

Daughter of the Empire

Book 1

Written by F. Messer 2005-2006

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This story contains spoilers so you have been warned!

CHAPTER TWO

Strength and passion 1

We were chasing a Corellian Corvette and they were fighting back. The frequent flashes of laser fire illuminated my quarters. I had turned the lights out because it made it easier to watch. The *Devastator* moved with a silky grace through space, like some huge malevolent creature stalking its prey. I knew without a doubt that this Corellian ship would lose.

Below us was my home world of Tatooine. It sat in space, a great orange ball of sand and rock. The atmosphere was nothing more than a thin blue line caressing the planet's surface. For such a hostile place it seemed so very fragile from up here.

Tatoo1 and Tatoo2 were nothing more than brilliant lights against the blackness of the space we were gliding through. On this huge ship, one barely even heard the engines, it was hard to believe we could move so fast. I would never have thought that something so large could be so elegant, but next to the bulky design of the tiny freighter, *Devastator* was a Prima Donn. How could they even hope to out run us?

I had heard from Jorae that there were whispers of plans for an even larger Imperial destroyer. I wondered how it is possible to build a ship even larger than this one. The Empire, it seemed liked its toys big and dangerous.

The small corvette was no match and it was tractored on board the *Devastator*, swallowed whole into the main hanger. I had to know what was going on so I made my way as quickly as I could to the main hanger bay to see what was happening. This was a restricted area and it was guarded, with no place to sneak by and no hope at all of just waltzing by the guards I decided to try some of the Force powers I had be learning. I took a deep breath and allowed the Force to move through me. It was easy to push the guards, just a little, and they let me by without a problem. I snuck around and climbed to the upper catwalk and watched everything from the high gantry. Not good to get too close. I was so fascinated by everything that was going on I didn't hear Jorae climbing up beside me, I was a bit surprised that found me.

"What are you doing here? It is off limits." He hissed.

"How in the name of Sarlacc did you know I was here?"

"I went by your quarters, your protocol droid said something about you muttering 'gotta see this.' It didn't take me long to figure it out."

"Well, now you found me, what is going on?"

"Lord Vader thinks the stolen plans for the battle station are onboard the ship, it's a consulate ship." he said. "If Vader is wrong there will be hell to pay."

I smiled at Jorae, "Lord Vader is never wrong. Now shut up and watch." I'd ask about what plans he was talking about later.

We heard the sound of laser fire and then there was an awful silence. I started to scramble down the gantry way but Jorae grabbed my arm. "No, bad enough that you snuck in here, now stay put!"

"You think they killed everyone onboard?" I asked him.

Jorae shrugged. "I don't know but I can tell you I am glad I am not on board that ship. Hey look!" he pointed to the hatch that was blasted open. A group of stormtroopers escorting a young woman completely dressed in white. She couldn't have been more than a year or two younger than I was, she was scared, I could feel her fear although she didn't show it. They took her off to the detention block. I watched as Lord Vader came out of the corvette shortly after but instead of leaving right away he stopped and looked up at exactly the spot we were hiding. We both ducked down as flat as we could go.

"Buggery sand rats and blast!!!!" I hissed. He might not have seen us but he sure as sarlacc knew I was there, right where I was not supposed to be.

We got out of the docking bay just as the *Tantive IV* was being released back into space. A few moments later an explosion rippled off the port side.

"They destroyed it." I whispered running to look out of the nearest view port. All that was left of the Corvette was twinkling bits of wreckage. They had taken only one prisoner which meant everyone else onboard that ship had been killed. Jorae tugged on my sleeve. "We need to get away from here before we get caught."

I didn't have the heart to tell him it was too late for that. As we walked back to my Quarters it suddenly occurred to me that Jorae seemed to know an awful lot for a Lieutenant. "How did you know about these stolen plans? You seem to know all the good news."

Jorae grinned at me. "Before I began my Imperial career I was a slicer. I know how to find information."

"A slicer?"

"Yeah, I can hack into computers and find all sorts of information. I am a communications officer in training. I got assigned to you as extra duty. They thought that we might get along, I guess, or maybe the idea was that I keep you out of trouble."

"I see." I said sarcastically. "Well, slicer, let's go and find out what is happening now."

"What do you mean?"

"You're going to show me how to get into the ship's mainframe. I don't have clearance to even look in the database."

Jorae stopped and stared at me. "Not on your life."

I smiled at him sweetly and it crossed my mind that I could maybe even force him to do what I wished, but I didn't want to do that. It wasn't a talent I used that often and it felt somehow vaguely wrong to use it in this manner. Jorae was

the only person aside from Lord Vader who spoke to me on this ship, besides I was betting had I tried any sort mind push again Lord Vader would feel it and I was pretty sure I was already in big poodoo for sneaking about in places I was not supposed to be. So I did the next best thing, I whined.

“Oh please...it doesn't have to be anything huge but I bet your clearance is way better than mine.”

He made a face. I whined at him some more and he finally gave in.

“Great! I need a lesson in how to use this ship's system anyway. It is a whole other world in comparison to where I come from.”

Jorae made a face. I got my droid to fetch us stim'caf and we got down to work. Jorae wasn't kidding about knowing his way around the computer system. He showed me how to use the consol and how to bypass some of the blocks in place.

“You should ask Lord Vader if you can get a better clearance level.”

“Oh yes, I will just march into his office and request that right away.” I made a face at him. “Can't you fiddle around with it or something?”

He thought about it. “Uhmhhh no.”

I made a face but I didn't push the issue. “So where are we headed?” I asked him. He brought up the navigational charts and the plotted course for the ship and pointed it out.

“Wonder why we are headed there, there are no planets near by.” I asked.

“That's where the Death Star is located.”

“What the heck is a Death Star?” I asked.

“Only the largest space station and the most powerful weapon in the Empire.” He said smugly.

“And the plans for it were stolen?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Bet someone's head rolled for that.”

Jorae nodded. “Well the Emperor doesn't send Vader after just anyone. Half the crew just about had heart attacks when the news hit that he was coming onboard. I would not want to be in her shoes.” He said.

“Whose shoes?”

“Sheesh, where have you been? That was Princess Leia, the daughter of Bail Organa. She's an ambassador to the Imperial Senate. Vader suspects her of being part of the Rebel Alliance, her file is red-flagged.”

“Rebels? You mean the Rebellion is a big thing.”

“Don't you get any news where you come from?”

I gave him a look. “I come from Tatooine. I have heard talk among some of the star pilots but thought it was mostly just gossip.”

“Oh well, that explains it.”

“Where are you from then?” I asked.

“Coruscant.” He said. “I grew up in Coco town.”

“Oh.” I nodded as if I knew what that meant and made a face that said I was clueless.

“It's short for Collective Commerce, lots of businesses there. My parents run a computer repair shop there.” he laughed. “Have you even been to Coruscant?”

I nodded. “Yeah for a short time, but I stuck to the palace, then I was transferred here.”

“The Imperial Palace?” he whistled. “You must be important.”

“Not that I know of, just got hired to do a job and that meant staying at the palace for a while.” I said.

“Must be something special about you, I never heard of Lord Vader taking anyone ever along with him. What is the palace like?” he asked.

“Big.” I said. “And opulent.” I shrugged. “I can't describe it.”

“I have always wanted to go there.” He said a little wistfully.

I did my best smuggler voice. “Stick with me kid and maybe you'll get your wish.”

He grinned. He had a great grin. Jorae was a couple of year older than me and very cute in a boyish sort of way. He had sandy coloured hair and warm, brown eyes. He was average height and slender in build. He had the most devilish grin I had ever seen. Given enough time I was certain I could corrupt him enough to get him into all sorts of trouble.

He gave me one of those grins now and nodded. “I get the feeling that with you, anything is possible.”

It was my turn to smile. I was happy to be with someone almost my own age, who did not care that I was not dressed in the right sort of fashion and who didn't speak Lord Vader's name in a hushed and terrified whisper. He did however turn visibly white when a message came through saying I was to report to Lord Vader immediately.

I winked at him and said “Paperwork” and left it at that. He walked me part way and then I was on my own. This was not going to be good but I didn't want Jorae to know I was scared.

Lord Vader was in his personal training room, which a fancy name for the huge empty space he usually practised in. Neither I nor the sound of the door closing distracted him and I arrived in time to watch him destroy two specially designed training droids. He was incredibly fast and I stood in awe at the grace and ease with which he fought. It was like watching some sort of strange mix between dance and martial art. I had never seen a light saber before, he had not spoken of it when he had begun my training. It was the most exquisite weapon I had ever seen. He stopped once the droids were in pieces and just stared at them

for a moment then he switched the light saber off, clipped it to his belt and turned his attention on me. He made a hand motion, I obeyed and came forward to stand a whole lot closer to him. He towered over me, his hands on his hips. I waited.

“You will not practice your force powers on members of this crew again.” He said.

I nodded.

“If you wish more access to restricted areas, you ask.” He said.

I nodded.

“You will remain on this ship when I go to the Battle Station.”

“But why?” I blurted out.

He seemed to be counting top ten. “Because, I wish it, because you will obey me when I tell you to do something. Is that understood?”

Then I said the two words one should never say to a Dark Lord of the Sith who has just given you a clear and direct order.

“Yes, but...” and that is as far as I got.

I doubt that I could ever really describe what it is like when someone has a force grip choke hold on you, but it is like being strangled from the inside out. A terrible, terrible sensation and Lord Vader made sure I knew what was happening to me by doing it slowly. I knew that force powers could be fought with force powers and in my small way I tried to fight back. It seemed I wasn't quite ready to die just yet and I used my anger and fear to push back at the force grip. Sort of like a sand-mouse trying to stop a Kraut Dragon, completely and utterly useless.

I stumbled backwards when he released me but instead of finding relief I found his hand at my throat. I guess in this case, if force powers were not going to scare me then his physical strength would have to do. I do not doubt for a moment that if he had wanted to he could have killed me with the force and I know I was not strong enough to stop him in the least but it was not what he wanted to accomplish. He wanted to terrify me and this way worked better. I could struggle against him with my own fledgling force powers but I had no chance against him physically. He pinned me up against the wall, his hand large enough to pretty much crush my throat in one go.

“You will obey me when I give an order.” He said.

I nodded as best I could with his hand around my neck.

“You will remain on board this ship until I return.”

I nodded some more, even though it hurt.

“You will not practice your force powers on members of this crew.” He said.

I nodded again, gritting my teeth against the pain.

“This is the last time I shall ever repeat myself to you.”

I nodded a fourth time and he let me go. I slid, not so gracefully, to the floor and touched my throat, everything still there, but breathing hurt.

He yanked me to my feet and made me face him. “If you disobey me in these matters, I will eliminate you.” He said tersely and then he left the room.

I sank back down to the floor and stayed there, swallowing to make sure I still could. I was shaking, I couldn't stop. If he had wanted me scared it had worked. I was terrified out of my wits. It took me forever to find the ability to stand up again and walk back to my quarters. When I arrived, there was a message on my data system informing me that my security clearance had been significantly upgraded and that a new ID card would be delivered as soon as possible.

I went into the bathroom to wash my face and saw the beautiful set of bruises that were beginning to blossom at my throat. They would serve as a reminder, the first of many, to never piss the Dark Lord off, ever.

On a star ship, time becomes irrelevant. The days are marked by watches and shifts, outside the ship is eternal darkness marred only by the brilliant pin prick of thousands of stars. Daylight is an illusion. I slept when I needed to most of the time, since I was not part of the regular crew I had no official watch duties, no regular watch duties meant no real routine. Most of the time I could sleep okay but not after what had happened, too many images in my head. I closed my eyes and all I saw was the *Tantive IV* exploding, even though I hadn't really watched the explosion, my mind created the image for me. I tried to shut that out and it would be replaced by Lord Vader or something else equally frightening. Finally, I gave up. Sleep was not going to come no matter how much I tried to relax. I got up and dressed in clothes that were easy to move in and made my way to the training room Vader had used. I hoped it would be empty at this time.

The room was basic and sparse. It had high ceilings which is why, I guessed, Lord Vader liked to use it for his light saber practice. It was in a quiet part of the ship, away from much of the general movement, hustle and bustle. There was a rack of hand to hand combat weapons, some of which I had never seen before and others that were more familiar to me.

I kept the lights off, the room was not totally dark and I didn't want the glaring lights on at all, not even a little bit. I loved to work out in the dark, force of habit. I began by stretching which felt better than I had imagined. My neck and throat still hurt to move so I was careful, but the muscles were glad to move. Instead of trying to force my way through the training that Lord Vader had shown me I stepped back into something from my past, something I had not done for a while.

I began to work my way through the basic Kata forms that Jyrki, the mechanic from back home, had taught me. I guessed, thinking back on it, he had taught me many things, not all of which I was happy to remember. I thought about

him as I began to walk through the movements that started off slow and gradually increased in speed.

My father had hired him after a really bad experience with a mech out of Corellia. The Corellian had completely bugged up a major repair and while he was arguing about it with my father Jyrki had come over and asked me what the fuss was about. I was all of fourteen or fifteen then, maybe. He had just heard the yelling and thought maybe someone was in trouble. I explained to him the problem, and he said just like that. "Bettin' I can fix 'er for yer." He had the strangest accent.

I just shrugged. "The hyper-drive is off, I think the regulator is blown but no one listens to me, you want to take a look-see go right ahead."

I walked with him into the engine room of the ship which my father and the Corellian, whose name I forget now, argued over.

He got right down to business, and dove into the pit taking a good look. After a few moments he climbed back out. He didn't say a word he just marched out of the ship and straight up to my father and said.

"Yer aughtta listen to the lady here, yer ship has a blown regulator, just like she said." he nodded at me as I was just appearing from the gangway. "There's a few other minor issues but basically the girl is right!"

My father just stared at him and right there on the spot hired him and fired the Corellian. A blown regulator should have been easy to spot and we all figured afterwards the Corellian was scamming my father.

I had liked Jyrki right from the get go, I suppose looking back on it all, it was natural that I would fall madly in love with him. Mid teens was the perfect age to fall head over heels in love with an older man and he was at least ten or more years older than I was. He was built tall and slender but he moved with such a powerful grace and strength that no one ever bothered him, not even the morons who would pick a fight with anyone. He had an angular face with high cheek bones and very pale ice blue eyes that were deeply contrasted by his very long black hair, eyebrows and eyelashes. No matter how much time he spent in the sun light, his skin remained ghostly pale. I would have killed for eyelashes like his. His smile was sweet and cocky all at the same time. There was always oil and grease under his finger nails no matter how much he scrubbed his large hands. We were fast friends from the get go. When I wasn't in school, I was ditching class to be at his side learning as much as I could about everything he had to teach me.

I know my father had him checked out, but I had taken to Jyrki right away and that had said a lot, my father had learned to trust me and my unusual instincts. While, that had been enough to get him hired, the absolute trust with his daughter came later and what ever had been said was between the two of them. I knew there had been words but neither would talk of it.

Once I remember shortly after he had started to work for us, I had asked

Jyrki how he stayed so fit because he sure loved to eat.

"A high metabolism and I practice," He had said. "Hand me ther hypo-spanner, Mouse." Mouse had been his nick name for me because I seemed to be able to get into the tiniest of places, useful for him when we were fixing something too small for his large hands to fit.

"Practice of what?" I handed him the spanner, I was being nose, in the six weeks he had been with us I had learned almost nothing about him personally which was beginning to bother my Jax like curiosity. I was as drawn to Jyrki as a Jawa to junk.

He rolled himself out from under the crawler we were working on and sat up, wiped his hands on the cloth he kept for that purpose. "Yer have grease on yer nose." He said handing me the cloth. I wiped at it and it made him laugh to see me making it worse. "Here," he said taking the rag from my hands and getting the grease off for me.

"So, practice what?" I pressed, by now I was used to his method of diversion.

He gave me one of those 'you ain't gonna let this go' looks and I nodded.

"Okay, but I can't just tell yer, I gotta show yer and if I am gonna show yer, yer gotta learn." He said.

"Okay." I said.

"Fine, I'll swing by after we're done here and yer cleaned up. Be wearing something easy to move in, this ain't no standing still thing, yer gonna sweat!" he said and slid back under the crawler and demanded the small wrench.

I waited for him, my stomach full of sand jiggers because it was the first time we would be together and we weren't fixing something. He arrived on time and before we left he went inside and said his hullo to my father, I guessed he was telling him where we were headed and what we would be doing.

We drove on a speeder he had rescued from a scrap heap and brought back to life, it went very fast and I clung on to him for dear life. He took us out to a place just outside the city but not so far away that we would be in danger from Sand People. On one of the hilly places, we climbed up to the plateau and there we just stood for a few moments while I caught my breath.

He began to stretch and warm up, without words. I tried to follow him, every time I got the particular stretch right we would move on to the next, when I did it wrong he would repeat it until I got it right. Once we were warmed up, he began to go through what he called Kata forms. Slowly at first, allowing me to follow and imitate, discover the movement for myself. It looked so easy when he did it and it felt so awkward for me to try and emulate. He did not stop, he just ran through the same basic motions again and again until I got the move more or less right and then moved on to the next. By the time he had run through a third of these moves I was shaking with exhaustion, my muscles were aching and

protesting loudly. Before I over did it completely he stopped. He handed me a canteen of water, gave me his jacket to keep me warm and told me to sit. I did as he asked without jokes or silly comments because this was a whole other Jyrki, not the grinning, kidding, joking about mechanic I knew, but something completely different, something that could be deadly. I watched in silent awe as he went back to working through the patterns he had taught me but instead of stopping he went further and began to get faster and faster until I could hardly keep up with his motion. I stretched out slowly, feeling the ache in my muscles that tomorrow would be stiff but not as much as I had imagined. The air at night was cold and I was beginning to feel that, but I stayed quiet and still because watching him move was pure magic. An hour later he too stopped, stretched out his muscles and drank from the canteen.

He made a 'let's go' motion with his head and I followed him back down to the speeder. I took up my place behind him, wrapping my arms about his warm body and my head against the broad of his back as he drove us back to town. He dropped me off at the house, I stood there wanting to say something and not having any words.

He looked at me then with his pale ice eyes and he said. "The man who taught me is dead." he said. "There's damned few about now who knows this sorts of moves, and them that do is best to be keeping quiet about it. Old teachings, long forgotten and best not spoken of, can yer do that? Can yer keep a secret?"

I nodded.

"Right then, I practice that every night after work in case yer wonderin'. Yer welcome to join me."

"I'd like that." I told him.

He nodded and then kick started the bike into action, saying with a grin as he left "Right then, see yer tomorrow at the bay, we got a lot to do, that blasted coupler should be there, I need yer tiny hands, Mouse." And with that he sped off to his home, where ever that was. I went inside, more tired than I could ever have imagined. I said my goodnights to my father and dropped on my bed falling asleep immediately. For the next four years I went with him every night when it was possible, and worked out along with him, learning this secret ancient form of martial art.

Now, in this room on board this Imperial Star Destroyer, I could hear his deep gentle voice and feel his calm manner as I began to walk through the ancient movements he had taught me. Just like Jyrki, I began slowly and worked my way up to a speed that when I first began to learn it, had never seemed possible for me. While I had not been keeping up with the work out in the last few weeks or so, I did not forget the motions.

There was a hypnotic rhythm to the sequences and I fell into the music of it right away, forgetting everything and everyone around me. In my mind, with my

eyes closed I was back on Tatooine standing along side the first man I had truly loved.

Jyrki's lessons had not only been about movement and perfection of the action but also about the mediation upon the movements, the breathing techniques that accompanied the moves, I had learned everything he had taught me eagerly, because as well as being crazy about him, I loved the peace and the simplicity of the movement, I suppose that was partly my reasons for wanting to learn dance as well.

Now as I began the faster movements I could see how they all tied together, I could see the threads of the Force that wound around everything and how they moved about me when I got the particular move just right. It was pure magic and I felt light and free, for the first time in a long time I also felt a great weight lift from my shoulders. The longer I worked through each movement, the more powerful the feeling of connection got, the more light I could see in everything that was around me. I could hear Jyrki's voice whispering in the darkness, telling to look around and see the world with open eyes, that everything was connected. That there were no coincidences and everything was chosen. It was then, that suddenly three things came to me all at once, a knowing slid into place that gave me the shakes and made me stop cold.

The first was his words, although leaning towards a different angle, and these movements were incredibly similar to the exercises Lord Vader had tried to teach me. I was stunned that I had not seen the similarity before. That Jyrki had been force sensitive and I had not known it, astonished me, that he had hidden it from me even though it must have been as plain as day that I had the same weirding ways, somehow stung. Secondly, he, like my father, had always encouraged me to hide it. "Keep it in the dark." He had told me. Looking back now I could see he had been terribly afraid, but for whom? The third thing that I suddenly realized was that I was no longer alone in this room. The steady rhythmic in and out of breathing told me that Vader had joined me.

He said nothing and the lights remained off. Lord Vader could see in the dark. He went to the weapon's rack and pulled out two of the long fighting staves. I had never seen this particular design before but I knew the weapon. Jyrki and I had often sparred with staves, once I had gotten good enough, it was my favourite form of hand to hand fighting. The other was knives.

He tossed one to me and I caught it. We circled each other and I could feel the air crackle around us. When he swung I could see it and defended the blow. The crack of the staves against each other was loud. Again we circled, again he attacked again I parried. This was a dance, elegant and dangerous. Lord Vader, for such a large man, moved with an unbelievable grace and I felt we were, seemingly, well suited to each other, even though I knew he was far better than I could ever hope to be.

For every attack he made I had a block, I could see what was coming through the light of the force. We continued at this level for a while and then he upped the ante. Suddenly there was a drawing of energy, I felt it crackle about us and he moved faster than before. It was harder to keep up with this and instead of easily deflecting each blow I had to work at it, duck and twist away. I was on the wrong end of several hard knocks and got the idea that he was toying with me. It was a dance with variations that were very new to me although I had learnt the basic steps well. He could see almost every counter move I was going to make, I was certain of it, but I kept my calm.

We would break apart and circle around one another, I, to catch my breath, he perhaps to find out my next move. Once more he attacked but this time instead of a simple defence I twisted up on the stick using it as a lever to gain height and kicked him full in the chest, it sent him flying. That was a trick Jyrki had taught me, think one move but execute another. I leant on the staff, my own breathing heavy as I was beginning to get tired.

He stood up and acknowledged the move with a nod, I knew I would never, ever get to pull that stunt with him again, I was certain of it, but it had been worth it, just once to put him on the ground. We circled again.

His attack was more furious than anything he had previously thrown at me, he had been playing with me, toying with me, testing my abilities. I could barely keep up with it, relentless he was, and eventually, as it had to happen, I stumbled backwards, fell down hard and lay on the ground with the end of his staff lifting my chin. We stayed in this position for a moment and then I flicked the staff away from my face with the back of my hand and got up. I walked away from him and turned the lighting up a bit. I am certain he could have fought all night but I was now tired and had had enough.

I wiped the sweat from my face with my extra shirt, drank from the water container I had with me and stared at him. He was not even breathing hard. He put the staves back in their place and walked over to me. Took a hold of my chin and with the tips his fingers and twisted my head from one side to the other, looking at my neck. His touch was surprisingly gentle and he let go of me without leaving any more marks.

“Someone has taught you in the ways of the Jedi.” He said. “Why did you not tell me this?”

“I have no idea what Jedi Ways are.” I said. “A mechanic on Tatooine taught me to how to fight. He told me it was an ancient form of combat, Old teachings he had said, that’s all.” I sat down on the floor and began a slow stretch to cool my muscles down. Lord Vader sat on the bench that was nearest me.

“Never the less, you were well taught.” He said. There was a touch of admiration in his voice.

I looked up at him but it was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

“Who exactly were the Jedi?” I asked.

“Traitors to the Empire.” He answered. “They were the guardians of the Old Republic, but they were too arrogant to see what was right under their noses.” The anger in his voice was palpable. “They were wiped out.”

“All of them?”

“In so far as it was possible.”

“Who killed them all?”

“I did, along with others loyal to the cause and capable of doing such a thing.”

I was silent, I had no idea what to think of this.

“The one who taught you in the Jedi ways, did you love him?” Vader asked suddenly.

The question took me by surprise, but I answered it anyway. “Yes, yes I did.” And I wondered what Lord Vader would know about love.

“Was he also in love with you?”

I shrugged. “Maybe, I don’t know. “ I said, and it was the truth. No matter what, Jyrki avoided anything that had to do with getting too emotionally close, and only once had he kissed me and that had happened while we were both half cut on my father’s moonglow. I can still remember it, a kiss so sweet and so full of longing and desire that when he had broken away from me, his inexplicable anger boiling through and breaking into the unbelievable desire, unwanted tears of disappointment had welled up in my eyes. He had turned away from me coldly, muttering something about being twice my age and working for my father but I knew these words were lies. His hands and his lips had said something completely different and I knew that he had felt something as magical for me as I had for him, as though some invisible bond wound us together, but he was as scared of it as I was ignorant.

He had kissed me just that once and it’s bittersweet taste still made my lips tingle to think of it. He had never touched me again in the manner he had that night, and never spoken of this incident either. It was business as usual the next day and he had broken my heart in some small way. Shortly, after that I had taken the job at Jabba’s. I couldn’t bear to be close to him because the longing it produced from deep in my body was unbearable. Still, to this day, I ached at the memory of it.

Vader nodded. “I sense much pain in you when you think of this man, why?”

“He left me without a word.” I answered. “One day he was just gone. He told my father he needed to go and that was that. He just left. My father always thought he was running from something.”

“He was.” Vader said. “He was running from the Emperor, he was running from me.”

I sighed. Pulled my knees up to my chest and hugged them closely.

"But he was clever to pass on what he knew in such a devious manner." Vader said. "Tell me, did he ever tell you anything about the ways of fighting he was teaching you?"

"There was a mantra he used to say sometimes before we would start the work out." I could hear Jyrki's voice as I remembered the words. *"There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is the Force."*

Vader nodded slowly. "That is the Jedi Code. But it is a lie. There is emotion, you have said so yourself, you loved your teacher. It is arrogance to think that beings can void themselves of their emotions. There are other ways."

"Other ways?" I asked. "How can I learn these ways?"

"I will show you the path." He said.

I looked up at him and he looked at me. There was so much I wanted to know, so much I needed to ask but I got the feeling he would not answer any more serious questions. I was in such turmoil, nothing was as it seemed. My whole world was changing, turning upside down and I didn't know what to do about it.

I jumped when he suddenly broke the silence, *"Peace is a lie, there is only passion. Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, I gain power. Through power, I gain victory. Through victory, my chains are broken. The Force shall free me."* He said, never taking his eyes off me. I wished I could have seen his face, staring at him was like staring into some awful endless black mirror.

"I sense much passion in you, much hunger for knowledge." He said.

I nodded, wondering, not for the first time just how much of my thoughts and feelings he could really sense. I thirsted after knowledge, it seemed I could never ever learn enough about anything I was interested in,

"You now have access to the archives and there is much there for you to learn." He said. That was not simply a suggestion.

I suddenly needed to ask the question that had been burning at me since the last time we had been together and I felt that given this sudden quiet moment between us, I wasn't risking death by asking it. "My Lord, why is it you do not wish me to accompany you on the Death Star?" There was a long pause and I half expected him to get angry again but it seemed this was a good mood day.

"There will be many things that I must take care of. Tarkin and the rest of the self styled, petty tyrants who think they own the galaxy would be only too happy to have me distracted. You, girl, are a distraction, with your untrained force powers and I cannot have that, it would serve their purpose perfectly. Especially Tarkin, who would find a way to use your attachment to me to his advantage and if you are to be used to anyone's advantage it shall be mine."

"You would use me to your advantage?" I asked flatly.

"I would kill you if it served my purpose." He said coldly.

"Oh." I said as I looked away from his gaze.

He stood up and I watched as he paused for a moment, towering above me.

"Your mechanic Jedi friend betrayed you when he left you. He was not just running from the Empire, he was running from his feelings for you." He said and I sensed he was angry, but I didn't know why. I didn't want to think that what he had said about Jyrki was real, but it had a ring of truth to it I could not deny and that made me incredibly sad. This sadness was a palpable ache and I fought it back.

Lord Vader nodded, "You fought well, you have some skill in this area, we will practice again, when I return." And with a swirl of his long black cloak he left as silently as he had come in.

I waited until the door had closed before I lay my head on my knees and cried until I had no tears left uncertain of exactly why. I sat on the floor for a long time just being, not thinking, not crying, not anything. When I could no longer sit on that cold floor I made my way back to my quarters and I fell in to a deep and dreamless sleep. When I woke up, Lord Vader had already left the ship and the *Devastator* was on her way, else where. I felt the lack of his presence on the ship keenly and wondered just how deep the bonding went between the teacher and the student.

I sat with the data pad on my lap staring out of the window, the great nothingness of space, when I was very small I used to look up at it and wonder what it was like to be amongst all those twinkly stars, but when I got out here I discovered that it was nothing like those dreams. All those stars that twinkle so beautifully are just pin pricks of light and the darkness outside which is deadly and cold. I had stayed in my quarters from the moment I had awoken, wanting to be alone. Too much to think about and I also had work to do, but it was the least interesting thing on my mind. I had skimmed through the old journal my father had given me but could find nothing to ease my troubled thoughts. All I knew was in conflict and who ever had written the journal felt the same as I.

The Force is like a sword. It has two faces. It can be used with finesse and skill, and will slice cleanly, elegantly through all. Or it can be used without skill; a simple crude tool that hacks it's way blindly through everything it meets. The weapon is merely a tool; it is the user who defines the use. To use the Force with finesse, takes years of dutiful practice and calm meditation.

I hate this. I hate the work, the dullness of it all. Dutiful meditation, pah!

I cannot bear this day that drags out before me like a wounded Bantha.

How can my mistress speak of such drivel? Does she not know how much easier it is to tap in to the energy I get from being angry? Yesterday, I was in tune with the Force as I never have been before. I reached deep within myself, thoughts of my father and what he was, what he had done and allowed that anger to flow through me. It was sweet, a sweetness unlike anything I have ever known. I will master the Force it shall not master me.

I stared out into the darkness. Had Lord Vader been right? Had Jyrki really been a Jedi? I knew there was truth in Lord Vader's words, I had seen it, I could almost always tell when someone was lying to me and Lord Vader had not lied. In fact, he was one of the few people in my life that had, so far, never lied to me. He spoke the truth as he saw it, in some strange way that had comforted me. I wondered, not for the first time, where Jyrki had gone and if he was still alive. I was certain he was, certain that the tenuous thread which had connected us would have some how alerted me if he were dead. I wondered if he ever thought about me.

I closed my eyes just for a moment, I wanted to connect with the Force, I wanted to connect with Lord Vader but quite suddenly I hit with a terrible, gut-wrenching sensation. A feeling of a great and sudden terror and dreadful pain and as quickly as the sensation had hit me so it suddenly vanished, leaving me breathless. I had no idea what had just happened but what ever it was, it had been swift and terrible. I tried to catch my breath, to relax enough to stretch out with the Force but I could feel nothing more, almost as if where once, something vibrant had been, was now a great void. A few moments later the alarm claxons in the ship went off, scaring the wits out of me.

"Buggery sand-rats!" I yelled at no one in particular and decided to see what Jorae was up to, maybe he could shed some light on what all the noise and fuss was about.

Jorae worked in the Communications Centre and it was busy as all hell when I went in. He looked up from his consol when I tapped him on the shoulder. Since, I had clearance now, no one bothered about me being here, no one was willing to argue about it or take it up with Lord Vader. I guess it beat sneaking about the ship, but it took some of the fun out of it.

"What's the hell is going on?" I asked, when he took off his headset and looked up at me.

"Something really big just came across the boards, the Core News Feeds all went mad a couple of minutes ago, something about a planet being destroyed." He said.

"A planet?" I asked, suddenly my legs were shaky. "A whole planet?"

"Whoa!!" Jorae grabbed me a chair and I sat down. "You're as white as a

ghost, are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded. I didn't think that telling him I had felt the destruction of that planet as though I had been hit in the stomach would do much good. Jorae had said on more than one occasion that he didn't believe in the force and no amount of Vader's weird power was going to convince him otherwise. I guessed that he had never seen Lord Vader in action. Jorae had shaken his head and said that so far he had managed to stay under the Vader radar. I had giggled at the joke. Jorae thought that he was very funny, and, sometimes he was. Lord Vader, on the other hand, was anything but.

"So, what do the news feeds say?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Not a lot, there is nothing specific, no details, just that all major shipping lanes are all closed and everything is being rerouted due to space rubble."

"Do they say what planet?"

"Alderaan." He said. "The shock wave warnings are so many that we can't keep up with it."

"A whole planet gone. " I said in a whisper. "How could such a thing happen?"

Jorae frowned. "It's very confused. No one knows."

I sat back in my chair and fought to remain calm, it made no sense to me and I felt a deep wave of sorrow for all those people who were so suddenly killed. I got up to leave, Jorae looked at me, worried.

"I'm fine, go back to work." I said. And Just then someone yelled "Hang on to something!"

The shockwave from the destruction of Alderaan hit the ship, rocking it like a tiny speeder in a sand storm. I was flung backwards and landed on the floor, others hung on to their consoles for dear life. The ship bucked once and rocked for only a few moments more and then stabilized out. Everyone went back to business and I got up off the floor. Jorae gave me an 'are you alright look?' and I nodded, I'd been half strangled by Lord Vader, landing on the floor with my butt wasn't anything I should worry about. Jorae was polite though, he never asked about the bruises.

I left the Communications centre and wandered aimlessly. I could not begin to fathom that someone or something had obliterated an entire planet full of living, breathing beings. I could not imagine how I would even begin to feel if that had been my home world. Everything I had even known and loved suddenly gone in the blink of an eye. It was unimaginable and terrifying to think about.

Without thinking about where I was going I made my way through the ship and ended up making a wrong turn somehow. I found myself in a small place near the bow of the ship, a place where everything was silent. There was a view port and nothing else. I didn't know what use this space was and much less cared. It

was peaceful and empty so I stood looking out of the view port and thought about home. Some time later when I made it back to my quarters there was a package waiting for me. Even in the midst of disaster the mail somehow managed to make it through. I expected that it was from my family but it was not. My fingers trembled as I read the letter that accompanied the small parcel.

My Dear, Miss Gabriel,

I trust that this letter will find you well and enjoying your work, with Lord Vader aboard the ISD Devastator. I wished to tell you how much I enjoyed our chance meeting on Coruscant and to, once again, apologize for my rude behaviour. It is not in my nature to act so rashly. I hope that you will not hold it against me the next time we should happen to meet.

A recent visit to a rather interesting planet brought you to mind. I found, quite by chance, a set of antique Zenji Hair sticks, similar to the ones you had in your hair the morning we met, and could not resist the desire to give them to you as a gift. I hope that they will bring you as much pleasure as I had while being with you.

*I remain, respectfully yours,
Cpt. Thrawn*

I sat down on the edge of the chair and gingerly opened the slender box beautifully wrapped in a silk so fine it was almost non-existent. Inside, lying on a velvet so red it almost glowed were two of the most exquisite zenji hair sticks I had ever seen. That he had likened them to the ones I had worn in my hair that night on the balcony was almost a joke. The zenji hair sticks I had were plain and simple. A gift from one of my father's pilots, a woman who had come from Ruusan, called Bedi Nuale. She had fascinated me with her incredibly long, curly hair which she always put up with hair sticks. I was very young at the time. It was she who taught me my first serious piloting skills and it was she who had taught me the subtle skill of using zenji hair sticks to hold up one's hair. Not as easy it looked but she was a patient teacher and I was a willing pupil. Before she left for another job on some other planet, saying Tatooine was just too hot for her, she gave one of her sets of zenji sticks. They were, slender, plain, carved from the bones of some long dead animal and much used. I loved them.

The zenji sticks that Thrawn had found were truly antique and extraordinarily beautiful. Made from a silvery metal that almost appeared to have its own light, the slender sticks had been ornately carved and were finished at the top with a large, faceted bead made from a polished milky white stone. When I played with the sticks, so the light played with the stones, it revealed a fiery blue-green core that danced like fire within the heart of the beads. I gasped, I knew exactly what this was, and it was as incredibly rare as it was precious, milky

ma'arilite, a stone so scarce it was fabled to have magical qualities. There were many legends and stories told about it.

I shuddered to even think what these hair sticks must have cost. I set them back in their beautiful box and sighed. I re-read his letter and didn't know what to think, I didn't even know how to reply to it. Somehow a simple thank-you did not seem enough for such a precious gift. I got up and went back to staring out of the view port, lost in troubled thoughts. Today, it seemed, nothing would bring me peace, not even such a beautiful gift from a man I barely knew.

As annoyed as I was with it, it was my work that kept me from going insane. It kept me busy and occupied where otherwise I would have gone mad from sheer boredom. Time can pass very slowly on a ship and with Lord Vader gone I was left very much to my own devices.

On a daily basis, there were over a hundred messages and letters to answer and deal with, many of them from lesser offices, much of it mindless inter-office news, memos and updates, many invitations to gallery openings, city functions, Imperial dinners and dances and so on, and some fairly important letters that needed Lord Vader's direct attention. I had discovered early on that he had mainly ignored all of this stuff, and never answered any of his correspondence unless it was from the Emperor himself. I had been uncertain at first how to deal with this and after some soul searching had ended up asking him if he wanted me to take care of it, as it was, after all, my job. His response had been terse and unpleasant, bureaucracy was something he loathed, but after a few days of some serious adjustments we found a happy medium.

I read through all the correspondence unless it was marked as coming from the Office of the Emperor, with the Emperor's personal seal, in which case I set it aside, unopened, in a separate data pad that was encrypted and would hand it to Lord Vader personally.

I organized his calendar, meetings and attendance at certain functions that could not be avoided. I answered the mail that was considered lesser and unimportant and RSVP'd the invitations as soon as they came in. Most of the time his social calendar was mostly left alone, but every now and then there were Palace functions he was obligated, as the second highest official in the Empire, to attend. So far we had not had to deal with anything of this nature yet.

At first, this had been a nightmare, the previous personal assistants had not lasted long enough to come up with any sort of organization at all, so everything was chaos. Now, I had it all running smoothly. Lord Vader had actually seemed impressed with the last update I had handed him. Everything was organized and neat, easy to get to without wading through a ton of nonsense. His

private correspondence was kept private and separate, his social calendar, easy to read and best of all it was hand delivered to him on a daily basis when he was around, when he wasn't about I encrypted the lot and sent it to him via direct, secure communications link and when that was not possible, it waited until his return.

I had my protocol droid file everything in the main databank, categorized, alphabetized and so on. I think it was actually happy for once. I was still having a hard time getting it to stop calling me 'mistress.' I suppose it is a programmed response and no amount of pleading or asking or swearing at the droid will change it.

I had time to spend searching through the archives that Lord Vader had mentioned. That was a labyrinth of information and I had no idea where to even begin looking. I had begun my search by looking for anything Sith related but of course as it is the way of such things I got diverted and ended up reading the Battle of Ruusan and a Sith Lord named Darth Bane. I was so swept away by the history I was reading I did not notice the door chimes until Jorae over rode the lock and tapped me on the shoulder. He gave me the fright of my life and it was a good thing I had been sitting reading or else my fight reflex would have knocked him on his ass.

He looked very serious, his face was a white as desert blasted bones and his fingers shook. I put the data-pad down.

"Jorae, what is it?"

"They blew it up." He said.

I shook my head, "Who blew what up?"

He sat down in the chair across from me. "The Death Star. It has been destroyed. Almost everyone on board is dead." He said, "We just got word through secure channels."

It was my turn to turn pale. "Lord Vader?" I could not believe he was on the space station when it blew up, I was certain I would have felt something, anything, but I didn't know if my force sensitivity was strong enough to sense his life force from so far away.

Jorae shook his head. "He and a couple of others managed to make it to an outpost near the Yavin system, we are on our way now to pick them up."

I let out the breath I had been holding.

"Wow there's going to be hell to pay for this." I said, "Who was in charge of the space station?"

"Well, Governor Tarkin was, but he didn't survive." Jorae said. "I guess the next person who would be responsible would be Lord Vader, he was supposed to get the stolen plans back."

"Not good." I whispered.

Jorae nodded in agreement. "I have only ever heard of the Emperor's

temper, but I can tell you, I am sure glad I am not in Vader's boots. The Emperor is going to be really pissed about this, the Death Star was his baby. It was almost twenty years in the making, all that time and money gone to waste. Someone's head is going to roll for certain."

I tried to remember to breathe and sat back in my chair. "What is our ETA to the outpost?"

"About six hours." He said. "I thought you should have some warning, considering..."

I looked at him. "Considering what?"

"Considering that when Vader comes back he's not going to be very happy and if he has to go to Coruscant to meet with the Emperor, you will probably have to go with him, it is part of your job, right?"

I took a deep steadying breath and nodded.

Jorae got up. "I have to get back to work." He said.

"Okay, thanks for the warning."

He grinned. "No problem, I have to tell you though, I am sure glad I am not in your shoes." And he ducked through the doorway as fast as he could.

I stood at the view port and looked out at the stars. Suddenly this universe did not seem so peaceful and settled anymore. I did not think that Lord Vader would take his anger directly out on my, especially if I kept out of the way but I was worried about having to return to the Imperial Palace. Why did there have to be so many complications?

I had fallen asleep in my chair, I guess I was more exhausted than I had realised. The com went off loudly, making me jump, the datapad on my lap fell crashing to the floor as I reached for the com and answered it. The officer of the watch ignored my bad temper and informed me I was to report to the hanger bay right away, that Lord Vader would be arriving shortly. I quickly gathered my work datapad and made my way through the corridors to the hanger bay. The place was busy and loud, space was being cleared and the klaxon sounded as the magnetic seal was opened.

I watched from where from where I was Lord Vader's TIE Advanced slid gracefully into the docking bay. The magnetic seal was locked back into place and the warning klaxons stopped. I walked down to the gantry that had been placed against the ship so that Lord Vader could exit and waited. From the looks I got from most of the men around me, they, like Jorae, were awfully glad not to be in my shoes. Lord Vader descended to the ground, gave his ship a quick once over, I followed his gaze and noticed the carbon scoring on the hull. Someone had hit it pretty good.

When he was satisfied, he spoke to the deck officer and ordered some further repairs on his ship then he turned to me, he said nothing but started to

walk towards the exit of the hanger bay. I had to trot at his side to keep up.

"You will cancel all engagements in my calendar until further notice." He said.

"Yes, my Lord." I nodded making the appropriate notes in my data-pad.

"Have there been any communiques from his Excellency?" he asked.

"Yes, My Lord. Two arrived late last night at twenty-three hundred hours and one came in an hour ago." I said. "The encrypted data-pads are in my office I wasn't cert ..." he cut me off with a wave of his hand.

"You will bring them to me in my chambers, right away." He said.

"Yes, my Lord."

"What are you waiting for, I want those datapads now.!"

"Yes, my Lord." I said and ran to my quarters and picked up the datapad with the Emperor's communiques and then headed to Lord Vader's chambers where he paced about like a caged animal.

He snatched the datapad from my hands read it, deleted the contents, then handed it back to me.

"We will be going to Coruscant, there you will accompany me. You will not be returning to this ship so do what you need to do to ready yourself. Do not waste time."

"Yes, My Lord." I said and waited to see if there was anything else.

Lord Vader turned away from me. "You may go." He said.

I nodded. "Yes, my Lord." I said but I paused, I wanted to know what had happened and I wanted to know what would happen when we reached Coruscant. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask when Lord Vader snarled at me.

"What is it, Miss Gabriel?"

I shook my head and then, without thinking, I replied. "I wanted to say," I paused, "that I am relieved to see you alive."

Lord Vader stopped and turned around, regarded me for a moment, he was probably as surprised as I was by the statement, and then said, "Your concern for my welfare has been duly noted, Miss Gabriel. You are dismissed."

"Yes, my Lord." I said and hurried away from his chambers as fast as I could, not that I had much to pack, but I wanted to be as far away from Lord Vader as possible. He was furious and he was not pleasant to be around when he was in one of his moods.

The trip from the *Devastator* to the landing pad on Coruscant was a long and tense one. A pilot I didn't know was at the helm and both Lord Vader and I, along with two stormtroopers and my protocol droid sat in the back. No one said a single word during the entire trip. I busied myself with sorting through files, making the necessary adjustments to Lord Vader's appointment calendar but mostly I was doing everything I could not to look at him and not to pester him with questions. My mind was in turmoil.

We landed and disembarked. There was a small reception party of more Imperial Troopers and Palace officials. Lord Vader said nothing as he swept by them. They waited for him to pass then followed after him. I, not knowing what else I was supposed to do, trotted along after them. We walked through the palace in silence. All around us were people and they all stared, and then hurriedly turned away. It was not comforting. Lord Vader stopped when he had reached the Grand Entrance, that place which led to all other places in the palace.

It was a huge foyer, really with an enormous stairwell in the centre of it that led upwards in two different directions. He stopped at the foot of the stairs and dismissed everyone, except for me, with a snarl and a wave of his hand. The troopers all saluted smartly, turned on their collective heels and marched off in one direction, the palace officials, our welcoming committee, all bowed and scurried away in another. He climbed the stairs and I followed.

On the third floor was the entrance to the passage that led to the Emperor's private audience rooms. I took a deep breath but before he opened the doors Lord Vader turned to me.

"When I have need of you, I will summon you." He said.

I looked up at him and blinked. He could have told me that before I had climbed all these stairs.

"Yes, my Lord." I said and turned to leave.

"Miss Gabriel," he said, I stopped and turned around again.

"Yes, my Lord?" I asked, sensing that he was choosing his words with care.

"You would do well to stay out of sight. No more incidents with your Human Resources friends." He said.

So, he had heard about that as well. I made a face and without even thinking about it said. "What the hell am I supposed to do?"

The air crackled just a little as he just stared at me. I put my hand over my mouth to stop anything else from just slipping out.

"Go file something." He said and then he opened the ornate door and went through it. I resisted the urge to peek before it closed silently. I wanted nothing to do with the Emperor. If Lord Vader feared him, I could not imagine how I would feel.

I stood in the hallway for a moment and then made my way back down the stairs, through the main foyer to the part of the palace where my office was, where my apartments had been. I still had the key so I thought I would try it out. I was a little surprised when it still worked. Even more to my surprise was that my protocol droid was waiting for me along with my luggage. I guessed this was still a home of sorts after all, but it didn't feel like that, it felt like a prison.

In spite of his last words to me, I actually had nothing to file, I was mostly caught up on the office day to day work. The disbanding of the Imperial Senate had done away with some of the internal memos and nonsense, taking the bureaucracy

out into the regional governors' hands. As Lord Vader was neither a regional governor nor a member of the Imperial senate my job was not really affected all that much by the change. I expected that would cause headaches a little later on, once the initial mess was all sorted out. In the mean time things were quiet, and a lot of people were out of a job. I suspected that the bunch from Human Resources was probably going insane with all the paperwork they would have, served them right.

I showered and changed into clothes that were more suited to wandering around the palace, although still my simple Tatooine fashion, they were at least clean. I felt grimy after the journey and wanted to dress up a little. I put my hair up with the beautiful zenji sticks Thrawn had given and wondered, briefly, if he had ever received my thank- you letter. No matter, he was probably busy, off somewhere in the galaxy trying to dominate something or someone like the rest of the Imperials I knew.

I had thought about maybe exploring some of the archives in the Palace, but then reconsidered, that was not, after all, keeping a low profile so instead I took a book and I went to my favourite quiet place, the old part of palace with the great balcony and view. It was still very early in the day and the air had that chill to it I did not think I would ever get used to. I was glad that I had brought a heavy poncho with me just in case.

I dragged one of the old chairs from the inner room on to the balcony and I curled up in it to read. One of the up sides of this job was that I did have some spare time to read. In difference to many of my friends at school back home, I actually liked to read and devoured any book that was given to me. It had gotten around the pilots that used our docking pad regularly that I was a reader and they would often give me holobooks that had been left behind or that they had already read. The book I had now was among my favourites and it was easy for me to lose myself in the story.

I had been sitting, reading for about two hours when the hair on the back of my neck suddenly stood on end and I realized that someone else was there and that not only did I know that someone was there, but I also knew who it was.

“Good Morning Captain Thrawn.” I said without getting up or turning a round.

He walked up to me, as if the act of speaking to him had given him the permission to do so, and stood beside the chair, and looked out over the city.

“I heard that Lord Vader had returned to the palace.” He said. “I had wondered if you were with him.”

“And you came here to see if you were right?” I asked, putting my book on my lap.

He turned his attention to me. “Still the sharp tongue, I see.” He said with

a slight smile.

I stared at him for a moment then retorted. “It matches your caustic wit.”

He inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement of my return fire then asked, “How was your tour of duty then? Did you enjoy life on an ISD?”

I nodded. “I don't know if enjoy is the right word, but it was interesting.”

“When will you be heading back?” he asked,

I shrugged. “I don't know, I am not sure that I will be returning to the *Devastator*.”

Thrawn turned to look at me once more. “Leaving the service of Lord Vader so soon?”

“Not that I know of, he just told me that I would not be returning to the ship, he said nothing about me no longer working for him.” I said. “I don't know any more than that. Lord Vader did not me any give details.”

Thrawn smiled. “Well, I have heard he can be evasive.”

“I am sure he has his reasons, Captain,” I said a little more sharply than I meant to. “In the mean time I have some time off to enjoy the peace and quiet, if you can call this planet that. Catch up on some reading.”

Thrawn raised an eyebrow at me, “You mean to tell me, Miss Gabriel, that you have a day off and you are going to spend it sitting alone on this isolated balcony reading a book?” he was genuinely surprised.

“Well, yes, actually.” I said. “I am to keep a low profile today. It seems the rumours of my little temper tantrum with the HR girls has made the rounds.” I shrugged, “This is a good place to keep a low profile.”

He shook his head and after a moment of thought he said, “Might I make you a proposal?”

“I'm listening.”

“It appears that I have some free time today, and it would be my pleasure to perhaps show you some of the more interesting aspects of this city.”

“Such as?” I was a little wary.

He cocked his head to one side and smiled. “Your caution is unnecessary, Miss Gabriel I assure you my intentions are...safe.” and then asked. “What would interest you?”

I thought about it for a moment. “Are there any decent art galleries or museums around here?” I asked.

I didn't like the way his grin suddenly became feral. “You are interested in art?”

I nodded. “My mother was an art historian from Alderaan before she married my father and moved to Tatooine. She had many books on the subject of art. I am afraid I was a poor student, I much preferred engines and mechanical manuals and I didn't pay as much attention to her as I should have.”

“You speak in the past tense.” He said carefully.

I nodded and looked away for a moment. "My mother died when I was young." I explained. "When she was killed, I did not realize what a positive force she had been in my life, full of beauty and light. She was extremely well educated and from a noble background, it was only because of her insistence and sheer force of will that I learned a small amount of her grace. I am quite certain that had I been left to my father's guidance I would be even more of an unruly grease-urchin than I am now. She made certain that I learnt good manners and etiquette and through her I suppose I inherited a love of art, but that is not something I tell too many people. Pilots and ship owners do not trust a mechanic who spouts poetry and loves to stare for hours at the works of Isonne Medeglia."

"Your mother must have been an amazing woman, I am sorry for your loss." He said, and he meant it. "But you do not give yourself enough credit, you may dress like an Outer rim grease-urchin and give attitude of an unruly pit-crew mechanic but you carry yourself like the noble born princess. You are a quite the lesson in contradictions."

I wasn't quite certain how to accept the compliment, if it actually was one, so I followed my mother's rule and I said thank-you and left it at that.

Thrawn nodded and turned back once more to over look the city. He then made a get out of that chair and come here motion with his hand. I did and came to stand beside him. He pointed to a far off tower.

"Do you see that building?"

I nodded.

"Down in that part of the city are some of the best restaurants around, away from the usual palace crowd, good if you want to duck under the social radar so to speak, and over there," he said pointing to another part of the city, "Is the Imperial Art Gallery, it has one of the most comprehensive collections in the known galaxy."

I looked up at him, wondering what restaurants and the Imperial art gallery had to do with each other. He looked back at me and for a moment our eyes met. My heart missed a beat and I felt as though my knees had suddenly vanished. I smiled and shrugged to hide the deep breath I needed to take.

"I thought that perhaps you would allow me to take you to lunch and then we could visit the gallery together, if that was acceptable?"

I nodded. "I would like that." I said, but some where in the back of my mind all my senses were telling me it was a bad idea. "Just on condition though."

He arched an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"No Nubian spice tea, I can't stand it, something in the spice mix makes me sick." I said.

He chuckled. "I think that can be arranged, anything else you do not enjoy eating?"

I shrugged, "To be honest not much, but Tatooine isn't exactly the

gourmet centre of the galaxy and my off world cuisine experience has been limited. Why don't I leave it in your hands?" then added, "You will know if I hate it."

He nodded and smiled.

"I guess I should find something more suitable to wear." I added, feeling decidedly urchin like beside him in his pristine looking uniform.

He gave me a slow once up and down look and smiled. "You are perfect just as you are, Miss Gabriel." Then he offered me his arm, which I took gingerly and he escorted me out of the palace. I wondered if accepting his invitation had been such a good idea after all.

He drove a small sleek two seater with an ease that told me he was a very good pilot in his own right. I was enthralled by the sights and sounds of the city, and I had not imagined that flying through it in the heart of the traffic would be so interesting. Thrawn pointed out many of the buildings that had some significance or meaning, he seemed very knowledgeable about the Imperial Center and I think my fascination and astonishment at the utter vastness of it amused him greatly but he was polite enough not to joke about it.

We flew to a small landing pad down near the lower levels in the commerce part of the city, Coco town, Jorae had called it. There we walked via an intricate series of stair ways and moving ramps to a small, somewhat suspect looking diner. I looked at my guide but he just gave me a smile as he opened the door for me, and we went inside.

The first thing that hit was the smell of fresh stim'caf and the second thing that hit was how clean it looked from the inside. Everything was in a retro look, deep red booth seats and chrome edged tables of some sort dull grey polylaminate surface. The waitress was a droid and she greeted Captain Thrawn by name. He said nothing, just gave her a friendly smile and a wave while leading me to, what I guessed was his favourite table. She came over and asked if he wanted his usual, he nodded and then she asked me what I wanted to drink.

"Jawa juice?" I asked.

"Comin' right up." She said, dropping a couple of menu pads on the table for us to look at then vanishing to back to the kitchen.

I looked around, taking in the décor and the feel for the place. It was not really what I had expected from him. He had struck more as a snob and this didn't seem to be the kind of place someone who had snobbish tastes would come. He must have read my thoughts.

"Not what you expected?" he asked, leaning his elbows on the table, his fingers steepled at his chin.

I smiled. "No, not really."

"This place has some of the best food around and it is out of the way from the palace. Most people who work up there would not dream of being caught here, I don't get pestered here." He said. "And they make the best stim'caf around."

I nodded and went back to looking at the menu. There were a lot of things to choose from and I could not even begin to decide. Thrawn must have seen the indecision on my face.

“I can make some suggestions, if you wish.”

“Please do, I have not had this much choice since. Well... since well I don’t think I have ever seen such a vast menu.” I said. It was a bit over whelming.

He glanced through his menupad and made some recommendations. I decided to try the Nubian salad and the Diner special, something called Old Dex’s surprise.

The waitress came back with our drinks and Thrawn placed the orders for us both.

I warmed my hands around the cup and sipped it slowly. It was the best Jawa juice I had ever tasted. Over the rim of my cup I watched the man who sat across from me and he, in turn, watched me. Finally, it was he who broke the silence.

“How do you enjoy working for Lord Vader?” he asked.

“Well, it is a demanding job.” I answered.

He shook his head. “That was not an answer to my question. There is much talk of you whispers and gossip mainly, most of it, I suspect untrue. You appear to have been given a unique place in Lord Vader’s life. That arouses curiosity.”

“Including yours?” I asked.

He nodded.

I took a deep breath. “I actually enjoy it a great deal. It is very challenging, more so than anything else I have ever done. Of course, days like these are rare gift, normally I am never off duty so to speak. He is very demanding but once you get past that, it’s okay.” I said.

“You do not seem to have developed the absolute terror most of his crews and personal have for him.”

I shrugged. “He’s just a man.” I said. “Albeit a powerful man with an ability no one seems to really understand. He can kill with a thought, but never the less, he is just a man.” I wasn’t telling him everything and I suspected he knew it but he did not press.

“An interesting way of looking at it.” He said.

“I would not be very good at my job if I was too terrified to talk to him, would I?” I said. “Don’t get me wrong, I have loads of respect for him and I have learnt well enough, when to stay the hell away from him. Just because I am not petrified of him doesn’t mean I am stupid.”

“His methods are a bit...” he searched for the right word. I found it.

“Abrupt?”

Thrawn nodded. “That is one word to describe it, I suppose.”

“You have to admit, he does get things done.” I said not liking the sensation of talking about Lord Vader behind his back.

Thrawn smiled. “I can see that loyalty is not something you lack. “

I didn’t know how to reply to that and was very glad when our food arrived. He had certainly been right about one thing, the food was amazing. Throughout the meal we kept the conversation light, only after we had both finished eating did we return to more personal subjects.

“Tell me about your home world.” I said as the Corellian version of spiced caf arrived.

Thrawn sat back and took a deep breath. “There is not much to tell, it is a planet very far from here, completely covered in ice. I have little contact with it, my work keeps me occupied.” He said.

“I cannot even imagine that, a planet of ice. I find it cold here most of the time.” I said.

Thrawn nodded. “You come from a place as opposite to my own home as could possibly be. Csilla is a very hostile environment but so, too, is Tatooine. I often wonder if such environments do not produce a certain amount of greatness or at the very least a powerful survival instinct.”

“Maybe, I don’t really know. You are right about the hostile though, it wasn’t always so.” I said. “Once Tatooine used to have oceans and jungles, but the biosphere was obliterated, or so the legends say. I cannot imagine it without the sands. There are so many extraordinary things about it I wouldn’t know where to begin, but then again what I love about Tatooine most people hate.”

“You miss it a great deal.” He said.

I thought about it and nodded. “I suppose I do, things seemed simpler there, I had my life. I knew what I was doing and I enjoyed it and that was that. Here, things are more complex, although I suppose, when you think about it, it is just a bigger sandbox.” I shrugged.

“What exactly did you do on Tatooine?” he asked.

“I was a part time mechanic and pilot at my father’s docking bay. I also worked as an office temp for Hutt Imports and Exports Inc and when I had time I danced at a couple of night clubs. I used to dance at the Palace but that was a bit too rough for me.”

Thrawn looked at me steadily for a moment, trying to put all the pieces of the puzzle together. “So, how, if you don’t mind me asking, did you end up being assigned to Lord Vader as his personal assistant?”

“That is a long story.” I said.

Thrawn waited.

“Well, to make it short, a Twi’lek called Bib Fortuna had the forethought and malice to send in a somewhat glorified resume for a job application on my behalf.”

“Why would he do that?”

“He wanted me out of the way so that his brother could have my job in the office. It was quite clever really, when you think about it. I think he suspected I would probably end up dead, but so far that hasn’t happened. I think he did me a favour really.”

“You seem to have a remarkable ability to see the positive in all things.”

I smiled. “My father says the same thing.”

Thrawn shook his head. “I hope I do not remind you of your father.” He said and our eyes locked for a moment.

I swallowed and looked away. “Far from it.” I said coolly and finished my drink.

Thrawn checked his chronometer and decided that if we were going to visit the art gallery we should probably go. He called for and paid the check and we left.

The drive to the art gallery was quick with out much time for conversation. We got there only to discover it had been closed early due to a problem with the surveillance system. Thrawn was very annoyed but instead of letting it show he suggested an alternative. I shrugged. It was not as if I had anything better to do.

The drive through the city to a quiet more residential area was a little more interesting, it was now rush hour traffic and Thrawn had to concentrate just a little more on what he was doing. I was just glad not to be the one piloting. The traffic here was pure madness. It was a wonder more people didn’t die. We arrived at a very elegant style building that reached far up into the sky and I was grateful to get the hell out of Coruscant air space.

I began to get the idea that perhaps this might not have been such a good idea when Thrawn produced a keycard and unlocked the door to an apartment. He let me in first and then followed closing the door behind him. I knew without asking that this was his home here on Coruscant.

I gasped. I couldn’t help it. The apartment’s main room was stunningly beautiful and very large, quite airy and bright, modern style architecture with old world charm. One had the illusion of almost floating in the sky at first. It was sparsely furnished, but what was there was elegant and expensive. I walked over to the window and looked out. The immediate sense of vertigo was dizzying and I had to step back and hold onto something. I turned around to find that some how the room had been transformed into a small but exquisite art gallery of sorts.

“Holograms?” I asked, because most of what was now visible had not been there a second ago.

Thrawn nodded. “Mainly, there are some real pieces as well, small treasures of mine.” He said. “I promised you art, Miss Gabriel. I hope this will satisfy your appetite for now.”

“It’s amazing.” I said and wandered through the display. Most of the pieces he had selected to show were things I had never seen before, not in books or

holograms or anything, and they were all remarkable. There were sculptures and paintings that were from all over the galaxy. As I stopped by a piece so he would explain about it. His knowledge was vast and his stories about each work delightful. I had, it seemed not only found something he would actually open up and talk about but something that he was quite passionate about.

“Which ones are real?” I asked and hoped that wasn’t a rude question. He said nothing, merely touched a button and most of the holograms vanished. Of the art that remained, there were three gorgeous paintings one of which was by my favourite artist, Ione Medeglia, and a small sculpture carved from a green-grey looking stone. My heart skipped a beat as I went over to it and studied it closely. Without thinking about it, my fingers went to the zenji sticks in my hair touching the milky stone that decorated the tops of them.

“Is this...?” I never got to finish my sentence.

“Yes. The carving is over a thousand standard years old. The stone is the brother-stone to the milky ma’arilite you wear in your hair.” There was tone in his voice that let me know it had pleased him to see me wearing his gift.

I so longed to touch the carving, it was shaped like flames from a fire, twisting and turning so that no matter which way one stepped or looked always the weird green and blue lights from deep in the heart of the stone could be seen. It had been polished until it was flawless.

I was so enthralled in the heart light from the sculpture that I did not notice how close Thrawn suddenly was to me.

“Touch it, if you wish.” He said. I was startled by the nearness of him, by the warmth of his breath on my neck. “I know you ache to touch it, it will not break.” He spoke softly.

So I did. I reached out and I caressed the sculpture with the tips of my trembling fingers. The stone was cold to the touch and hard as stone should be, but the silkiness of the polish was like touching nothing I had ever experienced. I wondered if ice was as smooth as this. Thrawn did not take his eyes off me. I wondered how many other women he had brought up here, lured in by his exquisite art and impeccable manners.

I stepped away from the sculpture and from him and went back to the window. He placed a hand on the small of my back and guided me through to another room which was not a room at all, but rather a large balcony with a magnetic seal. He released the seal lock so that the balcony was suddenly free, and open to the air. The view was dizzying. The sun was beginning to set very slowly and the sky started to blaze with colours that ranged from blood red to deepest purple. I had not realized it had gotten so late.

“I am impressed, Miss Gabriel, not many people would recognize ma’arilite if it jumped up and bit them.” He said coming to stand next to me.

“It was my mother’s favourite. You know there is a legend about it?”

He did not say yes or no, but waited to be told the story.

I could hear my mother's voice telling me my favourite bed time tale. "It is said that before hyper drive was discovered Mandalore was ruled by a race of warriors and great sorcerers. The sorcerers wanted to show their power and boasted that they could harness the lights of the stars and the suns. They spent many years and many days working their magic and finally the day came and they wove their spell. It worked and the entire world of Mandalore was plunged into darkness. The next day the people awoke to find two great stones standing side by side, one white and pale as morning mists and the other dark grey and green as deepest ocean or forests. Within each huge stone were trapped the lights of the sun and the stars. Only those who lived near the stone saw any light at all. The planet was plunged into a terrible dark, cold silence. For many months it was said that people could hear the crying of the lights of the sun and the stars, begging for their freedom until one day a great warrior came along and without hesitation he struck the stones with his fists, shattering them into a billion pieces and freed the lights of the sun and the stars.

Thus light was restored to the world, but people noticed that from that day onward the sun never shone as brightly as it had before and there were stars missing in the sky. They say that the lights we now see in each tiny piece of the shattered stones is that of a star or a shard of the sunlight trapped forever. Some even believe that you can still hear these remnants of what was weeping if you listen closely enough." I finished as the sun shed her final rays of light, painting the sky in glorious colours.

"A beautiful tale to describe something so rare." Thrawn said softly. Something in his voice made me look at him. The wind had picked up a little and blew at my hair. He brushed a stray strand from my face and the touch of his finger tips made my stomach drop. I just stood there bewildered by the desire I suddenly felt. Not since I had known Jyrki had I felt this ache, this awful, physical need. I didn't want this, I knew this feeling and it was not good, this led to hurt and heart break, sleepless nights and restless days. No, this was not at all what I wanted at all. I moved my head away from his hand and stepped back from him. The moment passed and I could breathe again. I knew I should leave, request that he call for transport so that I could return to the palace, but I didn't want to go back there.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked, his voice had a husky edge to it and for the first time I wondered if these feelings I had were not just one sided.

I nodded. "Please." I said and followed him back inside. I sat on the beautiful couch and watched as he poured to glasses of what looked to be expensive wine.

He handed me a glass and then touched his against mine so that the

crystal rang one single clear note.

"To rare and beautiful things." He said.

I nodded and drank the wine carefully. It had a lovely light, clear flavour that I could never hope to describe, nor would I have ever been able to describe the pale blue hue of it.

"Ice wine, from my home world." He said. "I do not get to share this often most people find it too light of a taste but I had the feeling you might appreciate it."

I nodded. "It's lovely."

He looked at me in a way that said far more than I am certain he had intended to and the air between us electrified once more. This time it was his turn to take a deep breath.

"Would you think it terribly rude if we watched the news feeds of the day? I am a bit behind the times." He asked as he sat on the couch beside me.

I was so relieved that I almost giggled. "No not at all, it would be nice to catch up." I said, glad to have something more or less normal to deal with.

He picked up the remote controller and turned on the view screen I had not even noticed before, tuned into one of the many news feeds and we sat together watching what had happened in the Galaxy according to the Empire

I remember that we were half way through watching a news feed about the destruction of Alderaan. The report had said something about it being caused by the Rebellion. A test of some sort of new weapon had gone terribly wrong and caused some sort of chain reaction that had caused the planet to explode. I had almost choked on my wine. Thrawn had given me that one eyebrow higher than the other look and asked if I knew something different.

I had shaken my head and then I had lied to him. I did not know him well enough to judge if I could trust him with such secrets, if it even was a secret. I was certain that he knew as much about it as I did, but neither of us was willing to part with that much trust. Not just yet, so we were playing games, the kind I had always hated.

He had let the matter drop and we had gone back to watching the programme. I was tired. In fact I think the best way to describe how I felt was utterly, drop dead, exhausted. For the first time in what seemed like forever, there was nothing for me to do, nothing for me to worry about and I relaxed.

The couch was deep and comfortable with a high back and large arms. I don't recall curling up into a small ball and resting my head, just for a moment, against the arm of the couch but I must have. My eyes would just not stay open. When sleep eventually came to whisk me away, there was no fighting it. The last thing I remember was Thrawn chuckling softly and placing a blanket over me.

"Sleep, Miss Gabriel. Nothing will harm you here, not even me." He whispered in my ear. And that was the last I knew until the dream came and swept

me up.

When I was young I used to have the worst nightmares imaginable. While I could never recall them upon waking, the terror of these dreams stayed with me for a very long time, dogging me in my waking world. I never connected them with real events in my life but they often preceded terrible things. They were at their worst several months before my mother was killed and after her death, about three months or so the dreams stopped as suddenly as they had begun. No one could explain why. Since then, I had not really had a nightmare of such terrifying proportions, until this one.

The dream came down upon me slowly, the way sand- spiders crawl over your body at night. I felt the fear but could do nothing to stop what was going to come. I found myself somewhere in the Imperial palace. A place I had never been to before. The room was dark and vast, elegant in a terrible way. The air weighed heavily upon me as I walked slowly towards the ancient and extraordinarily powerful man seated on the Throne. I did not want to go near him. He scared me more than anything else in the world. This was a raw fear, the kind that makes you freeze inside, lose the ability to think and tremble uncontrollably. He looked as old as time itself but it was a dreadful aging, as though something had eaten at him from the inside out. His dark power radiated about his body and seemed to fill the room.

"Come closer, child," he said. His voice was soft, gentle sounding but it had an edge like cold steel and I felt a wave of fear course through me, it made me feel sick.

I was sure that in my sleep I whimpered. I could no more resist the Emperor, even in my dream, than I could wake up.

I walked up to the throne until I was within arms length of him, close enough to see the yellow and bloodshot eyes that stared out from under the cowl of his cloak. I wanted to step backwards and move away but, as seems to be the way in dreams, Lord Vader was quite suddenly standing directly behind me. I tried to scream but could I could not make a sound. Now I was trapped.

"She is a pretty thing, Vader, why have you been hiding her from me?" the Emperor asked reaching out to caress my face. I shrank back from his touch but was blocked by Lord Vader, who clamped a hand upon my shoulder and pushed me forwards. The Emperor's touch was a caress of ice and the nausea I felt rippled through me making me physically sick. Lord Vader did not answer the Emperor. I shivered.

"You used to dance for the Hutts on Tatooine, did you not, child?" he asked but since he already knew the answer I did not speak. "Perhaps, you will dance for me." he said coming forward in his chair, his face close to mine, his vile yellow eyes glaring into my naked soul. Suddenly my control broke and my fear whirled through me like a howling devil wind and I unleashed all of the powers

of the Force that she could. Undisciplined and unpredictable, I heard Vader breathe behind me and felt his displeasure.

I thought he would kill me but instead he laughed and laughed. It was not a nice sound. It was a terrible sound.

"How rare." he hissed. "A little jewel among the stones." he placed his finger tips under my chin and raised my head slightly to look at her much as Lord Vader had done up our first encounter.

"Lord Vader, you should have come to me with this little prize." he said looking over my shoulder.

"Yes, my master." Vader said,

"But you wanted to train her...." the Emperor said softly.

"She is raw and untrained...she would have made a gift for you..."Vader said coldly.

He was lying and I sensed it and I wondered the Emperor knew it too.

"Old friend, I think you would have her for yourself. Such a pretty toy, though, beauty means little to you Vader. Power is what you desire. But power comes at a price. So does deception and failure." he hissed.

Suddenly, so fast I had not even seen him move, he reached past me to grasp at Lord Vader, snatching his right arm, a light saber ignited and there was a blur of light and then, instead of Lord Vader's arm being held in the Emperor's vice like grip it was mine. He smiled as he sliced through the flesh and bone. I tried to scream and I tried to pull away from his grip but it was too strong, he pulled me in so close to his face that he could have kissed me if that had been his wish.

"You will be mine, girl, mine. But not yet, Lord Vader may play a while longer. When he is tired of you, I shall take over, then you will know your true master," he hissed, his breath warm on my skin.

Panic overwhelmed me and suddenly, I found my voice and I screamed and screamed and screamed until something broke the spell.

I awoke, frozen with fright, bathed in cold sweat and shaking so hard my teeth were chattering. Thrawn was trying his best to calm me down and bring me back to the real world.

"It was a dream, just a dream." he kept saying over and over again. He was seated on the edge of the couch, and he gripped my shoulders so hard that his fingers bit into my flesh. It hurt but in a way that helped bring me back into the same reality he was in. The look on his face told me he was worried. I guessed it would not look too good on his record if Lord Vader's favoured assistant died in his home.

I had my right hand out in front of me and kept staring at it, chanting over and over in a hushed whisper "Still there, still there." It was still attached to my

arm, and I kept flexing the fingers to make sure everything worked until Thrawn took my hands in his and held them until I stopped. His hands were surprisingly warm and dry.

As the last remnants of the dream world slowly faded away, I saw there truly was no Emperor here and no Lord Vader. There was only Thrawn, whose hands held mine tightly enough to break through the numbing chill I felt. He spoke to me calmly as though I were a frightened bantha and his voice soothed just he had hoped it would. This dream had been so real, so unbelievably real. I could not seem to shake the dread that had followed me up from sleep but the panic receded slowly leaving me bewildered and uncertain of what to do next.

"Better?" Thrawn asked softly, letting go of my hands.

I nodded and looked up at him. The fear in my eyes touched something deep within him and his own eyes asked questions that I wasn't sure I could answer.

"Do you wish to talk about it?" he asked gently, brushing damp hair from my face.

"Something happened, the Emperor, Lord Vader... something happened, I don't know what but it was awful." I shook my head, the words tumbled out of my mouth but I couldn't get them to make sense.

"Well, the Emperor was very displeased with the outcome of Yavin. Perhaps your answer lays there." he said quietly.

I looked at his face. "You know what happened?"

He nodded.

"How much?" I asked.

"All of it." He told me carefully.

I hugged my knees close to my body and just looked at him. He had known all along what had happened to Alderaan and to the Death Star. I sighed, I did not want to play these games. I did not want any part of any of this world of court politics and deceptive smiles.

I shook my head and turned away from him. "I hate all these games, all these lies." I said, tears threatened to come.

He cupped my chin with gentle fingers and drew me back to look at him again.

"Trust is a delicate thing in our business, Merlyn." He said. "It is not easily given."

I searched his eyes, his face. There had been a test and I had not picked up on it but I had just passed it somehow. It had been the first time he had ever used my first name.

"Let me get you something to calm you down, something to drink and perhaps you can tell me about it." he said getting up.

I got up off the couch, wrapped the blanket about my shoulders and

followed him to the kitchen.

He poured me a generous glass of a deep amber, liquid and handed it to me, I took the glass with both hands. Then poured one for himself. "Thirty year old Corellian brandy. It's strong but it will help."

I sipped the brandy and felt it burn through my body. I cupped the bowl shaped glass in my hands and began to tell Thrawn about the dream, I told him everything. No more games, I had said to myself. I needed to trust someone and he was the only person I felt I could. He listened intently.

At four o'clock in the morning, it felt too late to go back to sleep and too early to be social. I sat on the edge of my bed staring at the wall. At this time of the morning the Palace was empty and quiet. The dawn was just beginning to start its slow spread in the sky. Some time after five in the morning I had asked if Thrawn would arrange for transportation to take me home. Home, what a strange concept and I hardly thought of this apartment as home, but there was no other word to use in its place. He had said he would take me back to the palace, that he had work there that needed doing so it was of no bother. I had not argued with him, I was far too tired and far too distracted.

We had sat in his kitchen for about three hours talking and after two generous Corellian brandies and a very strong stim'caf I was about as tired and as wired as a person could get.

I had described my dream and he had listened. I had described my time aboard the *Devastator* and he had listened. I had asked him about how he had known about everything so quickly and he had told me, without a great deal of detail but enough to let me know I had more of his trust now than I had perhaps been the case earlier the evening before. After this we had sat in silence for a moment. Then as if the question had been boiling over he asked when I had met the Emperor.

"Never." I had told him. "I actually have no idea what he looks like."

Thrawn had just nodded. "Then how do you know that was him who it was in your dream?"

"I don't, it just felt as though that is who it was."

He had smiled. "Well, then I shouldn't worry too much about it. Sometimes a dream is just a dream. You have been through a lot in the last while. I am quite certain you just needed to let it go."

"Don't you ever have bad dreams?" I had asked.

"Seldom." He said. "And when I do, I put them down to bad food."

And I had actually laughed.

"There, you see, nothing to fret about." He said.

Easy for him to say, I had thought and then I had asked to go home.

The flight back to the palace was almost surreal. Somehow time managed to stop and speed up all at the same time. At that hour of the morning there is less

traffic in the air and the lights from the city are like stars in reverse. We sat in silence, with me staring out of the window. The silence neither awkward nor comfortable, some place in between. I don't think we said a single word to each other, there was nothing to say.

He had landed on one of the North Face docking pads and walked with me to the door of the apartment. We stood there facing each other and there was that moment where things could go either way. The magic is there for a kiss and the gap that is there might stop it. I didn't know quite what to do. There was a time and a place for everything and somehow the timing for this was not right. In the breadth of a single moment I had made my decision and without considering any consequences I stepped back from him and turned slightly away.

"Thank you, Captain." I said. "I really enjoyed our time together yesterday." And I meant it. It had been a really great day.

Thrawn had regarded me for a moment with his eerie luminous eyes that were so hard to read, then he had taken my right hand in his and placed a gentle kiss on the inside of my wrist, right at the base where the wrist ends and the palm begins. It was intimate and somehow politely distanced all at the same time. He had not taken his eyes off my face.

"Then, Miss Gabriel," he said. "I suggest you stay alive so that we may do it again sometime." And with a smile he left.

I watched him walk down the dark corridor until I could neither see nor hear him any more. I had unlocked the door and gone in. Too tired to think and too wound to sleep.

I decided that sitting about on this bed would accomplish nothing and dwelling on dreams was, as Thrawn had said, pointless. I showered, got dressed and went to my office. My protocol droid was there and had once again managed to get everything unpacked and sorted out.

"Oh Mistress Gabriel, how very pleasant to see you. Shall I get you your usual stim'caf?" he said,

"Please." And then I asked. "Has there been any word from Lord Vader?"

"No Mistress. I have placed all your messages in the data terminal for your convenience. Lord Vader was not among those who have contacted you."

I sighed. "I guess no news is good news."

I sat and sifted through the daily mails and memos, sorting out the important ones from the usual nonsense, but my mind was not on the work. Most people worried themselves stupid when Lord Vader sent word, yet, it bothered me that I had not heard from him. I made a note in Lord Vader's calendar about a couple of up and coming social events that were important. A couple of

promotions for some of the Fleet officers. A rather high end Art exhibition opening and the Emperor's Grand Ball was coming up soon and that was a requirement for pretty much everyone who was anyone.

The Grand Ball was a huge excuse for all the important people, all the people who thought they were important and all the people who really wished they could be important to get together in their absolute finest clothes and hang out. It would be a gala evening full of snobbery and stupidity. The only things, to my mind that would make it worth while going, would be the food, the drink, the music and the entertainment. The Emperor spared no expense to see who would fawn over him the most to be in his good graces. I was glad that I didn't have to attend it.

I made certain that the invitation was first and foremost on Lord Vader's appointment calendar, highlighted and underlined.

I was surprised at how quickly the time passed and by the time I had finished sorting everything out it was well past midday. I sat and stared at the wall for a bit, thinking about everything that had happened. How did my life suddenly become so complicated? I hadn't bargained for any of this and I felt as though I was out of my league. It was as though I had gone from cruising in normal space to suddenly whizzing around in hyperspace all the time without a moment to think about where it was all heading. It was unnerving to say the least.

I started to write a letter to my father but after the fourth attempt I gave up. I would have to find some nice holo-card and send that with the usual, I am fine message. It wasn't as if I could give him details on what was really going on. *'Dear Dad, was on board an ISD, watched a ship being destroyed, then felt it when Alderaan was destroyed, then rebels blew up the death star...Oh and by the way my new boss? He's the one people call the Emperor's Iron Fist. He can kill people just by thinking about it.'*

It wasn't exactly stuff you could really write home about. I waited in the office until three o'clock, killing time looking through the online news feeds and then told P2B4 I was leaving and if anything important came up he could reach me via my comm.

I went back to my apartment and changed into clothes I could dance in. My body was stiff and sore. I wanted to work out. I took a small music bot, a bottle of water with me and I made my way through the quiet corridors of the palace to the old part where my favourite room was.

I loved this part of the castle and I especially loved this room. It was large and ornate, with high ceilings and beautiful plaster mouldings. The paint was fading and there was dust everywhere. The room with the balcony was sparsely furnished, the remnants of the time from before the renovations. There were a few chairs, an old table and a bookshelf that completely covered one wall. There were still some books in it. I hadn't actually read or taken any of the books, but I had

browsed the titles. I was pretty sure that I was not supposed to be here, although there were no signs anywhere that said it was forbidden, the feeling of forgotten abandonment said otherwise.

I appreciated the space and the quiet of this place. When I went to the recreational area that was in the Palace, it was always full and people stared. I had never liked to work through my exercise and dance routines with others around. I suppose the solitude I had gotten used to when I was with Jyrki had somehow stayed. I just liked to be on my own, where it was quiet and without distraction. I had also had the experience a couple of times, when I somehow aligned myself with what Lord Vader called the Force, that things got a little out of hand. When I let go I had no idea what I was doing. I had once all but destroyed a small workout room at Jabba's palace, because my dance had gotten a little too enthusiastic.

This room had hand laid wooden flooring. The patterns were starburst and Gianda flowers, intricate and beautiful. It had not been polished in a while and there were dust-durnies in every corner.

I shoved the table out of the way and set the music-bot up. I set it to play loud enough that I could lose myself in the music but not so loud that it would be heard outside. I had left the door open because the door to the hallway was shut. That way the air circulated through the room from the open balcony doors as well.

I began with a long, slow stretching sequence. It was as much ecstasy as it was agony and I made sure I warmed up really well. Then I started to go through Jyrki's workout. I loved the flow each move next to the other and I could feel the energy shift itself around me to flow with me and not against me. I loved it when the power aligned like this. When I finished the sequence of movements that Jyrki had taught me I began to dance.

As a little girl, so my mother had told me, I had danced before I could walk. I doubted that this was true, but my love of dance was something I had known my whole life. My mother had insisted I take lessons and so at a very young age I attended T'naga dance classes. It was a precise form of dance that required discipline and a lot of practice. I wasn't the type of child who took to being rapped on the legs or hands with a stick so after a year of dragging my heels and complaining about it, I was allowed to stop attending. I danced on my own after that, in the quiet of my own room where no one could see me or point out the faults or whack me with a stick every time my positions were incorrect. Even at an early age I was wilful and stubborn.

After things went bad with Jyrki I had gone looking for a dance teacher again. I found Kamadi Tza'ad and she was willing to teach me, for a price.

Kamadi was one of the best dancers in Mos Eisley. She had a reputation of being a terror to any student she took on and it was said she had broken the spirit of many would be dancers. Jabba the Hutt prized her for her ability to find the best and make them better. She had taught most of the dancers who worked at the

Palace freelance and pretty much had the monopoly on who danced where and when.

She had told me after I had passed her initiation test that she had been trained in dance at the Academy of Dance on Coruscant. I never knew if this was true or not but I was grateful that she had accepted me as a student. I had needed the distraction.

For two years she trained me every day. I had private classes and group classes and performance classes and so on. It was a long and difficult two years. When I danced at the palace for the first time it went so well that I was hired on the spot.

Kamadi was pleased that meant money for her. I was good for her bank account until the day I rebelled and told her where to go. I still remember that day. I had made everything in the room shake about and threatened her with making her hair fall out, not that I could do this, but I wanted to be free of her oppression and I was tired of giving up nearly two thirds of my pay to her long after the amount we had initially agreed on as her teaching fee was done. After that I had been free to do as I pleased but without her patronage I was at the bottom of the barrel when it came to getting shifts and without her protection I soon found out how rough it could be as a freelance dancer.

I had not lasted long at the Jabba's Palace, while I liked to dance there and I made good money in tips, I loathed the way I was treated, especially by the less than reputable pilots who hung out there, the other dancers and particularly Bib Fortuna. I suppose that in my desire to get away from my feelings for Jyrki, I had not really thought about where I was running too. And while I had loved to dance I was not willing to sell my soul for the ability to do so. Now, here in this room, I thought about my life. Each step I remembered was a step away from my past.

I set the music-bot to play a specific dance and began to run through the choreography. It was a dance I had learned from Rys, my roommate. I loved the intricacy of the patterns of steps, it was difficult dance to perform so I began slowly and walked through the steps one by one. Then I began over again faster. I repeated the whole dance again and again until I no longer knew where I ended and the dance began. I became one with the movements and in doing that I let the Force flow through me, which made the dance better, more powerful. I was in the middle of a full spin when I suddenly noticed the figure standing in the doorway. I stopped so suddenly that I almost twisted my ankle. I had neither noticed the intrusion on my space nor that the sun had set. I tumbled onto the floor.

"Oh, my dear, are you hurt?" the voice was that of an elderly man. He came forward slowly.

I got up and moved my ankle. "No, thank you I am fine."

"I did not mean to startle you." He said, looking around the room. I shut

the music-bot off. "I heard the music, I wondered who was here. This part of the Palace is no longer used."

"I apologize if I am trespassing. I am a bit new here." I said, suddenly feeling a bit shy as well as a little wary..

The man waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "I am sure no one will mind." He said.

I wiped the sweat off my face and neck. "That's kind of you. I hope I wasn't bothering you."

"No, not at all." He said walking out on the balcony. "I rather like this part of the palace, it is quiet. No one around to bother me, sometimes I come here to think. I don't mind sharing it with someone who enjoys it just as much and I won't tell if you don't." He said.

I nodded. "I Promise." I said with a smile.

I fetched a chair from inside and offered it to him, he chuckled and sat down.

"You are very kind to an old man, my dear." He pulled his robe about him and sat down. "You said you are new here?" he asked, looking up at me. I could not see his face because it was dark but I felt his eyes studying me.

"Yes. I was assigned to work with Lord Vader, his new Personal Assistant." I said.

"Ah, yes, Lord Vader's new office girl. I have heard about you."

I sighed. "The café incident? I know I am sorry I lose my temper and all control goes out the window!"

"I do not recall anything about a café incident, but I have heard Lord Vader mention you, I don't recall your name though." He said.

"Merlyn Gabriel." I said, "Lord Vader speaks of me?"

He chuckled. "He calls you annoyingly efficient."

"Oh?" I grinned. That sounded almost like a compliment.

"You dance very well, were you classically trained?" he asked changing the subject.

I shook my head. "Goodness no, I mean I have had some lessons and when I was young I studied a little but nothing seriously classical. I just like to dance, I like the energy it gives me."

"Have you thought about training?" he asked.

I laughed. "Who would train me? I am far too old." Then I added, "Although, I have always wanted to learn classical dance. I don't have time now, my work for Lord Vader keeps me busy enough. I think I prefer to come here and dance alone." Then more as an afterthought I added, "I'm not very trainable, or so I have been told."

He just chuckled, "Do you enjoy it?" he asked. "Working for Lord Vader?"

"Yes, actually I do, which seems to surprise everyone." I said. "He is very

demanding but he is also efficient. I find his honesty refreshing."

"As is yours." He said.

I looked at him. "I am sorry, I don't know your name."

"Many have called me Senator Palpatine, why don't you?" he said getting up to leave.

"Senator, it was a pleasure meeting you." I said.

"Likewise my dear." He said. "Oh, will you be attending the Grand Ball? I hear it will be spectacular this year."

"Good gracious no. I doubt I will be invited, I am quite sure the Emperor doesn't need an outer rim rat like me cluttering up his wonderful celebration. I would be terribly out of place with my old fashioned clothes." I said.

He chuckled. "Don't sell yourself short, my dear. Lord Vader is quite lucky to have you." He said and he patted my arm. He touched my skin with his papery hand and I could have sworn I felt something, a tremble of energy, like a static shock and I pulled my arm away from his hand without thinking about it.

Palpatine chuckled. "I shall enjoy meeting you again. My dear, you are refreshingly different." And with that he left the room.

I went back to my apartment, showered and went straight to bed. I was woken at 6am the following morning by a comm. Message telling me I was to report to Lord Vader's office at once. I dressed in a hurry and ran to the office. I knocked and was told to enter. Lord Vader stood at the window, his hands behind his back looking out of the window.

"You called, My Lord?"

"It would appear the Emperor has taken an interest in your work. You will accompany me to the Grand Ball that you have so efficiently reminded me of." He paused. "It is actually included in your duties to accompany me as I see fit and in my place, should I not be able to attend, to represent me at all official functions."

I wanted to say "Yes but..." but I knew what that would get me, a pretty colourful necklace I couldn't take off. I waited because there was more.

"A meeting with the Palace fashion Advisor has been arranged. You will accompany him today. While, it is irrelevant to me what you wear, the Emperor is a man of taste and requires an adherence to appropriate dress and etiquette. The Grand Ball is an event of some prestige. You will listen to what this fashion advisor has to say."

"Yes, my lord." I said.

"You may go." He said, without turning around.

"Yes, my lord." I said. And I left. Wondering how the hell I had managed to get myself into this mess and how I was going to get out of it.

At exactly eleven o'clock a very beautiful man walked into my office and asked with a dazzling smile if I was The Miss Gabriel he was to assist. I got up from

behind my desk and shook his hand.

“Siavaan Rimanata, everyone calls me Shiv.” He shook my hand back and grinned. “I hope you are ready for this.” He said and he ushered me out of the office. At the landing pad he swept me into a chauffeur driven sleek looking cruiser and off we went.

He was not what I had expected, but then again I had no idea what to expect. He was not overly tall and fairly slender in an elegant sort of way. He had long, wavy blond hair with and elegantly chiseled looking features. I suspected he had had work done. His eyes were the kind of green that only comes with augments and his teeth were just a little too white and a little too perfect. He spoke with a soft, tenor voice, was eloquent and polite and had been well educated in the noble art of etiquette. As he spoke about himself, telling me a little more than I really needed to know, I got the feeling he was over compensating and was a little nervous being with me. I asked him why.

“It is not every day that I am told to drop what I am currently working on and come and do a make over. I was especially surprised to hear that the order came from Lord Vader. It is not wise to displease Lord Vader.” He said.

“What were you doing when you dropped everything?” I asked.

“Coordinating the courtesans wardrobes.” He said. “They all have to look according to the Emperor’s design. This year the theme is a slightly retro Nubian look. Not easy.” He shook his head. “The courtesans can be difficult. So let’s enjoy the day, shall we?”

I smiled and nodded. “So what is first on the menu?”

He smiled and gave me the once up and down. “It’s a surprise.”

Our first stop was a very upscale hair salon called Te’n’renzza. We walked in and the Owner, a flamboyant middle aged man with blue hair that Shiv called Bam.

“Shiv, how delightful to see you again.” He said and they did that court kiss, kiss thing. “What brings you here today?”

Shiv nodded in my direction and Bam’s eyes almost popped out of his head.

“Oh my,” he said. “I see we have our work cut out for us. She does present a challenge.”

I didn’t like this talking about me as I wasn’t there. “She has a name, you know.” I said. “She is called Miss Gabriel.”

“Very well, Miss Gabriel, please follow me.” Bam said with a slightly injured air, and I did.

I had never in my life been to a hair salon. My mother had always cut my hair for me until I rebelled about having short hair and let it grow out. After that it was a struggle to keep it looking decent. I remember many torturous sessions having my washed hair combed out. It was always full of tangles and knots. It hurt

like hell but I never did go back to the standard Tatooine short hair. Now, I was sitting in this ritzy place having my hair washed by someone whose hands were softer than down. It felt glorious. When the assistant was finished she wrapped my hair in a fluffy towel and I was moved onto the next station. There I was told to sit in the chair and then Bam came over and fussed around.

“Okay,” he said, “I suggest short here and some fluffing here and the layers down the back.” He was about to handle my hair some more when I grabbed his hand and pulled him close to my face.

“Listen to me. If you cut more than a centimeter off my hair I will cut off your fingers.” I said with a sweet smile.

Bam, much to his grace, just smiled and nodded. “I understand, Miss Gabriel, now if you let go of my hand I can work my magic. Your hair needs some serious work. Where have you been living?”

“Tatooine.”

“Well that explains everything.” He sighed a long suffering sigh and went to work. He snipped and shaped and sprayed stuff in my hair and by the time he had finished I was amazed.

“Wow, I take it back, you can keep your fingers.” I said, amazed. My hair seemed to suddenly glow and shine as I had never seen it before. It was soft and almost beautiful.

“Another convert ” He said smugly and then he handed Shiv a very large bag full of hair products. “Try not to undo my hard work?”

The next place Shiv dragged me to was a salon that specialized in hands and feet and facials. I will spare you the details on all of this, needless to say they despaired of me. I often bit my nails, had worn desert boots most of my life when I wasn’t running around barefoot and I hated having the facial done. I had to admit it felt good afterwards though. We left with another bag filled of make Merlyn beautiful products. Then we got to the interesting part, clothes.

Coruscant has a large fashion district and there are many designers there all in competition with each other. Shiv explained that there were five major labels and several more minor ones all in the Designer guild and then there were the independents. First, because it was the way of things, we visited the five major labels first. I hated everything I saw. I don’t know who these guys designed for but it wasn’t for women shaped like me, that is a woman with enough hip and waist difference to give me curves, enough breast to make a man happy if he’s not into augments but not tall enough to kiss a Wookiee’s nose without standing on something. I was so not the right shape for almost everything I was shown, and I hated the colours. We went to several of the minor labels and it was more of the same. It seemed to me that if you were in the guild you followed a set of rules. The rules dictated the clothes and the clothes all had the same feel to them. I was not going to be a carbon copy of all the other girls at that Ball, no matter how

prestigious the labels were.

It was getting late and Shiv was getting desperate. Then, he had a brainstorm. And he dragged me to an out of the way shop just off the fashion strip called Cati's.

We went in and were met by a pretty young Rodian woman who actually gave me a smile that went to her eyes. She didn't immediately ask if I wanted a drink or a tiny sandwich that tasted like it had been made from synth bread that had sat around for seven years. Instead she ignored Shiv and started to talk to me.

"So what colours do you like?" she asked.

"Blue. I said, I love blues and greens. No more browns and no yellows." I said.

She nodded. "What do you dislike in clothes?"

"Restriction." I said, "I dance and I hate tight clothes. Everything I wear is long and easy to move in."

She smiled and nodded. "Are you from Tatooine?"

"Yep." I wanted to ask how she knew but she pointed to what I was wearing.

"That type of cloth is only found there." She said. "I studied many styles from the Outer Rim Territories."

She gave me a measured look and nodded to herself. Then she vanished for a few minutes and then came back with a rack of dresses.

I spent an hour trying on some of the most beautiful dresses I had ever in my entire life seen. We left with six. Then we followed Cati's advice and went shoe and accessory shopping at a place around the corner she swore would be amazing. She was not wrong. After that we went to an upscale department shop and in the space of another hour I had a whole new day to day wardrobe.

Once all the purchases were stored in the vehicle we went for something to eat, a nice little bistro in the Coco district. Half way through a very nice soup and salad I asked Shiv who was paying for all of this stuff.

"Everything had been charged to the Imperial Palace Account. So I guess the Emperor is paying for it all." Shiv said. "But that's normal, all the courtesan clothing is charged to this account."

"What we spent today could buy a space port on Tatooine." I said.

Shiv smiled. "Well, here it buys you clothes. Last time I looked you didn't need a space port, but you sure need clothes. You are an absolute fashion disaster."

"Gee, thanks." I said and we finished our food. Then we headed back to the palace. He helped me carry everything into the apartment which suddenly seemed a whole lot smaller.

"Damn girl, you need a decorator." He said looking around.

I asked if he wanted a drink or anything but he just said no thanks. "I have a lot to do tomorrow and no offence but shopping with you, while fun, is

exhausting. Say maybe we can get together again for stim'caf or something? We can catch up on the Palace gossip."

"Sure." I said. "I'd like that." And I meant it too and with a hug and that kiss kiss thing, that almost everyone in the fashion industry liked to do, he left.

I surveyed the mass of designer paper bags and boxes that cluttered up my apartment. It was obscene how much money had been spent on me today and I was still wondering why I was worth the effort and how the Emperor even knew about me. It was worrying and it nagged at me.

With a sigh I got and started to unpack everything. There were shoes, and six exquisite dresses, a bunch of office style clothes I was still not sure I would wear, some frivolous accessories I wasn't even certain I understood what they were for, along with a ton of personal hygiene, hair care and make up products I had never knew I had ever needed.

I was tired and I felt as though I had wasted the whole day. The Grand Ball was a huge event and I could not even imagine such a thing let alone imagine attending it. With a sigh I put all the pretty dress up clothes away. While putting away all the shampoos and body lotion and stuff I discovered a beautiful hand blown glass bottle of a very exotic bubble-bath. I felt it was a sign from the Great Maker and I decided to take a bath. I lit candles, poured myself a glass of my father's moonglow and dug out one of my favourite books.

It had been a strange day and I was glad it was over. I lounged in the bath until the water was cool, got out wrapped myself in the biggest towel I had just as the doorbell rang. I figured it was probably Shiv coming back to say he had forgotten something or maybe my droid with a message. When I opened the door the last person I expected to be standing there was Captain Thrawn. There was an awkward moment of silence and then not knowing what else to do, I said. "Well, are you coming in or is it your intention to just stand there watching me drip all over the carpet?"

He decided to come in.

One of the things that working as a dancer had taught me was to remain regal, no matter what. So bearing that in mind, I pretended that answering the door looking like a half drowned rat wrapped in a big fluffy green and white striped towel was the most natural thing in the world. Smiling as I gestured for Thrawn to come in.

I shut the door and told Thrawn to have a seat, if he could find one buried under all debris of tissue paper, designer bags and general mayhem that had followed the unpacking of the day's work. He surveyed my living room and then surveyed me. I stood there holding my towel dress, my hair dripping all over me

and the floor staring back.

“Don’t ask.” I said.

“Very well.” he replied with a slightly cocked eyebrow.

“I’ll be right back.” and I vanished into the bedroom threw on some clothes and wrapped a smaller version of the same towel about my hair. When I got back out he had cleared away most of the junk from the small couch and was sitting on it, studying a brochure Bam had given me about hair care.

“Would you like something to drink? Tea, some very bad stim’caf or maybe that gut rot my father brews?” I yelled from the kitchen.

“Tea would be fine.” He replied.

I had discovered that there was an in-house delivery service for those of us idiots who had not found off palace housing. It was very convenient, although expensive. It was the best way so far of grocery shopping. At least now I had the bare essentials in the apartment.

I made a large pot of my favourite tea put all the things I needed on a tray and carried the lot out in one go, using my foot to remove the paper junk on the table and replaced it with the tray.

I gave Thrawn a sweet smile when he looked up at me. “I haven’t had time to tidy, sorry. I wasn’t expecting company.”

I poured tea and handed him a cup. The apartment had come fully furnished including exquisite china. The tea cups were delicate and expensive. It was a little unnerving to use them. The ornate cup seemed ridiculously tiny in his hand.

“You might want to add a small amount of honey.” I said. “Some people find it bitter.”

He sniffed at the tea and took a sip. “What is this?”

“Tatooine desert-mint tea.” I said. “It is one of the few things that actually grows there. The sand people first discovered it, I think. They sometimes barter it for water, if they are feeling in a social mood. It doesn’t happen often though. Mostly, there are a few farmers who try to cultivate it, not so easy I am told.”

Once we had gotten the tea niceties out of the way we sat in silence. The scent of mint, Thrawn’s cologne and what ever that bubble stuff was which I had bathed in hanging in the air. It was a little intoxicating and the longer we sat there in silence the more nervous I felt.

“Okay.” Thrawn said finally, breaking the silence, “I have to ask. Did you buy the whole planet or what happened here?”

I glanced around at the mess and it was messy, but expensive messy. “Well, it appears, as Lord Vader’s PA, I have to attend palace functions, particular function of note is this Grand Ball. Someone, it seems decided that Nubian not Tatooine fashions are in vogue this year. The palace fashion consultant, Siavaan Rimanata, was hired to turn this desert rat into a retro Nubian clone.” I grinned.

“But it’s not going to work though.”

“Oh?” Thrawn raised an eyebrow.

“It seems that fashion here is an extreme sport.” I pulled the towel off my head and used to rub the last of the serious water out of my hair. Now I had semi wet hair trailing down my back, but the towel was just plain silly looking.

“Yes, I had noticed that. There are some advantages to wearing a uniform.” He said, ignoring the whole towel thing politely.

“You are lucky that way. I can’t believe what some people are going to show up in this year. There was this one really tacky bikini style thing, all gold and purple with little bits of cloth to disguise the fact it’s just underwear, looked like something you’d see at Jabba’s palace. I cannot imagine who would ever be caught dead in something like that. The theme is retro Nubian, but some of the stuff I saw it looked more like a nightmare version of the worst slave girl styles imaginable.”

“Retro Nubian?” Thrawn asked carefully.

“I didn’t ask.” I said making one of those *I have no idea* hand gestures. “Shiv was hard enough to shut up about his dismay at my fashion sense or lack thereof as it was, I didn’t want to encourage him to chatter about anything else. I am sure I will find out when I attend this silly ball thing.”

Thrawn suppressed the laughter he so badly wanted to let go of and drank his tea.

“What are you doing here?” I asked suddenly. “It’s a bit late for a social call isn’t it?”

He put his cup down. “Ah, yes, it almost slipped my mind. The sight of your new fashion, the elegant Towel Dress, almost made me forget. You left this behind.” He said pulling my book out of his attaché case. “I found it fallen down beside the seat in the sky speeder.”

I took it from his hand. I would have been annoyed to lose it, but had forgotten all about it. I had taken it with me when we had left the balcony to go to lunch.

“Thank you.” I said. “And just so you are aware, I will not be wearing the elegant Towel Dress to the ball, by the way.”

This time he didn’t hide his grin. “Well, it would certainly be an eye opener, or perhaps you were planning on starting a new trend?”

“Or the biggest fashion faux pas in the history of the Empire.” I added with a little shake of my head.

“So what will you be wearing?” he asked a little coyly.

I looked at him for a moment and then said “That would spoil the surprise. You will just have to show up to find out.” Now, who was being coy I wondered?

There was a look on his face that said he was enjoying this little game. “Well, Miss Gabriel, it is a requirement of all Imperial Officers to show up when they are not deployed. So, as long as nothing requires my attention elsewhere, I

will be there.”

“I shall look forward to that, captain, more tea?”

He shook his head. “No, thank you. Actually, as much as I would very much like to stay and explore the delicate topic of female fashion trends at the palace or lack there of further, I really have to go, duty calls.” He got up to leave and I followed.

“Thank you for bringing my book back. It is one of my favourites.” I said as we stood by the front door.

“Really?” he said. “I always found it a little heavy on the romance, not enough build up. The hero is a little too over the top and the leading lady too easy.”

I looked at him with some surprise. “You’ve read it?”

He nodded, “I enjoy reading although I don’t get much time for it. This is a classic, albeit it a tad heavy on the clichés. Still, the story is strangely compelling but there are better books out there, I would be happy to make a few recommendations.” He said, then added, “If you’d like.”

I smiled because he had described it so perfectly. “I would like that very much. I love to read and now, I actually have some time for it.”

“Thank you for the tea, it was surprisingly refreshing.” He said his hand on the door knob. I leant against the wall beside him.

“You are welcome.” I said. “So, I guess I will see you at the Grand ball then?”

He paused for a moment and smiled then suddenly leaned a little closer towards me and said softly. “I hope this dress of yours is worth the wait, Miss Gabriel. You have quite aroused my curiosity.”

There was a surge of electricity in the air and by standing where I had I had backed myself into a corner with no place to go. I shrugged as calmly as I could and said, “Well, you know what they say about curiosity”

He smiled at me slowly. “No, do tell.”

“It killed the jax.” I told him.

His eyes searched my face as he cocked his head to one side then smiled. I wasn’t sure I liked this smile. This was the hungry, feral smile of a creature about to devour its favourite meal. He reached up and caressed the side of my face. His fingers, while warm, made me shiver. He moved so that he was as close as he could be with out touching me and whispered in my ear.

“Yes, Miss Gabriel it did, but do you know what?” he asked.

I looked up into his face and shook my head.

“Satisfaction brought it back.” He murmured gently. His breath warm against my skin.

My heart decided it needed to do some triple time and I had forgotten to breathe. I just stared up into his eyes and hoped he would go away. He smiled and slid his hand around the back of my neck and with a motion, as subtle as it was

arousing, he drew me to him. I had both hands flat against his chest. Resist at all costs, I thought, this was a man I would drown in if I let it happen. He was more dangerous than anything or anyone I had ever met. Trouble was, I liked it, I liked it a lot. The wildness of the danger, the electricity and the passion. I liked this game more than I ever wanted to admit even though I lied to myself all the time about that.

“You should go.” I whispered. “Duty calls, remember?”

He did not take his eyes off my face and nodded. I could feel his heart beat beneath my right palm. I wondered if he knew how nervous he made me, was making me now. The warmth of his hand on the back of my neck, beneath my wet hair, was electrifying. His fingers brushed the sensitive skin there and I fought to not give in to the flood of warm desire it created. We stood like that for what seemed an eternity but could not have been more than a split second and then he stepped away from me. I put my hands behind my back. I didn’t want him to see how much they trembled.

He nodded. “Yes, you are right, I *should* go.” His voice seemed a little husky to me and the colour of his eyes had intensified. He gave me a look I could not decipher and then he left. Just like that the door was open and he was gone.

I slammed it shut and locked it. I leant against the wall and remembered to breathe. What the hell was this? What in the name of Sarlacc did I think I was doing? Being in his company was like playing with fire, sooner or later one of us was bound to get badly burned, probably me. It took me forever to fall asleep.