

Daughter of the Empire

Book 1

Written by F. Messer 2005-2006

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Chapter 11

Buried Deep, Scattered Wide

Time passed, days became weeks and weeks become months. I buried myself in my work and my training. It kept me from thinking too much. Master Kjestyll had returned and resumed his teaching with me. He had known what had happened and over time he drew the whole story out of me, piece by painful piece. Although the process of healing had begun with Thrawn and Navaari on Hjal, it was my Master's quiet attention and gentle words that helped me to face my own fears and slowly find myself again. I looked forward to my lessons with this gracious, subtle man. These times were among the few when I knew a sort of peace and calm that in my day to day life had become elusive.

It felt as though my life had been put on hold, as though I were waiting for something big to happen, almost as if I were on the cusp of some great indefinable turning point or adventure. The sensation nagged at me but like a flicker of motion one sees from the corner of one's eye, it was always out of reach. Even my dreams remained cryptic and fragmented. While the dreadful nightmares slowly subsided and left me some measure of peace my normal dreams were addled, devoid of sense filled with images and voices just beyond my reach to see or hear properly. These were restless times and I felt them keenly. So to keep myself busy, I did my work, attended the official functions I was required to attend and tried to stay out of trouble. I avoided thinking about Jyrki or my time on Hjal too much, both these things made me sad but for very different reasons.

The anniversary of the destruction of Alderaan was marked by a large and ornate memorial and an official day of mourning. The destruction of the Imperial Battle Station, which had also seen the deaths of thousands, was never mentioned. The Emperor was rarely seen during these times and there were many rumours that he was not well.

At first I had paid these whispers of ill health no mind, the palace was rife with such gossip but it seemed to me strange that he appeared to address the crowd for the Alderaan memorial only via holo projector and his speech had been very short and abrupt. It had also surprised me a little that he had not wished to speak with me after I have returned to the palace. For weeks I sat almost on pins and needles half expecting to be called to his chambers but the summons never came. I began to wonder if there was not some truth to the whispers.

My social life was busy. Shiv and his friends, who had somehow become my friends as well, saw to it that I was not often left alone. I was never quite sure if this was because he was afraid that if he didn't have me in his sight I might be suddenly snatched away again or if he just felt a bit guilty over what had happened,

even though there was nothing he could have done. He, too, had wanted to know, to understand what I had gone through and while I told him the gist of events I left many details out. He accepted this although I know it hurt him a little. It wasn't even a question of trust. I just didn't want to talk about it any more.

Thrawn, true to his word wrote to me regularly. I treasured his lovely, long letters describing everything from the most mundane aspects of life in deep space to in-depth discussions on art and literature. I was constantly amazed at how articulate he was and how interesting he could make even the most ordinary things sound.

He had not come to see me before he had departed to begin his service on board the *Grey Wolf* and I was glad of this. I hated goodbyes. What could one say in the few remaining minutes that tick by that have not already said a thousand times before? Farewells always struck me as stilted and uncomfortable affairs filled with half murmured promises that would never be kept. I suspected he understood this only too well and was even grateful that I made no such demands of him. Two days after his deployment a sealed box had been delivered to me containing not only a beautiful letter but data pads full of information on the Chiss language and a couple of other linguistic surprises.

...I raided my own personal data base and downloaded everything I could think of to help you with your studies of Cheunh. I feel that with your astounding abilities to learn this difficult language, you should be encouraged. I have also added two of the more prominent trade languages from that area of space. I have no doubt these will be easy for you to pick up and I recommend you do so. One never knows when something will be of use or when a translator will be required. There are very few outsiders to our world who speak Cheunh fluently, to do so would give you a great advantage. I shall enjoy testing your knowledge when I return and see how well you have mastered these challenges. Stay alive and well, my dear, so that we may continue our delightful, ongoing conversation when we next meet...

The language data bases that he had sent were incredibly detailed and extensive. It made me wonder if he had not tried to teach his mother tongue to a non Chiss before. I knew that he had set the bar quite high for me. I also understood that he knew he was pushing buttons and I would respond accordingly. I had never backed down from a challenge and I wasn't about to start now, especially with one that was actually fun.

Lord Vader, on the other hand, stayed distant. I had heard through the rumour mill that he was training several force sensitive people he had discovered. Strangely enough this didn't really bother me. I was not jealous by nature and as I slowly began to understand my own abilities and talents, I knew that I would never be what he had wanted. I was good at my job and someone he trusted in so far as he trusted anyone which for me, at this point in my life, that was enough, I did not

need to become one of his apprentices or worse.

Our moments of contact were brief and business like. He was busy and as long as I did what I was supposed to there was no reason for him to expand our contact or virtual meetings into anything more. I got the sense he was troubled by something he could not or would not discuss. He was moody and foul tempered most of the time and something weighed heavily on his mind. I put most of that down to the issues he had with the local seats of government and the constant power struggles that never seemed to end within the Imperial Court. He was busy with his command and his own affairs, busy with the ongoing search for the elusive rebels and I was an afterthought so I was surprised when I received a summons from him to rendezvous with the *Executor*.

I had taken to packing pretty much everything I valued, which was not much, on my ship. Although I had an apartment in the Palace, it never felt like home the way the *Ahnkeli' Su'udelma* did and I knew that while no one other than myself or Thrawn could get into my ship, my apartment was a different story.

I was happy to be in space and flying. The repair crew Thrawn had organized had done an excellent job and had even replaced the foot braces in the engine room. I had made sure to stock up on spare parts and anything else I could think of that I might need. The good thing about being in the employ of the Empire was that requisitioning things for ships was not an issue. It was late afternoon standard time when I landed onboard the *Executor*. There was no waiting. I was ushered directly to Lord Vader's private chamber by two nervous young stormtroopers who left a tad faster than decorum allowed.

There were no pleasantries and no questions about my health. He launched into the heart of the matter in his usual abrupt way. "You know that I have been searching for the individual responsible for the destruction of the Imperial Battle station." He said.

I nodded.

"You are also aware that I believe he was from the same planet as you."

"Yes, my lord."

"Then you will go to Tatooine and investigate his past."

"My lord, would not an Intel investigator be better suited for this?" I asked a bit surprised by this request.

He regarded me for a long, deadly moment then said. "I wish this kept off the official records. You are from Tatooine. You know its customs, ways and languages far better than any Intel spy could hope to. You have all manner of connections and you are unafraid to use them. You have my leave to use all and any means at your disposal to get this information. You will be given an office to work from at the outpost in Bestine, access to finances and a means to contact me on secure channels. You can attend to your regular duties as you see fit, I am certain that droid of yours will help out. But make no mistake this task I set for you

has priority. I want to know everything about this boy's life." He said and handed me a data pad with all the information I would need and dismissed me. Just like that, instead of heading off to Naboo with the rest of the Imperial Court, I was going home.

Tatooine never changed. I touched down late afternoon at my father's docking bay and was assaulted by the heat when I stepped from my ship. I didn't have time to think before I was tackled by Belkin in as huge a hug as the small Rodian could manage. She filled me in on all the gossip and by the time my father returned from errands I was more or less up to date with everything that had been going on pretty much planet wide. Supper that evening was a loud, joyous affair. It felt good to be back home.

Much later in the evening I crept away, up to the flat part of the rooftop. I sat staring up at the sky, wondering where Thrawn was now. I missed him and that both surprised and annoyed me. His lack of presence was an ache I didn't want or need. *This is what it means to be bound...* Navaari had said and he hadn't been joking. I was grateful when my father joined me, a bottle of moonglow and two shot glasses in hand. He and everyone else had carefully avoided all mention of Jyrki and what he had done to me at dinner. I knew that he needed answers and this was a good, quiet place to talk.

I sipped the gut rot slowly and before my father felt obligated to open up the conversation I told him what had happened. I left some things out and did not tell him about my trip to Hjal or my strange connection with the Dantassi. I wasn't sure he would understand that. I wasn't sure I understood it either. He stayed very quiet until I was finished my story and only after a few moments of silence did he pull me to him and hold me tightly.

"Why?" was all he could ask. I knew he was fighting back emotions and I pretended I didn't see the tears in his eyes.

"I don't know, papa." I told him with a sigh. "I really, really do not know. He would say one thing but mean another. His pretense was he wanted Imperial codes but it wasn't really the truth. He didn't know why either."

"I hope that he never shows up here, pet." He replied. "Because if he does, I will kill him."

"Well...you'll need to stand in line." I said with a small sad shrug.

He refilled my glass and we sat in silence for a while and I realized that it was, for the first time in forever, a comfortable silence.

"So, why exactly are you here? You were very vague at dinner." He asked.

I weighed telling him the absolute truth and finding some sort of white lie and in the end decided on the truth.

“Lord Vader has asked me to find out about someone named Skywalker.” I said. “The information I have says he was from Tatooine so here I am.”

“I know that name.” My father said rubbing his stubbled chin. “I’ll have to look some things up but I am sure I know that name.” he sipped his drink. “How long are you here for?”

“I don’t know, weeks, months, as long as it takes. Lord Vader wasn’t specific about the amount of time I had and I got the impression he didn’t really care as long as he got the information he wanted. I will have an office out in Bestine but that’s for appearances only. I had thought about maybe opening up the house out there but I’d rather base here and be near you and everyone if that’s okay?”

He smiled. “I could not be more delighted. There’s a shuttle that goes between Bestine and here pretty regularly. I know Bel and Bedi will be happy to have another female around, most of the pit crew and pilots are male right now which is driving the two women a bit nuts. Be nice to have everyone together again for a while, we might even convince your uncle Vahl to come out for supper.” He paused the added, “And we can always use another good mechanic.”

I leaned my head on my father’s shoulder and stared up at the sky. He wrapped his arm around me and squeezed tightly. Yep, it was good to be home and far away from the reach of the Emperor and all the intrigues of the Imperial Court.

Bestine was a small city that wanted to be important and failed miserably. It had started out as a small farming community and had worked its way up to the official capitol city, mostly be default. It was the least offensive city with the least amount of crime and it was sort of located in the middle of things. After the formation of the Empire a small garrison had been stationed there and eventually grew into the local seat of Imperial power. The offices were located near the starport and the city hall.

I had my papers and orders in hand when I walked into the building. While I wasn’t expecting trouble I was also reasonably sure I was not a welcome addition to the local status quo. I talked briefly to the desk officer who quickly ushered me into the office of the person in charge.

Tour Aryon was a striking woman. She was tall, elegant with beautiful dark skin and brown eyes. She regarded me with the same contempt usually reserved for jawas. Standing off to the side of her desk was a seedy looking young man with greasy black hair.

“Miss Gabriel, I trust your journey to Tatooine was pleasant?” she said not getting up to greet me and not shaking my hand. I ignored her rudeness. I had it on good authority that she and Lord Vader did not see eye to eye. I had not

expected a warm welcome.

“Yes, thank you Governor Aryon.” I handed her the data pad with the official requests and orders from Lord Vader. She took it gingerly as though touching it would give her a disease. I stood quietly, hands clasped behind my back waiting for her to read the instructions. I did not mind waiting, it allowed me time to let my force talents drift and get a sense of the undercurrents.

“Well, this all seems straight forward enough. You will be given office space and the required links. If you require further assistance you will find Mr. Taine most helpful. She indicated to the man at her side. I have assigned him to you as an aide. No doubt you will discover we do things a little differently out here on the Rim as opposed to the Imperial Palace.”

“Thank you.” I said politely.

“Are you at all familiar with Tatooine?” she asked. “You might want to acclimatise to the heat before you get to work.”

I smiled. Either she was testing me or she had no idea who I was at all and had not read my personal file. “I am from this planet, thank you. I am familiar with its climate. It should be in my personal file.”

She gave me a hard look. “Your file is restricted.” She told me. “I appreciate your honest answer. Your familiarity with this world saves us a lot of headaches. Many people come here only to discover it is too hot. Tatooine is not for the weak. May I inquire where you are from exactly?”

“Mos Eisley.” I said.

Her lip curled. “Ah, I see. Well, we won’t hold that against you. You have living accommodations?”

“Yes, thank you.”

There was a heartbeat’s space as she waited to hear if I would tell her exactly where I was living and when I did not volunteer any further information she gave me a fake smile and said. “Now, I am sure you are anxious to settle in your office.”

“Yes,” I nodded. “Thank you for your time.”

She waved her hand and Mr. Taine who moved and gestured for me to follow. “I trust you will find everything in order and let Lord Vader know we have done our best to accommodate you.”

I smiled. “You have been most kind, I will be sure to tell him.” I would have to watch my back with her, she was dangerous.

Mr. Taine did not speak a word and I followed him through the building to a small office on the upper floor under the roof on the south west side. This was probably the worst office in the entire building as it got the most heat and the most sunlight. The most desirable offices were always sub ground where it was cool. I knew it was perfect; people would leave me alone here when I was actually here. The window looked out over the backside of the city and in the distance I could see

the hills that sheltered Bestine from the desert. I looked about the small room. There wasn't much to speak of, a desk a chair, a holonet terminal, an older computer system and a bookshelf that was mostly empty.

"I apologise that this is all we could provide you with on such short notice, Miss Gabriel." Mr. Taine said in a tone voice that said he was anything but sorry.

"Not at all, I shall be quite happy here. I assume the holo link is secure and private?" I said.

He nodded. "As per Lord Vader's request." He was lying. I smiled.

"Then I believe I have everything I need." I said. I would not be using this office for anything important. Lord Vader had provided me with a small portable, secure holo transmitter and that was on board my ship. I had decided that my droid could work out of the office on Coruscant and we would keep in touch as necessary. Having office space in Bestine was strictly for appearances only. I was a civilian with no rank and in a position no one really knew quite how to deal with. I was a bit of an anomaly and I rather liked it that way.

"Well, then I shall let you get settled. Do enjoy your stay." Mr. Taine said as he handed me the key card to the office. I gave him my best smile and waited until he was gone. I gave it a few minutes before activating the holo transmitter and contacted Lord Vader. I knew this call would be monitored

"You have arrived, I see." He said testily.

"Yes, my lord. The journey was uneventful."

"You have been provided with what was requested?" he asked.

I nodded. "I have, my lord and everything is exactly as expected."

"Good. You know your job, report when you have something to discuss, other wise do not waste my time." He said with his usual cheer. "Do not disappoint me, Miss Gabriel." He added and severed the connection.

I stood and stared out of the window for about half an hour and then I left, locking the door behind me. I didn't spend any time in Bestine, there wasn't much to see. The commuter shuttle back to Mos Eisley was full and busy. I was more than grateful to step out of it and get back home. Being in the office in Bestine had made me feel dirty. I had not sensed that many lies and that much deception since the last palace party.

My father was in the kitchen having lunch when I got home. I joined him and told him about my morning. He had only laughed.

"That place has gone to hell in a sandcrawler." He said. I helped myself to more salad and sat at the table with him. "I have some information for you about that name you were looking for. Seems there was an Anakin Skywalker from Mos Espa, a slave. He won the Boonta Eve Classic, oh about thirty three or so years ago. It was a big upset apparently, and he was the first and only human to win it."

"It's a place to start, thanks papa." My heart skipped a beat at that name.

My father waved his hand, "Not done yet, Nate, who used to work at

Tosche's, told me that there was also a kid by that name used to hang out there. He told me that his name was Luke Skywalker, used to hang out with Biggs Darklighter's."

"Huff Darklighter's boy?" I asked. I remembered hearing that the son of the wealthy agricultural magnate had been killed but the reasons for his death were shrouded in mystery.

My father nodded. "Yeah, the two boys were friends apparently. Nate was telling me if you want to know more probably Laze Loneozner, better known as Fixer, or Tosche might be able to help you out a bit."

"Did he say where this Luke was from??" I asked.

"A moisture farm some place out on the edge of the Jundland wastes. Between Anchorhead and Wayfar." He said. "I did some digging though and that was the same farm which the Imperials did a raid on. Remember I told you about it, happened shortly after you started working for the Empire." He paused. "Is this boy in trouble, Merly? Why are you looking for him?"

"I don't know, papa. It's possible he's partly responsible for the death of thousands of innocent workers one of the Imperial space stations. He might also know something about the whole Alderaan incident as well. I just know I was asked to find out all about him. I don't know much more than that."

My father nodded. "That thing with Alderaan was bad business." He said quietly.

I nodded.

"I can take you out to Tosche's in two days if you want? I have to pick up some parts from him. You know how hard it is to actually find him, never at the station, never reachable. I set up a meeting a few weeks ago, so why don't you come with me?"

"Sounds perfect." I said.

"So, are you busy now?" my father asked, clearing the table.

I shook my head. "Not really, for a change."

"Good, I have an engine with your name on it. Nate Delann, the guy from Tosche's was supposed to take care of it but he got called away on an emergency. So damned hard to find a decent mechanic nowadays that I have to share mine with the other docking bays. If you wanted to make decent money you could stay here and fix ships."

I laughed. "What is it?"

"A YT nineteen-thirty." He grinned.

"Oh, I haven't seen one of those yet!"

"I thought you might like that." He said and we walked over to the dock repair bay. I sighed happily when I saw the ship. The YT 1930 was a really new light freighter from the Corellian Engineering Corp. Unlike the older YT models this ship had a center lined cockpit and was way more streamlined. She was pretty

looking. I grinned this would be fun.

"I'll just get my kit and get right to it. Is everything still in the same place?" I asked.

My father nodded. "Jyrki's system was so good no one's ever bothered to change it."

"Good." I said and I opened up the *Ahnkeli* 'Su'udelma to get my coveralls and tool kit.

As I found myself in the new freighter's engine room I could not help but smile. I had come full circle and it felt very strange to be back. Tomorrow I would start my search for the two Skywalkers, more convinced than ever before that they were linked. Everything kept coming back to this planet.

We drove to Tosche Station very early in the morning while the air was still relatively cool. The station which was also, among other things, a junk yard was located just outside of Anchorhead. Merl Tosche, who had founded the power and distribution station, was almost never there. He sold all sorts of mechanical bits and pieces including power converters and spare parts for moisture evaporators. I could remember infrequent visits to the station as a child, and spending several hours rummaging around the junk yard looking for interesting things. Surprisingly enough, Tosche was there by the time we arrived.

He and my father got along well. They had known each other for as long as I could remember and Tosche was one of those grown ups that had become a part of my extended family. I was, I think, a source of amusement for him and whenever I had accompanied my father out to the station Tosche had always allowed me to dig out small treasures from the junk pile and keep them.

"Good, you got here early. I don't want to hang around, too much to do." Tosche said as he greeted us. "And look at you, little sand bug, all grown up. Have you eaten, want something to drink? I made some sludge, not the greatest spiced 'caf in the galaxy but it is drinkable." He clapped my father on the back and chucked me under the chin as though I were still six and not well past my teens.

I loved the station because it was the homeiest wreck of a place I had ever seen. Disorganized chaos, Tosche called it. He poured three mugs of his sludge, his strange version of spiced stim'caf and we sat down to drink.

The business was discussed and the prices agreed upon fairly fast. My father didn't dicker around with Tosche for a few reasons, one was that no one else sold at such decent prices and the second was that it didn't really pay to get on Tosche's bad side. Once that was all out of the way my father edged the conversation around to what would interest me.

"Quiet out here these days I hear?" he said. "Where are all the kids who

used to loiter about the place?"

Tosche laughed. "I never minded them, gave them something to do, kept them out of trouble. Not many left now, though." He said. "Take it you heard about the Darklighter boy?"

My father nodded. "No details, though."

Tosche made a noise. "Word I got was he died fighting for them rebels. You know his old man was never happy that Biggs joined the academy. Was talking to Huff not too long ago and he hinted in that direction. Said the boy had chosen the right path, sacrificed himself for the greater good. Sounded like a bunch of bunk to me but you know how it goes. Huff was never one to hold back on what he thought and he made his feelings about the Empire well known. Sad though, Biggs was a good kid, he and his little pal Luke,...what was his nick name now?" he sighed as he thought about it for a minute, "Wormie they called him."

"Wormie?" I asked. "That's not very nice."

Tosche nodded. "Weren't much to look at that kid, skinny, kinda short always the brunt of the jokes. I always liked the Skywalker kid, though. He was a gentle kind of boy, good natured, and not a bad pilot either if their stories of racing around Beggars Canyon were to be believed."

"He still around?" my father asked.

Tosche shook his head. "Nope, went off world, followed his pal Biggs according to Huff. Although Huff didn't say it in so many words just hinted that the two were together before Biggs died. My guess is it was that dreadful thing about his aunt and uncle what drove him to leave."

"What happened to his aunt and uncle?" I asked sipping my sludge gingerly.

Tosche drew a deep breath and scratched at his stubbled chin. "No one rightly knows, seems they were dealing in stolen goods, not that I believe that for a second, and the Empire came calling. From what I heard the farm was destroyed and Beru and Owen were shot and burnt to death. At first everyone thought it was Tuskens but they don't use those kind of weapons as a rule and usually don't burn down the farms either. Don't know what the world is coming to these days."

"Where is this farm?" I asked.

"Out near the edge of the Wastes and the Great Western Dune Sea. I can give you a way point in if you want to pay respects, you'd not be the first." Tosche said. "Fixer went out there and said that folks had been dropping off chulpas as tokens, laid them on a mourning marker someone had put up for the Lars family. Fixer would be able to tell you more about Luke but he won't be here till noon. I can tell him to stop by the docking bay next time he's in town though."

I nodded. "I'd like that." I said. "Must have been hard for Luke to find his family had been killed."

"Aye, most likely, although I have to tell you, there weren't much love lost

between the boy and his uncle. Owen was a hard man to like, let alone love. Too much of his life spent struggling with the land and fighting the elements. Never saw a man so hell bent on winning against the desert, so against anyone who didn't agree with his point of view and his way of doing things. It was almost as if, sometimes he was scared the world would come down on his shoulders if he eased up for just a second. It would not have surprised me to learn that Tusken attacked the farm. Owen was never one to give the Tusken much of a thought. He hated them actually. He didn't much endear himself to the locals that's for sure either, but I saw the farm and that wasn't Tusken work." He shook his head. "He and that young nephew of his locked horns many a time, Luke wanted to be a pilot and Owen wanted him to take over the farm. I remember a couple of heated debates between the two and that young boy had a rough life. He was torn between duty to those who had raised him as their own and his desire to be up in space. Never saw anyone more hung up on flying than that kid. The lust for adventure must have come from his mother and father because he sure didn't get that from his uncle's side of the family."

"What happened to his parents?" I asked as Tosche refilled our cups.

Tosche shrugged. "Who knows? The only thing Owen would ever say about the boy's father was that he was a navigator on a freighter and he never mentioned the boy's mother. I remember when Cliegg Lars, Owen's father, remarried a slave he had freed. A quiet woman name of Shmi Skywalker out of Mos Espa, I assumed she was the link to the nephew but she died a long time ago. Tusken took her. No one knows why. Cliegg had organised search parties, I remember that I went on a couple but there was not a snowball's chance in the desert of finding her. The last one they went out on, only four out of the group came back everyone else was slaughtered and Cliegg lost his leg. After that the search just ended. I guess he gave up hope that she was still alive. I had heard a rumour that someone found her, brought her body back and she's buried somewhere out at the farm, but Cliegg wouldn't speak of it. He died of a broken heart I think, and when Owen took over the farm he wiped away all memory of his step mother. He blamed her for the death of his father." He paused. "Come to think of it, she had a boy of her own. I remember her telling me about him one day when I went out there to visit. She was so proud of him because he had been freed and taken off world to become a Jedi; of course this was all before the bad times. Maybe Luke was a cousin or something, as I understood it Jedi weren't allowed to have kids and the like. Can't remember his name now, but seems like there must be a connection in there some place, Skywalker ain't that common a name."

My father shook his head. "Sad business all around that." He offered.

Tosche nodded. "Aye, well you know how it is out here. Tatooine ain't for the faint hearted." He sighed, and then he looked at me with a smile. "Guess this is you catching up on all the gossip. I hear you're working off world now?"

"Yes, office job on Coruscant, pretty dull really. I am on holiday right now." I said with a smile.

Tosche grinned. "Well, I can't say I blame you for leaving, not much on this rock for the young people. I am surprised that Fixer and his girl are still around, but they seem pretty rooted to this place. Can't complain, he's a good mechanic and I couldn't run this place without him. I'll let him know you're interested in hearing about the Lars family, he knew Luke better than I did." He said. "Damn look at the time I have to get going, got another meeting. Come on Kit, I'll get you your parts and write down the waypoint to the farm so your girl here can go visit." He looked at me. "I remember you had an interest in tradition and the like."

"Still do, I doubt that will ever change." I said with a smile as we left the station lounge for the store room.

"Well, you are one of the few I think." He said as he and my father concluded their business.

In a speeder loaded with spare parts and a box of power converters and an address of how to get to the Lars farm, we made our way home.

After I had finished helping my father unload and store the spare parts I went and sat on board my ship. I had been provided with a small but powerful portable computer and in that I began to write down all the information Tosche had given me. I finished up and went into the house for a late lunch. Waiting on the table for me was a package with the Imperial courier seal on it. I grinned as I opened it and found two letters inside. I had sent word via the courier to Thrawn that I would be staying on Tatooine for a while, that I would have an office in Bestine mostly because I wasn't certain where I would be living. It seemed that Thrawn knew me better than I knew myself and his mail had been delivered directly to my family home. I was in the middle of reading the first letter when Bel came in.

"So, how is he?" she asked.

I gave her an 'I don't know what you are talking about' look.

She grinned. "Pssh!" she hissed flapping her hand at me. "I saw how you and that Imperial Captain you dragged here looked at each other...or better to say how you didn't look at each other. I signed for that package by the way. I saw the sender name, so how is he?" she sat down at the table across from me and helped herself to some tea.

"He is well, extremely busy and somewhere off in space saving the galaxy from evil." I smiled. "I never could keep anything secret from you, could I?" I said.

"She shook her head. "Nope."

She nodded and grinned then gave me a look I rarely saw on her face, one of worry. "Missed you, you know. We were all scared to death when you vanished." She said in a more serious tone.

“I know, me too.” I told her but I didn’t want to get into any great discussions about it now. “We’ll talk about it, I promise, Bel. I just need to, I don’t know, get some distance first, you know?”

She nodded. “Well, your dad filled Bedi and me in on what happened, you knew he would right? I just want to hear you are really okay from you. I know you were really attached to Jyrki.”

“Yeah, well I was an idiot and he was, well... he was something else all together. I’m not attached to him anymore.” I shrugged biting back the surge of anger I felt. I wasn’t sure what else there was to say on this topic. Bel looked at my face for a moment and just as she always had ever since I had known her, she just got it and let the subject drop. She grinned and tugged at the envelope I held in my hand. “He makes you happy even if he is what... twice as old as you are?”

I could not help the smile on my lips. “Yes, for what it is worth he does. He’s kind to me, Bel. I don’t think he’d hurt me. Not without fair warning first, it’s not his style.” I said ignoring her dig about the age difference.

“Well, that’s all that counts. After what Jyrki did to you, I am glad to hear someone knows what you are worth. Anyone who sends you letters on real paper via high end courier service must, at least, think you are special. I’d hate to have to add an Imperial captain to the list of people I plan on killing slowly and horribly. And,” she added “I rather enjoyed the debate we had when he was here. Your mother would have really liked meeting him. He’s quite clever, you know.”

I laughed. “That’s putting mildly.” I said.

She looked at me. “Is it serious?”

I gave her a look. “What do you think, he’s a career officer in the Imperial Navy.”

She grinned. “Okay, point taken...” she patted my arm and got up to return to the office. “If he hurts you, you let me know and I’ll put him on my list!” She made a wringing motion with her hands and grinned.

“Okay. I’ll tell him to watch his back, then.” I laughed. Once I had the kitchen to myself again I went back to reading my mail. The first letter was a cheerful account of continuing life in the Unknown Regions, the day to day routines on board the *Grey Wolf* and a discussion of a book Thrawn promised he would send. The second letter was a challenge. He had written it entirely in Cheunh. I could understand some of what was in the letter but mostly I knew this would require several hours of translation and use of the incredibly extensive dictionary he had included in the language database he had given me. From the few bits I could figure out I knew this was a lot more personal than the first letter. Since I didn’t have much else to do and I wasn’t about to go running out to the Lars homestead this late in the day I decided that a quiet evening studying Cheunh would not be a waste of time.

His letter was a caress. If I had thought him eloquent in his use of basic

then that was tease in comparison to his ability to communicate in his native language. It had taken me almost half the night to translate his words. If I had thought he would take it easy on me writing in Cheunh I was sadly mistaken. He had written as though I were already fluent in his language and not just getting my feet wet. Once I was certain I had the translation just so and could read it with out pause or interruption I was in awe. I had grown up in a world of words, through books, plays and poetry, mostly thanks to my mother. I had learned to love language at a very young age but nothing had prepared me for the beauty of this letter.

He had a way of making me feel precious. I hoped that what ever it was he seemed to be building between us was more than just a spacer’s passing fancy. If I let him, if I wasn’t careful this man would break my heart irreversibly.

I was in the middle of fixing an old swoop bike when someone squatted down beside me.

“I hear you’re looking for Luke Skywalker.” The voice was rough and gravely.

I got out from under the bike and sat up, wiping the grease from my hands.

“Well more like being nosey about his life here, actually. “ I said looking up.

“Name’s Fixer, Tosche said you were asking about him, said you had a big interest in local history and the like.” He said holding out his hand. I stood up and shook it.

“Merly.” I said introducing myself. “Yeah I like history, especially about this place and its folk. Though if I were to be honest I’d call it gossip, you know. Can I get you something to drink?”

The tall, stocky man nodded. “That be nice, sure is hot.”

I laughed. “It’s always hot here.”

He ran a hand through his unkempt dark hair and grinned. We headed into the office and I poured two cups of Bel’s iced ‘caf.

“Tosche wasn’t specific about what you wanted to know, you doing a story on Skywalker or something? I mean is the information worth something?”

“Could be I guess, never thought about it actually.” I said carefully.

“I heard from Tosche that you’re a good mechanic.” He said. “But I haven’t seen you around.”

“I do okay, been off world for over a year.” I told him, “Tosche said the same about you. I didn’t know you worked out at the station, but I haven’t been out there in a long time either.”

He laughed. "Yeah, Tosche don't call me Fixer for nothing." He said. "He gave me my first break actually, and then gave me a job. He's been good to me. He even doesn't mind that I'm building a podracer on the sly." He told me proudly.

"You race?" I asked. "I thought the Empire forbid that."

He grinned. "The Empire doesn't know spit about what goes on out here, sister. You think they care about a few Rimmers breaking their necks? Besides I ain't building it to race, I want to sell the thing. I'm getting married and need the cash for the wedding."

"Oh, well congrats on the engagement then. How can I help you then?" I asked wondering what exactly it was he wanted because he wasn't actually asking for cash, yet.

"Well, I need a specific part for the racer and Tosche said your dad probably had one to spare. Said your dad keeps all sorts of old parts. Tosche didn't have what I needed and to order it will cost a fortune. I was thinking maybe we could barter, my stories for the part I need."

"Well, I'd have to know what the part is. My dad would skin my hide if I gave away something worth a small fortune." I grinned.

He told me and I laughed. "You can't find that?"

"Not for this particular engine." He said handing me the data pad with the part's image and number on it. "They haven't been made in years. No one I know around has one. So do you?"

"Let me look." I left him in the outer office with Bel while I went into the store room and searched through the spare parts.

The spare parts room was larger than average because Tosche was right, my father hoarded engine parts. I guess that's where I got it from as well. I loved this room, its smell, its atmosphere and its charm. I found what he wanted at the bottom of one of the wall to ceiling shelving units. It was a small thing but Fixer was right, they didn't make them anymore for the engine he had and without it his engine wouldn't work. My dad had three of them tucked away so I didn't think one missing would be a big deal. Brand new still in its original package I carried the little part back into the office.

"This is what you want, yeah?"

His face lit up. "I never thought I'd see one of those, still packaged." I handed it to him and grinned. Only mechanics got that crazy look in their eyes when they held a much desired engine part in their hands.

"My father is a big packrat. He keeps all kinds of crazy things. I have to fix this stupid swoop, come and talk to me about Luke while I finish up?"

"Sure thing, can I get a refill, this stuff is good.?" He asked Bel, brandishing his cup.

He sat in the dust beside me and talked while I tinkered with the old bike. He fleshed out a lot of Luke's childhood for me and the tone of his voice let me

know that while they had known each other, he had not considered Luke as a friend so much, more like an annoyance that hung around with him and the others. He was like that younger kid brother who tagged after the big kids. I felt sorry for this Luke. His life sounded pretty rough and lonely.

"It's too bad Biggs ain't around any more, he and Luke were really good friends. He could have told you more. I never had much time for Wormie, really." He said rubbing his square chin. "Anyway, I heard that after his aunt and uncle were killed he went off world. I have no idea what happened to him after that. He's not the letter writing type and we weren't that close."

He had talked for the better part of two hours and at the end of it I felt as though I almost knew Luke myself. He might not have liked the Skywalker kid all that much but Fixer was a good story teller.

"How's Nate doing?" Fixer asked after I had tested the Swoop's engines and then shut them off.

"Good, I think, I don't see him much though. He's busy so we tend to trade off shifts here. I work when he's doing shifts else where and when he's here I get time off." I said. "There is a big call for good mechs in Mos Eisley at the moment. I think he's out at Winstrom's bay this afternoon, if you want to see him."

"Naw, I gotta get back, Tosche let me have the time off to see you and run some errands but he runs a tight ship, even when he's not there. Someone's gotta fix all the busted crap the farmers bring in." he grinned.

"Thanks for coming and talking to me." I said.

"No problem, I don't get into town all that often, my girl gave me a huge shopping list so I need to get on that. You know it's funny about Luke, I mean it's not like he's anyone special or anything, just some farmer's kid who used to get on my nerves, but you are not the only one in the last year or so who's asked about him. No one even knows if he's still alive or anything. It wouldn't surprise me, actually, if he had gotten himself killed like Biggs." He said. "You've been out to the Lars' homestead yet?"

"Not yet, still trying to figure out the best way and the best time to go out."

"Some folks find the passage from Wayfar along the ridge easier than from Anchorhead. I'd recommend finding an animal mount over a speeder though."

I nodded. "Yeah, I had a speeder breakdown once out in the Sea, never again." I told him. "It's pretty desolate out that way though, he must have been pretty lonely."

He shrugged. "Yeah, not much of a life I guess, never thought about it to be honest. The farm is a wreck, you won't find much there any more. Sad really, Owen had that place doing well. Who knows maybe someone will get it up and running again." He said. "Look I gotta go, thanks for the part, you sure your old man won't mind?"

I shook my head. "I'm sure. Anyway, better it gets used than sits and

collects dust in storage. Good luck with the racer.”

“Thanks, if you’re out at Tosche’s stop by say hi. I missed you last time, was on late shift the night before.” He said shaking my hand again and leaving.

After I had cleaned up I recorded everything he had told me on a data pad. I really wondered why this kid was of so much interest to Lord Vader. The more I heard about him the more he just sounded like some ordinary farm kid and not some heroic pilot who managed to blow up the Empire’s most ambitious weapon. I sat for a while staring at the little computer screen, lost in thought before Bel yelled that if I wanted to eat I should do it now. With a sigh I went into the kitchen for a late lunch and thought about my next move.

There are three ways to traverse the desert. You can walk, not highly recommended. A human requires a lot of water, at least two litres a day, more in the heat and carrying all that weight would not be helpful if one wanted to wander around the desert for any length of time. You can travel by vehicle, hopefully a decent speeder or swoop that won’t die from the heat or the sand. Sand is very unkind to most machines and unless you can fix your own machine and carry enough spare parts, lube and other accessories around with you along with all the water you need it is not the most recommended method of desert travel. Lastly, you can travel on an animal. The four favourite animals for travelling the deserts on Tatooine are Eopies, dewbacks, Rontos and banthas.

Eopies are ornery creatures that were mainly used be farmers. They were able to carry heavy loads and go long distances. I had bad memories of being bitten by a particularly cantankerous eopie as a small child. Rontos, although a good creature for travelling, were mainly used by jawas. Rontos needed a lot of water and were easily frightened by sudden movements; they were a pain in the ass to go near any urban areas with. Dewbacks were also often used as beasts of burden, great lizard like creatures whose ability to deal with the heat was often the stuff of legends. While I liked dewbacks it was banthas that really had my heart.

I remember the first time I ever saw a bantha; I was very, very young. We still lived in the house out by Bestine and it had been late in the evening, just around sunset. A baby bantha had wandered away from its herd and found its way to our house. I remember listening to it cry and feeling its pain and fear. I had taken a bowl of water and set it near enough to see but far enough away to not be in danger. Banthas could be really fierce when they wanted to and even babies were dangerous especially to small children.

I had sat on the stairs and watched as it considered the water and eventually trusted enough to drink from the bowl. I had watched in fascination as its strange, almost prehensile tongue had scooped the water from the bowl so

delicately not a drop had touched the sand. Not long afterwards, its mother had found it. I had thought that the two creatures would just leave but instead they nuzzled each other and then the mother, who was enormous, came right up to me sitting on the steps and gently butted at my hand with her nose. When I lifted my hand up she had licked at it with her tongue and then she turned around with her cub and left to rejoin the herd. I had never spoken on this incident with anyone. It had been magical and private, a kindness shown for a kindness given. Of all the creatures that dwelt on Tatooine, banthas were my favourite.

Most folks would swear that travelling by land speeder or some such machine was the best way to cross the desert. Not me, one bad break down in the middle of nowhere had taught me all I needed to know about how sand and machinery got along. It was no wonder the local stormtrooper garrison used dewbacks instead of speeders to get around the place. I had talked at great length about it with my father who wasn’t overly happy about me wanting to go out into the desert on my own. I suppose I could have told him I was fairly capable of taking care of myself by telling him about Myrkr and Rothana but these were things he didn’t need to know. In the end we compromised.

I stepped out of the shuttle at Wayfar and looked around. It had been a long time since I was here and at first glance nothing much had changed. Wayfar is a tiny place on the edge of the Dune Sea very close to Jabba’s Palace. A lot of the Palace workers who didn’t want to live there stayed in Wayfar but that didn’t help the place out much. It was not the prettiest town on the planet, or the safest.

The wind had picked up. Sand made its way into everything, even my mouth. I had forgotten about the taste and feel of grit between my teeth was like. It made me laugh but it wasn’t pleasant.

I had decided on bringing my Dantassi clothes, because they were light weight and easy to move in. I wore the light weight hooded coat for the trip. My mask was in its satchel which hung across my shoulder and the light weight back pack was filled with only what I would need, clothes, water, food and the bare essentials. I had weighed bringing my culling staff but in then decided against it, the weapon was unusual enough it would raise questions.

At my father's suggestion and as part of the compromise I had agreed to, I was to meet a very old family friend, someone who was not only familiar to me, that I trusted but also someone who could help directly. Vahlek Akosh was my *Dajdofa'zte'sa*. I did not know what the basic translation for that word was and I had always just called him Zte'sa or uncle. He had sworn to take the responsibility for my life should anything ever happen to my parents.

I did not see my uncle Vahlek all that often because he travelled a great

deal and was, of all the people in my , the most mysterious. He breezed in and out of our lives like wind. My father rarely spoke about him in much detail but he was always welcome in our house when he visited. I had adored him as a small child because he always had some sort of animal with him, usually a baby that he was training, and he always brought me really interesting and strange gifts. I didn't have to worry about looking for him in the crowd at the shuttle port because he recognized me right away.

"Lei'lei, there you are!" He said using his childhood nick name for me, a derivative of the word for Nahlei'lei which roughly translated to basic it meant gift child or niece. He was a tall, rugged, fierce looking man with weird pale, green eyes and long, very straight, white hair. I had never seen him without the two day's worth of stubble which never quite hid the long jagged scar running from jaw to temple on the left side of his sharp, angular face. He grasped me by both shoulders and pulled me into a hug. "Look at you, quite the young lady, all grown up and lovely." His husky voice was soft and warm.

I looked up into his pale eyes and grinned. I had not seen him in a very long time, but he had not changed much although his face was more weathered looking but that was all. "Zte'sa Vahlek, it is good to see you again." I said.

He bowed his head in acknowledgement and then began to cover his face up with a scarf. "We must hurry, this wind brings a storm with it and my home is an hour's walk. I'd have brought the speeder but with this wind and the sand it would have broken down, by foot is the best way to go."

"I didn't know you lived out here, if I had I would have come to visit when I worked at the palace." I said as we began to head away from the shuttle port.

He nodded. "I did not own the house at that time." He told me then added tartly. "If I had known you were working for Jabba out here I would have skinned your backside, though. I was glad to learn you were smart enough to get out of there while you could. Lucky for you I was off world and out of contact at the time."

I shot him a look. "It wasn't so bad!" I protested.

"Hmm." He told me gruffly "You say that but you don't believe it. I know the palace well enough to know it was not the right place for you. I was very shocked to hear you were dancing there. Your mother would have been horrified. She did not raise you for that sort of a life."

"Well, I stopped." I said defensively. One of the things I had forgotten about uncle Vahlek was his sharp tongue and no nonsense manner.

He stopped walking for a moment to look at me and I shrank back from his stare. "Yes, you did. There is hope for you yet." He relented a little. We continued to walk towards the city gate. "I had not planned on buying a house out here, but it was time to settle just a bit. Your father told me about the property and it was perfect for my needs."

I was not unhappy to leave Wayfar; it was a place of many memories for me from when I had worked out at the Palace, some of them not all that happy. Uncle Vahlek had not been far off the mark in chastising me for taking a job there but that didn't mean I liked to hear about it. I drew my hood over my head to shade my face from the burning suns and the strengthening wind. We were about five minutes out of the city walls when the sting of the sand against my face annoyed me enough to pull out my Dantassi mask and slip it on. Uncle Vahlek watched this action with great interest but did not say a word.

The trek to his house led us into the rocky edge of the Dune Sea and walking in the sand dunes in between the stony parts was taxing. I remembered Navaari's comment about my ability to walk through the snow. It had not occurred to me at the time that sand and snow were very similar. By the time we were half way to his home the sand storm was building up to be nasty. I could see the dark ribbon of what was to come off in the distance and the occasional flash of dry lightning. I hoped it would not last long.

Sometimes these storms could last for days. It hadn't been forecast but that never meant much. The winds and the sands seemed to take a huge delight in doing the exact opposite of what the weather bots predicted. We reached his house shortly before midday and I was grateful to get indoors to where it was cool and sheltered from the wind.

In the entrance hall I shook off the sand from my clothes and removed my mask. I was about to slip it back into the satchel when uncle Vahlek held out his hand, silently asking to look at it. I watched as he turned it over in his hands, studying the markings carefully. His fingers traced the carvings Navaari had recently added and I could not decipher the look on his face. He handed it back to me without saying anything and I followed him down the hall and found myself in a large, warm kitchen. I was greeted by three curious jaxes who came to running to greet him, mewling loudly, with their tails straight and high.

"Maddy, Mayhem and Kahvi." He said telling me their names. I took off my cloak and hung it over the back of one of the kitchen chairs. He put the kettle on the stove to boil water and I drew from my backpack the gift I had brought for him from my father.

"Papa said he promised this to you." I handed him the small box.

Uncle Vahlek took it from my hands. "Ah yes, black Koyish tea and Teki spice from Iridonia. I never know how your father does it but he always manages to find me some." He put it on one of the shelves above the stove. "Mek'kefa or mint tea?" he asked. "I'll get lunch ready in a bit, I expect you are hungry."

"Ooh mek'kefa, please." I said and sat when he indicated me to do so. I immediately had a jax jump in my lap. The orange one he had called Maddy. She curled up lap and began to purr loudly as I absently stroked her fur.

"You've still got a way with the critters, I see. The jaxes don't normally like

strangers, usually run and hide when I bring someone in they don't know." He said setting cups on the round, worn wooden table.

His home was welcoming and warm. It was clean and tidy, decorated with all manner of curious artwork and strange artefacts. In the open throughway between the kitchen and the living room was a mobile that hung from the mid beam. I studied it carefully. It was made from long bones decorated with feathers and its main piece was a human looking skull.

"A Sayormi mobile." He said watching my gaze. "Supposed to bring good luck and ward off evil spirits." He said, "It was a gift."

"It's very intriguing." I told him.

"Yes, you, of all people, would find it of interest." He said then after a moment's pause added, "The mask, your father has no idea does he?"

I shook my head. "I wouldn't even know where to begin explaining it all to him, he'd probably flip out. You know how papa gets sometimes."

Uncle Vahlek shrugged. "Never knew the Bone Traders were ones to be taking in strays." He said. "You've not been with your tribe long though."

"Not really, no." I said, wondering how he knew that.

He smiled. "The markings on your mask are all new and there aren't that many. It is a fairly recent thing, yes?"

"You seem to know a lot about them." I said nodding.

He shook his head. "More than the average person, I expect, and probably less than you. I know enough to give respect. They go their own way mostly, but I have crossed paths with some of their kind from time to time. That is not unexpected in my line of work." He poured spiced 'caf and I accepted the cup gratefully wondering, not for the first time, exactly what his line of work was. I had asked a few times when I was younger what he did for a living and was never given a straight answer. I once made the mistake of badgering my father about it until he had crossly told me it was none of my business, then relenting his hard words had mumbled something about Vahlek being good with animals and a bit of a wanderer. After a while I had stopped asking.

He sat down across from me and studied me carefully. I was not the little girl he remembered and my connection with the Dantassi had unsettled him. "I know they look after their own, that they are not to be crossed and they are not at all what they appear to be. It would seem that neither are you." He said.

I didn't know what to say. He was right.

He regarded me for a moment with his pale green eyes. "I've known you all your life and from day one you were always a little mystery. I still remember as clear as crystal the day we found you." He said.

"You were there?"

"Yes, I suppose your father never mentioned that, did he?"

I shook my head. "I only learned the truth about it all just before I went off

world and he didn't mention you. Well he didn't get into a lot of specifics. I don't think he knew how to tell me and it was a bit of a jumble."

"Yes, indeed, he contacted me shortly after you left to let me know he had finally told you. Should have been spoken of that sooner rather than later but done is done." He nodded. "Your father was always one to keep a closed mouth and he had his reasons for keeping my name out of it. I have my own past, one that I prefer to keep to myself, although it does seem that one's past has a way of following one around." He said quietly. Then he continued. "I can still remember that night as if it were yesterday, myself, Bedi, and Kit all sitting in the living room looking at you in your mother's arms. I had never seen Eri' so happy or so worried. We discussed what to do for many, many hours and in the end everyone decided that Kit and Eri' adopting you as their own was for the best. I remember the moment of when your father realized that he now had a daughter, how proud he was and how scared he was. I remember the love in your mother's eyes when she realised that she had finally been given the child she had always wished and longed for, even if you were not her flesh and blood, she loved you as if you were. When Kit and your mother asked if Bedi and I would be your Dajdofa guardians, well I was, we were honoured, although as a guardian, I don't know that I have actually done a very good job at it." He paused. "It was me who arranged the paperwork, got the birth certificates and forged adoption papers done up." He shook his head. "I should have been there for you more often, especially after Eri' was killed."

"Wait, Bedi is also my Dajdofa Guardian?" I asked. This was the first I had heard of this.

He nodded. "They never told you that?"

I sighed. "No, I suppose the only reason they told me you were was I asked why I should call you uncle when you aren't even related to anyone in the family. Bedi was just always there, she worked for my dad, I called her by her first name. I never thought there was anything more."

He rubbed his forehead. "I'm sorry you have to find all this out now and in this way."

"Why keep all of this a secret, why? I don't understand it." I asked.

"We all felt that some things were better left unsaid, especially at that time. From the note your mother had left with you, it was pretty clear she thought you were unique. She had written it in haste and she was frightened."

"Did you read it? Do you remember what it said?" I asked.

"Wasn't much to read. It said '*Her name is Merlyn and she is very special. Please love her as I do and protect her from those who would harm her for what she is.*' Maybe we were wrong not to search even more than we did for who had left you, I don't know. I just know we were all concerned for you. A tiny baby abandoned by a mother so scared by something she was willing to give you up to total strangers in a time of absolute turmoil. I do not doubt that she chose the time

and the place and the people who would find you very carefully. It was not a random act, but still it was a terrible risk. The Jedi were being hunted to extinction and we were hearing stories that all force sensitive children were being taken and murdered. None of us knew what that meant but it didn't sound like a pleasant thing. We buried the truth and hoped you would go unnoticed."

I just stared at him. Every time I turned around another piece of this story, this little puzzle unwound itself. I sighed.

He continued. "I remember once, when you were no more than a titch, you hardly come up past my knees that the baby bantha I had with me that day took to you as though you were its mother."

I smiled at that memory, I had forgotten about it. We were still living out in the house near Bestine. His baby bantha was twice my size and had chased after me, nudging me in the back every time it had caught up to me, licking me with its huge sticky tongue, wanting to play. We had spent hours at that game.

"I always knew you were special but that day confirmed it for me." He said. "So, it does not surprise me that the Bone Traders would take you in or that you would travel far in the Galaxy, although that you would end up working for the man who helped to wipe out the Jedi is an odd twist of fate."

"The Dantassi say nothing happens by accident." I said.

"So they do." He said. "Perhaps you will tell me about your association with them some day. I would very much like to hear it."

I just looked at him. He was right I had known him all my life and although his visits had been infrequent they had been special. I always thought of him as eccentric, now I learned he was much, much more. There was something he wasn't telling me about himself, something secret and dark he wanted to keep hidden. But now I was a mystery to him, with secrets of my own. I guessed that the keeping of secrets ran in my crazy family. The thought made me smile.

"Perhaps." I said after a while.

He sat back in the chair and changed the subject. "Why do you want a mount? There isn't anything out there but sand, critters, bones and the Tusksens." He asked.

"I am looking for information about a boy named Skywalker." I told him plainly.

"Funny how that name keeps getting bandied about." He said but didn't elaborate. "Taking that as you want to head out to the Lars farm then?"

"That was the idea." I said, wondering how he knew.

"Why? The farm was destroyed." He asked.

"I might be able to learn something anyway." I said.

"Ah, yes, one of your gifts. I remember that one very well. Are you sure you want to go out alone? I'd be happy to go with you."

I shook my head. "No, I need to do this on my own, I don't know why, I

just do. Please?"

He sighed and made a face which said he didn't like the idea much. "Well, doubtful the Tusksens will bother you out there, they avoid that place. Say it's haunted, cursed."

"Why is that?" I asked.

Uncle Vahlek shook his head. "I don't know exactly, they won't talk about it, steer clear of the area as well as the place where the Jawa transport was attacked. Tell stories of bad spirits and desert demons." He paused to sip his drink. "Your father wasn't very specific about your needs when he asked if I could help." He said. "So, I like to know what's going on before I let anyone take one of my critters, even you."

"Papa doesn't know the specifics." I said. "Hell, even I don't know the specifics. I was asked to find information, nothing more and nothing less. If that means I need to go visit this wreck of a farm then that's what I have to do. Lord Vader gets a bit tetchy when he doesn't get what he wants." I was going to win an award for understatement of the year.

"Your father and I go way back. He doesn't speak of our past much I suspect but when he needs my help he has it and as my nahlei'lei, so do you." He was silent and we both looked up as a strong gust of wind made the house shudder. "Good job you got to Wayfar when you did, looks like you'll be here for a bit. This storm's building to be a bastard."

"The ones they don't forecast are always bad." I agreed, and then asked. "How did you get to know papa?"

"I met him years ago off world, long before you came into the picture, long before he met your mother and settled down into a respectable living. He saved my life." He said. "Then, about a year later I saved his life and two years after that he saved mine again. We seemed destined to be saving each other's hides." He paused. "Somewhere along the line we became friends."

"I never knew that." I told him. "He doesn't speak about you much. Come to think of it he doesn't speak about himself much at all."

Uncle Vahlek smiled. "Do you ask?"

I looked up at him and shook my head. "No, Zte'sa, I guess I don't."

He gave me a look that said, 'well there you go.' Maddy shifted on my lap, looking for a more comfy position and Kahvi rubbed herself around my ankles. I leaned down to scratch the black jax between the ears.

"This storm will blow itself out by tomorrow, but till then you're stuck here. Got a spare room downstairs, bed's made and clean. 'Fresher is through past the living room, to the left." He said. "Later, if you want, I can tell you some stories about your old man." I nodded and he got up, "Right then, let me show you around."

Just as he had predicted the storm exhausted itself out sometime in the

very early morning. I woke up to the sound of purring jaxes, all three of whom complained loudly when I decided to get up.

I slipped on my cloak and went outside. This was one of my favourite times of day, although it was rare for me to be awake this early to actually experience it. The dawn sky was a soft velvety blue blushed with the faint pinks of the rising suns, the in between time. I sat on the sandy steps which led up to the front door and watched the suns rise for the first time in since I had returned to Tatooine.

I breathed the air in deeply, there is a moment when the night has passed and the morning has not yet begun when the air has a scent to it that always made me think of the word clean. As though no one had yet breathed this air in and out, that it had somehow been scrubbed new by the night and the suns' heat had not yet managed to change the smell and taste of it all.

As the light slowly took over the sky, I watched the colours of the desert change, from a strange silvery blue to a soft glowing gold. These moments of quiet and solitude were rare and I treasured them. This had been part of the reason I had often escaped to the bluffs above Mos Eisley, much to my father's annoyance and spent the whole night just watching the stars and waiting for the dawn, waiting for that moment of perfect stillness, and new, fresh air.

The quiet was broken by the snuffling sounds of an animal near by. I got up off the steps and walked a little ways past the front of the house. Around the side was a large bantha, probably looking for water and food. I smiled when I saw her because she was beautiful. It never occurred to me that standing in front of a creature that could have killed me with a single stomp of her foot might not be the best idea in the world. I knew no fear of these animals and I sensed no fear from her.

We watched each other for a long time, she sniffed the air, getting my scent and I stayed still letting her sort out whether or not she would stay or go. I relaxed and let my weirding sense touch her a little, sending thoughts of calm and peace. I was not a threat.

I guess she figured this out and in the end decided to approach me. What surprised me, more than anything else, was not her acceptance of my presence, that was normal for me and most animals, but when she knelt down to lie in the sand in front of me. This was how Uncle Vahlek found me when he came looking for me, sitting on the sand in the rising suns' light talking to and petting a bantha as though she were one of his jaxes. She alerted me to his presence by jerking her head up and making a very odd growling sound that came deep from the back of her throat. I stood up and she did too. He looked at me with a smile.

"I see she still remembers you. Nor do I need to help you find a companion for your trek to the Lars' farm." He said. "Her name is Mej-mej, which he pronounced may-may. It is Zabraki for little sister."

Upon hearing her name she ambled over to uncle Vahlek and head butted against him. "Come, dress, have breakfast and I will make sure you are all set to go. I feel better now that I know she will take care of you."

After a good breakfast, and some quick lessons on how to guide Mej-mej I was ready to go. I had a datapad map with the way point plotted in. I also had an old fashioned way finder. Uncle Vahlek had attached additional water pouches to the saddle and given me a vibro lance that also attached to the large and surprisingly comfortable saddle.

"If you happen to meet Tusken along the way, offer them the gift of water." He said. "But you should be left alone, especially if you are also masked." He nodded at my satchel I wore slung across my shoulder.

He gave Mej-mej a pat and spoke the word for down. She knelt on the sand and allowed me to climb up into the saddle.

"I expect to see you back here by tomorrow morning, tomorrow night at the very latest. You have a comm, so keep in touch. If I don't see you then, I'll come looking for you but that won't make me happy." He said.

"Yes, Zte'sa. Don't worry; I am pretty good at taking care of myself when the odds are more or less fair."

He nodded. "Yes, someday you'll have to tell me about that. Now go before it gets too late, and remember drink enough."

"Will do. See you when I see you." I gave Mej-mej a nudge with my heels and we were off. I did not look back.

It was hot. I was glad of the hooded cloak, the extra water and my Dantassi mask which helped to keep me cool. Mej-mej walked at a steady pace and I was surprised at how quickly we actually covered ground. By late afternoon, after stopping to shelter and rest from the midday heat, we came to the Lars homestead and it wasn't a moment too soon. I ached from riding all day.

"Ta'dosh!" I told Mej-mej. She made a snorting sound and sank to her knees so that I could slide off her back. My legs were stiff and a little shaky. I was used to many things but riding a bantha was not one of them. I patted her and gave her some of the fruit treats Uncle Vahlek had provided me with then I looked around. I had about three hours of light left so what ever I was going to do I needed to do it now.

There was not much to see. The main building had been badly damaged and there wasn't much left of it. I walked around the ruins and understood why uncle Vahlek had said the Sand People avoided this place. It tasted bad and made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

I made my way down into the underground part of the house and began to

look around.

Most people actually lived underground on Tatooine because it was cooler. What you saw on the surface was only a small part of the actual structure. There was nothing left. Anything and everything that could be taken had fallen to the scavengers. What had been left was either broken beyond repair or burnt rubbish. In the main open courtyard not even the décor had survived. As I went through the rooms, I felt as though I were the ghost not the other way around. I ran my fingers along the walls and tried to pick up anything I could but my ability to conjure images from inanimate objects was not always reliable. Of all my weird ways this gift was the weakest and I couldn't force it. It did not surprise me that nothing sharp came to mind. There were vague images of people and sensations of fear and anger. The kitchen had been torn apart, all useable machinery removed, dishes scattered about the place and broken, the cupboards ripped apart and smashed. Each of the sleeping rooms was much the same, what was of value had been removed the rest was destroyed. Nothing personal remained, not even clothes. Tatooine was a hard planet and anything that could be salvaged or scavenged was taken.

With a sigh I went back outside and found the entrance to the workshop and speeder garage. There was not much else left in this place either. Machinery, tools or spare parts of any sort would have been stripped and sold. All that was left was a big mess. Both garages were empty except for a wamp rat had nested in the air speeder garage. I left it alone. Although they were small they were also vicious, especially when they had young.

The main work shop was a wreck. I stepped over bits of twisted plastic and metal that was of no use. There were animal droppings and rubbish all over the place. I wasn't going to find much here. I went to kick a bit of junk out of the way and stumbled over it instead because it didn't move. I squatted down to look at it. It was a table peg, used to fix a work bench to the ground to stop it from rocking. I sighed and looked around. From this angle I saw things I had not seen while standing straight and one of them caught my eye, near the door under a piece of twisted dura plastic. I retrieved the toy, a small broken model of a sky hopper and gasped. Too fast, too jumbled for me to make immediate sense of them, the images tumbled one after the other through my head. When the onslaught had faded and I was returned to the here and now I got up. I tucked the broken toy in my pocket and left the work room.

Outside the light was starting turn from glaring bright to soft gold. I clicked my tongue and Mej-mej ambled to my side. I patted her flank and walked around the outside of the buildings again. Tosche had said there was a mourning marker and after a few moments I found it. I knelt down and looked at it. I was hesitant to touch it because I was still buzzing with the flashes from the broken toy.

People had left chullpas of various sizes and shapes draped across the rough hand made marker. A few of them were yellow with age, worn smooth by the sands, the carved markings no longer visible. I looked at the marker, a plain piece of durasteel, something had been etched onto it but so eroded by the elements that I could not decipher its meaning. I drew a deep steadying breath and reached out to touch it. To my surprise there was nothing. I laid my hand flat against it and concentrated but still there was nothing. I sat back on my heels and sighed. I then, out of curiosity began to touch the chulpas. Most of them were blank to me but one of the oldest suddenly set off a series of intense flashes. This time, unlike with the toy the images were more specific, far more powerful and centered around one moment in time, a burial. The vision knocked me flat on my ass. It was full of anger and pain, loss and regret. I let the breath I had been holding slowly out. No wonder the Sand People avoided this place. It was full of ghosts and sorrow.

I didn't want to camp here over night although that had been my initial plan. Mej-mej nudged my arm breaking me out of my reverie. With a sigh I got up. The ability to 'see' from inanimate objects was draining but I didn't know why. I brushed my fingertips over the carved Japor snippet once more but it had shown me all it was going to so I left it where it was.

The bantha knelt down allowing me climb back into the saddle. It was dangerous to travel the edge of Dune Sea at night but I wanted to get away from this place. I sat still leaning forward on Mej-mej's back resting my head against her neck. The twin suns were setting and it was always a glorious sight to see. I was tired.

"Riy bunkie dunko" I told her in Huttese. *Go home.* She tossed her head and turned in the direction we had come from. I pulled my hood up over my head and absently touched the bone mask. It gave me a strange sense of security. As a rule, most sane people never travelled alone at night. The Sand People often had hunting parties out after dark. I had been raised on this planet, heard the stories, been given the warnings about how dangerous it was, but as I sat high up off the ground on a creature large enough to tear a small house apart if she wished, I didn't care.

I had never travelled like this, alone so far out beyond a city limit after dark. It was awe inspiring. As every colour but the darkening blue faded from the sky, the stars began to shine. They were as bright as I could ever recall, reminding me of the night I had ridden back to the village with Navaari on Hjal, except these constellations were known to me. As Mej-mej walked towards uncle Vahlek's home I leaned backwards against her broad back and stared up at the sky, looking for the twelve sisters, the laughing wrix and best of all, the great Krayt dragon. Only the one moon was up so far and its light was still watery and pallid. The shadows from the rising jagged hills of the Jundland Wastes were eerie.

Tatooine had three moons, Ghomrassen, Guermessa and Chenini. They

did not all rise at the same time and they each had very different orbits so to have three full moons all at once was very rare. Tonight I would see Guermessa rise first, then Ghomrassen and only catch a glimpse of Chenini if I was still awake at about four in the morning. Tonight though, Chenini would be full.

Ghomrassen was the largest of the moons, even when she was just a sliver of light she was still bright enough to cast shadows. Chenini was the smallest and had the largest elliptical orbit. For the longest time she was over looked by astronomers, her name meant forgotten sister.

The night was still, not even a whisper of wind which was unusual. One of the things that off worlders complained about the most was the constant winds. The only sounds I heard was my own breathing, the occasional howl of some creature in the distance and the rhythmic sound of Mej-mej's feet in the sand as she walked.

During the day I had thought mostly about the job ahead. What I would find at the farm, how it would look and where to find shelter during the midday zenith. The way back to uncle Vahlek's home my head was filled with thoughts about the images I had been shown. They had been conflicting, and from two very different time periods. The problem with this gift was it was incoherent most of the time and I was not skilled enough to control it.

I pulled the toy sky hopper from my pocket and looked at it. My fingertips tingled touching it and I had to block the rush of images that threatened to overwhelm me. Mostly they were centered around a young boy, I wondered if this was Luke, I was certain it was but it was hard to tell with the visions sometimes. I tucked it away in the satchel I usually kept my mask in. I was tired and it had been an exceptionally long day. Mej-mej's gate was regular and hypnotic and eventually I dozed lightly in the saddle. I never heard them approach.

Mej-mej stopped suddenly and made an eerie sound. I was suddenly very awake with all the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. They had come up from behind, single file, soundless and deadly, a Tusken raiding party of seven. They manoeuvred their own bantha mounts to form a circle around me and they just waited silently.

Most settlers think that the Sand People are ignorant, backwater savages who are brutal for the sheer joy of it. The settlers shoot first and ask questions later, don't take the time to learn the local customs and languages. Of course, the Sand people's language is almost impossible for most non Tusken to learn and in that I was no exception. It was a guttural language that no matter how hard I had tried master or understand it, it had never made any sense to me what so ever. Sometimes some of the more travelled Tusken spoke Jawa or even Huttese.

I waited until the leader moved forward one step as was custom. I was masked, alone and unknown to them. They had no grounds to attack me and they didn't know the risk at stake, there could have been more of my kind hiding.

Tusken were cautious, despite what everyone thought about them.

I nodded my head to the leader and signed a traditional greeting. He replied in kind, and then to my very great relief asked in a heavily accented Huttese what I was doing.

"I travel homeward." I told him.

"The desert demands tribute." He replied. The traditional way of saying that they wished the water rite to be observed, essentially I would buy my way out of a fight by offering them a full water skin. Uncle Vahlek had tied extra water skins to the saddle for just this occasion. I untied them and offered them to the leader.

He accepted and barked something to his men. I let the skins fall to the ground and watched quietly waiting to see what would happen next. While I hoped they would honour the water rite there was always a chance they would not. So I waited. Mej-mej made a slow low sound and I placed a hand on her neck.

"Na'shej'la, Mej-mej." *Be still*, I whispered in Cheunh, the one language I was certain no one except me understood. I sent her calming thoughts. I could sense her willingness to defend if she had to but I was hoping it would not come to that. She stopped making noise and tossed her head from side to side, then settled down.

The Tusken leader looked at me for a long time. Not that either of us could see each other's face. We were both masked. Then he said. "Your bantha serves you well."

I stared at him and was suddenly angry. He had very deliberately insulted me.

"Mej-mej, ta'dosh." She hesitated just a second and then sank to her knees. The Sand people remained on their own mounts and watched carefully. I was well aware of the sudden rise in tension in the air but didn't care. I slid down from the saddle and went to stand to the side of the leader, so that he could see me and where the others also could see. I heard Mej-mej get back up and move to stand at my side.

"She is not my bantha." I told the leader. "She does not belong to me. She belongs to the desert and the sky, to the wind and the sand. She permits me the honour of her company and she carries me by her own will."

There was a long moment of silence and then the Leader spoke a command, his bantha lifted one of his front legs and the Tusken warrior dismounted with as much grace as any palace dancer. He came to stand in front of me and I had to push at Mej-mej to get her to step back.

The Tusken warrior looked at me, walked around me, studying me. I was not what he had expected.

"You are not like the others." He said, his oddly accented words sounding harsh and threatening to me. "You have the bearing of a hunter, a warrior and your

mask tells stories. You speak of the desert and your bantha companion with much honour. You know our ways and you respect the path of the Sand People.” He said.

“The desert is a living thing; it and its people deserve my respect. I have earned my mask and my place amongst the Mathäd’antass’Iyantha through hunt and ritual. Mej-mej honours me with her friendship. It is what it is.” I answered.

He regarded me for a long time through the strange goggled mask he wore. Ghomrassen rose three quarters full behind him. The moon’s light shone off my mask, causing the whiteness of the bone to glow, making my face ghost like and luminous.

“You are human.” He said looking directly into my eyes.

I nodded.

“Will you allow me to see your true face so that we may tell of you, let others know you are welcome amongst the sands, given right to go freely without fear.”

I was a little hesitant about this, unsure of the Dantassi policy on this sort of thing. Then I decided that given the circumstances and my lack of education on bone trader etiquette and regulations in this area I needed to make my own rules. I removed my mask and pulled back the hood on the cloak. Moonlight bathed my face, shone on my long hair and I welcomed it.

There was a ripple of shock and murmurs from the Tusken raiders but a single hand gesture from their leader silenced them.

“You are female.” He stated. While this had caused a stir amongst his men, he had not been surprised by this, in fact if anything I had gotten the distinct impression he was expecting this.

I put my mask back on and nodded. “I am Akiana’myshk’apavjäska, clan daughter of Kirja’navaar’inkjerii and Ta’kasta’cariad to Nikätza’arth’pavjäska.” I told him. “On this world I am Merlyn Gabriel, daughter to Kitga’ar and Eri’ Gabriel of Mos Eisley, and nahlei’lei to Vahlek Akosh and Bedi Nuale.”

He nodded at the recital of my lineage, such as it was. “We will remember you and pass the word along. You have shown much courage here tonight and we do not forget. As you have entrusted me so I give you my name.” then he spoke it twice once slowly and once at normal speed I repeated it once and he nodded that my version was acceptable.

“I am an honoured hunter to my tribe and I have waited a long time to meet you.” He said. I was puzzled but remained silent.

He drew from underneath his clothing something wrapped in a piece of cloth. He unwrapped it slowly and I saw a simple ring on a leather thong. He held it out to me, laid in the flat of his palm and allowed me to take it from him. I picked it up by the leather and didn’t touch the ring at all. It looked like a wedding band. The last thing I wanted was to deal with any images, visions this thing had to offer.

“It was foretold to me that I would meet a warrior girl with a ghost face. That she would know our ways and walk our path, and that she would be willing to accept the gift of pain.” He told me. “I have been carrying this burden for a long time. Before your time, there was a farmer who would not honour our ways, shot at our people, did not respect the desert.” He gestured to general direction I had come from. “The hunters from the tribe took the woman who belonged to him and held her as payment. It is our way.” He paused for a moment and watched my reaction when I didn’t give any he continued. “One night the devil from the dark came to take her. He slaughtered every single member of the tribe, men, women and children, showed no mercy. The foot prints in the sand were human, male. He killed with a sword of light. I was a boy, on a hunting party. We saw from the far away his death dance of light but could not arrive in time to stop the demon. After that night much war was waged between the Tuskens and the off worlders.”

I kept silent. His story made me shiver. I had heard rumours, tales told about this desert demon wielding a sword of fire which had torn the Sand People apart and of the terrible retribution that followed but I had always thought, like most of the people I knew, that these were just myths and campfire legends. Things your parents said to keep you in line. *You better behave or the B’Thazoshe Demon would come and get you with his weapon of light and drag you off forever to be his slave, if he doesn’t eat you first.* If there had been strife before between the settlers and the Tuskens after this event it had come to all out war.

He broke the silence and continued. “I found it left in the sand in the ruins of the tent where the woman was held. It was her token. I do not know what it means, but it was of value to her. I have carried it with me as a reminder that all outsiders are to be hated, to be killed, that they are vicious, mindless creatures, who do not respect the wills and ways of the living desert. To remind me of what off worlders are capable of, but tonight I see a different face and I know I can now pass this burden to you. I must no longer carry this memory, this pain, now it is yours.” He said. “You have given me my freedom.”

I looked at the ring dangling on the leather thong and then slipped it in my satchel.

“I am sorry for your loss.” I told him.

“The desert reclaims its own.” He replied. “You are of two worlds and there is much mystery about you. I see that you seek answers and your questions are your burdens. Answers will come to you when you do not expect it but they will not bring you happiness or peace. You are now known to us, Girl of the Ghost Face.” He said, “Go your way in safety.”

He mounted his bantha with an ease I envied and before I could even think to say another word he and his fellow hunters vanished single file back into the night. I watched them with a mixture of disbelief and awe. Only when I could no longer see them did I ask Mej-mej to kneel down so that I could scramble up

into the saddle again.

“Riy bunkie dunko, Mej-mej, let’s get the hell out of here and go home.” I whispered. All I wanted now was to be some place safe and familiar. The whole event had a terrible surreal quality to it, as though I were dreaming. It had unsettled me and left me feeling lost. Mej-mej sensed my need and she hurried. We were back before dawn.

I took off her saddle and made sure she had food and water before I went inside. The door was not locked and the spare bed had been made ready for me. He had expected me home. I stripped off my clothes and crawled under the covers. I slept like a baby. No dreams, no nightmares and interruptions. I woke mid morning to the scent of spiced stim’caf.

I had planned to return to Mos Eisley right away but the meeting with the Sand People had shaken something in me. Over his perfect mek’kefa and some fruit I had asked if I could stay for a few more days. For a long moment uncle Vahlek had just stared at me, as though he could dig beneath my lack of explanations and find the truth merely by looking at my face.

“Of course, just let your father know.” Uncle Vahlek answered. “I am happy to have you here.” I searched for any hint of untruth but there was none.

I had contacted my father and told him of my plans. He had not asked why and I had not elaborated. Once we were done talking he had wanted to speak with Vahlek. I had left the two to their conversation and went into the living room to curl up on the couch. I was stiff and sore from the long ride and I was still tired. As soon as I got my self comfortable, Maddy who had become my constant companion jumped up on my lap. Uncle Vahlek joined me in the sunken floor room, sitting in the chair adjacent to me and drank his stim’caf.

“What happened last night?” he asked. “I noticed the water skins are gone and I am sure even you cannot drink that much.”

I drew a deep breath and let it out noisily. He waited. I wondered where to even start and remembered Navaari’s words. *Start at the very beginning and do not stop until the words have done their job.* So I told him about the entire journey from start to finish. I repeated almost word for word the conversation I had had with the Tusken leader and then I waited.

“This ring, did you touch it?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No.”

He just nodded thoughtfully but didn’t comment further.

“It was the strangest thing.” I said when I was finished. “Have you ever heard of them doing anything like this?”

Uncle Vahlek shook his head. “No, as a rule they avoid all contact with anyone not Tusken unless they are trading or killing. I do know they are a deeply superstitious people with many beliefs and customs. It sounded to me as though this meeting was part of some prophecy and you along with it. Stranger things

have happened.”

I sighed. “My life just keeps getting weirder and weirder.”

“Forgive me for saying, lei’lei but your life started out pretty unusual to begin with.” Uncle Vahlek smiled. “Well, stay as long as you like. If I understood what your father was trying to tell me without actually telling me anything, you need the rest.”

Was that it? I just needed a holiday, no drama, no seduction, no violence and no threats? I nodded. “He’s right, I do.”

He got up. “I have errands to run, and groceries to buy. I will be back in a couple of hours. When you are ready you can tell me about what your father would not. I do not like all these secrets and hints of things that perhaps I should know.” He said.

I looked at him for a moment. “Okay.” I said.

He patted me on the head as though I were six. “Sleep, you are safe here.” He said, his words sounding familiar and comforting to me.

I closed my eyes and absently stroked Maddy slowly. I could hear uncle Vahlek move about the kitchen and I heard when he left the house. Its silence settled about me like a blanket and I remembered why I loved my home world so much. I don’t know if it was just being in a place of peace and quiet or that the rhythmic purring of the Jax was hypnotic or if it was a nice combination of both but almost as soon as I closed my eyes I slept and I dreamt.

I had travelled across the desert to come to a small house tucked away in the hills on the very edge of the Jundland Wastes, near the Dune Sea’s edge. I didn’t know why I had come here only that I was drawn to it the way a thirsty man is drawn to water. I walked into the house and was not surprised to find that I was not alone. It was the same long haired man from previous dreams. He had been waiting for me.

“Sit.” He said and I did.

“Where is the Chosen One?” he asked.

“I don’t know who that is.”

He sighed. “Yes, you do and he needs your help.”

I frowned. “You make no sense.” I told him, annoyed.

“He lost his way. He lost his soul and I could not help him.” He sounded incredibly sad.

I shook my head. “Who are you? Why do you keep coming to me?”

“I am the teacher looking for the student, the student looking the teacher. I do not seek you out, you come to me.” He said.

I got up, angry with the cryptic answers. “What do you want from me?”

“It is you that seeks answers from me.” He said. “You have many questions.”

I paced back and forth. “Who are you?” I asked again.

"That is the wrong question." He told me patiently.

"Who is the Chosen One?"

He shook his head.

Exasperation made me cross. "Who am I?" The words falling from my mouth before I could even consider them

He smiled. "That is the right question." He said. "The answers await you in the place where it all began."

"A map might be helpful." I told him.

He laughed, his blue eyes twinkled. "Go to the beginning, what you seek will find you." He spoke softly and he turned his back to me signalling this discussion was over. I stood staring at his back for a long time but he said nothing more. I left the small hut to walk back out into the desert and instead I found myself looking at the city of Mos Espa. It was in this moment I woke up.

Mos Espa, I thought as I sat up. Wasn't that the place where Anakin Skywalker had won the Boonta Eve Classic? Is that what he had meant, I would find answers to the Skywalker question there? Who am I? What sort of a question was that? I felt as though I were a snake eating its own tail. Everything was going around in circles.

I stayed with uncle Vahlek for over a week. Much of it was spent doing very little. I spent a lot of time with Mej-mej riding, exploring for short periods of time the area around his house. I needed the quiet and strange companionship she offered did me the world of good. My uncle was often absent from the house during the day, business he would say and nothing more. I didn't mind.

In the evenings, after he had retuned and after we had eaten, we would talk. The conversations were easier than I had thought they would be. He passed no judgement and offered no platitudes. He listened, asked questions and gave me his opinion only when I actually asked for it. There was a hardness and a stillness to uncle Vahlek that I had never noticed before. Of course, as a small child one does not see such things. But sitting alone with him in the house I felt the eerie thread of steel that seemed to hold him together. There was a tension that wound about him tightly. Even when he was relaxed he was ready, I just wasn't sure what it was he was ready for.

I had started off by talking to him about my work, my job but as the evening progressed I found myself talking more and more about what was going on underneath it all. I talked about the training and teachings I was on the receiving end of.

"Do you not find this all a little strange, Lei'lei?" he had asked when I had finished talking.

"Yes, but who wants to question the will of the Emperor and I like what I am learning. I just don't know about the why of it." I said.

He nodded. "I am surprised that they did not try to kill you when they found out you were a force sensitive." He told me bluntly.

"It was that exact reason that saved my life, I think." I replied. "It made Lord Vader curious. I think he sees me as some sort of pet project and I do my job so he has no real reason to complain." I wondered how I could explain the eerie connection I had to the man almost everyone regarded as the second most evil being in the galaxy.

Uncle Vahlek had just sighed. "Well, there are many forces at work in this galaxy and truth be told, I have seen many things that went well beyond explanation or definition. Who is to argue with destiny?" he said. "A grain of sand blown by the wind has no idea of where it will end up, yet in the end it is still part of the desert. Without the single grain of sand, there is no desert."

I had smiled at the saying. "Maybe," I said. "But I feel as though I'm missing something. I sense it the way you know when someone is watching you but you don't know who. I know there is more out there, I know that something will come, something huge but I just do not know what." I said.

"The universe is bigger than you Lei'lei, stop trying to solve all the mysteries at once."

I had rolled my eyes. "You sound just like someone else I know."

His response was to pat my hand and tell me to go to bed.

Two nights after this conversation, he had come down into the kitchen long after we had both said goodnight to find me sitting in the dark with my bone mask in my hands. I was crying.

"I'm sorry," I had said hastily wiping the tears away. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You did not, I was working not sleeping, just came down to make some tea, would you like some?"

I nodded and watched in silence as he pottered about the kitchen. When he had done and tea was made he sat across from me. The only light was the one that was over the stove. For a long time we just sat and sipped tea in a silence. That was the thing about uncle Vahlek, he was extraordinarily patient.

"Papa didn't tell you much about what happened with Jyrki, did he?" I asked after a while.

Unlike Thrawn or even Navaari uncle Vahlek did not clench his jaw when something angered him, instead a terrible sense of stillness seemed to ripple around him, almost as though his anger became something he wore. "What he told me was sketchy, no details. Said that Jyrki had kidnapped you from the Imperial palace and held you captive for almost a month against your will." He paused to and took a deep breath, "Kit was afraid to give me too many details because he was

worried I might go after him.”

“What does that mean, go after him?” I asked suddenly shivering.

My uncle’s pale green eyes turned stony. “There are things about me you do not know, should not ever need to know, suffice to say that one of my many skills is finding people. Another of my many skills is dealing with them once they have been found.” He said.

“Are you a bounty hunter?” I asked in a hushed tone.

Uncle Vahlek curled his lip slightly as if the very notion was distasteful and shook his head. “No.” He drew a deep breath. “If I asked you not inquire further about this would you respect my request?” he asked.

“Yes, Zte’sa I would respect it.” I replied. The air seemed to shift and the relief I felt from him was almost palpable. It was my turn to ask him something. “If I asked you to go after Jyrki, to find him, would you?”

He regarded me very carefully and then answered. “Yes, but only if *you* requested it.” He frowned. “Is that what you want?”

“No.” I said after a moment. “No, because someone once told me that his fate and mine were tied together and I believe him. If this is the case then what happens now needs to happen on its own, besides it’s my fight.”

He gave me a strange look, one that was tinged with a little bit of sadness. “When did you grow up?” he asked with a sigh.

I shrugged with one shoulder. He sat back in the chair, stared at the cup of tea and waited for me to start. When I began to tell him my story, I started with the Fete celebrations party and did not stop until I had told him everything, ending with my being back on Coruscant before I had gone off to Hjal. Occasionally he interrupted to ask for clarification on something and once or twice he had to wait for me to take a deep breath. While I was able to speak about it more openly than before the journey to Hjal, some things were still very difficult to express in words. When I had finished his anger was palpable.

“Now I understand why Kit was so careful with his words.” He said quietly.

I just looked at him. The silence in the kitchen was loud and it made me sad. My uncle broke it by changing the subject.

“The man you were with at this fete celebration, this officer you speak of, was he the one who gave you that necklace?” he asked.

I looked down at the little round pendant that I held in my fingers. Without even realising it I had played with it non-stop all the while I had spoken of my ordeal, just looking at it made me smile.

“Yes.” I said.

“Is he part of your connection to the Bone Traders?” he asked.

“How do you know all these things?”

Uncle Vahlek gave me one his rare and genuine smiles. “I am very good at reading people and every time you speak of something that troubles you your

fingers reach for that pendant. When the name Dantassi comes up you caress it and you smile ever so slightly.” He drank from his cup and made a sideways head gesture. “Ma’arilite is very rare and very precious so who ever gave it to you obviously thinks a great deal of you. Your expression softens when you touch it. It comforts you, which tells me you have a good connection with him. I saw the same expression in your eyes when you spoke of the man who took you to this fete celebration and put many small clues together.”

I smiled and turned away from his gaze but then looked back at him when he chuckled.

“Is my little Lei’lei being courted?” he teased.

I suddenly felt shy and pleased all at the same time. I tried to cover that up with a shrug. “Yes, maybe, I don’t know, it’s complicated, Zte’sa.”

“It usually is.” He replied knowingly. “But he makes you smile so I shall let him live.”

“Funny, Bel said the same thing.”

He laughed and poured us both more tea. He reached over and picked the bone mask up. Once more letting his fingers trace the carvings.

“This is a beautiful piece of work. It was made with much care and love. I envy you.” He said quietly. He didn’t elaborate and I didn’t ask. He handed the mask back to me. I turned it over in my hands, caressing it with my fingertips, still in awe of Navaari’s work then laid it gently back on the table.

“The tea will help you sleep. I will be here all day tomorrow so we can talk more if you want to.” He said watching me carefully.

I grinned. This was his way of telling me to go to bed. I got up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Night Zte’sa, thank you.”

He smiled. “Sleep well Lei’lei, I am quite sure the cuddle of jaxes that await you on your bed have done a good job of keeping it warm for you.”

I slipped out of the kitchen only turning around once to see him with my mask once again in his hands staring at it, deeply in thought.

My work for Lord Vader of learning all I could about the Skywalker boy was not forgotten. All the images I had been blessed with at the Lars’ farm had been dutifully entered into the data pad I had brought with me. In the quiet of uncle Vahlek’s spare bedroom I was able to sort through the images the little toy sky hopper had given me. I tried to write everything down in to some sort of coherent report. All the notes from what Tosche and Fixer had told me and all the little bits of information that I had slowly collected went into the data pad and slowly I began to get an idea of what this boy, Luke had been like. I mostly felt sorry for him.

I saw a boy with hair almost the same colour as the sand. He was lonely, quiet. He often dreamt of being a pilot. He had spent a great deal of time in the work room where I had found the toy, and like me he had no idea who his birth

parents were. The images had been jumbled mostly and I had seen him at various ages, as a very small boy to that of a young man. The sense of being different rippled around everything I had seen. He had known there was more out there but he hadn't known how to get there. He had spent his whole life feeling as though he did not really belong. I wondered if that had changed for him now.

The images from the chulpa had been far more specific, the burial of a woman, and those who had loved her speaking at her grave. The most powerful image was that of a young man, tears in his eyes and bitter anger burning at his heart. It had hurt to see this image. I wondered who he was. I wondered if the woman who had been buried was the same one that the Tusken warrior had spoken of. I wasn't sure but I suspected it was Shmi Skywalker, if that was the case then was the young man her son? The one Tosche had spoken of, the Jedi? I tried to sort it all out and write it down coherently but mostly I was trying to add two and two and coming up with five. I wasn't happy about this assignment any more. I didn't want these memories, these images. The deeper I dug into it the more questions appeared, the more I had the sense that something big was coming. It was this reason that kept me from actually touching the wedding ring I had been given by the Tusken warrior, although I had pulled it out of my satchel to look at it many times. I could sense that what ever it had to show me would be painful beyond belief and I just wrapped it in a piece of cloth, hiding it away in safety. I wasn't ready for what it had to give.

This gift of touch and sight was not strong and for most of my life the images shown to me were rarely so powerful that I felt them physically. These latest visions had been hard to bear and left me restless and sad. I had talked to my uncle about it the day he had stayed at home.

"They call it psychometry. It was a force power, the ability to pick up images and impressions from an inanimate object touched. To read a thing's memories as it were. It is a rare ability." He told me when I asked while I chopped vegetables for lunch and watched as he cooked.

"You knew I had this? How?"

"I used to bring you gifts, toys mainly when I would visit. Some were new but most were things I picked up along my travels. You almost always knew where the toy had come from before I ever had a chance to tell you. Sometimes you even knew the name of the person I had bought it from." He drew a deep breath. "Once I gave you a small wooden doll. The moment you touched it you burst into tears and wept for hours. You kept calling for someone named Kika and it was only after I did some investigation that I discovered the doll had belonged to a small girl who had watched her older sister, Kika, die in a raid on her village. I knew then that I needed to be very careful when I bought gifts for you, that they needed to be new and not used. It didn't happen all the time and mostly you did not seem bothered by the images and impressions but every now and then something you saw

troubled you terribly."

I remembered that doll. I could still see the images it had given me. My mother had taken it away and hidden it. I had been glad of that because the doll images I had seen had given me nightmares for months

"I had suspected that you were a force baby right from the very beginning. You were just different, we could all feel it. Kit didn't want to see that though, didn't want to acknowledge what you were. It took a lot of convincing to make sure he would not try to punish you every time you used your talents. That would have been the worst thing that anyone could have done to you. He didn't particularly like the Jedi much. That you might have this same power, well he didn't like that much at all. I think he was afraid for you. I told him that given time and patience you would learn to hide it on your own. I wasn't wrong." He sighed. "In my travels I met many Jedi, spent some time with a couple of them, and learned a little about their ways and the Force. During the Clone wars they all felt something was changing, just no one knew what. I remember hearing about the order that was given to cull them, that they were now enemies of the state. I could not believe it, didn't want to believe it." He shook his head. "We just did not know what your talents were and how strong you were. What we did know is that you needed to be kept hidden and safe, you didn't make that easy though." He told me. "On a job once, I met a man from Kiffu, an unusual Jedi who had the same gift you do. He had accidentally touched something of mine and knew more about me than my mother ever would. We talked about it while we travelled to Tatooine, it sounded awful."

I sighed. "I'm glad it's not my strongest gift and it's pretty sporadic but sometimes it's like being hit by a gaffi stick, especially lately." I told him.

He nodded. "I never met anyone with that particular talent who was happy with it." He said, "I can tell you this, the more you use it the stronger it will become."

"You seem to know a lot about this stuff." I said, hesitant to ask the real question.

"Yes, well, we all have pasts." His tone of voice said, do not ask so I didn't.

"You said you knew some of the Jedi?" I asked. "What about Anakin Skywalker?"

Uncle Vahlek sat back down in his chair and drew a very deep breath and nodded. "The Chosen One, they all called him. The hero of the Clone Wars. He was killed on Coruscant, or so they say."

I looked at him. "Anakin Skywalker really was the Chosen one? What does that mean? Why is it important?"

"Are you alright? You've gone as white as bleached bone."

I got up suddenly from my chair, waking Maddy who clawed at me in protest as I brushed her from my lap. "Did you know him?"

"No, I never met him, I only knew him by reputation. The holonet was full of stories of his bravery. It was hard not to hear of him."

"Papa said that a boy named Anakin Skywalker won the Boonta Eve classic pod race, are they the same? Was his mother someone named Shmi?" I asked. "A slave from Mos Espa?"

"I don't know, but she may well have been, I know that Anakin was from Tatooine. It was a big story among the Jedi. A Master named Qui-Gon Jin found him, managed to set him free from slavery and took him to be trained at the Temple on Coruscant. Something that was almost unheard of because the boy was too old for their sort of training."

"Did you ever meet this Qui-Gon Jin? What did he look like?"

"Once or twice. He was tall, had long hair, blue eyes and a beard. Very soft spoken...Lei'lei, sit down, you look like you are going to pass out." He got up and made me sit back down on my chair. "What is going on?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know. I have been having dreams, ever since Jyrki kidnapped me about a man who fits that description exactly. He comes to me asking about someone called the Chosen One. He mentioned the name Anakin once but I was never sure if he was this Chosen one or not. He keeps telling me I know the Chosen One but how is that possible if he is dead? These are just dreams and they are vague at the best of times. I tried to ask Lord Vader about but he did not wish to speak about the topic. I keep hearing this name over and over, first Jyrki saying that is was this Anakin who killed the kids at the Jedi Temple, then Sola Naberrie who said he was the Jedi assigned to protect the Queen, and everyone keeps telling me he's dead. If he is dead why does his name keep coming back again and again to haunt me? What is his connection to the kid from the Lars's homestead? None of this makes sense. I feel like I am missing something, something really important and it is starting to drive me mad." I pinched the bridge of my nose and tried to stave off the white noise threatening to over run my head.

"Don't push at it, when the answer is ready it will come." He said gently. "Tell me about these dreams."

So I did. He listened quietly and when I was done he said thoughtfully. "That sounds like Qui-Gon."

"What happened to him?"

He sighed, "He was killed on Naboo, during the blockade crisis. You probably don't know much about that do you?"

I shook my head. "Galactic history wasn't really my strong point in school."

He refilled our tea cups and began to tell me about the rise of Palpatine, about the blockade on Naboo, about the clone wars and the downfall of the Jedi. He spoke for hours telling me stories about this time period as though he had seen

it all for himself.

"Was Palpatine right? Did the Jedi want to take over the government?"

He sighed. "I don't know. It was a terrible time, very confusing. One day the clone warriors were fighting with the Jedi against the Separatists and the next day they were hunting the Jedi. The war was declared over and we were suddenly an Empire under the rule of Palpatine with the senate reduced to a puppet theatre. No one knew what had happened, what had hit them." He shook his head. "I lost many friends in that war." He said his voice suddenly full of sorrow. We were silent for a long time, only the hum of the refrigerator unit, the bubbling of the stew and the purring of the Jax on my lap broke the silence.

"I have to go to Mos Espa." I said suddenly.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because that is where it all began."

"I'll take you in the morning then." He said without even questioning why.

"I want to go alone."

He shook his head. "No. Mos Espa is not a nice place and you don't know your way around."

"I'm not a little kid any more." I said crossly even though what he had said was true. I had only been to Mos Espa once and that had been a long time ago.

"I know, regardless I'll take you in the morning. I have business there I can do so you won't have me baby sitting you the whole time but I won't let go alone, your father would never forgive me if something else bad happened to you. You are damned lucky I let you go off into the desert on your own and that was only because Mej-mej is pretty vicious when she wants to be. Your strange meeting with the Tuskens was risk enough. I'm not taking any more chances so don't even think of fighting with me on this. You won't win." That edge was back in his voice.

I made a face but part of me knew he was right and although I didn't want to admit it, his offer relieved me a little. I nodded. "Okay. But I have no idea what I am looking for, it could take a while."

"Fair enough and I might be able to help you with that, I have a few connections." He said sounding pleased but looking troubled. "We'll start early, shuttle in and then maybe head out to Mos Eisley when we're done, there are things I need to talk with Kit about, so pack your things okay?"

"Yes Zte'sa." I said getting up. I was tired, it was very late and I got the strange feeling that this circular snake eating its tail was about to bump into something big.

Mos Espa looked like a giant serpent from the air. It was a largest city on the planet and mostly be default the unofficial capitol. The shuttle flight to get there from Wayfar was two hours long and not especially pleasant. I was in the end, glad uncle Vahlek had come with me.

We disembarked and the smell hit me like a slap. Mos Eisley smelt dusty,

the air tinged with the scent of transport fuel and oil. Here, there were too many beings all living on top of one another. The city smelled of fear, sweat and the refuse from over population. It was unpleasant and I wrinkled my nose. Uncle Vahlek laughed softly.

“Core worlds have spoiled you, Lei’lei.” He said as he manoeuvred easily through the crowds of people who swarmed about the shuttle port. I had to trot to keep up with him and was jostled as those who had moved out of his way filled the space where he had been back in again.

“Where are we going?” I asked as we walked swiftly through the twisty streets.

“You want to know about the Boonta Eve Race, yes? We go ask someone who knows about it.”

The town hall was a fairly large building, and uncle Vahlek seemed to know his way around the building. I followed him through the labyrinth of corridors and stairs down into the basement, to a dimly lit room.

“Bareq, Bareq! You here or sleeping!?” my uncle yelled as we entered the room.

“Shut up d’ yelling, I’m old, not deaf!” came the gruff reply, two minutes later, appearing from behind one of the floor to ceiling archive shelves was a very annoyed looking Ithorian.

“Oh ‘tis you, what you wanting now?” Bareq asked my uncle, ignoring me. I had seen very few Ithorians in my life up close, although one or two did come through Mos Eisley, they mostly kept to themselves. They were among the more unusual looking beings in the galaxy. They were mostly peaceful, graceful beings with a long curved neck and T shaped head. They had two mouths, two throats and really melodic almost beautiful voices.

“Manners, Bareq, my NahLei’lei Merlyn is with me today.” Uncle Vahlek said pushing me in front of him so that Bareq could see me. “Bareq, is a bit blind so forgive his rudeness.”

“Blind my...” He stopped before saying what ever it was he really wanted to say and bent down to peer at me. “Ah, never be knowing you had attachments Akosh, be thinking you a loner guy. What you wanting?”

“My NahLei’lei wishes to know about the boy, Anakin Skywalker and the Boonta Eve Classic he won. You are the city’s archivist I thought, perhaps wrongly, that you might be able to help her, however we can go talk to Agle instead.”

“Naw naw, you in d’ right place. I be knowing all. I have facts, files, much informations. Anakin you say, Skywalker...” he nodded and then shuffled back into the stacks. “He d’ only human to win d’ Boonta Eve race ever. Big thing!”

At my uncle’s urging I followed Bareq into the stacks as the Ithorian searched for information.

“I was there, saw d’ race. Very exciting, lots of folkses unhappy they bet

against d’ boy.” He sighed. “Ah yes, here we are.” He pulled out several data pads and shuffled back towards me. “You can be reading these, it’s all we got on d’ boy. Was a slave here you know, he and his mother. A junk dealer called Watto owned them. He was a cranky ol’ b... . It all in d’ datapads. You can sit in d’ corner there and read them, not to leave this room though, forbidden. You can be making notes if’n you want. Will be ten credits for my work.”

Before I could dig any money out my uncle had already paid the fee. “Are you content to sit here and read for a few hours while I’m gone?”

“Yes, Zte’sa.” I nodded wondering how it was that people who had known you since babyhood could always somehow manage to make you feel as though you had never grown up.

“Good, I have business to attend to, should be back in three hours or so. I know a good place for lunch, so don’t go anywhere until I come back for you.” He told me.

“Yes, Zte’sa.” I said again rolling my eyes. I was convinced he still thought I was ten.

He laughed and patted me on the head. “Bareq? Bareq!” he yelled.

The Ithorian ambled back out from behind the stacks. “Quit with d’ yelling, I tell you, I can hear fine. What you want now?”

“Look after my NahLei’lei, or I will tell the kreetles to come and have lunch in this room.” Uncle Vahlek said.

The Ithorian shook his great curved head and sighed. “You a rough man, Akosh, mean to me. Your little charge is safe here, Ithorians look peaceful but we being very handy when backed into a corner and have to fight.”

My uncle smiled and nodded. “Fine then.” He said and he left without further conversation. Bareq looked at me for a moment and shook his head. “Was never knowing that man had anyone he cared for. How you get in his heart? Men like him have no one they treasure, too dangerous.” He asked.

I shrugged. “I’ve known him my whole life.” I said. “What do you mean by ‘men like him’?”

Bareq gave me a long steady stare which was a bit unnerving. “He a finder, among other things, very deadly.” He said. “No attachments, no strings.” And then with snort he turned his back on me. “He not be happy with me telling you his business if’n he hasn’t already told you. Best be reading now or else he be back and have to pay more credits.”

I did as he suggested. Curled up in the surprisingly comfortable chair in the far corner and began to read all about the Boonta Eve pod race and the boy that changed its history.

Time just slipped by, the archives Bareq had given me were really interesting, with images and information, the actual race had been captured and the highlights were to be seen. It made me wish I had actually been there, it looked

so exciting. I had never seen a pod race live; the Empire had banned them from taking place, not that this actually stopped it from happening.

There were also stories about Anakin and his mother, where they had lived, who their owner had been, and lots of other little stories and gossip which had been gathered to round out the life of this little boy who had won the pod race. There was one small image of the boy with a small group of people gathered around him after he had crossed the finish line; two of the faces were known to me. One was Amidala, the queen of Naboo in disguise and the other was the Jedi Qui-Gon Jin. I stared at the image for a really long time hardly believing that this man who was dead was the very same who kept appearing in my dreams. I found it strange to think that this little boy had become the hero of the Clone wars. He looked so young, just an ordinary kid. I was deep in thought when Uncle Vahlek returned almost four hours later.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” He asked bringing me out of my reverie. I looked up from the datapads.

“I think so.” I said, and then showed him the picture.

He nodded. “That’s Qui-Gon alright. Ready for lunch?”

“Yep.” I said getting up. I had made notes and copied some of the images and data into my own datapad.” I took the pile of archives and gave them back to Bareq who was now sitting at the desk near the front of the room.

“Was helping you?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Any time you be wanting more help and informations I am here.” He said and then looked up at my uncle. “And you be speaking nice to the kreetles, they do terrible bad damage to the archives. Tell them to stay away or bother Agle instead. I be having enough troubles as is without bugs destroying things.”

Uncle Vahlek grinned. “Thank you for all your help, Bareq.” He said and with me in tow, left.

“You wouldn’t really send kreetles to destroy his archives, would you?” I asked as we walked out.

Uncle Vahlek laughed. “No, Bareq and I have known each other a very long time and we argue like an old married couple. He is one of the most amazing beings I know, truth be told.”

It was hot outside in comparison to the soothing cool of the archive room and bright. I trotted beside Uncle Vahlek as he made his way through the crowded streets. He took me to a small, somewhat out of the way café and we sat outside under the shade of the awning. A cranky Rodian came and took the order and came back with our drinks. I watched people passing back and forth, going about their business, ignoring us and everything around them. Lunch came and it was surprisingly good. Uncle Vahlek chatted about some of Mos Espa’s more interesting aspects and I listened. It was a nice way to pass the time and I was

grateful that I could spend it with him. In the last week I felt that we had become very close. I had gotten to know him as more than just a fun uncle who brought me interesting toys and pets to play with. He had become a friend and someone I could talk to.

I was happy with the information I had found in the archives. I knew that Lord Vader would probably not have been so pleased about me digging up Anakin Skywalker’s past but I was becoming more and more convinced that the two Skywalkers were somehow connected. I was pretty certain that once I sorted these connections all out the story would make itself known to me. I wasn’t sure if finding all the information at the archives was at all what my dream had meant but it seemed to me that I had accomplished all I could in this town. I was looking forward to going home. Uncle Vahlek had just paid the bill when he suddenly got up, seeing someone across the street.

“Stay put, I’ll be right back. I need to talk to that man, it will just be a moment and then we can go. Bedi is apparently planning a full scale family dinner tonight, this means we need to get there on time. I do not want to risk her wrath.” He told me.

I nodded and watched as he made his way across the street weaving through the people and the traffic with surprising ease. I lost interest in what he was doing once he had stopped the person he wanted to talk to.

The late afternoon was always a nice time of day. I sat back in my seat and watched the world around me. My thoughts drifted a little to all the things going on in my life and I wondered what would be in store for me when I returned to the Imperial City. Now that I was away from it I realised I didn’t miss it at all. I missed Thrawn. I missed Master Kjestyll, Shiv and I missed Lord Vader but I did not miss Coruscant, the palace or the Emperor. It was a relief to be so far away from it all.

At first I didn’t notice the woman who was standing a little ways away from the café, staring at me but after a few moments it became unnerving. I stared back at her wondering if I knew her at all but she didn’t look familiar to me. She was an older woman with a face that had seen better times. She dressed typical to the region and her hair, which had been tied up in a simple bun was a sandy grey colour. After a few moments of staring I looked away. I thought she would just go away but instead she came up to the table and continued to look at me. It was unnerving. Unsure of what to do I looked around for Uncle Vahlek, but he was still deeply entrenched in what looked like a fairly serious conversation and I didn’t think that would be ending any time soon.

“Can I help you?” I asked the woman who seemed utterly fixated on me.

“Your name is Merlyn, yes?” she asked.

I nodded. “Do I know you?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No, but I knew your mother.”

I raised my eyebrows in question and asked with some disbelief. “You

knew Eri' Gabriel?"

She shook her head. "No, I knew your real mother, the woman who gave birth to you." She said, "The one who gave you your name."

"What?" I managed to whisper. Despite the warmth of the day all the hair on the back of my neck was suddenly standing on end.

She took a very deep breath and shook her head. "I don't even know where to begin. She told me this would happen but I didn't believe it." She wasn't making any sense, and I could feel her distress coming off her in great waves. It made me a little nauseous.

"I have no idea who you are or what you are talking about but I need to go, my uncle will be waiting for me." I said starting to get up. Suddenly, I didn't like the feeling that my world was about to come crashing down about me in a very messy way.

She grabbed my hand and pulled at me. "Please, listen to me." She spoke quickly. "I know how this must sound, but it is true. You were left someplace for others to find and raise, probably a transport ship. She left you with a journal only you can read and you probably have some remarkable talents that most people don't. Am I close?"

I sat back down hard in the chair. She now had my full attention. I nodded in answer to her question and looked again over to where uncle Vahlek was still standing. In my heart I knew there would be no avoiding this now, something set into motion that would be impossible to stop.

"Will you come to my home with me, I'd feel better about explaining all this to you there and I have something that belonged to your mother that she wanted you to have. I have waited a long time for this moment."

"Who are you?" I asked realising that I did not even know her name.

"My name is Rikka Blane. I was your mother's best friend." She said. I knew that everything she had told me was the truth. She had not lied but she was scared. I knew that she was very upset about seeing me. I could feel that without even concentrating. From some place deep inside of my soul I knew this was the answer to the unasked question, this is what I been waiting for. I could choose to get up and walk away and never know the truth or I could take the chance and go with this woman and find out where I really came from and perhaps why I had been so readily abandoned.

"I need to tell my uncle where I am going." I said pointing at him.

"That man, the one with white hair is your uncle?" she sounded more than a little surprised.

I nodded.

She made a face that was not happy and shook her head. "Come with me, he'll find you, it's what he's good at." She said bitterly.

I looked over at him and then back to Rikka who had now stood up.

"Please," she said. "I have carried these secrets a long time waiting for you."

I didn't know what else to do. I stood up and began to follow her through the streets of Mos Espa. I looked back over my shoulder but uncle Vahlek had moved and I couldn't see him any more. He was going to be really cross with me but I needed to know if what this woman was telling me was real.

She lived in a quiet street off the main core of the city, about ten minutes away from the café. A small unassuming house tucked away behind some larger apartment homes. As I followed her in through to door I didn't know what to expect. I didn't think that I was in any danger but I had terrible knots in my stomach. Her home was nice, simple and tidy. She ushered me into the small kitchen and gestured for me to sit at the table there.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked.

"No, thank you." I said folding my hands on my lap. "How do you know I am who you are looking for?" I asked trying to sound calm and business like.

She made a 'wait a moment' gesture with her finger and vanished from the room for a second. When she came back she handed me a holo-picture. It was of two young women hugging each other and laughing. One I knew was a much younger version of Rikka but the other made my heart skip a beat and I forget to breathe. My hands shook as I put the holo image back on the table. A very sickly, prickling sensation starting from the pit of my gut worked its way up into my head and I thought, just for a second, I would pass out.

'*Breathe just breathe*', I heard the man from my dreams voice whisper in my mind.

"I know who you are," She said seeing my reaction, "because you are the spitting image of your mother. Will you have something to drink now?"

It was all I could do just to nod. That tail eating snake had finally hit the wall and it hurt like hell.

I sipped at the cold juice she had given me and listened as she began to talk.

"Your mother was a woman named Akali L'uanna, she was a Jedi and she was my best friend." She said.

I watched as she tried to gather her thoughts. I could feel how hard this was for her but I didn't know what to think or say. I just stared at her and waited. Her words were not sinking in.

"Your mother and I had known each other since childhood. My family worked at the Jedi temple as part of the civilian work force and she and I became friends. It was not encouraged, these friendships but they happened anyway. I cannot count the number of times she was there for me. So when she showed up here one day, pregnant, scared to death with no place else to turn I was glad to have a chance to repay her for all she had done for me." She paused with a long sigh. "She would not say who the father of her child was even though I had asked.

She was confused and conflicted. The Jedi were not supposed to have relationships other than purely platonic. They were certainly not supposed to have children. She wouldn't tell me what had happened but she was terrified and that frightened me because of all the people I had ever met in my life she was the one person I thought to be fearless."

"We had lost touch after I married and left Coruscant to come here. I suppose that was normal. She was a Jedi with great responsibilities and we had drifted apart. I had tried to write to her a few times but never heard back. So, I was surprised to see her at my door step looking like death warmed up. She spoke about the war, what the history books call the Clone wars, and how terrible things had become. She had been involved in the Outer Rim disputes but she wouldn't speak of what had happened. Only that she had not imagined things could get so bad. She told me that I was lucky I had moved so far away, that on Coruscant the world had turned upside down. When she had discovered she was pregnant she thought only about the safety of her baby. She would not speak about who fathered you."

"She had just left her duties, her work behind. She said that you were all that mattered. I think she did not know how to deal with the guilt she felt between her need and love for you and her duty to the Jedi Order. She had been on the run for some time and it had taken its toll. She was not in good shape by the time she came to me and when you came into this world it was a little earlier than you should have. You were born here, in this house. She named you after her favourite flower from her home planet of Naboo." She said with a sad smile. "Her labour was really long and hard and I thought she was going to die in the process. What did I know about birth or helping with the process? I was no doctor and she refused outside help. She didn't want anyone to know she was here or that you existed. When you were born it was a small miracle really, I wished that my husband were still alive to share it, we could not have our own children and he had died of Tournier's syndrome some years prior."

"She stayed with me for a week and after a long discussion she decided to return to her duties and help fight out the war. I told her you would be safe here with me and that I would love you as though you were my very own. You were here for almost eight months. Such a good baby, an amazing baby really. You hardly ever cried and you always seemed content. It never occurred to me that you would be in any real danger, after all no one had known she was with child. When she returned almost a year later, I knew from the look in her eyes that something terrible had happened."

"She told me that her absence had raised questions and that there had been rumours about her and her relationship with the man who fathered you. She didn't think they knew she had borne a child but she was scared that even a whisper of such a thing could somehow get back to me, we had been friends and

that was a known fact. Finding me was not so hard. She said it wasn't safe any more for you to be with me, or for me to have you here. We argued a lot about what to do. I wanted you both here. No one would come here looking for a single Jedi, or so I had thought but she told me I didn't understand. The Jedi were being hunted like animals, slaughtered on sight, that there were bounties on their heads. She had said that the newly declared Emperor had decreed this but she didn't know why. She had tried to return to Coruscant but a beacon had warned her away, while she was on the run she had heard snippets of news reports and whispers of terrible things that were being done to hunt the renegade Jedi down and kill them. These people are ruthless, she had said. It was as if the entire galaxy had gone mad and been turned inside out. She believed that they would find her and if they even suspected a child they would hunt for that child as well. If they found you, she said, they would kill you and they would not even blink. She knew that you were force sensitive. She said she could feel it in you and that if she could so could others. She wanted you as far away as possible for anything that connected her with you. I disagreed with her but in the end she was your mother. She was special, she was a Jedi, she knew things, could do things I could not even dream of."

"One night, while I was asleep she took you and left, I never knew where. There was no note, no letter of explanation nothing. I suppose she felt that if I really knew nothing then I could say nothing. Two months later a letter, along with a sealed box, was delivered. The letter said that you were safe. She had found good people who would care for you, give you a good home far away from the Empire, and that there were no connections to tie you to her or me in any way. She had written that I was not to be sad, that I would meet you one day here in Mos Espa and I would know you by your looks. That when I did find you I was to ask about a journal only you could read but she never said why." Rikka drew a deep breath and sipped her juice. "I didn't understand any of this but one of her gifts was that she sometimes saw into the future and I assumed that she had seen this. All these years I have carried this story around in me and now here you are."

I sat there feeling as though I had just been punched in the gut. I was trembling. It was all incredibly surreal. There were so many things I wanted to ask and just could not. I had lost the ability of coherent thought. I was grateful when the front door open loudly and uncle Vahlek strode into the kitchen. I didn't have to see his face to know he was furious.

"I told you he would find you." Rikka said in a resigned voice. "He always finds those that he seeks."

"Quiet, woman!" He snarled.

I looked up at him, our eyes met and his anger immediately turned to worry. "Lei'lei what is it, are you hurt?" he asked coming to squat down beside my chair.

I just stared at him and then said in a voice I didn't recognize as mine. "I was born in this house."

There was moment of perfect stillness in the room and then uncle Vahlek stood up. He looked at Rikka who nodded.

"Tell him." I whispered to her. "Tell him everything you just told me."

And she did. Uncle Vahlek stood very still as her story unfolded a second time, less scattered, more coherent. When she was done she left the room without saying a word. He pulled a chair over and sat next to me. I pushed the holo-image Rikka had given me over to him before he could say anything and watched his face when he looked at it. He let the air out of his lungs slowly.

"You said you knew some of the Jedi, did you know her?" I asked.

"No Lei'lei I didn't." he spoke gently, he spoke the truth. "Sarlacc's teeth, the resemblance is uncanny."

Rikka came back into the room holding a plain metal box. She set it on the table and pushed it to me. "She wanted you to have this. It was sealed, I never opened it."

I glanced at uncle Vahlek and then gingerly touched the box. Nothing happened so I broke the seal and opened it. I heard uncle Vahlek make a small sound of surprise and Rikka covered her mouth with her hand. Lying on a folded piece of cloth was something I had only ever seen when I was in the presence of Lord Vader.

"Her lightsaber." Rikka said in a voice that was filled with sorrow. "She would not have given that up if she thought she would live."

I bit my lip and uncle Vahlek looked at me. "You do not have to if you do not want to." He said quietly.

"Yes, yes I do." I told him. "Because if I don't do it now, I never will."

He nodded but he wasn't happy and he shifted a little closer to me as though his physical presence would shield me from the hurt he knew was coming.

I reached over and picked up the lightsaber knowing that what would hit me would be terrible. All my life this one gift had made itself known in strange and often unassuming ways, building up slowly and quietly. In the last week I had had more visions and they had been more powerful than for most of my life and suddenly I understood why, to prepare me for this exact moment. All the training I had undergone at the hand of Lord Vader and Master Kjestyll had readied me for this because it would be one of the most difficult things I would ever have to see. I was not wrong. I took a deep steadying breath, looked at uncle Vahlek who nodded and then grasped the blade's handle firmly. I jerked back hard as the images assaulted me. I heard Rikka move and uncle Vahlek stopped her.

"No, don't touch her." He ordered, holding his arm out straight shielding me from her interference.

I gasped as the visions from this object tumbled about me. It was

physically painful. There were so many memories, so much information that it was too much to take in and understand all at once. Her life as a Jedi, the things she had done and known, the man who had fathered me, the war, even her own death were all tied up in this weapon that had been a part of her very being. It was as though I was being shown a holo story on fast forward with burning, powerful emotions embedded into it. I was numb when the visions finished. Her lightsaber had been a part of her, it held her soul and I never wanted to touch it again. It rolled from my open hand as I let it go. Uncle Vahlek caught it before it fell off the table and laid it gingerly back in the box.

The room was utterly still. I looked at uncle Vahlek. "Zte'sa, I want to go home now." I whispered. With his help, I got up slowly; it was like moving through water.

Rikka watched me. "She loved you so much and so did I." She murmured.

I just looked at her. I didn't know what else to say. Uncle Vahlek gathered up the box with the lightsaber in it and tucked it carefully in his bag.

"Will I ever see you again?" she asked. There was such a sadness in her voice I thought it would break my heart.

I had no idea how to answer her and I didn't have to because uncle Vahlek spoke first.

"You did what you were meant to." He said, his voice was firm but also gentle. "Give her time, Rikka Blane. When your paths are meant to cross again they will."

She regarded him coldly. "And what is your part to play in all of this, Tze'yusha'Jin?" she asked. I had never heard the word she called him before. I did not know its meaning but there was anger behind it and fear.

He just gave her a cold stare. "I am the girl's sworn guardian. You know what that means." He said almost angrily. "Be at peace."

She was very afraid of uncle Vahlek but I had no idea why. He waited until she gave him a small nod. She watched as he tucked a protective arm around my shoulders and didn't say anything else. As we left there were tears in her eyes.

I could not recall the walk to the shuttle port or the flight back to Mos Eisley. I just kept replaying the images of my mother over and over again in my head. Her life, her lover, her death, I couldn't shut them out. Uncle Vahlek kept silent. It was dark by the time we reached home and I was utterly exhausted.

We walked in the house and immediately everyone knew something was wrong. I just shook my head. How could I even begin to speak of what had happened? I needed to escape, to be some place quiet to think. Without saying a word I left the kitchen where we all stood and made my way up to the rooftop. As I

walked away I heard uncle Vahlek start to explain what had happened and felt the stunned shock that fell on the room.

I sat with my back against the domed roof and stared at the stars in the sky wondering how such a large and beautiful universe could be so twisted and cruel. I could not cry. I wasn't even angry. I felt strangely empty. Everything I had known in my life was being systematically turned upside down. All the things I had believed in no longer held sway or meaning. Questions I had never thought to ask before now screamed at me in my head. I was an illegitimate child born of a soldier and a Jedi in the midst of a war, hidden away from the very people I ended up working with and for. It was somehow not even a surprise but I couldn't quite digest it. Had the Emperor known this? Had he guessed? What about Lord Vader, he had been trained as a Jedi once, Palpatine had told me. Had he known my mother? Had he been among those who had hunted for her? Nothing happens by chance, the Dantassi said, there are no coincidences. I wonder what they had to say about being driven mad by it all.

It was my father who eventually came to make sure I had not jumped off the roof. He handed me a glass of moonlight and I sipped at it gratefully. For a very long time nothing was said, he was waiting for me to break the silence.

"Who am I, papa?" I asked.

I felt him smile and he ruffled my hair in a way he had not done since I was very small. "You are my beautiful, talented, wilful, mysterious daughter." He said. It was the perfect answer, perhaps the only answer. He waited a few moments then said. "Come back downstairs, everyone is worried. Dinner is waiting and so is your family."

I smiled at him and let him pull me to my feet. He cuddled me close. "No matter what," he whispered in my ear, "I love you, I love you more than anything in the galaxy and nothing will ever change that."

"I love you too, papa." And I meant it.

He nodded, "I know that, pet." He said and we went back downstairs into the house where the others were waiting.

For the next few weeks I lived in a world of engines and hyperdrives. My father had not been joking about the shortage of half decent mechanics. There was certainly no shortage of work and I threw myself into it. I could forget about pretty much everything when I was fixing a ship. None of my family pressed me for answers or details. Uncle Vahlek had told them everything Rikka Blane had said, there wasn't much to add. I think everyone was waiting for me to open that up and they were all afraid to push. That night, after dinner I had hidden on my ship under the pretence of doing work. Instead, I had sat at the little dining table and tried re read all of Thrawn's letters as if that very act would bring me some peace of mind but after reading the same sentence over and over again, I realised that not even Thrawn's words would help.

Uncle Vahlek had come to find me long after everyone else had gone to bed. He had looked at the small pile of hand written paper letters but had not commented. He watched as I had cleared them from the table and slipped them back in the ornate box I stored them in.

"I brought you this." He had said sitting down across from me placing the metal box with my birth mother's lightsaber in it in front of me.

I had let out my breath noisily and shaken my head. "I don't want it." I had said, folding my arms across my chest. I didn't want to touch it.

Uncle Vahlek had looked at me for a while and then had said slowly. "Okay."

"Will you keep it for me?" I had asked. "I don't want anyone else to know about it and I don't know what to do with it."

He had nodded slowly and taken it back, returning it to the satchel. "When you are ready, you know where to find it." He'd said.

"Thank you." I had said.

"Get some sleep, Lei'lei, sitting up all night brooding won't change what has happened, won't change the past and won't change the universe." He had said. "I doubt that this knowledge will even change you all that much, it just gives you a bigger picture of yourself, is all."

"I just don't know what to think of it all, Zte'sa." I had said. I was so tired.

"Well then, don't think. Give it time. You have been through an awful lot in the last year and a half, why do you feel you need to race through it all and have answers for everything now? You should know by now the universe unfolds its secrets one piece at a time, you can't force it or rush it and trying to do so will only drive you insane." He had said. "You always did try to run before you could walk."

I had given him a small smile and nodded.

He had studied me for a few moments. "Look, if you want to talk or a place to think, come out to the house. I'll have a key made for you and couriered out. The jaxes would love it, I'm sure." He paused. "That woman in Mos Espa, Rikka Blane, will be there when you want to know more about Akali L'uanna and if you don't want to go out to Mos Espa alone I will go with you. I always have things I can do in the city, even if it is only to pester Bareq." He smiled. "You are not alone Lei'lei, so don't isolate yourself, you have a wonderful family who loves you very much. Don't shut them, us, out."

"Thanks Zte'sa."

"Any time." He had said as he got up to leave. "I'll take care of this for you." He had patted his satchel.

I had nodded and watched as he left my ship.

He had been right. Sitting around brooding was not the answer, fixing things was and my father put me to work.

Both Bedi and Bel had tried to cheer me up but I didn't need cheering up, I

needed time to think. In the end it had been my father who had understood. He let me work, he didn't nag about the long hours I kept, or that I sometimes spent the night sleeping on my ship instead of in the house, and that sometimes I went up out to the Bluff and sat there for hours and hours on end. Of course, we had been through a similar situation before, when my mother had been killed. This time he understood that space and time was what I needed most of all and he gave it. When I was ready, I talked about it all and he listened.

It had taken me longer than I had thought it would to sort through all the information I had gathered and put it down into some sort coherent report for Lord Vader, my mind was on other things. What had seemed to me to be a huge jumble of images and thoughts had not seemed like much once I had transcribed everything from my head to datapad. When I was finished and felt that the report was as full as it would ever be I contacted Lord Vader, or tried to. For several weeks all I got was a sour faced officer on board Lord Vader's ship telling me the Dark Lord was unavailable for personal contact but I was welcome to leave a message. I should have been worried, perhaps, but I didn't sense anything wrong and put this lack of contact down to standard operating procedure while on some sort of covert operations. Although it wasn't normal for him to completely ignore me for long periods of time, Lord Vader was often unreachable. I didn't mind, I was happy on Tatooine and quite content to tinker with engines and manage my duties from home and Bestine. He contacted me five days before Boonta Eve.

"You have information for me?" he asked.

"Good afternoon Lord Vader, I hope that you are well?" I said ignoring his usual brusque manner for a moment then added. "Yes, I do you wish me to uplink now?"

"No, you will deliver this in person. I do not trust this to even the most secure channel. We will be in your sector shortly and you may rendezvous with me at these coordinates and personally deliver all the information you have. I shall expect you here at 22:00 CST at the latest."

"Am I to remain on board with you?" I asked, wondering if I should say my goodbyes now or not.

"That will be determined when I have studied the information." He replied tersely. "I shall expect you not to be late." He said and shut the connection.

By my calculations it would take me three hours to reach the rendezvous point pushing the engines just a little bit so I aimed for four and went to talk to my father. I wasn't sure what would happen so I wanted to leave properly and not just on a rush and hope that I'd be coming back. With Lord Vader it was impossible to tell what he wanted and I wasn't about to try and second guess him.

I arrived at the rendezvous point on time and once on board the *Executor* I was escorted to his personal chambers by two stormtroopers who refused to hold a conversation with me. Stormtroopers don't have much of a sense of humour. Once inside his private rooms I was left alone.

He was sitting in his hyperbaric chamber which was just opening up like some giant egg split in two. The dim lighting in the room made it difficult to see details and I was glad of this. I watched in morbid fascination as his helmet was mechanically lowered onto his scarred head. I breathed a small sigh of relief when his damaged skull was covered and the soft hiss of the pressure equalization signalled completion of the mechanical arm's task. I waited with my hands behind my back while he slowly got out of the strange cocoon like chamber and it closed up on its own.

He signalled me to follow him into one of the smaller conference rooms.

"I trust your flight here was uneventful." He said being uncharacteristically pleasant. "My aide readied stim'caf or tea if you wish." He gestured to the tray on the table, two carafes, milk in a jug and a single cup. He waited until I had poured a cup of 'caf then asked about my work.

I handed him the data pad. I sat down, sipped my drink, made a face and waited while he scanned it carefully.

"Is this all you found out?" he asked once he was done. He tossed the data pad on the table.

"There isn't much to find. He didn't have an exciting life in Tatooine and not that many people really knew him." I said. "I did find this at the farm he lived on." I pulled out the broken toy from my satchel and handed it to him.

He took it carefully from my fingers and looked at it, turning it over in his large, black gloved hands. "What am I supposed to get from this?" he asked annoyed.

"You don't get images, sensations from objects?" I asked a little surprised.

He regarded me for a moment then asked. "Do you?"

I nodded slowly, "My uncle called it psychometry." I said.

He paused for a moment and seemed to be re-evaluating me. "Another little talent you seem to have kept hidden." He said dangerously. "Show me what you saw."

I shook my head. I didn't want to do that. All the images I held in my head were a jumbled mess and disorganized. I had no way to sort them out and present them in any logical manner; this included the images of Shmi's burial and the images of my birth mother. I didn't want him to see these things. I wasn't going to get a choice in this matter though. He had plucked me out of my chair by my arm and pulled me up close to his face.

"Show me!" he commanded.

"My lord, everything is in the report..." I didn't get the chance to finish my

sentence before his grip on my arm turned very painful.

“Your disobedience is tedious, show me now!” he snarled.

I nodded and he let go of my arm. I was scared and tired so it was a struggle to get my thoughts in order and my breathing steady. I needed to be able to concentrate so that I did not show him the wrong thing.

I focussed on the little toy and pulled the images it had shown me to the fore front of my thoughts, Luke as a small boy, Luke as a young man, Luke arguing with his uncle, Luke with new droids. Up until that image Lord Vader was calm but as soon as he saw the two droids, an R2 unit and a Protocol droid he growled shaking my concentration. As I tried to get back on track he pushed at me and I lost the train of thought completely. Random images cropped up instead. Images of the burial, of the boy I thought was Anakin, the chulpas laid on the mourning marker. Sharp and clear images of my birth mother flashed through my mind as well until he broke the mental connection and pushed me away from him. He stared at me and the anger coming from him in waves was a physical thing.

“You must learn control.” He hissed. “You were told to find out about Luke Skywalker and instead I find you disobeyed me.” He was angry.

“I did not! It is impossible to ask about the name Skywalker without hearing the name Anakin as well. He is a folk hero on Tatooine!” I retorted hotly.

He advanced on me with a deadly menace. “I told you never to mention that name again! I told you he is dead!”

I put my hands on my hips; I was starting to get annoyed. “Well he may be dead but he is not forgotten! Why does it make you so angry, anyway? Why do you care?” I asked.

He turned away from me but his rage flowed about him like sand on the wind. Seconds seemed like hours until he asked. “Who is the woman, the one who looks like you?”

I did not want to get into this conversation.

“Who is she?” he asked again keeping his back to me. His tone of voice said he would not ask again nicely.

“Her name was Akali L’uanna, she was a Jedi.” I said quietly.

“I remember her.” He nodded. “Why do you have images of her in your head?”

I paused not quite certain how to say what I needed to say. I could feel his rising temper start to get the better of him and blurted it out. “She was my birth mother.” I said through gritted teeth.

He nodded slowly. “Yes, now I see. Now, I understand why you always seemed familiar to me.”

I stared at his back in disbelief. I wanted to scream at him but instead drew a deep breath. “When we met for the first time, you knew I had been adopted even when no one else knew, you did. How?”

He whirled around to face me and I involuntarily stepped back from him. “Do you think, for a second that I would allow you to work for me, so closely with me and I should not know exactly who and what you are? I make it my business to know everything about those around me, especially people with force powers.” he said. “Your adoption papers are on record, it was never kept secret, except maybe to you. Now I see that these papers were cleverly created, excellent forgeries I might add to get past our Intel screening. They indicated your birth parents were traders from Corellia and there was nothing to suggest otherwise, except your force talents. You were never what you appeared to be and now I understand why.”

I looked at him, “Did you know? Did you know she was my birth mother?” my heart was pounding but not from fear, I was angry and I was having trouble controlling it.

He shook his head. “No, but I suspected you had some Jedi blood in you. I did not see the resemblance until now. I did not know Jedi L’uanna well, our paths did not cross very often and it was a very long time ago” He added.

“Why did you not ever say anything about what you suspected?”

“What should I have said?” he asked. “Telling you of your possible heritage was none of my concern as long as you did your job and remained loyal to the Empire what do I care about who gave birth to you?”

My anger flared. “Did you kill her? Did you hunt her down?” I asked.

“I did not have to; her lover did that for us as he was supposed to, as he was ordered to.” He replied coldly.

I opened my mouth to answer but was at a loss for words. I wanted to ask if he knew how she had died but could not. Instead anger and grief poured out into the room, both his and mine and clashed. I yelled at him without thinking about the consequences.

“You really are heartless! Why did you ask me to find out about this boy, Luke? He’s just some poor kid who never even knew who his real parents were. He had a miserable life in the middle of nowhere on the most forsaken planet in the galaxy!”

He stopped for a moment. “You sympathise with him.” He said in amazement.

“I know what it is like to lose someone I loved. I know what it is like to grow up without a mother. I know how it feels not to know who my real parents are, not to know anything about where I truly come from. So yes, I sympathise with him. I understand what he must have felt growing up on that hell hole of a farm, alone not knowing who he really was. What would you know about any of this? You don’t have a heart or a soul; you don’t know what it feels like to love or to lose someone, especially your mother!”

He snarled at me. “Mind your mouth!”

I ignored the prickling sensation I usually associated with extreme danger.

“Why? You don’t give a Spicer’s damn about anyone or anything! You are nothing but a monster all wrapped up in black armour and hiding behind that mask. You hunt down people for sport. I was wrong about you; you have no redeeming qualities at all! In fact I am beginning to wonder if you even had a mother of if you weren’t something the Emperor hatched from a bad nightmare that he...”

I never got to finish my sentence. He moved so fast I never saw it coming. His hand clamped around my neck as he slammed me backwards against the wall so hard I saw stars when my head collided with it. His hand crushed my throat painfully and if he squeezed even the tiniest bit harder I knew he would break my neck. I stood very, very still and didn’t fight him. My anger swiftly replaced by fear.

“You hold your tongue you stupid, ignorant girl!” he hissed. “You know nothing of me or my life and you will never speak of my mother again!” he spat. As he spoke I saw flashes, inadvertent images sent to me through his anger which spilled about him like flowing water. His mother, letting him as a small fair haired boy leave home, telling him not to look back, his mother held captive and tortured in the Tusken camp, dying in his arms and worst of all his helplessness. I saw images of Padmé Naberrie and she was pregnant, flashes violent anger and jealousy, he was hurting her. I saw fire, lots and lots of fire. It was the fire and the agonizing pain that finally broke me. I screamed.

I wanted to stop the barrage of images but neither he nor I could control them. Sent in anger they shoved their way into my head like an angry mob and it was all I could do to stay conscious and sane. I gripped at the arm attached to the hand at my throat with my hands, wanting him to either let me go, to break the contact or kill me quickly and get it over with instead he stood transfixed on me. And then, as though I had been slapped on the face, it came to me, the link I had missed. I could not believe I hadn’t seen it before now.

Wide eyed I stared at him and before I could think to shut up I whispered, “Anakin. *You* are Anakin Skywalker.” I thought he would crush my neck but instead he pulled his hand away from me as though he had been stung. I slid clumsily to the floor and stared up at him.

“Luke is your son?” I whispered hoarsely.

He stormed away from me to the other side of the room, I could feel his conflict, his anger mingled with something else I couldn’t define and it made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I didn’t understand why I was still alive. I didn’t dare break the heavy silence and stayed as still as I could. When he turned around and came back to face me I was certain he would kill me. I cowered against the wall trying to make myself as small as possible. Instead he regarded me for a long time with a gaze hidden behind his mask.

“Anakin Skywalker is dead. Luke Skywalker is a traitor to the Empire. You will *never* speak of this again.” He said coldly. “Now, leave!”

When I didn’t move he hauled me to my feet and dragged me to the door

of the outer chamber, summoning the two guards who waited outside.

“Escort Miss Gabriel to her ship! See that she leaves immediately.” He said shoving me over to them. I shook my arm free when one of them reached for me. Lord Vader grabbed me by the chin forcing me to look at him directly. I whimpered. He was hurting me.

“You will stay on Tatooine and you will do your job from there until I say otherwise. Is this understood?” he said in a voice that told me I had no choice in the matter.

I nodded. I wasn’t very successful at stopping the tears that rolled down my cheeks. I thought for a moment we would stand locked together like that forever. His anger and my fear mixed together in one awful combination. Then he hissed into my face, “Get out of my sight.” He waited a hair’s breadth before shoving my face away from him so violently I thought he might break my neck after all and then without further word he returned to his chamber leaving me, shaken to the core, with two very confused looking guards.

“I know my way to the docking bay. “ My voice was hoarse and they insisted on accompanying me anyway, despite my protests.

I arrived back on Tatooine very early in the morning in a state of shock. I didn’t want to return to Mos Eisley, my father and the others would ask too many questions so I landed out by my uncle Vahlek’s house.

Even though I had tried to be quiet about entering his house at that hour of the morning, I had woken him. Tying his robe and yawning, he came down into the kitchen to find me sitting at the table. The bruises on my chin and neck were beginning to blossom like colourful flowers. I didn’t look at him; I just stared blankly at the wall, unable to speak, unable to cry. The shock of what had happened slowly sinking in.

“Lei’lei, what is it?” he asked.

I didn’t say anything and I didn’t resist when he inspected my jaw and neck. His touch was gentle as he surveyed the damage Lord Vader had done.

“Who did this to you?” he asked.

I told him. My voice was still hoarse and rough.

“Why?” his voice was tight and angry.

I bit back the first surge of sorrow I had felt since I had left the *Executor*. “Lord Vader doesn’t like to be reminded of the past.” I said. “He sent me away and I don’t know what to do. I don’t know why he is so angry, why he is so afraid.”

Uncle Vahlek pursed his lips and sighed. “The Zabrak have a saying. *To bury your past deep is to scatter your fears wide.*” He said. “I have some salve that will help with the pain, don’t go any where.” He told me getting up and vanishing for a few moments. When he came back he was holding a small tin, which when he opened it, filled the kitchen with a pungent scent. It wasn’t unpleasant. I winced as he applied a small amount to the nasty looking bruises on

my throat and jaw.

“Can I stay with you? If I go home there will be too many questions and I can’t handle that right now.”

He nodded. “Of course. I’ll let Kit know you’re here later on. You should get some sleep, you look like hell.”

I shook my head. “He’s banished me, Zte’sa.” I suddenly said on the verge of tears, looking into my uncle’s eyes for the first time since he had come into the kitchen. “I made him angry, hurt him somehow and now he’s banished me. I should be dead, I thought he would kill me but he didn’t and I don’t know why. Instead he sent me away and I don’t think he’ll ever want to see me again.” I blinked away the tears welling up in my eyes.

Uncle Vahlek regarded me for a moment; the expression on his face was unreadable. “Perhaps,” he said softly, “then again, perhaps not.”

I just looked at him. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Then you do what one always does when any terrible storm hits.” He said gently. “You wait it out, Lei’lei, just wait it out.”

End of Part 1