

The background of the cover is a dark, cloudy sky with a starry space background. In the upper right, a white Imperial Star Destroyer is visible. In the lower center, the back of a person wearing a black hooded cloak is shown, looking up at the ship.

**STAR**

**DAUGHTER OF  
THE EMPIRE I**

**WARS**

**BY  
FIONA MESSER**



# **DAUGHTER OF THE EMPIRE**

**Book One**

**By Fiona Messer**

## **Disclaimer**

This book is not affiliated with or endorsed by Lucasfilm or Twentieth Century Fox or any other entity connected to the Star Wars franchise in any way. It is a work of fiction intended for enjoyment only. All Lucasfilm characters remain property of Lucasfilm. The original story line and characters not affiliated with Lucas Arts are my own and are not to be used without my express permission.

This file is not to be hosted on any other site except mine. I have not, do not and will not make any money from this. The cover image is an altered screen-shot taken from the SOE/ LA game Star Wars Galaxies, they retain the rights to these images.

This story contains spoilers for just about everything ever written/filmed in the Star Wars world from the time period shortly before A New Hope up until and including Timothy Zahn's Heir to the Empire Trilogy. Read at your own risk.

You have been warned!

**Dedication**

*For Marcus, who encouraged.*

## **CHAPTER 1**

I thought that it was just going to be another sweltering hot day in Mos Eisley but I was wrong and had I known what was going to show up on my door step I would have run for the Jundland Wastes but that was not the case and for me it was business as usual until the doorbell rang.

I lived on Tatooine which was an unremarkable almost inhospitable planet situated in what was fondly termed the Outer Rim. It was hot, dry and almost always windy, so windy in fact that the Sand People had over 100 names for wind but only one word for town. Dust ruled here, next to the Hutts, the thieves, smugglers, pirates, bounty hunters, not to mention the slaves and then the rest of us poor working slobs. It was a wonder that anyone in their right minds would ever choose to come to this planet much less live in a town as desperate and as forsaken as Mos Eisley but I loved it. I had lived on Tatooine my whole life and although the sand, the wind and the Hutts sometimes drove me crazy I could not imagine living anywhere else in the Galaxy.

Life on an Outer Rim Planet was pretty basic, survival of the fittest or maybe, the most devious depending on your profession. Here the Empire was just a passing word on most people's lips and it was the Hutts who actually ruled so when an Imperial Messenger showed up at my house shortly after I had returned from work I was very surprised.

It was mid afternoon when the doorbell rang and both suns were at their hottest. I answered the door to see a very uncomfortable, young Imperial sweating to death on my doorstep, flanked by two Imperial stormtroopers in their gleaming white armour, holding carbine rifles. I stared at the young man, wracking my brains trying to figure out what it was that I had done that would warrant a visit from the Imperials but nothing specific came to mind. I worked at my father's docking bay as a part time mechanic, sometimes pilot and the rest of the time I worked for Hutt Imports-Exports inc. as an office temp, in fact I had just gotten a promotion which I had beaten out Bib Fortuna's little brother for, much to the annoyance of Bib Fortuna but nothing about my jobs would give cause for a visit from the Empire.

"Yes?" I asked sizing the young man up.

The Imperial looked at me as though he had never seen anything like me before in his life. I must have looked a fright. I could see by the look in his eyes that whoever he had been expecting to answer the door, I was not it. I was not tall or spectacularly beautiful. My hair was long, dark red, had a mind of its own and was currently tied back with a bit of routing wire. I had been working on a ship's engine so I was wearing my mechanic's clothes and I was still covered in grease, sand and dust because I had not gotten around to showering. Knowing me, I probably also had oil on my nose. Jyrki, who used to work for my father, had always said I was a born grease-monkey. I had loved playing with engines and ships for as long as I could remember.

"Can I help you?" I prodded.

The Imperial recovered from his surprise nicely though and asked, "Excuse me I'm looking for Miss Merlyn Ty' Erijann Gabriel."

"That's me." I told him I was and began to worry even more when he whipped out a data pad and gave it to me.

"I am to deliver this to you personally." He said.

Without even thinking about it I took the stupid thing from his hand and asked him if I owed him anything for the delivery because here nothing was ever done for free not even message delivery. He just gave me a puzzled look, shook his head and then, with a smart nod, he did a beautiful military style turn about and with his

stormtroopers he left looking relieved. I guessed most folks who get an Imperial summons didn't offer money by way of thanks.

I took the data pad indoors and wandered into our excuse for a kitchen where my room-mate Rys was making sweetened mint tea. Rys was a singer and dancer who worked for Jabba the Hutt, sometimes she was at the palace and sometimes she worked at one of his clubs in town, today was her day off. I showed her the data pad and told her what had happened and she went as white as a sun bleached skeleton. I pressed my thumb on the encryption tab and unlocked the message.

"Oh!" I said with surprise, "It looks like I have been offered a job." I told her. I had been expecting something bad so I was relieved. I handed her the data pad so she could take a look.

"I didn't know you planned on leaving Hutts Import and export Inc." She looked at me.

"Me either." I said, puzzled.

"I can't read this." She said, handing it back. The screen had gone blank the moment she had touched the data pad. I guess the Imperials took encryption seriously. So I read it for her.

***TO: Miss Merlyn Ty' Erijann Gabriel***

***FROM: Imperial Employment Department***

*Miss Gabriel, after long consideration and careful screening we have chosen you from the many fine applications for the position of Personal Assistant to one of our high ranking officers. You will begin this appointment immediately as his Lordship requires a new P.A. ASAP. An Imperial shuttle will await you at docking bay 51, Mos Eisley Space Station at 0900CST, fourth day of the tenth month, this year. Your promptness in this matter will be appreciated. We look forward to your arrival, and welcome you to the Imperial family. We trust that your journey will be a pleasant and uneventful one.*

*Yours Truly,*

*Erysie Candala*

*Chief Imperial Employment Officer.*

"When did you apply for an Imperial job?" Rys asked me.

"I didn't." I said. "I guess I will just have to write and say it was all a mix up."

Rys shook her head at me. "You don't tell the Empire no."

"But I don't want this job, I didn't apply for any job at all, hell I don't even know how they know my name!" I said. "How do I tell them that?"

"No one refuses a summons from the Empire. It's the Empire, Merly, they sent an Imperial messenger all the way from the Imperial Center to this forsaken planet just to hire you. They know you live here, they know who you are. Chances are they know everything they could possibly learn about you and quite probably more than you even know about yourself." She sighed. "Looks like you have a new job. Congratulations!" And just like that my life had changed.

"I wonder who the high ranking official is." I muttered.

She gave me a speculative look, "Well, whoever it is they didn't want to name him or her so it can't be good."

"Awesome." I replied looking at my cup. "I think I need something stronger than tea."

"Oh, speaking of, your dad called earlier by the way."

"Anything important?"

"He didn't say, but if you go to see him maybe you can beg a bottle of his gut-rot? We're out and it goes so well with bing-berry juice."

I grinned, "You are the only person in the universe who actually likes that stuff."

Rys smiled. "And your dad is happy to have a fan. He said he was free this afternoon."

I laughed because that was my father's code for *I really want to see you so no excuses*.

"Then I guess I'm heading over to see my dad." I grinned.

My father was stunned to learn of my new job, like Rys, he too believed that it was an offer I could not refuse. We sat in silence in the cool of the evening drinking his home made alcohol which he called moonglow and Jyrki had labelled as gutrot. As we spoke I got the feeling that he had a great deal on his mind, that he wanted to tell me something but he didn't know how to do it. I wasn't going to prompt him because I had received all the bad news I could take for one day.

The next morning when I went into the main office there was a subtle air of '*we know something you don't know*'. I got the full message when Bib's slimy little assistant handed me a congratulations on the new job holo.

Bib Fortuna was a bastard and I was sure that he was the reason the Empire knew all about me and that he had sent in an application on my behalf. But now there was nothing to be done about it and in the end it was not as if the Hutts cared about their office staff enough to even notice that I was gone. People came and went all the time and employees like me were easy to come by, mechanics and pilots, office assistants, dancers and slaves were all expendable, what was one more or less?

I had started my so called career with the Hutts as a dancer at the palace but it had been too rough and too far away from my home. Although I had dreamed of being a dancer for much of my life the reality had been very different and I hadn't really enjoyed it all that much. I had moved from the palace and had taken a spot in one of the many nightclubs Jabba owned thinking that this would be a step up but that wasn't the case either, in fact it had been worse so I applied for a part time job in one of the Import-export offices as it was something I was almost qualified to do.

Once word got around that I was a more than just a dancer and that I actually had some sort of a brain it was easy to take a step upward. I loved to dance but working as a dancer in a night club was not my idea of a life time career. I also loved working on and being around ships even more so I could have worked fulltime at my father's docking bay but there were complications with that. The office stuff had started after one of the clerks for the Hutt's main import- export office, which was located in downtown Mos Eisley, had run off with a pilot out of Mos Espa. It had left them short staffed so I had offered to pitch in, it was extra money and I could wear some normal clothes. It had helped that I was used to handling that sort of paperwork; I had done it for my father, after my mother had died.

My father owned a fairly busy well respected docking port and there was always a lot of paperwork associated with the ships, import and export cargo manifests and so on. It was busy work but I loved it and I was good at my job. What had started out as part time had turned almost full time pretty quickly once everyone realised I was able to think and adapt quickly as well as accomplish the job without stealing from the petty cash or somehow managing to lose thousands of credits worth of cargo. I received recognition faster than most along with decent wages and I was working my way up which had made me some enemies. I didn't think too many people were unhappy to see me go, I was in the way, I guess. I wasted my last morning at work packing up all my stuff, there wasn't much but I sure was not going to leave anything of mine behind and then I went to meet up with my father. He had mentioned he had something he needed to speak to me about and now time was growing short. I got the feeling that whatever it was he had to tell me I wasn't going to like it much.



My father had the speeder fired up and ready to go by the time I arrived and before I could ask what was going on with him we headed out to Bestine, which is the glorious little hell-hole that just happened to be the capital of Tatooine as well as the seat of Imperial power here on this planet. I always suspected that the Hutts had probably had a few choice things to say about it when the Imperial garrison had been set up there because the Hutts didn't like anyone moving in on their territory. The rumours all said that the Imperials there were just as corrupt as Jabba but that wasn't something I had ever wanted to prove.

The house we used to live in lay just outside of the Bestine city limits and was modest by Tatooine standards. I had been very young when we had moved into Mos Eisley after my father had bought the docking bay. My mother had still been alive then and she had been sad to leave the house near Bestine. She had never liked the city as much as my father had hoped she would so the Bestine house was never sold. She had sometimes come out here to get away from the noise, to get away from all the craziness. After she died my father had the house boarded up but he had never sold it. He could not bear to part with something she had loved so much so it had become just another abandoned dwelling littering the sand and there are many of those on Tatooine. Many ghost towns littered the deserts because this was a hard world to settle, too harsh an environment for most with too many things trying to kill you. Most prospectors eventually gave up and left. Tatooine was not a planet for the weak.

We got to the house late in the afternoon when the twin suns had already begun their slow descent in the sky. The shadows were long and the air was hot and heavy. My father unlocked the door and we walked in to our past.

It smelled unused and dusty. There was a strange decayed scent that tainted everything left alone too long. Sand had begun to creep through every crack and open space and eventually, one day, there would be no house left to see because it would be swallowed up by the sand. The Tusken had a saying about it, '*the desert reclaims all that it was*.' They laughed at the settlers for trying to dominate the deserts and hated them for what they saw as a desecration of a living breathing thing, to the Sand People, the desert was god.

It was eerie in the house after being away for so long. I had been only thirteen when my mother was killed in a speeder accident. She had been shopping one afternoon and someone running from the law had mowed her down in the street while she had been on her way home. The news had hit us all like a massive sandstorm. My mother had been the one who had held our family together. After she had died things at the docking bay had not been very happy. One day about six weeks after her funeral I had been so angry with my father that I had run away and come to spend the night out in this house just to try and be near her memory. He had gone frantic looking for me. It hadn't ended very well and I had not been in the house since. I sighed, my memories of this place were oddly dreamlike and I was haunted by them.

The late afternoon sunlight filtered through the cracks in the boards and particles danced in the air about us like fireflies as we moved through the stillness. Thick dust and fine sand covered everything. No one had been in here since my father's last visit and that had been several years ago. He made his way to the study, a tiny excuse for a room in the lower back of the house where the sun's heat would not fry it and began to dig around in one of the desk drawers.

"Why are we here?" I asked. I could have sworn I smelled my mother's perfume clinging in the air. It made me edgy.

My father looked at me nervously and I didn't need my weird talent to know that something weighed heavily on his mind because he always fiddled with his beard when he was worried about something.

"Papa, what is it?" I asked. Now I was getting worried.

He took a deep breath and then said the last thing I ever expected to hear. "Merly, there is no easy way to say what I have to tell you so I will just say it. Your mother and I could not have children of our own so when you suddenly came into our lives we jumped at the chance to adopt you and raise you as our own."

I opened my mouth but no words came out so I closed it again. He put his hand up to stop me from speaking so he could continue.

"You were just a baby when we found you tucked away in one of the extra cargo bays in the transport ship I used to run. That day Bedi Nuale and I had probably shuttled at least two hundred different folk from one place to another, most of who were trying to avoid something or someone. It was a very bad time in the Galaxy so you must understand that neither of us could have traced who had left you, although we did try. I can tell you this, your birth mother must have been very afraid of something to abandon her child to strangers. She left a note, she said your name was Merlyn and that you were special."

I sat down hard on the nearest chair causing dust to cloud up around me as I did so. I could not believe what I was hearing.

My father sighed. "Well, it didn't take your mother and me long to sort out that you were more than just special, that you were different from other children. You knew things before they happened, you could sense people's thoughts and you were always more sensitive to what was going on around you especially when people lied to you. Before you really got control over your 'gift' you could even move things about just by thinking about them."

I laughed a little. "Papa, I still can do that, I just don't let anyone see me is all."

It was a real pain to have to get up and fetch a tool I needed so often I just used to concentrate on it being in my hand and, suddenly there it was. I never really given it much thought before, I had always had this ability to move stuff around, sense what was coming next, figure people out and to even know things, on occasion, about the objects I touched.

He shook his head. "You should keep that talent of yours a secret. It has a name, it's called the Force and it will get you killed if the Imperials find out about it."

"The Force is a myth, papa."

"That is what the Empire would have you believe. Around the time of your birth the whole galaxy was in turmoil. There was a great war going on and those who supported the Republic and the way of the Jedi Knights were quickly eliminated."

"Tales of the Jedi are just fairy stories." I was puzzled by this. Of course I had heard of the Jedi, who had not, but what were any of the stories even true? Like most people I had grown up with the stories about them. They were said to have had great powers of all sorts but they were also betrayers of the Empire. Mostly it was just a lot of rumours and speculation, or so I thought, and none of the tales had ever made much sense to me, people with supernatural powers who could seemingly move the galaxy. I usually ignored it when people started up talk about the Old Republic and the Jedi Knights and how much better those times were. By the time news filtered out to this part of the galaxy it was often more rumour and myth than truth and no one much cared anyway? Even HoloNet news took a while to get out this way. By the time we heard about something that had taken place in the Core it was usually weeks old. It had never occurred to me that the strange little talents I had would be the same thing that the Jedi had.

My father broke into my thoughts, "I once saw a Jedi Knight use this strange power and it was the most amazing thing I had ever seen. I often watched you and wondered what would have happened if we could have found someone to train you properly but that was and is forbidden. Of course, now that I look back, it seemed that there was always someone about who would take you under their wing, especially Jyrki, who had a great fondness for you." He paused. "We had thought that

it was best that you knew nothing, that, foolishly perhaps, it would go away and then you could lead a normal life. I guess that was never meant to be." He said with a sigh.

He dug further around in the back of the deep drawer in the desk and found the hidden compartment he was looking for. It opened with a loud 'snick'.

"This is what came with you." He said handing me a small, incredibly ornate wooden box, intricately carved with tiny symbols that I had never seen before.

I took it from him gingerly because sometimes when I touched things they held memories, images and these memories were not always pleasant. I gasped as a jolt of recognition shot through me but it wasn't anything I could have ever defined. I could feel power from it and knew instinctively that the box and its contents were special and had been meant only for me. It felt warm and at home in my hands, almost as if the box was humming.

"What's in it?" I asked.

My father shook his head. "I don't know it will not open for me." He said.

As I brushed my fingertips across the lid of the box it opened smoothly and silently. Inside the box lay a small, leather bound book. I put down the box and lifted the book out gingerly and gasped it made my fingers tingle. I opened it and read the first few lines written there.

"It's a journal." I said softly.

"How can you read that?" My father asked. "You have never been taught that language."

I looked at my father then looked again at the hand written script and shrugged. "I don't recognize it but I understand it anyway."

"It's Mandalorian and you are reading it as if it were common tongue."

I looked at him.

"Keep that book close to you. I think that you will need it." He continued.

"Will it be that bad working for the Empire?" I didn't know what to think.

"No worse than working for Jabba the Hutt." He replied a little tartly.

"Well that's a comfort then." I snapped back. My father had hated that I had gone to work for Jabba the Hutt.

"I have heard tales about the Imperial Palace and those that work there. I am afraid you might be in for a very large culture shock. Be very careful, Merly." My father said as he locked the desk up and gathered some things he wanted to take back with him.

I shook my head. "Why didn't you tell me I was adopted?" I asked. I wanted to be angry but somehow I felt relieved as if deep in the back of my mind I had always known something wasn't quite right about me but I had never known what. Now I knew and it all made sense in a strange kind of way.

He looked at me, "We thought it best to keep that quiet under the circumstances. You were a Force sensitive child at a time when the Empire was systematically wiping all those with Force abilities out of existence. We both thought it best that you know nothing about your past and that you believed you were born here. I am sorry pet. I don't know what else we could have done. You were a gift to us and we were not going to lose you. So we kept it a secret and hoped it would keep you safe."

With a sigh I put the little journal back in its box. "Do you think my birth parents were Jedi?"

"I don't know what they were, where they were from or even who they were but I do know that you are not what you appear to be. That has some big advantages and disadvantages." He said and then added, "And I know I will worry about you. No matter who gave birth to you, you are and always will be my little girl."

I took one last look around the room wondering when I'd ever be back then I looked at the box I held in my hands. "Well, I don't seem to have much choice about

the matter, but I will do the best I can. Who knows maybe this could be a good thing?"

"That's what I love most about you, always optimistic." He gave me a hug. "But try to keep your talent a secret, Merlyn it's not safe to have these powers where you're going, not safe at all."

"I will." I promised quietly but in my heart I wasn't so certain it would be that easy, this gift had a nasty way of making itself known whether I wanted it to or not.

My father nodded and we left as we had arrived at the house, quietly and thoughtful. When I got back home I packed the few belongings, tools and clothes that I thought I could use or might need, along with my favourite books and that was that.

Saying goodbye was something I had never been good at and no matter how much one tried to make them easy they weren't. Tears were shed and promises of letters that will never be written or sent were made and that was that. I took my one moderate bag and without looking back I boarded the ship that was to take me to my new home and job. The upside of the whole trip was that I got to ride to Coruscant in a Lambda Class shuttle. I had loved these ships from the first moment I had ever seen a holo capture of one. Occasionally I caught a glimpse of one from a distance but I had never actually seen one so close before let alone go inside. They were in one word, gorgeous. I had never seen a ship so elegantly designed before and had the sting of saying goodbye to my life and family had been dulled slightly by the chance to ride in one. Perhaps one day I would be able to sit in the cockpit and see what it was like to fly.

The trip to the planet at the center of everything was long, dull and uneventful. The shuttle carried only a couple of people and the cabin I had been assigned to was empty. I guessed that Tatooine wasn't high on the Imperial holiday list of places to go. I was grateful. The people who travelled with me looked either scared to death or bored to death, either way, no one spoke to me which was fine. I had too many things on my mind and I wasn't in the mood for conversation. Far too much had happened in too short of a time and I was still dealing with the fact that the parents I had known my whole life were not my birth parents. I was an unknown, a foundling child without a real past. What had scared my birth mother so badly that she had felt the need to hide me away on an Outer Rim ship trusting me to complete strangers?

If I were to be completely honest I knew very little of the galactic history or history of any kind. It was a subject that had not been my strong point in the little amount of official schooling I had received as a child. While I loved to learn and had an insatiable thirst for knowledge, I was choosy about what I wanted to know and stubborn about not learning the things I considered dull and insignificant. I was regretting this now. Perhaps I should have paid more attention in class when the history of the rise of the Empire was being taught. Perhaps I should have actually gone to school more often instead of skipping classes to hang out with the mechanics in the pit but I had found school boring and no one much cared about attendance anyway especially after my mother had died.

She had been instrumental in making sure that I could read and write very well, she had instilled in me a love of books and thanks to her I had a solid grounding in all things artistic and cultural. I was naturally gifted in the area of mathematics and it was a subject I enjoyed greatly so I paid attention in these classes and did well but history was irrelevant and as far as I was concerned useless. Who cared about politics or wars? The Empire was a name slapped on a regime that didn't even know Tatooine existed much less cared about what went on there. The Emperor was a faceless name whispered in the dark shadows when people complained about the state of the galaxy.

My arrival on the core planet of Coruscant left me breathless as it was an entire planet covered by buildings and I had never seen anything like it especially for me coming from a world where there are hardly any buildings at all much less tall shiny sky scrapers built to soar up above the clouds. I was used to long, wide flat open spaces as far as the eye could see. This would take some getting used to. I had heard much about this planet from the off world traders and other pilots but I had never been this far into the core worlds before and no amount of words could have prepared me for what I was looking at. We arrived very early in the morning so I got to see a pretty spectacular sunrise from a single sun and it was as strange to me as the cold nip of moist air.

As soon as I stepped out of the shuttle and on to the platform a tall, terribly thin and very efficient looking woman walked up and smiled. The data pad in her hand said everything I needed to know about her.

"You must be Miss Gabriel. Welcome to Coruscant. I'm Erysie Candala. I'm here to help you get situated. So please come with me." She said while she ushered me along the walkway towards the largest building I had ever seen.

I only half listened as she gave me a brief run down on the job, it sounded like a lot of paperwork. I got the feeling that something about working for the Empire scared the sandjiggers out of her because she kept muttering something about '*his last assistant*' in past tense. It made me afraid to ask what happened to that last assistant, whose last assistant? She was not very specific about who it was I would be working for and every time I went to ask her about my new employer she launched into another lengthy explanation about another aspect.

She bustled hurriedly along the concourse which led to the Imperial Palace which was a huge complex built on top of the older palace and I had to trot to keep up with her. I barely had time to take in everything around me but what I did see was extraordinary in its architecture and beautiful but I found it overwhelming. It bothered me to be so high up off the ground and not be in a space ship of some sort, all around me were shiny buildings gleaming in the early morning light and a few meters down all I could see were clouds. Most Tatooine architecture is low to the ground or even sub ground to keep out the heat. Coruscant's architecture seemed to be based on the premise of getting as high up into the planet's atmosphere as possible. It was like living in the clouds.

First Ms. Candala showed me to my quarters which were much bigger than the apartment I shared with Rhys back home. I wondered how one person could use so much space? I asked her how to adjust the heating and she showed me where the control was but when she gave me a puzzled look. I didn't bother to explain that Tatooine was not sun deficient and that where I had come from was whole lot warmer than here. She handed me a data pad with the full job description and the card key for the assistant's office. She informed me that the apartment came with the job but many of the Imperial employees eventually found off palace places to live and if I should choose to do so I was to let the HR know right away. She did not specify why people would want to not live here but I got the impression the reasons were not good. While she never lied to me out right, I knew she was not telling me the whole story. I wondered what it was she was hiding from me and more to the point, why.

I thought I would get a chance to shower and change but that was not the case, apparently I was to meet my new employer straight away. He didn't make me nervous but how Ms. Candala acted when she spoke about him did. So I asked her just how high ranking was this high ranking official.

She gave me one of those looks that said 'poor you' and replied, "You could say that he is the Emperor's Right Hand man."

"So," I asked hoping for a good answer. "If he is so powerful, what does he need me for?"

Ms. Candala smiled slightly. "All our top Imperial Officials have Personal Assistants." She shrugged. "The Empire generates a great deal of work, much of which can be handled by office assistants. Unfortunately His Lordship has yet to find an assistant that suits his needs. He is quite demanding. No one we have hired for him has lasted long at the job."

"Why is that?" I asked thinking that perhaps I might yet be able to get home quickly.

"Because they keep dying." She said curtly.

"Dying?" I asked. "What kills them?"

Ms. Candala stopped walking and looked at me squarely. "He does."

I must have looked like a dying wamp-rat, opening my mouth and then shutting it again.

She just nodded and continued walking. "We hope that you'll be able to travel with him, of course." She said as though she had not just dropped a complete bomb on me. "He is often away from the Emperor on Imperial business although," she paused, "It is unusual for his assistant to accompany him. You will be fully briefed of course should that change."

I had no idea what she was speaking about but instead of asking I simply nodded in agreement figuring that I would learn later if it was important. I did wonder why she wasn't giving me any names though. She kept glancing at me and suddenly I understood that because I was a very quiet person it made her uncomfortable, she was one of those people who had a great need to fill the silence and so she babbled.

"You are very fortunate. To work with His Lordship is a great honour. We had a great deal of trouble choosing the best candidate for the job, but you fit our needs perfectly. It was your skills with languages that clinched it and of course your skills as a communicator. You are very accomplished for one so young. You graduated in the top five of your year; you excelled in your business externships. Were promoted swiftly within Hutt Imports and Exports Ltd. As well as being an accomplished dancer, mechanic and translator. You are quite remarkable. It's amazing really; you were just what we were looking for. It was lucky that we found you. Your application came to us, out of the blue, so to speak."

"Yes, that is certainly amazing." I said. It was all complete bantha poodoo, I had taken some night classes in business office management, but nothing spectacular and I had certainly never graduated top of anything before in my life. I almost giggled out loud at the accomplished translator line, although in a sense it wasn't that far off the mark, I was fluent in several languages but how many would be used out here? While Huttese, Rodian, some of the Outer Rim trade languages and thieves cant were among what I could speak fluently I doubted there would be much use for them in this cultured place. I would have loved to get my hands on this resume and had a good look at it. I was fairly sure that I knew who had sent it in and made a mental note to myself, that the next time I saw Bib Fortuna I would feed his head tails to the Almighty Sarlacc.

Ms. Candala showed me where my office was and then we went to the main office to meet my new employer, I hoped he would not be as big of a bastard as Jabba the Hutt had been but I had a really bad feeling about it. I swear, the air was swirling and you could feel tension and fear everywhere. I remembered what my father and my friend Jyrki had always said about fear and took a few deep steadying breaths to calm myself then walked in behind Ms. Candala to meet my new boss.

"Come along, we must not keep him waiting." She said.

She walked with me to the main office area but did not speak much at all. She was very frightened and doing her absolute best to hide it. "This is the lesser audience chamber." Ms. Candala explained in a whisper.

"His Lordship is in his, uhm, office, through those doors, knock and go in at his signal. He is expecting you." She said and was about to make a quick exit when I grabbed her arm.

"What is his name?" I hissed at her. "Who am I working for?" I was not going to meet my new employer and not even know what he was called for Sarlacc's sake.

She paled visible and trembled, stuttering badly, "L..Lord... I mean... Darth Va... Vader, the Dark lord of th... the Sith."

"Lord of the what?" I asked.

"Er Sith." She replied clearly puzzled by my attitude.

"Thanks." I patted the arm I was holding with my free hand and let her go. That I did not seem the slightest bit worried about this job upon hearing the name of my employer seemed to really throw her and she left as swiftly and as silently as she could without appearing rude. She was utterly scared to death. The bad feeling I had felt earlier was now twice as bad.

The main office area was a little over whelming, it was more like a large waiting room with serious class with ornate painted panels on the walls, very beautiful ultra modern style furniture. You could have waited comfortably in this waiting area forever, maybe some people did. On the opposite wall right across from the entrance were a set of large double, incredibly ornate doors that lead to the main office. I crossed the lush carpet and knocked. The doors opened automatically and I looked into a huge, high ceiling room with quietly understated expensive furniture and a fantastic view. I had never seen such elegance and opulence in my entire life. The wealth in this one room seemed to me to be enough to buy all of Tatooine and maybe more. It was unnerving.

"Come forward!" Said a deep, dark and disturbing voice. Even more disturbing was the breathing sound that completely caught me off guard, mechanical, metallic, strange. That Candala woman had not told me about his appearance, that it would be so foreboding. I had seen some odd creatures in my life but I had never encountered anything such as this. Was he truly a man or was he a machine? I suspected a little of both but I was not about to ask.

He was very tall, broad shouldered and dressed from head to toe in black. His face and head were completely covered by an elaborate, even elegant one could say, black mask and helmet. He stood facing away from me, hands clasped behind his back, watching the city. His dark silhouette was a sharp contrast against the hazy blue of the day sky. I could actually see the Force move about him, writhing like sand snakes. Suddenly I was terrified.

I entered the room with shaky knees and stood what I hoped would be a safe distance away from him. The door closed behind me as silently as it had opened and that scared me even more. I used every ounce of my strength and courage to stay put and not run because the idea of running as far away as possible felt very, very good but I was not a coward. I found that place within myself and managed to get my fear under control. *Just breathe*, I thought to myself, *just breathe*.

"I do not require a personal assistant." Lord Vader said without moving. "However the Imperial Human Resources Department in its infinite wisdom sees fit to provide me with one never the less." He spoke slowly and darkly. He seemed to draw a deep, thoughtful breath even though his actual breathing did not alter.

He turned around to look at me and I raised my chin a notch as he did so. It was as if not only was I not going to show my fear but I would challenge him to call me on it as well. I could have sworn the air about us seemed to ripple ever so slightly but the sensation vanished as swiftly as it had appeared.

"You do not look like much," He remarked. "You are a mere child." He paused and came to where I stood then walked around me as though I were some prized bantha to be sold at an auction. "Yet," He said with a slight pause, "I sense something about you."

I had to fight the nervous giggle that threatened to bubble over because I was really scared and all I could think of was replying that he had just uttered the worst come on line I had ever heard. Okay, I was terrified of this man, but I was also fascinated as well. He was the only person I had ever met who had a weird force ripple that I could actually see.

I held my breath and stood very still as though the very act of motionlessness would make me vanish from the Dark Lord's sight. I was not a tall woman and I felt diminutive next to most men but I felt even more like a small child next to Darth Vader, the top of my head barely reaching to just below his shoulders.

"I hope that you are better than the last one they sent to me." He said and he walked back to the window. "He did not last... long." The threat hung in the air.

I had no idea how I was supposed to reply to that comment so I said nothing.

"Have you no tongue, child?"

"I do, uh...my Lord." I actually managed to speak.

"Then, tell me your name."

"Merlyn Ty' Erijann Gabriel." I said.

"You are from Tatooine, most interesting." He stated. It was not a question and I wondered how he knew this, then again he probably had been given a file all about me and while the question had been rhetorical, I sensed he waited for an answer.

"Yes." It was true, I was from there but I wasn't sure where I had been born. I wondered why that should be interesting. Tatooine was not exactly the hub of civilization.

The Dark Lord merely nodded slowly. "You intrigue me." He said and in a movement so swift and agile that I never even saw it coming he had turned to face me and grasped my chin in his fingertips the way the slave traders will do when checking out the slaves only he seemed to be looking at me as if he could peer into my very soul.

His touch sent a nasty, ice-cold shock through me. I felt as though I would either vomit or pass out but since either would have been really bad form I fought against the sensations. All my earlier frustration and anger seemed to suddenly flow freely and it was as if I somehow found an inner source of power in my fear, it blossomed into strength and I let that strength keep me standing and breathing. I wanted to break the contact but dared not move. I desperately wanted to get as far away from this man as possible. I had never known such a feeling before.

Lord Vader nodded and released me. "You may well be of some assistance to me after all." He said looking into my eyes. I stared back up at him but saw only my own reflection in the black mirrors of the face-mask. "I am certain that the Candala woman will show you about and no doubt inform you about the work involved with this job."

I nodded.

"You may leave. I will call for you should I wish for anything that requires your assistance." He dismissed me with a wave of his hand and I had to fight the urge to run through the door that opened for me as fast as I could and never, ever look back. But I was a nosey creature so instead of running I walked and I did look back. I could not help myself.

Lord Vader had turned around so that he could watch me leave. The mask hid every expression his natural face might make but something about his stance told me that his curiosity had been aroused. I stopped and looked back at him and for what



seemed hours but was in reality only a split second something powerful passed between us. I don't know what it was but it was there, present, strong and icy cold.

I broke eye contact with that terrible mask leaving as quickly as I could and still maintain my dignity. On the other side of the lesser chamber Ms. Candala waited. She seemed surprised, no, absolutely shocked to see me at all. I wondered then just how many of these personal assistants ever actually even made it out of that office alive. I knew she was dying to ask me how the interview went or, more to the point, why I was still alive but I didn't feel much like talking. I could still feel the power of the Force that rippled about Lord Vader and I still felt the cold of his touch, it had stirred deep things hidden within my soul and I didn't know what to make of it.

Unlike all the dire warnings from my father, it had not disturbed him that I had this weird gift in fact I had gotten the distinct impression that my gift had somehow saved my life. I sure as heck was not going to share any of this with Ms. Candala, let her wonder at what had happened. Mystery is good for the soul, or so the sand people said. She showed me back to my apartment and left me alone. Magically my pitiful amount of luggage had been delivered. I turned the heat up, found an extra robe and dug out the Mandalorian box my father had given me. I touched the wood and found comfort in its solidity. Not for the first time did I wonder about the strange new world I had found myself in.

\*\*\*

A few days later, once I had settled in a little and begun to wade into my new job which was no easy task, I had soon discovered that when you worked for Lord Vader no one wanted to talk to you. It was as if working for him was like having a disease and the death and destruction he dealt in was catching. Luckily for me I had not seen Lord Vader since our first meeting and since no one had talked to me, or casually dropped by my office to say hi, welcome to the fold or even poor you, I managed to get a lot of work done in a short amount of time.

My office was situated next to the waiting area of his office. Far enough away that no one could really see me if they were not actually looking for me but where I was close enough that Lord Vader could yell at me if he wanted to. There was also a secretary protocol droid of some sort who was mainly there to set up visiting appointments. This was a very bored droid. No one, and I do mean no one, wanted to see Lord Vader if they could possibly help it. I was responsible for everything else such as keeping the memos sorted, keeping his appearances at the Official functions such as big promotions, Admiral to Grand Admiral, that sort of thing, a lot of this generally involved me saying *'I am sorry Lord Vader is unable to attend said function due to his busy work schedule....'*

It would have been rather silly and incredibly time consuming for each Imperial Officer to answer all the reminders and memos and letters and so on which they received on a daily basis. So every Imperial official was given a P.A. whether or not they actually wanted one to sort it all out for them. The amount of incredibly useless things that needed to be dealt with every day astounded me. It was truly bewildering and while I was sure that there were other things that would crop up because in this sort of job they usually did, for the moment I was content to try and sort out the mess that had been left behind and try and organise things for Lord Vader so that he didn't have to concern himself with the day to day nonsense that was so prevalent in the Empire and not want to kill me in the process.

My office was large, comfortable and had a decent view of this part of Coruscant from the west side. I was very glad the windows were sound proof though because it was a busy, busy city. The traffic here was astounding, just a steady stream of flying things going, albeit orderly, in every direction. I had a nice desk with lots of

space for all the crap that had been piled up on it by the previous assistant and a data terminal but I had yet to figure out my access code. I was hoping that once I got this sorted out I could get rid of the mess, obtain a comlink, and maybe procure storage space for the excess paperwork, data chips, pads etc. There was even a small but very functional en-suite 'fresher which the housebot cleaned dutifully every day. It had been instructed to leave the office part of the office alone until I could find the floor again. I still had not found the 'caf machine which was a little distressing.

Someone must have mentioned to the Human Resources department that I was still alive and still here because some skinny little, scared looking, short skirt wearing HR girlie dropped by my office and handed me a data pad full of useful things I needed to know, another data pad with the employment contract, another data pad with the Imperial Employment Rules and Regulations, guidelines and other wordy regulations pertaining to my job, a data pad with my health and work benefits, there was a separate one for the forms I need to fill out and sign, and a data pad of my banking information and payment schedule. She asked if I would sign the contract then and there and I told her no, I would read it first thank-you, that much I learned from working at Jabba the Hutt's, ALWAYS, always read the fine print!

She got quite put out and started to seriously argue with me about it until I said 'Perhaps you'd like to take this up with Lord Vader.'

She turned very pale, shut up right away, mumbled something about welcome to the fold and scurried out of my office as fast as she could.

I was beginning to see some serious advantages already to working for this man. I wondered if I should start wearing black.

I soon learned that there wasn't much to do if one wasn't a part of the in-crowd. This was okay, I had never been much of a party person and, for the most part, my experience with groups of people had not been very good. I had always been bit of a loner and my various peculiar talents went a long way to making sure it stayed that way. Even when I didn't use the Force gifts I had people somehow knew I was different. So instead I spent much of my free time exploring the Imperial Palace usually when was really late at night and I could not get to sleep.

I discovered that the older areas of the palace complex were very quiet late at night, everyone was either asleep, had gone home or they are out partying. There was always a 'function' going on somewhere, and people here loved to schmooze. I guess it made them feel important and being next to other even more important people helped. I had never really felt that way although I had also seen a lot of that go on at Jabba's. It had not interested me then, either. Maybe that was why people could never really figure me out. I didn't want fame and fortune. I didn't care if other people were famous or wealthy or both. I didn't know what I wanted but I did know the whole be famous and important thing was not it.

Many people had assumed I had taken the job as a palace dancer because I had wanted to be on stage, to be well known and famous but that was not the case. I had danced because I had loved to move and the only place you could find decent teachers were the ones who worked for Jabba the Hutt because that was where the money was. It was not as if Tatooine had a grand ballet school or anything even close to it.

My dance instructor saw that I had talent and that I was good enough to make serious money so she had gotten me a job, my first job outside of working at my father's docking bay. She had also taken a rather large cut of my pay and my tips until I felt I had paid her back for the time spent teaching, this was not a good moment for either of us and I didn't much like to think about it, but sometimes a person had to stand their ground. After that day, she avoided me like crazy and it was about this time that the rumours about my witchy ways started up. In the end, I didn't think that anyone really believed them, much, but still it was enough to give me an advantage until one day I got word that there would be a spot opening up in one of the Mos

Eisley night clubs and that perhaps, it was strongly suggested I should take it although it was more of an order than a suggestion but I didn't mind, anything that got me out of that palace and into something more suitable was a very welcome event, plus it was a lot closer to home.

I had learned the fine art of basic ship mechanics at a really young age. My father owned the docking bay so it was my playground and the guys who had worked there thought it was great fun to teach the Boss's kid about how ship's worked. It turned out that I had an aptitude for it and I ended up loving it enough to get certified. I had worked there as much as I could but this had been before dancing at Jabba's, before other stuff. When I left the palace for a dance spot in one of Jabba's clubs I never expected to take on a part time office job at Hutt Imports and Exports but it turned out to be perfect. It gave me time for other things allowing me to combine the mechanic work I had learned with everything else and I suppose, in essence, I became a sort of Jawa-of-all-trades to be more useful. I had wanted to learn some of the finer arts of office management so I had taken some of night courses on business management which had bored me to tears and had generally tried to make myself useful while staying under the radar. Of course if someone was jealous of you, you never stayed under their radar and if they were mean enough they would find a way to get back at you. I had learnt this first hand. It was how I ended up working for the Empire.

I managed, with the help of the protocol droid, to sort out everything in the office. My predecessor had left a big mess, I suspected he hadn't actually done much in the way of work but rather seemed to spend a lot of time on the data console browsing the singles dating archives among other less than allowed things. I was still not all that clear on what exactly had happened to him and the protocol droid would not discuss it whenever I brought it up he kept going on about how it was all 'most traumatic...' and then would leave the room in a huff. Eventually I stopped asking.

As the days passed by I found myself getting used to the way things worked. I did as Lord Vader requested and went about my business quietly. Keeping secrets was a way of life for me and I had learned at an early age to keep my particular secret safe but I had also a temper so on occasion things sometimes got out of hand. My temper didn't come out all that often because I had it under control most of the time. People had to work at getting me angry but unfortunately some of the twits around the palace just didn't know when to stop.

I had decided to go to the small café that was not too far away from the office. It was usually a quiet little place with only a few people there at that time of night but this particular time was the exception, this time there happened to be a group from the HR office there. They met there once a month but I had not known that, not a surprise. I did not ask sit with them nor was I invited to sit with them. I wasn't wearing the right clothes. So I sat at one of the small tables by the window and tried to enjoy my snack and drink in peace but people do love to poke at a sleeping krayt.

There was that moment when one walked into a room and everyone suddenly stopped talking and they avoided eye contact and it was easy to see that they had been talking about whoever it was that just entered the room. That's what happened to me. I generally tried to ignore this sort of thing because it happened everywhere and often to me. There was always someone was on the wrong end of the gossip. I would have ignored it all but in this case this particular circle of skycks was stupid.

One of the girls started to talk about 'my smell' loudly enough that I could hear it. So juvenile, I had showered so I knew I don't smell. But it was one of those things people liked to say to get someone going, another started up on how shabby my clothes looked, and a third began on my unfashionable hair. Okay enough was enough and I had gotten up and walked over to their table and asked them point

blank what their problem was. Perhaps they could recommend a decent soap, a good clothes shop and a hairdresser for me?

The little one who had been in my office the other day smirked, brave, now she was with a group that would back her up, animals in a pack were almost always braver, and had said something to the effect that Outer Rim trash should just stay home. They had all giggled.

I could handle that too, Tatooine was not the center of the galaxy so I could understand the comments about hair and fashion but I did not handle it well when someone insulted my family, which had been their next step. I must have had that look on my face, the one that said 'okay you crossed the line, you hit the right button and now I am mad'. They smelled blood and they went for the throat, stupid, stupid, stupid.

That was always the problem with city dwellers, they had no idea what a backed into the corner, angry animal will do, they didn't know the warning signs and they ignored the danger. So more insults were fired out at me and something snapped. It had been an incredibly stressful time for me, a new job, and relocation to a planet I hated along with a deeply disturbing new boss. There was only so much one person could take. I had reached my limit.

I took a really deep breath and let the anger I had been feeling become a visceral thing, its tendrils wound their way through my entire being and with a little flick of my hand I made each and every one of their drinks and their plates full of food, flip up and splat on their faces and laps. It was delightfully messy.

There was a stunned silence before what had just happened sunk in and then the oldest, meanest one, with the spiteful expression on her face, looked up at me and said. "You are so going to regret that."

I looked at her and gave her my best smile and said "Why you going to get me fired?"

But instead of coming back with some smart retort she just smiled really nastily and said. "Fired, No. killed, yes."

"Oh, you and whose army?"

"I don't need an army. I just send a report to the Emperor's office and let them know we have a Force sensitive working for us. He likes Force sensitive girls like you. He makes concubines out of them. They don't tend to last long." She said snidely.

This was supposed to scare me but it didn't. I had not ever seen, or met or even come close to the Emperor so, I figured what I didn't know didn't worry me too much. I had just shrugged.

"Whatever." I said with a shrug. I walked away and didn't look back.

However, I worried about this action afterwards. I imagined that pissing Lord Vader off was not a good thing to do and me throwing a hissy fit because I could not take a little teasing might just tick him off, or at the very least it made his office staff look bad and I supposed that reflected upon him. I guessed that I would find out soon enough. He had left in the morning for some important mission, but was supposed to return in a day or so. I hated that stupid HR bunch and I felt this hatred the way other people feel a punch in the gut it as though it were sand-fire alcohol, the really strong kind that the Sand People brew up, running through my blood. Hot, heady and vicious. I sat in my bedroom, unable to sleep and I had a very bad feeling about it all. I had avoided being one of Jabba's 'girls' I sure as heck didn't want to end up one of the Emperor's. Why was it, I wondered, could I not keep my temper in check when I needed to the most?

I read some of the Journal my father had given me to see if there were any insights and I saw that I was not the only one who had ever felt this.

***-The ways of the force are many and varied, but the true paths to understanding those paths are either light or dark. The path dictated by the light side is long and difficult. It takes years of patience and dedication to learn the ways of this mysterious power. The path dictated by the Dark side is easier and seductive, destroying the lightness of the soul. –***

*I am learning the ways of the force, it is hard and although my Mistress teaches me patience and inner peace, it is easier for me to use my anger and frustration. I can hurt my enemies more easily when I focus using my anger. Anger is a tool. I have learned this but Yhan'nimae does not know yet. I am afraid that when she finds out I have been practicing using the forbidden ways she will no longer wish to teach me and there is no one else.-*

Eventually I drifted off only to be woken at three am the morning by someone banging so loudly on my door that I thought the world was ending. I opened it angrily to see an Imperial Messenger with news. I was starting to hate these guys. The poor messenger jumped back and I must have looked a fright. I was informed in the usual brusque Imperial way that I was to pack what I would need, alert my staff, and accompany Lord Vader. He did not say where I was accompanying Lord Vader to, just gave me a landing pad number, E12-B and time, 06:00 am, CST. I guessed I was not being handed to the Emperor just yet instead it looked as though I was being sent to hell on a Star Destroyer.

It took me about ten minutes to shove everything I owned and might need into a bag. The protocol droid would do the rest of the work packing everything I would need for the office work. After I had finished my packing, I sat on my bed for about ten minutes before I decided to get out and get some air, I would not call it fresh, because it wasn't. I did not own any fine Coruscant traveling clothes so I had dressed in my usual Tatooine fashion, all long traveling skirts and a rough weave robe, and my hair hastily tied up with a set of well used bone zenji sticks. Then I went to find some peace and quiet.

The palace at night in this quarter was usually quiet. While the Imperial Center palace was full of people during the day at night, in the older quarters it was fairly quiet. Not so many of those who worked here also lived here, preferring to live away from the place where they worked but then I had not been here long enough to want to leave. I walked along the quiet places, relying on my second sight talent to help me navigate. This thing my father had called the Force had always served me well when it came to finding things, finding places, and my sense of direction almost never led me astray. Now, it helped me find my way to my favourite spot in the palace so far.

I made my way through the quarters where my apartment was, then down a maze of corridors to a much older part of the Palace. No one lived here and it held the scent of disuse, of being forgotten. The corridors were dimly lit and the once polished wooden floors were now less shiny. The art that hung on the walls was outdated and old but I never tired of staring at the various paintings, wondering about what stories they could tell. It led to old rooms and open galleries long left unused. Unfashionable, people had told me when I had asked discretely why no one ever came here anymore. I smiled slightly suddenly understanding that I had not only been given the worst possible job in the Empire but also been given the least desirable housing allotment as well. At the end of the main hallway, through the really beautifully carved doors, I found myself in a room that I had quietly claimed for myself. I didn't know what it had been used for but it had a set of ornate double doors which opened out onto a stunning, bow shaped balcony which overlooked the South-West part of the Imperial City. The view alone was worth it. This was where I went when I wanted complete peace. I would often bring a bottle of my father's moonglow,

a really pretty glass and I would sit and I would watch the city move. The balcony had a wide stone wall, a balustrade, which stopped people from falling into oblivion below.

I sat on the wall with my feet dangling over the edge with a glass in one hand thinking about the upcoming trip when I sensed him. I felt his hesitation when he saw me but it was a fleeting thing. He was very quiet as he walked to stand beside me. I was invading his space but he was gracious about it because before I even looked up to see who it was I offered to share my drink. The hand that took my glass from mine was blue.

"I am not accustomed to other people in this place." He said taking a sip of the moonglow. I thought he handled the liquor's rather nasty kick very gracefully.

"Neither am I." I told him. "But I am willing to share it if you are." And then I looked up into his face to see who it was I was talking to.

He was tall, very regal, serious and somewhat stern looking, I suppose even handsome after a fashion. He had hair blacker than night and skin which was a shade of blue I had never seen on a humanoid before but it was his eyes that drew me in and shut me out all at the same time. They were red, just red and they seemed to glow with their own eerie light. He had an aura of power and self assurance that wrapped itself around him in the same manner that the Force wrapped itself about Lord Vader and when he smiled I felt a ghost walk over my grave.

"What is this we are drinking?" He asked.

I laughed. "I'd have thought you be more interested in who you were drinking with."

He looked at me that one-of-a-kind stare Imperial men seemed to have perfected. "Miss Gabriel, I am well aware of who it is I am drinking with." Something in his melodic, deep, cultured voice made my heart skip a beat. He was cool and reserved but his voice had a touch of honey in it. It made me shiver slightly.

"Well, you seem to have me at a disadvantage, sir." I said.

He smiled, executed a perfect military style bow and said. "Captain Thrawn at your service."

"So, how is it that you know my name and most of the people who work on the same floor as me don't even know I exist?" I asked.

"I make it my business to know. When the Dark Lord actually chooses to keep the latest personal assistant he is given around rumours abound. I like to have the facts."

I looked at him and sighed, rumours about me. That could not be a good thing. I didn't say anything to his statement because I just could not think of anything to say. I went back to staring at the city and sipping my drink. He took the glass when I offered it again.

"So," He said after a short silence which I was pleased to see he didn't mind too much, "You did not answer my question. What exactly are we drinking?"

My laughter was genuine. "My father's self made moonglow. I have been frequently told it is good for the soul but I have my doubts."

"I thought this was illegal here." He studied the glass as though the contents would bite him.

I shrugged, "Maybe on Coruscant, but this stuff comes from Tatooine, not many rules about what you can brew in your home there. Fine thirty year old Corellian brandy is hard to come by, you know."

He regarded me with a curious look. "You are from Tatooine? That is most interesting."

"Oh, something about me you did not know?" I asked caustically, "And why should that be of interest?"

"I never said I knew everything about you, Miss Gabriel, just that I know who you are." He gave me a thoughtful look. "I find it an interesting coincidence that you should be from the home planet of the man you now work for." There was an edge to his voice.

I nodded. "Ah. I had not known that." I said. "Why is it an interesting coincidence? Many people are from Tatooine."

"Yes, but not many people from Tatooine work for the Empire and of those that do, there are only two I know who are Force sensitive, you happen to be one of them. I find it interesting that it should be you who ends up working for Vader. Who knew that Tatooine was such a breeding ground for the Force sensitive?" He said carefully.

"Mmmm who knew?" I replied, less than thrilled, wondering just how he had learned that about me and then remembered the incident at the café had probably made the rumour mill many times over. I wanted to change the topic. "What about you? Where are you from?" I asked.

"A planet called Csilla." He said in a tone of voice which told me he did not like to be asked anything personal and that this was all he would say on the matter, so I asked him something else that was personal.

"Do you miss it?"

He regarded me for a moment and I didn't think he would answer but he did. "No, not especially." He answered but he wasn't being entirely honest. "Do you miss Tatooine?"

"Yes." I nodded. "Yes I do. I hate it here."

That surprised him. "Why?"

It never ceased to astound me that everyone automatically assumed that I would love being here. Why was it that everyone thought people should absolutely adore the center of the galaxy? "Because it is too loud and too full of people who are too full of themselves, crowded and soulless. There is no room to breathe and when you do it all smells used. The air here is bad. How can so many people live on such a lifeless hunk of rock?" I said, having to take a deep breath. Left to my own devices I could have talked about how much I disliked Coruscant and why for hours but I got the feeling this would bore him, it bored me. I took a good sip of my drink to shut up.

"Yes, indeed." He nodded as if he understood. "You are refreshingly honest, Miss Gabriel." He then added.

I looked at him sharply. "I have discovered in life that lying about things doesn't always get you very far." I told him.

"Really? Most people, I fear, would argue that." He said.

"Well, I am not *most people*." I replied.

"Perhaps that is what is keeping you alive?" He suggested with a slightly annoying, know it all look.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I shot back.

He smiled coolly. "Most people have a tendency to displease Lord Vader, he lacks a certain amount of patience and he does not suffer fools lightly. They seem to have a short life span. You appear to have escaped his wrath so far which is cause for a certain amount of speculation."

"Well, I guess we shall see then because I am to accompany him on his next trip."

"Really?" Thrawn said, genuinely surprised, and then added. "Wonders will never cease."

Something in his tone made me cross. I swung my legs around and jumped off the balcony ledge, the fabric of my skirts swirling about me like dust as I did so. "I have to go." I said tersely. I was annoyed but I didn't know why. This man made me

uneasy and I could not put my finger on the reason. He was dangerous to me in some way but not in any manner I understood.

He grasped my arm as I was about to leave and pulled me to him, whispering close to my ear "Stay alive, Miss Gabriel. I should think the next time we meet you will have interesting tales to tell." The warmth of his breath upon my skin was electrifying and his smile was unnerving.

I shook my arm free and looked him in the eyes. "If you ever touch me again, I shall kill you." I said as coldly as I could. I was shaking, not because he had scared me but because he had suddenly stirred up feelings in me that I had hoped never to experience again and that was even more unsettling than working for Lord Vader.

He just smiled at me. "You are either incredibly bold or just very stupid."

This made me really angry and anger was something I could deal with. I shook my head and moved away from him.

"I am neither," I said, "What I am is tired and fed up of being bullied here. Every time I turn around someone is telling me how I will probably die some horrible death at the hands of my new employer, or making snide remarks about my clothing or my home world." I took a deep breath and went on "Men like you, and believe me I know your kind, you think you can grab a girl and she's yours. You think we are all slaves to your will because you own a blaster or fly a ship. You all seem to believe that we will swoon at your feet because you wear a uniform and command a few thugs!" I suddenly poked his chest with my finger, really annoyed. "So, why don't you just go back to wherever it was you came from and I shall go back to my nice, life-threatening job and we can call it even?"

He captured my hand to prevent a third poke at his chest and kissed the back of it. I snatched my hand away as though his lips had burnt me and he smiled a decidedly feral smile.

"My apologies, Miss Gabriel, you are correct and I should not have touched you without permission. Blame it on this strange brew of your father's and leave it at that. It was not my intention to offend. This has been a very pleasant surprise, meeting you, and I should hate to taint it with rudeness."

It was my turn to back down. I stepped back a pace and nodded not because I agreed with his last statement but because he had had the good grace to apologise. I took a deep breath and looked him in the eyes and said. "Okay. If I survive and live a little longer, then perhaps we will meet again."

"I shall look forward to it," He said and then added with a wicked grin, "Although next time, Miss Gabriel, I shall bring the refreshments."

I nodded and left. I felt his eyes follow me all the way into the shadows. I was not at all certain what was more worrying, traveling with Lord Vader or another meeting with this man. Neither put me at ease.

I arrived at the landing bay in time to meet Lord Vader who was standing with two stormtroopers. We boarded the shuttle with the troopers and my droid in tow. While they went into the passenger seating area I was dragged by the arm into the cockpit area by Lord Vader and told to sit in the co-pilot's chair. I did as I was told without a word. The door that separated the cockpit closed and for the first time ever in my life I experienced claustrophobia.

Lord Vader, physically, was a very large man but his presence was even larger. He filled every space he entered and when that space was as small as the cockpit of a shuttle there was little room for anything else. The sound of his breathing filled the air so perfectly timed that you could dance a waltz to it.

He said nothing as he prepared us for takeoff and I listened as Coruscant Air traffic control gave him clearance and then, suddenly, just like that we were rotating in the air, the shuttle's wings began their fold up procedure and before I knew it we



were beginning our ascent. I didn't mind silence but sitting beside Lord Vader made me nervous and when I get nervous I chatter.

"I always wanted to be in one of these." I said. "And I always wanted to learn how to pilot one."

Lord Vader looked at me for a second and then with a few deft motions at the control panel he said. "Very well, Miss Gabriel, the shuttle is yours."

We were in the middle of ascent into Coruscant airspace which was one of the busiest places in the galaxy. The shuttle rocked because it was not on auto pilot. Lord Vader, I later learned never used autopilot. I grabbed the controls and tried to stabilize her while rapidly scanning the control panel to see if I could actually recognize anything all the while the CATC was screaming at us because our line of ascent was 'off'. No kidding our ascent line was off!

I knew how to pilot just about anything. I had learned to fly when I was very young. My father owned a space port and he used to be a major shuttle and transport pilot. I was his only child so I got to learn all about ships and being a pilot almost before I could walk. I wasn't the greatest pilot in the world, if you wanted to see the greatest pilots in the world then you needed to go to Mos Espa where the forbidden pod racers took place or maybe the elite pilots of the Imperial navy, but I knew how to fly and one cockpit was, more or less, the same as the next. It was placement of things that changed.

So for a few very frantic seconds I found out where everything was. I was willing to bet the Imperial troopers sitting in the back had a few moments of panic though. Once I got oriented I was able to get the ship back under control but then I completely over shot everything because she was touchy, not like the sluggish freighter my father had or the small shuttle craft back home which was slow to respond and needed a good swift kick up the boosters before it would even think about turning, no sir, this shuttle was a spoiled little princess and she liked a gentle touch.

We gave a few oncoming vehicles a scare and had a near miss or three but in the space of about three minutes I had learned how to pilot a lambda class shuttle, at least I had learned the basics. Of course I drew heavily on my Force talents to help out. Sometimes it was like a voice whispering in my ear and sometimes it was like light dancing, either way it helped me do what I had to do. The most unsettling thing about the whole three minutes was the laughter I heard coming from my boss. A slow, low chuckling that was as nerve jarring as the ascent we just did.

"You find it funny that I almost smashed the shuttle?" I asked as I set our course into the nav computer so it could do the hyperspace jump calculations.

"You wished to learn how to fly this shuttle, now you know how to fly this shuttle. Had I thought you would not be able to do so I would not have given you the controls. You learn faster than I expected the Force serves you well." He said.

"Anything else I should know about this ship then?" I asked.

"The landing bay entrance is lower than it looks, when you bring her in to land, remember the clearance on the dorsal stabilizer."

"Ah, okay. Thanks for the tip." I said and we made the jump into hyperspace.

On the trip I asked a lot of questions about the shuttle and Lord Vader answered them all. I got the impression he enjoyed flying and maybe even enjoyed sharing a little of his knowledge about it. What I really wanted to know I didn't dare ask and he sensed this but gave me no opening. I wanted to ask about The Force, about why me? I wanted to know why everyone was so terrified of him and why I wasn't, scared yes, in awe of, completely, but terrified, not yet at any rate.

I stuck to asking technical questions about flying and the shuttle as well as the Imperial Class Star Destroyer we were heading for. It seemed the safest thing to do. I

figured that when he was ready, he would let me know what it was I need to know but for now I was contented to chat about ships and flying.

We got to the Imperial Star Destroyer and I was stunned at the size of it. It was bigger than any ship or anything I had ever seen. Flight command came over the comlink and requested clearance code. Lord Vader gave them the code and there was a moment's hesitation on the side of the Flight Command and then came a very nervous "Permission to land granted."

"Take her in, Miss Gabriel." Lord Vader said.

So I did all nice and easy so that the little princess landed perfectly. I even remembered to watch my dorsal clearance. Not bad for my first time.

We disembarked and Lord Vader was formally welcomed aboard. He vanished off to the bridge flanked by nervous Imperials and storm troopers. I was left with my fussy protocol droid and a rather confused looking Lieutenant.

"Welcome on board the *ISD Devastator*, Miss Gabriel. I am to show you to your quarters." He said.

"Great and who are you?" I asked. I was getting a bit tired that everyone seemed to know my name and never bothered to tell me theirs.

"Oh, sorry ma'am, I am Lieutenant Jorae Tobias. I have been assigned to assist you."

I laughed. "An assistant for the assistant?" That was just funny.

I walked with him as he strode through the ship to my designated area. He explained a little about my clearance level which wasn't all that high, the areas of the ship that were off limits to the civilians which was most of them, and that Lord Vader had requested that I be given quarters near his. I was not sure I liked the sound of that but wasn't going to argue, there was a lot to be said for being alive and I wanted to stay that way. Arguing about anything with Lord Vader was a good way to end one's life quickly. The trip through the ship took a while and along the way I learned where the main mess hall was, where the recreational areas were, and where the medical center was among other places. It was a huge ship and it was a labyrinth. I was thankful I had a good sense of direction.

"These are guest quarters usually reserved for VIPs but they don't often get used. If you need anything let me know by comm. or you can access the onboard computer and just ask it." Jorae said when we finally arrived at our destination.

"Thanks." I replied taking the card-key from his hand.

He gave me an uncertain smile and then left quickly. I sighed as I opened the door to my new home and was astonished at the size of my quarters. This was more like a luxury suite in one of the high end Corellian hotels I had heard people talk about than quarters on a ship. I had been expecting a small one bunk cabin not this. I was deeply happy to see that VIP quarters also included a large view port. Seeing the stars was a comfort somehow.

The main area was spacious and looked as though it had been set up to act as both an office and a sitting area. There was a large bedroom separate from the main and a 'fresher. It wasn't quite as luxurious as the apartment in the palace but it wasn't sparse and forbidding either. My protocol droid was not impressed though and fussed about the office area. I ignored him and asked about food. I was starving. Learning to fly a new ship via the shock learning method always made me hungry.

\*\*\*

I had not been on board for more than 12 hours but quickly discovered that life on an ISD was damned dull. If you were not part of the crew then you were on your own. If you were on your own, you were kept in the dark. When I was kept in the dark I tended to go looking to shed some light. I decided to ignore the rules and went

exploring since everyone was ignoring me it seemed the right thing to do. However, this was the wrong thing to do because I wandered into the detention block by mistake. Only I could do this, it could only happen to me and, to make matters worse, it could only happen to me during a particularly loud interrogation between a Rodian spy and Lord Vader, who didn't sound happy.

Surprisingly enough no one really took notice of me. I had no answers for this, because in theory I should have been marched right out of the area before anyone could have said banthapoodoo. Maybe, I was just lucky because no-one had really looked directly at me when I had snuck in. They were more concerned with staying out of Lord Vader's way. I had always been able to sneak about fairly easily. If I did not want to be seen then most people didn't see me.

The Rodian was screaming in Huttese and Lord Vader was yelling back at him in the same language. I had not known he could speak Huttese so this was useful information. I watched in silence as there were more screams, more torture and more wrong answers. There was some sort of protocol droid in there with him but it wasn't saying much until the Rodian switched to yelling in Rodian, then the protocol droid translated. This went on for another few minutes until the Rodian switched to another language that sounded remarkably similar to Rodian but wasn't quite right. The protocol droid struggled and after the third try apologised profusely because he could not translate what had been said. Lord Vader was furious and screamed to the droid to fetch him someone who could translate. I walked into the room with the infamous statement that would make me a bit of a legend on the ship, a legend in that I was regarded as the stupidest creature in the entire universe.

"I can translate it. He told you to go jump in the Almighty Pit of Carkoon."

The world stopped.

The only sound which could be heard was the mechanical breathing of Lord Vader. The protocol droid stood statue still, the Rodian glared at me and the stormtrooper whom I had not seen standing in the corner had suddenly become slightly more attentive than he had been. I stood in the doorway and realized that perhaps this had not been such a good move after all, but done was done and I could translate the Rodian's thieves' cant so I stayed where I was.

Lord Vader stepped forward and grabbed me by the arm dragging me into the room. "Explain yourself!" He demanded.

"Well I was bored so I decided to go for a walk." I told him. "I got lost and ended up here. I overheard the screams and was curious." Lord Vader's already painful grip on my arm increased so I got to the point. "He's speaking a very old form of Rodian thieves cant. It isn't surprising the protocol droid doesn't know it; the language is only a spoken one. There's nothing written and not many speak it any more. I learnt it at Jabba's palace. I'd tell you how but that's a long story. You are hurting my arm!"

He let my arm go and increased the pain on the torture device he was operating and asked his question again in Huttese. The Rodian screamed, I suddenly felt very sick, the room was too small, too hot and I didn't want to be here. The Rodian answered the question in cant and I translated.

It wasn't what the Dark Lord wanted to hear so we did it all over again and again and again. I cannot begin to describe how disturbing this was. I had seen some twisted things in my life, if you live on Tatooine, work for Jabba hang or out at a docking port and you see stuff. It wasn't always nice, but this ...this was nasty. It made me angry, though mostly it was the stupidity of the Rodian that made me really cross.

He actually knew what Lord Vader wanted, I could sense that much and I knew if I could somehow bend his mind a bit I could finish this but I didn't know how to get there. More questions, more stupid answers and my temper was beginning to

stir. I had learned a very long time ago to keep my temper in check but when I finally did give into it, it was like a wicked sand storm; once it started there was no stopping it. It felt like lightening in my skin, like roaring winds in my head and I just let it rush through me. Usually, I couldn't remember what happened while I was in this state, but I had been told it wasn't good.

The Rodian set me off and I lost control. I pushed him with my mind. I don't know how I did that either; I found his presence in the Force, I just saw white, closed my eyes and pushed. The Rodian stumbled over his words, speaking Huttese. I pushed again and he screamed. I could feel the pain and fear but it was as if I were on the outside of the room looking at it. There was a roaring in my ears and each time I pushed it got louder and louder until I thought it was going to consume me and then it was my turn to scream. I had no memory of anything which happened after that because I blacked out.

I woke up in the med-center. The first thing I saw was Lord Vader's mask as he stared down at me, I would have screamed but his hand clamped hard across my mouth before I could and he only removed it when he knew I would be silent.

"I see we have found one of your talents." He said.

I tried to sit up and discovered that made my head pound. "What talent? What happened? Why does my head hurt so much? Where in the name Sarlacc am I?"

"You have a gift for getting inside of someone's head and pushing them. I knew another, a long time ago who could also push another's thoughts. Your head hurts because you have no idea what you are doing but we will change that with training. You are in the infirmary, which is where you will stay until you are well enough." Lord Vader said.

"Well enough for what?"

But he did not say anything, merely nodded to the med-droid who unceremoniously stuck a needle into my arm and the world went dark again.

When I awoke the next time, according to the med-droid, I had been out for almost thirty-six hours. He was none too happy when I got myself out of bed and left. I wanted to be in my own room, my own bed, such as it was, not here with all the bleeping machines and the stench of the med-lab. My legs were wobbly and it took me a few moments to get my bearings. The headache had gone but dizziness and disorientation had taken its place. I wanted the world to stop spinning. I could not really fathom what had happened. What had I been thinking and, worse, what had I done?

The quiet of my quarters was calming. I sat and stared out of the view port too exhausted to want to do anything else. Stars by the billions lit up the blackness and I began to let my thoughts drift free and concentrated on my breathing. In and out, find the rhythm of it, Jyrki had once said, so I did. I allowed myself to let go of the anger and the fear I was carrying inside of me. There was a glow to it, like a thread of light entwined about everything which, if I chose to, I could follow it. I allowed this serenity to fill my being, such moments of peace were very rare for me and probably because I was so tired, unlike most times, I did not fight against the sensation of letting go.

I could see this mysterious Force, wrapped about around everything, binding it all together somehow, like invisible lacing made of light. I let my mind wander through the ship. I could see it as clearly as the stars outside the ship. I knew where I was heading and although a small part of me did not want to do this, this small fear that niggled in the back of the soul wanted me to shy away but I let it go. Fear was a part of being and it belonged to me, I did not break the train of thought instead I allowed it to soar. Slowly, I found my way to Lord Vader's quarters, the great room with the hyperbaric chamber. I sought his presence and found it inside the chamber, alive without the aid of his mask in this confined space.

He was meditating. I pushed ever so slightly closer to him, to the thread that seemed to connect us which was bright but nebulous and as I did so I brushed his mind with mine. It was like touching fire. For a second nothing happened and then I felt great surprise, recognition and finally anger. It was as if an iron fist had slammed down upon my head and the connection was broken, it had hurt.

I came to myself with a start, surprised because I was no longer tired or dizzy and it seemed to me as though I saw everything with new eyes. Somehow the world about me appeared brighter, more vibrant. I understood in that moment that every living thing was connected by this thing my father had called the Force and I was connected to Lord Vader by something strong and terrifying. A few moments later I was summoned to his chamber.

The room was larger than I had perceived. The actual chamber, which was spherical, was in the process of opening when I entered. I watched, holding my breath. There was a moment before the mask was attached where one could see Lord Vader's head. I wanted him to turn so that instead of the back of his head I could see his eyes but knew he would not give me that. Too intimate and I had already breached his trust once today. The mechanical arms set the helmet on his damaged head with a slight hiss as air and pressure changed from outside to inside and then a snick as it was locked in place.

He stood up and walked out of the chamber to stare out at the stars, hands clasped behind his back, thoughtful and silent. Only the sound of the chamber closing and his mechanical breathing filled the room. I waited.

"You are full of surprises, girl." He said after what seemed forever.

"I didn't mean to..." I began but the wave of his hand cut me off. I made a face but shut up.

"You are surprisingly strong in the Force and your instincts lead you well enough, but your powers are raw, untrained and dangerous. You lack direction and you are divided, chaotic, you must choose a path." He paused. "I should have killed you the moment I sensed your abilities but I have not had a student quite like you in a very long time. So, as I don't actually need a personal assistant, you have a choice either follow my training or die."

"That isn't much of a choice." I said.

He wheeled around to stare at me and I felt both surprise and anger build up the way one felt an oncoming storm pushing down upon everything in its path.

"And you already know my answer." I finished.

He nodded. "Very well. Meet me in my training area in one hour. Wear something you can move in." He turned his back to me once more and I knew I had been dismissed.

I left as troubled as I had arrived. I had no idea what would be required of me but if learning to use this weird power kept me alive then so be it. Choose a path he had said, but it seemed to me that he was choosing my path for me and it would be a dark one.

**TO: Lord Darth Vader**  
**FROM: The Imperial Social Division**  
**RE: The Annual Emperor's Grand Imperial Ball**

*Your Lordship, As you know it is almost time for the annual Imperial Ball which is held each year to aid in funding the costs of Palace upkeep. It would add greatly to the atmosphere if you would grace us with your presence. We would be greatly appreciative of an answer in this matter at your earliest convenience.*

Yours Sincerely,  
Marlann Taralae

*Imperial Social Director* I thought with disgust. I tossed the data pad with this memo across the room watched as the Protocol droid retrieved it. When he had placed it, just so, upon the desk I picked it up and tossed it back across the room. The process repeated several times until the droid asked me why I was throwing the data pad away.

"Because it's an utter waste of time even looking at these stupid memos let alone answering them." I said crossly. "I mean don't these people know what *He* does?" I asked. The droid began to reply but I shut him up with a wave of my hand. "It was a rhetorical question P2B4." I told him.

The droid fussed and placed the data pad on the desk again but this time, just out of my reach.

"I am programmed to answer these communiqués, Mistress Gabriel." He said.

I made a face. "Then you answer it. Tell them that Lord Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith, has better things to do with his time than attend some stupid function where he can neither drink the too sweet champagne nor eat the soggy canapés that are dutifully served, where he will be bored to death by the stupid, simpering chit chat of the palace courtesans. I am quite sure that he's the life of the party!" I said sarcastically.

"Oh I do not think that is an appropriate response." The droid complained.

"Fine, the answer is Lord Vader is not coming, you write it how you like it!" I said.

I was cranky. I was still stiff and very sore from the incredibly difficult work out Lord Vader had put me through the day before. I was not sure what the reason for the massive physical training was exactly but he had not been in the mood for answering questions so I never did find out. I assumed that if one trained the mind one needed to train one's body. There were mental exercises as well. I was learning to control the Force without it biting me back. I had a lot to practice and he expected me to do so every day. I wasn't sure this was going to work quite the way either of us planned.

I went through the training regime alone; it was not the same being on my own as working with someone. With no one to push, goad or be sarcastic the drive I had felt the day before, which had come through the anger, was not there now. I had no idea how he maintained that anger daily, he must have really had a serious hate on for the universe.

Without the anger the exercises were not any easier but they flowed better. I had learned similar moves when I was younger but these were somehow harder. I went through the set twice before I switched to a dance workout that was more familiar, one I had learned at Jabba's palace and had always enjoyed. I always found peace through dance. By the time I had exhausted myself, almost three hours had passed. I had not even noticed the time go by. I still had to practice the mental exercises but I fought against them. They were much harder to do and I got frustrated easily with them which of course made me angry and that led to a complete loss of concentration and it all sort of went downhill from there. I gave up after the third try realising that this was not going to work. He would just have to kill me because I wasn't spending all day trying to get it right. I went back to my quarters and, after a shower, settled in to catch up on the paperwork which only served to annoy me further. I sent the droid away and sat down to read some of the old journal my father had given me.

**-USING THE FORCE IS NOT SOMETHING THAT COMES NATURALLY.**

***ALTHOUGH THE FORCE SURROUNDS US AND IS ALL AROUND US IT IS NOT SUCH A SIMPLE THING TO USE. ONE MUST BE PATIENT AND CALM. TO FIND THE STRENGTH FROM WITH IN ONE MUST FIND THE STRENGTH FROM WITHOUT.-***

This was not helping. The journal said one thing and Lord Vader said another. Was there no middle ground? I was saved from my thoughts and frustrations when Jorae knocked at my door and asked if I wanted to go to the mess hall for supper with him. Food was the least complicated thing in my life right now and it was always a good thing to eat so I accepted his invitation and went to dine in the mess hall. At least this way, if Lord Vader decided to kill me it would be on a full stomach.

## **CHAPTER 2**

The ship was on full alert. We were chasing a Corellian Corvette and they were fighting back, the frequent flashes of laser fire illuminated my quarters like lightning. I had turned the lights out because it made it easier to watch. The *Devastator* moved with a silky grace through space, like some huge malevolent creature stalking its prey. I knew without a doubt that this Corellian ship would lose.

Below us was my home world of Tatooine. It sat in space, a great orange ball of sand and rock illuminated by its twin suns. The atmosphere was nothing more than a thin blue line caressing the planet's surface. For such a hostile place it seemed so very fragile from up here. Even the brutal suns, Tatoo1 and Tatoo2, were nothing more than brilliant lights against the blackness of the space we were gliding through.

On this huge ship, one barely even heard the engines, it was hard to believe we could move so fast. I would never have thought that something so enormous would be so elegant, but next to the bulky design of the tiny freighter the *Devastator* was the Prima Donna of space. How could they even hope to out run us? I had heard from Jorae that there are whispers of plans for an even larger Imperial destroyer. I wondered how it is possible to build a ship even larger than this one. The Empire, it seemed, liked its toys big and dangerous.

The small corvette was no match and it was taken on board the *Devastator*, swallowed whole into the main hanger. Now that there was nothing more to see from my quarters, I had to know what was going on so I ran down to the restricted area only to discover it was guarded, with no place to sneak by and no hope at all of just waltzing by the stoic stormtroopers. I decided to try some of the Force powers I had been learning. I took a deep breath and allowed the Force to move through me. It was easy to push the guards, just a little, and they let me by without a problem. I snuck around, climbed to the upper catwalk and watched everything from the high gantry. It was not good to get too close. I was so fascinated by everything that was going on I didn't hear Jorae climbing up beside me. I was a bit surprised that found me.

"What are you doing here? It is off limits." He hissed.

"How in the name of Sarlacc did you know I was here?"

"I went by your quarters and your protocol droid said something about you muttering 'gotta see this.' It didn't take me long to figure it out, you told me you liked it here."

"Well, now you found me, what is going on?"

"Lord Vader thinks the stolen Death Star plans are onboard the ship, it's a consulate ship." he said. "If Vader is wrong there will be hell to pay."

I smiled at him, "Lord Vader is never wrong. Now shut up and watch." I'd ask about what plans he was talking about later.

We heard the sound of laser fire and then there was an awful silence. I started to scramble down the gantry way but Jorae grabbed my arm. "No, it's bad enough that you snuck in here now stay put!"

"You think they killed everyone onboard?" I asked him.

Jorae shrugged. "I don't know but I can tell you I am glad I am not on board that ship. Hey look!" He pointed to the hatch that was blasted open. A group of Stormtrooper s escorting a young woman dressed in white. She couldn't have been more than a year or two younger than I was, she was scared, I could feel that but she didn't show it, she looked defiant and beautiful. They took her off to the detention block. I watched as Lord Vader came out of the corvette shortly after but instead of leaving right away he stopped and looked up at exactly the spot we were hiding. We both ducked down as flat as we could go.

"Buggery sand rats and blast!" I hissed.



He might not have seen us but he sure as Sarlacc knew I was there, right where I was not supposed to be. We got out of the docking bay just as the *Tantive IV* was being released back into space. A few moments later an explosion sounded on the portside.

"They destroyed it." I whispered running to look out of the nearest porthole. All that was left of the Corvette was twinkling bits of wreckage. They had taken only one prisoner which meant everyone onboard that ship had been killed. Jorae tugged on my sleeve. "We need to get away from here before we get caught."

I didn't have the heart to tell him it was too late for that.

As we walked back to my quarters it suddenly occurred to me that Jorae seemed to know an awful lot for a Lieutenant. "How did you know about these stolen plans? You seem to know all the good news."

Jorae grinned at me. "Before I began my Imperial career I was a slicer. I know how to find information."

"A slicer? They let you do that?"

"Yeah, I can hack into computers and disseminate information we get from the rebs. I am a communications officer then I got assigned to you, extra duty. They thought that we might get along, I guess, or maybe the idea was that I keep you out of trouble."

"I see." I said sarcastically. "Well, slicer, let's go and find out what is happening now."

"What do you mean?"

"You're going to show me how to get into this ship's mainframe. It's too complicated for me and I don't have clearance to even look in the database."

Jorae stopped and stared at me. "Not on your life."

I smiled at him sweetly and it crossed my mind that I could maybe even push him to do what I was asking by using the Force, but I didn't want to do that. Jorae was the only person aside from Lord Vader who spoke to me on this ship, besides I was betting if I tried any sort mind push again Lord Vader would feel it and I was pretty sure I was already in big poodoo for sneaking about in places I was not supposed to be. So I did the next best thing, I whined.

"Oh please...it doesn't have to be anything huge but I bet your clearance is way better than mine."

He made a face but he finally gave in.

"Great! I need a lesson in how to use this ship's system anyway. It is a whole other world in comparison to where I come from." I told him as we walked to my office.

I got my droid to fetch us 'caf and we got down to work. Jorae wasn't kidding about knowing his way around the computer system. He showed me how to use the consol and how to bypass some of the blocks in place.

"You should ask Lord Vader if you can get a better clearance level." He said. "You sort of need it for what he's asking you to do."

"Oh yes, I will just march into his office and request that right away." I made a face at him. "Can't you fiddle around with it or something?"

He didn't even think about it. "Uhhmmm no."

I made a face but I didn't push the issue. "So where are we headed?" I asked him. He brought up the navigational charts and the plotted course for the ship and pointed it out.

"Wonder why we are headed there, there are no planets nearby." I asked.

"That's where the Death Star is located."

"What the heck is a Death Star?" I asked.

"Only the most powerful weapon in the Empire." He replied smugly.

"And the plans for it were stolen?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Bet someone's head rolled for that."

Jorae nodded. "Well the Emperor doesn't send Vader and the five-oh-first after just anyone. Half the crew just about had heart attacks when the news hit that he was coming onboard. I would not want to be in her shoes." He said.

"Whose shoes?"

"Sheesh, where have you been? That was Princess Leia, the daughter of Bail Organa. She's an ambassador to the Imperial Senate. Vader suspects her of being part of the rebel alliance so her file is red-flagged."

"Rebels? You mean the Rebellion is actually a big thing."

"Don't you get any news where you come from?"

I gave him a look. "I come from Tatooine. I have heard talk among some of the star pilots but it was mostly just gossip. Anyway no one cares about this stuff out on the Rim."

"Tatooine? Oh well, that explains it."

"Where are you from then?" I asked.

"Coruscant." He said. "I grew up in Coco town."

"Oh." I nodded as if I knew what that meant and made a face that said I had no clues.

"It's an area of Coruscant, the Imperial City. It's short for Collective Commerce, lots of businesses and offices in that part of the city. My parents run a computer repair shop there." He laughed. "Have you even been to Coruscant?"

I nodded. "Well I landed there a short time ago, when I got started in my new job, but I stuck to the palace, then I was transferred here. I haven't exactly had much time to get a good look around the Imperial City, you know."

"The Imperial Palace?" He whistled. "You must be important."

"Not that I know of. I just got hired to do a job and that meant staying at the palace for a while." I said.

"Must be something special about you, I never heard of Lord Vader taking anyone ever along with him. What is the palace like?" he asked.

"Big." I said then added. "And opulent." I shrugged. "I can't really describe it."

"I have always wanted to go there." He said a little wistfully.

I did my best smuggler voice. "Stick with me kid and maybe you'll get your wish."

He grinned. He had a great grin. Jorae was a couple of year older than me and very cute in a boyish sort of way. He had sandy coloured hair and warm, brown eyes. He was average height and slender in build. He had the most devilish grin I had ever seen.

He gave me one of those grins now and nodded. "I get the feeling that with you, anything is possible."

It was my turn to smile. I was happy to be with someone almost my own age, who did not care that I was not dressed in the right sort of fashion and who didn't speak Lord Vader's name in a hushed and terrified whisper. He did, however, turn visibly white when a message came through saying I was to report to Lord Vader immediately.

I winked at him and said, "Paperwork." and left it at that. He walked me part way and then I was on my own. This was not going to be good but I didn't want Jorae to know I was scared.

Lord Vader was in his personal training room, which a fancy name for the huge empty space he usually practiced in. Neither I nor the sound of the door closing distracted him and I arrived in time to watch him destroy two specially designed training droids with his lightsaber. He was incredibly fast and I stood in awe at the grace and ease with which he fought. It was like watching some sort of strange mix

between dance and martial art. I had never seen a lightsaber before and he had not spoken of them as a weapon when he had begun my training. It was the most exquisite thing I had ever seen. He stopped once the droids were in pieces just stared at them for a moment and then he switched the lightsaber off, clipped it to his belt and turned his attention on me.

He made a hand gesture which said '*get over here*'. I obeyed and came forward to stand a whole lot closer to him. He towered over me, his hands on his hips. I waited.

"You will not practice your force powers on members of this crew again." He said.

I nodded.

"If you wish more access to restricted areas, you ask." He said.

I nodded.

"You will remain on this ship when I go to the Death Star space station."

"But why?" I blurted out.

There was a slight pause. He seemed to be counting to ten. "Because I wish it. Because you will obey me when I tell you to do something. Is that understood?"

Then I said the two words one should never say to a Dark Lord of the Sith who has just given you a clear and direct order.

"Yes, but..." and that is as far as I got.

There were no words to describe what it was like to be Force choked, but it was like being strangled from the inside out. A terrible, terrible sensation and Lord Vader made sure I knew what was happening to me by doing it slowly. I knew that Force powers could be fought with Force powers and in my small way I tried to fight back. It seemed I wasn't quite ready to die just yet and I used my anger and fear to push back at his Force grip. Sort of like a sand-mouse trying to stop a Krayt dragon, completely useless.

I stumbled backwards when he released me but instead of finding relief I found his large, black gloved hand at my throat. I guess in this case, if force powers were not going to scare me then his physical strength would have to do. I do not doubt for a moment that if he had wanted to he could have killed me with the Force. I knew I was not strong enough to stop him in the least but it was not what he wanted to accomplish. He wanted to terrify me and this way worked better. I could struggle against him with my own fledgling force powers but I had no chance against him physically. He pinned me up against the wall, his hand large enough to encompass my neck pretty much crush my throat in one go.

"You will obey me when I give an order." He said with anger laced through his words.

I nodded as best I could with his hand around my neck.

"You will remain on board this ship until I return."

I nodded some more even though it hurt.

"You will not practice your Force powers on members of this crew." He continued.

I nodded again gritting my teeth against the pain.

"This is the last time I shall repeat myself to you."

I nodded a fourth time and he let me go. I slid not so gracefully to the floor and touched my throat. It hurt.

He yanked me by the arm to my feet and made me face him. "If you disobey me in these matters I will eliminate you." He said and then, in a swirl of black cape and bad mood, he left the room.

I sank back down to the floor and stayed there, swallowing to make sure I still could. I was shaking and I couldn't stop. If he had wanted me frightened it had worked. I was scared out of my wits. It took me forever to find the ability to stand up

again and walk back to my quarters. When I arrived, there was a message on my data system informing me that my security clearance had been upgraded. When I looked I was rather surprised to discover it was a significant upgrade. A new ID card would be delivered as soon as possible.

I went into the bathroom to wash my face and saw the beautiful set of bruises that were beginning to blossom at my throat. They would serve as a reminder, the first of many, to never piss the Dark Lord off ever.

\*\*\*

On a star ship, time becomes irrelevant. The days are marked by watches and shifts while outside the ship is eternal darkness marred only by the brilliant pin prick of thousands of stars. Daylight is an illusion. I slept when I needed to, most of the time, and since I was not part of the regular crew I had no official watch duties and no regular watch duties meant no real routine.

Most of the time I could sleep okay but not after what had happened, too many images in my head. I closed my eyes and all I saw was the *Tantive IV* exploding even though I hadn't really watched the explosion my mind created the image for me. When I tried to shut that out this image would be replaced by Lord Vader or something else equally frightening. Finally, I gave up. Sleep was not going to come no matter how much I tried to force it because I simply could not relax. I got up and dressed in clothes that were easy to move in and made my way to the training room Vader had used. I hoped it would be empty at this time.

The room is basic and sparse. It has high ceilings which is why Lord Vader liked to use it for his lightsaber practice. It was in a quiet part of the ship, away from much of the general movement, hustle and bustle. There was a rack of hand to hand combat weapons many of which I had never seen before while others were familiar to me.

I kept the lights off because the room was not totally dark and I didn't want the lights on at all, not even a little bit. I began by stretching which felt better than I had imagined. My neck and throat still hurt to move so I was careful, but the muscles were glad to move. Instead of trying to force my way through the training that Lord Vader had shown me I stepped back into something from my past, something I had not done for a while.

I began to work my way through the basic Kata forms that Jyrki, the mechanic from back home had taught me. Looking back on it, he had taught me many things, not all of which held happy memories. I thought about him as I began to walk through the movements that started off slow and gradually increased in speed.

My father had hired him after a really bad experience with a mechanic out of Corellia. The Corellian had completely bugged up a major repair and while he was arguing about it with my father Jyrki had come over and asked me what the fuss was about. I had explained the problem to him and he had just listened.

"Bettin' I can fix 'er for yer." He had said.

I had just shrugged. "The hyper-drive is off, I think the regulator is blown but no one listens to me, you want to take a look-see go right ahead."

I walked with him into the engine room of the ship which my father and the Corellian, whose name I forget now, argued. He got right down to business, right down into the pit and had a good look. After a few moments he climbed back out. He didn't say a word he just marched out of the ship and straight up to my father and said.

"Ya aughta listen to the young lady here, yer ship has a blown regulator, just like she said." He had nodded at me as I was just appearing from the gangway. "There are a few other issues but basically the girl is right!"

"And who are you?" My father had asked.

Jyrki had stuck out his hand for my father to shake and said "Jyrki Andando, Merl Tosche sent me said yer might be looking for a good mechanic." He spoke with the strangest accent, pronouncing his name *Yourkeh* with a y instead of the j it had been spelled with. I had tried to place what planet he had come from by his accent but failed miserably.

My father had just stared at him and then, when I had nodded, right there on the spot hired him and fired the Corellian. A blown regulator should have been easy to spot and we all figured afterwards the Corellian was scamming my father. Besides if Merl Tosche had recommended him he must have been a really fine mechanic, which it turned out he was and so much more.

I had liked Jyrki right from the get go although I suppose looking back on it all it was natural that I would fall madly in love with him. Mid to late teens was the perfect age to fall for a roguish older man. He was somewhere around ten to twelve years older than I was. He was built tall and slender, rangy in a lean, hungry sort of way but he moved with such a powerful grace and strength that no one ever bothered him, not even the morons who would pick a fight with anyone.

He had an angular face with high cheek bones and very pale sky blue eyes that were deeply contrasted by his very long black hair and eyelashes. No matter how much time he spent in the suns light his skin remained ghostly pale. I would have killed for eyelashes like his. His smile was sweet and cocky all at the same time. There was always oil and grease under his finger nails no matter how much he scrubbed his large hands. We were fast friends from the get go. When I wasn't in classes I was at his side learning as much as I could about everything he had to teach me.

I know my father had checked him out but I had taken to Jyrki right away and that had said a lot, my father had learned to trust me and my weird instincts. While, that had been enough to get him hired, the absolute trust with his daughter came later and whatever had been said about me behind the closed door of my father's office was between the two of them. I knew there had been words but neither would talk of it no matter how much I pestered.

Once, a few months, he had started to work for us, I had asked Jyrki how he stayed so fit.

"Practice," He had said. "Hand me ther hypo-spanner, Mouse." Mouse had been his nickname for me because I was able to get into the tiniest of places, useful for him when we were fixing something too small for his large hands to fit.

"Practice of what?" I handed him the spanner, I was being nosey, in the six weeks he had been with us I had learned almost nothing about him personally and it was beginning to bother my Jawa like curiosity. I was as drawn to Jyrki as a tusken to junk.

He had rolled himself out from under the crawler we were working on and sat up wiping his hands on the cloth he kept for that purpose.

"Yer have grease on your nose." He had said handing me the cloth. I wiped at it and it made him laugh to see me making it worse.

"Here," He had said taking the rag from my hands and getting the grease off for me.

"So, practice what?" I had pressed, by now I was used to his method of diversion.

He had given me one of those 'you ain't gonna let this go' looks and I had stared right back at him shaking my head.

"Okay, but I can't just tell yer, I gotta show yer and if I am gonna show yer, yer gotta learn."

"Okay."

"Fine, I swing by after we're done here and yer cleaned up. Be wearing something easy to move in, this ain't no standing still thing, yer gonna sweat!" he had said and then had slid back under the crawler and demanded the small wrench.

I had waited for him full of sand jiggers in my belly because it was the first time we would be together and we weren't fixing something. He arrived on time and before we left he went inside and said his hullo to my father, I guessed he was telling him where we were headed and what we would be doing.

We drove on a speeder he had rescued from a scrap heap and brought back to life, it went very fast and I clung on to him for dear life. He took us out to a place just outside the city but not so far away that we would be in danger from Sand people. On one of the hilly places, we climbed up to the plateau and there we just stood for a few moments while I caught my breath.

He began to stretch and warm up, without words. I had tried to follow him. Every time I got the particular stretch right we would move on to the next when I did it wrong he would repeat it until I got it right. Once we were warmed up, he began to go through what he called Kata forms. Slowly at first, allowing me to follow and imitate, discover the movement for myself. It looked so easy when he did it and it felt so awkward for me to try and emulate. He did not stop, he just ran through the same basic motions again and again until I got the move more or less right and then moved on to the next. By the time he had run through a third of these moves I was shaking with exhaustion, my muscles were aching and protesting loudly.

Before I over did it completely he stopped. He handed me a canteen of water, gave me his jacket to keep me warm and told me to sit. I did as he asked without jokes or silly comments because this was a whole other Jyrki, not the grinning, kidding about mechanic I knew, but something completely different, something that could be deadly.

I had watched as he went back to working through the patterns he had taught me but instead of stopping he went further and began to get faster and faster until I could hardly keep up with his motion. I'd stretched out slowly, feeling the ache in my muscles that tomorrow would be stiff but not as much as I had imagined. The air at night was cold and I was beginning to feel that, but I stayed quiet and still because watching him move was pure magic. An hour later he too stopped, stretched out his muscles and drank from the canteen.

He had made a 'let's go' motion with his head and I followed him back down to the speeder. I took up my place behind him, wrapping my arms about his warm body and my head against the broad of his back as he drove us back to town. He dropped me off at the house, I stood there wanting to say something but not having any words. I had felt special being with him outside of the docking bay.

He had looked at me with his pale blue eyes and said. "The man who taught me is dead. There's damned few about now who knows this sorts of moves, and them that do is best to be keeping quiet about it. Old teachings, long forgotten and not to be spoken of, can yer do that? Can yer keep a secret?"

I had nodded. I would have done almost anything for him.

"Right then, I practice that every night after work in case yer wonderin'. Yer's welcome to join me."

"I'd like that." I had told him.

He nodded and then kick started the speeder into action, saying with a grin as he left "Right then, see yer tomorrow at the bay, we gots a lot to do, that blasted coupler should be there, I need yer tiny hands, Mouse" And with that he sped off to his home, where ever that was. I went inside, more tired than I could ever have

imagined. I said my goodnights to my father and dropped on my bed falling asleep immediately. For the next four years I went with him almost every night whenever it was possible, and worked out along with him, learning this secret ancient form of martial art.

Now in this room on board this Imperial Star Destroyer, I could hear his deep gentle voice and feel his calm manner as I began to walk through the ancient movements he had taught me. Just like Jyrki used to do, I began slowly and worked my way up to a speed that when I first began to learn it, had never seemed possible for me. There was a hypnotic rhythm to the sequences and I fell into the music of it right away, forgetting everything and everyone around me. In my mind, with my eyes closed I was back on Tatooine standing alongside the first man I truly loved.

Jyrki's lessons had not only been about movement and perfection of the action but also about the mediation upon the movements, the breathing techniques that accompanied the moves, I had learned everything he had taught me eagerly, because as well as being crazy about him, I loved the peace and the simplicity of the movement. It was like dancing and I had loved to dance but there was more to these fight forms than just movement.

Now as I began the faster movements I could see how they all tied together, I could see the threads of the Force that wound around everything and how they moved about me when I got the particular move just right. It was pure magic and I felt light and free, for the first time in a long time I felt a great weight lift from my shoulders.

The longer I worked through each movement, the more powerful the feeling of connection got the more light I could see in everything that was around me. I could hear Jyrki's voice whispering in the darkness, telling to look around and see the world with open eyes, that everything was connected. That there were no coincidences and everything was chosen. It was then, that suddenly a stunning realization came to me all at once, a knowing slid into place that gave me the shakes and made me stop cold.

I was shocked that I had not seen the similarity before. That Jyrki had been force sensitive and I had not known it, astonished me, that he had hidden it from me even though it must have been as plain as day that I had the same weird ways, somehow stung. He, like my father, had always encouraged me to hide it. "Keep it in the dark." He had told me. "It's dangerous." Looking back now I could see he had been terribly afraid, but of what, from who?

I suddenly realized was that I was no longer alone in this room. The steady rhythmic in and out of breathing told me that Vader had joined me. He said nothing and the lights remained off. He could see very well in the dark.

He went to the weapon's rack and pulled out two of the long fighting staves. I had never seen this particular design before but I knew the weapon. Jyrki and I had often sparred with long sticks, once I had gotten good enough; it was my favourite form of hand to hand fighting. The second was knives but I had only been taught those because Jyrki felt it was a good form of self defence and I needed this.

Lord Vader tossed one to me and I caught it. We circled each other and I could feel the air crackle around us. When he swung I could see it and defended the blow. The crack of the staves against each other was loud. Again we circled, again he attacked again I parried. This was a dance, elegant and dangerous. Lord Vader, for such a large man, moved with an unbelievable grace and I felt we were oddly well suited to each other, even though I knew he was far better than I could ever hope to be. I was smaller, more agile where he had strength and experience on his side.

For every attack he made I had a block, I could see what was coming through the light of the Force. We continued at this level for a while and then he upped the ante. Suddenly there was a drawing of energy, I felt it crackle about us and he moved faster than before. It was harder to keep up with this and instead of easily deflecting

each blow I had to work at it, duck and twist away. I was on the wrong end of several hard knocks and got the idea that he was toying with me. It was a dance with steps that were very new to me although I had learnt the basic steps well the sudden advance in complexity had me at a distinct disadvantage. He could see almost every counter move I was going to make, I was certain of it, but I kept my calm.

We would break apart and circle around one another, I, to catch my breath, he perhaps to find out my next move. Once more he attacked but this time instead of a simple defence I faked a step and then jumped, twisting up on the staff using it as a lever to gain height and kicked him full in the chest, it sent him flying. That was a trick Jyrki had taught me, think one move but execute another.

I leaned on the staff, my own breathing heavy as I was beginning to get tired.

He stood up and acknowledged the move with a nod, I knew I would never, ever get to pull that stunt again, I was certain of it, but it had been worth it, just once to put him on the ground. We circled again. His attack was more furious than anything he had previously thrown at me. He had been playing with me, toying with me, testing my abilities. I could barely keep up with it, relentless he was, and eventually, as it had to happen, I stumbled backwards, fell down hard and lay on the ground with the end of his staff lifting my chin. We stayed in this position for a moment and then I flicked the staff away from my face with the back of my hand and got up. I walked away from him and turned the lighting up a bit. I am certain he could have fought all night but I was now tired and I had had enough.

I wiped the sweat from my face with my extra shirt, drank from the water container I had with me and stared at him. He was not even breathing hard. He put the staves back in their place and walked over to me. Took a hold of my chin and with the tips his fingers and twisted my head from one side to the other, looking at my neck. His touch was surprisingly gentle and he let go of me without leaving any more marks.

"Someone has taught you in the ways of the Jedi." He said. "Why did you not tell me this?"

"I have no idea what Jedi Ways are." I said. "A mechanic on Tatooine taught me to how to fight so that I could protect myself. He said it was an ancient form of combat, old teachings he had said, that's all." I sat down on the floor and began a slow stretch to cool my muscles down. Lord Vader sat on the bench that was nearest me.

"Never the less, you were well taught." He said. There was a touch of admiration in his voice.

I looked up at him but it was impossible to tell what he was thinking. "Who exactly were the Jedi?" I asked. "I mean I've heard the fairy stories of super human strength and strange magics but who were they really?"

"Traitors to the Empire." He answered.

"And other than that?"

"They were people with power who were taught how to use their talents. They were the guardians of the Old Republic, but they were too arrogant to see what was right under their noses." The anger in his voice was palpable. "They were wiped out."

"All of them?"

"In so far as it was possible."

"Who killed them all?"

"I did, the Emperor did, and the clones did along with others loyal to the cause and capable of doing such a thing."

I was silent. I had no idea what to think of this.

"The one who taught you in the Jedi ways, did you love him?" Vader asked suddenly.



The question took me by surprise, but I answered it anyway. "Yes, yes I did." I wondered what Lord Vader would know about love.

"Was he also in love with you?"

I shrugged. "Maybe, I don't know." I said, and it was the truth. No matter what, Jyrki had avoided anything that had to do with getting too emotionally close which eventually included avoiding me as well.

He had only kissed me that one time and it had happened one night after we had worked on a particularly stubborn engine. After it had been fixed he had decided a celebration was in order so we were both drinking my father's moonglow. I could still remember this moment with kisses so sweet, so full of longing and desire that I hadn't known what had hit me.

I had been in love with him for a long time but I had no real idea of what to do about it. We had been sitting on the ramp of the ship we had just finished fixing, sharing my father's homemade brew from the same cup when suddenly our eyes had just met and it had felt as though Tatooine's twin suns had just collided in my gut.

He had sighed softly, as though he were letting go of some pent up long unanswered question and then, without warning he had cupped the back of my neck with his hand, pulled me to him and then he had kissed me.

It had been my first full real kiss and I could still recall the tingle of electricity as our lips met. I could also recall the power between us which had flared up when his kiss had gone from tentative and careful to something a whole lot more, when his tongue had touched mine a hunger had flared in me so powerful I had let it control me completely giving Jyrki my heart and soul all in a single moment. I had kissed him back with utter abandon giving into something deeper and far more primal than I had ever known. As his hands had caressed my body all I had known was that I wanted something much more and when I had moved to sit on his lap it still wasn't enough.

I am certain that had things not stopped when they did our lives might have been vastly different but something had spooked him. I had been so deeply involved in the desire and emotion he had stirred up in me that when he had suddenly pulled apart and got up I felt as though he had slapped me.

"This is wrong Mouse." Was all he had uttered leaving me bewildered. "This is a huge mistake and I can't do this. Go home." And with that he had pushed me roughly away from him and he left me all alone to try and figure out what it was exactly that I had done wrong leaving me confused and devastated.

He never spoke about what had happened between us instead it had been business as usual the next day except everything was different. He had all but ignored me and it had hurt. He had broken my heart in some small way and it was the most terrible feeling in the world. I couldn't eat or sleep and I couldn't even talk about it with anyone because I had felt too afraid, too ashamed. Two weeks later I had taken the job at Jabba's and shortly after that Jyrki had left without a word. Still, to this day, I ached at the memory of it all and not for the first time did I wonder if I was still in love with Jyrki after all this time.

Vader nodded. "I sense much pain in you when you think this man, why?"

I shrugged, "He left me. He came into my life, I fell in love with him and then one day he was just gone. He had told my father he needed to go and that was that. He just left, he didn't even say goodbye. My father always thought he was running from something."

"He was." Vader said. "He was running from the Emperor, he was running from me."

I sighed. Pulled my knees up to my chest and hugged them closely.

"But he was clever to pass on what he knew in such a devious manner." Vader said. "Tell me, did he ever tell you anything about the ways of fighting he was teaching you?"

"There was a mantra he used to say sometimes before we would start the work out." I could hear Jyrki's voice as I remembered the words. *"There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is the Force."*

Vader nodded slowly. "That is the Jedi Code. But it is a lie. There is emotion, you have said so yourself, you loved your teacher. It is arrogance to think that beings can void themselves of their emotions. There are other ways."

"Other ways?" I asked. "How can I learn these ways?"

"I will show you the path." He said.

I looked up at him and he looked at me. There was so much I wanted to know, so much I needed to ask but I got the feeling he would not answer any more serious questions. I was in such turmoil, nothing was as it seemed. My whole world was changing, turning upside down and I didn't know what to do about it.

I jumped when he suddenly broke the silence, *"Peace is a lie, there is only passion. Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, I gain power. Through power, I gain victory. Through victory, my chains are broken. The Force shall free me."* He said, never taking his eyes off me. I wished I could have seen his face, staring at him was like staring into some awful, endless black mirror.

"I sense much passion in you, much hunger for knowledge." He said.

I nodded, wondering, not for the first time just how much of my thoughts and feelings he could really sense. I thirsted after knowledge and it seemed I could never ever learn enough about anything I was interested in.

"You now have access to the archives, there is much there for you to learn." He said. This was not a suggestion.

I suddenly needed to ask the question that had been burning at me since the last time we had been together.

"My Lord, why is it you do not want me to accompany you on the Death Star?"

I half expected him to get angry again but it seemed this was a good mood day.

"There will be many things that I must take care of. Tarkin and the rest of the self styled, petty tyrants who think they own the galaxy would be only too happy to have me distracted. You, girl, are a distraction, with your untrained Force powers and I cannot have that, it would serve their purpose perfectly. Especially Tarkin, who would find a way to use your attachment to me to his advantage and if you are to be used to anyone's advantage it shall be mine."

"You would use me to your advantage?" I asked flatly.

"I would kill you if it served my purpose." He said coldly.

I looked away from his gaze and sighed deeply.

He stood up and I watched as he paused for a moment, towering above me. "Your Jedi mechanic friend betrayed you when he left you. He was not just running from the Empire, he was running from his feelings for you." He said and I sensed he was angry, but I didn't know why.

I didn't want to believe that what he had said about Jyrki was real but it had a ring of truth to it which I could not deny and it made me incredibly sad. This sadness was a palpable ache but I choked it back. "Probably."

Lord Vader nodded, "You fought well and you have some skill in this area. We will practice again when I return." And with a dramatic swirl of his long black cloak he left as silently as he had come in.

I waited until the door had closed before I laid my forehead on my knees and wept until I had no tears left to cry. I sat on the floor for a long time just being, not

thinking, not crying, not anything. When I could no longer sit on the cold floor I made my way back to my quarters and I fell in to a deep and dreamless sleep. When I woke up, Lord Vader had already left the ship and the *Devastator* was on her way elsewhere. I felt the lack of his presence on the ship keenly and wondered just how deep this peculiar bonding went between the teacher and the student.

\*\*\*

I woke up early but decided to stay in my quarters because I wanted to be alone. It was easy to work without Lord Vader's presence but my mind was very far away as I sat with the data pad on my lap staring out of the window into the great nothingness of space. When I was very small I used to look up at it and wonder what it was like to be amongst all those twinkly stars, but when I got out here I discovered that it was nothing like those dreams at all. All those stars that twinkle so beautifully are just pin pricks of light and the darkness outside is deadly and cold. My brain buzzed with too much to think about. I also work to do but it was the least interesting thing on my mind. I had skimmed through the old journal my father had given me but could find nothing to ease my troubled thoughts. All I knew was in conflict and who ever had written the journal felt the same as I did.

**-The Force is like a sword. It has two faces. It can be used with finesse and skill, and will slice cleanly, elegantly through all. Or it can be used without skill; a simple crude tool that hacks it's way blindly through everything it meets. The weapon is merely a tool; it is the user who defines the use. To use the Force with finesse, takes years of dutiful practice and calm meditation.-**

*I hate this. I hate the work, the dullness of it all. Dutiful meditation, pah! I cannot bear this day that drags out before me like a wounded Bantha. How can my mistress speak of such drivel? Does she not know how much easier it is to tap in to the energy I get from being angry? Yesterday, I was in tune with the Force as I never have been before. I reached deep within myself, thought of my father and what he was, what he had done and allowed that anger to flow through me. It was sweet, a sweetness unlike anything I have ever known. I will master the Force it shall not master me.*

I stared out into the darkness. Had Lord Vader been right? Had Jyrki really been a Jedi? I knew there was truth in Lord Vader's words, I had seen it, I could almost always tell when someone was lying to me and Lord Vader had not lied. In fact, he was one of the few people in my life that had, so far, never lied to me. He spoke the truth as he saw it, in some strange way that had comforted me. I wondered, not for the first time, where Jyrki had gone and if he was still alive. I was certain he was, certain that the tenuous thread which had connected us would have somehow alerted me if he were no longer alive. I wondered if he ever thought about me.

I closed my eyes, just for a moment, because I wanted to connect with the Force. I wanted to connect with Lord Vader. I let myself slip into a that strange state of being relaxed yet aware at the same time and let myself open up hoping to find him but quite suddenly I hit with a terrible, gut-wrenching sensation. I had to cover my mouth to keep from crying out loud. A feeling of a great and sudden terror coupled with the most dreadful pain and as quickly as the sensations hit me so they suddenly vanished, leaving me breathless. I had no idea what had just happened but whatever it was it had been swift and terrible. I tried to catch my breath, to relax enough to stretch out with the Force again to see if I could maybe learn some more about what had just happened but I could feel nothing more, almost as if where once, something

vibrant had been, was now a great void. A few moments later the alarm claxons in the ship went off, scaring the wits out of me.

"Blast!" I yelled at no one in particular then decided to see what Jorae was up to maybe he could shed some light on what all the noise and fuss was about.

Jorae worked in the Communications Center and it was busy as all hell when I went in. He looked up from his consol when I tapped him on the shoulder. Since I had clearance now no one bothered about me being here, no one was willing to argue about it or take it up with Lord Vader. I guess it beat sneaking about the ship but it took some of the fun out of it.

"What's the hell is going on?" I asked when he took off his headset and looked up at me.

"Something really big just came across the boards, the Core News Feeds all went mad a couple of minutes ago, something about a planet being destroyed." He said.

"A what? A planet?" I asked, suddenly my legs were shaky. "A whole planet?"

"Whoa!" Jorae grabbed me a chair and I sat down. "You just went as white as stormtrooper armour, are you okay?" He asked.

I nodded. I didn't think that telling him I believed had just felt the destruction of that planet as though I had been hit in the stomach would do much good. Jorae had said on more than one occasion that he didn't believe in the Force and no amount of rumours about Lord Vader's weird power was going to convince him otherwise. I had said that I guessed he had never seen Lord Vader in action. Jorae had shaken his head and said that so far he had managed to stay under the Vader-radar. I had giggled at the joke. Jorae thought that he was very funny, and, sometimes he was. Lord Vader, on the other hand, was anything but.

"So, what do the news feeds say?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Not a lot, there is nothing specific, no details, just that all major shipping lanes are all closed and everything is being rerouted due to space rubble."

"Do they say what planet?"

"Alderaan." He said. "The shock wave warnings are so many that we can't keep up with it."

"A whole planet is gone. Alderaan is gone?" I said in a whisper. "How could such a thing happen?"

Jorae frowned. "It's very confused. No one knows."

I sat back in my chair and fought to remain calm, it made no sense to me and I felt a deep wave of sorrow for all those people who were so suddenly killed. I got up to leave and Jorae looked at me, worried.

"I'm fine, go back to work." I said. And Just then someone yelled "Here it comes! Hang on to something!" Then shockwave from the destruction of Alderaan hit the ship, rocking it like a tiny speeder in a sand storm.

Too late to find something to hold on to, I was flung backwards and landed on the floor, others hung on to their consoles for dear life. The ship bucked once and rocked for only a few moments more and then stabilized out. Everyone went back to business and I got up off the floor. Jorae gave me an 'are you alright look?' and I nodded, I'd been half strangled by Lord Vader, landing on the floor with my butt wasn't anything I should worry about. Jorae was polite though, he never asked about the bruises.

I left the Communications center and wandered aimlessly. I could not begin to fathom that someone or something had obliterated an entire planet full of living, breathing beings. I could not imagine how I would even begin to feel if that had been my home world. Everything I had even known and loved suddenly gone in the blink of an eye. It was unimaginable and terrifying to think about.

Without thinking about where I was going I made my way through the ship and ended up making a wrong turn somehow. I found myself in a small place near the bow of the ship, a place where everything was silent. There was a view port and nothing else. I didn't know what use this space was and much less cared. It was peaceful and empty so I stood looking out of the view port and thought about home. Sometime later when I made it back to my quarters there was a package waiting for me. Even in the midst of disaster the mail somehow managed to make it through. I expected that it was from my family but it was not. My fingers trembled as I read the letter that accompanied the small parcel.

*My Dear Miss Gabriel,*

*I trust that this letter will find you well and enjoying your work with Lord Vader aboard the ISD Devastator. I wished to tell you how much I enjoyed our chance meeting on Coruscant and, once again, to apologize for my rude behaviour. It is not in my nature to act so rashly. I hope that you will not hold it against me the next time we should happen to meet.*

*A recent visit to a rather interesting planet brought you to mind. I found, quite by chance, a set of antique zenji hair sticks, similar to the ones you had in your hair the night we met, and could not resist the desire to give them to you as a gift. I hope that they will bring you as much pleasure as I had while being with you. I remain, respectfully yours,*

*Cpt. Thrawn*

I sat down on the edge of the chair and gingerly opened the slender box which was beautifully wrapped in a silk so fine it was almost nonexistent. Inside, lying on velvet so red it almost glowed were two of the most exquisite zenji hair sticks I had ever seen. That he had likened them to the ones I had worn in my hair that night on the balcony was almost a joke. The zenji hair sticks I had were plain and simple, a gift from one of my father's pilots, a woman who had come from Ruusan, called Bedi Nuale.

She had fascinated me with her incredibly long, curly hair which she always put up with hair sticks. I was very young at the time. It was she who taught me my first serious piloting skills and it was she who had taught me the subtle skill of using zenji hair sticks to hold up one's hair. Not as easy it looked but she was a patient teacher and I was a willing pupil. Before she left for another job on some other planet, saying Tatooine was just too hot for her, she gave one of her sets of zenji sticks. They were, slender, plain, carved from the bones of some long dead animal and much used. I loved them.

The zenji sticks that Thrawn had found were truly antique and extraordinarily beautiful. Made from a silvery metal that almost appeared to have its own light, the slender sticks had been ornately carved and were finished at the top with a large, faceted bead made from a polished milky white stone. When I played with the sticks, so the light played with the stones, it revealed a fiery blue- green core that danced like fire within the heart of the beads. I gasped. I knew exactly what this was and it was as incredibly rare as it was incredibly precious, milky ma'arilite, a stone so scarce it was fabled to have magical qualities. There were many legends and stories told about it.

I shuddered to even think what these hair sticks must have cost. I set them back in their beautiful box and sighed. I re-read his letter and didn't know what to think, I didn't even know how to reply to it. Somehow a simple thank-you did not seem enough for such a precious gift. I got up and went back to staring out of the view port, lost in troubled thoughts. Today, it seemed, nothing would bring me peace, not even such a beautiful gift from a man I barely knew.

As annoyed as I was with it, it was my work that kept me from going insane. It kept me busy and occupied where otherwise I would have gone mad from sheer boredom. Time can pass very slowly on a ship and with Lord Vader gone I was left very much to my own devices.

On a daily basis, there were over a hundred memos and letters to answer and deal with many of them from lesser offices and much of it mindless inter-office news, various updates, many invitations to gallery openings and city functions, Imperial dinners and dances and so on, and in between some fairly important letters that needed Lord Vader's direct attention. I had discovered early on that he had mainly ignored all of this stuff and never answered any of his correspondence unless it was from the Emperor himself. I had been uncertain at first how to deal with this and after some soul searching had ended up asking him if he wanted me to take care of it as it was, after all, my job. His response had been terse and unpleasant, bureaucracy was something he loathed, but after a few days of some serious adjustments we found a happy medium.

I read through all the correspondence unless it was marked as coming from the Office of the Emperor with the Emperor's personal seal, in which case I set it aside, unopened, in a separate data pad that was encrypted and would hand it to Lord Vader personally. I organized his calendar, meetings and attendance at certain functions that could not be avoided. I answered the mail that was considered lesser and unimportant and replied to the invitations as soon as they came in. Most of the time his social calendar was left alone but every now and then there were Palace functions he was obligated, as the second highest official in the Empire, to attend. So far we had not had to deal with anything of this nature yet but I was sure that wouldn't last.

At first this had been a nightmare because the previous personal assistants had not lasted long enough to come up with any sort of organization at all, so everything was chaos. Now, I had it all running smoothly and Lord Vader had actually seemed impressed with the last update I had handed him. Everything was organized and neat, easy to get to without wading through a ton of nonsense. His private correspondence was kept private and separate, his social calendar was easy to read and best of all it was hand delivered to him on a daily basis when he was around and when he wasn't about I encrypted the lot and sent it to him via direct, secure communications link and when that was not possible, unless it was urgent, it waited until his return. I had my protocol droid file everything in the main databank, categorized, alphabetized and so on. I think it was actually happy for once. I was still having a hard time getting it to stop calling me 'mistress.' I suppose it is a programmed response and no amount of pleading or asking or swearing at the droid will change it.

I had time to spend searching through the archives that Lord Vader had mentioned. They were a labyrinth of information and I had no idea where to even begin looking. I had begun my search by looking for anything Sith related but of course as it is the way of such things I got diverted and ended up reading the Battle of Ruusan and a Sith Lord named Darth Bane. I was so swept away by the history I was reading I did not notice the door chimes until Jorae over rode the lock and tapped me on the shoulder. He gave me the fright of my life and it was a good thing I had been sitting reading or else my fight reflex would have knocked him on his ass.

He looked very serious, his face was a white as desert blasted bones and his fingers shook. I put the data-pad down.

"Jorae, what is it?"

"They blew it up." He said.

I shook my head, "Who blew what up?"

He sat down in the chair across from me. "The Death Star. It has been destroyed. Almost everyone on board is dead." He said, "We just got word through secure channels."

It was my turn to turn pale. "Lord Vader?" I did not believe he was on the space station when it blew up, I was certain I would have felt something, anything, but I didn't know if my strange talents were strong enough to sense his life force from so far away.

Jorae shook his head. "He and a couple of others managed to make it to an outpost near the Yavin system, we are on our way now to pick them up."

I let out the breath I had been holding.

"Wow there's going to be hell to pay for this." I said, "Who was in charge of the space station?"

"Well, Governor Tarkin was but he didn't survive." Jorae said. "I guess the next person who would be responsible would be Lord Vader and he was supposed to get the stolen plans back."

"Not good." I whispered.

Jorae nodded in agreement. "I have only ever heard of the Emperor's temper, but I can tell you, I am sure glad I am not in Vader's boots. The Emperor is going to be really pissed about this because the Death Star was his baby. It was almost twenty years in the making, all that time and money gone to waste. Someone's head is going to roll for certain."

I tried to remember to breathe and sat back in my chair. "What is our ETA to the outpost?"

"About six hours." He said. "I thought you should have some warning, considering...."

I looked at him. "Considering what?"

"Considering that when Vader comes back he's not going to be very happy and if he has to go to Coruscant to meet with the Emperor you will probably have to go with him, it is part of your job, right?"

I took a deep steadying breath and nodded.

Jorae got up. "I have to get back to work." He said.

"Okay, thanks for the warning."

He grinned. "No problem, I have to tell you though I am sure glad I am not in your shoes." And he ducked through the doorway as fast as he could.

I stood at the view port and looked out at the stars. Suddenly this universe did not seem so peaceful and settled anymore. I did not think that Lord Vader would take his anger directly out on my, especially if I kept out of his way but I was worried about having to return to the Imperial Palace. Why did there have to be so many complications?

\*\*\*

I had fallen asleep in my chair more exhausted than I realised. The com went off loudly, making me jump so that the data pad on my lap fell crashing to the floor as I reached for the comm to answer it.

"What?" I yelled crossly.

The officer of the watch ignored my bad temper and informed me I was to report to the main hanger bay right away, that Lord Vader would be arriving shortly. I quickly gathered my work datapad and made my way through the corridors to the hanger bay.

The place was busy and loud, space was being cleared and the klaxon sounded as the magnetic seal was opened. I watched from where from where I was Lord Vader's TIE Advanced slid gracefully into the docking bay. The magnetic seal was

locked back into place and the warning klaxons stopped. I walked down to the gantry that had been placed against the ship so that Lord Vader could exit and waited. From the looks I got from most of the men around me, they, like Jorae, were awfully glad not to be in my shoes. Lord Vader descended to the ground, gave his ship a quick once over, I followed his gaze and noticed the carbon scoring on the hull. Someone had hit it pretty hard.

When he was satisfied, he spoke to the deck officer and ordered some further repairs on his ship then he turned to me, he said nothing but started to walk towards the exit of the hanger bay. I had to trot at his side to keep up.

"You will cancel all engagements in my calendar until further notice." He said.

"Yes, my Lord." I nodded making the appropriate notes in my data-pad.

"Have there been any communiqués from his Excellency?" He asked.

"Yes, My Lord. Two arrived late last night at twenty-three hundred hours and one came in an hour ago." I said. "The encrypted data-pads are in my office I wasn't cert ...." He cut me off with a wave of his hand.

"You will bring them to me in my chambers, right away." He said.

"Yes, my Lord."

"What are you waiting for, I want those datapads now!"

"Yes, my Lord." I said. I ran to my quarters and picked up the datapad with the Emperor's communiqués and then headed to Lord Vader's chambers where he paced about like a caged animal.

He snatched the datapad from my hands read it, deleted the contents, then handed it back to me.

"We will be going to Coruscant, there you will accompany me. You will not be returning to this ship so do what you need to do to ready yourself. Do not waste time."

"Yes, My Lord." I said and waited to see if there was anything else.

Lord Vader turned away from me. "You may go." He said.

I nodded. "Yes, my Lord." I said but I paused, I wanted to know what had happened and I wanted to know what would happen when we reached Coruscant. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask when Lord Vader snarled at me.

"What is it, Miss Gabriel?"

I shook my head and then said without thinking. "I wanted to say," I paused and then with a sigh continued, "that I am relieved to see you alive."

Lord Vader stopped and turned around, regarded me for a moment, probably as surprised as I was by my statement, and then said, "Your concern for my welfare has been duly noted, Miss Gabriel. You are dismissed."

"Yes, my Lord." I said and hurried away from his chambers as fast as I could, not that I had much to pack, but I wanted to be as far away from Lord Vader as possible. He was furious and he was not pleasant to be around when he was in one of his moods.

\*\*\*

The trip from the *Devastator* to the landing pad on Coruscant was a long and tense one. A pilot I didn't know was at the helm and both Lord Vader and I, along with two Stormtroopers and my protocol droid sat in the back. No one said a single word during the entire trip. I busied myself with sorting through files, making the necessary adjustments to Lord Vader's appointment calendar but mostly I was doing everything I could not to look at him and not to pester him with questions. My mind was in turmoil.

We landed and disembarked. There was a small reception party of more Imperial Troopers and Palace officials. Lord Vader said nothing as he swept by them.



They waited for him to pass then followed after him wordlessly. I, not knowing what else I was supposed to do, trotted along after them. We walked through the palace in silence. All around us were people who stared and then hurriedly turned away. It was not comforting. Lord Vader stopped when he had reached the Grand Entrance which was the place that led to all other places.

It was a huge foyer with an enormous stairwell in the center of it that led upwards in two different directions. He stopped at the foot of the stairs and dismissed everyone except for me with a snarl and a wave of his hand. The Troopers all saluted smartly, turned on their collective heels and marched off in one direction, the palace officials, our welcoming committee, all bowed and scurried away in another. He climbed the stairs and I followed.

On the third floor was the entrance to the passage that led to the Emperor's private audience rooms. I took a deep breath but before he opened the doors Lord Vader turned to me.

"When I have need of you, I will summon you." He said.

I looked up at him and blinked. He could have told me that before I had climbed all these stairs.

"Yes, my Lord." I said and turned to leave.

"Miss Gabriel," he said.

I stopped and turned around again. "Yes Lord Vader?" I asked, sensing that he was choosing his words with care.

"You would do well to stay out of sight. No more incidents with your Human Resources friends." He said.

So, he had heard about that as well. I made a face and without even thinking about it said. "What the hell am I supposed to do?" The air crackled just a little as he just stared at me. I put my hand over my mouth to stop anything else from just slipping out. "Oops."

"Go file something." He suggested and then he opened the ornate door and went through it. I resisted the urge to peek before it closed silently. I wanted nothing to do with the Emperor. If Lord Vader feared him, I could not imagine how I would feel.

I stood in the hallway for a moment and then made my way back down the stairs, through the main foyer to the part of the palace where my apartment was. I still had the key so I thought I would try it out. I was a little surprised when it still worked. Even more to my surprise was that my protocol droid was waiting for me along with my luggage. I guessed this was still a home of sorts after all, but it didn't feel like that, it felt like a prison.

In spite of his last words to me I actually had nothing to file and I was mostly caught up on the office day to day work. The disbanding of the Imperial Senate had done away with some of the internal memos and nonsense, taking the bureaucracy out into the regional governors' hands. As Lord Vader was neither a regional governor nor a member of the Imperial senate my job was not really affected all that much by the change. I expected this would cause headaches a little later on, once the initial mess was all sorted out. In the mean time things were quiet, and a lot of people were out of a job. I suspected that the bunch from Human Resources was probably going insane with all the paperwork they would have, served them right.

I showered and changed into clothes that were a little more suited to the palace, still my simple Tatooine fashion but I felt grimy after the journey and wanted to dress up a little. I put my hair up with the beautiful zenji sticks Thrawn had given and wondered, briefly, if he had ever received my thank-you letter because he was probably busy off somewhere in the galaxy trying to dominate something like the rest of the Imperials I knew.

I had thought about maybe spending time doing research in the main archives now that I had access but then reconsidered because what I wanted to do more than research was relax. I grabbed one of my favourite books and I went to my favourite quiet place, the old part of palace with the great balcony and view. It was still very early in the day and the air had a chill to it that I didn't think I would ever get used to. I was glad that I had brought a wrap with me just in case. I dragged one of the old chairs from the inner room on to the balcony and I curled up in it to read.

One of the up sides of this job was that I now I had more time to read. In difference to many of my acquaintances back home I actually liked to read and devoured any book that had been given to me. It had gotten around the pilots that used our docking pad regularly that I was a reader and they would often give me books that had been left behind or that they had already read. The book I had now was among my favourites and it was easy for me to lose myself in the story.

I had been sitting, reading for about two hours when the hair on the back of my neck suddenly stood on end and I realized I was no longer alone and that I knew who it was.

"Good Morning Captain Thrawn." I said without getting up or turning around.

He walked up to me, as if the act of speaking to him had given him the permission to do so, and stood beside the chair to look out over the city.

"I heard that Lord Vader had returned to the palace." He said. "I had wondered if you were with him."

"And you came here to see if you were right?" I asked, putting my book, open faced, down on my lap.

He turned his attention to me. "Still the sharp tongue, I see." He said.

I stared at him for a moment. "It matches your caustic wit." I replied tartly.

"Touché." He said with a smile which disarmed the tension between us. "How was your tour of duty then? Did you enjoy life on an ISD?"

I nodded. "I don't know if enjoy is the right word, but it was interesting."

"When will you be heading back?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know. In fact I'm not sure that I will be returning to the *Devastator*."

Thrawn turned to look at me once more. "Leaving the service of Lord Vader so soon?"

I shook my head, "Not that I know of, he just told me that I would not be returning to the ship, he said nothing about me no longer working for him." I said. "I don't know any more than that. Lord Vader isn't big on giving out details."

Thrawn smiled. "Well, I have heard he can be evasive."

"I am sure he has his reasons, Captain," I said a little more sharply than I meant to. "In the mean time I have some time off to enjoy the peace and quiet, if you can call this planet that. I thought I would catch up on some reading."

"You mean to tell me, Miss Gabriel, that you have a day off and you are going to spend it sitting alone on this isolated balcony reading a book?" He was genuinely surprised.

"Well, yes, actually." I said. "I am to keep a low profile today. It seems the rumours of my little temper tantrum with the HR girls has made the rounds." I shrugged, "This is a good place to keep a low profile."

"I see." He said in a way that let me know he didn't.

"You disapprove of reading?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not at all but reading is an activity that can be done anywhere at any time."

I just stared at him waiting for him to get to the point if he even had one. He stayed silent for a few minutes, staring out at the city and then he turned back to look at me with his intense red eyes.

"Might I make you a proposal?"

"I'm listening."

"It appears that I also have some free time today and it would be my pleasure to show you some of the more interesting aspects of this city."

"Such as?" I was a little wary.

He cocked his head to one side and smiled enigmatically. "Well, Miss Gabriel what would interest you?"

I watched him for a second and then asked, "Are there any decent art galleries or museums around here?" I asked. I didn't like the way his grin suddenly became feral.

"You are interested in art?" He asked.

I nodded. "Yes, you seem surprised."

He frowned slightly. "It was an unexpected request."

"Why? Because I come from Tatooine?"

When he didn't answer I knew I had hit the mark so I felt the need to explain. "My mother was an art historian from Alderaan before she married my father and moved to Tatooine. She had many books on the subject of art and she loved to teach me. My bedtime stories as a child were about the great artists in the galaxy and their lives, their histories. I think she hoped I would follow in her footsteps and eventually leave Tatooine to study at the University on Alderaan but I am afraid I was a poor student, I much preferred engines and mechanical manuals. I didn't pay as much attention to her as I should have but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate what she tried to teach me. I grew up with art and discussions about art sort of ruled in our home."

"You speak about your mother in the past tense." He said.

I nodded and looked away for a moment. "She died. I was quite young and when she was killed I did not realize what a positive force she had been in my life, full of beauty and light. She was extremely well educated and from a noble background, it was only because of her insistence and sheer force of will that I learned a small amount of her grace. I am quite certain that had I been left to my father's guidance I would be even more of an unruly grease-urchin than I am now. She made certain that I learnt some manners and through her, I suppose, I inherited a love of art, but that is not something I tell too many people. Pilots and ship owners do not trust a mechanic who spouts poetry and loves to stare for hours at the works of Isonne Medaglia."

"Your mother must have been an amazing woman, I am genuinely sorry for your loss." He said and he meant it. "But you do not give yourself enough credit, you may dress like an Outer rim grease-urchin and give the attitude of an unruly pit-crew mechanic but you carry yourself like the noble born princess. You are a quite the lesson in contradictions."

I wasn't quite certain how to accept the compliment or even if it was a compliment so I followed my mother's rule of thumb, said thank-you and left it at that.

Thrawn nodded and turned back once more to over look the city. He then made a *get out of that chair and come here* motion with his hand. I did, still holding my book, and came to stand beside him catching the scent of spice and soap. He smelled nice.

He pointed to a far off tower. "Do you see that building?"

I nodded.

"Down in that part of the city are some of the best restaurants around, away from the usual palace crowd, good if you want to duck under the social radar so to speak, and over there," He said pointing to another part of the city, "Is the Imperial Art Gallery, it has one of the most comprehensive collections of galactic art in the known galaxy."

What restaurants and the Imperial art gallery had to do with each other I wasn't sure. He looked back at me and for a moment our eyes met. My heart missed a beat and I felt as though my knees had suddenly vanished. I smiled and shrugged to hide the deep breath I needed to take.

"I thought that perhaps you would allow me to take you to a late lunch and then we could visit the gallery together, if that is acceptable?"

I nodded. "Okay." I said, but somewhere in the back of my mind all my senses were telling me it was a bad idea. "Just one condition though."

He arched an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"No Nubian spiced soup, I don't like it." I said. Actually it made me sick but I didn't feel the need to over share.

He chuckled. "I think that can be arranged, anything else you do not enjoy eating?"

I shrugged, "To be honest not much, but Tatooine isn't exactly the gourmet center of the galaxy and my off world cuisine experience has been limited. Why don't I leave it in your hands? You will know if I hate it."

He gave me a friendly smile. "I am certain I will."

"I guess I should find something more suitable to wear." I said absently brushing off my skirt. It was the wrong thing to say.

He gave me a slow once up and down look and smiled. "You are perfect just as you are, Miss Gabriel." Then he offered me his arm, which I took gingerly and he escorted me out of the palace. I wondered if accepting his invitation had been such a good idea after all.

He drove a small sleek two seater with an ease that told me he was probably a very good pilot in his own right. I was enthralled by the sights and sounds of the city and I had not imagined that flying through it in the heart of the traffic would be so interesting. Thrawn pointed out many of the buildings that had some significance or meaning, he was very knowledgeable and I think my fascination and astonishment at the utter vastness of what I was seeing amused him greatly but he was polite enough not to joke about it.

We flew to a small landing pad down near the lower mid- levels in the commerce part of the city, Coco town, Jorae had called it. There we walked via an intricate series of stairways and moving ramps to a small, somewhat suspect looking diner. I looked at my guide but he just gave me a grin as he opened the door for me and we went inside.

The first thing that hit was the smell of fresh 'caf and the second thing that hit was how clean it looked from the inside. Everything was decorated in a retro look, deep red booth seats and chrome edged tables of some sort dull grey poly laminate surface. The waitress was a droid and she greeted Captain Thrawn by name. He said nothing, just gave her a friendly smile and a wave while leading me to, what I guessed was his favourite place. She came over and asked if he wanted his usual, he nodded and then she asked me what I wanted to drink.

"Stim'caf with extra cream and some sugar?" I asked.

"Comin' right up sweetie." She said, dropping a couple of menu pads on the table for us to look at then vanished back to the kitchen.

I looked around, taking in the décor and the feel for the place surprised at his choice. He had struck more as a snob and this didn't seem to be the kind of place someone who had snobbish tastes would come. He must have read my thoughts.

"Not what you expected?" He asked leaning his elbows on the table, his fingers steepled at his chin.

I smiled. "No, not really."

"This place has some of the best food around and it is out of the way from the palace."

I raised my eyebrows in question.

"Most people who work at the palace would not dream of being caught here it's not upscale enough. I dislike having my affairs gossiped about so I prefer the anonymity and I don't get pestered here." He said. "Plus they make the best 'caf."

I nodded and went back to looking at the menu. There were a lot of things to choose from and I could not even begin to decide. Thrawn must have seen the indecision on my face.

"I can make some suggestions if you wish."

"Please do, I have not had this much choice since. Well... since well I don't think I have ever seen such a vast menu." I said. It was a bit overwhelming.

He glanced through his menu-pad and made some recommendations, explaining why with each choice. I decided to try the Corellian chell'ay salad and the Diner special, something called Old Dex's surprise.

The waitress came back with our 'caf and Thrawn placed the orders for us both along with a bottle of sparkling water.

I warmed my hands around the cup and sipped it slowly. He was right, it was some of the best 'caf I had ever tasted. Over the rim of my cup I watched the man who sat across from me and he, in turn, watched me. Finally, it was Thrawn who broke the silence.

"How do you enjoy working for Lord Vader?" he asked.

"Well, it is a demanding job." I answered.

He shook his head. "That was not an answer to the question."

"What answer do you want to hear?" I replied carefully.

He studied me carefully then said, "There is much talk of you. Whispers and gossip mainly, most of it, I suspect, untrue. You appear to have been given a unique place in Lord Vader's life. That arouses curiosity."

"Including yours?" I asked.

He nodded. "Indeed."

I took a deep breath. "Well to answer your question, I actually enjoy it a great deal. It is very challenging, more so than anything else I have ever done. Of course, days like these are a rare gift normally I am never off duty so to speak. He is very demanding but once you get past that, it's okay." I said with a little shrug.

"You do not seem to have developed the absolute terror most of his crews and personal have for him."

I made a pffft noise, "He's just a man." I said the amended with, "Albeit a powerful man with abilities no one seems to really understand. He can kill with a thought and he's pretty scary in that suit especially when he's pissed off, but never the less, he is just a man." I wasn't telling him everything and I suspected he knew it but he did not press.

"An interesting way of looking at it." He countered.

"I would not be very good at my job if I was too terrified to talk to him, would I?" I said. "Don't get me wrong, I have lots of respect for him and I have learnt well enough when to stay the hell away from him. Just because I am not petrified of him doesn't mean I am stupid."

"His methods are a bit..." He searched for the right word. I found it for him.

"Abrupt?"

Thrawn nodded. "That is one word to describe him I suppose."

"You have to admit he does get things done." I said not liking the sensation of talking about Lord Vader behind his back.

Thrawn smiled. "I can see that loyalty is not something you lack."

I didn't know how to reply to that and was very glad when our lunch arrived. He had certainly been right about one thing, the food was amazing. Throughout the

meal he kept the conversation light and only after we had both finished eating did we return to more personal subjects.

"Tell me about your home world." I said as the Corellian version of spiced 'caf arrived.

Thrawn sat back and took a deep breath. "There is not much to tell. It is a planet very far from here completely covered in ice. I have little contact with it as my work with the Empire keeps me occupied." He was being cagey and he really didn't want to discuss his home planet with me at all.

"I cannot even imagine that, a planet of ice. I find it cold here most of the time." I said. "I have not ever been so cold for so long in my entire life."

Thrawn nodded. "You come from a planet as opposite to my own home world as could possibly be. Csilla has a very hostile environment but so does Tatooine. I often wonder if such environments do not produce a certain amount of resourcefulness, or uniqueness or at the very least a powerful survival instinct."

"Maybe, I don't really know. You are right about the hostile though but it wasn't always so." I said. "Once Tatooine used to have oceans and jungles but the biosphere was obliterated or so the legends say. I cannot imagine it without the sands. There are so many extraordinary things about Tatooine I wouldn't know where to begin to talk about them all, but then again what I love about my homeworld most people hate."

He regarded me with his glowing red eyes for a moment. "You miss it a great deal." It wasn't a question.

I nodded slightly. "I do, things were simpler there. I had my life, I knew what I was doing and I enjoyed it and that was that. Here, things are more complex, although I suppose, when you think about it, it is just a bigger sandbox and I haven't learned the rules yet." I shrugged well aware I wasn't expressing how I felt very well.

"What exactly did you do on Tatooine?" He asked. "If you do not mind me asking."

"I was a part time mechanic and pilot at my father's docking bay. I also worked as an office temp for Hutt Imports and Exports Inc and when I had time I danced at a couple of night clubs. I used to dance at the Palace but that was a bit too rough for me."

Thrawn looked at me steadily for a moment, trying to put all the pieces of this puzzle together. He was unsuccessful so he asked, "Forgive me for saying this but those do not exactly sound like the perfect qualifications for what you are now doing."

I laughed. "No they don't do they?"

"So how did you go from being a part time mechanic and dancer on Tatooine to being assigned to Lord Vader as his personal assistant?"

"That is a long story." I said.

Thrawn waited. "We appear to have some time."

"Well okay, a Twi'lek called Bib Fortuna who is Jabba the Hutt's major domo had the forethought and malice to send in a somewhat glorified resume for the job application on my behalf."

"Why would he do that?"

"Oh that's easy. He wanted me out of the way so that his brother could have my job in the office. It was quite clever when you think about it. I think he suspected I would probably end up dead but so far that hasn't happened. I think he did me a favour really."

"You seem to have a remarkable ability to see the positive in all things."

I smiled. "My father says the same thing."

Thrawn shook his head and looked at me for a long moment. "I sincerely hope I do not remind you of your father." He said softly. Our eyes locked for a moment and I felt as though the air had been sucked out of my lungs.

I swallowed and looked away. "Far from it." I said coolly and gulping my 'caf because my mouth had suddenly gone dry.

Thrawn checked his chronometer and decided that if we were going to visit the art gallery we should probably go. He called for and paid the check then we left.

The drive to the art gallery was quick without much time for conversation. We got there only to discover it had been closed early due to a problem with the surveillance system. Thrawn was very annoyed but instead of letting it show he suggested an alternative. I shrugged. It was not as if I had anything better to do.

The drive through the city to a more residential area was a little more interesting. It was now rush hour traffic and Thrawn had to concentrate just a little more on what he was doing. I was just glad not to be the one piloting. The traffic on Coruscant was pure madness. It was a wonder more people didn't die in vehicle related accidents.

We arrived at a very elegant apartment building somewhere near what used to be the Senate district which reached far up into the sky and I was grateful when he landed the speeder gracefully on an outer landing deck. He helped me out of the airspeeder like a gentleman and led me to a set of ornate transparisteel doors. I began to get the idea that perhaps this might not have been such a good idea when Thrawn produced a keycard and unlocked the doors. He let me in first and then followed closing the door behind him. I knew without asking that this was his home here on Coruscant. The flat was bright, airy, with modern style architecture mixed with an old world charm. There was a lot of transparisteel, light cream walls and high vaulted ceilings. One had the illusion of almost floating in the sky.

I gasped. I couldn't help it. I stepped down the wide stairs which led into the open foyer and followed him into what I assumed was the living room which was stunningly beautiful and very large. It was sparsely furnished, but what was there was elegant and expensive.

Thrawn smiled as he watched me take everything in. I walked across the room over to the closest window and looked out. The immediate sense of height was dizzying and I had to step back and hold onto something. I turned around to find that somehow the room had been transformed into a small but exquisite art gallery of sorts.

"Holograms?" I asked, because most of what was now visible had not been there a second ago.

Thrawn nodded. "Mainly, there are some real pieces as well, small treasures of mine." He said. "I promised you art, Miss Gabriel. I hope this will satisfy your appetite for now."

"It's amazing." I said and wandered through the display. Most of the pieces he had selected to show were works I had never seen before, not in books or holograms or anything and they were all remarkable. There were sculptures and paintings that were from all over the galaxy. As I stopped by a piece so he would explain about it. His knowledge was vast and his stories about each work were delightful. I had, it seemed, not only found something he would actually open up and talk about but something that he was quite passionate about.

"Which ones are real?" I asked and hoped that wasn't a rude question. He said nothing; merely touched a button and the holograms vanished. Of the art that remained, there were three gorgeous paintings one of which was by my favourite artist Istone Medeglia and a small sculpture carved from a green-grey looking stone. My heart skipped a beat as I went over to it and studied it closely. Without thinking about it, my fingers went to the zenji sticks in my hair touching the milky stone that decorated the tops of them.

"Is this..?" I never got to finish my sentence.

"Yes. It is a Mandalorian carving over a thousand standard years old. The stone is ma'arilite, the brother-stone to the milky one you wear in your hair." There was tone in his voice that let me know it had pleased him to see me wearing his gift.

I so longed to touch the carving. It was shaped like flames from a fire, twisting and turning so that no matter which way one stepped or looked always the weird green and blue lights from deep in the heart of the stone could be seen. It had been polished until it was flawless.

I was so enthralled in watching the heart light from the sculpture dance as I moved that I did not notice how close Thrawn suddenly was to me.

"You may touch it, if you wish." He said. I was startled by the nearness of him and by the warmth of his breath on my neck. "I know you ache to do so and it will not break." He spoke softly.

So I did. I reached out and I caressed the sculpture with the tips of my trembling fingers. The stone was cool to the touch and hard as stone should be, but the silkiness of the polish was like touching nothing I had ever experienced. I wondered if ice felt as smooth as this. Thrawn did not take his eyes off me and I wondered how many other women he had brought up here, lured in by his exquisite art and excellent taste. I stepped away from the sculpture as well as from him and went back to the window.

"Come with me, I have something to share with you." He said and before I could speak he placed a hand on the small of my back and guided me through another set of ornate transparisteel doors to step out onto a large rectangular, semi open West facing balcony bordered on the open side by an ornate durasteel railing. The view was dizzying and as I leaned over the railing I had to close my eyes for a moment to stop the odd sense of vertigo. The sun was beginning to set very slowly and the sky started to blaze with colours that ranged from blood red to deepest purple. I had not realized it had gotten so late.

"I am impressed, Miss Gabriel, not many people would recognize Ma'arilite if it jumped up and bit them." He said coming to stand next to me.

"It was my mother's favourite. You know there is a legend about it?"

He did not say yes or no, but waited to be told the story.

I could hear my mother's voice telling me my favourite bed time tale. "It is said that before hyperdrive was discovered Mandalore was ruled by a race of warriors and great sorcerers. The sorcerers wanted to show their power and boasted that they could harness the lights of the stars and the suns. They spent many years and many days working their magic until finally the day came and they wove their spell. It worked and the entire world of Mandalore was plunged into darkness."

"The next day the people awoke to find two great stones standing side by side, one white and pale as morning mists and the other dark grey and green as deepest ocean or forests. Within each huge stone were trapped the lights of the sun and the stars. Only those who lived near the stone saw any light at all. The planet was plunged into a terrible dark, cold silence. For many months it was said that people could hear the crying of the lights of the sun and the stars, begging for their freedom until one day a great warrior came along and without hesitation he struck the stones with his fists, shattering them into a billion pieces and freed the lights of the sun and the stars."

"Thus light was restored to the world, but people noticed that from that day onward the sun never shone as brightly as it had before and there were stars missing in the sky. They say that the lights we now see in each tiny piece of the shattered stones are that of a star or a shard of the sunlight trapped forever. Some even believe that you can still hear these remnants of what was weeping if you listen closely enough." I finished speaking just as the sun shed her final rays of light, painting the sky in glorious colours.



"That is a beautiful tale to describe something so rare." Thrawn said softly.

Something in his voice made me look at him and for a second our eyes met. The wind had picked up a little and it blew at my hair tugging some loose from the zenji sticks. He brushed a stray strand from my face and the touch of his finger tips made me breathless. His hand stayed poised by my cheek, warm and real.

I just stood there bewildered by the desire I suddenly felt swell up inside of me. Not since I had known Jyrki had I felt this ache, this awful, physical need. I didn't need or want this feeling because it was not good, this led to hurt and heart break, sleepless nights and restless days. No, this was not at all what I needed. I moved my head away from his hand and stepped back from him. The moment passed and I could breathe again. I knew I should leave, request that he call for transport so that I could return to the palace but as much as being here with him made me nervous I found that I didn't want to go back and be alone either.

"Would you like something to drink?" He asked. His voice had a husky edge to it and for the first time I wondered if these feelings I had were not just one sided. I looked up into his face but I couldn't read his expression at all.

I nodded. "Please." I said and followed him back inside to the living room. I sat on the beautiful couch and watched as he poured two glasses of what looked to be expensive wine. It was a pale, clear blue colour several shades lighter than his skin.

He handed me a glass and then touched his against mine so that the crystal rang one single clear note.

"To rare and beautiful things." He said never taking his eyes off mine.

I got the distinct impression he wasn't just toasting the art in his flat. I looked away from his gaze and drank the wine carefully. It had a lovely light, clear flavour that I would never have been able to adequately describe.

"Ice wine from my home world." He said. "I do not get to share this often most people find it too light of a taste but I had the feeling you might appreciate it."

I nodded because he was right. "It's wonderful. I've never tasted anything like it before." I replied glancing upwards at him without moving my head.

He looked at me in a way that said far more than I am certain he had intended to and the air between us electrified once more. This time it was his turn to take a deep breath.

"Would you think it terribly rude if we watched the news feeds of the day? I am a bit behind the times." He asked as he sat on the couch beside me.

I was so relieved that I almost giggled. "No not at all, it would be nice to catch up." I said glad to have something more or less normal to deal with.

He picked up the remote controller and turned on the view screen I had not even noticed before, tuned into one of the many news feeds and we sat together watching what had happened in the Galaxy according to the Empire.

We watched the news feeds and then a documentary about the destruction of Alderaan. The report had said something about it being caused by the rebellion. A test of some sort of new weapon had gone terribly wrong and caused some sort of chain reaction that had caused the planet to explode. I almost choked on my wine. Thrawn gave me that one eyebrow higher than the other look and asked if I knew something different.

I shook my head and then I lied to him. I did not know him well enough to judge if I could trust him with such secrets, if it even was a secret. I was certain that he knew as much about it as I did, but neither of us was willing to part with that much trust. Not just yet, so we were playing games, the kind I had always hated. He let the matter drop and we went back to watching the programme.

I was tired. In fact I think the best way to describe how I felt was utterly, drop dead, exhausted. For the first time in what seemed like forever there was nothing for

me to do, nothing for me to worry about and no Lord Vader making me crazy so I relaxed.

The couch was deep and comfortable with a high back and large arms. I don't recall curling up into a small ball and resting my head, just for a moment, against the pillow braced against the arm of the couch but I must have. My eyes would just not stay open. When sleep eventually came to whisk me away, there was no fighting it. The last thing I remember was Thrawn chuckling softly and placing a blanket over me.

"Sleep my dear. I am here and you are safe. Nothing will harm you I promise." He whispered in my ear. And that was the last I knew until the dream came and swept me up.

When I was young I used to have the worst nightmares imaginable. While I could never recall most of them upon waking, the terror of these dreams stayed with me for a very long time, dogging me in my waking world. I never connected them with real events in my life but they often preceded terrible things. They were at their worst several months before my mother was killed and after her death, about three months or so, the dreams stopped as suddenly as they had begun. No one could explain why. Since then, I had not really had a nightmare of such terrifying proportions, until this one.

*The dream came down upon me slowly, the way sand- spiders crawled over your body at night. I felt the fear but could do nothing to stop what was going to come. I found myself somewhere in the Imperial palace. A place I had never been to before. The room was dark and vast, elegant in a terrible way. The air weighed heavily upon me as I walked slowly towards the ancient and extraordinarily powerful man seated on the Throne. I did not want to go near him. He scared me more than anything else in the world. This was a raw fear, the kind that makes you freeze inside, lose the ability to think and tremble uncontrollably. He looked as old as time itself but it was a dreadful aging, as though something had eaten at him from the inside out. His dark power radiated about his body and seemed to fill the room.*

*"Come closer, child," He said. His voice was soft, gentle sounding but it had an edge like cold steel and I felt a wave of fear course through me, it made me feel sick.*

*I was sure that in my sleep I whimpered. I could no more resist the Emperor than I could wake up.*

*I walked up to the throne until I was within arm's length of him, close enough to see the yellow and bloodshot eyes that stared out from under the cowl of his cloak. I wanted to step backwards and move away but, as seems to be the way in dreams, Lord Vader was quite suddenly standing directly behind me. I tried to scream but could I could not make a sound. Now I was trapped.*

*"She is a pretty thing, Vader, why have you been hiding her from me?" the Emperor asked reaching out to caress my face. I shrank back from his touch but was blocked by Lord Vader, who clamped a hand upon my shoulder and pushed me forwards. The Emperor's touch was a caress of ice and the nausea I felt rippled through me making me physically sick. Lord Vader did not answer the Emperor. I shivered.*

*"You used to dance for the Hutts on Tatooine, did you not, child?" He asked but since he already knew the answer I did not speak. "Perhaps, you will dance for me." He said coming forward in his chair, his face close to mine, his vile yellow eyes glaring into my naked soul. Suddenly my control broke and my fear whirled through me like a howling devil wind and I unleashed all of the powers of the Force that she could. Undisciplined and unpredictable, I heard Vader breathe behind me and felt his displeasure.*

*I thought he would kill me but instead he laughed and laughed. It was not a nice sound. It was a terrible sound.*

*"How rare and how delightful." He hissed. "A little jewel among the stones." He placed his finger tips under my chin and raised her head slightly to look at her much as Lord Vader had done up our first encounter.*

*"Lord Vader, you should have come to me with this pretty little prize." he said looking over my shoulder.*

*"Yes, my master." Vader said.*

*"But you wanted to teach her...." The Emperor said softly.*

*"She is raw and untrained...she would have made a gift for you..." Vader said coldly.*

*He was lying and I sensed it and I wondered the Emperor knew it too.*

*"Old friend, I think you would have her for yourself. Such a pretty toy, though, beauty means little to you Vader. Power is what you desire. But power comes at a price. So does deception and failure" He hissed.*

*Suddenly, so fast I had not even seen him move, he reached past me to grasp at Lord Vader, snatching his right arm, a light saber ignited and there was a blur of light and then, instead of Lord Vader's arm being held in the Emperor's vice like grip it was mine. He smiled as he sliced through the flesh and bone. I tried to scream and I tried to pull away from his grip but he was too strong, he pulled me in so close to his face that he could have kissed me if that had been his wish.*

*"You will be mine girl, mine. But not yet, Lord Vader may play with you a while longer. When he is tired of you, I shall take over and then you will know your true master." He hissed his breath warm on my skin.*

*Panic overwhelmed me and suddenly, I found my voice and I screamed and screamed and screamed until something broke the spell.*

I awoke frozen with fright and cold sweat and shaking so hard my teeth were chattering. Thrawn was trying his best to calm me down and bring me back to the real world.

"Merlyn, you were dreaming. It was just a dream and you're safe now." He kept saying over and over again. He was seated on the edge of the couch gripping my shoulders so hard that his fingers bit into my flesh. It hurt but in a way that helped bring me back into the same reality he was in. The look on his face told me he was worried and who could blame him. It would not look good on his record if Lord Vader's favoured assistant died of fright in his home.

I had my right hand out in front of me and kept staring at it, chanting over and over in a hushed whisper "Still there, still there." It was still attached to my arm, and I kept flexing the fingers to make sure everything worked until Thrawn took my hands in his and held them until I stopped. His hands were warm. As the last remnants of the dream world slowly faded away I saw there truly was no Emperor here and no Lord Vader either. There was only Thrawn, whose hands held mine tightly enough to break through the numbing chill I felt. He spoke to me calmly as though I was a frightened bantha and I followed the sound of his voice back into the waking world. The dream had been so unbelievably real and I could not seem to shake the dread which had followed me up from sleep but the panic receded slowly leaving me bewildered and uncertain of what to do next.

"Better?" Thrawn asked softly.

I nodded and looked up at him. The fear in my eyes touched something deep within him and his own eyes asked questions that I wasn't sure I could answer. He squeezed my hands gently and I looked down suddenly aware of his touch. I pulled my hands out of his reluctantly.

"Do you wish to talk about it?" He asked gently, brushing damp hair from my face.

"Something terrible... the Emperor, Lord Vader... something happened, I don't know what but it was awful." I shook my head, the words tumbled out of my mouth but I couldn't get them to make sense.

"Well, the Emperor was very displeased with the outcome of Yavin. Perhaps your answer lays there." He said quietly.

I looked at his face. "You know?"

He nodded. "I do."

"How much?" I asked.

"All of it." He told me.

I hugged my knees close to my body and just looked at him. He had known all along what had happened to Alderaan and to the Death Star. I sighed. I shook my head and turned away from him.

"I hate all these games, all these deceptions." I said turning away from him because I did not want him to see the tears that threatened to spill.

Gentle fingertips touched my chin and drew my head to look at him again. "Trust is a delicate thing in my business, Merlyn." He said gently. "It is not so easily given and we are just at the beginning."

"The beginning of what?" I searched his eyes, his face.

"Everything." His reply was cryptic. There had been a test and I had not picked up on it but I had just passed it somehow. It was the first time he had ever used my first name.

I just nodded and then after a too long silence I said. "I'm sorry if I woke you."

"I was not asleep." He said, "Let me get you something to calm you down, something to drink and perhaps you can tell me about what has you screaming in terror." He said getting up.

I got up off the couch, wrapped the blanket about my shoulders and followed him to the kitchen. He poured me a generous glass of a deep amber, liquid and handed it to me, I took the glass with both hands. Then poured one for himself.

"Thirty year old Corellian brandy. It's strong but it will help." He said.

I sipped the brandy and felt it burn through my body. I cupped the bowl shaped glass in my hands and began to tell Thrawn about the dream, I told him everything. No more games, I had said to myself. I needed to trust someone and he was the only person I felt I could.

I described my dream and he listened intently then I spoke about my time aboard the *Devastator* and then I asked him about how he had known about everything so quickly. He told me without a great deal of detail but enough to let me know I had more of his trust now than I had had much earlier that evening. We sat in silence for a while and it was oddly comfortable.

Then as if the question had been boiling over he asked, "So when did you meet his Excellency?"

"Never." I told him. "I have no idea what he looks like or anything. It's not like anyone actually cares about Emperors, Empires or even wars on Tatooine. He's just *The Emperor* to us, just a name and he's very far away. I know nothing about him except he's in charge."

Thrawn just nodded. "Then how do you know that is the Emperor who was in your dream?"

"I don't, it just felt as though that is who it was."

He smiled at my odd logic. "Well, then I shouldn't worry too much about it. Sometimes a dream is just a dream. You have been through a lot of stressful changes in the last little while. I am quite certain you just needed to let it go."

"Don't you ever have bad dreams?" I asked.

"Seldom." He replied airily. "And when I do, I put them down to bad food." I actually smiled.

"There, you see, nothing to fret about." He said with a warm smile.

Easy for him to say I thought and then because it was after four in the morning I asked if he could arrange for transportation to take me home. *Home* what a strange concept that was especially as I hardly thought of the apartment in the Palace as home, but there was no other word to use in its place and it was where all my things were.

"I can take you back there myself." He told me, "I have work to do and it is good to start early, it's always so much quieter."

I did not argue with him, I was far too tired and far too distracted.

The trip back to the palace was almost surreal. Somehow time had managed to stop and speed up all at the same time. At that hour of the morning the traffic in the air was less intense and the lights from the city were like stars in reverse. No wonder spacers called Coruscant the Jewel of the Core it must have sparkled like crazy from space.

We didn't speak as he drove and I stared out of the window. The silence had been neither awkward nor comfortable but settled some place in between. I don't think we said a single word to each other, there was nothing to say.

He landed on one of the North Face docking pads and walked with me to the door of the apartment. We stood there facing each other and there was a weird, wavering moment where things could have gone either way. The magic was there for a kiss as well as the gap which might stop it. I didn't know quite what to do. There was a time and a place for everything and somehow the timing for this was not quite right. I didn't want him to kiss me because I was tired, my mouth tasted fuzzy and after the whole nightmare thing it would have been just wrong. In the breadth of a single moment I had made my decision and without considering any consequences I stepped back from him and turned slightly away.

"Thank you, Captain." I said a little stiffly. "I really enjoyed our time together yesterday." And I meant it. It had been a really great day up until the nightmare.

Thrawn regarded me for a moment with his eerie, luminous eyes that were so hard to read, then he took my right hand in his and placed a gentle kiss on the inside of my wrist, right at the base where the wrist ends and the palm begins. It was both intimate and somehow politely distanced all at the same time. He did not take his eyes off my face.

"Then, Miss Gabriel," He said. "I suggest you stay alive so that we may do it again sometime." And with that he turned elegantly on his heel and left.

I watched him walk down the dark corridor until I could neither see nor hear him anymore. I unlocked the door and went inside too tired to think and too wound to sleep. So I made myself a cup of tea. I sat on the couch staring at the wall. Thrawn was right, at this time of the morning the Palace was empty and quiet so I decided that sitting about would accomplish nothing and dwelling on dreams was, as Thrawn had said, pointless.

I showered, got dressed in clean clothes and went to my office. My protocol droid was there and had managed to get everything unpacked and sorted out.

"Oh Mistress Gabriel, how very pleasant to see you. Shall I get you your usual 'caf?" He said in his usual, annoying chipper voice.

"Please." And then I asked. "Has there been any word from Lord Vader?"

"No Mistress Gabriel. I have placed all your messages in the data terminal for your convenience. Lord Vader was not among those who have contacted you."

I sighed. "I guess 'caf will have to do then"

I sat and sifted through the daily mails and memos, sorting out the important ones from the usual nonsense, but my mind was not on the work. Most people

worried themselves stupid when Lord Vader sent word, yet, it bothered me that I did not hear from him. I made a note in Lord Vader's calendar about a couple of up and coming social events that were important, a couple of promotions for some of the Fleet officers, a rather high end Art exhibition opening and the Emperor's Grand Ball was coming up soon which was a requirement for pretty much everyone who was anyone to attend.

The Grand Ball was a huge excuse for all the important people, all the people who thought they were important and all the people who really wished they could be important to get together in their absolute finest clothes and hang out. It would be a gala evening full of snobbery and stupidity. The only things, to my mind, that would make it worthwhile going, would be the food, the drink, the music and the entertainment.

The Emperor spared no expense to see who would fawn over him the most to be in his good graces. I was glad that I didn't have to attend it. I made certain that the invitation was first and foremost on Lord Vader's appointment calendar, highlighted and underlined. I was surprised at how quickly the day passed and by the time I had finished sorting everything out it was well past midday.

I sat and stared at the wall for a bit, thinking about everything that had happened. How had my life suddenly become so complicated? I hadn't bargained for any of this and I felt as though I was out of my league. It was as though I had gone from cruising in normal space to suddenly whizzing around in hyperspace all the time without a moment to think about where it was all heading. It was unnerving to say the least. I started to write a letter to my father but after the fourth attempt I gave up. I would have to find some nice touristy holo-card and send that with the usual, I am fine message. It wasn't as if I could give him details on what was really going on.

I waited in the office until three o'clock, killing time looking through the net-news feeds and then told P2B4 I was leaving and if anything important came up he could reach me on the comm. I went back to my apartment and changed into clothes I could dance in. My body was stiff and sore so I wanted to work out. I took a small music player, a bottle of water and I made my way through the back-ways of the palace to the old part where my favourite room was.

I loved this part of the castle and I especially loved this room. It was large and ornate, with high ceilings and beautiful plaster mouldings. The paint was fading and there was dust everywhere. The room with the balcony was sparsely furnished with the remnants of the time from before the renovations. There were a few chairs, an old table and a bookshelf that completely covered one wall. There were still some books in it and I had browsed the titles but had not actually removed any. I was pretty sure that I was not supposed to be here, although there were no signs anywhere that said it was forbidden, the feeling of forgotten abandonment said otherwise.

I appreciated the space and the quiet of this place. When I went to the recreational area that was in the Palace it was always full and people stared. I had never liked to work through my exercise and dance routines with others around. I suppose the solitude I had gotten used to when I was with Jyrki had somehow stuck with me. I just liked to be on my own where it was quiet and without distraction. I had also had the experience a couple of times, when I somehow aligned myself with what Lord Vader called the Force, that things got a little out of hand. When I let go I had no idea what I was doing. I had once nearly destroyed a small workout room at Jabba's palace because my dance routine had gotten a little too enthusiastic and I had made objects move.

This room had hand laid wooden flooring. The patterns were starburst and Gianda flowers, intricate and beautiful. It had not been polished in a while and there were dust durnies in every corner.

I shoved the table out of the way and set the music player up. I set it to play loud enough that I could lose myself in the music but not so loud that it would be heard outside. I had left the door open because the door to the hallway was shut. That way the air circulated through the room from the open balcony doors as well.

I began with a long, slow stretching sequence. It was as much ecstasy as it was agony. It felt really good and I made sure I warmed up really well. Then I started to go through Jyrki's workout. I loved the flow each move next to the other and I could feel the energy shift itself around me to flow with me and not against me. I loved it when the power aligned with me like this. When I finished the sequence of movements that Jyrki had taught me I began to dance.

As a little girl, so my mother had told me, I had danced before I could walk. I doubted that this was true but my love of dance was something I had known my whole life. My mother had managed to arrange for me to take lessons at a small expensive course that taught T'naga dance classes. It was a precise form of dance that required discipline and a lot of practice. I wasn't the type of child who took to being rapped on the legs or hands with a stick so after a year of dragging my heels and complaining about it I was allowed to stop attending. I danced on my own after that, in the quiet of my room where no one could see me or point out the faults or whack me with a stick every time my positions were not correct. Even at an early age I was wilful and stubborn.

After things had gone bad with Jyrki I went to Jabba's palace looking for a dance teacher again. I found Kamadi Tza'ad and she was willing to teach me, for a price. Kamadi was one of the best dancers in Mos Eisley. She had a reputation of being a terror to any student she took on and it was said she had broken the spirit of many would be dancers. Jabba the Hutt prized her for her ability to find the best and make them better. She had taught most of the dancers who worked at the Palace and pretty much had the monopoly on who danced where and when. She had told me after I had passed her initiation test that she had been trained in dance at the Academy of Dance on Coruscant. I never knew if this was true or not but I had been grateful that she had accepted me as a student. I had needed the distraction.

For nearly a year she trained me every day. I had private classes and group classes and performance classes and so on. It was a long and difficult time but it paid off and when I danced at the palace for the first time it went so well that I was hired on the spot. Kamadi was pleased that meant money for her. I was good for her bank account until the day I rebelled and told her where to go. I still remembered that day with frightening clarity. I had made everything in the room move about and had threatened her with making her hair fall out, not that I could do this, but I wanted to be free of her oppression.

I had not lasted long at the Jabba's Palace, while I liked to dance there and I made good money in tips, I loathed the way I was treated, especially by most of the bounty hunters, the less than reputable pilots who hung out there as well as Bib Fortuna. I suppose that in my desire to get away from my feelings for Jyrki, I had not really thought about where I was running too. And while I had loved to dance I was not willing to sell my soul for the ability to do so. Now, here in this room, I thought about my life. Each step I remembered was a step away from my past.

I set the music player to play a specific dance and began to run through the choreography. It was a dance I had learned from Rys, my roommate. I loved the intricacy of the patterns of steps; it was difficult dance to perform so I began slowly and walked through the steps one by one. Then I began over again faster. I repeated the whole dance again and again until I no longer knew where I ended and the dance began. I became one with the movements and in doing that I allowed the Force flow through me, which made the dance better, more powerful. I was in the middle of a full spin when I suddenly noticed the figure standing in the doorway. I stopped so

suddenly that I almost twisted my ankle. I had neither noticed the intrusion on my space nor that the sun had set and it was now dark. I tumbled onto the floor.

"Oh my dear are you hurt?" The voice was that of an elderly man. He came forward slowly.

I got up and moved my ankle. "No, thank you I am fine." I looked at him but he was wearing a hooded robe so I could not see his face.

"I did not mean to startle you." He said, looking around the room. "I heard the music, I wondered who was here. This part of the Palace is no longer used."

I shut the music player off. "I apologize if I am trespassing. I am a bit new here." I explained.

The man waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "I am sure no one will mind." He said.

I wiped the sweat off my face and neck. "That's kind of you. I hope I wasn't disturbing you."

"No, not at all." He said walking out on the balcony. "I rather like this part of the palace because it is quiet. No one around to bother me, sometimes I come here to think. I don't mind sharing it with someone who enjoys it just as much and I won't tell if you don't." He said.

I nodded. "I Promise." I said.

I fetched a chair from inside and offered it to him. He chuckled and sat down.

"You are very kind to an old man, my dear." He pulled his robe about him and sat down. "You said you are new here?" He asked, looking up at me. I could not see much of his face because it was dark and the cowl of his robe covered most of his head but I felt his eyes studying me.

"Yes. I was assigned to work with Lord Vader, his new Personal Assistant."

"Ah, yes, Lord Vader's new girl. I have heard about you."

I sighed. "The café incident? I know I am sorry I lose my temper and all control goes out the window!"

"I do not recall anything about a café incident, but I have heard Lord Vader mention you, I don't recall your name though." He said.

"Merlyn Gabriel." I said, "Lord Vader speaks of me?"

"Oh yes," He chuckled. "He calls you *annoyingly efficient*."

"Oh?" I grinned. That sounded almost like a compliment.

"You dance very well. Were you classically trained?" He asked changing the subject.

I shook my head. "No, not really, I mean I had some lessons and when I was young I studied a little but nothing seriously classical. I just like to dance. I like the energy it gives me."

"Have you ever thought about further training?" He asked.

I laughed. "Who would train me? I am far too old." Then I added, "Although I always wanted to learn classical dance I don't have time for it anymore, which is okay. My work for Lord Vader keeps me busy enough. I think I prefer to come here and just dance alone."

"Do you enjoy it?" He asked. "Working for Lord Vader?"

"Yes, actually I do, which seems to surprise everyone." I said. "He is very demanding but he is also efficient. I find his honesty refreshing."

"As is yours."

I looked at him. "I am sorry; I don't mean to be rude but I know your name."

"I used to be a senator here." He said without answering my question, "That was a long time ago now I am just an old man who enjoys the company of pretty young things such as yourself."

"Oh, uhm, well thank you." I said with a blush.



"It's going to be a delight to watch you fit in here, already you have made quite an impression." He said getting up to leave.

"It was a pleasure meeting you as well sir." I said suppressing the odd urge I had to shiver.

"Likewise my dear." He said. "Oh, will you be attending the Grand Ball? I hear it will be spectacular this year."

"Good gracious no. I am quite sure the Emperor doesn't need an Outer Rim dock rat like me cluttering up his wonderful celebration. I would be terribly out of place with my old fashioned clothes." I said plucking unconsciously at my dress with a small sigh. "I'm not exactly up on the latest clothing styles."

He chuckled. "Don't sell yourself short, my dear. Lord Vader is quite lucky to have you." He said patting my bare arm. As he touched me with his papery hand and I could have sworn I felt something, a tremble of energy which made my skin itch from the inside out. I pulled my arm away from without thinking about it.

He chuckled. "I believe I shall enjoy meeting you again. My dear, you are refreshingly different." And with that he left the room as silently as he had arrived.

I went back to my apartment, showered and went straight to bed. I was woken at 6 am the following morning by a comm. Message telling me I was to report to Lord Vader's office at once. I dressed in a hurry and almost ran the whole way to the office. I knocked and was told to enter. Lord Vader stood at the window, his hands behind his back looking out of the window. This was his usual stance.

"You called, My Lord?"

He spoke without turning around. "It would appear the Emperor has taken an interest in your work. You will accompany me to the Grand Ball that you have so efficiently reminded me of." He paused. "It is actually included in your duties to accompany me as I see fit and in my place, should I not be able to attend, to represent me at all official functions."

I wanted to say "Yes but..." However, I knew what that would get me, a pretty colourful necklace I couldn't take off so I waited silently biting my tongue because there was more.

"A meeting with the Palace fashion Advisor has been arranged. You will accompany him today. While, it is irrelevant to me what you wear, the Emperor is a man of taste and requires an adherence to appropriate dress and etiquette. The Grand Ball is an event of some prestige. You will listen to what this fashion advisor has to say."

"As you wish, my lord."

"You may go." He said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"Yes, my lord." I replied and I left wondering how the hell I had managed to get myself into this mess.

At exactly eleven o'clock the most beautiful man I had ever seen waltzed into my office and asked with a dazzling smile if I was The Miss Gabriel he was to assist. I got up from behind my desk and shook his hand.

"Siavaan Rimanata," He said pronouncing it Shee-ahvaughn, "Everyone calls me Shiv though." He shook my hand back and grinned. "I hope you are ready for this." He said and he ushered me out of the office.

At the landing pad he swept me into a chauffeur driven sleek looking cruiser and off we went.

He was not what I had expected, but then again I had no idea what to expect from a palace fashion coordinator. He was handsome but not overly tall. He was fairly slender in an elegant sort of way. He had long, wavy blond hair with and elegantly chiselled looking features. I suspected he had gotten some cosmetic work done. His eyes were the kind of green that only comes with coloured lenses and his teeth were just a little too white and a little too perfect. He spoke with a soft, tenor voice and was

eloquent as well as polite. It was easy to see he had been well educated in the noble art of etiquette. As he spoke about himself, telling me a little more than I really needed to know, I got the feeling he was over compensating and was a little nervous being with me. I asked him why.

"It's not every day that I am told to drop what I am doing and come and do a makeover. I was especially surprised to hear that the order came from Lord Vader. It is not wise to displease Lord Vader." He said with a conspirator's hush.

"What were you doing when you dropped everything?" I asked.

"Coordinating the courtesans wardrobes." He said. "They all have to look according to the Emperor's design. This year the theme is a slightly retro Nubian look. Not easy." He shook his head.

I just shrugged. I had no idea what slightly retro Nubian would even look like. "So what is first on the menu?" I asked.

He smiled and gave me the once up and down. "It's a surprise."

Our first stop was a very upscale hair salon called Te'n'renzza. We walked in and the Owner, a flamboyant middle aged man with blue hair that Shiv called Bam.

"Sheeeev! How delightful to see you again." He said and they did that court kiss, kiss thing. "What brings you here today?"

Shiv nodded in my direction and Bam's eyes almost popped out of his head.

"Oh my," He said. "I see we have our work cut out for us. She does present a challenge."

I didn't like this talking about me as I wasn't there. "She has a name you know." I said.

Bam's eyebrows raised and Shiv looked vaguely embarrassed.

"Is she new?" Bam asked.

"Not one of His girls, this one belongs to Vader." Shiv said by way of an explanation.

"She belongs to no one." I interrupted getting cross, "And she is called Merlyn Gabriel."

"Very well, Miss Gabriel, please follow me." Bam said with a slightly injured air. I did as he asked but not before I had given Shiv a look that would have killed a lesser man.

I had never in my life been to a hair salon. My mother had always cut my hair for me until I rebelled about having short hair and let it grow out. After that it was a struggle to keep it looking decent. I remember many torturous sessions having my washed hair combed out. It was always full of tangles and knots. It hurt like hell but I never did go back to the standard Tatooine short hair.

Now, I was sitting in this ritzy place having my hair washed by someone whose hands were softer than durni down. It felt glorious. When the assistant was finished she wrapped my hair in a fluffy towel and I was moved onto the next station. There I was told to sit in the chair and then Bam came over and fussed around.

"Okay," He said flourishing his scissors, "I suggest short here and some fluffing here and the layers down the back." He was about to handle my hair some more when I grabbed his hand and pulled him close to my face.

"Listen to me. If you cut more than a centimetre off my hair I will cut off your fingers." I told him with a sweet smile.

Bam, much to his grace, just smiled and nodded. "I understand, Miss Gabriel, now if you let go of my hand I can work my magic. Your hair needs some serious work. Where have you been living?"

"Tatooine."

"Well that explains a lot." He huffed and I didn't think he was speaking only about my hair.

He gave a long suffering sigh and went to work. He snipped and shaped and sprayed stuff in my hair and by the time he had finished I was amazed.

"Wow, I take it back, you can keep your fingers." I said not recognising the girl in the mirror. My hair seemed to glow and shine as I had never seen it before. It was soft and almost beautiful.

"My work job is done." He said and then he handed Shiv a very large bag full of hair products. "Try not to undo my hard work and feel free to make appointments regularly." Bam said.

"Uh thanks, I think." I told him taking the bag Shiv was trying to give me.

The next place Shiv dragged me to was a salon which specialized in hands, feet and faces. I will spare you the details on all of this; needless to say they despaired of me. I bit my nails, had worn desert boots most of my life when I wasn't running around barefoot and I hated having the facial done. I had to admit it felt good afterwards though. We left with another bag filled of make Merlyn beautiful products. Once the makeover part was done we got to the interesting part, clothes.

Coruscant had a large fashion district and there were many designers there all in competition with each other. Shiv explained that there were five major labels and several more minor ones all in the Designer guild and then there were the independents. First, because it was the way of things, we visited the five major labels.

I hated everything I saw. I don't know who these guys designed for but it wasn't for women shaped like me, that is a woman with enough hip and waist difference to give me curves, enough breast to hopefully make a man happy if he's not into augments, and not tall enough to kiss a Wookiee's nose without standing on something. I was definitely not the right shape for everything I was shown. All of the dresses were uncomfortable and I hated the colours.

Once we had exhausted all the major labels we went to several of the minor labels and it was more of the same. It seemed to me that if you were in the guild you followed a set of rules. The rules dictated the clothes and the clothes all had the same feel to them. I was not going to be a carbon copy of all the other girls at that Ball, no matter how prestigious these labels were.

It was getting late and Shiv was getting desperate. Then he had a brainstorm. He dragged me to an out of the way shop just off the fashion strip called *Cati's Creations*.

We went in and were met by a pretty young Rodian female who actually gave me a smile that went to her eyes. She didn't immediately ask if I wanted a drink or a tiny sandwich that tasted like it had been made from synth bread which had been sitting around for seven years. Instead she ignored Shiv and talked to me.

"So what colours do you like?" she asked.

"Blue." I said, "I love blues and greens. No more browns and no yellows." I said.

She nodded. "What do you dislike in clothes?"

"Restriction." I said, "I dance and I hate tight clothes. Everything I wear is long and easy to move in."

She smiled and nodded. "Are you from Tatooine?"

"Yep." I wanted to ask how she knew but she pointed to what I was wearing.

"That type of cloth is only found there." She said. "I studied many styles from the Outer Rim Territories. Tatooine cloth has a certain colour that isn't found anywhere else, it comes from the dyes used from desert plants."

She gave me a measured look and nodded to herself. Then she vanished for a few minutes and then came back with a rack of dresses. I spent an hour trying on some of the most beautiful dresses I had ever in my entire life seen. We left with six. Then we followed Cati's advice and went shoe and accessory shopping at a place that she swore would be amazing. She was not wrong. After that we went to an upscale

department shop and in the space of another hour I had a whole new day to day wardrobe on top of all the fancy clothes. Once all the purchases were stored in the vehicle we went for something to eat, a nice little bistro in the Coco district. Half way through a very nice soup and salad I asked Shiv who was paying for all of this stuff.

"Everything had been charged to the Imperial Palace Account. So I guess the Emperor is paying for it all." Shiv said. "But that's normal. All the courtesans' clothing is charged to this account."

"What? I'm not a courtesan!" I replied tartly.

"No but you do work for Vader so I expect you fall under the general girls who work at the palace umbrella." He shrugged making it clear he didn't much care who was paying for it and that neither should I.

"What we spent today could buy a space port on Tatooine." I told him.

Shiv smiled. "Well, here it buys you clothes. Last time I looked you didn't need a space port but you sure needed new clothes. You are an absolute fashion disaster."

"Gee, thanks." I said and we finished our food. It was late and I was tired so we headed back to the palace. He helped me carry everything into the apartment which suddenly seemed a whole lot smaller.

"Damn Rim-Girl, you need a decorator." He said looking around.

I asked if he wanted a 'caf or anything but he just said no thanks. "I have a lot to do tomorrow and no offense shopping with you is exhausting but fun, surprisingly enough so maybe we can get together again for 'caf or something some other time? We can catch up on the palace gossip."

"Sure." I said. "I'd like that." And I meant it too. With a hug and that kiss kiss thing which almost everyone in the fashion industry liked to do he left.

I surveyed the mass of designer paper bags and boxes that cluttered up my apartment. It was obscene how much money had been spent on me today and I was still wondering why I was worth the effort and how the Emperor even knew about me. It was worrying and it nagged at me but there wasn't much I could do about it.

With a sigh I got up and started to unpack everything. There were many pairs of shoes, six exquisite dresses, a bunch of office style clothes I was still not sure I would ever wear, some frivolous accessories I wasn't sure how to use, along with a ton of personal hygiene, hair care and make up products I had never known I needed. I was tired and I felt as though I had wasted the whole day. The Grand Ball was a huge event and I could not even imagine such a thing let alone imagine attending it. With a sigh I put all the pretty dress-up clothes away. While sorting out all of the shampoos and body lotion and stuff I discovered a beautiful hand blown glass bottle of a very exotic bubble-bath. I felt it was a sign from whatever gods looked out for me and decided to take a bath. I lit candles, poured myself a glass of my father's moonglow and dug out one of my favourite books. It had been a strange day and I was glad it was over.

I lounged in the bath until the water was cool, got out wrapped myself in the biggest towel I had just as the doorbell rang. I figured it was probably Shiv coming back to say he had forgotten something or maybe my droid with a message. When I opened the door the last person I expected to be standing there was Captain Thrawn. There was an awkward moment of silence and then not knowing what else to do I said.

"Well, are you coming in or is it your intention to just stand there watching me drip all over the carpet?"

He decided to come in.

One of the things that working as a dancer taught me was to remain regal, no matter what happens. So bearing that in mind, I pretended that answering the door looking like a half drowned rat wrapped in a big fluffy green and white striped towel was the most natural thing in the world.

I shut the door and told Thrawn to have a seat if he could find one buried under all debris of tissue paper, designer bags and general mayhem that had followed the unpacking of the day's work. He surveyed my living room and then surveyed me. I stood there holding my towel dress, my hair dripping all over me and the floor staring back.

"Don't ask." I said.

"Very well, if you insist." He replied with a slightly cocked eyebrow.

Our eyes met for a moment and I suddenly became very aware of what I wasn't wearing any clothes and the towel didn't seem appropriate.

"I'll be right back." and I vanished into the bedroom threw on some clothes and wrapped a smaller version of the same coloured towel about my hair. When I got back out he had cleared away most of the junk from the small couch and was sitting on it studying a catalogue which Cati had given me so I could see more of her clothing line.

"This designer is impressive." He said with a smile as he placed the catalogue back on the table.

I just nodded and asked, "Would you like something to drink? Tea, some very bad 'caf or maybe some more of that gut rot my father brews?"

"Tea would be fine." He replied quickly.

"Then I shall be right back." And I fluttered off to the kitchen quickly.

I had discovered that there was an in-house delivery service for those of us idiots who had not found off palace housing. It was very convenient, although expensive. It was the best way so far of grocery shopping. At least now I had the bare essentials in the apartment. I made a large pot of my favourite tea put all the things I needed on a tray and carried the lot out in one go, using my foot to remove the paper junk on the table and replaced it with the tray.

I gave Thrawn a sweet smile when he looked up at me. "I haven't had time to tidy, sorry. I wasn't expecting company."

I poured tea and handed him a cup. The apartment had come fully furnished including exquisite china. The tea cups were delicate and expensive. It was a little unnerving to use them. The ornate cup seemed ridiculously tiny in his hand.

"You might want to add a small amount of honey." I said. "Some people find it bitter."

He sniffed at the tea and took a sip. "What is this?"

"Tatooine desert-mint tea." I said. "It is one of the few edible plants that actually grows there. The sand people first discovered it, I think. They sometimes barter it for water, if they are feeling in a social mood. It doesn't happen often though. Mostly, there are a few farmers who try to cultivate it but it's not easy I am told."

Once we had gotten the tea niceties out of the way we sat in silence. The scent of mint, Thrawn's cologne and whatever that bubble stuff was that I had bathed in hanging in the air was a little intoxicating.

"Okay." Thrawn said finally breaking the quiet, "I have to ask. Did you buy the whole planet or did half of the Imperial city's shopping concourse explode in here?"

I glanced around at the mess and it was messy, but expensive messy. "Well, it appears, as Lord Vader's assistant I have to attend palace functions, particular function of note is this Grand Ball. Someone, it seems decided that Nubian not Tatooine fashions are in vogue this year. The palace fashion consultant, Siavaan, was hired to turn this desert rat into a retro Nubian clone." I grinned. "Not going to work though."

"Oh?" Thrawn raised an eyebrow. "Then this explains the dress catalogue."

"Yep, it seems that fashion here is an extreme sport." I pulled the towel off my head and used to rub the last of the serious water out of my hair. Now I had semi wet hair trailing down my back, but the towel was just plain silly looking.

"Yes, I had noticed that. There are some advantages to wearing a uniform." He said ignoring the whole towel thing politely.

"You are lucky that way. I can't believe what some people are going to show up in this year. The theme is retro Nubian."

"Retro Nubian?" This time both eyebrows went up.

"I didn't ask." I said. "Shiv was hard enough to shut up as it was. I am sure I will find out when I attend."

Thrawn suppressed the laughter he so wanted to let go of and drank his tea.

"What are you doing here?" I asked suddenly. "It's a bit late for a social call."

He put his cup down. "Ah, yes, it almost slipped my mind. The sight of your new fashion, the elegant Towel Dress, almost made me forget. You left this behind." He said pulling my book out of his attaché case. "I found it fallen down beside the seat in the sky speeder."

I took it from his hand. I would have been annoyed to lose it. I had taken it with me when we had left the balcony to go to lunch but had forgotten all about it which such a surprise wasn't given everything that had happened.

"Thank you." I said. "And, by the way, just so that you are aware I will not be wearing said towel dress to the ball."

This time he didn't hide his grin. "Well, it would certainly be an eye opener or maybe start a new trend?"

"I think more like the biggest fashion faux pas in the history of the Empire."

"So what will you be wearing?" He asked. He was being a little coy. "Something from that?" He nodded at the catalogue on the table.

I looked at him for a moment and then said slyly, "That would spoil the surprise. You will just have to show up to find out." Now, who was being coy I wondered.

The look on his face said he was enjoying this little game. "Well, Miss Gabriel, it is a requirement of all Imperial Officers to show up when they are not deployed on some important mission. So, as long as nothing big shows up, I will be there."

"I shall look forward to that Captain. More tea?"

He shook his head. "No, thank you. Actually, as much as I would very much like to stay and explore the delicate topic of female fashion trends at the palace or lack thereof further I really have to go. Duty calls. I have a meeting to attend." He got up to leave and I followed.

"Thank you for bringing my book back. It is one of my favourites." I said as we stood by the front door.

"Really? I always found it a little heavy on the romance, not enough build up. The hero is a little too over the top and the leading lady too easy."

I looked at him with some surprise. "You've read it?"

"Yes," He nodded, "I enjoy reading although I don't get much time for it. This is a classic albeit it a bit heavy on the clichés. The story is, however, strangely compelling. Still, there are better books out there, I would be happy to make a few recommendations."

I smiled because he had described it so perfectly. "I would like that. I love to read and now I actually have some time for it."

"Thank you for the tea it was surprisingly refreshing." He said his hand on the door knob. I leant against the wall beside him.

"You're welcome." I said. "So, I guess I will see you at the Grand ball then?"

"As I said, if I am here and able to make it I shall attend if only to see what fashion statement you will make."

"Well I happen to have a wonderful dress maker now so it might be sad if you missed it." I grinned.

He suddenly leaned a little closer towards me and said softly. "I hope this dress of yours is worth the wait, Miss Gabriel. You have quite aroused my curiosity."

There was a sudden surge of electricity in the air and by standing where I had I had backed myself into a corner with no place to go. I shrugged as calmly as I could and said, "Well, you know what they say about curiosity"

He smiled at me slowly. "No, I'm afraid I do not, do tell."

"It killed the jax." I told him.

His eyes searched my face as he cocked his head to one side then smiled. I wasn't sure I liked this smile; this was the hungry smile of a creature about to devour its favourite meal. He reached over and caressed the side of my face. His fingers, while warm but they made me shiver. He moved so that he was as close as he could be without actually touching me and whispered in my ear.

"Yes, Miss Gabriel it did, but do you know what?" He asked.

I looked up into his face, swallowed and shook my head.

"Satisfaction brought it back." He murmured gently. His breath was warm against my skin.

My heart raced in triple time and I had forgotten to breathe so I just stood there and stared up into his eyes like a little durni caught in the lights of a speeder. He smiled and slid his hand around the back of my neck and, with a motion as subtle as it was arousing, he drew me to him. I had both hands flat against his chest keeping him at bay, resisting the temptation to melt into him. This was a man I would drown in if I were to let that happen. He was more dangerous than anything or anyone I had ever met. The trouble was I liked it, I liked it a lot, and this electricity and this wild sort of passion were exactly what I both craved and feared. For a split second all I wanted was for him to kiss me, to touch me but that moment of madness passed really quickly and suddenly I was terrified of where this could end up. I pushed at his chest, just a little.

"You should go." I whispered. "Duty calls, remember?"

He did not take his eyes off my face and nodded. I could feel his heart beat strongly beneath my right palm. I wondered if he knew how nervous he made me, was making me now. The warmth of his hand on the back of my neck beneath my wet hair was electrifying. His fingers brushed the sensitive skin there and I fought to not give in to the flood of warm desire it created. We stood like that for what felt an eternity but was, in reality, no more than a split second and then, with a deep breath, he stepped away from me. I put my hands behind my back. I didn't want him to see how much they were trembling.

He nodded. "Yes, you are right, I *should* go." His voice seemed a little husky to me. He gave me a look I could not decipher and then, just like that, the door was open and he was gone.

I slammed it shut, locked it then against it and remembered to breathe. What the hell was this? What in the name of Sarlacc did I think I was doing? Being in his company was like playing with fire, sooner or later one of us was bound to get badly burned and given my record with men so far that would probably be me. In this particular game I had no idea what I was doing.

It took me forever to fall asleep thinking about Captain Thrawn. His presence was like a shipwreck. He came, shattered the peace and left again. I don't know what bothered me more, the effect he was having on me when he was around or that I actually liked it in some perverse, masochistic way. This was exactly how I had felt about Jyrki, all dizzy highs mixed with a listless sort of ache, sleepless nights and restless days. Except, this time, it was not a one sided thing, or at least it didn't appear to be. Thrawn was the one doing the chasing but I was not exactly telling him to go away.

Not for the first time did I wonder what exactly it was he wanted from me, the obvious notwithstanding. I also wondered what it was I wanted from him because if I seriously thought about where it could all end up, none of the endings I could imagine were very happy or even pretty. It was all around very bad news. Sort of like working for Lord Vader, but I hadn't handed in my resignation from that yet either.



### **CHAPTER 3**

During the days that followed after Thrawn's visit to my flat the atmosphere around the palace ramped up. I tried to ignore the build up of excitement which permeated everyone and everything over the Grand ball because unlike the rest of the planet I wasn't looking forward to it at all. As a rule, working for Lord Vader was something that kept me out of the lime light and away from most social events. He was not the most popular person on the block. The fact that not only was I required to be there but that at several points during the evening there was a good chance most people would actually be looking at me scared the sandjiggers out of me.

The closer the day got the more I hid in my office or my apartment. I could not believe I was actually worried about this silly event I was having some serious trouble sleeping. I kept having nightmares about ending up at the grand event half naked and tripping on the stairs and none of it left me rested. Even being in the office was not all that comforting because there were too many memo-reminders flying around about this, that and the next thing all having to do with this big event. I was getting serious cold feet but I suspected the chance of getting out of it with the excuse of being sick were about the same as going head to head with a Krayt Dragon on a bad day.

Out of all the junk that had come across my desk during the day, the only good thing had been mail from home. I had managed to send off a quick and dirty 'I am fine' postcard holo but some had never managed to write a big long letter. There was not that much I could really write home about because most of it was confidential or embarrassing. I had written a short letter about how nice the journey had been, how busy I was and what I thought of Coruscant but I had not mentioned being on board the ISD while Alderaan had been destroyed or that I was being pursued by an alien man who was twice my age. In other words I had lied through my teeth. I remember mentioning who I was working for and that I was enjoying the daily challenges of being an Imperial employee and I hoped my father would read between the lines and figure it out. I also hoped that when he wrote back he would be equally as careful. His letter was nice, full of news and generalities and one surprised.

*Dearest Merly,*

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

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

*Other than that things here do not change much. There have been extra Imperial personnel stationed in Mos Eisley because of an incident that happened just after you left. Something to do with a cantina brawl or stolen droids, can't recall which. I can tell you that Docking Bay 94 has been given the once over by the local garrison and everyone who worked there was taken in for questioning. I don't think Pirin Tek was all that impressed he lost two day's business. His loss was our*

gain. It certainly kept us busy, so business is good. I do miss my favourite mechanic though.

*Speaking of mechanics, your old friend Jyrki Andando, dropped by the other day and asked how and where you were. He seemed a bit concerned when I told him about your new job. Thinks the Empire will swallow a little Outer Rim girl up I think, he always did worry about you, sort of like a big brother I suppose. It must have been hard for you, an only child. He was just passing through, didn't say where he was headed next. Looked a bit rough, if you ask me, the boy hasn't been eating right or sleeping, always did work too hard. I gave him your address if he wanted to write. I told him you were fine and enjoying yourself in the Imperial Center. Must be quite exciting for you to finally get somewhere with culture and art. I know your mother would have been delighted. Perhaps when you know if you get holiday leave you can come and visit. I know the crew would love to see you again, as would I.*

*We are all missing you greatly, especially Bel and I.*

*Love always,*

*Papa.*

It was a nice letter and I was glad to have news but the bit about Jyrki niggled at me. I was really surprised that he had come back. It seemed strange because I thought he was gone from my life forever so I wondered what had brought him back to Tatooine. It was strange how people have a way of haunting you.

I was about ready to finish up, in the process of shutting all the computers down when someone knocked on the door. I yelled for them to come in. Shiv popped his head in the room.

"Hi." He said.

"You can actually come in, you know." I said as he lurked cautiously in the doorway.

"He's not here is he?"

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

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

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

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

"Escape? From what? Go where?"

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

I nodded, "Yup, keeps me alive."

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

"Sure, sounds good." I said, I had no idea what Taa'shi was but Corellian cocktails sounded like fun. I gathered my stuff, my satchel and made sure my cred-chip was there. I was pretty sure this evening would not be charged to the Imperial Account.

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

"Wait, what others?" I stopped dead in my tracks.

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

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

He gave me a look. "Nerfpoodoo, it's you who don't want to be with others, everyone thinks you are a snob. You don't speak to anyone and you never join in any

of the meet and greets, even though I know you get the memos. It's just some of the HR girls who gave you a hard time and that's only because you were new." He said. "You haven't really tried to get to know anyone have you? I mean, I was all set to take some catty little bitch who thought she was too good for the rest of us shopping the other day, and I ended up with you. You were not at all what I expected. You need to get out more and trust that not everyone who works here is so terrified of *Him* that we won't talk to you. Most of us don't actually care that much, I mean it's not like we work with Vader you know, he's hardly ever here. Come on... I put in a good word for you so you have to show."

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

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

"Would these be the same people, who called me Outer Rim trash and insulted my dead mother?" I said giving him the hairy eyeball.

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

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

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

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

"More Core world, less Rim?" He finished for me.

"Something like that." I nodded.

"Oki doki," He said and he grabbed my arm and slipped his through it. "Lead on Rim-Girl."

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

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

"I guess." I said.

"It will be fun, I promise, no one will die, and no one will call you trashy, trust me!" he said.

"Do I have a choice?" I asked.

"Nope."

And just like that we were off.

Coruscant was huge and over whelming and its industrial sector was, well, pretty industrial. Lots of power supply and relay stations as well as Plasma generators, waste management systems and manufacturing plants. It is a pretty grim place when compared to the ritzier, wealthier parts of the planet but people lived in I-sec and it had the reputation for being on the fringe, which was Palace slang for both really cool and really dangerous.

"You need to know where to go and what parts to avoid." Shiv told me, "People vanish sometimes when they come down into I-sec on their own. The lower levels are bad places to be if you don't belong and don't know what you are doing."

"That sounds like Mos Eisley on a good day." I told him, but as we flew over some of the parts he told me were rough I knew there were places far worse than the back end of Tatooine.

The club we were headed to was on the border between I-sec and one of the Alien sectors where mainly Twi'lek and Mon Calamari lived. It seemed like an odd combination to me but I didn't ask. I was still learning about the Emperor's dislike of non humans and I wasn't sure how well it sat with me. Tatooine was many horrible things but prejudiced against alien races wasn't one of them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I smiled and said 'hi' back.

Bobbyn, Maxxi and Antygra were all male, Ynyth was one of the prettiest girls I had ever seen and everyone was human. A few moments after the introductions and hulloes were done a waitress popped in and took drink orders that is she took Shiv's order. He ordered for all of us, a large pitcher of a Corellian cocktail called a DBH, which was short for Dirty Bounty Hunter. I had never tried this particular cocktail, being a simple up sort of girl, I liked my alcohol straight out of the bottle, not mixed with other things and usually of the distilled sort. Typical pit-mechanic stuff, I guess.

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

you had one sip you wanted more, I wasn't sure how strong it was but no one else seemed too worried so I just went with it.

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

"It's okay." I said honestly.

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

"Really?" asked Antygra who had long dirty blond hair and brown eyes, "I was always under the impression *He* was a real jerk to work for."

"He's not a jerk and he has a name." I told them and was a little surprised to find that I meant it. "So far I am still alive." I said with a grin, "Which I guess that counts for something." I sipped at the more some drink and added. "He has his good days and bad days."

Everyone nodded.

"Yeah I hear that!" agreed Bobbyn brushing his hand through his short brown hair. "I had a real run in today with *you know who*!" He said.

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

"She's one of the courtesans. She's been at the palace since she was a child. One of the Emperor's chosen, totally spoiled rotten, throws an absolute hissy fit every year right before the Grand ball wanting changes to this and that and the next thing." He said.

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you ever see the Emperor?" I asked.

Antygra shrugged. "It's rare. He used to be more accessible in the old days but the last six or seven years now he's been keeping more and more to himself. Only his trusted advisors and the chosen ones get to spend time with him. He makes public appearances for larger functions, gallery openings and the Opera, of course, but mostly we deal through his personal entourage and his office staff."

"Wow. That sounds very mysterious." I said.

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

"Oh do tell." Shiv grinned pouring everyone another glass of the BH.

"That alien captain that's been seen around the palace, you know the one with the blue skin." She said. "No one knows anything about him. Apparently the Emperor is quite impressed with him but no one has a clue where he even came from. I just heard from Kat, you know that slicer in Intel, that he is super intelligent and cold as ice. Comes and goes like he owns the place but never speaks to anyone. He gets assigned to the Outer Rim and Unknown Regions which is weird right?"

Antygra grinned, "Oh that's not all. I heard he's been screwing up at court and getting himself into all kinds of trouble. It's a wonder the Emperor hasn't banned him from the Imperial center or had him discharged from the navy."

"What's an alien doing at court anyhow?" Ynyth asked. "Does anyone know what planet he's even from? I've never seen anyone who looks like him ever before."

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

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

His comment made me half giggle and suddenly I was choking on my drink. Shiv obligingly banged me on the back, till I waved at him to stop.

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

"Usual court business I guess," Ynyth shrugged tossing her black curls coquettishly. "Probably seeing one of the girls, you know how it is. Half the Imperial navy is doing someone at the palace, It's kind of scary."

"He better hope he doesn't get caught then, if that's the case." Said Shiv.

"Why is that?" I asked.

"It's a big no-no having inter-palace relationships. It's not written anywhere but still, the Emperor doesn't like it when the Imperial Navy mixes with the Palace Courtesans. Bad things happen when such couples get caught. Even us lowly employees are not supposed to pair up, although we have it a bit easier than the courtesans do."

I nodded. "Okay, always good to know." I said.

"You know he's probably seeing our Princess. I mean she's always vanishing off somewhere for a day here a week or more there and so is he, or so I'm told. Bet you, they're having an affair." said Antygra.

Maxxi shook his head. "If that's true then I pity the guy." He said.

Antygra grinned, "Or she's probably setting him up or something."

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

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

"Yes, I mean no, well sort of." I shrugged. "I was on board the ship but we weren't near when the planet was destroyed, felt the shock wave though."

"No kidding was it dangerous." Bobbyn asked.

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

They all shook their heads at the same time.

"Well it's sort of like being a tiny little leaf in a massive ten point sandstorm."

They all nodded slowly but I didn't think they really understood.

"So you were okay though?" asked Maxxi.

"It was a huge shockwave but the ISD is build to withstand that sort of thing so it bucked once then rolled with it and when Captain turned her head into the wave and we rode it out." I explained. They all looked at me like I had two heads. So I explained a bit about ship piloting.

"You're a pilot?" Bobbyn asked.

I nodded. "And a fully qualified mechanic."

Antygra shook his head. "Okay I have to ask, how did you end as *His* PA? Those are not the qualifications HR generally looks for when seeking out new personal assistants. Usually the P.A.s are super highly qualified and have university degrees. HR is really picky about that actually."

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

"Well, I am sure the dancing helps." Said Maxxi after a moment's silence everyone, including me, suddenly laughed.

"Sucks about the rebels." said Maxxi. "I mean they destroyed a whole planet. Why would they do that anyway? Alderaan was a peaceful place." Everyone looked at me for an answer.

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

Everyone nodded solemnly.

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

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

They all shook their heads and we drank.

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

I had no idea what time I crawled into bed but it was on the later side of early rather than the other way around. I lay in bed with my head spinning feeling decidedly unwell. I had no idea what exactly is in a DBH but I knew I never wanted to have them ever again. I was pretty sure I had only had three but they were enough.

When I woke up a few hours later to go to work I was greeted by a pounding headache the likes of which I had never experienced before in my life and a mouth that resembled the Great Pit of Carkoon. I showered and stopped by the med-lab for something against the pain and then crawled into the office. It was not even nine, I had not had my 'caf yet and already there was a message from Lord Vader waiting for me. The day was not starting out so well and I had a bad feeling it was only going to go downhill from there. Whatever the medic on duty gave me cleared up the headache but it left me fuzzy headed and slow. Lord Vader's messages were terse and annoyingly vague about wanting to set up a face to face meeting with the droid designer he was working with. It had taken me well over two hours to deal with it. I spent the most of the time explaining why he should stop messing about or else life would get short and ugly pretty quickly. By the time lunch rolled around I was not feeling so hot. When Vader stormed out of his office and left the building I was more than relieved that he was gone. I could handle the anger and the yelling but when stuff started flying around the room it got a bit hairy. Shortly after lunch Shiv sent a message.

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

So I answered:

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

A few seconds later:

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

I wrote back:

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

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

**>>No danger pay, not in contract. Didn't u read the fine print? Big fuss here today, last minute jitters, usual boring stuff. Everyone in an uproar about last minute colour scheme change...happens every year you'd think**

**they'd be expecting it by now, I was. All be over in 2 days, thank goodness... never mind the Ugliers, they don't last long. Gotta blaze, hugs.<<**

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

It had been a nice interlude in my otherwise fuzzy, somewhat angst filled day. Later on during the afternoon the Mail runner dropped by with a box for me. I signed the delivery form and as soon as he had vanished again I sat down and opened it.

Inside, wrapped elegantly in beautiful Tanassi paper were a set of three handwritten books with old school binding. These were antiques in pristine condition. I took them out gingerly almost afraid that just by touching the ancient leather they would fall apart. I didn't recognize the title or the author and had no idea what world they had been bound on. I had never seen the style before. Once I had taken them all out of the box I found the note at the bottom, beautifully hand written on very expensive paper.

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

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

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

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

"That a trick question?" I had asked.

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

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

The Sand People have a saying about that sort of thing. "*The desert knows where each grain of sand came from, but not where its journey will end.*" It's a poor translation because it is often really hard to put what they say in to basic, but that was the gist of it.

The Sand People were nomads on Tatooine, desert dwellers who kept away from the townships and the settlers. They had a really bad reputation for being vicious and hating all other peoples on the planet but unless they were provoked they mostly left folk alone. They were a strange folk, though, full of superstitions and sayings. Their love for the desert was only rivalled by their mistrust and dislike of settlers.

A scholar had once gone out and lived with a tribe for several years, written about their customs and life style. After he had returned to his home planet and his book had been published he vanished. The book was not a big best seller or anything



and mainly made its way about the academic circles. I ended up with a copy because it had been left behind on one of the transports and one of the pilots had thought I might like it. He was certainly right about that. The more I thought about it, the more I believed that the Scholar who had written the book had probably gone back to the tribe and had, as they say, turned native.

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

I was melancholy and by the end of the work day, too many things were running through my head and my headache had come back with a vengeance. I left work, taking the box of books home with me. I stopped off at the med-center and talked to the doctor on call. My headache surprised him so he did a few tests to rule out all the options. His news wasn't great.

"If you really are allergic to glow spice you must be really careful. It's an accumulative allergy and could possibly kill you."

I just sighed, "Stupid drinks. I guess in the end the bounty hunters get you one way or the other."

He laughed and gave me something to help with the headache, telling me he'd have the results of the tests in the morning.

I went home and took one of the books that Thrawn had sent to me. I curled up on the small couch and relaxed to read in solitude undisturbed and uninterrupted. It was no surprise that I fell asleep on the couch. This was not an unusual occurrence for me.

The next day I went back to the medlab and had to digest the news that I was quite violently allergic to glow-spice and had to be very careful about ever ingesting it again from now on. I sat on the exam bench and sighed.

The doctor explained, "It's a very rare allergy, in fact you're the first person I've ever treated for it. The chemical that makes the spice glow is actually a toxin and some people react very badly to it. I have heard that there were more cases planet wide due to higher amounts of glow-spice being used in drinks to make them sparkle."

I felt a little justified that, in general, my own taste in drinks ran to the plain and simple.

"How are you feeling now?"

"Better. I still have a slight headache but mostly good."

He pressed a hypospray to my neck. "You should also be aware that if you are attending the Grand ball you might want to check the drinks being served. Glow spice is the latest fad and you can be sure there will be a great deal of it there. It's high on the ingredient list this year. The allergy is accumulative and it could be fatal after only minimal exposure."

Just my luck, I thought. "Thanks doc." I said and then I went to work grateful to have something to do with myself.

The day of the Grand Ball came far too quickly for my tastes especially as I was dreading it. I spent the day in the office trying to do some work but my heart wasn't really in it. Lord Vader was not around making me wonder if he would even show up at all but this question was answered by a comm from him telling me to be ready at

19:00 CST, and wait for the escort. By the time four o'clock rolled around I could no longer put it off.

I went home and decided to soak in the bath for a while. Bathing was a luxury I just could not quite get used to. I come from a world that was covered in sand. It never rained. Water was a commodity more valuable than any precious metal in the entire galaxy and the water I used for my bath could have made my father rich. Water was money on Tatooine and a bath full was a lot of wealth to be wallowing in. As I lay up to my neck indulging in the hot scented bubble filled water I remembered the first time I ever saw rain.

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

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

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

I had been quite young and I had never seen rain before, at least not that I could remember. A few moments later I had learnt what rain was and I had gloried in it, the lightning and thunder didn't scare me at all. It was awe inspiring. In the desert sometimes when conditions are right we got dry lightening even some thunder but never like this. I had danced around like a wind devil getting soaked. I had wanted to catch all the rain I could and take it home because it tasted so sweet but my father had told me that was not allowed, that there might be organisms in the rain that would damage the eco system on Tatooine, all incoming water had to be certified.

Within the space of twenty minutes it was all over, the storm had moved on and the rain had stopped leaving everything wet and shiny in its wake. I had splashed around in the puddles, shaken all the branches and plants that were near to me just to watch the water sparkle in the sunlight that had broken through the clouds. The air had felt thick and heavy. I had been almost drunk on it and had cried when it was time to leave. I suppose it was then and there that I had decided that I would learn to be a pilot so that I could visit worlds that had rain any time I wanted. I had refused to change my clothes and sat soaking wet all the way home. It had been the first time I had been sad to come home and I had resented the heat assaulted us when we disembarked. Dry and hot with almost no scent in the air to speak of except fuel and the standard city scent, people animals and something indefinable.

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

I had some time before I needed to be ready so it was nice to relax and lie in the scented bubbles. The Doctor at the med center had given me something for the lingering allergic reaction and my headache was mostly gone so I let my mind drift

and allowed my senses to roam free. I often wondered if Thrawn was head blind to the Force because I never once got the feeling from him that he was in any way sensitive to it. I didn't think he would be easily be mind pushed, his will was too strong for that. It never stopped me from trying to find him though. Instead, as usual, I connected with Lord Vader.

I did not manage this level of relaxation all that often but each time I had tried I had somehow managed to find him. I could no longer stop that it was as if we were tethered by the force, it was annoying. I felt his mind, just a brief brush, and I knew who it was I had found. His thoughts were closed to me like a locked vault there but underneath it all he was there.

The first time this had happened he had been furious, aboard the *Devastator*, and he had broken the connection so severely it had hurt. Anyone else might have backed off and stopped but I wasn't just anyone and I had tried it many times since then, each to varying degrees of success. It was like flame to a moth. I could not stay away.

I suppose in some way it was a perverse game of telepathic tag. I needed to know I could still do it. Each time he had shut me out and severed the tie brutally, but this time he allowed me to linger. He, too, in his own way was meditating and because he did not shove me away or slam down the connection I did not push. For now, it was enough for me that he had accepted my presence. Not for the last time would I wonder about these tenuous threads that bound us all together.

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

In spite of him saying that he had wished to take me on as a student, there had been no time for any lessons. I suppose that, given the circumstances, it was normal and to be expected, but I was a little hurt by it. I wanted to know and learn more, I wanted to become stronger with these weird ways I had lived with my whole life and he was the only connection I had to that. It never occurred to me that perhaps he was protecting me in some way or perhaps protecting himself.

I got out of the bath, the water now tepid, the bubbles pretty much gone and wrapped myself in a towel. I made myself tea, put on a dressing gown and sat down to read a little bit. I had some time before I needed to get ready and the best way to get away from all the thoughts and memories that chased me was to read. I really hoped that Thrawn would be at the ball so that I could at least thank him in person for the books. The possibility of seeing him was something I was tentatively looking forward to. I was not, however, looking forward to the evening and the task of turning myself from 'Rim-Girl' as Shiv liked to call me, into a classy lady look-a-like, well...I wasn't even sure that was possible but I had a few hours to work on it.

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

at least the basics of the art of makeup but I had not been the nest student. It was a little daunting trying to decide what to wear and how to go about fixing my hair and face and so on for what was the biggest social event of the year.

The dress I decided on was probably one of the most beautiful pieces of clothing I had ever seen. It was made from a very fine, soft silk that had been dyed various shades of green-blue. It looked how I always imagined an ocean would be. The bodice was snug and form fitting with a V shaped scooped neckline and a very low back. It was complicated to describe the way the fabric folded, crossed and wrapped around my body while skirt flared out from the hips downward and seemed to form a whirlpool of foamy sea green silk in many layers that never seemed to stay still. The bodice and the hem of the dress had been hand beaded with tiny beads that were iridescent, every time I moved the dress seemed to sparkle reminding me of the way stars twinkled in the night sky in the deep desert on Tatooine. There were no sleeves to speak of but rather beaded loops to slip the arms through that hung off the shoulders and at elbows, off which hung long flowing wings of silk. It was very elegant, extremely extravagant, and completely impractical. I loved it.

I had the perfect strappy little shoes to match with just enough heel to make me feel less like a Jawa that I usually did while standing next to Lord Vader. I had done enough basic make up to feel pretty but not so much that I felt as though I were wearing a mask. My hair I did up with the gorgeous Zenji sticks Thrawn had given me, they matched the outfit perfectly. I probably should have worn some other jewellery but there was nothing I had that matched and so I left my neck bare, I thought the hair sticks were enough and the dress was almost jewellery in its own right. I added the last touch of perfume and just as I was taking one last look in the mirror the door chime rang. My escort had arrived.

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

As we got closer I saw that what no one had bothered to tell me was that this was a red carpet affair. I began to nibble nervously at a nail then stopped. For a ride that was no more than five minutes long it lasted an eternity. The vehicle stopped at the foot of the red carpet reception area and the driver got out and opened the door for me and the silent young man in the immaculate suit who was with me. With a white gloved hand the Driver helped me out of the vehicle and essentially passed me on to my escort.

I concentrated on my breathing and tried to remember to smile. There were hundreds of people lined up on either side of the red carpet to see all the guests, along with camera crews and reporters galore. I had not been warned about this.

I was scared to death and I must have been sending sparks out in all direction because I suddenly felt Lord Vader brush my mind, he was nearby, there was a sensation of a whisper for me to calm myself down, he felt annoyed. Just breathe, I thought. My escort turned to me and nodded. With a smile we walked the red carpet. We did not, unlike some of the other guests who were also arriving at the same time, stop for photo opportunities or waves and play to the crowd. We simply walked straight past everyone without so much as even a glance. The young man escorted me up the great stairs and within a few moments we were inside the great hall entrance. The fans, the curious and the paparazzi were all left behind to cheer on the next people to walk the red carpet. I was never happier to be inside than at that moment.

With a curt nod the young man whose name I did not even know gave me a well practised military style bow and left. I turned around to see where he had gone and found myself staring at Lord Vader. The Dark Lord gave me a curt *come here* hand gesture and with a deep breath I did as I was bid. Lord Vader said nothing merely walked into the grand hallway and we stood at the top of a second set of stairs waiting to be announced. It didn't escape my notice that people had cleared a reasonable space around him.

The Imperial Palace had been rebuilt and redesigned by the Emperor and in the new design had been an enormous elaborate gala center which was where the Grand Ball was held. It was prominently situated in the center of everything and lavishly decorated. The main entrance had a grandiose designed so that all those who entered were given a spectacular view of the dance floor and table areas and all of those who were already down in the main gala area had to look up when the next guest was announced to view who it was. Once announced the guests then descended the richly carpeted stairs to the intricately decorative marble floor below.

The ball room was vast and the ceilings were incredibly high with dark vaulting to give them an almost deep-space like feeling. To the right and the left of the main area were the tables and seating areas for the guests, set so that they are slightly above the dance area but not as high as the throne area which sat at the far end of the room opposite the entrance.

Lord Vader waited while we were announced and then walked down the stairs, his black cloak flowing like water behind him. It was all I could do to keep up with him. He made polite nods in several directions as people greeting him but said nothing. I tried to keep my eyes front and just followed him as best I could without tripping up on his cloak.

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

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

"Yes, my lord." I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shiv nodded. "Nice gift and it's not easy to get the Zenji thing right so who taught you that?"

I told him about Bedi Nuale.

Shiv shook his head. "You never cease to amaze me." He grinned. Then his personal comm. started beeping softly. "Oops, gotta go and see what the problem is, probably someone broke a nail or something. I'll be back eventually so don't vanish without saving me a dance, yeah?"

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

Once again I was on my own standing out of the way enough that no one bothered to look at me and I did not get in anyone's way, near the corner without being backed into it. I watched the crowd around me as it shifted and moved. People mingled and chatted. The courtesans played their parts well, fluttering around the guests with a polished ease that made me feel very out of place. I had never gotten the hang of small talk. I watched two of them work the room. It was fascinating to see how each person they spoke to was made to feel special and the focus of attention. I wondered then, if there was a little more to the job of palace courtesan than just looking good at the Emperor's side.

I was certain that the amount of Intel being gathered at this shindig was immense and I wondered now if the Courtesans were also spies. It made sense to me and I was so busy watching the two courtesans that I did not notice who was around me. I almost jumped out of my skin when a soft voice murmured in my right ear. "This dress was indeed worth the wait."

I turned to my side to find Thrawn watching me intently. "Do you have to practice sneaking up on people or does it just come naturally?" I asked a little crossly.

He just smiled.

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

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

"Just people watching."

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

"Glow spice?" I asked the waiter.

"Yes, my lady." He said.

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

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

"That is an unusual allergy." He commented.

"Yes, it is. Unfortunately for me I had to find out the hard way, a night out with some friends turned into a massive headache with the possibility for serious life threatening complications." I said by way of explanations. "Apparently the toxin in the glow spice is not as safe as everyone claims it to be, one in every millionth person reacts badly to it. The allergy is accumulative so I have to be really careful."

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

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

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

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

"To the one in a million." He said softly looking intently at me. I blushed and had to look away when he smiled.

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

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

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

I smiled and shook my head. "Oh no, I am not much good at that I'm afraid. Small talk about this and that was never my thing."

"What is your thing, then?" He asked.

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

"It isn't just small talk it is how people get to know each other and how they disseminate information." He explained.

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

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

"Hence the reason I am not good at social functions." I laughed. "I have a tendency to ignore decorum." I said. "Or I stand back and observe, like tonight."

He nodded. "The courtly political dance can be tedious, I agree, but it is a necessity one should learn if one is to survive at the Palace."

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

this kind of game playing when I had worked at Jabba's Palace and I had not been interested in playing them then either.

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

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

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

"Perhaps I like getting into trouble." I said with a little smile.

"Is that so?" Thrawn said ever so softly, dangerously. "And what of the consequences?" He asked.

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

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

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

"One of three things," He replied. "For those not in the know of who you are, they will think I am being social, chatting with one of the palace courtesans. Make no mistake, my dear, despite your desire to be different, the style and the expense of the dress you wear will tell people you belong to the Emperor. You bear the mark of palace design." He paused to look at me but I kept a blank face and waited for him to continue. "For those few who know exactly who you are but who do not know me they will think I am talking to you so that I might better my standing with the man you work for, perhaps hope for a private meeting with him for the furthering of my career. Lastly, those that know who you are and also know who I am, a very small group I can assure you, will know this is not necessary as I already have the ear of Lord Vader and unlike many I do not waste his time so for these very few people that I stand here and converse with you will be an intriguing mystery which will no doubt occupy the gossip mills for weeks."

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

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

The air electrified. There was no other way to describe it. Over five hundred people bent their knee to one man all at the same time. I could feel the force shift and alter itself around the Emperor, as though he were a darkness that drew all the light towards him. I could feel his power, I could feel him reaching out to all those around him who could sense the force but I did not want him to find me.



Suddenly, I was terrified, I felt as though the walls were closing in on me and I didn't know how to escape. I could feel panic rising and didn't know how to quell it. I must have made a sound or moved because I felt a hand reach out and grasp me by the wrist, warm and strong, pulling at me to stay down. It stilled the fear. I fought to quell the rising terror that was beginning to make my heart race and breathing difficult. The hand at my wrist let go, but the momentary contact had been enough to ground me.

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

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

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

I nodded. My mouth was dry and I struggled to gain control of my fear. The Emperor finished his speech and the Master of Ceremonies banged his stick once more and announced that the Grand Ball had now officially begun.

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

"Now the evening begins in earnest." Said Thrawn dryly.

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

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

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

"Yes, Lord Vader. A most interesting and efficient young lady." Thrawn said with a sudden disinterest. "I hear she does her job well."

"Her reputation precedes her, I see." Vader said tartly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lord Vader swept into that forbidden two meters and bent to one knee gracefully before the throne. His black cloak spread about the floor around and behind him in an almost perfect semi circle. 'Show off.' I thought. I stayed a little behind him also dropping to one knee and bowed my head to this old man I did not know for the second time that evening.

"Ah, Lord Vader," The Emperor said. "How good of you to join us."

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

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

I waited until Lord Vader stood and then did the same. My heart was thumping so fast and so hard that I was certain everyone could hear it above the noise and the music of the gala behind us. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and stood in a dance position that was elegant and easy to maintain for long periods of time. I still did not look up into the emperor's face. I could feel his power radiate about him and it scared me to death. I had never experienced anything like this before in my life. I could not quite believe that this was the same old man I had met that one night in the old part of the palace while I had been practicing. I could feel his eyes upon me, studying me. I could sense him in the Force stretching out and seeking to connect with that little amount of ability I had. I did not want him in my head or even near me and as much as I didn't want to I fought him. A grain of sand against the wind, as the sand people would say. He chuckled, it was not a pleasant sound and it made my skin crawl.

"My dear child how refreshing to meet you again." He said. "You may approach me and you may look up."

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

"I can certainly understand why Lord Vader has chosen to retain your services, girl, I am told you are quite...efficient at your job and I know you will be of value to the Empire." He said and paused a moment before continuing, "Lord Vader did not, however, inform me of your talents in so many other areas." He said.

I kept very still and very quiet because I was not exactly sure of what other talents he was referring to but I had my suspicions. I felt Lord Vader shift a little behind me and realized that the words the Emperor had spoken had not been meant for me alone. There was threat and annoyance underlying everything the Emperor had said. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end and I shivered and then the mood shifted once again.

The Emperor sat back a little returning his attention to me. "No matter, we have met and I am most pleased to welcome another loyal member to our Imperial family. I am certain you will fit in well here and I look forward to further

conversations with you." He said and he gave me a smile that did not improve his looks any.

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

"You may go." He said with a wave of his hand. I made a motion to step back and then he added. "Miss Gabriel I am looking forward to seeing your dancing skill on the dance floor. I am also quite certain this gala event will be as nothing else you have ever seen before. I hope that you enjoy the evening."

"Thank you I am sure I will." I nodded and dropped a curtsied and then took my three steps backwards and without caring if it was rude or not vanished into the chattering, glittering crowd as quickly as I could.

Once I felt I was a safe distance away I looked back and saw the Emperor deep in conversation with Lord Vader. I was quite certain that was a conversation I did not want to know anything about. I also noticed the young woman to the right of the Emperor staring directly back at me, the one with the beautiful red-gold hair. She was regal and elegant, with the body of a well trained dancer and the poise of a manner born princess. The look she sent me made me shudder. It was one of pure hatred. I wondered what I had done to deserve that and then turned my back on her as well. The sooner I was away from that part of the room the better.

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

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

Prince Xizor was not a man I would have considered handsome in anyway and although I had heard whispers of his prowess with women looking at him now I couldn't understand why anyone would choose to share his bed. He was tall and arrogant looking, reptilian in origin with a top knot hair style I found vaguely disturbing. He gave me a single glance.

"My humble apologies." I said.

"Think nothing of it." He replied coolly in return. I went to turn away when he said.

"Wait, do we not know one another?" He asked with a smile I suddenly found alluring.

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

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

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

He smiled, it was dazzling smile but it was also predatory. "And you might be?" he asked.

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

"There you are!" I have been looking for you all over, you know better than to vanish like that!" I turned around to see Shiv looking at me, seemingly furious. I was

about to argue with him but I picked up on something and played along. I bowed my head as if embarrassed or ashamed and mumbled an apology.

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

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

Shiv bowed again. "Your highness is, as always, most gracious." He said and then he backed away still holding my arm in his death grip. He dragged me out of the main room. Up a set of side stairs and out onto a large terrace that over looked the city in the open air.

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

I shook it. Then I nodded. "Explain." I said.

"That was the almighty Prince Xizor." he said

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

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

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

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

"I would not have slept with that man." I stated hotly.

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

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

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

"Shiv, I am so sorry, who was she?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

I smiled. "Better the devil you know..."

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

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

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

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

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

"You do seem to excel at it." I replied wearily without turning around to look at him.

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

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

"Are you well? You seem troubled." He asked after a moment's silence.

"Do you really care or is this just more games? Polite palace banter designed to lure me into saying something stupid or giving you insider knowledge?" I said more sharply than I had meant to. I regretted the words immediately. "I'm sorry, that was uncalled for. If you must know it has been a stressful evening so far. Not at all what I had imagined." I couldn't bring myself to look at him. He seemed always to be around when I was at my most vulnerable.

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

"I am fine. It is just, as you so aptly put it, overwhelming." I replied with a nod.

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

"Then perhaps you would honour me with a dance." He asked.

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

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

"I'll bet you are." I whispered not knowing if he heard or not.

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

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

We stood side by side and watched the dancing with saying a word to each other. It would have been difficult to say the least to step into the middle of a dance already underway but even more so for me, I had no idea what they were dancing. It was full of complex steps and hand gestures, dancers wove in and around each other always ending back with their original partner.

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

"Certainly looks that way." I said.

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

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

"No." He replied thoughtfully. "Not that I am aware of at any rate."

I sighed. This was a whole new world to me.

We watched as the dance ended and the music changed. I recognized this piece. It had been one of my mother's favourites and the singer was about to sing the story that went along with the music. It was a love song theme for a very old waltz. This was a dance that had originated on Alderaan many, many years ago called the Kai'y'en-sai Waltz. Thrawn held his hand out and I took it.

I had learnt to waltz as a child. I had fond memories of watching my mother and father dancing this particular dance to a holo of this very piece of music. My mother had taught me the steps and I had often danced with my father, standing on his feet with mine as he whirled me around the living room in our small house. My mother had often laughed at the sight of us. It must have been funny. My father, contrary to appearances, was a good dancer and liked to dance.

My mother had told me one time that there were three types of men in this world when it came to dance. Those who did not dance at all and no amount of money or coercion would get them on the dance floor. Then there were those who learned to dance because they felt it was required of them to do so. They didn't mind getting out on the dance floor but they didn't lead well, most of the time, content to

get through the dance without really understanding it. Then there were the men who not only enjoyed the dance but when they had you on the dance floor they owned you. I had asked her what she had meant by that because it had not sounded like a good thing to me. She had just smiled and said, 'one day you will dance with such a man and you will know why that is special.'

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

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

"Look at me." He said softly.

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

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

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

The Music began to rise in tempo as the last part of the story was sung. Thrawn pulled me in closer and we swung around harder, my dress flared out about me like foamy water. I kept my eyes on his, because if I watched the room around us spinning I would get dizzy. He looked back at me with no expression I could decipher and only when he suddenly smiled and we moved as one did I begin to understand what my mother had meant.

The song ended and as it did he pulled me in tight to his waist while pushing back with the hand that held mine so that I lent backwards in an arch that allowed me to see almost behind me. It was a difficult and beautiful way to end the dance, traditional in that the Moon maiden dies in the arms of her star spirit lover who has burned her soul away with his fire, a typical end to an unhappy unrequited love story. Most dancers don't execute this move because it is too difficult to do well, the balance and the timing need to be perfect. We stayed in position for a moment longer than necessary. He was showing off, letting me know that on this dance floor, I belonged to him. I was too breathless to argue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"May I cut in?" Shiv asked.

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

"Thank you for the dances, Miss Gabriel, later on you will honour me with one more." He said with a bow. It wasn't a request.

I curtsied and smiled. "Only if you are very lucky." I whispered letting him know that just because he danced well I wasn't his for the taking. The look he shot me was so worth it. Shiv tugged at my hand and I followed him on to the dance floor and let the music take us away.

Shiv was also a very good dancer however there was something missing in the way he led but I couldn't put my finger on what it was exactly. Shiv gave me one of his dazzling smiles and I grinned back at him as we circled about the floor with everyone else.

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

"Yep I think so." I said keeping it light. "Senior Captain Thrawn or something like that. Bloody arrogant as all get out if you ask me."

Shiv shook his head and laughed. "You do seem to attract the sharks."

"Not my fault." I told him.

"You having fun so far?" He asked.



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

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

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

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

"Your sister?"

"Yeah, she had that quality of sparkle and lightness. Like everything around her shone in some way. She had a way about her that seemed to put people at ease. It was as if she could sense the mood of a room before she entered it and somehow change it. She was special. One might even say magical. You are a lot like her in some ways." He said giving me a look to let me know he wasn't just speaking in generalities. I opened my mouth but he shook his head and then went on. "I am guessing you'd be about the same age as her, early twenties?"

I nodded.

"Yeah, thought so." He nodded. "You have a lot of the same qualities." "She was lucky to have you." I told him. "A brother to watch over her like you did."

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

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

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

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

The dance ended and we walked away to join the rest of his small group of friends. Someone found me a drink with no glow spice and we stood around and chatted about silly things, the latest fashions and who was doing what with whom. I looked around but I could not see Thrawn anywhere, and I found myself strangely disappointed by that.

Lord Vader was also not around and when I looked about neither was the Emperor. I was grateful for small mercies. I was deep in thought when Antygra grabbed my arm and dragged me to the dance floor. It was beginning to get late and the music style was slowly changing to a more modern less formal style. No more patterned, formal steps to follow, no provocative caresses to avoid, just free style dancing which was fun. We all took turns dancing with each other and hung out in a little group near a corner. It reminded me a little of some of the organized dances at the school I had gone to on Tatooine.

Shiv handed me a drink of something clear and bubbly. "Just water with some fizz." He said noting how I looked at the glass.

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

Antygra looked at his chrono. "Well after midnight." He said.

"When did the Emperor leave?" I asked.

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

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

"Why wait for him?" Bee asked.

"I thought it was proper etiquette to accompany him out when he leaves."

Shiv shook his head. "Pah, that's really old fashioned, forget about it, no one does that anymore." He said.

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

Ynyth shook her head. "He won't kill you." She said.

"What makes you so sure?" I asked.

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

"Are you sure about that?"

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

"And Vader won't go against the Emperor." Shiv said quietly.

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

"Beats us, we've been speculating about that all night!" said Antygra. "Along with the rest of the people here and you really made our Princesses' day. Did you see the look she shot you?"

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

He nodded. "Yeah and looks like she doesn't have much time for you. Watch yourself around her."

I nodded. Just what I needed one more person I needed to watch out for.

I turned my attention back to watching Shiv and Ynyth dance. When they came back I said my goodnights. Shiv walked me to the front of the entrance and hailed me a ride back home.

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

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

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

The part of the palace where I lived was quiet and deserted. Although many people worked in the palace not so many chose to live in it. Most of those people preferred the newer wing to this older part. The quiet abandoned quality of this part of the palace never bothered me, but then I was used to the emptiness of the desert.

I still had music in my ears and was humming when I opened the door to my flat. I flicked the wall switch but no lights came on which was annoying really, but sometimes it happened because the fixtures in this flat were old and cantankerous. I shut the door and went to find the small table lamp when suddenly someone grabbed me from behind so that I could not move or struggle, and clamped a hand over my mouth tightly then whispered in my ear.

"I won't hurt yer but if yer yell for help then and we're both dead." The voice whispered. Whoever it was strong and despite their words, they were hurting me. I was terrified.

"If I take my hand away yer won't scream for help." It was not a question but rather a statement of fact.

I nodded as best I could. Slowly the hand was removed and he let go. I spun around and had to clamp my own hand over my mouth. Even in the darkness with only the faint light from outside to give me any idea of anything at all, I knew who this was.

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

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

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

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

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

"Mouse, say something."

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

"I came to rescue yer." He said and I couldn't help it I laughed.

Somehow the laughter helped. He just gave me a puzzled look. I got up and walked away from him.

"Rescue me from what?" I asked finally.

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

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

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

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

"I can help yer escape from him."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

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

"I have a decent idea." I suppressed a shudder, "What do you mean killer of children?"

Jyrki shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

"How do you know this?" I whispered.

"Because I was there when it happened." He said and his voice broke but he fought to control himself. "The night Anakin Skywalker served the Dark side and did your Emperor's bidding. Purge the galaxy of all Jedi right down to the children. I was very young and a few of us were out of bed, playing games of hide and seek in the catacombs. We were not supposed to be there. I and five others, we were down there playing when the attack happened. We could hear the screams and the fighting, the sounds of laser fire and lightsabers. I wanted to go and help but Salla'amy, the oldest of us, held us all back, made us hide deep inside one of the storage closets. We stayed there for a very long time, until we heard nothing only a dreadful silence. Then she led us away from the temple, but not before we had passed by some of the less lucky ones."

He sighed, "One of them was still alive but only just. She could not do anything for him. He told us what had happened. That Anakin had come with clone troopers to kill all the Jedi, every last one. He died in her arms and she could do nothing about it. We escaped through the underworld to a safe house and were smuggled off world. They separated us and I never saw any of them again. I spent most of my childhood going from safe house to safe house, hiding who I was and what I was until I was old enough to fend for myself. I never forgot the teachings though. I even passed some of them on to yer." He drew a deep breath. "Now don't yer see? Yer have to come with me, get away from the Emperor."

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

"The information wasn't easy to come by but I know. Yer need to trust me, that the Emperor is evil and so is the man yer work directly for. I have heard terrible things about this Darth Vader! Yer know I am telling the truth. I know that is one of yer talents."

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

"Why?" He asked fiercely.

"It's complicated. Where would I go? What would I do?" I didn't want to answer the why because I was certain he wouldn't like it much.

"Anywhere, work as a mechanic somewhere, free lance plenty of star ports would love to have a talented mechanic like yer around. Or yer could dance like yer did before. Why is it so complicated?"

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

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

"I don't want to spend the rest of my life running away always looking over my shoulder!" I said getting annoyed.

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

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

"What do yer mean by that?"

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

"Mouse I had to leave."

"Why?"

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

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

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

I opened my mouth then closed it again. "So he was right, you were running away from me, how you felt." I whispered. And I shook my head. "I was just a kid! I was in love! You could have at least said goodbye!" I spat.

He just stared at me but he didn't say anything.

I switched tacks, "Why did you never tell me you were force sensitive as well? Why did you never let me know that there was someone else like me?"

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

"For who, me or for you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, but did I gave my loyalty when I took this job." I said which I supposed was true as I had signed a non disclosure agreement when I had signed my contract.

"That makes yer a traitor." He hissed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Go hide in the bedroom, anywhere just hide. If you get caught here you'll be killed." I hissed. I was angry at him but I wasn't ready to lose him just yet.

He stared at me for a second and then vanished into the bedroom. I took a deep breath and went to open the door but there was no one there. I looked about the hallway and saw nothing and then I looked down. There on the door mat was a crystal glass with a little card in it. I picked it up and read the note.

*'You owe me a dance.'* It said.

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

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

He was leaning with both hands on the balustrade staring out over the city. If he heard me approach he didn't show it and for a moment I stopped in the entrance way just to watch him. He had taken off the dress uniform jacket and looked somehow less formidable in the dark, long sleeved undershirt and dress trousers. There was a leanness to him and a sense that he was more than just a captain in the Imperial Navy, that he had lived a life outside of the world of Imperial politics and palace intrigues. I had seen him on the dance floor and had been given a taste of his graceful strength. This was a man who kept secrets and showed only a very tiny part of his true self to the world around him. I wondered what it was he could possibly see in me that made him curious enough to pursue me and get to know me better. I wondered if it was wise to get to know him better but before I could come to any conclusion he broke the silence.

"Are you going to stand there until dawn watching me Miss Gabriel or will you join me for a drink?" He asked without turning around.

I sighed and came to stand at his side. He took the glass from my hands and filled it with something that wasn't champagne or my father's gut-rot. He topped up his own glass and touched it to mine. The crystal sang a clear beautiful note that hung in the air. I took a sip and smiled as I tasted very fine Corellian brandy.

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

I drew a very deep breath. "News from home." I said with a shrug. It wasn't exactly a lie.

"Problems?"

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

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

"Your ability to understate the obvious is astounding Senior Captain Thrawn." I remarked dryly using his full title.

"The correct form of address is still just Captain." He laughed. He had a warm, rich laugh and it was a pleasure to hear after the argument I had just had.

"Very well. *Captain*." I returned his smile. "Congratulations on the promotion I guess."

"Thank you." He replied sounding less than impressed.

"It isn't a good thing?" I asked.

"It's a bit redundant." He said with a shrug. "Imperial Ranking system takes a little getting used to."

"Lots about the Empire takes getting used to." I retorted.

He glanced at me and smiled.

"Did you enjoy the evening or was it too overwhelming?" He asked after a moment's silence.

I didn't know how to answer his question. I wasn't sure how I felt about what had happened during the course of the night. I especially did not know how to deal with the sudden appearance and subsequent disappearance of Jyrki. I sighed without thinking about it. Thrawn regarded me quietly and waited.

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

He nodded once.

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

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

"You are genuinely full of surprises, Miss Gabriel." He said taking a sip from his glass and looking over the city. I waited for him to answer my question. He drew a deep breath and returned his gaze to me once more. "I know enough to understand that it is not something which should be discussed lightly or out in the open." He said quietly. "What is on your mind?"

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

Thrawn raised an eyebrow. "I have heard something to that effect. Why are you asking this?"

I let out a noisy breath, debating what to tell him then finally said, "There are people from home who think I am betraying what they believe in by working for the Empire. He...they believe that it's wrong to work for the Emperor, to work here. I learned tonight that it was not just the Jedi who were killed but also the Jedi younglings, why would anyone do that? They were just children."

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

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

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

"No, not really." I shook my head. "But it bothers me all the same."

Thrawn watched my face carefully for a second and then nodded, "There are all kinds of people in this galaxy, my dear. That is part of what makes it so interesting but also part of what makes it so full of conflict. It has been my experience that power blinds people into doing terrible things in order to gain more power or maintain that which they already have. It is very seductive and it can be easy to lose sight of one's

ultimate goal when one is consumed by the lust for more of whatever it one wants more of." He paused. "You work for men who lust for power. Their desire to have this elusive thing comes at a cost which, for many, is too high. You and I, we serve them to the best of our abilities given the parameters we have to move in and I suspect, that like me, you endeavour to do the best job you can while staying true to your conscience. Does this make it wrong? I don't believe so. At some point in everyone's life they will serve what they perceive as a corrupt master, to remain true to oneself, one must do this job with honour."

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

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

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

"I suppose that would depend on circumstances and in my profession as a member of the Imperial Navy there are things that need to be done which I might not always find tasteful. I will follow orders when they make sense but I do not slaughter innocents just because I am told to. However, if the reason is there...." He didn't finish his sentence and something in his voice told me he knew much more about this subject than he wanted to let on. I didn't press.

"Make no mistake, Miss Gabriel, killing is a dreadful thing and it should never be done lightly but in days of chaos and turmoil it will happen. When people fight against each other, no matter what the reasons, there will be death. Anyone who serves in a military capacity must accept this as part of the job, but you are not in such a position so this is not something you will ever be asked to do and," He said softly, "I hope you never will be."

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

He turned to face me. "Everyone has the capacity to kill, some more so than others. It is a choice many must make on a daily basis whether they wish to or not and those who choose not to often die because of that decision." He said. "But it changes you and it makes you harder, colder in ways you cannot imagine. I am certain that if it came down to it and you had no other avenue available you would choose life over death, there is enough steel in you to do that I believe but I should hate to see that happen. It would strip away that dancing light in your eyes and that touch of innocence you so like to think you hide away where no one will see." He reached up and stroked aside the lock of hair which had fallen into my face.

His touch left me breathless.

He continued. "Do the job you were asked to. Stay out of harm's way and keep that lovely spirit of yours alive and flickering, just like the ever changing lights in that precious stone sculpture of mine you so love." He said gently. "It would be a great pity if this place broke you."

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

As he leaned in closer he whispered, "Working for the Empire may not always agree with you Miss Gabriel but I get the distinct impression that being with me does." Then before I could reply he lifted my chin upward with the crook of his forefinger and he kissed me.

His lips were soft and his scent was intoxicating. I sighed and gave in to the wash of desire that welled up from the deepest part of my being. As I responded to his



attentions, sliding his free hand about my hip, he deepened his kiss from gentle to exploring. It was so full of wonder and passion that it made my knees weak and watery. If he had not wrapped his arm completely about my waist to pull me closer to him I felt as though I would have crumpled to the ground. The touch of his tongue against mine was very persuasive and suddenly at that exact moment I just didn't care about anything else. Kissing him was like drowning so when his private comm went off a few seconds later it was as if someone had pulled me out of deep, deep water and slapped the air back into my lungs. I gasped with the shock of it, coming suddenly to my senses.

He swore in a language I didn't understand and retrieved the comm from his pocket giving me time to step back and move away from him. I turned away to look out over the city, gripping the balcony tightly for support because my legs trembled and I wasn't sure they could support me on their own. My heart raced hard in my chest, so much so that I thought it would blow up.

"I have to leave." Thrawn said but he did not sound very pleased about it.

I looked up at him and nodded trying to find my voice, "Time to save the galaxy from evil doers once more?"

His lips twitched into a slight smile, "Something like that." He replied never taking his eerie, glowing red eyes off mine. "I am not certain when I will return but this is a conversation I'd very much like to continue." He said stroking the side of my face with gentle fingers.

I shivered under his touch and moved my head away, just a bit. I downed the rest of the brandy in my glass and I gave him a nod not entirely sure what I was agreeing with.

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

## **CHAPTER 4**

The weeks that followed after the Grand Ball were mostly quiet and uneventful. All the excitement and buzz had gone and the usual intrigue and general plotting had returned to its behind doors state of affairs. This meant that for people like me life was fairly dull. Actually it was more than dull it was frustrating. In spite of his promise to teach me in the ways of the Force and to guide me further in the studies he had suggested Lord Vader had all but ignored me. He was busy.

I understood this especially since I was the one who set his appointment calendar and knew his schedule but it didn't mean I had to like it. I also didn't like the fact that I was being ignored. Three times he had told me to meet him to spar and three times he had stood me up, not even bothering to leave a note or a message to say he had been called away on Imperial business and would not be back for a few days, weeks, whatever.

To get rid of the frustration I would go on my own to my quiet spot in the old part of the Palace. As I was pretty much certain that Thrawn was also off somewhere in the galaxy doing his thing it was a sure bet that no one would bother me. Even Shiv was not around at the moment having been sent of the Emperor's retreat on Naboo to do some redecorating. The Emperor liked to spend a great deal of time there and it was Shiv's job to get the Retreat ready for his arrival.

The palace had a set of beautiful and functional training rooms where many forms of martial arts were practiced and taught. Occasionally, when I had the time, I would watch a class quietly from the back of the room and so far no one had minded me just observing. I enjoyed the different and wide variety of combat training that took place. It was amazing to watch and when I was on my own I would do my best to imitate the moves I had seen.

This was not always so easy without a teacher or someone to spar with. In the end I mostly ran through the entire move forms Jyrki had taught me and tried to add on what I had seen, often landing on my ass in the process.

Shortly after my return to Coruscant I had swiped a reinforced fighting stave from one of the combat practice rooms and stashed it in the room I now used for dance and martial arts workouts.

The old room I had taken over was a large quiet space and I could work out for hours without being interrupted by others wanting to share the space or worse have it for themselves. This evening had been no different.

Bored and frustrated I made my way to what I had begun to think of as my room and began to warm up and work out.

I liked the simple grace of Jyrki's training but now that I had seen other forms of movement I felt his lacked power and was less about offense and more about defence, which, I suppose, made sense given that Jyrki was a Jedi.

I had been trying to gather information of the Great Jedi Purge but the records were hard to get at and the information was scattered and encrypted. My skills as a slicer were fairly limited to a ship's onboard system and I had not yet gotten up the courage to ask Lord Vader to grant me even more access. So I had settled for the main palace archives and reading about the history of the Empire. Much of that, I suspected, had been created by the Emperor and his historians, after all history was written by the winners. There was no mention of the killing of children.

I preferred to practice in the late afternoon evening and especially in twilight. I found it familiar. Jyrki and I had always practiced at night so it was well ingrained in my being. With a sigh I began my routine. It was difficult to concentrate on what I was doing because my annoyance and frustration kept getting in the way, making

focus hard. Mostly I didn't want to find my inner calm I wanted to beat things to pieces. It was hard to do that when there is no sparring partner or droid and no hanging sparring bag around so I settled for a solid warm up and then went straight into the fight routine. About half way through my routine I found my rhythm and began to get lost in the movements. Finally found my center. I didn't know why I could do this more easily when I danced than when I practiced the fighting forms. It always seemed to take me twice as long when I was working through the kata forms.

In dance, a spin was a thing of grace, in the fighting forms it was a deadly weapon. In dance I would spot so that I didn't get dizzy, in the fight I focused on where my enemy was so that when I came out of the spin I knew exactly where to hit him, two very different things in my head although in principle they were actually the same. I often used to think how close the two forms were to each other. When I was in the right mood I could get them to flow from one to the other, but tonight was not like that. I was having a hard enough time concentrating as it was. Several times I had to execute the same move just to get it right. I was so deep in concentration that I never noticed the figure in the doorway watching me.

I was in the middle of the fourth try of when I caught the shape out of the corner of my eye. I wasn't expecting anyone and it broke my concentration in the middle of the spin, setting me off balance. I fell, landing flat on my ass on the floor. I was furious and was about to unleash my temper in all its glory when I recognized the shape of the cloak and immediately got to one knee.

"Do get up, my dear." He said coming towards me. "In this place I think we can dispense with court formalities."

"Yes your Excellency." I murmured a little unsure of why he was here.

As if he had read my mind he said, "I enjoy watching you, girl, you have an aggressive energy I find refreshing, Lord Vader was right to want to keep you to himself. You are as passionate in this form of movement as you are when on the dance floor. It is very ... stimulating."

I made a face.

"You are unhappy? I sense much frustration in you." He said looking at me.

I shook my head. "No your Excellency, well not really."

He smiled and he gestured for me to walk at his side. "Come with me there is something I wish you to see and I would enjoy the company of such a lovely young lady without the oppressions of court etiquette."

I put my hands behind my back and walked beside him as he left the room with the balcony and walked down the hallways into a part of the palace I had not yet explored.

"Tell me child, what is frustrating you?" He asked as we walked.

I huffed trying to find the right words to express how I felt. "I wish to learn more about the Force, Lord Vader said that he would teach me but he is very busy. I do understand this but it's difficult to be patient." I said. I didn't see the point in lying about it.

The Emperor nodded. "Yes, Lord Vader has many demands on his time and little left over for a student. I have been thinking about this since our last conversation and I have spoken with him about you."

I looked up at him and listened.

"I sense that you have formed a powerful bond with him that will be difficult to break. Yet, I wonder if he is the right person to teach you in the ways that would be most beneficial to you. Like my apprentice, you are ruled by your passions, but where his stem from anger and hatred, yours arise from desire. You have a hunger, a yearning for knowledge and much much more, you thirst for passion and I sense that you have skills and talents far suited to a different kind of instruction. You require a more subtle hand. You require strength without brute force. Under the correct

guidance you could reach your true potential, I fear that under Lord Vader's guidance alone this might not be possible. He has a tendency to be ...."

"Abrupt?" I finished for him.

He chuckled softly. "Yes, yes indeed, that would be an apt description of his ways."

"Well," I said coming to Lord Vader's defence, "I am quite sure that his work is far more important than anything else, including giving me some sparring lessons."

"It is, however I could arrange for someone else to guide you in a more suitable direction if that would be your wish."

"I would like that very much." I said honestly. "But wouldn't that make Lord Vader angry?"

The Emperor gave me a shrewd look and shook his head. "That is not something for you to worry about. Lord Vader knows I have only his best interest at heart this includes those under his protection." He paused. "Of course, there are also other avenues of work here at the palace open to you should you wish to explore them. I am always on the lookout for keen young people such as you." He said

"That is very kind of you but I like the job I do now." And I was surprised to discover this was actually true.

The Emperor nodded. "I thought as much, still from time to time I might have need of your skills and should I call upon you I know I can count on your help, yes?"

"Of course, Your Excellency" I said.

"You will be unique among those that work for me." He said and I caught the scent of a lie, there were others like me who worked for him, force sensitive and useful I was certain of that.

I glanced up at him sharply and he smiled at me. "Yes?"

"Forgive me for being blunt but that's not the truth." I said. "I am not unique. Why would you lie to me about that? I don't mind if I am not the only one."

He laughed ever so softly and it was not an altogether pleasant sound. "Ah yes, I was not certain if Lord Vader had read your talent in this area correctly, forgive the little test, my dear, I had to be sure"

"Did I pass?" I asked a bit annoyed.

"In more ways than one." He said with a smile I didn't like at all. He was playing the benevolent old man with me but underneath it all was something I could not put my finger on and it was very scary.

I sighed, "What sort of things would I be doing for you?"

"I have need of messengers willing to travel and deliver and pick up dispatches which I deem too important to be sent via normal transmissions. You have skills in piloting, you are able to dissemble truth from lie and you have force talents in certain areas which make you the ideal candidate for such a job. With some training to hone your skills you could be a very valuable member of the Empire and of even greater use to Lord Vader in the capacity of personal Assistant as well as to me." He said. "If you feel you are up to the challenge."

"I would be." I said carefully.

"I had hoped so. It would be such a shame to see your talent wasted on just a mindless office job."

We had walked for a long time through the old hallways until we came to a doorway which he unlocked with a slight movement of his hand.

"I have seen and know of your love for this older part of the palace and I thought you might enjoy this. It was once the main site for a small library used by a variety of teachers and students but it has since been long abandoned. Lord Vader mentioned you had an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Many of the archives here have not been touched in a long time. I am giving you complete access, a place if you will,

for you to study in peace. I feel the physical training which you will undergo will only serve to make you thirstier for the academic studies to supplement them."

I looked around in awe. He was right about no one being in this room for a long time it smelled of disuse and dust. I let my fingertips brush the shelves closest me and felt the room call to me. There was more here than just old archives, there was power here waiting to be found.

"This is extraordinary. Why are you giving this to me?" I asked suddenly.

He looked around and then back into my eyes. "If I had found you at an earlier age you would have come to me for training and perhaps even outshined my best pupil. I sense many talents in you which are, as of yet, undiscovered at worse and barely touched upon at best. You should have joined the ranks of my best agents under the guise of courtesans and Concubines but instead you have managed to remain hidden from me. This was quite an achievement." He shook his head and smiled. "Now I do not think such a position would suit you. You have grown up wild and wilful, your passions have been allowed to rule you and as we have observed you have bonded with my apprentice, making it difficult for me to train you personally. While I am certain we could break that tie binding you with Lord Vader, it might damage you in the process. You far more useful alive and I enjoy having pretty things such as you in my presence. It would be a shame to waste all you have to offer."

There was a hint of threat as well as untruth in everything was saying yet I could not figure it out and so I kept silent.

He glanced at me, "You are also refreshingly different from most of the fools I must suffer daily. It will be interesting to hear what you learn from these old archives. And," He added in a quiet voice, "I enjoy being a patron of the arts and guide to those who need some guidance. I am quite certain we will find a way to hone your skills and talents and bring some subtlety to your rather enchanting use of power."

I looked up at him wondering what exactly he was talking about.

He smiled, "Did you not think I would feel what you let loose at the Grand Ball? All that desire and pent up passion which you free when you dance. It's quite remarkable and also quite dangerous when used without proper training." He lifted my chin with his fingertips. They were icy cold and he nodded slowly to himself. "I can see what draws him to you, why he likes you so much." He said softly. "But he doesn't know he's playing with fire." He caressed the side of my face and then patted my shoulder. "I shall be watching you with great interest."

I was not sure who The Emperor was referring to and wasn't about to ask. I was glad when he turned toward the door indicating it was time to leave.

"I am granting you access to this place and the area here. I enjoy the peace here in the old part of the palace and you do as well this is something we have in common." He said as he closed the door. He handed me a key. "Keep it safe." He said and we turned to head back the way we came.

"Tomorrow when you come for your practice I will arrange for an instructor to be here to meet you. The combat form I am thinking of will be difficult but I believe it will suit you best of all."

"I am most grateful Your Excellency." I said.

"I hope this will keep you out of trouble until Lord Vader returns then you both will accompany us to the Retreat on Naboo, I am sure you will enjoy it there and as Lord Vader and I have much business to attend to you should have enough free time to enjoy some of the sights. It will be unlike anything you have ever seen before, that I can assure you."

"I've never been to Naboo." I said.

He nodded. "I know." He patted my arm. "Goodnight, my dear. You might want to rest, tomorrow will be strenuous." And with that he left down a corridor I had never noticed before.

The next day, when I got to the room where I liked to train there was already another person there, kneeling on the floor, his head bowed, and facing towards the doors that led onto the balcony. He was a slight man with long silver hair tied back in a long tail. He was dressed in black and red and he did not move when I entered the room.

I stood and watched him for a few moments but he neither moved nor acknowledged my presence. I sat down next to him and imitated his position. It was surprisingly comfortable to sit like this, both knees on the floor, heel to haunch and hands resting on the hips with the elbows pointed outward. I tried to match his breathing but I couldn't do it so instead I just concentrated on my own. In and out, slow and steady.

At first it was difficult to concentrate, I had never really been good at any form of meditation. I noticed how the floor bit into my knees. How holding my body still seemed to create havoc with my muscles. My thoughts would jumble and become chaotic instead of quiet and restful. It was almost as if the very act of being still created unrest and turmoil. I much preferred to move my body, letting the energy flow outward not try and calm it from within. For what seemed forever I fought against myself, and became more and more agitated.

Jyrki had tried to teach me this inner stillness, finding your center he had called it, but I was a fidget and sitting still was almost impossible for me. The trick, he has said was to not focus to being still, to not concentrate or try force the quiet to come but rather to allow the stillness to enter oneself and surrender to it. I never surrendered to anything in my life. I was not about to start with surrendering to myself. I would storm off in frustration and annoyance and go work through some more of the vigorous moves he had taught me. I would feel better afterwards but not calm and usually after one of these frustrating sessions Jyrki could beat me easily, I always ended up flat on my ass.

The time ticked by slowly and as it did so I felt something shift. I was determined to stay the course and show this strange man that whatever it was that the Emperor had seen in me wasn't false. Gradually, I felt myself let go of some sort of tension I had been holding. My breathing, which had been shallow and fast now steadied and deepened. I began to feel order in the chaos. I closed my eyes and allowed time to pass. It was not easy but in difference to my attempts to center with Jyrki, this felt right, as though I were collecting energy, like a ball of light in the very core of my being. I was lost within myself and did not hear the man at my side move. When he touched my shoulder I did not jump in fright as I usually would have, but simply looked up. Two hours had flown by and I had not even noticed.

Not one word passed between us. I did not even know his name, but I could feel his strength and power. I tried to touch him with the Force but there was nothing to find. I could sense the Force around him but it was somehow different from what I felt from Lord Vader and from the Emperor. This man did not use the Force but he was somehow surrounded by it. I didn't understand this but I didn't want to break the silence either. It was refreshing.

He began to move one extraordinarily simple motion which he repeated over and over. I began to mirror him. In silence we moved in tandem with me trying to imitate his ease and grace repeating the same simple movement again and again. We did this for two hours straight. Not one word spoken. It was as strange as it was somehow comfortable. Like slipping back into a routine I had left behind but had never really forgotten.

Once, I guess, he felt I had the move down well enough to satisfy him, he stopped. My limbs were trembling and I was soaked with sweat while he did not even appear to be breathing hard. He was not a tall man and he had deep steel grey eyes that almost matched the colour of his hair.

I did not know what to do. Speaking to him before he spoke to me first seemed wrong so I put my hands together and bowed. A move I had seen the students do in the training room to their teacher. It was the appropriate thing to do because he smiled and returned the bow.

"I accept you as my student." He said in a surprisingly deep, gentle voice. "We will continue tomorrow, Merlyn Gabriel." He bowed and then he left. I still had no idea who he was. I went to bed exhausted and woke up late enough that I had to rush to get into the office on time, not that anyone here seemed to care, especially with Lord Vader away at the moment.

When Lord Vader was away we communicated via holonet. It was an annoying way to work and I loathed it. Having to stand on a holo-emitter platform to deliver my reports and his schedule annoyed me to no end especially as sometimes he did not accept the transmission and it would then have to wait for another time. Another time usually meant while I was sleeping and I would be alerted via comm.

Most of the time our transmissions were short, to the point and sociable but sometimes they were not. Occasionally, we argued, and it could get loud. I was quite sure that he could have crushed my trachea with the Force if he wanted to but I got the impression he rather enjoyed fighting with me, or rather getting me wound up. This was one such day and while it was not a long transmission, it was a heated one. These arguments usually ended with Lord Vader stopping the transmission in the middle of one of my sentences. I knew he did that deliberately and he knew it made me furious but the fact that he hadn't killed me yet also told me this amuses him. He has a singular sense of humour. So my second evening of training with the mysterious man whose name I didn't yet know began with me being really annoyed.

I stomped into the place that had now become my training room once again to find my teacher meditating in that strange kneeling position. I stood there for a moment trying to unwind. It seemed to me that just being in this man's presence was calming, as though around him was a void where all emotion seemed to sink. But this time his calm sucking black hole could only do so much. I took my place next to him and began to imitate his kneeling position, when I felt I had found it and bowed my head, closing my eyes to try and relax, I felt him move. He said nothing and I didn't look at him. I tried not to jump when I felt his hands touch me. A small correction here and there with hands that, while gentle, had a steel like strength to them. He must have felt my tension and with two fingers he began to put pressure on certain points on my back. It was as if a sudden storm had been released and the emotion that flowed through me brought tears to my eyes. How had he done that with just a touch? I broke my concentration and looked up at him.

"The body stores everything." He explained. "You must release these emotions and be empty as wind. A body full of emotional clutter wastes energy. You will not learn when you come to me full of passion and anger. These things you will need but not here."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I don't know what he had done to me but I felt about ten kilos lighter than before.

"Now, again." He said and I went back into the meditation position. Once again he made small corrections.

"Breath from here not here." He said showing me. "Breathing is the key to all motion. Without the proper technique you will fail in your defence."

I did as he asked and he continued correcting me until he felt I had it more or less the way he wanted. He sat next to me while I slowly found my center and watched as I made that transformation from agitated annoyed office assistant to calmer, willing-to-listen, student.

When I felt ready I stood up and we began to work through the motion from the day before. This time he corrected my position and stance and added two new

movements. For hours we went through these three motions until I understood that this was the beginning of a language and in order to speak it fluently the motions had to sing to each other. It was a lot like dance. Each move had a name and a story behind it, as I went through each movement he spoke its name and told me its story. The flow of his voice matched the flow of the motion so that after a while I no longer knew where one began and the other ended. This time we ended the session with a series of slow stretching movements and quiet meditation. "To reflect on that which you have learned." He said. When we were done he allowed me a question. There were so many things I wanted to know but the most important was also the one I was most nervous about asking.

"I should very much like to know your name." I said after a long silence.

He nodded slowly. "Names hold great power. To know a thing's name is to hold power over it." He said. "Anonymity among my brethren is treasured but it is only fair that as my student you have a name by which to call me master." He paused. "I have been given many names in my life, some no longer hold meaning and others are to remain secret. The one I give to you is old and singular, an honoured name among my kind. Here in this place I am Taisto Kjestyll." He bowed to me and I returned it with one of my own. There was so much formality surrounding everything this man was teaching me and under normal circumstances it would have annoyed me, yet, I found peace in his presence and strength in the manner he taught with. The Emperor had chosen this teacher with great care and not for the first time did I wonder what motive lay behind it.

"Master Taisto Kjestyll." I said testing it out. "Thank you for this honour."

He nodded. "We will continue tomorrow." He said and he left.

The next day we continued in the same manner as before with three new moves being added to the ones I had already learned. Again, each new move came with its own name and story. I recited the names and stories of the moves I had already learned and paid great attention while the new ones were told to me. Unlike the teaching from Jyrki, this was far more involved and in depth.

The time passed so quickly that I almost wished I didn't have to work so that I could spend more time with this man and learn all he had to offer. The contrast of his quiet, calm ways to Lord Vader's chaos was stark. I wondered how I would ever find balance, or even if there was such a thing. I guessed I would find out as Lord Vader was due back on Coruscant tomorrow. Perhaps, we would continue our argument face to face. In the mean time I unwound in a hot bath too tired to read or even think. My muscles were sore and aching, yet I did not mind. I finally felt I was learning something that was useful to me even if it did not really seem Force directed. I wondered then about how complicated my life had suddenly become. On Tatooine everything had been pretty simple, I did my job, I had my friends and my life and that was that. Here, life was chaos and ever changing under currents of intrigue and there was no certainty at all. I would have been really worried about it if I had not been so damn tired.

\*\*\*

Lord Vader returned late in the night and demanded an update on everything that had happened while he had been gone in spite of the fact that I had sent him daily progress reports. This took a while and he was not in a good mood. I was beginning to wonder if he was ever in a good mood. Maybe the bad moods were his good moods. If this was the case, I sure didn't want to see him really pissed off at someone, especially not me. Instead of meeting at his office in the palace he ordered me to meet him at his Coruscant residence and bring all the pertinent information with me. It was almost impossible to get a taxi at that hour of the morning and even



harder to get anyone to go to where his home was. So by the time I go there I was well and truly riled up.

I had never been to Lord Vader's Coruscant home before, there had never been any need but now time was of the essence as we had received word that the Emperor would be moving his entire court to Naboo by the end of the week and that had been four days ago. Apparently this happened twice a year for a month depending on the Emperor's whims. He liked to be on Naboo for festival week. This meant a lot of mad scrambling and packing and since Lord Vader had not been on planet it meant a large logistical nightmare for me, never having done this before. I was hoping for some help but so far none had shown up. What a surprise.

Despite the fact that his Coruscant home was located as close to the Imperial palace as Prince Xizor's opulence palace was it felt as though it were in the middle of nowhere, or at least as middle of nowhere as one could get on this wretched planet. It was more of a creepy high-rise towering fortress than a home or a palace and he seriously needed to consult an exterior decorator. It is heavily guarded and I was escorted in by enough Troopers wearing enough fire power to take down a small army. For a man who was the second most powerful in the whole galaxy and who could kill with a thought, this was a bit of overkill.

The inside of the house is a strange blend of stark, ultra utilitarian furniture mostly made from beautiful red coloured greel wood that probably cost more for one piece than my father made in a year. He was also not big on indoor décor at all. Lord Vader's style was extremely minimalistic and maybe some people would have found it very ultra modern but I found the place grim, cold and unfriendly...it said a lot about its owner.

I was led up the main staircase to a turbo lift which sped upwards so quickly I had to fight to not be sick. When the lift stopped I was escorted out into a short hall and then through a doorway which led into a fairly large study like room. It was sparse on furniture, the only exception being the large antique desk which took up space near the ornate windows, the holonet terminal on it and a matching chair. The walls were bare and the bookshelves were dusty. The fire place had been sealed with dark coloured bricks. I guessed that Lord Vader wasn't one to enjoy a good fire or a nice book. He was standing with his arms folded over his chest looking out of the window. I honestly didn't know why he bothered to buy furniture because he never seemed to use it.

"Leave us." He barked at the guards and as they did he flicked his hand at the door shutting it with the Force. It made me jump and that annoyed me even more. I hated it when he did that. The room was cold and still. The dim lighting made it oppressive. This was not helped by the regular sound of his breathing. I stood there waiting for him to say something. When he didn't I lost my temper.

What I wanted to say was, "What can I do for you, my lord?" what came out of my mouth was "Is there a reason why you dragged me out of bed to come all the way over here at this ridiculous hour of the morning or did you just miss me?" I was too tired to connect my brain to my mouth. If, as Thrawn said, seduction was an art form, I must assume that so was dying and that I was looking for some practice in learning to do it well.

To my surprise there was no internal strangulation or even a marked change in Lord Vader's breathing he just stared out of the window until he broke the silence by saying. "I see Master Kjestyll's teachings have not improved your temper any." He said.

I wasn't certain how to answer that. "Well, he doesn't wake me up at three in the morning." I said with a shrug. "You could have gotten these updates in the morning, why am I here?" I asked.

"Sit." He ordered so I did, on the floor. He hadn't tried to kill me yet and I wasn't going to push my luck by complaining about his lack of furniture.

"I take it you have dealt with all the preparations for the move to the retreat?" He asked.

"Yes, as much as I can. There are things which need your approval." I told him.

He nodded. "It will be taken care of." He paused. "Naboo is a planet I prefer to avoid but this time the Emperor has insisted that we attend the court and work there for the duration of his stay." He did not just want to avoid the planet, when he spoke of it. I got the deepest feeling of anger and pain. He hated to go there. "I do not plan to stay on that planet any longer than necessary and if you wish you may accompany me but I shall leave this up to you. The Emperor has taken an interest in you it seems. He does not, as a rule, send one of his best Teräs Käsi instructors to teach just anyone. You will learn much from Master Kjestyll, but not everything. You still have much to learn in the ways of the Force." He said.

I nodded and felt a little chastised. It angered him I was learning from someone else, I could sense that. It annoyed him that the Emperor was interfering but there was something else on his mind as well and I could not put my finger on it so I waited.

I had never even heard of Teräs Käsi, Master Kjestyll had not once named the skills he was teaching me and I had never asked. I always assumed that when he wanted me to know he would tell me. There were so many things going on that I did not understand. They were all around me like little mysteries waiting to be unravelled as if the Emperor were weaving them all together in a pattern only he saw. I did not like being a string on this loom but I had no idea how to undo the knots already there.

"Should you choose to accompany me on some of my own missions I will be able to further your training in this area." He said suddenly breaking into my thoughts.

"I would enjoy that, my lord." I said and I meant it. It would probably be a good thing to get the hell away from the Imperial court for a while.

He seemed to be seriously thinking about something else and I sensed he was greatly troubled by something. All this chit chat about me and my teaching was avoidance. Finally, after a long silent wait he turned around and picked up a small silver box from the desk. From the box he took a tiny object and handed it to me.

"You are from Tatooine, this should be known to you." He said.

I looked at what he had just placed in my palm. It was a Japor snippet that had been hand carved. They were often used as a talisman against evil, or a good luck charm but in many cases they were often a token for remembering the dead. It had been a long time since I had seen one, especially one so intricate. The last time I had held one of these was at the funeral for my mother. I didn't know where the tradition came from although I suspected the Tuskens had much to do with it. They were a deeply spiritual people although incredibly violent. I had seen Sand People wearing such a talisman around their necks from time to time. My father had carved the two we had laid in the grave with my mother. One had borne the symbol for rebirth and the other for a safe journey.

I ran my fingers over the one I now held. It had been made with great care, the normally rough surface had been to polished silken smooth and the delicate patterns carved with much skill. The small symbol in the center of it surprised me.

### *Forgiveness*

"Yes, I know what this is." I said after a long while. There was much sorrow bound into this piece and my heart ached just touching it. "Who...what...?" I started but then I felt him force push at me and I caught flashes of images in my head, the face of a young woman I did not know, extraordinarily beautiful, a lake side, an

embrace and many more pictures, so many that I could not make sense of them. I shook my head because I didn't want to see this. The sheer emotions behind these images physically hurt.

"Stop it!" I said shakily. The intrusive images vanished as abruptly as they had started.

"There is a memorial to this woman in Theed. I wish you to lay the snippet there." He said. I waited for an explanation because this was the most unlike Darth Vader behaviour I had ever seen and it was worrying me. I looked at the snippet again. I so wanted to ask 'why?' but I knew there would be no explanations.

"It will be done My Lord." I said quietly as he handed me the small silver box to put the snippet in. Whoever this woman was she had meant something to him and the memory of her was painful.

"What was her name?" I asked slipping the snippet back into its silver box.

"Amidala Naberrie." He said, he paused for a moment then continued, "Miss Gabriel, in this matter, I expect the highest level of confidentiality. No one is to know of this. No one."

I nodded. "I understand." And suddenly I understood why I had been hauled all the way over here at three in the morning. In this house he knew no one would hear our conversation. At the Palace no place was really safe. Surveillance and spy equipment was everywhere.

I was astonished at the level of trust he was giving to me and more than a little scared by it. I could not help but wonder what this woman was to Lord Vader and why there was so much sorrow surrounding her. It made me think about the time he had asked if I had been in love with Jyrki and vice versa. Perhaps at one point in his life Lord Vader had also loved someone. It seemed really hard to imagine this now but it explained a few things. There was a moment where we said nothing to each other connected by more than just a mysterious power I did not yet understand. It was unbearable so I tucked the small box away in my satchel and pulled out the data pads I had prepared.

"I don't suppose there is any 'caf here?" I asked. "This may take a while."

\*\*\*

I had mixed feelings about going to Naboo. I was just getting used to Coruscant and here we were uprooting and moving. I should have been grateful for small mercies, instead of being on the main ship with the full court I tagged along with Lord Vader. I was not unhappy about this but it would have been better had he been in a more forgiving mood. He had already killed one officer and terrified several others. I saw many of those 'poor you' looks as I trotted to keep up after him as he strode down the corridor.

"You know, it causes a ton of paperwork when you do that." I told him crossly once we were in the briefing room.

"Do not try my patience." He snarled.

I drew a very deep breath. "May I ask why you are so ...angry?"

"Incompetence angers me!" He said, not really answering the question at all. He was sending sparks all over the place, just being in the same room with him made all the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

"If you didn't keep killing people off maybe they would learn from the mistakes they make instead of new people making the same ones all the time."

"They should not make these mistakes in the first place!" He yelled. "We are delayed because of incompetence. I will not tolerate it!"

He paced from one end of the room to the other like a caged wild animal. I thought he would drive me mad if he didn't stop but before I could say anything he

grabbed my arm and dragged me out of the briefing room down the corridors to the ship's recreation and sport's room.

'*Oh no, not good.*' I thought because I knew what was coming and sparring with him on a good day was rough enough but sparring with him on a bad day was suicide.

"Now we will see what you have been learning while I have been gone." He growled.

I stood there and stared at him for a moment and then I drew a deep, deep breath and tried to center. I would need all the concentration I could get if I was to get out of this without a trip to the med-center, which, I didn't think likely. I was pretty sure this sort of thing was not in the Personal Assistant job description. I was surprised that he even allowed me time to center and then when I was ready he handed me a long wooden quarterstaff but before I had time to think he attacked. Even if I had been ready I still would have landed on my ass because he was just bigger, faster and stronger. I got up and we did it again. I did not have time to think or feel or even consider what my next move would be. I was on the defensive and that was that. He was making me angry though. I had never seen anyone move as fast as he could. Last time we had done this he had been playing with me, taking it easy. This time he was venting all his anger on me. It was a night and day difference.

After the third time of being knocked flat on my ass by a blow that would not only leave a nasty bruise but also hurt like hell, I just sat there and stared at him.

"If you want to kill me, why don't you just strangle me like you do everyone else?" I asked.

"Defend yourself, you are better than this." He snapped.

"How?" I asked. "You move too fast."

"Use the passion inside of you to tap into the Force, you will see what is coming before it happens." He replied.

If only it was that easy, I thought. I shook my head. "How do I do that? When you move that fast I don't have time to think..."

I never got to finish my sentence. He reached over and hauled me to my feet.

"That is your problem. You are thinking and not feeling. You need to let go and fight with the Force not against it." He said. He was calmer now, not quite as riled up and furious. "I know you can do this, you have done it before." He said.

I took a deep breath. I had done it before he said, yeah when I wasn't really aware of what the heck I was doing. Disconnect, Master Kjestyll had said, although we had not been talking about the Force, it applied. *Do not concentrate on the moment, be the moment.* It was a difficult lesson to learn. How could you be the moment when the moment didn't stay still?

"The Force is always there, all the time. You must attune to it, like a beacon. When you are passionate, angry it flows faster with more strength." Lord Vader said breaking into my thoughts. "You think too much. You need to let go."

"Bad things happen when I let go." I told him.

He laughed. "What do you think will happen if you allow your feelings to become one with the Force? You are no match for me. You will do no real harm here. It is I who will harm you if you cannot learn this. If you truly wish to be a student then you must let go and you must find the power within you and you must fight back." He leaned in close. "We all have our dark places, Merlyn, I know you have yours, it is easy to see if one knows what to look for. Learn how to use it and you will be stronger and faster. It might even save your life."

He stepped back and before I had time to consider what he had told me he lunged at me with the quarterstaff. I took a hard hit off the hip and staggered backwards.

"Stop thinking!" He snapped. "React, feel, and let the Force guide you."

I took a deep breath, I could feel that thread of anger and the control surrounding it was tenuous. He smacked at me again and the thread snapped. Anger flowed through me. It was like sand fire.

"That anger you keep within you, I feel it, now use it, direct it, own it, not the other way around." He goaded, circling around me. "You complained about me not teaching you, now I am doing so. Learn" He said and landed a vicious blow on my thigh. It hurt like hell and I was genuinely pissed off.

Tap into the Force, it wasn't as easy as it sounded but I could feel it there. When he came in for the next attack I saw it happening from a place beyond physical being. I countered and avoided and this time stayed on my feet.

"Better." He nodded. "Do you begin to understand?"

I nodded. We repeated this exercise again and again. Each time it became easier to find that thread of power and tap into it. When I found it and used it he was pleased when I faltered and lost it he sent me flying. On the whole I preferred Master Kjestyll's teaching method but I was certainly learning fast. I could see how the moves that I had been learning from Master Kjestyll made a difference. I was surprised at how it all fit together, this magical dance full of wonder and pain. My body ached and I was tiring but Lord Vader wasn't ready to finish just yet. Each new bout we fought had a lesson in it that was taught with punishing blows and savage words. My anger gave me strength and the teachings from Master Kjestyll gave me endurance and agility. Although I was just a beginner I noticed a marked difference in my own skills. Painful as it was, Lord Vader was helping.

They say when one is learning something that it is a curve and when you reach the crest of it a light goes on somewhere. There is a moment of clarity when everything suddenly makes sense and you just get it. I suppose this is what Lord Vader had been trying for with me and he was doing it the only way he knew how. Somewhere in the middle of a particularly nasty attack I got it, I stopped thinking at all, there was nothing, just a white sort of noise and a kind of ease that made the world seem slow. The Force, when I found it or better to say when it found me, filled me up. If it were a light source I would be blinded by it. It is so powerful and so all encompassing that it would be easy to lose one's soul to it, perhaps even go mad. I just let it flow through me, I moved, it moved and we were one.

I knew where I needed to be and acted accordingly. It was the most extraordinary sensation I had ever experienced, like tasting cold, fresh water after being without it for too many days. Once I had tasted this power, I had a glimpse of what it could be and I wanted more. Lost in the intensity of it I did not want to stop and it was only a severe blow which caught my shoulder and sent me sprawling across the floor that brought me back to reality.

Vader nodded. "Well done, but you need to learn to control the power not let it control you." He admonished.

I sat up slowly, gritting my teeth to stop myself from crying in pain, that last blow had truly hurt and I wondered if he had broken my arm. He walked over to me, picked up my quarterstaff and put them both back on the rack where they belonged. He came back to me and squatted down to look me over.

"Get your arm looked at." He ordered, standing up again. "And practice on finding your center."

I looked up at him as though he were the insane one.

"Do it." He said. "Then you will find it easier to tap into the force."

I struggled to get up because just moving my left arm sent screaming agony through it. I gasped, almost crying, at the exquisiteness of the pain.

"Go to the med-center. You're no good to me broken." And with that he left.

The med droid gave me pain killers and a powerful bacta shot then sent me on my way. My arm had a hairline fracture in it and the bruises would be spectacular.

Once the droid had given me the okay I found my assigned quarters and threw off all my clothes in a pile on the floor. I went into the shower and stood under the pounding water with my head resting against the wall. As I stood there I wondered how Lord Vader knew so much about this martial arts form I was learning. He did not seem to use the same forms Master Kjestyll was teaching me yet there was a similarity to his own way of fighting that made me wonder about how and where he had learned to fight. It stood to reason that he would know of the combat master that the Emperor had assigned to me, after all Lord Vader was the Emperor's second in command but things were not adding up. I felt as though I was being kept in the dark about a great deal. I sighed, too tired to think. When I went to bed I fell asleep almost at once.

The dreams that came were disturbing and haunting. I had thought, after waking up for the third time that maybe it might have been more advantageous to travel with the Court entourage after all. I was pretty sure the Emperor would not have spent half the time beating me up with a big stick. But then again...with the Emperor there were worse things. The fourth time I managed to get back to sleep I did not dream and it was the sound of the comm system waking me up. In an hour we would be on Naboo.

In my wildest dreams I had not imagined a planet like this. Naboo was beautiful. It was lush and green and full of life. I stepped out of the shuttle and the first thing that hit me was the scent of living things and air which was sweet and humid. Everywhere I looked there were trees and flowers. Even the architecture matched the landscape. The buildings were all stately and elegant, with high copper covered domed roofs that had turned green with verdigris. The stone work walls on all the buildings had intricate patterns carved into them as decoration. There was a feeling of age here, of peace and quiet and maybe even sanctuary. I could see why the Emperor liked to be here, it was a haven in comparison to Coruscant.

The retreat was in a quiet area away from most of the major cities, but with a shuttle service it was easy enough to get to the capitol, Theed and the nearer city Nabubu. We flew over Theed on our descent to the retreat and it was stunning. I was looking forward to exploring it. The retreat itself was a vast complex hidden in the hills near a gorgeous lake. There are a couple of Imperial outpost bases nearby as well as a training facility. The main building was large, beautiful and built up out of the surrounding hill. Most of the complex was actually underground although one would never have suspected this from looking at the building. The upper levels were mostly libraries, living quarters and some meeting rooms, all which surrounded a large open gallery that led out onto a very large bow terrace with a stunning view of the lake.

In the off seasons when the Emperor was not in residence the Retreat was run by a skeleton crew but when he was here it became a hustling, bustling place and as we flew in on approach to the shuttle landing pad I could see we were probably among the last to arrive. I was tired, in pain and every bone in my body ached. Lord Vader was in one of his not speaking to anyone don't bother to ask or even think about asking me anything moods. I followed him into the main reception hall as we went to essentially check in. He told me to talk to the person behind the reception desk to obtain my living quarters while he spoke to one of the Imperial Officers on duty. The man behind the desk was tall, elegantly dressed and had manicured nails. The look on his face when I approached told me right away that we were not going to get along.

He gave me one of those snooty glances that said '*and just how are you going to bother me today?*'

"Good morning," I said. "Merlyn Gabriel, Lord Vader's Assistant checking in." It doesn't hurt to be polite.

He twiddled with his data pad stared at it for a few seconds and shook his head. "No, sorry that name is not on my list."

"Could you please check again? Perhaps I am listed under Lord Vader's party?"

"Spell your name please?" He said with a sigh. I was complicating his peaceful day.

I did. He checked again and shook his head. "No, sorry you are not registered."

"Well, I am here now so where am I staying?" I asked.... That twinge of impatience and annoyance starting to creep in.

"I am sorry Miss...er... Gabriel was it? You are not listed so I cannot issue a residency pass. Who did you say you were with?"

"Lord Vader." I told him again trying to remain calm and polite.

He shook his head again. "Lord Vader? No, I have no record of him sending in a residency request for you. Lord Vader never stays here and we do not have accommodations set aside for him or his party. And," He added. "We are full up now you will need to find accommodations elsewhere."

I looked behind me; Lord Vader was still on the other side of the foyer talking to the Officer. I pointed to him wonder if the idiot I was talking to was blind as well as rude. "Well, he is here now, and so am I and I need a place to stay. You must have something open." I said.

He began to shake his head again and I lost it. I was tired, cranky and I hurt. I wanted a hot bath and a decent bed because I really needed to sleep. I reached over the counter and I grabbed him by his clothes and dragged him to me. Anger made me fast and strong.

I brought his face as close to mine as was possible with the reception desk between us and I said between clenched teeth.

"I would very much like to have my accommodations now, if that is not possible then please let me speak to someone who will make this happen today!" I was sending sparks all over the place and I didn't really care.

He glared at me and shook his head then his eyes moved away from my face to something behind me. I heard the tell tale breathing and felt the hand that was placed on my shoulder. Lord Vader's fingers bit painfully into my flesh. I squeaked.

"Release him." He commanded.

I did as I was told.

The receptionist had turned an even paler shade of bone white but remained as dignified as he could, straightening out his collar and clothing.

"Is there a problem?" Lord Vader asked.

"No...no.... Lord Vader...no problem.... We were not expecting you or your...." He gave me a dirty look. "Assistant so er...uhm...soon."

"Your expectations are not my concern! You are wasting my time!" Lord Vader snapped.

The receptionist looked from me, to Lord Vader, to the hand gripping into my shoulder and back again. He swallowed and hastily consulted his data pad once more. "Ah yes, we do have one place open." He nodded. "At the other end of the complex I am afraid, by the lake one of the older auxiliary buildings used to house ...uhm... guests. It is about twenty minutes walk from the main buildings."

"It sounds fine." I snapped through clenched teeth.

I waited as he fussed about with the data pad and encrypted the keycard for me. He reached under the reception desk and brought out a small folder and handed them both to me.

"The shuttle will take you to your accommodations, Miss Gabriel, Lord Vader. I wish you both a pleasant stay here."

"Thank you, have a nice day." I said as we turned to leave.

Once outside Lord Vader turned to me and said. "There will be a reception tomorrow night in the main hall at nine, dress accordingly and do not be late. As it appears accommodations are in short supply this year I will be onboard my ship. Unless anything of importance arises I expect to be undisturbed." Which was Vader speak for *do not bother me unless it is life or death or it will be you will suffer the consequences*, "There is an office set aside for you in the main building, your droid is already there, and here is the data you will need." He handed me a data pad. "We will discuss matters of your duties here tomorrow, for now I suggest you improve your temper and get some rest." And with that he turned away and headed back into the main building, off to see the Emperor I guessed.

The drive to the place where I was to be living for the next month was short and silent. The driver dropped me off and took my meagre luggage to the door and left with saying a word. The receptionist had been right it was away from the main complex but I was actually grateful for the peace and quiet. I unlocked the door and went inside. The house smelled musty and was cool. It had not been used in some time and I suspected it was only ever occupied when there was nothing else available. Most people, I guessed, liked to be in or very near the main buildings, to see and be seen. I went through the house and opened up all the windows to let the fresh air in. While it had not been used it was clean and tidy and I was grateful for small mercies. I was happy to have a place to myself.

I wandered about the house trying to orient myself. There was a small kitchen with a tiny dining area, a decent sized living room space, open plan, with doors leading out to a nice little balcony which over looked the lake. I walked out onto it and stood there staring at the shimmering water. I could hear the wind rustling through the leaves in the trees and the sounds of birds. It was amazing. I went back inside and explored the rest of the house. There was a guest bathroom downstairs and then upstairs there was a nice sized bedroom with another small balcony that looked out over the lake, a bathroom with a bath and shower and a small study sort of room. It was the perfect size for one or two people. I was happy I did not have to share.

I went back into the kitchen, searched through all the cupboards and found the kettle. I had brought some things with me and my Tatooine mint tea was one of them. While the water heated up I unpacked my things which didn't take long. I had not brought everything I owned and even if I had it still would not have been that much. I found bedding in a linen closet and made the bed up, as soon as I had some tea I was going to sleep. I turned on the small HoloNet terminal and browsed the local directory to see if there was a grocery service, there was. I made a list and placed an order. One thing you could say about the Emperor, when his entourage moved en mass, everything was well organized.

I made my tea, dragged a chair out onto the balcony, sat down with the book I was currently reading, one of the ones Thrawn had given me, and relaxed. I didn't get days off all that often and I really needed this one because I was in pain and exhausted. As I moved my arm and winced, it occurred to me that I would have to dig through the clothes I had brought with me to find something dressy with sleeves to hide the bruises that were now blossoming into really amazing colours. I had not had time to think about Lord Vader's rather brutal lesson, but I was reminded of it every time I moved my arm which hurt like hell in spite of the bacta treatment. I put the book down after reading the same line five times straight. I was tired and my thoughts kept straying and always seemed to end up focused on one topic, Thrawn.

I didn't want to think about him but I couldn't help myself. Men like him were a breed apart and I wasn't sure what to make of him at all. He was very well educated and intelligent, powerful and arrogant, sexy and detached all at the same time. His cool reserve and sharp wit were things that I didn't usually find attractive yet I was as



drawn to him as a sand-moth was to flame. If I closed my eyes I could still feel the touch of his lips upon mine and the ache of longing it had given me. I could not begin to imagine what someone as sophisticated as he would even begin to find attractive about someone like me and I wondered, and not for the first time, if he was playing games with me and just what his motives for chasing me were.

If seduction was an art form then what happened once the piece of art was completed? Was it put up on display or left and forgotten? My instincts said stay the hell away from him but my heart and my body just wanted more and more. If desire was a drug then I was thoroughly addicted. I neither knew him nor trusted him yet I yearned, ached for his presence almost as much as he made me nervous. It was just an awful sensation and I knew it to be nothing but bad news. I sighed and decided that thinking about him would get me nowhere. He had not been in contact with me and I had not tried to figure out where he was. Our relationship, if you could even call it that, was based on chance meetings and moments of such intense passion that anything more would probably drive me insane.

I had met men like him before, men who were married to their ships, to space, and to their careers. These sorts of men were not interested in relationships and my experience with seeing them had taught me to stay the hell away from them. But Captain Thrawn was different. Aside from the obvious fact that he was not human, there was more to him, a back story I didn't know. This was a man who had many tales to tell, someone who was deep, thoughtful and very careful about almost everything he did or said. This was not a man to take up with a woman easily now was he a man who would jeopardize his career with a dalliance that could have him disgraced at court. He was an anomaly, an alien with power and presence at the Emperor's court. I could not see Thrawn doing anything without thinking carefully first especially not getting involved with a girl who worked at the palace since, according to Shiv, such activities were greatly frowned upon. So I wondered what it was in me that brought him into my life because, after all, he was the one doing the chasing. If I was just a conquest then this affair would be short lived and probably not very sweet, but he didn't strike me as a man who chased women just so that he could carve a notch on the bedpost so I wondered what his motives were. If it was just sex he was after there were prettier, far more experienced and easier to get women at court and if he had hoped to gain some sort of foothold with Lord Vader then courting me was not the way to go and he was smart enough to know that.

I was tired and I needed to sleep. I took the chair and my book inside and then I went to bed. I thought that with my mind in turmoil it would take me ages to fall asleep, but I was wrong. I lay down, curled up on my side and that was all I knew until my comm woke me the next morning.

\*\*\*

My first day on Naboo was for the most part quiet. I got up, got dressed and walked to the main Retreat building. It was extremely empty at that hour and it was easy to find the office assigned to me. The one furthest away from anything, no one it seemed wanted to talk to me or Lord Vader should he, by chance, happen to grace the retreat with his presence. I was pretty certain given the amount of negativity surrounding his feelings for this planet. He would not be showing up that often, not unless the Emperor ordered him to do so. That meant I was on my own which I rather enjoyed.

I sat and waded through the mail, sorted out Lord Vader's appointments for the next couple of days and made note of the official functions where his attendance was required, such as the reception held in the evening. I suppose this was the welcome to the Retreat kick off reception. I hated these sorts of things and Lord

Vader hated them twice as much as I did. I could just imagine the fun we were both going to have. After my Holo meeting with Lord Vader to discuss his agenda I went back to the house to sort out my stuff, unpack and put things away. I went through every dress I had and found one with long sleeves and long skirt that was formal enough to get me through the reception without the entire population knowing I had been on the wrong end of Lord Vader's temper.

The reception was held in the main hall, a wide open room with beautiful marble decorations and an intricately patterned stone floor. When I got there it was already full of people mingling, eating the vast array of finger foods and drinking whatever it was that was being carried around on silver trays by very serious looking waiters and waitresses. I scanned the room for anyone I knew and saw no one. I had not heard a word from Shiv or any of his group and my guess was that they were either very busy or had gone back to Coruscant. Lord Vader had not arrived yet and since I knew he would be coming later I didn't worry about it.

As there was nothing else for me to do I followed the lead of the other finely dressed people here and I grabbed some food then, after making sure there were no funky additives in the drinks, I managed to snatch a glass of wine from a fast moving waiter and headed straight for the other side of the room to where the ornate glass doors were open leading out on to the wide and very long terrace like balcony which was very high up off the ground and over looked the lake. I could see my house from here and noticed that I had left a light on. It was pleasant to stand outside. The breeze was gentle and cool, the lighting was low and elegant. The people on the terrace spoke in hushed tones as opposed to inside where there was much more chatter and laughter going on as well as music. It was building up to be a very lively night.

I hoped the Emperor would make his entrance soon so we could hear the speeches and then I could go home and curl up with my books. I was not interested in intrigue or the latest fashion fads and I didn't wish to flirt with the large variety of unappealing men who were obviously on the hunt or carry on ridiculous conversations about meaningless topics. I could have cared less about all of these things. I heard the crowd suddenly quiet down and thought that it was the Emperor but no, it was Lord Vader and walking beside him having an intense discussion was Captain Thrawn. I slowly made my way indoors. It would have been rude not to acknowledge Lord Vader's arrival and I was curious to know what they were talking about.

"There you are." Lord Vader said to me as I reached them. I took this as Vader speak for *hullo, how are you, have you settled in* and so on.

"My lord, good evening I trust your trip here was uneventful." I asked cheerfully.

He didn't bother to answer me instead he regarded me with one of his long hard stares. I ignored it.

I turned to Thrawn with an equally cheery smile. "Senior Captain Thrawn I wasn't expecting to see you here. I trust you had a successful mission saving the galaxy from evil doers?"

"It was most interesting, Miss Gabriel." Thrawn said with a slight smirk. "Perhaps I will regale you with some tales of my travels later if you are so inclined."

I got the impression he was baiting me so I just smiled and said lightly, "Something to look forward to then."

Thrawn gave me a look I could not decipher and smiled. "Perhaps."

I raised my eyebrows.

"We will have time enough for stories, maybe more than you might wish, oh excuse me I'm afraid I must speak with the Grand Admiral." And with that enigmatic

statement he strode off into the crowd to talk to one of the officers in a white uniform, someone I didn't know.

I looked at Lord Vader. "What was that supposed to mean?" I asked.

Lord Vader just turned his head and looked at me. "I am certain when the time comes you will be given the necessary information required to perform your duties." He said tersely.

"And what does *that* mean?" I said becoming a little more annoyed. They were playing games and I didn't much like it but I didn't get an answer because just at that moment the Emperor arrived and everyone dropped to one knee and the hall was filled with awed silence. I had the sinking feeling this was going to be an annoyingly long evening. There were many things in this galaxy that I loved doing but attending long boring Imperial social functions was not on this list. This reception was especially dull as there was no dancing and no real entertainment to speak of, it was, in its truest form, a reception with the usual round of pretty words, important guests and mindless mingling.

I listened to the speeches, clapped, smiled and even made small talk with a few people, most of which was banal chit chat about the weather or the latest scandals and fashion trends. I wondered how anyone could find such shallow topics even remotely interesting. One person in particular was most annoying, a lower clerk in the Emperor's office staff named Isti'mar T'garrel. He simply would not shut up and I could not get away from him. I thought it was a wonder he didn't blow up he was so full of hot air. I stood and smiled till my face hurt, nodded and agreed wondering if I was going to have to commit an act of violence to escape when I felt a hand on my arm.

"I am afraid I must steal Miss Gabriel away from your fascinating company." Thrawn said.

"Oh yes, yes, of course Captain... until next time then Miss Gabriel you can tell me what you think of my ideas for office organisation." Isti'mar said and as Thrawn led me out of the main hall to the balcony Isti'mar went off in search of another victim.

"You looked like you needed rescuing. That man can talk the fur off a Wookiee." Thrawn said.

"I guess I owe you one." I said.

"Ah, what a delightful position for me to be in. Walk with me, Miss Gabriel. There are some items I wish to discuss with you."

He was silent for the first little way nodding politely to the few disinterested people we passed. As far as they were concerned we were just another Imperial Naval officer and a palace courtesan. Their attention was turned to the main hall and from the sounds coming from it there was something far more interesting going on than Thrawn and me taking a walk.

"I believe that would herald the arrival of HoloNet star Wynssa Starflare." He nodded his head towards the room we had just left. "The Emperor enjoys her work and it is good public relations for her to be seen in the company of the Imperial Court."

"She's quite good." I commented, "I liked her last drama."

"Do you also wish to go and meet her?" He asked glancing at me.

I rolled my eyes, this was a test, "Oh yes, let me rush right in there and beg for an autograph just like all the other sycophants currently drooling all over her." I didn't even bother to contain my sarcasm. "She's an actress and right now the last thing she needs is one more besotted fan fawning in her face, which by the way I'm not. I said I liked her last piece of work is all not that I was her biggest fan."

I felt rather than saw Thrawn smile and soon enough we were well away from the main part of the huge balcony- terrace thing and wandered along the narrower walk way at the far end of the building. It was dimly lit and quiet

It was cooler now and a slight breeze had picked up, making the leaves in the trees rustle. It was so very different from Tatooine where there were no sounds of leaves in trees because there were no trees to speak of only the hiss of shifting sands or the howling of the winds when the storms came. I missed my home but I could get used to this kinder place. It was truly beautiful.

We stopped at the furthest end of the walkway and looked out over the lake.

"How do you like it here?" He asked eventually breaking the quiet. "You must find it vastly different from your home planet."

"It is." I nodded, "Naboo is one of the most peaceful, gentle places I have ever been to." I said honestly. "And I never thought I would ever get to live by a lake. This is a whole new experience."

"Yes, I imagine it must be. This lake is wonderful for swimming in especially early in the morning or at twilight." He said.

I looked at him as though he were joking. "Swimming?"

He looked at me and for a moment there was a question in his eyes but he was a smart man so he figured it out pretty fast.

"Of course, forgive me." He said with a chuckle. "Not much need to learn how to swim on a desert planet is there."

"Not really." I replied, "My mother often talked about it. She swam competitively as a child and daily when she lived on Alderaan. They had a pool in the house she lived in. She loved it but I never learned, even when I went off world. I never thought about it to be honest." I said. "But I take it you enjoy it."

"It was part of our physical training at the academy I attended as a young man. Some people preferred weight training and team sports but I must admit I enjoyed the water the most. It is a solitary sport that gives you over all fitness while allowing you time to think. I often used the pool at night when it was empty. When I am here I swim in the lake. You should take the time to learn." He said.

"Well, if I ever find someone to teach me I will think about it." I said cautiously. I was not about to tell him the thought of immersing myself in the lake scared the heck out of me. It was one thing to lounge in a bathtub full of water but the lake was a whole other herd of banthas.

"You live in the house at the very end, yes?" He asked pointing to the little house with the light on.

I nodded. Wondering just he knew that.

"Tomorrow morning at six am I will come by and teach you." He said very matter of fact. "You'll enjoy it." He said. "There is nothing to fear."

"If you insist." I said not feeling all that enthusiastic about this.

"I do, Miss Gabriel, call it repaying the debt you owe me for rescuing you just now."

"Remind me never to be in your debt again." I said a bit more snarkily than I meant to but he just laughed.

We were silent once more until he who spoke first.

"May I ask you a question?"

I looked up into his face. "Yes."

"Do you know any bounty hunters or smugglers?" He asked and then smiled because my reaction told him that I had not been expecting this question at all.

"Yes, I do actually, to both." I answered after a few moments.

"How well?"

"Well enough to steer clear of the subject." I said.

"How well do you know a particular man known as Boba Fett?"

"Fett?" I smiled then shrugged. "Well enough to know one does not talk about him. I used to see him at Jabba's Palace sometimes, he would chat up some of the dancers, nothing serious, just chit chat. He is a loner, smart and fast. He's one of Jabba's favourite bounty hunters because he's reliable. He uses our docking bay on and off when the occasion calls. Said he liked the way my father did business. He does not owe anyone any favours." I said evasively.

Thrawn arched an eyebrow at me. I had spent some time with Fett, more than I was willing to admit.

I sighed, "He didn't speak much when he showed up at the docking bay but he knew what he wanted, what needed to be done, he gave you a list and that was that. No dickering around with price or anything. He was true to his word." I added. I suppose in some ways I admired that about him. I wasn't too enamoured with his profession though.

"What do you know about Jodo Kast?" Thrawn asked breaking my thoughts.

"Never heard of him." I replied.

He nodded. "What about smugglers."

"What about them?"

"I need some names of people you would trust, smugglers who get the job done." He said.

I frowned, "You know, I am quite sure the Empire has lists for this sort of thing. Why are you asking me?"

"Because you will give me an honest opinion and you seem to have good instincts plus you have firsthand experience with some of these people without the problem of being affiliated with the empire."

"Then, yes, to answer your question, I know a few smugglers, a couple I would trust and who I know to be ...reputable, if one can use that word for such a profession." I said. "But I am not giving you names here in this place."

He inclined his head. "That I can respect and you can tell me more when you come with me in two days time."

"Run that by me again?"

"Lord Vader will inform you tomorrow that I have need of your services for a short while. Details I will leave up to him to tell you or you will find out when you come aboard the ship." He said.

I looked at him suddenly angry and put my hands on my hips. "You know I am not at your beck and call..." I started but before I could get any further he put his forefinger on my lips shutting me up.

"Hush." He said. "Something came up suddenly for which you have a skill I need and I believe I can rely on your discretion. Lord Vader speaks quite highly of you and I trust you would not wish to make a scene here." He smiled and the finger on my lips moved to brush away the stray lock of hair which perpetually fell into my face. "Trust me you will know all you need to know when the time is right in the meantime why don't we enjoy the evening?"

I raised my eyebrows, "And just what did you have in mind?"

He smiled. "Well, I thought we might finish the conversation we started on Coruscant." He said reaching up to caress my face.

I stepped back from him. "No, no. That is a very bad idea." I said shaking my head.

I turned to walk away from him. He made my knees tremble and my head spin and I was not up to dealing with that here in the presence of the Emperor with Lord Vader close at hand or with half the Imperial court watching everything everyone did. He caught my hand and pulled me to him.

"Why is that?" He asked.

"It is forbidden for members of the Imperial navy to fraternize with Imperial office staff." I said repeating Shiv's words verbatim.

"Do you always obey all the rules, Miss Gabriel?"

I mulled my answer over for a bit, "Not always." I eventually replied. "But I also don't like to flaunt that in front of half the imperial court either."

"Flaunting anything in front of the Imperial Court is never a good idea and it was not my intention to do so."

I narrowed my eyes at him, "Then what is your intention?"

He stared at me as though he were trying to decipher some secret code I had given him and finally said, "Shall we go for a walk? The gardens here are quite lovely by night."

The look on his face told me that no was not an answer he would accept. He began to walk away so I followed him down the small, half hidden set of stairs which led down from the balcony to the gardens below by the lake shore.

The carefully cultivated pathways had been created alongside the water, amongst the trees and beautifully tended gardens of sweet smelling flowers and manicured grass. I could really understand why the Emperor wanted to come here. It was as quiet and soft as Coruscant was noisy and hard. Even at night it was lovely. We walked beside each other in silence. When we came to a small cove like area he stopped.

On Tatooine most people's idea of romantic was taking a couple of speeders up into the dunes with a bottle of something illegal and sitting on the cool sands under the moons, hoping you didn't get attacked by either critters, dragons or Sand People. Others went to the local cantina and bought cheap Corellian beer, the theory being that if you gave your date enough beer she'd be easy. Trust me it is not romantic when your date throws up on you and no it wasn't me. My experiences with romance and men were not vast and not the best so it was little wonder I was as nervous as a wamp rat in a Krayt dragon's nest.

The cove was quiet and secluded. The manicured garden had given way to more unruly wild plants and the trees here were not pruned. The sleepy willowy trees with their long drooping branches that swept the ground rustled and sighed gently in the wind. The grass gave way to a small beach of round stones and the moonlight glittered off the water. I wobbled in my heels so I slipped them off and smiled at the feel of cool, smooth, round stones under my bare feet.

"I make you nervous. You are afraid of me." Thrawn said breaking the long silence. He selected smooth, flat stones from the beach and flicked them in a way that made them skip across the water. "Why?"

"You chase me, why?" I countered.

Three more stones skipped across the waters competing with the ripples from the wind.

"If I knew the answer to that I would most likely not be so intrigued." He said a little tartly as though he too were puzzled by his feelings and unsure of how to react to them, to me. I was about to speak but he continued, "You remind me of the ma'arilite sculpture in my flat. Every time I see it I see something different. You arouse my curiosity for the same reason. It is a sensation I am unused to when it comes to humans."

"And when you no longer see anything that interests you? Then what?" I asked picking up a stone to try and skip it like he had. I failed miserably and the stone sank with an audible plop.

He turned to look at me. "You need to flick your wrist." He said, picking up a stone to show me what he meant. "Like so." I sighed as he demonstrated.

I tried again without any success so I gave up tossing the last stone I had in my hand in the water and then rubbed my arms. The night was cool and with the wind

off the water I was starting to feel the chill. He unfastened and took off his dress jacket then slipped it over my shoulders. His warmth and his scent lingered in the fabric. I breathed it in deeply and shivered.

"You didn't answer my question." I said looking up into his face.

"The most honest answer that I can give you is that I do not know."

I sighed loudly.

"Who hurt you enough to make you so afraid of this?" Thrawn asked frowning ever so slightly and then shook his head. "I am not that man. I am not any of those men."

"I know that." I said. "But as you told me yourself, trust is a delicate matter and I don't really know you so how do you expect me to just blindly trust you?"

"Have I done anything to warrant your mistrust in me Merlyn?" He asked.

I shook my head. Up until now he had actually been the perfect gentleman and there was no real reason for me to be so scared but I was. The memory of the sting from Jyrki's strange rejection was still too fresh in my mind, in my heart and there had been other not so pleasant encounters with men who thought seduction and sex were games to be played but Thrawn was right, he was not these men and I was being unfair to him by painting him with the same brush.

"No but trust is still a bit of an issue."

"So it is." He agreed, "But sometimes a little faith can lead to new and interesting experiences."

I rolled my head away from his gaze and breathed in deeply, letting the air back out of my lungs very slowly. This was a calming technique I had recently been taught but it wasn't working. "Sometimes new and interesting experiences come back to bite you in the ass."

He studied me carefully for a moment then said, "Have my attentions displeased you?"

"No." Far from it, I thought.

"Have I done anything to hurt or offend you?"

I shook my head.

"Then why are you afraid of me, of this?" He asked again stepping towards me, closing the gap between us.

"It has been my experience that men take what they want whenever they want and are often unkind about the manner in which they do so. Affairs like this usually have a very messy and unhappy end." I told him without giving any details or explanation.

"There is that possibility." He agreed as he moved closer to me. I did not step back from him. "But if you never try how you will ever know? If you let your fear rule you, you will spend the rest of your life wondering *what if* and I know that is not who you are. Would you prefer to spend your days hiding from sensation and wonder for fear of being hurt? You did not strike me as a timid or cowardly."

His direct manner both puzzled and annoyed me. It was not at all what I had been used to and it made me speak without caution. "Is this how you usually seduce girls to your bed Senior Captain?" I asked.

I had expected a tart or evasive reply negating my accusation but instead he simply drew a deep breath and let it out again slowly. He looked at me steadily and an expression flickered across his features for a brief moment but was gone again before I could decipher it. I wondered if I had made him angry but when he began to speak I knew that wasn't the case.

"A man in my position, *especially my* position can ill afford the consequences from blind dalliances with palace girls. While perhaps these affairs are overlooked and tolerated as long as they remain covert between members of the same species I doubt very much that such behaviour from me would be granted the same level of

tolerance." He stopped for a moment to look at me then continued, "I am not and never have been willing to jeopardise my career simply for physical gratification or the satisfaction of taking a female into my bed, for which, I might I add, the opportunities within the palace confines have been surprisingly plentiful." He sighed. "So no, Miss Gabriel, this is not how I usually operate at all, in fact it is far from it."

I looked up into his face, searching for some hint or sign that he was mocking me or somehow making fun of me but I saw nothing of that in his eyes.

"Yet," I spoke carefully, "Here you are."

His expression was both sweet and feral at the very same time. "Indeed, here we both are." and with that he waited for me to reply, giving me the option to back away gracefully. The trouble was I have never backed away from anything in my entire life, even when I probably should have.

He paused as if he were choosing his next words with great care, "You are not the only one who would be taking a great risk."

"So why are you?" I asked, "Taking this risk?"

He smiled and it lit up his whole face, "Because I believe that there are occasionally some things worth taking a risk for, you may be one of them."

"May be?"

"It's too soon to tell yet." He replied as he caressed the side of my face with his fingertips. I closed my eyes and followed the motion with my head. "Desire is a powerful tool but it is also a wonderful gift." He murmured. "I desire you as I know you do me, I read it in your body language and your expression when you sometimes look at me and if that leads to something we can share even for a short time, would you have it any other way?"

I found myself unable to give him an answer so he continued.

"I am not making any promises or commitments." He said. "You know very well what my life is about as I do yours. Duty must come first."

I wanted to say something clever as an answer but there were no words to say, witty, stupid or otherwise. He had spoken honestly and while he had not actually come right out and told me as much, I understood that his attraction to me puzzled him as much as I feared mine for him. We were both taking a rather large leap of faith. It didn't mean I was not scared to death though so I just stared into his face, into his eyes and hoped he could figure it out for himself without me having to try and find the impossible words to tell him he was right but that this world he was daring me to look at was new and quite terrifying to me mostly because it was one I had little to no experience with.

He smiled and took my silence for the agreement it was, cupped my face in both of his hands. "Shall we continue our previous conversation? I am quite curious as to its outcome." He whispered in my ear.

I nodded.

He drew my face upward and he began to kiss me with gentle, breath-taking kisses which were both tentative and inquisitive. For a moment I stayed tense and nervous but his method of disarming me was very persuasive. When he felt me relax he slid one hand around the back of my neck under my hair and the other around my waist and pulled me to him. I found myself holding on to his shoulder with one hand while the other was pressed against his chest so that I could feel the beat of his heart. It was steady and strong.

I do not know how long we stood there in the quiet of the night wrapped in each other's arms talking with our lips and tongues but saying not one single word. Seduction was an art form, he had said, but so was kissing and as far as I could tell he was a master of this craft, teaching me with delicate care how beautiful an art form it truly could be. I lost track of time and space, the galaxy could have blown itself to pieces and I would never have noticed. When he finally pulled away from me I was so



dizzy with a desire that it almost made me ill yet felt more alive than I had ever felt in my entire life.

I rested my forehead against his chest trying to catch my breath, willing my own racing heart to slow down while he stroked the back of my neck and steadied his own breathing. Whatever this was, he felt it too and that thrilled me more than I could ever say. When he crooked a finger under my chin and drew my face up so we looked each other in the eyes I didn't offer any resistance but I sensed a slight hesitancy, an uncertainty in him which puzzled me a little. I could not read the expression on his face at all and the intoxicating sensations which had threatened to drown me receded slowly.

"That was probably one of the most interesting conversations I have ever had without even saying a word." I said feeling the need to break the sudden and somewhat awkward tension.

He chuckled softly. "You do have a flare for understatement, my dear."

"Docking bay humour." I said with a little shrug. "It's late. I should get back home." I didn't want to go but it was the right time to do so, anything more now would be too much, like eating too many sweets.

"Then I will see you to your door." He said in a way I knew there would be no arguing against. He did not wrap an arm around my shoulders or try to hold my hand and I did not expect him to. We walked side by side as we had earlier in an oddly comfortable silence. When we reached the house I returned his jacket reluctantly, it held his scent and I wanted to keep it near me for reasons I would have been very hard put to explain. Now I stood on the doorstep looking at him as he looked at me. I felt suddenly shy and awkward. He just smiled.

"Until tomorrow morning then. Rest well you will need your strength." He said.

"Oh." I had forgotten about that, swimming lessons were not high on my list of things to do. "Maybe that's not such a good idea, I don't even know what to wear and maybe it will rain and..." He placed a finger on my lips and silenced my babble of excuses.

"Tomorrow at six am. Do not concern yourself with anything else. Just be awake and ready to learn something new." He told me in a manner that let me know there would be no getting out of this.

I nodded. He smiled.

"Good night, Miss Gabriel, pleasant dreams." He said then he turned to walk back the way we came vanishing into the darkness before I could answer.

I went inside the house. I did not think I would be able to sleep at all but I was wrong about that. I did not even dream. The next thing I knew it was way too early in the morning and the doorbell was ringing.

I stumbled down the stairs wrapping an old robe around me and opened the door to find Thrawn standing there holding a neatly wrapped box. I made a face and indicated with a gesture he should come in. I wasn't awake enough for words yet.

He sat at the small dining table and watched silently as I made a pot of stim'caf and then after pouring two cups sat down across from him.

"This is for you." He said pushing the small flat box across the table to me.

"You know I didn't really think you were serious about this." I grumbled as I opened the box. Inside was a swimsuit. I pulled it out and held it up to look at it.

"It was the most modest one piece bathing outfit I could find. I guessed your size but it should fit."

I was still waking up so it never occurred to ask him why he would even think about what clothing size I was. I smiled at his use of the word modest. He had obviously never seen what the dancers at Jabba's wore. This swimsuit was a ball gown compared to those outfits.

"Should we have breakfast first?" I asked.

"No, eating after would be better. You should get changed."

I looked at the bathing outfit again and frowned. He noticed my hesitation.

"What is it?"

I took a deep breath feeling vaguely embarrassed. "How do I wear this?"

His smile was warm. "Just as it is, like a dance leotard but with nothing underneath. You should probably wear your robe as well to keep off the chill. The mornings here are cold in comparison to what you are used to."

"I'm not going to be able to talk you out of this am I?" I asked.

"No." Thrawn replied. "It will be a good thing for you to learn, trust me you'll enjoy it. Now go and change before we run out of time. I have a meeting to attend to this morning so we do not have all day."

I changed quickly in the bathroom and wrapped my robe tightly about my body. I grabbed the largest towel I could find and then followed him down to the water's edge.

He undressed while I watched and if it embarrassed him at all he didn't show it. I guessed swimming was a good sport because he was in amazing shape and I couldn't help but admire his physique. I just stood there and watched him until he got impatient with me and gave me a look which said '*get on with it.*'

I slipped the robe off and his face gave me the answer I had been afraid of. Of course the thing about wearing a swimsuit is while it covered the torso it didn't cover shoulders, arms, legs, hips and so on and so the exquisite bruises I had received from Lord Vader's charming little training session were not just in full bloom they were also in full view.

He walked over and took a good look at me especially the massive deeply dark purple bruise on my arm.

"I don't have to ask who is responsible for these, do I." He said coldly. He was really angry but I wasn't sure why or at whom.

"Sparring." I said by way of explanation with an awkward shrug.

He had simply clenched his jaw and taken a deep breath. "Did he break your arm?" He asked.

"It was nothing. A hairline fracture but it's better now." I said. "I can still move it and the pain is not as ... intense anymore." I wasn't about to explain the whole story because it was just too complicated.

"It's very hard to learn how to swim with a broken arm." He said dryly.

"You're angry." I was a bit surprised.

"I disagree with brutality for the sake of being brutal. Was there a lesson involved in this?" He asked gesturing to the massive bruise on my thigh as well.

"Sort of."

"Sort of?" His eyebrow arched.

I sighed, "Mostly he was angry and in a bad mood." I shrugged. "Sometimes that happens."

"Did you learn the lesson he was trying to get across?"

I had to think about it. "Yes." I said after a moment. "I suppose I did."

"Well then, you can learn this one too and I promise it will not leave you looking like a refugee from the slavers." He said.

I could feel him trying to back off from his own anger and it puzzled me a bit. Everyone knew what Lord Vader was like and I felt privileged to be able to spar with him, to be taught by him even if that did mean also suffering the consequences. Thrawn, it appeared, felt quite differently. He shook his head and that was all that was said about the awful bruises but he was angered by it and that anger simmered underneath his casual manner.

Swimming had never been high on my list of things I had felt I needed to learn. There wasn't exactly any call for such a skill on Tatooine and I was afraid of the water that lay before me. Thrawn sensed this immediately but he was a good teacher, patient and gentle and at the same time firm about me getting on with it. No messing about, no fear, no hesitation. Before I even had time to consider the consequences I was in the water and learning.

It took a little while and many attempts to drown but eventually I got the idea. By the time an hour had passed I could swim, not very well and certainly not very elegantly but I would no longer drown instantly if I were ever to fall in the water. At the end of it all when he was satisfied I would not die in some catastrophic water incident we called it a morning.

I sat on the shore wrapped in my towel and robe and watched as he swam laps. It was as though he became part of the water and wondered if he excelled at absolutely everything he did. When he was done, he dried off and wrapped his towel about his waist, picked up his clothes and we went up to the house to wash, change, and have a bite to eat. While he showered and dressed I had made tea and heated up some scones.

I dressed in work clothes, a long skirt and long sleeved shirt and wrapped a towel around my hair and sat with him drinking the tea, its warmth was wonderful after the coolness of the water.

"What, no towel dress?" He asked with a smirk.

"I think you saw enough today." I said and then instantly regretted it. That look had come back on his face again.

"It is not my place to say anything, however..." He began.

"No, it is not so don't." I cut him off. I just did not want to get into this conversation. I would get cross.

"Either you are very loyal or he scares you to death." He commented tersely, "You defend him no matter what his behaviour."

I stared at him for a second and sighed. "It's probably a bit of both and if I thought he was wrong I would tell you but in this case since I chose to let him spar with me I am as much to blame for the outcome. I wasn't fast enough."

"You have a choice?" He asked arching an eyebrow in disbelief. "That man is twice your size and his strength is mechanically enhanced of course you are not fast enough." He stopped suddenly clamping his mouth shut. He was furious and he didn't like it much. I wasn't sure why he felt this way, especially about me. I knew what I was getting into when I sparred with Lord Vader. I thought about his question for a moment then said.

"With regards to this particular aspect of my relationship with him, yes, I think I do. And I choose to be trained by him. I don't always enjoy the method much but I learn from it. If he had wanted me dead I would be dead." I rubbed the arm Lord Vader had almost broken absently. "Usually, he is not as angry as he was this particular time and usually he is not as ...." I searched for the right word.

"Brutal?" Thrawn asked.

I smiled a little. "I was thinking more of abrupt but that is one way of putting it." I nodded. "Normally he has more self control when it comes to sparring with me and he doesn't generally vent his anger on me like this."

He drummed his fingers together and stared at me for a moment. "Lord Vader and self control, this is an interesting choice of words. You really do have a unique way of looking at the world." He said.

I could not think of how to reply to that so I just said nothing, sipped at my tea and watched him as he watched me. When we had finished breakfast he got up to leave. I still had some things to do before I went into the retreat office, like my hair, so I didn't accompany him.

I saw him to the door. "Thank you, for teaching how not to inadvertently drink half the lake."

He smiled. "You are welcome but you should not go swimming alone for a while, you are not that good yet. It would be a shame if you drowned after all that hard work."

"Well, drowning isn't on my to-do list for the day, so I guess maybe some other time." I shrugged. "Maybe tomorrow?"

"When there is time I would be happy to have you join me." He answered. "However, tomorrow, neither of us will be here."

I nodded. "Ah, yes, this top secret mission."

"Something like that. In the meantime, Miss Gabriel, do try to stay alive and out of harm's way." This was a parting shot at the bruises now hidden under my clothes. I didn't answer him as he left.

Fifteen minutes later I was also on my way to work only to discover a puzzling message from Lord Vader waiting for me.

***Be ready to embark on board the ILC shuttle FuryII at the retreat landing pad at 04:00hrs CST. Pack enough for at least two weeks including semi formal wear as you will be expected to dine with the captain. More information given will be at Senior Captain Thrawn's discretion. Do not disappoint me with impertinent behaviour.***

It was not in my job description that I would also be loaned out to other members of the Imperial navy for unexplained missions to which I was not privy to any information about and I was a little annoyed by it. I replied to the transmission with a bunch of question about the work that would need to be done, who would be taking care of the office, what about my work here and so on. The answer I received was terse and to the point.

***I survived without the aid of an office assistant before you arrived, I shall do so for two weeks. You can catch up when you return. Anything important will be transmitted to you. Do not bother me with stupid questions again.***

I sat at my desk staring at the message with my chin in my hands unsure of how I would survive two weeks in space with Thrawn. What annoyed me the most was no one had actually told me what all this was about or why me. It was not as if I was a trained operative or even remotely related to the military in any way shape or form. I was also fairly sure that Thrawn's reasons for having me tag along had very little to do with his romantic interests in me. He was definitely not the type of man to mix business with pleasure. No matter how many scenarios I came up with none of them made any sense.

It also occurred to me that I still had the carved Japor snippet to deal with and had to find this memorial in Theed. I wondered when there would ever be time for a sightseeing trip into the capitol city. There were too many things to think about, too many side lines and distractions. Working for the Empire was complicated and I made a mental note to send word to Master Kjestyll that I would be gone for at least two weeks. In the end I went home early and packed what I thought I would need and a few more things besides then tried to sleep because the 3am wakeup call did not sit all that well with my normal routine. Instead I lay in my bed thinking about the morning's adventure in the water and what the hell this mission could be about. Being forthcoming with information was something greatly lacking in the Imperial world and sadly this seemed to be the norm rather than the exception.

There was only me and a lot of cargo waiting at the landing pad by the retreat at 3:30am. It was dark and cold and I was very tired. I watched as two Imperial soldiers loaded the shuttle and then waited until the pilot showed up. At ten minutes to four he was there. Apart from the slight nod of acknowledgement he all but ignored

me until he had done his external preflight check and then when he was finished and satisfied with it, he asked for my documents, which I gave him. He was an older man who gave me a brief once over and a curt nod.

"Captain Tjenn Wolfhr," He said shaking my hand. "Better get onboard then, Miss Gabriel, looks like it is just you and me and this pile of stuff. You can ride up front if you like." He said gruffly.

I liked him immediately. I sat in the co-pilot's chair and had strapped in by the time he finished making sure everything was ship shape, so to speak. I watched as he went through the checklist before requesting departure clearance. He smiled as he noticed my undivided attention.

"Don't suppose you'd let me fly her would you?" I asked quickly before I had a chance to think about it and not ask.

"Can you fly her would be the question Miss Gabriel." He said with a grin.

"Lord Vader seemed to think I could when he let me pilot out of Coruscant." I said with a smile.

To my great surprise he laughed. "Yes, I heard about that but I didn't realize that was you."

"You heard about that? What exactly did you hear?"

He punched a few controls and spoke with flight control and started the ascent. "Just that Lord Vader seems to have great trust in you. You gave a few of the noncoms a good scare though. Buddy of mine is on board the ISD you landed on, said you put the shuttle down like a pro. Only afterwards found out you'd never flown one before. People talk you know and that story has gotten around. Lord Vader doesn't usually like to be piloted around although much of the time he doesn't have a choice."

"Oh," I said. "Well, it is not as if I have never flown anything before."

"I heard." He smiled. "If you wish to practice, I don't mind." He said switching over the controls to me. "I used to teach at the academy before I was reassigned. Usually I shuttle the Emperor around this is a nice change in routine." He said. "Get ready and I will pass her over to you."

I put on the second headset and took over the shuttle controls. The flight was a long one. We were to rendezvous with the *ISD Vengeance* which was currently waiting at the edge of the Chommell Sector and the journey would take almost six hours.

Captain Wolfhr was a good teacher. Unlike Lord Vader and his learn by being thrown into the fire method, the captain was patient and made lots of corrections. He explained things and seemed genuinely happy to be teaching someone. I wondered why he had left the academy but wasn't going to ask that. I learned a lot about the finer art of flying a lambda class shuttle and with a whole lot less panic. He even taught me some of the tricks the better pilots used to get past some of the more cumbersome controls. The time passed surprisingly quickly. He was easy to be with and easy to talk to.

I learned that he was married, lived on Naboo with his wife and had two children, a son and a daughter. His daughter was almost the same age as I was and had just entered the Academy as an Intelligence Officer. His son was still too young but would be following in his father's footsteps as a pilot in the Imperial Navy. He showed me holo images of them both.

I talked about Tatooine and my father and my life as a docking bay brat. I talked mostly about my mechanic work and my own love of ships and flying. While I would never be the best pilot in the world, I loved it. He told me I had a natural touch for it almost as if I could talk to the ship. Lambda Class shuttles, he had said, were notoriously picky to handle and so far I had done well considering how little flying time I had ever had in one. I wondered if he had ever flown some of the older freighter ships because they were not only picky they were fat sluggish bantha cows.

I was almost surprised at how fast the time had gone by and jumped when the nav computer gave the alarm for the exit from Hyperspace. There was that amazingly dizzying swirl of stars and hyperspace and sub-light met and then we were in Core space. Captain Wolfhr punched in the co ordinates for the *Vengeance* and the last half hour of the trip was basically me trying not to get nervous.

"You want to land her?" He asked.

I grinned. "You trust me enough?"

"You have a nice touch with her. Just remember to watch the dorsal wing." He said.

He had just finished pointing out some very clever tricks when the Landing control from the *Vengeance* came over the comm requesting Identification and clearance codes.

"ISD*Vengeance*, this is Imperial shuttle *FuryII* requesting docking permission. Identification code being transmitted now, over." I said as captain Wolfhr transmitted the codes.

"Copy that *FuryII*, stand by for clearance code confirmation, over." said a very bored sounding voice.

"*FuryII*, standing by."

And then we waited for what seemed forever but were only about a couple of minutes.

"*FuryII*, this is the *ISD Vengeance*, you are cleared to land in the main hanger bay, *Vengeance* out."

With a nod from Captain Wolfhr I started the whole landing bay entry procedure. He talked me through it and kept me calm. It was a nice change from the last time I had done this. He even taught me how to style the ship so that it faced the right way for departure. That was a cute trick. I almost wished I could have seen the manoeuvre being done.

Once she was safely down and the engines shut off, I unbuckled myself and got up and stretched. He did the same, grabbed his flight data pad and made his way to the gangway. I followed behind him, picking up my travel bag along the way.

The deck officer saluted the Captain who saluted back. "Welcome on board the *ISD Vengeance*, Captain Wolfhr." He said and then with a curt little nod to me extended the same courtesy. Wolfhr handed the deck officer the data pad and told him about the supplies in the cargo hold. They saluted again and the deck officer vanished inside the ship.

"Captain Wolfhr, a pleasure to see you again." said a voice that brought goose-bumps to my skin. Captain Thrawn stepped forward and the two men shook hands. They obviously knew one another and seemed to actually get along.

"A pleasure as always Sir." Wolfhr said. "I see the *Vengeance* is treating you well."

Thrawn smiled. "Space treats me well, Captain, as you would know." Then he turned to me. "Miss Gabriel. I trust your journey here was a pleasant one?" He said with just a hint of a smile on his lips and something else in his eyes.

"It was an excellent journey, Captain Thrawn." I said in a tone of voice that made him arch one of those blue black eyebrows at me.

"I am glad to hear it." He smiled, giving me the full benefit of his eerie red eyes. "Then I shall look forward to hearing about it later, during dinner perhaps. Captain Wolfhr, will you be joining us this evening or must you return to Naboo?"

"Ah sadly I must return to Naboo, another time perhaps?" Wolfhr said, then turning to me he extended his hand and I shook it. "It was a genuine pleasure to fly with you, Miss Gabriel and any time you wish to get some more experience in a shuttle I would be delighted to give you space time in the *Fury* there. You have a

genuine touch with her and you are a most enjoyable co-pilot. I wish you well on your journey with the Captain here."

I blushed at his praise. "Thank you Captain Wolfhr, you are too kind. I would love to fly with you again sometime, I learned a lot."

Thrawn merely watched the whole exchange with a bemused look.

Wolfhr gave me a nod, turned and gave Thrawn a salute which was returned and then vanished back into the shuttle to prepare her for the turnaround journey. I did not envy him as this was a long day's work. Thrawn surveyed the amount of cargo being unloaded and frowned. He looked at the large travel bag at my feet. "Wait here a moment please, Miss Gabriel." He said and before I could reply he was off to talk to the deck officer and examine the data pad. After some serious discussion he left the deck officer and the men who were helping unload and came back over to me.

"That is all you brought?" he asked nodding at my bag.

"Yes."

He was about to say something more when Captain Wolfhr appeared again holding a rather large flat box.

"I almost forgot, this was sent up for you, Captain. Corellian Spice cake I believe. It was hand delivered from the Emperor's Kitchen, a gift, although there was no name attached to the requisition slip but the seal is genuine."

Thrawn smiled. "Ah our chef, no doubt, thought to honour our guest here. I hope you enjoy Corellian Spiced cake, Miss Gabriel."

"I am not sure I have ever tasted it, Captain." I said. I had actually never even heard of it.

Wolfhr grinned. "Then you are in for a real treat Miss. I hope the Captain sees fit to open a bottle of that fine brandy he always hides away, the two go well together." He said. The two men exchanged a look and a smile that made me so curious about their past history I had to bite my tongue to keep from asking.

"Enough of this chatter, I need to be back on Naboo and fit for work by tomorrow evening." Wolfhr said and with a nod to Thrawn and a wink thrown in my direction he walked back into the shuttle and the gangway closed up behind him.

Thrawn handed the cake box to one of his men with strict instructions that it was to be hand delivered to the chef and then he picked up my bag.

"If you will follow me, Miss Gabriel, I shall show you to your quarters." He said.

He was quiet for the walk to the quarters that had been assigned to me. I got the impression that there was something on his mind but he was not about to speak about it in the open and I wasn't going to ask. Only when we walked down a very quiet, deserted part of the ship did he say anything at all.

"I took the liberty of giving you quarters in the VIP area. I know how you value your privacy and quiet. There is a private training room just down the corridor from where you will be staying and a small recreational room as well." He said opening the door to my assigned quarters with a keycard which he then handed to me.

I followed him in. VIP quarters were located near the bridge and used for dignitaries and other high ranked people of note. I knew this from my time onboard Lord Vader's ship. They were always large, luxurious and quiet created to impress whoever was staying there.

I sighed when I saw the quarters he had selected for me. There was an enormous view port, a sitting room, a spacious 'fresher and all the luxuries I could ever have asked for. It was a bit of overkill really, I did not need all this space but I was fairly certain he had not assigned me to these quarters for their luxury but rather for their location, near the bridge and away from the main part of the ship, away from prying eyes of the junior crew.

"I trust you will be comfortable here." He said dropping my bag at the door of the bedroom. He opened all the doors to check that the quarters were in suitable condition, clean sheets on the bed, towels and so on. He was being a little scary, but then I had never seen him truly at work or on board his ship before. It was a whole new side of him.

"It is fine thank you." I said.

"There is a small Officer's galley facility just down the corridor where you may order food or drinks if you wish. There will be a formal dinner in the Captain's dining room tonight at 19:00 hrs and I expect you to attend, please dress appropriately. I will send an officer to escort you." He said.

I nodded.

"I will have something light to eat sent to you if you wish. You must be hungry after your journey." He continued.

I nodded.

"You also look tired, perhaps you would do well to rest before dinner this evening." He said a little less formally.

I nodded.

"Do you have any questions?" He asked.

"Yes." I said and wanted to continue with asking about food instead what popped out was "What the hell am I doing here?"

For the first time since Captain Wolfhr left Thrawn smiled at me. "All in good time, Miss Gabriel." He said almost smugly.

"Yes, of course." I replied rolling my eyes. He was right though; I was tired, too tired to play games. "It is pleasant to see you again, *Senior* Captain Thrawn." I retreated into formal politeness.

He laughed. "Miss Gabriel, it is always a delight to be in your presence." He said more gently stepping a little closer to me. "And the correct verbal form of addressing me is still just Captain."

I fought the urge to back away one step from him. He saw that and it amused him. "As you wish *Captain*." I said.

There was a moment of silence and then he said, "Unfortunately, as much as I would like to stay here and verbally fence with you, I must return to the bridge. I have much to attend to. I do, however, look forward to dinner this evening. You will get to meet some of the fine Officers who serve aboard this ship. I trust you will enjoy it. I know they are all quite curious about you."

"I am certain it will be very interesting," I said. "Although I am not entirely sure what there is to be curious about me."

His eyebrows raised in surprise at my statement. "You work closely with the Emperor's Iron Fist and you live to tell the tale. I expect they are all dying to know your secret."

I raised my chin a notch defiantly. "Oh? And what about you aren't you also dying to know that as well?" I asked.

"Of course but eventually I will unravel that little mystery on my own." He said softly. "All in good time, my dear, all in good time." He stroked the side of my face making me shiver.

I stepped back from him, my heart suddenly racing, annoyed that he could do that to me with the barest of touches and tone of voice. The tension between us was sparking and I knew he felt that too. We stared at each other for a moment until I looked away.

"Don't you have rebels to find or duties to attend to?" I asked crossly.

"I have plenty to keep me occupied Miss Gabriel." He said.

"Then go away and let me get some rest."

"As you wish." He replied. "Until this evening."



I bobbed my head at him and watched him leave.

After taking a few deep breaths, the first thing I did was unpack and sort out my things, hung up the clothes that need hanging up and put away everything else. The second thing I did was lie down and nap, I was exhausted. I did not think I would get much sleep but I did and woke up with just enough time to shower and dress before the stupid dinner thing.

The dress I had brought was one that Cati had made. A pretty purple dress that draped over one shoulder while leaving the other one bare. The one sleeve hid the awful bruise which had so upset Thrawn and I was glad. It wouldn't have made good table conversation if everyone was discussing my injuries at Lord Vader's hands.

I studied myself in the full length mirror. The dress was feminine and elegant but not over the top. I hoped it was not too formal but since the word formal had been stressed I wasn't going to worry about it too much.

I put my hair up with the silver zenji sticks from Thrawn, used a touch of my favourite perfume and applied enough make up to take away some of the oh-my-stars-when-did-you-last-sleep look I always got from traveling. I was just finishing up when the door chime rang.

The young midshipmen, who did not say a single word after 'Good evening Ma'am, I have been assigned to escort you. Please come with me', looked terrified. From the shake in his voice he had been practicing these lines a lot and he was scared to death of me for whatever reason. I could only assume it was because of who I worked for. Anything remotely connected to Lord Vader inspired fear. This included me as well, I guessed. I did not think I was actually all that scary, but I could never really tell how others saw me so it would have been hard to say.

I was met at the dining room by Thrawn who did not hide his smile when he saw me. He offered me his arm which I took. It was all very formal. He introduced me to the other five officers. I would never remember their names but I smiled at each one as they each in turn did that heel snap together polite nod thing. I think they were even more nervous about having me there, a woman and Lord Vader's assistant, than I was nervous to be there. I was seated next at the left hand side of the Captain and as he pulled my chair out for me to sit down I was grateful for all my mother's lessons in manners and etiquette.

The dinner started off with soup served by silent junior officers, followed by a nice meat dish that was so elegantly prepared it seemed almost a shame to eat. All the way throughout the dinner I was asked polite questions to which I gave polite answers. It was all very polished and pretty but I was very much aware that beneath the surface all eyes watched me.

I guessed that as Lord Vader's Personal Assistant I was as much a curiosity as anything else. I was pretty sure what they really wanted to know was something no one would actually dare ask. What was it really like working for Darth Vader and why was I not dead yet? Everyone followed Captain Thrawn's lead and he was the very model of elegant, courteous, politically correct politeness. Manners were a big thing at this dinner table. I was glad I had remembered to pack mine.

As the main course was done and the dishes cleared away, the wine glasses removed to make way for a dark somewhat bitter version of 'caf, and the men decided it was time to ignore me and get down to business. I was not giving them any news or information about what they really wanted to know so they turned their attentions to other topics, such as ship news and work and although they were very careful not to exclude me, they no longer made me a part of their conversation. I was grateful for this and happy to be left to my own thoughts. I caught bits and pieces of information that were interesting and some gossip that was meaningless but amusing. All the while I was being studied by Captain Thrawn whom I thought looked very amused by the whole turn of events. The only moment of silence came when

the Chef himself brought in and served the Corellian Spice cake that had been delivered earlier. Thrawn smiled and complimented the man on his forethought to have it made.

"I cannot take the credit for this, Captain." He said with a smile as he sliced the delicate looking cake up and served it. He left as soon as each person had been served and we waited for Thrawn to begin.

"Please, Miss Gabriel, you must tell me how you enjoy this delicacy, seeing as how you have never had it before." He said gesturing for me to start.

I looked around the table. This little bit of information surprised everyone there and I wondered just how special this desert was and why it was so coveted. I took my cake fork and neatly sliced a small section off and ate it slowly.

The cake was truly like nothing I had ever tasted before and I could understand why it was so popular so I took a second, larger bite. The delight of the new taste suddenly gave way to the sensation of something I could not describe but was definitely not pleasant. I dropped the cake fork to put my hand at my throat as I tried to swallow. I guess everyone thought I hated it at first. That would have been simple.

"Is the cake not to your liking Miss Gabriel?" Thrawn asked sounding a little displeased.

I wanted to answer him but my heart rate had suddenly tripled, I had broken out into a clammy cold sweat and breathing was becoming difficult. He was speaking to me but I could not seem to understand him clearly and I could not speak to tell him something wasn't right. I was having trouble focusing on his face. It didn't take him long to figure out something serious was going on.

"Miss Gabriel, are you alright?" He had gotten up from his chair and was at my side. "Jenson, get the Doctor, we need a medical team in here now." He said with remarkable calm.

My heart beat so fast I thought it was about to burst its way through my chest and it hurt. Anxiety and fear flooded through me. I felt as though I were being strangled from the inside. I was struggling against the fight and flight sensation that rushed through me all the while desperately trying to get air into my lungs. As I struggled to breathe I had the strangest thought about drowning on cake, it seemed ironic since he had just taught me how to swim.

Panicking, I stood up too quickly knocking the chair backwards. When my body convulsed I felt the room spin and felt the brush of Thrawn's hand as he reached for me but I collapsed on the floor before he could catch a hold of me. There was a terrible sensation of nausea and then mercifully everything went black.

The world became a series of disjointed images and a scramble of voices. I surfaced from the blackness that had swallowed me whole to experience pain and fear. I know I flailed about because a man's voice, one I wasn't familiar with, kept yelling for someone to hold me down. My heart beat so wildly and erratically that it hurt. There was brilliant white light in my eyes when they opened and I could not focus on any of the faces that peered down at me. I knew I was in a world of trouble but I didn't understand it.

I felt the sting of injections in my arm while the sensation of everything spinning out of control got worse. There was a terrible metallic taste in my mouth I could not get rid of and my chest felt as though someone was ripping it apart from the inside. I could hear someone saying something about losing her and then the world of pain, bright lights and anxious voices suddenly vanished.

If I was dreaming I didn't want it to end. I found myself in a place of quiet and ease. There was no one there but me and nothing tangible to see. All around me was a pale glowing sort of light and it seemed to ripple about as if it were alive. It was peaceful. I breathed deeply and watched in wonder as the light around me danced. I

wanted to move with it because it was beautiful and reached out to touch it but suddenly a great rift opened up in the space where I was. A terrible pain seared through my chest as though lightening were slicing me in two. I screamed and as suddenly as I had found myself in this secret place of serenity I was bounced back out of it into the turmoil of what I suspected was the ship's Med-lab.

My eyes opened to a face I didn't know and could not make out clearly. He was shining a bright light in my eyes and the set of his mouth was grave.

"Welcome back, young lady." He whispered.

"Will she live?" I heard a familiar voice ask from a distance.

"Captain, I thought I asked you to leave?"

"You did Doctor. I ignored it. Will she live?"

The doctor looked at me. "Yes, Captain she will live, but she's going to be out for a while so get out and leave us to do our jobs in peace."

I wanted to say something but before I had a chance I felt the jab of a hypodermic in my arm and once again the world swam and went black.

I don't know how much time had passed between the sedation and the waking. When I came to, it was not a happy moment. It was slow and unbelievably painful. My eyes fought to open and my head and chest ached. I was unbelievably thirsty and it hurt to move, it hurt to breathe. I must have made a sound because someone was at my side by the time I had managed to get my eyes open. I recognized the doctor but I didn't know his name.

"How are you feeling?" He asked taking my pulse and looking in my eyes with that awful bright light of his.

"Thirsty." I managed to croak out.

"Yes." He vanished for a moment and then came back with a small cup of water, helped me sit up slightly so that I could sip at it. "Just a little or you'll be sick." He said setting the cup aside.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You had an adverse reaction to something you ate." He replied.

"My head hurts." I said.

"Yes, to be expected. Sleep will help that. Close your eyes and get some rest." The doctor said gently. I did as he said and slipped back into oblivion.

As a child I had, for the most part, been unusually healthy. Only once was I seriously ill. Ill enough that I couldn't actually recall most of the time I had been sick. I had caught a rare variant of Tournier's Fever. Something that came from being bitten by the little black flies called Mawlgwies. It affected maybe one out of a hundred thousand people and it could be fatal. It was named Tournier's fever because he was the doctor who not only discovered the disease but also came up with the cure. I was ill for well over a month with fevers and chills, taking a medication that did almost as much harm as the illness but in the end I survived. I remember that time in flashes only. The dreams that came with the fevers still haunted me, almost as though the dream world had been more real than the one I had actually lived in. I remembered my mother's cool hands on my forehead. I remembered the injections and the maddening itch they caused. I also remembered the sensation of drowning in time, never knowing where or when it was. I would wake from the dreams soaked in fever sweat not knowing if it were night or day. I lost only a month or so but it felt like a year or more.

I was reliving this weird time warp sensation now as I woke again. I felt a whole lot better though, the headache had subsided and the exquisite pain in my chest was now down to a dull ache. It felt late, the lighting in the med lab was very dim and the place was very quiet with the exception of some humming machinery. I

let myself come back to the world slowly. I had been dreaming but the memory of what the dreams were about had faded as soon as I began to surface.

I sensed him before I turned my head and saw him sitting in the chair by the bed. He sat slouched back, his elbows on the armrests, his fingers steepled together with his fore fingers resting against his chin, he was deep in thought. His face was all shadowy lines and angles. My movement brought him out of his reverie and his eyes caught mine, they glowed softly in the dim light.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Miss Gabriel." Thrawn said quietly.

Before I could ask he had picked up the glass of water for me. He waited for me to sit up a bit and then handed me the glass. I drank a little but my hand shook so much I was afraid I would just drop all the water on me instead. I was glad when he took the glass back and set it on the table again.

"What happened?" I asked lying back down. Sitting up took too much effort.

He leaned forward in the chair and stared at me. "How are you feeling now?"

"Like I just went head to head with a Krayt Ancient and lost." I said. "What happened?" I asked again.

He took a very slow deep breath. "It appears the Corellian Spice cake that was sent up here with you was laced heavily with glow spice and as glow spice is not a poison for most people it did not register on the poison sweep. Glow spice also doesn't glow in opaque food stuffs which is why it is normally only used in drinks as a visual additive. It serves no other purpose than to make drinks sparkle. Thus I can only conclude that someone knew about your allergy and tried to poison you." He said. There was ice in his voice. "You had a severe reaction to the spice which sent you into anaphylactic shock and your heart stopped. Doctor Thracer was able to bring you back but you gave us all a good scare."

"Poison me? What for?" I asked in complete disbelief trying to understand what he had just told me.

"Now that is the question, isn't it?" He said coolly.

I closed my eyes still trying to wrap my head around the fact someone had done this deliberately.

"How do you know this was not just an accident?" I asked.

"There was enough glow spice in that cake to make all the drinks at the Emperor's grand ball twinkle for a year. Whoever put it in there made sure there would be enough to bring about a severe reaction. It was not an accident." He said in a quiet, even, deadly voice. "I will find out who is behind this and they will be brought to justice."

I sighed. This was all too much to digest and it was making my head hurt. "What time is it now?"

He looked at the chronometer at his left wrist. "A little after five in the morning." He said. "The doctor says you should be well enough in three days."

"Well enough?"

"We have work to do, Miss Gabriel." He reminded me with a slight smile.

"Ah yes, this secret save the world but don't tell anyone about it mission." I said.

He shook his head and gave me a real smile. "You have the strangest sense of humour."

I wanted to reply but was saved by the Doctor. "Captain, I thought I made it clear that my patient was not to be disturbed." He said, annoyed.

"Doctor Thracer, may I remind you that I am Captain of this ship and as such am responsible for all the lives on board her. It is my duty to check up on Miss Gabriel as she, too, is a member of this crew for the time being." Thrawn said coolly. I got the impression this was an old argument that these two men had rehashed over and over again.

"Then I should not have to remind you that, while you may run this ship Captain, the medical labs are my domain and as such, here, I am god and as god I am telling you to leave. If you insist on dragging this young lady on some off world mission she will need to be well rested and strong enough to survive your pig headed leadership. Now get out of my med-lab before I call in security and have you removed." The doctor stood in front of Thrawn with his arms folded across his chest, and although he was shorter and more slender than Thrawn was I was pretty certain he would carry out his threat regardless.

I kind of liked this doctor and I got the impression that underneath the gruffness Thrawn did too but he was never going to admit that. The two men stared at each other for what seemed like ages and I so wanted to tell them to quit the pissing contest because it was boring but I didn't think that was a good idea.

"Captain, can you please take this discussion outside? It is very loud and my head hurts." I said instead.

He gave me an even stare with one eyebrow raised. "Yes of course, Miss Gabriel, my apologies. I shall check on your recovery later with the good doctor's permission of course."

The doctor watched Thrawn's face intently until the Captain, with a none too happy look, stalked out of the med-lab with a sharp turn of his heel.

I couldn't stop the little giggle that escaped. Men were sometimes very funny.

Doctor Thracer gave me a speculative glance and then went about doing a check up. "It is a good job that you have a strong will to live, young lady, I am quite sure had I not been able to save you he would have had me shot on the spot."

"It would have displeased Lord Vader if I had died." I said, but I didn't really believe this.

The doctor gave me a knowing look. "Lord Vader, I think, has little to do with the Captain's desire to see you live."

"Hmm, well then maybe it is it this mission he has planned." I countered, ignoring the insinuated meaning in the doctor's words.

The doc shook his head in resignation. "Rest or you will not be going anywhere and I will have to post armed guards at the door."

"That would be fun to watch." I said sleepily. "People would pay...."

The doctor sighed. "You are as bad as he is. Go to sleep before I sedate you." He said and left me to do other things nearby. I drifted off to sleep with the comforting sound of him pottering about quietly.

For the next two days that was my life, lying in bed, with occasional trips to the bathroom just to keep it interesting. I didn't mind as I slept a lot and when I wasn't asleep then I read the book that a certain someone had left for me by the bed. It was mainly a collection of Galactic myths and legends, quite interesting really. It did not really surprise me that during this time I saw nothing of Thrawn and I was glad of the peace.

By the third morning I had had enough of med-lab, I asked the doc if I could just go back to my own quarters and sleep there and was grateful when he reluctantly agreed. I was glad to be back in a space free of people, beeping machines and the awful antiseptic, clinical scent that seemed to permeate everything in the med-lab.

The nice thing about a VIP suite on an ISD was that it had all the comforts of home and this included a bathtub. It was the first thing I did after making myself a nice hot cup of Tatooine mint tea was lounge for over an hour in a bath full of hot bubble covered water. I wanted rid of the med-lab smell and my hair needed washing so badly it was scary. It was a welcome change to the last few days of my life.

After I had gotten out dried off and changed into clothes that actually covered all of me and were a lot less drafty and scratchy I curled up on the couch with the book of myths and began to read. The story I was just about to finish had completely

piqued my interest. It was about a planet near the borders of Old Republic space that had been completely avoided, so much so that all reference to it had been lost. It was said to be haunted by creatures that could do strange things with the Force such as push it away or even hunt it down.

The details were a little sketchy but the stories intrigued me. Even the thought that there might be creatures who could also manipulate the force to their own means was an idea I would never have thought of. If these stories were even remotely true, creatures like that would be a good reason for anyone remotely force sensitive to stay away from this place. It was no wonder all references to this place had been quietly lost. The force worked in the strangest of ways and suddenly the reason for why I was here became a little clearer.

I felt the Captain's presence and before he could knock I used my own small force abilities to open the door. He walked in closing the door behind him before I could show off any more. He looked at me and then at the door but said nothing. He handed me a small slender box that contained my Zenji Hair sticks. I took them out of the box and put my still damp hair up. I was very glad to have them back.

Thrawn smiled watching me. "I thought you might like to have them returned to you." He said sitting down across from me.

"The doctor said you had them but what happened to my dress? It was a Cati original" I asked.

"It was cut off you so that the doctor could restart your heart." He said coolly. "Dresses can be replaced, you cannot." He said.

I just nodded. We sat in silence for a moment and then I said. "You found it didn't you."

His smile was slow and almost lazy. "Clever girl."

"You think they exist?" I asked touching the book.

"Myth usually has some sort of basis in truth. There are reasons why Myrkr was avoided by the Jedi, why it is not on any star-chart." He said.

I looked at him. "This little trip isn't sanctioned by the Emperor is it?"

An eyebrow arched sharply. "What makes you think that?"

"Creatures that have force powers or the ability to perhaps even repel the force would be a great threat to him. He would destroy that planet rather than even look to see there were any truth to the myths regardless of any argument to the contrary you could give." I said quietly.

He was quiet for a moment. "I shall be very careful about how I word things, Miss Gabriel, but in the interest of law and order neither the Emperor nor Lord Vader are privy to everything I do. It would not be the first time I have worked behind the lines, so to speak." He paused. "I do not always agree on our Esteemed Emperor's way of doing things, that is no secret but I serve the Empire to the best of my abilities, never question that." There was a glittering edge of steel in his words and I knew then I never wanted to be on the wrong side of him.

"But this little trip you and I are about to take is a secret." I pressed.

"I informed Lord Vader that I required the use of his force sensitive assistant to help me in some personal matters. Given that my interest in you is not such a great secret to him, he saw fit to give you time away without asking why." He said a little coldly.

"You are using me, in other words." I said matching the icy tone of his voice.

"Yes and no. I require your skills as a force sensitive. I chose you because I do not know or trust anyone else in this particular matter." He stressed. "While you remain loyal to Lord Vader, I sense that you also do not agree with everything the Emperor does. I am not asking you to betray any loyalties and if you choose to share any information we should happen to find then that would be your choice." There was a 'but' at the end of that last sentence and he did not have to fill in the blank for me. I

knew if I broke his confidence he would vanish from my life as certainly as if he had never been there to begin with. "This trip is merely a fact finding mission, nothing more nothing less."

"Oh, so we are just satisfying your curiosity." I said more snarkily than I had meant to.

He smiled. "You could put it that way, but now we are also satisfying yours as well." and I made a face because he was right about that.

"Does everything with you have an ulterior motive?" I asked looking into his eyes. I could read nothing in them. He was a locked door for me.

He was silent for a moment and sat back in the chair, countering my own stare with one of his own. When he finally did speak he chose his words with great care.

"Men in my line of work rarely have time for pleasure, Miss Gabriel, we are married to our careers, to our ships, and to our commands. If I were to tell you that I genuinely enjoy your company, that I expect nothing from you when I am with you in an unofficial capacity but that sometimes I wonder if there could be something more, would that answer your question?" Before I could reply he continued. "When you are onboard my ship, you become a part of my responsibility. You are under my command which makes this is about work regardless of whether it is officially sanctioned or not. In the end there is only one truth, that I serve the Empire, not simply the man alone, but the idea. In order to do that sometimes, I will go to extreme measures. Information is the most useful currency we have, my dear."

I nodded slowly because I got what he was talking about and he had known that all along anyway or we would not have even be having this conversation to begin with.

"Then we understand each other?" He asked standing up.

I stood up as well. "Yes, Captain. I believe we do."

He nodded. "Tomorrow we will take a small ship and see what we can find out about this mysterious place. I trust you feel well enough."

"I expect the fresh air will do me good." I said.

He chuckled. "I will come for you when it is time to leave, sometime early in the morning. Be ready, wear something you can travel inconspicuously and move quickly in." He said turning to leave. I followed him to the door, intending to open it the old fashioned way.

He turned to face me just before I could do so. He wanted to say something more, it was written on his face but instead he just searched my eyes looking for an answer to some unasked question. If he found it I never knew. He walked out leaving the wordless question hanging. I stared at the closed door for a moment before going back to the book so I could reread that whole chapter again. Any information was good information and I had the nasty feeling we would need all the help we could get our hands on.

\*\*\*

I had packed a small back pack with the bare essentials and I was ready when Thrawn came for me. Wordlessly, we walked through the corridors of the ship in the very early hours of the dawn watch. The deck officer greeted him with a salute which Thrawn returned.

"Everything is as you requested, Sir." The young man said.

"Very good, Mr. Athael, thank you." Thrawn said and I wondered if he knew the names of everyone on board this ship. It would not surprise me at all if he did. The young man saluted again and left smartly.

"Well, Miss Gabriel, there she is." He gestured towards the scruffiest looking ship I had seen in a long while. "The *Ahnkeli* 'Su'udelma." He said.

I raised both eyebrows. "Big name for a little ship." I retorted looking at the little HWK light freighter. "Where on earth did you dig this up from? It must be at least fifteen years old."

Thrawn smiled. "I take it you are familiar with this kind of vessel?"

I nodded. "More than I would prefer to say actually, saw a lot of them before the newer freighters came out, more people used them because they had better shielding, heavier fire power. Does she even still have her hyper-drive?"

He nodded. "There have been significant modifications to this ship, I am sure she will surprise you."

"She looks like a wreck." I told him flatly.

He purred in my ear "Looks can be deceiving, Miss Gabriel."

"Hmm!" was my only reply. I did not doubt that this little ship was probably wired and fired up to the teeth. The HWK series were, despite a bad reputation for being touchy little ships with big personalities, a line of tough, fairly versatile freighters which was why many smugglers used them.

I dropped my back pack at his feet and began to do my own fairly serious pre-flight check on the ship, I hadn't asked if I could but I didn't care. I had been taught never to fly in a ship I had not personally gone over and I wasn't about to start changing that now. I figured out pretty quickly there had been some substantial modifications done and most of them would not be picked up by a standard Imperial patrol. She was the perfect smuggler's vessel. It made me raise my eyebrows even more. I wondered exactly who he thought we would be going up against, if anyone at all.

When I was satisfied I walked back to where the Captain was standing watching me with a thoughtful expression on his face. I picked up my backpack.

"Shall we?" I asked.

He gave me a slow smile. "After you, Miss Gabriel." He said and we walked up the small gang way.

The *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* was a fairly small ship, room for six passengers plus a crew of two, usually, a pilot and a co pilot. There were no extra places for gunners and turrets this was a ship for drop and go not stay and fight. She could carry up to one hundred and fifty metric tons of cargo if the holds had not been altered, which in this case they had.

I walked through the ship and checked her out from the inside. I tweaked some of the engine systems while Thrawn watched me in silence. I had cut my mechanic's teeth on ships exactly like this. It was a sort of home coming for me. When I was done he headed towards the cockpit while I explored my sleeping quarters. I tossed my backpack on one of the bunks in the small crew cabin and went to join Thrawn. I was surprised to see the captain sitting in the co-pilot's chair.

"You seem to have far more experience with this type of vessel than I do," He said. "That makes you the designated pilot."

I grinned. Sat down strapped in and got my headset on. We were cleared for departure and we left quietly. It didn't take me long to sort out exactly what he had meant by significant modifications. Her engine was twice as powerful as it should have been, I wasn't even sure it was possible to do that and her hyper-drive had been jacked up to the max. Forward fire power had been boosted and the regeneration rate on her shields made my eyebrows rise as did the included counter measures.

"You expecting trouble?" I asked. This little ship was armed to the teeth and she would not be someone's prey but rather a worthy opponent if we got into a fight.

"Just covering all possibilities." He replied as he programmed the nav computer. "We will be making several hyper jumps, no direct line."

I shrugged. "Whatever you say, *Senior Captain*."

He sighed which made me grin. I liked knowing I could get under his skin.



I manoeuvred the ship away from the *Vengeance* and got a good view of the ISD in the process. I whistled softly. The ISD was a thing of deadly beauty. "Before you hit the go button I want to test her out a bit, she has a touchy feel to her and I need to get used to that."

He nodded his consent and I took the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* for a quick joy ride. She was a treat to fly, fast and responsive, and I think I made him a little space sick.

"That's enough." He said tersely and punched the nav computer's go switch.

I laughed. This was sheer joy and I had forgotten how much I loved just flying. The nav computer ticked over and the stars distorted as we went into hyperspace. Once we were in the hyperspace lane I unclipped and got up. The ship was on autopilot and I wanted to make some 'caf. According to the nav computer's calculations the next jump would be in five hours. I did not know the coordinates he had punched in and I didn't ask. He had his reasons for being secretive and I just didn't feel like arguing with him about it.

The *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* had a small galley, well it was more like an afterthought of a galley actually, but good enough for two people, a pain when you had to cook for passengers, though. It had been well stocked and it didn't take me long to get things sorted out. While the stim'caf was brewing I fetched the book I was reading from my backpack. When the 'caf was done I poured two cups, remembering how Thrawn had taken his the day he had taken me to lunch, strong and black. I made my way back to the cockpit, handed a cup to him and sat back down. He nodded his thanks and went back to studying the data pad he had in his hand. He was not really very conversational and hyper-space was very dull so I was glad I had brought a book to read. I sat the same way I always had when I was flying, feet wedged up on the consol, slouched back in my chair, my nose in a book held in one hand and a cup of sweet, milky 'caf in the other. If my complete lack of military decorum bothered him, he didn't say anything.

Every hour on the hour I got up and wandered about. Ship-check, my father had always called it. He had drilled that into me from the very first time I could ever remember flying with him. Always check the ship, he had said, always, even if everything seems to be running in perfect order. System fail and things can go wrong very quickly, just keeping an eye on stuff once an hour might save your life. He had shown me what to do and made it a point that all his pilots implemented an hourly check whenever possible. A walk-through the ship, a look at the systems readouts, smell for leaks and other simple things helped one get a feel for the ship and know when stuff was just not right. It was as if by doing these little checks you developed some sort of relationship with the ship and got to know her well enough so that when things did happen and go wrong you were not scrambling trying figure out where stuff was. It seemed like such a small thing and most pilots would say they knew their ship inside and out but I had been in the co-pilot's seat on a couple of runs for Jabba's people and when a pilot didn't really know his ship but thought he did and something went wrong you were screwed. They had all laughed at me for doing my routine ship checks but in the end, when a couple of times it had saved our lives, they stopped laughing and started doing checks of their own. It also helped to pass the time if there was some sort of routine scheduled thing to do, because any trip longer than two hours in a small ship is dull, even with a good book or board games... that is if you even have someone to play games with. Thrawn was silent almost the whole first jump. Deep in thought and studying the various datapads and books he had brought with him.

We ate cold sandwiches for lunch that I had made from the tin of mystery meat and bread from the supplies on board and all I got out of him was a polite thank-you. The route he had chosen had taken us just off the main trade routes into quieter space. Not so back water that we would look suspicious but off the main pathways.

When I checked the star chart as we came out of hyperspace I saw we would pass near Kuat. We cruised at sub-light for about half an hour and then Thrawn punched in the second set of hyperspace coordinates and we jumped again. This time we would be traveling for six hours.

"How long will we be gone for?" I asked after cleaning up the lunch dishes.

Thrawn thought about it for a moment. "If the calculations are right not more than seventy two hours." He said. "But of course there is margin for change depending on circumstances."

I nodded.

"What languages do you speak?" He asked suddenly.

I had to think about it for a moment. "Basic, High Court basic thanks to my mother, Huttese, Rodese, Rodian thieves' cant, some Bocce, and some pirate and smuggler cant." I said.

He raised an eyebrow. "Impressive list, most humans speak one maybe two languages. You seem to have a gift for them."

I shrugged. "I don't know about that, it was never really hard for me to learn a new language, it is a little like music I sort of see it rather than hear it." I could not explain it better than that.

"Interesting, but you left one out of that list." He said.

I looked at him, wracking my brain trying to think what other language I knew. Nothing came to mind so I shook my head, biting my lip in the process, "No, I don't think so."

He smiled slowly. "Now, that is very interesting."

"You've lost me, Captain."

When he spoke next I knew he was no longer speaking basic but I still understood him and the language he spoke made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I just sat in the chair across from him and stared into his eyes. "*It will be perfect for what I have in mind.*" He said.

I stared at him.

"That book about the myths I gave you to read, Miss Gabriel, is unreadable by most people and yet you did not even seem to notice this. This was not my first inkling that you are not all you appear to be."

My heart had begun to speed up a little. I did not like this little turn of conversation much and I still was not sure of what he was getting at.

"Any time you wish to get to the point Captain..."

He smiled and nodded. "The night you were in my flat, you picked up a book lying on the table and flipped through it."

I remembered, just in passing, because it was sitting there and had a beautiful old binding. "The little book with fables in it, I remember you asking if I wished to borrow it."

"And your reply was not, that you did not wish to take it because you could not read it but rather that you didn't wish to borrow something so old and precious. How you would know that it was both old and very precious was beyond me at the time, but you were nervous enough and I thought perhaps you were just being shy about not wanting to admit you could not read it. Now I understand the truth of the matter you truly don't see it do you?" He said more to himself. "You hear and see this language as if it were basic."

My father had said more or less the same words to me just before I had left Tatooine. "You mean Mandalorian?" I asked feeling suddenly very afraid of him. I got slowly out of the chair and backed away.

He sat there quietly. "I was not certain until now."

"So, I understand Mandalorian, so what?" I asked standing there with my arms folded over my chest. "I can't actually speak it." Then I asked. "What did you mean by *what I have in mind*?"

He was going to say something but he changed his mind, I read it on his face and felt it in the air as certainly as if he had held up a sign. Instead he said, "Where we are headed will be an outpost for smugglers and thieves, people on the fringe of society who do not wish to be noticed. I wanted to know if my theory was right because I will need a way to communicate with you that no one else will understand. I am quite certain that none of these people we will encounter will speak Mandalorian which was what I spoke to you just now. While you have an extraordinary repertoire of languages to call on, all of them are used by these people in some form or another. I had to be sure." He spoke quietly, calmly as if he were speaking to some frightened animal, trying to sooth me. I didn't work.

I remained standing. "You could have just asked."

"You would have lied about it."

"What makes you say that?"

He shook his head slightly. "You carry some secret about with you as though it were a ghost-bear clinging to your back. I don't even think you realise it, but it is there sometimes, in your eyes, a haunted uncertain look. It seems to crop up when you are near Mandalorian artefacts."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You study me like I am one of your pieces of art."

"I make it my business to know all I can about the people who are close to me."

"Then what?"

"Merlyn, we have already had that particular conversation." He said gently.

I nodded. So we had. "So, you know all there is to know about me while you remain a big mystery is that it?" I was angry now and glad of it. Anger was easier for me to cope with than that gut culling fear I had felt a moment ago. Even the name Mandalore seemed to cast some dark shadow over my heart.

"I remain a mystery to you because you never ask me anything personal." He said softly. "What do you want to know?"

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. He was right I never asked but how could I explain that he always appeared closed to me, that his body language and manners almost screamed do not ask anything personal and that I was scared to shatter what seemingly fragile bond there was between us by prying.

He got up and walked over to me. "You question nothing about me, someone you allow such close physical intimacy with." This puzzled him, I puzzled him.

"Physical intimacy is one thing." I said with a shrug. Not that my experiences in this particular area were vast, and most of what I had experienced up until his arrival in my life had not been pleasant. Tatooine is a rough place especially if you are female and if you are stupid enough to dance for a living.

"Are you saying you would allow anyone to be this close?" He cupped my face with his hand.

"No, in fact, I usually go out of my way to avoid it." I said backing away from him a step.

He smiled slightly. "Easier to break away from physical contact than to tear away from someone you allow into your soul, is that it?"

I was not at all sure where this turn of conversation had come from or even why. I looked away from him. He had a nasty knack of breaking down my walls and seeing the truth beyond. I shuddered to think what he would have been like had he been even the slightest bit force sensitive. He studied my face for a very long time.

"I forget that you are so young and inexperienced." He said quietly, more to himself.

"And just how old are you then?" I asked, hating to be called young, I had never felt young, not even as a child as though I had somehow been born with a different sense of what age and responsibility meant.

He arched an eyebrow in that annoying manner of his and replied, "Old enough to know better than to get tangled up with you. Is age important?"

"You brought it up." I snipped ignoring his first remark.

"Yes, yes I did." He acknowledged. "Merlyn, what do you want to know about me that will settle some of this angst?"

I stared at him because now, put on the spot I couldn't think of the right questions to ask.

He sighed and walked to the galley to make some tea with me in tow. When he was done he poured two cups and motioned for me to sit with him at the small dining table.

"I am a very private person. I have to be. Too many people pry into everything when you have been noticed by the Emperor. I am sure you have your own experiences with this. It is neither in my nature nor my upbringing to be open and giving with information I deem unnecessary, this includes all my personal information. The less people know about me the better. I notice you are also fairly careful with what you tell people about yourself and I get the impression that you grew up very quickly, did not have much of a childhood on Tatooine and perhaps that is in part what draws me to you." He paused to sip at the tea. "My home world is old and steeped in tradition. Discipline and self responsibility are highly valued among my kind. Children are taught from an early age to view the world with logic and a cool head. We also do not have much of an adolescence."

I watched him as he thought about what to say next.

"I come from a planet called Csilla, out in what you call the Unknown Regions of space. My full name is Mitth'raw'nuruodo, a far too complex name for most humans to pronounce so I allow them to use my core name, Thrawn. Not many people in the Empire even know my full name or its significance. I was born a commoner by Chiss standards but was taken into the service of the eighth ruling family as a Merit Adoptive, a very high honour, and then designated trial born, a status which would allow me to maintain my military familial ties after I left the service. I do not tell you this to brag but to explain a little of whom I am. I was the youngest Force Commander in the Expansionary Fleet in Chiss history, taking command before I had reached the age of twenty-five." He glanced at me. "Believe me when I tell you that I am exceedingly good at what I do."

He paused to take a sip of his tea. "Some time ago I was banished from my home world because the ruling families were too short sighted to see the choices I had made were in their own best interest. A great deal of this has to do with an incident that occurred around a Core world project called the Outbound Flight as well as a nomadic race of people's called the Vagaari. It was during my run in with the Outbound Flight that I had a somewhat less than positive experience with a Jedi, a breed of humans with abilities that were until this time unknown to the Chiss, so you must understand I have little faith and less trust in the words of those who call themselves Jedi, dark, light or otherwise. The abuse of the power you call the Force was abhorrent to me." He said with a slight shrug. "It was shortly after this I *chose* to work for the Empire although not for the reasons many would suppose." He stopped.

He had given me a brief outline and left many, many details out, I felt this but still it was more than I suspected he had told anyone else and I knew that he was giving me a great measure of trust.

"Do you miss your home?" I began, knowing I had asked this question before but wondered if this time the answer would be different.

"Yes, sometimes, about as much as I suspect you miss yours. I have family there and those ties are not so easy to cut but the Chiss prize intense focus and logic and suppress emotions that are considered hasty such as anger, hate and so on. I draw on this training to avoid longing for a home that is no longer my own."

"Family?"

He nodded. "I have parents and siblings. The Chiss, despite their cool demeanour, are very family oriented. Chiss families have long histories and value this greatly"

"Then you are lucky, I don't know where I am really from." I told him.

He watched my face carefully and held his silence, waiting, knowing that I would now tell him what it was he had wanted to know right from the start of this whole conversation.

"Just before I left to work for Lord Vader my father told me that I was not his or my mother's child. I am a foundling, left behind on one of his transports during Jedi Purge. The only thing I have to tie me to my past is a journal written in a language I have never learned to speak and that I am Force sensitive with some abilities that probably should have been kept quieter than they have been." I paused. "No one but I, my father and now you know this."

He nodded, letting me know he understood the trust I was giving him. "And you were the only one who could read this journal?" he asked.

I nodded. "The book was in a box which wouldn't even open for my father."

He arched an eyebrow at this but did not comment on it. "Does it hold any clues about who you are?"

"I know who I am." I said sharply making him raise the second eyebrow to join the first, "What I don't know is where I came from."

He smiled slowly. "At every turn you continue to surprise me." He said.

"Well that keeps you interested I guess." I said wearily.

His smile turned a little predatory, making my heart skip a beat. "Many things about you keep me interested, Miss Gabriel." His voice was a caress and it gave me goosebumps. I made a face at him and wondered how long we could keep playing this particular game before one of us caved in, went mad and shot the other.

"You didn't answer the question." He reminded me.

I shook my head. "None that I can decipher, it is very old, older than my birth parents I'm guessing and written by someone studying the arts of a Jedi but he was failing. He struggled with it, like I do. If you like I can show it to you sometime seeing as how you can read it and you can tell me what you think."

He gave me a solemn look. "I should be honoured to do so."

"I don't know how it all connects with the language though." I said.

"Neither do I but that would bear investigating, perhaps it is a racial memory. You do seem to connect with the artefacts from that culture." He said. "Maybe one of your birth parents had Mandalorian ties."

I sat back and drank the rest of my tea. I was suddenly exhausted. I had forgotten the near death ordeal I had been through three day previously but it had not forgotten me.

"Go and rest." He told me. "I will take the next watch." He paused and then said, "Your father and the other pilots you have flown with have taught you well but you are no good to me tired. Later on we will have much to discuss as I fill you in on what lies ahead of us."

I nodded and was not going to argue with him about it. I crashed almost the moment I lay down on the bunk and slept through the next two hyperspace jumps. When he came to wake me up we were a couple of hours away from Myrkr and he was no longer wearing an Imperial uniform.

## **CHAPTER 5**

I washed my face and cleaned my teeth then went to join him in the galley I sat silently listening to him wondering if he had completely lost his mind. I was doubly convinced of this when he vanished for a moment only to return holding a very small bundle of cloth and metal.

"No." I said shaking my head and getting up from the table to back away from him and the offensive garments he held in his hand. "No!"

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

"Then you are not hearing me." I told him standing there with my arms folded tightly across my chest. "I am not wearing that outfit." This was a losing fight but I was not going to let him get away with it easily.

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

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

"Are you this argumentative with Lord Vader?" He asked with a bemused smile.

"Yes." I told him. It was almost true.

"Then I do not know how he puts up with you on a daily basis." He shook his head and came at me. With one hand on my shoulder marched me to the small crew cabin, thrust the dance clothes into my arms and said. "Dress in private or I will undress you myself and I am certain you don't want that." He paused and gave me a look which made me want to hit him. "At least not yet."

His grin turned into a tight smile that let me know he wasn't joking about this either and no matter how much I protested I was going to lose this battle. I had a choice, I could throw a huge tantrum and see just how far I could push him and still lose or I could comply and get it over with what little dignity I still had intact.

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

Dance slaves were a breed apart. Women and sometimes men, prized so highly for their ability to entertain and dance that they were worth a great deal of money. There had been many such slaves at Jabba's, bought from all over the galaxy, many of the best were Twi'lek women. The clothes for dance slaves were revealing and skimpy at the best of times, I wasn't even certain the particular outfit Thrawn had picked out even deserved to be called clothing, a tiny deep blue iridescent bikini type top and bottom along with a skirt to match, made from such filmy, diaphanous fabric that was pretty much nonexistent, held together by fine beadwork and light but exquisitely woven metal bands and a pair of elegant beaded sandals to finish it all off. This little get up did not leave anything to the imagination. All that was missing was the neck collar and I had a bad feeling about that.

I had worn similar outfits on a couple of occasions while working at the palace, though not nearly so well made or expensive. I had not really enjoyed the attention these clothes had brought. Seemed to me it was not so much about the dancing when you wore next to nothing but more about trying to get the dancer out of the rest of the

clothes. I didn't last long dancing at Jabba's palace for a number of reasons and the dress code was one of them. A knock on the door broke me out of my thoughts.

"Go away!" I said angry at him, angry at myself for getting into this situation, not that I thought I had much choice in the matter.

"Merlyn..." there was a hint of annoyance in his voice.

"I said... go away!"

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

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

"You will need to do something with your hair and you should be wearing a lot more makeup." He said.

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

"Better?" I asked coldly when I came back.

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

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

He smiled. "I can live that as opposed to how you felt twelve hours ago." He said and then continued before I could ask what he had meant by that. "Myrkr is used, from what I have been able to discern, by smugglers and some pirates. They have a small set up in a place called Hyllyard. There we will land and look for a man named Schayll Ormante. He is a well known hunter, who apparently knows more about this planet than any another. I have arranged to speak with him about the creatures of this world because I have heard their bones possess unique properties and a naturally curious about the hunting available on the planet. He expects to be highly paid for this information unfortunately I am also certain he will double cross me." He paused. "I happen to know that he and his people have a weakness for beautiful women. I have told them as a sign of respect I will be bringing my favoured dance slave, Anwylydth, to perform for them. It is my hope that you will be able to distract them for a short amount of time while."

"Why?"

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

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

"I have felt what happens when you embrace the music and let your...how I shall put it... unique talents fly. Trust me they will be enthralled especially if you can actually direct this power at them deliberately." He replied.

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

"You make it sounds so simple." I said.

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

I made a face. "And if you are wrong?"

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

I sat back and folded my arms.

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

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

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

"It will be for a short time only, I promise." He said softly but I couldn't look at him. I did not want him to see the sudden tears that had welled up in my eyes. He left wordlessly to finish getting his own disguise ready. When he came back I did not recognize him at all.

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

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

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



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

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

\*\*\*

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

The first thing that hit me was the air. It was warm and sticky, full of moisture laced with a thousand different scents none of which were familiar to me. I suppose a rainforest world holds its perfume close to its skin. The air, which was so damp you seemed to drink it rather than breathe it, hugged everything tightly to itself, not letting anything dissipate. There was a dank earthy tone that was overshadowed by some sweet flowering thing and in between there was a slightly spicy tinge. I felt as though I had to gasp to get any air at all into my lungs and as sweat slowly began to bead on my skin I came to realize that perhaps Thrawn's choice of dance clothes had less to do with showing skin and more to do with the climate. I was glad it was late afternoon because I could not imagine the heat and the humidity in the middle of the day. Heat, I was used to but not all this moisture. The second thing I noticed was how shabby it all looked, this tiny community built up in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by thousand year old forests of lush, green vegetation and goodness knew what sort of creatures. Hyllyard would not make any of the top ten tourist sites that was for certain.

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

The room was large and overly decorated. The walls were covered with the heads of his trophies mounted on ornate wooden plaques, interspersed with a huge variety of strange weapons from all over the galaxy. The floors were covered in

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

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

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

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

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

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

The first round of conversation was polite banter mainly from Ormante boasting about his hunting prowess. He wanted to impress Honoured Za'ar because he was uncertain about the Bone Trader's own hunting skill. His fear rose about him like steam from a hot bath and it was making me ill.

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

Ormante did not pick up on the irony of that statement and I suspected that his method of hunting, despite the large display of primitive weapons on the walls, mostly consisted of using the highest powered rifle in the galaxy. Instead he nodded and went on to tell the stories of some of the trophies that hung on the wall. I tuned him out. I had heard hundreds of stories just like it while working at the palace. Hunters, no matter what they hunted, always wanted to talk about the catch of the day, always felt the need to display some sort of trophy. The only exception to that

had been Boba Fett. I had never once heard him boast about his work or his conquests.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The men looked from me to The Honoured Za'ar because the tone of voice he had used was sharp and commanding, even if they had not understood the language they had the idea I was being told off. I nodded submissively and bowed my head.

The Honoured Za'ar raised my chin with his fingertips and moved my head to one side so that he could unfasten the chain attached to the collar. I moved slowly and jax like, well aware that all eyes were upon me as I slid the thin silk robe from off my shoulders. I needed to warm up a little before I performed so I ignored everyone until I had fully stretched and felt prepared for the task ahead. They all watched me in silence; my warm up had seemingly rendered them speechless. Just wait, I thought, just wait.

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

I did not know what the music was called or who it was by or even where it had originated. What I did know is that Thrawn seemed to have a better grasp on my secret soul than I could ever have given him credit for. The music was intoxicating and strange with rhythms that seemed to reach into my very core and turned me inside out. I connected with it at once. I found the thread which bound it all together and I let it wind itself around me, all the while moving slowly.

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

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

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

Aware only of the terrible, beautiful tie that bound me I found myself in that place where the dancer becomes locked in the dance. The music was the key, turning and opening new pathways deeper into the dance, deeper into the dancer. I could no longer focus on individual faces. I saw only their lusts and needs, their dreams and wants. I drew these things into my dance and I spat it back out to them making their hunger an ache they would never forget. As the music shifted and changed, the way sands in the desert will, so did the dance. Sometimes light and airy, sometimes heavy and powerful and not one of them took their eyes off me. It was intoxicating. There had been times in my life where I had found this place within and danced its steps but I could not ever recall having done so deliberately to enthrall before. This was new even for me and I liked it more than I dared to say. I do not know how long I danced like this but I was aware when the Honoured Za'ar had returned to the circle and felt the balance of power shift. I turned my focus to him and to him alone for what I instinctively knew was the last piece of music. It was erotic and sensual and curved about me like the silk that wrapped my body.

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

more hungry and primal rise from him, I moved away to focus again on the others. They had not really noticed the very dangerous game I had just been playing.

The dance ended with a crescendo that left everyone breathless and me falling to the floor in a whirling spiral death drop. I lay there, arched in the back bend for a moment while the last vestiges of power writhed away and the room slowly returned to normal. The silence after the music almost as captivating as the music had been. Only when The Honoured Za'ar made a slow growl did I get to my knees and kowtow before him.

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

I nodded and bowed my submission once more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ormante shook his head.

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

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

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

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

\*\*\*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I shook my head suppressing a shiver.

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

"You expect Ormante to jump us?"

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

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

"Yes."

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

He smiled. "No, it would be highly impractical and tomorrow I will need your other skills at my side. You may wear what you please as long as it is something you

can move easily in." He said then added thoughtfully. "You fear the Bone Trader guise, why?"

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

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

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

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

I waited because I could tell there was a story in there somewhere and he would tell it if I was patient. He poured a little more brandy in my glass and I breathed its fumes in deeply. When I looked up at him he smiled slightly.

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

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

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

"They travel mainly in what you would know as the Unknown Regions, sometimes alone, sometimes in small groups or clans. The nomadic part of their lives is somehow a part of their beliefs that one must travel through much in order to gain the wisdom to lead. It is a rite of passage for those that wish to earn the title Honoured Elder. As they travelled about the regions of space so did word of their hunting prowess and naturally tales sprang up of their cruelty and viciousness. Stories that became exaggerated whispers of their almost magical hunting and tracking talents. I think the Dantassi allowed these tales to grow as it only served

their need for secrecy and their reclusive nature further by making them more unattainable." He drew a deep breath and paused for a moment to sip thoughtfully at the brandy. "Hunters of this kind, by their very nature, are ruthless and they have a strict code to which they adhere vehemently. The environment they come from forces a certain way of life. They can indeed be vicious and what happened to Ormante's man earlier was an example of how they would have reacted, but they do not usually do so without good reason or provocation."

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

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

"So where does the name bone trader come from, then? Why do people call them that?" I asked.

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

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

Thrawn was silent for a moment, the look on his face telling me that he was delving deeply into a memory that he had held close to his heart for a very long time. "I was with the small enclave that had found me for three months because, when they first found me I was too ill, too weak, too near death, I suppose, to be moved. Full of ice-fire fever and recovering from the frost bite I was glad to be where it was warm. I had not, up until that point realised what a sheltered easy life I had been born into. It was a time that changed me forever. When I was well enough I began to move about and learn a bit about their ways. I learned to speak their language which had splintered off from Cheunh but still, it was easy for me to learn. Like you, I have a gift for languages. I asked a lot of questions and tried in my own small way to fit in, however, when it was time for me to return home there was no changing their minds. Family is very important to the Chiss people and the Dantassi are no exception to this rule. I was someone's son, and while I did not want to go back home I knew in this decision I had no choice."



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

"And the name they gave you was?"

"Nikätza'arth'pavjäska." It means something along the lines of honoured clanson with the heart of the bear. There is no direct translation but that is the idea of it. Usually, under Chiss name rules, the core name would be Aarthp but it's a nonsense word that has a fairly negative meaning in the Dantassi language when mispronounced so when my name is shortened it is either to Za'ar or Nikätza'ar, personally I prefer the former, it suits my nature when I wear the mask."

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

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

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

He drew a deep thoughtful breath and as though he had read my thoughts he said. "Now, my dear, you know something about me that no one else aside from the Dantassi knows. I told no one, not even my family what had occurred, I never showed them the mask which had been wrapped in a fur lined satchel and hidden from sight. I explained nothing of the last few months of my life, no matter how hard my family tried to get me to speak of it. I had gone out a small boy eager to please his father and returned to them changed in ways no one understood. It was something I could not share with anyone, a different world, and a different time." He sighed and shook his head as if to shake off the memory. "You have nothing to fear from the Bone Traders and they should no longer be creatures that haunt your nightmares."

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

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

"Yes."

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

I made a yeah, yeah motion with my hand and he smiled vanishing into the tiny crew cabin to sleep. I poured another glass of brandy despite his words and moved to sit in the pilot's seat. It was quiet in space and I was grateful. My mind had

a lot to think about. I sipped the brandy slowly watched the dance of the stars that surrounded us while the hazy green planet of Myrkr slowly rotated below.

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

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

"You will need this." He told me.

The data pad that Ormante had given him contained the co ordinates to a small landing site, one of the few that were close, relatively speaking to where Thrawn hoped the creatures he was looking for could be found. It was more like a tiny hole carved out of the massive rain forest than an actual landing pad. I took a deep breath as I piloted us in and with some pretty interesting manoeuvring managed to get us down in piece.

It was early. Dawn had only just broken and the air still held that slight crispness that comes with night. The light was filtered and hazy as the sun began its slow climb to reach above the high canopy of the forest. Down on ground level the air was still moist and for the moment cool. I breathed in deeply trying to sort out the various scents that hung all around us while Thrawn consulted a small tool I had never seen before and after a moment's consideration he motioned with his head to follow him. I glanced backwards at the ship and with a deep seated feeling of dread I trudged after him. While I had not voiced it, I had a very bad feeling about all of this in the pit of my stomach.

It amazed me how swiftly and how silently he could move. In difference to yesterday, he was not wearing the long almost elegant ceremonial robes that swept about the floor and seemed to shroud him in even more mystery. Now he wore long, soft leather boots which went over some sort of leg wrap that covered the leggings or trousers he was wearing. Over the fitted shirt he wore a tunic which ended just below his knees, made from the same fabric as the cloaks, split at the sides to just below the waist, cinched with a leather belt that also held a wicked looking blade of some sort hidden in a wrapped sheath and goodness knew what else. Over this he wore a satchel and a water canteen criss-crossed over his chest. I had no idea what was tucked inside of the satchel and didn't dare ask. Over all of this he wore a similar hooded cloak with sleeves and the bone mask. Like mine, his hands were gloved and he held the culling staff in his left hand.

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

We walked for almost an hour before he raised his hand and we stopped. He stood cocking his head from one side to the other, like an animal on alert, listening. I also listened with all my senses. I calmed my breathing down and concentrated on

the living energy that surrounded us. I could reach out and feel that secondary world around us. There was something there, lurking at the edge of my abilities. It made me shiver involuntarily. He consulted the small tool again and then with two swift hand motions I knew we were being followed. He changed the direction of our trek through the forest and the path, that had up until now been fairly easy, was filled with shrubs and obstacles. I suddenly realized what he had seen all along, that path had been cut especially for us and cleverly designed to look old and not well used. Now Thrawn, as Za'ar, had moved off track and we made our way through the dense underbrush. It amazed me how silent he could be and I felt like a thundering Krayt Dragon in his wake, loud and clumsy.

Several times he paused and consulted the small directional tool, changing our pathway each time. After what seemed an eternity to me he finally stopped. With quick gestures I knew that whatever it was had been tracking us was nearby. I tried to reach out with my weird ways but I encountered nothing. It was as if somewhere up ahead there was barrier to my senses. Za'ar looked at me asking me with his eyes what I could sense. I shook my head. After a moment he made a stay put get down gesture and I crouched down as low as I could in the underbrush and watched as he vanished into the greenness as silently as if he had never been there. From where I hid I could see nothing, all around was thick, lush vegetation. The sun had now risen high enough in the sky that its light slowly began to filter through the high canopy in long dancing fingers of light. The temperature was also rising and along with it the humidity. Sweat beaded on my body and dribbled down my back.

Crouching became a strain so silently I shifted into the meditation pose I had been taught by Master Kjestyll. I do not know how long I sat like that for but I do know that the world about me became sharper, clearer. I had a much better sense of the boundaries of where the Force stopped. There were pockets of nothingness all around me but I was not in one of them. I sensed rather than heard when Za'ar returned. With silent hand signals he told me what I needed to know and we began to move again, at last coming a clearing that had not been made naturally. In the center of the clearing was a small ornate table and upon it a holo transmitter. I glanced at Za'ar and was about to ask what the heck that was but he shook his head and laid a finger on my lips. He took a small ball like object from his satchel and programmed it to do something then he tossed it in the air. A seeker of some sort, it hovered for a moment and then it began to flit and fly hither and to. There was no direct direction in its flight. Silently from our hiding place we watched as the seeker moved closer to the table and the holo transmitter. The erratic pathway hid the seeker's origin and just as well because just as it got within touching distance of the table something shot it out of the sky.

The crack of the gun echoed all around us and the sudden noise coupled with the angry screeching of whatever bird and wild life was near us was suddenly silenced. I held my breath afraid that whatever had shot down the tiny seeker could hear us and shoot at us as well. Nothing happened except the Holo transmitter suddenly came to life. It was Ormante.

"Greetings most Honoured Za'ar." The holo said. "By now you will have guessed that the hunt is on, except that it is you and your witch that will be our prey. Yes, we knew of her witchy ways just not the extent of them. But, no matter she will not save you here. The ways of the Force do not always work in one's favour here on Myrkr. I also know you tried to sabotage my headquarters but we found that as well. You are not as clever as you think, it seems." Ormante was gloating. I looked over at Za'ar but he did not move and I could read no reaction from him.

"But enough banter, from one hunter to another, it is time to see just who the better of us is. I look forward to hanging that elegant mask of yours next to my other

trophies, as for your witch, she will learn in time to respect me and my men and service us in every manner befitting such a creature."

I sucked in a breath loudly and shuddered. Za'ar laid a steadying hand on my arm.

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

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

This was a mess and I had no idea how we would get out of it. I had never been on any sort of a hunt before and I had certainly never been hunted. I was scared. Za'ar must have sensed this and gestured for me to come close to him. He laid his masked face against the side of my head and whispered.

"Be a spirit swift and silent like the wind. Trust your instincts and trust mine." He stroked my face with gloved fingers and calmed my rising panic. "Breathe." He added so I did.

When I had found some semblance of calm he let go of my arm and with a quick glance at the direction tool he signalled then we were off. We moved as ghosts.

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

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

Za'ar pointed with two fingers and when I looked at what he was showing me I saw what he had seen, small broken branches, almost too tiny to perceive and a single

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

"Wait they will come to find us."

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

We continued onwards. We had been travelling, if my watching the sun's direction had been correct in slow circles. I wondered why were not just going in a straight line but kept quiet. It was arduous and exhausting. Stops were few and far between and we drank our water conservatively. The sensation of being watched had not lessened with the discovery of the droid but had increased. It was making me even more edgy than I already was. Sensing this Za'ar picked up the pace and we travelled close together, almost touching one another.

The third trap was clever and would have maybe gotten at least one of us had it not been for my force sense. I felt it rather than saw it. A terrible sensation of danger surged through me for no reason and without thinking I pulled Za'ar's arm sharply downwards and we both flattened to the ground as the large scythe like blade swept in a graceful arc above us slamming and sticking into the tree across the way. Had we been standing it would have decapitated me and sliced him nearly in half. I just lay there on the ground for a moment, my heart pounding. There had been no trigger, I had felt no pull of some sort of line to activate the traps so what were we setting off? From my place in the damp, loamy ground I looked around me and then I spotted it, a state of the art infrared switch breaker. We would never have seen it even if we had been looking for such a thing. Ormante, for all his traps and talk about being the better hunter, was using the top of the line technology to track and trap. This was not about hunting this was about winning at any cost. He had no soul and no honour. I tugged on Za'ar's sleeve and pointed to the breaker. I felt something in Za'ar shift, an anger perhaps that had not been present before but now managed to surface. I guessed that Ormante was now pissing him off as well.

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

Silently he went back to the scythe blade and with an ease that frightened me he reattached it to its original position. He motioned for me to come to him and I watched as he reset the trigger breaker. The droid hovered in the air behind us but in difference to before, this time it did not follow us. It was not long after that we both stopped to listen as the scythe knife sliced through the air again and this time the scream that went with it made bile rise in my throat. Za'ar made a 'one' gesture with his forefinger. I shuddered. I did not need to ask how he had known. He had told me

that there were at least four men tracking us from behind and at least two somewhere in front of where we wanted to be. I had so wanted to ask why, if he had known this was going to happen in this way, were we here? But I was certain now was neither the time nor the place for that discussion and if we made it out in one piece I was going to have to hurt him.

Now we moved at a swifter pace, the sun high in the sky the heat and the humidity oppressive and hateful. I was angry at being dragged along into this mess. I knew why he wanted me here but it did not justify the risks. The anger I was feeling flooded through me, allowing me to touch that place Lord Vader had goaded me into reaching. It was not a good place to be. I needed to be clear headed not riled up in fury, acting without thinking. I steadied my breathing as much as I could and tried not to let my bitterness and sudden hatred of Ormante and his men best me. I could not think straight with the anger that clouded my mind. It was one thing to use that energy in a physical fight but it had a whole other feel to it when I was trying to concentrate and use the Force as a guide. I could still not shake that dreadful sensation of being watched.

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

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

"Witch!" He hissed.

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

The way became somehow easier and I did not think that was coincidence. There had been no more traps and we moved with a steady swift pace. The forest was silent and strange. I knew that the lack of natural sounds, animals, birds was a bad sign but I had no idea why. It felt to me as though the entire forest was holding its breath awaiting the outcome of this hunt. The day was slowly starting its decline and the sun that had been high in the sky was beginning its way back down and slowly being shrouded in the clouds that had begun to gather above us. The air felt heavy and oppressive. It did not surprise me to hear the rumble of thunder far off in the distance.

We continued our way in silence. It was the very worst part of the trek so far. The terrible sensation of being watched itched between my shoulder blades and I could not scratch it. Try as I might to reach out with the force I could not touch the source and that only made me more nervous. That peculiar pattern of dead zones was becoming more and more prominent, as if someone had punched great black holes in where the force should have been. More than once Za'ar stopped to listen and consult his tiny directional tool, we would alter our course slightly and continue on in silence. The Dantassi may well have been among the best hunters and trackers in the galaxy but they were not very comforting or forthcoming with information. I had the distinct impression I was missing some vital piece of the puzzle which annoyed me to no end.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



katarn, among other things, tore him to shreds. It was over in a matter of moments and then the thing turned its eyes to me.

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

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

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

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

watching me die at the hands of whatever creature this was, was far more entertaining than anything else he could have imagined.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I stared as he went to where the first creature lay on the ground, the one I had fought and killed. He sliced off part of its tail, wrapped it in cloth and tucked it away in his satchel. Then he opened up the creature's chest and cut out its heart. I watched with a cold detachment that scared me. He came back and knelt before me. He held the creature's heart in one hand and with the other he drove his forefinger deep in to the core of the heart and began to paint my face with the blood that spilled out all over his hand.

I instinctively pulled back from him but he hissed in an oddly serpentine manner and shook his head giving me a second to calm down. He drew three strokes upon my forehead and one straight line from the dent above my lips to the hollow at my throat. He laid the heart before me on the ground and in a language I did not understand he began to speak.

The words he spoke were full of ceremony and meaning. He took from around his neck one of the strange amulets he had been wearing. It had been carved from some porous bone and was shaped like a human skull. As he placed the amulet around my neck he whispered, "A te'ka Akiana'myshk'apavjäska."

I did not understand the words but that they were somehow important was not lost on me. I licked at the rain that dripped on my lips without thinking and in doing so tasted the blood he had laid there. He smiled when he saw that and then stood up. He offered me his hand and pulled me to my feet. The wound on my thigh was now

throbbing. I watched as he pulled back his hood and removed the bone mask, shedding the persona of Za'ar and becoming Thrawn once again. It astounded me how he could so easily make this transition.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He gave me a look that said 'explain now.'

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

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

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

I gave him a look which would have withered a tree.

"Can you walk?"

"I'll manage." I snapped.

"I can give you something for the pain."

I shook my head and he just stared at me.

"Can we go now?" I asked after a long silence. "Please?" I was hurting and I wasn't looking forward to the walk back.

He nodded and then led the way back to the ship. The direct route he took brought us there much faster than I could have hoped for. We ran into no more traps and I refrained from using any of my force powers for fear of stirring up more unwanted attention. It was a painful and difficult enough walk back with the wounds I had been dealt, I didn't feel like collecting any more. I was glad to see my ship untouched. Without changing clothes, I got us into the air but before I could set an orbital course Thrawn told me to fly over Hyllyard. As we did so, I watched as the cantina where Ormante had lived and kept all his precious trophies suddenly exploded. I looked at Thrawn.

"I thought he said he had found your sabotage."

Thrawn smiled. "He found what he was supposed to find."

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

He gave me a very feral smile.

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

He nodded. "But you should be aware that gunk, as you so eloquently put it, has a meaning that will stay with you for as long as you live."

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

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

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

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

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

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

understand. I sighed and with a shrug left to find comfort in the 'fresher. By the time I felt I was as clean as I was ever going to get I was also angry.

There was a slow gut burning fury that simmered in my gut. I had showered and changed into a cropped sleeveless top and a long wrapped skirt so that he would be able to dress the various hurts on my back easily enough and I could lift the skirt up so that he could deal with the gash on my thigh which was still seeping and bleeding. I had cleaned it as best I could and gritted my teeth in doing so because it had hurt like sand fire. I had wrapped a towel around it because I didn't want blood on my skirt. The welts on my jaw had all but vanished but where the creature had slashed me ached dully and although most of the feeling had come back and I almost wished it hadn't. As I waited for Thrawn, while he had quickly washed up and changed into clean clothes, my anger festered further.

The little common area of the ship was quiet and only the sound of the ship's engines broke through. I had pulled out the medical kit and sat at the table waiting, my leg supported by another chair. I sat in silence while Thrawn took care of my wounds. The disinfectant stung and the synthflesh he used to seal the large, ugly gash in my thigh itched. He was firm and gentle as he methodically dealt with my wounds, taking extra care of my leg because the wound was deep and long. He had given me a bacta shot directly into the cut which had not improved my temper any. That I was in pain had not escaped his notice but he said nothing about it perhaps because I had not made a sound. I had gritted my teeth and gripped the arms of the chair so tightly that my knuckles were white. I was not going to break down and cry or make a fuss in front of him so I let my anger flow about me and that helped dull the edge of the hurts. When he was done taking care of the various gashes and cuts on my body he said.

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

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

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

"Fine." I replied tersely.

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't think I will be able to forget that place so quickly." I said quietly. "In fact I am pretty sure I will wear the reminders for my entire life. The next time you need a force sensitive slave dancer to trot along with you on one of these little outings you can find someone else. I would rather spend the day sparring with Lord Vader in one of his bad moods than do this again." I could not keep the bite out of my voice.

Thrawn regarded me for a moment and spoke with a quietness which made my skin prickle. "Have a care..." He began not liking the comparison to Lord Vader and suddenly the anger, the bewildered sensation of loss and the physical pain I was feeling all crashed together and became a white noise. Without thinking about it I flung my cup, tea and all at him as hard as I could. He had anticipated this and he moved ever so slightly to one side, the cup and the tea flew past him hitting the wall behind. This did nothing to satisfy my anger at him.

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

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

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

"Information?" I spat.

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

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

"There are things beyond the borders of the known regions of space that would turn your blood to ice if you knew of their existence." He said slowly. "There are beings, creatures within the confines of known space that would make you feel the same if you were to know their true nature." He paused, weighing his words with care. "I have seen what Jedi can do with their terrible powers first hand, and I wish to be prepared should I come up against such creatures in the future. Information such as we now have may save many lives. You, my dear, with your fledgling gifts and small witchy ways have no idea of the unspeakable evil a Jedi can wreck should he or she choose to do so. So put your claws away. I would never knowingly endanger your life."

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

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

There was a moment's hesitation. "No." He conceded at length. "No, I was not."

"And if Ormante had shot me?" I asked.

Thrawn gave me a nasty smile. "That he would not have done. You are worth far more alive and kicking than dead." He said coolly. "Having been given a taste of

your... talents I can tell you that a dancer with your gifts would have fetched him much on the slave market."

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

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

The rest of my anger suddenly drained away leaving only the aftershock of fear. I felt the shakes come and could do nothing against them, even my teeth chattered. With a move that was surprising he caught me just before my legs buckled from under me led me to a chair and sat me down, made another cup of tea loaded with honey.

He handed it to me and said. "You are in shock. Drink it this time."

Then he cleaned up the mess I had made throwing my last cup of tea at him. Everything on the ship was made from unbreakable material so it had not shattered with the satisfying crash I had hoped for. He leaned against the small galley counter with arms folded over his chest. He drew a deep breath and after a moment he said.

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

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

"You are so arrogant." I said quietly.

"I am good at what I do." He replied evenly.

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

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

"Suffering in pain is not wise or necessary." He frowned.

I just glared at him. How could I explain that I could use the pain to fuel my anger and that kept me from crying which is what I really wanted to do. "You are not the boss of me and I've done my job so leave me the hell alone."

I watched his jaw muscles tighten at my words and for too long a moment we just glared at each other then he nodded. "Very well, but you must rest."

"Stop telling me what to do!" I said crossly. "In fact, stop talking to me at all."

He watched me carefully for a moment, his expression unreadable. When he didn't counter or say anything else I got up and went to sit in the Pilot's chair. I knew that I should go and lie down and that I was being ridiculously stubborn but I didn't really want to be alone and I didn't want to sleep. I was certain that sleep would bring nightmares and the thought of those nightmares scared me even more than what had happened on the planet. I cradled the cup of tea in my hands and stared out of the cockpit window. Hyperspace distorted everything and it mirrored how I felt. Thrawn busied himself with something in the common area, mid ship. It was enough that I could occasionally hear him moving about and as angry as I had been at him, I was grateful for his presence. I finished my tea and sat with my legs up against the dash of the cockpit. I suppose that after a while I dozed but my sleep was fitful and broken. I dreamt but when I woke up, twice, with a start, I could not recall anything.

At some point he had laid one of the ship's blankets over me and whispered for me to sleep. "Get some rest. I am here and you are safe." He had said.

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

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

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

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

"Buggery sandrats!" I hissed strapping myself into the seat and getting the tactical computer online, reading one ship off our starboard aft. Our shields were holding as we were fired upon again. I spun port side and manoeuvred the ship to avoid yet another volley of fire. We were taking damage and that was surprising considering how jumped up the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* was. Then I realised our shields were down. I swore and tried to raise them but the generator was malfunctioning.

The ship that was attacking us had a lot more fire power than she was supposed to. I scanned it and read only one life sign, human. The ship read as a normal YV-666 Corellian freighter but the name she was flying under made me grit my teeth. I knew that she would be able to out gun us because I had helped install those guns on her. I jammed the headset on and opened the frequency.

"*Doxy Jane, Doxy Jane* this is the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* requesting you stand down weapons fire, repeat stand down weapons fire, over." I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I shut the comm off and prepped for the ship to ship docking procedure. I grabbed a long sleeved shirt off the back of the chair and pulled it on. I did not want to give this guy any more of a show than necessary. I punched in the protocols and watched as we started the delicate ballet of in space docking. While that was going on I pulled up the schematic on the *Doxy Jane*, using some tricks Jyrki had taught me and I tapped into her computer via a back door. I was very familiar with not only this ship but her captain as well and now that familiarity would come in useful. Payback is a bitch, I thought nastily. I clicked the personal comm tool twice and got a double click back as an answer. Thrawn was listening in.

The docking procedure didn't take long and I was at the airlock to greet Raz when he and he alone stepped onboard. I wondered how long it would take him to

figure out who I was. I wasn't sure he would really remember me but I had not forgotten him.

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

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

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

I didn't remember who of them it was that grabbed me by the arms and backed me up to the nearest wall, but I remembered clearly what Raz did and the memory of it still made me shudder in horror. Three large men against one small teenage girl, it wasn't fair and even if one of them had not clamped his big sweaty hand over my mouth I had been too paralyzed with fear to scream anyway.

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

I was huddled on the ground too scared to even be hysterical. Once Jyrki had established that I was okay, just very shaken up and numb. He wrapped me in his coat and had wanted to take me home. I had started to cry then, too ashamed to go home, scared my father would think that this had somehow been my fault. So not

knowing what else to do he had taken me to his home nearby and fed me a good dose of Corellian brandy and given me clean clothes to wear. After I had calmed down and he had gotten the whole story out of me, was satisfied that Raz had not managed to fulfill his intent and that I was not hurt just very badly shaken up, he took me home. I had made him promise not to say a word to anyone about it. Jyrki had not been happy about that and had tried to tell me that none of this was my fault, that I had done nothing to encourage such an outrage. But no matter what he said, I still felt tainted. It was a few days after that little episode that we had started our training sessions but until this moment I had never put these two things together.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He took another step towards me and growled "I don't think so, you little ...." He didn't have time to even finish his sentence before I dropped him. While he was on his knees I stepped behind him and in a hold that was among the first Jyrki had ever taught me I had his arm behind his back and shoved upwards in the most painful and unnatural position it could be in without actually dislocating it. I shoved my knee deep into the middle of his back and he yelped with pain.

"You listen to me, you piece of bantha-poodoo. I am transporting a single passenger and I have nothing of value which you might want on this ship. If you do

not get off this vessel now I will lock you up and turn you over to the Imperial authorities. Are we clear on this?"

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

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

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

The momentary surprise was all I needed and I twisted Raz's wrist making him drop the blaster and slammed the toe of my boot into the back of his knee. The grunt of pain he let out was satisfying. His gun, I kicked out of the way, even if I had wanted to use it I didn't actually know how. I hated blasters and had made a point of never learning how to shoot one.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thrawn looked at me questioningly.

"We took damage that I can't fix that in space but I know a place where I can and no one will ask questions. This little trip of yours was supposed to be kept quiet right? Unless you want me to send out a distress signal as well I suggest you let me do this my way." I sat back and watched as the stars elongated and space spun. Once

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

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

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

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

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

"No." Then because he gave me that eyebrow look I told him the whole story, plus or minus a few details. He listened without interruption and when I was finished I could tell he was angry for what happened by the way his jaw clenched. "This Jyrki...?" He asked. "Was the one who...?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He laughed. It was a nice sound.

I handed him the empty glass and nodded. "I need to sleep, Captain. Will you wake me up when we reach Tatooine."

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

I looked him in the eyes for a moment and nodded. I suspected that compliments from Thrawn were very far and few between when it came to things like this. Tactics and strategy were his areas of expertise not mine. I lay down on the bunk and went out like a light and much to my surprise I did not dream.

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

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

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

I laughed. "Hi Belkin."

Thrawn quickly made a cut the comm motion.

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

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

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

"Yes or no?" He pressed.

I nodded.

"Use it" He told me.

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

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

I shook my head even though Bel could not see me. "No, can you have him ready the Pretty Toy for me?" I asked using our slang word for my father's favourite piece of equipment.

"You pick up something?"

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

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

"Better get out there fast then because I am starting to style now. *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* out." And I shut off the comm System while I concentrated on the landing.

It had been a long time since I had done a fully manual landing with a faulty thruster. It was kind of fun, actually. Thrawn said nothing as he sat and watched calmly. I wondered if anything ever unsettled him, if he ever lost his temper or freaked out. The ship came down with a gentle bump and I was grateful to be on solid ground again. I looked over at Thrawn who unbuckled himself.

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

"Aye aye, captain."

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

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

"Oh papa, don't fuss." I said. "I'm fine. It's the ship that isn't. Can you scan her first?" He nodded and pulled out the very illegal little toy he had acquired shortly before I had left to work for the Empire. I watched him for a moment then turned to

Bel and gave her big hug as well. She had been working for my father for as long as I could remember and was more like a sister of sorts to me than one of his employees. She was a crazy Rodian with a big heart and an even bigger sense of humour. She manned the comm and coordinated all the landings, among other things.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"May I?" Asked a cultured voice from the ramp.

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

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

"Captain, you know what that is?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

My father smiled. "Guess that means you'll be staying for supper then."

I looked at Thrawn. "Captain?"

"The offer is kind, Mr. Gabriel. It will be a welcome change from the fare we have had lately." He said.

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

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

Thrawn just smiled. "There wasn't much time for gourmet meal making, I am afraid."

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

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

"About three weeks ago."

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

My father shuffled his feet and played with his beard. Thrawn watched us both as though he were observing a sports event.

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

"You remember Bedi Nuale?" my father asked.

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

Thrawn merely nodded.

My father looked at the Captain and then back at me, I knew he was wondering what that had been about and would probably ask later but for now he continued.

"Well, she came back a month after you left."

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

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

Bel laughed. "He and Bedi got married last week."

"Bel!" my father hissed.

"What?" I asked in amazement.

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

"I wrote to tell you about it, honey. I was hoping you could come for the ceremony but when we didn't hear from you..." He said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"It was just a small gathering, Bel, Tigann, Marsaille, as well as some of the other pilots. I..." He started.

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

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

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

I sighed. "Oh Bel, I miss you all too."



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That earned me a raised eyebrow from Thrawn and a hard stare from Bel. After a moment she relented and mumbled something about missing me too then headed back to the office. Thrawn said nothing until we were quite alone but the twinkle in his eyes told me that this whole thing amused him greatly. He handed me the spanner and I went back to work.

"You have a good family." He said after a moment.

"I know." I said.

"Family is important, Merlyn, keep in touch with them."

I looked at him for a second. "That an order?" I gave him back the spanner.

He shook his head. "Consider it a request, on behalf of your friend Bel. She pokes even harder than you do."

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

He sighed. "Its design is Imperial."

"Not an answer to my question." I chided.

He glanced at me and then said. "I'm not certain but I think it was a black ops tracking signal beacon."

I stopped welding. "Okay what was it doing on the ship?"

"Good question. I am still working out all the facts. Things are not adding up."

"How did you know it was there?"

"Just a suspicion."

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

"Another good question."

"Someone working for the Empire?" I pressed.

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

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

"Yes, and there is part of the reason."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I can't work when you do that." I told him hiding my surprise and sudden case of nerves behind crossness and irritation.

He just smiled, looking a little like a jax that has just been offered its favourite meal. I handed him the micro welder and pointed to the little screwdriver set.

I rolled my eyes. "What about Raz, you think he just found us by accident?"

"You don't?" he asked.

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

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

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

"Just fix the ship." He said softly. "Stop worrying about the galaxy, that's my job."

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

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

I think my mother had missed the big dinner parties and her own large family gatherings from her home too much. After my mother had died Bel had taken up the torch of cooking or at least arranging something. I was a terrible cook and my father's menus were restricted to basic stews and soup which got pretty boring pretty fast. Eventually, the chore of cooking went on a rotating schedule and that meant the

meals were always, to say the very least, interesting. It depended on who was cooking and who was around. The faces at the table changed daily based on who had what shift and who was flying and who was off duty. The only constants were Bel and Tigann, who did the books, and my father.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You both worry too much." I said. "You make him happy, it's a good thing."

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

Charming? I thought, well I supposed that was one word for it. I just shook my head and grinned then began to fill her in on what life was like working on Coruscant. Bedi was a great cook and since it was sort of a special occasion my father had pulled out some of his really good wine. No one paid the slightest bit of attention to the fact that they had an Imperial Captain sitting with them of course it helped that Thrawn had changed out of his uniform into something more casual.

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

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

I liked working in the evening. It was cooler and it was quiet. I hummed to myself as I finished up. Working on the ship was so much easier when there was no one whispering distractions in my ear. As I packed everything away and tidied up it occurred to me that repairing ships made me happy. It was a simple thing, find the problem and fix it. The ship didn't try to kill you or get revenge for anything, it was just a machine. It either worked or it didn't. I patted the hull and smiled. This was a

good little ship and I would miss her when we returned to the *Vengeance*. I heard the bay door open and closed and smiled to myself. I knew whose footsteps those were.

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

"So how's my girl really doing?" He asked handing me a glass of his home made gut rot. "You honestly don't look so well."

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

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

I hugged him back. "I'm sorry I missed the wedding. I would have been here if I had known."

He smiled. "I know that, pet."

"What about you, are you happy?" I asked. "How are things here?"

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

I shrugged. "Guess, that's up to the Captain."

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

"Oh?"

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

I laughed and shook my head. "Well, I am sorry I am missing that. He is a real art expert and," I added, "he knows it. It will mostly be about who has the last word I think and my bet is Bel." I patted the ship again. "I would have stayed to referee but this ol' girl needed my care."

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

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

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

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

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

I sat there once again, my ear tuned to the shifting winds and the sands, watching the lights from the city as they twinkled in the oncoming night. Tatoo 1 and 2 had only just set so the sky was still dusted with pale light and pastel colours on the horizon. I marvelled at how different they looked from down here. I lay on my back

and stared up at the sky. The stars sparkled brilliantly against the blue of the oncoming night, ships moved about in orbit and although it could be incredibly lonely on this planet, somehow I never felt alone.

So much had happened to me in such a short period of time that I had not even really had a free moment to consider it all. Now, I had come home only to find out that life here had also moved on without me. It was a strange feeling. I closed my eyes and let my thoughts drift. It was not long before I felt that familiar sensation ripple through me. I could feel the force around me and I let it move through me. It seemed stronger here than I remembered. Maybe I was just better at sensing it than I had been. I thought of Lord Vader and wondered where he was right at this moment in time, if he had ever sat on a dune and watched the stars when he had lived on this planet. I wondered about him and his life here. I found it hard to imagine him as boy or even as a young man. What had he looked like, how had he lived? Did he miss it? I delved deeper into my own self, finding my center and tried to find his life force, hoping to somehow connect with him, but that was something far beyond my small abilities. I knew he was out there somewhere amongst the stars and the planets and while I could not sense Lord Vader, I did sense someone else. I smiled to myself when I heard the footsteps behind me but didn't get up.

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

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

I grinned, nodded and then sat up. "How was the art discussion?" I asked.

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

"Yep." I smirked. "I adore Bel, she's known me pretty much all my life, taught me Rodian and yep, she likes to have the last word."

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

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

Thrawn laughed. "She won and I escaped gracefully with the excuse that I needed to look for you."

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

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

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

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

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

Thrawn arched an eyebrow. "Really?" He asked and unlike me he wasn't joking.

"Sometimes, yes." I said more seriously.

"How is your leg doing?" He asked changing the subject abruptly.

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

"Come back to the ship, I want to make sure the wounds are healing, especially the one on your thigh, it was deep and nasty." He said standing up, offering me his hand. He helped me to my feet and for a moment we stood looking at each other. The air between us sparked. He brushed sand out of my hair and stroked my face gently.

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

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

"Why?" He asked.

I shrugged with one shoulder, "I don't know." I replied after a moment.

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

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

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

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

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

"You're better than some of the doctors I saw as a kid." I told him.

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

"Maybe later." I told him and he didn't say anything else.

The synthskin came off easier than I thought it would and the wound was healing better than I had hoped but the scar it would leave would be a beauty. Not even full immersion bacta treatment would change that now. Thrawn cleaned it carefully, gave me another bacta injection and then applied a new bandage of synthskin with a bacta strip. He wasn't taking any chances. When he was finished he patted my knee to signal he was done and put the med kit away.

I did not, could not take my eyes off him. His gentle touch on the sensitive skin of my thigh had burned despite the pain. I didn't quite understand the longing it had created and only knew that I hungered and ached for something I could not define, something that awoke in me every time he was near me, every time our eyes met and something leaped up between us.

We were alone, no one was shooting at us and I wanted to touch him, be close to him and not wait for his next move. Without considering the consequences I went to him, suddenly, and wrapped my arms about his waist from behind, resting the side of my face against the flat of his back. I felt his surprise as he tensed for a second and then he relaxed.

He turned around within the circle of my arms and with the tips of two fingers raised my chin up so I looked him in the eyes. There was a smile on his lips I didn't really understand, a moment in time where everything seemed to hold its breath and then, whatever electricity there was between us exploded.

He kissed me with utter abandon and I was swept up by the sheer force of it. He wrapped his arms gently around my body and pulled me tightly to him. His strength and passion flowed about me like a desert wind. It was intoxicating and overwhelming. All around me the Force surged and I could feel it pulling at me, building up like a giant power charge. I wanted to tap into it, to draw the energy through me into Thrawn but I couldn't control it. It was very powerful and I had not ever felt anything quite like it before. I breathed in his scent and lost myself to him, to his touch, to the sound of his voice. It was a terrible, desperate, physical ache. As suddenly as I had wanted it, so suddenly it was all just too much, too soon. I felt as though I were drowning, going under with no way out. I pushed back from him and covered my mouth with shaking hands, staring at him with more questions than there were answers for. He took my hands in his and looked at me intensely.

I shook my head. "Too much. I feel too much. I want..." Words tumbled out and I did not even know how to begin to explain what I was feeling. "I'm sorry, I didn't expect this to be so ..."

"Akiana'myshk'a," He said gently, his hands steadying mine. "I know."

"You do?" I asked feeling like a silly little girl.

He studied my face carefully. "Listen to me. There will always be time enough for this. When the moment is right for more you will know, you will not be afraid and it will not feel like drowning. Do not force it."

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

"I just know." He said in a voice that said he was not going to explain that statement further. "And..." He added with a slight smile and a raised eyebrow.

"Contrary to what many may think I am a very patient man. There are things in this galaxy that are worth waiting for," He brushed my cheek with the back of his fingers and whispered in my ear. "And you, my dear, are one of those things."

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

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

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

"Why do you call me by that name?"

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

"What does it mean?"

But he didn't answer me he just smiled.

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

"One day perhaps, when the time is right, you will learn its meaning." He said smugly, "Timing, Miss Gabriel, is everything."

And suddenly we were back to playing games again.

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

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

He chuckled.

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

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

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

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

\*\*\*

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

Thrawn too, had stayed distant and quiet for much of the return trip, as though he also had much to think about and distractions from me would be most unwelcome. He had left me mostly alone and I had been oddly happy with the breathing room.

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

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

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

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

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



I shook my head. "I can't." I sniffed.

He made a face that told me he was neither impressed nor surprised.

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

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

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

"Doc?" I grasped his arm.

He looked at me. "What is it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He nodded.

"I don't know what to say."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lord Vader mentioned that he was also somewhat surprised by your various abilities and, how did he put it... your impudent fearlessness. I merely asked if he had thought about extending your job range to more than just his personal office assistant. That you have come under the watchful eye of the Emperor has also not gone unnoticed. That he has talked to you about perhaps being a courier is known to Vader, which is partly why you were given this ship."

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

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

"And?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Long enough." He answered with a shrug.

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

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

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

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

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

He must have thought he was being funny because he was struggling to keep the laughter out of his voice but he could not keep his amusement out of his eyes.

"Maybe you should learn Cheunh to find out." He replied, arching an eyebrow in that smug way of his that made me want to smack him.

"Now, just how am I supposed to do that? Fly on over to Csilla and knock on someone's door and say, 'Hi Senior Captain Thrawn sent me over to learn your

language...how about it?' You think that would work? Or are you planning on tutoring me after a hard day's work running around saving the galaxy?"

"Giving you private lessons in my native language does have a certain charm and appeal." He gave me another smile which sent a shiver down my spine. "And the thought of you showing up on someone's door on my home planet demanding to learn Cheunh is a very amusing mental image. And I keep telling you the correct use of my rank when talking to me is still Captain."

I just gave him a really hard stare. "You could start by teaching me how to say 'you really annoy the sandjiggers out of me and I don't want to talk to you anymore'."

He just laughed.

Then something else occurred to me. "So the name Anwylydth does it actually mean something?"

"Yes, it's Sy Bisti for beautiful weapon."

I made a face at the word play. "Did you come up with that all by yourself?"

"It was a test. Nobody passed." He answered dryly.

"*Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma*, what does it mean, is it also in Sy Bisti?"

"It is Dantassi Cheunh, it means *Desert Angel's Kiss*."

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

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

"It's bad luck to rename a ship." I told him thoughtfully, wondering why Lord Vader would call a ship that. It was just more and more mysteries and questions laid one on top of the other. From the look on Thrawn's face I knew he would not answer any more of my queries. He would just talk in circles now, so with a sigh I changed the topic. "We'll be on the ground in ten minutes, Captain."

"Excellent, Miss Gabriel." He smiled.

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

The landing was text book, and without more than two words to each other we disembarked. He was met by several officers and was immediately spirited away while I was ignored and left to my own devices, which was fine with me. I went to take a look at my ship.

*My ship*, just being able to say that was a pretty sweet feeling. I gave her a good going over and then, grabbing my stuff, I headed to my home across the lake from the retreat. It was mid afternoon. The sky was clouding over and the day's warmth had turned humid and oppressive. I was tired, needed a shower and some rest. After that I made tea and sat out on the small balcony to watch the oncoming storm. It seemed impossibly unreal to be back here, as if nothing at all had ever happened. Yet things had happened and I felt it all slipping out of control. I decided I was not going into the office today because if I did and I happened to see Lord Vader I would have to fight with him about all this secret plotting behind my back. I didn't want to get into it with him just yet that would happen soon enough.

I sipped at my tea slowly and marvelled at the way lightening scored the sky and the loudness of the thunder that followed. It seemed fitting we would come home to a dirty great thunderstorm. It went with my mood perfectly. I would deal with all the office stuff tomorrow, I was quite sure there was a mountain of crap to wade through. For the time being it felt awfully good to be alone, in my own space with a

nice cup of tea and some time to sort out my thoughts. I had the feeling things in my life were only going to get more and more complicated.

## **CHAPTER 6**

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

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

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

I answered Master Kjestyll's message first and looked forward to training with him again. I hoped that he would read and answer the message swiftly and we could start as soon as possible. I felt I needed to get back to some sort of normal life. Was there such a thing when one worked for the Empire? Then I answered Lt. Jorae's letter. I was surprised to hear from him actually because he had not kept in touch after I had left the *Devastator*. I had just assumed he was happy enough not to be babysitting me anymore. However, he had written to say that they had been busy, that he had been catching up with his studies and was now working hard at his job. That, I certainly understood. I answered my father's letter even though the news was no longer new to me. I had both Bel's and Thrawn's words in the back of my mind about keeping in touch. So I wrote a long letter home, about mostly nothing, lots about the weather and scenery in Naboo and the social life and even some about my job and so on. I sent Shiv a short message telling him I was back on Naboo and lunch in Theed sounded nice. At some point I had to go to Theed anyway. The Japor snippet that Lord Vader had given me burned and I wanted rid of it as soon as I could. Then, lastly, I opened the small, long and flat unmarked box.

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

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

*Akiana'myshk'apavjäska*

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

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

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

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

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

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia*

*Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

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

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

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

\*\*\*

I wondered frequently why it was that wherever Lord Vader was concerned nothing was straight forward or simple. Most people thought it was and that everything with him was black or well...black but that was not really the case. Nothing

was ever as it seemed in the Empire, nothing but Lord Vader was not the only complicated person I had to deal with.

The Emperor loved games, political intrigue and the manipulation of all of his subjects, pawns and people close to him. He played one against the other and then sat back to see who came out on top then began it all over again. I was only just beginning to see some of these patterns. Some of it had been pointed out to me by Thrawn and was most obvious at the great functions everyone attended. Some of it I was seeing on my own from the memos and interoffice letters that flew about fast and furious. People of the Imperial court formed their own alliances and made their own political beds, everyone vying for the Emperor's favour and good grace. Nothing changed it seemed. I had seen the same things at Jabba's. There had been less politeness and the viciousness was more laid out in the open but the intrigue, back stabbing and intricate dance of climbing to the top were all the same. The only difference about what went on at Jabba's was it was all a little more honest, less veiled in secrecy and etiquette.

I knew from the whispers I heard and the insinuations that flew about the palace that almost everybody thought of Lord Vader as nothing more than the Emperor's 'Iron Fist'. His over-dressed, foul tempered henchman who swept in when all diplomacy failed and slaughtered any and all who would dare oppose the Emperor's will and partly this was true but there was more there beneath the surface, hidden behind the mask and cloak. Lord Vader was moody and pensive. He carried his anger and bitterness around with him as though it were the most precious thing in the galaxy. He hungered for something that was more than power, more than the sum of his hatred and rage. I sometimes got the feeling that it was not only the galaxy in general that he hated so much but also himself. I guessed it was easier to turn that feeling outward and direct it at everyone and everything that it was to look inward and deal with it. I often wondered what it was that had made him feel this way. It was as if he held some deep and dark secret about himself close to his chest and it ate at him body and soul. I knew that most people never felt or saw or read anything other than fury from him, too afraid to see or sense anything else. This was how the Emperor liked it. Rule through Fear. Most people were not force sensitive and never picked up on the more subtle emotions that were present. Most people stayed as far away from Vader as they possibly could. I had neither luxury.

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

"You took your time." Lord Vader growled.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You are angry." He said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I feel like I am being manipulated without a say in what or how this all happens. All this secrecy and sneaking around, I have never experienced anything

like it before. I mean, I've seen it happen but not to me. It is driving me crazy. Everyone is playing games and I feel like a tiny bug caught up in the middle of sandstorm." I told him.

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

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

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

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

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

He turned his head back to the window. "I was betrayed by someone I admired and even loved." There was a moment when utter and raw sadness washed through the room and as quickly as I had felt it so it vanished to be replaced by a bitter anger. "It was a long time ago and I have moved on to greater things. I do not wish to discuss the past. It is your future we are talking about." He turned away from the window and came to stand in front of me. He towered above me and it was as intimidating as all hell. "Tell me, what do you want?"

"To do the best job I can, whatever that job is." I said, folding my arms across my chest, mirroring his stance.

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

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

"You know who this is?"

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

"You are full of surprises, girl."

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

He did not disagree. "What did you mean by 'messed it up'?" He asked.

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

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

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

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

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

There was a moment's silence. "What do you know about that?"

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

Vader had gone very still. "The name of this 'farmer's kid'?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"See that you go. Theed is ...a beautiful city. It has an impressive library" He said almost quietly.

"Yes, my lord."

Then the mood shifted once again and he was all business like and cold.

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

"Yes, my lord." I said as I took the data pad from his hand and watched as he turned away from me again. I stared at his back for longer than I should have and then left. I had no idea what to think of his moods and these strange conversations. I walked in silence, making my way back to the landing bay.

The flight back to Naboo was a lot less stressful. By the time I got back to the office Master Kjestyll had replied that lessons would start immediately. He had set up a time and a place. All I had to do was show up. This meant I had a few hours to finish up, get some food and try to unwind a bit. The first two things would be easy to do, but unwinding after being in the presence of Lord Vader was a damn near impossible task.

I woke up early and took my ship to Theed because the retreat was so far away and finding the nearest shuttle-port was a big pain. I landed in the main star-port, paid the landing fees and walked out into the large square. It was one of the older cities on Naboo and was the capitol. While its roots were in agriculture, slowly over time it became the aristocratic center of the planet. It was also where the current queen lived. It was easy for me to get lost in details and Theed was full of amazing details.

I had never been to such a beautiful and ornate city. The buildings are almost all made from a warm, honey coloured stone, decorated with ornate carvings. The roofs reminded me a little of Tatooine in that they were domes and rounded but instead of being made from sand they were made from a metal that had turned a pale emerald green colour with the weather. Beyond the edge of the city were green fields and pastures. All around there were trees and cultivated plants and gardens and through it all ran the Solleu River.

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

I had packed a small satchel with things I thought I might need. I had strung a thin leather string through the Japor snippet, wore it as a necklace and had it tucked under my clothes. It seemed like the safest place to keep it. I was pretty certain that almost no one on this planet would remotely get the significance of the snippet but I had also been sworn to secrecy so I wasn't taking any chances. I made my way through the streets, browsing the shops and watching the people. There was an elegance here that was both calming and a little disarming all at the same time. People dressed up to go out and I must admit I felt a bit underdressed and back waterish but no one seemed to pay much attention to me. Just one more tourist in the capitol city here today off to the next sightseeing place tomorrow.

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

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

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

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

it there are some well written books in the gift shop I can write the titles down for you if you like."

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

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

"Does the statue mark her grave?"

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

I nodded.

The librarian smiled. "She has inspired so many young women like you. It is so nice to be able to help you to somehow get closer to her."

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

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

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

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

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

I made the excuse of having not eaten all day which was the truth and asked if she knew of any good places to go for food. With a bag full of books and information and a head full of recommendations of where to eat, I left the Palace and made my way back across the bridge to towards the star port. I did not really feel like going out

and sitting alone in a restaurant and I wanted to continue reading. I could cook and eat onboard my ship. That was the amazing thing about having my own ship, it was freedom to come and go.

By the time I reached the starport it was dark and very wet. Lightening seared the sky and the thunder rumbled loudly. I was grateful the bag all my purchases were in was water proof because I was soaked to the skin. I talked to the dock-master and paid the fees for staying the night and another day. I was not sure about my plans, I had wanted to lay the Japor snippet the statue as Lord Vader had asked but somehow that seemed wrong. By the time I had dried off, changed clothes and made myself some supper I had decided that in the morning I would go out to the Lake District and visit her burial site. I could shuttle into the nearest town and transportation from there was, according to the librarian, fairly easy. There were enough people who wished to pay their respects to Amidala that a way to get there had been made available.

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

\*\*\*

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

I sat quietly, feeling a little uneasy on the water in the little boat which was operated by a man who had said no more than two words to me. He wasn't unfriendly, he was just quiet. This was a new experience for me and I was not altogether sure how I liked being surrounded by all this water, deep and dark. I found it unnerving and I was never more thankful that Thrawn had taught me learn how to swim than at that moment. As unnerving as it was it was so beautiful. All around the lakes the hills and mountains rose majestically, covered in lush green vegetation. Everything here seemed alive and shimmering. Down by the water's edge, long branched sleepy trees, covered in pretty pale pink flowers decorated the shore line, the scent of the blooms wafted across the water, sweet, like honey. Birds with long wing spans flew high above the lake on thermals in large lazy circles. I was awed by their grace. Despite all the wonders to be seen, I was glad when we reached our destination. In the desert I was at home and comfortable, there I knew how to survive but out in the middle of a large lake, in a small unstable boat, surrounded by lush green hills, well that was another thing. The small wharf was half hidden in the little inlet and stone wall. We docked and the silent man helped me out.

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

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

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

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

I hitched my satchel across my shoulder and began my way up the stone stairs. I was glad it was a nice day, not too hot, not too cold. The sun played hide and seek with big fluffy clouds and the breeze was just enough to keep the flies away. I looked up at the sky, didn't look like a storm was coming in but I had seen how fast the weather could change here. I believed the boat man when he said it would get nasty. It was exactly as he had said, across the terrace and through the wrought iron gateway into a small, beautifully tended garden. Right in the middle of this was a simple carved stone grave marker surrounded by a circle full of smooth greenish pebbles which I guessed had come from the lakeshore. The grass was manicured and lush. The flower beds that were set against the walls were filled with all manner of colourful flowers and plants. Someone spent a lot of time here tending to this place. It had a peaceful, serene feel to it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sola smiled. "Padmé wore one something like that around her neck only hers was a little larger and it had different markings on it. A little boy from Tatooine gave it to her when she was quite young, while she was still queen." She smiled at the memory. "He was a slave. I remember Padmé was outraged when she told me about it. She could not believe that slavery still existed. Anyway, this boy helped her and the people who were protecting her. One of the Jedi knights with her managed to free him from his master."

"What happened to him, the little boy?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sola smiled and nodded. "Pretty name. It suits you."

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

"No one knows." She answered. "We were told she had been killed on Coruscant. No one knew how or who was responsible but it was a terrible time, chaos everywhere. The Jedi were being exterminated and it was war. My family investigated



the death when things were more stable but there was nothing. She was pregnant when she was killed, did you know that?"

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm sorry I didn't realise how late it was." I said.

"T'is alright Miss, it happens." He said.

Sola nodded. "We've known Jacob a long time, he is used to it."

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

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

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

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

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

Now that I had my own ship and was mobile Lord Vader no longer saw any reason why I should not come to him rather than meet at the retreat. Being at his beck and call was part and parcel of this job but flying all over the galaxy to do this job was not what I had imagined when I had signed my contract. I wondered more than once why he simply did not request I be stationed on board the ship with him and be done with it, but one of the pilots I had been speaking to told me that while Lord Vader spent a great deal of his time aboard the *Devastator* it was not the only ship he travelled with. I suppose it made as much sense to me as anything else around here did. I didn't really mind the travelling, I liked flying and any chance to practice and get to know my ship better was a very good thing. It was just a little frustrating when it interfered with my training schedule.

I hated having to send messages to Master Kjestyll that I would not be meeting with him as usual due to my own hectic work time table. In the end he sorted this out for me and arranged that we met when we could and in between I had a list of lessons to work on. Some people might have thought that this was dull but space could be dull without things to do. Even things that seem mindless, like repetitive exercises, could suddenly become fascinating. The long gaps in between hyperspace jumps needed something to fill them and there were only so many books I had with me to read. The ship's empty cargo hold had become on more than one occasion turned into an impromptu training area for me. While there was not enough space to practice large polearm work I could certainly go through the motions and movements I knew. The style of martial art that Master Kjestyll was teaching required no weapon. In some ways it was good for me to not be able to fall back on the easier style I had been used to. I felt almost naked without a polearm or stick in my hands, less strong somehow, but Master Kjestyll had said that the style of combat I was now learning required nothing more than force of will, concentration and a body in good physical shape.

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

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

"Something lies heavy upon your heart. Something in your spirit has shifted." It was the first thing he said to me as we met for my first lesson upon returning to Naboo.

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

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

I did as I was bid.

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

"Man or beast?" He asked.

"It was a creature. It attacked me, I defended myself." I said. I did not tell him that chances were good I would have killed a man as well if that moment had come. It never even occurred to me that he might be talking about the fact that I had died and

been brought back to life. Of course, that was something I had pushed to the very back of my mind and did not even want to think about let alone talk about.

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

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

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

I shook my head. "No."

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

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

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

"I do not need to hear or know the details. These things are sacred and secret. Each tribe has their way but he probably marked you, most likely with the blood of the kill and gave you a name to mark the rite of passage if his ways follow that of a Hunting society. While the methods of marking and the naming differ from tribe to tribe, species to species these things follow a similar path. I do not need to know what or how because I see the results in your eyes. You have taken the first steps away from childhood and I shall treat you accordingly. I merely needed to confirm this was so."

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

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

"Child, you possess a powerful ability. Gifts that come from the Force are a double edged blade, while they can be used as tools and weapons for your own use they can and will be turned against you if you allow it. What I teach you allows you a way to pass through this power without the dangers of it ever owning your soul. This teaching was built around being able to take the energy from the Force and those who wield it and deflecting it back against them without letting it destroy you. What others teach you...?" He shrugged. "You must use your own inner guide for that. Now, return to meditation pose and let us see if we can release some of these demons that create the tension which blocks your shi-lu." He tapped my solar plexus. "That place where energy comes from, your center of being."

In the lessons that had followed I was able to center much faster than ever before and with each session my ability to find that place where the energy I needed to fight came from became easier and easier. It was like tapping into a brilliant ball of light. Perhaps knowing that what I was learning not only could but someday would save my life made it all the more important for me to learn it properly.

Many of my lessons were held in almost complete silence. I watched and emulated what Master Kjestyll did. When I did the movement wrong he corrected me and we repeated it until I perfected it. This style or martial art was all grace and fluid beauty. Each movement aligned the next with an energy that was invisible but all around me yet did not tap directly into the Force and use it. I could feel the Force dance around me and I knew it was there but this form of fighting seemed to move around it rather than use it or fight against it.

We would start off with the motions and movements being slow and deliberate but as I became more proficient in each movement so we sped up the move. It was a style of dance that was as stunningly beautiful as it was viciously deadly. There were moments when in order to demonstrate how a move should look Master Kjestyll would show me by completing the motion himself. I did not think it possible for anyone to move with such certainty and speed. He would become a blur. I would quietly despair of ever being so good but never said anything about my fears to him. It served no purpose to tell him something I was almost certain he already knew.

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

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

I nodded.

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

"Could I kill if I had to?"

He nodded. "Yes. And now you know the answer. That answer is yes. You have faced this demon and overcome it. You will not hesitate should you come face to face with this challenge again."

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

"Killing is killing. Life is to be valued no matter what it is." Master Kjestyll said. "To take a life away from any creature or being is a spirit altering experience. It is not something ever to be done lightly although there are many in this galaxy who do not think this way. Do not be fooled, child, they pay a heavy price for the debts they incur. I do not worry about you ending up like this. Despite what you think and may feel, despite your own doubts and worries in your soul, your Shi-lu, you honour life above death. The challenge is to hold onto this honour and see it as important above all else, even when anger and fear tell you otherwise." He must have read something on my face. "I know that is not the way of Lord Vader or his Master. I know that Lord Vader will instruct you to find your strength and your power through the energy that anger and hatred will give you but it is not your path, child. Even now

you fight against his ways, conflicted with your desire to please him but eventually he will see what I already know and find a teaching method more in accordance to your needs or he will destroy you in the process." He lifted my downcast face upward to look him in the eyes.

"You and only you know what is in your heart. You and only you dictate the path you walk. Others may guide and advise but only you may walk it and you do so alone. I do not know how strong your particular touch with the Force is nor in what direction your particular gifts lie but I do know this, you are not weak minded nor are you easily led astray from your own beliefs or morals. I know and trust that you will take all knowledge that is given to you, that you will learn from all those who would teach you and use the best of it to the best of your abilities without losing your way."

He paused for a moment to correct my posture on one of the cool down stretches. "You have a difficult road to walk because you have chosen that strange and elusive middle path, neither one thing nor the other. Whatever your destiny is, all I can do is provide you with good tools to help you along the way."

I listened to these words with a sense of wonder. I knew at that moment that I adored him the way a child will look up to and even love a favourite teacher or mentor. I looked at him and nodded. I could not help but wonder how this man came to be in the employ of the Emperor with views on life such as he had. I had felt the darker side of the Force and knew that this was not it. Master Kjestyll was one of the Emperor's most valued martial arts trainers. It was a great honour to be considered one of his students. I knew this from the whispers I had heard. I knew he was held in high esteem because even when Lord Vader spoke his name there was a level of respect in the dark Lord's voice that was not apparent when he spoke of others. I had wanted to ask on more than one occasion, why master Kjestyll worked for the Empire but somehow it seemed far too personal a question and I did not dare. It was just another little mystery in a long line of things that didn't make sense to me because I did not know the whole story.

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

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

\*\*\*

I met up with Lord Vader in the Mid Rim near the planet of Ando. He was on his way to talk to a Bothan informant who lived somewhere in the area on an asteroid at a place called Void Station. It did not sound appealing to me and I was not happy at being pulled away from Naboo. In a short time we would all be back on Coruscant

and I did not want to think about it because I liked Naboo too much. I did not want to leave its softness and its lush green beauty. The thought of heading back to the Imperial City and all its noise, glittering durasteel buildings and bright lights made me sad.

I had not actually seen Lord Vader face to mask, so to speak, since visiting Padmé's grave but it was a meeting I had been dreading so I wasn't sad to have it wait. I had arrived on board the ISD and was shown to my quarters by an officer I didn't know and whose name I did not learn. I waited for two days while Lord Vader made this short visit to Void Station and it was a good opportunity to catch up on things. As usual Lord Vader had not been very specific about any deadlines but I had grown used to this. When I received word that he had returned and wished to see me it was almost a relief. Waiting drove me crazy and I wasn't particularly good at it.

I had some time to refresh myself. I changed clothes because the ship was, as always, too cold for my tastes. Since I had no uniform, I wore a long skirt and long sleeved top, over which I wore a sleeveless long coat which kept me warm. I waited for Lord Vader in one of the conference rooms. I was too edgy to sit so I stood in front of the view port and stared out into the inky space. A stone from Padmé's grave site sat in my pocket. I resisted the urge to play with it by clasping my hands behind my back. We were far enough away from Ando that all I could see of it was a small bluish ball surrounded by its sun. I knew from studying the maps and star charts of the region that Tatooine was not too far away but you needed to be on the other side of the ship to be able to see it if it was actually visible from here at all. I liked knowing where I was.

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

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

I looked up at him. I could not imagine a planet mostly covered in so much water. We had both come from a planet where water was so scarce people would kill just for a cup of it. I said nothing, there did not seem to be much to say. The correspondence and important matters had already been delivered to him. I went back to staring out of the window until Lord Vader broke the silence.

"You went to Theed?" He asked after a very long while.

I nodded. "Yes."

"You did as I asked?" He continued to stare out of the window.

I went to answer but hesitated just enough that he turned to look at me.

"Yes and no." I said, feeling the heat of his gaze.

"Explain."

"The place where you wished me to lay the Chullpah was too crowded and there was no place to bury it as tradition dictates." I said. Thinking about the very public place where the statue was situated. He remained silent but watched me intently. I continued. "So I went to her grave and I buried your token there. It lies under the stones, to the east as tradition dictates. I spoke the words of passage. Her spirit should know your message." I said.

The air rippled and I shuddered.

"Where is this place?" He asked after a long pause.

So I told him, describing the journey I had taken to reach the site of Amidala's grave. When I was done I reached into my pocket and pulled out the stone I had with me. The other one sat on my bedside table in the house on Theed.

"I brought you this." I said.

I went to hand it to him but instead of letting me drop it in his open palm he took my hand, with the stone in his. He wrapped his large gloved hand about mine so that my own fingers curled around the stone and gripped it tightly. His hold was strong, almost painful but I resisted struggling because I knew that was futile.

"Show me." He demanded.

"My lord, I don't...I can't..." I protested. I knew what it was he wanted but I needed to be relaxed and calm to even consider doing what he was asking. I tried to pull away from him but he did not let go of my hand, instead he increased the pressure and repeated the demand.

I took a very deep breath and pulled into play all the relaxation techniques that Master Kjestyll had been teaching me. Lord Vader did not interrupt or speak but I was more than aware of his hold which trapped my small hand in his. I struggled to push this to the back of my mind and I let go of my nervousness and my fear. I thought only about that day, that trip. When I was relaxed enough the images came and flowed about me. I felt him connect with my mind rather than intrude.

I showed him everything I could, the lake, the garden, the sunlight up on the grave stone, Sola and her smile, me burying the Chullpah, the longing and the sadness and the desire to stay in this small sacred place. The images were chaotic and my thoughts disorganised. I could not edit or sift through them, I did not have that skill so he felt everything I had felt, saw all I had seen, knew all that I knew and when I was done I pulled away from his grasp as fast as I could. I did not want this contact, it burned. He did not try to stop me. This sharing of images mind to mind was intimate and personal, it opened me up to feel everything from anyone around me and I didn't know how to cope with it or the mess that accompanied it.

I held the stone out to him with a trembling hand. The air was thick with tension. I thought he was going to slap my hand away or worse, hit me but instead he turned his back to me without doing anything. I sensed rather than knew that he was in conflict and what I had shared with him had only made this worse. I did not understand why he had given me this task or why he had wanted to share it in such an intimate and chaotic manner especially when it only served to make him angrier than he usually was.

"Leave me." He said his voice was rough. The room filled with emotions I did not understand. He was overwhelmed by the most terrible grief and loss, fighting back the desire to be violent. Raw, unchecked and open to it all I experienced these things as though they were a physical reality. All my defences were down, so everything he felt poured into me and it made me unsteady on my feet. I did not, could not move. He spun around to face me, towering over me. The sadness I had felt, swiftly being channelled into anger. I understood that trick. Anger was easier to cope with than grief. I did not understand his grief at all but because I had opened my mind to him I had left myself vulnerable to his emotions. Everything that whirled through the room I felt and it was far too much to deal with. I did not have the tools or the talent to cope. I felt gutted and raw.

"I shall not tell you again, girl. Leave, now!" His voice was a low snarl, his anger building up like an oncoming storm when it exploded it would be deadly.

I wanted to say something anything that would break this terrible aching sadness that had wrapped itself around me, inside of me but my survival instinct told me that leaving would be the best and the smartest thing I could do. I backed away from him without turning around and never taking my eyes from his face-mask. I

placed the stone on the desk and left the room without a word. I felt as though my heart was breaking but I did not know why.

Blindly, I made my way back the quarters I had been assigned and once the door behind me had closed I slid gracelessly to the floor, buried my face in my hands and wept uncontrollably. I had no idea why I was crying or for whom. I ached from a bitter, bitter pain, deep in my gut and it made me want to die.

The last time I had felt this way was when my mother had been killed. Then the grief had, at first, left me empty and angry and only after a long time had passed, did the sadness come and only then had I wept. It was bewildering to go through these emotions again especially since this time they were not even mine. It was as though I was grieving for him because he could not. All that sorrow had to go somewhere and I had sucked all in. It was a terrible experience. If he lived with that day in day out no wonder he was in such an awful mood all the time. He never let go of his pain. It fuelled him, it made him strong but it also tore him apart.

\*\*\*

As a rule I was not a melancholy person but I lacked the ability to deal with the emotions that had been dumped upon me by Lord Vader. When there were no more tears left to cry and that dull ache of despair had settled its self firmly in my gut, I curled up in a chair and stared mindlessly into space for hours. I don't know how long I sat there and I didn't care. I withdrew from everything and became, for lack of a better word, catatonic. I ignored all attempts anyone had made to get in touch with me, including answering the door or my personal comm. I just sat. So when the door to my quarters was finally opened from the outside, the lock overridden by a higher command, I probably should have been worried but I wasn't. I was just numb.

Backlit by the bright hallway, Lord Vader stood in the door way and stared. I glanced up at him briefly from where I sat and then went back to gazing out of the window. I could sense he was angry with me, perhaps angry enough to finally get rid of me. I welcomed the release from this horrible emptiness that the probable death at his hands would bring. For a moment time stood still, the officers in the corridor behind him all held their breath. The only sounds were the distant hum of the ship and the mechanics of Lord Vader's breathing.

"Leave!" He commanded and even in my own sorry state I sensed the relief that surged from these men as they hurried away, back to their respective duties and places as far from Vader as they could manage. He walked into the dark room, the door hissing shut behind him and came to stand in front of the window, deliberately blocking my view. I sat there wondering why he just didn't get my execution over with and be done with it. Instead he simply stood there, still and statue like, hands clasped behind his back, the rhythmic breathing filling the room.

Eventually he spoke. "I have been amiss in your training." He said. "I underestimated your ability to absorb emotions from others. This type of empathy is such a rare and unusual Force talent that it is easily overlooked. You seem unusually gifted in this area. I should have seen it sooner, as it ties in directly with your ability to sense deception. "

I stared at his back and said nothing.

"Without the proper tools this ability to empathise and feel the emotions of others will tear you apart. You absorb all that is around you and take it as your own until you no longer know who you are. What you feel now does not belong to you yet it consumes you as though it did. It is of little wonder you resist my teachings and are so difficult to train. Your own talents make you nearly useless as a dark side adept. Still, the Emperor has impressed up on me his wishes that you be taught to control and apply your various talents." He paused a moment to let his next statement sink in. "He does not feel my instructing you is a waste of my time. He feels you will be of



some small value to the Empire, that your unique talent combination makes you useful in areas where brute force does not work."

I wasn't certain I liked the sound of that and the not so subtle barb about me wasting Vader's time had stung, as it was meant to. I sensed disappointment in him that I was turning less and less into the ideal student he had originally foreseen. Yet for all that, whether he or I liked it or not, the bond that had been forged between us was there, stronger than ever. I remained silent.

I had always been very sensitive to what others were feeling and thinking. For as long as I could recall I could walk into a room and tell who was happy and who was not. I saw emotions the way most people saw colour. I picked up stray thoughts and images from those around me with the same casualness people picked up something they had dropped on the floor. Sometimes, I was even able to get feelings, pictures from objects that I touched. To a certain extent I had learned to block these sensations but it was impossible when the emotions were as overwhelming and as powerful as those Lord Vader had showered me with. I was aware that this gift enabled me to manipulate others but usually I tried to avoid that and I shuddered when I thought about what I had done to Ormante's men, what I had done to Za'ar.

Lord Vader's voice broke into my thoughts. "You are useless in this current state so we will begin by teaching you some rudimentary methods of shielding yourself." He said and before I had time to even consider answering he had turned, grabbed me by the upper arm and hauled me out of the chair to stand. He dragged me out into the corridor, the light was so bright it made me squint, and marched down the corridors to one of his training rooms. I had to run to keep up with him and not have my arm torn out of its socket in the process. The pitying glances of the men that we passed did little to make me feel better. The room was smaller than most and dimly lit. I would have thought that this served the purpose of a meditation chamber but the absence of Lord Vader's hyperbaric chamber told me this was not the case.

"Sit." He barked once the door was closed and I was standing almost in the middle of the room. Without thinking I dropped into meditation pose but before I could even get comfortable he had hauled me to my feet once again.

"No," He amended, "desert style." and proceeded to sit in just that way across from me. His annoyance and impatience filled the room, curling itself around me the way his cloak wrapped about him. I sat down again, this time with my legs crossed and my arms resting in my lap.

"Now, use what you have been taught and find your center." He instructed and to my surprise he began to do the same. I felt the shift as he began to focus his thoughts and his emotions. I sighed and worked to slow my breathing down. To listen to my own heart beat and find that place within where all energies became one. We sat in stillness.

Only when he had centered himself, focussing his powers, his anger to a single point and when he was certain that I had found a place where I could at least begin to listen and accept whatever training he was about to give did he break the silence. He told me to describe what I had felt when I had picked up the emotions and the images from him that morning.

"It was like the worst ever sandstorm imaginable and I stand in it without shelter, without any place to hide or go. It is as if the sand and the wind replace all that is inside of me with emptiness. It is a place without love or light. Your pain, your sorrow is so vast and so empty... there is no hope." I choked on the words, the ache of the pain flooding back to me in an unexpected rush.

"You leave yourself open and vulnerable. Even now I can see you struggle. You must learn to see without absorbing everything you feel into yourself. You do not have enough Force strength to do that and stay sane." He said. "What Master Kjestyll

teaches you is how to protect yourself from physical attack, use the same technique to block the stream of emotion."

I looked up at him. "How in the name of Sarlacc do I do that? The two things are as different as night and day?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, they are not different. You just perceive them as such. It is all energy. Does master Kjestyll not teach you how to deflect physical energy by absorbing it into your body and then to redirect it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then use that." He said and without warning I found myself suddenly engulfed in a blistering anger. I sucked in my breath and fought the wave of nausea that accompanied it.

"Block it." Lord Vader said in a low growl.

It hurt, this anger. It was a sickening, mental assault that twisted me from the inside out. I wanted to lash back at him but I did not have the strength. I took a deep shuddering breath and remembered the words from Master Kjestyll. 'Do not try to find the stillness, become the stillness.' It was something for me to cling to. I concentrated on the memory of his voice, I remembered the day he had tried to teach me this and how it had felt when I had found that quiet place where all my energy gathered.

It was a small thing and tenuous at best but it was a start. This anger that Lord Vader lashed out at me was as vicious as a sandstorm but even storms must blow themselves out and winds must eventually die down. So I pictured the great Dune Sea in my mind and imagined the anger as the wind flowing all over this wide vast and empty place. I held the image of the clear night sky in my mind and allowed the energy to flow upwards towards the stars and beyond, the way the heat from the day will vanish in the night. To my surprise it had worked. The anger that had filled me to the point of almost consuming me had gone leaving only quietness in its wake, but it had taken a lot of effort and I was trembling from it.

"Again." He instructed.

And so we continued over and over again. Each time it became a little easier to deal with and deflect the onslaught of emotions which he assaulted me with.

"I see a small improvement. Now, once more." He said and again I was assaulted with an emotion, but this time instead of the anger he had been using it was that same bitter sorrow I had felt earlier and along with it came images, perhaps unintentional, of a young woman, beautiful and vivacious, the same woman whose grave I had visited. I heard her laughter in my mind and felt her touch upon my skin as if it were my own memory and not Lord Vader's. There was passionate desire and so much all consuming love I thought I would drown in it. The worst of it was all through these carefully preserved memories lay the anguish of loss. I was suddenly, completely immersed in it all. Drowning and not even Thrawn's lessons on how to swim could save me from this.

"If you cannot learn to control this, you will die, girl." He hissed.

How could I fight against the almost overwhelming strength of these memories and this terrible pain? I doubled over and fought the scream I wanted to let lose. How could I combat such grief especially since it was also mine? I too, had suffered the loss of someone I dearly loved. This anguish was also in me. I fought to clear my head and find a way to go beyond the suffering.

I turned my thoughts away from what he was showing me and grasped at a memory that was mine and only mine, my mother. At first I pictured my mother's smile and that was a place to start. Slowly, I found space to think. I envisioned her arms holding me tightly and the sweetness of her comfort. Once I was in a place where I felt safe, I let the visions and emotions Lord Vader was forcing on me come. I thought about this dead woman's sister and the grave site, both of which had been at

peace. I let his sorrow wash through me and pour into the water of the lake in my own memory. I let the images of her smile and the sound of her laughter linger so that soon it was all I heard. Then I opened myself up fully as I was able to, allowed the energy that was my center to shine and let the connection I had with Lord Vader act as a conduit.

This bond worked two ways. I touched that space we shared, that tenuous thread and I sent these images and these memories back to him. I pushed my own impressions of that place surrounded by the beauty of the lake and the peace of the small garden where this woman had been laid to rest to cascade upon him. I felt his surprise and all that had lain open between us suddenly closed with a swift and violent block. The shock of it made me gasp and open my eyes. The first thing I realised was that I no longer wanted to die, or felt as though I had been wrapped in some terrible never ending fog of grief. I felt normal again.

He was silent for a moment. "You learn fast for one so young, for one so unschooled. Perhaps the Emperor was right. There is more to you than meets the eye." He said as he got to his feet. "We will practice more at a later time, this was enough for now." He said abruptly, but without anger.

I stood up slowly, shakily and looked at the chrono on the wall, what had felt like only a few moments had been many hours and it was very late. I also noticed for the first time that Lord Vader's chest plate looked as though someone had shot at it.

"My lord, you are...hurt...damaged?" I asked barely resisting the urge to touch the melted, scorched armour.

"It is nothing." He said brushing my words away with a gesture. "People will never learn that their puny skills are no match for the Dark Side, yet still they insist on attempting to assassinate me."

"Then your trip to Void City was unproductive?" I asked as we walked to the door of the room.

"Your ability to state the obvious never ceases to amaze me." He replied tersely. I took that as Vader Speak for 'yes'. He continued. "You will return to Naboo in the morning I have no further use for you here and work to do that requires no distractions." He stopped, turned and looked at me. "Practice what I taught you here today. You are useless to me otherwise. There will be times when it is necessary for me to communicate with you via the Force telepathy. I do not wish a repeat of your inability to cope with the side effects." He told me, pointing his finger at me.

It was not the first time he had called me a distraction or useless, I was certain it would not be the last. I nodded but before he could open the door and walk away I blurted out the question that had been burning a hole in my mind right from the moment he had handed me that Japor snippet.

"Who was she?" I asked.

He whirled around and for what seemed an age he did nothing but stare at me. Then, much to my shock, he said, "She was my wife." And before I could say another word he swept out of the room and left.

I have become a keeper of secrets. First Thrawn's little trip to Myrkr and all that we found there, now this little gem of Lord Vader's. I had not planned on this, but then again I had not really planned on working for the Empire either. Even at a young age, I knew I was different. I could see things happen before they actually took place, I sense things and knew things about people, no one else knew. I could touch objects and sometimes know who had owned them last and the stories that went along with them. This gift was not a good one though and it would tear me up if I could not learn how to control it better. Lord Vader had been right about that. I wondered if he was ever wrong.

People do not like precocious children who know too much and while at first, my strange talents and gifts were considered cute after a while they began to make

people nervous. At a very young age I was aware I was not quite normal. So, I learned to hide what I picked up from others, their stray thoughts and feelings. I learned not to gasp when I touched things, especially old and well used things. *'Keep it dark, keep it hidden.'* My father had often whispered to me. It was a hard lesson to learn and the emotions and the visions and the knowledge I picked up from those around me sometimes seemed to take over who I was. I learned to avoid physical contact and I learned to shut the sensations out. This little gift of mine was not something to be proud of and use, it was something to fear and shut away. Secrets, I had learned, are terrible heart wrenching things. While knowing other people's secrets was a burden, keeping them to myself was just a big pain in the ass.

In the days that passed after returning to Naboo, I tried to spend as much of my free time as possible studying and practising all I could. Master Kjestyll never questioned my sudden dedication or quiet determination but he sensed the need in me and the lessons became more intense. I kept up with the office work and managed Lord Vader's calendar with as much efficiency as possible. His communications were kept to the absolute minimum, as though the very act of speaking with me was painful. I must admit, I was not unhappy to be away from him. His presence was overwhelming. I had so many questions I wanted to ask him yet dared not. I did not want to rouse his wrath and I did not want to have to test my small abilities to block him out again either.

He was busy hunting the rebels who had brought an end to the Death Star. It was his primary focus in and around everything else he was doing. I suppose, due to my unique position in his life, I knew more than most about his comings and goings but even I was a little surprised at the whispered gossip which said he was becoming obsessed with finding a certain rebel pilot, the one who had actually been responsible for the Death Star's destruction. I wondered what it was about this particular pilot that was so important, but I dared not ask or even bring up the subject with him during our infrequent holo transmissions. Mostly I tried to stay out of his way and enjoy the rest of my time on Naboo because I knew it would end soon enough. In the middle of a fairly gruelling combat lesson I was suddenly summoned to the Emperor's private audience chamber. The messenger waited calmly, not even my surprise and hesitation seemed to concern him.

Master Kjestyll sensed my worry. "Child, undoubtedly the Emperor knows where you are at this moment and exactly what you have been doing. How you are dressed does not concern him. If he has summoned you now then he wishes to see you now. We will continue another time, as always." And with that he bowed, our customary end to a lesson.

Silently, I followed the messenger down quiet hallways. The Emperor's apartments and audience chambers were all in the upper part of the retreat compound specially built and accessible only by heavily guarded elevators. As with the Imperial Palace on Coruscant, I was almost certain that behind these official ways in and out lay a dozen or more secret passages. The elevator door slid open with an almost imperceptible hum and I followed the messenger into the small, dimly lit audience chamber horribly aware that I was soaked in sweat and probably smelled. He announced my name and then with a smart, sharp bow left me alone in the room. On either side of the elevator door stood two Royal Guards. Directly opposite the elevator door, upon a dais, sat the Emperor on a chair that had been specially designed for him.

My heart pounded at the sight of him. The aura of power that flowed about this room was palpable. I walked a little closer and then as protocol dictated, genuflected with my head bowed. I allowed my senses to reach out and feel the room. This was one of his lesser audience chambers, small and more intimate. I felt the presence of his Royal Guards and knew that aside from the two by the elevator, there were four

more in the room standing in the shadows. I also sensed another presence, a person I did not know hidden by the darkness.

"You my rise and come forward." The Emperor's voice broke the eerie silence and I did as he bid stopping a respectable distance before the dais began. I stood with my head down and my hands clasped in front of me, dancer style.

"How delightful to see you again, my dear." He said and I looked up at him and smiled. "I am sorry to have taken you away from your lessons but this could not wait and time is of the essence today." He paused and I waited silently. He had not asked me a direct question nor given me leave to speak. He nodded to himself and leaned forward in his chair. "Come closer, child, so that I might get a better look at you."

I did as he asked and stopped at the point where the raised platform began.

"How do you enjoy your lessons?" He asked.

I was not sure which lesson or which teacher he was referring to so I answered as best I could given the vagueness of the question. "I am learning much, Your Excellency, thank you."

"Good, good." He grinned. "I have heard excellent reports of your work from both your mentor and your master. I also hear that you are a competent pilot and that your skills as a dancer have indeed found a use." He said, pausing to let his words sink in. I wondered exactly what Captain Thrawn had told him and who exactly my mentor was and who was the master. I concentrated on breathing in and out. The Emperor scared the sand jiggers out of me especially in this formal place.

After what seemed an eternity of scrutiny he sat back again, once more shrouded by the shadows. "I have need of your skills, child, and I trust you feel up to the task at hand."

I gazed up at him unable to answer truthfully since I had no idea what task it was he was talking about. Our eyes met for a moment and for that split second I was convinced this man knew every tiny little secret hidden in my soul. It was difficult to breathe. I clung to all I had been taught and worked to maintain my own mental blocks. As fragile as they were, it made me feel better.

He chuckled to himself and then turned to look to his right, his hand beckoning for the person I had sensed there to come forward into the light. "This is one of my most favoured dancers, Lianna." The Emperor said as the girl that Shiv's group of friends often referred to as the Princess walked to the foot of his chair and sat, like a jax, curled up at his feet.

He reached out and stroked her beautiful hair which was the colour of red gold. She looked up into his face with such adoration and even love that I wondered if she were not something more than just his favourite dancer. She was elegant and beautiful. Her hair was perfect and her makeup tastefully and artfully done. Even the clothes she wore screamed of designer opulence. She was everything I felt I was not. Now, standing next to her in my training clothes, still damp with sweat I felt like something the jawas had dragged in. I nodded my head in greeting to her and she regarded me with her green eyes as though I were trash. It did not surprise me much and it was how I felt.

"Lianna, you recall Merlyn Gabriel, Lord Vader's ... personal assistant?" the Emperor said looking directly into the young woman's eyes. Lianna nodded. "It would appear that young Miss Gabriel has some talent as a pilot among ... other things. She will be taking you to your next job." I listened and she frowned ever so slightly. Neither of us said a word. The silence spoke volumes for us.

The Emperor turned once again to look at me. "How long will it take to get from here to Rothana?" he asked.

I quickly tried to remember where that was and then did the rough calculations in my head, wondering what on earth she could be doing all the way out on that forsaken planet. "Approximately eighteen hours if nothing goes wrong, at top

engine speed, " I said. "One way of course." I didn't mention I had calculated a couple of hours extra in case something did go wrong. It never hurt to have more time.

"Then you will leave here tomorrow at 18:00 hours. Lianna has an important performance at, when was it my dear?" He turned and asked her.

"I need to be there to perform at four pm in two day's time." She said.

"Good, then it is settled." The Emperor said. "Now, Lianna you may leave, I know you have things to do before this evening."

She gave me another glance that was anything but friendly and with an elegant curtsy moved gracefully out of the room. I had not been given permission to leave so I remained exactly as I was wondering what exactly was going on. The Emperor waited until Lianna had left the chamber and the doors to the elevators had once again hissed shut.

"She is lovely, is she not?" He said. I wasn't certain he actually wanted an answer so I simply nodded.

He continued, "She is very dear to me and I do worry about her when she has a performance away from the confines of the court. I would not let her go but she does have her heart set on it."

The Emperor got up. "Walk with me a little, child." He said and I fell into step beside him as he walked towards the elevator door. "I have it on good authority that you have become proficient in the art of, how shall I say it, self preservation and that your skills in hand to hand combat are improving. Lianna will need someone to watch out for her on this trip and I would appreciate it if you would do that for me." He said.

I wanted to ask if that were not a task better suited to one of the many and varied sorts of body guards and soldiers that were in his employ. He must have read that thought because he chuckled. We stopped in front of the door, and I was more than aware of the Royal Guards who stood there unmoving and silent.

"As a human female you would not be seen as a threat." He explained. "A male, especially one who is a soldier or a trained body guard, would antagonise an already difficult situation. They would be seen as a challenge and more than likely create more problems than they were sent there to prevent. She is to dance for a well known business associate of mine, let us say, it is a way of appeasing him for services rendered. I do not wish my dancer to be associated with unpleasant behaviour." He said. "If you are not up to this task I can find another but I should hate to think that your training with one of my best teachers has not been paying off." He chided slightly.

"No, Your Excellency, of course not. I am honoured you feel I am capable of this task." I lied through my teeth. I had no idea why he wanted me to do this as I was most likely the very last person capable of what he was asking but I was not going to argue with him. He smiled and patted me on the cheek. The touch of his papery hand sent a cold shiver down my spine.

"Good girl, I knew I could count on you. Now, you should run along home before you are late." He said.

Before I could even consider it being a terrible breach of protocol I blurted out. "Late? Late for what?"

But the Emperor did not seem to mind my lack of courtesy. He simply gave me a smile that was not altogether pleasant. "Now, now I would not want to spoil the surprise. Off you go, child." He said and turned his back on me, dismissing me abruptly. I stood there for a few seconds and watched him, waiting for the lift door to open. I was more than aware of the close and careful scrutiny by the two Royal Guardsmen. The rumours and whispers said that almost all the Guardsmen were force sensitive. I knew now that these were not rumours.

Only once I was out of the small audience chamber and out of the claustrophobic little elevator did I breathe a deep and heavy sigh of relief. This was, of course, shattered by someone tapping me on the shoulder and asking me my name.

"Miss Gabriel?" The young messenger asked. I nodded trying not to jump out of my skin. He thrust a slender envelope into my hand.

For a moment I just looked at it in bewilderment until the young man cleared his throat and said. "I was asked to wait for an answer."

I nodded and opened the letter. I knew the hand writing instantly and could not help but smile.

*My Dear Miss Gabriel,*

*I have two tickets to the opening season of the Opera House in Theed tonight, thanks to the generosity of His Excellency the Emperor, and would like to know if you would do me the honour of gracing me with your company for this event. I understand that it is short notice but I assure you such gala evenings are rare and this one promises to be spectacular. Should you say yes then I request that you be ready at your living quarters by no later than 17:00 hrs as we must be at the Opera House in Theed by 20:00 hrs at the latest and I would very much like to take you to dinner first.*

*With kind regards,  
Captain Thrawn*

I read the letter twice and asked the messenger what time it was. I had exactly an hour to get home and get ready. The young man looked at me and I smiled.

"You may tell the Captain that the answer is yes, I would be delighted." I said and as quickly as I could I made my way home, along the way trying to work out what the heck I was going to wear to this spectacular gala event. I didn't even know what was being performed as the opening show of the season but in the end it did not matter. I was nervous at the thought of being in Thrawn's presence again. I would have to work at getting that under control but in a way I didn't want to. In difference to being close to the Emperor, I liked how being near the Captain made me feel.

\*\*\*

In, *The Unanswered Question*, the well known play by Palena Osiri, the main character Varyl Desann tells Tyrea Berqus, the woman he loves but will ultimately betray and kill, the following. He says '*We dance around each other as though we were circling around a fire that slowly grows out of control and we are powerless to move away from it. We are drawn to its magnificent flame even though we know it will consume us.*' I always loved this line but I loved her reply even more. She tells him '*Then I shall dance, burn and be glorious.*' These words summed up exactly how I felt in the Captain's presence.

He arrived promptly, and I was more or less ready, which in itself was a small wonder. Usually, I did not fuss a lot about what I wore. Comfortable, functional and easy to move in were my criteria for clothing. Dressing up was not something I was very good at. I suppose that having a strict time limit imposed upon me helped. I had none of the usual agonizing hours in front of the closet wondering what to wear.

I picked a dress that had been among those bought from Cati as a possible to wear to the grand ball. It was a beautiful dress but at the time I had felt it a little too revealing. Now, it seemed like the right choice. It was a long elegant, seriously backless gown made from a soft silk that rippled around me when I walked the way light will move on water. I had chosen the colours because they reminded me of the night's sky just after sunset. The dress started from the ground up a dark deep velvety

blue and faded slowly into a beautiful shade of lavender that seemed to draw out the blue in my eyes. It was studded with tiny crystals that twinkled with each step I made. It had a snug bodice, with a fairly revealing neckline and was sleeveless. It was some sort of a miracle that kept the dress from falling off, that or Cati's amazing ability to design. The heavier silk shawl that went with it was a dark midnight blue was also littered with the same brilliant, tiny crystals. It was like wearing the star filled night wrapped around my shoulders. I took time with my hair and put it up with the elegant zenji sticks that Thrawn had given me. The soft little ringlets that framed my face made the look I was going for complete. The finishing touches were a little make up and a little perfume and I felt as ready as I ever would. It did not stop my heart from nearly leaping out of my chest when the door bell chimed.

I took a deep breath to try and calm my bad case of nerves and opened the door. To my surprise he was out of uniform and dressed in very elegant and formal black and white, evening wear. He looked, for lack of a better word, stunning. I motioned for him to come in and went to get my small clutch purse and shawl. He stood and waited never taking his eyes off me. Finally, the attention made me wonder if I had forgotten something or that, perhaps, my choice of clothing wasn't quite right.

"What?" I finally asked in exasperation.

He shook his head and smiled that wonderful secretive smile of his which said everything and nothing all at the same time.

"Is the dress not right for the evening?" I asked.

"The dress is perfect in fact it is more than perfect but something is missing." He said, playing.

"Care to enlighten me?" I asked.

He made a come here motion with his hand and pulled from his pocket a small, flat box which he handed to me.

"It is often the smallest of details that complete the whole picture." He said softly. "Open it."

The box was elegant and hinged. I opened it and sucked in my breath at what I saw. It was a tiny ma'arilite pendant on a simple silver chain.

"I know of your fondness for this stone so when I found this at an auction recently, I knew it should be yours." He said taking the delicate necklace from the box and placing it around my neck. The setting and the stone were no larger than the nail on my little finger. The pendant was square but turned so that it dangled from a corner. The little milky stone had a deep blue-green light in its heart and the setting looked very old, an antique silver metal decorated with three tiny silver balls to punctuate each corner. It was so small it was almost invisible and he was right, it completed the outfit.

His fingertips brushed the back of my neck as he fastened the clasp and I shivered. I felt the warmth of his breath as he leaned close to whisper in my ear. He made my knees weak just being so close. I fought the urge I had to lean back into his body.

"A'vai'jashia." He said.

I turned around to look at him. "What does that mean?"

"Beautiful." He answered simply.

I regarded him for a moment unsure of whether he was describing the necklace or me and said simply. "The pendant is lovely, thank you."

He arched an eyebrow. "Indeed, but I was describing you."

I blushed. He lifted my chin with his finger tips and made to kiss me. I moved my head away.

"Don't." I said. "I'll have to redo my lipstick." But in truth I did not want his kisses because if he started that I wasn't sure we'd leave this house at all.

I stepped away from him.



For a moment he watched me, a bemused smile on his lips and then said. "Perhaps later, then."

"If you are lucky." I replied and for a moment we just watched each other.

He took my shawl and placed it over my shoulders. "We need to go now." He said quietly.

Outside an Imperial driver waited for us and before I knew it I was off to Theed for a second time in a week, but this time for a much happier reason.

We arrived shortly after six pm and the driver dropped us off in front of the small restaurant that Thrawn had chosen with instructions to be back at half past seven to pick us up. It was not the long, leisurely dinner that it could have been which was a shame because the restaurant was very nice. Tucked out of the way and off the main promenade, it was not as well known as some of the more exclusive places but therefore the food, Thrawn told me, was much better and the service twice as fast.

He had been right about the meal, it was lovely, and despite my nerves I managed to eat and enjoy it. Our conversation was light and consisted mainly of him telling about the auction he had bought my necklace at and of me describing my first visit to this city. When it was time he paid the bill and we left for the Opera House in the waiting vehicle. Telling me it would be a spectacular evening had been a little bit of an understatement. The opening season night of the Theed Opera House was a red carpet evening.

He smiled and offered me his arm as we began our walk past the crowds of people who had all turned out to see the who is who of society walk up the grand stairs. There were camera crews and news teams, reporters and many photographers. Lights shone in our eyes as we walked up the red carpet and past the onlookers. I remembered to smile but as with my last walk up a red carpet, did not look in any other direction than forward. Once inside the atmosphere was considerably less chaotic and loud but no less charged with energy.

The Grand Foyer was stunningly beautiful. I marvelled at the architecture and the ornate carvings and decorations, the paintings and portraits of landscapes and Royalty past and present. We walked slowly through the foyer to the main entrance hall where people mingled and chattered. Several people came up to Captain Thrawn and made polite small talk. I was neither spoken to nor introduced. I assumed that this was normal for the Palace Courtesans and we were allowing the charade that I was one of them to continue. It did not really bother me. The Empire was a man's world to a great extent and pretty young women were expendable decorations, nothing more. If that was the impression most people had of me that was fine. If people think you are harmless they are less likely to see you as competition or worse an enemy. So I took my place at Thrawn's side and smiled cheerfully. When I was spoken to I gave the appropriate answers. I was however, grateful when we were informed that we should find our seats by a very pompous sounding announcer. Thrawn offered me his arm once again and I placed my hand on it and was careful not to trip on the hem of my dress as we made our way up the grand stairs to find our seats.

The Emperor it seemed spared no expenses and we had amazing seats in a small box mid way up the gallery on the right side of the hall. We were shown to our places by an usher who moved swiftly and silently. The box held room for four couples and I wondered who we would be sharing it with. We were at the front of the box and I was glad, being not terribly tall, it had always been my experience that whenever anyone sat in front of me all I saw was the back of their heads no matter how the seating was arranged. I sat on Thrawn's left hand side next to the wall. From the moment we had arrived at the Opera House he had been all polite formality. I was well aware that the eyes that had followed us as we had entered the Opera House and had continued to watch us with interest and curiosity as we sat. Thrawn was the

Emperor's pet alien and I was the one decorating his arm for the evening. It was all court politics and stiff etiquette. It was easy enough to maintain the charade of being disinterested in the man at my side when so much else around me was fascinating.

I watched as the seats filled and the air gathered energy. I looked back to see who had joined us in the box we had but I knew none of the faces. I simply nodded and smiled when they arrived and took their seats. The Empire was vast and the Imperial officers too many to count. I did not get out enough to know who was who nor, if I were to be completely honest, did I care. The place hummed with excitement when the Emperor took his seat in his own box. It was a fantastic display of opulence and wealth. Everyone was dressed up in their finest clothes and jewellery. The women sparkled and glittered like brightly decorated butterflies and the men all looked dashing and handsome no matter what species or race they were. Thrawn had not been kidding when he has said it would be spectacular. As with the Emperor's grand Ball, everyone who was anyone was here. I looked about and saw that even the current Queen of Naboo was there, seated, with her entourage in the box next to the Emperor. The noise of the audience quickly gave way to silence as the Orchestra began its warm up and then the house lights dimmed and the show began.

In my life I could count on one hand the number of professional theatre productions I had been to. Mos Eisley was not exactly the cultural center of the world and while I had made it off world often enough, it wasn't as though these trips were all based around going to the theatre or the opera or the ballet. My mother had made it a point of taking me to see the ballet when I was very young on a rare trip to Alderaan. The few times I had been exposed to these theatrical events had been magical to me. Now I sat in the darkened Opera House watching the Naboo Ballet Company perform Solace and Tempest.

The ballet had first been designed and choreographed by the now legendary dancer Akasti Schai, and was based around a very old Corellian legend concerning star crossed lovers, war, betrayal and ultimately, death. It was, on the whole, a very depressing tale because everyone you are made to care about in the story dies at the end, but the Naboo Ballet Company were among the finest dance company in the galaxy and despite the tragic air to the ballet the performances were captivating. Intermission came and went. We made the obligatory rounds, smiled at the right people and made polite conversation. We were given a glass of ice cold Nubian champagne which neither of us drank and before the lights were flickered several times to signal it was time for us to return to our seats I made a graceful exit to visit the ladies room. By the time I made it back to my seat the lights were starting to dim and the second act was about to begin.

Two thirds of the way through the second act when the story turns truly depressing and the tragic end of the two young lovers becomes inevitable I looked at Thrawn. I wondered if he was enjoying the performance and what he thought of it all. His face, his eerie red eyes showed no emotion. He sensed my gaze and turned to look at me and smiled. I felt his arm on the arm rest adjoining my chair shift so that it lay in direct contact with mine. His touch was somehow reassuring. I turned my attention back to the ballet. These dancers had perfect technique and where stunning to watch but all of that became secondary when I felt the subtle brush of Thrawn's little finger on the underside of my hand. It was the barest of touches and I was unsure at first if it had been deliberate or imagined but when he did it again, I shivered. I fought the urge to look at him and did not take my eyes off the stage. I was caught between the desire his seductive caresses were creating and the sensations I felt because of the ballet.

The whole opera house was charged with emotion and I experienced it keenly. The dancers had connected with the audience and the story flowed about us like water. We felt, through their craft, the joys of falling in love, the terrors of war and

now towards the end, the dreadful loss of everything held dear. In a way I was grateful for Thrawn's flirtation, it distracted me enough from the flurry of feelings surrounding me that I did not completely lose it when the two young lovers died at the end. And while I shed a few tears I did not unabashedly bawl my eyes out which, under normal circumstances, I would have done.

Instead, I sat there in the dark trying to get my breathing under control and my heart to slow down. His touch was electrifying and the finale was mesmerizing. When the ballet finished and the curtain calls and standing ovations were over, the house lights came up. I discretely brushed away the remainders of my tears. We, along with everyone else, left our seats and made our way down to the main hall where now everyone was gathered, drinking the free wine and champagne, and chattering like crazy about the wonderful ballet. As I looked around I was glad to see I was not the only one who had shed a tear at the end.

The reception afterwards was, Thrawn informed me, standard. He handed me a glass of white wine and together we mingled. I was a little surprised that when the Emperor entered the reception hall no one dropped to their knees instead they bowed their heads or curtsied. I followed suite and dropped a polite curtsy when he passed by where we were standing. To my and many other people's surprise the Emperor stopped and spoke to us.

"How did you think of the Ballet, Captain?" He asked.

"It was very enjoyable." Thrawn replied with a polite nod of his head. "Their reputation for being one of the best dance companies in the galaxy is well deserved. I thought their interpretation was intriguing."

The Emperor nodded and turned his gaze to me. For a second his weird yellow eyes searched mine and then he smiled. "I do not need to ask how you enjoyed this evening, child, it is written in your face plainly for me to see." He turned back at Captain Thrawn. "We shall have to endeavour to make certain that young Miss Gabriel is exposed to more live theatre. It seems to bring a flush to her cheeks and do her a world of good." He said quietly. He gave me another meaningful glance and I blushed from the heat of it, averting my gaze from his. Thrawn merely inclined his head and nodded in agreement.

"As your Excellency wishes." He said.

"Of course." The Emperor said.

I got the feeling there was another conversation going on underneath the words being spoken. I was grateful when he moved on to speak with someone else and left Thrawn and me out of his limelight. I took a deep, shuddery breath, a large sip of my drink and worked on the calming exercises I had been taught. I was more than grateful when Thrawn suggested we leave. The driver who had brought us to Theed was waiting for us and the ride back to the retreat was silent. I played nervously with the exquisite little pendant that hung around my neck. Thrawn sat still and calm. The driver dropped us off at the house where I lived and, after a brief conversation with the Captain, he drove away. I let the Captain into the house and pretended not to notice what he held in his hand.

My head was filled with music and dance. If I closed my eyes I could still see the grace and beauty of the ballet in my mind. I did not want the night in all its strange magic to end. I ignored the chrono that said it was later than I would have liked. I ignored the little voice in my head that whispered I had a long and arduous journey to make tomorrow with someone the Emperor considered precious. Instead, I turned the music player on and set it to random. I dug two glasses from the kitchen cupboard and danced about as Thrawn poured shots from the bottle he had brought in with him. He smiled as he watched me move to the music and I stopped when I caught him staring.

The music changed to something slow and sensual. He moved cat like, all ease and grace, to catch a hold of me before I could say a word. This dance he swept me up into was seductive and powerful. I didn't know the steps but that did not matter, as he had so brazenly told me once, he was an excellent leader. It took my breath away. Dancing with Thrawn was like being possessed. I looked up into his face and he gave me a lazy smile. As he stroked my back, I sighed and leaned into his body. I loved the touch of his hand on my bare skin, it was electrifying.

When the music changed to something very different we stopped and for a moment just stood. My heart raced and as I remembered to breathe. He said nothing, but the gentle caress of his fingertips up and down my spine spoke volumes. I looked up into his eyes and wondered what he was thinking but he just smiled, then he moved away from me, picked up the two glasses from the counter and handed me one. We touched glass to glass and he said. "Kha'säri'mahr."

I sipped my drink and breathed in the brandy's fumes. "Care to translate?" I asked.

"There is no literal translation but I suppose you could say it is a toast for good health and long life." He said. I gave him a puzzled look. He continued. "To translate it directly into basic it would be something like 'to slide along the bitter ice with grace and joy'."

I laughed. "I take that Cheunh is complicated."

"It is a highly synthetic language with the ability to create complex ideas by word combination and syntax. There is much beauty in its complexity. You'd probably like it actually, given your propensity for languages." He said with a smile.

"Probably." I said, moving away to turn the music down a little. When I turned back around I found Thrawn staring at me thoughtfully, intently.

"What?" I asked, cocking my head to one side.

He motioned for me to come to him so I did. He took the glass from my hand and set both it and his back on the counter. He turned his attention back on me and touched my face with his fingertips making my heart suddenly skip a beat. I drew in a deep shuddery breath.

"You really are quite lovely." He said softly.

I went to look away from him but he would not let me. His hands cupped my face and I surrendered to his pull. His kiss was slow, sweet and gentle as though he wanted to learn all there was about me just with the touch of his lips exploring mine. He tasted like brandy and honey. I reached up and stroked the side of his face, then ran my fingers through his beautiful blue-black hair. When he nuzzled the side of my neck, I gasped at the sensation of it and shivered as he laid tiny kisses from my ear down to my shoulder. I slipped my hands under his jacket and pushed it off him. It fell to the ground. He wrapped his arms around my body drawing me even closer to his. His hands, so warm upon my back, explored every inch of bare skin. It seemed to me that time had stopped. I lost myself as his mouth claimed mine again, closing my eyes and giving in to him completely only when he gently broke away from me did I look up into his face and only then did time move forward. There was a hunger in his eyes I had not seen since Myrkr and it was his turn to take a deep, steadying breath. For a moment we just stood in the circle each other's arms and then, pausing between words and deeds, with a sigh I laid my forehead against his chest. When he chuckled softly, I looked up at him.

"You can be quite dangerous, even now, at your most vulnerable." He whispered as he reached up and plucked from my hair the two zenji sticks that I had almost poked him in the eye with. He laid them beside the brandy glasses then ran his fingers carefully through my hair. "Your hair is beautiful. It reminds me of Adegan fire crystals in the sunlight."

I stared into his face, into his eyes. Did he have any idea how he made me feel? I longed for something I could not define. This ache, this hunger was all consuming. I yearned for it as much as I feared it. I sighed and backed away from him, picked up my glass and studied its contents closely. Whatever moment had hovered between us slipped quietly back into hiding.

He watched me intently for a few moments before asking, "What do you want, A'myshk'a?" It did not escape my notice that he had shortened my Dantassi name to its core.

I took a sip of brandy, letting the amber liquid warm my tongue before swallowing. I shrugged slightly with one shoulder. Passion and desire shifted around the room like restless sands in unpredictable winds. The magic of the ballet was slowly fading and the task the Emperor had given me was beginning to intrude on my evening.

"There is something on your mind aside from me." He said.

"I did not think you were force sensitive." I countered.

He smiled. "I do not need to be to know that something worries at you."

I looked about the room and wondered if and how many listening devices there were planted about the place. I was certain that the small job of ferrying this dancer about was unimportant and insignificant. Still, I worried about talking about it not knowing who else might hear. Thrawn watched me carefully.

"Let's go for a walk, some fresh air will do us both some good." He said after a moment and picked up his jacket, carrying it over his arm. I did not argue with him. We made our way in silence down the path to the lake.

It was a beautiful night, still and clear. The air was cool and quiet, there was almost no wind and the water was mirror still, reflecting the stars and the light from the moons. I shivered a little and was grateful when Thrawn slid his jacket over my shoulders.

"Won't you need it? It's cold out here." I asked.

He laughed. "Cold? Csilla is cold. This place, even at night, is warm for me. You are the one from the overheated sand box." He said, caressing my face. I closed my eyes and leaned into his touch. The warmth of it, the gentleness of it was calming.

"What is on your mind that it complicates this evening?" He asked.

I told him about the job the Emperor had given me.

"So he has finally given you an assignment of your own. Ferrying a dancer doesn't sound complicated." His eyebrow arched.

I nodded. "It should not worry me, but it does. Something doesn't feel right. I just cannot put my finger on it." I told him. "It is not as if Rothana is all that dangerous." I added, naming the planet.

Thrawn took a deep breath and nodded. "But why to Rothana?" He said, more to himself than to me.

"He said that this dancer has a performance there, a sort of payment or something for a local business associate." I told him.

"You know what is on Rothana, yes?" He frowned and moved away from me slightly.

"It is mainly an engineering planet. I assume they manufacture heavy equipment of some sort there. Apart from that I don't know much about it. It's out in Wild Space. I was going to read up on it tomorrow." I said.

Thrawn regarded me carefully. "Rothana is where the equipment for most of the Clone army was manufactured. A subsidiary of the Kuat Drive Yards is based there. It is hardly the place for a dance recital, particularly from one of the Emperor's prized dancers."

"So you think there is more to this than just a delivery-baby sit job?" I asked.

"What does your gut tell you?" He asked studying my face carefully and not answering my question.

"That something doesn't fit. There were lies in the truth he spoke, I could taste them." I answered after a moment.

He nodded and turned to stare thoughtfully out over the lake. "Far be it from me to question the Emperor's motives for what he does with his people, but take all and every precaution you can. Double check that ship of yours, change the codes and voice protect the door lock just before you leave. When you land on that planet make sure you set the emergency start up sequence on. Tomorrow morning I will drop something off for you in your ship I think you might find useful." He said, the sudden cold, business like tone in his voice scared me even more that the thought of this upcoming job.

"You think this will turn out badly?" I asked, worried.

He shook his head. "That I don't know. You are the one with the strange powers and I believe you when you say it feels wrong. I merely suggest preventative measures that you might not think of. Not because you are not capable but because you are inexperienced. Deception is not in your nature and you do not look for it in others."

"I guess I will have to learn then." I said.

He looked back over his shoulder at me. "I hope not." He said sharply.

I turned away from his stare.

He turned back to face me, the abruptness gone as swiftly as it had appeared. "A'myshk'a, there are precious few things in this galaxy that are not easily corrupted by a lust for power or a need to destroy that which they cannot have. I see it every day. I would not watch you fall prey to this." He paused. "You are so much stronger than you think. Whatever this mission brings, you will face it with grace and poise. You will succeed, of that I have no doubt, but do me a favour will you?"

I nodded.

"Use the bone hair stick to put your hair up and wear the Dantassi necklace, hidden under your clothes tomorrow."

I gave him a puzzled look.

He cupped his hands around my face and looked me in the eyes. "Help comes in unexpected guises. It never hurts to be prepared." He said.

"You are talking in riddles now." I said.

"Perhaps I am simply tired and perhaps it is time to call it a night." He said gently. "You have a long journey ahead of you. You should be well rested and alert for it." He brushed stray curls from my face. I wrapped my arms around his body and he held me close. His embrace was warm and comforting. He kissed the top of my head tenderly. The passion and desire that had flown between us earlier had now been replaced by something else, something very subtle, very powerful and utterly indefinable.

He walked me back to the door of my house. He kissed me lightly on the lips and whispered goodnight in my ear. As he vanished into the darkness I got the feeling that he was a little more troubled by the task the Emperor had given me than he had let on. It was not exactly how I had thought the evening would turn out and only once I was indoors did I realise I was still wearing his jacket around my shoulders. It was small comfort to think I would have to see him again if for no other reason than to return it to him.

I lay in bed for a long time unable to sleep. When I did finally fall asleep it was restless and filled with strange dreams. The alarm woke me early. I packed my things and readied myself as best I could before heading out to my ship. My thoughts were cluttered and unfocused, as if to mirror the strange fog that had settled around the lake. Everything was shrouded by an eerie grey mist. I made sure that the office work

was dealt with and sorted things out with my droid, then I went to my ship. Thrawn had been there before me. I wondered how he pulled these things off. I stood and stared at the ornate wooden box sitting on the table in the ship's common area. I opened it up and took the letter out that sat on top of what was inside.

*A'mia'Tekari,*

*Akiana'myshk'apavjäska, this name tells any and all in a certain elite circle that would know, who and what you are. Many times you have asked me for its meaning and I have always said when the time is right, well now the time is right.*

*Pavjäska is the name of the clan to which, by rite of passage, you now belong to. In basic it means, very roughly translated, North Shield Clan. When there is more time I will tell you more about this, your extended family. The rest of the name is perhaps more whimsical on my part but it does you justice and should anyone ask you can tell them its meaning is 'she who dances as light upon snow'.*

*The Dantassi are proud and brave but also elusive and secretive. You have been accepted into this fold through my words and my actions. I give you the right to invoke my name should anyone ever challenge this.*

*These clothes are yours. They were made only for you. While you have no bone mask to wear there is provided here, traditional facial paint. You know the pattern you may use, and you know how it should look. The culling staff I have left you was once mine and, as you have held it in your hands before, its weight will be known to you. May it serve you well.*

*A'myshk'a, do not fear the unknown. You are brave and supple. You will be as wind across snow, as light upon water. You will excel at this task you have been given and we will spend time together when you return.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia,*

*Nikätza'arth'pavjäska*

I read the letter twice before unpacking the box and looked at everything he had left for me. When I was done I repacked the box and hid it out of sight. I took the razor sharp culling staff and tucked it away where no one would see it unless they were doing a very thorough search of the ship. As I began the systems check and walk through of my ship, I could not help but think about what it was that Thrawn knew about this place I was heading to that I did not. That he maintained close bonds with the Dantassi was not a surprise to me, but somehow I got the feeling I was missing a great chunk of information on that side of his life. I knew from the various rumours and court gossip that he was a brilliant tactician and that when it came to strategy there were few among his peers who could top him. So while the reason for his concern, his advice and this gift were unknown to me, I was deeply grateful for them.

I made certain everything with the ship was in perfect shape, picked up some extra supplies and a few spare parts for things that had a habit of breaking down at the most inopportune moments and then I did as Thrawn had suggested I changed all the ship's codes, made the door lock voice activated only and made sure the emergency start up procedure was working and in place. I had sent word to Lianna that she was to be at the ship promptly half an hour before departure time. The rest of my spare time I spent reading up on my star charts and mentally preparing for a very long journey with another woman who did not seem to like me very much. It was going to be interesting no matter what happened.

## CHAPTER 7

Not every person who can fly is a qualified pilot and has the bit of paper to prove it. Pretty much anyone can buy a ship, learn the basics and run the sky. That being said, when you think about it, this makes space travel a little bit scary. Once my father figured out that I was really serious about learning to fly he made sure it was done right, no messing about. The pilots he hired for the docking bay were all well trained and had their papers. They were qualified to teach me and they did. Because I started out so young and, I suppose looking back now, because of my unique talents, I had a leg up on most people from around Mos Eisley. What made my life even more interesting was Jyrki, who seemed to know everything there was to know about pulling ships apart and putting them back together. He had told me that every good pilot knew enough about the ships they flew to patch them up when things went wrong, but the best pilots in the galaxy knew how to build their ships from scratch. I still don't know how serious he was when he said this but I had taken this advice to heart. I liked ship mechanics and I was in love with him so I had jumped on any excuse to be near him. For me it was a win win thing to learn all I could about ships and how they worked in and around my time spent flying. I never did find out where Jyrki learned to be a mechanic or for that matter a slicer.

I kept mulling over Thrawn's words to me during incident with the *Doxy Jane* about me being a slicer. I had never thought about it that way before. It seemed to me to be a natural extension of knowing how your ship ran. Jyrki had spent hours teaching the finer arts of ship board computers, the nav systems, the life support systems and the general how things work. I didn't have his natural talent for it but I was a quick study and good at mathematics. Plus for reasons I could never explain, I was damned good at remembering things almost perfectly. I doubted I could slice into just any mainframe of land based computer but I knew my way around ship's onboard computers much better than most.

Most space craft have the same basic design in the major part of the galaxy. It's really only when you head out into the Unknown Regions or the real backwater areas that you start to see really huge design changes and some pretty funky engine types. But really most ships come from the same places either the Kuat Drive Yards or the Sienar Fleet Systems and the Corellian Engineering Corporation. Most ship components come from one of these yards, and most ship designs follow a set list of standards. That is when they are manufactured. What the pilots and owners do to these ships after they come off the assembly line, well now, that's a whole other game altogether.

When it had come time for me to make my solo flight, the last step before getting my class 1 pilot's papers, my father had suggested the milk run that we did once a week from Tatooine to Nar Shadda. It was an easy route but a profitable one for the various docking bays and delivery ships that did it, delivering goods, mail as well as odds and ends, mostly stuff on the up and up. I had accompanied various pilots and my father on many many occasions so I knew this ride inside and out. It should have been an easy trip but as my luck would have it, it wasn't.

It had started off just fine, I had checked my ship, set the co-ordinates and had gotten on the go. About half way through the hyperspace jump the ship had bounced out into sub light with a bang. The *Black Pearl* was an HWK light freighter. My father's secondary transport ship, used for quick runs and light transports. I had not been kidding when I had told Thrawn I had cut my teeth on this ship class. She was a



reliable ship type that could be flown by one person, but unlike the *Ahnkeli'Su'udelma*, the *Pearl* had not been remodified and was not armed to the teeth. *Pearl* was a rust bucket kept in the air by chewing gum, engineer's tape and a whole lot of prayer. There was always something falling apart on her and even though Jyrki and I had gone over and over the engines at least three times before my run something still went wrong. This time it had been the hyperdrive motivator. It had blown and I was stuck.

The first few minutes in a crisis usually say a lot about how a person will react in a situation. I usually swore a lot using words that had my father been there and heard he would have blushed. Then I went to see if I could figure what the problem was and fix it. Once I had found out the hyperdrive motivator had blown there were a few more choice words and the insane desire to make a cup of tea. First things first was to get out of the hyperspace lane, so with some more cursing I had kicked in the sublight engines and moved off the shipping lane. Then because I did not have a spare motivator handy I had sent messages to the receiving dock that due to engine trouble I would be late. Once all the official procedures were out of the way I had gone back to the engine room and tried to figure out if there was any way to salvage this situation without calling for help.

As luck would have it I didn't have to think about it for long. Just as I was drinking my second cup of tea and browsing through the cargo I was carrying to make sure that nothing was perishable the proximity alarm went off. There was a YT-1300 freighter stopped just off starboard. I ran a quick scan and sighed. It was either bloody pirates, mercs or worse, nothing good that was for sure. They asked if I needed assistance and I told them what I needed. They said they had the part. I told them what I could pay them and they seemed happy enough. It was all lies and I was in trouble. The scan of their ship told me that there were four humans on board and no other life forms. I was pretty certain they had scanned me and knew it was just me and a boat load of cargo ripe for the taking.

Jyrki had always told me that when all the odds were stacked against you and it looked like you were dead in the water, change all the ship codes and add a few surprises. He had even gone so far as to drill me on what we would jokingly call the JEPP, Jyrki emergency procedures protocol. I had never thought I would ever have to use them. Now, while the captain of the YT-1300 was busy prepping his crew for my demise and the takeover of my ship I was busy getting the ship ready for them.

After a few radio calls back and forth they decided that three crew members against me was enough and when we docked it was all shake hands and make nice and no spare part. That, the captain told me was actually in the engine room in their ship and I needed to make sure it was the right one. Their engineer would show me the way. Blah, blah blah. Their engineer was twice my size, armed to the teeth and not very talkative. As soon as I stepped through the dock into their ship the doors to the boats closed. I knew this would happen but I acted surprised. When I went to get back to my ship that engineer showed me his strength. I put on a brave face. I didn't feel the need to show big and ugly how terrified I truly was. Instead I just clung to something that Jyrki had said to me after one particularly bad day.

"Mouse, when all else fails yer gotta remember, yer a pretty little thing and men like pretty things so use what yer've got!"

So I did. I turned on the tears, which wasn't that hard, made as though I was going to pass out and started to whimper while batting my eyes at this guy who suddenly went from thug number one to prince charming with bad body odour. I poured out a sob story about having to work for my uncle, that it was his ship, that I would be so dead if I lost it .... More blah blah blah. It kept the engineer occupied for as long as it was needed. I was ready when the radio call came through. The engineer who went to answer the call was rough and mean when he got back.

"Why ain't the life support working?" He asked wrenching my arm.

"I don't know?" I whimpered.

"Why don't the doors work anymore?" He snarled.

"I don't know do I look like a mechanic?" I whined.

He grunted something rude and went to try and break the seal locks on the airlock between ships. I moved slowly away and vanished into the shadows. On board the Pearl, they had about two hours of air left, maybe and no amount of messing with the doors would get them open, only I, or a really good slicer, could do that. I was banking on finding emergency suits on board and sure enough they were right where they were supposed to be. While the engineer was frantically trying everything he could think of to open the air locks I was busy getting into a space suit and being careful with the small piece of cargo I had taken from my ship. Lucky for me this special little treat had been on board.

The comm system in the suit allowed me to patch into the both ships and my guess is they were a little surprised to hear my voice.

"Captain Sonnar, by now I guess you realise that you are a bit stuck?" I said making my way to the engine room. I still needed a Hyperspace Motivator.

"What did you do you little b...."

I smiled as I cut him off. "Careful captain by my calculations you don't have a whole lot of air left and it's getting cold over there isn't it. You'll notice that I don't have atmo suits or any spare oxygen so you don't have a lot of time left. Care to hear my proposal?"

There was a nice silence then, "Okay, let's hear it."

"I'm going to take the motivator you offered me and I will leave you the credits we discussed. I will release the locks and allow you to come back on board your ship provided you do the same for me." I said. They did have a couple of spare motivators and I decided that for the trouble these guys were putting me through two for the price of one sounded about right. The credit chip I left in the box could be tracked and traced the minute they used it.

"That's it?" He asked.

"Yes." I remember I had smiled when I had said that because I knew they would be thinking I was just too gullible. Unfortunately for them I had had Jyrki drilling me on the evils of space travel for years and my own experiences with men of this kind made me just a tad wary.

"It's a deal then." He said.

"Call off your pet!" I said making my way back to the docking lock and hoping that this all worked out. I set down on the floor by my feet the two round leathery looking balls I had swiped out of my cargo bay. The engineer looked at me in the atmo suit and made to move towards me.

"Tell your engineer to back off or you all die." I said. "I have nothing to lose."

The captain did as I asked and the engineer backed right off. I stepped on the two little bladders I had brought with me and made my way to the docking hatch. Ran the code and let the door open. As I had suspected they would, the three of them came charging through with blasters ready.

"I wouldn't use those blasters, if I were you." I said.

"Why not, you stupid little girl?"

"You smell that?" I asked. I couldn't because the atmo suit was thankfully protecting me.

The men sniffed the air and made faces.

"That is Callion Gas, a little insurance on my part. It's not overly deadly, I don't think, but if you fire a blaster it will ignite and your ship will blow up taking you along with it and if you breathe it too long I am told it will damage your brain."

"Never heard of it." The man growled.

I shrugged. "No one usually lives to talk about it." I said. "Takes a quick vent to get it out of the ship, usually limited exposure isn't that deadly. But I don't know how long 'limited' is."

"What do you want?" He snarled.

"To return, unharmed, to my ship and for you to leave me alone." I said. "You can't vent without taking precautions and I have the only atmo suit that still works, which means, you'd all have to leave the docking back and go to the bridge which can be shut off while you do a purge."

The men looked at each other and I could tell the stench was getting to them. Their engineer had already thrown up once.

"Deal, now get the hell off my ship!" The captain yelled.

"Weapons down and move away first."

They did as I asked and I got off their ship. Disengaged the dock, reset my ship and started up life support again. It didn't take me long to get the new hyperspace motivator installed and even less time for me to get on the way again. I did have to jettison the atmo suit right away though because while Callion Gas was everything I had said it was, those little brown bladders were actually scent gland sacs from male dewbacks and the smell was really hard to get rid of. I didn't want to go home and find every female dewie around trying to jump on me because, well, I smelled good to them. The Hutts loved these things and considered them a great delicacy. No wonder Hutts had very very bad breath.

I had made it to Nar Shaddaa with surprisingly minimal time loss and when I got back home I was a certified pilot. I never told anyone what had happened, not even Jyrki although he had raised an eyebrow at the new hyperdrive motivator and the lingering odour of Dewback scent but he had not actually asked.

Now as I sat in my own ship waiting for Lianna to show up I thought about that trip. Maybe I wasn't devious and perhaps I did trust a little too much sometimes but I wasn't quite the wide eyed sand urchin Thrawn seemed to think I was either. I shook my head at that thought. No one was ever exactly what they appeared to be, not ever, not even me.

Lianna arrived right on time. She was dressed in elegant traveling clothes and had one travel bag. She asked for permission to board and called me captain with a slight curl to her lip. I shook my head, I wasn't actually a captain in title I was a certified pilot but if she wanted to call me that to piss me off, fine. I showed her where she could rest if she wanted to and stow her bag. I took her on the quick and dirty tour of the ship showing her the small galley and the common area.

"I don't cook I'm afraid, so you are on your own if you get hungry. The galley is well stocked and I assume you do know how to operate the stove?"

She nodded.

"Do you fly?" I asked as I showed her where all the food was.

"I am a dancer." She told me disdainfully as if that answered the question.

"Right." I nodded but I didn't believe her. I had watched her as she had looked around my ship. Followed her eyes went as they looked about. They were the eyes of someone who knew what to look for on a ship. She didn't look at the décor or comment on the rough looks of the ship. She had looked at the ship's lines, at the strengths and the weak spots. She had studied the small modifications that were visible to those who knew what to look for. I knew this because she had looked at the same things I had looked at when I had first come on board and I knew she was lying to me.

"Well, you might want to strap in I am taking off now." I said once the tour was over. She nodded and took the co pilot's seat.

She observed me carefully, covertly as I went through the departure routine. It was a little unnerving and it made me wonder just exactly who she really was. While she moved like a dancer, dressed like a dancer even acted like a prima dancer but she watched me the way people do when they are assessing your strengths and weaknesses, when they are sizing you up for a fight. I ignored it but that niggling feeling in the pit of my stomach said things were not what they seemed. I kept my thoughts to myself and played along. Without a word I got us into the air enjoying the sensation of defying gravity.

I loved the view we were treated to as the ship lifted off from the retreat. It was beautiful and I never got tired of it. I chattered on the comm with the Air traffic control, who was getting to know my voice pretty well and set our flight plan. Lianna watched me and did not seem in the least uncomfortable being in the air. Once we were free of the atmosphere I set the nav computer and punched in the co ordinates for Rothana. It didn't take long to get into the hyperspace lane and once we made the jump I hoped it would be one long and quiet trip. I could not keep from smiling when the stars swirled and elongated as we passed from normal space into the hyperspace lane. I never tired of seeing that either. As soon as the autopilot was on and everything was set I got out of my harness and went to make tea. I offered a cup to Lianna who accepted.

"Is this normal for you?" I asked breaking the silence between us.

"Is what normal?"

"That the Emperor sends you out to dance for people."

There was a split second where she almost smiled and I got the impression that it wasn't because she was happy but rather she found something I said funny.

"I do his will, whatever he requires of me." She answered in a way that made me wonder if we were still talking about dancing.

I nodded.

"I saw you at the ballet, did you enjoy it?" She asked after a moment.

"I did. I've danced my whole life but that's the first time I've ever seen a performance like that live."

She gave me a look of mild disbelief. "Really? You looked very at home at the theatre in the company of that Imperial officer."

That was a shot but I ignored it wondering why she hadn't asked me about my own dancing skills, another dancer would have been curious about style and training. A fellow dancer would not be as overtly rude as this woman was. Dancers were more the back stabbing sort.

"Captain Thrawn?" I nodded. "Yes, he invited me to accompany him." I said keeping my voice neutral.

"The Emperor's pet alien." She said with distaste. "Do you like him?" She pressed.

"I don't dislike him if that's what you mean."

She smiled ever so slightly and sipped her tea. "He seems to favour you at official events." She commented. "It has been noticed and people talk about it."

I made a face. "I have seen him, what three, maybe four times at some official function or another, the last one I was his, what is that charming expression the courtesans use, decorative eye-candy. If that constitutes favouring then I guess they are right." I shrugged. "People talk about anything and everything. I am quite sure there are a billion rumours about me and Lord Vader as well. It makes me laugh."

"Don't you care what people think?" She asked.

"Not about stuff like that I don't. People believe what they want to no matter what the truth. Gossip runs rampant in the Emperor's court." I looked at her. "I have no idea why Captain Thrawn chooses to speak with me, but I can tell you this I am glad he does. Being Lord Vader's assistant makes for a difficult social life and I expect

that the Captain has the same problem because he is not human. I am one of the few people who see past the colour of his skin and I think that is something of a relief to him." I said. "I grew up on a planet where being human means being out numbered sometimes. Aliens don't bother me in fact sometimes I think I prefer their company."

When I sat back down she looked at me carefully, the way you do when you suddenly see a person for the first time although you've looked at them many times before.

"You're not what I imagined." She said finally.

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"No, you actually have a personality and you can hold a conversation. I thought the Emperor had taken a liking to you because you were another piece of pretty fluff for him to have around but that's not the case is it? You are actually dangerous." Her voice had an edge to it I didn't know how to decipher and she had dropped the haughty dancer face for a second. What lay behind her eyes was calculating, clever and very dangerous. I had no idea how to answer her question so I stayed silent and just matched her gaze.

"I had heard that you were under the protection of Lord Vader, I had thought that it was because you were actually good at being an office girl but you are more than that aren't you." She wasn't asking a question. "What is it about you that the Emperor sees?" She asked.

"You'll have to ask him because I have absolutely no idea at all." I told her truthfully and then asked. "Why do you care?"

"I like to know who my enemies are." She said point blank.

I gave her a confused look. "Enemy?"

"Are you working for Isard?" She asked suddenly.

"The Intel leader?" I looked at her and then I just laughed. "Seriously?" I shook my head. "I am just Lord Vader's personal assistant. If you think I work for Intel then you give me far too much credit." I said.

"You know, I will find out if you are lying to me and when I do, I will make sure you are not a threat to me." She said coolly.

"How am I a threat to you? I don't even know you." This was getting tedious.

She smiled nastily. "If you think that you can take my place you are sadly mistaken."

She had me utterly confused. "You think I want to have your job? Lady, you're a bit of a nutcase aren't you. I have my own job and it's more than enough! I have no desire to take on professional dancer or what ever it is you actually are for the Empire as well." I told her.

She gave me a look and then unbuckled the harness. "I'm tired and I wish to rest before we arrive on Rothana so if you don't mind I will take my leave of you."

"Be my guest." I nodded and watched her go. The force moved about her but I couldn't pin it down.

She had been looking for something from me with all her questions but she had not gotten the answer she had wanted. She had not been able to sense the force around me or else she would have known what it was in me the Emperor and Lord Vader had seen. She didn't like uncertainties and she didn't like me much but I wasn't exactly sure why. I knew that while maybe she was a dancer and probably a very good one that was not who she really was.

I finished my tea in silence and did my hourly ship check. Everything was fine. I picked up the book I was half way through from my satchel and went back to the cockpit to sit and read. If I managed to nap a little along the way well, that was fine too. I knew from experience that the ship alarms were loud enough to wake the dead.

The journey passed without any incidents and I was grateful that Lianna stayed away from me rest of the trip. She only appeared when I announced via the

comm that we would be landing in a few moments. She was dressed in a beautiful dance costume and had her travel bag with her. She would change costumes several times if the performances called for it. I remembered having to do that a few times when I was a dancer.

"I will be several hours." She informed me as I styled the ship down onto the landing pad we had been assigned.

"I need to know where you will be in case I have to get a hold of you." I said.

"The offices are above the cantina." She replied, "But I would prefer not to be disturbed unless it is the Emperor."

I nodded. "As you wish."

The ship landed with a soft bump and I shut down the systems while she waited for me to open the door and the landing ramp.

She glanced at me. "How far away are we from the Cantina?"

"A few meters I think, I requested a landing space as close to it as possible."

"I will let you know when I'm done." She said as she slipped on the long fur lined coat which she had been holding.

Rothana was an arctic world so it was cold. I had requested an outside landing pad because they were a hell of a lot easier to take off from than an internal one, especially if I needed to leave in a great big hurry. It was awfully hard to fly through closed landing bay doors.

When the ship's door opened we were greeted by the initial wuff of air exchange. The air that left the ship was warm and for me smelled of hydraulic fluids and ship mechanics, the air that came into the ship was bitterly cold and smelled like oily pepper and burnt metal.

The night sky was crystal clear and I could see the Cantina just across the quad. We had landed very close to it. I could see beyond the gantries and the buildings up to the stars which shone with a brilliance I had only ever seen in the desert of Tatooine before. Without even thinking about it I reached out to Lianna and touched her arm wanting to wish her well. In an instant I knew that something very bad was going to happen to her. In that split second I felt rather than saw pain, confusion, fear and death. I was given an image of a room full of people all fighting, someone masked and darkly dressed was shooting at her and the last image was of her being hit in the back by blaster fire. I shivered.

"Good luck." I murmured.

She shrugged off my touch and gave me a filthy look. "I don't need luck." She told me tartly, "I am very good at what I do. Just be ready to take off when I am done."

"Right." I said still shaken from the sensations reeling through my body. I watched her leave with a chill in my bones that had nothing to do with the cold outside.

I waited until the door closed and then sat down. I was shaking. In my life I had never experienced such a sudden and powerful waking premonition before. I knew that such things happened because I had read about it in the little Mandalorian journal my father had given me. Its author often had terrible premonitions and he wrote about them, many of which came true after the fact. His Jedi teacher had told him that premonitions about the future did not always accurate and that they were unpredictable and that interfering with things because of them was often a very bad move. I had always felt that he should have listened to his teacher but now I found myself in much the same situation and I suddenly understood his point of view much better. I got up and made my way to the place where I had stored the clothes Thrawn had given me, fiddling with my bone trader necklace.

The process of becoming Akiana'myshk'apavjäska was strange and daunting. The clothes were beautiful and functional and made from a fabric that looked heavy

and thick but was neither. There was a long sleeved under shirt, a seamless over tunic with a square neckline and three quarter length sleeves that were wide, sitting just below the elbows. The tunic went to mid thigh, and was split up the sides to just below my waist. The pants were wide legged, and almost looked like a very long skirt. They could either be worn loose or tucked into the heavy soled boots I usually wore. Everything was dyed some deep shade of a blue that was so dark it almost looked black. Over the tunic and pants went a long, sleeveless robe that was meant to be worn open. It had only one ornate clasp at the top and around the collar, continuing down front seam were decorative and exquisite embroidered patterns, a sort of knot-work, mythical creatures twisting and turning into each other. Over this was worn the outer cloak. This was much as the one I had worn on the trek through the jungles on Myrkr, except it matched the rest of the clothes and fit me better. The sleeves were long and cuffed, and the hood was large cowl like and deep. It too was full of ornate embroidery and fastened at the neck with an ornate bone toggle. There were even heavy leather gloves which also matched.

Before I put on the cloak I went in to the 'fresher to apply the face mask make up. I thought it would feel yucky but I was wrong about that as well. It was surprisingly easy to apply and went on evenly and smoothly, the white base first then the black for the decoration. As I drew out the markings in an imitation of the ones Za'ar had placed on my face with his fingertips I suddenly and almost desperately I wished that he was here.

I braided my hair back and then knotted it up with the Bone needle, and then I smoothed some of the black mask paint over my head to further hide the redness of my hair. When I was done I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I no longer recognized myself. I wondered how Thrawn had known to give me this outfit now. If that had just been over cautiousness and coincidence on his part or had he really known far more than he had let on about what I was going to end up doing. I would have to ask him if I got back in one piece. Whatever the reason for his gifts, I was grateful.

I slung the small leather satchel that held my important things over my head, across my shoulder then I put on the cloak and picked up the culling staff. Za'ar had given me a Bone Trader name, Thrawn had somehow managed to provide me with clothes to look the part, now I had to find the person within to match. I stood very still for a moment and closed my eyes.

I had been taught well by Master Kjestyll and relaxing to find my center was no longer as difficult as it had once been. I breathed and let the force surround me. I could sense its presence and feel its weight. When I was ready I opened my eyes and sighed. I opened the ship's hatch and watched the ramp slide down. The air was biting cold but it was also refreshing and it woke me from the inside out. I locked the ship with the new voice code and waited until the door had closed before I made my way to the cantina. I was pretty certain that this place would make the one in Mos Eisley look like a palace and when I stepped through the doorway I was not disappointed.

Rothana was a planet no one went to unless they had to. Unless one worked or business here it was not a planet anyone stayed on for too long. It was home to the Rothana Heavy Engineering Company, which was a subsidiary of the Kuat Drive Yards. This in itself should have been enough to tell anyone all they needed to know. It was a cold planet filled with heavy duty industrial buildings where they built ships and transports. They also manufactured war machines here. The main city, Dyrsk, was not so much a city but rather a huddle of living quarters surrounded by the factories which were enormous. The only people who lived here were the workers and the absolute dregs of galactic society. If people thought that Nar Shaddaa was bad, they had never been here.

The cantina was a dimly lit, filthy building filled with factory workers, low-lives and aliens from all ends of the galaxy. The air was rank, filled with smoke, the sharp scent of sweat and the reek of stale beer. There was music coming from somewhere but it was not obnoxiously loud so I didn't mind it too much. I was surprised that not a single person even bothered to look up at me when I entered the main floor. I suppose I had been expecting some reaction to the outfit but as I scanned the room I saw the reason why. There were so many diverse looking people and aliens that one more painted, masked face made no difference. I took a deep breath and went to sit in a corner that was unpopulated and from where I could pretty much see the whole place. It was not the largest cantina in the galaxy.

I sat with my back to the wall. I ordered pikaché ale from the bored looking waitress and then noticed the door on the other side of the room behind the bar. I guessed that was where the entrance to the upstairs offices was because from my scans of the outside I had not seen any back way out. I paid the waitress when she brought my drink, gave her a healthy tip, hoping she'd leave me alone but I didn't touch the ale. I just sat and waited and watched.

The amazing thing about wearing a mask is it gives you an edge, a sense of anonymity. I had the hood of the cloak up and pulled low over my face, the lighting in the cantina was crappy to start with and it was easy to feel invisible so it scared the wits out of me when a deep, soft voice spoke beside my ear in a language I recognized but did not speak or understand.

"Eta'peylan nu'vje'a'tashku." He said.

I looked up and stared into the face a Bone Trader. For a split second I thought it was Za'ar but that was not the case. This man was taller, with broader shoulders. The ornate bone mask was not only made from that of a different creature but the intricate carvings that decorated it were also completely unlike those on the mask that Za'ar wore. Only the glowing red eyes held a strange sense of familiarity for me.

I had not even noticed him as I had scanned the room. He had moved like smoke to stand beside me and I had been caught utterly unaware. I fought to get my heart rate back down to normal.

"I do not speak your language. I'm sorry." I said in basic.

He cocked his head to one side and continued to stare at me. He then said something in a different language. Minnisiat was a trade language from the Unknown Regions. I had heard it before but I could not speak it either so I shook my head. He regarded me for another very long moment and then said in halting basic.

"Well met are we but I know you not. May I sit?"

I nodded and he took the chair next to me instead of the one across from me, allowing me to maintain my view of the room.

"My basic is not as well as I would like it to be, but easier to communicate with you, I think, yes?" He asked.

I nodded. "I speak other languages but not Cheunh or Minnisiat."

He drew a deep breath. "How are you named?" He asked.

"I am Akiana'myshk'apavjäska." I told him.

"Pavjäska, North Shield Clan, this name is well known to me but you are a'Traeth, not of the people. Who has named you?" He asked.

"Nikätza'arth'pavjäska." I said.

The Bone Trader sat back and nodded slowly. "This name is also known to me. A great warrior among our people, he is honoured." He was thoughtful and silent for a few moments and then he said. "I am Kirja'navaar'inkjerii, son of clan Inkjerii of the Hjal Dantassi."

"I am honoured to meet you." I said.

I sensed his smile beneath his mask and he seemed to relax a little but his eyes remained watchful.



"How is it that you are one of the People but not of the People?" He asked.

"Are you asking why I have the name?"

He nodded. "You are the first a'Traeth I have seen who bears a name and wears a hunter's face. I would like to hear how it came to be so."

"It is kind of a long story." I said.

He looked about the room. "There is time, nothing will happen yet. Whatever it is that you await will take longer than you are thinking."

"How do you know?"

Again I sensed a smile. "Tell you I shall, in trade for your story. The Honoured Nikätza'arth'pavjäska would not, I think, make of his Get just anyone."

I drew a deep breath and began to tell him about the hunt that had taken place on Myrkr without naming names or giving too much away. I gave as much detail as I could about the final parts of the hunt and my small part in it. I could still smell the blood and the muck and hear the screams of the men and the beasts as they had died. It was difficult to retell and I had to fight to still the shake in my voice when I spoke of Za'ar and how he had bloodied my face recounting the words he had spoken. When I was finished Kirja'navaar'inkjerii was silent for what felt like a very long time.

"Look around this room, Akiana'myshk'apavjäska. In the left corner do you see the man, dark clothed and masked? He awaits someone or something. He is looking too often at his chrono. Weapons are hidden at his back. He has reached behind twice now, to assure himself that they are still within his grasp. He watches the door, the same door you also watch. But he has not seen you or taken note that you also wait for that door to open."

I saw the man he spoke of, tall and slender, dressed in black space-gypsy clothes, wrapped and masked. All that could be seen of his face were his eyes and they were restless and wary.

"Look now across the room, there are two more clothes alike yet not alike. They are all together and they watch the room for who comes and who goes. His back up they are."

I saw the two he was talking about, a woman and a man, also dressed in space-gypsy clothes, her face was free but his was also covered.

"Now in the near corner by the come in door there are two more, the strength, and the, how do you say, muscle. They will be the last to leave when the fighting begins. All five came in this morning and have been waiting a restless wait ever since. The one you are watching over came in a short time ago here and they all went very still. She is who they hunt." He paused a moment then added. "She does not know you are guarding her back does she?" He asked.

I shook my head. "No." I said.

"You do not care for this woman, yet you will risk your life to protect her from unknown danger, why?"

"You are very observant. How do you know all of this?" I was suspicious of him now.

"I am Jhal'kai, this is meaning in basic something like, hunt or pack leader. I track the prey. I am very good at this job, well trained to see and know where the hunters and the hunted are, how they will run and what they will do before they know themselves. I am the one who must lead the hunters and tell them where they must go, for that I must predict what the prey will do." He said. "The ones we now watch here are not good at their jobs, they are nervous and show fear, untrained and untried. Only the one clothed in black is unafraid. He is their leader; they all watch to see how he signals and wait for his command." He gave a slight shrug. "You have not answered my question."

"I was asked by someone I work for to watch out for her. She is a dancer of some value." I told him.

He nodded. "You do not lie but you do not sound happy about this either."

I sighed and sat back in my chair. "Why are you here in this place?" I asked.

"It is a stop point for my kind. The cold is familiar to us and the people here are not interested in our ways. We are left alone to travel as we will. I wait passage to my next hunt on Kerest."

"Kerest? They have transports going there from here?"

"No but someone will take currency from me and deliver me there." He said.

"Currency speaks many languages." He added.

"What are you hunting there?" I asked.

"Ice beasts called Ikhatuu. Very challenging." He replied.

I had never heard of these creatures but Kerest was known to me. It had once been a planet with a thriving, civilized people but when their sun went inactive and the planet was plunged into an ice age, the civilization died. What rose in its place was a society of hunters so vicious that they pretty much hunted themselves to the brink of extinction. Word of their prowess and skills somehow reached the Empire at some point and there were several Kerestians who worked for the Emperor. They were well known for their unique and extraordinary weapon they called a dark stick. I had never seen one but I had heard tales of them. A weapon that when it was not turned on looked like a piece of metal, but when it was active it had a black light beam in the shape of a crescent moon. Its ability to slice through almost anything was the stuff of legends.

"Well, good luck with the hunt." I said.

He chuckled. "Luck, I need no luck but I thank you for the thought."

I sighed and fiddled with the small skull necklace I wore around my neck.

Kirja'navaar'inkjerii watched me for a moment.

"May I see that?" He asked.

I slipped back my hood and took the necklace off, handing it to him to look at. He took it gingerly, carefully in his large gloved hands. He stroked the bone with what seemed to me almost a reverence. He handed it back to me after a long moment. I slipped it back on and redrew the hood over my head. The bone needle in my hair had also not escaped his notice.

"I knew the man who carved that piece you wear about your neck. A great warrior was he, a leader of his people and a wise man. To own a token by him is a precious gift. This was your first-hunt gift from the one who named you?"

I nodded.

"He must think highly of you to part with such a treasure. You are bound to him?"

"I don't know what that means." I said.

Kirja'navaar'inkjerii shook his head and sighed. "How is it that such a great and noble hunter has chosen to make you of his clan, to make you his and not tell you anything about the people you have joined? You are ignorant of everything that is Mathäd'antass'Iyantha. You do not speak the tongue. You know nothing of the ways of the hunt and none of the customs. Lucky it is for you that I know of him and his name. Lucky for you it is that he is greatly honoured among my clan for his deeds. Others who would not know his name would have killed you for what would have been seen as desecration of our Way."

"I have no answers for you. I did not ask for this name or the hunt or these clothes." I said a little crossly.

"We do not ask for our fate, Tjällh. It is usually handed to us by unexpected means and unwanted circumstances." He chided. "He has bound you by name and gift, yet you know nothing. I have no polite way to give this question. Has he bedded you and joined with you as the one beast?"

I actually blushed and hoped that the makeup hid it. "Uhm.. no." I said. "Well that is to say... not yet. It is complicated." I opened my mouth to say more then shut it again realizing that Kirja'navaar'inkjerii was chuckling beneath his mask.

"I can see why Nikätza'arth'pavjäska is taken by you." He said gently. "But you must learn the way of the People, Akiana'myshk'apavjäska." He said. "There is more to the Dantassi than a mask and clothes."

"How in the name of the holy Sarlacc am I supposed to do that?" I asked. I really wondered about this because the circumstances of my life were not exactly conducive to me simply taking off to learn the ways of this strange culture Thrawn had thrown me into.

I felt him smile. "Uljask'peylan ji'rüshjen taeami." He said. "A way will be found."

"Easy for you to say." I sighed. "How is it you know the Honoured Za'ar? You keep saying that he is a great warrior known to your people. What did he do?"

Kirja'navaar'inkjerii drew a deep breath and glanced about the room. So far everything was still quiet and seemingly normal. The dark clothed man in the far corner still waited but was not agitated in anyway.

"Many, many years ago, before I was born, some of the Dantassi people left the mother world to explore, to find new homes, and to find new hunting grounds. We are, by nature, a restless people. We are not like the ordered Chiss who went underground to seek warmth and softness. We are born and bred on the world above where it is hard and cold. It shaped our needs, our wills. We sought more of the same hardness, not less. One of the planets these explorers found was a small world in what you would know as the shoulder of the Tingel Arm. It was uninhabited by sentient beings and had a good and varied animal population. The climate suited our kind, very cold, very harsh but not eternal winter. It was different and challenging. Hjal is situated between Sernpidal and Cadomai."

"For most it would be a worthless place. Yet my people colonized it, making it their home base and new hunting grounds. They lived and thrived there for many generations before another race from the far away came and made experiments on the land. They found something of value and made to war with us. Wishing to remove us from our home and take it for their own. We were small in number and unaccustomed to such warfare as we were about to meet." He paused and shook his head. "I do not know how it was that Nikätza'arth'pavjäska came to hear of our troubles but he came to our aid. He did not bring a vast army with him but a small group of seasoned warriors that he had trained alongside. He spent several months working with us and teaching us the arts of this different kind of war. It was something unfamiliar, new to us and lessons were well learned, never to be forgotten."

"We are known as great hunters across the galaxy but that is not the same thing as fighting an army of trained soldiers with weapons of terrible destructive power. The Dantassi pride themselves on the noble art of hunting, we prefer to see the eyes of our prey when we take its life, we use all that we take and waste nothing. War is destructive, without real purpose, fought for greed and power. It is not our way but we learned and we adapted."

"When the invasion came we were ready and through his great leadership we defeated our enemy so soundly they gave way and signed a treaty to never return. They greatly feared Nikätza'arth'pavjäska and his ways of knowing what they would do and how they would do it. It was as if he could read their intentions. When the fighting was done and the treaty signed, he left as quietly as he had come. For one so young he was well versed in the arts of warfare and his hunting skills were to be admired."

I sighed as I fiddled with my necklace. Every time I turned around it seemed I learnt more and more about a man I felt I barely understood.

The Bone Trader across from me nodded at the carving I played with. "It was my grandfather who was carving that bone charm you now wear. I am still recalling when he gave it to the Nikätza'arth'pavjäska. That you now wear it tells me much. Not easily are the gifts from one honoured elder to another passed onward. Nikätza'arth'pavjäska is not a man to do things lightly or without great consideration." Kirja'navaar'inkjerii said quietly.

I didn't know what to say. He was right about Thrawn who was not a man to do things lightly or without great forethought. For the second time since I had landed on this forsaken planet I wished he were with me. This sudden ache of missing him was new and I didn't understand it. Something of that thought must have shown on my face because Kirja'navaar'inkjerii placed a hand over one of mine and leaned close to me, locking his eyes on mine.

"Tjällh, have faith. It was not by chance that we are well met here. Nothing happens without reason. You are not alone."

"Thank you, Kirja'navaar'inkjerii." I said quietly, swallowing back the sudden rush of emotion that threatened to engulf me. I took a deep steadying breath, remembering Thrawn's words to me. *'Help comes in unexpected guises. It never hurts to be prepared.'* He had said. I wondered how he had known. More mysteries without answers.

As Kirja'navaar'inkjerii drew back I felt his smile. "It is customary for strangers to address each other with the fullness of their names, but you have shared too much of your spirit with me today for me to allow such formality. You may know me as Navaari." He said.

"Does this mean you can shorten my name as well?" I asked thankful for small mercies, Chiss and Dantassi names were a mouthful.

"If you allow, it would be an honour to do so."

"Za'ar calls me A'myshk'a. I take it that is the core form?"

He chuckled. "Yes. Although your full name is most beautiful. Do you dance?" I nodded.

"And Nikätza'arth'pavjäska has seen you dance."

I nodded again but I wasn't about to elaborate on that little episode of my life.

"My daughter loves to dance also. Perhaps one day you will travel to our home and we will meet under more restful circumstances. I would be offering you hospitality and you would be having a chance to learn the way of the People."

"I would like that very much." I said and I was very surprised to discover that I meant every word.

"When next you are with the Nikätza'arth'pavjäska you must ask him to take more care in educating you in our ways." He said softly.

I couldn't help but laugh a little. How could I describe to this stranger my very odd relationship with the man he knew as Nikätza'arth'pavjäska? I could not even make sense of that myself. I sat back in my chair and watched the room. It had grown more crowded as the shifts changed and the people coming off work came in for a drink.

The man in black had not moved from his spot and neither had his friends but they had grown more watchful. We had been talking for well over an hour and nothing much had changed. I allowed myself to relax and center a little so that I could sense the more subtle changes with my own small Force gifts and it was as if the world about me suddenly got brighter when I did this, allowed myself to touch the Force. Navaari watched me carefully for a moment but said nothing. He too, went back to observing the crowd. We lapsed into a silence that was surprisingly comfortable. I felt a kinship with this perfect stranger and I did not know why. What

was it about the Dantassi that made them so close knit, so strange and yet somehow now offered me a sense of solace? What had Thrawn done in making me a part of this culture? I felt as though I was being drawn into something that somehow went beyond my control and there was no way to stop it and I really wondered if I even wanted to stop it. One thing was for certain I was going to have to have a little chat with Thrawn about this when I got back. I sighed out loud, making Navaari look at me. I was about to say something when I felt a sudden shift in the air around me. A ripple in the force that told me something was about to happen.

Navaari motioned with his hand for me to be still. "Be still and observe, Tjällh." He said quietly, firmly. "When the time is right for you to intervene, you will know." So I sat and waited, they were the longest few minutes of my life.

There was a book called "The Art of War and Battle." It was a large, lavishly illustrated book of images and discussions about paintings and depictions of warfare throughout the history of the galaxy. What I enjoyed reading the most however, were the quotes from many famous and not so famous people. Some were warriors, some were innocent bystanders and some were instigators. It was one of the books my mother had brought with her after she married my father. It was one of my favourites for reasons I could never explain.

I had spent hours poring through the pages, studying the often garish and horrific images presented to me there. I read the quotes over and over again, thinking about the people who had uttered these statements and wondering, if they could have turned back the clock and changed the way things had happened if they would have done so. One quote in particular always stuck with me.

*"To watch a battle, a brawl or a fight between two foes is to watch an unchoreographed dance. At first glance, the movements are all chaos and madness, faster than the eye can follow but step in closer and you see each foot fall is precious, each sweep of the hand and blade exacting. For those in the fray everything happens in time slowed down. One second elongates, each moment captured by the desire to prolong one's life before it can be claimed by one's foe. For those who stand at the sides of the field and watch, it is sheer madness, a blur to the eyes, an insult on the ears and a wound to the soul that can never be repaired. Only when one enters the battle does one understand what an extraordinary thing it is, only after one is able to walk away from the same battle does one understand what a gift life is."*

The cantina exploded into motion in the single blink of an eye. The door to the upper offices opened and Lianna came out. She was not dressed as a dancer any more. She was clothed in a slick one piece jump suit, with a utility belt and she held a small brown satchel in her left hand, in her right she held a blaster pistol. She had been expecting trouble the moment she walked through the door and from the backward glance she gave the door there had been people following her down the stairs as well. She shut the door fast and blasted the lock. The look on her face was one of determination not fear, not worry, just a look of 'get the job done.'

Navaari looked at me. "She may dance but she is not a dancer. She is a predator and a hunter."

I looked back at him and said nothing. I had no answers. I had only the words of the Emperor in my ears telling me to watch out for her, telling me that she was precious to him, asking me to take care of her. If this was a test, it was an unfair one. She looked to me as though she could take on an entire army and win. I, on the other hand, did not feel remotely prepared for such a thing.

"Observe." Navaari said and he pointed to the two who had been standing across from the man in black. They had drawn their weapons and had gone into a battle stance, ready to aim and shoot. I followed Navaari's finger and saw that the man dressed in black had not moved much at all, still leaned against the wall and watched. He was, to the casual observer, not a threat but a disinterested bystander.

The two by the door had drawn their weapons also but kept them down, hidden. I looked back at the man in black. There was something compelling about him, something familiar. I could not see his face or anything about him that would give me a clue as to why I would feel this way, but there was a ripple about him that told me this was not the first time we had met, that he was in touch with the Force but he was hiding it.

The two across from him had nervous trigger fingers and they fired the first blaster shots at Lianna who ducked and avoided them easily all the while making her way towards the doorway, the only visible way out. Her shots, aimed at taking the two of them out were accurate and deadly. She had been very well trained. She did not once stop moving and as the cantina around her erupted into utter chaos with people either screaming and trying to get under something or yelling and trying to join in. She waltzed gracefully through it all. It is inevitable that when anyone started some sort of a fight in a cantina, especially a low end dive like this one, people had to join in. The motto anything for a good fight seemed to be the life blood of places like this. Better than the latest Holo-stories.

As she made her way from the doorway behind the bar to the front entrance she was engaged by several burly men who thought they'd like a piece of the action. I watched in a stunned sort of awe at her speed and certainty as she took them out one by one. She had been well trained in martial arts and she moved with such elegance that I felt a pang of envy. She had made it almost two thirds of the way through the room when out of the corner of my eye I saw the man in black finally move. He walked slowly with a languid grace. He paid absolutely no attention to anything else that was going on around him, not the flying bottles and drinks, not the flailing bodies and fists. He closed in on Lianna and she did not appear to notice him at all, too many other things were taking up her attention.

The two guardsmen at the front door had drawn their weapons and were aiming at her but she saw them and fired first. One she hit, one she missed and had to duck to escape his shot. As she began to stand back up so someone fell into her knocking her forward and the bag she had held in her hand went flying under the tables and slid not very far away from where Navaari and I were standing. I went to move for it but Navaari moved fast and stepped in front of me. He grasped my arm with a hand that gripped like a vice.

"Do not move." He hissed. "Wait, I will tell you when the time is right. On this you must trust me."

I nodded and took a deep breath. It seemed to me that we two were an island in a sea of absolute madness. I got control of my breathing and slowed it right down. *Become the stillness do not seek it out.* Navaari watched me as I found my center. I felt his smile and approval. He let go of my arm and handed me my culling staff.

I let the Force surround me. I stretched out with it to where the satchel Lianna had been carrying had landed and I touched it with my mind. Slowly I let its form and shape, its weight become crystal clear to me and with this weird power I had known since I was born, I began to force move the bag towards me. I let it drag low along the ground and the process was slow but I did not want to attract any attention to it. A bag moving itself across the floor was bound to raise a few eyebrows. When it was within reach I caught the strap of it with the end of my culling staff and pulled it to me. Navaari stood in front of me hiding me from the rest of the room while I slipped my cloak off to shrug the satchel across the other shoulder when I had my cloak back on he nodded.

"You are of the Schai'tai'kha. My people speak of such things but I have not seen it until today." He whispered. "Be ready, the time for action will be swift and soon. Let me lead and when I say, you must leave. No matter what you must get out of this building and trust me to do my job."

I nodded. He stepped aside so that I could see Lianna had fallen on the ground but had rolled to a crouch and was fighting the remaining guardsman from the doorway. She still had not seen the man in black who had made his way to stand close behind her, in a position of power. He was drawing a weapon from behind his back.

I wanted to yell out a warning but Navaari clamped a gloved hand over my mouth. He let me go but waved his forefinger back and forth.

"No words. Follow me. Do as I do." He said and I did. He walked away from our corner, away from the main fight towards the far end of the room, as though he wanted to get away from the fight that was slowly advancing forward. I watched as he took from underneath his cloak a tiny object. He showed it to me, lying in the palm of his hand. A flat wheel with sharp pointed dags made from bone. It looked like a multi pointed star. He took a second to size up his target and then with astounding accuracy and minimal movement, he flicked it across the room where it landed with a sharp crack directly into the forehead of the Guardsman who had been about to shoot once again at Lianna. Both she and the man in black looked about them to see where it had come from but they did not, for reasons I couldn't understand, see or notice us.

"No one sees what they do not expect." Navaari said by way of explanation, noting my puzzled expression and he was suddenly on the move again.

I followed like a clumsy shadow and tried to keep an eye on Lianna who was now fighting three people at once. The man in black was still stalking her and would have her in a few moments if she did not see him seen. How could he be so invisible to her and yet not to us? I wondered why he simply did not just shoot her. We moved towards him in a manner that was beguiling and misleading. I was at a loss for words. I had known that the Dantassi were among the best hunters in the galaxy but I had never seen, aside from Za'ar, one in action before. Navaari was as good as he had said he was. He moved with an ease through the fighting chaos that was beautiful. He tracked the man in black until we were very close to him but still he did not sense a threat from either of us. There was too much going on around him and he only had eyes for his target. I wondered how he could not notice us, still as statues amidst the utter chaos that surrounded him.

"There will only be one moment, Tjällh. Be swift as snow across ice. Be deadly as the cold." He said.

The moment, when it came, was like a flower opening to the sun. It was as if time had slowed right down and everything moved as though through water. Lianna finally subdued the last of the bar brawlers who had decided she looked like fair game and had stopped moving for a second. She caught her breath and was about to look for her satchel when the man in black slowly and carefully raised his blaster pointing it at her chest. Their eyes met for a split second and she moved to dodge the shot but before he could squeeze the trigger I launched myself at him and swung hard against the back of his legs with the blunt side of my culling staff. He buckled backwards under the blow and the shot went high, hitting the ceiling. I sensed the attention of the brawlers around us suddenly turn on me and then felt rather than saw Navaari go into action. He was so fast his movements were blurred. I had only one target to worry about. The man in black had dropped his blaster as he had gone down but when he rolled over to get to his feet he reached around to his back and drew out a long blade then turned to face me.

His eyes were as blue as the sky and they looked at me with such intensity it was unnerving. Somewhere deep in the back of my mind I knew those eyes. We circled each other for a second then he moved. He was fast, but it was a move I knew and I countered it easily. I deflected his advances with the culling staff and managed to get in several hard blows before he found a way to block the staff and we began to fight in earnest. I don't know how long we went at it. It seemed like forever and there was a moment when I felt as though I had slipped backwards in time. I knew his

moves and he seemed to sense mine. When he managed to knock me on my ass and kick my weapon away from me I felt a shiver of fear. He lunged at me and we rolled on the floor amidst the broken glass, the blood and the mess of furniture. He managed to straddle me and had the knife at my throat, his free hand trying to pull away mine that was protecting my neck. With my other hand I reached up and from my hair I pulled the bone needle. I didn't even think about it I just plunged it as hard as I could into one of his hands. He yelled in pain, dropped his blade in surprise. I kicked around and twisted my body, throwing him off me. I was on my feet before he was. The bone needle had punched clear through his hand. I glanced at the bloody hair needle in my hand then I kicked the fallen knife as far away from him as I could and backed up to where my culling staff lay.

He moved suddenly and unexpectedly, picking up a fallen blaster and he pirouetted around to get off one shot, before Navaari could get to Lianna and pull her down. It caught her square between the shoulder blades. She screamed and arched backwards as the blast hit her and then fell to the ground. I had slipped the bone needle in my satchel and held my culling staff in both hands. I moved faster than I thought I ever could and flew at him, smashing the staff against the side of his knee. He went down in agony. I knelt on his chest with one knee and ripped off his mask.

In that moment he could have killed me if he had wished, so great was my surprise. In his ice blue eyes that I had once loved there was not an ounce of recognition. He did not know who I was. He had not seen past the face paint and clothes yet. My heart ached seeing him again and without thinking about the consequences I whispered his name out loud. His eyes suddenly widened as he realised that I was not a stranger. It took a few seconds more and he placed the face beneath the paint. A thousand questions flashed across his face and he opened his mouth to say something. Then he realised that we were on opposite ends of a fight and that I was not paying attention.

What he would have done if he had gotten free I don't know, he had been as shocked at seeing me as I had been seeing him. I did not think about it, I was faster than he was and unhurt. Before he could say my name or act I cat's pawed his jaw as hard as I could and knocked him out. I would have, could have killed him without even knowing who it was. I did not want to think about it. I knelt on the ground, reached out and touched his face, staring at him for what seemed to me to be forever. If Navaari had not made his way to me and physically yanked me to my feet I probably would still be sitting there.

"We leave now" He hissed. "Do not look back, the one you protect is safe and I am right behind you."

I did as he said. No hesitation and I did not look back. I could not look back. It would break my heart to do so. What was Jyrki doing here? Why was he after Lianna? None of this could be a coincidence. Had the Emperor foreseen this happening? There were too many questions, too many uncertainties with no answers. I made my way through the still chaotic, fighting crowd and slipped out the door to the outside. The cold air bit into my lungs with a sting that made my eyes water and the back of my throat ache. I sensed rather than saw Navaari behind me and I moved quickly to my ship with him following. He had Lianna slung over his shoulder.

I opened the door with the vocal pass command and without waiting to see if he made it on board ran to the cockpit and began the start up sequence that was already on emergency warm up. We began lift off when the comm traffic started telling me I could not take off that I was unauthorized to do so. I grabbed my headset and babbled some frantic garbage about having a medical emergency and I was taking off with or without permission. Their answer was very rude and made me laugh, but they let me go anyway. I guessed they had other things to worry about. I saw by the con panel light that the ramp was up and the door closed. I desperately



wanted to check and see if he and Lianna were okay but someone had to fly the ship. I shrugged off my cloak and the two satchels, sat in my chair and got to work. As I set the coordinates for Kerest into the nav computer my hands started to shake. I managed to punch the switch on the auto pilot before I had to run to the 'fresher to throw up.

I knelt in front of the toilet resting my head against the seat fighting the waves of nausea and dizziness. Shock was a funny thing. It snuck up on you when you least expected it. If this happened every time I got myself into a fight or a scrap I wasn't going to be much use to anyone. I might have stayed there on the floor forever but a soft knock on the door made me remember I was not alone. When I didn't answer, the door opened.

"I'm fine." I said without looking up.

I heard the tap run and then Navaari handed me a glass of water. He knelt by my side and studied my face. I rinsed my mouth out and spat very un-lady like in toilet. He waited until I was finished and took the glass back when I handed it to him. When my legs stopped shaking I got to my feet and cleaned my teeth. He said nothing. I went from the 'fresher into the crew quarters where Lianna was lying on a bed. I could see she was breathing but I touched my fingers to the pulse on her neck all the same. Just to feel it, just to be sure.

"She will live. She was lucky that blaster was set to stun and not kill. There is a burn on her back from the shot."

"I have a med-kit with bacta strips and synthflesh." I said going to fetch it.

I watched as Navaari rolled her over onto her side and cut away the rest of her top with a bone knife that was wickedly sharp. The blaster burn wasn't pretty but it would heal without a scar. I cleaned it up and laid a bacta bandage over it.

I prepped a syringe and sedated her. Navaari cocked his head in question.

"She needs to sleep and I don't feel like answering the questions she'll have seeing me like this or why you are onboard." I told him.

I watched as he laid a blanket over her gently and was reminded that he was a father. I wondered how old his daughter was.

"I need to go and wash this stuff off my face." I said but was surprised when he grasped my arm.

"No." He said shaking his head again. He let go of me and with a glance once more at Lianna he left the crew bunk room and walked with me to the galley.

"No?" I asked. "What do you mean no?"

He sighed. "How is it that you are so ignorant?" He asked, sounding almost angry for the first time since we had met. "How is it that Nikätza'arth'pavjäska has taught you nothing? How is it that he binds himself to you and you do not know even this simple thing?"

I shook my head at him. "What simple thing?"

He explained to me as though I were a small child. "It is our custom that we are masked. We do not show our true faces to the outside world, beyond the confines of our enclaves and clan. Our faces are private, sacred. Only the members of our tribes may see us uncovered. You are not of my tribe and I am not of yours. It would be taboo for me to see your true face out here, without proper ritual or ceremony. It is our way, A'myshk'a. It is a manner of protection that dates back to before the great Cold came. I would explain it in greater detail but that is not for me to do. This is the responsibility of Nikätza'arth'pavjäska. He gave you this name and made you one of us. He should have prepared you better." He was angry but not at me.

"There was no time. There has been no time." I said quietly.

"This duel life you lead, a reason it may be for your lack, but he should know better" He shook his head. "Uljask'peylan ji'rüşhjen taeami."

"A way will be found." I sighed.

"Yes."

I shook my head. I felt like bantha poodoo. I put the kettle on to make tea. I rummaged through the cupboard looking for the honey that had been left from the last big trip I had made in this ship. That seemed to me to be a life time ago but it wasn't.

"Will you drink tea?" I asked. "Or is there some weird code against that as well?"

He chuckled. "The drinking of tea is not forbidden."

I loaded mine with honey and sat at the table. I had the weirdest sense of having done this before and time seemed to swim. I rested my head in my hands and concentrated on breathing in and out.

Navaari spoke softly to me. "You were not born to this life and you are inexperienced in the ways yet you fight with a valiant heart and you keep your compassion. The shock you felt earlier will pass in time. If you continue down this path you will, perhaps, no longer feel so ill afterwards. But these feelings are normal and should not be ignored. After a great hunt we celebrate. We feast and we drink, we dance and we couple. These things allow the energy that is gathered from the hunt, the tensions that are created to flow back to the place where they came from." He cocked his head to one side. "Nikätza'arth'pavjäska must teach you the ways or lead you to someone who can. It is one thing to know how to fight. It is quite another to deal with how it will make you feel. It is not a life for everyone. You are well trained, you know how to defend yourself and you hold much grace in your movements but the consequences are difficult for you. If you continue along this way as untried as you are, it will eat you up from the inside, I fear." He shook his head. "Not even your magics will save you from that."

I sipped my tea silently and watched as he tilted his mask slightly to drink also.

"And, you should have a bone mask of your own." He added offhandedly, "Painted faces are for small children."

I just stared at him. I thought the painted mask was appropriate then because I felt like a child in his presence.

"I set course for Kerest. The journey will take about four hours or so." I told him after a very long pause. The honey in the tea made me feel better.

"I am grateful." Navaari said.

"It seemed to be the least I could do." I said.

There was a long silence. It was not uncomfortable but it was not easy either.

"You knew him." Navaari said after a while. "I saw your face when you were taking away his mask. The one in black, he is meaning something to you."

I got up to get more tea with more honey wondering how inappropriate it would be to add brandy to the mix. I didn't want to talk about Jyrki. I shut my eyes tightly as his face, his clear blue eyes, flashed in my mind. I had stabbed him through the hand, I had drawn blood from him, this man who had once been my friend, had once been someone I had loved with all my heart. I had smashed my fist into his face. We had tried to kill one another. The look of surprise, more than that the look of shock and hurt that had flashed through his eyes when he realised who it was he was fighting against. Why had he been there? What was really going on? Why was he trying to kill Lianna? What was she to them? What was she at all? I had no answers to any of my questions.

"He is someone I knew from my home." I said coldly.

"You have feelings for this man?"

"Once." I said but that did not seem to do it justice. I still had feelings for Jyrki, I just didn't know what they were any more.

"You did not expect to see him, nor he you?"

I shook my head.

"He is a part of your past but you cannot let go." Navaari stated flatly.

"It's complicated."

He laughed then. "Everything about you is complicated, Tjällh."

I shrugged. What could I say, he was right.

"Have you spoken of your bond with this man to Nikätza'arth'pavjäska?"

I made a derisive snort. "Not in any detail but he has a pretty good idea.

"Perhaps it would ease this burden on your soul if you did. Secrets will be tearing you apart." Navaari said.

"You have no idea." I said quietly, bitterly. The warning in my voice for him to back off did not go unnoticed but he ignored it.

"If you cannot confide in the one who is bound to you..."

I cut him off. "Za'ar is not bound to me. He is bound to no one. I do not have a clue what I am to him and I don't know what he is to me. I don't think I will ever know what he is to me, but bound, tied, attached to, whatever name or label you wish to put on it does not apply to either him or me." I said. "He makes no commitment to me nor I to him. Our lives, such as they are, do not allow this. Not now, not ever." I was shaking as I said these words.

Navaari raised his hand for me to stop. "A'myshk'a, you have my apology for my words. They are not meant to distress you further." He said.

I sighed as I sat back down at the table. "You are right. I am not used to this way of life. I almost killed a man tonight, someone I cared about even loved once to protect a woman I neither know nor like." I paused as emotion caught in my voice. "The man you know as Nikätza'arth'pavjäska is still a stranger to me. We have not spent much time with each other. We live in a world where time together is scarce. Our moments together are stolen, tentative and precious." I took a deep breath wondering why it was easier to talk to a stranger than to confide in someone I knew and cared about. "Our relationship is still...new and very...well, very...complicated." I said.

Navaari listened and was silent for a long time. "Among my people there is a saying. *We do not choose the flakes of snow the wind blows in our face.* I hear in your voice the passion you have, the pain you hold close, the uncertainty of your life, so I will tell you this one thing. Nikätza'arth'pavjäska would not have made you a part his clan were there not some connection, some very powerful feelings there. He, when I knew him, was not a man to be attaching himself to anything or anyone. He was aloof, separate and difficult to get to know. I do not need to see him with you to know that he is being drawn to you in a way he cannot explain or understand. That is what it means to be bound." He tapped his chest. "You are feeling the lack of his presence here. This pain, this need, it goes beyond words and deeds. I am seeing it in your eyes when you speak of him, when you think of him. This feeling you carry with you is a binding, a mating of spirit and soul. That is what it means to be bound. I am sorry I have no other words in this language to express it."

"Did he send you to Rothana? Did he know you would be there?" I asked after a moment.

Navaari shook his head. "No. I have neither seen nor spoken with him in many seasons, but the hunt on Kerest is one my people attend every year. It is a gathering of sorts for the scattered tribes. This fact would be known to him." He sensed my questions. "We do not question destiny, A'myshk'a. Nothing happens without reason, nothing. Sometimes we are too small, too close to see the bigger path. When all around you is snow, it is often difficult to see a single flake and when sometimes we seek only that single flake, we miss seeing the snow."

I smiled. "The Sand People from my home world say much the same thing."

Navaari nodded. "Same meanings, different words."

I nodded and went back to my tea. There were a lot of things I wanted to ask Navaari but couldn't find the words. Perhaps he understood this because he contented himself by telling me more about the token Thrawn had given me and about the man who had carved it. He had a wonderful storytelling voice and I was deeply grateful not to be alone. The rest of the journey to Kerest was passed quietly.

I landed the ship without incident and walked with Navaari to the ramp. I hated long drawn out goodbyes, they made me uncomfortable. I didn't know what to say to him and I didn't want another lecture on my ignorance of all things Dantassi.

The door opened and the ramp dropped and we both stared out onto this planet. It was eerie and barren looking. The space port we had landed in was small, isolated and unmanned. It was early by Kerest standard time and the dawn was still a few hours off. The air was bitterly cold and the wind bit at my skin.

"There's no one here." I said.

Navaari cocked his head to one side. "Not so as to be seen, but we are not alone."

"Are you certain this is where you want to be?" I asked suddenly concerned for him without knowing why.

I felt him smile beneath the mask he wore. "Yes, I am."

Glancing out at the bleak landscape I wasn't so certain. "Will you be okay?"

His laughter was warm but I shivered and not from the cold. This planet had a bad past and I felt it keenly. There were ghosts here and they were unhappy. I looked up at Navaari who nodded.

"Yes, yes I will be as you put it, okay."

"Thank you." I said a moment's hesitation. "I'm not sure what would have happened if you had not been there, if you not helped me on Rothana but knowing my luck I am sure that things would probably not have gone so well without you."

He bowed his head slightly, a gesture of acknowledgment. "It was an honour to meet you, Akiana'myshk'apavjäska." Then he took from his neck one of his amulets and placed it over my head, around my neck. "Wear this in remembrance." He said quietly.

"I have nothing to give to you."

He chuckled. "You have given me much." Then he removed a second necklace and pressed it into the palm of my hand. "This you will give to Nikätza'arth'pavjäska and tell him this *Amdau'inte mikka-mawri'Ka. Ta'chi'sah a'mawri'Ka.*"

I repeated the words and Navaari nodded. He touched three of his fingertips to his forehead then reached over and touched mine in the same place.

"We will meet again, if not in this lifetime, then in the next." He said and then he was gone. I watched him walk into the darkness until I could no longer see him. I waited until the cold won and then I closed the ship back up.

I looked in on Lianna, she was still asleep. Then I settled back into the pilot's seat and took off. Automated landing stations always scared the sandjiggers out of me, but this place was worse than most. Kerest was a creepy planet that was full of darkness. I had felt its restless spirits and was glad to be well away from it. I set the nav computer for Naboo and watched with a strange inner stillness as the stars spun and elongated. My ship felt strangely empty without Navaari's calm presence and I missed him which surprised me.

I looked at the small amulet he had given me. It was little flower with four petals, giving it a square shape. It was small and delicate, yellowed with age, and not carved from bone but something similar, tusk or tooth perhaps. The other piece, the one he had told me to give to Za'ar I studied closely. It was a claw, a large claw that had been carved into the shape of a standing bear. It was extraordinary.

Once I had checked the ship and made sure everything was running smoothly, I went to the 'fresher and began the process of washing away the Bone Trader guise. I

was glad to get back into ordinary clothes and put my hair back up. I made sure there was no trace of the face paint on me and folded up the Dantassi clothes, packing them back in the box Thrawn had delivered them in. Once the box and my culling staff were safely tucked away in their hiding places I settled back into my standard ship routine. I made some soup and picked up the book I had been reading. I expected that Lianna would be out for at least another hour or so. I took my mug of soup and my book back up to the cockpit and sat down, my usual feet upon the consol position. I tried to read but I couldn't concentrate so instead I stared out of the cockpit and let my thoughts drift. My life just kept getting stranger and stranger.

Lianna woke up about two hours after leaving Kerest, groggy and suspicious. She made her way up to the cockpit and without sitting demanded answers.

"How do you feel" I asked, ignoring her question, a trick I had learned from Thrawn. Instead I got up and led her to the common area, motioned for her sit at the table.

"What happened?" She pressed as I made tea.

"You were shot with a blaster." I told her. "How do you feel?"

"My head hurts, my back hurts and my mouth feels like a desert." She told me curtly

I handed her a cup of tea and sat across from her. "Drink, the honey will help. The headache and the dry mouth come from the sedative. Your back will heal and, if you want, there are pain killers in the medkit."

She shook her head, sipping the tea. We sat in silence for a long time and only after two cups of sweetened tea did she begin to look better.

"I suppose I owe you my life?" She asked.

"Just doing my job." I told her.

She gave me a look which could have killed a wamprat.

"The Emperor asked me to make sure that you were safe." I said cagily. "He was concerned for his favourite dancer." I added a little more tartly than I had meant to.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "What happened? Tell me exactly."

I drew a deep, slow breath, time see how well I could lie and whether or not she could sense it.

"I heard the commotion while I was doing an external ship check. By the time I got to the cantina all madness had broken out." I said. "It was just a big mess, typical cantina brawl and someone decided to up the ante by pulling out a blaster and shooting at you. Once you went down it was a total free-for-all"

"How did you get me out?"

"Sheer force of will. You're not that light." I told her with enough annoyance in my voice to make her think that this was all some great inconvenience to me.

She scrubbed her face with her hands and sighed.

"What?" I asked her not expecting an answer.

"You should have left me there." She said wearily.

"Why?"

Her jaw tightened and I didn't think she would actually answer me but she did. "I was supposed to retrieve something in payment for the Emperor and now I have failed." For the very first time since I had first laid eyes on her she looked young and vulnerable.

I just stared at her the without a word got up and fetched her satchel. I tossed it on the table and sat back down.

"You dropped this." I told her.

She grabbed it and gave me a nasty look. She checked the satchel over and then without opening it tucked it down by her feet.

"I didn't look inside if that's what you are thinking." I told her. "I don't want to know what is inside."

She looked up at me. There were many questions in her eyes but she was not about to start the conversation.

I sighed. "Look, I was asked to do a job, I did it. I am pretty certain that while you can dance and you're probably quite good at it you are not just a dancer you are something else, something dangerous and deadly."

She narrowed her eyes at me and silently asked me how I knew all of this.

I shrugged with one shoulder, "It's tiny little things that give you away, most people wouldn't see them but I do. How you assess where you are, how you size up the people you meet. How you looked around my ship when you came on board. Stuff like that."

She opened her mouth to say something but I held up my hand to shut her up.

"I don't know what you are and I don't want to know. You carry a heavy secret around and it's weighing you down. The Emperor obviously values you and you care about him a great deal. He asked me to do a job I did it. Let's leave it at that, okay."

She drew a deep breath and sat back gingerly in her chair. "You really are not at all what you appear to be." She said after a long weighted silence.

I gave her an even stare. "None of us are."

She regarded me carefully for a moment. "I start to see why Lord Vader keeps you around. Tell me something is Merlyn even your real name?"

I laughed. "Yes, yes it is but I am betting Lianna isn't yours."

She went to speak but I shook my head again. "Look, I don't care what your real name is, who you are or even what you really do. In fact, the less I know about you and whatever it is your job is the better." I told her. "I work for Lord Vader, I keep his schedule up to date and run errands for him and do everything else that a personal assistant does. That the Emperor thinks I can be occasionally useful outside of that is flattering but it is not my main job and I have no intention and no desire to be more than I am right now. I am not a threat to you." I said. "I am not your enemy."

She stared at me with her incredibly green eyes for a long time and I held her gaze until we both looked away at the same time. "You are not my friend either." She replied grudgingly.

"Well I can live with that." I said lightly getting up to make myself another cup of tea.

We passed the rest of the journey back to Naboo in silence. I suppose we were both sorting out our own thoughts. She had retired to the sleeping quarters and I had stayed mainly in the cockpit. I managed to doze a little before we hit Naboo space and landed quietly at the Retreat. We arrived after sundown and I watched quietly as Lianna left the ship. Her only acknowledgment of the conversation we had had earlier was a nod of her head as she walked down the ramp and headed towards the retreat complex before I closed the up the door half way. It would do the ship good to have fresh air exchanged for the re-circulated air but I didn't want the ship wide open. If anyone wanted to visit they would have to knock.

Even after such a short trip I was always careful to run a thorough check on all the ship's systems. This meant computer run diagnostics and a personal look at the mechanics. While the on board computer ran self diagnostics I was in the engine room going over everything with a fine tooth comb. Some pilots I had known in my life found this procedure to be either a waste of time or utterly boring but I found it to be neither. It was always good to have the comp run self diagnostics and I liked being in the engine room. It was warm and the smell of hydraulic fuel and grease was always a comfort to me, reminding me of home.

With a flashlight in hand I began my inspection. I loved the main engine assembly, looking at everything that made this ship go. Usually people had astromech

droids do this sort of work but since I had learned most of my mech skills from Jyrki and he had hated astromech droids I had never learned to rely on them.

This engine was a beauty. The *Ahnkeli'Su'udelma* had been highly modified. Her engine was top of the line and new. Even so, that being said, it didn't hurt to check it over. I tweaked it and made sure the parts that needed to be lubricated were lubed and the bits that needed fluids were topped up and generally looked to make sure that wear and tear wouldn't suddenly break something mid flight. Mostly, I just loved to look at it. Once I had finished with the engine I started the general clean up.

It was my father who had instilled this need for order on board a ship in me. He had made the mass cleanups after each trip fun so I had never minded the process of cleaning the 'fresher, the galley or the common areas. This trip had been short and sweet and there was no real mess to deal with. Lianna had left nothing on board and no trace that she had ever really been here yet I felt the residue of her presence keenly like a slight hint of perfume. The echoes of our conversation lingered. It wasn't so much about what we had said to each other but rather more about the things left unspoken. I was lost in these thoughts when I heard a banging on the side of the ship. Someone wanted to visit. I looked at my chrono, it was later than I had realized. Time had slipped away without me noticing it. I made my way to the entrance door and opened it up again. I didn't smile when glowing red eyes met mine.

"Permission to come aboard?" Thrawn asked.

I made hand gesture that said *get on board* and walked back to the common area. I heard the door close up and steady footsteps follow me.

"Why are you here? Shouldn't you be off saving the Galaxy or something?" I snapped as we walked back up to the common area.

He arched an eyebrow. "You are angry with me?" He asked.

I didn't answer him instead I fussed about the galley. "Tea?" I asked as I put the kettle on the stove.

"Thank you." Thrawn said coolly, taking off his jacket and sitting down at the table.

We did not speak but I felt his eyes follow my every move. I sat down across from him and we drank tea in silence until I broke it. I was exhausted. In the last forty or so hours I had had maybe three hours of good sleep and two bowls of unpalatable soup. I had no patience.

"Why are you here?" I asked again.

He said. "I wanted to see how you fared after your first solo mission for the Emperor."

"Well, you see me. I am fine." I could not keep the anger out of my voice.

"A'myshk'a..." He began but I cut him off with a flick of my hand.

"What does Tjällh mean?" I asked sharply.

His jaw clenched and there was a sudden hardness in his eyes. "Where did you hear that word?" He asked carefully.

"What does it mean?" I asked again.

He drew a deep breath. "It is Dantassi-Cheunh." He said slowly. "I need to know the context in which it was used to know what meaning to tell you."

I dug in my pocket and brought out the pendant Navaari had given me to pass onto Za'ar and laid it on the table in front of Thrawn. "Amdau'inte mikka-mawri'Ka. Ta'chi'sah a'mawri'Ka" I said, repeating Navaari's words.

Thrawn picked the pendant up and studied it carefully. After a very long silence he asked. "Did he give you one as well?" He laid the bear amulet back on the table.

I pulled the tiny flower pendant out from under my shirt. He stood up and came over to me, pulled me to my feet, close to him and picked up the pendant between his thumb and his forefinger to study it carefully. I looked up into his eyes

but I could not read the emotion that was there. When he let it go he did not sit back down but instead leant against the galley counter with his arms folded over his chest distancing himself from me.

I sat back down. I was too tired for games. I just buried my head in my hands.

"What happened?" He asked after a long silence. There was a thread of steel in his voice I was not used to hearing.

"Did you know he would be there?" I countered

Thrawn shook his head. "No, but Rothana is a stop-over place for many Bone Traders and the hunt on Kerest takes place soon so I had hoped that if you needed help you would find it." He said. "That you would meet up with this particular man..." He shook his head again. "Not even I would have expected this coincidence."

"He said there was no such thing as coincidence." I said.

"Well, you do have a strange way of attracting the most unlikely of circumstances about you." Thrawn said softly.

I picked up the bear amulet from the table and played with it. "This means something to you doesn't it?"

"It is Kirja'navaar'inkjerii's way of reminding me of the past." He said evenly.

"The past has a funny way of catching up with us doesn't it?" I said shakily and suddenly it hit me like a sandstorm. He did nothing as I buried my face in my hands and burst into tears. I was furious with myself for crying but I couldn't stop it from happening either. Thrawn stood and watched without saying a word or moving to comfort me. He waited until I was done with crying and had wiped my tears from my face angrily before he spoke.

"What happened on Rothana that has you so tied up in knots?" He asked.

I looked up at him. "What does Tjällh mean?" I pressed. I could play these games too.

He sighed. "It is an archaic form of the word that means child, but it is not often used in that context. Did Kirja'navaar'inkjerii call you this?"

I nodded.

"After he knew that I was the one who named you."

I nodded again wondering why that was significant.

"He was angry with me, was he not?" Thrawn said evenly.

"Yes."

"Did he tell you how we knew each other?"

"He said you helped him and his people defeat invaders from taking their planet, that you and a small band of your warriors saved them."

Thrawn gave me a tight smile. "Then he did not tell you the whole story." He said. "Tjällh is an avuncular term, a term of endearment usually, but not exclusively, used between fathers and daughters. While the word is not meant to be condescending adults would not call one another that. It is a diminutive used for the inexperienced, for female children. The male version would be Tjäl'te. There is no direct translation anymore and it is seldom used outside of the family or clan circle and only used by the Dantassi. The use of this word from one to another implies a bond of some sort. In Chiss society no one would utter this word. It is considered old fashioned and meaningless."

"Why would he use this term for me? I am not his daughter or part of his family and he went out of his way to make sure I stayed hidden under the face paint because I was not of his clan." I was confused.

"It is complicated."

"Everything about you and me is complicated!" I shouted getting up out of my chair wanting to just walk away from him, from the ship, from everything. Suddenly the only thing I wanted was a hot bath and my bed. I grabbed my jacket and my satchel and went to leave. He moved faster than I would have given him credit for and



caught me by the arm. His eyes searched my face looking for answers to question he left unspoken.

"Tell me what happened." He hissed between clenched teeth. His grip on my arm strong enough to tell me he was serious about wanting an answer.

"Why? Why do you even want to know?"

"Because whatever it is you are afraid to tell me is eating you up inside. I see it in your eyes. It haunts you."

"What do you care?"

He took a deep breath but did not let go of my arm. "Because, as Kirja'navaar'inkjerii so cleverly reminded me, I have a responsibility to you and I have been amiss in it."

"Responsibility?" I hissed.

"Among other things," He stroked my face gently with his free hand. "Yes."

His aloofness and his cool tone I could deal with but this tenderness broke through my anger and I suddenly felt utterly lost.

"Talk to me." He insisted holding both my arms.

"I almost killed him." I whispered. I did not want to say these words out loud.

Wary puzzlement flashed across his face. "Who?"

"Jyrki." I said.

This time he did not try to keep his face expressionless. "I think you had better start from the beginning." He steered me to a chair and I found myself once again sitting at the table.

Without arguing I told him everything that had happened. He did not once interrupt or comment. He sat almost stone still across from me with his fingers steepled at his chin, never taking his eyes from mine. When I was done I had the feeling that time had also stopped and was holding its breath. He reached over to where the bear amulet still lay and picked it up. His fingers caressed the carving thoughtfully.

"I told you the last time we sat here about my first meeting with the Dantassi. I also told you that although I had searched for the ones who had named me and saved my life I never found them again and in that I did not lie. What I did not tell you is that I found others of the same clan, scattered throughout the galaxy, nomadic and hunting. Through these meetings I soon learned that while the Dantassi travel far and wide and are often solitary they are by no means out of touch. They manage to communicate with each other by many, many means and through this, keep up the closeness of community I had come to admire while living with the North Shield clan. Over the course of several years, although I was still considered very young by Chiss standards I had managed to attend many hunts and continue to learn the Dantassi ways. I managed to combine my love for these people and their world with my own world, my own obligations and the expectations of my family, but it was not always easy. It was my deepest secret." He paused. "I heard about the problem the clan on Hjal was facing through this network and I arranged with as many of the Hunters I knew as I could that we would fight these Traeth. We trained and planned for several weeks before we made our way to Hjal. As Kirja'navaar'inkjerii told you we trained their people and we beat back the Ninlial."

"How?" I asked.

"We used our weaknesses as strengths; we turned their strengths against them. They had weapons that could do terrible amounts of damage but what do you shoot these weapons at when you cannot find your quarry? We went to ground and we used the Hjal knowledge of this planet to help. We fought a guerrilla war against a people who had no concept about such a thing. The Ninlial were a race of people who valued order to the point of obsession and had almost no concept of chaos. A guerrilla style war was beyond their ability to comprehend."

"How did you know this?"

"I studied their art, their culture." He replied. "And through those studies I learned their weaknesses which we then used them to our advantage. The Dantassi adapt well and learn quickly. It was not difficult to find ways to circumnavigate the attacks. The Ninlial saw this as a sort of magic and feared us, feared me. They are a race blind to the Force, blind to all that they cannot see directly and their thinking is very linear. They fear anything they cannot comprehend. They cannot comprehend that which they cannot see." He explained. He stared at the bear amulet he held. "Several days after our victory, I found myself in a very bad situation mostly through my own lack of foresight. I would have been killed had Kirja'navaar'inkjerii not been nearby and saved my life. I had been scouting a path across an ice field and for one moment I let my concentration slide. I did not see the crevasse until I was in it, or better to say hanging from the wall by a bone knife. He had seen me suddenly vanish and knew what had happened. It was only through his fast thinking and strength that I live. He did not tell you this, did he?"

I shook my head.

Thrawn's mouth tightened. "Unlike the Wookiee or the Gungan, the Dantassi do not believe in the concept of a life debt. They do not hold with the idea that the people they have saved are forever indebted to them. They believe, instead, that to save someone's life is to become responsible for that person. Kirja'navaar'inkjerii takes this responsibility seriously." He said.

"What does this have to do with me?"

Thrawn smiled. "It is very rare for a Chiss to be accepted into the Dantassi. I was an exception. That I made you a part of the tribe I am a member of by my actions will no doubt raise many eyebrows. You are a'Traeth. Not only are you not Dantassi but you are not even Chiss, you are an off worlder and neither the Chiss nor the Dantassi are known for their love of outsiders. That you are of my making means that I am responsible for you. This, in turn, means Kirja'navaar'inkjerii feels he is also responsible for you through his responsibility for me and in some twisted accordance with the Dantassi tradition he is." He sighed and sat back in the chair.

"Kirja'navaar'inkjerii takes tradition very seriously; he no doubt, finds it difficult to understand why I have not given up everything to live the Dantassi way."

I folded my arms across my chest and scowled at him.

"I had no idea if you would meet another Bone Trader. I only knew that dressed as one you stood a better chance should you need to hide behind a disguise. I knew this because it is more than just a mask for me or for you. Through ceremony and ritual I made it a part of you and I knew you would take it seriously. I had hoped that should you need help you would find it but believe me that you would meet Kirja'navaar'inkjerii was as far from my thoughts as sunbathing in the Dune sea is."

"Why did you make me part of this world, a part of your clan?"

He smiled but he didn't answer me.

I made a face so he continued. "Listen to me carefully. I cannot tell you if the Emperor knew what was going to happen or who would be there. That he is powerful is of no question but such a power..." Thrawn shrugged. "The Dantassi believe that nothing happens without reason as do the Chiss to a certain extent. In this case I am inclined to agree with them. Nothing about you is ordinary, no matter what you want to think." He sighed. "You did not kill anyone. When you fought your friend you had no idea who it was and that was probably a good thing. You accomplished your mission, most likely exceeding the expectations of the Emperor and finding if not a friend in this woman you saved, then an ally. You managed to find the one Dantassi hunter in the galaxy who not only could help you but through obligations you had no idea of had to help you. He thinks highly of you despite my inability to fulfill what he sees as my obligations to your Dantassi education. And do not forget I have seen you

in action, so to speak. You are surprisingly resilient." He stroked the side of my face with the backs of his fingers. I closed my eyes as I leaned into his touch. "One day when you trust me enough and you are not completely exhausted I would like to hear the whole story of what lies between you and this Jyrki Andando but until that time I can wait. I will tell you with absolute certainty that this man from your past is bound to your destiny in a way the Dantassi would call ki'ymäutth, an unbreakable, eternal bond. Your lives are wound together but he is no longer your friend."

"Are you?" I asked.

"Am I what?"

"My friend?"

He looked me straight in the eyes for a very long time before answering. "No," He said softly. "I am far more than that."

I didn't know how to respond to that but I felt a great tug at my heart. Was this what Navaari had meant by being bound to a person, being bound to this person? The silence between us was heavy. Things that perhaps should have been said were left unspoken and when I could not stand it anymore I asked the least intrusive question that was on my mind.

"How do you know Navaari thinks highly of me?"

Thrawn sat back in his chair and chose his words with care.

"Kirja'navaar'inkjerii had two younger sisters, twins. They were both killed during the conflict with the Ninlial. Their grandfather had carved them each a small amulet in the shape of a flower to celebrate their birth. These small plants grow in the very harshest of climates, producing clusters of tiny red berries in the autumn and in the spring delicate little white flowers that have a beautiful and distinctive perfume. The berries are sweet, edible and valued as a food source, the flowers have healing properties. The Hjal call them Crackerberry flowers. One of his sister's amulets he passed on to his daughter when she was born, the other he always wore. Now you wear it. That he gave something so meaningful to you tells me you must have made quite an impression."

I shook my head. "He said the same thing about you giving me the little skull amulet."

Thrawn said nothing and we just stared at each other for a long while. Then because I was so tired I just rested my head down on my arms and closed my eyes. I didn't want to talk about anything anymore. I heard him get up and move about the galley, the clink of cups as he washed them out. I felt his hand on my shoulder and I got up almost droid like.

"Come, I'll take you home. You need to sleep." He said. I let him put my jacket over my shoulders and take my satchel. I glanced around and made sure everything that was supposed to be turned off was off. We left my ship and I locked her up. He had a small two seat transport waiting and the trip around the lake was a blur. I unlocked the door and he followed me in. I felt like a ghost. He turned on the light under the counter in the kitchen, filled the kettle and turned it on. I watched as he poured a little brandy from the bottle he had left here from the night we had seen the ballet in a cup and added a small amount of honey. When the water had boiled he added that to this strange brew and walked over to the living room with the cup and me in tow. We sat on the couch, side by side and he handed me the cup.

"Drink." He said, brushing hair from my face.

I looked at the cup suspiciously.

"Normally the Dantassi would use crackerberry liqueur as it is a little sweeter but the brandy is a good substitute. I have a hunch that you would lie in bed and instead of sleeping you will fret and think about everything that has happened without end. You are over tired and over wrought. This will help." He explained.

I sipped the drink carefully. It was sweet and hot with just the right amount of brandy. I wondered what crackerberry liqueur tasted like. The silence sat between us like a wall. Finally I turned to look at him.

"Why was Jyrki even there, Za'ar?" This question burned in me. Thrawn was right I didn't know how to let it go. His face had softened at the use of his Dantassi name. I hadn't meant to speak it but somehow it had slipped out.

"I do not know." He replied. "Perhaps to discover the answer to this you need to know what your young dancer friend was doing there."

I shook my head. "I don't want to know that." I told him. "Whatever it was it had nothing to do with dancing, she isn't my friend and I don't want to get involved."

He nodded and frowned. "Did he recognize you?" He asked.

I hesitated a moment then gave a small nod. "He didn't at first but..."

"But?"

"When I said his name out loud he knew. It just slipped out. I was so surprised."

He sat back into the couch and sighed. "I am betting he was as well."

"I think he might be a part of this rebellion, the ones who blew up the Death Star." I said after a very long pause.

Thrawn looked at me. "Have a care what you say." He said quietly.

I sipped my drink, tucked my legs up under me, jax like, and leaned against him, resting my head against his shoulder. He shifted to accommodate the weight of my body and wrapped his arm about my shoulders. I was too tired to consider the situation odd, instead I welcomed his presence. I allowed a little smile to myself as he plucked the hair sticks from my hair and laid them on the table.

"Do you remember the night of the Grand Ball, when you came to my flat?" I asked.

"Of course."

"The argument you overheard me having was with Jyrki, not a holo from home." I said.

He looked at me, I felt his body stiffen. "He was actually in your apartment?"

"He snuck in and out. I don't know how but he's very...resourceful and he's a force user." I said. "He said he had come to rescue me, he thought I was being held against my will."

"Why would he have had that idea?" He asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I really don't know. Not from me that is for sure, I like my job, remember? He thinks the Empire is evil and he hates the Emperor with a passion that's frightening. He assumed I would too. He thought that I was being forced to work here with no choice in the matter." I said. "He risked his life to come and get me out." I stopped to steady my voice. "When I refused to go with him we had a terrible fight. He said some awful things to me and I ...I slapped him when he called me a palace doxy because of how I was dressed. He was so shocked that I would like working for the Empire. I had never seen him so hurt." I had to stop and cover my mouth with my hand to stave back the emotion that threatened to pour out.

Thrawn drew a deep breath. "He is the one who thinks you are betraying what he stands for. He was the one feeding you the information about the Jedi children being slaughtered. No wonder you were so upset." He said softly, thoughtfully. "I should have seen this." Then he added with a touch of anger. "You may be many things, my dear, but a palace doxy is most assuredly not one of them."

I nodded but there was a lump in my throat. "In the end he was right because I'm betraying him now, aren't I? Just by telling you this...."

Thrawn considered this for a moment but did not answer the question, instead he asked. "Is he a part of this rebellion? Do you know that for absolute certain?"

"No." I said after thinking about it. "He did not say that he was a part of it in exact words. He just implied that the rebellion was right to destroy the Death Star."

Thrawn nodded. "Do you think he will try to find you again?"

"I don't know." I said. "I hope not."

"For his sake so do I." He spoke icily. I glanced up at him but his face gave nothing away. Only the slight clenching of his jaw told me he was angry, although I wasn't sure why.

"What was he doing on Rothana? Who were those people he was with? Why was he after Lianna? Why didn't he kill her? Why was the blaster set to stun?" I asked.

"Good questions." Thrawn said, running his fingers idly through my hair.

"Too many questions." I countered stifling a yawn. "And no answers."

"Hm." He said. "Answers will come in due time but when they do you may not like them."

I sighed. I didn't like any of this. I didn't like where it was going at all. Waves of weariness crashed over me and I let it come. The last thing I remember clearly were his fingertips caressing my face. I knew he was speaking to me but I didn't hear the words. I only knew that as long as he had his arm wrapped around me and while I was curled up next to his warmth that I was, for a short time, safe. After everything that had happened, it was a welcome sensation. With the sound of his voice in my ears I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

I woke to the sound of a raging storm outside. Thunder boomed and lightning seared the sky shaking the house. The wind howled and for a moment I had no idea where I was. The disorientation of sleeping like the dead made me slow and as I swung myself out of bed, I wondered how exactly had I gotten there. I had no memory of actually going to bed. I was still completely dressed with the exception of my boots. I sat for a moment on the edge of the bed shaking off the sleep that refused to go. I felt as though I was trying to claw my way up from the bottom of some murky river. With a yawn I made my way to the kitchen. What I needed was 'caf. While that brewed I sat at the breakfast bar. Only after staring at it for about five minutes did I notice the envelope with my name on it, Thrawn's handwriting, as always, beautiful and perfect. I opened it up and slipped out the letter he had left me.

*A'mia Tekari,*

*I do not pretend to understand why you insist on trying to keep these secrets you carry with you to yourself. They wear you down and burden you. I understand fully that you opened up to me last night only because you were so exhausted and I pushed. I hope that in time it won't take such extremes for you to trust me. I am not your enemy.*

*What you spoke to me of last night will remain in confidence. You have not betrayed anyone or anything. There was no information in what you told me that would require me to act upon it and certainly no substantial evidence to support opening any investigation. I would, however, recommend for your own peace of mind that you discuss some of these things with Lord Vader. He is directly responsible for you, your job and would perhaps help you decide a course of action regarding your suspicions about your friend. On a side note, I can assure you that the house you currently live in has no listening devices in it and that no one is spying on you.*

*I tell you all of this because I know that while you will put on that stoic face of yours, this conflict between you and this man from your past, between your desire to protect your family, your friend and your loyalty to the Empire will tear you apart. Just as a Star ship cannot function with two captains at the helm you will find it is almost impossible to serve two masters, something to consider.*

*In the next while duty will keep me busy and, more often than not, away but you will always have a way to reach me if you should need to. This frequency for holo transmissions is private and combined with a clearance code (your favourite stone) will ensure your message will be delivered securely to me. If you, as I do, prefer a more old fashioned way of communication, then a man called Jarack Behl. He has been made aware that you might wish to use his services. He will get in touch with you to give you the contact information necessary for you to have letters delivered. He is an Imperial Officer worthy of my trust.*

*Lastly, I offer something for your consideration. You told me last night that Kirja'navaar'inkjerii had been watching Jyrki and his people for some time before your dancer friend entered the room. He told you that they had been waiting for her. The first and perhaps most pressing question that springs to my mind is how did they know she would be there? Where are these people getting their information from?*

*I have said it before and I will reiterate here. Trust is a delicate matter in our business; it is not given easily or lightly. Be mindful of this, my dear. I hope that you slept well.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia,  
Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

With a cup of 'caf in my hand, I sat and stared at his letter reading the same lines over and over again.

*'The first and perhaps most pressing question that springs to my mind is how did they know she would be there? Where are these people getting their information from?'*

Where indeed? I knew the only person I had spoken to about what was happening had been Thrawn and I trusted him. So how had Jyrki and his gang known? This was not a good way to begin my day. It was already very late as I had slept in well past my usual get out of bed time plus the weather was not helping my mood any. I had decided I wasn't going to venture out of the house. I was pretty sure that my taking a day off would not be noticed by anyone. I had no illusions about my place in the Empire.

Thrawn was right. I would have to talk about this with Lord Vader, sooner or later. That was a conversation I was not looking forward to. What a mess. I sighed as I folded Thrawn's letter back up and slipped it into its envelope. I would tuck it away with the other letters I had from him. Hand written treasures. Since there was nothing else to be done about it for now I decided to have a bath and at least try to salvage what was left of my day. I hoped that the rest of the time I had left on Naboo would be uneventful and boring but I wasn't going to hold my breath.

## **CHAPTER 8**

*Chut chut, Captain,*

*I apologise for the long delay in replying to your letter, I started one about a billion times but somehow just never seemed to be able to finish it. It is difficult to sort out my thoughts when it comes to communicating with you.*

*First I should probably apologise for falling asleep like that. Odd really, I don't think I have actually slept curled up in someone's arms since I was a small child. It's a little embarrassing, to be honest, so thank you for being so understanding. And, since you asked, I slept like the dead.*

*There are things you wrote about in your letter which have been stuck in my head. I think about them over and over again. The primary one being, how did Jyrki know? I have no answer to this. Aside from you, I discussed what I was doing with no one. Not even Lord Vader knew the exact nature of my job. He said, and I quote, 'The details do not concern me. As long as you do your job for me, I do not care what else you do.' I don't argue with him when he gets in one of these moods. Certainly these people are getting information from somewhere inside but whom, where and how... I don't know.*

*You know, I am not Intel so it's not my job to sort this out but it does make me wonder if I should be writing some sort of a report or something. This is not exactly my area of expertise. I would be glad of any guidance you should have in this matter and I will take you up on your advice and speak with Lord Vader about it all. I wish to do this in person rather than any other means of communication but he doesn't want me to join him until after the relocation so this presents a bit of a time gap. How long can one sit on information like this before the higher ups get cross? If I lose my job because of Jyrki, I swear I will kill him.*

*On a side note, while I am grateful for your discretion in this matter do not ever question my loyalty to the Empire, to Lord Vader. Maybe my hesitation seems as though I am torn, I can tell you that I am not. Jyrki burned his bridge with me the night he broke into my flat. I don't think I love him anymore but sometimes it is hard to let go of what he meant to me. How does one let go of the past when it keeps showing up on one's doorstep?*

*You asked me about Jyrki and after lying awake pretty much every night ever since thinking about it, I guess I should try to clarify some of it all for you, and for me. Oddly enough it all seems bigger, more devastating in my head than when I try to write it out. In the end there is not much to tell, really. I was just a kid when my father hired him but we got along right from the very start. Jyrki taught me to repair ships and defend myself.*

*He was the first person who took my love of fixing things and interest in mechanics seriously and didn't just blow it off as a young girl's whim. He listened to me and he was kind. I suppose, looking back, it was only natural that he was the first man I ever utterly fell in love with. I gave my heart away without thinking and I pretty much worshipped the ground he walked on. I was a teenager and he was hiding a great big secret. I thought he loved me as well but I believe he loved his secret more. That's not very fair but I think it is the truth.*

*He has a past that is very dark and, I think, quite scary. I know there were a lot of things that he never told me or even hinted at, but he was hard and he was dangerous. I just never saw that side of him before. Things happened to him that I cannot even begin to imagine. He never spoke of any of his past while we were still speaking to each other. I had no idea what his motives for the things he did were until, perhaps the night he came to save me from the Empire.*

*I never knew or put two and two together that he was force sensitive and that he was quite powerful, powerful enough to be able to hide it from me until very recently. His reasoning behind not being able to return my feelings for him had something to do with a Jedi code of not being allowed relationships, at least that is what he implied. He seemed to think that what he is would have placed my life, my family's life in danger. I don't actually know that much about it. Jedi Lore, it seems, is a bit of a taboo subject. Lord Vader gets very tetchy when I bring it up. I wish I knew how to put into words how I feel. I can't say that I really understand any of it, to be honest. I absolutely do not know why I am telling you all of this but you asked and you seem to care.*

*You talked of my strange habit of keeping secrets and it made me think about it. Ever since I can remember I have been different. I have always been able to 'hear' people's thoughts, sense things and do things that were unusual. As a small child I learned that this was not a good thing and I learned to keep it hidden, all of it. I suppose I got used to being a keeper of secrets. I talk to you, not only because you somehow have this magical way of pulling information out of me but because, for whatever misguided reason, I actually trust you. And maybe I just like making you work for it, but I am still undecided about this. When keeping secrets becomes a habit, sharing them is a very difficult thing to do, even perceived ones. I am strangely grateful that you do push, although I am never certain of why. It is a kind of game playing, though, isn't it?*

*The past week has been a bit chaotic here. The Imperial Court will be moving back to Coruscant soon so all preparations are now in full swing. I find it sort of strange how crazy some people get over the smallest things. I will be eternally grateful to get back to some semblance of normal.*

*I have had some interesting run-ins with a Grand Admiral named Zaarin. His manner is somewhat abrupt and extremely arrogant. He gets cross that I can't tell him where Lord Vader is. He is a little scary and very oily. Oddly enough, when he shows up I find myself thinking of you. How strange is that?*

*While he makes me think of you, he, himself, gives me the creeps to be honest. I hope he won't be attending the Nubian Gala because I don't much feel like being polite to him. I actually don't feel much like going but I will be there at Lord Vader's insistence. Imperial protocol really annoys the sandjiggers out of me sometimes.*

*I guess I should wrap this up since the courier will pick it up shortly. I didn't think I would write such a long letter. Maybe it is easier to talk to you through a piece of paper? Or maybe it is just that we don't really get that much time to talk? I suppose that's normal in our line of work. I feel I know so little about yet you have become a part of my life here. I also know that when you are around me, my life is anything but boring. I am just not sure this is a good thing.*

*I hope that you are well and, as usual, saving the galaxy from evil doers. Again, thank you for your kindnesses.*

*Kaniwaturiki kinkin  
Merlyn*

There were days when all I seemed to do was deal with paperwork and this was never more true than when I walked into the office and discovered a ton of mail already waiting for me as if I had done nothing the day before. My droid brought me 'caf and I sat down to get work done. It had been about a week since I had written and sent off my letter to Captain Thrawn and since then life had been very, very busy. It wasn't that this was a bad thing but the first memo I read made me roll my eyes in despair and it was just the beginning.



**TO: Lord Darth Vader**

**FROM: The Imperial Social Division**

**RE: The Annual Nubian Gala, Theed, Naboo, 2nd reminder.**

Your Lordship, As you know it is almost time for the annual Nubian Gala which, as you know, is held each year to celebrate the Emperor's visit to Naboo and to wish him a safe return to Coruscant. As always the Gala will be held at the Imperial Palace in Theed. Formal dress is required. It would add greatly to the atmosphere if you would grace us with your presence. Should you be unable to attend then please indicate who shall be representing you in your stead. We would be greatly appreciative of an answer in this matter at your earliest convenience.

Yours Truly,

Marlann Taralae

Imperial Social Director.

**Outgoing scandoc transmission**[timestamp 09:43 cst]>>> Lord Vader, Here is the current list of things that need your attention.

---Invitation Response for the Nubian Gala in Theed. I have received the second reminder now and need to know what to tell them.

---Meeting reminder: Prince Xizor, at 13:00hrs CST, tomorrow via holo. This meeting has been postponed twice. His office is getting tetchy about it. Do you wish me to confirm or reschedule?

---Imperial Court will be relocating back to Coruscant in seven days; do you have any wishes or special requests with regards to your office in this matter?

---Can you please send me an updated schedule? I have had G.A. Zaarin asking for your whereabouts several times in a row now and I think he is getting tired of me telling him I do not know where you are, how long you will be gone for and when you will be back. He says he has important news for you which he will only deliver in person. You don't want to know the reply I gave him the last time he accosted me about this, suffice to say he is a little annoyed. Can you please either contact him at your earliest convenience or let me know when he will be able to speak with you directly?

--- Is there an ETA on when I will see you in person again?

<<< **End Transmission**

**Incoming scandoc transmission**[timestamp 10:38 cst]>>> Miss Gabriel, thank you for the fifth reminder about this up and coming event, however, I shall not be attending this season's Nubian Gala no matter how many times you inform me about it. As you are well aware, I have better things to do with my time than watch the entire Imperial Court fawn over itself. You may make the appropriate excuses as you see fit, although you should be aware that while I do enjoy the use of your 'He's hunting rebels' line, it is not standard protocol when turning down an invitation. Try to be a little more diplomatic in your responses. As my Personal Assistant, you will go in my place and represent me. An expense account has been created for you should you require appropriate clothing for this event and HR will send you the details. Alert me if they do not. Do not bother me further with this particular matter.

--- The meeting with Xizor can be confirmed but at 14:30 not 13:00.

--- Imperial court office relocation is your job deal with it as you see fit.  
--- G.A. Zaarin has the ability to reach me at his leisure and the information as to my whereabouts is available to him. He does not need to talk to you to schedule a meeting with me he can easily obtain that information from my aide-de-camp. Why he should be asking you for this information when he has clearance to obtain it himself is beyond me. Maybe you should stop smiling  
so much, you do seem to attract a lot of attention.  
--- Once the relocation to Coruscant is completed I shall request your presence.  
Curb your impatience.  
<<< **End transmission**

**TO: Miss Merlyn Ty'Erijann Gabriel**  
**FROM: The Department of Human Resources**  
**RE: Expense Account**

Miss Gabriel, at the request of Lord Vader an expense account has been created in your name. Enclosed in the following package are the details you will need in order to activate it. Please be aware that while the account has granted you a certain amount of freedom due to the nature of the requesting party, your expenditures will be monitored for abuse. If you have any questions regarding this or any other HR issues do not hesitate to ask. Please assure Lord Vader that we will do everything we can to accommodate his wishes regarding your well being.

Yours sincerely,  
Prissta Torrsett  
Human Resources and Development Manager

**IMS:to mgabriel**[timestamp 10:45 cst]>>> Hey! Sorry I haven't been in contact, been away mostly on Coruscant getting things ready for big E's return. Dropped by the office a couple of times but your droid said you were away on business. Will you be at the palace gala in Theed? I hope so; I have not seen you in months! What have you been up to? By the way, the theme this year is pre clone war fashion. If you are coming, give me a shout maybe I can slip away and we can go shopping or something, after all I do know where all the best shops are and the gala is only three days away. Hugs, Shiv. <<< **From:srimanata**

**Outgoing scandoc transmission**[timestamp 11:02 cst]>>> Lord Vader, Prince Xizor's office has asked that the meeting that was scheduled for tomorrow at 13:00 and then changed to 14:30 be postponed until three days from now at 10:00 am. They have expressed their regrets that the Prince is unavailable for the time requested and stress that due to the importance of the matter at hand a suitable and convenient time for both parties be found. Please let me know when you are able to meet with him, his secretary was very abrupt. I don't think they are very happy with me these days. <<< **End transmission**

**IMS:to srimanata**[timestamp 11:08cst]>>> Shiv, holy Sarlacc where have you been hiding? Yeah, been busy with office work, you know how it goes. I am obligated to attend the gala in Lord Vader's place so you will see me. I don't need to buy any new dresses but shopping with you sounds like fun, pick a time I will rearrange my nonexistent schedule. What the sandjiggers is pre clone wars fashion??????? As long as there are no metal bikinis to wear I am game. Send me a time! Looking forward to it. /hugs back , Merly. <<< **From:mgabriel**

**Incoming scandoc transmission**[timestamp 13:07 cst]>>>Miss Gabriel, inform Xizor's people that I will be available to meet with him tomorrow at 13:30. If he cannot arrange his schedule to allow time to meet with me then I question the seriousness of his desire to do business with the Empire, you may quote this if you wish. Inform his secretary that I will not be available for any time other than this for the next two weeks. They can take it or leave it. I have better things to do that accommodate spoiled, wealthy aristocrats. If his office is unhappy with your work then you may inform them they can discuss the matter with me. You are doing what I have told you to do and their like or dislike of this is irrelevant. <<< **End transmission**

**Outgoing scandoc transmission**[timestamp 14:23 cst]>>>Lord Vader, Prince Xizor will be available to meet with you via holo tomorrow as newly scheduled at 13:30 cst. <<<**End transmission**

**IMS:to mgabriel**[timestamp 15:43 cst]>>>Hey what are you doing this evening? Due to this gala thing many of the shops we use will be open tonight and if you wanted to we could maybe go browse? I have some last minute things to pick up for a couple of the high maintenance courtesans so it would be nice to have company. Just you and I, the rest of the gang are either busy or back on Coruscant. <<<**From:srimanata**

**IMS:to srimanata**[timestamp 15:52cst]>>>Sounds great, where do we meet? <<< **From:mgabriel**

**IMS:to mgabriel**[timestamp 16:04 cst]>>> I'll swing by the office and pick you up at around 17:00, okay? <<< **From:srimanata**

**IMS:to srimanata**[timestamp 16:10cst]>>>Perfect see you then!<<< **From:mgabriel**

I sighed. At least I would not be sitting at home alone this evening. My lessons with Master Kjestyll had been cancelled, he was away and most likely I would not be training with him again until I returned to Coruscant. I practiced on my own but I missed his gentle guidance. I wondered if I would ever have any normalcy back in my life at all. This uneven schedule was a bit hard to deal with sometimes. Though, really, I could not complain, a day such as this was nice. I got to catch up on all the really annoying stuff, like sorting out a meeting between Prince Xizor and Lord Vader. They could not ever agree on a time to meet and it took days before either one of them would compromise on a time and place and method. They drove me mad with this game. I was quite sure that whoever the secretary in Xizor's office was, she was also fed up, although I suspected she was mostly fed up with me.

After Shiv's last message I decided that I needed a break, went to grab a cup of tea and when I came back to my desk there was a letter waiting for me all wrapped up in an Imperial Courier envelope. I guessed my droid had signed for it. I smiled as I opened it up. Inside was a plain cream coloured envelope with my name written in exquisite hand writing. This was the perfect end to a busy day, a letter from Captain Thrawn. I opened the envelope carefully and with my cup of tea in one hand, read what he had to say.

*A'mia Tekari,*

*What a delightful gift your letter was. You surprise me at every turn and that is not easy to do. I trust that you are well despite the chaos being caused by the*

move back to Coruscant. No matter how many times the Imperial Court does this, it never seems to go smoothly. Bureaucracy it appears, does not learn from its past problems, but rather invents new ones along the way. I do not envy you.

It is quite late here right now and while an ISD's captain is never truly off duty I do have a few moments of quiet to reply to your lovely letter.

There are some things that need to be cleared up. Firstly, you fell asleep because you were exhausted. That is nothing to be embarrassed about. I did try to wake you but it was rather like trying to wake a hibernating Telatt Bear. I must admit that I was flattered that you felt safe enough with me to "curl up in my arms", as you so elegantly put it. As a matter of fact the word flattered does not do it justice; I was touched by that small moment of trust.

Secondly, I apologise for your sleepless nights. It was not my intention to create conflict by my questions, but in the end it seems to have done some good. You carry a lot on your shoulders for someone your age, and while I know you hate it when I mention this you really are very young to have such weighty secrets.

Your friend, Jyrki, was a fool in more ways than one. Do not shed tears for the past, A'myshk'a, he chose his path and chose not to share it with you. His error is my fortune. Believe me when I say I am far more attentive when it comes to taking care with beautiful, fragile things and before you start to protest, which I know you will, let me clarify. A heart is a fragile thing. You are a creature of extraordinary grace and beauty. I am honoured by your presence in my life.

You asked for my advice so I will give it to you. Speak with Lord Vader about the incident on Rothana and let him take it to Intel. Waiting until you can see him in person does not sound unreasonable to me. Aside from the name of your mechanic friend, there are not many details you can give. I also would venture to guess that a full and detailed report on what happened would come from the Emperor's dancer. I suspect that she will probably leave certain details out and one of those details would be your presence and part in what happened. It is entirely probable she knew exactly who and what you are; to you she was and remains just a dancer. Intel sometimes has a nasty habit of making mountains out of ant hills. Your job was to get her in and out and you did this.

In all honesty you have no proof that this attack was in any way rebellion related. You have no evidence as to why these people were on Rothana or why they were after this dancer. You speculate, and I suspect that you are not wrong in the train of thought, but you have no hard evidence to support any of it. You must remember that on paper at least, you are, first and foremost Lord Vader's personal assistant, nothing more, nothing less. Lord Vader has had far more experience dealing with this sort of thing and I do not think he would be adverse to your telling him in confidence what you think or suspect.

I personally believe it would be better that, if Intel were to learn about your extracurricular activities, they should do so from the Emperor himself. In the end, taking your personal feelings and speculations out of the equation, the facts, as you have presented them to me, say very little except that information is somehow being leaked from the Imperial Court. Where you see rebels could have been a mere kidnapping attempt to obtain a professional dancer. There are many ways to read the situation and none of them or perhaps all of them could be correct. Without the whole story it is impossible to tell.

You are reading more into this because you happen to have a relationship with one of the attackers, but in all honesty, how well do you really know him? How well can you guess his motives for what he was doing? I think that you worry a little too much about it because of your personal ties with this man. If the Emperor had wanted you to be more involved or to know more about the exact nature of the mission at hand and the young woman you were transporting he would have told

*you. The Emperor does nothing without reason or forethought and I cannot stress this enough. I am quite certain that should he wish more information from your point of view, he would not hesitate to question you. This is, of course, just my opinion.*

*I did not mean to give you the wrong impression with some of my words; I most certainly do not question your loyalty to the Empire or to Lord Vader. I was merely pointing out that trying to serve two opposing ideals is almost impossible. It was not meant as an insult.*

*Be very wary of Demetrius Zaarin, my dear. He is extremely intelligent and very ambitious. It does not surprise me that he has decided to seek you out. Aside from the fact that you are quite lovely, you also have the ear of the Emperor's Iron Fist. Zaarin will use any advantage he can in his quest for power. He probably thinks that you are an easy mark, I should dearly love to see his face when he realises that is not the case. He is a worthy opponent, to be sure, but I wonder a little about how he makes you think of me. Perhaps it is that you have a tendency to see men as predators and you are not altogether wrong in this thought. Trust your instincts, A'myshk'a. They serve you well.*

*I think I have addressed all of your concerns and questions, at least, I hope so. I am quite certain you will tell me if this is not the case. One of the things I admired about you from the very first moment we met was your ability to be straight forward. While I have told you that learning the ways of the Imperial Court are vital for one's survival in the Empire, your stubborn refusal to play these subtle games is a most endearing feature.*

*You wrote that you hoped I was well and, indeed, I am. I must admit I much prefer the straight forwardness of captaining an Imperial Star Destroyer to the petty political bickering that seems so prevalent within the Imperial Court. While playing such games can be interesting from a strategic point of view they do have a tendency to become tedious. I am quite sure you would not argue with me on this point.*

*We have been spending some time in the Ishanna System. Fairly routine I am afraid but one thing of note is the Planet S'krrr and the famous Sikadian Gardens. It is supposed to be a place of perfect ecological balance. I am hoping in the next couple of days or so to be able to explore this place further and will let you know how it is. Apart from this little diversion, life has been fairly routine and there is not much of interest to tell. You have experienced what life is like on board an ISD so you know what I am talking about.*

*On a side note Dr. Thracer asked me how you were doing and wished me to convey his best to you. You do seem to have a way with people, my dear it is not often the good doctor expresses such concern for a patient once they have recovered and after they have left his sick-bay.*

*Now, I am afraid I must finish up. I have no answers as to why you would find it easier to write your thoughts rather than speak them with me, but I will not complain. I have always thought that written correspondence was an elegant way to get to know someone and there have been many books published on this subject. If I can find a copy of Tristyl Da'hlena's book: 'Seraina and Damiano, an Intimate Portrait of the Lives of Two Space Traders in the Old Republic.' I shall send it to you.*

*It is a very well done study of correspondence between two freighter pilots who, after only ever having met face to face once, spent the first five or so years of their relationship together solely through the art of writing letters to one another. They would eventually marry, and although their jobs as pilots continued to separate them they had a rather astounding life together through the writing of letters and diaries. It is a lovely book and a very intriguing look at just how intimate the art of letter writing can be. I do believe that more often than not one can learn a*

*great deal more about a person by reading their words than by being a room with them for an hour. Then again, maybe it is the combination of both that works out best of all. Either way I am delighted that you decided to write. Thank you.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia,  
Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

I wondered as I read his letter how it was that, even though he was light years away, he could make me blush, manage to read my thoughts and still know exactly what to say to somehow sooth my fears. His letter was like a caress and as I folded it up, tucked it back in its envelope then slipped it into my satchel, I knew he was right. Such correspondence was precious.

I was in the process of washing out my tea cup and shutting down the comp systems when Shiv waltzed in. I was so glad to see him.

"Ready to go?" He asked after giving me bear hug and the obligatory kiss kiss on either cheek.

"Of course! I even have Lord Vader's permission to buy new clothes for this little shin-dig, expense account and all. Can you believe it?" I said getting my coat and satchel.

"In that case we best get started, if I remember right, you are fussy about your clothes." He grinned. I had forgotten what a sweet grin he had.

As we walked to his ship he slung his arm over my shoulder. "Missed you, Rim-Girl. This Naboo stint was really weird and there was just no time to socialise at all. So, come on, gossip...what has been going on in your life?"

I opened my mouth but had no idea where to start. I decided it best just to banter about the things that would have been common knowledge because as much as I adored Shiv, half the things that had happened was stuff I just couldn't discuss. What I lacked in gossip he more than made up for and by the time we reached Theed my ears were ringing from hearing about all the strange goings on. I was looking forward to the evening though and knew we were in for a fun time the moment we entered into the first dress shop.

Hours later I sat alone in the darkness of my unlit living room sipping my tea, ignoring the mess of expensive gift bags and tissue paper. I had unpacked and put away the new clothes and shoes wondering with a touch of guilt how anyone could say that the amount of credits I had spent was 'just a drop in the bucket.' The cost of one dress alone would have bought a Tatooine slave's freedom for sure, maybe even two. I wasn't sure how I felt about it but Shiv had brushed off my concerns.

"You think this is a lot?" He had asked. "HR will probably look at the bills and wonder why you didn't spend more then look into it all to see if you are somehow hoodwinking them and stealing from the expense account."

In the end I had bought three exquisite formal dresses with shoes to match and some more casual clothing that looked as Shiv put it, less sand-rat and more imperial. I also bought a new pair of boots because after the jaunt to Myrkr my old ones didn't look so hot any more. Perhaps I hadn't been extravagant but I still felt it wasn't quite right somehow. People in the galaxy were starving and I knew that for a fact. Under the surface of the shining Empire was a darkness that wasn't good and I knew that too. It was somehow difficult to justify, even though I knew I worked hard for the credits I earned. If Lord Vader chose to supplement this with an expense account because, in the end when I was obligated to attend the stupid Imperial function I needed to look my best and looking my best meant spending a lot of money, then that was his business but I wasn't sure I liked it all the same.

This, however, was not what had me sitting in my living room at three am unable to sleep.

After the two and a half hours of manic shopping, Shiv had decided a stop at a small quiet café was in order for spiced 'caf and dessert. Over the most amazing Nubian cheese torte I had ever tasted Shiv had surprised the sandjiggers out of me by asking how I had enjoyed not only my visit on board the *ISD Vengeance* but the Corellian Spice cake as well.

"How did you know I was on board *Vengeance*?" I had asked hoping to keep the shock out of my voice.

"Bobbyn told me." Shiv had said with a shrug. "He's in charge of all planet to ship special catering requests. One came through with your name on it as a VIP. He mentioned it in passing, laughed actually because he said you must have done some pretty nifty filing to get such special treatment."

"Special treatment?" I'd asked.

Shiv had nodded. "Corellian Spice cake is a very expensive desert. Bobbyn thought it was a bit strange because normally such requests will come from the Captain of the ship but this one came from higher up. He told me he figured someone wanted to impress your boss by impressing you, or maybe the ship's captain or something."

"Why would they do that?" I had asked. "I mean really, Shiv I am no VIP."

"Yeah, well someone thought you were. Bobbyn said they even took care to ask about allergies?"

My heart had skipped a beat. "Allergies?"

"Yep, he said that was unusual because most people don't think about stuff like that, usually he has to do all that sort of research himself. He told them that the only thing he knew of in your case was Glow spice..." He paused. "Hey are you okay, you look like you're going to be sick."

I shook my head. "I'm fine, really." I had concentrated on breathing as I'd asked the next question. "Who ordered it?"

Shiv had shaken his head. "Don't know, the request just had the official seal but no specific name, why?"

"Just curious. I could have sent whoever it was a thank-you." I had smiled. "What about who made it?"

"I'd have to ask Bobbyn. Corellian Spice Cakes are made to order and there are only one or two specialized bakeries that will make it on Naboo. It's very expensive due to some of the ingredients and apparently very tricky to make just right. Only certified bakery chefs are allowed to make it."

"Can you find out for me?" I had asked.

"Sure, but I have to warn you, if you are thinking about ordering one, they are really, really expensive. That's why it's VIP treatment only."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"So was the cake good?"

I'd shrugged. "I actually don't like Corellian Spice cake."

"Oh, well I guess the Captain and his officers must have loved you then, most people would kill for a slice of spice cake."

I had grimaced at his choice of words and I had been evasive when he had asked why I was on board the *Vengeance* and downright curious about Captain Thrawn.

"He seems to have taken a liking to you. I heard that you accompanied him to the ballet at the Grand Opera house opening." Shiv had said casually but with a look in his eyes which said "*Come on, tell me...*"

I had shrugged, why was it everyone wanted to know about this? "What do you want to hear? I was sent to the *Vengeance* on some consulting work, they needed me to sort out some office stuff. It appears I have a reputation for being efficient. He requested my services and Lord Vader told me to go. I do what I am told."

"And the ballet?"

I'd shaken my head. "This place seems to run on gossip. I was asked at the last minute. I suspect that either no one else would attend with him because he is not human or his original date backed out. Either way it was not a big deal. The ballet was wonderful though, were you there? I didn't see you."

Shiv had shaken his head. "Nope, I had to deal with some emergency on Coruscant. Antygra was there though, said he'd seen you together with Captain Thrawn."

"You have spies all over the place!" I had laughed. "I don't get asked out often and I have not been to the theatre in a long time. I wasn't going to say no, besides he's not so bad. I have heard there are worse sharks out there in the Imperial pool. He has always been the perfect gentleman to me."

Shiv had nodded. "It is true that some of the officers who like to be with the courtesans and girls that work for the Empire are not so nice. I hear things, get comm calls in the middle of the night and have to sort out messes, arrange for medical treatment. It isn't very pretty and it gets covered up. You'd tell me if something wasn't right?"

"Honestly, you don't have to worry; I was just decorative fluff at the Opera. It was a last minute thing. He is very fixated on his career not palace pretties."

He had nodded. "That's what I thought; the rumours say he is very ambitious, that's why he volunteered for the job of ferrying Lord Jerec around when no one else wanted to do it." Then he had grinned at me. "And you, little keeper of secrets, I know there's more you're not saying about this but I won't push."

"Good." I had said. "Because honestly...there's nothing to tell you."

Shiv had laughed. "You do so remind me of my little sister."

I had only nodded and after we had finished our 'caf he had taken me home.

Now I sat in turmoil. After thinking about it and pacing about the room until I was sure I'd worn holes in the carpet I decided to talk to the only person I felt I could trust. I grabbed my coat and ran out of the house to the office. I didn't have a holo terminal in my home and the only secure one I knew of was in the office where I worked and Lord Vader sometimes visited. I followed the instructions I had been given to the letter and then waited. When the holo image of Thrawn appeared I knew instantly I had woken him up.

"You were asleep, I'm sorry." I said before he'd even had a chance to ask what was wrong.

He smiled. "And you were not sleeping at all. What is on your mind?"

I took a deep breath, unlike when we were together in person, I knew that time was important and wasting it was bad. I got to the point and told him everything Shiv had told me about the spice cake order. When I was done and he said nothing it suddenly dawned on me this was not news to him.

"You already knew this, didn't you?" I asked, running my hand through my hair which for once was not knotted up with Zenji sticks.

He gave me that infuriating raised eyebrow look. "I would not be very good at my job if my people could not at least discover this."

"Why did you not tell me?" I was a bit surprised.

"Would it have made a difference?" He asked, frowning. "You are already stressed enough over all the things that have happened to you. Would this piece of information help settle you or would it just make it worse? I think judging by the look on your face and the tone of your voice the answer to that is perfectly clear. No, knowing this small thing would not have helped. The information in itself does not give concrete answers."

"But it's a place to start." I said.



"Yes and it will lead us to more information. Unfortunately, someone decided that it should be very difficult to discover the source and most of the paper trail has been destroyed. I would be most interested in hearing if your friend can discover more, although I would caution you that so far anyone who has been officially connected with this particular cake order has also conveniently disappeared."

A sudden horrible thought struck me. "You don't think Shiv or Bobbyn are involved do you?"

He shook his head. "No. Siavaan Rimanata has been with the Empire for a very long time. While he can appear a bit scattered and fluffy he is anything but. If he has chosen to take you under his wing and befriend you then I am comforted by that. As for Bobbyn Mattikarae, all reports indicate he was just doing his job. He has been questioned about this, although in a manner that would lead him to think it was nothing more than standard follow up." He paused. "If this did come from higher up, and I suspect it did, then the person responsible has the means and the power to erase all evidence that would lead to directly them. This is the reason that this particular investigation is being done quietly and to a certain extent, very slowly. Sometimes slow and quiet can lull one's opponent into thinking he is safe, maybe he will get sloppy and make a mistake. In the mean time we keep digging."

I sighed. I suspected that he also had an idea in which direction to look but I was betting if I asked him he would not tell me anything further.

"You should go home and rest, my dear, especially if you are to look your best at the gala." He said with a smile.

I made a face.

"You do not wish to attend? It should be a fun evening, it usually is. The Naboo pride themselves on such festivities. You could use some fun."

"I'd rather play with Krayt juveniles in the Dune Sea than go socializing with the likes of certain Grand Admirals that have been pestering me." I said crossly. Thrawn gave me a look that said *'Would you care to explain that?'*

"Zaarin!" I snorted, "Why is it that men of rank seem to think they can have anything they want at the snap of their fingers? I think he was shocked that I would turn down his invitation to be his escort for the evening. "

Thrawn's face hardened a little but before he could say anything I continued.

"I told him I already had a date, funny enough he assumed it was you. Guess he will be a bit surprised when I show up with Shiv, who offered to play chaperone when he heard the story."

"I do not doubt it." Thrawn nodded thoughtfully. "Heed my words; do not provoke this man. While you have a great deal of protection from Lord Vader, if this GA chose to he could make life very difficult for you. My guess is he wants something from you and he can be very single minded until he obtains it."

"What in the name of Sarlacc could he possibly want from me?"

Thrawn gave me a look.

It took me a few seconds. "You have got to be joking. He can have anyone he wants! There must be a dozen girls in the Court who would die to hang off his arm."

"It is amazing how desirable something becomes when one is told that one cannot have it." He said carefully.

I sighed and nodded. "You know, it's not my intention to make enemies." I said.

"Well, that just means you are interesting." He said with a smile "Try to enjoy the gala, my dear. If there is one thing the Empire knows well, it is how to throw a party."

"It's a shame you will not be attending, I will be wearing a new dress." I told him a little more coyly than I had meant to.

His smile turned feral. "Yes, that is a shame, but I am sure there will be other opportunities for me to see you in pretty dresses."

I swallowed back a smart retort and nodded. "Well, then captain I will let you get back to bed. I am sure you have a busy day ahead of you saving the galaxy from evil doers."

"No more so than usual." He replied airily.

I went to sever the holo connection but he made a gesture with his hand and I stopped.

"I do have one question for you. What does *Kaniwaturiki kinkin* mean?" He asked pronouncing the words with surprising accuracy.

It was my turn to smile. "You will have to learn Huttese to find that out, Captain."

He raised his eyebrow, cocked his head slightly and purred. "Why, Miss Gabriel, I thought you didn't enjoy these games."

"You seem to bring out my sense of play." I told him with a little grin. "Besides you started it."

His smile made me shiver and my heart skipped a beat. "I look forward to our joint language lessons then. A foreign tongue can be an interesting thing to master." He said with a perfectly straight face.

Okay, I was so out of my depth with him sometimes it was scary. I opened my mouth to say something but thought the better of it and shut it again.

His expression softened. "Go home and get some sleep. Do not worry about things you have no control over. This investigation is ongoing and when I know something concrete and useful I promise I will keep you informed. I trust, should you learn more, you will do the same."

I nodded. "I shall, thank you. I'm sorry I woke you for nothing."

"My dear, if it was of concern to you then it was not for nothing. I did not give you the ability to contact me in this manner so that it could be saved for a rainy day." His expression softened slightly. "And, I can't think of a more pleasant wakeup call than the sound of your voice."

I blushed and was thankful that the blue glow nature of the holo transmitter would not show this. "Good night, Captain." I said and severed the connection before I could get myself into more trouble. I stood in the quiet darkness of Lord Vader's office. Thrawn was right and I was tired. I left for my house as quietly as I had come in, locking the door behind me.

*Chut chut, Captain,*

*I suppose that until I am able to learn your lovely language, you will have to put up with mine. I learned Huttese at the same time I learned basic. I think this was at my father's insistence rather than my mother's. It is the language most used on Tatooine so I guess he had a point but I find it coarse, harsh, much like the desert. While I have not heard a lot of Cheunh, what I have heard sounds like music, so all innuendos aside; I would very much like to learn it fluently some day. Perhaps you could start by telling exactly what A'mia Tekari means and the literal translation of whatever it was Navaari kept calling me. Come to think of it, I am curious why it is that you don't call me that as well?*

*I thought that you might like to hear how last night's Nubian Gala went, seeing as how you missed it this year. You were right about one thing; the Nubians sure know how to hold a grand event. The palace is stunning. I wished I had had more time to spend just looking at some of the paintings. I had only been in the library before so I missed this the last time I was here.*

*The grand ball room was decorated with the most beautiful pale white flowers and floating lanterns made from some sort of delicate tissue paper that held*

little twinkling lights in them. From a distance it almost looked like the room was filled with stars, something to do with the representation of all the members of the Empire, Shiv said. Unlike the Emperor's grand Ball, Shiv doesn't have anything to do with the décor for this event so he was just as surprised as I was when we walked in the main entrance and were announced.

There was an orchestra and a very large buffet set up. I don't think in my life I have ever seen so much food, you could have fed an army. The orchestra was very good, not sure if it was the same one from Coruscant or not. They didn't play the Kai'y'en-sai Waltz. I did get to dance though, and to be honest that was one of the more fun things about the entire evening. Zaarin was also there and, yes he did ask me to dance several times throughout the evening. He is actually not too bad on the dance floor but he lacked something I couldn't put my finger on. He knew all the steps and was competent at leading but it was very mechanical. So, you owe me a dance when you come back.

Mostly, I stuck to myself and watched people. Shiv, as always, had to sort out small emergencies throughout the evening. It can't be easy what he does, dealing with the courtesans and such. I did ask how he managed but all he said was he enjoys the drama. You would have smiled when he nudged me to go and mingle though.

I was surprised by the number of Gungans attending. I was under the impression that the Emperor was not overly fond of non humans but he seemed to rather enjoy mingling and talking to some of the more prominent Gungan leaders. In difference to the Grand Ball on Coruscant, he was very approachable and spent a lot of time actually talking to people. Well, important people that is. I stayed away from him; he scares the sand jiggers out of me and I get to see enough of him as it is.

It is the first time I've seen Queen Kylantha up close as well. She seemed very sad and maybe just a little bored to be honest but then again it is hard to tell under all the makeup that she wears. Shiv mentioned that all the Royal clothes and the face paint are very ceremonial and representative of Naboo's history. I know that in one of the books I had read on Queen Amidala they touched on this as well, I should probably re read it again. I think it would be interesting to know what the clothing and the facial paint mean. Every culture does this though, I mean the Sand People have their clothing and mask rituals as do the Dantassi. I never really gave it much thought before and speaking of Dantassi clothing, just so as you know, hand washing them is a big pain!

There was lots of idle chit chat going on and I am sure you would have enjoyed all the banter and its associated under currents. Me, I can't make heads or tails of that stuff most of the time. Many people asked me why Lord Vader had not come, it seems that while people fear his presence they question his absence more. I gave them my standard answer. People's faces do funny things when the word rebel is uttered.

The strangest thing about the whole evening though was meeting a young man named Tlokal Idanjay and his mother, Ilara. He and his family are from Alderaan. He was studying off world at the time of the "accident" and his parents were visiting the school. It seems that, after a lengthy conversation which started because of the paintings in the great hall, his mother knew my mother. It was just plain weird. I had not visited Alderaan since the death of my mother. I know I had family there but we were not close. Her family were not happy that she married my father, married beneath her they all thought. She had been born into one of the noble houses and was supposed to enter into an arranged marriage. Guess no one there was too happy when she fell in love with my father and married him instead. It was only after I came on the scene did her family contact her. No one knew that I was adopted so they all thought I was the last of the blood line. How ironic.

*She was invited back home to visit with me in tow, everyone wanted to see "the baby". I think I was about 3 at the time, I have vague memories of that particular visit; a lot of aunts, uncles and cousins. My grandparents argued with my mother a lot and I remember her crying. I went back to Alderaan with my mother two more times before she was killed and both times we stayed away from her family.*

*It seems strange to me now that the destruction of the planet did not have a greater effect on me. After all, they were family. I wonder why I don't mourn their loss more. It was very surreal to hear Ilara tell me stories about my mother from when they were young. It seems as though my mother was quite outspoken and a bit of a tomboy. She told me that everyone was very saddened by the news of her death. I didn't have the heart to ask her why it was then that no one came to my mother's memorial on Tatooine. I got the feeling she didn't exactly agree with how my grandparents handled the whole situation.*

*Are large families always this messy? She asked to keep in touch with me and I told her yes, but I don't really know why. She seemed so sad when she spoke of my mother and I felt as though it were my job to comfort her. I was relieved when Shiv came to the rescue and asked for a dance.*

*Another nice part of the evening was meeting up with Sola Naberrie again. It should not have surprised me that she and her family were there because this gala was pretty much a who's who of Naboo and her family have a big name in politics here. Her youngest daughter, Pooja, was a member of the Imperial Senate until it was dissolved.*

*I met Sola some weeks back when I went to visit her sister, Padmé's grave. She was very kind to me that day and, as it happens sometimes, I felt this strange, strong connection with her. I think people were shocked when she hugged me. She was very surprised to see me and even more surprised when Zaarin, who was standing next to me at the time, informed her of just who it was I worked for. Although, I didn't get the feeling she disapproved. It's hard to know how to deal with that sort of thing because; after all, as you so aptly put it I am just an office girl. When I said this to Sola, the GA nearly choked on his drink, I thought he was going to snort champagne out his nose. Does he know something I don't or was he just being a poodoo head?*

*Anyway, we managed to speak a little more later on out on the terrace and the upshot of this is I have a standing invitation to visit the next time I am here. I have really mixed feelings about leaving Naboo. How is it possible to fall in love with a planet that one has no real ties to? Don't get me wrong, Tatooine will always be home and there are so many things I love about it that I could not possible name them all, but this place has a magic I can't define. It does seem a bit odd that the two planets Lord Vader despises above all else are the two that I love the most, and he hasn't killed me yet...how about that?*

*Something else I found out last night, did you know that the little house I am currently staying in is supposed to be haunted? Shiv told me. The story is good and the way Shiv tells it you almost believe it could be true. I must admit I have never felt or sensed anything strange there but it could be that I am so at home with ghosts and other weird things that I wouldn't notice?*

*So, now the focus is on packing up everything and getting it ready for the move which starts the day after tomorrow. HR asked if I wished to relocate to housing away from the palace and I think I surprised them by saying I'd rather stay. There are places in the palace that I have grown to love and I am, believe it or not, looking forward to seeing them again. Shiv was telling me that people have gotten lost in the Imperial Palace and that the children of families who live there are*

*not only allowed to play hide and seek they are encouraged to do so. I think it would be fun to learn some of the Palace's secrets, don't you?*

*Anyway, I hope that you are well and that your visit to the Sikadian Gardens was everything you expected. I look forward to hearing about it. Gardens like that are not something I have a lot of experience with; they are not very common on Tatooine, but I imagine they must be very peaceful and gentle places to visit.*

*Kaniwaturiki kinkin,  
Kakunap,  
Merlyn*

*A'mia Tekari,*

*Your letter arrived yesterday and it was a bright moment in what has been a difficult week. I was happy to hear that you enjoyed the Nubian gala and managed to find some joy in what I suspect you would normally call a stuffy, boring night full of over dressed diplomats and Imperial courtesans. Perhaps there is hope for you yet.*

*I am certain that by the time this reaches you, the mass return of the Imperial Court will be complete and you will be once again settled in your home in the Palace. I hope that the move was not too stressful and less chaotic than usual.*

*You asked what A'mia Tekari means. I shall endeavour to explain but keep in mind I am not a linguist by profession, so bear with my clumsy explanation. It is a fairly informal written greeting used between friends and family. A literal translation would end up along the lines of to the person for whom I have fond feelings, so to simplify you could say it means to my dearest. If you should wish to use this in writing to me you would use the masculine form and drop the 'a' in front of the word Mia (the possessive form of me) and add the letter 'e' before the word Tekari. Mia e'tekari is how it would be written. Tekari as a word on its own can mean many things, as so many words are apt to do in Cheunh, but its core meaning is beloved. This meaning, however, waxes and wanes depending on use and context.*

*Tjällh is a little more difficult and I have already explained its limited use but the absolute basic translation would be 'little one' or perhaps since this is the feminine form 'little girl'. I don't use this with you for the very obvious reason, in my eyes you are not a little girl. Given the nature of our relationship, it would be inappropriate for me to call you that. Cheunh is a very complex language. I am afraid I could not begin to teach it to you, and while you will no doubt pick up a word or a phrase here and there from me, teaching you to speak it is beyond my abilities. However, I will see what I can do to help you study the language should you truly wish to do so.*

*I really enjoyed reading your description of your Gala night out. I almost felt as though I was there myself. I could see it very clearly through your eyes, which is delightful. It would have been a most pleasant evening to have spent with you, especially as you mentioned that you had not seen the paintings that hang in Theed palace. I smiled at your description of dancing with Demetrius Zaarin. Many of the Imperial Officers are from wealthy families and learn the finer aspects of courtly behaviour from early childhood; this includes learning how to dance. Many men find dancing to be beneath them and an activity that while it is a requirement of court, must not need be enjoyed. I sometimes think that some of these men approach the dance floor as though it were a battlefield, something to be conquered. Unlike many of my fellow officers, I actually enjoy formal dancing; it is a most pleasant art form that gives many insights into one's partner. It is one thing to know the mechanics of the various dances; it is another to be able to feel the dance's soul. For a dancer such as you, a partner who cannot get beyond the mechanics of the dance*

*to feel its soul must be a most unsettling thing. As far as this subject is concerned, I am happy to owe you a dance or two. It is possible that I will be returning to Coruscant for Winter Fete Week and I am certain there will be ample opportunity then for you to collect on this debt then.*

*It was refreshing to hear that His Excellency, the Emperor was in good spirits and was mingling with his subjects. This puts the rumours of his failing health to rest. I can certainly understand your fear of him, he is very powerful in many ways but you appear to have his favour at the moment so I don't believe you have anything to worry about.*

*Gungans and the regency of Naboo have long been favoured by the Emperor. I must admit I do not know the story behind this but I am sure given your love of reading and research, you could probably find out. I was under the impression that many Gungans had become reclusive since the dawn of the Empire, however perhaps this is just rumours and bad gossip.*

*You mentioned the ceremonial wear of the Queen. Indeed every item of ceremonial clothing has some historical meaning attached to it. I do know off the top of my head that the red mark that divides the Queen's lips is called the Scar of Remembrance, but I am not sure what it is in remembrance for. Clothing plays a very important role in most species lives, at least those that wear some sort of clothing. I don't know much about the significance of it for the Sand People though, perhaps you can enlighten me. On another note, you do know that the fabric used in Dantassi clothing can be machine washed.*

*You have piqued my curiosity now ... why would you be mentioning the word "rebel" at an event attended primarily by Imperials?*

*It must have been very surreal for you to meet a childhood friend of your mother's but what an opportunity to learn more about this woman you loved so much, who shaped who you are with her life. I can certainly understand your hesitation about befriending Ilara Idanjay but bear in mind this woman probably misses her friend as much as you miss your mother. I have often observed that family members who have lost a loved one seem to end up comforting those outside the family who would mourn the loss as well. Families no matter how small or large are complex, my dear. I won't bore you with details from my own familial experience but needless to say you are not alone.*

*I don't believe I have ever met Sola Naberrrie before and although the name is familiar, I am not that well versed on all the great families of Naboo. It sounds as though you have made yourself a good friend on the planet and I am glad to hear it. As you have mentioned in passing before, because you work for a man who commands much respect and fear, you are also ostracised by many of your peers. It is comforting to know that not everyone in the galaxy transfers their fear of Lord Vader onto you.*

*Ignore Zaarin, he has some difficulty understanding why you not only seem to survive working for Lord Vader but also appear to have his confidence. You have quite the reputation among the Imperial officers for being somewhat of an elusive mystery. You would probably laugh yourself silly if you were to hear half of the speculation and rumours that are whispered about you.*

*Yes, it would have been very amusing to watch the GA snort champagne but I'm not certain he would have been terribly happy had that happened. I doubt very much that he 'knows something you do not'; he was more likely, as you so eloquently put it, being a poodoo head. You spurn his attentions so that makes you a frustration. Men of power do not like to be frustrated, especially by beautiful young women who have a mind of their own.*

*You seem to have that rare ability to see past the negative and accentuate the positive. It does not surprise me that you have fallen in love with Naboo. It is a*

stunning, lush planet full of beauty and life. That you should love your home world so much is not unexpected. I could not even begin to guess what it is about these two worlds that Lord Vader despises so much but I suspect your affection for these places has little effect on his feelings towards you. You stay alive because so far you have given him no reason to eliminate you. I would venture to guess that your love of both Naboo and Tatooine is at best some small source of some amusement and, at the same time, some annoyance to him.

I did indeed know that your little home by the lake was supposed to be haunted and I also know the story behind it. Ghost stories it seems run rampant on Naboo, both the Nubians and the Gungans have a strong history of such stories and belief in the supernatural. You might want to ask your friend Sola about the Night of Lights and Spirits, the one night of the year where the dead are able to walk among the living. I am not sure how rich the storytelling culture is on Tatooine but on Csilla we also have a strong oral tradition and many of the tales also involve the supernatural world. There are some amazing stories of ghostly happenings; this is of course doubly important in the Dantassi enclaves. Perhaps one day, when there is some time, I will share some of the more interesting ones with you. I will warn you in advance though, storytelling is not my forte. I am willing to wager that Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is an extraordinary storyteller, just as his grandfather was. It is a vital part of being a Dantassi hunter, the ability to retell the hunt in an exciting and captivating manner. A culture's oral history is quite fascinating.

Your comments about the Imperial Palace brought to mind the story of the unfortunate woman, Frona Zella who was found dead at her desk a year after she had died. This caused quite a stir and was the reason behind the wearing a com link at all times rule. The Emperor does indeed encourage the palace children to play Hunter as a method of learning the Palace lay out, although I am in still a little unclear how this helps the muddled adults find their way about. I am quite certain that you could spend a lifetime exploring the palace, looking for its secrets and still only scratch the surface. There are many rumours about hidden passages and entrances and exits and one has to work hard, I think, to separate truth from fiction. You, my dear, stand a fair chance of finding one or two with your gifts and your astonishing sense of direction. I look forward to hearing about your finds.

You asked about my visit to the Sikadian Gardens and there is much to tell. After some delays, I landed on Sk'rrr near the Gardens, with two junior officers, Wolver and Tier. There I met with a Shi'ido named Hoole and two human children, Tash and Zak. The young girl, Tash reminded me sharply of you, fearless and outspoken. It would have amused you to hear her grill me on my reasons for visiting the gardens. Of course little did any of us know that what I thought would be a pleasant side trip to learn a little about the Sk'rrr turned into something out of a very bad horror holo-drama.

I don't know how much you know about Sk'rrr but they are an insect based life form descended, as it turns out, from the drog beetles. The Sikadian Gardens were based on a delicate balance between the beetles and their predators the Shreev. The beetles eat, well, everything and the shreev eat the beetles. Without the Shreev the beetles would pretty much overrun not only the garden but the planet, so you would think that this planet and its inhabitants would have a vested interest in keeping this balance in check. This, sadly, was not the case.

The Sk'rrr have an interesting duality in their culture. On the one hand they greatly value art in its varied forms but on the other hand they also value the art of warfare. As one of their kind informed me, many of their artists are also poet warriors who have mastered both the light and the dark side of their personal natures. This could be seen in the layout of the gardens, it was most intriguing until it took a turn for the surreal and life began to imitate art.

*To make a long story short, it seems that the caretaker of the garden went mad and through his actions created a dreadful imbalance in the beetle population. The beetles, as I mentioned before eat anything and they devoured Lieutenants Wolver and Tier. It was most disturbing. I lost two good men all because of a madman. Needless to say leaving the gardens became a bit of an adventure as both my shuttle and the ship belonging to Hoole were disabled. What the Shi'ido and his two young charges were doing there I have no idea but I got the distinct impression there was more to their story than they were letting on. I would have found out had there been time; however surviving the beetles seemed a tad more important.*

*It never ceases to amaze me how short sighted fanatics are when it comes to the object of their beliefs. Had the Vroon, the garden's caretaker, not taken it into his head to upset the balance between the Shreev and the Beetles, none of the unfortunate and unnecessary deaths would have occurred.*

*I managed to learn a great deal about the Sk'rrr from the small amount of time I was able to spend in the garden before it was overrun and subsequently destroyed. I was also reminded of the short sightedness and closed mind views that seem to be quite prevalent about the Empire amongst its citizens. I do not know how many times I have heard and continue to hear that the Empire is evil and 'up to something.' How many times can one say the Empire is merely a system of government? That many, many worlds rely on this system of governing for law and order. That many hundreds of planets have never even see a Storm trooper garrison or the Imperial navy does not seem to enter into the minds of such people. It does not occur to them that all the planets under Imperial rule rely on the Empire for supplies, food, clothing and so on. The ridiculous propaganda being spread by the members of the insurrection known as the rebellion is most annoying.*

*I do have to wonder if, while they are fighting for their beloved beliefs, they have thought about what will happen to law and order should the Empire collapse. Running an Empire or for that matter any system of government is no easy matter. One can read many accounts from many worlds about governments being toppled and the aftermath of chaos that follows because there was no coherent plan in place for taking over. While freedom, which is a most intriguing word and concept in itself, is a desirable thing it becomes quite secondary when there is no food or shelter being provided and when infrastructure vanishes. There will always be someone who opposes the party in rule; it seems to be the law of nature, balance and opposition, predators and prey. The incident in the gardens only served as a reminder to me of what happens when that balance is upset. Anyway, my dear, I must end this letter and shall not bore you further with my musings on governments and those who dislike them.*

*I trust that you are keeping well and staying out of trouble. I very much look forward to spending some time with you when I return to Coruscant. Perhaps we can arrange to visit the Art Gallery together or go out to dinner. Think on it and let me know if there is something in particular that you would like to do. I will get in touch when I arrive and we can arrange something.*

*Ilath'mera'talashti'Ia,  
Mitth'raw'nuruodo*

*Leaving Naboo had been harder than I had thought it would be. I missed its gentle quiet, the sound of wind rustling through the leaves of the trees, the scent of dampness in the air and the lake where I had learned to swim. The contrast to Coruscant was almost a shock and the core planet seemed over crowded, far too loud and without a soul. It's brilliant lights which never dimmed, blocking out the stars above made everything harsh and cold.*



Coruscant was a never ending buzz of traffic and people. I had forgotten how busy it was. Lanes of air traffic which never stopped moving created a steady, constant thrum in the air, like a sub-harmonic that never went away. It set my teeth on edge and for the first week back it damned near drove me crazy.

In spite of all the chaos, the move itself had gone smoothly enough and for the most part there was very little disruption in my work which was a relief. Lord Vader had become used to things working smoothly, at least as far as the office stuff went, letting him down was something I didn't want to do, even if it was due to things that went beyond my control. It didn't take long for the rest of the court and palace to get back into a routine and soon enough it felt as if we had never left at all and Naboo became a world I visited only in my dreams, making me sad when I woke up to find myself on Coruscant instead. Perhaps I would have dwelt on this sense of homesickness but I didn't have time. Days soon turned into weeks and then months. Luckily for me there were enough distractions to keep me from getting too melancholy including the weeks which led up to one of the craziest times of the year.

Winter Fete Week drew nearer and so did the gear up for end of year. The office was inundated with memos and reminders about the various reports that had to be filled out and sent in, the stream of information back and forth seemed never ending. I was also busy sorting out the usual plethora of fan mail, junk mail and stalker mail that had not been sent to Naboo but instead had managed to pile up here, making me play catch up. I was grateful for the massive amount of work because it took my mind off missing Naboo and even more so, missing Thrawn who had been away on some terribly secret mission no one was talking about. It was rumoured that he had been sent to the Unknown Regions in disgrace, something that Shiv told me happened more often than most people knew. Being sent out to the edge of the galaxy and beyond was Palpatine's way of punishing those who displeased him.

I found it a little odd that although I missed Naboo, I was glad to return to my flat in the palace. It had surprised me that I would actually feel some sort of attachment to the apartment I lived in here, but I did. It had been strangely comforting to return to the familiar and as I had unpacked my things, my clothes and my books I had felt a strange sense of belonging creep into my actions. Some small part of me had made this place a home, a feeling I had not expected at all. It had taken me somewhat longer than I had expected to re-acclimatize to actually being back on Coruscant with its different planetary rotation and I seemed to spend more time awake at night wandering around the old parts of the palace than sleeping. So I had gone back to working out, both in dance and in the martial art Master Kjestyll had been teaching me and had been secretly pleased to find the rooms I used to use in the older, disused part of the palace were still there, untouched, dusty and, for all intensive purposes, mine.

I loved the stillness of the old part of the palace and thanks to the generosity of the Emperor I had access to a small but incredible library that was hidden away. I spent many hours after work in this library reading about history of various worlds in the Galaxy, lore, stories and tales from all kinds of cultures and peoples and most amazing of all, a history of the rise and fall of the Jedi. More than once I woke up, not in my bed, but curled up in the big old leather chair that was tucked in the corner of the library. Time slipped away from me when I read. There was a kind of magic to sitting alone in the old unoccupied part of the palace with my nose buried in a book. I was in the middle of reading a short tale about Freedom Nadd, a Sith Lord from ancient history when I felt a presence enter the room. I barely had time to stand so that I could kneel when the Emperor appeared.

"My dear," He said. "Such formality is not necessary in this place."

I stood up and curtsied then gestured to the chair I had been sitting in. With a smile the Emperor sat and motioned for me to sit on the floor at his feet.

"I was hoping to find you here. I have not had a chance to properly thank you." He said.

"Thank me?"

"You did an excellent job bringing my dancer back in one piece. She was very impressed with your piloting skills." He said.

"I was just doing my job, your Excellency." I said daring to glance up to look into his eyes.

The Emperor chuckled and patted my shoulder. "Yes, little one indeed you were." He said slowly, placing great emphasis on the words little one. I wondered if he read the surprise in my eyes and then realised that he had not only read it but had expected it. I looked away from his piercing yellow eyes. I felt as though he could read every inch of my soul and it was not a pleasant feeling. I wondered how much he really knew about what had happened on Rothana. He had never called me 'little one' before.

"I hope I have not displeased you, your Excellency." I said quietly.

"On the contrary, my dear, you surprise me at almost every turn and you surpass my expectations." He said with a smile. "Tell me, what are you reading?"

I picked up the book and showed him.

"Ah yes, *Sith Legends and Lore*. What do you think of it?" He asked.

"It's fascinating." I said honestly. "I had no idea the Sith had such an interesting history."

The Emperor smiled. "Sith culture is rich and diverse. It was suppressed for centuries during the rule of the Jedi Knights."

"Why?" I asked.

The Emperor gave an almost imperceptible shrug. "The Jedi decided that only their history and tales were worthy of note. They were afraid that anyone learning about other ways to use the force would be tainted. Sith history was almost eradicated but fortunately I was able to save it."

"That makes no sense. Why would learning about other methods of the Force be a bad thing? Shouldn't history reflect all sides and not just one?" I asked.

The Emperor's laughter echoed about the room. "You really are delightful, my dear, no wonder you are such a source of fascination to certain members of my staff." He said. "History is always written by the victors to reflect how they wish the galaxy to be seen." He leaned forward and lifted my chin with the tips of his fingers. "Your naiveté is most endearing. You are quite the contradiction in terms, most amusing to watch."

I didn't know how to respond and so I lowered my eyes and looked away. The Emperor sat back in the chair. "Now, how about you make this old man happy and read to me from that book you are enjoying so much. To hear the old stories told by a lovely young lady such as your self would be a most enjoyable way to pass time."

Happy to have the conversation steer away from the personal tone it had taken, I smiled, opened the book and began to read. It was almost three in the morning when I went to bed. The Emperor had listened with an almost eerie stillness while I read some of the stories aloud. Many questions about the Jedi and their kind had come to mind as I read, perhaps the Emperor had sensed this disquiet and as I finished reading the third tale he had asked me what I was concerned about. I had taken a chance that, perhaps in the quiet of this room and the dark of the night I could ask without fear of punishment, because asking Lord Vader anything about the Jedi usually resulted in some sort of angry outburst.

"You have many questions." He said softly when I put the book down. "Yet, you are afraid to ask me, why?"

"When I bring the subject of the Jedi up with Lord Vader he..." I searched for a diplomatic way to say he usually sent me flying into a wall.

The Emperor smiled. "Ah yes, Lord Vader's temper does have a nasty habit of surfacing when the name Jedi is mentioned. You must understand, girl, that Lord Vader's relationship with the Jedi was not a happy one."

"Relationship?"

"Lord Vader was trained as a young boy in the Jedi ways. They tried very hard to indoctrinate them into their narrow minded view of the world and the Force. He has every reason to despise them. You are lucky to have been born in an age where the Jedi no longer rule."

I looked up at his face and found his eyes boring into mine. The question on my lips was never spoken but he answered it anyway.

"Had you been born in an earlier time the Jedi council would have discovered that you were connected to the Force and they would have sent someone to extract you from your parents while you were still an infant. There would have been no choice in this matter. They would have come, you would have been taken and all contact with your parents forbidden. From that moment on the only life you would have known would have been the one the Jedi chose for you." He explained.

"That doesn't sound very fair. What if I had not wanted to become a Jedi?" I asked.

The Emperor chuckled. "Choice." He snorted. "Do you think the Jedi would have cared about what you wanted? In their eyes it was a great honour to be chosen for the Jedi Order, why should you or your parents have any choice in this matter?"

"That sounds very arrogant to me." I said tartly.

"It was their greatest failing. They were blinded by their arrogance and their narrow minded view of the Force." He replied. "You would have been taken away and indoctrinated into a world without love or anger, without material possessions or even a sense of self. You were there to serve the Jedi's perceived greater good. Individuality had little to do with the matter. For one such as you, this would have been a difficult road I think."

"How so?"

"My dear girl, you are a creature of great passion. It is this emotion which rules your actions, your heart, your very being. I have seen it when you dance, when you fight and when you are with the people you care about. Such emotion was distasteful to the Jedi. They believed that to feel such passion, or desire, that to attach one's self to another through a bond of emotion was to lead to the dark side of the force. This they feared greatly."

"Is the dark side bad?" I asked.

The Emperor smiled slightly and shrugged. "That depends greatly on your point of view, doesn't it?" He said. "Is it bad to wish for the power to do good? Is it bad to use whatever means are available to one for this ability? The Jedi despised the Sith because the Sith found a way to harness the power of the dark side, this power gave the Sith access to many abilities the Jedi considered to be unnatural and wrong." He sighed. "But let me ask you this; is it wrong to use a power that already exists in nature simply because it is contrary to the doctrine of a certain belief? Who decides such things and why?" He continued. "The answer is no, it is no more wrong to use the power granted to us through our deeper passions and our anger than it is to harness the power of a powerful and devastating storm and use it to our advantage, in, for example, powering the city's lights. On the one hand the storm's power is terrible and something to be feared on the other hand it is a source of energy and light. How does one decide what is good and what is bad?"

I didn't know how to answer that question but I could hazard a guess. "Would fear play a part in that?"

He nodded. "Yes, fear would be a deciding factor. The Jedi feared the Sith, feared their ability to use the darker nature of the Force. They feared their own passions and stifled all such emotions. Yet in doing so they closed a door way to understanding the nature of all things and were lost to their own arrogance that they were right in these things. Their methods did not work as well as they thought and in the end they were destroyed by their own short sightedness." He paused. "Now the Sith rule and the Empire is glorious. We have peace, law and order throughout the galaxy. People such as you now have great opportunities to become anything you wish rather than stifled in within the confines of the Old Jedi Temple. You are free to live as you choose, love whomever you wish and express yourself through your emotions and still learn the ways of the Force under such masters as myself or Lord Vader, should that be your wish."

I nodded not knowing what else to add or to say. I was tired, it was late. For every question the Emperor had answered another had sprung to mind in its place. He believed passionately everything that he had said and while he had not lied to me there was a ripple underneath his words that I could not put my finger on, as though the words were somehow being bent to fit the story and not the other way around.

"People fear what they hate, and they hate what they do not understand." He said. He must have sensed my feelings and I was more certain now than ever before that there was very little if anything I could ever hope to hide from this man.

"They do not understand that which is different from what they know. It is a simple enough thing yet it causes chaos. Take Lord Vader for example, he is feared and thus hated. You see that every day in the death threats that you read through then pass along to Intel. Now this hatred and fear has been passed along to you, I have been informed that you too have been receiving less than pleasant mail. How does this make you feel?"

I glanced up at him in surprise. Certainly in the last week or so I had also been surprised by the fact that some of the hate mail had been addressed solely at me, strange letters really, that had said such things as, '*We know who you are and we know what you are*' and, '*we will come for you*'. I had passed them along to Intel along with the rest of the usual nonsense. I had not taken the notes seriously but suddenly I wondered if I should.

"I honestly didn't think about it." I said frowning, "Should I worry about such things?"

The Emperor smiled and it made me shiver. "Not at all, after all you are safe here. No intruders could get into the palace to harm you." He said with an edge to his voice I didn't really understand. "I consider you a daughter of my empire and as such you are under my protection. I thought that would have been perfectly clear after the Grand ball."

I sighed. His words twisted in my head and my gut. Jyrki had managed to sneak into the palace, if he could do it so could others. If I said something would I not also get into trouble for not reporting the incident earlier? I was sure that if the Emperor had known about it he would have said something, yet it had never come up. I feared the Emperor even in this benevolent guise although it was how he chose to spend time with me. There was something deep and dark in his being that frightened me more than anything else ever had. I did not want to do anything to earn his displeasure so I held my tongue and said nothing.

"It is late and you must be very tired, child. While I do so enjoy these little chats of ours I would not want to be responsible for you not being able to perform your duties properly and efficiently. I am quite sure that neither Lord Vader nor Captain Thrawn would wish to see you in a state of exhaustion." He said. I glanced at him sharply wondering what exactly he meant by that but he simply chuckled and

clarified. "While you do work primarily for Lord Vader have you not also done some work for the captain?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Then it is reasonable to state that you should be in good health should they be in need of your services again. Both men have spoken highly of you. I am certain you would not wish to let either of them down."

"No, of course not." I said.

The Emperor stood up and motioned that I do the same. "Walk with me to the entranceway and then go to bed, my dear. Do not worry your pretty little head about these weighty issues. I assure you I have everything well in hand."

I did as he asked and then went home but as exhausted as I was sleep was a long time in coming.

\*\*\*

Winter Fete Week was a crazy time on Coruscant. It seemed that almost everyone took the week off from work and celebrated as much as they possibly could. There were parties almost every night and various organised celebrations, parades as well as informal gatherings throughout the entire week, all ending in a huge spectacular event that consisted of dancing, music, fireworks and, of course, dressing up. It was a time when people forgot their problems and conflicts and just got on with the business of having a good time.

I avoided it all as much I could and enjoyed the peace and quiet because most of the other departments had shut down for the duration of fete Week so the palace seem very deserted. I spent a lot of time in my office sorting out stuff that I usually didn't have to time to deal with as well as keeping up with Lord Vader's demands and the endless lists of things that needed to be done. It was not a good time to upset him with trivial problems and keeping things running smoothly was more an act of self preservation than pride in my work.

As of late, Lord Vader had become distant, withdrawn, and pensive. He was single minded in his determination to find out who it was that destroyed the Death Star. While he never actually spoke of it, sometimes I picked up these thoughts from him, much to his annoyance. He had decided not to return to the planet for any of the Fete Week festivities, which was probably a good thing since he tended to put a damper on the happy party mood when he was around.

Shiv, fearing that I was becoming as antisocial as Lord Vader, had dragged me off with his gang for several lunches and an evening out. This had been fun but exhausting. I didn't know where he got all his energy from. We mostly hung out in the fashion district because that's where Shiv had most of his contacts and knew the best places to eat or party depending on the time of day. Mostly, hanging with him and his friends was fun, light hearted and anything but serious. Sure made a change from my job and my training.

Master Kjestyll had returned and had been working hard with me. Our sessions had taken a turn for the weird. Lately the emphasis has been on survival techniques and some very odd training exercises. I was not sure what was going on but shortly after I got back from Naboo, he told me that we would start to concentrate on other aspects of combat. The most recent exercise was to have me wear a blindfold while he took me someplace. I had no idea where I was being taken but when we arrived and he removed the blindfold I still could not see.

The only thing he said to me was. 'Use all your senses to find your way out.' It had been a frightening experience. The room was darker than anything I had ever known and it had taken me what seemed forever to trace my way around it, to 'feel'

the walls and learn about the space. Only once I had done that did it occur to me that I could perhaps use my strange powers to 'see'.

I found the key to the door that had been hidden in the wall only because it felt different. Even then it had taken me several hours to figure that bit out. Sometimes I felt as though I was terribly slow learner but Master Kjestyll had been pleased with me. Saying I had actually figured it out a lot faster than others who were, in theory, a lot more talented with the force than I was.

I asked him if this was normal training for someone like me and his reply, offhand and a little guarded had been to tell me that the Emperor had requested it. I guess I must have made a face because he had gone on to explain that the Emperor had said it might be enjoyable for me to learn something more challenging than the Kata forms we had previously been working on. I told Master Kjestyll that being blindfolded and stuck in a black room with no way out was not my idea of fun.

"But you were challenged by it were you not?" He had said.

I had nodded. It certainly had been challenging as well as unnerving. It would not be the last time I would go through such an exercise either. We spent long hours talking about what had happened and how I should and could deal with the exercises better. Each time I was placed in one of these scenarios it was different and each time I learned something new. Sometimes I was required to fight my way out of a labyrinth and sometimes I was required to memorise the way in and out of a building. Sometimes it was the black room again each time with a different solution to getting the door open. When I asked why I was being put through all of this Master Kjestyll had shrugged. He surmised that perhaps the Emperor felt that as someone who worked closely with his right hand man such training would not be so out of place, but it was not his or my place to question the will of the Emperor. I thought it very strange that a Personal Assistant be put through this sort of training at all and it made me nervous. In the quiet of the night when I was safe and in my own flat, usually recovering from aching muscles and frayed nerves I wrote to Captain Thrawn of my experiences along with many other things. It seemed that writing to him became easier and easier and I looked forward to being able to put my thoughts down on paper.

Shortly after returning to the Core I had dragged Shiv out shopping specifically for nice writing paper and an appropriate way to store the letters that Thrawn sent to me. I ended up buying in addition to some very expensive but exquisite paper, an ornately hand carved wooden box. It was the perfect place for me to keep Thrawn's letters in. All of this had made Shiv extremely curious but he was getting used to my secrets and knew better than to push for an answer. I had not heard from Thrawn since his last letter describing his trip to the Sikadian Gardens and that had been a couple of weeks ago. We were now three days into Fete Week and I had hoped that he would somehow make it back for at least the latter part of the festival but so far I had heard nothing from him.

I sat in my office staring off into space, there was absolutely nothing going on. Even my droid was bored so I packed it in early and went home. Everything, including my sessions with Master Kjestyll, was on hold until after Fete week and I had turned down Shiv's offer to go out partying with him using exhaustion as an excuse because I wanted to have a nice bath and relax with a good book. Even though I had fun when I went out with Shiv and the gang, I still found the constant socializing difficult and after a while the noise and the push of so many people in one small place got to me. I had grown up on a planet that was vast and empty, I wasn't used to the crush of Coruscant and sometimes it pressed against me like a great weight. I enjoyed time on my own. There was always something deeply gratifying about being by myself and I had never felt lonely even though most people, including Shiv though that I probably was. I knew he meant well but sometimes his attempts to

turn me into a social butterfly were more frustrating than fun and I was just grateful to escape to my flat, retreat to the bathtub and relax.

I soaked in the bath for as long as the water had stayed hot and then, because I wasn't actually all that tired, I dressed in something pretty and comfortable and curled up on my couch to read a book. Somewhere between ten and eleven at night my doorbell rang. I was a little surprised but thought it might be Shiv come to drag me away despite my pleas for a night off. When I opened the door all I saw was a glass on the foot mat and a small hand written note that said. *'I know I owe you a dance but would you settle for a drink instead?'* It made me smile and I knew exactly where to go to get that drink.

I stood leaning against the doorway to the balcony and studied him for a moment. He was considerably older than I was and alien in more ways than I cared to count. Yet, standing there seeing him again made my heart race and my knees tremble. These feelings he stirred up in me were astonishing. I wanted to rush up to him and throw my arms around him but something about his stance and manner made me rethink that urge. Instead I waited until he turned around to watch me watch him, smiling as he did so.

"Good evening, Miss Gabriel." He said. "You are just in time for the fireworks."

"Captain, when did you get back?" I replied hoping to match his even polite tone. We were playing the formal game again. It was almost a competition to see who could out-polite the other and I never got tired of it.

"My shuttle landed less than two hours ago." He said taking the glass I was clutching from my hands.

I watched as he poured a pale pink liquid from a beautiful bottle into it and then took the glass back when he handed it to me. He filled his own and we touched glasses and drank, well sipped. This drink was like nothing I had ever tasted. Sweet and tart all at once, with a wild sort of flavour, fruit like or perhaps berry like I didn't know. It was as cold as ice on my tongue but warmed my belly like fire. I didn't need to be a genius to now it was very potent.

"Do you like it?" He asked.

I took a second sip and shivered involuntarily, letting the liquor sit for a moment on my tongue, in my mouth. "It's extraordinary." I nodded after swallowing. "Yes, I do like it."

"It is a gift from Kirja'navaar'inkjerii. Crackerberry Liqueur." He said.

"You saw him?"

Thrawn nodded but gave no details. "He wished you well, extended an invitation to visit his home on Hjal and said I was to share this with you."

"I take it the hunt was a success?"

Thrawn shrugged nonchalantly. "He did not say and I did not ask. Our meeting was very brief."

"How was he?" I pressed.

"He appeared to be in good health." He replied after a moment. "But I did not come here to talk about him, you know." He added.

I would have found a suitable retort I am sure of it but the sudden crack of fireworks that exploded around us made me jump in fright and cut off my train of thought. The display was amazing as usual. Each night of the week there was an astounding exhibition of fireworks at midnight. Coruscant, the center of all things in the Galaxy spared no expense in showing its citizenry that it could celebrate with the best of them. We watched in silence as the night sky lit up with every colour imaginable. Blooms of light in patterns I would never have thought possible decorated the city. On every available space people stood, just like us, and watched. Their eyes turned upwards marvelling at the spectacle, unaware of anything else

around them except the brilliant fireworks. I sipped at my drink until the glass was empty then turned to put it on the small table beside the balcony wall.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw him and the fright made me drop the glass I still had in my hand. It would have shattered on the ground but the Emperor, with a subtle move of his hand, caught it with the Force and set it upon the table easily. For a moment I just stood there like an idiot then more out of reflex than thought I genuflected and bowed my head. The Emperor walked over to where Thrawn was standing and all but ignored me. I guessed he wasn't in the benevolent old man mood this evening. For a moment the silence was deafening. I dared to look up at them and found the Emperor staring at me. His gaze was hard and unreadable. I shivered.

"Leave us." He said to me coldly.

With my heart pounding I did as I was told. I was more than relieved to be back in the relative safety of my apartment. My hands were shaking as I made myself a cup of tea. I sat in the quiet, dark living room half expecting a knock on my front door but it never came and after an hour or so I went to bed. It took me a long time to fall asleep and when I did I dreamed.

*I knew this place but what I was doing there and how I had gotten there were a bit of a mystery, the Dune Sea, a vast expanse of sand, dunes and not much else. I could feel the wind against my face and the heat from the suns but despite the heavy hooded cloak I was wearing I was chilled to the bone. I walked forward. The wind became stronger and the sand whipped up to form a veil around me. It stung my face and my hands and made it hard to breathe. It howled around me like a Krayt Dragon, pushing and pulling until I stumbled to my knees.*

*I huddled in my oversized cloak but to no avail. Stuck on the Dune Sea in the middle of a terrible sand storm I was going to die. Oddly enough this thought did not instil fear in me instead I felt a strange sense of peace. I closed my eyes and concentrated. Meditation the way I had been taught by Master Kjestyll. Look inward his voice said so I did.*

*When I opened my eyes all was silent and dark. The suns had set and the stars shone. I stared at the man kneeling across from me. Like me he too was wearing a heavy brown hooded cloak. When he raised his head I read surprise in his brilliant blue eyes. His hair and beard were the same colour as the sand and his face lined with age and time. He was familiar to me but I was sure I had never met him before.*

*"You are not the chosen one." He said. There was such sadness in his voice I felt tears well up in my eyes.*

*"Who are you?" I asked.*

*"I am the teacher awaiting the student, the student awaiting the teacher." He said cryptically.*

*I looked around me. "What happened to the storm?"*

*He smiled. "When one stills one's own fears, one stills the world around them."*

*"Are you saying I caused the sand storm? Am I dead?" I asked.*

*"No, in this place you are not dead, nor am I alive." He said. "You brought the storm with you but you also stilled it."*

*"Why am I here?"*

*He sighed. "You are on a journey. You are seeking guidance."*

*"Are you my guide?"*

*He shook his head. "I do not know. I do not know who you are or how you came to be in this place. I was not expecting you."*

*"Then why am I here?"*

*"A circular argument." He remarked. "You are not the chosen one, yet you bear his mark, his touch. You must walk your path with care. The trial before you*



*will take you deep into darkness but remember...in the darkness there is light and without the light there is no darkness. Be careful. Do not forget who you are."*

*"I don't understand." I said feeling a sense of panic rise in my gut.*

*He began to fade and became ghost like. "Be wary of hate and be mindful of your passions, they are your greatest source of strength and your greatest weakness..." He said, his last words drifting off into the wind which had picked up again. As I knelt there watching his physical body melt away I felt an unreasonable fear well up in me. His body was replaced by the outline of the Emperor but before I even had time to scream it was not the Emperor who stood before me but Lord Vader. He did not speak but his hand reached out towards me and as it did so the wind once again became a howling storm. The sand whipped about me, it got in my mouth and in my nose. No matter how hard I tried I could not help from breathing it in. I began to choke. I wanted to scream but I could make no sound. I reached out to grasp Lord Vader's outstretched hand, seeking his help but my hand passed through his incorporeal body. The Emperor's laughter filled my ears, drowning out the wind. That was when I found my voice and screamed, drowning in sand as I did so.*

I woke up gasping for breath. I was shaking and soaked with sweat. My own screams still echoed in my ears, had I yelled out loud or had that too been just a dream? I didn't know. With a sigh I heaved myself out of bed and stared at the clock till the time of 4 am registered. Usually I had no recollection of my dreams but this time I remembered every single detail. I wrapped a blanket about my shoulders. I was freezing cold and went to make tea. There would be no getting back to sleep now.

Just before the dawn, when I could stand it no longer I made my way through the empty hallways of the palace to Lord Vader's office. The polished stone floor was cold on my bare feet and it had not occurred to me that running around the palace in my night dress and dressing gown would be considered more than just a little unusual. I hesitated only a few seconds before activating the holo transmitter. If Lord Vader was awake and not occupied he would answer if he was busy or meditating he'd ignore it. He was awake.

"What is it?" He barked. He never wasted time on pleasantries.

"My lord, I hope I am not disturbing you." I said.

"No more so than usual." He retorted. "What do you want? This is not our appointed time to discuss matters."

I went to speak but suddenly I did not know what to say or how to put into words what it was I was feeling and fearing.

"Spit it out girl, do not waste my time!"

"I need to speak with you in person." I said quickly, the words tumbling out.

"I... I need your guidance, my lord, but not over the holonet. There are things... well you need to know, I need to tell you..." I felt like a wayward child asking for help from a stern, unyielding parent. It was not the first time I had contacted him out of schedule, nor would it be the last but it was the first time I had felt so helpless. Perhaps, it was something in my voice or stance, something in my manner or maybe he could sense my inner turmoil, I do not know but whatever it was it made him pause. Instead of his usual impatience or anger he answered thoughtfully.

"I shall be returning to Coruscant in three days, we will talk then."

Three days? I opened my mouth to protest but he raised his hand to shut me up.

"I am currently at the other end of the Galaxy, even if you were to take a shuttle out to meet me, the journey would take you at least three to five days, probably more." He admonished. "Whatever it is that troubles you enough to bother me with now has been on your mind for some time, I have felt this. It will not hurt you to wait a few more days. You need to learn the value of patience."

"Yes, my lord." I nodded pondering his right to even use the word patience but didn't say that out loud.

"In the mean time, I believe it is customary during Winter Fete to take time off. I suggest you do so. You are no good to me stressed out and losing sleep."

"Yes, my lord."

He stared at me for a moment and then severed the connection. I shivered in the coolness of the office and wondered what I was supposed to do for the next couple of days. With a sigh I went home, maybe I didn't know what to do for the next few days but at that moment all I wanted was a cup of tea, maybe another hot bath and some sleep. Sometime in the afternoon, after I had woken up from a dreamless nap, someone knocked on the door. I opened it half expecting to find some token or a glass or something sitting on the doormat but instead I stared into the face of a young man not much older than me. He smiled as he handed me an envelope.

"I have been told to wait for an answer, my lady." He said.

I had to bite my tongue. I never could get used to being called my lady, it wasn't something happened on Tatooine all that often. On Coruscant it was the norm.

I took the envelope from the young man's hands and turned my back to him while I opened it and read the hand written note.

*Join me for dinner tonight at 7 pm in my home. I promise there will be no interruptions or unexpected visitors.*

I didn't have to think about my answer. "You may tell the Captain the answer is yes, I'd be delighted to join him for dinner."

"Very good, my lady. He said to inform you, should you agree to his request that a driver will be here to pick you up at a quarter to seven."

"Thank you." I said and watched him leave before closing the door. I looked at the note in my hands. Thrawn's handwriting was always so elegant and precise, reflecting his personality. I glanced at the clock and sighed. I had four hours to figure out what to wear.

Five changes of clothing and an hour's worth of fussing with my hair later, I arrived at Thrawn's flat. He opened the door and smiled. I had only been here once before and that had been many months ago. It was a beautiful place, high up in the building with a stunning view.

"You look lovely." He said as he took my wrap and hung it up. I had decided on a simple, ankle length dress made from layers of some light, flowing material the colour of viridian. It was pretty, yet comfortable.

"Thank you and you look very...non military." I said with a grin.

"You prefer the uniform?"

"No, not really." I shook my head. He was dressed in a form fitting, long sleeved shirt made from a fabric which was so black it seemed to absorb the light and a pair of tailored trousers that matched. He looked refined and handsome.

"Would you like something to drink?" He asked.

I nodded. He smiled and went into the kitchen. Whatever he was cooking smelled wonderful. I wandered around the large airy living room and stopped at the ma'arilite sculpture. It fascinated me, this strange stone that refracted light in so many different ways it was as if I were watching an aurora trapped within its core.

"It calls to you that piece, does it not?" Thrawn asked. I took the glass he offered and nodded slowly. A call was not really the right word, this sculpture sang to me. I just did not quite understand what it was singing about.

"Kha'säri'mahr." He touched his glass to mine. I sipped the light sparkling wine and looked around the rest of the room. Nothing had changed since I was here but he had added a new work of art. It was a painting, abstract, strange and eerie. I didn't really have words to describe it. He had not hung it on the wall but had it

sitting on a bookshelf leaning against the wall as though he were still thinking about what to do with it and where exactly to hang it. I stared at it.

"What do you think of it?" He asked.

"At first glance it reminds me of some of my nightmares." I said.

"And on second glance?" He pressed.

"I wonder how the artist managed to create something that seems to move. It's fluid in a really unnerving sort way." I said. "Where did it come from?"

"I bought it at an auction. The artist is not known to me and it is believed to have come from the Unknown Region of space or perhaps even beyond."

"Does it really move or is that just an optical illusion?" I asked watching as the rounded shapes of black and white seem to shift and shimmer. It was as though the painting were more a living breathing thing than a simple work of art

He shook his head. "I am still trying to work that out myself. I have never seen anything quite like this. It makes me most curious and, I might add, cautious about the race of beings that could create something so...unusual."

"Well, it's just plain creepy." I told him flatly and it was.

With a smile he walked to it and turned the painting around so it faced the wall. "Better?"

I nodded. It was a strange sensation to see a work of art that sent shivers of fear down my spine and I wasn't at all certain this was a good start to a dinner date.

As if he sensed my trepidation he smiled warmly and let me know that dinner was ready. He placed a hand on the small of my back and guided me to the dining room. The table had been set beautifully and the candles warmed the room, stealing away the chill I had just felt.

"I hope you brought an appetite with you." He said as he politely helped me to sit. I was unaccustomed to these gentlemanly manners. I felt remarkably awkward despite all my mother's lessons although, I must admit I did enjoy the fuss he was making. I had never had a man cook dinner for me before at least not like this.

We started with a salad and then came the main meal, a fish dish. I had not eaten much fish in my life. It wasn't something natural to Tatooine but on Naboo it was a common source of food and I had discovered that I truly enjoyed it. The fish that Thrawn had cooked was lovely. I was surprised at the lightness of the flavour and complimented him on it. He smiled as he told me about the recipe, his mother's. As with the Naboo, fish were a staple part of the Chiss diet. They were grown and cultivated in underground lakes, several species which were well suited to the warmer waters deep under the planet's crust had been transplanted from other worlds.

"I have not met many men who could cook like this." I said, actually I had not known any man who could cook at all in the way. "How did you learn to do it so well and better still, why?"

Thrawn shrugged slightly. "The answer to the 'why' is it was a matter of survival." He said enigmatically. "As for the how, well, one can learn anything if one puts one's mind to it. I firmly believe that if you are going to learn how to do something then learn to do it to the absolute best of your abilities. I discovered I enjoy the subtle art of cooking. It is a pleasure to be able to share this once in a while. More wine?"

The meal ended with desert, a plate of sliced fruit most of which I had never tasted before, then a thick, sweet and spiced dark 'caf like drink, similar to the spiced 'caf that was found on Tatooine, which he served in the sitting room.

All through dinner he had kept the conversation fairly light. No discussion of politics or Imperial work. I had wanted to press him for more news on Navaari but that, too, seemed somehow forbidden. He had steered the conversation in the direction he wanted it to go, subtly and cleverly. As we sat in the sitting room I asked him about it.

"Meal times in my culture are times of peace and harmony. Discussion of weighty topics is to be avoided, most of the time. It is a nice custom and when I can I try to uphold it. Arguments and heady conversations are bad for the digestion." He said with a smile that made me wonder if he was not half joking.

I shook my head and laughed. "Meal times at my house, as you discovered, are full of all sorts of weighty topics and such. It was the only time we ever discussed anything mostly because it was the only time we were almost all together."

"So what you are telling me is you have mighty things you wish to discuss?" he arched an eyebrow.

I sipped the spiced drink thoughtfully. "More like nosey." I said truthfully.

"Ah, well, curiosity does seem to be one of your more prominent and, I might add, delightful traits." He teased.

"Well, I was going to ask about Navaari." I said. "You were not exactly forthcoming last night or did you know the Emperor would show up like that?"

"No, I didn't know but I suspected he might want to see me."

"He didn't seem very happy."

"He wasn't. In fact he was most displeased." Thrawn said airily.

"Okay, I'll bite." I said. "Why?"

Thrawn leaned back into the couch we were sitting on. "The Emperor is a man of great wisdom and power but even he does not always see beyond the grandeur of his own scheming. He does not like it when someone refuses him or tells him something contrary to what he believes." He shrugged. "I will not risk the lives of men in the Imperial navy on ideas and plans I know will ultimately fail. It is a waste of resources. It does not please him when I say no to a plan of his and it is made all the worse when I am right about its eventual outcome. He wanted to discuss this last night."

"You say 'no' to the Emperor?"

"When it is necessary, yes. I often disagree with him." Thrawn said.

"And you are still alive." I shook my head.

"I am useful to him." He said coolly. "The Emperor uses fear to rule. It is an interesting tool although not always appropriate. I suspect he was making a point with the entrance that he made last night; wishing to instil fear in you and place me in what could have been a compromising situation."

"Well, he instils fear in me alright." I said.

"And fear makes his subjects blind." Thrawn countered quickly.

I glanced at him trying decipher what he meant exactly by that but he didn't elaborate. I shrugged. "I doubt that simply watching fireworks with me is a particularly compromising situation."

"Well," Countered Thrawn with a wolfish smile. "It could have been."

I fiddled with my empty cup and tried to ignore the flush I felt in my face. "So, how is Navaari anyway?" I asked as I not so adeptly changed the subject.

Thrawn laughed and took the cup from my hands. "I'll tell you everything you want to know over brandy."

He was true to his word and over a large bowl shaped glass with a small amount of brandy in it he told me about his meeting with Navaari. I soaked up each word eagerly because despite the fact that my time with the Hjal Dantassi hunter had been very short he had, oddly enough, made a large impact on my life. But there wasn't much to tell in the end, the meeting really had been short and Navaari had mostly grilled Thrawn about me.

"He was curious." Thrawn said. "You were not what he expected." And before I could ask what that was supposed to mean he continued. "Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is somewhat old fashioned. He was surprised that I would choose a non Chiss female to...," He searched for the right word. "...To join my clan. He was surprised at how

young you are. He asked me why you and I told him. He asked me why I had not prepared you better and I gave him my reasons. He listened and then he proceeded to tell me off as though I was a young child not a respected hunter in my own right and I took it gracefully because he is my elder and I honour him greatly and..." He added. "He is also right."

I just looked at him as he spoke. "You won't elaborate on the details for me, will you?" I asked.

"No." He said firmly. "Kirja'navaar'inkjerii impressed upon me that we must visit Hjal, that you must be presented to the clan and given the right to unmask. I told him when the time was right."

"And he said?"

"He said nothing, he merely smiled. He placed both of his hands upon my shoulders and he touched his forehead to mine as is custom between hunters and then we parted ways. It was, as I told you before, a very brief, chance meeting."

"Navaari told me that the Dantassi do not believe in chance."

Thrawn cocked his head slightly and raised an eyebrow. "Nor do they but sometimes it happens anyway."

I finished my brandy and set the glass back on the table. "What does it mean the right to be unmasked?"

"You are asking for details again, yes?"

I nodded.

"It is the ceremony which allows a member from one clan to go unmasked within the confines of another clan." He said. "You would be brought before the entire clan, your face still hidden, to stand in front of the Tribal Elder. The ceremony entails a sponsor, which would be Kirja'navaar'inkjerii and the Ta'kasta'cariad, which will be me. The Ta'kasta'cariad presents you to the clan and the sponsor accepts responsibility for you on behalf of the clan. There are words spoken which you repeat and then I lift the mask from your face and show your true self to all, they in turn do the same for you. It is a momentous occasion. There is much celebrating afterwards."

"That's it?" He was leaving some things out, I could feel that.

"More or less."

"What are you not telling me?"

"Are you using your witch ways to read my mind?" He asked with a slight smile.

"No but I feel it when someone is not entirely truthful." I said openly.

He nodded his understanding. "Well, the ritual changes depending on circumstances, so I am vague about it because I have no real idea exactly which path will be taken when we actually go through with it."

"You mean you'd consider doing this?"

"It is not wise to displease a Dantassi elder, which Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is."

"Oh." I nodded. "And just for the record I don't use my witch ways on you, at least not since Myrkr and you deserved that."

His smile was slow but his eyes burned. I fought the urge to scuttle away from him on the couch instead I raised my chin just a notch and matched his gaze. He reached out to me and I held my ground. He took my chin, gently, between his thumb and forefinger. "That was a powerful little magic trick you pulled. Most unexpected." He whispered leaning in close to me.

"I was cross." I said.

"You need to watch your temper then." He said softly. He released my chin but caressed my face with the back of his forefinger.

"So I am frequently told." I said tartly.

He grinned.

I loved this tension that welled up between us. I never took my eyes from his and we stared at each other for a very long time. He brushed his finger across my lips but then abruptly sat back.

"Would you like more brandy?" He asked as the moment between us receded.

"No." I shook my head, more to clear it than to negate his question. "I think I have had enough, maybe a cup of tea?"

He got up taking the empty glasses with him and went to the kitchen. I followed. I watched him as he moved about the kitchen and set water to boil, readied a tea pot which looked very old, cast from a dark, heavy metal. Like everything he owned it was exquisite and beautiful. Its metal body decorated with ornate patterns.

"You wrote in your last letter that you had been undergoing training in the Center." He said as he readied the tea leaves.

I frowned. "The Center?"

"From your description, your master is having you go through training exercises at what is commonly referred to as the Center. It is a teaching facility used, in part, to help train the Emperor's private guard and his agents." He said pouring the water into the pot. The scent of the tea rose in the air and it was soothing. "In that cupboard, second shelf, you'll find cups and saucers." He said nodding his head in the general direction. I followed him back into the sitting room and set the cups on the table.

"White chaeya leaf tea from Malastare." He said as he poured two cups. "It has calming properties." I wondered who exactly it was that needed calming but let it slide.

"What do you know about this Center?" I asked taking the cup he offered. The tea had a sweet, fragrant scent. It tasted a little like Corellian Jasmine and wild apples.

"It is a secret training center for the best of the best, those who will serve the Emperor closely. It is used to train his spies, agents and, as I said, the Royal Guard. It is some place deep in the underground part of the Palace and not many outside this circle of people know of its existence." He said.

"You know." I pointed out.

He smiled. "I have undergone some of the programs and training regimes that are done there."

"Is that standard procedure for a member of the Imperial Navy?" I asked.

"No, but then I am not your standard Imperial Naval officer either." He said. "The man who found me and played a large part in my academy instruction felt it would be useful for me to be tested through the Center's programme."

"That was Voss Park, wasn't it?" I asked. "Palace gossip." I added to clarify where I had heard the name from.

He arched an eyebrow. "Yes. He is a good man, an intriguing man to say the least."

"So, what did you think of the training that you went through there?" I asked.

He sighed. "It was interesting. Some of the exercises were challenging and some of them were stupid and ill conceived. I made suggestions as to how they could be improved. I did not spend a great deal of time there. I am a little surprised that you are undergoing Center training but I assume, as in all things, the Emperor has his reasons for requesting this."

"Well, if he does, I don't know about it." I said not hiding my annoyance.

"Then my suggestion would be to learn all you can from what you are asked to do, enjoy it."

I made a face. "Enjoy it?" I let out the breath I had been holding. "I am Lord Vader's personal Assistant not a bloody spy or secret agent! Running around like a wamprat in a sand maze is not fun."

He laughed.

"It's not funny." I told him.

"No, probably it is not, but sometimes you are." He said gently.

I gave him what I hoped was an indignant look. "Glad I amuse you."

He sat back and regarded me evenly for a moment. "Are you scared by the exercises you are doing in the Center?"

"Yes, but not so much by the trainings themselves but what they represent." I answered.

"I can understand that, but perhaps you might want to let that fear go and concentrate on the lessons learned." He said.

"You sound like the writer of the little Jedi journal I have." I said. "That's good advice, in theory, but hard to put into practice."

He nodded. "Over coming fear is always difficult, it is a very powerful thing. Perhaps that is the purpose of your time in the Center, to overcome your fear."

"Fear of what?"

He gave me a speculative look. "That is something only you can answer. What scares you the most?" He asked.

"I don't know." I shrugged.

"Of course you do." He chided.

I frowned and thought about his question. "Failure." I said after a long silence.

He nodded. "What else?"

"Being helpless." I told him. "I am not overly fond of the idea of being trapped and I do not like losing control either."

"Does anything you have gone through at the Center address any of these things?"

I nodded. "Yes, but how...?"

"The Emperor knows many things. He has ways of seeing past the face and into the soul. Perhaps it is his wish that you face your fears. I am guessing, of course, but it would be the logical assumption considering he has expressed a wish that you be more than simply Lord Vader's go-to girl. Your place in the Imperial Court is unusual; you are privy to information on many of the high ranking officers, members of the Imperial navy among other things. You have a fairly high profile in the public arena. Lord Vader does not lightly allow anyone near to him and you have managed to be one of the few, much to the concern of some others. While you might not have thought about it, this does place you in an interesting and somewhat precarious position. Just something to consider."

I sipped my tea thoughtfully. "Cheery dinner-date conversation this." I told him after a moment. "Is there something going on that you know about and I don't?"

"My dear, I know many things you do not but with regards to this particular topic the answer would be no. I speculate and make educated guesses based on facts." He stated coolly then added. "And you are right, it isn't particularly cheery date conversation, but it is on your mind. Have you spoken your concerns with Lord Vader at all?"

"He said we will meet to discuss them when he returns to Coruscant in a couple of days from now."

He nodded. "Good. Perhaps that will help."

"I doubt it." I said dryly, pouring a second cup of tea. "After all, it is Lord Vader we are talking about here."

To my surprise Thrawn burst out laughing. I watched him for a moment in astonishment and then giggled with him, his laughter was infectious. It broke the strange tension that had dampened the evening and the conversation shifted to art and music. We talked for a very long time and it surprised me when I suddenly realised it was no longer late evening but early morning. I watched as Thrawn spoke

about an artist we both liked. He was animated and passionate. His hands, large and long fingered, moved gracefully as he spoke accentuating his words. As I watched him I realised that over the months that we had known each other I had begun to feel much more for him than just the sparks of desire he ignited in me. It occurred to me that this was not a very good thing and the little voice in my head said *back off and get out* but my heart said something utterly different. Something of these thoughts must have shown on my face because he stopped mid sentence and looked at me.

"What is it?" He asked. "Is something wrong? Is there something you'd like?"

What I wanted to say was 'I'd like to go home, it's late, and I need to sleep.' But what came out of my mouth was "I think I'd like you to kiss me."

He sat very still for a moment then smiled slowly. "I had wondered if you might make such a request." He said softly.

"You were waiting for me to ask?"

He leaned in very close to me and whispered in my ear. "It is not always about what I would like, Miss Gabriel. Sometimes I wish to know what it is you want." His voice was velvety and his breath was warm against the skin of my neck. It made me shiver.

I looked to his face to try and decipher this mystery of a man I sat next to. He simply smiled and then he did as I had asked. He kissed me. No mysteries in that, I did my best to kiss him back and gave up thinking about anything else.

Desire is a strange thing. It curls about inside your body like a dragon and breathes its fire until it feels as though you will burn from the inside out. It is a drug though, and once tasted, one generally wants more and it is a power that once tapped is hard to turn off. I could feel it all rise up and crash around me. I was true to my word and I did not use my Force powers on Thrawn but I felt his desire keenly and I fed on it, I fed on my own as well and it spiralled out of control showering us both. I could no more stop this than I could stop breathing. If this had been a tangible thing we would have been surrounded by a dancing, fiery light, least that is what it felt like. He broke from me, mid kiss, surprise in his eyes. He pushed back, holding me at arm's length. He worked to control his breathing.

"What is this? Is it your doing?" He asked,

I nodded. "I'm sorry...I can't control this...you, I mean I ..." I stopped and also tried to remember to breathe. "It's just..."

"This power you have..." He could not finish his sentence. He looked quite intoxicated but it had nothing to do with wine or brandy.

I swallowed trying to get my heart rate back to some sort of normal. I took a deep, steadying breath and shook my head. "This is something new, I have never felt this, well quite anything like this before, I don't know how to control it... I'm sorry." I shrugged.

I had no idea how to even describe what this was, how it happened. We stared at each other for several long wary moments and slowly the energy receded. He got up and walked to the window. He was very quiet. After a moment I followed to stand at his side. We watched the night sky slowly give way to the dawn, lighting the sky with hues of pink and orange. I wondered if I had done something wrong, this was new territory to me. I wanted to ask but feared his answer so I stayed silent and brooded.

When he finally looked at me it was with a smile. He caressed my face gently. "Do you have plans for this evening?" He asked.

I raised both eyebrows in surprise. That was the last question I had expected. "What did you have in mind?"

"Tonight is the final evening of Winter Fete, there will be a large celebration in the Imperial palace, the same place the Grand Ball is held. I believe I owe you a dance or two and this would be the perfect venue to repay this debt."



"The Imperial Fete Gala?" I asked. I had been aware of it, but had mostly ignored it, deciding not to go.

He nodded. "Yes, although it is not a required attendance event. The Emperor will most likely not attend this year, I heard that he was occupied with other matters, but many will. The orchestra will be the best and the dance floor, as you know, is large."

"So, there will be lots of people?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes." He said. "You'd prefer something less formal, less crowded?" He asked but before I could answer he continued. "I don't think it would be so wise for me to spend another night all alone with you. I only have so much self restraint and while, my dear, I can and will given half a chance, spend hours kissing you there will come a moment, a time when that is not enough." His voice was a husky purr.

"Is that so wrong?" I asked.

He sighed. "If I were to pick you up right now and carry you to my bedroom would you be afraid?" He asked.

"A little." I nodded but my heart leapt at the suggestion.

He shook his head. "You are such a distraction." He muttered more to himself than to me.

"Is that good or bad?"

He drew a deep breath. "Bad for my self control. Good for my ego." He said with a slight smile. "What you and I feel, it isn't bad or wrong but the timing is."

"Oh? Why?" I asked, folding my arms across my chest.

"Because, my dear," He whispered in my ear. "When I bed you I want that we have the whole night before us not already behind us. And there will be no fear just anticipation."

My mouth formed a silent "Oh!" and I suppose the sudden blush I felt rise in my cheeks told him all he needed to know.

He chuckled and went back to looking out of the window. "You never answered my question." He said after a while.

"Which was?"

"Do you wish to attend the festivities with me tonight?"

"Oh right, well it could be fun." I tried to sound nonchalant and failed. The prospect of being with this man again was intoxicating.

"I'll take that as a yes?"

"On one condition." I said.

He arched an eyebrow.

"That we slip away and watch the fireworks from our balcony in peace and quiet."

"I think that is a condition I can acquiesce to." He said. "And now I think it is time I took you home before I change my mind. I have some things to do and you have work, do you not?"

I stifled a yawn shaking my head. "No, I have been granted some time off for Fete week."

"Then I suggest you get some rest for this evening." He said.

"Aye, aye Captain." I said. I wondered what in the name of Sarlacc was I going to wear to this thing.

My life, it seemed, had sadly become a strange mix of the sublime and ridiculous. The ridiculous being my sudden need to be fashionable and worry about dresses, shoes and such and whether they would please this man or not. I smiled when Thrawn placed my wrap across my shoulders and without much further ado he took me home.

The first thing I did when I got back to my flat was make an appointment to see Cati, the Rodian seamstress whose dresses I adored, later that afternoon. The second thing I did was have a long, hot bath. My mind buzzed because I was over-tired and unable to unwind. I could not think straight. This blossoming romance was not what I had wanted or expected but it did make me smile. Every time I closed my eyes I could hear his voice, feel his touch, taste his lips and it was absolutely all I could think of. It was driving me mad. I did not like this sensation of spiralling out of control. That one person, this one man, had such a bewildering influence over me, scared me half to death but like the drug it was, I was beginning to crave it as well. It pushed at my self control which, if I wasn't careful, I would completely lose myself to him.

I had tapped into the desire, the power that we created between us and I had sent it flying like a wild wind all around the two of us. It had been so strong he had not only just felt it but it had hit him like a sand storm. That was the thing that worried at me the most. How did I learn to control that? Lord Vader had spoken of passion, saying it was a power and it should be used not shoved aside and stifled. The Emperor had said much the same thing, I was a creature of passion and I should tap into this power but when I did all manner of chaos seemed to break loose. I wondered if this intensity was normal but I had nothing except my experience with Jyrki to base it on and, well, that had not been the greatest example in the galaxy.

I lay in the bath and worked on letting it all go, concentrated on my breathing, but the relaxation techniques didn't work and the only thing that happened after a while was the water got cold. Frustration eventually gave way to exhaustion as I argued with myself over and over about everything and anything. When I did fall asleep it was a mercy.

I woke mid afternoon from a restless dream. The strange man in the desert from a previous nightmare haunted me in my sleep. The things he said, the images he showed me made no sense. Like most dreams they were jumbled and confusing yet real enough that I remembered them up on waking, troubled and fuzzy headed. It took several cups of thick, sweet stim'caf before I felt like myself and ready to face Cati and her almost overwhelming enthusiasm and personality.

Cati's shop was in the fashion district off the main strip. She recognized me instantly as I walked through the doors. Her mohawk hair had been dyed a bright red and it matched her outfit. A genuinely cheerful grin split her snout. I was surprised that she remembered my name and even more surprised that she remembered exactly what dresses I had bought from her previously. The conversation was light and airy until she commented on how tired I looked while taking new measurements.

"Late night." I said making a face and not quite managing to hide a smile.

She grinned as only a Rodian could. "Oh, I hope he was worth it." She said.

I looked at her for a moment and then threw caution to the wind asked. "How did you know there was a he involved?"

She gave me an '*I know all sorts of things*' look. "Miss Gabriel, I have been doing this dress making thing a long time. I have learned to read people pretty well over the years and that look on your face, that spark in your eyes says there is a man involved."

"Ah, well it's not what you think." I frowned.

She stopped what she was doing and put her hands on her hips. "And just what do I think?" She asked.

"Erm..." I opened my mouth then shut it again. Rodians could be fierce when they wanted to be and Cati was no exception.

"Well then! No actually, I wasn't thinking *that* at all." She told me tartly going back to taking measurements. I sighed, remembering that Rodians could also be very forward when they wished to be. "Actually what I was thinking is, it is nice to see

someone enjoying the company they keep rather than it being a job. You are not a courtesan so I didn't assume you were sleeping with him, whoever it is." She said with a grin. "Besides you don't have that slept with him look in your eyes. You have that wanting to be slept with look."

"Erm..." I started and then stopped. We were the only two in her shop, it was quiet and calm and she was chattier than I remember her being. "No, I am not a courtesan and yes he was worth losing sleep over." I could not help my smile. "I have no idea what I am getting myself into though." I added.

"Hrmph, I can see that." She said. "Now, what do you need from me today?"

"I need a dress." I said.

"You wouldn't be here if you didn't, details would be helpful." She said.

"For tonight." I added.

"Ah, I knew there was a challenge in this. Am I to also guess that you wish it to please this particular gentleman?"

I began to ask how she knew that but she just laughed. "Trust me...I've been doing this a long time. You have that blush about you. It's a good thing so I take it that would be a yes?"

"Yes." I replied feeling vaguely silly.

"What sort of venue is it?"

"The Fete festival at the Palace. So it's formal, even though they say it isn't and there will be dancing, lots and lots of dancing."

She grinned widely. "Oh, I have just the perfect thing then and it should fit you with some minor adjustments." And before I could say anything she vanished and returned a few moments later with an armful of pale pink fabric.

"Try this on." She said handing me the big pile of pink.

I did as I was told. I didn't think I had any right to argue with her seeing as how this was really short notice. The dress was surprisingly stunning and the colour was perfect. It was a strapless gown without a whole lot of back to it either. It was made from a beautiful silk that shimmered with pale purple highlights. The Bodice was snug and gave me cleavage yet was still amazingly comfortable. I wasn't sure how she had managed that trick. The front of the gown where the bodice ended had tiny, almost invisible pleats allowing for a flat clean look over the hips but the fabric flared towards the floor giving the skirt itself a lot of material. For fabric that looked heavy it was surprisingly light and soft. The entire dress had been hand beaded with tiny, pale iridescent beads. It was stunning.

I walked out of the change room and Cati whistled. "Yup." She said. "Needs to be hemmed though, you'll trip and fall on your face with that length."

"It's strapless, how on earth will it stay up?" I asked tugging a little at the bodice.

"Goodness, you are not going to fight a war in it or wrestle gundarks are you?" Cati shook her head. "You should learn to trust more. I am very good at what I do and believe me that bodice isn't going anywhere, don't worry nothing will pop out!"

I must have had a look of disbelief on my face because she told me to move around, stretch, twirl...do whatever it was that dancer did. So I obeyed and after five minutes of wild movements I was reasonably sure the dress would stay put.

"Right, now worry is over with, hop up on the platform so I can hem this dress or you won't have it in time for tonight. When do you need to be there?"

I stood on the platform so that she could do her work. "He'll be picking me up at eight tonight."

"Lots of time then, do you have shoes to match?" She asked.

"Uhm, that would be a no, not really. I don't own anything pink especially shoes."

She sighed and promptly vanished into the back room for a few moments. I could hear her talking but I didn't know the language. When she came back she continued to set the hem. About ten minutes into the process someone came into the store and yelled for her.

She came back with a box in her hands.

"Try these." She said taking a pair of shoes out of the tissue paper they were wrapped in.

"How do you do that?" I asked as I tried on the shoes. "They match the dress perfectly and they fit as though they were made for me."

She nodded. "I have an arrangement with the shoe maker down the street he matches dye lots with me and I use his shoes exclusively. He remembered your shoe size from your last visit."

"Cool." Was all I could think to say. She chuckled as she finished pinning the hem.

"Okay, Miss Gabriel, you can get out of the dress now."

I slipped off the shoes and got down off the platform. Wiggled my way out of the dress in the small change room and put my street clothes back on.

"I'll have it all sent over when it's done. Just give me the address." She said.

"Thank you for everything. I owe you one." I said as I wrote the expense account number on the bill.

She smiled. "My pleasure. Most of the time I get bored courtesans coming in and saying things like 'He likes black or he wants me to wear something backless. As a rule they are fussy and difficult to work with and so are most of the wealthier clients I have. Don't get me wrong I love them all they pay the bills but," she shrugged, "every now and then it is nice to fit someone who actually looks forward to the evening and you are positively glowing. How were you planning on wearing your hair?"

"Oh probably similar to how I am now, just tucked up with Zenji sticks."

She shook her head. "Let it down, sweep a little off your face, tie that up with a nice clip or something. You have lovely, long hair and your gentleman will like that if you don't often wear it down. You do have some decent hair clips don't you?"

I nodded. "Thank you." I said genuinely grateful and totally on impulse I hugged her.

She grinned. "I will have your dress finished and delivered by six pm, so enjoy the evening." She said.

True to her word, the dress and the shoes arrived at my door by six pm. I unwrapped the dress from the tissue paper and held it up. In the privacy of my own home it looked a lot more revealing than it had in the shop. I laid it over the chair and took a look at the shoes, they seemed a little higher than they had before and I bit my lip. What had I been thinking? It was just as I was about to go through my closet to see if there was anything else I could wear that I noticed the extra envelope with my name on it tucked in the box the dress had been in. Inside was a hand scribbled note from Cati and a delicate hair clip that matched the dress.

*Don't you dare get cold feet. The dress and shoes are perfect. He will love you in this dress, trust me. The hair piece is a little gift just to make sure you actually get that right and don't use some sort of paper clip or something. Next time you come to the shop I want to know how it went. - Cati*

The note made me smile and wonder how it was she really did know so much. It took me two hours to fuss with my hair, get my make up just right decide what perfume to use and get into the dress. I was an absolute wreck by the time the doorbell rang though I tried to hide it as well as I could.

We had been through this before. There was a sort of routine to it now, me opening the door, letting him in then waiting to see his face, his reaction to me. I

stepped back as he entered the flat. He was wearing his dress uniform and he carried it well.

His eyes looked me up and down. "Very pretty dress." He said with a wolfish smirk.

"Cati made it." I said for lack of anything else to say.

"Ah yes, your favourite tailor. I'll have to send her flowers as a thank you or something. She has a very good eye, you are quite ..." He paused, "stunning."

I was genuinely nervous. I wasn't sure why exactly. Usually we bantered cheerfully back and forth and it was easy. Suddenly, now I felt incredibly awkward. I could and would stand up to Lord Vader even argue with him, but right in this moment I wished the ground would devour me or something, anything to not have to face Thrawn. I smiled shyly, fiddled with my hair and looked away, glancing at my shawl and purse. I didn't see him move and I gasped when his hands slipped about my waist pulling me tightly to him.

"A'myshk'a, look at me." He commanded.

I did as he bid. I don't know what he read in my face and I could not decipher his own expression but the kiss he gave me was easy to understand. Time stopped, my heart raced and when the kiss ended I felt a lot less nervous. I wasn't sure how or why that worked but I wasn't going to argue and I was thankful that I had chosen a clear lip gloss over lipstick.

"Better?" He asked.

I nodded wordlessly.

"I have something for you." He said placing a small box in my hand before I could say anything.

I opened it and smiled. It was a pendant. "You give me so much..." I said quietly. I took it out of the box and studied it.

"It has a name, this piece." He said, "And it is quite old."

I let the light play with the stone, which was a simple, round piece of polished Ma'arilite. I could just make out the flash of blue, the colour of twilight night as I moved it back and forth.

Thrawn watched me and then when he saw from the look of surprise on my face that I had found the thing that made this piece special he took it from my fingers and fastened the delicate silver chain around my neck.

"It is very subtle." He said as he moved my hair aside, his fingers brushing the sensitive skin of the nape of my neck making me sigh. "Most people would not value such a pale example of Ma'arilite, but the woman who sold it showed me its treasure and I knew you had to have it. She said that it was called *Rishi-estalliana*, which means evening star. It is not as flashy as some pieces of Ma'arilite that I have seen but then again, sometimes the most beautiful things are hidden until someone uncovers their secrets." He said gently.

I picked it up and looked at it; it took a little bit of work to find that singular flash of brilliance and colour which twinkled just like a star in the blue

"Thank you." I said. "You keep giving me beautiful things and I don't know what to say."

He arched an eyebrow. "You don't need to say anything, just enjoy them. Now, shall we go?" He asked offering me his arm.

The air buzzed with excitement and good cheer. People were out in full force all over the city celebrating Winter Fete. We made our way into the great hall and I marvelled at how many beings attended this particular event. The hall was alive with laughter and chatter. Palace courtiers and courtesans, Imperial officers of all ranks, many Imperial Palace workers, civilian and military, human and alien alike all seemed to be enjoying and taking part in the party.

With my hand lightly placed on Thrawn's arm, we walked down the main stairs into the crowd. There were many faces I recognized and many members of the Imperial Navy and military nodded or saluted Thrawn as he passed by.

"What would you like to drink?" He asked me as we neared the buffet table and bar.

"Something that won't go straight to my head." I told him, looking around. Thrawn nodded and moved away from my side to go and fetch something to drink. I drew a deep breath and watched the crowd around me. Already people were dancing. The music was good and cheerful. I was caught up observing the swirling dancers when someone touched my arm.

"Hey, I didn't expect you to be here!" Shiv said happily giving me a hug and a kiss on each of my cheeks. "You look amazing!"

"Thank you, last minute decision." I said. "I tried to comm you two days ago but they said you were unavailable."

"Had to go off world for a project. Was it important?" He asked.

I shook my head. "Nope, just wanted to chat."

"Good evening Siavaan." Thrawn said from behind me. I took the pale blue coloured drink he offered me.

"Tanji berry juice, no alcohol, no fuzzy head." Thrawn said to me as I gave the drink a questioning look. Shiv raised his eyebrows.

I looked at both men. "I can't dance if I am drunk." I said tartly, sipping the strange berry juice and making a face. It was disgustingly sweet.

"We have a table reserved over there," Shiv pointed out, "If you want to join us, it will get very crowded soon and it's good to have a place to put your stuff, drinks, purses what ever..."

We walked over to the table to claim two seats and Shiv introduced Thrawn to Antygra, Bobbyn, Maxxi and Ynyth. They all hid their surprise at seeing the Captain joining their table really well but I knew there would be many, many questions as soon as Thrawn was not at my side. I laid my shawl over the back of the chair and my little purse on the table beside my drink as we got through the greetings and pleasantries.

"Captain, I believe you promised me a dance." I said before anyone could say anything else. Thrawn simply smiled, offered me his arm and led me to the dance floor where we joined in on the waltz currently being played.

"Your friends are nice but nosey." He said and we circled around the dance floor.

"How can you tell that, they never asked a single question?"

He laughed. "Curiosity is written all over their faces and you cannot tell me that they will not grill you about me and you as soon as you sit down and I am not at your side."

I gave him my best innocent look. "Guess you should probably stay very close to me then, shouldn't you."

"You play a dangerous game, Miss Gabriel." He said with that smile I had come to associate with his teasing.

"I am learning from the best." I retorted.

"So you are, my dear, so you are." He smirked.

We danced easily together and I loved the sensation of whirling around the dance floor in his arms. As we moved about he pointed out many of the military and naval officers to me. He began to teach me about how to identify the ranks from the insignia worn and the differences in the uniforms, the most notable being that Grand Admirals wore white. I didn't tell him that I had already known that. I didn't want to spoil his fun because he enjoyed teaching me. There were several men wearing the white uniform to be seen and he knew who they all were.

"In the corner, the Grand Admiral with the brown hair, next to the blond courtesan is Rufaan Tigellinus. He was appointed two years ago to the circle of twelve. Not the best military genius among us but he plays the court politics very well. He likes to be seen with the elite circles of the Imperial Court, the ruling families and Coruscant's wealthy." He said in my ear as we danced. "He is oily and does not like non humans but he tries to hide this fact."

I glanced at the man he was describing. He was not particularly handsome and had an air of haughty boredom about him. The young courtesan who hung off his arm also looked disinterested in anything going on around her.

"You know Grand Admiral Demetrius Zaarin already." Thrawn said, nodding over to where the Grand Admiral stood, talking with a small circle of lower ranking naval officers. "He is a brilliant scientist, very gifted, very intelligent and remarkably at ease with court society etiquette. He is the leader of the Star fighter Research has helped design some of the Imperial ships. He is working on upgrading some of the older model TIE fighter. He can be very charming when he wants to as you have already discovered."

I nodded. The music changed and so did the dance. Under Thrawn's leadership I didn't stumble over my own feet in fact the transition from one style of dance to the next was flawless.

"By the bar is Nial Declann. It might interest you to learn that he is force sensitive and he has been well trained in the arts you would know as Sith, that however, is not widely known." He told me with a slight smile, "He is known for his use of something the Emperor calls battle meditation, the ability to manipulate and help aid the troops during manoeuvres and actual offensives. He is moody and unpredictable, though. Very loyal to the Empire and not particularly interested in the inner intricacies of court politics, he and Tigellinus argue a lot."

"You seem to know an awful lot about them all." I commented as he guided me through a complicated set of steps.

"I make it my business to know as much as I can about my enemies and those who regard me as a threat." He said coldly. "Make no mistake, Miss Gabriel, the Imperial court and all its manifestations is a vicious creature. It is as much about survival of the fittest as it is about survival of the smartest as well as the most devious. Do you see the Grand Admiral over there, the one next to Moff Kaine, well that is Ishin-Il-Raz, probably one of the only Grand Admirals who was promoted purely for his ability to play the political games. He has absolutely no military or strategic knowledge what so ever. He helped to co-found COMPNOR. He has attempted to try his hand at the military game and failed miserably. His failures brought about certain atrocious acts and massacres which have helped to alienate certain members of the Empire against Imperial rule. He admires the Emperor above all other beings and tries to emulate him in many ways but fails to see the bigger picture."

"Sounds charming." I said flatly, glancing at the small man with black curly hair and cruel looking eyes. "Why are you telling me all of this?"

He smiled at me. "It is always good to know a little about the people who live in your world." He said. "These men are powerful and have influence. Even Lord Vader will, on occasion, listen to them when he feels they have something to contribute." He said leading me off the dance floor towards our table but before we could reach it we were intercepted by two young naval officers who wanted to talk to the Captain.

"Run along, my dear," He said in that cool tone he reserved for when we were in public. "I'll join you shortly."

"Yes, Captain." I said meekly, I could play this game too. I made my way back to where Shiv and Antygra sat. Bobbyn and Ynyth were dancing. I sat, took a sip of my drink and made a face.

"So you and the Captain, huh?" Antygra asked. "He took you to the Opera on Theed too didn't he?"

I rolled my eyes. "You were there, you spied on me."

"Oh please, it's not spying if I didn't know you were going to be there. But you know, you are his favourite, I have not ever seen him attend these sorts of functions before unless it was absolutely mandatory and never with anyone of the female persuasion." Antygra said, waving his hand at me to shut my protest up.

I shrugged and Shiv poked my arm. "Our Merly is just full of secrets." He said.

"So, what is he like?" Antygra asked. Everyone asked this. I gave him my usual reply and Shiv poked me in the arm again.

"Ow!" I poked him back.

"That's your standard answer, Merly. Now truth!" Shiv said.

I sighed. "Well, he is a very good cook." I said and then giggled at Shiv's expression.

"How do you know that?"

I looked at Antygra. "Not telling." I answered. "He is also a very good dancer and he has exquisite taste in wine and art."

Shiv shook his head in mock despair, "Oh dear."

I laughed.

"Anyone want something else to drink?" Asked Antygra, getting up, with a shake of his head.

"Sparkling water, please, anything but this awful berry stuff." I said.

Once he had left, Shiv cornered me. "Okay, out with it." He poked my arm. "What is going on with you and that man? And don't tell me 'nothing' because I simply won't believe that. You blush when you're asked about him and you were positively glowing as he swept you off to the dance floor."

"Shiv, you know it is forbidden to fraternise with members of the Imperial navy."

He gave me a look. "Okay, okay we'll go out to a tap'caf tomorrow afternoon, someplace private and you *will* tell me everything."

I just raised my eyebrows at him and accepted the drink Antygra gave me. I was certain that Shiv would have pressed further but Thrawn picked that moment to rejoin us.

"So did I arrive in time to save you from the inquisition?" Thrawn asked me, pointedly looking at Shiv and Antygra. They both tried to look innocent and failed. Thrawn smiled. "I see that is a yes."

"We are just looking out for our girl here." Shiv said defensively.

Thrawn arched an eyebrow. "Indeed. Well then, Siavaan, what would you like to know?"

I looked from one face to the other waiting to hear what the outcome of this would be but before I could find out someone tapped me lightly on the shoulder. I turned around to see Grand Admiral Zaarin standing there, asking me to dance with him. It would have been rude to refuse. I got up and placed my hand gingerly in the Admiral's. I looked back as I was escorted to the dance floor, they were all laughing. I was pretty certain that whatever Shiv, the Captain and Antygra talked about, they would not tell me afterwards.

The rest of the evening was a dizzying blur of dance and chatter. I suppose because it was Winter Fete and the last night of the celebration, as it got later in the evening so the party got wilder, louder and more out of control. It surprised me a little when several fist fights broke out among junior officers and palace civilian



workers. More than once I found myself being taken for a palace courtesan and having to fend off unwanted attention from some very drunk men. Usually these matters were resolved amicably enough and only twice did Thrawn step in and enforce my refusal firmly enough to get the point across. By eleven o'clock I had had enough.

"Can we go now?" I whispered as we danced to a slow piece of music. It was difficult not to forget where we were and lay my head against his chest as he held me close.

"If that is your wish." He said with a lazy smile.

"Well it is either that or I kill the next silly idiot who tries to kiss me or grab at me and that would make a scene." I said sweetly.

Thrawn chuckled. "When we finish this dance say goodbye to your friends and I will have the speeder waiting." He said.

My goodbyes were short and sweet, lots kisses on the cheek and another reminder from Shiv that no matter what I said I was going to meet him for 'caf and gossip the next day. I agreed hurriedly, just to placate him and then without another word, I grabbed my purse and shawl and walked swiftly out of the hall. It was raining. I hurried into the waiting speeder so I would not get my dress wet. It had seemed a bit silly to me that we should go to this fete thing in a vehicle when I only lived a short distance away but now I was glad, my feet ached from all the dancing in new shoes and the rain would have ruined my dress.

As soon as we stepped inside my part of the palace, I kicked off my shoes. Barefoot felt like bliss. Thrawn smiled watching me.

"You go on ahead, I'll join you in a moment I need to change shoes and visit the refresher." I said as we reached my flat. "Should I bring something to drink or do you have that sorted out?" I asked opening my door.

"I have that well in hand, my dear." He said with a warm smile.

"Glasses?"

"Taken care of."

"Then I will be with you in a few minutes." I said.

He arched an eyebrow and gave me one of those looks that somehow managed to make my knees weak. "If you have not joined me in five minutes I shall have to come looking for you and that could get...interesting."

I stood up on tip toes and kissed him lightly. "Interesting could be fun." I said.

"Miss Gabriel, the fireworks will begin very soon." His hands cupped my face gently.

Without meaning to I replied. "I hope so."

He gave me a slow feral smile and his eyes glowed. "Careful..." He said.

I swallowed and backed off a space. "I'll be quick as a pod racer!"

He turned away, chuckling as he walked down the hallway towards the older part of the palace where our balcony was.

I smiled as I walked into my flat. It didn't seem out of place to me to think of that quiet place and its stunning balcony as 'ours'. I wondered what this night would bring and realised with a smile that I felt anticipation, not fear. Quickly, I slipped into the refresher and did what I had to do. I brushed my teeth and refreshed my perfume. Then I went into my bedroom to find a more comfortable pair of shoes. I wasn't expecting to see anyone there so when I came face to face with two large men I had never met before standing in my bedroom I was momentarily shocked. It took the nearest one lunging for me to spring me into action. I kicked him as hard as I could and ran from the bedroom. I was not expecting to encounter someone else in my flat so the man who had been waiting in the quiet of the living room took me completely by surprise. When he backhanded me hard across the face and sent me flying across the floor, I didn't even get to see what he looked like. I saw stars and fought against

the dizziness but before I could get up the other two were upon me. I yelled and kicked and fought using everything I had ever been taught but one small woman against three very strong men was a bit unfair. They had the advantage and I was hindered by vast amounts of beautiful and expensive silk. It was a short fight. In the end I felt someone grab my hair and yank back my head, his hands grazed against the chain from my pendant breaking it. I reached up to catch the necklace before it fell to the ground just as a hypo-spray was jabbed into the side of my neck.

"Just like you said, Captain, she fights like a wee devil." said the voice at my side.

"Just dope her!" The order came from the man who had been hiding in the living room.

I would have screamed but a sweaty hand had clamped painfully over my mouth. I felt the pressure of the spray against my skin and then I felt the drug hit me like a lightning strike. It was very strong and it made my skin crawl from the inside out. I wriggled and struggled as much as I could but who ever held me had me locked fast in his arms and I was losing consciousness. I felt myself being lifted up and slung over someone's shoulder, I felt him duck to go under something and I then felt the darkness come for me. I struggled against it but lost. The last thought I remember having was that I had dropped the necklace Thrawn had given me and it would be lost. After that was only blackness and nothing more.

## **CHAPTER 9**

Time is an elusive thing. When we are happy and having a good time it speeds up leaving us breathless and bewildered. We ask ourselves '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 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 I was loaded with, 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, they were not 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 is 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 in 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, 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. 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 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 in a mask 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 and 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 with some Imperial Naval officer when she got to the flat, maybe she's one of the palace girls, they hear all kinds of stuff."

"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." Dag said angrily. "Came back changed and won't say a word about it either."

Valdia shook her head. "What ever 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 bastard 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.

"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. It 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 overheard 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 sleep.

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.

"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, so lost 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 so 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 quietly.

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 searing 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. She's the Emperor's enforcer."

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 anymore?" 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 face 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 didn't see 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 trying to get my fear under control before I lay down and let the pain and exhaustion take over.

\*\*\*

I had no way of measuring time such as chronometer or day and night so it all became blurred. 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 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. I was aware 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 sand 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 voice. 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.*

*I knelt in the sand. The wind danced about me. I drew a deep breath. I placed my hands at my hips and began to meditate, the way Master Kjestyll had taught me. As I did so I realised that 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.*

*Eventually I fought through the fever and I woke clear headed but exhausted. 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 also knew that even if I had wanted to give up Lord Vader's location I didn't know where he was. I did have access codes but I was certain that the moment the right people had known I had been abducted all my Imperial access had been removed. I supposed that there were slicers who could take an old code and use it, cracking the Imperial computers and I couldn't have 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 but 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 firsthand 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 to let 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. They were frightening thoughts.

I concentrated on my breathing and thought about a conversation I had had with Master Kjestyll about some of 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 their spirit, their will."

"Does torture work?" I had asked thinking back to an experience I had 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 reliable for gaining information."

"So how does one survive such an ordeal?" I had asked. It was unimaginable to me 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. It had been at least ten days, maybe more since I had been taken from my flat and I had not been able to wash or get clean. 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 without banging into anything. 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 a 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 in the room tall enough for me to stand on and even if I could have reached 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 plastic. Nothing in this room made 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 which 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. In school, on Tatooine, we are taught how to survive in the desert. The 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 does 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 strange to say the least. 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 to rest while I could. I was still tired, still worn out. Sleep deprivation could do a lot of damage so I figured 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.

Since there was nothing else to do I decided to meditate hoping that this would help me be strong enough to stand up to what ever happened next. I was deep in meditation when the door opened. I was aware of it but I didn't move. I used my 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. 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 let her think I was asleep and waited until she had left the room, my prison, before I got up to see what she had left. It was a plate with sandwiches and a new jug of water. Well, I thought, at least 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. 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, if he even thought about me at all. I sighed. That 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 drifted off to sleep, uninvited tears leaked from under closed eyelids. I didn't wipe them away. I was going to need all the hope and strength I could get for what I feared was yet to come.

\*\*\*

"Get up!" The voice was intrusive and harsh. 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 and 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 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 whatever was coming next.

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 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 asked and 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 remained hard.

Once I had thought of him as handsome and I suppose he was a good looking man but something mean 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 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 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 self. 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 scared but fear would kill me long before anyone or anything else would so I used all the training and teaching I had ever been given and I 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 said. "No one is coming to rescue yer. No one except me cares what happens to yer."

Oddly enough this made me laugh.

He backed off immediately. "Yer think this is funny? Yer think this is some sort of joke?" His anger flared now.

I 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 and 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 said. I couldn't help the spark of anger I felt rising from the pit of my belly from touching my words. I 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 said, softening his voice, becoming my friend. He was lying. He didn't actually know what he wanted from me.

"I know nothing. I can't help you." I said. I was just tired. This was like a broken holo recording that kept skipping and repeating over and over again.

"We'll see." He said after a long silence. He 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 was 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 somehow 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. Whatever 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.* 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 stay calm.

"How long before it starts to work?" Jyrki had asked.

"Couple of minutes, 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 homemade 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 really 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.

Valdia put her hands on her hips. "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 you dare 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 weakness 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?" 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 looked at Valdia and shook 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."

"Get Brit to take her back to her room then!" He snarled. His fury suddenly breaking through his carefully constructed control. I looked at him his face. Our eyes met but I didn't recognize him anymore. 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 which was the truth.

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 blinked sudden tears out of my eyes and 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 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 in conflict.

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 and failing. "It would be so much 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 with nothing to do. 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 in some meaningful way. That routines and schedules were important not stupid and 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.

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. I had to push myself just to get up from the cot and move my body. I practiced 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.

Her 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 to me it was with 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 understood 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 standoff and neither of us knew how to get past that without trying to crush the other's spirit.

Once I had tried to break through his barriers, tried to reach the man I had known and loved. 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 savagely. With a powerful backhand 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 but that 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.

Meals were now, almost always brought to me by Valdia. I looked forward to her visits because in difference to the taciturn men 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. 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. 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. 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. So I bided my time because sooner or later my chance would come. Patience has 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 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 quietly. "So, are you in charge when everyone is gone?"

"No, that's Sena's job, thanks 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 Mattiri that long and it's 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 because 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."

"Yes." 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. Later once I was done I lay down to sleep. I would need to be well rested but my dreams had other ideas for that.

*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 my hair, brushed my teeth and 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 Mandalore 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 focused 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 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 whatever and 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 here 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. The ship had been left on standby so the consol was not locked and I breathed a silent thank you to whatever gods were watching out for me.

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 Mattiri 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 constant naval presence in the system. I set new co-ordinates 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 Stormtrooper 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.

"Yes." 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 rundown 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 co ordinates 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, "Otherwise 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 Identification codes should you manage to escape." He replied. "The fleet was aware of your existence and abduction."

"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 Stormtrooper stationed themselves on either side of the door after the Captain had ushered me through it.

"A team will have to search the ship you arrived in but after they have...." He began

I cut him off. "I don't give a wamp rat's ass about that ship, Captain. Do what you want with it but you might find some interesting information on the onboard computers. I didn't touch them. It's not my ship, I just stole it to get the hell away."

The man regarded me for a moment and then he nodded curtly, he was about to say something more when his comm beeped. He turned away from me and had a conversation in subdued tones so I could not hear then he came back looking more relaxed than before. "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 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 whenever 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 Broggi." I said.

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 another 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 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 the past 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 knows 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 told me.

He was horrified when I told him about what Jyrki had done to me and named the drugs that I knew had been used.

"I should hold you here for observation and hook you up to fluids and electrolytes but I think a nutrient booster will be sufficient as long as you 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 had sighed. "I won't lie to you, Miss Gabriel, it will not be easy. I don't think that the reality of your situation and what you have gone through has actually sunk in yet."

I had nodded but I had no idea how I would deal with everything that had happened. "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 small frequent meals, drink lots of fluids and rest. I had two days to do just 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 just over a month but somehow I could not grasp this fully and it felt on one hand as though it were only yesterday I had been dancing with Thrawn on the last day of Fete week and yet 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, too 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. The two days passed without incident. I took the doctor's advice to drink lots and rest and for the most part I spent much of my time waiting in a strange kind of daze until the *Executor* arrived.

\*\*\*

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 hugging him. Instead I stayed where I was and just watched him pace the room. His cloak swept out dramatically behind him and I 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, how over bearing he was, how eerie the sound of his mechanical breathing was. How unnerving his presence could be. His power writhed about him giving me goose bumps. I had 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 working for the Empire 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. 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 Lord Vader in the face. 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 then 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 this, anger was easy to use.

He turned to look at me and then with a single hand motion 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 whatever 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 ship? This is the *Executor*?" I asked in a hushed whisper. I had heard the new flag ship 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 Sarlacc 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.

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 meters 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 amounts 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 were rare and I treasured them. Moments like these 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 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 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. It looked like a dentist's chair but there were restraints on the arm rests and for the feet. It was not very comforting.

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's hand 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." 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. 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 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 that 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 groan that escaped. I gripped the arms of the chair, digging my ragged nails into the soft covering. I concentrated on my 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 pain 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. I felt ready to answer whatever 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?"

"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 it 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 flat, calm 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 lose 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 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 starting to hurt and I suspected that the side effects of whatever mind bending drugs the agents had used were beginning to kick in. 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 light. 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 of my panic more than anything else. He had been meditating and I was a disruption, a disturbance in the Force that poked at his calm. For all the training I had been given I still had no idea how to control what I felt when in this half waking state, how to control the fact that I sent out what I felt 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 but it was a small comfort. The thing that I found strange was that most of the dreams I had dreamt 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 practicing 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." He said. I moved the staff away from my face and nodded. He took the combat stave 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 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. "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 finds them all and hunts them down. 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 Naberrie. 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 control those under his power, in his circle." 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 said bitterly.

"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, the fear they bring."

"Then we shall have to work on that for the next few weeks while you remain onboard." 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 practicing 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 cradling a cup of tea in my hands. It was late, although that was a relative term while in space, time was 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. You could say what you liked about the Empire but the Imperial Post service was efficient. 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 and the handwriting on the envelope which 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 safe and sound. It seems strange to me that I should even have trouble writing this down to let you know how worried I have been but such expression of feeling is, for even the most renegade of Chiss, difficult at best.*

*So I sit here on board the ISD Vengeance sipping this Tatooine mint tea which I have become quite addict 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 safe 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 found. 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 safely assume they drugged you with something to make you docile.*

*Whoever 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 reason I knew was that you left us a clue. Your necklace was caught in between the wood panels that led to this passage and 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 I imagine the agents sent to deal with you got more than they bargained for. 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 nearby. 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, 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. Please 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 not stop. This hurt was raw and painful. I choked it down and tucked his letter back into its envelope then I got up and made myself some tea before sitting back 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 five 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. 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 upcoming 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 'caf. 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. I was tired but I couldn't 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, nose 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 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 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 the whole experience 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 to know that this was not the case. 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 I was really lucky.

## **CHAPTER 10**

It was not until I was actually back on Coruscant that they informed me that I had been relocated. My flat had been deemed unsafe and I had been given a new home. My father would have called that shutting the cargo door after all the shipment has fallen out. Human Resources gave me two days to pack my world and move it from the place I had called home to the new one. At first I had been angry and was more than a little vocal about it but when I saw my new home I decided that I had gotten a better deal. It had taken me only a few hours to pack my belongings and move them with the help of a small repulser cart. I didn't have that much and most of what I had acquired in the last year were clothes.

The new flat was still in the older part of the palace but now closer to my favourite balcony and the secret library the Emperor had given me access to. I loved the architecture in this part of the palace, the high ceilings and the large windows. It was a larger space, with a better view, a nice kitchen and a really amazing bathroom. It was bright and cheerful and because it was in the old part of the palace the floors were of antique polished wood. I instantly felt at home. It took me about as long to unpack as it had to stuff all my things in the boxes provided. I had poked through the cupboards and discovered where the dishes, pots, pans, kettle, tea pot, cups and glasses were kept. I would have to rearrange everything again, but I didn't really mind that, it kept my mind busy.

Lord Vader had been true to his word and for the two weeks I was on board the *Executor* he had trained with me. I had missed sparring with someone during my captivity, the energy exchange and the adrenaline rush. Of course being taught by and allowed to spar with Lord Vader was like nothing else imaginable. He was as fast as he was unforgiving. If you did not learn swiftly from the mistakes you made then you paid for them dearly. He had no tolerance for weakness especially when he knew if he pushed at me that I would do better. Part of me had welcomed this because it was easy to focus on the deep seated rage stirred up inside.

He had attempted to teach me about control but the lessons frustrated me almost as much as they did him and usually ended up in a screaming match or a nasty sparring bout. I was a difficult student, I always wanted to run before I could walk and learning to control something that had been stifled and uncontrolled my whole life was just not easy. Now, it was even harder to deal with because I could not find any peace from within, no matter how much I meditated I could not find or maintain that stillness. I could call up the emotions I felt and I could send them flying about the room until one would swear one could see sparks flying but it was a wild sort of magic and I had no ability to control it. It was either all or nothing. We fed off each other, my fear and hesitation against his anger and impatience. Yet for all the conflict, I learned and, much to my surprise, made some progress in what Lord Vader said was actually a very difficult field to master. Despite his words to the contrary he did not seem displeased with my progress. I was under stern orders to continue practising everything he had taught me. Lord Vader and his fleet were off hunting rebels somewhere near Reytha and I was supposed to stay on Coruscant, catch up with the office work and most of all recover.

*Recover.* It was a simple enough word but its implications were anything but. I wasn't sleeping well and I seemed to spend a great deal of time in a weird state of expectation. Waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting to wake up and find myself still back in that darkened room on Mattiri, and waiting for some sort of bad news or unexpected and unpleasant event. I spent time in the office but often I would look up from my desk to discover the day had passed by and I could not remember what I had done or what I was in the middle of doing. It was frustrating and baffling. I had been



back on Coruscant for little over a week yet it felt like forever on the one hand and a split second on the other. I had hoped to resume training under Master Kjestyll but he had sent word that he would be unavailable for the next few weeks and I was to practice on my own, to train for the next test, the next level. He had said I was ready for it but I was not so sure. I had sent Shiv a message saying I was back only to learn he was currently on Naboo at the retreat, sorting out the year's events that would be taking place there. He would also not be back on Coruscant for another week or so. He had dropped me a quick note to say he was glad I was back and safe and sound and when he got back we'd get together for lunch. I was missing people. For the first time in my life I craved company and no one was there.

I had replied to my father it had been a difficult letter to write. I had told him what had happened in brief form, leaving out the details and then warned him about Jyrki.

*He's changed, papa. He's become dangerous and feral. I don't think that he will try to hurt you but be wary of him.*

It had taken me two days of stressing out before I had hit the send button. His reply had been short and reassuring but underneath the words I felt his own anger. I did not know how to cope with that or the guilt it brought with it. So I did what I always did when I couldn't face my father, I ignored the situation and hoped it would bury itself and just go away. He was every bit as bad as I was in doing this. Most of the time things in the office were quiet. Life just went on and it was a little surreal to me that while I had gone through this terrible event, everything else was just business as usual, well, most of the time.

I was in the middle of sorting through the huge pile of internal memos and trying to find my stim'caf when a knock on the door nearly scared me out of my skin. My droid shuffled over to answer it. The young delivery girl smiled as she handed me a huge bouquet of flowers in a vase all wrapped in some pretty pink paper. I cleared off a corner of my desk and unwrapped my gift. Corellian Stars, pale blue star shaped flowers, mixed with tiny Jin-Jin flowers which were almost pure black and Nubian roses that were a deep almost glowing red colour. It was a strange combination but very beautiful. Hidden in the bouquet was a small card which only added to the mystery.

*"I am not that easy to kill so do not worry when you hear the news."*

Of course I immediately had to turn on the internal news net and after some digging through the bulletins discovered much to my horror that the *ISD Vengeance* had been reported destroyed. There were few details on what had happened and there was no word yet on survivors.

I looked at the bouquet and smiled, sometimes Thrawn had a strange sense of humour and now he had some explaining to do but I was grateful and relieved. I decided that this was reason enough to just go home. I took my gorgeous flowers with me and decided to spend what was left of the afternoon with the holonet on in my flat to hear more on this whole *Vengeance* destruction thing. Naturally there was no more to hear on this topic but a lot of news about Prince Xizor and his latest girlfriend, some famous actress. I gave this relationship a month at best. That man went through girl-friends the way Lord Vader went through battle droids.

Lord Vader hated the Prince and could not keep the contempt from his voice whenever he spoke of him. I had no idea what anyone saw in Xizor, he was just plain creepy and then smiled to myself since that was probably the same thing that often got whispered about Thrawn. Alien beauty, I guessed, was definitely in the eye of the beholder. I absently brushed the flowers with my fingertips. I wondered where he was now and when he would show up on my doorstep.

My days and nights blended one into the other. Since sleeping seemed to be a thing of the past I had taken to curling up on the new sofa which was way more

comfortable than my old one, drinking cups of tea or a good sized glass of brandy and watching the Holonet. It was not as though there was anything all that interesting on most of the time but it was better than being left to my own thoughts.

I was in the middle of some terrible Holo-drama that was on the late night show when there was a soft knock on my door. When I opened it there was no one there but sitting on the door mat was a very pretty crystal glass. I grabbed my key and the glass and went to find the drink that matched it. He stood leaning on the balcony ledge with both hands watching the city. I stopped and just looked at him with a sudden and awful realisation. This was what I should have been doing the night Jyrki had come and snatched me away. Now here I was in the same place, doing the same thing, with the same man but everything had changed.

I wondered if it was possible to somehow erase the last two months of my life and go back in time, I wished it was. Seeing him made my heart ache and suddenly I was nervous but not in any good way. It was strange to me that all the while I was being kept prisoner thoughts of this man had helped to keep me alive, had given me hope and now that I was face to face with him again I didn't know what to do, what to say. I was about to slip back into the darkness of the room when he turned around and saw me. Our eyes met and time seemed to pause for a moment. He reached out his hand to me and as if I were drawn on a string I went to him. He took the glass from my hand, poured brandy in it then handed it back to me.

He touched his glass to mine in a toast and then said. "Welcome back."

I sipped my drink and nodded. "Thank you. It's good to be back." This had become my standard, guarded answer.

He studied my face carefully and then reached out to touch it. Without even thinking about it I flinched and took a small step back from him, then realised what I had done.

"Oh! I'm sorry." My hands were shaking. "I don't know why I did that."

"I do and I understand." He said with a small nod. "It is quite alright I did not expect you to fling yourself into my arms. I imagine it must be a very difficult readjustment to return to normal life. Trust after such a betrayal will be hard to give. I truly do understand."

I didn't sip the brandy this time I finished it off in one gulp and held my glass out so that he could give me a refill.

"I got your message." I said changing the subject. "Very interesting method you have of allaying rumours of your demise." I said. "The flowers are beautiful, thank you."

He nodded. "Did they make you smile?"

"You know they did." I replied. "What happened?"

"To make a very long story short the ship ended up in an asteroid field filled with Space Slugs with which she argued and lost. It was a bloody mess," He spat angrily. "And a ridiculous waste of life and equipment! After the inquiry and when I am not so furious about it I will tell you exactly what happened."

"I'm sorry." I apologised again, "What will you do now?"

Thrawn sipped his brandy. "I'll be offered a new commission but I am not entirely certain exactly what that will be yet."

"Well, thank you for letting me know. I would have worried." I said. "A lot, actually, so it is nice to see you looking so well and alive."

He smiled slightly and then became serious again. "You, on the other hand, look exhausted and you are far too thin."

"Well, you know, "I gave him slight shrug."I tried out a new weight loss programme. The sleep deprivation, bad drugs and darkness diet." I told him as I studied the contents of my glass. "Worked wonders don't you think? I don't believe it

will be a big hit though." I could not keep the bitterness out of my voice and had to grit my teeth to keep from saying more stupid comments.

His expression became unreadable, but the hardness that flashed in his eyes told me he didn't find my attempt at humour all that funny. I didn't flinch or shy away from his caress this time but I had to make a conscious effort not to and it did not escape his notice that my whole body had tensed up. I didn't want to be touched. I didn't want contact. I wanted to wallow and hide in whatever hole it was I had locked myself into.

"What did that pash'kja'anta do to you?" He almost whispered. I was pretty certain the word he had used was not very complimentary to Jyrki.

I turned away from him and leaned against the balcony. I didn't want to cry but his tenderness was making that difficult to avoid. I bit back the swell of emotion, shoving it deep down into the pit of my belly and drank the brandy. Its bite and burn helped me steady myself.

"I don't want to talk about it." I said with another shrug. "There is nothing much to say really." My words sounded shaky so I finished the brandy in the glass and then handed it to Thrawn. "I'm sorry, I thought... well I thought we could pick up where we left off but..." I stopped unable to complete the thought. Thrawn went to say something but I shook my head. "I'm sorry. I should go. I'm not the best company at the moment, I'm afraid." I wasn't certain that I'd ever be good company again.

He watched me for a moment then nodded. "This will not go away on its own, you know." He said quietly. "You will have to come to terms with the ordeal you went through before you can move on."

I wondered what he knew about such things, what he knew of captivity and isolation but I didn't ask. I just held out the brandy glass for him to refill it and he did but he wasn't so happy about doing so. I took an unladylike mouthful. "So how long are you on Coruscant for?" I inquired, changing the subject instead.

"A few days perhaps, it depends on a couple of things." His answer was offhand and cool.

I had insulted him or annoyed him somehow. I downed the rest of the brandy in my glass and set the glass down. "Well if you have time maybe we can have dinner or something?" I offered.

He smiled but it never reached his eyes. "If you would like that, I am sure it can be arranged."

I nodded and then without any further ado I turned and left. I felt his eyes follow me but I didn't look back. I just wanted to be left alone. I just wanted to curl up in a corner and do nothing. I wanted to die because I felt as though I were already dead anyway.

*Recover.*

I was starting to wonder what that word meant and I was certainly starting to hate it. I reached the sanctuary of my flat, slammed the door behind me and let out the breath I felt I had been holding since forever. The truth of the matter was I didn't really want to recover at all I just wanted the rest of me to catch up with the part of my soul that had died on Mattri; I was just surprised I hadn't noticed this before now.

I didn't think, I just went to the kitchen and dug out a glass and the bottle of my father's gutrot and poured a large amount into the glass. I curled up on the couch and cradled the glass in my hands. I felt like a bloody idiot so I turned on the Holonet and then I began to drink. I liked the oblivion the moonglow sent me into because I had discovered that if I got myself drunk enough I did not have any nightmares and for that I could live with the hangover.

I had no idea what time it was but I became aware that someone was knocking on the door. I woke up groggily, shut the HoloNet off, glanced at the clock and went to open the door, anything to stop the pounding sound.

Thrawn didn't wait to be asked he just brushed past me and came in. "I like your new place." He said coolly.

I was still trying to wake up and break through the alcohol induced fog that had settled around my brain. "What in the name the almighty Sarlacc are you doing here? It's five in the morning." I said closing the door behind him.

He surveyed the living room, eyeing the empty glass on the table and the almost empty bottle of moonglow that sat beside it. I followed his gaze and saw through his eyes the mess that I just had not gotten around to sorting out. The flat was a wreck, I was a wreck.

"Pack your things, enough for two weeks, clothes for a cold climate. As of now you are on leave." He spoke with a sharp authority that was a little startling.

"What?"

He handed me a data pad. I squinted at it and then handed it back to him. He hadn't been kidding. The order had been approved by Lord Vader and I was officially on leave. "This is your doing?"

"Yes"

"Why?"

"Because you are no good to the Empire in this current state and it is obvious to me that you will not deal with this on your own or seek help. The longer you dwell in this pain the worse it will get. So go and pack." He spoke with the voice that I was certain he used to give orders on his ship.

I went into my bedroom and just stared at the mess. I had no idea where to start. Thrawn stood in the doorway, arms folded across his chest and it dawned on me he was out of uniform.

"Cold climate? I don't have clothes for a cold climate. I come from a bloody desert world and I live in climate controlled housing." I said bewildered by this turn of events. The fact that the room was spinning was not helping matters any.

He made a face and went to my closet, dug around for a few moments then tossed a travel bag at me. "Well then pack what you think will do and come along. What you don't have but need will be provided for you after we arrive." He told me crisply. "Oh and where are your Dantassi things?"

"On my ship." I said as I started to pack random clothes, underwear, socks, and most of my Tatooine wardrobe. I slipped the little wooden box I kept his letters, my hair sticks and the gifts he had given me into the bag because there was no way I was leaving these things behind. I shoved past him and went to the bathroom to pack my toiletries and stopped when I saw my reflection in the mirror. I looked like a ghost, a drunk insomniac ghost, absolutely awful and it was the first time I had noticed. With a sigh I cleaned my teeth, my mouth felt like wamprats had died in it, then I brushed my hair and put it up. When I was finished packing I joined Thrawn who was now waiting in the living room. It did not escape my notice that he had cleared away the dirty glasses and cups.

"Ready?" He asked.

I nodded.

"Right," He said as he took my bag from my hands, "Let's go."

I had to trot to keep up with him. "Go? Go where?"

He stopped and looked at me. "That," He said with a slight smile, "Would spoil the surprise."

"I do believe, right at this moment, I almost hate you." I said angrily.

"Well," He said as he held the door open for me. "That is a step away from feeling nothing, perhaps there is hope for you after all."

I opened my mouth to reply but he placed a finger on my lips. "Hush." He said firmly. "Not one word." And with that he ushered me outside to one of the smaller landing pads.

I watched with a mix of astonishment and annoyance as Thrawn punched in a code and opened my ship.

"She's all set to go, Sir." The young landing dock worker told him.

"Thank you, Mr. Keach." Thrawn replied taking the data pad from the young man's outstretched hand. He didn't say anything to me at all he just walked on board with my stuff leaving me to follow him before the door closed. He made his way to the bridge, dropping my bag outside the crew quarters door. I tagged after him.

"How the hell did you open up my ship? I changed all the codes." I asked as he began the pre-flight check list.

"You should know the answer to that." He said as he sat in the pilot's seat.

"You're sitting in my chair and last time I checked the registration papers, this was still my ship." I said crossly, my hands on my hips.

He sighed, stood up, took me by the shoulders and pushed me into the co-pilot's chair. "You are still drunk which means you are not flying. So sit down and enjoy the ride." Before I could say anything else he had strapped me into the seat as though I were a small child and then sitting back down in the pilot's seat, slipped on the head set and was setting take off procedure.

I looked at him, watching him start the engines and set the flight plan. "You had a backdoor installed in my ship." I said. "That's how you could override the new codes."

"Thought it might be good to have options." He answered. I felt my stomach do a little lurch as we lifted off from the docking pad.

"You gave this ship to me, you had no right!" I yelled at him.

He glanced over at me and raised an eyebrow. "Yes, it was given to you, but you still work for the Empire and the Empire likes to keep its options open. So, before you get yourself worked up into a complete knot about it, you should be aware that it was a precaution in case something happened to you. I've seen you work on ship's computers remember, you are good at what you do so it seemed like a smart idea to have an extra key, in a manner of speaking, one you would not find right away."

I didn't say anything as the ship shuddered its way out of the atmosphere. I knew he wasn't lying and I knew that he had been well within his rights to do what he had done. I watched how he handled the *Ahnkeli'Su'udelma*. I could tell by the sureness of his touch, by how he manoeuvred the ship that he was good at this too. There was nothing for me to do except sit back and enjoy the ride, so that's what I did, mostly.

I loved it when the ship passed through the upper atmosphere and the shaking stopped, when the air gave way to space and instead of a hazy blue there was a deep velvety black littered with billions of stars. I never tired of that moment when we broke free from the planet's gravity and soared smooth. Once past the atmosphere the ship levelled out and I unstrapped.

"Where are you going?" Thrawn asked as he set the nav computer.

"As far away from you as I can without having to wear an EV suit!" I was still cross and my head buzzed in an unpleasant way.

"Well while you are getting away from me, you can make yourself useful and make some stim'caf." He said.

I spun around and with hands on hips stared at him. "This is MY ship! You don't own me and you don't order me around." My anger surprised even me.

He smiled coolly. "Not this trip, my dear. This time I am in command and you will do as you are told."

I stood and stared at him. I wasn't sure I knew this man. "Who the hell put you in charge of me? Who the hell put you in charge at all?"

"The who does not matter that I am in charge does." He said more to himself than to me then relented a little. "If I say please, will you make stim'caf?"

"You're going to let me operate the stove?"

"I think you can manage not to blow us up and it's not as if you'll lose your stove operations certification if you make stim'caf under the influence. However if I let you take the helm drunk that is another thing entirely." He smirked as he set the last of the controls.

We would be heading into hyperspace in a few seconds. I waited for the hyperdrive to kick in, listened to the pitch of its whine and smiled. It was in good shape, sounded perfectly normal. The stars stopped for a split second and then elongated. The ship lurched and then we slipped into hyperspace. I never ever tired of it. Thrawn glanced up at me and arched an eyebrow. "You need instructions on how to find the galley?" He asked.

I opened my mouth to reply and then shut it again. I wasn't going to win this conversation so I gave up. The truth of the matter was I wanted stim'caf too. It was far too early and I was starting to feel the unwanted effects of a dreadful hangover coming on.

"Fine!" I said and stomped off to the galley.

Making stim'caf was relaxing actually and while I was waiting for it to brew I poked around to see what he had done to my ship. Certainly there were new supplies on board and I smiled when I saw the fresh milk, fruits and what looked like meat for supper in the small refrigerator which meant he'd be cooking and he was an excellent cook unlike me. The 'caf brewed and I dug out cups, cream and sugar then waited with my head in my hands suddenly not feeling quite so great. I was sitting at the small dining table when Thrawn joined me. He poured two cups of stim'caf, dug out some sweet rolls and set them on a plate.

"Breakfast." He said offering me a sweet roll. "Eat."

"So, where are we going?" I asked ignoring the roll in favour of sipping my 'caf. It was hot, creamy and the best thing I had tasted in a while.

"Hjal." He said.

My heart leapt. "Navaari? We're going to see Navaari?"

He nodded. "When he learned that you had been found he sent word that now was a good time to pay a visit."

"He knows what happened?" I asked wearily.

Thrawn nodded. "I sent word to them shortly after I found you were missing hoping to elicit their help. The Dantassi are among the best trackers and hunters in the galaxy. I didn't think it would hurt to have extra eyes and ears keeping a look out for you." He pursed his lip and nodded to the roll on the plate. "Eat."

I scowled at it. My stomach wasn't overly happy and neither was my head.

"Eat, you'll feel better."

With a sigh I nibbled at the sweet roll. "How long till we get there?"

"Present course and speed, around forty six hours or so." He said.

"Two days." I sighed. "I just got away from being cooped up."

He cocked his head to one side. "I thought you loved being in space. I thought you loved this ship."

I looked up at him but I didn't want to explain so I just nodded, "I do." I said. "But I like the open sky even more at the moment."

He nodded. "Hjal has plenty of that."

"But it's cold, right?"

He smiled, got up poured us both a second cup of stim'caf and sat back down again. "Yes, it is cold, although it's actually early spring at the moment so it's not quite so bad."

"Define 'not quiet so bad'." I said sipping my drink.

"In the winter, the temperature on Hjal is somewhere around minus forty to fifty degrees centigrade and in the summer it sometimes can get as high as ten degrees above the freezing point. Of course this depends on where one lives. The enclave where Kirja'navaar'inkjerii is closer to the more temperate area so right about now during the day it might get up to five above and at night, if the weather is good, hover somewhere around the minus twenty or thirty mark, depends on the winds."

"Blessed almighty Sarlacc that's cold!" I whispered. "I'll freeze to death."

"I doubt that will happen. Kirja'navaar'inkjerii will see to it that you have the right clothing for travelling outside. I hope you do venture out because it is an extraordinarily beautiful place. I am quite certain you have never ridden a sled pulled by snow wolves across ice tundra before. And this time of year you might see the sky-fire that dance in the sky."

"Sky-fire?"

He smiled. "Yes, auroras, dancing lights in the night sky caused by the collision of electrons and atoms in the upper atmosphere. While Hjal's sun doesn't provide much heat it sends out intense solar winds and the planet has a powerful magnetic field. The best time to see them is spring and autumn so I am hoping you will be treated to a show."

"We don't get anything like that on Tatooine." I said. "At least I have never seen anything like that on the planet and never heard tell tale of it."

"Well, Tatooine, I am sure, has other amazing natural phenomenon." He said.

"Yeah, heat." I said tersely.

He laughed. "I'll make certain you are not cold."

I gave him a look.

He returned my glare with a slow, lazy smile. "Finish your breakfast." He replied, getting up from the table, refilling his cup and headed up to the cockpit. "Oh I brought some books for you to read, electronic form I'm afraid but I think you will find them interesting. They're on your bunk. When you're done eating, I suggest some rest."

"All I have done for the last two months is rest." I snapped.

"That wasn't rest." He replied as he left. "That was imprisonment."

"What the hell do you call this?" I yelled after him.

"A holiday!" Came the answer.

I sighed. There was just no winning with that man. I finished my 'caf and the sweet-roll then decided that my bunk took precedence over everything else and I went to lie down. I grabbed my bag and settled in for the flight. I looked at the books Thrawn had brought for me and smiled. I tucked myself into the upper berth and started to read. The book was good but I was more tired than I thought. I didn't remember falling asleep but the next thing I knew was Thrawn shaking me gently on the shoulder, waking me and asking me if I wanted to get up for supper.

"I slept?"

He nodded.

"How long?" I asked getting up.

"Almost seven hours." He said giving me a hand down from the bunk.

"Seven hours straight? I didn't wake up screaming or anything?"

"No, you slept. I did check several times to make sure you had not suddenly vanished."

I frowned at him. "What did you put in the stim'caf to make me sleep?"

"Nothing." He said coldly at the suggestion. "But you feel safe here and you like being on board this ship maybe it was just the sounds of the engines that were soothing."

"I always did sleep well on board ships." I murmured more to myself than him.

"I know, people like you are often more at home in space on a ship than planet side." He said, his expression softening. "The food will get cold."

"I haven't slept like that in a long time. In fact I don't remember the last time I slept for more than three hours straight through." I said digging out my toothbrush. "I'll be there in a moment."

He smiled and left me to wake up. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

\*\*\*

It was a little surreal to be back on board my ship with Thrawn. It brought back a lot of memories and the ship was not so big that I could avoid him all the time. I tried as much as I could to stay out of his way, preferring isolation to company. I read the books he had brought for me and did my duties when I was called on to do so. I spent a lot of time in the engine room where it was warm and I felt my most comfortable. The first seven hours of good sleep were also my last and after this I slept fitfully often waking up, if not screaming, then at least thinking I had, gasping for breath. More than once I woke Thrawn as well and it took him some time to calm me down. I had always been prone to nightmares but this was worse than ever.

I had taken to dozing in the engine room because at least there when I woke up yelling blue murder it was drowned out by the noise of the hyperdrive itself. He tried to talk to me about it, tried to draw out from me what had happened, what Jyrki had done but I would not and could not speak about it. We fought a lot and these fights usually ended up with him being tight lipped and terse and me yelling and throwing whatever was handy at the time. I did not understand how things could have gotten so difficult between us because he was the one person in the entire galaxy I trusted, the one person I wanted to be with in every way possible but I could not talk to him about what I had gone through and I didn't know why. The journey passed uneasily for us both.

We were a couple of hours away from Hjal's atmosphere when he came to find me. I didn't hear him come and I got a start when he hunched down at my side and touched my arm. I was deep into the book I was reading and the engine hum blocked out anything else.

"Come with me, I have something for you." He said helping me to my feet. Wordlessly I followed him up to the mess area. He was fully dressed in his Dantassi clothing except for a coat and his mask. He looked elegant and mysterious all at the same time.

"You know enough about the Dantassi to know that when we land you will need to have your face covered." He said.

I nodded.

He continued, "The last time I saw Kirja'navaar'inkjerii he mentioned that only children paint their faces and he gave me something to pass on to you." He said handing me an animal skin bag. I took it gingerly and gasped when I opened it up. The bone mask, which looked almost feline in its sleekness, was very beautiful. "He made this especially for you. No one has ever worn this mask before." He explained.

I turned it over in my hands, touching the surface that had been polished until it was glass smooth. The markings that Thrawn had drawn in blood upon my face when he had given me my name were etched into the bone and were coloured black. The inside of the mask was lined with what looked like animal hide which was soft and buttery, but I could not see how it was worn, there were no visible straps.



He answered my unasked question. "It used to be that the masks were tied with leather strips but the Dantassi have combined nanotechnology with the craftsmanship of the ancients. It will feel a little strange at first but the mask will meld with your face. Don't fight it let it do its work."

I was a bit sceptical but I did as he asked and placed the mask over my face. It was very odd. The leather, which wasn't really leather at all, shifted and formed, somehow sticking, if that was the right word, to my face. It wasn't painful or uncomfortable it was just strange, as though I had suddenly grown a second layer of skin.

"How do I get it off?" I asked unable to keep from touching the smooth exterior of the mask.

Thrawn guided my fingertips to the upper left edge of the mask, at my temple. There were three tiny notches carved into the bone. He placed my three fingers and pushed them into the notches. The mask peeled away from my face as though it were nothing more than a light cloth instead of bone.

"Well, that's different." I said.

He smiled. "The Dantassi are unafraid of technology and this makes wearing the mask so much easier."

"But you tie yours."

"Mine is an antique which I have not altered," He said, "I am used to it but Kirja'navaar'inkjerii thought that this would be easier for you."

"It certainly beats the face paint. I take it I should get changed and that the clothes you gave me are suitable?" I asked.

"They are." He nodded. "We will be landing in about forty minutes. Kirja'navaar'inkjerii will be waiting for us and we will be taken by sled to the Enclave. The housing complex is primarily underground. Given this fact it is surprisingly bright and spacious but there are now windows to the outside but there are also no locked doors, I promise."

"I guess I will just have to deal with that."

"I know this trip has not been easy for you," He spoke gently, "But I think this will do you the world of good and it will stop Kirja'navaar'inkjerii from nagging at me." He wanted to say more but instead there was just a silence that was neither comforting nor awkward.

I held the mask in my hands and studied his face, trying to read his emotions and thoughts. There was concern in his eyes and other things I could not decipher. He went to caress my face with the palm of his hand but I had to move away from his touch because the emotions it brought to the surface were almost physically painful. I couldn't deal with any of it. I saw the flash of hurt in his expression but he hid it swiftly and well. I went to apologise for what would have been the billionth time but he put up his hand.

"Stop. You have done nothing to say sorry for so don't say it."

With a sigh, I nodded. "I guess I'll get dressed now. I take it you are piloting us down?"

"Yes." He nodded. "So you have lots of time to get ready. Come and join me when you are done"

I took my time as I got into the Dantassi clothes. The finishing touches were the necklace amulets that I had been given. I still wore my ma'arilite necklace though and I wasn't taking that off. I tucked it under all the layers of clothing. With my mask in hand I made my way up to the cockpit and took my seat in the co pilot's chair. As we made the very bumpy ride down through the atmosphere I placed the mask over my face and became Akiana'myshk'apavjäska. It was a strange transformation and suddenly I was nervous about facing Navaari again, nervous about the whole idea of

everything this trip entailed. Thrawn must have sensed this because he looked at me as we touched down on the snow covered landing pad.

"You have nothing to fear here." He said as he turned off the ship's controls. "This is a safe place. In fact I cannot think of any place safer at the moment." He unstrapped, got up and offered me his hand. "Come along time to see what you think of life in the cold." He said. I watched as he slipped into a fur lined coat and heavy gloves and knew I was indeed, going to freeze my butt off.

It was beyond cold.

Rothana had been cold but this was colder. The sky was a weird silvery grey colour. The wind was strong, sharp and in cut through everything I was wearing into my bones plus it had started to snow. I was not dressed nearly warmly enough for this. I could see Navaari was waiting for us just across the landing pad. I hid behind Thrawn as he walked down the ship's ramp so that he would shelter me just a little. The ship closed up and he slung the bags over his shoulders. I followed his steps exactly so I would not fall knee deep into the snow. My head was hunkered down and I had bundled myself up as much as possible because I was freezing. The wind was so cold it hurt. It was a completely new experience for me and I wasn't sure what to make of it. I bumped into Thrawn's back when he stopped and fell backwards landing on my ass in the snow. The snow was cold and I tried to shake it off my hands before it made me even colder.

"You look like a jax with wet paws." Navaari's deep bass laughter boomed around me as he picked me up effortlessly and set me on my feet. "Welcome to Hjal!" He said.

I could not see his face but I could see the twinkle of merriment in his eyes. I brushed myself off and watched as he grasped Thrawn by the shoulders and they touched Forehead to forehead. Navaari was much taller than I had remembered. They spoke to each other in Dantassi-Cheunh and laughed. Then Thrawn moved aside and Navaari came to me. He tucked two fingers under my chin and raised my face. I was shivering despite the cloak I was wearing.

"We are well met Akiana'myshk'apavjäska. It is good to be seeing you alive and well. Come, I have brought clothings to keep you warm." He said as he led us to where a long, low to the ground, sled was sitting on the snow, there were small furry shapes curled up on the snow in front of the sled but I couldn't see exactly what they were. He took something from the box on the back of the sled and handed it to me. It was a heavy fur lined coat made of animal skins, large and almost floor length long. He helped me slip it on and showed me how to use the bone toggles to fasten it. He pulled the fur trimmed hood up over my head and fastened it so that it would not slip back when the wind blew. I felt like a little kid.

"You lose most of your body heat through your head so keep the hood up, the mask is protecting your face." He said. He handed me a pair of mittens that were made the same way as the coat and then handed me a pair of skin and fur boots.

"Those boots you wear will not keep this cold out. Change now. You will thank me later. It is unpleasant to get ice-burn."

So I did as he said and watched as he tucked my boots, along with our bags in the box tied on the sled. I had to admit I was a great deal warmer now that I was wearing better clothes.

"We go now. You are arriving just in time. A big weather system is moving in and this storm will bad, at least three days it will lock us in." He said. He nodded at Thrawn who sat on the sled with his back against the box. Guided by Navaari's hands, I sat between Thrawn's legs and he wrapped his arms tightly about me.

"This way, Tjällh, you will not fall off." Navaari said with a chuckle, patting me on the shoulder. "Nikätza'arth'pavjäska, hold on to her now. She is so small we will

lose her in this weather if she comes off the sled!" He said. I remembered that here no one knew him as Thrawn.

I was not prepared when Navaari gave a yip sound and what had been small furry bundles of snow suddenly stood up and became very large wolf like animals that howled as they shook the snow off themselves, I jumped. With another slightly different sound they suddenly began to move in unison. The sled lurched and I was utterly grateful for the strong arms that held me in place and the legs which braced at my sides. I glanced back and looked at Navaari. He was standing on the ends of the sled's runners, behind the box, holding on the back brace that arched over the box at the back of the sled. I turned my glance to Thrawn who, in his mask, was Za'ar. He just gave me a tight squeeze and pulled me back against his body. There was nothing else to do but hold on, sit tight and enjoy the ride.

The sled moved at a surprisingly swift pace, the wolf-hound like creatures, harnessed two by two, ran as a perfect team, it was amazing to watch. The wind rushed past us and the snow was falling faster and faster. It was a little like being in a sand storm except that snow was cold and everything was white. I was glad of the bone mask which kept the wind off my face. I huddled as close to Za'ar as I could. We were going so fast and there was nothing to see except white, so I closed my eyes and found myself relaxing. It was the weirdest place in the world to fall asleep but that is exactly what I did.

It reminded me of when I was a small child and had gone travelling on some cargo haul transports with my father. I almost always used to fall asleep on the way home, that not quite deeply asleep state that children often find themselves in. I was aware of my surroundings, I was aware that I was travelling. I could hear voices speaking but could never recall what was said afterwards. We would arrive home and my father would lift me out of the seat and carry me into the house. There was something magical about these moments that whispered of being safe.

I was aware that Navaari and Za'ar were talking but their conversation was just words lost on the wind. The journey felt as though it had taken an hour or more but I couldn't tell for sure. I dozed in and out of the world. At one point I remembered smiling because this was not the first time I had fallen asleep in this man's arms, it was a nice sensation and for this pocket of time I didn't want to be any place else in the entire galaxy.

I knew we had stopped. I could hear the yip and yowls of the wolf-hounds as they settled. I could hear Navaari talk to them. I felt Za'ar move but he didn't get up. He spoke to Navaari in their language and the next thing I knew was a pair of strong arms lifting me up.

"Tjällh, you are as light as a snow flake, lucky for you the wind gods did not want to steal you away." Navaari whispered in my ear as he brought me inside where ever it was that we were. I wanted to open my eyes but they were just so heavy. He laid me down, removed my boots and got me out of the heavy coat which he then put it over me like a blanket. I just curled up and drifted in and out of a dozy sleep.

"The ceremony is planned for tonight in three hours." Navaari said to Za'ar in basic. "Let her rest until then. It will be a long night."

"That she sleeps at all is a blessing." Za'ar replied quietly. He sounded tired. There was a moment of silence and then they switched to Dantassi-Cheunh. I listened to the sound of their voices. Theirs was a musical language and it was pleasing to hear but I understood nothing. The conversation turned serious at some point and from the tone of Navaari's voice he and Za'ar were not in agreement over something. Maybe it had to do with me because I had heard my name but mostly it was just tone and words. I tuned them out and eventually slept for real.

I woke up slowly on my own. No screaming, no nightmares. The first thing I realised was that my face was bare, I wasn't masked but I didn't remember taking it off.

"How do you feel?" Thrawn asked. I looked up and saw him sitting quietly in the chair across from the couch I was on. He had been reading a data pad.

"I'm not wearing my mask." I said, the grogginess making me slow.

"I took it off after Kirja'navaar'inkjerii left, more comfortable for you." He said coming to sit next to me. "How do you feel?" He asked again.

"Sleepy, waking up, where's the 'fresher?" I asked.

"Through that door there." He said, pointing.

When I came back he had poured me a cup of tea.

"We have about half an hour before the ceremony. Once that happens we will move. This is just a guest quarters, separate from the main complex. Navaari has a place for us in his home when this is over with. He already took the bags with him." He handed me a cup of hot liquid.

I cradled the hot cup in my hands. The tea had a smoky flavour to it that reminded me of a camp fire. He had sweetened it with honey and I was deeply grateful.

"The ceremony will be in Dantassi-Cheunh, I will try to translate as much as I can for you and tell you when you need to say anything but it is straight forward enough." He said. "Just follow my lead."

I nodded and finished my tea. I must admit it helped me to feel better. A few moments before there was a knock at the door, he handed me my mask which I slipped on.

"This is a good thing A'myshk'a. Do not be nervous or worried." He told me as he put on his own mask. "This ritual is rare and for one such as you, unheard of. It is a great honour for both you and me. Enjoy it." He opened the door and Navaari motioned for us to follow him.

I had not felt these sorts of nerves since the first time I was to dance in public. I remembered my training and I did the only thing I could, I breathed deeply.

"Let us go, it is not wise to keep the High Elder waiting." Navaari said. "Do not worry, Tjällh, he will not be biting you!" He chuckled, patting my shoulder.

We followed Navaari through a series of underground passages. It was hard to tell if they had been dug out from the ice and snow or constructed. Touch confirmed they were not created from ice. The walls were smooth and off white, lit by small luminous globes that adorned the walls. They reminded me of moonlight.

I gasped when we walked through a set of large and ornate, double doors into a huge hall. It was as full of people as it possibly could be. Each and every one of them were masked. They looked like ghosts in the flickering light that came from the large fire which blazed in the central fireplace and the torches that adorned the walls. The ceiling was high and arched. This hall had been built from wood and stone, and it was cooler than the small guest room we had been in. I marvelled at the high beamed ceiling. I could only assume that the hall was above the surface of the ground and not below it as the rest of the complex was. Intricate tapestries adorned the walls depicting hunting scenes and daily life in the Dantassi world. The details were astounding and beautiful. I wondered how they had been made.

We walked into the sea of people who stepped aside, making a path for us as Navaari led us through the crowd. There were whispers and comments as I passed with Za'ar following behind me. I was an oddity, the outsider who was to become one of their clan. I sensed a strange mix of curiosity and trepidation which dominated the atmosphere.

Navaari brought us to the dais where the man I guessed to be the High Elder stood. I looked up at this imposing figure who stood three steps up on the stage. He

was clothed in very ornate robes, and around his shoulders and covering his head was what looked like a wolf skin, complete with head. His bone mask was the most elaborate of any I had seen so far, covered with all kinds of symbols and carvings. It was very beautiful. Around his neck he wore many amulets and pendants and in his left hand he held an incredibly ornate culling staff which I hoped was used primarily for ceremonial purposes but somehow doubted it. He remained silent and motionless while Navaari placed me where he wanted me to stand. I was side on to the High Elder, facing Za'ar. Navaari stood directly behind me. For a moment there was absolute silence and then the High Elder began to speak.

His voice rang through the hall like deep clear bell. The cadence of his words rippled in an almost musical fashion and I was mesmerized by him despite the fact that I could not understand what he was saying.

When he had finished speaking Za'ar translated. "He welcomes all to this celebration. He gives the reason for this gathering. He explains to the people who you are, that I am your Ta'kasta'cariad and that you will become a part of Kirja'navaar'inkjerii's family although you bear my clan name."

I glanced up at the High Elder who waited for Za'ar to finish the translation then continued. He gestured with his hand to me and spoke at some length, then gestured to Za'ar and spoke for even longer. Then he waited for Za'ar to tell me what had been said.

"He told everyone how you have earned your name and the story of your hunt. Then he explained that I had chosen to name you and take you as mine, that I accept responsibility for this action, for you and that you are under my protection. He spoke of my connection with this clan, this planet and of the relationship between Kirja'navaar'inkjerii and myself which binds us together through fate."

The High Elder looked at me directly and motioned for me to come closer to him. When I hesitated Navaari nudged me from behind. I turned to face the High Elder and moved as close as I could without walking up the steps.

The High Elder leaned down and placed three fingers on my forehead and he began to speak. While he was looking directly into my eyes he was also speaking to the crowd. He said something that made everyone laugh.

"He speaks of your soul which he says he can feel. He is telling everyone that he thinks you are both brave and graceful. That you have a good spirit but it is touched by much hardship and sorrow. He speaks of a long road ahead and of many choices laid before you. He says that he believes you will be a good addition to the clan and given time you will not be so ignorant. He says that you are also very young and are to be forgiven for not knowing their ways. He points out that this is my fault." Za'ar said.

I smiled.

The High Elder removed his fingers from my forehead and used them to raise my chin upwards. This time he spoke only to me. His voice softened becoming gentle and kind.

"He asks, if you understand what it means to become part of this clan, a part of the Dantassi and if it is what you wish?" Za'ar translated when the High Elder had finished speaking.

I nodded. "Yes." I whispered.

The High Elder nodded back and let go of my face. He then turned to Za'ar and spoke to him. When there was silence Za'ar looked at me.

"He asks if I am ready to take my duty to you fully upon my shoulders. He has explained to me in detail what my duties to you are."

Za'ar and the High Elder then spoke at great length and none of what was said was translated. I glanced at Navaari but he gave nothing away, if anything I sensed that he too, was puzzled by this conversation. The Elder hesitated ever so slightly and

I could tell from his tone that he was questioning Za'ar at great length about whatever it was Za'ar had said. Something wasn't quite right, or better to say, whatever it was that had passed between Za'ar and the Elder had not been according to the plan originally set in place. They discussed this all in hushed tones and when they were finished speaking the High Elder turned to me and asked a single question.

"He asks if you accept." Za'ar said, without explaining anything else.

"Accept what?"

"Accept the tribe. Accept me." He answered. His voice was cool and steady but I felt something underneath his words and there was anticipation, a tension in his manner, as though there was a lot more than just being unmasked riding on my answer.

"How do I say yes in this language?" I whispered.

"Tja." He whispered back. *Tcheeya*, it was a pretty word so full of promise and hope.

I turned to the High Elder and spoke that word in a clear loud voice. I knew that there was more to this than what Za'ar had explained but I could not dig deeper and figure it out so I accepted everything at face value I felt that if it wasn't trying to kill me it couldn't be anything bad. There was a collective sigh from the crowd. The High Elder spoke to Navaari who answered with yes. The Elder then turned back to Za'ar and with a nod and a hand gesture gave him permission for the moment everyone had been waiting for. I was surprised at how nervous I was.

Za'ar removed his own mask first and then with a practised ease he found the release notches and drew the bone mask from my face slowly. He handed the two masks to Navaari and then before I could move or say anything he cupped my face in both his hands. I could not read the emotion that played across his face, in his eyes but I felt the heat of it and it was unnerving.

He whispered. "You honour me greatly." And then much to my great surprised he kissed me passionately on the lips in front of everyone who was in the hall. I was so stunned by this turn of events that I did not notice that all around me each and everyone in the hall had also removed their masks and that the atmosphere in the hall had gone from austere and serious to charged and celebratory. The cheering was deafening.

I might have stayed locked in Za'ar's embrace forever, searching his eyes for answers to the question of what exactly had just occurred but Navaari was not letting that happen. He pulled me in to a crushing hug and then pushed me back held me by my shoulders at arm's length. For this first time since I had met him I got to look at his face. He was older than Za'ar, older than I had imagined. His strong featured, square jaw face was weathered and lined and there were snow white streaks in his long, blue-black hair, beginning at his temples and trailing to past his broad shoulders. He was a mountain of a man, grizzled and seasoned by weather and age. He grinned at my expression.

"Not what you expected?" He asked.

"No." I reached up to touch him then hesitated, unsure if it was allowed.

He caught my hand and completed the motion so that my palm lay flat against his cheek. He cupped my hand with his. "But good, yes?"

I nodded not trusting my voice. How was it that I could have formed such a powerful connection with this person I barely knew?

"Tjällh." He placed the flat of my hand against the center of his broad chest. I could feel the beat of his heart through the soft fabric of his shirt. "This bond, it is a gift, rare and precious. I feel it. It is as though we have been knowing each other for many years, many lifetimes. Accept it, do not question it. This Universe is full of strange and magical things, it has always been so. This is simply one of the wonders. We find friends, allies, bond mates and there is no why there only is."

I fought the tears that welled up in my eyes, too much emotion and I felt it keenly. His face softened and he nodded. "We are now family. This is a good thing." He pulled me into another rib cracking embrace and then let me go. I looked at him then looked around me. He and everyone else around me had the same beautiful pale blue hue to their skin, long black hair and the same eerie glowing red eyes. It was a little unnerving to be the only one who was different. He patted my hand and smiled. I nodded and drew a deep breath. How was it that I could be such an outsider and yet feel as though I had found a home? I didn't understand it.

"Come I will show you to where you stay with us and you can get ready for the celebration. No masks, no hiding. Once you have changed clothings we will eat and dance and enjoy everything life has to offer. There is now a storm howling outside but we will be louder inside, yes." He said. "Now, follow me."

With Za'ar close behind me, I followed Navaari out of the main hall down through a series of deeper tunnels to short hall. He opened one of the two doors which led into a large, bright space. I had not imagined that despite being underground an apartment could be so airy and spacious. I followed Navaari into the flat silently watching as he gave me a quick tour.

The main entranceway led to a large open plan living area. It was spacious yet homey all at the same time and there was a beautiful fire place but no fire had been lit. Navaari pointed out the small but lovely kitchen and dining area to the left of the front door then he led us across the living room to the end hall and opened up another door.

"We separate our living and eating spaces from our sleeping areas. The guest rooms are here." He said as we walked into a smaller living area. "Your room is this one, A'myshk'a." He said opening up a door to a small but amazingly cozy little bedroom. Yours," He said to Za'ar, "Adjoins through that door and opens to the living area there." He walked through the living area and showed me where the 'fresher was and how everything worked. "We heat from geothermal source." Navaari explained. "This part of the complex is mostly under the ground to save energy."

I looked around. It was beautiful. The furniture was carved and made from either wood or stone. The lighting was the same glowing globes and candles that I had seen before. There were beautiful carvings and sculptures decorating the shelves and tables. I was beginning to realise that not only were the Dantassi great hunters and trackers but they were a deeply complex people also capable of producing the most astonishing works of art as well.

"I shall let you get yourselves ready, A'myshk'a, there are clothes for you in your room." Navaari said. "I wait for you out there." And he turned and left us alone, closing the door behind him.

I turned and looked at Thrawn who in turn looked at me. The silence was palpable and I was the one who broke it.

"You kissed me." I said.

He smiled. "Yes, I did."

"In front of all of those people."

He nodded.

"I thought we were supposed to be keeping that aspect of whatever this thing between us is a secret." I asked.

"It was appropriate to the situation." He said in that tone of voice which told me he wasn't going to elaborate. "Get dressed, something you can dance in, there will be a lot of that. The Dantassi like to dance." And he vanished into his room.

With a sigh and shake of my head I went to my own room to get changed. Navaari had not been joking about the clothing there was a closet full of things to wear. They were not new though and as I brushed my hand over them I picked up

images and sensations of a pretty young woman with long black hair and laughing eyes. I wasn't sure who she was but she had been happy here.

The clothing was an assortment of hand woven cloth or softened animal hide and each piece was in its own way elegant. There were shirts and trousers, skirts and blouses and dresses. I chose a mid calf length dress and leggings to match that had been made from a soft, fine leather. The dress was dyed a deep forest green colour and had been decorated with intricate embroidered patterns of spirals and flowers, embellished by tiny glass beads. It was beautiful. There were slipper like shoes that had tiny beaded flowers decorating them, which matched the dress. To my surprise they fit as though they had been made for me. I took my hair down and let it fall about my shoulders and face. When I felt ready I left the room and joined Navaari and Za'ar.

Navaari smiled when he saw me. "I hoped the clothes would fit you." He said, and then before I could ask he continued. "They belonged to my daughter, when she was about your age. It is good to see them being used again."

I didn't know what to say. I felt suddenly very shy.

"Come, we go now, or you will miss this celebration and it is for you!" Navaari said, breaking the awkward silence.

The great hall had been filled with tables. Navaari led us to the one that was ours and we sat. The food was unlike anything I had ever eaten before, and while some of the meats and sauces were a bit of an acquired taste for me, I tried a little of everything that was offered. The water was cold, clear and sweet tasting and it was the best I had ever had in my life. The wine was a similar pale blue to the wine from Csilla that Thrawn had once shared with me. It was neither sweet nor dry and had the flavour of berries. It was very strong and heady so I sipped at it carefully. People kept coming up to the table and touched both Za'ar and I on the shoulders, on the hands or making that strange three fingered touch to the forehead. It was a little unnerving and I had to fight not to shy away from them.

"It is their way of welcoming you." Navaari explained. "They mean no harm and most here do not speak basic fluently. We do try to teach it but many of our people do not leave this world and see no use for the learning of a language they feel is harsh and ugly."

Once the feasting had finished, people began to clear away the tables and I watched as musicians began to pull out their instruments and warm up. There were drums and stringed instruments that were either plucked or played with a bow depending on their size, strange wind instruments that created an eerie almost melancholy sound. I watched with fascination as they began to play and suddenly understood where the music that I had danced to on Myrkr had come from. I looked at Za'ar but his face gave nothing away.

I was surprised at the speed and volume at which the music was played, and it was not long before the dancers took to the floor. At first it was a performance and the steps were memorizing. Some were intricate circular dances that involved the weaving in and out of each other's arms, while others were more sets of four and the patterns square and box like. I had never seen anything like it and I was drawn in by the complicated beauty of it all.

Suddenly the show was over and everyone who had been watching joined in the dancing. I stood back, observing, would have stayed that way but Navaari wasn't going to let that happen. He did not even ask, he simply grabbed my arm and swept me into the whirling circle of people. The music was infectious and while I was uncertain of the steps at first, they were easy to learn. I soon discovered that once you were on the dance floor it was very hard to actually escape from it. Every time I tried to make my way back to the corner I had been standing in, hands grasped mine and hauled me back into the next set.



I kept looking for Za'ar and once or twice I caught sight of him weaving in and out of a circle. I could not have imagined him laughing as he was or being as relaxed as he looked in this place. I could not superimpose the image of this man I was here and now with over the one I knew from the Empire in his perfect Imperial uniform and cool, impeccable manners. I knew in my heart that they were the same person but it was two utterly different pictures. I wondered what the Emperor would say if he could see Thrawn now, then it occurred to me that perhaps it was this strange duality that made Thrawn so unique and maybe the Emperor was well aware of this. Thinking about the Empire led to thoughts of Jyrki. Perhaps it was these thoughts which instilled the sudden sadness within me, I was not really sure. I just knew that suddenly the laughter and the music, the noise and the whirling motion of all these people dancing was too much for me and I had to get away.

I broke away from the hands holding mine and slipped through the twisting, turning crowd to find myself at the front of the great hall. I felt a strange sense of panic rising in my chest and without really thinking about it fled from the hall altogether. I found the main entrance and slipped through the great doors. Outside the storm howled and raged but I was sheltered by a large porch like structure so I could stand and watch the wildness without being in it.

I was struck first by the cold, and then by the utter opaqueness of the snow. The wind was like a living creature and it was furious. The noise of it was so familiar to me, sand storms sounded very much like this, yet the mournful quality or perhaps the coldness of it instilled a melancholy in me that was hard to shake. I breathed in and out, fascinated by the white lacy mist of my own breath that hung on the air for a second only to be whipped away by a gust of stray wind that flung snow into my face. I was glad of the solitude but it did not last long.

Navaari slipped a heavy fur lined coat over my shoulders. Then he lit the pipe he had brought with him and took a long thoughtful draw from it. The tobacco was sweet and strong and made for a strange scent as it mixed with the peppery tang of the snow. I cuddled into the warmth of the coat. I was colder than I wanted to admit.

"Good that you did not venture too far away, easy to get lost in a storm like this. When the white-outs come, you cannot see past your hand sometimes." Navaari chided. "And you should dress better when you want to go outside."

"How cold is it?"

"By your reckoning, around minus twenty but with the wind it feels much colder." He smiled slightly. "And this is by our standards warm, it is early spring."

I looked at him. "How long could a person live in weather like this?"

He shrugged. "Depends on what clothings are worn. Like you now are dressed," He shook his head. "Perhaps a few hours not more and you not long at all, you are unused to this cold. Look, already you shiver. With the proper clothings, in the right layers then who knows, hours or maybe days? You must keep your head, your neck and wrists covered. Then it depends on how well fed and watered you are. Energy is needed for the body to stay warm and it takes a lot to stay warm in such cold as this. You would not last so long, tiny little thing. You are too thin."

"Have you ever been out in weather like this?" I asked ignoring his comments about my looks.

"Many times, but I have learned since a small child how to live in this environment. I know how to survive here. I would say that if I were to be on your home world then you would know what to do and I would be lost. I am unused to extreme heat."

I laughed. "I think you would survive just fine."

He just smiled and smoked his pipe. "Are you cold enough now to wish to return indoors?"

"Not yet. Too many people, it's too much. I need some quiet." I said trying not to shiver.

"And this is not loud?" He asked with a smile, indicating the wind and the storm.

I just smiled because I was certain he already knew the answer to that then asked. "Why did he bring me here?"

Navaari was silent for a long moment and I didn't think he would answer me. When he did his answer wasn't what I had expected. "Because I requested it." He said. "And because Nikätza'arth'pavjäska has fear."

"Afraid? He's not afraid of anything." I said.

Navaari gave me a long steady look. "Of course he is. All living creatures know fear. Some just hide it better than others."

"What was he afraid of?"

"You need to be asking Nikätza'arth'pavjäska this question." He answered simply.

Men and their secrets. I just sighed and looked out into the darkness and watched the swirling snow.

He tapped his pipe against the wall, knocking out the last of the smouldering tobacco and then tucked it back into his coat. "He worries for you, Tjällh. As do I."

"He told you what happened." It wasn't a question.

"Only what he knows, yes. He says that you will not speak the details of it."

I shrugged and pulled the coat closer around my shoulders. "There is nothing to speak of. I was kidnapped and treated....badly. I managed to escape and here I am. What else is there to say?" I said coldly.

Navaari nodded. "When you are ready there will be words enough I imagine." He replied sagely. "Now before you freeze to death will you please come inside?"

I did as he asked, grateful for the sudden warmth. Back in the main hall the celebration was in full swing but I didn't much feel like joining in, so I watched still huddled in the warmth of the fur coat. The sea of people, blue skinned, black hair and glowing red eyes, swirling about the great hall, their laughter and their voices carrying over the music made me melancholy and very sad.

It was a peculiar feeling to be the single outsider. I had never thought about being alien before, but here that is exactly what I was. Even though I had grown up on Tatooine and lived most of my life in Mos Eisley, perhaps the city most heavily populated by many different alien species, I had never felt as though I were on the outside. Here, with my pale pink skin, red hair and grey-blue eyes, I stood out. I wondered why Thrawn and Navaari had brought me here, why making me a part of their people's culture and lives had been so important, and what it all meant in the long run. I knew this was supposed to be a night of great celebration and that everyone seemed genuinely pleased to welcome me into their tribe but it made me despondent. I had no idea why though which was even more depressing.

I looked over the mass of people for Navaari and Za'ar. They, along with several other men, were standing in the far corner having what looked to be a deep and maybe even heated conversation. I wondered what they were talking about. It became clear to me in that moment that I would have to learn this language sooner rather than later. My mother had once told me that one of the most important keys to understanding an alien culture was to learn its language. She had never been more right than now. Thinking of her made me even more morose, I was just not in a celebratory mood. I looked once more over at where Navaari and Za'ar were and then, like a ghost, I slipped away.

Navaari's flat as warm and cozy. Someone had lit a fire in the fireplace and there was a tray of food and drink set up on a table in the corner. I looked around but I was alone and I was relieved for it. I changed out of the clothes into a long night

dress and with a datapad book I curled up on the small couch in front of the fire and began to read but I could not concentrate at all. After an hour I gave up, went to bed and tried to sleep. That was also a complete failure. Instead I lay, straining my ears to hear when Za'ar returned. I had brought a candle into my room, because I could no longer bear to sleep in a dark room with no windows. I watched as the dancing light from the flame created strange shadows on the walls.

Eventually, I drifted into an uneasy sleep that was plagued by fragmented dreams and a nightmare which eventually woke me, gasping for breath like a drowning man. The candle had gone out and I had to fight the panic that rose in my chest to choke me as I searched for light.

I had no idea what time it was and I didn't care. I only knew I needed to get out. With a grim determination I dressed as warmly as I could, remembering all that Navaari had said. I put on layers of clothes and finished with the warm boots, the mitts and the long heavy coat he had given me when he had met us at the landing pad. I slipped my bone mask in its satchel and slung it over my shoulder. It was not my intention to stray far from the main entrance but I wanted to be outside and I could stay out longer with better clothing. I left my room quietly, noticing that the door to the room where Thrawn slept was open. I had not heard him come back and for a moment I hesitated near the doorway torn between looking to see if he was really there and wanting to just leave. In the end I just slipped away. The whole place was quiet, as though the energy of the celebrations had given way to restful exhaustion. I stood in the great hall for a moment surveying the chaos left behind. The Dantassi certainly knew how to celebrate. The hall was huge when it was empty and strangely peaceful. I sighed and turned away from it all and made my way to the main entrance and then I went outside. The storm raged still, if anything it seemed to have gotten worse. It was as beautiful as it was fearsome and I marvelled at its power.

As a child I had always loved storms. I had loved everything about them, the wildness, the ferocity and the sheer pure energy. My mother had once come into my room when I was very small, worried that I was scared by a particularly bad sandstorm only to find me standing on my tip toes to watch it through the cracks in the shutters of the window. I wondered now, as I stood in the archway of the front entrance if this love of storms was somehow connected to my own weird ways. I wondered if some part of me fed off the wild energy such weather had to give. I knew that I felt more alive when I was in the middle of bad weather than when skies were clear and calm.

I wondered, suddenly, what it was like to stand in the middle of this howling blizzard, to be engulfed in its natural and blind fury and without considering the consequences I stepped out of the shelter of the entrance and into the storm.

The wind stole my breath and the snow stung my face as it smashed against my skin. I drew out the bone mask and placed it on my face. I drew the hood of the coat tightly around my head and turned around. I could still make out the vague shape of the Main Hall entrance way and the lights that adorned it but every now and then a huge gust of wind would sweep more snow around me and I would see nothing but the snow. I stood in wonder at this and without understanding why I turned my back on the entrance and began to walk. In the back of my head I knew this was not very smart but I was beyond caring. I was so tired of the nightmares and the fear. I was so fed up of everything and this strange numb sensation that had over taken my life. I just wanted a way out and vanishing into this storm and snow was the perfect way to go. I was not cold and I just kept walking. Had I stopped for even a moment to think, I would have been appalled at what I was doing. Sometimes, I was just so incredibly stupid.

I had no idea how long I had been walking for or even which direction I was heading in, I just kept moving. There was no road or path and although the snow was

hard packed about every fifth or so step I kept sinking knee deep into where it had drifted and was softer than the rest. It was a struggle to get through. The wind made it difficult to stand up straight and when I turned to head back to what I thought was the village and have the wind at my back somehow that didn't seem to work either so I just kept moving aimlessly really, and as I walked, my thoughts turned inward.

I went over and over in my head what Jyrki had done. I could not wrap my brain around it and I didn't understand what had motivated him. He had been my best friend, my first love and my teacher in so many things. I thought he had loved me too. No matter how much I worked it all through I could not come up with a reason good enough to justify his actions. I tried to imagine conversations with him and I am sure that I spoke out loud as I stumbled my way through the howling storm. I was angry with him and the more I went over and over everything he had done the angrier I became. At one point I stopped and I just screamed out loud because I didn't know what else to do. If he had been there in front of me I think I would have done him serious bodily harm.

I thought about the Emperor and his machinations. There was a man I could learn to hate and I wasn't sure that I didn't already feel that way. He was a poison and a darkness and he terrified me to my very core. I wondered, as I sank once more knee deep in icy snow and had to get out of my mitts so that I could scoop the snow out of my boot, why he took such delight in playing these games with everyone. I was certain that I was alive and doing as well as I was in my small part of the Empire only because he wanted something from me. I just did not know exactly what that was. Lord Vader had said often enough that it was my talent, my force abilities that made me unique and I had sensed no lie in his words but I didn't believe it entirely either. There were others far more talented than I was and far more willing to play the game, far more willing to suck up to the Emperor and do whatever he asked with argument or question. I could not seem to sort out the tangled web that was being woven about me and I didn't understand it. If he wanted something specific from me, then why did he simply not make his demands known? Why the games?

I knew that my abilities were getting stronger and that all the training and teaching that I was being given were helping to sharpen my skills but I did not know the reason. Lord Vader had talked about the peculiar combination of gifts that I had but he had never explained why this was special. I wondered as I slogged through the snow how I was useful to him, the Emperor and the Empire and what that meant exactly because it was starting to take on a sinister tone to it. In the last year I had learned that I was not the only person Lord Vader had taken under his wing, oddly enough this knowledge did not really bother me too much, in some ways I was glad for it. In the end it changed nothing between he and I, the bond that had been forged was there and was strong. I did not understand it but I didn't question it either.

There were many layers to the Empire and I was only now beginning to grasp this. It was not very comforting. I wondered about Lianna and her part in all of this. Her strange connection with the Emperor, her love and devotion to him was almost familial. Navaari had called her a predator and I knew he had been right but I had not wanted to see it, or know about it. She was threatened by me even though she had no reason to be. Whatever she was to the Emperor I was not going to replace her. I had seen a fear in her eyes when she had met me the first time and I wondered now if she saw me as some sort of rival even though I knew that was impossible. That would have been like pitching a wamp rat against a Krayt dragon. I had sensed the Force about her but it was not an obvious thing. She had been trained in everything from an early age and it showed. I was a stumbling child next to her, yet she had been afraid of me. It occurred to me that maybe the Emperor played on that as well, enjoyed watching how we circled about one another, against one another. I wondered why he would do that to someone who so obviously adored him.

I stumbled and fell and for a moment considered if it was actually worth getting up but my survival instinct was almost as strong as my stupidity factor and I struggled against the snow to my feet. I was tired though. My fingers were starting to feel the nip of the cold and the first inklings of what I had done, of the situation I was actually in were starting to sink in. I was not so much afraid as I was sad. Trudging through the drifts and against the winds was extremely hard work. I had no idea where I was, what time it was or when it would be day. I imagined my home world and its unbearable heat and it made me laugh to think that chances were I would die by freezing to death. The irony of this was not lost on me.

I loved Tatooine with a fierceness that often surprised even me, but not knowing if I had been born there changed this slightly. It made me wonder who my birth parents had been, where I had actually been born, where my homeworld really was. These were questions I was betting I would never find answers to. I had not lied to Thrawn when I had told him that I knew who I was just not where I had come from but now the deeper consequences of knowing that the people who had raised me were not the same people who had given me life were beginning to sink in. Had my birth parents also been force users? What planets had they come from? I didn't even know what they looked like. That last thought had made me shake my head. My red hair had often been a source of many questions as neither of my adopted parents on Tatooine had red hair. My mother used to explain it away that I was a throw back to her great aunt and, for the most part, this was accepted because my mother had eyes a similar colour to mine. Thinking about her made me ache with a sorrow that never fully seemed to leave me alone. It led me to thoughts about my father and all my friends back at the docking bay.

My father and I had had a difficult relationship but I knew he would be sad if I died and I felt a pang of regret at that. I was a wilful, stubborn child but he was every bit as wilful and just as stubborn as I was so we were well matched. We had often locked horns even when I was small but then my mother had been around to sort out the arguments and play mediator. After her death it was very bad for a long time and only in the last two years had we made any real headway in being able to actually seriously talk to one another without it ending in a fight or a frustrated shouting match. I hoped that with me so far away Jyrki would leave them all alone because it occurred to me he might decide to go after them to get to me.

I stopped for a moment to catch my breath and looked around me. I wasn't sure but I thought it was starting to get lighter out but maybe it was just my mind playing tricks on me. All I could see was waves and swirls of snow that writhed about me. It was as though I were dancing with ghosts and there was a stunning beauty in it. With a heavy sigh I forced myself to go on but I was so weary, my limbs and my lungs ached and it was getting harder and harder to think straight.

My thoughts turned to the ceremony I had just been through. I had not understood its full significance, I was certain of that fact. I knew that for Navaari it had meant one thing but for Thrawn as Za'ar it had quite a different meaning. I was sure that something deeper more important had happened but I was too blind or too stupid to put two and two together. I thought about Za'ar's kiss, and it was a thought which warmed me from the inside out. He was a strange man in so many ways, intelligent, cool headed, logical and utterly alien but I knew if left unchecked the sparks between us could fan into flames and I was scared that fire would devour me. Most of the time he was unreadable to me, yet there was a light to him, a genuine warmth that hinted at a deeper passion he kept tucked away. I could not fathom his attachment to me but on the other hand, I could not figure out my feelings for him. No matter which way I considered it, our relationship was complicated but I knew with absolute certainty, it was also a gift. One I was now throwing away. I thought about my last conversation with Navaari and I knew he would be furious with me for

doing this but in the end, I rationalised with myself, it was better for all if I was out of the picture. I seemed to be no end of trouble to everyone around me and gone was a good thing.

I was no longer thinking clearly. I was too cold. I fell once again sinking deep into the snow and this time I didn't get up. Instead I lay there burrowing into it a little and then curled up into a little ball with my back to the wind. I pulled my heavy coat close around me shutting the storm out. I had been cold but now lying in the snow I felt a surreal sense of warmth and I was very drowsy. My thoughts drifted back and forth but mostly they centered on Thrawn. I was a little sad that, for all the back and forth, for all the teasing that had gone on between us, we had never finished what we had started. I wondered what that might have been like and it was the last thing on my mind before I drifted, like the snow, in and out of a hazy consciousness.

I had no idea how long I lay buried there. I had lost all sense of time and place. I thought that I was dreaming when I heard someone speaking to me and felt myself being hauled out of the snow I had burrowed my way into. I struggled against this because I didn't want to be moved. I was warm where I was. Strong hands caught my flailing arms and held them tightly.

"Idiot child! Stop struggling!" Said a very familiar, very angry voice.

I did as I was told and with a deft movement my bone mask was removed. I gasped as the cold bit my skin. Warm hands touched my face and then my mask was put back on me. I was lifted up and bundled on to what felt like a sled. My mittens were pulled off and warm hands felt my own. Mine were cold but I wasn't sure how cold. I couldn't feel much. He put my mittens back on. I felt the sled move and closed my eyes.

I woke up in warmth but I was shivering. I sat up slowly and realised several things at once. One, I wasn't dead. Two, I was mostly undressed and had been wrapped in warm, dry blankets and a heavy fur. And three, my feet and my fingers itched and burned in a way that was pure torture. I went to scratch at my toes and a hand smacked mine away.

"Do not scratch, you will be making it worse!" Navaari scolded.

I tucked my hand back under the blanket and endured the awful prickling, itching sensation as blood found its way back into my extremities. I watched as Navaari set up a small brazier and cooked something in a pot on it. I looked around me and took stock of where I was. There wasn't much to see. We were in a small domed structure that looked a lot like it had been made from snow. There was a ledge that ran around the inside edge and then the floor had been dug out so that the inside was deeper and larger than it appeared on the outside and had been lined with thick animal skins, the fur side up. There was a small tunnel as an entrance and ventilation holes in the ceiling. Lanterns had been lit and the inside was surprisingly warm and cozy compared the howling storm outside. Navaari ignored me while he moved around the small space. For such a large man he moved with surprising ease and grace, readying this and that, taking things out of a large bag he had tucked over on the other side of the floor.

He tossed me some clothes. "Put those on, you should be warm enough now." He barked. I wriggled into the top, trousers and slippers and said nothing. Finally when he could keep it inside no longer his anger exploded around me like the storm outside.

"Idiot girl! What were you thinking? You could have perished in that weather! By all rights you should be dead!"

I looked up at him, meeting his seriously hard stare with my own. "That was more or less what I was thinking." I answered quietly.

He just stared at me wanting to ask why but instead he just sighed. "How are your hands and feet, still itchy or just warm now?" He asked.

I flexed my fingers. "They feel thick, funny, but warm." I said. "How long was I...? I mean how did you find me?"

"The thick feeling is normal. It will pass in a while. You are lucky to have no real damage." He said. "By the time we realised what you had done over four hours had passed. You travelled surprisingly far for someone walking without the right shoes." He poured some of the tea he was making into a cup and handed it to me. "Drink it slowly." He said and he sat down across from me with a cup of his own. "Lucky for you when I made your mask I added a tracking chip to it. We do that for children. Without it I would not have found you before the storm had ended and even then, there was little chance to find you alive. At least you were intelligent enough to have listened to what I said about clothings before going on your death walk." He stared at the contents of his cup for a moment. "A few more hours and ice burn would have taken your fingers and toes. You live under a lucky star."

I wondered about that. I didn't feel lucky, I just felt stupid.

"A'myshk'a, why?" He asked after a long silence.

I shook my head. "I just had to get away."

"In the middle of a blizzard?" Anger crept back into his voice.

"Wasn't any place else to go." I said quietly.

He made a face. "You think that death would solve whatever it is you run from?" He asked.

I shrugged.

"I did not think of you as being selfish." He said. His words were laced with a quiet fury. "But this was a selfish act."

I felt the sting of shame and concentrated on my tea. "Does Thra, I mean Za'ar know?"

"Of course he does, Tjällh. He was the one who alerted me you were missing."

"He didn't come with you?"

Navaari shook his head. "No, I am faster alone and he knows that, plus I was thinking you might want someone neutral to be talking with. He is very angry and that would have been unhelpful in this time.

I sighed. "I keep making the wrong choices." I said. "I seem to excel at pissing people off."

"Well, this was not a very clever move but you let your passions and your emotions rule your actions. I cannot say that, in the end, it was not unexpected. In that regard you remind me a little of my daughter when she was very young."

"Why did I not meet her or your family at the celebration?" I asked.

He weighed the question for a moment. I wondered if he would actually answer. I was so used to Thrawn's evasiveness on questions he deemed too personal or that he just did not want to answer that I expected the same from everyone else.

"She left Hjal some years ago. Married a Chiss scholar and moved to his home world." He said after a long silence. "We do not see each other often. She has walked away from this culture, this life and she does not look back." He drew a deep breath. "My wife passed onto the next world almost seven years ago, an illness we could not cure took her. It is the way of things. Family moves on, the ones we love move on. My daughter is happy with her life now, just as she was happy here as a child. As a father it was hard to let her go but to do otherwise would have been wrong."

"You seem so pragmatic about it all."

"It is what it is, Tjällh." He said with a sad smile.

"But you miss them?"

"Every day." He said. "But that is part of what it is to love someone."

I made a face. "Love!" I spat the word out. "I don't even know what that means."

Navaari looked at me with a mixture of surprise and puzzlement. "You have family, do they not love you? You have friends and you have Nikätza'arth'pavjäska do they not also in their own way love you and in turn, teach you what this is?"

I had to fight from raising my voice. "Friends who love you do not betray you. Family that loves you does not lie to you about the most sacred of things and men who have stars in their blood only love their freedom." I could not keep the bitterness from my voice.

Navaari refilled my cup and handed it to me. The expression on his face told me he was waiting for an explanation.

I sighed, "A year ago, just as I was to start working for the Empire my father told me that I was not his or my mother's child, that I had been abandoned and left behind on one of his freighters by someone too damned scared to take responsibility for what I was. I know nothing about what I am, where I come from, or who created me. So for all of my life I have lived in a lie, believing I was one thing to discover that I was something else." I said. I was angry over this but I had not realised it until now. How deeply did I shove these feelings down?

"The people who raised you as their own, did they not love you and care for you?"

"Yes, but they also lied to me."

"I will not debate their reasons, that is not my place but I am certain that their motives were based in love and nothing else." He said.

I shrugged. "Maybe." I said grudgingly. "My father and I don't always see eye to eye and there are many things he will not speak of. The peace that we have now, such as it is, is based on a mutual desire not to get into screaming matches. We agree to disagree. My mother died a long time ago. My birth parents left me nothing but an antique book, a legacy of dangerous talents and strange abilities which seem to land me in more trouble than they are worth."

"What of this betrayal from friends?"

My jaw clenched and I stared at the tea in my cup. When I didn't answer he continued.

"Very well, what of Nikätza'arth'pavjäska?"

"I have known men like him my entire life, pilots, captains, spacers. He finds me intriguing and perhaps at some point this game we play will get more intimate and even more interesting than it already has, if you know what I mean, but I will never be more than a pleasing distraction for him. To try and place any sort of claim on him would be like trying to stop a star from going supernova. I have no illusions about that. He has made space for me in his life and he is kind to me. I would even venture to say he has some feelings for me but love? For men such as he, love is a luxury that is found only in ridiculous romance stories." I sighed and fiddled with my cup. "The minute you try to tie someone like him down you destroy what makes them special. I may be young and naïve but I do know this, were I to try and claim that man as mine, put a binding on him in any way I would be left with a handful of sand in the wind. No, even if in his own way he cares for me a little, sees something in me that pulls at him, attracts him the way peko-pekos like shiny things, it is a small thing compared to who and what he is. I can live with that and I expect nothing from him" I shrugged.

Navaari looked at me for a long time. "How is it that someone so young can be so...I do not have the right word, like sour fruit...?"

"Cynical." I said sensing the word he sought.

He tasted the word and repeated it to get its feel and then nodded.

I shrugged. "It isn't cynicism, it's being realistic. I lived and worked at a docking bay, I saw it all the time, crying girlfriends clinging to men who would rather live amongst the stars than be planet bound, men married to their ships and that way



of life, leaving empty promises of love and the women who fell for them behind in a pathetic puddle of tears." I sighed at the memories my words conjured up. "I swore I would not be like that."

"I think you underestimate the depth of his emotions." Navaari said quietly.

"Do I?" I asked honestly. "Maybe, who knows? I find him incredibly difficult to read. I wonder sometimes if the Chiss even have emotions. But I can tell you this, I make no claims on him and in the end, for both of us, duty comes first."

Navaari sat back and studied me carefully. "You surprise me at every turn."

"Za'ar says exactly the same thing. You all think you know me, you all think that you have me figured out but you know nothing!" I said coldly. "Just like Jyrki, you both think of me as some stupid, pathetic child."

"That is more untrue than you will ever know." He said firmly and then asked. "Who is this Jyrki?"

"Didn't Za'ar fill you in?"

"He has mentioned the name, said this is a man from your past and responsible for what has recently happened but he gave no details."

"Then you know enough." My voice as cold as the air outside. "But you met him once."

"The man from Rothana." He nodded suddenly starting to put things together for himself. "The longer you keep this locked up inside of you, the deeper this poison will go." He said.

He was right and I knew it but I didn't want to go to there so I sipped my tea instead and then asked. "What is this place?" Steering away from the topic at hand.

He stared at me for a long time as if to gauge how far he could actually push me and then decided that now was not the right time. "It is a snow house. We make them when we go on long hunts. Lucky this one still stands from a hunt a few months back and was very close. They are efficient, easy shelter from the weather."

I nodded and drank the rest of the very sweet tea in silence. I had nothing more to ask or add.

"We will stay here until the storm has blown itself out. Foolish to travel back in this." He told me after a long while.

"Does anyone know you found me?"

He shook his head. "We have a good comm system here but this weather interferes with it. They will know when we return." He looked at me as I yawned. "You should rest now. We will talk more when you have a clearer mind."

I handed him my empty cup and curled up in the huddle of blankets and furs, turning my back to him. I knew he was watching me, trying to find answers but I didn't have any to give. I listened to him move about and the sounds of the storm that raged about us until slowly sleep claimed me but it didn't last long.

I woke screaming, half in half out of the nightmare whose images I would thankfully not remember when I had broken free from its grip. As I became aware of Navaari at my side, doing what all parents do for terror stricken children, I wondered if this would ever end. His whispered gentle words which won over the unnamed fear and when I had calmed down enough he let go of me and lit one of the lanterns. Light helped. He got the small brazier going and put water on to boil. The small space filled with the scent of whatever tea it was he was making and it was a good smell. I watched, huddled in the warmth of the blankets as he fixed me a cup.

"These night terrors, you are having them often?" He asked, pouring himself a cup of tea as well.

I nodded, cradling the warm cup in my hands, welcoming its heat. "I have always had bad dreams on and off, but not like this and not every night."

"Why will you not speak of what happened to you?" He asked getting straight to the heart of the matter.

I shook my head. "I can't."

"Why not?" He was going to push now, I knew that. There would be no avoiding this conversation and there was no place to run. I shut my eyes tightly and gritted my teeth.

"Stop fighting against what will happen anyway! Why will you not open up and talk to me?" I heard him move closer to me. "Why?"

"Because I am ashamed." I whispered. Letting out the awful truth I had locked away inside myself.

He had not expected this answer and he knelt in front of me, taking my face in his hands and holding it so that I could not avoid looking in his eyes.

"Look at me, Tjällh!" He demanded. "You have done nothing to feel that way."

I tried to turn away from his gaze but he would not allow me to. With his eyes and his hands he made me face not only his questioning stare but my own fears. I struggled to get the words out but they tangled on my tongue. The deep shuddery breath I took was not enough to quell the rising sense of disproportionate panic.

"Do you know what I used to tell my daughter when something had her so tied up in knots she could not even speak?" He said gently. "Start at the very beginning and do not stop until the words have done their job."

I shook my head and struggled to get clear from his grasp. He did not let go.

"Tjällh, there is only you and me here and we are in the middle of nowhere surrounded by the snow and wind of a spring storm. There is nothing and no one who will hurt you. So speak to me, tell me this thing that destroys you from the inside out before there is nothing left of you and I must mourn another loss."

His words sank in slowly, he saw this and he let me go. I trembled as took a small sip of my hot tea and then without further games or hesitation I began to talk. I told him everything that had happened and I left absolutely no detail out. My voice trembled when I spoke Jyrki's name, when I recounted his violence and his silent, brutal anger. I faltered when I spoke of the filth and the disgrace I had felt at being so dirty and so weak, of the humiliation and the despair. I side tracked a little and told him everything about my relationship with Jyrki, as I had known him, as I had wanted to know him. All the secrets I had been carrying for so long right from my earliest memory of Jyrki through to the most recent of hurts and the terrible sense of loss came tumbling out. All the things I just could not seem to come to terms with found their way to the surface. I poured my soul out to Navaari in a way I had not ever done with any other person before, not even Thrawn, and he listened without comment or interruption. When I was finished and there were no more words left inside I just looked at Navaari, waiting for him to respond. I huddled into the blanket around my shoulders. I felt for the first time in a very long time, a deep sense of stillness, of emptiness as though the white noise in my head had suddenly been switched off. Navaari took the empty cup from my hands and refilled it for me. I accepted it gratefully. He was silent for a very long time and I realised that I could no longer hear the wind outside either. The silence was deafening I was glad when he broke it.

"No one should ever have to go through such a betrayal." He said in a voice that did not hide his own anger. "This terrible sense of guilt you carry is not yours to bear. You did nothing to deserve this, you did nothing wrong." He said.

"Then why did it happen? Why did he do this to me?" I was on the verge of tears but I bit them back. Tears would come later, in private when I could let everything go with no one around to watch.

"I cannot answer that, only this Jyrki Andando can." He said. "But this I do know, you must understand what happened was not your fault. You need to stop blaming yourself. He had no right to harm you in this way, no matter what he thinks you have done or have become." He shook his head. "This man you once loved, I do

not even think he sees the person you are now. If he had he would know that you are not evil or even shaped by it. That you have a lovely spirit touched by difficult times. You did what you had to do and you acted with great courage." He cupped my face once more in his hands and made me look at him. "I am so honoured to know you, to have you be a part of my family, of my tribe. You may not be my daughter by blood but in my soul I know that we are bound by something powerful and I am telling you this as I would were you my own, I am proud of you."

He pulled me to him and held on to me tightly. I had not realised how much I had needed some sort of absolution, how much I had needed for someone to tell me these things or how much I had needed to just be held tightly and to feel safe. I swallowed down the desperate need to sob. If I began to cry now I'd never stop. With a sigh, after a long pause, I pulled away from his embrace and sipped at my tea.

"You miss her very much." I said wanting to talk about something else other than me.

"Yes, I do. My wife and I thought that we could not have children so when I'lliyare'a was born we knew she was a gift from the gods. Do not all parents think this way?" He added with a smile. "She was a cheerful, happy child but her eyes always looked to the far away and I knew that even though she was raised with us she would not stay with us forever. She longed for more, she longed for the stars. She was always looking past the now, beyond my shoulder into the future." He said. "I should not have been surprised then, when a young scholar came to Hjal to study the Dantassi way of life and I watched as he stole my daughter's heart." He shook his head.

"I do not mean that in a bad way. She was happier than I had ever known her to be and when, one night she came to my wife and I to tell us that she wished to marry this man and leave us, we both knew that no matter what we said we would lose her. It was better to give her up gracefully with our blessings than to will for her to remain here and have her leave in bitterness. So, after we convinced her to have a traditional Dantassi bonding ceremony, she left to start her own life on Csilla. She returned only once, when her mother was dying and we knew there was nothing to be done about it. Those were difficult days. I know she felt guilt and remorse about not being here for most of the illness and I was so tied up in my grief that I could not help her through her own. When she left after the death rites, many words had not been spoken which should have been said. We have not seen one another since, although we keep in touch. I feel the distance between us keenly but I am unable to bridge it"

I looked at him. "Fathers and daughters." I said.

He nodded with a slight smile because he understood exactly what that statement meant.

"I am quite certain that this is a dance that will always be so for eternity and it should be no other way. But it is a hardship that is sometimes difficult to bear." He said. "Without these hurts and these terrible times, how can we know joy and peace?"

"It seems like an awfully high price to pay, though." I said.

"Everything comes at a price, A'myshk'a." He replied.

I nodded and not knowing what else to say commented. "Storm's died down."

"Aye, and once we have eaten we will be heading back. It will be very late by the time we reach the village but you will see it is a different world outside." He told me and set about making some sort of food. We sat and ate the stew in silence. It was hot and surprisingly good. Once we were finished and everything cleaned and put away, I helped Navaari pack.

"Put your warm clothes on. After a storm like this the wind drops and so does the temperature. It will be very cold and it will be very beautiful." He said handing me the clothes I had worn when I had left the village.

The world that awaited me as I crawled through the entrance tunnel was vastly different from the one I had walked out into the day before. Where there had been

wild winds and blinding snow was now an eerie stillness and a crystal clear night. I breathed the night air in deeply and it was a sharp, icy shock. It made me cough. Navaari laughed as he packed the sled. The wolf-hounds were happily chewing on whatever food Navaari had given them. I wondered how they survived the storm.

"They curl up in the snow and their fur keeps them warm. They are born and bred in this climate." He explained reading my thoughts. "Put your mask on, it may not be windy but the cold will still freeze your flesh swifter than you can be imagining."

I drew the mask from the satchel across my shoulder. Navaari grinned when he saw my reaction when I saw it.

"It is tradition to write one's history upon one's mask. I was carving your story while you slept." He said. "Now any Dantassi will know who you are and where you have come from by the symbols." He tapped two of them. "This one says you are part of my family and this one is for Nikätza'arth'pavjäska."

My fingers traced the new marks he had carved. They had been made black by some sort of soot and then sealed with a waxy substance.

"I guess every time I need my story updated I shall have to come back to see you. I can't carve to save my life." I said as I slipped it onto my face. I drew my hood up and took my place on the sled. It was exhilarating and this time I was wide awake. The wolf-hounds were swift and, in the moonlight, glorious. The scenery was breathtaking. All around me was pristine white snow that glittered in the moons' light. It was beautiful. I lifted my face and gasped at the clarity and sheer numbers of the stars that shimmered in the sky. Their formations were foreign to me and I wondered if the Dantassi who lived on this planet had names for the patterns they created. After about an hour Navaari stopped the sled. The hounds sat on the snow, their misty white breath decorated the air as they panted. He motioned for me to get up and follow him a little ways from the sled and the hounds.

"Lie down and look up, Tjällh." He said. I did as he bid and could not keep the gasp of wonder from escaping my lips.

"The sky, it's dancing!" I whispered.

Navaari chuckled as sat in the snow beside me. "I am certain that Nikätza'arth'pavjäska has told you the scientific reasons behind this but we call them *Kiana sukaj'taiva*, heavenly dancers. My people know why they happen but we still see the magic. We tell our children if you whistle the lights will dance for you and sometimes they even whistle back."

I laughed and whistled and sure enough the lights of deep turquoise green and pale yellow rippled and shimmered across the sky. Navaari pointed out some of the patterns the stars made, telling me the stories behind them. I lay in the pristine snow, bathed in the twin moons' light watching the shimmering lights in the sky until Navaari pulled me to my feet.

"We should go before you get moon touched." He said. "While I am selfish and wish to spend as much time with you as possible sharing the wonders of my world your Ta'kasta'cariad will be waiting and he will be worried beyond reason now."

"I doubt that." I said under my breath as I took my place on the sled.

Navaari laughed. "You are being far too hard on that man." He said and he signalled for the wolf-hounds to run. I threw back my head and watched the sky. It had been a very long time since I had felt so free, so light, and so alive. It lasted until we reached the village and I had to face Thrawn angrier than I had ever known him before.

I followed Navaari into the sitting room. I felt the tension in the air crackle before I even saw Za'ar's face. When our eyes met I felt the full heat of his anger and I had to look away. I heard Navaari speak to him and looked up to see the two men face each other off, Navaari with his hand on Za'ar's shoulder.

"A'myshk'a, go and clean up," Navaari told me in a tone of voice that brooked no argument. I glanced at him and then again at Za'ar, hesitating. "Now, Tjällh!" Navaari insisted.

I hurried past them both to my room and then to the fresher. By the time I closed the door of the bath room the argument was underway and their voices carried low and hard. I was grateful that the water drowned out the discussion. Even though I didn't understand the words, the tone was unmistakable. I showered. The hot water felt good and I scrubbed myself clean. By the time I had finished and dressed the heat of the argument had gone leaving only a cold silence in its wake. I wrapped the warm robe over my night dress and walked into the sitting room. Both men stopped speaking and stared at me. It was unnerving.

"Better?" Navaari asked.

I nodded.

"Well, then, I shall be going to bed." He said getting up out of the chair he had been sitting in. "Nikätza'arth'pavjäska, remember well all that I have said." He came over to me and gave me a kiss on the cheek and then without saying anything else he left us alone, closing the door firmly behind him. The silence he left behind him was the worst I had even known. I could not look at Thrawn and I could not turn and run. His quiet manner was unnerving and while yelling at me would not change anything, that was simply not his way, it would have been so much easier for me to deal with.

Finally when I could bear it no longer I whispered. "I'm sorry." The words knotted in my gut and choked in my throat.

He stood up and folded his arms across his chest. He took a deep steadying breath and said in a cold, hard voice. "Merlyn, what were you thinking?" He only ever used my first name when he was displeased or being formal.

"I wasn't." I answered.

His jaw clenched. "No. You were not." His quiet anger hit me like a wave. He was still but his fury was not.

I looked away from his hard stare. A great lump rose up in my throat from my chest as though one of my nightmare monsters was trying to claw its way out from the inside. The grief burned and the more I tried to stop the tears that welled up in my eyes, unwanted, unbidden, the worse the ache got. I tried hard to fight against it but this was a losing battle. I was too tired, too wrung out to control any of my own emotions any more. I knew I simply could no longer stop this tempest from breaking. I turned my back to him and clenched my fists, struggling against the one thing that would finally help to free my soul.

"Let it go." He said quietly not moving from where he stood.

His permission was all I needed. Like someone had kicked me in the belly, it was emotional vomit and when it hit I went to my knees and buried my head in my hands. Sobs which sounded ugly and raw burned in my ears and tore at my throat. The dam broke and I cried. It was vicious, gut wrenching bawling, that made it difficult to breathe as I struggled against it.

I did not notice him kneel down at my side but when, after a few moments, he pulled me into his body and cradled me against him, stroking my still damp hair I cried even harder. I felt as though I were broken from the inside out and nothing in the galaxy would ever fix it.

He held on to me tightly whispering in his language words I did not understand but the tone said, *'there, there child everything will be alright'*. I didn't believe him; I didn't think that anything would ever be alright ever again. I cried until there was nothing left, until there were no more tears just shuddering, hiccupping breaths. My own body twitched against the sudden release of emotion it had been carrying around for far too long. I had not wept like that in a very, very long time and Jyrki had been the reason for it then as well.

"I hate him." I said when I finally found my voice. He tried to lift my face upward but I fought him. "No, I'm all splotchy." I said.

"Look at me." He commanded in that quiet voice. I did as he asked. He wiped away the remnants of my tears with his thumbs. He held my gaze as he spoke. "I would kill this man with my bare hands for what he has done to you but that will not change what has happened." He said. "Hating him will solve nothing and such a strong word should not be bandied about lightly. It will eat you up inside and turn you into the darkness you try so hard to avoid."

I looked at him and it occurred to me as he spoke these words that this is what the Emperor wanted from me. Slowly I began to understand wondering if Thrawn had known this all along. I nodded and looked away from his steady gaze.

"I made your shirt all wet." I said.

He smiled. "I think I will live." He tucked two fingers under my chin and made me look up at him again. "Why did you venture out into the blizzard?" He asked.

I shrugged. A dozen answers went through my mind all of them truthful to some degree or another but the one answer that leapt to the forefront was also the simplest. "I wanted to see what it was like."

He gave me a look. "Even though you knew it meant possible death?"

"Part of me knew," I said. "But I didn't care, that was not important." He frowned but I continued. "I have no good answers, I know you want one but I don't have any. I wanted to walk away from everything and the storm, well, it called to me. I didn't think, I just reacted."

"Have you ever done such a thing before?"

"Yes, once and not on such a dramatic scale but that is a story I don't want to tell you right now." That memory made me smile.

He nodded. "There are those among my kind who seek answers to the questions that have no answers. They go to extraordinary lengths to look within themselves and find peace. Sometimes you remind me of these people. We call them *Tyn k'etsja tavi vai'jash me akia*, the seekers of beauty and light." He sighed. "You do not understand the reasons for why you do these things because you act on instinct and you trust to something that is indefinable. Your journey takes you far and wide and the path is hard."

"Seems odd to hear you sum it up like that but, yes that's more or less what it is like." I sniffed. He handed me a handkerchief and I used it gratefully.

"Did your walk in the blizzard give you any insights?" He asked after a while.

"You mean aside from the fact that snow and wind is cold and really hard to walk through?" I asked.

He made a face and arched an eyebrow.

"Yes, but don't ask me what they are because I am still trying to sort that all out."

"Tell me," He asked in a tone of voice which said he already knew the answer. "Did you like being in the middle of the snow fury?"

"How did you know that?"

"Recognition." He said cryptically and then gently added. "Kirja'navaar'inkjerii was right about you when he said he saw in you a, how would you put it, kindred spirit. You and he are much alike. He thinks that you are blessed by the snow gods. Most humans would have perished in that storm, tracer chip or not."

I sighed a deep shuddery breath. "I would never argue with Navaari, but I don't think acting like an idiot counts as being blessed by anything other than an incredible lack of brains."

"Do not underestimate faith, A'myshk'a, it is a far more powerful thing than most beings ever give it credit for and you seem to have it in abundance."

"I have faith? Faith in what?" I asked. I didn't understand what he meant bit this.

He just smiled, but he didn't answer. I leaned my head against his chest, suddenly weary beyond imagining. "Why is it that whenever I am with you I always end up either falling asleep or crying?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Well, firstly, that is not always the case. Sometimes we dance or have the occasional silent but interesting conversation and secondly, I would venture to say that somewhere deep down in that addled brain of yours, you trust me enough to let go and be yourself. I take it as a great compliment if you really want to know." He drew a deep breath. "However, I have to tell you, you are a most frustrating creature."

"Why?"

"Because just when I think I have worked out how you will most likely react you do something utterly contrary to what I expect."

"You mean you hadn't foreseen my taking a walk?"

"Not exactly." He said. "But I am learning that you do have a flair for the dramatic."

I nodded and sighed. He got to his feet and pulled me up with him. "You must be very tired." He said. "I know I am."

"Yes I'm exhausted."

"We can speak more tomorrow," He said. "If you want to."

I paused for a moment. "Navaari told me you knew what it was like to be isolated, to be imprisoned."

He looked at me for a moment and then nodded. "In a manner of speaking, I do. It is a very long story and I promise one day I will tell you but not tonight."

"We seem to have many long stories to share with each other, then."

He smiled slightly. "Well, as long as you do not take any more suicidal walks in violent weather perhaps we will have time to share them as well as other things."

I nodded and reluctantly went to my room. I left the door open a little and put the lantern I had brought with me on the bed side table. My mind whirled and I couldn't still my thoughts. I lay in bed I listened to the sounds of Za'ar moving about the sitting room, turning off lights and also going to bed. Even though everything was quiet the noise in my head just seemed to get louder. I tossed and turned until I couldn't stand it anymore. Making my decision I got out of bed and quietly opened the door that separated our two rooms. I stood in the doorway backlit by the lantern on my bedside table. He was lying on his back. I thought he was asleep but then he opened his eyes and stared at me. For a moment I hesitated uncertain of his reaction. I was about to go back to bed when he leaned up on one elbow and cocked his head to one side in question.

"I don't want to be alone." I said by way of an answer.

He patted the empty side of his bed and pulled the covers back. I went to him without fear and curled up by his side as he lay back down. I rested my head in the hollow where his arm and his shoulder met. He wrapped his arm around me and pulled me close. His skin was warm and he smelled like home. I looked up into his face and for a moment our eyes met. Desire flared like blaster fire, making me gasp. Suddenly all I wanted was to kiss him, was for him to kiss me. It was a greedy, desperate need and I looked to him for answers. He read this easily in my eyes and stroked my hair.

"I know what you want," He said quietly, "I want it also but now is not the right moment. You are exhausted as am I."

I knew he was right but I asked the question anyway. "Will there ever be a right moment?"

He arched an eyebrow and gave me one of those looks. "Yes, do not doubt that."

I sighed and nestled into the warmth of his body, breathed in his scent deeply. I traced my fingers absently up and down the center of his bare chest from the hollow between his collar bones to his abdomen. He caught my hand with his and kissed my palm. "You do not make waiting easy, though." He said, shifting so that he was lying on his side. He wrapped himself around my body and he held on to me tightly.

"Good." I whispered back sleepily, burrowing into his warmth.

He chuckled as he caressed my back with the tips of his fingers. In the grace of his embrace, I fell asleep.

It was the sound of talking that woke me up. Half awake I listened thinking that perhaps it was Navaari but it was not. My skin crawled as the familiar voice, distorted via the HoloNet filtered through the half open door. I could only hear on side of the conversation, Thrawn's and it was the tail end.

"Yes, Your Highness, I understand." He said and then closed the connection.

I watched as Thrawn entered the room and stood at my side. "Good, you are awake. We need to return to Coruscant. I have been recalled to duty, my leave cut short." He said.

"When?"

"Immediately. I'll let Kirja'navaar'inkjerii know we must go now. Get dressed and pack." He didn't sound very happy about it though and he added. "I'm sorry."

"I understand, duty calls. You have to save the galaxy from evil."

"Something like that." He smiled slightly and left the room.

Getting ready quickly was easy to do and I didn't have much to pack. I was ready by the time Navaari came into the sitting room carrying a tray of breakfast things.

"Nikätza'arth'pavjäska will return shortly, he had business with the Tribal High Elder before you both leave. I thought while he was gone you and I could share breakfast." He said.

I was grateful and I was hungry.

"Are you alright? Is everything settled between you two?" Navaari asked handing me a cup of very sweet tea.

"I think so. He doesn't ever really let me get away with feeling sorry for myself." I said.

"Good." He nodded. "As soon as he is ready, I'll take you both out to the landing pad." He told me. "Are you all packed?"

I nodded. This conversation felt stilted and sad. I didn't want to leave this place and didn't know how to say what I really wanted to.

"A'myshk'a, I have something for you." He said suddenly and he handed me a small leather pouch. "It is a way to keep in touch." He said.

I slipped the small metal disk that was attached to a leather thong, like one of the amulets I wore, out of the bag. It looked more like beautiful jewellery than a transmitter or HoloNet device."

"How does it work?" I asked turning it over.

Navaari smiled and took it from my fingers and showed me then handed it back.

"That's very clever and I can always reach you?"

He nodded. "Unless the weather is really bad and I am out on a hunt in it." He sighed. "I wanted to give you an option should you ever need help again. You can wear it like a pendant or hide it in something. My people often keep them as a part of their masks. It can also work as a tracking device and most detection machines will not find it."

"And people think the Dantassi are a backwater race." I said.



"We promote that idea, Tjällh. The less the rest of the Galaxy knows about us the better, when you are a thing of myth and bedtime story then you are both quietly respected and left alone to your own devices. Our technology is kept secret for a good reason. The Chiss are much the same. We keep ourselves to ourselves."

I nodded and slipped the tiny disk over my head, tucking it under my clothes. "Thank you."

Navaari nodded. "Do not be sad. We will see each other again." He said. I was about to answer when Za'ar, looking more Imperial and Thrawn like than he had in the last few days, walked back into the room.

"Ready?" He asked as he picked up his things and began to slip on the warm clothes against the journey to the landing pad.

I finished my tea and with help from Navaari got into the long fur coat. There was little to say and the mood was heavy and quiet. Navaari and Za'ar spoke to one another in Dantassi–Cheunh completely ignoring me. It sounded serious. I sat on the sled, as I had when we had arrived and watched the world of white whip by us. It was cold and over cast, the sky a foreboding colour of grey. I wondered if there was another storm coming in. The trip seemed faster than I remembered and before I knew it we had arrived at the landing pad. I watched as Navaari unlocked the force shield that had protected my ship from the inclement weather. The more I learned about the Dantassi the more I marvelled at them.

I took off my mask and tucked it away in the satchel slung across my shoulder. Thrawn had already opened the ship up and was loading the bags inside. He and Navaari said their goodbyes and then he went onboard.

I looked at Navaari and didn't know what to say. So much had happened and it seemed like a dream. He moved to me and pulled me into a bone crunching hug.

"Ariathe'Ka Ia." He whispered in my ear. "If you need me, I am here for you." He said holding me at arm's length and holding my gaze. "Do something for me?" He asked. I nodded. "Talk with your father. Do not lose that contact. Perhaps he did not give you life with his seed, but he raised you and he loves you. Do not throw that away." He said.

I nodded. "I promise." I said.

"Do not forget," he said urgently. "Your job is not who you are, it is what you do. Do not let it destroy you."

"You sound like Za'ar." I said.

He smiled. "I shall take that as a compliment." He said. "You had better go. Do not be looking back, that is bad luck. We will be meeting again, I promise."

"How?"

He smiled. "I am Jhal'kai, I will find you." And he placed three fingers up on my forehead then touched his own.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

He smiled. "I tell you the next time I see you." He said. "Now go." I did as he asked and I didn't look back. Thrawn already had the engine on start up and by the time I stripped off the heavy coat and had made it to the bridge we were already styling to take off.

The engines blew snow all around us and even though I looked for him I could not see Navaari as we left the planet's surface. I felt that awful ache of letting go, of already missing someone before you have even left them behind. I sat in the co pilot's seat and strapped in. The ship began its fight against the planet's gravity and I closed my eyes. When we had broken through the atmosphere and he had set the nav computer I got up and went back to change out of the layers of clothes into something easier to travel in. I made tea and brought a cup to Thrawn. He was broody and silent and I wondered how serious the conversation with the Emperor had been.

"We should arrive on Coruscant in just under thirty five hours." He said.

"You're pushing the hyperdrive awfully hard." I told him, after doing the calculations in my head.

"I have an excellent mechanic on board." He told me and smiled for the first time since last night. "Thank you for the tea."

I sat down and nodded. "Is everything alright?" I asked after a long silence which I could no longer stand.

He was thoughtful for a moment. "Yes, I believe so." He said, and then added. "Things will change when I return to the Imperial City. I have been given command of a new ship and the duties I now have will take me very far away from the core planets for long periods of time."

"So what you are telling me is that we will not get see each other very often." I said.

He smiled. "It is sometimes very hard to hide anything from you."

"On the contrary." I replied a little testily.

He nodded. "Of course I tell you this in confidence because I need for you to understand that duty comes before everything else."

"I do understand, perhaps much more that anyone will ever give me credit for." I told him tartly. "Is this something you wanted, this assignment?"

He took a deep, thoughtful breath. "Yes. It is necessary for the safety of my people as well as for the security of the Galaxy." He said.

We sat in silence for a while sipping on hot tea, watching the swirl of hyperspace until I broke it.

"May I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"If we had stayed on Hjal one more night would we have ... I mean would you...?" I stumbled, trying to find the right words, feeling very awkward and blushed.

"Would I have bedded you?" He asked simply.

I nodded.

A very slow smile played across his lips. "My dear, from the moment you joined me in my bed last night, the plan was to not let you out of it for at least the next twenty four hours." I blushed even more and that made his smile widen. Then he said. "Sadly, things did not turn out quite as I had imagined and unless you find this ship, good as she is, a suitable place for such a first union, I am afraid it could be some time before we have the opportunity for such a precious, intimate ... conversation," He shrugged ever so slightly. "I would prefer that both the timing and place were special instead of one or the other." Then he added a little too casually, "Although, I am certain you have plenty of handsome, younger suitors who would wish to share this honour with you."

"Maybe I do, however I prefer wait." I told him a little airily.

"Why?" He asked, sipping his tea.

I looked at him for a moment wondering if he was asking this as a serious question or if he was playing with me. I decided he was being serious, genuinely curious and not wanting his ego fed.

"Because, Captain, as you so very eloquently put it some time ago, there are some things in this galaxy worth waiting for and I think you are one of them." Then added, "And whether more handsome or younger, know this, I do not want anyone else. So, unless you change the rules of the game, it stays like it is."

He opened his mouth to say something but I reached over and placed a finger upon his lips. "The sand people have a saying; *Desire is good for the soul*."

He nodded slowly and when I withdrew my fingertip he asked. "How is it that you can be so fragile one moment and so strong the next?"

I grinned. "I think that's called being female." I said and I got up to return to the galley. He laughed that deep rich laugh that warmed my being. I took the empty cup he offered me and went to get more tea. I hoped that this return trip would be uneventful and as good as the moment we had just shared.

\*\*\*

In difference to the journey leaving Coruscant, the journey back to the core planet was a lot more fun. Thrawn was a good travelling companion and the conversations were as varied as they were interesting. I badgered him to teach me more about his mother tongue and we spent a large amount of time engaged in Cheunh language lessons.

"You certainly do have a gift." He told me after a particularly intense session. "Most beings have a great deal of difficulty managing to even pronounce our names correctly."

"It's a beautiful language." I told him honestly. "Like music in some ways, one just needs to get the phrasing, the intonation just so."

That had pleased him and we had continued. I had to laugh though, like with every other language I had ever had to learn the first things I was taught how to say were, 'Hullo my name is, I come from and where is the nearest docking bay, cantina, hotel.'

When we were not engaged in discussions and language lessons, we were taking watch and or sleeping. My sleep patterns had not really changed much and I still woke up, more often than not, bathed in cold sweat, gasping for breath and screaming blue murder. It was frustrating more than anything else.

"These episodes, they will abate eventually but that will take time. The ordeal you suffered is not easily forgotten. The body remembers and it takes time to let go. On Hjal you made the first steps in this particular journey but you cannot expect to be free so quickly." Thrawn had said as we sat at the small dining table after a particularly bad episode that had me screaming blue murder. He had poured me a shot of brandy and watched as I drank it with still shaky hands holding the cup. "Humans are so full of strong emotions, and you are like a wild storm. It is a curiosity to me how you can be so conflicted, so full of such feelings and still be rational and even logical. Your dreams are perhaps a way for you to come to terms with these conflicted emotions, and maybe you should pay attention to what it is telling you."

"I don't even know what they are of." I said with a sigh. "I just wake up terrified, there are no images to remember, nothing concrete to hold on to and analyse. It's just fear. How do I fight that? How do I get past that?"

He had shaken his head. "Well, I do not know." He said honestly. "Nightmares are not something I have much experience with and I am in no position to give you advice on how to cope with them. Perhaps you might want to talk with Lord Vader on this subject, after all he is also Force sensitive and maybe he has a better idea of where the dreams come from and why you do not remember them."

I had said nothing to this. The thought of having a conversation on the topic of nightmares with Lord Vader was about as appealing as having my hands chopped off.

We were twenty seven hours into our trip back to Coruscant and I was just tired of being tired. I lay my head on my arms on the table and listened to the hum of the ship. It took me a few seconds to realise that something was not quite right with the pitch of that hum and there was a slight, almost imperceptible shimmy that shouldn't have been there. Thrawn went to say something but I shut him up suddenly with a wave of my hand and then before he could even ask what was wrong I raced to the bridge and looked over the consol. The read outs confirmed my fears and I was in the middle of shutting down the hyperdrive when Thrawn caught up with me.

"What are you doing?" He asked.

"Hear that sound?"

"I hear engines."

"Hyperdrive's overheating." I said hoping I had initiate shutdown in time. The ship shuddered more violently. Hyperdrive malfunctions were usually fast and fatal.

"What was that?"

"Not sure, if we're lucky it is..." but I never got my sentence finished, we suddenly dropped out of hyperspace just as a very large resounding bang came from the stern of the ship and we rocked about like a repulser with a bad lift.

"Buggery sandrats!" I swore and raced to the engine room. I opened the door and stepped back quickly. Smoke poured from the small room and it stank of overheated machinery and hydraulic fuel. I hit the vents and grabbed a filter mask, took the flashlight off the hook and opened up the engine hatch. I was ass up and head down in the pit when Thrawn came in and squatted down beside me.

"So what is the news?" He asked calmly, cupping the second mask over his mouth and nose.

"Wait a second..." I said Squirming further down the pit wall trying to peer under the hyperdrive. My arm brushed the engine and I yelped as it burned me.

"Merlyn...?"

"Shut up and let me do my job damn it!" I yelled at him. "Grab a hold of my legs will you!"

He did as I asked and I slid further down alongside the engine and twisted underneath it. I shone the light across the still steaming machinery and sighed when I finally found the problem, or at least what I figured was the problem.

"Up, up." I said reaching my arm up for him to grab. He was strong and hauled me to the floor with ease. I sat with my legs dangling over the edge and brushed sweat and hair from my face.

"Well, we were incredibly lucky." I told him trying very hard to keep the anger from spilling over into my voice.

"Define lucky." He said as I got up.

"Lucky as in still alive and not obliterated into tiny bits." I replied crossly.

"What is the problem?" He asked ignoring my snappiness.

I began looking through my spare parts chest and getting tool kit out. "I think we blew one of the transpacitors and the hyperdrive overheated. If I hadn't started shut down procedure when I had, we'd be space litter now."

"How did you know, was it your force sense?" He arched an eyebrow.

"No." I sighed and shook my head. "I know my ship, Captain, as you pointed out I am an excellent mechanic. I heard the problem because she told me what was wrong." I said patting the bulk head. "I told you to watch pushing the hyperdrive that much."

"This ship was refitted with a top of the line engine, one that we should be able to push past specs for a decent amount of time." He said with a hint of annoyance.

I nodded. "Yep, one should be able to do that but not with sub standard transpacitors in it."

"Substandard?"

I nodded. His jaw clenched and he was clearly angry.

"Can you fix it?" He asked.

"I can, lucky for us I have a spare transpacitor on board but we'll be on battery power till I can get this fixed, can't run the sublight engine because I need to get right underneath everything, can't do that while she's running, too damned hot and," I added. "I'll need your help."

"What ever you need me to do just tell me." He said.

"Well it's not complicated. I need you to hold on to me." And I grinned at the expression that flashed across his face. "Hand me those coveralls, please?"

I stripped out of my dress and stepped into the coveralls. Laid all the tools I was going to need out beside where Thrawn was, still heel to haunch staring at the hyperdrive as though just looking at it would fix the problem. I had the spare part in my hand and sighed. I really hated this particular operation. Transpacitors were in the worst place on an engine and an absolute bugger to get to on the fly. In order to fix this I had to hang upside down with my back to the pit wall. Usually the hyperdrive would be lifted out while in space dock or ground based dock but that would just take far too long in our case and we didn't have the equipment on board for it either. A person could if they were small enough slide in under the entire engine and work there but I never liked being under an engine that way. I had seen a man pinned when the whole engine block came down on him and after that incident I never wanted to risk it. Usually, there wasn't much on that side of the hyperdrive that could really go wrong. Transpacitors, even when they were not that good, rarely blew.

"Just make sure I don't fall into the pit." I said as I explained what needed to be done. "Or else it will take you until you are an old man to reach Coruscant."

"What do you usually do if you are alone and this happens?" He asked coolly.

"If I was on my own it wouldn't have happened, I am not the one pushing the engines over their limit." I said more tartly than I had meant to, "But usually there would be grab bars I'd hook my feet under to brace myself, however when the ship was refitted some moron saw fit to have them removed without thinking about engine repairs! So now you will have to sit and somehow hang on to my legs so I don't split my skull open fixing this engine. Think you can handle that?"

"Yes." He said. And I shimmied backwards, upside down to work in the small space under the hyperdrive engine while he made sure I didn't fall in.

I love engines. I love everything about them, the feel, the smell, the complexity, but I really wished that whoever designed them thought about having to fix them on the fly as well. The HWK series ship was well loved but there was some design flaws that made it interesting to mess about with. Whoever had done the refit and overhaul of this ship had really not given any thought to repairs and it annoyed me to no end that in order to replace the transpacitor I had to be an acrobat with contortionist abilities.

Hanging upside down in a tiny space next to a hot, oily engine that smelled like a cross between overcooked hyper drive fluid and burnt metal was not my idea of fun. The Transpacitor was right underneath and I had to twist to work on it. It took a lot of cursing and swearing to get the part off. When that was done I had Thrawn pull me back up and I showed him my find.

"Blown." I said, annoyed. "I hate it when people put crap on a good engine." I grabbed the new part and the tool I would need to attach it and with a deep breath, bent backwards as Thrawn eased me down carefully.

It was fussy work to attach the new transpacitor and more than once I was certain my colourful language made him wince. Not for the first time did I wonder why everything had to be so small, hard to get at and annoyingly difficult to reattach.

"Hand me the sealant will you, small tube of yellow stuff to your left." I yelled, shifting enough so that I could hand him the small spanner I didn't need any more. He placed what I had asked for in my hand and I finished the work. When that was done I took a good look at the rest of the engine from this angle, it wasn't often I nose dived into the pit so it was a good opportunity to check everything out. I didn't see anything unusual or out of place. This was a new engine and as Thrawn had said, top of the line. The use of substandard external parts was a bit worrisome though. I handed back the sealant goo and asked for the hydro-spanner again to make some minor adjustments here and there. When I was done, and Thrawn had helped me

back up I just sat for a moment, a little dizzy. We were now sitting legs locked over legs, the way circus artists who fly on swings did. It was a good way to support my weight while I was upside down but now it meant I straddled his lap. I looked straight into his face, while he held me, hands on my hips. There was a moment when I wondered if we would blow the engine up with the tension that had suddenly flared between us. I didn't take my eyes from his until he broke the moment.

"Everything under control?" He asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Think so." I nodded finding my voice. "Just can't feel my legs anymore." I patted his arm to let me up. I had to shake the pins and needles out.

"So, what is the status, are we good to go now?" He asked, watching me put my tools away and clear up.

"No, not yet. Need to wait another hour, to let everything cool right down. I don't want to risk damage to the second transpacitor. I don't have any more spares." I put the tool box back in its cubby hole. Once I was done clearing up, I unbuttoned the coveralls, I was sweating to death. I stripped off the top half and tied the sleeves around my waist. I was glad the little undershirt I wore had no sleeves.

"No way to push that?" He asked.

I turned around and caught him looking at me intently. There was a flash of hunger in his expression and while he masked it swiftly with a raised eyebrow and a slight smirk I still felt it. It made my heart race.

"What?" I asked testily.

"Can you speed up that start estimate any?" He repeated ignoring the real question behind my inquiry.

I picked up the transpacitor. "See this? We don't want another to blow. By rights we should be dead. Under normal circumstances I would recommend we stay dark for three or four hours so that I can run some serious diagnostics but you are in a hurry so I calculated I can push it to two. Now, I've already spent one hour hanging upside down fixing this thing so that leaves another hour for cool down. When we start the drive up again it has to be slow and easy. I know you are in a rush to get away from me and back to saving the galaxy from evil but this is the best I can do. If you think you can do better, you are welcome to try." I stood with my hands on my hips.

He took a few steps towards me. I backed away.

"Miss Gabriel," He said with a slow smile. "I would not presume to question the quality of your work or risk raising your ire." He reached out and took the blown transpacitor from my hands and studied it. "Good that you had a spare."

"I don't like being caught out. It can lead to ... unpleasant situations." I said backing up a few more steps as he manoeuvred me slowly against the bulkhead so that he could put the broken part he still held in his hands on the shelf to the left of me.

"So I infer." He said softly. There was look in his eyes that made my stomach drop. "You have grease on your nose." He pointed out.

I wiped at it with my fingers and this only made him laugh.

"Now you have more grease on your nose." He told me.

We were standing very close to each other and I had no place to go. The bulk head at my back was warm.

"Well, think of it as a fashion statement then." I told him as casually as I could.

"Suits you." He told me. "Flattering accessory to your..." He gave me the once up and down, "elegant outfit."

I scowled at him. He was playing games. "Don't you have work to do?" I asked.

"I thought we now had an hour of down time?"

"That's right."

"So that means I have an hour of nothing specific to do." He said softly, leaning with both hands against the bulkhead, trapping me between his arms.

"I am certain you could find something to pass the time." I said trying to ignore the sudden swell of sandjiggers fluttering in my belly.

"Well, I had thought perhaps we might continue a much earlier conversation." He told me casually but the tone of voice didn't match the predatory look in his eyes. With the fingers of his left hand he traced the skin of my right arm. His touch gave me goose bumps and that made him smile.

I swallowed, my mouth was dry. "I'm not feeling that chatty right now."

"Pity, I thought you enjoyed a heated debate." He whispered, brushing his lips against mine.

"Well," I conceded, "the taste of certain words can be stimulating."

He smiled. "And you certainly do have a talent with an alien tongue."

I made a face. This was a dangerous game he had started. "You know this constitutes serious verbal abuse, right?" I asked.

With a twitch of his lips, Thrawn leaned against my body with his and the heat between us rivalled the heat from the cooling engine. He watched my face, studied my eyes and then shook his head. I tried, without a lot of success, to get my breathing and my heart rate back under control, wondering what had brought this sudden passion play into game.

He hesitated for just a moment and then he growled softly, "That's enough oral foreplay, don't you think?"

I am certain, that had I been given enough time to think of it, I would have come up with a suitable reply but he did not give me that time. He moved swiftly, smoothly wrapping one arm around my waist and the other hand he slipped behind my head pulling me to him. In the same graceful motion he brought his mouth crashing down on mine. Words, all thoughts of words, all consideration of spoken conversation were suddenly driven from my mind.

I loved how he made me feel. His mouth, his hands, my body, I lost myself to his beguiling attentions and just enjoyed it for whatever it was, hoping he did as well. This was not the first time we had done this, I hoped it would not be the last and each time we took it just a little further. His affections sent me reeling and left me utterly breathless. Time spun around us, warping forward and before I knew it he had drawn back from me and was caressing my face with his hands. I did not need to see any physical tell tale signs to know how he felt. I could sense the desire in him as certainly as I could taste my own. It built and gathered within us, between us, swirling about like smoke. I could feel the wildness, the hunger of it. I took a deep steadying breath to try and control it, pull it back so that, unlike last time, I didn't shower him with it. I know he was aware of this but he didn't say anything about it.

"I thought this was not the place for such... discussions." I breathed against his chest.

"My dear," He chuckled. "This was merely a minor discourse. Consider it a reminder, if you will, of how interesting our conversations can and will be." He brushed his face against my hair.

I sighed. "For someone whose billionth foreign language is basic you use it with remarkable skill." I told him.

"It was a good way to pass the hour, was it not?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh I see, small talk, Just a minor distraction against the boredom of waiting?"

"Something like that." He smiled disengaging himself from me. "You know what they say, practice makes perfect."

I wondered just exactly what it was we were practising. "Either that or one of us will spontaneously explode from all this... tension."

"That will be most interesting to observe." He said.

"These games are driving me crazy, you do know that right?"

His smile was slow and easy. "Perhaps that is the idea."

I shook my head. "You are so impossible."

He laughed out loud and then kissed my forehead gently. "Small moments such as these are rare. They remind me that I am more than just a member of the Imperial Navy, that there are distractions worth stopping for every now and then and that hidden under layers of dirty work clothes and engine grease are treasures well worth finding" He spoke softly. "These moments of stolen pleasure are precious." And then he left abruptly.

I took a long, deep, steadying breath and stripped out of the overalls and back into my dress. It took my body longer than my brain to calm down and I was grateful when my knees stopped trembling. I went the fresher and washed the grease off my face. I looked in the mirror and sighed, shaking my head. I was playing with fire, bound to get burned in the worst possible way and I was encouraging it. I made my way to the bridge where Thrawn sat waiting for me. With a silent tiny prayer that the busted transpacitor was the only problem with the hyperdrive I started up the engines and listened to its whine. I didn't even realise I was holding my breath. The sublight engine revved and when that was hot I began the start up sequence for the hyperdrive. It sounded okay so I hit the switch. The ship shivered a little and the stars did what stars always do when one slipped into hyperspace. Nothing sounded out of the ordinary and I let go the breath I was holding

"Seems okay." I said.

"As I said before, you are an excellent mechanic." He told me with a cool smile.

"I am glad one of us has some faith in my skills. Now, I think I need a cup of tea. Want one?"

"Of course."

"Just do me a favour?" I asked.

He arched an eyebrow in reply.

"Do not run her hot. Don't push our luck any further." I said.

He gave me a little mock salute. "Aye, aye captain."

I just stuck my tongue out at him and with a sigh went to make tea. I sat down at the little dining table and rested my chin on my arms. I loved fixing engines but it was hard work. I listened to the sounds all around me and smiled. Everything was normal. I just hoped it stayed that way.

\*\*\*

The rest of the journey back to Coruscant was uneventful. I babied my engines although they didn't really need it and Thrawn indulged me in this. We spent the remaining time easy with each other's company. The language lessons continued only now it was my turn to share my knowledge of Huttese. I was surprised at how quickly he picked up on what I had to teach and only a couple of times did I catch him out, laughing at the funny things he had said.

"Huttese is mostly a spoken language but I do have some data that might help you if you really want to learn more." I told him.

Thrawn smiled. "That would be most helpful, but I do enjoy our joint language lessons and nothing can substitute learning with a native speaker."

"True." I agreed. "Will I be able to understand Navaari if I become fluent in Cheunh?"



He nodded. "Probably, while the two languages have splintered and the dialects have distinct differences, they do share the same base. You have a good ear, it would not take you long to pick those differences up," he said. "But you will have to work hard to be fluent. It is not an easy language for non Chiss to attempt, let alone master, even for someone as gifted as you."

"Too bad you are not sticking around." I grinned.

He just nodded. "Well, as you so aptly put it, duty calls."

The sudden passion and heat of our wordless conversation in the engine room was not spoken of but also not forgotten. Certain glances and smiles hinted at the heat beneath the winter and more than once I had wanted to ask him about it but there was just never the right moment. He was careful to keep a certain distance and for this I was oddly grateful. I liked his attention, his affection but I respected his need for space. I also, oddly enough, understood it and I was happy that he did not seem to need to rush things.

We arrived on Coruscant very early in the morning. The tall buildings were half buried in a sea of cloud. The sun was just beginning to show itself and everything was bathed in a beautiful pink light that danced about us as we made our descent to the landing pad.

"I have made arrangements for ship repairs." Thrawn told me after the ship had touched down and the engines were shut off.

I nodded. "I hope this crew will know what they are doing."

He gave me a tight smile. "Well, if they do not then there will hell to pay."

For a moment we stopped what we were doing and just looked at each other, words were not necessary.

"If there is time I will try to see you before I leave but I cannot promise it." He said.

"Then say goodbye now and leave it at that." I told him.

He smiled. "In Cheunh there is no word for goodbye. We say *a'chitra saf tyn'oni*, which means something along the lines of *until the next moment*."

I nodded and repeated the words, tasting them. He gave me one of those rare smiles that reached his eyes and lit up his face. He cupped my face in his hands, as though he were holding water. "You are quite remarkable." He murmured.

He leaned towards me and brought his lips to mine. His kiss was passionate and full of promise sending a longing through me that bled out onto him. When he drew back I heard him sigh. "You will hear from me in the usual way. Jarack will see to it that your correspondence reaches me." He said, hitting the button that opened the main hatch.

I nodded, watching as the door slid open and the steps unfolded. There was nothing else to say and he left the ship without looking back.

## **CHAPTER 11**

Time passed, days became weeks and weeks become months. I buried myself in my work and my training. It kept me from thinking too much. Master Kjestyll had returned and resumed his teaching with me. He had known the gist of what had happened and over time he drew the whole story out of me, piece by painful piece. Although the process of healing had begun with Thrawn and Navaari on Hjal, it was my Master's quiet attention and gentle words that helped me to face my own fears and slowly find myself again. I looked forward to my lessons with this gracious, subtle man. These times were among the few when I knew a sort of peace and calm that in my day to day life had become elusive.

It felt as though my life had been put on hold, as though I were waiting for something big to happen, almost as if I were on the cusp of some great indefinable turning point or adventure. The sensation nagged at me but like a flicker of motion one sees from the corner of one's eye, it was always out of reach. Even my dreams remained cryptic and fragmented. While the dreadful nightmares slowly subsided and left me some measure of peace my normal dreams were addled, devoid of sense filled with images and voices just beyond my reach to see or hear properly. These were restless times and I felt them keenly. So to keep myself busy I did my work, attended the official functions I was required to attend and tried to stay out of trouble. I avoided thinking about Jyrki or my time on Hjal too much, both these things made me sad but for very different reasons.

The anniversary of the destruction of Alderaan was marked by a large and ornate memorial and an official day of mourning. The destruction of the Imperial Battle Station, which had also seen the deaths of thousands, was never mentioned. The Emperor was rarely seen during these times and there were many rumours that he was not well. At first I had paid these whispers of ill health no mind, the palace was rife with such gossip but it seemed to me strange that he appeared to address the crowd for the Alderaan memorial only via holo projector and his speech had been very short and abrupt. It had also surprised me a little that he had not wished to speak with me after I have returned to the palace. For weeks I sat almost on pins and needles half expecting to be called to his chambers but the summons never came. I began to wonder if there was not some truth to the whispers.

My social life was busy. Shiv and his friends, who had somehow become my friends as well, saw to it that I was not often left alone. I was never quite sure if this was because he was afraid that if he didn't have me in his sight I might be suddenly snatched away again or if he just felt a bit guilty over what had happened, even though there was nothing he could have done. He, too, had wanted to know, wanted to understand what I had gone through and while I told him the short version of events I left many details out. He accepted this although I know it hurt him a little. It wasn't even a question of trust. I just didn't want to talk about it anymore.

Thrawn, true to his word wrote to me regularly. I treasured his lovely, long letters describing everything from the most mundane aspects of life in deep space to in-depth discussions on art and literature. I was constantly amazed at how articulate he was and how interesting he could make even the most ordinary things sound. He had not come to see me before he had departed to begin his service on board the *Grey Wolf* and I was glad of this. I hated goodbyes. What could one say in the few remaining minutes that tick by that have not already said a thousand times before? Farewells always struck me as stilted and uncomfortable affairs filled with half murmured promises that would never be kept. I suspected he understood this only too well and was even grateful that I made no such demands of him. Two days after his deployment a sealed box had been delivered to me containing not only a beautiful

letter but data pads full of information on the Chiss language and a couple of other linguistic surprises.

*...I have raided my own personal data base and downloaded everything I could think of to help you with your studies of Cheunh. I feel that with your astounding abilities to learn this difficult language, you should be encouraged. I have also added two of the more prominent trade languages from that area of space. I have no doubt these will be easy for you to pick up and I recommend you do so. One never knows when something will be of use or when a translator will be required. There are very few outsiders to our world who speak Cheunh fluently so to do so would give you a great advantage. I shall enjoy testing your knowledge when I return and see how well you have mastered these challenges. Stay alive and well, my dear, so that we may continue our delightful, ongoing conversation when we next meet...*

The language data bases that he had sent were incredibly detailed and extensive. It made me wonder if he had not tried to teach his mother tongue to a non Chiss before. I knew that he had set the bar quite high for me. I also understood that he knew he was pushing buttons and I would respond accordingly. I had never backed down from a challenge and I wasn't about to start now, especially with one that was actually fun.

Lord Vader, on the other hand, stayed distant. I had heard through the rumour mill that he was training several force sensitive people he had discovered. Strangely enough this didn't really bother me. I was not jealous by nature and as I slowly began to understand my own abilities and talents, I knew that I would never be what he had wanted. I was good at my job and someone he trusted in so far as he trusted anyone which for me, at this point in my life, that was enough, I did not need to become one of his apprentices or worse. Our moments of contact were brief and business like. He was busy and as long as I did what I was supposed to there was no reason for him to expand our contact or virtual meetings into anything more. I got the sense he was troubled by something he could not or would not discuss. He was moody and foul tempered most of the time and something weighed heavily on his mind. I put most of that down to the issues he had with the local seats of government and the constant power struggles that never seemed to end within the Imperial Court. He was busy with his command and his own affairs, busy with the ongoing search for the elusive rebels and I was an afterthought so I was surprised when I received a summons from him to rendezvous with the *Executor*.

I had taken to packing pretty much everything I valued, which was not much, on my ship. Although I had an apartment in the Palace it never felt like home the way the *Ahnkeli'Su'udelma* did and I knew that while no one other than myself or Thrawn could get into my ship, my apartment was a different story. I was happy to be in space and flying. The repair crew Thrawn had organized had done an excellent job and had even replaced the foot braces in the engine room. I had made sure to stock up on spare parts and anything else I could think of that I might need. The good thing about being in the employ of the Empire was that requisitioning things for ships was not an issue.

It was late afternoon standard time when I landed onboard the *Executor*. There was no waiting. I was ushered directly to Lord Vader's private chamber by two nervous young stormtroopers who left a tad faster than decorum allowed. There were no pleasantries and no questions about my health. He launched into the heart of the matter in his usual abrupt way.

"You know that I have been searching for the individual responsible for the destruction of the Imperial Battle station." He said.

I nodded.

"You are also aware that I believe he was from the same planet as you."

"Yes, my lord."

"Then you will go to Tatooine and investigate his past."

"My lord, would not an Intel investigator be better suited for this?" I asked a bit surprised by this request.

He regarded me for a long, deadly moment then said. "I wish this kept off the official records. You are from Tatooine. You know its customs, ways and languages far better than any Intel spy could hope to. You have all manner of connections and you are unafraid to use them. You have my leave to use all and any means at your disposal to get this information. You will be given an office to work from at the outpost in Bestine, access to finances and a means to contact me on secure channels. You can attend to your regular duties as you see fit, I am certain that droid of yours will help out. But make no mistake this task which I have set for you has priority. I want to know everything about this boy's life." He said and handed me a data pad with all the information I would need and dismissed me. Just like that, instead of heading off to Naboo with the rest of the Imperial Court, I was going home.

\*\*\*

Tatooine never changed. I touched down late afternoon at my father's docking bay and was assaulted by the heat when I stepped from my ship. I didn't have time to think before I was tackled by Belkin in as huge a hug as the small Rodian could manage. She filled me in on all the gossip and by the time my father returned from errands I was more or less up to date with everything that had been going on pretty much planet wide. Supper that evening was a loud, joyous affair. It felt good to be back home. Much later in the evening I crept away, up to the flat part of the rooftop. I sat staring up at the sky, wondering where Thrawn was now. I missed him and that both surprised and annoyed me. His lack of presence was an ache I didn't want or need. *This is what it means to be bound...* Navaari had said and he hadn't been joking. I was grateful when my father joined me, a bottle of moonglow and two shot glasses in hand. He and everyone else had carefully avoided all mention of Jyrki and what he had done to me at dinner. I knew that he needed answers and this was a good, quiet place to talk.

I sipped the gut rot slowly and before my father felt obligated to open up the conversation I told him what had happened. I left some things out and did not tell him about my trip to Hjal or my strange connection with the Dantassi. I wasn't sure he would understand that. I wasn't sure I understood it either. He stayed very quiet until I was finished my story and only after a few moments of silence did he pull me to him and hold me tightly.

"Why?" Was all he could ask. I knew he was fighting back emotions and I pretended I didn't see the tears in his eyes.

"I don't know, papa." I told him with a sigh. "I really, really do not know. He would say one thing but mean another. His pretence was he wanted Imperial codes but it wasn't really the truth. Truth is I don't think he really knew why either."

"I hope that he never shows up here, pet." He replied. "Because if he does, I will kill him."

"Well...you'll need to stand in line." I said with a small sad shrug.

He refilled my glass and we sat in silence for a while and I realized that it was, for the first time in forever, a comfortable silence.

"So, why exactly are you here? You were very vague at dinner." He asked.

I weighed telling him the absolute truth and finding some sort of white lie and in the end decided on the truth.

"Lord Vader has asked me to find out about someone named Skywalker." I said. "The information I have says he was from Tatooine so here I am."

"I know that name." My father said rubbing his stubbled chin. "I'll have to look some things up but I am sure I know that name." He sipped his drink. "How long are you here for?"

"I don't know, weeks, months, as long as it takes. Lord Vader wasn't specific about the amount of time I had and I got the impression he didn't really care as long as he got the information he wanted. I will have an office out in Bestine but that's for appearances only. I had thought about maybe opening up the house out there but I'd rather base here and be near you and everyone if that's okay?"

He smiled. "I could not be more delighted. There's a shuttle that goes between Bestine and here pretty regularly. I know Bel and Bedi will be happy to have another female around, the pit crew and pilots are male right now which is driving the two women a bit nuts. Be nice to have everyone together again for a while, we might even convince your Uncle Vahl to come out for supper." He paused then added, "And we can always use another good mechanic."

I leaned my head on my father's shoulder and stared up at the sky. He wrapped his arm around me and squeezed tightly. It was good to be home and far away from the reach of the Emperor and all the intrigues of the Imperial Court. I'd worry about the job at hand tomorrow but tonight I was just happy to be a little girl in her papa's arms again.

\*\*\*

Bestine was a small city that wanted to be important and failed miserably. It had started out as a small farming community and had worked its way up to the official capitol city, mostly by default. It was the least offensive city with the least amount of crime and it was sort of located in the middle of things. After the formation of the Empire a small garrison had been stationed there and eventually grew into the local seat of Imperial power. The offices were located near the starport and the city hall. I had my papers and orders in hand when I walked into the building. While I wasn't expecting trouble I was also reasonably sure I was not a welcome addition to the local status quo. I talked briefly to the desk officer who quickly ushered me into the office of the person in charge.

Tour Aryon was a striking woman. She was tall, elegant with beautiful dark skin and brown eyes. She regarded me with the same contempt usually reserved for Jawas. Standing off to the side of her desk was a seedy looking young man with greasy black hair.

"Miss Gabriel, I trust your journey to Tatooine was pleasant?" She said not getting up to greet me and not shaking my hand. I ignored her rudeness. I had it on good authority that she and Lord Vader did not see eye to eye. I had not expected a warm welcome.

"Yes, thank you Governor Aryon." I handed her the data pad with the official requests and orders from Lord Vader. She took it gingerly as though touching it would give her a disease. I stood quietly, hands clasped behind my back waiting for her to read the instructions. I did not mind waiting, it allowed me time to let my force talents drift and get a sense of the undercurrents.

"Well, this all seems straight forward enough. You will be given office space and the required links. If you require further assistance you will find Mr. Taine most helpful. She indicated to the man at her side. I have assigned him to you as an aide. No doubt you will discover we do things a little differently out here on the Rim as opposed to the Imperial Palace."

"Thank you." I said politely.

"Are you at all familiar with Tatooine?" She asked. "You might want to acclimatise to the heat before you get to work."

I smiled. Either she was testing me or she had no idea who I was at all and had not read my personal file. "I am from this planet, thank you. I am familiar with its climate. It should be in my personal file."

She gave me a hard look. "Your file is restricted." She told me. "I appreciate your honest answer. Your familiarity with this world saves us a lot of headaches. Many people come here only to discover it is too hot. Tatooine is not for the weak. May I inquire where you are from exactly?"

"Mos Eisley." I said.

Her lip curled. "Ah, I see. Well, we won't hold that against you. You have living accommodations?"

"Yes, thank you."

There was a heartbeat's space as she waited to hear if I would tell her exactly where I was living and when I did not volunteer any further information she gave me a fake smile and said. "Now, I am sure you are anxious to settle in your office."

"Yes," I nodded. "Thank you for your time."

She waved her hand and Mr. Taine who moved and gestured for me to follow. "I trust you will find everything in order and let Lord Vader know we have done our best to accommodate you."

I smiled. "You have been most kind, I will be sure to tell him." I would have to watch my back with her, she was dangerous.

Mr. Taine did not speak a word and I followed him through the building to a small office on the upper floor under the roof on the south west side. This was probably the worst office in the entire building as it got the most heat and the most sunlight. The most desirable offices were always sub ground where it was cool. I knew it was perfect; people would leave me alone here when I was actually here. The window looked out over the backside of the city and in the distance I could see the hills that sheltered Bestine from the desert. I looked about the small room. There wasn't much to speak of, a desk a chair, a holonet terminal, an older computer system and a bookshelf that was mostly empty.

"I apologise that this is all we could provide you with on such short notice, Miss Gabriel." Mr. Taine said in a tone voice that said he was anything but sorry.

"Not at all, I shall be quite happy here. I assume the holo link is secure and private?" I said.

He nodded. "As per Lord Vader's request." He was lying.

I smiled. "Then I believe I have everything I need." I said. I would not be using this office for anything important. Lord Vader had provided me with a small portable, secure holo transmitter and that was on board my ship. I had decided that my droid could work out of the office on Coruscant and we would keep in touch as necessary. Having office space in Bestine was strictly for appearances only. I was a civilian with no rank and in a position no one really knew quite how to deal with. I was a bit of an anomaly and I rather liked it that way.

"Well, then I shall let you get settled. Do enjoy your stay." Mr. Taine said as he handed me the key card to the office. I gave him my best smile and waited until he was gone. I gave it a few minutes before activating the holo transmitter and contacted Lord Vader. I knew this call would be monitored

"You have arrived, I see." He said testily.

"Yes, my lord. The journey was uneventful."

"You have been provided with what was requested?" He asked.

I nodded. "I have, my lord and everything is exactly as expected."

"Good. You know your job, report when you have something to discuss, otherwise do not waste my time." He said with his usual cheer. "Do not disappoint me Miss Gabriel." He added and severed the connection.

I stood and stared out of the window for about half an hour and then I left, locking the door behind me. I didn't spend any time in Bestine, there wasn't much to see. The commuter shuttle back to Mos Eisley was full and busy. I was more than grateful to step out of it and get back home. Being in the office in Bestine had made me feel dirty. I had not sensed that many lies and that much deception since the last palace party. My father was in the kitchen having lunch when I got home. I joined him and told him about my morning. He had only laughed.

"That place has gone to hell in a sandcrawler." He said.

I helped myself to more salad and sat at the table with him.

He smiled then said, "I have some information for you about that name you were looking for. Seems there was an Anakin Skywalker from Mos Espa, a slave. He won the Boonta Eve Classic, oh about thirty three or so years ago. It was a big upset apparently, and he was the first and only human to win it."

"It's a place to start, thanks papa." My heart skipped a beat at that name.

My father waved his hand, "Not done yet, Nate, who used to work at Tosche's, told me that there was also a kid by that name used to hang out there. He told me that his name was Luke Skywalker, used to hang out with Biggs Darklighter's."

"Huff Darklighter's boy?" I asked. I remembered hearing that the son of the wealthy agricultural magnate had been killed but the reasons for his death were shrouded in mystery.

My father nodded. "Yeah, the two boys were friends apparently. Nate was telling me if you want to know more probably Laze Loneozner, better known as Fixer, or Tosche might be able to help you out a bit."

"Did he say where this Luke was from?" I asked.

"A moisture farm some place out on the edge of the Jundland wastes. Between Anchorhead and Wayfar." He said. "I did some digging though and that was the same farm which the Imperials did a raid on. Remember I told you about it, happened shortly after you started working for the Empire." He paused. "Is this boy in trouble, Merly? Why are you looking for him?"

"I don't know, papa. It's possible he's partly responsible for the death of thousands of innocent workers one of the Imperial space stations. He might also know something about the whole Alderaan incident as well. I just know I was asked to find out all about him. I don't know much more than that."

My father nodded. "That thing with Alderaan was bad business." He said quietly.

I nodded.

"I can take you out to Tosche's in two days if you want? I have to pick up some parts from him. You know how hard it is to actually find him certainly never at the station and never reachable. I set up a meeting a few weeks ago so why don't you come with me?"

"Sounds perfect." I said.

"So, are you busy now?" My father asked, clearing the table.

I shook my head. "Not really, for a change."

"Good, I have an engine with your name on it. Nate Delann, the guy from Tosche's was supposed to take care of it but he got called away on an emergency. So damned hard to find a decent mechanic nowadays that I have to share mine with the other docking bays. If you wanted to make decent money you could stay here and fix ships."

I laughed. "What is it?"

"A YT nineteen-thirty." He grinned.

"Oh, I haven't seen one of those yet!"

"I thought you might like that." He said and we walked over to the dock repair bay. I sighed happily when I saw the ship. The YT 1930 was a really new light

freighter from the Corellian Engineering Corp. Unlike the older YT models this ship had a center lined cockpit and was way more streamlined. She was pretty looking. I grinned this would be fun.

"I'll just get my kit and get right to it. Is everything still in the same place?" I asked.

My father nodded. "Jyrki's system was so good no one's ever bothered to change it."

"Good." I said trying not to cringe at Jyrki's name.

I opened up the *Ahnkeli 'Su'udelma* to get my coveralls and tool kit then I went to work. As I found myself in the new freighter's engine room I could not help but smile. I had come full circle and it felt very strange to be back. Tomorrow I would start my search for the two Skywalkers, more convinced than ever before that they were linked. Everything kept coming back to this planet.

\*\*\*

We drove to Tosche Station very early in the morning while the air was still relatively cool. The station which was also, among other things, a junk yard was located just outside of Anchorhead. Merl Tosche, who had founded the power and distribution station, was almost never there. He sold all sorts of mechanical bits and pieces including power converters and spare parts for moisture evaporators. I could remember infrequent visits to the station as a child and spending several hours rummaging around the junk yard looking for interesting things. Surprisingly enough, Tosche was there by the time we arrived. He and my father got along well. They had known each other for as long as I could remember and Tosche was one of those grownups that had become a part of my extended family. I was, I think, a source of great amusement for him and whenever I had accompanied my father out to the station Tosche had always allowed me to dig out small treasures from the junk pile and keep them.

"Good, you got here early. I don't want to hang around, too much to do." Tosche said as he greeted us. "And look at you, little sand bug, all grown up. Have you eaten, want something to drink? I made some sludge, not the greatest spiced 'caf in the galaxy but it is drinkable." He clapped my father on the back and chucked me under the chin as though I were still six and not in my early twenties.

I loved the station because it was the homiest wreck of a place I had ever seen. Disorganized chaos, Tosche called it. He poured three mugs of his sludge, his strange version of spiced stim'caf and we sat down to drink. The business was discussed and the prices agreed upon fairly fast. My father didn't dicker around with Tosche for a few reasons, one was that no one else sold at such decent prices and the second was that it didn't really pay to get on Tosche's bad side. Once that was all out of the way my father edged the conversation around to what would interest me.

"Quiet out here these days I hear?" He said. "Where are all the kids who used to loiter about the place?"

Tosche laughed. "I never minded them, it gave them something to do, kept them out of trouble. Not many left now, though." He said. "Take it you heard about the Darklighter boy?"

My father nodded. "No details, though."

Tosche made a noise. "Word I got was he died fighting for them rebels. You know his old man was never happy that Biggs joined the academy. Was talking to Huff not too long ago and he hinted in that direction. Said the boy had chosen the right path, sacrificed himself for the greater good. Sounded like a bunch of bunk to me but you know how it goes. Huff was never one to hold back on what he thought and he made his feelings about the Empire well known. Sad though, Biggs was a good



kid, he and his little pal Luke...what was his nick name now?" He sighed as he thought about it for a minute, "Wormie they called him."

"Wormie?" I asked. "That's not very nice."

Tosche nodded. "Weren't much to look at that kid, skinny, kinda short and always the brunt of the jokes. I always liked the Skywalker boy though. He was a gentle kind of soul, good natured, and not a bad pilot either if their stories of racing around Beggars Canyon were to be believed."

"He still around?" My father asked.

Tosche shook his head. "Nope, went off world, followed his pal Biggs according to Huff. Although Huff didn't say it in so many words just hinted that the two were together before Biggs died. My guess is it was that dreadful thing about his aunt and uncle what drove him to leave."

"What happened to his aunt and uncle?" I asked sipping my sludge gingerly.

Tosche drew a deep breath and scratched at his stubbled chin. "No one rightly knows, seems they were dealing in stolen goods, not that I believe that for a second, and the Empire came calling. From what I heard the farm was destroyed and Beru and Owen were shot and burnt to death. At first everyone thought it was Tusken but they don't use those kind of weapons as a rule and usually don't burn down the farms either. Don't know what the world is coming to these days."

"Where is this farm?" I asked.

"Out near the edge of the Wastes and the Great Western Dune Sea. I can give you a way point in if you want to pay respects, you'd not be the first." Tosche said.

"Fixer went out there and said that folks had been dropping off chulpas as tokens, laid them on a mourning marker someone had put up for the Lars family. Fixer would be able to tell you more about Luke but he won't be here till noon. I can tell him to stop by the docking bay next time he's in town though."

I nodded. "I'd like that." I said. "Must have been hard for Luke to find his family had been killed."

"Aye, most likely, although I have to tell you, there weren't much love lost between the boy and his uncle. Owen was a hard man to like, let alone love. Too much of his life spent struggling with the land and fighting the elements. Never saw a man so hell bent on winning against the desert, so against anyone who didn't agree with his point of view and his way of doing things. It was almost as if, sometimes he was scared the world would come down on his shoulders if he eased up for just a second. It would not have surprised me to learn that Tusken attacked the farm. Owen was never one to give the Tusken much of a thought. He hated them actually. He didn't much endear himself to the locals either that's for sure but I saw the farm and that wasn't Tusken work." He shook his head. "He and that young nephew of his locked horns many a time. Luke wanted to be a pilot and Owen wanted him to take over the farm. I remember a couple of heated debates between the two and that young boy had a rough life. He was torn between duty to those who had raised him as their own and his desire to be up in space. Never saw anyone more hung up on flying than that kid. The lust for adventure must have come from his mother and father because he sure didn't get that from his uncle's side of the family."

"What happened to his parents?" I asked as Tosche refilled our cups.

Tosche shrugged. "Who knows? The only thing Owen would ever say about the boy's father was that he was a navigator on a freighter and he never mentioned the boy's mother. I remember when Cliegg Lars, Owen's father, remarried a slave he had freed. A quiet woman name of Shmi Skywalker out of Mos Espa, I assumed she was the link to the nephew but she died a long time ago. Tusken took her. No one knows why. Cliegg had organised search parties, I remember that I went on a couple but there was not a snowballs chance in the desert of finding her. The last one they went out on, only four out of the group came back everyone else was slaughtered and

Cliegg lost his leg. After that the search just ended. I guess he gave up hope that she was still alive. I had heard a rumour that someone found her, brought her body back and she's buried somewhere out at the farm, but Cliegg wouldn't speak of it. He died of a broken heart, I think, and when Owen took over the farm he wiped away all memory of his step mother. He blamed her for the death of his father." He paused. "Come to think of it, she had a boy of her own. I remember her telling me about him one day when I went out there to visit. She was so proud of him because he had been freed and taken off world to become a Jedi; of course this was all before the bad times. Maybe Luke was a cousin or something, as I understood it Jedi weren't allowed to have kids and the like. Can't remember his first name now, but seems like there must be a connection in there some place, Skywalker ain't that common a name."

My father shook his head. "Sad business all around that." He offered.

Tosche nodded. "Aye, well you know how it is out here. Tatooine ain't for the faint hearted." He sighed, and then he looked at me with a smile. "Guess this is you catching up on all the gossip. I hear you're working off world now?"

"Yes, office job on Coruscant, pretty dull really. I am on holiday right now." I said with a smile.

Tosche grinned. "Well, I can't say I blame you for leaving, not much on this rock for the young people. I am surprised that Fixer and his girl are still around, but they seem pretty rooted to this place. Can't complain, he's a good mechanic and I couldn't run this place without him. I'll let him know you're interested in hearing about the Lars family, he knew Luke better than I did." He said. "Damn look at the time I have to get going, got another meeting. Come on Kit, I'll get you your parts and write down the waypoint to the farm so your girl here can go visit." He looked at me. "I remember you had an interest in tradition and the like."

"Still do, I doubt that will ever change." I said with a smile as we left the station lounge for the store room.

"Well, you are one of the few I think." He said as he and my father concluded their business.

In a speeder loaded with spare parts and a box of power converters and an address of how to get to the Lars farm, we made our way home. After I had finished helping my father unload and store the spare parts I went and sat on board my ship. I had been provided with a small but powerful portable computer and in that I began to write down all the information Tosche had given me. I finished up and went into the house for a late lunch. Waiting on the table for me was a package with the Imperial courier seal on it. I grinned as I opened it and found two letters inside. I had sent word via the courier to Thrawn that I would be staying on Tatooine for a while, that I would have an office in Bestine mostly because I wasn't certain where I would be living. It seemed that Thrawn knew me better than I knew myself and his mail had been delivered directly to my family home. I was in the middle of reading the first letter when Bel came in.

"So, how is *he*?" She asked.

I gave her an *I don't know what you are talking about* look.

She grinned. "Pssh!" she hissed flapping her hand at me. "I saw how you and that Imperial Captain you dragged here looked at each other...or better to say how you didn't look at each other. I signed for that package by the way. I saw the sender name, so how is he?" She sat down at the table across from me and helped herself to some tea.

"He is well, extremely busy and somewhere off in space saving the galaxy from evil." I smiled. "I never could keep anything secret from you, could I?" I said.

"She shook her head."Nope."

She nodded and grinned then gave me a look I rarely saw on her face, one of worry. "Missed you, you know. We were all scared to death when you vanished." She said in a more serious tone.

"I know me too." I told her but I didn't want to get into any great discussions about it now. "We'll talk about it, I promise, Bel. I just need to, I don't know, get some distance first, you know?"

She nodded. "Well, your dad filled Bedi and me in on what happened, you knew he would right? I just want to hear you are really okay from you. I know you were really attached to Jyrki."

"Yeah, well I was an idiot and he was, well... he was something else all together. I'm not attached to him anymore." I shrugged biting back the surge of anger I felt. I wasn't sure what else there was to say on this topic. Bel looked at my face for a moment and just as she always had ever since I had known her, she just got it and let the subject drop. She grinned and tugged at the envelope I held in my hand. "He makes you happy even if he is what... twice as old as you are?"

I could not help the smile on my lips. "Yes, for what it is worth he does. He's kind to me, Bel. I don't think he'd hurt me. Not without fair warning first, it's not his style." I said ignoring her dig about the age difference.

"Well, that's all that counts. After what Jyrki did to you, I am glad to hear someone knows what you are worth. Anyone who sends you letters on real paper via high end courier service must, at least, think you are special. I'd hate to have to add an Imperial captain to the list of people I plan on killing slowly and horribly. And," she added "I rather enjoyed the debate we had when he was here. Your mother would have really liked meeting him. He's quite clever, you know."

I laughed. "That's putting mildly." I said.

She looked at me. "Is it serious?"

I gave her a look. "What do you think? He's a career officer in the Imperial Navy."

She grinned. "Okay, point taken..." She patted my arm and got up to return to the office. "If he hurts you, you let me know and I'll put him on my list!" She made a wringing motion with her hands and grinned.

"Okay. I'll tell him to watch his back, then." I laughed. Once I had the kitchen to myself again I went back to reading my mail. The first letter was a cheerful account of continuing life in the Unknown Regions, the day to day routines on board the *Grey Wolf* and a discussion of a book Thrawn promised he would send. The second letter was a challenge. He had written it entirely in Cheunh. I could understand some of what was in the letter but mostly I knew this would require several hours of translation and use of the incredibly extensive dictionary he had included in the language database he had given me. From the few bits I could figure out I knew this was a lot more personal than the first letter. Since I didn't have much else to do and I wasn't about to go running out to the Lars homestead this late in the day I decided that a quiet evening studying Cheunh would not be a waste of time.

His letter was a caress. If I had thought him eloquent in his use of basic it was tease in comparison to his ability to communicate in his native language. It had taken me almost half the night to translate his words. If I had thought he would take it easy on me writing in Cheunh I was sadly mistaken. He had written as though I were already fluent in his language and not just getting my feet wet. Once I was certain I had the translation just so and could read it without pause or interruption I was in awe. I had grown up in a world of words, through books, plays and poetry, mostly thanks to my mother. I had learned to love language at a very young age but nothing had prepared me for the beauty of this letter. He had a way of making me feel precious. I hoped that whatever it was he seemed to be building between us was more

than just a spacer's passing fancy. If I let him, if I wasn't careful, he would break my heart irreversibly.

\*\*\*

The days passed easily and I fell into a routine of fixing stuff around the docking bay. I was in the middle of fixing an old swoop bike when someone squatted down beside me.

"I hear you're looking for Luke Skywalker." The voice was rough and gravelly.

I got out from under the bike and sat up, wiping the grease from my hands.

"Well more like being nosey about his life here, actually." I said looking up.

"Name's Fixer, Tosche said you were asking about him, said you had a big interest in local history and the like." He said holding out his hand. I stood up and shook it.

"Merly." I said introducing myself. "Yeah I like history, especially about this place and its folk. Though if I were to be honest I'd call it gossip, you know. Can I get you something to drink?"

The tall, stocky man nodded. "That be nice, sure is hot."

I laughed. "It's always hot here."

He ran a hand through his unkempt dark hair and grinned. We headed into the office and I poured two cups of Bel's iced 'caf.

"Tosche wasn't specific about what you wanted to know, you doing a story on Skywalker or something? I mean is the information worth something?"

"Could be I guess, never thought about it actually." I said carefully.

"I heard from Tosche that you're a good mechanic." He said. "But I haven't seen you around."

"I do okay, been off world for over a year." I told him, "Tosche said the same about you. I didn't know you worked out at the station, but I haven't been out there in a long time either."

He laughed. "Yeah, Tosche don't call me Fixer for nothing." He said. "He gave me my first break actually, and then gave me a job. He's been good to me. He even doesn't mind that I'm building a podracer on the sly." He told me proudly.

"You race?" I asked. "I thought the Empire forbid that."

He grinned. "The Empire doesn't know spit about what goes on out here, sister. You think they care about a few Rimmers breaking their necks? Besides I ain't building it to race, I want to sell the thing. I'm getting married and need the cash for the wedding."

"Oh, well congrats on the engagement then. How can I help you then?" I asked wondering what exactly it was he wanted because he wasn't actually asking for cash, yet.

"Well, I need a specific part for the racer and Tosche said your dad probably had one to spare. Said your dad keeps all sorts of old parts. Tosche didn't have what I needed and to order it will cost a fortune. I was thinking maybe we could barter, my stories for the part I need."

"Well, I'd have to know what the part is. My dad would skin my hide if I gave away something worth a small fortune." I grinned.

He told me and I laughed. "You can't find that?"

"Not for this particular engine." He said handing me the data pad with the part's image and number on it. "They haven't been made in years. No one I know around has one. So do you?"

"Let me look." I left him in the outer office with Bel while I went into the store room and searched through the spare parts.

The spare parts room was larger than average because Tosche was right, my father hoarded engine parts. I guess that's where I got it from as well. I loved this room, its smell, its atmosphere and its charm. I found what he wanted at the bottom of one of the wall to ceiling shelving units. It was a small thing but Fixer was right, they didn't make them anymore for the engine he had and without it his engine wouldn't work. My dad had three of them tucked away so I didn't think one missing would be a big deal. Brand new still in its original package I carried the little part back into the office.

"This is what you want, yeah?"

His face lit up. "I never thought I'd see one of those, still packaged." I handed it to him and grinned. Only mechanics got that crazy look in their eyes when they held a much desired engine part in their hands.

"My father is a big packrat. He keeps all kinds of crazy things. I have to fix this stupid swoop, come and talk to me about Luke while I finish up?"

"Sure thing, can I get a refill, this stuff is good?" He asked Bel, brandishing his cup.

He sat in the dust beside me and talked while I tinkered with the old bike. He fleshed out a lot of Luke's childhood for me and the tone of his voice let me know that while they had known each other, he had not considered Luke as a friend so much, more like an annoyance that hung around with him and the others. He was like that younger kid brother who tagged after the big kids. I felt sorry for this Luke. His life sounded pretty rough and lonely.

"It's too bad Biggs ain't around anymore because he and Luke were really good friends. He could have told you more. I never had much time for Wormie, really." He said rubbing his square chin. "Anyway, I heard that after his aunt and uncle were killed he went off world. I have no idea what happened to him after that. He's not the letter writing type and we weren't that close."

He had talked for the better part of two hours and at the end of it I felt as though I almost knew Luke myself. He might not have liked the Skywalker kid all that much but Fixer was a good story teller.

"How's Nate doing?" Fixer asked after I had tested the Swoop's engines and then shut them off.

"Good, I think, I don't see him much though. He's busy so we tend to trade off shifts here. I work when he's doing shifts else where and when he's here I get time off." I said. "There is a big call for good mechs in Mos Eisley at the moment. I think he's out at Winstrom's bay this afternoon, if you want to see him."

"Naw, I gotta get back, Tosche let me have the time off to see you and run some errands but he runs a tight ship, even when he's not there. Someone's gotta fix all the busted crap the farmers bring in." he grinned.

"Thanks for coming and talking to me." I said.

"No problem, I don't get into town all that often, my girl gave me a huge shopping list so I need to get on that. You know it's funny about Luke, I mean it's not like he's anyone special or anything, just some farmer's kid who used to get on my nerves, but you are not the only one in the last year or so who's asked about him. No one even knows if he's still alive or anything. It wouldn't surprise me, actually, if he had gotten himself killed like Biggs." He said. "You've been out to the Lars' homestead yet?"

"Not yet, still trying to figure out the best way and the best time to go out."

"Some folks find the passage from Wayfar along the ridge easier than from Anchorhead. I'd recommend finding an animal mount over a speeder though."

I nodded. "Yeah, I had a speeder breakdown once out in the Sea, never again." I told him. "It's pretty desolate out that way though he must have been pretty lonely."

He shrugged. "Yeah, not much of a life I guess never thought about it to be honest. The farm is a wreck, you won't find much there anymore. Sad really, Owen had that place doing well. Who knows maybe someone will get it up and running again." He said. "Look I gotta go, thanks for the part, you sure your old man won't mind?"

I shook my head. "I'm sure. Anyway, better it gets used than sits and collects dust in storage. Good luck with the racer."

"Thanks, if you're out at Tosche's stop by say hi. I missed you last time, was on late shift the night before." He said shaking my hand again and leaving.

After I had cleaned up I recorded everything he had told me on a data pad. I really wondered why this kid was of so much interest to Lord Vader. The more I heard about him the more he just sounded like some ordinary farm kid and not some heroic pilot who managed to blow up the Empire's most ambitious weapon. I sat for a while staring at the little computer screen, lost in thought before Bel yelled that if I wanted to eat I should do it now. With a sigh I went into the kitchen for a late lunch and thought about my next move.

There are three ways to traverse the desert. You can walk, not highly recommended. A human requires a lot of water, at least two litres a day, more in the heat and carrying all that weight would not be helpful if one wanted to wander around the desert for any length of time. You can travel by vehicle, hopefully a decent speeder or swoop that won't die from the heat or the sand. Sand is very unkind to most machines and unless you can fix your own machine and carry enough spare parts, lube and other accessories around with you along with all the water you need it is not the most recommended method of desert travel. Lastly, you can travel on an animal. The four favourite animals for travelling the deserts on Tatooine are Eopies, dewbacks, Rontos and banthas.

Eopies are ornery creatures that were mainly used by farmers. They were able to carry heavy loads and go long distances. I had bad memories of being bitten by a particularly cantankerous eopie as a small child. Rontos, although a good creature for travelling, were mainly used by Jawas. Rontos needed a lot of water and were easily frightened by sudden movements; they were a pain in the ass to go near any urban areas with. Dewbacks were also often used as beasts of burden, great lizard like creatures whose ability to deal with the heat was often the stuff of legends. While I liked dewbacks it was banthas that really had my heart.

I remember the first time I ever saw a bantha. I was very, very young. We still lived in the house out by Bestine and it had been late in the evening, just around sunset. A baby bantha had wandered away from its herd and found its way to our house. I remember listening to it cry and feeling its pain and fear. I had taken a bowl of water and set it near enough to see but far enough away to not be in danger. Banthas could be really fierce when they wanted to and even babies were dangerous especially to small children.

I had sat on the stairs and watched as it considered the water and eventually trusted enough to drink from the bowl. I had watched in fascination as its strange, almost prehensile tongue had scooped the water from the bowl so delicately not a drop had touched the sand. Not long afterwards, its mother had found it. I had thought that the two creatures would just leave but instead they nuzzled each other and then the mother, who was enormous, came right up to me sitting on the steps and gently butted at my hand with her nose. When I lifted my hand up she had licked at it with her tongue and then she turned around with her cub and left to rejoin the herd. I had never spoken on this incident with anyone. It had been magical and private, a kindness shown for a kindness given. Of all the creatures that dwelt on Tatooine, banthas were my favourite. Most folks would swear that travelling by land speeder or some such machine was the best way to cross the desert. Not me, one bad

break down in the middle of nowhere had taught me all I needed to know about how sand and machinery got along. It was no wonder the local Stormtrooper garrison used dewbacks instead of speeders to get around the place.

I talked at great length about it with my father who wasn't overly happy about me wanting to go out into the desert on my own. I suppose I could have told him I was fairly capable of taking care of myself by telling him about Myrkr and Rothana but these were things he didn't need to know so in the end we compromised.

\*\*\*

I stepped out of the shuttle at Wayfar and looked around. It had been a long time since I was here and at first glance nothing much had changed. Wayfar is a tiny place on the edge of the Dune Sea very close to Jabba's Palace. A lot of the Palace workers who didn't want to live there stayed in Wayfar but that didn't help the place out much. It was not the prettiest town on the planet, or the safest. The wind had picked up and sand made its way into everything, even my mouth. I had forgotten about the taste and feel of grit between my teeth was like. It made me laugh but it wasn't pleasant. I had decided on bringing my Myrkr Dantassi clothes, because they were light weight and easy to move in. I wore the light hooded coat for the trip. My mask was in its satchel which hung across my shoulder and the light weight back pack was filled with only what I would need, clothes, water, food and the bare essentials. I had weighed bringing my culling staff but in then decided against it, the weapon was unusual enough it would raise questions.

At my father's suggestion and as part of the compromise I had agreed to, I was to meet a very old family friend, someone who was not only familiar to me, that I trusted but also someone who could help directly. Vahlek Akosh was my *Dajdofa'zte'sa*. I did not know what the basic translation for that word was and I had always just called him Zte'sa or uncle. He had sworn to take the responsibility for my life should anything ever happen to my parents.

I did not see my uncle Vahlek all that often because he travelled a great deal and was, of all the people in my life, the most mysterious. He breezed in and out of our lives like wind. My father rarely spoke about him in much detail but he was always welcome in our house when he visited. I had adored him as a small child because he always had some sort of animal with him, usually a baby that he was training, and he always brought me really interesting and strange gifts. I didn't have to worry about looking for him in the crowd at the shuttle port because he recognized me right away.

"Lei'lei, there you are!" He said using his childhood nick name for me, a derivative of the word for NahLei'lei which roughly translated to basic it meant gift child or niece.

He was a tall, rugged, fierce looking man with weird pale, green eyes and long, very straight, white hair. I had never seen him without the two day's worth of stubble which never quite hid the long jagged scar running from jaw to temple on the left side of his sharp, angular face. He grasped me by both shoulders and pulled me into a hug. "Look at you, quite the young lady, all grown up and lovely." His husky voice was soft and warm.

I looked up into his pale eyes and grinned. I had not seen him in a very long time, but he had not changed much, well maybe his face was more weathered looking but that was all. "Zte'sa Vahlek, it is good to see you again." I said.

He bowed his head in acknowledgement and then began to cover his face up with a scarf. "We must hurry, this wind brings a storm with it and my home is an hour's walk. I'd have brought the speeder but with this wind and the sand it would have broken down, by foot is the best way to go."

"I didn't know you lived out here, if I had I would have come to visit when I worked at the palace." I said as we began to head away from the shuttle port.

He nodded. "I did not own the house at that time." He told me then added tartly. "If I had known you were working for Jabba out here I would have skinned your backside. I was glad to learn you were smart enough to get out of there while you could. Lucky for you I was off world and out of contact at the time."

I shot him a look. "It wasn't so bad!" I protested.

"Hmm." He told me gruffly "You say that but you don't believe it. I know the palace well enough to know it was not the right place for you. I was very shocked to hear you were dancing there. Your mother would have been horrified. She did not raise you for that sort of a life."

"Well, I stopped." I said defensively. One of the things I had forgotten about uncle Vahlek was his sharp tongue and no nonsense manner.

He stopped walking for a moment to look at me and I shrank back from his stare. "Yes, you did. There is hope for you yet." He relented a little. We continued to walk towards the city gate. "I had not planned on buying a house out here, but it was time to settle just a bit. Your father told me about the property and it was perfect for my needs."

I was not unhappy to leave Wayfar; it was a place of many memories for me from when I had worked out at the Palace, some of them not all that happy. Uncle Vahlek had not been far off the mark in chastising me for taking a job there but that didn't mean I liked to hear about it. I drew my hood over my head to shade my face from the burning suns and the strengthening wind. We were about five minutes out of the city walls when the sting of the sand against my face annoyed me enough to pull out my Dantassi mask and slip it on. Uncle Vahlek watched this action with great interest but did not say a word.

The trek to his house led us into the rocky edge of the Dune Sea and walking in the sand dunes in between the stony parts was taxing. I remembered Navaari's comment about my ability to walk through the snow. It had not occurred to me at the time that sand and snow were very similar. By the time we were half way to his home the sand storm was building up to be nasty. I could see the dark ribbon of what was to come off in the distance and the occasional flash of dry lightening. I hoped it would not last long because sometimes these storms could last for days. It hadn't been forecast but that never meant much. The winds and the sands seemed to take a huge delight in doing the exact opposite of what the weather bots predicted. We reached his house shortly before midday and I was grateful to get indoors to where it was cool and sheltered from the wind.

In the entrance hall I shook off the sand from my clothes and removed my mask. I was about to slip it back into the satchel when uncle Vahlek held out his hand silently asking to look at it. I watched as he turned it over in his hands, studying the markings carefully. His fingers traced the carvings Navaari had recently added and I could not decipher the look on his face. He handed it back to me without saying anything and I followed him down the hall and found myself in a large, warm kitchen. I was greeted by three curious jaxes who came to running to greet him, mewling loudly, with their tails straight and high.

"Maddy, Mayhem and Kahvi." He said telling me their names. "The others are around somewhere."

I took off my cloak and hung it over the back of one of the kitchen chairs. He put the kettle on the stove to boil water and I drew from my backpack the gift I had brought for him from my father. "Papa said he promised this to you." I handed him the small box.

Uncle Vahlek took it from my hands. "Ah yes, black Koyish tea and Teki spice from Iridonia. I never know how your father does it but he always manages to find me



some." He put it on one of the shelves above the stove. "Mek'kefa or mint tea?" He asked. "I'll get lunch ready in a bit, I expect you are hungry."

"Ooh mek'kefa, please." I said and sat when he indicated me to do so. I immediately had a jax jump in my lap. The orange one he had called Maddy. She curled up lap and began to purr loudly as I absently stroked her fur.

"You've still got a way with the critters, I see. The jaxes don't normally like strangers. They usually run and hide when I bring someone in they don't know." He said setting cups on the round, worn wooden table.

His home was welcoming and warm. It was clean and tidy, decorated with all manner of curious artwork and strange artefacts. In the open thoroughway between the kitchen and the living room was a mobile that hung from the mid beam. I studied it carefully. It was made from long bones decorated with feathers and its main piece was a human looking skull.

"A Sayormi mobile." He said watching my gaze. "Supposed to bring good luck and ward off evil spirits." He said, "It was a gift."

"It's very intriguing." I told him.

"Yes, you, of all people, would find it of interest." He said then after a moment's pause added, "The mask, your father has no idea does he?"

I shook my head. "I wouldn't even know where to begin explaining it all to him, he'd probably flip out. You know how papa gets sometimes."

Uncle Vahlek shrugged. "Never knew the Bone Traders were ones to be taking in strays." He said. "You've not been with your enclave long though."

"Not really, no." I said, wondering how he knew that.

He smiled as if he read my mind and said. "The markings on your mask are all new and there aren't that many. It is a fairly recent thing, yes?"

"You seem to know a lot about them." I said nodding.

He shook his head. "More than the average person, I expect, and probably less than you. I know enough to give respect. They go their own way mostly, but I have crossed paths with some of their kind from time to time. That is not unexpected in my line of work." He poured spiced 'caf and I accepted the cup gratefully wondering, not for the first time, exactly what his line of work was. I had asked a few times when I was younger what he did for a living and had never been given a straight answer. I once made the mistake of badgering my father about it until he had crossly told me it was none of my business, then relenting his hard words had mumbled something about Vahlek being good with animals and a bit of a wanderer. After a while I had stopped asking.

He sat down across from me and studied me carefully. I was not the little girl he remembered and my connection with the Dantassi had unsettled him. "I know they look after their own, that they are not to be crossed and they are not at all what they appear to be. It would seem that neither are you." He said.

I didn't know what to say. He was right.

He regarded me for a moment with his pale green eyes. "I've known you all your life and from day one you were always a little mystery. I still remember as clear as crystal the day we found you." He said.

"You were there?"

"Yes, I suppose your father never mentioned that, did he?"

I shook my head. "I only learned the truth about it all just before I went off world to work and he didn't mention you. Well he didn't get into a lot of specifics. I don't think he knew how to tell me and it was a bit of a jumble."

"Yes, indeed, he contacted me shortly after you left to let me know he had finally told you. Should have been spoken about sooner rather than later but done is done." He nodded. "Your father was always one to keep a closed mouth and he had his reasons for keeping my name out of it. I have my own past, one that I prefer to

keep to myself, although it does seem that one's past has a way of following one around." He said quietly taking a moment to sip his drink. "I can still remember that night as if it were yesterday, myself, Bedi, and Kit all sitting in the living room looking at you in your mother's arms. I had never seen Eri' so happy or so worried. We discussed what to do for many, many hours and in the end everyone decided that Kit and Eri' adopting you as their own was for the best. I remember the moment of when your father realized that he now had a daughter, how proud he was and how scared he was. I remember the love in your mother's eyes when she realised that she had finally been given the child she had always wished and longed for, even if you were not her flesh and blood, she loved you as if you were. When Kit and your mother asked if Bedi and I would be your Dajdofa guardians, well I was, we were honoured, although as a guardian, I don't know that I have actually done a very good job at it." He paused. "It was me who arranged the paperwork, got the birth certificates and forged adoption papers done up." He shook his head. "I should have been there for you more often, especially after Eri' was killed."

"Wait, Bedi is also my Dajdofa Guardian?" I asked interrupting. This was the first I had heard of this.

He nodded. "They never told you that?"

I sighed. "No, I suppose the only reason they told me you were was I asked why I should call you uncle when you aren't even related to anyone in the family. Bedi was just always there, she worked for papa. I called her by her first name. I never thought there was anything more."

He rubbed his forehead. "I'm sorry you have to find all this out now and in this way."

"Why keep all of this a secret, why? I don't understand." I asked.

"We all felt that some things were better left unsaid, especially at that time. From the note your birth mother had left with you it was pretty clear she thought you were unique. She had written it in haste and she was frightened."

"Did you read it? Do you remember what it said?" I asked.

"Wasn't much to read. It said '*Her name is Merlyn and she is very special. Please love her as I do and protect her from those who would harm her for what she is.*' Maybe we were wrong not to search even more than we did for who had left you, I don't know. I just know we were all concerned for you. A tiny baby abandoned by a mother so scared by something she was willing to give you up to total strangers in a time of absolute turmoil. I do not doubt that she chose the time and the place and the people who would find you very carefully. It was not a random act, but still it was a terrible risk. The Jedi were being hunted to extinction and we were hearing stories that all force sensitive children were being taken and murdered. None of us knew what that meant but it didn't sound like a pleasant thing. We buried the truth and hoped you would go unnoticed."

I just stared at him. Every time I turned around another piece of this story, this little puzzle unwound itself. I sighed.

He continued. "I remember once, when you were no more than a titch, you hardly come up past my knees that the baby bantha I had with me that day took to you as though you were its mother."

I smiled at that memory, I had forgotten about it. We were still living out in the house near Bestine. His baby bantha was twice my size and had chased after me, nudging me in the back every time it had caught up to me, licking me with its huge sticky tongue, wanting to play. We had spent hours at that game.

"I always knew you were special but that day confirmed it for me." He said. "So, it does not surprise me that the Bone Traders would take you in or that you would travel far in the Galaxy, although that you would end up working for the man who helped to wipe out the Jedi is an odd twist of fate."

"The Dantassi say nothing happens by accident." I said.

"So they do." He said. "Perhaps you will tell me about your association with them some day. I would very much like to hear it."

I just looked at him. He was right I had known him all my life and although his visits had been infrequent they had been special. I always thought of him as eccentric, now I learned he was much, much more. There was something he wasn't telling me about himself, something secret and dark he wanted to keep hidden. But now I was a mystery to him, with secrets of my own. I guessed that the keeping of secrets ran in my crazy family. The thought made me smile.

"Perhaps." I said after a while.

He sat back in the chair and changed the subject. "Why do you want a mount? There isn't anything out there but sand, critters, bones and the Tusken." He asked.

"I am looking for information about a boy named Skywalker." I told him plainly.

"Funny how that name keeps getting bandied about." He said but didn't elaborate. "Taking that as you want to head out to the Lars farm then?"

"That was the idea." I said, wondering how he knew.

"Why? The farm was destroyed." He asked.

"I might be able to learn something anyway." I said.

"Ah, yes, one of your gifts. I remember that one very well. Are you sure you want to go out alone? I'd be happy to go with you."

I shook my head. "No, I need to do this on my own, I don't know why, I just do. Please?"

He sighed and made a face which said he didn't like the idea much. "Well, doubtful the Tusken will bother you out there, they avoid that place. Say it's haunted, cursed."

"Why is that?" I asked.

Uncle Vahlek shook his head. "I don't know exactly, they won't talk about it, steer clear of the area as well as the place where the Jawa transport was attacked. Tell stories of bad spirits and desert demons." He paused to sip his drink. "Your father wasn't very specific about your needs when he asked if I could help." He said. "So, I like to know what's going on before I let anyone take one of my critters, even you."

"Papa doesn't know the specifics." I said. "Hell, even I don't know the specifics. I was asked to find information, nothing more and nothing less. If that means I need to go visit this wreck of a farm then that's what I have to do. Lord Vader gets a bit tetchy when he doesn't get what he wants." I was going to win an award for understatement of the year.

"Your father and I go way back. He doesn't speak of our past much I suspect but when he needs my help he has it and as my NahLei'lei, so do you." He was silent and we both looked up as a strong gust of wind made the house shudder. "Good job you got to Wayfar when you did, looks like you'll be here for a bit. This storm's building to be a bastard."

"The ones they don't forecast are always bad." I agreed, and then asked. "How did you get to know papa?"

"I met him years ago off world, long before you came into the picture, long before he met your mother and settled down into a respectable living. He saved my life." He said. "Then, about a year later I saved his life and two years after that he saved mine again. We seemed destined to be saving each other's hides." He paused. "Somewhere along the line we became friends."

"I never knew that." I told him. "He doesn't speak about you much. Come to think of it he doesn't speak about himself much at all."

Uncle Vahlek smiled. "Do you ask?"

I looked up at him and shook my head. "No, Zte'sa, I guess I don't."

He gave me a look that said, '*well there you go.*' Maddy shifted on my lap, looking for a more comfy position and Kahvi rubbed herself around my ankles. I leaned down to scratch the black jax between the ears.

"Chances are good this storm will blow itself out by tomorrow but till then you're stuck here. Got a spare room downstairs, bed's made and clean. 'Fresher is through past the living room, to the left." He said. "Later, if you want, I can tell you some stories about your old man." I nodded and he got up, "Right then, let me show you around."

Just as he had predicted the storm exhausted itself out sometime in the very early morning. I woke up to the sound of purring jaxes, all three of whom complained loudly when I decided to get up. I slipped on my cloak and went outside. This was one of my favourite times of day, although it was rare for me to be awake this early to actually experience it. The dawn sky was a soft velvety blue blushed with the faint pinks of the rising suns, the in between time. I sat on the sandy steps which led up to the front door and watched the suns rise for the first time in since I had returned to Tatooine.

I breathed the air in deeply, there is a moment when the night has passed and the morning has not yet begun when the air has a scent to it that always made me think of the word clean. As though no one had yet breathed this air in and out, that it had somehow been scrubbed new by the night and the suns' heat had not yet managed to change the smell and taste of it all. As the light slowly took over the sky, I watched the colours of the desert change, from a strange silvery blue to a soft glowing gold. These moments of quiet and solitude were rare and I treasured them. This had been part of the reason I had often escaped to the bluffs above Mos Eisley, much to my father's annoyance and spent the whole night just watching the stars and waiting for the dawn, waiting for that moment of perfect stillness, and new, fresh air.

The quiet was broken by the snuffling sounds of an animal nearby. I got up off the steps and walked a little ways past the front of the house. Around the side was a large bantha, probably looking for water and food. I smiled when I saw her because she was beautiful. It never occurred to me that standing in front of a creature that could have killed me with a single stomp of her foot might not be the best idea in the world. I knew no fear of these animals and I sensed no fear from her. We watched each other for a long time, she sniffed the air, getting my scent and I stayed still letting her sort out whether or not she would stay or go. I relaxed and let my Force sense touch her a little, sending thoughts of calm and peace. I was not a threat. I guess she figured this out and in the end decided to approach me. What surprised me, more than anything else, was not her acceptance of my presence, that was normal for me and most animals, but when she knelt down to lie in the sand in front of me. This was how Uncle Vahlek found me when he came looking for me, sitting on the sand in the rising suns' light talking to and petting a bantha as though she were one of his jaxes. She alerted me to his presence by jerking her head up and making a very odd growling sound that came deep from the back of her throat. I stood up and she did too. He looked at me with a smile.

"I see she still remembers you. Nor do I need to help you find a companion for your trek to the Lars' farm." He said. "Her name is Mej-mej," Which he pronounced may-may. "It is Zabracki for little sister."

Upon hearing her name she ambled over to uncle Vahlek and head butted against him. "Come, dress, have breakfast and I will make sure you are all set to go. I feel better now that I know she will take care of you."

After a good breakfast, and some quick lessons on how to guide Mej-mej I was ready to go. I had a datapad map with the way point plotted in. I also had an old fashioned way finder. Uncle Vahlek had attached additional water pouches to the

saddle and given me a vibro lance that also attached to the large and surprisingly comfortable saddle.

"If you happen to meet Tusken along the way, offer them the gift of water." He said. "But you should be left alone, especially if you are also masked." He nodded at my satchel I wore slung across my shoulder. He gave Mej-mej a pat and spoke the word for down. She knelt on the sand and allowed me to climb up into the saddle. "I expect to see you back here by tomorrow morning, tomorrow night at the very latest. You have a comm, so keep in touch. If I don't see you then, I'll come looking for you but that won't make me happy." He said.

"Yes, Zte'sa. Don't worry; I am pretty good at taking care of myself when the odds are more or less fair."

He nodded. "Yes, someday you'll have to tell me about that. Now go before it gets too late, and remember drink enough."

"Will do. See you when I see you." I gave Mej-mej a nudge with my heels and we were off. I did not look back.

It was hot. I was glad of the hooded cloak, the extra water and my Dantassi mask which surprisingly enough helped to keep me cool. Mej-mej walked at a steady pace and I was surprised at how quickly we actually covered ground. By late afternoon, after stopping to shelter and rest from the midday heat, we came to the Lars homestead and it wasn't a moment too soon. I ached from riding all day.

"Ta'dosh!" I told Mej-mej. She made a snorting sound and sank to her knees so that I could slide off her back. My legs were stiff and a little shaky. I was used to many things but riding a bantha was not one of them. I patted her and gave her some of the fruit treats Uncle Vahlek had provided me with then I looked around. I had about three hours of light left so whatever I was going to do I needed to do it now. There was not much to see. The main building had been badly damaged and there wasn't much left of it. I walked around the ruins and understood why Uncle Vahlek had said the Sand People avoided this place. It tasted bad and made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I made my way down into the underground part of the house and began to look around.

Most people actually lived underground on Tatooine because it was cooler. What you saw on the surface was only a small part of the actual structure. There was nothing left. Anything and everything that could be taken had fallen to the scavengers. What had been left was either broken beyond repair or burnt rubbish. In the main open courtyard not even the décor had survived. As I went through the rooms, I felt as though I were the ghost not the other way around. I ran my fingers along the walls and tried to pick up anything I could but my ability to conjure images from inanimate objects was not always reliable. Of all my weird ways this gift was the weakest and I couldn't force it. It did not surprise me that nothing sharp came to mind. There were vague images of people and sensations of fear and anger. The kitchen had been torn apart, all useable machinery removed, dishes scattered about the place and broken, the cupboards ripped apart and smashed. Each of the sleeping rooms was much the same, what was of value had been removed the rest was destroyed. Nothing personal remained, not even clothes. Tatooine was a hard planet and anything that could be salvaged or scavenged was taken.

With a sigh I went back outside and found the entrance to the workshop and speeder garage. There was not much else left in this place either. Machinery, tools or spare parts of any sort would have been stripped and sold. All that was left was a big mess. Both garages were empty except for a wamp rat had nested in the air speeder garage. I left it alone. Although they were small they were also vicious, especially when they had young.

The main work shop was a wreck. I stepped over bits of twisted plastic and metal that was of no use. There were animal droppings and rubbish all over the place.

I wasn't going to find much here. I went to kick a bit of junk out of the way and stumbled over it instead because it didn't move. I squatted down to look at it. It was a table peg, used to fix a work bench to the ground to stop it from rocking. I sighed and looked around. From this angle I saw things I had not seen while standing straight and one of them caught my eye, near the door under a piece of twisted dura plastic. I retrieved the toy, a small broken model of a sky hopper and gasped.

Too fast, too jumbled for me to make immediate sense of them, the images tumbled one after the other through my head. When the onslaught had faded and I was returned to the here and now I got up. I tucked the broken toy in my pocket and left the work room. Outside the light was starting turn from glaring bright to soft gold. I clicked my tongue and Mej-mej ambled to my side. I patted her flank and walked around the outside of the buildings again. Tosche had said there was a mourning marker and after a few moments I found it. I knelt down and looked at it. I was hesitant to touch it because I was still buzzing with the flashes from the broken toy.

People had left chulpas of various sizes and shapes draped across the rough handmade marker. A few of them were yellow with age, worn smooth by the sands, the carved markings no longer visible. I looked at the marker, a plain piece of durasteel, something had been etched onto it but so eroded by the elements that I could not decipher its meaning. I drew a deep steadying breath and reached out to touch it. To my surprise there was nothing. I laid my hand flat against it and concentrated but still there was nothing. I sat back on my heels and sighed. I then, out of curiosity began to touch the chulpas. Most of them were blank to me but one of the oldest suddenly set off a series of intense flashes. This time, unlike with the toy the images were more specific, far more powerful and centered around one moment in time, a burial. The vision knocked me flat on my ass. It was full of anger and pain, loss and regret. I let the breath I had been holding slowly out. No wonder the Sand People avoided this place. It was full of ghosts and sorrow.

I didn't want to camp here over night although that had been my initial plan. Mej-mej nudged my arm breaking me out of my reverie. With a sigh I got up. The ability to 'see' from inanimate objects was draining but I didn't know why. I brushed my fingertips over the carved Japor snippet once more but it had shown me all it was going to so I left it where it was.

The bantha knelt down allowing me climb back into the saddle. It was dangerous to travel the edge of Dune Sea at night but I wanted to get away from this place. I sat still leaning forward on Mej-mej's back resting my head against her neck. The twin suns were setting and it was always a glorious sight to see. I was tired.

"Riy bunkie dunko" I told her in Hutttese. *Go home*. She tossed her head and turned in the direction we had come from. I pulled my hood up over my head and absently touched the bone mask. It gave me a strange sense of security. As a rule, most sane people never travelled alone at night. The Sand People often had hunting parties out after dark. I had been raised on this planet, heard the stories, been given the warnings about how dangerous it was, but as I sat high up off the ground on a creature large enough to tear a small house apart if she wished, I didn't care.

I had never travelled like this, alone so far out beyond a city limit after dark. It was awe inspiring. As every colour but the darkening blue faded from the sky, the stars began to shine. They were as bright as I could ever recall, reminding me of the night I had ridden back to the enclave with Navaari on Hjal, except these constellations were known to me. As Mej-mej walked towards uncle Vahlek's home I leaned backwards against her broad back and stared up at the sky, looking for the twelve sisters, the laughing wrix and best of all, the great Krayt dragon. Only the one moon was up so far and its light was still watery and pallid. The shadows from the rising jagged hills of the Jundland Wastes were eerie.

Tatooine had three moons, Ghomrassen, Guermessa and Chenini. They did not all rise at the same time and they each had very different orbits so to have three full moons all at once was very rare. Tonight I would see Guermessa rise first, then Ghomrassen and only catch a glimpse of Chenini if I was still awake at about four in the morning. Tonight though, Chenini would be full. Ghomrassen was the largest of the moons, even when she was just a sliver of light she was still bright enough to cast shadows. Chenini was the smallest and had the largest elliptical orbit. For the longest time she was overlooked by astronomers, her name meant forgotten sister.

The night was still, not even a whisper of wind which was unusual. One of the things that offworlders complained about the most was the constant winds. The only sound I heard was my own breathing, the occasional howl of some creature in the distance and the rhythmic sound of Mej-mej's feet in the sand as she walked. During the day I had thought mostly about the job ahead. What I would find at the farm, how it would look and where to find shelter during the midday zenith. The way back to uncle Vahlek's home my head was filled with thoughts about the images I had been shown. They had been conflicting, and from two very different time periods. The problem with this gift was it was incoherent most of the time and I was not skilled enough to control it. I pulled the toy sky hopper out and looked at it. My fingertips tingled touching it and I had to block the rush of images that threatened to overwhelm me. Mostly they were centered around a young boy, I wondered if this was Luke, I was certain it was but it was hard to tell with the visions sometimes. I tucked it away in the satchel I usually kept my mask in. I was tired and it had been an exceptionally long day. Mej-mej's gate was regular and hypnotic and eventually I dozed lightly in the saddle.

I never heard them approach. Mej-mej stopped suddenly and made an eerie sound. I was suddenly very awake with all the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. They had come up from behind, single file, soundless and deadly, a Tusken raiding party of seven. They manoeuvred their own bantha mounts to form a circle around me and they just waited silently. Most settlers think that the Sand People are ignorant, backwater savages who are brutal for the sheer joy of it. The settlers tend to shoot first and ask questions later never taking the time to learn the local customs and languages. Of course, the Sand people's language is almost impossible for most non Tuskens to learn and in that I was no exception. It was a guttural language that no matter how hard I had tried master or understand it, it had never made any sense to me what so ever. Sometimes some of the more travelled Tuskens spoke Jawa or even Huttese.

I waited until the leader moved forward one step as was custom. I was masked, alone and unknown to them. They had no grounds to attack me and they didn't know the risk at stake, there could have been more of my kind hiding. Tuskens were cautious, despite what everyone thought about them.

I nodded my head to the leader and signed a traditional greeting. He replied in kind, and then to my very great relief asked in a heavily accented Huttese what I was doing.

"I travel homeward." I told him.

"The desert demands tribute." He replied. The traditional way of saying that they wished the water rite to be observed, essentially I would buy my way out of a fight by offering them a full water skin. Uncle Vahlek had tied extra water skins to the saddle for just this occasion. I untied them and offered them to the leader.

He accepted and barked something to his men. I let the skins fall to the ground and watched quietly waiting to see what would happen next. While I hoped they would honour the water rite there was always a chance they would not. So I waited. Mej-mej made a slow low sound and I placed a hand on her neck.

"Na'shej'la, Mej-mej." *Be still*, I whispered in Cheunh, the one language I was certain no one except me understood. I sent her calming thoughts. I could sense her willingness to defend if she had to but I was hoping it would not come to that. She stopped making noise and tossed her head from side to side, then settled down.

The Tusken leader looked at me for a long time. Not that either of us could see each other's face. We were both masked. Then he said. "Your bantha serves you well."

I stared at him and was suddenly angry. He had very deliberately insulted me.

"Mej-mej, Ta'dosh." She hesitated just a second and then sank to her knees.

The Sand people remained on their own mounts and watched carefully. I was well aware of the sudden rise in tension in the air but didn't care. I slid down from the saddle and went to stand to the side of the leader, so that he could see me and where the others also could see. I heard Mej-mej get back up and move to stand at my side.

"She is not my bantha." I told the leader. "She does not belong to me. She belongs to the desert and the sky, to the wind and the sand. She permits me the honour of her company and she carries me by her own will. "

There was a long moment of silence and then the Leader spoke a command, his bantha lifted one of his front legs and the Tusken warrior dismounted with as much grace as any palace dancer. He came to stand in front of me and I had to push at Mej-mej to get her to step back.

The Tusken warrior looked at me, walked around me, studying me. I was not what he had expected.

"You are not like the others." He said, his oddly accented words sounding harsh and threatening to me. "You have the bearing of a hunter, a warrior and your mask tells stories. You speak of the desert and your bantha companion with much honour. You know our ways and you respect the path of the Sand People." He said.

"The desert is a living thing; it and its people deserve my respect. I have earned my mask and my place amongst the Mathäd'antass'Iyantha through hunt and ritual. Mej-mej honours me with her friendship. It is what it is." I answered.

He regarded me for a long time through the strange goggled mask he wore. Ghomrassen rose three quarters full behind him. The moon's light shone off my mask, causing the whiteness of the bone to glow, making my face ghost like and luminous.

"You are human." He said looking directly into my eyes.

I nodded.

"Will you allow me to see your true face so that we may tell of you, let others know you are welcome amongst the sands, given right to go freely without fear."

I was a little hesitant about this, unsure of the Dantassi policy on this sort of thing. Then I decided that given the circumstances and my lack of education on bone trader etiquette and regulations in this area I needed to make my own rules. I removed my mask and pulled back the hood on the cloak. Moonlight bathed my face, shone on my long hair and I welcomed it.

There was a ripple of shock and murmurs from the Tusken raiders but a single hand gesture from their leader silenced them.

"You are female." He stated. While this had caused a stir amongst his men, he had not been surprised by this, in fact if anything I had gotten the distinct impression he had been expecting this.

I put my mask back on and nodded. "I am Akiana'myshk'apavjäska, clan daughter of Kirja'navaar'inkjerii and Ta'kasta'cariad to Nikätza'arth'pavjäska." I told him. "On this world I am Merlyn Gabriel, daughter to Kitga'ar and Eri' Gabriel of Mos Eisley, and NahLei'lei to Vahlek Akosh and Bedi Nuale."

He nodded at the recital of my lineage, such as it was. "We will remember you and pass the word along. You have shown much courage here tonight and we do not forget. As you have entrusted me so I give you my name." Then he spoke it twice once



slowly and once at normal speed I repeated it once and he nodded that my version was acceptable.

"I am an honoured hunter to my tribe and I have waited a long time to meet you." He said. I was puzzled but remained silent.

He drew from underneath his clothing something wrapped in a piece of cloth. He unwrapped it slowly and I saw a simple ring on a leather thong. He held it out to me, laid in the flat of his palm and allowed me to take it from him. I picked it up by the leather and didn't touch the ring at all. It looked like a wedding band. The last thing I wanted was to deal with any images, visions this thing had to offer.

"It was foretold to me that I would meet a warrior girl with a ghost face. That she would know our ways and walk our path, and that she would be willing to accept the gift of pain." He told me. "I have been carrying this burden for a long time. Before your time, there was a farmer who would not honour our ways, shot at our people, did not respect the desert." He gestured to general direction I had come from. "The hunters from the tribe took the woman who belonged to him and held her as payment. It is our way." He paused for a moment and watched my reaction when I didn't give any he continued. "One night the devil from the dark came to take her. He slaughtered every single member of the tribe, men, women and children, showed no mercy. The foot prints in the sand were human, male. He killed with a sword of light. I was a boy, on a hunting party. We saw from the far away his death dance of light but could not arrive in time to stop the demon. After that night much war was waged between the Tusken and the off worlders."

I kept silent. His story made me shiver. I had heard rumours, tales told about this desert demon wielding a sword of fire which had torn the Sand People apart and of the terrible retribution that followed but I had always thought, like most of the people I knew, that these were just myths and campfire legends. Things your parents said to keep you in line. *You better behave or the B'Thazoshe Demon would come and get you with his weapon of light and drag you off forever to be his slave, if he doesn't eat you first.* If there had been strife before between the settlers and the Tusken after this event it had come to all out war.

He broke the silence and continued. "I found it left in the sand in the ruins of the tent where the woman was held. It was her token. I do not know what it means, but it was of value to her. I have carried it with me as a reminder that all outsiders are to be hated, to be killed, that they are vicious, mindless creatures, who do not respect the wills and ways of the living desert. To remind me of what off worlders are capable of, but tonight I see a different face and I know I can now pass this burden to you. I must no longer carry this memory, this pain, now it is yours." He said. "You have given me my freedom."

I looked at the ring dangling on the leather thong and then slipped it in my satchel.

"I am sorry for your loss." I told him.

"The desert reclaims its own." He replied.

"The desert reclaims its own." My reply was traditional but it made me sad.

There was a silence that went on for too long. I wasn't certain what to do but before I could move or speak he broke the silence for me. "You are of two worlds and there is much mystery about you. I see that you seek answers and your questions are your burdens. Answers will come to you when you do not expect it but they will not bring you happiness or peace. You are now known to us, Girl of the Ghost Face and we will not forget." He said. "Go your way in safety."

He mounted his bantha with an ease I envied and before I could even think to say another word he and his fellow hunters vanished single file back into the night. I watched them with a mixture of disbelief and awe. Only when I could no longer see

them did I ask Mej-mej to kneel down so that I could scramble up into the saddle again.

"Riy bunkie dunko, Mej-mej, let's get the hell out of here and go home." I whispered. All I wanted now was to be some place safe and familiar.

The whole event had a terrible surreal quality to it, as though I were dreaming. It had unsettled me and left me feeling lost. Mej-mej sensed my need and she hurried. We were back before dawn. I took off her saddle and made sure she had food and water before I went inside. The door was not locked and the spare bed had been made ready for me. He had expected me home. I stripped off my clothes and crawled under the covers. I slept like a baby. No dreams, no nightmares and interruptions. I woke mid morning to the scent of spiced stim'caf.

I had planned to return to Mos Eisley right away but the meeting with the Sand People had shaken something in me. Over his perfect mek'kefa and some fruit I had asked if I could stay for a few more days. For a long moment uncle Vahlek had just stared at me, as though he could dig beneath my lack of explanations and find the truth merely by looking at my face.

"Of course, just let your father know." Uncle Vahlek answered. "I am happy to have you here." I searched for any hint of untruth but there was none.

I had contacted my father and told him of my plans. He had not asked why and I had not elaborated. Once we were done talking he had wanted to speak with Vahlek. I had left the two to their conversation and went into the living room to curl up on the couch. I was stiff and sore from the long ride and I was still tired. As soon as I got myself comfortable, Maddy who had become my constant companion jumped up on my lap. Uncle Vahlek joined me in the sunken floor room, sitting in the chair adjacent to me and drank his stim'caf.

"What happened last night?" He asked. "I noticed the water skins are gone and I am sure even you cannot drink that much."

I drew a deep breath and let it out noisily. He waited. I wondered where to even start and remembered Navaari's words. *Start at the very beginning and do not stop until the words have done their job.* So I told him about the entire journey from start to finish. I repeated almost word for word the conversation I had had with the Tusken leader and then I waited.

"This ring, did you touch it?" He asked.

I shook my head. "No."

He just nodded thoughtfully but didn't comment further.

"It was the strangest thing." I said when I was finished. "Have you ever heard of them doing anything like this?"

Uncle Vahlek shook his head. "No, as a rule they avoid all contact with anyone not Tusken unless they are trading or killing. I do know they are a deeply superstitious people with many beliefs and customs. It sounded to me as though this meeting was part of some prophecy and you along with it. Stranger things have happened."

"He called me Girl with the Ghost Face." I sighed. "My life just keeps getting weirder and weirder."

"Forgive me for saying, Lei'lei but your life started out pretty unusual to begin with." Uncle Vahlek smiled. "Well, stay as long as you like. If I understood what your father was trying to tell me without actually telling me anything, you need the rest."

Was that it? I just needed a holiday, no drama, no seduction, no violence and no threats? I nodded. "He's right, I do."

He got up. "I have errands to run, and groceries to buy. I will be back in a couple of hours. When you are ready you can tell me about what happened to you, what your father would not. I do not like all these secrets and hints of things that perhaps I should know." He said.

I looked at him for a moment. "Okay." I said.

He patted me on the head as though I were six. "Sleep, you are safe here." He said, his words sounding familiar and comforting to me.

I closed my eyes and absently stroked Maddy slowly. I could hear uncle Vahlek move about the kitchen and I heard when he left the house. Its silence settled about me like a blanket and I remembered why I loved my home world so much. I don't know if it was just being in a place of peace and quiet or that the rhythmic purring of the Jax was hypnotic or if it was a nice combination of both but almost as soon as I closed my eyes I slept and I dreamt.

*I had travelled across the desert to come to a small house tucked away in the hills on the very edge of the Jundland Wastes, near the Dune Sea's edge. I didn't know why I had come here only that I was drawn to it the way a thirsty man is drawn to water. I walked into the house and was not surprised to find that I was not alone. It was the same long haired man from previous dreams. He had been waiting for me.*

*"Sit." He said and I did.*

*"Where is the Chosen One?" He asked.*

*"I don't know who that is."*

*He sighed. "Yes, you do and he needs your help."*

*I frowned. "You make no sense." I told him, annoyed.*

*"He lost his way. He lost his soul and I could not help him." He sounded incredibly sad.*

*I shook my head. "Who are you? Why do you keep coming to me?"*

*"I am the teacher looking for the student, the student looking the teacher. I do not seek you out, you come to me." He said.*

*I got up, angry with the cryptic answers. "What do you want from me?"*

*"It is you that seeks answers from me." He said. "You have many questions."*

*I paced back and forth. "Who are you?" I asked again.*

*"That is the wrong question." He told me patiently.*

*"Who is the Chosen One?"*

*He shook his head.*

*Exasperation made me cross. "Who am I?" The words falling from my mouth before I could even consider them*

*He smiled. "That is the right question." He said. "The answers await you in the place where it all began."*

*"A map might be helpful." I told him.*

*He laughed, his blue eyes twinkled. "Go to the beginning, what you seek will find you." He spoke softly and he turned his back to me signalling this discussion was over. I stood staring at his back for a long time but he said nothing more. I left the small hut to walk back out into the desert and instead I found myself looking at the city of Mos Espa. It was in this moment I woke up.*

Mos Espa, I thought as I sat up. Wasn't that the place where Anakin Skywalker had won the Boonta Eve Classic? Is that what he had meant, I would find answers to the Skywalker question there? Who am I? What sort of a question was that? I felt as though I were a snake eating its own tail. Everything was going around in circles.

\*\*\*

I stayed with uncle Vahlek for over a week. Much of it was spent doing very little. I spent a lot of time with Mej-mej riding, exploring for short periods of time the area near his house. I needed the quiet and strange companionship she offered did

me the world of good. My uncle was often absent from the house during the day, business he would say and nothing more. I didn't mind. In the evenings, after he had returned and after we had eaten, we would talk. The conversations were easier than I had thought they would be. He passed no judgement and offered no platitudes. He listened, asked questions and gave me his opinion only when I actually asked for it. There was a hardness as well as a stillness to uncle Vahlek that I had never noticed before. Of course, as a small child one does not see such things. But sitting alone with him in his house I felt the eerie thread of steel that seemed to hold him together. There was a tension that wound about him tightly. Even when he was relaxed he was ready, I just wasn't sure what it was he was ready for.

I had started off by talking to him about my work, my job but as the evening progressed I found myself talking more and more about what was going on underneath it all. I talked about the training and teachings I was on the receiving end of.

"Do you not find this all a little strange, Lei'lei?" He had asked when I had finished talking.

"Yes, but who wants to question the will of the Emperor and I like what I am learning. I just don't know about the why of it." I said.

He nodded. "I am surprised that they did not try to kill you when they found out you were a force sensitive." He told me bluntly.

"It was that exact reason that saved my life, I think." I replied. "It made Lord Vader curious. I think he sees me as some sort of pet project and I do my job so he has no real reason to complain." I wondered how I could explain the eerie connection I had to the man almost everyone regarded as the second most evil being in the galaxy.

Uncle Vahlek had just sighed. "Well, there are many forces at work in this galaxy and truth be told, I have seen many things that went well beyond explanation or definition. Who is to argue with destiny?" He said. "A grain of sand blown by the wind has no idea of where it will end up, yet in the end it is still part of the desert. Without the single grain of sand, there is no desert."

I had smiled at the saying. "Maybe," I said. "But I feel as though I'm missing something. I sense it the way you know when someone is watching you but you don't know who. I know there is more out there, I know that something will come, something huge but I just do not know what." I said.

"The universe is bigger than you Lei'lei, stop trying to solve all the mysteries at once."

I had rolled my eyes. "You sound just like someone else I know."

His response was to pat my hand and tell me to go to bed.

Two nights after this conversation, he had come down into the kitchen long after we had both said goodnight to find me sitting in the dark with my bone mask in my hands. I was crying.

"I'm sorry," I had said hastily wiping the tears away. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You did not, I was working not sleeping, just came down to make some tea, would you like some?"

I nodded and watched in silence as he pottered about the kitchen. When he had done and tea was made he sat across from me. The only light was the one that was over the stove. For a long time we just sat and sipped tea in a silence. That was the thing about uncle Vahlek, he was extraordinarily patient.

"Papa didn't tell you much about what happened with Jyrki, did he?" I asked after a while.

Unlike Thrawn or even Navaari uncle Vahlek did not clench his jaw when something angered him, instead a terrible sense of stillness seemed to ripple around

him almost as though his anger became something he wore. "What he told me was sketchy, no details. Said that Jyrki had kidnapped you from the Imperial palace and held you captive for over a month against your will." He paused to and took a deep breath, "Kit was afraid to give me too many details because he was worried I might go after him."

"What does that mean, go after him?" I asked suddenly shivering.

My uncle's pale green eyes turned stony. "There are things about me you do not know, should not ever need to know, suffice to say that one of my many skills is finding people. Another of my many skills is dealing with them once they have been found." He said.

"Are you a bounty hunter?" I asked in a hushed tone.

Uncle Vahlek curled his lip slightly as if the very notion was distasteful and shook his head. "No." He drew a deep breath. "If I asked you not inquire further about this would you respect my request?" He asked.

"Yes, Zte'sa I would respect it." I replied. The air seemed to shift and the relief I felt from him was almost palpable. It was my turn to ask him something. "If I asked you to go after Jyrki, to find him, would you?"

He regarded me very carefully and then answered. "Yes, but only if *you* requested it." He frowned. "Is that what you want?"

"No." I said after a moment. "No, because someone once told me that his fate and mine were tied together and I believe him. If this is the case then what happens now needs to happen on its own, besides it's my fight."

He gave me a strange look, one that was tinged with a little bit of sadness. "When did you grow up?" He asked with a sigh.

I shrugged with one shoulder. He sat back in the chair, stared at the cup of tea and waited for me to start. When I began to tell him my story, I started with the Fete celebrations party and did not stop until I had told him everything, ending with my being back on Coruscant before I had gone off to Hjal. Occasionally he interrupted to ask for clarification on something and once or twice he had to wait for me to take a deep breath. While I was able to speak about it more openly than before the journey to Hjal, some things were still very difficult to express in words. When I had finished his anger was palpable.

"Now I understand why Kit was so careful with his words." He said quietly.

I just looked at him. The silence in the kitchen was loud and it made me sad. My uncle broke it by changing the subject.

"The man you were with at this fete celebration, this officer you speak of, was he the one who gave you that necklace?" He asked.

I looked down at the little round pendant that I held in my fingers. Without even realising it I had played with it non-stop all the while I had spoken of my ordeal, just looking at it made me smile.

"Yes." I said.

"Is he part of your connection to the Bone Traders?"

"How do you know all these things?"

Uncle Vahlek gave me one his rare and genuine smiles. "I am very good at reading people and every time you speak of something that troubles you your fingers reach for that pendant. When the name Dantassi comes up you caress it and you smile ever so slightly." He drank from his cup and made a sideways head gesture. "Ma'arilite is very rare and very precious so who ever gave it to you obviously thinks a great deal of you. Your expression softens when you touch it. It comforts you, which tells me you have a good connection with him. I saw the same expression in your eyes when you spoke of the man who took you to this fete celebration and put many small clues together."

I smiled and turned away from his gaze but then looked back at him when he chuckled.

"Is my little Lei'lei being courted?" He teased.

I suddenly felt shy and pleased all at the same time. I tried to cover that up with a shrug. "Yes, maybe, I don't know, it's complicated, Zte'sa."

"It usually is." He replied knowingly. "But he makes you smile so I shall let him live."

"Funny, Bel said the same thing."

He laughed and poured us both more tea. He reached over and picked the bone mask up. Once more letting his fingers trace the carvings.

"This is a beautiful piece of work. It was made with much care and love. I envy you." He said quietly. He didn't elaborate and I didn't ask. He handed the mask back to me. I turned it over in my hands, caressing it with my fingertips, still in awe of Navaari's work then laid it gently back on the table.

"The tea will help you sleep. I will be here all day tomorrow so we can talk more if you want to." He said watching me carefully.

I grinned. This was his way of telling me to go to bed. I got up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Night Zte'sa, thank you."

He smiled. "Sleep well Lei'lei, I am quite sure the cuddle of jaxes that await you on your bed have done a good job of keeping it warm for you."

I slipped out of the kitchen only turning around once to see him with my mask once again in his hands staring at it, deeply in thought.

\*\*\*

My work for Lord Vader of learning all I could about the Skywalker boy was not forgotten. All the images I had been blessed with at the Lars' farm had been dutifully entered into the data pad I had brought with me. In the quiet of uncle Vahlek's spare bedroom I was able to sort through the images the little toy sky hopper had given me. I tried to write everything down in to some sort of coherent report. All the notes from what Tosche and Fixer had told me and all the little bits of information that I had slowly collected went into the data pad and slowly I began to get an idea of what this boy, Luke had been like. I mostly felt sorry for him.

I saw a boy with hair almost the same colour as the sand. He was lonely, quiet. He often dreamt of being a pilot. He had spent a great deal of time in the work room where I had found the toy, and like me he had no idea who his birth parents were. The images had been jumbled mostly and I had seen him at various ages, as a very small boy to that of a young man. The sense of being different rippled around everything I had seen. He had known there was more out there but he hadn't known how to get there. He had spent his whole life feeling as though he did not really belong. I wondered if that had changed for him now.

The images from the chulpa had been far more specific, the burial of a woman, and those who had loved her speaking at her grave. The most powerful image was that of a young man, tears in his eyes and bitter anger burning at his heart. It had hurt to see this image. I wondered who he was. I wondered if the woman who had been buried was the same one that the Tusken warrior had spoken of. I wasn't sure but I suspected it was Shmi Skywalker, if that was the case then was the young man her son? The one Tosche had spoken of, the Jedi? I tried to sort it all out and write it down coherently but mostly I was trying to add two and two and coming up with five. I wasn't happy about this assignment any more. I didn't want these memories, these images. The deeper I dug into it the more questions appeared, the more I had the sense that something big was coming. It was this reason that kept me from actually touching the wedding ring I had been given by the Tusken warrior, although I had

pulled it out of my satchel to look at it many times. I could sense that whatever it had to show me would be painful beyond belief and I just wrapped it in a piece of cloth, hiding it away in safety. I wasn't ready for what it had to give. This gift of touch and sight was not strong and for most of my life the images shown to me were rarely so powerful that I felt them physically. These latest visions had been hard to bear and left me restless and sad. I had talked to my uncle about it the day he had stayed at home.

"They call it psychometry. It was a force power, the ability to pick up images and impressions from an inanimate object touched. To read a thing's memories as it were. It is a rare ability." He told me when I asked while I chopped vegetables for lunch and watched as he cooked.

"You knew I had this? How?"

"I used to bring you gifts, toys mainly when I would visit. Some were new but most were things I picked up along my travels. You almost always knew where the toy had come from before I ever had a chance to tell you. Sometimes you even knew the name of the person I had bought it from." He drew a deep breath. "Once I gave you a small wooden doll. The moment you touched it you burst into tears and wept for hours. You kept calling for someone named Kika and it was only after I did some investigation that I discovered the doll had belonged to a small girl who had watched her older sister Kika die in a raid on her village. I knew then that I needed to be very careful when I bought gifts for you, that they needed to be new and not used. It didn't happen all the time and mostly you did not seem bothered by the images and impressions but every now and then something you saw troubled you terribly."

I remembered that doll. I could still see the images it had given me. My mother had taken it away and hidden it. I had been glad of that because the images I had seen had given me nightmares for months

"I had suspected that you were a force baby right from the very beginning. You were just different, we could all feel it. Kit didn't want to see that though, didn't want to acknowledge what you were. It took a lot of convincing to make sure he would not try to punish you every time you used your talents. That would have been the worst thing that anyone could have done to you. He didn't particularly like the Jedi much. That you might have this same power, well he didn't like that much at all. I think he was afraid for you. I told him that given time and patience you would learn to hide it on your own. I wasn't wrong." He sighed. "In my travels I met many Jedi, spent some time with a couple of them, and learned a little about their ways and the Force. During the Clone wars they all felt something was changing, just no one knew what. I remember hearing about the order that was given to cull them, that they were now enemies of the state. I could not believe it, didn't want to believe it." He shook his head. "We just did not know what your talents were and how strong you were. What we did know is that you needed to be kept hidden and safe, you didn't make that easy though." He told me. "On a job once, I met a man from Kiffu, an unusual Jedi who had the same gift you do. He had accidentally touched something of mine and knew more about me than my mother ever would. We talked about it while we travelled to Tatooine, it sounded awful."

I sighed. "I'm glad it's not my strongest gift and it's pretty sporadic but sometimes it's like being hit by a gaffi stick, especially lately." I told him.

He nodded. "I never met anyone with that particular talent who was happy with it." He said, "I can tell you this, the more you use it the stronger it will become."

"You seem to know a lot about this stuff." I said, hesitant to ask the real question.

"Yes, well, we all have pasts." His tone of voice said do not ask so I didn't.

"You said you knew some of the Jedi?" I asked. "What about Anakin Skywalker?"

Uncle Vahlek sat back down in his chair and drew a very deep breath and nodded. "The Chosen One, they all called him. The hero of the Clone Wars. He was killed on Coruscant, or so they say."

I looked at him. "Anakin Skywalker really was the Chosen one? What does that mean? Why is it important?"

"Are you alright? You've gone as white as bleached bone."

I got up suddenly from my chair, waking Maddy who clawed at me in protest as I brushed her from my lap. "Did you know him?"

"No, I never met him, I only knew him by reputation. The holonet was full of stories of his bravery. It was hard not to hear of him."

"Papa said that a boy named Anakin Skywalker won the Boonta Eve classic pod race, are they the same? Was his mother someone named Shmi?" I asked. "A slave from Mos Espa?"

"I don't know, but she may well have been, I know that Anakin was from Tatooine. It was a big story among the Jedi. A Master named Qui-Gon Jin found him, managed to set him free from slavery and took him to be trained at the Temple on Coruscant. Something that was almost unheard of because the boy was too old for their sort of training."

"Did you ever meet this Qui-Gon Jin? What did he look like?"

"Once or twice. He was tall, had long hair, blue eyes and a beard. Very soft spoken...Lei'lei, sit down, you look like you are going to pass out." He got up and made me sit back down on my chair. "What is going on?" He asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know. I have been having dreams about a man who fits that description exactly. He comes to me asking about someone called the Chosen One. He mentioned the name Anakin once but I was never sure if he was this Chosen one or not. He keeps telling me I know the Chosen One but how is that possible if he is dead? These are just dreams and they are vague at the best of times. I tried to ask Lord Vader about but he did not wish to speak about the topic. I keep hearing this name over and over, first Jyrki saying that this was this Anakin who killed the kids at the Jedi Temple, then Sola Naberrie who said he was the Jedi assigned to protect the Queen, and everyone keeps telling me he's dead. If he is dead why does his name keep coming back again and again to haunt me? What is his connection to the kid from the Lars's homestead? None of this makes sense. I feel like I am missing something, something really important and it is starting to drive me mad." I pinched the bridge of my nose and tried to stave off the white noise threatening to overrun my head.

"Don't push at it, when the answer is ready it will come." He said gently. "Tell me about these dreams."

So I did. He listened quietly and when I was done he said thoughtfully. "That sounds like Qui-Gon."

"What happened to him?"

He sighed. "He was killed on Naboo, during the blockade crisis. You probably don't know much about that do you?"

I shook my head. "Galactic history wasn't really my strong point in school."

He refilled our tea cups and began to tell me about the rise of Palpatine, about the blockade on Naboo, about the clone wars and the downfall of the Jedi. He spoke for hours telling me stories about this time period as though he had seen it all for himself.

"Was Palpatine right? Did the Jedi want to take over the government?"

He sighed. "I don't know. It was a terrible time, very confusing. One day the clone warriors were fighting with the Jedi against the Separatists and the next day they were hunting the Jedi. The war was declared over and we were suddenly an Empire under the rule of Palpatine with the senate reduced to a puppet theatre. No one knew what had happened, what had hit them." He shook his head. "I lost many



friends in that war." He said his voice suddenly full of sorrow. We were silent for a long time, only the hum of the refrigerator unit, the bubbling of the stew and the purring of the Jax on my lap broke the silence.

"I have to go to Mos Espa." I said suddenly.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because that is where it all began."

"I'll take you in the morning then." He said without even questioning why.

"I want to go alone."

He shook his head. "No. Mos Espa is not a nice place and you don't know your way around."

"I'm not a little kid anymore." I said crossly even though what he had said was true. I had only been to Mos Espa once and that had been a long time ago.

"I know but all the same I'll take you in the morning. I have business there I can do so you won't have me babysitting you the whole time but I won't let you go alone, your father would never forgive me if something else bad happened to you. You are damned lucky I let you go off into the desert on your own and that was only because Mej-mej is pretty vicious when she wants to be. Your strange meeting with the Tuskens was risk enough. I'm not taking any more chances so don't even think of fighting with me on this. You won't win." That edge was back in his voice.

I made a face but part of me knew he was right and although I didn't want to admit it, his offer relieved me a little. I nodded. "Okay. But I have no idea what I am looking for, it could take a while."

"Fair enough and I might be able to help you with that, I have a few connections." He said sounding pleased but looking troubled. "We'll start early, shuttle in and then maybe head out to Mos Eisley when we're done, there are things I need to talk with Kit about, so pack your things okay?"

"Yes Zte'sa." I said getting up. I was tired, it was very late and I got the strange feeling that this circular snake eating its tail was about to bump into something big.

\*\*\*

Mos Espa looked like a giant serpent from the air. It was a largest city on the planet and mostly be default the unofficial capitol. The shuttle flight to get there from Wayfar was two hours long and not especially pleasant. I was glad uncle Vahlek had come with me.

We disembarked and the smell hit me like a slap. Mos Eisley smelt dusty, the air tinged with the scent of transport fuel and oil. Here, there were too many beings all living on top of one another. The city smelled of fear, sweat and the refuse from over population. It was unpleasant and I wrinkled my nose. Uncle Vahlek laughed softly.

"Core worlds have spoiled you, Lei'lei." He said as he manoeuvred easily through the crowds of people who swarmed about the shuttle port. I had to trot to keep up with him and was jostled as those who had moved out of his way filled the space where he had been back in again.

"Where are we going?" I asked as we walked swiftly through the twisty streets.

"You want to know about the Boonta Eve Race, yes? We go ask someone who knows about it."

The town hall was a fairly large building, and uncle Vahlek seemed to know his way around the building. I followed him through the labyrinth of corridors and stairs down into the basement, to a dimly lit room.

"Bareq, Bareq! You here or sleeping!?" My uncle yelled as we entered the room.

"Shut up d' yelling, I'm old, not deaf!" Came the gruff reply two minutes later appearing from behind one of the floor to ceiling archive shelves was a very annoyed looking Ithorian.

"Oh 'tis you, what you wanting now?" Bareq asked my uncle, ignoring me. I had seen very few Ithorians in my life up close, although one or two did come through Mos Eisley, they mostly kept to themselves. They were among the more unusual looking beings in the galaxy. They were mostly peaceful, graceful beings with a long curved neck and T shaped head. They had two mouths, two throats and really melodic almost beautiful voices.

"Manners, Bareq, my NahLei'lei Merlyn is with me today." Uncle Vahlek said pushing me in front of him so that Bareq could see me. "Bareq, is a bit blind so forgive his rudeness."

"Blind my..." He stopped before saying whatever it was he really wanted to say and bent down to peer at me. "Ah, never be knowing you had attachments Akosh, be thinking you a loner guy. What you wanting?"

"My NahLei'lei wishes to know about the boy, Anakin Skywalker and the Boonta Eve Classic he won. You are the city's archivist I thought, perhaps wrongly, that you might be able to help her, however we can go talk to Agle instead."

"Naw naw, you in d'right place. I be knowing all. I have facts, files, much informations. Anakin you say, Skywalker..." He nodded and then shuffled back into the stacks. "He'd only human to win d' Boonta Eve race ever. Big thing!"

At my uncle's urging I followed Bareq into the stacks as the Ithorian searched for information.

"I was there, saw d' race. Very exciting, lots of folkses unhappy they bet against d' boy." He sighed. "Ah yes, here we are." He pulled out several data pads and shuffled back towards me. "You can be reading these, it's all we got on d' boy. Was a slave here you know, he and his mother. A junk dealer called Watto owned them. He was a cranky ol' b... . It all in d' datapads. You can sit in d' corner there and read them, not to leave this room though, forbidden. You can be making notes if'n you want. Will be ten credits for my work."

Before I could dig any money out my uncle had already paid the fee. "Are you content to sit here and read for a few hours while I'm gone?"

"Yes, Zte'sa." I nodded wondering how it was that people who had known you since babyhood could always somehow manage to make you feel as though you had never grown up.

"Good, I have business to attend to, should be back in three hours or so. I know a good place for lunch, so don't go anywhere until I come back for you." He told me.

"Yes, Zte'sa." I said again rolling my eyes. I was convinced he still thought I was ten.

He laughed and patted me on the head. "Bareq? Bareq!" He yelled.

The Ithorian ambled back out from behind the stacks. "Quit with d' yelling, I tell you, I can hear fine. What you want now?"

"Look after my NahLei'lei, or I will tell the kreetles to come and have lunch in this room." Uncle Vahlek said.

The Ithorian shook his great curved head and sighed. "You a rough man, Akosh, mean to me. Your little charge is safe here, Ithorians look peaceful but we being very handy when backed into a corner and have to fight."

My uncle smiled and nodded. "Fine then." He said and he left without further conversation. Bareq looked at me for a moment and shook his head. "Was never knowing that man had anyone he cared for. How you get in his heart? Men like him have no one they treasure, too dangerous." He asked.

I shrugged. "I've known him my whole life." I said. "What do you mean by 'men like him'?"

Bareq gave me a long steady stare which was a bit unnerving. "He a finder, among other things, very deadly." He said. "No attachments, no strings." And then with snort he turned his back on me. "He not be happy with me telling you his business if'n he hasn't already told you. Best be reading now or else he be back and have to pay more credits."

I did as he suggested. Curled up in the surprisingly comfortable chair in the far corner and began to read all about the Boonta Eve pod race and the boy that changed its history.

Time just slipped by, the archives Bareq had given me were really interesting, with images and information, the actual race had been captured and the highlights were to be seen. It made me wish I had actually been there, it looked so exciting. I had never seen a pod race live; the Empire had banned them from taking place, not that this actually stopped it from happening.

There were also stories about Anakin and his mother, where they had lived, who their owner had been, and lots of other little stories and gossip which had been gathered to round out the life of this little boy who had won the pod race. There was one small image of the boy with a small group of people gathered around him after he had crossed the finish line; two of the faces were known to me. One was Amidala, the queen of Naboo in disguise and the other was the Jedi Qui-Gon Jin. I stared at the image for a really long time hardly believing that this man who was dead was the very same who kept appearing in my dreams. I found it strange to think that this little boy had become the hero of the Clone wars. He looked so young, just an ordinary kid. I was deep in thought when uncle Vahlek returned almost four hours later.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" He asked bringing me out of my reverie. I looked up from the datapads.

"I think so." I said, and then showed him the picture.

He nodded. "That's Qui-Gon alright. Ready for lunch?"

"Yep." I said getting up. I had made notes and copied some of the images and data into my own datapad." I took the pile of archives and gave them back to Bareq who was now sitting at the desk near the front of the room.

"Was helping you?" He asked.

"Yes, thank you."

"Any time you be wanting more help and informations I am here." He said and then looked up at my uncle. "And you be speaking nice to the kreetles, they do terrible bad damage to the archives. Tell them to stay away or bother Agle instead. I be having enough troubles as is without bugs destroying things."

Uncle Vahlek grinned. "Thank you for all your help, Bareq." He said and with me in tow, left.

"You wouldn't really send kreetles to destroy his archives, would you?" I asked as we walked out.

Uncle Vahlek laughed. "No, Bareq and I have known each other a very long time and we argue like an old married couple. He is one of the most amazing beings I know, truth be told."

It was hot outside in comparison to the soothing cool of the archive room and bright. I trotted beside uncle Vahlek as he made his way through the crowded streets. He took me to a small, somewhat out of the way café and we sat outside under the shade of the awning. A cranky Rodian came and took the order and came back with our drinks. I watched people passing back and forth, going about their business, ignoring us and everything around them. Lunch came and it was surprisingly good. Uncle Vahlek chatted about some of Mos Espa's more interesting aspects and I listened. It was a nice way to pass the time and I was grateful that I could spend it

with him. In the last week I felt that we had become very close. I had gotten to know him as more than just a fun uncle who brought me interesting toys and pets to play with. He had become a friend and someone I could talk to. I was happy with the information I had found in the archives. I knew that Lord Vader would probably not have been so pleased about me digging up Anakin Skywalker's past but I was becoming more and more convinced that the two Skywalkers were somehow connected. I was pretty certain that once I sorted these connections all out the story would make itself known to me. I wasn't sure if finding all the information at the archives was at all what my dream had meant but it seemed to me that I had accomplished all I could in this town. I was looking forward to going home. Uncle Vahlek had just paid the bill when he suddenly got up, seeing someone across the street.

"Stay put, I'll be right back. I need to talk to that man, it will just be a moment and then we can go. Bedi is apparently planning a full scale family dinner tonight, this means we need to get there on time. I do not want to risk her wrath." He told me.

I nodded and watched as he made his way across the street weaving through the people and the traffic with surprising ease. I lost interest in what he was doing once he had stopped the person he wanted to talk to. The late afternoon was always a nice time of day. I sat back in my seat and watched the world around me. My thoughts drifted a little to all the things going on in my life and I wondered what would be in store for me when I returned to the Imperial City. Now that I was away from it I realised I didn't miss it at all. I missed Thrawn. I missed Master Kjestyll, Shiv and I missed Lord Vader but I did not miss Coruscant, the palace or the Emperor. It was a relief to be so far away from it all.

At first I didn't notice the woman who was standing a little ways away from the café, staring at me but after a few moments it became unnerving. I stared back at her wondering if I knew her at all but she didn't look familiar to me. She was an older woman with a face that had seen better times. She dressed typical to the region and her hair, which had been tied up in a simple bun was a sandy grey colour. After a few moments of staring I looked away. I thought she would just go away but instead she came up to the table and continued to look at me. It was unnerving. Unsure of what to do I looked around for Uncle Vahlek, but he was still deeply entrenched in what looked like a fairly serious conversation and I didn't think that would be ending any time soon.

"Can I help you?" I asked the woman who seemed utterly fixated on me.

"Your name is Merlyn, yes?" She asked.

I nodded. "Do I know you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, but I knew your mother."

I raised my eyebrows in question and asked with some disbelief. "You knew Eri' Gabriel?"

She shook her head. "No, I knew your real mother, the woman who gave birth to you." She said. "The one who gave you your name."

"What?" I managed to whisper. Despite the warmth of the day all the hair on the back of my neck was suddenly standing on end.

She took a very deep breath and shook her head. "I don't even know where to begin. She told me this would happen but I didn't believe it." She wasn't making any sense, and I could feel her distress coming off her in great waves. It made me a little nauseous.

"I have no idea who you are or what you are talking about but I need to go, my uncle will be waiting for me." I said starting to get up. Suddenly, I didn't like the feeling that my world was about to come crashing down about me in a very messy way.

She grabbed my hand and pulled at me. "Please, listen to me." She spoke quickly. "I know how this must sound, but it is true. You were left someplace for others to find and raise, probably a transport ship. She left you with a journal which only you can read and you probably have some remarkable talents that most people don't. Am I close?"

I sat back down hard in the chair. She now had my full attention. I nodded in answer to her question and looked again over to where uncle Vahlek was still standing. In my heart I knew there would be no avoiding this now, something set into motion that would be impossible to stop.

"Will you come to my home with me, I'd feel better about explaining all this to you there and I have something that belonged to your mother that she wanted you to have. I have waited a long time for this moment."

"Who are you?" I asked realising that I did not even know her name.

"My name is Rikka Blane. I was your mother's best friend." She said. I knew that everything she had told me was the truth. She had not lied but she was scared. I knew that she was very upset about seeing me. I could feel that without even concentrating. From some place deep inside of my soul I knew this was the answer to the unasked question, this is what I been waiting for. I could choose to get up and walk away and never know the truth or I could take the chance and go with this woman and find out where I really came from and perhaps why I had been so readily abandoned.

"I need to tell my uncle where I am going." I said pointing at him.

"That man, the one with white hair, is your uncle?" She sounded more than a little surprised.

I nodded.

She made a face that was not happy and shook her head. "Come with me, he'll find you, it's what he's good at." She said bitterly.

I looked over at him and then back to Rikka who had now stood up. "Please," she said. "I have carried these secrets a long time waiting for you."

I didn't know what else to do. I stood up and began to follow her through the streets of Mos Espa. I looked back over my shoulder but uncle Vahlek had moved and I couldn't see him anymore. He was going to be really cross with me but I needed to know if what this woman was telling me was real.

She lived in a quiet street off the main core of the city, about ten minutes away from the café. A small unassuming house tucked away behind some larger apartment homes. As I followed her in through to door I didn't know what to expect. I didn't think that I was in any danger but I had terrible knots in my stomach. Her home was nice, simple and tidy. She ushered me into the small kitchen and gestured for me to sit at the table there.

"Can I get you something to drink?" She asked.

"No, thank you." I said folding my hands on my lap. "How do you know I am who you are looking for?" I asked trying to sound calm and business like.

She made a 'wait a moment' gesture with her finger and vanished from the room for a second. When she came back she handed me a holo-picture. It was of two young women hugging each other and laughing. One I knew was a much younger version of Rikka but the other made my heart skip a beat and I forget to breathe. My hands shook as I put the holo image back on the table. A very sickly, prickling sensation starting from the pit of my gut worked its way up into my head and I thought, just for a second, I would pass out.

*'Breathe just breathe'*, I heard the man from my dreams voice whisper in my mind.

"I know who you are," she said seeing my reaction, "because you are the spitting image of your mother. Will you have something to drink now?"

It was all I could do just to nod and watch as she filled a small glass then handed it to me. I sipped at the cold juice and listened as she began to talk.

"Your mother was a woman named Akali L'uanna, she was a Jedi and she was my best friend." She said.

I watched as she tried to gather her thoughts. I could feel how hard this was for her but I didn't know what to think or say. I just stared at her and waited. Her words were not sinking in.

"Your mother and I had known each other since childhood. My family worked at the Jedi temple as part of the civilian work force and she and I became friends. It was not encouraged, these friendships but they happened anyway. I cannot count the number of times she was there for me. So when she showed up here one day, pregnant, scared to death with no place else to turn I was glad to have a chance to repay her for all she had done for me." She paused with a long sigh. "She would not say who the father of her child was even though I had asked. She was confused and conflicted. The Jedi were not supposed to have relationships other than purely platonic. They were certainly not supposed to have children. She wouldn't tell me what had happened but she was terrified and that frightened me because of all the people I had ever met in my life she was the one person I thought to be fearless."

"We had lost touch after I married and left Coruscant to come here. I suppose that was normal. She was a Jedi with great responsibilities and we had drifted apart. I had tried to write to her a few times but never heard back. So, I was surprised to see her at my door step looking like death warmed up. She spoke about the war, what the history books call the Clone wars, and how terrible things had become. She had been involved in the Outer Rim disputes but she wouldn't speak of what had happened. Only that she had not imagined things could get so bad. She told me that I was lucky I had moved so far away, that on Coruscant the world had turned upside down. When she had discovered she was pregnant she thought only about the safety of her baby. She would not speak about who fathered you."

"She had just left her duties, her work behind. She said that you were all that mattered. I think she did not know how to deal with the guilt she felt between her need and love for you and her duty to the Jedi Order. She had been on the run for some time and it had taken its toll. She was not in good shape by the time she came to me and when you came into this world it was a little earlier than you should have. You were born here, in this house. She named you after her favourite flower from her home planet of Naboo." She said with a sad smile. "Her labour was really long and hard and I thought she was going to die in the process. What did I know about birth or helping with the process? I was no doctor and she refused outside help. She didn't want anyone to know she was here or that you existed. When you were born it was a small miracle really, I wished that my husband were still alive to share it, we could not have our own children and he had died of Tourning's syndrome some years prior."

"She stayed with me for a week and after a long discussion she decided to return to her duties and help fight out the war. I told her you would be safe here with me and that I would love you as though you were my very own. You were here for almost eight months. Such a good baby, an amazing baby really. You hardly ever cried and you always seemed content. It never occurred to me that you would be in any real danger, after all no one had known she was with child. When she returned almost a year after your birth, I knew from the look in her eyes that something terrible had happened."

"She told me that her absence had raised questions and that there had been rumours about her and her relationship with the man who fathered you. She didn't think they knew she had borne a child but she was scared that even a whisper of such a thing could somehow get back to me, we had been friends and that was a known

fact. Finding me was not so hard. She said it wasn't safe anymore for you to be with me, or for me to have you here. We argued a lot about what to do. I wanted you both here. No one would come here looking for a single Jedi, or so I had thought but she told me I didn't understand. The Jedi were being hunted like animals, slaughtered on sight, that there were bounties on their heads. She had said that the newly declared Emperor had decreed this but she didn't know why. She had tried to return to Coruscant but a beacon had warned her away, while she was on the run she had heard snippets of news reports and whispers of terrible things that were being done to hunt the renegade Jedi down and kill them. These people are ruthless, she had said. It was as if the entire galaxy had gone mad and been turned inside out. She believed that they would find her and if they even suspected a child they would hunt for that child as well. If they found you, she said, they would kill you and they would not even blink. She knew that you were force sensitive. She said she could feel it in you and that if she could so could others. She wanted you as far away as possible for anything that connected her with you. I disagreed with her but in the end she was your mother. She was special, she was a Jedi, she knew things, could do things I could not even dream of."

"One night, while I was asleep she took you and left, I never knew where. There was no note, no letter of explanation, nothing. I suppose she felt that if I really knew nothing then I could say nothing. Two months later a letter, along with a sealed box, was delivered. The letter said that you were safe. She had found good people who would care for you, give you a good home far away from the Empire, and that there were no connections to tie you to her or me in any way. She had written that I was not to be sad, that I would meet you one day here in Mos Espa and I would know you by your looks. That when I did find you I was to ask about a journal only you could read but she never said why." Rikka drew a deep breath and sipped her juice. "I didn't understand any of this but one of her gifts was that she sometimes saw into the future and I assumed that she had seen this. All these years I have carried this story around in me and now here you are."

I sat there feeling as though I had just been punched in the gut. I was trembling. It was all incredibly surreal. There were so many things I wanted to ask and just could not. I had lost the ability of coherent thought. I was grateful when the front door open loudly and uncle Vahlek strode into the kitchen. I didn't have to see his face to know he was furious.

"I told you he would find you." Rikka said in a resigned voice. "He always finds those that he seeks."

"Quiet, woman!" He snarled.

I looked up at him, our eyes met and his anger immediately turned to worry. "Lei'lei what is it, are you hurt?" He asked coming to squat down beside my chair.

I just stared at him and then said in a voice I didn't recognize as mine. "I was born in this house."

There was moment of perfect stillness in the room and then uncle Vahlek stood up. He looked at Rikka who nodded.

"Tell him." I whispered to her. "Tell him everything you just told me."

And she did. Uncle Vahlek stood very still as her story unfolded a second time, less scattered, more coherent. When she was done she left the room without saying a word. He pulled a chair over and sat next to me. I pushed the holo-image Rikka had given me over to him before he could say anything and watched his face when he looked at it. He let the air out of his lungs slowly.

"You said you knew some of the Jedi, did you know her?" I asked.

"No Lei'lei I didn't." He spoke gently, he spoke the truth. "Sarlacc's teeth, the resemblance is uncanny."

Rikka came back into the room holding a plain metal box. She set it on the table and pushed it to me. "She wanted you to have this. It was sealed, I never opened it."

I glanced at uncle Vahlek and then gingerly touched the box. Nothing happened so I broke the seal and opened it. I heard uncle Vahlek make a small sound of surprise and Rikka covered her mouth with her hand. Lying on a folded piece of cloth was something I had only ever seen when I was in the presence of Lord Vader.

"Her lightsaber." Rikka said in a voice that was filled with sorrow. "She would not have given that up if she thought she would live."

I bit my lip and uncle Vahlek looked at me. "You do not have to if you do not want to." He said quietly.

"Yes, yes I do." I told him. "Because if I don't do this now I never will."

He nodded but he wasn't happy and he shifted a little closer to me as though his physical presence would shield me from the hurt he knew was coming.

I reached over and picked up the lightsaber knowing that what would hit me would be terrible. All my life this one gift had made itself known in strange and often unassuming ways, building up slowly and quietly. In the last week I had had more visions and they had been more powerful than for most of my life and suddenly I understood why, to prepare me for this exact moment. All the training I had undergone at the hand of Lord Vader and Master Kjestyll had readied me for this because it would be one of the most difficult things I would ever have to see. I was not wrong. I took a deep steadying breath, looked at uncle Vahlek who nodded and then grasped the blade's handle firmly. I jerked back hard as the images assaulted me. I heard Rikka move and uncle Vahlek stopped her.

"No, don't touch her." He ordered, holding his arm out straight shielding me from her interference.

I gasped as the visions from this object tumbled about me. It was physically painful. There were so many memories, so much information that it was too much to take in and understand all at once. Her life as a Jedi, the things she had done and known, the man who had fathered me, the war, even her own death were all tied up in this weapon that had been a part of her very being. It was as though I was being shown a holo story on fast forward with burning, powerful emotions embedded into it. I was numb when the visions finished. Her lightsaber had been a part of her, it held her soul and I never wanted to touch it again. It rolled from my open hand as I let it go. Uncle Vahlek caught it before it fell off the table and laid it gingerly back in the box.

The room was utterly still. I looked at uncle Vahlek. "Zte'sa, I want to go home now." I whispered. With his help, I got up slowly; it was like moving through water.

Rikka watched me. "She loved you so much and so did I." She murmured.

I just looked at her. I didn't know what else to say. Uncle Vahlek gathered up the box with the lightsaber in it and tucked it carefully in his bag.

"Will I ever see you again?" She asked. There was such a sadness in her voice I thought it would break my heart.

I had no idea how to answer her and I didn't have to because uncle Vahlek spoke first.

"You did what you were meant to." He said his voice was firm but also gentle. "Give her time, Rikka Blane. When your paths are meant to cross again they will."

She regarded him coldly. "And what is your part to play in all of this, Tze'yusha'Jin?" she asked. I had never heard the word she called him before. I did not know its meaning but there was anger behind it and fear.

He just gave her a cold stare. "I am the girl's sworn guardian. You know what that means." He said almost angrily. "Be at peace."



She was very afraid of uncle Vahlek but I had no idea why. He waited until she gave him a small nod. She watched as he tucked a protective arm around my shoulders and didn't say anything else. As we left there were tears in her eyes.

I could not recall the walk to the shuttle port or the flight back to Mos Eisley. I just kept replaying the images of my mother over and over again in my head. Her life, her lover, her death, I couldn't shut them out. Uncle Vahlek kept silent. It was dark by the time we reached home and I was utterly exhausted.

We walked in the house and immediately everyone knew something was wrong. I just shook my head. How could I even begin to speak of what had happened? I needed to escape, to be some place quiet to think. Without saying a word I left the kitchen where we all stood and made my way up to the rooftop. As I walked away I heard uncle Vahlek start to explain what had happened and felt the stunned shock that fell on the room.

I sat with my back against the domed roof and stared at the stars in the sky wondering how such a large and beautiful universe could be so twisted and cruel. I could not cry. I wasn't even angry. I felt strangely empty. Everything I had known in my life was being systematically turned upside down. All the things I had believed in no longer held sway or meaning. Questions I had never thought to ask before now screamed at me in my head. I was an illegitimate child born of a soldier and a Jedi in the midst of a war, hidden away from the very people I ended up working with and for. It was somehow not even a surprise but I couldn't quite digest it. Had the Emperor known this? Had he guessed? What about Lord Vader, he had been trained as a Jedi once, Palpatine had told me. Had he known my mother? Had he been among those who had hunted for her? Nothing happens by chance, the Dantassi said, there are no coincidences. I wonder what they had to say about being driven mad by it all. It was my father who eventually came to make sure I had not jumped off the roof. He handed me a glass of moonglow and I sipped at it gratefully. For a very long time nothing was said, he was waiting for me to break the silence.

"Who am I, papa?" I asked.

I felt him smile and he ruffled my hair in a way he had not done since I was very small. "You are my beautiful, talented, wilful, mysterious daughter." He said. It was the perfect answer, perhaps the only answer. He waited a few moments then said. "Come back downstairs, everyone is worried. Dinner is waiting and so is your family."

I smiled at him and let him pull me to my feet. He cuddled me close. "No matter what," He whispered in my ear, "I love you, I love you more than anything in the galaxy and nothing will ever change that."

"I love you too, papa." And I meant it.

He nodded, "I know that, pet." He said and we went back downstairs into the house where the others were waiting.

\*\*\*

For the next few weeks I lived in a world of engines and hyperdrives. My father had not been joking about the shortage of half decent mechanics. There was certainly no shortage of work and I threw myself into it. I could forget about pretty much everything when I was fixing a ship. None of my family pressed me for answers or details. Uncle Vahlek had told them everything Rikka Blane had said, there wasn't much to add. I think everyone was waiting for me to open that up and they were all afraid to push. That night, after dinner I had hidden on my ship under the pretence of doing work. Instead, I had sat at the little dining table and tried re read all of Thrawn's letters as if that very act would bring me some peace of mind but after reading the same sentence over and over again, I realised that not even Thrawn's words would help.

Uncle Vahlek had come to find me long after everyone else had gone to bed. He had looked at the small pile of hand written paper letters but had not commented. He watched as I had cleared them from the table and slipped them back in the ornate box I stored them in.

"I brought you this." He had said sitting down across from me placing the metal box with my birth mother's lightsaber in it in front of me.

I had let out my breath noisily and shaken my head. "I don't want it." I had said, folding my arms across my chest. I didn't want to touch it.

Uncle Vahlek had looked at me for a while and then had said slowly. "Okay."

"Will you keep it for me?" I had asked. "I don't want anyone else to know about it and I don't know what to do with it."

He had nodded slowly and taken it back, returning it to the satchel. "When you are ready, you know where to find it." He'd said.

"Thank you." I had said.

"Get some sleep, Lei'lei, sitting up all night brooding won't change what has happened, won't change the past and won't change the universe." He had said. "I doubt that this knowledge will even change you all that much, it just gives you a bigger picture of yourself, is all."

"I just don't know what to think of it all, Zte'sa." I had said. I was so tired.

"Well then, don't think. Give it time. You have been through an awful lot in the last year and a half, why do you feel you need to race through it all and have answers for everything now? You should know by now the universe unfolds its secrets one piece at a time, you can't force it or rush it and trying to do so will only drive you insane." He had said. "You always did try to run before you could walk."

I had given him a small smile and nodded.

He had studied me for a few moments. "Look, if you want to talk or a place to think, come out to the house. I'll have a key made for you and couriered out. The jaxes would love it, I'm sure." He paused. "That woman in Mos Espa, Rikka Blane, will be there when you want to know more about Akali L'uanna and if you don't want to go out to Mos Espa alone I will go with you. I always have things I can do in the city, even if it is only to pester Bareq." He smiled. "You are not alone Lei'lei, so don't isolate yourself, you have a wonderful family who loves you very much. Don't shut them, us, out."

"Thanks Zte'sa."

"Any time." He had said as he got up to leave. "I'll take care of this for you." He had patted his satchel.

I had nodded and watched as he left my ship. He had been right. Sitting around brooding was not the answer, fixing things was and my father put me to work. Both Bedi and Bel had tried to cheer me up but I didn't need cheering up, I needed time to think. In the end it had been my father who had understood. He let me work, he didn't nag about the long hours I kept, or that I sometimes spent the night sleeping on my ship instead of in the house, and that sometimes I went up out to the Bluff and sat there for hours and hours on end. Of course, we had been through a similar situation before, when my mother had been killed. This time he understood that space and time was what I needed most of all and he gave it. When I was ready, I talked about it all and he listened.

It had taken me longer than I had thought it would to sort through all the information I had gathered and put it down into some sort coherent report for Lord Vader, my mind was on other things. What had seemed to me to be a huge jumble of images and thoughts had not seemed like much once I had transcribed everything from my head to datapad. When I was finished and felt that the report was as full as it would ever be I contacted Lord Vader, or tried to. For several weeks all I got was a sour faced officer on board Lord Vader's ship telling me the Dark Lord was

unavailable for personal contact but I was welcome to leave a message. I should have been worried, perhaps, but I didn't sense anything wrong and put this lack of contact down to standard operating procedure while on some sort of covert operations. Although it wasn't normal for him to completely ignore me for long periods of time, Lord Vader was often unreachable. I didn't mind, I was happy on Tatooine and quite content to tinker with engines and manage my duties from home and Bestine. He contacted me five days before Boonta Eve.

"You have information for me?" He asked.

"Good afternoon Lord Vader, I hope that you are well?" I said ignoring his usual brusque manner for a moment then added. "Yes, I do you wish me to uplink now?"

"No, you will deliver this in person. I do not trust this to even the most secure channel. We will be in your sector shortly and you may rendezvous with me at these coordinates and personally deliver all the information you have. I shall expect you here at 22:00 CST at the latest."

"Am I to remain on board with you?" I asked, wondering if I should say my goodbyes now or not.

"That will be determined when I have studied the information." He replied tersely. "I shall expect you not to be late." He said and shut the connection.

By my calculations it would take me three hours to reach the rendezvous point pushing the engines just a little bit so I aimed for four and went to talk to my father. I wasn't sure what would happen so I wanted to leave properly and not just on a rush and hope that I'd be coming back. With Lord Vader it was impossible to tell what he wanted and I wasn't about to try and second guess him.

I arrived at the rendezvous point on time and once on board the *Executor* I was escorted to his personal chambers by two stormtroopers who refused to hold a conversation with me. Stormtroopers don't have much of a sense of humour. Once inside his private rooms I was left alone. He was sitting in his hyperbaric chamber which was just opening up like some giant egg split in two. The dim lighting in the room made it difficult to see details and I was glad of this. I watched in morbid fascination as his helmet was mechanically lowered onto his scarred head. I breathed a small sigh of relief when his damaged skull was covered and the soft hiss of the pressure equalization signalled completion of the mechanical arm's task. I waited with my hands behind my back while he slowly got out of the strange cocoon like chamber and it closed up on its own.

He signalled me to follow him into one of the smaller conference rooms.

"I trust your flight here was uneventful." He said being uncharacteristically pleasant. "My aide readied stim'caf or tea if you wish." He gestured to the tray on the table, two carafes, milk in a jug and a single cup. He waited until I had poured a cup of 'caf then asked about my work.

I handed him the data pad. I sat down, sipped my drink, made a face and waited while he scanned it carefully.

"Is this all you found out?" He asked once he was done. He tossed the data pad on the table.

"There isn't much to find. He didn't have an exciting life in Tatooine and not that many people really knew him." I said. "I did find this at the farm he lived on." I pulled out the broken toy from my satchel and handed it to him.

He took it carefully from my fingers and looked at it, turning it over in his large, black gloved hands. "What am I supposed to get from this?" He asked annoyed.

"You don't get images, sensations from objects?" I asked a little surprised.

He regarded me for a moment then asked. "Do you?"

I nodded slowly, "My uncle called it psychometry." I said.

He paused for a moment and seemed to be re-evaluating me. "Another little talent you seem to have kept hidden." He said dangerously. "Show me what you saw."

I shook my head. I didn't want to do that. All the images I held in my head were a jumbled mess and disorganized. I had no way to sort them out and present them in any logical manner; this included the images of Shmi's burial and the images of my birth mother. I didn't want him to see these things. I wasn't going to get a choice in this matter though. He had plucked me out of my chair by my arm and pulled me up close to his face.

"Show me!" He commanded.

"My lord, everything is in the report...." I didn't get the chance to finish my sentence before his grip on my arm turned very painful.

"Your disobedience is tedious, show me now!" He snarled.

I nodded and he let go of my arm. I was scared and tired so it was a struggle to get my thoughts in order and my breathing steady. I needed to be able to concentrate so that I did not show him the wrong thing.

I focussed on the little toy and pulled the images it had shown me to the forefront of my thoughts, Luke as a small boy, Luke as a young man, Luke arguing with his uncle, Luke with new droids. Up until that image Lord Vader was calm but as soon as he saw the two droids, an R2 unit and a Protocol droid he growled shaking my concentration. As I tried to get back on track he pushed at me and I lost the train of thought completely. Random images cropped up instead. Images of the burial, of the boy I thought was Anakin, the chulpas laid on the mourning marker. Sharp and clear images of my birth mother flashed through my mind as well until he broke the mental connection and pushed me away from him. He stared at me and the anger coming from him in waves was a physical thing.

"You must learn control." He hissed. "You were told to find out about Luke Skywalker and instead I find you disobeyed me." He was angry.

"I did not! It is impossible to ask about the name Skywalker without hearing the name Anakin as well. He is a folk hero on Tatooine!" I retorted hotly.

He advanced on me with a deadly menace. "I told you never to mention that name again! I told you he is dead!"

I put my hands on my hips; I was starting to get annoyed. "Well he may be dead but he is not forgotten! Why does it make you so angry, anyway? Why do you care?" I asked.

He turned away from me but his rage flowed about him like sand on the wind. Seconds seemed like hours until he asked. "Who is the woman, the one who looks like you?"

I did not want to get into this conversation.

"Who is she?" He asked again keeping his back to me. His tone of voice said he would not ask again nicely.

"Her name was Akali L'uanna, she was a Jedi." I said quietly.

"I remember her." He nodded. "Why do you have images of her in your head?"

I paused not quite certain how to say what I needed to say. I could feel his rising temper start to get the better of him and blurted it out. "She was my birth mother." I said through gritted teeth.

He nodded slowly. "Yes, now I see. Now, I understand why you always seemed familiar to me."

I stared at his back in disbelief. I wanted to scream at him but instead drew a deep breath. "When we met for the first time, you knew I had been adopted even when no one else knew, you did. How?"

He whirled around to face me and I involuntarily stepped back from him. "Do you think, for a second that I would allow you to work for me, so closely with me and I should not know exactly who and what you are? I make it my business to know

everything about those around me, especially people with force powers." He said. "Your adoption papers are on record, it was never kept secret, except maybe to you. Now I see that these papers were cleverly created, excellent forgeries I might add to get past our Intel screening. They indicated your birth parents were traders from Corellia and there was nothing to suggest otherwise, except your force talents. You were never what you appeared to be and now I understand why."

I looked at him, "Did you know? Did you know she was my birth mother?" My heart was pounding but not from fear, I was angry and I was having trouble controlling it.

He shook his head. "No, but I suspected you had some Jedi blood in you. I did not see the resemblance until now. I did not know Jedi L'uanna well, our paths did not cross very often and it was a very long time ago" He added.

"Why did you not ever say anything about what you suspected?"

"What should I have said?" He asked. "Telling you of your possible heritage was none of my concern as long as you did your job and remained loyal to the Empire what do I care about who gave birth to you?"

My anger flared. "Did you kill her? Did you hunt her down?" I asked.

"I did not have to. Her lover did that for us as he was supposed to, as he was ordered to." He replied coldly.

I opened my mouth to answer but was at a loss for words. I wanted to ask if he knew how she had died but could not. Instead anger and grief poured out into the room, both his and mine and clashed. I yelled at him without thinking about the consequences.

"You really are heartless! Why did you ask me to find out about this boy, Luke? He's just some poor kid who never even knew who his real parents were. He had a miserable life in the middle of nowhere on the most forsaken planet in the galaxy!"

He stopped for a moment. "You sympathise with him." He said in amazement.

"I know what it is like to lose someone I loved. I know what it is like to grow up without a mother. I know how it feels not to know who my real parents are, not to know anything about where I truly come from. So yes, I sympathise with him. I understand what he must have felt growing up on that hell hole of a farm, alone not knowing who he really was. What would you know about any of this? You don't have a heart or a soul; you don't know what it feels like to love or to lose someone, especially your mother!"

He snarled at me. "Mind your mouth!"

I ignored the prickling sensation I usually associated with extreme danger. "Why? You don't give a Spicer's damn about anyone or anything! You are nothing but a monster all wrapped up in black armour and hiding behind that mask. You hunt down people for sport. I was wrong about you; you have no redeeming qualities at all! In fact I am beginning to wonder if you even had a mother or if you weren't something the Emperor hatched from a bad nightmare that he...."

I never got to finish my sentence. He moved so fast I never saw it coming. His hand clamped around my neck as he slammed me backwards against the wall so hard I saw stars when my head collided with it. His hand crushed my throat painfully and if he squeezed even the tiniest bit harder I knew he would break my neck. I stood very, very still and didn't fight him. My anger swiftly replaced by fear.

"You hold your tongue you stupid, ignorant girl!" He hissed. "You know nothing of me or my life and you will never speak of my mother again!" He spat. As he spoke I saw flashes, inadvertent images sent to me through his anger which spilled about him like flowing water. His mother, letting him as a small fair haired boy leave home, telling him not to look back, his mother held captive and tortured in the Tusken camp, dying in his arms and worst of all his helplessness. I saw images of Padmé Naberrie and she was pregnant, flashes violent anger and jealousy, he was

hurting her. I saw fire, lots and lots of fire. It was the fire and the agonizing pain that finally broke me. I screamed.

I wanted to stop the barrage of images but neither he nor I could control them. Sent in anger they shoved their way into my head like an angry mob and it was all I could do to stay conscious and sane. I gripped at the arm attached to the hand at my throat with my hands, wanting him to either let me go, to break the contact or kill me quickly and get it over with instead he stood transfixed on me. And then, as though I had been slapped in the face, it came to me, the link I had missed. I could not believe I hadn't seen it before now.

Wide eyed I stared at him and before I could think to shut up I whispered, "Anakin. *You* are Anakin Skywalker." I thought he would crush my neck but instead he pulled his hand away from me as though he had been stung. I slid clumsily to the floor and stared up at him.

"Luke is your son?" I whispered hoarsely.

He stormed away from me to the other side of the room, I could feel his conflict, his anger mingled with something else I couldn't define and it made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I didn't understand why I was still alive. I didn't dare break the heavy silence and stayed as still as I could. When he turned around and came back to face me I was certain he would kill me. I cowered against the wall trying to make myself as small as possible. Instead he regarded me for a long time with a gaze hidden behind his mask.

"Anakin Skywalker is dead. Luke Skywalker is a traitor to the Empire. You will *never* speak of this again." He said coldly. "Now, leave!"

When I didn't move he hauled me to my feet and dragged me to the door of the outer chamber, summoning the two guards who waited outside.

"Escort Miss Gabriel to her ship! See that she leaves immediately." He said shoving me over to them. I shook my arm free when one of them reached for me. Lord Vader grabbed me by the chin forcing me to look at him directly. I whimpered. He was hurting me.

"You will stay on Tatooine and you will do your job from there until I say otherwise. Is this understood?" He said in a voice that told me I had no choice in the matter.

I nodded. I wasn't very successful at stopping the tears that rolled down my cheeks. I thought for a moment we would stand locked together like that forever. His anger and my fear mixed together in one awful combination. Then he hissed into my face, "Get out of my sight." He waited a hair's breadth before shoving my face away from him so violently I thought he might break my neck after all and then without further word he returned to his chamber leaving me, shaken to the core, with two very confused looking guards.

"I know my way to the docking bay." My voice was hoarse and they insisted on accompanying me anyway, despite my protests.

I arrived back on Tatooine very early in the morning in a state of shock. I didn't want to return to Mos Eisley, my father and the others would ask too many questions so I landed out by my uncle Vahlek's house.

Even though I had tried to be quiet about entering his house at that hour of the morning, I had woken him. Tying his robe and yawning, he came down into the kitchen to find me sitting at the table. The bruises on my chin and neck were beginning to blossom like colourful flowers. I didn't look at him; I just stared blankly at the wall, unable to speak, unable to cry. The shock of what had happened slowly sinking in.

"Lei'lei, what is it?" He asked.

I didn't say anything and I didn't resist when he inspected my jaw and neck. His touch was gentle as he surveyed the damage Lord Vader had done.

"Who did this to you?" He asked.

I told him. My voice was still hoarse and rough.

"Why?" His voice was tight and angry.

I bit back the first surge of sorrow I had felt since I had left the *Executor*. "Lord Vader doesn't like to be reminded of the past." I said. "He sent me away and I don't know what to do. I don't know why he is so angry, why he is so afraid."

Uncle Vahlek pursed his lips and sighed. "The Zabrak have a saying. *To bury your past deep is to scatter your fears wide.*" He said. "I have some salve that will help with the pain, don't go anywhere." He told me getting up and vanishing for a few moments. When he came back he was holding a small tin, which when he opened it, filled the kitchen with a pungent scent. It wasn't unpleasant. I winced as he applied a small amount to the nasty looking bruises on my throat and jaw.

"Can I stay with you? If I go home there will be too many questions and I can't handle that right now."

He nodded. "Of course. I'll let Kit know you're here later on. You should get some sleep, you look like hell."

I shook my head. "He's banished me, Zte'sa." I suddenly said on the verge of tears, looking into my uncle's eyes for the first time since he had come into the kitchen. "I made him angry, hurt him somehow and now he's banished me. I should be dead, I thought he would kill me but he didn't and I don't know why. Instead he sent me away and I don't think he'll ever want to see me again." I blinked away the tears welling up in my eyes.

Uncle Vahlek regarded me for a moment; the expression on his face was unreadable. "Perhaps," he said softly, "then again, perhaps not."

I just looked at him. "I don't know what to do."

"Then you do what one always does when any terrible storm hits." He said gently. "You wait it out, Lei'lei, just wait it out."

---

End of Part 1