Dark Empress

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Relationship: Mara Jade/Luke Skywalker, Leia Organa/Han Solo
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Dark Empress

by Phaedra Dahl

Summary

This is the continuation of "Parallel Paradoxes" and "Defining Destiny"

Summary: Mara Jade finds more than she was looking for as she goes in search of the missing and suspected fallen, Luke Skywalker. Can she keep her own passion and darkness from ruining her too?

For those have you who have read the Dark Horse Series, I have changed it somewhat. But here’s what you need to know:
• Almost two years after Thrawn has left (seven years after ROTJ)
• Luke and Mara are secret lovers, trying to be together and plan their lives around the chaos of the galaxy
• The New Republic has fallen and has become the puppet to an unknown master
• Coruscant is in ruins
• The Organa-Solo family is on the run, when Leia has just given birth to the newest member, a son
• Luke, having sacrificed himself, believed to have fallen to the Dark Side has disappeared

Notes

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Characters: Mara, Karrde, Leia, Han Chewbacca, Luke…and other…
Quote: It had taken Mara that long to rebuild her trust with Karrde before he would stop looking at her from the corner of his eye; treating her like a wounded animal.

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I make no money off of this... Many thanks to Tom Veitch and Cam Kennedy for their original story.

So this it...
For those of you who have been following my stories for the past year ( or more), I sincerely thank you, and hope that this one lives up to your expectations.

There will be twists, there will be turns...and I will try to all make sense in this one.

If you are new to my story-- I would suggest going back and reading "Parallel Paradoxes" and "Defining Destiny" as I will make some references to plot points from those 2 stories.

I will always post when something will be NSFW ( not safe for work...wink-wink, nudge-nudge...say no more)...also, included in this warning, that this story will certainly take a dark turn, and I will post warnings about that too, when the time is right.

My last and final warning, was that I originally started writing this story many years ago...I don't know if I felt that it wasn't particularly good ( I blame the comic) or if I wasn't getting the feedback that I so desperately wanted ( yes, I'm a comment whore). So please help and keep me motivated. (really not kidding here...almost abandoned other works several times)

And please enjoy the story! Cheers, Phae

**
The Search

A long time ago…it a galaxy far, far away…

Hyperspace: Ash Worlds; Kirrium Reaches

Sometimes light speed just wasn’t fast enough.

Mara Jade sat back and looked over the controls in front of her.

If I could boost the auxiliary power, I bet I could override the thrusters… she thought to herself.

It was only one of the irrational ideas that she had come up with in as many days.

Hurdling through space, she was given the luxury of time to think about her decisions. But she didn’t want this luxury; she wanted to be there, now, with no other obstacles in her way.

It was one thing to con Karrde into letting her off of Takodana by herself; it was going to be entirely different matter to con his sister into believing that she was behaving rationally.

Mara swallowed, looking down at her console again, trying to remember where her train of thought had gone in the blink of an eye.

That seemed to be the way things had gone since she had felt the shift in the galaxy over a month ago; she had felt the change in Luke, somewhere, star-years away.

She knew that it had to be him; who else could have impacted her so hard.

Mara, in cockpit of her Z-95 Headhunter, rubbed her forehead, trying to complete the opposite tasks of trying to remember everything and wanting to block it out.

In her cabin, aboard the downed Wild Karrde on Takodana, she had awoken in the middle of the planetary night cycle; frantic, feeling the shift… the dread…

Running to the control room in nothing but her night shift, Mara burst into the room and demanded that Aves do a search on all of their known channels for anything relating to Skywalker…anything…any news…any hint of news…

He looked perplexed and became more-leery of her as Mara became more agitated when his search yielded no results.

Mara grumbled to herself as she recalled that they had to call Karrde to come and take her away from the console as, in her delirium, she had demanded that they start the pre-fight recognition and boost the main engine, putting the Wild Karrde back into space. She was determined to go in that instant to find Skywalker…Luke.

Karrde was able to calm her down and take her back to her quarters, but sat watch with her all night.

When dawn approached, Maz Kanata was there; she eyes large and fearful. She didn’t say anything out of the ordinary, but all it took was one look at Mara for her to nod and then turn away, woefully, and head back to her castle.

That was over a month ago.
It had taken Mara that long to rebuild her trust with Karrde before he would stop looking at her from the corner of his eye; treating her like a wounded animal.

She hated pity but she hated not knowing anything that was happening. Being on Takodana had sheltered and secluded them from the outside world. The best source of information was, sadly, overhearing gossip from the other smugglers and pirates that frequented Maz’s Castle for a rest-stop.

It was disappointing, but nothing had changed since their big meeting of almost two months ago. All truces and treaties are off.

Those who were on the edge of being legitimate, had to make the swing the other way and sink deeper into the dark underground world.

Even Karrde regretted making some of the calls that he had to; dealing with those that he had no choice but to take on as clients.

Mara knew what he was doing to save his skin, and everyone’s skin who worked for him.

She knew that he was trying to avoid getting involved in the crime syndicates that were threatening to form again. Noticeably, the Hutts had consolidated their power, even though it would be just a matter of time before they turned on each other. It still bought them the biggest share of the smuggling rings; you either worked for them, against them, or in-line with them.

Karrde had, regretfully, decided to work in-line with them; being the middleman to their supplies. It wasn’t a fast way to make profits, but it kept him from getting directly involved with the Hutts. And for some reason, they trusted him where others didn’t.

It was a long game that he had in mind, but Mara could play at this.

When chaos would be done, the Hutts would find themselves with very few friends, making enemies along the way.

Karrde would have to bend, in this new game, but in the end, he would emerge stronger than before. It had been suggested once or twice that he and Booster should make a formal alliance after this war and then both would be victorious and unstoppable…and most importantly, back on the road to being legitimate.

The only action that he probably regretted the most was to down the Wild Karrde inside the forest on Takodana, and fall under the protection of Maz Kanata. It would serve as a base, and keep people guessing as to where he was hiding.

But this seclusion came at a price. Karrde gave specific instructions for his crew not to visit the Castle, should they be seen and cause suspicion.

He had caught Mara coming back from the Castle one evening, though Karrde should have known better, and that she had her ways to find things out.

That escape gave her scraps of information but little beyond it. According to rumor, The Resistance had fled their base ahead of the Imperials that were searching the Hutt territory. Knowing that Leia Organa-Solo and her family had made it out safe allowed Mara to breathe a bit easier.

But now, there were other rumors flying. Rumors that had grown legs for some time but up until now, they had no possibility of being true; the most-concerning being that Luke Skywalker was the new Emperor, commanding the Imperial Fleet and calling on systems to join him.
Knowing the improbability was one thing, but it still left her with an uneasy question: if Luke wasn’t in control of the New Empire, then who was?

Mara exhaled slowly, still watching the dizzying stars race by, wishing to be anywhere than trapped in a cockpit.

She knew those rumors weren’t true, but then, like all good rumors, they were rooted in truth somehow.

So on her best behaviour for almost three weeks, Mara had managed to convince Karrde that she should be the one to make this delivery.

Being one of a handful people allowed to know this restricted information, gave her almost full access and a long enough leash to find what she needed.

Mara knew that she was being watched; Karrde never attended the loading of a freighter. He stood by and watched as she checked off the manifest. He checked and double checked her co-ordinates; even quizzed her on the details that couldn’t be inputted to the nav computer.

That’s why when she reached her first destination that she wasn’t surprised to find the homing beacon on the outer hull. Karrde was afraid that she was going to jump ship with the delivery and make a beeline for where the rumor had placed Skywalker.

Coruscant.

He was last placed on Coruscant, running missions to get senators, and their families, off the planet safely before the Imperial siege set in.

That would be the last place that Mara would be able to get in. The planet was under embargo and the Imperial blockade made sure of it.

She knew this because prices for goods to be shipped there had gone up ten times the going rate. There were a lot of smugglers who were either going to make their reputations on getting through or make their mark in the sky as they got blasted out.

It was the second homing beacon and the tracing program that Karrde had installed that she had suspected, and found, making her smile to herself. The first beacon was too easy to find and she was sure that even though it was hidden extremely well that Karrde would have taken other provisions.

Waking her from her thought, the proximity alert sounded on her data pad, starting the countdown as to when she should pull back on the levers to bring her out of hyperspace.

Ghent had wired a new interface into her data pad that allowed for her to re-route all the co-ordinates through the pad instead of the nav computer, less she should get boarded or impounded, she could take the portable and secure information with her; these two situations had been happening more and more frequently.

Mara pulled back on the levers when she felt the time was right; if she came out too soon, then she would have to put the ship on manual for too long her liking and coast to her destination.

The star-lines came to a halt, peacefully, and the little blue-green planet in front of her still seemed too far away, but such it was when using manual controls.

There was nothing she could do about the distance other than wait it out and keep heading to her destination.
Planetoid S4-315 was known to be habitable but as yet wasn’t claimed by any governing body. It had no resources that anyone wanted, and because it’s trajectory, it was out of communication alignment with most of the known services.

Those who knew about it just called by its code name, or by the moniker New Alderaan. And now, it was home to the band of Resistance fighters that had fled the Hutt world of Da Soocha.

Given that this region of the galaxy was almost foreign to her, Mara had spent time getting to know what little was written on the area.

The planetoid was too small for any sort of militarization, too far away to be affectual and although there was life readings, the population never concerned anyone.

It was perfect for Rebels, pirates and smugglers.

Thinking about all that could go wrong, Mara now wished that she had asked Maz Kanata to give her back Luke’s lightsaber; she would feel safer having it.

Grumbling to herself in the cockpit, she thought of her misguided attempts to construct a new lightsaber in the days after she felt the shift in Luke. It was just another act of desperation, but it felt like something that she could control, one thing that would keep control of her.

Only, it didn’t.

When she couldn’t sleep- which was often -Mara would go to her work bench and hover over the tiny components, directing her energy into making a new lightsaber.

The copy of Kenobi’s journal that Luke had given to her before he departed for Coruscant, had all the instructions inside it, along with Luke’s own notes.

When she first opened the instructions, Mara had to choke back her feelings at seeing his writing in the margins; the heartache had lanced her so hard, and without any expectation.

At the loneliness of missing him, at the rumor that he had been captured, at the loss of any valid information, only fueled on her anxiety.

When her exhaustion overtook her, that was when it started to unravel. There was even a night when she tried to convince herself that she didn’t love him, never loved him, never could have loved him; only to avoid feeling the sense of loss that she did when she felt the shift in him.

There was no reason to it; no way to explain to someone who couldn’t sense the Force. She tried explaining it to Karrde; a tipping of the scales…that’s what she had called it. The Dark Side had gotten stronger.

And it was more-evident when she tried to meditate; her mind wouldn’t allow her to see anything but death and destruction, leaving her with a chill that she just couldn’t shake.

Since then, Mara had tried not to touch the Force unless she needed to.

That, was the real reason that she failed each and every time that she tried to make her new weapon.

She hadn’t cut herself off from the Force, and she wasn’t hiding either, in case Luke would try and reach out to her, but she wasn’t reaching out, for fear of what she would find.

Yes, there was her other truth.
Mara was afraid of what had made Luke actually turn to the Dark side. Whatever made it possible would have had to been stronger than she was aware. If it had the power to turn him, then it would certainly have the power to turn her.

She had known that power, at one point in her life. It was the contempt for her victims that kept her going. It was a well in the pit of her soul that spurned her on, and it only got refueled when she received praise from her Master when a task was completed. Her Dark circle had no end, but it also had no roots.

Contempt could masquerade as hatred but it wasn’t well-founded. Her aggression and passion were only for the praise that she sought and desperately wanted.

She could admit that she had only felt true un-abiding hatred twice in her life; once, when she had blamed Luke for her downfall, and second when she learned the truth of all of Palpatine’s lies.

She still wasn’t consumed by the Dark Side, as some might have been, but she certainly did linger under its cloud for the majority of her life.

Luke…Luke had become her light… the way out. He had awoken in her something that she thought was dead and could never be recessitated. Her numbness had started to lift, and she could feel things that she never felt before. Surprisingly, she had even learned how to love…him, of all people.

The blue-green planet was closer now, and she guided the craft to coast to the correct hemisphere of where she needed to go. Latching onto the only beacon in the area, she sent the correct codes across, announcing her arrival. By planetary time, it should be just after midday on their solar cycle.

Soon, she would be with the only other person who could sympathize with her.

Loving Luke felt wonderful and awful at the same time. As glorious as being with him felt, at the back of her mind, Mara always believed that the time would come when she would be punished for all that she felt for him. It was a constant ‘check over your shoulder’ type of feeling that she could never shake.

But nevertheless, she chose to love him.

She wanted to feel his reassuring kiss; the touch of his skin on hers. She yearned for him physically, wanting the chaos around to cease for the moments that they could be together. It surprised her on how much she had come to rely on his presence and knowing that they would be together…. How much she loved him; thoroughly and utterly in love with Luke Skywalker; like the world would end without him.

And how she could not be so affected by feeling the change in him; like they were connected, that their meeting was not just some random occurrence.

A year ago, Mara would have hated it, hated herself for feeling this way. But since revealing her love to him, it had been more than she had ever thought to hope for. It wasn’t the pitiful experience that she thought it would be. All her life, she had never thought that she would want a relationship like this, nor did she think that she was capable of having one.

Now, she couldn’t think of herself of being without it, being without him.

Missing him now was getting harder and harder by the day. Routinely, she had to pull memories of him just to be able to get as little sleep; remembering their guided meditation dreaming.

It wasn’t as effective without him- but it was something.
The controls on the Headhunter shuddered as she approached the atmosphere. She checked the distance inside the gravity well, and saw that the pull was larger than she thought and adjusted her controls again to allow for the difference.

The Headhunter ducked underneath the clouds of the atmosphere to reveal more detail about the planet.

Lowering down, it could skim over the terrain and follow the co-ordinates in.

As she got closer, Mara felt it; she could feel the itch in her senses crawling up her neck. It wasn’t an unfamiliar feeling to her; Luke could feel the same way when he was unhappy about something. If Mara was sensing his sister, then there’s no reason as to why Leia would be any different from her brother.

And why shouldn’t the former princess be tense? She had every reason to be.

Pinnacle Base on Da Soocha was evacuated rather quickly, causing the Resistance leaders to go scurrying for cover. It was about to be flushed out by an advantageous Hutt with no morals.

The rumor was that Organa-Solo went into labor shortly sometime after that. Now, in fear of her life, her family’s lives, and her brother’s…Leia went to hide among the people she knew and trusted.

New Alderaan was their haven; a secret colony, named for the former world, and used different synonyms to protect its hiding place.

With her hands on the controls, Mara was satisfied that she would make the delivery and get the answers that she came for. At least, she hoped that she would get them; she hoped that Leia would have the answers. But there was always the possibility that that she was just as much in the dark as Mara.

Lowering the Headhunter still, she was coming up on the where the landing pad should be. Odd, that there seemed to be no technology around; the life-form readings spiked but not dramatically so; there was definitely a congregation of people down there.

In a clearing of forest, a landing pad appeared.

Mara sent out her senses; soft, like the tendrils that she used to use when she spoke to Luke.

Reaching back with frantic recognition; Leia floundered for a delicate touch, but achieved it nonetheless. And there was something else.

Mara frowned as she flew the Headhunter towards the pad.

The rumors were right. She could sense another presence with Leia; a little mind, unable to process complexed thoughts, but an entity that had life-force of its own.

Sighing, Mara grinned briefly, thinking about the little mind; this was probably Obiwan, the new addition to the Organa-Solo household.

It should be a time of celebrating. It should be a happy time for a growing family; but it wasn’t. However, Mara got the feeling that her visit was a welcomed one.

The Headhunter touched down and it was efficient to watch how the ground crew rushed to throw a canopy over the landing pad, covering the freighter and the very existence that there was even a base
here. Suddenly that explained the lack of appearance of any technology on her scopes if they were using camo-web dampening.

Mara walked to aft section to release the cargo hold. She shimmied in between the containers as the Headhunter was packed to the brim of supplies and blaster parts. Food and artillery were priorities for the make-shift army.

She pushed the first of the palettes onto the lift and it began to lower as she rode it down to the ground.

Waiting was the ground crew; their general sense was that they were in desperate need of this delivery.

She may have been holed-up on Takodana for the past month, but it didn’t escape Mara’s perspective that rations were on the short-side here, and everywhere.

During the previous war, she had seen the remnants of many Rebel bases, and then, it looked like they weren’t in want of anything. In some case, they had too much and had to leave it behind as they made a run for it.

It was apparent that as the war dragged on, those resources depleted themselves with every evacuation.

And here, the equipment looked old, and the volunteers looked old too; like they had seen this all before.

The battle wasn’t directly in front of them. It was still in the far-reaches of the galaxy.

Mara brought her hand up as she watched a transport take off to the sky from an adjacent pad; the after-burn glowed before it shot off into the distance.

One of the grounds crew approached her for the manifest, which she handed over happily, along with the controls to the lift.

When she looked back up, familiar faces were standing on the sidelines, just watching.

Han Solo didn’t bother to smile, but as Mara walked towards him, she could see the tension around his eyes relax.

“Solo” she said with a nod as she came within earshot of him. “Chewbacca.” She regarded the Wookie.

“Jade” he replied with a twitch of his cheek, and tilt of his head asked her to follow him.

The Wookie gave her a hook of his chin and a low rumble in greeting.

It was a sombre greeting but a fitting one; Solo was not the type of person to try and make you feel at ease if he wasn’t.

He turned and led her away; she hastened her steps as Chewbacca followed behind her. She got the distinct feeling that even he was on edge too.

In silence, they passed several people; running in different directions. It seemed that everyone here had more than one job, and it took swift action to see that the job got done.

Contrary to her estimation, she was sure that the landing pad was small and only accommodated
smaller shipments. As she followed Solo, she could see how wrong she was.

The canopy was actually made up of many canopies linked together and several larger ships were covered by it, crammed together; including the Millennium Falcon.

When it appeared that no one else was around, Mara thought it safe to speak. She hurried her steps and fell in line with Solo.

“I hear that you made it out ahead of time, and that congratulations are in order.” She murmured over.

In her senses, she could feel that he was indeed happy with the new arrival, but not happy with the circumstances.

“We were lucky.” Han murmured right back.

She could also feel his overall unhappiness regarding where they were, in the here and now.

Mara couldn’t blame him, to go from living in a palace, assuming your family was protected to going to this, was not something that she would wish on anyone.

Then, he said something that she would have never expected from him.

“You felt it?” He asked, his blank tone didn’t change. “You felt…Luke?”

Stopping in her stride, she wasn’t prepared for this, not yet.

Solo stopped and turned to face her; Mara looked up and met his eyes, seeing all that she needed to.

“Yes.” She said, unflinching.

He nodded once, turned and kept walking.

Mara followed quickly beside him.

It must have been difficult for him to understand it; not being Force-sensitive either, but surrounded by them. How confusing to try and explain what had happened.

To be honest, Mara wasn’t even sure that she could describe it.

Solo was quiet for the rest of the trip to their quarters, but she could sense his somber mood, if not, the entire base’s mood.

He paused at a doorway, and pressed the release. Ducking his head, he led the way inside.

Chewbacca stayed outside the door as Mara walked passed. He seemed pleased taking up a guard position for those he protected.

It wasn’t much, but the shelter had walls, and amenities.

Looking uncomfortable, and unsure as what to say or do next, Mara decided to let him off the hook now that they were alone.

“Han…” she said softly. “How are the twins?” She asked; trying to be part of the family.

He looked a little shocked that she had used his first name and then caught on that she was trying for
“They’re asleep right now.” He mumbled. “Leia is resting too.”

“No, she’s not.” Mara replied. “She’s waiting to see me.”

He snorted quietly, and his lip twitched, almost forming his lopsided smile. Han knew better than to delay this meeting and the outcome might not be entirely unpleasant if Mara could help Leia.

Leading the way, inside the small dwelling, Han stopped at what made for a door. He rapped gently, and then pushed it aside, allowing Mara to enter by herself.

The room was dimly lit and the former princess sat upright in the cot that they tried to make into a comfortable bed.

Still looking dignified, Leia smiled gracefulty over to the smuggler.

“Hi” Mara smiled and mouthed, just in case a baby was sleeping.

Leia visibly sighed. “It’s good to see you.” She whispered, and then patted the side of the cot, asking the other woman to come closer. “He just went down.” Leia said quietly as she looked over to the bassinet beside the bed.

Mara took the opportunity to walk around first and gaze down.

Asleep, on his back, with no cares in the world, the baby slept soundly; his tiny hands clutched at nothing, vibrant pink lips pursed at the open air, and just tufts of dark brown wisps of hair on top of his head.

A few more moments Mara watched, slightly envious; envious to be able to sleep like that, and envious for the new life.

“How old?” She asked, still watching the little one.

The rumor was that there had been an addition, but no further details.

“Nine days… give or take.” Leia said.

“Obiwan Solo?” Mara asked.

“Ben…” Leia corrected her.

Looking over, Mara smiled. “He’s beautiful.” She whispered.

Nodding, Leia looked proud, but tired.

Rounding back from the cot, Mara sat down on the far edge from the other woman.

“It took longer than the twins.” Leia spoke softly. “There were complications… he was early, and the medic thought that he might be a breach birth too… but then he turned himself around in the end.”

For all the trouble, the mother still looked over lovingly at the infant.

“I wish that I had brought something.” Was all Mara could think of to say.
Leaning, Leia reached over and patted her hand. “You did.”

Mara smirked. She thought about it for a moment, and wondered if Leia could use some practice. Sending out her senses, she relaxed and touched the other mind. <<You look tired…are you alright? >>

Jarred, Leia looked over to her sharply, unaccustomed to hearing another’s voice in her head. Swallowing, the Resistance leader let her eyes flutter, trying for that extra bit of concentration.

Mara could feel the intense push against her senses, and then it was like a giant wave that flooded over, feeling everything all at once. She stood up and stepped back; as a reflex, she covered her ears, for no other reason than she thought it could block out the noise.

The baby stirred; coughing and whimpering.

Leia gasped and looked over to make sure that everything was alright; and pulling back her senses, she soothed the little one.

Coming back, Mara sat back down to show her that she was off-put. “I guess we know what you need to work on.” She mumbled.

Leia’s shoulders dropped, disappointed in herself. “I’ve been meaning to practice.”

Nodding, Mara excused the bombardment. “It could have been worse…Luke used to do it without warning me.”

She simply nodded a reply, and looking down.

It was the bantha in the room; Mara had said the name that she swore that she was going to wait for the other woman to mention.

“All Luke.” Leia exhaled, closing her eyes.

Without even trying, the room seemed to get darker as both of them knew what had happened; both could feel the other’s heart ache.

Ben whimpered again, as if sharing in the pain.

The room was silent, but Leia’s eyes said it all; sad and avoiding contact.

Finally, she was able to summon the words. “What do you know?” Leia asked; her eyes now turned up, looking determined and prepared.

It was Mara’s turn to look away; she never saw more similarities between the Skywalker twins as when they were being determined.

“I don’t know much more than you do…” Mara murmured. “I felt the change in him, but I don’t know why or how.”

Leia nodded. She started off slowly. “He was on Coruscant and they had almost completed the last evacuation. Lando told me that Luke might have figured that they were after him specifically because they brought in an AT-AT. And for Lando, it confirmed it when they didn’t come for the evacuees after they had Luke in custody.”

She sat quietly, but Mara’s eyes went wide as she listened; Luke had told her about the AT-AT attack on Ovanis… and then, the Star Destroyer that was set to capture him on Mustafar.
The smuggler swallowed hard, unsure if his sister was aware. “They…the Imperials, have been after him for a while.”

Leia dropped her head. “I know.” She whispered. “It was like the time, after Yavin, like a search, just for him, and only him.”

“Lando said that Luke surrender to them…so that the rest of the team could get away.” Leia finished. “Luke went with them…willingly.”

Mara got up from the edge of the cot and stalked a few paces. Doshing Jedi, she cursed… stupid, stupid man!

She turned back to look at his sister; she was expecting to see worry and concerning, but what she saw confirm her own valid feelings. Leia was no less angered at her brother for doing something that reckless and needless in the moment.

Leia sat with her eyes looking out at nothing until she started to relax. Blinking a few times before she turned her head, she hesitated on her next words.

“And then, I felt it.”

Mara nodded; there were no other words from what could have described that moment. A rip, a schism, a shift, a tear, a break, a split – were all very good words but still couldn’t describe it.

Inhaling deeply, she could finally say what she had avoided saying out loud to anyone. “I felt him turn…to the Dark side.” Mara said quietly.

Leia’s head dropped again, nodding and then her shoulders shuddered.

Walking over, Mara came back to sit on the edge of the cot.

“I should have never let him go back.” Leia said. “I had the reports in my hands of massing starships. I had the reports that were using his code name again and again. The directives that were coming from Imperial command.”

“There just no logic to it…as to why they wanted him so badly.” Leia rambled. “It didn’t make sense. I used to believe it was all just a revenge tactic… to strike a blow at morale…to destroy Luke would have been to destroy Hope itself.”

“But it wasn’t…isn’t.” The princess corrected herself. “There’s a play here…to win something…to gain something. I can feel it.”

Mara just simply nodded; it did feel like something was beyond this action, but without her connections, she couldn’t put all of the pieces together yet.

Leia looked at the other woman sharply. “There’s more.” She said, in a voice that reminded Mara of the Chancellor of the Republic rather than a sister or friend.

“There have been sightings of him.” Leia said.

Instead of adding in, Mara just nodded her head; yes, she had heard these rumors too. Luke was the head of the new Empire…

“…on Byss.” Leia finished.

That snapped Mara’s mind away from refuting anything. “Byss?” She repeated.
Nodding, Leia confirmed what she had just said. “In those same reports…” She paused. “We have visual confirmation of Luke…and what appears to be… Palpatine.”

Mara stood up and directly pointed at the other woman. “No.” Her tone was harsh and her words were fast. “It isn’t Him. I would have felt it. I would have known. Luke would have told me somehow by now…and he hasn’t…So it may be a clone…It may be Irek masquerading…but it’s not…”

Leia nodded reluctantly, seeing the reaction in her friend.

“It’s not.” Mara repeated strongly. “It’s not.” She repeated again, almost hearing a quiver in her own voice.

The fear, and then the possibility that it could be Palpatine was all too real for Mara to even truly consider.

She could feel her sides start to shake, and she hugged herself to keep the cracks in her composure from showing. She feared that exhaustion and the façade that she had put in place to make this trip possible, were starting to show.

The deafening silence in the room was cut by the wail of the infant in the bassinette beside his mother.

Leia turned in the direction of her new-born son to calm and soothe the child. Whispering sweet words, in the way only a mother could, she picked up the infant to shield him from the emotions in the room.

Mara stood back and watched, realizing that it was her feelings that had interrupted the baby’s rest. “I’m sorry.” She said sympathetically. Shaking her head, Mara came closer after she tried to reach out in her Force aura, knowing that it had soothed the twins before.

Leia must have sensed it too, and looked up at her, rocking the baby in her arms. “It’s not your fault.” She replied. “He’s just very sensitive to the changes around him.”

Mara came back to look at the innocent baby; so fragile, so small.

“He was reacting to anything and everything when I was pregnant.” Leia explained. “This conflict…this war has made him even more-sensitive.”

She shook her head, still rocking the little one. “The twins take consolation in each other…and somehow, Han is able to soothe them better than I could.” She looked down, feeling pity for the boy, and responsible with all the love of a mother. “Ben feels…alone.”

Mara was now determined to relax her mind and help calm the baby. She inhaled, and then sent her feelings across, mentally playing with color in the baby’s mind. Luke had shown her this method; it required no words, no deep thoughts other than to concentrate on the waves of color.

Leia looked up at her as the baby started to settle, also feeling the sensation. “Where did you learn to do that?” She asked quietly.


Leia nodded, and returned the tight grin. They were both aware of the affect that the Jedi had on their lives.
As Ben allowed himself to be put back to sleep, Leia offered him over to the other woman. “Do you want to hold him?”

Mara looked surprised that she would be trusted with the child, and held up her hands and shook her head. The baby was just too new; what if she did something to hurt him…her feelings had already upset him.

Leia seemed to accept her reaction, and turned to place Ben back in his bassinette.

Peering over, Mara did watch as he returned back to his sleeping position. She sighed to see that her affect didn’t stay with him.

Both women stayed enthralled by the sleeping infant; their peace fed into his peace, and so on.

It was a welcomed distraction, one that Mara wished she could stay in for longer, but she knew the new rules of the temporary base. Staying too long or showing activity could tip off anyone in the area as to an unchartered settlement.

Mara reached over to stoke the cheek of the infant by means of bidding the baby farewell.

In that instant, Leia reached out, clutching the other woman’s hand, and sending out her feelings. <// Please? Please help find Luke?//> She begged.

They back away in unison from the bassinette.

Looking into the eyes of desperation of his sister, Mara nodded, knowing that she had her own reasons for wanting to find the Jedi.

Leia seemed to relax when she got the assurance that Mara would try to help, by the means that she was able.

But the smuggler could see that her visit was taxing on the other woman, and made her quiet departure with pleasantries.

Walking back through the compound, her mind started to work; what was the best method and how she would go about getting through the forces at Byss.

Mara was half way up the ramp to be inside the Headhunter when she heard his voice behind her.

“Leia told you, huh?” Han Solo asked.

Mara turned around to come down a few steps, looking at him. “Yes.” She answered simply.

“About Byss?” He asked.

She got the feeling that he wanted to take off with her and bring Luke back from wherever he was.

“Yes.” She replied without any preamble.

“So what are you planning to do about it?” Solo asked, probably already guessing the answer.

Mara looked into his eyes, unflinching. “You know.” She said, not wavering.

He shook his head once, knowing that she was crazy for evening thinking it. But then nodded, as knowing it was the only solution. “That I do.” Solo replied.
Neither of them was much for words; words meant nothing, actions did.

He looked away once and then back at her, knowing the only words that would have any meaning to them, holding the fate of the mission that she gave herself. Solo dared to utter them. “Jade, May the Force be with you.”

Giving her a hap-hazard salute, he turned and walked away.

Mara watched him go back inside the makeshift base before she turned and head into the cockpit.

**

**Hyperspace: in the Deep Core Region**

It took almost two days, and two jumps to reach the Core.

In that time, Mara used all the information that she assemble to form her her plan. If Luke was there, then she was going to find him and bring him with her.

Her first stop was Neimoidia. In the Colonies Ring, she knew that there was an active spy unit. They weren’t loyal to anyone unless you had the credits.

A payoff for information, a payoff for the supplies that she would need, and one more payoff for the instructions that she needed to get her there, bought Mara all that she would require.

Reading through the sliced security files, gave her more details about the attack on Coruscant.

The Imperials, always one to keep files, reported exactly what she knew.

The city hub of Corusta, in the shadow of the Manarai Mountains, was under lockdown, due to suspicious activity in the area. As the ban was about to be lifted, orders came to prepare for a large-scale ground assault, without directive or determined target.

It was unclear under whose authority that the orders were given, but it seemed to be largely based of insight and without reason to those that had filed the report.

But Mara understood. So many times, she had made orders under her instincts in the Force, without any cause or reasoning to those around her.

If there was another Force-user in play, this would make perfect sense.

The report outlined the attack by troopers and AT-AT; it seemed to be an elevated response to the rumor of just one person, and then it was revealed that it was the Jedi, Luke Skywalker as their intended target.

Had this been one event, it would have been out of place. But in the weeks leading up to this, the new Imperial infraction had made several attempts to capture him.

From the report, Mara was sure that Luke had sacrificed himself, knowing he was being hunted, to save the innocent lives that were with him.

She grumbled under her breath for that one. It never ceased to amaze her just how selfless he could be; to the point of destroying himself in the process.

In truth, she knew that she should see it as admirable, but at the cost of the bigger picture, she just saw it as a waste.
You live to fight another day. Pick and choose your battles.

She had to hide herself on her missions, for the greater good of accomplishing what she needed to. There were sacrifices that needed to occur, both lives and property, but in the end, in served a purpose that was higher than self-preservation.

Yes, it made her cold to the lives that were around her. It made her jaded to the value of life, but it always resulted in success.

Luke, on the other hand, acted in the moment, not seeing past what was occurring. He could sacrifice himself today, but what would be the result tomorrow? He would end the fighting momentarily but the fighting would still continue with or without him. What did he gain? -nothing.

Although she loved him, she was beginning to resent him and his actions.

Her second stop was inside the Deep Core Region. As close as she could get to Byss, without actually entering the System. She stopped on Relus, the only other planet in the area that shared the same pulsating sun as Byss, Beshqek.

It was from this sun that gave the whole system a general uneasiness.

Byss and Relus had closed themselves off to outsiders since the before the forming of the Galactic Empire. Both worlds had riches that didn’t need any help from the outside planets.

They allowed themselves to fall under the rule of the Empire by sheer obliging will. They had thought that the new Empire was the latest form of regency and regality that they liked.

The last time that Mara had been in the system, she was onboard one of the Super Star Destroyers, Eclipse, touring with the Imperial Regatta.

Liana was a special guest of the Emperor, dancing nightly for those dignitaries that were falling under the spell of the Imperial might.

But Mara Jade, The Emperor’s Hand, was aboard, collecting information on the guests that she would then turn over to her Master; including the details of those who were receiving bribes from senators who harboured Rebel splinter cells.

Now on Relus, she could recall the same feelings that she was having now. The whole system felt like a pressure cooker for her; pressing in against her Force senses.

When she had first experienced it, the Emperor scoffed at her discomfort and berated her for not being strong enough in the Force to be securely immersed in it. He questioned her loyalty which only made her defensive and furthered her desire to prove her worth.

As the regatta came closer, the Emperor took a select few to join him on Byss; she was not included.

Later, she found out why.

The planet, with the radio activity from the pulsating sun, had become an amplifier for Dark energy. Those who had meager Force talents would experience heighten powers. The Emperor was rewarding them, in a sense, by showing them what they were capable of.

Stopping at Relus was bringing back all her memories of the area. This was as far as she had come to Byss the last time she was here.
It served no other purpose than to check that her cover and her sources still worked. There was nothing to buy or acquire here; doing so would only tip off the authorities to unusual purchases.

The other purpose was that, for the first time in weeks, in her senses, Mara could feel him.

Luke was alive, somewhere in this system; Byss was less than three light-years away. As they were once able to test the limits of their communication abilities; she knew that the distance was within their scope.

She didn’t dare contact him, or reach out. If he was on their side, if he was compromised, she had no clue if he was going to be with, or against her.

And besides, what state was he in? She asked herself.

The Dark Side had found him, but it didn’t need to search far for him; it felt like Luke had welcomed it, succumbing to the constant pull that tugged at him during every waking hour.

The shroud had descended on the galaxy and shift had been felt in the exact moment when Luke turned.

During the time that had led up to her current trip, Mara shook her head, remembering how pathetic she had become.

That night- that same night that Luke turned, she had begged Karrde to let her go. She pleaded to him, even before the sun rose. Crying before him, Karrde reached out and held her firmly, rocking her to calm her.

He was right not to let her go immediately. Karrde pointed out that she didn’t have all the details and trying to find Luke without a plan was reckless and counter-productive. It would be futile to act when she didn’t have all the information that she would need. For once, someone else had the perspective that she needed.

Mara cringed when she thought she wanted to act with her heart instead of her head.

Instead, Karrde waited until he could arrange for her to make a delivery to the new Resistance Base on New Alderaan. Letting her go, only after he was sure that her emotional state was back in place, and knowing it was the only way for Mara to find more answers.

Leaving Relus, felt like she was closer to accomplishing more than she had in the past few weeks; she had a plan and the resources to execute it.

Pulling out of hyperspace, Mara was approaching Byss at the beginning of their night cycle, but she also knew that she would be entering a system that was a war zone.

All Imperial-held systems were war zones. She had experience with this sort procedure; it was familiar and rote.

The star lines came to a halt as she pulled back on the levers, and the little freighter shook as it came out into an unexpected debris field.

What came as a surprise was the amount of Star Destroyers massing in one area.

Unlike a regatta, these ships were not leisurely floating in orbit around the planet, like they used to, around the Death Star. These ships were on high alert.
The armada of fleet ships would have once instilled an amount of pride in her. Now, Mara only saw them with disdain. She wouldn’t admit to anyone, but part of her wished she feel that pride again; she wanted to feel like belonging to something bigger than herself, she had sadly missed it.

The nearest Star Destroyer hailed the Headhunter and asked for the proper identification and recognition codes. As a registered Imperial Importer, her false ID gave permission to land, with very little question, and only paused to check her credentials.

Byss might be closed system, but the residents still wanted the supplies from their home-worlds, and a registered importer would gladly be welcomed.

From what Mara knew, and from what she could learn about the current situation, Byss was extremely secretive system, and dislike foreigners; they were courting the Emperor’s favor and found it acceptable to host Him, giving Him a royal residence for His convenience.

Aside from the Regatta, she knew that the Emperor would take regular sabbaticals here. Since her presence wasn’t needed, she had decided read up on the customs and culture in the area, for the eventually that she knew that she would need that information.

As the Headhunter made its approach, Mara could feel the change start to come over her. She was sure it was the effect of the long-standing Dark side. Inside the cockpit, the fear, the anxiety was manifesting as a twittering in her stomach, and the shadow increased. She wondered if Luke could sense her from here but dared not to try until she could control herself and her environment.

Pinpointing the nearest spaceport to what she presumed would be the Imperial Palace, the freighter touched down easily.

Mara raced to shut down the controls and get as far away from the freighter as possible. The twittering in her senses was now like a constant nagging that the world was about to descend on her.

Gathering her gear, Mara started to question what type of mission did she think that she was on. Was she here to get Luke and bring him back to the fold? Was she here to fight her own demons that still plagued her from her former life? Was she here for his benefit or hers?

At the hatch, she paused, feeling another shiver over her senses, a sweep that she was sure was purposeful but chose to ignore it as a distraction.

The air was heavy, she noticed. It was somewhat stale, and odd fragrances of food drifted on the wind. She sealed the ship and left to join the general populace among the corridors and avenues of this unusual world. Covering herself with her deep brown velvet cloak, she drew the hood close, over her flaming hair.

Byss was affluent, for a closed-in society. The population kept their wealth secluded. Much akin to Coruscant, Byss was heavily populated, and its glory still shone bright. The buildings and homes were stately and decorated in lush swirling colours of violet, teal and an eerie green.

Her feelings fit with the peculiar glow of the city. Her anxiety had now evolved into an ever-present headache.

Mara wrapped her cloak tighter around herself in order to stop shivering from the cold. No, on second observation, the air wasn’t cold, but cold had permeated her skin just the same. She pushed her feelings aside— they were not going to interfere with her mission.

Pulling her hood a little further down towards her face; this was going to be one of those worlds where she would be recognized immediately. The citizens of this planet were aloof and wary of
those who didn’t fit into their standards.

Mara walked the streets with cautious impunity, as keeping with her character would behave, blending in. The corridors were busy and bustling, even for later in the day. Moving in and out of the other pedestrians, she was headed towards what would be, presumable her lodgings.

In a moment of weakness, her thoughts broke through her concentration.

*Luke*, she called out in desperation with her mind, *where are you?*

Suddenly, a shroud of the Force came around her.

*<Leave!>*

The order came through her like she had been struck by lightning. Emotion and over-whelming fear shot into her.

Stunned, Mara stopped in her tracks, clutching her chest, breathing hard, fighting to stay upright, and fighting for consciousness.

It wasn’t going to sit well with her ego if she were to faint in this public place, even where she knew no one and no one knew she was here.

Taking a few deep breaths, she stayed grounded enough to move over to side, letting others pass, and holding on to the nearest support. She watched from under her hood as the crowd went by without so much as noticing her.

It was him!

*Luke!* Her heart cried, but she dared not to call out.

Her heart leapt, knowing that she had sensed him, and he had sensed her. It was relief and anguish at the same time.

A wash of anger at him caught her off-guard. Why shouldn’t she be angry with him for doing something as stupid as allowing himself to be captured.

But now was not the place for further examination. Surely, her reactions would be out of the ordinary and target her as different.

The hotel was only a few blocks away and she was determined to make it there.

It had scared her; she felt his fear, his struggle, his anger, and moreover, it was directed at her.

She had felt his emotional struggles before, but she had never been the root of it. It was unnerving to be at the center of that storm within him.

It was extreme and raw, but then, Luke always felt things intensely. It irritated her that she usually felt them too, especially whenever he was near.

As a person who had been numb to such things for most of her life, Mara was still learning not to find them unpleasant and uncomfortable.

The stoic had it easy. Why would anyone want to feel things when they could have the option not to?
She could blame it on him, but she could also lay the blame on herself.

Training with him had put a crack in the wall. Removing her implant on Roche was the final step to agreeing that she wanted to learn how to feel again; she wanted to be normal.

On Roche, the surgeon had removed the tiny locator implant from her lower spine, she had discovered its true intent. She had always been told that it was to locate her corpse, should she ever go missing. However, tests proved that the device was also sending trace amounts of testosterone and adrenaline into her bloodstream, causing her bouts of insomnia, anxiety and aggression; suppressing any true emotions that she could possibly feel.

The second step proved to be another matter entirely. Her special-forces tattoo was located on her left foot, between her toes, a small Imperial insignia that had been stamped into her body with titanium ink. No one, legitimate or otherwise, would chance removing it. It was going to be her mark for the rest of her life.

Her last step to becoming “normal” was to have her reproductive system reinstated. Years of being chemically sterilized had done their damage and this was all an attempt to start a new life.

After having the implant removed, she slowly felt her anxieties recede, and sleep had returned to her. But the sleep had been restless.

Her growing Force abilities, awakened by Luke, had caused her more trouble than assistance.

With her mind clearer than it had ever been, she was able to experience Force visions when she meditated.

She could see things so vividly and in precise detail…but that was then… this was now, after the shift.

If she tried to meditate, her mind wouldn’t allow her to go to the place that she needed to see. It wouldn’t allow peace and tranquility to come to her.

If she was able to set her mind, Darkness would invade her visions, converting her into someone she did not recognize. A shadow in the distance ordered her total obedience, and she gave it, with terror in her heart.

Visions of tall beings, dark corridors and ominous figures haunted her mind. A mocking laughter and a presence eluded her search. Among all these images was Luke, begging for help, yet rejecting it.

These images had caused her to wake screaming and sweat-stained from her meditative state, but also with the lingering urgency that she needed to find him.

She knew that she had seen Byss before in her visions.

The planet had the same inner glow that did not sit well in her consciousness.

The green glow of the city suddenly irked her, as the tall citizens rushed past her, in their high collars, heavy cloaks and sleek green skin.

Outsiders were extremely noticeable and, as she took note, extremely rare.

The distance between her ship and the hotel wasn’t great, but she could count on one hand how many human and non-Byssians she had seen on her way there.
The hotel was clean and quiet, and check-in was relatively painless, yet her growing fear, that at any
given moment, a squadron of Stormtroopers was about to descend on her, would not leave. She
looked around the empty lobby and silently agreed to herself that she would spend her nights and
days with a blaster close at hand.

The room was small but sufficient.

In the ‘fresher, she took the off-chance and looked at her own reflection.

Her green eyes looked faded and worn-down.

Her hair was still vibrant and it shone as she removed her hood; it had grown past her chin since the
unfortunate haircut that she was forced to give herself, and she could now pull it back in a functional
manner.

Her cheeks had sunken in and she knew that she had lost weight since she had lost contact with

Mara reached up to her hair, and stroked what ends had escaped her braid, remembering how Luke
loved to look at it, and stroke it whenever he got the chance.

She closed her eyes, and thought of the hot sun from their shared dream-visions, she needed the
warmth from the vision now; like a sunset, he had described it once.

Oh Luke… she allowed herself to pine for him where no one could see.

With a jolt of pain, she felt her muscles seize up, and she gripped the edge the counter, gasping.

<I said, Leave!>

Mara, never to be the one to shrink away from one of their fights, was struck by her own reactionary
anger. Angered by her lack of control, when her breath returned to her, she reached out again and
yelled into the empty air, “I’m not leaving until I see you!”

No reply.

“I can find you, you know…” Her voice lowered, and she tried to keep her courage in the face of his
possible reaction, feeling like lunatic, talking to the air. “You’re easy to find on a world full of green-
skins and non-sensitives…”

<Leave…>

The shock hit her again, only this time the sense was of him begging, not ordering.

Oh Gods, please leave… the words, coming from him, weren’t formed, but she could sense their
intention.

Desperate, Mara reached out, wanting to find his sense again, realising just how much she had
missed it while they were apart.

But he was gone. Sheltering, shielding. She could help but feel rebuffed by his abilities; after all the
attempts that she had tried to teach him how to shield, he chose now to actually use it.

Something had taken hold of him. Something his sister either forgot to mention or refused to discuss.

It was not going to be a restful night.
Mara had decided that she wasn’t going to sleep; there was no point to it. She didn’t trust the planet and she didn’t trust the room.

Instead, she used survival techniques and crouched in a corner of the room all night, allowing herself to doze in thirty minute increments, keeping herself alert.

At the break of dawn, she dressed in a grey bodysuit, fixed her blaster into its sleeve holster, another blaster rested on her right hip and a set of vibroblades in her boots. Admittedly, this would be the point at which she would attach a lightsaber, if she had one.

Mara draped her cloak around her shoulders and left her room. According to her chrono it was very early in the morning, even for the citizens of Byss. The streets were empty, which gave her a good chance to get the lay of the land.

The buildings seemed cleaner somehow, almost cheery, if they were to stand anywhere else but here. It was an opulent city to say the least.

The sun was beginning to rise through the orange clouds, it cast a shadow over the buildings, causing the outer walls to glow, and increasing the uneasy feeling inside her.

Just then, a feeling came over her; she was being watched. No, the street was being watched.

Mara’s eyes covered the avenue, trying to find the area or thing out of place. Nothing moved, nothing stirred.

She held her breath and listened.

Not a sound.

Unconvinced of her safety, she moved from the unprotected openness of the avenue to an adjacent alleyway. She felt it again, more intense than before, as if the world was going to topple on her. Then she heard it…

The unmistakable sounds of marching; the rhythmic steps in military precision beating like the rhythm of her heart.

She pressed her body up against the wall, hiding in the shadows, watching what could and would come down the street.

The footsteps approached, getting louder, and she recognized the steps before they came into view.

Stormtroopers.

But why? Byss wasn’t under siege.

A small squadron would be easy to follow. They were obviously out on a perimeter patrol.

What was the perimeter they were protecting?

Cautiously, Mara followed behind them, ducking into alleys and doorways.

Like most patrols, they were only concerned with what lay ahead of them and would only pause at intersections of the street to check their position. In other words, a serious patrol would exhibit more suspicion, more force.

When it was decided that their circle was complete, the squadron marched in unison toward the large
The Citadel—its high towers and impressive walls rooted the city’s glory. The majesty of such a grand fortress was not lost on Mara’s sense of aesthetics. As she followed the syncopated troopers, her senses tingled—Luke was near.

Rather than reach out for him again and be shunned, she watched the squadron march toward the side gate of one of the towers. The bright white armoured column led the way to a possible entrance.

If Luke was in there, she was going to find him.

The structures on Byss were ancient, and an accessible rooftop allowed her to get the perspective to observe the procession with relative protection.

However, Mara wasn’t as arrogant to think that a human wouldn’t generate any suspicion if her movements wouldn’t alert any spies to her present position.

So she waited, albeit somewhat impatiently, for the streets to experience new life, as the city awoke, before she decided to move.

As the street population swelled and citizens swept by her, she infiltrated herself into their movements to hide her own. Walking in perfect step among their tall silhouettes, she was able to follow the path taken by the perimeter guard around to the far side of the Citadel.

From her perspective, it was the most-obvious path into, and out of, the Citadel. But she could also see that the Citadel stood as its own protection; no outer guards were visible, which meant that all security was within the building.

Mara moved swiftly among the crowd still, keeping shrouded with shadows, making sure that if there was a watchful eye upon her, it would have difficulty locating her.

Luckily, the path of the pedestrians led directly around the Citadel, letting her observe the building as a tourist might, all while gaining some insight.

Speeders and transports were coming and going without pause from a lower entrance, which meant lax in outer security; it was too tempting not to take.

She knew standard Imperial procedure in a place like this. Byss and its Citadel must have felt truly felt safe, above reproach or attack. She had seen it on other worlds; with the right credentials, she could pass almost without question.

A stop at the nearest spaceport to procure a speeder and a change of clothing, and Mara was confident that at this level she would be able to make her way to the very breeches of the Citadel.

As per procedure, she slid her acquired speeder to a halt, as an import officer approached.

With the tones of a man who felt he was much superior then the position he was placed in, he demanded her identification. Gladly, Mara handed it over with a gentle smile masking her true intent.

It simply stated her name and occupation; Tiantra Sonep; registered Imperial importer.

She knew it was a good forgery; its price was high enough to ensure that it was not a bad one.

Dismissively, before he directed her to a docking station, he laboriously repeated the protocol procedures to her. Patiently, Tiantra Sonep listened to them.
Mara Jade, however, was trying her best effort to keep her senses about her; the resounding pressure had intensified since arriving.

She had her back-story prepared. She was to meet with the Procurement Officer in charge of obtaining a source for Coaxium fuel; Commander Celex was expecting her.

After docking, she promptly abandoned her vehicle for the invisibility offered by the various airshafts and turbo-lifts. No one had come to check her in, so her disappearance wouldn’t have gone noticed.

The Citadel was just as ancient as the rest of the city, and there was only one major turbolift shaft. If this served as an Imperial residence, there was a good chance that it would lead right to a throne room of sorts.

Up until now, Mara had refused to reach out in her senses and her abilities. But she was left with little choice but to Force-probed the hallway for any activity behind ventilation grating.

Pairs of massive droid sentinel guards roamed at regular intervals, but she got the sense that they were more for a show of force than for any actual security detail. They were a deterrent, a large obstacle without much of a sense that to blast something that moved.

Mara had kept her position until she was able to ascertain the precise timing of their sweeps.

The grating gave way easily under pressure from her vibroblade.

It wasn’t as simple as stalking through a palace undetected; her mind was immediately shot back into the past. This was all too real now.

The Citadel was either designed this way, or was cultivated, to be reminiscent of other Imperial residences with its white marble, and echoing corridors. It was the grandeur that she had learned to live with.

Finding Luke would be easy; he still shone in her mind.

Her perception seemed somewhat skewed, however; the coldness was drawing closer, the humming in her mind made her suffer bouts of distraction, but she was so close to her goal that with every step his presence grew stronger.

She stopped; her senses flared. And she ducked back into the hallway from which she just came, hiding into one of the recessed doorways, and drawing her blaster.

Mara caught just the motion and the color as it paraded past.

Red…tall, red-clad, human guards.

She sucked in air quickly; the Imperial Royal Guard.

No, it can’t be. She shook her head, denying, and pressing on with her goals.

Her goals…he was her goal…to get him out. And nothing was going to stop her.

It took a few more deep breaths before she felt that she could go on.

The Citadel was designed like most Imperial palaces; the apse and the nave led directly to the grand audience chamber.

Sentinel guards roamed the hallways; avoiding them was becoming more difficult; they timing was
coming closer and closer together.

Luke must be close. *She wanted him to be*...for all this would be in vain. Her senses knew that he would be.

Another turn in the hallway and she knew that she was there.

The doors to the chamber were large, ornate and ancient. As Mara pushed on them, with a creak they swung open, as if they were light as a feather. Apprehensively, she walked towards the portentous black chair in the middle of the otherwise empty room.

A sense of deja vu struck her; memories of being summoned before her former master returned.

Giving in to the fatigue, she let her muscles shiver as she circled around the chair to see its occupier.

Her breath froze in her chest, as a pair of bloodshot blue eyes glared up at her from under unkempt shaggy blonde wisps of hair.

“I told you to leave this world.” He growled, shaking his head as he rose to stand. “Why didn’t you listen to me?”

She had lost her voice.

His appearance was not the one she recognized; his manner was not his own.

It wasn’t possible. Had he fallen to the Dark side? Her head shook in disbelief.

Within seconds Luke grasped her by her upper arms, entering her personal space as he put himself face to face with her, slightly shaking her.

She heard his ragged breathing. His mumblings seemed urgent but, in the midst of her shock, she couldn’t comprehend his words.

“Luke…” She breathed out as she studied his face, “What’s happened to you?”

“Mara—” she recognized the pleading voice coming from him. “You must leave now. Before it’s too late. Don’t question me….if you don’t leave He’ll find you and then…I can’t help you—” Luke reasoned with her.

He ordered—“Leave now.”

He begged—“Please?”

She studied his face-- the edges were there, the contours that made up his cheekbones, the dimple in his chin but it wasn’t him, was it?

Still locked in his grasp, she shook her head again, “No...not without you…I can’t…”

As she finished speaking, she saw his face register a distraction past her shoulder; his eyes grew immediately cold. She entirely sure, but she thought she could see orange seeping in on the edges of the blue.

In that instant, Luke raised himself to full height and stern look came to his face.

A laugh broke the silence between them; a cackle that sent shivers down her spine.
Luke released his hold on her.

Mara trembled with trepidation for a moment, the blood leaving her face, her body filling with a feeling of absolute horror.

Slowly, she turned in the direction of those mocking tones. Her eyes widened at the impossible figure approaching the two of them.

“I’ve waited for you.” He rasped. “You took your time in returning to Me.” His red eyes were glaring out from under his black hood as he approached.

“Welcome, My Hand.”

Mara’s mouth dropped open as her eyes rolled backwards.

Before her mind was swept into unconsciousness, she felt the strong arms of Luke catch her body, keeping her from falling.

TBC
The Reckoning

Chapter Summary

Quote: Like a rejected child, she choked down her hurt feelings- they would be her undoing.

Characters: Mara, Luke and The Emperor?

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Chapter Notes

Unabashedly promoting my other works here… I hope you’ve read ‘Parallel Paradoxes’ and ‘Defining Destiny’…gonna be taking some plots bunnies from them… and then putting the bunnies back, unharmed.

Okay…there’s a little violence warning with this FYI…

Also, there’s a shout-out to my sisters in the 501st who would notice uniform details… and if I got it wrong –they will let me know ;)

And, yeah, I was watching The Cell (the only good thing about that movie was the fashion), and Handmaid’s Tale (one of my favourite books EVER!).

Bum-Bum-Bum! How will Mara ever get out of this one.

BTW, the goal (aside from making Mara canon again) is to release a chapter on Sundays…good for evening or morning readings ~wink!

**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Byss: Imperial Citadel

Luke watched as the other dark presence, known as Sedriss, bowed and walked away from their nefarious Master. The two men glared eye-contact at the other in passing.

He waited until he heard the doors close, and watched Darth Sidious from under heavy lids, looking at Him with impunity. He waited further until the Other turned to face him, and raised his brow questioningly.

“It wasn’t supposed to happen like this.” He uncharacteristically hissed. In his long dark robe, Luke paced in the chamber.

“I agree.” The older man said indifferently; turning away, it was of no importance to Him.
“You used me as bait.” He accused.

“You wanted her to find you—she did.” The Emperor was flippant, but greatly amused at the predicament.

“You promised that she wouldn’t be hurt.” Luke dared to argue back.

“She isn’t.” Darth Sidious’s tone grew more annoyed with the younger man, but permitted his anger. “And I promised nothing of the sort.” His dark curtness echoed off the walls.

Pacing, the former Jedi had no retort but only steamed in his own feelings.

“If anyone is to blame here, it would be your desire for her that you let slip into the galaxy’s consciousness, and then, of course, her own foolishness.” Sidious didn’t need to use any tricks. “It was you who called out to her.”

Stopping, Luke glared at the other man, trying to remember his place here. He had no words that he could fight back with. Mara had come to find him of her own accord; even after he had repeatedly warned her to turn around and leave.

It was something that was gnawing at him; she had done this to be with him. He was to blame….but she had done this.

“We have other matters to discuss, my apprentice.” Sidious snarled as he took to his throne. “You have yet to report to me on the situation at Kalee, Yaga Minor and Borosk—how did they receive you?”

Luke turned his back away from the older man; a thing that no one else was permitted to do.

Since agreeing to this odd union, both men had struck an accord. If Sidious wanted Luke as his apprentice in the Dark Side, then Luke would succumb but only under his terms; his reputation would not be of that of his father, he refused to kill indiscriminately, he refused to take any command that would act against the citizens of the former Republic. Instead, he acted as an ambassador, of sorts, calling worlds back into the order that was once The Empire.

As Luke saw it, when the time came for them to join and heal the galaxy, the citizens would be far more-trusting if they saw him as the one to level the hand that would destroy them.

Sidious agreed, still with enough guile to hint that all those resolves would soon crack. Though he hated the act, he was wise enough to see that his new apprentice was indeed perceptive to the mood of the galaxy.

“The reigning governor of Kalee was less than receptive.” Luke said blankly. “I convinced him otherwise, that joining us was in his best interest.”

Sidious hid his smile.

“Borosk needed less convincing and pledged their loyalty immediately.” He took a breath before continuing. “Yaga Minor will need a new leader in that region.”

“Oh?” Sidious asked from his throne; his voice filling the space. “And why is that?”

The older man could feel the rise in power in the former Jedi.

“I had to relieve him of his duty.” Luke answered blankly.
“Was it quick?” Sidious asked.

“Yes.” He replied.

“Was it satisfying?” Sidious asked again.

Luke looked at the blank marble walls, tracing one vein on the surface as a distraction. “No.” He answered.

&lt;And why not? &gt; Sidious touched his mind.

“I don’t know.” Luke answered, preferring not to return the mental contact.

“You do.” The Emperor insisted blatantly. “You are just being obstinate to admit to your true feelings.”

Looking back, Luke’s shoulders heaved as he prepared to answer. “He angered me.”

&lt; How? &gt;

“He called me a ‘magician’ and then threatened to turn his weapons on Valc VII.” He said.

&lt; How did you respond? &gt;

“I showed him my lightsaber.” Luke hissed, his eyes squinting as he recalled it; the simple slice through a man. “His subordinates fell in line immediately thereafter.”

“So why do you feel that it wasn’t satisfying?” Sidious asked in a voice that was part Emperor and part teacher.

Turning around, Luke regarded the older man, knowing that this was part of his lessons in the Dark Side. “It felt… temporary… acting in anger.” He said.

Sidious chuckled, please and amused. “And so it should.” He gestured for the younger man to come closer.

In the two months since joining the reborn Emperor, the man had aged rapidly, now requiring, or appearing to require, His gnarled black cane for support.

From his throne, He leaned on it, watching His apprentice with great interest.

Luke frowned, waiting for further understanding.

“Anger and rage are always temporary.” The Emperor explained. “When the source is removed, so goes the power.”

“Your father, for example, felt rage and would lash out. It would solve the immediate problem but it would not have any lasting results.” Sidious spoke slowly. “Vader would call on his anger for Kenobi, letting the power flow through him, to heal his lungs… but it couldn’t be sustained. So the results were never completed.”

Narrowing his gaze, Luke tried to understand.

“Anger, rage, hatred are all instigators to using the power of the Dark Side.” Sidious rose from this throne, as the Red Guards followed behind.

“The difference is that those feelings imply that you care enough to have them.” The Emperor was enjoying having one so attentive. “The difference between Jedi and Sith is that Jedi care to feel for others, while Sith having nothing but indifference towards others.”

The former Jedi didn’t nod, but pondered those words.

“You will never be a Sith.” Sidious said without any contempt. “Your emotions sway too much from the Light to Dark. You will never escape your ability to feel.”

“Don’t deny it–it’s pointless… it’s the reason that I need you.” Walking, Sidious didn’t pose a threat in His observation. “Your feelings, for My Hand, drives you now.”

Luke opened his mouth to refute it, but he knew it was true.

Mara was here. He could feel it. Nothing would give him more relief than to see her and know that she wasn’t injured or damaged.

It had been three days since she had arrived looking for him; he knew what she wanted, but he wasn’t prepared to go with her so soon.

If he was being fully truthful with himself; he would have to admit that he didn’t understand his feelings for her, now.

Since turning, it had been revealed that she was sent to manipulate him, as others had been sent to do. Were all her feelings just an act? It made him doubt her love; it made him doubt his own.

Furthermore, he was granted access to some of the files on The Emperor’s Hand. Reading through them gave him an insight to the levels that she had sunk to in order to attain her goals. This couldn’t be the same person that loved him; another monster in his life.

“It does.” Luke agreed, watching the Emperor begin to take His leave.

The older man coughed-laughed before he spoke. “In time, when she has made her own decision, then you can make yours.” Sidious enjoyed these sorts of predicaments of emotional torture, He fed on them. “I promised her to you… if you still want her… provided that she is still loyal.”

Feeling that this was his dismissal, Luke bowed and said, “Yes, Master” before backing away.

**

In the dark, she couldn’t see her hand in front of her face.

When she had come to, she thought she had been blinded, but her Force skills told her differently.

The cell was low, and she banged her head when she tried to stand up, so now she crouched…or crawled.

Then, her mind started to work, and remembered why she was down here to begin with.

To console herself, and to bring warmth into her joints, she crouched and rocked herself, repeating the words, “It wasn’t him… It wasn’t him… It wasn’t him… It wasn’t him…”

Mara had no idea how long she had been down there but she recognised this same procedure. She had suffered through this same treatment once before, during training ….and once after that.
It was a way to breakdown a mind; feeling lost and disorientated always made for the best interrogations. They cracked so quickly with little or no effort.

She would have cracked by now; sleep deprived and emotionally vacant, the only things she had left was her sanity. *Maybe.*

The void of light was playing with her senses; Mara had to take her hand and guide her eyelids down to protect them.

Then, the memories would come; not of her training but of the second time that she had to endure this form of torture.

The term ‘rotting in your cell’ was a favorite tactic of the Director of Intelligence, Ysanne Isard. Mara could recall with absolute precision, seeing that pale face with the blue and red colored eyes looking down at her.

All she could remember, before she was placed there, was feeling the loss of the Emperor at Endor; she had fainted. Next, she woke up in the cell. A few taunts from Isard, who never did trust The Hand Program, and she was left to die there.

Mara’s mind jumped; she must be starting to feel the effects of the solitude, because she couldn’t remember how she got out of that cell. But, she could remember the trip in the tunnel under the palace that led to her freedom and her eventual escape from the planet.

“*Thought she was better than me.*” Mara grumbled, making the only sound in the room, and an incoherent one at that.

Maybe her sanity was leaving now too.

Just then, she heard the *beep!* the warning before it came.

Raising her hand up to her face, she checked that her eyelids were still closed because she knew what was going to happen next.

Forcing her eyes to open, she saw the beam of light that came down, and the tray of food that was lowered down to her.

Crawling, Mara made her way over, knowing that this was her meal for the day, knowing that this was her only source of light for the day too.

It wasn’t appetizing, but it was warm and it had some sort of taste to it. This time she was given a glass of water to wash it down.

She snorted, by means of making sure her sanity was still there.

“*Standard Imperial Procedure is to allow prisoners to have exactly three hundred and sixty seconds of which to consume their meal and use the evac unit. At which point in time, they shall return to their solitude. Manual for Confinement Protocol, Section Eleven, sub-section nine point one.*” Mara said to the air, quoting from her training, informing them that she still knew of their tactics.

She started counting in her head, the time allotment.

Between bites of her meal, she laughed as she looked up into the light, knowing that it was what was keeping her vision intact. She was sure that her guards were starting to question if this was the
Mara could guess that she had been down there for at least two planetary cycles, maybe three. And she knew for a fact that she hadn’t followed any of the normal breakdowns that this type of incarceration could lead to; she hadn’t gone frantic and pounded on the borders of her confinement, she hadn’t screamed to the outside world making bargains for her release, and she hadn’t sat in the darkness sobbing.

Each of these stages would have gone along with the breaking of spirit that was needed if they planned to interrogate her.

If they were watching her, they would have either been astounded that she didn’t crack, and now they were the ones to break, probably taking pity of her, perhaps recognising that she was once one of their own, made to endure this treatment.

Her time was running out, and a second beam shone on the evac unit in the corner.

Pushing the food tray aside, she crawled over and quickly used the unit; at least her bodily functions were still somewhat normal.

The darkness would be back soon and this small luxury would be taken away from her; so many times she had watched as prisoners lost their dignity and refused to use the facilities. She wasn’t going to be one of those types of prisoners.

Crawling back to the food tray for the remaining twenty seconds, Mara knew that she needed to finish the water before it was taken away.

Grabbing the glass, she drank down all that she could finish. Proud that she didn’t hear the beep, indicating that meal time was over, she continued to shove food in her mouth.

The beep came; she back away, but still kept in the light for as long as she could, as the tray went back up into the ceiling.

She watched as it faded into nothing, and watched for longer as the lights were cut but the bulbs faded out.

Mara sat, listening to sound of her own breathing; maybe if she played that she had been broken by the system, they would let her out…and then, she could find him.

Luke, her mind called.

At one point in her life, in a cell like this, she had called out to him before; only, at the time, she called for revenge, with absolute hatred in her heart, feeling nothing else.

In the darkness now, Mara began to try and rock herself again. But her limbs felt suddenly heavy, weighted down.

She went to lift her hand to ensure that her eyes were closed, but her arms wouldn’t lift.

Suddenly, and without warning, all the lights came up, and involuntarily, she closed her eyes against the harsh whiteness of it all.

She could feel it, she was losing the ability to keep in the crouching position that she was in, and lost her balance falling to the side.
Everything was beginning to blur.

Mara now recalled the next step for a co-operative prisoner; drug them.

And the blackness came to her again.

**

There was a thick taste in her mouth.

*Cloradiate*

Mara remembered the name of her preferred sedative; tasted like chalk, but left no evidence in the blood stream.

She blinked, and then blinked into sunlight...or perhaps, just light, taking in her surroundings. Clearly, she was lying on her right, as the side-ways view of the room would indicate.

It was a cell of another sort; standard white blank walls, standard cot, standard door.

Sitting up on the cot, she looked down at herself to see that she had been cleaned and dressed in a gray, Imperial boiler-suit.

Craning her neck, she looked at the most-obvious spot as to see what had been decided to do with her. There was no insignia on her left shoulder; meaning that it hadn’t been undetermined if she was going to be considered amongst their ranks.

On the table across from the cot, a black officer’s command cap sat. Mara squinted to look at it, and felt slightly insulted; the disk on the center of the forehead was only that of a lower rank and had none of the fine details, or notches, that her former uniforms had.

This was also a test; would she feel the need to put on the cap to complete the uniform? Did she want to fit back in with this regime?

On her feet; standard issue work boots.

All of this implied that she was *not* a normal prisoner. They knew it. She knew it.

Fully sitting up, Mara righted her weight, and swung her legs over the edge of the cot. Glancing down, she wouldn’t let another detail slip from her notice.

Taking the boot from off her left foot, she proceeded to remove the laces and thread them in the correct manner.

*Not criss-cross...* she reminded herself, mentally chastising the last person who wore these boots... *Dente de Serra...* she reminded them.

This was the game; make her feel insulted, then, make her feel that she wanted to be a part of it.

So far, they had been living up to every textbook technique that she had been taught. But in this little bit a defiance, she was able to show them that she remembered what the rules of this game were.

Mara wished she could generate some feelings for her captures. She wished she could generate any feelings at all.

She was numb, and if you scratched the surface, she could admit that she was scared too.
All of her treatment was in preparation to meet with the one who called Himself Emperor.

It had been drilled into her from very young age, that you never show what you were feeling on the inside; your face was taught to portray nothing.

Fear, pain, sadness, happiness, love; these things were all dead.

You were to feel nothing but dedication to your purpose and your work. If you didn’t learn it the first time, it was taught to you again, until the consequences of your feelings out-weighed the need to have them.

If they were watching, they were surely curious as to what she would do next as she finished lacing her other boot.

She kept her eyes down, trying to think of nothing, and trying not to remember the last thing before she found herself inside a cell.

Those eyes… those red eyes, had haunted her for the first five years since Endor. She had seen them in her dreams, saw them while she worked.

They still haunted her, periodically, since Wayland, waking her in the night, calling out for the visions to stop.

Now they were vivid and present and real.

She shivered.

And then, another set of eyes filled her vision, remembering as the orange seeped into his blue eyes.

Mara shook her head just before the door opened and two Sentinel droids waited in the corridor for her to join them.

Getting up, she felt the stiffness in all her joints; a lingering effect of the sedative.

She took another look at the command cap, and decided to play along. Reaching over, she picked it up, tucked her hair behind her ears, and placed it on her head before following the droids.

Adjusting the haphazard uniform in place, she was ready.

Stepping out into the hall, one droid preceded her, and the other took up rear flank. They walked in single file along the empty hallways.

Strange, she thought, that they seemed to be asking for her to join them, …and not using any binders.

With every step, her mind started to race as to where they could be taking her. Luke! She immediately thought, but then dismissed it as she could not sense his presence.

A feeling of loneliness entered her; she had not felt his presence since she had found him. She was sure that he would have been happy to see her, and want to come with her, but for some reason, he seemed determined to stay.

Mara knew where they were headed. There was no need to guess.

It was all confirmed when they turned down a hallway that led to the large black doors that she had opened several days before, to find Luke.
Outside the chamber, she paused and looked up and the large black doors; thinking of what lay beyond, and how she should act.

This was an unfathomable situation.

For months, she had read the reports, heard the reports; all giving indication that He had returned. Yet, she refused to believe it. Mara had even tried to reach out into the galaxy that this was real, that He was real, and received no indication that it was, He was, real.

At the back of her mind, she was still skeptical; she had been given no proof that this was the same Emperor that she once served. Her first reaction to seeing Him was merely shock, and nothing more.

Even her sense in the Force was unsure; the aura was there; the malevolence was present, even the mannerisms were exact- yet, still she had doubt.

Given her closeness with the Emperor, before his supported death, she was sure that if he was able to arise, that, somehow, some way, He would have tied to reach out and contact her.

He had put so much effort into training her, and trusting her. Wasn’t she valuable enough to Him to have done so?

Clearly not, He had other ‘Hands’ in play; a thought that still irked her.

Like a rejected child, she choked down her hurt feelings- they would be her undoing.

This general distrust is what sat at the back of her mind as the doors creaked open before her.

The Sentinels kept their stance, as it was clear that she was to enter the chamber alone.

Lifting her chin, she knew the behavior that would be expected of her. Walking forward, stopping in the middle of the room, she turned back to confirm that she was now alone, and assumed the relaxed military position; feet at shoulder width and arms behind back. It was comfortable and familiar.

She jarred a bit when the doors closed behind her with a clank! as the old-fashioned doors might.

The room was shrouded in darkness. Only fragments of light cracked though the glass panes, leaving branches streaking across the floor.

Though the walls were white marble, there was no brightness, only the somberness of a tomb.

The room had been configured differently since she had first entered it.

The white marble walls and floors were a surprise from the usual darkness that made up for most Throne Rooms.

A dais had been constructed- although it too looked as if it was made from marble. Perhaps it was here all along, and she failed to notice it the first time.

But atop the dais, was the back of the large black throne; light, from the windows behind the throne, back-lit the ominous silhouette.

Looking up, she had no doubt as to whom that throne truly belongs to.

Mara surveyed the space, trying to sense for any presence other than her own. She knew that she was not alone; the room was breathing, in and out at a raspy pace.
An uneasiness set-in as she waited; this was a test of her limits and how much did she recall of her former life.

The portentous throne turned to face her.

The room grew colder, and yet still she waited.

Rule number one: speak only when an answer is demanded of you.

For a split second, Mara felt the instinct to bow, or take a knee, as she was taught, but refrained.

And then she felt the tendrils, reach out for her in the Force; a wave came over her senses, she dared not reach back.

“So…” He paused. “How long has it been, my child?” His speech was casual, but she knew that this was meant to lead her into a sense of false security.

He may have been raised a mere meter off the ground but it projected His voice, clearly and ambivalently.

“Almost seven years, I believe.” He said, answering His own question.

The robbed figure got up from the throne, and motioned to descend the stairs; stepping on each one and pausing, waiting for her reaction.

Mara watched His actions with suspicion, but did not react.

“I suppose that I should be honored that you didn’t fall to your knees in my presence.” Slow and articulate, the tone was sarcastic and irreplaceable. “So many others have, you know…without a care as to whom they give their loyalty to.”

The figure in the shadow motioned its hand, in conversation. “It does you credit that you are not so bendable…”

“However, in seven years, you remembered rules… protocol… manners of dressing… codes… but,” He hissed as He took the last step down. “You seemed to have forgotten the etiquette of court.”

She could feel a shiver on her spine, and fought as to control her body.

“It is customary to bow before The Emperor… it is obliging to genuflect before your Master.” He sneered; the eyes flamed from under the hood.

With a flick of His finger, her knees buckled and gave way.

Mara stopped from fully losing her balance, and caught herself as she was suddenly on the floor. The sound of the crack of her left knee cap hitting the cold marble floor echoed. She breathed hard taken by surprise, and suppressing the pain.

He came closer to her. She still refused to move, keeping her posture, but she could feel fear snaking up her skin.

Instead of looking away, she dared to do it; she blinked and then looked directly into those eyes, and thought what she had been thinking all along.

Without words, she stood defiant against him. *I refuse to believe, without proof!*
Pausing, she waited and watched his eyes; at one point in her life, she lived to see the praise that came from him, but now…

Without warning, and surprisingly, he laughed; chuckling in the wickedest manner. “Good… good… so very good of you.”

“So many sycophants have fallen at my feet without so much as to challenge the validity of my claim.” Walking, he began to encircle and inspect her. “How pleased I am that you would not be so moved as to do the same.”

He came even closer yet, perhaps less than two meters and began to encircle her form.

Stopping behind her, so that she could not see, but only hear his voice, he said slowly, and approvingly. “You truly are one of my greatest achievements… My special case… My Treasured Hand.”

Mara could hear the drag of his robe along the ground as he moved again, coming around to face her.

“So…” He hissed, and she could feel the air change around them. “Let’s have it then… ask what you need to in order to satisfy your questions… to prove myself.” He demanded. “Then, we shall deal with your insolence directly.” He whispered sinisterly.

Her mind raced; all the questions that she had at the forefront of her mind were gone. All the words that she wanted to use had escaped her. There were so many things that she wanted to know.

Here was her chance and it was slipping away from her. She felt the poke in her senses, but still couldn’t form the words when her mouth dropped open.

Tilting his head, He looked unimpressed but amused that she had lost her guile.

Mara mustered what she could, and found words, some words. “Endor.” She said plainly. Her under-used voice cracked. “You showed me…”

“That I perished under the might of Vader and Skywalker at the moment of my supposed death?” He raised his brow, asking contemptuously. “…and I gave you one last command at that time.” He sneered.

Mara braced herself for the retribution. She felt it; delivered with a shudder.

</ You failed! /> His voice boomed in her mind and in her senses; the pressure in her head was back again, and with full force.

Oh Gods…that touch, it was familiar…but it wasn’t enough to convince her just yet.

“Do I need to remind you of what that command was?” He asked with a touch of menace in his voice.

Reflectively, like a child being punished, she shook her head, and looked down.

“No?” He snarled, feeding off her immediate fear. “Pity, perhaps we should start somewhere else?”

It was taking her might, but she refused to follow him with her gaze as he began to walk around her again.

“You were my student since you were a child. I selected you, guided you, trained you… gave you
all the best education that could be afforded to you. I even saw to it that you were given cultural instructions under the greatest dancers in the galaxy.” He listed without emotion as He walked.

“When you came of age, you were presented at court, as Liana, my prized dancer…to which you proved, dancing to “Seasons of the Years” in the Grand Ballroom in the Imperial Palace on Coruscant, and given rave reviews.” He sounded proud of her accomplishments.

“You shone as my agent as well… the youngest ‘Emperor’s Hand’ that was ever in service.” He said, knowing all these things to be true.

Mara’s lips twitched, knowing that she liked to think of herself as the only ‘Emperor’s Hand’.

“Ahhhh…” He mocked. “I can feel it; your disapproval. You thought you were the only one….and you were, my most-favored, most-reliable…. The others, such as they were, paled in comparison to you.”

“And yet, here you are… and where are they now?” He hummed the words, and grinned from under the hood.

“Do you require more proof?” He asked, losing his amused tone. From under the hood, his eyes narrowed.

The skin on her back began to warm again, and the “nail” was dragging up her spine, digging in.

“Your access name was ‘Wisteria’.” He said; his voice didn’t increase, but his words echoed about the room. “You were trained on Yarsus, Tharrian, Veens, and so many more…going to the places that excelled in their schooling and I gave it all to you!”

She shifted as to remove from the irritating rake on her skin.

“And yet, you have the gall to question My authority!” His voice boomed; and with that, she felt streaks across her entire flesh.

Mara shivered, but still refused to give her obedience so willingly. Her green eyes flashed, she wasn’t about to give in to a clone?

“A clone?” He mocked, hearing her thoughts. “You think I’m a clone?”

“And why should I prove my legitimacy to you?” His tone knowingly, far-superior. “I, who named you? I, who trained you and brought you up from nothing?”

She could feel the air get darker and tighter. In her senses, wearily, she got into the proper position before him, on one knee with her head down; shrinking herself as she had seen others grovel.

“And how do you repay My Kindnesses?- My Trust?” The walls pushed in on her with the echo of His voice.

“For the past seven years, I’ve reached across the divide, touching your mind, as I used to, with the only command that you were to complete…."

Looking at the marble floor, she gasped to herself. The voice… the voice that haunted both her waking and sleeping hours…. It was all real! The order to kill Luke Skywalker came from Him! – not a disembodied ghost, a vacant command, or a memory long-suppressed.

She swallowed hard, clenching her muscles as she did when His voice returned to her.
“And what do you do?” He asked, snarling, coming closer. “You joined him…studied under him… and then, fell in love with him.”

“Didn’t you?” His voice reverberated with the Force on her senses and skin.

Sneering, He turned away. “Of all the lessons that you were taught, ‘learning how to feel’ was not one of them.”

“You? My swift Hand of Justice… You used to be absolute and precise. I could count on your ability to see through the clutter of emotions and do what was asked of you. But instead, you became a love-struck doe for the one Rebel that she should have hated!”

“Skywalker!” He spit the name.

Crisp, clean and clear, His voice whispered with distaste. “How ignorant…how repugnant…how pathetic!”

Mara could feel the room gathering energy; she braced herself for what she couldn’t predict.

“Did you place your lips against his?”

With a pop! sensation, she could feel her mouth warming; the feeling that you get after a smack from a fat lip.

“Did you let him between your thighs?”

Groaning, Mara felt her lower abdomen squeeze from the inside; the same type of cramp that she got once a month, only deeper and more-constricting, the same muscles that delivered pleasure.

“Did you wrap your arms lovingly around him?”

With that, her right arm popped! as her shoulder dislocated. Stifling, she held in the yell that she wanted to let loose.

“You? Really?” He ridiculed. “Love and feelings are foreign things to you…you’ve never known it and will never know it…because you haven’t the capacity for it!”

He paused, coming closer to see the pain on her face.

“Yet, you still think you deserve to know if I was able to transfer my existence from one body to another? –you were there when Vanée’s assistant made his attempt!”

Mara remembered; watching it all in horror and mystified that He could even do such a thing- that the Force would allow Him to transcend. Shivering, she didn’t dare ask how? As it boggled her mind if it was even possible.

</ Did you forget that I can hear all your thoughts as well? />

Her eyes flashed up at him; there was no shielding, no protection that she could hide behind, He had taught her all of it.

“Whether you deserve it or not, I will tell you…so that you remember, just who is the greater power here.”

He smiled beneath his hood. “You’ll remember Jeng Droga… perhaps he was a more-dedicated Hand than you were, as when approached, he gladly agreed to accept my consciousness into his
body at Endor... Sate Pestage was waiting aboard the Eclipse, preparing Drogo for the transfer.”

Mara’s eyes widened; Jeng Drogo had taught her combat skills, until she bested him. After that, she never saw him again. And Sate Pestage was the twisted droon who followed Palpatine’s shadow at every turn; with his limited Force power, he would have been the one to usher Palpatine’s spirit from one body to the next.

“When Vader thought himself so noble to sacrifice himself to save his son, I had readied myself for the exchange.” He continued to explain.

“As Drogo’s body was already dying- he was weak, as you well know, and I waited until we arrived at Byss, to my secret cloning facility, to transfer My essence into a body that had been prepared using My genetic make-up.”

She shivered involuntarily, as the adrenaline to suppress the pain started to surge; yes, she knew of several cloning facilities, but never knew that they would ever be used.

“You remember seeing the schematics for that facility, don’t you? –it was very similar to the facility that I had, in waiting, at Wayland...that one that you helped the Rebels destroy.” He spit the words out in her direction.

She felt the severe yank at her hip, pulling her kneeling leg out of its socket; falling over with no dignity. Finally, she allowed herself to cry out quietly; biting her lips shut.

Too absorbed on deflecting her own pain, she didn’t hear Him recede, but she knew that He loved to watch others in pain; He fed on it.

The room was quiet once again, but it was deceptive; drawing on power, and preparing. But his tone seemed to change.

“However, clone bodies are unreliable...they age too quickly. Within a year, I feel the need to transfer bodies.” He said in an almost conversational manner; as if this was all boring Him.

“But knowing what I do of my home-world, I only had to wait until a Gungan would become as greedy as to sell their precious algae out on the open market.”

Cormix and Boss Mo’nach; Karrde’s clients from Naboo... The missing algae shipments—they went to...

“Me.” He chuckled under his breath, finishing her thought. “Did you know it regenerates tissue approximately ten times faster than bacta... how marvelous!”

“It grows cloned bodies as well!” He cackled, amused and celebrating. “Almost as fast as Thrawn’s method of growing them without the Force.”

“Where Thrawn’s method failed, mine succeeded.”

His attention turned back to her. “However, ideally, My Cloning facility would have kept preserved bodies for year to come.” He hissed, remembering. “These algae would have proven useful there...”

“Not like bacta...” He sounded almost content, which made her dread for the worse.

“Bacta can relieve nerve damage...”

Like fire, rakes across her skin and down her body flamed in agony.
“It can repair tissue…”

In an instant, Mara screamed to the room as the echo came back at her; the tears across her arms, she could see her own flesh ripple inside the skin as the mass came from off her bone.

“It can regrow bone…”

One by one, she could feel her lower spine start to pop at vertebrae were crushed, leaving her paralyzed unable to scream out.

"/ So through all this… do you doubt who you are in the presence of now? /" He hovered over her.
"/ Are you still useful to me? Give me one reason as to why I should spare you? /

“One last question…” He hissed, standing over her. "/ Feel free to answer this… /" His mind re-iterated. “What will you call me now?” His sinister voice asked.

She shivered as she swallowed, fighting for air, fighting the pain that was rife through all her limps.

Choking on what moisture she had in her mouth, Mara found that she couldn’t speak. Reaching out, she answered how she knew she could; this wasn’t a clone, this wasn’t an imposter…

<<Master! >> Her mind called to Him; knowing it may or may not save her.

Lying helpless, and limp, she could see her contorted hand crumpled before her, almost every bone in her body broken.

There was one more punishment that was more-severe than feeling the vile stinging rays of electrocution shooting through your body, and she feared that the most.

Mara’s body twitched and her lungs fought for air as she watched as her skin started to turn gray, dying; by the Force; He was removing the air and moisture from every cell, just as she had seen done time and time again to other victims of His power.

With her last few thoughts, she remembered that only thing that had brought her joy in her life, and as brief as it was, she refused to let go without thinking about him.

Luke, her mind whimpered softly.

If this was going to be the way that her life was to end, she just closed her eyes and just let it happen.

**

Again, waking from darkness; the last thing she remembered was pain…agonising pain, more-severe that she had ever experienced. Her dying body slipping away from her…

Vaguely, in her state of semi-consciousness, Mara was surprised that she was alive; that she was kept alive.

Her eyes opened as slits, then closed. The light around her was too bright.

And yet, she wasn’t ready to fully wake. Her mind was still foggy; probably from whatever medical treatment she had.

When she tried to breathe, she got the unmistakable scent of chemical; bacta? Or the miracle algae? her mind said.
Why had she awoken? What had woken her?

Mara involuntarily moaned as she felt it on her skin.

Whatever had been covering her was pulled away, and it was the very act of the slip on her skin, and exposure to air, that caused this new sensation that bordered on pain.

Naked and exposed.

Someone was there...in the room with her now. She could feel their shock and horror as to her appearance.

She hadn’t the strength to try and look through their eyes. But she could sense that whoever they were; they cared.

Then, she felt the warm touch...fingers, and then the flat of a palm, drifting up the side of her body, passing her hip and dipping at her waist, touching her shoulder. Not in a threatening or lurid manner, but healing and energetic, being far more effective than a bacta dip.

*Gods, what did He do to you?*

She heard his voice, wordless but inside her head.

Gasping, she wanted to speak; she wanted to call his name. *Luke!* She mentally yelled without reaching out in her feelings, knowing that Palpatine would hear her.

*Luke!* She tried again; it must be him, it had to be him.

She could feel his fingers, curled, and stroking the soft of her cheek, caressing her, calming her.

*He promised that He wouldn’t hurt you! He said that you would be rewarded for your loyalty!*

His mind flashed with anger, boiling; she could hear his thoughts.

She could feel his whole hand petting her hair; she didn’t need words to describe that it felt wonderful to have his touch again.

Then, as gentle as a feather, she felt his skin on hers; the brush of his lips on the corner of her mouth, pursing ever-so softly.

Mara began to let the sedation of a healing trance begin to work, knowing that he was near.

She didn’t hear his final words before he left her chamber.

*He said that you were Mine!*

**

Awaking this time came swiftly.

Mara sat up, anxiously, looking for any indication as to her situation.

For anyone else, they would have thought they had woken up inside a dream.

She was back in the throne room, beside the dais, on a tufted platform.

Looking down, she quickly examined where she thought that she might be damaged; the skin was
fresh and unscarred. Her joints moved without issue.

She was dressed in the exquisite blood-red beaded gown; fashioned to be the perfect picture of desire, as her chest heaved.

Mara wanted to yell, wanted to sob, wanted to fight…but she couldn’t. With the horrifying thought, she brought her hand up to her face and felt the decorative, divinely-designed muzzle holding her mouth closed.

Without looking, she moved her foot, to be told the truth; the sound of the chain resonated in the marble room.

It was unsettling and unnerving because she knew exactly what this meant.

Mara clutched the fabric of the gown to her chest, and shivered. She would have preferred her other cell.

The bird had been caught, in its great, big beautiful cage again.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Self-Pity by D.H. Lawrence

I never saw a wild thing sorry for itself. 
A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough without ever having felt sorry for itself.
The Performance

Chapter Summary

Quote: Considering her own eyes, she made them blink just to be sure that this wasn’t a dream; trapped in a nightmare.

Characters: Mara, The Emperor, Luke, Sedriss QL

**

Chapter Notes

So, it’s been rainy here…which seems to meet the mood of this story. I will not lie, I bought a little plasma lamp that keep on while I write (its one of those ball lights that has electric waves coming off of it…) so the mood is perfect….

Don’t get used to a quick update… I just happened to be in the mood. But, it will be raining for the next few days.

Not a SMUT-Warning…just a peppering of smuttiness… just a dash really… a hint...

It’s coming, I promise.

**

Imperial Citadel: Throne Room

Mara had found a comfortable position to rest herself in, while she waited.

Before she put her head down, she was given the chance to see if she had been healed; she moved her body, not feeling an ounce of pain – even her skin looked flawless, from what she could see of it; better than flawless; renewed.

When she found a shiny metal surface, on the edge of her pedestal, she could see her reflection. Aside from the filigree muzzle, she had been made up to look her finest.

She knew what He made her into; a decoration, something to look at, in both beauty and in warning.

Now, she sat, calmly, resting with her chin atop her hands.

Remembering, she had watched others live this life; the courtesans. They were placed as objects of decoration; to be desired and admired, but served no real purpose. If that was to be her role, then so be it – she could play this.

Given this time alone, Mara could think of her next move. But thinking only got her so far. Without guidance from The Emperor, she had no idea as to what He expected of her, and to that, she couldn’t
plan any further.

A random thought came to her; she had the Force.

Yes… could she do it, here and now, without being sensed or punished if this was something that was restricted from her?

She waited; there were no repercussions from even thinking it. Surely, The Emperor would know if she had considered it – He knew all of her thoughts before.

Closing her eyes, she relaxed her mind, trying to sense what was in store for her.

With no effort, her mind found him immediately. Luke! She called out, and then withdrew- she had not been given permission to contact him. Would she be punished again?

Mara froze, waiting for her world to drop, and it didn’t.

Relaxing, she closed her eyes once again, and tried not to think of Luke… but opened her mind.

The stars of the galaxy floated by, zeroing in to where she needed to see. In her senses, she could feel the shudder, not of fear, but of movement, jarring, shift, spinning out of control.

With flashes of light, and then explosions around her; she knew what she was seeing; a battle, a heated battle. A Mon Cal Cruiser surrounded by TIE fighters and two Star Destroyers. A fleet of X-wings dived in the direction of the TIEs in a defensive motion, while the Cruiser was concentrating its firing power, not on the Star Destroyers, but on the larger vessel that was heading towards the nearest planet. A World Devastator! It was a suicide mission to try and stop another planet from dying.

Like all her visions, she wasn’t allowed to stay long in one moment. Pulled out of one moment and into the next: it looked like Coruscant, but deserted. The once gleaming buildings were ash-scattered and there was no movement, but even the skylines were empty.

Her mind rushed again, and took her to a dark room; a cloaked figure hung his head. As if feeling or sensing her, he looked up and removed his hood quickly. She gasped as she finally saw Luke’s face!

Mara! He called out to her, frantic, and wanting her; his eyes wide and bright blue.

She yanked back on her senses, and brought her mind back to the present, for fear of seeing anything else.

Mara opened her eyes, and looked out across the empty throne room. The residual effect of touching the Force was that she had a clearer perception. So it was of no surprise when the large black doors open into the room.

In her senses she could feel it, feel Him, approaching.

She hadn’t been given enough time to think, or reason, what she would do again when she saw Him, and she knew that would be inevitable.

In the short distance, she could hear the sounds of the Red Guard’s armour as it clicked on the marble floors; it was unmistakable, and so very different from that of Stormtrooper armour.

She may not have decided what her course of action would be, but she did know one thing; she wanted to stay alive. Her will to live would be her motivation.
Silently, sleekly, she rolled off the pedestal on onto the floor, on both knees, assuming a kneeling position with her head down, waiting. To stay alive, she had to play the part.

Her senses told her that The Emperor wasn’t alone, and semi-familiar presence that astounded her when she realized who it could be.

Dr. Cylo had been instrumental in all of the genetic testing to locate Force users during the highest reign of The Empire. He had created himself, experimenting on himself until he had perfected ways to save the body and mind.

Rumor had it that he had designed Vader’s armour, and that the Dr. Cylo that she knew was not the original, but a modified clone, enhanced beyond normal human skill and knowledge. But all this paled if this was Dr. Cylo.

Only Cylo had the zeal to keep living to work.

Mara dared to think that this was just another clone, and she could be right. From last she remembered, Cylo had gone into madness; turning on Vader and threatening treachery on The Emperor, before he was destroyed. He had even offered to clone her, claiming he could make her invincible.

Perhaps, The Emperor had saved a clone of Cylo somewhere, and reinstated him; Cylo was a genius after all, and his gifts could not be ignored.

As they approached, she could hear the conversation.

“Your Majesty,” the other said. “I have told you what I know to be true… the resources are running low. Growing a specimen now might damage all future hopes.”

The voice sounded like Cylo, but without looking up and reaching out in her senses, Mara kept her position and waited.

She felt when The Emperor recognised her in the room; His piercing gaze felt like a cold light on her, but she also felt His enjoyment at seeing her so humble.

Palpatine drew His interest away from her, before speaking. “Yes, Doctor, we shall continue this discussion later- I know that you will find a way that meets My needs. I have other matters that require My attention.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The doctor said; and Mara could sense that he was leaving.

From the sounds, and her peripheral view, she saw the Red Guard go past her and assume their positions on either side of the throne. Her senses were astute as to notice that they were human, and not droids as she had suspected.

Now, for all intents and purposes, she was alone again, with The Emperor.

Sensing that he was coming nearer, she withdrew; fearing that he wouldn’t be pleased to know that she still used her Force skill.

She didn’t need the Force to know that He was watching her now; amused by what he saw.

He would have seen her elegant form, on both knees with her head down, beside the pedestal; the picture of submission. No longer willful or doubtful, but the loyal servant that He once praised.
Ascending the stairs, he paid no notice to her when he passed by, going to his throne.

But once seated, Mara heard His breathing as He considered her. “Arise, Mara Jade.” He said calmly.

Doing as she was told, fluidly she came to her full height, still with her eyes cast down.

“I have decided to spare you…that is, until you prove that you are no longer useful to Me.” He spoke crisply. “Look at Me.” He ordered.

Mara turned her body and slowly glanced up at him.

With His hood removed, she could see that He inhabited a younger form of himself; the body was perhaps His age at fifty years of age, maybe slightly older. But his orange eyes were keen.

“My servants, Sedriss, and Skywalker will soon be here.” He explained. “When they arrive, I will be able to ascertain if your presence has the desired effect that I wish.”

She knew that He would give her a command on how to act.

“I want you to release your Force aura.” Palpatine said carefully. “Let your presence be felt but not directed at either one of them. They will both be able to sense you.”

Mara blinked her eyes, understanding. She had done this before, shielding herself up until it was revealed that she was there.

“Do you understand?” He asked, somewhat callously; wanting to hear the right answer.

She bowed her head, and reached out, answering Him, unable to speak aloud because of the muzzle. << Yes, Master >> The voice she projected was docile.

“Good.” He huffed. “Now go back to your perch, and be sure to display your limitations.”

Mara bowed fully, and understood what He had meant by limitations; He wanted her to display the chain around her ankle.

<<Yes Master >> She replied.

The muzzle and the chain would arouse or rebuke either men that were expected before Him. Having not known Sedriss, she could not predict what sort of man he was. But she could guess what Luke’s response would be at seeing her like this.

The Emperor had engineered it all. He was suspecting that Luke would be furious, sinking him deeper into the Dark Side. She was a pawn.

Back on the pedestal, she did, in fact, perch, and pose. Stretching out her legs, coiling the chain at the foot on her stand, it became decorative.

Even with the muzzle, Mara knew how to form her eyes, wide and large, tilting inward, almost seductive with a hint of fear.

She would appear as a caged figna; humbled and restrained, but dangerous if let loose. She was restrained for her sake, as well as for their protection. It was a lie; a deceit.

Fluttering, her eyes closed briefly, sending her senses out, unguarded, unshielded; this was more-difficult than it sounded. Unlike Luke, she kept her aura closely protected, afraid that it would reveal
her. It took her concentration to achieve this.

</ Do you sense them coming? /> Palpatine asked slyly. </ Skywalker is most-eager to see you, after sensing you. />

Mara broke with the façade, and wanted to look over to see if she had lost any ground.

</ Oh, yes. I felt you reach out in your feelings… you had a vision… We shall discuss it further, after… /> He was curt but not reprimanding as she thought He would be.

She regained her posture again, straightening her back as they approached, sending her aura out, without really trying.

Mara heard their marching feet and the staccato of the beat informed her that neither of them enjoyed the other’s presence; a rivalry had developed.

She could sense it all; distrust, jealousy, hatred… but in that, Luke’s presence still shone over Sedriss. To her, it couldn’t be anything but clear.

Although they were not in-sight, she sensed it when Luke recognised her presence; he seemed hurried to see her again.

Looking out, her face became expression-less; a breathing doll, a vacant witness.

From the far end of the room, the men appeared; walking shoulder to shoulder, matching in gate and stride.

Mara tried not to look over; to keep her eyes forward; she wanted to make eye contact with Luke, she wanted to feel enveloped in his presence.

Both garbed in black, Luke presented a better figure than Sedriss, dressed for an Imperial audience.

She felt Luke’s immediate reaction to seeing her; she could feel the rush in his protective nature, wanting to break her chain, and carry her away.

She could feel it boiling and festering in him; hatred, and rage at seeing her like this, knowing what had been done to her to make her submit in such a manner.

If she could feel it, then so could Palpatine. Switching her senses, The Emperor was, indeed, feeding off the feelings in the room.

“Ah, My Dark Jedi…” Palpatine greeted them; she sensed, rather than saw his sinister smirk. “… returned from your duties, no doubt.”

Both men stopped before the dais and bowed in unison but did not lower themselves to take a knee before their Master.

Mara was trying to record all their interaction; strange, that Palpatine called them ‘Dark Jedi’… not ‘apprentices’ as she thought Luke had succumbed to.

She saw Luke stepped forward, and his eyes flicked over to her before addressing The Emperor; his eyes began to seep with the orange fury as he spoke.

“Master, I have to report that the sieges on Veen have ceased without any further resistance. They were pleased to have order restored.” Luke said in a blank tone; expressing pleasure nor displeasure with the events.
“Yes” The Emperor hissed. “You did well to re-instate the governor there. I’m sure they will reward you with their loyalty.” He paused. “Tell me, what was their perception of you?”

It was a trick; Palpatine never asked a question if He already knew the answer.

Luke blinked his eyes solemnly, and began to speak, keeping his voice controlled, describing his actions, with satisfaction to The Emperor.

She liked just hearing Luke’s voice, regardless as to what he was saying; her mind flash on the memory of hearing his voice in her ear as he would wake her in the mornings after a night of passion, the warmth of his breath on her skin as he spoke. She could feel the flush of that memory coming on her; she pressed it down, knowing that she would pay the price for having it.

She struggled to keep her other senses aware.

Mara looked out, keeping her posture and manner, cool, indifferent; she could feel the curiosity coming from Sedriss as to her presence.

She could feel his stare; the captivation of another Force-user, such as himself…and a female one at that.

It wasn’t admiration for her abilities, it was a lust…

Sedriss was untrained as to keep his thoughts to himself. And as The Emperor engaged Luke, fleetingly, Mara saw the images in Sedriss’s mind; he like the idea of her bound at mercy. It was cruel; the things that he wanted to do to her. His fantasy was taking him away from his duty.

In the background, she could hear the growl come to Luke’s voice as he spoke with The Emperor. He must be sensing Sedriss’s thoughts.

Not just wanting to protect her, but Luke wanted to covet her as his own, and his anger was elevating quickly; his vision was of running Sedriss through with his lightsaber for even daring to think about what belonged to him.

Mara swallowed quietly; Luke had admitted that he once was jealous over how others saw her, but she didn’t think it would escalate to murder… over her… for her. She’d be expected to be honoured if it was done in love, but this wasn’t love; it was possession. Luke was in deeper than she had expected.

When he was done speaking, Luke stepped back inline with the other man.

“Sedriss…” The Emperor said with a sternness in his voice. “… Report.” He ordered.

The younger man stepped forward, and bent slightly before addressing. “Master…” he began with a reverence that was absent from Luke’s voice.

From her peripheral vision, she could see Sedriss; he was younger than Luke, by only a few years, but he was hardened. His build was wider and bulkier than Luke; his size was earned by his efforts; it was his pride, and his expectation that he would be reward someday for those efforts.

Mara was drawn away, in her senses; breaking in poise, her eyes flicked over to the two men, then quickly flicked back.

Luke was watching her, ignoring the others and the issues that he was required to be attentive for.
With her senses open, she centered on him; it pained her to feel his heartache, his longing for her too.

She blinked slowly, savoring it, and still trying to hold unto her numbness as her shield.

Blinking again, brought her focus back into the room, and aware of the happenings.

Sedriss finished his report, and stepped back.

The Emperor gave each of them instructions to their next objectives. Mara half-listened, trying not to absorb too many details; she may be privy to be in the room, but it was unclear if she was an active participant.

She assumed that Palpatine stood and began to come closer; she could feel it in her aura.

The Emperor descended the stairs to be at the same level as the pedestal that Mara rested on.

With a dismissal, He watched as His servants leave the chamber.

She felt Luke hesitate before turning to depart.

Palpatine’s eyes narrowed, possibly appraising them; He was neither please or annoyed with them.

From the corner of her eye, Mara watched his chest heave before He turned to her. She flicked her eyes forward because she hadn’t been given permission to look on Him, but she could feel His consideration.

“You reached out in the Force before I arrived.” Palpatine stated blanked; it was hard to read if she to be punished or praised.

“At one point in time, you would have never done that, without My guidance. Was that something that Skywalker taught you?” His tone was almost conversational, but it could all be a trap.

‘You may answer.’ Palpatine touched her mind.

Reluctantly, she reached back. << Yes Master… he did. >>

“You had a vision…” He said blankly. ‘What did you see?’ He asked, knowing he was entitled to her gifts and how she used them.

Mara blinked, looking out on the chamber, thinking of how to describe it; the images rushed by her so rapidly. << A battle, Master. >> She breathed heavy remembering the details. << Two Star Destroyers were in engaged against a Mon Cal Cruiser… the Cruiser was firing on… a World Devastator? >> She was unsure if that was what she saw, but continued. << I did not see the end of the battle, Master. >> She could sense his disappointment, so she included other details. << I saw Coruscant in ruins…deserted…empty. >>

Palpatine inhaled deeply, considering her words. “And what else?…something you left out.” He hissed.

<< Master, I saw Skywalker…before he arrived here… I wasn’t… >> She was about to make excuses for herself but then stopped, knowing that excuses only angered him.

“You weren’t attempting to contact him.” He finished with an exhale. “The Force showed him to you…. Involuntarily.” He whispered, seeming to excuse her, and her vision.

Turning, He ascended the stairs back to his throne.
Mara looked out on the vacant room. She could feel that The Emperor was considering her again; deciding if she was, in fact, useful to him. He rarely kept things around that weren’t.

She felt the touch before she heard the words. "Tell me…what did you make of their appearance?" He asked.

Internally, she shivered, unsure of what to say. "Master?" She asked, knowing that He sensed her uneasiness.

"At one point in time, I used to value your opinion and insight… you used to be clear on your appraisals. I’m asking for it now."

Mara was left with no other recourse. "Sedriss hates Skywalker. He is envious of him… his power…and that he has, apparently, usurped his position that he thought he held."

“Yes.” Palpatine hissed behind her. "What else?"

"Sedriss is dangerous."

"How so?"

"He is sloppy…he would disregard direct orders…he cares about discovering his own powers rather that fulfilling his position to serve You."

He chuckled behind her. "Your insight has improved greatly since adopting other approaches to your studies."

“He found me…Sedriss.” Palpatine said quietly, to her as much to himself. “He was training with the Imperial encampment in the Unknown Regions. He came to follow them under the guidance of his new faith.” He mocked. “They call themselves ‘The Acolytes’…amusing name for nothing more fanatics with no real aptitude for the Force.”

“He’s not a Sith. He’s not worthy.” He spat. “He is only good for whatever I purpose I put him to. His darkness is the only thing that keeps him here.”

“I’ve met one. Mara mentally recalled… An ‘Acolyte’… she thought back.

“You did what?” Palpatine sounded surprised that she would think without asking him.

"I’ve met an Acolyte of the Beyond, Master. They are searching for Sith artifacts …to destroy them."

"Narv Dengar has become a smuggler, and his assistant, Lemay, is a follower."

Her response did not have the effect that she thought it would have.

Palpatine chortled, entertained at the notion. “The traitorous, former, Ensign Dengar has a fanatical assistant?” He coughed. “Whatever did you do? Knowing you as I do, I am sure that you just did not sit by and allow him to stand… come now, I know you too well.”

It was an order for more information.
Mara hesitated, unsure, but decided to reveal it, risking the wrath of invoking the name of His former apprentice. << They were looking for Sith artifacts, so I directed them to Vader’s palace, Bast Castle, on Vjun. >>

He cackled openly. “Splendid! So very wicked of you! I have always admired your general distain for those who offend you, my child.”

Palpatine knew, as well as she, that Bast Castle was nothing more than a death trap for would-be assassins; anyone attempting an attack on Darth Vader would have preferred to meet their deaths on one of the treacherous mechanism than to confront the Dark Lord personally.

Pausing, He seemed to consider letting her in further, rewarding her with knowledge of her present situation.

</Sedriss desires you… and your power…you seduced him adequately… he’s curious about you, and he lacks the skill to hide it from Skywalker. />

She could almost hear him smiling with spiteful glee.

</Did you feel the spike in Skywalker when he noticed it? – it was too delicious not to taste. Had I not been here, Skywalker would have struck him down. />

Mara heard him sigh.

</How wonderful is jealousy… how delightful a tool… like your twisted vibroblade; it goes in, cutting deep, and destroys more as it leaves. />

She knew of the weapon that he referred to; she had used it repeatedly; one blade with three edges, twisted in a convex to inflict the most amount of damage.

Luke was the target, and she was the blade that Palpatine wanted to use.

He grew silent again; the room grew cold.

Mara braced herself; she closed her eyes, expecting…

The sound that surprised her, was the click of metal unlatching; she could feel the restraint come off her ankle. With another click the muzzle came of her face and fell in her lap.

A mental image came to her, without words, showing her kneeling before His throne.

Relaxing her position, she slid from off the pedestal, and onto the stair adjacent to assume the position that he required of her.

“When last we met, you neglected to inform Me that you had your locator implant removed.” Palpatine said blankly.

“You also neglected to mention that your biological functions have returned.” He added.

She worked her jaw, before opening her mouth. “Yes Master. “ Her voice croaked quietly.

</Was this for Skywalker’s benefit? Has he asked you for a child? />

Mara kept her eyes on the marble stair in front of her. << Not directly, Master. >>

</ But he wants one? – not surprising, his father wanted a legacy too. >/>
"Yes, Master."

"Of course he wants a child... Jedi crave life... it feeds them and their power. His words were analysing the situation, estimating his opponents.

"During your recovery, I've replaced your implant- I'm sure that you were missing it. He snarled.

She could feel her lungs shake at the news. "Yes Master."

"I've made a decision." Palpatine announced. "You are to be demoted, and kept alive." He said strongly. "I'm making you available to Skywalker... but not to his liking... to my liking."

"He is not allowed to touch you... reach out to you... you are to refuse his advances. Likewise, I will make your introduction to Sedriss." The Emperor ordered. "I will give them both My instructions, regarding your presence."

"Skywalker... Keep him at bay... make him yearn for you... drive his furry... be the knife."

"Can you do it?" Palpatine asked slowly, with doubt in his voice.

Mara tilted her chin down to her chest. "Yes Master." She said loud and clear.

Just then, a Sentinel droid entered the chamber.

"Good." He said, satisfied; she would keep her side of the bargain. If not, she knew the consequences. "This droid will see you to your chambers."

"Don't disappoint me." He re-iterated, with a crook of his finger.

She shivered as a surge of dark energy passed through her. Mara leaned forward on her bended knee. "Yes, Master... Thank you, Master." She replied with conviction.

It was her dismissal.

Mara rose up slowly, and back away, still facing the throne, descending the stairs with her head down; she knew he was watching, to make sure that he didn’t misplace his trust in her and her abilities.

Backing until she estimated that she was in the middle of the room, beside the droid, she gradually lifted her head to see that He had turned His throne away from the chamber; a sure sign that she may now turn her back on the room.

The droid guided the way, leading to a direction that she did not been before, away from the Throne Room.

The Sentinel moved as a pace comparable to walking speed; she could hear the servos along with the sound of the beads of her dress on the floor as the slight train followed behind her. Turning at a corridor, the droid stopped in front of another door, just before it slid open.

Dropping her head, Mara didn’t know what to expect; she could have either been raised up, or placed back into a sufficient cell.

She kept her head down, not because of servitude, as she had done with The Emperor, but because she did want to see where she had been placed.
“These are you quarters.” The Sentinel said as an automated response. “All will be provided for you at the behest of His Imperial Majesty.”

The Sentinel turned and left the room.

Mara waited, dejected by all that had happened. Now, she decided to look up to see where she had been placed.

The bedchamber was large and grand. The dark purple colors contrasted with the silver and black ornamentations. The high ceilings illuminated an incandescent glow about the room; jet-black beads dripped from the chandelier. The rusched linens and lush fabrics were only a reminder of her former life.

The sizeable bed sat at center stage, raised several steps above the floor, and covered in velvet and silk-satin pillows. A plum-colored velvet chaise rested beside the bed.

A well-supplied vanity sat in the corner, waiting for someone to come and adorn herself. No doubt, there was probably a well-stock wardrobe, full of the same sort of gowns she was wearing now.

From her perspective in the middle, she noticed that on either side of the opulent room, twin doors that led to who-knew-where. She regarded the second doorway, puzzled as what lay beyond its threshold.

These were not the type of quarters that she was expecting; this was not a cell…or was it?

It was all very similar to her former private residence at the Imperial Palace on Coruscant, raising her ego to princess status she had been led to believe she was entitled to all her life.

She knew this setting was designed to put her at ease, but there was nothing easy about where she had been placed.

Swallowing, she knew that she had one more duty to perform; an act of humility. Reaching out, she touched the mind that allowed this to be possible, that allowed her very existence.

<< Master? >> She called; she could feel His sense around her, as if it hadn’t left. << I humbly thank you for the generosity that you have shown me. >> In the empty room, she bowed as if he was there, before her.

He seemed please and His presence drifted away.

Mara let out a sighed of relief, perhaps his shadow wouldn’t be constantly over her. She had no delusions about what life would be like His thumb; she had no freedom -it was gone, but His presence could not always be with her.

Looking around, she appraised the room. Swallowing, she went to the ‘fresher doors as they opened for her with her approach.

It was just as grand as the rest of quarters, styled in the manner of other older Imperial residences.

A large mirror hung over the sink, giving her the first chance to see herself.

At first glance, uncontrollably, her eyes quivered, and she could feel the sob in her chest, gasping for air, she rushed at her reflection.

Yes, she was a vision; her body put on display. The garnet-coloured dress plunged to her waist,
revealing the creamy mounds of her breasts; milky skin like silk. Her hair, twisted and curled ornately, and her face made up impeccably.

Mara didn’t recognise herself and reached out to touch the polished glass.

Considering her own eyes, she made them blink just to be sure that this wasn’t a dream; trapped in a nightmare. So many times, she had wished to have her former life back, believing it was be-all and end-all to her existence… and now that it was here, all she wanted was that it be taken away from her.

Waking her from the moment a chime rung back in the main chamber.

Pulling herself out of the trance, Mara collected her mind before returning to the adjacent room.

The main door opened and an automated cart rolled in with a serving of her meal. The robotic lid removed as the steam and scents were released into the air. Judging by the selection, it was later in the day than she realized; this must be evening meal, she discerned.

She wasn’t hungry. She wasn’t tired. She was here.

I am here. Mara told herself, resigning that this was where she had to learn to survive.

Faced away from the interior door, she did not sense that it had opened; joining two residences.

In the shadow, backlit by the light from his room, he stood in the threshold, watching her.

TBC
Chapter Summary

Quote: Only, it was unclear if they were going to follow His orders, or follow their hearts.

Characters: Mara, Luke. The Emperor and others

Chapter Notes

This isn’t quite the Smut-fest yet …but don’t worry…I’m getting there.

Well, the rain siege has ended and we shall see what comes out of me in the next few days… I hope I have held you over with several chapters all at once.

What do you think so far? There’s plot…I’m getting there… and there will be smut… I so promise.

Imperial Citadel

Mara froze; she could feel the sudden change in the room. His presence washed over her senses; familiar and bold.

Her hands dropped, unsure if he would think that she posed a threat. There was no way to tell what he thought: did she rejoin her Master? Or was she resisting Palpatine?

Given what she could recall when she first found him on Byss, there was no way to tell what sort of reunion this would be.

Her eyes flitted closed; letting the images in her mind match that of what was actually occurring. She was not prepared to see him just yet.

From behind her, his presence grew, like a cloud of smoke, drifting on the floor in her direction, until it found her.

She swallowed slowly, her mouth was dry. She didn’t need to hear his approach; she could sense it when he advanced.

The backless gown allowed her to feel the heat that radiated from off his body when he was immediately behind her.

In the pit of her stomach, the trembling started. It had been over two months since she had been alone
with him. Two months of worrying, longing, and waiting to see him again.

His emotions were blocked from her; she couldn’t read whether he was pleased or displeased at her presence.

Now, Mara heard his breathing; strong and hot. The air he exhaled, skimmed the naked skin on her back, resulting in the unwilling dimples to appear.

Her hands hung limp at her sides. Slowly, she felt the heat in them too as he covered them with his own.

As his skin touched her, she felt the thrill of his flesh, exciting her; the magnetic energy that there always was between them.

_Gods, his touch..._

His hot palms cupped the outside her hands before his fingers gingerly interlaced with hers.

He stepped in closer, pressing his chest to her back.

Mara inhaled sharply when she felt him nuzzle softly into the side of her hair; the delicate intrusion was so welcomed… so tender.

She could feel his longing, his desire, his wish that she was safe and to be with him.

_Please speak_, she begged him in her mind. _I need to hear you._

She whimpered when he let go of one of her hands, fearing that he was leaving.

Only, with her eyes closed, she imagined that he came around to the front of her, switching the gentle touch, and still keeping the contact.

Now, his hot breath was on her cheek as he came closer still; his cheek rested beside her temple, and she felt his lips brush the side of her face; she wanted more than this.

_Gods_, more than anything she wanted to tilt her head up and place her lips to his; it would make it all go away, she would wake up, and they would be together, somewhere else…

He pulled back, slightly. “Open your eyes.” He murmured intently.

She sighed; _Luke’s voice_, the deep slight-lisp that only he could have.

Mara shook her head, refusing.

“Why not?” He asked quietly.

She shook her head, again, like a child. “What if they’re not blue?” She whispered. “I don’t want to see your eyes if they’re not blue.” The words were less than a whisper, merely mouthed with an outgoing breath.

She heard him snort, somewhat sarcastically, somewhat amused.

He breathed deeply. He came close by her ear, “They are…” and then, pulled back.

Slowly, she capitulated; her lashes fluttered on her cheeks before opening her lids. Downcast, she lifted her gaze upwards from the center of his chest, past his dented chin and full lips, and stopping
so that her eyes met his.

Those eyes were indeed blue; dark sapphire and round – she recognised that look in an instant. Mara blinked before staring into those eyes, searching them, looking for the man she knew.

Luke’s lip twitched with mild contentment that she was satisfied. He stepped in, releasing her hands, about to wrap her in his arms, now entranced in the thought of her lips on his.

He dipped his head, wanting to satisfy his need.

Cringing, the words left her mouth instinctively. “You’re not allowed to touch me.” She whispered as she stepped away; scared by remembering her instructions. “*By His orders.*” She added, as if it could make a difference.

The edges of his eyes hardened, but he stepped closer to her, taking her hand again, he walked around, trying to hold her close, encircling her.

“I don’t care.” He whispered at her ear. “I don’t abide by *His rules.*”

She could feel his exasperation at being told someone else’s wishes.

*< He wouldn’t dare to punish me. >* Luke’s voice in her head had turned darker.

Mara jarred; as if it had been the first time that he had reached out to her like this, in the time before Wayland, uneasy with his contact.

She swallowed before speaking. Carefully, she took his arm away from around her waist, and stepped out of his reach. “But He would punish me… *to hurt you.*” She said quietly with conviction.

She closed her eyes again; only to get a sense of his reaction.

Luke understood what she was saying. She could feel it.

It was unspoken, but the other knew that they were meant to be used against each other. Only, it was unclear if they were going to follow *His* orders, or follow their hearts.

She could find it just as easily to believe that he was a willing accomplice to The Emperor’s wishes, just as he could believe the same of her.

Mara shivered; a dark cloud came into the room. He resented her for adhering to her orders.

She heard the growl in his chest, and with nothing more between them; he left her, *alone.*

Feeling safe to turn around, she saw the joining door close behind him.

Staring at the door, she understood why she had been placed in this room. It was for Luke’s temptation and the breaking of his resolve in which The Emperor would fill *His* amusement.

Palpatine was probably hoping to be able to punish both of them for their transgressions.

There was no point in hiding it. Mara had no choice but to follow through with what she was told. She knew the procedure, and she knew what would be expected of her; she had no other option.

Reaching out, she addressed Him.

<< Master?>> She called.
His reply was wordless, but waited on her.

<<Skywalker came to my room…just now… I resisted him, as You had instructed me. >> She informed Him.

No words from Him, only a wave of satisfaction, and dismissal for the night.

Mara stood as His presence slipped away; considering if that was the correct course of action. It would have been inevitable; either she would have told Him, or He would have accused her of it at their next meeting.

In the silence of the extravagant room, she stood, numb and lonely.

Without a reprieve, she decided to behave as what would have been expected of her before retiring for the night.

Mara approached the large wardrobe and stood before the closed doors; it was merely another costume change for the part she was to play.

**

It was hard to tell where night ended and day began.

Under the covers of the lush bed, Mara had huddled her form, to the very edge. And during the course of her sleepless night, she had gone to each side, until she esteemed that, now, she was either too close to the door that opened to the rest of the palace, or to the door that opened to Luke’s room. There was no safe place for her.

The coming day would tell what purpose she was to serve, if any at all.

She was used to it, life in the palace. Whether she was seen as a performer or hiding in the shadows, witnessing how others were treated, told her a great deal about their station.

So when the soft chimes rang to wake her, sitting up in the bed, Mara watched as the door to the palace opened without her acknowledgement, and the grand display began.

A series of droids entered, following by a green-skin humanoid alien. Mara recognised the species native to Byss; their pearl-like skin, elegant necks and round blue-black eyes were unmistakable.

Without any instruction, the Byssian headed into the ‘fresher; the sound of running water could be heard.

Pulling back the covers, Mara went to stand, and watched as a new serving cart rolled to the chaise beside the bed.

Clearly a dining cart, it was to indicate that she was expected to eat.

Doing as she was told, Mara went to the chaise to have her meal.

It was everything that could be wanted from the palace; many times, she had morning meals are fine as this one.

Mara paused before taking a sip of the caf, looking up at the set of doors that joined her room to Luke’s; she remembered who she enjoyed having this meal with the most.

The Byssian now appeared, and without acknowledgement to Mara, went about her business;
preparing and laying out the day’s clothing. When she was done, she stood beside the vanity, waiting for her services to be needed.

Sighing, Mara put down her cup of caf and headed for the ‘fresher.

This routine had just given her all the information that she needed to know about her position; she was somewhere between ‘servant’ and ‘courtesan’.

The number of attendees, told her that she was valued enough to be looked after, but also thought capable of performing some of her own tasks; to which, Mara was grateful- she couldn’t stand to be waited on hand and foot.

Inside the ‘fresher, a water shower started to steam the room.

Mara saw that the Byssian had prepared the cleansers and towels for her.

Slipping off her night shift, she hung it on the adjacent hooks; there was no need to clean up after her- it would all be taken care of.

As she opened the shower door, she let the water run over her fingers to check the temperature, and then stepped inside.

Mara tilted her head back into the water, and wondered if the Byssian would be able to tell if she had been crying or not, or would the shower rinse away her tears if she would allow herself to cry, here and now.

Tears would have been soothing now, if she could form them; but none came.

The thought that came to her was of Luke; their last night on Da Soocha…in a shower, like this, with steam that rose, and the desire to pleasure each other in love.

He had taught her to cry too; safe and protected with him, not humiliating and painful. Would he be upset that she couldn’t remember how to do it? Would he even care?

Mara finished her shower on empty thoughts, trying not to think of anything; it was easier that way.

She wrapped herself in the robe that was prepared by the Byssian. Pausing, she thought it strange that she was calling this other person, simply by the name of her species.

It was probably for the best, Mara reasoned. When she had other attendees, when she had learned their names, learned something about them; they were gone, taken away.

In her beliefs, she always supposed it was them who were punished for becoming too familiar, and not her. She didn’t want another attendee to be ‘dealt with’ on her behalf.

*It was for the best*, she said to herself. So the Byssian would stay ‘The Byssian’ in her mind, with no reflection on how Mara truly felt about her; it was better not to think about her at all.

Exiting the ‘fresher, Mara came over to the vanity, sat down and stared blankly at her reflection. She didn’t take notice or object as her hair was styled in place, and she turned towards the Byssian before she was asked, as the other applied the cosmetics to her face.

Turning back at her image, Mara paused as she waited for her garments to be prepared for her. She stared into her own blank, green eyes and watched them blink back at her.

Unlike the garnet gown, a simple black dress was laid out for her. It was form-fitting, bellowed at the
knees, and flowed to the ground. Small, slipper-like shoes adorned her feet. Sedate onyx jewelry was selected for her; placing them on her ears and at her collar.

Surprising though, the Byssian brought out an onyx coronet, and placed it on Mara’s head, arranging her red-gold locks so that the black gems were visible; it could have been considered a *crown*.

As in Imperial fashion, a Sentinel droid arrived as Mara’s escort, summoning her.

Without a schedule to her activities, Mara could only guess what would be asked of her today. She was sure that her presence was at the request of The Emperor.

Sure enough, they arrived at the throne room; the large doors were already open. She frowned slightly, remembering that this was a sign that The Emperor was to have an audience today.

Clearly, she was the first to arrive, ahead of the others guests.

The Sentinel stopped at the door, and allowed her to continue.

As she walked, Mara regarded the dais again. From this vantage point, it looked so much higher than it actually was; perhaps an optical illusion.

She had resigned herself that she would probably be placed back on the pedestal, displayed as both a prisoner and a prize, instilling her humility and humiliation. But instead, where the pedestal would have been, a small, less portentous chair was arranged.

Black and with a high back, it was styled in the same fashion as the one that rested atop the dais, without the signifying capper.

Walking closer for further inspection, she could believe that it couldn’t be for her. She was always invisible in court, unless The Emperor had instructed her to make herself be seen. She was supposed to be a shadow, a ghost, a rumor.

This simple question started to make her nerves shake. *This was never what I wanted*. Her mind said, now shaking her head as well.

With a startle, His voice touched her.

</ It is not about what you want… It is My desire that you remain there. /> Palpatine had summoned her to be front and present for the day.

</ Sit and wait. /> The Emperor ordered.

His presence faded, but she knew He had the ability to touch her mind at any time, she answered back. << Yes Master >>

Mara walked forward and ascended the few steps, half-way up the dais, to the smaller chair, and sat down upon it. Relaxing her arms on the rests, she still kept her spine straight and elongated. She was the picture of regal beauty.

She waited, and heard the sound in the background and the energy; the march of the heavy feet, the clamouring of those around The Emperor, wanting His attention.

The procession turned the corner into the room, with the Red Guard out in front, then The Emperor, then His advisors, and then the courtiers behind.

Mara stood and stepped away from her chair, with her head down.
The Red Guard took up their stance as The Emperor stepped to rise above the crowd. As He came passed her, Mara took a deep bow and curtsy before Him. From under His hood, she could see His sneering smile, pleased.

His advisors had seats waiting for them to the lower left side of the dais.

As The Emperor took to His throne, it allowed that others in His court to be seated.

From out the corner of her eye, she saw Palpatine motion with His hand, indicating that she was absolved to be seated as well.

She backed away to her chair and resumed her position, looking out at the crowd that had assembled.

Several of them looked at her; her senses told her that a scarce number recognised her, but couldn’t place her. She may not be looking at them directly, but she could see them leaning and whispering to each other, regarding her. Those who did not know her severely out-numbered those who thought they did, but all of them were certainly curious. The Emperor seldom had any sort of accompaniment when He held court.

The courtiers were not all native to Byss; she recognised some of the fashion, several noble houses were present too.

The groups of advisors were huddle together, opposite of her. Sitting front and center was Sate Pestage; Royal Councillor and Grand Vizier.

Pestage had started his career as an assistant to Palpatine, back when He was a senator representing Naboo. Like Palpatine, he hid his Force-talents, even when the galaxy thought of The Emperor as a withered old man. Now, he sat proudly, ahead of all the others, knowing that he helped make The Emperor’s return possible.

He was scheming and devious in his own right; Pestage was another dangerous person with his own agenda. Mara wondered what he had thought of Sedriss; surely, their personalities would clash.

The other advisors, she did not recognise, but she was well aware of their positions within the rebuilt-Empire. The Emperor had found a new group of advisors, for the former grouping had perished on board the Death Star, with the exception of Pestage.

Just as well, it was old blood; incapable of seeing passed their perceived importance.

In this new grouping, Mara could senses their dark powers; most of them barely Force-sensitive, but all twisted in their own right, using their unique talents for His gain.

Pestage stepped up from his seat; Mara caught his eyes, and his glare; he knew who she was, both her fictitious personae, and her real agenda. He clearly didn’t like seeing her back at court again.

The loyal advisor began to direct the session; making introductions, accepting gratitude on behalf of His Imperial Majesty, and generally conducting the tone and pace.

Mara sat, looking out and listening.

At midday, The Emperor broke his audience. Rising from his throne, the room paused and bowed, as He descended the stairs. He came to her level and stopped, holding out His hand.

Mara took her que, rose and placed her hand under His, and assumed to walk beside Him, down the stairs to the antennae chamber at the side of the room.
His advisors followed behind them.

She had played the part of His escort, until inside the room, He removed His hand, and went past her, into a secondary room, without further notice, into His private chambers with His advisors, leaving her excluded.

She waited there with a Sentinel droid, until He returned. With as much notice as He had accepted her to walk with him into the throne room, He expected that she would return with Him.

The audience had regrouped and waited until He ascended to the throne again, pausing to leave her at her level.

Mara waited, just as the rest of them before He lowered Himself into His Throne, then she sat down, looking out again; looking, but not looking, at each of them.

Again, the meetings resumed. This was all just another form of palace life; an audience with The Emperor.

Things could be learned if she watched closely. But this was not where the events that controlled the galaxy took place; not out in the open, for others to see. They happened behind the scenes; in solitude, with His advisors, or on His own accord.

What was happening now, was just for show; it meant nothing, accept for those who felt it necessary to be seen.

Mara could feel it, on her senses; the galaxy was calling. The Force was calling. Something was happening somewhere else.

As the couriers left the room, Mara sat; poised, posed and perfection. All of those who were in attendance today, looked at her with some sort of fascination. Was she a consort? Was she a collaborator?

She was not a decoration, lounging about like other courtesans were known to do. She had been placed upon a throne, of sorts; not on the same level as The Emperor, clearly, but given her proximity to His seat of power, it would be wrong to assume that she didn’t hold some sort of place of the hierarchy of the Empire.

All of them had looked at her, waited to see if she had any input in their requests or consultation.

Mara had recognised several of them; nobles from independent worlds that had refused to join the New Republic, and had, up until now, refused to join any of the Imperial infractions.

With the throne room nearly empty, Palpatine turned to His advisors and dismissed them too. Pestage looked dejected as he threw one more glare at her, as she was allowed to stay.

Palpatine waited until the chamber was clear; just He, her, and the Red Guard.

She could sense that He was eager to converse with her. So far, she had been given no instruction as to her purpose. If today was an example; she was to be seen and not heard.

His quiet cackle broke her thoughts. “How many of them, do you think, believe that you are to become an Empress?” He asked, thinking it folly.

Mara tilted her head, but did not turn her face in his direction.
“No doubt that you look the part…” He said flippantly. “And since you revealed yourself to be My Loyal Servant in Coruscanti social circles, I’m sure the rumour will begin to grow now. The grovelers seldom change their habits.” He said snidely.

“Pestage was surprised to see you, as I am sure, you were to see him.” Palpatine paused. “We shall see which one of you wins the race to treason sooner.” He growled lowly, with spite in his voice.

Mara shivered at the threat, and caught the meaning; her actions would be under watch and constantly scrutinized for any subversion.

She received her next instruction; mentally he sent the image of her facing him. Rising from her chair, she turned in His direction, and stepped to the middle of the stairs with her head down, waiting.

“Oh no, my child.” He said condescendingly, “Bring your eyes up. If you are to be thought of as an Empress, then you must behave as one.”

Mara lifted her eyes, meeting his glowing red pupils; He smiled wickedly, yet serenely.

His expression began to change, relaxing back into his concentrated glower. “I must admit that I was surprised when you contacted Me, regarding Skywalker and his behavior.” Palpatine said with astuteness. “I was somehow sure that you would have been seduced by his rebellious ways.” He lisped.

“Tell me, what made you behave so?” He asked with intent.

Pausing only momentarily, Mara decided not to think about her answer; if she tried to contort her words, it would sound too contrived for His taste. “Master, You gave me orders not to touch Skywalker.” She looked down. “He willingly touched me. I felt the need to inform You.”

“Did you think that I would not know that he had made the effort?” Palpatine asked.

Mara shook her head and swallowed, feeling that a punishment was about to come on. “No, Master.” She replied. “You would have known.”

“But you believed that I would have thought you the lesser servant had you not told me, correct?” He asked.

She bowed her head. “Yes Master. You would have questioned it if I had not informed You.”

Palpatine coughed his disapproval. “You have your own rebellious streak that We must deal with, eventually.” He said, torn between the confrontation, and other subjects that seemed more important. “Aligning yourself with New Republic, granting them access to information that they never had before… and I know about your assistance at Gyndine; using a decoy shuttle to plant a ghost-cypher coding device. I would be angered if it didn’t show how clever you really are, and gave Me just as much, or more, information about the Republic Fleet than it gave them on Our activities.”

His eyes narrowed again. I would be greatly incensed with you, if only, I was not the one who insisted that you were so well-trained. He paused. You are My own creation- I should be rather honored. />

He seethed in His own thoughts.

A rasp came from the back of his throat. “You wanted Skywalker to touch you. You miss his touch, his body, his affection…his love.” Palpatine sneered.
She looked down, not wanting Him to see her eyes. Shakily, she began to reply; for fear that He was looking to retaliate. “Master… I…”

“Look at me.” He ordered; his terse tone still dripping with condescension.

Mara raised up her eyes. “Yes Master, I miss him.” She said quickly, knowing that she had just revealed her weakness.

Palpatine’s eyes narrowed, waiting for her to finish.

“I love him.” She whispered; although she thought that she masked it well, she shared her heartache, knowing it would please Him to feel her pain.

“Still?” He hissed. “After knowing that he helped destroy My Empire, after finding out that he is the son of Darth Vader… you still find that you are drawn to him?” He was skeptical.

Her eyes quivered. “Yes Master.” Mara said quietly, ashamed, with no logical reason why her feelings were swayed; it boggled her too.

“He!” He scoffed with contempt. “A year! It took less than a year for Skywalker to undo all the work, all the self-control that I had trained into you.”

The Emperor was not angry, just displeased, as He breathed heavily, considering. “Emotions” He mumbled with distain under his breath.

Palpatine sat regarding her, unsure if she was really of value to him. At last He continued, disappointedly. “He is drawn to you too… more than I realised.”

Pausing, He relaxed on one arm of his throne. “I gave him the orders, this morning before you arrived, that he is not to be in contact with you… not to touch you. And then I sent him on his next mission. Skywalker will return in five day’s time.”

He exhaled; a sharp look in his eye. “It was wonderful to hear his mind at work…trying to determine how he could circumvent My orders… how he could try and find a way to be with you.” Palpatine pondered. “I was wrong to think he is just like his father…Vader would have never taken a moment to consider his actions. Vader would have done what he wanted, and suffered the consequences later.”

The Emperor eyed her carefully. “You want him, don’t you? Physically.” He susurrated. “Was he a good lover? Did you enjoy his body?”

Mara inhaled uncomfortably at the thought of sharing this information. “Yes Master” She said, showing how it pained her to think of it. “I did.” She replied, keeping her eyes steady, concealing how much she yearned for him now.

“You will be glad to hear then, that Skywalker refused any sort of company that I’ve offered to him.” Palpatine adjusted his position. “Sent them away, without conversation or consideration.”

As a response, she raised one eyebrow, then lowered it again, feigning her disinterest and supressing the warming in her heart.

“But in meditation, he thinks of you.” The Emperor seemed displeased in Skywalker’s behaviour. “He sees you…but not as you… as Liana, of all things!” His vexation turned into contemplation.

“Has he seen you dance?” Has he watched your body move for him?
She hid her sigh with her exhale. “Yes, Master”

Palpatine nodded. “And how would he have been aware of Liana?” He asked, probably knowing the answer but wanting to hear it from her.

Mara stored her courage. “At a charity auction, Master…Count Adessic approached me by that name. Skywalker overheard.”

“Adessic?” He asked, astounded. “Is he still alive? The countess has been trying to have him removed for years. Did Adessic try and buy your attention? He was always after it… yours, and every other courtesan.”

“Yes Master, he did.” She paused, remembering another issue and then tried to hide it away, but it was too late.

Palpatine’s orange-red eyes narrowed on her, as she dared to keep something from her. </ Let’s have it… what are you keeping from Me? /> His mind snarled harshly.

Mara floundered, and cringed, berating herself for recalling the memory in His presence. << I-I wasn’t attempting to keep anything from you, Master…I just didn’t see it as relevant as to include it. >> She stuttered in her mind.

</ I decide what it relevant…not you. /> Palpatine’s finger twitched and she felt a shot of pain in her side. </ Carry on… /> He ordered slowly.

<< Skywalker has a fantasy that involves Liana. >> She said quietly in her mind.

</ A Dark one? /> He seemed delighted.

<< Yes Master. >> Mara replied.

</ You know it? /> He was feverish for the details.

<<Yes Master, he revealed it to me. >> It was taking all of her control not break down. << He fears it. >>

The Emperor stretched out his hands with his palms upwards, eagerly. “Show it to me!” He ordered.

It had been a common thing between them, Master and servant, for her to share her thoughts. She had thought it was one of many things that made her special, unique, to Him.

She knew that she was betraying Luke, knew it in her heart, but the consequences of withholding something that The Emperor demanded were just too severe.

She nodded, and closed her eyes to enhance the contact. Slowly, she placed her hands over his, barely touching his claw-like fingers, and reached out in her feelings, regretting the images that came to her.

The vision flashed; a secret that Luke had kept to himself; he hated himself for having these thoughts, hated that lurking in his mind were these wants, and hated that he enjoyed them.

The dress…the white-silver sheer dress… the leather chaise… his demands of her body…taking her… pleasuring himself…causing her pain…and the euphoric release from it all.

The Emperor’s quiet cackle broke the vision, and He removed His hands. “So, he does have some of his father’s sadistic tendencies.” He jeered. “How noble of him to try and keep them from you.”
Unobtrusively, she began to lower her hands, feeling that He was asking no more of her, for the moment.

Mara opened her eyes to see that The Emperor was regarding her in an engrossed fashion; behind His eyes, He was pondering.

“Your ability to connect to the Force has strengthened.” Palpatine observed cautiously. “Can I attribute this to Skywalker’s training?” He asked in a marginally sarcastic manner.

Her eyes flashed away, then met his again. “Yes Master”

“And your meditation, your other visions, do those come to you regularly as well?” The Emperor asked keenly.

“Yes Master” She replied automatically, feeling that He was going to ask more from her, fearing what He would see if were to see all that she did; there were things, and people that were of a personal concern to her.

"< You would deny Me if I asked this of you? /> He asked impetuously; His words in her mind were cautionary.

Mara could sense that He was hungry for it. She knew, from her past, that Palpatine had advisors, seers who were gifted at visions.

He prized them and relied on them; Sith visions could be unreliable, it was explained to her. Since the Sith concentrated on their own goals, seeing a larger picture of the worlds around them was difficult.

She knew that He was capable of having visions, but even He was insecure with the accuracy of those visions, preferring others to confirm what He saw.

She cast her eyes downward for a moment before looking back up at him. “No Master, I wouldn’t deny you… but…”

“But what?” He asked impatiently, eager to see what she saw, and know what she knew.

“Master,” Mara pleaded, “I am unsure of my own visions. I cannot be sure that they will be of any service to you.” She answered. “And the manner in which I receive them can be unsettling.”

It was true; even Luke couldn’t stay with her as she meditated, the images came on too rapidly and too vividly for him. He had only been able to last a few minutes, whereas she could stay like that for at least an hour.

“It’s not the nature of your visions that concern Me.” He replied, affronted that she would think that He lacked the same level of stamina as she. “It’s the content that I desire.”

“Your vision from yesterday…of the battle and the Mon Cal Cruiser.” He spoke rapidly. “The Home One was engaged in battle against the Bellicose and the Deception near Alphran during our night cycle. It left, escaping, but not before it did severe damage to our resources.”

Mara knew those names, of both the Cruiser and Star Destroyers, and she knew what He meant by ‘resources’; a World Devastator.

“Had your vision had more detail, We could have planned accordingly, ensuring our venture was successful.” Palpatine mused.
Palpatine’s eyes narrowed, still demanding of her; His patience was rapidly dwindling.

She looked around at where they were now; trying to find a way to give him what He wanted. Thinking of the method that she usually used for her meditations, Mara looked around the throne room for an equivalent.

The Emperor eyes focused, seeing what she was doing, hearing her mind at work.

Surprising her, He rose from His throne, and took His cane in hand; Mara ducked down immediately, bowing, keeping her head lower than His.

“Come child.” Palpatine ordered, leaving His throne.

Mara hastily stepped back, making room for Him to descend the stairs in front of her.

After He passed, like a child, she scurried to catch up with Him, walking a few paces behind. Looking over her shoulder, she saw that the Red Guard stayed in place.

As He walked, she noticed that He was relying on His cane; something that she hadn’t seen since she had arrived. As quickly as she noticed it, she made sure that it slipped her mind. To notice a weakness in Him would have been unforgivable.

He led her to His antennae room; secluded and away from the throne room. This small chamber led to a secondary chamber, more private than the one she had been brought to earlier in the day.

In the second room, the lights came up with His approach, but only dimmed half-way, keeping it still in darkness.

This- Mara recognised this type of room immediately. She knew it was a private sanctuary for Him.

He had different ones over the years; whether it was a pod, a dome, or a room, all were ways to block out the rest of the galaxy and center Himself in order to conduct the business of the Empire.

Mara looked around, and saw His modified throne. Larger than any other chairs in the room, it was less-harsh, less-dynamic than the one out in the throne room. The other chairs looked as to be comfortable as it would be necessary to reach out in the Force.

The room wasn’t without its nuances. The walls appeared to be a darker marble, bluish, perhaps even lapis and not marble. It was common to believe that some stones magnified Force powers.

The Emperor was arranging Himself as she looked around.

On display, she noticed several of His prized Sith holocrons growing and pulsating with their crimson heartbeats inside the pyramid shape. He also displayed a collection of several blue-glowing Jedi Holocron cubes, as she recognised them. And yet, it caught her notice that there were several ‘empty’ holocrons, both of Sith and Jedi design; not glowing, just off to the side, trying not to bring attention to themselves.

Mara swallowed before looking over at Him as He regarded her.

“Does this all seem familiar to you, child?” His voice was uncharacteristically kind.

She knew He had the ability to portray kindness, but only when it served His wants. He would always show it to her after she had pleased Him in some fashion; it was what fed her servitude.

“Yes Master.” She whispered, respecting the intention of the room.
“It should.” His voice was quiet and passive, hiding His immediate desire. “In familiar surroundings, such as these, I trained you. Do you recall?”

“Yes Master.” She looked over at him. << You taught me a great many things. >> She reached out to Him; showing him her respect and gratitude.

The Emperor smiled. Then His eyes glanced over to the seat adjacent from Him.

Mara dipped her head and came over to join Him. Sitting down, she could feel the lingering presence of someone else, and shuddered for the sense.

Palpatine frowned, but before He could ask, she replied to His question. “Pestage was here.” She said timidly. “His presence still remains.”

The Emperor nodded, pleased that her senses were so attuned to her surroundings.

Wasting no time, He extended His hands, palms upward, expecting her to give Him what He so desired.

Motioning to consent to His wishes, Mara paused and looked down at them, and then back up at His face; watching His scowl form.

“Master…” She appealed to Him before she thought that she would be punished. “In order to access my visions… I must meditate… in the Light.”

He pulled back His outstretched hands, curling the fingers towards Him. Palpatine seemed to consider this before resuming His position, and encouraged her to continue.

Mara swallowed, and placed her hands delicately over His.

With effort, she began to breathe slow and steady; it was difficult to concentrate with such negative energy around her, but eventually, she was able to block out everything else.

On the fringes of her mind, coming into focus, she could feel the images about to emerge. They were averse to showing themselves, just as she was to revealing them.

It had been some time since she had a full session of meditation. It had been even longer since she had a fulfilling session, where she felt right and centered in her own world. Calming herself, she was able to bring them through.

Mara sighed, feeling the call of her visions to want her to see what they had to give her and she didn’t resist them any longer.

Like the lines of hyperspace, the images came, alive and vivid, just snippets of occurrences, and views; a mountain top, the rain coming down on a plain, the fluttering of leaves, and the flash of people, aliens, humans, droids…

Soon, the images deepened in the meaning; a factory, the movement of shipments, the marching of troops, the crash of waves, a storm…

As she let the images come and as they grew in intensity, Mara begged that they wouldn’t reveal anything that would jeopardize her friends, and those that she now considered family.

A swarm of TIE fighters falling into precision around a Super Star Destroyer, then, strange, those same fighters engaging what looked like enhanced TIE’s that were protecting a Star Destroyer of a
different design – not commonly used by the Empire.

The Emperor’s hands flinched against her fingers, almost breaking the contact.

A different series now emerged; one after another, seemed to be in various rooms, people coming together under discussion; Mara saw some of the very people that she saw in the session today. They were arguing with their own peoples, though the reason was unsure, but heated.

The images were starting to slow, as they sometimes did; like a wave, she once described it as. The crest was the intense and rapid; the trough was slow and lamenting.

Now, she saw people, individuals, just trying to live in the galaxy; men, women, workers, farmers, laborers, mothers, fathers, children… of all species, of all different cultures; their faces as they went about their lives.

Mara could sense that Palpatine was not so interested in these sights.

But then the anticipation of the influx of images increased, building to the crescendo that would eventually return.

Feeling the rush of the images starting to speed up, The Emperor broke his contact now, pulling his hands away, and breathing hard.

Mara became aware, and turned away as to not see that He had been affected by her visions; that He was weakened by them. She, however, being used to them, was barely fazed.

He must have seen that she was trying to take no notice of His state. “That will be all.” He hissed through gritted teeth, still recovering, dismissing her.

“Yes Master.” She got up and bowed before backing away, out of the room.

She held it in her throat as she left the private chamber, back into the antennae room, and straight to the doors of the throne room.

As the Sentinel droid led her back to her quarters, she allowed herself to swallow hard, releasing the tension that she felt in her body, and releasing that tension that she felt that came from the Emperor.

He was unnerved by some of the things that He had witnessed in her visions.

It was still possible that He would have taken His discomfort out on her for supplying those images.

Mara walked quickly, almost trying to pass the Sentinel, wanting to find comfort back in her quarters, racing to get there.

The doors opened with her approach, the droid stopped, she entered. And not waiting for the mechanics to slide the doors shut, Mara reached out, with a wave of her hand, the doors closed quicker.

She stood in the middle of her opulent room, breathing hard, expecting the worse that didn’t come.

Looking up, she walked over to the doors that conjoined their rooms, placed her hand on the panel and let her hand slide down, wanting, but refusing to call out his name.

Feeling so very alone.

**
Each day they kept to the new regiment.

Dressing for the throne room, Mara would arrive and assume the minor chair by the dais as The Emperor kept court.

At midday break, He would retire to His private chambers, and send Mara to her chambers, with the instruction to meditate.

The Emperor would conduct the afternoon session without her.

After court was dismissed, He would call for her, to report on her visions.

Palpatine revealed nothing as to His feelings on what she saw; He sat listening and concentrating on her details.

Or if He felt inclined, He would order her to reach out into her mind and see the vision for Himself, and marvel at how rapidly they came to her.

Mara had no control over whom and what she saw; for the most part, her visions were obscure, jumbled, just snippets. But they meant something to Him, and clearly, He wanted to see more, asked for more, and almost begged for more.

*She was proving of use to Him.*

**

The fifth day began like any other; the meal, the preparation, the procession into the throne room. And the waiting.

At midday, a Sentinel was ordered to return Mara back to her room.

The Byssian waited inside, standing beside the wardrobe.

Mara ate her meal in silence, and when she was done and cart removed, the Byssian took it upon herself to present Mara with a change in wardrobe.

Instead of a court gown, she was shown a simple black jumpsuit, much like her leather ones. It fit perfectly, and proper active footwear was provided.

Mara questioned it all, but didn’t reject the idea of wearing it. It was comfortable and felt more like her.

The second surprise came in the form of following another Sentinel.

Leaving her room, she prudently watched where they were going; away from the throne room, away from the residences. She was being led to a place where she didn’t sense another person.

The droid stopped short of a sliding door, and the release gave way, opening up the room to her.

Mara walked in the room, as it appeared that she was the only one to be allowed into the space.

The room was covered in wall to wall dark rust-coloured marble; veins of ivory and coral creased into the slabs. It was a grand room; opulent, and probably never used for it’s intended purpose.

A purpose that was still a mystery to her.
As Mara came further into the room, she noticed a small table off to the side. A silver glint caught her eye. She moved closer to the familiar object. It was a lightsaber, not hers...not Luke's.

Picking it up, she inspected it cautiously.

It was an older model...possibly Clone War era; the carvings on the hilt looked almost like tribal etchings.

Within a split second of feeling the cool cylinder in her hand, the room plunged into darkness.

A deafening silence was broken as she started to breathe heavy, arms outstretched in the dark, trying to find her way out.

Mara gasped as a snap-hiss! was heard from close by, and the swift movement of a green blade coming to life, made her ignite the weapon in her hand as an automatic reflex; the yellow glow of the saber extended forth.

Without warning, he attacked; she was made to parry and counter the strike against the other blade.

The humming and crash of the sabers was a shock to her; but should not have been. They had sparred on numerous occasions, and every time, the intrinsic hum brought her comfort.

He stepped into the light of the engaged sabers; Luke’s face, with one challenging eyebrow. From the glow of the swords, his face had taken on eerie contours.

She stared at Luke’s expression with shock. Something almost playful came over him as he advanced his attack.

Mara stretched out her feelings, but he was dark to her, blocking his intentions.

He swung, and she parried it. He struck, and she held him back.

With the exchange of blows, his aggressive motions forced her to move backwards, taking sidesteps and narrowly escaping each lunge. She was able to defend by blocking most of his swings, until he cornered her.

It was a quick fight.

With her back up against the wall, their swords clashed again, and as he put his weight into the attack, leaning in, their faces came within centimetres of each other.

So close was his face...so close was his lips. Mara could feel his aura radiating off of him, and she wanted to enveloped in it.

Suddenly, a questioning look came to his face, followed by one of disgust.

Luke backed away from her, allowing her to gain some ground.

In the darkness, Mara could watch his figure move, as his green blade stayed at his side.

She moved, hesitantly, to what she presumed was the centre of the room.

With little show of regret, he turned and advanced on her again.

This time his attack wasn’t playful; it was angry, it was malicious.
She fought again to dodge his blows and strikes. Faster than she thought it was possible to move, his saber dashed and crashed on her blade. It seemed like she was only holding the saber for means of stopping his and not trying to keep up a battle.

Luke was again forcing her back, but to a different corner.

He hinted at no withdrawal of his assault. Something had angered him.

She tried to reach out to find the cause, but as she did, a Force-shove bludgeoned her against a hard surface, and wedged her between two adjacent walls.

The sabres glow between them caught his features.

Yes, he was indeed angered, but also disappointed. With a gruff snort, he aborted his attack and retreated again.

Mara held her “safe” position in the corner for a few moments before taking steps away from her haven.

The surprise, of his blade being extinguished, caught her off guard. She could not follow his form, and in the darkness, with his presence shielded, she could not find him.

She reached out in the darkness, trying, with her blade as her only beacon, to guide herself to an exit. She was done playing –Luke could stay in the darkness if he wanted.

Taking small cautious steps, Mara was trying to keep her wits about her as she was sure that she must be to the middle of the room by now.

Her senses suddenly tingled, and the rapid *snap-hiss* by her ear told her she had underestimated his anger.

His green blade came up directly under her chin and wavered threateningly. Mara panted heavily, and tried to back away from it. Her movements were stopped when she backed into him.

Luke held her against him. Her eyes widened as she watched the green blade hover closer and pause. She could feel his chest heaving; not from lust or anger, but from exasperation.

Unexpectedly, the blade moved away, and she felt her body being flung forcefully to the floor, losing her weapon in the process, as the lights in the room came up.

Still in shock, she looked up in time to see Luke striding towards the doors.

Her lightsaber, which had landed in front of her, abruptly moved, speeding towards his outstretched hand.

He refused to look back, as he left her, humbled, on the floor.

**

The shadows cast by their silhouettes in the private audience chamber made for a sinister montage. Their voices bounced off the walls – the acoustics made as much havoc as the shadows did.

Master and apprentice conducted their business with astute and technical coldness.

From the corner of his eye, Luke watched the old man pace in front of his throne, leaning on the
Since arriving on Byss, Luke could estimate that Sidious had aged approximately twenty years in that short time.

Now, in private, He relied on a cane when he walked; his hands looked boney and fiendish.

The Emperor’s body might be decaying, but his mind was far removed from ever accepting that eventuality. Never underestimate the powers of the Emperor – a lesson inevitably learned by all those who encountered him.

“And so, the Viceroy of H’reara bowed before you?” Sidious sound equally proud and amused.

“Yes Master.” Luke replied statically, giving no such honor as many did when they said those same words.

It was temporary, he told himself. Still intent with returning to his constant use of the Light, Luke was willing to make exceptions until then.

However, day after day, it seemed like that goal was slipping farther and farther away.

“The Viceroy was only willing to concede so long as it was clear that I would be assuming power at some point. “ Luke said, keeping his expression monotone.

Sidious exhaled with a growl; He knew that He had promised to share power with the young Jedi at some point – an eventuality, but even now, still just a possibility. Lurking, He hoped that the Jedi would sink deeper into his feelings and not return. That was his gamble; that was His game.

“Yes, your reputation is still your asset.” He hissed. “You do not like politics, I think.” Sidious said studiously.


“Even your precious New Republic?” Sidious asked, inquiring.

<Yes, even the New Republic. > Luke answered back, mentally growling his own resentment.

“Curious as to why?” Sidious sat back into His throne, preparing for the answer. “You fought so hard, and lost so much during your little Rebellion.” He sneered. “And what did you truly win? What did you expect to gain from it all?”

Luke fought to control his rage, trying to separate his feelings from the logic that he wanted to express. “We gained nothing.” He said quietly. “It was only a fight to let the people decide on how they should be ruled. I really had no opinion, one way or another, as to the system that should be used.” He made direct eye contact with the other man, letting his words be impactful. “Only that I despised the former regime.”

Sidious held his glare as His mouth started to form a smirk. “And so did others, as it would seem. Until it can’t be denied that a unified front would be in their best interests.”

“Take heed, Jedi Skywalker.” Sidious watched the other man carefully. “You will learn that average citizen has no care for the systems of government until it affects them directly. They would rather be left alone, which makes controlling them that much easier. And the system that does stand for them, be it a ‘Republic’ or ‘Empire’, only makes their decisions less and less cumbersome on them.”
“They need to be guided… and We can do that.” Sidious concluded. “And if you think that they should have the choice… then, yes, let it appear that they have made the decision on how to be ruled when systems come to you… but never let it slip your mind, that it is the Force that wills us to be greater than all of them, and the Force which will guide their destiny.”

The Jedi’s eyes narrowed, not willing to fully accept the other man’s point of view, and not trusting enough to input his own.

As their business was concluded, plans were made and future endeavours plotted, the tone of their meeting changed.

“I sense displeasure in you, Jedi Skywalker.” The tone of curiosity in the Emperor’s voice had an unusual quality, and yet He still spat the word ‘Jedi’ at His leisure.

“I gave you a gift in allowing you time with My Hand.” Sidious glared from under his hood. “Were you unsatisfied with your gift?”

Luke paused briefly, and tilting his head, he locked eyes with the other man. “No, Master. She is…..” He paused to find the right word.

“Oh, but you are…” Sidious abruptly retorted. “I can sense it.”

Luke’s feelings took hold of him; the shadow grew as he considered what had transpired. “She has been pacified, Master.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes, I know,” Sidious tartly responded. “Mara Jade is a wilful creature, even at the best of times.” He hobbled back to his throne, and adjusted the drape of his sleeves as he sat down. “She has been altered for your convenience.”

“I prefer her wilful, Master.” Luke mumbled, more to himself than to his dark master.

“Indeed?” Sidious asked; Luke sensed a mental probing from the old man. “I must admit that I am curious to learn why you prefer her that way. Most men would prefer to have a docile partner.”

Luke pushed back the probe, by increasing his dark thoughts. “I prefer to break her will myself, rather than to have her control given to me artificially.”

The revealing statement hung momentarily in the air.

The old man laughed evilly. “You don’t know how proud your father would have been to hear you say that.”

On the side of his face concealed from the Emperor, a muscle in Luke’s jaw twitched uncontrollably.

“I agree then. Let it be done on My orders. She will be restored to you- unaltered.” Sidious almost sounded genuine but still harboring His malevolence. He waved the other man away as means of a dismissal.

Feeling the leering eyes on him, Luke turned to face the throne and bowed deeply. “Thank you, Master.” His eyes had turned a deep orange before leaving the chamber.

TBC
The Quandary

Chapter Summary

Quote: 'Your kind always gets scraped off the bottom of boots.' Her mind spoke as her lips curled. 'It's only a matter of time, and how sharp the instrument that does the scraping, before you'll be gone too.'

Characters: Palpatine, Cylo VII, Mara, Luke, Sedriss, and others

Chapter Notes

I treid to get this one out for yesterday (as it is my goal to post chapter updates on Sundays) but it was Canada Day, and I just couldn't get there... BUT

So not much to say about this chapter but it was hard to push out... my brain wants to take a break and get too far ahead in the story...it's already plotting the aftermath of this round, and working on the next series... stoopid brain.

And, I totally took my plot bunny for Chapter 12 of 'Parallel Paradoxes' -- see if you can spot it.

Anyhoo, there's a minor SMUT warning... getting a little suggestive... just to get us all riled up for when the main event happens... it's coming.

Enjoy.

Imperial Citadel: Cloning Catacombs

There was an unnatural glow in the sterile environment. Part med center- part experimental laboratory; the doctor here was ecstatic to finally have a visitor worthy to appreciate his work.

On the slab in the secluded room, the patient lay unconscious and appeared peaceful.

Her body was laid out. Her head tilted back for support of her exposed neck. Her eyes were closed. Her red-gold hair brushed away from her oval face. Just a sheet of white medical filmsy covered her body.

The procedure was complete.

“Your Majesty, we feared that she may have injured herself, resisting, while we were trying to sedate her.” Dr. Cylo said with some trepidation. “However, she seemed to be already in a state of anxiety prior to our arrival.”

The doctor motioned to the holo-player screen, showing the woman in question, run into the room,
clearly upset, and huddled herself in the corner. Then, both droids and guards tried to extradite her from her position. She fought them off bravely but she was unarmed, and as she tried to flee, she was stunned, then sedated.

The Emperor turned away from the screen, looking into the adjacent room at the unconscious patient.

“And her other conditions?” Palpatine asked; not out of concern, but because it might hamper his other plans for her.

Dr. Cylo came closer, preparing the list of statistics for his master. “Physically, she is almost at normal levels. The higher than normal cortisol in her bloodstream, and her nutrition, did cause her to miss her monthly cycle- we suspect that that she stopped eating for a period of time. But once her adrenaline level returns to the baseline measurement, and we can add the extra oxytocin into her implant, her placidity shall be even more noticeable.”

“No Doctor.” The Emperor replied. “Do not add anything to her biological functions. I wish her activities to be as normal as possible. Naturally- if at all possible.”

The doctor paused, feeling underwhelmed. “As You wish.” He replied graciously, and bowed his head.

“How long will it be until her reproductive cycle also returns to normal?” Palpatine stared at Mara’s unconscious form.

“Soon, Your Majesty.” The Doctor swallowed nervously. “I expect her to reach her luteal phase in seventeen days.”

“That soon?” The Emperor asked slowly.

“She wasn’t damaged, Your Majesty. Her body was in a state of stress, and then the recovery from her…” The doctor searched for the correct words to use describing a punishment, the likes, he had never seen before. “…Condition… and now, she is finishing her treatment. The body learns to compensate quickly and she seems to have a higher-than-normal healing factor.”

The Emperor narrowed his eyes, and then turned away, looking over to the other concern of the doctor’s dominion.

In the depths of the Citadel, constructed for his research and developments, Dr. Cylo was able to make the best use of his seldom-limited resources.

In the opposite room, they grew; silent and in their tubes. Row after row of them existed. However, as it may appear a successful enterprise, the bodies inside the cloning tubes looked incomplete and not properly generated; something that their owner didn’t not see as a success.

Each body was a replication of their host; The Emperor, grown from the original’s cells.

Palpatine looked at them; some of them almost fully grown. He frowned. “And what of our other matter, Doctor.” Palpatine’s voice was precise as he spoke.

“Your Majesty…” The doctor became even more nervous than he was portraying, knowing that this venture was pending demise. “We are still facing the same issue that we continue to encounter… and the genetic samples are dwindling…. A good sample is in short supply, Your Majesty…the cells are corrupt.”

“I want to hear solutions, Doctor…not the reiterations of the problem.” The Emperor cut him off.
Swallowing, Dr. Cylo gained some courage. “Yes, Your Majesty. We may have found a solution, but it may be difficult to find a host.”

From under his cowl, Palpatine turned in the direction of the doctor. “Explain yourself.” He ordered tersely.

Cylo swallowed again, knowing that this was going to take more courage than he probably had, but he also had the pride of his work. “We suspect that the reason that you are requiring a new body, more frequently, is due to your usage of… the Force…”

The doctor spoke carefully as the red eyes glowered at him. “Clone bodies are not good transmitters of the power. Cells that are artificially grown, and at a speed greater than that which occurs naturally, cause the bodily tissue to never develop correctly in order to emit such power.”

He had seen it; and had he not been there, he would have never believed it. Seeing the transference of Palpatine’s essence from one cloned body to another was impossibility in all other realms of science.

The doctor found himself trying to learn all that he could about this mystical energy field that allowed for such a thing to occur.

Only once, in the years that he had been working with the resurrected Emperor, did he ever see His plans falter. A body hadn’t been fully grown yet, and for a short duration, the Emperor assumed the containment in one of the glowing-red pyramids before completing the transition.

Cylo stood up straighter, sure of his theory. “We hypothesize that if we can start a body for you, in utero, giving it a natural growing period, that body will be able to regenerate itself…growing a newer cellular sample…one that will be able to hold the power of… the Force.”

The doctor had no experience with what the Force was, or how it worked, but he was amazed at such a marvel that it was, allowing things to be possible where all else failed.

The Emperor considered his words as He looked out at his collection of predestined bodies, knowing that each one would crumple within a year of assuming the frame.

“We can grow a body, to the natural gestation of nine months… once the birthing has occurred, we can transfer that body to an incubation tube, and continue its natural growth until You feel that You wish to inhabit it.” Cylo explained optimistically.

“Given the rate that You are currently requiring a new form, we can safely assume that we will be able to properly grow a natural specimen in approximately ten years?” The doctor was beginning to get nervous again, as his guest had gone quiet.

“Currently, You have fifteen ‘usable’ bodies, Your Majesty, which should be more than sufficient. However, if we had the option to grow an infant under normal conditions...then…” Cylo paused.

“Then what?” Palpatine snapped, impatient for the conclusion.

“A naturally-grown body should have a longer expiration, and should age accordingly, giving You almost another lifetime…and another round of successful cells, which to grow future generations.” Cylo finished quietly.

The room grew dense, as the Emperor seemed to consider all the ramifications. He slowly stalked the plexi-window before Him, looking out at the bodies, and all the possibilities of living on for years to come.
Dr. Cylo wasn’t Force-sensitive—at least to his knowledge, but the air in the room began to change. He could feel it; energy generating, like the feeling before a static-electric shock is delivered.

Turning, Palpatine then regarded the patient in the opposite room.

He watched her chest as her lungs took in and released air.

“And if the mother is Force-strong…that would enhance the infant’s chances of being Force-strong as well…” The Emperor spoke in hushed tones, devising His plan aloud.

“Um… of that, I am unsure, Your Majesty.” Cylo watched Palpatine stare into the opposite room. “From my testing, yes, there is a heredity aspect to Force-sensitivity but it cannot always be presumed.”

“Ah, are You considering using Your own genetic material in the ovum or…a sample from someone else?” Cylo tensely tried to find the words. “I only ask because in either instance, the ‘carrier’ would need to ‘conceive’ prior to implantation. For best results, all the natural hormones that are present at conception are imperative so that the ovum can adhere to the walls of the uterus.” He explained quickly as to not offend his master.

“What would the procedure entail, Doctor?” The Emperor’s attention was concentrated on the resting patient.

“The ‘carrier’ would have to conceive, or at least be receptive to conceiving...preferably, naturally. Although in vitro fertilization can be also successful, but we run the risk of too many implantations when we only require one.” Dr. Cylo seemed to become uncomfortable again.

“The amniotic sac develops within two weeks after conception, but for a good implantation, I would suggest waiting for after day thirty six, during the formative time of the placenta.” Cylo was confident in his science, if nothing else.

“We would then discard the conceived ovum, and replace it with the fertilized ovum of our own making, containing the genetic makeup that You desire.” Cylo finished.

“I want My genetic code, Doctor.” Palpatine said quickly.

Dr. Cylo seemed puzzled. “No others, Your Majesty? I understand we have the strongest Force-user available to us… surely a genetic sample from …”

“The Skywalker Bloodline has too many inherent weaknesses.” Palpatine took a deep breath, and His eyes unfocused for a moment. “It’s cursed… but the power…” He said inaudibly, considering.

Dr. Cylo nodded, not quiet understanding, but agreeing to agree with whatever his master wished.

“We have the ‘mother’, Doctor… my willing servant.” Palpatine looked sharply, instructing on His demands, motioning to the resting body.

Cylo looked over at the female, surprised at the choice. Surely, a stronger subject could be found; another Force-user… this one seemed to be used…but resilient.

“She is in perfect health, other than her present healing condition?” Palpatine asked, sounding resolved.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Cylo answered without even thinking it through.
“Will she do it?” The doctor asked quickly, and then regretted it. Wanting to explain his reasoning, he continued. “Sometimes, success is highly depended on the co-operation of the subject… the body makes suitable hormones that encourage conception.”

A sneered crossed Emperor’s face. “She has the desire for a certain mate….and she knows the consequences of refusal.” He snarled.

Palpatine watched the resting body of Mara Jade with great interest now; narrowing his appraising gaze.

“All right.” The Emperor said in a conversational, maniacal tone. “I have one last thing to decide…. Do I grow my next available body, or do I grow my next apprentice?”

The Sith Master cackled openly.

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Imperial Citadel; Royal Suites

Mara woke; startled, and unsure of where she was. Shivering, she clutched the available sheet to her body and pulled it up to her neck.

She should have been familiar with this sort of awakening; so many times had something been done to her without her knowledge or consent. She was a thing that could be molded and manipulated in many ways to suit His needs.

They had placed her back in her room, and she confirmed what her senses already told her; she was not alone.

The Byssian stood by the vanity; the serving droid waited by the chaise.

By all appearances, it was a normal day. But it wasn’t.

She shivered again, trying to gain control of her feelings; fear and anxiety were running rampant through her, unexpectedly. It was like waking from a nightmare that was all too real. Slowing her breathing, she began to bring her emotions under control.

_Something_ had been done to her; it was coursing throughout her veins, racing through her mind, and pulsing in her body. The numbness was gone and the drive to flee was demanding.

Swallowing, Mara was sure to tamper it down with all her might; if the Byssian should notice, if the Byssian was actually a spy for Palpatine – He would not take kindly to her panic.

This was not the first time. During her previous service, she could count several episodes where she had missing time; sedated against her accord, but for His will and purposes.

There was something obscure about not knowing where you had been or for how long… or for that matter, what had been done to you… and finally, least of all, why.

Waking back up in the room…_her room_ as she had come to think of it, nothing seemed out of sorts. Even the table that she had remembered breaking when they came for her, was replaced and looked identical to the one that had previously been there.

It was all a show- a false sense of security. Behind the fancy dressing, she knew that she was still being watched and carefully observed- her senses told her so.
They had not re-dressed her; it would have been too much dignity to give.

Composed, Mara decided to play along. Peeling back the covers, she stepped out of the bed and headed in the direction of the ‘fresher.

Her naked body walked with purpose but her mind was still scattered with thoughts. It was a strange thing to not know the date or the time. She could estimate if she tried, but she was sure that she would be wrong.

The shower had steamed the room and although she didn’t feel physically dirty, she wanted to rid herself of the feeling of someone else’s hands on her.

*That must be it.* Mara thought quickly. *They must have taken me somewhere.* Her mind thought fast and in short bursts.

A rapid memory reminded her that the Emperor hadn’t been able to catch these personal thoughts if she thought them fast enough and released them just as quick.

She took her time with the cleanser and tried to remember all that had happened before they so roughly removed her.

The flashes of images came as she closed her eyes; Luke… the lightsaber duel… *was it a duel?* She remembered how it felt like a test. And she strongly remembered not being given permission to engage him. But, somehow, it had been allowed.

She snorted harshly at the oddity of being given such test of their wills; he was clearly given some permission, whereas she was given none. And then she paused, thinking that she shouldn’t have dared question the Emperor… and then, she paused again, waiting for the punishment to come… and waited, frozen still… and waited.

Nothing came.

Relaxing, Mara continued with her regiment, rinsing the cleanser from her hair.

In many ways, her new situation was like her former life, and in many ways it wasn’t. Maybe the threat was always there of punishment; but perhaps she was too loyal to notice, blinded by her own zealousness.

She never thought of her life as a yoke, saddled by her devotion. It was her want, and her will, to serve—at least she believed it was. Maybe it was a prison all along.

What was she prepared to do for the same Empire now?

And Luke? – What was he now? – What had he been turned into?

Another rinse gave her time to consider him and their last encounter. He seemed playful, at first…but then, *disappointed?* – she wanted to say. It surely wasn’t one of their normal sparring sessions. It was different; he was different.

She had lingered too long, she estimated, and left the shower. A glance in the mirror didn’t show any change in her features; she remembered taking a hit from one of the guards as she tried to defend herself. And where a bruise should be on her cheekbone, there was none.

Mara wrapped her body in an available robe and went back into the main room. She glanced over at Luke’s door before turning her attention to the Byssian, and the vanity.
Blankly, she sat down before the mirror, and felt the tugs on her hair as the Byssian removed the moisture from it.

Random, unbidden thoughts entered her mind.

*Luke used to love to stroke your hair. Her mind said casually. He loved to look at it, and watch you... admire you... love you.*

Mara sucked in air harshly at the last thought, sitting up straighter.

Did he still love her? – the doubt surfaced, cruelly, making her almost break into a sob.

It was just one of the many questions she had for him, if they were ever allowed to be alone together.

She froze again, and waited for it. The dread, that she had just had another thought, contradicting the direct order from the Emperor, scared her.

Waiting; nothing happened.

Mara let out the breath she was holding.

It would be wrong to think that she had been allowed a little bit of freedom, in her thoughts at least, because she knew the Emperor had the ability to invade her mind at any point in time. Once, she had found it reassuring to know that He was always close at hand, now it was a horror that was meant to keep her chained to Him.

The Byssian tugged again at her hair; Mara moved back to accommodate the pulling.

Without thinking, she looked into the mirror before her. In the reflection, she could see the Byssian hard at work, churning the red-gold tresses in her hands into formation.

For a moment, the Byssian looked into the mirror at the same time, and their eyes met briefly. The Byssian blinked once, acknowledging the other woman, before returning to her work.

Mara sighed as the last pin was put into place; perhaps this little informality would not cost the Byssian her positon. She hoped it wouldn’t cost the other her life.

Turning, Mara cast her eyes down, as to not make that mistake again, and tilted her chin up as she knew it was time to have her cosmetics applied.

With her eyes closed, Mara wondered if she could touch the Byssian’s mind and see what the day lay ahead for her. Surely, the Byssian was given instruction on how to dress the woman that she waited on; those instructions would have to include an itinerary and suitable attire.

Relaxing, Mara stretched out her senses.

Before she even got to the edge of sensing another being, a shot of pain stabbed her in the side. She gasped and pulled away from the Byssian, clutching the spot that throbbed from the phantom pierce.

Sitting up straight again, without explanation to the other, Mara felt the Dark Presence recede and knew that she had just been yanked back on her leash from attempting to travel too far ahead.

When the Byssian was done, she silently walked away.

Mara opened her eyes in time to see the Byssian press a comm unit before she proceeded to stand beside the wardrobe, waiting on the next portion of her servitude.
It was odd to see such a thing; the Byssian had never called on someone else before.

Without much fanfare, the main doors opened and a crimson cloaked-figure entered. It appeared to be a small-framed female. Walking through the room without much notice to anyone else, the figure stopped at the serving droid’s tray.

After the serving droid opened for the new arrival, the young woman picked up a utensil, and sampled the food before her. After swallowing, she stood, looking off in the distance, pausing.

When satisfied, she headed for the door through which she had arrived. She stopped and bowed before Mara.

“At the behest of His Imperial Majesty.” The stranger said and then left the room.

A taster… Mara had been given a taster; she frowned.

It was a formal thing, one she never would have believed that she would ever be given. Tasters were only given to a high ranking guest, or someone that the Emperor wanted to secure their health. Poison was such an old fashion way to remove someone, but still useful, as a former assassin would know.

She was also aware that this gift was to indicate that there had been a change in her position; she was to be taken care of.

To her knowledge, only the Emperor had a regular taster.

A memory one, of a valued courtesan, was given a taster- but that was because it was feared that she would attempt to take her own life while her lover was away.

Mara stood from the vanity and walked over to the cart. It would be a shame if the food, and the efforts of her taster, were to go to waste… it would be ungrateful to not eat from the bounty that was given to her by His Imperial Majesty.

She began to pick at the food, and nibbled as the Byssian started laying out her clothes for the day.

It was an orchestrated dance; orderly and with purpose. Mara watched, but didn’t watch as this was done for her.

If her station had been elevated, then it was uncommon just to have one servant. Perhaps she was still being kept secluded from the rest of the court.

She watched the clothing selection carefully; it would be another sign as to what was expected of her.

It caught her attention that there were no undergarments afforded to her. It seemed odd and impractical, but it was another clue to her vague position at court. Courtesans never wore undergarments.

Today’s selection was a dark aubergine gown; a simple cut with split long sleeves that resembled a cape as she walked. Matching healed-shoes graced her feet; still tight and uncomfortable. Golden cuffs graced her wrists, a plated ‘y’ necklace hung low on her collarbone reaching to her waist, and the crowning element was the gold forehead circlet that fit nicely into her coiffed hair.

As a last touch, the Byssian stepped in front of her, holding a small crystal bottle that Mara recognized. It was the small perfume that had been made for her, so long ago; its signature style gave
Willingly, she raised her chin and allowed the scent to be placed at her neckline. It wafted delightfully, the floral and spice fragrance; an indulgence that she allowed herself to have, a luxury that she knew would come at a cost.

The Sentinel arrived, and before Mara began to follow it, the Byssian bowed to her; something that hadn’t been done before.

Swallowing, Mara took the opportunity to shake off the unnerving behavior of those towards her, thus far.

She was led to the empty throne room.

It had been rearranged since she had last been there. Now, atop the dais, two thrones sat, side by side. Equal in size and proportion but they differed in colour. The black throne sat to the right of the dais, whereas the gray throne sat on the left.

Half way up the dais, off to the left side, was her smaller chair – it certainly wasn’t a throne.

The Sentinel moved aside, letting her assume the role that she knew that she had to play. Mara walked forward, alone in the room, her footsteps echoed as she ascended the stairs.

Once in position, she turned and looked out on the vacant space, before lowering herself in the chair.

Her eyes fluttered briefly as she felt the touch of her Master on her mind, reaching out to her, with no commands but only showing her that she was where He wanted her to be. She had been punished for reaching out in her senses before, but now it seems that He had given her permission to do so, if not directly.

Inhaling deeply, her feelings stretched out before her, sensing the Emperor’s arrival…and beside Him, like a flare in her senses, Luke was approaching.

Behind them, and eager court was clamoring again, begging for attention from either man, either Emperor?

Mara frowned and pulled her senses back, but before she did, she felt the presence that wanted her with a ferocious hunger, touch her mind and let her go with the same speed.

The sound of the marching came closer and she rose from off her seat, preparing for their entrance, just as she did before.

There was a silent language to the behavior of court life; those who travelled with the Emperor were held in high esteem, with relation to their distance of His presence… the farther away you were from Him, the farther away you were from His good graces.

Therefore, it was a mixed message and perplexing to her as to why she was given a taster, placed so close to the throne, but not allowed to travel with His entourage; still stuck between prisoner and princess, without a clue, without a purpose.

She stepped away from her seat and bowed her head as she felt them arrive.

The Red Guard stalked up the stairs and passed her to her positions as they always did. For a split second, she sensed them; human… and curious as to where they were found. The rumor was that the upper elite of the Guard had done away with themselves, ‘fell on their own swords’, after Endor for
not being able to protect their Master. No, these were both attentive and fully trained Red Guard at His side.

Mara could feel it when the Emperor and Luke came closer; their presences fought each other quietly for who would occupy the space in the Force; two auras in the same proximity.

A fleeting thought; Vader would have never let his presence match that of the Emperor.

As they came closer, without looking up, she bowed and curtsied; she felt the intent eyes of Luke on her.

She caught a glance of their figures as they passed at her current eye-level; the Emperor, walking on His cane, in his long black robe, and Luke, his black boots and black regalia.

After the room bowed, Mara felt the tendrils on her mind.

 אלק Arise my child, and take your seat above them. /& Palpatine’s mind whispered on hers.

She did as she was told.

With her eyes that saw, but appeared to not see, the court was not as full as it had been recently but it still kept to its design.

His advisors sat to the right of the throne on the lowest level but jutted out in front of them was one seat, the same size as hers.

On that seat, Sedriss had been given a placed to rest; one that he was not happy with. Set aside from the other Force-users, and left with the ramble.

She could feel it; his disdain for his placement, but he didn’t blame the Emperor. No, Sedriss blamed Luke first, and her, second, as he had been replaced. His cold eyes were attempting to pierce her.

The same spike in energy, that she had previously experienced, was back again. Only this time, with her skills in the Force, it wanted to push Sedriss from off his chair without any thought to how it would appear.

She tightened her jaw, expecting another reprimand from the Emperor, as she received when she tried to reach out to the Byssian, but none came; instead she felt a slight warmness, applauding her feelings of anger and resentment. It was short-lived.

Grand Vizier, Sate Pestage stepped forward, and the session began.

Keeping her attention and her senses aware, Mara listened keenly for any address of Luke directly, to see if he had been given a title, to see if he had been given any commanding power.

Sure enough, one courtier had made the slip and referred to him by ‘Lord Skywalker’, but even he paused before using the term, unsure if it was the correct title to be used.

She didn’t need to see it, but it felt like the Emperor nodded, approving the terminology without objection and the session continued.

Things in the galaxy were progressing, worlds were falling into line with the New Empire; the Hapes Consortium emissary came forward to represent the dowager Queen, Ta’a Chume, but not the current Queen, requesting, and being granted an audience with the Emperor.

The session broke on this news. A legitimate royal house was acknowledging the supremacy of the
Empire; it was a win of sorts. The Emperor took it as such when He dismissed the court.

The courtiers and advisors left as the Emperor remained seated.

He waited until His three Force-users were only present.

Mara knew her place, and knew better than to address the Emperor directly, but it appeared that Sedriss did not. The young man got off from his seat abruptly and marched to the front of the dais; his face twisted with impotent anger.

“Master…” his voice hissed demandingly.

Mara held herself as she felt, rather than saw, the blast of current hit his chest, causing him to stumble backwards.

“You have forgotten your place, Sedriss.” Palpatine hissed.

It was a mere reprimand, as Sedriss recovered and took a knee before the dais.

A pause for silence and Palpatine began. “Whilst Lord Skywalker and I…” He was amused by the new title bestowed on the Jedi, “… retreat to confer, it is My wish that you escort the Lady Jade back to her room.” It entertained Him to throw around titles now that His courtiers had done so.

Mara doubted that the title He had used for her had any merit, but she felt a thorn in Luke’s senses when it was suggested that she was to be left alone with Sedriss, but he stayed silent.

“Perhaps, you might converse with her on the proper behavior and etiquette concerning My Throne Room.” Palpatine snarled.

Knowing that the Palpatine was descending the stairs, she heard his cane as it touched each one of the stairs with Luke with directly in His shadow. Rising, she stepped away and bowed before He passed.

Lifting her head, her gaze followed Luke’s figure as he walked beside Palpatine towards the private quarters. He paused as the Emperor entered before him, and he looked back to meet her eyes; they looked concerned but then hardened, seeping with yellow, as he turned to follow Palpatine into the room. The door sealed.

Mara inhaled, and hardening her own look before she turned to face Sedriss. Raising her chin, she descended the stairs before him, keeping a regal posture, and knowing that she had been placed high above him.

She stopped in front of him.

He was younger than she; perhaps only by a few years. He would have been considered attractive if he took the time to take care of himself. His dark hair swept off to the side, and his green eyes, rimmed with yellow, blazed back at her.

He must have been counting on her being disturbed by seeing the colours in his eyes, indicating his presence in the Dark side. But unknown to him, she had grown up in a court where eye-colour meant nothing to her; she had regularly looked into the eyes of the Emperor and had not feared them as other would.

His Force aura was shaky but bursting for the power that he craved; it was unnerving to be around it.
Locking eyes, she remembered the position that she once held in the Empire and the respect that was given to her; if not by name, then by reputation. An *Emperor’s Hand’s* orders and instructions went without question.

For a moment, he seemed to be taken aback by her posture; she was not an item on display as he thought she was.

“It is proper behavior to bow before a superior member of His Majesty’s court.” Mara said in a monotone, controlling her voice to be emotionless; that was when others usually found it most off-putting, not being able to read her.

“It is also proper behavior not to speak, unless spoken to, by His Imperial Majesty…” She turned away and started to walk towards the door sensing he was following her as he was told to do. “…at which point in time, you will address His Majesty as ‘Your Imperial Majesty’ on your first phrase. After that, you may referred to His Majesty as ‘Your Imperial Highness’, or ‘Your Highness’ …or, if you have been so granted, as ‘Master’. But if you are speaking to others, it is always ‘His Imperial Majesty’, or in casual conversation ‘His Majesty’.”

Sedriss seemed not to be taking her guidance, and only sneered as he walked behind her; she could sense it, as he must have sensed her.

“What do you call Him?” He asked, sneering, from behind her.

Mara paused in the hallway, and turned to look at him with a stern look. “I have always called His Imperial Majesty, ‘Master’.” She replied coldly, knowing that this sort of formality was riling him up.

*I’ve known him longer than you have, you sniveling little piece of podoo. Your kind always gets scraped off the bottom of boots. Her mind spoke as her lips curled. It’s only a matter of time, and how sharp the instrument that does the scraping, before you’ll be gone too.*

She could tell that Sedriss hated it, and he hated her, and Luke, for arriving in court. Before them, he was Palpatine’s main servant, and he didn’t understand his place among them. He didn’t see the reason why they were placed above him. He didn’t understand that this was part of the game that Palpatine was playing to keep him on edge.

There was no point in reminding him that she was here against her will, but she would keep up the ruse easily if it meant keeping him off-kilter. As far as she was concerned, Sedriss was just another pair of eyes to spy on her.

She turned to continue her path back to her room. She was about to instruct him on the proper procedures on how to escort a guest when she sense him come up beside her.

“He’s told me what you were.” Sedriss growled over to her, trying to whisper. “Skywalker’s whore.” He hissed. “And He has promised you to me, as well.” He added for flavor.

Mara kept her head high with those words and didn’t flinch.

They reached her door, and it opened with their approach; they stopped at the threshold.

The energy was back in her veins again, and with command, she turned to him.

Her vivid green eyes narrowed as they burrowed into his.

Sedriss paused, and constricted his posture.
“He may have promised me to you…” She said quietly and controlled, knowing that words from the Emperor could have many meanings; the term ‘promised’ could imply her company, or could refer that he would eventually meet his demise by her hand; it was all within His jurisdiction. “… but He’s promised me before to others, and some of them didn’t like the gift of my presence. You might find that you won’t either.”

Mara stepped inside the room, keeping her firm look and seeing his eyes waver.

“Remember that.” She whispered before the door closed.

It slid shut and she could still feel Sedriss on the other side, temporarily scared but not enough to truly be forever in fear of her.

This exchange was satisfying… fleeting, but satisfying.

She paused without flinching, expecting a punishment that never came.

Left alone now, she had nothing but herself to keep her company. Her room was silent; the opulence drowned out any other noise.

Palpatine was giving her more of a leash; no droid escort, and not punishing her for threatening one of his apprentices.

For once, it didn’t feel like she was being watched; hounded. It was a small liberation, Mara knew it, but it was one nonetheless.

Looking around the room, her senses were keenly aware, probably clearer, as well. She hadn’t noticed that they were even dull to begin with, but now, she felt differently. There was something that was making her bolder, without even trying.

Looking at the door that joined her room to Luke’s, she could feel the resentment come over her. This was his fault…all of it… every bit of it. If it wasn’t for him, she would be here.

Marching over to the door, Mara was surprised when it opened at her approach. She was sure that it was never going to open for her; she had no authority, so why would it open?

Standing at the threshold, she was even further surprised when she didn’t sense a presence in the next room.

Luke must still be in audience with the Emperor. If the Emperor had lifted the ban on her contact with Luke, He didn’t inform her, testing them again.

With the door open and vacant room available, boldly, she walked through into another realm.

The room, Luke’s room, was decorated in greys and black. It was just as lush as her room was, and just as ornate.

Oxidized chrome and jet black onyx accentuated the room. There were several raised areas about the room; his bed was on a platform, much like hers, and a longer section near the opposite wall, probably meant for dining… many ministers took meals in their quarters when official dinners weren’t required.

She wondered what he thought about all this. Knowing him, she was sure that he would find it just as excessive as she thought. But then, he seemed to be acclimatizing himself with the other facets of Imperial life, she wondered if she knew him at all.
Luke was not Luke. *Not my Luke*, her mind said to her tenderly. Then, without words, she berated herself for even having a naïve thought. It was true; she couldn’t fathom how they had gone from being so close, loving and needing each other, to feeling so distant.

What had Palpatine used to make Luke change, to darken? What argument did He come up with to cast a shadow over that bright a light?

Her only conclusion was that he had been thoroughly changed, and a pain in her chest, of her own making, started.

When Luke came into the throne room and assumed the seat beside Palpatine, Mara sensed the collective gasp from the chamber. It was a clear message; a unified front of two thrones, acknowledged shared-power.

Mara snorted, and felt free to have the thought that Palpatine would never share power, even for an instant.

Walking over to the decorative chess board, she looked at the different levels in the game; it looked like someone had been playing recently, with the pieces moved from their starting points, but the game was clearly not completed.

Something else caught her attention; a window… *his room was given a window!* On one of the many raised areas, the opened curtains streamed in light.

Mara walked up the level on the opposite and approached the frame, only to gaze out of a viewport that she hadn’t been allowed to have. She briefly remembered a tactic being used to distort time; if you can’t tell what time of day it was, it could be manipulated.

The pulsing sun appeared to be lowering on the horizon, suggesting it was passed midday.

In the distance, there was a spaceport… not the one that she arrived in, but the comings and goings suggested life out there. Off, in the far distance, she could see the Star Destroyer that hovered over it all.

“That’s how you know that I’ve been summoned.” His voice said from across the room, breaking her thoughts.

Mara straightened her back immediately, feeling like she shouldn’t be there; she was intruding on his private space.

“It rests there until I’ve been instructed to go elsewhere.” His voice explained, coming closer to her.

With her back to him, she swallowed so that he wouldn’t see that his presence made her nervous. She prepared her blank face and slowly turned in his direction.

He stood just inside the threshold of their rooms, having entered through her room. Her eyes narrowed at the odd thought that he should have been there first.

Mara made sure that she breathing was under control as she looked at him.

He seemed taller or broader somehow.

Luke set his shoulders back; the leather stretched with his body. His wardrobe had been clearly designed for the benefit of a public appearance; the dark browns and blacks were to suggest that he was still the Jedi that the public knew, but with a much more-regal air to it.
His hair had grown and had gotten darker since Ovanis. It was also styled to be a mature presentation of himself.

And though, she could sense that he was still of a weary state, his eyes were not red and sunken as when she had originally seen him… or even that of their second, brief, meeting.

If anything, his presence was bolder, stronger, and more-confident.

As she looked into his blue eyes from across the room, he began to walk towards her.

“What were you thinking, just then?” He asked in a subdued, but reserved, manner. His chin jutted in the direction of the window and his eyes softened, truly asking and wanting to know.

Without considering, she opened her mouth and let the thoughts come out, unrestrained. “I was wondering if my ship was impounded or still available at the spaceport.” She said resignedly. “I was missing some my things.” She finished on a whisper.

Her eyes glanced at his hands; there was no jade ring on his finger. << Your pendant… I thought it would be safer left aboard the Headhunter. >> She reached up to her collar for the missing symbol of their love, pointedly reminded him that he once cared for her.

Luke tilted his chin up, his expression filled with concerned before considering her words. He inhaled deeply, and his look hardened again.

“It’s been impounded.” He said with no emotion. “And ripped apart, searching for any evidence, other than why you claimed to arrive here.”

She watched him as his look drifted away from her.

“I came for you.” She replied. “And for you alone.” She whispered. << I felt your pain. >>

He ignored her statement. “They didn’t find your lightsaber on you, or inside the Headhunter – that was why you were given a different one to use during our session.” He said casually; almost too casual, not asking a direct question that he wanted the answer to.

Mara watched him; he was an animal inside, pacing, knowing that he was in a cage too.

“I was in the process of making a new one, before I left to find you.” She said, feeling his surprise. His face didn’t change expression but his eyes widened, asking for more.

“I left your saber with someone that I trust…” she said quietly. “…for safe-keeping.”

Luke nodded once, his posture relaxing.

He still was too far away to get a full impression of his senses, which was what she wanted. And only then, she would be able to sense if he was fully immersed in the Dark Side.

He stood between her and the door back to her room; she would have to cross directly in front of him if she needed an escape route. Mara’s eyes flitted around quickly, unsure if she needed it, before coming back to his face.

She had to remind herself that she was angry with him; for turning to the Dark, for keeping her here, as if he had the power.

Luke still watched her as he came closer, but veered off course to her direct path, and stopped at the
liquor trolley beside the chess game.

His eyes looked down to measure out a sample of the liquid, and then they lifted back up, meeting her eyes, and raising one eyebrow, offering her a drink wordlessly.

Mara shook her head once, and while he looked back down to finish his preparation, she glanced over at the open door to her room.

From her peripheral vision, she saw his opposite hand come up and waved; the door slid closed.

“You won’t be needing that.” Luke mumbled under his breath, before his eyes came up to lock on her.

She could feel the rise and fall of her shoulders with her breath; an odd mix of fear and anger in her senses, and the feeling that she was never going to get the answers that she wanted.

Mara blinked once, acknowledging that she was thinking of escape. The corner of his mouth twitched.

Luke walked over to the seat in front of the chess board. He picked up one of the figures and moved it to an empty place absently, without any real purpose. “Do you play?” He asked, not looking at her, but at the board; his lip twitched again, almost forming a smirk.

A direct question, she could avoid it. “No, I do not…” Mara said clearly, but then searched her mind for his title, and floundering a little in her double entendre. “…Lord Skywalker.” She finished, trying not to let her voice wavered.


The tension was starting to get to her, building and pressing on her senses. It was a resort that she knew she couldn’t take, but it also seemed the most direct, regardless of the risks of her thoughts being overheard.

<< What do you want me to call you? I haven’t been instructed to call you anything else. >> Her thoughts sounded snarky, and childish, but completely reasonable.

He looked up from the game board to watch her walk down the few steps to be on the same level as him.

<< Shall I curtsy or kneel before the New Emperor? >> Mara stopped in-line with him, half way to her room. Even with the doors closed, she was sure that she would feel more-safe there.

It was mocking. She knew it, but it was sure to get some reaction out of him.

His eyes narrowed at her. With a wave of his hand, a few of the pieces of the game moved. And he smirked, knowing he had made his own wordless double meaning.

“You may call me whatever His Imperial Majesty wishes…” She said smoothly as she curtsied at the knee, not missing the inference he made with the gesture; it was all a game, now.

Mara could feel the wave come over her.

< I want to call you ‘Mara’… *my love… my angel*… I want to kiss you and hold you and make this
all go away… > His voice agonized over to her. < But I can’t… and I won’t. > He snarled.

For the briefest of seconds, his face softened too, and then it was gone, and it was back to formality. “I trust you have recovered from our sparring session of a few days ago? “ He asked, and then looked away, taking a moment to sip his drink.

A few days? It seemed like only the previous day. Whatever had occurred was definitely took longer that she had anticipated.

“It was just a scratch, Lord Skywalker.” She replied, feeling a rise in his emotions at having her be so formal with him. It wasn’t her place to let on if anything else had occurred because she had no remembrance of being injured or otherwise.

His jaw set tightly, and nodded once. “Good.” He said blankly. “That time, was supposed to be a gift. I was given permission to be with you…as a reward, for my loyalty.” He scoffed.

She blinked, realizing why he felt disappointed by their meeting.

“Do you often attend court?” Luke asked without any preamble, emotionlessly, as if he really didn’t to hear it, and switching topics.

“As often as the Emperor bids me to, Lord Skywalker.” Mara replied, feeling the spike in his emotions.

“Don’t you mean, Darth Sidious?” He asked, his tone going cold.

“His Imperial Majesty has not allowed me to be one of his apprentices, or given me permission to refer to him by such a term. Therefore, I refrain from doing so.” She explained stoic ally, and then sighed. “Only Master, and apprentices refer to each other as ‘Darth’.”

If Luke had been given the title of ‘Darth’ he would have been using it by now; a sign that perhaps he wasn’t in the inner sanctum.

He snorted again, and looked into his glass at the remaining liquid. < So you’re not studying from Him? > He asked critically.

Mara let her eyes open and close slowly, not sure how much she should reveal. No, she hadn’t been studying with Him, but she had been using her gifts to see things for Him.

“No, it’s clear that He already has two apprentices…what would He need me for?” She asked in a tone that she would dare not use in the open.

“What, indeed.” Luke said quietly. “I’ve asked myself the very same thing.” He spoke louder now, and without keeping the innuendo that they had when they spoke using the Force. “What could He possibly keep you here for?” He looked at her, pointedly, accusing her.

Openly, Mara let her face express her thoughts without concealing it. She was sure he was making a statement that she was in collusion with the Emperor with regards to his predicament, which was still unclear to her- Was he an apprentice or a future Emperor, himself?

It had gotten darker in the room since she had come closer to him, but he didn’t move, planted where he was.

Luke looked away, giving her an opportunity to take a few more steps towards the release and the door.
“I told you, that wasn’t an option for you.” He growled, not looking in her direction. “Do you think that a door and a wall will save you?”

“The Emperor gave you permission to see me without an escort—nothing more.” Mara said, surprised by her own boldness, but he clearly didn’t understand the limits to being given orders and how to obey the intent and the words of them. “I am not yours to command. I answer to the Emperor.” She stopped and paused, regretting that she had to use those words again to describe her life.

She tried to hold herself as she watched as his eyes seeped on the edge with orange. Luke held her gaze, seething, until the orange disappeared; she sighed to herself, relieved.

“Is Sedriss given the same permissions to you that I am?” He asked with a growl still present in his voice, and his chest heaved.

She was tempted to dance around an answer but she knew it would only fan the flames of his jealousy that was now evident. It was a hot button for him; he didn’t like having competition for her attentions, and he knew exactly why Sedriss was kept around.

“No.” she said with conviction. Without thinking, she shook her head, feeling at loss for what she was truly doing here; she knew she was being used, but to what end had yet to be revealed.

Luke nodded once, and then turned away from her. Walking to the closet on the far short side of the room, his glass floated back to the liquor stand without an issue.

The closet opened with his approach, and she knew that he must have done it with the Force. He was using it more-casually than he had done before. On Coruscant, and other places, he only used it as a last resort, not as a first option.

“Sidious says that I’m not to hide my gifts from those around me. That, my use of the Force should be a reminder that they are lesser than me, and should learn their place, and accept my guidance.” Luke replied with his back to her.

She hadn’t noticed if she had made her thoughts available to him.

“Including, intruding on other’s minds.” He mumbled while looking at the options before him. “However, you were broadcasting.”

There was no point in trying to hide her thoughts and feeling, then; if Palpatine and Luke could hear them, it was futile.

With a huff, Mara walked a few steps in his direction, still maintaining what she felt was a safe distance. “Then, you know that I’m confused about your position here, just as I am about my own.” She declared, knowing that she might suffer for it later, but she wanted something more than being with him; she wanted some answers, from someone that she thought she could trust.

<< I felt you turn… the galaxy felt you turn. >> She accused. Lost in her own feelings, she opened her mouth, to try and remind him of the intimacy that they once shared. “You told me that it felt like I had died when I shield myself completely from you… think about how it felt for me when I sensed the change in you.”

Losing all of her resolve to stand stoic from him, she had lost the control that she once had. “And I came here to find you…and to get answers….” << to bring you back. >>

He snorted once at her conceit of her abilities if she thought she was as strong as he to bring another back from the Dark Side. He knew what it took to do such a thing, and he doubted that she would
even understand.

Luke watched her as he started to undo the fastenings of his belt, intent on disrobing for the night. “Did you think that I would go with you?” He asked.

“Yes.” She replied, now starting to be unsure.

“Why?” He asked snidely. “Because I love you? Because I care so much for you? Because I’m supposed to trust you?”

“All of those things.” Mara blurted out, not thinking about the consequences. “And because of those things.” She whispered, hoping that he would feel her desperation, and know that she was taking a chance, on her life, to see this through, because of him.

She was thinking it would melt his heart and that he would sweep her up in his arms, and would agree to escape with her on the spot.

But instead, he scoffed, turned away and removed his shirt, replacing it with a light robe and wrapping it around him.

She watched his muscles tense and release, his head drop and shaking off his thoughts that he kept to himself.

<It’s not that easy. > His mind touched back. “I’m not ready. There’s still work to be done.” His voice was blank.

At last, some clue to why he remained; feeling that he had a purpose there.


He twitched when she used his name, but he stood silent.

She tried to reason it out; there must be something that he’s getting here that he wasn’t before. The Emperor never had to push too far in order to make someone turn; she had touched the Dark Power once or twice when she was in service, but it never stayed. Luke was stuck in the mire, and refusing to dig himself out.

Then, it started to make sense to her; his distance, his turn, his behavior.

“You’re doing this become a Jedi Master, aren’t you?” She said quietly, not sure if she was correct or not. “You’ve turned yourself to use the Dark Side so that you can come back.” She accused, made bold by his audaciousness, risking her for his goals.

Luke’s expression didn’t change, but his eyes resigned.

Keeping her eyes on him, she stepped away from him, and closer to the door that separated them. Mara didn’t need to hear it; she didn’t need to hear any of his reasons or excuses. He had jeopardized her life, and the rest of the galaxy for his own quest for power. She knew what that kind of desire looked like; she had it herself once.

Mara breathed hard; her chest heaving, keeping her emotions from spilling over; regretting that she was ever having them in the first place.

His eyes watched her, but he didn’t try to stop her. “You don’t understand.” He growled.
“I understand.” She spit back, as an automatic response. “Palpatine offered you power… and you took it.”

“You’re one to talk…” Luke snarled at her. “How long did it take before you kneeled before him? Did He ask or did you naturally call Him ‘Master’ upon seeing him again? How many dresses did you go through before you decided on the right one, Lady Jade?”

“He dressed you up very nicely, to put you in front of me.” He scowled in her direction. Glaring, she snarled back, under her breath. “It’s not real…nothing is.”

Up until then, she hadn’t reached out to him fully, and had refused to do so, knowing that it wasn’t permitted; now, she wanted to deny him that intimacy that they once shared when they touched each other in the Force. But it called to her, telling her to do it, telling her that she would get the answers that she sought.

Mara’s brow creased, and whispered, “What did He give you?... What did He offer?” Her eyes fluttered before she allowed herself to reach over to him, trying to get a full sense of who he was.

Luke must have received her feelings because he didn’t block them out. She could feel all the torment, all the confusion; his anger, at her, at himself, at his father, and the Emperor.

Simmering, that accompanied the storm of his emotions, was the want and the lust to be with her. And behind that, his own purpose, and not just the goal to be a Jedi Master, something further behind it.

She paused. Vader? – How was he still apart of this? … an incomplete piece; it didn’t make sense how Vader fit into the pieces.

Her eyes focused on him, now, scared, but still wanted to ask the question. “What did he promise you?” Her voice trembled.

Luke broke his gaze with her, and looked away.

<< What do you want, so badly, that you went with Him? >> She asked, taking another step towards the door, but also making her as close to him as she needed to be to cross his path.

Luke’s shoulders heaved as he breathed heavy through his nostrils; his look darkening and on the edge of erupting.

He was avoiding her question, she wanted the answer… but she also knew there was another answer that she didn’t want to know; why have you turned on me?

So, for the last, and final time, her voice cracked as she asked, “What do you want?”

Instantly regretting it, Mara saw the room darken, the energy around her began to vibrate, and the air became sharp, cold.

His breathing got heavier, his eyes widened, allowing the orange to seep into the rims of his pupils.

“What do I want?” Luke repeated, his voice bounced off the walls and back at her, not changing in volume.

He turned and looked at her; intent, immoral , and impious. Stepping towards her, Mara became aware of what he felt was going to halt the turmoil that spun inside him, and the thought, made her
body pulsate.

“I want you.” He said slowly through gritted teeth; the words as tight as her senses.

Ensnared by his eyes, she watched him come closer.

“I want you in my bed tonight.” Luke’s voice pronounced each word with precision. His hand came up, reaching out and she could feel the sense of his phantom touch on her skin.

“I want you to quiver at the thought of what I can do to you.” His voice had gone quiet as he breathed through his mouth.

Mara reached for her forehead as images flashed; her head thrown back, mouth open, moaning, as she climaxed, just for him.

“I want your wetness to cover my sheets as I pound you so hard that you lose control of yourself.” The unseen hand was gliding possessively up the side of her body, pushing, kneading into her skin.

Her body pulsed against her will.

“And I want you to scream for more, as I take back what’s mine…what should have been mine.” Luke’s face twisted with his last words; his pupils, where blue had become sapphire, had expanded into black, dilated, edged in golden orange, and hungry.

Her mouth dropped open; she thought there was no doubt of her desire and love for him but somewhere the seeds of suspicion were sown… his doubt.

“I’ve always been yours…” Mara’s lips moved almost silently, dry on the air of her gasp.

Luke’s amber eyes narrowed. “Really?” He inhaled once before reaching out with his other hand, away from her. “Are you sure of that?”

A nondescript square black velvet box flew in his direction, called to his hand. “I may be new to court practices, but I believe that when a lady of the court keeps a ‘gift of offer’, she means to fulfill it.” He mumbled, steadying his voice.

She licked her lips, feeling that the quaver that started there was now going down her body as she remembered that box, and she shook her head as she stared at nothing but it.

Slowly, she pointed at it, as she continued to shake her head. “Luke… I never… I never answered his request… I never wanted his attention… I never came to his call… I never… never…” Mara uncharacteristically stuttered.

His lips began to curl. “You had every opportunity to tell me…” Luke’s eyes rolled, just to keep from looking at her. “…on Coruscant, when I asked you pointedly… on Mustafar, when we were in his castle… and so many times before then.”

He turned the box in her direction. Mara started to blink rapidly, feeling moisture starting to build in them… her mouth made a motion to speak as Luke began to open the box.

“We stood over them… you and I… the night of the auction… you told me about how precious they were… a favourite of the Emperor’s… you forgot to tell me what they really meant.”

The lid opened, and even with the lack of light in the room, the blood red jewel’s facts sparkled and danced as if evilly celebrating their brandish.
She stood, shuddering, looking at the Obaline Ruby Choker resting on the pure white satin cushion inside the box.

“When were you planning to tell me that my father asked you to be his whore?”

Her breathing was little gasps as she sucked in air, fearing to feel if another invisible hand would be at her throat soon, unsure if she could sway him. “Luke…I never accepted those…I-”

“You never sent them back either.” He accused, and left his next question unspoken.

“Palpatine told me not to…” Mara rapidly said. “He told me to keep them…to use them, if I ever needed to…I didn’t know what he meant at the time…I was so young…I didn’t know…I didn’t want to go to-…I had no intention of ever going to--” She couldn’t finish the thought that was so repugnant to her.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” He whispered as he tossed the box on the ground between them; the jewels fell out of the box and onto the floor. <This…you…and my father…this was what he used to call me into His web.>

She shook her head again. “I didn’t know how to tell you…without hurting you…further.” She said the words absently and she heard his voice inside her mind.

It was another piece; Luke just wasn’t just angry that she didn’t tell him about the offer his father had made to her, but he was angry with himself that his emotions were used to manipulate him again, and that she was one objects to be used at the apex that could tip him.

Now, he doubted everything about her; whether she did love him, or understand what love was.

<My father’s turn…> His voice sounded hollow as his eyes started to fade in their intensity. <He was controlled by his feelings for my mother. When he thought she had betrayed him…he choked the life out of her.> Luke revealed and cast his eyes downward.

Mara’s eyes flashed over to his hands, and expected him to outstretch his hand in her direction, grabbing at her absent throat, then flashed back up at his face, seeing it haunted.

Luke’s doubt…his only doubt, was what was keeping him from her now – if she could break through it, and he could see that she wasn’t there to play with his emotions, as his father’s had been, perhaps…

She knew that she had precious little time before Luke would make up his mind on where they stood.

Risking it all; risking his wrath, and risking His wrath, she took quick steps towards him, almost touching his body alongside him, foregoing all that they had said to each other thus far.

If they were being watched, it would just appear as some sort of seduction tactic, and maybe it was.

Luke seemed surprised that she would come in so close to him, surprised that she would even take his hand, and surprised when she placed her forehead against his.

We haven’t got much time, she thought over in her own mind, knowing that he would hear the words, and the intent.

I love you!…and this is the only way that He can’t hear us. The room is probably bugged, and I know He can hear it when I communicate to you through the Force-He knows how to break
through my thought process. I know you think that you have a plan...a way out, but you don’t. It’s a
trap... it’s all a trap, meant to keep you here by your own will...I’ve seen it a thousand times. Please
Luke, let’s leave here. If you have a Star Destroyer at your command, then take us away. I’ll go
anywhere with you. We can leave on a shuttle, or if we can make it to the spaceport, steal a ship ...
You don’t need Him to give me to you...I am always yours... but He is going to use me against you,
I know it, even more than you think is possible...I don’t know how. I don’t know His plans, but...
please!...please!... She begged when she felt his body stiffen and felt that maybe he didn’t want to
leave ... Please? She asked feebly, as a last resort, now sensing it was a big mistake on her part,
assuming that he would want to go.

As Mara backed away, she looked directly into his face; his eyes were full of sapphire blue; his face
so close to hers; their lips centimeters apart.

“Come back to the Light.” She said, not making a sound but the air leaving her mouth, warm on his
skin. “That’s why I fell in love with you.” She said louder.

With a sigh, he took her hands from off of his body, and let them drop at her sides.

“Mara, I don’t need someone who only sees the good in me.” Luke said; his eyes now searching her
face. “I have enough people who want me to be something that I’m not.” He mumbled.

With a wave, the adjoining door, slid open.

“I need someone who sees the darkness in me, and still wants to stay.” He said strongly.

Luke backed away, and then, turned away, pointing towards the door. Dismissing her.

Mara opened her mouth, only to close it again. She looked at his back for one moment before she
turned away, and walked through the threshold, into her room.

The door slid shut, and she was alone.

TBC
Chapter Summary

Quote: It grew denser, darker, danker which could only mean one thing; she would soon be in the Emperor’s presence, and then there would no hiding what she had done, what she had said to Luke.

Characters: Palpatine, Mara, Pestage

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Chapter Notes

I don't usually do this, but I started thinking of Mara differently... it was strange of this one, but as I wrote this chapter, I thought that everything Mara does is either a dance or a fight-- nothing else -- she doesn't know any other way to be.

A dance; could display any sort of mood. A fight; could be against an enemy, for a goal or inside herself.

She's such a fun character to play with sometime.

Oh...and no smut-fest with this one yet... but it's coming... oh, sweet Budha, it IS coming!

**

Imperial Citadel: Outside the Grand Chamber

Her pace quickened to keep up with that of the Sentinel droid. And with every step, it echoed her thoughts; her dainty slippers clicked in time on the sleek marble floor.

*Trea-son-Trea-son-Trea-son…*

The swooshing sound from fabric of her gown filled in the void where her gait did not.

*He- knows – He- knows- He- knows…*

She may have looked the picture of noble beauty and dignity, but she knew that she was anything but.

The summons came before she awoke, and the Byssian was more-efficient than usual, knowing what was being demanded of her.

Mara woke, ate, and dressed quicker than she done since she had arrived on Byss.
As she walked now, her mind fought with logic with her emotions.

*If He really wanted you dead, He wouldn’t have sent the taster this morning.*

*If He knew all that transpired between you and Luke, He wouldn’t have let you live this long.*

*He knows that you’re plotting against Him.*

And then, her emotions resurrected to give their illogical opinions.

*He needs you- you’re valuable to Him.*

*Prove your worth and you’ll survive.*

*You have to live… you need to live.*

If it wouldn’t have been obvious, she would have been wringing her hands as she walked; her nervous habit that she thought that she hid very well.

So preoccupied was her mind that Mara just let the Sentinel droid guide the way, without taking notice of where she was being led. The corridors of the Citadel all looked very much alike and there weren’t any distinguishing factors to this one either.

The only exception was the sense in the air.

It grew denser, darker, danker which could only mean one thing; she would soon be in the Emperor’s presence, and then there would no hiding what she had done, what she had said to Luke.

She knew that she was breathing heavy without exerting herself, just out of fear. It was His favorite tactic, to make his victim wait. She knew He had the power to rip through the air in the Citadel and take the life from out her body, if He truly wanted.

There was no reason to wait; He could have done it last night when the words left her mouth.

In fact, she had lain awake, expecting it. Or worse, to feel her joints ripped from her body again, and then the agonizing pain as life left her.

The other thoughts that plagued her night were about Luke.

Luke, and his refusal to leave Byss with her, played on her mind. Even more, he had blocked her out since she returned to her room; shielding himself just as she had once shielded herself from him.

His presence felt so far away…and not even alive.

*You should have told him…you should have told him about Vader. He was right, you had every chance…you told Leia, why not tell Luke? Her mind was merciless when it came to questioning her own actions.*

Lying in bed, she stared up at the ceiling; her mind came up with another way to keep her awake. *He said he had work to do…what sort of work? She didn’t believe for one moment that Luke was going to follow the Emperor. But the thrones?… same size…side by side… what does it mean?*

Walking in an empty corridor, Mara let her body shudder just once from the tension she was trying to keep at bay.

The Emperor was still the Master at playing the games of the mind; to give her such mixed messages.
To be given a taster and a personal valet were not things to take lightly; these signals meant that He valued her, in some aspect.

It would be a waste to destroy something that you were taking great care of.

Mara continued to walk and looked down at her shaking hands as she reminded herself to stop it immediately.

The layered gown of sheer fabrics made for an ombre-effect of dark plum, forest green, and midnight blue as she walked. The gown showed off the porcelain skin of her shoulders and fine neck. And as per the usual, a headdress was chosen; the jewels danced in the stream of gold that was her hair.

Why would He dress you up to only rip you down? Her mind had not taken a side either on the debate of her status.

The Sentinel was not programed with patience in mind, and sped ahead of her, paused and then waited for her to catch up.

Mara decided that the Citadel was more vast that she had originally thought, and they seemed to be headed in the direction of the throne room but then turned to one of the antennae hallways.

It was a nondescript enough door when the Sentinel paused, and took up its position on the side of the frame, indicating that this was her door to enter.

The door had a timer on it, and the hasty droid had already signaled their arrival. So she watched as the small light flashed to acknowledge that they were to be received.

The door slid open, and she stepped inside.

Mara minutely nodded, understanding exactly where she had been taken to.

If past behavior was indicative of future actions, then this room must be the vestibule to the private audience chamber. Unlike the Emperor’s private mediation chamber, this room wasn’t designed for meditation.

It was a theatre, not unlike the throne room, where the drama played out of life behind the court. There were no illusions here. The Emperor could be as generous or as cruel as He genuinely felt. Only those who understood the true nature of the court were welcomed here.

Mara sighed as she looked around the room at the collection of art housed in the recessed alcoves. The Private Audience Chamber in the palace on Coruscant had a room such as this.

Visitors would feel proud that they had been invited to this inner sanctum of the Emperor, until they found out why they had been summoned.

Now, to be praised or punished- she had no idea which; awaited her.

It would very like the Emperor to give her all the pomp and circumstance that He had been showing her of late, only to throw her down to the ground without warning. Or worse.

She wanted to move, she wanted to pace about in the small room and wring her hands, and reason this out.

Luke would have let her. He would have watched as she would go through the motions as she tried to come up with some rational thought. And then, he would have found a way to calm and soothe her.
He always did.

To play the paly, she stayed true to her personae and stood, waiting, with her hands clasped in front, looking noble.

As she took a deep inhale, Mara felt His Presence reach out to her, beckoning her.

The side door opened, revealing another entrance to his meditation chamber, not the audience chamber.

Summoning her courage, she proceeded to enter.

The room was not welcoming; the energy swirled with the ebb and flow of windstorm, as gusts and pockets of malevolent power embraced and then released her.

In here, the Force was angry, hostile, and bitter.

Adjacent to her present course, the wall of glowing holocrons called to her. They flickered at her appearance in the room. But again, it was the empty ones, placed on a higher shelf, which caught her attention before she brought her thoughts back to the present.

Her only defence was to call on her own power, her aura and her shielding against it, which only made her more observant to the Dark Force.

Inside the darkened chamber, she felt another presence in the room, and his peering shadow moved within the murky confines.

“Emperor’s Hand” He lisped loudly, with a voice that was used to addressing the Throne Room. He bowed ever so slightly as his eyes glowered.

He stood above her, tall and lean, dressed in the long purple and red velvet robes of an Emperor’s Advisor; his face pale, gaunt and angular.

Before she genuflected, she thought it odd that he would receive her under her former rank. Perhaps her final position was still in-question.

“Vizier Pestage” Mara returned the bow, making sure her head went lower than his, showing him that she knew her place in this world.

Pestage stepped aside and gestured for her to continue to enter the room, without stopping her from her eventuality.

She rounded the high-backed chair that only Palpatine could occupy.

Catching the gasp in her throat, Palpatine appeared paler, and older since the day before; she held it in, knowing better than to express her thoughts. Was His clone body weakening?

Instead, she immediately, went to her knee in front of Him, and dropped her head. “Master.” She greeted Him quietly.

Palpatine coughed and cleared his throat. “My child” He replied. “Rise, and join Me.” He pointed to the chair that she had occupied on her previous visits.

“Yes Master” She dutifully said as she kept her head down and took the seat across from his throne.

Mara sat reservedly, knowing that he was watching her. Pestage had not left the room, and she, for a
moment thought that this would be Pestage’s reward, of some kind, to watch another punished; it was his pleasure to be present when revenge was meted out.

But no, as she dared to raise her gaze, she could see that Palpatine was smiling, His wicked grin of satisfaction, directed at her.

But He was quiet, eying her, making her nervous beyond the level that she thought she was capable of withstanding.

Under His scrutiny, Mara thought she would break her own will. Under His scrutiny, only He was capable of breaking her will.

His breathing seemed to resonate in the small space.

“Where shall We begin?” He said slowly, waiting and pausing at each word.

He inhaled deeply and let it out slowly; He intended to let her twist in her emotions. He seemed pleased that she was even having emotions that now could be twisted.

She looked away, trying to hide her guilt, but then looked up, remembering that He would read it differently if she wasn’t direct with Him.

“You did very well last night.” Palpatine said appraisingly; speaking each word in turn, drawing them out at His leisure.

The comment hung in the thick air, like one of the holocrons on a shelf.

Mara remained quiet, watching the glowing spheres from inside his hood.

“… Begging Skywalker to take you away.” He continued deliberate pace in His manner. “I must applaud you on your performance… you were the knife that incises his soul… I could have almost believed you.” His eyes told her a different story than his smile; they knew the truth.

Palpatine leaned back into his seat; a casual position that He wouldn’t assume in public.

Despite, His relaxed position, the energy around her crackled with rage. Mara sat tight, holding herself against the fear of retribution. She had committed treason, and she knew it; so did the Emperor.

“I had almost forgotten that in your skills set was the talent to …deceive.” Palpatine’s voice was drawn out, but not lazy; He had all the intent, and all the time in the galaxy to make His point.

“You had so many different skills… talents… and inclinations, that I often wondered where you should have been placed for My best vantage.”

Mara didn’t flinch and kept her gaze fixed; letting her face relax as to appear that she, too, was relaxing.

Palpatine’s eyes narrowed at her; she could senses that His mind was swiftly at work, still deciding on what to do with her.

“Skywalker’s demeanor was very distraught before I sent him away and, of course, alluded to the fact that Sedriss would be sent to look after you in his absence.” The corner of the Emperor’s mouth tugged, amusedly.

She could feel the Force swirling around her, wanting to permeate her mind and her senses; it was
following Palpatine’s commands.

“His emotions are a wonder to me… so many, all at once.” Palpatine looked at her pointedly. “Do they baffle you as well?”

It was direct question, she couldn’t avoid it.

“Yes Master.” Mara replied without thinking about it.

In actual fact, she assumed that Luke was always feeling something because that was just his nature to care. His motives were usually more-pure than anyone she had known before, so they weren’t baffling, just over-whelming to someone who didn’t know how to feel.

“He has his mother’s control.” He muttered under his breath, before paying closer attention to her.

“I’ve sent him away.” The Emperor announced, strangely informing her. “He will be back, shortly. And hopefully, with more systems willing to join Us.”

Mara knew that she had let her eyes flounder as she heard this news. This was the first time that she had caught wind of Luke’s purpose.

*Us, He had used the term ‘Us’. Her mind started to process the possibility. Shared power? She questioned again, thinking it was not possible.*

She exhaled through her mouth, without realizing that she had betrayed herself.

The Emperor came forward in His seat, very aware that she was able to process part of His plan.

“Oh yes…” He hissed. “Skywalker is proving to be a great ambassador for the New Empire.” His red eyes glowed. “With him at My side, worlds are flocking to rejoin us. It’s only a matter of time until The Republic regroups and votes-in an establishment of a joined Empire…represented by *Light* and *Dark.*”

“Systems that were reluctant to join both the Empire and Republic are falling in-line under Skywalker… they trust him… they want him, a Jedi, to guide the galaxy.”

“And those that fell into believing that the Jedi were the sworn enemy of the Empire are even capitulating to the notion that it is necessary to have Force-users direct the galaxy.”

“It helps that the ‘New Religions’ of the Force are making it easier for us.” He said, glancing over at her; making sure that she knew that she was included in His predictions. “The Church of the Force has been particularly resourceful and accepting of joint-rule.”

Mara could feel it, as she breathed, the power-lust that came from the older man; His soul was hungry for it.

“As an advantage, the growth in the faith of Force-users has only made Us into mythological creatures, capable of completing astounding tasks, for their gain. They look to Us, leaders in the Force, to make their decisions for them.” Palpatine said with greed in His eyes.

“We shall be invited soon to Coruscant and gain our seat of power.” He said, seething. “You’ve seen it, haven’t you?” The Emperor asked her.

She shifted in her seat, uncomfortable, before giving Him an answer. She dropped her eyes. “No Master.” She said quietly.
“No?” Palpatine’s voice was irritated.

“No Master, I have not seen the rise of the New Empire… in my visions.” She tried not to let her voice waver.

He paused; she could feel the intrusive touch on her mind, and she didn’t fight it. He was searching for the right answers, His answers, and wouldn’t be satisfied with anything else.

He stopped, paused again, and then resumed His search.

The long moment passed until He withdrew; Mara felt relief wash over her.

She heard Him growl lowly, under His breath, discontented.

“Never to mind…” He grumbled. “You have other insights that are more than useful.”

Palpatine continued, watching her. “You were very correct when you accused him of turning to the Dark Side to achieve the level of Jedi Master.” His lips paused in a straight line. “If he should ever return to the Light, it would prove to be most-interesting how he should get there.”

She could feel the next touch on her mind. << You know to what end that I intend to win this, don’t you? >> His voice was slow and deep, showing that He already had instituted His plan.

It was as much an accusation of her desire to flee as it was a test to see if she still understood the methods of his thinking and plotting. If you were at point A, Palpatine had already plotted points B, C, and D ahead of you, not including the options that you had not considered.

<<Yes Master.>> Mara exhaled and looked at him directly, not flinching, but showing Him that she remembered the rules.

Her senses reminded her that they were not alone in the room. If Palpatine spoke to her through the Force, than He intended to keep all of His plans from others, including the lurking Pestage.

The glowing orange-red eyes flared, and He nodded once, expecting her answer without being provoked.

<< If Skywalker turns back to the Light, You will have a Jedi Master to contend with… and certain systems will follow his leadership. You will appear to share power. >> She replied, repeating what He had already told her.

<< Go on… you’re doing so well. >> His condescending tone was appraising her.

<< If Skywalker sinks further into the Dark, then… then, he could be molded into a Sith… and you will have a new apprentice. >> She said tentatively, speaking her estimations to him.

“Precisely.” He brought his hands together, in front of Him, with the fingertips touching. << Your heighten insight is still remarkable, and has not diminished over the years. >> He hissed. << I win either way. >>

Now, He watched her again, and His sense in the Force, so icy and bone-chillingly cold.

“It’s you that concerns Me.” Palpatine rasped. “I am going to forego a punishment for your impudence of last night, and give you the benefit that your words, and behaviour. That it was all done in your attempt to follow my orders… to twist Skywalker’s emotions.”

Mara still watched Him very carefully; he thought no such thing. He was well-aware that she meant
every single word, and would have disobeyed Him if it meant leaving with Luke, her Luke.

Instead, she tilted her head down. “Thank you Master.” She said semi-apologetically.

“Although, I wonder…” The Emperor’s voice trailed off, and His eyes going unfocused before They came back to her.

It wasn’t unusual for Him to break His train of thought, to not reveal what He was entirely plotting, but it was unusual for him to do it in front of others.

For a moment, Mara thought she saw weakness, and then dismissed the thought.

“I forgot what a good little actress you can be when you want to be.” Palpatine was breathing hard, without a reason that she could see. But He was still stronger in the Dark energy that she wouldn’t dare to challenge Him. “Tell me, did you keep up your dance training as well?”

Her eyes flitted up curiously, surprised that the conversation had changed. And she shook her head. “No Master… regretfully, I…”

“Pity.” He interrupted her. “Though, you still seem physically able. I’m sure with just a bit more training and practice that you could resume your skills.”

She watched Him in silence; there was always a reason behind where He was leading a conversation.

“I remember your first performance… ‘The Seasons of the Years’…” He looked away fondly. “You were so young, and I received so many compliments on finding such a talented dancer. That piece is usually performed by a much more-seasoned dancer because of the difficulty and emotional performance that is required. You were able to achieve both.”

His voice had gone quiet, still assessing her.

Mara listened to Him. Palpatine was nothing if not a connoisseur of the arts; He encouraged them whenever he could and took great pride in cultivating His collection.

However unlike, say Thrawn, for example, He never studied them and used them as tools; they were merely things of beauty. Beauty that He kept for Himself. And to find that beauty in places as dark as His soul, it was odd to want such things.

“Your next performance was just as grand. ‘The Attia’.” The Emperor reminisced. “A dance that requires the duel aspect to the main character; her outward self, and her reflection in the water.” Palpatine tilted his chin down, and smiled. “Oh, how I would love to see you perform that again.”

Mara returned His smile, with a tight grin, recalling on how bloodied her feet were by the end of that performance, but she would do it all again for the feeling that she got when she danced.

“Do you remember all?” He asked, as his tone dropped.

“Yes Master.” She replied.

“Could you do it again… with some training? I understand that Master Doev is still available, and still teaches.” He asked; holding out a tempting treat for her.

She was amazed again. Training to perform one of her favourite dances wouldn’t be a punishment; it would be a reward.
“Yes Master... with training, I could perform it again.” Mara whispered, remembering that she didn’t find it straining; it spoke to her, and the narrative she found easy to exude. She loved to dance; she felt free every time—no matter what she was performing, or for whom.

The Emperor came forward, sitting up. “I have decided then, that in fourteen days’ time, that you will perform ‘The Attia’ at the Grand Assembly for all of My guests.” He proclaimed.

Mara crinkle her brow at hearing this, surprised that He was hosting a Grand Assembly during a war.

Palpatine snorted dismissively. He must had heard or sensed her thoughts. “My child, the ‘war’, as some have referred to it as, was merely a righting of wrongs. Worlds are coming back to fray, with little or no hesitation. Of course this beleaguers The Rebellion and former New Republic devotees—they thought there would be conflict, when really there is none.”

He chuckled slightly, amused at her, and amused with the situation. “It seems they misread the pulse of the galaxy, yet again. The galaxy liked being part of an Empire... and with Skywalker’s name attached to it, they fell inline sublimely.”

“Pockets of Rebellion are throwing down their arms and re-enlisting in the Empire... even Skywalker’s traitorous sister has gone into hiding with her family. Organa-Solo is finding that she has less and less friends who want her kind of freedom.” Palpatine snarled at the mention of the Rebel leader.

“The people have grown weary of war and fighting. They prefer to have the control that an established regime is ready to assume.” The Emperor reasoned with her, sounding congenial and accepting of the relevance of it all. “There’s been no further institution of violence unless it is made by The Rebellion.”

Mara had seen this act before; the charming older man, disfigured in the name of duty, but doing His best for the galaxy.

“It is remarkable at how welcoming the galaxy has been to Skywalker as My emissary. He has received several proposals of marriage; old noble houses wishing to align themselves with Us.” He was boasting now, but had to add in an extra gouged in her direction. “I dismissed them, of course. If Skywalker is to have a consort, it must be of his choosing, and one who is strong in the Force.”

He opened his hands and fiendishly smiled; the ‘charming old man’ act dissolved in front of her, as she knew it would.

Now, He breathed deeply, letting His notions hang for her as a lure, to see how far her emotions would let her react.

He was disappointed; Mara remained placid, not hiding or portraying anything. He was hoping for jealousy, but didn’t get it.

“Share your thoughts... you’ve never been one to hold your tongue.” Palpatine spit the order swiftly. “Even at the pinnacle of your power, you never held back.”

“You’re using me to manipulate him... Skywalker.” She said cautiously.

At the back of her mind, she could feel her fear shifting; there was something that Palpatine wanted from her too—something that He was willing to let her transgressions slide. This, He had never done before.

“Of course, I am. You are what he wants.” He snarled. “You are an object of desire for him on so
many levels. I can use you to get what I want from him.”

Palpatine leaned forward, into her space. “Consider it.” His voice seduced. “He had never known the magnitude of being around other Force-users. As powerful as he is, he has never reached beyond all that was possible… until you.”

“You complete his ability to reach his potential in the Force.” The Emperor sat back, sat tall, confident.

“When the two of you are together, how much do you feel? How amplified do your own senses feel?” He asked rhetorically, drawing her in. “Think of how much stronger his own powers feel? Vader’s power was just a small example of what Skywalker could be truly capable of. Imagine not being limited by a damaged body…”

Mara could feel the enticement in His words, but felt trapped ambiance.

“I felt the two of you together, across the galaxy… and every Force-user felt you, as well… the joining of your power with his.” Palpatine’s tone was wrapped in his own imagination of the potential He had available.

“Yes, I use you to make him draw on his strengths… he will be unstoppable, and I, will reap the rewards.” He announced without any ceremony; as if it was blatant, and natural.

“Skywalker isn’t a leader – he lacks the drive, or will to push the galaxy in the direction that it needs to be in, in order to combat threats, and to bring all beings under control. But he does have the power.”

The Emperor was flippant in His estimations. “So, I manipulate him into his greatness… and I’ll use that greatness how I please.” He divulged condescendingly.

Watching, Mara knew it was all true; it could never be anything else… unless Luke was able to break the spell of the Emperor. Somehow though, she reasoned, Luke wouldn’t need much convincing to see his way clear. If he was only given some space… away from this oppression.

It was still a puzzle of how she was to fit into all of this. Palpatine needed her, but clearly was going to keep her walking the fine line between His puppet and princess.

Now, He was eyeing her with intensity, waiting on her.

There was something in His eyes… and something in her senses that started to tingle; her warning senses flared.

If she thought the air was tense before, it was now as if the air was being choked from the room.

“You, however, are a different matter.” Palpatine drew his words nefariously slow.

“Your twist…your turn, will not be as easy. I’ve planned it as well. But there will be no manipulation for you… you are not so easily convinced of the betterment of My guidance.” He smiled from under His hood. “Oh-no, My Hand, you are designed to serve, and you will do it willingly. I will make you see that you will want to serve Me.”

</You once desired nothing but serving Me… and you shall do it again. /> His mind raked on hers; Mara brought her hand up to her ear, wanting to block out the pain that accompanied it.

“You will serve Skywalker as his dutiful consort- giving him all that he wants; an amplifier for his
power… and, *a legacy.*” The Emperor decreed.

“You will serve me… *be My Oracle.* You will delve into the Force and see all that is before you.” Palpatine announced with a grin. “And you want this too… you want those images in your mind, you want to see them… it makes you feel strong, it gives you purpose in the galaxy. You are meant to see it all… and you will share it with Me.”

“Skywalker’s teachings have been limiting to you; he does not know how to reach you, and to make you truly reach out in your power.”

</i> I have ways to motivate you. /> The Emperor railed again on her mind.

Her nostrils flared as she breathed, trying to ward off the pain in her head.

“And you *do* have power… not to be dwarfed by Skywalker, but equal in skill as his.” Palpatine broke off His attack on her. “And you could be *more,* in ways that he will not comprehend… *your kind* always had abilities beyond that of the Jedi… or the Sith. You only need to have the desire to reach out and touch them.”

“But You taught me to hide my talents…” Mara whimpered, recovering and not believing what she was hearing.

“No longer, my child.” The Emperor smiled sweetly to her; relenting. “You should never have to hide yourself. Your aura should shine as bright as it possibly can.”

She could feel his gratification swelling.

“Do it because hiding your gifts occupies so much of your energy that could be put to better use.” He ordered.

“Do it because you are gifted, past the average Force-user; you know it and so should others.” His voice was tight.

“Do it because you want to… *you need to,*… your strengths are what kept you alive and ahead of so many.” He fed her conceit as well as his own.  </i> And because I command you to! />

Mara swallowed, feeling under *it,* the spell that He would weave to suck others into His world, and under His thumb. It was a seductive world; He held out all promises that she could ever want; offering her a life with Luke, a position in the court as Oracle, using her own powers…

She stood, and back away, looking down, knowing that she was breaking with protocol and proper behavior; she turned away, unsure of what she was hearing, unsure of her own feelings.

Years ago, she would have flung away everything up until now to reach out for everything He was offering, without question.

Deep in her thoughts, Mara looked back up to see that He was wearing His ‘charming old man’ face again.

“And how goes your proficiency with Teräs Käsi? You once bested your instructor.” The Emperor’s eyes blinked as if they had just been sharing a casual conversation.

Mara jarred, bringing her mind back into the here and now. “I-I- remember some of it, Master.” She stuttered.
“I trust you’ve kept up your skills in Bakuuni Hand and Echuni as well?” Palpatine seemed truly interested. “I gave you all the skills that you required.”

Combat training - He wants to know about your combat training. He mind caught up with her.

Mara nodded absently, trying to figure out where she had lost the conversation.

“You had the best training in the galaxy, and you took to it, without question, without issue. My perfect student.” The Emperor boasted, still grinning at her. “Where others failed, you bested them… you bested all of them, even the others that I had considered for the position.”

Her brow furrowed, trying to pick up somewhere, recognising His words, His Praise.

“There were other Hands before you, but none as great as you, since.” Palpatine’s smile started to contort, grinning egregiously.

Mara raise one eyebrow, knowing that He was watching her, sensing her feelings, playing on what He knew put her on edge. She could feel her anger rising, remembering the moment when Thrawn had revealed that there were other Hands in play.

“Why, you vain little creature.” He grinned with wicked satisfaction. “You don’t mind that the position has been filled by others… you resent that the title is used… you think that it belongs to you.”

“How marvelous.” He laughed at her narcissism.

“I supposed you’ve earn the right to be vain about your former position – you were the only one to hold for as long as you did. Other Hands either failed at their duty, or perished when they were found out.” The Emperor’s glib tone was expected.

“Even now, my agents are in play… but not a Hand… there are ‘Shadow Hands’ but they will only be activated if I require them.”

Mara knew the ‘Shadow Hand’ program: sleeper cells of agents who would live in the Empire, placed living ‘normal lives’ until called upon.

For a moment, she frowned, feeling left-out, denied her place. She could feel her resentment growing; Thrawn had nicked it when he called her on it. And although, she had started to see that she had just been a pawn, she still felt important, needed, when she held her special place in the order of the galaxy.

Palpatine snorted loudly, still playing cordial. “Come now, the only reason you were so timid in front of Me, when you first arrived here today, is because you fear punishment. Without those consequences, you would go unquestioned if you kept your aura of power around you that you once exuded.”

“You would walk into my court with your head held high, looking down on all those who sought your destruction… and you proved yourself time and time again.” Palpatine reminded her.

“You were The Emperor’s Hand… My Hand… My only Hand that I ever trusted to fulfill their duty.” He whispered gleefully.

“You, who would be held above all other women of the Empire.”

Mara felt the draw of his words; her eye’s widened with the possibility.
“Brie was a laughable joke who spawned only resentment and only proved useful in ruin – at Skywalker’s hand, no doubt- when she revealed the name of the pilot who destroyed the Death Star to me, thus reveling Vader’s treachery.” He mocked.

She looked away, feeling the anger rise up.

“Ismaren may have shared my bed, but she could have never have brought me the Ruler of Amuund before Me, swearing his allegiance.” Palpatine derided the other woman’s station.

The taste of bile was in Mara’s mouth, encouraging her hatred for those in court.

“Isard may have been conniving and thought herself worthy to rule My Empire, but she lacked your tenacity and stamina… and refused to understand the true nature of the Force.” He scorned his Directed of Intelligence for her lack of vision.

Mara’s senses yearned for the revenge on the woman who dared to imprison her.

“They all paled when they were compared to you.” Palpatine whispered.

“You have a chance to be Empress, in your own right…beside Skywalker.” He claimed loudly. “Don’t deny yourself your rightful position because you fear it. Listen to the Force- Do what it tells you that you must do!”

She could almost convince herself of every word He was saying. Here, was an opportunity, to gain back all the power, all the prestige that she once held – and at a higher level too. With Luke at her side, the limits were boundless. Her power would be recognised. She would be in control, again.

“You were never meant to be second in command of anything.” Palpatine deviously declared.

Mara turned her head and looked pointedly at the Emperor and His smug expression; it was a dig at Karrde and his organisation, thinking that smugglers had no place of value in His galaxy.

In an instant, she remembered her life with Karrde and his gang. Did she love that life?—yes she had. She had friends, and those she considered family. They had taken her in when no one else wanted to. It wasn’t wasteful and worthless – her life, beyond the Empire, had value. And she was damned if she was going to throw it all away.

Yes, she was a great actress, and she could pretend here and now that His words had gotten the affect the He desired; He wanted those words to stir in her the feeling of grandeur that she once had. But now, she used her resentment at the way He devalued the rest of her life, and turned it into pride; Palpatine would see it as pride in serving His Empire, but in her heart Mara knew it was pride in herself.

They locked eyes; pleased with what He saw; the fire was back in her. He could believe that He saw the cunning and guile back in her, and believe that it would be used for His will and His motives.

Palpatine motioned his hand.

The doors leading to the Throne Room opened. In marched the Red Guard.

Mara froze, her confidence slightly shaken; were they here to take her a prisoner? Her heightened senses told her to relax and to still herself.

Palpatine wheezed as He got up from His chair. He walked over to where she was standing, only to reach out His withered hand and cup her chin, directing her face- an action He had done so many
times in her youth, when she still thought of Him as a kindly father-figure to her.

He examined her eyes before releasing her. Smiling his sickly grin, Palpatine declared quietly. “You are dismissed.”

Mara blinked a few times, understanding her instructions. “Yes Master.” She said almost inaudibly.

His words broke her fear and she turned before Him to bow again, turning back to go through the door which the Guard had just come from; the door which quietly led into the, presumably, empty Throne Room.

“No.” The Emperor said with exemption.

Mara stopped.

“The other door.” He ordered. “…Through the main corridor. The ramble are lining up now, waiting on Me. Let’s see where they think you should be placed, shall We?” He cackled somewhat. “If they think a crown should be placed on your head, they will bow. If they think that you are temporary, then, they will disregard you.”

She swallowed, and made for the door that she had arrived at, the obvious door. “Yes Master.” She said graciously, as a reflex.

When she reached the threshold, she bowed once more. “Thank you Master for the generosity you have shown me.”

Without looking at her, the old man waved her away.

The doors opened to the receiving room, and before the second set of doors could open, she could feel it; the energy building on the other side. The courtiers were nervously waiting for the Emperor to appear, as He would lead the procession into the throne room. They murmured amongst themselves, either please or displeased to be there.

She paused, and took one deep breath before coming within the door sensor’s release. It hissed quietly open, and all of a sudden the murmuring stopped; she could feel the energy directed at the door.

Pulling herself to her full height, Mara walked out, keeping her chin up.

There was surprise; they were expecting the Emperor.

She stopped and looked around at the faces as they stared back at her.

A Sentinel droid broke the tension and came before her, escorting her back to her quarters. She followed slowly behind it.

As she walked, the crowd parted for them.

The first group of courtiers were shocked to see her and floundered as to how to behave. They were older and probably more-familiar with court life. If she had been formally introduced at court, which she hadn’t, then they would know what her title was, and how she fit into the structure. As it was, when they parted for her, they ducked down, looking unsure.

The next group had more time to prepare, and they, strangely, bowed and backed away, making room for her.
And the next grouping followed suit, and then the next, until she was at the end of the hallway and turned to head for her chambers.

The Emperor sat back, from the holoscreen and chuckled. A lanky figure came behind him.

“She did not accept your offer, Master.” The Vizier’s voice seethed.

Palpatine needn’t look over his shoulder; He could sense the curiosity in the other man.

“No, she did not, Pestage…” He sneered as he still watched her frame navigate the corridor. “… not immediately, but she will…in time. Mara Jade is not Luke Skywalker… she is not easily seduced by flights of fancy, or her emotions. Her mind needs time to work, and to reason out her path and place. But it has always been her ego that will be her undoing. She is too proud to have it any other way.”

On the screen, they saw a group of dignitaries stop short and bow accordingly as she moved on, like grace on a cloud.

He cackled a little louder, amused with himself. “You see that, Pestage?” He addressed the man at the front of the grouping. “What a fine Dowager Empress she will be.”

“Master?” The other man asked, demurely.

“Yes Pestage?” Palpatine replied, somewhat annoyed that His attention was directed elsewhere.

The other man began again. “Master, I must beg to ask what You had intended when You paused in thought….”

Pestage was like any other creature of His Master’s making; he wasn’t thought intelligent enough to think for himself and needed to be guided, so his questions weren’t thought of as intrusive.

“Ah…that.” The Emperor sneered. “That will be for Skywalker to decide how we should best use her.” He rose from this chair and started to lead the way into the adjoining room. “If he still has true feelings for her… if he acts on his feelings, then she will be of use to Me.” Slowly, His feature began to twist. “If not…then, there are alternatives to my plan.”

Remembering Himself, Palpatine looked at his advisor. "Skywalker's devotion to her could be his undoing."

His cane, from across the room, came to His call. Palpatine lumbered a few steps on the gnarled piece of wood before He turned to the other man. “And so it shall, Pestage… so it shall.”

The old man cackled, wickedly as He walked into the next room, greeting the assembly waiting for Him.

TBC
The Student

Chapter Summary

Quote: “When the time is right, you will be My catalyst and then, you will be My vessel… until then, you are where you need to be.” The Emperor hesitated, and tried for the demeanor that He esteemed would gain her perspective. “My Child.” His voice became saccharine sweet.

Characters: Mara, Palpatine, Red Guard, Master Doev (original character), Ensign Tauer (original character), Sate Pestage, Sedriss, and Luke

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Chapter Notes

Rant of the day: Writing Palpatine’s dialogue is A LOT harder than anyone thinks. I have to use the italics more than anyone should. And I have to use my “word-a-day” dictionary to expand my vocabulary, which I thought was expansive enough, but it appears not. AND, after writing His dialogue, I find myself talking to people condescendingly in real life – my husband said I was being “snobby” the other day.

My husband says that this story doesn’t have the “energy” that the last stories had… and I think he’s right… it’s definitely slower from a writing perspective. But I still hope it keeps everyone interested.

And the smut is coming...I promise it is... just hold on a little longer.... I do ‘plot’ too , you know....those who have read 'Parallel Paradoxes' and 'Defining Destiny' know that the longer I hold off on smut, the better it is.... right?

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Imperial Citadel: Byss

Mara felt her body lifted, and then hurled across the room.

With a thunderous thud, she fell hard on the marble floor; her opponent didn’t have the decency to aim her onto the mats.

As she shook off the pain of landing on her side, she heard the cackle from the side lines.

“I told you not to damage her.” The Emperor’s voice ordered. “She is to be conditioned only… re-trained.”

Sitting up, she then went to stand, looking over.

“And you!” Palpatine watched her intently. “You are instructed to reach out in the Force with all
Mara nodded. “Yes Master.” She said through her heavy breathing as she returned to the starting mat.

She looked at her opponent as she walked; one of the Red Guards, unmasked, nameless, silent and diligent in all His orders. His eyes were blank, dead, with astuteness.

Once, she had been taken to their secret training academy and pitted against one of their instructors. Barely winning, she stood and watched as he was executed for his failure. The Emperor was pleased in her and found her ready for her next task.

Swallowing and finding air, she set her mind to find the Force as well – Palpatine would know if she didn’t follow His orders.

Centering her mind, Mara inhaled slowly calling on her talents.

Today was part of her new schedule. Only days into the routine, she had settled-in nicely. With goals in mind, she hadn’t been pressed for any other answers, at the moment.

The mornings were filled with meditation with the Emperor, or, for the Emperor; He would impatiently wait until her visions were over before asking her what she saw.

He was satisfied; the visions, as jumbled as they were, were proving useful to Him. He delighted in hearing them or asking her to relive them and show Him the details.

Now the Force was flowing into her; not the peaceful Force that Luke asked her to reach out to, but it seemed chaotic, without boundaries or relevance, but powerful nonetheless.

Mara looked over once again to see that the Emperor grinned, feeling her draw on her power, and He nodded once with approval.

This was the first time He had come to witness the combat training that He had provided to her.

Both she and Red Guard were instructed to only use Teräs Käsi; the hand-to-hand form of combat, preferred when addressing Force-users and armed opponents, known for speed, and deadly force, if needed.

She got into her position and waited for the Guard to do the same.

With the Force, she could feel the distinct moment before he came towards her. She could feel his determination, his drive to prove himself in front of his Master, his fear of failure if he didn’t.

And most of all, she could sense the attack method he intended to use.

Luke had once described what fighting was like for him when he truly called on the Force: he said it was like seeing everything in slow motion, making it easier for him to make his moves, and gain the upper hand.

She could understand that now. Instead of positioning herself into an attack position, she placed her hands behind her back, and waited for the Guard’s first moves.

Quickly, using her speed and grace, Mara stepped aside as his arms reached out for her clumsily. With her arms not available to grab, he fell into the classic misdirection of trying to land hit.

“You move too fast.” She mumbled absently under her breath. “You didn’t take the time to consider your endeavours.”
my position.” She chastised.

It gave her just enough time to execute the ‘Spitting Rawl’. It was the most-powerful attack against an armed opponent, and only masters of Teräs Käsi knew how to perform it well.

Mara flipped sideways, and as the Guard passed her, she delivered the three hits that brought him down, before bashing both her fists in a vertical fashion.

With such power, the man who towered over her was rendered to the mat easily.

She stood back, watching the man push himself sluggishly off the floor, recovering. She held her defensive position; they had not been ordered to stop their combat.

“Good!” He cackled. “Good!” And He applauded.

“My child.” He called.

Turning in his direction, she saw that He had extended His hand, indicating that her training was done for the day, and that He requested her presence.

Mara jogged over and took His hand and she took a knee. “Master.” She said, graciously accepting His offer.

His cold hand brought her up, as He began to walk away from the training room, leading her to follow Him.

“You have dance training this afternoon, I believe.” The Emperor said dismissively as He limbered.

“Yes Master.” Mara replied.

“And how goes those studies?” Palpatine hissed. “Do you call on the Force in those efforts too?”

“No Master.” She said after she swallowed the air.

“You should…today.” He ordered. “I want to feel your presence.”

“Yes Master.” She answered reflectively.

“Master Doev says that you have retained much of your agility. Although, he was unhappy to see you marred by this other training.” The Emperor spoke to the air and not to her. “We shall have to find ways to improve your combat training as to not gain marks on your body. We cannot have dancers who are not pristine.”

“Yes Master.”

“Tomorrow, I think you should concentrate on Bakuuni Hand.” Palpatine announced, glancing back at the recovering Guard. “It will be a surprise for Skywalker when he sees how skilled you are.”

“Yes Master.” Mara answered without revealing how His words disturbed her; was she to battle Luke?

“And tomorrow, I would like to be in attendance of your dance practice.” The Emperor nodded to one of His Advisors as they walked from the room. The advisor noted down the detail. “I would like to see the complete first movement of The Attia.”

“Yes Master.” For His benefit, she beamed with pride.
He turned slightly, looking at her, sensing her; He chortled once, in amusement.

In the corridor, they all paused.

“Go now, child, and prepare for your other lessons.” Palpatine released her hand, and flitted in a direction that led to her room.

Mara curtsied and lowered her head. “Yes Master. Thank you Master.” She spoke timidly.

Without looking up, she waited until His presence was far enough away before she moved.

Alone now in the corridor, she was allowed to find her way back without a Sentinel droid leading the way.

Only in public was she granted an escort. But in the days since she last audience with the Emperor, she had been given a solitary Red Guard instead of a Sentinel droid to bring her to court.

And show was made for her to enter court, as her own precession; entering after the Emperor, after the court had assembled, rising up the dais, genuflecting before Him and then allowed to be seated on her chair, her perch.

It was an odd sort of arrangement; unnerving and unsettling.

She had even been given another Byssian servant; now each had their own jobs; one for hair and makeup, and one for wardrobe and dressing.

When Mara reached her room, one of the Byssians was already there, waiting for her.

She was disrobed with excellent precision, and directed into the shower, before she would eat, and be dressed again, for her dance training.

The schedule was not grueling, but would also include an appearance at court, and escort the Emperor for His evening meal before being dismissed.

The Emperor had stated that it was important for her to be seen, and seen frequently. He had also alluded that this was necessary as she had reveled herself to the galaxy, and there was no hiding her now. He clung to His displeasure at that particular situation, and made her aware that He recalled that she had exposed herself to the Republic and the galaxy.

In the shower, it became her only place for her mind to stop and think. At night, she could sometimes sneak her own thoughts in before she suspected that they would be detected.

But now, as the water rinsed her body and soothed her aching joints. Mara could pause.

In the days since her private audience with the Emperor, her mind kept coming back to His words; wanting raise her up to an Empress with Luke as her Emperor.

It was tempting- so very, very tempting.

Mara let the water roll off of her, and her mind went to another place. All she wanted now was some news as to what was happening out in the galaxy. Was the war all but over? What happened to Karrde? What happened to The Resistance? And what about Leia, Han, the children?

Surely, Luke would care about these things too. She decided that she would ask him, if she got the chance.
It gave her hope that she could hear sounds from his room during the previous day. Perhaps he would be back soon. The Emperor only gave the notion that Luke would be attending the Grand Reception in ten days time.

She left the shower and knew that she had to rush before going to her next practice.

Pausing, she caught her reflection in the mirror to see the welt on her shoulder. The Byssian was not going to like that. Master Doev would not understand and call her an ‘inept, graceless, rancor’.

Mara had no time to further think about it.

Hurried, she ate her food, standing in place, after the taster left. She even assisted in putting on her unitard so that the Byssian wouldn’t have to fight with the tight material.

Slinging her towel and slippers over her shoulder, she almost ran from the room, but maintain her poise in the silent hallways.

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“1, and 2, and 3, and 4,….” Doev’s voice was clear in the training room, over the recorded music of ‘The Attia’.

“Lift to your height… and relaxed your shoulders.” He called out in his prim Core accent.

Mara did as she was told, rotating on the pointed shoes, stretching her neck. Her body fought with her as the muscles from the morning’s combat training now protested their use in a different manner.

The welt did not go unnoticed and Doev had pressed into it several times when he had positioned her, as a form of reprimanding her.

And now, he grimaced, watching her, disapproving of her.

Doev’s Mirialan temper was legendary. They may have looked angelic, but Mirialans were anything but.

He stopped the music and walked over to direct her again. He walked on cane, but didn’t need one; it was to keep tempo on the floor.

She dropped her stance, and relaxed by placing her hands on her waist, pacing in place with out-turned toes, and glaring over at him.

“You’ve seem to have lost the elegance that you were once known for.” Doev commented. “I told His Imperial Majesty that you were too old, and out of shape to perform such a challenging piece.”

His eyes looked her up and down. “Perhaps if His Majesty wanted a cantina girl who lumbers about, then His Majesty would be satisfied.”

Mara held his look with her glare, partially knowing that he was right; she was too old for this dance and she did survive by being a cantina dancer, unlearning all that she knew. But she wanted to prove him wrong.

“And from the start of mark two… where you seemed to forget your range as well.” Doev said snidely, as his cane came up to poke her in her welt.

She was about to make him regret it, when she recalled something that Luke had told her once, about Master Yoda, poking him with a gimmerstick. Perhaps all masters enjoying the poking and pushing
of their students.

Luke, her mind wished.

Suddenly a sharp pain in her side, reminded her of another Presence. The Emperor prompted His order for her to call on the Force in her all her trainings.

<< Yes Master. >> She replied silently.

As she walked over to her mark, her feet, inside the satin slippers, pointed outward, and she inhaled deeply. Before Mara posed in the starting position, she half-closed her eyes, calling on the Force.

In contrast to the morning’s combat training, The Force was now at peace, calming and revitalizing; the energy seemed to approve of her usage.

When she was ready, she inhaled deeply again before the music came up.

As Doev’s stick beat the tempo, she began.

Imagining the story, Mara felt her body move, easily, elegantly, extraordinarily.

In her mind, she could recall hearing the story of ‘The Attia’ for the first time.

As a child, her governesses would tell her stories of fantasy and she would absorb herself into them. Those stories could take her places; take her away from her life. Until one day, they stopped having the same effect; stories and fantasies weren’t true, and would never be true for her. Perhaps, she stopped believing anything was possible. Perhaps the fantasy was lost when she realized that monster could and did exist.

But dancing now, Mara felt free and strong; she had drowned out Doev’s voice and listened to the music in her head, remembering how it sounded in the Grand Ballroom in the Palace, resonating and warm, and there was nothing but her in that moment.

She was so enthralled that she went past the point to where she was supposed to have relearned the steps, remembering the dance by heart, and going past what she thought was possible.

Wrapped up in the Force, and her memories, her feet and body had a mind of their own, doing what came naturally to them. The sound of tiny taps of the hardener toes of her slippers blended in time to the music, as they carried her.

With her mind so far away, she didn’t notice that Doev did stop instructing her and merely watched.

Mara could feel it coming up; the trepidation in her grew… and she stopped short of the Grand Jete, realizing where she was and how she got there. She refused to do the next step.

Turning, she saw Doev with his mouth open, and, for once, speechless. Flustered, he regained himself and hastily walked over to the aud-unit and stopped the music.

She stood there, breathing hard, finally feeling the strain.

“You remembered it.” He said before facing her. “You remembered it all.” His eyes were somewhat in shock, and then he remembered himself. “Pity that you lacked the perseverance for the final movement.” His eyes hardened.

Doev wouldn’t have been one of the galaxy’s best instructors if he couldn’t find criticism in his students.
It had returned; her glare. Mara held it, huffing as she watched him.

“When the Emperor attends the practice tomorrow, perhaps you will also be able to remember that you are a dancer and not a galloping gorlax when you complete the final movement for His Majesty.” Doeve turned away.

“You are dismissed.” He announced without giving her another consideration.

He wasn’t watching but Mara made enough noise on her way out to make sure that he knew she was leaving.

She stormed out of the chamber and headed back to her room, grumbling all the way; the same way she used to after rehearsals.

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It was another morning session, in court.

She sat, gazing out; chin held high, posture as straight as a line.

The Byssian had to work hard today to meet the dressing requirements for attending court and hiding the evidence of the day’s other activities. However, she was able to do it and send her charge to court looking presentable and regal.

Mara didn’t mind today’s choice of clothing. The gown was dark navy velvet that changed hues to vivid purple as she moved. It was high at the neck and covered her arms, hiding any bruises that might be accumulating.

Her mid-section was exposed, showing a sensual glimpse of skin that the male courtiers, and even some of the female ones, admired. And the long skirt wasn’t as cumbersome as she thought it would be.

Even the choice of jewelry, she found acceptable. She was never one for extravagance.

Pestage was just about to dismiss court, when an envoy appeared at the long end of the hall.

She recognised his position immediately, although her was no one to her, as he might have not stood out from others; the cut of his uniform marked his distinction.

The new arrival must have caught the eye of Pestage; soon, a clerk quietly addressed the other at the back of the room, without much notice.

And the session came to a close with the Emperor making His way down the stairs of the dais to the antennae room.

Mara followed in line with the procession; behind the Red Guard but ahead of Sedriss.

Once inside the smaller room, she felt the cold shiver go through her, summoning her further to the small audience chamber.

It was the first time she had been welcomed into the space. The meditation room, she felt, was the more-personal space, yet she had been allowed in there.

This would also be the first time that she would finally see the goings-on of the New Empire.

She had been curious to see this interaction, and her patience was about to be rewarded.
In her former life, she would have thought nothing to attend the meetings in this smaller room. She was a prime agent in the movement and orchestration of the Emperor’s regime; a necessary cog in the wheel, as it was.

Now, she had been reduced to decoration, or perhaps not.

Mara moved off to the farthest side of the room, in the shadows as she had been taught to do in these circumstances; she was always a silent figure, just watching until she was needed. Surely, this would apply now.

The Emperor took up a grand chair in the middle of the room, with the Red Guards presented behind Him. Even now, there was prompt and circumstance to everything that was done.

Aside from her, only Pestage and the recently arrived envoy entered as well.

Strange, that an ‘Ensign’ was sent instead of a ‘Captain’ or a higher rank. Her mind recalled the protocol with expertise; would Palpatine consider this an insult?

The envoy was young; probably seventeen, eighteen? –probably some high-ranking officer’s son; a son of a ‘nobody’ wouldn’t have never become an envoy to the Imperial court. He looked nervous. He looked proud, as well.

Without any provocation, she reached out in her feelings, slowly, curious about what news might the envoy might possess. There was a good chance that he no idea what the message contained, but then, there was a better chance that he did; no one would want to deliver unhappy news to the Emperor.

“Ensign Tauer.” Palpatine announced. “You bring news from the Unknown Regions, and other areas?” His voice sounded unimpressed, but He knew the significance of the meeting.

The young Ensign stepped forward and took a knee with his head down. “Your most-reverenced Imperial Majesty, I bring news from the Star Destroyer Deception.” The young man’s voice wavered over his, clearly, practised words.

The Emperor was enjoying the other’s nervousness and, as the Ensign paused to swallow and wet his mouth before continuing, He spoke. “Yes, Ensign Tauer, continue.”

“Your Majesty will be glad to hear that the emissary from your court was well-received to the party representing those in the Unknown Regions.” Tauer managed out in one breath. “They returned with a gift for You, Your Majesty.” Tauer bowed and gestured for his gift to be presented.

Pestage frowned as he came forward and presented the data reader to the Emperor.

There was nothing indicative of what made this reader special, until the Emperor opened the device and gazed at the projection as it came to life.

“Your Majesty, the party representing the Unknown Regions, gifted this map of the plotted areas of their galaxy.” The Ensign said quietly. “And indicated that they are willing to hear the prospects of representation in Your future plans.”

Mara watched the Emperor closely; this was what He claimed to be after. A map of the Unknown Regions would be extremely valuable to anyone wishing to rule over it.

Closing down the reader, Palpatine handed it back to Pestage, who was waiting to serve.
“Very good, Ensign.” The Emperor exhaled slowly, showing neither pleasure nor displeasure at the news. “Go back to the Deception, and tell Admiral Valeur to await further orders.”

The young man bowed again. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

As awkward as it was, the Ensign managed to raise himself from off the floor, and backed out of the room slowly.

The room was quiet now as the Emperor paused. Mara could feel the energy building in the room, as a plan was coming together.

“Pestage, send word to Skywalker that he is to transfer to the Deception, and he is to make contact with the party from the Unknown Region.” Palpatine’s eyes were unfocused as He spoke. “There, he is to make Our position clear as to Our demands.”

“Yes, Master.” Pestage hissed, as he bowed.

If she could, Mara wanted to shake her head, not agreeing with the Emperor’s order, but instead kept her body language silent. Her mind, though…

Turning swiftly to her darkened corner, Palpatine spied. “You don’t agree with this?” He asked her pointedly.

Surprised, there was nothing she could do but answer. “No Master.” She said without hesitation.

“But you do.” His eyes narrowed. “Speak.” He ordered.

Stepping forward, Mara lowered her head. “Master, this will be an important contact with the Unknown Regions – is it necessary to send someone who was formerly an enemy of Your realm, as Your representative?” She spoke clearly.

Her eyes came up to see the He was amused by her perception.

He hummed appreciatively, considering. “Your consideration does you credit.” Palpatine said quietly. “We shall consider it before sending the order.” He gestured to Pestage, indicating a hold on sending out His orders to Skywalker.

His eyes were still on her as He gathered himself up from His throne. A crooked finger gestured for her to follow Him.

The Red Guards stayed in place, silently.

Back into the foyer and into His meditation chamber, Palpatine walked on his cane to reach His position in the room.

She followed behind, watching Him move, trying not to think of how He was aging since her arrival.

Once inside the chamber, the lights lowered, casting the shadows from the available light.

He preferred it this way; dark and ominous, finding it easier to commune with the Force.

As Palpatine arranged His area to His comfort, Mara found herself drawn again to the wall of holocrons.

Daring to step closer, she watched the lights, and lives, in them flicker; even the Sith holocrons glowed and moved internally. It was mesmerizing and hypnotic. There was an aura and sense that
came with each one.

Unbeknownst to her, the Emperor had rotated His throne to regard her. When she looked over at Him, He as watching her intently.

“They intrigue you, do they?” He said pensively.

Mara looked over to Him and remembered a time when she didn’t have to be so guarded with her thoughts; He allowed her to have them freely, and was even curious as to how her mind worked. It was fatherly, to some extent, and protective of her and her talents. It was the closest thing that she knew to having a mentor, a parent-figure. Sometimes, she missed it.

She turned her gaze back to them. “Yes Master, they do.” She said quietly. “I wonder how they became like this.” She spoke wistfully, still watching them with interest. “Some of them have an energy… a draw to them.”

“They want to share what they know…” Her voice drifted away.

There were so many questions floating in her mind as she watched the red glow inside the Sith holocrons danced like flames, compelling and captivating.

“Why didn’t You ever train me?” She asked, and then remembered herself, and immediately regretted the question, waiting for the repercussions.

Fearful, she ducked her head down as she turned in His direction, only to see the glint in His eyes.

“Did you want to be trained?... to be a Sith?” Palpatine asked as His eyes analysed her.

Lost, Mara swallowed, unsure of her answer. At the time, all she wanted was the attention and praise of her Master… she didn’t know anything else.

He must have read her mind and her senses. “I made the correct decision not to train you as My apprentice.” Palpatine said with no tones of condescension. “I had Vader and as disappointing he was, in many aspects, you, and other could never live up to his power.” His voice was somber.

“You also lacked several intrinsic facets that would have not made a suitable candidate,” Palpatine’s eyes drew together, watching her mind register with disappointment, then indignance, and then acceptance.

“A Sith needs to live in Darkness and be conceived of it.” He said, meeting her eyes with resolve. “Vader lived the Darkness, as it did many of My other temporary apprentices.” He inhaled slowly. “You knew Darkness, but it never lived in you.”

His exhaled rasped, if somewhat angrily. “You, my child, have wallowed and weaned where you needed it but you cannot be Darkness if it is not allowed to be engrained into your soul.”

“A True Sith has Darkness embedded in them – its strong and will latch onto its source, and thrive.” Palpatine motioned for her to join Him in the seat opposite Him, for her daily ritual of revealing her visions.

His eyebrows raised as she was still listening. “Sometime Darkness can be manufactured… one can find their motive for yearning for the Darkness, but, once again, it will never be permanent unless one reveals their entrenched desires.”

Mara lowered herself down, feeling that He had shifted into a teacher with her, as He once had.
“Skywalker’s Darkness is borrowed…” Palpatine’s tone started to return to regal in nature. “His Darkness lingers from his father…Vader’s shadow… but the time will come when he will have his own stalwart that will ensnare his soul, and he will have to decide side of the fulcrum that he falls to, and he will have to act on it.”

“It is the choice of the action that makes all the difference.”

She nodded, understanding some what she was hearing, and it gave her a miniscule of hope, thinking that Luke may not be as far gone as she suspected.

Once more, His eyes narrowed, and she felt the cold sweep over her senses, searching for something, something that she didn’t know He was looking for. Perhaps He didn’t know what He was looking for either, in her.

Nevertheless, He presented His hand in her direction, demanding her to use her talents again.

Mara watched, and extended her hand out to meet His, touching it only as much as she needed to make contact. His fingers curled like claws around her palm.

Closing her eyes, she felt Him bridge the gap between their minds. He preferred to linger on the outskirts, and only see the verge of the images now. Since His first experience, Palpatine only stayed on the fringes as the images raced by, seeing what He wanted and ignoring the rest.

The Force was being allusive today, in this moment; she had already called on it several times before now. It was reluctant to join her.

Maybe she still wasn’t at peace from the answer that He had given her with regards to why He had never attempted to train her, or maybe she was still unsettled with her position in court, or maybe she hoped that her own mind wouldn’t betray her.

With effort, Mara decided to concentrate on something would bring her peace. Her mind started to wander and settled on the image and remembrance of the Jedi Holocron that she and Luke encountered in Vader’s castle on Mustafar.

The cube had responded to Luke’s touch, and the image that appeared sang a bitter-sweet melody that brought the calm that they both needed in the moment.

She could hear the tune in her head, and let it take her away and deeper into her visions, letting them come freely.

The images started slowly as they always did.

This time, she watched as a single leaf trapped, and travel with the flow of a river, gaining and losing speed as it floated with the will of the water that carried it. It came to stop on a stone along the river, and she could see it age as it rested there, as leaves and other debris came to join it.

The wind took her vision away from the resting foliage; she travelled with the invisible gust, moving smoothly and then jerky like a zephyr.

The voices on the wind caught her attention; the murmuring and the voices mingled, growing in intensity; she could make out the words, forming thoughts and arguments.

The words became harder and more static, as if intently pushing her in the path from whom they were spoken. They started to form full thoughts, as if listening in.
“We can’t wait any longer for directions that won’t come!” A man yelled to a room of people. “There’s no hope for survival if they refuse to act!”

“Our actions will not be those that jeopardize our people, Admiral.” The female voice said.

Mara gasped; she knew that voice. It could only be one person. No, please move one… don’t show anything! She ordered her mind.

The vision came in clearer; a briefing room, it looked like it was aboard one of the Mon Cal Cruisers, a gathering of people, but the ones who stood out, she recognized immediately.

Leia stood up from her place, confronting the others who clearly opposed her.

“You are in no position to dictate to us on how we should handle this, Your Highness.” The other man sneered at her. “We will take what’s left of our resources and head for Zinus… perhaps we can make peace with your brother.”

Before Leia could answer, the vision shifted again, much to the dismay of Palpatine who gripped Mara’s hand as it dissolved.

It faded with flashes and shots of colour as laser bolts shot in various directions. Green and red flashes were met with explosions.

“We’re taking losses on all sides… there’s just too many of them.” A pilot’s voice cut off abruptly with an explosion nearby.

“Reds! Engage the portside canon and let’s see if we can turn out the lights!” Mara jarred with the voice, and strained her senses to decide if it was Antilles, Klivian or Jansen… but it was too familiar not to recognise.

The vision was of inside a TIE cockpit, listening to the frequency chatter of the panicked Republic fighters.

This time, Mara made the vision look over to the pilot’s ID receiver, trying to catch the markers, hoping that she could later research that fighter’s position and possibly where he had been stationed.

She zeroed in on the ID, DS87-40.

The vision ripped away again, zooming towards it’s next stop.

The explosions didn’t stop and persisted; only on a larger, closer scale. On the ground, she could see the wind carrying her again as it drifted with the afterburn of the explosion, drifting with the smoke and dust, carried away, landing at the heels of the boots at someone on the field.

The black leather had an owner; an officer reporting to a superior rank.

“Lord Skywalker, the residents are resisting our presence and are disgruntled with their leadership.” His voice seemed unsure of what do without direction.

“Withdraw.” Luke’s voice ordered clearly. “We will convince their leadership that it is their best interest to accept our guidance… and then, they will fall in-line.”

The vision drifted up with an aerial view looking down, overhead of both men; Luke paused before he spoke, and looked up in the direction of the air, as if sensing something, then went back to his duties.
The wind took her again, flying away, letting the images flip and flip again, over places and time. Over the waves of the ocean, the crashing on the rocks, the smell of the sea air permeating her nostrils, following the cliff up and giving her another site from above, looking down on the figure staring out towards a quasar sun pulsing in the distance.

The breeze dropped until she could see the figure clearer; a woman, long hair blowing in the breeze, wearing a shawl, clutching it to her body, looking across the water, watching the sun set.

The woman’s hair danced on the breeze, whipping uncontrolled, the colour of fire, red-gold, like her own hair. The form looked familiar too; graceful and stoically watching.

The vision shifted angles and Mara could finally see the face of the woman looking out over the ocean. She gasped as she was looking at her own face, older, aged, yet sadly-serene.

The image was yanked away from her as the Emperor wrenched back his hand. “Ceana…” He exhaled as pulled away.

Mara blinked several times, bringing herself out of the visions; the aura and emphasis was fading, leaving her with a dizzying affect of not being prepared to stop what she was seeing.

The name that Palpatine spoke, echoed in her mind as the last image dissolved. Ceana… Ceana… Ceana…

For a moment, she breathed heavy, regaining her thoughts for the present.

The call of the Force had not faded away, though, and she could feel the Emperor’s compunction as He was hoping to leave the visions, while she remained and continued to have them after His departure.

Palpatine’s chest heaved, as well; his breathing exasperated, as He glared at her. “So…” He hissed. “It seems that the galaxy is contesting our rule. And Organa-Solo fails to gain control of her forces, yet Skywalker has the wisdom to succeed.”

“It appears that way, Master.” Mara said quietly, accepting of what the visions had to offer, still fearful of the things that she saw, knowing that her friends were in jeopardy, and now, she was the instrument to reveal those perils to their enemy.

Her thoughts started to flip through all that she saw, all that He saw too; berating her ability to see things in such an unbidden manner. If she could just learn control over them, the images, the visions… if she could just center her mind to answer one question at a time.

She shook her head, unconcerned, for the moment of her thoughts. “Is this what I am to be now? A receiver?” Mara rubbed her forehead, wearily with her hand.

She felt the sharp sting in her senses.

“You are to be whatever I need you to be.” The Emperor snapped at her. “At My will, and by My guidance.”

“Yes Master.” She answered quickly. “I’m sorry Master… it’s just…”

“You are confused about your position and security within My court.” He locked His red eyes on her; he was still recovering and glowered at her. “You are neither Hand, nor Empress, for the time being. And you certainly do no enjoy playing ‘courtesan’.”
“You are to be whatever I need you to be… whatever I tell you to be.” He growled. “For now, …” Palpatine paused. “I need you to be My Oracle… my seer… and you have fulfilled your duties relatively well.”

He glanced over at the door, signalling that she was about to be dismissed.

Mara raised off her seat and bowed deeply.

“When Skywalker returns, you will prove your use.” He said ambiguously, but as if it had all been designed.

“When the time is right, you will be My catalyst and then, you will be My vessel… until then, you are where you need to be.” The Emperor hesitated, and tried for the demeanor that He esteemed would gain her perspective. “My Child.” His voice became saccharine sweet.

She back away, feeling that her dismissal was eminent. Bowing, she replied, “Yes Master.”

With a cold touch, she was sent away.

**

She could feel it, in the coming days. Counting down the days until the Grand Reception.

It was like an excitement building in her belly. She knew he was coming… returning from wherever he had been sent.

It was at the back on her mind every moment since she had gotten the feel that Luke would return soon.

And every day was a fight to keep her mind on her other duties; combat training and dance classes.

The Emperor seemed pleased with both. He randomly appeared, with a small coven surrounding Him, appraising her work and granting His approval over her progress.

Master Doev loved the attention and Mara could guess that he had not had such a commission since the fall of the Empire after Endor; dance instructors were not at a high demand.

The chosen Red Guard either succeeded or failed with her training, but still followed the Emperor’s instructions.

At night, when she assumed that she wasn’t being watched, Mara would find herself lingering by the door that separated her room from Luke’s, wishing for his return.

Since her visions of Leia and the Red Squadron, she hoped, with the mention of those names, would bring him around sooner, and return to the idea of escaping; it was still at the back of her mind, no matter if it was treason or not.

Then, as she slept, in the middle of the night, she could feel the difference in her space. An energy was back and near.

“Luke.” She whispered as she awoke in her room.

In the darkness, she could see that the doors were closed, but she could feel his presence; weary and angered, agitated, frustrated.

Peeling back the covers, Mara rose and shifted over to the door, gingerly pressing her hand against
with the vague notion that it might burn her to the touch and the thought that it would open just because she was there.

But it didn’t move, refusing her.

She pressed her full palm on it, and then her other hand. Sleepily, she then leaned against it, just wanting to feel his presence again.

_Gods_, she wanted her friend back... to talk…to be held… to not feel so alone.

She closed her eyes and slinked down on the floor resting her head on the partition.

She must have fallen back asleep in that same position, as she awoke for the second time to the sound of the light chimes that the Byssians used to announce their arrival and the breaking of the day.

Mara shook off the sleep quickly, and got up off the floor before the opposite doors opened, standing, and waiting for them to enter.

They seemed surprised that she was already awake, and they took their notes from that, preparing where they needed to, moving around her like she wasn’t there.

It was three days until the Grand Reception, now, and the Byssians’ energy was also spiked; they moved so cleanly, yet fastidiously, that it couldn’t go without notice. They were concerned that the performance of the their charge, her, was going to reflect poorly on them.

They also seemed worried that she was already awake, ruining their plans for the normal procedure.

Taking the only step that she knew how to rectify the situation, Mara went to go stand by the side of the bed, which seemed to put them as easy, no matter how ridiculous it made her feel to pretend that she had just risen from the bed.

She humored them and headed for the ‘fresher just as she would on any day. Something in her senses told her that it would not be ‘any day’ for day; she could still feel Luke’s energy, close by.

The shower rained down on her; it wanted to be cleansing but only mewed her mind.

She wanted to reach out to him, touch his mind, let him know that she was still here; she stayed for him. Mara remembered his words when he rebuked her, thinking that she would not stay with him because of his darkness… but she did, and she would.

The promise that she would live this thing out, and live it with him, was present on her mind. _To survive_, was her goal.

Exiting the ‘fresher and back into her chamber, Mara expected to find another gown for her appearance at court waiting for her. Today, the Byssians had laid out her combat wear, black and fitting, it was similar to her leather jumpsuit and suitable footwear.

After dressing, they had taken very little time to arrange the rest of her, mere minutes on her hair and makeup; pulling it back with no fuss.

If there had been a change in the schedule, she hadn’t been notified.

Even further, the Byssians left after their work had been complete and a Sentinel droid arrived and waited on its orders, blocking the door.
It was perplexing in the least, and the time passed before the droid came to life again, instructing her to follow.

There was an itch and tingle in the back of her mind as Mara followed; one that she hadn’t left in a long time, and one that she knew immediately. Her danger senses were flaring and putting her on high alert.

The threat wasn’t close by, but she could feel it building.

She was being led to the throne room, but judging by the time that she was waiting in her room, surely the session would be over now.

The droid approached the doors and then swayed back and allowed her to go in front of it.

With a clank of the heaviness, the doors opened for her, and allowed her to enter, alone.

Her senses were not wrong; it was an odd site in front of her.

The room had been darkened from its normal state when court was in session, and the Emperor’s presence darkened every corner further; He was not content.

Up on the dais, the Emperor and his Red Guards waited. Below them, at floor level both Luke and Sedriss were facing them, with room between the two for her to advance.

It was eerie and unnerving; no one acknowledged her in the room.

Walking forward, and with no clue as to what was transpiring, Mara felt the only thing to do was the natural thing that would be expected of her.

Coming closer, she stopped between the two men in front of the dais, and dropped to one knee with her head down.

She could feel it; He was angered.

“Master.” She said solemnly. “What is your bidding?” She asked slightly less zealously than she normally would.

Although, He may not have been pleased, He cackled as He watched her. “See? See how marvellously obedient she is?” He said grandly to the room.

Mara could feel both Luke’s and Sedriss’s attention on her. Neither of them was not happy to see her like that, for their own reasons.

“My child, and come before Me.” He ordered congenially.

Keeping her head down, she got up and ascended the stairs, coming before Him, but she knew His attention wasn’t directed at her; His anger had a target…two targets in fact.

“There’s been mention as to why do I have so many apprentices at the moment.” The Emperor snarled, looking down at the others. “There’s been a demand that I reveal your purpose here.”

Mara’s skin crawled; she knew that tone and she knew that when He said ‘demand’ that someone was going to pay the price. No one made ‘demands’ of Him. It couldn’t have come from Luke; he knew better. But Sedriss did not.

“Do I plan to reinstate you as My Hand? And do I plan to supplant you over another?” The Emperor
mocked the indignant questions; that one would dare to ask Him.

She felt the touch of the Emperor’s mind on her. Shall We show them just how treasured you are? He asked.

“Before you think that she is just a trinket in My court… before you believe that she is just an instrument for My pleasure…” The Emperor held up one of his hands, pausing. “She is no trinket, My so-called apprentices… She is a reward.”

With a flick of His hand, a Red Guard came forward.

Mara’s sense spiked as she called on the Force with speed in time to hear the Emperor’s command. “Engage.” He ordered with a cool indifference in His tone.

In an instant the Guard rushed in her direction, force-pike ready in hand, lunging, as if she was an immediate threat to the Emperor fulfilling his primary goal to protect the Emperor at any cost.

She vaulted away, and landed on the lower level dais, where her perch was normally situated, to get her bearings.

Only one Guard had been sent after her as her eyes quickly flicked to the other Guard standing like a statue, assessing the threat.

The Guard threw away his red cape, advancing on his target; the fabric billowed dramatically behind him, revealing his red plated armour glistening in the dim light.

Mara quickly thought through all her techniques that she has been recently practising, surmising that the Emperor had planned this all along, a display that would eventually play out, either her survival or her death, with witnesses, a performance for them.

The Guard was armed and she was not. Her first goal was to remove the weapon, that would mean that she would have to retrieve it some how.

He charged, pushing the lance in her direction. Mara caught the blade to her side, slicing into her suit, skimming her skin and delivering a stinging shot of electricity, but positioning it so that she could render it unusable as she braced it against her body and levied her weight to kick away from him, breaking the shaft and pushing him off his ground at the same time.

She rebounded higher up the staircase in the direction, with the Emperor behind her, as she crouched in a readied defensive position.

The Emperor cackled joyously, watched them, and watching His two apprentices. “Look at her… how wonderfully skilled she is.”

The Red Guard now only had his skills in hand-to-hand combat to try and end her.

It was their goal and she knew it; once instructed to defend the Emperor, they would not stop until their opponent was dead. So, she had to fight with the same goal in mind. Even if left alive, they would try to destroy her until otherwise ordered.

He was skilled; she knew it. She had trained with two Guards over the past few days, alternating combat skills; it had to be either one or the other that she was fighting now. Both were powerful, but each had also been given the directive not to maim or kill her in those sessions. Now, those orders didn’t apply.
Her next goal was to see that she could force him to remove any, and all, of his protective gear; his helmet and armour.

She knew that all combatants preferred to fight unobstructed so when he came towards her, she made the deliberate attempt and kick at his head, breaking the lip of the helmet. As she suspected, he discarded the helmet before his attack seemed more-aggressive now.

The Guard, she recognised him now; he preferred the ‘Bakunni Hand’ method of combat. He was proficient at it. But so was she.

And she had the Force.

Calming and centering herself in the thick of battle was a challenged, but she was able to do it, preparing for the next round.

She could see the attack before it came; he went for her legs, assuming they were unstable on the different level of the stairs. He would have been right, if she hadn’t anticipated the grab that he made for them.

With her clasped fists, she pounded his out-stretched arms, fighting them but he caught her calve with one hand, grabbing it and trying to break it.

“Her power…her very essence in the Force, is a thing to desire.” The Emperor spoke to the observers; Mara had almost forgotten about them.

With a kick to the unguarded face, she broke off his attack, and launched one of her own; grabbing his breastplate, she anchored her body and used the Force to enhance her throw of his body down the rampart side of the dais.

He fell with a hard Bang!, astonished that, for her small frame, she had so much power. He recovered and had yet to be ordered to stop. He, then, discarded the breastplate, knowing that she had used it against him.

She wanted this over as soon as possible, determined that she was going to subdue him and nothing more; and unconscious opponent would satisfy her, but she doubted it would satisfy the Emperor.

Mara jumped over the railing to go after the Guard as he assumed his own defensive position.

The Emperor’s voice echoed in the room. “Her beauty and her body are mere attributes that are accessories to her strength and tenacity.”

More than ever, she was intent to prove that statement was true; a fight for her life.

The guard rushed again, swiping at her and connecting with the side of her body that had been previously injured.

He hammered at her side, and tried to make contact with her face, to put her off; switching his style to Echuni, making short swift gestures to attack.

Mara backed away, avoiding the hits and firing back with her own. The fight brought them back in front of the audience and Emperor.

In her senses, she could feel the urgency in Luke, wanting to come to her aide. Sedriss, watched on, in both shock and amazement with her skills.
And something else, from both of them.

The guard must have sensed that she had diverted her attention momentarily and came again at her, gaining the upper hand and throwing her across the grating of the metal stairs of the dais.

She fell on her side, hard, scrapping her knees as she fought to stay upright.

“And I can feel it in both of you…. You want her… you desire her… her body… her power… at your command… to be yours.” Palpatine was taunting his two apprentices and not putting a stop to the show.

Now, it became clear, He had no intention of stopping this if she found herself in a losing position. He was willing to let her die, if she was not worthy to fight.

It was a hard reality; one that she had learned to live with when she was in service as Emperor’s Hand; she was disposable, she was only there to serve Him.

Her instincts were not going to allow to be used and discard; she wanted to live.

Mara knew the pressure point to hit, waited for her opening to deliver the blow that would break the necessary ribs in the Guard. She switched her style to Teräs Käsi. The quick snapping sounds, jarred both him and her to the reality of their fight.

The Emperor chastised further. “To have her… to be allowed to be with her, is a gift… a show of My Generosity, not your entitlement!”

In her senses, she could feel a shift in the Force; it was not longer warming and strengthening. Although she didn’t feel that she had called on it any differently, The Force had decided that there had been a change; it cooled.

The Guard took a moment to regain from his injury, as if nothing phased him; he spit blood to the side and carried on with death in his eyes.

With vehemence he attacked, launching into his own Teräs Käsi assault. To put her off, he tried the ‘charging wampa’, and only getting so far as to be met with her swift moves.

Mara dodged his attack, and countered with one of her own, failing to use any known style and fighting purely out of necessity, something that the Guard wasn’t prepared for; an opponent with no rules.

She took several hits as she tried to gain an upper hand in close contact. Feeling the gaze of the Emperor and his impatience, she wanted this to be over as well.

But it was not the sense that she wanted from Him. She could feel it, in the Force, she was losing her will, something was over-taking her sense. Keeping her skills about her, it was overtaking her; this was not her feelings at all, this sense of desiring the death of someone, but she recognised it. The same sense when she was about to hand down the judgement of the Emperor; so many times, she had felt the touch of His mind on hers… and she could feel it now.

It sent a shiver up her spine as it flowed with the Force, dictating her moves and attack.

With the movement of the Guard, she found herself, bracing him in a body lock, holding him in a position, unable to move, making him vulnerable. There was a way to break the lock, but there was little time.
In numbness, she turned her head to see the heinous smirk of her Master, the Emperor. A quick instance, she caught Luke’s eyes; wide, shock, in disbelief, watching her in horror.

She sensed, rather than saw, the Emperor gestured for the killing move.

Not hesitating, Mara did it. With a sickening sound, the Pop! of breaking the vertebrae, she crushed the nameless Guard’s neck.

She could feel it, as the pulse start to fade away in his carotid artery, the shivering in her body as the adrenaline took over. Her senses quaked too.

She fought it, the feeling of shock, trying to listen to the words of the Emperor, praising her ability, but she didn’t hear them.

When her eyes started to focus, she looked over to Luke, seeing the horrified expression on his face, looking back at her. She could feel the moisture starting to build in her eyes; she blinked it away as she let the body slump as she released it.

The quiver in her lips was threatening to emerge; the Emperor’s absent order to rejoin the others at the base of the stairs.

She moved slowly, descending the stair. Locked on his eyes, Mara reached out her senses towards the only man who would understand what she was feeling, or keep herself from feeling.

<<Luke…>> She begged. <<Please?... Kill me?>>

Her unauthorized communication caught the attention of the Emperor, and her plea.

“No!” Palpatine’s raspy voice yelled at her back, suddenly furious at her. “How dare you!”

The shot of blue energy emanated from His hands; shocking her directly in the back, and surprising everyone in the room.

Mara lost control of her footing, taking the shot and falling forward down the stairs. She flailed in pain and shock; her mind reeled, not able to take-in what was happening to her.

Rushing towards her to catch her fall, Luke grabbed her body in one arm, catching her around her waist, bracing her.

She could feel the energy erratic and violent as another blue bolt attempted to find her.

If she wasn’t losing consciousness, she would have seen the protective shield Luke had manifested with the Force using his opposite hand, around him and her, reflecting the lightning, and the flare in his eyes as he stared down the Emperor.

She couldn’t fight it any longer and was losing her battle to stay alert, going limp in Luke’s embrace, still trying to hold on.

The Emperor relented and drew back his power; seeing that He was evenly matched.

“She’s mine!” Luke growled protectively cradling her body against him.

Both men tensely challenged each other silently for power.

Mara finally gave in and didn’t hear the Emperor announce, “So be it.”
She wasn’t conscious, and barely aware that she was in some sort of med room, lying on her chest; she could feel the cool sensation on her bare skin, the energy healing her.

Mara was aware enough to sense Luke, nearby and healing her. She reached out her senses to acknowledge him.

He was concerned and concentrating on healing her. He was worried and reconsidering his actions of not leaving with her when he had the chance. He blamed himself. He hated the Emperor openly, not hiding it.

She could feel all his feelings; he wasn’t shielding. What brought her the most comfort was that she finally felt his love… he cared and he still loved her.

In her haze, he stopped to come closer, stooping down to tenderly brush the hair away from her face; his fingers curl to stroke the skin on her cheek.

Mara felt his hot lips on her temple, and she reveled in it, turning her face to him, almost weeping tears of joy and comfort.

Then, yielding to him, she was gifted the relief of the feel of his lips on hers, gently and lovingly pursing, sending the rush of excitement through her. She pressed her mouth back at him, wanting more from her uncooperative body.

She was losing again, made to succumb to the healing.

Their kiss broke but he hovered near.

She felt it, a changed in his senses, coming on like a wave, as she was being forced into a healing trance.

Luke’s voice was angry, and the words were fading into the distance. “If this is a ruse… if you are using me, and my feelings for His motives… no matter how I feel, I will break you.”

And dark came again to her mind.

**

From His mediation chamber, The Emperor pulled back His senses, seeing and hearing everything that transpired.

His red eyes fluttered open to notice the other man in the room.

Pestage bowed with recognition and looked on his Master with curiosity.

“She will be a sufficient tool, Pestage… a very sufficient tool.” Palpatine smiled wickedly.

TBC
The Simulacrum

Chapter Summary

Quote: Clothing was the communication of the court. Leia had once told him as she tried to explain why her clothes were never as fancy as what he thought a princess should look like. But he was younger then, and believed so much that wasn’t true.

Characters: Luke, Sedriss, Palpatine, Pestage, Mara… and an audience

**

Chapter Notes

Suggested reading for the next few chapters: "Parallel Paradoxes" Chapters 12... and maybe 13

Alright—partial SMUT WARNING… as a side lines… there is some language that is used here… consider yourselves warned.

So, I had a bit of a pouting session in a comment in the last chapter… about getting comments… and the energy that came from that pout, made this chapter.

So, from the math, I gather that there is about 150 of you that read each chapter… and so far there is one consistent person who leaves comments (which I totally love BTW—the more I can engage with the readers, the more motivated I get), but seriously, I need more from readers… I’m getting winded, and tired. I’ll say it again, “how is it that I can write 10 thousand words per chapter and not get 1 back?”- please think about this… really… even if you leave a ‘hi’.. ‘hello’ or something to let me know that you are reading, then it will make me feel like I’m not writing to wall or robots that just keep hitting a refresh button.

I’m tapped… I wrote 2 chapters this week, and I’m exhausted. It’s going to take me a while before I write the next chapter… and if you get to the end of this chapter, you can see that we are at the smut part.

And really good smut too. ~wink!

I want it to be impactful but not a place that we can’t come back from. It will take me some time to figure this one out.


FYI: I was listening to ‘Swan Lake’ as I wrote the dance scenes… I listened to the full performance almost 6 times to write this thing… once again, mathed: 6 listenings times 2 hours a piece, equals about 12 hours of writing, making 22 pages, 9601 words.

My hands hurt… see you soon.

**
Byss; The Citadel, Grand Amphitheatre

The sounds of the murmuring of the crowd that was forming, and orchestra warming up, made for a most-surreal situation. But then, all of it was surreal since he had arrived on Byss and succumbed to the power of the Emperor over four months ago.

Luke Skywalker glared across the crowded room, from the corner that he had willingly wedged himself in.

He had no desire to communicate, or be welcoming, to those in present company. Hiding in the shadows, with his arms crossed on his chest, he observed them as he sensed their excited and anxious energy.

This dance performance was to be the final aspect of the evening, and Luke had refused to go to the dinner hosted by the Emperor, having ordered Sedriss to go in his place. The younger man basked in the attention while, in his room, Luke felt the Emperor’s annoyance that the semblance of appearance wasn’t kept to the plan.

*This was not what we agreed to.* He argued back. Although, the push and pull between them was never cordial, there was violence behind the vehemence now.

It was clearly displayed by the Emperor’s attack on Mara that perpetrated this new round of venom.

Luke looked out, under his dark-blonde hooded hair, making eye contact with Sedriss, who had wisely chosen to stay away from Luke, and had ceased his fantasies regarding Mara.

The younger man swallowed quickly and then turned his attention back to the persons in front of him, pleased to have their audience, and not a powerful Jedi who could defy the Emperor with one hand.

No one had approached Luke yet, hiding in the corner. And well that they should not, and would not; he was projecting an air of ambiguity, keeping himself seen, yet hidden, unavailable for pleasantries, for, he felt none.

The performance was delayed on account that the Emperor had not arrived yet to make his grand entrance into the amphitheatre.

Knowing that his education was not up to par, the attendants assigned to dressed him for the night, informed Lord Skywalker that the amphitheatre was much smaller than that of the Galaxies Opera House on Coruscant, but the sound quality was no less precise and that he was sure to enjoy the night’s viewing.

All the guests were extremely excited about it. A prima dancer had been found who knew one of the Emperor’s favourite pieces. Although it was only an exert from the entire ballet, it would still be exquisite.

Luke knew the dancer of whom they spoke of…who it could only be… *Mara.*

Quietly, he let his eyes flutter shut and find her in the Citadel, preparing. He stayed only on her periphery, fearing that his full presence would upset her. He could sense her unease, not because of the performance, but that the Emperor was with her now.
He could feel the tenseness in her body as she spoke with Him, at how His presence made her weary, and frightened, like a child constantly awaiting a punishment.

How could he blame her for feeling this way? –he couldn’t. He had seen it, witnessed her twisted, broken body after her first meeting with Palpatine. The rage inside Luke was stirring before this instance and had swelled since.

Mara lay on the gurney fighting for her life in the med ward. She was not conscious which was the only modicum of good to come from it; he doubted that anyone would be able to survive the amount of pain that she must have experienced before she essentially, died, at the hands of Palpatine’s wrath, and then was resuscitated, reinvented, and put to His use.

The hate and the raw power that was in Luke, at that very moment, was nothing like he had allowed himself to experience before.

He wanted to find Palpatine and run him cleanly through with his lightsaber, striking Him down, without time to prepare for any reaction or means to recuperate into another clone.

And that, was the only thing holding Luke back from taking further action on the malevolent dictator. There was always the looming chance that Palpatine was ready and prepared to transplant into another body and let the saga continue.

Until Luke could find a way to stop Him, there was no reason to openly turn on the Dark Master. It was a game… it was all a game.

Even Mara’s role perplexed Luke. There was no way to know what she truly wanted, or if she even knew herself.

A stab of anger arose in him. She looked very comfort in the throne room. He thought bitterly. He forced away the dark thoughts about her again, trying not to think, trying not to remember how regal and perfectly situated she looked sitting on the throne, lower, but beside the Emperor, how beautiful and elegant she looked, trying not to remember how taken back he was when she came into his space and touched her forehead to his, pleading with him.

He would have gone with her in the instant, would have made the escape that she didn’t dare to plan openly. And he regretted every second since he turned her away that night; it took all his strength to do so… if he still wasn’t sure what side she was playing on.

There was so much conjecture to the information. Luke knew that Emperor kept in constant communication with all His operatives; he could feel the oppressive weight as to when the Emperor had tried to invade his thoughts and feelings, searching and gleaming at any chance to twist them, and use them for His advantage.

If this was what Palpatine did to him, it must have been an even harsher crucible put on Mara.

Palpatine would have met with resistance to Luke’s mind, but Mara… Palpatine had taught her how to block thoughts, and if He taught her that, then He would have also left His own door to get through any obstacle she put in place.

The game had so many pieces in play that it was drowning in players.

Luke knew that Mara was a piece in that game. She was going to be moved into position, and he could feel that it was to take place tonight of all nights.
The rise in the volume of the music broke his thoughts.

Once more, he looked about the room, catching a glance of himself in one of the polished glass walls. They had dressed him up nicely; subdued, midnight navy, but with the cut of the recognizable Jedi ensemble.

_Clothing was the communication of the court._ Leia had once told him as she tried to explain why her clothes were never as fancy as what he thought a princess should look like. But he was younger then, and believed so much that wasn’t true.

He was fabricating his own truth now, for the audience; a unified front that really wasn’t.

Sure, he had represented the Empire, but under the guise of assembling a _Consolidated Republic_; those were words that he was told to use when addressing the emissaries from different worlds. A _unified autocratic leadership, made from the powers of Light and Dark_; more of the key phrases he had been slewing lately; _willed by the people of the galaxy_, he was sure to add.

A separate peace needed to be established so that a session of the Republic could be called to vote in the reform. It was all too procedural for his taste, but Luke had been taught enough about red tape to make it sure.

If Palpatine was good for one thing, it was to make sure that His actions were purely legal and appearing that this was done for the benefit of the galaxy, not His own.

Having _Luke Skywalker_ represent the Light side of the joint rule was a genius concept that sold extremely well, even considering the recent news of his father, Vader. The galaxy had a short memory and forgave him for that, accepting him back as their savior, meant to keep the Emperor’s tendency to resort to violence and militarism to a minimum.

There were only a few worlds that rejected the idea; most came to the foregone conclusion that having a Jedi as a leader was acceptable.

It boggled Luke’s mind that there would be hesitation, no question at how quickly they had deceived themselves into thinking that this form of government would be in any way beneficial to them and their people; they accepted it blindly.

Palpatine must have caught on to his reluctance, because He explained it as the populace merely accepting the followings of the ‘Church of the Force’ and believe Force-users superior to others… and even if those were not ‘true-believers’, they had witnessed Luke and his abilities to make them believe that anything was possible.

_The opinion of the galaxy is like a speck of dust on the wind._ Palpatine had said. _It follows an ebb and flow, and to catch it at the right time, requires patience and the ability to capture the minds of the people._

The Emperor was not wrong.

Luke hated that he had become the image that the galaxy was now going to associate with being undefeatable, and god-like. This was not the image that he wanted for the returning Jedi to have.

He hated that he had come to rely on Palpatine for so much of this form of learning, this test of his willpower.

He knew that he was not a very patient person, unlike Mara. Luke frowned, thinking of her again.
Yes, it was a test, every time the Emperor called him into a session, Luke inwardly cringed, but kept his mind open for any foothold, any grasp at a way to stop Palpatine from His continuation from one body to the next.

So far, Palpatine divulged that He had been through eight bodies since Endor. Although, it had been estimated that a clone body should last Him about a year, the bodies were crumpling with each extreme use of the Force that Palpatine displayed, aging it faster than expected.

The trust between them was tenuous and limiting; Luke could feel the seductive pull that the Emperor wanted him to take. It was a blatant lie that Palpatine wanted him to fully return to the Light; He wanted Luke to sink further down into the Darkness, and stay there, eventually becoming His apprentice, replacing his father. That is why the Emperor insisted that Luke refer to him as ‘Master’ and allowed him to call Him by His Sith name, ‘Darth Sidious’.

Even Sedriss was not allowed to call Palpatine ‘Darth Sidious’; it was a rule that the names of Sith Masters must be protected, that was why it was still easier for the galaxy to believe that Palpatine wasn’t as nefarious as He truly was.

But it was a lie that Luke was willing to accept until he had the knowledge in order to defeat Palpatine, this time, for good, without a chance of His returning.

Luke sighed and came away from the corner fully, feeling that the Emperor was close at hand.

Sedriss still watched him warily, fearful of a demonstration as to the same power that he had seen in the throne room three days ago, but unleashed on him, instead of anyone else.

Even though Luke was unsure if his ability to create a Force-shield was going to work, but work it did, protecting him and Mara from the onslaught of electric energy that came forth from Palpatine.

He could feel the surprise from Sedriss that anyone could have the ability to do either action, combined with the fact that he had just seen Mara kill a man with her bare hands.

Sedriss now understood that he was the lesser-skilled of all the Force-users that he found himself associated with.

And to Luke, even Mara’s skills stupefied him. He knew she was resourceful and a skilled fighter but now he had proof that she was more than just that. He had convinced himself that she was not the killer, the ingrained murderer that she claimed to be, but now, she was, and she was more than capable of killing on a whim.

But even with this knowledge, he knew that that was not all that she was. Everything he had seen from her, in that macabre demonstration was not the person he knew; he knew she had compassion.

As she descended the stairs and reached out to him; he wanted to rush to her and hold her, taking her away. And then he heard her plea, begging again for him to end her life, just as she did before they battled the insane close of Joruus C’boath on Mount Tantis, if this was what was going to be expected of her again.

It was unbearable; her pain and self-loathing that had returned to her, her shame and agony at the will of the hands of the Emperor…just because He demanded it of her, and she…she obeyed.

When she had described what it was like living under Palpatine, saying that she had ‘no choice’ in any of her decisions, Luke couldn’t have estimated that the depravity went so deep into her; she really and truly was never allowed to be herself. Palpatine always found a way to make her actions at His will, and make her believe that they were her will too.
If she didn’t kill the Guard, the Guard was going to kill her, and it would have been of no bother to the Emperor.

She chose to live and to fight… for what? Luke had asked himself. So many others would have let the Guard kill them. He saw it in her eyes, before her final move, looking at him and he knew; she wanted to live, to survive, for him.

She was trying to destine herself to be his saviour. It was a thought that truly shook him; the woman who didn’t know how to feel or care for anyone had learned to care, and, love him enough to risk her life.

Steeling his resolve, Luke found that he was more-determined than ever to play this game until he found the weakness he needed to ultimately destroy Palpatine, once and for all- for his sake, for Mara’s sake, for the memory of his father, and for the sake of the galaxy.

The murmuring from the adjacent room had ceased and the others in the antechamber were preparing for the Emperor’s arrival, to be in procession as He was to take His seat for the performance.

Luke raised himself to his full height and straightened his back, as Leia had instructed him to do, keeping the posture of befitting his rank and status, behind the Emperor.

The doors to the outside corridor slid open as the Red Guards silently enter and took up their position on either side of the threshold. Sate Pestage walked ahead of the Emperor only to bow deeply once inside the room, making way for his Master.

With the gnarled cane proceeded His gait, the Emperor smile magnanimously about the room, greeting all those who were there to worship at His excellence, until His red eyes glowered on His apprentice.

Palpatine kept His smile, but His eyes tilted inward as He spired Luke’s poised form, vacantly, waiting on Him.

Like those in the room, Luke bowed as to not openly offend the older man.

The Emperor ignored the general populace as He came forth, leaving the antechamber and going into His box in the Grand Amphitheatre. Luke fell into step behind Him, then Pestage, then Sedriss, and the Red Guard; behind them, the other attendees followed.

Without a word the Emperor gestured to the audience and the orchestra that was now waiting His command. He lowered into the regal chair that had been designed for Him; Luke took up his seat to the right of the Emperor as he felt all the eyes in the room on their placement.

He could hear their minds, fluttering and questioning the positions of those around the Emperor.

This was the first public appearance of the unified front; no doubt it would be reported on and broadcast around the galaxy. It was now the official claim that Emperor Palpatine and Jedi Luke Skywalker had breached the animosity, and had formed a coalition in peaceful union.

Luke held a tight grin until the Emperor gestured for those around Him to rest into their seats.

It took a moment for the orchestra to strike up their opening melody. And Luke watched as the conductor moved fluidly in rhythm with the tones.

He knew what this part was, the overture, Mara had educated him as to so much. It was a sampling of the musical interludes that the selection would play.
It was dream-like with rising tempos and then dulcet light flutterings.

Palpatine leaned over to his side, drawing on Luke’s attention.

From what he could sense, the Emperor was in a relatively congenial mood, but Luke knew that wouldn’t last.

“I understand that this is you first ballet, Jedi Skywalker.” Palpatine sneered, enjoying that He had so much more knowledge than others.

“Yes, Master.” Luke replied statically, without emotion, trying to conceal that he was looking forward to see Mara dance. Secretly, he always wished to see her in her element, knowing how she loved it, feeling her freedom.

“Are you aware of this performance?” Palpatine asked, raising His chin, looking out, as the overture died away, and the orchestra paused to begin the full performance.

“No Master.” Luke said blankly. He had no particular interest in what the meaning or the story was behind the dance, only, that Mara would be in it. He knew that there was a very good chance that the selection was chosen purely on the basis that it was to manipulate his feelings.

The lights went down briefly, and then came up, with a number of dancers assembled. The music struck up, and the dancers moved in unison, from one side of the stage to the other in a synchronized pattern.

Palpatine exhaled slowly. “It’s called ‘The Attia’. The music was composed by Ansel Ayun of Naboo.” He said, and huffed at the mention of his home-world. “My family were patrons of Ayun… he was such a sloppy man, but wonderfully gifted, as you will see.”

Luke could feel some sort of pride in Palpatine, showing His air of superiority.

The energy of the music and dancers was intrinsic; a whirl of colour and movement.

“It is normally performed in five acts, We will only see three tonight.” The Emperor explained without being provoked. “The first and second act have been shortened and blended into Act One.” He commented off-handed. “The Second Act will feature the chorus dancers, and then, of course, the final Third Act.”

“It is taken from a folktale…a fairy-tale.” Palpatine scoffed. “Taken from a story that is told to children.”

The dancers joined into a circle completing the intricate steps, appearing to be at some sort of social gathering.

“In this part of the story, the village is told to find from their lot, the most-beautiful, and most-virtuous girl.” The Emperor’s voice went distant. “She is to be the rarest in beauty and purity, for she is to be led to meet the prince, and he will decide if he will marry her.”

The music was building, and it was clear that the plot was being dictated to him. Luke watched intently, knowing that Mara was to be playing the role of the chosen village girl; Attia, he supposed was her name.

Each of the female dancers took their turn in front of the chorus troupe, performing to their ability, and then joined by a male dancer, leading them away to join the others.
Again, they danced in unison. As a group, they made configurations, dancing in one fluid movement. Each was graceful in their own right; perfect and symmetrical.

It was somehow peaceful, escapist to some extreme, and certainly transcending the reality of his world, but Luke could feel himself becoming immersed in it.

The music began to low as the dancers moved off to the side of the stage, and held their positions. Then, the tempo seemed to change. It the distance, the back ground, a form began to move.

It was a female body, poised, graceful, sleek, and moving in time to the rising melodic structure, coming forward.

There was a collective gasp from the audience, and Luke couldn’t help but catch the breath in his lungs looking at the vision before him. Even the Emperor hummed and rasped His approval of her appearance.

Mara came forward, dressed as a villager, singled out by her luminous, iridescent pale lilac dress. Her fire hair pulled away from her face, neatly placed inside a crown of flowers.

She as captivating; looking fresh and innocent. And yet, there was something that was also magnetic about her.

Luke could feel it; she was drawing on the Force for her performance. It made her essence shine like a glimmering star in his eyes; warm, inviting… Gods, it made his heart ache to watch her, adoring her.

Side-stepping, she motioned to interact with some of the dancers on the sidelines; she would dance for them, they would mimic her, several male dancers crossing sides of the stage, each taking a turn.

“At this point, Attia does not know about the request from the prince, and the village has all but decided that she is the one to go to meet him.” Palpatine explained quietly. “She is an innocent. She has no knowledge of the world. She merely exists for beauty and youthfulness.”

Luke watched as Mara danced playfully among the other dancers.

“This was not her first performance.” The Emperor remarked. “My Hand… It was her second performance in court. She first performed ‘Seasons of the Years’, and then the following year, she performed the prima role in ‘The Attia’; when she was more-matured and able to interpret the difficult scenes. When she was sent to learn how to dance, her instructors were amazed at her ability, without any training. They said it was a waste if she was to be anything else. She was a natural.”

Absently, Luke turned his head, hearing the words, knowing that He was speaking about Mara.

“And she was… still is.” Palpatine said unceremoniously, staring out, watching. “According to her instructor, she remembered almost the entire dance, with little guidance. Although, I knew she would.”

In his senses, Luke could feel a strange sensation, tingling at the back of his mind; he didn’t like the way that Palpatine seemed to praise her but at the same time, He would have gladly destroyed her only days ago.

Mara was now at the center, dancing in front of all others. She moved superbly; refined, strong, and powerful. Her feet, on pointe, moved rapidly and expertly.

In the background, a male dancer appeared, standing still once he got into position.
“That is the prince’s emissary, sent to find a bride. He sees Attia, but is not convinced that she is a pure as she seems.” Palpatine, whispered.

A second male dancer appeared, beside the first.

“That is the prince’s magician, Viggo…he will decide if Attia should meet the prince.” The Emperor voice was subdued, but He seemed pleased with the performance, so far.

There was an energy that was building in the dance and music.

“It is coming up.” Palpatine said, sitting up straighter in his seat, expecting something to occur. “I want to see if she does it as well as she did it when she performed it the first time… the Grand Jeté.”

“She was so young then… and now, it will show if she still has the skill.” He said ominously.

“Attia does not know she is being observed, judged… she is enjoying her life and those around her… the Jeté is a symbol of her joyousness…a celebration.”

The music was building and escalating.

Luke focused on Mara now; he could feel that she was preparing herself and she was nervous.

The tempo picked up and the all the audience seemed to be waiting for it.

Mara moved to the far edge of the stage, and in a series of turns, she gained momentum, and launched her body into the air in a single movement, performing the split in her legs, before landing perfectly.

On que, Palpatine clapped his hands together reservedly, praising her. The audience followed suit, applauded quietly before stopping to watch the remaining of the performance.

One more turn amongst the remaining dancers, and Mara whisked off stage as the two men in the back ground came forward.

“The emissary has decided that Attia will go meet the prince. Viggo, however, does not want Attia to attend court.” Palpatine said, his mouth tight.

The music and the act ended with the dancers moving to join each other one more time before disappearing off stage.

The stage darkened and then the light rose up again.

“This is the Second Act.” The Emperor spoke lowly. “Viggo devises a plan to show Attia a magical mirror, to find out if she is as innocent as she seems.” He relaxed back into his seat, not as enthralled with this portion of the performance.

Instead, Luke watched as the male performer engaged what looked like a battle, and then the dance, as Viggo, came forward.

The dancer that played Viggo was strong and precise, making leaps and bounds across the stage.

But Luke wasn’t concentrated on him, he was trying to sense Mara; where did she go, what was she feeling?

Again, she had enticed his soul; he had seen a side to her that very few people would see as her true self, lost in the beauty of the dance.
He found her; her mind was concentrated on the dance, on her next performance. Her feelings were in the moment and the Force was flowing through her with very little demand of it. Luke pulled away his search, not wanting to disturb her; she was still a mix of emotions from her battle from three days ago that if she had left his attention, there was no telling what effect it would have on her.

Luke found his heart ache again with missing her, missing her friendship and companionship, missing just her. He had never felt so alone since he had come to Byss and isolated himself. He needed her, and hoped that she needed him, as well.

So he watched the performance trying to follow the story before him.

The male dancer was just as detailed and studious as the others, yet sinuous and smooth in his movements.

“Here Viggo sends an invitation to Attia, asking for her to meet him at The Lake of Dreams, where he will instruct her to look into the water, creating the magical mirror, and to find her true self.” Palpatine explained, disinterested.

Luke gave a side-glance and knew why the Emperor’s feelings about this portion were fleeting; He knew what it was like to be the one pulling the strings of the activity around Him, and unless He was the one doing the pulling, it did not interest Him. Palpatine was more interested in the reactions of those who He chose to play with. A character with a devious plan did not interest him; only His own plans.

There was a collective gasp when Mara appeared again; the setting had turning from daylight in the village to nighttime beside The Lake.

She and the dancer playing Viggo danced back and forth in a conversation between the two of them, until she moved off to the side of the stage and Viggo positioned behind her.

The center of the stage went from a yellow light to a seeped blue, appeared to be the water of The Lake, and Mara disappeared from the side of the stage, having a hologram replace her form, standing still.

A form fluttered upstage away from the audience, and started to come closer as the music grew in intensity.

Mara turned to face the audience, now dressed in dark purple and blues; her face made angular by the makeup but no-less beautiful or captivating.

“This is Attia’s shadow personality. The one she hides from all those around her. Viggo is testing her purity… Is she kind as she seems? Is she fit to marry the prince? Or is she vain and cruel?”

“The role of Attia is considered by some dancers to be one of the hardest to perform. It requires skill, for the Grand Jeté in the First Act, and then there is a series of thirty-two Fouéttes, a full rotation on just the point of a dancer’s toes, that is required in this act.” The Emperor shifted his weight, becoming more-interested in this portion of the performance.

“A dancer in the role of Attia must be also able to portray both the innocence in the First Act, and the dark-self in the Third.” Palpatine explained as His eyes narrowed. “My Hand is quite gifted at both roles… it took her almost two years to learn both parts until she was ready to debut it for Me.”

“I was extremely pleased by her performance that night, and if she is able for perform the Fouéttes, then I shall be pleased again.” He remarked snobbishly.
Luke could feel the resentment building in him, knowing that this was just another opportunity to rile his feelings. All he wanted was to watch Mara, and see her in her element, loving something that brought her joy; he had seen her dreams once, she dreamed of dancing.

For a few moments, he could almost believe that Palpatine would relent as a reserve came to watch the dance before them.

And Mara, she moved like she was on air. She cast a spell like no other; the dress fluttered with her movements and the flow of her body.

Luke’s chest grew heavy, breathing for feeling the need for her.

“Do you still want her?” Palpatine’s voice broke his thoughts, and Jedi turned his head to look at the other man before turning back to watch the performance, when he knew that another performance was about to begin; one with the Emperor conducting the movements and the dance.

“If not, she can be replaced.” He said cavalierly. “I have been in contact with one that you have sampled before… the same hair, the same eyes, a presence in the Force… all I need do is to call on her. She will need some mending before you can have her, but she will be otherwise suitable.”

Inhaling harshly, Luke knew to whom He was referring. Shira Brie… Mara had warned him; a ghost from both their pasts.

“Not so willful… not so graceful… but a warm body, capable of pleasuring your needs, of that, I am sure. And so willing to serve.” Palpatine sighed as if He also found a replacement that wouldn’t satisfy His needs either.

“But you won’t, will you? You love this one too much to ever let her go.” The Emperor’s eyes were fixed on Mara’s movements. “You see yourself having a future with her… in your arms, in your bed… loving her and her loving you.”

Looking out, Luke watched as Mara began to movement in a more-passionate manner; sly, seductive, and shrewd.

“How surreal… how romantic…” Palpatine sneered.

“What do you see when you look at her?” The Emperor asked. “Do you still see her as you wish… untainted by my will?” He remarked. “Watch her closely, Jedi Skywalker… here, she is just not playing a part. All that she needs to summon this performance is inside her already.”

Calling on the Force, Luke pulled from the power to keep his mind righted away from getting darker.

“The dark feeling she emotes now are all hers, not a performance.” Palpatine’s lip twitched, amused by his own observance. “Yes, she can be devious and deceitful… and before you, she was devoid of feeling, which, in My opinion, she preferred to be.”

Mara moved, swaying her stance, making larger movements, and the look in her eyes had changed; they tilted in, as Luke had seem them do, when she was mischievous, teasing and seductive towards him.

“Are you watching? Are you paying close attention to the way her body moves? So refined… strong and get fragile.” Palpatine was relentless in His regard. “What are you thinking? Are you remembering what it was like to have her flesh touching yours?”

Luke moved from the discomfort, shifting in his seat, and then mentally cursed himself for giving
away what he was feeling.

“Do you remember the smell and taste of that skin? Did it feed your desires? Do you still taste her essence on your lips and know that they cannot quench the lust that you still feel for her?”

The music was building; Mara was interacting with Viggo again, playfully bringing him into the dance with her, revealing her motives, being tested by the magician.

“And what of her lips? Are they just as sweet? In your greed to have her, do you yearn for them too?” The Emperor’s voice was seductive as the thoughts he described.

Luke’s eyes rolled, blocking out the memory of kissing those lips just days ago; how it pained him to have the relief of the feel on his mouth and in his heart.

“She has gotten rounder since she left My service… become more-womanly in her figure. I reconsidered that perhaps, given her age and build that I should have found something more-suitable for her to perform. I suppose you find that desirable, as well?” It was spiteful, and an observation on the Emperor’s behalf.

“Does the swell of her breasts excite you? The thought of her tight apexes- does it thrill you? Have you suckled on those delicate gossamer mounds, feeling her arousal feed your own?”

Mara jumped and stretched as the flesh that was just mentioned moved inside her dress, catching Luke’s eyes.

“Does her skin flush in marvelous hues as you are the one to bring her closer to the cusp of her pleasure?”

Luke’s gaze went to her collarbone and saw that the exertion from the dance was causing the same flush that passion did. He swallowed at seeing the dusting of freckles that appeared, just as they would if he had placed his lips in the right spot.

Palpatine leaned on his armrest again, nearing the Jedi. “Can you feel it now?... what she would feel like, to be yours again? Would you devour her in mad passion, or take your time to savour her?” He whispered; the lisp drawing out the words. “Because only one thing that can satisfy you… when you join your body with hers, no? That is the moment that you long for… feeling her engulf you, constricted in bliss.”

The tempo of the music changed.

The Emperor sat up. “Ah, here Attia reconsiders her feelings… and soon she will do the Fouéttes, signifying her changing, rotating feelings of who she is.” He said in a tone just above a whisper, as Sedriss also seemed to take notice in the description of the dance.

Watching Mara’s precise moves, Palpatine relaxed back down, nearing Luke again.

“Is it her Force aura that brings you closer to your own pinnacle?” Palpatine asked, breaking his demeanor that had been burgeoning on being crude again. “Do you feel her power and know that she becomes a part of you in your power? Connecting to you as no one else can?”

But Luke knew that His taunts were not over; His approach was fading again, back to being almost wistful.

“As I have told you before, she was meant to be yours after Endor. I would have presented her to you in a similar manner as you see her in now.” The Emperor’s chin jutted out, in direction of the
Mara moved with tranquil agility, reverting back to her innocence; playful and content. Luke stopped and allowed his mouth to almost form a smile, watching her.

“You would have adored her from the moment you saw her… and she, recalling your strength and power, would have come to you without being coaxed.” The Emperor waxed poetic as almost telling a story of His own making. “You would have had six more years of her, basking in her love, feeding off of each other, creating your own supreme legacy.”

It was this possible life that caught Luke’s attention and imagination. He had often wondered what it would have been like if he had agreed to join his father and the Emperor that fateful day.

“You see, at Jabba’s, you perplexed her, you rattled her senses – something that I have never seen in her before. You were her enemy but she could not deny the power you had over her too.” Palpatine revealed. “And you do… if you chose to believe it. She wants you and hungers for you too, in her mind, in her body and in her soul.”

As much as he hated hearing his own feelings revealed, Luke could feel that he wanted to hear more about the way Mara felt about him. He knew that he was the cause of her suffering for a long time, and still shocked that she was able to move past those feelings to find her heart with him.

“You throw her senses into the escalation of highest heights.” The Emperor murmured, while sitting up again.

“Oh, how envious I am of your youth and your potency over her, Jedi Skywalker.” Palpatine stated; Luke thought that he could almost hear jealousy in His words. “The things that you make her feel, both physically and emotionally, she will never have with anyone else.”

The music had changed again, reverting back to a passionate tempo, briefly and Mara moved to match it.

“I have felt her, in the throes of passion with you… she leaves all her cares behind and allows herself to be carried away, wrapped in you, climaxing for you.” Palpatine hissed. “And now…in this room of a thousand people, she dances for you, and you alone.”

The Emperor sat up, spontaneously, leaning forward. “This is the moment…” He sat, holding his breath as Mara stepped up to perform the most-difficult part.

Luke could almost hear the mental counting of the man beside him as she rotated elegantly on one toe; it was spell-binding.

As she came down from her posed, The Emperor clasped his hands together in front of the amphitheatre, and the audience applauded in respect.

Mara paused, and broke from character, to accept the gratitude. Then, she went back to her mark, readying to resume the dance.

“She did it… and not only that, I believe she accomplished thirty-four Fouéttes in a row!” Palpatine said as the others around Him acknowledged it. He relaxed back down, as the performance resumed.

The excitement died down, and the Emperor rested his weight again in Luke’s direction, the armrest serving as a device to still keep Him and His words at bay—but for how long?
“How does that make you feel?” Palpatine asked the Jedi at his side.

Luke could feel the touch of the Dark Force on the corners of his mind; tendrils of crisp, sharp cold snapped to keep his mind enraptured.

“How do you wish to be alone with her right now?—to be the only one watching this performance? Or do you wish that others can witness and crave what you have, desire what you can touch, and covet what you own.”

Briefly, Luke seethed, regretting his control on his own emotions.

“Yes… you refuse to share her, do you? How badly do you want to push in Sedriss’s eyes for even looking at her the same way you do?” Palpatine almost laughed at the thought. “And he does… he wants her as well. Only, he would have her at his mercy, pleasuring him. I have seen what is in his mind, his lust for her, his resentment over her power…and wanting her wailing for him. How many other men do you wish to destroy for thinking the same thing?”

Luke was fighting with himself, trying to not to listen; it was the same manner in which he was seduced into his feeling now. Just as he thought that he could dig himself out, he was drawn back in, feeling the same wave of raw anger.

“I would be keen to say that your feelings are justified…and they are…but what you fail to see is that it is she that is to blame here.” Palpatine raised his eyebrows, going back to being conversational in his tone, not regarding his attempt to rile up the other man beside Him.

“You gave yourself to her, and how does she repay you? She returns to her former Master. She returns to her life in the palace…a life that you, as a peasant farmer…a Jedi…could never give her.”

Palpatine shook his head, tisking her behaviour. “She sold your love for a crown. Not even a full title or rank, at that either.” He sighed dramatically. “And she wears it well, does she not?”

Mara and the dancer portraying Viggo were back together now; she had traded places with her reflection, replaced the hologram and danced in the pale lilac-coloured dress again, possibly symbolizing that she had passed the test of the magician.

Luke leaned in, wanting to see that she, Mara, could still have innocence in her face. This is what kept him from her. He had begged that she, Mara, had not reverted back to being The Emperor’s Hand again…that she was still broken from that spell, that person.

“She will have her place in Our New Empire… but it is up to you, my young apprentice, as to where she should be placed…beside your own throne, as your consort, your equal…or in your bed, as concubine, seen and only but kept for your pleasure?”

The energy twisted in the Force; Luke could feel that Palpatine was gearing up for another verbal attack.

“She is suited for both positions, I assure you.” The Emperor gleamed over to the man at his side. Then, looked back out. “Think on that, the next time you find yourself between her thighs…of how many other men she has snared with those eyes of emeralds, those lips of velvet and skin like silk.”

Luke suppressed a feral growl that he wished he could release; not at Mara, but at The Thing seated beside him. He would suffer these words, if not to prove that he did not have to act on them. He could sit through the taunts, the prodding, the insults, so long as he knew that she saw something in him that could be redeemed. But even Luke knew that he had a tipping point.
“Think of how your father would have fornicated with her until she bled for him… as her body pulsed for him as it does for you.” Palpatine’s pronunciation left no room for the intention that He aimed His words at.

As the music came down with a crescendo, so did the Emperor’s last assail.

“And then, try to erase all those memories from her body as you take your turn with her.” Palpatine smiled, still looking out, appearing to be pleased by the performance but was more-pleased that his words had the effect that He wanted, and intended.

Luke looked down to see the tremble in his hand, clenching the arm of the seat rest in furious rage; his right hand had torn into the material of the rest, pulling it to shreds. He sat, trying to calm himself, reminding himself that this was the Emperor’s way to release his feelings and sink him down into the Darkness even further.

_Mara is not the Dark…she is your Light… you love her._ His mind repeated until he could feel the tension start to dissolve.

The Emperor laughed maniacally under His breath.

Mara was taking her final turn on stage, as her dance was ending. She flew into the edges of the stage, not to be seen again, as the audience erupted in applause for her performance, and as the other dancers resumed their positions to end on a final dalliance.

The music swirled and heightened for their final movement, ending the piece with long extravagant flourishes. And with the final crescendo, it ended; dancers stopped in the final controlled pose.

The audience froze as well, until the Emperor rose from His seat and began to applaud. Then, those around Him, did the same, clapping for the performance.

Luke joined them; it was spectacular, there was no denying it. All the dancers and musicians took his spirit away; it was nothing like he had ever seen before and would probably never see again. And Mara, _his Mara_, was radiant.

The audience waited until the Emperor made to leave from His box, and all those who attended Him.

The inner court stopped inside the antechamber as the Emperor announced. “We shall go and congratulate the performers on their magnificent show tonight.”

The guests resounded encouragingly at the idea that the Emperor insists upon.

However, Palpatine motioned for Luke to come near.

Obliging, Luke reluctantly came close to the older man.

“Jedi Skywalker, you are excused from the rest of the formalities tonight. Go to your quarters, and wait for the proof of how I value your service.” Palpatine prescribed contritely, and confidently that His orders would be followed.

Luke backed himself away with a bow, feeling dismissed. “Yes Master.” He said suppressing his snarl, before turning heel and separating himself from the group.

He didn’t storm down the crowded hallway, returning to his quarters, but the Jedi’s cloak flapped from the breeze that he was making with his pace.
Away from the crowd, back into the hallways of the Citadel, Luke tried to get his feeling under control; the combination of love and hate boiled within him now.

Equally, it was a spiral of purity and depravity that he fought within himself, begging and pleading that neither would have a target.

**

**Backstage: Grand Amphitheatre**

Mara paced in the corner, waiting for her body to calm, waiting to fully catch her breath, waiting for the approval from the Emperor. She knew that she would sense it immediately if He was displeased.

She saw Him briefly before the performance, but He had specifically kept His distance from her; making her uneasy, wanting her performance to be perfect.

She had not been secluded with Him since the events of three days ago; He had stayed away from her, not asking for her visions, not inviting Himself to her practices.

She had not seen Luke either since he had started the healing process on the burns on her back.

In truth, she had thrown herself into this performance, thinking of only this performance, thinking how Luke was seeing it for the first time.

*Her Farmboy;* she smiled tightly at the thought, and then let it go, in case it was discovered.

She couldn’t, and didn’t want to make herself remember the events that had led up to that injury; she was trying to block them out.

The sound… that sound, of the neck breaking of the Red Guard, echoed in her for the days that followed. Even now, when alone, she could hear it. And the sense of her individuality breaking as well. She was the puppet again; given into the command of her Master, without question, without compassion.

And the one thought that pervaded her; *would Luke understand and still love me?* Her mind asked repeatedly.

There was no time to think of that, The Emperor and his honoured guests were approaching. With her senses opened, she searched the group for Luke’s shining presence, but didn’t find it.

Mara knew that he had been watching; she sensed him throughout the performance, and drew her energy from his attention.

She even felt his darkness emerge as her own performance became darker. She feared that something had occurred that sent him there.

She feared having to see the Emperor again, but decided that she would continue to appear to be dutiful.

The doors to the room opened and the dancers lined up to be greeted by the Emperor, and reap His praise.

Mara felt His attention her as soon as He arrived, with the procession of guests behind him.

It was meant to be social and all of the young dancers were ecstatic to be receiving the attention bestowed by His Imperial Majesty.
Taking their turns, they each bowed as He wordlessly nodded them away, thanking them, until He arrived at the principal dancers.

The male lead dancers bowed deeply as the Emperor gave them His attention and then dismissed them, turning His gaze on the final dancer waiting for Him.

Mara was sure to bow deeper than her counterparts, knowing that a reckoning was coming, but perhaps she had regained some of her favor with Him. She held her pose, in an almost grovelling manner, until she felt, rather than saw, His gesture.

Two unknown Byssian servants appeared.

The first brought forth a large white box decorated with a bilious white ribbon, and placed it off to the side; no doubt, those who were watching supposed it would be a luxury gift from the Emperor to His favorite dancer and her triumphant return to the spotlight.

The second brought an impressive array of red roses was brought forth into her sightline, and she looked up to see that Palpatine was directing them to be brought to her.

“You did a splendid display of your talents, My child… only you could do so much.” He smiled at her with dangerous eyes, as those around Him thought that He was giving her special attention, and they applauded again at the show.

Taking the bouquet in her arms, she did the only thing that she could think of, and bowed again. “His Majesty is most-gracious and most-generous to bestow His compliment on me.” She said soberly, but loud enough so that The Emperor, and the others, could hear.

He grumbled as the applause died away. Those in the room must have sensed a change in the tone; Mara could feel the icy energy building.

The others grew silent, and felt the chill and the silence became uncomfortable, watching as the Emperor stared at the red-headed dancer who was cowering before Him.

“Leave Us.” He ordered loudly in a rasp.

Mara’s eyes flickered up in time to see the hasty departure of the room, leaving her alone with the Emperor. She clutched the roses to her body in some form of protection.

When the room was silent again from the noise of the other minds, she dared to look up, and into the face of her Master.

His red eyes were dark and centered on her; his raspy breathing echoed.

“I feel that I need to comment on your performances.” He said snidely.

Mara cringed. She knew that He was referring to both her dance recital and events of the prior days.

“To praise or punish… I fear that neither will give you the right motivation.” So far Palpatine had kept His distance, He hobbled closer to her, resting on His cane as he came closer still.

“So let me be quite clear.” He hissed, lowering his voice. “Never, have I given anyone the leeway that I give to you… not a moment’s hesitation would I have given to Vader or anyone else who would disregard My generosity…yet, here you are.”

“You know what you have done… and you know why you should be punished.” He snapped.
“But how?... How should I punish you?” Palpatine was amused by his own quandary. “But I have decided.”

Mara swallowed, feeling a shiver in her body; her danger senses did not flare, only her instincts that told her that she would rather a decision had not been made; she was going to made to suffer.

Palpatine’s eyes relaxed, and He came closer to her still, gently grasping one of her hands that held the bouquet of roses to her chest. The other hand, He tenderly reached out to cup her chin and direct her gaze into His eyes.

“Tonight, my child, I will go into hibernation.” He said in a tone that would almost elicit sympathy. “This body is beginning to fail, and it must be preserved, and I must prepare in advance of the transference.”

Mara could feel that His hand start to grip her hand in a tighter fashion; her hand clutching the roses had found a thorn, and it started to dig into her palm. His hand on her chin started to clench her jaw in a vice-like grip as well.

“I have decided that you are to decide your own punishment.” His voice had turned into a snarl. “You know how I enjoy my pound of flesh to be delivered… wrap it up however you like, but serve it to me before I take my sleep… otherwise…” His staccato voice trailed off.

“Otherwise…” His hands constricted on her as she felt His Dark Touch and the tension in her body. “You might not like the other options.”

His eyes grew darker, and His mind raked on her. </ This is your last, and final, chance… There will be no more. />

Mara could feel the shiver in the strength of His hands as He pressed into hers as hard as they could before truly doing any damage. And then, without notice, withdrawing away with His message delivered.

He backed away from her, with His eyes still locked in Their hardened state. With a blink, the look was gone, and He returned to the meager old man with a disarming, knowing grin.

Palpatine turned away from her, intent on leaving the room. He paused and looked back at her, the sharpness had returned to his eyes once more. “Skywalker awaits you… as a gift for your performance tonight… use your time well.”

He turned and walked away, leaving the room.

With a hard exhale, she released her body from the frozen position that she was in, finally feeling free to breathe.

Mara looked down at her hand that held the roses, to see the cut and the pool of blood forming in her palm. She shivered again as she saw the gift box waiting that was left by the Emperor, without presenting it, but she knew it was for her.

Dropping her head and relaxing her arms, she walked up to it, thinking about His words to ‘decide’ her own punishment.

There were only several things that could appease Palpatine at this point, and she knew all of them would be at her peril.

Finding a small discarded towel, she pressed it into her palm, catching the blood, and providing some
comfort as she came over to the box.

In her mind, there was a twinge of happiness to soon see Luke again, knowing that he still cared for her.

Mara pulled off the bow on the box, releasing the top, and then pulled that away too, knowing that this gift was not really a gift… they never were.

Moving the tissue paper aside, she sob-gasped as she saw what was inside, and knew what she would need to do in order to win back the Emperor’s favor, and curse her return to Luke’s love.

There it sat, looking up at her… the dress of a courtesan… from the night of the auction… from Luke’s vision… where he lost his soul to her, and into the Darkness.

Paid for with pain.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

I still love all of you... even if you don't want to write anything back.

:)
The Prepotence – Part 1

Chapter Summary

Quote: It had made his temperature rise, and his skin boil from fury, but touching that skin was like touching the sun; you still wanted its warmth even though you knew it could hurt you.

Characters: Mara, Luke, and Sidious

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Chapter Notes

Happy Friday!

It is a long-weekend here in Canada… and the weather is muggy in my fair city… so I am encouraged to write a sticky-licky chapter.

Okay, I hope you have read “Parallel Paradoxes”; Chapter 12… and maybe 13… and a little bit from Chapter 15 of “Defining Destiny” - they will fill in help in the blanks before you read this portion of the story.

I don’t really have much to say… except, SMUT-FEST! It’s time for “50 Shades of Skywalker”—well, maybe not… there’s powerplay, but who is the top? who is the bottom? and who is ‘topping from the bottom’?

ROUGH SEX Warning!!! Be warned! All story warnings apply with this chapter… this is not an easy one… but you have been warned… maybe you should move along if you are ‘dainty in spirit’, and we’ll see you in the next chapter.

I’m gonna leave this right here… and we can chat about it in the end. ~wink!

**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Byss: The Citadel: Private Residence

One performance had ended; another was just beginning.

Mara waited until the Byssian left her room before she allowed her eyes to look up; she didn’t want to see what she had become, what she had been made into.

It was painful enough to recall the details of Luke’s vision and fantasy that she knew that she would need to replay in order to gratify the Emperor’s lust to feel her pain, and Luke’s demise.

Slowly, her eyes came up to regard her reflection.
She looked back at herself; first meeting her own hollow look, and finally scared of what she would see there.

The Byssian had done her work well to prepare Mara. After a bath, removing all the sweat and ache that came from the dance performance, Mara’s body had been powdered and perfumed just as any courtesan would have been, prepared for the *entertainment* she was bound to provide.

Creams and makeup had been applied to make her appearance even more-entrancing, making her more-attractive than Mara thought that she would be capable of looking.

Her hair had been curled loosely before being twisted up into the single decorative comb; it was part of Luke’s fantasy that he would indulge the enjoyment that it gave him, something that coaxed his hunger for her.

Mara blinked at her reflection, just to make sure it was her own that she was looking at.

The semi-sheer dress glimmered in the dimmed light of her room. In the incandescent glow, she could see the contours of her body and the fair skin in the shadows, ready for seduction.

She turned her face to inspect the makeup that was placed on her; not overdone or ‘painted’ as she suspected would be needed. Perhaps the Byssian had received instructions of how she was supposed dress her charge; knowing Luke, he would have preferred her looking more-natural than artificial.

Inhaling, Mara decided it was time, and that she couldn’t delay it any longer.

Relaxing her mind, she called on the Force to take this final step; the Emperor’s presence had lingered with her since He had issued His threat, and He was curiously watching her now. Without calling out, she could feel Him in her skin; wanting to see what she saw, wanting to hear what she heard, wanting to feel what she felt.

As Emperor’s Hand, it was a useful skill to show Him the evidence that she had collected for Him before He passed judgement, and she performed the sentence. But now, it was like a set of eyes on her at all times.

And those things that He could not sense or see with the force, He had hidden communication equipment around her room. It wouldn’t be unlike Him to also include a holo unit kept on her as well.

There was no way to plan her way around all the possibilities that could occur; her mind had tried to play them all out. When she did, she was met with a shot of phantom pain from the Emperor, chastising her for even trying to find a way to escape His demands.

She could feel the Emperor’s strength weening though; she hoped that He would fulfill His promise to go into hibernation as soon as He felt that she had completed what was asked of her.

She knew how far she was allowed with His contact; any and every nuance in the Force, He would be able to feel from her, and from Luke—but that was with the aid of the Force… *without it*…

She strongly suspected that He wasn’t able to hear the full conversation when she placed her forehead to Luke’s; it was a type of contact that she never had with anyone before and didn’t know that was even possible. But it was sufficient, and she assumed that it had been kept between her and Luke. Mara knew that the Emperor based many of His assumptions on what He thought He knew.

Quietly, she let her mind drift further into the Force, sharing her presence, and not hiding herself from the man in the other room.
She had felt Luke’s presence when she returned, after her encounter with the Emperor.

Luke was brooding like a storm; building, preparing to surge, wrapped in his own torment. And she could feel physical tension in him... *he wanted her.*

There was no question as to what had put him there. As a captive audience, sitting directly beside the Emperor, he probably endured a series of taunts and provocations, meant to derive his peace of mind. It was a familiar way that Palpatine would torment those He intended to warp.

Luke was starting to calm himself, calling on the peace in the Force. To feel her now would hopefully add to that peace.

But, if Luke saw her, now, Mara knew it would be the tipping point that the Emperor intended.

She shivered; it was cold and cruel what she was about to do to him. A punishment for both of them.

Inhaling and exhaling deeply, she called more of the power in herself, releasing more of her aura; not calling out to him, but letting him know that she was present, and so very close by... in arm’s reach... *unintentionally tempting.*

In her mind’s eye, she could see Luke look up from his introspection, as if feeling her and sensing her.

Mara looked at herself again, assured that she looked the part, still numb to recognize the person looking back at her.

There was an urgency coming from his room; as if he was standing by the door that separated them, begging that it would both open and not open, less his reaction to seeing her again. He wanted to see her so very badly but feared what he would do once he did.

But Luke refused to hit the door-release that would let him be with her, trapped in a prison of his own making.

She turned away from the looking-glass, and walked over to the velvet chaise close to her bed.

From his vision, her form had rested on a similar piece; it had become part of the imagery that he needed to recognize the familiarity of it all.

Sliding on the soft material, she positioned her body, knowing how to make it appear to it best form, arranging the fabric so that her skin could be seen yet obscured by the delicate silver pattern on it.

Looking up, Mara watched the onyx jewels on the chandelier sway, casting shimmers of light in her shadowy chamber, remembering how to seduce man.

For the most part, it was easy. The courtesans had taught her at a young age on how to detract her mind from where she was and what she was doing, in order to keep a bit of her person to herself, in order to keep her from feeling, in *unpleasant tasks* that were given to her. Mara sighed, trying to find that place again.

Reclining, she was the picture of allurement.

Passively, she relaxed deeper, feeling the Force in her, sensing the anxiousness in the Emperor for her payment to Him, sensing Luke’s impatience and frustration.

It was time.
<<Luke…>> She called out to his mind, touching against him, gently, tenderly, with tendrils of colour that he would feel and take comfort in, knowing that it was her.

His mind reached back, calming himself with her presence, no longer with urgency, relaxing back; he sent back the furls of colour that could bring her calm as well.

Luke’s peace would not last long when he realized that he was being played; Mara tried to keep her fear in check, preparing for his immediate wrath. She knew that it would be unavoidable.

Reaching again, she sent the words that he needed to hear. <<Luke… come to me? >> She asked in a most-passive voice, feeding it with her true loneliness for him.

There was a pause, his hesitation, and then, she heard the door slide open, and a stream of backlit light fell across the floor from his room into hers, in her direction.

The chaise was turned away from the door, and she sense him coming closer, rounding the obstacle to finally be with her; his mood was prepared to be achingly happy to see her again.

Mara sensed his purposeful strides. She looked up in time to see him come around to face her.

Like ice, the Force suddenly froze in the room.

Luke’s features played out all his emotions; he was never very good at keeping them to himself. In nanoseconds, his deep sapphire eyes said how happy he was to see her, and then shock as he saw what was before him, and then all the implications.

He halted where he was, stopped in his tracks, breathing hard.

“No…” He mouthed, unable to form the word.

“No…” He said louder, shaking his head with sorrow as his heart broke, seeing how she was displayed for him.

“No.” He repeated slowly as horror grazed across his face; knowing that she would only do this if she was put up to it by Palpatine.

His hand came up and pointed accusingly at her. “No!” He growled as rage appeared; his pupils started to seep with orange on the border; understanding that she would only do this if she was put up to it by Palpatine.

The room began to quake; objects started to shiver.

Mara could feel his energy switch and the cold, dark cloud descend; the energy was volatile and chaotic, building into a hate-fueled tempest.

She could hear the laughter of the Emperor echoing at the back of her mind.

Feeling a seizing in her muscles, she knew that it was coming from Luke, and not the Emperor; given time, he would make the decision to crush the life from out of her. She was sure that was exactly what the Emperor wanted, to have Luke open himself that way to the Darkside and be forever lost.

She had no time, rising from the chaise; she broached the physical barrier, pushed his outstretched hand away and brought him in quickly.

Mara crushed her mouth against his; Luke’s senses were shocked, and then she rapidly placed her
cheek to his, tilting his head away from where she thought the recording devices could be and placed her forehead against his.

Luke! Her mind screamed to him, with all she had, beseeching his very essence. I don’t want to do this! I didn’t plan it! You know this. You absolutely know this! I would never betray you this way… it’s all Palpatine! It’s all Sidious!

She hoped that by invoking the Sith’s name that it would remind him of how manipulative He could be, and who the real enemy was.

Pulling away slightly, Mara looked into his eyes; she had to see it in his eyes in order to check that he understood what was happening here.

Luke breathed through his teeth, still enraged, glaring at her, grabbing her away from him by her biceps, with a shake, almost lifting her. He glared but seemed to be holding himself back, barely.

His hands burrowed into her upper arms, almost crushing the fine limbs.

She winced, letting Palpatine sense this first ounce of pain; physically and emotionally.

“Then how? Why?” He tremored as he snarled; she felt the wave of bitterness from him. His eyes still rimmed with fury.

She shivered, letting her eyes waiver, losing her control, but only briefly, she showed him that this wasn’t all an act on her part.

Gradually, he relaxed his grasp on her arms, feeling that she was going to communicate with him again.

Without words, she had no other choice. Every other means of communication would betray him, her, and her motives. Mara let her eyes communicate for her.

She let the corners of her eyes dip, hoping that he would see her sorrow as well and the pain the she felt being in this situation.

Rounding her eyes and lifting her brows, optimistically, she showed him that she held out hope that they would get through this.

And in case that the Emperor was keenly watching, she shared her sense and His sense with Luke, before she gave him a seductive look, trying to reveal that she had a game that she had to be a part of.

Luke swallowed hard before letting her go, distrusting her, scowling at her.

Mara used her body to move in a manner that anyone watching would register as seductive. Her hands that had tried to brace him back, still held him at his forearms. She slid her hand up one of his arms, coming down his shoulder and over the material covering his chest until it came to rest in the middle of it, playing with the closures, intending to disrobe him at some point.

He flinched, unsure of her motives. Luke watched her, suspecting her of her deceit; he was not willing to relax his suspicion.

Her other hand travelled up his arm, almost wrapping around his neck, trying to bring him closer. He turned his head to see where it was travelling, tense to allow it.
Slowly, she leaned in to him; he tilted his face away from her, not wanting to feel the touch of her skin yet, continuing to feel betrayed.

At first, Mara let her breath, touching his available skin; hot and humid on his jugular. She felt his shoulders dip down, almost surrendering.

Coming closer, with a nuzzle into his jawline, and a graze on his cheek, Luke allowed her to come in closer still.

Her cheek rested on his; he swallowed, accepting the touch. Mara fluttered her eyelashes against him, feeling the reprieve in her senses too, taking comfort that he was letting her break through to him.

She sighed when Luke nuzzled back, letting her to come closer, his arms slipped around her, holding her. Mara paused in the moment, just enjoying the feel of him. But she knew that she didn’t have the freedom yet to have her own feelings, to have her own thoughts; Palpatine was still conscious and would not relent until He was satisfied.

Moving slightly, she came back up to place her head against his. Luke accepted it and didn’t fight it.

Sidious. She repeated as she leaned and swayed against him, appearing to start her entrapment. He saw it in your mind… your fantasy, your vision.

Mara moved back again to check his eyes, to see if he understood.

The orange rims were just now on the perimeter of his dark blue pupils. Luke nodded once and looked away; ashamed that he had even thought about her like that, and then looked back at her, his jaw clenched.

He looked down at her hand on his chest; joined by the other hand, lithely, one by one, she started to undo the fasteners of his tunic.

He stopped her hand, into the third fastener. “No.” He exhaled with his breath. “There has to be another way.” He said, barely audible, clinging to his anger.

“There isn’t.” She replied at the same volume.

“Why?” He exhaled again, looking down, seeing that he was touching her, forgetting his anger, and just feeling her hand in his. Luke looked up, wanting to see her face.

Mara looked at him; her green eyes were sad, and remorseful. She came back, close to his face again and gently pressed her temple to his.

This is my punishment, for defying Him, for calling on you in the throne room. She swallowed. Your demise would be an added benefit to Him for my penance.

She broke the contact, keeping her words short and to the point, just in case it was discovered that there was some secret between them.

“What does He want?” Luke snarled quietly, keeping her in place.

Pain… He wants my pain… Mara felt Luke’s body tense with the idea. And He wants you, to deliver it.

He allowed her to relax and come away from him a bit. Luke was holding her by her uppers arms as
she slinked back.

Without warning, he took her by the shoulders and turned her away from him aggressively, with her back pressed to his chest, possessively.

She could hear his deep breaths and the heavy beat from his heart, and his hot, hot skin through his tunic.

Mara jarred, frozen, unsure of what Luke had in mind. His hands moved down her arms, coming onto her torso; again, he was fighting with his rage, yearning and desire. She could feel it in him, battling for supremacy. But this, this action had a purpose, he was looking for something.

His hands were scanning her. Luke moved so that in his search, his face came alongside her cheek, looking over her shoulder.

“Is there any other game that you’re playing?” He whispered in her ear. …*that Sidious is playing?* His mind asked of her.

His hand slid over her lower belly and she sensed his probe, and knew what he had on his mind.

She hadn’t even considered that Palpatine intended for her to conceive Luke’s child now, but it would make perfect sense if he was looking for another body to inhabit.

The horror struck her, but she kept it under control, knowing that she would be ovulating soon but not now. Maybe this was just a way for her and Luke to become familiar with each other again, in hopes that she would conceive. Maybe this was just to put a block between the two of them. Maybe it was to set fear into her even further than it already was.

There were too many possibilities to reason out; all of them ending with Palpatine winning in some fashion or another.

Mara shook her head, meekly, knowing that was still a good possibility that Luke wouldn’t believe her. “No” She answered back quietly.

His search was done, satisfied that she wasn’t attempting to get pregnant, by her will or the will of the Emperor; to give his child to a Monster… *his powerful, Force-strong child.* But his hands stayed on her body, gliding over to her hips, and resting there, rubbing the joints.

As he exhaled, she could feel more of his anger that was directed at her withdraw, leaving only a shadow of resentment for Palpatine.

“As what?” He asked into her earlobe. Luke lingered there, breathing on the nape of her neck.

Mara rolled her eyes closed. Even with the fear and futility of their situation, she didn’t want to admit that she relieved that Luke was so close and that she was in his arms, no matter the reason or the predicament. She allowed herself to take a second to remember what it was like to be loved by him.

Unconsciously, she pushed herself back against him, wanting more of the contact she craved; his chest was hot, his body firm, and… she felt it… his erection, *hard,* pressed up against her.

She knew that he was trying to conceal it now; he hadn’t attempted to bring her that close to him as she was now. He wasn’t overtly trying to impose himself on her… but… *He wanted her.*

*Gods,* she wanted him too… so desperately.
“What do we do now?” He agonized, whispering, knowing that they had to do something, some sort of action, something that would appease the Emperor for the time being; Luke just didn’t want to be the one to say it.

She felt another type of shiver in her, infringing on her mind; a warning coming from Palpatine not to reveal too much.

Mara arched her back, pressing back on him, acknowledging his desire, making contact with his groin. “You take me...” She said, drawing out her words in a husky voice. “…in the way that you want me, Lord Skywalker.”

Luke started to rear back; as much as he may have thought about her like that, he didn’t want to act on it. He wanted to keep it to himself and never have that power over her.

Quickly, Mara moved again, placing her temple beside his and rising up her arm to drape it around his neck.

Luke... she said gently to his mind. I know that you don’t want to do this... and I know your reasons why, but it will be much, much worse if you don’t act on it.

She broke away and turned in his embrace, looking somberly into his eyes, now wrapping her arms around his neck, bringing him close again. I know that you would never truly hurt me... I know this is not who you are.

Her hands slid down his chest and started to undo the final fastenings.

Luke’s eyes followed her acts; he still frowned at the implications that were becoming clear.

Mara slipped her hands under his tunic to feel his skin; searing, smooth, sleek and strong. He was breathing heavy.

He let her slip the garment from off his shoulders and fall away to the floor.

With his tight flesh available to her, she made the most of it, traipsing her fingers on the contours of his muscles. She could feel the electricity coursing in him. Wrapping one hand around his mid-section, she moved the other hand up his body, over his shoulder and into his shortened thick hair, petting at the nape of his neck.

Involuntarily, Luke nulled his head into her touch.

This time she motioned into his neck and placed her lips to his jugular, and interchanged her kisses with nuzzling into him, and finding the right time again to make contact.

I’m giving you permission, Luke. She spoke as gently as she could, given that she knew that the Emperor would eventually get impatient. Fulfill your fantasy... you need to make it... She searched for the right word so that he wouldn’t refuse. ... uncomfortable.

He began to shake his head, knowing what she was asking, knowing what she was willing to do.

Again, she tried. Don’t lose yourself in, but feed what you need to... She started to beg; if he didn’t cooperate, if it wasn’t convincing, Palpatine would be sure to ask for more, taking more, destroying more.

The Emperor may have wanted to have both of them in his clutches, but Mara knew that He would gladly accept that she had been fully humbled by this instead.
“Mara…” Luke quietly moaned her name in protest, but also in longing, and utter desire to want to be with her. He would be lying to himself, and to her, if he denied that it was something that he didn’t crave to his core.

She directed his face to look at her, into her eyes, and into her soul. “Take me… let me be yours… and yours alone.” She lustily lamented.

He was about to shake his head, refusing her, refusing to play along with the crucible they found themselves in.

There were few options left, and he needed to understand the ramifications if he didn’t follow through, if he didn’t take action, if he didn’t want her to live.

She could feel him in the Force; his anger still hovering, mixed with resentment and reluctance that had several rationales.

Reaching out Mara touched his mind, even though she knew that Palpatine would hear it directly. «Don’t you want me, Luke?»

Sharply, he looked at her. His deep, dark sapphire eyes told her how close he was to losing his control. «Not like this!» He snapped back.

For quick second he saw it; her eyes shook with fear. She blinked- it was gone.

«Give in to your fantasy… and let it just be that… a fantasy.» Her eyes implored him. As a last resort she placed her temple to his, one more time. He, will kill me. She shivered as she spoke to his mind; it wasn’t an act, she was truly afraid of what word happen if she wasn’t able to give Palpatine what he wanted. There would be no healing trance, no bacta dip, and no miracle algae that would save her this time.

Luke arms instinctively wrapped his arms around her protectively; wanting to protect her from Palpatine and his evil will, wanting to protect her from his own dark demons that would thrive. Keeping her close, hugging her, he was not going to lose her; she trembled again.

This time, he wanted to be sure. This will be all an act? He asked to her.

He could feel her sadness wash over her.

Yes. She answered; disappointed that it had to be this way, disappointed in herself.

Mara felt him shift under her embrace; his posture stiffened.

The Force changed its direction; it was morphing into the macabre. Waves of colour that were meant to be calming had changed their hues, and started to snap like a flag in a rough wind.

“What if I don’t want it to be?” He mumbled in a deep tone, still holding her. “I have thought about you like this.” He confessed.

“Not out of anger… or rage… but because, I have wanted you, like this.” He whispered. He was apprehensive; not trusting himself not to lose control in the realm between reality and passion.

Then, release it… don’t give it power over you… over me… purge it from your system until you’re satisfied. She reasoned to him. Palpatine is watching, right now. She warned. I can take it, Luke. She gave him a reprieve
The corner of her lip tugged. *I might even like it.*

His chin tilted up and his brow ceased at her confession.

Mara blinked her dark emerald eyes at him once, agreeing. “What would you do with me?” She asked, quiet and coy. “If you were to do such a thing?”

She came out of his embrace, taking his hand and stepped away, guiding him closer to the chaise, knowing that it was part of the fantasy too.

It wasn’t by her design, but there was a cascade of light pointed directly onto the chaise that made the area glow. Surely under that beam, the silver thread of the sheer dress would remind him of how transparent it was.

Luke turned his head away, perhaps reconsidering. But then, he looked back at her. Every nuance of his vision was there. She was the picture of both innocence and impurity. And he wanted both.

The Force drew back, subsiding for the time being, lingering on the fringes.

As she moved, he noticed her body under the fabric; he knew how soft her skin felt, how sleek those curves were under his hands.

Luke tugged his hand back, bringing her with it, back into his arms. He inhaled, smelling her perfume; a mixture of sweet and spice.

Holding her, his hand came up to stroke her cheek. Lost in her eyes, Luke blinked once, finally agreeing to save her, even though he knew it was selfish to have this indulgence.

“Do I call you ‘Liana’?” He asked, darkly and resigning.

Mara let her eyes flutter, and nodded once. If she needed to believe that she was somewhere else— that this wasn’t happening between them—then, she had to become someone else to him; not ‘Luke and Mara’… ‘Lord Skywalker and the dancer, Liana’. ‘Luke and Mara’ would never be so cruel to each other.

“Yes, Lord Skywalker.” She said sweetly lisping in a breathless voice. When she opened her eyes, she was met with the darkest pupils she had ever seen on him, but still rimmed in orange.

There were no words now, he cupped her cheek, letting his thumb roll over the velvet skin, stopping on her plump lips as she pursed against it.

He came in closer, wanting to have those lips as his own. Dipping his head, he placed his cheek to hers and kissed the side of her face ever-so gently, then again with more pressure, and again with more passion. He tilted her chin in the perfect direction to capture those lips.

Mara pulled away, and met his look as she shook her head, reminding him that this was not love, this was as it needed to be. An intimate gesture would have a larger meaning later.

Luke glared briefly, and then turned her head, choosing to draw his lips along her jawline to her earlobe.

She gasped quietly, enjoying the feel of him. Her hand reached out for his torso; lean and strong in his core. She flattened her palms on him, exploring him as if he was new to her, rediscovering him after such a long hiatus.
Moaning slightly, she felt him suckling where her neck met her collar; his tongue darted out sampling the sweetened skin.

He exhaled with a growl before biting down and pursing his lips fiercely on her, just to hear her moan for him again. And she did, delightfully distressed.

His hands had encircled her, and began to move the sheer silk around, pushing it over her encased skin. Wanting to break the barrier between them, his nails dug into the fabric, wanting to pull it from her.

Yes, this was what he wanted for the longest time, denied it, and refused it for himself. Some small part of him wanted the control over her, if only for a night, if only for a moment.

And she was something that he wanted to control; her wildness, her vivacity was in stark contrast to everyone else that he knew. He was never able to predict her next move.

He could argue it, claiming that it was some latent suppression of the Vader in him; he had denied it for so long and with so much effort, it loomed more than it should have, influencing him where it should not.

Oh, how he could count the times that he pleasured himself while he thought about what she would actually feel like, sound like… to be with her as he wanted. It would drive him to be lost in lust; not love.

Mara mewed quietly with the fervor of his lips on her skin; she couldn’t control that her body was responding to him, crying out for him too. He was still dangerous to her; he could turn on her at the slip of a hair. Perhaps that is what made him more-tempting than ever.

His hands drew up her body. The fabric of the dress may have been the finest silk, but inside, the silver thread that decorated the outside felt like small razors as it scratched the skin that touched the inside; it made her conscious of where his hands traveled, heightening the experience, and warning her.

He paused to look down to her face, and observed her, not as the woman that he loved, but as a thing of beauty, a gift, sent to him, to be used by him.

In the light, her skin glowed; pure and perfect. Her lips and her cheeks were flushed and rosy; looking past, he could see the blush on her alabaster collarbone, the freckles emerging. In her eyes were irises of darkest jade, with flecks of gold, almost drowned out by her jet-black pupils.

Searching, he took her in, looking at all of her before him. There was something so magnetic about her that kept him coming back, the same intrinsic thirst drove him constantly.

Sighing, Luke reached up and pulled the comb that held her hair in place. The waves of red-gold fire tumbled away freely, with the gasp he held in his throat. He dropped the comb, letting it fall away, and his fingers glided smoothly through the mane that fell below her chin, framing her face.

It’s still shorter than when I first met you. He thought over to her, marveling at the colour and softness, knowing that she didn’t hear but it would take his tenderness as a sign of appreciation; it had been cut during her altercation some months back, but it had grown since.

Desperately, he wanted her lips again, but it was too much to ask, and it was the wrong thing to ask of her. She was here for all the wrong reasons and the only thing that she wanted from him was not to risk himself for her.
He could feel it; the presence behind this all. It was a performance for Him, and he tried not to blame her for it. Sidious’s sneer lurked now in Luke’s mind too.

She felt small in Luke’s presence, even though he didn’t tower over her. It was his presence in the Force that made him seem bigger, stronger than anyone she knew. He was a giant to them all, dwarfing even the Emperor. It made her willing to submit to him, and him alone.

His mind was a blaze with all his thoughts, all at once. Mara could sense his arguments as to why he shouldn’t be doing this, and all his resolve on why he should. It had made his temperature rise, and his skin boil from fury, but touching that skin was like touching the sun; you still wanted its warmth even though you knew it could hurt you.

Meticulously, her fingers came to the fastening of his trousers. Her hand dipped lower, rubbing the bulge encased within the material, holding it back, holding him back. She could feel the rigid pulse through the material, hardening his erection even further.

Mara swallowed at the dry air, remembering the first time they had come together, and she was not disappointed by his size and ability. She smiled to herself and suddenly hungry for his skin, in return.

She was not supposed to enjoy this, there would be a repercussion soon, but she would delay it as long as possible, as long as the Emperor could wait to receive it.

Now, she was with Luke; her Luke, strong and tender, fierce and gentle, light and dark, hot and cold.

He had stopped his attentions to her neck and was watching her now, watching her sleek, graceful hands, taking their time to undress him.

She didn’t rush the moment, and looked into his face, he was staring at her intently, as her hands undid the fastener and loosened the waistband of his trousers, pushing it down so it hung at the merge of his groin, muscles curved in the direction of his dominance.

Hovering her hands from breaking his body free, she leaned in close as he turned his head away. One time, she placed her lips at the pulse point on his neck, and turned to look over at his pained face, and then kissed again to ease his troubles; one more kiss to relax his body, and a deeper kiss made him melt back to her.

He exhaled long and slow; the moist air dusted her bare arm, and placed his own lips gently to the available skin.

In his mind, he made his decision; this shouldn’t be loving and it shouldn’t be drawn out either. He needed to summon his guile to do this; being this tender wasn’t not going to work in his favor.

The Force that had been with them served as a warning of the precipice that impending; it was rising again, coiling itself like a snake about to strike, taking the energy from the room.

Mara froze before delivering her next kiss, and felt a change coming over him; his senses gruelling, and the storm building.

Abruptly, Mara found his arm hooked around her waist, dragging her to the end of the chaise, to the raised arm, and turned away from him.

Roughly, his hands found the neckline of the dress, and swiftly ripped it down to her bare shoulders. The sound of the fabric and stitches giving way, shocked her. She crossed her hands protectively on her chest to hold the dress from falling off her frame.
Luke’s breathing was ragged and animalistic; she could feel his eyes looking at her from over her shoulder.

He recoiled. His gaze shouldn’t be this wanton. He shouldn’t be looking at the creamy mounds of the top of her perfect breasts.

But he was…

Because…They were his; she was his.

Impulsively, he pushed her hands away and replaced them with one of his own, gripping and pumping the flesh in his strong hold, while holding her around the waist.

Mara moaned out, surprised by him, and surprised by her own reaction to him; feeling the throb in her core.

Her nipples perked involuntarily through the silk gauze; tight and sensitive, they were basking in the ferocity of his actions.

He switched to the other breast, breathing in time with his grip, beginning to rock his pelvis up against her backside.

She shifted and tried to move away, just out of instinct, but she couldn’t deny the ache and the ripple of thrill in her body. She began panting and holding her breath as the swell of sensation began to take hold; it was building in her core, the flush, the heat.

Impatiently, he switched his hand from clasping at her breast to gathering up the material of her dress, fighting to get at her skin.

Querulously, Mara found herself pushed forward; her hands braced her from falling too far and caught the arm of the chaise.

With a violent tug on her dress, she heard and felt the fabric being torn from her waist down.

The cool air touched her backside briefly before she felt it replaced with his searing hand. His nails grazed the cheek of her buttocks before it dug into her flesh, grasping a handful and squeezing it to a pinch; not playful, not teasing but aggressively and possessively.

With a jerk, she was pulled slightly away from the chaise, keeping her hands on the armrest, her hips jutted out and back, backing up into him as she bent forward.

She could feel the cold fastener of his trousers on her skin, the rough touch of the material at the fly, and with a jostle, she felt the change when he forced himself free of those restraints, and hot skin was pressed against her backside; his thickness vowed to be pressed inside her, soon.

Luke paused, admiring her shape, letting his hands knead the available flesh. His palms came to rest on either side of her hips, and waited for the abundant surge in his desire to past that teetering edging of no return.

Hostilely, he kicked her legs apart, separating her thighs and making her accessible to him. He sucked in air sharply, seeing the glistening lips of her sweet cunny.

She was already partially wet; he could feel her tremble with anticipation, made from fear and angst. But he knew that she was not ready yet, and if he would take her now, he would relinquish all of the control that he had left.
Instead, he was on intent on preparing her for the eventuality of their joining. *Pain*, he reminded himself, *it has be dispensed with pain.*

_Gods_, he didn’t know how long he would withstand holding back, keeping his desires in check. So, in a hurried manner, he thrusted the top of his hand between the slickened lips of her labia, pushing them apart, butting up against the fork of the hood of her swollen clit.

Mara bucked back as he held her firmly in place with his opposite hand at her hip. Moving his dominant hand back and forth, slowly, irritating her clit, making it dance, making his hand wet with her juices.

She whimpered and panted in time as he coaxed her wetness. Rhythmically, he began to rock her hips as he gained speed.

Then, one finger, followed by a second, entered her. As they dipped inside her depths, she felt them separate and open her more, widening her.

She could feel it building in her, her body wanted a release, begging for a release now.

<No!> Luke ordered as he touched her mind. <You are not allowed to come.>

The urgency in his demand astonished her, and she bit her lip, clamping her mouth shut from revealing how close she was to her own punctuation; she tampered it down by his command.

And then suddenly he stopped, retracting his hand; Mara whined at the absence from the arousal.

She was at a loss to predict his next action, but knew there was a culmination, a payment that had yet to be met.

If anything, she could sense that the Emperor was watching with anticipation of his young proteges; seeing their decent.

With a surprise, she gasped as she felt Luke’s thumb encircle her puckered entrance. Her eyes shot open, staring into the shadows of her room, listening to his ragged breathing, feeling the energy building.

She knew his intended destination as she sensed that he was rounding the taut hole with her own nectar on his hand.

Everything until now had been so heightened, the thought of feeling this too, would be too much.

“You offered it to me once.” Luke’s sultry voice came into her ear. “You thought it would be tighter than your pussy.” He said in deep tones. “You wondered if you could take it…take me inside you.” His hissed.

Mara’s mind flashed back to that night on Tanaab; their night of loving-making, when she danced for him as a cantina girl in that lurid brothel.

She convulsed with little gasps, imagining the idea of his girth inside her. If he entered her where he wanted, then yes, it should be enough pain to satisfy the Emperor. She couldn’t help but think of the outcome.

Luke wasn’t asking permission; the tip of his thumb pushed at her anus, testing the resistance.

Unconsciously, her body started to seize, uncharacteristically nervous.
He must have sense it. In her ear, his voice was seductive. “Will this be your first time… *like this?*” Mara shuddered; yes, it would be… she had offered the option to other men, but none had taken her up on the offer, and none had lived much longer after the offer was made either.

Her bottom lip began to quiver.

“I want to have you where no one else has had you before.” Luke growled. Again, his thumb pushed at the little taut opening. “*Is this mine?*” He asked with venom in his voice.

She nodded her head fretfully slow, acknowledging that he would be the first man to ever enter her there.

“Good.” He said acutely, satisfied with her answer and her apprehension.

His hand made another pass at her moistened vulva, slicking it in her essence and applying it liberally around the tiny aperture.

She braced herself as she felt him adjust into position; putting the head of his rock-hard cock at apex of her very opening.

Swallowing the air dry, she muffled her moan as he pushed his head past the bridge of the ring of muscles. She wanted to move away as it stung from the pressure.

His hands moved to hold her by her elbows back to keep her from shifting, causing her to lean forward, as he pushed even farther, taking in half-way down his shaft.

And he stopped, waiting for her body to adjust, waiting for her muscles to relax, and riding out the discomfort he could feel from her.

Mara sobbed once and then stifled it, being aware of the cause of her ache. He was thick, and the initial entrance felt like it was tearing her in two. The undulations flowed through her; ripple after ripple of agony.

In the Force, Sidious celebrated, dancing with atrocious glee, gloating his win, over her and over the Jedi’s willpower.

But Luke was experiencing an anguish of a different kind. He rolled his eyes, feeling the euphoria of the constriction around him; it was like nothing he had ever felt before.

Added to the bliss, was the feeling that she was completely his, not sharing this experience with anyone but him. He had asserted, and inserted himself where none had been before, and he adored it.

So much so, that he was tempted to start his further declaration on her and push deeper into her before he knew that she was ready.

It was his hunger that he was feeding and, *Gods, how he wanted it.*

The tension was starting to leave her body as she accepted the intrusion. Rearing back, he pulled himself almost out of her before he entered her slowly again, going deeper, submersing himself.

She moaned in protestation as he stopped, once burrowed inside her. Panting, she could do nothing to fight it. This was the Emperor’s will and Luke’s desire.

He withdrew and entered her again; this time smoothly, without obstruction.
Mara still bucked back and struggled; it throbbed and stretched her tight ass.

Without indication as to why, she found his hand inside her hair, yanking and wrenching her up. Her back arched to accommodate the movement; he didn’t like it that she was resisting.

“Don’t fight it…Liana.” Luke paused, remembering where they should be. “I can make it hurt far more than it does right now… and I promise that I will, if you fight it.” He warned.

He began to move holding onto a handful of her hair; she could feel his withdraw and then the languid push back inside, and then repeating. Each movement was compounded by his weight and the tugging at her hair. Each stroke was a lance into her unaccustomed body causing her to gasp and grunt from the struggle.

As he entered her, he inhaled through gritted teeth, and as he withdrew, he exhaled deeply, and fighting to pierce her core. It was glorious, the feeling and sensitivity of it all, and her…

For her… his mind echoed. He could sense her pain in the Force. And although he knew it was something that she was deigned to experience, he wanted this moment to be something beyond the likes that she would never have again, with anyone.

Losing his fight with his patience, his pace quickened. As he began grunt, she began to whine quietly.

*Oh Gods, he was filling her.* Mara felt the shiver in her arms, trying to keep her upright, until a new sensation started to distract her from the fatigue.

Between her legs, the sensation commenced; the twittering, the fluttering, the tease. Her body was being roused in pleasure; her clit started to judder, as if lips were suckling on it, as if an attentive finger was shaking it. And then, from inside, a mass started to swell, filling her svelte pussy.

Soon, invisible hands gripped her breasts as roughly and with the same command as he had; pinching at her engorged nipples.

The heat inside her was building; it was almost too much to feel all at once.

“Luke” she breathed out in her mumblings; knowing that he had summoned the Force to do these things to her body, pleasuring her as he pummelled her.

“You’re on the verge now, aren’t you?” He asked breathlessly, barely making the words out. “You want to moan and call out for me, don’t you?” He questioned sardonically. “You want to feel the rush and pulse all over your body?” He inquired with a cruel tone in his voice.

The pace of all the activity fell in-line with each other, and she could feel the divine agony of it all. And all of it was gaining momentum.

“Oh Gods” she murmured, through the pain and delight. “Oh Gods” She said at a louder volume, as it was fostering her torment. “Oh Gods!” she bellowed as it was threatening to overwhelm her, about to withhold her breath, waiting on it.

“I forbid it!” He said slowly, in a volume that hadn’t increased, but the walls reverberated the sound back at her. He slowed all of the paces of the devotion that he was performing on her.

Mara stopped her iterations, and clamped her mouth shut. His power distracted her from what her body was feeling.
“You are not allowed to feel it.” Luke ordered in a dark voice. “…Not until I say so.”

She swallowed waiting on his instructions. He had once been commanding with her, but that was playful in nature, now, she sensed that if his orders weren’t followed…

“If you climax without my permission…” He warned. “There will be consequences.” He paused. “Do you understand, Liana?”

“Y-y-yes…” she stammered and swallowed; moving within the confines of the position that he had put her in. “…Lord Skywalker.” She whispered.

Without missing a beat, he resumed his activities; harsher and at the same pace when he was at full bore. The slapping sound of their bodies was intermingled between whimpers, whines and rutting.

Bearing into her, he leaned forward, and replaced the attentions of his Force-induced hand, with one of his own, torturing her clit, wanting to be the total master over her body.

It was he who climaxed first, erupting inside her snug fissure with molten seed, but refusing to stop and embrace the moment. He still pounded her relentlessly, knowing that she would need to capitulate sooner than later as he felt that she had been on the verge for quite some time, and knowing that his pace would have to dwindle soon too.

“Now…” He panted with an open mouth behind her, at her ear. “Now, you are allowed to come.” He ordered.

Without another moment slipping by, Mara’s body relaxed and the convulsions came on as she willfully held her breath and released.

Starting in her core, within the first few pulses of her vulva, he moved his hand away as the fluid came from her in hard spurts, seeping from out of her, down her inner legs, into both the fabric of the chaise and what was left of her dress.

He felt the hot clear liquid come from her, proud that he was the one to bring her to this level, proud that she didn’t do this for any before him, and proud that she did it for him.

The shiver travelled up and shook her torso as she let out a deep-throated moan; it was both pleasure and pain.

Her body had confused her mind as to what she was feeling; she wanted more but hated the idea of what she had to go through in order to get it. It was excruciatingly raw and electrifyingly rousing at the same time.

And finally, her legs shook from strain, from exhaustion, from holding her body in place.

Luke had pulled out of her, to watch the results of his labour. Lord and Master, Lover and Laborer had brought her here. He had felt what she had felt, feeling that she had served her purpose.

He breathed hard, wanting to catch her as he watched her lose control and slip to the floor, humbled, shamed, and chastened by him.

She whimpered, on the verge of crying, her hair covering her face, the gown ripped to shreds on her back, redden handprints marked where he held her down.

Luke swallowed, knowing that he had to stand back, just a bit longer….detracting himself from any sort of feeling he could have for her. He turned his face away from witnessing it; she wouldn’t see
when his eyes opened to slits, the fully red and glowing irises that he bore.

< Master…> He reached out, with the Darkness surging in him. < There… it is done.>

His eyes rolled back, feeling the Emperor’s satisfied, sadistic mind touch back.

Mara, from the floor, looked up to the invisible presence that was in the room with them too. She felt it.

Darth Sidious was pleased; He had managed to destroy her vanity, and his control. He was very pleased indeed. She felt the wave of His pleasure wash over her as she slumped down, gaining more space on the floor, wanting to hide from it.

</ Rest My child /> Palpatine whispered to her sweetly, as if He hadn’t been the reason for her to suffered, as if He hadn’t been the one who wanted a dark apprentice.

It lingered there, in the room, His tangible presence, as if there were three persons, and not two, and then, it dissolved.

It was gone for the time being; the Darkness had dissipated, leaving those to deal with the result.

Luke released the breath that he was holding, gaining back his control, and his spirit, knowing what he had done. He breathed heavy a few more times before he rapidly descended to the floor and scooped her up in his arms, incoherently begging her forgiveness for all of it.

Mara gulped, bringing her mind back, coddled in Luke’s arms again, watching his mouth move, seeing the pain in his eyes as they returned back to the brightest blue, and then the tears that formed in those eyes as he kissed her temples, calling her name.

“Mara…” He called, mortified by his actions. “Mara…” He whispered as he rocked her. “Mara…” He called delicately, kissing the side of her face as he carried her into his room.

Between the two rooms, the door slid shut as he left that world, her room, behind, and took her away.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

**

First off, let me be quite clear, in no uncertain terms, I do not take the idea of “rape/sexual assault” lightly. So I feel the need that I might have to defend this chapter and my rationale behind it.

Did rape/sexual assault occur? – yes, yes it did. I define “rape/sexual assault” as having any form of predatory advances placed on a person, unwillingly.

But in this case, do I think that Luke was the rapist? – no… and let me tell you why.

I think, in this case, both Luke and Mara were the victims, and I know that the
perpetrator is Palpatine/Sidious… because, I wrote him that way.

Let’s also be clear, that at no time did he “take over” Luke’s body, but Luke was still just the vessel for Palpatine’s will… he was just along for the ride. And although it was vicious what he did to Mara, Luke did have her consent to do it to her. We have to keep this in mind.

Palpatine, however, was punishing her… and then punishing them both, using the other for this vengeance. A "punishment" never denotes consent. He did not have Mara’s consent, and encouraged the outcome of what was being done to her against her will. He did not have Luke’s consent to harass him, in a sexual nature, as he did.

I also believe that it is “sexual assault” to include yourself, uninvited or unwittingly, in someone else’s sexual actions –or- to misdirect your intentions so that you derive sexual gratification from an unwilling/unwitting person. For example, in case one; to stand, stare or encourage a violent sexual act. For example, in case two; conduct yourself in a manner that you receive sexual gratification but the other party isn’t aware that you behaved with them to receive the pleasure (i.e., someone with a foot fetish works at a shoes store and while helping a customer, they become aroused in order to complete a sexual act at a later time).

Rape/sexual assault should never have an “arousing” aspect to it. And I wrote this chapter, specifically, to be a dark fantasy with a power shift between the two of them, and to be erotic.

If I was to write a rape/sexual assault scene ( and I’m not saying that I can’t or won’t), believe me, the feeling that you would get after reading it would not be the same as you are feeling right now.

You should be a bit aroused yourself by the idea of a hedonistic Luke, and a submissive Mara… and not repulsed. (well, maybe a little repulsed… if you are not too keen on anal intercourse… but certainly twitchy at the other things that were happening in this chapter… I mean, come on… a hot, commanding Luke? who couldn’t get a case of the screaming thigh sweats for that?).

I’d like to hear your thoughts on this chapter… and keep it polite… I can take criticism so long as it doesn’t come with malice aforethought.

If the feedback that I get suggests that I should dial it back a bit… then I am willing to rewrite this chapter. However, once you see where it is going, then you might understand why I made the decision to write this chapter, this way.

Please, don’t be shy. I appreciate all comments.

Thank you for listening.

**
The Prepotence – Part 2

Chapter Summary

Quote: “Do you think that I don’t understand Darkness, Luke? After all this time?” She stopped and stared at him and inhaled once.

Characters: Mara, Luke, Palpatine, Pestage

**

Chapter Notes

Thanks everyone for the comments on the last chapter, and for being so patient for this one. Sorry for the delay – we've have results from the forest fires and British Columbia which has kept me out of my computer/sewing room because of the smoke.

I have this chapter, and then another fast on the heels of this one.

When last we left our heroes… they were covered in shame and sex juice.

Well, it hasn’t gotten much better since then, but if you skipped the previous chapter, then you can sigh at this one, and enjoy it.

This will be a SMUT-FEST, but of a different calibre…and as always, some plot…a lot of plot, exactually. There are a bunch of plot bunnies floating around this one from “Parallel Paradoxes” and “Defining Destiny”… Try to read some in between the smut, okay?

Take a deep breath, and then start to read.

**

Byss; The Citadel; Private Residence

It was all a blur; lost in ecstasy, buried in the pain, rooted in the strain on their emotions.

Mara lost the realization of what was happening to her; from her moments on the floor, then in his arms, in his room, then in the shower as the warm water ran down her naked body, having the dress removed from her form in a rush; he mumbled incoherently through it all.

A towel padded her down and bundled her up. A robe was placed around her and he lifted her again, holding her, and now rocking her on the chaise in his room.

Gratefully, Mara shivered, huddled up against him, trying to take in the warmth from his body.

And then…there were no words, and it was quiet.
With the exception of the sound of his mumbling, it was quiet in a sense that there was not another mind between them; the air had gone silent and the other foreboding presence had lifted.

Something had occurred that neither of them had felt in a long time; they were alone. There was no other influence around them.

Luke was petting her hair and holding her tightly to him. She didn’t try to block him out, even though his energy was still erratic and disjointed.

This sort of repercussion was not new to her. Perhaps she had grown accustom to any of Palpatine’s ploys and tactics that they had little affect on her past the moment from when they occurred. It was strange to think that this was what she accustomed to the precipice, the always waiting, the ‘behind every corner’ sort feeling that came with the day to day living in an Imperial world.

Luke was not.

Although her body hurt, and her mind was slightly spiraled, she shifted to look up at the man who was holding her now.

He had tucked his chin to his chest as he spoke quietly to her, still rocking her in his arms, not wanting to look at her, not wanting to see the result of his actions.

She knew that she needed to break him out of this, his mire, his wallow, if he didn’t want to sink deeper than he needed to.

It became clear to her that Palpatine never wanted a ‘Light Emperor’ to rule beside Him; He wanted an apprentice who was just as Dark as He was. And there was no measure that He was not willing to take to get there.

Sighing, “He’s gone.” she said, aiming to reach her normal volume, but her voice cracked. “He’s gone now.” She repeated, trying to catch Luke’s attention, distracting him.

He shifted his head, looking up, surprised that she was speaking to him. He lifted his face higher when he saw that she was looking directly at him, not avoiding him.

Luke gulped as he saw her face; her wet hair was matted in sections, her makeup was in disarray, and the lashes that surrounded her jewel eyes were still wet and clumped in tiny sections from where she almost cried.

“He’s gone into hibernation.” Mara reduced her volume when she saw that his eyes were concentrated on her and what she was saying.

He drew in his brows, frowning for a moment until the words registered with him. Then, he relaxed his face, just looking at her, and nodded solemnly.

She shifted a bit, to free her hand, and come up and touch his cheek; a tender gesture, because, she still loved him.

Looking at him, he was not ready to return to the farm boy that she adored; his eyes, however blue, were reddened by his emotions, and his features were sunken with concern.

“We’re probably still being watched, but…” She said quietly, “…He’s not here.”

For a moment his eyes wavered, as if he was sensing around them, seeing that it was true, not feeling the Emperor’s presence. Silently, Luke nodded, casting his eyes down again, wanting to go back into
his sorrow.

If this was anyone else. If someone, other Luke, had violated her body, she wouldn’t have allowed it. She wouldn’t have allowed herself to feel pity for him.

But this was Luke; the man who loved her with all his heart, or so she wanted to believe. So, she wanted to be close to him, wanted him to hold her as no one else could.

She had no intention of letting him. Mara shifted her weight and made her hand available. It tremored as it cupped his cheek and directed his eyes back to hers.

Exhausted, physically and emotionally, she still had the sense to come closer to him and pressed her lips to his.

Reluctant at first, he seemed surprised and whimpered at the moment that her lips touched his. Gradually, he eased his body to hold her more-tenderly, loosening his crushing hold to keep her close; the desperation faded, receded, as if it had never had been there.

A real kiss; the moment that they had longed for, hoped for, and finally succeeded. Taking each purse, one by one, and the touch of the other’s skin, not for granted, it was woefully beautiful to feel the contact of the person who could bring penitence to your soul.

<I don’t deserve this.> His mind whispered. <I don’t deserve you.>

She pulled away slowly, resting her head to his. And just breathing.

He swallowed hard, holding back another wave of emotion that threatened to crash but stopped and felt her calmness. In such a close contact, he found the pace to match his breathing with hers.

Luke felt Mara shiver and then he realized that she was cold; her exposed skin was dimpling in patches. The short robe that he had found for her still left skin exposed.

He broke away from their huddled-mass to look around them for a suitable blanket, or any covering that would keep the shiver away. In his actions, when he had brought them into his room, he had come to the nearest piece of furniture, the long banquette beside the holo-chess game, and stopped there.

There was nothing suitable around, and it was just a reminded that this was not a home. A home would have had something of comfort, something that reminded guest that their host cared.

His fingers fumbled as he tried to bring the material of the robe over her skin. Mara watched him, and then stopped him again from trying to make amends for an unfathomable situation.

“Luke…” She called quietly and waited for him.

When he stopped, when he looked up, his eyes searched her face with questions he wanted to ask, but couldn’t, not just yet.

But she heard his first question; Why? -why did He want me to do this you?

“It was necessary.” She said blankly, and then, looking away sharply; something had caught her senses. Something odd, yet familiar was around them; not a presence but something else that lingered and threatened.

“Necessary?” He repeated with horror. How could something so vile be necessary? His chin
dropped again, unable to comprehend what she had learned to recognise as ‘normal’ in her world.

Mara stared off into the room, looking directly at the places where a holo-recorder would have been placed. It seemed too ‘set up’ for her like; and her senses spiked. Her eyes darted rapidly until she saw the faint glisten of a minute lens focused on her, on them, placed on one of the decorative pendulum lights.

Without blinking, she stared directly at it, so that whoever was watching knew that she knew, too. “I deserved it. I disobeyed Him by turning to you in the throne room… by communicating with you, by asking for you to remove me from His service. It was my punishment. I should have known better. His Majesty has been very gracious and generous to me. I should be a better servant to Him.” She said in monotone, but with solemn countenance that it would be accepted as real.

She tilted her head to the side to see if the lens would close, and it did. With a sigh, Mara relaxed back into his arms.

Oblivious to what had just happen, Luke shook his head. “Is this what it was like for you to live under His rule? Before…” His words cracked as he came to all the implications that he never wanted the answers to, as his gaze narrowed, still searching and marvelling that she was able to come out from under it… maybe she wouldn’t be able to, this time.

He had never asked her before, never truly understood, never wanted to ask. He had never considered what a crucible it was like to live under Sidious… no, not live… survive.

Mara shrugged and shook her head, resigning to her side of the truth of the life that she knew. “Partially… the only difference is that I wanted to be under His rule.” She confessed, knowing that it was the absolute truth, at one time.

Luke’s sad eyes watched as he listened, knowing that there was more.

“I’ve had over five years to break out from under this way of thinking… I never realized how scared I was when I lived in the palace… I only lived for His praise.” She whispered her explanation. “I used to think this was… normal.”

It was all she could think of to say.

She shivered again unexpectedly; Luke blinked back into the immediate reality, she was cold and he needed to do something to her, for her, so that she wouldn’t feel this way.

True to his nature, he collected her in his arms again, lifting her. He walked over to his bed; the covers opened for him at his will, and he gently put her under the bedding, and tucked her in.

Mara watched him and seeing that he was genuinely interested in making her comfortable when all she wanted was to be with him. “I’m not made of sugar.” She whispered, seeing the familiar look of concern on his face.

“I know. I still haven’t figured you out, yet.” He said, still quietly as he sat down on the edge of the bed, beside her.

The corners of her mouth tugged into a grin, feeling like they couldn’t put up this pretense any longer, and then relaxed, realising that he liked the idea of taking care of her, even if she didn’t need it; it was his way, his gift, of trying to make up for all that transpired.

She could feel it; he wanted to return to the same sort of balance that they had between them in the days before Coruscant. It should be an easy thing to do, but was it even possible? And Mara knew
that she wouldn’t the one who needed to break that wall. So, she waited.

Luke seemed to be contented just to be with her, for the time being.

He was no longer erratic as he had been. Now, he was just taking comfort in the fact that she was close to him. He needed it to ground himself in her presence.

And Mara could feel him too, in the Force, his presence, strong, bold, determined, resilient as ever. He wasn’t the bright light anymore though, and that worried her. His spirit was damaged, similar when she picked him up after his mission on Ovanis; hollow.

“Mara…” He mumbled her name under his breath, “… I’m so very and truly sor-”

“Sorry?” She asked, cutting him off, stopping him. “Be sorry later… we only have tonight.” Pointedly, she reminded him that their time together was limited. Sitting up, she flipped over the covers off to her opposite side, opening the bed, inviting him to come and join her.

His eyes widened, looking at the vacant space, surprised that she was asking for his company and then back at her face to make sure that it was something that she truly wanted.

Mara swallowed, and tried to soften the look in her eyes; he was just as much a victim of the twisted mind of Palpatine as she was. She nodded, confirming her invitation.

Luke sighed and dropped his head again, paused and then looked up at her with his azure eyes, and nodded silently, with a tug in the corner of his mouth.

Getting up from the corner that he had situated himself in, he made his way around to the side of the bed that waited for him.

As he walked, he discarded the clothing that was left on his body; dropping his tunic and taking a moment to leave behind his trousers. He looked almost like the bashful farmboy in his boxer briefs, but they would be suitable sleeping attire for the night.

Watching as he sat down on the edge of the bed, she saw his shoulders slump; he sighed, and decided to join her.

His robotic behavior perplexed her as Luke lay down on his back, pulled the covers up on himself, and stared up at the canopy over his bed, keeping his space.

Mara rolled to her side to face him, under the lush coverings, hoped that he would mirror her; she missed being close to him. She watched as he simply stared at nothing, but she could sense that his mind was trying to process all that was happening around him.

She nestled into the pillow, and waited, trying to bring calm into herself, not replaying the events that had occurred in her room. As she tried not to think about it, it became harder to push those thoughts from her mind. She had forgotten the primary rule of having any physical punishment or unpleasant task forced upon her or her body. She had forgotten to disconnect herself from being present.

It had become a habit to imagine that she was somewhere else, that it wasn’t happening to her; it made it easier to endure until it was over. It had become a coping mechanism, another type of mental wall that none could invade.

But without it in place, she could feel everything that was happening to her, to her body, to her spirit.

“Is that why you had those nightmares?... On Coruscant… when you first arrived?” Luke’s voice
broke her introspection. “And all the twisted things He did to you?”

He was still looking up at the canopy, without looking at her.

“You forget that I did things too.” Mara said with astuteness, still unable to entirely forgive herself for her passed life. “I wasn’t afraid of the dreams. I was afraid of who I was in those dreams.”

It was hard to imagine a time when they slept together, peacefully, holding onto each other, taking comfort in each other; keeping their own nightmares at bay - and it worked.

Now, he was ready. Luke shifted, and turned in her direction. His face still portrayed his torn emotions; he hadn’t learned the fine art of going to stone as it was a necessity to preserve some small portion of yourself.

He rested his head on his pillow, and his hand, out of habit, rested on the pillow in between them, closing a gap.

There used to be a space between them as they slept, only touching when they were making contact through the Force, to keep a platonic distance. Even in those days, it was unspoken, but they knew that they shared something special between them; a connection, a sharing of the Force.

With a sigh and tight grin, Mara snaked her hand from under the cover to join his, and place her hand on top, touching him. She felt him flinch, wanting to pull away, feeling like he didn’t warrant this tender touch.

Instead, she inched herself closer to him, coming to the middle of the bed, the border that would equalize the space between them.

Luke turned his head, looking away, staring blankly again. “I don’t recognise who I’ve become.” Then, he whispered. “I’m finding it hard to remember all the things I’ve done since I’ve arrived here… since that day… it blurs together.”

Mara cleared her throat, only to draw his attention back to her. She waited until his eyes returned to meet hers. “That’s what He wants.” She sighed. “It’s part of His game, part of His ploy. You become so disorientated that you lose the ability to fight back.”

Now, it was his turn to inch his body closer to her, feeling that she understood, and now, he was beginning to understand.

“You are like a tapestry to Him. You have so many strands for Him to pull into place. It’s not one strand that He pulls… it’s many.” She said. “Strands you didn’t even know you had… until you try retrieve the first one, but it was the second, or third that He truly wanted to play, that you let sneak past.”

“Then, He has used you so many times, that you don’t even notice that you’re being used again, and again… and again.”

Luke shook his head on his pillow, trying to unwind the puzzle.

She paused, wondering if she should hold back, but knew it would only makes sense in context. “You’re an open book for Him… the playground is boundless, and you’re a powerful toy.”

“But, clearly, He has picked His favourite strands to pull.” She said quietly, looking away from him, ashamed that Palpatine had found her strands, now too, and was weaving her into place.
Their eyes met and he nodded, understanding.

“He did find them.” Luke said, a sadness in his eyes. “I let Him find them… I didn’t mean to, but He found them. I thought I had built up enough of a tolerance…”

Mara moved closer to the middle of the bed, showing him that she accepted him, and being able to accept his deficiencies.

“He found every one of them.” Luke said, numbly. “He used my past… my father… everything… He used you, to get to me.” He shook his head. “And, I let Him… I fall for it every time.”

“I don’t have enough stamina not to react to it.” He didn’t respond to her, he stayed where he was, not coming closer. “Palpatine sparks my anger, and I give in… angry at Him, for being so blatant… angry at myself for being so visible.”

Waiting, Luke breathed through his mouth, calming himself. “And I just sink deeper, into the Darkness.”

“It’s not a hole that I can’t fill anymore. It’s a chasm that gets deeper and wider.” He sighed. “It’s eating me from the inside out… every action, every lie that I tell others and tell myself.”

“I tell myself that I’m saving lives, by avoiding conflict, but at the same time, if they resist, I have to take action against them… I’ve become the attack vonskr for Him… I’ve become… my father.” Luke squinted, looking at nothing.

She wanted to stop him right there, pointing out that most of those that he was sent to ‘bring into line’, were also enemies of the New Republic too, but he probably wouldn’t believe her.

“You are not Vader.” Mara said sternly. It was the truth; Luke had eons to go before he reached that level of depravity.

He shook his head again, looking at her. “Mara, you don’t know My Darkness.” His voice wavered with emotion.

His hand started to slide away from under her touch, drawing it back to him, not wanting her to show him any type of kindness.

Mara huffed through her nostrils, amazed at him. “Do you think that I don’t understand Darkness, Luke? After all this time?” She stopped and stared at him.

It wasn’t a contest, but he spent only few months under the spell of the Emperor- she had spent years. And spending more years trying to forget. She had to put this in perspective for him.

Quietly, she forced the words out in a slow, icy tone. “Men still climax when you ignite a lightsaber through their brains as you kriff them, Luke.”

He stopped and looked at her. Shock went over his visage which faded with some receding horror, and he saw that she didn’t blink, didn’t flinch from the revelation. It was just as it was with her… nothing more.

Swallowing hard, Mara began to remove her hand and move away from him. He now had just as much of reason to shun her, possibly more so.

Luke caught it; he held her hand before it could disappear. He wasn’t going to do it. He wasn’t going to reject her… certainly not, if she wasn’t going to reject him.
Instead, he brought himself closer to the middle of the bed and rolled slightly onto his back. His arms opened, offering them up for her comfort, and his reprieve- if she would allow it. His eyes begged that she would entertain the thought.

With a little gasp in her chest, Mara pulled herself across the meridian, and went to his side, finding her nook in his shoulder, resting her head, resting her hand in the middle of his chest, finding her place in his heart.

She nestled in, feeling him kiss her forehead. Closing her eyes, she savoured in his presence, holding her tightly, listening to his heartbeat in his chest, feeling the rise and fall of his breathing.

Forgiveness was given without being asked for, at this point. It was useless; there would be more transgressions to come until they found away to leave this place, and come out from under the control of the Emperor. To forgive for every instance from now until that moment was pointless.

Luke’s body was relaxing against her, settling in to the familiarity that came with holding her. They could be anywhere, and as long as they could hold each other, it felt like a home of sorts.

Tilting his cheek to the top of her head, he nuzzled into the red-gold curls, placing his chin on her forehead.

This was something that they had not done for a long time and it returned easily.

A thought occurred to her. The corners of Mara’s lips twitched as she thought that it may have been a while since they set the ‘Dankin Plan’ into effect; their own unique way of communicating through the distances that separated them, a method to get all the necessities of shared information that they needed to.

There would be an unspoken line that both of them knew they couldn’t breach, things that couldn’t share, but for the things that they could share, they would take the chance now to do it.

Since he was so concerned about her, Mara decided that she should be the one to break the ice.

“She’s waiting out the war in the Rim… hiding.”

Luke’s senses seemed surprised that the smuggler chief would take such an action. He didn’t have anything of equal value to tell her, so he just squeezed her, knowing that she was concerned for her boss and friend… her family.

He felt a twinge of reproach in her before he heard it. “I traded your lightsaber – for safe keeping- in exchange for a kyber crystal to make my own lightsaber.”

“I thought that there were too many relic hunters out there that think that I have it.” Mara explained. “And…” She paused. “It never really felt like me.” She finished quietly, fearing that it might hurt his feelings.
“I started reading Kenobi’s journal and tried to follow your notes on how to make my own saber.” She heard him snort softly, amused and proud of her.

Mara shifted and looked up to his face to see his clear eyes. “I felt a… connection… to the crystal. It felt right.” She explained.

Luke’s lips twitched to a grin and he kissed her forehead, accepting that it was the right thing to do; she had made the right decision to protect his father’s lightsaber as well as begin her path to training as a Jedi. It gave him hope to hear this from her. She had been hesitant to accept a future as being a Jedi. Maybe this was starting to change.

Her cheek twitched. “But I keep failing at it… my circuits keep getting fried.” She growled at her mistakes. “The emitter won’t ignite and shuts down the capacitor before it even heats up.”

He snorted, this time a bit louder, appreciating being like this. “So did mine, until…” He raised his eyebrows, and tilted his chin down, looking her in the eye, knowing that she was missing the important and necessary step of reaching out in the Force in order to complete a functioning lightsaber.

Mara narrowed her eyes, just in case he was thinking of lecturing her on the subject; she knew where she was at fault and didn’t need him to point it out. “Don’t enjoy this.” She growled again, and tapped him in the middle of the chest, knowing that he too, failed several times before finishing his own lightsaber.

Inhaling the scent of her perfume, and exhaling calmly, he knew it was his turn.

“Lando has invited us to come and see his newest venture when it’s completed.” Luke said, knowing it was a pipe-dream, and just a distraction in in their conversation. “He’s an investor in a luxury casino on Canto Bight.”

Her face brightened.

“You said that you never knew what it was to take a vacation… this could be our chance.” He kissed her forehead again.

She nestled back down on his chest. “You know that I’m bad at cards.” She mumbled; there was one of her secrets that he held in check.

“I know, but I’m smart enough not to mention it, to anybody.” Luke squeezed her again. He was sure that he heard her mumbled something like ‘better not’.

He could feel her getting a little somber, knowing that what she had to say next might upset him, but she had decided that she tell him anyway.

“I saw Han and Leia… and the new baby… Ben.” Mara said, sounding wistful, and enjoyed remembering what it was to be reminded that there was innocence in the galaxy. “He’s so small… so fragile… beautiful.” Her tone softened. “I’ve never seen such a newborn baby before.”

Luke’s chest moved sharply as he gulped at the air upon hearing that he was an uncle again. After a moment, he asked quietly, “Can I see?”

Nodding, she closed her eyes, reaching out in her senses with the Force to find him and touch his mind.

She could sense him; as damaged as he was, she could do it, but his spirit didn’t have the same draw,
after being touched by the Emperor’s will, as it did before. It was as if a wall had come up and surrounded the once shining star that was his essence. The star had dimmed, tainted.

This was once a simple thing, sharing images between their minds; they did it so often when they dreamed together, but she could sense that he knew that she would feel the change in him and was a bit reluctant.

Nevertheless, Mara pushed past her own hesitation and showed him what she remembered of the visit with his sister, prior to leaving for Byss.

The baby, fresh and new, mass of dark hair, the plump pink lips suckling on air, little hands balled up into tiny fists, sleeping peacefully in the bassinette beside his mother.

Luke exhaled hard, his shoulders relaxed, taking comfort that his new nephew was safe and healthy and his sister too.

Mara opened her eyes first and saw the pained expression on his face. And why shouldn’t he feel pain? - he had missed sharing in this experience with his family.

“I felt him.” Luke mumbled. “I felt his birth and his existence into the Force.” He said with his eyes still closed, holding onto the image that she had shared.

She nodded, even though he didn’t see it. “I felt him too.” She whispered. And she did. She could vividly recall being able to sense when another Force-user was being born, only this time, instead of the ‘tiny pop’, as she had once described it; it felt like a graze on the skin of her arm, and more-relevant to her.

Luke exhaled again, clearing his senses, trying to bring calm into himself rather than more guilt and regret. He opened his eyes, looking over to her.

It was his turn again, in the conversation. And there was no place to go but down. She was right and they only had tonight.

“He has made me His emissary.” Luke announced quietly. “That’s what Palpatine calls me. His Jedi Emissary.” He hissed, resenting the title. “That’s my place. To bargain, barter, and beg for systems to join us.”

His hand came up and rubbed his face; just thinking about his duties was not pleasant. “He stakes my reputation on His will and His demands.”

Mara suspected that a great deal of the ‘bargaining’ came at the point of a lightsaber; a choice that Luke never liked using but knew the necessity of it.

“There’s so much poison in the galaxy.” He said. “One system will not be involved if another system’s offer is greater—and they want proof.” He maligned. “Another world will not lend any of the ships unless the debt is paid by a different system.”

“I hate politics.” He sighed. “I’m not good at it… Leia is… she likes it, but not me.”

She grimaced. “So does Palpatine- He secretly hates it too.” Mara shifted, uncomfortable to discuss it, but she knew the truth. “He likes moving the people, playing them off each other, but He hates the mechanics and the necessary wagering.” She said quietly. “Why do you think He ordered you to do it?”

Luke looked over to her.
“He hates the people of the galaxy so much that He would rather wipe them all out, and have them start again, being subservient to Him rather than have all these small quarrels.” She continued. “It is also why He hates alien species so much. He doesn’t understand their logic, culture or thought-process… doesn’t bother to. It is easier to control enslaved minds, rather than free ones.”

“It’s the chaos and the unpredictability of freewill that He absolutely despises.” Mara’s voice became quieter, as if she had said something she shouldn’t have. “He loves the fear and the control… that is what feeds His power.”

Mara sighed heavily. “That’s why He’s made me his ‘Seer’… His Oracle… My visions are what He uses me for. He wants to be able to see things in advance so that He can control the outcome.” She swallowed hard, knowing that she was adding to the demise of people, even if it was unwittingly. “I can’t control them… what I see…what He sees. I’m adding to the destruction by showing Him the possible solutions for His success.”

It surprised Luke, hearing this; Mara had only been developing her gifts when they were last together. She was new to using them, and although she had become a quick study, where her visions that strong that she could now se across the galaxy? It wouldn’t be impossible since she had the ability to hear a voice across worlds.

Palpatine had all but told him that Mara’s mother was a gifted seer too.

“I’m hurting people again, and there’s no way to stop it… unless I stop seeing for Him… if I do, then He will…He will…” She gulped at the eventual outcome if she didn’t meet up to His standards.

Luke was looking at her, unsure of the exact nature of her gifts. His arms held her tighter.

Tilting her head, she looked directly into his eyes, without flinching. “I saw Leia. I didn’t want to, but I did… I saw her, as clear as I see you now… she was losing support among one of the systems that once protected the Resistance… on Zinus…and He saw it too.”

“I can’t control who or what I see… there’s no way that I can protect those that I care about from my mind.” She shifted, to look out into the nothing in the room. “That’s how He uses me this time.” She paused. “And as His toy… for you and Sedriss.”


“I want to believe that he’s redeemable. I want to believe that he has potential not to be corrupted…” He reasoned out loud.

“You can’t save everyone, Luke.” She said quietly but knew that he always wanted to try.

“…But he has this fanatic logic to him that I just can’t find a crack in.” He finished.

“He’s from the Unknown Regions… that’s what Palpatine said.” Mara chimed in. “He said that Sedriss was an ‘Acolyte’.”

She felt his muscles tense with the mention of the religious Force zealots.

“Unknown Regions? An ‘Acolyte of the Beyond’? Are you sure?” Luke huffed. “Why doesn’t that surprise me? For years, before the war, Palpatine was squirrelling away resources, starting His own second Empire on the other side of the galaxy…waiting and hoping for the day that He would need them.” He growled. “And we didn’t see it.”

“Palpatine also said that the Force moves differently on that side of the galaxy… it was almost as if,
He fears it… and all this, is just another way to control it.” She whispered, realising that it started to make sense.

She met his eyes as he was thinking of what she meant by ‘moves differently’. He had felt it, how the waves and ripples of the Force had different speeds and different currents; it was like trying to predict which way the wind would blow, but he always knew it was there.

Luke nodded, and held her tighter again, trying to make her feel safe with him.

Mara nuzzled him back, relishing the feeling of being in his protective grasp again. “Sedriss…He’s dangerous and too eager.” She kissed his shoulder, holding him too. “He may be afraid of you, for the time being, but he will get over that fear soon enough if Palpatine makes him His full apprentice… training him in the way of the Sith.”

“Palpatine wouldn’t do that.” He grumbled. “He has no faith in Sedriss.”

“He may not have any faith in him, but He isn’t above using Sedriss’s ambition to get what he wants… propping him up, elevating him, only to throw him down.” She knew all about the escalator of pride and vanity, and the quick tumble to the bottom. It’s an offer too tempting not to take.”

Mara knew the truth about men like that. “It still makes him dangerous. Failing upwards will allow him to make poor decisions that will impact us all.”

It wouldn’t have been the first time that Palpatine took some mediocre pawn and warped him. Even though she was warm and taking comfort in him, she involuntarily shuddered at the thought of Sedriss, prompting Luke to bring up the covers over her shoulder.

He held his breath for a moment. “I think Shira Brie might be coming back to court.” Luke blurted out, knowing that there was no delicate way to tell her that the other Imperial agent, that was once his lover and a useful pawn, could return too.

“What?” Mara asked with shock, pulling out of their embrace.

Sighing, he decided to reveal the full extent of Palpatine’s threats and taunts. “The Emperor informed me that if you weren’t to my liking that there was another available… one that I knew… with the same colour hair and eyes… I assumed that He meant Brie.”

Sitting up, Mara crossed her arms on her chest and huffed a few times, looking out into the room. No one had the ability to truly ruffle her like the mention of the other possible Emperor’s Hand. It wasn’t just the jealousy that she had concerning Luke, and his past with the other woman; it was more about Brie’s position in court.

“I didn’t take it seriously. He was probably just saying it to rile me up, and knew that it would get back to you.” Luke mumbled, reaching his hand out to stroke her back, and convince her to lie back down. “She would just be another woman that He has tried to offer me since I’ve been here.”

She looked over at him, knowing full well that he hadn’t taken solace in any of those women; she never questioned his loyalty or love. But there was something that she should inform him of, just in case.

“If the Emperor offers you another courtesan… you should take it.” Mara said, and turned away to look out into the room. She could feel his surprise at this revelation. “If you don’t, you’ll be insulting the Emperor by refusing His gift to you.”

She turned to look over her shoulder, looking at his perplexed face. “And, if you don’t, it gives Him
fodder for His taunts… He’ll think that I mean too much to you.”

It was clearly known that they could be used against each other. And it was clear who, between them knew how to play this game better.

She shook her head and then lay back down beside him. “You don’t have to _do_ anything with them… you could sleep on the chaise, if you wanted to. But it’s the appearance that you need to maintain.”

Before he could refute it, she decided to finish her reasoning. “You could just talk to them. They would be so enamoured by the invitation that they would probably just babble away. You would get to hear all the court gossip. It’s often rooted in truth—it can come in handy at the most unexpected times.”

Mara rolled her eyes before she had to remind herself of all the goings-on that were needed to keep up such trivial things. “You’ll have to find a way to pay her for her silence, or whatever story you need her to make up. She will be asked, by everyone, including the Emperor of how you spent the night.”

Luke’s cheek twitched before he shook his head, knowing what now needed to be done, just in case the situation arose again. She was right about every other aspect of this game.

She had placed her head on his shoulder again, just like before, getting comfortable and looking up at him.

The breath caught in his chest of how precious she was to him; her eyes, her presence, her mind, her soul- he adored all of them that made up her. He wanted to say the words… the only words that he knew to be true when everything else around was fictitious and fabricated, but he also knew that it wouldn’t be right to just say it when what he really wanted to do was act on it and show her that he cared.

He stroked a few errant hairs away from her face, admiring her beauty at the same time. “You looked beautiful tonight.” He whispered instead. “Your dancing was… amazing.” He cringed at hearing how unsophisticated he must have sounded to her. “I’ve never seen anything so incredible in my life.”

In the adoring glow of his compliment, Mara smiled, truly smiled; he could always be counted on for being genuine with her.

“Did you understand the story?” She asked back quietly.

“Yes.” He chagrinned and sighed. “As Palpatine dictated it to me.” He growled.

“Oh.” She smirked, about to attempt to make fun of it, a joke at the Emperor’s expense, and trying to keep the moment light. “Was He educating the ‘great unwashed’ by providing a play-by-play of the dance?”

Luke snorted quietly at the term she had used to describe those that Palpatine thought of as rabble, knowing that he was among them. “Yes, He did a very good job of it.”

Mara raised her eyebrows.

“I now know what a Grand Jeté is… and a Fouetté.” He stuck out his chin and lifted it, pronouncing the words in snooty manner. “Did you accomplish the full thirty-two Fouettés, my dear? His Majesty believed that you perhaps did thirty-four.” Luke mocked the core accent with precise tones.
Her lips twitched off to side, and her eyes narrowed, knowing that he was teasing the hoity crowd, and not her. “I did only twenty-nine.” She snarled at him, but at herself, too, for missing the extra rotations. “I over-extended and was rotating too quickly, about to lose my balance, and couldn’t hold it any longer.”

“It was still the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” He said earnestly and quietly, and kissed her forehead.

She basked in his praise; she was only dancing for him, and he knew it.

In silence they held each other. It had been a long time since either them had felt this kind of peace that they could only find together.

It may have been distorted, and ugly, how they were allowed to come together, but it was in a moment like this where they could take some comfort in their solitude. How they had suffered for it and fought to finally have it.

Each of them knew that the fight wasn’t over yet. The battle lines had not been drawn, and there was no way to know what would be the deciding outcome of this yet; for them, and for the galaxy.

Mara could hear his mind at work; the activity of it all. He was trying to decide if he should trust her; really and truly trust her. She could feel his apprehension, and she knew that she he would just be let down if he asked.

Finally, Luke broke the tension in the air. “Mara…” He called softly, nuzzling into her hair. “I’m still trying to plan a way out of this, for you, for me… for us…”

She stopped him right there, putting her hand up, almost to his mouth.

“Shhh…” Mara caught herself before she choked on a sob. “Don’t tell me… my mind can still be invaded by Him… whatever you’re thinking, keeping it to yourself, and I’ll go along when the time is right, but not before.” She whispered rapidly.

She shuddered, in stark contrast to the peace that they were feeling. “He sees too much inside of me… I will be made to be your worst enemy.”

It was her fear; that her skills, her gifts, that she, would be used to hurt him or others that she cared about. “I’m not free… I’m still His servant… to do as He wants with me.”

Luke held her tightly, refusing to let her go. “You were right.” He said in hushed tones. Faced with the futility of it all, he rubbed his face. “He is superbly gifted at this… I don’t know how to plan around it.”

“Don’t.” She said blatantly. “You can’t possibly.” Mara added without an argument. “You’ll go insane if you do… just like Cylo.” She mumbled.

“What?” He asked, shocked. The doctor that lingered around the court seemed so intelligent, so benign.

“Doctor Cylo” She repeated. “That isn’t the original one, by the way.” She continued. “This one is a clone. I think he was onto his fifth or sixth reproduction when I was last in the palace… so this must be the seventh or eighth edition.”

“The Cylos always get wrapped up in their work that they become unstable and the Emperor has to have them destroyed. But he’s a genius, so that is why Palpatine keeps regenerating him.”
It was shocking, all the things that she knew; who was who, what was what. There seemed to be no end to it.

She paused. “He is the one who designed Vader’s suit.” Mara said quietly; invoking the name and memory of his father.

Luke’s eyes started to harden, thinking that the doctor was harmless, but now seeing that even he, Cylo, had a place in Palpatine’s plans all along.

“He is the one who grows Palpatine’s clones…. In the miracle algae.” She snorted with resentment, knowing that Karrde’s clients were the ones that made the supply possible. “The algae from Naboo… you met the clients on Dantooine. The Imperials got their hands on it, and now we know where it went.”

He gasped. “How do you know this?” Luke twisted in their mass, lowering her back on to the bed, and looking down on her, leaning on his side.

“It’s healed me twice since I’ve arrived here.” Mara looked up at him, watching his face for any reaction; a strange sensation coming from him.

“Once after I arrived… after Palpatine punished me, to heal me and take me back.” She said with apprehension. “And then, just a few days ago, to heal the burn on my back and prepare me for the performance.”

“No spa or beauty treatment has ever worked like this stuff has.” She mumbled, letting her wry comment die as the sensation grew stronger.

Luke back away from her and sat straight up.

“I’ve even seen his cloning chamber, right here below The Citadel.” She finished slowly, unsure if it was the content of what she was saying, or the situation that she found herself in, that seemed to upset him.

“Below the Citadel?” He asked intently. “Right here? Below us now? Palpatine is growing His clones?”

Mara nodded, almost reluctantly, still unable to predict his mood.

“Yes.” She said quietly. “Haven’t you felt the eerie hum of this place? – like Wayland, but not.”

They had experienced the same sort of inner hum, and disorientation that came from the thousands of sleeping forms that were growing beneath Mount Tantis. But, unlike growing army, the unanimated bodies for the Emperor grew, not in masses but in a select number.

Luke’s mouth dropped open and his eyes went wide. He turned away from her briefly, his mind agog. He breathed deeply, and then looked back at her, seeing her face as she tried to read him.

In a second, Mara gasped and held her head, as if something had just pierced her brain.

Rushing to her, Luke went to hold her again. “I’m sorry. He said quickly. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to bring my shields up so quickly on you.”

She breathed heavily and let his words sink in. Then, she realized what he had done; he was correct to do it too. If she was a vessel for the Emperor, it was better that he keep his thoughts from her.
Nodding, she could feel herself start to recover, not realizing that she could still feel him in the Force.

“It was just a shock.” Mara said as she rubbed her temple. “I didn’t know that you could do that.” And she grinned from under squinted eyes as the pain started to dissolve away.

“You’ve been practicing…well, so have I.” He said, twitching a hap-hazard grin. “Necessity is the mother of invention.” He mumbled, still checking her to see if she was hurt.

She looked up to him with a clear expression, showing the pain had faded, and he felt relieved. His hand came up and cupped her cheek tenderly, looking into the cool jade of her eyes. She could sense that he wanted to kiss her again, and she wouldn’t deny him.

But instead, Luke swallowed and looked away, and then, moved away, turning to the bedside table. He opened a same drawer and leaned in to retrieve something.

“I have something for you.” He mumbled with his back to her. “If you still want it.”

Turning around and coming to be beside her, Luke was looking down at the item in his hand, sheepishly. “You hid it well. It took some time for me to find it on the Headhunter, among the all the pieces.”

He opened his hand to reveal the pendant that she so longed for, and missed. His pendant. The one he had given to her as a symbol of his love for her.

Mara couldn’t help but grin, looking at the small piece of carved Japor Snippet. It was as precious to her as the galaxy’s largest diamond. She could feel the moisture start to form in her eyes at seeing it again; she thought it was lost forever.

“Hide it… but keep it with you?” Luke asked as he watched her treat it like a revered treasure.

Her hand tentatively reached out for, trembling to take it back, and put it around her neck, close to her heart, where it belonged.

Lunging in, she kissed the side of his face, and then again, as he accepted it.

Looking into his azure eyes, so close, and not just in gratitude, but in love as well, tilting his chin, she placed her lips to his; just like the first time they kissed, it was tender, wanting, passionate and it thrilled her soul.

She closed her eyes and gave into all that she was feeling. Mara hum between their lips, feeling his warmth, tasting his skin, letting the fluttering in her stomach grow; a welcomed crescendo that she had never felt before him, and convinced that she would never feel with anyone but him.

As Luke kissed her back, his hand caressed the side of her cheek, trying to be as delicate as he could so he wouldn’t break her. To him, she was still a beauty that was incomparable to anything in the galaxy, and he cherished her. Pursing his firm lips against hers, he wanted only more; to hold her more, to kiss her more, to be with her more.

He lay back down beside her, wrapping her in his arms, pursing and pulsing his lips on hers, sweetly, gently. A heat in his body began to grow.

There was no fight in her now, with her arms draped behind his neck, she felt his weight lay beside her, and close as their bodies aligned.
Their kisses broke temporarily as he would kiss her cheek and she would nuzzle against his nose as they tried take some air between them.

She ventured forward, escalating her kisses and let the tip of her tongue slip into his mouth. With a growl, he returned the favour, and further pressed his body against hers.

Just the reaction from him made her mind dance and her skin tingle as she moaned between their lips. Taking a gamble, she let her hand begin to roam, from around his neck, down his strong shoulders to the firm muscles of his chest.

Mara could feel his willingness to touch her too, but he held his arousal in check, keeping himself from spurring his passion on.

He wanted to touch her. He wanted to caress the skin that he had clawed at, previously. He wanted to be with her, as they should have been. But he denied himself.

But his body didn’t lie, and she could feel the hardness pressed up against her, intensifying her want to be with him too, feeling the throb in her core, to feel him.

If anyone was going to breech the divide, it was going to have to be her to do it. Between kisses, Mara dared to ask. “Luke, will you make love to me?” She whispered in his ear as he kissed her jugular in tiny spurts.

He paused to look into her eyes, seeing the dark pools of emerald; he knew that she must have been seeing his darken sapphire gaze back at her. After all that had transpired, he frowned questioning that she still wanted him, and why.

“He will take you away from me soon.” She whispered, and choked on a small sob, knowing that it was true; they wouldn’t be allowed together if they were made happy by each other.

It was a last grab to just be together, without the presence of the Emperor.

And truth be told, Luke could feel that their love would be redeeming, cleansing, and wash away the ugliness of the past few hours, and make it into something new between them.

He frowned and shook his head with his doubt. “Please say that this… isn’t just physical between us?” He questioned, unsure but wanting to be sure. “That you feel it too?”

She knew what he was asking, yet both of them knew that to say the simple words now, would break their hearts; better to save them for when they were at liberty to delight to hearing those words come from the one you cared about.

“We’re connected, somehow.” Mara whispered, reaching up to touch his temple, smoothing a hair and soothing his mind. “I’ve never known this before… and I don’t want to know it with anyone else.”

“How could you want me when all I’ve brought you is pain?” He inquired, still reluctant.

What if he couldn’t control himself again? What if he felt the call of the Dark Side while he was with her? What he hurt her again? – this wouldn’t be Palpatine’s doing, it would be his.

“You haven’t brought me all pain…” Mara raised up from the bed and kissed the exposed skin on his neck; a sensitive spot that she hoped would start to convince him. “You’ve taught me that there are other ways. You’ve shown me that I can be more than I thought I was.”
She could sense it, his self-reproach and guilt, but behind that Luke didn’t feel that she could be attracted to him, physically any longer; that he was taking his pleasure from her but not giving any in return.

Mara watched him look away, getting lost in the thought that she could be expected to reciprocate his feelings. The guilt that he had taken his own gratification in what he had done to her, and she was left with nothing.

“Luke… you pleasure me too, you know?” She purred. That tone caught his ears and he turned to be more-attentive to her now. “I enjoy you and your body, just as you enjoy mine.” She grinned meekly, seductively, truthfully.

Her hand came up and guided him back down with her, following her lips.

“Mara, I—” He stumbled over his words. “…don’t deserve this.” He said right before he pressed his mouth to hers again.

<<You do.>> She argued back, meeting his mind with the Force, showing him that they did have a connection, one that was deeper than could be managed by just touching, or kissing, or the intimate act of their bodies joining.

<<I do.>> She reasoned, telling him that she wanted him for her pleasure.

She could tell that Luke was fighting with himself to make the decision, but at this moment, he wasn’t entirely disinclined to join her; he would just need a little more convincing.

Moving, Mara pulled back, as he watched her intently. Inside the covers, she turned away from him, much to his dismay.

Sitting up, he got a view of her back as he watched as she lowered, one shoulder of the robe from off her body, exposing her fine skin. Languidly, she looked over her shoulder as she removed the opposite shoulder, and let it drop, revealing her naked back.

She wiggled inside the coverings, and then produced the robe entire robe, and threw it away from the bed before she rolled back to be with him.

Touching him, she leveraged her body, and pressed up against him; his naked flesh feeling the heat from her naked flesh.

Luke released the hard breath he was holding at the exuberance that he felt as she resumed touching him.

Marveling at his skin, his clean chest, Mara pressed her lips at his collarbone as he craned to let her. Again, she trailed kisses down his body. “I’m not doing this for you.” She looked up from his sternum; her eyes round, dark and mysterious as ever. “I’m doing this for me. I want you.” She purred.

He swallowed hard, still barely clinging to the thought that he shouldn’t, didn’t, merit her devotion.

Her attention went back to touching him; her fingers kneading the firm flesh, feeling his energy seep into her. “Do you know what’s it was like to want to be with you… missing you… missing us… all this time?” She kissed his tanned rib cage, the muscles clenched in reaction.

“I thought about you every night…” She looked up again; smirked and then went back to her work.
“…and during the day.” She slid her tongue along one particular ridge of his abdominal muscles.

<<I touched myself, when I thought of you.>> Her voice was throaty in his mind. <<Cried out your name when I climaxed, wanting you.>>

Finally, Luke succumbed to her, and moaned as he leaned his head back into the pillow. He brought his arms up, covering his eyes, resisting the urge to touch her, getting lost in her touch; letting her have her way with him.

He could feel the cool air as she pulled back the covers, exposing his body to her whim. Agonizingly pleasurable, he smiled absently as she went back to work, kissing his body.

And he didn’t fight it, lifting his hips, as she rolled down his boxer briefs, and releasing his screaming cock from its cage.

Mara brought her concentration back to his neck as she wrapped her hand around his thickness and began to pump his shaft in tender, but demanding, strokes.

Luke opened his eyes, only to roll them, before he watched her face; biting her bottom lip, beginning to breathe hard. Looking down, he saw the two most-perfect breasts in the galaxy, pressed up against his chest. He resisted to reached out and caress them, treating them tenderly, instead of harshly; the memory was still fresh.

Again, she came towards his mouth and latched on, taking the moment to savour a deep and dominant purse, steering his body, distracting his mind, back down into the bed.

The pleasant diversion of her wanton kisses, made him surrender. Gradually, she slid her outer leg, up his thighs as her hand still pumped his waiting member.

She broke away as she slid the covers from off of him. Sitting up, she slid her weight over him. “Look at me.” She whispered between her breaths.

His eyes met hers, glued to her actions as she positioned herself above his mass erection. He watched, holding the air in his lungs as her svelte pussy eased down in absolute, glorious torment.

She moaned, taking him in, satisfying the yearning that she had for months of wanting him. She rested atop him and looked down to see his tortured expression that matched her own utmost desire.

She shuddered, waiting for her body to adjust to accommodate him. And in that time, to ease off some of the pressure, she leaned forward kissing him deeply, and guiding his hands to rest on her hips.

When she was ready, she began to move.

Slowly, sluggishly, serpentine-like, her moves were distinct and deliberate; moving where she wanted to move, internally touching the places where she wanted to be touched.

She slid her hands to his chest, his sternum, to brace the rocking of her pelvis, controlling the depth and speed at which she stroked and steered their passion.

When she felt that the heat in her body wanted more, she began to sit higher, taking more of him inside her, taking the full brunt of his exquisite member that throbbed in her core.

She moaned and panted with every movement; the thrills and sensations over her skin and her body made her alternate between openly undulating and baring the heightened instant through gritted teeth.
“Oh Gods!” She hissed, clasping her own breasts as she rode him; they were extremely sensitive and would put her over the edge.

Knowing how to control her pleasure, she rocked and squeezed the mounds in time, feeling the wave, and ripple about to come on.

“Oh Gods!” She hissed again, as the wave crashed inside her, spasming in little quivers.

He must have sensed it, and sat up to capture her mouth, devouring her lips, tasting her mouth, and she broke away, gulping for air, still keeping her pace.

He fell back against the sheets, holding her hips, and helping her reach her eventually completion. He couldn’t stand it, watching her; it was too much beauty to behold, it was too much splendor for his body to have, it wasn’t enough just to give her his body. He closed his eyes, bewildered, and besotted.

She rocked her body atop of his and looked down to see that he still kept his eyes clenched. It pained her to do this, but she knew it would be the only way to confirm her actions and words here tonight—although she meant every subversive thing she said to Luke, the Emperor wouldn’t have seen it that way.

Dropping her neck back, Mara looked up at the ceiling, and for a second time, caught the edge of the lens that was peering down, watching them, from the chandelier above.

“Luke… do you love me?” She asked, looking at the hidden holo-recorder. A look came into her eyes, knowing that she was breaking the spell between them, sharing this aspect with the voyeur, sent to record every detail of her encounter with the Jedi.

“Gods! Yes” He moaned, lost in his pleasure.

“Would you do anything for me?” She asked, swallowing hard, hating whoever was doing this to them; she shielded her true feelings from Luke.

“Of course!” He bellowed. “Anything!”

“Do you belong to me?” It was a question that the Emperor would want proof that she could control the Jedi.

“Yes! I do… I’m nothing without you.” He moaned and started to open his eyes, wanting to see her.

Are you satisfied now? She mentally asked the inanimate oculus that was spying on them. This other lens closed and she looked back down at him, ready to abandon her role that she needed to perform.

With gulp in her throat that she had just committed treason against both of them, against their love, his face looked so agonized that he was at her mercy, immersed in his total love for her and waiting on her rapture.

Mara blinked the tears that were forming in her eyes; she loved him so much, and now had possibly condemned them both to the servitude that Palpatine would expect from them. But she had spared his life and hers by having him admit the power she had over him.

They were both considered valuable and pliable, and that was exactly what Darth Sidious wanted.

With a moan that he would have construed as passion, and not heartache, she returned to seeing to her own needs.
She rode him harder now, rotating her hips, increasing her speed, determined that she needed this, and she needed him.

He began to moan her name with every thrust. “Mara!” He called out. “Mara! My angel!” He bellowed. “Mara! My love!” He moaned to the air, indicating that he was close.

It was building in her too; this time, stronger. She couldn’t form the words, mewing at her capitulation, panting and fighting for air.

At last she could feel it, on the verge, on the cusp, on the edge. “Luke!” She called out. “Please come!”

He didn’t need further convincing as his pelvis bucked back at her, and she felt shots of his hot seed inside her.

And with that, she relaxed her muscles and let the synaptic chaos begin, causing her cervix to flutter and her walls to clench rapidly around him. With a deep wail, her shoulders crunched in juxtaposition to the rapture of it all.

Mara lowered herself to collapse forwarding, falling into his waiting chest, curled up against him. His arms cradled her, holding her, stroking her back.

They were exhausted, both mentally and physically now.

He rocked her on his chest, back and forth, calling her name sweetly, kissing her forehead as they came down from euphoria.

Until the there was nothing left but the aura of their pleasure, she allowed herself to be held by him, and the waves of bliss died away like breaking on the shore.

She could hear his heartbeat in his chest, returning to its normal pace. And she smiled listening to deep drum.

He shifted her to the side, still in his arms, disengaging their bodies, but kept close; both ready for the rest they could be afforded, finding safety with each other.

“When we get out of this…” She mumbled quietly to his chest, letting their peace finally find them.

“When we get out of this?” He mumbled into her hair, quoting her back to her, incredulously.

“When did you get to be the optimist?” His voice was drifting off.

She did something that she hadn’t done in a long time and snorted once. “I blame you.” Mara whispered, snuggling closer into him.

Luke’s arms pulled her tighter. “I love you.” He whispered as the night took them.

**

Morning:

He took one last look at her sleeping form, in his bed. She looked so peaceful, like a doll; a fragile perfect doll with a halo of soft red-gold curls around her.

Luke felt the jolt again, of the Emperor raking on his mind to summon him again to an audience.

He turned, and left his room, making his way down the frigid hallways.
His heels clicked as he made his way to the private audience chamber. The flick of his cloak followed upon the sound of his heels. Both were curt as he tried to put on the personae that would be needed for this summoning.

The Red Guards separated for him and allowed inside.

The air in the small room was tight and congested with the malevolence of the Emperor.

“Master.” Luke said in a tight voice, addressing the back of the chair in the middle of the room.

Pestage stood off to the side as always, and eyed the Jedi carefully, almost warning him not to be impudent, but daring him because of the possible results.

The black chair turned to face him.

Luke inhaled and waited, trying not to be surprised to see that the Emperor’s face had aged, almost overnight.

It was true, any use of the Force was draining His body.

“Young Skywalker.” Palpatine hissed from under his hood. He chuckled softly, knowing that the Jedi had just left the bed where his lover still rested, and what had transpired by His design.

Luke bowed as an offering, but nothing more.

“I have a mission for you.” The Emperor’s hand reached in the direction of Pestage, but not in the Force; He was conscious about His use.

A data disk was presented to the Jedi.

“I am sending you away. I require to you attend, as My Emissary, My representative, to a delegation from the Unknown Regions.” Palpatine’s raspy voice managed to get the words out, but He struggled.

The Emperor watched the young Jedi take the disk, examining him for any sort of emotional reaction. He was sure that the Jedi would have one, especially knowing who he would be leaving behind.

But reward would have to wait for another day; disappointedly, the Jedi simply slipped the disk into his tunic.

Palpatine huffed once, showing his discontent.

“You are to meet on the moon of Rakata Prime.” The Emperor explained. “There, you will make your introduction, and presence known, to their representative.” He rasped. “They are Force-strong and will be impressed by your aura.” He inhaled sharply, as if fighting for air. “I want them to understand that they will be over-powered if they decide to advance past their borders. This is not a negotiation.”

“Go now. Your shuttle awaits.” Palpatine hissed his order.

Whether it was assumed, or natural, out of numbness, Luke simply answered “Yes Master.”

With a flick of His wrist, His Majesty, Darth Sidious, dismissed him away.
TBC
The Conception

Chapter Summary

Quote: “It screams in the Force, too...” He smiled wickedly. “The soul of the clone as I rip it free.”

Characters: Leia, Han, Palpatine, Mara, Sedriss and others

Chapter Notes

So... to make up for my gap of time between the release of chapter 9 and then 10... I wrote extra hard this week... and there will be another chapter soon following on the heels of this one too.

Now, before I make a humorous comment, I'm going to say this... ALL CHAPTER WARNINGS APPLY TO THE CHAPTER BELOW!!!

I cannot be any clearer than this: NON-CENSUAL SEXUAL ACT SCENE IN THIS CHAPTER!!! You have been warned. Turn back now or forever hold your horror and your negative comment.

For those of you who have no interest in this chapter- I will make a comment as to what happened in this chapter at the beginning of the next relevant chapter.... Giving you the abridged version without any of the details—I will say this as a spoiler—it doesn’t happen until the latter half of the chapter. So, if you want to, you can read until we return to Byss.

I will comment below… as to my motivation on this one too.

**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Resistance Base of New Alderaan

She reread the notice for the third or fourth time; she had lost count already.

Taking a deep breath, Leia Organa-Solo tried again to read between the lines of the coded message, but it was vague, at best.

In her senses, she held up her hand in the direction of the joining door to their private residences as it swooshed open, indicating that whatever he came in for could wait until she finished reading.

Han took three steps in the room when he noticed that she was deep in thought. He stopped, huffed and put his hands at his waist as he waited before being granted an audience with the committee. He
rolled his eyes again, knowing that she probably sensed it.

“Almost done.” Leia murmured without looking at him, finishing it again, hoping that she had caught all the nuances.

Finding no hope in it, she shut down the data pad, shaking her head in frustration. “I don’t get… I just don’t get it… how can they just abandon us?”

He was prepared to keep his usually candor with regards to the latest inclination of the Rebellion, but that all dissolved when he saw the distress on her face. Never in his life had he met someone so dedicated to a cause more than her, even when that cause worked against you.

Instead, he stepped forward, offering his arms as they had the power to soothe her in the past whenever trouble reared its ugly head. “What’s wrong sweetheart?” Han asked, giving her a tight grin as she looked up at him.

“We lost another one!” She exclaimed, marching right past him, ignoring the gesture, to the opposite side of the room; she was sure that she had a contact that could help them in their time of need.

As Leia found the case, and opened the data card files, she fumbled through them.

He lowered his arms and just watched her. His lip twitched, as he shook his head, realizing that she would rather get some condolences from her work rather than from him.

“Kiaktak told us that they were given a better offer by the Emperor!” She was still looking for another policy that she remembered that she had filed. “That is the third one… and all them have the same story…. That Luke… Luke! Of all people!… made them the offer that their world will be saved if they agree and support a unified Empire… with him and Palpatine as the rulers!”

“Can you believe that?” She almost yelled the words; it was one thing to have the Emperor working against them… her… it always felt personal. But now, Luke had aligned himself the malevolent dictator. How could he!

“No, I can’t believe that.” Han murmured. “I can’t believe that from The Kid.” He walked away from the center of the room, towards one the plasti-windows of the makeshift garrison.

“Luke has had no training in galactic politics… he has no concept of the inner workings of the government, policies… basically, how to rule anything… or anyone!” She carried on.

Han just looked out the window, setting his jaw, mumbling under his breath.

“I swear that if I can’t get the cooperation of the other worlds that have been affected then we will never see the end of this war.” Leia stood up straight, finding the report that she was after, and turned her attention. “What did you just say?”

He sighed. “I said that no, I can’t believe that of Luke.” Han tried not the let the growl in his voice be heard. “I think that he has—”

“Well, that just can’t be it!” Leia let loose again, seeing that she had the wrong document, not hearing a word that was said to her. She started her search again.

“I think he has his own plan.” Han mumbled, finishing his thought, for what it was worth. “We just have to give him the chance to figure out how he plans to get out of this one.”

“Beliteem didn’t even bother to read this… you want to know how I know that?—He didn’t bother
to sign it either.” She growled, flipping pages on the data reader. “How are we supposed to keep a government together if no one will follow the policies?”

“I think Jacen is getting a tooth.” He squinted and said softly. “I know Jaina already has one because she bit him this morning.”

“That amendment should be connected to this document… and it isn’t.” Leia huffed.

“I think Ben’s hair is going to be curly… I think he looks like my father.” He had hopes that his last few words would draw her out of it, but she only mumbled to herself from the other side of the room.

He turned around to watch her, his wife, the mother of his children, and the leader of the Resistance—not necessarily in importance in that order. Han sighed shortly, grimaced and made a motion to go back through the doors that he had arrived. “Well, I can see that my presence is not required here.” He mumbled as he made his way. “Helpful as ever.” He growled.

And that caught her attention. Leia’s mouth gapped open. “But Han, I need you.” She cried, looking at him, watching him go.

He halted his departure, surprise that she even noticed. “You need?” Han asked, trying not to sound sarcastic. “What about what I need?” He tried not to raise his voice or his ire. “What about what our children need?”

This was the same fight that they had been having, off and on, for almost five years now. It always came down to the demand of what the galaxy expected of them versus what they expected for themselves, versus what they wanted from their lives.

It was always duty first for Leia, and it was growing tired.

Exasperated, she shook her head, not believing that he was bringing this up. “I really don’t have time to have this fight right now.”

There were times that he just gave in, and let he have her way, but he wasn’t prepared to be bulldozed by the galaxy this time. “Really? You have time to fight everything else in the galaxy.” Han stood firm, crossing his arms against his chest. “Why not fight for us?”

The former princess stood, just looking at the man that’s she had decided to spend her life with, speechless; he had the uncanny ability to pick the absolute wrong times to want to discuss things.

“You’re just as bad as him.” Han muttered, turning away. He saw one of the children’s toys on the chaise and walked over, picking it up, intent on making his excuse to leave the room, return the toy to its owner, and leave the situation.

“Don’t you dare say that!” She flared back at him. “I’m nothing like my father!”

“I didn’t mean that you were like Vader” He spat. “I meant that you are just like Luke!—the two of you decide to chasing off on your crusades without thinking about anyone else that gets left behind.” He said in a voice above his normal speaking volume. “You’re so damned-ready to sacrifice your lives that you don’t think about the other people in your life.”

Han’s hazel eyes looked hurt; and expression that he would only allow to her, and maybe Chewie, but certainly no one else. “I didn’t want Rebel Leader anymore… I thought when the war was over, so was the position.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I was fine to stand by your side as a politician… when there was no risk… but here we are again, aren’t we? – back at war.”
He shook his head, seeing the futility in it. “When is going to be over, Leia?” His eyes now hardened, looking directly at her. “I want a family…”

Taking the toy in his hands and crushing the soft fabric from out of frustration, trying to reason it out to her, making his argument to save his family. “Even if that means living on the Falcon and making short delivery runs…as a…a…” His words failed without logic, grasping at straws.

“A what?” The princess scoffed. “A smuggler?”

“You fell in love with me when I was a smuggler.” Han said sharply, and the dropped his head. “And now?... that I’m not a Rebellion General…”

The comm pinged.

He looked back up at her, as the small sound became a much larger sentinel as what divided them.

They held their eye contact as the silence grew hard and sharp. The comm pinged again, reminding them that there was a life in progress.

Leia’s eyes flitted over to the comm then back to his face.

Han nodded once, acknowledging that she needed to take it, and then looked away, knowing that it would only ping again, and she would resent him from stopping her from taking the call.

Leaning over, she touched the pad. “Organa-Solo here.” She answered as she watched his brooding form.

The ambient voice spoke quickly from the comm unit, and he looked over his shoulder, listening, but not listening.

“Yes, send him in.” She said as she started to prepare herself to look the part of a Rebel leader again.

After she cut the call, Leia paused; Han was frozen with his back to her. She sighed, knowing that he was mostly right in his appraisal of the situation.

But there was no immediate solution; she couldn’t just walk away from the Rebellion and run off to become a smuggler’s wife. She didn’t know how to be that.

She stepped from around her desk and about to walk over to him, hold him, let him hold her; they had been through too much to leave things as they were.

Looking over his shoulder again, “I wanted a wife.” Han mumbled, knowing that she heard him.

Leia opened her mouth, ready to fight back, but the door to her office slid open without any pretense, and the party entered. She righted herself and stood with her regal posture, ready to address the visitors.

Han turned around, now that there would be a witness. He tried his best to not look out of place, crossing his arms on his chest, hiding the stuffed toy under one arm.

The person who entered was no stranger to either of the Solos, but they weren’t quite the level of authority that Han was expecting. It seems that the top aide from Admiral Ackbar could still look as somber as the leaders that they presented.

It was Petierse Joeren, had represented the Admiral for years during the war; one of the few human aides that the Mon Calmarian had and trusted. The young man looked over at Han, narrowed his
gaze and looked back at the former princess.

Leia nodded, excusing Han’s presence and agreeing that he could be privy with whatever information was being sent to her.

“Your Highness, our spies in the deep core have reported back on some movements within the New Empire.” Joeren’s voice was strong and clear.

She nodded, encouragingly, giving him permission to continue.

The young man’s eyes glanced over, again, to the other man in the room before he began. “We’ve had word that the Emperor’s regatta is forming around Byss, and that he has planned to make an announcement once he is invited to speak in front of the New Republic.”

“We’ve also had news that… um, Lieutenant Skywalker will…um… be announced as the Emperor’s co-ruler and referred to as ‘Emperor’.” Jeroen said concisely. “Our other report claim that he has left our system, headed for a rendezvous with a delegation from the Unknown Regions.”

Leia straightened her shoulders but remained silent until all the information was delivered.

“There has also been the rumor that Mara Jade will be granted the title of Dowager Empress, soon.” Jeroen announced.

Leia’s eyes widened slightly and tilted her chin up, and then lowered it again, trying to not to portray her surprise, but it didn’t escape the notice of her husband.

“It that all?” She asked.

“Yes, your Highness.” Jeroen said, and then bowed, leaving the room.

For a moment she just stood there, looking at nothing before her, staring off into space, getting a sense of the news that had been presented to her.

“Palpatine is preparing to make an appearance in the Senate.” Leia grumbled. “Probably, one of his puppet-leaders to request a vote for no confidence under the current formation and leadership.”

She looked up to see the expression on Han’s face; he had abandoned his previous argument, seeing that there was one more important before them.

“And Luke is headed to the Unknown Regions?” He said, asking a rhetorical question. “That’s a long trip… almost fifteen days to cross the Xerces Ridge, and then another fifteen to get back over it.” He mumbled. “He’ll be gone for over a month… out of contact, out of connection, to anyone.”

“Xerces Ridge?” Leia asked.

“It’s the drifting radiation storm that borders on the Unknown Regions. Smugglers used to dare each other to cross it.” Han said. “In the mild areas, it could fry communication equipment. It the dense parts, it could eat a whole ship, breaking through the deflector shields.”

“You have to fly in the tail of the storm as to not get any cast-off radiation either.” He added.

“But he’s going there to meet with a delegation party. Are the Unknown Regions going to join the Republic?” Leia rationalized, but it was all still speculation. “Palpatine spent his time hiding out there until now…”

Han stood, considering; if he was still part of this outfit, he would have his two cents to add, but her
wasn’t. Just as well, he could make heads nor tails of it. “I got nothing.” He shrugged. “Imperial power moves are beyond my way of thinking.”

“What bothers me is that they sent The Kid – why would that slippery Sith do something like that?” Han asked.

Leia nodded, her face looking lost, fearing for her brother. It was then that she decided it was time to come to him.

Opening his arms, Han couldn’t deny her his embrace now. Her diminutive form fit well on his chest, rocking her.

“And that title, for Mara… ‘Dowager Empress’, which has me more-concerned.” Leia looked up at him, her dark eyes ridged with fear.

Han frowned; surely the red-headed smuggler could take care of herself. “Why?” He asked quietly, sensing there was more to this than what was apparent.

“That title, that she is expected to be given.” She whispered. “The term ‘Dowager’ implies that she would be the mother of an emperor….” Leia said as the horror of the implications caught up with her. “But, mother to who? And by whom?”

Husband and wife looked at each other in shock as they began to realize that there more pieces in play than just the fate of one soul of a Jedi.

**

**Byss: Imperial Citadel**

It had become her ‘normal’ type of morning. Her body had figured out how to get on the Byss time line, and now she found herself awake before servants would arrive.

Mara lay in her bed, ahead of schedule, of course, and looked at the door that separated her room from Luke’s.

She knew he wasn’t there. His presence had disappeared by morning several day ago, after the night of her dance performance.

The Citadel had seemed relatively empty since then; even the Emperor’s presence flitted in and out of her senses, without calling on her.

She had resumed her other schedule as well; she still was assigned to combat classes and dance practice to use her time, but with less vigor than before.

In combat classes, practice with a Red Guard was replaced with a random trooper who wouldn’t prove much of a challenge.

Master Doev was replaced by a droid who projected a hologram of the positions and choreography that she was supposed to follow.

And for the past few days, she had not been summoned to court, but Mara also got the sense that Palpatine had not called a session either, so it was of little concern to her. She knew that He was preserving His energy for other purposes.

It was her gilded cage to rest in until called upon.
Adding to all of this, she missed Luke. Her loneliness just added to her listlessness.

Looking at the door, she recalled their night together, feeling the sting of heartbreak, knowing he wasn’t there. She closed her eyes, briefly and saw his face, smiling at her right before he went to kiss her. It was still hard for her to fathom how she loved him so.

Although he was the instrument for her punishment, she didn’t hold it against him; she knew who had orchestrated the whole thing.

The soft chimes sounded in the distance and the doors opened for the Byssian servants to come in and start their day.

Mara arose from her bed when they assumed they positions and made her way over to the ‘fresher to shower.

When she returned, the taster was waiting beside her food cart, ready to sample the meal on her behalf.

As the taster bowed and left the room, Mara watched the only other human female that she had seen in the palace, leave. She wondered where did this other woman go when she wasn’t risking her life?

There was a short reason to believe that any of her food would be at risk for poisoning, but it wasn’t out of the scope of possibilities. Countess Jiinap was poisoned by her servants. Duke and Duchess Re’vik were poisoned by a rival cousin. Even General Knall was poisoned by his staff, as it turned out.

It just seemed like an unsatisfying way to end someone; there would always be a chance of survival if a death wasn’t watched or sensed – the poisoner seldom watched the actual event and had to rely that they had paid enough for the concoction to work adequately. Given the few times that Mara had used this technique, as the Emperor’s Hand, she didn’t entirely trust it.

At least her last meal will be tasty. Mara thought to herself, concerning her taster, as she started to eat her meal. The macabre thoughts that one had when they find time on their hands.

From the corner of her eyes, she watched as the Byssians; ‘Number One’ and ‘Number Two’, she thought she would call them mentally, to avoid becoming attached and to avoid confusion; began to prepare their perspective areas for Mara’s day. It always gave her a hint of what would be expected of her.

Ah-ha! Mara gleaned interest as she saw that a long black dress was being prepared for her by Number Two. A summons from court, no doubt.

Number One stood by the vanity, arranging the make up for the day.

Make up! Her mind reeled, out of sheer boredom. That would one way to poison someone… the skin is very porous. It would absorb quickly and be nearly untraceable- most powdered varieties of poisons are. She thought as she sipped her last mouthful of caf.

It was just a game to pass the time, nothing more.

Getting up, she made her way over to the vanity and watched as her hair was styled and twisted into a simple chignon, with soft tendrils framing her face; Luke loved it when her hair was done up in this simple style.

Mara sighed before turning and tilting her face up in the direction of Number One. She closed her
eyes and let the work be done.

The Emperor had sure chosen to lavish attention on her; two attendants, and a taster, and when needed, an escort to and from court. When she lived in the palace on Coruscant, she had to do her own makeup and hair, until she decided to invest in a Q4 droid.

Opening her eyes at the right moment, the Byssian finished her work on Mara’s face. She turned, looking into the mirror to see what had been done; it would be another clue as to what lay ahead for the day.

But no clue was given, as her natural beauty wasn’t severely enhanced over any other standards.

Mara nodded once, accepting her appearance and then went over to the second Byssian, waiting by her wardrobe.

It looked like the basic and simple, long black gown was going to be the selection for the day.

At the back of her mind, she wondered if the Emperor ever had an input into what she would be wearing; did He select it? Did He commission it? She had heard a rumor among the harem of courtesans that He would often select a colour palette for them, so that they all coordinated in some fashion or another.

She fingered the material of the gown before it was presented to her; it was a soft knit of some sort of fiber, that had a nice sheen to it. But her senses gave a bit of start when there appeared to be no undergarments to be worn with it.

It wasn’t unusual for this to happen, particularly, if a dress clung to her body in a certain manner or exposed some skin in an awkward spot. But this dress wasn’t cut in a seductive manner; it had scooped neck and long sleeves. The fabric wasn’t fine or appeared to be distinctive enough.

But she shrugged and slipped it on, even with her slight apprehension.

Mara smoothed the fabric down over her body, and saw the simple slippers were prepared for her feet.

Either, court wouldn’t be in session or the Emperor still wanted to see her regardless, or both. Her clothing suggested that she wouldn’t be appearing as formally as she was usually dressed.

When she was ready, both servants bowed and left her alone, to wait until she was summoned.

As a child, and as a young adult, the Emperor would call her to court, to hide among the courtiers. He would give her the challenge to find something for Him, or to listen in on conversations and report back to Him, being undetected by the masses.

She had made a game of it, just like she did with most of her training, trying to better her achievements time and time again. Now, she supposed it was a way that she created to make herself oblivious to the deceit around her.

Mara sat, perched on her chaise, waiting for the sensation, a jolt that would mean that she was being called.

So, it was a surprise when her doors opened, and a solitary Red Guard appeared for her with no summons.

Getting up from her seat, she followed the Guard in silence; it was just another odd thing that irked
her senses about this day. If court wasn’t in session, and she wasn’t dressed up in court attire, why was she given a Red Guard escort? A Red Guard escort was only given to those who were considered slightly below, or equal to the Emperor.

She check her senses again for any danger, but Red Guards didn't think for themselves, they acted on orders and if they perceived a threat to the Emperor; she wanted to make sure this lone Guard wasn’t going to exact revenge for the events that happened in the throne room when she was forced to kill one of their own.

Her senses didn’t flare, and he was blank in his thoughts.

She decided to go with him willingly. It was something to ponder as her was led away.

The hallways were empty and devoid of any other persons. Walking past the throne room, headed directly for the private quarters, where the Emperor’s private audience and meditation chamber lay.

She had been there several times before and knew the protocol upon entering the foyer to both rooms. To her left, the private audience room; to her right, the meditation chamber.

The Red Guard stood in the foyer with her, until the door to her right opened, granting her access.

Mara entered alone in to the darkened room, and reached out her senses, knowing the purpose of this room.

The sense of the atmosphere was dank with the heavy presence. As opposed to Luke, where his sense had a smooth ebb and tide, the waves of the Force crashed on the rocks of her senses in a thunderous, hard boom.

She knew better than to block her senses from it; she had lived in it at one time and wouldn’t have known the difference. Besides, it would anger the Emperor if He knew that she was rejecting it now.

His chair was turned away from her, and she could sense that He was concentrating on something else now.

While she waited, she turned her glance to the wall of the glowing cubes ad triangles.

She had seen them in the palace on Coruscant, and in Vader’s collection, and here, they still mystified her and drew her in. They were so intrinsic and exquisite, and so tempting to want to touch.

Quietly, as not to disturb the Emperor, she padded over to stand before the wall.

Looking at the holocrons, Mara’s attention was drawn to the two empty ones that she had seen before, still unused; one was triangular shaped, and the other, a square; one of Sith design and the other presumably, Jedi. There was no inner glow to either of them, no pedestal for them to hover above.

Escaping her knowledge, the Emperor had turned in His chair to regard her.

She wondered why they were even part of the collection.

The Emperor was watching her, as she was looking them, these little boxes. She could feel it when He drew His attention on her.

“Do they really have souls in them?” Mara mumbled out loud.
Without any prompt or circumstance to their conversation, she merely asked.

He clearly wasn’t insulted by her lack of formality, by not greeting Him with a bow and title of ‘Master’; He had allowed it before with her, and only her.

Palpatine had humored her before; He liked her curiosity, it amused Him.

“The Jedi ones, do not.” He answered quietly, contemplating and drawing on her interest. “They have only reflections of their owners, yet it still takes skill and energy to complete the task.”

He coughed quietly. “The Sith holocrons, however, do contain the ‘souls’ of fallen Darths.” His voice sounded almost sad and respectful, but Mara knew it was probably laced with distain. “There is no after-life for a Sith. This, is the only means by which We can live on without a shell.”

She was about to reach out and hold one of the empty ones, but decided against it. She still wondered why they were there.

“Does it hurt?” She asked boldly. “The transference? How does it work?” She turned and looked over to see if she over-stepped a boundary.

From under His cowl, she could see a serene smile on His face; she was the inquisitive child again to Him, and she was the eager student, absorbing all the information that she could.

“Ah, my child, the process is a rather simple one, merely a preparation of the mind for my part.” Palpatine chortled in His reply. “It is when the body dies that I feel the phantom pain of it.”

Mara walked over, coming to her chair, her place in the room, still listening.

“It is the other body that experiences the greatest amount of, what you call, ‘pain’ – I call ‘ecstasy’” His serene smile turned into sadistic pleasure before her.

“A clone body is resuscitated and alive for only a few seconds before the process begins. But in the fleeting moments, it is alive… a new soul... a new mind.” He looked off into the distance, as He remembered the process.

“It is with supreme power that I take the soul from another living thing and supplant it with My own. It screams out as it is lost into the void. And I... I take another form.” Palpatine finished His explanation with an icy look in her direction.

“It screams in the Force, too...” He smiled wickedly. “The soul of the clone as I rip it free.”

Mara nodded solemnly as she understood that, holding her horror from displaying on her face, in His greed to live on, He had to kill another being to do it.

She turned and glanced at the empty holocrons. “Then why do you need the…”

He didn’t let her finish. “There are times when the soul is not prepared to leave the body, and I require a temporary solution before the transference is complete.”

His amusement in giving an explanation was wearing thin, and He answered her curtly; she was keeping him from His true purpose of summoning her. “It also makes for a satisfying punishment, to be caught in limbo, detracted from a body, confused and contorted.”

Casting her eyes down, she nodded, getting her answer. The empty holocrons were a contingency plan and nothing more. “Thank you Master.” She said quietly, grateful that His shared His
knowledge with her.

It was quiet in the room, but for his breathing and the sense that He was watching her.

“So, I understand that you gave young Skywalker a fine send-off before his current mission?” Palpatine seethed.

Slowly, Mara drew her gaze up, meeting the glowing red-orange eyes from inside His cowl. “Yes, Master.” She answered evenly without being sure if He was pleased or not.

“You treated yourself to his body.” The Emperor said blankly. “After he used your body so roughly.”

She sucked in a short burst of air as the memories were thrust upon her mind; both of pleasure and of pain.

“What did you learn from that experience?” He hissed His question.

“Master,” She tentatively addresses him. “I learned that I deserved my punishment. I should be more diligent and loyal in my servitude to You.”

“Yes…” He sneered. “Yes… and you did well, to also prove that Skywalker will bend to you. So full is his heart that he can’t help himself… much like his father.”

“I must say that I was impressed that you cajoled his confession so well… getting his declaration of devotion, yet satisfying your own wants as well.” Palpatine smiled beneath His hood. “Clever girl, most impressive.”

“Thank you Master.” Mara bowed from the waist in her chair.

“Do you know why I’ve called you here today?” The Emperor asked, switching moods, and changing tones.

“No Master.” She replied, keeping her eyes down.

“Sure, you must have a quandary, a thought?” He said sweetly. “Humor Me, for I do enjoy seeing your insights at work, My Oracle.”

“Master, I assumed that You wished me here to see for You.” Mara whispered, but in her senses, she knew that somehow wasn’t the case.

He didn’t seem to be prepared for it, and the Force didn’t seem like it would be accepting of it. It just didn’t feel right.

She tilted her chin away from Him as He watched the realization come over her senses, that she wasn’t there to give her visions to Him.

Palpatine nodded, grinned like a cat, seeing that she understood, and He hummed with his exhale, feeding from her knowledge.

“Tell me,” Palpatine said in a grand fashion. “Do you remember when you were child, and you witnessed others, in My service, genuflect before me?”

Mara lifted her head. “Yes, Master.”

Of course, she did; she witnessed it all the time, from heads of state, royalty; upper and lower houses,
military leaders… all of them, worshipped before Him.

“Did you ever think to how they became like that?” He asked. He called His cane to Him, with one out-stretched hand.

Leveraging His weight, He rose from the chair, taking the first few steps away.

She did what she knew instinctively to do, and followed just slightly behind, matching his pace.

“N- no, Master.” She answered quietly. “I thought they gave their loyalty willingly… I never questioned why they wouldn’t.”

“So right in thinking so.” Palpatine said as He hobbled towards the door. “Most of them did… without question… without prodding.”

“Servitude requires that a certain aspect that needs to be in the nature of those that do the serving. Would you agree?” He asked from over His shoulder.

The door leading to the foyer opened, and He walked into the antennae room.

Mara nodded, and then replied, “Yes, Master” knowing that He couldn’t see her from behind Him.

“A person wants to serve… to be of use… to find a higher goal in their gifts.” The Emperor approached the door on the opposite side of the room, the audience chamber, and it opened for Him with no ceremony. “A conduit for another’s will.”

“And so on, and so forth, they should find satisfaction in serving their master well. Do you not agree?” Palpatine asked, striding forward towards the throne that had been raised several steps up from the base level, on a small dais at the back on the room.

“Yes Master.” She said, watching Him maneuver up the chairs to His throne.

The Emperor stopped to turn around and lower down into the seat of power.

Instinctually, she bowed, as was the custom, to never keep your head above the Emperor while He was holding court. And although, only she was present, it would be undignified not to make the gesture.

“A satisfaction that can only come from knowing that one did their utmost to please and fulfill their duties… to please and fulfill the wishes of their masters.” He flitted His hand, acknowledging her bow.

Seeing it from her peripheral view, she stood up again.

“What did you think when you saw the nobility come before Me?”

Mara looked up, slightly confused, but she knew He would recognize if she was telling him the truth or feeding Him lies. She thought for a moment, trying to recall her thoughts are she watched them almost lie down to the ground for Him.

“I thought they looked ridiculous.” She answered vacantly, unguardedly, and concentrating on the memory. “I remember being angered by them, thinking that they weren’t genuine when they paid homage to you. That they thought that they shouldn’t have to do that… that they were above it… that they were just doing it to save their own necks.” She blinked and then looked over at His face, seeing if she gave a blunt-enough answer that was to His liking.
He smiled, relaxing back on the throne. “And Vader? For all his power. What did you think when you saw him bow before Me?”

Mara shook her head and swallowed. “I thought that he was lying to you… being ungrateful… after all that You did for him… saved his life, gave him power, gave him wealth… and all he had was treason in his heart.”

Yes, it was true, she didn’t think much more of Vader’s display of servitude; it was just for show.

Palpatine hummed appreciatively, considering her words, considering if she was telling Him the truth of her feelings.

But His hum turned into a growl with each breath; a low rumble. “Did you find satisfaction in serving Me?” The Emperor asked, his eyes gleaming from under His hood.

“Yes, Master… I did… I do.” Mara corrected herself quickly; it was a partial truth, she had reconsidered what her life had been like in the palace, and in service to Karrde, she had displayed the same loyalty and dutifulness.

Then, He did something unexpected. He raised up His hand, in a friendly manner to her, gesturing for her to come closer.

Mara shuffled her feet in his direction, until she was at the base of the stairs, stopped by the first level.

Palpatine beckon again.

Blinking, she lifted the hem of her skirt as she started to make her way up the three steps and then a few more steps to be in front of Him.

His head tilted, and gestured her to turn away from Him, looking out to empty small room. The Emperor arose to stand behind her, resting His hands on her shoulders as He pointed out at the space.

“Do you see it? The view that I have from My Throne?” His voice was soft and warm. “That I can look down on those who come before Me, offering themselves as if they were the greatest prize to have.”

“I can see into their minds and souls…” His voice was almost in her ear. “…as they lay bare before me.”

His hands came to rest on her shoulders; it was a familiar touch, one that He had done before, but not in a long time. Mara accepted it.

“And with you at my side, as you develop your gifts, I will be able to see across the galaxy.” He spoke calmly.

His hand from around her shoulder stayed in place, but she almost flinched as His other hand slid down her arm to her wrist. Then, without her notice, his hand transferred to her torso, sitting on her mid-section.

“You, as an Empress, will see them too… their empty gestures will mean nothing without examples of how they serve you.”

She could feel the swirl of energy around her; the Darkness massing, searching her. His hand lowered to rest on her abdomen.
“And your gesture to Me, will be proof of your greatest loyalty.”

He sucked in air harshly, and then moved His hand away.

Mara could feel the swell on her mind, the after effects of a direct touch of his power. It blurred her reality, and she became lost for a moment. What had happened? Was that real? Did she imagine it?

She wasn’t prepared for the assault on her mind and felt dizzy.

Before she could collect her thoughts, the door to the room opened and Sedriss appeared, standing tall. He stopped at the back of the room, waiting to be requested forward. Unlike her, he had been dressed for court, looking every bit the Sith Lord that he wanted to be.

She wasn’t entirely sure what had just transpired, but she knew that she had seen the same sort of thing happen to other, just not to her; the Emperor had used his unique skill to compel those he wished to control without their knowing it.

He dismissed her, and released her back to stand at the base of the stairs.

Mara was still in a bit of a haze as she suddenly saw Sedriss standing beside her, and she watched him bow and address the Emperor properly; he seemed to have taken her lessons regarding court protocol.

She could hear the words of Sedriss’s report, but she stumbled over recognizing the meaning for several seconds, waiting as her mind became clearer and clearer.

“Yes Master” Sedriss said with a bow.

“Good… very good.” Palpatine praised him. “I’m very pleased to see that at least one of my servants can take orders and return with success.”

Mara looked up to the Emperor with His words, unsure if He was chastising her as well as praising Sedriss.

“I have made a decision concerning My Inner Court.” The Emperor announced; His voice echoed in the small room, as He stood and came forward.

“Sedriss… you shall be My new apprentice in the Ways of the Sith.” Palpatine’s voice hissed, and there was a swell in the air of Dark Power.

Beside her, Sedriss inhaled sharply, feeling himself wrapped inside the cocoon of energy.

Mara looked over at him and for one brief moment, she felt sorry for him, knowing what he was dedicating his life to.

This was familiar to her too; she had her ritual that had bonded her to her Master at one point in time, and she had seen others bonded to Sidious as well. But the bond between Sith Master and Apprentice was different than the one between Emperor and agent.

Once, she had felt jealousy when she saw this part of the ritual performed, but now, she knew what it meant for those novitiates who sought it out. Sith Apprentices always had a stronger connection to Darth Sidious than she had, but then again, they never stayed for very long after their initiation – Vader saw to that.

But Vader was gone now and there was no one else who could—… Mara stopped and mentally
gasped –Luke!

Her eyes flitted over to Palpatine, but in these instances where He was assuming the role of Sith Lord and Master, she knew Him as Darth Sidious, and that He deserved more respect; she cast her eyes down immediately, showing that she knew that she was unworthy to receive such a compliment of being asked to join the elusive group of Force-users.

She stepped back, knowing what was coming. She had to keep her thoughts to herself for the time being.

Sedriss knelt before the Emperor, on both knees; the look on his face as he was absorbing the strength from his Master.

“From here on out, you will be known as Darth Faustus…” Sidious proclaimed, raising His arms up.

Sedriss looked enraptured by it all, and bowed forward. “Yes Master… Thank you Master.” He was breathing heavily, overwhelmed by the power that was coursing through him.

He rose up from his supplicant position with his eyes closed, still drinking in the atmosphere.

“Arise my true apprentice. Arise Darth Faustus.” Sidious ordered.

Sedriss did as he was told; his shoulders slumped over until he drew himself up to his full height and regarded his Master.

At this point, Mara knew her place in the ritual; she took to a knee in front of both of them as she was not an apprentice and she was not a Sith. They were both considered above her, in station now, and she tucked her head under as she knelt.

“Mara Jade… come forth.” Sidious announced.

“Yes Master” She said immediately, surprised, and stood, stepping closer to Sedriss, now Darth Faustus. She looked up when she felt that it wasn’t satisfactory, and took a few more steps, almost standing in front of the new Sith Lord.

She looked up at Sidious to see the gleam in His vibrantly glowing red eyes; His power was rejoicing in the moment.

“Do you see her, Darth Faustus?” He asked.

“Yes Master.” Faustus replied.

“Turn and look at him!” Sidious snapped at her.

Mara did as she was told, and turned to look into the face of Sedriss; his eyes now yellowed by his own dark power.

“She was My very loyal servant… My Hand… hidden, kept in disguise, a ghost, a rumor… working for Me, serving My needs. So powerful, so intuitive that her name was feared among all of My court and My Military. She went where others could not. Did what others failed to do.”

Mara tilted her chin up ever-so slightly, hearing her praise.

“And, Force-strong too.” Sidious whispered. “She is My prize… My treasure… and Mine to decide her fate.”
She blinked, knowing it was all true.

“And beautiful too… do you not think so, Faustus?” Sidious hissed coercively.

Sedriss’s eyes dropped down to look into her eyes; his pupils began to dilate in front of her. “Yes Master.” He answered, taking a deep breath and letting it out in a growl.

“Her unique hair…” Sidious sneered. “Look at it.” He ordered Faustus. “Know that you are looking at the colour of the twin sunsets on a distant rim world.”

Mara felt her senses start to quiver, and the quivering started to grow.

“Look into her eyes, and know that you are looking in to the colour of a precious gem that has been slices in a thousand pieces to show off their radiance and brilliance.” Sidious said, spinning His web.

“Yes Master.” Sedriss said blankly; his eyes went darker and fuller, his breathing was deep.

“And her skin, so fine and pure… you would think that she would be the product of a noble household… not a cloistered world, barred from most contact with the galaxy.”

She froze; the air was becoming dangerous, her senses told her so.

“Reach up and cup one of her tender breasts…” Sidious order.

Sedriss’s right hand came up and grasped her body through her dress, as a grin grew on his face. Mara gasped quietly.

“I’ve heard it told that her body is very receptive to attention.” Sidious spoke; Mara knew it was a taunt to her. “You should take the opportunity to *arouse* such attention, for you may not be granted another chance.” Sidious directed Sedriss.

She could feel that Sedriss’s thumb began to make circles on her nipple that was perking involuntarily; his hand began to massage her mound as he let out a little growl between his lips.

Mara was revolted by him, but kept her place; Sidious had not ordered her to move.

“Do you not think that she is exquisite? – given all her gifts and attributes?” Sidious asked, direct at Faustus.

“Yes Master.” Faustus hissed; his hand was squeezing her flesh and his ministrations were starting to be painful.

“Skywalker thinks so…” Sidious sneered. “He likes to believe that she belongs to him… but the truth of the matter is that she is *My servant*, and I decide to whom she will be *gifted* to.”

“Turn around, and face Me!” Sidious snarled at her.

Mara jumped a bit and did as she was told, feeling an icy draw in her skin, coming out of the touch of Sedriss.

“Yes Master.” She whispered as her eyes went wide.

Her memories went back to seeing *this* done before too. But when she was present, she had turned away for *this part* of the dedication ritual, refusing to watch, knowing it was one of two ways the Sith bind their loyalty to each other.
“Present yourself to Darth Faustus.” Sidious ordered; but she still looked up to Him will fear in her eyes. “Now!” He commanded in harsh, hushed tones.

Mara swallowed. “Yes Master.” She said in a voice just below a whisper.

It had always been some courtesan who had been chosen for this task; one that would be compensated later. And depending on the level of servitude that was expected of the newly christened Sith, the ritual could either be of short duration or humiliating painful for the vessel.

Mara placed her hands at the side of her skirt and began to lift her dress higher, inching the fabric with her fingers.

Sedriss had probably never seen this part before, never heard of it; she could feel that the thought of it, once he realized the implications, was driving his arousal, for he had wanted her at his submission.

When she could feel the cool air on her backside, Mara took to her knees on the first step of the pedestal, exposing her genitalia to Darth Faustus. She placed her hands before her on the second step, knowing that she would need to brace her weight and the weight of Faustus too.

“I present you with a gift… Darth Faustus.” Sidious proclaimed. “Go in to her… take what I have given you… share with Me this treasure… and We shall forever be Master and Servant.”

It took a moment before Faustus realized what he was being offered. But in that split second, Mara heard the unfastening of his belt, and the shift in the fabric of his trousers, before she felt the hot hand on her buttocks, and the pressure at her vulva, wanting to enter her.

She held in the gasp that she wanted to let loose; her body wasn’t ready for such a thing to happen, she was dry at the thought of it.

Mara clamped down on her mouth, about to bellow at pain of being lanced into her core unwillingly.

With a maniacal grunt, Faustus pushed and completed entered her, ending with a satisfied growl.

“Yes, take her, and enjoy her body and her presence in the Force… feed off of it.” Sidious commended.

Faustus began to move inside her.

Mara clenched her eyes shut, remembering that she used to go to a different place in her mind during events like this, where this wasn’t happening to her, that she wasn’t a part of it, that her body wasn’t apart of it.

“No.” Sidious hissed at her. “Look at me, my child! He invaded her mind as Faustus invaded her body.

She had no choice but to look up at the Emperor as He gazed down on her; her body jarred with every thrust Faustus was making into her. She knew that Faustus was pleasured by her body’s restriction on providing the necessary juices that followed arousal; she wasn’t aroused, she was silently appalled.

Sidious watched from above; His apprentice take her at His mercy.

“/Skywalker did not fulfill his full punishment on you. / His voice was saccharine sweet in her mind as His eyes danced with delight. / He was too lenient… and you know it. / His voice switched to being curt and concise. 
The pummeling continued, until Faustus wasn’t satisfied with his leverage and reached for her shoulders, bearing deeper into her; Mara winced, wanting to move.

With a flick of His hand, Mara’s hands were locked into place, and she audibly gasped as her head was yanked down into a position that pushed her hind quarters into the air, arching her back, allowing Faustus his desired position. She was locked in an invisible stockade by the Force, willed by Sidious.

Faustus’s speed increased, and he grunted in time with his pleasure.

Mara allowed herself to whimper softly as she was not allowed to distracted her mind.

</ This… this, my child, is your true punishment. /> Sidious informed her. </ You know why you deserve it, and you know that you must endure it; to be back to the level of trustworthiness that you were before, to be back in My good graces. />

She released a tiny cry; sensing that Faustus was almost complete.

</And after this, We shall see if you can complete the task that I have ordained for you. />

It wasn’t a play, it wasn’t contrived, and she knew it had to be genuine. << Yes, Master. >> Her mind whimpered back.

Faustus took three deep strikes before he held himself in place, and grunted as she felt the hot liquid spurt inside her. He breathed hard and satiated; proud of his accomplishment and proud of his conquest.

With a slap to her backside, he retreated. Still breathing hard, he adjusted his clothing back into place, and then bowed before Sidious.

“Thank you Master.” Faustus sneered, imbuing his words with his servitude.

Sidious cackled from atop the dais. “In taking this gift, which I have offered to you, it binds you to My wishes, My desires, and My commands.”

“Yes Master.” Faustus bowed again.

Mara, as powerless as she was, still prostrate on the steps, she could feel him calling on the Force in this moment; Faustus was exposed and she could see the limits of his power. Yes, he would not last long.

“Go now, My Apprentice, and await My commands.” Sidious ordered.

“Yes Master.” With last bow, Faustus backed away and left the room.

With his departure, her backside was still open to the air. She could feel that he had left his deposit inside her. She was trying to keep herself from shuddering and gulping for air; the pain in her body from this uncomfortable position was just one issue.

She jostled slightly, wondering where the limits were of these imposed restraints, but wasn’t allowed much movement.

“Oh, take care, My child.” The Emperor said sweetly.

Mara craned her neck in the invisible stockade to look at Him; He was descending the stairs, coming in her direction.
“You see, you are very valuable to me now.”

She dropped her head, stopping her body from shaking, and shivering, or at least trying to.

She felt the icy hand of the Emperor on her back; it drifted down her spine, and stopped just above her tail bone.

“I understand that, for best results, that a certain position should be assumed for at least thirty to sixty minutes after an accreditation has been made.”

She could feel a warmness, a heat, in her lower abdomen.

“But sometimes these things need assistance.” He hissed.

Mara gasped as she felt the muscular contractions inside her, pumping her internal workings, not pleasurable, but painful, against their will – and then, they stopped.

As He stood, He took the lower half of her dress and covered it over her exposed side.

“Have some dignity girl, as you conceive My next form.”

And He left the room.

Mara could only hold herself a few seconds before she finally let out the sobs and tears out, still locked in the Force stockade.

She screamed openly in the empty room.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

So, with chapter 9, and Luke's "punishment" on Mara, I thought it would be good to comment on this chapter, the stark contrast between the two.

While Ch 9 was written with the intent of dark erotica... this was not... it was meant to be brutal, difficult and appalling-- which, hopefully I attained in writing it.

I take the idea and the act of sexual assault/rape very seriously. And I considered not writing this chapter, and just hinting to it afterwards. But I wrote this for two reasons; as a plot device, and to show the brutality that I don't believe has been expressed in the Star Wars universe before.

As a plot device-- I think it got to where the story needed to be... and in using it as a device, I had to write an non-con scene.

I hope, as readers, you will understand that I wanted to also show that Mara had been a witness, if not a part, of crimes like this before-- and we forgave her, out of her own brutalization.

I'd like to hear your thoughts and feelings on this... and normally, I don't offer this,
because it is a writer's choice to decide what they release-- but I will consider any requests to change certain parts.

Thank you, Phaedra Dahl
The Intersection

Chapter Summary

Quote: Not everyone wanted peace. Not everyone was content to let others exist, in peace.

Characters: Luke, Neiro (original character)

*

Chapter Notes

So… I stole a bunny… from the new Zahn book, “Thrawn: Alliances”… I won’t tell you what it is, but if you’ve read the book, then you will know… oh, you will know.

Also, I would like to thank the kind people who make ‘The Last Jedi- The Visual Dictionary’ for all the excellent work they do in helping us lowly fanfic writers out.

Interesting fact: I hate coming up with names. It boggles my mind how writers and creators attempt to name all the things in other places, and make it sound believable. I struggle with this all the time, and I know, for me, it ruins it, when an “earthly” name is used for something that, clearly, could have a different name someplace else. And character names alludes me too.

FYI: this chapter is ALL plot… just a quick trip to the Unknown Regions before we head back to the chaos that is Byss. I hope y’all won’t get offended with all the TFA/TLJ references. I’ve never hidden the fact that I want to blend certain EU characters back into canon… and my quest continues! (defiantly shakes fist in the air, a la Judd Nelson in the Breakfast Club)

Enjoy!

*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Unknown Regions; Rakata Prime

It was an odd thing to be escorted by pristine-white Stormtroopers, and not to be under detainment.

Luke looked over his shoulder, trying to get a sense of the person who was the in the armor, slightly behind him.

Mara had told him once that Stormtroopers tended to have a bit more personality than that of TIE pilots; their training was different, they were allowed to keep aspects of their individuality and hence their minds were behaved differently.

In combat, they would have been expected, not only to carry out direct orders, but to also make
decisions for battle strategy, which would explain why there was a person left inside that shell.

That would also explain how the Force perceived them too. Unlike sensing one hive-like mind, he could feel unique senses from those around him; some were curious, some were nervous, and some were astute.

It would have been a break in rank if Luke dared to ask if they could see efficiently through those helmets. Given his short duration inside the armor, he had to become a quick study as to how make it work best for him by tilting his head at awkward angles to see out the green-black tinted visor.

It was still an odd thing to have in common.

It was an odder thing to ponder as they strode down the ramp of the Imperial shuttle.

He sighed to himself; Mara.

He had left her bedside so quickly that he hadn’t even been given time to say goodbye to her. On the voyage here, he had been given excessive time to think about her. Although their night together was a mixed bag of both pain and pleasure, in the end, they had found a way to come together, in love, as limited as it was.

It had given him an ounce of feeling that he hadn’t felt in a long time; the bright light of hope.

Feeling her love, and knowing that she still cared for him, despite it all, she had stayed to be with him.

Still, Luke hated leaving her behind, leaving her to the mercy of Palpatine and alone with Sedriss, and his senses told him to be worried for her.

He had worried for her ever since she arrived on Byss.

At first, sensing her arrival, he wanted to go to her, for his own selfish reasons of missing her. Close behind that, came the rationale that Palpatine would find her and twist her, bend her, to His ways. And He did, all over again. Luke knew it; she had to succumb to the power of the Emperor. Part of it was engrained in her; she couldn’t help but take a knee, curtesy, call Him ‘Master’ on instinct, and nothing else. The other part was her true personality that knew the difference from her life before Endor, and her life after.

Luke knew differently; he could sense it. He could sense her desire to break free, and break him free of the influence of the Emperor.

There was something else that was keeping her there, at his side, and he knew what that was too; she was staying for him, staying and risking her life to see that he was safe – an idea that wrenched Luke’s gut and filled him with guilt. Everything that happened to her, until she was free, was a result of his actions; Luke shouldered the blame for this.

The only other reason, that she stayed, was fear; not the fear that she wouldn’t be able to find a life again, but the all-consuming fear that her life would end, painfully, agonizingly, unmercifully at the hands of Palpatine – He would never allow her to leave His service for a second time. He would rather destroy her than allow anyone else to use her, or her skills, to their own benefit.

Until Luke could find a way so that Palpatine could not be implanted Himself into another form, to live on, and be forever vanquished, Luke was destined to stay close, study the malevolent leader, and find something in the Force to ever prevent something like this again.
But Force had also deemed this meeting as necessary. The Emperor expressed just as much when He gave the instruction to the Jedi to attend it.

For almost fifteen days, the Star Destroyer, *The Conspirator*, followed the gap in the opening of the radioactive wave that separated the two hemispheres of the galaxy. The random black holes, that had been previously plotted, had alluded them, as well. Even a craft as big as the *Conspirator* had to take it’s time while traversing this side of the galaxy.

During the journey, Luke had stayed on the bridge and watched as the star lines went by. He watched out the viewport with his hands clasped behind his back. With his mind open, and from under his hood, he could hear from those around him, the comments comparing his presence to Vader.

*Not quite as tall*, made him raise an eyebrow.

*Certainly powerful*, reminded him why they kept their distance from him, speaking to him only when necessary.

In the Force, he gained the knowledge to see and sense where the tide of the storm was going. It was as if he could that the storm had a will of its own, and for lack of a better term, *thought for itself*, thereby it had a presence in the Force. And from the helm, he would give random orders as to the trajectory that they should follow.

As he watched the stars and knew the dangers that could happen if they should veer off course, he couldn’t help but be reminded of the gift that was made to the Emperor of this map to the other side of the cosmos, and the divide.

Now that the party had arrived, Luke had stretched out his feelings, and had been rewarded with the utter senses of those around him.

He had never been one for, what he felt, was intruding on someone else’s mind and feelings. It felt like an imposition, a line in the sand that he dared not to cross.

But since *his turn*, as those referred to it as, it had been as if a door to entire new universe had been exposed. There were no longer the hinderances of conscience that once held him back. There was blurring of what was right and what was wrong; a gap that could allow for certain actions to be done with certain intentions.

Luke inhaled deeply, trying to remember all the arguments that he used to give himself when he felt conflicted, and thought what a useless waste of time that had been, proving to be only a barrier to his skills.

If the Emperor’s tutelage had taught him anything, he had learned to become more distrustful of those around him; there was a motive behind everything.

Not everyone wanted peace. Not everyone was content to let others exist, in peace.

Now, his solemn manner might look like the passive Jedi, but he was learning indifference.

It was a hard skill to master, and even harder to maintain. Mara had made him crack minutely; he could feel her love, but he couldn’t allow himself to be encompassed in it, as he once had allowed himself. He would have clung to her, borrowed some of her optimism, but until his ultimate goal was finished, he had to maintain the shroud of impenetrability.

The precession must have looked impressive to those who were watching nervously from the
sidelines; the reputable Jedi, in his dark robes billowing behind him, and then the following white guard walking in unison.

In all their finery, he could still sense that his troopers were nervous.

From the other side, Luke could sense that the approaching party was just as anxious.

Why shouldn’t the crowd be nervous? – it was most-likely that they had never seen anyone from this side of the galaxy either.

Luke had heard all the rumors about those from the Unknown Regions; they were savages, they didn’t speak the same language twice, they were always fighting amongst themselves, and threaten the lives of those in the galaxy that he knew.

As he walked closer to the receiving party, it occurred to him that they could esteem the same things about him, and his part of the universe.

It would put his mind at ease if he understood more about those that he intended to converse with.

Palpatine had been explicit in His demands of this meeting; He wanted no interference from those in the Unknown Regions while He made His bid to once again control the galaxy. It was an assurance that once that came into fruition, then a peace could be made that would ensure both divisions of the galaxy success.

At the back of Luke’s mind, he had reasoned out that there must have been something that kept Palpatine from wanting to conquer this hemisphere of the galaxy too. The Emperor seemed reluctant to do so.

His mind whispered, *Fear!*

This was just a preliminary meeting. So much so, that there was not the usually grandiose fanfare that went with these sorts of things.

Aside from meeting in neutral territory, the small moon of Rakata Prime, served to be just on the border of both regions; easily accessible, virtually uninhabited, and avoiding the roving radiation storm that had created the border between both fronts.

As he understood it, Rakata Prime had been the meeting place for Palpatine and those of the Unknown Regions before. Probably done under the secrecy from the Republic and the Empire, as it went unreported. The landing pad and platform that they arrived on seemed used, but practical, with a touch of ceremonial function that Palpatine, no doubt, would admire.

At either end of the duracrete construction, a landing pad was placed for the perspective crafts that would arrive, then a platform, wide enough to hold a precession, and long enough to look impressive at a distance. At the center of the extended platform, a canopy, and two chairs, placed opposite each other.

The party from the Unknown Regions looked impressive to Luke; he assumed that he must have looked the same to them.

Both parties strode with a casual, formal air, and as he got closer he could see more detail about them.

A single humanoid representative walked ahead of the group. It appeared to be a male, older, taller than most humans; his slender arms moved precisely with each stride. He wore a long silver-colored
caftan, made from some sort of metallic cloth. His serious face was aged, wisps of long white hair framed his face and he had smaller eyes for such a large frame.

Behind him, his entourage followed; draped in thick purple fabric with nothing but ocular lenses visible, an even taller individuals came. And then followed by a cadet of syncopated guards, bearing a black flag with a red octagonal border and a pointed red circle in the middle.

It was just as well, the troopers that marched behind Luke bore the white and black Imperial Crest; it was all about symbols.

When they reached an equal distance from each other, each group stopped short of the meeting area.

Luke had been briefed on the etiquette that would be required of him.

The Stormtroopers halted without instruction on the border of the meeting area and the Jedi stepped forward, taking thirty paces or so by himself, out of earshot, and stopping beside the chair he was expected to assume, representing the Emperor and the Republic, or New Empire.

Likewise, the emissary from the Unknown Regions, reflected the same stance.

Pausing, Luke made eye contact, and conscientiously softened his gaze before he brought his hands together and bowed in salutation, and then righted himself.

The emissary, genuflected in a graceful movement of his hand before he did the same.

For a split second the Force spiked, and then rested, contented, flowing without pause.

“Greetings.” Luke said, standing tall and dignified. “I am Luke Skywalker, Jedi Knight and representative for His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Sheev Palpatine. I speak on behalf of His Imperial Majesty, with all prudence and acknowledgement of that He rules over and claims domain. I come in the hopes that we can reach a mutual agreement which should prove beneficial to both our sovereign entities.” He bowed again.

For a moment, he wondered if it was egotistical to assume that the emissary would understand Basic, and if he should have arrived with a protocol droid in tow.

The emissary nodded once, accepting the greeting. With sweeping gesture of his hand, the emissary began to speak. “Greetings Jedi Skywalker.” His voice was thick and throaty, inhaling deeply between the phrase. “I am Neiro, representative for the Sho-vuun Peoples to the Consortium of Worlds.”

Luke frowned, a bit perplexed by their title to their section of space, feeling uncertain in the Force.

“We are a collective of peoples from this region of the galaxy that work for the protection and bounty of our worlds.” Neiro responded, answering the Jedi’s unspoken question. “We represent several sentient species including, but not limited to, the Sho-vuun, the Chiss, the Well’en and the Phyuks, and, of course, human colonists.” He gestured in Luke’s direction.

“Will you converse with me?” Neiro moved his slow gesture in the direction of the two opposite facing chairs.

Nodding once, Luke nodded once. “It would be an honor, and pleasure to converse with you.”

Both turned and approached their perspective seat with decorum. A serving droid appeared, offering refreshments between the two parties, and left.
When Luke looked across from him, he saw that Neiro’s eyes had narrowed, and a strange sense was tugging on his periphery, as if the Force was nudging him.

“Tell me, Jedi Skywalker, are you adverse to speaking plainly, without the pomp of politics?” Neiro asked coolly, leaning on the armrest of his chair, accommodating for his height. “Our peoples have not met with the likes of yours in quite some time and have expressed an interest in learning more.”

It was as if there was the third entity between them; the Force churned over their meeting as well.

Luke allowed a tight grin before he replied. “I have no aversion to it.” He replied politely. “In fact, there are many who are curious about your region and peoples as well.”

He could sense that this pleased Neiro as the emissary shared his own tight grin, but he could also sense a curtness in the Force; a tightening, bracing for something to occur.

“We have many questions…” Neiro spoke slowly. “The first of which is how does your galaxy regard us?”

Tilting his head, Luke smirked and paused. “You’ll forgive me if my answer seems rude and ignorant, but it is born out of lack of knowledge and fear.”

“Of course.” Neiro replied. “I am sure that our opinion of your kind would be most-similar.”

Luke smirked again, out of embarrassment for the thoughts he was about to share. “They believe that your people are savages, sent to rampage and destroy them all, simply interested in conquering or slaughtering them in their beds.”

Neiro nodded and looked away before his gaze came back. “Strangely, our opinion also leans the same way… but of course that isn’t the truth, is it?”

“Not at all.” Luke answered. “I certainly don’t believe that.”

“Oh?” Neiro mouthed. “And what is it that you believe?” His voice went low.

Amused, Luke could sense that his own feelings were telling him to carefully navigate this potential mine-field. “I believe that the concerns of your peoples match those of ours; our citizens want nothing more than to live a peaceful existence.” He paused. “And although, our species and cultures may vary, we still have the intention to live in harmony.”

“Odd though…and broad thought…” Neiro looked back at him. “Coming from one from such a desolate world, an isolated world, that you would be able to form opinions that are more-open that those around you.”

Luke raise an eyebrow, surprised that opinions had been formed about him on this side of the galaxy as well.

“We have heard much of you, Jedi Skywalker… your reputation proceeds you. However, I was expecting someone a bit older to have such a vast repertoire, and presence in the Force.” Neiro leaned back into his chair, suggesting a casual air. “Tell me, your people, did they ‘walk the sky’ and is that how they received their name?”

Pausing, Luke took a sip of drink. “You do me the honor of knowing some of my past, but in earnest, my family history has been left behind in sands of my home-world.” He said smiling calmly.

Neiro nodded. “I just find it amusing. You see, the first to venture over into your realm were Chiss
voyagers, sensitive in the Force.”

Luke sat up with the first mention of the Force in the Unknown Regions, by someone from the Unknown Regions. Palpatine only said that the Force moved differently here.

That, so much was true. Since arriving, Luke hadn’t been able to sense any sort of ‘scale’ that measurement one essence of the Force over another… it felt neutral – if that was possible.

“Because they were able to navigate the storm without use of technological advances, merely alone by their senses in the Force—they were called ‘Sky Walkers’.” Neiro tilted his head. “However, you’ll forgive me if I question if you have any Chiss Ascendancy in your hereditary background?”

Luke’s brows came together, uncertain if there was any blue-skinned, red-eyed being in his background that he should know of. With a quiet snort, he shook his head. “I don’t believe so.” But at the back of his mind, a voice commented, you did have a high percentage of ‘unknown’ on your genetic test for the War Orphans Association.

Neiro nodded politely.

“It is my turn to ask something of you and your people.” Luke mimicked the other emissary and leaning back into his chair. “How is it that you have learned so much about us, yet we know virtually nothing of you?”

The emissary took the opportunity to settle into his chair as well. “Aside from the navigational difficulties which divide us?” Neiro asked rhetorically. “There are few worlds that are close to the great divide. In our ancient language of Dwartii, we call it ‘Fierta Uum T’ka’, or ‘Tongue of the Viper’. One would have to travel a great distance after crossing it to be in the more-populated worlds. And those that have ventured over from your realm into ours, have done so at their peril and are willing to share much detail about life beyond the Tongue.”

“Even those close to Palpatine settled just inside the boundary of the storm, after the Battle at – Endor? I believe?... and then did not proceed any further.” Neiro exhaled harshly, showing his displeasure. “The Supreme Leader granted them sanctuary under the provision that should not disturb the tranquility of our realm. They have been most-content to await Palpatine’s return to rule.”

Luke nodded, keeping his demeanor cool, and storing this information for use at a later period. “We call it ‘Xerces Ridge’, named after and explorer who was able to map it approximately.” He looked off to side, hoping that Neiro understood the essence of dry wit, as there was no such thing as approximation in the cartography of celestial movements.

Neiro simply smiled and nodded.

“I’ve had my own unsuccessful encounters with those from your realm. We call your realm ‘The Unknown Region’.” Luke said politely. “Since so much of it is…well, unknown to us.”

Neiro narrowed his gaze.

“My experience comes from personal knowledge of the Ssi-Ruuks.” He said. “And the Chiss. But we were always taught that there are vast amount of those in the Unknown Regions that wish us harm.”

Sitting up, Neiro took an interest now; his face poised with surprise then moving to a more-serious look in his eyes. “The Ssi-Ruuk, you say?” He asked.

“Yes.” The Jedi replied. “They tried to use their ‘entechment’ technique on a sentient world; Bakura.”
Shaking his head, Neiro mouth twitched. “They were banished from our realm. The Ssi-Ruuvi Imperium was not originally of our realm, either. They claimed to be passing through, and when we learned of their plight and the hopes of entechment, our Supreme Leader made the decision to forcefully ostracize them.”

Luke nodded along, catching the phrase ‘Supreme Leader’ again, looking away and they came back to Neiro’s face; at least they had one common enemy.

“The Chiss, however, will forever be our allies. They have protected our border regions for generations, advancing their technology and their knowledge of your realm.” Neiro said.


“Of the clan Mitth’raw’nuruodo?” Neiro asked.

Luke nodded, and was about to enlighten the other emissary, but stopped, sensing...something...

“Then you would have been delighted to have such a skilled and readied mind leading your side of the galaxy.” Neiro praised.

“Some wouldn’t have seen it that way.” Luke said, trying to keep his distain at bay.

“I see.” Said Neiro, sensing displeasure in the Jedi. “And perception is everything, is it?”

“When a leader reigns with chaos, then, yes, it is.” Luke said simply, keeping his tone as neutral as possible.

“Ah, Jedi Skywalker, please be assured that there are a thousand different terrible things that wish to pass from our realm into yours. For our benefit, we also keep them at bay.” Neiro’s face suddenly turned to stone. “If you should inquire further, I can tell you the plight of our realm against those who call themselves the Yuuzhong-Vong, and their destructive path that they attempted on our worlds and our people.”

Luke could feel the fear coming from Neiro as he thought of the destruction.

There was a distinct pause that signified the respect that both parties held for the great loss of life.

“Perhaps we should concentrate on those enemies that we have in common, and perhaps we can succeed in vanquishing them together, for our mutual protection?” Luke said quietly, and solemnly.

Neiro chuckled under his breath, glad for the break in the tone of the conversation, looking across at him. “Spoken like a true Jedi.”

Luke senses twitched at those words; so many times, the words True Jedi had been slurred as an insult, but he could sense that they took on a different meaning here.

Neiro continued casually. “Yes Jedi Skywalker, let us be friends on that accord. These terrible things on our side of the galaxy that we prevent from gaining hold here, and we block them from you- Do you do the same for us?”

“I hope we do.” Luke answered, truthfully. “Though, I think that fear keeps us mainly in our borders. And our section of the galaxy is quite wide before the edge of our gravity well. So it’s the vast space that protects your realm too.”
“That’s a very honest answer coming from the agent of Palpatine.” Neiro say coyly.

Now, Luke sat straight up. Knowing that he was representing the Emperor, he felt that should appear to at least take a bit offense at the jab.

“I meant no insult by it.” Neiro said, relaxing his eyes. “I merely meant that you are far beyond the powers of Sheev Palpatine, yet you are representing Him, and not the other way around.” He breathed hard. “In our realm, it is those who have the power and the skill that ascend to the ruling class. The Supreme Leader was curious as to why it is not the same in your realm, Son of the Chosen?”

Like a smooth breeze, Luke could feel the touch on his senses by another presence. It was as if Neiro had revealed himself, in the Force. It was a presence that wasn’t startling, or dark, or light… what was baffling was that it neutral… a strong neutral feeling; having the capacity to be either light or dark but not distinctively deciding which side to use.

Luke’s eyes narrowed for a second time, and he knew that he didn’t have to respond to the name that Neiro had just used, referring to his father.

“Do you not prefer that I call you that?” Neiro asked quietly, appearing to be surprised that the Jedi seemed to be put-off.

“The Chosen One was my father’s mantle.” Luke replied politely, but on guard now. The knowledge he had was limited, but he also knew that the usage of that title was also limited to just Force-users or those with the knowledge of the prophesy.

“Yes, we know.” Neiro said with sympathetic eyes, sending out his sense that he did not wish to insult the man across from him. “Anakin Skywalker is revered among our people for his selflessness and bravery… and Darth Vader is equally respected for his power and efficiency as well.”

This news came as shock to Luke; it wasn’t common knowledge that Anakin and Vader were one person, yet, here, in the Unknown Regions they knew of it and accepted it, as if... if it was nothing to them.

“And as the two are one, he is honored in either fashion as being The Chosen.” Neiro’s mouth formed a pleasant smile. “So, it is truly an honor to be making the acquaintance of the son of such a...such a... I apologize, we have no word for it in your language. In our tongue, we call him, ‘Qi’a’vik Toom’.” He paused, thinking about the translation, and smiled again. “It means ‘With Two Souls’.”

Rather than reacting, Luke waited quietly, listening on the emissary across from him. In the Force, he could sense that Neiro wasn’t hiding himself; he had no ulterior motives than those things which he already expressed. If anyone was being closed it was Luke, as he tried to guard against releasing too much of what he was feeling.

And right now, he couldn’t fully express those feelings; he wanted to be proud that his father had a reputation passed all the destruction and brutality, that somewhere, Anakin Skywalker was still respected.

Instead of being overwhelmed by his feelings, Luke nodded again, accepting the words as a compliment.

“You’ll forgive my ignorance again, Representative Neiro, but it is surprising to me that you have heard of my father, as my portion of the galaxy had seemed to have forgotten him.” Luke replied
solemnly.

Neiro’s eyes narrowed. /²/ That is because Palpatine wanted your galaxy to forget him… and the Jedi. /²/

Averting his eyes for a moment, Luke heard the voice in his mind, and smirked, suppressing a twitch in his nerves; Mara was right, it was uncomfortable to have another mind contact you when you weren’t prepared for it.

“You are quite right.” The Jedi spoke slowly and quietly; this would be the wrong place to portray that he was anything but in agreement with the Empire, in its present state.

There was no escaping it; Neiro had opened himself to the Force, not holding back. Luke inhaled and released his breath, he decided to let his presence be felt.

Upon feeling the sensation, Neiro inhaled sharply, realizing that he had yet to feel anything so massive as the Jedi’s presence. His eyes widened and then nodded with wonder.

Now both participants would have no walls to hide behind.

“It seems we both have knowledge that we could share.” Luke raise one eyebrow and let his mouth tug downwards.

“It does seem that way.” Neiro appraised.

“You’ll forgive me if I have many questions for you.” Neiro spoke precisely, now drawling on some words. “We have many like you… a Force-user… as you refer to them as, for we do not distinguish who does and does not use the Force.” He exhaled slowly. “But because we have not a had a purge of Users, as your region had experienced, that our population is adept to feeling at ease with the Force.”


“I believe, Palpatine initiated the cleansing as a method to curb the studies of your kind… the Jedi.”

The sense coming from Neiro was not malicious but truly curious. “My initial question is to why such a thing occurred?”

He inhaled deeply before answering; it was a difficult question to answer and Luke was unsure if he was up to the challenge of divulging a millennium of history into one sentence. “You ask a challenging question, Representative Neiro.” He paused and then began to speak slower, thinking of how to phrase it. “For generations, there existed two major fractions of Force-users; The Sith and The Jedi. Each side choses to act from different motivation and application of their skills, thus resulting in lingering conflict, until at last of the Sith were vanquished by the Jedi and were relegated to go into hiding.”

“We have no such fractions.” Neiro said quietly and continued to listen.

“The Jedi prospered, assuming roles in support of the government, The Republic.” Luke felt that he was skimming over the history. “Then, at last, The Sith adopted a means by which they were able oust the Jedi from their relationship with the governing body. Thereby, making the Jedi, enemies of the state.”

“And hunt them down?” Neiro asked. “And by almost removing all potential Force-users? – whether they were to be Sith or Jedi?” /²/ Palpatine did this? /²/
Feeling his shoulders slump, Luke resigned, with a heavy heart. “Yes.” He answered, also holding his anger in check.

It took a moment for the reasoning to set in, but it had clearly impacted Neiro, sitting back in his chair, looking off, away from the other man, bringing his hand over his mouth as he considered the implications.

Luke could feel the weight of the moment too.

As the silence crept in, he could feel that Neiro’s feelings weren’t necessarily of an amicable nature towards Palpatine; that he, and his people harbored some resentment over the Emperor.

And then, he could sense the feelings coming from Neiro; their galaxy had nothing but contempt for Palpatine and his Empire. He could feel it. Palpatine was just another invader in their world.

Pausing, Luke leaned in to sip from his drink, and when he felt that it was right, he decided to take this opportunity to ask the questions that had been forming in his mind.

“Representative Neiro, you said that you have many Force-users in your realm, as you, yourself, are… I’m wondering as to why I don’t sense a… a… designation with you?” He thought that he had formed the question before-hand, but when it came time to express it, it sounded strange to ask it the way that he did; the Force always seemed to have two sides, a Light and a Dark.

Neiro sat up again, taking interest in the question posed before him. “Yes, I see from where your quandary arises.” His small eyes narrowed, and the relaxed. “You’ll forgive me if I still appear disheartened by your description of the annihilation of so many.”

It was easy to understand; the repercussions of Palpatine, Vader, all His Inquisitors and agents would be felt for generations to come.

Luke casted his eyes down. “Yes, it grieves me too… knowing that my father also had a hand in it.” He said quietly. He caught the sense of surprise from the other man.

Looking up, he now knew that it wasn’t common knowledge that Vader was among those who hunted down his own kind.

Instead, Neiro nodded, absorbing the information rather than questioning it. He paused and then looked directly at the Jedi. “Yes, we have many.” He said quietly. “Almost all that are born have a gift of some kind; some are stronger than others. Every inhabitant of our realm is considered a Force-user… they all have the potential for touching the essence around them. It is raw and natural.”

“Life creates it… makes it grow.” Luke said, repeating the words of Master Yoda.

“Exactly.” Neiro’s face brightened, finding the same sensibility comforting. “And just as the gift is natural, so too is the nature of using that gift. The gift is neither good nor bad, light nor dark- it is empathetic, not sympathetic and does not follow emotions or reasoning- it simply is.”

“We did start off as separated ideas and ideals.” Neiro said, speaking casually. “Yes, we know of the Jeddah… the Jedii… the Yedtah, and so many other names.” He paused. “It is rumored that the very first Jedi Temple rested, at one time, inside our borders. The drift in the Viper over the centuries puts it either inside or outside our realm, but that the magnetic field around such a place makes it hard to find. I believe now that it rests inside your realm and its coordinates are lost to time.”

Luke perked up with this knowledge.
“It is so rumored to be a source for darkness as well. Both sides, in balance, on this one world… this one lost world.” Neiro relaxed his eyes, feeling the truth in what he was saying.

“We have those who only wish to dwell in darkness… The Sith, I believe that you call them. They came here too… just as the Jedi…. Sharing their knowledge, drawing from our wisdom. Their teachings and philosophies are only inward, thinking of their needs, desires and levied them against all others.”

“Each came, studied, and left us their knowledge. We have immense pride in keeping records of their teachings.”

“That is how our realm functions in the Force. There are no divisions in Users, merely a strength. If someone works for the benefit of all, they are not delegated to that role forever, as it is natural to experience different emotions and feelings.” Neiro continued to explain. “And that is why we have not had a fractioning of Users… no destruction… no slaughter. It is, unnecessary… and wasteful… and damages the Force.”

A feeling started to sweep through Luke; a shadow was descending.

“However, if a User manipulates their power and twists it, there can be no balance until it has been righted again.” Neiro sat up. “Supreme Leader says, Darkness rises and Light to meet it.”

“It does not go without saying that, in every instance, this is true.” The emissary sighed. “There are some who will forever be consumed by the darkness. The lighter side, it seems takes the demand of conscience with it. Darkness is by far easier to tap into.”

“So, you have touched the dark power?” Luke asked, curious for the emissary, and curious for his own sake.

“Of course.” Neiro replied. “We all have at some point in time. It is necessary. But to linger there… to draw from that power constantly, to make a galaxy suffer for the leech of the strength, is simply an act of greed, not of strength… and that, is the crime.” He paused. “With punishment that is on the self and the soul.”

“There are those of Ren, and their acolytes, who would seek to use this power for themselves. They are held in balance by those who wish to stop their rise and avoid the chaos that plagued your realm.” Neiro leaned closer with his last words. “They live in a dark fantasy as much as they live from the dramatics of it.”

/* You know this now, don’t you? I can see Palpatine’s shadow over you. /*/ Luke didn’t flinch away. <Yes… and I’m having difficulty finding my way back. > He divulged, not fighting it. The draw the Force in this moment, felt like it would not tolerate any more lies from him to himself.

/* Release your fears… He controls you through them. You might not belong in the dark, but your soul cannot forever live in the light. /*/ Neiro replied. /* You are not our enemy, Jedi Skywalker… but until you are free from the clutches of Palpatine, we cannot call you our friend either. /*/ We know that you intend to restart the Jedi Order, but we ask that you consider what I have told you regarding the balance of the Users, and your place within it. /*/ Palpatine is an abomination in the Force -stealing essence to live-on passed his time, and we will not align ourselves with the likes of him. /*/ Neiro finally leaned away, back into his chair, relaxing. /*/ He has been a burden on our realm since He, and his followers, arrived nearly eight seasons
ago… starting His colony near the Tail of the Viper. Though He leaves us in relative peace, however, we can feel His influence on the Users- the balance sways when He is here. His followers are zealots of a variety that we care not for. They easily connived with ideas of grandeur. /*/

Neiro stopped, and his breathing slowed, his eyes returned to a calm nature. /*/ You, Jedi Skywalker, are not made from the same cloth as Him. Your shadow will be quite temporary, but the stain will stay with you forever, I’m afraid. /*/ Neiro’s eyes gleamed with a spark momentarily. /*/ But you are so much stronger than He is…your father was conceived by the Force… you have the essence of greatness… I wonder why you do not over-power Him? /*/

He leaned back in his chair again. “Oh, I see it now…” Neiro hissed optimistically, and nodded with a grin, and let several breaths pass before communicating again. /*/ … I know why you do not turn on your Master…I understand now. Should you, or your sister, decide to ever take the reins of power for yourselves, then, we shall reconsider, when it should ever come to pass. /*/

Luke inhaled, oddly, finding some sort of strength in Neiro’s words; they were compelling and intriguing. “And your Supreme Leader?” He considered his next words carefully. “Can you please tell me the methods of command over your realm?”

“Our power structures?” Neiro asked, returning to his polite countenance.


“It’s very simple, Jedi Skywalker.” Neiro smiled serenely. “Each world has its own sovereignty and regency over their people and their worlds. They pay a shared stipend to our collective so that the interior and the borders can be protected by our forces. The Supreme Leader is an elected position, decided by those worlds who contribute the most towards protection. We do not interfere with internal politics or conflicts, unless we have been requested.”

“So, your Supreme Leader does not orchestrate a governing body?” Luke asked.

“No.” Neiro replied. “He takes more of a military role… a protective role. He is a strong User and utilizes his strengths to guide our realm in security… and not by oppression.”

Releasing the breath that he was holding, Luke couldn’t be entirely sure that Neiro’s answer wasn’t clouded by his own judgement. He nodded once but hiding his reluctance to fully accept that answer as accurate.

“And now, with the pleasantries aside.” Neiro said a bit louder, knowing that they still had an audience that surrounded them. “You are here on behalf of your Emperor…”

Luke could feel the twist in his stomach. He’s not my Emperor. He wanted to reply directly, but held it in.

“Yes.” The Jedi said graciously. “Emperor Palpatine would like reassurances that there will be no interference from your realm, The Unknown Regions, as He is set to ascend the throne in our portion of the galaxy.”

“And you? Where would fit in His power structure?” Neiro asked, point-blank.

“As co-rulers, we would be mutually responsible for the unification of our realm.” Luke said sitting up, familiar with the by-line that he had been using to sway those into believing that such a thing was possible. “Emperor Palpatine realizes that the stability of the galaxy relies on the peace that can be achieved by unifying the Force, and then healing the galaxy.”
Neiro watched him carefully and raised one brow. He exhaled and then nodded slowly, taking in the explanation.

“Very well then.” Neiro said after pausing. He motioned to arise from his seat. “I will bring your greetings and considerations before the Supreme Leader.”

Neiro got up from his seat as Luke mimicked him, sensing that the meeting was over.

Both men stood tall beside their chairs and regarded each other.

“Go back to Emperor Palpatine and inform Him that there will be no interference from the Unknown Regions.” Neiro said blankly.

Luke bowed. “I will gladly deliver this message to Emperor Palpatine.” He knew that he was meeting his obligation and nothing more, even though his interest and appreciation of the Unknown Regions had now increased; there was a world past and freed from Palpatine’s tyranny.

Neiro then broke with protocol and took a step forward, extending his hand. Luke extended his own hand to feel a small data chip being placed into his palm.

/*This is for you, Jedi Skywalker – not for Darth Sidious. */ Neiro covertly communicated. /*It is the writings of a Darth Plagueis, The Wise. It is said that he learned the secrets as to how to conquer death, but was not able to prepare for it before his demise, at the hands of his apprentice. Perhaps it could be of some use to you? */

Backing away, Neiro returned to his formal position and bowed.

Dumb-struck by what was just handed to him, Luke blinked and then mirror the same respectful stance. “It was a pleasure.” He said quietly. <Thank you for your gift, Representative Neiro. > He sent over.

They eyed each other one more time, in a knowing glance, and then turned away, in a sign of trust and returned to their parties, shuttles, and leaders.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Okay y’all... con season is upon me and I’ve got to take a break from Fanfiction, in favor of cosplay-- not the geekiest thing that I’ve said. I will see you on the flip side of this... expect the next chapter, around Sept 30-ish... or there abouts. Cheers, Phae
The Consolidation

Chapter Summary

Quote: If You move against the Senate, before they invite You, You will fail.

Characters: Mara, Darth Faustus, Darth Sidious, Pestage and others... possibly another missing EU character in need of resurrecting... maybe...

Chapter Notes

**

OMG! First of... so sorry for making all of you wait. This is the update... at Con, I got sick and didn’t make it to most of the days... like, really sick, for about 3 weeks... coughing and hacking...doc told me it was virus and just had to suffering until it left... then feeling better, and finally writing.. and BOOM! Sick again... this time, I get mad and tell the doctor that it’s not “just a cold”, and that I am not “waiting it out”... so, then they diagnose me with “Walking pneumonia” which now means antibiotics and bed rest...

Now, I’m feeling much better but essentially every time I moved, I coughed... and coughed hard, making me dizzy. So, aside from going to work, I slept.

On a brighter note... I did start two chapters after this one, so the follow up with be faster now that I’m feeling much better.

Thank you everyone who wondered what on Emperor’s Black Bones happened to me... I’m glad that you cared... and to be truthful, if it was me, when my story was going to be back.

So without further ado...

(drum roll please)

Ok... so for those of you who missed Chapter 12... here’s the abridged version: Palpatine decided to appoint Sedriss as his official apprentice, giving him the name, Darth Faustus. To bind Master and apprentice, Palpatine gifted a sexual encounter with Mara (against her will). This was done in order to secure His future; either in a new body grown for Him, or for a new apprentice of His making. ... and Luke don’t know....

mu-Hu-Ha-HA!!!

**

Byss: Imperial Citadel; Throne Room

Mara stared blankly out at the throne room in front of her. Her back was straight and high, and her
hands were gracefully folded in her lap with the drape of the ornate brocade covering them.

Inside the cuff of her sleeve, she rolled around the small piece of carve Japor Snippet, helping to keep her solemn countenance. The little piece of petrified wood was soothing and smooth as it moved oblivious to everyone else.

The once bright throne room was draped in the veil of dimness. The Emperor liked it this way. Those coming before Him would be leery of the darkness, and He would feed off their fear, and He needed their fear.

Palpatine’s strength was fading, and fading quickly. He needed to do anything to leech His time from any source possible.

She blinked randomly, not responding to those that came in front of her.

On the same level of the dais as her, across the divide of the center staircase, Darth Faustus sat, also looking out, but his attention and energy was put into the appearance that he had been elevated past the same level as the regular courtiers and making sure that they knew it.

He stared out at them with his yellow eyes, shuffling or making some excusable noise to be noticed.

No matter the blank visage that she portrayed, Mara was acutely paying attention to all that occurred around her. She doubted that Faustus was doing the same.

Higher up on the dais, the chair, next to Palpatine’s throne, was empty. And though she knew it was directly behind her, it broke her heart if she could see a glimpse of it from out of her peripheral vision.

It was a clear message; Palpatine and Skywalker were to be the rulers. Darth Faustus sat in close proximity to His Master, and she sat in a closer distance to Skywalker’s chair. It was evident on the direction to which the tide was flowing.

From his throne, Palpatine sat; His mind ready and alert but His body looked frail and weak. It was deceptive, but then again, He enjoyed the thought that it gave His enemies the opportunity to root themselves out.

He had aged quickly since Skywalker had left. Mara strongly suspected it was probably due to straining His reach in the Force to keep a keen eye on the Jedi. She could feel the pull in His aura, making Himself reach vast and beyond; trying to grasp what He knew was out of His reach, His control.

As accommodating as Skywalker appeared, she knew that Palpatine considered him a loose cannon; unpredictable, and still, she thought with a tug on the corner of her mouth, reckless.

The drain was considerable on the artificial form. She had let her ears perk when any mention of it was said in her proximity; the cells of the clone bodies weakened with every call on the Force.

When the Emperor summoned her recently, He had all but refrained from touching the Force unless He needed to, relying on her re-telling of her visions, as it had now become a daily occurrence.

Faustus, as apprentice, had been allowed into meditation room too, watching, regarding, and seeing what made her so valuable to his Master.

It had irked her to see him in the closed quarters, inside the inner sanctum. It was unnerving enough to be in the secluded space with Palpatine, but He seemed to pay no attention to the agitation Faustus
caused in her.

When Faustus caught her eye, he would smirk; an all-knowing smirk from his yellowed-eyes in the
days since his ascension in rank.

Now, he sat across the aisle, looking smug as the last courtier bowed before the seats of power.

This time it was the offer from a fuel refinery plant owner from the Rim, and all the goods it could
produce, in exchange for protection from the gang of pirates, or smugglers, or both, who were
pillaging and interrupting supply runs.

Mara knew the sector and knew who probably was in control of those disruptions…she also knew
what needed to be done in order to stop them. But she kept her thoughts closed and didn’t allow
them to run off, as she would have at one time. If Palpatine didn’t hear her thoughts, then Faustus
might, and he was learning quickly from his Master to play to the advantage by other’s
disadvantages.

Faustus would never be as strong as she, or Palpatine- and never as strong as Skywalker. But what
he lacked in talent, he made up for in ambition.

She blinked expressionlessly when the emissary was done. She sat poised, looking regal, looking
sublime, hiding all that she truly felt.

Skywalker had been gone for over week, twelve standard days- if she thought about it. She had
refrained from calling out his name in the time that he had left, in the days since Sedriss had been
given his title. And all she could feel was nothing.

The emissary backed away.

Mara exhaled at the monotony of this display; it would be taxing if it wasn’t so tedious.

Vizier Pestage stepped forward and court was called to a close.

As if nothing interested her, a diversion from meeting the looks and eyes of anyone else, she watched
the edge of Pestage’s dark navy cloak trailed behind him as he walked.

The courtiers seemed apprehensive to leave, and Pestage had to usher them out. It was an odd
arrangement and she could understand as to why the attendees were reluctant to leave. It was always
protocol to watch the Emperor leave, and possibly be invited to His private rooms and be given
special time, bending His ear, bargaining for advancement. But no such luck today.

Mara knew why, and dropped her head; partially bowing, partially avoiding her position in His inner
court.

The Emperor’s body was failing and He did not want anyone to witness just how feeble His current
body had become.

During the nights, she could feel the sweep over her senses before she felt His presence linger and
slightly fade from her direct contact; He was hibernating in order to preserve what strength He could.

The Emperor hobbled down the stairs on His gnarled cane; the distinct clicking sounds were
followed by His heavy and labored steps.

The Red Guard followed their Master protectively, and then His apprentice, and, in line with her, she
and Pestage took their place in the procession into His private chambers.
Today, the grouping went through the main foyer and into the audience chamber. It was a slow lumber to get there with no immediacy to the procession.

As the doors opened. First, into the foyer, and then through the second set of doors that lead into the private audience chamber. She could feel the wave of energy emerge as the doors unleashed the nature of the abodes.

The Guards remained in the main foyer, silent and grave.

Mara suppressed a grimace and shiver as she entered with Pestage behind her.

The Emperor made his way to His throne in this smaller room. There was no second throne here, waiting for a ‘second Emperor’; no false pretense of who was really in charge of the Empire, no need to think that He was sharing power with anyone, let alone a Jedi.

Regardless, after bowing, she took to standing at the base of her side of the smaller dais, and Faustus mirrored her position on the opposite side.

It was easy to remember that she would be thought of as having some position in the hierarchy; she was made to look it, after all.

Today’s rendering of a portrait of an Empress offered little to the imagination.

The beaded garment she wore was of the T’nar variety, since His Imperial Majesty was courting their favor at the moment. The envoys had been present in court for the past few days, watching all that transpired. They had warships, and Palpatine wanted them.

So, the fabric from their home-world was wrapped around her shapely frame, leaving her mid-section bare; the fine skin on display and to be admired. Her hair pulled away from her face, also styled in T’nar fashion, with, of course, a suitably-sized coronet showing her station.

In the dim light of the room, the beads still sparkled as she walked, the clicking sound of the crystal facets still echoed, and the fabric fell according her frame as she came to stop.

Days ago, she was alone with the Emperor until Faustus appeared, and entered into covenant with His Master, assuming the title of Darth, using her body to seal the pact.

Mara controlled her emotions, even with feeling the leer of Faustus now; he remembered. And in his stupidity, thought that she was still part of the offering.

Inhaling, she pushed his presence back and zeroed in on her Master; the Emperor would enjoy feeling her call on Him, looking to Him, groveling before Him as His loyal and trusted servant.

Indeed, He did, she could feel the sweep of His presence on her mind; as if petting her hair as He would a cat, or a barv, or any other animal that would be at His heels.

He did treat her as a valuable asset, now.

It would be too early to tell for sure, but she could feel it. If she searched for it; the extra Force essence inside her.

She didn’t want to go looking for it; it was just a matter of not wanting to repeat the procedure again, if it didn’t take, if she wasn’t impregnated, that made her stop and search.

It was so small at this point. It would be hard to tell when it happened, and with whom. She begged
and she pleaded, please don’t let it belong to Luk--- No! She stopped herself- he was Skywalker, again. There needed to be some distance between them, and she would not allow herself the familiarity now.

Exhaling quickly, she let it slip her mind away, just in case her thoughts were to be shared.

She blinked and caught the shadow of movement to her side as Faustus shifted his weight from one foot to another. He hated standing. He hated standing and not being raised above others.

Mara allowed herself to glance over at him, and then back at the room; she doubted that he even knew that he had been used. He wasn’t smart enough to comprehend all the pieces that Palpatine had in play, and how he was just one of those many pieces.

Inhaling again, she stood straight, feeling a new party approach.

From the back of the room, and unmistakable gait of a man of service approached. Coming closer, he was announced, by Pestage, to the Emperor.

“Commander Rehal, of the Star Destroyer Deception, Your Majesty.” Pestage said grandly.

The Commander looked proud as he came closer.

Mara took note of him as he was the Commander of the Star Destroyer that Skywalker was known to travel on.

The Commander took to a knee respectfully further away from the dais and dropped his head.

Like all the recent arrivals from the military, he was relatively young for his position, but his senses were keen, and his devotion was unwavering.

“Ah, Commander Rehal, I’ve been expecting you.” The Emperor greeted the new-comer.

He kept his head down, as he spoke. “Your Imperial Majesty.” His voice was strong even muffled by his chest and he clearly hadn’t been broached on protocol; he would be allowed to stand after being first addressed by His Majesty, but he kept to his knees.

“Report Commander.” Palpatine ordered; amused by the show the dedication but disenchanted that true regimes were not being followed.

“Your Majesty, I am pleased to report that all the Victory-Class Star Destroyers that You have requested will be operational and present from your desired regatta and appearance as we rendezvous with the Eclipse, before We travel to the Core Worlds.”

The cackling was accompanied by a wheezing cough. “Good Commander. And the estimation for all of this? —Is it on schedule?” Palpatine asked.

“Yes, Your Majesty. There are no delays expected.” Commander Rehal sounded very sure of himself and the answer that he gave with no hesitation.

“Very Good Commander.” The Emperor exhaled loudly with a hiss. “Then everything is proceeding according to My plan.”

Mara watched as the young Commander looked up in time to see his dismissal. He backed away, as he was properly taught. She tried not to concentrate on the plans that she had just heard. It was vague at best, but she could guess what those plans might entail.
When the room was empty again, it was quiet. And there was the faint sense of a recoiling in the Force; a draw, a borrowing of energy. And the walls seemed to breath in laborious effort. It was just the residual effort of Palpatine as He tried to grasp the implications of the news that was just delivered.

The *Eclipse* has been the jewel of the Imperial Navy; a floating Imperial Palace that was lavish as much as it was a source for destruction. Its appearance would strike fear into the hearts that saw its outline resting in the stratosphere.

To have such a majestic vessel leading a regatta would mean that the Emperor was planning a voyage, and soon.

With the exception of those with the inner court, she could sense the movement of the Emperor, as He was descending the small set of stairs.

At the base of the steps, without notice, He held out His hand in her direction. Without a pause, she took it and placed her hand underneath it; feeling the charge in her skin as the energy transferred, a slight drain her energy.

“My child.” Palpatine exhaled raspy. “I require your insight.” He said as he walked to the direction of the main foyer doors.

“Yes Master.” She said without hesitation.

“I sense a disturbance in the Force, and I need to be assured that We shall not face any disruption in what I need to transpire. I need to know if you see success in Jedi Skywalker’s venture to the Unknown Regions, for on this, several issues rest.” He said, walking at His low pace.

“Yes Master.” Mara replied astutely; her senses pricked at the thought that Skywalker, as an envoy, when she had suggested that he shouldn’t have been sent.

They made their way through the foyer and into the meditation chamber. The doors opened and closed for the party, and Pestage and Faustus lingered behind, seeing that their Master favored her attention and skills for the time being.

Mara could feel the cast-off resentment behind her. It was a cloud, from the two other men in the inner court. They despised that she had specific role to play, and they felt left-out of the ability that she had.

It was nothing to gloat over; her skills had merely been transferred from one aspect to another. She had gone from directly taking an order and fulfilling it, to a daily contact that she wished He didn’t require.

Inside the room, the Emperor took to His chair with great effort. Mara stood in place as He withdrew His hand when He felt secure enough in His position.

She curtsied before her seat, and paused before sitting down, knowing that this might earn her favor.

When His red eyes met her face, her eyes flicked over to the others in the room, then back at her Master.

Palpatine scrutinized her face carefully and drummed his crooked fingers on the armrest before He tilted His head in the opposite direction. “Leave us.” He croaked over his shoulder still watching her.

With His order, Mara bowed her head in wordless gratitude.
When the room became empty, He simply ordered. “Speak.”

“Master.” She said meekly and quietly, with her eyes cast down.

“Yes child.” He hissed, as He observed that she did not take to her chair, but briefly as He must have caught something in His senses, and His ire subsided.

“I have something to report to You, on which, You would want to know immediately.” Mara spoke unnaturally softly and slowly.

She let her eyes flutter closed; it had only been days since… what if she was wrong? “Master, Your desire was successful. I carry Your asset.” She said at normal volume.

“Show Me!” He cackled, with a cough.

His hand came from out and darted in her direction.

Taking the gnarled manacle, she placed it to her lower abdomen. “It is very weak, Master.” She made her excuses for the size, but for being only a small set of cells, a larger presence couldn’t have been expected.

She could feel the spine of energy search the portion of her body. Mara let her eyes rolled shut as she felt it when He found the miniscule bundle.

He hummed sadistically, as He found the essence, and then backed away.

The dark energy swelled, celebrating, then died away.

She lifted her head and saw His lips curl into a fiendish smile. “Well done, My child… only you could have pleased Me so.” He gestured to seat across from Him, satisfied.

Mara lowered herself down, still avoiding the eye contact with the Emperor.

And the silence lingered between them, until she felt that it was right to look up.

From under his hood, His eyes were keenly watching her, his fingers drummed again, as if He was considering what to say.

He inhaled deeply, preserving His energy, and hummed as He exhaled, as He came to decision. “Do you know that when you first came to Me, that I was disappointed?” Palpatine said in a conversationally rhetorical manner.

Mara couldn’t help but widen her eyes at this.

“It’s true.” He said with little conviction. “You were a disappointment until I started to train you personally. Your gift for communication was the likes that I had never seen before, and that save you.”

It was a hidden threat, quietly kept from her.

“But as your other skills improved, I do not regret My decision to keep you as My servant.” His red eyes narrowed. “And until now, I see that you have other gifts that were waiting to flourish.”

“I needed to consult several writings that confirmed what I had assumed.” Palpatine inhaled again with effort. “The gift of insight is one of the last Force-gifts to emerge…. Did you know this?”
She shook her head slightly.

“According to the Whills...” He sucked in the air harshly. “Seers, Oracles, Foretellers – they’re gifts tend to develop later in their life, as a means, after their other skills have been honed. Trying to force the gift to appear, can be devastating to the Force-user... and warp the mind.”

Mara swallowed, sensing that although He was relaxing from their normal formality, He wouldn’t allow any of her questions today, but He seemed to welcome her passivity.

“Do you remember Dlog?”

She sat up with the name and nodded once, remembering the sallow-faced skinny man whose teeth had rotted away when he wickedly grinned in her direction.

“He was a sufficient Seer.” Palpatine coughed and adjusted his failing body. “He was far too eager to please Me, and I believe that he tried to reach into the void more-frequently than he should have.”

Mara looked away and remember that Dlog used to be seen talking to himself and interacting with things or persons that weren’t there.

Dlog had disappeared from court before Endor, and there were rumors that he was kept alive, in comfort, for his own protection yet continued to have visions; his ramblings still had the possibility to hold secrets that no one else knew. Madness had cursed and saved him at the same time.

She nodded again, hoping that she wouldn’t have the same fate.

The old man sighed. “Dlog had no formal Force training... the visions just naturally came to him. It’s a regretful thing that he wasn’t better-used to my advantage.” He pondered and then paused. “Just as well, so many others lingered in the Dark, and as you know, the Dark is not conductive for conjecturing and forecasting.”

As the Emperor leaned back, resting his withered frame, his eyes still glowed. “Perhaps that is not why you loitered there.”

The energy in the room was not grand and sweep as it had been since she had arrived on Byss, but it felt like a dagger being sharpened out of sight, like a blade on a stone, waiting to be used.

“You certainly had the capacity for it... and as others have said, The Force moves differently around those who about to kill.” His voice drifted in thought. “And you could kill, didn’t you?”

He smiled, “And how marvelously you did kill.” Grinning, His hands came together and rested, fingers touching.

Mara felt an icy touch, but it wasn’t coming from Palpatine. It was coming from her soul; her conscience had grown in the few years and grown much larger in the last year. And the memories... all the memories had started to flood back... with only one person that helped keep them at bay... who helped remind her that she wasn’t just a killer...

“I used to feel your pleasure when you would return victorious.” Palpatine’s voice hummed. “You would glow with pride and purpose.”

“How astute and with finesse did you do my bidding... I could feel the anger in you, rising, imbuing you with power, fueling your righteousness... it was your shield and armor against anyone who dared to betray me.”
“All I need do, with a flick of My finger, was to send you out… My scourge, My wrath, My ghost… My Hand…”

“You would move with such precision… My very own silent figra… lurking in the shadows, bearing your teeth, ready to pounce and tear into the flesh of My enemies.”

Turning in her seat, she looked away into the dim corners, feeling the well inside herself again. Beneath the surface, it was there. There were days that she yearned to feel it all over again; the glory of the court, the love and praise from her only father-figure, feeling what she thought of was love and adoration.

The Emperor chortled quietly. “And you would return, successful.” His saccharine tones were dulling.

Her breathing shivered, thinking of how good it felt… being needed… feeling rewarded. And she could feel it again, knowing that something inside her hungered for it again, knowing that she could call on a power that she didn’t believe that she carried.

She closed her eyes and could feel the burning; the burn of a power that never fully emerged … and yet, when she inhaled and held it, then let it go, so did the passion.

There was always something that kept her from being pushed over to the Darkside; something that was too valuable to let go of in the Light.

And there it was; He had tricked her again. Tricked her into fearing herself and her power.

He hummed contently as she felt herself recover; He had fed off her passion for her former position, and her fear of returning to that person. It gave Him a spark of energy and she knew that her feelings had been manipulated again, feasted on to lend Him strength.

Mara opened her eyes, hiding her resentment at being duped, and then blinked to relax the corners of her eyes, knowing that He would also look for any sort of bile from her, any excuse to punish her.

The room was quiet, and the Force had returned with a gentle tide, if somewhat begrudgingly.

“Now…” Palpatine said calmly, from the back of His chair. “Tell me what you see?”

She bowed from her waist. “Yes Master.” She whispered dutifully, sitting back in her chair, beginning to prepare herself, exhaling to find clarity.

The visions she was to have, she would have by herself. No more did Palpatine ask to follow along; it was too much for Him and drained His strength to follow the rapid images. Now, she would have them alone and speak them out-loud, what she saw.

The Emperor trusted her that far, to believe in what she was seeing.

“What do You wish to see, Master?” Mara asked in a submissive demeanor that was not her own. “I wish to practice being more-concentrated in my visions.” She spoke timidly. “…to be able to serve You better.” She finished quietly.

She didn’t need to see His expression in order to sense the shift in His energy; He was amused by her effort.

“I need you to see into the future… if that is possible for you.” Palpatine said as He watched her carefully. “I want to see Coruscant… and the current senate… and the pulse of the galaxy…” His
voice faded again.

It took effort for her not to raise an eyebrow. And she suppressed her sarcastic comment, *You’re not asking for much.*

Mara closed her eyes again, and tried to reach for the power, the Force, that was inside her. It was taking more of an effort these days; her mind was a scatter with ideas and notions that she hope she had protect behind her own shielding. Failing that, she had, in reserve, the ability to empty her mind so that it couldn’t be read.

Today, though, it would take great concentration to look for something to relax her mind. In the past, she had used a *someone* that had allowed her mind to rest into a peaceful state.

*Luke*… her mind whispered and called out his name to the void. She sucked in air harshly, pushing her thoughts away from him. The Jedi, and her memories with him, would be of no use here.

It was time for her breathing to grow long and deep, reaching out in her heightened sense.

And at the same time, she could sense that Palpatine was growing impatient with her.

Again, Mara tried, with more effort, to reach into the deep state that she needed to into order to see beyond the here and now.

Her mind found the abstract thought that would lead her there; the wall of holocrons, and the mesmerizing flicker of energy inside each one of them.

She centered on a fictitious one in her mind; if she was to have one, what would her holocron say about her and her travels?

She hoped it would glow, but not in the subdued blues of the ones on the shelf; she was sure that given where she was in her life, it wouldn’t have been so tranquil for her. It would probably glow in yellow, or even orange, given how tainted she felt. But certainly not blue… there were other things made from the color blue…

Mara let her mind drift following the streak of the colour how, feeling herself get deeper and deeper into the mist of her mind and the pull of the Force… outwardly, she began to mumble of the things she saw…

*The stars… the moons… the clouds… the wind… it drifts… falling, gliding… pulling… pushing… over the water… faster and …faster…*

*I am seeing it now….hovering…*

*The mountains… the mountains are on fire… were on fire… they burned… last of those that resisted… Coruscant… the city is well… but hides the truth… the people are restless… it’s all a deception… the lower levels plan for attack… we must…. She paused, watching the vision become clearer … we must wait… their displeasure will be the trigger for Our Renewal… do not act against them… they will be dealt with by the Republic’s own forces…*

She gasped watching …*the Senate… the people… will welcome us… if we bide our time… those loyal to You, to the Empire…*

Her breathing changed; taking short breaths.

*We have enemies… Mara whispered … enemies in our ranks… I see… others…*
The actions and people played out before her as she paused.

*Rehal… his lieutenant… is a spy… feeding his information to…* She shook her head, not able to see the end of the story.

In an instant, her mind was swept somewhere else.

*Voices… many, many voices… anger… fear… they’re speaking so fast, I can’t understand what they are saying… I think they are speaking in Veemow… yes… they are planning something… the shipyards on T’nar… an attack is being planned…*

In a language she was unfamiliar with, the words flew out of her mouth as in her vision, her sight was concentrated on the mouth of a speaker, and she repeated his words as they came.

As she finished, Mara’s senses were yanked back again to another moment.

*He is standing there… A vision of a figure she recognized came to her…about to meet with the receiving party…*

It was Luke! Meeting with the envoy of the Unknown Regions. She begged her mind to stay there just a little longer, and pleaded that her mouth wouldn’t reveal the full extent of the vision.

*Skywalker… Skywalker will be successful in his mission… those from the Unknown Regions will not interfere with Your plans… they were impressed with him and his power… He will be the key to securing a future with them…*

Mara gasped hard, trying to keep her next visions to herself.

*He hides something… something he wants to keep to himself… but… he teeters… he can still fail…*

She could feel a wetness on her cheeks, trying to hold back the feelings that also came with the images… Luke’s pain and torment.

*The crowds… She said; the images were covered in orange and red, but not the heat. They see You… reborn… in glory… on the… the… seat of power… over the galaxy once again…*

Mara quivered hard and gasping; her eyes opened, holding in the words that were about to emerge…

The last vision she had, she dared not speak… *Skywalker… Dead…*

In all, it needed Coruscant to be in utter ruins again before Palpatine would come to power, with no one to stop Him.

She held her sides, rocking in her seat; the visions had gotten more-intense lately, and always came with pain. Shivering, she looked over to see if He would be pleased with what she suffered.

And He was.

She had said the right things and saw what He wanted; never mind that it was a hard battle to get there, but Mara had not mentioned if she had seen Skywalker in power beside Him, and she had not.

His smile and His eyes gleamed from under His cowl.

Instead, He chose to blink serenely, again, feasting on her discomfort. The red eyes simmered.

The deadening quiet came again.
“Well, what did your insight tell you of all this?” Palpatine asked, with only a slight touch of malice in His voice.

Mara looked over to Him, thinking fleetingly that He was looking for something to punish her on, if she would prove to be incorrect.

“If You move against the Senate, before they invite You, You will fail.” She replied curtly, with unexpected boldness; either driven by the threat or the annoyance of the lingering pain.

She heard the growled exhaled from underneath the hood; He was displeased with her candor but willing to forgive the slight because, thus far, she had been accurate in every one of her visions.

He seethed, considering, and then with a gesture of his outstretched manacle, He simply said, “Now, go, My child.”

A few short gasps, and she raised herself up from the chair, bowed and turned to walk away.

**

Mara bolted up from her bed.

In the darkness, she could only see the red dim lights that made for the “eye” of the sentinel droid in the corner of her room.

Palpatine had gone into his slumber almost eight days ago, and since then, the security around her was heightened; either she was accompanied by a sentinel droid or a single Red Guard, never left alone, never to be her own being.

Even in ‘powered-down’ mode, she still resented the droid’s presence.

But something had woken her; a feeling, a sense. It was immediate; a demanding call.

She exhaled and shivered, thinking that maybe she had another bad dream; maybe this was the dream… the nightmare?

With a beep!, the droid came to life without being coaxed by her movements; it jolted into position, still on-guard in her room.

The waking chimes sounded quietly inside her chamber too, now.

If she had a chrono, it would have told her that it was deep into the night, by planetary standards.

Slowly, the lights came up in the room, supposedly timed to wake her.

Sitting upright already, Mara waited and watched as the doors to her room opened and the two Byssian servants appeared.

Unlike other mornings, they were more-hurried and rushed to their stations, and no food service droid, or taster, followed them- so this wasn’t part of the regular morning routine.

Without apprehension, the sentinel droid rolled forward, passed the middle of the room, almost reaching her bed, and then leaned forward. The light hologram image projected out in front of it.

The image crackled before fully coming to life. Pestage appeared, looking solemn.

“Mistress Jade.” He said.
Mara watched the image, thinking it must have been prerecorded.

“Your presence is requested in the lower chambers. Prepare yourself.” Pestage bowed slightly, and then his image faded away.

She sat and looked away, but only for a moment.

There was only one reason as to why she was called to a late-night summons. She had felt it since the last day that she had attended court… or, the last time court had been called into session, the last time that she was invited into the inner sanctum and her talents called upon.

The Emperor hadn’t been seen in public recently, and although she could feel His presence about, it was not strong and meandered in and out of her senses. She could feel His strength weaning, and she knew that the time couldn’t be far behind.

Mara peeled back the covers and went about her regiment as if it was nothing out of the ordinary. The only issue that had changed, was that she didn’t shower before the preparation was to begin. She could sense the urgency in the Byssians and followed their lead.

The makeup was subdued and but her hair was still prepared in a dramatic fashion, pulled away from her face and twisted into a tight, intricate design.

The clothing was chosen was dark and weighty. The simple dress was accompanied by a hooded cloak; what style elements that were missing were made up for by the luxury of the fabrics, feeling ceremonial in nature.

One last touch was added; a jeweled head band. Sitting front and center, a large teardrop obalone ruby sat in the middle of the band, with smaller rubies on either side that dropped down, framing her eyes, but looking into her reflection, all she could think of was that it looked like her forehead was bleeding.

The hood was then placed over her head, strangely, to cover all the work that they had just done.

When they were done, the Byssians stepped away and bowed in time for the doors to open again, and a single Red Guard appeared.

Silently, Mara followed, without question. Her mind had started rambling during her preparation, but, wisely, she didn’t show it.

The memories came back to her; lurking in the shadows while the Emperor had chosen to leave His body once before. She had felt the Dark energy swirling in the room, and the vacuum that it left. It was overpowering, and she hoped that this time she would be able to brace or shield herself before she felt it.

The Red Guard walked in front of her; the motion of his steps, and even the position of his pike, were soundless.

The trip through the Citadel would eventually lead to the long corridor before descending into the lower portions.

Mara shuddered, sensing the other that was approaching.

Darth Faustus was given his own Red Guard and they joined in line with her procession as their hallway met the main one.
Unlike her quiet journey, Faustus’s heavy boots announced his arrival.

With precision, as they met, the two Red Guards faced each other and then lead the way in front of their two charges.

Keeping her eyes forward, Mara slowly brought up her shields, sensing that Faustus was determined to burrow into them.

He hadn’t forgotten the Sith ceremony and was determined to remind her of it every chance that he got, which had been seldom since the actual event. But now, walking shoulder to shoulder, not alone, but virtually unobstructed, she could feel that he wanted very much to taunt her.

“Any idea what He wants now?” Faustus snarled over to her, showing his disdain for the whims of an old man.

It was a battle in her on who she resented more; Faustus or Palpatine, but given the moment, the winner was Faustus.

She resisted shaking her head, and mentally called him a fool.

“His Imperial Majesty has called us into His presence. I need not to ask why. That is not my duty.” She said in a curt voice.

Her eyes flashed over to him and then back at their path. “You are His apprentice. Are you not worthy enough to perceive what your Master asks of you?” She knew it was snide, and she could sense that it irritated him from the growled that emerged in his breathing.

Mara simply raised her shielding further, blocking him out, but kept her senses open. Everything in his essence told her that he was just as volatile as every other Sith Lord that she had known, but he didn’t fill her with the fear and reverence that she would outwardly display with them. Still, she was convinced that he was just temporary.

Her wrath may only be of the verbal kind, but it was one of her many weapons available to her.

“I see that you are using a borrowed lightsaber.” She flitted her eyes over again to be sure. “Does it still glow yellow?” She asked pointedly, recognizing the same hilt that she had used in her brief session with Skywalker.

Her lips twisted in a quick grin as he looked down to the saber hilt hanging from his waist and left him wondering how she knew a detail like that.

“And your eyes haven’t fully turned yet.” Mara said blankly. “I guess that means that you have failed to make your own saber, and make the crystal bleed as well.”

Dropping these words that she knew would agitate him, she let one more dagger fly as they entered the turbolift behind the Guards. “Master will be greatly displeased if you couldn’t even perform those aspects of your duties.” She mumbled, still looking forward, she could sense it when he turned in her direction, his eyes ablaze with yellow venom.

His retort died on the tip of his tongue when the turbolift’s doors opened again to lower levels of the Citadel and the wave of Dark energy washed over him, redirecting his attention. The words were lost as the party stepped forward in procession, and she could feel his apprehension in being here.

Faustus looked around at his surroundings, seeing the cloning chambers to one side and med-center on the other. But Mara kept her eyes forward as she had seen the chamber before.
It may have been a great deal smaller than the Spaarti cylinder columns on Wayland, where the columns held thousands of tubes, and here, possibly only a hundred, but the low-level hum was no-less grating on the senses.

She had only caught a brief glimpse of them, the last time she was down in the chamber, after recovering. Cylo had made an error and quickly closed off the plasti-steel window when he saw that the cloning facility had caught her attention.

Now though, she could see that only a handful of the tubes were in use, some of the growing bodies looked fully-formed where others did not; deformed or missing pieces. But it was clear as to whose forms were growing in each and every one of them.

The Red Guards went into the room without any trepidation and assumed their positions in the far corners of the room.

Mara knew her place in this performance. She was to be a witness and nothing more, seeing the ultimate power of the Emperor.

It was a macabre sight to behold. The med-center had been turned into a theatric display of sorts.

The green glow was provided by the medical equipment which Dr. Cylo hovered around with zealous effort. The equipment gave its own tempo to the surroundings as hisses and beeps regulated in the background.

In the middle of the room, two hover-lift beds rested side by side. The body of the unconscious Emperor lay resting; His breathing labored but steady. His current body was all but a crumpled-form, grotesque and withered, decaying, a grey-green shade on the slick, oily skin.

In the opposite bed, a body rested, fully covered; the chest rose and lowered, if somewhat artificially; keeping a rhythm that suggested that it wouldn’t be capable to do it without assistance.

Pestage stood close to the body of the Emperor, appearing to be in some form of mediation himself. His eyes closed as he chanted under his breath in a language that Mara recognized as Ancient Sith but failed to understand the words.

She took a moment to look over at Faustus, seeing that his eyes had done wide, and though his lips were closed, his jaw had gone slack. He was of no further concern of hers, and Mara bowed before the bodies, knowing that it would be witnessed, and then took up her position in an unoccupied corner of the room.

When she had seen the transference first done, she was in just as much shock and awe as she felt coming off of Faustus; it was unbelievable, no doubt. And at the time, Palpatine had transferred himself into a waiting Sith holocron. Now, she had no reason to believe that the process was any different when transferring into a waiting body. Yet, somehow she knew that wasn’t going to be the case.

*It screams in the Force.* Palpatine had told her, and under her cloak, she shivered at the thought.

Mara thought back to what she remembered of seeing the process done and tried to remember any other important details.

Palpatine had told her, at the time, that it was better to surround the body with Force-users, to prevent his essence from being redirected from its intended placement – that was why she had been invited to witness the event.
Although it sounded odd, it made sense when she felt his energy being syphoned into the holocron. She needed to be grounded in her own Force-essence, making almost a "wall" to block His strength from taking over any other form. But eventually, His essence went willingly and seemed to understand the transition, and then back into His body, when it was necessary.

Dr. Cylo scurried around the room, from one body to the next, frantic and animatedly eager for what was about to transpire. He mumbled words excitedly as one thing after another caught his attention. He checked and re-checked the equipment, incited by this momentous occasion.

Mara watched him, cautiously, understanding how he could seep into madness so many times, as his other clones had done before.

It was a disturbing sight, that if she was unguarded, her face would twist in the same manner that Faustus’s face twisted now.

The turbo-lift opened again, and without Red Guard, and the cloaked figures appeared; three of them, hooded in black, strangers to her, but she felt it…

The wall of dark energy came at her, but with her shields up, it didn’t impact her as she would have expected.

Three, human, males… Palpatine wouldn’t trust any non-humans with an institution such as this.

She allowed her lip to twitch off to the side but suppressed a knowing nod; Palpatine had recruited more than just Sedriss, now Darth Faustus. He had created a select group of, for lack of a better term until she determined otherwise, Dark Jedi; a group of Force-users that he kept in reserve if he ever needed them.

The thought that she allowed herself to have… He would not need you if Skywalker was here… His power would over-shadow all of you, and then some.

The newcomers took up a position surrounding the lifeless forms and started repeating the same words as Pestage. Faustus joined them and mumbled along where and when he could.

Keeping her position in the corner, Mara watched the faces of the other Jedi, not recognizing any of them, even with the dim light obscuring their features.

They must be new recruits. She thought to herself. There had always been others, in the shadows, waiting to replace those that failed before them.

But she watched, curiously, feeling the energy that they brought into the room.

For a moment, one of them -the bearded one, looked up and over to her. Their eyes met, and then, he looked away, concentrating on why he was there, ignoring her.

Mara blinked and then turned her attention back to the resting bodies, as she could start to feel the shift happening.

Pestage’s voice had been monotone up until now, but it was growing in volume and the repetitive words were becoming louder and hypnotic.

Cylo scurried back and forth between the machines situated at the feet of each of the bodies, looking over to Pestage, waiting on a sign that it was time to end a life and begin another.

The voices echoed, the machines hissed; a drumming feeling in her started, with a constant beat.
The room vibrated with the energy that swirled in a chaotic storm.

Mara rolled her eyes closed, remembering that she, and her presence in the Force was supposed to be a ‘wall’, not allowing for the presence that was the Emperor to escape, and direct it into the empty vessel of the clone body.

Reluctantly, she knew that she needed to let her shields fall away, becoming part of the energy, the Force tempest reared and grew with her presence joining it.

Her eyes became slits as she opened them ever-so slightly, to see if she was having any effect. Looking over, she saw that Faustus was standing tall as if inhaling and absorbing the twisting turmoil around them.

The nebula of Force power was now something tangible.

Mara held her sides, inside her cloak, to keep the nausea at bay; it was a dizzying effect, all the combined power. And she braced herself, sensing that it was about to happen.

This time, her eyes lifted to watch the bodies in front of her, watching as the life exited the older form, cells dying, turning the skin a deeper shade of grey, darkening... blackening...

Her mind flashed on one of her first visions of her and Luke; making love against their tree on Yavin... her belly... and that swollen belly turning to a sickening tangle of darkened veins, shriveling skin, dying flesh, causing her to shriek and bellow in pain...

Another vision, one that was too real; she could see her skin, just months ago, lying on the floor of the throne room, watching her paralyzed body lose color, lose air, lose life, turning grey as the air was sucked from it, as the Emperor willed her punishment for her obstinance and disobedience.

The power of the dark energy in the room was causing a vacuum, sucking and leeching from where ever it could... it was draining her, starting to cause pain from resisting the draw of it...

And then, Mara felt the void in her presence, as if an invisible sonic chasm as one life, one powerful life, left its physical form...

It hovered... lost... confused... angered...

...Pain... Hatred... Loathing... Ambition... Desire... Compulsion... Need... Hunger... Fever...

And then, instantaneously, the scream....

A wordless, tormented bellow shook the room.

Over her senses, she felt the eternal howl of sheer agony, one spirit being replaced with another... new soul, yanked, contorted and discarded... and then... fading... fading... gone....

Mara felt herself sway, feeling drained, bringing her hand to her head, reaching out with the opposite hand to anything to balance herself. She caught the edge of a random object, keeping herself upright, and listening as the voices of those in the room weaken and the electricity dwindled.

She could hear Cylo’s voice, excitedly celebrating, as if he had never seen it before. He had, in fact, not seen it before; this version of Cylo had not, the others had, she estimated, many times - been the orchestrators, administrators, of the whole ordeal.

Panting, and holding her sides, slowly she raised her head, being the witness to the crumpled body
on one hover-lift, and on the other… the newer body started to move, waking the form, becoming one with the exterior.

The Dark Jedi were now kneeling before the new form, still chanting the words of the ancient language quietly.

The new clone body sat up, with the assistance of Cylo.

Pestage now dropped to a knee before the younger body of his Master.

Her eyes were transfixed on the sight. The younger face opened His eyes slowly, revealing the yellow irises. One blink, and now the eyes appeared orange. And again, and the eyes appeared the glowing red that came from a presence that was fully aware.

At seeing this, Cylo backed away, and took a knee.

The eyes of the newly reborn Emperor looked down at those in front of Him, but then turned His attention away from them, and to her direction.

Freezing, feeling the air in her lungs turn to ice, Mara dropped down immediately, bringing her chin to her chest, shivering from His power, shivering from fear, astounded, mind reeling.

Unbidden, her mind allowed one thought… How is Luke ever to defeat you? She dared to ask before closing her thoughts again.

As her mind still was processing what she had seen, in the distance, the sounds of movement could be heard.

A shadow descended on her.

A hand reached out and cupped her chin, directing her gaze up.

Ascending, her eyes widened and then followed where they were being lead.

He was wrapped in an awaiting black robe. His face angular, young, and regal… almost seductive. His lips sneered and then relaxed. His eyes, those red eyes, gleamed.

And then, He spoke… “Oh no, my dear… You do not belong with them.” His voice as smooth and clean, in a perfect Core accent, almost musical.

He gestured with His other hand to guide her from off the floor. “You belong to Me.” He whispered.

Without hesitation, Mara followed where He lead her; leading her out of the room, towards the turbo-lift, away from the others, as the Red Guard preceded them.

“Come… My Empress.” He hissed.

TBC
The Education

Chapter Summary

Quote: It was left unguarded and he was sure that it was not connected to any of the Imperial networks, given the content that he found contained on it; the strange things that militia used to entertain themselves in their down-time.

Characters: Luke… and the Dark Side…

**

Chapter Notes

Okay, I just want to say, that this has been the hardest chapter that I've ever had to write… the things I do to write chapters! Having virtually no knowledge about Darth Plagueis, I went out and bought The Book of the Sith… and, save your money, it was a bit of a snore.

Also, I don't like using other people's sources of information.

So, I have decided that I didn’t like any of the info in there—since it relied too much on midichlorians, and I’ve never liked that premise all that much, so I wrote my own… which required me to break out some biology books instead… oh, the suffering for my art! (hand to the forehead, lamenting)

I tried to keep the biology lesson to a minimum... and please don't correct me if I'm wrong and you know better, okay?

Let me know if were able to get through this one without falling asleep—because I seriously tried to make it interesting. I really only wrote this chapter to push through some plot and nothing more...

I tried…. Almost wore out my italics button too.

**

Aboard the Conspirator, in hyperspace

The engines whirled with a fine-tuned efficiency that he would expect from any other mechanism in the Empire. They worked quietly in the background, reaching to all would-be silent corners on the magnificent vessel; a lurker who witnessed everything. A spy with no voice.

After hours of watching the star lines drone by, an act that normally brought him peace, Luke turned, frustrated, to leave the bridge. As opposed to feeling the immense grandeur of feeling a living galaxy, now he only felt the emptiness and void of space as they travelled at the tail end of Xeres’s Ridge,
avoiding the radiation storm.

They had fallen behind in their return journey to the deep core of their galaxy; the storm had unexpectedly swelled in sections and only with a Jedi at the helm, sensing the shifts before they had occurred, they had avoided catastrophe.

The bridge crew watched as his eyes rolled back; they looked around to each other nervously as they could intrinsically feel the power swell around them, and then he murmured, giving them orders to follow, keeping them from harm but moving them off their present course.

He flexed his tight muscles from under his dark-brown leather vestment, remembering it now, hearing the tension in the hide as it stretched and released in his movements.

His next command was to inform His Imperial Majesty that they would be delayed in their return due to the storm and change in course. His eyes bore into the deck officer with the order, so he was sure that the message was delivered accurately.

And his last order was simple uttered with a growl, “I am not to be disturbed.”

“Yes Sir!” The deck offer said quickly, saluting without question.

His black cloak billowed behind him as he strode the hallways; troopers and personnel purposely stepped out of his way, remembering his reputation, and that of his father.

There was nothing that he wanted from anyone now. His mind was more-preoccupied with bigger issues and questions.

Walking in the cold corridors to his quarters, only the engine-hum accompanied him; everyone else onboard feared him and would not want to be given the chance to ‘make friends’.

The crew on the Deception knew better. But this wasn’t the Deception; this crew were virtual strangers to him. Luke supposed that he was given the lesser-valued Conspirator just in case it got damaged in the perilous trip.

He was weary in his stride as he was not sleeping again.

His dreams- if you could call them that- circled around Mara, and against his wishes. He didn’t want to think about her, and yet, he wanted to be with her more than his immediate objective. She, and her presence, would be able to let him sleep.

The dreams were sometimes vague and cruel at how they mocked his wants and desires; she was either the angel of his life, or the demon sent to corrode his soul.

And it was pointless to argue either side because she was still under the thumb of the Emperor, and until Palpatine’s power over her was extinguished, she was not to be anything but a ploy to be used. She had told him as much, knowing her own flaws.

And Gods, yet, he still wanted her.

He walked purposefully to his quarters; his mood was a thick and brooding as his cloak.

The Emperor was sure to mention that, although Vader never was aboard the Conspirator, the rooms were designed to suit the call of a Lord of the Sith.

The doors open and quickly closed behind him. Luke stopped inside the threshold and could see, as
he paused, that the room would have been designed to fit his father’s aesthetics, needs and wants. The apathetic design invoked no feelings from him at all.

The Sentinel droids held their stealthy position inside the room. Luke paid no attention to them as he stalked past them and further into the only refuse that he could find from the rest of the crew.

The dark metal paneling did not absorb the teem of the engines but heightened it; letting the reverberation encompass him. Perhaps inside the polished helmet of Vader, the hum would have sounded comforting, but he doubted it as his mind flashed on the image of his father’s cybernetical form.

The only lighting came from the floor or the recessed wall panels.

They had taken the care to install a bed for him and tried to accommodate his station as befitting a future Emperor even in this ambiguous state. It was lush and as grand as his one on Byss.

At the foot of where he was supposed to find solace and rest, he stood, looking blankly at the obtuse rectangle.

Luke exhaled, letting his shoulders slump and his mind flashes on the last pleasant vision he had in such a place on Byss; curled up, huddled, tucked into the covers, she slept, mouth pouting, her cheeks slightly rosy.

Luke turned and looked across the room to the only place where he did find rest on this journey.

The meditation pod was brought to life as he approached; the hiss, the movement and the illuminated internals welcomed him.

The Qabrat of Lord Vader; part life support, part isolation chamber.

**This**, this was where he could see his father would find a place of reprieve. It was blank but for a solitary chair and no other controls. From his first use of the pod, Luke discovered that it only responded when he reached out in Force and commanded the functions; if he willed it to close, then it closed for him.

He sat down in the bright whiteness, relaxing and desiring nothing more than to be secluded from the galaxy.

Sensing his wish, the chair reclined and swiveled, and the pod closed. The brightness dulled, and he was submersed into lulling comfort.

From under his cape, Luke retrieved the data pad that he had procured from some unfortunate officer who left their personal device out in the open. It was unguarded and he was sure that it was not connected to any of the Imperial networks, given the content that he found contained on it; the strange things that militia used to entertain themselves in their down-time.

It was perfect for reading the drive that Ambassador Neiro had provided to him. Perhaps Mara’s devious talents had rubbed off on him. He didn’t trust reading it from his own device or any that could be accessed by the Imperial network.

Luke inserted the small drive into the side of the data pad and lifted the lid, watching the viewing screen come to life.

He knew it would take some time to read the almost-ancient disk. It looked like it had the capacity to handle a large document, but the programming alluded to that it was probably created some time
before the Clone Wars, possibly longer.

As he waited, his mind had the fleeting thought of wondering how much more information the Unknown Regions were storing, remembering the mention of the first Jedi Temple that once rested inside their borders.

The data reader struggled to find the writing of Darth Plagueis, as if it knew it was reading something that should not be seen by common men.

What proved to be bewildering was that the Sith Lord didn’t sound like a Sith Lord in his writing… he sounded more like a scientist, reveling his discoveries, but knowing that the reader would have to be dark of heart to comprehend them.

But true to Sith nature, all the good intentions were directed at furthering self-desires, and self-ambition.

Luke leaned back, waiting, letting his eyes flutter, drawing from inside himself, feeling the flow of energy around him, centering it, and straining to concentrate.

Here, his mind found it easy to dissolve into the place that felt natural to him; the Force was with him, quiet and subdued, feeling attune.

But that was not what was required here, and he knew it. His first attempted proved that it was futile to stay rested and relaxed, at peace with his Jedi self.

As the script appeared on the screen, Luke, with a relaxed gaze, saw it and inwardly growled at the slashings on the page.

At first sight, he thought it was the Sith Language. Mara had told him that only Master and Apprentice studied and could read the prose. Although it looked like the common Basic Aurebesh lettering, its jagged mannerisms obscured the writings.

It took several moments before he realized that it wasn’t the ancient Sith Language – Plagueis had merely decided to write his findings in Aurebesh, only backwards.

And then, to further hamper the understanding of the material, it was vague and almost coded, bordering on poetic in nature.

Through an unintentional burst of anger, it was then that Luke discovered that the words could be read… perhaps ‘read’ was a misnomer… they could be interpreted. He wasn’t supposed to read what was in front of him, but to discover what was not on the page, what the dark master wanted to divulge between the lines, as it were.

So, he knew what he needed to do to understand what was before him.

The Darkside had seduced him through his desire for knowledge. It was the only way to fully understand the writings that might help him find a way to defeat Palpatine, once and for all.

Reaching back into his mind, he forced the images, the memories, to come to life that would trigger the necessary feelings that would invoke his mire; anger, fear, aggression … to first time that he had felt true searing-rage in his life; the death of his aunt and uncle… the loss of their innocent lives sparked something that he thought that he had buried. Buried and forgave, not because he wanted to, but he realized that he needed to, but now, he willfully let it fester.

He let the memories flow; the waft of the smoke, the smell of their charred skin, the dehumanizing
way their bodies had been strewn as a warning to others….

And then, the other memories followed… the slaughter of the innocent Jawas… Leia, her captivity and torture… the destruction of an entire planet…

One after another; cruelties and atrocities of the war and all the battles in between… caused a rage in him that simmered. Soon, he brought the anger closer to home, remembering all the encounters with his father.

It was an easy rage to tap into; it was his weakness that recently had been made raw again. Palpatine relished the selective coaxing which only made Luke hate the Emperor as well.

Unwillingly, a new source an anguish sent his rancor soaring. The more that he thought of his predicament, and place in the New Empire, he couldn’t ignore the images of her.

Yes, now Mara had become part of the focus for the bile of his darkness. As much as he refused to give into the free-flowing images, he couldn’t deny it either.

She was very much a cog in the machine in the New Empire.

The images were unforgiving and relentless; she was divine, seated on the dais, dressed as royalty, set above others, placed in front of him, so close but so far, made to perform in front of him, bowing, curtsying to her Master, her Overlord, “Yes Master”, “No Master”, “As you wish, Master”, her doe-like eyes resting on the Emperor’s every word, basking in His favor…

She looked very comfortable indeed; playing with his emotions…. Begging him to leave, seducing him into the darkness by implementing the Emperor’s punishment, knowing that he desired her in his darkest fantasies, wanting her beyond reason, listening to her lies, her seduction, her entrapment….

The energy started to amass; building the storm within him.

Was anything real with you? Do you even know, yourself? He questioned the images of her elegant form that his consciousness threw at him. Do you even love me?

Gods, I want you…. I want to take from you just the way He does… but I want you to give it to me without being asked for it… and you will… you will give yourself to me…

The tempest of passion was reaching its apex. Grudgingly, Luke held onto his feelings in that moment and opened his eyes, feeling the burn in his pupils, knowing that he now had the wrath within him to read the script.

He exhaled hard before finding the place that he had last left…. And Plagueis’s writings came alive…

The Force is malleable.

It wants to be controlled. It is like water, like a river- without the borders to contain and manipulate it, it will be erratic and lack fundamental purpose.

Therefore, it is with necessity, that one must control the Force.

To say that one must heed to the will of the Force, they have blinded themselves to have their will infringed upon. They are too weak and without the persistence to take upon the task that is needed in order to control the Force; they have limited themselves by their own ineptitude.
The followers of the Force may only agree on one aspect—that life creates It. On that, the fact is irreversible.

And it is upon the Sith that we must decide that life, and the essence of life, like the Force, can be controlled. And thusly, and rightfully, so can death... for our own purposes.

But what is the Force, and what links it so heavily to the essence of life?

Before I explain further on the concepts of the Force, I shall pose my theory on ‘the essence of life’.

The ‘essence of life’, I have discovered through study, is to be made of many things.

First, we must look at the biological functions that are associated with ‘the essence’.

In order to have a measurable, and relatable, results, we must have proof that ‘the essence’ is a thing, and not a merely concept.

The essence of life, is unceremoniously measurable by energy – yes, it is the conversion of energy, on a cellular basis, regardless if the subject is human or alien which denotes the evidence of a measurable result.

It has been reported, however inaccurately, that midichlorians control the presence of the Force in a being.

Those who have learned the purpose and placement of the midichlorians in the cells of each of every cognitive and non-sentient being, can now begin to understand the bond between the living and non-living essence.

The usefulness of a component that can be measured, but not understood, and has its complexities in the ability to fulfill the manipulation of its function.

The essence of the midichlorians is to serve only as a conductor of the Force. The Force is present in every midichlorian and every living thing has midichlorians. Therefore, the practicality that life is dependent upon midichlorians is irrelevant; to have life without the Force or midichlorians is impossible.

Luke frowned; knowing this was not entirely true. Thrawn had learned to grown clones with the absence of the Force by the help of the ysalamari... but then, the clones must have had midichlorians in them because they did have a presence in the Force – a very distinctive presence... a warped presence, but a presence nonetheless.

I am unable to dissect a midichlorian, but I have been able to identify its various parts. And as I have ascertained, it is not the connection between the midichlorian and the Force which draws the power. It is the energy of life and non-life which produces the power... and that goes beyond the ability of mere midichlorians.

And that, which it more-ancient than the knowledge or discovery of midichlorians. I believe it is the capability of the power which increase the number of midichlorians in a being; the adept to perceive the Force is derivative from the presence of the midichlorians.

Stopping, Luke thought to summarize what he had just read. Essentially, the midichlorians responded to the power already in the cell... but where did the power come from? And how did the effect the generation of life?

One must first examine the contents of each and every cell— for, in doing so, to create or destroy life,
a User must be able to control the very essence of life… each and every cell in a being’s body. This examination will be at its vagueness, due the factors which effect the different species of the Cosmos—but allowing for common the similarities in all species.

The outer membrane of a cell is constructed of a porous material that allows fluid and nutrients to flow through its permutation; sometimes replaced by a cellular wall.

This membrane can be either open to allow the flow, encouraging life, or, closed, suffocating the cell.

It is with practice, that I have learned to isolate the cells of my body, my apprentice’s body, and the living material of other sentients.

I would encourage that a Supplicant should practice on a minor sentient-being in order to isolate the living tissue to replicate my findings… I would suggest selecting an area of visible skin, so that results can be observed.

A clear mind is needed in order to source and seek out such a select and minute particle … and, of course, propensity in the Force is a requirement.

Concentration and visualization are required in order to achieve success.

Willfully commanding life or death at a whim, takes the intention of holding such a valuable commodity at your desire; making to bend to your will. For a User commands the nature and nurture of the Force.

Luke sucked in air harshly at those words, wanting to dispel them, knowing the Jedi were servants of the Force and not its Master. But he knew he had to keep the animosity inside him and carry on.

Upon being able to manipulate the cell membrane(s), your subject, in a susceptible state, will not be able to perceive the minute changes that you will compel from the cells.

Closing the cell membrane, and the skin should appear to die…. Suffocate.

Again, he stopped reading, and his eyes opened fully to consider the words. The Sith Lord had actually asked to use a living victim to test his methodology on.

Shaking his head, it would be impossible to find a subject who wouldn’t be alerted to his attempts to master control at such a level.

His eyes looked down at his hands holding the data pad, and for a moment, Luke regard the synth flesh on his right hand.

It had been repairs several months ago, on Roche… perhaps?

Synth skin was grown from real flesh. It even bonded to his nerve endings to make touch and feeling more-sensitive. Only, and he knew this ever since he acquires the prosthetic limb, it never truly felt like it belonged to him. It was only a reminder of how close he came … to … to …

Luke shook his head, denying the guilt that threatened to emerge. He knew what he had become and he knew the struggle that he once fought against.

A new wave of hatred started to form, manifested towards himself for being such a fool to follow it.

Control… the Sith Master spoke of control, and of the mastering of this stage of process. Only
understanding the procedure was the way to unraveling Palpatine’s mind to live on.

The Force was with him, regardless of the side that he served now… it was only waiting on him to call to it… learn from it… let it reveal what he needed from it.

He inhaled deeply, and let his eyes drift shut, remembering the words of the Sith Master, directing him to find the smallest of life; a cell, or set cells.

In his mind he could visualize the synth skin, a section of it, just above where it had once been damaged, now repaired, by a blaster bolt on Jabba’s sail barge.

The patch to repair the area was gone now, but movement still felt tight in that area, as if the mechanics were still uncooperative.

Luke could see it, and as he examined it in his mind, the sensation on the flesh started to tingle.

He could visualize the cells as they made up the dermis; the microscopic details became clearer, seeing the individual cells clustered together, working as a unit, connected and conjoined.

Working harder, he centered on a grouping of them; he could consciously feel the cold area on his skin.

_The cell membrane_… He could see the outlines around the set.

*Close the membrane and the cell dies.* The words repeated in his mind; he mumbled them again with eyes closed, focused on the task at hand.

He reached out, turning the membrane rigid, not allowing the flow of oxygen into it. Luke felt the flush of ice on his skin; he gasped and halted the experiment.

His eyes opened and he looked down at his hand. An area, perhaps a centimeter in diameter, had turned grey, almost white, and the skin around it had inflamed, protecting the other cells from what had inflicted, forming what appeared to be a burn.

Within nanoseconds, the flesh had died at his will, and seconds after that the process had started of his body trying to repair what had died.

Luke exhaled, stunned, that he could have the power to control life and death on such an intricate scale.

This sort of knowledge must have fascinated a young Palpatine. With the desire to control the grandness of a galaxy would have hardly stopped a man who could control the essence of life, if he was so dedicated.

He took short breaths inside the pod, realizing now, that yes, Palpatine would have thrived on this knowledge, and celebrated the control over it.

Now the horror entered his mind, thinking of how it could be used against a victim, or an enemy, or over anyone Palpatine wished to control.

Unstoppable death…

Unable to prepare against it…

Luke wondered how many foes had met their end this way, watching the life being sucked out from their bodies.
Now, he almost preferred the method of Force-electrocution than this, as an option for death.

But there had to be more. More than just the capability to end life, but to transfer it. That was what Luke was truly after.

Surely, the sesquipedalian Sith Master would not stop to rejoice his learned knowledge over those could not foster the meaning of his words.

He had to go on; he could not stop here. There was a drive that the answers he sought were within his reach.

An ache in his chest prevailed as Luke knew he had to reach into himself, going darker, to carry on in reading the macabre manifesto.

The hunger for knowledge was aided by the Darkside element of Passion; he was passionate to find the solution that would end his own personal hell and torment from the Emperor, and be done with it, once and for all.

It was easy to tap into the famishing hatred for the man, the thing, that constructed and contorted Luke’s world and the lives of all those around him.

This was easy to achieve, and he could feel the swell, allowing it to only grow so far, and not to consume his rational thought, for there was a task at hand.

Unconsciously, Luke scrolled the pages of the data reader until he felt it was right to stop.

Controlling the fire within him, he opened his eyes, which he was sure were now crimson from the burned, but ignored the feeling, to continue reading.

Greater than that of the cell membrane, is the source of power in the cell.

I am speaking, of course, of the mitochondria, and not of the midichlorians.

The mitochondria, as the ‘powerhouse’ of the cell, responsible for the breakdown of simple and complex sugars, simply provides the energy that it needed in order to survive.

As you may have observed, kill the cell membrane, and those cells around the infected area will simply respond- the process for regrowth will begin and is too rapid to predict.

However, kill the energy source of the cell and the functionality of repair cannot proceed.

Next, I am troubled by a correct explanation for my findings. I have been able to see that when I actively disrupt the life of the mitochondria, that there is a transference between the mitochondria and the midichlorians.

Although, it is not observable, I believe the midichlorians absorb the energy from the mitochondria. Proof of this is measurable in the electrostatic shift of energy transference; energy is given between the two entities.

Presently, I have only tested on skin and tissue samples. If I could test on a living Force-sensitive subject, I could ascertain as to whether my hypothesis is correct—that a subject could willingly control the consciousness of the energy transference, thereby transferring their own consciousness from one form to another.

Luke shudder; there is was. Plagueis had revealed his belief; that a Force-strong being would have to
have the control and awareness in order to do the transfer.

It was hard not to get wrapped up in the zealous writings of the Sith Master; the words had an energy to them, and the concept, though repulsive to a Jedi, implied the unimaginable power that such a trait could have.

His finger slid down the sidebar, skimming through the writing, wishing to see and understand more about the transfer of energy.

Until, something caught his attention.

*The most potent exchange in energy is, of course, conception.*

*It should be noted that in humans, in particular, that the aptitude for conception is greatly increased when an attachment, a bond, is formed.*

*Although conception has been known to occur when there is no attachment or bond – look to the number of off-spring of human Jedi to prove that no attachment or bond needs to occur. There is predominant evidence that the Force favors these conditions – further research made be required regarding Jedi mating practices, as the Jedi have deceived themselves into believing that they do not long for, nor require, physical pleasures or passions.*

*As for the Sith, partnerships, bonds and attachments are encouraged which fosters a source of protection as well as a source for the lingering passion which can sometimes occur. Passion, or lust, can be temporary, and temporal, and transferable when needed as a stimulus for attaining a goal. It serves to deliver pleasure to one’s self. It can be used and discarded just as any other tool.*

*It is the division of the cells, as the zygote matures, which produces the energy that is needed in order to form a ‘fusion’, if you will, with the Living Force.*

*This is where the midichlorians form a fusion with the Living Force. A midichlorian can retract its initial hold on the Living Force if interrupted, but then regain it again. The bond is unbreakable, except when a cell dies, or when a User retracts their life-essence from a cell/midichlorian.*

*As each cell is made new and created, the fusion and attraction to the Living Force increases.*

It was not the information that Luke was after, but it still provided the insight into the carnal workings of the Sith, or at the very least an acknowledgement that they, too, could feel such things.

He rubbed his forehead; no closer to the answers that he searched for. *Darth Plagueis, the Wise* certainly had the wisdom to hide his findings, buried underneath a magnitude of data.

It was there. It had to be- all the mysteries had to be locked in these writing. Why else would Neiro give them to him?

His blood boiled under his skin, rushing to find so desperately what he needed.

In truth, he had limited time. He would be needed on the bridge again, and soon. Beyond his quarters, he could sense an impending shift in the storm again.

And if the previous writings were anything to go by, if Luke found the answers that he needed, he would need time to prepare the use of them- there was only so long that he could delay his return to Byss, and face the Emperor once again.

And a reborn Emperor at that! -he had felt the surge of energy this time, being more-attuned to it, and
felt the Darkside coiling like a snake, ready to strike; a sure sign that the Emperor had usurped another fresh form.

With not his first exasperated sigh, Luke tried again, centering his mind, reaching out, and still searching.

Letting his mind focus, he skimmed again and stopped. Swallowing, he let his eyes relax at the words, as they formed a coherent thought.

*Let it not be said the that energy transfer is an easy feat.*

*The object and desire of the participants must be so great and so unyielding that the nature of the Force has no alternative than to submit to the desire of the Sith that holds the power to accomplish this.*

*The means to accomplish this, however, do not require the subject to be a Master of the Force, only the skills and knowledge make it possible.*

*By means of the ability to center and contrate one’s mind, deem the success or failure.*

*For a Sith, it must be with total desire that one can overcome the abyss that is death.*

*...to ensure success a conduit must be used. In place of inferior conduits, several novices or initiates aid in directing the consciousness from one form to another.*

*The swell and the storm of the massing energy is so great that it must be contained.*

*A vessel; another Force-strong individual must be used to channel and direct the energy to its intended placement.*

*Any loss of control, any deviation or weakness in concentration can have dire effects for the energy and consciousness transfer.*

*They must be able to concentrate on their tasks as well. For if they are unable to keep their minds in a state of preparedness, they may unwittingly diverge the consciousness from its chosen path.*

*This can be done by the chanting of the ancient words of our brethren.*

Pulling himself out of the words, Luke blinked and looked at the script that he now recognized as the ancient Sith words, still undecipherable to him.

The script looked angry, harried, and volatile.

He wished he could read them and understood them, but he read on, with an anxiousness building in him.

*... Feed from the power of these words. Imbue them in your soul. Feel the desire and the rush fill you and aid in your visualization of the mastery over all the Force as you will it to follow your command.*

*Take the energy that masses around you. Be aware of it. Be conscious of it, and focus your utmost wants outwardly, controlling your own energy and forcing your presence into the object that rightfully belongs to you.*

*Take it. Claim it. Force out any impediment in your path. You are the consciousness that wills it so.*
Your direct thoughts ensure your success.

The power is yours to use as you see fit. Unlimited abundance is at your command, and all the secrets of the Living Force! Bind yourself to the energy and make the shift from your physical bonds to the temporal plane, and to a new form!

He broke immediately from reading, feeling too drawn in by the spell and promise that the impossible was truly possible.

The words drove Luke’s thirst and hunger for power that he didn’t know that he wanted. His lungs heaved with every breath. He had been so close to giving in and letting himself be devoured by the promise of power.

The crack in the pod allowed fresh air to rouse his consciousness into the present and force out the cloud that was swirling around him. It also allowed for those who were wishing for his attention the notion that he had made himself available.

Slung forward, with his back to the only door in the room, he felt the presence and heard the mitigating quiet cough before he turned around to face the only other person that would dare disturb him.

The young officer from the deck looked scared, and his eyes flickered around the room, anywhere but the pod and its inhabitant.

With command of the Force, the pod swiveled and open in the direct of the officer, showing that the Dark Jedi within was not amused to be disturbed as he straightened his stance, resting his hands on his knees.

“Lieutenant.” Luke acknowledged the other man as his voice cracked from his dry mouth; the word echoed in the room, implying annoyance and grandeur at the same time.

S—S-Sir…” The young man stuttered. “We’ve been able to send a signal and have received confirmation back from Byss.”

With not much more than a nod from the mystical Jedi, the Lieutenant continued. “My Lord, the Emperor’s emissary sent a rather ominous message… simply stating that ‘all preparations have succeeded to ensure the future course of action’.”

The young man cleared his throat. “I asked what the meaning of the message was… and…”

Luke inhaled. “I know what it means.” He responded quickly, stopping the further intrusion. After he took a slow breath, he gave kept his tone but relaxed the speed of his words. “Keep on course and inform me if there is even the slightest change in the read-outs.”

“Yes, My Lord.” The younger man replied with a bow, as the pod turned away and sealed again, ending the conversation abruptly.

The Emperor would be sure to await his arrival; his return to Byss… his return to her.

TBC
The Elevation

Chapter Summary

Quote: In truth, she knew her purpose; she was a hostage, to be held against the Jedi should he step out of line. She was a vessel to do the bidding of the Emperor; her body was an object to be used until she was no longer useful.

Characters: Mara Jade, Emperor Palpatine, Darth Faustus, Sate Pestage, and others

**

Chapter Notes

I got nothing… I have to make my way through this story now and get it written down… I’ve gone too far ahead of it in my head… please read and enjoy, and hopefully comment-- whatever that will keep me in the her and now of this story.

Oh yeah… Mild Language Warning.

Cheers My L/M Shippers!

**

Imperial Place; Byss

The chimes outside in the hall echoed the passing of midday. But to Mara, her mind didn’t process time by standard hours. Her days were not counted, but only numbered in events that she witnessed.

Her stomach cinched and spasmed quickly. Quietly swallowing, she held the bile in her throat that was threatening to emerge.

This was not what she was accustom to.

She had been taught to hide in the shadows; reputation by rumor only, nameless, faceless. Being on public display like this irked her strongly.

It was taking all her nerve to keep from riling up against the pomp and circumstance that she now had to follow.

Mara walked silently, with a Red Guard leading the way and one slightly behind her in the procession to the Grand Throne Room.

Courtiers bowed and made way for her, with all eyes scrutinizing her every move.

She could feel them bearing into her; some feared her, some dismissed her, and some truly loathed her. But all of them still held her at some level of speculation. They knew who she was, but not what
she was.

The murmurings caught her ears as she walked with her head held high, looking the part, but not feeling it yet.

“My Lady”

“Young Highness”

“Emperor’s Hand”

“Lady Jade”

They each had some sort of title for her until they were told otherwise; no one wanted to be wrong in the manner that they addressed her.

It used to be that you could tell a person’s station by their clothing, she amused to herself, thinking back to when courtiers and the senators lined the halls waiting for a private audience with the Emperor.

She allowed her mind to drift as the walk was uneventful and just another opportunity to be seen.

The Trade Federation used to wear purple. Mara remembered, thinking back to seeing them clustered together in a reception area of the Emperor’s private quarters, in the palace on Coruscant. The Mining Guild favored green… dark green. As she thought of their robes. Those who were neutral to Imperial rule wore white. Her mind emotionlessly flashed on seeing Leia wearing senatorial robes.

Her green eyes blinked solemnly at a courtier who bowed as she passed- he thought she was acknowledging him, but she was merely shifting her thoughts.

They were fleeting thoughts, but anything to keep her mind off where she was, what she was doing, and who she had become.

Then again, I used to have a purpose too. She told herself. Before… long before…

In truth, she knew her purpose; she was a hostage, to be held against the Jedi should he step out of line. She was a vessel to do the bidding of the Emperor; her body was an object to be used until she was no longer useful.

The doors to the Throne Room opened as she approached. Meticulously, the Red Guards took flanking positions on either side of her as she entered.

The activity inside the room did not halt because of her appearance.

For all the extra security that appeared around her after the Emperor’s metamorphosis into his new clone body, there seemed to be some forgiveness that now extended to Mara when she wasn’t where she was expected to be, at an expected time.

It was a moot point anyhow. Given the nausea that she had started to experience at random times, it was hard to predict when and where she could attend court. It seemed that the Imperial Court did not want to explain why she was experiencing any form of illness. Mara doubted that anyone but her, the Emperor and Doctor Cylo knew of her condition. Even Faustus and Pestage seemed oblivious to it.

In the weeks since Palpatine had assumed a new body, the attention paid to her had been more-
diligent, yet relaxed in some manners.

Her Byssian servants weren’t as harried in the mornings. However, her taster appeared for all her meals, Red Guards followed her every movement and when they were not available a sentinel droid kept quiet watch, and Doctor Cylo would appear every few days with a medic droid in tow, poking and prodding.

Mara exhaled, waiting at the back of the room until she felt the sweep on her senses. Although the session was in progress, the Emperor’s touch on her mind, ushered her to come forward.

The delegation from Vloon stood at the base of the dais. Through a protocol droid, they were conveying their support to the Empire, and asking for protection from the neighboring system Praasiv IV.

Walking directly, she stepped to the side of the rambling droid, stopping at the base of the dais to curtesy deeply and gracefully, before ascending the stairs to her own minor throne.

The Emperor motioned his hand dismissively in her direction, while watching the delegation grovel.

She caught his red gaze as she came closer and cast her eyes down briefly, begging forgiveness for the interruption and quietly taking her seat.

Since His transformation, He had been kinder to her than He previously been; gone were the thinly veiled threats and insults. If she could believe He was capable of feeling it, He was treating her like the precious object from her youth; merciful and understanding, a doting surrogate father.

In the back of her mind, Mara knew that it was all for show, and there would always be a price to pay for this leniency at a later time. The Emperor’s voice and candor was still laced with the venom that loomed over everything.

Relaxing her back into the chair that was provided, she glanced over to see that Darth Faustus was feigning interest, as per usual, trying to look the part.

It was also unusual that a Sith Lord was being kept so close to his Master. Others had been sent on missions, to do their Master’s bidding; Vader never attended court without an astute reason or summoning, or had been granted a seat. Faustus was being kept on a short leash. Which he’ll probably hang himself on, she thought wickedly.

He had recently been granted his own Star Destroyer, and as soon as Skywalker was to return with the Conspirator, it would be deemed into his service. Little did he know that it was an affront to receive a lesser vessel; the Conspirator was outdated by many means, and she recalled it being one of a few in the fleet that survived the civil war. If it came back at all from the Unknown Regions, it would be a feat unto itself.

Mara inhaled slowly, hiding that her stomach had once again flipped, and she held herself from any sort of reaction, changing her concentration to the party in front of the dais.

To her, the Vloon always looked nervous. Perhaps in was their multiple compounded eyes that flickered quickly. Or perhaps it was their language; the chorts and chips, at different intonations, were difficult to perceive.

She could sense that they were indeed uneasy to be in Palpatine’s Court again; He was known for his dislike of many alien species. And although many of them would be accommodating to His needs and wants, He would unexpectedly, and ruthlessly, blindside them by cruelest of means.
There were numerous races that were nonexistent, thanks to the Empire.

Their protocol droid was a C-unit, not as comical as Skywalker’s golden cyborg, and tended to be less-animated; Mara regarded it so. The droid was summarizing the party’s request; an offering of skilled labor, slaves—she thought, in trade for Mitiss Ore.

She could feel the itch in her skin, knowing that they were bartering with the lives of their people for the opportunity to refine the ore and resell it to a higher bidder.

Knowing that it was useless to shield her feelings, she felt the deeper itch, almost claw-like on her mind, before she heard the words.

<So, My child… what do you believe should be the result of this meeting? /> Palpatine’s voice impatiently snarled in her mind. He was growing bored with this tedium.

He could be charming when He wanted something. More and more regularly, He was asking for her opinion on issues presented to the Empire. It wasn’t that He was just asking her for her daily visions, but in open sessions, He would call on her to make decisions directly in front of those attending court. These editions were growing infrequency and in importance.

Mara assumed that was the reason that she had been shown more-respect by courtiers recently.

*If the Emperor respects her council…and favors her…” It was an easy thing to observe and presume. The rational thought that followed also included finding ways to win her favor now too. Though most of the gifts that arrived for her never made their way before her.

<<Master, they will keep the most-skilled labor for themselves, for the refinement of the ore.>> She answered back, releasing her feelings, knowing that He would sense that her answer was coming from her insight in the Force, and not from her own feelings on the matter. <<It would not be wise to accept their offer, as it stands. However, their labor costs on ore refinement are less than that throughout the Empire. It would be better to allow them to keep their labor-force and instead receive a greater percentage of the profits from the refined ore. Unskilled labor will cost more in the end…and let those inferiors be their issue, not Yours, Master.>>

She sensed that He was considering her words, and then she felt it again; the gentle patting on her mind, as if He was stroking the head of a pet.

</Yes/> He hissed. </Yes… quite right…quite right indeed. />

Mara knew the costs associated with running an Empire and acquiring a galaxy at your whim. It required vicious tenacity and the credits to back up your ambition. And what a better way to build ambition than with mountains of credits.

From her peripheral view, she could see the Emperor raising His hand, stopping the diatribe of the droid, to His pleasure, and the pleasure of the court.

The droid shook for a moment at being halt and then digressed to its programming, coming to a passive position.

The room was quiet for a moment. Silent. Waiting.

Feeling the tension arise in the courtiers pleased Him greatly.

“I have decided…” The Emperor announced slowly; his voice not grand but projecting out into the room so that it echoed slightly. “…that Lady Jade will negotiate the contract for this enterprise.”
The energy in the room rippled in surprise.

Shifting uncomfortably in her seat, Mara could not have predicted this decision, nor could the rest of the room in attendance.

Palpatine waved the group away, as He was tiring of them. “Preparations will be made to meet with her on My behalf.” He said keenly. “I have faith that she will act accordingly in the Empire’s best interests.”

The delegation paused and then bowed deeply to the Emperor. Stopping, they turned in Mara’s direction, and gave her a lesser bow, acknowledging her.

She knew that all eyes were on her, and she nodded once, accepting the rule of His Imperial Majesty.

The lull was coming in the session, and Vizier Pestage stepped forward, calling for closure. The visible side of the Empire was made of an orchestrated show with precise timing. Those deeds that were needed to conduct the colossal conglomerate were best done behind closed doors; ignorance was bliss for much of the galaxy – they would never hear of the countless monstrosities that were needed to keep the march going.

At least the presentation of normality of grandeur was still a function of the Imperial Court. The Emperor made his way descending the dais, stopping at Mara’s level and pausing to grant her with His presence, offering His hand in her direction. Rising from her seat, she took it without exception, watching forward as they descended together, looking regal, appearing to be somewhat His equal.

Mara resisted the shudder and the wave of nausea and followed where He led her.

She allowed herself to have a side-glance at the Emperor and then looked back at their joined hands, presented as a noble gesture on his part, treating her like a high-stationed ornament.

Palpatine was a much younger version of himself than she had expected him to emerge. True, He looked like the chiseled nobility that he was known for, keeping His air above everyone else, and made quite seductive with the power that He wielded.

Darth Faustus, begrudgingly, followed behind them in the procession; she could feel his building resentment of her. Strangely too, Pestage also seemed annoyed at her position in court. She was making enemies without her consent; she was the type of person who preferred to cultivate her own adversaries and give them motives to hate her.

Yes, Faustus was boiling now, seething behind her. In her senses, it felt like the hot breathing in her ear, huffing with hatred. She could almost hear the words berating her and the Emperor to select her over his own apprentice.

The doors to the inner sanctum opened for the procession.

"You did very well, My dear." Palpatine’s voice was condescending. ".. as opposed to others." He sneered.

Faustus wasn’t hiding his feeling at all from his Master, and the Master was not please. Reflectively, Mara flinched, knowing that this behavior would not be tolerated.

Another mental pet from the Emperor was sent to assure her that she was not the source of His displeasure, sent to ease her anxieties, not to upset her condition.

She could feel the energy massing behind His façade for her benefit, as the doors to the private
audience chamber opened.

Once the processional was inside, instinctively, she stepped to the side on the Emperor, backing away with haste, and dropping her head submissively.

Pestage must have sensed it too and stepped back from the target.

The Emperor turned with the swiftness that His older form would never have allowed. The ozone smell proceeded the electrical burst that shot out from his hand, catching Faustus squarely in the chest, causing the younger man to drop to his knees, pushing his body back with force.

“How dare you even question My decisions, you insect!” Palpatine’s voice bellowed in the small room, shaking the walls.

Faustus dared to look up with an amber glare at his Master.

The arches flew one more time, making the reprimand clear. This time though, Mara pushed herself not to look away from the punishment; she wouldn’t feel sympathy for a man who felt none himself.

Palpatine withdrew his hands, turning to walk to the remaining paces to His throne. He sighed, relaxing into His seat of authority, confidently, to watch Faustus recover.

Taking her place, Mara ascended to stand beside the throne, quietly observing, trying to not let the smell arouse the sickness.

Faustus seemed to have gotten the point and kept his head low as he went to stand at the base of the dais. Before he got there, he was stopped.

“Your presence is not required, Darth Faustus.” Palpatine said, keeping his voice in control. “Go to my private quarters, and I will consult with you shortly.”

Faustus seemed to consider his options, but decided that he would bow and say solemnly, “Yes Master.” Then, backed away a respectable distance before leaving.

Waiting Pestage approached the dais when he felt it was safe to do so. “Master,” He almost whispered, “They are here.”

The Emperor took a long deep breath, and held it, turning his throne to regard her, his hands came together, fingers touching, contemplating.

Mara dipped her head, knowing that he was watching her intently.

“Let them in.” Palpatine said with a wave in Pestage’s direction.

She could sense that she was being watched, and if she dared to think it, admired. Looking up, His red pupils were relaxed, and then she could feel the caress over her body, gently stroking her lower belly protectively; an action that she didn’t even want to do to her own body.

Mara looked away as the sound the footsteps caught her attention and she could feel the new presences before she saw them.

Palpatine turned His throne in their direction acknowledging their arrival.

The three cloaked forms came in and quickly took to their knee in front of the dais; the same three who attended Palpatine’s transformation.
She hadn’t seen them since that night, and though she hadn’t outwardly thought about them since, she knew that they were lurking somewhere in the palace.

Pestage stood beside their forms, waiting on commands.

“Pestage informs me that the issue has not been dealt with aboard the *Deception*.” The Emperor said without a preamble.

Mara frowned, trying to recall if there was an issue aboard the *Deception; Skywalker’s Star Destroyer*.

“You will recall that in your previous visions, that you had divulged that you saw a plot of treason within the crew.” Palpatine reminded her.

The vision had occurred before His transformation, and rightly, her memories of anything taking place before that moment had blurred. But recalling it, she knew of the vision of which He spoke.

She had clearly saw figures hiding data, gathering in groups with for the purpose of sabotage.

“I have been informed that there are suspicious transmissions leaving the Star Destroyer.” Palpatine hissed. “Your visions are proving to be correct on this matter.”

As a repeat of the show in the Grand Throne Room, His words surprised her. “I want you to command My Shadow Hand with the necessary instructions in order to root out those that conspire against Me and My Empire.”

Mara blinked, astonished again, and looked over at the three forms.

*Shadow Hand?* – a Shadow Hand had not been in place since her first days in the palace. The group of Dark Jedi had been dissolved because of their own treachery; rumor had it that they had been secretly working for Darth Vader, only one of the many reasons that the Sith Lord was under suspicion for treason.

*Palpatine must have assembled a new group of followers.* Force-sensitives, but posed no threat to Him, eager to learn to use their gifts, filling them with power.

The one with the beard looked up at her; she caught his look before he ducked down again. His dark brown eyes and somber look knew the seriousness of the moment.

With a swallow, her lower lip quivered, not from hesitation but from fear that she would do something that would displease the Emperor. Ever since her supposed elevation in status and His transformation, she had been trying to stay within His good graces, being the dutiful servant that He wanted, not angering Him any further.

Palpatine turned His throne in her direction. Smoothly, He left the seat of power, coming close to her. “Why do you waver, My dear?” He said in dulcet tones. “You were My most-capable Hand…the one that I trusted with all my endeavors.”

*/ You heard My voice… Issued My commands… Served My justice. */ He mewed in her mind. */ What gives you pause now? */

She could feel that His patience was dwindling with her now, thinking it was an artificial show, not amused if she was playing this meek role; even she knew that it didn’t suit her personality.

He came behind her, gently taking her hand in his, much as he did when he led her into the room,
coaxing to come forward. “Tell Me, how would you use them to your best advantage?”

Drawing her to the center of the platform, looking down on them, his words enticed her. “You desire this.” He whispered close to her. “/How long have you felt idle since you have arrived? /

Mara reflectively brought her brow together, wanting to deny it; yes, the second that He had proposed this to her, only a few moments ago, she had started planning the means to sort out this issue.

It was a draw, a trap; a tantalizing trap that would make her feel useful again.

She closed her eyes to search the vision again, to see if this would lead back to anyone that she didn’t wish to be seized by the entrapment.

Knowingly, she called on her feelings, reaching out in the Force, not hiding it and giving Palpatine a reason for her hesitation in answering him quickly.

He hummed appreciatively. “/Yes, call on the gifts that I showed you how to use. /

This was not the peaceful side of the Force that she was learning to trust and the ice started to fill her veins as far as she would allow it.

/

You have it in you… I know that you do. / It was now Darth Sidious’s dark tones that throbbed in her mind; He was reveling in her touch to the Dark. /No one could be as ruthless as you were… cunning and insightful… beyond your years. /

In the private chamber, He stepped away from her readying himself to reap the rewards of a well-trained spy and assassin. /Be My wrath yet again… Command them using your skills of insight and wisdom… they yearn for it… can you not feel it? … they are looking to you for your guidance. /

When He felt her confidence growing, she heard His words to Pestage, and including her. /Take heed, Vizier, and see why I have placed her above Faustus. /

Pestage lifted his chin, waiting.

Palpatine stood back, watching with pride.

Setting her shoulders, Mara walked down the steps in front of the hooded threesome.

“You will follow Protocol Eidolon- make yourself invisible to crew and all those aboard. Search the uncommon areas first – any communication devices will most-likely be hiding in air vents and compartments. The most-common covering with be magnetic, so use an electrometer to find any deviations where there should not be any.” She announced.

“Once you have found the devices- as I believe there to be several – make duplicates of their information- cover the original device in theta-radioactive solution. This will be undetachable to the naked eye, but will leave a signature that can be linked to the guilty party. Then, return the original devices where you found them.” She concluded.

“Trace the theta-solution, and inform me of those who were found to carry the radio-active in-print.” Mara finished sternly, remembering how effective this method was for discovering traitors.

The group motioned to bow before her, the one with the beard paused before following the others. “As you wish.” They said with slightly less zeal than they displayed for the Emperor.
Mara turned to look at Palpatine and measure His amount of pleasure at seeing her in action yet again.

The Emperor smiled slyly, His eyes glowing in appreciation.

Palpatine looked over to Pestage. “Inform Commander Rehal that My Shadow Hand is in action.”

“No.” She said abruptly, causing the Emperor’s eyes to widen and look at her audaciously, about to narrow, about to reprimand for ever to stop His command.

“He should not be warned, Master.” Mara said quickly, trying to explain herself, but still kept the hardened look of the killer that she was known to be. “It is very likely that Rehal is aware that the plotters are in his midst, and he may be aiding them. To notify him will only make the guilty become sloppy, and then we will lose the upper hand to find out to whom they have been sending their correspondence to.”

Mara swallowed, realizing how close she had come to impudence on her part. “The wider net will catch them so that the traitors will not be able to escape… sealing their fate, and revealing their accomplices.”

Her eyes darkened even further, and permitting the twitch of her lip into a satisfied mien.

Palpatine relaxed the anger in his eyes towards her, and returned to her with a mercurial sneer of his own.

Turning to the rest of the attendees in the room, He addressed them. “Yes, let it all be done according to her instructions.” He began to make His way to the exit, leaving the private throne room. “I put my trust in her… My Hand.”

The trio bowed. “Yes Master” they said in unison.

“You are dismissed. Go, and do My bidding and then report back to her. Await her commands.”

“Yes Master.”

When the Emperor was gone, the Shadow Hand turned to her, bowed and the exited themselves, off to perform all that was requested of them.

Alone in the small audience chamber, with no one but herself, letting go of the personae that not felt surreal, the only thought she had now was…

What have I done?

**

The day had become early evening, and for the past three days, she had met with the Vloon, negotiating the rates and repayment schedule for the Empire.

They weren’t as intimidated by her as they had been before the Emperor, but they were still standoffish with the cool and aloof woman who spoke on behalf on His Imperial Majesty.

She possessed some sort of power, much akin to the Emperor, but they couldn’t suss out why she was so valuable. They decided to afford to her all the gentrification that they would give to her Master, without question.

When Mara left the chamber rooms, on her way to return to her quarters; her head was hurting, and
random aches were making usually tired… her condition again, no doubt.

The hallway was dimly lit, and at this hour in the day, their shadows grew ten times their actual height. The air, however was tight, and this caught her attention only before she could truly sense it.

Only one Red Guard was leading her back and suddenly he switched hands of his Force-pike, preparing as the air now snapped.

In a split second, the Red Guard was hurled against the nearest abutment, rending him unconscious.

Mara, instinctive went to retrieve the Guard’s pike in order to protect herself. But before she made it to the limp form, he came from the shadows and stepped in front of her path.

Faustus’s face was twisted; she hadn’t seen him since he was last dismissed, when he had been punished.

In the gloom of the hallway, she could see an angry mark on the left side of his face; a severe burn, highlighting his orange eyes, glaring at her.

Bracing herself, she reached out in her senses, preparing to do battle with the angered Darth. She stretched out her hands, and planted her weight.

But all of this preparation was in vein. Faustus sneered at her, coming parallel to her form in the hall.

In the cramped space, he ignited his lightsaber. The crimson blade extended with a familiar snap-hiss! It sputtered and cracked strangely as if the energy could not be contained. “Do you not see?” He sneered at her proudly. “I’ve made it bleed now.”

Mara’s eyes were on the bleeding, hostile blade as it hummed in the close space. She had to chance it, trying to make her escape, hoping that her absence had gone noticed.

With an outward twist of her leg, she spun in the direction towards the main corridor, but Faustus was faster. He caught her, single-handedly around the waist and pulled her back in the shady recesses.

She struggled until the saber came up and wavered in front of her, daring her to fight harder less it should be put to use. As she relaxed and lessened her fight, did the threat seem to withdraw.

The heat of being pressed against Faustus became clear as she heard his breathing close to her ear. He inhaled deeply into her hair. “Why haven’t you come to my bed?” His voice cracked from trying to keep his sounds low. “You know that I’ve wanted you.”

“You know why.” Mara grumbled under her breath. “The Emperor hasn’t sent me to you.” She could feel him pressing himself against her body. And the random thought passed through her mind, He doesn’t know! - not about It…

“You need not wait for the order… I know that Skywalker saw you without His consent.” Faustus growled, his groin digging in at her hip. “I feel your power… it’s as hungry as mine…”

Then, the tone changed from lust to a different form of seduction, in a heartbeat. “We can overthrow Him, you know…” Faustus was trying to inveigle her in his scheme. “Destroy the cloning chamber and prepare for the coming of the Supreme Leader.”

For a moment she was aghast that he was suggesting such a thing, to her of all people. Mara
struggled again until she remembered the humming blade that touched the edge of her skirt and singed it away. “No.” She growled openly.

She watched the blade come up and hover in front of her; feeling his unstable mood shift again.

The anger in Faustus was turning to rage; the arm around her waist started to tighten, threatening to crush her ribs and her sides. “You think you’re so kriffing high above everyone else, don’t you?” He extorted. “He’ll destroy you.”

With a jostle, he made his demands known. “It will be painful, and I’ll enjoy watching it when it happens.” Faustus’s menacing voice was so close that she turned her head away as he attempted to garnish nuzzling against her soft skin. “You might serve Him… but I know the secrets of the Unknown Regions and keep them at bay.”

“And what you don’t realize is, no matter if He is displeased, He will still allow me to have anything that I want…” His groin was hardening as he spoke without a care. “Including ripping open your dainty, little cunt as much as I want.”

His crackling red saber reiterated his point and his avidity to not to let the object of his desire go. “Before the end, I’ll have you screaming for me, just like your scream for Skywalker… and I’ll make Skywalker watch as I take you from him.”

A tingle in her sense warned her first; she could feel the number coming towards her, a set of Red Guards.

With a jerk, Faustus released his hold on her, sensing the approach of the others too. <\* This isn’t over. *\> He warned before he disappeared back into the shadows and was gone from hallway when the Guards arrived.

As they appeared, the adrenaline left her body and so did her resolve. Mara fainted to the floor slowly without a word of explanation.

**

Mara looked up at the lights rather than look anywhere else.

A Byssian sat in the room with her, off to the corner, for when their services would be needed. A Red Guard sat just outside the door.

She lay on the cold metal surface for one of her many inspections that seemed to be on a rotating schedule of every few days. This day was one of them; an inspection without reason.

Dr. Cylo wasn’t concerned about his patient.

It wouldn’t have mattered; the doctor was watching the sonogram, tracking the progress for his Master, and not interested in anything else.

She supposed that most women would be curious about what was happening with their body; she was not.

It was a thing that was growing inside her- nothing more.

She knew that It had a presence; she could feel as much. But It wasn’t strong and prominent in her senses. The whole thing felt so temporary… if you could call it that, she grumbled to herself.
She didn’t bother to reach out to the presence either. As far as she was concerned, It was a cancer growing inside her. To her reasoning, she couldn’t fathom as to how this thing worked into Palpatine’s plans.

The stories that Mara could spin as to how this was supposed to play out was making her mind hurt, and then the shiver would start; the one that always came when she felt the fear – the fear of Skywalker’s reaction when he would return.

Once, she did reach out to It, trying to get a sense of who conceived It. When she was satisfied that It was not Luk – Skywalker’s, she felt relieved. She could feel It though; It was made from Faustus and part her.

Yes, It was something that belonged to her too, made of her cells, part of her presence in the Force.

When she did reach out for It, she was trying to see if It had a future; her senses told her that It did not. Perhaps reverting to her callous nature was the best course of action; it was easier not to feel anything for It, except when she allowed a twinge of sadness for the part of her that would never thrive.

It was inevitable and no matter how many times that she tried to put it at the back of her mind, It was there, and what purpose It would be made to serve.

Mara’s mind stopped the treadmill of thought as Cylo’s behavior started to perplex her. He was mumbling to himself, looking at the sonogram and consulting the MD droid.

“Yes… yes, she will be ready from the implantation soon.” He mumbled, lost in his own conclusions, centered on his job. “This has gone on longer than expected though.” His words barely making any sound.

Mara frowned. Wasn’t she already implanted with something? She shifted under the sheet covering her body, and the sound made the doctor looked up, realizing that his patient was conscious.

His eyes looked worried, then he forced a tight grin to her, and patted her nearby hand, working on his bedside manner. “Everything is fine.” Cylo said, with his eyes widening in a manner that wasn’t reassuring and nodding to her.

“The Emperor will be pleased with your progress.” The doctor said. “You may prepare to leave now. We are done for today.” He finished with a tight smile, and left her alone with the droid.

Perplex, Mara did as she had always done at the end of these visits – leaving bewildered again.

**

He had called, requesting for her attendance.

It was strange to be at the beck and call of the Emperor in this manner. He had preferred to contact her mentally rather than in-person.

It was almost midday, and the Throne Room was empty.

Meetings with Him were unpredictable; He was unpredictable. The Emperor guarded His intentions and thoughts better than she had ever encountered. There would have been a time when she would reach out for Him, trying to read His feelings, and be ceremoniously blocked, to the point of being painful on her mind at the rejection.
The Red Guards had left her there and had closed the doors behind them. Mara could sense them on
the other side of the partition, waiting, guarding.

Shrugging to herself, she had no idea as to why she was summoned here. The Byssians had made
her up to look her finest; the jeweled crown had taken any light in the room and had cast facets on
the floor that danced as she walked. While she still had her figure, the fabric of the dress clung to her
shapely body which was getting more-shapely as the days passed.

She was the made to be the picture the rising Empire incarnate; seductive and harsh at the same time,
lush and alluring to those with greedy minds.

But there was no one to witness it; no one in the halls, no one in the Throne Room now.

Her senses sparked and she knew there was another motive for her to be there; it was never that
simple. Losing her stoic candor now to nervous tension would now be tolerated, even if she was
valued.

It had been days since she had her encounter with Faustus; she had sent a coded message over to the
Emperor, warning him about his apprentice. She had received back the appreciative touch on her
mind, but she suspected that He already knew.

It wasn’t a surprise then when she felt the touch of her Master on her mind again, announcing His
arrival into to the room.

Mara turned to face the door that led to the private chambers, and waited, moving herself to the
usually path that the Emperor took when in the great room to His throne; that was where she thought
He intended to head.

The doors opened smoothly and without ceremony. Without His accompanying vizier, the Emperor
looked like most noble men from a distance. As He neared her, his red eyes glowered on his majestic
face, and He opened his hands in a welcoming manner.

“My child.” Palpatine greeted her; his lips temporarily upturning but his eyes stayed flat.

Mara curtsied deeply, lowering her head, and waiting until he came closer.

“You are a vision of loveliness and regal beauty.” His words slurred to make them sound more-
important, and give some credence to his complement which seemed unnatural for even Him.

Keeping her head down, she replied humbly. “Master, you do me great honor with Your words.”

“Indeed, I do.” He said, taking control of his accolade. “But it shouldn’t go without notice that by
your direction, My Shadow Hand will be reporting back to you shortly.” Palpatine walked passed
her, expecting her to follow.

“Yes Master” She said quietly as she felt the sweep of His contentment.

“And I reviewed your agreement with the Vloon.” The Emperor commented as He walked to the
middle of the room with her in tow. “I am pleased with the potential profitability and output of the
negotiation.”

He was, but she could sense not as pleased as He would have liked. “Yes Master” Mara kept her
head down.

“I am wondering if you were too lenient when you made these agreements.” He turned to regard her.
“It was never My intention to let lesser beings think that they ever had the upper hand in any situation. I am not accustomed to waiting for the things that I want.” 

Inhaling, she kept looking down. “Master, Vloon is located along a primary trade route, and they have many trading partners in the senate.” She paused. “My senses told me that if His Majesty wishes to overtake the senate, then Vloon could be a perfectly situated ally.” Mara looked up to meet His gaze. “However, when Your Majesty’s rule come fully to fruition, then terms of this contract can be ratified in Your favor.”

It was a dance with words, but both of them knew what she had implied.

It wasn’t a hint or a threat; it was just how the Empire used to operate, and she had displayed that she understood it perfectly. The Empire would look cooperative, until it wasn’t and then it just took what it wanted when it had the upper hand.

Palpatine raised His eyebrows, now appreciative of the cunning that she had demonstrated. His eyes narrowed, looking deceptively relaxed. “Good then… very good. Things are proceeding according to My plans. I should soon to in place to return to the senate and take control of it once again.” His voice carried in the space with His grand ideas.

However, nothing could be that easy. Only moments ago, she could sense that He was on the verge of reprimanding her for being prideful of her work, even if it was successful in His glory.

Palpatine smiled, coming closer to her, with his back to the dais. “And now, I wanted to be the one to inform you…” He reached out, asking for her hands.

Mara brought them forward and looked down as He took them, holding the knuckles up, mimicking affection. “After an arduous journey, Skywalker will return today.” His voice hardened.

“Now, as a matter of fact.” It was perfectly timed. Wearing a fiendish grin, she watched the Emperor’s smile grow.

Then, as He backed away from her, she felt it; the brightest star of a presence in the Force. A presence that she dearly missed and then began to fear.

Oh Gods! Her mind panicked. He will know!

The grin twisted into a snarl as He fed His hunger for her fear; His eyes rolled with glee. “Oh, I hope that he won’t be disappointed with your present condition….” Before fully retreating, He felt free to leave one last barb. “May your reunion will be a pleasant one.”

She didn’t hear it; her mind was reeling. Mara had begged the Force that this could have been put off forever. Her body started to involuntarily shake with fear.

Luke! Trying not to call out to him, with feeling his presence now within close-proximity. The Conspirator must have landed!

As her mind started to race in order calculate how long it would take for him to arrive at the palace, after disembarking…and taking a shuttle…she felt him.

< Mara!> Luke called her name; tears threatened to form in her eyes at his touch.

He must have sensed her and came looking for her presence in the Force. <I’ll be there soon.> He promised vacantly, without emotion.
Chapter Summary

Quote: Mara’s shielding was usually a harbinger of things to come; a way to protect herself against others and herself.

Characters: Mara, Luke, Emperor Palpatine, Darth Faustus, Sate Pestage, and others

Chapter Notes

Oh gods.. it's cold out side.

Sorry to make all of you wait, but once again, Darth Real-life is a bastard. Since the holiday season, after my two plagues... I have the lovely thing called "repetitive stress syndrome" which cause my hands to cramp up... rather painfully too. Believe you me, that I would have loved to continue writing this story in place of going to physiotherapy. I even tried using voice-to-text to get it going, but it didn't help.

Hands are feeling better but I'm going to pay for typing 20+ pages, I know it... but the show has to go on.

Warning: some smut, only by mention.

So enjoy and let me know what you think? Personal goal: make readers absolutely hate Palpatine... mu-hu-ha-ha (evil laugh)

Igliak Space Port; Imperial City on Byss

Swirls of green, gold and orange illuminated the Imperial City.

Looking down over the deeply in-laid streets, confirmed their aged and their direction, leading to the Imperial palace.

The Conspirator hovered ominously above the city, resting like a dark grey cloud over all that lived there. From its belly, the shuttle descended.

The agile craft moved silently as if it was a bird of prey. The screech that came from the two accompanying TIE fighters could be heard kilometers away, a wretched scream, sent to distort and disorientate.

He towered behind the pilot and copilot silently, looking over their shoulders, watching their approach to the Imperial Palace.
It seemed so long since he had been there. In his mind, he rejected the notion to ever refer to it as a home of any sorts. It was not.

But it was where she was… wasn’t that enough?

Luke crossed his arms on his chest, looking out, recalling that he felt her personal Force shields slam down after he had reached out to her. Before that, before she was aware of his presence, she was… he wanted to say, scared. And that concerned him.

Secretly, he had hoped that she would reach back to him, on some level, hoping that he would feel her presence and be able to shake off all the emotions that he had been keeping to himself on this journey.

Feeling her light would feed his own. And it needed feeding; the flame in him was subsiding, he hated to admit it.

Beleaguered by guilt, he didn’t want to think of the images that he had needed to activate his darkest feelings.

_She was there…_ in all of them. Replaying their night before he had left on this journey. His dark fantasy come to life, haunted him, holding her at his whim, feeding off her fear and pain, possessing her how no one else had; and how much he had enjoyed it.

Never mind the remorse that he felt after it was said and done.

To make matters worse, she was pushed aside all of his actions, seemingly forgiven him, and took him into her loving touch. No matter how he tried to rationalize it, it was either a sign that she was used to such behavior and could predict it, or she that she was an accomplice to it all. The deeper knife cut into him when he thought that possibly she allowed such things because they were _normal_ to her… and now, he had become like everyone else who had used and abused her.

Sucked into the void, he had let his feelings for her hasten his demise.; anxiety and paranoia fed the fear and resentment.

It was a necessary evil; Luke shook his head looking away, and then preparing himself, knowing that it was a weak excuse. He needed to delve deeper in order to read the writing of the mysterious Sith Lord. He looked out again, knowing that there was something that was waiting for him too.

Mara’s shielding was usually a harbinger of things to come; a way to protect herself against others and from herself.

Luke sighed, putting in place his own shields; nowhere near as strong or reinforced as hers, but sufficient against lesser Force users. But then, she had lived with the over-bearing presence of the Emperor for most of her life. _Practice makes perfect_…

His lip twitched. He hated becoming the person that had to protect his thoughts and feelings from others. It felt unnatural.

In the Force, he could sense the swell in the Dark energy that thrived in the Palace on the horizon. On his return journey, he had felt it, the expansion in the immense anger, hatred and ambition. It was like a balloon; growing in resistance, fighting against what contained it, and then bursting forth. Now, the energy radiated, stronger than before; new.

It could only mean one thing; Palpatine had transubstantiated himself from one body to the next.
Luke growled slightly on his exhale, preparing himself for what to expect.

The shuttle dipped towards the landing platform of the Palace.

He turned to leave the cockpit, readying himself to disembark, feeling the relief of the crew. They didn’t like his presence; they didn’t like his reputation.

Whatever Mara’s reasoning for closing herself off, it still annoyed him and he forced himself to try and release the resentment at feeling the proverbial ‘slam in the face’ that he had experienced.

His eyes glanced over the honor guard that was waiting for him at the top of the plank. He hoped to see his reflection in their glossy white armor, to see what he had become.

_I don’t want to see them if they’re not blue._ She had said to him once when she wanted to see his eyes.

Luke let his lip twitch instead of a snort, remembering and repeating those words in his mind. Strangely, he wondered now too what colour they would appear to others.

On this trip, he had felt the singe in his eyes as he felt his emotions changed. He couldn’t predict with accuracy what others saw in him now.

The shuttle bounced, signifying its arrival. The repulsorlifts hissed, releasing and exchanging gases. And without much more preparation, the plank of the shuttle lowered.

He turned to face the moist air that entered, and the natural light that came with it.

With a _clank!_ the plank was fully lowered allowing the precession to emerge.

He strode forward, not masking his weariness, wearing it, weighed and heavy, like the cape that hung from his shoulders.

The Stormtroopers moved in precision behind him; the sounds of their armor kept cadence.

Keeping his head high, Luke couldn’t help but notice the receiving party that was waiting for him at the entrance to the palace from the landing pad.

Pestage, the Emperor’s lacky, stood stoically with his own grouping of underlings behind him. Pressed to his chest was the data reader that detailed all the rote activities of the court, and Luke supposed that Pestage was there to present them to him.

It was an odd thing to send a Vizier to do a courier’s work, but then it was Mara who pointed out once, that an appearance such as this always had a different meaning.

Pestage was a man of importance, and it would be wrong to dismiss his place in the Empire. This man was the first and only agent that Palpatine totally and fully trusted; the keeper of the secrets.

Unlike others, Pestage didn’t fear him. The Vizier kept his distance, did his service and left; never asking, never attempting to befriend or amuse.

As he got closer, Luke watched the Vizier closely. Pestage had also learned the skills of blocking out the presence of other Force-users, but if his shield was any sort of protection, it held better that durasteel, never letting anything out. However, the remainder of the man’s Force skills could hardly place him as being called ‘Force-strong’. In fact, Pestage’s Force skills didn’t go much beyond being able to sense another Force-user and hearing the call of the Emperor. He had a Force-presence but
Luke’s mind flashed on the writings of Darth Plagueis; it was knowledge that drove skill in the Dark Side, not just power. Power was a thing that was yearned for and sought after, part of the passion, helping to complete the eternal cycle.

*Perhaps that it why those who are the most-vulnerable, who have no true power, are drawn to it? Luke thought passingly. But then Vader... he had power... and it still called to him... all the while being powerless... to stop it.*

Coming closer, Pestage bowed.

*Do you feel powerless?* Luke dared to ask himself before sweeping away the thoughts and walling up his own feelings.

“Vizier Pestage” He spoke quietly as he slowed down his gait before the other man.

“Jedi Skywalker,” Pestage responded with an inherent sneer which Luke ignored, knowing it was probably the nature to pick up his Master’s subtleties in language after years of service. “Your presence is requested in the Throne Room at the behest of His Imperial Majesty.”

Nodding once, he continued his path with little more notice to the information, but mentally paused, feeling like he was being directed there for a reason. His mind flash on the image, the memory, of skulking in the corners of Bespin and being lured into something that he was unprepared for.

Inside the threshold to the Palace, he dismissed the Stormtroopers to return to their posts. If the crew of the *Conspirator* kept their distance from him, then so would the conniving courtiers in the corridors. His brooding melancholy was his shield against them.

But now, his mind went elsewhere, still latched onto finding her presence.

Mara was here. Luke could feel her, reluctantly releasing her grasp on her shields, wanting to sense him too. He frowned, adding to his glare; *she was weakening?* – that wasn’t at all like her. His pace quickened, wanting to rush through the crowd of expected courtiers but surprisingly, none were to be found.

The halls were empty, which only added to the irritation that was growing at the back of his mind.

*Where the blast was she?* Luke asked himself, feeling her sense but not able to know where she was.

Just then, he was gifted with a mental image of her, trembling, bracing herself near the white marble dais. *She was in the Throne Room!*

Whatever had caused her so much fear, she had closed herself off again. It didn’t feel like an immediate threat, but Luke made his path directly to the nefarious room.

His mind started to list, trying with efficiency, to number the possible predicaments that could be waiting for him. Luke knew that the Emperor loved to hold over those things that He thought were unknown; loved them and used them to His own advantage.

It would be no surprise that the Emperor would appear reborn, wearing the younger body of himself. It would be a given that this would occur; Luke had felt the change.

He had even felt the surge in power prior to that, sensing that perhaps Sedriss had learned a new skill or had an advancement, somehow. He had sensed that too, prior to the Emperor’s transformation;
wondering if one had to do with the other.

It was strange to feel these things now, knowing that in the past, he hadn’t truly stopped to examine every sense that came to his notice. Every little nuance in the Force had passed his notice; the ‘pops’, the ‘bursts’ of new Force presences or activities had not made him stop and ponder that perhaps he should. A regret that he still hung on to, and would attempt to make right, if given the chance.

Turning the corner, the grand doors were before him. There were no Red Guards flanking the ornate opening.

Approaching them, Luke looked up and down at the barriers that blacked his way. If he was expected to arrive, why were the doors closed?

A flash of annoyance, futilely refusing to play the game that the Emperor had laid out for him, Luke levied his hand and Force-pushed the structures open, demanding his entrance into the room.

The portentous doors gave way with ease when their size would have argued that they wouldn’t. With their impedance removed, light from the adjacent room streamed into the hall.

Luke didn’t ask permission and entered, knowing and wanting that, which he would find there.

The backlit light had set the room aglow, unusually warm and welcoming in such a place, and had cast her shapely silhouette at the end of the room.

He could feel his willpower yielding as he involuntarily quickened his pace to finally see her; his heart suddenly devoid of all the gloom, doubt, guilt and desperation that had been building in him, as if he had never felt them at all.

Without the restrictions of being watched, Luke allowed himself to smile, approaching her; she was a welcomed site. He glanced around quickly to ensure that they were indeed alone.

The light in the room played a marvelous game as it shone behind her, obscuring her features but casting beams off her golden-red hair. Droplets of sharp arches, from off her jewels, formed a ring on the floor before her, like crystal raindrops, making her look radiant.

Luke stopped midway into the room and slowed down his pace, in awe of her once again.

<Mara…> He whispered to her gently. He swallowed, preparing for anything that he was about to say to her, knowing that the Emperor would overhear it, somehow.

He sighed, releasing all his tension. Still not able to see her face but drawn in just the same. <I remember the first time that I saw you…> He began. <The sun was at your back… just as it is now.> His steps were as slow as his words. <And into the shadow… I saw… the most beautiful woman that I had ever seen in my entire life.>

His heart was aching in his chest, just to see her. Into the darken shape of her form on the floor, Luke looked up at the dais, seeing her now.

Beyond the jeweled circlet on her head, she was the picture of unattainable beauty; her glorious hair arranged to fame her perfect porcelain face, eyes wide and brilliant green, rich sheened black satin contoured her body.

He gulped on the dry air as his heart leapt in his chest, just as it had done on Myrkrr.

Luke stopped just before the first few stairs, looking up at her, and paused, ceasing in his adjure;
something wasn’t right.

She stood next to her chair on the dais, practically behind it, in almost a form of protection. He watched her face again to notice that she was pale- paler than usual, all colour gone, no blush on her cheeks. Mara’s eyes were indeed wide, and vivid, next to her skin; they darted to him, and then over to the side door, to the Emperor’s private chambers, then back at him.

On closer examination, Luke watched the small gap in her mouth, as her lower petal lip began to quiver.

She moved slowly, to put the chair between him and her, going behind it, gripping the leather of the rests that her nails dug into it.

Her shields were still drawn tight, not relaxing, not relenting.

“Mara?” He asked quietly, perplexed by her behavior, fearing that perhaps she didn’t recognize him, perhaps Palpatine had cloned her too, and now her new form had no memory of him; it wasn’t beyond the scope of possibilities for the arcane Sith Lord.

But no… it was her… and she was afraid of him.

“You’ve -you’ve returned.” Her voice trembled. “- safely.” She added as an afterthought, forcing a slight grin.

Luke took a cautious step onto the dais, directing his senses to calm her, promising no threat to her.

“Yes.” He said quietly. “It took longer than expected.” He softened his eyes, apologizing for leaving her alone.

Maybe that was it? -the reason for her behavior. He had been away longer than expected and she had grown distrustful of him. But it didn’t feel like it.

“What has it been?” He asked, remorsefully, knowing that it was his departure that took him away from her. “Five? Six, standard weeks?”

“Seven… almost eight.” Mara said blankly; her eyes darted over his shoulder, back at the adjoining door again, like she was expecting someone to appear.

He nodded, acknowledging his absence again. Daring, Luke took another step up towards her. “I missed you.” He said, letting his pain show in his eyes. <I didn’t want to leave you in the way that I did.> He confessed.

They had been wrapped in each other’s love right before his departure, and he was ordered to leave without saying goodbye to her.

Mara looked away; her eyes going blank, remembering something in the moment. She looked back to him and nodded, still void of emotion, but there seemed to be less fear there than before.

Taking it as a signal, Luke stepped up one more time to be on the same level as she. He backed away, still giving her a safe distance.

She looked off, staring at the ground, and returned her gaze when she felt safe to do so. “I missed you, too.” She whispered.

Her eyes came back to his face, and she blinked once, letting her lips form a tight smile which she held and then let dissolve.
Luke watched her body language, seeing that she had let her shoulders ease down and her grip on the smaller throne relax. He turned his own head ever-so slightly to appraise what he was seeing in her.

Like a cat, her eyes watched him, wide and still filled with worry.

It dawned on him that it wasn’t anything he had done to cause this apprehension in her.

“Mara? What happened while I was away?” He asked tentatively; a dark look coming over his features, ready to retaliate to anything that had been done to her in his absence. His hands flexed into fists and then relaxed under his cloak, building, kept in check, for now.

She looked away from him again. This time, if it was possible, her skin went paler, almost greying. Shaking her head, her mouth opened with a loss of words.

“Luke… I-” She stumbled over the words, unable to look at him.

Something was causing her pain, and he didn’t like it. Without a concern for what it was, he just wanted it to stop for her, Luke rushed over to her, coaxed her out from behind the chair, and took her into his arms tenderly.

She resisted only briefly and then let go, wrapping his arms around her.

Mara closed her eyes, fighting no more, and let him. He was warm and he rocked her in a gentle sway. She shivered, knowing that the eventuality was now upon her, knowing that in the past keeping things from him only ended disastrously for them, for her.

She let him hold her a bit longer, one more reprieve that she knew that she wasn’t entitled to.


“You’re shivering.” He said softly into her hair. “Why are you shivering? I’m here…” His words quick and agile. “You’re safe now.”

<You’re still shielding.> He mentioned as it worried him.

It was time, before the choice was no longer hers to have, Mara pulled back from his embrace but still in his arms. Looking at his face, examining it for any trace of darkness that could erupt; her eyes wavered, her bottom lip quivered.

Again, on a whisper, “Luke…I have to-”

“Ah, My Jedi Apprentice!” The exalted voice echoed from a corner in the all-but the empty room. “You have returned to Us from your successful mission, I see.”

Mara dropped her head in resignation now. “I’m sorry… so sorry.” She said inaudibly as she pushed back, away and cowering from both men now.

Turning his head to the new presence in the room, Luke let her slip from his arms, aware that they had committed some unspoken crime in the eyes of Palpatine.

He turned fully, in the direction of the approaching figure, watching with awe. He knew that the Emperor had taken a new form but he was unprepared to see the younger figure unmarred by time.

The reborn Palpatine certainly looked younger, and younger still than when Luke was first brought before him on Byss. Now, the Emperor appeared to be only five to ten years older than Luke, and it
boggled his mind to ever think that it was possible. The younger body would be a worthy adversary indeed, given the knowledge, skill and experience that could amass in a mind that had lived well-beyond its time.

Given all the prestige that he had in life, Palpatine had outfitted himself in the somber regalia; heavy black velvets and elegant oxblood silks draped on his proud form.

Luke descended the stairs, to be on the same level as the approaching Emperor; his mind reminded him of the rule of etiquette to keep his head below that of the ruler.

When enough distance separated them, not averting his eyes, he bowed. “Yes, Master” He hissed, reluctantly submitting.

From behind the chair on the dais, Mara still cowered, witness to the bizarre stand-off that had come to be the interaction between Luke and the Emperor; amicable but still reserved adversaries. She could feel the tension in the room change; it was no longer just hers and grew between the two formidable parties.

Through the light in the room, shadows were cast on the floor, and ambient edges started to coil inward, closing and cloistering.

“Good.” Palpatine sneered; He took the time to acknowledge the bow, but little more. Instead, He turned His course to encircle the base of the dais, around the Jedi. “And without any waste to Our resources… a skilled navigator you have become.”

He smiled in dark candor, letting His eyes drift up the stairs in her direction. “I see that the two of you are having your reunion.”

“Has Lady Jade been so kind as inform you of all the progress in My Empire?” The Emperor said while watching her, warning her.

“No.” Luke answered sharply, attempting to break the tone that was being set.

“Pity.” Palpatine turned in the direction of the Jedi. “You have missed seeing her at court. How marvelous a negotiator she is? But perhaps she has learned from you, as you have secured our treaty with those from the Unknown Regions… teaching her the skills of Jedi patience, no doubt.”

Watching the Emperor, Luke’s senses told him that an attack was eminent, but the nature of the attack, he was unsure. “Perhaps.” He agreed as he watch the Emperor begin to ascend the dais.

Palpatine glided up the few steps to stop at the mid-level platform, where the two smaller thrones rested.

Mara came out from behind her chair, and curtsied deeply, meeting the Emperor’s regard. She swallowed as she held the pose; He held all the options from what was to transpire, and she knew that it was a punishment, a correction that He was about to serve up. The only savior was that she knew that it wasn’t her petulance that He was after. He was determined to see Skywalker suffer, but, through her; and who knew how to predict an irrational Jedi.

Her eyes met the red blazon gleam; they begged for this not to happen.

For a moment, He held His smile before it went flat. “Stop shielding.” The crackle came through His lisp with His order. Turning, He headed to His throne.

Inhaling, she straightened her posture, letting go of her only form of protection.
To this point Luke couldn’t have sensed her in the room, and when he did, he noticeably jarred, feeling her fear. It was crippling the difference that he could sense in her... she was afraid... for him... and then, of him.

Looking up, Palpatine had closed his eyes and was savoring the feelings coming from His servant.

In the Force, the room was beginning to swirl as energies revealed themselves; a storm gathering strength.

The Emperor lowered Himself into His proper place, adjusting his flowing robes as He sat. “Lady Jade seems to be nervous.” He commented. “I wonder what could have caused her to feel this way.” He sighed. “She has so many secrets to keep... and kept some of them, she has.”

“Other secrets... not so much.” Palpatine relaxed back into His throne.

Mara bowed her head, letting her heart start to wring.

“For example, Jedi Skywalker, I was unaware that you had given her a token of your love.” The Emperor said quietly; His tone calmly demeaning.

Instead of reacting, Luke raised his chin defiantly, but said nothing.

Shocked, looking up, Mara turned to see the Emperor holding the Japor Snippet pendant, dangling the fine chain between His fingers, playing with it as if it was a lure or bait. She was sure that she had hidden well, in all the best spots, never putting it back to the same spot twice, every nook and cranny she could find in her room.

“Crafty and charming…” Palpatine looked at the pendant as it dangled. “An old-world treasure and a romantic notion.” Gracefully, He extended His hand and the pendant floated before Him, held in place with the Force.

The chain curled in the invisible hand as it turned from all angles. “Shall we test her skills? To see what a good student she is? To see what a good teacher you are?” Palpatine grinned. “Let us see if she can take it from My grasp before I destroy it, shall we?”

Mara gasped, panicking, wanting the precious pendant back; her emotions erratic. Could she control them in time to save what she held so dear to her?

The pendant began to shake, vibrating with the energy that would be needed to abolish it.

“No.” She said through gritted teeth, reaching out her hand and reached out her feelings, trying to gain control over that which she needed to.

But the Emperor was too strong, and no sooner had the rock began to shake, it cracked apart, rendering it to debris.

As the chain dropped to the ground, being released from the Force, Luke took a menacing step in the direction of Palpatine.

“Foolish girl.” The Emperor drummed his fingers on the side of the throne. “Do you think that her feelings are as brittle and malleable as that stone? It appears that her skills are.”

Luke brought his other foot up to rest level with the step that he was on, feeling his breath deepen, keeping control of his emotions.
“And now, I wonder what secrets she might be keeping from you, Jedi Skywalker?” Palpatine slurred.

“Step forward.” The Emperor growled an order to her.

Mara rolled her eyes closed and took a penitent step closer to the middle of the platform.

“Maybe you should search her feelings, and ask her, what she could be possibly keeping from you that would cause this much fear?” Leaning forward, Palpatine mocked the importance that He was alluding to.

Luke glanced over at her and frowned. Feeling his suspicion take over, he took another step up, wanting to be closer to her and fearing that whatever it was, was not of her doing.

Relaxing his breathing, he sent out his feelings towards her, reaching out to her directly in the Force, and watched as his senses touched her; she shivered, wanting to back away.

“Did you know that Sedriss became My apprentice?... Darth Faustus, as he is now.” Palpatine’s voice lingered behind Luke’s feelings.

“Yes, I have made him a Sith Lord… It was the only way to secure what I needed from him.” Palpatine continued. “And now, he has served his purpose.” He said flippantly.

She was resisting, trying to obey her master by not hiding herself, ad yet still searching for something to hide behind.

<Mara…> Luke called to her gently, fearing for the worse. <Whatever has happened… whatever has occurred… we can get over it…> His eyes blinked over to the Emperor, shooting the other man a glare, and then returning to soften his gaze at her.

Her Force aura was strong, as it always was; vibrant and drawing him in, but it wavered. The essence wasn’t right, almost too strong. Luke frowned, looking at her, up and down. Something was physically wrong with her, out of place, not quite her.

“Tell me, Jedi Skywalker, did she ever explain the pact between Master and servant? Master and apprentice?”

Luke lost his concentration on her, looked over to the Emperor. “No, we have never had that conversation.” He growled, keeping civil.

The Emperor smiled. His yellow-rimmed red eyes resting at a relaxed gaze. “Oh, I am sure that the Jedi have some sort of ritual that bonds Master and Padawan. They were so indecisive about such things that I doubt it was practiced with you.” He casually pointed in the direction of the younger man. “Or if General Kenobi even practiced such things himself. He hated ceremony and procedure, but strangely followed the rules.” He smirked. “But Master Yoda -now, I could see him adhering to all the codes of conduct.”

“You see, but We Sith…We have our ways that must be kept and maintained. Tradition and order. Without it, the chaos is allowed to fester. We must keep our ways secret. We must keep our training secret. And we must keep ourselves, secret. Hiding in the shadows. Only revealing ourselves when needed… when it is time.”

“There is only one way that an individual can fully attain the full level of a Sith… this you know.” Palpatine’s voice turned almost conversational. “Your father, and the sacrifice he was willing to make for his ascension – killing his most valuable possession in exchange for increasing his own
power – but that is the final step that seals the covenant to the dark power but does not bind a Master and apprentice together.”

Luke’s shoulders began to rise and fall with his breaths; a growl at the back of his throat began at the mention of his father’s fall and alluding to his mother’s death.

The energy was massing, causing the air to become tight, choking on the cold, Mara watched back and forth between the two men, quickly, for any sign that one of them was going to strike, or that she had been found out, that Luke would lash out at Palpatine… at her.

“No, it is much simpler than that… the bond.” The Emperor’s eyes gleamed. “It’s a simple as a gift that is offered to the apprentice.” His hand gestured in Mara’s direction. “A gift that appears to grant a favor but serves another purpose. A purpose for the Master.” He slowed his words.

“With Vader, it was so easy… all he wanted was power. So, I gave it to him… a simple gift, granting him permission and sending him to destroy those who had denied him his rightful place.” The tone in Palpatine’s voice was informative, not incendiary. “And he took it, without ever asking more.”

The grin on the Sith Master changed from whimsical to wistful. “Sith get accused of being greedy. We are not. We are needful – needing the implements of our bidding, the tools of our fruition.”

But then, He tilted his chin down, and raise one eyebrow, preparing His next words. “Just as it was with Sedriss and his rise to Darth Faustus.” The Emperor rested his gaze into the eyes of the young Jedi. “I will let you ponder on what I could have to give to him that he so desperately wanted… But, I will digress on what he could provide Me with… my needful thing.”

He didn’t like the tone that the Emperor had assumed. Luke shook his head, refusing to be lured in yet again, refusing to think on what could have sealed their pact.

Surely, Sedriss wanted many things that those in the Dark yearned for; power, control, dominance. All he could recall was that Sedriss had wanted his place in the new Empire, beside the Emperor – Luke had usurped his position.

But that just didn’t make sense, as it had not happened.

Sedriss wasn’t extremely strong in the Force either. There was something else that the young malevolent man wanted… some thing that belonged to Luke… something that he could take from the Jedi.

In an instant, Luke turned his head and looked directly at Mara, as he made the connection.

She dropped her head, and her body now noticeably began to tremble.

Luke opened his mouth, now breathing deeply, watching her. “No.” He growled.

“Oh yes.” Palpatine gleamed. “Faustus was very willing to take what I offered to him.” Coming from off His throne, He ambled to the edge of His platform to look down at the mid-level, to watch more-closely. “And she, of course, is My loyal servant… willing to please her Master, at any cost.”

“You went willingly?” Luke asked her directly, putting all the clues together; her fear, and anguish now seemed rightful. He had spoken before he could comprehend, and knew that she had been given no choice in the matter, but it didn’t stop the rage that was starting to brew.

“She knew the ceremony.” The Emperor informed him. “She had seen it many times and knew the
content and the reasoning. I am, however, just as surprised as you, how a skillful Force-warrior, as she, didn’t even put up a fight to resist.”

Turning his head at the Emperor, Luke’s vision was starting to see blanks in fringes of his sight. From under his cloak, his fists balled, clenched and released.

The energy was building; the crescendo could be felt as if the room had a heartbeat. The marble tiles began to shake.

“Faustus was willing. He had been willing for some time. You know that he lusted after her. You felt his dark fantasies that he had for her… not unlike your own.”

Stealing himself Luke looked away, to the floor, from both of them. He shuddered inside his shell, regretting everything.

“You see, I did not intend for that to be her only coupling.” Palpatine said casually. “I was hoping that it would take a little longer, when you would return.” He paused dramatically. “All that I wanted was a Force-strong body that I could someday assume.”

“Clone bodies are so unreliable… they age, crumple, under the use of the Force.” The Emperor explained. “A body grown in the natural way – the human way, would require conception by two Force-users.”

Luke inhaled sharply, realizing that the night that he and Mara had been together, she had been close to her cycle. He was sure that there was no way that she would have become pregnant by him. But he had to be sure.

Without any reasoning in his mind, he had to know and know immediately. *Did she conceive his child and plan to give it to Palpatine?*

The storm inside him started to break apart. His leather-clad hand raised in her direction, and instantaneously reacted.

Stunned, Mara reached for her neck as she felt the grip around her throat, grabbing at nothing. Then lifted off the ground, dragged in the direction of his outstretched hand, her toes gliding on the marble tiles, fighting the invisible grasp.

“Did you?” Luke growled loudly; his teeth bare and his eyes wild. “Did you?... is it?... is it…?” He couldn’t form the words through his anger.

Mara gasped as his glove met her throat and she clawed against the glove. “Luke…” she sobbed. “Please?” she whimpered. Her only thought was that she couldn’t feel his hold tightening at her neck.

He didn’t ask permission and drove his opposite hand to her lower abdomen, searching with the Force.

And the vision came to Luke… not of her, but of the other man… *Faustus.*

The vision of lust before him, touching her body, stroking her breasts, feeling his lust come…his hardening groin.

She flinched feeling the deep intrusion inside her body, feeling her essence being plowed through, and her barriers being rendered useless in the face of his power.
He watched powerlessly as the images came. *Her backside, available and engaging in the rutting between the two bodies... the pleasure, oh the pleasure! Her body fighting against him.* Faustus’s point of view of the entire act.

Watching, she saw the rims of his pupils take on the yellow hew. As his search was quick, the yellow seeped over the blue, and morphed in front of her to crimson.

And then, the culmination of it all. *The release of seed and rapture that only the wanton could find solace in, spurting from his body into hers.*

He rasped with every breath while she whimpered her silent pleading.

And at the end of the vision, only a brief glimpse into what her pain must have been like, and that faded to the present.

Swallowing deeply, his words came from a guttural bellow. “That isn’t mine!” He announced and accused her.

With a powerful swoop, Luke threw her from his grip, backwards.

With loud sob of pain, Mara clashed on the edge of the dais, falling a down a few steps, hitting her hipbone on the cold marble as she went until she stopped in a heap and allowed herself an open cry.

Looking up at him, the tears began to come, and so did her words. “I did it for you!” She cried. “If I didn’t, then He would have had me conceive your child... and then He would have taken it away for me... from you... from us... raised it as His own... only to take our child when He needed a body... that’s what He wanted, Luke... our child... I did it for you... I did it for you...” She rambled, raising her hands up to protect herself from what was to come, feeling that Luke’s vengeance wasn’t over.

The second shock startled her more, looking up at the face of the Emperor looking down on his servant. The Sith Master’s smile told a different story than the one that others could have read but they would have misinterpreted the expression.

Mara’s eyes widened, realizing that she had it all wrong... this was the story that He wanted her to believe, that He wanted her to divulge to the angered Jedi. She had become part of the lie, the scheme that was not what it seemed.

Luke looked over at the smiling Emperor. Seeing that He was pleased with Himself. “This is what you wanted!” The room shook on those words. “This is what you planned!” The dais shook and the tiles began to crack. The air began to snap with the current, the massing energy.

Palpatine’s smile dissolved, forming the snarl on his lips, but stayed silent.

His head snapped back to her, on the floor. “And you!” The Jedi was no longer there, madness had begun to set in. “You would have let Him... His Loyal Hand!” Luke took a step in her direction, and reached out his hand once again.

Trying to get to get feet, she knew it was futile to run from him, but perhaps she could prepare herself for some sort of protection. A fight, though, was not what he had in mind.

Caught in a Force-grasp, she couldn’t move. Mara tried to resist and fight off his strength but she knew that Luke was too strong; he was always too strong for her but never showed it, until now.

She suddenly bellowed in pain, clutching her lower stomach, keeling in agony, feeling the ripping
inside her; her Force-essence being damaged and yanked from the inside.

Mara cried out again, sensing what Luke had done.

*It was gone now.*

*Its* presence had *vanished* inside her. The life-force was gone.

She rocked her body as the pain still lingered, and coursed in her. Panting, Mara looked up into Luke’s tortured face as he stared back with hollow red eyes.

“There, Your Majesty… I’ve done away with your *needful* thing.” Luke hissed before turning back to regard.

For a moment Palpatine looked at the other man, pondering as it became apparent in this moment, that the Jedi had done just what He wanted him to do. A ruse, a con designed to be used from so many angles. “Oh, so now you have destroyed Darth Faustus’s unborn child… a pity…” The Emperor was coiling his viper tongue. “But how will you reconcile that you murdered her *innocent* unborn child as well? Yes, Jedi Skywalker… it was made from her too… the woman you professed to love and adore with all your being.”

Luke staggered back as the realization came to him, lost in his own feelings that rage out of control, he had just committed the most heinous act. Taking an innocent life…

“Can you really call yourself a ‘Jedi’ now? – one must ask themselves.” Palpatine said, not reacting, keeping his countenance.

Swaying, Luke brought his hand to head, feeling the weight of his act, looking down at Mara’s body as she suffered. And aside from the rage, the ache in his heart and his soul grew.

Bringing his hand to his forehead, inwardly he began to curse himself, coming under the influence of the Emperor again, a victim of his own feelings, of his own anger and doubt.

He staggered, taking one step at a time, coming down, lost in his turmoil; the dark feelings dancing and celebrating their release. Luke felt his body drawing and wanting to leave this place, forcing himself towards the exit, leaving it all in his wake.

He couldn’t hear the words of the Emperor reprimanding for leaving without permission; it was a premise for later punishment that went ignored in his mental confusion.

*What have I done? What have I done? … Mara!… Oh gods! Mara!* 

The throne room doors forgave his insolence and opened for him without a command into the corridor. Blind in his furry, Luke left still quelling from what he had just done. *A life… an innocent life!* 

The empty halls echoed his ragged breath and his burgeoning cries, half walking and half stumbling to a place that he knew not where, as thought came back to him.

*Palpatine… this is all of your making! The anger raged again. You! … you and your filthy ambition!* 

*Why? Why dear Force – Why?… why am I tortured like this? What purpose does it serve? Why am I so weak? How could I have trusted her? How could I trust myself? What has she done to me?*

*This is all my fault. I should have never left her here alone. I should have never called out to her…*
she should have never have come here... why did she come... why? Why? His hand rested on his lightsaber hilt at his waist. For a moment he caught the sensation of the cool metal of the saber, and the next thought left his mind just as quickly as it came. Palpatine...He wants you to destroy yourself.

An instinct in the Force, and Luke paused, and looked up from his torment, and down at the end of the hall, the figure stood, poised and ready.

His stance was one of a man ready to do battle; shoulders broad and hands in a ready position at his sides.

Sedriss! Luke’s mind hissed the name in madness and all the rage was back. Calling on the Force, never a care to the nature of the powers that answered, he dashed in the direction of the outlet for his anger.

Darth Faustus responded by pacing himself to engage the other man, drawing his lightsaber as he cantered on the marble floor, bringing the crackling red blade to life.

Luke met the weapon with his own, drawing his lightsaber, the snap-hiss! as the green blade ignited, humming with furious revenge.

Leveled with the Force, leaping, Luke came down on the new Darth’s blade, crossing it with such power that it came loose and Faustus was repelled by the Jedi’s Force presence and sonic push, throwing him back down the corridor from which he came.

The red blade sputtered and died before the hilt was called back to its owner to defend himself as a dark figure with a green blade approached. Faustus recovered and came to his feet rapidly.

“You!” Luke roared. “You took her!” He stalked closer. “You raped her!” He stopped back, wanting a fight, needing a fight; a tangible opponent who he could punish and concur.

Stupidly, Faustus dared to smile, seeing that he had gotten to the Jedi. Before he could utter a taunt, the attack came.

The green blade moved rapidly and magically that the movements were fluid and precise and not what he was prepared for. A fully trained Force-user... the strongest Force-user on the galaxy. Faustus was realizing the err of his ways, engaging Skywalker directly. All he could do was to rebuff the attack, dodging and missing the swings on the green blade against red one.

The hisses and cracks and buzz bounced of the walls, growing in volume as the heated fight continued with Faustus stepping back and the Jedi advancing.

The blades locked together, causing each man to come face to face with his nemesis.

Faustus gritted his teeth looking into the red eyes of Skywalker. “She wanted to obey her master.” He said with no excuse, turning it back on the other Force-strong entity that made up their unholy trio.

It was enough of a shock in the Jedi to stun him briefly, for Faustus to rear and throw a punch across the chin of his opponent.

Luke stepped backwards, only to get his footing before he advanced with the punch having little effect other than to break their sabers apart. His eyes wild with determination, and knowing that his skilled was unmatched; his presence swarming around them.
Faustus backed up again, but his cocky attitude was leaving rapidly as he felt the full weight and strength of the other man bore down on him. Again, he backed up, and faster getting more distance, retreating with regret for what he had unleashed.

The Jedi kept a steady pace walking towards the Sith with blade raised and ready, neither losing nor gaining speed.

Now, he could understand why Skywalker was the greater, sensing the power around him. Faustus turned, taking the chance to dash from the corridor, away from the battle. Outmatched in so many ways, he need to get away.

Frozen in the Force, the Sith’s feet moved but no distance was gained. Treading on the marble, his boots slipped the surface and screeched as he began to move backwards, towards the looming Jedi.

No sooner than he realized his folly, the green blade pierced through his chest, to his shock and horror. Faustus dropped his own blade as he was even unable to gasp. Looking down, seeing the fizzling edges of the emerald blade impaled in his torso, the realization struck as the pain started.

In the moments left in his recognition, he felt the Force presence surround him; it was grand and over-powering, fleeting thought, thinking it was so much larger than his Master’s, the Emperor, Darth Sidious… unmatchable… anywhere.

Faustus heard the breathing come closer, and the green blade moved slightly, withdrawing. In his final moment he heard the words, growled in his ear, “And you will never have her again.”

The green blade died and the body slumped from off it.

Backlit, standing over the body, the storm died away… leaving only emptiness.

**

In the forest on the planet Takadonna

The readouts came quickly. For being isolated inside a Rim World, the communication response was quick, which is just what you want when you don’t want your transmissions tracked.

He looked over his shoulder first, just to see who was in the room. Aves turned in the direction of the bigger desk and the man behind it, waiting for him to look up.

He shifted in Mara’s chair; it was her console after all, designed for her and he didn’t feel right using it. Aves cleared his throat just to be noticed again.

Talon Karrde looked up from his data pad to the other man, exchanging his concerned expression for a placid one, still trying to hide himself.

“We just got another one.” Aves murmured. “Another invite to the ‘party’.”

Karrde raised an eyebrow, putting down his pad and giving his full attention.

“This one has come through the Pfassi, though.” Aves said, waiting on a comment.

“And?” Karrde asked quietly.

“They sent the same set of coordinates that the Ta’shoosh did… Same as … Same rendezvous point… same contact code.” He said.
Sitting back in his chair, Karrde’s eyes went distant, thinking.

Aves looked down but glanced up, just to see if this time it would stir something in the other man.

This had been the third in a series of requests coming from an underground source, routed through different channels. All of them gave the same information and asked for the same assistance; calling on all available space fighters and warcrafts to assemble and form a makeshift army, going up against the New Empire.

A space date was given and the time was drawing near.

Karrde hummed in contemplation.

The thought hang in the air, but wisely, neither of them voiced it. _If Mara was here, she’d know what to do… and she wouldn’t be silent about it._

Just another remembrance that Mara’s presence was sorely missed.

The cool blue eyes of the smuggler chief looked over at his communications officer one more time.

“Besides…” Aves started, “…this one is special. It has the codes that were recognized only by our New Republic skimmer.” He tilted his head. “That means, it would have had to come from somebody pretty high up to be able to send it out… and directed to us… with no other tags in it.”

Those same eyes narrowed, knowing exactly who the sender could have been.

Karrde’s lips formed a tight smile; something that he hadn’t done in a long time. “Please tell Her Highness that I will consider the offer.”

Aves’s mouth dropped when he put two and two together, realizing that it must have come from the Rebel princess herself. He turned to the console, ready to send back their own message, paused and looked over at his boss again.

It was along shot. The Rebellion was no more. The New Republic was barely handing on by a thread, with no standing army or fleet. A resistance had popped up but like the Rebellion, it underfunded and undermanned to take on another Empire.

“Are you thinking of how you’re going to help Mara?” Aves asked quietly.

Sitting back, he brought his hands together, and touched his bottom lip in a pensive gesture. “I’ve been thinking about that ever since she left here.” Karrde mumbled, barely audible.

That was months ago, without a word, without a notice.

They weren’t ignorant, out on the little moon. News of galactic importance still found them. And all the rumors couldn’t help but find their ears of a New Empire, Emperor, and possible Empress with a stern look and red-gold hair. And all the rumors of Skywalker’s fall.

They were smugglers, not warriors, not soldiers. How many times had Karrde argued that fact? They were there to make a profit, not to build a republic.

But neutrality had it’s cost too. How much were they willing to pay if it all meant falling under Imperial control again?

Aves dropped his head; he had his own respect for Mara, not just a colleague but as a friend too.
Since Wayland, coming up on two years, she had made herself a part of not just the business but with her gruff demeanor fading slightly, others had gotten to know her and accepted her, and now, missed her, like a family.

“Tell her…” Karrde paused, his eyes coming back from thought. “Tell Organa-Solo that I will respond… I need more time.” He nodded.

Aves’s face ticked, and turned to prepare to send the message. “Got’cha Boss.”

“And then…” Karrde said louder, “… contact Booster Terrik… Jossel, Kleet, and any other of the friendly bosses that you can think of, and tell them that, we have a fleet to assemble.”

Nonchalantly, hiding his growing excitement, Aves simply nodded. “Yes sir… right away, Boss.” He turned his chair and starting typing.

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**Under the Imperial Palace; Byss**

Mara breathed in small gasps. The pain, like stabbing through her mid-section had abided but the pressure had not.

She had been moved. She knew it. As soon as Luke had left the chamber, she was hurdled around by MED droids and taken, half-consciously, to Doctor Cylo’s quarters.

Conscious enough, she had felt the surge in Luke’s power and suspected the worst, feeling his down-turn into a darker self. She had let herself slip into this state where she had no chance to fight back against what was happening to her.

The mad Doctor flew around the room. When she opened her eyes to slits, she could see him, talking, mumbling, announcing wildly.

“There’s still time!” He shouted. “All can be preserved, Your Majesty!” He beamed. “We can begin the implantation now!” He celebrated.

Mara closed her eyes at that point, not resisting when she willfully surrendered, wishing it was all over; whatever this plan the Emperor had in store for her. Mentally begging for it to all be over, once and for all, wishing her own demise.

She wasn’t asleep, or forced into unconsciousness and could feel what was being done to her. They had spread her legs apart and the pressure she could feel as instruments were used. She had cried out when it had hurt too much that she had to acknowledge it.

It seemed like an eternity, but slowly, she become more-aware, and the haze of the room halted. The pain was gone, leaving a feeling of numbness in her lower half.

Even the room’s sense changed. It was calmer now, quiet, white, sterile.

She blinked, opening her eyes ever so slightly.

A hand came up, curled and caressed her cheek. The cool skin stroked again as awareness came to her.

“You did very well today, My child.” The Emperor’s voice was in the background. “And now, you will fulfill your primary function.”
Mara opened her eyes fully; a chill in her senses.

“Your body was needed to start the process of conception.” Palpatine had sat beside her on her recovery bed.

He looked down at her with gentle eyes, if it was possible. “It was necessary. It was necessary too that Skywalker should rid you of the inferior form that was growing inside you.” The Emperor stopped and looked at her blankly. “Luckily, the Jedi only destroyed the fetus and left the amniotic sack, allowing Doctor Cylo to implant My growing embryo… taken from the last few good cells of My original form, and your unused ovum, harvested from you.”

Swallowing, Mara quaked.

“And now you and I are bonded together.” Palpatine said. “And Skywalker? Well, his guilt and shame over what he did to you, will be his own prison as I keep you close to me.” He raised his hand to her forehead. “Now sleep, My dear… you are going to need all your strength, My Dowager Empress.”

She resisted until his powerful compel was too much, and she let the veil draw.

TBC
The Extortion

Chapter Summary

Quote: Luke had always wondered what side of the Force 'despair' had served; it served neither, if his feelings were correct.

Characters: Luke, Mara and The Shadow Hand

**

Chapter Notes

I got nothing.

Just read and enjoy... but thank you for the comments! :)

**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Byss: Lower Quadrant of the Imperial Palace

Far from the gloriousness of the New Imperial court, the air in the small room was bleak.

“Why did you come?” He asked, mumbling with his chin on his chest.

Those were the words that he decided were the least-harsh out of all the questions that he had for her.

It was a surprise to feel her. It was a greater astonishment to know that she was daring to come this close to him.

He was sure that it would have been the Emperor to arrive first, and then send her in to finish the job after all pokes and barbs had gotten under his skin.

Luke exhaled heavily; it was the only movement allowed to him.

Somewhere, they had found the ancient contraption that he was now in. Suspended above the ground, in a containment field, they had anchored his arms and legs in magnetic restraints.

The pre-Clone War detainment mechanism was clearly designed for Jedi, or at least a Force-strong individual. It would have taken a strong mind in order to concentrate to escape from it. But he was certain that the shock collar was added for his benefit and wasn’t part of the standard model.

He had dipped his head, and kept his eyes closed. The nausea- inducing, slow-turn in the suspension field was irritating and his emotions would start to swell as the sickness came on, causing the collar to send an electric shock into his neck whenever it sensed an escalation.
His mind could not remember all the details, other being shot several times with stun blast, taking him down as he stood over the crumpled body that was Sedriss.

It wasn’t wrong to treat him in such a manner. Luke was sure that trying to suppress his flying rage warranted the necessary precautions to stun him. Considering the size of the storm of erratic passion that course through his veins at that given time, he was beyond control.

Her form moved in the shadows, he could sense it without looking up. She walked to be in time with the rotation.

“I wanted to.” Mara said quietly. “I was worried about you.” It was pointless to deny as much. “And then… He ordered me.”

She could feel Luke’s feelings slump even more, reminding him that her will was not her own.

Nothing was her own anymore; not her feelings, not her thoughts and not her body, or whatever was done to it. Not even what he had done to it, just days ago in the Throne Room.

Five day-cycles had passed since he had been detained, trapped and fed intravenously only when he would cooperate to be stunned again into unconsciousness.

“I would have been here sooner if…” She started to say. Slowly, his head left up to see her form walking to keep in time with him. “…if He didn’t think that you posed a threat to me.”

There was one beam of light in the room, and as she approached it, Luke lifted his head fully, just to see her.

Mara stepped into the light ahead of his rotation, and stopped to look at him, knowing that he could now see her too.

Gone was the supposed Empress that Palpatine showed to the galaxy. No jewels, no finery. She was dress simply in black tunic and trousers, but still managed to look regal, Imperial.

She held the gasp in her chest looking at him.

His eyes were blue but bloodshot, there was a welt under his left eye, probably from the butt of a blaster as he would have refused to go down. His tunic was ripped at the right shoulder, showing the puncture marks of where they would have forced the needles for the fluid and nutrient tubes.

But it was the expression on his face that disturbed her; that haunted, gaunt look of a man defeated; defeated by his own doing and the nefarious doings of an evil Sith Master.

He was able to register the notion that she would think that he was capable of hurting her intentionally, but then, his face dropped because he realized that he had done such a thing.

Luke cringed before he felt it; the electro shock that would arrive when his emotions would start to raise. He convulsed as much as the restraints would allow him, and then closed his eyes to control his feelings again.

The Force had told him the he would have to face her again at some point. While incarcerated, his mind drifted back to a time when they were happier. His mind had even drifted back to a time when they weren’t so happy, but even those instances didn’t compare to now.

His mind could race to why Palpatine had chosen to put her in front of him now, and the Force would send no answers to the ones that he wanted.
It must have registered with her too, Luke’s presence and his essence in the Force, and all his questions, trying to make sense of it all.

The only answer would be to reach out to her, and demand what he wanted to know.

The Force must have told her but then her skills to sense an impending attack were always heightened. “I’m still pregnant.” Mara said flatly; she felt his surprise. “It was all a rouse… He wanted you to destroy Sedriss… He wanted the opportunity to implant His own making into me.”

There was nothing left to hide behind. Luke narrowed his eyes, still suspicious of her, and aware that she wasn’t projecting any barriers to her feelings, not for his benefit and not with any motive of the Emperor.

“The clones He has left have mutated so that they are unstable to hold the Force. They deteriorate too quickly. He had some genetic material left from His original body and used it to make the new body… growing inside me.”

Luke stayed silent but she could sense his mind working. He tried to suppress the horror of the thought and translated it into preparing himself for another shock in his neck as his emotions reacted.

“In a month, when He returns to the senate, with you at His side. He will present me as the ‘Dowager Empress’, and tell them that I carry your child, as a symbol of unity.”

Mara swallowed. “He will tell them that I am to serve as His representative when He is not available. He has been using me as such since you left.” She said quietly, knowing that she was a cog in the wheel.

“And in eight months, after I deliver His new body – that body will go into incubation, until He needs it… then, He will kill me.” She said blankly. “…probably in front of you… probably in front of the galaxy… wanting them to see your full downfall.”

She had accepted her lot this time, knowing full well why she was allowed to live. Palpatine, no doubt, had planned everything ahead of time.

“I’ve seen it.” Mara whispered; which was partially true. She had seen the galaxy coming back under Imperial Rule. She had seen Palpatine coming back into power, and yet everything else she supposed was necessary in order for Him to achieve His goals as she didn’t see herself as part of the picture.

“So, when you ask why am I here… I think you know why.” She said, with no emotion. “I’m here to make sure that when those restraints are released that you behave yourself, like the picture of Jedi virtue that He wants, and does as He commands.”

Walking over to the console, she typed in a few codes, and looked over to see the stun collar disengage and dropped to the platform.

“I am His insurance policy that you don’t do anything out of the ordinary and follow His plans.” Mara typed in a few more times and the prisoner stopped rotating. “He knows this… and knows that I know it too.”

Luke groaned as the motion stopped but his mind still swirled. He lifted his head as the lights came up in the room. He squinted against their brightness.

“You did His bidding for Him.” She said. “He wanted Sedriss dead … for treason to the Unknown Regions and their Supreme Leader… He wanted not to be implicated in it either… a deranged Jedi, suits His needs and is a better narrative for the Unknown Regions.”
He groaned again as he sensed her trepidation at using a skill that she felt that she hadn’t fully mastered.

There was no nice-way to do this. Coming out of a containment field usually only had a dead body drop to the floor unceremoniously.

Mara sighed, and reached out in the Force, knowing that he would feel her. She hoped her skills would be able to catch his limp form.

The field’s power cut out and he dropped and then stopped, caught by an invisible hand. Luke didn’t flinch as he was lowered to the ground slowly. On the floor the weight of the restraints still held him down, covering his hands and feet inside the confining contraptions.

He lay there in a huddle mass, not wanting to move, waiting for his mind to stop spinning as it was still having an effect on him. He had tried to stop the sickness over the past few days, but he was shocked by the collar every time that he reached, looking for his skills in the Force too. A preventative measure. There were limits placed on him that he was unaware of.

Her boots made a heavy sound on the grid as she came over to him. He didn’t protest as he felt his body being moved. There was no joy at being released. This was just a prison within a prison.

Pushing his shoulders up, Mara wedged herself behind him so that his back rested on her chest. She reached out and picked up his arms in turn and hovered the key over the sensor until it clicked and came away. Next, his limp legs allowed her to release them.

“Are you sure that’s a wise idea?” Luke mumbled, not sure of her or of himself.

“If you wanted to kill me, you would have done it by now… shock collar be damned.” She said shifting his weight so that he rested back against her. “Besides, what difference does it make it’s by your hand or His.”

Luke had always wondered what side of the Force ‘despair’ had served; it served neither, if his feelings were correct. He involuntarily sighed as he began to feel the heat from her body.

“Drink.” She ordered quietly, bringing a sluff to his mouth. “It has electrolytes in it… for your strength.” She whispered.

He did as he was told, until the liquid spurted from his mouth, coughing, abating the dryness.

Putting the container down after he had enough, she picked up his left hand and started to rub his skin vigorously, and intermittently massaging his joints. “I’ve never had to revive anyone from a containment field before. They usually gave up or gave out before the end of the third day.” She mumbled. “Let me know when you can start to feel it again?”

His fingers twitched, so she gently placed that hand down and started to work on the next one. “You should try to move your toes.” Mara suggested. “I would hate to have to do that for you.”

With his fingers now moving on his right hand, she put it down and brought up the cup, putting the sluff again to his mouth. “Drink.” She said quietly.

When she felt that he was done, she brought it down and started again with his left hand. <<I heard you trying to meditate while you were in here.>>

He was quiet, just breathing.
<<What were you thinking about?>> She asked him through the Force.

Luke inhaled heavy, watching her hands, and feeling the touch of her mind. “I wasn’t… I was just looking for some direction… hoping…. I don’t know…” He shook his head and his voice faded away.

He could feel the rise and fall of her breath resting against her, almost matching his. She switched his hands again and started to massage up his arms too. “I wanted the Force to tell me something… or show me something.” Luke mumbled.

He just watched her hands, touching him, messaging his skin, bringing feeling and warmth back into them. “I just wanted…”

“Hope.” Mara said quietly.

Closing his eyes, he nodded slightly.

“Believe it or not, I want that too, Luke.” She said, almost into his ear. “Just to be able to feel it again.”

He could feel the fight in her to keep everything locked inside and he knew that her passive exterior was just for show.

“I find it hard to believe.” He growled and then immediately regretted it. It was cruel to her, but a part of him wanted her to hurt, as much as he did.

His left leg shifted, showing that he was getting feelings back into lower half.

“I don’t doubt it.” She agreed. “It would look that way.” She put down the hand that she was working on and brought up the cup again, offering it to him. “I used to take lessons in controlling my face… did I ever tell you that?”

She didn’t wait for an answer, and recalling it for herself as much as it was for him.

“They used to take a gintu stick to my backside if I smiled when I wasn’t supposed to.” She said casually. “They once bruised my spine so badly that I couldn’t walk. It took a bacta dip to feel my legs again.”

“But the real trick came during what was called ‘etiquette class’… it was nothing more than me looking into a mirror and trying to keep the pain from showing as they would break my fingers.”

She snorted quietly, finding it pathetic in herself that she stood for such things. “There will be time to cry later, child. – that’s what He used to tell me as they reset my bones. I would get sort of reward if I didn’t scream as they did it. Then, He would suggest that I use the pain to my best advantage, and to remember it.”

“And I did… I used it to compare my pain level if I was ever in a situation that required me to put the pain aside until I allowed myself to feel it.”

“That was around the time that I lost my last governess… I think.” Mara continued, vacantly; telling the story without an emotion. “The one who used to call me ‘Button’….” She put down his hand.

Pausing, Luke jolted slightly when he felt her fingers starting to stroke his hair. First, at his temples and then to the nape of his neck. It was oddly soothing.
Whatever anger he felt towards her, started to dissolve, listening to her, realizing that this time it was no different that her life in the palace before Endor. Only now, it seemed more-personal as she was happy under the delusion that she was once special.

“She used to sing to stop me from crying… or sit in the corner until I went to sleep… always there.” Mara sighed. “And then, one morning, she was gone, and replaced by a droid.”

Her fingers raked into his hair; it had grown thicker, longer and slightly darker since Ovanis, she observed, and he heard her random thought.

He gave in and forgot himself, trying to stay strong, and hummed as she touched him, missing her kind touch, remembering that this was something that not everyone saw in her. Luke opened his eyes and looked out at the detention room, dropping his head back, letting her pet his hair, allowing himself this one brief moment.

“It’s no different now.” She said as she stroked. “I look like I feel nothing… that nothing touches me.”

Luke could feel her heartbeat on his back, and listening to her breathe and feeling her presence.

“I had just learned how to smile, in the past year, now I have to forget it again.” Mara murmured regretfully.

She paused before continuing. “I keep asking myself what was difference between how I lived then, and how I live now.”

Luke moved his other leg, but didn’t shift; he liked this feeling close to her without a threat.

“Through all my upbringing, I wasn’t afraid.” She said. “I had convinced myself that whatever that was being done to me was to make me better and stronger. I didn’t see the manipulation behind it all. It was done because I was special – that’s what I was told. I was a special case.”

“After Endor…” She caught her breath. “…I started to realize it. I didn’t need anyone to point it out but I still held on to the fact that I thought I was special. I fought anyone who challenged those ideas. I thought they could see it on my face… that I was duped, fooled into believing something that was real.”

“You see, I didn’t need you to point it out to me. I already knew… I just didn’t want someone else to see it... and knowing that I knew.”

“I tried to hide it behind every blank expression.” Her voice faded.

Luke felt her mind touch his. <<I’m afraid now… and I’m hiding it just like I hid all my other feelings.>>

“It doesn’t matter what happens now.” Mara whispered by his ear, still petting his hair. “Palpatine has heard all of this. He listens to all my thoughts. He knows ways passed my barriers.”

“You may have taught me different ways…but, He taught me first.”

She stopped touching him. “I’m your enemy just as much as He is.” She said at normal volume.

Luke felt her pain at those words; she had been forced to pick a side.

Shifting her weight, she supported his back until he could support himself. Mara stood up and then
helped him leverage his body up to a standing position. She slung his left arm over her shoulder and they took and first few wobbly steps in the direction of the door.

Luke shuddered as the feeling came into his legs in the form of pins and needles, shooting up his joints.

Mara must have suspected that he would experience such a thing and halted, just holding him up without moving.

At this closeness, it was no effort to sense her thoughts; she was correct and she wasn’t protecting her thoughts; her mind flashed on several images all at once.

*Their kiss under the tree at Yavin IV when she told him that she loved him. A blaster leveled at his head on Myrkrr, hoping that he wouldn’t see it quiver in her hand as she so desperately wanted to pull the trigger. Lastly, the repay of the moment in the Throne Room as she begged him to end her life after killing the Red guard; it would have been a mercy-killing in her mind, sparring her to live in this moment now.*

But through all this, he could sense her desperation of wanting to be anywhere else than where they were now.

The things that her mind to concoct came to one conclusion and needed one result.

“You can’t save me.” He said quietly, a hard tone in his voice.

“I know.” She answered swiftly.

She let those words sink into him. “I have no intention of saving you. If you can’t save yourself, then no one will be able to do it for you.”

After a few more steps, she stopped only to reposition him. “There is one thing I can do for you.” Mara mumbled close to him. “You once said that you knew that Vader… Anakin, was still there, inside him… the good in him. You saw it when no one else could. You were the one person who believed that he would, *and could*, come back.”

She exhaled heavy, showing that she was weakening. “I can see it in you.” Her voice was soft, but filling with emotion. “I know that you are still the good person, The Jedi, that you need to be… and that he will come back to you.”

They stopped, and she removed his arm from off her shoulder, allowing Luke to balance on his own weight and take a few steps without her.

Staying close, Mara walked along side him, keeping a close distance so that he could hear her words. “Luke, He needs you to fight Him… in front of the galaxy. He wants them all to see your destruction.” She shivered, knowing that she was burgeoning on committing treason again; words or thoughts didn’t matter to Palpatine, it was all the same.

They were coming close to the door, and he could feel other presences on the other side. Red Guards…

<<Palpatine still fears you and your power… in the Light. You have to believe that you are capable of winning, otherwise, you will never do it. >>

Stopping, Luke turned in her direction to look at her face, knowing that he might see nothing… *but*…
The door slid up, removing the divide between him and the waiting guards.

He searched her face, trying to see a crack in the visage that she could put on, separating the projection from the real her.

Her eyes darkened to a deep emerald green. The fighter in her was still there, hidden from the Emperor, but still courageous and strong.

She straightened her back and stood taller, assuming the role of Empress, as the Red Guards came into position to take the Jedi away, gesturing for him to step into the hallway.

Luke had a moment to realize what that meant before he was encouraged to move; his eyes widened, relaxing his shoulders, and followed his charges without any further compelling.

She was preparing for her side of the fight that she knew was coming. All of her hope wasn’t gone yet.

**

**Byss: The Emperor’s Private Audience Chamber**

With all the changes in the galaxy, one thing was sure; deeds of an unscrupulous nature should best be done behind closed doors.

Mara stood in the empty room, at the base of the dais, waiting for them to appear.

Given her own past, she knew that there was more than one way into most of the rooms in the palace. All of them involved ways that you could move undetected and silently appear in any room that you wanted to; getting the jump on your victim, blending into a crowd, over-hearing what you needed to.

But this palace on Byss was still unfamiliar to her. She had not been granted the luxury of exploring it on her own, finding her preferred means to get what she needed. It crawled under her skin that she still felt as these were surroundings were not in her control; that someone else had the advantage over her.

She waited now, still unsure, stalking and biding her time for the other party to arrive.

It gave her time to truly look about the room, thinking that the granite on the walls looked of the same type that was used in the main hall at the Castle of Darth Vader on Mustafar; the mottled grey, black and red flecks blended together.

Stopping in front of the dais, she regarded the chair that sat front and center, and instinctually knew why she didn’t dare ascend the steps to sit in it now. The Emperor would never allow such a thing.

Even in an empty room, she could feel His presence around her, or at the very least, the lingering feeling that He had been there and left some trace behind.

Mara looked at the stairs, and her mind flashed on the bonding ceremony between Sidious and Faustus; she shivered and then stepped back to comfortable distance.

She had replayed it in her mind, several times now, trying to examine how she felt about it.

The old version of her, The Emperor’s Hand, would have possibly felt honored, as the thought filled her with sickness; obeying her Master, shared for the sake of a bonding, being the special object that
solidified a treaty.

Looking blankly at the place that Palpatine had chosen to humiliate her for His own needs, she regretted nothing that Luke had done to Sedriss. She had felt the apex of Luke’s hate and could see in her mind’s eye the green glowing lance that cut the new Sith Lord down. She only had two regrets; one was that Luke had risked himself in the process, and that he had gone too far to ever come back from it.

The second, that she wasn’t the one to do it either. It would have been extremely satisfying.

She looked away from the spot, feeling the power that came with those emotions of revenge; it made her feel strong. A strength she hadn’t felt since… since… since she had bore her hatred for Luke Skywalker for all those years.

The hatred, the sense of revenge, and the motivation that came from the euphoria of attaining success – those had kept her alive and going since Endor.

Mara gulped and looked up at the throne again; her thoughts confused and swirling. She had promised herself that she would not be in this place. She had convinced herself that she was no longer that person…Luke had convinced her of as much.

Her stomach fluttered, and something was welling inside her. Her senses were growing, trembling… They stopped. The room stopped. She refused to let it take hold on her, for reasons that she felt she wasn’t allowed to… because she had sensed them.

Looking over her shoulder, her turned to address them. Silently, without warning, they had appeared in the room.

Now, on a knee, with heads bowed, the three hooded figures, The Shadow Hand, was before her.

They waited for her, as if statues.

“What is thy bidding, My Mistress?” The first figure hissed.

It took her a moment to realize that they were at her command. Her command…Palpatine had given their instruction to her. Whatever latent insecurity and questioning she had, now was not the time to display the weakness.

They were garbed in black, the traditional color of servants of the Empire, but she didn’t like not knowing who she was dealing with. Palpatine had selected them; they were His creatures.

She could sense their presence in the Force; attentive, eager to prove themselves, and Force-strong. Not as strong as she would have suspected, but skilled enough to cloak their presences and move with stealth agility – all the same skills that she was taught.

A wave of foreboding came over her. “Remove your hoods.” Mara ordered, feeling their curiosity about her starting to slip into her senses.

They did as they were told.

She inhaled as she first regarded the two Oscians; the alien race that only produced conjoined twin offspring. It was now that she noticed their mirrored cybernetic arms, and she suspected that their legs were mechanical too. They had been separated, probably by order of the Emperor.
The Oscian, nearest to her, tilted his semi-conical head and the lids of his eyes blink vertically.

*This must have been the dominant twin. She thought. The bolder of the two of them. Palpatine was very lucky to find Force-strong Oscians.*

It was still unusual to see an alien race active in the Empire. The Oscians had a reputation of being secretive and selective of who they chose to follow.

The third member of the group wasn’t a surprise; the bearded human male who watched her when he had the chance. Oddly though, he had kept his head down, avoiding her inspection.

“Report.” She said with confidence.

“Mistress,” The first Oscian spoke, lisping. “*Protocol Eidolon* was followed. Just as you had suspected, several transmission devices were found. Their contents, however, were wiped before we retrieved them… all, but one.”

From under his cloak, the Oscian held out the small data disk in his cybernetic hand. “The transmissions were encrypted but we were able to break the code.” He paused. “The information implicates that Commander Rehal has been broadcasting coordinates to an unsecure location. He--”

“What proof do you have that is was Commander Rehal?” Mara blurted quickly; her mind flashed on the possibility that Rehal was not culprit.

The Star Destroyer *Deception* was technically under Luke’s command… if Luke was sending out coordinates then maybe she was counteracting anything that he was attempting to do. If this was part of his plan…

“Even with the encryption, the signature code was implanted directly from Rehal’s personal station.” The Oscian said.

“And you don’t believe that it was anyone else other than Rehal?” She asked narrowing her eyes. “Not a lieutenant that was given his access codes? Not a spy who stole the codes to implicate Rehal? Not one of Rehal’s enemies?”

The Oscian looked surprised that she had thought of different scenarios. “We have not investigated those alternatives, Mistress.” He answered slowly. “Perhaps--”

“Perhaps you should have conclusive evidence before it is brought to the Emperor or acted upon.” Mara replied. “What is the significance of the coordinates?” She taped the disk with her fingernails.

“It contains the coordinates for a location on Coruscant … where the Emperor is planning to land when His Imperial Majesty makes His return to the Capital… the star date that has been prepared.” The Oscian finished quickly.

Nodding, Mara could see where that knowledge could come in handy for an ambush. “And what of the theta-radiation tracking?” She asked, knowing it was part of their duties.

“The devices that have been identified have not moved from their original locations.” He said quietly. “We are awaiting their progress.”

“Good.” She said without sounding overly optimistic; their task wasn’t done yet, no need to congratulated them on a job half-done. “Take a copy of the data that you have provided to me, and have a level-four information officer run it through identity slicing… looking for any comparative findings to Rehal’s previous messages.”
Mara looked directly at the Oscian. “Then, you know what needs to be done with the officer.” She said coldly.

There was a great deal of loyalty in the Officer Corps. If one of them should speak out of turn, and it got back to Rehal, this mission would be over very quickly.

“As you wish, Mistress.” The Oscian bowed, and the other two followed suit.

She inhaled, and looked them over. “You are dismissed.” She said quietly.

“Yes Mistress.” The Oscian hissed again.

They rose from their positions seamlessly and turned to exit through the chamber door as she watched.

Mara’s lip twitched. Clever… didn’t want me to see how they arrived so they took the obvious way out.

Something in her senses now twitched. “Wait! You! Human… Stay.” She decided quickly; she was bothered by his presence ever since the Emperor’s rebirth and now she was going to get the answers that she wanted.

The Oscians paused and they left in silence.

The human kept his back to her as the door slid closed. And they were alone.

She watched his shoulders as he breathed and gave him a few moments as she felt him try to assemble his mental barrier.

“Face me.” She ordered stoically, sure to not raise her voice, sure not to raise his anxiety.

He inhaled one more time before doing as he was told; she sensed that he didn’t particularly like being ordered, which was odd for a servant of the Emperor. Perhaps he was another Sedriss; to do as he was told until his moment of glory would present itself.

The brown beard on his face made him look older than he was. His dark brown eyes had a hard edge to them, like he had seen too much. Much like Imperial fashion, he had kept his general appearance in tidy style, but clearly, to his own liking. Tall and broad in the shoulders, she had assessed that he moved stiffly, not fluidly like a spy or an assassin should do.

“Who are you?” Mara asked, holding her frown from appearing.

“Mistress?” He asked in a distinctly Core accent.

“Who are you?” She asked again, letting the frown become an expression of annoyance. “You are, or were, not a member of Special Operations.” She declared.

He raised an eyebrow and for a moment, she thought she could see a hint of mischief in his eyes; he was enjoying that she didn’t know.

He stayed silent, almost daring her to guess.

“You don’t move like a spy.” Mara pointed out, looking him up and down. “You move like a… Stormtrooper.” Yes, given his height and build, it would fit.

“The Emperor found a Force-strong Stormtrooper.” She mumbled, forgetting herself, letting her
mind ponder the reasoning.

Usually Force-sensitive Stormtroopers were sent either in Vader’s special legion, The 501st, Vader’s Fist, or they were sent to train as Red Guards. But never were the sent into the espionage game, on the chance that they might run into a familiar face from their days at the Academy.

“And you don’t move like an Empress.” His voice was curt, and angered at being found out. “You, are the one who moves like a spy.”

Mara’s eyes widened and she felt her jaw drop inside her mouth, preparing a retort.

“Tell me, how long did it take for you to learn how to walk without your footsteps being heard?” He sneered, but then playfully grinned. “It’s a trait that I’ve always admired about you.”

She stopped herself from revealing too much in her expression. So, you want it to be a game of words? She thought.

“Always?” Mara smirked at him, keeping a hard look in her eyes. “That could either be a very long time… or a very short time in Imperial service. It wouldn’t have given you much of a chance to observe me.”

He smirked and looked away, and then back at her, ready to play. “I didn’t need to see you in Imperial Service to observe you.” His smirk faded. “You made yourself the center of attention on Coruscant at the Bremen Hearing… outing yourself, Emperor’s Hand.” He exhaled. “I merely watched with the rest of the galaxy.”

It had been close to a year since the trial and events that had brought her back to the Capital, that had started her new life, with Luke and the Smuggler’s Alliance.

Mara lifted her chin, not ashamed of her actions. “I didn’t know that Dark Jedi had access to the holonet.” She didn’t even need to think about the words, they just came from her mouth.

“I am no Jedi.” He suddenly growled, resenting the word.

She could sense now why he was chosen to be part of the Shadow Hand. His emotions were raw and exposed and easily accessed for use by the Emperor. Yes, he made the perfect pawn or perhaps the perfect partner.

He was not her enemy, in any sense. It would be better to get the information that she needed from him.

Turning away from him, she casually paced; her feet not making a sound as he had previously perceived. She looked down at them and then back up at him.

Now, he wore the frown.

“The trick is to arch the center of your feet so that the softer part of the sole touches the flooring.” Mara revealed. “It’s hard to master and not lose your balance, or look out of place.”

He looked perplexed at her, not sure what she was about to do.

“But you weren’t part of the Legion when Palpatine called you to his Shadow Hand, were you?” She asked casually. Her senses were guiding her conversation and where it felt that it needed to get to.
It was his turn to step back. His brown eyes pinched at the corners.

Then she felt him, in the Force, trying to read her, trying to see if she really was the Emperor’s servant again. He was searching for his own reasons, not his Master’s.

“No, I wasn’t.” He shook his head but kept eye contact with her.

Mara felt the tingling at the base of her neck, telling her that something was not as it appeared. “You weren’t in Imperial Service at all, were you?”

He shook his head again, his eyes darkening.

“The Emperor didn’t find you…” She whispered, letting her senses and insight guide what she was saying. “You were…” She blinked, knowing that she was right. “…a mercenary.”

Then, without a word, he nodded, agreeing with her unspoken conclusion. “You could almost say that you found me.”

A quiet gasp escaped her lips, and she glared at him.

This time when he smirked at her, for having the upper hand, he pulled back his cloak to reveal his black armor-plated chest, to stand taller.

“This, of course, will stay between you and me.” He said. “I won’t tell on you.”

In that second, she found she was tempted to reach out to the Emperor, calling on Him to hear the confession of treason.

“And you won’t tell on me either.” He declared. “Otherwise, it would put all your friends, and those you care about, in danger.”

It wasn’t a threat but she felt like reacting anyway. Instead she paused; not speaking out-loud or to the Emperor mentally.

“Yes, your smuggler friends on Takadonna … or your Resistance friends, hiding in their former outposts.” His voice softened, sounding like he cared too.

Mara allowed her head to shake, unsure of how she was connected with him.

“It was your suggestion to Organa-Solo to active the sleeper cells to investigate Fel’ya and infiltrate the New Empire.” He said quietly, trusting her and revealing himself. “I had the necessary qualifications.”

Audibly, she gasped. Then not pausing, she looked around, looking for anything, trying to see the tell-tale signs that they were not alone. “Not here!” She shout-whispered to him, and stepped closer to him. “And not through the Force… He will hear everything.”

He looked around, trying see what she had been looking for, realizing that she was right. He should have appeared more-concerned, but wasn’t. “I’m about to disappear.” He whispered back.

“Then why did you tell me?” Mara started to feel her sides shake for fear that she might be implicated or linked to a spy network.

“The Force told me to.” He said blankly. “I only have one Master and it isn’t the Emperor… and that Master told me to remind you of the other people out there, and to make you question who you truly serve, Empress.”
She reared back and stepped away from him. Watching him, she took in his appearance again, noting a small detail, the call numbers on the plate. *TK-936*

“The Force wants to know which side you serve?” He asked; his eyes burrowing into her. “I have a job to do, and it’s time that you figure out what’s your job in all this.”

He took a few steps in the direction of the opposite wall. “For now, I’ll give you only one answer.” He pointed at the wall. “The panel is in this corner, but the release is down at the ground.”

Walking over, he demonstrated, finding the seam in the wall panel and releasing the hidden door without a sound. He stepped over the frame and crouched inside the tunnel, preparing to go into hiding. “And be careful of those Oscians – they are an ambitious duo.”

She watched as the panel silently close, and he was gone. The nameless man… *TK-936*.

Alone in the room once more, Mara stood, letting the silence forget that it was a witness.

He was right. The stranger was right.

She had not been loyal to the Force, not at all.

Luke would have reprimanded her, if he was training her again, demanding that she use it and feel its presence every moment, every day.

Her shoulders slumped, knowing exactly why she had not done such a thing, knowing why she only touched it when she needed to or when instinct took over.

She swallowed, knowing the truth; she was afraid which side of the Force would answer her and come to her call.

With all the darkness that had surrounded her lately, Mara wondered how far she was willing to go into the abyss again.

How twisted must deeds be and yet still be in the service for good, to remain… good?

It was the argument that she felt would burden her life if she never found an answer for it.

If she had given herself a mission, it would be to secure Luke’s return to the Light first, and then worry about her own redemption later.

The Emperor was waiting now; she could feel His impatience drumming on her senses.

This time, she knew what she was headed for. This time, she had some sort of protection, buried in her belly- a risk He was not willing to take, the leash that she would allow her certain steps and tread where she should not.

*His Hand … His Dowager Empress…* titles that had no true definitions, and had no bounds.

Just like her place in the Force; which ever side that she needed to call on to get the job done, it had become her ambiguous job to do it, trend the lines, serving both enemy and friend.

And meet those challenges, she would.
"Closer to Fine"
By the Indigo Girls

…
Well darkness has a hunger that's insatiable
And lightness has a call that's hard to hear
I wrap my fear around me like a blanket
I sailed my ship of safety 'til I sank it
I'm crawling on your shores

…
There's more than one answer to these questions
Pointing me in a crooked line
And the less I seek my source for some definitive
The closer I am to fine
The closer I am to fine
The Desideratum

Chapter Summary

Quote: All the veterans of the last war, they would have hated to win a bet if they had placed odds on being up against the Emperor again.

Characters: Han Solo, Chewbacca, Leia, Admiral Ackbar, General Madine, Mon Mothma, and surprise!

**

Chapter Notes

OMG!... I think I'm hitting my writing wall... also, it's con season and my sewing room keeps calling me away.

I've got one more chapter to struggle through until I get to the meat and potatoes... and what I mean by that, is that sometimes, I go too far ahead of the story instead of staying in the present and writing as a go along ... I'm like Luke in that sense that I don't see what's in front of me...

But I'm back now... so hopefully I can have the next chapter out soon. ..but whenever I say that, it still takes me 3-5 days to hammer one out.

Thank you for holding in there with me... it will be worth the read when I get there...

Cheers, Phae

Mon Calamari Cruiser: The Home One

_They’ll be fine._ He thought to himself as he looked out the viewport. Hovering above ‘New Alderaan’, the _Home One_ was preparing to jump into hyperspace.

The little planetoid looked lonely and abandoned; green-gray with sparse specks of blue and green dotting the sphere.

_They will._ Han repeated to himself; thinking of his children on the planet below, left in the care of Leia’s aide, Winter.

Jaina was almost speaking in full sentences and walking on her own; determined and focused, like her mother. Jacen was less-vocal, having trouble with some words but was inquisitive and interested in examining everything around him.

Ben, being only a few months old; his dark hair had a gentle curl to it, and his equally dark eyes watched the world go by him. He was attentive as those eyes watched and tracked every movement. His siblings were curious and doting on the new addition.
He sighed with heartache one more time before turning away, knowing that the countdown clock had already started for the jump.

On board a Mon Cal Cruiser varied from their usual ride of the repurposed Star Destroyer, the Emancipator. Imperial tech might be familiar to him, but in truth, it wasn’t the distance travelled, it was how comfy the ride was.

One thing that he had to give them credit for, these Mon Cal Cruisers sure were smooth; no jolts or kicks as the jump took place, and no large hiccups as they came out.

There was just something more organic about this means of transportation.

Striding across the deck, he watched as crews brushed past him, running from one ship to another.

It was no great secret that they found themselves under staffed and out-gunned again in the face of holding up a resistance to the Imperial war machine.

Han’s cheek involuntarily twitched; he had seen it all before. In fact, the Home One had been their floating base at Sullust before launching their attack on the second Death Star at Endor. This was a more than familiar sight.

Prior to the latest skirmish, the Home One had fallen under those who were sympathetic to Fel’ya and all his great plans. As soon as his leadership of the New Republic started to waver, so did his loyal crew, dropping their support and throwing it behind a Mon Cal leader once again. Military had this unspoken rule of being loyal to those who were loyal to them; rumors of serving up ranks for the picking didn’t bode well in any circle.

Walking closer, he mentally paused to recall if the Falcon was in the same dock that it was in now. He shrugged, it probably was. Things rarely changed in Rebellion protocol… just the faces; those changed, some vanished, some faded away.

They were headed to destination unknown, to rendezvous with the other vessels in, what was deemed, the Resistance Fleet. He scratched his head as he walked, estimating where they were headed and who would be there once they arrived. Probably headed to neutral space… probably the Raddus… definitely the Liberty… maybe the Emancipator… maybe others. There wasn’t much left to the “Resistance Fleet”; most larger vessels were owned by individual systems who were holding off showing support to either side less one triumph over he other. Politics.

Even the unpredictable, Garm Bel Ibis was a welcome sight, adding his Peregrine Dreadnaught into the fray, allowing his other ships to roam the galaxy under protection duty.

The floor of the deck shuddered only mildly as the acceleration engaged. Only someone green behind the ears would notice it. He did pause to look around to see who stopped in the tracks. Sure enough, he could count a few, but kept walking towards his ship.

From under one of the repulse lifts, sparks and arcs of electricity could be seen, from a plasma welder. Then stopped, and the Wookie looked over and bellowed in his direction. The rant went on, detailing all the was wrong with the ship, this time.

“Well, you can’t expect me to remember the last time I checked the shock absorbers!” Han griped back. “When was the last time you checked them?” He sassed.

The returning growl from Chewbacca was less than friendly and would have caused others to retreat in fear but was only done to silence the other.
“Yeah, yeah…” He scoffed, mumbling. “I forgot, that besides Lando, you’re the responsible one.”

He came closer and inspected the work. No matter what squabbles they had, there was no doubt that he trusted his ship to anyone else but his long-standing co-pilot.

There was also no one else who could read the smuggler’s moods, as changing and as allusive as they could be.

Chewie had decided it was time to put the tools away, knowing that he had just been making busy-work since they came on board, trying to stay out of everyone’s way.

It was a strange sense that came as others surveyed them. It was a mixed bag of respect, having been heroes of the last war, and still met with suspicion as the New Republic hierarchy still hadn’t seemed to accept them back into the fold since Wayland.

Still, it had its place, and truth be told, a Mon Cal Cruiser was just as much a home as any other place now.

“Anyone home?” A familiar voice called. Imbued with all the charm that it naturally had, Han didn’t need to turn around to know who that voice belonged to.

“Under here!” he called directing the other man in the right direction. “Just finishing up working on the shocks.” Han informed him.

“You know, if you just let me buy the Falcon off you, I could have her fully up and running in no time. Bring her back to her former glory.” Lando said from the side lines, standing beside the down plank, running his hand over the shielding absently.

Chewie was first to come from under the ship followed by Han who wore his furrowed frown.

The Wookie backed him up as he stared down at the man who called him ‘a friend’. He was just as protective of the freighter as the owner of it, if not more.

“When are you going to stop with that?” Han shook his head. “You’re never going to get her back.”

The gambler couldn’t help but smile at his crusty friend. “Never say never.” Lando winked.

The Corellian walked passed him, headed off the deck towards the crew residences. “You at least got that part right.” He grumbled. “I never thought that I’d be back here again.”

Lando’s smile faltered and the charade stopped. All the veterans of the last war, they would have hated to win a bet if they had placed odds on being up against the Emperor again.

“Neither did I.” Lando matched the under tones. Ever the optimist, he tried to switch topics. “Where do they got you holed-up?”

The deck was virtually empty at this end as the smaller fighters were docked closest to the exit bay. Han shrugged, and shook his head, feeling out of place. “They gave us a command suite.” He answered, knowing it was Leia’s position that afforded them this sort of comfort. “Near Esmire and Madine.”

“Madine is here?” Lando asked. “Yeah, I guess he would be.”

The Senate had disbanded and left in an unresolved session when last the news broke. The New Republic was hardly a republic anymore, so military rules were no longer in application. However, a
The conversation grew quiet as only their footsteps were heard. There wasn’t much that could be talked about as things had a clear division between what was confidential and what wasn’t, even between old friends.

“I hear Mon Mothma is aboard the Raddus.” Lando tried to lift the mood, giving an air positivity.

The former Rebel Leader was a formidable foe for the Imperials. Hearing her name could only instill respect and hope; the two factors that the Rebellion had been built on.

“I heard that too.” Han said lowly; it was just another reminded that his information was on a limited basis.

“Are you going to the meeting?” Lando asked, without thinking. “I’m headed to the briefing room now.”

He tried to keep his grimace from showing. “Yeah…” Han said lowly. “I’m to meet Leia outside the room.” He explained.

“Oh that.” Lando faltered and then tried to recover. “I forgot about that.”

“Yeah that.” Han growled. Once again, the feeling of being excluded riled him up more than it should have. “Wanna remind me again how you got back in their good graces and I didn’t?”

It was unfair and they both knew it; they had been made generals at Endor, both had resigned their commissions at the end of the war, and both had disobeyed command chains and went to storm Wayland – but only one of them was getting punished, and they both knew it.

“Hey, you just let me know when you want to go charging off into the field to rescue senators, and I’ll gladly switch with you, making deliveries out to Yavin IV.” Lando shot back. “We know that it has nothing to do with deeds, but it’s about who you know.” He said in a quieter voice.

To save Leia’s reputation, Han had taken a back seat. But what good it had done them wasn’t worth much when the news of Daddy Vader hit the holonet; friends turned foes, and colleagues turned combatants where Leia was concerned.

Only those around her now were loyal to her and were playing politics as well as stocking a secret army from the Republic for just such a case. She stood to lose all her support if they didn’t respect him as well. The last thing she needed was a husband who publicly defied everything that she stood for, even if it aided her cause and saved the galaxy some turmoil.

The hallways were getting crowded as they approached the open doors of the briefing room. There were small groups from several wings of star fighters that Han recognized.

Three Sullustans had clustered together, and Lando broke from their group when he went over to greet his former co-pilot, Nien Numb, on his way into the meeting.

Han recognized several uniforms of Republic wings also; some in blue flight suits wearing black armbands, signifying that their squad had taken losses.

Strangely missing from their uniforms were the badges of the New Republic ranks and wings; the circle were those patches used to be were vivid against the weathered flight suits.

Well, if you’re going to commit mutiny, better be dressed for it. He grumbled to himself.
A group of Trandoshan pilots looked leery over at the others around them. They had good cause too for their uneasiness; the reputation and brutality of their people had ostracized them from the New Republic, but they had no love for the Empire either. It didn’t help matters that the rumors that the bounty hunter, Bossk, was still alive and hiding out with his clan.

Han looked over his shoulder to check on his buddy after hearing a low rumble come from the other; Trandoshans were known for hunting Wookies, and the Wookies didn’t much like them in return either. He could recall Chewie once saying that they might look leathery, but they still are tasty when cooked properly, when referring to the reptilian race.

Something must have transpired because the fur around Chewie’s neck was puffed up, and the Trandoshans were baring their teeth as they passed in the hallway.

“Easy Buddy.” Han murmured. “I got your back.”

Luckily, at that moment, approaching from the other end of the corridor, was cluster of the ruling-body, and at the center of them was Leia.

He could feel the engines start to die down. Wherever they had been sent to, they had gotten there. No doubt, assembling with other ships in what was left of the Republic fleet. Sitting mynocks, waiting to be found, plotting against the Empire.

Han stopped before the briefing room’s doors; it was the symbolic threshold that he dared not cross as he waited for his wife.

There were several persons that he did not recognized, and several that he knew well. General Madine was at her side, looking solemn and expressionless as ever.

The blue-toned Mon Cal that was beside him was a relative of Ackbar’s and one of the few that the Admiral trusted to govern the Home One in his place. General Funnet was known for his tactical skill as well as his leadership abilities.

The group came closer and Leia positioned herself to be on the outside, closer as she approached her husband.

There was something about her when she took on the role of Rebel Leader; Han could feel the swell in his heart looking at her. She positively glowed with confidence and those around her, respected her.

He inhaled deeply watching her, and just her.

Leia had pulled her hair back into one the her famously ornate hairstyles that framed her face, and the had chosen to wear the white senatorial gown, adding the crest of the New Republic at her collar.

Her dark eyes were serious and astute, listening as the group walked, but softened as she saw her husband, blinking with recognition.

As they came closer, she paused at the threshold. “I will be with you shortly.” She said to the others.

The replies were a mixture of ‘Yes, your Highness’ and ‘Of course, Senator’ – to which she was neither, anymore.

Han watched her face at she paused to acknowledge that none of those titles were accurate but dare not correct them. He knew it pained her to see all her hard work get washed away in such a short period of time, knowing that they were facing the same threat as before, minus the benefit of one
He knew what she needed. “Nice hair.” He said lowly, and then lopsidedly smirking for her amusement.

Leia sighed, looking into his eyes. “I see that you’ve dressed up for the occasion.” She said playfully.

“Hey, I wore my best holster.” He faked a hurt look and murmured back.

No matter any of their troubles, a quick back and forth could remind them of the world that just existed between them and their family.

Leia’s lip twitched in a tight smile before she glanced off into the waiting room.

“Care to join me?” She asked, looking back at him to see if he understood the implications.

For only the briefest of seconds, his expression registered surprise and then formed a frown. “Are you sure?” Han asked with one raised eyebrow. “You must have misplaced my engraved invitation.” He said with sarcasm.

As her poised posture would allow, she exhaled slowly, amused at his attempt to be witty for her sake. “Yes.” Leia paused. “I am sure.”

Han pushed his lower lip forward, as if considering, but only for the minutest of moments before he nodded once slowly, and quietly accepting as he moved to stand at her shoulder.

Leia reached over and discreetly touched his hand, giving it a squeeze. “Captain Solo, on behalf of the Rebellion of Allied Systems, would you consider lending your assets in our effort to curtail the current regime and threats?”

They began to walk into the room; the groupings of the forces were beginning to assemble.

From the corner of her eye, she could see the smug smirk that he was holding back. With her senses in the Force, he was seriously considering denying them the assistance that they so desperately needed just despite them. But then, as she always knew, his feelings changed, and knowing what he knew…

“Well, since you asked all polite and such…” Han mumbled under his breath. “Anything for you, Princess.”

“Good.” She said fully, squeezing his hand one more time before releasing it. “That’s what I’d hope you’d say.” She paused, and felt it was her last opportunity. “Scruffy Nerf Herder.” She mumbled.

He grumbled something before he caught her eye one more time, seeing her appreciation of him in her dark eyes. He sighed and nodded, letting her to do what she does best.

Leia walked over to join the other command groups. She positioned herself beside the holo of Admiral Ackbar and the stoic General Madine. The glowing blue holo of Mon Mothma flickered and then subtly steadied.

Han watched and let his lip twitch. As much as he was glad to back in the fold, he knew what they were asking of him and his family and those sacrifices that were too large to name.

Still, he had his own reasons for getting involved this time. For the protection of his own children, and for their future, and lastly for his friend and brother, he needed to be included in this fight.
A soft chime sounded, calling the meeting to order.

Lando found his way back to the other smuggler and the trio stood off to side waiting and watching, like the rest of the room, as the lights went down, and the meeting was called to order.

Han spied over the crowd in the briefing room of the Home One. The Mon Cal Cruiser was able to hold almost all the X-wings from this region, but the Raddus and the Liberty showed up in tow, laden with their own squads, ready for a fight. Many of those in the room now were remnants of large squads, at one time but had been dwindled away, reducing their numbers.

The holo of Mon Mothma came forward and addressed the gathering.

“Citizens of the Galactic Republic, colleagues and friends. The time has come when decisive action is required.” The Chandrilan leader addressed the group stoically.

Her holo flickered and resumed its poise. “With rumors and suspicion aside, we have been able to ascertain that former Emperor Palpatine is indeed alive and directing the Imperial efforts to reclaim the senate.” She exhaled with apprehension. “According to our sources, and with the senate in its current state, He only requires fifty-one percent of the vote of the standing membership in order regain power over the Republic, returning it to Imperial Rule under His guidance.”

The former Chancellor’s voices dropped, portraying her disappointment before her words did. “We have also come to understand that He has gained much of his support through the influence of Jedi Knight Luke Skywalker’s intervention to sway opinion.”

She paused, waiting upon the shock and awe of the crowd.

Han looked around, trying to read the room, hearing words in low tones; “traitor”, “lies”, “Darkside”. Then, he turned his attention to Leia. She looked out at the crowd blankly, but he could see the subtle pinch in the corner of her eyes, refusing to believe that she had lost her brother entirely.

He kept his cool, still on the fence about what he was willing to believe about Luke.

“We believe that the deceit and coercion of the parliamentary process must be stopped in order to re-establish the Republic.”

“The time has come for us to take action.” Mon Mothma directed their attention again. “Even though the senate was disrupted by an Imperial attack and occupation, by legal presidents, full control of the Republic is not assumed. The Emperor will be returning to Coruscant shortly, waiting on the vote to be complete before assuming control. It is at that time that we plan to intercept control of the Republic and the governing body until a fully-present senate can vote on the motion.”

Her head dropped. “Once again, we call on the sacrifices of the citizens of the galaxy to take action against the corrupt and brutal regime that threatens us.” She paused. “General Madine, please elaborate on our tactics and requirements.”

Her holo stepped back and General Crix Madine walked forward.

He was reserved in nature, never revealing too much on the emotional spectrum, but his eyes had the hardened look of someone who resented another fight.

“It is our intent to keep the fighting away from the Capital City and thereby minimize any civilian casualties.” He surmised. “To accomplish this, we intend to land our troops in the smaller surrounding cities and engage Imperial ground troops, intervening and intercepting, preventing them from entering Coruscant City.”
From the projector in the middle of the room, a map of the Capital world appeared. Several yellow dots appeared on the blue planet.

“These are the points that we have identified as possible artillery drop sites for Imperial Forces- based on the locations that have been used in the past, ideal for a heavy defensive tactic.” He swallowed. “We anticipate the use of All-Terrain Armored Transport as part of the siege by the evidence of those that were used when originally over-taking the Capital. However, we are expecting more of a presence than before, increasing their numbers.”

Madine continued. “From these vantage points, and placement of our forces, we will have the tactical advantage, barring the Imperials and, impeding their advancement.”

“A two-part endeavor will be required with the use of ground troops and air support in order to stop their advance.” Madine stopped. “I will ask Admiral Ackbar to elaborate.” He stepped back into line.

The holo of the Mon Cal leader came closer to the projector.

Han narrowed his eyes, waiting to hear the next part of the plan. Somehow, they always saved Ackbar to drop the heavy on the room, disclosing where the most amount of effort, with the least chance of success, would fall.

“Although we have been able to determine the caliber of the resistance, we have not been able to clarify or anticipate the numbers that we will be facing.” Ackbar announced to the room.

“It is uncertain if the Imperial Forces have also been able to consolidate their power with the worlds that have joined their fraction. We cannot predict if those worlds will provide aerial support to the Imperial troops.” The Mon Cal said without a preamble.

“In short, if a battle was to ensue in the space above Coruscant, then the predictability of an outcome could be radically different than those that we expect.”

“The defensive wings of Republic forces have disbanded under their former leadership and regrouped into selected squadrons to provide support for the ground assault.” Ackbar confirmed.

From the corner of the room, Han raised his eyebrows. So, sending in the starfighters first... good idea. He thought to himself.

“Our greater concern is the interference of a World Devastator, if the Emperor feels that it will be necessary to inflict damage if He feels that a tide is turning. It would not be beneath Him to obliterate His own forces if He feels overwhelmed or at a risk of lost.” Ackbar chapped his mouth before continuing. “Therefore, it is imperative that we concentrate our fire power on the destruction of their larger weaponry first.”

“The Empire is massing their fleet on the border of the Core worlds. The Deception, the Conspirator, and the Eclipse, as well as several other Star Destroyers, will make up the “Imperial fleet” - who knew what else they were hiding.

“We must keep the World Devastator from coming within range of Coruscant.” He declared.

The room murmured again with the mention of the vehicle that was only second to a Death Star in destruction capabilities.

Taking down a Death Star required both smaller and larger crafts to keep the Star Destroyers from getting involved. It was a move that still sounded too risky to many in the room.
The lights in the room raised, signifying the beginning of the discussion as to how they should proceed.

If it was wartime, then they all would simply follow Ackbar’s instruction. But they weren’t. They were a rag-tag of volunteers who were either displaced or looking to return the favor to the Imperials.

They represented worlds and leaders who were no longer part of the unit of the Republic, and now they had their own ideas of protection at heart; separate minds and separate interests.

A lower chime sounded.

Commander Esmire stood up from the crowd. “Admiral, if I may ask, what are the hinderances that we are facing? - other than the sheer scale of the assault.”

The crowd whispered, and the other holo projections in the room wavered.

“Commander, we have determined that is only merely our numbers that concern us.” Ackbar paused. “It is in both the number of starfighters and larger vessels that we feel will be underrepresented.”

The projection in the middle of the room changed; showing the Imperials fleet versus the Resistance’s known vessels. They were evenly matched. But even wasn’t what they were going for. The Resistance wanted to end this fight, once and for all. It would be a good bet the Empire wanted to do the same and would hedge their stance against anything else.

The whispering grew louder.

So, the plan was use smaller starfighters to protect the ground troops, while the larger vessels matched wits with the equally large Imperial vehicles.

Han growled under his breath; they had missed an important detail. There was a reason that smaller fighters were used was to also protect the larger ships; coverage. Smaller star fighters had the ability to get through shields, come in on close contact and take down defensive bombardment.

In short, they were missing the key piece of intermediary vehicles that could maneuver quickly and had the fire-power to stay in the game longer.

It was horrible odds. Lando caught Han’s eye and shook his head slowly. Neither one of them would be willing to lay bets on these odds.

Watching Leia, he saw her look around the room, looking for the spark of hope to show itself among the group.

“It’s suicide.” was said from a corner, from an unidentified voice.

The voices grew louder talking amongst themselves.

He could feel it. It didn’t take a Jedi, just good instincts, to know the doubt was all around him.

“And what does this accomplish?” A voice called. “What are hoping to gain?” The volume was higher as it went above the crowd.

Mon Mothma came forward again, raising her hand, settling the group back into silence.

She was poised. “A tactical group will also be in place in the senate.”

“To do what?” A Rodian asked in their language, still doubtful.
Mon Mothma paused and righted her stature. “To assassinate the Emperor.” She said strongly.

Han blinked in shock and shook his head, but not entirely surprised that it had come done to this. He was merely surprised at the words used by the normally peaceful leader, who looked for all diplomatic solutions before reverting, or even mentioning, open violence.

The room quested for a moment before the next question was served. “And what about Skywalker?” was blurted out.

Han quickly looked over at Leia to see her blink once. She had no delusions about what needed to be done, even if that meant turning on her brother to prevent Palpatine from assuming total control again.

No one had been able to determine whose side Luke was on. All they were left with were doubts. Han could make his own assumptions, think that the Kid was just playing a game, and in the end, he would switch allegiances, turning the tides, but now even the smuggler wasn’t sure if he could count on the Kid.

Left with uncertainty, there was only one solution.

Leia stepped beside Mon Mothma’s holo projection. “We have made provisions, if and when, Jedi Skywalker appears to have taken a position contrary to our own.” She said solemnly.

Only Han could see the quiver in her lip.

The room hushed with the revelation that the former Chancellor, the senator, the Rebellion leader, the princess, was endorsing the use of deadly force against her own brother if it warranted it. That’s how important this fight was to her.

Chewie rumbled something beside him.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” Han muttered back.

The rumbling in the room was coming back as things were starting to fall into perspective and the risks that others were willing to take to secure the freedom of the galaxy.

There were a group of Crinians who were huddled in close contact and seem to have elected someone to speak for them. Standing up, one came forward. “Senator, to summarize, we are under staffed and out-gunned? And our only chance of success rests on the possibility of a turn-coat Jedi who might have a change of heart?”

Half of the room growled; clearly Luke still had some supporters in the crowd who didn’t like the idea that a Jedi could anything but loyal to freedom.

Resentment was growing, and the room erupted in dialogue that crossed the space without concern for decorum; yelling and conjecture reigned.

Leia stepped up, raising her hands in the air, calling for the attention of the assembly and to bring it back to order.

Over the crowd, a siren suddenly wailed over the sounds of everything else.

Leia turned around to the command crew behind her, seeing what had brought about the concern. It could be a passing meteor that alerted the sensors, but probably not…
The room silenced itself with fear.

“Your Highness! We been found!” The Ensign called from over his shoulder, and the room gasped. “Approximately sixty ships approaching… freighter-class… off the port bow…with no signals!”

The room was holding its breath in unison for a brief second, before the hive of activity started. A mad dash was made to stations as shields went up and a defensive plan came into play.

The holos of Ackbar and Mon Mothma died immediately as they went into defensive action.

Madine went to a corner of the room as pilots from various former Republic wings followed his lead, preparing to head to their fighters.

Leia ran to the communication station to monitor the situation.

Without missing a beat, Han quickly joined her at her side. His eyes darted over the read-outs and sensors, as they all lit up.

From out of nowhere, dotted on the horizon, one after another, ships appeared and halted immediately before coming any closer to the resting Resistance fleet.

They kept coming, and stopping; three, four, maybe six at a time. Ships of every different style and standard… all with one major difference.

Han spotted it immediately, but kept it to himself, and stopping the panic in him. He reached out and touched Leia’s arm discreetly.

She looked over at him with and had to look twice to see that he was not in the same state as her or as anyone else in the room.

He winked, and she stopped her haste.

“We have a hailing signal!” The yell came from across the room.

“Patch them through!” She ordered the Ensign, turning to the holoprojector.

The room went dead silent, holding its collective breath.

She watched, her senses tingling and sparking wildly, but not in a panic, not reacting as this didn’t feel like a threat.

The screen crackled and sparked a few times before the transmission came through and the face formed in the bluish tint of the hovering projection.

Han tapped her arm again and directed her attention to the class of vehicle that just entered the system, and the unmistakable shape of a vehicle that they knew well.

Leia relaxed immediately, and shot a glare at her husband, just in case she couldn’t do it later.

“Greetings, Organa-Solo.” His voice was calm and passive.

Leia broke into a smile, but then went back to her appearance of passivity. “And to you too, Captain Karrde.” She said, letting the warmth be heard in her voice.

The smuggler boss serenely smiled, keeping his cool demeanor, and then sighed. “I heard that you were planning to throw a revolution without me, and I thought that just couldn’t be correct.”
Leia smirked; it would be hard to explain the nature of their relationship without revealing too much.
“I was under the presumption that you weren’t interested in such a party?” She quipped.

“It’s never been my wish, but I’d hate to be excluded… besides, once you get a taste for it… it’s hard to let it go.”

“Quite.” She said, watching the smuggler chief.

Talon Karrde looked past her and into the room of waiting Resistance, sensing it was time to state his purpose. “On behalf of the Smuggler’s Alliance, we are here to offer our services in your cause to reclaim Coruscant and reinstate the Republic Senate.” He announced. “Our ships, and resources are yours.”

There was a determination in his eyes. He had his own reason for wanting to join. One of his own was involved now, and it made perfect sense that he was willing to put his resources into getting back his second in command.

All in the room, and those aboard the other ships, started hailing each other, regrouping and to include those in the plan.

Freighters; well-gunned, well-shielded, easy to maneuver, and trained crews.

The gap was closed as far as fire-power was concerned.

Looking up at the projection, she smiled openly, feeling the hope in the room growing. Her husband came to stand beside her, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Did you know about this?” she murmured behind her.

If she could see him, Han cringed a bit, but then lost the pretense. “You left your codes out in the open… and I just happen to know a few people who know how to fight dirty.”

“You fight dirty.” She growled but took his hand and squeezed it.

Coming closer, he stood with her back at his chest. “I want what you want… you know this.” He said into her ear. “Besides… hey, it’s me!”

Leia turned to look up at his lopsided grin.

His hazel eyes turned somber, and knowing that the fate of the galaxy was in their hands again; the lives of their children were at risk, and all the lives of those they cared about. Whatever problems they had between them needed to be put aside, for now. “I love you.” He said soberly, knowing the risks.

Inhaling deeply, feeling his mood and the mood of the room. “I know.” She whispered.

Turning back to the projection. “Welcome, Captain Karrde… we are glad to have you.” She said louder, choosing her words carefully to still imply that these smugglers and traders were equal, but separate, entities. “Please come aboard so that we can elaborate the details with you and your associates.”

The smuggler chief smiled serenely before the transmission closed.

The fight was on.
TBC
**The Modification**

Chapter Summary

Quote: But they both knew the actuality of the situation; Luke would never take a knee, never truly refer to the other as ‘Master’, and never entirely yield to the whims of a Sith.

Characters: Luke, Emperor Palpatine

Chapter Notes

**

OMG! you poor guys must have thought that I've died and left the story undone... no, I wouldn't do that to you... but I think I'm getting story-fatigued...

In between a getting ready for con (which was a week ago... btw, if you ever want to go to an international con, may I suggest the Calgary Comic and Entertainment Expo?--very laid-back and chill con but lots to see and you wake up to mountains every morning!) and then I had the plague before the con and now still getting over that... I ABSOLUTELY promise that I won't abandon this story. It might take me a while to come up with updates but I will not leave you hanging.

Since, its 'FORCE WEEKEND' I'm going to try and give you the updates that you deserve....

In this corner, weighing less than you think, but clearly stronger than you can imagine... hailing from the great sovereign system of Naboo... The Master of Malevolence... The Personification of Pride... The Senator of Sinfulness... His Imperial Majesty... Darth Sidious himself... presenting: Emperor Sheev Palpatine!!! (the crowd goes wild... somebody has to)

And in this corner, I give you the underdog... weighing in with more strength than he thinks he has... hailing from the planet that is farthest away from the bright center of the galaxy... The Pilot of Perfection... The Finest of Farmboys... The Jedi of Justice... (not to mention a fine piece of ass)...his noble and self-sacrificing self... the one and only... Jedi Knight Luke Skywalker!!!! (the crowd loses it!)

Let's getting ready to R-R-Rumble!!!

**

Imperial Palace: Byss
The hallways and corridors were devoid of life. No bustle, no clamoring public, but still an eerie echo persisted in the baronial passages in the palace, of the former activity, marked by dark desires and erratic energy.

The Emperor had sent them all away, preparing for His upcoming voyage to the Capital of the galaxy in the coming days. Reluctantly, they obeyed the order, returned to their home worlds only to tighten their own control over those who would be casting the vote.

Answering a summons, Luke could leave his quarters, unescorted. Still, he was still under supervision, his movements were watched and monitored; sentinel droids were posted in the hallways at the joining corridors. But artificial intelligence had its limitations, unable to predict erratic behavior, unable to tap into a mind, and unable to read the Force.

His latest outburst had been seemingly forgiven. But still, there was no ‘normal’ to return to. Life in the palace was contrived for a purpose and only Palpatine knew the full outcome as His will deemed it so.

It was merely a precaution, and a warning.

Luke could estimate that perhaps he wasn’t as transparent to the Emperor as he originally believed, if Palpatine was taking these provisions.

He had decided to test the limits of the nefarious leader. He had spent the past several days reaching out and touching the Dark Power, stretching his limits, testing his strength, only to see if Palpatine would respond with ire and reprimand.

None came.

However, the aftermath was the cost to his soul; the pit inside him was deepening, becoming vacuous, cavernous. He could feel the ache after touching the essence inside himself that harbored all of his anger and resentment. And there were so many sources of late to draw from; the greed and underhanded activity of the senate and the politicians, his Master and captor, and the unresolved hatred that continued to thrive towards his father.

Looking at his own reflection, Luke could only see more and more the similarities that cursed both father and son, weighted like the black cloak that graced his shoulders, growing heavier by the day. In an influx of anger, he had made the mirror break, come crashing to the ground in his chamber, standing amongst the plexi-shards and thinking nothing more than the cleaning droids now served a purpose.

A stray thought crossed his mind. At what point am I no longer a Jedi? Catching his appearance in the scattered pieces, he questioned, Dark Jedi? Is that what I am?

In that moment, he let his eyes flutter close, feeling the singe in them, holding it in check, waiting to sense the Emperor’s wrath. Instead, he could feel both the pleasure and the envy, at a pupil who ventured on their own. Darth Sidious would have craved his student’s capabilities in every facet.

Stranger yet, he was allowed to keep his lightsaber with him. Luke supposed it was another test to his limits; a macabre form of torture to see how consumed the Jedi was, to see if he would take his own life over his actions, or would he thirst to live, for his own vanity.

Luke had another objective, though, and She was in the adjoining room. He could sense Mara; her comings and goings. Her aura was strong, but her spirit was weak, tiring under the burden of maintaining her poise, her role, her guise. The shadow of sadness followed her.
His temper would graduate when he thought of her presence being stronger than he could recall, probably enhanced by *the thing* growing inside her.

The crescendo would die down, and he’d be left with remorse once again, left wanting to hold her and comfort her in some manner; finding a source of Light briefly, then fading. As her experience differed from his, it must have been taking its toll.

More than anything, Luke longed to see her.

He had days to reflect on his behavior towards her, and his feelings. Placing the blame for all that she had encountered, all the she was feeling now, squarely on his own shoulders.

When she had released him from his bonds, from the containment field, he had felt her resignation at where she had been placed, and she wasn’t fighting against it any longer.

Luke felt her desolation, like a stab in her heart, her apathy to let things progress around her as if it had become normal to her, as it once had.

It would be impossible to apologize to her now, even if he could. There would be no words that could express the level that he needed.

There was still the lingering doubt that she was part of the game being played on him, and it gnawed at him in those moments when both trains of thoughts would collide; the darkness that sought his revenge and his emotions that wanted to wrap her in his protective love.

Luke exhaled, keeping his stride in a studious pace, walking towards his duty for the day.

He had chosen his black Jedi ensemble that he wore for his first encounter with the Emperor; it always solicited one raised eye brow from the other man. A quiet dig at a memory when Light had conquered evil. The distinct rejection of the grandeur offered to him, refusing any of the regal garments that had been procured.

Footsteps that were heard were his own, and distracting, keeping a tempo that harkened to the militaristic training that he had, in time with his own dignity that remained.

A spike came in his senses, forcing his head to look up and take in his surroundings.

Across the adjacent hall, Luke caught the edge of movement. A blur. As he came to cross the corridor, travelling in his own direction, he saw *her*.

Escorted by a Red Guard, she was oblivious to him, lost in her own thoughts. From afar, she still made his heart ache; a beautiful doll, dressed up to perfection, her copper hair coiffed, and her frame draped in the darkest midnight blue.

Her hands were held in front of her, resting over her mid-section, trying to conceal the slight bump that only he noticed.

*Mara*, his mind called, instantaneously, without consent, but for a moment with deep unabated longing.

She paused, then looked up and around as if sensing his presence, seeing him.

Even at this distance, Luke saw the concern on her face when she caught sight of him. He slowed his pace as he continued his walk but let his eyes roll shut.
For only a moment, he reached out and sent her the memory of a tender embrace between them; maybe on one of their mornings together, wrapped in each other’s arms, a warm stream of light caressing both of them, starched sheets covered their bodies, a quiet moment as her velvet lips pressed to his.

Fleeting, and it was gone as she was ushered in one direction, and he intently headed in another.

Luke opened his eyes, hardened his gaze and kept walking; his emotions, wanting to recapture what they had, but still ambivalent towards her, in general.

He had exited the corridor, not stopping. Capriciously, he dared to form a tight grin.

No doubt that this mild interaction was ordained. The Emperor was without guile and would stop at nothing to turn the screw a little tighter.

Putting Mara at an arm’s distance away when lately Luke’s thoughts had been of her, was a tactic that was presupposed and presumptuous to elicit a response.

One more turn en route, and Luke arrived at his destination ahead of the Emperor.

The room was no less ominous than it was when he had sparred with Mara after she had arrived on Byss. He walked into the middle of the marble room. Although, tomb could be just as good as a descriptor.

It was hollow, with its rust-coloured walls, and veins that dripped down from the ceiling. It would be a grand room if it wasn’t decorated with a feeling of foreboding as well.

Luke regarded the light sources and recalled how he shut them down as he sparred with Mara. The sconces were old-fashion, some sort of bronzed metal, tarnished by age, casting triangular beams down. They provided very little light and only warned that darkness wasn’t far away.

That day, he was testing her limits, for his amusement, hoping she would fight back, but she had refused, simply defending herself. It was as if her instincts and personality had been washed away. In truth, they had been induced and subdued by the Emperor’s will, keeping her in a demeanor that was not her own. Much like the implant that used to feed her anxious behavior, artificially modifying her, prior to its removal.

The last moment, he felt his emotions spike; angry at the Emperor for changing her when he realized it, angry with her for allowing it and not fighting back. And then, disappointed to have wasted their precious time together.

He had loved to spar with her. Her growing abilities came close to matching is own. He loved the look in her eyes; determined and strong, and sometimes, beautifully mischievous.

But on that day – no, there had been no spark in her eyes, no fight in her.

He had pinned her to his chest, wavering the lightsaber under her, wanting that posture to ignite her yearning with his proximity, wanting her to respond with the vigor that he so admired in her. But she only felt fear. The joy between them was missing.

He sighed, releasing the tension at the memory, but still feeling uneasy about being in this room. Since arriving on Byss, this was the room that Sidious would meet with him, luring him ever-so closer and down the Dark path.

Today would be no different, Luke sensed.
The storm, that was Palpatine, met the ebb and flow that crashed, and then rescinded. One day the Dark Lord was calm and subdued. The next, volatile and hungrier than before.

It was the constant thought that dwelled for all His motives; Control. His mind screamed it. His actions beckon for a longer reach for it. If the Emperor had control of those around Him, and of events, then He would have Power… and it was the Power that drove Him ever forward.

There were obstacles that frustrated Him even more than those things that lurked outside His control; the errant Jedi in his midst, the will of the galaxy, the servant who could see all the chaos that would break His reign.

From behind Luke’s shoulder, he could feel the presence before he saw the shadow descend and lengthen across the floor, announcing Palpatine’s arrival.

Luke turned to acknowledge the other’s presence, bowing slightly, but less than he would if he was attending court; there was no deception of rank here. Palpatine knew that the Jedi was only being civil and nothing more; there was no need for falsehoods or pretension.

With one solemn nod, The Emperor returned the unspoken greeting.

It was breaking protocol and all royal functions. Even Vader descended to a knee and cowered before his Master in private with no audience.

The term ‘Master’ had only been given to Sidious in the presence of others, begrudgingly, and His orders were never questioned. But they both knew the actuality of the situation; Luke would never take a knee, never truly refer to the other as ‘Master’, and never entirely yield to the whims of a Sith.

It was something that Palpatine was willing to overlook due to the return that Luke’s reputation lent to Him.

There, in the back of Luke’s mind, was the reason that he was able to restrain himself, towards the Emperor, at least.

The Emperor may have been able to sense him, experimenting with the Dark Powers, since returning from the Unknown Regions, but He could never have guested the facets that Luke had been studying. All the materials on Darth Plagueis’s writings were kept on Luke’s person at all times; the small data disk fit nicely into the opening of a hidden seam- a lesson learned from the destruction of the pendant that he had given Mara; hiding was useless.

Both men faced each other, paces apart, with the energy in the room starting its climb.

Regarding the new form of the Emperor, only weeks old, His skin looked taunt and stretched across high cheek bones, angled nose and refined brow. In this state, His hazel eyes hid their malevolence until He desired the change.

The body may have been new, but it still had the appearance of a sickly colour. A random thought as to how He was able to deceive so many for so long. His light auburn hair was styled sleekly accentuating all the sharp contours.

Dressed in regal fashion, Palpatine came further into the room. “Skywalker.” He seethed. “I see that you have recovered from your episode.”

A Jedi still had ingrained in them not to react to a simple barb, despite its leanings. “I have.” Luke answered dispassionately. His cool blue eyes stayed astute.
“Good.” Palpatine said succinctly; his eyes rounding, grin like that of a nexxu. “As you have received a new demeanor, then I must assess my new form.” He took several glides into the room. “I wish to test this new body. I desire that you humor My aptitude. – I have yet to meet one so worthy of the trial.”

Standing his ground, Luke didn’t move but still watched, and felt the energy starting to gain momentum as the room began to hum. He could sense what was being asked of him. The Emperor had not engaged him in a battle fully or outwardly so, just a battle of wills more-over, and not truly matched. It was a masterful play where he could never assess the Emperor’s full range of power because He never revealed it.

“Do you know that I once battled Master Yoda?” Palpatine said off-handedly, walking over to a sideboard table and removing His deep-crimson cloak.

The Jedi shook his head silently, watching, waiting for the viper to strike.

Palpatine looked over His shoulder, regarding the younger man. “It’s true.” He said, turning, letting His mouth tug in the corners, forming a satisfied sneer.

The Emperor levelled one of His fingers subtly, gracefully, and the doors closed immediately to the room, making the panes shutter.

“Although, given that neither one of us was fully defeated; one might call that a draw.” Palpatine walked casually over to the side of the room, before turning to His opponent. “However, given the fact that the Jedi abandoned the senate and their duty, then it can also be fully assumed that, I won.” He raised an eyebrow condescendingly.


As if He heard the other man, Palpatine’s eyes narrowed and brow lowered.

Without warning, the Force snapped, and the Emperor’s eyes turned feverish-orange, the hilt of a lightsaber appeared in his hand, and the red blade ignited with the sharp sound, _whoosh-fizz._

Unwavering, the Jedi waited to respond. Regardless of the side of the Force that he called on, his nature was not to react until necessary, not to draw his weapon until needed. Luke’s muscles tightened, preparing.

Against the cold, the most-nominal sounds could be heard; even the shifting of garments sounded like thunder when senses were fine-tuned.

In the silence, the battle of wills paused as the Force reared in gestation.

Then, with an inhuman bellow, He attacked. Palpatine leapt from his stance towards Luke.

The rapid sounds and actions sparked; the snap-hiss as the green blade came to life, the flap of the lux fabric of the Emperor’s garb with movement, culminating in the clash of the two blades.

A quick parry, and then they were locked against each other.

The snarl of Palpatine bearing down on the Jedi, forcing His weight to tower over the other man, peering over the blades to see if He was able to illicit a desired response and revenge.

Determination did not serve Dark or Light, so having it in Luke’s arsenal would not rip his soul. And the question arose quickly in his mind if the Emperor was as truly skilled as he believed himself to
With a side-kick to his opponent, Luke broke the lock, and slashed up and down with unmatched speed so that Palpatine needed to take a few paces back as the Jedi gained ground.

The Emperor recovered, backing away in an open stance, blade at the ready. “Do you not feel the call?” He asked, chiding. “How badly do you want to defeat Me?”

Luke resisted the urge to attack, gripping his saber two-handedly in front of him. He breathed deeply, fighting back the feeling to unleash his anger. “Not so much as to give in to Your wants.” He replied smoothly.

Again, the incursion came; wildly, and appearing to be out of control.

The sabers clashed, hissing and spitting their discharge. Fury and ferocity controlled the pace as a deranged dance took place.

“No?” Palpatine said above the sounds. “And what do you believe are My wants?”

The Emperor made some impromptu maneuvers, unexpected and unorthodox from any fighting style, more-random and untrained than Luke could anticipate, but he responded defensively in kind.

“You want me to fully submit to the Darkside.” Luke replied in strong confidence. “…to fully become a Sith… Now that you’ve lost your apprentice.”

He expected the Emperor to retaliate immediately, but instead He laughed openly.

“Oh, I assure you, Jedi Skywalker that my motives would never be that visible… even if you were able to have the same insight as my Hand.” Palpatine gleamed. “You could never see My plans unless that was what I wanted.”

Despite the tense air, the Emperor’s sense seemed playful, teasing, even under the goading.

The fight had found its pace; strikes and lances tested skill but not fueled as it should be.

“No, you see, I was merely sporting with you.” The Emperor smiled on His side of His blade. “Court-life had become stagnant and I longed for the upheaval and zeal that only the drama of vindication could provide.”

The red blade struck several blows in succession, forcing Luke back but not yielding.

“It would have only been a benefit to Me if you had killed her in anger, allowing yourself to submit to the Darkness.”

Luke’s stomach clenched; sickened that he had been, in fact, so close to killing Mara, and not thinking, acting in madness, killing the child inside her, and then, acting on vengeance when he killed Sedriss. His senses were ripe for fully turning, teetering on the edge of the same fate as his father.

He had questioned himself in the days since then, what had made him stop and not kill her. In meditation, he found the answer, granted a vision of the fear in her eyes as she looked at him, regarded the monster in the making. It was just enough to spare her and direct his anger at the proper source.

The Emperor advanced again, fast-paced, far-reaching out in front of himself, Luke noticed without
taking advantage of it. Instead, he chose to respond by appearing to be caught off-caught, flipping to avoid the hits.

“I could have found a replacement, if the situation warranted it.” Palpatine said flippantly, smirking at the movement of the other man. “There are always others waiting to serve… and without question.”

It was another barb, driving to find a root in the Jedi’s nerves. It wasn’t incentive enough to lash out, if Luke felt that it was another threat on Mara.

But now, she carried His form; a genetic replica of the Emperor, from the original source. She was precious now, treasured and invaluable. Palpatine would never risk her survival. Hence, why He was keeping them apart, in case his volatile Jedi should react negatively.

“You’ve hinted at that before.” Luke said, still invested in scrutinizing where the next attack would come from. “But, if those resources were so valuable to You, then You would have used them before now.” He quipped back.

This time, the Jedi attacked, swinging precise strokes, backing the Emperor from gaining advancement.

He noted that Palpatine seemed to lack the physical rebuttal that Luke had trained for; no jumps or flips, but the sense that there could be. However, this new body seemed to be accustomed to sparring and was well-prepared for it. Perhaps muscle memory was able to transcend with the transfer of spirit?

The Force was swirling between the two foes, but not searing in a fit; it was controlled and tight.

“You still want something from me.” Luke said blankly, knowing it was true.

In his mind, the thought that the general public had never seen the Emperor fight occurred to him; an advantage to those who were unable to esteem it. Even during their encounter on the Death Star, the Emperor’s talent for electro-static discharge was a surprise… an almost lethal surprise. The Emperor was the keeper of secrets.

This enthusiasm from the younger man irritated the reborn clone; showing a defiant side. With vigor, Palpatine launched another attack, rebounding from a side abutment in the marble, slashing his blade down, bearing his teeth.

“I do.” The Emperor declared. “Your usefulness is not to be undone, yet.”

Luke circled to counter the attack, striking where he needed to with his blade of emerald fire.

The pace of the encounter was unnerving, unlike any other fight that he had before. The energy in the room was building and he could sense that Palpatine was holding back.

“Tell me, what is it that you are resisting when you refuse to give into your feelings?” It was surprising to see Palpatine’s malicious pause for the sake of true curiosity. “What is it that keeps you from truly turning?” He said quietly, narrowing His gaze.

The sabers clashed slowly, mimicking repetition in stances and postures, sizzling and hissing spits when they met.

Luke stayed silent, letting the Emperor thoughts hang in the air between them, but his eyes locked onto the glare of the evil creature.
“Is it your vanity Jedi Skywalker? - Are you too vane to let one man get the better of you?” Palpatine whispered, almost to Himself. “I’ve felt your conscience and how it wavers.” He said louder. “And to why you can’t look beyond yourself in the moment.”

Breaking the fight, Luke stepped back, still holding his saber prepared. His nerves felt spiked, sensitive, and raw; ready to defend them if he needed to.

“You are closer to the edge then you thought you could be; your constant self-examination is why you can’t move past, either returning to the Light or submerging in the Dark.” The Emperor proclaimed with quiet triumph. “Self-interest is the antithesis of the Dark Side… the beginning of the climb to greatness and then the assault to glory.” His eyes flamed.

The blades clashed and locked… in a stalemate.

Luke felt it, the realization that he had been too self-involved of late; considering himself in the fray, *his inner turmoil*, and not the greater impact. He nodded imperceptivity, rationalizing it.

The Force had been mandated to stay in the median, not taking sides in this battle, not favoring one over another.

The sabers fizzled in unison, signifying their cohesion in the tempest.

“My return to Coruscant.” Palpatine announced as He broke His stance, pulling back. “I require your presence and your compliance as I regain control of the senate.”

“And of the galaxy.” Luke added, if not somewhat snidely.

Palpatine narrowed his eyes, not enjoying the oversight in His words. He clashed again, the Jedi volleyed away, much to His displeasure. But this was not what He was after; He wanted and craved the confrontation, so He pursued.

“And of the galaxy.” The Emperor echoed, reluctantly. He paused, sensing that the Jedi would respond if provoked. “And of your Rebel friends.”

The jibe worked, and Luke felt the prang at the mere mention of those who he knew were going to work against any efforts made by the Emperor. It was just the pause that He needed; the red saber slashed… and missed.

Luke deflected the glance with ease, and then parried the next blow too.

“It would be a shame if they spoiled My plans for uniformity… and peace.” Palpatine scorned. “It would be a shame if you aided them.”

The room became darker as the sconces flickered, some cutting off their sources of light.

“It would be a greater shame if I had to destroy what you loved in retribution for any *altercations* of My plans and observances.” The Emperor hissed menacingly.

There; there was the threat that Luke was waiting for. But unlike the battle on the Death Star, he chose to wait to respond. Words were not actions; the future was in motion. He responded only by blocking the strikes that came his way.

“And what’s not to love?” Palpatine goaded. “A sister… a man as close as a brother… *their children*… your friends as you relate to as family, as well.” He sighed languidly. “All eviscerated if you do not heed to careful observance of your actions.”
Luke blinked rapidly, choking down the rage inside him. Choosing to reply and wordlessly remind the older man of who was the skilled Jedi; switching his style, showing that he had gained the knowledge past the mundane.

The strikes came fast, cunning and deliberate. The green blade moved with precision, slicing the air quickly.

Palpatine frowned, not expecting the change up. He danced to the side, sweeping strokes with the red blade when He should have stayed hard and locked blades as a counter initiative.

For the first time, Luke saw a glimpse of fear in the other man, and just as quickly as the expression appeared, it morphed into something dangerous.

“And what about her?” Palpatine seethed, teeth glowing from the red blade reflected. “We cannot forget about her… your reason for staying, is she not?” He mocked a frown. “Her life in payment for your disobedience?”

Luke could feel the burn coming in his eyes- he always felt it there first before his emotions would respond. Inhaling, he pushed the feelings away. These were still just words, not actions.

The Emperor enjoyed it when He believed that he had the upper hand, so Luke backed away, en guard for any tricks.

Palpatine paced in His side of the room; His strides revealing His growing impatience that He had not garnered the eruption from the Jedi that He wanted.

Again, the Force seemed dissatisfied; Darkness had yet to be quenched. Instead of coiling, it was growing, billowing like a storm cloud on the horizon. The essence was the mood, but the energy was dwindling, declaring that this battle must, and would, end.

Luke took the chance to calm his mixed feelings, keeping his thoughts to himself, sensing the on-coming apex.

This mulling of tides would not do. The only warning was a low-key growl before Palpatine attacked, with no stylized movements other than to release fury.

The sabers fizzled against each other throwing their voltaic echo about the room.

Master and servant met face to face as blades locked.

Even with a younger face, the contours of the Emperor’s visage showed where ridges, rippled with rife, would soon emerge.

At this close a distance, Luke watched the other man’s red eyes, listened to His breathing, concentrated on His bared teeth as they were locked in battle.

It shouldn’t be unexpected, to find themselves in this position now. Everything was planned by the Emperor’s will; even to the minutest of details, this very moment, a test of strength, an examination of perseverance.

In his mind, the calm called, whispered, touching on the fringes, asking to be called upon; but Luke refused.

Instead, he flickered his eyes, calling on an ephemeral emotion that Palpatine could instilled in him; loathing, anger, hatred.
In a burst of muscular energy, Luke pushed the aggressor away from him.

Palpatine responded with a stagger and turned swiftly to flourish his blade and return to an attack position, as his grand robes followed suit, and snarled.

It was time for this fight to come to an end.

The green blade slashed with repetitive quick strokes, finding its mark and beleaguering the red blade fought to keep upright.

The Emperor seemed surprised that the Jedi fought so aggressively; He would have been pleased, but He was not as it was apparent that youth could still have an advantage… and skill. But rage; rage could surpass youth, if given a chance.

So far, the fight had lacked the physical attacks that could prevail; only maneuvering to avoid contact. But the time for decorum was over. To fight aggression required aggression.

Without warning, Palpatine sprang towards Luke, bellowing as He came. Before He landed, He was met with a swift kick to the gut, sending Him sprawling, and scurrying away as the Jedi advanced.

Luke stood above Him, with his blade prepared but not raised.

Palpatine looked up at him; His eyes flamed deep and hard.

Luke took two steps back and realized that he had shown his strength. Just as he had always been told- he had the power to defeat the Emperor.

It was irreversible. Now, they both knew who would have an upper hand in a fight of pure power.

From the hard ground, Palpatine smoothly resumed to his full height. He should have been defeated, should have feared the other man, but instead he snarled.

“Good…good, Young Skywalker.” He sneered. He took a few steps, looking as though he was pacing, but really separating them in distance. “And now, I believe its time for you to return to the Light… to find your path again…as Jedi….”

He backed away, bringing his blade down; Luke stared, shocked at the Emperor.

Palpatine raised His hand in the direction of the other man and waved it in a passing gesture. “I released you from your servitude.” He said in a royal manner.

Luke flinched as he felt the touch of the Dark Master’s mind touch; as if something had lifted, but not gone.

“I promised you as much when first you joined Me.” The Emperor hissed. “Your free-will.”

Nodding, Luke backed farther away, sensing it might be a trick, a deception that asked for trust and begged for the naïve to believe. He narrowed his eyes, still feeling the burn in them from touching the Dark senses that he needed in the moment.

It was convenient; the Dark side had provided him the power that he craved. Now, the Emperor was offering his emotional freedom too, no longer feeling it necessary for Luke to share the draw to the same power.

“I need you to be the Jedi that those acknowledge and respect, in the face of the galaxy and the senate.” Palpatine stated, not vanquished, not the loser in this battle.
The suspicion started to grow in Luke with the question, ‘why?’ in his mind.

“They need to see you as the savior… the glorious son… returned to save them all.” The Emperor said. “And I need… the Master… to take his place… for balance.” He said with a serene smile.

It was like a grating on his nerves, hearing the Emperor, the words of the unscrupulous, the mocking of the degenerate, speaking of a nature of what He knew not; Palpatine was incapable of ever knowing or understanding the nature of the Force that called for peace, compassion, justice and self-sacrifice. It was foreign to Him.

Luke backed up again and breathed hard. Still with silence, he didn’t respond, agreeing or acknowledging that he was willing to return to the Light.

Gladly, he would have gone back. Joyously, he would be willing to touch that power again. If only to clear his soul, to release the feelings that engulfed him.

But…

He needed the Darkness now.

And, there was the trap.

It wasn’t going to be a simple lightsaber fight or a show of force that would conquer his greatest enemy.

The thoughts, skills and deeds that were needed to ensure that Palpatine could never assume another clone body, or any other form, required the call of the Darkside.

No action could be as manipulative, so greedy, so self-serving as to continue a life long-past your natural expected form. It was the simple base for the Darkside, touching on all the dogma as passion that thrived for it.

Luke felt the twist in his gut.

He’s got you, his mind said with self-reprimand, without examining the thought immediately.

Relaxing his shoulders and calling off his defensive pose. He closed his saber down and placed it on his belt.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Luke responded by bowing, reverting to the title that Palpatine assumed, leaving the title of ‘Master’ behind- which he had used flippantly and in passing, never truly acquiring the role of apprentice.

The Emperor nodded once, accepting the moniker, and waved the other man away.

He turned to leave. The doors opened for Luke’s will and closed behind him as he went back to his room to contemplate this interaction, just a Jedi would reflect on it.

The empty halls allowed for his thoughts to start.

He’s got you… you’re trapped now… He knows something…

Enveloped, Luke tried to shake this feeling now. He was indeed trapped.

Darth Plagueis had declared that no one could cheat death and call on the Light… these types of deeds had to be done in the mire of the Dark.
A little longer, he told his mind and his soul, knowing that in the Light was where he belonged. Just a little longer.

He had the power, and the knowledge. Now, he needed the opportunity.

TBC
The Solicitation

Chapter Summary

Quote: And until she either acted upon her feelings or stopped carrying the thing that was most needful to Him, she was deemed safe, for the time being.

Characters: Mara, Emperor Palpatine

**

Chapter Notes

I got nothing.... I need to get this story going... and quite frankly, I've made you wait enough... I'm going to go and answer my comments that I've been rudely ignoring (but not really ignoring-- seriously, they've been a great help to motivate me to keep writing... once again, I've gone too far ahead in this story, in my brain, and I just want it to finally get to the big moment... yes it's coming!)

This is Mara's turn to fight with Palpatine... but does she have the will or the strength now?

Byss: Imperial Palace, The Emperor’s private quarters

In the dim light of the room she felt very small, like she did as a child. But then, at that time, she had once enjoyed the grandeur, the immense feeling like she was part of something bigger. Now? --- now…

“Master” she addressed him solemnly. Mara dipped at the knee and bowed her head inside the threshold of His private quarters.

This was new to her, being in this part of the palace; she had yet to be granted access here. Although, it was foreign, this was not uncommon. She had been summoned to His private quarters on the palace on Coruscant many times- her orders given in private with no record that they, or she, had been dispatched.

The room was dark, but lush, black, gray and clouded with oxblood accents, implying the regality. It was a rouse. Unlike her personal quarters, they appeared to have the necessities of living, but His quarters lacked a personal touch, serving only to breach the distance and difference between those who could know of its existence, and those who actually saw it.

In short, there was no bed, or any other evidence that “living” went on in this room. And Mara remembered the special precautions that were taken on Coruscant to ensure the safety of the Emperor from the Rebel Scum.

Each night, He would enter a non-descript pod and hover in the atmosphere until the proper time in
the day-cycle and return to the palace. No assassin would be able to locate Him when they thought that He would be at His most vulnerable.

Looking around the room, she only saw few objects that might be considered personal; a gilded puzzle box, jeweled and presented in ceremony; a statuette of the Emperor, carved from a rare and semi-precious stone, so fine that she could see her reflection in it.

Mara tilted her head, seeing an empty pedestal; a carved base with a plexi clear dome sat almost in the center of the room. It was out of place amongst the other objects d’art, looking as if it was waiting to house a treasured gift not-yet given.

In the corner rested His meditation pod; yes, she was familiar with that item in particular… and feared it.

His back was to her, reclined in a smaller throne. Palpatine poured over His holoprojector, displaying what appeared to be a map of the terrain of Coruscant; the planet stretched out showing all of it facets.

He sat back, bringing His fingertips together, contemplating, narrowing His gaze until He gestured at her, acknowledging her, but not breaking His concentration.

Mara sensed, rather than saw, her reprieve to relax her stance. She stood at the back of the room and didn’t approach. She didn’t feel welcomed to do so.

The throne turned slightly in her direction.

The Emperor paused and looked up at her. His eyes appeared green at this vantage point, and subdued, but she had also seen Him morph into all sorts of appearances over the course of her life.

He gestured again, motioning her forward, and then went back to looking at the map.

“It appears that the Rebels are massing their ships and are planning an attack upon my return to the Senate.” Palpatine said calmly, the air of confidence in His words. “According to my sources, they plan to come in through the lowlands first, through the smaller cities. Then, converge on the Capital with their ground forces.”

She inhaled, listening for any tone or sense that couldn’t be said. Her attunement in the Force told her that He found these tactics amusing, like it was a performance, put on for His entertainment.

As if hearing her thoughts, Palpatine looked up at her; His eyes darkened to an orange hue. “Of course, your Rebel friends will be with them.” His lip twitched, almost forming a smile. “Organa-Solo, no doubt. Only she would be so bold as to launch an interception.”

Mara stood silent and blinked, holding back the swallow that was in her throat.

Her mind had been dwelling on those that she had considered friends, until recently, and to what ends a friendship would entail. It still boggled her mind that she was able to have them, and now care and worry for them, and their outcome.

Palpatine paused and regarded her for a moment. “What do you feel for them, I wonder?” He said out-loud, rhetorically. “You used to take no pity on them, and their antics.” He leaned on the arm-rest of the chair and drummed his fingers with his opposite hand, watching her. “You used to have such loathing for their troublesome ventures… it was almost fanatic.”

He leaned in, almost sitting up. “But then, I don’t think I could have stomached another fanatic in my
constant presence… there were so many of them.” The Emperor smiled serenely. “No, you were loyal… but controlled… ruthless and attentive. It was you and your astute observations that I admired. I don’t think you would have been as effective if you had let your emotions get the better of you.”

A casual snort, and he looked away. “Yes, your passion was elsewhere, I think. You had distain, but not hatred, for them.”

His resting hand gestured her further.

Mara paused but a moment, lost in her memories with His words, but then remembering herself and where she was at present. In her haste to meet this summons, she hadn’t thought about why she had been called.

There could have been so many reasons, but the ones that sat clearly, unobstructed, in her mind were the ones that relied on the fact she was plotting her escape, Luke’s escape, and the eventual demise of the Emperor. There was no point to hide it either. It was just another game to Him, to see how long she would last, to see if she would continue to be useful to Him.

And until she either acted upon her feelings or stopped carrying the thing that was most needful to Him, she was deemed safe, for the time being.

“So,” Palpatine grinned. “… where do you believe they will make their attack, My Hand?” He sneered, knowing that she was in a precarious situation.

Mara inhaled, preparing herself. She glanced over at Him, meeting His eyes, unafraid as she used to be when she addressed Him.

“They will try for a diversion first in the Senate Chamber.” She said casually. “They will assume that Your forces will be sent there to protect You and Your entourage. And then, they will take the secret passage ways in order to gain closer access to You, Master.”

He gleamed, eyes turning a mercurial amber hue. “Go on…” Palpatine quietly ordered.

“Inside the palace, troops should be stationed in the smaller antechambers along the interior hallways…” Mara stood firmly, knowing that she had been trained for such a circumstance. “The Rebels will no doubt use an assault team… or several assault teams, to come within striking distance.”

“To do what?… precisely?” He snarled, knowing the outcome as well as she.

“To try to assassinate You, Master.” She finished confidently, not shying away from the truth.

For a moment, He looked at her, quietly.

She could feel the touch on her mind as it skulked in the recesses of her senses.

</ And how do you feel about such a thing? /> He asked through the Force; His voice seductively luring as it tried to burrow into her senses as it once had.

Mara rolled her eyes and reached back. It felt unnatural as it once had with Skywalker, but it also felt like it had the potential to be a stronger than it ever had. <<They are fools to choose such an obvious tactic.>> She sent back. <<So obvious that there must be another plan in motion, as well.>>

Surprisingly, Palpatine reared back and openly cackled into the room. “Yes! … yes… precisely yes.”
He lisped. “And that is why you would make a fine successor.” His hands clasped together appraisingly.

She lowered her eyes, in the appearance to be grateful of the compliment.

The idea had been tossed around so much so of late, that she had nothing but indifference to hearing that He was planning on a successor. It was nothing more that palace gossip or mumbling that she had caught wisps of; either putting her, Pestage, or Skywalker in play, if they should be needed.

His celebration ended abruptly. “This does not please you.” Palpatine said curtly, waiting on her reaction.

Whether it was her realization that she was only going to be expendable, or possibly her loss of hope, Mara looked up and didn’t avoid the otherwise rhetorical statement. “No, it doesn’t.” She said quietly, but boldly.

She blinked rapidly, as if a part of her mind knew that she was skating along a sharp edge. But then, a wave washed over her, like the chill of the first fall of a cold rain, and then rescinded.

Closing her eyes slowly, she what had cause the icy stroke. It wasn’t the touch of the Emperor, nor any other fully-living Force-presence.

She raised her hand and placed it on her lowered abdomen, calming the presence inside her, willing the unconscious thing to coalesce.

Palpatine’s sly eyes watched her action, and raised one eyebrow.

Mara could pretend to anyone else that nothing had occurred, but she knew better. “It senses when You are near, Master.” She said, knowing it might be true, and might not; there was no way to tell, but it was a simple correlation that He would find compelling.

“Does it?” His eyes came alive and He leaned forward. “Anything else?” He asked intently.

“No Master.” She said quickly, looking down.

Palpatine leaned back into His chair. “Pity. The end of your first trimester and it didn’t seem to inconvenience you, though.”

Mara nodded, keeping her eyes where they were.

The Emperor paused; she could have sworn that it was His nature to continue but He didn’t.

The room was quiet, deathly quiet, but there was a tide on the way. She could feel the energy massing, the touch of the Force building, reaching on the fringes of the walls encircling her, Him, them.

Then, the silence broke.

“Do you remember coming to my private quarters on Coruscant?” Palpatine asked in a voice above a whisper.

“Yes.” She said, equally quiet.

“What do you remember of those days?” He asked, raising up his voice but still under normal volume.
Mara looked up at Him, her eyes went blank, going back into the past, and letting her mouth flow with words. “You trained me, in a room just like this one.” She inhaled as her eyes glanced over at the meditation pod, and then back at Him. “Trained me in the ways of the Force. Trained me to use my powers for You.” She blinked dispassionately. “Taught me that my powers came from You.”

She blinked again, and then just stared past Him, avoided His eyes, knowing that He might see the resentment in her soul, if He did.

Her life had been a lie; the first lie that she had been told was that her gifts in the Force were gifts from Him, and not of her own.

He didn’t seem phased that she had caught His lie. Palpatine only smirked, then relaxed. “I told you those things so that you could achieve more.” He explained. “You had been instilled that your strength in the Force was limited; things that you should not reach for… things that you were denied learning.”

“If I didn’t tell you that you leaned on My powers, you would have never progressed past moving stones.” He said; his eyes almost sympathetic.

“Tell me…” Palpatine paused, still in a casual manner. “What did you feel when I trained you?” His voice was subdued and calm.

She could sense His true curiosity behind His question, although His motive wasn’t clear.

Mara swallowed, clearing her throat before she spoke. She looked down at her feet, and said. “I felt special… allowed to know things that others weren’t.”

She had spent the first five years after Endor remembering her life as golden days, and the almost two years after that, after Skywalker had pulled the wool from off her eyes, to examine how she felt about it.

He stayed quiet. When she looked up, His head was tilted off to the side, taking pity of her for her misconception. Palpatine nodded slowly. “And you were… and still are.” He said solemnly. “None but you could have been trained so well as to achieve the things that you achieved, saw the things that you saw, and gained the strength that you gained.”

“It was through My training that made those things possible for you.” He added.

Without warning, she felt it inside her, the wave of anger come through her, sharp like a cold burst of air. But she held it back, not reacting and holding it in place, and kept quiet.

“I treasured those times.” Palpatine said unguardedly.

Mara looked at Him sharply, surprised that He was saying such things.

“It was at a time in My life when things had become stagnant for Me, with little else to master in the Force.” His red pupils looked to her, graciously. “And a new mind, that I discovered, so raw and fresh… with no impediments to learning to get in the way. A new spirit, so full of potential, so wonderous that I only had to offer the fruit and they would gladly take it.”

She blinked as an image intruded her mind; the memory of the fruit that he had offered to her as child… in the garden… of her home… her real home… from the memory that she had once shown to Luke.

“Those times, training you, one on one, were some of My most fulfilling times that I have ever
shared with any of my apprentices.” The Emperor’s voice sounded passive, recalling.

“Or Hands.” She snarled lowly. Mara didn’t catch herself before she let her words slip, and saw the error in her ways as she stepped back immediately.

Palpatine turned His head quickly at her, annoyed that she had broken His moment of self-satisfaction. “Yes.” He hissed and then inhaled, flaring His nostrils. “Let us deal with this prevailing issue that you refuse to relinquish as it seems to be a bone of contention for you.”

“I had other Hands… they served their purpose. And as you learned, had no knowledge of the other ones.” He snapped at her, sending a shiver into her. “I believe that you were instructed on the necessity of deniable plausibility at one point in your training, were you not? Imagine if two Hands had learned of the other? Think of the issues that could arise if their duties had intersected!”

She swallowed immediately, looking down, playing the submissive role that He had learned to expect from her.

In truth, it had made sense. Once, she would have never questioned him, understanding that all of His orders and requests had a purpose that she was deemed not fit to see, or understand, but she had a place in them. Questioning Him would only lead to punishment.

“I’m sorry Master…. Our time together felt special to me, and when I learned of the other Hands, I felt…” Mara stumbled over her words, but got them out, shaking her head as to question her own actions, thoughts and words.

“Neglected? Unworthy?” Palpatine snarled at her.

She nodded silently; yes, she had felt both of those things at learning she was not special any longer… and hurt.

For a moment the silence hung as the flow of the Force returned back to a languid wave.

“Do you know why you succeeded when others failed? – because it was I who trained you… not left to a random instructor. I trained you… took you, molded you, saw that you had every resource above the others…and yes, you were special…. But…” Palpatine’s had begun to rise, and then stopped and paused.

“You could have been greater still.” He whispered.

Without considering, she acted on emotion and looked at him with malice audacity, and blurted out, “You used me!” Mara shivered after the words left her mouth, astounded that she even had the courage to say them.

Palpatine exhaled loudly, annoyed and swiftly rose from His chair, as a younger body would allow Him. He took two paces and extend His hand in her direction, pointedly. “I used your skills… better than anyone else would. You would have felt neglected and under-appreciated if you had chosen any other field. … and you would have been rendered a contingent casualty.” He snapped.

His was displeased with her ingratitude, but not threatening; He used to allow her to be candid with Him as no other were.

Mara understood, looking down, allowing Him to sense that she felt the sense of loss when He supposedly died at Endor; it had rocked her world, and part of her still felt devastated.

And He was right again; in the purges of the Force-strong, she would have been among their
numbers if she hadn’t been singled out. He had saved her from all of that.

“You used me to murder innocent people.” She murmured somewhat repentantly.

She only continued because she senses that she could; Palpatine was making another allowance for her. This would not have been tolerated with anyone else around.

“Innocent?” He chided as He repeated the descriptor. “Not so… Every task that I gave, every life you took, served a higher goal. There was no one who didn’t deserve to be dealt with.”

Mara looked up to Him with sad eyes, wordlessly asking for any reasoning, or purpose. “And Skywalker?... you ordered me to kill him to revenge his father.” She said quietly, letting the pain flow through her, and sensing that He too could sense it.

“Skywalker was, and still is, a traitor and terrorist.” Palpatine said calmly, seeing that she wasn’t challenging Him. “His Rebellion did nothing as to cause chaos and disorder in the galaxy.”

He explained in a subdued tone; the same tone that He used when He educated her. “For every life his kind ‘saved’, they killed five that either stood in their way, or were collateral damage.” He shook his head. “Needles waste.”

Turning, she stepped over to the gilded box and looked at it, trying to think of a diversion, to turn the conversation, trying to turn away from the truth that was an accurate account of the Rebellion, not just Imperial propaganda.

“And yet, you still find yourself drawn to him, don’t you?” He asked; His tone humming lowly. Mara found that she couldn’t look at Him, right then; her thoughts were becoming jumbled.

“Is Skywalker really the gleaming savior in your eyes? -when he intentionally caused you great pain.”  Palpatine said slowly, accentuating the deepest cut.

She shook her head, and stepped closer to the box, seeing the patterning in the metal-work, and tried to refute it. “No, he didn’t know that I would be affected… he did it for…”

“He did it for himself!” The Emperor said strongly. “To save his father’s soul, and the save himself from the Darkside… it was nothing but his greedy desires that made him seem like he was doing it for the galaxy. His immediate goal was to always seek My destruction and be damned anyone who stood in his way.”

Mara shook her head again, but knew it was futile. She knew Luke didn’t think of the repercussions of his actions. He had told her as much, telling her that he would not apologize for trying to save his father, or Vader destroying the Emperor on Endor… only that he was sorry that she was affected by it.

“They placated themselves, thinking themselves noble and sanctimonious in their goals! And they called me evil! - when they destroyed more than they ever built up.” Palpatine stood indignant, his voice fueling.

She felt His ire start to recede, redirecting to her; still, slightly irritated that her ego needed tending to.

“When I selected those who needed to be eliminated, I sent you… precise and clean, no damage past than what was needed to do the job. Those that were targeted and assigned were eliminated with purpose – they stood in the way of a well-functioning machine that stayed the course for over twenty-standard years.” He said dignified. “You were a part of that success.”
“And after every mission, you came before me, successful and proud of your accomplishments! And rightly so… I could have never given any Hand the leeway which I gave to you.” Palpatine came closer to her.

She forced herself not to look over at Him, lest she would be drawn in to His spell again.

“I raised you up, taught you your skills in the Force, treated you like I would my own child.” He cooed quietly.

Sharply, Mara looked at him aghast and horrified. He could have never been her parent – never! A parent would have trained someone to kill… or wanted their child to learn how to kill!

“Do not appear to be so wounded. You knew what you were being trained for!” And with those words, His appearance changed again; from being the kindly mentor to the devilish fiend that He always was. “You enjoyed in the elevation… deep down inside of you, you learned to love each and every moment of your purpose!”

“Do not pretend that now you found the same purpose with the Rebels or your smuggling friends… you out-perform them at every turn.” Palpatine chastised her naivety. “You feel that you should be raised above them again and resent having to be made to be the second-best to anyone… let alone someone who calls on your skills to aide in his limited ones.”

She frowned and opened her mouth to defend the obvious jibe at Karrde and his organization; he had given her a home when others had not.

“You do not resent me… you resent yourself! I never once lied to you about your position… you never asked if you were the only Hand. You believed yourself to be the only Hand, because you wanted to be the only Hand that I required.” The Emperor shot to the quick of any argument that she could form.

“So jealous of you of others attention that you even though yourself to challenge Lord Vader… a costly mistake if I had allowed it.” He sneered.

“And now, you reach into the Force, calling upon the Light – do not deny that it feels unnatural to you, like an itch under your skin of how transparent all your feelings have become. The skills that I taught you were immediate and direct, never needing to force yourself to feel something that you didn’t.” He didn’t need to mount an argument – she knew what he was saying was true.

Mara, as a reflex, shook her head, didn’t want to believe it.

“You think that it was I who was underhanded and deceitful towards you. Never! Look at those around you…”

Palpatine’s gaze softened and took a masterful stride towards her. “Skywalker wants to make you into what he thinks a Jedi should be… follow in his footsteps.”

Her eyes hardened, not openly rejecting His words.

“He wants you to use a power that seems out of his reach… using your gift of insight… going beyond what you know of yourself to be true… to envision his journey to become a Jedi Master… to raise himself up as a Jedi Master.”

Mara stood, frozen, listening.

“But no, you are not a Jedi, and you know this. Your nature does not allow it. Too long did I train
you to call upon your darker-self. Only sadly, you will also never be a Sith.” Palpatine lessened the harshness of his voice.

“And what a wonderful Sith you would have made if I thought that it would not be wasted in favor of your other gifts, of late.”

He took another step in her direction. She could feel His glacial shadow come into her aura.

“Yes, your calling is to look out into the void and tell me what it is that see. And without lying to yourself, don’t deny that you feel larger and apart of the galaxy, more than you ever did. If Skywalker did anything for you, it was to unlock this ability. And for that, We do owe him gratitude. Jedi skills are not without their own version of usefulness.” Palpatine nodded slowly.

“But Skywalker? What does he lend to you? Are you his equal? Does he share what the Force was able to give to him? – No, he does not!” He said louder, making it clear that she couldn’t hide behind any lies.

“You are his warm blanket at the end of a long day -you soothe his troubled spirit. You are the body that he wants when he craves a release – his satisfied climax when he breaks his Jedi rules of attachment and yearns for carnal cravings. Does he give as much as he takes from you?”

_He loves me!_ Mara mind yelled back, but her mouth was sealed. Her argument sounded juvenile and ridiculous, laughable. If she was her former self, she would rightfully mock those words.

“And when he encouraged his father to turn on me, do you think that the repercussions of any it crossed his mind? - including the pain he might cause others? – it doesn’t sound very Jedi-like, does it?”

“And you did feel pain, didn’t you, my child? You missed your duty … and you missed My presence, didn’t you? How much heartbreak did you feel? How much loneliness did you encounter? How lost were you?” His tone was dulcet, almost melodious and calm.

“Do you still feel the pain now? --- and nothing could fill the void.” Palpatine’s younger face, was just as theatrical as His older version, but without the gouges of years and powers, He was luring her in.

Mara blinked rapidly, breaking the spell- she could sense it now. She was being reeled back into believing it… but this time… this time, she didn’t want to fight it. She couldn’t fight it- it was all true!

“And as you say, when you found out, what you call, _truths_… did it make you feel lost all over again? The truths that you came to accept that were your reality all along, ones you just failed to see.”

She nodded- it was absolutely true. He must have sensed her pain just as He had been sending her the messages to kill Skywalker since Endor. Mara gasped and nodded again.

Her feelings were twisting in her gut. Once again, she wished that she had never been able to feel like she had felt since she allowed Skywalker to teach her these things… these useless, horrible, kriffing things!

“I can feel it in you… oh yes, your anger is rising. Your hurt is palatable. …and so vivid… still so fresh and raw… unresolved.”

The energy in the room began to swell, like a sleeted blight, sharp daggers of ice.
“It started in you at such a tender age... you came willing with Me to train...”

Mara shook her head, begging Him not to relive the circumstances that she had recalled in a moment of weakness with Skywalker.

“You wanted more and more power as you learned...” Palpatine’s eyes, although glowing scarlet, were condoling, appearing to not intentionally hurt her, even though they achieved it greatly. “And you want it back... all of it.”

She had freed her damaged psyche, but her rage was yet untapped, waiting for its turn at the forefront.

“Even as the anger and hate boils in you now, when it is unleashed in you, so will the power that is needed to retain it. It has no root in you – you know darkness, but as I have explained, it does not fester in you.”

His voice started to grow, filling the room, and filling her senses. “So, do what you must, in the here in now... let it go.... Open yourself up to all the vengeance and retribution that you desire... let it feed you... let it feed me in payment for all that I have given you... let it feed the form growing inside you.”

She turned away, trying to find a place to hide. This time, she had turned in the direction of His statuette; the surface only reflected her own image back at her; her face contorted with by her emotions and her tortured mind.

Mara broke away, almost is sobs; the emotions colliding with the controversy from what she had supposed and what was actually true.

Yes, Palpatine had never lied to her... kept her safe when other hadn’t... her emotions swirled... even Skywalker... Luke... had she convinced herself that she loved him?... it would be so much easier if she didn’t... and Karrde, did he use her too?

Who was to blame for all of it?

“Let it free, girl... let you say your own truth, and become powerful in your own right! Feed my form inside you! Give it your strength!” He ordered, knowing she wouldn’t disobey Him. “Say it!” Palpatine voice boomed in her ears.

With a deep breath, Mara released her vicious mortem. “I hate you!” She cried outwardly, loudly, without regard, looking at her own reflection.

“Of course, you do.... Who do you hate?”

Mara dropped to the ground, fully sobbing....

“Me!...Myself!.... I am to blame!” She cried out her pain, rocking herself.

If she hadn’t gone with Palpatine as a child, if she hadn’t been so eager and want something beyond herself...if she hadn’t become a murderer... if she hadn’t deceived herself all those years... if she hadn’t failed in killing Skywalker... if she hadn’t fallen in love with the Jedi... made herself vulnerable... stopped protecting herself....

Mara wept strong and hard, releasing her self-loathing.

The pit in her feelings, deep and vast, buried under years of training away her feelings, crippling
every emotion, stunting her growth… but now, somehow freeing her too.

“Let it make you strong.” Palpatine said, rolling His eyes, feeding off of her darkness. “Take your hate and hold it close as you once did.” He seethed, sucking in air. “Make it the jewel in your crown.”

She stopped quaking at hearing the words. The Emperor always wanted better for her… yes, better than she had deserved.

Gasping for air, she looked up at Him, as He looked down into her eyes. She saw that He did always protect her. He never lied to her. She owed Him her gratefulness… and her usefulness.

Her chest shuddered in slow convulsions as Mara started to recover, finding her outburst unnecessary, and uncouth. She swallowed as she watched Him turn away, and give her rest, as He returned over to His throne.

Her breathing returned to normal, and she used the sleeve of her gown to wipe away any tears, or tear-tracks, to might render her appearance unseemly to Him.

“Master” She said after she had regained herself, wanting to find dignity again, wanting Him to see her as competent, able to do anything that was asked of her.

Mara waited until Palpatine looked over at her, narrowing his cold eyes, measuring her strength.

“You will not be able to defeat the Senate without the majority of the vote.” She said blankly, returning to the business at hand.

She had been called to His quarters for a reason, and she lifted her chin, showing that she was still the competent person that He trusted and knew, despite her breakdown.

With dispassion and directness, she let her aura convey the change in her presence; the ice that once flowed into her steely nerves was called forth in her demeanor.

Inhaling, she released her presence, so that he could feel that she has envisioned it, and she believed it.

“You will need to have more than the normal fifty-one present of the vote.” She exhaled, not wanting to lose her nerve. “According to the rules of the Senate, an official session must have seventy-five percent attendance of the voting capacity. And of those in attendance, you must garner eighty percent of their majority for any vote to re-establish leadership.” She recited from memory of her civics class.

Palpatine chuckled, and smiled wickedly. “Good… very good. Spoken like a true states-person. I do so enjoy the rules of governing… and though some might not believe, I have always followed the will of the people.”

He sighed and rested back into his throne. “You see, since the Alliance assumed control of the Senate… slowly, the larger worlds and systems have gradually leave the caucus. I made it a point to ‘reach out’ to the smaller worlds, the Rim planets and clusters, encouraging their petitions to join the Galactic Senate as individual entities.” He gestured off-handedly. “Even sending emissaries from Skywalker’s home-world to join where once they had been neglect by the grander worlds.”

Palpatine smiled. "Smaller worlds that would benefit from their friendship with an authoritarian power... without the means to leave during chaos, willing to buy their protection."
Mara frowned, then raised her eyebrows and widened her eyes, mouth dropping, realizing.

“Yes, yes… and now there are thousands of those worlds that now have voting-power in the Senate… thanks to My other initiatives that I had in place.” Palpatine smiled sweetly.

“You had Fel’ya allow them to join.” She whispered breathlessly, realizing that thousands of worlds could turn the tide and make all votes perfectly legal. *The numbers had stayed the same but the players were different.*

His smile grew broader, basking in the fact that He had seen to it, wordlessly agreeing with her.

Even with the shock of this news, Mara remembered that she was here deliver the other issues that she had seen in her visions. “Master, the only other difficulty that I see, would be in sheer numbers” The words tumbled from her mouth, as she still tried to process her way through. “If the Rebels were able to mass an army or a navy, they could over-whelm Your Forces.”

“Numbers are not a concern, my child.” Palpatine turned His throne towards the display screen on the tabletop.

From the holo-projector a series of new images arose; new vehicles, with an alien look to them, but still familiar. New ships, resembling that of the Imperial fleet… several hundred of them, massive in size.

“They call themselves the ‘First Order’… after my original command that was given to regroup in the Unknown Regions. They have trained and prepared for the past six years, waiting for my return. Loyal and abundant… harvested from the human families that tried to colonize past Xeres’s Ridge.”

The Emperor’s macabre attention was completely enthralled by the images that hovered before Him. “I will not fail.” He announced with malevolent conviction.

Mara felt her skin flush with freezing cold, and did the one thing that she could think of. Dropping to her knee, she bowed her head too.

“As You wish, Master – *let it be so.*” She replied, dumbstruck that she could ever doubt Him.

TBC
The Reprieve

Chapter Summary

Quote: Mara blinked rapidly as she let her full weight rest in the embrace that she should have found comforting. Her mind started to race.

Characters: Luke and Mara

**

Chapter Notes

I ain't got nothing to say... but 'just keep writing', 'just keep writing', 'just keep writing' ...

A moment to see where our lovers are at... with each other and themselves.

Somewhere in the Force

“Where are we?” She asked, her voice distant in her ears.

Mara raised herself up from off the warm body that she found herself lying beside.

Bathed in light and wrapped in the purest of white sheets, they found themselves resting side by side, pressed together, in bed.

“I don’t know.” He answered, letting his eyes just drink in the moment, feeling very peaceful with her in his arms once again. “Does it matter?” Luke asked, grinning as he pushed away a strand of red-gold hair from her face, letting his finger gaze the cheekbone of her fine skin.

Unlike him, she seemed rattled that they were there together.

<We’re probably dreaming.> He mentally told her, in the Force, without words. “I know that I am.” He said sweetly.

She looked over to him, surprised, but then realized that he could be right. This world was too perfect to be anything that could be real for them.

Mara’s body still resisted the lure of the moment as the edges of the image started to quiver. “Why?” She asked.

“Probably because I’ve been thinking about you.” He said, sighing, regretfully pleasant.

She looked over to him, and truly examined his appearance.

His hair was back to its longer length – longer than she preferred, but the much-preferred golden shade that was long enough to form a wave across his brow.
His blue eyes were the colour of the sea after a storm and just visible through dreamy slits.

His bare chest was toned, not showing a mark of abuse or wear; the sheet had drifted to lapse over his mid-section.

The same sheet was shared between them, and she could feel his hot skin touching her where the sheet didn’t separate them.

She uneasily brought her head back down and rested it on his shoulder; she supposed this was where she was prior to being aware of where she was.

Mara blinked rapidly as she let her full weight rest in the embrace that she should have found comforting. Her mind started to race.

*They shouldn’t be here... they shouldn’t be together... even in their dreams. Did she summon him, or did he summon her to this place?*

“Ssshhh…” He said. “Your mind asks too many questions. Can’t we just enjoy this, while we are here?”

She shook her head. “No... we will be punished.” She whispered.

“No, we won’t.” He said quietly. “You worry too much.” He shrugged pulling her tighter. “It’s only a dream.”

The wind chose to pick up and waft into the room; it was warm and comforting – two things that she hadn’t felt in a long time.

Mara only started to relax against him a she felt his body beside hers. She looked up at his face to see that his eyes were closed, and he was simply enjoying that she was close.

She hooked her chin back onto his shoulder and nuzzled against it, still waiting for their world to crumble.

But her mind must have wanted him to be close; *why else would they have this contact now?* Only times when she truly longed for him, then he would sense her a reach back in his mind. Maybe they both needed each other now.

If she worked at it, she could become accustomed to this dream world, and place them in scenarios that she would find acceptable.

*Maybe they had just made-love and now were sharing a quiet moment? Maybe they had just woken up in the summer seasons on Yavin IV and the breeze was a harbinger of tranquility?*

“As this you?” Mara asked into his skin. “Really you?”

His chest rose and fell when his breath. “Yes it is.” Luke said lowly. “We’re still on Byss... in the palace. I’m currently in the room next to yours, and I wanted nothing more than to hold you tonight.” He said with his eyes closed. “Is that alright?”

He reached out to her again, saying words that had no sound. <I don’t want to worry about what is to come in the next few days... all I want is one moment that we can be together.> He inhaled again. <I need this... *I need you...* and I thought that you needed me too.> He exhaled slowly.

Her emotions flared, recalling her encounter the Emperor; He had said that Skywalker was using her
for his needs.

But something was different about him, something was trying to change, yet also fighting to stay the same.

She could sense it; he was timing his breaths, trying to stay calm and find peace… trying to call on the Light. He was fighting whatever that didn’t want him to be this way.

“He told me that I should return to the Light.” Luke said, keeping the pace of his breathing.

Mara jarred. He wants me to turn to the Dark. Her conscious mind touched back.

Although she wanted to deny it, she could feel the on-coming chill of reality.

Suddenly, she became very aware that in his dream, they were naked, very naked, under the sheet, and she became very self-conscious, touching her own belly, looking for the bulge that had started to appear. Then, trying to move away, afraid of his touch, afraid of her feelings, afraid.

Mara struggled to pull away the sheet, making a barrier between them, protecting herself, steeling herself, cloistering her feelings; the tugging became frantic.

Luke stopped his peaceful interlude and opened his eyes to see the fear on her face.

In the dream, the bright, warm light changed to a heavy downpour as storm clouds rolled in, outside the room, on the horizon.

“Mara…” He called to her to get her attention. He called again, and reached up to stop her hands, pulling at the cloth.

She flinched and pulled away from him, keeping what fabric that she could between them, to move back.

Luke sat up fully, looking at her, recognizing where he had seen this expressed on her face before- in the days when she would run from his touch, scared of his feelings, and scared of her feelings. So, he paused, and waited for her panic to stop.

He watched as he saw her lip tremble and her refusal to look at him.

He sighed and shook his head. “Is love such a strange thing to you now?” He asked, surprised, but not really; it was possible that her experiences here were reverting.

Then, he dared to ask what was now at the back of his mind. “Is my love that foreign to you, too?”

Outside the fictitious window, the storm crashed, and a cold breeze broke through the room.

Now, it just wasn’t her lip that quivered, her eyes blinked rapidly, and her shoulders trembled too.

Finally, she looked at him, with tears in her eyes that were unshed. “I don’t know what’s real anymore, Luke…” Mara mumbled. “… Including your love… or mine.”

And with that, the thunder rolled beyond, and her image dissolved in front of him, leaving him alone in the dream.
TBC
The Cessation

Chapter Summary

Quote: It was a look that could deceive very easily, as Luke still felt that he was under a shadow of his own making; darker than he should be, and yet not as dark as he felt that he needed to be.

Characters: Luke, Mara, Palpatine, Pestage, and others

**

Chapter Notes

Whoa Nellie!... I got nothing except that I want to get into the next few chapters as quickly as possible... this what I've been waiting for... so read... please read, leave comments... give me a thumbs-up or thumbs-down... I dunno... just read.

Love you! Cheers, Phae :)

**

Imperial Palace; Byss

He looked at himself in the grand mirror that had been placed inside his chamber, and regarded his appearance.

Luke turned his head from side to side to see if he could see the difference in himself.

He felt differently since his last confrontation with the Dark Sith Master; released from obligation but not from his own will.

They had certainly outdone themselves, making the farm-boy into an upstanding member in the Imperial court.

It was a stylized version of what they thought a Jedi should look-like; a noble Jedi. Somehow the tailored tunic and tabard had made him appear broader in the shoulders; the raw silk was formed tight and neat over his form.

He shook his head resentfully to himself as he adjusted the black leather gloves on his hands.

*It completed the look.* The Byssian had said as they dressed him, and the selection was at the request of the Emperor.

Growling under his breath, Luke turned away from the polished plexi-glass and made his way over to his doors that would lead out into the corridor. His cape flourished as he walked, catching the air behind him with his stride.
The gray hues of the ensemble were simply a reminder that the Emperor expected the Jedi’s presence to be ambiguous to those who were watching him closely; neither Light nor Dark. It was a look that could deceive very easily, as Luke still felt that he was under a shadow of his own making; darker than he should be, and yet not as dark as he felt that he needed to be.

Outside the threshold, the Sentinel droids were waiting for him. They followed closely; their weapons held lofty against their plated chests.

He walked the hallways again, knowing this time he was headed for the landing pad and not a trap or incandescent meeting that would only lead to another rift inside him.

The instructions that he was given were very specific, outlining his behavior as to where and when he would be required to appear.

The itinerary spoke of little else beyond the ceremonial aspects of what would be required of him. The Emperor controlled every nuance that would be seen and reported on.

Luke lifted his chin as he walked, heading towards the shuttle that would take him to the Emperor’s waiting flagship, the *Eclipse*.

The massive vessel returned from wherever it had been hidden, and now hovered above the Imperial city, waiting on His Majesty’s command to lead the Regatta to Coruscant.

He had seen the thing arrive in the atmosphere and hang over the palace and city like a cloud that carried, but refused, to storm down on those below.

Larger than Victory-class Star Destroyer, the *Eclipse* was sophisticated and elegant if not also impending.

In his senses, Luke could feel like the palace was almost deserted; no movement, no sounds other than his own and the Sentinel’s. Perhaps he was the last to board the shuttle, but then, that information was not on his list of instructions either.

The doors opened and closed with Luke’s passing movements, not restricting him at all.

While preparing himself, he had briefly sensed Mara, and then she was gone, shut herself off from him, like she had done so many other times.

In their shared dream, days ago, he had hoped to show her that he was changing, willing to change, ready to fight back, hoping that she would join him.

She had refused.

And even more-beleaguering, she had denied her love for him, as if she had forgotten how she felt, or even how to feel, closing off her emotions, except fear.

It was a stab in his heart, deeper than Luke thought possible. Such a wound would have fueled his dark feelings if he didn’t believe what he saw, and felt, in her, weren’t genuine and raw. He was afraid for her, that her confusion had pushed him away.

He sighed heavily as the last doors opened to the landing pad.

It was early morning by Byss standards; the pulsating star that made for a sun, was rising on the orange horizon.
On the platform, the clouds of exhaust fog from the shuttle’s repulse-lifts drifted as the start-up sequence was beginning.

At the base of the shuttle, eight gleaming stormtroopers, four to each side, lined the direction that led inside the shuttle.

He thought that he had gotten used to them, but seeing the white armor always caused a rise in Luke’s senses. He exhaled slowly, reminding himself that this was all just for show.

As he walked toward the boarding plank, he sensed when the Sentinels stopped, and allowed him to continue on his own to go up inside the ship.

Luke ducked as he approached the bulkhead, turning to his right, he entered the aft-section.

This was a transport shuttle, not a military model as he had become familiar with at Endor. This ship had a passenger cabin that was more-akin to a lounge than a cargo hold.

The doors to this section slid open for him casually, as the others had.

He had nonchalantly responded to their granting him access to this part of the shuttle, casting his eyes down as he walked through.

Looking up, Luke caught the breath in his chest.

Mara was already waiting inside the passenger cabin in the shuttle. She looked up and over to him immediately; her eyes widened with surprise, fear passed over her features before returning to a blank expression. If another person was to regard her, they wouldn’t have noticed any of those subtle nuances that Luke did.

She was dressed in a simple dark cyan gown, with a cape that blended into the dress, attached at the shoulders. Her hair had been pulled back to form an intricate bun at the nap of her neck, and two flat bands of titanium formed a circlet on her forehead.

The colour of the gown brought out the blue undertones in her emerald eyes. Against her fair skin, the colour made her look beguiling.

Lifting her chin, she nodded once to acknowledge his presence.

Luke nodded back wordlessly, still appreciating her appearance.

No matter how many times he tried to convince himself that she would have belonged with him on a moisture farm, it always took his breath away when she looked like queen, like she was never out of place in this world.

A muffled clank! was heard from beyond the room, breaking his thoughts and signifying that the shuttle was preparing to lift-off.

The artificial gravity kicked in, and he could feel the heaviness in his feet from where he stood.

It would be a short ride from the palace to the waiting Eclipse; maybe mere minutes.

It suddenly occurred to Luke that they were alone together, truly alone; no guards, no Sentinel droids, no court spies.

Without any further thought on it, within two strides, he had crossed the room to be in front of her.
Mara turned quickly as he approached and her face broke his posture as her mouth opened to reject whatever it was that he was thinking. But he was too fast.

Before she could protest, he had cupped her cheeks tenderly and brought her lips to his own.

At first, she froze but at the first purse of his hot mouth, she whimpered, succumbing and responding to the taste of him.

She shivered at the feel of his real skin on hers again, the energy spiked between them, and then melted against him.

For all that transpired, between the mind games, the fear and dread of never knowing the outcome in Palpatine’s menagerie, they had found one perfect moment. Every action, every transgression seemed to disappear as she heard his mind beg forgiveness and still pledge his love.

For all his words, she had nothing to return to him, still confused and confounded by the wedge of doubt that had been placed in her. Yet, she still craved his kiss; it invoked so much more than simple flesh on flesh. She wanted it because it was uncontrolled, not preordained, and finally, humanizing.

Stopping between the passionate touch of their mouths to catch their breath, she exhaled his name almost silently. He still cradled her cheeks delicately in his fingers while he placed his forehead against hers, just to stop their world from spinning.

There was silence; deafening, quiet, peaceful silence… and light, the glimmer of light.

The shuttle jarred, announcing their arrival. It seemed too quick, too brief, too cruel.

Luke released her face and stepped back, going to the opposite side of the cabin, and turning his gaze away from her, readying himself to resume his composed stance, appearing not to have taken one momentary dalliance with her.

Watching him, Mara dropped her head, and turned away, disappointed, but not in him. Somehow, he had learned to play the game, and appear as if nothing had happened. But as she could still feel the pressure on her lips from his mouth, she swallowed, controlling her own emotions that would overtake her if she allowed it.

Setting her emotions in check, she straightened herself to a correct posture before turning in the direction of the door.

They stood, separated by an invisible wall, looking forward, prepared.

From outside the cabin, the muffled sound of the plank hitting a metal deck could be heard. The cabin door slid open and there was a pause between the two of them.

Luke eyes narrowed briefly, wondering what his course of action should be. From the corner of his eye, he saw her form bow, as if acknowledging that he was to precede her in leaving the shuttle.

All this formality was still unfamiliar to him, and far from appearing clumsy, when he knew of what was expected, he could rise to the expectations and look like he had always known court-life. He wore it well, and the farm-boy could not be found, instead the princely Jedi displayed his aloofness.

He stepped forward ahead of her, sensing that she was waiting for the customary ten paces behind him, as she had described to him on Mustafar – it seemed to be the standard precedent.

It was hollow in the holding-corridor of the shuttle, only leading to the down-plank, through which
the lights from deck beamed upward. He tried not squint against the difference as he descended.

On the deck of the *Eclipse*, the sound of armor marching in cadence punctuated and filled the otherwise immense space.

Luke paused after he walked the slightly-more than ten paces from the shuttle. His senses flared looking out over the legions and legions, row upon row of glistening white Stormtroopers also waiting, at attention, on the deck flanking an open area where the shuttle had landed.

It reminded him greatly of the deck aboard the second Death Star.

Mara must have sensed it and paused as she came to stand beside him when he broke from protocol.

She stopped and seemed to acknowledge him, as she appeared to straighten her posture again, showing that it was he that was waiting for her.

He felt a light brushing on his mind, urging him to turn to his left and walk forward; a mental image that she would walk beside him.

As they walked, a trooper with a red shoulder pauldron fell in-line behind them.

Luke inhaled and felt the touch on his mind again.

<He is the honor guard of the 501st Legion.> She commented. <Vader’s Fist… his former personal legion… it’s implied that they fall under your command now.> She said blankly, informing him.

Before she prepared to stop him again, it became clear as to why there was a large space beside the shuttle they arrived on.

A second shuttle was positioning to arrive on the deck. Luke watched it approach the airlock grid, with a TIE Fighter escort. The fighters broke away and allowed the shuttle inside.

The shuttle slid to halt and cushioned on the repulse-lifts.

Mara moved to approach the area as to where the plank would descend. Several meters away, she stopped and stood looking forward, waiting.

Luke could feel the thousands of eyes on him, all of them practiced in Imperial protocol, looking for any breech that he would make.

The shuttle hissed, and the plank descended. Half-way though the lowering, Mara stepped back and took to a knee in her gown, lowering her head too. Luke mimicked her posture, feeling it unnatural as all of this was.

The wave of cold exited the shuttle first, blowing over those who could sense it, and behind that, Red Guards left the shuttle and flanked the ramp.

In the background, the music began, playing the sounds of the Imperial Orchestra, the illustrious anthem.


Doing as he was told, Luke raised himself, stepped forward and came to the left side of the Emperor. He took note of those others in the entourage that were in his field of vision.
Vizor Sate Pestage was several paces behind the Emperor. And behind him, several groups of courtiers in their finery.

Mara seemed to know her place and stood as soon as Palpatine extended His right hand. She bowed before crossing His path, and gracefully placed her hand under His before they all resumed their pace.

“You seemed troubled, Jedi Skywalker.” The Emperor said from under His hood.

Before Luke could reply to the negative, Palpatine continued. “I assure you that all My plans will come to fruition and that you will have a place in them.”


An honor guard waited at the far end of the deck, and the blast-doors opened long-before they arrived under them and crossed the threshold.

A private turbo-lift waited, and Luke stepped back to allow the Emperor and Mara to enter first; he stepped in behind them, accompanied by Pestage and two white guards. The ride was short and quiet.

When the lift stopped, and doors opened on the opposite side from which they had entered, the guards stayed in the lift as it was apparent that two Imperial Red Guards were already in the room. Luke waited until the Emperor stepped out, and he followed suit in-line with the Vizor as rank would dictate.

They had arrived in a private meeting room; it wasn’t as militaristic as the remainder of the Eclipse appeared to be. The sedate grey was draped with burgundy accents of colour, decorated with a throne rested on a one-step raised dais. Behind the throne, a large circular, and picturesque window allowed a full view of the stars and the resting Imperial Fleet.

Few personal objects were dotted around the room as well. Luke noticed the small curio display of holocrons. One shelf of blue cubes and one of red pyramids… so close to each other… too close. And one single cube that had no color whatsoever, set apart from the others. Was it the same one that He kept in the palace on Byss? Luke mentally frowned, seeing it as an odd object to keep close at hand, but his attention was soon diverted to other matters.

It was more of private office than a throne room; the business that was conducted in here was discreet.

Palpatine lifted his hand from off Mara’s, signifying that her presence as an ornament wasn’t needed any longer. As He walked ahead, she stayed put and curtsied at the knee, and lowered her head again. He regally strode past the other men to the throne. Turning, He adjusted his sleeves before sitting down.

Pestage walked forward and stopped to the left of the throne, raising his chin.

Luke stood in place and watched Him, following Him with his eyes. When the Emperor rested, his eyes looked beyond and watched the activity just outside the viewport; TIE Fighters flew in patterned-groupings between the large vessels.

A chime sounded softly in the room before the turbo-lift doors opened again, then entered a uniformed officer who stayed back until the Emperor crooked a finger in his direction.

The officer came to the base of dais and took a knee before the throne.
“Your Imperial Majesty” He said, in a voice that was almost too loud for the room and bowed.

The space between pauses could be measured, surely by design, Palpatine waited to acknowledge the man. “Admiral Liter” He said in a low tone. “Deliver your report.”

The Admiral rose from his knee and stood astutely. “Your Majesty, I am please to report that the Fleet has ensembled and we are waiting Your command in order to enter light-speed for the Core-world of Coruscant.”

The officer stopped in case the Emperor required any further information, when nothing came, he continued. “Included in the Fleet, are the two World-Devastators, as requested and equipped as ordered, Your Majesty.”

Luke felt the hairs on the back his neck started to rise with the mention of the super-weapons which could wipe out the life-forms on whole planets. And how they could possibly be equipped to do more damage than they already could?

Liter continued, “I am pleased to inform to that we anticipate the journey should be less than thirty standard minutes, and as scheduled, Your shuttle will rendezvous at the Senate in time for the General Assembly.”

“Good Admiral” Palpatine said quickly. “Is there any advantageous news from the Capital? Anything unexpected?”

“No, Your Majesty.” Liter replied. “There has recently been an increase in trade since the embargo had been lifted and the general populace seems to welcome the influx of freighters and supplies in the system. Attributing it to Your protection, shipments of goods has actually increased by approximately seven percent.”

Mara shifted from her position with the mention of increased trading, and Luke was almost tempted to look over at her, sensing that there was more than the obvious, but refrained. He wondered if she was thinking about Karrde and her friends, wondering if they were involved or affected.

“I am sure that they would be grateful since they have been inconvenienced by the disruption this insurrection has caused.” Palpatine added.

Liter simply nodded, agreeing.

“Anything else, Admiral?” Palpatine raised an eyebrow.

“No, Your Majesty.” Liter said swiftly and bowed.

With a flick of His hand, the Admiral was dismissed. Liter turned on-heel and the left the way he arrived.

Without consideration as to how it would be perceived, Luke turned his head down and followed the Admiral; his senses had been spiked, feeling uneasy, since the officer had arrived in the room. Now it had become apparent.

When the lift doors slid shut, the Emperor didn’t delay. “Something unnerves you, Jedi Skywalker?” Palpatine sneered. “Do you lack the stomach for confrontation?”

Turning his head back in the direction of the throne, he dared to make direct eye-contact, looking into the orange-red glowing pupils. “I have no issue with confrontation, only the means by which You intend to enforce your leadership.” Luke replied curtly, not shying away from any lesser
interpretation.

“You don’t enjoy the message that My presence will invoke in the Core and in the galaxy?” The Emperor’s voice displayed intonation at the end of His question.

“I don’t enjoy the message that my presence will invoke when associated with World-Devastators hovering in orbit when the Senate will be in session, expected to vote.” Luke said bluntly. “It gives a very distinct message <threat>, if the Senate doesn’t capitulate to Your demands.” He included a touch in the Force, showing his displeasure.

“I agreed to this arrangement under the terms that my reputation would under-write Your seriousness in reinstating a peaceful reign.” Luke said with his eyes still locked on the other man.

As if a curtain dropped, the room became glacial, and the tension was tight.

Palpatine’s eyes narrowed at the young Jedi and growled as He exhaled. “Leave us.” He croaked harshly.

Pestage seemed surprised that he would not be allowed to see the Jedi reprimanded, but turned to bow before leaving.

Mara, who still had her head cast down, motioned to curtsey, preparing to move, feeling dismissed as well, leaving with Pestage.

“Not you.” Palpatine snarled at her; Mara froze.

Luke felt the wave of dread come over her, assuming that she would be punished because of his infraction. He prepared himself ready to defend her if he needed; Palpatine wouldn’t be given a chance if his anger rose to that level. The Jedi readied himself an attack, feeling the energy rise in himself.

The doors closed behind Pestage, and it began.

“Jedi Skywalker, in politics, it is necessary to not only let one’s words speak for them.” Palpatine said slowly. “Including the World-Devastators in the Regatta, is not a threat… they are also a reminder of the protection that My rule will bring.”

“They look like a threat.” Luke said in his own slow, deep tone; his facial expression stood hard. “Therefore, they will be perceived as a threat.”

The Jedi’s glared continued. “Just as You have kept Mara here to threaten me.” He growled.

She immediately looked up and over at him, as her mouth dropped open, and then back at the Emperor for His reaction, ready to plead that she had no intention of action.

Surprisingly, Palpatine laughed out-loud, then stopped only to sneer. “I don’t require her to threaten you. She is more-valuable, not a pawn to be played, and she knows it.” He cackled His last few words.

“She carries her clemency in her womb.” Palpatine snarled. “In case you have forgotten...”

Luke’s eyes flicked over to her face, then down her body to the bulge in her abdomen, and then away, disgusted by what had been done to her.

“If My plans do not transpire as I have instructed of you, or she had foreseen… it is you, and the
galaxy who will pay for that err in judgement, not she.”

Luke’s brow lowered, but before he could speak, Palatine continued. “Yes, the World Devastators will be present… and they are not a threat…they are a promise.” His fingers braced against each other in front of his chest.

Mara stood frozen but she could smell the gathering of the ozone molecules in the air; the energy building between both of them, with her in between.

The sub-light engines kicked in and the stars behind the throne blurred, signifying that they were at the beginning of their journey together to the Core.

“I solemnly promise that, without your assistance, should you choose to act against me, or if your Rebel friends attempt a coupe, that I will show no mercy and turn the World-Devastators on the entire system.” Palpatine barred His teeth as He pronounce every word with static tones.

The tension between the two of them caused Mara to see the mist of her short breaths in the chilled air; anger and rage had arrived in the room with the Dark Force on both sides.

The breathing in Luke’s chest subtly growled as he exhaled. “Then, You risk Your own life as well.” He pointed out, seeing the flaw.

“Not if I leave My trusted advisor and My oracle on board the Eclipse while I descend down to the planet.” Palpatine corrected him. “Along with the remaining members of My Shadow Hand, Pestage is more then capable of performing the transubstantiation of My Force-essence into another clone body, if, I should need it.”

The red pupils looked at Luke from over the folded withering hands. “Oh, do you not know how to change forms in order to save yourself?” Palpatine mockingly condescended. “Or do you believe that becoming one with the Force will serve the greater good? -Pity, if you do not.”

They locked glares on each other. Mara blinked rapidly waiting on one to make a move against the other. Under the hum of the engine, she heard the leather on Luke’s gloves expand and contract as he balled his fists in anger, sensing that he was planning to take some form of action.

For a few moments, locked in time, seditionist and sadist met at a stalemate until it was no longer tolerable.

Surprisingly, it was the Jedi who broke his stance first. He glanced over to her one more time before dropping his head and surrendering. “I will agree to Your terms, and I agree to conduct myself in the manner that we settled upon.” Luke said as he exhaled strongly.

Mara could sense that he was conceding as the Force started to flow again in the room with fluid measure.

Even the Emperor sensed it and His eyes briefly closed, feeling the Jedi sincerity, and opened to a relaxed shape. “Good…good. You have chosen wisely.” Palpatine nodded, and settle back in His throne, confident in the outcome of His venture.

TBC
**The Indecorum**

Chapter Summary

Quote: There was no time to fill-in the story that needed to be told, but emotions don’t need permission to give answers.

Characters: Holo-net Reporters, Luke, Han, Chewie, Rebels, the Oscians… and maybe The Emperor, again?
**

Chapter Notes

Buckle up… this is where it gets interesting.

Once again, I think that I’ve broken my italics key on my keyboard.

Thanks for waiting.

**

**Coruscant: Galactic Senate Auditorium**

*As broadcast by the Galactic Holonet, from Imperial space:*

(Originally reported in Ubesse, translated by protocol droid)

*Greetings Citizens of the Galaxy! Today we bring you glad tidings as our Emperor, former Supreme Chancellor, makes His triumphant return to the Galactic Senate.*

*We can see by the images provided by our Fly-eye droid, broadcasting in live-time as the events actually occur. The Emperor’s shuttle has landed on the Galactic Palace platform and we are waiting to see the procession—which will be impressive, no doubt.*

*Pausing now, from this view as it seems that the shuttle is merely powering down, we will replay some the events that lead up to this momentous occasion.*

*As you can see here, the Imperial Regatta appeared in the airspace over the city of Coruscant to the thunderous applause of the waiting citizens, nearly two hours ago.*

*Two World Devastators appeared alongside several Victory-class Star Destroyers, as well as the Emperor’s personal flagship, The Eclipse.*

*Rumor has it that His Glorious Majesty intends to make a gift of the two large, specialized vessels to the Senate, in show of His generous nature, and His graciousness, forgiving ways.*

*We now switch to the scene inside the Galactic Senate as a vote of no-confidence was called earlier*
today on the leadership of any of the acting leaders over the interim of Borsk Fel’ya, representative of Bothawui and former Chancellor of the Galactic Republic.

A secondary voted was taken as to whether to invite the former Emperor, Sheev Palpatine, to define His plans to resume the structure and peace that His reign gave the Galaxy.

Although some star-systems have flatly rejected the idea, the surrounding opinion is that the Emperor will pose a plan that will unite, rather than divide the Galaxy.

The representative from Piroket, Feesh Gwantar, was the first to suggest it and called for the vote. Several other smaller systems, encouraged this form, and responded with a request to invite the former Emperor to Coruscant to discuss His insightful and efficient ideas to resume peace within the realm.

We go back now to the Galactic Palace landing platform, as it appears that the ramp has been lowered from the Emperor’s shuttle.

Yes, in fact the ramp has indeed been lowered and we are waiting now to see what will emerge… His Majesty has always been respectful of the pomp and circumstance that comes with the dignity of office which Senate that has always been afforded… such a noble human!

Rumors have been swirling over the past six years that the Emperor escaped the tragedy that occurred over the Moon of Endor – that He was murdered in cold-blood by His cowardly servant, Darth Vader.

It seems those rumors are true and that Our Emperor, through His own bravery, survived those sad days, months, and years that followed when we were left to insufficient leadership, held in limbo by the very terrorists that robbed us of our glorious leader!

Yes… we can see it now… as the Fly-eye droid comes closer… the Red Guards of the Emperor has disembarked and are now lining up beside the ramp… of course they would, for need of extra security… there have been rumors too that a ‘Resistance’ has formed to subjugate these proceedings… lead by those of the former ‘Rebel Alliance’.

No doubt all precautions will be taken for the Emperor’s safe journey to the Senate Chamber.

The other rumors also pertain that the Emperor will be escorted by Luke Skywalker, Jedi Knight and son of Darth Vader.

This former Rebel-leader has abandoned his position, and come to the conclusion that Imperial structure and order will best serve the galaxy, in his Jedi-wisdom.

The Emperor, once again, displaying his regal nature, has forgiven past indiscretions by the Jedi, and sought a partnership to unify the galaxy in harmony.

Balance and Unity- are the talking points which the Emperor will speak on today.

Oh! There seems to be more movement below, as a small group of senators have come from the palace and are waiting at the landing platform, waiting to greet the Emperor.

Yes… oh yes! There it is… I believe this is it! Yes, there is a dark, cloaked-form emerging now from down the ramp of the shuttle. He appears to still be mobile after all these years… but, yes, the Emperor still is walking on a cane… and beside Him? Yes, it appears to be Jedi Knight, Luke Skywalker, following closely beside the Emperor?
Yes, I did say, ‘beside the Emperor’… walking as if… equals… um, the Red Guards are now flanking them as they walk towards the Palace.

Citizens of the Galaxy… this is an unusual site, indeed.

The senators look confused as the symbolic duo are approaching them now… they are not sure as to whether they should kneel or bow… yes, they seemed to have figured it out now, bowing to Skywalker, and kneeling before the Emperor.

Ah-ha! The first glimpse of the Emperor’s prowess as He waived the gesture away, indicating that the senators need-not cower before Him.

Skywalker seems unphased by the events, and despite his reputation for humbleness, he has been dressed to match the nobility that he also represents now, wearing what appears to be the Jedi tunic, tabards and cloak, in the finest of cloth, in order to match the masterful garments of the Emperor.

The senators appear to be taken into the entourage, following behind His Imperial Majesty, and the Jedi, as they make their way to the Senate Chamber and Auditorium.

This just in, we have word from the Imperial envoy that His Majesty will not enter the Chamber until He is called upon by the galaxy to take up the duty of leadership.

The envoy, I am told has been sent into the Chamber to present His Majesty’s arguments in favor of reconstructing the Empire to include the unity of the Jedi. This statement has been given, in advance to all Senators to review and to vote upon before an official invitation has been extended for the Emperor to resume power over the galaxy.

The Jedi, once declared enemies of the Galaxy and Senate, are now accepted as Skywalker is set to rebuild and remold the Jedi Order.

I’ve just received a copy of the envoy’s statement now… and… and… this can’t be! Yes… yes… power is to be equally shared between the two human males! His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Palpatine and the Jedi Knight, Luke Skywalker!

Unbelievable Citizens! How advantageous a leader… how bold, to propose such a thing! This, could very-well be the turning point for peace in the galaxy… a young man led by the kindness and wisdom of an experienced soul!

Alright, I’ve been told that I must interrupt this broadcast as we to go visuals into the Senate Chamber now. The vote has been called, the ballots have been cast, and we are waiting on the tallying of those votes.

I am sorry but we have no holos of the Emperor, or His waiting entourage at this time – no doubt, the energy will be tangible wherever He is!

Okay, I’ve been informed that they are re-counting the votes, in order to be sure of accuracy. And as we wait, our Fly-eye droid has picked up some movement from a nearby spaceport.

Oh, it just looks like several freighters are leaving the port in unison, is all. Not an uncommon site… glad that trade-routes have finally opened up again under the idea of security and protection provided by the gifted World Devastators that the Emperor will bestow on us.

It seems for others to be any other day on the Capital planet… whereas for some, it is a grand day.

…oh again, another group of freighters seems to be departing from Western spaceport. Lots activity
today!

The space-lanes around the Palace have been closed today, for the ceremony that is sure to ensue after the Galactic Proclamation will be announced.

And another group of freighters, leaving Eastern port… perhaps this is for a display in favor of His Majesty?

Oh, there’s my signal… the vote has been recounted and the results are in! The Chamber has gone very silent now- let’s go inside to hear the results.

Cleave Y’tulla of the sovereign world of Cato-Argo is approaching the podium. There is a low rumble of excitement inside the chamber.

Ah, Y’tulla is pausing before coming up fully to the podium… the rumbling is growing but apparently not from the senators.

It’s a … A Siren! Yes, a proximity siren has sounded inside the Chamber Hall!

We are under attack!

We go now, outside the Palace… several large war-class vessels have entered the atmosphere! They seem to be of every shape and size… but the most-recognizable is that of a Mon Calamari Battle Cruiser!

Yes! It has been confirmed that they are Mon Calamari Cruisers… and it looks like they are positioning to engage the Imperial Fleet!

Oh, my stars! We are under attack! The Emperor is under attack!

And more… and more freighters are leaving various spaceports from around Coruscant! It appears that they are headed directly for the World Devastators!

From above, we can clearly see that offensive action is starting to take place all over the city… there are explosions… blaster-fire from every direction!

My programming can not process what is happening right now…

If you have access, please take cover and protect yourself as an invasion has started! … it seems to be at the hands of the Rebel Alliance… possibly… sources have yet to confirm.

If standard procedure is to occur, all broadcasting and holonet projections will be jammed as the communication systems are over-ridd---

**

Inside the Galactic Palace:

The floor beneath his feet rumbled, signifying that somewhere a greater event had taken place.

The count-down had started. Timing was everything in a place like this. They had mapped out that it would take the Emperor approximately twenty minutes to return to his shuttle and make a run for it. That window was closing with every tight fight they encountered.

Alarms wailed, the sounds of blaster-fire and explosions could be heard in every direction.
Han Solo paused and listened from his position until he was sure that the sounds were moving away from his vantage point.

When he was confident for his safety and the safety of his team, he waved them forward, to take the next bit of ground.

The fight had been around the Senate Chamber, in the main hall, before actually entering the Senate auditorium. Leia had been very specific on how this attack was supposed to go.

“Do not fight inside the Senate Chamber.” She had said. “It will make diplomacy impossible if we ever try to resume the Galactic Senate.”

To her, the Senate still held some power; it was almost with religious sanctity that she respected the place; a shrine to the ethics of ideals.

It was the optics of politics again, and Han rolled his eyes at it, but understood her meaning. If they ever wanted peace, real peace, they, The Resistance, were going to have to show that they respected the process. This attack was only meant to single out those who were enemies of peace and of the people.

With no time for further contemplation, they had reached the crossroads of hallways; the perfect place for an ambush. Imperial Troops had been spotted in this area recently, and no doubt had been ordered to stand their ground.

It was the quickest and easiest route for escape for them, heading back to their landing platform.

The messages that flew over the commlinks were vague, and had proven incorrect in the two other hallways that the strike-team had been through. Why should this one be any different?

Han flattened his back against the nearest wall, keeping his blaster raised close to his chest. Looking over at the other members of his team, he silently gave the hand signal for them to take-up a similar position.

He didn’t have to look over when he felt the other presence come closer. The sound of a low chuff was all he needed to hear to know that Chewbacca was beside him.

“Yeah,” Han growled over his shoulder. “Looks like we got what we asked for.”

The Wookiee chuffed a few more times and nudged the smuggler.

Turning, he looked down to see that someone had come prepared. Chewbacca had opened the pouch that he usually carried at his hip. Inside, there were several small detonators.

Han looked up wearing a lop-sided grin as the Wookiee tilted his head. “It was nice of you to bring the party favors, Buddy.” He said, glad that he never underestimated his friends.

There was only one way to clear the hallway. Chewbacca reached into his sack and pulled out one of the detonators, and turned it on.

“I got you.” Han muttered. He could feel that they both mentally counted to three.

Instinct took over and Han stepped from around the corner. A few blaster bolts whizzed by him, and he fired back, but it was just enough cover for Chewie to launch the explosive device down the hallway, in the direction of the Imperials.
Coming back around the way, they braced themselves, until the walls rattled and the group heard the explosion.

Han, then looked over at his team, and gave them the signal that they were moving forward. “Keep it low.” He ordered.

He knew the risks; there was always a chance that there would be a few survivors on the Imperial side. Sure enough, one or two more bolts came towards them as the team moved.

This troop of Imperials seemed to be more-determined than the last. And it was easy to know why.

This Resistance strike-team was in-charge of finding and locating the Emperor himself; the instructions were to kill, render incapacitated, or capture – in that order of preference.

They were moving towards the arrival platform for Palpatine’s shuttle. Surely, that would be the means of escape if the Emperor decided to make a run for it, and that meant more troops protecting their exit strategy.

Still a gambler at heart, Han was willing to make a bet on it.

But something kept tugging at the corner of his mind, something that he wasn’t prepared to meet with the eventuality of…. Luke.

All the intel, and sight confirmations had said that the entourage had moved this way.

The same commands that were ordered for the Emperor were the same ones that were ordered for the Jedi, with only one caveat… if he demonstrates that he is acting against Resistance forces, it will leave them with no choice. Leia had it written into their objectives, and she would be forced to deal with it when the time came.

It was still unknown which side of the argument that Luke fell on. Han had watched the holo-news as Luke came off the shuttle, in-line with the Emperor; his face was blank, but Han also knew when the Kid was trying to put up a good front.

In the back of his mind, Han was still unsure if he’d be able to make the call if it came down to it. Luke was his brother, after all, and …Luke was still Luke – he hoped. Sure, the Kid was off a few times, but somewhere there was still that eager farm-farp who knew right from wrong.

The info had come across the commlinks that the detonators that were implanted earlier in the arrival-corridor had gone off and that some sort of collapse had happened there.

Han had hoped that this news was correct, hoping that he would find the Kid down, but not out. And lingering still at the back of his mind was another doubt, about this whole mission.

Years of his own Imperial training told him that there should have been more to this. He knew the type of detonators that they were using; small and placed strategically enough to cause the collapse, but he also knew that the corridor should have been swept for any sort of devices – they should have found them… shouldn’t they?

Han shook his head mentally as he strafed the hallway with his team, making it to the next set of blast doors; he was hoping his gut was wrong… that this wasn’t a trap.

But it wasn’t time to think about that now, they were at the doors that were either going to make it or break it for the team. Beyond this point, this was the corridor that was supposed to have collapsed – there should be wounded troops on the other side of this door, and given that this would have been
the place, there should also be an Emperor in critical condition… and maybe an unconscious Jedi too. But nothing was ever that easy.

Leia had warned him too, that Palpatine was not known for using the Force. If He was trying to escape, He would have used every method possible, without getting His hands dirty, before using the Force. Han grimace- he was not looking forward to that either.

Beyond this, there would have been a second set of doors, an airlock before making it directly to the landing platform and the shuttle that the entourage had arrived on.

Chances were very good that the Emperor was behind the blast doors, waiting for the airlock to open, and beyond that, a booby-trapped platform, set to explode if it came to that.

Stopped at the first set of doors, the strike force prepared themselves to take another leap in their mission. Han slipped the slicing disk into the computerized lock, and thanked his lucky stars that Karrde had brought his slicer, Ghent, in to the mix, allowing them this tech.

He held up his hand, and Han motioned the count-down for the door to open. 3-2-1…

Suddenly, through the opening doors a hail of blaster bolts flew in their direction; the first few members of the team caught it straight to the chest, taking them down.

Han glanced around and then flattened his back inside the protective framework.

*Close the blast doors! Close the blast doors!* The mechanical yelling was coming inside the hallway; ordering to block the Resistance team out.

He shook his head; it would be a crap-shoot to get in there. From what he could see, the hallway was littered with debris, fallen duracrete and hanging lighting fixtures; the smoke made it almost impossible to get an idea of the number of troops waiting in the hall.

*Keep going*… the back of Han's mind tingled, and he shook it off. But without reasoning, he did it. Dropping to the floor and crawling on his belly, he made it over the threshold and fired in the direction of the troops. He kept moving and coughing until he came to a piece of duracrete that was big enough to hide behind.

Several team members did the same thing; some were successful, some were not.

Amid the wailing sirens and the blasts, Han could detect that there was a massive amount of panic at the end of the hallway.

Through the smoke, he could see the red armor moving rapidly, and his mind sparked. They had to be close to the Emperor… *those things never leave His side!*

The blaster fire was still too thick to make a move. Aside from the immediate danger, duracrete was raining down periodically too. As Threepio would say, “This corridor might be not entirely stable.”

In the blueprints of the palace and surrounding landing platforms, that statement was probably more-true than false; there was no structure support under this hallway. If it fell, they all fell. So, the clock was running low on whether this would hold or not.

From behind the duracrete boulder, Han took a second to check the power level on his blaster, and then resumed blindly firing. The blasts that came back at him, seemed to know his position much better than any other set of troopers that they had encountered.
From behind him, he heard Chewie bellowed. Han squinted and listened to the instructions – it could work.

Chewie was going to throw what remaining detonators that he had in the direction of the troops. It would take out the troopers but it also might weaken the hallway further. It was a risk they were willing to take.

“Go for it!” Han shouted back.

With more might than a human, Han saw one of the cylindrical disks fly overhead, then seconds later, explode as the surprised troopers must have caught it and the ground shook.

Roaring again, Chewie explained that he only had two more detonators left.

“Do it buddy!” The smuggler yelled, putting all their chances on this.

The next detonator did just what the predecessor did, and took out a few more troops, or at least stunned them.

The floor beneath Han groaned as it shook. “This is not good.” He mumbled.

The troops must have caught on to where the explosive devices were coming from, as they changed their aim to the door frame.

The last detonator didn’t get very far. Han saw it leave, and get launched into the air, but Chewie’s throw must have been short as it landed in front of the duracrete slab that Han was hiding behind.

Han’s eyes widened and he watched the red lights blink down to their time when they would let loose. He wanted to cringe and look away, bracing himself for impact.

Suddenly, the disk rose up from the floor, and hurled itself in the direction of the troops, exploding last-second where it was supposed to.

Shaking it off, Han watched as smaller pieces of fallen duracrete raised up from off the floor, and hurled themselves in the same direction as the detonator, pelleting the troops at the other end, disorientating them.

Han looked over at the one of his team members, and saw that his mouth went slack, watching this. The smuggler broke his own dumb-founded expression with the only thing that made sense. “Kid! Is this you?” He yelled forward.

He couldn’t help but think that it was, suddenly happy.

“Yeah…” came the response in a voice, that he recognized, coughed and sounded rasped with pain.

Han looked over the top of the slab, in the direction of the voice. Through the smoke, he could make out a form that was braced up against a slab of his own, wearing the dark browns that he had seen Luke wearing in the holo-vid.

He was determined to make it over to him. Han brought his legs under him, getting enough momentum to roll into position. Without really thinking it through, he tucked and rolled into the middle of the firing field.

Blasts followed his movement and with efficiency he returned them, crouching and sliding to where he felt he needed to be.
The floor creaked again; the sound of stressing metal.

Rolling closer to the wall, Han fired as he went, holding his blaster awkwardly, until he was up against the wall. He was mistaken, there was actually two large pieces of duracrete; one that was giving him cover, and second one, in front of him, that the familiar form was crouched behind.

“Kid!” he yelled over. “How we doing?” He smirked, waiting on the answer. It would be a sure sign of who he was dealing with.

With a groan, he heard. “Same as always.”

Han didn’t have much time to sigh, but now he felt somewhat relieved, as relieved as he could be during a firefight. He peaked over the duracrete, just to be sure, and got his first answer as to why the Jedi hadn’t been in the fight until now.

Slumped against the wall, it looked like he had taken the main blast head-on, from the explosives that had been implanted in the corridor. Perhaps, he was just coming to… a streak of blood was trickling down his forehead, and his face was covered in dust. The Jedi had seen better days.

“I haven’t got a Tauntaun for you to rest and cuddle up to… can you move?” The smuggler asked, implying one of the many times that they had saved each other’s lives, sure that it would invoke something… anything.

Several larger pieces of duracrete lifted in the air and flew in the direction of the troopers. With a grunt, “Yeah… I can move.” Han heard.

And here was the big question. “Which way?” Han asked slowly and loudly.

It was an implied question, loaded with the possibility that Luke might be joining their team or battling against it.

The Jedi coughed a few times but didn’t reply.

Sensing it, Han knew what the silence meant; there would be no cut and dry answer to this one. Luke wouldn’t act against the Resistance, but for some reason, he couldn’t join them either… he certainly wasn’t hampering them as another round of debris pelted the troopers with invisible hands.

Time was up and the decision was made as the sound of the blast doors opening at the Trooper’s side of the hallway, allowing an escape.

In between the noise, he heard the voice again. “Han… I just can’t…” Luke wheezed; his voice sounding broken and apologetic.

As fresh air cracked into the hallway from the open door, Luke got to his feet and made a break for it, in the direction of the Troopers, igniting his lightsaber and deflecting bolts from both sides of the fight, heading towards the Emperor’s platform.

Han watched, looking up, seeing Luke make for the door at the far end, following the Emperor’s entourage, trying to make it to the shuttle to escape.

The Jedi’s instinct would be wrong on this one, heading directly for the airlock that was triggered to explode, causing the platform, the shuttle and anything else on it to fall to the planet below; nothing would catch it, no one could survive. It was a last-ditch effort.

Han felt it when the second set of doors to the airlock opened simultaneously, and a cold wave
washed over him. He jumped up, ready to follow his brother, to warn him, to call him back, and if duty required it, to stun the Jedi where he stood.

What he witnessed, he couldn’t describe if he needed to, but he still ran towards it.

The large blast hit, rattling the entire structure, threatening to throw him backwards. Han looked up in time to see Luke’s form, with his hands raised up, projecting a glowing blue shield-like form in front of himself, so that everyone that was left in the hallway was protected from the sonic shock came through; a sonic shock that would have killed everyone, and Luke, the Jedi had blocked it.

Even with all that power in the Force, he still couldn’t stop the inevitable, and the sound of tearing metal told a different story, the platform was about to give way, breaking at its most-fragile points.

“No!” Luke screamed in panic, still rushing towards the entourage.

A second wave threw him back and all the others around him; the smuggler and the strike team couldn’t have predicted it, but the Jedi could.

Han had only seen this sort of discharge once before, and not all that long ago, on Wayland, with the death of C’Boath. The feral electro-static burst and cloud of energy dropped him to his feet – the same sort of power surge that could only be summoned when a Dark Force-user died.

Chewie howled in agony, and other team members grabbed their sides from the eruption.

Cringing and crawling, Han watched as Luke was still trying to get to the platform. It took all his effort to get up from off the floor and follow his brother.


The metallic groan reminded him that this hallway wasn’t going to stick around much longer either. Looking over his should, he yelled to his team, “Fall back! - That’s an order!”.

Chewie roared a refusal, until his eyes met those of the smuggler’s, and saw the determination to go after the Jedi.

Losing track of the number of steps that it took, Han followed through the cloud of smoke, dodging dangling wires and chunks of duracrete to get to Luke. There was no way to tell where the hallway ended and where the edge would just fall off. Running blindly was the only way to catch up.

Jogging with a limp as it appeared that he had injured himself, Han was about to pick up the pace, heading into a cloud when he was stopped by an arm across his chest, holding him back.

When he looked down, he saw the reason for the short trip. There was nothing below his feet to travel on, and the metal heaved again, bounced, with the added weight.

Luke was braced against what was left of the threshold of the airlock blast-doors, face cut up and bruised, dusty and covered in debris. He was breathing heavily and holding the smuggler back from falling to his death.

Han flailed his arm backwards, hoping the momentum would keep him inside the remnants of the hallway. When he gained his balance, he looked over the edge and saw the reason for the collapsing hallway.

The explosives hadn’t exactly done their work, and the platform was hanging on by one strut,
attached to the underside support-beam of the palace by a whim.

And on the platform, held in place by the grav-locks, was the Imperial Shuttle, weighing the whole thing down, threatening to break it all off. The shuttle looked undisturbed by any sort of damage.

Han turned his head slowly to see the expression on his brother’s face. No Force-skills were needed here to know what the other man was thinking. “Don’t try it, Kid…” He said slowly. “The Emperor’s gone… we’ve won.” He said quietly, knowing that it probably wasn’t true… it didn’t feel true at all.

Luke’s face was blank, jarred; his eyes wide just staring at the shuttle. His chest heaved a few more times before he turned to acknowledge his brother’s face. “He’s not.” He said in a voice that was both calm and icy, and so very, very sure of what he was saying.

Luke blinked a few times, bringing life and expression back into his face. “He had a clone waiting aboard the Eclipse… waiting for Him to transform if anything went wrong.” He looked over the edge again at the dangling shuttle, past to down below where a lifeless clone body would have fallen.

“Don’t do it, Kid.” Han pleaded again.

“I have to.” Luke answered quickly; his muscles tensing for the jump, reasoning that if he landed just right down the shuttle, he could get the ramp open. “I have to…” He repeated.

“No, you don’t!” Han yelled as the wind whipped by, reminding him of the precariously spot they were in. He grabbed the front of the Jedi’s tunic to reason with him.

The metal groaned and the popping of joints could be heard, a warning of things to come.

Luke wasn’t looking at him; he was looking at the shuttle, mentally making the calculations, before then, looking into his brother’s eyes, his own eyes softening, going sad. “Mara…” He said, almost whispering “He’ll kill her if…if…”

Luke looked back up into the sky, to see the outline of the Eclipse, still in orbit; there was still time to get to her. “She’s pregnant.” He said blankly, brokenly, blindsided in his feelings.

Han, shocked at the news, saw the haunted expression of a desperate man, and slowly released the other man’s shirt.

There was no time to fill-in the story that needed to be told, but emotions don’t need permission to give answers.

They both looked up to the sky to see the Eclipse suddenly disappear, going to lightspeed; Luke tensed, almost panicked.

It was a long second, as Luke saw Han nod once and step back, letting him do what he needed to do.

“Tell Leia that I’ve found a way to stop Him.” Luke said abruptly.

Han shuddered briefly before he watched the Jedi jump off the failing structure and fall towards the shuttle.

He couldn’t have predicted anyone else’s success, but he watched as Luke landed, rolled and was able to open the ramp, not fifty meters below him. Han squinted, and let out the breath that he was holding as he saw Luke make it inside the shuttle.
A few seconds and lights on the shuttle came alive, signifying that Luke was able to power it up. Another few seconds and the grav-locks disengaged, tumbling and then the shuttle spirited away, leaving a trail behind it.

Han hung on a little longer, watching the shuttle pursued by a B-wing fighter. It maneuvered to avoid the blasts, then leave the gravity well, and make the jump, following the Eclipse.

The hallway rebounded with the shift in weight, throwing Han backwards, back into the hallway.

He didn’t need a second opinion, Han retreated, running, taking his team back into the palace with him. At least this part of the mission was completed. He knew that he had to find his wife immediately and tell her about the encounter.

They ran from the hallway; Resistance team members, Wookiee and smuggler, bracing for the full collapse of the landing platform.

Tell her what? Han had no clue, but he was sure that the fight wasn’t over… not by a long shot.

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Byss: under the Imperial Palace, inside The Cloning Chamber

The machines beeped and alarmed wildly amongst the debris; sounding their state of panic as the support systems for the cloned bodies died away.

They had been called into action in the moment that the Emperor’s entourage on Coruscant had met with an ambushed. Everything had been perfectly timed, perfectly coordinated. It had taken hours to get to this point in the orchestrated plans, and with little uncertainty, they knew what needed to be done.

In the adjacent clinical room, the doctor’s body lay limp on the floor. One pierce through the chest with a force-pike was all that was needed to relieve Doctor Cylo VII of his present form. It was in the orders to eliminate that clone in particular. The doctor had the growing knowledge of how to keep life going and growing well-past its expected days.

Approaching each spaarti tube, a blaster made short-work of the system, frying the all the components within, with two shots.

When the tube was opened, the body and all the contents spilled out onto the floor, the hooded figure rammed the pike through the chest of the chest of the dying clone, just to be sure.

The body coughed, sputtered and gurgled its last breath all in one motion; never given a chance to live.

They had once been His loyal Shadow Hand, but now...

In their native-tongue, the separated Oscian twins took at their given tasks, instructing and confirming once they had completed the slaughter and moved on to the next tube. Their sense in the Force told them when their work was completed.

They spoke in the language that sounded only like clicking and ticking to anyone else.

“We are almost finished Brother.” The secondary twin with the mechanical right arm chirped out-loud.
“Yes, Brother… only one more row to go.” The more-dominate twin was leading the direction that they were headed in. “Palpatine didn’t have much security in this area…” He commented snidely.

“There are less clones in this row.” The secondary Oscian remarked, glad that their work was almost done.

It was eerie being in such a place, and doing such a task, but it was ordered and given to them to perform.

“This doesn’t feel right… there should be…” The secondary twin said quietly, and after saying it, regretting it, sensing that his brother would find weakness in him.

“What?” The dominant twin was curt, and asked just before he shoved his force-pike into a groaning form on the floor. “Darth Faustus is gone… Skywalker isn’t here to protect his Master’s forms… and Palpatine will not be back from Coruscant for days, if not longer. This is our perfect moment.”

“Yes brother.” The secondary twin dropped his head minutely. “Yet, I can’t help but feel…”

“What?” He snapped again at his brother. “What you are feeling is that we are very close to finishing the Supreme Leader’s wishes… he will be very pleased indeed.”

“Yes, brother… very pleased.” The secondary twin repeated.

Neither of them took to notice the form that had arrived through the clinical room and now waited in the doorway to the cloning chamber; looking and watching with glaring, glowing red eyes from under its hood.

Pausing, it cackled; laughing at the audacity of its minions. The sound of the laugh carried over the sounds of the failing equipment and the ghoulish screeches of dying clones, filling the space with its own macabre tone.

The Oscians stopped, frozen in their positions, ready to stab the last clone together.

The cackle filled the space again, bouncing off the walls, heightened and powerful in the Force.

The dominant Oscian looked to his brother before he spoke. “Master?” He asked in Basic, surprised, trying to sound inquisitive rather than guilty.

The other Oscian twin looked to see what could have made the sound.

Before either could react, a sharp, crooked line of electrical current caught them each squarely in the chest, frying the electronics in their arms, sending arcs into the rest of their bodies. The smell of ozone and decomposition perfumed the room.

“Why, you treacherous leeches!” The voice boomed over the room, enhanced with a consuming dark aura.

The dominant Oscian saw a hooded-figure move about the room, coming closer to the isle that they had stopped at. The twins looked at each other as the voice was not the one that they recognized, but the presence most-certainly was.

The form moved to round the isle, and the presence of Darkness loomed over the twin Oscians.

As pliant as they were, they ducked down, appearing to be submissive, still wounded from the first
shot of electricity. The dominant Oscian dared to look up at the form that was above them now.

Beyond the form, two Red Imperial Guards waited at the threshold—this was their Master's bidding. From the shadows, the silhouette was not the one that was expected.

“Master?” The Oscian asked again, as his mouth went slack with surprise as he saw the face inside the hood.

Without another word, a clear shot of blue electricity hit both Oscians in their chests, internally cooking the bodies where they stood. Before another word could be uttered, the room echoed with the high-pitched voltaic storm and maniacal laugh.

TBC

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