

CHAPTER THREE

The Elegant Dance 1

Some days, life just minds its own business and gets on with itself. Even the Palace had days like that. The usual nonsense came in and got sorted out. People avoided my office and I didn't perform any more magical feats of food and beverage levitation. Yet, for all the quiet solitude, I was not bored. The better I got at being 'annoyingly efficient' it seemed the more work I ended up having to do.

It had been several days since Thrawn had shown up at my apartment. His presence was like a shipwreck. He came, shattered the peace and left again. I don't know what bothered me more, the effect he had on me when he was around or that I actually liked it in some perverse, masochistic way.

This was exactly how I had felt about Jyrki, all dizzy highs and longing wrapped up in , sleepless nights and restless days. Except, this time, it was not a one sided thing, or at least it didn't appear to be. Thrawn was the one doing the chasing, although I was not exactly telling him to go away. Not for the first time did I wonder what exactly it was he wanted from me, the obvious not withstanding. I also wondered what it was I wanted from him because if I seriously thought about where it could all end up, none of the endings I could imagine were very happy or even pretty. It was all around very bad news. Sort of like working for Lord Vader, but I hadn't handed in my resignation from that yet, either.

I was in the middle of eating lunch when Lord Vader summoned me to his office. When he was around, this had become normal, our daily briefing so to speak, but his timing was always terrible. I sighed and put down my fork, grateful it was a cold salad I was eating. It would still be cold when I got back. I gathered my datapads and walked over to his office, the door always opened for me just as I reached out to touch it. I hated it when he did that.

"Good afternoon, my lord." I said walking in. I took my usual place beside him at the window. He was always there, watching the city, I never knew if he actually sat at his desk or if he even sat anywhere. I wondered if he even slept. Probably not, best to not even go there.

He handed me a datapad. I took it and ran down the list. He had discovered that part of my job, aside from keeping his busy schedule straight, was to actually do things for him, run errands, set up meetings and so on and now that is what I was also doing. It kept me busy so that was okay.

"I want the appointment with the tailor rescheduled." He said. "You can inform him that I will want several new cloaks and he will bring a selection of fabrics."

"Yes, my lord."

"Also, I have placed a requisition for new combat training droids. See to it that they understand the need for haste and make sure they have all the specs."

"Yes, my lord."

"I understand, you have all that you require for the Grand Ball?"

"Yes, my lord, thank you."

"Then I will expect you to accompany me as is protocol. I trust you understand all that is required."

I hesitated and he looked at me. "Not really, my lord."

"You are expected to learn the etiquette involved." He growled.

"How? It isn't written anywhere and no one here will speak to me." I said giving him a cross look.

Lord Vader seemed to take a deep breath and just stood staring at me. There was a build up of power in the room and I worried about whether or not I would have to buy a high-collared dress.

"Explain." He said finally.

"Well, it is like this, I work for you and everyone is scared of you so they don't talk to me about anything. They are all too terrified that if they say the wrong thing you will choke them to death in their sleep or something. Even Shiv hasn't been returning my comms although I suspect he has his hands quite full with the palace courtesans. I have gone through the Palace data base but there is no reference to Palace Grand Ball Etiquette or any palace etiquette for that matter, something I find a little odd considering the Emperor places so much emphasis on it. So, if I need to know something about all this palace etiquette stuff, I will need to hear it from you!" I was annoyed.

The force flickered a little between us but I stayed very still, if I didn't stand my ground I would never get anything done. I put my hands behind my back and waited.

Vader turned back to looking out of the window. "Very well, pay attention!"

I did.

"This event is bound by annoying rules of politesse. All attendees are announced upon arrival, you will be my escort for the evening. The Emperor has expressed a wish that you attend as such, so be it. You will stand at my side until I say you may leave. You will obey me in these things, to do otherwise reflects poorly and will annoy me greatly." He said

"Yes, my lord."

"Do not over indulge in the food or drink."

"No, my lord."

"The Emperor will make his entrance later than stated on the programme as is his way, when he is announced you will genuflect and look at the ground. Do not look up at him as he passes, I shall know if you do, so don't." he paused. "He

will sit and announce that all may rise. Then you may stand. After which, at some point during the evening, you shall be presented before him by me, again you will genuflect and bow your head until you are told otherwise. You will address him as 'your Highness or your excellency' and you will not speak out of turn. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Once he has dismissed you, you will take three steps backwards before you may turn your back on him. You will be representing me so I expect complete obedience from you in all things during the event."

I nodded. "Yes, my lord."

"You will not under any circumstances discuss anything to do with your job. You are expected to make small talk and interact with the guests but make no mistake, you will be watched. The Empire values confidentiality, as do I."

"I understand, my lord." I was a little insulted about that but let it go.

Sometimes he liked to get me going and annoy me, I was sure of it.

"You will accompany me to the entrance when I leave but you may stay if you should wish to do so."

"Thank you, my lord." I said.

Lord Vader nodded. "What do you have for me today?" he asked getting back to business.

I handed him the datapad with his itinerary and notes, along with his encrypted messages. He looked it over and acknowledged his schedule, making no changes.

"You may go." He said.

"Yes, my lord." I said and I left.

These meetings never took that long and I was always glad to get back to my own office, I enjoyed the illusion of safety. My salad was still there and my droid had replaced my cold half finished coffee with a new one.

Some days were just normal days and for that I was grateful.

I had to admit that in spite of the build up of excitement that permeated the Palace in general over the Grand ball, I was mainly trying to ignore it. As a rule, working for Lord Vader was something that kept one out of the lime light and away from most social events. He was not the most popular person on the block. The fact that, not only was I required to be there, but that at several points during the evening there was a good chance that most people would actually be looking at me, scared the sandjiggers out of me.

We were now three days away from the Great Event and the closer the day got the more I hid in my office or my apartment. I could not believe I was actually worried about this and was having some serious trouble sleeping. I kept having nightmares about ending up at the grand event half naked and tripping on the stairs. It was not good. Even being in the office was not all that comforting, too many memo-

reminders flying around about this, that and the next thing all having to do with this big event. I was getting seriously cold feet, but suspected the chance of getting out of it with the excuse of being sick were about the same as going head to head with a Krayt Dragon on a bad day.

Out of all the junk that had come across my desk during the day, the only good thing had been mail from home. I had managed to send off a quick and dirty 'I am fine' holocard last week. There was not that much I could really write home about, most of it was fairly confidential and would never make it past the censors anyway. So, I had written a short letter about how nice the journey had been, how busy I was and what I thought of Coruscant. In other words I had lied through my teeth. I remember mentioning who I was working for and that I was enjoying the daily challenges. I had hoped my father would read between the lines and figure it out and if he wrote back he would be equally as careful. His letter was nice, full of news and generalities and one shock.

Dearest Merly,

I can't tell you how glad I and the crew are to hear that you are settling in and enjoying your new job. I am quite certain that you are up to handling the day to day challenges that come your way and have no doubt that you will be an asset to the Empire. I am immensely proud of you.

I let Rys know that you sent a card, as you had mentioned, so that she can come by her home check the post. I have not seen her in a few weeks as she is now working out at Jabba's Palace pretty much full time. She dropped some of the things you left at the house off for you. So now everything is being stored here. I think she plans to lease the place and live at the palace until she finds something else, I am sure she will tell you all about it.

Other than that, things here do not change much. There have been extra Imperial personnel stationed here because of an incident that happened just after you left. Something to do with a cantina brawl or stolen droids, can't recall which. I can tell you that Docking Bay 94 has been given a serious toss over and everyone who worked there was taken in for questioning. I don't think Pirin Tek was all that impressed he lost two day's business. His loss, our gain. It certainly kept us busy, so business is good. I do miss my favourite mechanic though. Speaking of mechs, your old friend Jyrki Andando, dropped by the other day. Asked how and where you were. He seemed a bit concerned when I told him about your new job. Thinks the Empire will swallow a little Outer Rim girl up I think, he always did worry about you, sort of like a big brother I suppose. It must have been hard for you, an only child. He was just passing through, didn't say where he was headed next. Looked a bit rough, if you ask me, the boy hasn't been eating right or sleeping, always did work too hard. I gave him your address if he wanted to write. I told him you were fine and enjoying yourself in the Big C. Must

be quite exciting for you to finally get some where with culture and art. I know your mother would have been delighted. Perhaps when you know if you get holiday leave you can come and visit. I know the crew would love to see you again, as would I.

*Missing you greatly,
Love,
Papa.*

It was a nice letter and I was glad to have news but the bit about Jyrki niggled at me. I had been really surprised that he had come back. Seemed strange to me, I had thought he was well and gone from my life forever. I wondered what had brought him back to Tatooine because I could not really see him as the pop in for tea type. Funny, how people have a way of haunting you.

I was about ready to finish up, in the process of shutting all the comps down when someone knocked on the door. I yelled for them to come in, I am far too lazy to get up and open it myself. Shiv popped his head in the room.

"Hi." He said.

"You can actually come in, you know." I said.

"He's not here is He?"

"No, Lord Vader is not here. You are safe." I grinned.

Shiv came in and the door dutifully shut behind him. "Like to keep out of his way."

"Apparently you are not alone, what's up?" I asked getting up and giving him a hug and that kiss kiss thing.

"I am escaping." He said with a grin. "Feel like coming?"

"Escape? From what? Go where?"

He rolled his eyes, "Girl, you ask too many questions."

I nodded, "Yup, keeps me alive."

"Need a break, too much courtesan yap yap yap." he said making talking motions with his hands. "There is a cool little place in the Industrial sector, new bar that opened up about a month ago, sell good Taa'shi and have the best Corellian cocktails around. Want to come?"

"Sure, sounds good." I said, I had no idea what Taa'shi was but corellian cocktails are always fun. I gathered my stuff, my satchel and made sure my credchip was there. Was pretty sure this evening would not be charged to the Imperial Account.

"Great, the others are really looking forward to meeting you." He bounced.

"Wait, what others?"

"Oh, just some of the crew from the events committee, my partners in crime, I guess you could say."

"I don't know about that, Shiv, most people don't want to hang with me."

He gave me a look. "Nerfpoodoo, it's you who don't want to be with others, everyone thinks you are a huge snob. You don't speak to anyone and you never join in any of the meet and greets, even though I know you get the memos. It's just some of the HR girls who gave you a hard time and that's only because you were new." He said. "You haven't really tried to get to know anyone have you? I mean, I was all set to take some catty little bitch who thought she was too good for the rest of us shopping the other day, and I ended up with you. You were not at all what I expected. You need to get out more and trust that not everyone who works here is so terrified of *your boss* that we won't talk to you. Most of us don't actually care that much, I mean it's not like we work with *Him* you know? Come on... I put in a good word for you so you have to show."

I just stared at him. "People think I am a snob?"

"Uh huh." He nodded then relented. "Well not everyone."

"These would not be the same people, who called me Outer Rim trash and insulted my mother, would it?" I said giving him the hairy eyeball.

"Naaaw, that's Priss from HR, she has a thing against people from the Rim, don't know why, and I think she secretly wanted the Vader job, so you got a bad word from her in her group and they kinda like to mob folks they don't like. My crew ain't like that, come on, it will be good."

"People really think I am a snob?" it shocked me and what was more, he was kind of right about how I had avoided everything remotely social but so far I had not really had much reason to want to join in, not because I was a snob but because I didn't feel as though I was good enough.

He shook his head. "Prove them wrong." He grinned. "Show them what you showed me, that you are fun and funny." then he added. "And smart, not too much fashion sense though."

"Okay, okay, but we have to swing by the apartment first I want to change into something a little more..."

"Core world, less Rim?" he finished for me.

"Something like that." I nodded.

"Oki doki," he said and he grabbed my arm and slipped his through it. "lead on Rim-girl."

It was really hard to get Shiv to shut up but it was also really hard not to like him. He was the most affable person I had ever met. He even helped me pick out a decent outfit to wear and then we were off. To tell the truth I was really nervous about it but also flattered that he had even thought about me. When I asked he had said.

"You looked like you could use a friend." He shrugged. "I make a pretty good friend." He said, "Besides, the more the merrier, right?"

"I guess." I said.

"It will be fun, I promise, no one will die, and no one will call you trashy,

trust me!" he said.

"Do I have a choice?" I asked.

"Nope."

And just like that we were off.

Coruscant is huge and over whelming. The Industrial sector is, well, pretty industrial. Lots of power supply and relay stations and Plasma generators, waste management systems and manufacturing plants. It is a pretty grim place really, but people live in I-sec and it has the reputation for being on the fringe, which was Palace slang for both really cool and really dangerous. You needed to know where to go and what parts to avoid. Shiv told me, people vanished sometimes when they came down into I-sec on their own. The lower levels were bad places to be if you didn't belong and didn't know what you were doing. It sounded like Mos Eisley on a good day I told him, but as we flew over some of the parts he told me were rough I knew there were places far worse than the back end of Tatooine.

The club we were headed to was on the border between I-sec and one of the Alien sectors where mainly Twi'lek and Mon Calamari lived. Seemed an odd combination to me but I didn't ask. I was still learning about the Emperor's dislike of non humans and I wasn't sure how it sat with me.

The taxi driver maneuvered in between the towers and the other strange looking buildings and docked us at the front door of the club, there was no line up yet. Shiv paid the taxi and took me by the arm. He gave the bouncer a flashy smile and said. "Hi, Yaak."

The bouncer, a really mean looking Zabrak just nodded and waved us in. "Friendly." I said.

Shiv just grinned. "He doesn't win points for being friendly." He said and tugged me into the club.

What looked seamy and run down on the outside was the exact opposite form the inside. This made the Cantina back home look like a slop hole. The pain was all a tasteful soft glow-paint and the lights shifted every few seconds running through the spectrum of colours. The furnishings were all some exquisite black sort of acrylic polymer that had holograms inlayed in it, every time you moved your eyes the something within the dark furnishings twinkled like stars. The music was loud and modern. It had a slightly dark edge, heavy on the electronics and bass, with a female vocalist who could hit the high notes with an ease that was almost surreal. Every now and then she would hit a note that made me shiver, as if that single note was being driven into my spinal cord with a nail. Right in the center of the club was the largest dance floor I had ever seen, complete with the most modern lighting system ever. It was pretty spiffy.

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Shiv, who still have a grip on my arm, tugged at me and we headed over to the far corner, up some stairs into a smallish room with a good view of the dance floor and entrance.

"VIP room." He said. "Palace always has one in every club, just in case the Emperor wants to go dancing." he rolled his eyes. "We get to use them, so it's cool"

We slipped through the very interesting holographic waterfall, like doorway cover and joined another four people in the corner couch section.

Shiv sat down and yanked me down to sit beside him. "Everyone this is Merlyn." He said and everyone waved and said hi.

Then he started the introductions going from left to right. "That's Maxxi, Yynyth, Bobbyn, and Antygra. We all basically work in the same department.

I smiled and said hi back. Bobbyn, Maxxi and Antygra were all male, Ynyth was female, and everyone was human. A few moments after the introductions and hulloes were done a waitress popped in and took drink orders that is she took Shiv's order. He ordered for all of us, a large pitcher of a new Corellian cocktail called a bounty hunter. I had never tried this particular cocktail, being a straight forward sort of girl, I liked my alcohol plain out of the bottle, not mixed with other things and usually of the distilled sort. Typical pit-mechanic stuff.

The drink and glasses arrived and I was leery. It was a violent blue colour with glowy things in it. Shiv just shook his head when he saw my face. Poured everyone a glass and we toasted and drank. It looked blue, it was blue and it tasted like blue. It was almost sickly sweet with a vaguely fruity flavour and once you had one sip you wanted more.

At first it was small talk, mainly everyone bitching about their day and who or what they were working with or on. When Maxxi asked me what it was like to work with *Him*. I had shrugged.

"It's okay." I said,

They all shook their heads at the same time it was unnerving.

"Really?" asked Antygra, "I was always under the impression *He* was a real jerk to work for."

"Well, so far I am still alive." I said with a grin, "So, I guess that counts for something." I sipped at the more some drink and added. "He has his good days and bad days."

Everyone nodded.

"Yeah I hear that!" agreed Bobbyn, "I had a real run in today with *you know who!*" he said.

I glanced around. "You know who?" I asked thinking he meant the Emperor.

"One of the courtesans, been at the palace for ever, since she was a child. One of the Big E's chosen, totally spoiled rotten, throws an absolute hissy fit every year right before the Grand ball wanting changes to this and that and the next

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thing.” He said.

I waited for a name but none came, I looked at Shiv for an explanation.

“We don’t mention names.” He said. “There is surveillance everywhere. Don’t mention names, ever. You’ll get used to it. We just have our own names for everyone.”

“Yeah, safer that way. Bobbyn’s talking about our resident Princess. A real winner, hope you don’t end up on her wrong side, she can make life hard for you.” Maxxi added.

I nodded. I was feeling a little out of my depth. Shiv leaned in and whispered in my ear. “I’ll point them all out at the Grand Ball, but you want to stay alive at the palace, you will learn to stay out of the Courtesans’ way. They are a little witchy, if you get my bend”

I nodded and wondered if I also came under that heading, a little witchy, but no one said anything so I let it go.

“Do you ever see the Emperor?” I asked.

Antygra shrugged. “It’s rare. He used to be more accessible in the old days, but the last six or seven years now he’s been keeping more and more private. Only his trusted advisors and the chosen ones get to spend time with him. He makes public appearances for larger functions, gallery openings and the Opera, of course, but mostly we deal through his Personal Assistants and the Office.”

“Wow. Sounds very mysterious.” I said.

“Yeah well, you know who is even more mysterious?” said Ynyth.

“Oh do tell.” Shiv grinned pouring everyone another glass of the vile but addictive cocktail.

“That alien captain that’s been seen around the palace, you know the one with the blue skin.” She said. “No one knows anything about him. Apparently the Big E is quite impressed with him but no one has a clue where he even came from. I just heard from Kat, you know that slicer in Intel, that he is super intelligent and cold as ice. Comes and goes like he owns the place.”

I took a sip of my drink and said nothing but I knew who they were talking about and it seemed I knew a lot more about him than anyone else.

“Yeah, totally weird given that the Big E doesn’t like aliens, you know.” Said Ynyth. “I heard that he could read minds or something and he has these evil, red glowing eyes. Kat said the guy was totally intimidating.”

I had to stop from giggling. I turned it into a coughing fit. Shiv obligingly banged me on the back, till I waved at him to stop.

“So what is he doing at the Palace then?” Antygra asked.

Ynyth shrugged. “Probably seeing one of the girls, you know how it is. Half the Imperial navy is doing a girl from the palace, It’s scary.”

“He better hope he doesn’t get caught then, if that’s the case.” Said Shiv.

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Big no no inter-palace relationships. It’s not written any where though. But still the Big E doesn’t like it when the Imperial Navy mixes with the courtesans or even employees, although we have it a bit easier than the courtesans do.”

I nodded. “Ooookay, always good to know.” I said.

“You know he’s probably seeing our Princess. I mean she’s always vanishing off somewhere for a day here a week there! Bet you, they’re having an affair.” said Antygra.

Maxxi shook his head. “If that’s true then I pity the guy.” he said.

Shiv just rolled his eyes. “Antygra is into the big conspiracy theory thing.”

Antygra gave Shiv a wounded look. “Well everything is a conspiracy.... Speaking of, say, Merly, where you there when Alderaan blew? Shiv says you were assigned to *Him* on board the *Devastator* at the time.”

“Yeah, I mean no, well sort of.” I shrugged. “I was on board the ship but we weren’t near when the planet was destroyed, felt the shock wave though.”

“No kidding, was it dangerous.” Bobbyn asked.

I blinked a few times. “Have you ever been in space when a shockwave that big hits?” I asked.

They all shook their heads at the same time.

“You ever seen a Kratt Dragon?”

Antygra nodded. “I have at the zoo. Huge, man!” and he made a ‘this big ’ gesture with his hands.

“Well imagine something hurling that at you and you are the size of a small cat.”

They all nodded slowly.

“That’s gotta hurt.” Said Maxxi.

“It was big, but the ISD is build to withstand that sort of thing so it bucked once then rolled with it, Captain turned her head into the wave and we rode it out.” I explained.

They all looked at me like I had two heads. So I explained a bit about ship piloting.

“You’re a pilot?” B’byn asked.

I nodded. “And a qualified mechanic.”

Antygra shook his head. “So, wait, how did you end as *His* PA?”

I shrugged. “Just lucky, I guess. I have done office work too and speak a few languages and I can dance.” I said but it all sounded lame.

“Well, I am sure the dancing helps.” Said Maxxi after a moment and everyone, including me, laughed. I did not tell them I was force sensitive, or that Lord Vader had picked up on that and was nudging me along in some sort of a direction.

“Sucks about the rebels.” said Maxxi. “I mean they destroyed a whole planet. Why would they do that anyway? Alderaan was a peaceful place.” Everyone

looked at me for an answer.

I shrugged. "I don't know anything about rebels, that's Intel's job and I don't have clearance that high and it's not like *He* tells me anything." I said getting into the spirit of things, two bounty-hunters later and my head was getting a little fuzzy.

Everyone nodded solemnly.

"You got a bum deal, getting that job. I think." Bobbyn said.

"Someone has to do it, right?" I said. "And it wasn't like I could say no, was it?"

They all shook their heads and we drank.

"Well, this is too serious for our night out, we should go down and dance!" Shiv said and he pulled me to my feet and dragged me out of the VIP room down the stairs to the dance floor. Everyone was right behind us and for the next three hours we danced.

I have no idea what time I crawled into bed but it was on the later side of early rather than the other way around. I lay in bed with my head spinning. I have no idea what exactly is in a corellian bounty-hunter but I knew I never wanted to have them ever again. I am pretty sure I only had three but that was three too many. When I woke up a few hours later to go to work I was greeted by a pounding headache the likes of which I have never experienced before and a mouth that resembled the smell from a dead wamp rat. I showered and stopped by the med-lab for something against the pain and then crawled into the office. It was not even nine, I had not had my stim'caf yet and already there was a message from Lord Vader waiting for me. The day was not starting out so well, and I had a bad feeling it was only going to go down hill from there.

I had never been so glad to see a day come and go. I had walked through it in a haze. What ever the medic gave me this morning it cleared up the headache but left me fuzzy headed and slow. Lord Vader's messages were terse and annoyingly vague about wanting to set up a face to face meeting with the droid designer. It had taken me well over two hours to deal with it, the time delay not helping the situation any. The man simply did not want to speak with Lord Vader and he was not answering any of the comms sent to him. This was not a good thing and I did not want to be in the middle of it. I spent the latter half of the time explaining why he should get himself over here and stop messing about, or else life would get short and sweet. It got ugly and he got the message but I was not feeling so hot by the time lunch rolled around. When Vader stormed out of his office and left the building to go and do sarlacc knows what. I was more than relieved that he

was gone. I could handle the anger and the yelling but when stuff started flying around the room it got a bit hairy.

Shortly after lunch Shiv sent a message.

>>hey, how are you doing today? Did you have fun?<<

So I answered:

>>Never drinking Bhs again, what the heck is in them anyway, woke up with vicious headache and bad case of desert mouth didn't realize they were that strong, won't be doing that again!!! Had lots of fun dancing tho. Mood in office this am is Ugly.<<

A few seconds later:

>>BHs are low alcohol, we can't dance properly if we get too drunk, you might be allergic to glow-spice though, have heard that can be nasty. Next time we find something else. Ynyth says hi, was nice to finally meet you. Sorry about ugly mood, think it's palace wide tho, don't sweat it!<<

I wrote back:

>>Great, now you tell me. Hi back. Guess it's uglies-all-round day then, do we get danger pay?<<

I waited for Shiv's answer while sipping my 'caf.

>>No danger pay, not in contract. Didn't u read the fine print? Big fuss here today, last minute jitters, usual boring stuff. Everyone in an uproar about last minute colour scheme change...happens every year you'd think they'd be expecting it by now, I was. All be over in 2 days, thank the maker... never mind the Uglies, they don't last long. Gotta blaze, hugs.<<

I had not even known we could message through the system like that although I suspected Intel was logging it all and probably reading it as well, oh well, if they were they were probably bored to death.

It had been a nice interlude in my other wise fuzzy, somewhat angst filled day.

Later on during the afternoon the mail runner dropped by with a box for me. I signed the delivery form and as soon as he had vanished again I sat down and opened it. Inside, wrapped elegantly in beautiful Tanassi paper were a set of three books. Old school binding, antiques in pristine condition. I took them out gingerly almost afraid that just by touching the ancient leather they would fall apart. I didn't recognize the title or the author and had no idea what world they had been bound on. I had never seen the style before. Once I had taken them all out of the box I found the note at the bottom, beautifully hand written on very expensive paper.

I hope that you will enjoy these as much as I have. I think you will find the story far more eloquent and enticing than the book by Padomex Ielse. At the very least they will keep you occupied and out of trouble for a while.

The note wasn't signed but I know who had sent them. I was not sure how I felt about receiving gifts from him but books would win my heart every time. I carefully wrapped them back up in the paper and slid the box out of site. I found it a little disturbing that the one person who seemed to be stirring up the Palace gossip rounds was the one person who seemed to have taken an interest in me. I shoved the thoughts out of my mind, it was sort of pointless to dwell on the why and how when there were no answers to any of the question.

Jyrki had once said that the Universe was elegant in its machinations and the plan and path were laid out, you just needed to follow them. I had asked him if that meant he thought that destiny was a set thing, because I didn't agree with that, I thought we had a choice in the matter.

He had shrugged. "What is choice?" he had asked.

"That a trick question?" I had asked.

"Nope, but yer gotta remember, if it is yer destiny then yer were bound to make that choice anyway so, was it really a choice to begin with?"

By the time we had finished the conversation I was even more confused about it all than before we had started. I still didn't think he was one hundred percent right though. I felt you always had choice and you may have had a destiny but it was more of a guide line than a set path.

The Sand people have a saying about that sort of thing. "*The desert knows where each grain of sand came from, but not where its journey will end.*" It's a poor translation because it is often really hard to put what they say in to basic, but that was the gist of it. The Sand People are nomads on Tatooine, desert dwellers who keep away from the townships and the settlers. They have a really bad reputation for being vicious and hating all other peoples on the planet, but unless they are provoked, they mostly leave folk alone. Once or twice, one maybe two would come into the city to barter something, especially if water was even more scarce than usual, then you would get to see one up close and not worry too, too much about being attacked. They were a strange folk, though, full of superstitions and sayings. Their love for the desert is only rivalled by their mistrust and dislike of settlers.

A scholar had once gone out and lived with a tribe for several years, written about their customs and life style. After he had returned to his home planet and his book had been published he vanished. The book was not a big best seller or anything and mainly made its way about the academic circles. I ended up with a copy because it had been left behind on one of the transports and one of the pilots had thought I might like it. He was certainly right about that.

The more I thought about it, the more I believed that the Scholar who had written the book had probably gone back to the tribe and had, as they say, turned native.

I think it is hard sometimes to go back to the world you left, even though

you might yearn for it. I wondered about that as I answered my father's letter. How much I missed him and my life on Tatooine. That I missed Tatooine would surprise most people, but it had been the only home I had even known. I wondered if given the chance. Could I actually go back to my old life? I didn't think so, some things just change you forever and, unlike Jyrki, I didn't believe that the path you walked was already laid out for you without deviations of chance. I believed that you walked it and chose the best route you could. It would be hard not to make some wrong turns along the way considering there was no map to follow. Maybe the end result was the same no matter what, but the journey was what really counted.

I was melancholy by the end of the work day, too many things running through my head and my headache had come back with a vengeance. I left work, taking the box of books home with me. I stopped off at the med-center and talked to the doctor on call. He did a few tests to see if I really was allergic to glow-spice. He told me that if I was indeed allergic to the spice I would have to be careful it was an accumulative thing and eventually could kill me. I sighed... in the end the Bounty Hunters get you, one way or the other, I had said and he had laughed. He gave me something to help with the headaches, telling me I'd have the results of the tests tomorrow. I went home and changed into comfy clothes, tucked the first book in the set Thrawn had sent me under my arm and went to my secret balcony hideout in the old wing. I sat and read in the quiet solitude undisturbed and uninterrupted.

It seems to me that time passes by slowly when you wait for something, especially if you are looking forward to it but if you are sort dreading something, then time has a way of sneaking up on you. Before I had even had time to digest the news that I was, yes, quite violently allergic to glow-spice, and now had to be very careful about ever ingesting it again, that the books Thrawn had sent were not just good, but very good, so much so that I was annoyed when I had to stop reading them to go to work and that the droid designer who had annoyed Lord Vader's obituary was on page three of the daily news-mag, the day of the grand ball was upon us.

I spent a half day in the office. Lord Vader was not around. I suppose he had his own thing to do to get ready, I hadn't asked, there are just some details I did not want to know. I had been sent a comm from him telling me to be ready at 19:00 CST, and wait for the escort. It was vague, but what else was new? I had gotten my work done then left. It is a five day work week on Coruscant for the most part but weekends were something that meant little to Lord Vader so my schedule was not anything reliable, not that I minded. On Tatooine it had also not been a reliable routine after all, it wasn't as if ships broke down on schedule. I didn't mind much. The hours I worked were flexible depending on what was going on and since I was more or less on call twenty four hours a day, days off were pretty much non existent. I tended to shift my work times around, depending on when Lord Vader

was actually around and what needed to be done.

I went home and decided to soak in the bath for a while. It was a luxury I just could not quite get used to. I come from a world that is covered in sand. It almost never rains. In my life time I don't ever remember rain at all, but I have heard tales of it happening. The water I used for my bath could have made my father rich. Water was money on Tatooine and a bath full of the stuff was a lot wealth to be wallowing in.

I remember the first time I had ever seen rain. I was off world on Corellia, with one of the delivery shuttles. It had been a good chance to get off planet and see something new and since my father was the pilot at the time no one said anything about him bringing his little girl along.

We landed in one of the smaller outposts on the planet, in one of the forest zones. Corellia was as far removed from Tatooine as I had ever seen, lush and green, as well as a little chilly with only a single sun. The air was filled with scents I had never experienced before, grass, leaves, and flowers, sweet, heady and intoxicating. It was also full of moisture. Humidity my father had called it. It was luxurious and I ran around the area while they unloaded the delivery like a mad thing. They had just finished the unloading when a sudden squall sprung up. A thunder-head coming in on the afternoon heat, normal for the area the landing pad manager had told me.

He had said. "Better get back on board little lady, it's gonna rain." I can still see the look on his face when I asked him "What is rain?"

I was quite young and I had never seen rain before, at least not that I could remember. A few moments later I learnt what rain was. I gloried in it, the lightening and thunder didn't scare me it was awe inspiring. In the desert sometimes when conditions are right you get dry lightening even some thunder if you are close enough to hear it, but never like this. I danced around like a wind devil getting soaked. I wanted to catch all the rain I could and take it home because it tasted so sweet but my father told me that was not allowed, there might be organisms in the rain that would damage the eco system on Tatooine, all incoming water had to be certified. Within the space of twenty minutes it was all over, the storm had moved on and the rain had stopped leaving everything wet and shiny in its wake. I had splashed around in the puddles. Shaken all the branches and plants that were near to me just to watch the water sparkle in the sunlight that had broken through the clouds. The air felt thick and heavy. I was almost drunk on it and cried when it was time to leave. I suppose it was then and there I decided that I would learn to pilot so that I could visit worlds that had rain any time I wanted. I had refused to change my clothes and sat soaking wet all the way home. It was the first time I was sad to come home. The heat assaulted us when we disembarked. Dry, and hot with almost no scent in the air to speak of except fuel and the standard city smell, people animals and something indefinable.

Now, I could lie in a bath full of water and even pollute it with scented oils and bubbles if I wished. No matter how much I told myself that, here on Coruscant it was normal and feeling guilty about it didn't do anyone least of all me, any good I still maintained a sense of absolute wonder that I could fill a bath tub with water just to lie in it.

I had some time before I needed to be ready so it was nice to relax and lie up to my neck in scented bubbles. I let my mind drift and allowed my sense to roam free. I closed my eyes and just breathed. The Doctor at the med center had given me something for the allergy and the headaches had mostly gone. He had explained that the chemical that makes the spice glow is actually a toxin and some people were just allergic to it, rare but it happened. They had seen more cases in the last year because the spice was being used more and more as an additive in drinks, to make them all sparkly. I felt a little justified that, in general, my own taste in drinks ran to the plain and simple. He had also given me the heads up that if I was attending the Grand ball I might want to ask what was in the drinks first as glow-spice was high on the ingredients list this year. Just my luck, I had thought.

The thing about letting your thoughts drift is that if you are Force sensitive you get images of things sometimes, or feelings about people that are somehow connected to the force as well. I wasn't searching for anyone or even trying to practice technique. I was just drifting. I could sense many beings. Nothing concrete just the sense that they were there, all drawn to one source though. It was like a deep dark hole and it radiated power. I stayed as far away from that point as I could.

I had often wondered if Thrawn was head blind to the Force, I never got the feeling from him that he was in any way sensitive to it, but I knew he would not easily be mind pushed, his will was too strong for that. It never stopped me from trying to find him though. Instead, as usual, I connected with Lord Vader.

I did not manage this level of relaxation all that often but each time I had tried I had somehow managed to find him. I could no longer stop that. Just a brief brush and I knew who it was. While his thoughts were closed, like a locked vault, to me, there was some sort of connection forged. It had been there almost from the beginning and I had no idea how to break it or even if I had wanted to.

The first time this had happened he had been furious, aboard the *Devastator* and he had broken the connection so severely it had hurt. But I had tried it many times since then, each to varying degrees of success. It was like flame to a moth. I could not stay away. I suppose in some way it was a perverse game of telepathic tag. I needed to know I could still do it. Each time he had shut me out and severed the tie brutally, but this time he allowed me to linger. He, too, in his own way was meditating and because he did not shove me away or slam down the connection I did not push. For now, it was enough for me that he had accepted my presence. Not for the last time would I wonder about these tenuous threads that

bound us all together.

It was as Jyrki had said, all was connected. But he had not told me that sometimes it was possible to bind yourself to someone so tightly that it became almost impossible to break the tie. I felt the Force around me and it had rippled when I had thought about Jyrki. Lord Vader's touch on my mind became a question but I had no answers. Physically, I shook my head, thoughts suddenly unclear and chaotic, images of my own past mingling with things I had never done came crashing down upon me. It was painful and I could not stop it. I felt Lord Vader react and he broke the connection with a jolt. But before it had been completely severed, I could almost have sworn I heard him telling me not to be late.

With a sigh, I let go and opened my eyes. In spite of him saying that he had wished to take on a student, there had been no time for any lessons. I suppose that, given the circumstances, it was normal and to be expected, but I was a little hurt by it. I wanted to know more and learn more. Become stronger with this strange power which I had lived with my whole life and he was the only connection I had to that. It never occurred to me that perhaps he was protecting me in some way or even protecting himself.

I got out of the bath, the water now tepid, the bubbles pretty much gone and wrapped myself in a towel. I made myself tea, put on a dressing gown and sat down to read a little bit. I had a little bit of time before I needed to get ready and the best way how to get away from all the thoughts and memories that chased me was to immerse myself in a well written story.

I hoped that Thrawn would be at the ball so that I could at least thank him in person for the books. I was not looking forward to the evening and the task of turning myself from 'Rim-Girl' as Shiv liked to call me, to retro Nubian lady look-a-like, well...I wasn't even sure that was possible but I had a few hours to work on it.

I have never been a dress up sort of girl, not much call for it in Mos Eisley, and as a dancer ...it is not so much about dressing up as dressing down or better to say dressing in as little as possible and still remain decent. I was always the one who had engine grease under my nails and oil smears on my face and nose as opposed to nail polish and make up. All that girl stuff was just a little bit mysterious to me. Perhaps if my mother had lived that would have been different. It wasn't as if my father was a lot of help in this area. I got by with the basics. It was a little daunting trying to decide what to wear and how to go about fixing my hair and face and so on.

The dress I had decided on was probably one of the most beautiful pieces of clothing I had ever seen. It was made from a very fine, soft silk that had been dyed various shades of green-blue. It looked to me to be how I always imagined an ocean would look like. The bodice was snug and form fitting with a V shaped scooped neckline and a very low back. It was complicated to describe because of

the way the fabric folded, crossed and wrapped around the body. The dress flared out from the hips downward and seemed to form a whirlpool of foamy sea green silk in many layers that never seemed to stay still. The bodice and the hem of the dress had been hand beaded with tiny iridescent crystals, every time I moved the dress seemed to sparkle way sunlight twinkles off water. There were no sleeves to speak of but rather beaded loops to slip the arms through that hung off the shoulders and at elbows, off which hung long flowing wings of silk. It was very elegant, extremely extravagant, completely impractical and I loved it. I had the perfect strappy little shoes to match with just enough heel to make me feel less like a Jawa that I usually did while standing next to Lord Vader. I had done basic make up, just enough to feel pretty but not so much that I felt as though I were wearing a mask. My hair I did up with the gorgeous Zenjji sticks Thrawn had given me, they matched the outfit perfectly. I probably should have worn some other jewellery but there was nothing I had that matched and so I left my neck bare, I thought the hair sticks were enough and the dress was almost jewellery in its own right. I added the last touch of perfume, and just as I was taking one last look in the mirror the door chime rang. My drive had arrived.

He had nodded curtly and said nothing. His hand gesture said to accompany him so I did. I had a light shawl that matched the dress wrapped about my shoulders and a tiny clutch purse that held my ID card, my apartment key and lip-gloss. I had been a little anxious while getting ready but now my heart was starting to pound. I did not ever recall being so nervous. Not even the first time I had ever performed on stage had I felt like this. I tried to remember to breathe as I followed the man who was escorting me to the waiting vehicle. He opened the door to the back seat area and I sat down, he sat silently beside me and the driver drove.

As we got closer I saw that what no one had bothered to tell me was that this was a red carpet affair. I began to nibble nervously at a nail then stopped. For a ride that was no more than five minutes long it lasted an eternity.

The vehicle stopped at the foot of the red carpet reception area and the driver got out and opened the door for me and the silent young man in the immaculate suit who was with me. With a white gloved hand the Driver helped me out of the vehicle and essentially passed me on to my escort. The man who had driven the vehicle said nothing and he left, it was unnerving. I concentrated on my breathing and tried to remember to smile. There were hundreds of people lined up on either side of the red carpet to see all the guests, along with Holocan crews and reporters galore. I had not been warned about this and I was scared to death. I must have been sending sparks out in all direction because I suddenly felt Lord Vader brush my mind, he was near by, there was a sensation of a whisper for me to calm myself down, he was annoyed.

Just breathe, I thought. My escort turned to me and nodded. With a smile we walked the red carpet. We did not, unlike some of the other guests who were also

arriving at the same time, stop for photo opportunities or waves and play to the crowd. We simply walked straight past everyone with out so much as even a glance. The young man escorted me up the great stairs and within a few moments we were inside the great hall entrance. The fans, the curious and the paparazzi all left behind to cheer on the next people to walk the red carpet. I was never more glad to be inside than at that moment. With a curt nod the young man whose name I did not even know gave me a curt military style bow and left. I turned around to see where he had gone and found myself staring at Lord Vader. The Dark Lord gave me a curt *come here* hand gesture and with a deep breath I did as I was bid. Lord Vader said nothing merely walked into the grand hallway and we stood at the top of a second set of stairs waiting to be announced. It didn't escape my notice that people had cleared a reasonable space around the man at my side.

Each year the Grand ball was held at the palace. The Imperial Palace had been rebuilt, redesigned by the Emperor and in the redesign had been an enormous elaborate gala centre. It was prominently situated in the centre of everything and lavishly decorated. The main entrance has a grandiose designed so that all those who enter are given a spectacular view of the dance floor and seating areas. All of those who are already down in the main gala area must look up when the next guest is announced. Once you have been announced you descend the richly carpeted stairs to the intricately decorative marble floor below.

The ball room is vast and the ceilings are incredibly high with dark vaulting to give them an almost deep- space like feeling. To the right and the left of the main area are the tables and seating areas for the guests, set so that they are slightly above the dance area but not as high as the throne area that sits at the far end of the room opposite the entrance. Lord Vader waited while we were announced and then walked down the stairs, his black cloak flowing like water behind him. It was all I could do to keep up with him. He made polite nods in several directs as people greeting him but said nothing. I tried to keep my eyes front and just followed him.

He strode across the floor to the far side of the room on the right of the Throne, there in the corner was the table reserved for him. I also had place there, as was indicated by the beautifully scripted name card. I left me purse and shawl there, it was surprisingly warmer than I had expected.

"You may mingle if you wish, or stay here. Once the Emperor has made his entrance I shall expect you to be here. Is that clear?"

"Yes, my lord." I said.

He did not sit but went back to the main floor and began to seek out certain people he wished to speak with. I was, it seemed merely decoration for the evening and of no consequence which was fine with me. I waited until he was well out of the way and then made my way back down into the main area.

The place was filled with people of all sorts. I recognized the Imperial Navy

and Military uniforms. The Palace Courtesans were easy to spot as they were all dressed according to the theme of the evening and I could see Shiv's style written all over them. They were all quite stunningly beautiful. There were also a surprising amount of alien species given the Emperor's supposed dislike of anything not human. While I recognized many of the species present I could not have said who they were working for or affiliated with. Every few seconds a new arrival was announced and everyone would look up for a moment to see who it was and then return to their conversations.

It was very overwhelming and I was starting to feel a little like a grain of sand in the desert. I made my way slowly through the crowds and small groups, half catching the talk animated and lively. The atmosphere in the room was vibrant and, for the most part, cheerful. People glanced at me as I passed them and then went back to their conversations. I was unknown and unimportant and I was happy to keep it that way. At the far corner exact opposite from where Lord Vader's table was I spotted Shiv talking to Antygra and I made my way over to them. As soon as Shiv saw me he waved.

"There you are, we were wondering if you were actually going to make it" he said as we greeted with the traditional kiss kiss.

"Not come and stand the Dark Lord of the Sith up? I value my life too much." I said as Antygra and I also said hullo in the traditional manner, a little peck of a kiss on each cheek. "Everything looks amazing." I said.

Antygra nodded. "Yeah, Shiv has managed to do it again." He said. "Be right back, some people down there I absolutely have to say hullo to." And he vanished into the crowd.

Shiv gave me the once up and down look and made a twirl around motion so I did. "You look fabulous" he said. "I approve. You were right about the dress, it is perfect. I love what you did with your hair. Where did you get those gorgeous Zenji sticks?"

"Thanks." I said. "They were a gift."

Shiv nodded. "Nice, not easy to get the Zenji thing right, who taught you that?"

I told him about Bedi Nuale.

Shiv shook his head. "You never cease to amaze." He grinned. Then his personal comm. started beeping softly. "Oops, gotta go and see what the problem is, probably someone broke a nail or something. I'll be back eventually so don't vanish with out saving me a dance, yeah?"

"Okay, I won't." I said and watched as he too vanished into the crowd.

Once again I was on my on my own. I liked where I was in though, it was out of the way enough that no one bothered to look at me and I did not get in anyone's way, near the corner with out being backed into it. I watched the crowd around me as it shifted and moved. People mingled and chatted. The courtesans

played their parts well, chatting to the guests with a polished ease that made me feel somewhat out of place. I had never gotten the hang of small talk. I watched two of them work the room. It was fascinating to see how each person they spoke to was made to feel special and the focus of attention. I wondered then, if there was a little more to the job of Palace courtesan than just looking good at the Emperor's side. I was certain that the amount of Intel being gathered at this shindig was immense and I wondered now if the Courtesans were also spies. It made sense to me.

I was so drawn into my thoughts and watching the two courtesans that I did not notice who was around me. I almost jumped out of my skin when a soft voice whispered in my right ear. "The dress was indeed worth the wait."

I turned to my side to stare Thrawn in the face. "Do you ever not sneak up on people?"

He smiled. He was wearing the Imperial dress uniform and he looked stunning in it, broad shouldered, slender waist. His blue-black hair had been newly cut, the short military style that I usually hated but it suited him. He had a strong face with strong features. He was all shadowy lines and cut stone angles. The softness of the blue hue in his skin was made somehow more noticeable by the deep dark colour of his hair, tinted with a blue that only comes when one's hair is that black. His hawk-wing eyebrows and long dark lashes made the eerie red luminosity of his eyes all the more strange and otherworldly. I would have said his face could have had a cruel edge to it but was somehow saved by the sweetness in the curve of his lips. He was not someone I would have immediately thought of as handsome but his physical presence made my heart race.

"My apologies" He said. "I did not realize you were so deep in thought."

"Just people watching."

He nodded knowingly. A waiter came by bearing a tray full of beautiful crystal glasses filled with champagne. Thrawn stopped the man and was about to take two glasses off when I noticed the sparkly things dancing about in the liquid.

"Glow spice?" I asked the waiter.

"Yes, my lady." He said.

I looked at Thrawn and shook my head. "I am apparently quite allergic to glow spice. I can't drink that."

He placed both glasses back on the tray. "Please bring us two drinks without glow spice." He said and the waiter nodded and vanished.

"That is an unusual allergy." He commented.

"Unfortunately for me I had to find out the hard way, a night out with some friends turned into a three day headache with complications." I said by way of explanations. "Apparently the toxin in the glow spice is not as safe as everyone claims it to be, one in every millionth person reacts badly to it."

"The latest fad, next year it will be something completely different." He

said a little disdainfully.

I looked around us. More and more people had arrived, many more aliens now many more extra ordinarily beautiful women and very handsome men, there were film stars and musicians, politicians and business owners. The music had begun to play also but no one was dancing yet. I was curious about what sort of dances would be done here.

My mother used to tell me stories about some of the grand events back on her home world and she even taught me some of the simple waltzes and pavans, but I was pretty certain I would be lost when it came to the intricacies of court dance here on Coruscant.

The waiter came back with two glasses of non glow-spice champagne and Thrawn took them, thanking the man graciously. Being rude was not among of his faults. He handed me a glass and touched it gently with his own. The crystal rang true and clear.

"To the one in a million." He said softly, his eyes catching a hold of mine. I actually blushed and had to look away when he smiled leaving me no doubt he knew exactly the sort of effect he had over me.

"Is it what you imagined?" he asked watching me as I scanned the room.

"No. No, I had not expected it to be so...much" I shook my head. "I don't know that I have ever seen so many people dressed so beautifully in one place before." I said. "It is a little over whelming, especially when one does not know many people."

"You could mingle and get to know people, if that was your wish."

I smiled and shook my head. "Oh no, I am not much good at that I am afraid, small talk about this and that not my thing."

"What is your *thing*, then?" he asked with a bemused smile.

I shrugged. "I don't know, discussing engine types, dissecting hyperdrive problems, fawning over ship designs, or discussing the relevance of art and myth. That's a little more my thing, I guess. I could care less about the weather or the current fashion trends, or what ever it is that people banter about at functions such as these. It seems a bit pointless to me to make small talk."

"It is how people get to know each other, how they disseminate information." He said.

"I understand that, but I find it tedious. If you want to know something why not just ask?" I said.

"Perhaps decorum dictates such bold questions are not appropriate to the situation." He countered.

"Hence the reason I am not good at social functions." I laughed. "I have a tendency to ignore decorum." I said. "Or I stay out of its way, like tonight."

He nodded. "It can be tedious, I agree, but it is a necessity one should learn if one is to survive at the Palace." He said a little like a teacher instructing a

wayward student.

"Your advice will be taken under consideration." I said with a smile. "But I have to tell you, these games and intrigues are...tiresome."

He gave a curious look and leaned a little closer to me "Learn the games, my dear, you may not like it, but it would be shame if you were no longer around to make mysterious conversation with me." he smiled, took a sip of his drink and watched the crowd for a moment.

"So, when does the dancing begin?" I looked at him. "I thought this was to be a spectacular event, so far it is just meet and greet." I said. "And, it would appear, a giant play- ground for the verbally challenged." I added.

Thrawn shook his head, "You have a sharp tongue and an even sharper wit." he whispered. "You might want to watch that, it will get you into trouble."

"Perhaps I like getting into trouble." I said.

"Indeed?" Thrawn said ever so softly, dangerously. "And what of the consequences?" he asked.

I looked up into his face, "You didn't answer the original question." I said, avoidance was also part of this game.

Thrawn acknowledged that with a slight nod. "Nothing will start until The Emperor makes his entrance. He likes to be fashionably late. Once he is here, the evening's programme will begin. Until then it is time for people to see and be seen, to discuss politics and make connections, to make the small talk you dislike so much." He said. "As I have said, it is about working the room to one's advantage. It is the one time of the year when everyone who is anyone, gets to play in what is arguably the largest political arena in the galaxy. When the Imperial Military mixes with the civilians, the wealthy elite with the HoloNet's famous and so on. Much information will be passed about. Tonight many alliances will be forged or broken, friends and enemies bought and sold, won or lost. It is an elegant dance, Miss Gabriel, but it can also be quite deadly if one does not know the steps." He added. "Who you are seen with is of equal importance to your appearance."

"That you are seen with me, what does that say?" I asked.

"One of three things," he answered frankly. "For those not in the know of who you are, they will think I am being social, chatting with one of the palace courtesans. Make no mistake, my dear, despite your desire to be different, the style you wear and the expense of the dress will tell people you belong to the Emperor. You bear the mark of the palace design. They will think I desire to bed you because you are close to the Emperor and could perhaps curry some small favour between us." He paused to look at me but I kept a blank face and waited for him to continue. "For those few who know exactly who you are, but who do not know me, they will think I am talking to you so that I might better my standing with the man you work for, perhaps hope for a private meeting with him for the furthering of my career. Those that also know who I am, will know this is not necessary. I already

have the ear of Lord Vader because unlike many, I do not waste his time. For those very few people who know all the pieces of this puzzle, that I stand here and speak with you will be a mystery and that is delightful, don't you think?"

I nodded uncertainly, took a sip of my drink then asked. "So why *are* you standing here talking with me?"

He gave me a lovely, indecipherable smile and was about to answer when suddenly the Master of Ceremonies banged his staff loudly three times upon the floor and announced the entrance of the Emperor and his entourage. Like everyone else in the grand ball room, I dropped to one knee and bowed my head so that I looked to the floor. True to my word and fearful of Lord Vader's wrath should I disobey, I did not look up.

The air electrified. There was no other way to describe it. Over five hundred people bent their knee to one man all at the same time. I could feel the force shift and alter itself around the Emperor, as though he were a darkness that drew all the light towards him. I could feel his power, I could feel him reaching out to all those around him who could sense the force but I did not want him to find me. Suddenly, I was terrified, I felt as though the walls were closing in on me and I didn't know how to escape. I could feel panic rising and didn't know how to quell it. I must have made a sound or moved because I felt a hand reach out and grasp me by the wrist, warm and strong, pulling at me to stay down. It stilled the fear. I fought to quell the rising terror that was beginning to make my heart race and breathing difficult. The hand at my wrist let go, but the momentary contact had been enough to ground me.

The Emperor made his way down through the room, the only sound was a strange tapping sound and the footsteps of his entourage. It seemed to go on forever. After an eternity of staring at the floor, feeling the cold hard marble bite into my knee, the Master of Ceremonies banged his staff upon the floor and announced that all might rise.

Slowly I got to my feet and like everyone else I looked to where the Emperor sat. It was difficult to see over everyone and the Emperor was shrouded in an elegant, dark coloured cloak, standing on either side of the throne were two of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. Behind him flanked the mysterious Royal Guard. No one moved as the Emperor began to speak. A short welcoming speech but I heard none of the words. The sense that he was vaguely familiar to me, a thought I had dismissed as being from the dream I had once had, was replaced with a certainty that I knew this man. Fear shot through me. I swayed on my feet as the world began to swim around me.

"Passing out at the Grand Ball is a bad thing to do." Thrawn hissed in my ear. I focussed on his voice and glanced at him. The look on his face asked if I was alright.

I nodded. My mouth was dry and I struggled to gain control of my fear.

The Emperor finished his speech and the Master of Ceremonies banged his stick once more and announced that the Grand Ball had now officially begun.

It was as if a switch had been thrown and everyone who had been statue still was now suddenly animated and talking. Music played and the waiters once again made their rounds with trays of canapés and drinks.

“Now the evening begins in earnest.” Said Thrawn dryly.

I nodded but could not shake the sense of dread I felt. “So that’s the Emperor?” I asked. I fought to get my shaking knees and hands under control. Thrawn nodded his head. Then he looked just beyond my shoulder. I turned around in time to face Lord Vader.

“Lord Vader, always a pleasure.” Thrawn said with a courteous bow.

Lord Vader nodded. “Likewise, Captain Thrawn. I see you have made the acquaintance of my young assistant.” He was being awfully polite.

“Yes, Lord Vader. A most interesting and efficient young lady, I hear.” Thrawn said with a sudden, cool disinterest.

“Her reputation precedes her, I see.” Vader said tartly.

I really hated it when people talked about me as if I was not standing right in front of their noses but I had learnt my lesson on what happened when I spoke out of turn and I kept my mouth shut.

“Miss Gabriel, the Emperor wishes to meet you. You will accompany me.” Lord Vader said reaching to grab me by the arm.

“Yes, my lord.” I said as I side stepped him. He had a habit of hurting me whenever he dragged me off somewhere. I turned to Thrawn “Captain, it was a pleasure to meet you. I hope that you enjoy the evening.” I said politely, since we were being very formal now, I could play that game too and it hid how nervous I was.

Thrawn nodded. “Perhaps with Lord Vader’s indulgence you would do me the honour of a dance later on?”

I looked at Lord Vader because there was a moment’s pause before he replied. “If that is your wish, she will honour you with a dance.” He said then he looked at me. “Now you will come with me.”

I gave Thrawn a polite curtsy and not knowing what else to do with it, I also handed him my empty glass and trotted after Lord Vader as he strode through the room, a path was cleared for him as people stepped back out of his way.

There was an area of perhaps two metres in a semi circle around the dais where the Emperor sat that was clear of people. Imperial Guardsmen completed the circle standing around and behind him. The Emperor sat upon an ornate high backed throne which in turn was situated up on the raised dais, so that he looked over everyone and every thing. It was very intimidating to say the least, no matter where a person was they were forced to look up at him.

Lord Vader swept into that forbidden two metres and bent to one knee as

more gracefully than I had ever seen him move before the throne. His black cloak spread about the floor around and behind him like water at night. ‘Show off.’ I thought. I stayed a little behind him also dropping to one knee and bowed my head to this old man I did not know for the second time that evening.

“Ah, Lord Vader,” the Emperor said. “How good of you to join us.”

Lord Vader said nothing, stayed on his knee and did not look up.

“I see you have brought your new assistant to be presented. You may both rise.” The Emperor said.

I waited until Lord Vader stood and then did the same. My heart was thumping so fast and so hard that I was certain everyone could hear it above the noise and the music of the gala behind us. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and stood in a dance position that was both elegant and easy to maintain for long periods of time. I still did not look up into the emperor’s face. I could feel his power radiate about him and it scared me to death. I had never experienced anything like this before in my life. I could not quite believe that this was the same old man I had met that one night in the old part of the palace while I had been practising.

I could feel his eyes upon me, studying me. I could sense him in the Force stretching out and seeking to connect with that little amount of ability I had. I did not want him in my head or even near me and as much as I didn’t want to I fought him. A grain of sand against the wind, as the sand people would say. He chuckled, it was not a pleasant sound and it made my skin crawl.

“Miss Gabriel, how refreshing to meet you again.” He said. “You may approach me and you may look up.”

I moved forward so that I was standing even closer to him than Lord Vader and I looked up. The eyes that met mine were yellow and fierce. Power radiated and moved about him like snakes in a pit. I could feel surprise in Lord Vader's thoughts. He had not known that The Emperor had already made my acquaintance. That angered him, but how could I have known? I was quite certain there would be words about this later on.

“I can certainly understand why Lord Vader has chosen to retain your services, girl, I am told you are ... efficient at your job and I know you will be of great value to the Empire.” He said and paused a moment before continuing, “Lord Vader did not, however, inform me of your talents in so many other areas.” He said. I kept very still and very quiet because I was not exactly sure of what other talents he was referring to although I had my suspicions. I felt Lord Vader shift a little behind me and realized that the words the Emperor had spoken had not been meant for me. There was threat and annoyance underlying everything the Emperor had said. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end and I shivered and then the mood shifted once again.

The Emperor sat back a little returning his attention to me. “No matter, we have met and I am most pleased to welcome another loyal member to our Imperial

family. I am certain you will fit in well here and I look forward to further conversations with you.” He said and he gave me a smile that did not improve his looks any.

“Yes, your Highness, thank you.” I whispered. My mouth was desert dry.

“You may go now child.” He said with a wave of his hand. I made a motion to step back but then he added. “Miss Gabriel, do enjoy the evening, I am looking forward to seeing your talents on the dance floor if you find a suitable partner. I am also quite certain this gala event will be as nothing else you have ever seen before.”

I nodded and dropped a curtsied and then took my three steps backwards and, without caring if it was rude of not, vanished into the chattering, glittering crowd. Once I felt I was a safe distance away I looked back and saw the Emperor deep in conversation with Lord Vader. I was quite certain that this was a conversation I did not want to know anything about. I also noticed the young woman to the right of the Emperor staring directly back at me, the one with the beautiful red-gold hair. She was regal and elegant, with the body of a well trained dancer and the poise of a manner born princess. The look she sent me made me shudder. It was one of pure hatred. I wondered what I had done to deserve that and then turned my back on her as well. The sooner I was away from that part of the room the better.

I must admit I was at a loss of what to do next. There was an orchestra and a singer beginning to start the entertainment for the evening but I had no interest in that now. All I wanted to do was find a quiet corner and hide. The crowd was over whelming and as people moved about me I found myself suddenly quite disorientated and without meaning to I accidentally backed into someone much larger than me.

I turned around to offer my apologies and found my self face to face with the head of Xizor Transport Systems. I knew him by name and HoloNet reputation only. Lord Vader had many dealings with him and his corporation. He was, I had heard, the third most powerful man in the known galaxy.

He was not a handsome man to me, although I had heard whispers of his prowess with women. He was tall and arrogant looking, reptilian in origin with a top knot hair style I found vaguely disturbing. He gave me a single disinterested glance.

“My humble apologies.” I said.

“Think nothing of it.” He smiled politely, coolly in return. I went to turn away when he said.

“Wait, do we not know one another?” he asked, with a smile I suddenly found alluring.

I shook my head. “No I don’t believe so. I am fairly new here I am afraid.” I said, suddenly hoping he’d ask to get to know me better and wondering why in the name of Sarlacc I would think that all at the same time.

“Allow me to introduce myself, Prince Xizor.” he said. My heart fluttered a little. I was confused by this, I did not know this man nor had I wanted to a moment ago.

I gave him a very polite nod. “A pleasure to meet you, your Highness.” I said, and I meant it, I was suddenly finding him more and more attractive than I had a moment ago. I felt as though there were bees buzzing around in my head.

He smiled, it was dazzling smile but it was also that of a predator. “And you might be?” he asked.

My knees felt suddenly weak and I was about to give him the answer when a hand grabbed my arm painfully.

“There you are!” I have been looking for you all over, you know better than to vanish like that!” I turned around to see Shiv looking at me, seemingly furious. I was about to argue with him but I picked up on his strange manner and played along. I bowed my head as if embarrassed or ashamed and mumbled an apology.

Shiv moved me out of the way and stood before the Prince, giving Xizor a deep courtly bow. “My humblest apologies, your Highness, I cannot control all the girls here. I am afraid, and they will flock to you for attention. I hope you will forgive the breach in etiquette. You know you have so many fans, I cannot keep them from bothering you. This one is completely besotted.”

Xizor gave me a bored look and as suddenly as the attraction to him had been there, it was gone. “Think nothing of it Siavaan.” Xizor said with a wave of his hand, “I commend you on your impressive work. The palace ball room is once again stunning with its...decorations.” he said giving me a nod. Suddenly, I was decoration now. I was starting to get really cross.

Shiv bowed again. “Your highness is, as always, most gracious.” He said and then he backed away still holding my arm in his death grip. He dragged me out of the main room. Up a set of side stairs and out onto a large terrace that overlooked the city in the open air. I had not known it was there so well was the entrance incorporated into the design of the room.

“Is your head clear now?” he asked me as I turned around to give him a piece of my mind. I stopped before I had even gotten a word out.

I shook it. Then I nodded. “Explain.” I said.

“That was the almighty Prince Xizor.” he said

“Yes, yes I know that I am not completely stupid you know.”

“What you don’t know is he is Falleen. He does something with his pheromones to make himself irresistible to women.” Shiv said. He was really angry. “Not many people have this knowledge. Too bad, really, it might save a lot of heartache.”

It was starting to dawn on me, that sudden fuzzy headedness and instant desire for a man I had initially found repulsive.

“Now he thinks you are just some fawning palace courtesan. He won't have

any interest in you. He likes the chase. A devoted, star struck fan is not a lot of chase or fun for him. Better for you.” Shiv said. “He and Lord Vader do not get along. If he had figured out who you were he'd have made a bigger play than he already was, just to annoy Vader, and that would have been ugly. I don't know how you have managed to survive this long in Vader's presence but sleeping with Xizor would have ended it pretty quickly.”

“I would not have slept with that ... that ... man.” I stated hotly.

Shiv shook his head. “Yes, yes you would have, you might not have wanted to in your deepest heart, and maybe you could have fought him for a while but eventually you would have succumb to him and he would have had you anyway. He does not stop until he gets what he wants. I have not yet met a female who could resist his charms.” He almost spat that last word out.

I knew he was right and I felt somehow tainted and ashamed. “How do you know all this if no one else does?”

Shiv drew a deep breath. “He destroyed someone I cared for deeply. Played his little games until she could not resist, she was his mistress for a short while and when he was bored of her he gave her a very expensive gift and told her never to contact him again. She was so young and so much in love she could not bear to let him go. They say it was suicide, but I think he had someone deal with her. He has a reputation for being ruthless that way. Do not get in his way.”

“Shiv, I am so sorry, who was she?”

He clenched his jaw and fought the anger and emotion that welled up within him I did not need to be force sensitive to see how much he hated Xizor.

“She was my baby sister, Mahriella.” He said with a shake of his head. “Her whole life, all she wanted was to be a courtesan and work here with me. She loved the palace and all the glamour.” He shook his head. “If I had known then...”

I touched him on the arm. “You didn't know then. It wasn't your fault.”

He shook his head. “No, maybe not, but since then, I have made it my mission to find out all I could about him and his kind.”

I sighed and turned around so that I was leaning with my back on the balustrade. “Thank you. You probably saved my life.” I said.

“You're welcome. It was the least I could do after forcing those stupid Bounty Hunter drinks on you.” He said with a grin trying to lighten the mood again.

I smiled. “Better the devil you know...”

“You got that right.” He said and then his comm went off again. He looked at it and sighed. “Another world shattering disaster I suppose. Gotta blaze.” He said. “Stay away from that man, though.” He added. “Oh, and save me a dance!” he told me.

“Gosh I don't know if there is room....” I said making a face.

He grinned. “You owe me one Rim-Girl, make room!” and then he left to go and sort out what ever it was that needed his attention.

The Terrace was large and just as elegant as the inside hall was. There was soft lighting and incredible plants all over, perfectly positioned. I turned around and stared out over the city. It was a blaze of lights, those from the never ending stream of vehicles and those from the buildings all around us. Inside the music had begun and through the open archway, when I looked, I could see the dancers take to the floor. It was indeed, elegant both inside and outside. Yet, behind all this opulence and beauty lay a hidden core that was dark. Everywhere I turned it seemed there were layers upon layers of intrigue and deception. It was just depressing. I was having a hard time figuring out where I was fitting into all of this. I did not want to cry but suddenly there were tears in my eyes. I choked them back. This was neither the time nor the place for weaknesses to be seen.

“I suppose you will consider this sneaking up on you again.” said a familiar voice from just behind me.

“You do seem to excel at it.” I sighed without turning around to look at him.

Thrawn came to stand beside me and he handed me a glass of cold, white wine. “I thought that after your meeting with His Excellency, the Emperor, you might need this.” He said.

I took the glass gratefully. The wine was crystal clear, very dry and icy. I sipped at it thoughtfully.

“Are you well? You seem troubled.” He asked.

“Do you really care or is this just more games? Polite palace banter?” I said more sharply than I had meant to. I regretted the words immediately. “I'm sorry, that was uncalled for.” I couldn't bring myself to look at him. He seemed always to be around when I was at my most vulnerable.

“I do understand, Miss Gabriel,” he said. “A face to face meeting with the Emperor can be intimidating at the best of times. Here, in this arena, I imagine it must be quite overwhelming.” There was genuine kindness in his voice. I looked up into his face.

“I am fine. It is just, as you so aptly put it, overwhelming.” I said. “This isn't quite how I imagined an event like this to be.”

He studied my face carefully. The words said one thing, the remnants of my tears said another. He was polite enough to let it go.

“Then perhaps you would honour me with a dance.” He asked. “And I shall do my best to salvage the rest of the night for you.”

I smiled. “As long as it is a simple one, I am not all that familiar with most of the court dances here.”

He gave me one of those hunter and hunted smiles that made my stomach drop and my knees weak. “How fortunate for you then, I am well versed in many of the Palace dances and I happen to be an excellent leader.” He said.

“I'll bet you are.” I whispered not knowing or caring if he heard or not.

He offered me his arm and I took it as though I were a manner born noble and not just an Outer Rim nobody who was so far out of her depth she was starting to drown.

Inside the Ball Room the mood was bright and full of cheer. People had taken to the dance floor and the orchestra played beautiful music. This was more like what I had thought a grand ball to be. The music was beautiful, the singer was fantastic. I had never heard live music so well played. I stood in awe as the people on the dance floor swirled and spun around me.

We stood side by side and watched the dancing without saying a word to each other. It would have been difficult, to say the least, to step into the middle of a dance already underway but even more so for me, I had no idea what they were doing and the dancers went by too quickly for me to try and decipher what they were doing. It was full of complex steps and hand gestures, dancers wove in and around each other always ending back with their original partner.

“A Pavane,” Thrawn explained as if he had read my thoughts. “one of many variations. This one is called The Haarask’eh Pavane, after the man who created it. He was complicated and so is his dance”

“Certainly looks that way.” I said.

“It is constructed from repeated themes, not difficult once you have learnt the initial pattern. These dances are an excuse for people to talk, and flirt.” He said. “Observe the hands, some people actually touch finger tips and others do not touch at all, while others will place palm to palm, the ultimate in flirtation. Much information is passed about as one steps around one’s partner it is easy to whisper in their ear. Difficult to eaves drop on the dance floor, that is why these dances are so ...” he paused looking for the right word. “, appreciated by the Imperial Courtiers and everyone else who is here. To a very observant person who knows what to look for, it is not difficult to discover who is in bed with whom,” he gave me a knowing look, “often in the most literal sense.”

“Does anything happen here without some sort of intrigue and double meaning?” I asked.

“No.” he said. “Not, that I am aware of at any rate.”

I sighed. This was a whole new world to me. We watched as the dance ended and the music changed. I recognized this piece. It had been one of my mother’s favourites and the singer was about to sing the story that went along with the music. It was a love song theme for a very old waltz. This was a dance that had originated on Alderaan many many years ago. The Kai’y’en-sai Waltz.

Thrawn held his hand out and I took it.

I had learnt to waltz as a child. I had fond memories of watching my mother and father dancing this particular dance to a holo of this very piece of music. My mother had taught me the steps and I had often danced with my father, standing on his feet with my own as he whirled me around the room in our small

house. My mother had often laughed at the sight of us. It must have been funny. My father, contrary to appearances, was a good dancer and liked to dance.

My mother had told me one time that there were three types of men in this world when it came to dance. Those who did not dance at all and no amount of money or coercion would get them on the dance floor. Then there were those who learned to dance because they felt it was required of them to do it. They didn’t mind getting out on the dance floor but they didn’t lead well, most of the time, content to get through the dance without really understanding it. Then there were the men who not only enjoyed the dance but when they had you on the dance floor they owned you. I had asked her what she had meant by that, it had not sounded like a good thing to me. She had just smiled and said, ‘One day you will dance with such a man and you will know why that is special.’

The waltz began slowly and quietly as the singer began to weave the tale she was singing about. I could tell she also loved this song, this story. Thrawn placed one hand flat against the small of my back, with the other he held my right hand snugly, forcing mine into the perfect dance position. Part of this particular waltz was posture. I placed my left hand on his right shoulder and he swept me into the thick of the swirling dancers.

I was a little alarmed at first, no one had ever just taken over before and I watched my feet to make sure they were going in the right directions.

“Look at me.” He said softly.

I did and he smiled and nodded ever so slightly. “A little trust, Miss Gabriel.” He whispered.

The directions were subtle and strong, the slight pull or push of his fingertips at my back, direction from the hand that held mine and all the while I did not take my eyes from his face. The song began to pick up pace and the music swelled with it. I closed my eyes for a moment and let the magic that was beginning to well up around me, around us, wrap me in its spell. Step and step, around and around we went, everything else was a blur.

The song wove around us, the tale, somehow fitting, about a spirit of a distant star yearning for the love of a moon maiden he could not have. It was a story about passion, want, desire and the messy end that generally happens when star-spirits fall in love with distant moon maidens.

The Music began to rise in tempo as the last part of the story was sung. Thrawn pulled me in closer and we swung around harder, my dress flared out about me like foamy water, I kept my eyes on his, because if I watched the room around us spinning I would get dizzy. He looked back at me with no expression I could decipher and only when he suddenly smiled and we moved as one did I begin to understand what my mother had meant. The song ended and as it did he pulled me in tight to his waist while pushing back with the hand that held mine so that I lent backwards in an arch that allowed me to see almost behind me. It was a

difficult and beautiful way to end the dance, traditional in that the Moon maiden dies in the arms of her star spirit lover who has burned her soul away with his fire. A typical end to an unhappy unrequited love story. Most dancers don't execute this move, it is too difficult to do well, the balance and the timing need to be perfect. We stayed in position for a moment longer than necessary. He was showing off, letting me know that on this dance floor, I belonged to him. I was too breathless to argue.

He pulled me up so that I could stand and the next dance began. A Pavane I didn't know. I started to pull away but he would not let go of my hand.

"This is a simple dance, you will learn it very quickly." He whispered and he led me into position. We stood opposite from each other grouped with five other couples in a line, each line formed spokes towards the centre of the room. I was sure this looked stunning from above. The music was completely different, stately and heavy with no singing. The steps were easy to pick up and the pattern was repeated often enough so that by the time we had gone through it twice I was more sure of myself. It was not so much about dancing as walking in time and knowing where to put one's hands and feet.

The dance involved facing one's partner, palming with right hands and walking around one another, a little like circling cats sussing each other out for a fight. There were some intricate hand movements over the head of the woman while the man circled around her, this was the pointing the dance where if anything was to be whispered in the ear of one's partner it would be here. Everything else was eye contact and hand touch. The pattern was repeated and the woman handed off to the next man standing in line and so it went one until you were back at your original partner. I danced down our line once, I knew no one else in it so no one spoke to me and no one touched my hand.

"Not so difficult?" whispered Thrawn in my ear as he circled around the first time.

I shook my head as we stepped back and palmed towards with right hands, I shivered as he let his little finger caress the side of my hand slightly. He smiled when he saw my reaction. We circled about again and he whispered, "Now do you understand?"

I nodded ever so slightly and he handed me off to the next man. I wondered when this dance would end, it was a little too predatory for my tastes. The third and final time I returned to dance with my partner. He touched the tips of his fingers suggestively to my own. I had not ever imagined that some thing so light and simple could be so sensuous and powerful. As he circled around me for the last time he whispered something in a language I did not understand, but the warmth of his breath on my neck made me shiver. I wanted to know what he had said to me but he gave away nothing except for a smile. His eyes let me know this was far from over, what ever this game was that we were playing, and that he was

enjoying it greatly.

The dance ended with the man executing an elegant bow and the women dropping to a deep and beautiful curtsy.

We stood up and the music began for the next dance, something a little lighter in a simple waltz tempo. Thrawn was about to take my hand when someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"May I cut in?" Shiv asked.

I grinned, I was actually relieved to see him and Thrawn arched an eyebrow, but decorum dictated that he give way to the request. He inclined his head and in a very cool manner and with a smile I was not sure I liked, he took me by the hand and quite literally handed me to Shiv. They were both very polite and formal to one another, all according to etiquette, very proper.

"Thank you for the dance, Miss Gabriel, perhaps later on you will honour me with one more." He said with a bow.

I curtsied and smiled. "If you are very lucky." I whispered. The look he shot me was so worth it. Shiv tugged at my hand and I followed him on to the dance floor and let the music take us away.

Shiv was also a very good dancer, but there was something missing. I could not put my finger on what it was exactly but decided not to dwell on it. Shiv gave me one of his dazzling smiles and I grinned back at him as we circled about the floor with everyone else.

"So who was that then?" Shiv asked. "Wasn't that the mystery man Antygra was on about the other day?"

"Yep I think so." I said keeping it light. "Captain Thrawn or something like that, arrogant as all get out."

Shiv shook his head and laughed. "You do seem to attract the sharks. I thought he was going to duel me for the right to dance."

"Not my fault." I told him. "And he's just an Imperial officer, you know how they sometimes get."

"You having fun so far?" he asked, thankfully changing the subject.

"Now I am." I said. "It was a little hairy earlier on though!"

He nodded. "Yeah, big night for you and I am sorry that I added to the stress, I didn't mean to dump on the mood."

"Not your fault, I guess I owe you one though." I said.

"Don't think about it." He smiled. "You know you remind me a lot her actually."

"Your sister?"

"Yeah, she had that quality of sparkle and lightness. Like everything around her shone in some way. She had a way about her that seemed to put people at ease. It was as if she could sense the mood of a room before she entered it and somehow change it. She was special. One might even say magical. You are a lot like

her in some ways.” He said giving me a look to let me know he wasn’t just speaking in generalities. I opened my mouth but he shook his head and then went on. “I am guessing you’d be about the same age as her, early twenties, maybe twenty twoish?”

I nodded.

“Yeah, thought so.” He nodded. “You have a lot of the same qualities.”

“She was lucky to have you.” I told him. “A brother to watch over her like you did.”

He gave me a sad smile. “That’s what brother's are for. I just wasn’t smart enough to see what was before my eyes. I guess that's why I kinda took to you. You remind me of her and I would hate for you to end up like that.”

“No worries, Shiv, a girl doesn’t grow up on Tatooine and not learn how to look after herself.” I told him. “I do have a mean streak you know.”

He considered this for a moment. “Maybe, but I don’t think you are as bad or as tough as you’d like everyone else to believe. That's part of your charm.”

I grinned. I had no answers for that but I hoped it was true. I hoped I could keep that dark side of my soul locked away and quiet forever.

The dance ended and we walked away to join the rest of his small group of friends. Someone found me a drink with no glow spice and we stood around and chatted about silly things, the latest fashions and who was doing what with whom.

I looked around but I could not see Thrawn anywhere, and I found myself strangely disappointed by that. Lord Vader was also not around and when I looked about neither was the Emperor. I was grateful for small mercies. I wondered where Lord Vader was and if he had left how much trouble I would be in for not, as he had instructed, accompanying him to the grand entrance way. I did not really have long to ponder these things before Antygra grabbed my arm and we went out to the dance floor. It was beginning to get late and the music style was slowly changing to a more modern less formal style. No more patterned, formal steps to follow, no provocative caresses to avoid, just free style dancing, which was fun. We all took turns dancing with each other and hung out in a little group near a corner. It reminded me a little of some of the organized dances at the school I had gone to on Tatooine.

Shiv handed me a drink of something clear and bubbly. “Just water with some fizz.” He said.

I sipped at it gratefully. “What time is it now?” I asked.

Antygra looked at his chrono. “Well after midnight.” He said.

“When did the Emperor leave?” I asked.

“He’s probably in the private chambers. He doesn’t often stay that long. Makes an appearance, speaks to the chosen few, watches some of the stately dancing and then he retires to his private chambers. Your boss went with him. All private secret hush hush meetings.” Ynyth said. “While he makes a big splashy

entrance he often leaves the room like a ghost.”

“What am I supposed to do then, wait till Lord Vader shows up to leave?” I asked. I was tired and I wanted to go to bed.

“Why wait for him?” Bobbyn asked.

“He told me that it was etiquette to accompany him out when he leaves.”

Shiv shook his head. “Pah, that's really old fashioned, forget about it, no one does that any more. He was just giving you a hard time.” He said. “Likes to wind people up he does.”

I wondered how he would know that but decided not to ask him here.

“Okay but if I get killed for a breech in etiquette it's your fault.” I wagged a finger at him.

Ynyth shook her head. “He won’t kill you.” She said.

“What makes you so sure?” I asked.

“*He* presented to you the Emperor. That never happens unless the Emperor is interested in meeting a person, means you have been noticed and are noticeable for some reason. *He* won’t harm you now, it might annoy the Emperor.” she said.

“Are you sure about that?”

“Heck no, but I can tell you this, The Emperor never requests to see someone at the Grand Ball unless he has a vested interest in them for some reason and wants everyone to know it.” She shook her head, her dark curls flying about her face.

“And Vader won’t go against the Emperor.” Shiv said quietly.

“What does he find so interesting about me?” I wondered out loud.

“Beats us, we’ve been speculating all night!” said Antygra. “Along with the rest of the people here. And you really made our Princesses’s day. Did you see the look she shot you?”

Only Shiv’s face said he had a pretty good idea of what lay behind it all but he masked it with a silly grin and cut the discussion short grabbing Ynyth by the arm and dragging her out to dance.

“The red head is the one you call princess?” I whispered to Antygra.

He nodded. “Yeah and looks like she doesn’t have much time for you. Watch yourself around her.”

I nodded. Just what I needed one more person I needed to watch out for. I turned my attention back to watching Shiv and Ynyth dance. When they came back I said my goodnights. Shiv walked me to the front of the entrance and hailed me a ride back home.

“Stay alive Rim- Girl.” He said. “We’ve planned to go out and try some new restaurant next week if you’re game.”

“Sounds wonderful. If I am not dead by next week, you can count me in.” I told him with a grin.

We hugged, did that kiss kiss thing and I went home.

The part of the palace where I lived was quiet, deserted actually, which for the time of night wasn't so unusual. Sometimes if things were busy, some people worked really late but for the most part it was a pretty dead place to be. I liked it like that actually. The quiet abandoned quality of it never bothered me, but then I was used to the emptiness of the desert.

I walked in the back way because I had been dropped off on the other side from my usual entrance. I still had music in my ears and was humming when I opened the door to my flat, no lights came on which was annoying and a bit unusual. I shut the door and went to find the desk where I kept a porta lamp when suddenly someone grabbed me from behind so that I could not move or struggle, and clamped a hand over my mouth tightly then whispered in my ear.

"I'm not going to hurt yer, but if yer scream we're both dead." The voice whispered. Who ever it was strong and despite their words, they were hurting me. I was terrified.

"If I take my hand away yer won't scream for help." It was not a question but rather a statement of fact. I nodded as best I could. Slowly the hand was removed and he let go. I spun around and had to clamp my own hand over my mouth. Even in the darkness with only the faint light from outside to give me any idea of anything at all, I knew who this was.

"Hullo Mouse." He said quietly. He looked awful.

I could only whisper his name. "Jyrki." And then I had to sit down because my knees were shaking so much I thought they would give way.

The silence in the place was palpable. I sat with my head in my hands, my elbows resting on my knees taking long, steady, slow deep breaths in and out. He fetched a glass of water and knelt in front of me holding it out. I shook my head. I couldn't hold it, my hands were still shaking so much and I didn't want him to see that. He took a sip and put the Glass on the table.

"Mouse, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare yer." He said trying to look at my face.

I could not believe he was even here. I just sat there shaking my head in disbelief.

"Mouse, say something."

I looked up then into those brittle blue eyes I had known so well. "What are you doing here?" was the only thing that came out of my mouth. I resisted the urge to reach up and touch his face.

"I came to rescue yer." He said, and I couldn't help it, I laughed and somehow the laughter helped. He just gave me a puzzled look. I got up and walked away from him.

"Rescue me from what?" I asked finally.

"Yer father said yer had been summoned by the Empire to work, I came to

get yer out." He said.

"Why?" I asked. "Why would you risk your life to do that? I don't need rescuing."

He gave me a confused look. "Yer father said yer were working for Darth Vader and the Emperor." He said as if that explained everything.

"So?" I asked. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I can help yer escape from him."

"Escape to what?" I asked. "Why do you think I need rescuing? I like my job here."

It was his turn to stare at me. He shook his head. "What?"

"I like it here. I like my job. I don't need to be rescued." I repeated.

He ran a hand through his hair and paced about the room. "Rys and yer father said yer hadn't applied for the job, that yer went against yer will."

"I didn't apply for it, that's true but it isn't that bad. I wrote and told papa that I enjoyed it here. Is that really why you risked your life to come here?" I asked.

He looked at me sharply. "Why in else, the name of Sarlacc, would I break into the Imperial Palace? I heard who yer were working for and I had to come and get yer and now yer tell me yer like it here?"

I shrugged and shook my head. "Yes, that's what I am saying."

"Yer work for that bastard killer of children and yer like it here?" he hissed coming towards me. I backed up. He was suddenly fierce and frightening.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Yer have no idea who the Emperor really is do yer?" he said softly.

"I have a decent idea." I said. "What do you mean killer of children?"

Jyrki shook his head. This was making me angry now. It was late and I was tired of having my wits scared out of me. I marched over to him and grabbed his arm. I could feel the Force flicker between us. I don't know how I could ever have missed it before. It crackled when I touched him and he pulled away from me.

"Why didn't ever tell me who, what you were?" I asked.

"Because if anyone ever found out it was a death sentence." He said bitterly. "For all of us."

"You are speaking in riddles, I don't understand!"

He swung around and looked me in the eyes. "That man, the one everyone bows to and calls Emperor, the man yer work for, murdered children, the younglings at the Jedi Temple here on Coruscant. He sent his dark apprentice in to butcher and slaughter innocent children who tried to fight him off with what little force powers they had."

"How do you know this?" I whispered.

"Because I was there when it happened." He said and his voice broke. He fought to control himself. "The night Anakin Skywalker served the Dark side and did your Emperor's bidding. Purge the galaxy of all Jedi right down to the children.

I was very young and a few of us were out of bed, playing games of hide and seek in the catacombs. We were not supposed to be there. I and five others, we were down there playing when the attack happened. We could hear the screams and the fighting, the sounds of laser fire and light sabers. I wanted to go and help but Salla'amyrr, the oldest of us, held us all back, made us hide deep inside one of the storage closets. We stayed there for a very long time, until we heard nothing only a dreadful silence. Then she led us away from the temple, but not before we had passed by some of the less lucky ones. One of them was still alive but only just. She could not do anything for him. He told us what had happened. That Anakin had come with clone troopers to kill all the Jedi, every last one. He died in her arms and she could do nothing. We escaped through the underworld to a safe house and were smuggled off world. They separated us and I never saw any of them again. I spent most of my life going from safe house to safe house. Hiding who I am and what I am. I never forgot the teachings though. I even passed some of them on to yer." He drew a deep breath. "Now don't yer see? Yer have to come with me, get away from the Emperor."

"Jyrki, I am so sorry that happened to you." I said. "But what does this have to do with me, here and now?"

"Yer need to trust me, that the Emperor is evil and so is the man yer work directly for. I have heard terrible things about this Darth Vader! Yer know I am telling the truth. I know that is one of yer talents."

"I can't leave here, I can't do that." I shook my head. I wasn't sure how to digest this information. I could not understand why anyone would want to slaughter children but I knew Jyrki wasn't lying. I didn't know what to think.

"Why?" he asked fiercely.

"It's complicated. And where would I go? What would I do?"

"Anywhere, work as a mech somewhere, free lance plenty of star ports would love to have a talented mechanic like yer around. Or yer could dance like yer did before. Or you could maybe use what yer've learned here and help the Rebellion. Why is it so complicated?"

I sighed. "Because it is and I don't want to live the rest of my life on the run from the Empire." I didn't want to get into all of my reasons for staying. I suspected it would not go over very well.

He shook his head. "Yer'd rather stay here then and work for a man who slaughtered children and countless other innocent people? A man who rules the galaxy by creating fear and hate?"

"I don't want to spend the rest of my life running away always looking over my shoulder!" I said getting annoyed. "And the last time I read about the Empire, the Emperor was voted into power by the people."

"What have they done to yer? What hold do they have over yer?" he asked, I could feel the anger welling up in him as it was in me as well, and I wanted to feed

off it.

"Nothing at all." I said "Which is more than I can say about you!"

"What do yer mean by that?"

"You left me without even saying goodbye. You just up and went. You knew how I felt, you knew how much I loved you and you just vanished. Not a note, not one word. I had no idea what I had even done wrong! No one here has ever hurt me the way you have!" I cried at him. Old wounds coming to the surface.

"Mouse I had to leave."

"Why?"

"It was becoming, as yer so aptly put it, complicated."

"Why?" I asked louder. "Explain it to me."

"Yer were a girl and I am twice yer age!" He said.

"Don't lie to me. I was old enough to marry legally so age means nothing. I know you felt something for me, I know it! That kiss was so powerful..." He didn't let me finish.

"That kiss should never have happened! It was wrong!"

"How...why?"

"Jedi are not supposed to fall in love and have relationships." He said quietly.

I opened my mouth then closed it again. "So he was right, you were running away from me, how you felt." I whispered. And I shook my head. "I was just a kid and I was in love with you. The least you could have done was said goodbye!" I spat. "Why did you never tell me you were force sensitive as well? Why did you never let me know that there was someone else like me?"

"I didn't tell yer because it would have put yer life in danger." He said, "And I left because I didn't want to cause any more pain."

"For who, me or for you?"

"This isn't about that." He said shaking his head and changing the subject. "I am sorry I hurt yer but I had to go. Now I am back and yer need to come with me, before someone catches us."

I stepped back. "Catches you, you mean." I said, "I am not on the wrong side of the fence here."

He gave me a look of disbelief. "Yer would rather stay here than come with me?"

I nodded. "I have a life here, I have a job, I have friends who care about me and won't break my heart the way you did. I work for the Empire, what difference is that from working for Jabba? As I recall you hated that too."

"At least on Tatooine I knew yer were safe." He said.

"Safe is a relative term, Jyrki. I am safe here."

"Why? Did yer sell yer soul to the evil that sits on the throne?" he asked.

"No, but I gave my loyalty when I took this job." I said.

"That makes yer a traitor." He hissed.

"A traitor? According to whom?" I asked, narrowing my eyes. "Doesn't this depend a little on how you look at it all? I happen to working for the people who are legally in power, that's all. Whose side are you on? Because the last time I looked being part of the Rebellion was called treason."

"The Rebellion didn't destroy an entire planet full of innocent people." Jyrki spat.

"There were innocent people on the space station that the rebels blew up! Who is worse? Are we playing who kills the most people now? Is that how you decide whose side you need to be on? The side with the lowest body count wins? What about those of us who don't even know how to fire a blaster?" I asked him. "If there wasn't a resistance then Alderaan would still be in one piece! There is blood on everyone's hands if you want to look at it that way." I yelled.

"I don't know yer at all any more." He said coldly. He gave me a once up and down look taking in the dress, the make-up, the hair. "They've turned yer into an Imperial palace doxy that will do whatever the Emperor wishes and yer actually like it."

I moved so fast he didn't see it coming and I slapped him across the face so hard this sound ricocheted about the room like gunfire.

"Get out." I hissed between clenched teeth. "Get out of here while you still can." I could feel the love and sorrow I had for him slowly being replaced with a cold, hard anger. It occurred to me then, that love and hate are close cousins. "If that is how you feel about me then you never knew me at all. Get out!"

"Mouse I'm sorry I didn't mean...." He didn't finish because there was a soft knock at the door.

"Go hide, in the bedroom, anywhere just hide. If you get caught here you'll be killed." I whispered. I was so angry at him but I wasn't ready to lose him just yet. He stared at me for a second and then vanished into the bedroom. I took a deep breath and went to open the door but there was no one there. I looked about the hallway and saw nothing and then I looked down. There on the door mat was a crystal glass with a little card in it. I picked it up and read the note.

'You owe me a dance.' It said.

It was all I could do not to scream in frustration. The men in my life these days all had impeccable timing. I slammed the door shut and swore up and down. I put the glass on the table by the door and hid the note under a book. Went into the bedroom to tell Jyrki it was all clear and he could come out but the room was empty. I looked under the bed, in the closet everywhere I could think of that a grown man could hide, but he was not there. I bridled my anger enough to be able to reach a little with the force and then I knew for sure he was not in my apartment any more. I don't know how he had done it, but he had gone. I hoped that he would be safe where ever he was and I also hoped I would never see him again.

I picked up the empty glass and went to meet Thrawn. I knew exactly where he'd be and I did not want to be alone in that flat any more tonight.

He was standing with both hands leaning on the balustrade staring out over the city. If he heard me approach he didn't show it and for a moment I stopped and leaned against the entrance way just to watch him. He had taken off the dress uniform jacket and looked somehow less formidable in the long sleeved undershirt and trousers.

"Are you going to stand there all morning Miss Gabriel or will you join me for a drink?" he asked without turning around.

I sighed, and came to stand at his side. He took the glass from my hands and filled it with something that wasn't champagne. He topped up his own glass and touched it to mine. The crystal sang a clear beautiful note that hung delicately in the air. I took a sip and smiled. Corellian brandy.

"I was not certain you would come. I heard raised voices from your apartment. Is everything in order?" he asked.

I drew a very deep breath. "News from home." I said. It wasn't exactly a lie. "Problems?" he asked.

"Nothing I can't handle." I was being evasive and he knew it. I could sense he wanted to know more but we were not quite at that point yet where he could dig. So instead he said.

"It would seem you have had a busy night then."

"Your ability to understate the obvious is astounding captain." I remarked dryly.

He laughed. He had a deep rich laugh and it was a pleasure to hear after the argument I had just had. I didn't know how I felt about what had happened during the course of the evening and night. I especially did not know how to deal with the sudden appearance and subsequent disappearance of Jyrki. I sighed without thinking about it.

Thrawn regarded me quietly and waited. The silence between us was great and I was at a loss how to start.

"May I ask you something?" I said finally.

He nodded.

"What do you know about the Great Jedi Purge?"

The look on his face told me this was not the question he had been anticipating.

"You are genuinely full of surprises, Miss Gabriel." He said taking a sip from his glass and looking over the city. I waited for him to answer my question. He drew a deep breath and returned his gaze to me once more.

"I know enough to understand that it is not something which should be discussed." He said quietly. "What is on your mind?"

"Is it true that the Emperor had the Jedi children killed?" I asked.

Thrawn raised an eyebrow. "I have heard something to that effect, but you are treading dangerous ground here. Why are you asking this?"

"There are people from home who think I am betraying what they believe in by working for the Empire. I learned tonight that it was not just the Jedi who were killed but also younglings, why would they do that? They were just children."

Thrawn looked at me and turned around so that he leaned with his back to the city against the balustrade. "I do not presume to understand everything the Emperor has done but I can only surmise he saw children with Jedi potential as a threat. The Jedi were declared an enemy of the Republic and that included all who were in training. It happened a long time ago and you were not a part of that, why does this trouble you now?"

"I have a difficult time with the thought of children being slaughtered because of a what-if." I said.

"I can understand that." He nodded. "But does this knowledge change the job you do here? Whose beliefs matter more? The only person you need to worry about betraying is yourself. You have no control over what others think or believe. Does the person that said this to you mean so much to you that you question everything you are now?"

"No, not really." I shook my head. "But it bothers me never the less."

"There are all kinds of people in this galaxy, my dear. That is part of what makes it so interesting, but also part of what makes it so full of conflict. It has been my experience that power blinds people into doing terrible things in order to gain more power or maintain that which they already have. It is very seductive and it can be easy to lose sight of one's ultimate goal when one is consumed by the lust for more of what ever it is that one wants more of." He paused. "You work for men who lust for power. Their desire to have this elusive thing comes at a cost which, for many, is too high. You and I, we serve them to the best of our abilities given the parameters we have to move in, and I suspect that like myself, you endeavour to do the best job you can while staying true to your conscience. Does this make it wrong? I don't believe so. At some point in everyone's life they will serve a corrupt master, to remain true to oneself, one must do this job with honour. Does this then make it right?" he drew a very deep breath. "Who is to say what is right and what is wrong?"

"Why do you serve the Empire?" I asked.

"Because I know I can make a difference. I can add my expertise to bring and maintain order. I may not always agree with the people who are in charge, and make no mistake I will tell them when I feel they are in the wrong, but in the end I do what is asked of me because I believe it makes the difference between order and chaos."

"Even if that meant slaughtering innocent people, children?" I asked.

"I suppose that would depend on circumstances and in my profession as a

member of the Imperial Navy there are things that need to be done which I might not always find tasteful. I will follow orders when they make sense but I do not slaughter innocents just because I am told to, however, if the reason is there..." he didn't finish his sentence. "Make no mistake, Miss Gabriel, killing is a dreadful thing and should never be done lightly, but in days of chaos and turmoil it will happen. When people fight against each other, no matter what the reasons there will be death. You are not in such a position, this is not something you will ever be asked to do and, "he said softly, "I hope, for the sake of your soul, you never will be"

"Do you think I don't have it in me to kill?" I asked, wondering what he had meant by that.

He turned to face me. "Everyone has the capacity to kill, some more so than others. It is a choice many must make on a daily basis, whether they wish to or not, those who choose not to often die because of that decision." He said. "But it changes you and it makes you harder, colder in ways you cannot imagine. I am certain that if it came down to the blade's edge and you had no other avenue available, you would choose life over death, there is enough steel in you to do that, but I should hate to see that happen. It would strip away that dancing light in your eyes and that touch of innocence you so like to think you hide away where no one will see." He reached up and stroked the hair that had fallen into my face aside. "Do the job you were asked to. Stay out of harm's way and keep that lovely spirit of yours alive and flickering, just like the ever changing lights in that precious stone you love so much." He said gently.

I could not tear my eyes away from his. I could have sworn he was not Force sensitive and yet he seemed to see right through every block and wall I put up, straight into my soul. He studied my face carefully, I felt my cheeks flush and it was hard to catch my breath.

As he leaned in closer he whispered, "Working for the Empire may not always agree with you, Miss Gabriel, but I get the distinct impression that being with me does." And then he kissed me with a deep and gentle kiss, so full of wonder and passion that it made my knees weak and watery. If he had not wrapped his arm about my waist I might have just sunk to the ground. This was such bad news and I had so been right about him. I would drown in what he had to give and I wasn't sure I could handle that, but the touch of his lips against mine was very persuasive and at that exact moment I just didn't care about anything else. So, when his private comm went off a few seconds later it was as if someone had pulled me out of the deep end of the water and slapped the air back into my lungs. He swore softly in a language I didn't understand giving me time to step back from him. I turned to look out over the city, hanging on to the balcony for support. My heart raced so hard in my chest I thought it would burst its way out, in a painful and messy explosion.

“I have to leave.” Thrawn said, he did not sound very pleased about it.

I looked up at him and nodded, “Time to save the galaxy from evil once more?”

He smiled. “Something like that.” He said. “I am not certain when I will return, but this is a conversation I’d like to continue.” He said stroking the side of my face with gentle fingers, his thumb caressing across my lips.

I moved my head away, just a bit and swallowed a mouthful of brandy. I gave him a nod, not entirely sure what I was agreeing with.

He regarded me for a moment then and leaned in close to whisper in my ear. “Seduction, Miss Gabriel, is a most wonderful art form.” And with that he departed and left me alone to collect my wits and watch the sun rise. I hoped that the day it brought with it would be a whole lot less eventful.