

Daughter of the Empire

Book 1

Written by F. Messer 2005-2006

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Secrets, Lies and Things Left Unsaid. 1

Not every person who can fly is a qualified pilot and has the bit of paper to prove it. Pretty much anyone can buy a ship, learn the basics and run the sky. That being said, when you think about it, this makes space travel a little bit scary.

When my father figured out that I was really serious about learning to fly he made sure it was done right, no messing about. The pilots he hired for the docking bay were all well trained and had their papers. They were qualified to teach me and they did.

Because I started out so young and, I suppose looking back now, because of my unique talents, I had a leg up on most people from around Mos Eisley. What made my life even more interesting was Jyrki, who seemed to know everything there was to know about pulling ships apart and putting them back together. He had told me that every good pilot knew enough about the ships they flew to patch them up when things went wrong, but the best pilots in the galaxy knew how to build their ships from scratch. I still don't know how serious he was when he said this but I took his advice to heart. I liked ship mechanics and jumped on any excuse to be near him. So for me it was a win-win thing to learn all I could about ships and how they worked in and around my time spent flying. I never did find out where Jyrki learned to be a mechanic or for that matter his ability to slice onboard computers.

I kept mulling over Thrawn's words to me during incident with the *Doxy Jane* about me being a slicer. I had never thought about it that way before. It seemed to me to be a natural extension of knowing how your ship ran. Jyrki had spent hours teaching the finer arts of ship board computers, the nav systems, the life support systems and the general how things work. I didn't have his natural talent for it but I was a quick study and good at mathematics. Plus for reasons I could never explain, I was damned good at remembering things almost perfectly. I doubted I could slice into just any mainframe of land based computer, but I knew my way around ship's systems much better than most.

Most space craft have the same basic design in the major part of the galaxy. It's really only when you head out into the Unknown Regions or the real backwater areas that you start to see really huge design changes and some pretty funky engine types, but really most ships come from the same places either the Kuat Drive Yards or the Sienar Fleet Systems and the Corellian Engineering Corporation. Most ship components come from one of these yards, and most ship designs follow a set list of standards. That is when they are manufactured... what the pilots and owners do to these ships after they come off the assembly line, well now, that was a whole other sabacc game altogether.

When it came time for me to make my solo flight, the last step before getting my class 1 pilot's papers, my father suggested the milk run that we did once a week from Tatooine to Nar Shaddaa. It was an easy route but a profitable one for the various docking bays and delivery ships that did it. Delivering goods, mail and odds and ends mostly stuff on the up and up. I had accompanied various pilots and my father on many, many occasions so I knew this ride inside and out. It should have been an easy trip but as my luck would have it, it wasn't.

It started off just fine, I checked my ship, and got on the go. Set the coordinates and began. About half way through the hyperspace jump the ship bounced out into sub light with a bang. The *Black Pearl* was an HWK light freighter. My father's secondary transport ship, used for quick runs and light transports. I had not been kidding when I had told Thrawn I had cut my teeth on this ship class. She was a reliable ship type that could be flown by one person, but unlike the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*, the *Pearl* had not been remodified and was not armed to the teeth. *Pearl* was a rust bucket kept in the air by chewing gum, engineer's tape and a whole lot of prayer. There was always something falling apart on her, and even though Jyrki and I had gone over and over the engines at least three times before my run something still went wrong. This time it was the hyperdrive motivator. It blew and I was stuck.

The first few minutes in a crisis usually say a lot about how a person will react in a situation. I swore a lot using words that, had my father been there and heard, well he would have blushed. Then I went to see if I could figure what the problem was and fix it. Once I found out the hyperdrive motivator had blown there were a few more choice words and the insane desire to make a cup of tea. First things first was to get out of the hyperspace lane, so with some more cursing I kicked in the sublight engines and moved off the shipping lane. Then because I did not have a spare motivator handy I sent messages to the receiving dock that due to engine trouble I would be late. Once all the official procedures were out of the way I went back to the engine room and tried to figure out if there was anyway to salvage this situation without calling for help.

As luck would have it I didn't have to think about it for long. Just as I was drinking my second cup of tea and browsing through the cargo I was carrying to make sure that nothing was perishable the proximity alarm went off. There was a YT-1300 freighter stopped just off starboard. I ran a quick scan and sighed. It was either bloody pirates or mercs, nothing good that was for sure. They asked if I needed assistance and I told them what I needed. They said they had the part. I told them what I could pay them and they seemed happy enough. It was all lies and I was in trouble. The scan of their ship told me that there were four humans on board and no other life forms. I was pretty certain they had scanned me and knew it was just me and a boat load of cargo ripe for the taking.

Jyrki had always told me that when all the odds were stacked against you

and it looked like you were dead in the water, change all the ship codes and add a few surprises. He had even gone so far as to drill me on what we would jokingly call the JEPP, Jyrki emergency procedures protocol. I had never though I would ever have to use them. Now, while the captain of the YT-1300 was busy prepping his crew for my demise and the take over of my ship I was busy getting the ship ready for them.

After a few radio calls back and forth they decided that three crew members against me was fine and when we docked it was all shake hands and make nice and no spare part. That, the captain told me was actually in the engine room in their ship and I needed to make sure it was the right one. Their engineer would show me the way. Blah, blah blah. Their engineer was twice my size, armed to the teeth and not very talkative. As soon as I stepped through the dock into their ship the doors to the boats closed. I knew this would happen but I acted surprised. When I went to get back to my ship that engineer showed me his strength. I put on a brave face. I didn't feel the need to show him how terrified I truly was. Instead I just clung to something that Jyrki had said to me after one particularly bad day.

'Mouse, when all else fails yer gotta remember, yer a pretty little thing and men like pretty girls so use what yer've got!'

So I did. I turned on the tears, which wasn't that hard, made as though I was going to pass out and started to whimper while batting my eyes at this guy who suddenly went from thug number one to prince charming with bad body odour. I poured out a sob story about having to work for my uncle, that it was his ship, that I would be so dead if I lost it More blah blah blah. It kept the engineer occupied for as long as it was needed. I was ready when the radio call came through. The engineer was rough and mean when he got back.

"Why ain't the life support working?" he asked wrenching my arm.

"I don't know?" I whimpered.

"Why don't the doors work any more?" he snarled.

"I don't know do I look like a mechanic?" I whined.

He grunted something rude and went to try and break the seal locks on the airlock between ships. I moved slowly away and vanished into the shadows. On board the *Pearl*, they had about two hours of air left, maybe and no amount of messing with the doors would get them open, only I, or a real slicer, could do that.

I was banking on finding emergency suits on board and sure enough they were right were they were supposed to be. While the engineer was frantically trying everything he could think of to open the air locks, I was busy getting into a space suit and being careful with the small piece of cargo I had taken from my ship. Lucky for me this special little treat had been on board.

The comm system in the suit allowed me to patch into the both ships and my guess is they were a little surprised to hear my voice.

"Captain Sonnar, by now I guess you realise that you are a bit stuck?" I

said making my way to the engine room. I still needed a Hyperspace Motivator.

"What did you do you little b...."

I smiled as I cut him off. "Careful captain by my calculations you don't have a whole lot of air left and it's getting cold over there isn't it. You'll notice that I don't have atmo suits or any spare oxygen so you don't have a lot of time left. Care to hear my proposal?"

There was a nice silence then, "Okay, let's hear it."

"I'm going to take the motivator you offered me and I will leave you the credits we discussed. I will release the locks and allow you to come back on board your ship provided you do the same for me." I said. They did have a couple of spare motivators and I decided that for the trouble these guys were putting me through two for the price of one sounded about right. The credit chip I left in the box could be tracked and traced the minute they used it.

"That's it?" he asked.

"Yes." I remember I had smiled when I had said that because I knew they would be thinking I was just too gullible. Unfortunately for them Jyrki had been drilling me on the evils of space travel for years and my own experiences with men of this kind made me more than just a tad wary.

"It's a deal then." He said.

"Call off your pet!" I said making my way back to the docking lock and hoping that this all worked out. I set down on the floor by my feet the two round leathery looking balls I had swiped out of my cargo bay. The engineer looked at me in the atmo suit and made to move towards me.

"Tell your engineer to back off or you all die." I said. "I have nothing to lose."

The captain did as I asked and the engineer backed right off. I stepped on the two little bladders I had brought with me and made my way to the docking hatch. Ran the code and let the door open. As I had suspected they would, the three of them came charging through with blasters ready.

"I wouldn't use those blasters, if I were you." I said.

"Why not, you stupid little girl?"

"You smell that?" I asked. I couldn't because the atmo suit was thankfully protecting me.

The men sniffed the air and made faces.

"That is Callion Gas, a little insurance on my part. It's not overly deadly, I don't think, but if you fire a blaster it will ignite and your ship will blow up taking you along with it and if you breathe it too long I am told it will damage your brain."

"Never heard of it." The man growled.

I shrugged. "No one usually lives to talk about it." I said. "Takes a quick vent to get it out of the ship, usually limited exposure isn't that deadly. But I don't

know how long 'limited' is."

"What do you want?" he snarled.

"To return, unharmed, to my ship and for you to leave me alone." I said.

"You can't vent without taking precautions and I have the only atmo suit that still works, which means, you'd all have to leave the docking back and go to the bridge which can be shut off while you do a purge."

The men looked at each other and I could tell the stench was getting to them. Their engineer had already thrown up once.

"Deal, now get the hell off my ship!" the captain yelled.

"Weapons down and move away first."

They did as I asked and I got off their ship. Disengaged the dock, reset my ship and started up life support again. It didn't take me long to get the new hyperspace motivator installed and even less time for me to get on the way again. I did have to jettison the atmo suit right away though because while Callion Gas was everything I had said it was, those little brown bladders were actually scent gland sacs from male dewbacks and the smell was really hard to get rid of. I didn't want to go home and find every female dewie around trying to jump on me because, well, I smelled good to them. The Hutts loved these things and considered them a great delicacy. No wonder Hutts had very, very bad breath.

I made it to Nar Shaddaa with surprisingly minimal time loss and when I got back home I was a certified pilot. I never told anyone what had happened, not even Jyrki. He had raised an eyebrow at the new hyperdrive motivator and the lingering odour of dewback scent but he had not actually asked.

As I sat in my own ship waiting for Lianna to show up I thought about that trip. Maybe I wasn't devious and perhaps I did trust a little too much sometimes, but I wasn't quite the wide eyed sand urchin Thrawn seemed to think I was either. I shook my head at that thought. No one was ever exactly what they appeared to be, not ever, not even me.

Lianna arrived right on time. She was dressed in elegant travelling clothes and had one travel bag. She asked for permission to board and called me captain with a slight curl to her lip. I shook my head, I wasn't actually a captain but if she wanted to call me that to piss me off, fine. I showed her where she could rest if she wanted to and stow her bag. I took her on the quick and dirty tour of the ship showing her the small galley and the common area.

"I don't cook I'm afraid, so you are on your own if you get hungry. The galley is well stocked and I assume you do know how to operate the stove?"

She nodded.

"Do you fly?" I asked as I showed her where all the food was.

"I am a dancer. I don't need to fly a ship." She told me disdainfully.

"Right." I nodded but I had watched her as she had boarded, following her gaze as she had looked about. Her green eyes held a cunning that went well

beyond her years, they were the eyes of someone who expected trouble at any turn and were also the eyes of someone who knew what to look for on a ship. She didn't look at the décor or for where to sit and be comfortable. She looked at the ship's lines. She looked for the strengths and the weak spots. She looked at the small modifications that were visible only to those who knew what to look for. I knew this because she had looked at the same things I had looked at when I had first come on board and I knew she was lying to me.

"Well, you might want to strap in I am taking off now." I said once the tour was over. She nodded and took the co pilot's seat. Her eyes watched me carefully, covertly as I went through the departure routine. It was a little unnerving and it made me wonder just exactly who she really was. While she moved like a dancer, dressed like a dancer even acted like a prima dancer but she watched me the way people do when they are assessing your strengths and weaknesses, when they are sizing you up for a fight. I ignored it, but that niggling feeling in the pit of my stomach said things were not how they seemed.

I loved the view we were treated to as the ship lifted off from the retreat. It was lush and beautiful. I never got tired of it. I chattered on the comm with the Air traffic control, who was getting to know my voice pretty well and set our flight plan. Lianna watched me and did not seem in the least uncomfortable being in the air. Once we were free of the atmosphere I set the nav computer and punched in the co ordinates for Rothana. It didn't take long to get into the hyperspace lane and once we made the jump I hoped it would be one long and quiet trip. I could not keep from smiling when the stars swirled and elongated as we passed from normal space into the hyperspace lane. I never tired of seeing that either. Once the autopilot was on and everything was normal I got out of my harness and went to make tea. I offered a cup to Lianna who accepted. We sat in the cockpit in silence until she spoke.

"I saw you at the ballet the other night. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes." I replied. "I didn't see you there. What did you think of it?"

She shrugged nonchalantly. "Not their best performance but not their worst either." She glanced at me, "I noticed that you were with the alien."

"Captain Thrawn?" I nodded. "Yes, he invited me to ...accompany him." I said keeping my voice neutral.

"The Emperor's pet." She said with distaste. "I have not spoken with him, what is he like?"

I shrugged. "Arrogant." I said and it was true. "And very intelligent, very knowledgeable about the arts and art."

"Do you like him?" she pressed.

"I don't dislike him if that's what you mean. I don't really know him all that well." Which was also true, from a certain point of view although I'd be willing to bet I knew Thrawn a whole lot better than a great many people in the Imperial court did.

She sipped her tea. "The Emperor seems to have taken a great interest in him, says that he's quite talented."

"Really?" I said lightly. "In what way?"

"He is supposed to be a brilliant tactician or something." She said. "Do you know much about his past?" she then asked. She was digging but I wasn't sure why.

"Not really, we didn't discuss personal things. He is a very private person and we mostly talked about art when we talked at all."

"I heard that he was found on a planet all alone, exiled from his people."

I looked at her. "Oh?"

She nodded. "That's the story. A Captain Parck found him. Said this alien single handedly outsmarted his men while they were looking for some smugglers or something. They thought he was a simple savage turned out he was not." She paused. "Parck brought him back to the Emperor and then helped to train him, or so I heard."

"Why was he exiled?" I asked wondering if maybe she had heard something or knew more than she was letting on..

"Something about going against some core belief of his people." She said.

I nodded. None of this information was really new to me and I didn't know what to add and I wasn't sure where this conversation was going. I did the best thing I could think of and kept my mouth shut, waiting for her to speak.

"He seems to favour you at official events." She commented after a lengthy silence. "It has been noticed and people talk about it."

I smiled. "I have seen him, what three, maybe four times at some official function or another, the last one I was his ...what is that charming expression the courtesans use, decorative eye-candy. If that constitutes favouring then I guess they are right." I shrugged. "People talk about anything and everything. I am quite sure there are a billion rumours about me and Lord Vader as well. It just makes me laugh."

"Don't you care what people think?" she asked.

"Not about stuff like that I don't. People believe what they want to no matter what the truth. Gossip runs rampant in the Emperor's court." I looked at her. "I have no idea why Captain Thrawn chooses to speak with me, but I can tell you this, I am one of the few people who sees past the colour of his skin." I said. "I grew up on a planet where being human means being out numbered sometimes. Aliens don't bother me, in fact sometimes I think I prefer their company."

"It's his eyes that weird me out, they seem to bore right through a person.

Cannot tell what he is thinking." she said with a shiver. "He seems so distant and cold."

I smiled at that statement. "I don't imagine for a moment it must be easy for him in this cliquish human oriented Empire we have." I shrugged. "Besides I am happy at least someone wants to speak with me, most of the time I am the one shunned because of who I work for."

She nodded. "What is Lord Vader like to work for?"

I favoured her with a smile. "Abrupt." I said and got up to get more tea. I was getting tired of these questions that were going nowhere.

When I sat back down she looked at me carefully, the way you do when you suddenly see a person for the first time, although you've looked at them many times before.

"You're not what I imagined." She said.

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"No, you actually have a personality and you can hold a conversation. I thought the Emperor had taken a liking to you because you were another piece of pretty fluff for him to have around but that's not the case is it, you are actually dangerous." her voice had an edge to it I didn't know how to decipher, but she had dropped the haughty dancer face for a second and what lay behind her eyes was calculating and clever. I had no idea how to answer her question so I stayed silent and just matched her gaze.

"I had heard that you were under the protection of Lord Vader, I had thought that it was because you were actually good at being an office girl, but you are more than that aren't you." She wasn't asking a question. "What is it about you that the Emperor sees?" she asked.

"You know, I have absolutely no idea at all." I told her, *and I hope I never find out*, I thought, then asked. "Why do you care?"

"I like to know who my enemies are." She said point blank.

I gave her a confused look. "Enemy?"

"Are you working for Isard?" she asked suddenly.

"The Intel leader?" I looked at her and then I just laughed. "Oh, you are funny." I shook my head. "I am just Lord Vader's personal assistant. If you think I work for Intel then you give me far too much credit." I said.

"You know, I will find out if you are lying to me and when I do, I will make sure you are not a threat to me." She said coolly.

"How in the name of the holy sarlacc can I be a threat to you? I don't even know you." I said with a sigh, this was getting tedious.

She smiled. "That's a good thing." She told me getting up. "I'm tired and I wish to rest before we arrive on Rothana, so if you don't mind I will take my leave of you."

"As you wish." I said with a shrug and watched her leave. The force moved

about her but it wasn't strong. She had been looking for something from me with all her questions but she had not gotten the answer she had wanted. She had not been able to sense the force around me or else she would have known what it was in me the Emperor had seen. She didn't like uncertainties and I made her nervous but I wasn't exactly sure why. I knew that while maybe she was a dancer and probably a very good one, that was not who she really was. I didn't want to think about it. The less I knew about her and what she was doing on Rothana the better, I was certain of that.

I finished my tea, and did my hourly ship check. Everything was fine. I picked up the book I was half way through from my satchel and went back to the cockpit to sit and read. If I managed to nap a little along the way well, that was fine too. I knew from experience that the ship alarms were loud enough to wake the dead.

I was grateful that Lianna stayed away from me rest of the trip. She only appeared when I announced via the comm that we would be landing in a few moments. She was dressed in a beautiful dance costume, wrapped in a long fur lined coat and had her travel bag with her, probably she would change costumes several times. I remembered having to do that a few times when I was a dancer.

"I will be several hours." She informed me as I styled the ship down onto the landing pad we had been assigned.

"I need to know where you will be in case I have to get a hold of you." I said.

"The offices are above the cantina." She said, "but I would prefer not to be disturbed unless it is the Emperor."

I nodded. "As you wish."

The ship landed with a soft bump and I shut down the systems while she waited for me to open the door and the landing ramp.

"It's cold out there, we landed outside not in. You might want to do up your coat." I told her as I walked with her to the door and opened it.

She scowled at me. "How far away are we from the Cantina?"

"A few meters I think, I requested a landing space as close to it as possible."

"Then I am fine." She said.

Rothana is an arctic world, so it is cold. I had requested an outside landing pad because they were a hell of a lot easier to take off from than an internal one, especially if you are wanting to leave in a great big hurry. It is awfully hard to fly through closed landing bay doors.

When the door opened I was greeted by the initial wuff of air exchange. The air that left the ship was warm and smelled of hydraulic fluids and ship mechanics, the air that came into the ship was bitterly cold and smelled like oily pepper and burnt metal.

The night sky was crystal clear, and I could see the Cantina just across the quad. We had indeed landed very close to it. I could see beyond the gantries and the buildings up to the stars which shone with a brilliance I had only ever seen in the desert of Tatooine before. Without even thinking about it I reached out to Lianna and touched her on the back of her hand, wanting to wish her good luck. In the flash of an instant I knew that something very bad was going to happen to her. In that split second I felt rather than saw pain, confusion, fear and death. I was given an image of a room full of people all fighting, someone masked and darkly dressed was shooting at her and the last image was of her being hit in the back by blaster fire. I shivered.

She shrugged off my touch and gave me a filthy look. "I don't need luck." She told me tartly, "I am very good at what I do. Just be ready to take off when I am done."

"Of course." I said still shaken from the sensations reeling through my body. I watched her leave with a chill in my bones that had nothing to do with the cold out side.

I waited until the door closed and then sat down. I was shaking. In my life I had never experienced such a sudden and powerful waking premonition before. I knew that such things happened because I had read about it in the little journal my father had given me. Its author often had terrible premonitions and he wrote about them, many of which came true after the fact. His Jedi teacher had told him that premonitions about the future did not always accurate and that they were unpredictable and that interfering with things because of them was often a very bad move. I had always felt that he should have listened to his teacher but now I found my self in much the same situation and I suddenly understood his point of view much better. Protect her at all costs the Emperor had said, well the only way that was going to happen was if I went in there after her and I couldn't do that dressed as I was. To borrow a phrase from a man I once knew, They eat little girls like me for breakfast in places like this. Now I knew why Thrawn had given me the Dantassi clothes and I was grateful for his clever thinking.

The process of becoming Akiana'myshk'apavjäska was strange and daunting. The clothes were beautiful and functional and made from a fabric that looked heavy and thick but was neither. There was a long sleeved under shirt, a seamless over tunic with a square neckline and three quarter length sleeves that were wide, sitting just below the elbows. The tunic went to mid thigh, and was split up the sides to just below my waist. The pants were wide legged, and almost looked like a very long skirt. They could either be worn loose or tucked into the heavy soled boots I usually wore. Everything was dyed some deep shade of a blue that was so dark it almost looked black. Over the tunic and pants went a long, sleeveless robe that was meant to be worn open. It had only one ornate clasp at the top and around the collar, continuing down front seam were decorative and

exquisite embroidered patterns, a sort of knot-work, mythical creatures twisting and turning into each other. Over this was worn the outer cloak. This was much as the one I had worn on the trek through the jungles on Myrkr, except it matched the rest of the clothes and fit me better. The sleeves were long and cuffed, and the fur trimmed hood was large cowl like and deep. It too was full of ornate embroidery and fastened at the neck with an ornate bone toggle. There were even heavy leather gloves which also matched.

Before I put on the cloak I went in to the 'fresher to apply the face mask make up. I thought it would feel yucky but I was wrong about that as well. It was surprisingly easy to apply and went on evenly and smoothly. The white base first then the black for the decoration. As I drew out the markings in an imitation of the ones Za'ar had placed on my face with his fingertips, I suddenly and almost desperately wished that he was here.

I had braided my hair back and then knotted it up with the Bone needle, then I smoothed some of the black mask paint over my head to further hide the redness of my hair. When I was done I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I no longer recognized myself. I wondered, again, how Thrawn had known to give me this outfit now. If that had just been over cautiousness and coincidence on his part or had he really known far more than he had let on about what I was going to end up doing. I would have to ask him if I got back in one piece. Whatever the reason for his gift, I was grateful.

I slung the small leather satchel that held my important things over my head, across my shoulder then I put on the cloak and picked up the Culling staff. Za'ar had given me a Bone Trader name, Thrawn had somehow managed to provide me with clothes to look the part, now I had to find the person that fit.

I stood very still for a moment and closed my eyes. I had been taught well by Master Kjestyll and relaxing to find my center was no longer as difficult as it had once been. I breathed and let the force surround me. I could sense its presence and feel its weight. When I was ready I opened my eyes and sighed. Whatever happened would happen and I could only deal with things as they came. I opened the ship's hatch and watched the ramp slide down.

The air was biting cold but it was also refreshing and it woke me from the inside out. I locked the ship with the new voice code and waited until the door had shut before I made my way to the cantina. I was pretty certain that this place would make the one in Mos Eisley look like a palace and when I stepped through the doorway I was not disappointed.

Rothana was a planet anyone went to unless they had to and unless one had work or business there it was not a planet anyone stayed on for too long. It was home to the Rothana Heavy Engineering Company, which was a subsidiary of the Kuat Drive Yards. This in itself should be enough to tell anyone all they needed to know.

It was a cold planet filled with heavy duty industrial buildings where they built ships and transports. They also manufactured war machines here. The main city, Dyrsk, was not so much a city but rather a huddle of living quarters surrounded by the factories which were mammoth by comparison. The only people who lived here in any permanent sort of capacity were the workers and the absolute dregs of galactic society. If people thought that Nar Shaddaa was bad, they had never been to Rothana.

The cantina was a dimly lit, filthy building filled with factory workers, low life's and aliens from all ends of the galaxy. The air was rank and filled with smoke, a hint of spice, the sharp scent of sweat and stale beer. There was music coming from somewhere but it was not obnoxiously loud so I didn't mind it too much. I was surprised that not a single person even bothered to look up at me when I entered the main floor. I suppose I had been expecting some reaction to the outfit but as I scanned the room I saw the reason why. There were so many diverse looking people and aliens that one more painted, masked figure made no difference. I was quite certain that had I stepped through that door in my normal day to day clothes with my hair unbound and my face unmasked the reaction would have been entirely different.

I took a deep breath and went to sit in a corner that was unpopulated and from where I could pretty much see the whole room as well as the main entrance. With my back to the wall and my feet propped up on a chair, I casually ordered pikaché ale from the bored looking waitress and then noticed the door on the other side of the room behind the bar. I guessed that was where the entrance to the upstairs offices was because from my scans of the outside I had not seen any back way out, at least non that were topside. I paid the waitress when she brought my drink, gave her a healthy tip, hoping she'd leave me alone, and didn't touch the ale. I just sat and waited and watched.

The amazing thing about wearing a mask was the sense of anonymity and security it gave the person wearing it. I had the hood of the cloak up and pulled low over my face, the lighting in the cantina was crappy to start with and it was easy to feel invisible. While I wasn't exactly what I would call relaxed I wasn't fully paying attention either so it scared the wits out of me when a deep, soft voice spoke beside my ear in a language I recognized but did not speak or understand.

"Eta'peylan nu'vje'a'tashku." He said.

I looked up and stared into the face a Bone Trader. For a split second I thought it was Za'ar but that was not the case. This man was taller, with broader shoulders. The ornate bone mask not only made from that of a different creature but the intricate carvings that decorated it were also completely unlike those on the mask that Za'ar wore. Only the glowing red eyes held a strange sense of familiarity for me.

I had not even noticed him as I had scanned the room. He had moved like

smoke to stand beside me and I had been caught utterly unaware. I fought to get my heart rate back down to normal.

“I do not speak your language. I’m sorry.” I said in basic.

He cocked his head to one side and continued to stare at me. He then said something in a different language. Minnisiat was a trade language from the Unknown Regions. I had heard it once or twice before but I could not speak it either so I shook my head. He regarded me for another very long moment and then said in halting basic.

“Well met are we, but I know you not. May I sit?”

I nodded and he took the chair next to me instead of the one across from me, allowing me to maintain my view of the room.

“My basic is not as well as I would like it to be, but easier to communicate with you, I think, yes?” he asked.

I nodded. “I speak other languages but not Cheunh or Minnisiat.”

He drew a deep breath. “How are you named?” he asked.

“I am Akiana’myshk’apavjäska.” I told him, giving him the name Thrawn had given me.

“Pavjäska, North Shield Clan, this name is well known to me but you are a”Traeth, not of the people. Who has named you?” he asked.

“Nikätza’arth’pavjäska.” I said carefully.

The Bone Trader sat back and nodded slowly. “This name is also known to me. A great warrior among our people, he is honoured.” He was thoughtful and silent for a few moments and then he said. “I am Kirja’navaar’inkjerii, son of clan Inkjerii of the Hjal Dantassi.”

“I am honoured to meet you.” I said.

I sensed his smile beneath his mask and he seemed to relax a little, but his eyes remained watchful.

“How is it that you are one of the People but not of the People?” he asked.

“Are you asking why I have this name?”

He nodded. “You are the first a”Traeth I have seen who bears a Clan name and wears a hunter’s face. I would like to hear how it came to be so.”

“It is kind of a long story.” I said.

He looked about the room, following my eyes. “There is time, nothing will happen yet. Whatever it is that you await will take longer than you are thinking.”

“How do you know?”

Again I sensed a smile. “Tell you, I shall, in trade for your story. The Honoured Nikätza’arth’pavjäska would not, I think, make of his ‘kast just anyone.”

I drew a deep breath and began to tell him about the hunt that had taken place on Myrkr without naming names or giving too much away. I gave as much detail as I could about the final parts of the hunt and my small part in it. I could

still smell the blood and the muck and hear the screams of the men and the beasts as they had died. It was difficult to retell and I had to fight to still the shake in my voice when I spoke of Za’ar and how he had bloodied my face, using the words he had spoken. When I was finished Kirja’navaar’inkjerii was silent for what seemed a very long time.

“Look around this room, Akiana’myshk’apavjäska. In the left corner do you see the man, dark clothed and masked? He awaits someone or something. Looks too often at his chrono. Weapons are hidden at his back. He has reached behind twice now, to assure himself that they are still within his grasp. He watches the door, the same door you also watch. But he has not seen you or taken note that you also wait for that door to open.”

I saw the man he spoke of, tall and slender, dressed in black space-gypsy clothes, wrapped and masked. All that could be seen of his face were his eyes and they were restless and wary.

“Look now across the room, there are two more clothes alike yet not alike. They are all together and they watch the room for who comes and who goes. His back up they are.”

I saw the two he was talking about, a woman and a man, also dressed in space-gypsy clothes, her face was free but his was also covered.

“Now in the near corner by the come in door there are two more. The strength, the how do you say, muscle, they will be the last to leave when the fighting begins. All five came in this morning and have been waiting a restless wait ever since. The one you are watching over came in a small time ago and they all went very still. She is who they hunt.” He paused a moment then added. “She does not know you are guarding at her back, does she?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No.” I said.

“You do not care for this woman, yet you will risk your life to protect her from unknown danger, why?”

“You are very observant to know all of this, how?” I was suspicious of him now.

“I am Jhal’kai, this is meaning in basic something like, hunt or pack leader. I track the prey. I am very good at this job, well trained to see and know where the hunters and the hunted are, how they will run and what they will do before they know themselves. I am the one who must lead the hunters and tell them where they must go, for that I must predict what the prey will do.” He said. “The ones we now watch here are not good at their jobs, they are nervous and show fear, untrained and untried. Only the one clothed in black is unafraid. He is their leader, they all watch to see how he signals and wait for his command.” He gave a slight shrug. “You have not answered my question.”

“I was asked by someone I work for to watch out for her. She is a dancer of some value.” I told him.

He nodded. "You do not lie, but you do not sound happy about this either."

I sighed and sat back in my chair. "Why are you here in this place?" I asked.

"It is a stop point for my kind. The cold is familiar to us and the people here are not interested in our ways. We are left alone to travel as we will. I wait passage to my next hunt on Kerest."

"Kerest? They have transports going there from here?"

"No but someone will take currency from me and deliver me there." He said. "Currency speaks many languages." He added.

"What are you hunting there?" I asked.

"Ice beasts called Ikhatuu. Very challenging." He replied.

I had never heard of these creatures but Kerest was known to me. It had once been a planet with a thriving, civilized people but when their sun went inactive and the planet was plunged into an ice age, the civilization died. What rose in its place was a society of hunters so vicious that they pretty much hunted themselves to the brink of extinction. Word of their prowess and skills somehow reached the Empire at some point and there were several Kerestians who worked for the Emperor. They were well known for their unique and extraordinary weapon they called a dark stick. I had never seen one but I had heard tales of them. A weapon that when it was not turned on looked like a piece of metal, but when it was active it had a black light beam in the shape of a crescent moon. Its ability to slice through almost anything was the stuff of legends.

"Well, good luck with the hunt." I said.

He chuckled. "Luck, I need no luck but I thank you for the thought, none the less."

I sighed and fiddled with the small skull necklace I wore around my neck. Kirja'navaar'inkjerii watched me for a moment.

"May I see that?" he asked.

I slipped back my hood and took the necklace off, handing it to him to look at. He took it gingerly, carefully in his large gloved hands. He stroked the bone with what seemed to me almost a reverence. He handed it back to me after a long moment. I slipped it back on and redrew the hood over my head. The bone needle in my hair had also not escaped his notice.

"I knew the man who carved that piece you wear about your neck. A great warrior was he, a leader of his people and a wise man. To own a token by him is a precious gift. This was your first-hunt gift from the one who named you?"

I nodded.

"He must think highly of you to part with such a treasure. You are bound to him?"

"I don't know what that means." I said.

Kirja'navaar'inkjerii shook his head and sighed. "How is it that such a great and noble Hunter has chosen to make you of his 'kast and not tell you anything about his kind? You are ignorant of everything that is Mathäd'antass'Iyantha. You do not speak the tongue. You know nothing of the ways of the hunt and none of the customs. Lucky it is for you that I know of him and his name. Lucky for you it is that he is honoured among my clan for his great deeds. Others who would not know his name would have killed you for what would have been seen as desecration of our Way."

"I have no answers for you. I did not ask for this name or the hunt or these clothes." I said.

"We do not ask for our fate, Tjällh. It is usually handed to us by unexpected means and unwanted circumstances." He chided. "He has bound you by name and gift, yet you know nothing. I have no polite way to give this question. Has he bedded you and joined with you as one beast?"

I actually blushed and hoped that the makeup hid it. "Uhm.. no." I said. "Well that is to say... not yet. It is complicated." I opened my mouth to say more then shut it again realizing that Kirja'navaar'inkjerii was chuckling beneath his mask.

"I can see why Nikätza'arth'pavjäska is taken by you." He said gently. "But you must learn the way of the People, Akiana'myshk'apavjäska." He said. "There is more to the Dantassi than a mask and clothes."

"How in the name of the holy Sarlacc am I supposed to do that?" I asked. I really wondered about this because the circumstances of my life were not exactly conducive to me simple taking off to learn the ways of this strange culture Thrawn had thrown me into.

I felt him smile. "Uljask'peylan ji'rüshjen taemi." He said. "A way will be found."

"Easy for you to say." I sighed. "How is it you know Za'ar? You keep saying that he is a great warrior known to your people. What did he do?"

Kirja'navaar'inkjerii drew a deep breath and glanced about the room. So far everything was still quiet and seemingly normal. The dark clothed man in the far corner still waited but was not agitated in anyway.

"Many, many years ago, before I was born, some of the Dantassi people left the mother world to explore, find new homes, and find new hunting grounds. We are, by nature, a restless people. We are not like the ordered Chiss who went underground to seek warmth and softness. We are born and bred on the world above where it is hard and cold. It shaped our needs, our wills. We sought more of the same hardness, not less. One of the planets these explorers found was a small world in what you would know as the shoulder of the Tingel Arm. It was uninhabited by sentient beings and had a good and varied animal population. The climate suited our kind, very cold, very harsh but not eternal winter. It was

different and challenging. Hjal is situated between Sernpidal and Cadomai.”

“For most it would be a worthless place. Yet, my people colonized it, making it their home base and new hunting grounds. They lived and thrived there for many generations before another race from the far away came and made experiments on the land. They found something of value and made to war with us. Wishing to remove us from our home and take it for their own. We were small in number and unaccustomed to such warfare as we were about to meet.” He paused and shook his head. “I do not know how it was that Nikätza’arth’pavjäska came to hear of our troubles but he came to our aid. He did not bring a vast army with him, but a small group of seasoned hunters that he had trained alongside. He spent several months working with us and teaching us the arts of this different kind of war. It was something unfamiliar, new to us and lessons were well learned, never to be forgotten.”

“We are known as great hunters across the galaxy but that is not the same thing as fighting an army of trained soldiers with weapons of terrible destructive power. The Dantassi pride themselves on the noble art of hunting, we prefer to see the eyes of our prey when we take its life, we use all that we take and waste nothing. War is destructive without real purpose, fought for greed and power. It is not our way but we learned and we adapted.”

“When the invasion came we were ready and through his great leadership we defeated our enemy so soundly they gave way and signed a treaty to never return. They greatly feared Nikätza’arth’pavjäska and his weirding-witch ways of knowing what they would do and how they would do it. It was as if he could read their intentions. When the fighting was done and the treaty signed, he left as quietly as he had come. For one so young he was well versed in the arts of warfare and his hunting skills would have rivaled the best of us.”

I sighed as I fiddled with my necklace. Every time I turned around it seemed I learnt more and more about a man I felt I barely understood.

The Bone Trader across from me nodded at the carving I played with. “It was my grandfather who carved that bone charm you now wear. I still recall when he gave it to Nikätza’arth’pavjäska. That you now wear it tells me much. Not easily are the gifts from an Honoured Elder passed onward. Nikätza’arth’pavjäska is not a man to do things lightly or without great consideration.” Kirja’navaar’inkjerii said quietly.

I didn’t know what to say. He was right about Thrawn he was not a man to do things lightly or without great forethought. For the second time since I had landed on this forsaken planet I wished he were with me. This sudden ache of missing him was new and I didn’t understand it. Something of that thought must have shown through the paint and on my face because Kirja’navaar’inkjerii placed a hand over one of mine and leaned close to me, locking his eyes on mine.

“Tjällh, have faith. It was not by chance that we are well met here.

Nothing happens without reason. You are not alone.”

“Thank you, Kirja’navaar’inkjerii.” I said quietly, swallowing back the sudden rush of emotion that threatened to engulf me. I took a deep steadying breath, remembering Thrawn’s words to me. *‘Help comes in unexpected guises. It never hurts to be prepared.’* He had said. I wondered how he had known. More mysteries without answers.

As Kirja’navaar’inkjerii drew back I felt his smile. “It is customary for strangers to address each other with the fullness of their names, but you have shared too much of your spirit with me today for me to allow such formality. You may know me as Navaari.” He said.

“Does this mean you can shorten my name as well?” I asked thankful for small things, Chiss and Dantassi names were a mouthful.

“If you allow, it would be an honour to do so.”

“Za’ar calls me A’myshk’a. I take it that is the core form?”

He chuckled. “Yes. Although your full name is most beautiful. Do you dance?”

I nodded.

“And Nikätza’arth’pavjäska has seen you dance.”

I nodded again but I wasn’t about to elaborate on *that* little episode of my life.

“My daughter loves to dance. Perhaps one day you will travel to our home and we will meet under more restful circumstances. I would offer you hospitality and you would have a chance to learn the way of the People.”

“I would like that very much.” I said and I meant every word.

“When next you are with Nikätza’arth’pavjäska you must ask him to take more care in educating you in our ways.” He said softly.

I couldn’t help but laugh a little. How could I describe to this stranger my very odd relationship with the man he knew as Nikätza’arth’pavjäska. I could not even make sense of that myself. I sat back in my chair and watched the room. It had grown more crowded as the shifts changed and the people coming off work came in for a drink.

The man in black had not moved from his spot and neither had his friends but they had grown restless, more watchful. We had been talking for well over an hour and nothing much had changed. I allowed myself to relax and center a little so that I could sense the more subtle changes with my own weirding ways. It was always as if the world about me suddenly got brighter when I did this, allowed myself to touch the Force. Navaari watched me carefully for a moment but said nothing. He too, went back to observing the crowd. We lapsed into a silence that was surprisingly comfortable. I felt a kinship with this perfect stranger and I did not know why. It was so strange and yet somehow, here in this place, being dressed in this manner offered me a sense of solace. What had Thrawn done

in making me a part of this culture? I felt as though I was being drawn into something that somehow went way beyond my control and there was no turning back, as if, by naming me under Dantassi laws he had placed me on an irreversible path to something unexpected and yet, at the same time amazing. One thing was for certain I was going to have to have a little chat with Thrawn about this when I got back. I sighed out loud, making Navaari look at me. I was about to say something when I felt a sudden shift in the air around me. A ripple in the force that told me something was about to happen.

Navaari motioned with his hand for me to be still. "Be still and observe, Tjällh." He said quietly, firmly. "When the time is right for you to intervene, you will know."

So I sat and waited, they were the longest few minutes of my life.

There was a book called *'The Art of War and Battle.'* It was a large, lavishly illustrated tome full of images and discussions about paintings and depictions of warfare throughout the history of the galaxy. What I enjoyed reading the most however, were the quotes from many famous and some not so famous people. Some were warriors, some were innocent bystanders and some were instigators but they all had poignant and fascinating things to say on the subject of war and fighting. It was one of the books my mother had brought with her after she married my father. It was one of my favourites for reasons I could never explain.

I had spent hours pouring through the pages, studying the often garish and horrific images presented to me there. I read the quotes over and over again, thinking about the people who had uttered these statements and wondering, if they could have turned back the clock and changed the way things had happened if they would have done so.

One quote in particular always stuck with me.

"To watch a battle, a brawl or a fight between two foes is to watch an unchoreographed dance. At first glance, the movements are all chaos and madness, faster than the eye can follow but step in closer and you see each foot fall is precious, each sweep of the hand and blade exacting. For those in the fray everything happens in time slowed down. One second elongates, each moment captured by the desire to prolong one's life before it can be claimed by one's foe. For those who stand at the sides of the field and watch, it is sheer madness, a blur to the eyes, an insult on the ears and a wound to the soul that can never be repaired. Only when one enters the battle does one understand what an extraordinary thing it is, only after one is able to walk away from the same battle does one understand what a gift life is."

The cantina exploded into motion in the single blink of an eye. The door to the upper offices opened and Lianna came out. She was not dressed as a dancer any more instead she was clothed in a slick one piece jump suit. She held a small brown satchel in her left hand, in her right she held a blaster pistol. She had been expecting trouble the moment she walked through the door and from the backward glance she gave the door there had been people following her down the stairs as well. She shut the door fast and blasted the lock. The expression on her face was one of determination not fear or worry, just a look of 'get the job done.'

Navaari looked at me. "She may dance, but she is not a dancer. She is a predator."

I looked back at him and said nothing. I had no answers. I had only the words of the Emperor in my ears telling me to watch out for her, telling me that she was precious to him, asking me to take care of her. If this was a test, it was an unfair one. She looked to me as though she could take on an entire army and win. I, on the other hand, did not feel remotely prepared for such a thing.

"Observe." Navaari said and he pointed to the two who had been standing across from the man in black. They had drawn their weapons and had gone into a battle stance, ready to aim and shoot. I followed Navaari's finger and saw that the man dressed in black had not moved much at all, still leaned against the wall and watched. He was, to the casual observer, not a threat but a disinterested bystander. The two by the door had drawn their weapons also but kept them down, hidden. I looked back at the man in black. There was something compelling about him, something familiar. I could not see his face or anything about him that would give me a clue as to why I would feel this way, but there was a ripple about him that told me this was not the first time we had met, that he was in touch with the Force but he was hiding it.

The two across from him had nervous trigger fingers and they fired the first blaster shots at Lianna who ducked and avoided them easily all the while making her way towards the doorway, the only visible way out. Her shots, aimed at taking the two of them out were accurate and deadly. She had been very well trained. She did not once stop moving and as the cantina around her erupted into utter chaos with people either screaming and trying to get under something or yelling and trying to join in. She appeared to me to waltz gracefully through it all.

It is inevitable that when anyone starts some sort of a fight in a cantina, especially a low end dive like this one, people will join in. The motto anything for a good fight seems to be the life blood of places like this. The real thing was better than the latest Holo-stories any day of the week.

As she made her way from the doorway behind the bar to the front entrance she was engaged by several burly men who thought they'd like a piece of the action. I watched in a stunned sort of awe at her speed and certainty as she took them out one by one. She had been well trained in martial arts and she

moved with such elegance that I felt a sharp pang of envy. She had made it almost two thirds of the way through the room when out of the corner of my eye I saw the man in black finally move. He walked slowly with a languid grace. He paid absolutely no attention to anything else that was going on around him, not the flying bottles and drinks, not the flailing bodies and fists. He closed in on Lianna and she did not appear to notice him at all, too many other things were taking up her attention.

The two guardsmen at the front door had drawn their weapons and were aiming at her but she saw them and fired first. One she hit, one she missed and had to duck to escape his shot. As she began to stand back up so someone fell into her knocking her forward and the bag she had held in her hand went flying under the tables and slid not very far away from where Navaari and I were standing. I went to move for it but Navaari moved fast and stepped in front of me. He grasped my arm with a hand that gripped like a vice.

“Do not move.” He hissed. “Wait, I will tell you when the time is right. On this you must trust me.”

I nodded and took a deep breath. It seemed to me that we two were an island of stillness in a sea of absolute raging madness. I got control of my breathing and slowed it right down. Become the stillness do not seek it out. Navaari watched me as I found my center. I felt his smile and approval. He let go of my arm and handed me my culling staff.

I let the Force surround me. I stretched out with it to where the satchel Lianna had been carrying had landed and I touched it with my mind. Slowly I let its form and shape, its weight become crystal clear to me and with this weirding power I had known since I was born, I began to force-pull the bag towards me. I let it drag low along the ground and the process was slow but I did not want to attract any attention to it. A bag moving itself across the floor was bound to raise a few eyebrows. When it was within reach I caught the strap of it with the end of my culling staff and pulled it to me. Navaari stood in front of me hiding me from the rest of the room while I slipped my cloak off to shrug the satchel across the other shoulder, when I had my cloak back on he nodded.

“You are of the Schai’tai’kha. My people speak of such things but I have not seen it until today.” He whispered. “Be ready, the time for action will be swift and soon. Let me lead and when I say, you must leave. No matter what, you must get out of this building and trust me to do my job.”

I nodded. He stepped aside so that I could see Lianna had fallen on the ground but had rolled to a crouch and was fighting the remaining guardsman from the doorway. She still had not seen the man in black who had made his way to stand close behind her, in a position of power. He was drawing a weapon from behind his back.

I wanted to yell out a warning but Navaari clamped a gloved hand over

my mouth. He let me go but waved his forefinger back and forth.

“Follow me. Do as I do.” He said and I did. He walked away from our corner, away from the main fight towards the far end of the room, as though he wanted to get away from the fight that was slowly advancing forward. I watched as he took from underneath his cloak a tiny object. He showed it to me, lying in the palm of his hand. A flat wheel with sharp pointed dags made from bone. It looked like a multi pointed star. He took a second to size up his target and then with astounding accuracy and minimal movement, he flicked it across the room where it landed with a sharp crack directly into the forehead of the Guardsman who had been about to shoot once again at Lianna. Both she and the man in black looked about them to see where it had come from but they did not, for reasons I couldn’t understand, see or notice us.

“No one sees what they do not expect.” Navaari said by way of explanation, seeing my puzzled expression and he was suddenly on the move again. I followed like a clumsy shadow and tried to keep an eye on Lianna who was now fighting three people at once. The man in black was still stalking her and would have her in a few moments if she did not notice him soon. How could he be so invisible to her and yet not to us? I wondered why he simply did not just shoot her. We moved towards him in a manner that was beguiling and misleading. I was at a loss for words. I had known that the Dantassi were among the best hunters in the galaxy but I had never seen, aside from Za’ar, one in action before. Navaari was every bit as good as he had said he was. He moved with an ease through the fighting chaos that was beautiful. He tracked the man in black until we were very close to him but still he did not sense a threat from either of us. There was too much going on around him and he only had eyes for his target. I wondered how he could not notice us, still as statues amidst the utter chaos that surrounded him.

“There will only be one moment, Tjällh. Be swift as snow across ice. Be deadly as the bitter cold.” He said.

The moment, when it came, was like a flower opening to the sun. It was as if time had slowed right down and everything moved as though through water. Lianna finally subdued the last of the bar brawlers who had decided she looked like fair game and had stopped moving for a second. She caught her breath and was about to look for her satchel when the man in black slowly, carefully raised his blaster and pointed it at her chest. Their eyes met for a split second and she moved to dodge the shot but before he could squeeze the trigger I launched myself at him and swung hard against the back of his legs with the blunt side of my culling staff. He buckled backwards under the blow and the shot went high, hitting the ceiling. I sensed the attention of the brawlers around us suddenly turn on me and then felt, rather than saw, Navaari go into action. He was so fast his movements were blurred. I had only one target to worry about. The man I was fighting had dropped his blaster as he had gone down but when he rolled over to

get to his feet he reached around to his back and drew out a long blade then turned to face me. His eyes were as blue as the sky and they looked at me with such intensity it was unnerving. Somewhere deep in the back of my mind I knew those eyes.

We circled each other for a second then he moved. He was fast, but it was a move I knew and I countered it easily. I deflected his advances with the culling staff and managed to get in several hard blows before he found a way to block the staff and we began to fight in earnest. I don't know how long we went at it. It seemed like forever and there was a moment when I felt as though I had slipped backwards in time. I knew his moves and he seemed to sense mine. When he managed to knock me on my ass and kick my weapon away from me I felt a shiver of fear. He lunged at me and we rolled on the floor amidst the broken glass, the blood and the mess of furniture. He managed to straddle me and had the knife at my throat, his free hand trying to pull away mine that was protecting my neck. With my other hand I reached up and from my hair I pulled the bone needle. I didn't even think about it I just plunged it as hard as I could into one of his hands. He yelled in pain, dropped his blade in surprise. I kicked around and twisted my body, throwing him off me. I was on my feet before he was. The bone needle had punched clear through his hand.

I kicked the fallen knife as far away from him as I could and backed up to where my culling staff lay. He moved suddenly and unexpectedly, picking up a fallen blaster that I had failed to see. For a split second I thought he would fire at me but instead he pirouetted around to get off one shot. Before Navaari could get to Lianna and pull her down the blast caught her square between the shoulder blades. She screamed and arched backwards as the bolt hit her and then fell to the ground. I glanced at the bloody hair needle still in my hand and then slipped it into my satchel. I grasped my culling staff in both hands and moved faster than I thought I ever could, flying at the man who had shot Lianna, smashing the staff against the side of his knee. He went down in absolute agony. I had broken something, I had heard the crack of the bone. I knelt on his chest with one knee and ripped off his mask.

In that single moment he could have killed me if he had wished, so great was my surprise. In his ice blue eyes that I had once loved there was not an ounce of recognition. He did not know who I was. He had not seen past the face paint and clothes yet. My heart ached seeing him again and without thinking about the consequences I whispered his name out loud. His eyes suddenly widened as he realised that I was not a stranger. It took a few seconds more and he placed the face beneath the paint. A thousand questions flashed across his face and he opened his mouth to say something. Then he realised that we were on opposite ends of a fight and that I was not paying attention.

What he would have done if he had gotten free I don't know, he had been

as shocked at seeing me as I had been seeing him. I did not think about it, I was faster than he was and I was unhurt. Before he could say my name or act I cat's pawed his jaw as hard as I could and knocked him out. I would have, could have killed him without even knowing who it was. I did not want to think about it. I knelt on the ground, reached out and touched his face, staring at him for what seemed to me to be forever. If Navaari had not made his way to me and physically yanked me to my feet I would have stayed there until the security force had dragged me away.

"We leave now" he hissed. "Do not look back, the one you protect is safe and I am right behind you."

I did as he said. No hesitation and I did not look back. I could not look back. It would break my heart to do so. What was Jyrki doing here? Why was he after Lianna? None of this could be a coincidence. Had the Emperor foreseen this happening? There were too many questions, too many uncertainties with no answers. I made my way through the still chaotic, fighting crowd and slipped out the door to the outside. The cold air bit into my lungs with a sting that made my eyes water and the back of my throat ache. I sensed rather than saw Navaari behind me and I moved quickly to my ship with him following. He had Lianna slung over his shoulder. I opened the door with the vocal pass command and without waiting to see if he made it on board ran to the cockpit and began the start up sequence that was already on emergency warm up.

We began lift off when the comm traffic started telling me I could not take off without the authorization to do so. I grabbed my headset and babbled some frantic garbage about having a medical emergency and I was taking off with or without permission.

Their answer was very rude and made me laugh, but they let me go anyway. I guessed they had other things to worry about. I saw by the con panel light that the ramp was up and the door closed. I desperately wanted to check and see if he and Lianna were okay but someone had to fly the ship. I shrugged off my cloak and the two satchels, sat in my chair and got to work. A few moments later we were free and clear of Rothana and began set the nav computer to jump us into hyperspace as soon as we passed the planet's gravity pull.

Shock is a funny thing. It sneaks up on you when you least expect it. As I set the coordinates for Kerest into the nav computer my hands started to shake. I managed to punch the switch before I had to run to the 'fresher to throw up. I knelt in front of the toilet, resting my head against the seat fighting the waves of nausea and dizziness. If this happened every time I got myself into a fight or a scrap I wasn't going to be much use to anyone. I might have stayed there on the

floor forever but a soft knock on the door made me remember I was not alone. When I didn't answer, the door opened.

"I'm fine." I said not looking up.

I heard the tap run and then Navaari handed me a glass of water. He knelt by my side and studied my face. I rinsed my mouth out and spat very un-lady like in toilet. He waited until I was finished and took the glass back when I handed it to him. When my legs stopped shaking I got to my feet and cleaned my teeth. He said nothing. I went from the 'fresher into the crew quarters where Lianna was lying on a bed. I could see she was breathing but I touched my fingers to the pulse on her neck all the same, just to feel it, just to be sure.

"She will live. She was lucky that blaster was set to stun and not kill.

There is a burn on her back from the shot."

"I have a med-kit with bacta strips and synthflesh." I said going to fetch it.

I watched as Navaari rolled her over onto her side and cut away the rest of her top with a bone knife that was wickedly sharp. The blaster burn wasn't pretty but it would heal without a scar. I cleaned it up and laid a bacta bandage over it.

I prepped a syringe and sedated her. Navaari cocked his head in question.

"She needs to sleep and I don't feel like answering the questions she'll have seeing me like this or why you are onboard." I told him.

I watched as he laid a blanket over her gently and was reminded that he was a father. I wondered how old his daughter was.

"I need to go and wash this stuff off my face." I said but was surprised when he grasped my arm.

"No." He said shaking his head again. He let go of me and with a glance once more at Lianna he left the crew bunk room and walked with me to the galley.

"No?" I asked. "What do you mean, no?"

He sighed. "How is it that you are so ignorant?" he asked, sounding almost angry for the first time since we had met. "How is it that Nikätza'arth'pavjäska has taught you nothing? How is it that he binds himself to you and you do not know even this simple thing?"

I shook my head at him. "What simple thing?"

He explained to me as though I were a small child. "It is our custom that we are masked. We do not show our true faces to the outside world, beyond the confines of our enclaves and clan. Our faces are private, sacred. Only the members of our tribes may see us uncovered. You are not of my tribe and I am not of yours. It would be taboo for me to see your true face out here, without proper ritual or ceremony. It is our way, A'myshk'a. It is a manner of protection that dates back to before the great Cold came. I would explain it in greater detail but that is not for me to do. This is the responsibility of Nikätza'arth'pavjäska. He gave you this name and made you one of us. He should have prepared you better." He was angry but not at me.

"There was no time. There has been no time." I said quietly.

"This duel life you lead, a reason it may be for your lack, but he should know better" He shook his head. "Uljask'peylan ji'rüshjen taeami."

"A way will be found." I sighed remembering these words from earlier.

"Yes."

I shook my head. I felt like bantha poodoo. I put the kettle on to make tea. I rummaged through the cupboard looking for the honey that had been left from the last big trip I had made in this ship. That seemed to me to be a life time ago but it wasn't.

"Will you drink tea?" I asked. "Or is there some weird code against that as well?"

He chuckled. "The drinking of tea is not forbidden."

I loaded mine with honey and sat at the table. I had the weirdest sense of having done this before and time seemed to swim. I rested my head in my hands and concentrated on breathing in and out.

Navaari spoke softly to me. "You were not born to this life and you are inexperienced in the ways of a warrior, yet you fight with a valiant heart and you keep your compassion. The shock you felt earlier will pass in time. If you continue down this path you will, perhaps, no longer feel so ill afterwards. But these feelings are normal and should not be ignored. After a great hunt we celebrate. We feast and we drink, we dance and we couple. These things allow the energy that is gathered from the hunt, the tensions that are created to flow back to the place where they came from." He cocked his head to one side.

"Nikätza'arth'pavjäska must teach you the ways or lead you to someone who can. It is one thing to know how to fight. It is quite another to deal with the ways it will make you feel. It is not a life for everyone. You are well trained, you know how to defend yourself and you hold much grace in your movements but the consequences are difficult for you. If you continue along this way as untried as you are, it will eat you up from the inside, I fear." He shook his head. "Not even your weirding magics will save you from that."

I sipped my tea silently and watched as he tilted his mask slightly to drink also.

"And, you should have a bone mask of your own." He added offhandedly, "Painted masks are for small children."

I made a face, his barb had been intentional but I wasn't about to push the conversation further by asking just how I was supposed to procure myself such a mask. The silence in the galley was not uncomfortable.

"I set course for Kerest. The journey will take about four hours or so." I told him after a very long pause. The honey in the tea made me feel better.

"I am grateful." Navaari said.

"It seemed to be the least I could do." I said.

There was another long silence this time it was heavy and I suspected I would not like what was said next. I was right..

“You knew him.” Navaari remarked. It was not a question. “I saw your face when you took away his mask. The one clothed in black, he is mean something to you.”

I got up to get more tea avoiding Navaari’s gaze. I didn’t want to talk about Jyrki. I shut my eyes tightly as his face, his clear blue eyes, flashed in my mind. I had stabbed him through the hand, I had drawn blood from him, this man who had once been my friend, had once been someone I had loved with all my heart. I had smashed my fist into his face. We had tried to kill one another. The look of surprise, more than that the look of shock and hurt that had seared through his eyes when he realised who it was he was fighting against. Why had he been there? What was really going on? Why was he trying to kill Lianna? What was she to them? What was she at all? I had no answers to any of my questions.

“He is someone from my home, my past.” I said coldly.

“You have feelings for this man?”

“Once.” I said but that did not seem to do it justice. I still had feelings for Jyrki, I just didn’t know what they were any more.

“You did not expect to see him, nor he you?”

I shook my head.

“He is a part of your past but you cannot let go.” Navaari stated flatly.

“It’s complicated.”

He laughed then. “I am thinking that verything about you is complicated, Tjällh.”

I shrugged. What could I say, he was right.

“Have you spoken of your bond with this man to Nikätza’arth’pavjäska?”

I made a derisive snort. “Not in any great detail.” but Thrawn had a pretty good idea.

“Perhaps it would ease this burden on your soul if you did. Such secrets will tear you apart.” Navaari said.

“You have no idea.” I said quietly, bitterly. The warning in my voice for him to back off did not go unnoticed but he ignored it.

“If you cannot confide in the one who is bound to you...”

I cut him off. “Za’ar is not bound to me. He is bound to no one. I do not have a clue what I am to him, and I don’t know what he is to me. I don’t think I will ever know what he is to me, but bound, tied, attached to, whatever name or lable you wish to put on it does not apply to either him or me.” I said. “He makes no commitment to me nor I to him. Our lives, such as they are, do not allow this. Not now, not ever.” I was shaking as I said these words.

Navaari raised his hand for me to stop. “A’myshk’a, you have my apology for my words. They are not meant to distress you further.” He said.

I sighed as I sat back down at the table. “You are right. I am not used to this way of life. I almost killed a man tonight, someone I cared about, even loved once, to protect a woman I neither know nor like.” I paused as emotion caught in my voice. “The man you know as Nikätza’arth’pavjäska is still a stranger to me. We haven’t spent much time with one another. We live in a world where time is scarce. Our moments together are stolen, tentative and precious.” I took a deep breath wondering why it was easier to talk to a stranger than to confide in someone I knew and cared about. “Our relationship is still...new and very...well, very...complicated.” I said.

Navaari listened and was silent for a longtime. “Among my people there is a saying. *We do not choose the flakes of snow the wind blows in our face.* I hear in your voice the passion you have, the pain you hold close, the uncertainty of your life, so I will tell you this one thing. Nikätza’arth’pavjäska would not have made you of his were there not some connection, some feelings there. He, when I knew him, was not a man to be attaching himself to anything or anyone. He was aloof, separate and difficult to get to know. I do not need to see him with you to know that he is drawn to you in a way he cannot explain or understand. That is what it means to be bound.” He tapped his chest. “You feel the lack of his presence here. This pain, this need it is going beyond words and deeds. I see it in your eyes when you speak of him, when you think of him. This feeling you carry with you is a binding, a mating of spirit and soul. That is what it means to be bound. I have no other words in this language to express it.”

“Did he send you to Rothana? Did he know you would be there?” I asked after a moment.

Navaari shook his head. “No. I have neither seen nor spoken with him in many seasons, but the hunt on Kerest is one my people attend every year. It is a gathering of sorts for the scattered tribes. This fact would be known to him.” He sensed my questions. “We do not question destiny, A’myshk’a. Nothing happens without reason, nothing. Sometimes we are too small, too close to see the bigger path. When all around you is snow, it is often difficult to see a single flake and when sometimes we seek only that single flake, we miss seeing the snow.”

I smiled. “The Sand People from my home world say much the same thing.”

Navaari nodded. “As it is with such cultures, same meanings, different words.”

I nodded and went back to my tea. The rest of the journey to Kerest was passed in silence.

I landed the ship without incident and walked with Navaari to the ramp. I hated long drawn out goodbyes, they made me uncomfortable. I didn’t know what to say to him and I didn’t want another lecture on my ignorance of all things Dantassi.

The door opened and the ramp dropped and we both stared out onto this planet. It was eerie and barren looking. The space port we had landed in was small, isolated and unmanned. It was early by Kerest standard time and the dawn was still a few hours off. The air was bitterly cold and the wind bit at my skin.

“There’s no one here.” I said.

Navaari cocked his head to one side. “Not so as to be seen, but we are not alone.”

I shivered and not from the cold. This planet had a bad past and I felt it keenly. There were ghosts here and they were unhappy. I looked up at Navaari who only nodded.

I sighed. “Thank you.” I said. “I’m not sure what would have happened if you had not helped me on Rothana but things would probably not have gone so well without you.”

He bowed his head slightly, a gesture of acknowledgment. “It was an honour to meet you, Akiana’myshk’apavjäska.” Then he took from his neck one of his amulets and placed it over my head. “Wear this in remembrance.” He said quietly.

“I have nothing to give to you.”

He chuckled. “You have given me so much more than you are possibly knowing.” Then he removed a second necklace and pressed it into the palm of my hand. “This you will give to Nikätza’arth’pavjäska and tell him this *’Amdau’inte mikka-mawri’Ka. Ta’chi’sah a’mawri’Ka.’*”

I repeated the words and Navaari nodded. He touched three of his fingertips to his forehead then reached over and touched mine in the same place.

“We will meet again, if not in this lifetime then in the next.” He said and then he was gone. I watched him walk into the darkness until I could no longer see him. I waited until the cold won and then I closed the ship back up.

I looked in on Lianna, she was still asleep. Then I settled back into the pilot’s seat and took off. Automated landing stations always scared the sandjiggers out of me, but this place was worse than most. Kerest was a creepy planet that was full of darkness. I had felt its restless spirits and was glad to be well away from it. I set the nav computer for Naboo and watched with a strange inner stillness as the stars spun and elongated. My ship felt strangely empty without Navaari’s calm presence. I looked at the small amulet he had given me. It was little flower with four petals, giving it a square shape. It was small and delicate, yellowed with age, and not carved from bone but something similar, tusk or tooth perhaps. I studied it closely. It was a claw, a large claw that had been carved into the shape of a standing bear. It was extraordinary.

Once I had checked the ship and made sure everything was running smoothly, I went to the ‘fresher and began the process of washing away the Bone Trader guise. I was glad to get back into ordinary clothes and put my hair back up.

I made sure there was no trace of the face paint on me and folded up the Dantassi clothes, packing them back in the box Thrawn had delivered them in. Once the box and my culling staff were safely tucked away in their hiding places I settled back into my standard ship routine. I made some soup and picked up the book I had been reading. I expected that Lianna would be out for at least another hour or so. I took my mug of soup and my book back up to the cockpit and sat down, my usual feet upon the consol position. I tried to read but I couldn’t concentrate so instead I stared out of the cockpit and let my thoughts drift. My life just kept getting stranger and stranger.

We arrived on Naboo some time after sundown. I watched quietly as Lianna left the ship. Her only acknowledgment of the conversation we had had earlier was a nod of her head. I watched her walk down the ramp and head towards the retreat complex before I closed the up the door half way. It would do the ship good to have fresh air exchanged for the re-circulated air but I didn’t want the ship wide open. If anyone wanted to visit they would have to knock.

Even after such a short trip I was always careful to run a thorough check on all the ship’s systems. This meant computer run diagnostics and a personal look at the mechanics. While the on board computer ran self diagnostics I was in the engine room going over everything with a fine tooth comb. Some pilots I had known in my life found this procedure to be either a waste of time or utterly boring but I found it to be neither. It was always good to have the comp run self diagnostics and I liked being in the engine room. It was warm and the smell of hydraulic fuel and grease was always a comfort to me.

With a flashlight in hand I began my inspection. I loved crawling underneath the main engine assembly, looking at everything that made this ship go. Usually people had astromech droids do this sort of work but since I had learned most of my mech skills from Jyrki and he had hated astromech droids, I had never learned to rely on them.

This engine was a beauty. The *Ahnkeli’Su’udelma* had been highly modified. Her engine was top of the line and new. Even so, that being said, it didn’t hurt to check it over. I tweaked it and made sure the parts that needed to be lubricated were lubed and the bits that needed fluids were topped up and generally looked to make sure that wear and tear wouldn’t suddenly break something mid flight. Mostly, I just loved to look at it.

Once I had finished with the engine I started the general clean up. It was my father who had instilled this need for order on board a ship in me. He had made the mass cleanups after each trip fun. So I never minded the process of cleaning the ‘fresher, the galley or the common areas. This trip had been short and

sweet and there was no real mess to deal with. Lianna had left nothing on board and no trace that she had ever really been here. Yet, I felt the residue of her presence keenly. The echoes of our conversation lingered. It wasn't so much about what we had said to each other but rather more about the things left unspoken.

She had woken up about two hours after leaving Kerest, groggy and suspicious. She had made her way up to the cockpit and without sitting had demanded answers.

"How do you feel" I had asked, ignoring her question, a trick I had learned from Thrawn. Instead I got up and lead her to the common area, motioned for her sit at the table.

"What happened?" she had pressed as I had made tea.

"You were shot with a blaster." I had told her. "How do you feel?"

"My head hurts, my back hurts and my mouth feels like a desert."

I had handed her a cup of tea and sat across from her. "Drink, the honey will help. The headache and the dry mouth come from the sedative. Your back will heal and if you want there are pain killers in the medkit." She had shaken her head, sipping the tea. We had sat in silence for a long time and only after two cups of sweetened tea did she begin to look better.

"I suppose I owe you my life?" she had asked.

"Just doing my job." I had told her.

She had just given me a look.

"The Emperor asked to me make sure that you were safe." I had said cagily. "He was concerned for his favourite dancer." I added a little more tartly than I had meant to.

She had narrowed her eyes at me. "What happened?"

I had shaken my head. Time see how well I could lie and whether or not she could sense it.

"I heard the commotion while I was doing an external ship check. By the time I got to the cantina all madness had broken out." I had said. "It was just a big mess and someone decided to up the ante by pulling out a blaster and shooting at you."

"How did you get me out?"

"Sheer force of will. You aren't light." I had told her tartly.

She had buried her head in her hands and sighed.

"What?" I had asked her not expecting an answer.

"You should have left me there." She had said wearily.

I had just stared at her the without a word got up and fetched her satchel. I tossed it on the table and sat back down.

You dropped this." I had told her.

She had grabbed it and gave me a nasty look. She had checked the satchel over and then without opening it had tucked it down by her feet.

"I didn't look in it if that's what you are thinking." I had told her. "I don't want to know what is inside."

She had looked up at me. There were many questions in her eyes but she had not wanted to start the conversation.

I had sighed. "Look, I was asked to do a job, I did it. I am pretty certain that while you can dance, probably far better than I can, you are not just a dancer. It's tiny, little things that give you away, most people wouldn't see them but I do."

She had opened her mouth to say something but I had held up my hand to shut her up.

"I don't know what you are and I don't want to know."

She had drawn a deep breath and had sat back gingerly in her chair. "You are not what you appear to be." She had said after a long weighted silence.

I had given her an even stare. "None of us are."

She had regarded me carefully for a moment. "I start to see why Lord Vader keeps you around. Tell me something, is Merlyn your real name?"

I had laughed. "Yes, but I am betting Lianna isn't yours."

She had started to speak but I had shaken my head. "Look, I don't care what your real name is, who you are or even what you really do. I was asked by the Emperor to deliver you to Rothana and to make sure you got back safely. I did that so everything else is none of my concern. In fact, the less I know about you and whatever it is your job is, the better." I had told her. "I work for Lord Vader, I keep his schedule up to date and run errands for him and everything else that a personal assistant does. That the Emperor thinks I can be occasionally useful out side of that is flattering but it is not my main job and I have no intention and no desire to be more than I am right now. I am not a threat to you." I had added. "I am not your enemy."

She had stared me in the eyes for a long time and I had held her gaze until we had both looked away at the same time. "You are not my friend, either."

With a smile I had nodded. "I can live with that." I said getting up.

We had passed the rest of the journey back to Naboo in silence. I suppose we were both sorting out our own thoughts. She had retired to the sleeping quarters and I had stayed in the cockpit. I had managed to doze a little before we hit Naboo space and had landed.

I was lost in these thoughts when I heard a banging on the side of the ship. Someone wanted to visit. I looked at my chrono, it was later than I had realized. Time seemed to slip away without me noticing it. I made my way to the entrance door and opened it up again. I didn't smile when glowing red eyes met mine.

"Permission to come aboard?" Thrawn asked.

I made hand gesture that said get on board and walked back to the common area. I heard the door close up and steady footsteps follow me.

“Why are you here? Shouldn’t you be off saving the Galaxy or something?” I snapped as we walked back up to the common area.

He arched an eyebrow. “You are angry with me?” he asked. I didn’t answer him instead I fussed about the galley.

“Tea?” I asked as I put the kettle on the stove.

“Thank you.” Thrawn said coolly, taking off his jacket and sitting down at the table.

We did not speak but I felt his eyes follow my every move.

I sat down across from him and we drank tea in silence until I broke it. I was exhausted. In the last forty or so hours I had managed to get maybe three hours of good sleep and had eaten two bowls of tasteless soup. I was all out of patience. “Why are you here?” I asked again.

He said. “I wanted to see how you fared after your first solo mission for the Emperor.”

“Well, you see me. I am fine.” I could not keep the anger out of my voice.

“A’myshk’a...” he began but I cut him off with a flick of my hand.

“What does Tjällh mean?” I asked sharply.

His jaw clenched and there was a sudden hardness in his eyes. “Where did you hear that word?” he asked carefully.

“What does it mean?” I asked again.

He drew a deep breath. “It is archaic Cheunh.” He said slowly. “I need to know the context in which it was used to know what meaning to give you.”

I dug in my pocket and brought out the pendant Navaari had given me to pass onto Za’ar and laid it on the table in front of Thrawn. “Amdau’inte mikka-mawri’Ka. Ta’chi’sah a’mawri’Ka” I said, repeating Navaari’s words.

Thrawn picked the pendant up and studied it carefully. After a very long silence he asked. “Did he give you one as well?” He laid the bear amulet back on the table.

I pulled the tiny flower pendant out from under my shirt. He stood up and came over to me, pulled me to my feet, close to him and picked up the pendant between his thumb and his forefinger, studying it. I looked up into his eyes but I could not read the emotion that was there. When he let it go he did not sit back down but instead leant against the galley counter with his arms folded over his chest, distancing himself from me.

I sat back down. I was too tired for games. I just buried my head in my hands.

“What happened?” he asked after a long while. There was a thread of steel in his voice I was not used to hearing.

“Did you know he would be there?” I countered.

Thrawn shook his head. “No, but Rothana is a stop over place for many Bone Traders and the hunt on Kerest takes place in a few days I had hoped that if

you needed help you would find it.” He said. “That you would meet up with this particular man...” he shook his head again. “Not even I would have expected this coincidence.”

“He said there was no such thing as coincidence.” I said.

“Well, you do have a strange way of attracting the most unlikely of circumstances about you.” Thrawn said softly.

I picked up the bear amulet from the table and played with it. “This means something to you doesn’t it?”

“It is Kirja’navaar’inkjerii’s way of reminding me of the past.” He said evenly.

“The past has a funny way of catching up with us doesn’t it?” I said shakily and suddenly it hit me like a sandstorm. He did nothing as I buried my face in my hands and sobbed silently. I was furious with myself for crying but I couldn’t stop it from happening either. Thrawn stood and watched without saying a word or moving to comfort me. He waited until I was done with crying and had wiped my tears from my face angrily before he spoke.

“What happened on Rothana that has you so tied up in knots?” he asked.

I looked up at him. “What does Tjällh mean?” I pressed. I could play these games too.

He sighed. “It is an archaic form of the word that means child, but it is no longer used in that context. Did Kirja’navaar’inkjerii call you this?”

I nodded.

“After he knew that I was the one who named you.”

I nodded again wondering why that was significant.

“He was angry with me, was he not?” Thrawn said evenly.

“Yes.”

“Did he tell you how we knew each other?”

“He said you helped him and his people defeat invaders from taking their planet. That you and a small band of hunters saved them.”

Thrawn gave me a tight smile. “Then he did not tell you the whole story.” He said. “Tjällh is an avuncular term, a term of endearment usually, but not exclusively, used between fathers and daughters. While the word is not meant to be condescending, adults would not call one another that. It is a diminutive used for the inexperienced, for female children. The male version would be Tjäl’té. There is no direct translation any more and it is seldom heard outside of the family or clan circle and only spoken by the Dantassi. The use of this word from one to another implies a bond of some sort. In Chiss society no one would utter this word. It is considered old fashioned and meaningless.”

“Why would he use this term for me? I am not his daughter or part of his family and he went out of his way to make sure I stayed hidden under the face paint because I was not of his clan.” I was confused.

“It is complicated.”

“Everything about you and me is complicated!” I shouted getting up out of my chair, wanting to just walk away from him, from the ship, from everything. Suddenly the only thing I wanted was a hot bath and my bed. I grabbed my jacket and my satchel and went to leave. He moved faster than I would have given him credit for and caught me by the arm. His eyes searched my face looking for answers to question he left unspoken.

“Tell me what happened.” He hissed between clenched teeth. His grip on my arm strong enough to tell me he was serious about wanting an answer.

“Why?”

“What ever it is you are afraid to tell me is eating you up inside. I see it in your eyes. It haunts you.”

“Why do you care?”

He took a deep breath but did not let go of my arm. “Because, as Kirja’navaar’inkjerii so cleverly reminded me, I have a responsibility to you and I have been amiss in it.”

“Responsibility?” I hissed.

“Among other things,” He stroked my face gently with his free hand.

“Yes.”

His aloofness and his cool tone I could deal with but this tenderness broke through my anger and I suddenly felt utterly lost.

“Talk to me.” He insisted holding both my arms.

“I almost killed him.” I whispered. I did not want to say these words out loud.

Wary puzzlement flashed across his face. “Who?”

“Jyrki.” I said.

This time he did not try to keep his face expressionless. “I think you had better start from the beginning.” He steered me to a chair and I found myself once again sitting at the table.

Without arguing I told him everything that had happened. He did not once interrupt or comment. He sat almost stone still across from me with his fingers steepled at his chin, never taking his eyes from mine. When I was done I had the feeling that time had stopped and was holding its breath. He reached over to where the bear amulet still lay and picked it up. His fingers caressed the carving thoughtfully.

“I told you the last time we sat here about my first meeting with the Dantassi. I also told you that although I had searched for the ones who had named me and saved my life I never found them again and in that I did not lie. What I did not tell you is that I found others of the same clan, scattered through-out the

galaxy, nomadic and hunting. Through these meetings I soon learned that while the Dantassi travel far and wide and are often solitary they are by no means out of touch. They manage to communicate with each other by many, many means and through this, keep up the closeness of community I had come to admire while living with the North Shield clan. Over the course of several years, although I was still considered very young by Chiss standards I had managed to attend many hunts and continue to learn the Dantassi ways. I managed to combine my love for these people and their world with my own world, my own obligations and the expectations of my family, but it was not always easy. It was my deepest secret.” He paused. “I heard about the problem the clan on Hjal was facing through this network and I arranged with as many of the Hunters that I knew as I could that we would fight these Traeth. We trained and planned for several weeks before we made our way to Hjal. As Kirja’navaar’inkjerii told you we trained their people and we beat back the Ninlial.”

“How?” I asked.

“We used our weaknesses as strengths and we turned their strengths against them. They had weapons that could do terrible amounts of damage but what do you shoot these weapons at when you cannot find your quarry? We went to ground and we used the knowledge of Hjal to help. We fought a guerrilla war against a people who had no concept about such a thing. The Ninlial were a race of people who valued order to the point of obsession and had almost no concept of chaos. A guerrilla style war was beyond their ability to comprehend.”

“How did you know this?”

“I studied their art.” He said. “And through those studies I learned their weaknesses which we then used them to our advantage. The Dantassi adapt well and learn quickly. It was not difficult to find ways to circumnavigate the attacks. The Ninlial saw this as a sort of magic and feared us, feared me. They are a race blind to the Force and their thinking is very linear. They fear anything they cannot comprehend. They cannot comprehend that which they cannot see.” He explained. He stared at the bear amulet he held. “Several days after our victory, I found myself in a bad situation mostly through my own lack of foresight. I would have been killed had Kirja’navaar’inkjerii not been near by and saved my life. I had been scouting a path across an ice field and for one moment I let my concentration slide. I did not see the crevasse until I was in it, or better to say hanging from the wall by a bone knife. He had seen me suddenly vanish and knew what had happened. It was through his fast thinking and strength that I live. He did not tell you this, did he?”

I shook my head.

Thrawn’s mouth tightened. “Unlike the Wookiee or the Gungan, the

Dantassi do not believe in the concept of a life debt. They do not hold with the idea that the people they have saved are forever indebted to them. They believe, instead, that to save someone's life is to become responsible for that person.

Kirja'navaar'inkjerii takes this responsibility seriously." He said.

"What does this have to do with me?"

Thrawn smiled. "It is rare for a Chiss to be accepted into the Dantassi. I was an exception. That I made you a part of the tribe I am a member of by my actions will no doubt raise many eyebrows. You are a Traeth, outsider. Neither the Chiss nor the Dantassi are known for their love of outsiders. That you are of my 'kast means that I am responsible for you. This, in turn, means Kirja'navaar'inkjerii feels he is responsible for you through his responsibility for me and in some twisted accord with the Dantassi tradition, he is." He sighed and sat back in the chair. "Kirja'navaar'inkjerii takes tradition very seriously, he no doubt, finds it difficult to understand that I have not given up everything to live the Dantassi way."

I just sat and listened.

"I had no idea if you would meet another Bone Trader. I only knew that dressed as one you stood a better chance should you need to hide behind a disguise. I also knew that through ceremony and ritual I made the mask a part of you and I knew you would take it seriously. I had hoped that should you need help you would find it but believe me, that you would meet Kirja'navaar'inkjerii was as far from my thoughts as sunbathing in the Dune sea is."

"Why did you make me part of your ...'kast?"

He smiled but he didn't answer me. I made a face.

"Listen to me carefully. I cannot tell you if the Emperor knew what was going to happen or who would be there. That he is powerful is of no question but such a power..." Thrawn shrugged. "The Dantassi believe that nothing happens without reason as do the Chiss to a certain extent. In this case I am inclined to agree with them. Nothing about you is ordinary, no matter what you want to think." He sighed. "You did not kill anyone. When you fought your friend you had no idea who it was and that was probably a good thing. You accomplished your mission, most likely exceeding the expectations of the Emperor and finding if not a friend in this woman you saved, then an ally. You managed to find the one Bone Trader in the galaxy could not only could help you but, through obligations you had no idea of, had to help you. He thinks highly of you despite my inability to fulfill what he sees as my obligations to your Dantassi education. And do not forget I have seen you in action, so to speak. You are surprisingly resilient." He stroked the side of my face with the backs of his fingers. I closed my eyes as I leaned into his touch. "One day when you trust me enough and you are not

completely exhausted I would like to hear the whole story of what lies between you and this Jyrki Andando but until that time I can wait. I will tell you with absolute certainty, that this man from your past is bound to your destiny in a way the Dantassi would call ki'ymaütth, an unbreakable, eternal bond. Your lives are wound together but he is no longer your friend."

"Are you?" I asked.

"Am I what?"

"My friend?"

He looked me straight in the eyes for a very long time before answering. "No," he said softly. "I think am far more than that."

I didn't know how to respond to that. I felt a great tug at my heart. Was this what Navaari had meant by being bound to a person, being bound to this person? The silence between us was heavy. Things that perhaps should have been said were left unspoken and when I could not stand it any more I asked the least intrusive question that was on my mind.

"How do you know Navaari thinks highly of me?"

Thrawn sat back in his chair and chose his words with care.

"Kirja'navaar'inkjerii had two younger sisters, twins. They were both killed during the conflict with the Ninlial. Their grandfather had carved them each a small amulet in the shape of a flower to celebrate their birth. These small plants grow in the very harshest of climates, producing clusters of tiny red berries in the autumn and winter and in the spring delicate little white flowers that have a beautiful and distinctive perfume. The berries are sweet, edible and valued as a food source, the flowers have healing properties. The Hjal call them Cracker-berry flowers. One of his sister's amulets he passed on to his daughter when she was born, the other he always wore. Now you wear it. That he gave something so meaningful to you tells me you must have made quite an impression."

I shook my head. "He said the same thing about you giving me the little skull amulet."

Thrawn said nothing and we just stared at each other for a long while. I was so tired. I just rested my head down on my arms and closed my eyes. I didn't want to talk about anything anymore. I heard him get up and move about the galley, the clink of cups as he washed them out. I felt his hand on my shoulder and I got up almost droid like.

"Come, I'll take you home. You need to sleep." He said. I let him put my jacket over my shoulders and take my satchel. I glanced around and made sure everything that was supposed to be turned off was off. We left my ship and I locked her up. He had a small two seat transport waiting and the trip around the lake was a blur. I unlocked the door and he followed me in. I felt like a ghost. He turned on the light under the counter in the kitchen, filled the kettle and turned it

on. I watched as he poured a little brandy from the bottle he had left here from the night we had seen the ballet in a cup and added a small amount of honey. When the water had boiled he added that to this strange brew and walked over to the living room with the cup and me in tow. We sat on the couch, side by side and he handed me the cup.

“Drink.” He said, brushing hair from my face.

I looked at the cup suspiciously.

“Normally the Dantassi would use a cracker-berry liqueur, but the brandy is a good substitute. I have a hunch that you would lie in bed and instead of sleeping you will fret and think about everything that has happened without end. You are over tired and over wrought. This will help.” He explained.

I sipped the drink carefully. It was sweet and hot with the right amount of brandy. I wondered what cracker-berry liqueur tasted like. The silence sat between us like a wall. Finally I turned to look at him.

“Why was Jyrki there, Za’ar?” This question burned in me. He was right I didn’t know how to let it go.

His face had softened at the use of his Dantassi name. I hadn’t meant to speak it but somehow it had slipped out.

“I do not know.” He answered. “Perhaps to discover the answer to this you need to know what your young dancer friend was doing there.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to know that.” I told him. “What ever it was it had nothing to do with dancing and I don’t want to get involved.”

He nodded and frowned. “Did he recognize you?” he asked.

I hesitated a moment then gave a small nod. “He didn’t at first but...”

“But?”

“When I said his name out loud he knew. It just slipped out. I was so surprised.”

He sat back into the couch and sighed. “I am betting he was as well.”

“I think he might be a part of this rebellion, the ones who blew up the Death Star.” I said after a very long pause.

Thrawn looked at me. “Have a care what you say.” he said quietly.

I sipped my drink, tucked my legs up under me, jax like and leaned against him, resting my head against his shoulder. He shifted to accommodate the weight of my body and wrapped his arm about my shoulders. I was too tired to consider the situation odd, instead I welcomed his presence. I allowed a little smile to myself as he plucked the hair sticks from my hair and laid them on the table.

“Do you remember the night of the Grand Ball, when you came to my flat?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“The argument you overheard me having was with Jyrki, not a holo from home.” I said.

He looked at me, I felt his body stiffen. “He was in your apartment?”

“He snuck in and out. I don’t know how but he’s very...resourceful and he’s a force user.” I said. “He said he had come to rescue me, he thought I was being held against my will.”

“Why would he have had that idea?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I really don’t know. Not from me that is for sure, I like my job, remember? He thinks the Empire is evil and he hates the Emperor. He assumed I would too. He thought that I was being forced to work here with no choice in the matter.” I said. “He risked his life to come and get me out.” I stopped to steady my voice. “When I refused to go with him we had a terrible fight. He said some awful things to me and I ...I slapped him when he called me a palace doxy. He was so shocked that I would like working for the Empire. I had never seen him so hurt.” I had to stop and cover my mouth with my hand to stave back the emotion that threatened to pour out.

Thrawn drew a deep breath. “He is the one who thinks you are betraying what he stands for. He was the one feeding you the information about the Jedi children being slaughtered. No wonder you were so upset.” He said softly, thoughtfully. “I should have seen this.” Then he added with a touch of anger. “You may be many things, my dear, but a palace doxy is most assuredly not one of them.”

I nodded; there was a lump in my throat. “In the end he was right because I’m betraying him now, aren’t I? Just by telling you this...”

Thrawn considered this for a moment but did not answer the question, instead he asked. “Is he a part of this rebellion? Do you know that for absolute certain?”

“No.” I said after thinking about it. “He did not say that he was a part of it in exact words. He just implied that the rebellion was right to destroy the Death Star.”

Thrawn nodded. “Do you think he will try to find you again?”

“I don’t know.” I said, “I hope not.”

“For his sake, so do I.” He said icily. I glanced up at him but his face gave nothing away. Only the slight clenching of his jaw told me that this was a thought which made him angry, although I wasn’t sure why.

“What was he doing on Rothana? Who were those people he was with? Why was he after Lianna? Why didn’t he kill her? Why was the blaster set to stun?” I asked.

“Good questions.” Thrawn said, running his fingers idly through my hair. It felt so good I never wanted him to stop doing this and I leaned into his touch. I

sensed his pleasure and his smile.

“Too many questions.” I countered stifling a yawn. “And no answers.”

“Hm.” He said. “Answers will come in due time, but when they do, you may not like them.”

I sighed. I didn't like any of this. I didn't like where it was going at all. Waves of weariness crashed over me and I let it come. The last thing I remember clearly were his fingertips caressing my face. I knew he was speaking to me but I didn't hear the words. I only knew that as long as he had his arm wrapped around me, and while I was curled up next to his warmth that I was, for a short time, safe. After everything that had happened it was a welcome sensation. With the sound of his voice in my ears I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

I woke to the sound of a raging storm outside. Thunder and lightning seared the sky and shook the house. The wind howled and for a moment I had no idea where I was. The disorientation of sleeping like the dead made me slow and as I swung myself out of bed, I wondered how exactly had I gotten there. I had no memory of actually going to bed. I was still completely dressed with the exception of my boots. I sat for a moment on the edge of the bed shaking off the sleep that refused to let go of my brain. I felt as though I was trying to claw my way up from some murky river.

With a yawn I made my way to the kitchen. What I needed was stim'caf. While that brewed I sat at the breakfast bar. Only after staring at it for about five minutes did I notice the envelope with my name on it, Thrawn's handwriting, as always, beautiful and perfect. I opened it up and slipped out the letter he had left me.

A'mia Tekari,

I do not pretend to understand why you insist on trying to keep these secrets you carry with you to yourself. They wear you down and burden you. I understand fully that you opened up to me last night only because you were so exhausted and I pushed. I hope that in time it won't take such extremes for you to trust me. I am not your enemy.

What you spoke to me of last night will remain in confidence. You have not betrayed anyone or anything. There was no information in what you told me that would require me to act upon it and certainly no substantial evidence to support opening any investigation. I would, however, recommend for your own peace of mind that you discuss some of these things with Lord Vader. He is

directly responsible for you, your job and would perhaps help you decide a course of action regarding your suspicions about your friend. On a complete and utter side note, I can assure you that the house you currently live in has no listening devices in it, so our conversation was not observed.

I tell you all of this because I know that while you will put on that stoic face of yours, this conflict between you and this man from your past, between your desire to protect your family, your friend and your loyalty to the Empire will tear you apart. Just as a Star ship cannot function with two captains at the helm you will find it is almost impossible to serve two masters, something to consider.

In the next while duty will keep me busy and, more often than not, away but you will always have a way to reach me if you should need to. This frequency for holo transmissions is private and combined with a clearance code (your favourite stone) will ensure your message will be delivered securely to me. If you, as I do, prefer a more old fashioned way of communication, then a man called Jarack Behl. He has been made aware that you might wish to use his services. He will get in touch with you to give you the contact information necessary for you to have letters delivered. He is an Imperial Officer worthy of my trust.

Lastly, I offer something for your consideration. You told me last night that Kirja'navaar'inkjerii had been watching Jyrki and his people for some time before your dancer friend entered the room. They had been waiting for her, you said he told you. The first and perhaps most pressing question that springs to my mind is how did they know she would be there? Where are these people getting their information from?

I have said it before and I will reiterate here. Trust is a delicate matter in our business; it is not given easily or lightly. Be mindful of this, my dear.

I hope that you slept well.

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia,
Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

With a cup of stim'caf in my hand, I sat and stared at his letter reading the same lines over and over again.

The first and perhaps most pressing question that springs to my mind is how did they know she would be there? Where are these people getting their information from?

Where indeed? I knew the only person I had spoken to about what was happening had been Thrawn and I trusted him. So how had Jyrki and his gang known? This was not a good way to begin my day. It was already very late as I had slept in well past my usual get out of bed time and the weather was not helping my mood any. I had decided I wasn't going to venture out of the house. I was

pretty sure that my taking a day off would not be noticed by anyone. I had no illusions about my place in the Empire.

Thrawn was right. I would have to talk about this with Lord Vader, sooner or later. That was a conversation I was not looking forward to. What a mess. I sighed as I folded Thrawn's letter back up and slipped it into its envelope. I would tuck it away with the other letters I had from him.

Since there was nothing else to be done about it for now I decided to have a bath and at least try to salvage what was left of my day. I hoped that the rest of the time I had left on Naboo would be uneventful and boring but I wasn't going to hold my breath.