

# Daughter of the Empire

Book 1

Written by F. Messer 2005-2006

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**This story contains spoilers so you have been warned!**

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Hand that Guides 1

I walked into the office thinking that it would be chaos and was pleasantly surprised to find that my droid had actually done a passable job of sorting out most of the silliness that usually ended up on my desk. He had simply left all the more important or confidential things to one side for me to deal with when I returned. Once, I had waded through that pile and done all that I was supposed to do with it, I read the mail that was actually for me. The letter from my father had finally found me. There were several notes from Shiv asking where I was until the last one which said;

*'Okay, be all mysterious then. Let me know when you are back and we can maybe steal away to Theed for lunch.'*

I had to smile, hadn't I said almost the same words to Thrawn? There was a letter from Lt. Jorae and a short note from Master Kjestyll about a training schedule that needed to be approved as well as a small package with no return address or name on it.

I answered Master Kjestyll's message first and looked forward to training with him again. I hoped that he would read and answer the message swiftly and we could start as soon as possible. I felt I needed to get back to some sort of normal life. Was there such a thing when one worked for the Empire?

Then I answered Lt. Jorae's letter. I was surprised to hear from him actually because he had not kept in touch after I had left the *Devastator*. I had just assumed he was happy enough not to be babysitting me any more. However, he had written to say that they had been busy, that he had been catching up with his studies and was now working hard at his job. That, I certainly understood.

I answered my father's letter even though the news was no longer new to me. I had both Bel's and Thrawn's words in the back of my mind about keeping in touch. So I wrote a long letter home, about mostly nothing, lots about the weather and scenery in Naboo and the social life and even some about my job and so on. I sent Shiv a short message telling him I was back on Naboo and lunch in Theed sounded nice. At some point I had to go to Theed anyway. The Japor snippet that Lord Vader had given me burned and I wanted rid of it as soon as I could. Then, I opened the small, long and flat unmarked box.

I was not certain how to react. What lay inside the box was wrapped in a piece of what I could only imagine was some sort of silk which shimmered and was all blues, greens and something I could not quite sort out all at the same time. It was exquisite and exotic and I knew exactly who this gift had come from but the silk was only the wrapping, and when I uncovered what it hid my heart skipped a

beat.

It was a hair stick. It had a flat, triangular top and a long slender needle and had been created from a piece of bone. In the top was carved an intricate pattern, one I remembered seeing before on the bone mask that had been part of Thrawn's disguise. A small hole had been carved through the base of the triangle so that a strip of leather might be pulled through it to hold it even more securely in place. The piece was a small work of art in its own right, the carving beautifully done and the whole hair needle polished so smooth it felt like water on glass. Underneath the silk that had wrapped it was a note on expensive paper, written in the most elegant of hands.

*Akiana'myshk'apavjäska*

*There is a saying amongst my people, Amdau'inte mikka-mawri'Ka. Kiatsu'inte amahned-mawri'Ka. Amdau'inte asahae-entwyr'ka zallwyn'te. It translates roughly into basic as; 'Do not forget where you have come from, do not worry about where you are going to, do not lose the lessons learned along the path in between.'*

*This piece, unlike the necklace given to you at the site of the hunt, was made only for you to mark a rite of passage that few would understand. Aside from the hands of its maker, no one else has touched it. It is yours and yours alone.*

*The symbol carved is an ancient one for fire and water, the flame and the wave intertwined in a complex knotwork of paths from which they emerge separate but not untouched by each other. As you can imagine both these elements are vital to any Hunter for he or she could not survive long without either, yet given a chance both could be deadly. It is a delicate balance, an elegant dance.*

*The fabric that wraps this gift is a small piece of a silk that is found only on my home world. It is produced by tiny worm like creatures that live in the ice. They are hard to find and greatly treasured. The harvesting of their silk thread is done in such a way that the creatures themselves are not harmed. Both the Dantassi and the Chiss consider them sacred. While the creatures are known as Kiemur'abwyr'kuinynta, which translated, as best as possible, into basic means little creatures that spin light from the darkness of the ice, the fabric itself is called T'zakoyr'a silk, because of the ceremonial piece of clothing it is used almost exclusively to make. The colour reminded me of the way light plays with the glacial ice, blues and greens and something indefinable, much the way light dances with the ma'arilite stone you love, in essence it reminded me of you.*

*Akiana'myshk'a, do not forget your past for it is the ground upon which your feet stand. Do not look too far into your future, the future is fickle and subject to change. Do not forget the lessons learned along the way for they are*

*your guide when all else is dark.  
Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia  
Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

I sat staring at the bone hair needle. It was truly exquisite. My fingers traced the carved pattern on the head of the hair-stick and relished the smoothness of the polished bone. The needle was strong and sharp and with new eyes I suddenly saw it for what it really was, not just a beautiful ornament for my hair but also a weapon. I wrapped my hand around it and noted how the curve of the top allowed a place for my thumb, and that even with my hand grasping fully about it, there was enough length left of the needle part to seriously do some damage to anything or any one that was stabbed by it. When I laid it upon the tip of my finger, using the small hole as a guide, it sat perfectly still, a delicate balance just as he had written. This gift was beautiful, functional and deadly.

The bone was still white, new. This had been recently made. Old bone yellowed with age and use. I wondered about its maker but the piece didn't speak to me. Had Thrawn as Za'ar carved this for me, if not then who? He just got more and more complex and the more I learned about him the less I felt I knew him.

I sighed as I contemplated all these things with the bone hair stick in my hand. It was a work of art in its own right and I was completely lost in thought when the comm beeped and Lord Vader barked into it that he wanted to see me. I jumped with fright. I answered him and then packed the gift away, carefully wrapping the silk about the needle and slipping it into the box which I hid in my desk drawer. It was already starting off to be an interesting day. I grabbed the data pad I had prepared and hoped that Lord Vader was in a decent mood.

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Why was it that where ever Lord Vader was concerned nothing was straight forward or simple? Most people thought it was and that everything with him black or well...black but that was not really the case. Nothing was ever as it seemed in the Empire, nothing.

The Emperor loved games, political intrigue and the manipulation of all of his subjects, pawns and people close to him. He played one against the other and then sat back to see who came out on top then began it all over again. I was only just beginning to see these patterns.

Some of it had been pointed out to me by Thrawn and was most obvious at the great functions everyone attended. Some of it I was seeing on my own from the memos and interoffice letters that flew about, fast and furious. People of the Imperial court formed their own alliances and made their own political beds, everyone vying for the Emperor's favour and good grace. Nothing changed it

seemed.

I had seen the same things at Jabba's. Oh, there had been less politeness and the viciousness was more laid out in the open but the intrigue, back stabbing and intricate dance of climbing to the top were all the same. The only difference about what went on at Jabba's was it was all a little more honest, less veiled in secrecy and etiquette.

I knew from the whispers I heard and the insinuations that flew about the palace that almost everybody thought of Lord Vader as nothing more than the Emperor's 'iron fist'. His over-dressed, foul tempered henchman who swept in when all diplomacy failed and slaughtered any and all who would dare oppose the Emperor's will and partly this was true but there was more there beneath the surface, hidden behind the mask and cloak.

Lord Vader was moody and pensive. He carried his anger and bitterness around with him as though it were the most precious thing in the galaxy. He hungered for something that was more than power, more than the sum of his hatred and rage. I sometimes got the feeling that it was not only the galaxy in general that he hated so much but also himself. I guessed it was easier to turn that feeling outward and direct it at everyone and everything that it was to look inward and deal with it. I often wondered what it was that had made him feel this way. It was as if he held some deep and dark secret about himself close to his chest and it ate at him body and soul. I knew that most people never felt or saw or read anything other than fury from him, too afraid to see or sense anything else. This was how the Emperor liked it. Rule through Fear. Most people were not force sensitive and never picked up on the more subtle emotions that were present. Most people stayed as far away from Vader as they possibly could. I had neither luxury.

I had gone to the office as requested but Lord Vader was not there. A sulky droid passed along a data pad with an encrypted message to me that I was to meet him at the Retreat landing pad. When I got there I was surprised to see him standing near my ship, talking to one of the Imperial pilots. The pilot stiffened when he saw me and gave me a smart little imperial bow then with a salute to Lord Vader he left the area a little too quickly for my tastes.

"You took your time." Lord Vader growled.

"Good Morning, my lord." I answered, "You know, if you had sent me a direct comm message I would have been here sooner."

"Comm messages can be overheard." Was all the reply I was given.

I watched and then followed him as he walked around my ship. He was studying her, looking at the lines of the ship, the welds and joins. I knew that by where he looked and where he let his hand trace the lines. I knew because I had done the same thing when I had first seen her.

"Are you satisfied with this vessel?" he asked as we stood in front of the gangway. It was closed.

I nodded. "Yes, my lord." then remembered to add. "Thank you." Then because I couldn't help myself, "She's not much to look at on the outside but she's a real treat to fly."

He gave me a glance that was hidden behind his mask. "I did not have the pleasure of testing her myself. I must go to the *Devastator*. You will take me and I can see if this ship was worth the credits that were paid for her."

I opened her up and let him on board first. I did a quick pre flight ground check of the ship and then followed him in. I tried to ignore the fact that he was there in the seat beside me and ran through all my usual systems checks. He said nothing but the rhythmic sound of his breathing was enough to put me on edge. This was a huge breach in protocol but no one was going to argue with Darth Vader. If he wanted to be ferried about in a civilian ship by his personal assistant then that was that. I can't say I was all that happy about it either but I was also not about to argue with him. He didn't seem to be in a bad mood and I didn't really want to change that by pointing out protocol to him. It wasn't among his favourite subjects anyway.

The *ISD Devastator* was in high orbit above Naboo. The trip there was short, tense and anything but sweet. The landing was fine but he growled anyway. We disembarked with Vader leading the way. He brushed past the pleasantries and swept through the ship with me running behind to keep up. He was starting to annoy me.

In the quarters designated his, where the hyperbaric chamber was, he finally stopped. The door closed and the only sounds were that of his mechanical breathing and the ship itself. I held my breath.

"I understand that your work for Captain Thrawn was satisfactory." He stated. It was not a question so I didn't answer. Lord Vader continued, "His report was favourable. It would appear that you are capable of far more than sorting out my calendar and answering mail." He paused and I stayed silent. "Thrawn believes that I am wasting your talents and the Emperor has also expressed an interest in your duties being expanded."

I shifted slightly, unable to stop the sudden flash of annoyance I felt and he turned to look at me.

"This does not please you." Another flat statement but he was right.

"I am not sure how to take all this ... concern for my career." I said carefully.

Vader nodded. "Your feelings in this matter are not unknown to me however it is not wise to go against the Emperor's wishes." He said.

"Did you bring me all the way out here just to tell me that?" I asked crossly.

"I see your time with Thrawn did not improve your civility any." Lord Vader said tartly.

I opened my mouth then closed it again. Best not to go there.

He stared at me for a moment and the air filled with that tension one gets right before a storm, this time most of that tension was coming from me, though. "You are angry." He said.

I watched him warily. "If I say yes, will you hurt me?"

"Now you fear me?" he asked. He seemed surprised by this.

I lost my temper. "What do you mean by 'now'? Of course I am afraid of you. Everyone is afraid of you. You'd kill a mouse bot for squeaking the wrong way. I just try not to show it because it doesn't get me anywhere. I can't do my job properly if I am so wrapped up in fear I can't think straight." I said. "But unlike most people around here I am not absolutely terrified of you. Please don't ask me why that is because I don't know the answer to that myself."

"Why hesitate with your opinions now?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"I don't like explaining the bruises I end up with from you when you are mad and you take it out on me, even if it is while we are sparring."

He was silent for a moment. "Perhaps I was wrong about the Captain's influence." He paused and then said. "Speak your mind."

"I feel like I am being manipulated without a say in what or how this all happens. All this secrecy and sneaking around. I have never experienced anything like it before. I mean, I've seen it happen but not to me. It is driving me crazy. Everyone is playing games and I feel like a tiny bug caught up in the middle of sandstorm." I told him.

He was silent for a long time and had moved to stand by the view-port so that he looked out into the space beyond. He had folded his arms across his chest and the air in the room felt weighted and thick. When he finally broke the silence what he said was unexpected to say the least.

"Being manipulated, it is not a pleasant experience I agree."

"How would you know? No one would dare manipulate you." I asked in surprise.

Lord Vader swiftly turned around to look at me. "You think I was always this way, as you see now?" he shook his head. "Once I was young and idealistic, much as you are. Unlike you, I did not see what was happening, how I was being used, as you feel you are, and I did not see the lies until it was too late." He paused and the sound of his breathing filled the room. "Your ability to see through deception, your courage to address it is admirable. Unfortunately these games, as you so eloquently put it, are a part of life in the Imperial court, get used to it."

"What happened to you then?" I risked asking.

He turned his head back to the window. "I was betrayed by someone I admired and even loved." There was a moment when utter and raw sadness washed through the room and as quickly as I had felt it so it vanished to be replaced by a bitter anger. "It was a long time ago and I have moved on to greater

things. I do not wish to discuss the past. It is your future we are talking about.” He turned away from the window and came to stand in front of me. He towered above me and it was as intimidating as all hell. “Tell me, what do you want?”

“To do the best job I can, what ever that job is.” I said, folding my arms across my chest, mirroring his stance.

He nodded. “Good.” He went to one of the consoles and pulled out a data pad which he then handed to me. “I need information...”

“What do you want to know?” I asked cutting him off when I read the name on the data pad.

“You know who this is?”

“Yes, I’ve met him several times. He worked for Jabba as a smuggler, had a good reputation until he messed it up. I know him enough to talk to on a casual basis. He and his co pilot, a Wookiee, used to hang out in the Palace sometimes. They used our Docking bay once or twice. He’s okay, a bit cocky though, smart mouthed.”

“You are full of surprises, girl.”

I looked up at him. “I worked for Jabba the Hutt, my father runs a docking bay in Mos Eisley, this stuff is common knowledge for people like me and you know that.”

He did not disagree. “What did you mean by ‘messed it up’?” he asked.

“Word was Solo got stopped and had to dump contraband cargo worth an awful lot of money. Jabba wasn’t too pleased about it, put a black mark against Solo’s name. The Hutts don’t like to lose.” I said.

Vader nodded as though he knew more about that than he was willing to say.

“Why do you want to know about Solo?” I asked. “He’s a smuggler, small time.” I wondered if this had any connection to Thrawn asking me about smugglers and bounty hunters. I would not put it past them. Despite their differences the Captain and Lord Vader seemed to work closely together, completely opposite from one another but working towards a common goal. That thought was very unnerving.

“His ship was involved in an incident in Mos Eisley that I am investigating.” Vader said.

“It was the *Falcon* that blasted its way out of Bay 94?” I asked surprised.

There was a moment’s silence. “What do you know about *that*?”

I shrugged. “Just what my father told me. Not that much, there was some sort of fight and the *Millennium Falcon* blasted its way out of the bay 94. The docking bay was then closed for investigations. He said there had been trouble in the cantina too, rumours about a Jedi Knight waving a light saber around protecting some farmer’s kid from one of the local thugs.”

Vader had gone very still. “The name of this ‘farmer’s kid’?”

I shook my head. “No idea, we don’t have a lot of contact with the moisture farmers directly.” I said. “But, you know, papa mentioned that there had also been a series of killings out of town, a Jawa transport got hit and a moisture farm owned by a guy named Lars. He and his wife were killed. The Tusken were blamed for it but word on the street was it was the Empire. Maybe these incidents are related.”

“Lars? Owen Lars?” Vader asked. Suddenly there was a tension in the room that was making the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

“Maybe. Not too many people live out that way, near Anchorhead but I’d have to ask my father. He hears stuff all the time. The docking bay is a great place to be if you want the latest news and gossip.” I looked at him, wishing I could see past the mask. “You sound like you knew this farmer.”

“No.” he said but I tasted the lie behind that word. I did not press the issue. There was a new and sudden anger within Lord Vader that I didn’t understand. I was just glad it was not directed at me. He held out his hand and I gave him the data pad back.

“I will be away for a few days attending to business. I suggest you use the time to catch up on things.” He said. “I believe you were wishing to visit Theed?”

I nodded. “I have not been able to get there yet, so yes.” Letting him know I still had not done what he had asked with the Japor Snippet. He turned away from me, back to the window and the sorrow that I had tasted earlier came flooding back.

“See that you go. Theed is ...a beautiful city. It has an impressive library” He said almost quietly. Then the mood shifted once again and he was all business like and cold.

“Yes, my lord.”

“You may leave now. I trust you will continue your training with Master Kjestyll, I expect you to do well in these endeavours. It would displease me greatly should I hear you have not lived up to your full potential. We will have time to discuss your force training when I return. You may submit your daily reports via the usual channels, anything that is pressing can wait unless it is from the Emperor himself.” He said as he turned about, picked a different data pad from the consol near by. “This has information you will need and a list of things I require done before I return.” He said handing it to me.

“Yes, my lord.” I said as I took the data pad from his hand and watched as he turned away from me again. I stared at his back for longer than I should have and then left. I had no idea what to think of his moods and these strange conversations. I walked in silence, making my way back to the landing bay. The flight back to Naboo was a lot less stressful. By the time I got back to the office Master Kjestyll had replied that lessons would start immediately. He had set up a time and a place. All I had to do was show up. This meant I had a few hours to finish up, get some food and try to unwind a bit. The first two things would be easy

to do, but unwinding after being in the presence of Lord Vader was a damn near impossible task.

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It was easy for me to get lost in details and Theed was full of amazing details. I had never been to such a beautiful and ornate city. I had taken my ship because the retreat was so far away and finding the nearest shuttle-port was a big pain. I landed in the main star-port, paid the landing fees and walked out into the large square.

Theed is one of the older cities on Naboo and is the capitol. While its roots were in agriculture, slowly over time it became the aristocratic center of the planet. Theed is where the current queen lives.

The buildings are almost all made from a warm, honey coloured stone, decorated with ornate carvings. The roofs reminded me a little of Tatooine in that they were domes and rounded but instead of being made from sand they were made from a metal that had turned a pale emerald green colour with the weather. Beyond the edge of the city were green fields and pastures. All around there were trees and cultivated plants and gardens and through it all ran the Solleu River.

It was a humid day, the air filled with a sweet dampness that permeated everything. While the sky was still a hazy pale blue there were clouds massing off in the distance. Before the day was out it would rain, probably there would be thunder and lightening along with it. The city was full of people going about their business. Everything seemed so normal and calm. Imperial presence was low key and quiet here. The Nubian people were on the whole very peaceful. It was all very civilized and completely opposite to Mos Eisley, which always some how seemed chaotic and disorganized to me.

I had packed a small satchel with things I thought I might need. I had strung a thin leather string through the Japor snippet, wore it as a necklace and had it tucked under my clothes. It seemed like the safest place to keep it. I was pretty certain that almost no one on this planet would remotely get the significance of the snippet but I had also been sworn to secrecy so I wasn't taking any chances.

I made my way through the streets, browsing the shops and watching the people. There was an elegance here that was both calming and a little disarming all at the same time. People dressed up to go out and I must admit I felt a bit underdressed and back waterish but no one seemed to pay much attention to me. Just one more tourist in the capitol city here today off to the next sight seeing place tomorrow.

I found the library, which is actually a part of the Palace, almost by accident and decided that now was as good a time as any to poke my nose inside. It

was impressive and it was huge. Overwhelming might be a better word for it.

The architecture was stunning. The entrance to the palace is wide open and high with vaulted ceilings and marble inlay floor. Everything was ornate and delicate. There was an austere stillness to the building I found calming. I walked through it until I found someone to talk to. She directed me to the main library and I went in. There were shelves that went floor to ceiling with both electronic and print archives. I just stood there for a few moments and gazed in wonder at it all. I guess I must have attracted attention because it didn't take long before a very nice librarian came over and asked if I needed help. I had not even thought about why I was here or what I actually wanted. So I explained I was a tourist and was looking for some information about the history of Theed and then asked about the statue of Amidala.

The librarian smiled. "Ah yes, many people ask about that. She was much loved, such a shame."

I gave her an 'I am a stupid tourist can you explain that' look and she smiled and led me to an alcove and pointed me to the stacks there.

"She was queen of Naboo for two terms and then she became a senator. She reigned during difficult times and did much for her people. It was tragic that she died so young." The librarian said as she pulled out several data-files and handed them to me. "These are some of the more readable accounts of her life and if you should wish it there are some well written books in the gift shop I can write the titles down for you if you like."

I nodded. "That would be very kind." I said. "What do you mean by died so young?"

The librarian sighed. "She was just twenty seven when she was killed on Coruscant so the official story goes. No one knows how or why she was killed, it remains a mystery to this day. Poor thing, she was with child at the time. I was there for the funerary procession, terrible day for Naboo." She sighed. "She had done so much for her people, you see. She is considered a heroine by all Nubians."

"Does the statue mark her grave?"

"Oh heavens no." the librarian shook her head. "The statue was erected some years after her death, the Emperor thought it fitting to mark her passing. He was quite fond of her you know. They worked closely together while he was still a senator and she queen. I think he thought of her as a sort of daughter. He never had family of his own, poor man, must be quite lonely for him now. No, she is not buried here. Her family did not wish that, although it would have been fitting. Many of the past monarchs are laid to rest in the crypts below the palace. Her family took her body back to be buried near the Lake District, her favourite place, they said. I think they wished that she be left in peace. It is not an easy place to get to, although there is a boat that goes out to the island where the villa is twice a day for mail and supplies." She looked at me. "If you want I can tell you how to get

there.”

I nodded.

The librarian smiled. “She has inspired so many young women like yourself. It is so nice to be able to help you to some how get closer to her.”

I smiled. I didn't have the heart to tell this very enthusiastic woman I really and truly had no idea who Amidala was and that it had not been her that had inspired me to come here. I took the data pads and the list of recommended books and went to sit in one of the chairs provided and began to read. The only interruption was when the librarian returned to give me a detailed description of how to get to the Lake District and the burial site of Amidala. I sat and read. Time passed and I did not notice. The story of Amidala's life was fascinating and I was surprised that she had entered politics so young. It was a bit humbling to read that at the age where I had been pondering the mysteries of ship mechanics and arguing with my father about going to school, she had been queen of an entire planet and was busy running around saving her people. I almost jumped out of my skin when someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was the librarian again.

“I am sorry, dear, the library will be closing in fifteen minutes. If you have a library membership I can check that out for you,” she said nodding to the data pad in my hand. I shook my head.

“I am afraid I am not a resident of Naboo, just here for a short time.” I said, I did not want to get into details.

She smiled. “If you want to continue reading I suggest you stop by the gift shop, they have a copy of that particular book you have there. It is one of the better ones. They close soon too.” I nodded and thanked her for all her help.

The gift shop was easy to find and I bought several books. A couple on the history of Naboo itself and several about Amidala that the librarian and the shop clerk recommended to me. One was more filled with images than words and I felt my stomach drop when I saw Amidala's face. I must have turned very pale because the shop clerk asked if I was alright

I made the excuse of having not eaten all day which was the truth and asked if she knew of any good places to go for food. With a bag full of books and information and a head full of recommendations of where to eat, I left the Palace and made my way back across the bridge to towards the star port. I did not really feel like going out and sitting alone in a restaurant and I wanted to continue reading. I could cook and eat onboard my ship. That was the amazing thing about having my own ship, it was freedom to come and go.

By the time I reached the star-port it was dark and very wet. Lightening seared the sky and the thunder rumbled loudly. I was grateful the bag all my purchases were in was water proof because I was soaked to the skin. I talked to the dock-master and paid the fees for staying the night and another day. I was not sure about my plans, I had wanted to visit the statue as Lord Vader had asked but

somehow that seemed wrong. By the time I had dried off, changed clothes and made myself some supper I had decided that in the morning I would go out to the Lake District and visit her burial site. I could shuttle into the nearest town and transportation from there was, according to the librarian, fairly easy. There were enough people who wished to pay their respects to Amidala that a way to get there had been made available.

I sipped my tea and sat staring at the image in the one book that had startled me in the gift shop. This woman, who was so beautiful and so sad, was the same woman in the visions Lord Vader had projected at me. What was she to him? Why did he need her forgiveness? It made no sense to me. I absently ran my fingers over the smoothness of the Japor Snippet around my neck and sighed. Nothing was ever as it seemed, especially when it came to Lord Vader. I was surrounded by men who were shrouded in mystery and untold stories.

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The journey out to the Lake District was a lot easier than I had thought it would be and it was quiet. Which was fine by me, I didn't want conversation and I was glad of the solitude. I found the people and the places I was supposed to according to the Librarian's way description easily enough and it seemed that visiting the burial site of this past Queen was not unusual. People were kind and helpful and before I really knew it I was sitting in a small boat being taken to a secluded spot hidden in the lakes amongst the mountains.

I sat quietly, feeling a little uneasy on the water in the little boat which was operated by a man who had said no more than two words to me. He wasn't unfriendly, he was just quiet. This was a new experience for me and I was not altogether sure how I liked being surrounded by all this water, deep and dark. I found it unnerving and I was never more thankful that Thrawn had taught me learn how to swim than at that moment.

As unnerving as it was it was so beautiful. All around the lakes the hills and mountains rose majestically, covered in lush green vegetation. Everything here seemed alive and shimmering. Down by the water's edge, long branched sleepy trees, covered in pretty pale pink flowers decorated the shore line, the scent of the blooms wafted across the water, sweet, like honey. Birds with long wing spans flew high above the lake on thermals in large lazy circles. I was awed by their grace.

Despite all the wonders to be seen, I was glad when we reached our destination. In the desert I was at home and comfortable, there I knew how to survive but out in the middle of a large lake, in a small unstable boat, surrounded by lush green hills, well that was another thing.

The small warf was half hidden in the little inlet and stone wall. We docked and the silent man helped me out.

"I will be back for you in an hour, Miss. The weather isn't going to hold, it's bad sailing on the lake when the storms come through." He said. "Please be here, awaiting." He said.

I nodded. "Thank you." I said as I looked around to see where I was supposed to go next.

The boat pilot smiled. "Go up the hill, Miss, just follow the path and go on to the terrace, just beyond there you'll see a garden and the grave marker. You can't miss it."

"Thank you." I smiled back at him. I guess he had done this many, many times.

I hitched my satchel across my shoulder and began my way up the stone stairs. I was glad it was a nice day, not too hot, not too cold. The sun played hide and seek with big fluffy clouds and the breeze was just enough to keep the flies away. I looked up at the sky, didn't look like a storm was coming in but I had seen how fast the weather could change here. I believed the boat man when he said it would get nasty.

It was exactly as the boat man had said, across the terrace and through the wrought iron gateway into a small, beautifully tended garden. Right in the middle of this was a simple carved stone grave marker surrounded by a circle of smooth greenish pebbles which I guessed had come from the lakeshore. The grass was manicured and lush. The flower beds that were set against the walls were filled with all manner of colourful flowers and plants. Someone spent a lot of time here tending to this place. It had a peaceful, serene feel to it.

I walked to the stone marker and knelt down at its side. The carvings in the stone were delicate, floral and vine patterns that decorated the edge and around the name which was Padmé Amidala Naberrrie. There was no other writing and no other information, just her name and this place. I reached out to touch the stone half expecting to feel something, anything that would explain Lord Vader's connection to this long dead woman but the stone gave me nothing. It was just stone, smooth and warmed by the sunlight. I slipped the Japor Snippet from around my neck, and held it in my hand. The bone like carving still held the heat from being next to my skin. I closed my eyes and tried to conjure up the force, perhaps I could sense something if I were more relaxed but that did not help either. So I just knelt there for a while, in the sunlight, next to this grave full of questions to which there were no answers.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Someone said behind me.

I jumped at the voice. I had not heard her approach nor had I felt her presence. I looked up to see an older but still lovely woman. She had a regal face and beautiful dark hair that was greying at the temples. She had a basket in her arms full with hand gardening tools.

"I didn't mean to startle you." She said.

I went to stand up but she gestured for me to stay as I was. "I'm not intruding am I?" I asked.

"No, but this time of year is usually quiet, no longer peak tourist season. I wasn't expecting anyone here." She said. "I come up once a week to tend to the garden." She said setting her basket down. "Are you a student? Are you writing a paper? You are too young to have any memories of Padmé in person."

"No. No I am not a student. I was told about her by someone I work for and the librarian in Theed told me about this place. I just wished to pay my respects." I said. I had the Japor Snippet in my fingers and was playing with it absently. "Do you work here?"

The woman smiled and it was sad smile. "No, my family owns this property. I am Sola Naberrrie. Padmé was my little sister."

"Oh, I am so sorry." I said.

"It was a long time ago." She replied quickly, letting me know this was her standard response.

I looked at her, the sadness of loss was etched into her face, it showed in her eyes when she spoke her sister's name. I knew how that felt. "Well, they say that time heals these sorts of wounds but it doesn't, not really. I don't think you ever stop missing people that you love."

She gave me a speculative look. "You know, don't you? What it feels like to lose someone."

"My mother." I said. "She was killed when I was young. I still miss her."

She nodded. "Most people come out of curiosity I think. They lay flowers, look at the stone and then leave. I am never sure what they are thinking when they stare at her grave. It seems strange to me that she attracts so much attention such a long time after her death. She was a brilliant young woman." She sighed. "It's odd, really, of all the moments and memories I have of her I always think about the last time I saw her."

I nodded. I understood that. "Funny how that works out isn't it."

She looked at the snippet in my hand. "What is that?"

"It's called a Chullpah." I said, letting her hold it. "It is carved from a Japor Snippet. It is traditional for people from my home world to lay them at graves and burial sites. But they are also good luck charms, tokens of affection as well."

"It is beautiful." She said handing it back. "Where is your home world?"

"Tatooine. The snippet carving is something the settlers learned from the Sand People."

Sola smiled. "Padmé wore one like that around her neck only hers was a little larger and it had different markings on it. A little boy from Tatooine gave it to her when she was quite young, while she was still queen." She smiled at the memory. "He was a slave. I remember Padmé was outraged when she told me about it. She could not believe that slavery still existed. Anyway, this boy helped

her and the people who were protecting her. One of the Jedi knights with her managed to free him from his master.”

“What happened to him, the little boy?”

“He went on to become a Jedi Knight himself. Funny really, because when she worked as a Senator this same boy was assigned to watch over her. Anakin Skywalker was his name.” she smiled. “They came to the Lake District to stay, to hide. She came home for a few days and he was with her. I teased her about it. I used to tease her about boys all the time. They liked each other, but of course he was a Jedi. ”

I smiled but that name rang a bell with me. I had heard it before I just could not recall where. “What did that have to do with them liking each other?” I asked.

“The Jedi were forbidden to have attachments, no romance or anything of that nature. Padmé explained that to me after dinner. The Jedi way was a hard path to walk I think. I know he was in love with her, you could see it in his eyes when he looked at her especially when he thought no one was watching and I would bet my life she felt the same for him.”

I looked at her. “How sad. Did they stay friends?”

“I don’t know. It was around that same time the Clone Wars started, she was more often than not on Coruscant, we did not hear from her all that often and she never spoke of him. They probably went their separate ways. She was very devoted to duty, she would not abandon that for love, I don’t think.” She shook her head and sighed. “Here I am boring you with all this nonsense and I don’t even know your name. I am sorry.”

“My name is Merlyn it is not boring at all. You have made her seem so alive to me. I am touched and grateful.”

Sola smiled and nodded. “Pretty name. Suits you.”

It was my turn to smile and feel a little shy. “I hope this is not a rude question, but how did she die, the books are all very vague about it?”

“No one knows.” She answered. “We were told she had been killed on Coruscant. No one knew how or who was responsible but it was a terrible time, chaos everywhere. The Jedi were being exterminated and it was war. My family investigated the death when things were more stable but there was nothing. She was pregnant when she was killed, did you know that?”

I shook my head. It wasn’t mentioned in the book I had been reading. “And the boy, Anakin?”

“I don’t know, I think he was killed when the Jedi were purged. We never heard from him or anything about him. He vanished but at that time many Jedi vanished.” Sola said and was quiet for a moment then said. “She was a beautiful girl with a lovely heart. I still miss her.”

I was about to answer her but I heard shouting. “Oh no, the boat...”

Sola smiled and patted my arm. “You do what it is you came here to do. I know him I’ll talk to him. He won’t leave without you.” She said and she hurried away.

I knelt at grave marker, knowing this long dead woman suddenly a whole lot better than I had an hour ago. I took the Japor Snippet that Lord Vader had given me and I buried it on the east side of the stone deep underneath the pebbles. I whispered the traditional words that went along with it and then went to leave but before I did I picked up two smooth, round deep dark green stones and slid them into my satchel. I didn’t know why I had done that but I needed to take something. I felt a strange sadness at leaving. There was a peace and a stillness in this small garden that touched me deeply. I made my way back down to the water where Sola and the boat Master were waiting.

“I’m sorry I didn’t realise how late it was.” I said.

“T’is alright Miss, it happens.” He said.

Sola nodded. “We’ve known Jacob a long time, he is used to it.”

I smiled. “It was really nice to meet you.” I told her. Her smile was warm and kind. When she took my hands in hers and gave them a squeeze I smiled.

“Yes, it is not often I feel I can speak with people about my sister. Perhaps we will meet again.” She said as I got in the boat.

“I would like that. Thank you.” I said as Jacob pushed us back from the dock and we made our way back out into the lake.

We made it back to the other side just as the rain began and by the time I got to the shuttle port it was pouring. The journey back to Theed I barely noticed. I was wracking my brains as to why the name Anakin Skywalker was so familiar to me. I made to Theed just after supper time and by the time I made it back to the Retreat it was shortly after eight. What had started out as a down pour was now a full blown summer storm. The wind blew the rain horizontally into my face and the lightening and thunder were so loud and so bright that it amazed and almost scared me. By the time I got to my house I was soaked through to the skin and shivering.

I lay awake in bed a long time watching the lightening flash through the window. Sleep it seemed was not going to come easy. I tried to remember where I had heard the name Anakin Skywalker before but that memory remained elusive and out of my reach. When sleep finally did come it was filled with terrible dreams. I awoke bathed in cold sweat with my heart pounding. What I had dreamed I could not remember but the lingering sense of terror and loss stayed. It was half past five in the morning and I knew there would be no more sleep for me so I got up. I dressed warmly, made tea and took my cup to my favourite spot near the water and sat to watch the sun rise. I hoped that Lord Vader would be reachable because I wanted to tell him the job he had given me was done. Maybe that would be the end of the dreams and the restlessness that had accompanied this whole thing. I

hoped so but somehow I didn't really believe it.

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Now that I had my own ship and was mobile Lord Vader no longer saw any reason why I should not come to him rather than meet at the retreat. Being at his beck and call was part and parcel of this job but flying all over the galaxy to do this job was not what I had imagined when I had signed my contract. I wondered more than once why he simply did not request I be stationed on board the ship with him and be done with it, but one of the pilots I had been speaking to told me that while Lord Vader spent a great deal of his time aboard the *Devastator* it was not the only ship he travelled on or with.

I suppose it made as much sense to me as anything else around here did. I didn't really mind the travelling, I liked flying and any chance to practice and get to know my ship better was a very good thing. It was just a little frustrating when it interfered with my training schedule. I hated having to send messages to Master Kjestyll that I would not be meeting with him as usual due to my own hectic work time table. In the end he sorted this out for me and arranged that we met when we could and in between I had a list of lessons to work on.

Some people might think this was dull but space can be dull without things to do. Even things that seem mindless, like repetitive exercises, can suddenly become fascinating. The long gaps in between hyperspace jumps needed something to fill them and there were only so many books I had to read. The midship's common area had become on more than one occasion turned into an impromptu training area for me. While there was not enough space to practice large polearm work I could certainly go through the motions and movements I knew. The style of martial art that Master Kjestyll was teaching required no weapon. In some ways it was good for me to not be able to fall back on the easier style I had been used to. I felt almost naked without a polearm or stick in my hands, less strong somehow, but Master Kjestyll had said that the style of combat I was now learning required nothing more than force of will, concentration and a body in good physical shape.

'Your body and your mind and your spirit working as one', he had said 'will be a far more powerful weapon than you running around the galaxy, half trained wielding a big stick.'

The tone of my lessons with Master Kjestyll had shifted after my return from the mission with Captain Thrawn. There was not much I could hide from my Master it seemed and I was almost glad that this was the case. There was no one else for me to talk to and although I had been very careful not give any details, the tone of what had happened on Myrkr had not been lost on him.

"Something lies heavy upon your heart. Something in your spirit has

shifted." It was the first thing he said to me as we met for my first lesson upon returning to Naboo.

I knelt in the center of the room in the meditation pose, trying to collect myself but found it hard. Images of the hunt flashed through my mind and no matter how hard I tried I could not turn them away. Master Kjestyll has stood behind me, as always, calm and thoughtful.

"You will find no peace as long as you carry this weight. Stand up, child so that I might look into your eyes." He said.

I did as I was bid.

"You have seen death and you have taken a life." He said. It was not a question but I answered it with a nod anyway. I wondered how he could tell this from just looking into my face. It was though the bloody markings Thrawn as Za'ar had placed upon my face were still there.

"Man or beast?" he asked.

"It was a creature. It attacked me, I defended myself." I said. I did not tell him that chances were good I would have killed a man as well if that moment had come. It never even occurred to me that he might be talking about the fact that I had died and been brought back to life. Of course, that was something I had pushed to the very back of my mind and did not even want to think about let alone talk about.

"How did it feel to take this life?" he asked. The question was unexpected and I frowned. The Imperial way was not to question if lives were lost be they creature or sentient beings. He waited for me to answer never taking his eyes from mine. I wanted to look away but dared not break the contact.

"Sad," I answered after a long time. "Sad yet at the same time, powerful as well. I don't know how to describe it. It happened so fast that I didn't think I just reacted. I cannot put it into words."

"Would you have killed it if your life were not in danger?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No."

"The power comes from knowing you have that ability to give or take life. The sadness tells me that you have not sold your soul to this power." He said. "You were not alone when this occurred?"

I shook my head. I had given no names and said nothing that would indicate who I had been with but Master Kjestyll seemed to understand that secrecy was a part of what ever it was I had been through and he did not press.

"The one who was with you, he acknowledged this event for you." And while once again it was not a question I nodded. I opened my mouth to tell him about what Za'ar had done but he waved his hand at me, silencing the words on my lips.

"I do not need to hear or know the details. These things are sacred and secret. Each tribe has their way but he probably marked you, most likely with the

blood of the kill and gave you a name to mark the rite of passage if his ways follow that of a Hunting society. While the methods of marking and the naming differ from tribe to tribe, species to species these things follow a similar path. I do not need to know what or how because I see the results in your eyes. You have taken the first steps away from childhood and I shall treat you accordingly. I merely needed to confirm this was so.”

I made a face. All this talk about me stepping away from my childhood made me both sad and annoyed at the same time. I was not a child and I had not felt like one for a very long time. Yet, in some deep part of me I knew he was right just as Za’ar had been right. Myrkr had marked me for better or worse, it had changed who I was and how I saw myself. How exactly was something I didn’t know. It irked me to be called a child but I was somehow saddened by this strange need to mark the step away from being one. It made me wonder what childhood really was and why we need to celebrate the fall from grace and loss of innocence.

I looked at Master Kjestyll and sighed. What he had been teaching me coupled with my own weirding ways had probably saved my life on Myrkr. How he could tell all of this from just being in my presence both awed and troubled me.

“Child, you possess a powerful ability. Gifts that come from the Force are a double edged blade, while they can be used as tools and weapons for your own use they can and will be turned against you if you allow it. What I teach you allows you a way to pass through this power without the dangers of it ever owning your soul. This teaching was built around being able to take the energy from the Force and those who wield it and deflecting it back against them without letting it destroy you. What others teach you...” he shrugged. “You must use your own inner guide for that.”

“Lord Vader said a name for your teachings, he called it ...” again he held up his hand, silencing me.

“We do not speak that name here or anywhere. Honour this above all else.” He had said and I had bowed in the traditional manner, from the waist with my hands flat together to acknowledge his request. I wanted to know why this was so but dared not even ask.

“Now, return to meditation pose and let us see if we can release some of these demons that create the tension which blocks your shi-lu.” He tapped my solar plexus. “That place where energy comes from, your center of being.”

I did as he had asked and for three solid hours all we worked on were ways for me to rid myself of tension. I, although I did not think that being a personal assistant was a stressful job, was not a relaxed person. It had never occurred to me that there were so many places and so many ways one’s body stored its stress. At the end of the session I was exhausted but a whole lot more relaxed. I was able to think clearly and my shoulders did not feel as though they were permanently placed up by my ears and made of stone any more.

In the lessons that had followed I was able to center much faster than ever before and with each session my ability to find that place where the energy I needed to fight came from became easier and easier. It was like tapping into a brilliant ball of light. Perhaps knowing that what I was learning not only could but someday would save my life made it all the more important for me to learn it properly. Many of my lessons were held in almost complete silence. I watched and emulated what master Kjestyll did. When I did the movement wrong he corrected me and we repeated it until I perfected it. This style or martial art was all grace and fluid beauty. Each movement aligned the next with an energy that was invisible but all around me yet did not tap directly into the Force and use it. I could feel the Force dance around me and I knew it was there but this form of fighting seemed to move with it rather than use it or fight against it. We would start off with the motions and movements being slow and deliberate but as I became more proficient in each movement so we sped up the move. It was a style of dance that was as stunningly beautiful as it was viciously deadly.

There were moments when in order to demonstrate how a move should look Master Kjestyll would show me by completing the motion himself. I did not think it possible for any one to move with such certainty and speed. He would become a blur. I would quietly despair of ever being so good but never said anything about my fears to him. It served no purpose to tell him something I was almost certain he already knew.

Something had changed within me and I had not been able to figure out exactly what it was. I approached my lessons with more seriousness than I had before. I could not put my finger on what it was exactly but it niggled in the back of my mind. So after one particularly gruelling session that we had chosen to do outside in the quiet of a secluded area near the lake I had asked what had changed.

“You have killed.” Was the answer I was given. “It is too simple an answer?” Master Kjestyll has smiled.

I nodded.

“Before, when you came to me, you were a girl, learning the movements as though they were choreography for a dance recital, hearing the philosophy without truly understanding its meaning. Now, you return from this journey of yours having put to practice that which you have learned. You went beyond the memorized steps and the borrowed knowledge.” He said. “You have discovered that if you must you can complete the action through to the death blow. This knowledge gives you strength, which in turn allows a certain level of confidence, and that confidence allows you to step over the hurdles your fear creates.” He gave me a slight smile that never really reached his eyes. “It was the biggest question written in your eyes when you first came to me.”

“Could I kill if I had to?”

He nodded. “Yes. And now you know the answer. That answer is yes. You

have faced this demon and overcome it. You will not hesitate should you come face to face with this challenge again.”

I wasn't so sure of that last statement though, killing an animal that was about to have you for lunch was one thing killing another person, well that was another. “A man I know told me that killing changes you and takes away from you.” I said thinking on Thrawn's words to me that night on the balcony when he had kissed me for the very first time. “Killing an animal is one thing...”

“Killing is killing. Life is to be valued no matter what it is.” Master Kjestyll said. “And he was right. To take a life away from any creature or being is a life altering experience. It is not something ever to be done lightly although there are many in this galaxy who do not think this way. Do not be fooled, child, they pay a heavy price for the debts they incur. I do not worry about you ending up like this. Despite what you think and may feel, despite your own doubts and worries in your soul, your Shi-lu, you honour life above death. The challenge is to hold onto this honour and see it as important above all else, even when anger and fear tell you otherwise.” He must have read something on my face. “I know that is not the way of Lord Vader or his Master. I know that Lord Vader will instruct you to find your strength and your power through the energy that anger and hatred will give you but it is not your path, child. Even now you fight against his ways, conflicted with your desire to please him but eventually he will see what I already know and find a teaching method more in accordance to your needs or he will destroy you in the process.” He had tucked two fingers under my chin then and lifted my downcast face upward to look him in the eyes.

“You and only you know what is in your heart. You and only you dictate the path you walk. Others may guide and advise but only you may walk it and you do so alone. I do not know how strong your particular touch with the force is nor in what direction your particular gifts lie but I do know this, you are not weak minded nor are you easily led astray from your own beliefs or morals. I know and trust that you will take all knowledge that is given to you, that you will learn from all those who would teach you and use the best of it to the best of your abilities without losing your way.” He paused for a moment to correct my posture on one of the cool down stretches. “You have a difficult road to walk because you have chosen that strange and elusive middle path, neither one thing nor the other. Whatever your destiny is, all I can do is provide you with good tools to help you along the way.” I listened to these words with a sense of wonder. I knew at that moment that I adored him the way a child will look up to and even love a favourite teacher or mentor.

I looked at him and nodded. I could not help but wonder how this man came to be in the employ of the Emperor with views on life such as he had. I had felt the darker side of the Force and knew that this was not it. Master Kjestyll was one of the Emperor's most valued martial arts trainers. It was a great honour to be

considered one of his students. I knew this from the whispers I had heard. I knew he was held in high esteem because even when Lord Vader spoke his name there was a level of respect in the dark Lord's voice that was not apparent when he spoke of others. I had wanted to ask on more than one occasion, why master Kjestyll worked for the Empire but somehow it seemed far too personal a question and I did not dare. It was just another little mystery in a long line of things that didn't make sense to me because I did not know the whole story.

These discussions with Master Kjestyll were rare and to be treasured. He did not often give lengthy speeches such as these and almost never were they so open and honest. But we were outside and away from the retreat in the quiet of the woods. I knew that the rooms in the retreat building were all bugged and filled with surveillance equipment, that internal spies were everywhere. The Emperor liked to be kept informed no matter what. There were few secrets within the Empire and little that the Emperor did not know.

I pondered these moments and conversations as I travelled through space to meet Lord Vader and questioned my feelings and connection with him. Under the tutelage of Master Kjestyll I felt safe. His hands were gentle and his guidance subtle and non threatening. Lord Vader scared me but that did not override my desperate need to please him. I craved his attention and his teachings even though I knew they were both brutal and about as subtle as a sandstorm. These two mentors in my life were at complete opposite ends of the spectrum. Where everyone else was in between, I had no idea. I was starting to wonder if there were not too many influences in my life, too many hands, all pulling me in too many different directions. I certainly did not understand where everyone fit into my life or how I fit into theirs. It was a sobering and very discomfoting thought.

I met up with Lord Vader in the Mid Rim near the planet of Ando. He was on his way to talk to a Bothan informant who lived somewhere in the area on an asteroid. Void Station, this spy's home was called. It did not sound appealing to me and I was not happy to be pulled away from Naboo. In a short time we would all be back on Coruscant and I did not want to think about this move. I liked Naboo too much and I did not want to leave its softness and its lush green beauty. The thought of heading back to the Imperial City and all its noise, glittering durasteel buildings and bright lights made me sad.

I had not actually seen Lord Vader face to mask, so to speak, since visiting Padmé's grave and had been almost dreading this particular meeting. I had arrived and was shown to my quarters by an officer I didn't know and whose name I did not learn. I was to stay on board ship for two days while Lord Vader made this short visit to Void Station. Catch up on tings I guessed. As usual Lord Vader was not very specific. I was glad to get to spend some time with him but by the same token I worried about it. I had some time to refresh myself. I changed clothes because the ship was, as always, too cold for my tastes. Since I had no uniform, I

wore a long skirt and long sleeved top, over which I wore a sleeveless long coat. It kept me warm at least.

I waited for Lord Vader in one of the conference rooms. I was too edgy to sit so I stood in front of the view port and stared out into the inky space. The stone from Padmé's grave site sat in my pocket. I resisted the urge to play with it by clasping my hands behind my back.

We were far enough away from Ando that all I could see of it was a small bluish ball surrounded by its sun. I knew from studying the maps and star charts of the region that room was not too far away but you needed to be on the other side of the ship to be able to see it if it was actually visible from here at all. I liked knowing where I was.

I did not need to turn around when the door opened to know Lord Vader had entered the room, the sound of his mechanical breathing was tell tale sign enough, that and the ripple of the force that made all the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I did not have time to turn around to face him before he had stridden across the room and was standing at my side. He folded his arms and gazed to the same spot I had.

"The planet Ando. Two moons, single sun. It has water on ninety-five percent of its surface and a population of eight hundred and fifty million inhabitants." Lord Vader said coolly. It never ceased to amaze me that he could spout off these facts about almost every world he encountered.

I looked up at him. I could not imagine a planet mostly covered in so much water. We had both come from a planet where water was so scarce people would kill just for a cup of it. I said nothing, there did not seem to be much to say. The correspondence and important matters had already been delivered to him. I went back to staring out of the window until Lord Vader broke the silence.

"You went to Theed?" he asked after a very long while.

I nodded. "yes."

"You did as I asked?" he continued to stare out of the window.

I went to answer but hesitated just enough that he turned to look at me.

"Yes and no." I said, feeling the heat of his gaze.

"Explain."

"The place where you wished me to lay the Chullpah was too crowded and there was no place to bury it as tradition dictates." I said. Thinking about the very public place where the statue was situated. He remained silent but watched me intently. I continued. "So I went to her grave and I buried the snippet there. It lies under the stones, to the east as tradition dictates. I spoke the words of passage. Her spirit should know your message." I said.

The air rippled and I shuddered.

"Where is this place?" he asked after a long pause.

So I told him, describing the journey I had taken to reach the site of

Amidala's grave. When I was done I reached into my pocket and pulled out the stone I had with me. The other one sat on my bedside table in the house on Theed.

"I brought you this." I said.

I went to hand it to him but instead of letting me drop it in his open palm he took my hand, with the stone in his. He wrapped his large gloved hand about mine so that my own fingers curled around the stone and gripped it tightly. His hold was strong, almost painful but I resisted struggling because I knew that was futile.

"Show me." He demanded.

"My lord, I don't...I can't..." I protested. I knew what it was he wanted but I needed to be relaxed and calm to even consider doing what he was asking. I tried to pull away from him but he did not let go of my hand, instead he increased the pressure and repeated the demand.

I took a very deep breath and pulled into play all the relaxation techniques that Master Kjestyll had been teaching me. Lord Vader did not interrupt or speak but I was more than aware of his hold which trapped my small hand in his. I struggled to push this to the back of my mind and I let go of my nervousness and my fear. I thought only about that day, that trip. When I was relaxed enough the images came and flowed about me. I felt him connect with my mind rather than intrude. I showed him everything I could, the lake, the garden, the sunlight up on the grave stone, Sola and her smile, me burying the Chullpah, the longing and the sadness and the desire to stay in this small sacred place. The images were chaotic and my thoughts disorganised. I could not edit or sift through them, I did not have that skill so he felt everything I had felt, saw all I had seen, knew all that I knew and when I was done I pulled away from his grasp as fast as I could. I did not want this contact, it burned. He did not try to stop me. This sharing of images mind to mind was intimate and personal and I didn't know how to cope with it and the mess that usually accompanied it.

I held the stone out to him with a trembling hand. The air was thick with tension. I thought he was going to slap my hand away or worse, hit me but instead he turned his back to me without doing anything. I sensed rather than knew that he was in conflict and what I had shared with him had only made this worse. I did not understand why he had given me this task or why he had wanted to share it in such an intimate and chaotic manner especially when it only served to make him angrier than he usually was.

"Leave me." He said his voice was rough. The room filled with emotions I did not understand. He was overwhelmed by grief and loss, fighting back the desire to be violent. Raw and unchecked, I experienced these things as though they were a physical force. All my defences were down, so everything he felt poured into me and it made me unsteady on my feet. I did not, could not move. He spun around to face me, towering over me. The sadness I had felt, swiftly being

channelled into anger. I understood that trick. Anger was easier to cope with than grief. I did not understand his grief at all and because I had opened my mind to him I had left myself vulnerable to his emotions. Everything that whirled through the room I felt and it was far too much to deal with. I did not have the tools or the talent to cope. I felt gutted and raw.

“I shall not tell you again, girl. Leave, now!” his voice was a low snarl, his anger building up like an oncoming storm when it exploded it would be deadly.

I wanted to say something, anything that would break this terrible aching sadness that had wrapped itself around me, inside of me but my survival instinct told me that leaving would be the best and the smartest thing I could do. I backed away from him without turning around and never taking my eyes from his face-mask. I placed the stone on the desk and left the room without a word. I felt as though my heart was breaking and I did not know why.

Blindly, I made my way back the quarters I had been assigned and once the door behind me had closed I slid gracelessly to the floor, buried my face in my hands and wept uncontrollably. I had no idea why I was crying or for whom. I ached from this bitter pain, deep in my gut. The last time I had felt this way was when my mother had died. Then the grief had, at first, left me empty and angry and only after a long time had passed, did the sadness come and only then had I wept. It was bewildering to go through these emotions again especially since this time they were not even mine. It was as though I was grieving for him because he could not. All that sorrow it had to go somewhere. It was a terrible experience. If he lived with that day in day out no wonder he was in such an awful mood all the time. He never let go of his pain. It fuelled him, it made him strong but it also tore him apart.

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As a rule I was not a melancholy person but I lacked the ability to deal with the emotions that had been dumped upon me by Lord Vader. When there were no more tears left to cry and that dull ache of despair had settled itself firmly in my gut, I curled up in a chair and stared mindlessly into space for hours. I don't know how long I sat there and I didn't care.

I had ignored all attempts anyone had made to get in touch with me, including answering the door or my personal comm. I just sat. So when the door to my quarters was finally opened from the outside, the lock overridden by a higher command, I probably should have been worried but I wasn't.

Backlit by the bright hallway, Lord Vader stood in the door way and stared. I glanced up at him from where I sat and then went back to gazing out of the window. I could sense he was angry with me, perhaps angry enough to finally get rid of me. I welcomed the release from this horrible emptiness that the

probable death at his hands would bring.

For a moment time stood still, the officers in the corridor behind him all held their breath. The only sounds were the distant hum of the ship and the mechanics of Lord Vader's breathing.

“Leave!” He commanded and even in my own sorry state I sensed the relief that surged from these men as they hurried away, back to their respective duties and places as far from Vader as they could manage. He walked into the dark room, the door hissing shut behind him and came to stand in front of the window, deliberately blocking my view. I sat there wondering why he just didn't get my execution over with and be done with it. Instead he simply stood there, still and statue like, hands clasped behind his back, the rhythmic breathing filling the room.

Eventually he spoke. “I have been amiss in your training.” He said. “I underestimated your ability to absorb emotions from others. It is such a rare and unusual force talent that it is easily overlooked. You seem unusually gifted in this area. I should have seen it sooner, as it ties in directly with your ability to sense deception.”

I stared at his back and said nothing.

“Without the proper tools this ability to empathise and feel the emotions of others will tear you apart. You absorb all that is around you and take it as your own until you no longer know who you are. What you feel now does not belong to you yet it consumes you as though it did. It is of little wonder you resist my teachings and are so difficult to train. Your own talents make you nearly useless as a dark side adept. Still, the Emperor has impressed up on me his wishes that you be taught to control and apply your various talents.” He paused a moment to let his next statement sink in. “He does not feel my instructing you is a waste of my time. He feels you will be of some small value to the Empire, that your unique talent combination makes you useful in areas where brute force does not work.”

I wasn't certain I liked the sound of that and the not so subtle barb about me wasting Vader's time had stung, as it was meant to. I sensed disappointment in him that I was turning less and less into the ideal student he had originally foreseen. Yet for all that, whether he or I liked it or not, the bond that had been forged between us was there, stronger than ever. I remained silent. Mulling over what he had said.

I had always been very sensitive to what others were feeling and thinking. For as long as I could recall I could walk into a room and tell who was happy and who was not. I saw emotions the way most people saw colour. I picked up stray thoughts and images from those around me with the same casualness people picked up something they had dropped on the floor. Sometimes, I was even able to get feelings, pictures from objects that I touched. To a certain extent I had learned to block these sensations but it was impossible when the emotions were as overwhelming and as powerful as those Lord Vader had showered me with. I was

aware that this gift enabled me to manipulate others but usually I tried to avoid that and I shuddered when I thought about what I had done to Ormante's men, what I had done to Za'ar.

Lord Vader's voice broke into my thoughts. "You are useless in this current state so we will begin by teaching you some rudimentary methods of shielding yourself." He said and before I had time to even consider answering he had turned, grabbed me by the upper arm and hauled me out of the chair to stand. He dragged me out into the hall, the light was so bright it made me squint, and marched down the corridors to one of his training rooms. I had to run to keep up with him and not have my arm torn out of its socket in the process. The pitying glances of the men that we passed did little to make me feel better.

The room was smaller than most and dimly lit. I would have thought that this served the purpose of a meditation chamber but the absence of Lord Vader's hyperbaric chamber told me this was not the case.

"Sit." He barked once the door was closed and I was standing almost in the middle of the room. Without thinking I dropped into meditation pose but before I could even get comfortable he had hauled me to my feet once again.

"No," he said, "desert style." and proceeded to sit in just that way across from me. His annoyance and impatience filled the room, curling itself around me the way his cloak wrapped about him. I sat down again, this time with my legs crossed and my arms resting in my lap.

"Now, use what you have been taught and find your center." He instructed and to my surprise he began to do the same. I felt the shift as he began to focus his thoughts and his emotions. I sighed and worked to slow my breathing down. To listen to my own heart beat and find that place within where all energies became one. We sat in stillness.

Only when he had centered himself, focussing his powers, his anger to a single point and when he was certain that I had found a place where I could at least begin to listen and accept what ever training he was about give did he break the silence.

He told me to describe what I had felt when I had picked up the emotions and the images from him that morning.

"It was like the worst ever sandstorm imaginable and I stand in it without out shelter, without any place to hide or go. It is as if the sand and the wind replace all that it is inside of me with emptiness. It is a place without hope or light. Your pain, your sorrow is so vast and so empty... there is no hope." I choked on the words, the ache of the pain flooding back to me in an unexpected rush.

"You leave yourself open and vulnerable. Even now I can see you struggle. You must learn to see without absorbing everything you feel into yourself. You do not have enough Force strength to do that and stay sane." He said. "What Master Kjestyll teaches you is how to protect yourself from physical attack, use the same

technique to block the stream of emotion."

I looked up at him. "How in the name of Sarlacc do I do that? The two things are as different as night and day?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, they are not different. You just perceive them as such. It is all energy. Does master Kjestyll not teach you how to deflect physical energy by absorbing it into your body and then to redirect it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then use that." He said and without warning I found myself suddenly engulfed in a blistering anger. I sucked in my breath and fought the wave of nausea that accompanied it.

"Block it." Lord Vader said in a low growl.

It hurt, this anger. It was a sickening, mental assault that twisted me from the inside out. I wanted to lash back at him but I did not have the strength. I took a deep shuddering breath and remembered the words from Master Kjestyll. 'Do not try to find the stillness, become the stillness.' It was something for me to cling to. I concentrated on the memory of his voice, I remembered the day he had taught me this saying and how it had felt when I had found that quiet place where all energy gathered.

It was a small thing and tenuous at best but it was a start. This anger that Lord Vader lashed out at me was as vicious as a sandstorm but even storms must blow themselves out and winds must eventually die down. So I pictured the great Dune Sea in my mind and imagined the anger as the wind flowing all over this wide vast and empty place. I held the image of the clear night sky in my mind and allowed the energy to flow upwards towards the stars and beyond, the way the heat from the day will vanish in the night. To my surprise it had worked. The anger that had filled me to the point of almost consuming me had gone leaving only quietness in its wake, but it had taken a lot of effort and I was trembling from it.

"Again." He instructed.

And so we continued over and over again. Each time it became a little easier to deal with and deflect the onslaught of emotions that he assaulted me with.

"I see a small improvement. Now, once more." He said and again I was assaulted with an emotion, but this time instead of the anger he had been using it was that same bitter sorrow I had felt earlier and along with it came images, perhaps unintentional, of a young woman, beautiful and vivacious, the same woman whose grave I had visited. I heard her laughter in my mind and felt her touch upon my skin as if it were my memory and not one from someone else. There was passionate desire and so much all consuming love I thought I would drown in it. The worst of it was all through these carefully preserved memories lay the anguish of loss. I was suddenly, completely immersed in it all.

"If you cannot learn to control this, you will die, girl." He hissed.

How could I fight against the almost overwhelming strength of these memories and this terrible pain? I doubled over and fought the scream I wanted to let lose. How could I combat such grief especially since it was also mine? I too, had suffered the loss of someone I dearly loved. This anguish was also in me. I fought to clear my head and find a way to go beyond the suffering.

I turned my thoughts away from what he was showing me and grasped at a memory that was mine and only mine, my mother. At first I pictured my mother's smile and that was a place to start. Slowly, I found space to think. I envisioned her arms holding me tightly and the sweetness of her comfort. Once I was in a place where I felt safe, I let the visions and emotions Lord Vader was forcing on me come.

I thought about this dead woman's sister and the grave site, both of which had been at peace. I let his sorrow wash through me and pour into the water of the lake in my own memory. I let the images of her smile and the sound of her laughter linger so that soon it was all I heard. Then I opened myself up fully as I was able to, allowed the energy that was my center to shine and let the connection I had with Lord Vader act as a conduit. This bond worked two ways. I touched that space we shared, that tenuous thread and I sent these images and these memories back to him. I pushed my own impressions of that place surrounded by the beauty of the lake and the peace of the small garden where this woman had been laid to rest to cascade upon him. I felt his surprise and all that had lain open between us suddenly closed with a swift and violent block. The shock of it made me gasp and open my eyes. The first thing I realised was that I no longer wanted to die, or felt as though I had been wrapped in some terrible never ending fog of grief. I felt normal again.

He was silent for a moment. "You learn fast for one so young, for one so unschooled. Perhaps the Emperor was right. There is more to you than meets the eye." He said as he got to his feet. "We will practice more at a later time, this was enough for now." He said abruptly, but without anger.

I stood up slowly, shakily and looked at the chrono on the wall, what had felt like only a few moments had been many hours and it was very late. I also noticed for the first time that Lord Vader's chest plate looked as though someone had shot at it.

"My lord, you are...hurt...damaged?" I asked resisting the urge to touch the melted, scorched armour.

"It is nothing." He said brushing my words away with a gesture. "People will never learn that their puny skills are no match for the Dark Side, yet still they insist on attempting to assassinate me."

"Then your trip to Void City was unproductive?" I asked as we walked to the door of the room.

"Your ability to state the obvious never ceases to amaze me." He replied

tersely.

I took that as a 'yes'.

He continued. "You will return to Naboo in the morning I have no further use for you here and work to do that requires no distractions." He stopped, turned and looked at me. "Practice what I taught you here today. You are useless to me otherwise. There will be times when it is necessary for me to communicate with you via the force telepathy. I do not wish a repeat of your inability to cope with the side effects." He told me, pointing his finger at me.

It was not the first time he had called me a distraction or useless, I was certain it would not be the last. I nodded but before he could open the door and walk away I blurted out the question that had been burning a hole in my mind right from the moment he had handed me that Japor snippet.

"Who was she?" I asked.

He whirled around and for what seemed an age he did nothing but stare at me. Then, much to my shock, he said,

"She was my wife." And before I could say another word he swept out of the room and left.

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I have become a keeper of secrets.

First Thrawn's little trip to Myrkr and all that we found there, now this little gem of Lord Vader's.

I had not planned on this, but then again I had not really planned on working for the Empire either.

Even at a young age, I knew I was different. I could see things happen before they actually took place, I sense things and knew things about people, no one else knew. I could touch objects and sometimes know who had owned them last and the stories that went along with them. This gift was not a good one though and it would tear me up if I could not learn how to control it better. Lord Vader had been right about that. I wondered if he was ever wrong.

People do not like precocious children who know too much and while at first, my strange talents and gifts were considered cute after a while they began to make people nervous. At a very young age I was aware I was not quite normal. So, I learned to hide what I picked up from others, their stray thoughts and feelings. I learned not to gasp when I touched things, especially old and well used things.

'Keep it dark, keep it hidden.' My father had often whispered to me. It was a hard lesson to learn and the emotions and the visions and the knowledge I picked up from those around me sometimes seemed to take over who I was. I learned to avoid physical contact and I learned to shut the sensations out. This little gift of mine was not something to be proud of and use, it was something to

fear and shut away. Secrets, I had learned, are terrible heart wrenching things. While knowing other people's secrets was a burden, keeping them to myself was just a big pain in the ass.

In the days that passed after returning to Naboo, I tried to spend as much of my free time as possible studying and practising all I could. Master Kjestyll never questioned my sudden dedication or quiet determination but he sensed the need in me and the lessons became more intense.

I kept up with the office work and managed Lord Vader's calendar with as much efficiency as possible. His communications were kept to the absolute minimum, as though the very act of speaking with me was painful. I must admit, I was not unhappy to be away from him. His presence was overwhelming. I had so many questions I wanted to ask him and dared not. I did not want to rouse his wrath and I did not want to have to test my small abilities to block him out again either.

He was busy hunting the rebels who had brought an end to the Death Star. It was his primary focus in and around everything else he was doing. I suppose, due to my unique position in his life, I knew more than most about his comings and goings but even I was a little surprised at the whispered gossip which said he was becoming obsessed with finding a certain rebel pilot, the one who had actually been responsible for the Death Star's destruction. I wondered what it was about this particular pilot that was so important, but I dared not ask or even bring up the subject with him during our infrequent holo transmissions. Mostly I tried to stay out of his way and enjoy the rest of my time on Naboo. I should have known that would not last.

In the middle of a fairly gruelling lesson I was suddenly summoned to the Emperor's private audience chamber. The messenger waited calmly, not even my surprise and hesitation seemed to concern him.

Master Kjestyll sensed my worry. "Child, undoubtedly the Emperor knows where you are at this moment and exactly what you have been doing. How you are dressed does not concern him. If he has summoned you now then he wishes to see you now. We will continue another time, as always." And with that he bowed, our customary end to a lesson.

Silently, I followed the messenger. The Emperor's apartments and audience chambers were all in the upper part of the retreat compound specially built and accessible only by heavily guarded elevators. As with the Imperial Palace on Coruscant, I was almost certain that behind these official ways in and out lay a dozen or more secret passages.

The elevator door slid open with an almost imperceptible hum and I followed the messenger into the small, dimly lit audience chamber. He announced my name and then with a smart, sharp bow left me alone in the room. On either side of the elevator door stood two Royal Guards. Directly opposite the elevator

door, upon a dais, sat the Emperor on a chair that had been specially designed for him.

My heart pounded at the sight of him. The aura of power that flowed about this room was palpable. I walked a little closer and then as protocol dictated, genuflected with my head bowed. I allowed my senses to reach out and feel the room. This was one of his lesser audience chambers, small and more intimate. I felt the presence of his Royal Guards and knew that aside from the two by the elevator, there were four more in the room standing in the shadows. I also sensed another presence, a person I did not know hidden by the darkness.

"You my rise and come forward." The Emperor's voice broke the eerie silence and I did as he bid stopping a respectable distance before the dais began. I stood with my head down and my hands clasped in front of me, dancer style.

"How delightful to see you again, my dear." He said and I looked up at him and smiled.

"I am sorry to have taken you away from your lessons but this could not wait and time is of the essence today." He paused and I waited silently. He had not asked me a direct question nor given me leave to speak. He nodded to himself and leaned forward in his chair.

"Come closer, child, so that I might get a better look at you." I did as he asked and stopped at the point where the raised platform began.

"How do you enjoy your lessons?" he asked.

I was not sure which lesson or which teacher he was referring to so I answered as best I could given the vagueness of the question. "I am learning much, Your Excellency, thank you."

"Good, good." He grinned. "I have heard good reports of your work from both your mentor and your master. I also hear that you are a competent pilot and that your skills as a dancer have indeed found a use." He said, pausing to let his words sink in. I wondered exactly what Captain Thrawn had told him and who exactly was my mentor and who was the master. I concentrated on breathing in and out. The Emperor scared the sand jiggers out of me especially in this formal place.

After what seemed an eternity of scrutiny he sat back again, once more shrouded by the shadows. "I have need of your skills, child, and I trust you feel up to the task at hand."

I gazed up at him unable to answer truthfully since I had no idea what task it was he was talking about. Our eyes met for a moment and for that split second I was convinced this man knew every tiny little secret hidden in my soul. It was difficult to breathe. I clung to all I had been taught and worked to maintain my own mental blocks. As fragile as they were, it made me feel better.

He chuckled to himself and then turned to look to his right, his hand beckoning for the person I had sensed there to come forward into the light.

“This is one of my most favoured dancers, Lianna.” The Emperor said as the girl that Shiv’s group of friends often referred to as the Princess walked to the foot of his chair and sat, like a jax, curled up at his feet. He reached out and stroked her beautiful hair which was the colour of red gold. She looked up into his face with such adoration and even love that I wondered if she were not something more than just his favourite dancer. She was elegant and beautiful. Her hair was perfect and her make up tastefully and artfully done. Even the clothes she wore screamed of designer opulence. She was everything I felt I was not. Now, standing next to her in my training clothes, still damp with sweat I felt like something the jawas had dragged in.

I nodded my head in greeting to her and she regarded me with her green eyes as though I were trash. It did not surprise me much and it was how I felt.

“Lianna, you recall Merlyn Gabriel, Lord Vader’s ... personal assistant?” the Emperor said looking directly into the young woman’s eyes. Lianna nodded. “It would appear that young Miss Gabriel has some talent as a pilot among ... other things. She will be taking you to your next job.” I listened and she frowned. Neither of us said a word. The silence spoke volumes for us.

The Emperor turned once again to look at me. “How long will it take to get from here to Rothana?” he asked.

I quickly tried to remember where that was and then did the rough calculations in my head, wondering what on earth she could be doing all the way out on that forsaken planet. “Approximately eighteen hours if nothing goes wrong, at top engine speed,” I said. “One way, of course.” I didn’t mention I had calculated a couple of hours extra in case something did go wrong. It never hurt to have more time.

“Then you will leave here tomorrow at 18:00 hours. Lianna has an important performance at, when was it my dear?” He turned and asked her.

“I need to be there to perform at four pm in two day’s time.” She said.

“Good, then it is settled.” The Emperor said. “Now, Lianna you may leave, I know you have things to do before this evening.”

She gave me another glance that was anything but friendly and, with an elegant curtsey, moved gracefully out of the room. I had not been given permission to leave so I remained exactly as I had been. Wondering what exactly was going on. The Emperor waited until Lianna had left the chamber and the doors to the elevators had once again hissed shut.

“She is lovely, is she not?” he said. I wasn’t certain he actually wanted an answer so I simply nodded.

He continued, “She is very dear to me and I do worry about her when she has a performance away from the confines of the court. I would not let her go but she does have her heart set on it.”

The Emperor got up. “Walk with me a little, child.” He said and I fell into

step beside him as he walked towards the elevator door. “I have it on good authority that you have become proficient in the art of, how shall I say it, self preservation and that your skills in hand to hand combat are improving. Lianna will need someone to watch out for her on this trip and I would appreciate it if you would do that for me.” He said.

I wanted to ask if that were not a task better suited to one of the many and varied sorts of body guards and soldiers that were in his employ. He must have read that thought because he chuckled. We stopped in front of the door, and I was more than aware of the Royal Guards who stood there unmoving and silent.

“As a human female you would not be seen as a threat.” He explained. “A male, especially one who is a soldier or a trained body guard, would antagonise an already difficult situation. They would be seen as a challenge and more than likely create more problems than they were sent there to prevent. She is to dance for a well known business associate of mine, let us say, it is a way of appeasing him for services rendered. I do not wish my dancer to be associated with unpleasant behaviour.” He said. “If you are not up to this task I can find another but I should hate to think that your training with one of my best teachers has not been paying off.” He chided slightly.

“No, Your Excellency, of course not. I am honoured you feel I am capable of this task.” I lied through my teeth. I had no idea why he wanted me to do this I was most likely the very last person capable of what he was asking but I was not going to argue with him. He smiled and patted me on the cheek. The touch of his papery hand sent a cold shiver down my spine.

“Good girl, I knew I could count on you. Now, you should run along home before you are late.” He said.

Before I could even consider it being a terrible breach of protocol I blurted out. “Late? Late for what?”

But the Emperor did not seem to mind my lack of courtesy. He simply gave me a smile that was not altogether pleasant. “Now, now I would not want to spoil the surprise. Off you go, child.” He said and turned his back on me, dismissing me abruptly. I stood there for a few seconds and watched him, waiting for the lift door to open. I was more than aware of the close and careful scrutiny by the two Royal Guardsmen. The rumours and whispers said that almost all the Guardsmen were force sensitive but I knew now that these were not rumours.

Only once I was out of the small audience chamber and out of the claustrophobic little elevator did I breathe a deep and heavy sigh of relief. This was, of course, shattered by someone tapping me on the shoulder and asking me my name.

“Miss Gabriel?” the young messenger asked. I nodded trying not to jump out of my skin. He thrust a slender envelope into my hand.

For a moment I just looked at it in bewilderment until the young man

cleared his throat and said. "I was asked to wait for an answer."

I nodded and opened the letter. I knew the hand writing instantly and could not help but smile.

*My Dear Miss Gabriel,*

*I have two tickets to the opening season of the Opera House in Theed tonight, thanks to the generosity of His Excellency the Emperor, and would like to know if you would do me the honour of gracing me with your company for this event. I understand that it is short notice but I assure you such gala evenings are rare and this one promises to be spectacular. Should you say yes then I request that you be ready at your living quarters by no later than 17:00 hrs as we must be at the Opera House in Theed by 20:00 hrs at the latest and I would very much like to take you to dinner first.*

*With kind regards,*

*Captain Thrawn*

I read the letter twice and asked the messenger what time it was. I had exactly an hour to get home and get ready. The young man looked at me and I smiled.

"You may tell the Captain that the answer is yes, I would be delighted." I said and as quickly as I could I made my way home, along the way trying to work out what the heck I was going to wear to this spectacular gala event. I didn't even know what was being performed as the opening show of the season but in the end it did not matter. I was nervous at the thought of being in Thrawn's presence again. I would have to work at getting that under control but in a way I didn't want to. In difference to being close to the Emperor, I liked how being near the Captain made me feel.

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In, *The Unanswered Question*, the well known play by Palena Osiri, the main character Varyl Desann tells Tyrea Berqus, the woman he loves but will ultimately betray and kill, the following. He says '*We dance around each other as though we were circling around a fire that slowly grows out of control and we are powerless to move away from it. We are drawn to its magnificent flame even though we know it will consume us.*' I always loved this line but I loved her reply even more. She tells him "*Then I shall dance, burn and be glorious.*" These words summed up exactly how I felt in the Captain's presence.

He had arrived promptly, and I was more or less ready, which in itself was a small wonder. Usually, I did not fuss a lot about what I wore. Comfortable, functional and easy to move in were my criteria for clothing. Dressing up was not

something I was very good at. I suppose that having a strict time limit imposed upon me helped. I had none of the usual agonizing hours in front of the closet wondering what to wear.

I picked a dress that had been among those bought from Cati as a possible to wear to the grand ball. It was a beautiful dress but at the time I had felt it a little too revealing. Now, it seemed like the right choice. It was a long elegant, seriously backless gown made from a soft silk that rippled around me when I walked the way light will move on water. I had chosen the colours because they reminded me of the night's sky just after sunset. The dress started from the ground up a dark deep velvety blue and faded slowly into a beautiful shade of lavender that seemed to draw out the blue in my eyes. It was studded with tiny crystals that twinkled with each step I made. It had a snug bodice, with a fairly revealing neckline and was sleeveless. It was some sort of a miracle that kept the dress from falling off, that or Cati's amazing ability to design. The heavier silk shawl that went with it was a dark midnight blue was also littered with the same brilliant, tiny crystals. It was like wearing the star filled night wrapped around my shoulders. I took time with my hair and put it up with the elegant Zenji sticks that Thrawn had given me. The soft little ringlets that framed my face made the look I was going for complete. The finishing touches were a little make up and a little perfume and I felt as ready as I ever would. It did not stop my heart from nearly leaping out of my chest when the door bell chimed.

I took a deep breath to try and calm my bad case of nerves and opened the door. To my surprise he was out of uniform and dressed in very elegant and formal black and white, evening wear. He looked, for lack of a better word, stunning.

I motioned for him to come in and went to get my small clutch purse and shawl. He stood and waited never taking his eyes off me. Finally, the attention made me wonder if I had forgotten something or that, perhaps, my choice of clothing wasn't quite right.

"What?" I finally asked in exasperation.

He shook his head and smiled that wonderful secretive smile of his that said everything and nothing all at the same time.

"Is the dress not right for the evening?" I asked.

"The dress is perfect, but something is missing." He said, playing.

"Care to enlighten me?" I asked.

He made a come here motion with his hand and pulled from his pocket a small, flat box which he handed to me.

"It is often the smallest of details that complete the whole picture." He said softly. "Open it."

The box was elegant and hinged. I opened it and sucked in my breath at what I saw. It was a tiny ma'arilite pendant on a simple silver chain.

"I know of your fondness for this stone so when I found this at an auction

recently, I knew it should be yours.” He said taking the delicate necklace from the box and placing it around my neck. The setting and the stone were no larger than the nail on my little finger. The pendant was square but turned so that it dangled from a corner. The little milky stone had a deep blue-green light in its heart and the setting looked very old, an antique silver metal decorated with three tiny silver balls to punctuate each corner. It was so small it was almost invisible and he was right, it completed the outfit.

His fingertips brushed the back of my neck as he fastened the clasp and I shivered. I felt the warmth of his breath as he leaned close to whisper in my ear. He made my knees weak just being so close. I fought the urge I had to lean back into his body.

“A’vai’jashia.” He said.

I turned around to look at him. “What does that mean?”

“Beautiful.” He answered simply.

I regarded him for a moment unsure of whether he was describing the necklace or me and said simply. “The pendant is lovely, thank you.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Indeed, but I was describing you.”

I blushed. He lifted my chin with his finger tips and made to kiss me. I moved my head away.

“Don’t.” I said. “I’ll have to redo my lipstick.” But in truth I did not want his kisses because if he started that I wasn’t sure we’d leave this house at all. I stepped away from him.

For a moment he watched me, a bemused smile on his lips and then said. “Perhaps later, then.”

“If you are lucky.” I said and for a moment we just watched each other. He took my shawl and placed it over my shoulders. “We need to go now.” He said quietly. Outside an Imperial driver waited for us and before I knew it I was off to Theed for a second time in a week, but this time for a much happier reason.

We arrived shortly after six pm and the driver dropped us off in front of the small restaurant that Thrawn had chosen with instructions to be back at half past seven to pick us up. It was not the long, leisurely dinner that it could have been which was a shame because the restaurant was very nice. Tucked out of the way and off the main promenade, it was not as well known as some of the more exclusive places but therefore the food, Thrawn told me, was much better and the service twice as fast.

He had been right about the meal, it was lovely, and despite my nerves I managed to eat and enjoy it. Our conversation was light and consisted mainly of him telling about the auction he had bought my necklace at and of me describing my first visit to this city. When it was time, he paid the bill and we left for the Opera House in the waiting vehicle. Telling me it would be a spectacular evening had been a little bit of an understatement. The opening season night of the Theed

Opera House was a red carpet evening.

He smiled and offered me his arm as we began our walk past the crowds of people who had all turned out to see the who is who of society walk up the grand stairs. There were camera crews and news teams, reporters and many photographers. Lights were shone in our eyes as we walked up the red carpet and past the onlookers. I remembered to smile but as with my last walk up a red carpet, did not look in any other direction than forward. Once inside the atmosphere was considerably less chaotic and loud but no less charged with energy.

The Grand Foyer was stunningly beautiful. I marvelled at the architecture and the ornate carvings and decorations, the paintings and portraits of landscapes and Royalty past and present. We walked slowly through the foyer to the main entrance hall where people mingled and chattered. Several people came up to Captain Thrawn and made polite small talk. I was neither spoken to nor introduced. I assumed that this was normal for the Palace Courtesans and we were allowing the charade that I was one of them to continue. It did not really bother me. The Empire was a man’s world to a great extent and pretty young women were expendable decorations, nothing more. If that was the impression most people had of me that was fine. If people think you are harmless they are less likely to see you as competition or worse an enemy. So I took my place at Thrawn’s side and smiled cheerfully. When I was spoken to I gave the appropriate answers. I was however, grateful when we were informed that we should find our seats by a very pompous sounding announcer. Thrawn offered me his arm once again and I placed my hand on it and was careful not to trip on the hem of my dress as we made our way up the grand stairs to find our seats.

The Emperor it seemed spared no expenses and we had amazing seats in a small box mid way up the gallery on the right side of the hall. We were shown to our places by an usher who moved swiftly and silently. The box held room for four couples and I wondered who we would be sharing it with. We were at the front or the box and I was glad, being not terribly tall, it had always been my experience that whenever anyone sat in front of me all I saw was the back of their heads no matter how the seating was arranged.

I sat on Thrawn’s left hand side next to the wall. From the moment we had arrived at the Opera House he had been all polite formality. I was well aware that the eyes that had followed us as we had entered the Opera House and had continued to watch us with interest and curiosity as we sat. Thrawn was the Emperor’s pet alien and I was the one decorating his arm for the evening. It was all court politics and stiff etiquette. It was easy enough to maintain the charade of being disinterested in the man at my side when so much else around me was fascinating.

I watched as the seats filled and the air gathered energy. I looked back to

see who had joined us in the box we had but I knew none of the faces. I simply nodded and smiled when they arrived and took their seats. The Empire was vast and the Imperial officers too many to count. I did not get out enough to know who was who.

The place hummed with excitement when the Emperor took his seat in his own box. It was a fantastic display of opulence and wealth. Everyone was dressed up in their finest clothes and jewellery. The women sparkled and glittered like brightly decorated butterflies and the men all looked dashing and handsome no matter what species or race they were. Thrawn had not been kidding when he has said it would be spectacular. As with the Emperor's grand Ball, everyone who was anyone was here. I looked about and saw that even the current Queen of Naboo was there, seated, with her entourage in the box next to the Emperor. The noise of the audience quickly gave way to silence as the Orchestra began its warm up and then the house lights dimmed and the show began.

In my life I could count on one hand the number of professional theatre productions I had been to. Mos Eisley was not exactly the cultural center of the world and while I had made it off world often enough, it wasn't as though these trips were all based around going to the theatre or the opera or the ballet. My mother had made it a point of taking me to see the ballet when I was very young on a rare trip to Alderaan. The few times I had been exposed to these theatrical events had been magical to me. Now I sat in the darkened Opera House watching the Naboo Ballet Company perform *Solace and Tempest*.

The ballet had first been designed and choreographed by the now legendary dancer Akasti Schai, and was based around a very old Corellian legend concerning star crossed lovers, war, betrayal and ultimately, death. It was, on the whole, a very depressing tale because everyone you are made to care about in the story dies at the end, but the Naboo Ballet Company were among the finest dance company in the galaxy and despite the tragic air to the ballet the performances were captivating.

Intermission came and went. We made the obligatory rounds, smiled at the right people and made polite conversation. We were given a glass of ice cold Nubian champagne which neither of us drank and before the lights were flickered several times to signal it was time for us to return to our seats I made a graceful exit to visit the ladies room. By the time I made it back to my seat the lights were starting to dim and the second act began.

Two thirds of the way through the second act when the story turns truly depressing and the tragic end of the two young lovers becomes inevitable I looked at Thrawn. I wondered if he was enjoying the performance and what he thought of it all. His face, his eerie red eyes showed no emotion. He sensed my gaze and turned to look at me and smiled. I felt his arm on the arm rest adjoining my chair shift so that it lay in direct contact with mine. His touch was somehow reassuring.

I turned my attention back to the ballet. These dancers had perfect technique and were stunning to watch but all of that became secondary when I felt the subtle brush of Thrawn's little finger on the underside of my hand. It was the barest of touches and I was unsure at first if it had been deliberate or imagined but when he did it again, I shivered. I fought the urge to look at him and did not take my eyes off the stage. I was caught between the desire his touch was creating and the sensations I felt because of the ballet.

The whole opera house was charged with emotion and I experienced it keenly. The dancers had connected with the audience and the story flowed about us like water. We felt, through their craft, the joys of falling in love, the terrors of war and now towards the end, the dreadful loss of everything held dear. In a way I was grateful for Thrawn's flirtation, it distracted me enough from the flurry of feelings surrounding me that I did not completely lose it when the two young lovers died at the end. And while I shed a few tears I did not unabashedly bawl my eyes out which, under normal circumstances, I would have done.

Instead, I sat there in the dark trying to get my breathing under control and my heart to slow down. His touch was electrifying and the finale was mesmerizing. When the ballet finished and the curtain calls and standing ovations were over, the house lights came up. I discreetly brushed away the remainders of my tears. We, along with everyone else, left our seats and made our way down to the main hall where now everyone was gathered, drinking the free wine and champagne, and chattering like crazy about the wonderful ballet. As I looked around I was glad to see I was not the only one who had shed a tear at the end.

The reception afterwards was, Thrawn informed me, standard. He handed me a glass of white wine and together we mingled. I was a little surprised that when the Emperor entered the reception hall no one dropped to their knees instead they bowed their heads or curtsied. I followed suite and dropped a polite curtsy when he passed by where we were standing. To my and many other people's surprise the Emperor stopped and spoke to us.

"How did you enjoy the Ballet, captain?" he asked.

"It was magnificent." Thrawn replied with a polite nod of his head. "Their reputation for being one of the best ballet companies in the galaxy is well deserved."

The Emperor nodded and turned his gaze to me. For a second his weirding yellow eyes searched mine and then he smiled. "I do not need to ask how you enjoyed this evening, child, it is written in your face plainly for me to see." He glanced back at Captain Thrawn. "We shall have to endeavour to make certain that young Miss Gabriel is exposed to more live theatre. It seems to bring a flush to her cheeks and do her a world of good." He said quietly. He gave me another glance and I blushed from the heat of it, averting my gaze from his. Thrawn merely inclined his head and nodded in agreement.

“As your Excellency wishes.” he said.

“Of course.” The Emperor said. I got the feeling there was another conversation going on underneath the words being spoken. I was grateful when he moved on to speak with someone else and left Thrawn and me out of his limelight.

I took a deep, shuddery breath, a large sip of my drink and worked on the calming exercises I had been taught. I was more than grateful when Thrawn suggested we leave. The driver who had brought us to Theed was waiting for us and the ride back to the retreat was silent. I played nervously with the exquisite little pendant that hung around my neck. Thrawn sat still and calm. The driver dropped us off at the house where I lived and, after a brief conversation with the Captain, he drove away. I let the Captain into the house and pretended not to notice what he held in his hand.

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My head was filled with music and dance. If I closed my eyes I could still see the grace and beauty of the ballet in my mind. I did not want the night in all its strange magic to end. I ignored the chrono that said it was later than I would have liked. I ignored the little voice in my head that whispered I had a long and arduous journey to make tomorrow with someone the Emperor considered precious. Instead, I turned the music player on and set it to random. I dug two glasses from the kitchen cupboard and danced about as Thrawn poured the brandy from the bottle he had brought in with him. He smiled as he watched me move to the music and I stopped when I caught him staring.

The music changed to something slow and sensual. He moved cat like, all ease and grace, to catch a hold of me before I could say a word. This dance he swept me up into was seductive and powerful. I didn't know the steps but that did not matter, as he had so brazenly told me once, he was an excellent leader. It took my breath away. Dancing with Thrawn was like being possessed. I looked up into his face and he gave me a lazy smile. As he stroked my back, I sighed and leaned into his body. I loved the touch of his hand on my bare skin, it was electrifying.

When the music changed to something very different we stopped and for a moment just stood. My heart raced and as I remembered to breathe I wondered what he was thinking. He said nothing, but the gentle caress of his fingertips up and down my spine spoke volumes. I looked up into his eyes but he just smiled, then he moved away from me, picked up the two glasses from the counter and handed me one. We touched glass to glass and he said. “Kha'säri'mahr”

I sipped my drink and breathed in the brandy's fumes. “Care to translate?” I asked.

“There is no literal translation but I suppose you could say it is a toast for good health and long life.” He said. I gave him a puzzled look. He continued. “To

translate it directly into basic it would be something like ‘to slide along the bitter ice with grace and joy’.”

I laughed. “I take that Cheunh is complicated.”

“It is a highly synthetic language with the ability to create complex ideas by word combination and syntax. There is much beauty in its complexity. You'd probably like it actually, given your propensity for languages.” He said with a smile.

“Probably.” I said, moving away to turn the music down a little. When I turned back around I found Thrawn staring at me thoughtfully, intently.

“What?” I asked, cocking my head to one side.

He motioned for me to come to him so I did. He took the glass from my hand and set both it and his back on the counter. He turned his attention back on me and touched my face with his fingertips making my heart suddenly skip a beat. I drew in a deep shuddery breath.

“You really are quite lovely.” He said softly.

I went to look away from him but he would not let me. His hands cupped my face and I surrendered to his pull. His kiss was slow, sweet and gentle as though he wanted to learn all there was about me just with the touch of his lips exploring mine. He tasted like brandy and honey. I reached up and stroked the side of his face, then ran my fingers through his beautiful blue-black hair. When he nuzzled the side of my neck, I gasped at the sensation of it and shivered as he laid tiny kisses from my ear down to my shoulder. I slipped my hands under his jacket and pushed it off him. It fell to the ground. He wrapped his arms around my body drawing me even closer to his. His hands, so warm upon my back, explored every inch of bare skin. It seemed to me that time had stopped. I lost myself as his mouth found mine again and only when he broke away from me did I look up, only then did time move forward. There was a hunger in his eyes I had not seen since Myrkr and it was his turn to take a deep, steadying breath. For a moment we just stood in the circle each other's arms and then, pausing between words and deeds, with a sigh I laid my forehead against his chest. When he chuckled softly, I looked up at him.

“You can be quite dangerous, even now at your most vulnerable.” He whispered as he reached up and plucked from my hair, the two Zenji sticks that I had almost poked him in the eye with. He laid them beside the brandy glasses then ran his fingers carefully through my hair. “Your hair is beautiful. It reminds me of Adegan fire crystals in the sunlight.”

I stared into his face, into his eyes. Did he have any idea how he made me feel? I longed for something I could not define. This ache, this hunger was all consuming. I yearned for it as much as I feared it. I sighed and backed away from him, picked up my glass and studied its contents closely.

He watched me intently for a few moments before asking, “What do you

want, A'myshk'a?" It did not escape my notice that he had shortened my Dantassi name to its core.

I took a sip of brandy, letting the amber liquid warm my tongue before swallowing. I shrugged slightly with one shoulder. Passion and desire shifted around the room like restless sands in unpredictable winds. The magic of the ballet was slowly fading and the task the Emperor had given me was beginning to intrude on my evening.

"There is something on your mind aside from me." he said.

"I did not think you were force sensitive." I countered.

He smiled. "I do not need to be to know that something worries at you."

I looked about the room and wondered if and how many listening devices there were planted about the place. I was certain that the small job of ferrying this dancer about was unimportant and insignificant. Still, I worried about talking about it not knowing who else might hear. Thrawn watched me carefully.

"Let's go for a walk, some fresh air will do you good." He said after a moment and picked up his jacket, carrying it over his arm. I did not argue with him. We made our way in silence down the path to the lake.

It was a beautiful night, still and clear. The air was cool and quiet, there was almost no wind and the water was mirror still, reflecting the stars and the light from the moons. I shivered a little and was grateful when Thrawn slid his jacket over my shoulders.

"Won't you need it? It's cold out here." I asked.

He laughed. "Cold? Csilla is cold. This place, even at night, is warm for me. You are the one from the overheated sand box." He said, caressing my face. I closed my eyes and leaned into his touch. The warmth of it, the gentleness of it was calming.

"What is on your mind that it complicates this evening?" he asked.

I told him about the job the Emperor had given me.

"So he has finally given you an assignment, on your own. Ferrying a dancer doesn't sound complicated." His eyebrow arched.

I nodded. "It should not worry me, but it does. Something doesn't feel right. I just cannot put my finger on it." I told him. "It is not as if Rothana is all that dangerous." I added, naming the planet.

Thrawn took a deep breath and nodded. "But why to Rothana?" he said, more to himself than to me.

"He said that this dancer has a performance there, a sort of payment or something for a local business associate." I told him.

"You know what is on Rothana, yes?" He frowned and moved away from me slightly.

"It is mainly an engineering planet. I assume they manufacture heavy equipment of some sort there. Apart from that I don't know much about it. It's out

in Wild Space. I was going to read up on it tomorrow." I said.

Thrawn regarded me carefully. "Rothana is where the equipment for most of the Clone army was manufactured. A subsidiary of the Kuat Drive Yards is based there. It is hardly the place for a dance recital, particularly from one of the Emperor's prized dancers."

"So you think there is more to this than just a delivery-baby sit job?" I asked.

"What does your gut tell you?" he asked studying my face carefully and not answering my question.

"That something doesn't fit. There were lies in the truth he spoke, I could taste them" I answered after a moment.

He nodded and turned to stare thoughtfully out over the lake. "Far be it from me to question the Emperor's motives for what he does with his people, but take all and every precaution you can. Double check that ship of yours, change the codes and voice protect the door lock just before you leave. When you land on that planet make sure you set the emergency start up sequence on. Tomorrow morning I will drop something off in your ship I think you might find useful." He said, the sudden cold, business like tone in his voice scared me even more that the thought of this up coming job.

"You think this will turn out badly?" I asked, worried.

He shook his head. "That I don't know. You are the one with the strange powers and I believe you when you say it feels wrong. I merely suggest preventative measures that you might not think of. Not because you are not capable but because you are inexperienced. Deception is not in your nature and you do not look for it in others."

"I guess I will have to learn then." I said.

He looked back over his shoulder at me. "I hope not." He said sharply. I turned away from his stare.

He turned back to face me, the abruptness gone as swiftly as it had appeared. "A'myshk'a, there are precious few things in this galaxy that are not easily corrupted by a lust for power or a need to destroy that which they cannot have. I see it every day. I would not see you fall prey to this." He paused. "You are so much stronger than you think. What ever this mission brings, you will face it with grace and poise. You will succeed, of that I have no doubt, but do me a favour will you?"

I nodded.

"Use the bone hair stick to put your hair up and wear the Dantassi necklace, hidden under your clothes tomorrow."

I gave him a puzzled look.

He cupped his hands around my face and looked me in the eyes. "Help comes in unexpected guises. It never hurts to be prepared." He said.

“You are talking in riddles now.” I said.

“Perhaps I am simply tired and perhaps it is time to call it a night.” He said gently. “You have a long journey ahead of you. You should be well rested and alert for it.” He brushed stray curls from my face. I wrapped my arms around his body and he held me close. His embrace was warm and comforting. He kissed the top of my head tenderly. The passion and desire that had flown between us earlier had now been replaced by something else, something very subtle, very powerful and utterly indefinable. He walked me back to the door of my house. He kissed me lightly on the lips and whispered goodnight in my ear. As he vanished into the darkness I got the feeling that he was a little more troubled by the task the Emperor had given me than he had let on. It was not exactly how I had thought the evening would turn out and only once I was indoors did I realise I was still wearing his jacket around my shoulders. It was small comfort to think I would have to see him again if for no other reason than to return it to him.

I lay in bed for a long time unable to sleep. When I did finally fall asleep it was restless and filled with strange dreams. The alarm woke me early. I packed my things and readied myself as best I could before heading out to my ship. My thoughts were cluttered and unfocused, as if to mirror the strange fog that had settled around the lake. Everything was shrouded by an eerie grey mist.

I made sure that the office work was dealt with and sorted things out with my droid, then I went to my ship. Thrawn had been there before me. I wondered how he pulled these things off. I stood and stared at the ornate wooden box sitting on the table in the ship’s common area. I opened it up and took the letter out that sat on top of what was inside.

*A’mia’Tekari,*

*Akiana’myshk’apavjäska, this name tells any and all in a certain elite circle that would know, who and what you are. Many times you have asked me for its meaning and I have always said when the time is right, well now the time is right.*

*Pavjäska is the name of the clan to which, by right of passage, you now belong to. In basic it means, very roughly translated, North Shield Clan. When there is more time I will tell you more about this, your extended family. The rest of the name is perhaps more whimsical on my part but it does you justice and should anyone ask you can tell them its meaning is ‘she who dances as light upon snow’.*

*The Dantassi are proud and brave but also elusive and secretive. You have been accepted into this fold through my words and my actions. I give you the right to invoke my name should anyone ever challenge this.*

*These clothes are yours. They were made only for you. While you have no bone mask to wear there is provided here, traditional facial paint. You know the*

*pattern you may use, and you know how it should look. The culling stave I have left you was once mine and, as you have held it in your hands before, its weight will be known to you. May it serve you well.*

*A’myshk’a, do not fear the unknown. You are brave and supple. You will be as wind across snow, as light upon water. You will excel at this task you have been given and we will spend time together when you return.*

*Ilath’mera’talashti’Ia,  
Nikätza’arth’pavjäska*

I read the letter twice before unpacking the box and looked at everything he had left for me. When I was done I repacked the box and hid it out of sight. I took the razor sharp culling staff and tucked it away where no one would see it unless they were doing a very thorough search of the ship. As I began the systems check and walk through of my ship, I could not help but think about what it was that Thrawn knew about this place I was heading to that I did not. That he maintained close bonds with the Dantassi was not a surprise to me, but somehow I got the feeling I was missing a great chunk of information on that side of his life. I knew from the various rumours and court gossip that he was a brilliant tactician and that when it came to strategy there were few among his peers who could top him. So while the reason for his concern, his advice and this gift were unknown to me, I was deeply grateful for them.

I made certain everything with the ship was in perfect shape, picked up some extra supplies and a few spare parts for things that had a habit of breaking down at the most inopportune moments and then I did as Thrawn had suggested. I changed all the ship’s codes, made the door lock voice activated only and made sure the emergency start up procedure was working and in place.

I had sent word to Lianna that she was to be at the ship promptly half an hour before departure time. The rest of my spare time I spent reading up on my star charts and mentally preparing for a very long journey with another woman who did not seem to like me very much. It was going to be interesting no matter what happened.