

Daughter of the Empire

Book 1

Written by F. Messer 2005-2006

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CHAPTER ONE

Choose a path 1

I had thought that it would just be another sweltering hot day in Mos Eisley. Had I known what was going to show up on my door step that day I would have run for the Jundland Wastes. However, that was not the case and for me the day was business as usual

Dust and sand, just like the Hutts, ruled here coating the thieves, smugglers, pirates, bounty hunters, not to mention the slaves and then the rest of us poor working slobs in its grit and grime.

To label Tatooine as hot and dry would be an understatement of the largest magnitude and, contrary to what many off-worlders thought, it was almost always windy. The sand people had over 400 names for wind and sand but only one word for town. It was a wonder that anyone in their right minds would ever choose to visit this planet much less choose to live in a town as desperate and forsaken as this one but I loved it. I had lived on Tatooine my whole life and, although the sand drove me crazy, I could not imagine living any where else in the entire Galaxy.

Life on an Outer Rim Planet is pretty basic. Survival of the fittest or better to say, the most devious depending on your profession. Here, the Empire was just a passing word on most people's lips. It was the Hutts who ruled not the Emperor no matter what the local stormtroopers would have on believe. So when an Imperial Messenger showed up at my house shortly after I had returned from work, I was very surprised.

It was mid afternoon, the time when both suns are at their hottest. I answered the door to see a very uncomfortable, young Imperial messenger sweating to death on my doorstep, flanked by two Imperial Stormtroopers in their gleaming white armour, holding carbine rifles. I stared at the young man wracking my brains trying to figure out what it was that I had done that would warrant a visit from the Imperials but nothing serious came to mind. I worked for Hutt Imports-Exports Inc. as a part time mechanic, sometimes pilot and office temp, in fact I had just gotten a promotion which I had beaten out Bib Fortuna's little brother for, much to the annoyance of greedy, power hungry Twi'lek so there was not much love lost between the Twi'lek and myself, we had often locked horns, so to speak.

"Yes?" I asked.

The Imperial looked at me as though he had never seen anything quite like it before. I must have looked a fright. I could see by the pained expression on his face that who ever he had been expecting to answer the door, I was definitely not it.

I am not overly tall or spectacularly beautiful. I have an angular face with a big nose and long, dark red hair that was usually tied back with a bit of routing wire. I had been working on ship's engine so I was wearing my dirty coveralls, and I was covered in grease and sand dust. Knowing me, I probably had oil on my nose. Jyrki, one of my father's mechanics had always said I was a born grease-monkey. I was never quite sure what that had meant exactly, Jyrki wasn't from Tatooine and he had some funny sayings that often made no sense to me.

The Imperial recovered from his surprise quickly and asked in a very imperious tone if I was Miss Merlyn Ty'Erijann Gabriel. I told him I was, and began to worry even more when he whipped out a data pad and gave it to me.

"I have been sent from the Imperial Palace on Coruscant to deliver this to you personally."

Without thinking to question it first, I took the stupid thing and even asked if I owed him anything for the delivery. Here, nothing is for free not even mail or message delivery. He just gave me a puzzled look, shook his head and with a smart nod, he did a beautiful military style turn about and he, flanked by his stormtroopers, left. He looked really happy to go. I guess most folks who get an Imperial summons don't offer money by way of thanks.

I took the data pad indoors and wandered into our excuse for a kitchen, my room-mate Rys was there, she handed me a cup of cold Jawa juice. I showed her the data pad and told her what had happened and she went as white as a skeleton. I pressed my thumb on the encryption lock and unlocked the message.

"Looks like I have been offered a job." I told her with some surprise, I had been expecting something bad. I handed her the data pad.

"I didn't know you planned on leaving HIE Inc." she said. Rys was a singer and dancer who worked for Jabba, sometimes she was at the palace and sometimes she worked at one of his clubs in town, today was her day off. We had met at the palace, during my short stint as a dancer there.

"Me either." I said.

"I can't read this." she said, handing it back. The screen had gone blank the moment she had touched the data pad. I guess the Imperials took encryption seriously so I read it for her.

TO: Miss Merlyn Ty'Erijann Gabriel
FROM: Imperial Employment Department

Miss Gabriel, after long consideration and careful screening we have chosen you from the many fine applications for the position of Personal Assistant to one of our high ranking officers. You will begin this appointment immediately.

An Imperial shuttle will await you at docking bay 51, Mos Eisley Space Station at 0900CST, fourth day of the tenth month, this year. Your promptness in

this matter will be appreciated. We look forward to your arrival, and welcome you to the Imperial family. We trust that your journey will be a pleasant and uneventful one.

*Yours Truly,
Erysie Candala
Chief Imperial Employment Officer.*

"When did you apply for an Imperial job?" Rys asked.

"I didn't." I said. "There must have been some mix up, I guess I will just have to let them know."

Rys shook her head at me. "You don't tell the Empire no."

"But I don't want this job. I didn't apply for it. Hell, I don't even know how they know my name!" I said. "I just need to figure out how to tell them that?"

"No-one refuses a summons from the Empire. It's the Empire. Merly, they sent an Imperial messenger all the way to this forsaken planet just to hire you. They know you live here, they know who you are. Chances are they know everything they could possibly want to learn about you, and quite probably more than you even know about yourself." She sighed. "Looks like you have a new job."

And just like that my life had changed. This was not what I had planned but then again, I never actually planned for anything. I wondered exactly who the 'high ranking official' was. I found it a little odd that there had been no mention of his name.

My father was stunned when he heard the news of my new job. I had gone round to the house to tell him and was not really surprised at his reaction. Like Rys, he too believed that it was an offer I couldn't say no to.

We sat in silence in the cool of the evening, drinking his homemade moonglow. I sensed he had a great deal on his mind and I got the feeling he wanted to tell me something but he did not know how to do it. I wasn't going to prompt him, I had had all the bad news I could take for one day.

The next morning I went to work as usual but there was a subtle air of 'we know something you don't know'. I got the full message when Bib's slimy little assistant handed me a congratulations on the new job Holo. I had told no one and Rys had sworn she'd keep it a secret. That rat bastard, I had had the sneaking suspicion that he was the reason the Empire knew about me and was betting it was he who sent in an application on my behalf.

There was nothing to be done about it and in the end it was not as if the

Hutts cared about their office staff that much. People came and went all the time. People like me were easy to come by, mechanics and pilots, office assistants dancers, all expendable, what was one more or less?

I had begun my career working for the Hutts as a dancer at the palace, but it had been too rough and too far away so I had taken a spot in one of the many nightclubs Jabba owned in Mos Eisley. Once word got around that I was a decent mechanic and could handle a ship okay, it was easy to take a step upward. There was more call and more need for a decent mechanic than a dancer any day of the week and as much as I loved to dance, I loved working on and being around the ships even more.

The office stuff had started after one of the office temps had run off with a pilot out of Mos Espa and they were short staffed, I pitched in, it was extra money. I was used to handling that sort of paper-work.

My father owned a fairly busy, well respected docking port and there was always a lot of paperwork associated with the ships, import export, cargo manifests and so on. I had taken over dealing with that after my mother had died. It was a busy life but I loved it. I was good at my job and I was working my way up. I got the distinct feeling that not many people at HIE Inc here are unhappy to see me go, I was in the way I guess.

I packed up all my stuff, there wasn't much, but I sure was not going to leave anything of mine behind and then I went to meet up with my father. He had said he had something he needed to speak to me about. I had long sensed that he had something serious on his mind he wanted to tell me and now time was growing short. I got the feeling that what ever it was he had to say, I wasn't going to like it much. My father had the small shuttle fired up to go by the time I got home and we headed straight out to Bestine.

Bestine was the official capital of Tatooine, although it was smaller than Mos Eisley and Mos Espa. It was also the seat of Imperial power here on this planet. I always suspected that the Hutts had not been overly happy when the Imperial garrison had been set up there and an Imperial governor instated. For the most part the Imperials seemed to ignore Jabba's dealings and the under belly side of Tatooine in general. Rumours had it that the Imperials there were just as corrupt as Jabba the Hutt, but that wasn't something I had ever wanted to test.

Just outside of Bestine was the house we used to live in. I had been very young when we had moved to Mos Eisley, shortly after my father had bought the docking bay. My mother was still alive then and she had been sad to leave this house.

She had never liked Mos Eisley as much as my father had hoped she would so this house was never sold and it had become her refuge. She would sometimes

come out here to get away from the noise. After she had died, my father had closed the house up but he had never sold it. I don't think he could bear to part with something she had loved so much but we almost never used it so it became just another half abandoned dwelling and there are many of those on Tatooine. It was a hard planet to settle, too harsh an environment for most, too many things try to kill you. Most prospectors eventually gave up and left. There were many ghosts towns on this planet. Tatooine is not a place for the weak.

We got to the house late in the afternoon, the twin suns had already begun their slow descent. My father unlocked the door and we walked in. It smelled unused and dusty. There was that strange decayed scent that taints everything left alone too long. The sand had begin to creep through every crack and open space, and eventually, one day, there would be no more house to see. It would vanish in the sand and become nothing more than a memory. The sand people had a saying about it, *'the desert reclaims all that it was.'*

The sand people laughed at the settlers and hated them for what they saw as a desecration of a living breathing thing, to the sand people, the desert was a living, breathing god.

It was eerie in the house after being away for so long. I was only thirteen when my mother was killed. A speeder accident, someone running from the law had run her down in the street while she was on her way home.

I had not been here since, yet I had memories of this place. They seemed dream like now and I felt haunted by them. The late afternoon sunlight filtered through the cracks in the boards and the dust particles danced about us like fireflies as we moved through the stillness. A thick layer of fine sand covered everything. No one had been here in a long time.

I followed my father as he made his way to the study, a tiny excuse for a room in the lower back of the house where the sun's heat would not fry it, and dug around in one of the desk drawers.

"Papa, why are we here?" I asked. It was strange to be in this place, like some sort of half forgotten dream. I could have sworn I caught the scent of my mother's perfume and it made me edgy.

My father gave me a sideways glance and I didn't need my weirding ways to know that he was worried about something.

"Papa, what is it?" I pressed. I was getting worried.

He took a deep breath and said the last thing I ever expected to hear. "Merlyn, there is no easy way to say what I have to tell you so I will say it now. Your mother and I could not have children of our own, so when you suddenly came into

our lives we jumped at the chance to adopt you and raise you as our own."

I opened my mouth but no words came out.

He put his hand up to stop me from speaking and continued, "We estimated that you were not quite a year old when we found you in the transport ship I used to pilot. You had been tucked away behind some crates in one of the extra cargo bays. That day, Bedi Nuale and I had probably shuttled at least two hundred different folk from one place to another, most of them trying to avoid something or someone. It was a very bad time in the Galaxy and you must understand neither of us could have traced who had left you, although we did try. I can tell you that your birth mother must have been very afraid of something to abandon her child. She left a note saying that she was not giving you up because she didn't want you but because she was afraid that you would be either taken from her or killed because of what you were although she didn't say what exactly that was."

I sat down hard on the nearest chair. I could not believe what I was hearing. I felt as though I could not breathe.

My father sighed. "Well, it didn't take your mother and I long to sort out that you were a bit different than most children, quite a bit different actually. You knew things before they happened, you could sense people's thoughts and you were always more sensitive to what was going on around you especially when people lied to you, just to mention a few of your remarkable talents. Before you really got control over your 'gift' you could even move things about just by thinking about them."

I laughed. "Papa, I still can do that, I just don't let anyone see me is all." It was a real pain to have to get up and fetch a tool I needed so often I just used to imagine it being in my hand and, suddenly there it was. I never really thought about it before, I always had this ability to move stuff around, as well as the ability to sense what was coming next, figure people out, know something about an object when I picked it up.

He shook his head. "Well you should keep that gift of yours a secret. What you can do has a name, it's called the Force and it will get you killed if the Imperials find out about it."

"The force is a myth, papa, fairy stories."

"That is what the Empire would have you believe. Around the time of your birth the whole galaxy was in turmoil. There was a great war going on and those who supported the Old Republic and the way of the Jedi Knights were quickly eliminated. The Jedi were classed enemies of the state so they were hunted down and wiped out."

I was puzzled by this. I had heard of the Jedi, who had not, but what was true? I had thought that the stories about them being witches or something, betrayers of the Empire were just lots of rumours and none of the tales made much

sense. I usually ignored them when people started up talk about the good old times, before the Empire was formed, before the Emperor took over. By the time news gets out to this part of the galaxy it is often more rumour and myth than truth and who cared anyway? To me the Empire was just a word and the Emperor was some faceless figure I knew nothing about. Paying attention in school had never been my strong point.

My father grimaced and continued. "I once saw a Jedi Knight use this strange power and it was the most amazing thing I ever saw. I often watched you and wondered what would happen if we could have found someone to train you properly. That was and is forbidden, of course. Although, now that I look back, it seems that there was always someone about who would take you under their wing, especially Jyrki, who had a great fondness for you." he paused. "We had thought that it was best you knew nothing about this, that your talents would go away if not fostered and encouraged, allowing you to lead a normal life. I guess that was never meant to be." He said with a heavy sigh. "It is not your destiny."

He dug further around in the back of the deep drawer in the desk and found the hidden compartment he was looking for. It opened with a loud 'snick'.

"This is what came with you." he said handing me an incredibly ornate wooden box, intricately carved with tiny symbols that I had never seen before.

When I took it from him, I gasped as a jolt of recognition shot through me. I could feel power from it and knew instinctively that the box and its contents were special. It felt warm and at home in my hands, almost as if the box was humming.

"What's in it?" I asked.

My father shook his head. "I don't know, it will not open for me. We think that the lock is attuned to your bio signature." he said.

As I brushed my fingertips across the lid of the box and it opened smoothly, silently. Inside the box lay a small book. I put down the box and lifted the book out gingerly, it made my fingers tingle. I opened it and read the first few lines written there out loud.

"It's a journal." I said softly, showing my father the open pages.

"How can you read that?" my father asked.

I looked at my father then looked again at the hand written script and shrugged. "I don't recognize the language but I understand it anyway." It was as if a voice in my head made the translation for me. I read the symbols and understood the text but I doubted I could speak it on my own. It was an eerie sensation and it sent shivers up my spine.

"You don't recognize it because as far as I know, it's a dead language, child." He said thoughtfully. "And you are reading it as if it were common tongue. Keep that book close to you. I think that you will need it." He said.

"Will it be that bad working for the Empire?"

"No worse than working for Jabba the Hutt."

"I nodded." My father had hated that I had gone to work for Jabba.

"I have heard tales about the Imperial Palace and those that work there. Be very careful, Merly." My father said as he locked the desk up and gathered some things he wanted to take back to Mos Eisley with him. I shook my head.

"I don't know what to think. Why didn't you tell me I was adopted?" I wanted to be angry but somehow I just felt relieved as if deep in the back of my mind I had always known something wasn't quite right about me but could not put my finger on exactly what it was. Now that I knew this great secret suddenly many little mysteries all made sense in a strange kind of way.

He stared at me for a long quiet moment. I must have looked every bit as lost and as worried as I felt and he was not making me feel any better. "We thought it best under the circumstances. You were a force sensitive child in a time when the Empire was systematically wiping those with force abilities out. We all thought it best that you know nothing about your past and believe that you were born here. I am sorry, I don't know what else we could have done. You were a gift to us, we were not going to lose you."

With a sigh I put the little journal back in its box. "Do you think my birth parents were Jedi?"

"I don't know who or what they were but I do know that your birth mother was scared enough to give you up so that you would be safe." He said and then added, "You were never what you appeared to be, never just a little girl. You were and are extraordinary and I just know I will worry about you."

I took one last look around the room. I looked at the box I held in my hands. "Well, I don't seem to have much choice about the matter but I will do the best I can. Who knows, Papa, perhaps this could be a good thing?"

"That's what I love most about you, always optimistic." he gave me a hug. "But try to keep your talents a secret, Merlyn."

"I will." I promised quietly but in my heart I wasn't so certain it would be that easy. These gifts of mine had a way of making themselves known whether or not I wanted them to. My father nodded. We left the house as we had arrived, quietly and thoughtful.

Saying goodbye was never something I had been good at. Tears were shed and promises of letters that would never be written or sent were made and that was that. I had never lived away from my home world before and it had actually never occurred to me to do so. My father had held onto me tightly for longer than I had expected and I sensed in him a great wave of love and worry all mixed up together. He had hoped to keep me safe, hidden away from the galaxy at large because he feared that if someone were to discover that I was not your average girl it would

mean my death but fate, it seemed, had other plans. When he finally let me go and I turned to go up the ramp of the Imperial shuttle that awaited me I grinned, just a little because as nervous and as scared as I was, I was also excited. There was a definite up side to this Imperial job thing and that was that I was getting to fly in a Lambda Class shuttle.

I loved these ships but had never actually seen one so close before, let alone go inside. I had only ever seen one once before from a distance, but it had been love at first sight. They were, in one word, gorgeous. I had never seen a ship so elegantly designed before and had been thrilled to be able to finally go inside one. Perhaps even one day I would be able to sit in the cockpit and see what it was like to fly.

The take off was smooth and I waved from the small viewport to my family as we lifted up from the docking bay, dust and sand obscuring my view, and watched, with a lump in my throat, as the only home I had ever known swiftly receded into ball of orange dancing around twin suns. Once we were out of the planet's gravity well we slipped into hyperspace and everything after that was uneventful.

The trip to Coruscant, the planet at the centre of everything, was dull and uneventful. The shuttle was only half full. Most of the folk on it looked either scared to death or bored to death, either way, no one spoke to me, which was fine. I had too many things on my mind to engage in mindless, time passing chatter with complete strangers. Too much had happened in too short of a time and I was still trying to come to terms with the fact that the parents I had known my whole life were not my birth parents. I was an unknown, a foundling child without a real past. What had scared my birth mother so badly that she had felt the need to hide me away on an Outer Rim transport ship? Now there were so many questions to which I had no answers and I was leaving the one place where I might actually find them.

I knew very little of the galactic history, the subject had not been my strong point in the little amount of official schooling I had had as a child. While, I loved to learn and had an insatiable thirst for knowledge I was choosy about what I wanted to know and stubborn about not learning the things I considered dull and insignificant. I was regretting this now, perhaps I should have paid more attention in class when the history of the rise of the Empire was being taught. Perhaps I should have actually gone to school more often instead of skipping classes to hang out with the mechanics in the pit. It was too late to do much about these things now and I half expected that if I really wanted to learn more about this part of history there would be plenty of books on the subject where I was going.

Coruscant, I had never been there before, although I had heard many tales

about its magnificence and beauty. Words had not done this planet justice at all and I was certainly not prepared for what I saw as we flew into land.

The entire planet was covered by buildings, there was not a single wide open space of nothing anywhere to be seen. It was just down right weird to actually see it with my own eyes, especially coming from a world where there are hardly any buildings much less tall shiny sky scrapers that rose like mountains above the clouds. I had heard so much about this planet from the off world traders, the spacers and other pilots but never thought I would see it with my own eyes. I had never been this far into the core worlds before, there had never been any real need to.

We had arrived early in the morning so I got to see a pretty spectacular sunrise, a single sun sunrise, and it was as strange to me as the nip of cold in the air. I had gasped as I had stepped off the ramp onto the landing pad and could see my breath mist the air, ever so slightly.

There was a representative waiting to meet me at the Palace shuttle pad, Erysie Candala a tall, terribly thin and very efficient looking woman. The data pad in her hand said everything. She introduced her self while ushering me along the walk ways and gave me a brief run down on the job. I got the feeling that something about working for the Empire scared the sandjiggers out of her. She kept muttering something about 'his last assistant' in past tense. It made me a little afraid to ask what happened to that last assistant, and more to the point *whose* last assistant? She was not very specific about who it was I would be working for and every time I tried to interrupt to ask this question she neatly sidestepped answering by bringing up some other important point about the job I had been especially chosen to do.

The Imperial Palace was a huge complex built on top of the older building. It was in a strange, alien way beautiful and although it was extraordinary in its architecture, I found it overwhelming. It bothered me to be so high up off the ground and not be in a space ship of some sort. I was well aware that thousands of metres below me was more city. It never seemed to end.

Ms. Candala showed me to my quarters, they were bigger than the apartment I shared with Rhystall back home. I wondered how one person could use so much space? I asked her about the heat and she showed me where the control was giving me a puzzled look as she did so. I didn't bother to explain that Tatooine was not sun deficient and that where I had come from was whole lot warmer than here. I was freezing cold and decided that the first order of business would be to find warmer clothes.

She handed me a data pad with the full job description she had just spent

the last thirty minutes telling me about and the card key for the assistant's office. She informed me that the apartment came with the job but many of the Imperial employees eventually found off palace places to live. She did not specify why that was and I did not ask. While she never lied to me out right, I knew she was not telling me the whole story. I wondered what it was she was hiding from me and more to the point, why.

I thought I would get a chance to shower and change but no, apparently I was too meet my new employer straight away. He didn't make me nervous but the manner in which Ms. Candala acted when she said his name did.

I asked her just how high ranking was this particular government official. She gave me one of those looks that said 'poor you' and then replied, "You could say that, he is the Emperor's Right Hand man."

"So," I asked her hoping for a good answer. "If he is so powerful, what does he need me for?"

Ms. Candala smiled sadly. "All our top Imperial Officials have Personal Assistants." She shrugged. "The Empire generates a great deal of work, much of which can be handled by office assistants. Unfortunately his Lordship has yet to find an assistant that suits his needs. He is quite demanding. No one we have hired for him has lasted long at the job."

"Why is that?" I asked thinking that perhaps I might yet be able to get home quickly.

"Because they keep dying." She said curtly.

"Dying?" I asked in alarm, "What kills them?"

Ms. Candala stopped walking and looked at me squarely. "He does."

I must have looked like a dying wamp-rat, opening my mouth and then shutting it again.

She just nodded and continued walking. "We hope that you'll be able to travel with him, of course." She continued. "He is often away from the Palace on Imperial business, although," she paused, "it is unusual for his assistants to accompany him. You will be fully briefed when the time is appropriate."

I had no idea what she was speaking about but instead of asking I simply nodded in agreement. I did wonder why she wasn't giving me any names though.

I was very quiet and it made her uncomfortable, she was one of those people who needed to fill the silence and so she babbled. "You are very fortunate. To work with his Lordship is a great honour. We had a great deal of trouble choosing the best candidate for the job, but you fit our needs perfectly. It was your skills with languages that clinched it and of course your skills as a communicator. You are very accomplished for one so young. You graduated in the top five of your year; you excelled in your business externships. Where promoted swiftly within Hutt Imports and Exports Inc., as well as being an accomplished dancer, mechanic, pilot and translator. You are quite remarkable. It's amazing really; you

were just what we were looking for. It was lucky for us, your application arrived out of the blue, so to speak."

"Yes, that is certainly amazing," I said. I didn't think it would be prudent to tell her it was all complete bantha poodoo. I had taken some night classes in business management, but nothing spectacular and I had certainly never graduated top of anything before in my life. I almost giggled out loud at the accomplished translator line, although in a sense it wasn't that far off the mark, I was fluent in several languages but how many would be used on the core world? While Huttese, Rodian, Sy-Bisti as well as various versions of thieves cant and trade languages were among what I could speak fluently I doubted there would be much use for them in this cultured place. I would have loved to get my hands on this resume and had a good look at it. I had a sneaking suspicion who had fabricated it and sent it in. I made a mental note to myself, that the next time I saw Bib Fortuna I would feed his Lekku to the Almighty Sarlacc.

Ms. Candala bustled me about, showing me where I would be working. The office was just as large as the main floor on a small tatooine house and I wondered what the hell I would need so much room for, it seemed like an incredible waste. It dawn on me slowly that luxury was on a planet such as Coruscant had nothing to do with things like water but with space. I had taken a cursory glance around my new work area and frowned. It was a little on the messy side, as though the last occupant had left in a hurry.

Once she had pointed out all the essentials of my work area we went to the main office to meet my new employer. I hoped he would not be as big of a bastard as Jabba the Hutt was, but I wasn't holding my breath. I was beginning to have a really bad feeling about it and I could have sworn that the air around us was swirling with tension and fear.

I remembered what my father and my friend Jyrki had always said about fear and took a few deep steadying breaths to calm myself then walked in behind Ms. Candala to meet my new boss. Nothing in my life had prepared me for what happened next.

Ms. Candala walked with me to the main reception area, she did not speak much at all. She was very frightened and doing her absolute best to hide it. "This is the lesser audience chamber." Ms. Candala explained in a whisper.

"His Lordship is in his, uhm, office, through those doors, knock and go in at his signal. He is expecting you." she said and was about to make a quick exit when I grabbed her arm.

"What is his name?" I hissed at her. "Who am I working for?" I was not going to meet my new employer without even knowing what to call him.

She paled visible and trembled, stuttering badly "L...Lord... I mean... Darth Va... Vader, the Dark lord of th... the Sith."

"Thanks" I patted the arm I was holding with my free hand and let her go.

That I did not seem the slightest bit worried about this job upon hearing the name of my employer seemed to really throw her, she looked at me as if I had suddenly sprouted a tail and then left as swiftly and as silently as she could without appearing rude. She was scared to death. The bad feeling I had felt earlier was now twice as bad, but I had been in scary situations before. I wondered how bad could this Darth Vader actually be?

The main office area was a little over whelming, it was more like a large ball room than a waiting room, with serious high class decorations, ornately painted panels on the walls and very beautiful, ultra modern style furniture. You could have waited comfortably in this waiting area for ever, maybe some people did. On the opposite wall right across from the entrance were a set of large double, incredibly ornate doors that lead to the main office.

I knocked. The doors opened automatically and I looked into a huge, high ceiling room with quietly elegant furniture and a fantastic view. I had never seen such elegance and opulence in my entire life. The wealth in this one room was enough to buy all of Tatooine and maybe more. It was unnerving.

"Come forward!" said a voice which was deep, dark and disturbing. Even more unnerving was the breathing sound that completely caught me off guard, mechanical, metallic, and strange. That Candala woman had not told me about his appearance, that it would be so foreboding. I had seen some odd creatures in my life but I had never encountered anything, anyone such as this. Was he truly a man or was he a machine? I suspected a little of both but I was not about to ask.

He was tall, very tall, broad shouldered and dressed completely from head to toe in black. His face and head were completely covered by an elaborate, even elegant black mask and helmet. He stood facing away from me, hands clasped behind his back, watching the city. His dark silhouette was a sharp contrast against the hazy blue of the day sky. I could actually see the Force move about him, writhing like sand snakes. Suddenly I was terrified.

I entered the room with shaky knees and stood what I hoped would be a safe distance away from him. The door closed behind me as silently as it had opened and that scared me even more. I must have used every ounce of my strength and courage to stay put and not run. The idea of turning around and getting as far away as possible was very strong, but I was not a coward. I found that place within myself where I could sometimes be still and managed to get my fear under control. Just breathe, I thought to myself, just breathe.

"I do not require a personal assistant." Lord Vader continued, not moving. "However, the Imperial Human Resources Department, in its infinite wisdom, sees fit to provide me with one never the less." he spoke slowly and grimly. He seemed to draw a deep, thoughtful breath even though his actual breathing did not alter.

He turned around to look at me and instead of looking away deferentially,

I actually raised my chin a notch as he did so. It was as if not only was I not going to show my fear, but, what the heck I would challenge him to call me on it as well. I could have sworn the air about us seemed to ripple ever so slightly but the sensation vanished as swiftly as it had appeared.

"You do not look like much," he said. "You are a mere child." he paused and walked around to where I stood then walked around me as though I were some prized bantha to be sold at an auction. "Yet," he said with a slight pause, "I sense something about you."

I had to fight the nervous giggle that threatened to bubble over, because I was really scared and all I could think of was that he had just uttered the worst come one line I had ever heard. I was terrified of this man, but I was also fascinated as well, he was the only person I had ever met who had a weirding force ripple that I could actually sense and see. I held my breath and stood very still, as though the very act of motionlessness would make me vanish from the Dark Lord's sight.

I was not a tall woman, I felt fairly diminutive next to most humans but I felt even more like a small child next to Darth Vader, the top of my head barely reaching to his shoulders.

"I hope that you are better than the last one they sent to me." He said and he walked back to the window. "He did not last... long." The threat hung in the air.

I had no idea how I was supposed to reply to that comment so I said nothing.

"Have you no tongue, child?"

"I do, my Lord." I actually managed to speak.

"Then, tell me your name?"

"Merlyn Ty'Erijann Gabriel." I said.

"You are from Tatooine, most interesting." He stated. It was not a question. I wondered how he knew this, then realised that he probably had been given a file all about me and while the question had been rhetorical, I sensed he waited for an answer.

"Yes." And it was true, I was from there but I wasn't sure where I had been born. I wondered why that should be interesting, Tatooine was not exactly the hub of civilization.

The Dark Lord merely nodded slowly. "You interest me." he said and in a movement so swift and agile I never saw it coming, he had turned to face me and cupped my chin in his fingertips, the way the slave traders will do when checking out the new slaves. He seemed to be looking at me as though he could see into my very soul. His touch sent a nasty, ice-cold shock straight through me. I felt as though I would either vomit or pass out but since doing either would have been really bad things to do my first day on the job, I fought the sensations and struggled to remain calm.

I could feel something else at work in the room, another presence and quite suddenly it brushed against my own, the way fingers idly graze the fur of a sleeping jax. I don't know what happened but it was as if, quite suddenly all my earlier frustration and anger suddenly flowed freely. As though somehow I had found an inner strength in my fear and it blossomed into strength. I grasped onto this small sensation of strength and allowed it to calm me down. I could tell it was not me alone doing this and I wanted to break the contact but dared not move. I desperately wanted to get as far away from this man as possible. I had never known such a sensation before.

Lord Vader nodded and released me. "You may well be of some assistance to me after all." he said looking into my eyes. I stared back up at him but saw only my own reflection in the black mirrors of the face-mask. "That the Candala woman will show you about and no doubt inform you about the paperwork involved with this job."

I nodded.

"You may leave. I will call for you should I wish for anything that requires your assistance." he dismissed me with a wave of his hand and I had to fight the urge to run through the door that opened for me as fast as I could and never, ever look back. But, I was a nosey creature of habit, instead of running I walked and I did look back. I could not help myself.

Lord Vader had turned around so that he could watch me leave. The mask hid every expression his natural face might make but something about his stance told me that his curiosity had been aroused. I stopped and stared back at him and, for what seemed hours and was in reality a split second, something passed between us. I don't know what it was but it was there, present, strong and icy cold.

I broke eye contact with that terrible mask and left as quickly as I could and still maintain my dignity. On the other side of the lesser chamber waited Ms. Candala. She seemed surprised, no, absolutely shocked to see me at all. I wondered then, just how many of these personal assistants ever actually even made it out of that office alive. I knew she was dying to ask me how the interview went, or more to the point why I was still alive but I didn't feel much like talking. I could still feel the power of the Force that rippled about Lord Vader and I still felt the cold of his touch. It had stirred deep things hidden within my soul and I didn't know what to make of it.

In difference to all the dire warnings from my father, it had not disturbed Lord Vader that I had this weirding gift, in fact I had gotten the distinct impression my gift had somehow saved my life. I was not going to share any of this with Ms. Candala. Let her wonder at what had happened. Mystery is good for the soul, or so the sand people said.

She showed me back to my new flat and left me alone. Magically, my pitiful amount of luggage had been delivered. I turned the heat up, found an extra robe

and dug out the box my father had given me. I touched the wood and found comfort in its solidity. Not for the first time did I wonder about the strange new world I had found myself in.

It had been a few days since my arrival at the palace and as I began to learn the ins and outs of my new job, no easy task, I had learned a few things.

1: No one wants to talk to you when you are assigned to Lord Vader.

It was like working for him was a disease and the death and destruction he dealt in was catching. People avoided me mostly and give me these weird sideways pitying glances. No one would tell me how many P.A.s there had been before I had been given this job. It was really annoying.

2: If you are going to be living and working here you have to dress the part.

I was decidedly unfashionable it seemed. I would eventually need to go shopping, but since I was not even sure if or how I was getting paid going shopping was on hold. I figured that payment for this job was a must and I was betting there might even be danger pay, and if I was getting paid where the heck was my account. I had not been able to track down any of the HR people to ask these questions. It seemed they made themselves really scarce when Lord Vader was around. This week he was here due to some big thing with the Emperor.

I ran around in my Tatooine finest and I still looked like a refugee from the trash compactor. The current trend for office girl fashion was short tight skirts, some sort of dark shiny leg coverings with spiked heel shoes and a little military style shirt to match, various colours of course. Completely impractical and some people should just NOT wear short skirts. However, as no one was speaking to me, giving me advice or nudging me in any direction I continued to wear my Tatooine wardrobe. Comfy, practical and I didn't look like a clone of all the rest of the nerfs here. Of course, the rest of the nerfs here looked at me as though I were Bantha poodoo. Oh well....it was not like my new boss was setting any fashion trends, at least none that I knew of.

3: Never, ever mention the Dark Lord's name loudly.

Everyone whispered his name. They whisper when they talk of the Emperor as well. It was downright annoying and very silly. How could they all be so scared to death of Lord Vader and the Emperor? I had asked this and all I got were those pitying looks that said 'Don't ask, don't tell, poor you, you will find out soon enough.' It was beginning to get really aggravating. I was sort of at break point, to be honest, and swore that the next person who did that don't ask don't tell look thing was going to get a smack. How the heck was I supposed to learn how to

fit in here and do my job if no one was saying anything about anything, which usually meant something, was going on.

4: Even the Empire gets bogged down in paperwork.

The day after I had arrived, I went straight to work in my office. Typically, I had some trouble with the card key but the really annoying protocol droid that had been assigned to me, helped figure it out. When I opened the door, it was not okay. What a mess. It looked like a sandstorm had been through the place a few times and then come back again because it didn't do the job properly the first time. There were data pads and memos everywhere, lots and lots of memos, lots and lots of invitations, lots and lots of really stupid rules and regulations updates and addendums. Ship schedules, meeting schedules, official function schedules It was insane. My first real job was to actually find my desk. My second job was to sort out everything lying all over the place and file it so I could find it. It took me a day to accomplish half of it.

5: Protocol droids are not always particularly helpful.

It was not helpful, after having observed me for an entire day struggle with the clean up to then utter the phrase *'I have been assigned to help you, I could have sorted all of these files out, had you but asked me to.'* Needless to say I no longer wanted any protocol droids near my office but that was mostly wishful thinking, this protocol droid was as shunned as I was so I relented on the banishment thing and told him he could stick around as long as he didn't offer any more helpful hints after the fact. Protocol droids, I soon learned, are also not all that good at paying attention to what you tell them to do if it doesn't suit their purpose.

I had not seen Lord Vader since our first meeting, thankfully, and since no one was talking to me, or casually dropping by my office to say hi, welcome to the fold or poor you, I managed to get a lot of work done in a short amount of time.

My office was right next to Lord Vader's well, next to the waiting area actually, far enough away that no one could really see me if they were not actually looking for me but where I was close enough that should he need me I could be there quickly. .

Ha also had a secretary of sorts , another protocol droid who was mainly there to set up visiting appointments. I found out later that Lord Vader had a fondness for protocol droids although no one could or would explain why. This was a very, very, very bored droid. No one, and I do mean no one, wanted to see Lord Vader if they could possibly help it. I was grateful this was not part of my job description but, I was, it seemed, responsible for everything else. Keeping the memos sorted, keeping his appearances at the official functions such as big promotions, Admiral to Grand Admiral, that sort of thing straight...this involved

mostly saying 'I am sorry Lord Vader is unable to attend said function due to his busy work schedule...' silly really, answering all the really stupid letters and mail and memos he received. In turn he would provide me with lists of things he needed done. On the surface it seemed like an ordinary assistant's job but I had the feeling there was a lot more going on than met the eye, I was still too new to see or understand it all.

My office was not only overly spacious but it also had a decent view of the city from the west side. The traffic here was astounding, just a steady stream of flying things going, albeit orderly, in every direction. I had a nice desk with lots of space despite all the crap that had been piled up on it by the previous assistant. There was a data terminal which I had yet to figure out how to access, a holonet terminal and a comlink. There was a lot of storage space for the excess data chips, pads etc. In one corner was a small lounge area and there was even a small, personal refresher attached which the housebot cleaned dutifully every day. It had been instructed to leave the office part of the office alone until I could find the floor again. I still had still not found the stim'caf machine though. I kept forgetting to bug that silly Protocol droid whose name I could never remember, about it.

A week after I had begun working , someone must have mentioned to the HR department that I was still alive and still here because some skinny little, scared looking, short skirt wearing HR girlie dropped by my office and handed me a data pad full of useful things I need to know, another data pad with the employment contract, another data pad with the Imperial Employment Rules and Regulations, guidelines and other useful information, a data pad with my health and work benefits, there was a separate one for the forms I need to fill out and sign, and a data pad of my banking information and payment schedule. She asked if I would sign the contract then and there and I told her no, I would read it first thank-you, that much I learned from working at Jabba's. Always, always read the fine print. She got quite put out and started to seriously argue with me about it until I said "Perhaps you'd like to take this up with Lord Vader."

She turned very pale then and had shut up right away, mumbled something about welcome to the fold and scurried out of my office as fast as she could. I was beginning to see some serious advantages already to working for this man. I wondered if I should start wearing black.

I was mostly left alone and I often worked late. This part of the palace complex was really quiet after normal working hours as everyone had either gone home or they are out partying somewhere. There was always a 'function' going on somewhere and people here loved to schmooze. I guess it made them feel important and being next to other even more important people helped. I didn't particularly care about that sort of thing, I had never really felt the need to be

important although, I had seen a lot of that go on at Jabba's. It had not interested me then, either.

Maybe that was why people could never really figure me out, I didn't want fame and fortune, I didn't know what I wanted but I did know the whole be famous or important thing was not it. I had danced because I had loved to move and in dancing found a sense of peace. The only place you could find decent teachers were the ones who worked for Jabba the Hutt. It was not as if Tatooine had a grand ballet school or anything even close to it.

My dance teacher had discovered I was good enough to make serious money and she had gotten me a job, my first job outside of working at my father's docking bay. She had taken a cut of my pay and my tips until I felt I had paid her back for the time spent teaching. This was not a good moment for either of us and I didn't much like to talk about it but sometimes you have to stand your ground. After that day she avoided me like crazy and it was about this time that the rumours about me being a witch started up. In the end, I don't think that anyone really believed the stories much, but still it was enough to give me an advantage, although my time working at Jabba's Palace had been relatively speaking short, for a number of reasons.

I had learned the fine art of basic ship mechanics at a really young age. My father owned his own space port by the time I was old enough to run around and be a pest so I got to play there. The people who had worked there thought it was great fun to teach the Boss's kid about how ship's worked and I was more than happy to be the centre of attention. The ironic thing about this was that I ended up loving it enough to eventually take it seriously and get certified so that I could work there part time while I was still in school.

Dancing for Jabba at his palace had not really been on my list of things I wanted to do in my life but certain circumstances led up to it happening anyway. During that time my father and I were at odds with each other, in fact I was at odds with most of the galaxy it seemed. It was a difficult period in my life and I suppose, looking back it was a good thing it didn't last that long.

When I left the palace for an 'office' job at Hutt Imports and Exports I was able to combine the mechanic work I had learned with everything else and I suppose, in essence, I became a sort of Jawa-of-all-trades. I had taken some of night courses on business management and had generally tried to make myself useful while staying under the radar. Of course if someone was jealous of you, you never stayed under their radar and if they were mean enough, conniving enough, they would find a way to get back at you. I had learnt this first hand, which was how I ended up working for the Empire.

I had managed, with the help of the protocol droid, to sort out everything

in the office. My predecessor had left a big mess, I suspected he hadn't actually done much in the way of work, but rather he seemed to spend a lot of time on the data console browsing the singles dating archives and some rather dubious escort sites which used a lot of words like pleasure, erotic and more bang for your credits. Some of the images had shocked the hell out of me and I was grateful that the protocol droid knew how to erase these links from the computer's memory.

I was still not all that clear on what happened to the previous assistant and the protocol droid would not discuss it, kept going on about how it was all 'most traumatic...' and then would leave the room in a huff. Eventually I stopped asking. That was the big thing around here, 'don't ask, don't tell' but since keeping secrets was a way of life for me, it wasn't really a big deal. I doubted though, that what had happened the previous evening would stay a secret for long and I suspected that I was in big bantha poo-doo.

I had a temper. It didn't come out all that often because I had it under control most of the time. You had to really work to get me angry. Unfortunately some of the twits around here just didn't know when to stop.

I had decided to go to the little café that was not too far away from the office. It was usually a quiet little place with only a few people there at that time of night but this particular evening was the exception, this time there happened to be a group from the HR office there. They met there, apparently, once a month but I had not known that, not a surprise. I did not ask sit with them nor was I invited to sit with them. I wasn't wearing the right clothes. So I sat at one of the small tables by the window and tried to enjoy my snack and drink in peace.

You know that when you walk in a room and everyone suddenly stops talking and avoids looking at you that they have been talking about you. That's what happened this time too. I tried to ignore that sort of thing, it happened everywhere, office politics and always someone was on the wrong end of the gossip, but they didn't stop at shutting up. One of the girls started to talk about 'my smell' loudly enough that I could hear it. So juvenile, I had showered so I knew I didn't smell. But it was one of those things people liked to say to get someone going, another started up on how shabby my clothes looked, and a third began on my unfashionable hair. Okay enough was enough and I had gotten up and walked over to their table and asked them point blank what their problem was. Perhaps they could recommend a decent soap, a good clothes shop and a hairdresser for me?

The little one who had been in my office the other day smirked, brave, now she was with a group that would back her up. Animals in a pack were almost always braver than when they were solo, and she had said something to the effect that Outer Rim trash should just stay home then they had all giggled. I could handle that too, Tatooine was not the centre of the galaxy, but I just could not handle it well when someone insulted my family, which had been their next step. I must have had that look on my face, you know the one that said 'okay you crossed

the line, you hit the right button and now I am mad'. They smelled blood and they went for the throat, stupid, stupid, stupid.

See, that was always the problem with city dwellers, they had no idea what a backed into the corner, angry animal will do, they didn't know the warning signs and they ignored the danger. So more insults were fired out at me and something snapped. It had been an incredibly stressful time for me, a new job, a relocation to a planet I hated, a deeply disturbing new boss and I didn't know about the rest of the galaxy but there was only so much one person could take. I had reached my limit. I took a really deep breath and let the anger I had been feeling become a visceral thing, its tendrils wound their way through my entire being and with a little flick of my hand I made each and every one of their drinks and their plates full of food, flip up and splat on their faces and laps.

There was a stunned silence before what had just happened sunk in and then the oldest, meanest one, with the spitey face, looked up at me and said. "You are so going to regret that."

I looked at her and gave her my best 'I hate you face' and said "Why, you going to get me fired?"

But instead of coming back with some smart retort she just smiled nastily and said. "Fired, No. killed, yes."

"Oh, you and whose army?"

"Oh I don't need an army, I just send a report to the Emperor's office and let them know we have a force sensitive working for us. He likes force sensitive girls, he makes concubines out of them. They don't last long."

This was supposed to scare me but it didn't. I had not ever seen, or met or even come close to the Emperor so I figured what I didn't know didn't worry me too much. I had just shrugged. "What ever." I said, and I walked away and didn't look back.

However, I worried about this action afterwards. I imagined that pissing Lord Vader off was not a good thing to do. Me throwing a hissy fit because I could not take a little teasing might just tick him off, or at the very least it made his office staff look bad and I supposed that reflected upon him. I guessed that I would find out soon enough. He had left in the morning for some important mission, but was supposed to return in a day or so.

I loathed that stupid HR bunch and I felt this the way other people feel a punch in the gut it as though it were sand-fire alcohol, the really strong kind that the Sand People brew up, running through my blood. Hot, heady and vicious. When I had gone home to the quiet of my flat, I had read some of the journal my father had given me, to see if there were any insights and I saw that I was not the only one who had ever felt this way and that this was not a good thing.

-The ways of the force are many and varied, but the true paths

to understanding those paths are either light or dark. The path dictated by the light side is long and difficult. It takes years of patience and dedication to learn the ways of this mysterious power. The path dictated by the Dark side is easier and seductive, destroying the lightness of the soul. - I am learning the ways of the force, it is hard and although my Mistress teaches me patience and inner peace, it is easier for me to use my anger and frustration. I can hurt my enemies more easily when I focus using my anger. Anger is a tool. I have learned this but Yhan'nimae does not know yet. I am afraid that when she finds out I have been practising using the forbidden ways she will no longer wish to teach me and there is no one else.-

I sat in my bedroom, unable to sleep because I had a very bad feeling about what I had done and the possible fall out from it. I had avoided being one of Jabba's 'girls' at all costs and I sure as heck didn't want to end up one of the Emperor's. Why oh why could I not I keep my temper in check?

At three am the morning someone had banged so loud on my door that I thought the world was ending. I stumbled out of bed, still half asleep, and opened the door to find an Imperial Messenger standing there looking both bored and annoyed all at the same time. I was starting to hate these guys. Stiffly, he informed me in that usual brusque Imperial manner I was starting to associate with anyone wearing a uniform, that I was to pack what I would need, alert my 'staff, and get read to depart at once to accompany Lord Vader.

I just stared at the young man in dozy confusion. 'What staff?' I thought with annoyance. I had a cranky complaining protocol droid called P2B4 and that was it.

He did not say where I was accompanying Lord Vader to, just gave me a landing pad number, E12-B and time, 06:00 am, CST. I guessed I was not being handed to the Emperor just yet, it looked as though I was being sent to hell in a space ship in stead.

It took me about ten minutes to pack everything I owned and sent word to the protocol droid who did the rest of the work packing everything I would need for the office work. After this was finished, I sat on my bed for about ten minutes before I decided to get out and get some air. I would not call it fresh, because it wasn't, nothing on Coruscant was fresh, everything was recycled but I tried not to think about that too much.

I had dressed in my usual Tatooine fashion, a long travelling skirt and simple short sleeved top with my favourite robe thrown over to keep me warm. My hair had been hastily tied up with a set of well used zenji sticks but I had missed a few strands and they straggled in lazy curls around my face. I did not own any fine Coruscant travelling clothes and it never occurred to me to buy any until this

moment but now it was too late. I glanced at my reflection in the mirror and shrugged then left to find some peace and quiet.

The palace at night in this quarter was usually quiet. Unlike myself, not many of those who worked here also lived here, but then I had not been here long enough to want to leave. I walked along the quiet halls relying on my weirding way to help me navigate. I had always called it my weirding gift, the name a translation from Huttese meaning anything unusual or not normal, this thing my father had called the Force, and it has always served me well when it came to finding things, finding places, my sense of direction. Now, it helped me find my way to what had become my favourite place to sit and think.

The palace was vast and extraordinary with lots of secrets and deserted spaces. There were whispers that not even the Emperor knew them all. No-one did. There was a place on the other side of the secondary library, down the hall and through the door at the very end into the old corridor. This was a much older part of the Palace and it led to old rooms long left unused. Unfashionable, people said. If you were to go down this short little hallway through the really beautifully carved doors at the end you would end up in this stunning but long deserted room. I did not know what it had been used for, but it had a gorgeous bow shaped balcony that you could go out on to view the city. That view alone was worth the risk of being a place that I had considered might just be off limits to someone like me.

This was where I went when I wanted complete peace. I had brought a bottle of my father's moonglow and tucked it away in one of the disused cupboards along with a glass so that then when I came here to sit, I could also have a drink. Just as I had on Tatooine, from the edge of the Bluff in Mos Eisley, I would watch the city below me dance.

I was sitting on the wide stone wall that stopped one from falling into oblivion below, with my feet dangling over the edge, a crystal glass in one hand thinking about what was coming next when I sensed him come. I felt him hesitate when he saw me but it was a fleeting thing. His sense of place was stronger than my intrusion in it and I was invading his space but he was gracious about it. Before I even looked up to see who it was I offered to share my drink he had murmured his thanks. The hand that took the glass from mine was pale blue.

"I am not accustomed to other people in this place." He said taking a sip of the moonglow. I thought he handled the liquor's kick very gracefully.

"Neither am I." I told him. "But I am willing to share it if you are." And then I looked up into his face to see who it was I was talking to. He was tall, very regal, stern and somewhat serious looking, I suppose even handsome after a fashion. He had hair blacker than night tinged with that

midnight blue and pale blue skin that was a shade I had never seen before but it was his eyes that drew me in and shut me out all at the same time, red, just red and they seemed to glow with their own eerie light. I felt mesmerised by them.

He had an aura of power and self assurance that wrapped itself around him in the same manner that the Force wrapped itself about Lord Vader. When he smiled, I felt a ghost walk over my grave and glanced away shyly.

"What is this we are drinking?" He asked casually as he studied the liquid in the glass with care.

I laughed, "I'd have thought you be more interested in who you were drinking with."

He looked at me that one a kind stare Imperial men seem to have perfected. "Miss Gabriel, I am well aware of who it is I am drinking with." His deep, cultured voice was almost like a purr.

Something in his tone made my heart skip a beat. He was cool and reserved but his voice had a touch of honey in it. It made me shiver slightly.

"Well, you seem to have me at a disadvantage, sir." I said.

He smiled, executed a perfect military style bow and said. "Captain Thrawn, at your service."

"So, how is it that you know my name and most of the people who work on the same floor as me don't even know I exist?" I asked.

"I make it my business to know, Miss Gabriel. When the Dark Lord actually chooses to keep the new office girl around, rumours abound."

I was suddenly speechless, rumours? About me? That could not be a good thing. I didn't say anything to his statement because I just could not think of anything to say. I went back to staring at the city and sipping my drink. He took the glass when I offered it again.

"So," he said after a short silence which I was pleased to see he didn't mind too much, "What *are* we drinking?" His curiosity getting the better of him.

My laughter was genuine. "My father's self made moonglow. I have been frequently told it is good for the soul."

"I thought this was illegal here."

I shrugged, "Maybe on Coruscant, but this stuff comes from Tatooine, not many rules about what you can brew in your home there. Fine thirty year old Corellian brandy is hard to come by, you know."

He regarded me with a curious look. "You are from Tatooine? That is most interesting."

"Oh, something about me you did not know?" I said sarcastically. "And why should that be of interest?"

"I never said I knew everything about you, Miss Gabriel, just that I know who you are." He gave me a thoughtful look. "I find it an interesting coincidence that you should be from the home planet of the man you now work for." There was

an edge to his voice.

I nodded. "Oh, I hadn't known Lord Vader was from Tatooine as well." I said. Then I asked with a slight frown, "Why is it an interesting coincidence? Many people are from Tatooine."

"Yes, but not many work for the Empire and of those that do, there are only two I know who are force sensitive." he said carefully.

"Mmmm, pure coincidence." I said wondering just how he knew that about me and then remembered that what had happened at the café had probably made the rumour mill many times over. My little talents were not something I wanted to discuss with this stranger so I changed the topic. "What about you? Where are you from?" I asked.

"A planet called Csilla." He said in a tone of voice that told me he did not like to be asked anything personal and that this was all he would say on the matter, so I asked him something else that was personal. I liked to live dangerously.

"Do you miss it?"

He regarded me for a moment and I didn't think he would answer but he did. "No." he said. "Do you miss Tatooine?"

"Yes." I nodded. "Yes I do. I hate it here."

That surprised him. "Why?"

It never ceased to astound me that everyone automatically assumed that I would love being here. Why did everyone think you should absolutely adore the centre of the galaxy? "Because it is too loud, too full of people who are too full of themselves. There is no room to breathe and when you do breathe it all smells used. The air here is bad." I said, taking a deep breath to stop the on coming verbal storm that threatened to break free from my mouth. Left to my own devices I could have talked about how much I disliked Coruscant and why for hours, but I got the feeling this would bore him. I know it bored me. I took a good sip of my drink to shut up.

"Yes," He nodded as if he understood. "You are refreshingly honest, Miss Gabriel." He said.

"I have discovered in life that lying about things doesn't always get you very far." I told him.

"Really? Most people, I fear, would argue that point." He said. "Deception is the rule rather than the exception in this place."

"Well, I am not 'most people'." I said.

"Perhaps that is what is keeping you alive." he suggested with a slightly annoying know it all look.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I shot back.

He smiled coolly. "Most people have a tendency to displease Lord Vader and in doing so they seem to have a rather short life span."

I got the distinct impression that he didn't actually like Lord Vader all that

much and that made me a little defensive. "Well, I guess we shall see then, I am to accompany him on his next trip."

"Really?" Thrawn said, genuinely surprised, and then added. "Well, that is a small, how would you put it, miracle. You really are a creature of surprise."

Sarcasm, I hated it from other people as much as I used it myself. I swung around and jumped off the balcony ledge, the fabric of my skirts swirling about me like dust as I did so. "I have to go." I said tersely. I was annoyed but I didn't know why. This man made me uneasy and I could not put my finger on the reason. He was dangerous to me in some way but not in any manner I understood.

To my surprise, he grasped my arm as I was about to go and pulled me close to his body, whispering in my ear "Stay alive, Miss Gabriel. I should think the next time we meet you will have interesting tales to tell." The warmth of his breath upon my skin was electrifying, his smile even more unnerving.

I shook my arm free and looked him in the eyes. "If you touch me again, I shall kill you." I said as coldly as I could. I was shaking but not because he had scared me but rather, because he had stirred up feelings I had hoped were long lost and that was even more unsettling than working for Lord Vader.

He just smiled at me in a manner I took to be patronising. "You are either incredibly bold or just very stupid." He said.

That made me really angry and anger I could deal with. I shook my head and moved away from him. "I am neither," I said, "what I am is tired and I am fed up of being bullied here. Every time I turn around someone is telling me how I will probably die some horrible death at the hands of my new employer, or making snide remarks about my clothing or home." I took a deep breath and went on "Men, like you, and believe me I know your kind, you think you can grab a girl and she's yours. You think we are all slaves to your will because you own a blaster or fly a ship. That we will swoon at your feet because you wear a uniform or command a few thugs!" I poked him in the chest with my finger, suddenly really annoyed. "So, why don't you just go back to where ever it was you came from and I shall return to my nice, life-threatening job and we can call it even?"

He captured my hand to prevent a third poke at his chest and kissed the back of it. I snatched my hand away from his as though he had burned me and he smiled a decidedly feral smile.

"My apologies, Miss Gabriel, you are correct and I should not have touched you without permission. Blame it on this strange brew of your father's and leave it at that. It was not my intention to offend. This has been a very pleasant surprise meeting you. I should hate to taint it."

It was my turn to back down. I stepped a few paces away from him and nodded, not because I agreed with his last statement but because he had had the good grace to apologize, something I had not expected him to do. I took a deep breath, looked him in the eyes and said. "Okay. If I survive and live a little longer,

and we chance to meet again then I shall tell you a story.”

“I shall look forward to it,” he said and then added with an almost sly smile, “although next time, Miss Gabriel, I believe I shall bring the refreshments.”

I nodded and left. I felt his eyes follow me all the way into the shadows. I was not at all certain what was more worrying, the travelling with Lord Vader or another meeting with this extraordinary man. Neither put me at ease.

There is an old saying amongst the pilots, “*Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it.*”

I arrived at the landing bay in time to meet Lord Vader and his usual stormtroopers. All I had was a small pack and my protocol droid and that was it. We boarded the shuttle and the troops, along with my droid went into the passenger troop area, I, grasped by the arm, was dragged into the cockpit and told to sit in the co-pilot’s chair. The door that separated the cockpit closed and for the first time ever in my life I experienced claustrophobia.

Lord Vader, physically, is a very large man but his presence is even larger. He fills every space he enters and when the space is as small as the cockpit of a shuttle there is little room for anything else. The sound of his breathing filled the air, you could have danced a waltz to it, it is so perfectly timed.

He said nothing as he prepared us for take off. The Coruscant Air traffic control gave him clearance and just like that we were rotating in the air, the shuttle’s wings began their fold up procedure and before I knew it we were beginning our ascent.

I don’t mind silence, but sitting beside Lord Vader made me nervous and when I get nervous I sometimes chatter. “I always wanted to be in one of these.” I said. “I always wanted to learn how to pilot one.”

Lord Vader looked at me for a second and then after making a few deft motions at the control panel he said. “Very well, Miss Gabriel, the shuttle is yours.”

I stared at him for a second in shock, we were in the middle of ascent in Coruscant airspace and it was busy.

The shuttle rocked because it was not on auto pilot. Lord Vader, I later learned, NEVER uses autopilot. The moment of shock passed and acting out of sheer instinct, I grabbed the controls and tried to stabilize her while rapidly taking in the control panel to see if I could actually recognize anything all the while the Coruscant air traffic control official was screaming at us because our flight plan was ‘off’. No Kidding!

I know how to pilot. I learned to fly when I was very young. When your father owns a space port and used to be a major shuttle pilot and you are his only child, you get to learn these things. I am not the greatest pilot in the world, if you

want to see the greatest pilots in the galaxy then hang out in Mos Eisley. I would never be one of the greats but I knew how to fly and one cockpit is, more or less, the same as the next. It is placement of things that changes. So, for a few, very frantic seconds I learned where everything was. I was betting the Imperial troopers sitting in the back were having a few moments of panic, though.

Once, I got the placement of where the ship’s systems were sorted out I got the ship back under control. I completely over shot everything because she was touchy, not like the sluggish freighter my father owned or the small shuttle craft back home, both of which were slow to respond and needed a good swift kick up the boosters before they’d even think about turning. Unlike the ships I was used to this shuttle was a spoiled little princess and she like the gentle touch.

So we gave a few oncoming vehicles a scare and had a near miss or three but in the space of about three minutes I had learned how to pilot a lambda class shuttle, at least the basics. Of course I had drawn heavily on my weirding ways to help out, sometimes it is like a voice whispering in one’s ear and sometimes it is like light dancing, either way it helped me do what I had to do. The most unsettling thing about the whole three minutes was the laughter I heard coming from my boss. A slow, low chuckling that was as nerve jarring as the ascent we just made.

“You find it funny that I almost smashed the shuttle?” I asked as I set our course into the nav computer so it could do the hyperspace jump calculations.

“You wished to learn how to fly this shuttle, now you know how to fly this shuttle. Had I thought you unable to do so I would not have given you the controls. You learn faster than I expected, the Force serves you well.” He said.

“Anything else I should know about this ship then?” I asked.

“The landing bay entrance is lower than it looks, when you bring her in to land, remember the clearance on the dorsal stabilizer.”

“I will remember that.” I said and we made the jump into hyperspace.

On the trip I asked a lot of questions about the shuttle and Lord Vader answered them all. I got the impression he enjoyed flying and maybe even enjoyed sharing a little of his knowledge about it but what I really wanted to know, I didn’t dare ask, he sensed this but gave me no opening.

I wanted to ask about The Force, about why me? I wanted to know why everyone was so terrified of him and I wasn’t, scared yes, in awe of, completely, but terrified...not yet at any rate. I stuck to asking technical questions about flying in general, the shuttle and the Imperial Class Star Destroyer we were heading for. It seemed the safest thing to do and for reasons I couldn’t fathom I enjoyed the fact that he answered me openly and honestly about all of these things, as though he had found a co conspirator in all matters of ships and piloting. Even more confusing to me was the fact that I liked this feeling of being special despite the fact that sense a whole lot more going on under the surface. I guessed that when he was ready, he would let me know what it was I needed to know.

We arrived at the Imperial Star Destroyer *Devastator* on time and I was stunned by the sheer size of it. It was bigger than anything I had ever seen. Flight command came over the comlink and requested clearance code. Lord Vader gave it and there was a moment's hesitation on the side of the Flight Command and then came a very nervous "Permission to land granted."

"Take her in, Miss Gabriel." Lord Vader said.

So I did, nice and easy and the little princess landed perfectly. I even remembered to watch the dorsal clearance. While he said nothing about the landing I sensed a certain amount of pleasure from Lord Vader and I breathed a sigh of relief.

We disembarked and Lord Vader was formally welcomed aboard. He vanished off to the bridge flanked by nervous Imperials and stormtroopers and I was left with my fussy protocol droid and a rather confused looking Lieutenant.

"Welcome on board the ISD *Devastator*, Miss Gabriel. I am to show you to your quarters." he said.

"Great, who are you?" I asked. I was getting a bit tired that everyone seemed to know my name and never bothered to tell me theirs.

"Oh, sorry ma'am, I am Lieutenant Jorae Tobias. I have been assigned to assist you."

I laughed. "An assistant for the assistant." That was just funny. I walked with him as he strode through the ship to my designated area. He explained a little about my clearance level, giving me the impression it was not all that high, the areas of the ship that were off limits to the civilians, which included me, and that Lord Vader had requested I be given quarters near his, something I gathered from the tone of the Lieutenant's voice was very unusual. I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that but wasn't going to argue, there is a lot to be said for being alive and I wanted to stay that way.

It took a while to get around the *Devastator* and along the way I learned where the main mess hall was, where the recreational areas were, and the medical centre among other places. It was a huge ship and it was a labyrinth. I was thankful I had a good sense of direction. We arrived at my quarters and I was surprised. They were larger than I had imagined and I even had a view port. Seeing the stars was a comfort I had somehow not expected.

There was a sleeping room separate from the main suite area, a small refresher and a small sitting area. It wasn't as luxurious as the palace but it wasn't sparse and forbidding either. It could have done with a different colours scheme though. My protocol droid was not impressed though and fussed about. I ignored him and asked about food. I was starving. The shock method of learning to fly a new ship had made me hungry.

I had not been on board for more than twenty four hours but already I had discovered that life on an ISD is damned dull, and if you were not part of the pack you are on your own. If you are on your own, you were kept in the dark. When kept in the dark one tended to go looking to shed some light. I had decided to ignore the rules and go exploring, since everyone was ignoring me, it seemed the right thing to do.

However, this was the wrong thing to do when one wanders into the detention block by mistake. Only I could do this, it could only happen to me. And, to make matters worse it could only happen to me during a particularly loud interrogation between a Rodian spy and Lord Vader, who didn't sound at all happy. Torture, questions, wrong answers, more torture. No one seemed to really take any notice of me. I had no answers for this, because in theory I should have been marched right out of the area before anyone could have said Bantha poodoo. Maybe I was just lucky and no-one really had looked directly at me when I had snuck in. I had always been able to sneak about fairly easily. If I had not wanted to be seen then most people didn't see me.

The Rodian was screaming in Huttese and Lord Vader was yelling back at him in the same language. I was a little surprised and thought that it was a good thing to know; he could speak Huttese. More screams and more wrong answers. I was not looking, I swear, I was hiding, sort of, but that didn't mean I was deaf.

There was protocol droid in there with him, presumably for translations but it wasn't saying much until the Rodian switched to screaming in Rodian, then the protocol droid translated. This went on for another few minutes until the Rodian switched to another language that sounded remarkably similar to Rodian but wasn't quite right. The protocol droid struggled and after the third try apologies profusely because he could not translate what was being said. Lord Vader was furious and screamed to the droid to fetch him someone who could translate. Without even considering the consequences, I, got up and entered the room and said the words that would alter my life forever.

"I can translate it. He told you to go jump in the Almighty Pit of Carkoon."

The world stopped. The only sound was the mechanical breathing of Lord Vader and the low steady thrum of the ISD's engines. The two stormtroopers, their faces hidden by closed helmets, stood statue still, the Rodian glared at me and the Imperial guard whom I had not seen had turned a pale white and swallowed audibly. I stood in the doorway and realized that perhaps this had not been such a good move after all, but done was done and I could translate the Rodian's thief cant.

Lord Vader stepped forward and grabbed me by the arm dragging me into the room. "Explain yourself!" he snarled.

"I was bored." I told him. "I got lost and ended up here. I overheard the screams and was curious." Lord Vader's already painful grip on my arm increased.

“He’s speaking a very old thief’s cant. It isn’t surprising the translator droid doesn’t know it, the language is only a spoken one, nothing written and not many speak it any more. I learnt it at Jabba’s palace. I’d tell you how but that’s a long story, you’re hurting me!”

He let my arm go and increased the pain on the torture device he was operating and asked his question again in Huttese. The Rodian screamed, I suddenly felt very sick, the room was too small, too hot and I didn’t want to be here. The Rodian answered the question in cant and I translated.

It wasn’t what the Dark Lord wanted to hear so we did it all over again and again and again. I cannot begin to describe how awfully disturbing this was. I had seen some twisted things in my life, live on Tatooine, work for Jabba hang out at a docking port and you see stuff that isn’t always nice, but this ...this was nasty. It made me angry, or better to say it was mostly the stupidity of the Rodian that made me really cross.

He actually knew what Lord Vader wanted, I could sense that much and I knew if I could somehow bend his mind just a bit I could finish this but I didn’t know how to get there. More questions, more stupid answers and my temper was beginning to stir. The wretched thing about my temper was that when I finally give into it, it was like a wicked sand storm. Once unleashed there was no stopping it. It felt like lightening in my skin, like roaring winds in my head and I just gave into it.

Usually, I never remembered what happened while I was in this state, but I have often been told it’s not good. Well, the Rodian set me off and I lost control. I pushed him with my mind. I don’t know how I did it either, I just saw white, closed my eyes and pushed. The Rodian stumbled over his words, speaking Huttese. I pushed again and he screamed. I could feel the pain and fear but it was as if I were on the outside of the room looking it, somewhere else. There was a roaring sound in my ears and each time I pushed it got louder and louder until I thought it was going to consume me, and then it was my turn to scream. I had no memory of anything that happened after that because I blacked out.

I woke up in the med-centre. The first thing I saw was Lord Vader’s face, I would have cried out in fear but his hand clamped hard across my mouth before I could do that, he only removed it when he knew I wasn’t going to scream after all.

“I see we have found one of your talents.” He said.

I tried to sit up and discovered that doing this made my head pound. “What talent? What happened? Why does my head hurt so much? Where in the name Sarlacc am I?”

“You have a gift for getting inside of someone’s head and pushing them. It is a Force talent. I knew another, a long time ago who could also push another’s thoughts. Your head hurts because you have no idea what you are doing but we will change that with training. You are in the infirmary, which is where you will stay

until you are well enough.” Lord Vader said.

“Well enough for what?”

But he did not say anything, merely nodded to the med-droid who unceremoniously stuck a needle into my arm and the world went dark again.

According to the med-droid I had been out for almost twenty-four hours. He was none too happy when I got myself out of bed and left. I wanted to be in my own room, my own bed, such as it was, not here. My legs were wobbly and it took me a few moments to get my bearings. The headache had gone but dizziness and disorientation had taken its place. I wanted the world to stop spinning. I could not really fathom what had happened much less what I had done.

The quiet of my quarters was calming. I sat and stared out of the view port. Stars by the billions lit up the blackness. I began to let my thoughts drift free and concentrated on my breathing. In and out to find the rhythm of it. I allowed myself to let go of the anger and the fear I was carrying inside of me. There was a lightness to it like a thread which entwined about everything, if I chose to I could follow it.

I allowed this ease and serenity to fill my being, such moments of peace were very rare for me and I suspected it was because I was so tired that unlike most times I did not fight against the sensation of letting go. I could see this mysterious Force, wrapped about around everything, binding it all together somehow like invisible lacing. I let my mind wander through the ship. I could see it as clearly as the stars outside the ship. I knew where I was heading and although a small part of me did not want to do this, this small fear that niggled in the back of the soul shied away but I let it go, I didn’t want to break this train of thought.

Slowly I found my way to his quarters, the great room with the hyperbaric chamber. I sought his presence, and found it inside the chamber alive without the aid of his mask in this confined space. He too, was meditating. I pushed ever so slightly closer to Him, to the thread that seemed to connect us, when I did I touched his mind with mine and felt great surprise, recognition and then anger. It was as if an iron fist had slammed down upon my head and the connection was broken. It had hurt.

I came to myself with a start, surprised because I was no longer tired or dizzy and it seemed to me as though I saw everything with new eyes. Somehow the world about me appeared brighter, more vibrant. A few moments later I was summoned to His chamber.

The room was larger than I had imagined. The chamber which was spherical shaped was in the process of opening when I was allowed to pass through the doors. I watched, there was a moment before the mask was attached where one could see Lord Vader’s head. I wanted him to turn so that instead of the back of his head I could see his eyes but knew he would not give me that. Too intimate and I had already breached his boundaries once today.

He stood up and walked out of the chamber to stare out at the stars, hands clasped behind his back, thoughtful and silent. Only the sound of the chamber closing and his mechanical breathing filled the room. I waited.

"You are full of surprises, girl." He said after what seemed forever.

"I had not meant to..." I began but the wave of his hand cut me off. I made a face and shut up.

"You are strong in the Force and your instincts lead you well enough, but you are raw and untrained and dangerous. You lack direction and you are divided, chaotic, you must choose a path." he paused. "I should have killed you the moment I sensed your abilities but I have not yet had such a student of my own. You have a choice, follow my training or die."

"That isn't much of a choice." I said crossly.

He wheeled around and stared at me, I felt the anger build up the way one feels pressure from an coming storm.

"And you already know my answer." I finished.

He nodded. "Very well. Meet me in my training area in one hour, wear something you can move in." he turned his back to me once more and I knew I had been dismissed. I left as troubled as when I had arrived and did as he bid. I had no idea what would be required of me but if learning his weirding ways kept me alive then so be it. Choose a path he had said, but it seemed to me that he was choosing my path for me and it would be a dark one.

TO: Lord Darth Vader

FROM: The Imperial Social Division

RE: The Annual Emperor's Imperial Ball

Your Lordship, as you know it is almost time for the annual Imperial Ball which, as you know, is held each year to aid in funding the costs of Palace upkeep. It would add greatly to the atmosphere if you would grace us with your presence. We would be greatly appreciative of an answer in this matter at your earliest convenience.

Yours Sincerely,
Marlann Taralae

Imperial Social Director. I tossed the data pad with this memo across the room watched as the Protocol droid retrieved it. When he had placed it, just so, upon the desk I picked it up and tossed it back across the room. The process repeated several times until the droid asked me why I was throwing the data pad away.

"Because, it is an utter waste of time even looking at these stupid memos

let alone answer them." I said crossly. "I mean don't these people know what *he* does?" I asked. The droid began to reply but I shut him up with a wave of my hand. "It was a rhetorical question P2B4." I told him. The droid fussed and placed the data pad on the desk again but this time, just out of my reach.

"I am programmed to answer these communiques, mistress." He said.

I made a face. "Fine then, answer it. Tell them that Lord Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith, has better things to do with his time than attend some stupid function where he can neither drink the too sweet champagne nor eat the soggy canapés that are dutifully served. Where he will be bored to death by the stupid, simpering chit chat of the palace courtesans. I am quite sure that he's the life of the party!" I said sarcastically.

"Oh I do not think that is an appropriate response." The droid complained.

"Fine, the answer is Lord Vader is not coming, you write it how you like it!" I said. I was cranky. I was still stiff and very sore from the incredibly difficult work out Lord Vader had put me through the day before. I was not sure what the reason for the massive physical training was but he was not in the mood for answering questions so I never did find out. I assumed that if you trained your mind you needed to train your body too. There were mental exercises as well, learning to control the Force without it biting me back. I had a lot to practice and he expected me to practice every day.

I had gone through the training regime alone in the morning, it was not the same being on my own. With no one to push, goad and be sarcastic, the drive I had felt yesterday which had come through the anger had not been there today. I didn't really know how he did it, how he maintained all of that anger on a daily basis, he must have really had a serious hate on for the universe.

Without the anger the exercises were not any easier but they flowed better. I had learnt similar moves when I was younger but these were somehow harder. I went through the set twice before I switched to a dance work out that was more familiar, one I had learned at Jabba's palace. I always found peace through dance. By the time I had exhausted myself, almost three hours had passed. I had not even noticed and had yet to practice the mental exercises.

These were much harder to do and I got frustrated easily with them which of course made me angry and that led to a complete loss of concentration and it all sort of went down hill from there. I gave up after the third try, convinced this was not going to work. He would just have to kill me because I wasn't spending all day trying to get it right.

I went back to my quarters and after a shower settled in to catch up on the paperwork which only served to annoy me further. I sent the droid away to find me tea and sat down to read some of the old journal.

-USING THE FORCE IS NOT SOMETHING THAT COMES NATURALLY.

ALTHOUGH THE FORCE SURROUNDS US AND IS ALL AROUND US IT IS NOT SUCH A SIMPLE THING TO USE. ONE MUST BE PATIENT AND CALM. TO FIND THE STRENGTH FROM WITH IN ONE MUST FIND THE STRENGTH FROM WITHOUT.-

It was not helping, the journal said one thing and Lord Vader said another. Was there no middle ground? I was saved from my thoughts and frustrations when Jorae, the young Lt, assigned to help me, knocked at my door and asked if I wanted to go to the mess hall for supper with him. Food was the least complicated thing in my life right now and it was always a good thing to eat so I accepted his invitation. At least this way, if Lord Vader decided to kill me it would be on a full stomach.