were deciding something. "Well Tekari, he didn't make it complicated; you do that all by yourself. Perhaps he simply gave you a choice which you did not know you had before."

"It's not a choice I wanted or sought out." I snapped back sullenly.

"Then what do you want? Because if it is to settle down in a house on a nice planet someplace and lead a normal life with me as your mate by your side I will tell you right now that is not going to happen any time soon." Now he was angry. "I do not have to tell you how difficult things are going to get once this campaign begins in full. I give you as much of my free time as I can, if that is not enough then I don't know what else to do," He paused for a moment to study my face then said, "Do you see the possibility of that sort of a life with Ged Larsen?"

I looked at him with wide eyes not liking how this was all turning out. "I'm completely freaked out about a single kiss, I feel guilty because a little part of me enjoyed but you... you already have him and me living together?" I asked in disbelief, "Now who is making a big deal out of this? It was just a kiss not sex, not a pledge of marriage or anything else!" I was right and he knew it but it didn't matter and now once again we were fighting because of another man.

"Do you wish to sleep with him?" He asked calmly, as though he were asking if I wanted another drink.

I stared at him and wondered, just of a second if it was possible to love and hate all at the very same time. "I'm still trying to work through the fact that he is attracted to me, that he kissed me. I hadn't thought that far ahead but if you give me some time I might have an answer for you." I said nastily.

I watched the muscles of his jaw clench. I was winding him up, and some very small part of me was enjoying it as if I wanted him angry and jealous. Another part of me kept thinking that we were acting like idiots and this was all going to end very badly if someone didn't come

to their sense very soon.

"You did not answer my original question; do you see the possibility of a life together with him?" He asked again, slowly, dangerously.

"I shook my head. "No, the answer is no. In the space of five hours he's gone from being a simple friend to something I can't define. I like him, we get along and there are things about me he understands like what it means to use the force but he's not you and I never considered that this would happen, it was not something I planned."

"Planned!" He snorted, "You don't ever plan anything, you walk into situations and create chaos. If this was so unplanned then why do you act as though you have betrayed me."

"I am not acting as though I betrayed you, I am confused because I felt something other than fear and loathing. This wasn't like when Zaarin tried to rape me. It never occurred to me that another man would feel that way for me or could make me feel like that."

"Like what?"

"Like I was something more than just a glorified secretary or a decorative feature to be bedded at one's convenience or someone's punching bag!" I snapped.

"Is that how I make you feel? Because if that's the case you've had ample time to say something or walk away."

"No! Stop twisting my words!" I yelled at him. "He kissed me. I didn't ask him to, he just did it!" I said through clenched teeth. "Once. That was all. It took me by surprise and I reacted."

"I see." He said coldly. "One kiss is enough to change a world A'myshk'a, you and I both know that. How do I know that is not the case now?"

"I am bound to you." I protested, as if that was the answer to everything.

"Not in any official capacity." He replied coolly.

I looked into his eyes, grabbed his arm and pushed up the sleeve of his undershirt. "This says otherwise." I said, touching the bracelet around his wrist.

His head tilted to one side. "This has no meaning in the legal sense of the word."

His words stung even though I knew what he meant. "If it is so meaningless then why do you bother to wear it?" I spat.

“Merlyn, I pride myself on having almost infinite patience but you are eroding that swiftly.” He said very quietly. “You know very well what I mean. You are not legally bound to me under any Dantassi laws which means you are still free to choose another mate should you wish to do so. The bracelet itself has great meaning for me otherwise I would not have accepted it from you, nor would I break regulations to wear it and you should know this.”

“I see.” I bit back. “Well I also bound myself to you in public with the blessing of the elder and you did not complain about it then but it was not legal or official because you won’t ever allow this for what- ever lame excuse I am still waiting to hear. While you made certain that you are unattainable to anyone else I am apparently still free for the taking and therefore an easy target to any predator that comes along!”

“There are valid reasons for this as you well know.” He said coolly.

“No, I do not well know! You never give me a valid reason!” I snapped. “Always we do things your way; always you are the one dictating how everything between us goes. Everything is under your control all the time! We meet when you say, we have sex when it’s convenient for you and our relationship is this huge secret I can’t talk about! How is anyone else supposed to know I am off limits when I can’t tell them I’m taken?” I yelled, “You’ve left me, by your own admission, free to pick and choose yet every time someone else gets close to me you totally freak out. You won’t let me officially bind myself to you yet you act as though that is how I should behave. I’m not anything to you under any law any where. How the hell do you think that makes me feel? You cannot control me or who is attracted to me even though you try. You won’t let me openly and legally bind to you so where does this leave me? You can’t have it your way all the time. ”

I was right and my point was valid, I could see that in the expression on his face but he didn’t give way, he was too angry. “So you are saying you welcomed the advances from Larsen?”

“No that is not what I am saying and you know this.” I snarled. “How many times must I tell you there is no one else? How many ways can I say you are stuck with me before you believe me? You need to get a grip on your jealousy? Stop twisting everything around, stop making this more confusing than it should be!”

“I am not the one who seems to be confused or uncertain about my feelings in the matter of our bond. It is you who seem to have some reservations. Jealousy has nothing to do with this.”

Our eyes met and I held his stare. He was making me cross, “I do not have reservations.” I told him. “And as for your feelings...” I shrugged, “You hide behind that Chiss cool and pretend nothing ever touches you but I know better, I’ve seen what happens when someone encroaches on your space. You are so jealous you can’t even bear the thought of another man being interested in me let alone touch or kiss me so don’t you dare tell me otherwise. You think you own me!”

“That is a lie.” He growled, his voice low and angry as he walked towards me so that I had to back up until I came up against the wall. Leaning over me with one arm braced against the bulkhead at my back so that I could feel the warmth from his body and the heat of his bottled fury as he spoke. He was angry but for the first time since this whole discussion began I got the feeling he was not just angry with me but rather with something or someone else unrelated to the matter at hand, this was just an outlet for something bigger that had gotten under his skin.

“Is it?” I asked. “Then why do you accuse me of being unfaithful to you when you know it’s not true, when I tell you everything that’s going on?”

“Tell me everything? Since when? I practically have to use Imperial interrogation methods to get you to tell me what is on your mind!”

“Now you’re just being mean.” I said, “I was about to tell you what happened when the door chime rang, you were the one who told me to answer it, remember?”

“Ah yes, well who knows what you were about to say,” he said, “If you really did have nothing to hide, then you would not feel so reticent about telling me the truth about what the hell is going on between the two of you and you certainly would not be entertaining him so late at night in your private quarters.”

“I did not invite him to come here tonight, in fact I was just as surprised as you were when he showed up and even had you not been here I still would have told him no!”

“Larsen does not strike me as a man who takes no for an answer.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, “Then I would have dealt with him the same way I dealt with Zaarin but I am sure Ged would not have pushed things in that direction.” I snapped, “Why are you so angry? Quit making this into an even bigger mess than it already seems to be. You’re being a moron stop complicating everything.” The moment the words were out of my mouth I knew I had pushed the wrong button and gone too far.

“Allow me to un-complicate it then.” He said and without further warning, grasped my chin roughly with his forefinger and thumb and he kissed me. With his tongue and his lips he poured his anger into me and I fed off it as though I were starving. His jealousy and my guilt, along with our combined tempers, mingled to form a sort of madness that swept over the two of us in a way I had never experienced before. His kiss was brutal but I welcomed it, wanted it and he knew this by my reaction. When he drew back to stare at me I felt a subtle pause in time and space as though the galaxy were waiting to see which side of some invisible crazy line that we were so dangerously close to crossing we would end up on. I stared into his face wishing he would stop this insanity, wanting him to wrap his arms around me and tell me all was forgiven that he understood and that it didn’t matter but he did none of these things, he simply stared at me, his glowing red eyes burning with an emotion I wasn’t sure I could read and certainly didn’t like. For a moment we both wavered, then our eyes locked and he kissed me again with renewed savagery.

I should have stopped him but I didn’t. His kisses were possessive as well as unkind. There was a power to them and it took over everything else including common sense. I soaked it in, revelled in it, craved it and sent it back; showering him through the force with everything we were both feeling complicating the madness further still. It was terrible and I let it get completely out of control driving our actions until I had no idea what we were doing. It was as if all reason, all sense had flown out the airlock. Before I fully understood where this was headed, without words he hoisted me up and, with a deftness that comes only from practice, took me swiftly against the wall of my quarters claiming what he felt was his in the most cruel, powerful and passionate way he could and part of me welcomed it openly.

“A’mal’yn!” He snarled in my ear and pushed himself deeper into my body, “Mine!” I shut my eyes tightly. I wanted to tell him he

was right and that I was his in every single sense of that word but he was too angry to listen to me. I knew him too well and he did not get this angry that often but when it did happen it was like a Hjal winter storm, it was unstoppable. There had to be more going on than just the flirtation with Ged to piss him off this much, I was sure this was not the only reason for Thrawn’s mood but it was the easier to explain and the easiest for him to use. The only thing I could do was to hang on to him and ride it out.

Lifted up and supported by his arms in such a way that it gave him all the power, all of the say, I clung on tightly. I wrapped my legs around his hips and with one arm around his shoulders to hold on, snaked my other hand up behind his neck and threaded through his hair which I gripped far harder than necessary making him hiss in pain but he didn’t pull away or stop what he was doing. In fact it only seemed to encourage him. Jealousy, anger and pain it was a terrible cocktail I knew all too well. I had seen the results before and they were never pretty, not ever.

This was not the first time we had been rough with each other, our combined passion seemed to bring out the worst in us both sometimes. It was almost as if we enjoyed it, though I am not sure either of us would have ever admitted it. We were so used to each other’s bodies, we had made love so many times that even now in such an unkind and unloving manner I responded to him the only way I knew how, shivering with the desire he stirred up in me despite the brutality of the act. No one else could stir me up the way he could.

I silenced my voice by sinking my teeth into his shoulder, biting back any sounds that might have escaped to give away what was going on in this small space. When he was finished, his release a final thrust which slammed me back against the bulkhead wall, I felt my own body surrender and only then did I lift my head back to let my voice cry out for him, for us, for all that we were but he covered my mouth with his hand, silencing me. For a moment, breathless, we stayed like that locked together but more further apart than I had ever known. I opened my eyes to stare into his face. When his eyes met mine I flinched from the hardness I saw in them and the moment hung between us precariously.

I should have said what was in my heart right then and there. I should have told him I loved him, that I was sorry about what I had

said to him, that there was no one else in my life not now, not ever and that what-ever had happened between Ged and me was only a fleeting, trivial thing, just a stolen kiss and nothing else. I should have told him these things out loud but instead, made dumb by the uncharacteristic rawness of his actions, I said nothing. I could only gaze into his eyes while he regarded me with the same stunned expression. What the hell had just happened? What the hell had we just done to each other?

As if he could read that question on my face he shook his head then abruptly lifted me away, separating us physically to set me on the ground. I leaned against the wall for support because my knees were shaking so badly I wasn't sure I could stand on my own. For a moment I watched a myriad of emotions flicker across his face, fear, self loathing and above all anger. He had let his emotions rule him and he had become a force of nature. His animal instincts had taken precedence over his logical common sense and he had become an alpha male predator protecting his territory and marking what was his when it had been threatened by a rival. That calm façade he always worked so hard to maintain had been shattered in an instant by me and I wondered if a part of him now hated me for it.

I also understood that while I had committed no real sin against our bond, I had simply, by my actions and my own sense of guilt, given him cause to question everything we were and he was a man who did not often have to deal with situations such as this. Never before had I done or said anything to make him so unsure of his place in my life in such an overt and obvious manner. And while he had often told me he did not think he was a jealous man by nature we both knew that where I was concerned this was not the case. I only had to recall the terrible fight we had had over Zaarin to know just how deep that particular emotion went. He did not like it and he did his best to deal with it but this time he had been pushed too far.

He had acted out of jealousy and anger but with his physical release those emotions had retreated allowing logic to come back to the forefront. A flash of self loathing shone briefly in his eyes then receded just as swiftly. I could see that he was furious with himself for this breach of decorum, this terrible loss of control, especially since I understood there had been something else driving him, some other reason for his uncharacteristic fury. He stepped away from me, sorted himself out, picked up his jacket and without a word performed a

perfect military turn to walk away and leave me alone in my quarters, shaking, bewildered and aching with a myriad of emotions I did not know how to deal with.

I don't know how long I sat on the floor of my room shaking from the aftermath of our insanity but eventually I got cold. To warm up again I showered, staying under the scalding water for a long time as if it could take away some of the sting of what had happened but it didn't. At some point during my shower I made up my mind what to do next, knowing no one would like it but I didn't much give a damn.

I dressed in comfortable, easy to move in clothes and then I sliced into the main system using old but still valid override codes from my time with Lord Vader. I was a little surprised that they still worked but didn't question my luck, and managed to download everything I would need without tripping any noticeable alarms. Then I packed everything I owned, which wasn't much, in a carry-all bag that was slung over my shoulder as I slipped out of my quarters. I thought I had managed to escape notice when I heard someone yell my name.

"Miss Gabriel!" A young voice shouted as I stalked down the corridor towards the small hanger where my ship was. "Miss Gabriel please...wait...I have a message for you from the Grand Admiral...."

I didn't stop and the young messenger had to run to catch up with me, waving what looked like an envelope in his hand. "Miss, he requested that I give" He started, holding out the envelope.

I flapped my hand abruptly at him in a Shut Up Right Now manner and he shut up instantly. "Let Admiral Larsen deal with it or better yet tell the Grand Admiral to shove it up his...." The young man's eyes widened significantly and I shook my head, biting off the comment on the tip of my tongue, "Oh never mind! Tell the Grand Admiral that what ever it is he has to say to me can wait until I return!" I snapped and kept on walking leaving a very flustered young man who could only stare at me still holding the hand written note in his hand. I was known for many things but being outright rude, up until now, had not been one of them. A tiny part of me felt bad, the rest of me just didn't care. No one else followed me, or came after me and by the time I had made it to the hanger bay where my ship was the *Virulent* was on battle alert.

Another battle drill but this time I was not only awake for it, I welcomed it.

I wondered, as I sat in the pilot's seat of my ship and started the engine, if Thrawn and I would ever learn. I wondered if I would ever learn. As I watched all the onboard lights go green I shook my head, probably not, I thought. I seemed doomed to make the same mistakes over and over again. I punched in an access code and the hanger bay shield dropped. I styled the *Ahnkeli'Su'udelma* out of the hanger and slipped out into space.

It took whoever was in charge of flight ops on the *Virulent* approximately three minutes to figure out what I was doing and alert the Admiral, a few seconds later I heard Ged's voice over the comm. asking me what the hell I thought I was up to. I ignored him. When Ged got tired of the radio silence he threatened to use a tractor beam, waiting to see if that would stir me out of my disobedience, it didn't. When I saw the telltale spike of the *Virulent's* tractor beam powering up I just smiled, set my co-ordinates and then I micro jumped just out of its range, one of the more useful tricks which I had learned from Thrawn. The comm. crackled to life again and a very annoyed sounding Ged Larsen threatened me with everything from court martial to execution if I didn't get my ass back on board this very minute. I ignored him some more because I just didn't want to speak to him at all and since I blamed him for the current mess it seemed appropriate to lump him in with the same black hole of frustration I had stuck Thrawn. As far as I was concerned both men could go to all nine Corellian hells and stay there. I had work to do. I sighed and stared at the co-ordinates I had put into the nav computer, watching the countdown to the jump tick off too slowly. I let out the breath I had been holding when the stars elongated sweeping me into the hyperspace lane and as far away from both Ged and Thrawn as was possible.

As the *Ahnkeli'Su'udelma* slipped into hyperspace I knew a subtle sense of relief and even though I understood I was running away from the problem at hand but I didn't care. I was, I thought to myself, quite good at running away, but then again so was Thrawn he just did it under the guise of having to save the galaxy. I sighed; there is nothing more powerful than wounded pride compounded by guilt and anger. No wonder I thought as I unstrapped myself from the cockpit to go to

the galley and make some tea, that Lord Vader had turned to the Dark Side. Being in a relationship was enough to drive anyone around the bend.

It took me nearly two days to travel to Obroa-Skai and as I requested landing permission from Planetary Flight Control I wondered why it was I kept ending up on planets that were mainly cold and snowy, it was as if the universe really hated me. From above I could see the white of the snows that covered a great deal of the planet and for a moment I was sharply reminded of Navaari and Hjal. Everything had seemed so peaceful there, so uncomplicated.

"*Ahnkeli'Su'udelma*, you are cleared for landing bay two-nine-aurek," A very bored sounding controller droned, breaking into my thoughts, "please observe the rules and see the dock-master upon arrival, OSPFC out."

"Roger that, flight." I answered and took my ship in to land.

There had been no trouble with getting a landing permit, I was a civilian with a civilian ship and Obroa-Skai was a neutral world and by all accounts quite beautiful. It was a mix of tundras, deserts, grasslands and mountains with a standard day of twenty-six hours. It was also home to what was probably the largest repository of galactic information known to all, with maybe the exception of what ever the Emperor had managed to squirrel away on Wayland. The planet had remained neutral throughout the entire Galactic Civil War, which was quite a feat given how valuable the information the great libraries held was. I had read that the New Republic had petitioned the Obroans heavily to get them to join them but so far the Obroans had not done so, preferring their neutral status for the time being.

I was grateful that the way from the large docking bay to the main library was all through covered walkways, and while I was certain that the planet was beautiful and worth exploring I didn't have the time to do so. I may have been angry with Thrawn but I could still do the job he had given me, besides it would satisfy my own curiosity as well.

The great library was stunning. Built to reflect the peaceful nature of the Obroan culture, it arched tall and serene above everything else. When I stepped through the main doors I was astonished at how the natural lighting of the world I was on played around the grand hall. It was like watching light dance and for reasons I could never explain it reminded me sharply of home, though I wasn't exactly sure which

home that was. I sighed and went to find the main desk. I had half expected to meet some sort of resistance when I went into the main building but there had been no visible security measures at all and after living for so long under strict security rules it felt weird to come and go freely.

With a sigh I stopped looking around and went to what looked like the main information area and spoke to the young female Obroan who was seated there.

“You’ll need to fill out these forms and apply for an access card and code.” She told me when I asked about getting into the main library for information. I took the forms she handed me and filled them out quickly. She scanned through them and nodded, added the information to the computer and then a few moments later handed me an access card. “This will grant you access to all open areas of the system,” she said, “If you are looking for rare material then you will need a temporary pass.”

I thanked her and took the slim duraplast card from her fingers. She must have seen something of the “how do I find what I need” look on my face because then she asked, “Are you looking for anything specific?” The librarian at the information desk asked.

I thought about it for a second and then smiled. “Yes, I am looking for information about a planet in the Ojoster Sector called Wayland.”

The young Obroan typed something into her terminal and then a few seconds later handed me a small chit. “You’ll need this access code to get the information you need, go to terminal Senth, in the planetary map hall. There isn’t a great deal known about the world but we do have some information on store.” She smiled and then as an afterthought added, “Is there something of interest on that planet?” she asked, “I have a note here which states the late emperor tried to get us to delete all information pertaining to Wayland from the data banks.”

I raised both eyebrows, “Really, how strange. I am just doing a research project for some surveyors, you know how it goes, they don’t tell me anything just want someone to get the information for them.” I sighed and made out like an exasperated assistant.

“Typical, no one ever wants to do their own research.” She commiserated, “Well good luck, if you need anything else, let me know, I am here until twenty-four hundred hours.”

I thanked her and then went in search of terminal Senth in the planetary map hall.

She had been right, there wasn’t much information about Wayland but the most vital thing was, its location. I stared at this for a long time and then, after copying what I needed onto a data-chip, I left the library feeling like a ghost and made my way back to my ship. Once I had paid the Dock Master and left the confines of the planet’s gravity well, I locked in my next set of co-ordinates to the nav computer and watched as once again the stars exploded into the hyperspace-lane. Thrawn would probably be annoyed that I didn’t return directly to give him the information he had asked me to gather but I didn’t much care. I needed to go someplace quiet, some place where I could think. Not for the first time did I wish my father was still alive, I wanted his advice, his comfort but he was gone and Tatooine no longer seemed like I place I belonged to so instead I found myself headed towards the only other place I had ever really called home and the one person I knew I could trust to hear me out without judging me and who could send the information I had gathered to Thrawn without any issues.

By the time I reached Hjal I was exhausted. The journey from the inner ring to the tingle arm took nearly four days and I did not sleep well all during that time. Nightmares plagued me, especially the ones which somehow managed to feature both Thrawn and Wayland together. I should have just returned to the fleet and handed over the information to Thrawn but I was still angry at him and I needed a way to send the data I had found securely without having to go back.

Navaari was waiting for me as he said he would be, and after a hug I thought would crush all my bones he gestured for me to straddle the sled so we could head back to the enclave. We didn’t speak, it was far too cold, and by the time we arrived I was half asleep. He nudged me awake and told me to go inside, get changed and warm up, once he had finished with the hounds and the sled he’d come and join me.

By the time he was done I had showered, dressed in clean, warm, comfortable and was sitting on the couch holding a very large glass of the brandy I had brought with me. Thrawn was right; I drank when I didn’t want to face what ever issues were in front of me. As I sat there waiting for Navaari I realised Thrawn was right about a lot of things but he was also wrong as well, he just didn’t like this being pointed out to him. I watched Navaari come in, strip off his warm gear

then sit beside me on the couch. There was a long silent pause while we summed each other up and then he spoke.

“So, little pup, you want to be telling me your side of it?” He asked, letting me know that he had already heard Thrawn’s.

I made a face. “He knew I’d come here.” I said flatly, wondering how Thrawn could have known what I was going to do even before I did.

Navaari shrugged. “He mentioned you might be showing up, though not for the reasons I was thinking.”

“What exactly did he tell you?”

“That you had an argument and it was not very pretty. That it was having to do with another man.” Navaari was careful to keep his voice neutral.

I sighed and then because there would be no peace until I had done so, I told him the whole story, every bit of it, without exaggeration, hysterics or tears and he listened without interruption.

There was a long silence after I had finished and then he asked, “Do you like this other man, this Larsen?”

“Yes, but not in the way Za’ar thinks.” I said with a nod. “Ged is a good man, smart, funny and a loyal Imperial but I think we’re like fire and oil. A little of both is wonderful but too much and it’s utterly consuming. What would start out as a sweet little romance would end very badly, we’re too much alike in too many ways. I’d rather keep him as a friend than have a short, torrid affair with him at the risk of ruining everything else. I think he would have also figured this out sooner or later, he’s not a stupid man but like most men he has to push, you know, to see how far he can get.” I shrugged a little, “And sex is sex no matter what name you slap on it, it’s often the logical conclusion to a chase....”

“So you came here before that happened?”

I nodded, “It’s tempting, you know, just a little.” I sighed.

“So is walking out in a storm, but that is not making it a good idea.” Navaari chided.

“I know, but just because I felt something, some spark doesn’t mean I am willing to throw the last ten years away for a fling. I’m silly and impetuous but not utterly stupid. I needed time to think before things got out of hand. He kissed me and I liked it but....” I shrugged not knowing how to finish. I had thought long and hard about

everything that had happened while on the flight to Hjal and come to the conclusion that while a fling with Ged would probably be fun, exciting and sweet that he was also a career officer and he did not want a wife or a girlfriend, at least not in me at any rate. I was interesting to him but once he had bedded me that interest would grow cold pretty quickly.

“It is easy to let the physical take over.” Navaari nodded. “I am understanding this perhaps better than you might be thinking.”

I just smiled. “Well then you know why I needed time away. I don’t want to have an affair with anyone other than Za’ar. It’s nice to know that someone else finds me attractive but that doesn’t mean I have to or will fall for him instantly does it?”

“And why did you not tell Nikätza’arth’pavjäska this?” Navaari asked with a nod.

“I tried,” I made a face, “but you know how well he listens when his mind is already made up. He saw a bunch of misleading clues and put them all together to come up with the wrong conclusion. Za’ar...well he’s sometimes just too damned smart for his own good or maybe it’s just that I am terrible at hiding how I feel from him. He read my guilt and he thought he was right because he always thinks he’s right. He did not give me much of a chance to explain anything and then when Ged showed up with a bottle of wine and high hopes, well that just made an even bigger mess.” I sighed, “Why is it that men always assume the absolute worst?”

Navaari smiled, “Because underneath the bravado and arrogance we are all being terrified that females will see right through us and discover our every flaw, then leave us because of this. Nikätza’arth’pavjäska pushed because he was letting his fear of losing you get in the way of his ability to think clearly, you do seem to be having a way of doing that to him. No wonder he is never thinking clearly when it comes to you.” He said.

“Well, you know what, that’s his problem and not mine.” I retorted tartly.

“Aye, so it is. He does have his hands full with you and he is not knowing what to do about this some days.” Navaari teased and let the matter drop for the moment.

“I need you to send him this.” I dug out the second data chip from my bag, the one I had made after my trip to Obroa-Skai.

“What is it?”

“Information he asked me to obtain for him.”

“You should take it to him yourself, pup.”

I shrugged. “I need some space, Navaari. He’s so wound up about this campaign he’s on that I feel as though I am either in his way or simply there on demand for him when he needs to let off steam. I’m tired of it. He doesn’t want me to step foot onboard the *Chimaera* for some reason he won’t explain. I was on Ged’s ship in the first place because he wanted me safe, or so he said but now I wonder if he wasn’t trying to set something up so we could have this fight and he could end this relationship. I’m tired of the secrecy and everything else and maybe he was right, maybe I want too much from him and maybe things between us are just not going to work out.”

“Rubbish child!” He snorted as he took the little chip from my fingers. “After all he has done to be able to have you as close to him as is possible, how can you be believing such a thing?”

I made a face. “It’s easy when he acts like a complete idiot. There are moments when I think it would be so easy to just walk away....” I said with a sigh.

“Do you still love him?” Navaari asked suddenly.

I looked him straight in the eyes. “How can you even ask that?” I said sadly. “Some days I think if I could love him more than I already do I’ll explode from the weight of it.” I replied, then added, “But sometimes that’s not enough and sometimes it’s just too much.” I swirled my drink around my glass and sighed.

I wasn’t sure I was making sense but Navaari nodded and looked at the data chip in his hand. “I’ll send this now, that way if there’s an answer it will arrive sooner rather than later. What is on this anyway?”

“An access code which will give him the ability to data mine for the whereabouts of a planet he’s looking for.” I didn’t tell Navaari I already knew where this planet was, I didn’t think he would like that all that much and I certainly didn’t want him to tell Thrawn.

He nodded and vanished. He always knew how to get in touch with Thrawn, it was a Dantassi thing. I finished my drink and poured some more. For the first time in a long time I felt the terrible tension that had somehow managed to creep into my daily life dissipate. I leaned back and closed my eyes, and was almost asleep when Navaari

returned.

“You are exhausted little one, you should get some rest.”

I smiled. “Was there an answer?” I asked.

“He asked me to be telling you that he is grateful for your help and glad to hear you are safe.” Navaari said sitting beside me. “He indicated that perhaps it would be good for you to remain here for a while.”

I smiled and shook my head. “He wants me out of the way while he goes to find Wayland.” I said a little crossly.

“Can you be blaming him?”

“No.” I agreed. “I promised him I would stay away from that place.”

“Yes, but he also knows you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“He knows that your curiosity often outweighs your common sense.” Navaari said, “He also thought you should know that Ged Larsen is particularly angry with you for leaving his ship in the way you did. His words were ‘she will be required to apologise for the breach of decorum when she returns to the *Virulent*.’”

I rolled my eyes. “Men and their wounded pride.” I said, “Well I’m not going back for a while, so he will have to wait for his apology.”

Navaari laughed. “Well, pup, you are welcome to stay here as long as you want, this is your home and I am more than happy to be having you to myself for a while.”

I nodded. “I’d like that, Pa’tjad’cu-sja.” I said leaning against his shoulder. “Things always seem so much clearer when I am here.”

“That is because this is your home.” He told me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. “Besides you will not be going any place for awhile anyway, there is a large storm laying in from the North so you will be grounded for a few days.”

“I can live with that.” I said with a yawn. “So tell me, how are things with you and An’jast’a.”

“You have not yet heard?” He asked, surprised, “I sent word; you should have received it before you left.”

“Heard what?” I grumbled wondering in that had something to do with the envelope the young officer was trying to give me before I fled the *Virulent*.

He chuckled, “Are you wishing to see us bound?”

I turned my head to look at him. "What?"

"I have asked her and she has said yes, this was last week. I sent you a message but then you arrived here without knowing so I am thinking the message missed you."

"You and An'jast'a will perform the Nai'da?" I asked not even bothering to hide my delight.

"Yes, in one month from tomorrow. If you are wanting to stay this long?"

I flung my arms around him. "Oh Navaari, of course I'll stay for that, are you crazy? Will An'jast'a mind?"

"Mind? No, Kycsi'i she will be delighted, you are as a child to me, you are family. If you would like to, you can stand for me."

I opened my mouth and then closed it again, "But...your daughter, will she not stand for you?"

He shook his head, "She is unable to attend." He said in a tone of voice that told me he did not want to speak about what ever had passed between them just yet.

"I will be honoured to stand for you Pa'tjad'cu-sja." I told him quietly, meaning every word.

He smiled, "Then it is Da'han's fortune that brings you here."

"No, it was a rather nasty argument with Za'ar that brings me here." I said wryly.

"Then Da'han is working in mysterious ways, Kycsi'i." He said.

I couldn't argue with that and I was happy to have a good reason to stay here. I snuggled into his warmth and let my exhaustion take over. He let me doze for a little while and then, before I completely fell asleep, he sent me to bed and for once I didn't dream, or if I did they were not unkind dreams. I had a month's grace to find some peace and I wasn't going to waste it.

Standing for Navaari as he was bound to An'jast'a was one of the proudest, most wonderful moments of my life. As the enclave elder pronounced them joined I thought my heart would burst and the tears that welled up in my eyes were tears of pure joy. The great hall was so full it felt as though it would burst, Navaari had many friends, as did An'jast'a, and everyone wanted to be there for them when they finally

wed. The celebration which took place after promised to be the largest the enclave had ever known and I felt honoured to be a part of it but at the same time saddened that Thrawn was not here to share it with me.

During the feast I sat next to An'jast'a as was custom and she made certain I did not feel left out or lonely. She made sure that I was caught up on all the latest news and gossip that I had managed to somehow miss during the month I had been on Hjal. It was easy to avoid the gossip when Navaari was in charge of keeping me busy. Convinced that I was getting lax in my practice of tracking he had insisted on taking me out on long treks across the tundra to make sure my skills had not diminished any. I had been grateful for the distraction and happy to be under Navaari's watchful guidance, learning from him was a treat. He had sensed my need to escape from Thrawn, from Ged and everything that had been happened. When I needed to talk he listened, when I wanted advice he gave it and when I needed a distraction he provided it in the form of hard work.

Once the feasting was done the great hall was cleared for the dancing. It was a huge thing and the Dantassi loved to party at every opportunity. I was convinced it had something to do with the endless amount of time they seemed to spend cooped up due to bad weather. Whatever the reason for the celebration it was usually an amazing event and normally I enjoyed it greatly but this time I found myself missing Thrawn more than ever. His presence failed and it made my heart ache. At some point late in the celebrations, once I managed to escape being swept into the dancing again, I slipped quietly out of the hall, picked up my warm clothes and went to the South Gate to sit out on the hanging bench that had been made for me by Kerrjan, one of Navaari's closest friends. I had often come here when I wanted to be alone, when I had felt the walls of the enclave closing in on me or when Navaari and I had been fighting. It was Kerrjan's clever solution to stop me from doing crazy things and to give him some peace and quite. Apparently, Navaari and I were very loud when we argued. I loved it here especially when it was such a beautiful night, still, cold with a crystal clear sky full of twinkling stars.

As I swung the bench back and forth with the tips of my feet I stared up at the sky I could not help but wonder where Thrawn was now and how his campaign was going. I had not heard from him in all the time I was here and now, after a month's time, I wondered why I

had been so angry at him and if he was still furious with me or if he had just decided I was no longer worth the hassle. I missed him greatly and I was deeply saddened that he had not come to see Navaari joined with An'jast'a. Bundled up in the warmth of my clothes, I was half dozing when I heard the outer door open. I let my senses talk to me and smiled, making room for Navaari to sit next to me.

"You should be celebrating." I said as he tapped his pipe against the side of the chair to empty it.

"I could be saying the same for you." He replied as he filled his pipe and lit it. "I just wanted to be sure you were not vanishing off into the night."

I made a face, "You will never let me forget that will you?"

"Probably not." He chuckled. "So what is on your mind that you had to be slipping away like a ghost?"

"Nothing really, I just needed some fresh air." I said evasively.

Navaari smiled and took a deep draw on his pipe, making the tobacco glow. "You've been gone nearly two hours, that's a lot of fresh air." He said gently, "What is it?"

"He should be here for you!" I said crossly.

"He is busy fighting a war, Kycsi'i." He said gently.

"I know but still...."

"I did not expect him to be here and neither should you. If you want to speak with him you should return to him and stop hiding here."

I nodded, Navaari was right and we both knew it. "I was planning on returning to Nirauan in a day or so." I said, "I thought it would be best if I was out of your hair when An'jast'a moved into your home."

"You are never, as you are putting it, in my hair and it is your home as well, but An'jast'a will appreciate the gesture. She is a little worried about taking over your place in my life."

I laughed, "She can't do that." I said, "We have different places in your heart and as long as I have a bed to sleep on when I come to see you I don't care really. In fact I think she'll do wonders for the place because while you may be the best tracker there is you know nothing about home décor." I paused to look up at him to make sure he knew I meant what I said, "I am truly happy for you. It was about time."

He smiled, "You are not the first to be telling me this little pup, but it is nice to hear it from you."

For a long moment there was silence between us, comfortable and easy then I broke it by asking the one question Navaari had avoided answering the entire time I had been there.

"Why did your daughter not come to see you bound?" I didn't think he would reply because before when I had tried to bring up the topic he had always shut me down as fast as he could. His daughter was a touchy subject at best but this time he surprised me.

"She disapproves." He said simply, studying his pipe as though it had suddenly become a fascinating artifact.

I looked at him in surprise. "What? Why?"

"Under Chiss custom remarrying is seldom done. She feels I am dishonouring the spirit of my late wife, her mother. She did not wish to be a part of this. She is angry with me for what she feels is a breaking of trust."

I sat back against the bench and let out an angry puff of air.

"Well, that's just dumb."

He smiled at my reaction but the sadness in his eyes didn't go away.

"What's the real reason she didn't come?" I pressed.

He shook his head and took a long draw from the pipe, the scent of the smoke permeated the air like a strange sweet perfume. "She wants nothing to do with her Dantassi life. She is ashamed of it. The Chiss view us as something to both fear, look down up on and ultimately ignore. We are a part of their past, their history they would rather forget. She has left her Dantassi past behind to become Chiss. Returning here reminds her of where she came from and she does not wish that."

I frowned, "But you are her father."

He nodded, "So I am but in the end sometimes the family you are born into is not the family you choose to be with."

I leaned me head against his shoulder. "Well I think she's stupid then." I said tartly.

He chuckled a little and stroked my hair. "She has chosen her path just as you choose yours."

"I don't choose my path, Navaari, it chooses me. I just seem to go along for the ride." I said with a large sigh.

"Psshht," he answered back, letting me know he wasn't buying my pat answer. "You choose everything you do, all in life is chosen." He

paused for a moment then said, “You need to go back to your mate, whether you are believing it or not he needs you, now more so than ever before.”

“I find that hard to believe.” I grumbled.

“Perhaps but it is the truth.” He said. “I would be happy forever if you chose to stay here and live as the Dantassi but your place is not here. I do not know what your future will bring but I do know that you and Nikätza’arth’pavjäska are two parts of a whole. When you are together you shine and when you are apart and fighting it is as though the sun has gone dark. You need to break from this stubbornness and return. He came to you when you needed him and now you must return that favour. He needs you, even if you do not believe this, even is he is not showing this. Do not let your pride and anger get the better of you. It will be something you regret for the rest of your life.”

I sighed. “Okay I get the message.”

He laughed and emptied his pipe. “Come back inside before An’jast’a has to come search for us, if she does it will not be a happy thing.”

We returned to the celebration and it went on for many more hours. I stayed until I could no longer keep my eyes open and An’jast’a shooed me to bed.

Two days later I took my leave of Navaari and the Dantassi once more and was on my way back to Nirauan with sand-jiggers in my belly at what sort of a reception I would find there. I needn’t have worried so much though because everyone on the base was so preoccupied with what Thrawn had done by winning his first major battle that my return was a very small thing in comparison with his finds.

It seemed strange to be back on Nirauan after such a long time away but my things were here, and for all intensive purposes it was home, or as close to a home as things got for me, if I didn’t count Hjal. I found myself at loose ends trying to acclimatise to both the planet’s time difference and climate. Time lag caught up with me after a while and I slept for nearly a day.

Once I felt more like a human being and less like a sun-doped jawa I began the process of catching up on all that I had missed during my time on Hjal. It was Voss Parck, thrilled to see me back safe and sound, who filled me in on all that had occurred in the time I had been away. As we sat in the quiet of the small private lounge which Thrawn

reserved for private conversations, eating a light supper and drinking a very nice wine he told me how, once Thrawn had received the data from me, he had taken his fleet to Obroa-Skai and raided the great library’s archive computers. Not only had he been able to determine the location of Wayland, which did not surprise me, but he was also able to obtain a vast wealth of up to date information on the New Republic. There had been a skirmish over the planet when the New Republic’s assault force consisting mainly of frigates and three wings of X-wing fighters had shown up. Parck grinned as he recounted how Thrawn, using his keen knowledge of art had managed to bring about the attack force’s defeat. I just shook my head at his thought process. I had never known anyone else to use art as a tactical weapon before.

“After he was done there he went to Myrkr and then on to Wayland.” Parck said.

“Did he find it?” I asked, “Mount Tantis?”

“Oh yes.” Parck nodded, “He most certainly did, and we’ve been busy ever since.”

“Why is that?”

“He’s taken some of the technology he found there and he having it installed here, in one of the subbasements.”

I frowned. “He’s having cloning tanks installed here?”

Parck did not bother to hide his surprise. “You know about that?”

I shrugged. “I knew there was a cloning facility on Mount Tantis so what else could he have been after? Why is he growing clones here?”

Parck shrugged. “He did not say, I think he is trying to maybe experiment with the effects of the ysalamiri on clone growth but to be honest Merly, it’s all technology I can’t keep up with. Now the cloaking device... that’s another story.”

“Wait the what...ysalamiwatsits?” I flapped my hand at him to back up a bit.

“Ysalamiri, some creature he found on Myrkr that repels the force.” Parck said looking at me with a frown, “He said you were the one who actually found them.”

I nodded, “Ah those things,” I said with a sigh. “I remember but I didn’t know their name.”

“He’s had them installed all over the *Chimaera* to keep his crazy Jedi master in line.”

“Crazy jedi master? What crazy jedi master?”

“Some really strange old man he found on Wayland, claims to be Jorus C’Boath but he’s actually a clone. He’s as mad as a sun crazed durni and as dangerous as a tusken raider. Seems he’s a jedi master and a pretty powerful one as well, anyway he’s on board the *Chimaera* helping Thrawn direct the flow of battles or some such nonsense.”

“Buggery sandrats I’ve been gone for just over a month and the whole galaxy has turned upside down.” I said wryly. “Well I guess that explains why he didn’t want me on board his flagship.”

“Yes,” Parck nodded. “He asked me to tell you to, and I quote, not even think about it.”

I laughed and sipped on my wine. “I have no desire to go near any crazy Jedi master, clone or not. Between the Emperor and Lord Vader I have had enough jedi-ness to last me a lifetime.” I said, “So what’s he doing now?”

“He’ll be arriving here in two days to take on supplies, sort some things out then he will continue what he has been doing.”

“And that is?”

“Showing the New Republic who is really in charge of the galaxy.”

I smiled. It was nice thought. I just hoped he knew what he was doing. “Two days?” I asked.

Parck nodded. “When I informed him you had arrived on the base he did tell me that I was to keep you here until he had a chance to speak with you.”

“Oh oh.”

“He mentioned to me that you and this Admiral Larsen had a little misunderstanding?”

“Oh that, well I left his ship without permission and he was a little annoyed, when he tried to pull me in with a tractor beam I micro jumped out of range, yeah he’s a bit pissed but there’s more to it than that.”

This time it was Voss Parck’s turn to smile, “With you, Merly, there usually is.”

What could I say, he was absolutely right. I sipped my wine with a smile while he began to fill me in on the news of what had been happening on the base all the time I was gone. I was grateful for his kind chatter it kept me from thinking about Thrawn’s arrival and all

that it would bring. The last time I was with him things hadn’t exactly been cheerful.

I sat with my legs dangling over the side of the gantry and my chin on my arms as I rested them on the railing watching Thrawn disembark from the shuttle. He didn’t look up but he knew I was there. I watched as he returned the salute from his deck officer and then, with Rukh in tow, left for the commander center and then to the debriefing I knew was scheduled. It was just past two in the morning local time and I had no intention of going near our quarters not to mention sleeping.

People were used to me being up on the gantry, sitting like a little kid watching a Jawa market so I was left alone mostly. I just observed the activity on the dock as pilots and crew came and went, going on about their business. Even at this late hour there were a myriad of things to do and it was interesting to see, of course avoidance of Thrawn made anything more interesting including watching the dock-bay crew sweep the floor. I wasn’t tired although I should have been. I had woken up early because of nightmares and then spent most of my day with the Fel boys, teaching them Cheunh and helping their mother, Syal who was kept busy with their latest addition Jagged. He was a bit of a handful.

I had come to watch Thrawn’s shuttle land as soon as Parck told me it was on the way to the base but actually seeking Thrawn out was not on my agenda. I decided to wait until he sent for me, or not. Either way he had to make the first move. It was nearly four am when he broke the stand-off by coming to fetch me himself. I felt the subtle shake of the gantry when he walked along it and only glanced at him when he squatted down, heel to haunch, beside me. For a very long time we just stared at each other until he broke the silence.

“I am sorry.” He said simply.

I continued to stare at him until something in his expression wavered and then I nodded. “Me too.”

He opened his mouth but the overly abrupt hand gesture on my part stopped any words he wanted to say from escaping. “Don’t.” I said. “I know you feel you need to explain but you don’t.”

His expression indicated frustration. I sighed and returned to

resting my chin on my arms to stare over the docking bay. “Navaari was right.”

“In what way?”

“You and I are like the ingredients in a sun. We need each other to shine. It’s fine as long as all the chemicals and gasses that go into making it up are in harmony, but when something goes out of balance it explodes, usually violently and then things get...well... a bit tense. It’s all very exciting in a weird sort of way until someone gets burnt or hurt. We’re very good at going nova and we’re both very good at hurting each other when we’re angry.” I glanced at him and he nodded, waiting for me to finish. “It takes two to start a war. You were wrong...but so was I.” I paused for a moment. “And,” I added, “I think a part of me likes winding you up like that even though I know it will end in disaster.”

“Why?”

I shrugged ever so slightly with one shoulder, “Because I’m human, I need emotion from my partner. You’re so calm and so cool headed almost all of the time, you use your own super intelligent logic to out logic everything and everyone else, and it’s like living in a vacuum. I almost never know what you are thinking or feeling unless you show me and even then that’s rare. Sometimes I feel as though I could be part of your office furniture. Riling you up like that is the only way I have of really knowing that you actually care about me, even if it’s anger it’s better than cool, calculated indifference.”

“I have never been indifferent when it comes to you.” He said quietly. I could taste the hurt behind the words.

“I know that...logically.” I said with a little grin then returned my gaze to the quiet of the docking bay.

“But logic isn’t always enough?” He said after a moment.

“Something like that, I guess.” I nodded. “Look, I’m not now nor was I ever having an affair with Ged Larsen. That’s not to say it didn’t cross my mind because that would be a lie. He’s attractive, intelligent, arrogant and bossy which is exactly the sort of man I seem to like. Maybe if you were not in the picture he and I would have started something but I am also sure if we had it would have ended badly. So you were wrong about all of that, wrong and hurtful. You need to believe me when I say I would not do that to you. If, and I have to stress the if part here, if I were going to cheat on you, you’d know about it because I would talk to you about it first.” I glanced up at him.

He arched an eyebrow, “Then it wouldn’t technically be cheating.”

“You get my point.” I gave him a look.

“I do.” He conceded.

“You have no real reason to be jealous but you are anyway. I like it even though the results are a bit...unpredictable and winding you up just to get a response is also unfair. In this I was wrong and I’m sorry, but as I said, it takes two.”

He reached out to brush the side of my face. “Time with the Dantassi seems to have a calming effect on you.”

“No, it’s the mind numbing cold of the planet does that.”

“So, I take it from the fact that no objects are being flung at me that you have forgiven me?”

“There is not really anything to forgive.” I said after a lengthy silence.

“Indeed?” He replied sceptically.

I glanced at him. “If I had told you to stop you would have.”

He sighed as he stood up. “I think this is a conversation better finished in private, don’t you?”

I stared at him for a moment then reluctantly got up, unsure of how the rest of this conversation would play out. I walked beside him in silence as we made our way to our private quarters. The halls of the base were quiet and almost deserted. There were a billion questions I wanted to ask him about his campaign but I kept my mouth shut not wanting to break the oddly calm stillness between us.

He let me through the door first before following me inside. Once inside he began to strip off his uniform jacket in a single graceful motion. It was like watching him shed a skin and once he laid it carefully over the back of a chair he seemed to relax. I watched this process with a sense of profound wonder. When he was done he turned to look at me, for a second our eyes caught and time paused. When he beckoned I came to stand before him. When he crooked a finger under my chin and raised my face upwards I didn’t resist. We stared at each other and then he nodded ever so slightly.

“If you had asked me to stop, I would have.” He said after what seemed forever.

I just continued to look at him.

“But you said nothing.” He continued, almost puzzled. “You let

me....”

I gave a slight shrug with my left shoulder and moved away from his touch. “You seemed to need....”

“I did not need to be cruel or hurtful and I was both.” He interrupted angrily, turning away from me to pace over to the window; the dawn was making its presence known as the night sky began to lighten in the east in faint red streaks. “It is a poor leader who cannot admit his mistakes.” He said. “I have had time to think on what passed between us and it was...unnecessary.”

“I pushed, you lost it, we’re both to blame.” I said more sharply than I meant to. “Sometimes I like it when you lose control; sometimes I want you to lose control.” I said honestly.

“Why?” He asked turning to look at me, curiosity and concern rippled across his face.

“The Emperor would say it is all about power games, my uncle would tell you it’s because I don’t know when to back off and I really don’t know but it’s probably someplace in between.”

Thrawn arched an eyebrow at me.

I shrugged. “I don’t care to get into the why of it and it’s not something I want to make a habit of either. It happened; it’s done and over with so can we please just let it go, okay?”

“Just like that?”

I nodded, “Just like that. Some things are better left alone and I think this is one of them.” I said, watching him carefully, wary and worried that something really had broken between us. Vader had often been abusive and Thrawn had often berated me for allowing it, as if I had had a choice, and now here we were discussing a similar theme only this time it wasn’t Vader he was angry at it was himself. I watched the struggle on his face and then breathed a small sigh of relief when I saw him let it go. I went to sit down; suddenly I was tired.

“I’ve said it before, I will say it again; you are a distraction I do not need but you do make my life interesting.” He remarked quietly.

I wasn’t quite sure how to take that so I just smirked a little and sipped my drink. “You’re not the easiest man in the galaxy to be with either you know.”

“Then we make the perfect pair, don’t we.”

“That’s what Navaari says all the time, only he usually adds we’re both too stupid and stubborn to see it. I really am sorry. I think

you’ve been right all along when you said I need some sort of crisis to deal with in order to be happy.”

“You should try to base your happiness on something less destructive.” He replied.

“You mean I should not create more conflict?”

He nodded. “We have more than enough of that to go around right now without you adding to it, my dear.”

“Your campaign?” I asked, “How is it going anyway?”

He smiled slightly but it never reached his eyes. “As well as could be expected given the circumstances.” He said after a moment.

“That didn’t sound encouraging.”

“Things sometimes do not go according to plan.” He said cagily.

“But Park said you were doing well.” I frowned.

“Define well tekari.” He replied. “I am working with too few ships and too many raw, untrained people. Given these circumstances we have done well so far but it is difficult and I cannot help but think the New Republic seem to have an inordinate amount of sheer dumb luck on their side. Though we have made great strides and I am, for the most part, pleased with what we have accomplished so far.” He drew a deep breath and came to sit beside me. “I do not discuss openly much of what has gone on. I wish to boost moral not drive it down but we lost a significant battle because I misjudged the enemy’s capacity to think on their feet.”

“Doesn’t that crazy old jedi master you have on board the *Chimaera* help?”

Thrawn shot me a sharp look. “He does his job but he is unpredictable and in this particular case was of no use. Park told you about him did he?”

I nodded. “And the clones, and the cloaking device.”

“I see.” He said unhappily, “Well, Joruu C’Boath is a clone of an old jedi master I once had the misfortune to meet when I was a lot younger. This clone has all the unpleasant personality traits of the long dead original jedi master as well as clone instability. In other words he is a dangerous time bomb who is quite out of his mind but he has his uses and for the most part I have him under my control. When I no longer have that ability I will eliminate him.” He said. “I would prefer you stay as far as way from him as possible which is the main reason I wanted you on board the *Virulent*.”

“And now?”

Thrawn shrugged with one shoulder, “Ideally, my dear I would prefer you return to the *Virulent* and resume your work there.”

“After the fuss you made you want me to go back there?”

“It is still the safest place for you to be and one where you can be of use. I am concerned that C’Boath will sense your presence here and try to obtain you for his student. I have no illusions about what he would do if he became aware of you and your talents and I do not wish to have to deal with such a problem should it arise.”

I slumped back against the couch. “I should have stayed with Navaari.”

“The thought had crossed my mind but I am not so sure his new wife would have appreciated that.”

I scowled at him. “You should have been there.” I said suddenly switching to the topic of Navaari’s wedding.

“Yes, but I was not and it seems everyone except you understands why. I have a job to do and I cannot drop everything to come to a wedding. It was far more important that you be there and it meant far more to Kirja’navaar’inkjerii that you were there than I. If I cannot accomplish this task, if I cannot unite this galaxy under one military might then the future will be uncertain indeed.”

“Uncertain? We’ll all just be under the rule of this crazy New Republic, what is so terrible about that?”

“Nothing if you live in a time of peace and security but I happen to know that this little galaxy is not as safe as everyone seems to think it is.”

“You’re talking about this threat from beyond?”

“I am.” He nodded. “I realize no one wants to hear about it, I realize it is easier to say it’s a lie there is nothing beyond this galaxy and that it is simply an excuse to obtain more power but mark my words, should this invasion come to pass this galaxy will be very sorry it was so quick to eliminate the might of the empire.”

“Every time you speak of this you scare the hell out of me.”

“As well you should be scared.” He said flatly. “These creatures eliminated a Chiss defense fleet as though it were a small bug to be stepped on and while my people may not appear outwardly aggressive we have some of the finest warriors in this galaxy. It is a mixed blessing that the Chiss have no desire to rule everything or to make the first

move when it comes to dealing with threats from other species because if they did, the New Republic would not exist. So yes, you should be scared.”

“If this threat is so terrible then why not talk to the leaders of the New Republic, why not try to make them understand.”

He laughed, “Do you really think that after everything they have done to beat the Empire they will willingly and openly talk to the last Imperial Grand Admiral and then give up their power over what they would see as pure speculation?”

“But you said...”

He held up his hand for silence. “I know of a threat that may or may not happen. I am calculating by the knowledge I have and the artwork I have managed to gain access to that this species we discuss will come, they are driven to do so. However, it is only conjecture and,” he said with a sigh, “I have been wrong before.” He drew a deep breath, “No self respecting government would ever in their right minds, give up their power to a military might based on such a theory. They would no more trust me on my theory than they would the Emperor to be nice.”

“Artwork?” I asked quietly, remembering a piece he had once shown me very long ago in his flat on Coruscant. It had utterly creeped me out.

“Yes.”

“I remember the painting. Aside from being the ugliest thing I have ever seen what did it tell you?”

“That this is a species best left alone and we should all pray they do us the same courtesy.” His reply was evasive and said this topic was not up for discussion yet.

“What about joining with The New Republic instead of trying to beat them then?” I steered the topic back.

He shook his head, “I personally do not believe that the New Republic has what it takes to actually join forces and fight off a common enemy, just as the last republic bickered until the end so will this one. It is the nature of the beast. While they all say they want fairness and equality it is the way of things that some species are more equal than others. I guarantee you that should this threat come to pass, it will take this government too long to take appropriate action and then they will spend more time trying to figure out who to blame than trying to solve the situation.”

I stared at the dregs of my drink and let the weight of the silence descend on my shoulders. "I really hope you're wrong because if this is the future we face then everyone will wish they had the might of the Empire to back them up."

Thrawn regarded me carefully. "The problem is no one is ever happy with how things are run and everyone not running things thinks they can do a better job. When Palpatine took on the mantle of emperor everyone cheered and those who opposed were few and far between, but when suddenly things didn't go their way the same people who cheered turned against him. I would willingly bet that in ten years we will see the same kind of dissent in this new government when people realize that they do not get all that they want or when things do not go their way."

"Do you think you can win?"

He thought about his answer for a while, "Yes, but it will not be easy and certain things have to go very right for it all to happen."

"If I ask for details you won't give them will you?"

"No."

I watched his face, not saying anything and then asked, when he remained closed on that subject, "So what now?"

He cocked his head to one side and downed the rest of his drink. "Now, if you permit me, I shall take you to bed."

"No more discussions?"

"Not of a verbal kind, unless you wish to stay up discussing politics and war until I need to depart of the *Chimaera* again but I can think of more pleasant ways to spend my time with you."

"Endless discussion about war and politics...that's not really my idea of fun." I said letting him take me by the hand and pull me to my feet.

"Nor mine." He smiled.

It was a familiar scene. Me, standing with my hands balled up into fists on my hips, angry and stubborn, while Thrawn, his arms folded across his chest, regarded me in his cool, reserved manner as we argued or rather I argued ...loudly. People avoided the area of the corridor where we were standing as though their lives depended on it.

"Why must you always be so difficult?" He asked calmly. "It is a simple thing I am asking and yet you feel the need to complicate it."

"I am not complicating anything; you're the one forbidding me to do something I have done millions of times before! It's the lower levels of the base for sarlacc's sake not the creepy flesh eating bug infested caverns! My workout room is in the basement and I used to go down there all the time! What the hell are you hiding from me?"

I was trying his patience but I didn't care. I was tired, cranky and beyond reason. I had wanted to go down to the room I used as a gym but now, all of a sudden, the area was now off limits and I didn't like this much. He had reasoned there were other rooms I could set up and use as a private work out area if I had wanted but that was not really the point. The discussion had gone from civil to angry when he had outright forbidden me to go into the sublevels and then would not give me any real good reason.

"Merlyn, the area we are discussing is now off limits to all but a very select few due to the delicate nature of the project being undertaken and you are not on that list."

I took a deep breath to begin my own tirade in response but before I could even get a word out he calmly but firmly grasped my upper arm and led me into one of the offices and shut the door.

"What are doing?" I hissed.

"I would prefer we do this in private. It is not good when you undermine my authority in public. While I know that giving you an order is rather like waving a red flag at a raging bantha the rest of this base does not need to see it in action."

"Well there wouldn't be any argument if you wouldn't forbid me to do things I have already been doing since the first week I have lived here."

He sighed. "Just because you were allowed space to use does not make that particular space yours for all of time. The sub-levels are now in use for a very large and very secret project which demands the utmost in security and while I know you can keep your mouth shut I simply cannot take the risk."

"Risk of what?" I demanded. "I'm not going any where because you've made it pretty clear you'd prefer to keep me close and besides there is no where else for me to go anyway and if anyone invaded the base they'd discover your secrets all by themselves with no help from

me what so ever.”

“How difficult are you going to be about this?” He asked after a very lengthy silence in which we just stared at each other.

“Very.” I replied. “That was MY room, you said I could have it and now I can’t for no real good reason! You’ve no right to keep secrets from me all the time.”

His eyebrow shot up. “No right?” He asked. I could swear I saw the faintest hint of a smile on his lips but it vanished as soon as it came. “I am the leader of this base, the leader of the Imperial Navy and I have all the rights in the galaxy to keep what ever secrets I see fit to do so from you. Just because you share my bed and my heart does not mean you are automatically privy to everything going on in the universe, especially if it has to do with my current and future campaigns.” He said. “You are my mate not my first in command and the sooner you get that through your lovely head the better.”

I couldn’t really come up with a suitable reply to his logic so I did the next best thing and made a face that said I don’t care and we were at an impasse. The moment stretched into a too long silence that I wasn’t going to back down from.

He drew a deep long breath and then shook his head. “It doesn’t matter what I say does it. As soon as I have left the base you will find a way to bypass the security and go down there.”

I made another face because he was right. I really didn’t take being told no very well.

“If I take you down, explain and show you the project myself will you promise to leave things alone afterwards?” He asked carefully, “Because I really don’t want to have to lock you up for the duration of this campaign.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

His glare said Try me and I didn’t need to be force sensitive to know who would lose this fight. He was willing to compromise but that only went so far.

I sighed loudly and nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay what? Okay you allow me to give you a guided tour through this project and then you leave it alone or okay I incarcerate you for the next millennia and let everyone think we have a very kinky relationship?”

“Think I’ll take choice number one, if that’s okay with you.”

“Smart girl.” He said.

I sighed and moved away from him. After nearly four months away, he had been on the base for just two days and almost all of it had been spent in meetings with his staff. I had seen him briefly once when he first got back because he had come into the quarters to change into fresh clothes but that had more or less been it. He was due to ship out again sooner than I would have liked and I was not really happy about it. I felt as though I never got to see him anymore and I wasn’t sure how to cope with the sensation of being a bystander in what looked to be a very complicated game of dejarik. He understood that most of my being difficult came from not wanting to admit I was scared and that it was just easier to pick a fight with him than deal with my fear of losing him. I kept telling myself I should never ever have gotten involved with him in the first place but it was a bit too late for that now. I had my back turned to him and stifled a yawn. I was exhausted.

“Tekari...” He started but I shook my head and made a please don’t motion with my hand.

I didn’t know what to do or think any more. After we had made up from the terrible fight which had taken place on board of the *Virulent* we had talked about where I should go, and what I should do. His suggestion had been to return to working with Ged Larsen on board of his ship but I had outright refused, citing his jealousy of Ged and my need to be on the base to help Syal with the children and teach Cheunh but really I was scared to leave. For the first time in my life I felt as though I had no place, no real purpose and no useful job and I wasn’t handling this very well.

“Merlyn, look at me.”

I did as he commanded. He reached out and caressed the side of my face with his hand, this time I didn’t flinch or move away. “Perhaps you should talk to the doctor about giving you something to help you sleep, something to maybe counter these nightmares you’ve been having.” His voice had softened now that we had brokered a deal.

“No.” I said. I didn’t want drugs to help me sleep, what I wanted was to understand the terrible dreams that had started up again. He watched me for a moment, trying to puzzle out what I wouldn’t tell him. I guess when it came to secrets I also had my own fair share.

“S’jiu tekari...” He started but I shook my head again. I didn’t want to hear what he was going to say, however this time he ignored

me and continued, "You wake up half the base at the moment with your screams. Tir tells me that Syal is worried about you. I have not seen you in this state in a long time and not opening up about it is not going to help." He lectured. I wondered how many times he had said these words to me. When I said nothing he continued, "Are these the dreams in which you see me die?"

I gave him the one shoulder shrug. "I really don't want to talk about it." I said and I meant it.

"Fine, but sooner or later you will need to deal with these nightmares and find a way to get some sleep."

"I don't know why you're so worried about it," I snapped. "It's not as if I keep you up." It was a low shot because I was over tired and angry as well as scared and frustrated. We stared at one another and I wondered if I had gone too far. The moment between us wavered and then the expression on his face gentled.

"I know the past four months have been difficult for you and I appreciate that you are unhappy with this situation, however when the commanding officer of this base gives me reports which include concerns about your well being I am afraid I do worry about it."

I exhaled slowly. "Guess that will teach me for confiding in people."

"Do not blame Voss or even Syal; it was the doctor who expressed concerns, Voss merely mentioned it to me." He said.

I just stared at him wondering when this discussion had suddenly become all about my bad sleeping habits rather than his secrets in the basement.

"Talk to me tekari," He said quietly, "Please?"

I bit at my bottom lip and turned away from him, wrapping my arms around my body. "Do you recall that awful painting you once had in your dining room on Coruscant?"

"I do."

"Well that's what some of these dreams are like." I said. "I can't explain it but they're bad. I wake up terrified because something terrible is coming, is going to happen and I don't know what because I can't see it clearly enough."

"Do you not think it is just a manifestation of your worry for me, for what is happening now?"

I made a face, "You sound like Doctor Thracer."

"Be that as it may, you did not answer my question."

"I don't know." I shrugged, "But it feels different from the dreams I have about you, about the campaign even about the Emperor. In these dreams everything just feels wrong, as though the universe becomes twisted somehow." I struggled for more words and then gave up exasperated. "What do you care anyway? You are too busy fighting your own war!" I regretted the words as soon as they were out of my mouth but it was too late. I flapped my hand at him and fought back tears of frustration. "I'm sorry. I'm so..."

He cut me off. "I understand, I don't take it personally when you lash out because you are so tired you cannot think straight but I will march you to the medlab if you don't get some rest."

"Not advisable." I growled. "You may be leader of this base but I can still hurt you." As I said those words I wondered if Rukh would suddenly appear and put his knife to my throat. Where ever Thrawn was Rukh was not that far away.

For a long heavy moment Thrawn watched me and then he just sighed letting some of the tension he had been holding in go.

"I don't know how to help you. I arrive back on this base to find you pale and drawn. You've lost weight and everyone who cares about you has come to me expressing concerns." He eventually said. "I see you in turmoil and I don't know how to fix that. Even if I could tell you right now this campaign was a complete success that all was well and you and I could settle down somewhere and start a family that would not help would it? You would still wake up screaming from something I can neither see nor do anything about. Would my constant presence at your side alleviate these nightmares?"

I shook my head. "I doubt it. These dreams, these visions, they're not like the ones I have about you and yes I still have those as well. Hell, I even still dream about Jyrki for sarlacc's sake. But these new ones, they are vague and utterly terrifying." I wasn't telling him the whole truth about how much detail I could recall from these new sets of dreams and I was pretty sure he knew that but he let it go for now.

He glanced at his chrono and said, "I will be free of meetings in about four hours then I am all yours."

I nodded not trusting myself to speak.

He came up to stand behind me and with his hands on my shoulders turned me to face him again. "Why don't you go and see if

you can get some sleep so we can talk without it turning into an argument?”

I saw genuine worry in his eyes and I felt a pang of guilt. He had enough on his shoulders as it was without me adding to it.

“I will come for you when I am done and we can talk then, I promise.”

“And this super secret project that’s stolen away my training room?” I asked with a little smile.

“That was part of the deal.” He stroked the side of my face with the backs of his fingers, kissed me on the forehead, “Go and get some rest, please? I truly do not want to spend the precious amount of time I have with you arguing, we’ve done enough of that to last a lifetime and I am quite tired of it.” he said, waited for me to nod and then he left.

I stood still for a few moments and then headed to our quarters. It was late afternoon and Thrawn was right I was exhausted. I stripped off and slid into one of his shirts because it held his scent which that was comforting and drifted into sleep. I didn’t dream and nearly five hours later Thrawn kept his word.

It was the touch and warmth of his hand as he ran his fingers through my hair that woke me up. He sat next to me on the bed, fully dressed, leaning back against the headboard and smiled at me when I focused on his face. “Do you have any idea how truly lovely you are?” He asked.

I made a face and got up, not bothering to hide the blush that rose to my cheeks. He did not say things like this all that often and I was always at a loss for words when he did. I never thought of myself in that way and somehow it surprised me that he did. In my head I would always be the plain Outer rim girl who never quite fit in anywhere but he saw past all of that. I stumbled to the fresher to wake up. Once I had cleaned my teeth and washed the sleep from my face I felt a whole lot better. When I returned to the bedroom Thrawn had not moved but he had taken off his uniform jacket. He patted the side of the bed I had just come from and motioned for me to rejoin him there.

“I want stim’caf.” I told him.

He shook his head, “No you don’t.” he countered. “You want me, now come here.”

I was surprised at the sudden shot of desire his words created and it made me blush as well as smile. “You are so arrogant.” I told him

as I sat on the bed beside him.

His smile was smug. “I am simply very good at what I do, my dear.” And to prove his point he began to trace his fingers lightly across the skin of my thigh.

I shivered at his touch, watching the blue of his hand against the white of my own flesh and wondered if he was deliberately tracing along the scar there or not.

As if he could read my mind he said almost absently. “I should have made you heal in a bacta tank.”

The scar on my thigh was the first of many I had gathered over the years since I had begun working for the Empire but unlike most of them this one had a meaning and memory that was not altogether unkind. “I’m glad you didn’t. It serves as a reminder.” I said softly.

“A reminder of what?” He asked, sliding his hand further up my leg, under the shirt to my belly.

I swallowed as what he was doing with his hand was starting to make thinking difficult. “That nothing is ever what it seems to be and when I let my guard down I tend to get hurt.”

“Even when you are with me?” He asked as he watched my reaction while he brushed the tip of my breast with his thumb.

I gasped. “Especially when I am with you.”

“I don’t think that’s what you really mean tekari.” He murmured.

“Oh?”

“No, I think you mean it reminds you that everything is dangerous.”

“Everything is.” I nodded wordlessly as he unbuttoned the shirt I was wearing and brushed it aside.

“Perhaps,” He smiled that beautiful yet feral smile I had come to think as his hunter’s smile. “But you rather like danger unfortunately.” He said.

I pulled his shirt off and ran my hands down his chest, tracing the line of blue black hair that went from his navel to his trousers. I didn’t need to be a jedi to see that he too was aroused and in need. I traced the form of him through the fabric of his pants and gave him a feral look of my own. When he growled from the back of his throat, I laughed. Two could play at this particular dangerous game and at least here we were, more or less, evenly matched. For a moment we stopped

and stared at each other and I that single second the rest of the galaxy slid away, there was only him and me. This passion which sparked between us never ceased to astonish me and sometimes I wondered if there was enough space in the universe for such a powerful thing.

Four months apart had done its damage and suddenly a desperate sort of need made me hungry for more than just caresses so when he brought his head down close to mine to kiss me I threaded my fingers through his hair, gripped hard enough to surprise him and whispered in his ear "Don't be gentle this time." I figured there would be time enough afterward to unravel the secrets he had in the basements but right now there were more pressing things at hand. I released my hold and he pushed himself up.

His eyebrow arched and for a moment he paused, braced above me with a smile that was unreadable to consider what I had just said to him. "As you wish, my dear." He replied and with that the games began in earnest.

Several hours later, satiated and a lot less tense, I followed him quietly down to the door to the now forbidden basement area. As we stood at the door he looked at me. "What you will see is a secret. I expect you to respect this absolutely and I also expect you to not come down here again unless I give you permission to do so. If you disobey this order then I will have you locked up. Do you understand?"

I didn't like being spoken to this way but since we were standing in front of a matched set of Chiss guards I didn't argue. I nodded. "Yes, Admiral."

He nodded at the guards who moved slightly to allow us to unlock the door. As we walked down the small corridor to the turbo lift I felt my head buzz but shook it off as a reaction to too much physical exercise and not enough to food. He was silent in the lift but I could feel him watch me carefully.

"What?" I asked.

He shook his head as the lift stopped. "Come let me show you the project." And without anything further he stepped out of the turbo lift into another dimly lit hallway. I shook my head to clear away the dizzy sensation I was feeling. This wasn't how I remembered it. He had

changed things down here. I followed him, having to trot to keep up with his long legged strides. He keyed in a code on the door-pad and the security door slid open. He walked through into the room and I followed. I immediately doubled over, clutching at my head and sinking to my knees with a gasp.

"Ysalamiri." He said as if that explained everything and then grasped my arm and helped me to my feet.

I was completely and utterly head blind and the effect was hellishly disorienting. Stepping through the door into the room had been like stepping into the vacuum of space with no suit on. It was as if everything I knew and felt had suddenly been sucked out leaving me cold and blind in the process. The only other time I had ever experienced this was on Myrkr. Slowly I got my bearings and adjusted to a world without the force. I had not truly realised how much of a part of my life it was until it was suddenly no longer there.

The room was dimly lit and fairly quiet with the exception of the humming machinery and a quiet bubbling noise. I looked around and saw, built into the walls and ceiling of the room branches of Myrkr trees and on these branches were the strange, furry serpent like creatures Thrawn had named Ysalamiri. The room was full of them. It was no wonder I had reacted the way I had, these creatures somehow managed to repel the force away. I drew a deep breath and began to take note of the machinery until I came to the large tanks, the source of the faint bubbling sound. At first I thought they were empty but then I noticed one was not and went to take a closer look.

"Cloning tanks from Mount Tantiss." Thrawn explained walking beside me.

I glanced at him then to the growing being inside the one tank that was being used. "Is that a...human?" I asked, it was hard to tell because the clone was still in very early stages."

"A Chiss actually."

I glanced up at him in surprise.

"Humans make excellent soldiers and we are already making use of the large cloning facility left to us in Mount Tantiss for them but I wish to see if I can breed a better class of soldier and the Chiss make for better soldiers."

"Who is it a clone of?" I asked.

He regarded me for a moment and then said, "No one you know

and the one who volunteered wished to remain anonymous.”

I nodded. I could certainly understand wanting to not be known but eventually that truth would be all too evident when the clone matured. “Why all these creatures?” I waved my hand at the menagerie around the room.

“They repel the force as you well know but unbeknown to most it is the force that also greatly interferes with how fast we can mature a clone. When the force aspect is removed the clone maturation process is sped up greatly, allowing us to create more clones faster. It bypasses the cloning sickness that was sometimes prevalent in clones who were matured too quickly.”

“Did the Emperor know this?” I asked now curious.

Thrawn shook his head. “I do not think so. He was aware of Myrkr and its unusual fauna but he avoided the planet and removed it from all the databases. He would not have instituted the use of a force repelling creature in a place where he thought he was a god.”

I nodded rubbing absently at my temples.

“Are you alright?” Thrawn asked.

I nodded. “It’s just difficult to get used to. It would be like you suddenly losing your ability to see.” I smiled wanly, “Right now I am just an ordinary girl with no special abilities.”

“Well, perhaps your special abilities have been temporarily removed however, my dear, you are anything but ordinary.”

“I can’t even tell if you are telling me the truth or just pulling my leg when you say that.” I sighed and looked around again at the room.

He didn’t dignify that statement with an answer. Instead he said, “Any questions you have about this project ask them now because once we leave this room there will be absolutely no further discussion about it and you will not be allowed entry again.”

I nodded. I was pretty certain I would not ever want to come back here. I did not like the eerie sensation of being cut off from the force and the clone growing in the tank made me very uneasy. I sighed and thought about it but in the end there were no more questions to ask. He was planning an army of Chiss clones. I really didn’t need to know more than that nor did I really want to.

“I will be installing more of the Ysalamiri in the hallways, just to that you are aware.” He said.

I nodded and turned to him. “Thank you.”

He tilted his head to one side, “For what?”

“Sharing this with me.”

His smile reached his eyes and he almost laughed. “That was pure self preservation tekari. If your curiosity had not been satisfied you would have found a way to venture down here on your own and I don’t wish to think of the conclusions you might have come to or what the effects of these creatures would have done to you. Better that you know what is going on and I know what happens when you are in the same room as the ysalamiri because they will be a part of my life for a while, or at least until the clone making process is done and the Jedi Master is off my ship and out of my presence.”

“If these creatures nullify the force won’t it be impossible for your Jedi Master to detect me?” I asked suddenly wondering.

“I dare say you are right but do you really want to take that risk? I know I do not.” He said as we left the cloning room as quietly as we came.

Only once we were back up in the main floor of the base did the force return to me. It was as if someone had suddenly turned on all the lights. We walked in silence back to our quarters and once there he poured two brandies and motioned for me to sit beside him on the small couch. He touched his glass to mine and sipped slowly. I did the same and relished the warmth that slid down my throat.

“I will be leaving the day after tomorrow and I want you to return to the *Virulent*.” He said suddenly with no preamble.

I just glanced at him over the rim of my glass. “Why?” I asked.

“Because I think you will be safe there and I want you to work as a liaison with Ged Larsen for me.”

“After everything that happened?”

“The only thing that occurred was my inability to control my own emotions and that will not happen again. Larsen has assured me you will be safe and I trust you.”

“You do?”

He smiled. “Yes.” He said and it was not a lie. “You are not happy here, even though you try to be and you need a job that is more than just something to while away time. I need you on board the *Virulent* and Larsen says that he has use of someone with your abilities in the area of ships mechanics as well as your, for lack of a better description, office skills.”

I gulped the rest of my brandy down and toyed with my glass. “And will I get to see you?” I asked quietly.

“When and if I have time during the next stages of this campaign then there will be time for you. I cannot promise any more than that.” He said looking at the remnants of his own drink, “But I will keep you better informed.”

“Promise?”

He regarded me for a long moment, his glowing red eyes bored into mine and then he said, “Yes. I promise.”

I nodded, “Okay then I will go back to the *Virulent* but if you ever and I do mean ever pull a stunt like you did the last time I was there I will put you on your ass so fast even Rukh won’t know what hit you.”

He smirked and put aside his glass. “Is that a threat or a promise Miss Gabriel?”

I narrowed my eyes at him as he removed the glass from my hand just in case I decided to use it as a projectile and before I could come up with a suitable retort he shut me up with a kiss. It was hard to argue with this ability of his to quell any discussions and instead of fighting him I played along and kissed him back. We didn’t have so much time together that I wanted to waste it talking about trivial things.

I sat with one hand gripping the edge of Voss Park’s desk and with my other I held my hair back from my face. I felt like bantha poodoo, not to mention deeply embarrassed. “I am so sorry about that.” I mumbled.

“Merlyn maybe you should go pay the doctor a visit.” Voss’s concern would have been almost funny if it weren’t for the fact that I had just suddenly and violently thrown up in the waste basket by his desk. “There’s been a bad case of Corellian flu going around and I hate to say this but you really don’t look so well.”

I nodded and took the tissue he handed me to wipe my mouth. “You’re right, I don’t feel so great.” The truth was I hadn’t been feeling so great for a while but had just put it down to lack of sleep.

He grinned and made a motion with his fingers that I had

missed a spot. “Regular rest and some food would help that you know. You push yourself too hard. I heard you spent nearly fifteen hours straight in the pit fixing ships the other day. You know that is against regulations.” He poured a glass of water and handed it to me.

“I hate seeing broken ships lying around. We need all the working ships we can get.” I shrugged, sipping the water slowly. “I can’t sleep, I can’t settle so I make myself useful.”

“I am quite sure that when the Admiral said you should do something productive to keep busy until the *Virulent* returns from what ever mission Admiral Larsen has it on he didn’t mean kill yourself by working over time in the flight deck pit.” He said with a sigh, “Even the chief of ops came to me worried about the time you’ve been spending there. Half the crew are sick with this virus so it’s no wonder you are too. Don’t make me pull rank and forbid you to go down to the hanger.”

I gave him a weak smile. “You’re right, I just wish....” I stopped myself from saying what I really felt out loud, Voss knew it anyway, “I suppose just bugging off to Hjal would also not be a good idea.” I said with a sigh. I had been toying with the notion of going to spend some time with Navaari but never quite made up my mind about it.

“Oh I am certain Thrawn would not mind you going to Hjal but please don’t just leave without telling me, the paperwork is a bugger.” He teased. “Really, Merly, go see Doc Thracer and for goodness sake get some rest and maybe eat something, you look like something out of one of those awful holo-horror dramas Fel likes to read .”

“You know you can be really bossy some days.”

“Just because I care.” He shot back with a grin.

“Thanks.” I got up a little shakily. I had been feeling queasy for a week or so on and off but usually it went away after a while. The throwing up was a fairly recent event and given that someone on the base had contracted the Corellian flu which had spread rapidly, my being unwell was not a surprise. What had surprised me this time was that it had been the smell of the stim’caf Voss had poured me which had made me so sick.

“I swear as soon as I hear anything from him I will come and find you myself.” He added looking at me with genuine concern. “But really if Thrawn comes home to find you dead or in a coma or something from this flu it will be ugly.”

I nodded again, mumbled another embarrassed apology for being sick and made my way to the medlab where Doctor Thracer didn't seem all that shocked to see me. "I'll be right with you dear. This Corellian flu outbreak is creating a lot of paperwork. Go wait in exam room two."

He came into the small room just as I was throwing up again. "Oh, that's not very good. Let's see what's going on shall we." He said as he shut the door.

I stood quietly by the bed as Doctor Thracer fussed. He asked questions, took my temperature and then waved the small hand scanner up and down my body. There was a moment where he just looked at me with an expression I could not decipher and then he tucked the scanner away.

"So?" I asked. "What's wrong with me this time? Did I manage to catch this wretched flu?"

"Nothing is wrong with you. You are in perfect health." He said with a smile.

"Well I don't feel healthy." I snapped. "I feel sick and tired and just plain out of sorts."

He nodded. "Yes, that's perfectly normal for a woman in your condition."

"My condition? I thought you just said I wasn't sick." I said, confused.

He looked at me in surprise. "Merlyn, you're not sick, you're pregnant."

The shock of his words drained the blood from my face and for a moment the world around me spun out of control. I felt his hands catch me and the next thing I knew I was lying down on the bed trying to recall how to breathe.

He handed me a glass of water. "You really didn't know or suspect?" He asked with surprise.

I sat up slowly and shook my head. "How is this possible? How did this happen?" I asked him.

He frowned for just a moment, deciding if the question was a serious one or not then after taking a good look at my face decided I wasn't messing with him. "You are sexually active are you not?" He asked carefully.

I nodded. "Yes but..."

"And you don't take anything to prevent pregnancy from happening do you?"

"No." I said crossly. "But Thrawn does."

Doctor Thracer shook his head ever so slightly and sighed. "He didn't tell you." He murmured.

"Tell me what?"

"The Admiral stopped taking Evexelhan." He said naming the drug which enabled men to have sex without producing viable sperm thus preventing unwanted pregnancies. The drug had become very popular for members of the Imperial navy who did not want to suddenly find themselves landed with a baby and a wife after one night of shore leave. Thrawn had told me a very long time ago when the topic of babies had been brought up one evening that he had taken care to prevent this possibility. It would have been a very bad thing to get pregnant during Palpatine's reign.

I looked at him, stunned. "When was this?"

"Shortly after he returned from his exploration of Mount Tantiss." Doctor Thracer frowned because really he was giving me information that was, in theory, private between him and Thrawn. "He said the drug had started to give him headaches, which is one of the known long term use side effects."

"That was ages ago." I protested, "He should have told me." And I wondered why he didn't. That was very unlike Thrawn, he usually took care to avoid any unseemly complications of any sort and babies would be considered a major complication, at least in my book at any rate.

The doctor frowned and fiddled with the scanner in his hand. "The chances of you conceiving a child with him were, as far as statistics go, incredibly slim, next to impossible actually, and you are not together that often perhaps he felt the risk was minimal or maybe he really just forgot. He's had a lot on his plate lately."

I stared at the doctor angrily. "Yet here I am, minimal risk aside, pregnant." My mind reeled as I spoke that word out loud. "He should have said something. I am certain he had no intention of any sort of family plans, this is not something he wanted especially now."

For a terrible long moment an unhappy silence weighted the air down.

"I can advise you on your options." He said quietly after

watching my face carefully.

“Options?” I asked a little confused then I realised what he was not saying. I narrowed my eyes at him. “You mean like terminating the pregnancy?”

He nodded carefully keeping his expression neutral.

I shook my head. “No way. That is not an option I even want to hear about.” I said angrily, unconsciously clutching my abdomen, suddenly fiercely protective over this little life I had thought was lack of sleep, bad dreams and stomach flu.

“Merlyn, apart from the pregnancy is everything alright? Between the two of you is everything alright? You don’t seem happy about this.”

“Don’t seem happy? You just told me the impossible has happened.” I couldn’t stop the tears that welled up in my eyes. “I’m too shocked to know what to feel.” Which was the truth.

“The shock will wear off. How will you feel about it after the news has had time to sink in?”

I thought about it for a moment and then gave him a little smile. “It’s clichéd and silly and probably the most girly thing I will ever say in my entire life, Da’han help me, but I want this.” I said. “We’ve talked about it, you know, on and off through the years we’ve been together but always the time just wasn’t right and then when you told me that it would be damned near impossible I had given up the idea but ...this child is nothing short of a wonder.” I whispered the words carefully. “I think apart from the shock I’m well...pleased, I guess... I think.”

“You’re very good at hiding your joy well.” Doctor Thracer said wryly.

I made a face at him. “Well, this could not have happened at a worse time. Thrawn’s in the middle of a war that will last for who knows how long. The last thing he will need or want to hear is that he’s going to be a father.” I didn’t even want to imagine that conversation.

He nodded without comment but his expression said he wasn’t buying my explanation.

“How far along am I? Can you tell?”

He looked at the scanner’s data. “Approximately forty two days, give or take, so nearly nine weeks going by Coruscant standard time.” Nirauan’s days were longer and instead of five day weeks, here they stretched out over into seven days per week. We tried to keep to

Coruscant standard time when ever possible but it wasn’t always easy to do given the planet’s time and rotation differences.

I did some mental math and nodded. “His last time on the base.” I said with a sudden flashback to that particularly memorable evening. Just the thought made me blush but the doctor tactfully ignored this.

“When you missed your period did you not wonder?”

I shook my head. “I was never regular, I’ve told you that, especially with all of the sport and exercise I do and lately it’s been even more irregular than ever. I just put it down to stress, general bad eating habits and lack of sleep.” I sighed. “I didn’t think anything was wrong until I started throwing up at the drop of a hat and then I just assumed it was this stupid flu that’s been going around.” I said, “But all of a sudden I can’t stand to be around stim’caf any more and you know that’s not normal for me.”

That made him smile, my stim’caf habit was legendary on the base. “It should pass. Cravings and changes in food and drink likes and dislikes are pretty standard.”

“I hope it goes away soon!” I said, alarmed at the thought of not being able to go near stim’caf for fear of throwing up.

He nodded. “It’s normal as is the morning sickness which, despite its name, can occur at any time I am afraid to tell you.”

“Ugh.” I made a face.

“Drink lots of fluids and you need to eat better as well as rest more. I will make up a diet plan for you and we’ll need to monitor your weight gain. I should warn you, you’ll be tired and you will have mood swings due to all the hormone changes.”

“The drinking and eating part I can probably manage in between the throwing up parts but the sleeping part... can’t guarantee that unless you have a sure fire cure for getting rid of nightmares.”

“I wish I could help you with the bad dreams, Merlyn, I see what they are doing to you but I don’t know how to help other than offer you some sort of counselling to discover their roots.”

“Talking won’t help.” I said with a shrug.

He sighed and nodded. He knew all about my strange gifts and the issues they brought with them. “I want to keep a very close eye on you. While Chiss and human physiologies are similar there are some major differences which will complicate this pregnancy greatly. That

means monitoring your health carefully. I don't want to scare you but this will not be an easy pregnancy."

"Differences? Aside from the obvious appearance ones what should I know about?"

"The major one I am concerned with right now is the different gestation times. Humans carry offspring from between two hundred and fifty-nine to two hundred and ninety-four days. Chiss gestation times are longer by nearly fifty to sixty days. I don't know what sort of stress that will put on your body."

"He wants me to return to the *Virulent* and work with Admiral Larsen. I would have been there now except the *Virulent* is off on some mission and out of contact for another month or so."

"Well I don't really care what he wants from this moment on you are my patient and you will remain here. While I am sure the doctor on board Larsen's ship is good he will not know yours or Thrawn's medical histories the way I do, he certainly won't have much experience with Chiss physiology and I have better equipment here." He said thoughtfully. "Don't make me pull rank on you to get you to do as I ask."

"You're the second person to say that to me today." I smiled.

"I'm surprised you don't hear that more often. You are reckless and impulsive but if you want to carry this child to term you will have to curb that nature and settle down a bit."

There was something he wasn't telling me so I asked outright. "What's the but? Because I hear a definite but in there, what are you not telling me?"

He drew a deep breath. "Most inter-species pregnancies don't last to term. The variables in DNA make it almost impossible to grow a viable embryo that lasts beyond fifty-six days and, to be brutally honest with you; this is usually a good thing due to the deformities and mutations that occur." He looked at me to make sure I was actually hearing what he was saying. "You need to be prepared for the fact that the chances you will carry this child to term are very, very slim. I will do everything I can for you to make it possible as long as it does not place your life in any danger but statistics are not on your side."

"So what you are telling me is not to get too attached to this baby?"

He sighed. "Without trying to seem like Doctor Doom here, yes.

If you make it past the two hundred day mark then we can hope a little but before that, especially in the first hundred days I would advise caution and that's the reason I don't think you should be anywhere else but here."

"I will have to lie or find some really good reason why I should stay here." I said quietly.

"You already have a good reason, dear, you're pregnant with his child." He was puzzled.

"How long before it starts to show?" I asked ignoring the unasked question in the doctor's eyes.

"Not for a while yet, at least a hundred and thirty days or so depending on development."

"So we can keep this a secret, at least for now?"

He looked at me for a moment then nodded. "Yes, if that is your wish."

"And you won't tell Thrawn or anyone else?"

"Unless you give me permission to do so I am legally not allowed to but why, if I may ask, do you not want to tell him or is he not the father?"

I shook my head. "Oh he's definitely the father." I said quickly with a smile I couldn't quite stop. "There's never been anyone else."

He nodded. "Then what is the problem?"

"He has enough to worry about and as you said I might not carry to term. I'd rather tell him good news when I know the news is good. If I tell him now and things go wrong" I shrugged offhandedly but suddenly and to my surprise I didn't want to think about that. "Besides it's not as if he is here every day to see what's going on. I'm not even sure when I will see him next so best not to worry him just yet, especially while he's in the middle of his biggest move yet. When we know for certain there will be a baby then we can tell him, okay?"

He wasn't happy about this but he nodded anyway. "As you wish but I have to tell you I don't like it and I am pretty certain he won't either when he does find out. You know how is about you keeping secrets from him."

I made a little gesture with my shoulder. "Well that's my problem when it happens isn't it. Right now he's busy, in fact he's up to his neck in it. I don't want to add to the stress."

"I heard that he was planning on going after the ships at the

Sluis Van yards.” Doctor Thracer said as he loaded up a hypospray. I gave him a look. “Prenatal vitamins, nothing more.” He said as he pressed the spray gun against my neck. “You’re eating habits are terrible when Thrawn is away and your body needs a boost.”

I nodded. “The fleet needs ships, though I find it weird there are not more Imperial ships out there. I mean the Imperial navy was enormous and not so many were actually destroyed at Endor. Where did the rest of the ships go? I mean surely if an Imperial Captain heard that a Grand Admiral had survived and was trying to take back the Empire would he not come running to join in?”

Doctor Thracer shrugged. “I agree with you but I have no answers. Thrawn often asked the same question as you and I had no answers for him either. Perhaps these ships are holed up somewhere so remote that no one knows what is actually going on, or maybe the crews simply gave up and left these ships abandoned somewhere in space. I don’t think we will ever know.” He dug out a data pad from one of the drawers and started to punch stuff into it.

I shook my head. “It doesn’t add up, you know.” Then, suddenly feeling exhausted I discovered I didn’t really care about ships or fleets or much of anything. I sighed. “I didn’t know he spoke to you about his campaign?”

The doctor smiled. “We have come along way from the very first time you met me, you know. I have you to thank for that.”

I raised my eyebrows at him.

“You have a way of bringing people together, though I don’t think you notice that much. After Endor he had no one to talk to about you and what you were going through so he came to me and through that experience we developed a friendship after a fashion. He does not confide in many people nor does he have many people he would call friend but somehow I am honoured to be one of them so yes he talks to me about his campaigns though not in great amounts of detail. Friend or not that’s still classified information but I think he finds it of use to have a non military point of view sometimes.”

“So he finds it weird as well that so much of the Imperial Navy is ... missing.”

“Yes but he cannot afford the resources to try and find them or try to obtain information on where to start looking.”

A thought flashed across my brain but I bit down on it before it

could show on my face and I changed the subject quickly. “How long will this nausea and vomiting go on for?”

“Hard to say, though in normal human pregnancies it usually subsides after eighty to ninety days though there are exceptions to this rule and given the nature of this pregnancy I can’t say with any certainty this will hold true for you. I can give you something for it if you need it.”

I shook my head. “No.” When he raised his eyebrows at me I explained, “You can’t tell me for sure that anything you give me won’t harm the baby can you?”

“No. You are the first human I know of to conceive with a Chiss. I have no idea what will happen so I am going to have to do some research on Chiss pregnancies. I truly didn’t even think this was possible and I remember telling you that when you asked me some time back. I guess I am eating my words today.” He smiled.

“So this is a good thing right?” I asked carefully.

“Yes, if you two wish a child this is a very good thing though I cannot stress enough caution in your optimism but the fact that you even conceived at all is a very good sign, bad timing aside.”

That made me smile. “So... tell me what I need to know about being pregnant because this is a first for me.”

Doctor Thracer handed me the data pad and did his best to educate me on the subject of being an expectant mother. By the time he let me go I was more bewildered and astonished than ever. I was grateful to get back to my quarters so that I could just lie down. It was an awful lot to take in and on top of it all I was worried about Thrawn. The attack on the Sluis Van Ship yards should have taken place and I had half expected to hear about the results by now.

As I lay on the bed I could not help but think about the lack of Imperial ships and wondered where the rest of the ships had gone. I was certain now, from the dreams I had been having that the Emperor was not dead but very much alive and also planning some sort of grand come back. The real mystery was why had he not found Thrawn? The two of them would have been invincible together. But then again, I thought the together part was probably the real issue. Palpatine had let power go to his head and for all intensive purposes I thought he was just mad. Sharing had never been high on his list of things to do and sharing with Thrawn, well that would be just wrong in the Emperor’s

books. I wondered if he was simply waiting on some hidden planet somewhere for Thrawn to do the major damage to the Rebels and then sweep in and take the end glory for himself. If that was the case then Palpatine was more than just a power hungry madman he was a petty idiot. Thrawn did not want to rule the galaxy as its new Emperor; he wanted to bring back the law and order which had held the empire together so that if there was an invasion from some nasty unknown species that lived beyond the galaxy's edge then just maybe we'd all be prepared, at least that was his story and so far he was sticking to it.

I absently rubbed my belly and thought about the new life that was growing inside of me with a sigh. It was too early and too small to sense or feel anything yet it was there. A child, our child. The prospect was daunting. Oddly enough I found myself wondering what Palpatine would have thought of this had it happened while he was still alive and on Coruscant. Chances were good he would be repulsed by the idea of a human and a Chiss mating and producing offspring but there was also a good chance my child would be a force user and that would complicate things even more. If Palpatine lived and if he ever found out I was certain he would want this child to train especially if it had Thrawn's brains and my talents. I knew a sliver of icy fear then, and hoped that what ever gods were watching over me stuck close by because I was quite scared to death which, I suddenly realised, was probably how my own birth mother felt when she had discovered she was pregnant with me as well.

The mood on the base had shifted slightly with the news that Thrawn had not been able to grab all the ships he had hoped from the raid at the Sluis Van yards. Suddenly the reality of what the Grand Admiral was attempting to do and just how hard it would be had begun to sink in. According to Parck Thrawn had managed to sneak up and was in the process of taking all the rebels ships but rather than let Thrawn take the ships from them the rebels had used the fact that Thrawn had forgotten to jam the signals of mole miners and turned the machines on the ships to destroy them. When I had heard this news I was astonished at what had taken place.

"They're desperate." Voss had said when he had given me the details. "As you can imagine, Thrawn wasn't overly happy with the outcome. They did manage to procure some ships but not nearly as many as they had hoped."

I had just shaken my head. The New Republic's victory was empty since they had to destroy the ships to win but it hadn't made me or anyone else feel any better about what had happened.

"So what next?" I had asked.

Voss had shaken his head, "I don't know. Thrawn did not go into details about his plans and I did not ask."

I had nodded and that had been that.

Later I learned that instead of returning to the base for supplies and briefings Thrawn had chosen to take the ships he had managed to obtain to a secret location and then go back to Wayland to check on the progress of the clones being created there. All Voss could tell me Thrawn had other ideas and they did not involve returning to Nirauan for the next little while.

In a way I was relieved to hear this because I was pretty sure if he were to see me in my current state he'd know instantly something wasn't right and badger me about it. The morning sickness was proving to be an issue and there wasn't much the doctor could really do about it except prescribe herbal remedies and teas which helped a little but not enough. The very fact that I couldn't go near stim'caf alone would have set off Thrawn's curiosity alarm bells.

I had told Park that I had come down with a particularly bad version of the Corellian Flu which had a long recovery time and he accepted this without question. It meant no one would think it strange that I rested a great deal or that instead of working in the pit instead I spent a lot of my time reading in the quiet of my quarters, not that I figured anyone would really care anyway, but it was always good to have an excuse. With Thrawn's campaign so far underway things at the base were fairly busy and I was a minor blip on the radar as far as most of the people were concerned.

I was not surprised when Voss came to me shortly after the news about the Sluis Van raid to tell me that the few Chiss who had been learning basic had told him they no longer had the time to study and felt they had come sufficiently far enough to more than get by. I had to agree with this assessment of their skills and in the end I didn't

mind the break. I was exhausted almost all the time which surprised me but apparently was normal according to what the doc said.

“Your body is a little busy at the moment.” He said when I complained about it during a check up. “I don’t, for a second, imagine that growing another being is easy and neither should you.”

When I made a face he had just laughed. “My dear you had better get used to your body and your time no longer being your own.” He admonished.

It was a daunting thing, this little life that was slowly but surely growing inside of me, but it was also infuriating. While I still could not sense or feel it I was well aware of its presence due to the morning sickness that seemed to happen at the most inopportune times. The almost constant nausea was driving me crazy.

“I do not know what to say, Merlyn, usually I can address this problem with standard medications but in your case there’s not much we can do. The herbs are not helping and the antic emetic drugs are too risky and unfortunately I cannot think of anything else that might work for you.” He said. “I will do some more research and see if I can find anything to help because you are supposed to be gaining weight not losing it.”

I patted my abdomen feeling the ever so slight roundness that I was pretty sure wasn’t fat. “This little alien is not making my life easy. Just like his father.”

“His?”

“Feels like a him.” I smiled. “It’s always males making my life hard.”

Doctor Thracer gave me a look full of worry. “I realise that I am preaching to deaf ears but do not get too attached to this pregnancy you are not out of the woods yet, not by a long shot.”

I made a face. “I know, I try but it’s difficult.”

“I understand that but I am concerned.”

“You said everything was ok.”

He sighed. “You are in no immediate danger and as far as I, and all this equipment, can tell you are stable but the fact that you are so sick so much of the time worries me a great deal. You have to eat and you really have to gain some weight.”

“You want me to get fat?” I grinned.

He shook his head with a smile. “You are a slender woman

Merlyn. You were tiny when I first met you and you’re still tiny. If it were not for the fact that I’ve actually seen you tuck away more food than a grown man on occasion I’d think there was something wrong. I do not think that getting fat is one of the things you need to worry about. I am quite sure that the admiral will adore you no matter what, after all he’s stuck with you in spite of all your crazy antics. I only need to see the way he looks at you to know that he won’t care about a bit of extra weight as long as you are healthy and well and I dare say he’d welcome that to finding you skinnier than a skeleton.”

“Funny ha ha.” I retorted, getting off the exam bed.

He regarded me for a moment. “You don’t have any abdominal pains, especially sharp ones or any spotting, do you?”

I shook my head. “No, just nausea, vomiting and a lot of really, really bad dreams which I guess would explain why I am so tired all the time.”

“Well the same advice still follows no heavy lifting, no stress and your mission is to find food you can keep down and to drink more fluids.” Doctor Thracer said flapping his hand at me in a shooing motion. “Now, I have patients to see to and you seem to be healthy so go away and stop worrying.”

I nodded and then because there was nothing else I left to find something useful to do.

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As I washed my face and stared at my reflection in the mirror I could understand why Doctor Thracer was so concerned. I looked gaunt and there were terrible dark circles under my eyes. I had hoped that the soup I had eaten would stay put but it hadn’t and I was getting really fed up of this. It was late and this was wearing me down and even I was starting to worry about the baby, about myself. I was tired. I was tired of being sick and even more tired of the terrible dreams which had me waking up screaming in terror. I was scared and feeling very sorry for myself. I probably would have spent more time feeling that way had the chimes to the door not suddenly rung making me jump in fright. I made sure I didn’t look quite as scary as I felt and went to answer the door.

“Syal!” I said surprised to see her.

“Hullo Merly, can I come in?”

I stepped back to let her past. “Are the boys okay?”

“Oh they’re fine.” She said with a smile, making her way to the small kitchenette. “I thought we’d have some tea and a chat. It’s been a while since you and I just had a girl’s evening. I had K’arla’sh baby sit so we could spend some time together.” She replied as she put water in the kettle.

I smiled and pulled the tea pot and two cups out of the cupboard then reached for the tea but was stopped by the touch of Syal’s hand.

“Try this tea instead.” She said gently, “it’s one of my favourites.”

We waited in comfortable silence for the water to boil and then with the pot full I placed everything on a tray and which she picked up before I could and we made our way to the living room. We sat and she gazed at me for a very long moment and then she said, “So why did you not tell me you were pregnant Merly?”

For a moment I forgot how to breathe then I shook my head. “How did you....?”

“I’ve been pregnant enough times to just know.” She said as she poured tea and then handed me a cup. “This will help with the morning sickness, or in your case the all the time sickness.”

I sniffed the tea suspiciously. “What is this?”

“It’s an extract from a root the Zabraki use in their cooking. They call it zjenzär and it’s what makes Zabraki food so spicy.”

I took a sip and smiled. The taste was familiar to me. I loved Zabraki food. “This really helps?”

She nodded, “I am allergic to most anti emetic drugs and this was suggested to me when everything else failed. My first pregnancy was pretty rough. When medicine couldn’t help me I went to see a herbalist and this was what she suggested. I was sceptical but it helped.”

“Then why the hell hasn't Doctor Thracer suggested it?”

“It's used in cooking as a spice,” she said with a shrug, “that it helps against nausea isn't something most people seem to know about.”

“Does everyone know?”

“Know what?” She asked, “Know that you’re with child? No I doubt it. The flu has been going around the base so you not looking so

well isn’t so weird but usually people get over a flu after a couple of weeks and you don’t seem to be getting any better. Eventually folks will be wondering about that so I thought you might like some help. Have you gotten word to Thrawn about it?”

I shook my head. “It’s too early.”

Syal frowned.

“Doctor Thracer, he thinks well, he wants me to be cautious.” I sighed. “He keeps warning me about the dangers of cross species mating and the terrible outcomes.”

She nodded. “He’s worried you cannot carry to term.”

“I don’t want to tell Thrawn until I’m sure and while he’s away it seems selfish to give him yet another thing to worry about.”

“I doubt he will see it that way.” Syal said. “I get why you think it is a good idea but I think you are wrong. It’s his baby as well and even though he is a passive observer he is a part of it, he should know the whole journey not just the last few months. I didn’t even know you were trying.”

“We weren’t.” I said with a shrug.

She raised her eyebrows at me so I told her what had happened and when I was done she took a deep breath. “That’s not at all like him.”

“I know but it doesn’t matter anyway because what’s done is done.” I said absently stroking my abdomen. “Unplanned doesn’t mean unwanted.” I said with a smile.

She nodded, “But still that’s not like him, not at all.”

“I don’t really know, it’s been ages since we’ve actually spoken.”

“Still has he ever kept anything important from you before?”

I thought about it for a moment and then shook my head. “Not that I can ever remember. He’s never kept anything from me that would impact me in that way.” I said slowly. “I mean he won’t talk about his work much, in fact he flat out refuses to discuss it most of the time so I really don’t know anything that goes on in that area, but if it was something to do with me, to do with us, as far as I know he’s never lied and he’s always been upfront about things. It’s one of the things I love about him. I always knew where I stood with him but lately...I don’t know especially after this.”

“What do you think it means then?”

I shook my head, “I don’t know.”

She was silent for a moment, “You have to tell him about the baby. Men don’t like it when women keep such secrets from them, you have to tell him.”

I smiled sadly. “A very good friend of mine once told me the exact same thing.”

“And was she right?”

“More than she will ever know.” I said quietly thinking of Cati.

Syal gave me a puzzled look so in order to change the subject I told her the whole story about having to accompany Grand Admiral Zaarin to one of the Emperor’s Grand Balls. By the time I was finished with the story she was in tears from laughing so hard.

“Zaarin must have been so mad at you.” She said between breaths.

“You have no idea.” I said, “In fact he was so pissed that he tried to rape me a year or so later.”

“What!” She very nearly spilled the tea from her cup.

I nodded and told her that story too.

“You’re unbelievable, Merly.” She said with a grin. “You look so... I don’t know...harmless.”

I grinned. “I know but I grew up on a docking bay in Mos Eisley, trust me I had to learn the hard way how to defend myself. One of the mechanics at the bay showed me how.” I said, surprised at the pang of sadness I felt at the thought of Jyrki. “Seems like forever ago though and I never imagined for one moment I would be living at the other end of the galaxy, in love with a man who is not even human and pregnant with his child.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Not a bit.” I replied and I almost meant it, if Syal spotted the lie she let it slide.

“So any word on when Thrawn will return to the base?” She asked after a moment’s quiet.

I shook my head. “No. Last I heard he was returning to Myrkr for a sweep and clear.”

“So it could be a while before he returns?”

“Your guess is as good as mine Syal.” I replied, “But I hope it’s soon.”

“Yeah I understand. It’s so hard when they are away.”

“Usually I can deal with it but this... pregnancy... changed all

that.”

“It always does.” She nodded, “It always, always does.”

We both sat back against the couch with a sigh. And for the very first time I understood what my Uncle had meant when he had said that choosing to be with being with an Imperial lifer was my heartache. I was so grateful to have a friend like Syal who understood exactly what it was like.