

Daughter of the Empire

Book 1

Written by F. Messer 2005-2006

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CHAPTER FIVE

Ghosts of Flesh and Bone 1

“No.” I said shaking my head. “No!”

“I am not asking you. I am telling you.” Thrawn said holding out the clothes he wanted me to wear.

“Then you are not hearing me.” I told him standing there with my arms folded across my chest. Battle stance my father always called it. “I am not wearing that outfit.” This was a losing fight but I was not going to let him get away with this easily.

He did not move and we were at an impasse. “I have already explained to you why it is necessary.”

“I don’t give a wamp rat's ass why you think I should run around looking like someone’s dance slave, I am not wearing that, and that’s the end of it!” I was really angry at him. I had thought that maybe he was joking when he had explained what he wanted me to do over a cup of fresh stim’caf, but when he had actually produced a set of exquisitely made, barely there dance clothes I knew he was deadly serious.

“Are you this argumentative with Lord Vader?” he asked with a bemused smile.

“Yes.” I told him. It was almost true.

“Then I do not know how he puts up with you on a daily basis.” He shook his head and came at me, with one hand on my shoulder marched me to the small crew cabin, thrust the dance clothes into my arms and said. “Dress in private or I will undress you myself and I am certain you don’t want that.” He paused and gave me such a wolf like grin I wanted to hit him. “At least not yet.” His grin turned into a tight smile that let me know he wasn’t joking about this either and no matter how much I protested I was going to lose this battle. I had a choice, I could throw a huge tantrum and see just how far I could push him and still lose or I could comply and get it over with what little dignity I still had intact.

He knew he had won when I sighed. “Good girl.” He said and he left the room closing the door quietly behind him. I punched in the lock code to make sure he stayed out. I changed quickly, hating the feel of the expensive silk. At least, I though ruefully, he had good taste.

Dance slaves were a breed apart. Women and sometimes men prized so highly for their ability to entertain and dance that they were worth a great deal of money. There had been many such slaves at Jabba’s, bought from all over the galaxy, many of the best were Twi’lek women. The clothes for dance slaves were revealing and skimpy at the best of times, I wasn’t even certain the particular outfit

Thrawn had picked out even deserved the label clothing, a tiny deep blue iridescent bikini type top and bottom along with a skirt to match, made from such filmy, diaphanous fabric that was pretty much non existent and a pair of elegant beaded sandals to finish it all off. This little get up did not leave anything to the imagination. All that was missing was the neck collar and I had a bad feeling about that.

I had worn similar outfits on a couple of occasions while working at the palace, though not nearly so well made or expensive. I had not really enjoyed the attention these clothes had brought. Seemed to me it was not so much about the dancing when you wore next to nothing but more about trying to get the dancer out of the rest of the clothes. I didn’t last long dancing at Jabba’s palace for a number of reasons and the dress code was one of them. A knock on the door broke me out of my thoughts.

“Go away!” I said angry at him, angry at myself.

“Merlyn...” there was a hint of annoyance in his voice.

“I said... go away!”

He lost patience, overrode the lock code and walked in anyway.

I waited for some sleazy innuendo or sarcastic remark but neither came. He paused mid step and for a moment his expression was unreadable to me, then he became all business like. He looked me up and down and nodded then handed me a silk robe that matched the skirt. Wordlessly, I slipped it on and followed him out back into the main part of the ship.

“You will need to do something with your hair and you should be wearing more makeup.” He said.

I turned around and went back into the crew room, using what little make up I had brought with me and did a passable job on my face then I took the Zenji sticks out and let my hair tumble down. It was very long and curled softly about my shoulders and down my back.

“Better?” I asked coldly when I came back.

He nodded. “I will be masquerading as a Dantassi Bone Trader, you will not be able to see my face and you should be mute. It would be best if everyone we encounter thinks you do not speak or understand basic. I know this will be difficult for you because I know how much you like to give your opinion but a lot is riding on this so try to keep quiet.”

“You know, you irritate the sand jiggers out of me.” I told him bluntly.

He smiled. “I can live that as opposed to how you felt twelve hours ago.” He said and then continued before I could ask what he had meant by that. “Myrkr is used, from what I have been able to discern, by smugglers and some pirates. They have a small set up in a place called Hyllyard. There we will land and look for a man named Schayll Ormante. He is a well known hunter, who apparently knows more about this planet than any another. I have arranged to speak with him about

the creatures of this world because I have heard their bones possess unique properties and a naturally curious about the hunting available on the planet. He expects to be highly paid for this information unfortunately I am also certain he will double cross me.” He paused. “I happen to know that he and his people have a weakness for beautiful women. I have told them as a sign of respect I will be bringing my favoured dance slave, Anwyldth, to dance for them. It is my hope that you will be able to distract them for a short amount of time while.”

“Why?”

“The less you know about that the better.” He said tartly.

I gave him a look that pretty much said 'right now I hate you', He ignored it. “How do you know that my dancing will distract them?”

“I have felt what happens when you embrace the music and let your...how I shall put it... unique talents fly. Trust me, they will be enthralled.” He said calmly.

I raised an eyebrow but said nothing and he continued. “I hope that we can get through this quickly. Once I have a good idea where to start the hunting so to speak, you and I will go and explore.”

“You make it sounds so simple.” I said.

“It should be simple. I have made a point of learning all I can about Ormante and his people, what sort of art he likes and what sort of men they are.” He said.

I made a face. “And if you are wrong?”

“There are always alternatives, Miss Gabriel.” He told me in that cool manner of his. “I am not so inflexible that I do not see the possibilities for things to go wrong.”

I sat back and folded my arms.

“Oh and one other thing.” He said, reaching behind his chair into the satchel that sat on the floor pulling out a very ornate slave’s collar and placing it on the table. “You will need to wear this.”

I just stared at him and then raised my chin and pulled my hair out of the way. “Let’s get this over with then.”

His hands were gentle and he slipped the collar around my neck without comment or caress. This was business only and for that I was grateful. I had never had to wear one of these dreadful things before and although he had obviously thought about it and managed to find one that was made from some lightweight metal and designed so that it didn’t cut into my skin it was, never the less, extraordinarily uncomfortable. I loathed anything around my neck and for a few seconds fought the surge of panic. I concentrated on breathing and nothing else.

“It will be for a short time only, I promise.” He said softly but I didn’t look at him. He left wordlessly then left to finish getting his own disguise ready. When he came back I did not recognize him at all.

Dantassi Bone Traders were rare. In fact, they were mostly a thing of

stories that parents told their children to scare them into being good. They were creepy, shadowy figures of myth and urban legend. No one knew who or even what they were, where they had originated from or what exactly it was that they even hunted, although it was whispered that they would hunt anything and anyone for the right price. Even their name was a mystery because no one knew what Dantassi meant or if they actually did trade in the bones of their prey.

I knew they were real because I had seen one once when I had been quite young. The Dantassi had booked passage on a small transport my father and I were piloting one time and had been silent and scary the entire trip. He was so alien in his weird hunter’s get up and bone armour, decorated in talismans that only he knew the secret to with the mask that hid his face. I could still seem in my mind the way his weird, deep set, glowing red eyes followed my every move. They were nomadic, reclusive, solo predators with a reputation for being absolutely ruthless while on the hunt. What they did in their spare time was anyone’s guess. All I really remember from that particular job was that I had been so grateful when the Bone Trader on our transport had left I had burst into tears.

Now Thrawn stood in front of me dressed much the same way. It gave me a chill to see him and even more to get a sense of the presence he pulled into himself. Already a tall man, he seemed somehow taller in the disguise. The long, dark robes and over sized hooded cloak only served to accentuate that. The face mask was an ornate piece of art carved from the skull of some creature that had once been, perhaps, vaguely humanoid and it hid his own face completely. The soot black markings that had been etched into it were all ritualistic and they all had a meaning. I was betting anything Thrawn knew how to decipher all of it, In fact, I was fairly certain he knew more about the Dantassi than anyone else, especially if he was masquerading as one. Around his neck hung various talismans and objects that looked a whole lot like finger bones among other things. In one gloved hand he held an evil looking culling staff and in the other he held a delicate silver chain that I knew I would soon learn the strength of. I could barely see his eyes from behind the mask and under the cowl of his hood but what I could see scared the sand jiggers out of me. They held that same weirding ghost like quality that I remembered from my first encounter with such a creature.

When he spoke I jumped in fright because the voice augmentation he had somehow managed to implement made his already deep, velvety voice dark and gravelly as if he had lived his whole life in the confines of a smoke filled hut in some remote part of what ever world the Dantassi Bone Traders came from. He motioned for me to come to him and I did without question. I stood very still while deft fingers fastened the chain to the collar. He said nothing else and I dared not break the silence. We had begun to play our roles and already I was losing myself to it. Silence was a powerful thing. If he had wanted a better way to scare me into submission he could not have found it. I had had nightmares for many, many

months after seeing the Bone Trader on that flight with my father.

Thrawn took over control of the ship while I sat in silence and watched as this mysterious planet, which was covered mainly in green lush rain forests, loomed closer and closer. I was grateful when the ship landed on the small docking pad and we disembarked. The sooner this was over with the better.

I had always believed that Mos Eisley was probably the biggest hell hole in the whole galaxy and since that is what pretty much everyone said who ever passed through the city it was hard not to believe it. I had been to other outer Rim planets and seen some of their so called hell holes and still always felt Mos Eisley would win that contest hands down but the moment I stepped on to Myrkr and into Hyllyard I knew that Mos Eisley had just been bumped down to second place.

The first thing that hit me was the air. It was warm and sticky, full of moisture laced with a thousand different scents none of which were familiar to me. I suppose a rainforest world holds its perfume close to its skin. The air, which is so damp you seem to drink it rather than breathe it, hugs everything tightly to itself, not letting anything dissipate. There was a dank earthy tone that was overshadowed by some sweet flowering thing and in between there was a slightly spicy tinge. I felt as though I had to gasp to get any air at all into my lungs and as sweat slowly began to bead on my skin I came to realize that perhaps Thrawn's choice of dance clothes had less to do with showing skin and more to do with the climate. I was glad it was late afternoon because I could not imagine the heat and the humidity in the middle of the day. Heat, I was used to but not all this moisture.

The second thing I noticed was how shabby it all looked, this tiny community built up in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by thousand year old forests of lush, green vegetation and goodness knew what sort of creatures. Hyllyard would not make any of the top ten tourist sites that was for certain.

We were met by two men who held enough fire power in their arms you would have thought the entire Imperial navy was visiting not an off world hunter and his pet slave. There were no nice words of welcome, in fact no one said anything at all. I could sense and see in the two men that they did not know what to make of the Dantassi Bone Trader and were scared by his presence. Me, they just wanted to undress and did so with their eyes about as openly as it could be done. I just raised my chin a notch and gave them both a cold, haughty stare. Thrawn remained as still as stone and only moved when they finally decided we were safe enough to bring into one of the larger buildings, an absolute dive of a cantina. We were led through the main room which was empty except for a very bored looking bartender and shown into a private room in the back.

Schayll Ormante was an overweight man with opulent tastes and we had just stepped into his private sanctuary. The room was large and overly decorated. The walls were covered with the heads of his trophies mounted on ornate wooden plaques, interspersed with a huge variety of strange weapons from all over the

galaxy. The floors were covered in elegantly hand woven carpets and the furniture was all very expensive and made from quite rare Chak-wood. In the center of the room was a large low, round table around which plush silk cushions were placed. There were no chairs at all. Upon the table was a beautiful hand thrown bowl filled with exotic fruits, tiny hand blown glasses and a large carafe. It was filled with mek'kefa, a kind of spiced stim'caf, which I could smell from where I stood. There was too much djyn spice in the mix.

Ormante came forward with a jolly 'isn't this splendid we are all going to be the best of friends' sort of smile, behind which he also hid a fear and a loathing I could almost taste. Thrawn had been right, this man would double cross him in a heart beat. He bowed deeply to Thrawn and in return Thrawn acknowledged this with a slight inclination of his head. Ormante then turned his attention to me and he went to take one of my hands but before I could even react, Thrawn moved ever so slightly to stand in front of me and said in a voice that cut the air like a vibro blade.

"We meet well Schayll, son of Ormante. I am..." and the name he spoke was utterly unpronounceable in what ever language it was originally from. "But you may call me Honoured Za'ar." He paused and tugged lightly on the chain that bound me to him making me step forward one step. "This is Anwylydth. She is here because her dancing is a gift I would honour you with for our agreement but as my bondling she is to not be touched by any hand other than mine. This is the only warning I shall give. To lay hands upon her is seen by me as a great insult and discourtesy. I shall kill the offender." Thrawn's voice was as quiet as it was hard.

Ormante stepped backwards away from me and I shivered ever so slightly because I was certain that Thrawn as Honoured Za'ar had meant every single word he had just said. He was so very scary in this disguise that I could no longer think of him as Thrawn and in my mind he became the Honoured Za'ar.

Ormante led us to the table at the center and bade us sit. I waited until the Honoured Za'ar was first seated and then at his command I sat down and curled up like a Jax close to his left side. When Ormante and several of his men were also seated, Ormante clapped his hands. A pale looking woman appeared and served finger food on polishes plates, then she poured tiny glasses of mek'kefa. She glanced timidly at me but I ignored her. Make no connections.

She went to pour me a glass as well but Za'ar made a stop gesture with his hand and I thought she would drop the carafe in his lap she was trembling so much. Only after she had left the room did Ormante raise his glass in toast. I was surprised when Za'ar also drank but reckoned that if Ormante wanted to kill us he was more the type to engineer a hunt, poison would be no sport and that was not his style.

The first round of conversation was polite banter mainly from Ormante boasting about his hunting prowess. He wanted to impress Honoured Za'ar

because he was uncertain about the Bone Trader's own hunting skill. His fear rose about him like steam from a hot bath and it was making me ill.

The Honoured Za'ar looked about the room slowly, taking in every detail and then slowly nodded. "You have achieved many kills in your time." He said slowly. "It is a challenge to slaughter so many creatures in such a short time. Your hunting skills intrigue."

Ormante did not pick up on the irony of that statement and I suspected that his method of hunting, despite the large display of primitive weapons on the walls, mostly consisted of using the highest powered rifle in the galaxy. Instead he nodded and went on to tell the stories of some of the trophies that hung on the wall.

I tuned him out. I had heard hundreds of stories just like it while working at the palace. Hunters, no matter what they hunted, always wanted to talk about the catch of the day, always felt the need to display some sort of trophy. The only exception to that had been Boba Fett. I had never once heard him boast about his work or his conquests.

I let my mind wander and reached out to touch that mysterious power that had been a part of my for as long as I could remember. I slowed my breathing and steadied my thoughts, paying attention to my surroundings with that inner eye I had lived with my whole life. I only came back to myself when the Honoured Za'ar began to ask about the hunting grounds on this planet because the air in the room suddenly charged with a ripple of fear.

Ormante shrugged. "This planet challenges." he said. "The creatures here have adapted to their environment well. I am still mapping their behaviour." He said he was not lying exactly but there was something he was not saying.

The Honoured Za'ar inclined his head ever so slightly and looked at Ormante with a stare that stilled time. "Are you saying I have come here under false words? You assured me you have knowledge about good hunting grounds."

Ormante back pedalled quickly. "Not at all, but the locals talk of ghosts and evil spirits in the forests. It is dangerous here. That is all I meant" and with a nod of his head one of the men who sat at the table produced a data pad which he handed with trembling fingers to the Honoured Za'ar.

There was a thick silence in the room as they waited for the Honoured Za'ar to read the information stored on the datapad. When he was done he slipped the pad into the battered leather satchel he wore slung over his shoulder. In the same daft motion he pulled out a small pouch and tossed it to Ormante.

"Payment as agreed." The Honoured Za'ar said. "You may count it if you wish." He added knowing Ormante would not do this in front of him. Then he turned to me and I looked up into the mask with its well-deep eyeholes to try and find the man I knew was behind it. If Thrawn was there I could not find him, the deep red glowing eyes that stared back at me were cold and unforgiving.

"Now, Anwylydth will dance as agreed. I wish to return to my ship before night fall is complete. It is a time of prayer and consultation to the gods before the hunt." He said slowly getting to his feet. I had no choice but to also stand and wait in my own silence. "I have provided the music which pleases me. I trust you will allow this small courtesy." Za'ar said to Ormante who was only now getting to his feet. The man nodded and accepted the music chip handed to him. Two others removed the large table and I saw that I was truly to be the center piece of the room. So much the better, I thought grimly.

"You will do this to the best of your skills. Our lives may depend upon it." Za'ar said in the language only he and I understood.

The men looked from me to The Honoured Za'ar because the tone of voice he had used was sharp and commanding, even if they had not understood the language they had the idea I was being told off. I nodded submissively and bowed my head. The Honoured Za'ar raised my chin with his fingertips and moved my head to one side so that he could unfasten the chain attached to the collar. I moved slowly and jax like, well aware that all eyes were upon me as I slid the thin silk robe from off my shoulders. I needed to warm up a little before I performed, and so I ignored everyone until I had fully stretched and felt prepared for the task ahead. They all waited, my warm up had seemingly rendered them speechless. Just wait, I thought.

I walked to the center of the room, where the table had once been and stood there waiting for the music to start. The Honoured Za'ar motioned for all to sit and Ormante had dimmed the lights while he had placed the music to play. I had no idea what music Thrawn had chosen and hoped I could dance to it. I closed my eyes and waited. When Ormante and The Honoured Za'ar were seated, next to each other, the music began.

I have no idea what the music was called or who it was by or even where it had originated. What I do know is that Thrawn seemed to have a better grasp on my secret soul than I could ever have given him credit for. The music was intoxicating and strange with rhythms that seemed to reach into my very core and turned me inside out. I connected with it at once. I found the thread which bound it all together and let it wind itself around me, all the while moving slowly.

The first part of the music was languid and sensual. A man's voice sang without words while the drums and the strange wind instruments writhed about the core like snakes. It was exotic and that was how I moved. My hands and arms became serpents and I moved in a small circle with the smallest of motions creating the largest of ripples. I could feel desire and lust rise out of this small group of men like smoke from a fire. As I moved around slowly I could see into the eyes of each man and knew that with this rising energy I had now I could bend them to my will if I so chose to do so. I could feel myself slip into this power until I faced Za'ar. Deep from within his mask, eyes I had known stared back and

grounded me, just enough to bring me back from drowning in what ever dark magic it was that was happening here. I was grateful for that.

When the music changed way for the next piece I could feel the tempo slowly begin to build up and the dance became more intricate and a little more primal. This was the feeling I loved when I danced, a connection to something unseen and all around. It was elemental and full of wonder. I wove stories in the air with my fingertips and spread mystery with the sway of my belly and hips. Once the heavier drums began I knew I had found the place I needed to be and that was that.

I danced for each man, and each man thought I danced solely for him. I found the force that coursed through me and connected to it. It seemed so easy when powered by a music that touched me so deeply it almost hurt. As the rhythm began its agonizingly slow journey to a crescendo I was suddenly aware that The Honoured Za'ar was no longer beside Ormante and had left the room. Now was the moment to maintain and hold the room as I had never in my life done before. The music became wilder, like a storm unleashed and I was swept along with it.

Aware only of the terrible, beautiful tie that bound me I found myself in that place where the dancer becomes locked in the dance. The music is the key, turning and opening new pathways deeper into the dance, deeper into the dancer. I could no longer focus on individual faces. I saw only their lusts and needs, their dreams and wants. I drew these things into my dance and I spat it back out to them making their hunger an ache they would never forget. As the music shifted and changed, the way sands in the desert will, so did the dance. Sometimes light and airy, sometimes heavy and powerful and not one of them took their eyes off me. It was intoxicating. There had been times in my life where I had found this place within and danced its steps but I could not ever recall having done so deliberately to enthrall before. This was new, even for me, and I liked it more than I dared to say.

I do not know how long I danced like this but I was aware when the Honoured Za'ar had returned to the circle and felt the balance of power shift. I turned my focus to him and to him alone for what I instinctively knew was the last piece of music. It was erotic and sensual and curved about me like the silk that wrapped my body.

This was what a dance slave truly did and I understood that while in life, the master held the chain, in the dance the slave held the power. I used every skill I had ever learned to make certain he knew that I now understood this. Through hands and hips, through glance and sway, with every motion I made and every step I placed I told him that here, in this space and time for this moment, I owned him. I pulled all the desire and longing that was in the room to me and I showered him with it. Making him want and yearn for something he could not ever touch. I never once took my eyes off his and just when I felt a flash of anger coupled with

something else far more hungry and primal rise from him, I moved away to focus again on the others. They had not, it seemed to really noticed the very dangerous game I was just playing. The dance ended with a crescendo that left everyone breathless and me falling to the floor in a whirling spiral death drop. I lay there, arched in the back bend for a moment while the last vestiges of power writhed away and the room slowly returned to normal. The silence after the music almost as captivating as the music had been. Only when The Honoured Za'ar made a slow growl did I get to my knees and kowtow before him.

"It is done." He said in the language only we knew.

I nodded and bowed my submission once more.

When he stood up so did everyone else. I remained kneeling with my head bowed because he had not given me permission to stand. There was small talk and some awed praise for the skill of his dancer along with one joking remark about how much it would cost to buy me. The look that Za'ar must have given the man cut short any laughter that might have arisen. Dantassi bone traders it seemed took the bonding to their slaves seriously.

"I will take my leave now. I have much to think on. I trust you are satisfied with the arrangement we have come to this day?" The Honoured Za'ar said.

Ormante nodded and agreed whole heartedly. His cheeks still flushed and his eyes still a little glazed. "It has been a true pleasure, most Honoured Za'ar. I hope that we will meet again, perhaps on the hunt. I should very much like to see your skills with that weapon of yours." He nodded to the culling staff in the Bone Trader's hand.

Za'ar said nothing but merely nodded. He made a gesture that meant get up. I did so in one fluid motion. He moved my head and fastened the chain to the collar once more, letting the rest of it fall to the ground, holding only the hand loop. With an elegant bow, he swept out of the room, the talismans and amulets about his neck tinkled like the wind chimes at Jabba's palace. I began to follow him but just before I could get to the door a hand grabbed me by the arm.

I wanted to react and fight but I was caught in playing this role and could do nothing. I froze with fright and stared the way a creature caught in the lights of a speeder will as one of Ormante's men decided his desire was stronger than the Bone Trader's threat. He backed me quickly into the wall by the doorway and flashes of an earlier moment in my life smashed through my brain. I could smell the stench of unclean teeth and the sour rest of cheap brandy on his breath as he moved his face closer to try and kiss me. My heart raced with a fear that was almost irrational. I moved my head to one side to get as far away from him as possible and closed my eyes.

I neither heard the Bone Trader come back into the room nor did I see him twist the man's head with an easy grace that would have terrified me. But I both felt and heard the short, sharp crack as the man's neck snapped and it made me

sick.

The man's body slid in a graceless huddle to the floor in front of me and I had to fight the urge to throw up. Za'ar lifted my face upward, gentle fingertips under my chin and moved my head from one side to the other, checking for damage and then with an anger that was palpable he strode up to where Ormante was standing slack jawed and whiter than a ghost.

"This is how you honour your guest?" hissed the Bone Trader leaning into Ormante's face. "You wish my wrath?"

Ormante shook his head.

Za'ar drew a deep breath. "I do not forget such slights but as he has paid with his life I shall not mark it against you."

"I am most grateful, Honoured Za'ar, he was a fool anyway." Ormante stumbled.

The Honoured Za'ar stared at Ormante a moment longer than was necessary and then, with me firmly in tow, swept out of the building, across the now dark town square to the landing pad where our ship was. We walked on board and I waited until the door closed.

"Get this thing off me now!" I hissed at him. Panic suddenly swept through me like a sand storm. I felt as though I could not breathe and I wanted the collar off my neck. Wordlessly, efficiently he removed it and I stepped away from him, watching as he shed the bone face mask and removed the small device that had altered his voice. The world seemed to shift slightly and the roles we had taken on slipped away. We stared at each other for a moment and a thousand things that could have been said remained silent. I shook my head at him and went to the 'fresher. I needed to wash the grime off my body and get out of these clothes. I needed to find myself again and judging from the look in Thrawn's eyes so did he.

I woke from a fitful sleep filled with fragmented dreams that vanished as I opened my eyes. It was sometime well after midnight and I knew that trying to go back to sleep was a waste of time. Images of recent events kept flashing through my mind making me restless and edgy. I got up and after washing my face I made my way into the main area only to find Thrawn sitting at the crew table in the galley area. He had turned all but the night lights off and the ship was bathed in a pale red light that matched his eyes.

We were in orbit around Myrkr. I was grateful for that, truth be told the planet gave me the creeps. I was happy to be above it rather than down on the ground. I joined him at the table and wordlessly he pushed one of the two glasses towards me and poured a little brandy in both. I watched him as we sipped the drink in silence. His face had a taut look to it and there were shadows under his

eyes. I wondered when it was that he had last slept.

"How are you feeling, now?" he asked eventually breaking the stillness between us.

"Uneasy. I can't sleep. Bad dreams." I said.

"You need to step back from what happened down there. It was just a role you played, nothing more." He said.

"And killing that man was part of that?" I asked getting to what was at the heart of the matter for me.

"He had been warned, he failed to listen." Thrawn said icily. "Would you have rather I had let him have his way with you?"

I shook my head, suppressing a shiver.

"When a Bone Trader says something will be done, it will be done. I made that clear to them all and still he chose his lust over his life. One less we will have to deal with tomorrow." Thrawn explained.

"You expect Ormante to jump us?"

"I know he will. He wishes to be known as the best hunter in the galaxy, and hunting a Dantassi Bone Trader would go along way to further that goal."

"So you will be wearing the 'guise again tomorrow?" I asked shivering inwardly.

"Yes."

"Well, I am not wearing that dance outfit tomorrow, or ever again for that matter." I told him.

He smiled. "No, it would be highly impractical and tomorrow I will need your other skills at my side. You may wear what you please as long as it is something you can move easily in." He said then added thoughtfully. "You fear the Bone Trader guise, why?"

So I told him about when I had first seen one of their kind and he listened carefully.

"It is very rare to see them beyond the border to the Outer rim. He did you both great honour by choosing your ship. They are very careful about whom they will travel with and have almost a sixth sense for the company they keep, even for something as simple as choosing a transport." He said quietly, thoughtfully.

"You seem to know a lot about them when no one else even thinks they are real."

"I should know about them, they originate from my home world." He said matter of factly.

I waited because I could tell there was a story in there somewhere and he would tell it if I was patient.

"I have told you, I was born common and I bettered myself through my abilities and talents of strategic thinking. I was discovered at an early age and groomed for eventual adoption into one of the Ruling Families in the Ascendancy.

My father, although not well off or high of stature, thought it wise that I should learn the arts of war and how to hunt from an early age. On one such expedition we went with a small group of experienced men up to the surface to hunt Ice-bears, one of the few creatures that somehow manage to survive on the surface, despite the cold. I was separated from the group when a freak storm came up. I should have died, I was only a boy and completely unprepared for the vicious weather topside but the gods or luck or fate or what ever name you would call it was on my side and I was found by a Dantassi hunting party. When I regained consciousness I was in one of their enclaves deep within the Ice caves. They tended my frost bite and brought me back to life. It had been the first time I had ever seen my own people outside the confines of the society I was being raised in. I was fascinated by them. To me they seemed so primitive and strange yet, as I later saw, they were anything but."

"The Dantassi have a long history that dates back to before the ice age. They were a sect of Chiss who had left the main society and the new ways that sprang up after the world of Ice came. Chiss society is quite rigid in some ways and there were those who simply could not, or would not conform to the new way of life. They left and formed their own society, much, I suspect, as the Sand people on your world have. They seem primitive to the untrained eye but learn more about whom they are and you begin to wonder who is the more primitive."

"They chose the ways of the hunter but did not abandon technology easily. They advanced in their own time, all the while choosing to remain hidden and separate from the rest of the Chiss who had gone deep into the core of the planet for warmth and survival. It did not take long for the stories of their strange, nomadic ways to filter through but the government, in its infinite wisdom, decided to leave them be, choosing instead to allow stories and whispers to become legend and myth. In Cheunh, my mother tongue, they are called Mathäd'antass'Iyantha which, roughly translated, means 'Ghosts of flesh and bone'. When they began to go off world the name was shortened to Dantassi."

"They travel mainly in what you would know as the Unknown regions, sometimes alone, sometimes in small groups or clans. The nomadic part of their lives is somehow a part of their beliefs that one must travel through much in order to gain the wisdom to lead. It is a rite of passage for those that wish to earn the title Honoured Elder. As they travelled about the regions of space so did word of their hunting prowess and naturally, naturally, tales sprang up of their cruelty and viciousness. Stories that became exaggerated whispers of their almost magical hunting and tracking talents. I think the Dantassi allowed these tales to grow as it only served their need for secrecy and their reclusive nature further." He drew a deep breath and paused for a moment to sip thoughtfully at the brandy. "Hunters of this kind, by their very nature, are ruthless and they have a strict code to which they adhere vehemently. The environment they come from forces a certain way of

life. They can indeed be vicious and what happened to Ormante's man earlier was an example of how they would have reacted, but they do not usually do so without good reason or provocation."

I looked at him. "You admire them." I said.

He nodded. "Yes, I do. They have a society that somehow, despite all the chaos around them, works as a well run well organized machine. They keep a law and order within their enclaves such as I had never really seen before. I am not eloquent enough to be able to put it into words that would describe it adequately. They function just as well within a group as they do alone. When they hunt, it is extraordinarily well planned out, every detail and every eventuality thought of and they always achieve their goals."

"So where does the name bone trader come from, then?" I asked.

He smiled. "One of the truly amazing things about them is their ability to create stunning works of functional art from the bones of their kills. The mask I wore is over four hundred years old, a true artefact yet it is functional and efficient. On any other world it would be considered a museum piece and used for display only. For the Dantassi, it is a family heirloom to be handed down from generation to generation and used until it no longer existed in any useful form. Once, an anthropologist called Mah'andatw'yr wanted to study their ways and migratory patterns across the ice fields and glaciers. He lived with them for about three years and learned a great deal all of which he wrote about and left to our great Library. As a parting gift from the tribe he was given an exquisite walking staff, carved from the thigh bone of a polar Nere'tz. He donated this to the museum as an artefact to be admired and looked at. Three weeks after the dedication ceremony for this addition to the museum, he was mysteriously killed and the staff removed with such ease and grace from the museum that people spoke of ghosts in the building for years afterwards. Only a handful of people actually know that he was killed by the Dantassi elder who had given him this staff for desecrating its honour. The government from that moment on banned anyone from ever placing Dantassi artefacts on display. They will sometimes trade lesser pieces, I suppose you would call them trinkets and talismans made from finger bones and the like, for goods they need but the pieces that are actually worth something to a collector, you will never see in any collection."

"How did you come by that mask, then?" I asked.

Thrawn was silent for a moment, the look on his face telling me that he was delving deeply into a memory that he had held close to his heart for a very long time. "I was with the small enclave that had found me for three months because, when they first found me I was too ill, too weak, too near death, I suppose, to be moved. Full of ice-fire fever and recovering from the frost bite I was glad to be where it was warm. I had not, up until that point realised what a sheltered easy life I had been born into. It was a time that changed me forever. When I was well

enough I began to move about and learn a bit about their ways. I learned to speak their language which had splintered off from Cheunh but still, it was easy for me to learn. Like you, I have a gift for languages. I asked a lot of questions and tried in my own small way to fit in, however, when it was time for me to return home there was no changing their minds. Family is very important to the Csillian people and the Dantassi are no exception to this rule. I was someone's son, and while I did not want to go back home I knew in this decision I had no choice."

"We set out one morning when the weather was calm as a small hunting party and trekked across the northern ice shield. The journey took fifteen days and I learned more about hunting during that time than I had in my whole life before or since. While I was with them I killed my first Ice bear single handed and unbeknownst to me at that time passed, in their eyes, from boyhood to man. They left me in a place that was very near a military outpost point where I would be found within hours of activating the outpost's signaller. Before they began their return journey the elder who had travelled with us removed his bone mask and gave it to me. He told me that he had lost his only son to a bad hunt several seasons before and had no family left to pass along the mask to. I had earned his respect and he, with the agreement of the rest of the hunting party, accepted me as family. They gave me a name and the mask, along with the heart of the ice bear, was the token for this rite of passage. I still, to this day, see them clearly in my mind as they vanished into the drifting snows. I never found them again although I spent some time looking when I was old enough."

"And the name they gave you was?"

"Nikätza'arth'pavjäska." It means something along the lines of honoured clan-son with the heart of the bear. There is no direct translation but that is the idea of it. Usually the core name would be Zaarthpa but that has a fairly negative meaning on its own so when this name is shortened it is to it Za'ar or Nikätza'a, personally I prefer the former, it suits my nature when I wear the mask."

There was a moment of silence between us then I asked, "They don't really keep slaves do that?"

"No, far from it in fact. Both the Chiss and the Dantassi abhor the idea of slavery, but Ormante and his men do not know this fact."

I nodded slightly, digesting everything he had told me and stared at him for a long, quiet moment. Every time I unravelled one of the little mysteries around him another one seemed to pop up in its place leaving more questions than answers. No wonder he was a huge topic for palace gossip.

He drew a deep thoughtful breath and as though he had read my thoughts he said. "Now, Miss Gabriel, you know something about me that no one else, aside from the Dantassi, knows. I told no one, not even my family what had occurred, I never showed them the mask which had been wrapped in furs and hidden from sight. I explained nothing of the last few months of my life, no matter how hard my

family tried to get me to speak of it. I had gone out a small boy eager to please his father and returned to them changed in a way no one understood. It was something I could not share with anyone, a different world, and a different time." He sighed and shook his head as if to shake off the memory. "You have nothing to fear from the Bone Traders and they should no longer be creatures that haunt your nightmares."

I studied his face carefully. There was still so much about him I did not know yet and for all our seductive dancing around each other, stolen kisses and quiet caresses I had never felt as close to him as I did in this moment. I nodded and he knew I understood.

"Will you be staying up for a while?" he asked changing the subject.

"Yes."

"Then you have the next watch, I need to rest. Wake me up in four hours. We have much to plan." He said getting up. He looked at me with a sudden grin. "Don't drink all the brandy. I need you clear headed. I have the feeling we will need to be very wary of both man and beast when we return to Myrkr's ground."

I made a yeah, yeah motion with my hand and he smiled vanishing into the tiny crew cabin to sleep. I poured another glass of brandy despite his words and moved to sit in the pilot's seat. It was quiet in space and I was grateful. My mind had a lot to think about. I sipped the brandy slowly watched the dance of the stars that surrounded us while the hazy green planet of Myrkr slowly rotated below.

I was glad I had brought my desert work clothes with, loose fitting trousers with pockets everywhere, lace up boots so broken in they were more a part of me feet than my socks were and a light long sleeved fitted shirt. I had a small satchel slung over my shoulder and had tied my hair back in a tight braid which had them been knotted up so that the hair would not pull or catch on anything. Thrawn had wordlessly looked me up and down and nodded then handed me a long dark, hooded cloak with sleeves, made from a material that despite its looks was surprisingly light weight.

"You will need this." Was all he had said.

He had woken exactly four hours after he had gone to sleep and over breakfast he had told me what he thought might happen, all the scenarios and none of them sounded appealing to me. Then we had gone over hand gestures. Dantassi sign language to talk to one another without words. There were not too many and I was a quick study.

The data pad that Ormante had given him contained the co ordinates to a small landing site, one of the few that were close, relatively speaking to where Thrawn hoped the creatures he was looking for could be found. It was more like a

tiny hole carved out of the massive rain forest than a actual landing pad. I took a deep breath as I piloted us in and with some pretty interesting manoeuvring managed to get us down in piece.

It was early. Dawn had only just broken and the air still held that crispness that comes with night. The light was filtered and hazy as the sun began its slow climb to reach above the high canopy of the forest. Down on ground level the air was still, moist and for the moment cool. I breathed in deeply trying to sort out the various scents that hung all around us.

Thrawn consulted a small tool I had never seen before and after a moment's consideration he motioned with his head to follow him. I glanced backwards at the ship and with a deep seated feeling of dread I trudged after him. While I had not voiced it, I had a very bad feeling about all of this in the pit of my stomach. It amazed me how swiftly and how silently he could move. In difference to yesterday, he was not wearing the long almost elegant ceremonial robes that swept about the floor and seemed to shroud him in even more mystery. Now he wore long, soft leather boots which went over some sort of leg wrap that covered the leggings or trousers he was wearing. Over the fitted shirt he wore a tunic which ended just below his knees, made from the same fabric as the cloaks, split at the sides to just below the waist, cinched with a leather belt that also held a wicked looking blade of some sort hidden in a wrapped sheath and goodness knew what else. Over this he wore a satchel and a water canteen criss-crossed over his chest. I had no idea what was tucked inside of the satchel and didn't dare ask. Over all of this he wore a similar hooded cloak with sleeves and the bone mask. Like mine, his hands were gloved and he held the culling staff in his left hand.

We looked a right pair, I thought. Just before we had disembarked he had come at me with a black, greasy, smudge stick and had painted my face with it. In the mirror I could see that the painted on mask resembled a skull somewhat but the additional markings gave it an eerie otherworldliness. With the hood up it would be difficult to actually see my face and, he had said, the darkness beneath my eyes would help from the sun glare should we come across clear patches in the forest. I had nodded sometimes desert travellers will do the same thing. I still thought it looked damned creepy though.

We walked for almost an hour before he raised his hand and we stopped. He stood cocking his head from one side to the other, like an animal on alert, listening. I, too, listened with all my senses. I calmed my breathing down and concentrated on the living energy that surrounded us. I could reach out and feel that secondary world around us. There was something there, lurking at the edge of my abilities. It made me shiver involuntarily. He consulted the small tool again and then with two swift hand motions I knew we were being followed. He changed the direction of our trek through the forest and the path, that had up until now been fairly easy, was filled with shrubs and obstacles. I suddenly realized what he had

seen all along, that path had been cut especially for us and cleverly designed to look old and not well used. Now Thrawn, as Za'ar, had moved off track and we made our way through the dense underbrush. It amazed me how silent he could be and I felt like a thundering Kratt Dragon in his wake, loud and clumsy.

Several times he paused and consulted the small directional tool, changing our pathway each time. After what seemed an eternity to me he finally stopped. With quick gestures I knew that what ever it was had been tracking us was near by. I tried to reach out with my weirding ways but I encountered nothing. It was as if somewhere up ahead there was barrier to my senses. Za'ar looked at me, asking me with his eyes what I could sense. I shook my head. After a moment he made a stay put get down gesture and I crouched down as low as I could in the under brush and watched as he vanished into the greenness as silently as if he had never been there. From where I hid I could see nothing, all around was thick, lush vegetation. The sun had now rises high enough in the sky that its light slowly began to filter through the high canopy in long dancing fingers of light. The temperature was also rising and along with it the humidity. Sweat beaded on my body and dribbled down my back. Crouching became a strain so silently I shifted into the meditation pose I had been taught by Master Kjestyll. I do not know how long I sat like that for but I do know that the world about me became sharper, clearer. I had a much better sense of the boundaries of where the force stopped. There were pockets of nothingness all around me but I was not in one of them. I sensed rather than heard when Za'ar returned. With silent hand signals he told me what I needed to know and we began to move again, at last coming a clearing that had not been made naturally. In the center of the clearing was a small ornate table and upon it a holo transmitter. I glanced at Za'ar and was about to ask what the heck that was but he shook his head and laid a finger on my lips. He took a small ball like object from his satchel and programmed it to do something then he tossed it in the air. A seeker of some sort, it hovered for a moment and then it began to flit and fly hither and to. There was no direct direction in its flight. Silently from our hiding place we watched as the seeker moved closer to the table and the holo transmitter. The erratic pathway hid the seeker's origin and just as well because just as it got within touching distance of the table something shot it out of the sky.

The crack of the gun echoed all around us and the sudden noise coupled with the angry screeching of what ever bird and wild life was near us was suddenly silenced. I held my breath afraid that what ever had shot down the tiny seeker could hear us and shoot at us as well.

Nothing happened except the Holo transmitter suddenly came to life. It was Ormante.

"Greetings most Honoured Za'ar." The holo said. "By now you will have guessed that the hunt is on, except that it is you and your witch that will be our prey. Yes, we knew of her weirding ways just not the extent of them. But, no matter

she will not save you here. The weirding ways of the Force do not always work in one's favour here on Myrkr. I also know you tried to sabotage my headquarters but we found that as well. You are not as clever as you think, it seems." Ormante was gloating. I looked over at Za'ar but he did not move and I could read no reaction from him.

"But enough banter, from one hunter to another, it is time to see just who the better of us is. I look forward to hanging that elegant mask of yours next to my other trophies, as for your witch, she will learn in time to respect me and my men and service us in every manner befitting such a creature."

I shuddered and Za'ar laid a steadying hand on my arm.

"So without further ado, the hunt begins now. I have given you a lead start of course and feel it only fair to tell you that not only do we out man you three to one that there are also traps laid out before and behind you should you try to return to your ship." He was boasting.

"May the better man win." He concluded and with the holo transmitter switched itself off. Za'ar signalled the move now and we left the area as swiftly as we could. The blast from the exploding transmitter would have knocked us flat had we stayed where we were.

This was a mess and I had no idea how we would get out of it. I had never been on any sort of a hunt before, and I had certainly never been hunted. I was scared. Za'ar must have sensed this and gestured for me to come close to him. He laid his masked face against the side of my head and whispered. "Be a spirit, swift and silent, like the wind. Trust your instincts, trust mine." He stroked my face with gloved fingers and calmed my rising panic. "Breathe." He added and I did. When I had found some semblance of calm he let go of my arm and with a quick glance at the direction tool he signalled then we were off. We moved as ghosts.

It was, surprisingly enough, not Za'ar who found the first trap but me. I almost fell into it. At the very last second the skin on the back of my neck prickled and I twisted, cat like, purely out of instinct as the ground beneath my feet began to give way. Za'ar grabbed my flailing arm and with a strength that took me by surprise yanked me back from the edge. I stood, shaking, and looked into the deep pit that had been lined with razor sharp vibro-blades. Za'ar took out the data pad he had brought with him and the directional tool and made some notes and adjustments. I reigned in my fear and breathed deeply to try and find that tenuous thread of the force that was the eyes in the back my head, that sixth sense with which I lived with my whole life. It was there but it was broken and discontinuous. I had never felt a pattern like this in my life before, as though there were dead zones all around us. Despite the oppressive damp heat, I shivered. We were being watched, I could sense that but I also had the distinct impression that the eyes which followed us about were not human.

I stood still as Za'ar, cocking his head from one side to the other listened

for the sounds of the forest. There were none. Everything, including the air was silent as if holding its collected breath waiting for the next knife to slice. The hand gesture meant follow, so I did. Slowly, almost painfully we made our way through the thick underbrush until suddenly Za'ar stopped and gestured to crouch. I strained with all my sense to learn what it was that had spooked him, but I could feel nothing. He took another seeker from his satchel, smaller than the last, programmed it and set it free. It travelled in a very low zigzag path and then there was a small popping sound and a tree branch which had been tied back and taut suddenly swung with all the power of a missile in the direction of the path we would have been on. The branch had been stripped of bark and twigs but laced with hundreds of deadly looking metal spikes. I was certain they had been coated with something poisonous. My own suspicions were confirmed when Za'ar took a leaf from the ground, wiped some of the needles and then wiped the blade of the culling staff with the same leaf. The blade glistened now. He stopped to pick up the small seeker he had let loose, shut it off and slipped it back into his satchel.

Za'ar pointed with two fingers and when I looked at what he was showing me I saw what he had seen, small broken branches, almost too tiny to perceive and a single heel mark in the ground. I shuddered. Ormante was sick in the head and I was betting he was somewhere watching all of this somehow. That very thought made me look up into the high canopy of trees. How could he be tracking us? Was there a heat seeker droid somewhere above us? It had to be a top of the line one to break through all the moisture and the humidity of the forest. Za'ar touched my arm and with two fingers gestured for me to watch his eyes. I nodded and he looked slowly upwards to his left. I did not move but let my eyes follow the line of direction and there, lurking just out of view was a small, well camouflaged tracking droid but of a design I had never seen and it was silent. I wondered what Za'ar was going to do about it and as if he had read my mind he simply shook his head, brought his face close to my ears and whispered. "Wait."

I nodded but I didn't like it. This was taking forever and there were still at least six men out there just waiting to shoot us in the back or worse.

We continued onwards. We had been travelling, if my watching the sun's direction had been correct in slow circles. I wondered why were not just going in a straight line but kept quiet. It was arduous and exhausting. Stops were few and far between and we drank our water conservatively. The sensation of being watched had not lessened with the discovery of the droid but had increased. It was making me even more edgy than I already was. Za'ar had picked up the pace and we travelled close together, almost touching on another. The third trap was clever and would have maybe gotten at least one of us had it not been for my weirding ways. I had felt it rather than seen it. A terrible sensation of danger surged through me for no reason and without thinking I pulled Za'ar's arm sharply downwards and we both flattened to the ground as the large scythe like blade swept in a graceful arc

above us slamming and sticking into the tree across the way. Had we been standing it would have decapitated me and sliced him nearly in half. I just lay there on the ground for a moment. There had been no trigger, I had felt no pull of some sort of line to activate the traps so what were we setting off? From my place in the damp, loamy ground I looked around me and then I spotted it, a state of the art, infrared switch breaker. We would never have seen it even if we had been looking for such a thing. Ormante, for all his traps and talk about being the better hunter, was using the top of the line technology to track and trap. This was not about hunting this was about winning at any cost. He had no soul and no honour. I tugged on Za'ar's sleeve and pointed to the breaker. I felt something in Za'ar shift, an anger perhaps that had not been present before but now managed to surface. I guessed that Ormante was now pissing him off as well.

Za'ar pulled me close to him and spoke in my ear. I nodded that I understood. Za'ar got up slowly and went to the scythe blade. He looked at it carefully and then using the blade as a mirror he located the seeker droid that had been following us. Before I even had a chance to see what he was doing he had pulled something else out of his satchel and it was in the air, flying at the droid before I could even tell what it was. A few seconds later the droid simply fell out of the air it had been hovering in. Za'ar found it in the underbrush and removed what ever it was he had thrown at it from the droid's surface and slipped it back into his satchel. He then did something with the droid and before I could think to guess what the droid was back up in the air hovering, seemingly fully functional.

Silently he went back to the scythe blade and with an ease that frightened me he reattached it to its original position. He motioned for me to come to him and I watched as he reset the trigger breaker. The droid hovered in the air behind us but in difference to before, this time it did not follow us. It was not long after that we both stopped to listen as the scythe knife sliced through the air again and this time the scream that went with it made bile rise in my throat. Za'ar made a 'one' gesture with his forefinger. And I shuddered. I did not need to ask how he had known He had told me that there were at least four men tracking us from behind and at least two somewhere in front of where we wanted to be. I had so wanted to ask why, if he had known this was going to happen in this way, were we here? But I was certain now was neither the time nor the place for that discussion and if we made it out in one piece I was going to have to hurt him.

Now we moved at a swifter pace, the sun high in the sky the heat and the humidity oppressive and hateful. I was angry at being dragged along into this mess. I knew why he wanted me here but it did not justify the risks. The anger I was feeling flooded through me, allowing me to touch that place Lord Vader had goaded me into reaching. It was not a good place to be. I needed to be clear headed not riled up in fury, acting without thinking. I steadied my breathing as much as I could and tried not to let my bitterness and sudden hatred of Ormante and his men

best me. I could not think straight with the anger that clouded my mind. It was one thing to use that energy in a physical fight but it had a whole other feel to it when I was trying to concentrate and use my weirding ways as a guide. I could still not shake that dreadful sensation of being watched.

We moved onwards until Za'ar suddenly stopped and gestured for me to hide under the brush. He motioned for me to stay flat and hidden and then as ghost like as it was possible to be he simply vanished into the forest. I heard the sound of the culling staff and the sick, wet thud of the body hitting the earth. I had not seen what had happened nor felt the closeness of the man tracking behind us and I was grateful I did not have to witness what ever nasty end he had come to. When Za'ar came back he motioned with his fingers 'two'.

I felt rather than heard the next attack and before Za'ar had even time to react I had moved. The reflexes taught and beaten into my body and a brain that now worked on automatic and before the man dressed in clever camouflage had time to reconsider his next move I was on him. One of Ormante's hunters blind without the tracker droid had made a rash move and decided to try and jump us. I had felt his presence as a ripple and wondered for a brief moment if this man was not at least in some way force sensitive. I could sense him but I had not felt the others. It was confusing to me. I was in his face before he had time to react to me and had caught him with a sharp cat's paw blow to the chin. While he stumbled I crouched down and swept my leg around sending him down to the ground. He recovered faster than I thought he would and was up and facing me as I considered my next move.

"Witch." He hissed.

I gave his taunt a slight shrug and we circled about like Jaxes fighting for territory. I just watched his eyes and knew a split second before he made his move that he would do it. He took the kick to the leg better than I had hoped and came at me with a lunge that sent me on my ass. I grinned as I got up. Fighting him seemed somehow sadly easy when compared to the last round I had gone with Lord Vader. His moves were predictable for the most part. His training had been rudimentary in the style of fight I had engaged him in. I figured him more for the blaster type. I was somehow glad to be finally doing something other than just skulk around this dreadful forest in fear. Not for the first time did I silently thank the Emperor for sending me to Master Kjestyll and for Lord Vader's impromptu training sessions. That did not mean Ormante's man did not get in a few good blows of his own but I had experienced worse. The fight would have gone on a while longer had Ormante's man not pulled out a blaster and pointed it at my chest with a malicious grin. I stood stone still, wild eyes feigning fear and drew a deep breath. I kept my eyes on his all the while seeing behind him what he could not and at the very last minute ducked as Za'ar swung with the culling staff and neatly ended the man's life. 'Four' said the fingers Za'ar held up and I could only nod.

The way became somehow easier and I did not think that was coincidence. There had been no more traps and we moved with a steady swift pace. The forest was silent and strange. I knew that the lack of natural sounds, animals, birds was a bad sign but I had no idea why. It felt to me as though the entire forest was holding its breath awaiting the outcome of this hunt. The day was slowly starting its decline and the sun that had been high in the sky was beginning its way back down and slowly being shrouded in the clouds that had begun to gather above us. The air felt heavy and oppressive. It did not surprise me to hear the rumble of thunder far off in the distance. We continued our way in silence. It was the very worst part of the trek so far. The terrible sensation of being watched itched between my shoulder blades and I could not scratch it. Try as I might to reach out with my weirding ways I could not touch the source and that only made me more nervous. That peculiar pattern of dead zones was becoming more and more prominent, as if someone had punched great black holes in where the force should have been. More than once Za'ar stopped to listen and consult his tiny directional tool, we would alter our course slightly and continue on in silence. The Dantassi may well have been among the best hunters and trackers in the galaxy but they were not very comforting or forthcoming with information. I had the distinct impression I was missing some vital piece of the puzzle and it annoyed me to no end.

I suppose I should have seen it coming and perhaps in my own subconscious way I did but at the time it was a mass blur of motion and fear. We reached a small clearing, natural not man made and there, at the edge of this space, Za'ar stopped. He had handed me the culling staff to hold while he removed the blade that was sheathed at his waist. It was as deadly looking as it was beautiful. Carved from some sort of bone, etched with more of the symbolic patterns that marked the mask and my face it truly was a work of art, but the gently curved blade was honed to an edge so sharp it was almost invisible. I wondered what sort of bone, what sort of creature was strong enough to create a weapon such as this from.

Za'ar made several short movements with his hand and I knew that what ever was going to happen to us would happen soon. The forest was too still, too quiet. The darkening sky was ominous and the first flashes of lightening only served to make the whole scene even more dramatic. Ormante had known that late afternoon it would cloud over and the rains would come. We had been drawn to this spot for a reason but for the life of me I could not figure out what it was. I stretched out with my senses. What ever had been stalking us, watching us was close by. It had an alien feel to it. I knew it was not human and I knew it was not friendly. With a quick hand gesture, we were on the move again moving around the perimeter of the clearing.

I did not understand until it was too late what was happening. We had moved forward from the edge into the clearing and suddenly I was blind,

completely and utterly head blind. The sensation unbalanced me and I stumbled. Za'ar reached out to grab my arm and at that moment Ormante attacked. Instinctively I flung myself back from Za'ar's reach and rolled on the ground to come up onto a battle crouch, the culling staff still in my hands. I had not sensed the shot but heard it as it cracked through the air. I looked over to where Za'ar had been and my heart caught in my throat. He was lying on the ground still and silent. I watched in horror as Ormante and the man I recognized as the bar tender came out from their hiding places. They gave me a cursory glance and headed straight to where Za'ar lay, face down on the ground. Ormante kicked Za'ar's body with his boot and grunted. I stifled the sound that threatened to break out of my mouth and the two of them turned to look at me.

"Boss, can I have her?" the bartender asked with a grin that made me shudder. He hefted the vibro-blade combat staff from hand to hand.

Ormante shrugged. "Try not to break her, Reg." and he folded his arms to watch. "She's worth a lot of credits."

I took a deep breath. This was not going to be easy or fun. Unlike the last of Ormante's men that I had tackled this one, Reg, moved with a grace that told me he knew exactly what he was doing and more to the point what I would probably do. I moved slowly backwards until we were in the center of the small clear space, more room to move more chances for me to see what might be lurking beyond. While I was head blind and could not use the force at all, I did have very good peripheral vision.

We circled each other. He was good. He did not once take his eyes off mine. I let him move first I needed to gauge his strength. When he came at me it was not straight forward and without the force to help me I was on the defensive right away. Still, I saw in his eyes a measure of surprise that his attack had not sent me flying and that blow for blow I had matched him. I had never held a culling staff before and I was surprised at its elegance and perfect balance. The vibro staff was heavier more clumsy and I could tell by the way Reg handled it, that it was also a little bit top heavy. He swung at me hard and I dodged backwards, letting the force of the carry through unbalance him, swept the culling staff around and down to knock him off his feet but he jumped it at the last minute and we were back to circling around one another and staring into each other's eyes. All the training I had done, all the rounds I had gone with Jyrki, Master Kjestyll and Lord Vader had not prepared me for combat where my life was truly on the line and I was scared. This man who faced me was out for blood and if the weapon did not kill me what they would do to me afterwards would.

I drew a deep breath and steadied my nerves. If I could survive Lord Vader's bad temper I could survive this. I pulled everything I had learned into my center and shifted my weight. I feigned a movement to the left and then swung hard to the right, going from a high, riding bantha stance down into a deep dance

lunge. I was pretty sure they didn't teach this in any academy and it took Reg by surprise. The blow caught him mid thigh and he went down. I watched his face and saw him blanch with pain and then bite it back. Tough guy. This dead zone had started when I had stepped into the clearing with Za'ar and so slowly I began to shift my weight and edge back out towards the peripheral. It was as though someone had turned a light on and suddenly the world became bright and full. I reached out with all that I could, touched that hidden world all the while defending myself against the onslaught of attacks that came from Reg. We parried and ducked, attacked and retreated. It was dance full of fury and hate made all the more difficult by the fact that we were not longer clear from brush and bush. I used everything I had ever been taught including my connection with the force and fought him back as hard as I could. Twice he had managed to cut me with the vibro-blade on the staff he wielded and I was bleeding but I gave as good as I got and he too was marked, his clothes stained red with his blood. It was darker now and the lightening drew closer. The chaos of thunder and the rising wind overshadowed our own voices and the sounds of the combat we were engaged in. I could no longer hear Ormante shouting words of encouragement or goad his man into more action.

I had no warning, perhaps, because I was already stretching my abilities to the maximum while trying to stay one step ahead of Ormante's man. While in the middle of a swing that might very well have been my undoing something shot out of the underbrush and savagely attacked him. Something large and vicious looking, with a whip like tail that it used in just such a manner, snarled behind Reg and clamped onto the arm that held the vibro-blade staff. The crunch of bones was sickening and I was, for a moment, stunned watching the sheer power and agility of the animal. Reg screamed as the grey beast that looked something between a sand panther and a katarn, among other things, tore him to shreds. It was over in a matter of moments and then the thing turned its eyes to me.

My blood ran suddenly cold. It knew. Somehow it was aware of me and my weirding power. Slowly it turned away from the corpse of Ormante's man and snarled. The deep throated sound made the hairs on the back of my neck prickle and I knew without question this was what I had been sensing all along, this creature was what had been stalking us, hunting us, not only Ormante's men. I began to back away slowly. I did not take my eyes off it and knew there was, without a doubt, no way I could avoid the battle that was coming. Already tired from the long day and the fight with Reg I also knew that I would probably die here. Fighting a man who was not even force sensitive was one thing, facing off against this creature that had tracked us efficiently and easily through my force abilities was another. What ever this thing was, it hated. I knew I had reached the clearing because once again there was a moment of complete disorientation as I descended once more into head blindness.

The creature stalked me but it also stopped for a moment when it entered the clearing and I knew what ever it was that affected me and my force abilities also affected it and suddenly the puzzle fell together. I did not have time to contemplate the revelation as the animal hurled itself at me. This time I did not think about next moves and what my foe would be doing, I simply fought. Its tail caught me on the arms but the long sleeved coat that Za'ar had given me protected me from what ever poison was in it. Judging by how quickly welts and a red rash had sprung up on Reg's body where ever he had been slashed by the tail, I was certain that was this animal's main defence. The animal leaped at me again and managed to rake me with its fore claws. While it was leaping a second time, I went low on one knee and swung high with the culling staff, catching its under belly with a full sweep. The creature screamed mid air and fell to the ground writhing in pain. It lay on the ground panting and snarling, blood pouring from the wound in its gut. I felt such a terrible sadness well up in my heart and I knew I could not leave it this way. With a deep ragged breath I raised the culling staff high and brought it down upon the creature's neck. The blade was sharp and true and the blow killed it instantly. I stood and stared at the carnage. I leaned heavily against the staff and caught my breath, too tired to jump when I heard the sounds of someone applauding. I turned around slowly to see Ormante standing behind me holding a blaster in one hand. I could not compete against a blaster and I was too tired, too sad to care any more. He had killed Za'ar and now he would kill me. I just stared at him.

"Well done, witch, well done." Ormante said. "Those creatures are damned hard to kill, lucky he was travelling alone. They usually run in pairs or packs." He spoke in a calm voice of a man who knew he had won, all the while walking towards me slowly with his blaster trained on my heart. As if it could not get any worse, the sky suddenly opened up and the rain poured down upon us. I raised my face to it and hoped that if he was going to shoot me he would get it over with fast.

In the center of this dead zone I neither felt nor heard the second creature but in the blink of an eye it was on me. From behind me it had leaped and pounced on my back. The blow sent me sprawling onto the ground. The culling staff flew out of my hands. I struggled against the weight of the creature and rolled over unbalancing it enough that I could at least get to my knees. It had righted itself and turned to face me so swiftly I had no time to shield part of my face before the tail whipped around and caught me on the left side of my jaw. The pain was agonizing and I could feel a certain numbness begin to creep its way along my face. Welts rose up on my skin. I shook my head to try and fight off the dizziness and unsteadily got to my feet. The wound on my leg was still bleeding profusely and I was beyond tired. All the while Ormante watched from his place of relative safety with a lazy smile and a certain disinterest. He had lowered the blaster and folded his arms together as though watching me die at the hands of what ever creature

this was, was far more entertaining than anything else he could have imagined.

Suddenly, I was furious and in some sort of stupid move I flew at Ormante at the same time the creature flew at me. In a strange threesome we moved and tumbled as one. The animal trapped between two humans was snarling and wild. There was a dreadful struggle until the noise and the fight were broken by the sound of pistol fire. The animal arched and then fell heavily on top of me. I struggled to get it off me and tried to get up. As I managed to get to my knees Ormante grabbed me and wrapped his arm around my throat dragging me to a standing position. I fought against the grip he had on me but he was, despite his fat appearance, stronger than I was. I felt the muzzle of the blaster against the temple of my head but I didn't understand what it was at first. I was so disorientated. I looked at the dead animal that lay at our feet and then looked at the direction the shot had come from. My eyes locked on Za'ar's and suddenly filled with tears.

"Do not move or I will kill her." Ormante said shoving the blaster's muzzle even tighter against my temple.

Za'ar did not move and the pistol he had trained on Ormante did not waver. "Stay as still as you can." He said to me in words I understood but knew I shouldn't. There was no time to blink. The pistol fired, the blast shot past by my head and Ormante fell backwards. He had not known what had hit him.

I sank to my knees in the now sodden ground. Za'ar made certain that Ormante was dead and then knelt at my side. All I could do was stare at him. I had been so certain that he had been killed that even now with his hands on my arms and his voice asking me if I was alright I could not be sure this was real. I could not sense anything from anywhere I was head blind and in excruciating pain. Everything moved in slow motion.

"How did...?" I began when I finally found my voice but he placed a gloved finger to my lips, always his way of silencing my questions.

I watched him inspect the various wounds that bled and hurt, paying special attention to the welts on my face where that creature had swiped me with its tail and the long, deep gash across my thigh. He did what he could with bandages he had pulled out of his satchel. The rain that had poured down on us had now become a heavy drizzle that was some how soothing.

I stared as he went to where the first creature lay on the ground, the one I had fought and killed. He sliced off part of its tail, wrapped it in cloth and tucked it away in his satchel. Then he opened up the creature's chest and cut out its heart. I watched with a cold detachment that scared me. He came back and knelt before me. He held the creature's heart in one hand and with the other he drove his forefinger deep in to the core of the heart and began to paint my face with the blood. I instinctively pulled back from him but he hissed in an oddly serpentine manner and shook his head giving me a second to calm down. Three strokes upon my forehead and one straight line from the dent above my lips to the hollow at my

throat. He laid the heart before me on the ground and in a language I did not understand he began to speak. The words he spoke were full of ceremony and meaning. He took from around his neck one of the strange amulets he had been wearing, one had been carved from some porous bone and was shaped like a human skull. As he placed the amulet around my neck he whispered, "A te'ka Akiana'myshk'apavjäska."

I did not understand the words but that they were somehow important was not lost on me. I licked at the rain that dripped on my lips without thinking and in doing so tasted the blood he had laid there. He smiled when he saw that and then stood up. He offered me his hand and pulled me to my feet. The wound on my thigh was now throbbing. I watched as he pulled back his hood and removed the bone mask, shedding the persona of Za'ar and becoming Thrawn once again. It astounded me how he could so easily make this transition.

"We have what we came for." He said speaking basic. "We should head back to the ship. It is not far from here." He picked up the culling staff from where it lay and cleaned the blade.

"What do you mean 'we have what we came for'?" I asked when I finally found my voice.

He pointed to the creature that lay near by. "They hunt through the force, do they not?"

I nodded. "It was me they were stalking and I think Ormante knew that, I think he used it but how did you know?"

"I saw it as it went for you." He said. "I was watching you all along."

I glared at him, "You watched that whole fight and did nothing?"

He gave me a slight and cold smile. "You seemed to be doing just fine on your own."

"I thought you were dead." I said my voice quavering slightly. Emotions I did not understand catching in my throat.

"I am not so easy to kill, but I needed everyone to think that was so, even you, especially you." He said. He went over to a spot near the edge of the clearing and there I saw the boots of another man. Za'ar picked up his bone knife and wiped it clean of the blood which had coloured the pale white blade crimson.

"Six men plus Ormante, but this one would have shot you had I not taken care of him." He said.

"I saw you on the ground. I heard the shot."

He smiled. "And thought exactly what I wished everyone to think. A dead man is no threat and Ormante's arrogance allowed him to believe he could actually best me. His man's shot went wide, typical for this type of terrain. A standard mistake for men who hunt using only the best technology has to offer and do not rely on their instincts and training." Thrawn paused. "Ormante believed what he read on your face. That left me free and clear to deal with their sniper. You were

not in any real danger.”

I nodded but the anger I felt did not die so easily. “Well,” I said after a moment. “You are wrong about what we came here for.”

He gave me a look that said ‘explain now.’

I looked upwards to the trees we were almost standing under. “There are two creatures at work here.” I said. “Those things,” and I pointed to the dead animals on the ground. “And these ones.” And I pointed to the slender furry creatures that clung to the branches of the trees above. He looked to where I pointed but I could tell he didn’t understand and how could he have. He did not sense the force and so he had no concept of what I had felt.

“What ever those things that attacked me are, they use the force to hunt with. They are as aware of it as I am, as anyone who is sensitive to it is. They are aware and they hate.” I told him my observations. “These things in the trees have the opposite effect. What ever they are they have the ability to shove back the force, being near them is like being in a dead zone. Here, right now I am as head blind as you are. I sense nothing. That is why I could not sense the men behind us, they were travelling under the shelter of these strange dead zones, although I don’t believe they knew that either. All along I knew someone or something was watching us, I just didn’t know what it was. My guess is you are looking at this planet’s version of us today. Myrkr’s very own hunter and hunted.”

Thrawn stared at me for a moment. “Well, Miss Gabriel.” He said quietly. “You are full of surprises and you certainly do have your uses.”

“Can we go now?” I asked after a long silence.

He nodded and led the way back to the ship. The direct route he took brought us there much faster than I could have hoped for. We ran into no more traps and I refrained from using any of my force powers for fear of stirring up more unwanted attention. It was a painful and difficult enough walk back with the wounds I had been dealt, I didn’t feel like collecting any more.

Without changing clothes, I got the ship into the air but before I could set an orbital course Thrawn told me to fly over Hyllyard. As we did so, I watched as the cantina where Ormante had lived and kept all his precious trophies suddenly exploded. I looked at Thrawn.

“I thought he said he had found your sabotage.”

Thrawn smiled. “He found what he was supposed to find.”

I shook my head and set a course away from the planet, running the autopilot on. “You are really, really scary sometimes, you know that?” I said as I got out of the pilot’s seat.

He gave me a very feral smile.

“Do I have permission to get changed and wash this gunk off my face?” I asked him.

He nodded. “But you should be aware, Miss Gabriel, that gunk, as you so

eloquently put it, has a meaning that will stay with you for as long as you live.”

I paused to look at him. “What did you say to me down there, when you were painting me with blood?”

“That was the first time you have ever hunted much less kill a living creature in such a manner.” He stated. It was not a question it was a simple fact. It was true but how he had known this was beyond me all together. “You fought with great courage. I watched how you took the life of the animal you wounded to spare it further pain. That marks you far above people such as Ormante.” He spat the name out with such utter contempt that it made me shudder. He got out of the co pilot chair and moved to stand in front of me. His fingertips traced the remnants of the bloody markings he had made earlier on my face.

“I honour you this day with the blood of a fierce heart, for you have fought valiantly and well. You have proved your worth to kin and clan and you are no longer a child but a hunter in your own right. I name you Akiana’myshk’apavjäska.” He said softly and then he kissed me gently on the lips. I stared up into those strange red eyes I could so rarely read and tears welled up in mine. I could no more stop my tears from tumbling down my cheeks than I could stop a herd of stampeding banthas. He stroked them away with his thumbs.

“What does it mean?” I asked when I could find my voice.

He gave me one of those secretive smiles and shook his head. “Not for you to know yet.” He said. He caressed my face with gentle fingers and stopped before he touched where the tail from the force hunter had slashed me. He regarded it carefully and then stepped away from me, the tenderness vanishing as suddenly as it had come.

“Go wash. I will tend to your wounds when you are done.” He said coolly and I wondered what had brought about the sudden change of mood. I stared at him for a moment, reminded that he was not human, that he was more different than anyone I had ever met. An alien from very distant planet with ways I could never hope to understand. I sighed and with a shrug left to find comfort in the ‘fresher.

I was angry, a slow gut burning anger that simmered and burned in my gut. I had showered and changed into a cropped sleeveless top and a long wrapped skirt so that he would be able to dress the various hurts on my back easily enough and I could hike the skirt up so that he could deal with the gash on my thigh which was still seeping and bleeding. I had cleaned it as best I could and gritted my teeth in doing so because it had hurt like sandfire. I had wrapped a towel around it because I didn’t want blood on my skirt. The welts on my jaw had all but vanished but where the creature had slashed me ached dully and although most of the

feeling had come back and I almost wished it hadn't. As I waited for Thrawn, while he had quickly washed up and changed into clean clothes, my anger festered. The little common area of the ship was quiet and only the sound of the ship's engines broke through. I had pulled out the medical kit and sat at the table waiting, my leg supported by another chair.

I sat in silence while Thrawn took care of my wounds. The disinfectant had stung and the synthflesh he used to seal the large deep gash in my thigh itched. He was firm and gentle as he methodically dealt with my wounds, taking extra care of my leg. Because the wound was deep and long, he had given me a bacta shot which had not improved my temper any. That I was in pain had not escaped his notice but he said nothing about it perhaps because I had not made a sound. I had gritted my teeth and gripped the arms of the chair so tightly that my knuckles were white. I was not going to break down and cry or make a fuss in front of him so I let my anger flow about me and that helped dull the edge of the hurts. When he was done taking care of the various gashes and cuts on my body he said.

"You might have to spend time in the bacta tank when we return to the *Vengeance*."

I took a deep steadying breath but said nothing. The air between us sparked and crackled Vader style. He regarded me for a moment with a hard stare which I returned in full. I hated the idea of being submerged in bacta and had no intention of letting that happen. I would rather have scars than be half drowned in that stuff.

"The first hyperspace jump will take six hours." He told me flatly as he finished up.

"Fine." I replied tersely.

He gave me another look, paused as if to say something but changed his mind instead he cleaned up the bloody bandages and mess from putting me back together again. Once that was done he calmly and silently made tea. All the while I sat and watched, never taking my eyes off him, wanting to scream with the anger inside and not knowing how to let it go or even why it was there in the first place.

"So what about what we discovered down there?" I asked. "What happens now?"

"Nothing happens now. We leave it alone." He said coolly, pouring two cups of tea.

"We leave it alone?" I said slowly. He handed me one of the cups and leaned back against the counter, watching me carefully.

"For the time being, it would be best if Myrkr were left half forgotten as it has been in the past." He said.

"I don't think I will be able to forget that place so quickly." I said quietly. "I will wear the reminders for my entire life. The next time you need a force sensitive slave dancer to trot along with you on one of these little outings you can find

someone else. I would rather spend the day sparring with Lord Vader in one of his bad moods." I could not keep the bite out of my voice.

Thrawn regarded me for a moment and spoke with a quietness which made my skin prickle. "Have a care..." he began and suddenly the anger, the bewildered sensation of loss and the physical pain I was feeling all crashed together and became a white noise. Without thinking about it I flung my cup, tea and all at him as hard as I could. He had anticipated this and he moved ever so slightly to one side, the cup and the tea flew past him hitting the wall behind. This did nothing to satisfy my anger at him.

"You have a care." I hissed between clenched teeth, getting to my feet. "You, who are supposed to be this great military genius, you drag me out here on this bizarre mission of yours and for what?" I asked. "In the last five days I have been poisoned, I have died and been brought back to life. I have been paraded as a slave-girl and made to dance half naked for men who would just as soon rape me as watch my performance. Been hunted by the same men who though it might be fun to tear me to pieces, attacked by vicious creatures I don't even have a name for and had a blaster shoved in my head by some deranged man who thought it might be fun to hunt a Bone Trader instead of his usual fare and you tell me to have a care? What were you thinking? I am not some highly trained assassin or a Dantassi Hunter and I am certainly not one of your elite storm trooper soldiers. Yet, you dragged me out on this mission as though I were all of the above and you put my life at risk without so much as a by your leave!" I went to him, standing so that there was no space between us and I poked him hard in the chest. "Have – a – care?" I said again, punctuating each word with a jab from my finger. "You tell me why I should have a care, Captain, because I really need to know what we gained from this little jaunt of yours that was so worth the price I paid."

He caught my hand in his and held it tightly, almost painfully, preventing further jabs on his chest. He never once took his eyes off mine as he spoke.

"Information." He said ever so softly. "The most important reason of all, information."

"Information?" I spat.

He nodded, letting go of my hand. "We went there to discover if the myths were true and they are. I needed to know in order to prepare." He said.

I narrowed my eyes and glared at him. "Prepare for what?"

"There are things beyond the borders of the known regions of space that would turn your blood to ice if you knew of their existence." He said slowly. "There are beings, creatures within the confines of known space that would make you feel the same if you were to know their true nature." He paused, weighing his words with care. "I have seen what Jedi can do with their terrible powers first hand, and I wish to be prepared should I come up against such creatures in the future. Information such as we now have may save many lives. You, my dear, with your

fledgling gifts and small weirding ways have no idea of the unspeakable evil a Jedi can wreck should he or she choose to do so. So put your claws away. I would never knowingly endanger your life.”

There was such awful truth in what he said that for a moment my blood did run cold. I wanted to stay angry at him but somehow that was hard to maintain in the face of his utter calm.

“But you did endanger my life, down there on that planet. You were not completely prepared for what Ormante had planned despite all your strategy and theories.” I said quietly.

There was a moment’s hesitation. “No.” he conceded at length. “No, I was not.”

“And if Ormante had shot me?” I asked.

Thrawn gave me a nasty smile. “That he would not have done. You are worth far more alive and kicking than dead.” He said coolly. “Having been given a taste of your... talents I can tell you, that a dancer with your gifts would fetch him much on the slave market.”

“You took an awful risk.” I said not wanting to even think about what he had just said, not wanting to start a discussion on that little stunt I had pulled in the cantina. I had hoped he had forgotten that, guess not.

“I am an excellent marksman. You were in no real danger from Ormante.” He shrugged ever so slightly. “The creatures that attacked you were, however, somewhat unexpected.”

The rest of my anger suddenly drained away leaving only the aftershock of fear. I could feel the shakes come and could do nothing against them, even my teeth chattered. With a care that was surprising he caught me before my legs buckled from under me led me to a chair and sat me down, made another cup of tea loaded with honey. He handed it to me and said. “You are in shock. Drink it this time.” Then he cleaned up the mess I had made throwing my last cup of tea at him. Everything on the ship was made from unbreakable material so it had not shattered with the satisfying crash I had hoped for. He leaned against the small galley counter with arms folded over his chest. He drew a deep breath and after a moment he said.

“I do not often repeat myself but for you I will. I would not ever knowingly place you in life threatening danger. You were right, however, that I did not foresee everything that could happen. But, Miss Gabriel, mark my words well, I did not underestimate you.”

There was a compliment in there somewhere but I ignored it. We stared at each other for what seemed like forever.

“You are so arrogant.” I said quietly.

“I am good at what I do.” He replied evenly.

With a sigh, I sat with my head in my hands, my body trembling and in

pain. The wound on my thigh throbbed mercilessly and the place on my back where the second beast had raked me with its fore claws ached. I felt oddly empty as if some part of me inside had been gutted clean and there was nothing left to fill in the black hole. I watched as Thrawn rooted about in the onboard med kit and dug out something I assumed was for my pain. I shook my head.

“No.” I said. “I don’t want that, it will make me stupid. This pain is the only thing I can feel right now and I need it.”

He nodded. “Very well, but you must rest.”

“I can rest out here.” I said stubbornly.

He watched me carefully for a moment but said nothing.

I got up and went to sit in the Pilot’s chair. I knew that I should go and lie down but I didn’t want to be alone, I didn’t want to sleep. I was certain that sleep would bring nightmares and the thought of those nightmares scared me even more than what had happened on the planet. I cradled the cup of tea in my hands and stared out of the cockpit window. Hyperspace distorted everything and it mirrored how I felt. Thrawn busied himself with something in the common area, mid ship. It was enough that I could hear him moving about and as angry as I had been at him, I was grateful for his presence. I finished my tea and sat with my legs up against the dash of the cockpit. I suppose that after a while I dozed but my sleep was fitful and broken. I did dream but when I woke up, twice, with a start, I could not recall anything. At some point he had laid one of the ship’s blankets over me and whispered for me to sleep. “I am here and you are safe.” He had said.

I woke up next when the nav computer signalled we were coming out of hyperspace. I guess he had gone to lie down or meditate or something because I was alone in the cockpit.

We had come out of Hyperspace in the Mid Rim, near but not on the Corellian Way. I took the ship off autopilot and set course for the next hyperspace jump manually. The sub light trip to the next hyper-point would take us near Mimban, this was a fairly quiet region and I liked the calm, didn’t see the need for the auto pilot to be on all the time. I studied the star chart I had called up, just out of idle curiosity. It always amazed me how many worlds there were out there and how easy it was to get to them with Hyperdrive. I had often wondered what it had been like before hyperdrive.

I looked for Tatooine and found it, stuck out in the Outer Rim and felt a sudden pang of homesickness. Then I looked for Csilla and found it after some searching, all the way across the galaxy almost exactly opposite Tatooine in the region labelled Unknown Space. I wondered how long it would take this little ship to get all the way out there and what was beyond those borders. I was a little surprised to find it on the map at all and guessed the star Charts in the *Ahnkeli* ‘*Su’udelma*’s data banks were very up to date. There were some advantages to flying for the Empire.

I had spent a little time out in this region of space doing runs with my father and had always found it incredibly dull. Not much to see and little of interest going on. So it was quite a surprise when suddenly someone fired at us and the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* came under attack. The ship rocked a second time as second blast hit us on the starboard side.

"Buggery sandrats!" I hissed strapping myself into the seat and getting the tactical computer online, reading one ship off our starboard aft. Our shields were holding as we were fired upon again. I spun port side and manoeuvred the ship to avoid yet another volley of fire. We were taking damage and that was surprising considering how jumped up the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* was. The ship that was attacking us had a lot more fire power than she was supposed to. I scanned it and read only one life sign, human. The ship read as a normal YV-666 Corellian freighter but the name she was flying under made me grit my teeth. I knew that she would be able to out gun us because I had helped install those guns on her. I jammed the headset on and opened the frequency. "Doxy Jane, Doxy Jane this is the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* requesting you stand down weapons fire, repeat stand down weapons fire, over." I said.

"*Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*, this is the *Doxy Jane*. You have entered restricted space. You will lower your shields and prepare to be boarded."

"Doxy Jane, say again, restricted space? On whose authority, over?"

"*Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*, you have entered space controlled by the Razer Consortium. All vessels passing through this territory are required to pay a travel tariff of forty percent of what ever cargo you are hauling. Lower your shields and prepare to be boarded. over."

Razer Consortium? I had never ever heard of that and from my time on Tatooine I thought I had pretty much heard of all the major and fairly minor pirate outfits that were around. I brought up the star chart again just to be sure. Bloody pirates.

"Doxy Jane, I see no such restrictions on my current star chart, over."

The ship rocked again as the *Doxy Jane* fired another volley at us. Something started beeping madly on the main consol, our starboard thruster had taken a hit and I saw that another good shot like that would probably take our starboard shield generator out.

I was so caught up in trying to figure out how to solve this problem that I did not hear Thrawn enter the cockpit. I just about jumped out of my skin when I turned around and saw Thrawn leaning over my shoulder. His face so close to mine I could feel the warmth of his skin. He was about to ask what was going on but I put my finger to his lips and shushed him, worked both ways that trick. I had an open comm and I didn't want the pilot of the *Doxy Jane* to know I had company just yet.

'Pirates' I mouthed. Thrawn nodded and backed off a bit.

"*Doxy Jane*, I am carrying nothing of value. I am transporting one passenger. I repeat, we have nothing of value onboard. Stand down weapons fire, over." I said all the while Thrawn watched me. I had been through stuff like this before, especially when flying runs for Jabba the Hutt.

"*Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*, perhaps you should get a better star map .You will prepare for boarding inspection and tariff payment."

"*Doxy Jane*, who am I speaking to? I will not allow you onboard until I at least know who you are, over" I said.

"*Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*, this is Captain Raz Drillon, Stand down shields and weapons and prepare to be boarded."

I cut the comm for a moment and turned to Thrawn. "How long does it take you to get dressed in that Bone Trader disguise of yours?"

"Few moments." He said. "What is going on?"

"He's a pirate. I read only the one life form on the ship, but he's faster, his shields are stronger and he out guns us. He's already done some damage to the starboard thruster. He wants money, or cargo. He's going to get a lot more than he bargained for." I said. Thrawn just looked at me with one eye brow arched. I sighed. "Captain, I don't have time to explain. From the first moment we met you have been telling me to trust you, now I am asking you. Trust me on this. I know this guy, and I sure know this ship. I don't know where he came from or what he is doing out here but I can handle this. Can you go and change please?"

He hesitated for a fraction of a second then nodded. "Very well, Miss Gabriel."

"Captain, keep an open comm. And, "I said, "be prepared for the unexpected, just in case I am wrong."

He grinned. "Now you have piqued my curiosity." He said as he vanished back aft.

I slowed the ship down a bit and checked over everything once again. Then drew a deep breath hoping I was right about this because if I wasn't it could be ugly.

"*Doxy Jane*, this is *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*. I will agree to allow one person on board to comply with your, ah..., inspection regulations however if I read anything so much as a mouse bot on the scanner I will blow the dock are we clear on this?"

Raz Drillon laughed into the comm. It turned into a series of hacking coughs. "*Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*, you've got guts girl, I will give you that. Prepare for port side dock."

I shut the comm off and prepped for the ship to ship docking procedure. I grabbed a long sleeved shirt off the back of the chair and pulled it on. I did not want to give this guy any more of a show than necessary. I punched in the protocols and watched as we started the delicate ballet of in space docking. While that was going on I pulled up the schematic on the *Doxy Jane*, using some tricks Jyrki had

taught me and I tapped into her computer via a back door. I was very familiar with not only this ship but her captain as well and now that familiarity would come in useful. Payback is a bitch, I thought nastily. I clicked the personal comm tool twice and got a double click back as an answer. Thrawn was listening in.

The docking procedure didn't take long and I was at the airlock to greet Raz when he and he alone stepped onboard. I wondered how long it would take him to figure out who I was. I was pretty sure he would not really remember me but I had not forgotten him.

Raz Drillon had worked as a pilot with my father at our docking bay. Even as a kid I had not liked him much. Instinct and observation had made me wary of this man who laughed too loud and spat on the ground every chance he got. He was bullish, rude and mean. When I started to blossom from awkward kid into a teenaged girl, Raz's attention suddenly turned to me. His long leering glances at my changing body did not go unnoticed by me and I began to avoid him like the plague. It was around this time that he bought the *Doxy Jane* from one of the junk dealers near by and used our facility to fix it up. Jyrki had just started working for us and since I spent almost all my free time with him, I also spent a lot of time working on the *Doxy Jane* as well, because while Raz was an okay pilot he was a terrible mechanic and didn't have much of a clue about how the ship worked. Jyrki had done all the major reworking including a lot of the computer installations showing me everything every single step of the way. I probably knew more about the *Doxy Jane* than Raz did. Jyrki had made certain there were back doors into all the systems, not because he wanted to do anything illegal per say, but because he liked to have options. He had used Raz's ship as a teaching tool for me. It had been quite an education.

I sighed and watched as the airlock door opened. There was that little wuff of air exchange that always happened because no matter how good you are the one to one mix is never perfect between ships and through the small airlock stepped the man who had tried very hard to rape me when I was younger.

That memory flooded back as Raz and the scent of him came through the doorway. I suppose that after watching me for so long he decided he would simply take by force what he couldn't have freely. One evening after most of the pit crew and staff had gone home he had come back from the Cantina with a couple of his buddies to find me still working on one of the ships in dock. I didn't like being alone with him at the best of times. I had sensed his intent right from the word go and that made me all the more scared. I had tried to play it cool and had gotten up from the ground, out from under the ship I was working on and tried to walk away from him and his friends.

I didn't remember who of them it was that grabbed me by the arms and backed me up to the nearest wall, but I remembered clearly what Raz did and the memory of it still made me shudder in horror. Three large men against one small

teenaged girl, it wasn't fair and even if one of them had not clamped his big sweaty hand over my mouth I had been too paralyzed with fear to scream anyway.

I had never been touched like that before, and I had never been undressed by or in front of strangers either. I absolutely dreaded to think about what would have occurred had Jyrki not come back at that moment because he had forgotten something. And while most of what happened was still somehow, mercifully blurred I could still see Jyrki's face as he took in the situation. I had been backed up against a wall held by a man twice my size while two others grabbed, groped and tore at me and my clothes. For a split second our eyes had locked and then Jyrki had gone into action. I had never seen anyone move so fast, and I suspect neither had Raz or his two friends. It was over in a matter of moments. Jyrki knelt down by Raz and whispered something in his ear. I never knew what Jyrki had said but despite being beaten half to death Raz cleared out of the docking bay as fast as he possibly could, leaving his two friends to be picked up by the local police.

I was huddled on the ground too scared to even be hysterical. Once Jyrki had established that I was okay, just very shaken up and numb. He wrapped me in his coat and had wanted to take me home. I had started to cry then, too ashamed to go home, scared my father would think that this had somehow been my fault. So not knowing what else to do he had taken me to his home nearby and fed me a good dose of Corellian brandy and given me clean clothes to wear. After I had calmed down and he had gotten the whole story out of me, was satisfied that Raz had not managed to fulfill his intent and that I was not hurt just badly shaken up, he took me home. I had made him promise not to say a word to anyone about it. Jyrki had not been happy about that and had tried to tell me that none of this was my fault, that I had done nothing to encourage such an outrage. But no matter what he said, I still felt tainted. It was a few days after that little episode that we had started our training sessions but until this moment I had never put these two things together.

"Welcome aboard the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*, Captain Drillon." I said coldly as he stepped through the hatchway.

He sized me up and down and there was a flicker recognition in his eyes but he still had not figured it out yet.

"Nice ship, maybe I'll just take her as payment." He said. "Name's kinda long though, isn't it?"

I just shrugged. I had not named her and I didn't even know what the name meant.

"You going to show me around, Captain...?" he asked searching for my name.

I gave him a look. "Not Captain, just a pilot doing her job." I said. "I told you, I have a passenger and he will not be very happy when I have to explain why he will be arriving at his destination late."

Raz looked at me with a puzzled expression and then recognition dawned

on him. "I know you." He said. "Ain't you Kitga'ar Gabriel's little girl. My, my, my, you all grown up." He looked around the ship. "You all alone then or is Jyrki still playing the love sick, watchdog boyfriend?" He took a step towards me but I stayed my ground. The docking bay entrance was not that large and I didn't want him inside the cargo bay or any other part of the ship.

"What is all this crap about tariffs then, Raz, you playing at pirate now? This part of space is free and clear and don't tell me I need to update my star map, trust me it's as up to date as it gets."

He shrugged and grinned. "Man's gotta make a living ain't he." He said.

"Life get a bit difficult for you after you tried to rape me then?" I asked, knowing full well that Jyrki had done some serious damage to Raz's already piss poor reputation. Not only had he not been able to find work with most of the people who would even think about employing a pilot such as him but he had also been black listed from pretty much all the docking ports and landing bays that were out there. I do not know what it was Jyrki had told people but it had done its damage.

"Pah, was just having a little fun with you was all." He said.

"Ah, well I hope it was worth it." I said sweetly. "You and your two pals against a little girl, word gets around I guess." I sighed and looked at my finger nails. "Get off my ship, Raz before I make sure you can't even fly in free space without someone harassing you."

He took another step towards me and growled "I don't think so, you little ..." he didn't have time to even finish his sentence before I dropped him. While he was on his knees I stepped behind him and in a hold that was among the first Jyrki had ever taught me I had his arm behind his back and shoved upwards in the most painful and unnatural position it could be in with out actually dislocating it. I shoved my knee deep into the middle of his back and he yelped with pain.

"You listen to me, you piece of bantha-poodoo. I am transporting a single passenger and I have nothing of value you want on this ship. If you do not get off this vessel now I will lock you up and turn you over to the Imperial authorities. Are we clear on this?"

Raz nodded and I let him stand up, then I let his arm go. He whipped out the blaster with his other hand before I even had time to move and shoved it in my face. This was the second time in as many days this had happened and I was so fed up of it.

"What's to stop me from just shooting you now and taking your ship?" Raz sneered.

I caught movement from the corner of my eye and smiled. "Him." I said motioning with my head to where Za'ar stood with his blaster pointed at Raz.

The momentary surprise was all I needed and I twisted Raz's wrist making him drop the blaster and slammed my heel into the back of his knee. The grunt of

pain he let out was satisfying. His gun, I kicked out of the way, even if I had wanted to use it I didn't actually know how. I hated blasters and had made a point of never using one.

"I told you, I was transporting a passenger and I told you he would not be pleased by this little interruption. Now, get off my ship before I throw you in this airlock and then blow it." I hissed in his ear.

Raz looked up at me then looked at the Bone Trader. His face was almost as white as the bone mask Za'ar wore. The outfit had had the desired shock effect. He struggled to get to his feet and limped through the hatchway. I watched as the airlock shut and then raced back up to the cockpit. I knew Raz would try to salvage what was left of his pride and I had planned to stop that from happening. Za'ar followed, the amulets about his neck sounding like tiny wind chimes as he moved.

I brought up the schematic I had called on earlier and punched in the back door code. It gave me the access I needed. Raz had neither changed the codes to his computers nor thought to have someone look for encoded access nodes. Thrawn stripped off the mask and watched me with interest as I typed in several sets of numbers. Each time I was asked to confirm and each time I hit yes.

"That is highly illegal, you know." he said.

"I do know that and I don't care." I said finishing what I had started. "He's had this coming a long time, and if I just let him leave he will have a go at us. As I said before he has bigger weapons and a better shield." I added. I punched in the last of the codes and sent the sequence. "You can have me arrested for slicing when we get back on your ship."

"You are a little scary sometimes." He said.

"Then I guess we are evenly matched." I retorted.

Thrawn just gave me one of those smiles which said everything but told me nothing.

I just shook my head and started up the engines and turned the ship around to watch the results of my work. Raz had begun a firing sequence but as soon as he did so, all of his systems began a systematic shut down. In a matter of moments his ship went dark. Nothing, except life support, worked. Two seconds after that, the ship began to send out a distress signal on an Imperial carrier. I was pretty sure he'd have some explaining to do when the local Imperial Patrol got out here. His ship was probably full of contraband. I could only imagine the panic going on over there on board the *Doxy Jane*. It made me smile.

"Now we can go." I said and I set new hyperspace co ordinates into the nav computer.

Thrawn looked at me questioningly.

"We took damage to the starboard shield generator and thruster. I can't fix that in space but I know a place where I can and no one will ask questions. This little trip of yours was supposed to be kept quiet right?" I sat back and watched as

the stars elongated and space spun. Once again we were in hyperspace, but this time we were headed for Tatooine. In a few hours I would be home. Since the Captain had not argued with me, I guessed he understood the situation.

I got up and headed for the galley. I dug through the galley cupboard until I found the bottle of brandy and poured myself a shot while Thrawn removed most of the bone trader disguise and stood next to me. He took the glass out of my hand and sipped from it before handing it back.

He said. "You did not tell me you were also a slicer."

"I'm not." I said. "But I helped refit that ship. I knew her engines, her codes and worst of all, her Captain. Which I suppose was lucky for us."

"I take it from the conversation you had with Captain Drillon it was not a good relationship." He said.

"No." and I told him the whole story, plus or minus a few details. He listened without interruption and when I was finished I could tell he was angry for what happened by the way his jaw clenched.

"Jyrki?" he asked. "Was the one who...?"

"Yes." I nodded cutting him off. "Jyrki Andando, he said he had forgotten his jacket or something. He worked as a mechanic for my father for some years. He was the one who taught me the trick with the ship codes. But he was never my boyfriend." I said with a sigh. Thinking of Jyrki made me sad.

"No, but he was the one who broke your heart." Thrawn said evenly making me look up at him. "It is there in your voice when you speak his name."

"It was a long time ago." I said flatly. "He saved my neck that day and showed me how to defend myself afterwards. He was a good mechanic and he taught me most of what I know about ships. He left to find work somewhere else. He was a bit of a drifter, never staying in one place too long. I got over it." I lied with a shrug.

Thrawn watched my face carefully. "I must remember never to hurt or slight you. You can be as unforgiving as the cold on my planet. You do not forget anything anyone has done to or for you, do you?"

I returned his stare with one of my own. "I don't forget, that is true." I nodded. "But you are wrong about the not forgiving part."

"Oh?" and that blue-black eyebrow arched in surprise.

"I forgive you for dragging me out here on this crazy mission." I said finishing the brandy shot.

He laughed. I handed him the empty glass and nodded. "I need to sleep, Captain. Wake me up when we reach Tatooine."

"As you wish." He said with a slight smile. Then he added. "Miss Gabriel, what you did with that pirate, it was very well played."

I looked him in the eyes for a moment and nodded. I suspected that compliments from Thrawn were very far and few between when it came to things

like this. Tactics and strategy were his areas of expertise not mine. I lay down on the bunk and went out like a light and much to my surprise I did not dream.

The next thing I knew was Thrawn's hand on my shoulder and his voice in my ear telling me we were about to come out of hyperspace. I got up slowly, because every part of my body ached. I changed into clothes that hid all the bandaged wounds, cleaned my teeth and brushed my hair, putting it up with the Zenji sticks. By the time I was fully awake we had come out of hyperspace and were in orbit above Tatooine. I sat down in the pilot's chair and punched in the right coordinates. Put the headset on and opened up the direct channel for my father's docking bay.

"Docking Bay 49, docking Bay 49 this is the starship *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* requesting a Kiss and Cry." I grinned as I said the words. Thrawn gave me a look. I just smiled sweetly at him. That was a family code and it meant clear the dock, I am coming home.

"*Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* this is docking Bay 49, we are clearing space for you now. You have landing slot two. Merly, is that you?"

I laughed. "Hi Belkin."

Thrawn quickly made a cut the comm motion.

"Bel, stand by a moment." I said and I cut the comm. "What is it?"

"Your family's docking bay would not happen to have a very good ship scanner would it?" he asked. I knew what exactly what he meant but not why he was asking.

I gave him a look. "Everyone knows those kinds of scanners are illegal."

"Yes or no?" he pressed.

I nodded.

"Use it" he told me.

I opened the comm again wondering just what that was all about. "Bel, is papa around?"

"He's out on the bay at the moment you want I should get him?"

I shook my head even though Bel could not see me. "No, can you have him ready the scanner for me?"

"You pick up something?"

"Maybe." I said glancing at Thrawn who nodded. "I'll also need a tool kit ready, we took some damage to our starboard shield generator and thruster so I am coming in on manual."

Bel laughed into the comm. "This I gotta watch, have not see you do a hot landing in a long time, girl."

"Better get out there fast then because I am starting to style now. *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* out." And I shut off the comm System while I concentrated on the landing. It had been a long time since I had done a manual landing with a faulty thruster. It was kind of fun, actually. Thrawn said nothing as he sat and watched

calmly. I wondered if anything ever unsettled him, if he ever lost his temper or freaked out. The ship came down with a gentle bump and I was grateful to be on land again. I looked over at Thrawn who unbuckled himself.

“Do what you need to do, Miss Gabriel.” He said as he left the cockpit area. “Please bear in mind we do have a rendezvous to make.”

“Aye aye, captain.”

I shut all the systems down and then opened the ship. It was late afternoon and the first thing that hit me as I stepped out of the ship was the heat. I had forgotten how hot Tatooine really was. The second thing that hit me was the scent of the air. I breathed it in deeply, home, it whispered to me and I could tell the day had been still, holding its heat close to its skin. I stood at the foot of the landing ramp and looked around me, it seemed as though nothing had changed. The usual chaos lay everywhere and then I saw my father and behind him came Bel. I flew at him and wrapped my arms around him. I tried not to wince as he squeezed me tightly. I was determined that none of my family and friends should notice that anything bad had happened. No matter how much I hurt.

“Merly, it is so good to see you.” my father sighed into my hair. “You are so pale and you are too thin, child. Does the Empire not feed you?” he asked letting go of me and looking me up and down.

“Oh papa, don’t fuss.” I said. “I’m fine. It’s the ship that isn’t. Can you scan her first?” He nodded and pulled out the very illegal little toy he had acquired shortly before I had left to work for the Empire. I watched him for a moment then turned to Bel and gave her big hug as well. She had been working for my father for as long as I could remember and was more like a sister of sorts to me than one of his employees. She was a crazy Rodian with a big heart and an even bigger sense of humour. She manned the comm and coordinated all the landings, among other things.

My father walked around the *Ahnkeli ’Su’udelma*. He whistled softly. “This is some little ship, Merly.” He said. “must have taken some fire power to knock that thruster out of alignment.”

“We ran into Raz Drillon and the *Doxy Jane*.” I said casually. “He’s playing pirate out near Mimban now.”

“That’s a name I have not heard in a while.” Said my father with a quiet anger. It was then that I understood he had known all along what had happened to me.

“Well, he’s probably having an interesting time of it explaining to the Imperials what he was doing there. I pulled a slice on him he won’t forget.” I said. “Jyrki would have been proud.”

My father stopped for a moment and looked at me. “A good lad that. We miss him around here. I told you he came by a while ago?” he asked as he resumed his scan.

I nodded. “Yes, papa you did.” I said then added because I needed to confirm it. “He told you about what happened with Raz, didn’t he?”

“Yes, but only because I threatened to fire him if he didn’t tell me what was going on. You, all white like a ghost wearing Jyrki’s clothes and he looked like he had swallowed a nest of bees. What was I supposed to think?”

I shook my head. “He saved my life that night and what he taught me has saved it a dozen times since then.” I told my father. “I didn’t want you to know, I was ashamed.”

“I know, pet, but you had nothing to feel shame for. That man was a rat bastard and he got what he deserved. I doubt there are many docks or people who would have him after Jyrki and I were through with him.” He said and he stopped when the scanner beeped loudly. “Ah, here it is. Nasty piece of hiding that, someone knew what they were about, let me tell you.” I watched as he dug something out of the hiding place and brought it to me.

“What in the name of Sarlacc is that?” I asked.

He held the tiny disk between his forefinger and thumb. “Not sure. Some sort of tracking device would be my guess but unlike anything I have seen so far.”

“May I?” asked a cultured voice from the ramp.

I looked up at Thrawn. He was dressed in his uniform. He came down to where we stood and held out his hand, palm side up. My father was momentarily surprised but then dropped the tiny disc into Thrawn’s waiting hand. The captain studied it carefully. I saw that jaw clench and knew he recognized what ever it was that had been stuck to the ship.

“Captain Thrawn, may I introduce my father, Captain Kitga’ar Gabriel, owner of this docking bay.” Thrawn looked at me then at my father and smiled. “Papa this is my ...uhm...passenger, Captain Thrawn of the Imperial Navy.” I watched as the two men, sized each other up, shook hands and then went back to looking at the tiny disk.

“Captain, you know what that is?” I asked.

He nodded slowly. “I have a good idea, Miss Gabriel, but further tests back on board *Vengeance* will confirm my suspicions. Shall we see about getting the damage to this ship repaired?”

I nodded. “Yes, Captain.” Repairing ships was something I could do. Solving mysteries about strange tracking devices I would leave up to Thrawn.

I had a look at where the *Doxy Jane* had hit us and sighed. It wasn’t that bad but it was fiddly to fix. I hauled the toolkit over and began to get to work. Thrawn and my father walked around the ship and surveyed the damage.

“Take a while to fix, few hours maybe.” I said. I pointed out the problems.

My father smiled. “Guess that means you’ll be staying for supper then.”

I looked at Thrawn. “Captain?”

“The offer is Kind, Captain Gabriel. It will be a welcome change from the

fare we have had lately.” He said.

My father nodded. “Ah yes, my girl can fix ships but she's not much of a cook.” He grinned. “Please, call me Kit, no one is that formal around here.”

“Papa!” I said, but it was true. I hated to cook and I was not all that good at it.

Thrawn just smiled. “There wasn’t much time for gourmet meal making, I am afraid.”

My father turned to me and asked. “Merly, did you get my last letter?”

“When did you send it? I have been out of contact for a while.” I pulled off the housing for the shield generator and began to sort out the mess.

“About three weeks ago.”

“No, I guess it will be waiting for me when I get back. I have been traveling around a lot so maybe it just is still trying to catch up with me.”

My father shuffled his feet and played with his beard. Thrawn watched us both as though he were watching a sport’s event.

“What’s up papa?” I asked and then looked at Thrawn. “Captain, hand me that h-spanner, please?”

“You remember Bedi Nuale?” my father asked.

I nodded. “Yep,” I said and then told Thrawn. “Bedi is the one who taught me how to put my hair up with the Zenji Sticks.” Thrawn merely nodded.

My father looked at the Captain and then back at me, I knew he was wondering what that had been about and would probably ask later but for now he continued. “Well, she came back a month after you left.”

There was something in my father’s voice that made me stop what I was doing and look at him. Bel had joined us and was grinning from ear to ear, which for a Rodian was quite something.

“What is it papa?” I asked. I had never seen my father look so sheepish before.

Bel laughed. “He and Bedi got married last week.”

“Bel!” my father hissed.

“What?” I asked in amazement.

Thrawn could not stop the smirk from touching his lips and I gave him a stare that said. ‘Not one word.’

“I wrote to tell you about it, honey. I was hoping you could come for the ceremony but when we didn’t hear from you...” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. “It was just a small gathering, Bel, Tigann, Marsaille, as well as some of the other pilots. I...” he started.

I thrust the spanner I was holding in my hand at Thrawn and threw my arms around my father. “That’s wonderful, Papa!” I said and I meant it. He and Bedi had always gotten along really well and he had been sad when she had left. He had hidden it well but I had known anyway.

“I am so glad you think so.” My father said, looking very relieved. “I will just go and let her know we have two extra for supper. She will be thrilled to see you again.” He said. “Bel,” he scowled at the Rodian, “don’t you have work to do?” he asked as he turned to leave.

The Rodian grinned and squeezed my arm with her hand. “Merly, it is so good to see you again. He's missed you terribly.” She looked over to where my father had vanished. “It hasn’t been the same since you left, you know.”

I sighed. “Oh Bel, I miss you all too.”

She nodded. “Ya, we know that but you could write more than you do, you know. I mean come on Tatooine is NOT exactly the capitol of the galaxy, news once in a while would be good! Your dad worries sick about you and you never write! You can’t be that busy are you?” she told me off.

I glanced at Thrawn, who made a point of studying the damage on the side of the ship. Bel caught that look and poked the captain on the arm.

“You keep her too busy? If this is your fault then you should be ashamed, she has a family who would like to hear from her!” Bel, with her hands on her hips, half the size of the man she was barking at, was as fierce as any Dantassi Bone Trader.

Thrawn gave Bel a steady look. “Shall I order Miss Gabriel to write weekly reports to her family then?” he asked in his cool, cultured tone.

Bel looked at him for a second deciding if he was playing her for a fool or being serious. “You should do that.” She nodded coming to the conclusion that he was not making fun of her.

Thrawn gave Bel a look that said *‘you and I know better.’* “Tell me Miss Belkin, do you think that Miss Gabriel would obey such an order?”

Bel opened her mouth then closed it again, then said. “You’re smarter than you look, for an Imperial.”

Then it was my turn to look away and bite the giggle back.

“Bel, Bel I promise I will write more.” I said. “Leave Captain Thrawn alone, he can’t order me around anyway, I am not Imperial navy.”

That earned me a raised eyebrow from Thrawn and a hard stare from Bel. After a moment she relented and mumbled something about missing me too then headed back to the office.

Thrawn said nothing until we were quite alone but the twinkle in his eyes told me that this whole thing amused him greatly. He handed me the spanner and I went back to work.

“You have a good family.” He said after a moment.

“I know.” I said.

“Family is important, Merlyn, keep in touch with them.”

I looked at him for a second. “That an order?” I gave him back the spanner. He shook his head. “Consider it a request, on behalf of your friend Bel. She

pokes even harder than you do.”

I looked at him and smiled. “Who do you think I learned that from? Hand me that micro-welder will you.” He did and the glasses to go with it. I slipped them on and started the weld process. “What was that device my father found on the ship?”

He sighed. “Its design is Imperial.”

I stopped welding. “I figured that. What was it doing on the ship?”

He sighed. “Good question. I am still working out all the facts. Things are not adding up.”

“How did you know it was there?”

“Just a feeling.”

“Who put it there?” I asked. He was being evasive.

“Another good question.”

“Someone working for the Empire?” I pressed.

“That is a serious possibility. Possibly someone with inside help, someone who has access to things that most don’t. There are many within the Empire who would love nothing more than to see me fall from grace.” He shook his head. “You have no idea what truly goes on behind the scenes.”

“Why would someone want to go after you? I mean, aren’t you really good at what you do?” I asked.

“Yes, and there is your reason.”

I made a face. This didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me. Then something else occurred to me. “You think, perhaps, the whole thing with the cake is part of that?” I asked.

Thrawn regarded me thoughtfully for a moment. “The thought has crossed my mind. You have no enemies within the Imperial Court, yet and poisoning you serves no real purpose but using you to get to me is a possibility.” He said coldly. “A coward’s way of doing things and when I find who is responsible I will deal with them swiftly.”

I nodded and went back to what I was doing. “Remind me never to cross you or get on your bad side. You are as unforgiving as the desert and I am betting you never forget anything, ever.”

He laughed. “How was it you put it? We are evenly matched.”

I finished the weld I was working on, shut the torch off and lifted the goggles from my eyes to look at him. “Is that a good thing?” I asked.

He smiled, leaned towards me and whispered in my ear, “I hope so, Miss Gabriel, I hope so.” The warmth of his breath made me shiver despite the heat in the air.

“I can’t work when you do that.” I told him hiding my surprise and sudden case of nerves behind crossness.

He just smiled, looking a little like a jax that has just been offered its

favourite meal. I handed him the micro welder and pointed to the little screwdriver set.

I rolled my eyes. “What about Raz, you think he just found us by accident?” “You don’t?” he asked.

“I don’t know what to think any more and right now I am not thinking clearly at all.” I confessed. “I just find it hard to believe that it was a coincidence.”

Thrawn drew a deep breath. “I don’t think there is any connection between the tracking device and that pirate, if that is what you are asking. That it was sheer coincidence is also something I don’t believe in. There are no coincidences from my point of view. Everything has a meaning in it, no matter how small. We are just sometimes too close, or too far away to see, it that is all. I don’t think that your encounter with that pirate was coincidence, more like luck I would say, since you did have a score to settle with him. The Mimban lane sometimes suffers from these petty thieves. It is not unknown in that part of space. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, picked on the wrong ship. Not so improbable, really. He was sitting just off the beaten track for some days, waiting for some smuggler ship with less fire power than his to wander by and we fit the bill. It was his bad luck he picked on you.” He said. “That you don’t know what to think or feel right now is of no surprise. It isn’t as if you have had an easy few days.”

A retort about whose fault that was about to burst out of me but before I could say it out loud he placed a finger on my lips.

“Just fix the ship.” He said softly. “Stop worrying about the galaxy, that’s my job.”

I just gave him a look and probably would have found a suitable reply but Bel appeared and yelled that supper was ready.

What had started out as a casual thing had become tradition at our docking bay. Suppers were always a family affair and pretty much everyone that worked at the Bay was considered part of the family. My mother had insisted on feeding everyone at least one good meal a day. At first, as I recall, everyone was nervous about eating at the Boss’s table but after a while that vanished and we all ate together in my father’s house as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

I think my mother had missed the big dinner parties and her own large family gatherings from her home too much. After my mother had died Bel had taken up the torch of cooking or at least arranging something. I was a terrible cook and my father’s menus were restricted to basic stews and soup which got pretty boring pretty fast. Eventually, the chore of cooking went on a rotating schedule and that meant the meals were always, to say the very least, interesting. It depended on who was cooking and who was around. The faces at the table changed daily based on who had what shift and who was flying and who was off duty. The only constants were Bel, Tigann, who did the books, and my father.

Our house was right beside the docking station and, for a Tatooine town

house, was fairly spacious. My father had never redecorated after my mother had died so it still held her taste in furniture and artwork, all subtle colours and an understated elegance. It felt good to be home, surrounded by things that were familiar to me.

Bedi met us at the door. She had not changed much but she had cut all her beautiful hair short. She enveloped me in a huge hug and completely ignored Thrawn, until I untangled myself from her and introduced them. It was Bel who saved the day by dragging him away into the living room to sit, giving me time to talk with my now step mother.

“You cut your hair!” was all I could think to say as we stood and stared at each other.

“Too hot here.” She said. “I can’t deal with the heat and all that hair anymore, am not young like I was, you know. I kept my collection for you though. It’s in your old bedroom on the bookshelf.” She told me.

“Thank you.” I said with a grin. “I am so happy for you both.” I told her, giving her a warm hug.

“Your father was so worried about how you would take it.” She confided in me as we went into the kitchen. “Me, as well.”

“You both worry too much.” I said.

“Come on give me a hand with supper. You can tell me all about your work and who that man is out there, he is quite charming.” She smiled.

Charming? I thought, well I supposed that was one word for it. I just shook my head and grinned then began to fill her in on what life was like working on Coruscant.

Bedi was a great cook and since it was sort of a special occasion my father had pulled out some of his really good wine. No one paid the slightest bit of attention to the fact that they had an Imperial Captain sitting with them.

I loved how my family and friends just didn’t worry about things like that and treated him like one of the crew, as if they had known him forever. On Tatooine no one cared where you were from or what you looked like, not really. They dragged him into their crazy conversations and welcomed his stories in return. He was surprisingly entertaining. I suppose what amazed me even more was how comfortable he seemed with it all. He reminded me of a djakka lizard, able to adapt to pretty much anything and be at home pretty much anywhere he went.

Once we had finished eating, Bedi made mint tea and everyone sat back, full and relaxed. It was when Thrawn made the mistake of commenting on one of the paintings in the living-room that I decided it would be a good time to head back to the Bay and finish working on the ship. Art was a hot and heavy topic in my house with Bel leading the crusade. There was not much left to do on the repairs and I wanted to finish as soon as I could, maybe get a little bit of time in with my family before we headed back out. I made my excuses and escaped before the

discussion got really interesting or heated depending on how things went.

I liked working in the evening. It was cooler and it was quiet. I hummed to myself as I finished up. Working on the ship was so much easier when there as no one whispering distractions in my ear. As I packed everything away and tidied up it occurred to me that repairing ships made me happy. It was a simple thing, find the problem and fix it. The ship didn’t try to kill you or get revenge for anything, it was just a machine. It either worked or it didn’t. I patted the hull and smiled. She was a good little ship and I would miss her when we returned to the vengeance. I heard the bay door open and closed and smiled to myself. I knew whose footsteps those were.

“Hey, papa.” I said. Wiping the grease from my hands as best I could.

“How’s my girl really doing?” he asked handing me a glass of his home made gut rot. “You really don’t look so well.”

I sipped it and made the appropriate face. “Oh papa, I’m fine, honestly. I am just a bit tired. This has been a long trip.” I said, it was party true. “It’s hard work and it’s odd hours but it is a really interesting job. I sometimes even get to fly people around.” I said. “I like what I do and apparently I am good at it. It sure beats working for Jabba. I miss you though and working here. I miss home.”

My father nodded. “Of course you do, pet, but you can’t stay here forever. I knew that, I’ve always known that. You were meant for more than just here, it was never your destiny to live your whole life on this sand box. It’s a big galaxy out there and you need to find your own way. I am just glad you are happy.” He said putting his arm around my shoulder and hugging me close. “Doesn’t mean I don’t miss my girl, though.”

I hugged him back. “I’m sorry I missed the wedding, papa. I would have been here if I had known.”

He smiled. “I know that, pet.”

“What about you, are you happy, papa?” I asked. “How are things here?”

“Yes. I am. Life is good here for us, no need for you to worry about that.” He said with a smile then asked. “What time were you planning on leaving this evening?”

I shrugged. “Guess, that’s up to the Captain.”

My father smiled. “Well, I think that maybe you have some time, then.”

“Oh?”

“He and Bel got into a serious discussion about two of the paintings in the house. When I left they were starting to pull out your mother’s art history books, arguing about brush strokes and techniques. I don’t think he knows what he has gotten himself into. Bedi was laughing her self stupid in the kitchen. He is quite the interesting man, that captain of yours, but he is no match for our Bel.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Well, I am sorry I am missing that. He is a real art expert and,” I added. “he knows it. It will mostly be about who has the last

word I think.” I patted the ship again. “I would have stayed to referee but this ol’ girl needed my care.”

My father gave me a thoughtful look and then nodded. “I gathered from the way they were getting into it, it will be a long night.”

I grinned. “If the Captain asks you can tell him I am up on the bluff.” I said. “If he’s gotten himself wrapped in an art conversation with Bel then I have time to say hullo to the desert.”

He nodded. “I will let him know where to find you. But be careful, the Sand People have been raiding closer to town this season. And don’t stay out there all night. I’d like to spend some time with my only daughter before she heads back off into the great unknown.”

“I won’t papa, promise.” I kissed him on the cheek and took off for one of my favourite places in the whole galaxy.

The bluff was out just beyond the town’s edge, a fifteen minute walk from where we lived. It was just a cliff like edge off the rising dunes and hills, but I had spent more time out on it than I could even count. From it one could look out over the city of Mos Eisley and the desert beyond.

I sat there once again, my ear tuned to the shifting winds and the sands, watching the lights from the city as they twinkled in the oncoming night. Tatoo 1 and 2 had only just set so the sky was still dusted with a pale light on the horizon. I marvelled at how different they looked from down here. I lay on my back and stared up at the sky. The stars sparkled brilliantly against the blue of the oncoming night, ships moved about in orbit and although it could be incredibly lonely on this planet, somehow I never felt alone.

So much had happened to me in such a short period of time that I had not even really had a free moment to consider it all. Now, I had come home only to find out that life here had also moved on without me. It was a strange feeling.

I closed my eyes and let my thoughts drift. It was not long before I felt that familiar sensation ripple through me. I could feel the force around me and I let it move through me. It seemed stronger here than I remembered. Maybe I was just better at sensing it than I had been. I thought of Lord Vader and wondered where he was right at this moment in time, if he had ever sat on a dune and watched the stars when he had lived on this planet. I wondered about him and his life here. I found it hard to imagine him as boy or even as a young man. What had he looked like, how had he lived? Did he miss it? I delved deeper into my own self, finding my center and tried to find his life force, hoping to somehow connect with him, but that was something far beyond my small abilities. I knew he was out there somewhere amongst the stars and the planets and while I could not sense Lord Vader, I did sense someone else. I smiled to myself when I heard the footsteps but didn’t get up.

“Are you ready to leave, Captain?” I asked as he approached.

He bent heel to haunch, squatting on the ground beside me and stared out over the city. “Change of plan, we leave in the morning.” He said. “I want some peace and quiet, time to think, to meditate on some of the recent events and I believe you might enjoy spending a little more time with your family considering the news you were given today.”

I smiled and nodded then sat up. “How was the art discussion?” I asked.

“Belkin will argue the hind legs off a Varactyl, but she knows her art.” He said. “But then you knew that already didn’t you.”

“Yep.” I nodded. “I adore Bel, she’s known me pretty much all my life, taught me Rodian and yep, she likes to have the last word.”

“You have some stunning pieces of art in your home.” He said quietly.

“Mostly my mother’s. She brought a lot of the pieces with her when she left her home on Alderaan. Anyone who spends any time in the house gets an art education. Bel took up that job after my mother’s death. I probably should have warned you. I am sorry I missed seeing you and Bel in action.”

Thrawn laughed. “She won and I escaped gracefully to look for you.”

“Well, you found me.” I said looking at my nails. There was grease under them.

He gazed out over the city. “Your father said this was where you used to come as a kid when you wanted to get away from the world. I can see why, this is quite a view of the city and the sky.” He said after a moment.

I nodded. “Yeah, I love it here, listening to the wind and the sands. I started coming up here just after my mother died. It was rough in the house for a while, between me and my father. Guess it could not have been easy for him either but as a kid, one doesn’t think about stuff like that. Sometimes, I would spend all night out here just watching the stars and the city, not tell anyone where I was. I would just come up here to sit and then go home after the suns had come up, crawl into bed and sleep. I drove my father crazy. I don’t think he really understood that sometimes I just liked the silence.”

“You were not afraid of being out here on your own?”

I looked at him. “No, oddly enough, I was never afraid out here. I probably would have gone deeper into the dunes, if I could have. You scare me more than being out here does.” I said jokingly.

Thrawn arched an eyebrow. “Really?” He asked and he wasn’t joking.

“Sometimes, yes.” I said more seriously.

“How is your leg doing?” he asked changing the subject abruptly.

“It hurts, but not quite as badly as before.” But I was lying. It hurt like hell, in fact everything still hurt like hell and I think he knew that. I had put on a brave face because I did not want my family asking awkward questions or worrying too much.

“Come back to the ship, I want to make sure the wounds are healing,

especially the one on your thigh, it was deep and nasty.” He said standing up, offering me his hand. He helped me to my feet and for a moment we stood looking at each other. The air between us sparked. He brushed sand out of my hair and stroked my face gently.

“I scare you?” he asked quietly, he was just not going to let that go. I was sorry I had even made a joke out of it.

I swallowed and nodded. His eyes glittered with an eerie light quite all of their own and I wondered what the world looked like to him through those red, luminous eyes.

“Why?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” I answered after a moment.

He caressed my lips with the tips of fingers and smiled as I shivered. “I do.” He said and he let go of me.

With my heart pounding and my mouth feeling like the desert I was looking at, I said. “Don’t suppose you’d care to tell me the answer then?”

“Better if you figure it out on your own.” He said and he started back down the bluff towards the ship. With a sigh that let him know he annoyed the sandjiggers out of me I followed him. The docking bay was thankfully deserted when we got back and the ship was a quiet refuge.

Once he had inspected the wounds on my back I sat down, hiked up my skirt and plunked my leg on the chair across from me and folded my arms across my chest. He squatted at my side and inspected the wound with great care. He had been right, it was a deep and nasty gash and I had been worried it would get worse instead of better, but he had done a good job in treating it. I asked him about his medic skills.

“When one goes into combat, one is given basic field medic training” He replied as he began to tend to the bandage and ease it away from my skin. I winced at the pain despite his care.

“You’re better than some of the doctors I saw as a kid.” I told him.

“Well, I had some time in my younger years to learn more about field medicine when I had to take care of myself.” He replied in a tone telling me he wasn’t going into details but that behind his words lay one hell of a story. “I’m sorry this hurts, you should take something for the pain.” He added.

“Maybe later.” I told him and he didn’t say anything else.

The synth skin came off easier than I thought it would and the wound was healing better than I had hoped but the scar it would leave would be a beauty. Not even bacta treatment would change that now. Thrawn cleaned it carefully and then applied a new bandage of synthskin with a bacta strip. When he was finished he patted my knee to signal he was done and put the med kit away.

I did not, could not take my eyes off him. His gently touch on the sensitive skin of my thigh had burned. I didn’t quite understand the longing it had created

and only knew that I hungered and ached for something I could not define, something that awoke in me every time he was near me, every time our eyes met and something leaped up between us.

We were alone, no one was shooting at us and I wanted to touch him, be close to him and not wait for his next move. Without considering the consequences, I went to him, suddenly, and wrapped my arms about his waist from behind, resting the side of my face against the flat of his back. I felt his surprise as he tensed for a second and then he relaxed. He turned around within the circle of my arms and with the tips of two fingers, raised my chin up so I looked him in the eyes, there was a smile on his lips I didn’t really understand, a moment in time where everything seemed to hold its breath and then, whatever electricity there was between us exploded.

He kissed me with utter abandon and I was swept up by the sheer force of it. He wrapped his arms around my body and pulled me tightly to him. His strength and passion flowed about me like a desert wind. It was intoxicating. It was scary. It was very powerful and I had not ever felt anything quite like it before. I breathed in his scent and lost myself to him, to his touch, to the sound of his voice. It was a terrible, desperate, physical ache. As suddenly as I had wanted it, so suddenly it was all just too much, too soon. I felt as though I were drowning, going under with no way out.

I pushed back from him and covered my mouth with shaking hands, staring at him with more questions than there were answers for. He took my hands in his and looked at me, studying my face, my eyes.

I shook my head. “Too much. I feel too much. I want...” Words tumbled out and I did not even know how to begin to explain what I was feeling. “I’m sorry, I didn’t ...”

“Akiana’myskh’a,” he said gently, his hands steadying mine. “I know.” He studied my face carefully. “Listen to me. There will always be time enough for this. When the moment is right for more you will know, you will not be afraid and it will not feel like drowning. Do not force it.”

“How did you..., how do you know?” I felt like such an idiot.

“I just know.” He said in a voice that said he was not going to explain that statement further. “And...” he added with a slight smile and a raised eyebrow. “Contrary to what many may think I am a very patient man. There are things in this galaxy that are worth waiting for,” he brushed my cheek with the back of his fingers and whispered in my ear. “And you, my dear, are one of those things.”

I turned my face away from him but he wasn’t letting me get away. “What scares you?” He demanded, “Just say it, don’t think about it.”

I took a deep breath. “It isn’t true what I told you earlier,” I said as he turned my face back to meet his. “It isn’t you that scares me. It is how you make me feel. It’s just so.... overwhelming.”

He nodded because he already knew that. He also knew I needed to say it out loud. "Go and spend time with your family, Akiana'myshk'a. It may be a long time before you see them again."

"Why do you call me by that name?"

"Because it gives me pleasure to do so." He answered casually.

"What does it mean?"

But he just smiled.

I sighed and stepped back from him. "Will you ever tell me what it means, the whole name?"

"One day, perhaps, when the time is right, you will learn its meaning." He said smugly "Timing, Miss Gabriel, is everything." We were back to playing games again.

I rolled my eyes. "Why all the secrecy?" I asked but he never got the chance to answer because the knock on the side of the ship and the sound of my father's voice broke the spell. I looked at Thrawn, he just shook his head. Timing was, indeed, everything.

"Fine, be all Mr. Mysterious then." I hissed at him.

He chuckled.

"Your ship, Captain, you show my father around. I need to get some things for the night." I told him.

It was almost a blessing to be able to step back into formality. I went into the crew quarters to pack for the night and listened while Thrawn welcomed my father on board and showed him the ship. By the time they had done the small tour I had collected my wits about me, splashed cold water on my face and packed for the night.

"We leave at seven am, Miss Gabriel. Do not be late." Thrawn said coolly as I went to leave with my father.

"Yes, Captain." I replied without looking back at him. My father slung his arm around my shoulder and we walked out of the docking Bay to go home. I had a whole night to catch up on the last four months. I wasn't going to waste it.

Thrawn returned the salute that the deck officer gave him as we disembarked from the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*. The rest of our journey to the rendezvous with the *Vengeance* had been uneventful. The farewell on Tatooine had been brief but not painless. I wondered if it ever got easier to say goodbye to people you loved and cared for. These thoughts had made me melancholy and pensive which, in turn, made me moody and withdrawn.

Thrawn too, had stayed distant and quiet for much of the return trip, as though he also had much to think about and distractions from me would be most

unwelcome. He had left me mostly alone and I had been oddly happy with the breathing room.

"Lt. Wulfman, please escort Miss Gabriel to the Medical Bay. Inform Doctor Thracer he is to do a complete check up." Thrawn commanded after the pleasantries were over with. This was an order, given in a tone of voice that even I dared not argue with but I wasn't happy about it.

The Lieutenant was about to touch me on the arm, indicating the way but I pulled away from him. I gave Thrawn a glare and said tersely. "I know the way, Captain."

The Lieutenant looked to Thrawn for help. The captain just shrugged slightly. "As she says, she knows the way, Lieutenant. Just make sure she goes there and does not deviate." He added giving me a meaningful stare which said *do not try my patience*. The lieutenant saluted and with an escort I went to the med lab.

The Doctor was not pleased to see the mess I was in. He was even less pleased with my lack of information about how I came by all the various wounds, cuts and even more bruises. I just sat in silence while he took care of me. It was such a relief just to be someplace safe, quiet, familiar and in the hands of someone not playing head games with me. I owed this Doctor my life and I was thankful to be in his care. I didn't have to pretend that everything was alright as I had on Tatooine because I had not wanted to worry my family. I suppose it was only natural that all the stress, fear and everything else I was keeping tightly locked inside bubbled over, or maybe it was his gruff kindness whatever the reason, I sat there and wept silently. Doctor Thracer just handed me a handkerchief and continued to do his work.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked after a few minutes.

I shook my head. He made a face that told me he was neither impressed nor surprised.

"I'd like to keep you here for rest and observation, you are somewhat dehydrated and quite anaemic but you will argue with me, won't you?" he said with a sigh.

I shook my head. "No, I am too tired to disagree with you, Doc." I was just very grateful he had not suggested a bacta immersion.

He nodded. "Very well, young lady. I will give you something for the pain that will knock you out." He led me to one of the beds in a quiet corner, handed me a gown and let me get out of my clothes. I was so grateful just to lie in a real bed with clean sheets that I didn't even flinch when he shot me full of nutrients, pain killers and a powerful sedative.

"Doc?" I grasped his arm.

He looked at me. "What is it?"

"Keep him out of my hair for a while will you, please?" I asked as I felt the sedative start to kick in.

The doctor smiled grimly, he knew exactly who I was talking about. "With great pleasure, now rest." And that was the last thing I knew.

The doctor was as good as his word and Thrawn did not come near me for two days. When I was finally allowed to go back to my own quarters, I felt much better, at least physically and was glad to hear when we were finally in orbit around Naboo. I was relieved to be returning to the retreat soon. I wanted to get back to my normal work and back to my training. I was packed and ready when Lt. Wulfman came to fetch me. He took my bag and walked with me to the docking bay and did not say a word the whole time. I expected to see an Imperial shuttle waiting for me but there was only the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* and the Captain.

"Thank you Lieutenant, you may return to your duties." Thrawn said. The Lieutenant saluted and left.

"Doctor Thracer assures me that you are fully recovered and well enough to return to work." Thrawn said picking up my bag and carrying it on board the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*. I followed him a little confused.

"You are flying me back to Naboo?" I asked.

"No, Miss Gabriel, you are quite capable of flying your ship yourself." He said handing me a data pad.

"My ship?" I asked, looking at the data pad he handed me. Ownership rights for the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*, all in my name.

"It was discussed that you might have need of a vessel to carry out some of the work you may be asked to do. You seemed comfortable with this ship so it is yours." He told me.

I stared at him for a moment. "You are giving me my own ship?" I asked, and then I added. "What do you mean by, work I may be asked to do?"

He smiled. "Yes, this ship is yours. All the paperwork is in your name." he said and then to answer my second question he said. "That is not my place to tell you about that, you must discuss that with Lord Vader."

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. "My ship?"

He nodded.

"I don't know what to say."

"Well, 'thank you' usually works well enough." He told me, adding. "And your first job is to take me to Naboo. I have a meeting with the Emperor and Lord Vader and I am quite sure you wish to get back to work."

"Thank you." I said quietly and just stared at him for a moment then asked. "You want to leave now?"

"You are cleared for departure." He told me as he sat down in the co-pilot's chair. "So anytime you are ready."

I sat in the pilot's seat and put on the headset. My ship, I was not sure I believed it. As I took us out of the *Vengeance's* docking bay I asked Thrawn about the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*.

"I found her in one of the Imperial impound yards." He said. "When I learned that you might need a ship of your own I suggested this one. She was refitted to Lord Vader's specifications for you and then rechristened."

"You..., Lord Vader planned for this?" I asked. I was having trouble getting my head around this.

"He informed me that you would need to be mobile. We discussed it, talking about a lambda class shuttle because you seem to love them so much, but that would draw far too much attention to you and," he added, "you will get enough flying time in the shuttles as it is. The HWK series is less likely to be noticed especially if you need to be discreet. It seemed a fitting ship for you and the trip we took was a good test run of both ship and your abilities."

"A test?" I asked giving him a filthy look. "This whole thing was just some sort of a test?" I was about to launch into a tirade when he cut me off.

"Do not start that argument again." He warned.

We stared at each other for a moment then I, backing down, went back to staring out of the cockpit. The air between us fairly crackled because I was angry and he was annoyed. I thought about it for a few seconds and then decided I wasn't letting this go.

"What exactly do you mean by discuss? I am a bit confused. You and Lord Vader talk about me? Why? What in the name of Sarlacc about?" I was a personal assistant and it bothered me that this man, who had seemingly taken a fairly deep personal interest in me, also talked about me with the man I worked for. It made me more than just a little nervous.

Thrawn sighed. "Briefly, it was discussed how best to utilize your various talents." He looked at me and must have read something in my face because he added. "Do not make more of it than it is." He chided.

"How can I make more of something when I don't even know what that something is?" I said sharply.

Thrawn frowned. "I have seen you deal with situations that for most untrained civilians would have been a disaster, yet you handled everything that was thrown at you with a calm and a grace that struck me as almost elegant. You are an excellent mechanic and a good pilot in your own right. You have many hidden talents that could serve the Empire well if directed properly. As a mere personal assistant, you are wasting these talents, no matter how good you may be at that job. I had suspected that you would be resourceful as well as clever and this time that we have spent working together has shown me I was right, but you also have an inner strength and resilience that, for one so young, quite frankly, surprised me."

I just stared at him because for once he had rendered me speechless, so he continued.

"Lord Vader mentioned that he was also somewhat surprised by your various abilities and, how did he put it... your impudent fearlessness. I merely

asked if he had thought about extending your job range to more than just his personal office assistant. That you have come under the watchful eye of the Emperor has also not gone unnoticed. That he has talked to you about perhaps being a courier is known to Vader, which is partly why you were given this ship.”

“And this has to do with you, how?” I asked.

“He asked if I would observe you while on the mission with me. Evaluate your work outside of the normal environment. While he did not know the details of our trip, he knew it would be unusual.” Thrawn continued ignoring my tone of voice.

“And?”

“And...that is all, nothing more, nothing less. If he has other plans I do not know of them, nor do I wish to. That has nothing to do with me. I do, however, hate to see talents and potential wasted. As for my evaluation, Lord Vader will receive that all in good time.” He said coolly. “Do you want to spend the rest of your life as a mere personal assistant or do you wish to expand your horizons and be more?”

“I had not really thought about it, to be honest but I can tell you this, Captain. I am more than just a *mere* personal assistant, I am a very *good* personal assistant.” He was making me cross. I didn’t like this plotting and scheming about me behind my back.

Thrawn arched an eyebrow. “Indeed, however, should you choose to, my dear, you could be so much more. I merely pointed that out to Lord Vader when he commented upon your ability to deal with him. As I have said, it is a shame if the Empire wastes the talents of good people. With some training and care you could be even more valuable than you currently are. Being valuable to the Empire is also vital for one’s survival within the Empire.”

I gave him a look. “I was under the impression, after this trip, that doing a good job in the Empire not only creates enemies but is also very bad for one’s health.”

He chuckled slightly. “It is a delicate balance, Miss Gabriel, but you have a naiveté and a touch of sweetness that can be most disarming, I do not think you need worry about such things just yet.”

That sounded almost like an insult and I made a face but before I could say anything he continued with a sigh.

“Business and pleasure, it has been my experience, do not generally mix well. I have some difficulty with this in your case as you are a pleasure I wish to have in my life, however my business of serving the Empire comes first and foremost. If that includes giving Lord Vader or, for that matter, the Emperor my opinion on your work then I shall do so as honestly and as unbiased as possible. I have no doubt that your life will take you very far from home and that this journey has only just begun. Do not look for insult and injury where there are none.”

“So, you speak to the Emperor about me as well?”

I was trying his patience. “Your name has come up in passing.” He said and the tone of voice let me know that was all he would say.

I sighed. “How long will you be on Naboo this time?” I asked changing the subject.

“Long enough.” He answered with a shrug.

I shook my head. “Fine, be all mysterious then!”

“Your curiosity will be the death of you one of these days.” He admonished.

“Yes, maybe it will. But wasn’t it you who told me satisfaction brought the dead jax back to life?” I said smartly and resisted the urge to stick my tongue out at him.

He just smiled and shook his head then said something to me in what I could only assume was his native language.

“What did you just say?” I asked, narrowing my eyes and giving him my best spitey face.

He must have thought he was being funny because he was struggling to keep the laughter out of his voice but he could not keep his amusement out of his eyes. “Maybe you should learn Cheunh to find out.” He replied, arching an eyebrow in that smug way of his that made me want to smack him.

“Now, just how am I supposed to do that? Fly on over to Csilla and knock on someone’s door and say, ‘Hi Captain Thrawn sent me over to learn your language...how about it?’ You think that would work? Or are you planning on tutoring me after a hard day’s work running around saving the galaxy?”

“Giving you private lessons in my native language does have a certain charm and appeal.” He gave me a smile that sent a shiver down my spine. “And the thought of you showing up on someone’s door on my home planet demanding to learn the language is a very amusing mental image.”

I just gave him a really hard stare. “You could start by teaching me how to say ‘you really annoy the sandjiggers out of me and I don’t want to talk to you any more’.”

He just laughed.

Then something else occurred to me. “*Ahnkeli ’Su’udelma*, what does it mean, that’s in your language isn’t it?”

“It is Dantassi Cheunh, it means *Desert Angel’s Kiss*.”

I made a face. “Oh, that’s very cute.” I said sarcastically. “And even translated it is still an awfully big name for a little ship.”

He shrugged ever so slightly. “You can always rename her.” He said. “But the name was based on a suggestion from Lord Vader.”

“Bad luck to rename a ship.” I told him thoughtfully, wondering why Lord Vader would call a ship that. It was just more and more mysteries and questions laid one on top of the other. I knew that Thrawn would not answer any more of my queries. He would just talk in circles now, so with a sigh I changed the topic. “We’ll

be on the ground in ten minutes, Captain.”

“Excellent, Miss Gabriel.” He smiled.

I just shook my head and slipped the head-set on so I could talk to the landing control. The sooner we were on the ground and I was away from Thrawn, the better. I was pretty certain that one of these days I would simply forget about protocol and just shoot him. He drove me crazy in nearly every way it was humanly possible to do so but I could not imagine my life without him in it anymore and somehow that annoyed me even more.

The landing was text book, and with out more than two words to each other we disembarked. He was met by several officers and was immediately spirited away while I was ignored and left to my own devices, which was fine with me. I went to take a look at my ship. *My ship*, just being able to say that was a pretty sweet feeling. I gave her a good going over and then, grabbing my stuff, I headed to my home across the lake from the retreat.

It was mid afternoon. The sky was clouding over and the day’s warmth had turned humid and oppressive. I was tired and needed a shower. After that I made tea and sat out on the small balcony to watch the oncoming storm. It seemed impossibly unreal to be back here, as if nothing at all had ever happened. Yet things had happened and I felt it all slipping out of control. I decided I was not going into the office today because if I did and I happened to see Lord Vader I would have to fight with him about all this secret plotting behind my back. I didn’t want to get into it with him just yet, that would happen soon enough.

I sipped at my tea and marvelled at the way lightening scored the sky and the loudness of the thunder that followed. It seemed fitting we would come home to a dirty great thunderstorm. It went with my mood perfectly. I would deal with all the office stuff tomorrow, I was quite sure there was a mountain of crap to wade through. For the time being it felt awfully good to be alone, in my own space with a nice cup of tea and some time to sort out my thoughts. I had the feeling things in my life were only going to get more and more complicated.