

Daughter of the Empire

Book 1

Written by F. Messer 2005-2006

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Chapter 9

The Dark Stripped Bare 1

Time is an elusive thing. When we are happy and having a good time it speeds up leaving us breathless and bewildered. We ask our selves 'how did it get so late?' and 'where did the time go?' When we are unhappy, bored or waiting for something time stretches out long and crawls as slowly as it can. Every second seems like an hour. We query the higher powers about why is time dragging its heels so much? We measure time by chronometer and mark it with numbers but in truth, it cannot be quantified. Time is at its most peculiar, its most mysterious when one is ill or injured, then time bounces back and forth as the mind wanders from reality to memory to dreams.

I had no concept of how much time had passed. I was aware only in small flashes of momentary lucidness that I was travelling. In the minutes between when whatever drug I was being sedated with wore off and the next dose was administered, I could take some sort of stock of my surroundings and situation. It wasn't good.

I heard voices, male and gruff, but most of the time their words were muffled and I could not understand what was being said. I knew I was lying on a makeshift bunk and I was in a spaceship, I could feel the throb and hum of its engines. It was a fast ship and we were travelling through hyperspace. Once, I had tried to get up which had resulted in me vomiting violently on the floor. Someone had come in and found me half twisted over the edge of the bunk, they had not been impressed. I had tried to fight them when they went to subdue me with the hypo spray. That had earned me another backhand to my head which only served to make my already battered face ache all the more fiercely. Who ever had hit me had picked me up and all but thrown me back into the bunk. I guess they were worried I would try to run away because they had tied my arms to the bulk head to stop me from getting up after that. I was aware of a terrible thirst but before I could even think about communicating this to someone would come along, hold me down and inject more sedative into me and the oblivion would swallow me up again, leaving only my vivid and strange dreams for company and comfort.

Time, it was an elusive thing and once it has ticked forward you can never get it back.

The world came alive in fragments of pain and confusion. Someone was trying to lift my head and I felt water dribble down my chin.

"You need to drink." A female voice said. There was a hint of annoyance

behind her words.

I tried to open my eyes but they were gritty, sticky and not co operating. I was aware that I was in pain, that my face ached and my head pounded but it was all still very distant. I felt some water trickle down my throat and realised I was very thirsty. I stopped fighting against the person trying to get me to drink and swallowed the small amounts of water gratefully. She laid my head back down and spoke to someone else in the room.

"He used too much feynoxinol and she's dehydrated from vomiting so much. I told him to go easy on that stuff."

It was a man who answered. "Captain said she would fight and she did. She's stronger than she looks."

"I suppose someone thought smashing her face would help with that?"

The man snorted. "You can complain to the Captain about that. He's the one who hit her. No messing about either, just POW and she went down like a drunken Rodian. He wasn't kidding about her abilities though, she damn near incapacitated Brit when she kicked him in the groin."

"No need to ask who hit her a second time I guess." She said with a sigh. "Brit's temper needs to be checked. What's the Captain's deal with her anyway?"

I managed to get my eyes to open but everything was a dim blur. The room I was in was brightly lit, the light hurt and all I could make out were the shapes of the two people speaking.

The man shrugged. "Dunno actually. He says she has vital information about the Imps and that monster the Emperor keeps on a loose leash but I think it's personal. He wants her up and talking by tonight."

The woman barked a laugh. "What the hell does he think I am, a doctor? She's had the crap beaten out of her, she's been doped on feynox for days. She's dehydrated and lucky to be alive. She needs to heal. What does he think this is, some Imperial interrogation Center? If the General finds out about this he'll go ballistic."

"Look, I got no idea what the deal is, all I know is he wants her talking."

She sighed. "Who is she anyway?"

"Don't know that either but judging from that dress, she's part of the Imperial Court. Brit said she was at some fancy to do for Fete Week and she was with some Imperial Naval officer when she got to the flat, maybe she's one of them palace girls, they hear all kinds of stuff what might be useful."

"What happened to him, the Imp she was with?"

"No idea, he wasn't with her in the apartment."

The woman sighed. "Glad I am not in her shoes, but seriously Dag, she needs time to heal. I can't give her any more medication till the feynox is out of her system, can't mix feynox with a truth teller. I won't be responsible for her death."

The man named Dag made a grunting noise. "That's between you and the

Captain, Valdia, and I wouldn't cross him. He's not been the same since Rothana."

"What the blazes happened there anyway?" she asked.

"No idea, but he lost good people on that little trip, not to mention the damage to his knee." Dag said angrily. "Came back changed and won't say a word about it either."

Valdia shook her head. "Whatever it is he better deal with it, it's eating him up and not doing us any good. We ain't the Empire, and he's been a real pissant to work with." She said angrily.

"Better you tell him than me, then." Dag grunted. "I'm going for lunch, see you later."

I heard him leave, open then close a door that sounded metal and heavy. She sighed again and turned back to me. She had a wet cloth in her hand and she used it to try and clean up some of the blood that had dried and caked on my face. Her touch was light but it hurt anyway. I moaned in pain.

"I'm sorry, whoever you are." She said sadly.

I opened my eyes again and looked at her. My vision was clearing more and more. She stopped what she was doing when she caught me looking at her. My left eye was very swollen and my head ached.

"Where am I?" I croaked. My mouth was dry and my throat was very sore.

"Safe." She said but she didn't sound very convincing.

"How long have I been out for?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't really know."

"What day is it?" I asked.

She told me and I closed my eyes again. I had been gone from Coruscant for four days. I had lost four whole days.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

I told her.

"It's the side effects of the sedative they gave you. Should ease off in a day or so then you won't feel so nauseous. I can't give you anything for the pain though, feynox doesn't mix well with anything else out there and we don't have any bacta bandages for your face." She was lying about the bandages. "You need to drink water, you are very dehydrated. I'll leave a jug and glass by the bed for you. You probably won't be eating much for another twenty four hours, though; you'll just throw it up. I'll arrange for you to have some soup or broth later. There is a 'fresher in the corner of the room, just a chemical toilet I'm afraid, and a small sink for wash-up, don't drink the tap water it's recycled and not potable."

I nodded slowly to show I understood. She adjusted the blanket someone had tossed over me. I was freezing cold and shivering.

"Look, I don't know who you are or why the Captain wants you here but do as he asks. He's a good man but he doesn't mess about if you know what I mean." She said getting up. "You should try to sleep some more." She added.

I nodded to that as well and watched as she left the room. The lights went off after she had left and the door has shut. I sighed. The room was very dark with only a small amount of light sneaking under the door. I didn't want to move, it just hurt too much. Instead I lay as still as I could and tried to put all the pieces of the conversation I had over heard together. The slow sickly sensation of knowing who might be behind all of this wormed its way through my brain but I didn't want to believe it. I did as the woman named Valdia suggested. I closed my eyes and slipped back into a restless, dream filled slumber.

I woke to the sound of muted arguing. The voices were coming from outside the room I was in; one was female and the other male. I had no idea how long I had been sleeping for. Time shifted forward in a sneaky way. I had woken up several times disoriented and scared only to slip back into the oblivion. This time I did not go back to sleep. I tried, slowly to sit up.

My head still ached but the fierceness had subsided. It took me a moment of deep breathing to get past the dizziness that hit me. I looked for the water and was grateful the glass had been filled. I wasn't sure my shaking hands could actually hold the jug steady enough to pour. I sipped the water slowly and began to take stock of where I was.

The room was dark but my eyes had adjusted to it. There was enough light sneaking in from under the door that I could make out shapes and size. It was a tiny room, and true to Valdia's word there was a chemical toilet in the far corner next to a small sink. There were no windows. I was on a small camp cot and that was the only furniture in the room. There was nothing else. I touched the wall beside the bed and noted its smooth texture. Bi-state memory plastic. This structure was temporary. I wondered exactly where here was, with a structure that could be collapsed at a moment's notice, chemical toilets and recycled non drinkable wash water, I was betting this building was not on a planet but maybe an asteroid or something like that. It was just a guess but it was a place to start.

I was about to try and get up and see if standing was something my legs would let me do when the light came on and the door opened. I noted that the light switch was on the outside of the door and not on the inside. The light was brilliant and hurt my eyes enough that I had to shut them and I didn't see who it was that came in. I heard the door close and footsteps come to stand in front of me. I squinted up at the man standing in front of me. I couldn't see his face clearly.

"Hullo Mouse." Said a voice I never thought I would hear again.

I drew a deep steadying breath and sat back against the wall, pulling the blanket around my shoulders. I was very aware of how filthy I was and how bad I must have looked and smelled. I just stared at Jyrki mutely, watching him squat down beside the cot. I didn't speak a word to him; I had no idea what to say.

"Valdia tells me yer didn't react well to the Feynoxinol. I'm sorry about that." He said quietly. "But we had to subdue yer to get yer out of the Palace." He

watched me for a moment waiting to see if I would break my silence then continued. "I am also sorry about yer face. I didn't mean to hit yer quite so hard but after yer fine display of skills on Rothana I couldn't take any chances."

I blinked. I had suspected he was behind this but actually knowing it hurt.

"Mouse, "he said placing a hand on my knee. "I need yer help."

I drew my legs up to my chest, trying to make myself as small as possible. I didn't want him touching me. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I felt the sting of tears prickle but I fought them. I didn't want to cry and show weakness.

"You beat me and kidnapped me because you want my help?" I asked. My voice was hoarse, scratchy and trembled. He picked up the cup of water and offered it to me. I didn't take it from his hand and after a few moments he set it back down on the ground.

"Had to get yer out of there but didn't think yer'd come easy." He explained.

I was having a hard time digesting this information. "Why?" was all I could think to say.

"Empire's got yer brainwashed, Mouse. I had to save yer before it was too late."

I shook my head slowly. Too late for what I wondered but I didn't ask it out loud. I could not believe what I was hearing. "You can't keep me here." I said.

"Yes, I can." He said simply. "We need yer help. Yer have access codes to the Imperial network and yer know where Vader is, we need this information to stop them." He said bluntly.

I shook my head at him. "I can't do that. You need to let me go home."

He smiled sadly. "Yer will give me the information we need, Mouse." He said with a quiet certainty that made my heart skip a beat. "It will save lives. Yer will tell me." And then after a moment he added. "This is yer home, now, there is no going back."

I don't think I had ever felt so exhausted in all of my life. I sighed and closed my eyes. "I can't tell you what I don't know." I said.

I heard him stand up and I looked at him. "Yer'll change yer mind when yer see that the Empire is evil and I saved yer life."

"You've lost your mind." I said softly.

He drew a deep breath. "I know it will take a while for the damage the Empire has done to yer to be sorted out. I know yer don't mean these things yer say and yer didn't mean what yer did on Rothana." his voice was soft but there was now an edge to it that glittered like a razor blade.

I pinched the bridge of my nose to try and stave off the pain in my head. "I didn't even know it was you." I said.

He stood very still and silent for a moment then he leaned over me, bracing himself against the wall so that our faces almost touched. "I lost good

people there." He hissed. There was a weird hardness in his blue eyes I had never seen before. I was suddenly very afraid of him.

"I'm sorry." I whispered. "I didn't want for anyone to get hurt. I was just doing my job."

"And what job was that?"

"Protecting the dancer."

He stood back up and laughed. "A dancer? Yer think that piece of work the Emperor sent to Rothana was a dancer?" he shook his head. "Oh, Mouse, yer'll have to do better than that."

"I don't know what you mean." I was starting to get annoyed with this conversation.

I watched as he began to pace about the small room. "That woman yer say is a dancer killed three men and stole valuable information. One of those men had a wife and four kids, did you know that?"

"Why did she kill them, if that is really the case?" I asked.

"They were helping to supply weapons to the rebellion." He said. "Empire doesn't like us all that much, in case yer hadn't noticed."

I opened my mouth then shut it again. I didn't know what to say. I couldn't lie and say that Lianna really was just a dancer because even I did not believe that. I was in a bad place. I could feel this. "Is that why you were trying to kill her?" I asked.

"Don't be ignorant! We were not trying kill her at all. We needed her alive, she had information valuable to our cause. Capturing one of the Emperor's agents would have been useful to us, but yer messed that up, yer and yer friend in the mask. Not sure what that was all about but it doesn't matter now. Instead of her we have yer. Perhaps in the end that is even better for us, after all yer work closely with the Emperor's Iron Fist. Yer must know all sorts of things about him that we can use."

"Jyrki, you need to let me go. You can't keep me here."

He looked at me for a moment and moved with that cat like grace I remembered so well to come and sit beside me on the cot. He caressed the side of my face that was not battered and bruised. I did my very best not to flinch but was unsuccessful. Hurt and surprise flashed in his eyes but it was quickly replaced with anger.

"Am I not good enough for yer any more?" he asked in a flat even tone that scared me more than his getting mad would have done. He smiled but it never reached his eyes. "Or is it that yer prefer the touch of an Imperial hand now?" He said coldly.

"My head hurts." I said by way of explanation. I watched him, now wary. The hair on the back of my neck was standing on end. I just matched his stare. I didn't want to back down, but I was very afraid. It was slowly dawning on me that I

might not get out of this alive. I closed my eyes and drew a very deep breath. Fear would kill me faster than anything else would. I felt him move from my side to stand up.

“Get some rest Mouse. Yer need to recover yer strength.” He said.

I opened my eyes to look at Jyrki searching for the person I once knew but I could not find him in this man who stood before me now.

“Please don’t do this.” I whispered. “You can’t leave me in here all by myself.”

He just looked at me with an air of patient sadness. “We’ll talk when you’re feeling better and thinking clearly.”

I just stared at him.

“I’ll have Valdia bring yer some soup or something.” He said. “Yer don’t need to worry any more, Mouse, yer among friends. The Empire can’t find yer here.” And with those words he walked out of the room. The lights went back off and I heard the sound of the lock being engaged.

I sat still for a very long time before I lay back down and let the pain and exhaustion take over.

When you have no way of measuring time such as chronometer or day and night, it all becomes blurred. I slept fitfully and each time I surfaced and opened my eyes it was dark. The sedative they had used on me slowly worked its way through my system leaving me shaky and delirious. I woke and slept with no concept of time, no idea where I was or how I had gotten there. Sometimes the room I was in was bright and there were people talking near me, someone’s hand on my forehead, and someone trying to get me to drink water. Sometimes the room was dark and I was alone. I had no way of telling how much time had passed. I was aware that I was not very well, that on some level I was fighting for something but I wasn’t sure what. In between the long moments of nothingness, I dreamed.

The desert called to me. Its winds that snaked across the sand whispered my name and its lure was powerful. I knew I was dreaming but I couldn’t come up from it so I walked, following the call I heard.

Tatooine burns during the day under the fierce light of two suns. By night the planet chills to the open sky as the heat escapes back into the darkness. It is a planet of many extremes and few compromises.

I walked onward aware of the heat on my bare feet, aware of the sting of sand flung against my skin by the wind. The suns’ glare created shimmering on the horizon and I knew a thirst like none other, yet despite these things I kept on walking forward.

In the distance I saw him. He was dressed in ancient looking robes and a poncho that had seen better days. His longhair whipped about his face by the wind, despite his efforts to keep it tied back. He was very tall, the last time I had seen him he had been kneeling in front of me. I ran to catch up with him but somehow he always managed to remain ahead of me.

I tried to yell out to him, calling for him to wait for me but I found I had no voice. Grief and fear overcame me and I stumbled to my knees in the sand. The wind had begun to pick up, the way it does before a storm. I felt a terrible despair sweep through me and it seemed to me that the wind whispered for me to give up, lie down and die. It was a seductive voice, soothing and lulling me into doing what it wanted. I bowed my head to its will. Just as I was about to lie down and close my eyes I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“A’myshk’a, you must fight. You are stronger than this.” The bone trader said. He wore Navaari’s mask but the voice was that of Za’ar’s.

“How?” I asked.

“Listen to your heart.” He said. “Look inward and you will see you are not alone. Do not give up hope.” He withdrew his hand from my shoulder and began to move off into the swirling sand leaving me, once again, alone. I cried out Za’ar’s name and felt the tears slide down my cheeks.

So I knelt in the sand and the wind danced about me. I drew a deep breath, placed my hands at my hips and began to meditate, the way Master Kjestyll had taught me. As I did so I realised, I was not the little girl that Jyrki had known. He no longer knew me at all. What he saw when he looked at me was a ghost of the past and it made him sad. He couldn’t let go.

I did not know how long I had knelt like that but when I raised my head the storm had stopped and the suns had begun to set. There was only me in the vastness of the Dune Sea, but I knew in my heart the Bone Trader was right, I was not alone.

I woke clear headed. The scent of hot sand and desert wind lingered in my nose. I didn’t open my eyes instead I lay on the cot and allowed myself to take stock of my situation which wasn’t very good. Jyrki had changed and he had become dangerous to me. I had seen that bitter hardness in his eyes and it scared me. I had gotten the feeling that he would just as soon kill me with his own hands rather than allow me to return back to my place with the Empire. I knew that even if I had wanted to give up Lord Vader’s location I didn’t know where he was, but I did have access codes. I was certain that the moment the right people had known I had been abducted all my Imperial access had been removed, but there were slicers who could take an old code and use it, cracking the Imperial computers and I couldn’t have that. I swore that I would not allow that to happen. Not because I cared so much about the Empire but because I was not going to let Jyrki win. This had become very personal although I didn’t know why.

I lay there in the dark wondering how Jyrki thought he could go about getting information from me. I was certain he knew I wouldn't voluntarily give anything up. He knew first hand how stubborn I could be, he'd even encouraged that from time to time. How did you win against an enemy that knew you almost better than you knew yourself? There had been a veiled threat of possible violence in his words and I was certain he had done that deliberately, letting me think and dwell on this. The anticipation of pain was often worse than the pain itself. I wondered if he would have the guts to hurt me himself or if he would let one of his thugs do it for him. These were frightening thoughts but nearly as frightening as knowing who was responsible for my misery.

I concentrated on my breathing and thought about a conversation I had had with Master Kjestyll about the exercises at what Thrawn had called the Center and I had asked why the room was always dark. "It is a form of torture." He had said. "Deprive the person of light, deprive them of the ability to tell the passage of time and you can deprive them of hope. Deprive a person of hope for long enough and eventually you can break them."

"Does torture work?" I had asked thinking back to an experience I had once had with Lord Vader and a rather unfortunate Rodian.

Master Kjestyll had drawn a deep breath. "A wise man once wrote a long time ago, torture is a fairly ineffective method of extracting information because the weak will tell you anything and everything you want to hear whether it is true or not and the strong will not break, they will choose death instead." He said. "It seems to me that torture is more about the breaking of will and spirit. That makes it about power, rather than information. So if one is looking to dominate another being through fear it will either work or it will not. The problem is this. A spirit broken and bent by such means is a weak spirit who will not be much use. A strong spirit that will not break will be destroyed and that is also a loss. The use of torture is not always very reliable for gaining information."

"So how does one survive such an ordeal?" I had asked. It was unimaginable to me, at that time, to experience what he was talking about.

"By finding strength from within. By remembering that no matter how much pain the body must endure that unless one allows it, one's spirit cannot be broken." He had said.

"You make it sound easy."

He had looked at me. "The simplest of answers are often the most difficult to put into practice. You must find your inner strength and that is very difficult because in doing so you must face yourself."

I lay in the darkness of the tiny room and wondered exactly what that had meant. I knew for sure that whatever was coming, it would not be good. I sighed as I slowly got up. My body was stiff and sore, my joints ached with a fierceness that was almost exquisite. I was filthy. My hair was matted and stank of stale vomit.

My dress was soiled and uncomfortable. It was a ball gown and not really designed to be slept in and lived in but it was all that I had at the moment. I stood up and stretched slowly, carefully. It was painful.

There was enough light sneaking in from under the door that I could make out where everything was, I could see shapes and shadows. I went to the small sink and tried the tap. Water ran out of it. It was freezing cold but I didn't care. I felt around to see if there were any towels or anything I could use as a cloth but there was nothing, there was only a small bar of soap. With a sigh I picked up the skirt of my dress and using my teeth I ripped at it. I tore off a long strip from around the hem and then tore a piece off of that. With my makeshift face cloth, the small bar of soap and the coldest water I had ever felt, I set about trying to clean up. It felt so good that I almost cried. I wanted to wash my hair but that was almost impossible, in the end I managed to rinse most of the crud out of it and I braided it as best I could, tying it with the clip from Cati and another strip of silk from my dress.

After that was done, and I felt more like a human being and less like a caged animal, I explored my room. There was not much to explore. The door slid shut side to side not up and down and it locked from the outside. It was smooth and there was no way I could open it from my side of the room. The walls were completely smooth, there were no openings, nothing to grasp on to or pluck out. With my hands I could feel air flow and after a few moments found the small vent in the ceiling. Even if I had wanted to get at it I couldn't, there was nothing I the room tall enough for me to stand one and then, even if I could have reached it, it was barely the size of my head.

The cot in the room was a basic standard camp cot. There were no parts I could take off it to create a weapon and it was made from a very light weight durable plastic which made it strong but useless for anything but sleeping on it. Even the water jug and glass were unbreakable plastic, so apart from using the jug to hit someone with, they were also useless. Nothing in this room could be made into a suitable makeshift weapon, even if I had found something using it to get anywhere would be a whole other story. If I was going to get out of here alive I had to find a different way and that would take some time and planning.

I sat back on the cot and drank the water that had been provided for me. A person could live a long time without food, over a month depending on health but water was a must. An average human could not survive more than a week without water. In the desert this time was significantly less. Growing up on Tatooine, desert survival lessons were a part of school routine. These lessons were, of course, theoretical, but they were drummed into our head never the less. So I drank the water left for me and hoped there would be more to come.

What did one do all day locked up in a dark room? In my entire life I had not ever faced a situation quite like this one. It was both surreal and unnerving. Waiting for something to happen, for someone to come and decide my fate was

worse than having to work with Lord Vader on one of his bad days, at least with him I knew where I stood and what to expect.

I lay back down and decided that maybe I should try to relax while I could because only Sarlacc knew what Jyrki had in mind for me later on. My stomach growled reminding me it was still there and I smiled when I realised I was hungry. It made a nice change from being sick all the time. Remembering all that I had been taught I let my breathing soften, deepen and I began to meditate hoping that this would help me be strong enough to stand up to what ever happened next.

I was deep in this state when the door opened. I was aware but I didn't move. My eyes were closed so I used my other senses and felt the presence of the woman called Valdia. She didn't turn the light on and she didn't close the door either. She thought I was asleep. I could feel her fear of me as well as her sadness. She was not happy with this situation, I could sense that coming off her in waves.

I listened as she put something on the floor and picked something up. I was aware that she was standing next to the cot, looking at me. I felt her hesitate there and picked up on her concern and her worry. She was also angry but it wasn't directed solely at me. I stayed motionless, waiting until she had left the room, my prison before looking to see what she had left for me.

It was a plate with sandwiches and a new jug of water. Well, I thought, they weren't going to starve me just yet. I ate slowly and was grateful. At least would not have to deal with Jyrki on an empty stomach. I lay back down and relaxed. *Conserve energy until such times as you will need it.* I tried to meditate again but instead I ended up letting my thoughts wander.

Time had slinked forward second by second, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. As I drifted off to sleep I wondered if anyone was looking for me. I wondered if Thrawn had come back to find out why I had not joined him on the balcony to watch the fireworks, annoyed or perhaps angry that I had been playing with him.

Thinking about him pulled at me in a way that ached more than all the physical pain I was experiencing. My hand had gone to the place at my throat where my necklace should have been. I wondered if he was worried about me or if he even thought about me at all, then sighed. This negative place was a road of thought I didn't need to go down.

Instead I concentrated on thinking about his way with me, the gentleness of his voice, and the touch of his hands. I remembered his kindnesses, his friendship and his ability to still my fears with a single kiss but it was his face, his eyes and the sweetness of his smile that I held in my memory as I finally drifted off to sleep. Uninvited tears leaked from under closed eyelids but I didn't wipe them away.

"Get up!" A voice that was intrusive and harsh hollered in my ear. The hands that yanked at me were strong and rough.

This was the umpteenth time I had been woken up this way. This had become a weird sort of routine. At strange, intermittent times the small prison room I was in would be flooded with light and I would be dragged awake, a hood placed over my head and then taken to another part of the compound.

The first time this had happened it had scared the sandjiggers out of me. I had been deeply asleep and the utter disorientation had left me confused and frightened. I had been hauled to my feet, my hands bound behind my back and taken to a small interrogation room. The room itself was ordinary and empty save for a single table in the middle and two chairs. No windows and bare smooth walls the colour of ship grey. It had seemed very bright to me, but I was getting used to living in the dark so even a candle would have seemed overly brilliant.

I was seated in the chair that had its back to the door and left alone in the room for what seemed hours. At first I let my fear and my nervousness win. I was cold, scared and very much alone. It was a sure bet that Jyrki was counting on this to happen but what he no longer knew about me was that I had changed. Over the past year I had been tested and tried, trained and taught in ways he had no idea of. I was no longer the eager, infatuated girl he had known and maybe even cared for.

After what I had guessed had been about half an hour I calmed down. I remembered what Master Kjestyll had taught me and I concentrated on my breathing. I sought to become part of the stillness of this strange room and not try to fight against it. With my arms still shackled behind my back I relaxed my body and I centered as I had been taught to do so many times before. There is a place deep within that is still and calm, where one's spirit resides. I went to this place and stayed there. It would give me the strength for what ever was coming next, I hoped.

When I heard the door open behind me I didn't turn around. While I didn't want to give away exactly how much I had changed, I also did not want to show too much fear either. I knew who it was who had entered the room without looking and inwardly I sighed. Now it would begin this battle of wills. I raised only my eyes to meet Jyrki's as he sat down across from me, sliding a data pad to my side of the table.

"I need yer access codes, Mouse." Was all had he said. His ice blue eyes were hard.

I just looked at him. I didn't look at the data pad. I didn't move. I didn't speak. I just watched him.

"Why are yer being so stubborn? Do yer like suffering?" he'd asked, I could sense his slow rising temper as I held my tongue. "All yer have to do is give me yer codes and yer'll be given decent quarters, hot meals, a shower, all the comforts of home." The words held promise but his eyes had remained hard.

Once I had thought of him as handsome and I suppose he was a good looking man but something had etched in his face and had taken away the subtle beauty I had once seen twisting it into something hard and cruel. I wondered what he had gone through in the last few years that had changed him so much, or if he had always been this way and I had just been too smitten to see it.

I had stayed still and silent. There was nothing for me to say except no, and my silence said that for me. He had stood up from the table and paced around the room. I had felt his tension keenly; he was angry and agitated, fighting with himself. The battle was not just between his will and mine but between his own morals. He was scared of something but I could not sense what it was and without giving away more of my abilities than I wanted him to know I could not find out. Instead I maintained my own calm and stayed quiet. This wasn't easy and I was frightened but fear would kill me long before anyone or anything else would so I used everything I had ever learned and struggled to keep my calm. I felt him move beside me and fought to stay very still when he leaned in close to my ear.

"Smarten up, Mouse." He had said. "No one is coming to rescue yer. No one except me cares what happens to yer."

Oddly enough this had made me laugh.

He had backed off immediately. "Yer think this is funny? Yer think this is some sort of joke?" the anger flared now.

I'd sighed and looked at him, moving for the first time since he had entered the room. "No, Jyrki, I don't think this is a joke. I don't think it is funny that you have kidnapped me, that you are holding me against my will, that you used dangerous drugs to sedate me, that you use methods of psychological torture to scare me. I don't think this is funny at all. What is funny is that you actually believe you care about me." I had said. I couldn't help the spark of anger I felt rising from the pit of my belly from touching my words. I had squashed that down with a very deep breath. To give in to my anger would be to lose this confrontation.

"Mouse, all yer have to do to end all of this is tell me what I need to know." He had said, softening his voice, becoming my friend. He was lying, he didn't actually know what he wanted from me.

"I know nothing. I cannot help you." I had told him. I was just tired. This was like a broken holo recording that kept skipping and repeating over and over again.

"We'll see." He had said after a long silence. He had left the room without picking up the data pad. I sat still in the chair, alone in the room for a long time before the same gruff voiced man came back to return me to my room. I had been grateful that he had taken the binders off after returning me to the small prison.

The next few times we had gone through this dance it had been the same thing. The fifth or maybe it was the sixth time I had lost my temper and it felt as though I had lost my mind. It had begun the same, the same stiffness, the same

quiet battle of wills but at some point during the questions Jyrki had fired at me I had given into my frustration and anger. Something had snapped. I had gotten up and kicked at the table, shoving it violently towards him. I had gotten to my feet then and screamed at him. I had wanted to hurt him but with my hands tied behind my back all I could do was kick at him. It was a futile waste of energy. He had avoided my attempts to hurt him easily enough and after a moment of staring at me, he had left me in the small interrogation room, screaming at the walls like a lunatic. I didn't know if I had gone mad or if it was normal to some how step outside one's own self. I watched, as though from a great distance as this person, who looked and sounded a lot like me, threw herself against the walls, against the door until it was opened. Hands had grabbed at me and I had struggled, screeching, fighting until someone had doped me and the world receded into a never ending nothingness.

This time was different, this time Jyrki had brought along a friend. I recognised the woman called Valdia and took note of the wary unhappiness in her eyes. She stayed very quiet for most of Jyrki's one sided conversation, watching me more than she watched him. After a while Jyrki had tired of my stubbornness and had nodded at her. I watched her with wary interest as she fought the protest that rose within her. What ever it was she was being asked to do, she was not happy about it. Jyrki had given her a hard, meaningful look which made her sigh.

She had come to stand next to me and cleared away hair from the side of my neck. I felt the pressure of the hypo spray and heard the hiss as she activated it. My heart suddenly raced, adrenaline flooded me and that terrible sense of fight or flight only served to scare me more. I felt the drug course through me and it was an ugly sensation.

Master Kjestyll had told me many times during our lessons together this one thing. *Fear will kill you faster than anything else because it will cloud your judgement and cause panic to move you. Overriding your fear and the subsequent panic should be the first thing you work to accomplish*. I don't think I had ever truly understood this statement because until this moment I had never known such acute fear, even though I knew it was drug induced. I was struggling to breathe and calm.

"How long before it starts to work?" Jyrki had asked.

"Couple of moments, maybe." Valdia had told him. "If she reacts to it the way she is supposed to."

They waited. I sat shivering, my teeth chattered. Gradually the effects of panic subsided and a strange sort of euphoria took over. A part of me knew this was not real, a part of me knew that I was being drugged but the other part of me didn't care. It was like floating on fluffy clouds. I closed my eyes because the room was doing some strange things. I could hear someone talking to me but the voice was very far away.

“Mouse!” someone shouted. It took me a few moments to realise it was Jyrki.

I opened my eyes to see him. I grinned. “Hey, you.” I tried to say but my words came out slurry. I felt as though I had just consumed an entire bottle of my father’s home made liquor.

“It’s working, I think.” said the woman by his side. “But this phase won’t last very long so you need to be quick about it.” She warned him. “Once this stage wears off she’ll be in bad shape. The side effects of bloom-spice are not pretty. Which is why this is a bad idea. If the General knew what you were doing he’d throw you out the nearest airlock.”

“Val, when I want your opinion I will ask for it.” He had said coldly. “We need the codes she carries in her head. We need the information on where that bastard is. You want another Alderaan? Sarlacc knows what the Empire is cooking up now. Mon Mothma’s group got that blasted battle station but that was a lucky shot, thanks to that Skywalker kid. You think the Empire is sitting still and not cooking up something bigger, stronger? The General would love to get the jump on the Imps and he doesn’t need to know about this just yet. He’s got enough on his mind as it is.” he spat the words out. I worked at not giggling.

“Don’t you dare bring up Alderaan. Of course I don’t want to see another incident like that, I lost my whole family except for my baby brother so don’t lecture me. Of course we need information but this is wrong!” she said fiercely. She was very angry and I could see it surround her in a brilliant light. “And as for the General, well I am pretty sure that as much as he wants to learn as many Imperial weaknesses as possible this is not the method he had in mind!”

Jyrki nodded. “We need information and pussy-footing around won’t do that for us. Sometimes the only way to fight fire is with fire. The Empire would not think twice about doing worse than this if the tables were turned.”

My world spun. I felt as though my body were made out of rubber. In my head I heard a voice whispering to me to fight. It reminded me of Thrawn and I smiled thinking of him.

Jyrki grasped me by the shoulders, his hands were cold and his fingers bit into my bare skin. I tried to look at his face but it kept swimming in and out of focus. My stomach began to complain so I closed my eyes. I had never taken any kind of doping spice in my life before so this was completely new experience for me. I didn’t like it much.

“Mouse, where can we find Darth Vader?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Don’t know.” I told him fighting against the fact that my tongue felt as though it were three times its normal size. I kept trying to look at it but wasn’t having much luck. “He’s on his ship.”

“Where is his ship?” he asked.

“In space, silly.” I giggled and hiccupped.

“Where in space is he?” Jyrki asked, his patience wearing thin.

“On his ship.” I answered.

Jyrki growled in frustration. “This is useless!”

“Are you mad, don’t be mad. Lord Vader is always mad and I don’t think he likes me you know, he hits me when he’s cross.” I said with a sigh. “He doesn’t like anyone.” I added hoping that was what Jyrki wanted to hear. All I wanted was to lie down because the spinning sensation was getting worse.

Valdia frowned at my words and Jyrki sighed. “You sure this stuff is working?” he asked her.

I looked at Valdia who shrugged. “No I am not and I told you before I have no way of knowing how she will react to it. Using bloom-spice as a truth teller is unreliable at best.” She said crossly. “She reacted really badly to the feynox so I have no clue how this stuff will affect her. I told you this was a bad idea.”

I nodded. “Bad idea, bad idea.” I echoed, then giggled and hiccupped again.

“Mouse! Mouse, look at me.” Jyrki said guiding my face to his. I looked into his eyes, they were so blue. I remembered how much I had loved his eyes.

“You have such beautiful eyes, but they look angry. Why are you so angry?” I asked him. “Did papa say something to you? Did you lose the hyper spanner again?” I was becoming incoherent.

“Mouse, concentrate, what is your access code to the Imperial data network?” he asked ignoring my question.

I frowned and looked around. I had no idea where I was. “Issa lot of numbers.” I said nodding. “Can’t tell you them though, issa secret.” I said.

“She’s not going to tell you what you want to know. She’s very strong willed, even doped she’s strong. Her mind, her subconscious is fighting against the drug.” Valdia told him, folding her arms across her chest in a very ‘I told you so’ manner.

I looked at Jyrki who was still leaning in close to me. I wanted to touch his face but my arms were tied behind my back. I couldn’t remember why that was. “Where’s papa, is it supper time yet?” I asked suddenly. “Is he mad at me? Why are my hands tied?” I was very confused. My head had begun to pound and my stomach suddenly lurched. “I don’t feel so good.” I told him.

He had looked at Valdia and shaken his head. “This was a waste of time!” he spat.

“I warned you.” She snarled at him. She had been about to add more but I interrupted them both by vomiting violently. I sat on the edge of the chair, panting in short, quick and shallow breaths. My heart was pounding in my ears and cold sweat prickled all over my body. I felt as though I were dying, I hoped this was the case.

Jyrki made a sound of disgust and Valdia moved to my side. Her fingers

were cold against my neck as she felt my pulse. She shone a small light into my eyes and I knew that she was worried. "That's enough, Captain. Her body isn't dealing well with this and she needs to lie down." Then she added. "Unless you want her murder on your conscience, I suggest you end this now."

"Gah!" He spat, "Get Brit to take her back to her room then!" His fury suddenly breaking through his carefully constructed control. I looked at him his face. Our eyes met but I didn't recognize him any more. I wanted to say I was sorry, I wanted to know why he was so angry with me, but I was afraid to say this out loud. My head spun and with a sigh I simply let the dizziness take over, let my head roll back and closed my eyes. Time bounced onward without me knowing.

I woke up on the cot in the small dark room I was being kept in. My mouth resembled a sewer and I was pretty certain that a bantha was dancing on my brain. The light was on and at my side, sitting in a chair that had not been there before was Valdia.

"How do you feel?" she asked. She put a cup of water to my lips. I sipped at it.

"Like death." I told her, squinting. "How long was I out for?"

She pursed her lips tightly. She didn't want to tell me.

"How... long?" I clasped her hand.

"Over 36 hours." She said quietly, she was embarrassed. "I wasn't sure you were gonna come out of it."

"Why are you doing this to me?" I asked but it was more like a whimper.

She frowned and a strange expression of anger and sadness crossed her face. "Captain Andando says you have information that we can use to fight the Empire." She said by way of explanation.

"What does he think I am?" I whispered truly wondering this myself.

"Someone with access to a lot of important information." She answered.

"I'm just an office girl." I said. "I am just an assistant."

She just stared at me. "You work with high ranking officials." She countered.

I lay back down on the cot and laughed which turned into a coughing fit. "I can tell you about what up and coming social functions are happening at the palace or about where the best tailors on Coruscant are." I said. "Or maybe you need to know what size boots Darth Vader wears."

She shook her head. "So you have no idea where the Imperial fleets are?"

"No." and that was the truth.

I could feel her sudden flare of anger. Jyrki hadn't been entirely honest with her. "What about access to the Imperial computer network?"

"Just low level clearance and just to the local network, for memos and messages and stuff." I lied. "And that access would have been deleted the moment people knew I had been abducted." I added.

She sighed. "The Captain told me you were involved in the destruction of Alderaan."

I just stared at her for a moment. Jyrki had actually said that? I shook my head. "I have no part of the military, I'm a civilian worker. I had nothing to do with that at all. I lost family when the planet was destroyed." I said sadly.

I could feel her indecision and stayed very quiet. She was already angry with Jyrki and she was weighing the truth of my statements against her dislike of his actions.

"I'm sorry." She said getting up. "I don't know what to do about this. I owe him my life and he's really a good man." She told me but she sounded as though she were trying to convince herself more than explain to me. "You know him from before, don't you?"

I nodded. "He worked for my father." I said and I could not keep the sorrow out of my voice. "He knew me as a child and he was like an older brother to me." I swallowed the sadness down. "But he's changed." I added.

She drew a deep breath. "You need to rest. Your body doesn't like the drugs we've been using. I don't know why. I'll try and bring you some food later on and some clean clothes. That dress is pretty disgusting. I don't care who you are, you deserve to be treated like a human being not an animal. I don't know why he hates you so much and I am sorry I can't help you more. If it were not for the captain my little brother and I would be dead. I owe him everything."

I just looked at her and said nothing. There was nothing for me to say. I watched as she left the room, closed the door and the lights went off. I had lost all track of time; I had no idea how many days I had been in this place now. I lay awake a long time thinking about everything that had happened. I never did manage to fall asleep, instead I dozed fitfully. I was awake when Valdia came back into the room much, much later on.

She put clothes down on the chair for me along with a small kit of toiletries and some towels. "There is a toothbrush and stuff in the kit for you." She said quietly. "I'll bring food when it is done."

"Thank you. You are very kind." I told her, knowing she didn't feel kind at all, she felt guilty.

She nodded and left quickly. I made her uncomfortable. I was a reminder that the lines between right and wrong were very thin. She hated the Empire, I felt that every time the word came up but she didn't hate me. What they were doing to me was exactly what they were fighting against. She was conflicted between her desire to please Jyrki and her sense of right and wrong.

I got up slowly, my head protested but I didn't care. I looked at the clothes

she left me. Everything was used but freshly laundered. I stripped out of the once beautiful dress and sighed. I braved the freezing cold water and scrubbed myself until it almost hurt. Then, with a strange feeling of relief, I slipped into the clothes. Shorts and a t shirt became my underclothes and then the jump suit which was a little too large but I didn't care. It was comfortable and more importantly, clean. I rummaged through the little toiletries kit and found the toothbrush and paste. I spent at least ten minutes cleaning my teeth and for the first time since I had been kidnapped I broke down and wept. It was as if the simplest act in the galaxy, this thing I had taken for granted my whole life, had suddenly become the most precious gift ever.

I was sitting on the bed when Valdia returned with a tray of food. She set it on the chair.

"Don't eat too fast, you'll be sick." She said squatting down by the cot. "You need to gain some strength, keep food in your stomach and not throw it up."

"You a doctor?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Just a field medic, patch folks up mostly." She said. "But I know enough to see you aren't looking or doing so well. I brought you some fruit juice and some more water. The stew doesn't have much flavour but it's hot and the apple is fresh."

"Thank you." I said shyly. "I hope you don't get into trouble with Jyrki for being nice to me."

Her anger suddenly flared about her like white fire. "I don't give a smuggler's kiss about what the Captain thinks. Even if you do work for the Empire, you don't deserve to be treated like this, no matter what. I'm sorry I let it go on this long."

"Lots of people work for the Empire." I said. "Garbage disposal workers on Coruscant work for the Empire, I don't see any of them here." I said. "I'm here because it's personal."

She looked at me for a moment and then nodded. She had gotten my point. "Eat before it gets cold." She said. "I'll pick up the tray tomorrow morning."

I made a noise that was a cross between laughter and a snort. "Morning, night, I have no idea what time of day or even what day it is any more." I said.

She sighed then she told me what date it was. I did the math in my head and sat back against the wall. My heart seemed to stop. "That's over three weeks? I've been gone for over three weeks? How is that possible? How?" I didn't know what to think and the tears that welled up in my eyes were genuine. How could so much time have passed? It was all a blur since the fight in my flat, since they had kidnapped me. "I wish he'd just kill me and get it over with." I said softly, trying not to cry. "It would be easier than this."

She looked away from me. "I have to go." She said quietly. I just nodded and didn't say anything else. I didn't need to. When I was once again alone I

picked up the bowl of stew. She was right, it didn't have much flavour but it was still warm and it tasted like heaven to me. I ate slowly, thoughtfully. The juice she had brought was sweet and cold and I savoured every sip. I kept the apple for later.

I needed to get out of here. I needed to make a plan because no one was going to come for me. There were no heroes and no rescues. I had no illusions about how unimportant I was in the eyes of the Empire. If I wanted to escape, I would have to do it myself. I just needed to wait for the right time, play my part and hope that some luck was with me.

I could have never imagined captivity in all my wildest dreams. I could never ever have dreamed up that it would be so difficult to spend hours upon hours alone in a small dark room. That isolation would be so hard to bear. It would have never occurred to me that the simplest things, like taking a bath or being able to make a cup of tea would become so meaningful and be so missed. I had not ever considered the importance of being able to tell time or that routines and schedules were important not stupid and that without them I was lost.

My days were spent in a sort of muddled haze that hovered between despair and anxiety. I tried to fight this with thoughts that were cheerful and full of hope. I conjured up memories of better things and better times. Sometimes it was a childhood memory; sometimes it was something more recent. I went over and over in my head all the things I had done that had led up to this point, especially the incident on Rothana. I thought about Navaari but more often I thought of Thrawn and these thoughts, these memories kept me afloat but this strange psychological warfare that Jyrki was waging against me was wearing me down.

I didn't understand why he was doing this. I tried to keep my spirits up but it was a difficult battle. I struggled to hold onto everything that I had ever been taught. The lessons learned in the Center seemed pitifully small in comparison to the reality of what I was experiencing and sometimes I had to push myself just to get up from the cot and move my body. There were times when despair overwhelmed me and I wished that the drugs they had been using on me had killed me.

In between these terrible down times, I practised my kata forms and tried to keep myself fit. It did not help that while Valdia did her best to see I was fed at least once a day, for the most part meals were not at all regular, letting me know that my presence on this base was not a well known fact. I was pretty certain, given the sippets of conversations I had heard that how I was being treated was not normal and if I were to be discovered then there would be hell to pay.

Val's visits were highlights to me, counter pointing the infrequent, nasty visits from Jyrki. Since the day he had used the truth teller drug on me he had stayed coldly distant. When he had come near me, it was all uncomfortable silences rather than conversation. I could sense the struggle within him but I could not reach him. He railed against an anger I did not understand. Some part of me

knew this was a power struggle but I could not for the life me understand why. He asked the same questions, he requested the same information but the questions were more routine than anything else. We were at a stand off and neither of us knew how to get past that without one of us killing the other.

Once I had tried to break through his barriers, tried to reach the man I had known and cared deeply for. I had brought up old memories, moments of love and laughter. I had felt him respond but as suddenly as that spark of hope in me flared so had his temper and with that he had, for the first time since the night he had abducted me, hit me. With a powerful backhand across my face he had managed to shatter my hope that perhaps he could still be reasoned with. I knew for certain then, that Thrawn had been right when he had said that while Jyrki's fate and mine were inexplicably bound together, he was no longer my friend. After that his visits to my room and my visits to the small interrogation room were surrounded by silence and muted anger.

It had become a contest of wills with the threat of violence now more than ever, present. More than once, I wondered if I could have taken him on and win in a fight. We were often just the two of us alone and sometimes my hands were not tied behind my back but I didn't honestly think I could beat him. I was not at my very best and he had a pretty good idea of my strengths from our fight on Rothana. He harboured a lot of anger over that fight. He was still limping from the damage I had done to his knee. I sensed that escape would come through sneakiness and stealth rather than a straight out fight. So I slowly formed different plans and possibilities in my mind and waited until the time as right.

My meals were almost always brought to me by Valdia. I looked forward to her visits because in difference to the taciturn man named Brit who refused to even say hullo, she would often spend a little time talking with me. Mostly I listened as she talked about her brother, her family and her life. Sometimes, she would ask me about myself but I kept my answers basic and simple. I talked about my own family and my life on Tatooine, making it sound both simple and idyllic. I wanted her to feel sorry for me, to pity me.

We avoided the topic at hand, my being held captive and what was going on now between Jyrki and myself. She was sad at the situation. She did not like that Jyrki had brought me here and was keeping me against my will. She was torn between her own feelings about that and her sense of loyalty to the man who had saved her life. I sensed these emotions and took note of them. I projected my sadness and used her guilt leaking these feelings around me the way I had done with the desire I had picked up from the men on Myrkr. Amplifying the emotions and sending them outward was easier than trying to control someone's mind. While I did not want to do that to her, I wanted her to care about me, I wanted her to see me as a person not just a prisoner but I didn't want her to get any sense from me that I was a threat of any kind at all.

She had become comfortable talking to me, she thought of me in some weird way as a friend and she wasn't so careful about what she said to me any more. So I bided my time because sooner or later my chance would come. Patience had a way of paying off.

"I'm sorry I'm later than usual." She told me one day when she brought my food. "It's a bit chaotic here. Everyone is getting ready to go out on a mission." She said. I hoped that the sudden interest I felt didn't show on my face.

"Will you be leaving as well?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, the captain is taking the crash team, some sabotage mission out near Sullust, I think. They'll be gone a few days, so with the General and his teams also out on a mission it is just a small skeleton crew left here." She sat on the floor, as she often did. "I don't like to fly and I'm a terrible pilot so I am pretty useless on the hit and run trips."

"Well, I am glad you are here, I'd probably starve if it were not for you." I said wanting to reinforce my dependence on her presence. "When do they leave?"

"Late tonight." She said. "I'll worry because they take Mikka, my brother, with them."

"I'm sure that Jyrki will look after him." I said. "Are they going by transport?" I asked.

She shook her head, "No, X-Wings, they leave the transport freighters here. It's a hit and run mission, transports would get in the way."

I nodded and sipped the hot tea she had brought me. "So, are you in charge when everyone is gone?"

"No, that's Sena's job, thank goodness." She said. "It is really rare for two teams to be gone at the same time, but the Captain said the chance to do what they want to do will not present itself again so he took the initiative. When he gets an idea in his head it's very hard to dissuade him. The Empire isn't looking for us anyway they are looking for the group responsible for the Death Star destruction. We can take this structure down pretty fast when we need to. We've not been on Mattri that long and it's only a small complex this time." She said. It did not occur to her at all that perhaps it was a bad idea to tell me all of this. She was completely at ease with my role as a docile prisoner. She really did think of me almost as a friend.

"I guess it must be hard to coordinate all the hanger traffic then." I said. "I mean with everyone gone or is that your job as well?"

"Goodness, no." She shrugged. "Mikka told me each ship has its own ID code that gets it through the force field. The codes are built into the ships so only our ships get in and out. It makes it easy when there is no dock operator, which according to the captain that was the best way to get by with less man power." She said, and then she smiled. "You know, you and Mikka would get along really well, he loves to talk about ships and flying. I don't make a good audience for his

interest because I hate space travel.”

I smiled. “I can understand that.” I nodded.

She got up. “I need to go. I have to get some things ready for Mikka before he leaves. I’ll try to be back later but don’t count on it. Tomorrow will be easier, I’ll have a lot more time.” She told me, and then pointed to the tray. “I brought you some extra fruit, in case I get held up or something.”

“I understand.” I said. “Thank you for all you do for me, but you should spend time with your little brother. Family is important.” I told her. She smiled and nodded. I watched her leave, the door close and the lights went off.

I sat in the dimness of the small room, eating the food she had brought for me. I had a day, give or take a few hours to plan. If what she had said was true then after tonight the people I feared the most, the ones who could stop me, would kill me without a thought would be gone. It was the chance I had been waiting for and I wasn’t going to mess it up. When I had finished eating I pulled out the silk dress that I had stuffed under my cot. Carefully and with purpose I began to tear the skirt into strips.

I dreamt of walking in the desert, the Dune Sea. I followed the footsteps of the man with the long hair and the poncho. He was always one step ahead of me but I needed to talk to him so I kept on going.

“Help me!” I cried out to him after what seemed an eternity. “Please.”

He stopped and turned to face me. He was very tall and his eyes were as blue as the clear Tatooine sky. His long hair danced around his face with the wind. It was the first time I had gotten to see his face clearly. He was covered in a sorrow which he wore like the poncho. I reached out to touch his face but he brushed my hand away with a slow, languid motion.

“You are not the Skywalker child, you are not Anakin.” He said quietly. “You are not the chosen one.”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“Yes, you do.” He answered simply. “Do not follow in his footsteps, do not stumble and fall.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand.”

“You see past the lies into the truth. Do not follow the darkness, follow the light.” He said.

“You are not making any sense!”

He looked at me the way my father sometimes had when I was small and was struggling to learn some lesson or another. He reached out and touched my face gently. “One day you will understand. Remember all you have been taught, it will serve you well. Remember, do no harm.”

“Who are you?” I was crying now, soundlessly. Tears rolled down my cheeks and I didn’t wipe them away.

“A shadow of the past, a fragment of the future.” He said and he started to fade from sight. “You are stronger than you think. Be ready for your moment.” He whispered and disappeared.

I woke clear headed and for the first time in a long time with hope. I could still feel the touch of the strange man’s hand on my face. I got up and washed my body and brushed my teeth then with the comb that Valdia had found for me managed to scrape my hair back into a more or less tidy braid. Once I had finished that I could feel anticipation begin to turn to nervousness and that was not good. Waiting for an event was the most difficult time. *Fear is a weapon your enemy will use to still your action ...* Master Kjestyll’s words echoed in my head. *Become the stillness...* so I did the only thing I knew how to quell the beast within, I meditated.

I knelt in the classic pose and I allowed my breathing to slow down. I let my mind drift as it always did at the beginning of the process but then the focus came. The little journal my father had given me had spoken of this energy, this force. It was all around us, it had said, binding each and every living thing together. As I sat in the quiet of that small dark room I could feel this energy gather within me. I could feel it in my own center and it was powerful and peaceful at the same time. I don’t know how long I stayed like that. When I got it right, when the meditation worked, time became meaningless.

I sensed her coming long before she got to the door so that by the time she walked in I was sitting on the cot, as usual. I hoped that she would not notice that something was different. I smiled at her, as I always did, and watched her set the tray down on the chair.

“Morning.” She said. She sounded tired.

“Is everything alright?” I asked getting up from the cot and going to the sink to wash my hands. “You sound as if something is wrong.”

She sighed and then as she had done so often before she sat down on the floor. “No it’s nothing really. I just worry about my brother.” She had brought her cup of tea with her and she took a sip from it. “I don’t sleep well when he, when everyone is out on a mission.” She said.

“I can understand that, you must be exhausted then.” I told her as I dried my hands.

She nodded. “It has been a really rough few weeks.” She said and I bit back the angry retort that wanted to spring out of my mouth. Instead I sat across from her and put my hand on her shoulder to comfort her. Through that simple act of touch I knew that she was at ease with me and that she felt very alone.

“You are a kind person.” She said patting my hand. I sighed. I thought

about apologising to her for what was about to happen but didn't. Instead I withdrew my hand from her shoulder and picked up the cup of tea she had laid in front of me, took a sip and set the cup down. I drew a slow deep steadying breath and focussed my energy.

She never saw it coming. The heel of my fist connected with her jaw in a swift sharp crack and sent her reeling backwards. For a split second I thought it hadn't worked but when her eyes rolled back into her head and she crumpled into a little pile on the floor I felt relief flood through me. I checked her pulse. She was still alive. I struggled to get her up onto the cot. I took the strips of silk I had readied the night before I bound her hands and feet then gagged her. I searched through her pockets and took her ID badge, her weapon and anything that she could use to free herself when she woke. I turned her to face the wall and then I covered her with the blanket. Anyone just looking in would think it was me sleeping.

The ID badge opened the door via a tiny sensor and I slipped out of the room. That was the easy part, now the tricky bit began.

Look as though you belong. Master Kjestyll had told me on one of the exercises I had undergone at the Center. *When in doubt act with authority, less people will question you if you look like you not only belong but are in charge than if you slink around trying to hide.*

I gathered myself and projected confidence as I walked down the empty corridors. Valdia had not been kidding when she had said they were running on a skeleton crew. The compound was deserted.

Use all of your senses to find your direction. Listen to sounds for clues, smell the air for people, for fuel for food, look for use and disuse.

I listened and heard laughter and voices coming from the direction I was heading, I could also smell food. I figured that the mess hall lay ahead so I slipped into a side corridor. While I didn't think that many people were actually aware of who I was in this place I was not about to tempt fate either. I took a second to slow my heart rate and steady my breathing. As I did so I touched the force and tried to get a feel of where I was. It was faint but in the air I caught a whiff of a familiar scent and smiled.

The complex was not that large and the layout followed a basic base design. The hanger bay was at the center. I stayed close to the wall, in the shadows. The hanger was not in use with so many of the fighters gone so the lights were dimmer than usual. It was standard procedure to save energy. The lack of light was my friend. I made my way over to a place that hid me from plain sight but allowed me the ability to survey the hanger in total. There were three ships. One X-wing and two freighter transports, YV-666's. I sighed with relief because this was a ship type I could fly; the X-wing would have presented no end of problems.

I waited and watched but nothing moved in the hanger. I guessed that

with most of the fighters out the ground crews were eating breakfast or lunch or just relaxing. Down time was precious so they would enjoy it while they had it. Slowly but with purpose I made my way to the nearest transport hoping against hope that Jyrki had not done some serious jury rigging to secure the ships. I hit the door open button and for a few precious seconds my heart was in my throat then much to my relief the door opened. I walked up the ramp like I belonged there, closing the door behind me.

It took a few seconds, sitting quietly to see if I had attracted any unwanted attention but no one came after me. I had guessed that from the sounds I had heard in the hallway, and the time of day it was according to the ship's chrono, it was lunch time for most of the staff and they were not expecting a prison break, because they were unaware that there even was a prisoner.

I made my way to the cockpit and began the pre-flight warm up. I did not turn on any internal lights, darkness was good cover and the consol had light enough to see by. Valdia had been right and the codes to allow the ships through the force field were hard wired into the ship and with no interruption and no one stopping me, I piloted the ship out of the hanger and into space. My heart raced and I was almost certain I would be caught and shot out of the sky or worse taken back to the prison I had been held in but nothing happened. It was so anti climactic I was almost disappointed. I remembered Master Kjestyll saying that escaping was not like a holo story, full of flash and fire; the very best escapes were quiet and went unnoticed. Escape was about the lack of attention rather than attracting it.

I took a moment to get my bearings and took note of where the base was. The Mattri asteroid belt was in the Churba sector in the Mid Rim. I began to programme the nav computer to make a series of small hyperspace jumps to get me as far away as possible from both this place and the Sullust system because I didn't want to run into Jyrki and his crew. I didn't breathe a sigh of relief until the stars spun and I slipped into hyperspace. Once in hyperspace I explored the small ship, checked out the status of the engine, went over the ship's ID and got familiar with her controls.

She was a long ship almost twenty three meters in length, bulky in the ass end with a small cockpit. There were a small crew area with a little galley, sleeping berths and a small head but the majority of the spare room in this ship was cargo hold and engines. There wasn't much onboard her in the way of personal effects which made sense to me. She was a general use ship and I supposed that most of the rebels who could pilot would have flown her at one time or another, bringing what they needed with them rather than leaving their stuff on board. The galley was equipped with the basic supplies and long lasting emergency rations. I boiled water and made tea, something fruity and sweet smelling. I didn't care because it was hot and I had made it in freedom.

I made my way back up to the ship's cock pit and took my place in the pilot's seat. As I cradled the cup in my hands I started thinking about where the best place to find Imperial help. I had toyed with the idea of heading to Tatooine, going home to my father but I decided against this because I did not want to worry my father. I also did not want to give Jyrki a reason to go after my family. I wanted to get back to some sort of normalcy. I wanted to get back to work. I wanted my life back. I wanted to feel safe but I wondered, given the circumstances, if that was possible ever again.

I knew there was an Imperial Outpost in Bestine but Tatooine was far away from the center of things and I had no idea how the Imperials there would react to me suddenly showing up in a rebel ship, looking like death warmed over proclaiming to be Lord Vader's Personal assistant. I sat and studied the star charts while the ship travelled through hyperspace. I had no idea where Darth Vader was and there was no way to contact him personally from this ship as it had no Holo transmitter and the comm system was not that powerful. I could have headed to Coruscant but a gut feeling more than anything else told me that might not be the very best idea. Restless, I went back to the galley and made another cup of tea and sat thinking about this for a long time.

As the ship dropped out of the first hyperspace jump and geared up for the second I decided to head out to the Carida system because I knew there was a permanent Imperial presence there, the training academy was placed on that planet and that meant a permanent naval presence in the system. I set new coordinates into the nav computer and then sat back because until I reached the system there was nothing else for me to do but wait for time to pass. Oddly enough it was among the longest five hours in my life and even though I was physically exhausted, I could not sleep.

I came out of hyperspace close to Andra a planet in the same system and slowed the sublight engines to minimal. I figured the best way to get attention was to shout so I set a distress call on the only Imperial channel I knew off the top of my head. I didn't have to wait long. The comm came to life as the *ISD Malignant* hailed me.

I answered their request for information by giving my personal Imperial ID number and the clearance code that I would use when travelling on official Imperial business. There was a palpable silence on the other end of the comm for what seemed to me to last forever. Then I was told to stand down engines and allow for a tractor beam to latch on and draw the freighter into the docking hanger. I did exactly as I was asked to do and waited while the process completed. I shut the ship down completely and went to the hatchway. As the doorway opened I took a deep breath. Facing me was a group of trigger ready stormtroopers and two fairly nervous deck officers. I walked down the ramp with my hands in front of to show I was unarmed and I stood very still at the foot of the ramp while one of

the deck officers patted me down. The air was charged with anxiety and apprehension. It wasn't until the man in the captain's uniform joined the group and waved at the troopers to drop lower their weapons.

"Miss Merlyn Gabriel?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Welcome back to the Empire. I am captain Broggi of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Malignant*. If you will follow me." He said and without further ado he turned heel and began to walk away from me. I took a deep breath and followed him. I tried to ignore the two stormtroopers that followed me.

"Captain..." I began but he stopped, turned around and cut me off before I could say anything else.

"Miss Gabriel, I must respectfully request that you remain silent until I can escort you to a secure area where, after your debriefing, I will be happy to answer your questions as best I can." And he turned away from me once more walking very fast. I had to trot to keep up.

The small office room was plain but non threatening. The debriefing was swift. I gave them a quick run down of what had happened to me. I told the captain and the two officers who were with him everything that I knew about the base I had escaped from. Told them that the ship's nav computer had the coordinates for the asteroid base and I told them about the hit and run mission I had learned of in the Sullust system. They were not so concerned with the details of my captivity but took interest at the information on the Rebel base. I had asked the captain how he had known my name.

"The fleet has been on alert for your possible return ever since you were reported missing. It would appear that you are more important than the rebellion realises." The captain said snidely, "other wise they would not have let you slip through their fingers so easily."

I was genuinely surprised. "You were looking for me?"

"We were not given orders to carry out an active search but we were told to be aware of your Ident codes should you manage to find your way back to the fold." The captain said. "The fleet was made aware of your existence and abduction hours after the incident occurred."

"Lord Vader ordered this?"

"The word is the actual command came from the Emperor himself." He said in a voice that betrayed his fear and awe of the man he spoke of.

"The Emperor?" I whispered but instead of fear I felt a sudden flash of anger.

The captain nodded. "Yes, Miss Gabriel. Now please, I cannot say more than this. I am to escort you to suitable quarters and see that you are treated as our guest." He escorted me without further word to my new home for the next while and I was very aware that the two stormtroopers stationed themselves on

either side of the door after the captain had ushered me through it.

“Miss Gabriel, Lord Vader has been made aware of your return and we will rendezvous with the *Executor* in two days. Due to the circumstances surrounding your recent experience I must respectfully request that you remain confined to these quarters until your transfer to the *Executor*. This is standard Imperial protocol when dealing with this sort of situation. You must be sequestered until you can be properly debriefed by Intel. Lord Vader has requested that this take place on board the *Executor* under his supervision.” The captain could not hide the shudder of fear when he said those words.

I sighed. I suddenly it dawned on me that I was now an unknown, not to be trusted, tainted by the enemy. “I understand.” How could the captain of this fine ship know that I would rather face Lord Vader any day than go up against Jyrki again.

He nodded and visibly relaxed. “Is there anything you need? I have been ordered to make certain that you treated well and are comfortable.”

“I need clean clothes, some decent food, and the ability to make tea when I want it. A long hot shower and I should probably get checked out by the ship’s doctor.” I told him bluntly, no point in messing around.

“Of course, I’ll have the quartermaster send up supplies and clothing for you.” He said. He pointed out the small kitchenette and the menu plan. “You can fill that out and meals will be delivered to you, someone will be by later to pick it up. The troopers stationed outside the door can escort you to sick bay when you are ready.

“Thank you, Captain.” I nodded.

There was nothing else to say. Lord Vader knew where I was and I took comfort in that. I was safe now and I was weary. Captain Broggi had done his job. He gave me a curt nod and left me alone to sort myself out. Compared to the tiny room I had been kept in by Jyrki the ISD’s guest quarters were palatial. I had forgotten how huge a star destroyer was.

I was deep in thought staring out the large window when the door opened. One of the troopers laid a large pile of clothes, towels and toiletry supplies on the nearest chair. I thanked him but if he heard he made no acknowledgement. I laughed out loud. It would seem that for the time being I had swapped one kind of prison for another, one kind of silence for another.

With nothing else to do, I took the towels, the toiletries and went into the fresher to shower. I stood under the hot water for a very, very, very long time. It was as if I scrubbed my skin hard enough, washed my hair roughly enough, let the water pound on me for long enough I could erase these last few weeks of my life away. It didn’t work but when I finally emerged from the fresher I did feel a whole lot better. I dressed in the clothes provided; they were men’s PE clothes and far too large but I didn’t care as they were clean and comfortable. I stood and watched the

stars from the window.

It was difficult to grasp that I was safe. It felt utterly surreal to me and I wasn’t sure how to deal with it. I turned away from the view port and turned my attention to the menu planner I was supposed to fill out. I was done by the time someone came to pick it up but if he had asked me to tell him what I had chosen I couldn’t have. With a sigh I decided that before I got too settled I should probably pay the ship’s doctor a visit. Goodness knew what the drugs that had been pumped into my system had done to me.

The doctor had been expecting me and I was taken to a secluded exam room. He was gruff and the examination was thorough.

“We’ll know if there is any lasting damage when the test results come back.” He said.

He had been horrified when I had told him about what Jyrki had done to me and named the drugs that I knew had been used.

“You need to eat, drink lots of fluids and rest.” He told me when he was done. “You need to recover from everything that was done to you, both physically and mentally.” He sighed. “I won’t lie to you, Miss Gabriel, it will not be easy.”

I had nodded. I had no idea how I would deal with everything that had happened because it had not really sunk in yet.

“It’s like a very bad dream.” I said.

The Doctor had nodded but had not said anything else except to reiterate that I needed to eat, drink lots of fluids and rest. I nodded, I had two days to do that and only that. I was grateful to be back in the quiet of the quarters assigned to me. I had grown used to solitude and the short trip to the med bay had exhausted me. I wondered if it was normal to feel so numb and then decided I was too tired to really care. I made myself a cup of tea and sat on the closest comfy chair. There were datapad books to read and an entertainment holo with a varied selection of things to watch, including the latest news net feed but I could not concentrate on any one thing.

How was it that so much time had passed and yet I felt as though it had all happened in the wink of an eye? I had been gone well over a month but somehow I could not grasp this fully and it felt as though it were only yesterday I had been dancing with Thrawn on the last day of Fete week . I had to struggle to try and place everything that had happened in some sort of chronological order. My ordeal was a blur of fractured images and strangely disassociated memories, as though it had happened to someone else and not me. In hindsight, escape had seemed too simple, to uneventful somehow. I felt hollow inside, gutted. When my meal came I ate slowly but without tasting it. Not long after that I went to bed. Exhaustion, it seemed, was merciful and for the first time in a long time without I slept without dream or interruption.

Lord Vader just stood and stared at me until the door to my quarters closed. I knew from past experience that everyone on the other side of the door was most likely breathing a very large sigh of relief. I was glad in a strange sort of way to see him but he wasn't the public display of affection sort of man so I refrained from showing him how I felt instead I stayed where I was and just watched him pace the room and got the distinct sense that he was not unhappy to see me.

"This ship's physician informs me that you were not permanently damaged." He said coming to stand in front of me. "You should be able to go through the debriefing procedure without too many complications."

I just stared at him. I had forgotten how tall and overbearing he was. How eerie his mechanical breathing sounded and just how unnerving his presence could be. His power writhed about him giving me goose bumps. I had also forgotten how frightening he could be even when he wasn't even trying.

"It is nice to see you again as well. When can I get back to work?" I asked.

"Once Intel has cleared you." He said and moved away from me to stand at the window.

"What does that mean, exactly?"

He turned his head to regard me for a moment then went back to looking out of the window. "Intel must be satisfied that you are not working for the Rebellion in some manner, that you are not a security risk. That you have not been turned."

"I told them nothing!" I said hotly. "I managed to escape, no thanks to anyone and came directly here! I'm certainly not about to help people who think kidnapping is a good thing to do! What do you think I am, an idiot?"

For such a large man he moved with an exquisite grace and speed. He had my face between his gloved hands before I could even move. I could feel him brush my mind with his and I shuddered in his grip.

"Show me." He said. It was not a request I could refuse. I took a deep breath and tried to relax as much as I could, given the circumstances, opened my mind to him and allowed him to touch my thoughts. I showed him the jumble of images I held locked up tightly in my head, shared with him the ordeal in as much as I could remember it or was able to. It was an eternity until he released his grip on me. "The Emperor was correct in his appraisal of your inner strength." He said as he let go of my face.

"The Emperor...?" I felt anger flare from deep within my gut. I was starting to learn to hate that vile old man and his strange ways. "He knew this would happen to me, didn't he." I said with gritted teeth. With my arms folded across my chest and my chin raised to look directly at Lord Vader. I knew I was being defiant

and that was not overly smart but I didn't care. I was angrier now than I could ever remember. It burned in my belly with a dark, gnawing heat. I was not backing down but Lord Vader wasn't taking the bait either, he simply turned away from me to stare out into space once more.

He was silent for a long time, long enough that I didn't think he would answer me. When he did speak it was with careful deliberation. "My Master sees many things, knows much. If he had foreseen this event, he had his reasons for saying nothing."

"I'll take that as a yes, then." I retorted reading between the lines.

"I see that captivity has not softened your sharp tongue any or given better manners."

I bit back the retort that was on the tip of my tongue and smiled. This was familiar territory and I welcomed his sarcasm. Perhaps he had not missed me but he had missed these conversations with someone who did not cower at his every word.

"Did *you* know?" I asked after a long silence.

"No." he answered and it was not a lie. He was suddenly very angry. I felt it flow around him and he welcomed the sensation. I understood; anger was easy to use. He turned to look at me and something connected between us. I didn't understand it but it wasn't a bad thing, if anything it felt a little as though he had worried for me and was glad to see me whole and alive. It was a subtle thing and I caught only a fleeting sense of it but it was enough and I nodded to him in thanks.

With a single hand motion that said "*come*." I knew we were leaving the *ISD Malignant*. We headed to the hanger bay, to his shuttle where we would fly over to the *Executor*. It seemed a strange scene to me, him striding like some great black giant out of the nightmarish fairy tales I had been told as a child and me running to keep up with him so as not to get lost. I got the distinct impression from his moody silence that what ever awaited me on the *Executor* was not going to be pleasant.

He had flown the shuttle himself, which was unusual. I sat in the co pilot's chair and was utterly awestruck at the size of the ship we were heading for.

"This is your new flag ship? This is the *Executor*?" I asked in a hushed whisper. I had heard the new lead ship for the fleet was impressive, but words had not done this vessel justice at all. I sensed his pleasure but was not certain if it was from my question or because of the ship or both.

"Yes." He said as we drew closer to the largest space ship I had ever seen in my entire life. "Magnificent is she not?"

I nodded. "Magnificent doesn't even come close to describing her, holy sarlace she's huge." It was so easy to talk to him about ships and machines. It was the one subject he never shied away from and it was easy to forget for a short time who or perhaps what exactly he was as well as what had happened to me.

He chuckled, a sound I didn't think I would ever get used to. "She is twelve times the length of an ISD. Close to nineteen thousand metres in length. She has a crew and compliment of just under three hundred thousand men, give or take, and over five thousand turbo lasers and ion cannons."

I whistled slowly. "What about the engines?"

He glanced at me and nodded. "You will appreciate this; she has a class two hyperdrive, thirteen engines in five thruster banks with a mass acceleration rate of twelve hundred and thirty Gs."

"Wow, that's a lot of kick." I said then laughed at the image that suddenly popped into my head. "Bet she steers like a fat, drunken bantha, though."

He nodded. "She's no pod racer but she is a beauty and she has a lot of power. There is no other quite like her in the galaxy." There was a wistfulness in his voice that sometimes came when we spoke like this. I wondered, not for the first time, what he had been like before the mask. In some ways I was sad I would never know that part of him. He had a lot to teach me and I was grateful for the small mounts of time I got to spend with him.

Whispers said he was brilliant with machines. That he had almost a magical way with them and was one of the best pilots in the entire Imperial Navy, so quiet times like this with him were rare and I treasured them because they hinted at the man behind the mask rather than what the mask represented. I admired the grace and elegance with which he set the shuttle down in the hanger bay. A perfect landing. He was aware of my scrutiny and I felt the pleasure he took from my admiration of his skill. He was extraordinarily good at what he did and he knew it.

"The interrogation you will undergo will be unpleasant." He said with uncharacteristic openness. "The Intel agent will wish to use standard procedures. You will be strong and not embarrass me." He added.

"Define unpleasant." I said as we slipped out of the cockpit.

"It will entail the use of an interrogation droid with certain chemical substances which will make you more pliable and open to questioning." He said. "This chemical process is known to be painful."

"Great, more drugs." I said crossly. "You know, so far, I have not reacted very well to this sort of thing. It usually ends up with me throwing up all over the place, so you might want to stand back when they do this because vomit doesn't usually go well with black." Then I added uncertainly. "You will be there as well, won't you?"

"Yes." He said. "Intel has a habit of being overly enthusiastic about their work, I wish to supervise. You are of little use to either myself or the Emperor damaged or dead."

I nodded and accepted that this was his way of reassuring me even though it wasn't actually very reassuring.

He continued. "I know you remained loyal to the Empire but Intel will not be fully satisfied until they have come to this conclusion on their own. Since they have no faith in the Force they must achieve this by mechanical and chemical means." He added. "The experience will be..."

"I know, unpleasant. I understand." I said. "I won't let you down."

We walked down the ramp into the hanger. "See that you don't." he said waving an accusing finger at me. He stalked off with me trotting behind him to keep up. There was no more conversation. The interrogation room was small, smelled like a cross between some medical antiseptic and toilet cleaning fluid and it was very claustrophobic. Lord Vader's large physical presence did not help ease this sensation. There was an intimidating looking chair in the center of the room complete with restraints on the arm rests as well as for the feet. I tried very hard to calm my nervousness but wasn't overly successful. I was grateful when the two Intel agents and their interrogation equipment showed up. The sooner this was over with the sooner I could get back to a normal life.

There was a sense of heaviness in the air, oppressing and stifling. The two agents were very nondescript men of average weight and height. While one set up the equipment they were going to use the other addressed me directly.

"Good afternoon, Miss Gabriel. My name is Agent Dahn and I will be conducting this hearing today. I understand these proceedings are, perhaps, frightening to some but I assure you we shall do our best to make them as painless and as swift as possible. The Empire values its loyal citizens and prolonging an unpleasant procedure is not in our best interests." He motioned for me to sit in the chair. I did so without saying a word. I would have remained silent but he went to restrain my feet and arms and I protested.

"You don't need to do that." I said. The idea of being tied down was even worse than anything else I could imagine.

"I am afraid it is standard procedure, some people find it difficult to remain still during these procedures. He said in the same flat tone.

"No, you really do not need to do that." I said a little more firmly. The first sparks of anger growing in my gut.

There was subtle movement from Lord Vader and the Intel agent backed off. I was grateful for that tiny victory. Agent Dahn gave Lord Vader a curt nod and then began to explain what it was they were going to do.

He gestured for me to roll up my sleeve. "The drug we use will allow the interrogation droid to follow your brain wave patterns. This enables us to discern whether or not you are telling the truth. Some people find the initial effects to be painful, I apologise if this is the case however, these effects are short term. Once you are ready, I will ask you questions regarding your experience with regards to your abduction and consequent imprisonment and I want you to answer truthfully. We are looking to determine if you have been somehow influenced by

these rebels and are now under their influence. The more truthful you are the swifter we will be done and can evaluate your status with regards to your job. The less you fight against the procedure the less damage will occur to your brain. Do you understand what I have said?" His voice never lost the flat monotone and his eyes, which were a pale silvery grey colour showed absolutely no emotion.

"Yes. I understand. Just don't take it personally if I throw up on you." I said. I did not look at Lord Vader but I reached out with the force and was calmed by his solid presence there.

"Very well, then. Let's begin." Agent Dahn said with a nod to his silent partner ignoring my barb. The other agent, who remained nameless, fiddled with a switch on the small round droid that hovered in the air. The little droid was a nasty looking piece of work and the syringe that was attached to its arm didn't give me any comfort. It hummed as it moved closer and I drew a deep steadying breath as it targeted my arm and pierced the skin. I felt the drug it injected into my body burn.

It was as if billions of tiny fire spiders had infiltrated the underside of my skin and were slowly searing their way to my head. I reeled when the substance hit my brain. The pain was as exquisite as it was acute. The agony was so severe that for a moment I wasn't sure I wanted to live. It felt for all the world as though thousands of tiny red hot needles had been plunged into my head and I gritted my teeth so hard I was certain I would break my jaw. I would not give them the satisfaction of screaming in pain but I could not help the muted sound that escaped. I gripped the arms of the chair, digging my ragged nails into the soft covering and concentrated on breathing in and out. *Pain is just a moment, let it move through you and around you and beyond you*, master Kjestyll had said one day while I was nursing some hurt or another, easy for him to say not so easy to do, though. The agents knew their work well and they knew the moment the white hot agony had subsided and the drug had set to work, opening up my mind to the droid's sensors.

"Miss Gabriel, can you hear me?" Agent Dahn asked.

"Yes." I told him but I was having trouble focusing on him.

"How many fingers am I holding up?"

I blinked and concentrated on the hand he had in front of my face. "Four." I told him.

He nodded. "Right then, let us begin." He consulted a data pad and began to ask me questions. The substance they had pumped me full of gave me a remarkable clarity once the pain had passed. I felt that the whole world was suddenly awash with a light I had never noticed before. I tried to keep my eyes on Agent Dahn but he moved about as he spoke and that was making me dizzy so instead I turned my attention to Lord Vader who was standing behind the two Intel agents, near the wall. He was statue still but I sensed him watching the

proceedings with great interest. He did not acknowledge my gaze but he brushed my conscience with a steadying touch so that I felt ready to answer what ever it was the Intel agents had to throw at me. I had nothing to hide. Their questions never seemed to end though. It was a circular discussion and I wondered why they kept asking the same thing over and over just with different words. What did I know about my captors? Had I given any information pertaining to my job and the Empire? What sort of interrogation methods had been used? What my relationship with Jyrki had been? How had I managed to escape? The questions came one after the other until they started to repeat, blending one into the other. I started to get fed up with it all and lose my patience.

"Look I told you the answer to that already." I said leaning forward in the chair. "Yes, I knew him personally. He worked for my father when I was a child. Lots of people worked at the docking bay but I don't see them trying to kidnap me! Jyrki had an agenda but I don't know what it was. He wasn't very forthcoming about his exact reasons for what he did. I think it was mostly personal."

"Why do you believe that?"

"Because there is no other reason that makes sense." I said. "He feels strongly that the Empire is evil, he wanted to rescue me from it. His asking for codes and fleet positions was just an excuse to justify getting me away from the thing he sees as his enemy." I shook my head.

"So there was nothing that led you to believe that Mr. Andando harboured you any ill will or would abduct you in this manner?"

"No." it was the truth. I had not seen it coming. I did not see the point in mentioning anything about the incident on Rothana, and since Agent Dahn did not ask about that I suspected they didn't know.

Agent Dahn nodded, looked at the readouts on his data pad from the interrogation droid and continued. I was getting tired and my head was beginning to pound. We had been at this for hours.

"Is there anyone you work with at the Imperial Palace whom you would suspect of being a double agent?"

"No." I said. "But then again I don't know that many people there and most people don't really seem to want to know me all that well."

"What about Captain Thrawn?" I looked at agent Dahn in surprise. That was a new question out of the blue.

"What about him?" I asked carefully.

"Do you suspect him capable of being an agent for the rebellion?"

I laughed. I laughed so hard tears rolled out of my eyes and down my cheeks. It was laughter that bordered on hysteria. He waited until I had stopped and then asked the question again.

"No." I answered matching his even tone.

"What is your relationship to him?"

I looked at Lord Vader who remained stone still, then answered remembering to keep it truthful. "I have no idea." I said.

"What is his relationship to you?"

"That is the same question." I said.

"Just answer it."

"This has nothing to do with my kidnapping!"

"He was with you the night it happened. He was the one who alerted the authorities just moments after your disappearance. We are merely looking for connections and answers."

I was beginning to hate this man and his flat, monotone questions. "Sometimes he requests my presence as an escort for an official Imperial function. The night I was kidnapped, I had been his escort to the Fete Week finale festivities. I assume, before you ask, this is because that most people in the Imperial court will not stoop to taking the arm of a non human in a court that favours humans above anyone else. I don't have an issue with the colour of his skin or his eyes."

"So you do not believe there is any connection between your abduction and Captain Thrawn?" Dahn said coolly.

I sighed and touched the anger that how now gone from tiny sparks to a deep burn. It was powerful and I could use it. I could feel the strength it lent me and if I tapped into it I could hurt these two men and their little mechanical toys. I knew that I was being pushed but I didn't care. I could feel Lord Vader watch me and I could sense his surprise at my rising fury. He simply shook his head. He touched my thoughts with his and the anger slowly dissipated. From that brief contact I knew that he, too, was interested in my answer and me letting loose force powers in blind fury would not help me get back to work any sooner. I could see the room with astonishing clarity.

I could see the two agents in front of me as though they were made of transparent glass and I knew what they were thinking. One was bored, wishing this was over so he could get back to the book he had been reading and the other was now hoping to bait me. He had found a button and he was pushing it. I wondered how he would feel if I turned around and pushed at him the same way I had done so long ago with the Rodian spy Lord Vader had been interrogating.

I got up out of the chair, pushing the small interrogation droid aside. "You really want to know what I think?" I asked as Dahn started to protest and the second agent with no name suddenly became a lot less bored. "I think that you have a lot of nerve to question the integrity of a loyal Imperial Naval officer." I stood directly in front of Dahn, he was a good foot taller than me but I didn't care because I was now so very angry. "Asking this question is like asking me the colour of the rebellion's toilet seats. It is an utter waste of time and does nothing to further the cause at hand, namely catching the bastards who decided to break into the Imperial palace and remove me in order to obtain information to help them. I

am happy to say that I did not provide them with any useful information and you have already discovered this during the course of your interrogation so to continue this line of questioning is a pointless waste of Imperial time. If you want to know about Captain Thrawn's loyalty to the Empire, I suggest you ask him yourself!" I was about to poke him in the chest but Lord Vader intervened.

"I think you have the answers you were looking for Agent Dahn, do you not?" he asked it, but it was not a question.

Agent Dahn and his silent partner did their very best not to show the fear they felt but I could smell it. It was as if the drug they used not only opened my mind to their infernal interrogation droid but it also heightened my own abilities and senses. Their fear smelled rank.

Vader waited for a nod from both men. "Then I can assume this interrogation is finished and you are satisfied with the answers you got?"

Dahn nodded. "Yes, Lord Vader."

"And Miss Gabriel is free to go?"

"Yes, Lord Vader."

I was about to add to this conversation but his powerful hand bruised my arm painfully with its grip and I was dragged unceremoniously from the room. He did not let go of me until we were well away from the agents, that room and their nasty little droid. He walked swiftly and I did my best to keep up. It was a large ship and a bit of a maze. The turbo lifts were fast and surprisingly silent. The area he eventually stopped in was very quiet.

"This area of the ship is off limits to all but a select few with the appropriate clearance. You will stay here for the duration of your stay on board. Your quarters have been made ready and you will find everything you need has been provided."

"So I am a prisoner again?" I asked crossly.

"You are free to wander around this area only. This is for your protection. This is a secure part of the ship and it limits the opportunities for you to get into mischief."

My mouth opened to say something against this but he shut me up by continuing.

"As soon as those Intel agents clear your access you can go back to work. Everything you need for the time being is here. I will decide when you may return to Coruscant."

I went to protest but he held up his hand. "Not a word."

"But..."

"You simply cannot resist can you?" he growled.

"Well, I..."

He held up a finger and I felt warning ripples in the force. I opened my mouth then shut it again. It just wasn't a good thing to argue with the Dark Lord.

There was no winning and losing had a tendency to be permanent. He handed me a code card and pointed to the door to my new and latest home. I opened the door and was surprised at the size and comfort of the suit I had been given. It was as large as my flat on Coruscant, a home away from home.

“When there is time I will train with you, you look as though you have lost some of your conditioning. A little reminder to stay fit would not be amiss.” He said, “In the mean time I suggest you meditate and take time to recover your strength.” I watched as he turned to leave.

With a sigh I entered my new quarters. The first thing I looked for was the small kitchenette or galley. I desperately wanted a cup of tea. My head was pounding and I suspected that the side effects of what ever mind bending drugs the agents had used were not going to go away gracefully. For the first time since Jyrki and his friends had taken me away from Coruscant I felt I was more or less free. It was all suddenly a lot to think about.

Lord Vader left me alone for three days but I felt his presence every time I woke up from a nightmare which was frequent. Peace was elusive. I was a bit of a mess. I could not sleep at night and I was tired and listless during the day. When I dreamed the images were fractured and frightening. There were no singular or clear images just powerful sensations and a lot of fear.

I made the mistake of sleeping without a light on the first night and when I woke suddenly terrified and in the dark I had no idea where I was. I sent fear showering about me. I floundered and drowned in it. I had never been one to suffer claustrophobia but waking in the darkness was terrifying. I hit the bedside lamp switch and the room flooded with brightness. I sat huddled in the large bed, soaked in sweat and trying to slow my breathing. I felt Lord Vader brush my mind with his, bothered by the intrusion more than anything else. He had been meditating and I was a disruption, a disturbance in the force that poked at his calm. I had no idea how to control that I sent out what I felt like a holonet beacon when I wasn't careful. My passion both dark and light was a wild, unpredictable thing. It was like throwing a stone into a pond; the ripples just kept going and going.

After that I slept with a light on but it didn't stop me from waking up gasping for breath, clawing at invisible night terrors. It just meant that when I woke up I could see where I was right away, a small comfort. The thing that I found strange was that most of the dreams I had while I was imprisoned I remembered with stunning clarity but these nightmares were faceless, invisible. Each time I woke I was conscious of Lord Vader, his presence, aware of me and my fear. Sometimes he did nothing, and sometimes he intervened. I didn't understand

why, but he calmed me down. These were things we had never spoken of and I was certain that we would probably never would. While I sensed his annoyance at the disturbance, he was not angry. So it was him I reached out to. There was no one else and I got the distinct impression he understood about nightmares.

My fourth day on board the *Executor* he found me in the exercise room. I was hoping that working out would somehow ease the restlessness, the listlessness I had been feeling. I moved slowly, deliberately going through the basic kata forms Master Kjestyll had taught me. There was a grace in the movements that eased my sense of loss. I didn't hear him come in but I felt the force ripple around me and knew he was there. He watched me and when he felt I was ready to play he tossed me a combat staff.

It was a dance, really, and we both enjoyed it. He wasn't angry and he wasn't trying to teach me any lessons he was just practising with me. Not that he needed it but I certainly did. While I knew he was going easy on me I still came out of the session with more than my fair share of knocks and bruises. After an hour or so I knelt on the floor, catching my breath. Vader used the tip of his wooden staff to raise my chin upward. I didn't fight him.

“We will do this again tomorrow. Perhaps tonight you will sleep without interruption. You must learn some control over this talent of yours. I get tired of your disruptions.” He said.

I moved the staff away from my face and nodded. He took the combat staff I had used from my hands and put them both away. I moved to sit with my back to the wall and watched as he, now warmed up, began to practice with his lightsaber against specially designed combat remotes.

I loved to watch him practice. He was fast and agile. He moved with a grace and an ease that never ceased to astonish me. I could feel and almost see the force move about him as he tapped into its energy. He fought with a passion and a fury and it was a tangible, violent, raw thing. I sat there on the floor of the training room and allowed his energy to wash over me and in some strange way it eased a little of the pain in my spirit. I sat there and relaxed, letting my thoughts drift.

When he was done he looked at me. “You wanted to speak with me before your friend decided to forcibly remove you from the palace.” I nodded. He waited a few seconds and walked about the room, his hands clasped behind his back. “Then speak.” He said.

So I did. I told him everything that had been on my mind since the first time Jyrki had broken into my flat in the Palace. He did not interrupt and when I was finished he remained quiet for a long time.

“He escaped from the Jedi Temple?” Lord Vader asked, breaking the silence.

I sighed, nodding. “He hates the Empire. He hates the Emperor.” I said quietly. “But I don't understand why he hates me.”

"He does not hate you, he hates himself." Vader replied standing still for a moment.

I looked up at him. "But why?"

"He survived." He said simply. "He should have been eliminated in the Jedi purge."

"He and the others, they were just children." I asked.

"Children carry the ideals of their teachers, their parents. In order to stop the spread of their lies, their ridiculous arrogant ideals all Jedi were purged so that the order of things might start anew."

I was silent trying to take this in. "Will they catch him?" I asked.

Vader shrugged. "The base you were held at was abandoned by the time the fleet assigned its destruction got there. The raid at Sullust never took place. I can only assume that this Jyrki Andando and his crew were warned. They escaped this round but it is only a matter of time before the Empire hunts them down and finds them all. These rebels, they are a thorn in the side of the Empire, but the Emperor finds them an amusing distraction."

"You disagree." I said. I could feel it in his words. He paced the room, this time anger in his steps.

"The smallest grain of sand can stop the mightiest machine." He said quoting an old Tatooine proverb.

"The woman who brought me food mentioned the name of the pilot who blew the space station up. Said his name was Skywalker. Did you know that?"

The air shimmered and I felt the weight of his emotions as though they were a rock fall. "The name is not unknown to me." He said coldly but his words did not match what he felt.

"It's not the first time I've heard that name mentioned." I said quietly. Lord Vader turned and stared at me intently. I thought I would burn from the heat of that gaze. "First it was from Jyrki but also from Sola Naberrrie. She said that the Jedi assigned to protect your wi... I mean the then queen of Naboo was called Skywalker. Anakin Skywalker. Do you think there could be a connection?"

"Anakin Skywalker is dead." Vader snarled. "He perished in the Clone Wars. Do not ever mention that name again."

I nodded. "Okay, okay. Do you think that maybe he and this pilot, this other Skywalker, are related?"

He stormed over to me and hauled me to my feet. His anger was a living breathing thing. "You will speak of this to no one!"

"I promise." I whispered, suddenly very afraid of him. He let me go and stalked back and forth, agitated. I slid back against the wall to the floor. I didn't think that my shaking knees would support me.

"Have you told this to anyone else?" he asked suddenly.

"No one." I answered. "I had totally forgotten about it until just now,

actually. It was your quote that made me think of it. It reminded me of some dreams I have been having." I shook my head. "I sometimes see a man and once he mentioned this name you don't want me to say, called him the Chosen one."

The stillness that suddenly hit the room was palpable. I thought for certain he might actually kill me as he strode over to where I sat but instead he squatted down in front of me, heel to haunch.

"What did this man look like? Did he have short hair, a beard?" he asked.

"He had a beard but his hair was very long. He looked tired, sad. He wore farmer's clothing and a poncho, looked like a desert dweller. He was tall and had the bluest eyes I have ever seen." I said conjuring up the images from my dreams and showing him. "Do you know who he is?"

"I knew someone who would fit that description a long time ago." He said with an audible sigh. "Why does he haunt *your* dreams?" he asked more to himself than to me.

I shook my head. "I have no idea, but the dreams where he appears are very clear, almost as if they were real and not dreams at all." I watched him as he got and resumed his pacing. "Who is he?"

"Someone long dead and best left forgotten." Came the terse reply. "Do not mention these dreams to anyone else."

I wanted to ask why but something about his manner made me think twice about that. Instead I asked the next question that burned in my brain. "Why did the Emperor not say anything if he knew what was going to happen to me? Why did he not stop it?"

Vader stood up. I thought that he would give the same answer he had the last time I had asked this question but instead he said. "My Master knows much, he foresees a great many events, the greater pattern of things. In your case, this was most likely a test." He said.

"A test?" I asked in disbelief. "A test of what?"

"Your strengths, your weaknesses or your loyalty?" he shrugged. "Truly, only the Emperor can answer that question."

"Has he done this to you? Did he test you?"

"Many times." He said coldly. His words were laced with anger, pain and sorrow.

"Why?"

"He enjoys the game of it. It is a way to manipulate and maintain supremacy." Vader said thoughtfully. "It is all about control and power."

I looked at him as he spoke. He was being very candid with me and I knew that this trust was fragile and tentative. He saw something in me that reminded him of himself. I could feel the anger behind his words and I understood it because it was my anger also. I did not like these strange games that somehow I had become entangled in without my knowledge or permission.

"You interest my Master. Your gifts and Force talents are unusual in their combination and particular strengths. He is working out how best to utilise them and you. Make no mistake, girl, he will use you even if you do not wish it. We are all pawns in his universe." He continued.

"You make it sound as though we have no choice." I said.

"We do not. It is our destiny." He answered cryptically.

I sighed. This was an awful lot to digest. "I'm sorry I disturb you, I can't control the nightmares or the fear they bring."

"Then we shall have to work on that for the next few weeks while you remain onboard with me." He told me.

I nodded. I suspected that would not be as easy as it sounded.

"Return to your quarters. Tomorrow you will meet me here at the same time. Be prepared to work hard."

"Yes, my lord." I said and because I had been dismissed, I left. Just as I was going through the door I heard the hum of his lightsaber.

Three straight days of practising with Lord Vader had not helped my sleeping habits any. I still woke up at strange hours soaked in sweat in full fledged panic. I knew from experience that it was impossible for me to get back to sleep so I just got up and spent time in the sitting area of my quarters. I watched the stars through the large window in my quarters cradling a cup of tea in my hands. It was late, although that was a relative term while in space as time seemed artificial when there was no real day or night. Even though there were lots of people about and working on the ship this part I had been sequestered in was terminally quiet. Lord Vader had private chambers in this secure area and I felt his presence on and off but he never came to visit so I just about jumped out of my skin when the door chime sounded late one evening. The bland faced young man at my door said nothing. He simply handed me a package and then left, quickly. One could say what one liked about the Empire but the Imperial mail service was efficient.

Delighted, I sat back down and opened my mail. A letter from home, a card from Shiv, a letter from Jorae and the last two items made my hands tremble. I opened the slender one first. The small package was beautifully wrapped in a hand painted piece of iridescent silk. The handwriting on the envelope that held the precious letter was, as always, lovely.

A'mia Tekari,

Words cannot express the emotion I experienced when I heard that you had been found and were safe and sound. It seems strange to me that I should even have trouble writing this down to let you know how worried I was but such

expression of feeling is, for even the most renegade of Chiss, difficult at best.

So I sit here on board the Vengeance sipping this Tatooine mint tea which I find myself quite addicted to trying to formulate sentences that do not sound like ridiculous florid prose from some besotted teenager. Suffice to say, my dear, I was deeply relieved to hear that you are well and once again in the hands of the Empire under the watchful eye of Lord Vader.

When you did not join me on the balcony the night of the Winter Fete party I made good on my threat and came looking for you. I was not expecting the unpleasant surprise that awaited me in your flat, signs of a struggle, blood on the floor and you nowhere to be seen. I am quite certain I missed you only by a few minutes but it was enough for who ever had taken you, and I have my suspicions on this, to get you out of the palace. Knowing you and your indomitable spirit I can only assume they rendered you unconscious by some rather painful and unorthodox methods and drugged you with something to make you docile.

Who ever it was, entered and left through a secret passage that led directly to your bedroom. I am certain you had no idea of this and to be honest the only way I knew was that you left us a clue. Your necklace was caught in between the wood panels that led to this passage without this, chances are, no one would have discovered it because it was remarkably well hidden and even harder to open.

The Imperial Palace is very old in some parts and full of secrets as you have mentioned before. This was one I wish you had discovered earlier rather than later. It does, however, answer the question of how your mechanic friend managed to enter and escape unseen the last time he visited you.

I do not know what you have gone through in the weeks you were abducted and held prisoner but I dearly hope that it has not crushed your beautiful spirit. I am so sorry that I was not there in time to stop this from happening, and I deeply regret letting you out of my sight that night. I imagine that chaining you to your desk under the watchful eye of an Imperial storm trooper would probably not be the best solution although the thought had occurred to me.

Lord Vader has informed me that you will remain on board the Executor for a couple of weeks until your security clearance has been reinstated by Intel and you have recovered your strength. I trust that their debriefing methods were not as brutal as usual and that you will not have to experience such a thing ever again. Knowing you as I do, I imagine the agents sent to deal with you got more than they bargained for and I have to tell you this thought makes me smile.

By the time you will be returned to Coruscant I should be able to arrange some leave. I do have business that I need to take care of which will require a visit to the Imperial City and I hope to be able to see you there at the same time.

For the time being I remain as captain of the Vengeance under the command of the Emperor's agent, Jerec. We are currently heading towards Ithor, there is something of interest to Lord Jerec in the asteroid field near by.

Ithor is a place of some interest as its native peoples, the Ithorians, have long taken an interest in conservation of their home world. They have built what they call Herd ships above the surface of the planet where they live their day to day lives. It is forbidden to enter the surface of the planet to all but a chosen few. One of the more peculiar aspects of Ithor would be the bafforr tree which is said to have telepathic abilities. I imagine for someone with force sensitivity this might be an intriguing thing to investigate. Certainly this helps to explain the strong bond between the Ithorians and their planet. I shall know more about our plans in a few hours and perhaps see if there is an opportunity to explore this world further. I will let you know if anything interesting comes up.

In the meantime, my dear, I hope that you are recovering quickly from your ordeal and that the people responsible for your abduction are caught swiftly and punished as Imperial Law dictates. I have taken the liberty of returning to you your necklace, its chain repaired. It is a small thing but I do hope it brightens your day.

I look forward to being with you in person again and seeing with my own eyes that you are alive and well. Do try to stay out of trouble until then.

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

I unwrapped the little box and struggled against the strange surge of emotion that welled up in my chest. There, nestled in more of the same silk, was the tiny ma'arilite pendant Thrawn had given me the night of the Winter Fete party. With shaky fingers I fastened it around my neck. I fought back the tears that had welled up in my eyes. I didn't want to cry, I didn't want to even think about crying because I was afraid that if I started I would never stop. This was hurt was raw and painful so I choked it back and tucked his letter back into its envelope. I got up and made myself some tea before sitting down to go through the rest of my correspondence. My father's letter was short and full of worry.

Dearest Merly,

I have tried to get in touch with you several times over the last two weeks only to be told that you are unavailable. I am not usually given to panic but something about the person's manner led me to believe that all is not well with you. So when you can, drop me a line or get in touch via holo net.

I wanted to tell you that Jyrki recently contacted me asking if you were still working on Coruscant and how you were doing. He seemed very agitated

but he denied that there was anything wrong. He said that I was not to worry about you and that you would be safe soon enough. I have no idea what he was talking about but something about his manner bothered me.

Anyway, honey, we are fine here. It is business as usual really, despite the strong Imperial presence here. No one seems to really care much actually, you know what Mos Eisley is like and that is not likely to change any time soon.

Everyone here sends their love and hopes that you are well. Please get in touch so your old man can stop worrying about you and get on with the business of running a docking bay.

*Love always,
Papa*

I didn't know how I was going to answer this letter so I set it aside and picked up the card from Shiv.

Hey Rim-Girl,

Word around the Palace is you have been found, no details though. What happened anyway? You get bored of your dashing Captain and run away to some distant planet with a secret admirer we don't know about?

You haven't missed much in the last month or so. Life around here never changes that much, the courtesans still cause me no end of headaches, the themes for the up coming events have been sorted out and I can tell you this much, you will laugh because someone decided that one of the lesser events should have an 'outer rim' feel to it. Be prepared to give me lots of tips on what to do, you are after all my outer rim expert.

Anyway, when you do get dumped back on the Coruscant let me know, we need to talk. You have a ton to tell me and you know you want to go out to lunch with me and spill the gossip!

*Hugs,
Shiv*

Shiv loved being cryptic. I know he was dying to learn about the exact nature of my relationship with Captain Thrawn but how could I tell him that when even I did not know the answer. It had been the thoughts of Thrawn and his way with me that had helped to keep my hope up while I was a prisoner. I had worked for the Empire for a year now and I had known him for almost as long, but I could no more describe what I felt for him or how he fit into my life than I could count the stars in the sky. My hand went to the pendant at my throat and holding it steadied me a little. The last letter as from Jorae, true to form it was short and

sweet.

Hi Merlyn,

I am hoping this gets delivered to you sooner rather than later. I hope that you are well now, (yes, I know some of what happened) I work now as a communications officer on board the Avenger and when we got the notification of your disappearance I nearly choked on my coffee. I was really glad to hear that you were found in one piece. You know how it goes, no secrets in the Empire.

We are part of the Death Squadron, you know, and maybe I might get to see you at some point. The rumour mill has it that you are being sequestered on board the Executor. I heard it was an impressive ship. You'll have to tell me sometime, but at least now you know how to get in touch with me. I'll probably be on board this ship for a while though I hope eventually to work onboard the Flag ship. You always seem to be one step ahead of where I want to be.

Anyway, back to work for me

Your friend,

Jorae

I sat back and sipped my tea, too tired to even sleep. I hoped that Intel would give me my clearance back soon because I was going stir crazy. I picked up the second package which bore Thrawn's hand writing and opened it. The little note was said;

Waiting can be a tedious thing even when one is not a prisoner. I thought you might enjoy this book. It was written almost two hundred years ago by a young soldier who found himself a prisoner of war. He was a captive for almost seventeen years and how he survived is extraordinary. After his eventual release he turned to poetry and became very well known for his works. I realise this may not seem the most appropriate of tales for you at this time, but read it. I think you will find it most enlightening in many ways.

I unwrapped the book and marvelled at its beauty. Books made from paper were rare and this one was beautiful. I wondered where in the Galaxy he found these treasures. It had a slightly musty scent to it and I was a little scared to open it in case it fell apart. I knew when I read the title that Thrawn had been, once again, right. This was a book I had to read. *The Dark Stripped Bare*. Carefully, I opened it, nosy, in spite of myself. After the first page I knew that this book would be painful to get through. I set it back on the table and gathered my knees to my chest and hugged them close. I had wanted to get back to work, get back to a normal life but I honestly wondered if that was even possible. I knew a strange sense of fear now that I had never known before and I didn't like it. There had been moments in that small room on Mattri where I had thought seriously about death. There had been moments where I had even wished for it. In the darkest of

these moments I had longed for that release because I had given up on hope. To look back on it now in the relative comfort and safety of the Star Destroyer I was on, it was now embarrassing, shameful. I wondered if I could have handled it any better, done things any differently.

I picked up the book again and looked at the first page. As I re read the poem that started off this book I wondered how it was that Thrawn always seemed to know exactly what it was I needed. I stroked the words with my fingertips.

*In the darkness I do not exist
Light is a weapon.
Filth is the cloth which covers me
I wrap my misery in it
And know shame.*

*My soul vanishing, is the wind
Pain is a caress
A lost memory saves me
In the dark stripped bare
I find hope.*

I sat quietly and alone but I was not lonely. I only had to look at the table, at the letters and well wishes from the people in my life who had missed me, who cared for me. I knew that although he had surrounded himself with people, Jyrki was desperately lonely and for the first time since my return I felt sorry for him. I curled up on the little couch and pulled the blanket that was there over my shoulders. I had the book clutched in one hand and my other hand held onto my necklace. As I drifted off to sleep it occurred to me that despite everything which had happened, how lucky I really was.