In the wake of the catastrophic events at Bespin, nascent Jedi Luke Skywalker postpones his return to Dagobah and follows his friends back to the Alliance. Once again leading Rogue Squadron and struggling with the fallout of Vader's revelations, he receives a baffling and disturbing gift from the Dark Lord himself: a girl.

Force strong but half-dead, she inexplicably feels like his, and her arrival will change everything. Vader plots to get his son at his side while the Emperor plots to kill him. The last of the Jedi harangue him to finish his training, while the Alliance tries to use him to its best advantage. Amidst the chaos, Luke finds himself increasingly anchored and challenged by the fiery-haired woman who's captured his heart. She's every bit as broken as he is, but together they just might survive.

Notes

AU Post Bespin/ESB.

This is the first thing I'll have posted publicly, and it's not beta'd - constructive criticism (and editing notes as needed) welcome!
Leia Organa, the last Princess of Alderaan, gave a bone-weary sigh of relief and slumped gratefully against the solid, furry warmth of the wookie behind her. Her aunts would have had fits if they’d been able to see her exceptionally un-regal posture in that moment, but she didn't care.

All that mattered was that the people she loved – the tiny precious patchwork of chosen family she had left - would live.

In front of her, Han Solo and Luke Skywalker were laid out side by side in matching repulsar beds that hovered parallel to one another in the pristine and spartan confines of a compact cabin in the medical cruiser's private care ward. Nutrients and cleansers in I.V. drips affixed to Han's left arm were gradually restoring balance to his system and color to his skin. The EmDee droids had opted to keep him sedated; hibernation sickness could be harsh, and it was kinder to let him sleep through the recovery period. He'd only been encased in carbonite a few hours – Leia thanked the goddess for the hundredth time that Lando's people had disabled the *Slave I* while Fett was observing Han's torture. She didn't want to imagine what would have happened if they hadn't been able to corner him. If Lando's security forces hadn't stuck loyally to their Baron Administrator and helped steal Han back before he could be spirited away to Jabba's grubby clutches.

In the second bed, Luke lay pale and listless. He, too, was sedated, though his was lingering from the surgery they'd done to salvage what they could of the stump where his right hand had been. They'd given him the best cybernetic hand available, covered in synth flesh dyed to match his own. If she hadn't known, hadn't blinked through watering, horrified eyes at the wound when they'd pulled him from his precarious perch under Bespin, she probably wouldn't have noticed that it wasn't real at all. Even now, he was transitioning from sedation to exhausted sleep, muttering unintelligible words plaintively through lips split and cracked by the hellishly cold winds that coursed across Bespin's underbelly. He hadn't told her yet what had happened in those long, dark hours while she and Chewie fought for Han in the station above him. Hadn't explained how he'd even known they needed him, or where they'd be. She didn't know if he'd finished his Jedi training (though that seemed unlikely), or simply abandoned it to rush to their sides. Whether he'd stay when he woke, or disappear again to the unknown swamp where his Master promised to make him a Jedi.

That he'd confronted Vader was obvious. That Vader hadn't died, she'd learned from Alliance Intelligence. The only thing Luke had told her – had mumbled, half-coherently, his blue eyes shining with unshed tears and heavy with self-recrimination – was that he'd lost Artoo. While he was in surgery, Intel had quietly confirmed that although his x-wing had been recovered, Luke's beloved, faithful little droid had been carted away in Vader's personal TIE fighter, to places and fates unknown.

Dodonna had come by earlier, urging her to get some rest. Rieekan had simply squeezed her shoulder in understanding and let her be. Luke and Han had sat with her by turns in the long, dreadful weeks after Yavin when she'd been confined to the med ward, enduring treatment after treatment to contain and repair the heinous abuse Tarkin and Vader had inflicted on her in the Death Star. They'd never asked any questions, never looked at her with pity or treated her as if she might break if they breathed wrong. They'd merely done their damnedest to distract her. They'd teased and joked and sometimes just sat in companionable silence so that she was never alone with her nightmares. Now it was her turn.

Leia shifted, settling in against Chewie, and waited. This was her family. Whatever hell they'd have to face when they woke, they'd face together.
Mara Jade knelt at the foot of her Master's throne, head bowed low in obeisance. Behind unparalleled shields, her heart pounded and her mind raced.

Cold fury crackled off the Emperor, flowing down the metal steps between them like a corrupted waterfall to spill into the icy cloud of wrath that churned around her. At her back, tucked into the shadows beyond the reach of the room's minimal lighting, she could feel Vader's gaze boring into her stiff spine. He, too, radiated dark energy, though his reminded her disconcertingly of a predator patiently observing prey.

Mara gritted her teeth, and funneled her resentment into strengthening her shields. She was no one's prey.

“Explain yourself, my Hand!” Palpatine snapped viciously. “I gave you an order.”

Her body hummed like a live wire, but when she opened her mouth her voice came out with the smooth, polished deference only a lifetime of training could produce.

“I completed the mission as you instructed, my Emperor. All of the targets were eliminated, all of the requested intelligence retrieved and immediately supplied to Isard.”

She didn't look up. Didn't twitch. Willed herself to be as cool and unmoved as the Ithorian marble of the Imperial Palace's ballroom floor.

“You assisted the efforts of traitors to my throne,” he snarled.

Mara was taken aback. “I have done so many times, Master,” she reminded him, uncertain what made this any different. “They were a resource to be used, and I exploited them to achieve my mission parameters in the most efficient and effective way possible. I did nothing to disrespect your authority, Master, I swear it.”

Another crack of dark energy lashed against her, and she set her jaw against the pain. She could feel the welts already rising on her skin under the snug, soft leather of her bodysuit.

“You allowed them to live!” Palpatine howled. “The traitors walked free.”

This was wrong. Terribly wrong. He’d never been this upset with her. This unhinged, uncontrolled in her presence. She'd completed the mission – gone above and beyond. This shouldn't be happening.

“They were misguided, my Emperor,” she licked her lips and spun through her lessons on negotiating, searching for words, phrases, that would explain to his satisfaction. “They truly wanted what was best for the Empire, and followed me instantly when I commanded it. They are superbly trained.”

She might have been rambling now. That wouldn't be acceptable, but maybe it didn't matter. He was in her head already, slithering around, scraping against her thoughts and intentions. Surely he would see that she'd only done what she thought was best for him. Just as she always did.

“The Empire has invested heavily in them, Master.” She would not plead or make excuses. Only offer him her logic and accept his conclusions. She was the Emperor's Hand; she did not grovel. He wouldn't have allowed it, anyway. “To kill them would have been a waste of precious resources. They can be reclaimed. Be of vital use.”
Her head snapped up, gripped and painfully jerked by a gnarled, unseen hand.

“No level of investment spares someone the costs of disobedience,” Palpatine rasped, his sulfurous eyes gleaming a sickly mottled yellow. “You felt for them, my Hand.”

Mara didn't speak. The vice-like grip on her jaw made it impossible. Not that there would anything to say. Her Master's vile, ghostly fingers pressed against her mind, a sharp point of pain in the tiny sliver of memory that was a split second's empathy for the Hand of Judgment. It had been less than a heartbeat of weakness, but shame flooded her, saturating her until she might drown.

He'd warned her. Been warning her for years about that compassionate streak, that deep-seated flaw that left her open to empathy. It had never been condoned. Force knew she tried to crush it, to rip it out – anything to make herself perfect in his eyes. It hadn't worked.

His malevolent gaze sliced through her, and she knew with sudden, terrible certainty that this failure – her only failure, ever, in his service – was to be her last.

“Yes.” It was a sibilant hiss, coiling around her, twining through her very bones. “You understand now, Mara Jade. You are unfit to be my Hand. I will show you what should be done with those who entertain thoughts of treason for so much as a breath.”

Pain exploded in every cell of Mara's body, and she contorted violently, a blood curdling shriek tearing itself from her throat against her will. Her vision went electric blue, swallowed by the snapping, crackling bolts of violet-blue light that shot from her Master's fingertips and engulfed her. She clenched her eyes shut, suddenly terrified that they might burst from the insane pressure rioting under her skin as her blood boiled in her veins.

The Emperor Force-held her in place, just off the ground at the foot of the stairs, his cruel grasp compressing her ribs even as her body tried to arch and she gagged for breath under the assault. A rib snapped, then another. She couldn't feel it under the blistering agony consuming her, but she heard them and recognized the familiar sound. She could feel the frosty mist of his cruel cackling as it whirled around her, the biting cold of it slicing sharp against the blistering heat of the lightening. It felt like she was being skinned alive, one infinitely fine layer at a time. She thought she sobbed, but she couldn't be sure. There was too much pain, hitting her from inside out and outside in, eating through her like acid, and she couldn't see, couldn't think, couldn't hear, couldn't move.

“You disgust me.” If Mara had been able to hear the Emperor's last words to her over the endless, roaring rush of torment consuming her they'd have broken her heart.

Everything stopped.

Mara's skull impacted the durasteel deck plating of the bottom step with an audible crack when Palpatine dropped her with a short, derisive flick of his ashen fingers.

“Leave her.” Turning his back on his discarded Hand as though nothing had happened, Palpatine resumed his scheduled meetings with fresh calm and poise.
“As you say, Lord Vader.” The Noghri melted back into the shadows, another shadow detaching itself from the wall to trail him.

The Sith stalked to the containment field he'd erected in the center of his quarters. The silver and blue astromech caught within rocked on its wheels as much as the restraining bolt would allow and spat a scurrilous stream of creatively crude curses at him.

“You have a very rude mouth for such a small droid,” the Dark Lord observed in amusement. “If you wish to be returned to your Master, however, I suggest you adopt a more civil tongue.”

Artoo gave a dubious squealing chirp that informed the Sith in no uncertain terms what he thought of that idea.

“Do you not wish to return to Skywalker?”

The droid gave a sad tootle.

“If you agree to carry two messages to your young Master, I will allow you to take a confiscated Rebel shuttle and return to him, unharmed and untracked. Do you understand?”

After a split second of processing, the droid beeped wary acknowledgment. He had no desire to comply with this monstrosity, created from the twisted remnants of what had once been his mistress's beloved, but his logic circuits told him he couldn't afford to turn down this opportunity. Besides, he reasoned smugly, he'd technically only agreed to carry the messages. If he decided he didn't like them, it would be a simple matter to “accidentally” corrupt the files at playback. He'd have done his end of the bargain, and Master Luke would remain unharmed.

“Good.”

The door whispered open, and Artoo's photo receptor tracked the little grey aliens that had left earlier as they crossed silently behind the Dark Lord. Each securely grasped a booted heel of the limp body they dragged behind them.

Without turning, Vader commanded, “Secure her in the crate with the devices provided.”

“Yes, Lord Vader.” Together, they lifted their limp captive, hefting her into a large plasti-steel cube that had been delivered a few hours before.

Artoo didn't get watch any further, however. It was time to start recording.
Wedge Antilles fumbled blindly in the dark next to his bed. His questing fingers closed on the heel of one of the boots he'd toed off before falling across his bunk in mind-numbing fatigue only a handful of hours before. Without moving his head from where it was buried in his pillow, he winged the footwear in the general direction of the room's other bunk. It impacted what he guessed was the wall with a solid *thunk*.


“Comm.” Antilles mumbled. “Goin' off f'rever.”

Wearily, Luke rolled over and groped for the comm device beside his bed. “Skywalker.”

“Luke,” Leia's voice was urgent and sent a shot of adrenaline straight through him. “We need you in the comm center, right away.”

“At 0300 the comm center was sparsely populated but still hummed with low-level activity. Leia was there, calm and oriented as always, despite the dark circles forming under her eyes and the stress lines near her temples. Even now, Luke thought, she was still the prettiest woman he'd ever seen.

“On it.” Luke thumbed the device off and hauled himself out of bed. “Sorry,” he apologized as he flicked the lights on to their lowest setting and started throwing on his clothing. It was rumpled from having been peeled off and dropped in a haphazard pile beside the bed, but when Leia said 'right away' she usually meant it.

Wedge grumbled something unintelligible and dragged a blanket over his head. The long, late shifts were taking a toll on both of them.

Double checking his attire to make sure he was decent, Luke scooped up Wedge's boot and dropped it back by his CO's bunk. “You couldn't grab anything softer?” he asked wryly. Without waiting for an answer, he flicked the lights back off and was out the door.

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“What have we got?” he asked, moving directly to her side.

The tech in front of them half turned, head cocked as he listened to his headset, fingers dancing over the buttons and knobs of his console.

Before he could open his mouth, though, C-3PO shuffled over, raising his arms and exclaiming, “Oh, Master Luke! It's the most wonderful thing! Artoo Detoo has made contact!”

Luke's heart leapt, hope suddenly writ large across his expressive face. “Artoo?! He found a way to get us a message?”
The tech, clearly experienced with Threepio, cut the golden droid off to answer that one himself. "Yes, Sir, Commander. He claims to be on one of the desert moons of Delphon with a shuttle. He's requesting pickup, and says it's urgent that we come quickly." The man frowned and pressed a finger against the speaker that cupped around his ear. "It gets a little fuzzy from there – some kind of interference – but it sounds like he's got some kind of time-sensitive cargo."

"Cargo?" Leia's brow furrowed. "What kind of cargo would he have been able to steal from the Empire?"

"Could be whatever was on the shuttle when he jacked it," Luke suggested, his mind whirling at the thought of getting his mechanical friend back. "Any Imperial activity in that area?" he asked the tech.

"No, Sir. There's not much of value in that system to interest them. It appears to be all clear."

"What's all clear?" Han entered hurriedly, still pulling his vest on. "What's goin' on?"

"Wonderful news, Captain Solo!" Threepio crowed. "Artoo Detoo has made his escape! He's waiting for us to come rescue him, right now!"

"Ah, so he did get out," Solo grinned, pleased. "I knew the Imps wouldn't be able to hold the little bugger."

"He's got some kind of cargo," Leia told him, turning around and folding her arms across her chest. "We'll need to send something other than just x-wings to the pick-up."

"You mean you need the Falcon, Princess," Han wrapped an arm around her hip, and Leia leaned into his solid warmth. "Chewie and me can have her ready to go by the time the Kid here rouses the Rogues."

Leia nodded, decisively. "Getting Artoo back is a priority. If he's stayed true to form, he'll have spliced his way into half the Imperial network and have valuable information. The pick-up team should launch as soon as we can get everyone in their ships. Luke," she turned to her brother, still marveling slightly at how right it felt to think of him that way. "You should go with Han in the Falcon. We'll need you free to work on Artoo if he's been compromised."

The Jedi's heart twisted at the idea of the droid having suffered at the hands of the Empire, but he nodded his agreement. "I'll go put out the call. See you in the docking bay."

Han grinned. "You're just afraid of what he'll do if he sees you flying that bucket of bolts with another astromech in his slot."

Luke scowled, but couldn't quite honestly deny the jibe. He opted not to answer in favor of just jogging off to wake his squad. They wouldn't be happy to be routed from their beds so soon, but behind the complaints he knew they'd move with real urgency. Every x-wing pilot considered his (or her) astromech almost an extension of himself; they'd no more willingly leave one behind than abandon a flight-mate. He smiled slightly to himself, thinking of the party they'd no doubt throw in the little droid's honor when they got back.

Leia tipped her head up to look at Han. "Keep an eye on him, will you? If Artoo's been damaged, he'll take it hard."

Han dropped a kiss on her forehead. "Don't worry, Your Highnessness. That tin can's as stubborn as the Kid. They'll be all right."

Leia was there two hours later when the small convoy launched. She prayed silently to whatever
gods watch over the Jedi that getting Artoo back would start to lift the dark cloud that had hung over
Luke since Bespin.

He'd improved fractionally after the long, dark night they'd spent huddled in the Falcon, stunned and
clinging to each other in the wake of his broken confession to her and Han and Chewie about his
battle with Vader. His face, permanently tanned from Tatooine's twin suns, had paled nearly to
alabaster when he'd stumbled over clumsy words to choke out the gut-twisting secret of their
parentage. His voice had been the barest of raw whispers when he divulged Vader's offer to rule as
father and son, and his own choice to fall from the gantry rather than acquiesce.

They'd speculated about the things it was impossible to know in hushed tones. Reassured Luke in
much louder, firmer ones that he'd done everything as right as he could. That Vader's revelations and
demands did nothing to change who he was, who *they* were. Eventually, the turmoil of those dark,
haunting hours had given way to dawn. Habit and the unyielding demands of a bustling Rebellion
demanded they crack the Falcon's hatch and re-enter a world that somehow seemed both totally
unchanged and completely alien.

They'd kept their secrets quiet, and gone back to living as if nothing had changed. As if *they* had not
changed, irrevocably.

Leia watched the last ship in the convoy wink out into hyperspace, then squared her shoulders
resolutely and turned away. There was nothing more she could do now. Nothing but wait. Wait, and
hope.

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The trip to Delphon wasn't long, but the hours seemed to pass with all the speed of a bantha trudging
through a Dagobah swamp. Luke managed to spend the first few hours asleep, his worn body
demanding rest. After that, he gritted his teeth and made himself practice the basic maintenance on
his new prosthetic hand that the med droids had proscribed.

*Regular adjustments will be needed until it is fully settled in,* they'd instructed in that unperturbably
calm, almost sing-song vocal modulation they were infamous for. The proper steps had been
patiently modeled for him until he could easily make the minor tweaks himself. *Technically* it was
easy, at least. Psychologically it was still excruciating to stare at an open panel of circuitry where he'd
so recently had flesh, blood, and bone. To work on himself as he would a droid.

*The first step to becoming more machine than man, like Vader. Like… my father.*

At least here, in his bunk on the Falcon, he could flounder in the dark tides of his turbulent emotions
alone. No Rogues peering over his shoulder, innocently curious about the technicalities of his new
appendage. No feigning good humor and forcing half-baked smiles at lewd jokes intended to bolster
his spirits. There was a shred of peace in that, and Luke reminded himself to be thankful for it.

He was more grateful, however, when the Falcon's chimes indicated their approach on their target
was imminent. Anything other than agitated impatience became impossible, then, driving away his
pain and fears for himself.

Yoda's scoldings about patience and control prodded the back of his mind, but Luke ignored them.
This was his *friend.* A friend who'd been taken captive and held by the Empire – by Vader - and
somehow made a miraculous escape. He had every right to be anxious.
They reverted from hyperspace without incident, and quickly located the shuttle on the moon's otherwise barren expanse. The Rogues set up a defensive perimeter while the *Falcon* went down. Han, Chewie and Luke disembarked, blasters and light saber out and at the ready.

Artoo whistled and tooted an enthusiastic welcome from the lowered ramp as they approached and Luke broke into a grin. “Artoo! Are you all right?”

The droid rocked on its wheels and launched a string of insistent electronic chatter.

“Whoa, slow down!” Luke admonished, crouching in front of the droid and running his hands over it's casing, looking for damage, tracking devices, or other major issues.

“Luke, we're picking up company on our long-range scopes.” Wedge's voice broke across the open comm channel. “Doesn't look like Imps, but doesn't look friendly either. We should make this quick.”

“Got it, thanks.” Luke looked up at Han, who had ducked around them to check out the shuttle's interior and was just emerging again.

“This thing's going nowhere,” Solo shook his head. “Looks like one of the ones we lost in that attack off Sullust last year. It's banged all to hell and completely wiped – I don't even how the tin can here got it this far.”

Artoo bleated something rude about Han's lack of faith in his skills, then whistled commandingly at Luke again.

“Did you find the cargo he's talking about?” Luke frowned.

“Yeah,” Solo eyed the droid. “It's a crate. Only thing in here. Whatever's in it isn't showing up on scans, and me an' Chewie couldn't get it open.”

//It's Force sealed. For Master Luke only.// Artoo announced, imperiously.


“Luke,” Wedge prompted over the comm again. “Hurry it up, or this is gonna get ugly.”

“Right.” Luke jumped to his feet. “Han, set some charges – if we can't take the shuttle back, we should blow it. Chewie, get Artoo into the *Falcon* and get her fired up. I'll get the crate loaded and we'll get out of here.”

Artoo rolled after Chewie, and Han disappeared with a quick nod of agreement. The shuttle's interior was small and gutted, so there was no missing the crate Artoo had referred to. Luke let his eyes roll half-closed in concentration, lifted one hand, and floated the crate via the Force out of the shuttle and into *Falcon*'s cargo hold. At least his endless hours levitating rocks on Dagobah had finally proved useful. Moments later, they were rocketing off the moon, the fiery shell of the shuttle in their wake. They jumped to light speed just as the approaching ships – Wedge was laying money on pirates – entered firing range.

Once in hyperspace, Luke made Artoo his first priority. To his surprise, the droid didn't seem to have been subjected to any damage, and wasn't rigged with any kind of tracking or sabotage devices. There was evidence of a restraining bolt having been applied and then removed, but nothing else.

Nothing except a message.
Luke sat on the *Falcon*'s common area floor, heart and jaw clenching, as a hologram of Darth Vader flickered to life from Artoo's projector.

“‘My son,’” the Sith intoned ominously. “I am most displeased at your continued rejection of your true heritage. Despite your obstinacy, my offer stands. As a gesture of good faith, I am returning your droid, unharmed. You will find that the contents of the crate accompanying him also belong to you, and may prove highly useful. A word of caution, my son. I would not tell your *masters,*” the title dripped with condescension, “about your new acquisition. They will not understand.”

With that cryptic warning, the hologram vanished.

“What in the hells was that about?” Han demanded. He scowled fiercely at the now-empty spot on the floor, seriously debating whether scouring it with acid would be sufficient to remove the taint of the Sith's projected image. The casualness of his pose, leaning against the wall with his arms folded, belied the tension that hummed through his body. Bacta and a few other medical interventions had healed his body from the ravages of the scan grid and Vader's other torture toys at Bespin; his mind still bore vivid scars.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Luke shook his head, uneasily. “What would he have that would belong to me besides Artoo?”

//Your hand?// Chewie growled darkly.

Luke flinched and managed weakly, “I think he'd use a smaller crate for that.”

“Short and Round said it was Force sealed,” Han said, considering. “Can you open it?”


//Is that safe?// The Wookie tipped his head, snuffling suspiciously.

Luke was quiet a moment, wrestling internally. He tried reaching into the Force, and got only vague encouragement that wasn't particularly insightful.

Again, Yoda's voice berated him – *you will know when you are calm, at peace.* He shoved the memory aside. He'd like to see even *Yoda* figure out how to be 'calm and at peace' right now.

Finally, he decided to trust the Force (vague as it was intent on being) and said with quiet conviction, “Vader wants me to join him. He tried violence on Bespin and it didn't work. The box is probably a bribe of some kind – an effort to buy or tempt me. It shouldn't hurt us.”

Han was less convinced, but he trusted the Kid. Moreover, though he'd never have said so out loud, if something was going to go wrong, he'd rather it happened in the contained confines of his ship than on the Base where Leia could also be exposed. Force knew she was struggling as much as Luke with the thought of having Vader for a father, and still trying to run the Rebellion besides. If they could spare her anything, he was determined to do so.

“All right,” Han gestured to the crate. “Let's see what it is, then.” He made himself grin to lighten the tension. “Maybe it'll be liquor – that always makes a good bribe.”

Luke managed a small smile before it slipped in anxiety. He ran his hands over the box, sinking into the Force as Ben had taught him. He didn't find any sense of threat or danger, though he could feel his father's touch on it, and it sent an unpleasant shiver down his spine. Finding two small points that felt oddly like the Force equivalent of latches, he experimentally depressed them. There was a sharp, loud *click* and he stepped back quickly as the lid popped.
White gas wafted out of the thin slit at the seam, dissolving harmlessly around him. Nothing else moved. Luke realized he was holding his breath, and made himself exhale. Working his fingers under the edge, he gave a hard shove up and back, spilling the lid off and onto the floor on the opposite side of the crate.

“Oh, Sith.”

Chapter End Notes

Delphon is an actual GFFA planet (Outer Rim). That said, I made up the part about desert moons for my own convenience.
First Glimpses

Chapter Summary

The crate is opened; dark discoveries and darker theories ensue. Artoo has another message, and preliminary plans get made. Oh, and Luke thinks he might be losing his mind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Cuddled into the smallest possible ball, arms shackled at the wrist and tucked tight up around her head as if to ward off a blow, was a girl. A long red braid, shot through with streaks of gold, wrapped around her throat oddly then disappeared behind her shoulder. Her skin was ashen under wide streaks of angry red scoring, and the black jumpsuit that fit her lithe form like a glove was charred. Thick, heavy cargo webbing clamped her into place against the form-molding interior of industrial grade packaging foam. The coarse material - intended for cargo, not flesh - had abraded her skin everywhere it touched.

Out of nowhere, Luke felt something rouse inside him. Something he hadn't known was there - had missed as it slumbered in a quiet corner of his soul. Whatever it was, it was awake now, and fixated single-mindedly on the girl.

“What in the nine hells?!”

The thought was his, but apparently not his alone because the words had tumbled out of Han's mouth. The former smuggler reached out to touch his fingers to the girl's wrist, looking for a pulse, when a sharp crack made him jerk back with a curse, shaking his hand rapidly.

//Stun cuffs.// Chewie rumbled.

“Didn't realize they were on,” Han griped, sucking at the side of his index finger to ease the stinging. “Who stun cuffs someone inside a crate, in flight? You know how many times these must have gone off coming in and out of hyperspace, or landing, if they're set that high?”

Artoo blatted an indignant defense of his piloting skills, and Han waved it off.

“That ain't what I meant. Even fancy Force-fingers over here would have had a bumpy ride bringing in a shuttle that banged up.”

“I got them.” Luke reached out in the Force. He didn't have the fine control needed to work the inner mechanisms, but he had no trouble simply frying and snapping them.

That done, the Jedi's fingers curled around the lip of the crate, gripping until the edges bit into his palms. She felt like a star. Even battered and unconscious, she radiated power in the Force.

But it was... broken, somehow. Fissures ran through her Force presence in a way he'd never seen before and didn't understand. She felt thready, as if the pulse of her life force was hiccuping every dozen seconds or so. That scared him, but he wasn't sure why.
Chewbacca leaned over the crate and delicately lifted the edge of the woman's open jump suit away from her chest with a claw. //The cuffs appear to be the least of her worries.//

The skin visible between the leather of her suit and the black silk of her under-tank was a densely mottled mess of livid burns, raised weals, and dark bruising.

Artoo beeped helpfully that he'd completed a preliminary bioscan if they were interested. Han motioned in a 'hurry up' gesture, and the droid projected the results.

“How the shavit is she still alive?” Han demanded after the third line cataloging catastrophic damage. “And why did His Wheezingness send her to you?”

“He thinks she's mine.” Luke wished he could take the words back as soon as they were out of his mouth.

“Whadda ya mean, yours? Han snapped sharply, glaring. He knew the Kid didn't believe in slavery any more than he did, but had never been able to stop himself from bristling whenever the subject came up.

“I don't know,” the Jedi said helplessly, lifting bewildered eyes. “It's just what he said, remember?”

Luke didn't even begin to try to explain the nagging, unnerving feeling in his chest that there was a terrifyingly real possibility that Vader had been on to something. The thing inside him had yet to stop staring at the unmoving figure before him, and wisps of alarmingly personal anger were starting to float around it, coalescing into something large and vengeful in response to the harsh marks on her skin. Whatever this was, it couldn’t be good. He needed to distract himself from it. Now.

Shaking his head as if to clear it, he said quickly, “We need to get her out of there.”

“Yeah,” Han agreed. “Let's get her into the med bunk.”

With Han’s help, Luke cut free the straps that held the woman in place. Then he carefully hooked a hand around her back and under her shoulder and pulled her upright, balancing her so he could get an arm under her legs. The movement dislodged her braid and Han swore.

“That's a sedation collar.”

“What?” Luke froze, craning his neck to see the flat, dulled silver ring encircling the woman's throat.

“Slavers use 'em to keep their 'chattel' quiet during transport. It's got mini hypo-spray nozzles inside, and a timer. Injects pre-set doses at regular intervals to keep her out.”

//Someone did not want her to get away.// Chewie rumbled, eying the girl with new concern. //She is either very valuable or very dangerous.//

“Well, she ain't gonna be either if she dies before we get her in some bacta,” Han pointed out. “Come on. I'm sure I've got something that can get that damn collar off.”

Luke sank into the bench seat alongside the dejarik table and let his head drop into his hands.

They'd left the cuffs in the crate, cut the collar off, and tucked the woman into the Falcon's med bunk. Han had set up a hydro-drip to combat severe dehydration and a cleanse drip to start lowering the outrageous level of hard-core sedatives in her system. He'd guessed from the look of it that the
collar had been set by someone who didn't quite know what they were doing; the doses were much too high and too close together for the woman's size and condition.

After that, there wasn't much they could do until they got to base. Still, Artoo's limited med scan and a standard field assessment had been enough to leave them all incredulous and more perplexed than ever.

“I checked the roster,” Han told him. “She doesn't match any missing Rebels. And she's too young to be Imperial Intelligence.”

//Whomever she is, she won't be happy to wake up// Chewie opined. //She looks like someone dropped her down a reactor core.//

“Something's wrong with her sense in the Force, too,” Luke told them quietly. “It's... broken. Like there are fissures in it.

Han sat forward, suddenly worried bordering on angry. “Are you telling me she's a Dark Sider?”

“No! No!” Luke shot back immediately. “She's definitely not Dark. I've never seen anything like this before, but it's just...” He swallowed, and his eyes drifted away for a moment before returning grimly to Han. “I think they might have mind-kriffed her.”

There were more polite terms he could have used, of course. Terms more in keeping with his generally (relatively) clean language habits. But it was important that he convey the depth of the damage; that he not let a nicer term sugar coat the fact that her head was as wrecked as her body.

He felt the shift in Han and Chewie as they digested the suggestion.

Everyone had heard the ominous, frightened whispers of what Sith could do if they ripped into your head and used you for a plaything. All three present knew that Vader had forced his way into Leia's mind during her captivity on the Death Star.

But Luke had barely known what the Force was, then, and he'd been in bashful awe of the brave, beautiful Princess. He hadn't known how to look in the Force, and wouldn't have been able to bring himself to add to her suffering by inspecting her that way even if he had. So he didn't really have any solid references to use for comparison. Nothing beyond the natural, instinctive understanding that getting your head invaded by a Sith would have to leave very, very nasty marks... scars that might show up as the equivalent of deep cracks in your Force sense.

Yoda would have known, of course. Could have explained, or told him what to look for if he'd been so inclined during those painfully long, swampy weeks. Luke silently added 'mind rape' to the infuriatingly long list of rather important things his lilliputian Master had opted not to cover.

Which brought him back to where he was now: struggling (as usual) to function as a Jedi, suffocating under the weight of the responsibilities thrust on his lonely, burdened shoulders. Reduced to making semi-educated guesses about the Force and Dark Side atrocities, with people's lives hanging in the balance. Unless Ben deigned to pop in for one of his random visits, feeling uncommonly cooperative, his only hope was that the woman herself would not only wake up, but know – and be able to explain - something useful about what had been done to her. He tried not to think about the (at best) callous detachment or (worse) sheer cruelty almost unavoidably inherent in expecting her to recount, in detail, what were probably the worst moments of her life in front of men she didn't know while still as fragile as she would be when she woke.

“Like they tried to do to Leia,” Solo ground out, flopping back in his seat, and expelling a rough
breath. “Shavit.”

//Vader did this?// Chewie grumbled thoughtfully. //To hurt you?//

Luke frowned. “I don't know. It's possible.” He sighed and rubbed at his forehead glumly. “That doesn't make a lot of sense, but I wouldn't put anything past him, at this point.”

//It is unlikely that Vader injured her.//

Three heads swiveled to stare at Artoo.

“You know somethin' you ain't been telling, Short and Round?” Han raised an eyebrow.

//His message indicates he reclaimed her.//


//For her. Bio-locked.//

Luke dug his fingers into his eyelids. Could this get any more weird? “Okay, are there any other messages or anything that I should know about?”

//He placed a light saber in my compartment. Also bio-locked.//


“Bio-locked how?” Han wanted to know.

//DNA and fingerprint scan.//

“She doesn’t need to be awake for that.” Solo finally stated the (uncomfortable) obvious.

The old farm boy morals Luke had been raised with objected. It was a violation of her privacy, to say the least. She'd already suffered so much that this would only add insult to injury. But the Rebellion Commander in him knew he didn't have the luxury of such morals at the moment. They were headed back to the same base that housed Alliance High Command. He couldn't afford to ignore information that might clarify whether she was an asset or a threat. The potential consequences were too severe. Especially since Artoo had just hinted that she was not only a Force user, but a trained one.

Luke didn't know if that thought cheered or scared him.

“I don't think we have a choice,” he sighed. “Come on, Artoo.”

The droid obediently rolled along behind him back to the med bunk.

“My Uncle Owen would have my hide for this,” he told the woman's limp figure as he pulled the blanket back and lifted one of her small hands. “If it matters at all, I'm sorry.”

As gently as possible, Luke pried the woman's jaw open and slid her index finger along her tongue. Then he pressed it to Artoo's scan pad. A positive beep told him they were in. Luke tucked her hand back across her stomach and replaced the blanket they'd covered her with.

They returned to the common room. “All right, Artoo. Light saber first, please.”

The astromech tooted cheerfully and popped open a slot on his domed lid. A small riser inside
elevated, presenting a slender, polished ebony handle. Luke lifted it with a combined reverence and wariness. The construction was basic, but the light weight hilt was etched with beautiful and intricate filigree and worn where her fingers routinely wrapped around it. There was no doubt that it was a woman’s weapon, and well loved.


“Well that's some good news, at least,” Solo muttered. “What about this message?”

Luke shut off the light saber and returned it to Artoo’s compartment. “Hold onto that for now,” he instructed. “And show us the second message, please.”

Artoo whistled in acknowledgment and the hilt disappeared into his depths. Luke sank back onto the bench as the droid’s silver dome whirred and the hologram of Vader once again illuminated in front of them.

“Mara Jade,” Vader's deep voice was crisp, condescending, and frigidly cold. “Your life is forfeit, and your citizenship in the Empire rescinded. I have broken your bond to your former master - you belong to me now. You live only because I have seen fit to assign you a new purpose. You are to serve my son in any capacity he requires. Do not to allow him to come to harm. Serve him well, and you may yet have an opportunity to reclaim your former glory. Fail me in this, Hand, and I will Force-bind you and give you to Darillion. Permanently.”

The Dark Lord's holo image snapped off. For a moment, there was silence.

“Well, that was disturbing.” Han observed, tightly.

“As, well,” Luke worked to keep his voice even, despite the terrible tightening in his chest. “Do you know who her former master was? Did he tell you anything about her, other than this?”

The droid hummed an apologetic negative.

“It's all right,” he replied, distractedly, patting the silver domed head. “At least now we have a name. Maybe that'll help us find something to explain this.”

“I think that explained plenty,” Han put in dourly. “Your old man thinks you're reckless and wants to make sure you to live long enough for him to figure out how to turn you. So he kidnapped you a bodyguard an' is blackmailing her into doing what he wants.”

“Kidnapped her from where, though?” Luke wanted to know. “What did he mean by calling her 'Hand'?”

“I don't know,” Han said. “Maybe if we're nice to her, she'll tell us when she wakes up.”

//Perhaps we should keep her a secret for the time being.//

Han cut his eyes to Chewie. “For her safety, or the Kid's?”

//For everyone's.// The wookie mused. //She is a Force user, and damaged. It may be wise to conceal her until we have more answers.//

“High Command'll have to know,” Han mulled it over.

Protect. The newly awakened, now fully solidified, and as-yet-unnamed thing inside Luke yet
rumbled ominously. He had a strange mental image of a feral male nexu crouching low over the woman (Mara, it corrected his thoughts) in the med bunk, razor claws extended and quills bristling. Four red eyes glowed possessively, unblinking. Mine.

Sweet Force, I'm losing my mind. Luke forced himself to take deep, slow breaths and think rationally.

“It's going to be late by base time when we get back,” he worked through his thoughts aloud. “We can keep her on the Falcon until the Rogues are disembarked and disbursed. Have a path cleared to smuggle her into the med bay. If Leia can arrange for her to seen only by med droids and kept off the books in a private room, we can seal our mission reports as classified and no one will have to know about her until we've got more information.”

Han considered that. “You're gonna have to go before the Council, you know. Try to explain this.”

Luke shrugged. “It'll be a short meeting. The deranged Sith Lord that nearly killed me not too long ago decided he doesn't want me dead after all. So he kidnapped me a half-dead babysitter from Force-knows-where, and shipped her to me in the care of my astromech - who he apparently stole just to prove he could. I didn't ask for her, I don't know anything about her, and I can't make any kind of decisions until she wakes up – if she even does.”

“Sounds about right,” Han agreed. “I'll prep a coded message to Leia so we can give her a heads up as soon as we hit real space. You an' Chewie take apart that crate, see if we can't find any more clues we can use. Whoever she is, she's gonna need all the help she can get.”

Chapter End Notes

Obviously, there's going to be some very broken Mara stuff going on in upcoming chapters. I promise that by the end she'll have come back into her own and be the awesome kick-a$$ warrior we all know and love!

Also, just for the record, I promise that although we get the first conjectures of Vader's possible thought process here it won't turn out to be quite that over-simplified when all the pieces come together.
The Plots Thicken

Chapter Summary

Vader has a vision. The Jedi aren't happy (still/again). Luke gets an unexpected insight into his 'nexu' situation and possibly his father's plans.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Deep in hyperspace, the Imperial Super Star Destroyer Executor streaked silently toward its destination in near-silence, predatory and unyielding as it's master. Nestled in its heart were Darth Vader's private chambers; the closest thing he'd had to a home for decades. Within the elaborate and immaculately clean suite, pride of place was given to a dais fashioned in the shape of a crisply-edged hexagon. On the dais rested one of Vader's most prized possessions: a meditation sphere. Three meters across, the sterile, environmentally controlled globe was the only place the dark Lord could truly relax.

Since Mustafar, it had been the one space in which he could safely shed his stifling mask and bulky armor and, for a handful of hours at a time, strip down again to only what little remained of Anakin Skywalker. It was perhaps not surprising, then, that this was where he often did his best meditating.

Late into the ship's night-cycle, Vader reclined on the medical-grade form lounger mounted inside his sphere. The air was cool edging on cold against his bare, scarred skin. Only the faintest of tiny recessed lights sparsely illuminated the space, sparing his damaged eyes the stabbing pain proper light would have caused. His rebreather modulated his lungs to a steady, even rhythm; it was the only sound.

Deep in meditation, he watched passively as the Force tossed images up at him like driftwood washing ashore on the paradisaical beaches of Chandrila. They rolled in from the farthest edges of his awareness, as if on an unseen tide, frothing up in turns at his metaphysical feet for examination.

In his youth, Anakin's predisposition to foresight had been a curse. He had watched, helplessly, as the deaths of his mother and his wife were endlessly replayed before him – first in his dreams and meditations, then in real life. How he had suffered, then.

But not any more.

Now, foresight was a greedily relished gift. Loathsome as the Emperor was, he was powerful and learned in the crafts of the dark side; two decades at his master's heel had taught Vader much. No longer was he the struggling, suffering Jedi, watching what he could not hope to change. As a Sith, and a puppet-master in his own right, he foresaw and reshaped events to his whim.

This night, a now-familiar scene greeted him first.

_He is in the Throne Room, digging the heavy-booted heels of his prosthetic feet into the deck plates, holding his ground as the Emperor's lightening sizzles off the red blade of the saber locked in his gloved grip. Static and ozone boil around them. The old man cackles as he redoubles his assault, already smelling the charring of the thick fabric and plasti-steel armor that will soon fail to protect_
Vader’s vulnerable core from the snapping, searing light. To his right, Jade rejoins the fray, oblivious to the blood running thick and dark from her temple. Her violet blade splits the Emperor’s attention and assault until a hard thrust with the Force slams her back into a console with the crack of breaking bone, punctuated by her shriek of fury and pain. Palpatine hisses in evil delight, and cannot deny himself the split-second pleasure of sucking in the tang her pain as if it were the finest of delicacies.

It is the opening they were waiting for. From Vader’s left, as he knew it would, comes the green arc of Luke’s light saber. Drunk on Jade’s pain (long his favorite liqueur), the Emperor cannot redirect fast enough. The blade slices through him from throat to hip, bisecting him cleanly, cauterized halves falling away from each other seemingly in slow motion, sparks still spitting from the gnarled fingertips. With grace that should be impossible for his bulk, Vader drops and rolls away from the coming blast, saber snapping safely off as he falls.

Breathing heavily from earlier attacks and still shell shocked by his success, Luke remains where he stands.

A blur of black and red barrels into him, savagely throwing him aside half a heartbeat before the massive concussive blast released by the extinguishing of the Emperor's life force. The ring of befouled power slices through the spot where the Jedi had stood with obliterating impact. The former Emperor's Hand is tossed like a rag doll, stopping only when one of the room's thick durasteel pillars intersects her flight, snapping her neck and dropping her to the floor, limp and cold. The new, unnatural angle of her head starts blood dripping into glassy green eyes that stare blindly at nothing. An era has ended. On Vader's next breath, a new one begins.

The Dark Lord could taste the first hints of victory and freedom on his tongue. Anticipation flavored his thoughts as he guessed at which of the other familiar visions would visit him next and suppressed impatience for new ones. His plan had been diligently crafted on these insights; he needed to pay close attention to ensure nothing had been missed.

A chime interrupted his concentration and he pulled himself from the velvet warmth of the Force crankily. It took a moment to re-affix his vocabulator, but he bothered with nothing else before switching on the sphere's comm to 'audio only'.

“Yes, Admiral, what is it?”

Piett did not apologize for interrupting him, but got straight to the point. He had been in Vader's service long enough to know the value of brevity and efficiency. “Your contact is the comm, my Lord, seeking to report in.”

“Patch him through.”

“As you wish, my Lord.”

A split second later, another voice – far less cultured than the Captain’s and still bearing the slight taint of an old Corellian accent – emerged from the speaker. It was a bit too caviler for addressing someone of Vader's rank, but the Sith chose to overlook that flaw for the moment. The dark-haired Myke had proven useful, and might again; his lack of respect could be easily remedied when he was no longer of any value.

“Lord Vader.”

“Well, Mazzic?”
“The Rebels showed up, as you predicted. Some x-wings and a beat-up old freighter. Burned the shuttle and left the shell behind, but we did comprehensive sweeps and a visual inspection—there’s no way the droid and the container didn’t go with them.” A hint of nervousness showed through now. “As you suspected, we were unable to track their hyperspace jumps.”

“That is of no consequence,” Vader growled, steepling his fingers together. “I will see that your pay is promptly delivered.”

Without waiting for a reply, he waved a hand and silenced the comm.

He has the girl, then. Good. The plan is in motion. Pulling the vocabulator off again, Vader tossed it aside.

*Use her well, my son. There is much you must learn— and unlearn— and time is short. Soon, we will rule together... one way, or another.*

· ·

“Changed, something has.”

“I felt it as well, old friend.”

“A turn for the worse, this is.”

Ben Kenobi sighed, the blue nimbus of light surrounding him shimmering in response. “Luke feels deeply, like his father did before him. It is his incomplete training that allows his emotions to so strongly color the Force. I am worried for him.”

“Left he should not have. Return he must. Vulnerable he is, to the evil of Vader and his Emperor.” Yoda's wrinkled green face scrunched in displeasure, then he whacked his gimer stick decisively on the dirt floor of his cramped Dagobah hut, narrowly missing the tail of a snake casually slithering past. “Go to him you must,” he announced.

The deceased Jedi considered that. “Perhaps you could send him a message, first? Appearing like this is very trying outside of Dagobah. I will need to gather my energies before I can appear to him again.”

The Grand Master nodded gravely. “Contact him I will. Prevail upon him to return. If comply he does not, upon you the onus will rest.”

Kenobi bowed, the blue light surrounding him beginning to diffuse into the swamp's humid air as he faded. “Let us pray he sees reason, this time. I do not wish to lose him as we did his father.”

Yoda dipped his aged head, heart heavy and gripped the top of his stick more tightly in tiny, clawed hands. “May the Force be with us all.”

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Leia showed her ID to the guards stationed outside the miniscule private room at the back of Indigo Base's med bay. It wasn’t necessary, of course, everyone knew who she was. But she believed in keeping up protocol and not appearing to expect exceptions because of her name or status. They waved her in, scrupulously cautious not to catch of glimpse of the interior. They didn't know what they were guarding, only who was allowed in. Given the extremely exclusive nature of that (very short) list, none of them had any desire to risk their necks finding out.
Han and Luke both looked up when she entered, and she favored them with an encouraging smile. She allowed herself to detour to Han, first, indulging in a tight embrace and a quick kiss. Nearly losing him to carbonite and the threat of Jabba's grubby clutches had cemented the changes to their relationship that had developed en route to Bespin and altered her perspective on the past, present and future. She was determined not to waste a single day – a single minute – embracing their shared love, now.

Luke sat hunched, elbows on his knees, hands over his mouth in troubled thought, staring at the woman they'd brought back with Artoo.

“How is she?”

“Not good.” Luke picked up a data pad from a holder on the side of the repulsar bed and handed it over. “She's got massive electrical burns from an unknown source over most of her body – the med droids have never seen anything like it. We had her on a cleanse drip all the way here, and there's still an absurd amount of drugs in her blood. There's some kind of brain trauma, but it doesn't match anything in the data banks.”

He didn't bring up the cracks in her Force sense, or his theory about their source. Not to her. Not yet.

“Why is she laying like that?” Leia eyed the patient's unusual position, propped on her side, held in place by foam supports.

Luke's face twisted in a grimace, and his hand reached out unconsciously to touch the girl's hair, now woven around her head in a slightly messy crown braid.

The med droids had insisted that the long tresses be secured out of the way of her damaged skin or – preferably - cut off, so that they could attend to her properly. Luke had been appalled by the suggestion and Han had intervened, hastily braiding it up as best he could. Thankfully, he'd been practicing on Leia and had managed a decent job of it.

(It had been a peculiar experience for the smuggler on multiple levels. When he brushed Leia's hair at the end of a long day, she would unwind under his fingers, tension seeping out as she melted and softened. Her head would tip back or to the side, silently assisting him in finding the correct angle or catching the right lock of hair for the next step in the braid. Their new guest had been limp and unresponsive, her hair tangled and dry from her ordeals. More disconcertingly, Luke had watched every move of his friend's hands with an odd expression that spoke of amalgamated attentiveness, longing, caution and jealousy. It made him uncommonly self-conscious and, despite having been happy to help, Han was glad to finish and put a little distance back between himself and the woman.)

“Her back is a mess,” the Jedi told his sister.

Han clarified, bluntly, “Looks like she was dragged by her feet a decent ways across corrugated decking. Tore her up pretty good.”

Leia's eyes flicked between the two men and the girl. “Why isn't she in bacta?”

Solo shook his head. “Tried. Barely got her feet in and she started seizing up.”

“What?” The Princess asked, startled.

“What kind of allergy. She doesn't have any of the usual bio-markers for it, so they didn't know before they started to dunk her. They haven't figured it out yet,” Han shook his head. “But unless she wakes up and enlightens us, she's gonna have to heal the old fashioned way.”
Organa shot a sympathetic glance at the still figure. Healing without bacta was practically archaic these days, something done only on the poorest, most barren planets that lacked access to even basic formal medical care.

“We didn't find anything on her. Whoever she is, she doesn't have any public record. But that's not necessarily a surprise for a Force-sensitive.”

Luke nodded knowingly at that; Owen and Beru had done everything possible to hide him from the public eye. Since the fall of the Old Order, most Force sensitives had laid as low as possible to avoid discovery and exploitation.

“Any hits on the Darillion guy from the message?” Han asked.

Leia's eyes hardened and her lips curled in disgust. “Oh, he wasn't hard to find at all. Suffice it to say I'd personally shoot her myself,” the Princess gestured at the woman in the bed, “before I'd let her end up anywhere near him – no matter who she turns out to be.”

“That bad, huh?”

“He's an Imperial, and a vile, lecherous sadist,” Leia bit out. “According to Intel, women unfortunate enough to end up in his grasp leave it in body bags. Sometimes in pieces.”

The nexu in Luke's chest snarled. Stop, he tried to quiet it. She just said we're not letting Mara anywhere near him, remember? Everything is fine.

He tried to ignore the fact that somewhere between opening the crate and getting her to med bay, she'd very firmly become Mara to him. Even in his private thoughts, she showed up by name, with a distinct feel attached to her, just as his closest friends and family did. It was disconcerting, to say the least – even for someone who cared as quickly and broadly as he always had.

“Luke?” Leia's voice pulled him from his thoughts. She was looking at him strangely. “What's wrong?”

Kriff.

He'd been hoping she wouldn't feel his internal conflict through their burgeoning twin bond. He should have known it was a futile wish. For all it's reticence about being clear and helpful when he could really use it, the Force never failed to work all too well when it was least convenient.

“I don't know,” he told her honestly. “But I think Vader wasn't kidding when he said he thought she was mine.”

Leia lifted a quizzical eyebrow, and sank onto the edge of the bed to face him more closely. “What do you mean?”

“I feel like a wild nexu took up residence in my chest the instant I took the lid off that crate. It gets…” he made a frustrated motion. “Agitated when I think about her being hurt or threatened. I've never felt anything like it, and it scares me. Jedi shouldn't get possessive. Ever. Especially not over people they don't even know!”

Especially when they happen to be the son of the second most powerful sith in the universe.

Leia processed that in silence for a moment. She could feel her brother's embarrassment clearly, and
his desperation for understanding. Finally, she said softly, “I have the same nexu inside me.”

Two pairs of equally astonished eyes flew to her - one blue, the other hazel.

“I felt it the first time when this nerf-herder,” she jerked a thumb at Han, a wry smile quirking at her lips, “ran down the prison block corridor toward me on the Death Star, yelling and shooting everything in sight.” Her voice dropped. “I thought it was going to claw it's way out of my chest when he dropped into the carbonite chamber.”

Luke stared at his sister, speechless but suddenly possessed of a gloriously precious measure of hope. Maybe he wasn't losing his mind.

“I'm not even going to try to guess how Vader would know,” Leia continued, seriously. “But if that's what you feel, then we need to be very careful with her.”

Luke nodded. The nexu inside him settled, flicking it's long, dangerous tail contentedly. In the wake of it's calm, a different sort of pain blossomed in his chest. A haunted look ghosted across his flushed face, and his hands clenched into tight fists.

“How could he?” he implored, despairingly. “If he knew – even suspected – that… that I'd be connected to her. How could he threaten to give her to some sick bastard who'd…” the words strangled in his throat. “Who'd hurt her like that? Holding that over her head, he enslaved her, Leia – as surely as if he'd bought her from a Hutt. In my name.”

Solo spoke up sternly, pushing off the wall to lean forward and point a commanding finger. “You ain't responsible for what Vader does, Kid. You got no control over him, and this ain't your fault.”

“But how could he think I'd accept? That I'd make her stay here, under those conditions, no matter how I felt about her?”

The Jedi thought he might drown under the waves of uncertainty and self-loathing crashing against him at the thought. He couldn't imagine demanding that someone love him, that they stay and subject themselves to his desires. Nexu or not, Mara owed him nothing. If she didn't want to stay, he'd let her go. He'd have to.

He knew he was reckless; understood that he clung fiercely to his friends. But what could he have done to make Vader think he'd participate in coercing someone into what amounted to slavery? What had his father seen in him that made him believe that Luke would condone such a horrible, demeaning arrangement?

“Maybe she's not the only one being blackmailed,” Leia suggested.


“Huh,” Han's brow furrowed, and he folded his arms, thinking. “She's got a point, you know. Of all the bio-locks in the galaxy, he picks one you can access with uncuffing her or waking her up? For a message he stored in your droid? That can't be coincidence. Set up like that, he'd have to have figured you'd get a glimpse at her message one way or the other. It ain't much of a stretch to assume you'd let her stay and do her job – even if you didn't like it – just to keep her out of that sleemo's harem.”

The nexu did not like the word harem. Luke told it to shut up – it was a figure of speech. (He hoped.)

*Force*, Yoda was not going to be happy about this. Hells, *he* wasn't happy about this! If what Han
conjectured was true, Luke was already unwittingly playing along Vader's script. Force knew he wouldn't want any part of whatever was to be found at the end of that.

“Look,” Leia interrupted his chaotic thoughts, patting his arm reassuringly. “Until she wakes up and we find out what we're really dealing with, we're just borrowing trouble. I'll sit with her for a while – why don't you get something to eat? Check in with your Squad.”

She phrased it as a suggestion, but Luke knew a command when he heard one. Shoving down his cranky inner nexu – don't want to leave her - he complied. Refusing to look back as he exited, he turned one frustrating thought over and over in his head as he navigated the base's halls.

When I said I wanted to be a Jedi like my father before me, this was NOT what I had in mind.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks are due to Wookieepedia for supplying details on the meditation sphere and Mazzic's race.

Please don't get used to chapter updates this quick - just trying to get as much as I can done and posted before I start a new job next week IRL, which will slow me down a bit. That said, I'm still going to shoot to update generally once a week.

Most importantly, I promise Mara wakes up soon!
Chapter Summary

Palpatine plots and Rebel High Command is skeptical. Oh, and Mara wakes up. It goes... less well than Luke might have hoped.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Throne Room of the Imperial Palace in the heart of Imperial Center (formerly Coruscant) was quiet, save for the indistinct hum and muted whirring of electronic equipment. Beneath the throne, a vast network of equipment monitored the whole of the galaxy, cataloging its every breath and pulse and feeding the endless stream of information directly to the Emperor's fingertips.

Tonight, however, all screens lay dormant. The throne was turned away from the doors, stairs, and statuesque Red Guards. Below the giant view port it faced sprawled the glory of the glittering city-planet, nearly as alive with lights and movement even at this late hour as it was during the height of the day. Palpatine sat unmoving as stone, staring but seeing nothing of the city. Instead, the galaxy crawled before his jaundiced, unfocused eyes, snaking past through the Force as he explored it with malicious leisure.

He thought briefly of how empty the room felt without his Hand. She'd spent hours - days - of her life simply there waiting on his pleasure. Standing in the shadows, alert for threats or training herself to be still despite mind-rending boredom and impatience. Kneeling on the stairs until her body cramped mercilessly in punishment for some trivial offense, more often than not still bleeding from the preceding beatings. He'd savored the tremors of her pain and self-flagellation in the Force every time she'd been so humbled. Soothed his own stresses and vexations by counting the individuals drops of her blood as it dripped to the metal plating beneath her.

It was inconvenient that she'd had to be disposed of. She'd been a worthy experiment, and an unprecedentedly loyal slave. He'd have liked to know just how far he could push her, physically and mentally, before she gave out. He'd already taken her farther than he'd ever taken any other; none of his other experiments had survived nearly so long.

But it was unavoidable. His attentions were needed elsewhere, now. The girl would have been merely a distraction. A dangerous one, given that annoying seed of light he'd never quite managed to fully stamp out of her.

He'd come close, once. But he'd nearly lost her entirely, and hadn't been ready to relinquish his toy yet, so he hadn't tried it again.

Now his Hand was gone, her remains incinerated with the rest of the Palace's refuse. It was no matter; his Throne Room wouldn't be empty for long. The son of Skywalker had been unearthed from the Outer Rim hellhole he'd been concealed in by the remnants of the Jedi. He was emerging rapidly into his power, and would soon be ready to take his father's place at the Emperor's side.

Broken in body and heart, Anakin Skywalker had served Palpatine well. Unbroken, or broken solely by his new master's hand, Luke Skywalker would be an Apprentice to put Vader to shame. Soon he
would stand, kneel, and bleed for the Emperor's pleasure. Already the forces that would drive the boy to his fate were in motion, fomenting wickedly in the darkness.

A cruel smile crept across the Emperor's thin, ashen lips. *I'm well prepared for you, son of Skywalker. Don't keep me waiting.*

* * *

Luke nervously straightened his uniform and looked up at the semi-circle of High Command leaders. He knew them all personally, at least to some degree, but facing them formally never failed to make him feel like a hick farm boy again, uncertain and awkward. It should have helped that the meeting was taking place in a small, utilitarian room little different than any other on the forward Base. That he stood only a few meters away from them, and that there was nothing but their respective uniforms and positions on opposite sides of the battered, nondescript table to hint at formality or rank.

It really might have helped, he decided, if there hadn't been so very much at stake.

“Commander Skywalker,” General Rieekan led, his blue eyes curious but kind when they rested on the young Squadron Commander in front of him. “Princess Leia has given us to understand that your droid, Artoo Detoo, has returned to you with some unexpected cargo.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Cargo addressed to you, from Darth Vader.”

“That appears to be the case, yes.” Luke reminded himself not to fidget.

General Madine stepped in, leaning forward on one elbow and cutting directly to the chase. “He really sent you a girl?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Luke shoved away the embarrassment and vague sense of shame that came with acknowledging that. He hadn't *asked* for her. Han was right - that Vader had sent her anyway was not his fault and should not reflect badly on him.

“Why?” The ex-Imperial was blunt.

Hearing his Aunt Beru chide his posture in the back of his mind, Luke lifted his chin, straightened his shoulders, and met the General's gaze firmly. “Hells if I know, Sir.”

The nexu inside him twitched. *Mine.* Luke swatted at it. *Knock it off. You want to protect her, you let me handle this.* The creature growled, but backed off a smidgeon.

As the Jedi had hoped, his comment broke the tension in the room. Carlist Rieekan almost smiled.

“Ostensibly, no one but Luke and Han had seen the missive from Vader.”

Han had lied (because Luke was a terrible liar), explaining dismissively that the file had been corrupted on playback. *Probably an embedded security measure,* he'd brushed it off, Luke had just shrugged regretfully, and reassured them that the message was short and not really helpful anyway. Which was true. Sort of.
Secretly, they'd played it for Leia, who had completely agreed that, given Vader's open references to Luke as “my son”, a little subterfuge was a small price to pay for keeping the dangerous secret of their parentage under wraps a while longer.

She'd also agreed not to disclose either the existence or the contents of the message intended for Mara; at least not until Jade woke up and could see it for herself. As a gesture of respect, it was practically microscopic in comparison to the insults she'd already endured. But it was something, and it went a long way towards soothing Luke's guilt over taking advantage of her incapacitation to view it himself. Han rationalized the decision by pointing out that, without the context that only they had, the message to Mara was pretty vague and cryptic. It really wouldn't help anyone to hear it without the kind of back story only she could provide, anyway.

Falling back on his sincerely apologetic expression and echos of Ben Kenobi's “certain point of view” example, Luke cleared his throat.

“Yes, Ma'am, there was. But it wasn't much help. He suggested that I might find her usefull.” He hesitated, uncomfortably. “How or why wasn't mentioned.”

General Dodonna scowled. “We have few details of your confrontation with Vader as Bespin,” he prodded. “I don't suppose you might have given any indication that your loyalty could be bought with a pleasure slave?”

The suggestion was, of course, a ludicrous attempt at fishing for information by provoking him into speaking carelessly. As a fighter pilot and the Hero of the Battle of Yavin, Luke did not lack for pretty and willing women to share his bed. That he chose to sleep alone reflected his priorities (and his overloaded schedule), not his options.

It wasn't the first time Dodonna had attempted something in that vein, and Luke knew better than to fall for it. Though he'd participated in the Yavin awards ceremony a few years earlier, the man had never quite come to trust the young Jedi. He'd cut his teeth on Imperial propaganda before defecting early on to the Rebellion. He'd cut his teeth on Imperial propaganda before defecting early on to the Rebellion. He'd long ago discarded most of the Empire's speciest and otherwise narrow-minded views, but a mistrust of Jedi still lingered.

Luke felt Leia's indignation mirror his own, and was comforted by the distinct resentment coming off most of the others in the room as well.

“General,” Leia reprimanded in her best Senate voice. “Commander Skywalker's behavior has been unimpeachable since he joined us at Yavin.”

Suppressing both his own irritation and a smile at Leia's strong defense of him, Luke added somewhat dryly, “With all due respect, Sir, if Vader condescended to know or care about such things I think he'd have just sent me a data pad of instructions for using a dark side mind trick. It'd have to have been a lot less trouble.”

Mothma stifled a smile. “I understand the young woman herself has been unable to provide any clarity on these questions.”

Luke sighed. “She hasn't regained consciousness yet.”

Rieekan tipped his head. Brown hair in need of a trim, overlooked too long amidst his own packed days, slipped over his forehead. “Surely having been in bacta this long she should be starting to come around.”

“She's not in bacta,” Luke explained, delicate in his phrasing. Common sense told him he ought to be
able to trust this group with all the details of Mara's condition that he knew. A wariness radiating from the over-protective creature inside him dictated otherwise. “She didn't react well to it. The med droids are still working on the best alternatives. I'm not sure when she'll come around or how long after that it will be before she'll be ready to talk.”

“She'll need to be questioned as soon as possible,” Dodonna pressed, testily. “If she did, in fact, come directly from Darth Vader, she could have valuable information.”

Despite his best efforts, Luke's tone held a bite when he answered. “I assure you that no one wants answers about this more than I do, Sir, but we can't expect her to just wake up and start spitting out data on command.”

“She's an Imperial, Commander,” his superior began to reprimand.

“Actually,” Airen Cracken spoke up for the first time, his keen eyes considering Luke intently, “we don't know that.”

“Excuse me?” Dodonna looked taken aback; so much so, that he actually sat back in his chair.

“The Empire has a long history of abducting anyone it wants who declines to join it's ranks voluntarily,” Cracken reminded the Council. “Unless we receive indications or intelligence to the contrary, there is every reason to believe she was an unwilling captive of the Empire.”


“What do you propose?” Mon helpfully inquired, deferring to Cracken's discretion.

“Patience,” Cracken answered simply. “We can reassess the situation if and when she wakes up.”

Crix Madine spoke up again, dipping his blond head to peer at Luke thoughtfully. “May I ask why you're keeping her under lock and key, and as far off the record books as possible, Skywalker?”

And here they were at the really tricky part.

_Don't screw this up_, Luke willed himself.

“As most of the Council is probably aware, Sir,” he said grimly, “it's not uncommon for Imperial prisoners to be kept in med bays so they can be resuscitated if 'interrogation' goes too far. Given the severity of her condition, it's very likely that was the case for our guest. If that's true, then waking up in our med bay surrounded by controlled chaos and people she doesn't know will be traumatizing - at least until she's acclimated. Intelligence procedures recommend seclusion and stability as much as possible during the initial recovery phase.”

Remembering Leia's coaching, he progressively made eye contact with each member of the Council as he spoke, adding weight to his earnest words.

Cracken was silent a moment. “Your logic is sound, Commander. But you understand that it's not something you can carry on long term?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Very well. You'll keep us informed, Commander?” Rieekan prompted.

“Of course,” Luke promised. He gave a respectful nod and turned on heel to exit the room and return to the Rogues, Cracken's words ringing in his ears like a dark prophesy.
Please, Mara. Wake up soon.

- -

“Mara?”

It had never occurred to Mara that when she got to hell she might be called by her proper name.

For a decade before her death, she'd been known almost exclusively as the Emperor's Hand. Here and there she had taken aliases as needed to complete her assignments, but they had been fleeting and meaningless. Prior to that, in childhood, she had been called any number of nasty derogatory things by her instructors or trainers. But never by her real name. If someone had told her that the only reason she had a name at all was to simplify record keeping, she would have acknowledged the suggestion as an entirely valid theory.

“Mara, can you hear me?”

She was still drifting in a fog, trying to find a foothold on reality, when she registered the words.

*They speak Basic in hell? I'd have expected Corellian, or even Olys Corellisi.*

It was a bizarre thought, barely formed before it dissipated again, pushed aside by the growing awareness that everything hurt and her shields were completely missing in action.

“Jade? Will you open your eyes for me?”

Her danger sense prickled, but felt strangely off-kilter. She got a garbled mental image of a warning klaxon, it's desperate ringing and flashing muted in the depths of murky water. It took much longer than it should have to identify the cause: a bright gleam at the edge of her fogged senses that suggested a Force sensitive. A powerful one.

“Please? I know you can hear me.”

The voice was coaxing this time, and accompanied by tiny exploratory tendrils of energy that twitched closer to her.

That made her already burning chest constrict further. *Definitely Force strong then. Kriff.*

This was a deeply disadvantaged condition in which to face the unknown. But she was the Emperor's Hand; she'd spent most of her life doing things in non-ideal conditions. She could survive this, too.

*Do you have to try to survive in hell? It's not like there's anywhere else to go.* Again, the flaky thought popped up from nowhere only to puff away an instant later. *What the kark is wrong with my head?!*

Whatever it was, she'd have to sort it out later. Right now, she was being observed by a Force sensitive who knew she was conscious. Dealing with that had to take first precedence. If he thought she was purposely defying him, things could get ugly in a hurry.

Her eyes felt like they'd been doused with sand and then coated with engine sealant, but she applied her will and managed to pry them open. The light stung but she refused to show the pain, waiting silently for her sight to adjust.

The first thing to come into focus was a pair of intensely blue eyes under a mop of shaggy blond
Mara blinked, the sensation like wiping sandpaper across her eyes, and her watcher pulled back slightly. His genuinely happy, relieved expression was utterly incongruous with her current situation.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” the man greeted.

Living? She was alive? That wasn't right. Wait. Why was that wrong?

Blessedly, none of those thoughts came out verbally. Speaking felt too far beyond her capacity, still. It probably wasn't wise until she better sorted out the full nature of her predicament anyway. Instead, Mara managed a tiny nod. The movement sent a lance of pain down her spine, but appeared to satisfy her watcher.

“I'm Luke Skywalker,” he told her, “and you're in the med bay on Indigo Base.”

It was the kind of basic introductory information Luke was accustomed to (and appreciated) being met with when he awoke in med bays - something he had far too much experience with. If he'd expected the woman in front of him to feel the same, however, he was to be sorely disappointed.

Her spike of anxiety and the spiral of strained disorientation that followed instantly on its heels caught him completely off guard.

“Hey!” Luke leaned over her, hovering in worry. He desperately wanted to touch her – a press of her hand, a touch to the shoulder – but wasn’t sure if he could without causing her pain now that she was awake. “It's all right! You're safe.”

Safe. Mara couldn't remember the last time she'd been safe, if she ever had. But this, this was the furthest thing from safe she could be. Worse even than most of the levels of hell.

A med bay. On a Rebel base.

Now that he'd said it, she began to place more of the noises and feels around her. The double port inserted into the back of her left hand, to cycle drugs through her system. The distinctive beeping of a heart-rate monitor. The almost-inaudible hum unique to standard-issue medical repuslar beds, and the rasp of the coarse, easily-laundered sheets that always sheathed them against her cheek. Her skin crawled at the whisper of the medical gown against her otherwise bare skin, hideous memories brushing against the edges of her shaky mind.

And Skywalker. Luke Skywalker. A flash of memory - his file - darted into her vision, then fell away just as fast. The Jedi burned like a supernova in the Force and he knew her name. He knew who - what - she was, and she was completely helpless before him.

Mara wasn't prone to fear, but she was an expert at recognizing and categorizing threats. Everything about this situation screamed serious, genuine threat at the highest levels.

Her fingers twitched against the rough sheets, and her breath caught in her parched throat, but nothing else responded to her commands. The Force lightening had laid waste to her nervous system, and the time spent in the cramped confines of the crate, then unmoving in a bed, had locked up her muscles.

Far worse, she finally realized with stark, chilling clarity what was wrong with her head: there was an aching, pounding void in her skull where the Emperor had been.

It was as if half the structure of her mind had disintegrated, leaving her consciousness perched
precariously across the haphazard arrangement of supports that remained. Thoughts and memories previously sealed off had sheared through old boundaries and spilled into spaces unprepared to contain them; pathways she’d relied on abruptly gave way to emptiness or were clogged by debris.

Skywalker had welcomed her back to the land of the living, but Mara felt the dawning of a petrifying suspicion that she hadn’t returned. Not fully. She'd been dragged back from the abyss, somehow, but something crucial had been lost.

Luke's body hummed with tension. She hadn't responded to his reassurances of safety at all; if anything her small, frantic movements had gotten only more frenzied. He took the risk and caught the woman's right hand in his own.

“Mara, calm down,” he instructed, try to make his voice soothing and putting the tiniest bit of the Force behind the order. “Reach for calm in the Force.”

He watched her eyes dilate at that, fresh distress piercing her, and wondered if it was being identified as a Force user or feeling him use the Force that spooked her. Either way, it was too late to take it back now, so he pushed ahead.

“I know you can. It's all right. Come on, please.”

The room was spinning. Or maybe she was spinning. Skywalker pushed with the Force- not hard, but enough. Mara's senses shrieked a warning. She had no shields. A little more – if he pushed just a little harder he could overrun her. Plunder her ravaged mind. Her entire body vibrated in an attempt to answer her commands as she willed it to defend her.

His voice invaded her consciousness, insisting that she look at him. She didn't want to. Couldn't tell if it was Force compulsion or just the instinctive response of a scrambling mind to lock onto the only solid ground, but she unwillingly complied. The cerulean eyes were there, then, filling her vision again and anchoring her. The pitch and roll of the world leveled off a fraction, and her breathing eased minutely – just enough that she was no longer choking.

Light. He was impossibly bright, with none of the cold, inky darkness that had been been present in every other Force user she'd ever known. H is warm hand was rough with callouses but gentle as it wrapped around hers. The touch sent her heart rate skyrocketing anew. No one touched her like that.

A trap? She grasped for logic, trying frantically to steady herself, but something in her head gave way and the jumble of debris shifted. The world tilted precipitously. A gagged, strangled cry tore at her throat and her tattered body began to give out.

A thought that didn't feel like hers beat insistently at her muddled mind, even as it crumbl ed. Not a lie.

I t was the last thing she knew before her eyes rolled back into her head and blackness took her.

Frustration bit Luke hard as Jade pitched into unconsciousness again. Releasing her hand, he tucked it back against the foam propping her in place and flung himself back into his chair.

Inside him, the caged nexu paced, fuming. You upset her.

It's not my fault!

Of course it's your fault - you were the only one here!
Arguing with an imaginary predator inside him was preposterous, but went a surprisingly long way towards sorting out his tangled thoughts. Because it had a point; something about the few seemingly innocuous bits of information he'd provided had instantly and seriously agitated Mara.

In retrospect, he supposed it wasn't a surprise that his name sparked a strong response – blowing up the Death Star had given him a reputation. Within the Rebellion he was a reluctant hero; in the Empire he was reviled. Either way, his name did tend to cause reactions.

Should have stuck with just Luke, he thought, ruefully.

That she'd be alarmed to be identified as a Force-user was also something he should have expected; after all, she probably had no way of knowing the Rebellion would never abuse Force-sensitives the way the Empire did.

His glimpse of her waking Force presence had been brief, but revealing. The fractured, unsteady state of her mind told him volumes. It also made him exceptionally aware that his (very) limited knowledge of what Sith mind invasion involved or how it worked was pitifully inadequate.

While the nexu inside him snarled and spat for violent retribution at the Sith who had decimated Mara's head, the Tatooine farm boy side of him was torn between the desire to vomit and weeping. Watching misery inflicted on another being was bad enough. To see such atrocities committed on someone he was increasingly – if still confusingly – coming to view as his was maddening. The idea that something as inherently beautiful as the Force could be wielded as an instrument of suffering was offensive to the soul. That possibility that it could have been his father defiling the Force that way was crushing.

Is this really what I come from? Is that darkness lurking inside me, somewhere?

Closing his eyes, Luke reached out to the Force. There was no telling how long it would be before Mara woke again, or how far into the all-but-ever-present well of despair that had shadowed him since Bespin he would slide if his thoughts were left unchecked. He emptied his mind and worked to find his center. He'd have to leave soon; his responsibilities to Rogue Squadron hadn't abated, and he couldn't afford to be distracted or upset over this when he flew.

When he opened his eyes half an hour later, he'd reclaimed his mental balance. Before he left the room, he lifted one hand to tenderly brush back the frizzy wisps of hair escaping the edges of the messy braid that encircled Mara's head.

“It'll be all right, Jade,” he promised, softly. “You'll see.”

Chapter End Notes

I know Mara wasn't awake for long, here. She'll be up and around for progressively longer stretches in the near future - promise.
Chapter Summary

In which we flash back to how Luke and Leia discovered they were twins, Dodonna loses patience and starts planning to interrogate Skywalker's new guest himself, and Luke strives to make his second conversation with Mara better than the first.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 6: We Meet Again

“Luke!”

“Hey, Wedge.” Helmet in hand, the crinkly fabric of his orange flight suit whispering with every stride, Luke trotted across the hangar towards his x-wing, Artoo, and Wedge.

The Corellian was getting the droid settled in the astromech slot of Luke's ship, and leaned off the ladder to scrutinize his squadron leader. “Where have you been? I thought we were going to have to send out a search party.”

“Sorry,” Luke apologized with a chagrined grimace as he approached. As a Commander, he'd never had much leeway in his schedule. Cutting out to check on Mara every minute he could eke free from the crush of commitments had made him even more scarce than usual. He felt a stab of guilt at the realization that his CO had no doubt been left picking up the slack.

“Everything all right?” Antilles pressed.

“Yeah.” Luke glanced around. Judging the rest of the Squad far enough away and too busy with their own conversations to overhear (as if they wouldn't find out soon enough anyway), he lowered his voice. “I've been assigned a new project. Really classified... and complicated.”

Wedge jumped down from the ladder. Landing neatly, he raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Command is piling more on your plate?”

“I think it's a temporary thing,” Luke answered, reassuringly. “I'll try not to keep dumping extra work on you.”

“Not worried about that, Boss - just you. Even Jedi have to sleep, right?”


Jan Dodonna rapped his knuckles on the frame of the open door to Crix Madine's cramped office. He'd never understood how his counterpart worked with his office open to the hall; he'd have been endlessly irritated by the noise and interruptions from passing troops and service droids. Nothing would ever have gotten done.
On further reflection, however, he supposed the habit might be necessary simply to avoid claustrophobia. Bedraggled piles of data pads (most of which had seen better days), faded schematics printed on wide sheets of flimsy, and Goddess-knew-what-else stacked on every flat surface in the tiny, dimly lit cubbyhole of a room seemed poised to spill over in a potentially fatal avalanche at any moment.

*At least with the door open, someone might notice in time to come dig him out before he suffocates,* he thought acerbically.

Madine looked up from where he was hunched over a data pad. “Jan. What can I do for you?”

Dodonna stepped inside and hit the door controls. Possible deluge notwithstanding, the coming conversation was not for public consumption.

“Does Skywalker seem twitchy to you?” he demanded without preamble.

The edges of Crix's mouth quirked upwards, wryly. “Of course. I would be, too, in his boots, after the year he's had.”

“He's hiding something,” Dodonna insisted.

Madine set down his data pad and leaned back in his lumpy, threatbare chair. “Probably a number of things,” he concurred. “He hasn't filed a single report on his Jedi training, and his recounting of the Bespin incident is even more vague than the Princess's and Solo's.” He folded his hands in his lap and tipped his head, considering the other General soberly. “But technically, he was on approved leave until his reinstatement post-recovery from getting his prosthetic. He doesn't owe us any explanations for what happened during that time period – much as we might wish he did.”

“I meant about the girl.”

Crix shrugged. “It's all related, isn't it? Has to be.”

“All the more reason he needs to come clean about it – *all* of it,” Dodonna insisted, testily.

“He's not ready.”

“The entire Rebellion is at risk,” Jan snapped, throwing out a hand in annoyance. “We could have an Imperial plant in the heart of this base, and one of our key Commanders is withholding vital information!”

Crix shook his head, his tone reproving. “He's young and in the midst of a rough patch, but Skywalker is neither a traitor nor a fool. The Rebellion is all he has – his friends and his squad are his family, and they're all here. He wouldn't risk them. If he thought she was dangerous, he'd say so.”

Dodonna scowled fiercely. “I'm going to wake her. Commander Skywalker leaves for an extended patrol run tomorrow morning. If she hasn't woken by then, I'll have the med droids bring her around and get some answers. If she turns out not to be a threat, he can do with her as he likes.”

“I'll go with you, then. Say, 1000 hours?”

The Commenorean General nodded curtly. “I trust you'll keep this off the record, as a precaution?”

“Naturally.”

Satisfied, Dodonna took his leave. Madine sat and stared at the once-again-open door of his office
for a long time. Cracken had warned the boy he couldn't keep his guest in seclusion long term, but he was certain Skywalker had counted on even the short term being longer than this. Tapping the edge of his data pad to refresh it, he skimmed the new messages, hoping that there'd be an update on the girl's condition – something he could use to buy the Commander more time.

Nothing.

Rubbing tired eyes with stiff fingers, he sighed. He'd done enough handling of Imperial prisoners – as both an Imperial and a Rebel – to know that if no report was forthcoming between now and then, tomorrow's appointment could be very unpleasant.

For all of them.

- -

"Your Highness?"

Leia stopped and scanned the comm center. A dark-skinned tech in the corner lifted his hand and wiggled it. She headed in his direction.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Ma'am we're getting a coded message from an unknown source. Tags say it's for Commander Skywalker."

Leia's heart rate kicked up, but she kept her expression neutral. "Any emergency flags or tracers on it?"

The man double checked his screen. "No, Ma'am. It's pre-recorded, standard priority levels. Just a weird encrypt and none of the usual source indicators. Might have just come from some really old equipment, though, I guess."

Her concern eased slightly. "All right. Put it on data chip for me, then completely wipe it from our system, just in case. I'll personally deliver it to him - his astromech should have the decrypt codes."

"Yes, Ma'am."

A few minutes later, Leia was exiting the comm center. Chewie huffed a warm greeting from where he perched atop the Falcon welding a hull plate when she arrived, lifting the blast shield on his helmet to give her the wookie equivalent of a welcoming smile. She returned it.

"If anyone asks, I'm not here," she told him. He harned amused understanding, and she ducked inside gratefully. There was nothing for one's peace of mind like knowing an enormous walking carpet capable of easily pulling people's arms out of their sockets had your back.

Han was in the galley when she entered, poking at a pot of something (that smelled divine) simmering on the ancient, dented cook-top. He grinned at her as she breathed it in eagerly, then dropped the mis-matched lid back on it.

"Hey, Your Worship," he greeted, moving to wrap his arms around her. "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist the siren call of my Corellian stew."

"Well," she teased, standing on her tiptoes to kiss him, "I was going to drag you to bed and have my way with you. But I could be talked into dinner."
Solo smirked. “Have your way with me, huh? I like the sound of that.”

He leaned down to press a kiss to the pulse point of her throat, and Leia arched into him with a contended hum, her fingers curling into his dark hair. He was working her uniform top free of her waistband when her comm chimed.

“Damn.”

“It'll wait,” he urged, lips against her ear, hands sliding against bare skin in all the right places.

Leia bit off a moan as she reluctantly fished out her comm, having recognized the distinct chime that indicated Luke was on the other end. Putting a small hand flat on Han's chest, she halted his progress and summoned a polite, controlled tone. “Organa.”

“Leia?” Her brother's voice crackled over the channel. “Artoo said you were looking for me.”

“You got a message,” she replied evenly. She felt Han still, his head coming up so he could search her face as he felt her tense under his hands. “I left it in the usual spot. It's… from your Old Friend.”

The was silence on the line for the space of a few heartbeats. Then the answer, flat and short. “Thanks.”

Without another word, the line went dead. Leia flicked the comm to 'off' and tossed it on the dejarik table.

“Everything all right?” Han asked, suspiciou.

Leia leaned forward, resting her forehead against his broad chest and savoring the way his arms immediately came around her comfortingly. “Luke's Jedi Master sent him a message. It's encrypted, but it doesn't take a genius to guess what it says.”

“He wants him back,” Solo posited grimly.

She nodded against him, breathed in his reassuring scent and steadying herself with his presence.

“He won't go, you know.”

“He didn't finish,” she reminded him. “He came for us, came back after because of his hand, but he wasn't done.” She sighed and closed her eyes. “It was hard enough to let him go before. But now…”

Leia trailed off, her mind jumping back to the night they'd huddled, disheveled, on the floor in the Falcon's barely lit bunk room.

It had been late; past midnight by base time, at least. Not one but three empty bottles of Whyren's had lain strewn on the floor around them. (They'd finish a fourth before they slept.)

Luke - sock-footed and looking too young to be drinking at all in his faded, once-green cargo pants and Alliance-issued grey sweatshirt (sleeves pulled all the way down, because he hadn't been able to look at where his new hand met his arm yet without feeling queasy) - had huddled with his knees pulled up to his chest, back the edge of the bottom bunk. Leia sat across from him, her own back to the opposite bunk, long hair plaied back in a single informal braid – a casual intimacy she'd only dare share with those closest to her. Han completed the triangle, lounging sloppily against the narrow section of wall that divided the bunks, his long legs folded up haphazardly. The lights had been faint – it was much too late (and they were much too drunk) for anything else.
They'd told him everything about their ordeal; alternated turns spilled their wrath and terror and *sweeet-Force-why-didn't-we-see-the-signs* hindsight moments, interrupting and finishing each other's sentences, but somehow getting it all out more or less coherently. Luke's eyes had been unending wells of pain when he confessed in a barely audible mumble that it had been their pain that drew him. Pulled him inexorably from his protesting Master's side – because how could he not try?

He'd wretchedly begged them to tell him that his 'Old Friend' hadn't been right – that he hadn't dishonored everything they stood for by coming.

Han had sworn euphuistically in *four* languages and threatened to tear the damn Jedi swamp-rat to pieces for feeding him that shavit – and he had a wookie, dammit, he could do it. Luke had simultaneously laughed and cried as the cursing and vehement emotion sounding off his brother-by-choice washed his soul with waves of solace.

It had been Leia's soft, stubborn pleading that eventually drew out the full story of Luke's battle with Vader. She'd leaned far over – it was easier than staying upright at that point, honestly – to clutch his hands in her own and insist that he needed to tell them. They were *family*, weren't they? They'd made themselves that after Yavin – they had to know.

She hadn't understood the look of pain that crossed his face when she'd said it. Not then. But she'd squeezed his fingers tighter and pleaded, and he'd relented as he always did in the face of her beseeching, regardless of request or cost.

So he'd stammered through it, from stumbling across the the Dark Lord in the carbon freezing chamber while looking for them, to the fierce, sprawling battle that had followed. His mechanical fingers had flexed convulsively in her grip as he choked the words out, and he wouldn't look at his hand or them – just stared hard at the dingy floor.

"I jumped the railing. Tried to keep fending him off. To find an opening. I... over-reached. His saber – he just – and my hand – it was gone. My light saber, and my hand, just - and it hurt, Leia, it hurt *so much.*"

He'd yanked his hands from hers and covered his face with them, his palms coming away wet when she'd pried them away and back into her own keeping as if she could channel her own strength into him. It must have worked, somehow, because he'd lifted mournful, red-rimmed eyes to hers.

He'd sounded like a lost child when he whispered the words that shattered her world.

"He said he didn't want to destroy me. That I didn't realize my importance, my power. He wanted… he offered to complete my training. That we could rule together – bring order to the galaxy. He said I didn't know the power of the Dark Side. Didn't know anything - because the Jedi had lied to me. About my family. About my father… and my - my sister."

Leia vividly remembered the feel of sucking in a gasp, and still feeling lightheaded and breathless as something massive shifted inside and around her. Could almost feel, even now, Han's steadying hand on her back as she'd wavered under the previously unknown sensation of *understanding* effervescing to life behind her eyes. A hundred little cues and feelings and oddities suddenly coalesced into knowledge that hadn't been there a moment before, and her mouth had hung open in a mute, horrified 'oh'.

Luke saw it – felt it happen, in the Force – and nodded ponderously, as if his head were as heavy as a Star Destroyer.

"Vader is my father, Leia. *Our* father. The Jedi took us when we were born. Separated us – hid us
away. Lied – to us, to him, to everyone.”

His voice had cracked in a sob. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. He said I could save you. If I joined him - I could make sure you were safe, forever, but – I couldn't. I couldn't do it. I let go. I just let go and fell off the gantry because I couldn't -.”

He’d broken off, falling forward over their still joined hands, weeping in great shuddering gasps.

She’d moved instinctively, her brain fogged from the whiskey and the numbing, stupefying awfulness of it all. Gathered him against her, his tears soaking almost instantly through the shoulder of her shirt as he clung to her miserably.

“I… I know. Somehow, I've always known.” Her voice had sounded tinny to her own ears, as if she were speaking far away through a bad comm system. “Of course you couldn't.”

Unmoored from everything they'd ever considered solid and reliable in the galaxy, the Skywalker twins had, still clutching one another, pitched sideways. Directly into Han. True to form, Solo had caught them. Had leaned back against the *Falcon*'s shabby walls, wrapped a strong, comforting arm around each of them, and let them cry until they were spent.

Now, Han's firm, confident voice dragged Leia back to the present. “Doesn't matter. He won't leave.”

“How can you be so sure?” She sounded tired, even to herself, and wished she didn't. She never let anyone but Han (and sometimes Luke, because she couldn't help it) see this side of her – she didn't even like seeing herself this way, uncertain and weary.

“Jade,” he informed her, smugly. “There's no way the Kid's going anywhere until she's all sorted out. An' if her three minutes of being awake yesterday are any indication, that ain't gonna be any time soon.”

Leia's head came up, even as relief flooded her at the realization that Han was completely right. She wouldn't have to petition Luke to stay on her behalf, or for the Rebellion. Wouldn't have to pace and worry as he disappeared into the unknown again, for an undetermined amount of time. Luke would never abandon his new charge. She had time. *They* had time.

“She woke up? I hadn't heard.”

“I don't think the Kid's too happy with how it went,” Solo confided. He proceeded to fill her in with what Luke had told him. “Still, she *did* wake up.”

“Is he going to file a report? The Council should be informed.”

“Eventually, probably.” He shrugged. “Ain't much to tell, yet, and Too-Onebee said her throat might be too shot to talk for a couple more days.”

“All right.” Leia tipped her head back to stare up at his hazel eyes, marveling again at the warmth in them, just for her. She thought of the way Luke's eyes watched Mara, and prayed that the Force would be as kind to her twin in its choice of mate as it had been to her. Because for all that she had lost, she had also gained something infinitely precious. “How long till dinner?”

He lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug. “Half an hour? A little longer till Chewie'll be done and ready to join us, though.”

“I don't want to think, for a while. Distract me?”
Han grinned. “Any time, Princess.”

Then her feet were off the floor, her legs wrapped around his hips, his mouth against hers as he carried her toward his cabin. Worries about the Jedi and her brother, Mara and the Rebellion – everything fell away. It wouldn't be long – they never had as long as they wanted – but for a few beautiful, stolen moments, there would be nothing in the galaxy but her and Han, and everything would be right.

And for now, that was enough.

- -

“Welcome back.”

Mara had been awake, trying to get her bearings – unmoving, giving nothing away, of course - for a few minutes before Luke called her on it this time. It was either rare courtesy, carelessness, or a ploy to lull her into carelessness of her own. She was so tired that just thinking about the last made her feel ill.

Still, there was no value in pretending to sleep when your watcher knew you were pretending, and she gave up her facade without further prompting. Knowing the med bay lights would be searingly bright, she tried to move her head, to angle even the slightest bit away from them, then resigned herself to the suffering. At least her eyes were a bit less gritty this time; she was thankful for the small mercy.

Luke watched Mara's eyes scrape open. He'd been waiting impatiently as she swam slowly back to consciousness - as though it were taking her tremendous effort to get there – jittery and hopeful in equal measures about what look might cross her pale features when she focused on him. He'd felt her wake, and suffered a pang of dismay when she'd continued to feign unconsciousness. His first thought had been that she was trying to avoid him. Now he caught the funny movement of her head and the way her pupils dilated and narrowed in quick succession, a flare of discomfort in the Force from her unshielded mind and the fine skin at the edges crinkling in the vestiges of an involuntary flinch. Understanding brought consolation - he hadn't considered how sensitive she must be right now.

“I'm sorry.” He quickly reached out with the Force, dropping the room's illumination to half it's usual level. “Is that better?”

Mara blinked, taken aback by the considerate gesture, and managed a nod. The movement didn't hurt this time, which she considered a welcome improvement. With the reduced strain on her eyes, a lifetime of reading and tracking people caused a small corner of her brain to instinctively register and note that Skywalker seemed to ease slightly under the softer lighting, too. He looked tired, and worried, but still strangely hopeful - for what, she couldn't identify.

“Water?”

Her voice was a papery croak, but he brightened considerably and moved quickly to retrieve a glass by the bedside. He lifted it for her, and held the straw in place at her lips with the deft movements of someone experienced with the maneuver. She wondered how often he'd sat thus with friends (or prisoners?) to get so comfortable with it.

“Thank you.” Her voice was only infinitesimally stronger after the drink, but again her training kicked in to prescribe appropriate responses. He was playing the polite, concerned captor. Until he tipped his hand otherwise, she'd fare best by modeling herself the well-behaved captive.
“You're welcome.” Luke set the glass back on the stand and made himself sit back down in his chair, giving her space. He'd thought long and hard about their first encounter, and kept himself under strict rein in the Force; determined not to unnecessarily spook her again.

“I know we got off to something of a rough start last time.” He gave her a small, rueful smile. “I told you the kinds of things I like to hear when I wake up. I thought maybe this time you could tell me what you'd like to know, and we'll see if it goes any better.”

Mara appraised him warily, attempting to discern if this was a test. Her head was still astoundingly uneven, and common sense said she had to doubt her own perceptions. But the earnestness of his expression held true straight through his Force sense, as best she could tell.

“How long have I been here?” Speaking was difficult; her cadence was uneven, and her voice crackled like ancient parchment, but he seemed to have no trouble hearing her.

“About two standard weeks,” he answered. “And I think you were in transit for about four days before that.”

Three weeks. She'd been 'executed' almost three weeks ago. “How... did I get here?”

“You came on a shuttle, piloted by my astromech droid.” Luke hoped that paring his answers down to the basics would allow him to answer honestly while still avoiding the kind of alarm that had so devastated her last time.

Mara intentionally focused on staying balanced in a relatively stable, roughly square-ish point in the core of her mind. She pictured herself in dance practice, balancing on her toes, unwavering more than a fraction of a centimeter in any direction. She could not lose this opportunity to gather information by tipping over, sprawling into an unsafe pocket of her consciousness and blacking out again.

“How?”

Luke hesitated, still not sure how to phrase that answer in any even remotely undisturbing way. His concern was doubled by the realization that he could already feel exhaustion edging back against her presence in the Force, her body still far from equipped to handle the demands of both wakefulness and healing.

“Vader sent you, to serve in some sort of body guard capacity. He recorded a message for you on my droid – I can show you, if you want, whenever you're up to it.”

Vader.

Luke tensed as Mara's fingers spasmed, looking for something solid to hold on to, and her eyes squeezed shut.

A memory slammed into her from the side, and she made herself spin on her fixed point, absorbing and spiraling the impact back out to avoid being knocked off center. She felt more than saw the ghostly impression of two Noghri. A hazily remembered grating sensation against her back as the deadly, diminutive aliens - visible only when the faint light blinking off a nearby panel illuminated their sharp teeth – dragged her. A blur that might have been a large, black-gloved hand passing over her slitted eye-lids. Then searing pain and bottomless blackness.

Comprehension wound itself around her as she whirled, the heaviness of the realization anchoring her to her place as if the satin dancing slippers she'd mentally envisioned had transmuted to lead.
The Emperor discarded his Hand, and Vader sipped the remnants to his son.

Excruciating grief threatened to drown her.

She'd failed. A lifetime of sacrifice and suffering, pushing herself to never be anything less than the best, culminated in failure so complete she'd been deemed unfit – unworthy to continue breathing – by the only authority she'd ever known.

Instinct was to throw up walls to protect herself from the onslaught, but in her current state it would have been a costly mistake. She barely caught herself in time, and compensated by emptying herself. It was like carving a hole in the bottle of an ocean; as if every pore in her body opened and she could hold nothing but what she ensconced on the tiny solid point at the pinnacle of her focus. Everything else simply spilled out, falling away until she was nearly hollow. It was an old and familiar exercise, and it proved to be her saving grace, now.

“What did you just do?” Luke's eyes were wide with awe, and (to her consternation) Mara realized that her utterly fragged shields had let at least something of the messy torrent of thoughts and memories — and their abrupt flushing — through.

She tried to shrug. “Stayed awake.”

She swallowed against a still dry throat and, without further cues, he thoughtfully offered her the water again.

“Mara,” Luke risked asking as he put the glass back aside, “can you tell me what happened to you?”

She looked at him blankly, then blinked, her brow furrowing slightly like she didn't understand the question. Luke felt genuine confusion rioting around her in the Force, and was perplexed by it.

“What?”

“You were exposed to a massive amount of electricity, and your head is...” Luke hesitated. Kriffed was the word that came to mind, but seemed a bit undiplomatic given the situation. He settled on, “battered, too. Can you tell me what they did to you, what they used?”

It was a terrible question to have to ask, but the sooner they knew, the better they could help, he reminded himself. He'd owe Master Yoda a return message anyway — if he got any details at all, he could at least include a reasonably articulated request for the right information to help her heal the fissures in her Force sense.

Apprehension wriggled through Mara, viscous and disquieting.

Is this a trick? But why? He's a Jedi – and the son of a Sith, for kriff sake - he can't possibly think I'll believe that he doesn't know. What would he even stand to gain?


“Show me the message.”

Luke frowned slightly. “All right.” He fished his comm unit out of his pocket. “Artoo, can you come to med bay please? Thanks.” He tucked the small transceiver back away. “It'll just take him a couple minutes to get here.”

He wanted to repeat the question, explain that he was only trying to help, but even without reaching out he could feel the unease seeping off of her. Whatever they'd done, she didn't want to talk about it
yet.

And, oh, did he ever know that feeling.

“What are you giving me?” Mara fluttered the fingers of her right hand toward the I.V. line in her left.

“Diclofenac and misoprostol.” Luke leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and laced his fingers together. “We tried all the usual things first, but nothing worked.”

They’d tried over a dozen common painkillers, in fact, before they’d found a single one that had proved to be any more effective in Mara's system than water. To say the med droids were clueless and unhappy about their inability to explain that phenomenon would be a gross understatement.

“I don't want them.”

“You want something else?”

“No. Nothing. Turn them off.”

“Mara,” Luke placated. “You're badly injured. You have to have something.”

“No.” She glared at him, green eyes hard.

Luke stared back, bewildered. “You want to be in pain?”

Whatever reply she would have made was cut off by the door sliding open. Artoo Detoo rolled in, and chirped a cheerful greeting when he saw Mara was awake.

Luke smiled affectionately at the droid. “Mara, this is Artoo Detoo. Artoo, can you play both the messages for her, please?”

The astromech tooted an affirmative, and his holo-projector whirred to life. Vader's image appeared. “My son...”

Luke surreptitiously watched Mara as she fixated on the hologram. Her jaw was clenched tightly, every line in her body tense, and loathing leaked out of her at the sight of Vader. No love lost between them, then, he deduced.

Mara was livid. A crate? He kriffing stuffed me in a crate, like a- a thing?? Karking bastard.

The message ended, and Vader dissolved for a second, then reappeared and began speaking again. “Mara Jade. Your life is forfeit...”


The words sought to crush her with their weight, their abhorrent implications and insinuations. Mara's stomach knotted, and if she'd had any color to begin with it would have drained from her skin. Her eyes slid shut, and she grasped truculently at her center, trying not to fall off the single stable point inside her mind.

She was no longer the Emperor's Hand. She was... nothing. A ghost. Residue. The slag of a former life. One that had been stripped of its purpose and honor before it was snuffed out.

Purpose. Vader had assigned her a new purpose. Presumptuous son of a schutta - she'd never been his to command, and they both knew it. Or at least they had.
But she'd been discarded, and he'd scraped what remained of her from the Throne Room floor before it could be incinerated – no, she hadn't been worth even that much attention. He'd had his little alien slaves do it for him. Now she was the slave, and he'd just given her to his son. Gifted her to Skywalker.

There was a questioning whistle, and then a low hum.

“Yes. Thanks, Artoo.” Luke eyed Mara's ashen form anxiously. Said her name gently and struggled against the urge to reach out and touch her. “Mara?”

You have to open your eyes. Training from – and for – a life that no longer existed prodded at her. Be the good captive. Buy yourself time to make a plan.

But a plan for what? Escape? To where? The Emperor would never take her back. And Vader… Vader had made himself explicitly clear. He knew. Knew how Palpatine had taken her to the edge of an abyss from which she nearly hadn't returned; wouldn't return if she ever found herself there again. And he was just ruthless enough to make good on his threat to drag her there again if she defied his will.

Old memories, unrestrained by the reinforced walls she'd long used to hold them in check (walls now reduced to piles of rubble at the bottom of the cavernously empty hollows in her brain), clawed their way up from the broken darkness beneath her perch to assault her fragile consciousness. Their gouging grip dug dangerously into the single stable pillar she'd been using to anchor herself and it wobbled.

Emerald eyes opened, and the torment reflected in their depths tore at Luke's heart.

“I won't call you Master.” Mara's voice was a hoarse whisper, and her hand clenched into a fist around a handful of coarse sheets.

He did reach for her then; covered the white knuckles of her fingers with his own and squeezed gently. “I don't want you to.”

Mara's pillar toppled, and she felt the cascading impact as a rolling tremble down her body. Above her, alarms started to sound on the monitoring board as the misfiring circuitry in her brain barreled her body toward shock.

“No! Mara, stay with me.” Luke abandoned his resolve to avoid Force use and reached out just to the edges of her presence, trying to gauge what was happening – and instantly got knocked away. Hard.

Not by shields, but – upheaval?

He watched in a sort of disturbed awe as her head was rocked by what he could only compare to the shuddering, grinding slide of dislodged tectonic plates. She hadn't shoved him out on purpose, his feelers had hit one of the massive chunks as it thrust upward in collision with another quickly ground beneath it.

Sweet Force, if it's this bad from the outside, how is she surviving trapped inside?

The door whisked open and a Too-Onebee droid rushed in, already ejecting a needle from a slot on it's metal arm. The attached cylinder began to fill with a calculated cocktail of drugs.

No. It's coming. Don't let it - get out, move – now! Dammit -!
The staccato burst of Mara's thoughts – cut off in a muffled mental scream of frustration - hit too late for Luke to react, and he watched impotently as the droid thrust the needle through the thin med gown into Mara's spine. Her eyes snapped wide for a split second, unfocused and despairing, before she convulsed and went limp.

Shaken, Luke sank back into the chair and stared at the bed blindly. He'd felt the dark tsunami surge up around her, but hadn't been able to discern its source or constituents. Everything Vader had said was awful, but he was vexingly unsure what exactly had triggered the shock. Or even if anything had at all – she'd been exhausted halfway into their conversation; perhaps she'd just hit her body's physical limit for the time being.

One thing had become starkly clear, however: Mara obdurately loathed med droids, drugs, and apparently everything else associated with med bays. Her reaction the first time she'd woken up, combined with her demand that he cut off her pain meds and her strong emotional response to the arrival of the Too-Onebee just now made for an undeniable pattern with dark implications.

The nexu inside him (that he'd been trying adamantly to repress) prowled restlessly, already obsessing over the question of how it could protect her from this – where she could go to get out of here. There was still the need for a nutrient feed to consider, after all, even if she could somehow manage to do without painkillers. Luke resolved to talk to Leia about the possibilities.

Anything to not have to watch Mara collapse on him again, beyond his ability to help.

His thoughts were interrupted by a bump against his leg and a sad electronic coo.

“Yeah, Artoo, I lost her again.”

A chirp.

“No, it's not your fault.” Luke sighed. “She'll be all right. She just… needs more time, I think.”

The Too-Onebee fussed a bit before excusing itself. When it was gone, Luke gathered himself and rose. Stepping closer to the bed, he brushed a hand across Mara's pale cheek. She felt cold under his fingertips, and he leaned down to dig another blanket out from the supply stored in the bed's base. He thought of the way his Aunt Beru had tucked him in as a child while he draped the utilitarian covering over Mara. Wondered if Mara had had someone to tuck her in, growing up. It occurred to him for the first time that there might be someone out there right now, frantically missing and searching for her. He had no idea.

When he'd satisfied himself that she'd be warm enough, he paused. She couldn't hear him, but he spoke anyway.

“It won't always be like this, Jade. You're strong. If you let me help you, we can get you better. Fix whatever they did.”

His thumb moved in slow strokes, tracing the line of her shoulder blade where it stood out too prominently under the blanket. His other hand came up to rub at the ache starting in his forehead.

“I'm going to be on patrol for the next couple days,” he told her, regretfully. “So I won't be by to visit as much. But I'll come see you when I get back. Focus on getting better while I'm gone, all right? We have… important things, to talk about. The sooner the better.”

Luke wanted to linger. To hold her hand while she slept like he had Leia's after Yavin, just for the sake of being there to do it. But he couldn't. He had to go, or he'd be late getting changed and to his ship on time for patrol. He'd sacrificed dinner in favor of scarfing down a ration bar on the run as it
was already.

Knowing he shouldn't, Luke still couldn't help but lean forward and brush his lips across Mara's temple. “Hang in there, Mara. I'll see you soon.”

Then he stood, straightened his shoulders, and walked out, Artoo on his heels.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to frangipani for the phrase "consummate ambivalence", which was constantly in my head while working on this chapter and the next one.

I'm not super thrilled with how this installment turned out, but I'm posting anyway in the spirit of refusing to let perfect be the enemy of good/done because I don't think continuing to fuss over it will really improve it much. (Constructive criticism totally welcome, though, so I can apply the principles to the next chapter!) Also, because I have fun stuff coming up for L/M that I am more than ready to get to!

I promise this is the last time that Mara passes out in trauma-induced shock from conversing with Luke. If it didn't show that her control is getting better, it will in the next chapter, I promise!
Examinations and Escape

Chapter Summary

Dodonna and Madine pay a visit to the med bay. Leia discovers something unexpected about Mara's origins. Mara decides she's done with the med bay, and Artoo 'helps'...

Reality faded back in slowly.

Again, years of training kept Mara's body still and her breathing level as she strained to listen at the edges of consciousness against the lingering grogginess as it dissipated almost languidly from her mind.

A few machines beeped, and life hummed faintly on the other side of the door, but there was no other sound. No one else breathing nearby. No rustle of fabric. No bright glimmer of Skywalker, waiting just outside her personal space in the Force.

Could she actually be alone? The idea of being secluded with nothing but her own thoughts and free to conduct more thorough reconnaissance was tantalizing.

Cautiously, she balanced herself on one of the sturdier pylons in the wreckage of her mind and mentally reached out. She started small, inching along her own body and the bed. Finding nothing to cause alarm, she let her awareness creep outward. It was a painstakingly tedious task to do at this pace, but she didn't dare go any faster with her control still so limited. She schooled herself to patience; she needed information, leverage – something to alter the balance of power in her favor. She couldn't afford to miss anything because of restive hurry.

After what felt like an unbearably long time, she reached the edges of the room on all sides. She truly was alone. Cracking a single eye open, she rolled her gaze around the perimeter of her bed, visually verifying her assessment. (Droids didn't show up in the Force, after all.) Still, she found nothing aside from the machines wirelessly monitoring her condition.

Finding the coast clear, Mara evaluated her options. The first thing she needed was movement. Starting with her toes, she began a profoundly simple exercise, tensing and relaxing each muscle group in turn. She took stock as she went, making note of which muscles she had to repeat the process on more than once to get a satisfactory response. Aside from the lightening burns and some faded bruising at her wrists – she'd been stun cuffed somewhere along the line, she realized – and, of course, her head, she didn't appear to be injured. That was good news.

She was appallingly weak from having been immobile for so long, but that wasn't necessarily the handicap for her it would have been for anyone else. The Force, as the Jedi would say, was her ally.

If she could sort out her head enough to consistently and stably access and apply it, that is. Ergo, she decided, the next step was to do a thorough inspection of the mess and figure out if she could fix it, or at least jury-rig something to hold her over until she found a way out of this disaster. With a last longing glance at the vials of painkillers still dripping into her I.V. - she'd so have liked to get rid of them first – she funneled her attention into the most crucial priority.

Burrowing inside herself, she shut out the rest of the world entirely. Mara drifted among the shattered
pathways of her mind, examining and inspecting, compiling a comprehensive list of the losses and possibilities for repairs. Reviewing her findings, she settled on one shattered wall, and the dreck and chaos littering the space around it. Digging through the mess was too dangerous; if she dislodged it, there was no telling where it would end up. Instead, she'd try to repair the wall first. Create a locked, secure barrier behind which she could imprison unsafe thoughts and memories when they attacked.

Mara excelled at walls. Nearly without thinking, she began to weave the pattern in her mind. Almost immediately, she realized something was wrong.

Her chest tightened. The wall wasn't holding. She checked her method, then checked again. Tried another approach. Tried everything she knew and watched in mounting trepidation as nothing held.

Finally, one excruciatingly in-depth analysis later, she determined the source of the problem. Understanding lanced through her, cold and sharp.

_The Emperor never meant to allow me to live apart from him. He didn't leave enough of me in my head to continue alone._

Now that she saw it, she couldn't believe it hadn't been obvious from the start - the patterns he'd wrought in the labyrinth he'd made for himself in her mind. The strategic supports he'd insinuated himself into so early.

Passing out at the end of her conversations with Skywalker hadn't been physical weakness from her injuries as she'd thought, nor emotional volatility as he probably assumed. It had been the human equivalent of blowing a fuse. With huge gaps in critical pathways – too many to work around for any length of time - her body simply lacked the ability the handle stress or maintain awareness in anything more than short spurts.

Without the Emperor filling the holes he'd carved into her head, she was going to die.

Looking at the crumbling, blackened edges of her mind, she guessed that every time she blacked out, she was frying a little more of what structure remained. Those stark, bleak facts left only two questions to be answered: How long could she hold out before she simply stopped waking up at all, and how was she going to spend the hours (days?) left to her before her unceremonious return to hell?

Time stopped as the experience of fathomless betrayal distorted everything Mara thought she knew. Past, present and future blurred, rearranged and rewritten in the harsh light of stark realities previously unknown.

Mara opened her eyes and glared savagely at the sterile expanse of the too-white ceiling, as if it were solely to blame for the catastrophe she found herself inhabiting. She'd given the Emperor _everything_, and this was her reward?

One thought coalesced in the mess of hate, despair and rage that consumed her.

_I'm going to see you in hell, you sick kriff – and it'll be sooner than you think._

- -

Luke glowered at the green-tinted screen in the dashboard of his cockpit. Until a few moments ago, he'd been having a refreshingly good day.
The Rogues had been in top form and high spirits all day, filling the radio waves between their patrolling x-wings with wild guesses at their Commander's new “secret project” (whose existence had been a secret for all of about half an hour). They'd argued about, then voted on, which guesses to include in a betting pool on the subject. (It was Tycho's turn to keep track this time.) They had made an endlessly entertaining game of trying to con hints and clues out of him.

(This had met with zero success, but their spirits remained undaunted.)

Luke had laughed so hard at some of their guesses that he'd had to shut his mic off repeatedly, and would have to remember to scrub the tear tracks off his cheeks when he could finally remove his helmet all the way.

In short, tense spurts tucked in and around their jovial chatter, they'd intercepted and destroyed two Imperial probe droids long before they'd come within range of the base, buying the Rebellion more precious time on Zastiga.

As usual on extended patrols, they'd set up shifts. Luke handed command off to Wedge and went into passive mode with half the squadron to catch a few hours’ sleep. Antilles and the other half of the squad had already had their naps; when Luke's crew came back online they'd finish their run and turn their noses gratefully back towards home. Before tipping his head back to try to catch some rest, though, Luke had asked Artoo to decrypt Yoda's message. No better place to view a private message, after all, than alone in a single person ship in deep space.

Less than two dozen words total, it had completely ruined his good mood. Apparently, Yoda thought he was loitering.

Luke reread the brief message and wondered if his Master had somehow Force-encoded crankiness into it, or if it was just his imagination.

*Return you must. Much there is still to learn. Unsettled you are. Dangerous this is. Cease loitering you should. At once, return.*

The Jedi had fought in the Clone Wars under Yoda's watch; Ben Kenobi had been a decorated General. Yoda had to know what war was like - how critical any given day could prove to be without warning. Luke wondered if 'his' war was somehow less noble or important in the Jedi's eyes than his father's, or if being hidden away in his swamp for so long had simply reduced the former Grand Master's concern for what happened outside the myopic priorities of the all-but-microscopic Jedi remnant.

Skywalker balled his hand into a fist and punched it halfheartedly against the side panel of his ship. He was tired and, if he was honest with himself, hurt. Ben and Yoda hadn't been completely honest with him, and he'd paid for it. Paid with his hand, and his peace of mind. Would easily have paid for it with his life, if Vader had been so inclined. No matter how much he knew he ought to go back – intended to keep his promise and go back to finish his training - he couldn't do it yet. Couldn't face thrusting his bruised and aching heart back into Yoda's small, clawed hands with his trust still so badly fractured.

*Mara.* Her face swam in his mind, and he felt a measure of calm return. He didn't have to debate or berate himself – he couldn't leave right now, even if he wanted to. Until they got her health restored and her situation sorted out, Mara needed him. And she was Force-sensitive, too. He brightened at the idea of taking her with him to Dagobah when he returned. Maybe he wouldn't have to be alone, next time.

Better mood restored, Luke punched the button to erase the message. He'd send a reply when he got
back to base. Reiterate his promise, and explain that he simply couldn't get away just now.

“You sleeping yet, Boss?” Wedge's voice crackled from the radio across a private ship-to-ship channel.

“Not quite,” Luke shook his head, even though his friend couldn't see him. “Just taking care of a couple loose ends.”

He could hear reproof clearly in his CO's voice. “You try to keep up this pace and you're gonna make yourself sick,” he warned. “If I catch you up over there trying to sneak in 'just a little more' work again, I'm going to tell the Princess and she'll assign you a supervisor or body guard or something.”

_A little late for that_, Luke thought, grinning at the irony in spite of himself. _Vader beat her to it._

“I'll keep that in mind,” he replied dryly. “Night, Wedge.”

He could hear Antilles' scowl. “I mean it.”

Luke didn't reply, just shut the link off and finished dropping fully into low-power mode. Moments later, he was asleep, lost in sweet strange dreams of a red-headed Jedi trailing an exasperated green troll across a humid swamp, dissecting the finer points of Force theology.

---

A minor crisis involving the Base's fire suppression system came across General Madine's cluttered desk at 0800 hours. He, Dodonna, and half of the base's tech support crew proceeded to spend the next six hours unraveling the chaos and getting order fully restored. By then, they were sufficiently backed up on other key work that they mutually agreed to postpone their visit to Skywalker's guest until the following morning.

By 0700, their newly arranged meeting time, Madine had still found no updates on the woman's condition. He wondered if Skywalker was too backlogged to keep up with his report writing, trying to avoid giving up information for as long as possible, or genuinely had nothing to tell.

He hoped, for all their sakes, it was the latter.

---

Voices floated through the periphery of Mara's awareness. She was on her back, she realized, the foam that had surrounded her gone. Something cold was seeping through her veins, a tingly trickle she identified immediately. She searched for it's entry points, and found only one - the port in the back of her hand.

_They expect this to be easy, then. Or else they're trying to play it low key to avoid spooking me._

She thought she could feel a barely perceptible tightening and weight on her skin from extra tape that hadn't been there before, binding the tubing securely against her from middle finger to wrist. Insurance that none of the movements she could make in her weakened state could dislodge it, disrupt the flow of the blueish fluid that would force her to stay awake, pinning her to awareness long past her body's normal tolerances.

It seemed the Rebellion had run out of patience, and come for answers.

_It had to happen sometime_, she thought grimly. Trying to gather herself against what she knew came
next, she found a small, somewhat stable sliver of her brain and assigned it to track the voices.

“Good, you're here.” Male, gruff. Unhappy?

“How is she? Did they get everything set up?” Another male. Calmer, smoother. Faint Coruscanti accent. The cultured inflection brought an unexpected ache; Mara had never truly known a home, but the vast city-planet that was Coruscant was the closest she'd come. Given what she'd learned the last two times she'd woken, this might be the last time she encountered any remnant of it.

“Stable. They're certain they can bring her around.”

A new voice, this one noticeably mechanical. An EmDee med droid. “Everything is in place, Generals. We can begin at your signal.”

Mara refused to flinch, despite knowing what was coming. The electrical pulse that shot through her body sizzled against frayed nerve endings from her scalp to her toes, but she bit back the hiss of pain that wanted to escape. She wondered, fleetingly, if they knew nothing at all about Force lightning and its effects, or if they knew everything and were using it to their cruel advantage.

“The patient is alert,” the med droid informed the Generals. “All vitals register within adequate ranges.”

“Ma'am,” the smoother second voice addressed her with a crisp military precision, “are you awake?”

*He's been assigned to play 'good trooper', then.*

Mara let her eyes creak open, careful not to look fully awake until after a few stuttering blinks. It took longer than it should have for her to pull their names from her previously rapid-fire memory. Crix Madine. Jan Dodonna. High-ranking Imperial defectors, both.

“Nice to see you awake,” Madine smiled kindly at her. “We were starting to be worried.”

*They didn't know I was awake? Skywalker didn't tell them?* That was interesting. She wondered what else they didn't know. She nodded slightly, to show she'd heard and understood him.

Dodonna moved to the end of her repulsar bed and plucked the data pad containing her chart from it's holder. Mara thanked the stars that she'd taken time to edit it after she'd regained some motion when she'd woken up alone. Interestingly, it hadn't had her name – just an arbitrary patient number. She'd wiped everything but her basic vitals – height, weight, etc. The record of the drugs they'd tried and found useless, as well as her immunity to bacta, was gone. The only drug dosages on record were the ones still dripping into her feed now.

The General fixed the data pad with a withering look. “There's practically nothing on here,” he announced, tossing it back into it's holder.

Madine politely ignored the comment. “I'm General Madine,” he introduced himself, manners impeccable. “This is General Dodonna. Do you know where you are?”

Mara shook her head slightly, not having to fake the wince she included for effect.

“You're on an Alliance base,” he told her. “You arrived severely injured a few weeks ago. Are you able to speak?”

Mara licked her lips and opened her mouth as if trying, but nothing came out. She pursed her lips in a frown, then tried again. This time, there was a rasp of air, but still no proper sound.
Dodonna narrowed his eyes at the girl when she raised a distressed green gaze to them.

“It's all right,” Madine reassured her. “I'm sure your voice will come back with time. Commander Skywalker tells us you still have a great deal of mending to do.”

Her face wrinkled in confusion.

“You're not familiar with Skywalker?” Dodonna inquired, looking down his nose at her, as if she were a difficult child telling fibs. “He's certainly be spending enough time at your bedside.”

Mara opened her mouth as if to reply, then managed a minute, helpless shrug. Internally, her thoughts raced as fast as they dared across the jagged surface of her mind. *How can they know this little? Is this just an elaborate charade?*

That she was a pawn in a much larger game was obvious; who was being played, she had yet to work out.

For a fleeting second, she had the horrified thought that Skywalker might actually be intending to accept Vader's offer to rule and deceiving the whole of the Rebellion leadership. Not that it mattered to her what happened to the Rebels, of course, but to pull off a deception of that magnitude meant he could be easily deceiving her in her current state as well. Could be toying with her, solely for the pleasure of playing with the (until recently) favorite possession of the man who would be his Master, the Emperor.

That would certainly explain why he hadn't just riffled through her head the instant she woke up and pulled out everything he wanted to know, or everything his superiors apparently wanted to know badly enough to strong-arm her awake for questioning.

The alarm associated with that idea cost her. The med droid at her side moved, and the ice creeping into her veins increased. She saw Madine's eyes flick to the movement, and realized he was tracking how much waking agent she was given.

*Of course he is. He was an Imperial General. He knows this process inside out.* She wasn't sure if that thought was encouraging or not.

“Given that your voice isn't with us yet,” Madine said reasonably, “I think perhaps an alternative is in order. Do you know the tapping code?”

Mara had learned the ancient mariner's tapping code when she was four. If her instructor hadn't hated children so dourly, she might have thought it was a game and immensely enjoyed it. She pasted on an embarrassed expression and shook her head regretfully.

“We'll go with blinks, then,” the General replied, unperturbed. “One for yes, two for no. All right?”

She adjusted her expression to pleased and nodded. Added a single blink for good measure.

“Do you know how you got here?” Dodonna took the first question, and Mara could feel ripples of his energy ramping up as he anticipated finally getting somewhere.

*Saying yes means implicitly acknowledging you've been awake and talked to Skywalker.* Two blinks.

“Do you remember being with Vader prior to being sent here?” The man didn't take his eyes off her, and his voice was brusque and clipped.

Mara grimaced, her fingers flexing against the blanket in unfeigned distaste, and blinked once.
“Were you an Imperial?” he asked sharply.

Mara faltered. Intentionally widened her eyes and cast a scared, helpless look between the two men.

Madine cleared his throat. “Were you a citizen of the Empire?” he restated the question solicitously.

Mara let out a breath, blinking once and nodding.

“Were you a member of the Imperial Forces?” Dodonna clarified, hawkishly.

Technically, no, Mara thought to herself. She'd never held any formal rank; she'd only ever been a power unto herself. It was always nice when one didn't have to lie. Confidently, she blinked twice.

“Were you a prisoner?” he continued. He still felt suspicious to her limited Force sense, but it was starting to taper off.

I was Vader's prisoner for at least a few minutes while he was stuffing me in that sith-spawned crate.

The thought carried with it a tide of wrath; her equilibrium tipped and she started to slide.

The med droid depressed the dispenser button again. A fresh flow of ice hit Mara's veins, solidifying the glacial wall propping her upright, freezing her in place, awake and aware.

Nod and blink.

“You're giving her more of that, already?” Madine asked, sharply.

“It is necessary to keep her awake,” the droid replied, placidity undisturbed by the man's tone. It's metal appendage slid up Mara's arm, adjusting the tube that carried the drugs, accidentally catching the edge of her sleeve on its way.

“Kriff.” Madine muttered under his breath, as if he didn't typically ascribe to swearing in front of ladies.

Mara would have been amused, but was distracted by the realization that she couldn't feel most of her body anymore. Nerve endings tingled with a frost-bitten edge, but intermittent numbness roved through her at the same time, progressively disassociating her from herself. She imagined her captors would be terribly displeased if they figured out the counter-productive interactions between their chosen drug and her damaged nerves.

She tensed when Madine moved suddenly, ducking around Dodonna to the opposite side of the bed from the droid. Mara jerked ineffectually when the General's hand pushed her sleeve up past her elbow, and held it back leaving her skin exposed. Unwilling to look directly at the scarlet marks feathering across her illness-bleached skin, her eyes darted to his face. She remembered at the last second to make them wide and wild instead of the narrow and sharp they wanted to be.

Blue eyes – darker than Skywalker's, and terribly grave – flicked up from her arm to her face. “These are from Force lightening.”

Mara stopped breathing. He knows?

That made no sense. If Skywalker claimed not to know, why would Madine? Her head spun with the violent return of the idea that the Jedi was lying to her and the equally vehement assertion of some other portion of her fragmented mind that he couldn't be. He was dangerous, yes, but not Dark. Mara had grown up in the heart of darkness -she'd know it when it was present, she was certain.
A warning tone went off on the monitor behind her, and the med droid responded immediately. Mara's eyelids fluttered as a scorching line of acid slithered through the flowing stream of cold stimulant being fed into her system.

“Stop!” Madine demanded. “What is that?”

“A heating agent,” the EmDee replied in it's perfectly modulated calm. “The stimulant has reached adequate saturation to begin lowering her core temperature beyond safe levels.”

“Flush it,” he commanded. “Get it out of her system – all of it.”

Ice and acid corkscrewed in Mara's veins, and she gazed up at the General with eyes gone dull and bleary.

“I'm sorry. I didn't realize.” Crix gently pulled the girl's sleeve down and tucked her arm under the blanket, smoothing it over her with fatherly care. “Get some rest. You're safe here.”

Dodonna, who had been watching slack-jawed, started to splutter, but Madine cut him off with a sharp shake of his head.

Exhaustion poured in fast as the med droid pushed a cleanser through Mara's blood stream. She felt like she was floating, surreal and vague. Madine said something, but she didn't hear it.

Madine watched the girl drift; her eyes were half open still, but she wasn't with them any more. He took two steps to the end of the bed and grabbed the data pad. Punching in new commands, he spoke strictly to the med droid. “She's not to receive waking agents again –or visitors, except Skywalker. Leave her be.”

Servos whirred as the droid cocked it's mechanical head as it automatically began to remove the now unneeded vial from Mara's feed line, but it asked no questions. “Yes, General.”

“What the chaos was that all about?” Dodonna demanded.

“Did you ever see the Emperor use Force lightening?” Madine asked, dropping the data pad back in it's holder and spearing his counterpart with a hard gaze.

Jan's eyebrows raised dubiously. “I've never even heard of it.”

“I saw it once,” Crix told him, grimly. “Just before I got out. The ultimate punishment for traitors to the Empire.” His voice was colder than Dodonna had ever heard it. “I watched him fry a man to death in front of my eyes, and then helped remove the body from his presence. That girl,” he pointed to Mara, “has twice the Force lightening scars of the corpse I carried. Whoever she is, whatever she did, she's an enemy of the Emperor – not us.”

With that, he stalked out, leaving Dodonna to stare after him in mute astonishment.

- -

“Leia? I have something you might want to see.”

The Princess hauled herself out of the mired details of the Rebellion Resources Inventory she'd been studying to squint up at the stately form of Winter Retrac. “What is it?”

Winter stepped fully the office and let the door glide shut behind her. “The techs had a few of the
older, independently contained databases powered up yesterday looking for something. I had them run that DNA sample you were researching last week through, on the off chance that there was something relevant... and there was.”

“You found a match?” the Princess exclaimed, incredulously.

“A partial one,” Winter amended, holding out a data pad. “The mother, from the looks of it.”

“Duchess Satine Kryze,” Leia read. “Of Mandalore. Disappeared a year and a half after the Empire was formed.”

“She's not on record as having any children,” Winter said conspiratorially, slipping into the seat opposite Leia and leaning in, her fine, white-blonde hair falling over her shoulder, “but it's definitely a match.”

“It says 'deceased', but there's no date or cause of death. What happened to her?”

“It's believed she was eliminated by the Emperor for having had close ties to the Jedi.”

Leia made a face and brought a hand to her neck, working at the tension knots forming there. “Not her, too.”

“What?”

“Close ties to the Jedi?” Leia repeated, suggestively. “Disappeared just in time to have a secret, Force-sensitive child, then never be seen or heard from again?”

Winter frowned thoughtfully and drummed her flawlessly manicured fingertips on the table, thinking. “You think she had an affair with a Jedi.”

“My birth mother must have,” Leia pointed out.

Aside from Han and Chewie, Winter was the only person who knew about Luke and Leia's parentage. She'd grown up in Aldera like a sister to Leia, and they'd been keeping each other's secrets since they'd been barely old enough to talk.

“And we know it got her killed,” the Princess continued. “Is it that much of a stretch to think that Duchess Kryze might have found herself in the same situation? Mon did tell us that Vader spent the first couple years of the Empire tracking down stragglers Order 66 had missed. If the Duchess was hiding her Jedi lover when Vader caught up with them, it'd explain why she suddenly vanished. And why we didn't find a record of the father – most Jedi records were completely wiped in the Purge.”

Winter felt a pang. “He killed them both and took the baby,” she said, softly.

Leia nodded, wearily. “It'd make sense.”

Her foster sister leaned forward, truly troubled now. “You're suggesting that the Emperor had Luke's new guest since she was an infant.”

“I know.”

“You think he's had her that long, and really not... turned her into an Inquisitor or something?”

The Princess sighed, her head beginning to truly throb. “Luke insists she isn't. He swears she's safe.”

Winter was quiet for a long time, then whispered, “I hope he's right.”
In the silence, Leia stared at the data pad displaying a summary of Satine Kryze's life. “If this is right,” she said, thoughtfully, “She's the cousin of Korkie Kryze, Duke of Mandalore.” She lifted an intrigued gaze to Winter. “And potentially the rightful heir to the throne.”

She could already see her foster-sister's sharp mind running the various factors, calculating the convoluted variables involved in the lineages and transfers of power at that level.

“By all accounts, Satine was well loved. Even if her daughter wasn't a viable candidate for the throne, the Duke would almost certainly be interested in her. Her discovery and return could be a valuable political asset.” Winter glanced sideways at her foster sister. “Properly handled, it could also be an enormous boon for the Alliance,” she observed shrewdly. She held out her hand for the data pad. “I'll do some research on Mandalorian rights of succession.”

Leia nodded, and relinquished the pad. “I'll tell Luke.”

The Princess turned her gaze back to her Inventory without actually seeing it. She'd met Korkie Kryze a few times in the Senate before Palpatine had disbanded it. He was a good man. If Mara was the lost (captive? kidnapped?) heir to Mandalore's throne, she knew he wouldn't hesitate to welcome her into his family, no matter what her condition. Handled well, it could be good for Mandalore, the Alliance, and Mara.

No matter how it was handled, letting her go would be heartbreaking for Luke.

Chewing the inside of her cheek as she turned the possibilities over in her head, Leia reluctantly punched a message to her brother into her data pad.

*News. Come see me when you get in.*

---

Luke dragged himself out of his x-wing and dropped to the hangar floor without a hint of grace. Around him, the other Rogues were doing the same, several groaning gratefully when their feet hit the ground. After two days in the sky, they were all stiff, exhausted, and stank like wet wampas. Their astromechs, on the other hand, twittered cheerfully, energized by the run, and preened in an immense sense of their own importance.

//Time to check on The Project?// Artoo whistled hopefully as the maintainers hoisted him free of his slot and lowered him expertly to the ground. Since he couldn't say Mara's name in the company of other pilots or astromechs who'd understand and ask questions, he'd taken to referring to her The Project. Luke wasn't sure if it was disturbing or endearing.

“I have to see Leia, first,” he told his droid, wearily. “And then a shower.” *If I try to go see Mara like this she'll wake up just to kick me out*, he thought.

Not having a proper sense of smell, Artoo had never appreciated the human predilection for constant bathing. //I can go now?//


Pleased, Artoo blurted and rolled off. His master watched fondly for a second before making sure his squad was all safely disembarked and on their way to their own food, showers, and bunks. After assuring himself they were, he plodded his own path towards Leia's office.
“Luke.” She looked up when he entered, and gave him a warm smile but made no attempt to approach.

Likewise, he politely kept his distance out of tacit acknowledgment that he needed to scrub down before touching another human being for anything less than emergency circumstances. “Hey, Leia. You said you had news?”

She nodded. “We – Winter and I – found Mara's mother. Or at least the record of her.”

“You did?” Concurrent rushes of hope and worry arced through him.

“There's no direct record of Mara,” Leia clarified, “but her mother was definitely Satine Kryze, the Duchess of Mandalore during the Clone Wars.” She hesitated. “According to current law, it looks like she could be the heir, Luke.”

“She's a Duchess,” he rephrased her words skeptically, striving to make sense of the idea. “There's an actual throne waiting for her? On Mandalore?”

Leia shook her head. “Her cousin has been ruling as Duke since Satine died - possibly at the hands of Vader.” She hesitated, and her voice softened. “Luke, there's a very strong possibility that the Emperor has had Mara since she was an infant.”

“That's a long time to keep a political prisoner,” Luke protested, then paused. “You think he had other uses for her.”

Leia met his eyes, her chocolate-brown gaze warm and apologetic. “I'm not going to pretend I understand the way the Emperor thinks. I just thought you ought to know. Maybe you can use it to prompt Mara to open up to you a little.”

He nodded, unease leaching through him. “Thanks.”

“Are you going to see her tonight?” she asked.

“Yeah. As soon as I get cleaned up.” He gave her a half-grin. “Artoo's already on his way down there – I think he's getting attached.”

Leia laughed slightly. “I think he just wants to get out helping Threepio with that translation project Winter's got him tasked on.” Her expression softened. “Don't stay with Jade too long tonight, all right? You need some sleep.”

“You've been talking to Wedge,” Luke accused good-naturedly. “Don't worry, I will.”

Giving his sister a jaunty salute in lieu of a smelly hug, he took his leave and headed for his quarters. Wedge would be done with his turn in their miniscule fresher by now. He could clean up, swing by the mess for a quick bite, and then head down to see Mara. He didn't hold out hope that she'd actually be awake, but he'd feel better having checked in anyway.

- -

Artoo Detoo ran an auto-update as he rolled happily down the halls toward the med bay. When it loaded, he squealed to himself in alarm, drawing startled looks from passersby. There had been an update to Mara's file by General Madine. Master Luke was not going to be happy.
The guards on duty recognized Artoo and cleared him to enter Jade's room. The droid adjusted his photo-receptors twice before accepting what they were telling him: The Project's bed was empty. A sound caught his sensors and he shifted gears. Almost immediately, he identified her presence on the opposite side of the room.

Rolling around the bed, he whistled sternly at her. //You should not be up. You are damaged.//

“I noticed.” Mara didn't look up from where her fingers were digging into the seam of a square panel whose design universally screamed duct work. Her emaciated grip strength was deplorable, and she'd already sliced several fingertips trying to pry the cover off.

//You should not be up.// Artoo insisted again.

She ignored him. Her plan was a long shot and appallingly reckless, but at this point she really, literally had nothing to lose. Except her life, which was ticking on borrowed time as it was.

//What are you doing?//

She couldn't tell if it was curious or suspicious. Maybe both. “Getting out of here,” she replied, matter-of-factly.

//Where are you going?//

“I don't know yet,” she snapped, shortly. “But if I'm not staying here another kriffing minute. You Rebels can tell me I'm 'safe' all you want, but I'll be damned if I spend whatever time I have left in a med bay, open to anyone and everyone's inspection. That's just begging to wake up with needles in every finger, electrodes in my chest, and pumped full of enough drugs to fill Kessel – and I'm done.”

//Master Luke will worry.// Artoo asserted, rolling closer to her.

*Pretty sure he has bigger problems to worry about – like being the son of Vader,* she thought with a snort. Still, the little astromech hadn't attacked her or turned her in yet, and she hated being unnecessarily mean to droids.

“Tell him not to worry,” she informed her metal companion as she shifted her weight, gathering herself and preparing to climb into the shaft. Her balance, strength, and ability to stay conscious were only minimally improved after her overnight stretching and mind sorting, then her post-interrogation 'nap'. But if she was going to move, it had to be now. Time was short; the droid was here, which meant Skywalker wouldn't be far behind.

“I won't hurt anyone, or break anything – I just can't stay here.”

The beeping she got in return was decidedly thoughtful. //You are damaged.//

Mara surprised herself by giving the little droid a wry grin. “Yeah, we covered that already.”

Artoo considered this, processors running flat out as he evaluated the situation and sifted it through his logic and human behavior filters. Master Luke had been investigating alternative living situations for Jade (her proper designation, the Master reminded him nearly every time he referred to her as The Project – as if his flawless digital memory could forget). He was also aware of the Master's deep concern for Jade's distress over med bays, and anticipated a strongly negative reaction to news of her interrogation.

Logically, then, it followed that Jade was acting in accordance with Master Luke's wishes by removing herself from both the med bay and the reach of Alliance High Command. It also followed
that her performance would improve in an alternative environment. Master Luke would be unlikely to be thrilled by her decision to act without proper review of The Plan. (Humans liked that sort of thing, if the endless meetings Artoo had sat through in his lifetime were any indication.)

But Jade's Plan would satisfy everything Master Luke was hoping to accomplish and, damage aside, if she was anything like the other humans Artoo had come to know, the exercise involved would assist her in working through tension and result in improved vitals and better decision making.

Mara waited, tensely, while the droid watched her, his round mechanical eye twitching, unable to discern whether he was going to sound the alarm or take her suggestion. She really didn't want to deactivate this one unless she absolutely had to – if he'd withstood captivity by Vader, he was a hearty little thing worthy of her respect. Still, she couldn't wait forever. She was already running solely on adrenaline, and she knew it.

Without warning, a holo map of the base's duct system popped into life above her head. A red dot illuminated a spot in the lower right corner.

//You are here. If I do not turn you in, you will meet me there?// Another dot, blue this time, flashed into life near the middle of the map.

“What's the meeting place?” she asked, leery.

//Empty quarters. Secure. Off record.//

“You're willing to let me go?”

//It is best.//

Something embarrassingly akin to glee surged through her. “You've got a deal, Short Stuff.”

Pleased, the droid rolled backward slightly giving her more room to wriggle into the shaft unimpeded.

//My designation is Artoo Detoo.//

Once fully inside the duct Mara shot a grin back over her shoulder as the droid extended a mechanical arm and lifted the panel she’d laid aside, prepared to replace it behind her. “Thanks, Artoo.”

- -

Luke emerged from the fresher, ravenous but blessedly clean, to find Artoo unexpectedly plugged into the computer socket in the corner of his quarters.

“What are you doing here?” He asked, surprised, pulling his shirt over his head. “I thought you were going to see Mara.”

//She is gone now.//

“What?!” Luke's heart plummeted, then began to pound. “Gone where?”

//Duct work.// Artoo answered cheerfully. //Out of reach of further interrogation.//

“Duct work?” He repeated incredulously. “What interrogation?”
The droid made an impatient noise. //Generals Dodonna and Madine interrogated Mara Jade.//

Luke's blood ran cold. He'd never told Mara what Command did and didn't know about him and Vader. There was no telling what she'd inadvertently given away.

“Oh no. When? Is she all right?”

Artoo let out a stream of binary only a seasoned pilot would be able to keep up with. //Amendments to her file note she was tortured with Force lightening by the Empire and has been deemed not a threat to the Alliance.//

“She told them what happened?” He was stunned. *She told them. She wouldn't tell me what happened, but she told them. What in the hells did they do to make her talk? What on Hoth is Force Lightening?*

Anger ignited inside him, instant and incandescent, and Luke grabbed his socks and boots and finished dressing as if the base were on fire. “Come on.”

He stalked toward the Command wing of the base, oblivious to the wrath rolling off him in waves. Later, he would be eternally grateful that it was Madine's office he came to first, and that the General was there when he marched in, bristling for a fight.

“Commander Skywalker.” Madine took one look at the younger man and thumped his palm on a pile of flimsy on the corner of his desk, knowing that somewhere in its depths was buried a remote to shut the door. Artoo barely darted inside before it closed, shutting the three of them in the dim, cramped space.


“You got her name?” Madine regarded the news with interest.


“Have a seat, Commander.”

Luke was humming with pent-up fury and fear; sitting was the last thing he wanted to do. But a lifetime of Uncle Owen's uncompromising conditioning to respect his superiors overrode his desire to pace and he sat, stiffly.

“Ms. Jade didn't say a word to me,” Madine leaned forward, hands flat on his desk, and met Luke's eyes. He projected stern, centering calm – the result of decades of leading military men and women in high-stress circumstances. “In fact, I was given to understand it was her first time waking up and that her voice was not yet functional.”

Luke stared back, face a mask of anxiety, emotions too tangled to parse. *She didn't tell them anything. He knows I withheld information. Dear Force, what happened? What do I do now?*

He didn't intentionally select his words; just opened his mouth and found them coming out, and waited to see what he said.

“She woke twice, very briefly. She was scared, and confused.”

Madine nodded, evenly. “We used the blinking code to communicate with her. She confirmed she'd been an Imperial citizen, but not in military service, and a prisoner of Vader. I identified the Force
lightening myself – the scars are very distinctive. She seemed particularly distressed by my recognition of them.”

The General's composure started to unwittingly seep into Luke, and he grasped for his own. “What is Force lightening, Sir?”

Crix shook his head. “I can't tell you how it's generated or how it works,” he apologized. “Only that the Emperor can generate some sort of electric current from his hands. It appears to be incredibly painful and is almost always fatal.”

Luke's heart clenched. Mara faced the Emperor? Was tortured by Palpatine himself? Facing Vader alone and armed had been terrifying; he couldn't begin to imagine standing forsaken before the Emperor's wrath.


Luke dragged a shaky hand over his face. “I just got back from a patrol run. Artoo went on ahead to check on Mara while I got cleaned up. He was back in my quarters when I came out of the sonics – he said she was gone - escaped into the duct work.”

Crix gave him an astonished look. “Commander, I just saw her and she could barely move.”


The General turned to the droid. “Artoo, is it? Are you certain she's in the duct work?”

An affirmative chirp. //She said you should not worry; she will not cause harm.//

Luke's head snapped up. “You talked to her?”

Another chirp.

If the situation had been less severe, Crix might have been entertained by Skywalker's complete and total stupefaction.

“You watched her crawl away?!” Luke demanded. “What were you thinking?”

“It aligned with The Plan,” Artoo insisted.

“There was a plan?” Madine inquired, with interest.

“No,” Luke protested. “Or, not exactly. I – she needed to get out of med bay. She's been hurt in them, I think.” A look of pain crossed his face. “Like I said at the briefing – she… med bays, med droids… she can't, they've…” He stopped trying to finish that sentence, unable to make his voice spit out words adequately depicting what he'd felt from Mara when she'd been aware of where she was, and under whose 'care'. “I was talking to Leia about finding somewhere else she could recover, but it was all still speculative.”

“I see.” The two men regarded each other for a long moment. “So we've been keeping a heavily traumatized traitor to the Empire in a highly stressful environment, ultimately driving her to a desperation that resulted in her currently being MIA within the walls of this base.”

Luke was absolutely certain he was about to be court-martialed on the spot. Ejected from his role as Commander of Rogue Squadron, and probably tossed into the brig. He did the only thing he could
do - nodded.

“Yes, Sir. That about sums it up.”

Madine reached for a data pad. “Effective immediately, I'm pulling you from all other duty – Antilles can run Rogue Squadron for a bit. You're hereby reassigned to Special Duty at the highest levels of security classification – you answer directly to me. Find Jade, and get her ensconced somewhere she feels is safe. We need to know who she was and what she did to elicit the Emperor's wrath to such an extreme degree. Whatever is was, it was sufficient to bring his personal fury down on her head harder than I've seen anyone else subjected to in decades. That may indicate a weakness or preexisting initiative we can take advantage of.”

Two pairs of blue eyes, one light as the sky, one dark as midnight sapphires and warm with sympathy, met and held.

“You're not court-marshaling me?”

Crix shook his head. “It's clear that your actions have been motivated by good intentions, Commander, and that you're doing your best in difficult circumstances. Given what we know Ms. Jade has been though, and how much she's likely suffered that we don't know about, a turn of events like this shouldn't have been entirely unexpected. I trust you'll find a way locate her and prevent us from ending up here again.”


“Commander?” Madine's voice caught him as the door whisked open, and Luke half turned back. The General's mouth twitched at the edges. “Get better about updating your reports more regularly, will you?”

“Yes, Sir.”

- -

An hour later, Luke had roused a sleeping (and then concerned and confused) Wedge for a short turn-over briefing, swung by the Falcon to give Han a grim update, and been badgered into accepting a nerf stake and veggie mix his friend had insisted he eat.

“Can't go scrounging around for a fugitive on an empty stomach, Kid.”

“I don't even know where to start,” he lamented, shoveling another forkful of the meal into his mouth. “She can't be moving very fast, but there's no way to know which direction she went. We don't have enough mouse droids to even attempt a proper search, even if I requisitioned every one on base. What if something happens to her?”

//Why can we not just wait at the rendezvous point?//

Three heads – two human and one wookie – swiveled in unison to stare at Artoo.

“What rendezvous point?” Han found his voice first.

//Block 21C.// Artoo elaborated. //She will come. She promised.//
“What's Block 21C?” Solo asked, intrigued.


Block 21C was a rarely used section of the Base compound's lower levels. Sandwiched between the main electrical hub, bulky environmental control equipment rooms, and deep storage, it was usually empty. Occasionally, one or two of the dozen narrow quarters clumped in an isolated cluster behind several security walls was used to house top secret informants and other high ranking visitors whose presence needed to be kept a closely guarded secret.

//Because you are human,// Artoo whistled consolingly. It was taken as a matter of historical fact by most droids that humans were, however enchanting, utterly hopeless as a species without proper mechanical supervision and support.

Chewie barked with laughter and whuffed his agreement.

“You should take some supplies,” Han advised, leaning over the dejarik table, face screwing up in thought. “See if Supply can give you some clothing for her, at least. Maybe a spare blanket or two. You know, try to make it comfortable.”

//Nutrient paste.// Chewie added. //The cub will need something easily digestible while she heals.//

“Right,” Luke chewed another bite and started a mental list of things to collect. When he'd finished and thanked Han profusely for the food, Chewie thrust a small bag at him.

//Some things, for the girl.//

“Thanks, Chewie.”

“Keep us in the loop, Kid,” Han admonished, clapping a hand on his friend's shoulder. “Chewie and I have a supply run tomorrow, but Her Worship and Winter are here, and we won't be gone long.” He pointed a finger in Luke's face. “You don't have to do this by yourself.”

“I know.” And he did. Luke thanked the stars every day for his found family. “I just wish I knew how to get that same message across to Mara.”

“You will,” Solo assured him, all casual confidence. “It'll just take a little patience.”

Luke made a face. Patience. The never-ending refrain that was the bane of his existence. “Right. Clear skies, you two.”

He took his leave with Artoo, making the rounds to pick up the things on his list, then trekked down to the bowels of the base. He refrained from asking how Artoo had the codes to over-ride the door controls all the way down (what was that phrase Han liked? Plausible deniability?) and, in short order, they let themselves in to the designated quarters.

The lights flickered on around them as they entered, revealing a small, mostly generic bunk room. Only an experienced eye would notice the differences that set it apart as 'special guest worthy'. There were single beds bolted into the walls to the left and right of the door where most rooms had upper and lower bunks. The square, two-person standard-issue table had slightly padded chairs instead of the hard, molded plasti-steel ones that populated most rooms. The compact fresher at the back would be just slightly larger than usual, as well. The faded paint was a subtle two shades warmer than the utilitarian white-wash slapped on most rooms' walls.
Especially helpful, for his purposes anyway, was the small conservator cube tucked into a corner. Informants couldn’t be seen in the mess halls, so the chiller was typically stocked with food and drinks to minimize their need to be brought or leave for meals. Now, it would allow Luke to stash the protein pastes Mara would (hopefully) be transitioning to in lieu of an intravenous nutrient drip, reducing the number of times he needed to leave her alone, at least initially.

The air was mildly musty from disuse and Luke fingered the controls, increasing the circulation and adjusting the temperature. The room was empty, but that was no surprise. Even if she made steady progress, it would be a while until Mara reached them. He itched to crawl into the shaft himself, if only to be actively searching and not waiting, helpless and dependent on her to keep her word to settle the pacing, rumbling nexu in his chest. But that would be pointless and foolish, and he knew it.

Vividly remembering just how pale, cold and desperate she’d been when he’d left her last, he almost did it anyway.

Artoo, for his part, seemed supremely unconcerned. Already, he was jovially extracting the magnetic clips holding the room’s duct work panel in place, positively resolute (for some reason beyond Luke’s comprehension) that Jade would pop through in due time, and The Plan would continue as he apparently imagined it was supposed to.

Luke wished he had a single iota of his friend’s confidence.

After making the room as ready as he could with his meager supplies and even scantier hope, he pulled off his boots and stretched out on the bunk to the left of the door. His eyes burned with exhaustion.

“Artoo, can you take this watch?”

From his position adjacent to the open panel, the droid bleeped brightly. Luke lowered the lights a fraction, draped his right arm over his eyes, and fell into an exhausted sleep.
Chapter Summary

In which Luke and Mara finally have some long overdue conversations complete with angst, unexpected revelations, and mutual perception shifts. The Rogues get word their Boss is reassigned and decide to 'help', and the Jedi find out Luke has company - much to their dismay. Mara decides she's had enough of everyone else's shavit, and takes charge. Luke's totally on board, and then... things... happen.

Note: please mind the tags, as the rape/non-con references properly start in this chapter.

Chapter Notes

Huge thanks to the talented Flames_and_Jade for brilliantly beta-ing this chapter for me! (All remaining errors are solely my own.)

Credit is also due to Frangipani for the fire gems reference, as I first encountered the term in her awesome WIP Ricochet.

Jedi Grand Master Yoda poked at the antiquated comm equipment stored in a petite closet alcove crammed into a corner of his Dagobah hut. He longed for the days when trained Jedi techs and administrators received, screened, forwarded, and sent his messages. It had been a luxury he'd entirely failed to appreciate until they were all dead, their blood splashed across the Temple's walls and coating its floor, and he'd been driven to the edge of the galaxy, forced to do everything himself.

The persnickety comm unit, salvaged from the beat-up ship that had carried him from the ashes of his old life to this place of exile, protested the unending humidity of this planet-side cupboard it was never intended to inhabit. The gaggle of small, crawly creatures that had taken up residence in its innards didn't help.

On the fourth try, Skywalker's message finally decrypted properly and scrolled across the small, scratched screen.

*Can't return now. Needed here. Will come as soon as I can.*

Yoda harrumphed.

“He isn't coming then?” Kenobi inquired.

“Dawdle he does,” Yoda grumped, shutting off the machine with slightly more force than was strictly necessary. He the tattered grey cloth that hid the alcove fall back into place and hobbled back to his preferred seat before the fire. “Go to him you will.”

Ben nodded sagely. “It will be another day yet before I've gathered adequate energy to appear to him there, but I'll leave as soon as I can.”
The little green master eyed the ghost of his former pupil sternly. “Convince him, you must. Accept this refusal we will not.”

“I am sure he can be made to see reason,” Kenobi soothed. “May the Force be with you, Master.” He faded slowly from view, leaving Yoda once again alone in his swamp.

“Allow you to win, we will not,” Yoda muttered to old, unseen enemies halfway across the galaxy, his eyes falling half shut as he drifted into the flows of the Force. “Defeat you, the boy can. Enable him we will. At any cost...”

- -

Mara dropped out of the cavernous blackness of unconsciousness into the tight, not-quite-as-dark confines of the Rebel base’s gut works. She refused to count the number of times she'd passed out since escaping the med bay. As with the previous times, she’d just barely managed to first cram herself into the narrow gap between an enormous pipe she guessed carried fluids or gases for the environmental systems and a tangle of multicolored electrical wiring. It would have been an extremely unpleasant position if she'd been awake to endure it, but her body already ached and burned so badly that the added tensions, bruising and cramping just faded into the larger morass of pain. More importantly, the combined heat and energy signatures of the piping and wires would bury and mask her presence to all but the most astute search tools.

_I hope Skywalker isn’t a search-and-rescue adept._ There was a distinct possibility that he'd be able to find her easily through tracking in the Force; if roles had been reversed, she'd certainly have found him with no trouble. Her decimated shields were unlikely to do her any good, after all. Still, she was waking once again with no condemning cerulean gaze boring into her. Maybe he'd focused his training elsewhere.

Pitching stiffly out of her hidey-hole back into the main duct, she forced herself to ignore the scrape of the rough walls against her chafed skin and the film of dirt, grease, and other anonymous grime that sloughed off the neglected metal surfaces to cling to every inch of her. Likewise, she refused to think too hard about the flaking, crumbling edges of her mind. Every time she came back to awareness, there was fresh charring, new damage. Her brain was atrophying, and if she brushed against the boundaries they flaked like ash and fluttered away, hollowing her out a little more, one fine sliver at a time. She'd be nothing more than a husk soon. Empty, dry. Eroded and swept away by the cosmic winds.

Undeterred, she reached a cramped hand out for the next ridge in the ducting, arduously beginning to claw her way forward again. She could die later. Right now, she had a promise to keep to a strange little astromech... and Mara Jade always kept her promises.

- -

“Where’s the Boss?” Wes peered around the briefing room inquisitively, as if he might randomly find Luke lurking under a table or crouched behind the podium, prepared to leap out and yell “surprise!”.

“Not coming.”

“What?” Hobbie Klivian demanded from the doorway, a step behind Wes. “Why not?”

“He’s been pulled for special duty,” Wedge told them flatly. “Classified. We have to hold down the fort until he gets reinstated.”

“Not by himself, is he?” Tycho asked from his seat at the front left corner of the room. “His x-wing
is still here. Solo and Chewbacca left yesterday, and I just saw the Princess this morning. If he's not with them or us, where did he go?"

“I don't know,” Wedge didn't hide his own disquiet. “All he said was that something went wrong with his secret project and he needs us to keep the rest of the world running until he gets it sorted out.

“We have to help him,” Hobbie asserted, immediately.

“After the briefing,” Wes countered, selecting a seat and wriggling back into it until he was comfortable. He propped his boots on the seat back in front of him. This was his standard briefing position until ordered to sit up, and it was crucial that he take it now – just to keep everything flowing as close to usual as possible, as per the Boss's apparent orders. It wouldn't do to be too proper up front, anyway – their CO might think they didn't have any faith in him. “We have to keep up appearances, after all.”

“Right,” Hobbie agreed. “Hurry up, Antilles. We've got snooping to do.”

Wedge rolled his eyes and shuffled his notes. *Whatever you're doing, Luke, hurry up*, he thought. *Or this is going to get colorful, real fast.*

- -

A happy chirp broke Luke from his doze and he blinked instantly awake.

“I told you I would.”

His heart leapt at the croaked whisper and his body followed suit, launching up from the bunk to crouch by the vent opening opposite Artoo. Mara recoiled instinctively at the sudden movement, curling away from him as far as she could in the narrow space. Luke cursed silently and shifted back slightly, lifting his hands up by his shoulders, open palms out.

“Sorry! I didn't mean to startle you.”

She studied him guardedly with bloodshot eyes, from just out of reach. “I'm not going back.”

“Yeah, I got that,” he grimaced. “You can stay here. Now will you please come out of there?”

Mara hesitated. It was taking everything she had to not collapse; there was nothing left for a Force inquiry into his intentions. But he looked deeply sincere – apologetic even, and he'd made no move to haul her out despite how tempting it must have been. It wasn't as if he couldn't pin her there in the Force if she tried to escape again. Still, this was the best advantage she'd have, and she pushed.

“No more drugs.”

“You're going to need something,” he told her, flatly. “Or you're not going to be able to move.”

“I said no, Skywalker,” she ground out. *I won't be your experiment, too.*

She didn't say the last out loud – couldn't. Admitting how the Emperor had exploited her would all but personally invite him to do the same.

The words hung between them, unspoken but ringing clearly in the Force. He wondered if she could feel it; was certain from her stony expression that she hadn't meant for him to. The solid ache of it seeped into his chest and he had to concede.

“All right,” Luke allowed reluctantly. “No more drugs.”
There was no guarantee that he wouldn't go back on his word, of course, but it was all she had – all she was going to get – so she accepted it. There was still her last resort measure to fall back on, if everything else failed.

Mara pressed bloodied hands against the metal sheeting around her, trying to hide their trembling as she eased forward. Skywalker caught her as soon as she was close enough, strong hands hooking under her arms to pull her out. That wasn't unexpected. The gentleness in the action - the care with which he lowered her to the floor - was.

“Gods,” he griped, snagging a thick bantha wool blanket off the end of the closest bunk and wrapping it over the frayed remains of her med gown. “You look like hell.”

*Guess I'll fit right in when I get there, then.*

“You think?” She wobbled slightly as she fought off the spots creeping along the edges of her vision again.

Luke pulled his small canteen from his belt, twisted it open and held it to her lips. His left hand curled into the snarled hair at the base of her neck, supporting and steadying her. “Here, drink this.”

Mara pressed her lips together and tried to turn her head.


She glared suspiciously at the bottle. Luke looked down at it as well, trying to figure out what concerned her. Finally, it occurred to him. “It's just water and electrolytes. Nothing else, I swear. Look.” He took a healthy swig himself. That wasn't particularly convincing as far as Mara was concerned; she knew full well that Jedi could readily cleanse toxins from their systems using the Force.

Artoo tootled, startling both of them. He extended a thin probe from a tiny, circular port on his casing. Luke raised an eyebrow, but proffered the canteen as requested, holding it sideways so the droid could insert and then remove the wand. There was a soft whirring, and a moment later the droid projected a holographic readout of the contents. As promised, it was only a standard mix of water and electrolyte solution.

Mara relented, tipping her head back toward Skywalker, accepting this time when he again pressed the bottle to her chapped lips and tilted it. She managed a little, unconcerned about the splash that spilled messily down her chin, leaving a streaky trail through the grime in its wake.

It tasted divine, and Mara's eyes slid shut, relief sapping the last vestiges of her strength. Losing the battle to stay upright, she started to slide sideways down the wall.

“Dammit.” Luke shifted, halting her downward motion. Getting an arm behind her, and another under her knees, he lifted her. Carrying her to a bed, he eased her down onto it and adjusted the blanket to ensure she was fully cocooned. She was limp, unresisting as he piled two more blankets over her for good measure and brushed loose strands of her matted hair back from her face. But he could feel her in the Force, fighting against sleep – still wary, on edge.

“Mara.” He knew he'd have her only a few more moments tonight. Hated the idea of her being dragged into sleep still afraid. “How can I help you feel safe?”

One reddened emerald eye cracked open, and he knew that even now, like this, she was weighing the risks of telling him anything. “Give me a blaster,” she finally answered, flatly.
Unexpectedly, he brightened. “I can do you one better. Artoo, compartment please.”

The little droid whistled and rolled forward, a slot on his dome sliding open as Mara twisted her head to see. Luke watched as her eyes widened, a radioactive spark of hope touching off in her Force sense as the tip of the ebony hilt cleared the droid's surface.

“Thanks.” Luke grasped the saber hilt, reversed it, and leaned over to free Mara's right hand from her wrappings. He pressed the cylinder into her palm and wrapped her fingers around it, not removing his hand from over her own until he was certain of her hold.

She could kill him.

Right now. Just a flick of her thumb, and the blade would ignite. Burst through his chest with a snap-hiss and then a charring crackle. At this range, in this position, even he couldn't stop her. He had to know it – no one who'd ever been injured by a light saber ever took its danger for granted, in any hands. But he just waited, content to let her hold the power, eyes searching her face, looking for – what?

“Better?”

Safe. He'd wanted her to feel safe.

Mara gripped the hilt of her saber, centered herself on it's comforting heft, and stared up into the most impossibly sincere azure eyes she'd ever seen. Skywalker may have been Vader's son, but he was fundamentally unlike any Force user - any person – she'd ever met.

Looking at him in that moment, Mara's world shifted a solid ninety degrees. Speechless, she nodded.

Luke smiled, buoyed by the feeling of something altering in her. He felt the wariness dissipate, replaced by other things. She was fading quickly, and the emotions were too vaporous to pin down, but the overall effect was uniformly brighter than anything he'd felt from her thus far, and that was enough.

“You'll be here when I wake up?”

“I'm all yours,” he promised, knowing as he said it that it was far more true than she could possibly realize right now.

She nodded again, more faintly this time. Luke straighted up as her eyes slid shut and she dissolved fully into sleep.

Luke retreated toward his own bunk, and Artoo followed, giving a quiet, inquisitive trill.

“Yeah, I think so.” He glanced at the droid. “How many kilometers of duct work did she crawl through?” He asked it quietly, though she was so deep under already he could probably have shouted without waking her.

//Assuming the most direct route, approximately one point six.//

One and a half kilometers, barely alive. Aside from apparently having reached the limits of her tolerance for the med bay, he still wasn’t sure what she'd hoped to achieve by risking her life that way. Couldn't imagine how she’d managed it, no matter what her motivation.

Luke's eyes caressed Mara's grip on her saber with conflicted emotions. Grimacing guilt at having not yet attempted to make one himself to replace the one he'd lost at Bespin. Disconcerting gratitude
for having lost it, knowing now who it belonged to and what he'd almost certainly done with it before it ended up in Obi-wan's possession. Longing – Mara was the only other person since Ben and Yoda who understood what it was to be connected to a light saber. There'd been no mistaking her response – it was her saber, and it was precious to her as his had been to him. If she understood that, what else would she be able to share with him that no one else had, or could?

He was so tired of being alone in this fight. Han and Leia were family, and the three of them loved each other unconditionally. But there were things they couldn't share with him any more than he or Han could truly share Leia's devastation over the loss of Alderaan. But Mara… just maybe…

In giving her her saber back, he'd altered their standing for the better, he was certain Luke leaned back against the wall, folded his legs up underneath him and settled in to meditate. Maybe he finally stood a chance of getting her to talk to him. A chance to get some answers.

- -

Acid rain hissed and spit against the vast transparisteel windows of the meditation room that crowned the pinnacle of Bast Castle. A special glossy coating, developed specifically to withstand Vjun's abominably inhospitable climate, repelled the corrosive drops and they slid away, down the sloped sides of the castle's spire, glinting like Sormahil fire gems in the occasional flash of lightning.

Immersed in the flow of the Force, Vader sat oblivious to the eerie beauty of it, and to the ominous rumbles of accompanying thunder. Instead, sprawled before his mind's eye was the fortress's library, many floors below where he now sat.

_It was dark, the entire castle – most of planet, even – deathly quiet. He couldn't feel the garrison of stormtroopers permanently assigned to the guard the castle. It was as if the entire hemisphere was empty, except for the three of them. But the Force – the Force surged around the looming bookcases and deep nerf-hide chairs in choppy torrents._

_Torrents that converged on Mara Jade._

_She sat, cross-legged on the huge, cushioned footstool of one of the deep chairs, still as the statue that commanded the fortress's entry hall. Behind her, Han Solo fiddled with something one handed – his blaster glued to the opposite palm. The Rebel's eyes flicked to the former Emperor's Hand every few seconds, dark with worry. Solo was wound tight as a repulsor coil, but Vader paid him no mind._

_His attention was riveted on the girl. Anticipation – unlike anything he'd felt in decades – knotted in the remains of his stomach. The Force calmed, suddenly, like turning a corner in a choppy river, out of the rapids and into a deeper, smoother channel. It still flowed swift and strong, but it had narrowed into a single, fluid band of energy. Energy that felt familiar at an elemental level, and nothing like Mara._

_Jade opened her eyes. The familiar, defiant emerald was gone. In it's place was a distinct shade of azure Vader knew intimately._

_Exhilaration roared through the Dark Lord – it had worked._

The image dissolved abruptly, and Vader slammed a gloved fist against the armrest of his form lounger with a growl. This vision was new, and disturbing. He fought the desire to paw through the stream of the Force, clutching and grasping at its wake, to drag the vision back and coerce it to give up its meaning.

_Why would I allow a traitor and a slave into my private domain?_ But even as he grumbled the
complaint to himself, he knew the answer.

*The eyes.* His son's eyes, in Jade's face.

Flicking a single finger, Vader triggered the release on his mediation sphere with the Force. He was already rising as it began to pull apart, opening around him. Striding to his private comm console, he stabbed the button to summon the ranking officer of his resident garrison with a mechanical finger.

“Yes, my Lord?”

“Come at once,” Vader intoned, darkly. “There are plans to be made.”

- -

Han leaned a muscled forearm against the door frame of Leia's office and grinned. “Hey, Princess. Did ya miss me?”

Leia and Winter both looked up. Winter's smile was amused; Leia's was brilliant. “Han!”

“Excuse me a moment,” Winter rose gracefully. “My caff is cold.” Taking her (still steaming) mug, she vacated the room with the royal grace she'd been raised to.

Han lowered his arm to let her pass with a nod, then sauntered in, whacking the door controls with the side of his hand as he entered. Leia tipped her head up for a kiss, leaning back and humming happily as her scoundrel's arms curved around her back to pull her closer, and his tongue darted out to tease hers a moment before he released her. Snagging the chair Winter had left, he dragged it around and sat in it backwards, mere centimeters from his Princess.

He scanned the stack of data pads. “So what'd I miss?”

“Me, I hope,” she retorted primly.

Han laughed. “I always miss you, Sweetheart.” He winked. “Shove those data pads on the floor and I'll show you how much right here.”

“Han!” Leia chastised through her answering laugh. She shook her head. “Your run went well?”

“Smooth as Severeens,” he assured her, one hand sneaking forward to subtly caress her knee while they spoke. It was a simple touch, but seemed to pour comfort and love directly into her soul. “Now come on, give me the latest.”

“Well,” she brushed a hand over a wisp of hair that threatened to escape the neat braids coiled around her head. “Mara survived her trek through the duct work and actually showed up exactly where she told Artoo she would. Winter's digging turned up that Mara is the daughter of a Duchess, and possibly heir to the Mandalorian throne. And,” she glanced at the door with a frown, “the Rogues are up to something.”

Han rolled his eyes. “They're *always* up to something,” he pointed out.

Chocolate brown eyes sparkled at him. “I'm serious,” she insisted. “I don't like it. Janson has been entirely too well behaved - and he's been sucking up to Mon Mothma more than usual.”

“Which means he's trying not to draw attention to whatever bigger mischief he's involved in,” he translated. “Great. Let me guess – we get to run interference?”

“Same as always,” she agreed.
Luke didn't realize he'd fallen from meditation into sleep until he woke, snapping from soundly out to completely awake in the blink of an eye the way every fighter pilot at war learns to.

The sound came again, a soft worried bleep.

Rolling his head to the side, he glanced across the room to where Artoo hovered near Mara's bunk.

“What is it?”

//Something is wrong with her breathing patterns, but I cannot identify the cause.//

Luke listened, focusing both his physical and Force senses on Mara. His hearing picked up the difference quickly; she was taking in air in small, stuttering gasps, as if her airway was obstructed.

That clinical observation was lost in the tide of ominous vibrations roiling around her in the Force. He caught caustic, muddied flashes of things he couldn't completely grasp, but didn't need to see to understand.

She was choking, an implacable mass shuttering her throat. Claws, sharp and jagged, raked down the interior of her mind, ripping gouges into her consciousness that echoed the dozens of cuts the neuro-whip had inflicted across her thighs and stomach. Blood trickled down her body, streaking down her breasts as she hung suspended from ankles that shrieked from the bite of metal cuffs digging into the tender juncture where flesh barely covered bone. She tried to scream, but her voice was long since gone. Wanted to weep, but had no tears left. Wanted to beg for death, but knew he'd never be so kind.

“Mara!”

She gasped, wild eyes snapping open, her whole body convulsing. The world spun around her, then lurched to a sickening stop. Skywalker was leaning over her, his eyes dark with apprehension. Both his hands pinned her wrists to the bed beside her shoulders. She hadn't even registered taking an instinctive but uncoordinated lunge at him as she jolted awake. Artoo whistled in alarm beside her, and Mara used the distinctive sound to pull herself more solidly into the now.

“Let go.” She jerked away from Skywalker's touch, heart pounding, skin burning and crawling as the vestiges of her remembered torment overlapped with current reality. Scooted backward as far as the small bunk would allow when he released his hold and eased away from her.

“You were having a nightmare.” Luke sat on the edge of the bunk, reaching for his own calm, trying not to show how shaken he was by what he'd glimpsed.

“I woke you.” Her words were rough and quiet.

“It's all right. We should get cleaned up and eat something anyway.”

Mara swallowed and nodded.

“Why don't I go first?” he offered. “I'll only be a minute, all right?”

Another nod. Not altogether happy at leaving her as she was, Luke made himself get up anyway. Grabbing fresh clothes, he disappeared into the refresher while Mara stared at the ceiling, working her breathing toward a consistent and calm pattern.
She'd fought her way upright by the time he emerged to find her half folded over Artoo, who was beeping a confident reply to something she'd said. Seeing Luke, Mara determinedly levered herself off the bed. Her entire body protested the movement, throbbing and sore from the previous day's exploits, but she refused to give him an opening to touch her again. She couldn't; not yet. Not with that fresh in her mind.

Artoo held still, content to serve as anchor and support.

"There are clothes for you in there," Luke kept his distance, sensing her reservations about him and able now to guess at their cause. He watched her hobble unsteadily across the small room, one hand braced on the droid's rounded head. Artoo stopped at the door, ensuring she had a solid grip on the frame before he moved from underneath her palm. The door closed behind her, and Luke let out the breath he'd been unconsciously holding.

Absently glancing down, he realized that the blankets were streaked with dried blood that had flaked off her torn up skin, and the dust that had clung to her after her long trek. He should replace them while she was otherwise occupied. Bundling the dirtied fabric into a bag to be sent to the base's laundry facility, he tried to figure out what he was going to say when she came out.

There was so much to talk about, he didn't even know where to start.

In the 'fresher, Mara sat on the plasti-steel floor of the sani-steam and scrubbed wearily at her skin with the cleansing bar she'd found unwrapped and waiting. It was humiliating to be too weak to stand for as long as it would take to get clean, but it was not (by any means) the first time in her life she'd been so. Blessedly, there was no one around to know.

The fine film of filth that coated her gave way under the warm water and cleanser. Underneath, the silvered scars stood out against skin now pink from her scouring. She made herself ignore them. Refused to think of the gorgeous dresses she'd worn in her past life that were out of the question now, short of spending hours getting immaculately sprayed with a full body foundation meticulously matched to her skin tone. Not that it was going to matter, given her definitively short life-span, anyway.

She noted scathingly (but without surprise) that only her face and throat had been spared scarring. Her former master had hated anything interfering with his enjoyment of the way pure torment played out on his victims' faces in their final moments. As if agony and terror created a form of art on a being's face that he alone could appreciate. (Well, he and one strange blue Chiss he'd recently secretly promoted to Grand Admiral. Their shared taste in bizarre art had been disturbing to witness. At least her change in circumstances meant she'd never have to play arm candy to that red-eyed lunatic again.)

She wondered fleetingly if Palpatine had intended to display her body somewhere, as a warning to others, then snorted derisively. It would serve Vader right if his corpse-jacking got him strung up in her place. As she worked a foaming cleanser through the rats nest of her hair, she tried to decide if being cast off to the Rebels — rebel scum she could hear Vader sneering — was better or worse than having her corpse displayed in the Palace. Everyone knew the Emperor could turn on them for the smallest infraction, the slightest misstep. But she'd been wholly cast out, unworthy even to be incinerated in the heart of the Imperial capitol, lest her ashes pollute it's glory.

Yes, it was definitely an insult.

Vader's condescension aside, the corpse-jacking idea raised a far more grim and troubling question: could the Emperor know I'm not actually dead?
Sith or not, the Emperor was still only a man; he couldn't know everything. That said, Mara knew it was ignorance and vanity to think that Palpatine didn't have his claws deep into the pulse points of everything that went on within the walls of his Palace. Vader, for all his cunning and strength, was far from infallible – and it was evident that where his son was concerned, his thinking was less rational than ever. Despite the heat of the water, a chill ran down Mara's spine. Her bond with the Emperor was thoroughly broken, but it was impossible to say how long it would be before the loss killed her. No way to know if he could reforge it, if he got to her before she died. Unthinkable to imagine what he might do – or make her do – if he got her back.

Never. Mara reached into the depths of her head and whispered mental fingers over the kill switch the Emperor had long ago embedded in her head - one of the few (ironically) fully intact portions of her brain. Originally it had been intended to ensure she could never be made to talk if she were somehow taken prisoner; insurance that she'd be able to fry her own head rather than let the Jedi ransack it if Yoda ever left his secret place of exile and tried to use her knowledge to get to Sidious. It had never been a likely scenario, but Palpatine liked to prepare for all contingencies. That said, he'd prepared quietly - she'd have bet every Imperial credit in circulation that even Vader didn't know she had that final resort fail-safe.

I won't be retaken. He betrayed me – I can never forgive that. I'll put myself down, first.

That grim resolve made, Mara turned her attention to the task at hand. Declined to give in to longing thoughts of the special conditioner she’d always kept on hand to restore her long tresses after being hit with Force lightening. Reminding herself to be grateful simply to be clean, she pulled at the ends of her hair until it squeaked, ensuring she’d gotten all the cleanser out.

Eventually, she turned the water off and crawled out of the stall. She didn't bother to get up to dry off or dress. Just pulled the clothing that had been left for her off the vanity top and dragged it on. The loose pants were too large, but she was able to cinch the drawstring around her hips enough to keep them up. The shirt was a standard-issue sleeveless grey PT top emblazoned with the Alliance logo. Even as too-thin as she was now, it clung to her curves. She tugged at it uneasily, then berated herself - if Skywalker wanted to kriff her, he'd have done it already, wouldn't he?

Experienced hands twisted her hair into a messy knot atop her head and secured it in place with one of the hair bands she found alongside the toiletries. Either the Jedi was uncommonly aware of women's hygiene habits, or he'd had help coming up with the list of things to bring for her. She filed that observation away for future exploration – if she lasted long enough to get around to it, that was. Finally, cleaned, fully dressed, teeth brushed, and as close to human as she was getting, Mara hauled herself upright, leaning heavily on the wall and gripping the door frame tightly with one hand.

Artoo was waiting politely for her, and she didn't hesitate to let him help her back to her – freshly made, she noted – bed. When she reached it, she sat heavily. “Thanks, Short Stuff.”

Luke rose from where he'd been crouching in front of the conservator cube in the far corner of the room and turned. His gaze slid over her, assessing. Mara wrapped her arms over her chest and tucked her knees up, loathe to give away how discomfited she still was, but unable to leave herself open to his gaze.

“Are you cold?” Luke asked, his voice colored with concern.

Cold? It was better than admitting vulnerability, and she took it. “Yes,” she lied.

Luke detoured to the room's small table and plucked his tan fatigues jacket off the back of one of the chairs. He crossed the room and offered it to her. “Here.”
Thrown by the noble gesture – and by the ease with which he seemed to have accepted the lie (wasn't he reading her in the Force?) - she took it. Wrapped it around herself and accepted the comfort of both her curves and the scarring disappearing under the thick fabric.

Skywalker held out a small foil packet of protein paste.

“You should try to eat. I know it's not appetizing, but I don't think your body will tolerate anything more solid yet.”

Mara took the packet, glancing briefly at the brand and flavor. Not the worst she'd had, and suitable for a stomach recovering from an extended time without solids. She'd have to take it slowly, but it would do.

Luke carried a small rations box to his own bunk and took a bite of one of the wafers as he settled into a comfortable seated position. He chewed thoughtfully, swallowed, and said with intentional casualness, “Why didn't you tell Dodonna and Madine anything when they interrogated you?”

“About what?” Mara didn't look up from smearing a small amount of paste on her fingertip.

“About me. That we'd spoken. My connection to Vader.”

“Did you want me too?”

“No, of course not.” Luke took another bite of his wafer and tried to sort his messy thoughts and emotions as he watched her suck her paste-covered fingertip, lips closing over it down to the first knuckle as the mush slowly dissolved against her tongue. “I'm sorry, Mara.”

She pulled her finger from her mouth and skimmed her eyes up to his. “For what?”

“That you ended up cornered like that. That I didn't have a chance to warn you about who does and doesn't know what.” He slumped against the wall, ration box neglected. “I thought we had time, still.”

“Until?” Mara waited for him to say 'until we join my father' or 'until they blew my cover' or something else that proved her Force sense was completely karked and he'd been playing her all along.

“Time to figure this out,” he shot back, tugging at his hair in frustration. “Time to get you stabilized and have a proper conversation about complicated things.”

“What's complicated?” Mara made herself smear more paste on her finger. She wasn't the least bit hungry, but going through the normal motions helped her focus.

“Everything.” Luke's hands fell to his lap, and his head dropped. His shoulders drooped as if they carried the weight of the galaxy and dejection rolled off him in waves.

Force help her - it looked real. He was either truly into something well over his head – exactly why Vader had supposedly sent her to him in the first place – or he was a Palpatine-grade manipulator. She had to know.

Accepting the risk, Mara stretched a tendril of her mangled Force sense toward him, assessing. It could have been taken as either the height of rudeness or a threatening gesture, but he neither called her on it nor thrust her away. He just sat very still and let her do it. Mystifyingly, amid the frustration and confusion, she again found only light.
I'm not lying. I'm not a threat. Please believe me. They weren't properly words, but the intent was clear and rang with truth in the Force, and she had to accept it, inexplicable as it was. She pulled back and braced herself for a reciprocal probe to even the score, but it didn't come.

Mara disliked things that didn't make sense, and this entire situation made very little. “I'm awake now,” she announced, taking charge. “Start talking.”

Luke looked up, astonished but heartened by the sudden change in her demeanor. He'd felt her conflict in response to the Force probe, as if she hadn't found what she'd expected, but it looked like maybe that was going to somehow work to his favor.

“Okay.” The suddenness of the opening left Luke casting around, trying to figure out where to begin. “You know who I am, and who my father is.”

“Vader,” she said flatly.

“Yeah. You know he... cut off my hand, at Bespin?”

“After he had your friends tortured to lure you.”

“My friends, and my sister.”

He felt her shock and prayed it wouldn't spell an abrupt end to their conversation.

“You don't have a sister,” she accused.

“I do - Leia. Vader told me himself.”

Mara tipped her head back against the wall and carefully sorted that piece of information across the few pieces of steady ground in her head. “Organa. Vader has a daughter and he's hiding her from the Emperor. Sith.”

“Yeah.” Luke gave her a small, self-deprecating smile. “It was kind of a shock for us, too.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You didn't know?”

Luke shook his head. “The Jedi took us when we were born. Hid us, and lied about who we were. I didn't meet Leia until we accidentally ended up on the Death Star together. I didn't know she was my sister until Vader told me.”

Mara considered that. It would bear a great deal more reflection, but for now she needed to push on with sorting out the bigger picture. “Your Command doesn't know.”

“It's safer that way for now.”

She could see that logic. “Vader offered you a place at his side, and you said no.”

“Right.” Luke grimaced. “As you could tell, he's not exactly happy about that.”

“Which is why he sent me.”

“I don't know – is it?” Skywalker's blue eyes bored into her, and Mara saw in them the same desperate need to understand – to unravel the giant, convoluted mess they found themselves in – that burned in her. “I have no idea, Mara. I really don't. He just sent you. You saw both the messages – you know as much as I do. More, in fact. I have no idea who you are, who your former master was, what Force lightning is – any of it!”
His frustration bled through, and she felt the petition clearly. *Please, tell me something – anything.*

“I’m no one, Skywalker,” she said, rigidly. “Not any more – just a ghost.”

“But you were someone,” he pressed, sitting forward. “Someone Vader thought could help me, somehow.”

Mara gathered herself, met his eyes and held them levelly. “I was the Emperor's Hand.”

He stared at her blankly, devoid of recognition.

“His personal servant. Spy, assassin, investigator, enforcer – anything he wanted, I did. Quietly. Off the books.” Her lip curled in ironic disgust. “Your father referred to me as the Emperor's 'pet experiment.'” She made a derisive noise. “I suppose I should be gratified to know that underneath all that contempt, he considered me talented enough to be worth sending to protect his wayward son.”

Luke was horrified. “*The Emperor* was your master?”

“Yes.”

“He made you kill people?”

“Since I was ten.”

“But -.” Luke was reeling. “Sweet Force, he really did take you as an infant, then.”

It was Mara's turn to be taken aback. “What?”

“Your parents,” Luke voiced the rest of the thought. “Vader killed them a couple years after the Empire was established – we're pretty sure, anyway, given how they just vanished.” Compassionate eyes roamed over her. “But I hadn't really believed it was possible for him to have kept you that long.”

“I don't have parents,” Mara said tightly. “I never had parents.”

“You did,” he corrected softly. “Your mother was a Duchess. Satine Kryze, of Mandalore. Your father was a Jedi. She was hiding him – and you – when Vader found them, we think.”

Mara stared at him, silent for a long moment. “How did you figure that out?”

Luke shrugged one shoulder. “Ran your DNA through some of the Old Republic Databases.” A concerned look crossed his face. “We ran a lot of tests when you first got here. Before we knew - about the med droids/med bay thing, I mean.”

Mara looked away, jaw tight.

“Mara,” Luke asked carefully, loathe to risk ruining everything now that they were finally really talking, but needing to know. “Why can't you tolerate bacta?”

“Autoimmune response,” she answered flatly, still not looking at him. “Overexposure, when I was young.”

“You were that badly injured as a child?”

She huffed what might have been intended to be laughter. “Every day.”
A memory flickered between them, hazy and unintentionally shared but searing nonetheless. A little
girl's pleading cries. A man, wiry and sneering. “You're not done until you get it right or wake up
drowning in the tank. Now shut your squalling and run it again.”


“Kriff!” Mara pressed her hands to her temples, fighting back the humiliation threatening to swallow
her – her thoughts hadn't been so clearly on display since she was a child, and the lack of control was
horrifying. “Karking shields!”

“Your head.” Luke knew he was on shaky ground, now, and tread with exceptional care. “Your
Force sense has… fissures. From the Force lightening?”

She looked at him sharply. “You honestly don't know what Force lightening is, do you?”

He shook his head. “I'd like to, though.”

Mara gritted her teeth. His was so earnest. So innocent.

“I can show you,” she warned, “But you won't like it.”

“Do it anyway,” he said resolutely.

“Come here.”

Immediately, Luke set the ration box aside and scooted off the bed. Watched Mara set her foil paste
packet aside and inch closer to the edge of her bunk. Crossing the room in a few short strides,
Skywalker knelt beside the bed, instinctively knowing she wasn't yet ready to have him sit beside
her.

Mara shifted, tucking her legs beneath her. “Don't touch me,” she instructed, firmly. “Just be open,
and let me give you the memory.”


Mara took a steadying breath, gathered her resources. “Close your eyes.”

Trustingly, he did, grounding himself firmly to show he'd heard and would respect the boundaries
she'd set. Her right hand settled on his shoulder, not gripping, just resting, the physical contact
helping her anchor her still uneven Force sense.

After a moment, he felt something at the edge of his mind. She was pushing a memory toward him –
no, two. The first was detached. He could see the Emperor's cowled head from through the corner of
Mara's vision, and watched in mesmerized horror as bolts of electric blue light shot from his wrinkled
finger tips. The victim, an Imperial officer to judge by the uniform, shrieked and writhed on the floor,
convulsing under the assault.

The memory faded, and he accepted the second. The scene shifted, and this time it was Mara the
Emperor was staring at with cruel, jaundiced eyes. Luke felt his own chest constrict with hers under
the Force grip, then choked as she shared two excruciating seconds of the bolts licking across her
body, searing and scorching everything in their wake.

The contact snapped off and he fell back into his own body, rolling away from her to crouch on
hands on knees, gasping raggedly. Luke had broken bones, crashed ships – hells, he'd had his hand
cut off. Only the last began to approach the unimaginable pain of his blood instantly boiling inside his veins under the lightning’s venomous kiss.

Mara had withdrawn into herself, her weak shields drawn tightly around her as if half-expecting retribution for having complied with his terrible request. Even so, Luke could feel her dismay at having been the conduit through which he met that pain. It wasn’t quite guilt or regret, but deep disquiet all the same.

His mind raced, spun, and raged. Hot tears pricked at his eyes, and his voice was gravelly. “He did that to you?”

She'd shown him a scant two seconds; his mind refused to contemplate or imagine her full torment carried to the lengths he knew it had gone. Everything he thought he'd known about her functioning through the pain from the time they’d pulled her from the box to this very second blurred, overwritten with new understanding.

“What did you think happened?” The words came out minorly baffled.

“I don't know. But I could never have imagined… that.”

Mara tried to conceive of what it must be like to be introduced to the very idea of Force lightning for the first time at this age. She couldn't remember ever not knowing what it was. She didn't have to come up with a response, though, because he lifted his head, blue eyes piercing, and spoke again.

“Why? What did you do, Mara?”

“I failed him,” she answered sourly. “I failed him, and I paid the price for it, all right? He fried me and left me on the floor to die. Vader sent his little alien slaves to scrape up the remains, broke my bond to the Emperor, and shipped me to you.”

“Breaking the bond – that's why your head…?” Luke pushed back until he sat on his heels, body still sparking with random bursts of pain from the borrowed memory and stared at her, aghast.

“Is kriffed? Yes.” Mara gestured impatiently to her skull. “Vader just ripped the Emperor out, and now there are holes. Huge, gaping chasms that are going to kill me.”

“Kill you? You're dying?! I thought you were getting better! Why didn't you tell me?” Luke demanded.

“When?” She shot back, hotly. “I couldn't stay awake long enough to figure it out until just before your Generals paid me a visit, and then I had a few other things on my mind. Then I was unconscious – again.” Her voice went soft and bitter. “One of these times I'll pass out and just not wake up.”

“You can't,” Luke protested automatically. The nexu in his chest that had been blessedly quiet was suddenly frantic and clawing at his ribs. “You can't die, Mara.”

“You think I want this? That I haven't tried to fix it?” she snapped, throwing up one hand in frustration, the other pressing against the wall to steady herself as anger made her mind's fragile supports shiver and disrupted her equilibrium. “I tried everything. And it didn't work. He didn't leave enough of me to fill the voids.”

Frustration bled off of her in the Force, and self-disgust. She looked up at him, and her expression went funny for a second before it smoothed into a placid mask. “If you get word to Vader, maybe he can send you someone else. A Noghri, or something, to help.”
Luke stared at her, astonished. "She's dying, and she's worried about me? About the commands of Vader - who kidnapped and blackmailed her?"

"I'm not worried about that," he objected. "I can take care of myself. But you – there has to be something I can do to help, Mara."

"You can avenge me." Her jaw set grimly. "Get a data pad, Skywalker. I'll give you as much as I can to use against him before my time is up."

- -

Tycho leaned forward over the small, square table in the pilot's lounge, ignoring his Lum. "You're sure?"

"He hasn't left the base," Hobbie insisted, tapping one index finger on the tabletop insistently. "We've been over all the records."

Celchu considered this. For all that the Rogues cultivated a reputation as mischief makers and hot shot pilots, they could be intensely thorough and effective when they wanted to – and for Skywalker, they wanted to. If Hobbie said Luke was on base, then unless Rogue Leader had pulled some (unlikely) Jedi magic, he was on base.

"All right," he reasoned out. "If he's still here, he's got to be holed up somewhere not many people go, or there'd have been sightings." He tugged a scuffed data pad out of his pocket and pulled up a base schematic and started alternately highlighting and shading out different areas.

Wes followed his progress and nodded approval. "He's not hitting any of the main areas, and Wedge says he's not coming back to the room to sleep," he noted aloud. "So he's either on a ship, or somewhere with basic facilities. That limits the options."

"He could be on the Falcon," Klivian said doubtfully. "Restricted access, smuggling compartments and all."

"The Princess would look less worried if she was checking up on him every night," Wes countered. "I think she's got other things on her mind the nights she 'sleeps' on the Falcon."

"Which brings up another point," Tycho pointed out. "Solo hasn't been seen altering his usual patterns. Wherever Luke is, he's either MIA or checking in solely through electronic means."

"Anything we can hack?" Wes asked hopefully.

"Us, no," Celchu shook his head. "Our astromechs, maybe. Who's got the most corrupted one?"

There was a moment of silence as they considered.

"Gate is most likely to be up for some illicit fun," Hobbie concluded after a moment. "He hangs out with Artoo too much."

"Right," Tycho agreed. "You," he pointed to Wes. "Find a prank to distract Wedge. You," he ticked his finger over to Hobbie. "and I will use the distraction to corner Gate. Convince him to find Artoo."

"Find Artoo, find the Boss," Wes replied, smugly, lifting his Lum for a celebratory sip. "We're in business!"
Luke woke to the demands of nature. Rolling out bed quietly, he glanced at Mara. She'd fallen asleep on her back late in the base's night cycle, exhausted from hours of pouring out classified Imperial secrets to him and Artoo. Her choice made, she moved forward with impressive speed and efficiency. Luke's mind still reeled, and he was thankful he'd had Artoo to record it all – he was no slouch, but he'd never have kept up on his own.

Jade had shifted in her sleep, and lay on her side with her back to the wall, still wearing his jacket, fingers again tightly wrapped around the hilt of her saber. Her legs were drawn up, and she appeared to have unconsciously scrunched herself into a loose ball. As if she'd somehow instinctively minimized the visible surface area of herself vulnerable to attack, her core fully protected. It was a heartbreakingly defensive position in which to sleep, and Luke wondered if it was just an unconscious reaction to unfamiliar surroundings or if she usually slept that way. He wanted to pull blankets up over her, but didn't dare risk waking her.

Luke made his way quietly to the 'fresher. When he emerged, he started.

Ben Kenobi stood over Mara, his shimmering blue aura bleached nearly to white. He turned his head to look at Luke, and his expression was more stunned and unnerved than Luke had ever seen it.

“This is why you haven't returned.”

Luke had a sudden, strong desire to put himself between Mara and Ben. He made himself hold his ground. “Among other reasons.”

Kenobi retreated a few steps, backing away from Jade until he reached Luke's bunk and sank onto it, feebly. Luke, who had become attuned to the minute shifts in Mara's presence during his long vigils at her bedside, felt the tell-tale blip in the Force that said she was awake, even when there were no outwards signs.

Stay quiet. He wasn't sure she'd hear the thought, wasn't sure he'd been able to make himself clear, until she shifted slightly with a soft, sleepy noise and tucked her face in the crook of her arm before going still again, her breathing quiet and even.

Ben, still apparently shell shocked, missed it entirely. “She should not be here.”

Luke's head snapped up with interest, even as he took a few subtly strategic steps forward, angling himself between the room's other occupants. “You know her?”

“Mara Jade,” Kenobi said, his voice the same soft, defeated tone it took on whenever he spoke of Vader. “The Emperor's Hand.”

Luke felt a flare of something from Mara but it was smothered before he could identify it clearly.

“Palpatine's personal plaything,” Ben continued. “Expert assassin, spy, and extreme experiment. Molded from birth to be everything Palpatine desired, and nothing he did not.”

Luke's blood ran cold. “How long have you known?”

“Yoda and I have always known about Satine's daughter,” Kenobi replied, suddenly sounding very old and very tired. “

Revulsion crawled along Luke's skin like a living thing. “And you didn't help her?!”
“There was nothing we could do. There were only two of us, Luke – we were lost, heartbroken, and nearly devoid of resources. We couldn’t save everyone - you and your sister had to be our priority,” Ben dismissed the idea heavily. “Sacrificing Mara was a grim necessity – as is her removal from your life now.”

Luke seethed. “She’s not going anywhere.” He could feel Mara's agitation humming in the Force behind him, and guessed that it was only his own raging inner turmoil between them hiding her alertness from Ben.

“She has been made into the Emperor's pawn, Luke, and you must get her far away from you before she can do you harm. She is dangerous.”

“She doesn't belong to him any more,” he asserted, harshly. “He tried to kill her! Fried her nearly to death with something called Force Lightening – which, by the way, I don't remember hearing a word about during my training! And she's not leaving. She's meant to be with me, Ben. I can feel it, in the Force.”

Kenobi's presence flickered – something Luke had never seen it do before - and his expression blanked as if he'd just glimpsed the Emperor himself.

“What do you mean?”

Luke stumbled through roughly the same explanation of feeling like there was a nexu in his chest that he'd given Han and Leia. “Vader knew it, too,” he added, defensively. “He said so when he sent her to me.”

“This is… most unexpected,” Ben managed at last, his hand trembling as it reached to stroke his beard as if he could pull the answers out of his racing mind through the repetitive action.


Ben's gaze drifted to Mara's still form. “The Skywalkers are a unique line,” he said, at last. “Singed out, by the Force, for great deeds… and great sacrifices.” The Jedi Master sighed and ran a ghostly hand over his face. “It is one of the exceedingly rare bloodlines subject to the Begotten Prophesy.”

Luke was completely lost now, but an icy tendril curled in his belly – a sensation he'd regrettably come to associate with unwelcome truths whispering along the threads of the Force.

“What says what?”

“There are some, born into this life, who have been assigned destinies by the Force that are too big, too weighty, to carry alone. The Force compensates by predestining them a partner, connecting them – instantly – at first meeting to the man or woman they will need to achieve their fated task.”

“What?” Luke's knees gave out at the sheer audacity of that suggestion, and he dropped to sit hard on the edge of Mara's bunk. The tension radiating from her had ratcheted up and seemed to pulse directly into the base of his spine before seeping out into the rest of his body.

Ben's eyes took on a faraway look. “I first became aware of the prophesy when my Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, met your grandmother on Tatooine.”

Luke's eyes were wide as sensor array dishes. “Your Master met my grandmother?” He dredged her name from ancient memories of Aunt Beru's family stories. “Shmi?”

Kenobi nodded. “From that moment on, a part of him belonged solely to her. Formal attachment was
impossible, naturally – it was forbidden by the Code. But Qui-Gon risked the wrath of the Council – even expulsion from the Order – to free Anakin from slavery and train him in the ways of the Force. They were never able to be together - Qui-Gon died pursuing his promise to make Anakin a Jedi, and Shmi remained in slavery until she made a marriage of a practical nature to Cliegg Lars. But he gave his life to doing what she needed him to – getting Anakin to the Jedi.”

“And my father?” Luke asked softly, dreading the answer.

Ben was quiet a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was laced with wistfulness and regret. “Anakin loved your mother from the moment he laid eyes on her. Everything he did, from that day until the day he turned, he did for her, in one way or another. She, in turn, followed and believed in him until it killed her.” The old Jedi shook his head. “It should never have made any sense for them to be with one another. But the Force pulled them together, because their relationship was necessary for you and your sister to be born – to bring balance to the Force and restore the galaxy.”

“You think Han is with Leia just because the Force decided she needed him to get her out of the Death Star? To help her run the Rebellion?” Luke scoffed, insulted. “He loves her.”

_No mystical energy Force controls my destiny, Kid._ Luke could all but hear Han's cocky words from their first night on the Falcon. Much as he believed wholeheartedly in the Force, Luke didn't think for an instant that Han being with Leia had to do with anything other than the two of them being perfect for each other.

“I think the Force recognized Captain Solo as the kind of man who would willingly die for your sister, which may be exactly what he's intended to do. Just as Jade, if she truly has been chosen for you, will almost certainly die for you.

“No!” Luke's hands balled into fists. “She's not a pawn – not of the Emperor, not of the Force. You sacrificed her – left to suffer her entire life - for me. I'm not going to let her die for me, too! You said the future is always in motion,” he challenged.

“So it is,” Kenobi agreed. “But that does not mean we can escape our destinies. Multiple paths may lead to the same end.”

“I'm not going to let her die,” Luke vowed, stubbornly.

“You cannot dictate the will of the Force,” Ben said patiently, falling into teacher mode. “And these are not truths you should have been forced to face so soon. Come back to Dagobah, Luke.” He shot an unhappy glance at Mara's still form. “Bring her, if you must.”

“I told you, I can't,” Luke shot back. “If I don't stay and help there might not even be a New Republic in which to rebuild the Order at all.”

There was no arrogance in the assertion, just acceptance of fact. It wasn't that Luke considered himself important at all. But Leia, Mon Mothma and others on the High Council – how often had he and his Rogues and all the other fighter pilots snatched them back from the Empire's clutches at the very last second? Every pilot was desperately needed, and made an outsized difference in keeping the lynchpins of the Rebellion alive and free. Every loss was felt, and he couldn't do that to them – couldn't take a single precious resource away from them at this critical juncture.

“Luke, you must complete the training,” the Force ghost argued. “This is dangerous time for you. Lingerigds only prolongs the risk.”

“Why can't you teach me here, then?”
Kenobi gave a patronized sigh. “Appearing here is difficult and draining for me, and unsafe for Yoda. Even if it were not, Jedi training is exceptionally intensive – you need to apply yourself to it fully.”

“Then it will have to wait,” Luke maintained, mulishly. Abruptly, he switched topics. “My father broke Mara's bond to the Emperor and she's suffering. How do I help her?”

Mara lurched away sharply when Kenobi reached for her in the Force, smacking her head against the wall with a crack that made Luke wince. Her eyes snapped open, and her thumb hovered over the ignition switch of her saber.

“It's all right.” Luke shifted sideways so he could half face her while keeping Ben in view. “He won't hurt you.”

“He won't be sorry to see me die, either,” she spat, never taking her eyes off the Force ghost.

“The Emperor is not one to leave resources available for others to use, if he can help it,” Kenobi observed. “It appears he was very strategic in his infiltration of your mind, young Hand.”

“Don't call her that,” Luke snapped. “She's not the his any more. Can you help or not?”

“I cannot,” Kenobi shook his head. “The only thing that can save her now is a replacement bond.” He looked at Mara reprovingly. “But that would require submitting the whole of herself to another, and that, I think, is not something she is prepared to do.”

“You said she was destined to help me,” Luke pleaded.

Kenobi looked at him compassionately. “The future is always in motion, Padawan. Perhaps she was merely here to teach you a lesson, and you will be find yourself assigned another mate when she becomes one with the Force.”

“I'm not becoming 'one with the Force'” Mara seethed. “I'm going to hell for my crimes– where I was before Vader dragged me back.”

“Enough!” Luke slashed his hand through the air and glared at Ben. “If you're not going to help, get out.”

Surprisingly, Kenobi didn't appear offended. “Consider what I've said, Luke. Ask yourself if you will better serve your friends here, now, or as a fully trained Jedi when next you return from Dagobah.” With that, he shot Mara a warning look and vanished.

“Force.” Luke let out a harsh breath and bowed his shoulders, propping his knees on his elbows and burying his face in his hands.

Mara watched silently, edging herself toward an upright position, emerald eyes assessing him intently.

Luke lifted his head to shoot her an aggravated glare. “How can you be so calm? Aren't you upset? You heard what he said – the Jedi made you a sacrifice, let you be a pawn. The Emperor treated you like – like an experiment.” He spat the word as if it tasted foul on his tongue.

“Upset?” She repeated incredulously. “Of course I'm kriffing upset!”

“You think I don't want to lay waste to everyone who did this to me? To the Emperor that I slaved to please every minute of my life – who just discarded me like I was nothing? Vader, who shipped me to you in crate like a slave - a piece of cargo? I could ruin them – but I won't kriffing live long enough!”

Luke's head had come up, his eyes narrowing and suddenly burning bright with reckless fire. His vision blurred, separated. He saw Mara in the Force, molten fury boiling and splashing through the fissures in her presence like lava churning at the heart of a volcano. Raw power – like the heart of a star compressing just before it goes nova – frothed through the jagged breaks in her spirit. Her face was flushed, eyes snapping, chest heaving.

They said that none of the nine hells held the fury of a woman scorned. Looking at Mara, scorned by both the Empire and the Jedi, Luke believed it.

_She could do it._

He knew it, suddenly, like he'd known Vader spoke the truth about his bloodline. Like he'd known he'd find Yoda on Dagobah, and that he had to go to Han and Leia at Bespin. Luke _knew_ Mara could be the key to destroying the Empire.

“Bond with me.” The words were out of his mouth before he finished the thought. “I can fill the gaps – keep you alive. We can take down the Emperor together.”

He felt the surge of fire in her, felt the answering rush in himself that left him breathless.

Mara struggled against herself, wary even now. There were things worse than death, even with as ignoble as her end seemed destined to be. Inviting a powerful Force user into your defenseless mind was an excellent way to open the door to exactly those kinds of ugly, soul-destroying worse-than-death experiences. It was a galling risk. If she had any sense, she thought, she'd refuse and just wait to die with whatever small dignity she might yet be afforded. But Mara was, above all, a fighter. If there was even the tiniest possibility that she could live through this to keep fighting – let alone to avenge herself on the Master who betrayed her, she had to take it, whatever the cost.

“I thought Jedi didn't believe in revenge,” she hedged.

“We believe in justice – in protecting the innocent,” he countered, feverish blue eyes boring into her, body and soul. “None of the atrocities will stop until he's gone – and you aren't the only crime Palpatine has to answer for.”

“Organa,” Mara said, knowingly. “Solo.”


“You don't know all that you're offering, Skywalker – it's dangerous.” Even as she said it, Mara leaned toward him, hungrily feeling out the edges of his immense power. She'd known he was dangerous since the instant she'd woken. But maybe – oh, just maybe – he didn't have to only be dangerous to her. _Together..._ 

“You'll be linked to me – intimately. Forever.” Her eyes searched him, equal parts eager and daring. “You know what I was.”


She shook her head. “I'm nothing, now, like this.”
Luke licked dry lips, irrepressibly drawn to Mara's heat and the promises she offered. “Bond with me then. Do this with me – until he dies or we do.” He reached for her, reveled that she didn't shy away when his hand cupped her cheek.

“I can't – I won't - be your slave. I won't be used again.”

Luke felt the frisson of something cold go down her spine at the dark memories that skittered across her mind. Felt the conflicting needs roil in and around her.

*No,*” Luke breathed, brushed the work-coarsened pad of his thumb across her cheek. “No, Mara. Not like that. Equals.” He probed the edges of her sense, looking for the right words – looking for what she needed to hear from him. Ached when he found it. “I won't meddle in your head. Won't... force anything on you – from you.” His eyes blazed suddenly at the next thought he brushed, and his tone dropped viciously. “Won't let him have you back.”

Mara had spent a lifetime learning to read people, the nuances of expression and body language and personal tells that could make the difference between living and dying in dicey situations. Everything about the man touching her screamed *honest.* It wasn't enough.

“*Promise me,*” she demanded, pushing her unsteady Force sense to its limits, testing – requiring – that it give her confirmation of what her physical senses were telling her. The Force complied, delivering what she'd commanded in spades.

Luke shone in the Force, pure and bright, conviction holding straight through to his core. “You have my word, Jade,” he swore softly, brilliant, unblinking eyes never leaving hers.

“Yes.” Mara released her saber hilt, letting it fall to the bed. Pressed one hand over his where it rested on her cheek, knelt up and steadied herself with her other hand gripping tight on his shoulder. “Yes.”

“Tell me how.” Luke's entire body tightened with anticipation as Mara dropped her shields completely. His eyes slid half shut as he basked shamelessly in the heat of her internal inferno, unmasked and so close.

Mara concentrated – used everything she had to weave a solid golden cord of Force energy from the fabric of her core. Breathless and flushed, she held it out to Skywalker. He stared at it, entranced. Could not have looked away if the entire galaxy imploded around them.

“Take it.”

Luke took a half second to dip into the flow of the Force, calming and centering himself. Then he reached out and wrapped his own Force sense around the golden thread that led directly into the heart of Mara Jade.

Half a heartbeat later, a thermal detonator went off in his head.
Chapter Summary

Force bonding (continued), first reactions, Rogue hi-jinks, another peek at Mara's origins, and new living arrangements.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in posting! The sprawling logistics of the story have started to catch up with me and I had to spend a while moving stuff between this chapter and the next one to get events in an order that made sense... and that didn't leave this chapter at like forty pages. Lol.

(On the bright side, I've also been working ahead on the final battle for this fic and I'm SUPER excited about how it's coming together!!)

Again, ginormous thanks due to Flames_and_Jade for being awesome and beta-ing this for me! As always, all errors are my own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He ought to throttle him. Really, it would be entirely justified this time. For all that the Alliance needed good pilots – and Wes was one of the best – this was just... too much.

“I don't see what everyone's so upset about,” Janson insisted earnestly. “I was just bringing to light a critical failure in operational performance.”

“Were you?” Wedge asked, dryly.

“Yes,” Wes persisted. “If Gold Squadron had fully checked their radios – like they're supposed to, as per Alliance standard procedures, I might add – they've known they were malfunctioning before they got out there in the middle of their exercise.”

“They didn't malfunction,” Antilles corrected, darkly. “You purposely reset them to auto-translate everything into – what the hell was it?” He glanced down at the concisely worded incident report by Gold Squadron's commander that he had pulled up on his data pad. “Ewokese? What even is that?”

“Ewoks,” Janson started to explain cheerfully, “are a mostly sentient race native to one of the forest moons of Endor. They're really very -.”

“Save it,” Wedge interrupted. “They're incomprehensible over the radio, is the point. And since no one could figure out how to undo whatever the kriff you did until after they'd landed and taken everything apart, they had to go old-school visual-only procedures to land the entire damn squad!”

“Another valuable practice exercise,” Wes put in, helpfully.

“Gods dammit, Janson!”
Wes shut up.

“We're supposed to be keeping things under control until the Boss gets back – not setting the base into chaos! What the hell am I supposed to tell Command?”

Janson shrugged and suggested sincerely, “Yub, yub?”

Leia nibbled delicately on a piece of muja fruit. She savored it's juicy reddish-orange flesh one tiny bite at a time, trying to draw out the pleasure of the indulgence as long as possible. Han had smuggled the small box of fruit in on the last supply run and hidden it on the Falcon for her exclusive enjoyment. Part of her scolded that it was bad form to let him spoil her like this. In spite of her rank and royal heritage, she was a soldier now; she served in the metaphorical trenches alongside everyone else. Shared the same cramped bunk rooms and stale rations; both morale and her position as a leader were stronger for it.

But her father – Bail, her real father in every way that mattered – had taught her during her first eager, enthusiastic days in the Senate that taking care of oneself was not optional – it was essential. In that regard, he'd reminded both her and Winter often, simple traditions and small pleasures were unrivaled for effectiveness and bang for one's credits.

“Whether you are acting in your role as Princess or Senator, my dear,” he had admonished, his warm dark eyes locked on her from a serious face, “you must prioritize your physical and mental health. You cannot be the strong, steady, kind, and level-headed leader our people need if you've run yourself empty and ragged.” Leia could still remember his strong, gentle hands on her shoulders as he'd turned her around and pointed her toward his desk, where he'd ordered tea and miniature iced cakes for the two of them. “Simple traditions and small pleasures can be astoundingly restorative. Knowing when and how to use them well is an art form no less necessary to master than the art of debate if you wish to be successful.”

Han, though he would neither frame nor describe it that way, was of a similar philosophy. Corellians, for all their rough-and-tumble reputations, were fiercely loyal to family and routinely built variants of traditional domestic “hearth and home” habits into their nomadic (and sometimes chaotic) lives. So where Bail had shared tea with his daughter in a fine office under the guise of “consulting about an important affair of state”, Han smuggled her much-coveted fruit and sweets to be enjoyed after hours in the cramped but inexplicably cozy main hold of the Falcon.

So Leia told herself the part of herself that felt guilty about savoring her treats to shut up. She was honoring her father's memory and abiding by the wisdom he'd spent his life trying to impart to her. She refused to let any doubts or misplaced guilt denigrate that.

To be fair, she might have continued to do it regardless, if only for the way Han looked at her when she accepted and quietly relished his gifts. She wasn't blind to the strain her position put on him; she was far from oblivious as to how much he worried about her and fretted over not being able to do more to help – as if giving up everything to follow her back into a war that had never been his was somehow not enough. These 'bits of precious' (as she'd heard some of the Rebels describe the things they missed the most) – sweets, soft blankets, the cleanser she loved that smelled of home – reassured him in ways nothing else did. Watching her bask in them satisfied him; the gold flecks in his hazel eyes glimmered, and his lips quirked in that not-quite-smirk that was a dead giveaway he was pleased with himself.

Han was her rock in these messy, traumatic days, and she couldn't imagine denying him this comfort. Since Bespin, nights on the Falcon were their shared breaths of sanity and hard-earned respite from
the unrelenting demands and stress that waited just outside the hatch. A way to reconnect and re-
stabilize each other that they relied on.

“I don’t know, Princess,” Han was saying now. “Are there any non-judicial punishments they
haven't already used on Janson? Because – Leia?” He broke off, straightened abruptly from where
he’d been lounging against the hatchway. “You all right?”

Leia shook her head, her mouth suddenly too parched to speak. Heat furled over her and her skin
prickled as if she’d stepped too close to an open flame. She licked her lips, the traces of sticky muja
juice on them providing enough moisture to stammer out, “I don't…hot. Too hot.”

Han was across the space between them and around the table in an instant, crouching beside her. He
pressed the back of a perpetually grease-stained and work roughened hand carefully to her forehead.
“You feel okay,” he said, doubtfully, his voice tight.

Leia shook her head slightly, felt his hand slide from her forehead to catch her chin, tipping her head
back to look at him while he examined her with sharp concern. She imagined she looked like she felt
– as if she’d been hit with a fever out of nowhere. Eyes unnaturally bright, cheeks flushed, breathing
gone shallow and rapid.

“Not me, I think.” Leia gripped Han's wrist to steady herself as she attempted to parse the new

A rush of energy hit her and she gasped and flopped back against the booth seat, eyes wide.

“Leia! Tell me what's happening.”

“Adrenaline rush,” she rasped. Then she bent double, as indefinable and oddly muffled pain
assaulted her. “Ugh.”

“Can you shut him out?” Han demanded. “You need me to find him or something?”

Leia shook her head again as the waves receded. She was still aware of them, but they no longer
crashed over her. It was almost as if they'd reoriented themselves in a different direction. “Just wait a
minute.”

That was not what Han wanted to hear, but he complied. Sliding to his knees on the floor, he
anchored one steadying hand at Leia’s hip and pressed the other to the intricate braids at the back of
her head as she leaned forward, letting her forehead rest on his shoulder. Setting his jaw, and
muttering silent prayers to every god he could ever remember hearing of, he waited.

- -

From a distance, Luke heard Mara give a sharp cry and felt her fall away from his hand. He couldn't
see her, though. An explosion of hot, golden light consumed him, roaring through mind and body
like a wave of fire. It was intense and disorienting, but it didn't hurt, exactly. Instead, it drove through
and then out of him, leaving him bent over, breathless and tingling with the same kind of adrenaline-
 fueled high he felt after blowing up the Death Star.

In it's wake, he found something new inside him. It was nestled in his core, as deep and protected as
anything could be. A tentative prod found it fascinatingly and intricately knit into both his body and
his soul. A closer, spellbound look revealed that it was a piece of Mara.

And she was suffering.
The realization ripped through him, setting off alarm bells and a fresh wave of adrenaline, her pain becoming as real and immediate as if it were his own. Twisting, he fiercely blinked proper vision back into his eyes and found her in a heap on the bunk, gasping.

Hooking an arm around her waist, Luke hauled her back against his chest. Wrapping his arms firmly around her torso and hips, Luke dropped his chin to her right shoulder.

“Breathe, Mara,” he commanded, the low steadiness of his tone defying the virulent fear that held his chest in a vice grip. “Match your breathing to mine.”

Someone had injected liquid plasma into Mara's veins and she was dissolving from the inside out. The fire consumed her oxygen, and she couldn't breathe. She barely registered the shaking as her body plunged straight toward shock. The crisp, charred portions of her mind exploded away, sand-blasted into a swirling mass that blacked out her vision. The fragile architecture of her mind rocked under the assault, and she nearly lost her tenuous grip on consciousness. Something punched through her chest, ripping out a chunk of her battered soul. She was hemorrhaging, her life-force tumbling out into the flow of the Force in a torrent, frothing like white-water rapids.

_Breathe Mara._

Even as her spirit rushed out of her body, a bizarre and strangely elating rush crackled along the periphery of her awareness. _Skywalker._

As violently as her soul had been bifurcated, something else slammed into the ragged, bloodied gap, solidly plugging it. Mara spasmed as gossamer threads - blisteringly hot, and sharp as zenji needles - flared out of it to dig into her, body and mind. They expanded outward, swelling and reaching, catching and binding. In seconds, the new entry was irrevocably embedded – a piece of Luke had become part of her. His presence cascaded through her, smoothing every jagged edge and bridging every yawning chasm in her head, coalescing sculpturally around the shattered remains and making them beautifully, staggeringly whole.

_Breathe with me._

She felt the words as much as heard them. Registered, finally, his body solidly holding hers, the steady rise and fall of his chest against her back. His strength seeped into her, stabilizing her traumatized frame, and she tried to comply.

The first breath was little more than a gagging gurgle, the second and third hardly better. On the fourth try, she manged some air and the inferno receded fractionally. Mara shut out everything but her breathing, willing her lungs and diaphragm to obey. Sluggishly, she brought her breath in time with Luke's and felt both the suffocation and pain ebb. She subsided against him, spent.

Luke shifted backward, taking Mara with him until his back hit the wall.

She'd told him that he'd know her intimately; Kenobi had warned that a bond would mean Mara giving herself to completely to another. But now, actually experiencing it, the magnitude of what had just happened dumbfounded him.

The Emperor had spent two decades burrowing himself channels into Mara's mind, worming his way insidiously deep. When that connection had been forcibly broken, he had been sucked away, leaving long, winding hollows through her mental core. Although he was not the original source, Luke was fount of magnificent Force power. The instant he'd entered her mind, both of them open and unguarded, the void had sucked him in to fill and saturate every empty crevice.
For him, it had been a painless rush; a high. The exhilaration of a steep, spiraling dive into vast depths, with a sharp turn and cork-screwing rocket back up into the stars at thrilling, break-neck speeds. He'd had no idea that for her – so long tainted by the icy, inky touch of darkness and still raw from the recent stripping – his essence had scorched as it rushed through, cleansing and cauterizing open wounds.

As he brushed a worried, feather-light touch over her now, Luke properly grasped the nearly unfathomable commitment Mara had made – the irreversible risk she'd taken, on him. She would never survive having those wounds reopened, regardless of whether there was another to take his place or not. His mind – never desecrated the ways hers had been – would survive losing her. At least for now; he suspected that if this bond between them was left to grow, she'd come to permeate him the way he did her and her loss would leave him as she had been – unsteady and empty, until he dissolved into the solar winds.

He wouldn't have it any other way.

Though she would never have admitted it, Mara was immensely grateful for Skywalker's strong arms wrapped around her, steadying her as she mentally reeled.

He wanted her. Not as a slave, a kriff-toy, a bodyguard, or even a Hand. He just wanted her. As an equal. Skywalker's wide-open mind revealed not a hint of feeling that he saw her as a burden or a tool. He was happy. It was incomprehensible – didn't fit any paradigm she'd ever encountered. But, somehow, it was her new reality.

Mara. She was so close, clasped against his chest, that Luke couldn't help but breathe in the scent of her. Still lofting on aerials of wonder and the wisps of euphoria their melding had evoked, he turned his head a fraction and – without thinking – pressed his lips tenderly against her throat.

Her entire body responded to the touch, surging in a way that left her equal parts petrified and needy for something she didn't recognize – and entirely light headed.

His whisper of her name had been crisp and clear in her head; her need fogged his mind over. The terror on its heels cut through like a vibroblade. Luke tried to grapple with the tumbling emotions that ricocheted rapid-fire between them, struggling under the onslaught of images and impressions that blurred together in a riptide across their unbounded minds. Unconsciously, he gripped Mara tighter, as if he could fix himself to her physical presence.

Mara felt her emotional lurch spin Skywalker out, his unshielded, inexperienced mind devastatingly unprepared for the impact. Cursing, she ruthlessly squelched her own anxiety and grounded herself in the moment's imperative: regain control. Refocused, she promptly threw up a small mental wall directly in his careening mental trajectory.

Luke unexpectedly collided with something solid, and discovered he was suddenly soundly lodged in the river of their shared consciousness. He laid flush against the unmoving point while the torrent continued around him, equal parts thrilling and terrifying in its intensity.

Mara's voice broke through. Stay here.

Luke tried to nod, and hoped she felt it. Pressing himself more firmly against the anchor point, he waited.

After a moment, he began to detect tiny shifts. Mara moved around him, expanding the wall that held him steady with strategic, practiced movements. Luke lost all sense of time as he watched, fascinated, as she constructed a dam of sorts, funneled and bounding their thoughts. He had a moment of panic
at the idea that she might, even now, be able to shut him out completely – cut him off from this glorious awareness of *her* and *them*, but she didn't.

Instead, he felt the tide slacken. Found himself eventually in a gentle stream rather than a raging river.

Luke opened his eyes. Mara had shifted and hung limply in his arms, her right cheek pressed to his left bicep, head tipped back so that her hair – which had come loose – pooled like silk on the mattress behind her.

When she opened her own eyes to return his gaze, they blazed with delicious satisfaction that entirely belied her weariness. “We're going to kill the Emperor.”

Luke grinned euphorically back at her. “I know. Where do we start?”

Previously unknown levels of giddy delight eddied through Mara. *Need to check the boundary shielding*, the piece of her mind that was still wholly her own pinged. *Still leaking way too much Skywalker somewhere.*

“Shields. A plan.” She paused, abruptly realizing how painfully exhausted she was and conceded, “but first, I need a healing trance.”

He looked at her curiously. “A what?”

“You've never done a healing trance?”

“Never heard of it.”

“Damn self-flagellating Jedi,” she griped, lifting a hand to rub her forehead and biting back a groan as her sore body protested the movement.

Luke's eyes widened as the bone-deep ache spilled clearly across their bond. “Force, Mara!”

“I can fix the shielding, I think,” she assured him, trying to shift to a more upright position, suddenly very aware of the way she was sprawled in his lap. “Give you space, so you won't feel me so much.”

Luke tucked an arm under her knees and lifted her. In seconds, he had her out of his lap and laid flat on the bed, the bunk's unimpressive pillow under her head. “I don't want you to mask it,” he told her firmly, kneeling beside her. “I want you to heal.”

Knowing that she had to be in pain and catching glimpses from behind her inconsistent shields had been one thing. This visceral awareness of the constant, all-consuming ache she carried completely reoriented his perspective. He had no idea how she'd functioned this long, but he knew he wouldn't keep functioning if he had to keep feeling it from her. The idea of letting her just box it in and suffer it quietly was too repugnant to consider.

“I might look...” she cast around, trying to figure out how to explain a healing trance in one sentence or less to someone who'd never even heard of the idea. She gave up and went with, “too still. Unresponsive. But it's fine, all right?”

“All right,” Luke said trustingly.

“Artoo,” Mara reached past Luke with a hand, smiled slightly when the astromech wheeled forward, his metal casing connecting with her palm.
"Yeah, and they're gonna get a lot better," she promised. "If I'm not up in 24 hours, I need you to give me the wake-up cue. It's the first four bars of the Imperial March."

The droid gave a disdainful whistle.

Mara frowned. "Good point." She rolled her head to the side to look into his electronic eye. "I'll change it before the next time, okay? I can't now."

"That is acceptable."

"Thanks." Mara looked up at Luke, who still knelt beside her. Felt him feel the unease in her chest in a funny feedback loop she'd have to work on when she woke up.

Luke 'listened' – tried, with no real idea what he was doing, to follow Mara's flicker of disquiet to its source. Felt relief and gratitude that she tested their connection by pushing the source toward him when he lost the thread.

"You had to hide to do this, before? You don't now – Artoo or I will stay with you the whole time," he vowed, taking the hand she had rested against the droid and squeezing it before setting it gently on her ribs. "We won't let anyone near you while you're out.” He paused, searched her face, her sense. "You'll tell me, if there's something I can do?"

She scowled at him. "Get some sleep, Skywalker. I'm tired of laying around – when I wake up, there's going to be shavit to do."

He grinned. "Yes, Ma'am."

Luke stayed where he was, watching physically and in the Force as Mara shut her eyes and submerged herself into the Force. One moment she was there, connected to him, the next she was entirely muted, sunk like a stone into distorting depths. He could still feel her securely linked to him, but it was like looking out a transparisteel porthole now, swells of Force energy rippling across its surface between them.

The distance was both a loss and a comfort. Being this close to another person, continuously, was going to take some getting used to. It was nothing like his twin bond with Leia.

Leia. Luke reached for his connection to his sister and felt a flood of emotion when she reached back. Alarm, worry, absurd relief, surprise. He winced.

Stay there. I'll come to you, he promised. Waited for her reluctant agreement, then gently disengaged.

"Artoo, I need to go see Leia."

//I will stay. Guard.// The little droid announced. His dome whirred for a moment. //Jade is ours now?//

Luke looked down at Mara's still form; brushed his fingertips across her cheek, pleased to find her warm to the touch this time, that unnatural cold she'd constantly borne in the med bay gone.

"Yes, she's ours now." Luke gave his mechanical friend a funny little smile. "Or maybe we're hers."

Unconcerned with the finer details of the arrangement for the moment, Artoo Detoo gave a happy blat and rolled over to his preferred sentry spot next to the door. Luke located his boots and
straightened the rest of his clothing. With a final glance at Mara and a quiet thanks to Artoo, he left. As he strode down the hall towards the lifts, he heard the door seal and double lock behind him. Mara's personal sentinel was taking no chances; she would be safe.

- -

In his private quarters at the Imperial Palace, the Emperor stopped walking and tipped his head, peering sightlessly into the well of the Dark Side.

Something had changed.

Threads in the Force were tearing, unraveling, and re-weaving themselves in unexpected ways. He sniffed, like a predator catching a scent. An alluring fragrance slipped past, hauntingly familiar but distinct from anything he’d encountered before. On it’s heels was a sensation he identified clearly as being associated with the younger Skywalker. Yellow eyes slitted and gleamed with malice in the near-dark of his rooms.

*You cannot control this game, Son of Skywalker… whatever you have done that I did not foresee, I will find out. And I will use it against you, as I used every choice your father made against him. You will be mine.*

- -

“Decided he has.” Yoda felt every year of his near-millennium of life in that moment, etched into the creases of his green skin, heavy on his small bones. “Unexpected this is. Now, matters are worse.”

- -

On Vjun, Vader sat in statuesque stillness, the sensory inputs of his mask that supplemented his damaged eyes tracing the path of glittering acid raindrops down the windows of his library as he felt long-awaited realignment of intensely monitored currents in the Force. A low, satisfied growl rumbled through the otherwise silent expanse of the vaulted sanctuary.

“Finally.”

- -

In deep space, former-CorSec-officer-turned-treasure-hunter Corran Horn was awoken by a definitive ripple in the Force. Blinking into the darkness, he gingerly disentangled himself from his still slumbering wife without disturbing her and edged his way out of bed. The master cabin was roomy for the *Pulsar Skate's* size, as befitted a heavily modified, highly customized Baudo-class star yacht originally intended as the plaything of elite, well-funded youth eager to sew intergalactic wild oats.

But Mirax Terrik-Horn ran a tight ship, and there was – thankfully – nothing on the floor to trip over (or painfully stub one's toes against) between the bed and the door. Feeling no warning of danger, Corran left his light saber on the bedside table. Reaching the door, he tapped the faintly glowing door release and stepped into the corridor. Following the feeling of a new presence, he climbed the wide, padded stairs up to the next level and looked to his right, towards the small curved niche Mirax used as a business center. What he saw stopped him cold.

Horn found himself face to face with the glowing blue-aura-ed form of a man he had never had the opportunity to meet in life. For a bizarre, fleeting moment, he wasn't sure how to address his guest. His name seemed too formal, but the alternative felt too awkwardly personal for a first-time encounter. He used it anyway.
“Grandfather?”

“You recognize me!” Nejaa Halcyon exclaimed, elated.

“I've seen a couple holos,” Corran explained, blinking forest-green eyes a few times as if to be properly sure he wasn't seeing things.

“I'd hoped so. This damn appearing-to-the-living thing is a hellava lot harder than Kenobi makes it look.”

“Kenobi?” Corran puzzled for a second, wracking his memory for the name.


“Oh. He does this -” Corran waved at his grandfather, meaning to reference the glowing blue apparition factor of his appearance, “often?”

“More than most. Long story,” Halcyon dismissed it. “Turns out, it's exhausting – so I'll get to the point. You need to find the Rebel Alliance. Specifically, one Commander Luke Skywalker.”

Corran raised an eyebrow. “And I would want to do that because…?”

Nejaa smiled, and it was rich with something Corran couldn't quite name. “Because if you find him, you'll find her.”

“Her who?”

“My granddaughter.”

“Your -.” Corran stopped. Gaped. “You're joking, right? Or I'm still dreaming.”

Halcyon shook his head. “Vrai's daughter lives.” His expression grew grave. “But she doesn't know who she is – what she is.”

“She doesn't… wait, what?” Corran narrowed his eyes in astonishment, rapidly doing the math in his head. “She'd have to be – how can she not know?”

“That's is long story, and I am not strong enough in this skill yet to stay and tell it. You'll have to get it from her.” Nejaa flickered. “Damn. I'm sorry I can't stay, Corran.” His expression softened. “You have become a fine man. I regret that I was not there to see you grow up.”

“Corran?” Mirax's sleepy voice came from over Horn's shoulder. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing, Sen.” Hapan for treasure, 'Sen' had been Corran's pet name for his wife since before they were married.

“Who are you talking to?” She stepped to his side and peered at the empty niche.

“My grandfather is here,” he explained, wrapping an arm around her trim waist. “Force ghost of him, anyway.”

“Oh.” Mirax was unperturbed by standing in the presence of a ghost she couldn't see, wearing nothing but the explicitly short, impossibly soft champagne-pink silk negligee she'd gone to bed in. Even half asleep, however, she was smart enough to recognize that long-dead relatives didn't just drop in without a good reason. “What happened?”
Halcyon smiled, good humor written all over his expressive face, even as he flickered again. “I believe Mara is of less concern for your wife right now than the fact that Booster is about to blithely rob the Imperial banking stronghold on Korfo II blind.”

Corran winced. “Did you know your father was going to knock over a major Imperial Bank?”

“Gods damn it!” Mirax cursed, whirling to their left, her chin-length, ebony hair flying. “Five years in Kessel and the man still acts like he's some invincible, hot-shot space pirate!” She tore into the cockpit, still cursing when the door auto-closed behind her.

Horn looked back to his grandfather, but Nejaa had faded from view entirely. Only his voice lingered in a soft, ethereal echo.

“Find Skywalker and Mara. They're going to need you.”

- -

Luke jogged through the halls of Indigo Base, nodding acknowledgment when people called to him, but refusing to stop or answer. It was noticeably less polite than he usually was, but Leia's simmering impatience pulled him hurriedly forward.

Chewie sat on a crate at the bottom of the Falcon's ramp. Ostensibly he was tinkering with an unidentifiable part; to the trained eye, however, it was obvious he was running interference.

“Hey, Chewie.”

//The Princess is worried about you.//

“I'm all right.”

The wookie tipped his head and huffed in amusement. //It is her you must convince, young one. Not me.//

Luke gave a chagrined smile. “Right. Will you come in with me? You should hear this, too.”

Chewie harned amiably. On the way inside, he depressed the controls to close the hatch behind them.

Luke turned into the main hold, and staggered back a step when Leia threw herself into his arms.


The Jedi hugged his sister. “I'm fine, really.”

“You weren't fine,” Han retorted. “Not if what she felt was even close.” He gestured at Leia, and scowled ferociously at Luke.

Luke paled slightly, and gripped his sister's shoulders, pushing her back away from him a bit to look her over intently. “You felt something? What was it? Are you hurt?”

Leia shook her brother's hands off impatiently. “I'm fine,” she insisted. “But, Luke, I've never felt anything like that from you before! It was a huge rush.” She chewed her bottom lip. “Then, pain, and confusion, before it leveled out. You're not as intense, now, but you still feel… different, somehow.”

“Different?” Luke repeated, simultaneously intrigued and alarmed. Leia had felt Mara's pain through him? He sent up a quick prayer to the Force that Mara was as good with Force shielding as she'd
intimated she was, or this was going to get supremely messy in a hurry. “Different how?”

“I don't know!” The Princess snapped in exasperation. “This isn't my thing – it's yours!” She threw up her hands in annoyance. “Just – layered, somehow. I don't know how to explain it.”

“Of course,” Luke apologized, chastened. He should have known better than to expect her to find vocabulary for something he could barely explain himself. “Sorry.”

“Don't apologize, just tell me what happened,” Leia commanded.


“Then sit down,” Han pointed them both towards the table. “And start talking.”

They did, Leia reclaiming her spot next to Han, Luke sliding onto the bench seat opposite them. Chewie settled onto a crate along the opposite wall where he had room to continue fiddling with the part he'd carried in with him while he listened.

Luke backtracked to the point where he'd last spoken to Han – on his way down to the hidden rooms at the bottom of the base to wait for Mara – and picked up there. He briefly covered her reappearance, then shared her appalling revelations of her past as the Emperor's Hand. He gave them a highly edited recounting of her reluctant sharing of her memory of Force Lightening, then explained about Ben's visit and, finally, their bonding.

He intentionally left out any mention of Mara's nightmare. Not only because he believed it was a private matter but because, since the revelation of his heritage as Vader's son, he had become uncomfortable sometimes – even among those closest to him – admitting the things he could do as a Jedi. The things he sometimes accidentally did as a Jedi. Confessing that he occasionally saw far more than he'd expected (or intended) when he tried to read someone reeked of exactly the kind of intrusions and abuses and dark that made people galaxy-wide fear Jedi.

The thought of the people he loved the most – his family – becoming (even justifiably) wary of him was unbearable.

So, for now, he left that bit out entirely.

“Let me get this straight,” Han said finally, leaning forward, his face scrunched in disbelief. “You just permanently bonded yourself to an Imperial assassin against the direct advice of your Jedi Masters to keep her alive so the two of you can kill the Emperor?”

“Ex-Imperial,” Luke said decisively, pleased that he'd managed to convey everything clearly, “but yes.”

“Then you left her alone, with Artoo, do some trance-thing you've never heard of before?”

“Yes.”

“And if you die, she does too. But not the other way 'round.”

“Right.”

“Are you insane?”

struggled to find a way to convey his absolutely certainty that they had to do this. “We – the Alliance – we’ve been fighting the Empire. The system – the fleet, the Moff’s, the regional governors, the whole thing! But it's too big, too spread out. Half of them don't even disagree with us – not really. Everything revolves around the Emperor – all the power, all the direction, all the fear that keeps everyone else from rebelling – it all comes straight down from him. If we take him out, everything else changes in our favor.”


“I don’t know yet,” Luke cut her off, firmly. “But we can. I know it, Leia.”

She stared at him, befuddled, but unable to ignore the absolute confidence he projected, or the feel of quiet pleading that drifted in its wake.

“All right,” she said finally. A flash of panic hit as her brain, having settled on not pursuing that line of argument, caught up on processing everything else he’d said. “Wait. You're not leaving the Alliance, again, are you?”

“No!” He reassured her quickly. “Or not yet, at least. Mara needs to heal, and I have no idea how long it’s going to take us to figure out the mechanics of this bond. Then there’s training to do, and planning.” He gestured vaguely. “I mean, eventually, maybe I'll have to, if Command won’t formally assign me to the mission when the time comes.” He reached across the table and caught her hands, squeezing them. “But I'm here, now, and I'm not going anywhere yet, all right?"

//You don't know how the bond works?// Chewie asked, skeptically.

“Not exactly,” Luke allowed, shifting uncomfortably. “But we'll figure it out.”

“So you're not leaving,” Han reiterated, entirely unwilling to get into a drawn-out discussion about Force bonds just then. “What about Jade? She gonna join up?”

“No,” Luke said immediately, then backpedaled slightly. “I mean, we haven't talked logistics yet, but I don't think so.”

“Why not?” Leia inquired, her chocolate eyes examining him incisively.

Luke looked for the right words, extremely aware of how completely recent events had wrecked his previously rock solid assumptions about so many things. Unsettled allegiances he'd thought set in duracrete. Finally, he admitted with blunt honesty, “I don't want her to. We – like I said, she needs time.” He gave his sister an imploring look. “She needs some space to get her bearings, for us to figure out how we're going to move forward. We can't both be serving full time, it would never work. My commitments are one thing, but...”

“But only if she's free to work around you,” Han caught on. “Like me and her Highnessness.”


The Princess was quiet, considering. She couldn't argue the logic, but neither could she dismiss the imperatives of the Alliance. “You’ll get her set up with Winter, and Intel, at least?” she pushed. “She's too great a resource not to get involved in our operations, regardless of her official status.”


Leia nodded, and reached over to squeeze his arm in compassion. As much as she saw the need for
everything Mara could give them, she wasn't heartless or ignorant. They all knew Jade would have a magnitude of emotional trauma to stumble through during her adjustment. You didn't simply survive your own near-death, have everything you'd ever known ripped away from you, and find yourself in the hands – and in one case the head – of people you'd been taught to view as enemies, and not suffer any fallout.

“I don't want to make our bond public, either, at least not yet,” Luke told them, getting back on track. “I'll take responsibility for her, officially, I mean, but it's safer for everyone if we keep information on a need to know basis for now. I'm not sure how to explain it yet anyway. In fact,” he looked at Han now, “I was hoping she could start bunking on the Falcon.”

Leia's brows knitted in surprise. “The Alliance can find lodging for her.”

“I know, but I think the remove would be best for everyone.”

//Mara will be bound to you, instead of the Rebellion, as I am to Han.// Chewie observed, thoughtfully.

“Yeah.”

Han considered that. “Chewie's flexibility has come in handy,” he agreed, after a moment. “An' if Jade's that closely hooked to you now, I'd rather have her where I can keep an eye on her.” He leaned back, folded his arms across his chest. “Sure. I don't see why she can't stay here. Give it a try, at least.”

Leia tipped her head to the side and regarded her brother. “What exactly is Mara's relationship to you, now?”

Luke shrugged. He very much wanted to reply with “she's mine”, but knew it wouldn't be constructive or even entirely true. Force bond and Jedi prophesies aside, he didn't own Mara – didn't presume that she owed him anything. He had to woo her, win her willing loyalty and – eventually, he hoped – love. Until he did, (the bond and Vader's blackmail notwithstanding) she was an entirely free agent.

“We haven't worked that out, yet,” he said, at last.

“You may need some kind of legal arrangement for her to stay here,” Leia warned, gently. “Maybe a wardship? An independent being under your care and sponsorship due to extenuating legal and health circumstances? We can't just have unquantified ex-Imperials running around the Base.”

Luke nodded. “I'll talk to her.”

“All right.” Leia paused. “You'll decide what you want to tell people?”

Nothing, Luke's inner nexu growled automatically. Again, he knew this gut reaction was not helpful, but couldn't entirely keep the wariness out of his voice when he spoke. “People being High Command?”

“People being people,” Leia corrected. “Command, Rogue Squadron – all the people she's going to inevitably rub shoulders with just by being here.”

What could he tell people? This is Mara. My deranged father kidnapped and blackmailed her and sent her to me as a gift. She'd only been awake for a few days, but I'm madly in love with her and positive she's meant to be mine forever because a mystical energy field you can't see or feel told me so. I think.
Yes, that would go over *smashingly* well.

“The truth,” he answered, finally. “That she was kidnapped and tortured by the Imperials, and got out with Artoo in his recent escape. There's no need to get into details. Not yet, at least.”

“All right.” Leia knew there was no way it was going to be that easy, but it was fully evident that Luke simply didn't have any more answers at the moment. “How soon can we get her moved onto the *Falcon*?”

Luke rubbed his forehead wearily. “Um, she told Artoo to wake her up in 24 hours if she wasn't up on her own already. I'm certain that won't be enough, but if it's a natural breaking point for her, I don't see why we can't move her then. She can just have the bunk room I usually take, I guess.” He gave a half shrug. “It's not like she's got much to move.” He frowned. “I need to find her more clothes. Stuff with sleeves. Layers, too, maybe.”

“Self-conscious about the scars?” His sister guessed with a sympathetic grimace.

“Not self-conscious, exactly. But she doesn't like attention.” It was close enough to the truth.

“Operative training 101,” Han guessed. “Don't stand out.”

Luke nodded, but couldn't help but add, “And you know how Imperials treat women.”

“Yeah. Especially the pretty ones,” Han muttered grimly.

Leia's mouth set in a hard line. “Of course. Give them a centimeter and they'll take a parsec.” She nodded firmly. “A lifetime of that would certainly teach you the value of never giving anyone even the hint of an opening.”

“Don't worry, Kid,” Han put in, confidently. “We'll take care of everything. Right now, you need to go take a nap. You look beat. Let us handle this.”

“Are you sure?” Luke couldn't help the hopefulness in his voice. Ben's arrival had interrupted his sleep, and with the rush of the bonding wearing off, he was exhausted.

Han waved toward the corridor. “Positive. Now get lost.”

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Gate squawked impatiently, and Tycho scowled. “No, he's *not* on the *Falcon*. We checked there first, remember?”

The astromech bleeped and disconnected from the wall socket, his limited patience for human foibles fully expended.

//Artoo Detoo says if you wish to find Commander Skywalker you should go here.// He whirred out a series of coordinates that Tycho rapidly scrawled on the back of his hand with a grease pencil he dug from his flight suit pocket.

“Finally! Thanks, Gate.”

The droid snorted and rolled away, tootling to himself sarcastically. Tycho glanced up at Hobbie.

“Ready?”

“Let's go.”
Back in the familiar comfort of the *Falcon*, Luke slept like a rock. Apparently the bonding had taken more out of him than he'd anticipated, because when he finally woke, the chrono told him it was just past 14:00 – far later than he'd expected.

His first thought, aside from how much better he felt now that he was rested, was of Mara. She still had time before the 24 hour deadline she'd given Artoo to wake her, but it had sounded like there was a possibility she might wake before then. Cautiously, he reached out in the Force as he usually did when looking for someone, wondering if he could feel her without disturbing her trance.

Almost simultaneously with the thought, his attention snapped – apparently of its own accord – from where he'd stretched it directly to the new Mara-place inside him. He blinked. The nexu inside him (now contentedly curled around the spot where he felt Mara connected to him) opened one placid red eye, examined his attention skeptically, then closed it again.

Experimentally, Luke prodded the connection slightly. She felt… like she had when he left. Muted, but stable. Stronger. Still indelibly attached to him.

To feel her like that, with such little effort, was fascinating. She hadn't been exaggerating when she'd said he had a direct line to her head now. Even with Leia, there was more effort involved.

Relieved that she didn't appear to have been disturbed by his touch, Luke backed off as much as he could figure out how to, and turned his attention back to himself. He got up, put himself through the sani-steam, then dug a spare uniform out of the narrow cargo locker and redressed. As he closed the locker, it occurred to him that in a few hours this would be Mara's space as much as his. Taking a quick glance around, he found little to tidy. He wished there were something – anything – he could do to make the space feel welcoming, but pushed the thought aside. They were at war – had been at war for years, now. The kinds of small touches and luxuries his Aunt Beru had loved to put out on the rare occasions they'd had guests were simply out of the question, now.

He did two full sweeps of the room anyway, ensuring that at least it was picked up and orderly. He dumped the detritus that had collected in the room's second locker into a box and shoved it in the bottom of his own, ensuring she'd have one fully clear for herself. Not that she'd have much to fill it, but at least it would feel like her own space (he hoped), rather than giving the impression she was being inconveniently wedged in somewhere.

That done, he emerged from the cabin and followed the feel (and then the sounds) of Han and Chewie to the back corner of one of the smaller, less used cargo holds.

“No, not that one. It gets sheer if it gets wet. There should be a darker one in here somewhere,” Han was saying, his voice muffled.

Chewie harned in response.

“I don't know, why do we still have any of this stuff? It comes in handy sooner or later, doesn't it?”

Luke stepped into the middle of the mess that littered the corner they occupied and looked around, amused. “What's all this?”

Han craned his neck around looked up over his shoulder. “Hey, Kid. You look better.”

“Thanks.” Luke picked his way around a pile of indecipherable bits and pieces that might have once belonged to ship parts on the floor. “What are you doing?”
Luke shook his head. “This is the furthest thing from hurt, Han. Mara...” he smiled slightly. “She's all heat and purpose and drive, and I need that right now.” He looked down at his right hand, abashed, as he clenched and unclenched his mechanical fingers. “I lost most of mine at Bespin.” His smile returned, reassuring now. “But I promise, if I need something I'll tell you, all right?”

“Right.” Han nodded, then waved him off. “Well, right, then. Get going. Get her up here, before your squad accidentally blows the base up or something.”
Four ominous notes pierced Mara's floating haze, and she blinked the fuzziness of the healing trance from her eyes. Rolling her head to the side, she found herself face to face with Artoo's curious electronic eye.

//--You are all right?--/

“Yes.” Her voice was coarse from sleep, and she cleared her throat and tried again. “Thanks.”

//--It is not 24 hours, but Master Luke requested I wake you. He is coming soon.--/

“Okay.” Mara slid from the bed to the floor beside Artoo and leaned forward in simple stretch, muffling a groan as her stiff joints popped and cracked.

She easily tracked Luke's progress across the base toward her. He'd always glowed, but now she felt as if she'd acquired an internal proximity sensor dialed in to his presence. That was going to be interesting... she had no precedent for that. No idea what kind of shielding – if any – could mute or turn it off. She felt Luke studying it too; it was a bizarre sensation. As if they stood at opposite doors to the same small room, focusing on an object between them, but able to see each other's scrutinizing gazes somewhat around it, as well. Unable to shut it down for the moment, she pulled back, intentionally turned her focus to something else. It gave her only the tiniest bit of distance, of mental space, but it was something.

Mara was still on the floor when the door opened and Luke stepped in, looking clean and refreshed. She'd worked out enough of the kinks to be in a reasonably respectable stretch by that point, folded in half over her outstretched legs and pointed toes. She lifted her head to look at him, curling her fingers around her calves to push a little deeper, refusing to wince as stiff muscles creaked loose.

“You feel better,” he commented, obviously pleased both by her improved condition and by how easily he could sense her.

Mara wondered (again) how the bond could have seemingly side-stepped her normally superb shields so completely. Why did Skywalker have so much access to her, all the time, now? Had the Emperor had it and just not cared enough to engage it? Or was this somehow different? It was impossible to know but she was clearly going to have to rework her shielding entirely. Force, she had so much work to do.

Rather than attempt to dip a toe in the enormous river of information that needed to be exchanged, decisions to be made, and tasks to tackle, she focused instead on the mundane. “What's in the bag?”

“Clothes.” Luke came around and set it on the end of her bunk. “Not much, but better than what you've got now, at least.”

Luke shifted uncomfortably as he caught Mara's awareness of his guileless, sincere hope that they pleased her, made her feel more comfortable. It was awkward to be so exposed and he tried to take consolation in the knowledge that they were both equally on display to one another. Any embarrassment would be shared, at least.

Mara wiggled her toes, then winced as her foot cramped badly. She sat up, prepared to pull her foot in and dig her fingers into the contracted muscle.

Luke beat her to it, dropping to the floor and catching her foot in his hands before she could pull it in. She jerked, startled, as he lifted it into his lap and his strong fingers began to gently knead out the knot.
“What are you doing?”

“Fixing the cramp.”

“I can do it.” She made to pull her foot back, but he held on firmly.

“Let me, Mara.”

“Why?” she asked suspiciously.

“Because if we're going to work and train together, we have to be able to touch each other,” he said simply. “And not just in the Force. This is as good a place as any to start.”

He had a point, but her body still knotted with tension. No one in her life had ever touched her the way Skywalker did, with care and concern. Part of her yearned — ached — for it. To let him keep touching her until she felt the comfort he offered straight through to her bones.

But a lifetime of engrained training and trauma screamed warning. Her shields weren't right, her perceptions could be warped, influenced and clouded by his desires to her detriment. Touch brought pain — it always had, period. That he hadn't hurt her yet, that he was unlike anyone she'd ever known, didn't change that reality.

“There's no 'yet', Mara,” Luke said quietly, disturbed and grieved by her inner conflict. “You have my word, remember?”

She was silent for a moment, watching him, wrestling with herself. He'd sung with truth in the Force when he'd made the promises she demanded. Her new life was only hours old, but it would do her no good to keep comparing it to the one she'd left behind.

“I'll… adjust,” she agreed, solemnly. “But don't push it.”

Luke nodded, reluctantly acknowledging that he was asking for a huge change from her — amid scores of other changes, large and small, all being thrown at her at once. Time. They would have to go one step at a time. Which brought him back to what was supposed to be the primary topic of the moment.

“While we're discussing adjustments,” he said, redirecting, “can we talk about where you'll live, for a minute?”

Mara could feel an odd combination of tentativeness and certainty in him, and opted to just nod and gesture for him to continue. Luke adjusted his hold on her foot and worked his thumb deeper into the knot in her sole.

“My squadron is getting... unruly in my absence. I need to go back on duty, and I'll need Artoo.”

Mara felt a pang she'd never have admitted to at the thought of losing the little mechanical sentinel who guarded her while she slept. Luke felt it, but pretended not to, even though he knew full well that she knew he'd felt it.

“I'd like to move you to the Falcon, if you're willing. There's a bunk room set aside for me, but I'm barely in it these days. You could have it as permanent quarters — it's safe, and private.” He added meaningfully, “Han's ship is private property — not under Alliance jurisdiction.”

Mara considered this. She'd read Solo's file, and was aware of Luke's complete faith in former smuggler and his wookie. Appreciated that if he trusted his sister to Solo and his ship, she had
nothing to worry about. Still, she sought to clarify.

“You want me to join his crew? To answer to him?”

“No,” Luke said quickly. He cast about for a better explanation. *Family. You don't have to do this alone, Kid.* “Chewie is bound to Han through a Life Debt. You're bound to me, now. I want you to have the same kind of protected, free-ranging position he has. You'll have to conform to his basic rules about safety and stuff, but that's all. Otherwise, you'll just be responsible to me – to whatever we agree on as a plan.”

“They're okay with me, with -,” she gestured between them to indicate the bond, “this?”

“Yes,” Luke answered, relieved. “They're both willing to have you.” His voice softened with regret. “I know it's not much, but it's the best I can offer, Mara.” *I've got nothing of my own to give.*

She felt his consternation at that; painful memories of smoke pouring from a gutted, burning house. Flashes of the flight from Hoth in the cramped confines of his x-wing, everything he could call his own – nearly every item issued by the Alliance or scavenged along the way – cramped into it's underbelly. She felt an unfamiliar need to offer comfort, and blamed it entirely on the unshielded bond.

“It's not like I've exactly got much to my name either, Skywalker.”

Discomfited by the alien desire to offer solace and by his silent but profuse gratitude in response, Mara pulled her foot away from his hands and tucked her legs beneath her in a cross-legged pose and folded her arms. “Do we have a cover? You can't possibly intend to tell everyone who I was.”

“I'd hoped we could find an arrangement that wouldn't need a cover actually.” He made a face. “Not that I've figured out what that's going to be. Leia suggested maybe making you my ward, but that doesn't feel right.”

“An Oath Rigora might cover it,” she proffered. “We've already made the commitment, after all. Organa won't like it, but if the Alliance wants to be considered a legitimate government, they'll have to honor it.”

“A mutual blood oath?” The idea hadn't occurred to him, but he had to admit it had merit.

“It's a universally recognized legal construct, not that different than a life debt – except for not being permanent, of course,” she reasoned. “You'll be legally free of me when the Emperor's dead. We're not required to tell anyone what the Oath is, just that we have one.” She added gravely, “and it will satisfy Vader.”


“I do.” Something dark and icy rolled through her and she quickly shoved it away, continuing sternly. “This isn't just between us, Skywalker. You saw the message – Vader thinks I owe him for saving my life. He was explicitly clear on how he intends to collect on that debt – and what he'll do it he thinks I'm not holding up my end.”

Luke had nearly forgotten about Vader's blackmail in the jumbled confusion and excitement of the bonding and the onslaught of logistics to address in its wake. His gut twisted. “I'm won't let him do that to you, Mara.”

She set her jaw. “No offense, Skywalker, but you don't have a great history at protecting people from Vader. Besides, even if you could, he can make himself a royal pain in the ass, and we're going to
have our hands full as it is. We can't be worrying about hiding from him on top of everything else – we need him at least neutrally out of the way, if not actually on our side. An OR will satisfy him, and give us room to breathe.”

Luke absolutely hated that she was completely right. He took a deep breath and released it, forcing himself to let go of the anger and frustration along with it. “All right,” he said, when he'd regained sufficient calm. “Do we have to do something with this? Put it writing? Submit it to someone or something?”

Mara relaxed a fraction. “I'll take care of it after the move. Consider it one of my first official duties as your CorUnum.”


“It's a title, as close to universally recognized as one can get, indicating mutual vows between equals for an established purpose. I've seen it used for life debts, intimate business partnerships, or – like us – individuals on a shared quest for vengeance against a common enemy.”

And hadn't that been an interesting wrench in her mission plan. Mara made a mental note to tell Skywalker that story someday, preferably over glasses of something very high proof.

“It should spare us a lot of inconvenient questions and assumptions,” she added. “I believe the literal translation is 'one heart'.”

His brilliant eyes softened in warmth. “Does it apply only to you?”

Not sure why it mattered, or why his look was making her core temperature creep disturbingly upward, Mara schooled her mind to the pertinent question.

“No, it's a shared term, like 'spouse' or 'sibling'.”

“Perfect.”

He seemed much happier about that than she felt the situation warranted, but she decided now was not the time to dig into why. “I'll just get changed and we can go, okay?”

“Of course.”

They rose together, Mara pulling clothing from the bag and carrying it into the 'fresher to change. Luke gathered the remaining meager supplies and packed them for transfer to the Falcon.

Mara emerged and stuffed the clothes she'd been wearing into the bag. Then she grabbed her boots and sat down. Instead of putting them on, however, she turned them over and felt along the heels.


There was a faint click, and Mara popped a tiny curved blade out of each boot heel. She grinned at Luke's wide-eyed astonishment. Examining them and finding them to her satisfaction, Mara replaced the blades and donned her boots. She nodded toward the blaster sitting on the table. “Is that for me?”

“Yes,” Luke handed it to her. Watched her examine it, as well, with an experienced eye before strapping it to her thigh.

Finished, Mara looked at him. “You're sure Solo is all right with this?”

Luke gave her a wry grin. “I'm pretty sure he's gonna love you. Ready?”
Mara grabbed the satchel and nodded. “No time like the present.”

Luke had braced himself for questions and interruptions on their way to the hangar, because he never walked anywhere these days without being stopped, joined, or hailed, it seemed. The presence of an unknown woman out of uniform would only double people's interest. Much to his confusion, no one spoke to them, or even seemed to look at them beyond a passing, disinterested glance.

They were halfway to the hangar before he felt the Force current coming off of Mara subtly redirect the attention of a passing Mon Cal away from them.

“What are you doing?” he whispered, fascinated.

She looked at him oddly out of the corner of her eye. “Why are you whispering at me?”

He blushed slightly and cursed himself for it. “I don't want to ruin,” he made a vague waving motion with his hand. “Whatever that is that you're doing.”

Her brow furrowed. “You're not familiar with simple re-directions?”

“Ah, no?” He hoped he didn't sound like a complete moron. “Please tell me it's not a Dark Side thing because I really, really want to learn it.”

Mara looked genuinely concerned now. “Kenobi didn't teach you this? What the kriff did you learn?”

Luke tipped his head, indicating an upcoming turn down an adjoining corridor to their right. “All kinds of things,” he reassured her. “But never anything like that.”

She shot him a sideways glance, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Once I'm settled and get the rest of my shields back up to par, you and I are going to sit down and compare notes. If your masters didn't teach you something that basic, Force only knows what else they left out.”

Luke tried and failed to hide his delight. She'd not only agreed to teach him something new and wonderful, she'd volunteered to open up to him about her Force training.

Please, please, please don't do anything stupid and screw this up, he pleaded with the idiot farm boy inside him that occasionally drove Leia to distraction. It would surely annoy the stars out of Mara as well if he didn't keep it contained, and he couldn't afford to blow this already.

“That sounds great,” he agreed. “Here we go. The Falcon's just over there.”

“I know what the Millennium Falcon looks like, Skywalker,” she informed him, amused.

“You do?”

“Of course. I read your file, and the files of all your known associates. Was made to study them, actually. The Falcon had it's own file, believe it or not.”

“Oh.” Luke led her up the ship's ramp to the common room where Han and Chewie were waiting. “Do I still need to do introductions?” he asked awkwardly. “You sound like maybe I don't.”

Mara snorted, shifted the satchel to her other shoulder and stuck out her hand to Han. “Mara Jade.”

Han accepted the handshake. “Nice to properly meet you, Mara Jade. Sounds like you know your
“Only the important ones.” Then she cocked her head back and to the side to look up. “Master Chewbacca.”

Chewie purred, pleased at both the honorific and the recognition. It was always a toss up how an ex-Imperial was going to interact with non-human species; many weren't at all gracious.

“Did you really make the Kessel run in less than twelve parsecs?”

“Eleven point seven nine,” Han said, proudly.

With her Force senses solidly steadied again, Mara had no trouble discerning the unvarnished truth under his Corellian ego. “Then it's an honor to come on board.”

“I like her already, Kid.” Han grinned. Over his shoulder, Chewie huffed in amused agreement.

Mara's expression turned serious. “Skywalker says you've agreed to let me bunk here. I understand if you don't want anyone else touching your ship, but I'm not bad with hyperdrives if you ever want a hand.”

Han's grin widened. “Do you drink?”

“Only if it's good.”

“Play sabacc?”

“When I can find someone willing to lose to me.”

Chewie barked out a laugh, and Han waved a hand toward the corridor. “Come on in, sister. You and me are gonna get along just fine.”

Han gave the standard casual tour as they headed back towards the crew cabins, motioning at doorways and listing off what they were as they went. Luke watched in silent fascination as Mara instinctively began sketching a new mental map over the remembered outline of the schematics she'd once studied.

When they reached the cabin that was usually Luke's, Han hit the door release and gestured everyone inside with a flourish. Mara stepped inside and looked around with a critical eye.

The ship – and that room in particular – had been home to Luke since Yavin, but he had a sudden pang of insecurity, remembering what it had looked like to him the first time he'd seen it. He couldn't imagine how it must come across to someone who'd been raised in the heart of the Empire's finery.

“It ain't much, but it's yours,” Solo said, leaning against the wall in the corridor. “You can change the lock code to whatever you want – just make sure Luke knows. It's stocked with the basics, already, but Her Worshipfulness says we can req you anything else you need.” He smiled mischievously. “Course, come on a run or two with me, and I'm sure we can do even better.”

“This is perfect,” Mara announced, setting her bundle neatly on the end of one of the lower bunks.

“You two talk about the ward situation, Kid?” Han asked. “Winter came by asking about flimsey-work. She wants to get it in the system before anybody else on Command realizes Jade here is awake and moving around.”

“We're taking a different route,” Mara answered for him. “An Oath Rigora.”
Han raised an eyebrow, then nodded when Chewie harned approval. “That works.” He shot Luke a look. “You get to be the one to tell Leia, though.”

“Thanks,” Luke said dryly. “Speaking of which, I should get going. I need to see Madine and get reinstated before Wedge shoots Wes out of an airlock somewhere.” He looked at Mara. “Will you be all right?”

She nodded, all unruffled calm, and looked to Han. “Can you give me the rest of the tour?”

“You wanna start with the standard stuff, or the special mods?” he asked, eyes already gleaming.

“Weaponry first. Always.”

Luke shook his head. “I put the protein packets in the bag,” he reminded her. “Make sure you eat. And don't push too hard. Just because you're not technically dying any more doesn't mean you don't have a long way to go.”

“Don't mind him,” Han said over his shoulder as they moved back down the corridor. “He's always thinking with his stomach.”

_Please, Mara. I can feel how much you still hurt, and it's distracting as hell._

_A tour and then another trance_, she promised, then corrected: _Tour, food, trance._

Satisfied, Luke said his farewells and left the three of them already discussing the _Falcon's_ targeting systems, thick as thieves.

**Chapter End Notes**

Oath Rigoras are an actual GFFA thing; I have adapted them here to suit my own purposes. The Ewokese prank was inspired by an ongoing prank the Rogues played in the pro fics.

Likewise, Nejaa Halcyon was actually Corran Horn's grandfather; Vrai Halcyon I invented. Because, seriously - what is better than Mara being half Mandalorian and half Corellian?? Is there any better combination for the woman who's going to kick the ass of the preeminent Sith in the galaxy? I think not.
Shields, Spies, and Enlightened Self-Interest

Chapter Summary

Mara makes friends. Shields get sorted out (somewhat). The Emperor moves his evil plans forward another step, and a few other (unexpected) things happen. The pace picks up as Luke and Mara both plunge into the new realities of life bonded and focused on an audacious, dangerous goal...

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience while I was blind-sided by real life during my attempts to get this chapter sorted out, cleaned up, and posted. It is un-beta-ed (because I really, really just want to get it posted while I have a second) so all errors are my own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distinctly fetid aromas hung like an oil slick in the shoddily filtered air. Hobbie kept his breath as shallow as possible to avoid inhaling the miasma any more than absolutely necessary. Sweat dribbled down the back of his neck, and his uniform clung to his sticky, overheated body in gummy patches. The data pad in his hand beeped, and he glanced at it, verifying that they were, indeed, at the coordinates Gate had passed along from Artoo.

Behind him, Tycho's voice was morose and fed up. “We've been had.”

Klivian looked up again, solemnly taking in the churning heart of the Base's sanitation processing facilities, and had to agree. There was no way Luke had been down here. They had just wasted four hours of their lives on a grimy, revolting wild snee chase.

“Son of a schutta! Who the hell programs droids to be so damned devious? I swear – when I find them, they're going to pay for this!”

Celchu barked a laugh as they started the dull slog back to the parts of the Base civilized enough to be inhabited by more than just barely-sentient sanitation droids. “Pretty sure they already are,” he said, shaking his head ruefully. “They're our astromechs,” he reminded his fellow pilot. “How many times have we tweaked their programming to get them to help us with a prank?”

“You think we brought this on ourselves.”

“Yup.”

“Dammit!”

“- -

“That's everything,” Han folded his arms and leaned jauntily against the wall. “Any questions?”

Mara glanced around thoughtfully, then fixed him with an intent gaze. “Have you made spacial
modifications recently, or are you hiding something in the other smuggling compartments that you
don't want me to know about?"

“What?!” Han was off the wall in half a second, furious.

“You showed me four smuggling compartments. The Empire's records show eight.” Mara showed
nothing but calm, gesturing down the corridor they'd come from. “Two more in the ceiling back
there, one behind you, and another in the smaller hold.”

“I don't tell anybody about those,” Han snapped. “Hell, Luke's all but lived on this boat for years, an'
he only knows one of ’em! How the kark did the Empire find out?”

“Do you really want to know?”

/I do./ Chewie growled from her left.

Mara refused to be intimidated. Solo and the wookie had already demonstrated an openness to liking
her. Providing this type of invaluable intelligence was her chance to establish herself in their trust and
earn full acceptance — an essential first step in ensuring both her own continued safety and the
success of her new mission.

“They seized a half dozen YT-1300's after Yavin. Disassembled them down to the bolts. Overlaid all
the maps and cross-referenced them with the partial schematic the Death Star mapping team made
while you were presumably hiding out, waiting for the coast to be clear to rescue the Princess. Even
with all the different configurations, it was a matter of fairly simple math to find the missing spaces
big enough to be useful. It's in the official record.”

“Gods dammit!” Han slammed the flat of his hand against the wall beside him, oblivious to the sting
in his half-panicked ire. “That's just kriffing great.”

Chewbacca examined Mara with new appreciation. //You hold valuable secrets, young one.// He
considered her a moment. //Many others like this one, I expect.//

“I can help you stay under the radar in all kinds of creative ways, if that's what you're implying.”

“Why?” Han asked, bluntly. “Because you're bonded to the Kid, now?”

“Yes.” She folded her arms across her chest, and held his gaze evenly. “It's enlightened self interest.
Until Skywalker and I kill the Emperor, our safety and chances of success are directly linked to
yours.”

Solo regarded his new passenger shrewdly. He didn't have the Force, but he'd never needed it to be a
solid reader of people. Jade wore a look he knew all too well; it spoke of a singular awareness of
stacked odds and a sharp-eyed readiness to defy them at any cost. It was the look people got when
they'd had no one but themselves to rely on for too long. He'd worn one just like it for a long time.
Before Chewie. Before Luke and Leia and the whole damn Rebellion had just barreled into him like
a crashing, burning Imp Star and engulfed him in their beautiful chaos like he belonged there.

Just like we're about to do to her. In spite of the nasty news he'd just gotten, a half grin tugged at the
corners of his mouth. Poor girl was already being sucked in and still had no idea just how completely
enfolded she was going to become in the unparalleled craziness that was living with Skywalkers.
Well, he could use a little sane, cynical company.

“Fair enough,” he drawled, finally. “I'll dig up the schematics and we'll get started tomorrow. But
first,” he pointed an emphatic finger at her, “we gotta get some of that nasty paste stuff in you. Luke
is damn irritating when he gets to fussing.” He eyed her with a hint of reluctant curiosity. “He'll
know if you don't hold up your end of the bargain, right? With this connection you've got?”

Mara lifted and dropped one shoulder in a shrug that was just a bit too uncomfortable to be truly
indifferent. “Probably, if he's paying attention. At least until I get the shielding between us
reconfigured and create some space.” She gave Solo a halfhearted glare. “Don't think I don't know
you'd tell him, anyway.”

Han waved that off. “I ain't a tattler. 'Cept for your own good, of course. But you look like you've
got at least a little sense of self-preservation, so maybe I won't have to.” He cocked a thumb over his
shoulder. “Now go get some food and mystical Force sleep, before you get us all in trouble.”

Mara snorted but took two steps towards the door, prepared to comply. Then she stopped and half-
turned. “I do have self-preservation instincts. They're rather well honed, in fact.” She let the
statement hang, guessing that with these two she wouldn't have to spell it out.

Chewie rumbled softly. //You will be undisturbed, cub.//

She nodded once. Then again, more firmly, before turning on her heel and heading down the
passage. Satisfied that she had achieved her 'in' with her new shipmates, Mara turned her attention to
the next items on her agenda. First: properly secure her assigned sleeping quarters.

The Falcon's weaponry might have been updated, but it's crew quarters appeared to be almost
entirely original stock. It took only a minute to reset the cabin's lock code. In another three, she'd hot-
wired the ancient comm link they'd provided into the door release and remotely connected it to the
data pad Skywalker had brought up from their temporary basement quarters. Any attempt to break or
override the lock and open the door would trigger the wake up chime and pull her from her healing
trance. The room wasn't large, and she'd have little time to react, but at least she'd have a fighting
chance.

That completed, Mara fished out one of the protein paste packs, ripped it open, and squeezed a tiny
amount directly onto her tongue. Waiting for it to dissolve, she examined the room's four bunks. It
was a simple decision to reject the upper two; the lower ones were wider and offered less distance to
fall if the ship lurched. It was equally easy to select the one opposite the door rather than adjacent to
it – it was by far the better defensive position.

The linens appeared satisfactorily clean, and she confiscated the pillow and blankets from the upper
bunks to pad the bed she'd selected as well. Continuing her exploration as she painstakingly worked
her way through the bland food packet one unimpressive dollop at a time, she found one locker of
things that were obviously Skywalker's and another left empty – presumably for her. He'd expected
her to arrange her things, then. To make herself at home. It was generous – that was proving to be a
consistent trait of her new CorUnum, she noted.

Sadly, it was wasted the effort. Mara had never been 'at home' in her life – she wasn't convinced
she'd know the feeling in the unlikely event she ever encountered it. Having spent most of her life
moving in and out of temporary spaces, she was accustomed to making do. She would do here what
she had always done – exist in a space that wasn't hers until her mission was complete and leave
behind as little mark of her presence as possible. She refused to let herself wonder what it might be
like to do anything else.

Having made good on her promise to Skywalker by finishing her 'meal', she set the data pad's alarm
to play in twelve hours and tucked it into the base of the bunk above her. She wondered if Artoo
Detoo would approve of the song whose opening notes she'd chosen to replace the Imperial March.
Cantina of Stars was an old spacer shanty she'd learned on an undercover mission once. The
whimsical tune extolled the delights of a cantina made of stardust that served as a sort of happy
purgatory for spacers after death. Full of good ale, mischievous women, and freedom from labor, it
struck her as the sort of irreverent ditty the odd little astromech might enjoy.

Removing only her boots, Mara sank onto the bunk fully clothed and still wearing her blaster. She
believed the wookie when he promised she wouldn't be disturbed, but healing trances made her feel
vulnerable. At least staying dressed would mitigate the discomfort slightly. She settled in and closed
her eyes, only to crack them open with a groan a moment later.

She'd inadvertently chosen Luke's bunk. The feel of him lingered like an invisible imprint on the
pillow, seeping up into her like living warmth. Strangely – perturbingly – she found it comforting.

Mara bit back the impulse to switch bunks simply on principle. She could cite perfectly sound
logistical reasons for her choice; there would be no need to admit to anyone that (Force help her) she
enjoyed the echo of him around her. Resolutely closing her eyes again, she vanished into the depths
of a healing trance.

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Luke shuck his boots and dropped onto his bunk. Artoo rolled past to plug into the wall socket
while his master thumbed on his data pad and flicked through, opening files and messages. He'd
spent the better part of an hour with Madine, explaining the Oath Rigora, justifying billeting Mara on
the Falcon, and – out of necessity – confiding in the General about Mara's ability to enter healing
trances. Naturally, that last was intriguing, and Luke had had to promise to explain all about it… as
soon as he got her to explain it to him. For the time being, the former Imperial had been satisfied that
Mara was secure enough in her new position not to disappear again and safe under Solo's care.

Reinstated to duty as Rogue Leader, Luke had snagged a couple ration bars from the mess then
retreated to his room to catch up on what he'd missed and hopefully reconnect with his CO.

“Artoo, what's this?” He turned the pad to face the droid, whose photo-receptive eye scanned it
attentively. Then he chirped.

“You what?”

//They did not have clearance to The Project.//

“So you sent them to the sanitation core?”

//Technically, Gate did.//

Luke sighed. “Right.” Biting off a generous chunk of the paste-board flavored food bar, he chewed
methodically while he worked through the rest of the information.

There was a note from Winter requesting that he submit a requisitions list for his 'guest' as soon as he
had one. A reminder from Leia that he'd damn well better be planning to make 'family dinner' this
week now that he was no longer on unconscious-patient-turned-fugitive watch any more. He found
two copies of the full report on the Ewokese debacle. One was professionally edited; the other
contained impressive profanity in half a dozen languages.

Luke groaned when he spotted the memo from Riekaan informing all Squadron leaders that the base
would be engaging in a week-long review of all manual backup procedures to 'remedy oversights
recently brought to light'. Everyone was advised to expect retraining and corresponding drills.
Great. The Jedi slumped slightly as he saw his chances to spend time with Mara – and find out what other shiny Force tricks she knew that his Masters had apparently 'forgotten' to tell him about – go up in smoke.

He was about to start numbing his disappointment by burying himself in maintenance status reports on his pilots' x-wings when the door slid open and Wedge strode in. “Boss!”

“Hey, Wedge!”

“Please tell me you're really back.”

Luke smiled. “I'm really back,” he confirmed as his friend flopped across his own bed with an exhausted huff.

“Thank the Gods!” Antilles rolled his head to the side and eyed his commanding officer. “That whole secret project thing finally over?”

“Not exactly,” Luke shook his head. “But I've been reinstated to full time duty.”

“You're doing both?” Wedge asked, incredulously. He rolled over to face his friend and frowned. “Whatever this is, Boss, you shouldn't have let them rope you in. You were barely getting any sleep before – I don't how you think you're going to keep handling command and a major side project.”

*I'll send a memo to Vader. Luke thought dryly. Dear Father, my CO says your lunatic ideas are bad for my health and you should knock it off.*

Aloud, he said, “It's complicated. But it's going to get better soon.”

“Yeah? Got a breakthrough or something?”

“Something like that,” Luke agreed. “My 'secret project' should stop being a secret soon.”

“Good. I want to know what was worth running you ragged like this.”

“It's not just me, you know that. We all get it in turns.”

Wedge considered arguing, but decided to let it go for now. “Well, put me at the top of the list of people to tell when you can, all right?”

Luke grinned. “You know it. Now, how about you catch me up?”

---

Corran Horn was back in the lower level of the *Skate*, waiting at the small dining table with two mugs of caff when Mirax descended to join him. Dropping into the seat across from him, she accepted one of the mugs and took a long sip before sighing.

“Get a hold of him?”

“Yeah,” she responded, tucking a strand of silky ebony hair behind her ear. “I've got a new course set for Korfo – we should get there in just enough time to stop him from doing anything truly stupid.”

“So we're shooting to scale him back to just regular old Booster recklessness, this time, then?” Corran asked, amused.

“It's worth a try.” The wryness in Mirax's voice suggested that she knew full well how unrealistic the
goal was.

“Bank robbers,” her husband considered, taking another sip of his own caff. “That'll be a new one to add to our resumes.”

“Smugglers don't have resumes, Darling, they have reputations.”

“Ah yes,” he smiled. “Which is why people in half the Mid-Rim drop their weapons and concede as soon as they realize who you are.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” Mirax cooed, shooting him a sultry look over her caff. “But not until after you tell me what your dead grandfather was doing on my ship.”

“Remember when we talked about my family?”

“The conversation about what they could do, or the one about how you're the only one left?”

“Both.”

“There was a significant amount of hard liquor involved both times,” Mirax pointed out, “but I'm sure I got all the essential bits. Why?”

“Because according to my grandfather, I'm not the only one left. I have a cousin. A female cousin.”

Mirax sat very still and stared at him intensely for several long, silent moments, processing that before she spoke. “She'd have to be your father's brother's daughter, then? What was his name?”

Corran thanked the Force (not for the first time) for a wife who was utterly undisturbed by the random, seemingly unbelievable things that came with being married to a Jedi. Apparently, there were benefits to growing up in the unpredictable environment of the smuggling world.

“Vrai. He disagreed with my father on the value of remaining under the radar and took the original family name when he became a full Jedi Knight.”

“Vrai Halcyon,” Mirax tested the name on her tongue, squaring it with her memory. “He died with his lover, didn't he?”

“Right. She was a Duchess, and pregnant when they disappeared.” Disappeared, in this case, being the Imperially approved euphemism for state-sanctioned-murder.

Mirax snorted into her caffe. “Forget to mention those little details before, Darling?”

“Didn't seem important at the time,” he justified.

“Well, looks like it is now. Where has this cousin been for twenty plus years, and how the kriff has she stayed out of the Emperor's clutches?”

“No idea,” Corran sighed. “He couldn't stay and explain – said showing up at all was harder than he'd thought. All I got was that her name is Mara, and she's apparently turned up alongside a Commander Luke Skywalker in the Rebel Alliance.”

“Skywalker?” Mirax repeated. “You mean the kid who blew up the Death Star?”

“Probably,” he agreed. “Can't imagine there are that many Skywalkers running around.”

“Why did he come to tell you now?”
“I don't know. But, Sen,” he met her eyes gravely. “He said she doesn't know who or what she is.”

Mirax blinked. “But Halcyn women -.”

He shook his head. “Yeah. I don't know, either.”

“Kriff.” Mirax blew out a breath. “Well, we can't just leave her. If the Empire got its hands on her...”

She didn't have to finish the thought out loud.

They sat in silence a few minutes, assessing the situation.

“I still have connections,” Mirax said at last. “You remember Antilles? He'll know how to find Skywalker within the Alliance. He should be able to finagle us an interview one way or the other. If not, maybe Dad can help us work something out.”

“After Korfo.”

“After Korfo,” she concurred. “Corran.” She looked at him, worry edging her sense in the Force and darkening her eyes. “You're not going to join up, are you? For her, I mean? If she got the family talents?”

Corran rose, walked around the table and leaned down to kiss his wife thoroughly, pressing her back into her chair with the firmness of his ardor. When he dragged his mouth from hers, finally, he met her eyes gravely.

“You are my family now, Mirax. I'll do what I can to help Mara, if we can find her and she's willing to listen. But I'm not going to put you in the middle of a war.” His eyes clouded, and he stroked his wife's bare thigh with a warm, reassuring hand. “I saw what becoming a Jedi widow did to my grandmother. I won't do that to you.”

Mirax wrapped her arms around her husband's neck and clung for a moment, relieved and feeling only slightly guilty for asking him to make such a choice if it came to that. Intent on distracting them both from dark thoughts, she pressed her lips to his throat, then murmured in his ear. “There are some other Jedi things you could do, if you're of a mind to.”

Corran grinned. “Why, Mrs. Terrik-Horn! Are you implying I would ever engage in inappropriate uses of the Force?”

“Implying… demanding… take your pick.” She caught her breath as he skimmed his hand higher under her soft nightdress.

“Well, in that case...”

Through a rare confluence of effort and circumstances, Luke was able to keep Mara's presence on the Falcon a secret for six solid days. This small miracle was largely attributable to a few key facts.

First, the whole of the base was consumed with the exhaustive Command-ordered review of best practices, backup procedures, and training. Piled on top of their ongoing schedule of harassing the Empire, working to bring new worlds and volunteers into the Alliance and it's forces, and all the routine work necessary simply to keep the Base operating smoothly, this left everyone with scant time for anything but work and sleep.

Second, Han had abruptly decided (for reasons he remained vague on) to 'upgrade' the Falcon.
Immediately. To Luke's bafflement, it appeared that the upgrades were to include massive spatial reconfigurations throughout the ship. Already, panels and deck plates were torn off, wiring strung about, and loud arguments between Solo and Chewie ranged up and down the corridors as they disagreed about the meaning of smudged, non-standard marks denoting previous modifications scrawled across the battered flimsy blueprints they'd dug up from Force-knew-where. No one was setting foot on the ship unless they had to.

Third, Command meetings had been temporarily suspended. Cracken was on an undisclosed Intelligence mission, Mon Mothma was off base in talks with two more worlds seeking to join the Alliance, and Riekaan was leading an assault on an Imperial Base on the Outer Rim with Gold Squadron. Until Command reconvened on Indigo Base, Luke's appointment to formally appear and explain the updated situation was officially delayed.

Mara made prodigious use of those precious days. She spent most of the first two sunk deep in a healing trance. After that, she vigorously tackled the task of sorting out the shielding situation. She hadn't expected it to be easy, exactly, but she was thoroughly unprepared for the extent of the quandary she actually found herself with once she got started.

Luke felt her rising frustration as their connection remained unchanged, despite her capacious attempts to create solid walls and boundaries between them. The longer she struggled, the more desperate an edge her efforts took on. It was dangerously distracting for them not to have any barriers at all between them. Worse still that Luke's twin bond to Leia extended the risk that much further. They were both doing the mental equivalent of walking on egg shells, minorly panicking every time their thoughts drifted. If Mara hadn't spent so much time in trances, they'd have driven themselves crazy the first day.

The end of her third day in seclusion, he excused himself from his Squad after their shift and made his way to the ship. He knew she could feel him coming, so he was unsurprised to find the door unlocked when he let himself into the cabin.

She sat on what he still thought of as 'his' bed, cross-legged and digging her fingers into her temples. Luke could feel the headache snarled at the base of her skull, her muscles knotted from holding the same position and intense concentration for hours.

"Nothing works," she told him without preamble, her voice and Force sense despondent. "Our bond isn't like anything I've seen before."

"That's good, isn't it? I mean, you've only ever seen coercive bonds, right? So the fact that ours is entirely different is good."

He was trying to be comforting. To remind her that her inability to put distance between them wasn't a threat. She nearly snapped at him that it wasn't good – not having control was never good – but he meant it. He was so genuinely sincere, that it was almost unnerving. Instead, she just shook her head.

"Here, turn around a bit." Luke crossed the small space and twirled his finger in a circular motion. "Let me do something about those knots while you tell me about it. Maybe talking it out will help."

Mara regarded him warily for a moment. "More of that 'getting comfortable'?"

"Yes," he told her firmly. "Now come on. Tell me about what you tried. I could feel it, but I didn't follow a lot."

She held her place another moment before shifting ninety degrees so that she sat facing the foot of the bunk. Luke eased one knee onto the edge of the mattress at her back, his other foot firmly planted
on the floor so that he was only half behind her. There wasn’t much space, but he wanted to avoid making her feel boxed in. Gently, he lifted her braid and draped it over her shoulder. She was tight as a bow-caster cord when he brought his hands to the tops of her shoulders and slid his thumbs up the back of her neck, feeling out the strained muscles.

A dozen ways to incapacitate someone starting right where he was flashed across her mind and their bond. Luke countered by purposely visualizing the pattern he’d long watched Aunt Beru’s weathered fingers quietly work on Uncle Owen’s neck after a long day in Tatooine’s unforgiving suns. The way his uncle had softened under her touch, strain leeching away.

Strong hands – one flesh and bone, one synthetic – rubbed and kneaded. Quiet confidence and optimism fluttered whisper-soft through the bond, easing away doubts and fears in time with the loosening effects of the physical touch. Part of Mara protested stridently; he was sliding past her usual guards, and she was supposed to be better than that. She knew better.

In spite of herself, Mara found words falling unbidden off her tongue.

“There were channels, before. He burrowed into my brain and I couldn’t keep him out, not really. I could shield a little, try to keep things from disturbing him or catching his attention. It was a matter of blocking the pathways. Creating walls and layers to redirect or bury thoughts, feelings.”

Her skin was soft under his fingers, the well-worn fabric of the top she wore smooth when his palm slid over it. Luke wished he could slip it aside, let the warmth of his hands on her shoulders help soothe her; wondered if she’d ever trust enough to let him. Quickly, he quashed the thought. She was just starting to relax fractionally; if she caught those kinds of hopes from him, she’d lock back up in an instant.

“I filled those channels – the empty spaces left behind.”

Mara gave a soft sigh, her head dipping forward as he stroked a thumb up her neck. “It’s more than that,” she murmured, her eyes sliding shut. “I think – I think it’s because I offered. You didn’t carve your way in, I opened for you. You… infused me. You’re not confined to the etched channels. Blocking or redirecting doesn’t hinder you, because you’ve got a three-sixty degree view.”

Luke considered this silently for a few moments, turning the situation over in his mind. “Maybe,” he ventured thoughtfully, “we just need a different approach.”

“What?” she countered skeptically.

“When you explain the Emperor’s presence, it sounds very…” he looked for the right word. “Architectural.”

Luke envisioned a sprawling cityscape as it might appear on a ship’s scanner. “When he was in your head, he could only see where he was, or where he had channels, right?” He supported his question with the impression of the ship dipping into the skylanes between buildings, its visual feeds showing only what was immediately around it or visible from holo-feeds monitoring other skylanes. A wide view, to be sure, but with plenty of blind spots. “But I can see everything.” He pulled the mental image back up and out, the imaginary ship rising above the fray and able to see everything below it in clear relief.

“That’s accurate so far,” Mara allowed. “So?”

“So maybe you’re making layers and walls out of the wrong things,” he suggested. “You’re still thinking architecturally, but it’s not usually structures that screw up scans.”
“Organics,” Mara breathed, following his line of thinking. “You can hide life forms from a ship's sensors by layering them under other life.”

Immediately, she reached inside herself. Luke let his eyes fall half shut as he sank into the bond to watch her, fascinated by how much she knew how to do in this realm.

Instead of trying to build a wall in the spaces of her mind, Mara tapped at a natural curve in the structures that comprised and ordered her thoughts. It responded, the top layer peeling back while still remaining attached at one side. Like a curtain, she drew it over a randomly selected memory.

She felt Luke's fingers still, his head tilting to the side as he peered curiously at the obscuration.

“I can't see it,” he verified. “I can tell there's layers – something more than I can see – but I can't make out even a hint of what's underneath.”

Mara felt warmth blossom in her chest and tension bleed from her entire body. Skywalker was pulsing with quiet pride; he was proud of himself for finding a solution. Equally proud of her, for figuring out how to apply his theory in practice. She went very still, suddenly.

“What is it?” he asked, his ripple of concern washing over her.

“You helped me keep something from you.”

His brow furrowed in confusion. “You wanted space.”

Mara twisted around to look at him seriously. “No one has ever willingly let me keep a secret, Skywalker. Even a harmless one.”

“Oh.” Luke let his hands fall, and sank onto the bed, one leg tucking underneath him as he sat.

“You keep giving me power. Ways to defend myself – against you.” She struggled to explain. “It's… different, than what I'm used to.”

He shrugged. “I want you to be happy, Mara.” He gestured toward her. “And shielding did more for your tension than that neck rub was going to do in an hour.”

Mara wasn't sure what to do with that information. It wasn't news, of course. He'd been very clear about his desire for her to be safe and comfortable. But to be on the receiving end of such selfless goodwill left her feeling disconcertingly like she owed him something.

Mara Jade hated being in anyone's debt.

“Do you have somewhere you have to be tonight?”

“No.”

She could feel his curiosity and fragile hope at the question, but he didn't dare ask why she wanted to know. “We still have to have that discussion on training when there's more time but,” she glanced at the chrono, “I could teach you the basics of redirection before I have to sack out in my next trance.” She glanced at him, feigning nonchalance despite flood of delight that washed through her as his Force signature lit up.

Luke leaned forward, eagerness in every line of his body, his eyes bright and intent. “I'm so ready.”
The Imperial Palace on Coruscant was a marvel of design, architecture, and opulence. Every last bit of which was completely wasted on the limp, oblivious form of Povetma Lev.

The Bothan's usually soft fur was uneven, badly singed nearly to bald in some places, and thickly matted with dark streaks of dried blood. He slumped, unconscious, between the two storm troopers whose grip on his upper arms kept him suspended mostly upright, head lolling low and to the left.

“This is the surviving spy?” Palpatine sneered, stepping carefully down the wide, shallow steps from his elevated throne toward the troopers.

“Yes, My Lord.”

The Emperor extended a wrinkled hand to grip the rebel's chin sharply between bony fingers. Reaching out in the Force, he felt along the edge of the man's mind as a thief might examine the seam of a safe, testing the seal. His thin lips twisted in a cruel smile when he found no shielding to speak of. Digging his fingers deeper into the man's jaw, he thrust the Force equivalent of a scalpel into the furry alien's mind. A few quick, deft incisions removed every memory of his capture and the subsequent torture. Erased what little conscious memory the traitor had of cracking and spilling everything he knew under the skilled, ruthless hands of an Inquisitor.

Then, the Emperor drew mentally drew his thumb over a shriveled tongue and rubbed.

The prisoner's mind blurred, memories sluicing away into vague smears like a message written in sand, wiped away by the first kiss of an ocean’s tide.

“Clean him up. Return him – and what remains of his companions – to the alley from which they were collected,” Palpatine ordered, his hand dropping from the Bothan's head. “See that the data tapes are on his person when he awakes.”

- -

Povetma Lev lifted his head very, very slowly. His head pounded as if a herd of banthas was tap dancing directly on his skull, and the foul stench of the dumpster half a meter from his shin made bile burn at the back of his throat. Leaning as far sideways as he could without toppling completely over (which wasn't very far at all, he was dismayed to find), he emptied the meager contents of his stomach onto the alley's filthy, cracked pavement.

Inching semi-upright, he slowly came back to himself. His memories were obliterated – nothing but a soupy mess. How much had he had to drink? He'd had to drink, of course – you couldn't be undercover, waiting to meet a contact and not drink without rousing suspicion – but he'd never overdone it before. Certainly never come close to overdoing it to this degree. Had he been drugged? The thought made his fevered blood chill.

Casting his muddled gaze around, he froze.

His fellow spies lay sprawled nearby. Fredace Tines lay on his back, eyes starting blankly at the sky, a trail of dried blood crusted from the side of his mouth to his throat. Just beyond him, Kuma Cometdown lay sprawled, face down, in a puddle of filth. Lev was sick again, puking until there was nothing left but dry heaves as his addled brain tried to assimilate the reality that he was the only surviving member of his cell. Tines and Cometdown had been like brothers to him – they'd been alone against the galaxy, it seemed, for years already – fighting for the rebellion from their hard-won secret safe houses inside Coruscant.

Povetma fumbled with the fasteners on his jacket, pawed at the hidden inner pocket, panic clawing at
his throat. His stiff, numbed fingers closed on the thin, hard case of the data tape secured there and he let out an involuntarily sob of relief. He had the data. H is brothers-in-cause had not died in vain.

What the kriff had happened? Poison. The idea appeared of it's own volition, floating to the surface to drift across his pain-wracked mind. The blood, the vomiting, the memory loss. That last round of drinks – the one they nursed to give their contact time to disappear into the night, to put distance between them, before they took their own leave – must have been tainted. They'd gotten the tapes, started their planned evac through the alley behind the Howling Hawk-bat cantina toward the spaceport where they could climb aboard their battered shuttle and make for their rendezvous with the Rebel fleet and then… what?

There were no memories to help him, but common sense filled in the gaps. Supplied images of stumbling, feeling the effects begin. Staggering into the alley, leaning on each other, trying to wretch the toxin free of their systems before it fully took effect. It appeared he had been the only one to even partially succeed.

Crawling toward the others, Lev reverently pressed their eyes closed with unsteady thumbs, murmuring slurred prayers for their souls. Slowly, he dragged himself upright. When the world stopped spinning enough to move, he limped his way toward the spaceport. He would be late in making his rendezvous, but he would get there. The Rebellion would get the technical specifications of the Second Death Star. He'd make sure of it.

- -

“My Lord.”

“Yes, what is it?” The Emperor snapped. He'd grown more irritable than he'd expected in the interim between disposing of his Hand and his acquisition of young Skywalker. It had been two decades since he'd had to do without a steady stream of suffering to lap at and appease his Sith-ly hungers. He was not adjusting well.

The clone trooper either didn't notice or was too petrified already to be any more concerned about his Emperor's mood.

“The spy regained consciousness and has returned to his ship, Sir. As per your orders, he's been cleared to leave the planet without delay.”

“Good,” Palpatine murmured, as his gnarled fingers stroked the edge of his throne in anticipation. “See that he encounters no other barriers in his return to our Rebel friends.” Sulfurous eyes narrowed. “It would be most inconvenient if I had to send young Skywalker a second invitation.”

- -

“What are you nerf herders doing?” Leia Organa demanded.

There was a smack and a harsh curse in reply as Han, startled, whacked his head on the flooring panel he was hunched and twisted underneath. Wriggling his way back a few steps, he looked up from the depressed service access area in the center of the main hold.

“Leia,” he smiled at her charmingly. “Didn't expect to see you this early.”

She lifted an amused eyebrow. “Good, because I'm not here to see you. I'm looking for Mara Jade.”

From somewhere out of sight below the decking, Chewie huffed a negative. //The cub cannot be disturbed. She is entranced.//
“Everything all right?” Han asked, boosting himself up to sit on the floor at the edge of the open space.

“Fine,” the Princess informed him. “I’d just like to meet my brother’s new CorUnum in person 
privately before they end up in front of the Council. Mon is due in about the same time you’re 
scheduled to get back from tomorrow’s run to Ord Mantell. I’d hoped to catch Mara before you left.”

“Just in case it went bad,” Han nodded. “Fair enough.”

“There’s no reason for it to go badly,” Leia said, coolly. Han saw right through that act. “Relax. You’ll like her.” A muscle on Leia's jaw twitched, and Solo caught on. “She'll like you, too,” he promised. “She's a smart girl.”

Leia sighed and moved to sit on the floor beside him, leaning gratefully into his chest as he wrapped his arms around her. “I only just found my brother, Han. I didn't expect to be sharing him so soon,” she admitted softly. “Especially not with someone I've never met. Awake, at any rate. He's so taken with her – he was just about glowing when I saw him tonight.”

Han pressed a kiss to the top of his Princess's head. “She's good for him, Sweetheart. When's the last time you saw Luke that relaxed?”

Not since Bespin. She didn't have to say it out loud. He knew.

“You'll be careful in Ord Mantell?” She changed the subject, peering past Han's shoulder with a frown. “Should you even be flying with this much torn apart?”

//We've flown in worse states.// Chewie offered helpfully.

“That's not encouraging,” Leia replied dryly.

“It'll be fine,” Han said breezily. “We'll just work on non-essential stuff while we're in flight. Leave all the engine work till we get back.”

Leia hid a cringe. “You better not do anything stupid, Han. You're bringing back desperately needed supplies for the Alliance.”

He grinned at her, clearly hearing the concern she refused to voice. “Don't worry, Sweetheart. We'll get all your cargo back, safe and sound.”

“Hmm,” Leia was unconvinced. “Here.” Reaching into the pocket of her uniform, she retrieved a data chip and handed it to him. “It's from Winter. She said you'd need it.”

“Thanks.” Han snagged the chip and slipped it into his own pocket.

Leia examined him dubiously. “Are you seriously going to try to bring this thing,” she waved around her, indicating the Falcon at large, “up to Alliance code?”

“It ain't that hard,” Han brushed it off. “It's time I stopped putting it off.”

“Why?” The Princess tipped her head, watching him. The ship was his mistress, and they both knew it. She'd been with him far longer than Leia, and every centimeter had a story. Every deck plate and switch panel bore his blood, sweat, and tears. To commit to the kinds of massive overhauling necessary to comply with Alliance standards was every bit as enormous an undertaking emotionally as it would be physically.
“Well,” he grinned at her, cinching her suggestively tighter to his side, “for one thing, our bunk isn’t nearly big enough. I’ve got to expand it to really ravish you properly, and if I’m taking that much apart anyway -.”

“Han,” Leia interrupted, bringing a small hand up to cup his cheek. “Seriously. Tell me.”

Her smuggler snuggled her a little closer still before lowering his voice and answering solemnly. “They’re going to do it, Ley. The Kid and Jade, they’re going to kill the Emperor. The whole Empire is going to collapse, and you...” Han brushed a hand softly over her braids. “You’re going to be right in the middle of the New Republic that replaces it.” He quirked her a half smile. “They can’t do it without you, you know.”

Mute, Leia nodded.

Han continued. “Chewie an’ me been talking, and there's no way Mon and them will let you keep using the Falcon as your main transport if we don't get it up to code. I don't want you relegated to whatever hunk of junk they've got available – not if I can throw a few upgrades in here and get her up to par.”

Solo fumbled and looked down at his Princess, hazel eyes grave. “I don't want to give you reason to leave me, Leia.”

“You half-witted nerf herder.” The words were equal part incredulous and exasperated, and Leia murmured them like a caress. She shifted until she straddled Han's legs, kneeling up to kiss him long and soft and thoroughly. “If you think I'm ever letting anyone else fly me around again, you left your brain down in that hold,” she told him pertly, cocking her head toward the access hatch.

“Yeah?” He was still a bit dazed from the kiss, and glowing with warmth at the way she'd just laid all his fears to rest. “I don't know if the rest of Command is gonna go for that.”

“Well,” Leia informed him, primly, “then when the Emperor is dead and I become this very important person in the new government, I guess you'll just have to marry me so they have no ground to stand on.”

Han stared at her, dumbfounded. “You'd marry me, your Highnessness?”

Leia lifted herself off his lap and straightened her clothes. Then she bent down until her face was just above his as he leaned back to peer up at her. “Finish that master cabin expansion you were talking about so you have somewhere to ravish me on our wedding night, Flyboy.”

She dropped a quick, teasing kiss on his cheek – his mouth was still dropped in a wide-open “oh” and headed for the door. She paused just inside the hatch. “Don't get yourself in killed in Ord Mantell, all right? It'd really put a crimp in our plans.”

- -

Located in the heart of the Bright Jewel system, Ord Mantell was conveniently located on several major trade and transportation routes. It was easy to get to, and – if you knew where to look and had the credits to back it up – was one of those wonderful places where a being could get just about anything their heart desired.

Giant, glittering cities rambled along the southern edge of the planet's Worlport continent. The sprawling metropolises crawled with life of every form, size and color, and the spaceports bustled day and night without pause. It was the perfect place for a beat-up freighter to touch down, palm a few credits into the right hands (and in some cases claws or paws), pick up some illicit goods, and
disappear back into the gulf of space with no questions asked.

Han had every intention of doing exactly that. “That was the message we were waiting for,” he announced with satisfaction. “Our last delivery shows up in an hour. Let's make sure we're ready to go the minute it hits the deck.”

//Jade should have returned by then.// Chewie agreed.

“Whadda ya mean, returned? Where'd she go?”

Chewie shrugged giant, furry shoulders.

“You don't know? You let the Kid's girlfriend just wander off on one of the most dangerous planets in the galaxy? By herself?”

//The correct title is CorUnum.//

Han threw his hands up. “Who cares what her title is? It ain't gonna help her if she gets caught by some low-life. Or us, if Luke finds out!”

Chewie huffed, unimpressed. //The cub was an assassin.//

“The cub,” Han reminded him, “has been awake less than a week, and can't eat solid food yet!”

// She promised she would not be long.//

Han swung around and slapped a palm against the wall beside the Falcon's open hatch, leaning heavily on it and repressing the urge to charge off the ship in search of the redhead. What the kriff had she been thinking? He'd promised Luke she'd be fine. Given his personal word of honor that she'd come back safe and sound. He stared at the churning mass of beings thronging the spaceport.

He had a bad feeling about this.

- -

Mara brushed a hand lightly over the hood she'd tucked her hair under and wished, not for the first time, that she'd had some dye on hand. Red stood out, and attracting attention was the last thing she wanted right now. Slipping into 'spy mode' she adjusted her gait to a mildly inebriated shamble and ran her tongue over her teeth, preparing herself to speak with a well-practiced, slightly slurred Sullustan accent.

The bored young Twi'lek at the front desk barely glanced up when Mara rented a room at the dingy Carnal Carnival hostel. It was among her favorites because it not only rented by the hour, but allowed patrons to pay after their time was up. Not surprisingly, it's clientele was heavily skewed in favor of flesh workers who paid for the room out of fees they'd just earned in them. That had also worked in her favor more than once in the past; no one ever asked any questions if people came and went from the same room at different times with different company, making it perfect for meeting contacts or luring targets without attracting attention.

Despite her impatience, Mara maintained her lackadaisical pace all the way to her assigned room. Once the door was closed behind her, she did a quick assessment of the spartan chamber before dropping the act. Alone and in the clear, she dragged the room's single chair to the corner and climbed up to pry the cover off the ventilation duct. In short order, she was crawling through the narrow space, studiously ignoring the grunts, moans, and screams of pleasure wafting up through the grates that led to other rooms in focused pursuit of her objective.
Just off the second floor ducting, she shoved her thumb into a hidden catch. The panel popped loose, revealing a dusty cubby just big enough for the ancient, scuffed carryall it held. The dust was undisturbed; no one had been here since she’d stashed it. Excellent.

The crawl back was a bit slower with her cargo in tow, but she didn’t mind in the least. Dropping back into her room and replacing the panel, she plopped the bag on the bed and tugged it open. Satisfaction washed over her, hot and sweet.

Mara?

Skywalker’s voice in her head startled her so badly that she’d yanked her blaster from it’s holster and had it up and ready before she stopped herself. She felt him cringe when he registered her alarm, and a wave of apology from his end of the bond.

What is it, Skywalker? She sounded a bit more annoyed than she meant to; it was her own fault she’d jumped like that.

I didn’t mean to startle you. I just… he hesitated. You felt really happy. What happened?

Mara refused to blush. She had a right to be pleased, dammit. I found something. I’ll show you when I get back, all right?

Okay. Wait… you found something? Did you leave the Falcon?!

Jade rolled her eyes. I’m a big girl, Skywalker.

There was enough warning in her tone that Luke bit his tongue. Still, he felt distinctly displeased when he answered. Alright. Be careful.

Always. With that, Mara firmly – but not unkindly – drew a curtain between them. Then, free to revel in her elation without embarrassment, she dug into the bag and latched onto her prize.

Hello, Baby. I missed you.

---

Wedge Antilles flicked through his mail. Most of it was just the routine work messages that came with being second in command of the Rogues. But one message stood out. It was flagged as having been inspected and approved by Alliance security.

Wedge raised an eyebrow. Messages from outside the Alliance network were hard to get, and rare. This one looked to have come a long way, too. Korfo? Who do I know in the Korfo system?

Tapping the screen curiously, he blinked.

Veggies –

Long time no see. How about a drink? Get me clearance, and I’ll bring a nice vintage Whyren’s. It’s important.

Myri

He read the script twice, and was already reaching for his comm by the time he finished.

“Winter? It’s Wedge. I need a favor...”
Forty-five standard minutes after entering the Carnal Carnival, Mara left it an entirely different person.

Her hair was spray-died a cheap, brassy shade of blonde (compliments of one of the bottles stashed in her newly retrieved pack) and piled messily atop her head in a casual style that made her look taller than she actually was.

The mismatched outfit she'd arrived in had been replaced with clothing that fit her like a glove – or would, once she fully regained a few pounds of muscle lost during her confinement to the med bay. The faded, well-broken-in black leather pants and boots were durable, functional, and comfortable. The soft, loose grey top and equally faded leather jacket were both high necked and long-sleeved, conservative but not prudish. She could have been a crewer on any of five hundred different freighters docked in the spaceport at that very moment – no one would look at her twice. The blue skinned girl at the desk certainly didn't when she used Imperial credits from her tote to pay the meager fee for her rented room.

A few minutes of casual walking later, she was on the boardwalk, turning into the Last Card – one of the bedazzled, over-lit casinos that sprouted up every few kilometers along the main thoroughfare. Passing through the soaring lobby, she let the fickle and frivolous emotions of the mass of beings around her wash shallowly over her senses. Just enough to keep herself aware of any undue interest or possible danger, but nothing more. Passing by the elaborate arched entrances to the gaming rooms, she made a left into the smaller but even more plush side lobby that led to the establishment's luxury spa. She'd taken treatments there more than once in her past life; they'd always as part of her cover, just another well-calculated act to further a mission, but even at that she'd been impressed with the staff.

The Togruta at the reception desk gave her a polite, professional smile when she entered but Jade didn't miss the way her eyes flicked to Mara's brittle, garishly done hair. There was a distinctive grimace in her emotions – the reaction of every professional to seeing something they take seriously badly butchered by amateurs – but, to her credit, it never showed externally. It was all right, Jade wasn't offended. She completely agreed. That was why she was here.

“Good afternoon, Ma'am,” the Togruta greeted politely. “Do you have an appointment?”

Consciously using an entirely different persona than the one she'd applied at the Carnival, Mara conjured an indeterminately Outer-Rim accent and furrowed her brow like someone trying to remember something.

“I'm looking for a product,” she said, feigning helplessness. “I got it here last time I was in port, but I can't remember what it was called.” As she'd hoped, the receptionist brightened at the chance to show off her expertise and make a quick sale.

“For skin or hair?” She inquired strategically.

“Hair,” Mara answered. “It came in a gold bottle. About this big.” She held her hands up, drawing a vague outline of KeraTex's signature flagon shape.

A gleam lit the stylist's eyes. “I know exactly what you mean. Just a moment, please.”

Ten minutes later, after a show of asking a few more questions, then praising the service girl and tipping her well, Mara was back on the boardwalk. She moved briskly toward the docking bay where her ride was waiting, a fresh supply of the best conditioner in the galaxy for lightening-fried
hair and a few other necessities tucked safely in her bag.

Halfway between the casino and the spaceport she took a sharp right into a wide, bland alley. She had one more stop to make.

A tiny chime over the door sounded as she slipped inside the unmarked storefront. Inside, stacks of power packs and other accessories covered every inch of surface space on the shelves that prolifically lined narrow, cramped aisles. Secured to the walls was an impressive array of well maintained, very legal weaponry.

The Diamal behind the counter looked up, his long, narrow face curling into the closest thing it could make to a smile. His expressive ears flicked happily in recognition. “Celina, my dear! This is a welcome surprise.”

“Aspheratz.” Mara may have faked the Ishorian accent, but the warmth in her greeting was genuine.

The older alien set aside the flimsy-work he’d been examining. “I thought perhaps you’d found a new supplier, it has been so long.”

She gave him a reproving look and leaned her elbows on the counter. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve just been out of sector. Long trips aren’t the standard in my line of work, but they’re not unheard of, you know.”

Her ‘business’, as far as he knew, was providing specialized security for highly valuable – and sometimes volatile – cargo for not-quite-legal freight handlers.

Aspheratz Odiorti flicked his ears again at his favorite patron. “You are back here, at the intersection of major trade routes,” he approved. “Looking for another gig?”

She shook her head. “Got one. Something big.” She gave him a meaningful look. “I was hoping you could help me fill my requisitions list.”

Odiorti’s nostrils flared, ruffling his short white beard, and he moved to lift a hinged portion of counter, waving her back. “For you, my dear, I just might have something... special in stock.”

Mara hid a grin as she stepped into the shop’s back room. Her host depressed a hidden button, and she heard the door lock behind them. There was a soft whir as wall panels started flipping, revealing a much more appealing – and much less legal – armament selection.

“Would you like a cart?” Alpheratz teased.

Jade snorted. “Shut up and give me six of those.”

Mara sparkled when she was happy. She glittered like the mineral-rich sands of Tatooine's endless desert catching and refracting the light of two suns at noon. It was unlike anything Luke had ever felt before, and a fascinating revelation.

Almost as mind-boggling as the realization that he could feel her just as clearly when they were in entirely different sectors as he could when they were merely on opposite sides of the base. It wasn’t like that with anyone else. Not that he had a lot of other people to use for comparison, of course, but still. Master Yoda, Ben, Leia – even Vader, when he’d called out to him during the escape from Bespin. Distance mattered. Except with Mara, apparently, because no matter where the rest of her went, part of her always remained with him.
It was an awe inspiring and humbling thought.

Luke was so distracted marveling at this new development as he crossed the landing bay that he nearly concussed himself on his ship. Only Artoo's squeal of alarm saved him, and he backed up sheepishly.

“Sorry, little buddy. No, it's okay, I'm fine. Just thinking.”

Reluctantly, Luke tucked soft shields around his Mara-place and brought his focus back to the moment. If he didn't pay attention to what he was doing, he was going to end up splattered across an asteroid or something and entirely miss the chance to find out what other amazing things they could do with their bond.

*I don't know what you're doing off the Falcon, Mara, but please come back safe… I already have no idea what I'd do without you.*

- -

Mara and her bag both weighed significantly more when she slipped back out onto the street, though her carefully chosen clothing gave no indication of the fresh supply of weapons packed onto her person.

The spaceport was, as always, a roiling mass of life. Humans, aliens, droids, and automated service vehicles of every age and description tangled and wove through the orderly layout of docking bays, access corridors, and transport lanes, each focused on their own missions, tasks, and timetables. Mara ducked down a nearly empty service tunnel that arced around to the right, seeking to avoid the crush as she made her way back to the ship.

There was a distinct ting at the edge of her danger sense. Not a direct threat to her, perhaps, but something wrong. Out of place. Mara slipped deeper into the Force and followed the feeling, freeing her hold-out blaster from it's wrist holster as she slid into the shadows. *There.*

Just ahead, a Trandoshan crouched on a hovering maintenance pod, his tools ignored beside him. To Mara's practiced eye, it was obvious he was casing the *Falcon.* Together, they watched as the last supplier shook hands with Han at the hatch, then swung onto his speeder and barreled away. The reptile must have done his homework, because he, too, seemed to know that this was the time to move.

“Solo.” Mara heard it hiss not quite under it's breath as it rose. “Time to go, Solo…”

- -

Mirax didn't turn around as the cockpit door whisked open behind her. Practiced fingers darted over the control panel, and the hum of the *Skate's* engines changed pitch as they prepared to make the jump to light speed.

“Got our clearance?” Corran asked, dropping into the co-pilot seat beside her. He was just as a good a pilot as she was, better if he used the Force to give him an edge, but the *Skate* was her ship and he knew better than to think he ought to be the one flying it.

His wife nodded, hitting the hyperspace lever and watching the stars stretch from pinpoints to long, bright blurs of light before glancing toward him and replying.

“Wedge can't tell us where the Base is, obviously, but he got permission to meet us in neutral space.” She shrugged. “It's not ideal, but it will work.” She frowned, thinking through the logistics. “Then
we just have to find Skywalker.”

Corran heard the faintest of whisperings from the Force. Not words, precisely, but clear nonetheless. “Somehow, I don't think that's going to be a problem.”

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“Somehow, I don't think that's going to be a problem.”

“She should have been back by now,” Han griped. “You didn't even make her take a transmitter or comm link or something? We've got no way to find her. What if something goes wrong?”

“Nothing is-ss going to go wrong.” The sibilant voice announced itself smugly from behind him at the same moment Chewie roared and lunged for his bow-caster. “Not unless you are very ss-stupid, Solo.”

Han spun, already pulling his blaster from his holster, only to find it yanked from his grip. He was nearly brained by Chewie's bow-caster as it snapped past as well, both weapons clanging hard into the wide, circular hyper-magnet at the smoothly-scaled, three-toed feet of the powerful figure in the doorway.

“Bossk,” Solo gritted. “I could have gone a while longer without seeing you again.”

The yellow-skinned lizard made a slurred gurgling sound – it's species' approximation of a laugh. “Jabba grows weary of waiting to s-settle his-s s-score with you.” His thick thumb adjusted it's grip on his own blaster, treated to avoid being attracted to the magnet, keeping it flawlessly trained on the pair before him. “You will make me a rich man. Now -.”

A soft crackle interrupted whatever instruction he meant to give, and Han and Chewie watched in astonishment as the huge alien spasmed, then crumpled face-first to the deck.

“Kriffing amateur.” Mara leaned down, snapped the magnet off, and lobbed the abruptly freed weapons to their owners. Reaching back, she smacked the button to close the hatch, then leaned down and retrieved a small, circular stun disc from the base of the bounty hunter's neck. Tucking it into a pocket, she tossed an ancient, scuffed leather carryall toward the dejak table and shot a look at Han. “I suggest we get in the air before anyone else shows up with bright ideas.”

Han glanced at the creature on the floor, then back at Mara's hard expression. “Yeah,” was all he said before he ducked around the corner after Chewie.

When the Falcon was safely in hyperspace, they returned to the main hold to find their guest propped against a wall, his head lolling as he started to come back to consciousness. He'd been efficiently stripped of his weapons and a wide assortment of other equipment, all of which was now piled in the open top of Mara's bag. A few locator devices and transmitters sat smoking on the table. Mara leaned against it, arms folded across her chest, eyes never leaving her prisoner.

Beady eyes deep set in a pointed skull blinked open, squinting against the headache that inevitably followed being hit with a stun disc. Han imagined that side effect only got worse if you took one to the nape of the neck – even if it was a thick, scaly one. His hand dropped to his blaster as Bossk's fat fingers flexed, even though they both knew he no weapons left to pull.

“Protected by a girl now, Solo?” The Trandoshan jeered.

“She got your ass down in a hurry,” Han shrugged. He was above being baited by scum like this, these days. He saved his pride for better insults – and more worthy insulters.

“What do you want with Solo?” Mara broke in, her voice all business.
The lizard snorkeled. “What everyone wants—Jabba’s bounty.”

Mara glanced at Han. “That’s still active?”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t about to pay him after that whole mess with Vader.”

Her head tipped to the side as she considered. He did have a valid point. She narrowed her gaze and returned it to Bossk. “You’re here only for Jabba?”

“Who else would want such scum?” he hissed in contempt.

“Me.”

“And who are you, little girl?”

The tone was a leer, and Han mentally shook his head. Bad move, buddy.

“You have a bad memory. Not a good trait in a bounty hunter.” It was Mara’s voice that was mocking now, and the prisoner bristled.

“You think I would lower myself to remember a little—.” He broke off, the dark pebbles of his eyes widening in disbelief as Mara winked at him and wiggled her fingers in a cheery little wave.

Han wasn’t sure where the two had met before, but her motion obviously triggered a distinct memory. Not a happy one, if the tone of his voice on the next word out of his mouth was any indication.

“You.”

“Ah, see? That’s better.”

“Emperor’s Hand,” Bossk shrilled. “You have aligned with this—scum? Jabba will be pleased to sell that information to the—.”

A blaster bolt drilled between Bossk’s eyes; he never finished the sentence.

As quickly as it had appeared, the hold-out blaster slid back into Jade’s sleeve. “You got a corpse hatch?” she asked, sliding smoothly upright from where she’d leaned against the table. “Or you need me to take care of it?”

Han wrinkled his nose at her indignantly. “Course I do. What kind of sloppy, second-rate operation you think I’m running here?”

//It is next to the trash chute.// Chewie offered, already moving to hoist the body over his shoulder. //I will show you where the handle is hidden.//

“Don’t tell Leia!” Han called after them, heading in the opposite direction toward the liquor cabinet. “Or Luke!”

Fifteen minutes later, Bossk’s body had disappeared without a trace and the three of them sat around the dejarik table. Chewie had a mug of some kind of pungent brown Kashyyyki liquor, Han held a tumbler of Whyren’s, and Mara had a shot of Severeen’s brandy in a tiny glass. Even that was more alcohol than she should be drinking yet, given her still-healing condition, but recent events called for an exception to best practices.

“Why’d you leave the ship?”
She gestured toward her bag. “To get that.”

//A stash// Chewie sounded impressed. //The Emperor will not know//

“He didn't like to concern himself with the details,” she shrugged. “As long as I accomplished what he wanted within acceptable damage parameters.” Her expression darkened as she toyed with her glass. “He also didn't like to be bothered when things didn't go according to plan. I learned to leave backup resources in place for myself.”

“Like that,” Han gestured toward her sleeve, and didn't miss the affectionate way she gazed at the blaster as she slid the sleeve back to show them. It wasn't all that different than how he looked at the Falcon.

“Custom made,” she told them proudly. “Just for me.”

“Effective,” he complimented.

“Mmm,” she agreed, savoring the warm caramel tones of the brandy on her tongue. It was such a welcome reprieve from the tasteless, utilitarian pastes she'd been confined to and the ration bars she'd been living on for weeks before her execution.

“You heard what I said about not telling the Kid or Her Highnessness about the corpse-hatch, right?” Han clarified. “That's the kind of thing they really don't want to know about.”

“The kind of thing they keep you around for?” Mara asked, understanding beyond her years in dark eyes and the tight lines around her mouth. “And now me, apparently?”

He just nodded, sipping his own drink. He'd long ago become accustomed to his role in the Skywalkers’ world. Hell – the Rebellion’s world. They needed people with broader definitions of acceptable and noble than their own to do the things they couldn't dirty their hands with. He didn't mind. That was how the world worked, and if it kept him in their orbit, it was an easy price to pay.

“What are you going to tell them?”

“Nothing.”

Mara raised an eyebrow. “Think you can get away with that?”

He eyed her over the table. “Unless your bond thing lets Luke in on the secret, yeah. Wouldn't be the first time.”

She shook her head firmly. “We've got a lot to sort still, but I can do that much. He won't hear it from me.”

There was silence for a moment as they sipped their drinks, the only sound the soft humming, rattling and occasional clank that was the Falcon in flight.

//You saved our lives, cub.//

“Enlightened self-interest,” Mara brushed it off. “I can't risk the Emperor finding out I'm still alive. Besides, if anything happened to you, Skywalker would get distracted and probably do something reckless. I don't have time for that right now. I've got a Sith to kill.”

“You gonna let us help?”

“It's not exactly going to be a pleasure cruise, Solo.”
“Maybe you didn't notice,” he said, leaning back, draping his arms casually against the back of the booth seat as he gestured, “but playing errand boys for the Alliance ain't exactly fulfilling work. I'm not above anything Leia needs from me, but that don't mean I couldn't use a little more excitement in my life.”

Jewel-like eyes examined him, and he could all but feel her weighing their futures. “You're good with a blaster, and a ship. You could come in handy.”

Han grinned and Chewie whuffed with anticipation. //So you do have a plan.//

“I might not have gotten around to telling Skywalker yet,” she allowed. “But of course I do.”

Solo leaned forward, elbows on the table, hair falling low of his eyes as he watched her, waiting. Mara's head came up, that obnoxious dye-job glinting in the low light as she turned her glass around in her fingers. “Sith,” she told them almost conversationally, “feel their enemies' happiness as something akin to the sound claws make when you drag them across a slate – it makes their teeth grind and their bones ache. They thrive on other people's suffering, and they worship order and control. Palpatine more than most.”

“So I'm going to take the pretty, orderly little system he built to control the galaxy and burn it down.” Her lips twisted in a vicious smile, as she glanced back up to meet Han and Chewie's rapt gazes. “And while he's writhing like a fish on a hook from the Alliance's delight ringing in the Force and the disorder littering his playground, I'm going to walk right back into the Palace he raised and murdered me in and cut his Force-damned head off.”

Mara held up her shot glass, with it's final sweet taste of indulgence. “You up for it?”

Two thick, chipped glasses clinked against her own. It was going to be one hell of a ride – and they were all in.

Chapter End Notes

Bossk was a very successful, well-respected bounty hunter who did a lot of work for the Empire in the GFFA verse.

I totally did not intend to write the Han/Leia sort-of-proposal in this chapter… it just kind of happened. So, yeah.

The Cantina of Stars song is based on an old Whaler's shanty of similar themes called Fields of Green.

It is actually Legends Cannon that Mirax Terrik Horn and Wedge Antilles call each other Myri and Veggies, respectively. More on their relationship next chapter!
Friends and Family

Chapter Summary

Introductions, long overdue conversations, and new friendships.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luke was easing his x-wing into a flawless landing when Artoo warbled what he already knew – the *Falcon* was back. Despite her successes in giving them some space in other ways, Mara had yet to find anything that could impact or alter what Luke had come to refer to as the bond’s “homing beacon”.

The trip to Ord Mantell had proved to be an enlightening, if unintentional, experiment on that front. As she’d moved further away, the feel of her had telescoped. It was less like looking at map and being able to pinpoint her than as though they had a cord strung between them, or two limitless magnets embedded inside their chests. He wouldn’t have been able to tell someone “oh, she’s in Ord Mantell” if he hadn’t already known that was where she was going, but he was certain he’d have been able to find her by hopping in his x-wing and taking off after the feel of her if he’d needed to. He suspected he could have meditated on the potential philosophical implications of that for longer than Master Yoda had been alive, but this was war. There was no time for such indulgences – it was enough to know that they’d always be able to find one another, no matter what.

As she’d returned, the telescoping phenomenon had collapsed, her presence becoming more placeable in immediate space. Now that Mara was back on base, he knew with clarity that she was in the main hold of the *Falcon*, where it rested in the aft docking bay. Whether that was because he knew both the base and the *Falcon* intimately, because she was subconsciously making other cues available to him (the smell of engine grease, the scent of sizzling metal as wires were fused), or simply the result of close proximity, he still had no idea.

It turned out that having a Force bond was an enchanting thing, except for the minor inconvenience of its not coming with any kind of instruction manual. It was akin to getting a new, highly customized droid and only being able to discover all the features by randomly pushing buttons or guessing at commands. Maybe you’d get nothing, sometimes you got something spectacular, and occasionally you came up with something that made no sense whatsoever.

The x-wing hissed and popped as it settled fully into place, and Artoo automatically started the normal shut down routine.

//We will go see Jade now?//

“Yes,” Luke agreed. “She has something to show me.”

The Rogues were already dispersing when Luke dropped his helmet and gloves into his seat and slid down the ladder to the hangar floor. Antilles, parked beside him, was unfastening his flight suit as he waited for Gate to be lifted down by the ground crew.

Glancing around to ensure the rest of the Rogues – eagerly departing for chow and a run through the
sonics – wouldn’t hear, Luke stepped closer to his CO and mimicked his movements, peeling his flight suit halfway down and trying the arms snugly around his waist.

“Hey, Wedge. You got a minute?”

“Sure, Boss. What's up?”

“Still want to be the first to know about my secret project?”

“Yes.”

“Let's take a walk.”

Wedge happily fell into step as they headed for one of the other docking bays. The ramp was up, but Luke used his code to get them into the Falcon.

“You can't put that one there, you'll get a feedback loop,” Han was saying as they approached the main hold, his voice somewhat muffled.

“If you put it over there, it won't make code.”

Luke felt Wedge's flare of surprise at both the unfamiliar female voice and the sight that greeted them when they turned into the hold. A pair of booted feet were hooked into the floor grating, the well-oiled leather stretching up slender calves to knees bent at a ninety degree angle, suspending the rest of the body upside down into the hold.

Luke tapped the toes of one of the booted feet with his own. “Having fun down there?”

“No,” Mara announced, curling upright into view. “Alliance Safety Code is absurd. There's absolutely no allowances for the kind of cross-wiring Solo's got rigged right now.”

She sounded annoyed, but felt… comfortable. Luke examined the sensation curiously. Something had changed while she was away.

Wedge surreptitiously watched his commanding officer's eyes skim over the unknown woman. It was an interesting look, he decided. Somewhere between the calculated assessment he used when evaluating pilots freshly returned to duty from a medical leave and the tender way Han watched Leia when she wasn't looking, like he saw something the rest of them couldn't quite grasp. He caught the hitch in Mara's otherwise smooth roll upright and wondered if she had been injured recently; that would account for at least some of Luke's odd regard. The rest...

“Hey, Kid.” Han popped out of the hold, pulling himself up just behind Mara as she rose and brushed at her clothes. “Wedge.”

She went shopping, Luke realized. The faded brown leather pants and boots topped by a long sleeved forest green tunic fit her well, and would have let her blend in seamlessly on scores of worlds. Her long hair was twisted back in a soft knot at the base of her neck, and it gleamed in a way it decidedly had not when she left. His fingers itched to touch it, test its softness for himself.

“Solo,” Antilles greeted. “I'd heard you were remodeling, but I hadn't realized it was this serious.” His gaze went to Mara. “Or that you had procured outside help.”

“Wedge, this is Mara Jade,” Luke introduced. “Mara, this is -.”

“I am Mara Jade,” she supplied. “CO of Rogue Squadron, and the Alliance's answer to Soontir Fel.”
She stuck out a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too, ma'am,” he answered, shaking her hand firmly. “Though I don't know about being the answer to Fel.”

Her intended reply was lost when Artoo rolled in, squealing happily and stopping directly at Mara's feet. //Did I miss it?//

“Miss what?”

//You had something to show Master Luke. Highly distracting.//

“Was it?” Mara shot a glance at Luke, who shook his head.

“It was not highly distracting,” he tried to protest. “Just a little. Maybe.”

Artoo blatted his opinion of that prevarication.

“I didn't show him yet, but you may as well come along and see it too. Come on.”

“Be right back,” Luke said to Wedge before following Mara and Artoo down the corridor and into the cabin.

“You had a good trip?” He asked.

“Yes.” She turned to face him and peeled back her left sleeve, twisting so he and Artoo could see the holster strapped to her arm. A snap of her wrist revealed a compact, extremely lethal looking hold-out blaster of unique design. “This is what I promised to show you.”

There was that glitter of genuine pleasure again, making Luke's breath catch.

“The best hold-out blaster ever made. I designed it myself.” She hesitated. “A reward, from the Emperor. When I was sixteen.”

Luke didn't dare ask what she'd had to do to earn such a token of approval. Instead he reached out, his fingers hovering just above it, itching to explore it's mechanics. “May I?”

“I'll do you one better.” Mara turned around and pulled open a carryall on the foot of her bunk that Luke didn't remember having seen before. Facing him again, she held out a holstered blaster.

“What's this?”

“It's for you. The closest non-custom thing I could find to mine.” Her face took on a serious expression.

“Light sabers have their limits. There's no substitute for a good blaster on your wrist.”

Luke was too surprised and delighted to remember to mention that he didn't have a light saber at the moment. “You got me a present?”

Mara looked at him blankly; he was glowing in the Force – lit up like a festival tree. She knew she'd chosen a nice piece, but it shouldn't be that exciting.

“It's a weapon, Skywalker. For protection.”

Luke tried to parse the emotions swirling through their bond. There was a lingering sparkle of
satisfaction from Mara. Confusion over his reaction, and very real concern (that she appeared to be unconsciously shunting to the edges of her awareness) for his well-being. Following the thread of confusion, he found two images. The blaster, grounded in associations like practical, valuable and respect. Directly opposite, the idea of 'gift/present', splashed with distasteful affiliations to frivolous, favor-currying, and obligation.

A luma panel went off in his brain and Luke grinned, his fingers caressing the blaster he held as he filed his new insight away for later. “Thank you, CorMeum.”

Mara physically started, and Luke frowned slightly. “Did I say it wrong? I looked it up- I'm sure it's the right form of address between us. But I got Threepio to pronounce it for me, and he can go a little funny sometimes on dialects.”

“I – no, you said it right. I just didn't expect you to use it.” She eyed him, warily. “You know what it translates to, right?”


Mara shook her head. “It's your right as my CorUnum. I just wasn't expecting it, is all.”

Wanting to put things back at ease between them, Luke hefted the blaster. “I wasn't expecting this, either.”

She shrugged. “Enlightened self-interest, Skywalker.”

He harrumphed dubiously but didn't argue, instead sticking out his arm. “Show me how to put in on.”

The return to a subject she was fully comfortable with worked as Luke had hoped. Mara's sense in the Force promptly leveled back out and, despite his inability to hide his delight, she didn't show the slightest discomfort when her nimble fingers brushed against his skin as she adjusted the holster's straps and positioning, and demonstrated how to both put on and remove the holster. Then she gave him a two minute lesson in how to snap his wrist properly to release the weapon into his waiting hand. When she was satisfied that he'd be able to manage himself, she tugged his sleeve back over it.

“There. Now you'd better get back out there before your CO starts making crude assumptions.”

“Mara,” Luke stopped her when she made to start for the door. “Did you get the message I left? We're due before the Council tomorrow morning.”

“I saw it,” she confirmed. “Sounded like Winter prepped you pretty well.”

“You didn't get any prep,” he pointed out. “Are you going to be all right?”

“I was raised to work the Court. I doubt the Alliance's High Council will prove much of a challenge, as long as you don't tell them who I was.”

“That's for you to tell – or not. You know that.”

She nodded, then gestured toward the main hold. “I see you wanted to give yourself a jump start on the introductions.”

“Wedge is a friend,” he explained. “I wanted you to have someone else around you were comfortable with, though it looks like you and Han and Chewie are getting along well. Did you do a little bonding while you were out? And something with your hair?”
Mara ignored the first question in favor of the much safer second. “KeraTex. It's the only conditioner
that fixes Force-lightening fried hair.”

“I didn't realize he'd done it enough that you'd have had to learn things like that,” Luke said quietly.

“I tried to be perfect, so he wouldn't have to,” she assured him, as if she considered such assaults not
only somehow justified, but also completely her fault. “But his standards were… exacting.”

This time she did slip past him and opened the door. Artoo and Luke followed her back down the
corridor. “You'll be here to pick me up in the morning, I assume?”

“0745,” he confirmed. “More than enough time to get to the meeting room.” And hopefully practice
my redirection skills, he sent mentally.

Mara struggled to hide her ambivalence over his innocent enthusiasm. It was ridiculously endearing,
and part of her wanted to simply enjoy quietly basking in the warmth of his happiness that he let flow
so freely between them.

But deep within her his joy created a stab of sharp disquiet. She had not enjoyed practicing
redirection when she'd first learned. She'd been a child, dropped into situations where the
consequences of a misstep had been steep and cruel. She'd been raised to believe such methods were
natural and necessary; now dark whispers coiled inside her, murmuring of deceit and subjugation at
levels and extremes she hadn't seen and wasn't ready to confront.

Mara slammed a wall across that corner of her thoughts, forcing them into silence. “Go eat
something, Skywalker. Tomorrow's going to be a long day. Antilles.” With a polite nod of farewell
at Wedge, she excused herself, slipping into the open section of floor. She would bury herself in the
interrupted rewiring project, use the focus to keep the darkness inside her at bay… at least for
tonight.

The pilots lingered another minute, chatting with Han and making their farewells before they
disembarked, heading for the mess hall.

They'd completely cleared the docking bay before Wedge spoke up. “She is your secret project?”

“Yup.”

“You gonna fill me in? Because I don't even know which question to start with.”


“What?!” The Corellian protested.

“You heard Han – Mara and I have to meet with the Council first thing to confirm her status on base.
They'll have a fit if I run my mouth to anybody else before then.”

“You are a cruel man, Commander,” Antilles groused.

“At least I gave you a sneak peek,” Luke pointed out.

Wedge considered that, then grinned evilly. “That is something to hold over Janson and Klivian all
night,” he agreed.

The rounded the corner towards the mess, and Wedge lowered his voice. “She's… important, isn't
she?”
“Very.” Luke’s voice was quiet, too.

Wedge nodded. “Thanks for making me first on the list, then.”

Leia waited until 1900 hours, when she was sure Luke would be in the Commander's Call meeting and Han would be at the weekly all-sections sabacc game, then she excused herself from her other commitments and discretely made her way to the Falcon.

The ship was closed up, but she'd had the codes since Bespin and let herself in easily. The hatch closed after her, and she reached out in the Force. She and Luke didn't have much in the way of spare time, but they had spent as much of it as they could together. Before Mara's arrival, he'd been using some of it to haphazardly teach her what he could about the Force where they could sneak it in.

He'd been blessedly accepting of her opinion that being a Jedi wasn't for her (especially after they found out the truth of their parentage), though she thought that might have had more to do with his general disillusionment with the Jedi than with any particular enthusiasm for her decision to continue focusing on politics. Regardless, after some initial puzzlement and uncertainty, he'd done his best to accommodate her request to focus on Force techniques she could employ in her daily role of a leader and Counselor rather than saber sparring, rock-stacking, and other more esoteric aspects of what Kenobi and Yoda had taught him.

One of the most useful things he'd managed to pass along thus far had been the ability to 'look' ahead of herself, in the Force, and identify when there were people present. She was still honing her ability to sort specific individual beings from a crowd; her closest inner circle she could manage with little trouble. Beyond that, it remained hit and miss. In this case, thankfully, it didn't matter. She merely had to locate the only life signature around.

She hoped that Mara wasn't in a healing trance, whatever that was. Luke and Han had both mentioned it, but her brother hadn't yet had any clear idea of how it worked or the scope of its application. Han had told her that it seemed like the equivalent of a power nap; sort of like sleeping, but went a lot further toward clearing up extensive injuries Mara had only just finished mending. She wanted to talk to Jade, but wasn't keen on the risk of accidentally causing her harm by interrupting a process she didn't understand.

Thankfully, the Force sparked and she found the ship's other lone occupant moving in her direction. Leia slipped into the common room, not wanting to appear to be sneaking around even though it was obvious she wouldn't have been able to get the drop on the better-trained former Hand even if she'd wanted to. Leia regretted that her schedule conflicts and Han's supply runs had prevented her from visiting before now, when there would still have been time to get intervention from Luke if this conversation went poorly. She wasn't unaware of the fact that she could intimidate people simply by virtue of her power and position, even when that wasn't the intent. (Which, in all fairness, it usually was.)

“Princess.” Jade appeared in the doorway with a silence that was impressive for someone wearing boots. She held herself carefully, but calmly.

“Mara,” Leia greeted, trying to intentionally put warmth into her Force presence as well as her voice. “I hope I'm not disturbing you.”

“You wouldn't have come now if it wasn't me you wanted to talk to.”
Leia smiled slightly. *Straight to the point. I can work with that.* “I was hoping we could speak. Do you have a moment?” Leia gestured toward the dejarik table.

“Would the cockpit be all right?”

Leia covered her surprise and quickly agreed. She purposely followed Mara in, her tactical political mind curious to see which seat the other picked.

Mara was well aware that both her request and her choices now could be interpreted as socially significant signals. But she’d been raised in the Imperial Court, cultivated to play this game as expertly as Leia had been. She settled into Chewie’s co-pilot seat and drew her legs up into a cross-legged position. Not a formal negotiating pose, but respectful, attentive, and reminiscent of the way the Jedi Council would have sat.

It was a calculated play. As Skywalker’s sister (and by all accounts fiercely protective of him), it was as much to Leia’s benefit to get along with Mara as it was in Mara’s to play nice with her. Taking the co-pilot’s seat suggested that she didn’t intend to challenge Leia’s authority. Her chosen negotiating pose, however, hinted that she wasn’t intimidated or ignorant of her own power.

Leia recognized the calculated overture and allowed herself a smidge of satisfaction. It was definitely a good sign that there was potential to forge an understanding between them.

Easing into Han’s seat, Leia turned it on the diagonal, facing halfway between the view port and Mara.

“I hope I didn’t disturb your healing trance.”

“No. I’m only doing them overnight, now.” Mara glanced down at her arms, as if seeing through the long sleeves of her tunic. “It’s a good thing Vader didn’t bother to send any of my formal dresses with me. I started healing far too late to do anything about the scars.”

*Calculated vulnerability,* Leia thought. *And implied shared ground with my own Imperial scars. Whoever taught her was good.*

“Did they ever figure out why you can’t tolerate bacta? I didn’t hear.”

Mara chose to interpret ‘they’ as Han and Luke, preferring not to think about med droids while she was trying to find common ground with Skywalker’s sister. It was an indulgence she knew she shouldn’t allow herself; Leia had been an unwelcome “guest” of Vader and Tarkin. No doubt she harbored a certain shuddering distaste for needle-bearing droids herself under that calm demeanor. It might prove to be a shared bonding point if she made herself talk about it. But that was deeper than she wanted to go at the moment.

“It’s an autoimmune condition,” she told the Princess. “Standard training parameters in my youth were that I continued to work on the designated skill until I’d either mastered it or woke up in the bacta tank. Sometimes from the injuries caused by the practice itself, sometimes from the ‘motivation’ applied to keep me focused. Unfortunately, there was nothing on record to warn my instructors or the med droids that spending every night that way for a few years at that age can cause a violent autoimmune response to develop.” She shrugged. “I had my first bacta-induced seizure at seven. It took them four nights of intensive study to figure out what was happening, and they never did find a work-around.”

*No wonder Luke’s been so protective,* Leia thought instantly.

Force knew her own heart had twisted and wept over the grief in Han’s past. The loss of his family.
The depredations he'd suffered in his youth, struggling through the galaxy alone. The shame heaped on his name in prestigious circles when he was tossed from (or abandoned, as he preferred to frame it) the Imperial Academy, despite the immense effort he'd put into it and the numerous honors rightfully won.

If Luke truly felt about this girl as Leia did about Han - and she had no doubt that he did - and had heard that story, it was frankly a miracle that his earnest, self-sacrificing farm boy sensibilities hadn't compelled him to wrap her in a cocoon of blankets and warm Force energy and tuck her away somewhere safely out of the reach of the rest of the galaxy for, oh, say, the next half a century or so.

Aloud, she said only, "I can see how that would be distressing to someone who's spent as much time in bacta as my brother."

"He'll stop being concerned once I have the chance to explain healing trances," Mara promised. "It's absurd that his Masters didn't teach him."

"There's a great deal they should have told him that they did not," Leia agreed grimly. She eyed Mara. "Much of which you seem positioned to teach him, conveniently."

"I've no intention of yanking him around like they did, if that's what you're worried about," Mara said firmly, shifting in her seat and fixing serious eyes on the Princess. "We may be presenting the Oath aspect of our relationship to the Council tomorrow, but you've got the Force and you've seen the messages. You know the OR isn't even the half of it."

Leia watched the other woman, her experienced political mind and every ounce of her Force talent scrutinizing, looking for falsity, evasion, or deception. She found none.

"Just to be clear, you have no intention of hurting, misleading, or otherwise using my brother?"

"No."

Part of Leia's spirit breathed a heavy sigh of relief; the single word rang clearly in Force as truth. Another piece of the Princess's heart remained tightly knotted around the place within her that housed her link to her twin, not yet satisfied. "You're certain you can kill the Emperor together?"

"Absolutely." Mara paused and pinned Leia with an unyielding stare. "May I be blunt, your Highness?"

"Just Leia, please. And by all means."

"Are we going to be able to work together? Because I'm bunking on your consort's ship, bonded to your brother and sworn to a mission that directly impacts your Alliance. I'm not looking to step on your toes, but I'm not going to shy away from whatever needs to be done, either. I don't want Skywalker caught in the middle later, when our lives depend on his focus. If there's a chance this is going to get ugly, we need to settle it now."

Sanguine now, Leia leaned forward and let her hand rest just a moment on Mara's. "You keep that attitude, and we're going to get along just fine," she promised. Relinquishing a fraction of her royal demeanor, she sat back, letting herself sink into the familiar comfort of Han's chair. "Believe it or not, I'd like us to be friends."

"I'm not very good at 'friends'. They were… not encouraged, shall we say, in my former life."

Leia stared absently out the view port. "We should make a good pair, then," she mused, softly. "Aside from Winter, this war has cost me nearly everyone. I've got colleagues, of course. And Luke"
and Han and Chewie. But friends..."

Mara turned to stare out the view port as well, examining Organa from the corner of her eye. “You think we should practice, together, Leia? For Farmboy's sake?”

“I'll be a challenge.”

“I've never turned down a challenge.”

“Me either.”

- -

For all that Luke had worried about it, the next morning's Council meeting proved to be vastly anticlimactic. Much as they didn't necessarily appreciate the situation, the Counselors had clearly reviewed the sum total of the Oath Rigora documentation and reached the inevitable conclusion that unless they could prove Mara was a direct threat to the health and safety of the base, they either had to let her stay or risk alienating half the galaxy by snubbing a near-universally recognized legal construct.

They decided to let her stay.

It probably didn't hurt that Mara had subtly but decidedly planted the suggestion in her initial documentation that, as a Jedi, Luke had complete control over her – she was helpless to do anything that might harm his friends or his cause unless he let her. (Which, of course, he wouldn't.) She further propagated that opinion with tiny, well-chosen gestures of submissiveness artfully sprinkled throughout their interview with Command.

When questioned as to what she'd been prior to being 'executed', she'd said only that she was a slave in the Imperial Palace – which was not untrue, from a certain point of view.

When asked what she'd done to earn execution by Force lightening, Mara had said only, “I was caught aiding enemies of the Emperor. For their sakes, I don't believe it's safe to say more at this time.”

The Council hadn't been particularly satisfied with that but, again, had found themselves without recourse. They could try to insist on more information, but if the disclosure somehow hindered another group's revolutionary endeavors (or, Force forbid, led to them getting caught), the damage to the Alliance's reputation would be irreparable. It wasn't worth the risk.

So, in much less time than Luke had expected, Mara had been cleared to stay and granted permission to move freely about the base as needed to comply with her Oath Rigora duties to Skywalker.

Still, he reflected, as he saluted the Counselors and turned to head toward the door (Mara at his heels), the meeting had not been without its surprises or frustrations. If the feelings he picked up in the Force were accurate, Mara and Leia appeared to have reached some sort of agreement between themselves – though when or how they might have done so eluded him.

General Dodonna, though outwardly acquiescing to the will of the Council, retained a deep-rooted suspicion of Mara that set Luke on edge. The man all but projected – as much as a non-Force-user could – an eagerness to get Mara in a closed, surveillance-free room and empty her head... one way or another. It had taken all Luke's self-control not to physically interpose himself between Dodonna and Mara for most of the interview.

The door whisked shut behind them and Luke turned his steps automatically toward the officer's
lounge, too agitated by Dodonna's attitude toward Mara to practice the redirection he'd so enjoyed working on during their walk over from the Falcon barely an hour before.

*Stop worrying about Dodonna,* Mara ordered in his head.

*Didn't you feel him?* He demanded. *I don't want him anywhere near you.*

*Of course I felt him,* she shot back. *But I can handle it.*

*Handle it?!* Handle what? *Being shoved in an interrogation room so he can try to pick your head clean?*

*The worst he can think up would be nothing compared to the lightest day just standing beside the Emperor. I'm not fragile any more, Skywalker – I mean it, this isn't something for you to worry about.*

There was no part of that that Luke could argue with, and no part he didn't resent. *Promise you'll stay away from him anyway.*

She snorted. *I'm not the one with such a death wish they got assigned a minder.*

Luke sulked, entirely aware that she hadn't actually agreed to his demand.

*This isn't the way back to the Falcon. Where are we going?*

“Here,” he answered aloud, tapping an access code into a small panel beside one of the many uniform doors that lined the side corridor they'd turned into. There was a beep, and they were in, the door sliding shut again behind them.

“Officer's lounge,” he answered her unvoiced question as he crossed toward two worn but serviceable club chairs in one of the back corners and dropped his data pad on the low round table between them. “It's always empty this time of day. They cleared my schedule for the morning on account of the Council meeting, and I thought maybe we could use the rest of the time to have that conversation on training we're painfully overdue for.”

“Good call,” Mara agreed, finishing her habitual visual and Force sweeps of the room. It was a fairly cozy space. Small and windowless, it looked as if it's contents had been salvaged from an eclectic assortment of ships, other bases, and a few of the galaxy's seedier cantinas and hostels. *Maybe even a brothel or two,* she thought, eying a particularly bizarre light fixture near the long, narrow shelf that served as a make-shift bar.

There was a faintly stale quality to the air, minor dusty undertones to its scent, as if the base's air filtration system couldn't quite keep up with the myriad forms of dirt, liquor, sweat and tears that Rebellion officers carried in with them every night. But it was empty and devoid of surveillance or monitoring equipment. The single access point – the door through which they'd entered – was easily observed, and she decided it would do.

Luke was at the bar, pouring them the only non-alcoholic thing he could find – some kind of purple juice with a pleasant, fruity smell that fizzed zealously when he portioned it into squat, square glasses. “You want me to go first?” he asked, carrying the drinks to the chairs he'd selected and dropping into the one on the right.

Mara picked her way around the discordant clumps of furniture, arranged seemingly at random, and tucked one foot beneath her as she settled into the second chair. Tugging her own data pad from a pocket, she keyed it open and then fixed Luke with an attentive stare.
“Ready when you are.”

The Flow of the Force was endless, weaving into and through all things. Since his death, Obi-wan Kenobi had marveled at how easy it could be to find a single other being in that unfathomably vast expanse… if they were willing to be found.

Fortunately for him, Nejaa Halcyon had never hidden from anyone in his life and hadn't seen the point in starting after his death.

“Master Kenobi,” Halcyon greeted politely when Ben drifted into the correct alcove of Force energy and was able to make visual contact. He motioned to the elegant older woman beside him. “I don’t believe you’ve ever met my Aunt Tarazet.”

Ben gave a low, respectful bow. “Master Halcyon, it’s an honor. Your reputation precedes you.”

“Tarazet is fine,” the white-haired woman waved away his formality with one hand. In her other arm, she cradled a dark haired infant who studied Ben with fascinated eyes.

“And who is this?” Ben asked, smiling kindly at the baby.

“Vallin,” Nejaa said fondly. “My aunt is enjoying him while she can – he's going to be born in not too long, if things proceed apace.” He ran a fingertip across the baby's toes, earning a gurgling coo and happy wiggling. “Have to spoil him before it's Booster's turn, you know. Not that he'll remember, of course.”

“Corran's son, then?”

Tarazet nodded. “Yes. But wonderful as little Vallin is, he isn't the reason you've found your way all the way out here, Master Kenobi. What can we do for you?”

“Ben, please.” Obi-wan folded his hands in the sleeves of his robe, a lifetime of habit remaining with him even now. “I expect you know why I've come.”

“Mara,” Nejaa said simply.

Obi-wan sighed. “My apprentice had the misfortune to inherit his father's recklessness and his mother's heart. As you're no doubt aware, he's bonded himself to Mara Jade, in ways they have only begun to understand, to keep her alive. What's more, they've taken a blood oath to kill the Emperor.”

“It's too late to dissuade them,” Tarazet observed, wiggling her fingers at Vallin, who grasped at them, cooing in happy obliviousness to the seriousness of the conversation happening around him. “So if you're looking to get involved, you must be hoping to help.”

Kenobi nodded. “Much as it pains me to see them take this course, I cannot deny that they have a better chance of stopping the Emperor and bringing balance to the Force than anyone since Anakin was boy. But they cannot do it alone. They will need help.”

Nejaa raised an eyebrow. “Surely he's more likely to listen to you – someone he knew in life – than us.”

“Luke believes that Yoda and I sacrificed Mara on his behalf; he'll have naught to do with either of us on her account. It is my hope that if we go together, they both might be persuaded to listen.”
“As it happens,” Nejaa informed him, “I've already sent Corran and Mirax.”

“With respect, Master Halcyon, Mirax has no connection to the Force. Corran is a fine Jedi, but unequipped to assist Luke and Mara in mastering the complexities of her gift.”

“For Force sake, Kenobi,” Halcyon rolled his eyes. “I'm not going to be the only one here going by his title – I think we're a bit beyond that, don't you?”

“Informality would be convenient if we're to undertake this effort together,” Ben noted politely.

“And how exactly are you proposing that we go about these visits to the corporeal world?” Nejaa demanded. “We both know you can't stay long anywhere outside Yoda's sanctuary, myself even less.”

“If we can convince them to return to Dagobah,” Ben began.

“You're not dragging my great-grand-niece off to that Force-forsaken swamp!” Tarazet sniffed, indignantly. “Anyway, it's completely unnecessary. Mara can connect you to Corran, who can project you as you wish to appear. You may lose a bit of resolution from the relay effect, but it's quite effective in the lack of other options.”

Both men stared at her. “What?”

“I've never heard of such of such a thing,” Ben said, finally.

“Aunt Tarazet, that's brilliant!” Nejaa leaned forward to kiss her cheek emphatically. “I knew you were my favorite aunt for a reason.”

“I was your only aunt in life, Neji,” she pursed her lips, trying to suppress a loving smile. “It hasn't been so long that I've forgotten, you know.” She gave Ben a sweetly innocent look. “As for you, Master Kenobi, surely you didn't think the Halcyon women would tell the Order all their secrets, did you?”

Ben adopted a wry, long-suffering expression. “Corellians never do, Madam. Shall we?”

- -

Twenty minutes in, the conversation Luke had very much looked forward to had proven to be far less cathartic than he'd anticipated.

“Let me get this straight,” Mara said, her glass and data pad both on the table between them, all but forgotten. “Your illustrious Jedi Masters intentionally groomed you to be thrown at the second most powerful Sith in the known galaxy – who they conveniently neglected to tell you was your father – and they spent ninety-five percent of their time rambling at you about philosophy and attachments?”

“I guess.”

She looked away, her jaw working as if she were chewing nails. Thrown to the vornskyr, just like me. Arrogant Jedi bastards.

Luke was fairly sure he wasn't supposed to have heard either of those thoughts, but Mara was too pissed at the moment to shield clearly from him.

“Mara,” he asked, surprised. “Are you... worried about me?”

“No!” She snapped, jolting to her feet. She started an agitated pacing in the cramped space and
glared at him. “We're supposed to be confronting the most powerful Sith in the galaxy, and your Masters taught you jack shavit! Taking you into combat right now would practically be murder! If Vader hadn't figured out who you were and wanted you alive…” she blew out a harsh breath.

_I'd have ended up tortured, like Leia, or just dead._ That wasn't something he wanted to think about, either.

“You can teach me,” he reminded her, earnestly. “I'm a quick learner – you said so yourself when you were showing me redirection.”

“Tricks are one thing, Skywalker. Proper training…” She trailed off, radiating distress. “I don't know how. I wasn't taught that way – not in any way you want any part of.” She stood, turning her back to him, spine ramrod straight, a dull ache seeping off her.

“Well,” he said carefully, “I told you all about mine, such as it was, so we're about to the point where you tell me about your training anyway.”

She turned the idea over in her head, felt him brush encouragingly against her in the Force.

“I didn't get Force training separately from other things,” Mara confessed, finally. “I wasn't intended to be an apprentice or an Inquisitor, or anything really powerful. It was just worked into the rest of my training – combat, stealth, survival, intelligence. Always with the goal of helping me have an edge. It wasn't something to rely on, just a boost – a backup. A tool, like any other.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “I got an unofficial secondary education just by surviving Vader and the Emperor. I don't have a unified theory for you, Farmboy – just a lot of ugly little tricks for staying alive.”

“I think we've agreed that philosophy and theory didn't help me very much when I was hanging off the underside of Cloud City.”

Mara snorted, and some of the tension eased from her shoulders. “All right,” she said after a moment, thinking hard. “We can still do this.”

The Emperor's Hand had been a free-form position, demanding and varied. Despite her intensive training on multiple subjects, she'd been required to learn as she went, as well – adapting, inventing, reshaping herself and her environment as needed to fulfill her assigned goals. She had excelled at it. There was no reason she couldn't do the same here.

“Did you have any kind of plan?” Luke asked, tentatively. “I know you haven't been awake for long, but you know the Emperor better than I ever will…”

_I'm going to take the pretty, orderly little system he built to control the galaxy and burn it down._ Her words to Han and Chewie echoed in her head. Apparently she was still not shielding properly, because Luke blinked.

“Okay. That's one approach.”

“We need to undermine his control,” Mara explained, figuring that since he'd already seen she may as well go for it. “Get the system that supports him spread thin, and the flow of the Force filled with distractions before we move on him.” She cocked her head. “We can train in the process, around other things. I'll write a plan.”

“Full of ugly little tricks?” Luke asked hopefully, his blue eyes bright and disarming as they fixed on her.
"Force it wasn't fair for someone so incredibly powerful to look that adorable when he was excited.

"Liked the redirection, did you?"

"You know I did. Mara..." Luke hesitated, all seriousness now. "Do you know how to make a light saber? Because I'm going to need another one before we move on the Emperor."

"You don't have one?" She asked incredulously.


"I did. I just assumed you'd made another. You've gone this long without one?"

Luke looked embarrassed. "It's not like I can just go out and buy a new one."

"They didn't teach you? Your Masters?" She answered herself. "Obviously not." Without thinking, Mara reached under her shirt and produced her own saber.

"You've had that on you all morning?" Luke asked in surprise.

"It was made for concealability," she informed him, twisting the casing apart. In seconds, she'd disassembled the weapon, laying four stones out on the table between them. "Pick two."

Luke shied back. "I can't take yours."

"I have twice as many in it as it needs," she told him, uncompromisingly. "Redundant backups. They won't be as good as going on a crystal quest to Ilum or somewhere yourself, but it'll get you started. I'll make you a list of other parts."

Luke looked at the glowing crystals on the table before him, and licked his lips nervously. You will know when you are calm, at peace. Closing his eyes, Luke reached a hand out, let it hover over the stones, seeking the Force. In his mind's eye, two intensified their light, singing to him. Without conscious thought, he felt them press against his palm.

He opened his eyes, jubilant. "They chose me."

Mara's hands were already recomposing her saber with the other two stones. "Good. It will only take couple days to make a new one once you've got all the parts. I can show you how. It won't be as good as a proper Master would do, but I guarantee it'll be better than learning from Vader like I did."

Luke felt a spike of jealousy, then chagrin when Mara's eyes darted up to his, dark and unhappy.

"He's my father," he said quietly, rolling the crystals between his fingers. "My light saber had been his. He should have been the one to teach me. Instead, I never learned and he was teaching you."

"Be thankful for that." Her voice was low and grim. "Whatever happy bonding experience you imagined, it wasn't like that. Wouldn't have been, even for you." She glanced at the stones he still played with. "He isn't going to be happy about this new saber you're making, either."

"Why not? Because I lost the other one – don't deserve a new one?"

Mara shook her head. "It's about the stones."

Luke felt her shield the dark memories, seeking to spare him. "Don't." He corrected. "Please. I want to see."
She looked away, but pulled back the shield.

She was young, still at the awkward, gangly stage where childhood begrudgingly gave way to adolescence in a disjointed, uncoordinated tangle of growing limbs and budding curves. She walked in silence beside her Master, swallowed by the darkness that billowed around him and rolled outward from his steps like smoke rolling low to the ground in a confined room. They were in his personal chambers, a place she trembled to go, but she held herself tall and brave, aware of the mistake it would be to show so much as a hint of reluctance.

She did not let herself look at the sprawling expanse of his bed, piled high with the lushest of comforts. She did not want to think of Ysanne Isard lounging there, her cold, smirking face above a body flushed with the sensual acts the courtesans gossiped about. Did not want to imagine her Master sleeping, to even accidentally suggest by careless thought that he might -for so much as a second- not be in absolute control of his Empire.

A bony hand lifted from within her Master's cloak, and an enormous section of wall slid aside. Had she been any less thoroughly trained, Mara might have caught her breath in a gasp. The concealed door gave way to a long, wide room lined with transparisteel cases. Relics and personal effects of every kind and age were arranged with museum-quality precision in the cases, on the walls, and on a stands in a rambling maze.

“Are you ready to be tested, my Hand?”

“Yes, Master.” Mara's entire body clenched in trepidation, but her voice was steady.

“Very well. Proceed.”

“Thank you, Master.” With fierce determination, Mara stepped into the room. The next three hours were an odd blur, studded with sharp bites of rejection and fear. Relics she didn't recognize called to her, shrieking in the Force. Some pleaded with her, others reviled her, until every isle felt like the roar of a crowded pod-racing stadium had been shoved into an echoing canyon – it was deafening, and her heart pounded under the assault.

She made herself move at a steady pace past everything that was not a light saber. There were dozens of sabers on display, all dismembered, their stones lying on flat velvet cushions before the disemboweled casing from which they'd come. Each time she found a Jedi's saber, she stopped, held her hands over the stones, asking if they would accept her – just as she had been instructed.

By the twenty sixth, she was shaking, violently. Some of the stones snapped at her in the Force, nasty little bites that reddened her skin and stung. Others spat, until she felt as if her whole body was grimy and glutinous with the residue of their disgust. A few burned her, scorching her palms until she feared she might bleed on her Master's trophies and lose this precious chance to prove herself worthy. Maybe half a dozen tried to warn her off, thrusting graphic memories of their owner's demise into her mind before she could kick them back out. An awful handful were simply dead, sucking and soulless under her Force touch; these made her wish to curl into a ball and vomit, but each time she righted herself by force of will and continued.

Desperation clawed at her, and tears burned the back of her eyes. Would none of these weapons find her worthy? She'd worked so hard, suffered so much. Held back nothing, asked for nothing but more instruction, more training – regardless of the cost - that she might excel. What would she do – what would she be – if she remained unchosen when she reached the last one?

On the final aisle, deep in the recesses of the room, she found the ruined shells of twin saber hilts resting in an 'x' across each other. The folded velvet before them held four matching stones,
scratched and scarred from the complete destruction of their casings. Mara's knuckles cracked and blood began to well from the split skin on her left ring finger as she lifted leaden hands to hover over the stones.

Warmth. Mara flinched away, expecting another singe of fire, then stared, eyes huge, as all four stones began to glow, softly, their gentle warmth easing the pain of her palms. The ghostly image of a Togruta female flashed across the back of her eyes, half seen and half felt in the Force.

“Will you carry these stones with honor, little one? Give them a chance to live – to fight – again?”

“Yes,” Mara whispered, fervently, choking on the sobs that threatened to rip free. “I will, I swear. Please.”

“You are worthy, Mara Jade. Carry them well.” The image behind her eyelids vanished and Mara heaved for air, desperately, clutching her treasure to her chest.

She'd thought the gleam in the Emperor's eyes when she showed him the stones had been pride in her success. It wasn't until much, much later that she'd realized he had known what was to come when she obeyed his instructions to take them to Lord Vader, whom he had tasked with overseeing the construction of her saber. Even now, she tasted bitterness on her tongue at the memory of Vader's wrath, understanding that Palpatine could have spared her – or even just warned her – before she stepped proudly into his quarters and held them out, exhausted but beaming with joy.

“Lord Vader, I have my crystals. I am ready to begin.”

The moment had stretched in silence, dread blossoming in her heart as the towering Sith stood utterly still, riveted on the glowing stones.

“Where did you get those?” he growled, silent thunder rolling off him in the Force until everything not fixed in place around them rattled violently.

“They chose me,” Mara stammered, her mind racing as she looked for her error, for the answer to how she should - could - fix this. The next words seemed to come out of her mouth of their own volition – surely she had not meant to say them. “They found me worthy.”

She didn’t register moving, only the hard smack of her head against the wall as she hit and the crushing pain in her chest where his gloved hand pressed against her sternum, pinning her entire weight in place. Her feet were well off the floor and immobilized by the weight of the Dark Lord's metal and leather suit pressed along her length, the polished black of his helmet a breath away from her bleeding nose.

“You are not worthy to lick Ahsoka's boots. I should kill you just for touching them, little Hand.”

Mara couldn't breathe; spots danced across her eyes and her head swam. He could snap her in half; it felt like he might already be halfway there.

“Give them a chance to live – to fight- again.”

“I will, I swear.”

The Togruta – Ahsoka? – had made her promise, and she'd given her word. She had to remain worthy.

Drawing a ragged gasp, Mara blinked and locked her blurred gaze on the ebony eye plates before her. “She chose me,” she rasped. “And our Master commands you. Teach me.”
She never saw the gloved fist that crashed across her temple.

Luke closed his eyes, sick to his stomach when the memory blacked out.

“He was sitting at the table -all the stones laid out in front of him – waiting when I woke up on his floor.” Mara's voice was professional and detached, but every muscle in her body was tight and she remained facing away from him, arms wrapped around herself. “I dragged myself to the chair and stayed there three days putting the saber together. I never did find out what the Emperor said or did to make him comply, but he didn't touch me again until the task was over. He went directly to the Executor and left for somewhere Mid-Rim. I didn't see him for six months, and when he came back it was like it never happened.” She freed one hand to make a vague gesture. “We can try to get you different ones. I might know someone who can get us a line on some. So you don't have to carry these. Don't have to deal with his fury over it, if you see him again when we go to finish this.”

“No,” Luke's voice was low and firm, and there was a hard edge to his Force sense. “I want these.”

Mara didn't understand, but didn't ask. Skywalker's relationship with Vader was his own; it wasn't her place to question it unless it interfered with their mission.

“The other parts won't be hard to find,” she told him. “The casing is the most important part. You want it to be comfortable in your hand. If it came from somewhere that has beauty or meaning for you, so much the better – it will speed up your bonding to it.”

“Where did yours come from?” Luke picked up the weapon from where she'd left it on the table and turned it over in his hands. “It's exquisite.”

“I stole it.” It occurred to her after she said it that Luke might not be as comfortable with that admission as Solo or even Organa would have been. She found no judgment from his side of the bond, though, only sincere interest, then a flutter of awareness that he'd asked something more personal than he'd realized.

“I didn't mean to pry. It's just… I haven't seen very many, honestly, and none like this.”

Mara took a deep breath and released it softly, bracing herself for the vulnerability. “I cut it from the barre in the private attic practice studio of the Imperial Center Performance Hall. I still feel the confidence and determination I had there every time I touch it.”

“You dance?”

Luke's awe was a vibrant thing, and Mara couldn't tell if it came from her unexpected willingness to confess such private things to him, or from the imagined images of her dancing that spilled across his mind.

“I did,” she admitted, quietly. “I loved it.”

“Will you teach me?”

She half turned, her brow furrowing in confusion. “To dance?”

He nodded, vigorously.

“Why?”

Because you love it. Luke buried that thought instantly. Said instead, “It will make me a better fighter. Coordination, timing – dancing and lots of what goes into fighting aren't that different,
Mara was positive that wasn't the primary motivation, but couldn't argue the point. “Maybe later,” she deferred. “First, you need a functioning light saber. And we need a full assessment of our Force skills. There isn't a lot of time, Luke. He's actively planning for you.”

Azure eyes met hers, determination matching her own burning in them. “You set the pace, I'll match it.”

Mara couldn't have sworn that she actually knew what peace felt like; it and all its iterations had been scarce or perhaps fully absent for the entirety of her life. But, she thought, as she returned to the chair beside Luke and reached for her abandoned data pad, there was a very real possibility that it might feel something like this. A combined satisfaction and clear sense of purpose, direction, and fitness for her task.

And, murmured a little voice she was long accustomed to ignoring, someone to share it with.

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“Ms. Jade.”

Mara turned her head to examine General Madine. She was impressed that he'd noticed her; though she wasn't hiding, exactly, the nook she'd tucked herself into was shadowed and people had been passing her at a steady rate for more than an hour without noticing.

“General.”

He stepped into alcove beside her, keeping a polite, formal distance between them. Mara felt a small twinge of reminiscence. Before he'd turned, Madine had embodied all of the best of the Imperial military. Even here, in the bustling heart of the Rebellion, he was impeccably groomed and mannered.

“Rogue Squadron is on assignment at the moment,” he observed, his eyes scanning the crowd along with hers. “Your CorUnum with them.”

“Yes.”

“I was wondering if I might offer you a formal tour of the base.”

Mara raised an eyebrow in surprise and glanced sideways at him.

“I always made a point of giving new officers a formal tour of my vessels when I was in the Navy,” he explained. “I'd be honored if you'd allow me to extend a similar offer to you, now.”

“I've not sworn myself to the Rebellion,” she reminded him, cautiously.

“No,” he agreed. “But I know what you have pledged yourself to, and I find it equally worthy of my respect and support.” He turned sapphire eyes on her and in them Mara saw rare kindness and understanding. “If you're interested, of course.”

“It would be my pleasure, General.”

Several hours later, Mara reluctantly admitted that she was thoroughly smitten. Crix Madine embodied everything that she had loved best about being an Imperial. He was precise and orderly where it mattered, and carried himself with the dignity and calm of a man who has has become so
accustomed to preventing the world from ending that he no longer considers it anything remarkable.
His knowledge of Imperial ships, procedures, and history was unimpeachable; his knowledge of all
things Alliance not far behind. He had a brilliant mind and a careful tongue – and a bottle of
Severeen's in his bottom desk drawer.

The first step into his office after her tour had been an experience, to be sure. Like everything else on
base, it was a hodge-podge of assorted bits and bobs collected, salvaged or washed up in Zastiga
from all corners of the universe – and showing the wear and tear of their journey in countless tiny
ways. He'd serenely relocated a stack of actual flimsy print-outs from the office's lone visitor chair to
offer her somewhere to sit, and then proceeded to hold the best conversation she'd ever had about the
relative merits of the latest Imperial hyperdrive technology in comparison to several older, but more
reliable models.

Mara found herself unaccountably relaxing amidst the mountains and towers of data pads, flimsy
sheets, actual books, and other detritus that filled the cramped office. Unaccountable until a memory
surfaced.

She'd been less than a decade old – so small still that her feet didn't reach the floor when she climbed
into the adult-sized chair in the tiny study room buried in the basement of the Imperial Library's. A
hunched, grey-haired old woman with a sweet but absent-minded air would collect the books Mara
had left requests for – all with titles far too ponderous and grim for her age – and leave them in one
of the subterranean stacks rooms. When the building had emptied for the night, Mara would sneak in
using secret passages and private codes to study. Without a legal identity, she couldn't use the library
during the day, after all. Even if she'd forged one, she'd have drawn too much attention checking out
books on forbidden or simply too advanced subjects. She'd watched the librarian from the shadows,
humming as she came and went, fastidious about the care of her books and oblivious to the details of
anything else. Madine's office held the same air of precise care colliding with complete disregard in
the most charming of ways.

A chime went off, reminding the General that he was due elsewhere. As they rose, he snagged a
piece of flimsy from the stack, tore off a corner and scribbled something on it.

“If you find yourself in need of a quiet place to work on your plans, please consider my office at
your disposal.”

She took the scrap and realized it contained the door code. “You're very trusting, General.”

Madine shook his head. “What I am, Ms. Jade, is a good judge of character.”

Mara stopped in front of the door, holding out a hand to block Madine's as he reached for the button
to open it. She searched him, visibly and in the Force, and took a stupid risk. “I was the Emperor's
Hand.”

“The rumors were true, then. You did exist.”

Mara nodded.

“Were you ever on my ships?”

“I never had the privilege.”

Madine reached for her hand, lifted the back of it to his lips. “Well, I'm pleased to have you on my
ground now, Ms. Jade.”

“Mara.”
His lips curved. “I look forward to working with you, Mara.”

“I don't understand,” Luke groused, running a frustrated hand through his hair. “I can see it.”

“Show it to me again, and I'll hit you,” Mara sniped, irritated. “Just because you can see it, doesn't mean I can access it.”

“But you're only drawing a fraction of the power you have the potential to,” he protested. “Did you look at what I showed you?”

Mara rolled her eyes. “No, Skywalker, I completely ignored the image you put directly into my head all four times!”

Luke jumped up and stalked to the opposite wall, pacing and gesticulating as he tried to work through the mystery of why Mara could feel – but not touch – the enormous nimbus of power that surrounded her in the Force. “Maybe he blocked you from it, somehow.”

“Maybe it's not something I'm meant to control,” she countered. “We've been training for three days, and it's already obvious that my danger sense is light years better than yours. It could just be my power is wired more like a sensor pack than a weapon.”

“I don't believe that for a minute,” Luke shot back. “My danger sense is already improving, just from watching how yours works. There's no reason you shouldn't be able to expand your reach, too – we just have to figure out how.”

“If there were blocks, they should have been knocked out when you replaced him in my head,” Mara pointed out. “Or at very least you should be able to see them, even if I couldn’t.”

“Okay,” Luke reasoned. “Maybe it's not that kind of block. Could he have done something else that cut you off from it? He's a Sith, he's got to -.” He stopped abruptly, his head snapping up. “What was that thought?”

Mara had gone white as porcelain. “The drugs. Oh, Force.”

“What drugs?”

Mara shook her head, pushing to her feet and moving to the opposite wall of the small room they'd managed to secure for training, putting as much distance as she could between them.

Luke measured her sense in the Force, gauging how far he could push and gambled that he had a little more room, still. “Mara, what drugs?”

“I don't know.”

“You know something.”

Mara closed her eyes, her expression grim. “He was looking for something, but I never found out what. I would get called to his presence, kneel as usual, and then he'd -.” She stopped. Gritted her teeth and started again. “He'd send some kind of pulse through our bond, and I'd black out. I'd wake up in the med bay, Force-bound, immobilized, with six Force-pike toting Red Guards weighing and measuring my every breath. The techs would take what they wanted, do what they wanted, and shoot me full of whatever the cocktail of the day was. Every round was different – sometimes it would only be a few, other times it would go on for days. When they decided they were done, I got
untied and crawled back to my room. They never talked to me, or acknowledged me when I talked at them. It's why I didn't respond to the pain killers you tried in the med bay. But I don't know what they did, or were trying to do, I swear.”

Luke was stricken. “Mara.”

“It doesn't matter,” she said fiercely. “I won't let it. You have no idea what I've done, with barely any Force power at all – I can hold up my end without touching any more power than I have right now.” She lifted her chin. “I won't fail you.”

He stared at her, speechless for a moment, before he managed to reorient himself. “I'm not worried about that, Jade.” Deliberately, he crossed the room to stand in front of her. “Whatever he did, I'll find a way to fix it, undo it.”

“It doesn't matter. I don't need it,” she told him stubbornly. “I'll manage.”

“You deserve it,” he countered, firmly.

“We don't have time to worry about it now,” she reminded him. “There are other priorities.”

Luke's comm chose that moment to go off, and he cursed under his breath.

“That'll be Wedge. You have to go. Don't do anything stupid, all right?”

“We're just meeting an old friend of his,” he reminded her. “In neutral space. It'll be the safest thing I've done in weeks.”

Mara didn't look convinced. “Take your blaster.”

“You've already got me trained, Jade. I haven't gone anywhere without it since you gave it to me.”

That pleased her. She tried not to show it, but Luke felt the tell-tale glimmer against the edge of his mind all the same.

“Do something for me while I'm gone, CorMeum.”

“What?”

“Dance.”

She wrinkled her brow in confusion. “For who?”

Luke reached out, tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. Felt her tense as his fingers brushed her temple and sighed softly. “Just for you.”

“Why?”

“Because it will make you happy.”

“What does that matter?”

Luke grabbed his things and headed for the door. Just before he stepped into the hall, he shot a grin over his shoulder. “Humor me.”
I swear to the Force Corran and Mirax feature prominently in the next chapter... I just realized that the stuff in this chapter had to get covered before we get to them or it wasn't going to make sense the way it was supposed to when they show up...
The faint beeps of the keypad were the only sound in the otherwise empty, silent hall when the General briskly tapped his entry code into the office door. The rare quiet and lack of distractions made him unwelcomely aware of the weariness torsioned between his shoulder blades, and seemed to magnify the skein of stress-induced knots twining down his spine from the nape of his neck to the small of his back. Command meetings were necessary, but some days they felt like little more than bleak rehashes of bad news on all fronts.

A spy ring on Coruscant on the cusp of procuring vitally important information was long overdue to check in. Fear that they – and possibly untold other cells – had been compromised was rampant, as were concerns that the critical intel they'd been after was irrevocably lost. Every minute the Alliance didn't act could potentially be paid for in blood; acting too soon on such paltry information as they had might be equally costly. The knowledge sat heavy on Madine's heart as the door whooshed open and he stepped inside.

Movement to his left caught his eye and, in spite of the burdens he carried, a smile blossomed. “Mara.”

“Crix.” The redhead looked up from where she was curled in his threadbare visitor's chair, legs drawn up to her chest, ankles crossed, her datapad resting on her knees. The fine line between her brows from where she'd been scowling at the screen disappeared when she lifted her gaze to him, and her finger remained hovering, poised in the act of poking critically at the device. “Have fun with the stuffed shirts?”

He shook his head. “Bad news, again.”

“I heard.”

Madine eased into his chair and folded his hands in his lap, discretely stretching his legs as he settled in. “I find myself tremendously grateful that our annual break period is approaching. The troops need
it this year more than ever, I think.”

She peered at him. “Solo mentioned that, too. Something about kidnapping Organa for a vacation.”

“They would both benefit from that,” the General opined. “We can, of course, find you quarters on Base while they're gone.” He gave her an amused look. “I don't imagine you'll enjoy being cooped up on a ship with the two of them while they indulge in 'concentrated relaxation'.”

Mara snorted. “You think thin walls are bad, try being able to feel it in the Force when no one's ever taught them how to shield.”

“I'll pass, thank you.” He motioned at her datapad. “Working on something interesting this evening?”

“Doing some math.” Jade gave him a stern look and waved the gadget at him. “Do you know how long it has been since you got off this base and did something… stimulating?”

“Too long,” he replied, blandly. “You have a suggestion, I presume?”

She handed the pad over, carefully concealing her tentative hope behind a composed, neutral expression as he skimmed it. Then eager sapphire eyes flicked up to meet hers, and she savored the rush of titillated delight he unconsciously projected.

“When do we leave?”

“I need another day to finish maneuvering Solo into line. Day after tomorrow all right?”

“Absolutely.”

- -

Luke's fingers traced a well-worn path around the handle of the hyperdrive lever, curling into a familiar hold just a few seconds before he – almost leisurely – pulled it back. A mild tug from his crash harness pressed him back into the seat as the x-wing rapidly decelerated into normal space. Incalculable hours spent flying the same fighter in the same position had so thoroughly conformed the supportive foam to the nuances of his body that he barely noticed the pressure. His attention remained transfixed directly ahead – no matter how many times he made the jump to and return from hyperspace, watching the stars stretch and then collapse back into pinpoints of light never got old.

A twitter from behind him confirmed that they had dropped out into the Ottega System, almost exactly where they'd planned. Half an hour ahead they'd glide into the night side of Ithor's fourth moon. Ithor itself was forbidden territory; covered with verdant forests, its surface was considered sacred. Ithorians lived on floating cities that never infringed on the pristine glory of the 'Mother Jungle' below. Trade and other activities related to intergalactic relations were conducted on the planet's multiple moons to prevent the trespassing of outsiders on holy ground.

Artoo chirped again, confirming that he'd received the all-clear from Gate. Wedge had come out about ten minutes ahead of them and was banking in day side. They'd land at separate spaceports and convene in the middle at the coordinates Wedge's contact had agreed to.

“Send the return signal,” Luke instructed. “Then do a full sensor sweep – we don't want any surprises.”

As they continued their uneventful approach toward the chosen spaceport, Luke mentally reviewed what Antilles had been able to tell him about this run. As of when they'd taken off, he still hadn't been able to say what his friend wanted, only that he was certain it was worth going.
“Myri and I grew up together, Luke. She's like a sister to me, and she isn't the type of person to screw around,” he’d said, firmly. “If she's going out of her way to find me, it's worth our while to go.”

Luke trusted Wedge and his judgment implicitly. He felt a twinge of guilt that there hadn't yet been time to answer his CO's questions about Mara as he'd promised. The last few days had been hectic and they'd barely had a moment to themselves – certainly nowhere near the amount of time they'd need for him to properly explain. Wedge understood, but he hadn't been able to pass up ribbing Luke about the delay, anyway.

Almost unconsciously, Luke feathered a touch over his Mara-place in instinctive response to thinking of her. She was intently focused on something, a sense of anticipation hovering around her. Luke smiled and sent up a quiet prayer to the Force that she was mapping out plans to teach him more of the wonderful, dirty little tricks Yoda would never have stooped to. Bolstered by his hopeful thoughts, Luke turned his concentration back to the task at hand.

“Start descent procedures, Artoo. We've got friends to meet.”

- -

“That'd work,” Han squinted at the symbols scratched onto the flimsey between them, illustrating the proposed solution to his latest remodel challenge. He stood chest-deep in one of the former smuggling compartments and scratched absently at an itch behind his ear as he considered the math. “Hell, it'd triple her core strength – but it ain't gonna happen. You know how much that amount of terenthium-desh alloy would cost?”

“A hundred Imperial credits worth of fuel and a scolding from Organa.”

Han glanced up to where Mara lay on her stomach on the decking at just about his eye level – directly into a sly smile and eyes that glinted with invitation. He felt his own face split into an answering, equally mischievous grin.

“You know where we can steal some.”

“And someone who will plate the Falcon's core frame and inner hull with it – all to code – for payment in more stolen alloy,” she confirmed, smugly. “But you want this, you have to help me drive a skewer under the Emperor's nails.”

“Free ship work and some fun? I aint gonna say no to that.” Han grabbed the nearest rag and started wiping off his hands. “Where are we goin’?”

“Bilbringi.”

- -

The Melancholy Maggot was exactly Mirax's preferred speed, Wedge decided. The name was easy to remember, but didn't stand out enough to draw unwanted attention from general passersby. The outside wasn’t much to look at but, once you got through the door, the interior's sleek lines, warm colors, strategic lighting, and understated décor gave it an unexpectedly upscale feel. Careful planning downplayed the presence of security measures, though a practiced eye could tell they hadn't been skimped on.

Nice to see she hasn't lost her touch since becoming an “old married woman,” he chuckled to himself.
Wedge gave his assumed name to the polished droid at the concierge stand and was promptly shown
toward a private booth in a back corner. A small square jamming unit was already set in the center of
the table, a green light indicating it was hard at work ensuring the conversation between the couple
present wouldn't be electronically overheard. An elaborately patterned privacy screen was pulled half
across the booth's raised alcove, hiding the pair from regular line of sight unless you were nearly on
top of them.

“A drink, Sir?” The escort droid inquired politely as Wedge slid into the booth opposite the others.

“We've already got some coming.” Horn spoke up.

The droid inclined it's mechanical head and rolled away.

“Myri.” Wedge leaned across the table, and Mirax met him halfway pulling him into a zealous bear
hug.

“Veggies! How's the day job?”

“Good as can be expected,” he answered with an easy shrug when she released him, sticking his
hand out to grip Corran's firmly. “Horn - good to see you.”

“Wedge. Thanks for meeting us.”

“Anything for Myri.” Wedge widened his eyes at Corran in mock terror. “I mean, have you seen
the Imp Star her dad swings on anyone who pisses her off?”

“The red paint makes it kind of hard to miss,” Horn remarked dryly. “Of course I could just be a little
paranoid – they have been using holos of me for target practice since we got married.”

“Sounds like Booster,” Wedge laughed.

The drinks arrived then, and Wedge breathed in the rich aroma of his whiskey before taking a slow,
appreciative sip. “You don't even need Booster and his threats with bribery like this,” he sighed,
happily. “Can't get anything better than Lum on Base. It gets old fast.”

“Speaking of Base, where's your backup?” Corran eyed the cantina beyond their privacy screen.
“Brass didn't change their minds and let you come alone, did they?”

“Course not,” Antilles shook his head. “He came in night side – should be here in a minute.” He
frowned and gestured at the neon-orange spritzer the serving droid had brought for Mirax. “You're
not drinking?”

“Taking a break from the booze.” She shot an impish glance at her husband. “In hopes of satisfying
an irresistible urge to watch my father get wrapped around a grand-baby's little finger.”

Wedge's eyebrows shot up. “Seriously?” He darted a glance between them, then was over the table,
reaching around drinks to enthusiastically hug her again. “That's so great!”

“What is?” Luke slid into the booth as his CO pulled back into his own seat again, quickly flicking
the screen fully shut behind him. He tugged the hood of his cloak back, but didn't remove it.

“They're trying for a baby,” Wedge explained, pushing a drink towards Luke before making
introductions. “Myri, this Rogue Leader. Boss, Myri.”

They'd long ago learned not to introduce Luke by name anywhere they didn't have to – a lesson
painfully reinforced most recently by Mara's initial reaction to it.


“Always a pleasure to meet friends of Wedge's,” Luke smiled. His eyes lingered on Corran a moment longer than strictly polite as they shook, and he found the other man returning the look.

A Force-user, Luke realized with surprise. Trained, too, by the feel of his shields. Well, that wasn't in the briefing.

Wedge hadn't missed the look passing between Luke and Corran, but wasn't sure what to make of it. Could Jedi recognize each other through the Force in casual contexts? He probably should have thought to ask ahead of time. Too late now. Keeping half on eye on the two, he turned back to Mirax. “Never thought I'd get a chance to introduce you guys to each other – what brings you this far outside the Core, anyway?”

“We're looking for someone,” Mirax replied, her tone going all business. “You're our best shot at getting connected.”

“Yeah?” Wedge leaned in over his drink, curiously. “Who would I know?”

“Luke Skywalker.”

Outwardly there was no sign of a change, but Corran felt the jolt in the Force as Rogue Leader's shields doubled. Really? he wondered. There's no way it could be this easy...

“Whadda you need Skywalker for?” Wedge frowned. Pretending he didn't know him would be pointless– Mirax had had all his tells nailed since they were six years old.

Mirax kept her primary attention on Antilles, but her well-honed smuggler's instincts kept a tight bead on the other, subtly shifting dynamics around the table. “We need to get in touch with a woman. Our information says if we find him, we'll find her.”

Corran reached over, brushed his fingers against his wife's hand, then flicked them in Luke's direction. “I think we're already halfway there, Sen.”

Mirax raised an eyebrow. “That was faster than I expected.” Her lips curved in a sardonic quirk. “I don't suppose you've got Mara back in your ship by any chance, have you?”

The temperature in the booth plummeted a solid ten degrees and Corran had shifted to plant himself between his wife and the sudden whorl of Force energy that swelled around Skywalker before he'd realized he was moving.

“Whoa!” Wedge threw his hands up, palms out, nearly knocking their drinks over in the startled, sweeping motion. “Easy now!”

He and Mirax couldn't feel whatever Corran seemed to be reacting to, but both recognized the anticipatory shift in Luke's weight. Anyone used to a good bar brawl would – it was a gut-level response to perceived threat, every muscled coiled in preparation to lash out defensively.

“Where did you hear that name?” The question was low and harsh, the power tightly coiled around the Jedi twisting and curling in barely-controlled agitation.

“Knock it off!” Mirax demanded, shoving at Corran and glaring at Luke. “Both of you. We're here
Luke warily tested that in the Force. Finding that it held up, he made himself take a few deep, steady
breaths and intentionally relaxed his muscles a fraction. “We can't discuss this here,” he told them,
firmly, his tone more even this time. “Is there somewhere safer we can go?”

Mirax shared a glance with Corran, then Wedge who just shrugged at her. “The Skate is docked
nearby,” she allowed, finally. “Come on.”

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Han wasn't used to traveling with brass on board – at least not aside from Leia, who didn't really
count. It was distinctly odd to walk into the common area of the Falcon and find General Madine
pacing around a holo-projection opposite Mara as if he belonged there.

“We'll be there in twenty hours,” Solo announced, sprawling himself into one of the seats, pretending
to be more at ease than he was. He liked Madine, but he figured it would be a little while longer
before he adjusted to seeing the man so casually in his space.

“No unwanted questions from Indigo Control?” Mara verified.

“We had authorization codes from two members of High Command. I could've told 'em I was
headed to Hysperidium to play blackjack with ol' Wrinkleface himself and they wouldn't have
blinked.”

“This will be much better than Hysperidium,” Mara promised, folding her arms across her chest in
satisfaction.

//Obviously you've never flown through an asteroid field before.// Chewie grumbled from his spot
nearby. //I am not looking forward to doing it again.// He chuffed half-heartedly at Han. //Even if
there aren't space slugs and mynocks this time.//

“Space slugs?” Madine raised an eyebrow.

“Tell you later,” Solo waved the story away, then pointed to the hologram showing the layout of
their target. “You sure they're gonna fall for this?”

Mara's face darkened slightly, but she nodded with confidence. “It's based on a plan developed by
one of the Empire's most brilliant – and damn irritating – strategists. He never got a chance to put it
into play, and it wasn't circulated at anything less than ultra-classified levels.”

She smiled, a savage twisting of the lips that painted her face with blood-chilling ruthlessness for just
a second. “By the time they figure out what's happening, I'll have decorated the shipyard with their
corpses.”

Apparently undisturbed by Jade's malice, Madine turned politely to the wookie. “You had no trouble
making the necessary adjustments to the up-link sensors?”

//The rewiring is fully complete. I did it myself.// Chewbacca affirmed. //It is ready.//

“Then I suggest we all get some rest,” the General advised. “We'll need to be in top form when we
arrive.” He looked back at the holo solemnly. “The instant we drop out of hyperspace, everything is
going to happen very, very quickly.”

---
The ten minute walk from the *Maggot* to the private hangar just off the main spaceport was conducted mostly in silence. The Horns led the way, and Wedge fell in beside Luke, shooting puzzled, sideways looks at this friend. Sooused with his own troubled thoughts, Luke barely noticed.

They knew about Mara. No one was supposed to know about her, but somehow these previously unknown friends of Wedge's did — and it had taken them all of one comm call to find their way straight to her, through him. It was a frightening thought.

Corran punched in a series of security codes to get them into the hangar, and Mirax produced a beckon call from her jacket pocket, remotely lowering the hatch of the pristine Baudo-class star yacht Wedge identified as her private ship — the *Pulsar Skate*.

A curious, slightly suspicious whistle greeted them as they approached, pulling Luke from his worries. Looking up, he caught sight of a well-maintained little green and white astromech droid examining them intently from the top of the ramp.

“I'll explain in a minute, Whistler,” Corran promised. “Come on, inside.”

The droid rolled back to let them pass, then followed as Mirax led them deeper into the ship. Stopping in what appeared to be the main hold, she pointed toward a cozy, tastefully decorated conversation circle done in soft shades of grey and tan.

“Sit,” she commanded. “Wedge, not you. You help me pour drinks.”

Corran and Luke sat roughly opposite each other, while the others moved purposefully toward the sideboard.

“You're a Jedi.” Luke spoke first, his voice calmer than before. “Wedge didn't tell me.”

Horn met his gaze evenly. “It's not really the kind of thing one goes around announcing if they don't have to,” he observed. “Kind of like not telling people your last name is Skywalker.”

Luke sighed and looked down at his hands, staring somewhat distantly at his right one as he flexed it. The circuits twinged. He hadn't been keeping up the maintenance. He'd have to make time to do it again soon. “Yeah.”

A glass appeared directly in front of his face and he accepted it without question. Drink handed off, Wedge scooted past and dropped into the seat next to him. Mirax passed Corran a drink and settled in beside him with her own more mundane tumbler of sparkling water.

“All right,” Wedge impatiently got straight to the point. “We're in a safe place, we've got drinks, and you two Jedi don't look like you're expecting to kill each other any more, so will somebody please tell me what the kriff is going on?”

There was a moment of uneasy silence, and Wedge reached his limit. He narrowed his eyes at Luke. “What's with the defensiveness, Boss? This isn't like you — at all.”

Luke answered his CO, but his eyes were on the Horns. “They shouldn't know about Mara. Less than a dozen people even know her name, let alone where she is — and they're all at Indigo Base.”

“If that's true, it's a relief to hear,” Corran said, offering an olive branch. “The fewer people who know about her, the better. Mara is… special.”

Wedge looked between the two of them, his face creased in a scowl. “Exactly what kind of 'special' are we talking about here?”
“The dangerous kind,” Mirax told him, grimly. “She's a powerful Force-user – or has the potential to be, at least. Supposedly she doesn't know what she is.”

“What do you mean *what* she is?” Luke asked, sharply.

Corran darted a look at his wife, then returned his gaze to Luke. “No disrespect, Skywalker, but that's a discussion we should have with her.”

“You want to see Mara, you go through me,” Luke ground out, uncompromisingly.

“Enough with the big, bad Jedi routine,” Mirax snapped. “We *need* to talk to her. She's at enormous risk – if the Empire gets their hands on her, the results will be catastrophic.”

“They already did.” Luke bit out each word as if they were made of shards of glass.

The others gaped at him, slack-jawed and silent.

“But she was supposed to be with you,” Corran protested, dread manifesting as galling cold that seeped straight to the marrow of his bones.

“She is now.”

Mirax squeezed her husband's knee so hard her knuckles went white, her mind recoiling from the implications. “If they had her -.”

“Catastrophic doesn't even scratch the surface.”

Myri’s eyes slid shut and she cursed viciously in Huttese.

“Gods dammit!” Wedge was beyond frustrated. “Enough with the cryptic shavit, all of you – seriously. Somebody start at the beginning and make some damn sense.” He pointed to Luke accusingly. “You got her from the Empire?”

“Yes. It's… the situation is complex.” He pinned Corran with a stern glare. “Tell me what you meant by not knowing *what* she is.”

Corran had spent enough years managing investigations, interviews, and interrogations for CorSec to be an excellent judge of how information was to going flow – or not – in any given scenario. Living amongst top-notch smugglers had only further refined that gift.

Nejaa had said that if he found Luke, he'd find Mara. At the time, Horn hadn't given it much thought. Skywalker was fairly well known; it made complete sense to use him as a way point or directional beacon through which to locate someone of lesser visibility. But it was blatantly obvious now that his cousin wasn't just any standard associate in the Jedi's realm of influence – whatever position she held to him, she was valued.

That would have been cause enough for Luke to deny them access to her without first thoroughly assuring himself that they were safe. That he had somehow wrested her away from the Empire's clutches sealed the matter. They would have to prove they had something of adequate value to justify the risk, or Luke wouldn't bargain. Thinking what he would be like if their roles were reversed – if, Force forbid, it had been Mirax taken and hunted and at risk – Corran couldn't blame the other man in the least.

He cut to the chase: “She's a Halcyon.”

“Does being a Skywalker matter?”

Luke had the grace to wince. “Sorry.” He took a deep breath, tried to refocus. “Why you? Why are you looking for her? Just to tell her she was in danger?”

“All Force-users are always in danger,” Corran dismissed that suggestion out of hand, and decided that continued bluntness was going to be his best bet. “Mara is my cousin. The Force ghost of my grandfather showed up right over there,” he pointed to the adjacent business nook, “recently and told me she was alive and I needed to find her.”


“Because she has to know she’s a Halcyon.” Corran pressed his forearms to his thighs and leaned forward, his fingers intertwined between his open knees, body and Force sense radiating urgency colored vividly with pride. “Halcyon women are born Battle Coordinators, Skywalker. Always. Our line was almost the galaxy’s sole source of them for centuries before the Purge.”

Wedge lifted a finger. “Help me out, again, here – Battle Coordinator? That what it sounds like?”

“A weapon,” Mirax confirmed flatly. “They link, integrate and harmonize other Jedi – sometimes even non-Force sensitives. The efficiencies created by that kind of meld could double a group’s impact in a fight.”

“Fierfek.” Luke struggled to breathe, the weight of the words and their implications as crushing as a bantha abruptly sitting on his chest.

The Force whispered past his ears and for a few agonizing seconds he was engulfed in a ghastly vision.

Palpatine stood on the bridge of a Super Star Destroyer, his gnarled hand on the shoulder of an empty shell that had once held Mara’s star-bright essence. Now skeletal and vacant-eyed, it remained motionless as the Sith reached through their bond into her hollowed-out body and accessed her gift. Like a puppet on strings, it obeyed his whim, the halo of power around her shimmering to iridescent life as it filled involuntarily with the minds and presences of others, knitting them together in a web of power waiting to be unleashed on a single, massive, coordinated assault on the Emperor’s enemies.

Lurid understanding dawned, and Luke fought down the urge to lash out, his body shaking with the effort of containing the violent rage that flash-boiled beneath his skin.

That was what he wanted. What he was trying to do with the drugs - hijack her gift.

Only he hadn’t. All that experimentation and he’d never figured out how. Instead, he’d crippled her in the Force, somehow cutting off her natural-born talents. Accidentally? Intentionally? It was impossible to know, and Luke wasn’t sure which would be worse. Most tellingly of all, the Emperor had made absolutely certain Mara never knew what he wanted – what she was capable of.

That’s why she never got more than piecemeal training in the Force. Luke was stupefied by the realization. He was afraid of what she could become.

“Luke?” Wedge prompted, concerned by the suddenly ashen cast to his friend’s skin and the way his hands had begun to shake. “You all right?”
“No,” Luke grated out. “No, I – damn him to all the kriffing hells!”

“Who?” Antilles asked, confused.

“Palpatine.” Luke spat the name as if it tasted of Hutt slime on his tongue.

Corran felt as if he'd taken a fist to the gut. “The Emperor had her – as in, personally?”


“For how long?” Mirax demanded.

“Always.” Skywalker scrubbed his face with his hands, head and heart aching. Oh, Mara.

“Always?” Corran repeated, incredulously. “You can't be serious.”

“I wish I wasn't.”

“Start talking,” Mirax ordered. “The Empire had her and now you do, but you obviously didn't know what she was. How did you get her? What are you doing with her? How are you hiding her?”

“I can't -.” Luke stopped, sent a pulse of true apology in Corran's direction before starting again. “I need to talk to Mara. You need to talk to her – to meet her.” He grimaced. “I wasn't kidding when I said the situation is complex, and there's too much I can't tell you without her permission. I can tell you that she doesn't know about this – her father, the Halcyon heritage.”

“You are hiding her in the Force, somehow?” Mirax pressed, again. “Because as much as we need to see her, it's a damn bad idea to put three Jedi in one spot if you haven't got that covered – it's all but begging to draw the Emperor's attention.”

“Sort of,” Luke answered awkwardly. “Palpatine thinks she's dead, so he shouldn't be actively looking for her. I think the bond might help with that, too, but I'm don't really know. It's not like we've had the ability to test it, or anything.”

“What bond?” Wedge wanted to know.

*Shavit. Probably should have waited to mention that.* Mara and I have a soul-bond, in the Force,” Skywalker admitted. Feeling the shock ringing through the room from all three of his companions, Luke decided to hell with it and added, “And we've taken an Oath to kill the Emperor.”

“You what?!” Mirax all but shrieked. “You're throwing her right back at Palpatine? Are you out of your mind?”

Wedge didn't even give Luke a chance to answer. “That's your ‘special project’?! What the kriff, Luke?”

“It's complicated.” Luke pleaded, throwing out his hands, palms up. “And I can't explain it without Mara. You'll understand when you meet her. Look,” he paused, tried to think through the mess. “There's an Alliance-wide furlough coming up. We could meet you somewhere. You can tell her about her gift, and she can tell you as much as she's willing to about… why it's all so complicated.”

The four of them sat a moment, turning that prospect over in their heads.

“I might know somewhere we could go,” Corran said, eventually. “Somewhere safe. I'll make some comms.” Without another word, he rose and strode toward the cockpit.
Luke looked at Mirax, weariness etched in his face. “Is there somewhere I could sit, for a while? I need to meditate. Maybe see if I can reach Mara.”

“Whistler?”

The droid responded to his name by rolling out of the corner where he'd been quietly observing them to stop at Mirax's elbow.

“Take Skywalker down to the gym, will you?”


Alone in the conversation circle, Mirax and Wedge looked at each other.

“Jedi,” Mirax huffed.

“Tell me about it!” Wedge rolled his eyes.

“How did they ever even survive this long as a breed? We've only got two between us, and they'd clearly both be space dust without us!”

“A dozen times over,” Wedge muttered darkly. “This is way off the insane scale – even for Luke.”

“Crazy stupidness is going around,” Mirax informed him, unimpressed. “Booster just knocked over a major Imperial bank - on a whim, for kriff’s sake!”

“No way!”

“Oh yeah,” she rolled her eyes, but couldn't quite stifle her grin. “It was lunacy.”

Wedge snagged his drink from the table, stood up, took two steps over, and then plopped onto the cushion directly beside her. “Tell me everything.”

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Nestled in a belt of mineral and metal-heavy asteroids, which conveniently provided ready access to invaluable raw materials, the illustrious Imperial Shipyards at Bilbringi were a cornerstone of the Empire's naval supremacy. One of the primary suppliers of Star Destroyers and one of the only supply and repair points for Super Star Destroyers, the shipyards were crucial to the Imperial war effort.

Mara was going to relish watching them burn.

Perched on the edge of the navigator's seat in the Millennium Falcon's cockpit, she cracked her knuckles. “Ready, boys?”

“Whenever you are, Sweetheart.” In the seat ahead of her, Han had modulated his tone to grim, but didn't know how to hide the anticipation and excitement that flowed off of him like an electrical current. Mara made a mental note to forbid Skywalker from ever teaching him; Solo's mercenary enthusiasm was delightful – not that she'd ever tell him so.

“Now.”

The Falcon pitched out of hyperspace.
Jade's skillful fingers were already flashing over the console, spooling out top secret codes she'd been privy to in her former life at furious speed. Chewie harned just as the indicator light to her left flipped from red to blue. She was in.

“Crix.”

The screens on Madine's side of the cockpit lit up, the array an exact real-time replica of what was being displayed in the Command Centers of each of the four massive Golan II Space Defense Stations that formed a perimeter guard around the shipyards.

“Got it,” he confirmed, his own fingers moving rapidly to punch in further commands. “Beautiful,” he murmured a moment later, as bright blips hiccuped across the screen, brilliant sparks that arced in all directions for just a split second each before they vanished.

“Sixty-six,” Mara announced gleefully, as Han angled the Falcon in a sharp banking maneuver up and away from the bristling turbolaser batteries on the nearest Golan – which were now spitting angry splashes of vicious green light toward them in a steady stream. “Next jump!”

“You better be right about this, sister.” Still barrel-rolling the ship clear of lingering laser blasts, Han doubled checked the coordinates, took a deep breath and pulled the lever again.

- -

In the superstructure of Green One, Commander Quell Bionte stared at the screens before him in disbelief. Alarms screeched and clanged in the background, and his men ran from one end of the Command Center to the other, shouting and tapping frantically at their stations.

“Sixty-five, Sir! No, wait – sixty-six!”

Bionte spun to glare at the Lieutenant who'd spoken. “Get me trajectories and firing solutions – now!”

Outwardly, the Commander maintained precise military calm. Inwardly, he was panicking. Sweat poured down this spine under his flawlessly pressed uniform. The shipyards had a state-of-the-art defense system. In addition to the Golans, Bilbringi boasted a rare Crystal Gravfield Trap (CGT). Designed to zoom in on a mass of sensor-stealthed ships from thousands of kilometers away, it was used to ensure that no cloaked ships could get near the facility. CGTs were enormously expensive and notoriously effective; he'd never heard of one being bypassed.

Until today.

According to their sensor arrays, a battered freighter had materialized out of hyperspace perilously close to the shipyards. Presumably using it as a radar guidepost, more than five dozen cloaked enemy fighters had dropped out of hyperspace – still cloaked – and darted through the Gravfield Trap, registering as bright blips of energy on the screens as they rocketed through, disappearing into the shipyards. It shouldn't have been possible – it defied everything they knew about the most up-to-date cloaking technology. But it was there, on the screens – they'd all seen it.

The shipyards were under siege.

- -

Han never let go of the hyperspace lever. Almost as soon as he had it fully forward, he was yanking it back again, eyes glued to the controls. Mara had triple checked the math and sworn that she wouldn't embed his precious ship in an asteroid or bring it out of hyperspace directly into the center
of an SSD. And he trusted her – he did – but he still felt a hell of a lot better when real space came back into focus and they were exactly where she'd promised: directly beneath the Golan II designated Sentinel. Checking the readouts, he tapped buttons and tweaked dials, drifting them just a hairsbreadth closer to the underside of the giant, semi-octagonal station and a mite nearer to the narrow, conical spine that projected from its base. Tucked in that close, they were effectively shielded not only from the Space Defense Platform's sensor arrays, but all of its thirty-five turbolaser batteries, ten proton torpedo launchers, and eight tractor beam projectors. The station's physical bulk and massive sensory output would also – at least theoretically - more than mask the Falcon's presence. It wasn't all that dissimilar to the stunt he'd pulled after the last time they'd tangled with an asteroid belt, tucking themselves in close to the Star Destroyer that had been hunting them post-Hoth until the Fleet disappeared and they could float away. But this time, they were the hunters.

Mara and Madine were both out of the cockpit already, running for the upper docking hatch.

“We're in,” Mara's voice rang over the ship's comm. “Seal us off.”

Chewie lowed, letting the two know that the entire station was on high alert, defense crews scrambling for their ships, all weapons charged and armed. //Watch for cross-fire,// he warned. //They are initiating firing solutions.//

“Make sure they find something to hit,” came the terse reply. “Opening hatch in three, two, one!”

Clad in hastily donned evac suits, Mara and Madine floated free of the Falcon's top hatch. From the cockpit, Han hit the control to reseal it and re-pressurize the small chamber beneath.

//Deploying shrapnel,// Chewie huffed, his giant paws stilling as he completed the task.

“I guess now we wait.”

Han stared out through the shadow of the behemoth above them at the horizon of stars, half-completed ships, service and construction vessels, and floating dockyard platforms. In the distance, three more Golans floated, each over two kilometers long, and about half as wide and tall. Massing more than an Imp Star, every one was on high alert, the usually placid lights at their corners flashing orange and red in alarm as their turbolasers began lancing green jets of concentrated light into the spaces between them on the trajectories their sensors told them the phantom “invaders” had taken into the shipyard.

Solo held his breath until the one of the bolts finally intersected a piece of all the all-but-invisible shrapnel they'd jettisoned from the Falcon's hold at Mara's order. Coated with a cheap but unbelievably flammable powder, the piece exploded riotously on contact. Additional powder, floating in space around it, erupted as well in a brilliant, sensor-scrambling flash. It was the perfect illusion.

Elated by their “kill”, the Golan crews redoubled their efforts. Han shielded his eyes and hoped Madine and Mara would hurry up. At this rate, it wasn't going to take the Imperials long to knock out all sixty-six imagined siege vessels – even if they couldn't see them until they blasted them into smithereens.

- -

Motioning for Madine to stay back, Mara freed her lightsaber from where she'd clipped it to an outer hook on her evac suit. Bobbing just out of range, Madine grabbed a protruding panel on the base of the Defense station and wrapped his bulky glove around it securely before giving her a thumbs up with his other hand. Holding herself in place with her left hand, Mara ignited the saber with the other
and cut them an entrance into the station’s base.

Two minutes later, they were inside, a few chambers over from their entry point, stripping off the suits. Dumping them behind a stack of crates, they used good old fashioned Imperial assault hand signals to communicate and were off towards their goal.

Skirting around major population centers and main transit routes, they ducked into a service corridor and ran – weapons out and at the ready – along the underside of the station. Six dead troopers later, the indicators painted on the flat grey deck plates told Mara they were directly beneath the main command super structure. The thick steel of the welded-shut access door boiled and melted under the hiss and crackle of her purple blade, and she jumped back as it fell toward them with a ringing clang.

Madine gestured gallantly for her to precede him. “After you, my dear.”

Mara grinned and dropped a curtsy worthy of the Imperial Court. Then they were scrambling up the access ladder, every rung bringing them closer to the next step of their attack.

- -

General Drost was asleep in his lavishly outfitted apartment in the officer’s wing of the residential complex on one of the docking platforms when every alarm in the orbital shipyard complex simultaneously emitted a shrill shriek. Jolting upright, he squinched his eyes against the flashing red and yellow lights that swept cyclically through his quarters. Throwing off the richly embroidered duvet, he lurched to his feet and staggered toward the comm embedded in his wall.

His head, achingly tender with the beginnings of a galaxy-class hangover, had begun to pound by the time he stabbed the comm button with a stiff, clumsy finger. “This had better be -.”

He trailed off, jaw dropping as the starry expanse of space outside his floor-to-ceiling windows illuminated with three near-concurrent bolts of green light. A fraction of a second after they evaporated, the spot where they’d intersected erupted into a fireball. He was still gaping soundlessly a half-second later when a speeder-sized chunk of asteroid, it’s heavy metallic core molten, hurtled through the glittering remains of the first explosion to slam through his triple-shielded windows.

With a savage crunch the General was no longer alive to hear, the projectile spewed boiling metal and razor-sharp rock through the apartment’s airy rooms before punching at breakneck speed through the far wall and splattering into the hallway. The super-heated gases that had been trapped in the asteroid’s core went up in gouts of blue-white flame on contact with the station’s artificially oxygenated interior.

Up and down the curved corridors of the installation, similar chunks of scorching death demolished walls and enveloped entire sections of the facility in toxic smoke, flame, and molten chaos. The impeccably installed, never-before-used safety and anti-fire systems auto-deployed exactly to spec, but they never stood a chance.

As each section went up it touched off the ones beside it. The residential section gave way to industrial areas and stockpiles of fully-fueled equipment, flammable shipbuilding materials – even large scale stores of volatile cleaning solutions – ruptured, ignited, and instantly overwhelmed every thought and scrambled effort at containment.

- -

Aboard Green One, Commander Bionte watched as Sentinel opened up its full array of weaponry. But – mind bogglingly – it was no longer targeting the invaders’ trajectories.
It was coring a hole straight through Outpost, one of it's fellow defense platforms.

Golan II's boasted outrageously powerful shields; individual proton torpedoes were little more than a nuisance. But whomever was manning the helm of Sentinel wasn't wasting their time with anything so meager. Instead, they launched a salvo of eight torpedoes at the same time, all aimed at precisely the same point.

The shield went hazy, adopting a pearly cast as the torpedoes hit, their energy dancing across the shield's surface in wild, crackling bolts as it attempted to diffuse the massive influx of energy. Another, single torpedo tore into the overstressed shield, and the shield projectors encircling the station's equator sparked. Molten plasma rolled across the hull, frying the projectors and searing metal hull plating as it went.

Bionte watched, aghast, as Sentinel's torpedoes turned on Picket, repeating the same attack.

Outpost struggled to recover, it's crew bringing every weapon to bear, but it was too late. Turbolaser blasts cut deep gouges into the station's now unprotected belly, melting and peeling armor plating until it twisted away and floated free into space. Outpost vented atmosphere and something inside caught fire; burning gas speared outward from the open maw carved into it's side. Entire sections of hull blistered and boiled under the terajoules of light being pumped into them by their sister station. The first portion of the frame gave. The superstructure snapped off, collapsing into the levels below, and the beleaguered station folded in on itself, imploding into slag.

Sentinel shivered as it's shields took direct hits from Green One. Awareness of one's imminent death was a strong motivator, and the troops aboard the other Golan were learning fast.

Mara ignored it; they could copy her strategy all they wanted – it wouldn't work. While she'd been venting the oxygen from every section of Sentinel other than the Command Tower, Madine had been using one of her old Imperial codes to override and reroute the station's power supplies. Every joule of energy the station's massive power generators could spew out was being directed into the weapons and shielding. A quick and dirty reshuffling of the shield frequencies further foiled any attempts to overload and short out the shield generators; it was an old trick most naval noobies had never heard of because modern SSD's and Imp Stars were programmed to do it automatically. Only officers of Crix's vintage remembered how much more effective the trick was when done manually; it was amazing what a difference expanding the acceptable safety parameters by just a few extra points could do.

Stepping nimbly over the bodies of the command crew that she'd wiped out with her lightsaber and bare hands within seconds of accessing the Tower, Mara flitted between consoles making adjustments and ensuring the volleys of torpedoes and turbolaser blasts never faltered.

Madine remained at the station he'd chosen, diligently remote piloting the engineering droids he'd hacked. (That, he'd informed her pleasantly, was a new skill he'd acquired during his time with the Alliance.) His face was fixed in an expression of intense concentration, but every few minutes Mara would see him smile slightly as the droids finished igniting the core of another asteroid and launching it – at his command – into the nearly finished hulls of the star destroyers locked into docking platforms across the shipyard. Due to their size, and the fact that they weren't fully loaded with the standard compliment of men, weaponry, and all the flammable paraphernalia that usually accompanied both, the ships rarely exploded on contact. Instead, they gave the appearance of being eaten from the inside out. Liquefied metal from both the asteroid interiors and the ships they'd gutted floated in surreally delicate, shimmery blobs around the wrecks of docking platforms, slowly freezing into gem-like spheres in the vacuum of space.
“Jade!” Han's voice cut through the personal comm fixed to her belt. “We got runners!”

“Shavit!” Mara swore. “Can you get them? I don't have anything to spare.”

“You want 'em for anything?”

“I want them dead,” she hissed.

“Done,” he answered, flatly.

Mara continued her relentless assault on the two remaining Golans, but her eyes darted to the screens to track the Falcon's progress whenever she could. It didn't take long.

The Falcon's superior speed, upgraded guns, and Chewie's expert aim were more than enough to make short work of the escaping shuttle. Three direct hits in rapid succession and it (and its contents) were sundered into nothing more than dust and tiny shards of metal, plastisteel, flesh, and bone.

By the time Solo had looped around, returning to the safety of Sentinel's shadow, the fight was over. Three pocked, blackened hulks were all that remained of the once elite defense perimeter.

“Nice job,” Mara punched the button and Solo and Chewie appeared on the large comm screen, grinning.

“Anything for you, Sweetheart. You gonna set that one to self-destruct before or after we grab the alloy?”

Mara looked around and frowned. “I was actually thinking about keeping it.”

“Keeping it?” Han repeated dubiously. “What for?”

“Leia.”

Han's face scrunched in confusion, and Madine started to laugh.

Mara's brow furrowed. “You don't think she'd like it? I mean, it'll need a good scrubbing, but...”

Madine shook his head, and the warmth pouring off of him in the Force made Mara relax. “I think it's just what she needs.”

- -

Whistler was waiting when Luke eventually rose from his cross-legged position on the padded floor of the Skate's small workout room. Whether he was infallibly polite, doubted Luke's ability to get himself reliably back to the common room, or felt he couldn’t be trusted alone was unclear. Given his experience with Artoo, Luke was betting on one of the latter.

When he re-entered the main hold, he couldn't help but smile. Mirax was sprawled across her husband's lap, hands moving in animated gestures as she recounted a wild story. Corran's fingers played with his wife's soft, dark hair, his faintly amused expression adoring as he watched and listened. Wedge lounged on the other end of the small seating unit, Mirax's sock-clad feet in his lap, laughing hysterically.

Deep underneath his happiness at finding his friend so relaxed among adopted family – Force knew Wedge deserved every bit of rest and renewal he got – Luke felt a twinge. This was Mara's family, too. This kind of easy camaraderie was exactly what he wanted for her but, for now, it remained painfully far out of reach.
“Boss,” Wedge greeted, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. “Someday I gotta introduce you to Myri's old man. You'll love him.”

Luke moved to resume the seat he'd had earlier. “I'd like that.”

“Did you get a hold of Mara?” Corran asked.

Luke shook his head. “She's otherwise occupied.” She'd been shielding tightly, and he got the impression her concentration was fully involved in something important. He hadn't felt it wise to intrude; he could try again later.

Wedge gave him a curious look. “Does the bond come with a 'leave a message' function?” he asked.

“Not that we've found yet,” Luke told him, bemused. “But you never know. It didn't exactly come with a manual. We might discover one yet.”

“That has to be interesting,” Mirax observed.

“It can be,” Luke agreed. “Any verdict on somewhere safe for us to meet?”

Corran nodded. “My grandfather – well, step-grandfather, technically – has an estate on Corellia.”

Luke was startled. “Corellia is occupied territory.”

“You're a Rebellion,” Mirax pointed out. “Depending on one's point of view, everything under your control is occupied territory. Everything else is normal.”

Luke was thoroughly over 'a certain point of view' arguments, but held his tongue.

“You have my word that it's safe, Skywalker,” Horn said. He intentionally lowered his shields in the Force, letting Luke feel his earnestness and certainty. “Grandfather's got a private landing pad, and more than enough room to put us all up comfortably. You won't even have to go through customs or anything.” Corran fingered his wife's hair contemplatively another second before adding more softly, “He wants to meet her. He loved Mara's father just as much as he loved mine.”

“Please, ask him to be prepared to give her space,” Luke said carefully. He knew he hadn't fully concealed his heartache when Corran's eyes snapped to his and narrowed. “The Emperor had her,” he said simply. “He left scars.”

“She's still family,” Mirax spoke up firmly, then softened her tone slightly. “But we'll make sure Rostek understands.”


“Of course he is, and so are you,” Mirax informed him.

Luke looked up, surprised. “You don't have to -.”

“Shut up.”

He blinked, then chuckled. “Right. Thank you, again, then, I guess.”

Wedge opted to stay up and keep trading gossip with Mirax; Luke turned in for the night. The bunk room he was set up in was compact but comfortable. After so many years of Alliance accommodations, it felt downright luxurious. He made quick work of his nightly ablutions and then crawled into the bunk, sighing with pleasure at the way he sank into the mattress and the feel of the
crisp sheets against his skin.

Exhaustion weighed heavily on him, but even as he slipped toward sleep he reached for his Mara-place.

- -

With the decision to keep the Golan, plans changed slightly. Han and Chewie loaded the *Falcon* with the terenthium-desh alloy they'd need for the ship and to pay for the work of properly applying it, as per the plan. Instead of helping, Mara and Madine saw to *Sentinel*. Restoring oxygen and power, Mara commandeered what droids they could find that remained functional and set them to work emptying the station of bodies and the associated mess. Madine took a small ship from the hangar bay and scoured the ruins of the shipyards for any other resources the Alliance might be able to make of use. At Mara's request, everyone collected all the weapons, explosives, and other potentially dangerous materiel they could find and brought it back for her.

“This is just the first hit,” she reminded Han with dark satisfaction.

Anything that remained intact when they were done stripping it, they destroyed, gutted, or set aflame by the most expedient means available. When nothing but a wasteland of destruction smoldered at their backs and every hint of evidence that might be traced back to them was erased, they departed.

Golans weren't intended to travel by hyperspace more than a few times. Traditionally, they did very little traveling of any kind. Once they'd reached their assigned destination they usually became semi-permanent fixtures, after all. It didn't help that they were also – for obvious reasons – rather hard to hide.

Thus, after much debate, Madine and Chewie took the Golan directly back to Zastiga. Mara and Han took the *Falcon* to Mara's contact on the Outer Rim. The man (creature?) was of indeterminable descent – Han identified markings distinct to at least six different alien races in his strange features, but he welcomed them with open arms. He (it?) called Mara “Senni” and, as far as Han could tell, was crazier than a spice-addicted hawk-bat, but he obviously knew his business. He was thrilled to trade the work for the spare alloy, and had them in and out in record time.

For all the he hovered, groused and threatened, Han had to admit to himself that he couldn't have done nearly as good of a job on his own. When they made the jump back toward Indigo Base themselves, his metal mistress was stronger, sleeker, and cleaner than she'd been since she was first built.

- -

Leia stared at the footage scrolling across the screen. Beside her, the other members of the High Command were equally speechless.

Bilbringi had been laid to waste.

The news was being strongly suppressed by Imperial media, but keeping an event of that magnitude quiet was difficult even for the Empire. There had simply been too many people stationed there - too many suppliers on standardized schedules who showed up with their wares only to find themselves in a floating graveyard - to keep word and amateur footage from leaking.

It was widely assumed, of course, that they'd done it. Who, exactly, and how remained vague, but the Alliance hadn't gone out of its way to correct the assumption and the populace at large was just running with the idea. Already, they'd seen a surge in enlistment, and strategists were ramping up for
an anticipated tidal wave of new recruits to accompany existing troops when they returned to the Rebellion after they dispersed to visit families, home sectors, and other old haunts for a few weeks during the upcoming furlough.

Their discussion of how to best prepare and proceed was interrupted by frantic reports from Indigo Control that a Golan II Space Defense Platform had just emerged from hyperspace in orbit around the planet. Leia bolted for the Control room, decorum abandoned, the rest of High Command on her heels. Winter was already there, and she turned huge, unbelieving eyes to Leia.

“It's for you.”

“What?” Leia was certain she'd heard wrong.

The huge screen at the front of the room flickered, and Crix Madine appeared on it, Chewbacca's furry bulk visible over his left shoulder.

“Your Highness,” Madine said formally, upon seeing her. “It is my privilege to present you with a gift from a mutual friend. She regrets that she was unable to deliver it herself, but she was still needed elsewhere.”

“What are you going on about?” Dodonna grumbled. “What gift?”

“This battle station,” Madine replied blithely, his eyes twinkling as if this were the most fun he'd in ages, “is a gift specifically to Princess Leia. Shall I park it here, your Highness, or would you like me to find another spot?”

“Right there is just fine, Crix, thank you.” Leia pressed her lips together, trying to stifle the overwhelming urge to laugh until she cried. “I'll be up to inspect my present directly.”

Luke closed his eyes in his bunk on in the Pulsar Skate. He opened them in the hold of the Falcon. It was empty and disconcertingly spotless. Where it had been torn up the last time he'd walked through, it was now sleekly finished in some kind of metal he didn't recognize. Fascinating as all of that should have been, it fell away entirely when his eyes fixed on the center of the room.

Mara was dancing.

She wore a clinging purple bodysuit that left most of one leg and the opposite arm bare, and her hair had been scooped back into a loose ponytail. Silvery scars scrolled across creamy skin like filigree in the low light, and she moved with a fluid grace unlike anything Luke had ever seen. He heard the music now, too; the volume was low, but the notes thrummed with emotion, rising and falling in an evocative tide. His CorUnum was music made flesh, moving in perfect time with the sound, the Force dancing in and around her as if in a duet. The entire hold seemed to glitter with her pleasure, like it had been filled with stardust. It was breathtaking.

As the final notes slipped toward silence, Mara slid into a perfect split on the floor, folding flat over the leg outstretched in front of her. For a moment, everything was still save for the sound of her breathing.

Then her head snapped up. “Skywalker?”

“That was beautiful, CorMeum.”

Instantly, Mara folded up, tucking her uncovered leg beneath her and wrapping her covered arm
around her uncovered one. “What are you doing?”

“I think I'm sleeping,” he answered honestly. He gestured toward her. “Please don't do that. I thought we pretty unequivocally established that you're safe with me.”

“It's not that.” Mara glanced down. "It's indecent."

Luke looked at her in confusion. "You're fully dressed, Mara."

"But you can see the scars," she told him, quietly. “That inherently makes me 'not presentable'."

“You're not a display piece. This is just regular life, Jade.”

She frowned at him, and he could feel her looking for words. “That's not a category,” she attempted to explain, after a moment. “Or at least it hasn't been before. I was invisible, or I was on display – required to meet Court standards. There wasn't anything in between. This -,” she gestured derisively at her bare, marked flesh, “would have been completely unacceptable.”

Looking up at him properly now, her eyes narrowed and she cocked her head. “I know you're not really here, and I can see through you. Are you manifesting, somehow, or am I hallucinating?”

He smiled and shrugged. “Maybe both, probably neither. Bond glitch maybe? Or a feature we haven't figured out yet? Who knows.”

Luke tested to see if he could move his semi-ethereal body and found that he could. Moving forward, he crouched in front of her, until they were eye to eye. “Either way, I'm sort of here and I think Imperial Court rules are a load of bantha fodder. Please?”

Mara considered him uncertainly for a moment before unfolding her arms and shifting her pose to sit cross-legged in front of him, arms hanging loose, hands in her lap. Luke's eyes traced their way up the bare skin of her arm, then met her uneasy gaze. “Thank you.”

“Don't get used to it,” she grumbled. “It's only because you're the only one here. Sort of here. Whatever.”

“I know.” Luke gestured around them. “Han and Chewie must be exhausted from whatever they did to make the Falcon look so good.”

Mara gave him a wicked smirk. “A little.”

Luke eyed that expression. “You're not going to tell me, are you?”

“Nope. You'll find out.”

“When I get back?”

“Maybe when you wake up.”

“Fine, keep your secrets.” Luke pretended to sulk, but relished the sparkle of her smug satisfaction. “If you're not going to talk, will you dance some more? I've never seen anything like it.”

“It was a standard warm-up, Farmboy.”

He doubted that greatly. “Don't care.”

She gave a patronized sigh. “If I do will you quit haunting me and go back to sleep properly?”
“Sure. Eventually.”

Mara snorted at that, but rose anyway and reset the music. “Don't get used to this, either, Skywalker.”

“Of course not.”

There would be difficult and painful things to discuss later, but they would wait until he got back to Base. For now, Luke's ephemeral body settled back and soaked in the happiness that was seeing his Mara happy. In his bunk aboard the *Pulsar Skate*, he smiled in his sleep.

Chapter End Notes

The Bilbringi sections of this chapter are derived largely from the battles of Bilbringi in the TTT and Isard's Revenge.

The phantom invaders idea was (hopefully obviously) adapted from Thrawn seeding Coruscant with cloaked asteroids in TLC.

Kudos and thanks due to my amazing husband who (a) asked what I was blowing up this week, and (b) politely reminded me that asteroids could not already be flaming when they crashed through a General's window (actual flame requires oxygen, which they wouldn't get until they were inside), allowing me to (hopefully) correct accordingly.

Furlough was totally not an actual thing in the GFFA Rebellion; I made it up to suit my purposes via creative license.

Things no one but me cares about: Green One and Sentinel were actual GFFA Golan II's; I made up the names of the other two. Mara's dancing outfit at the end is intended to be one of the ones she is shown wearing in the comics.
Hell's Teeth

Chapter Summary

Vader's in a snit, Leia settles in to her new battle station, Luke builds a lightsaber, and Mara gets swamped with the emotional fall-out of making friends, meeting family, and facing a few demons. (Nothing explodes this chapter, sorry... we'll get back to that soon, promise.)

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is for Mara.” Corran held up a small, sealed, dual-sided test kit. Breaking the seal on one side, he pressed it to the inside of his wrist. There was a small hiss as it extracted a tiny sample of his blood, then a pop as it auto-resealed when he pulled it away. Horn held the kit out to Luke. “All she has to do is the same thing I just did with the other side here.” He tilted it and pointed. “It'll prove that we are related and we're not making this up.”

Luke nodded and accepted the kit. “Thank you.”

“This should go without saying, but destroy it when she's done – the less evidence of her there is anywhere, the better.

“I agree.”

Mirax passed him two data chips. “This one has the information you'll need to meet us on Corellia. Wedge knows the encrypts. This one is for Mara- it's just family background, mostly, but it'll work for an introduction.”

"She'll appreciate that.”

“Veggies,” Mirax held out her arms. “We'll see you in a couple weeks.”

“You're coming to Corellia?” Luke asked, surprised.

Wedge pulled back from the embrace and tossed his boss a disbelieving look. “Are you kidding? Of course I'm kriffing coming!” He pointed to the data chip. “And I'm the only one with the encrypts, so you have to let me.”

The small group made its farewells and the Rebels headed down the ship's ramp. Busy replaying the last twenty-four hours in a continuing struggle to assimilate the prolific and unexpected revelations they'd confronted, they didn't say much.

Exiting the docking bay in which the Skate rested, they hung a left into the spaceport's main thoroughfare. Almost immediately, both felt their skin begin to prickle with a sense of wrongness that
transcended conscious thought and had its roots in primitive instinct. Luke casually drew his hood up and ducked deeper into the recesses of his cloak. Wedge popped the collar of his jacket and hunched his shoulders, slouching toward the wall as they slowed their steps and took proper stock of their surroundings, Luke extending circumspect feelers in the Force for good measure.

Neither had paid much attention to the spaceport on their way to the *Skate* the night before, registering little more than the stereotypical bustle routine to spaceports the galaxy over. Cloudy recall supplied the usual sea of moving bodies and raucous noise as beings negotiated, argued, greeted each other jovially, or wept in parting. In the background of those memories, regularly spaced holo-transmitters blared the standard mix of sludge news, Imperial propaganda disguised as real news, advertising, and bulletins related to arrivals, departures and travel-related legal reminders. Shameless advertising squawked endlessly from smaller flat screens embedded in the walls alongside service outlets of every description.

It was a droning, mind-numbing buzz that pervaded every spaceport… and was conspicuously absent now. It wasn't that the spaceport was empty; despite the fairly early hour it held a decent number of beings. It was just… still. And chillingly uniform.

Every screen and holo projector played the exact same thing on an endless, perfectly synched loop. Beings clustered around each display, some silent with shock, others leaning into each other with frightened, subdued murmurs. Interspersed at random intervals, Luke could pick up on silent geysers of jubilation spouting off individual beings in the Force, though external indicators of that emotion were strangely missing. Sharing a look, the two Rogues drifted closer to the nearest holo-projector to investigate. Merging with the crowd, they eased closer until they were face-to-holo with the flickering images, yet mostly secluded from others' view in a bit of a cubbyhole created by a poorly designed walkway renovation at some point in the port's history.

When the images and accompanying text-crawl sank in, Luke dove directly for his Mara-place. He cursed colorfully when he found her in a healing trance. Of course she was. *Dammit.*

He still didn't know how to remote-wake her from one, if he even could. He really needed to find out why she was still consistently using healing trances instead of just sleeping at night. Unless there was something going on that she hadn't told him about, she should be long past needing them. While he was at it, he ought to insist they make time for her to explain to him how they worked in the first place and how to put himself in one – which they somehow hadn't yet gotten around to covering. Luke automatically added all of the above to his running mental list of things they needed to talk about.

Ultimately, it didn't matter; he didn't really need her to confirm it for him. He might be mystified as to *how* she'd pulled it off – and distinctly alarmed that she'd gone and done it on her own without a peep of warning – but there wasn't a shred of doubt in his mind that he was looking at his CorUnum's handiwork.

“Bilbringi,” Wedge breathed, awestruck. “Who the kriff do you suppose pulled that off?” When Luke didn't answer right away, he leaned over to peer at him more closely. “Boss?”

Luke had a funny look on his face that Antilles couldn't quite pin down. It hovered somewhere between awe, terror, and a hysterical urge to laugh. On the third try, the Jedi managed to utter a single word.

“Mara.”
“Looking for something?” Mara folded her arms across her chest and canted an appraising gaze at Solo.

“You think we could put a door here?” Han asked, retracting his measuring tool and tapping the wall that separated this bunk room from his own. “Or would it have to go over there?”

“Royal marriage standards aside, wouldn't giving Leia her own bedroom defeat the purpose of all the work you're doing on the master cabin?”

“It aint for her,” Han shook his head. “She's sleepin' with me. I was thinkin' it would make a good nursery down the line. When there's kids, you know? Connect it to our room for all the late night feedings and stuff. Sounds like a good plan, right?”

“I know nothing about children,” she informed him, definitively. “The only child in the Imperial Palace was me, and I didn't count.”

He scowled, then waved it off. “You can learn on mine. They'll be half Corellian and half Leia – more than durable enough to handle it.”

Having been under the impression that most beings not biologically prone to eating their young were inherently protective of them, Mara found the casualness of the offer comical. “That won't be necessary.”

Han gave up considering the wall and looked at her with interest. “Why not? Got plans to have your own?”

“Can't, and I don't expect to live that long, anyway.”

“What?”

Not sure which part of her assertion he was asking about, she went with the one that seemed of paramount relevance. “The Emperor is a formidable opponent,” she explained, patiently. “The chances of both Skywalker and I surviving the confrontation are essentially nil. Given the logistics of our arrangement, that leaves me the victorious dead and Farmboy going on to double-hero status.”

Solo stared at her for a moment, speechless and incensed, then jabbed a finger vehemently in her direction. “You get that shavit out of your head right now, you hear me? I expect you to come back from killing that piece of worm-ridden filth alive and ready to learn to be an aunt, understand?”

Taken aback and confused, Mara didn't answer right away. No one had ever cared if she lived through a mission, so long as she completed it to spec. The idea that someone would not only insist on it, but be actively planning her role in a future she didn't expect to see was entirely new and disconcerting.

“I… I'll see what I can do.”

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Almost before the stars had finished resolving into the pin pricks of light that signaled full reversion to real space, Gate and Artoo Detoo released ear-splitting squeals followed by parsec-a-minute chatter.

Luke punched the comm button. “Wedge, are you seeing that?”

“Hard to miss, Boss. Did you know about this?”
“I think I'd have mentioned it.”

“Commander Skywalker, this is Indigo Control. Please alter your course heading – we're sending up what you need now. Princess Leia has requested you report to Hell's Teeth before returning to Base.”

Artoo chirped that he'd received new coordinates and protocols. //You wish to comply?//


“Our new Orbital Defense Station,” the controller laughed. “Don't tell me you missed her?”

“No, we saw her all right,” Luke agreed, eyes still locked on the floating giant looming imposingly just ahead. Even though he was pretty sure he knew the answer, he asked anyway. “Where did she come from?”

“Bilbringi,” Control answered, smugly. “Came with some Imp-standard boring name, from what I've heard, but the Princess re-christened her in honor of her having one hell of a bite.”

Wedge cut into the comm channel. “Those orders apply to me, too?”

“Hold a moment, Rogue Three.”

Wedge keyed a private direct comm line open. “If he says no, I expect you to pull some strings, Boss. There's no way I'm not going to check this thing out with you!”

Luke was spared from replying by Control's return to the shared channel.

“Rogue Three, you are cleared to accompany Commander Skywalker. Agent Retrac will meet you when you land.”

Leia had wasted no time in making Teeth her own.

Within six hours of it's delivery, Sentinel had a new name and skeleton crews running round-the-clock shifts. Alongside the handpicked Alliance personnel, small teams of droids (mostly those scavenged from Bilbringi) tirelessly assisted in efforts to remove the last evidence of Imperial control - and the former crew's slaughter - from the decks and systems.

Crix and Chewbacca had thoughtfully utilized their time in hyperspace to clear out the former commandant's suite for the Princess, and the other five in that wing for whomsoever she wanted alongside her. Leia's modest belongings looked all the more starkly meager in the apartment's spacious expanse, her handful of worn uniforms taking up only a tenth of the hangers in the walk-in closet. But she and Winter – who'd taken the rooms immediately beside hers – agreed that it felt positively hedonistic to have so much space, so much clean and well-stocked and matching around them after so many years on the run in crowded, credit-strapped Alliance facilities.

Luke and Wedge, collected by Winter as promised, were effusive with their praise and wonder when delivered to Leia's new personal 'war room' – the well appointed office attached to her suite.

“Only you could have something this big and complex online and running as smooth as a droid fresh out of an oil bath this fast,” Wedge complimented, impressed.

“Madine and Chewie have been stubbornly vague about how our little mischief makers were able to take the station so intact.” Leia pressed her lips together in a disapproving look, and turned to Luke.
“Did you know what they were up to?”

“Not a clue, I swear.” He put his hands up to his shoulders, palms out in a plea for leniency. “And I haven't gotten a word out of Mara since. Whatever she and Han are up to, it's taking her full attention. Did they tell you anything?”

“Mum,” the Princess sighed. “We'll have to pry it out of them when they get back.”


“Extended family dinner,” his sister corrected. “Winter needs to hear it as well.” She glanced at the Corellian. “Care to join us?”

“Tell me when and where, Your Highness,” Wedge agreed, heartily.

“I'll let you know as soon as I know,” she said, dryly. “In the meantime, both of you get back to Base and get some rest. In the morning, pack up your things and the rest of Rogue Squadron and move up here.”


Leia nodded and pointed to the floor. “This is the Command Wing. Crix has the first room on this side, and Winter has the quarters between his and mine.” She flicked a finger to point at her door. “Chewie has the room opposite this one for now, though he wants back on the Falcon when it returns, so I thought maybe Mara could take it. The other suites on that side are for you two. I've got the droids clearing out the next wing over for the rest of your squad. You're to be reassigned to Crix and posted here as the Base's first deployers in future offensives and the last to leave if it comes to defending Indigo from Imperial attack.”

That was a humbling honor, and they were quick to accept. Compromising between the shared wish to stay and catch up and a realistic assessment of the time, they postponed a full tour of the station in favor of a working dinner in Leia's new office. By the time they finally dragged themselves back planetside to pass a final night in their rooms on Base, Skywalker and Antilles were dead tired and their heads were spinning with information overload.

As Wedge disappeared into the fresher for a quick run through the sonics, Luke snagged the piece of flimsy adhered to the outside of a box unexpectedly waiting on his bunk.

*Farmboy - most of what you need for your saber is inside. See the enclosed list of remaining parts to gather on your own - I'm not going to do all the work, here.*

Luke wondered briefly if Mara had had Han pick the lock on his quarters for her, or if she'd done it herself. It occurred to him that he probably ought to be more concerned than he was about how casually they both disregarded locked doors, but he brushed the thought aside. His consternation would change nothing, and there were much more important things in need of his energy.

Flipping the lid open, he surveyed the box's bounty. A dimetris circuit (tagged 'activation loop') lay alongside a cracked comlink which had been marked 'for recharger port and wire'. Underneath those were a flashback suppressor, dynoric laser feed line, and a small but highly efficient power cell.

Stuck to the inside top of the box was the extremely short list comprised of a hilt and a few assorted buttons and switches.

He'd been pondering hilt options since Mara had shared the crystals from her own saber with him. He needed to make a decision in the morning - he wanted to be ready when she got back. She'd
started their crusade against the Empire with a bang, and he intended to be ready for whatever came next.


Luke opened his eyes and found himself staring at a high, polished ceiling; the familiar hum of the Falcon in flight seeped comfortingly into his bones.

“Are you going to make a habit of this? Because half-transparent isn't really a good look for you.”

Rolling his head to the left, Luke drank in the sight and feel of Mara. She lay on a long, rectangular crate of military-grade metal emblazoned with standard warning symbols and Danger: Explosives. She looked comfortable in generic smuggler-style clothing, her knees bent, booted feet flat on the crate's top, her arms laying loosely at her sides. She didn't bother to open her eyes or look in his direction, but he thought her lips quirked briefly before she smoothed it away.

“Pretty sure it's your fault,” he said easily. “I was trying to sleep over here.”

“Mmm,” she made a non-committal noise before switching topics. “Can you feel that?”

Luke reached out, followed her sense to the sweeping swells of emotion she was tracking in the Force. “Joy,” he acknowledged, watching her saturate herself in it. “Beings across the galaxy are celebrating what you did.”

She did smile now, sharp and dangerous. “The Emperor can feel it, too – I know he can. His own personal salt kneel.”

“Salt kneel?”

Mara opened one eye and glanced side-long at him. Luke felt her presence brush his inquisitively; then she sighed and closed the eye again. “That's not a thing for everyone else, is it?”

A memory passed between them, with an under-note of apology similar to what he'd felt when she'd shared the Force lightening experience with him. Luke felt her palms and bare knees scored with some kind of device that tore hundreds of delicate slices into the skin. Blood welled up but before so much as a drop could spill, she was on all fours on a set of wide, shallow stairs, hands and knees pressed into neat circles of salt. Agony flared as the fine grains ground into lacerated flesh, grating deeper with every minute shift of her weight. The pain burned up through her limbs, working out to merge into the savage ache that developed in every muscle as Mara tried to stay fastidiously still, even while the biting cold of the throne room made her shiver.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

The mantra became the only thing Mara could hold in her head as the hours stretched and her world emptied of everything but the pain and shame of having failed at some detail of her work.

Luke gulped for air when Mara withdrew the memory, pulling on the Force to bring himself back toward balance. He clenched his fists as she repeated her initial question.

“No, that's a not a thing other people do. It's barbaric.”

“Oh.” Mara reached for the comm at her belt, plucked it off and double-depressed a button on the side. Then she tucked it back away.

“What was that?”

“A code, to Artoo. He's keeping score for me.” She rolled her neck until it cracked, then settled her head back down on the crate. “When I find something new I thought was normal that registers as
scandalously awful to everyone else, it's a point to him. Every time I get a little of my own back – like the shipyards – it's a point for me. I'm going to see how close I can get to evening the score by the time we kill him.”

She said it matter-of-factly, all grief and rage sublimated into an icy, focused drive for vengeance. Luke had no idea how she managed it. Still struggling with own emotions, he didn't say anything.

“You don't think Bilbringi was worth a point?” Mara asked, faint concern coloring her sense.

“It was brilliant,” Luke assured her. “Can't say I liked being left out, though.”

“You were busy.” She felt something in him respond to that and opened her eyes, turning to narrow her gaze at him. “Something happened.”

“Wedge's friends were looking for you.”

“What?” Mara abruptly sat up.

“They're your family,” Luke mimicked her movement, folding his legs under him in a standard meditation pose. He took a deep breath and drew calm from the Force, preparing himself as best he could for a vitally important – but likely volatile – conversation. “They had something you need to know.”

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Beneath Vader's heavily booted mechanical feet, the floor of the Executor's bridge creaked as his towering rage consumed the space around him, warping and distorting the iron deckplates as it clawed outward from his blackened soul.

This was her doing. That misbegotten, accursed Hand had demolished a prized component of Imperial infrastructure – what was she thinking?

In the control pit at the center of the bridge, officers carefully hid their own nervous fear and muttered low, bracing words to the men under their command. By shared, unspoken agreement, they all studiously ignored the sweat trickling down their brows and under the necklines of starched uniform collars as their Lord growled softly at the scene outside the flagship's viewport.

“My Lord,” only Admiral Firmus Piett had the intestinal fortitude to approach the Sith directly. His parade-ground worthy posture and steady voice gave away not even a hint of the terror that sat in an icy chunk in his gut. “We've secured the perimeter, and confined the media crews in violation of your non-tresspassing edict. We've thoroughly searched every ship and individual, and confiscated all recordings, reports, and other evidence.”

“Well done, Admiral,” Vader intoned. “Return the media mongrels to their ships and then incinerate them all.”

Only a lifetime of military service prevented Piett from reacting with the shock and horror that assaulted him at his master's words. In a clipped, professional tone, he replied quickly, “As you wish, My Lord.”

Certain that he would be promptly obeyed, Vader stalked from the bridge.

Do not test my patience, little Hand, the Sith thought malevolently into the Force as the turbolift carried him toward his personal chambers. I intervened in your intended death for a purpose. Continue in this juvenile insolence, and I will make what happened to you the last time look like a
Mara peered up from where she'd been bent over the dejarik table, currently covered by flimsy sheets containing the Falcon's brand new, still-in-progress blueprints on which she'd been scribbling notes. “You don't like it?”

Leia stood, hands folded in front of her in a prim, Princess-ly pose and tried to keep her expression composed. “It's amazing. I'm just trying to understand.”

“You said we should be friends.”

“So you stole me a Golan?”

Mara made a frustrated noise and straightened, tossing her pencil on top of the sheaf of flimsy. “Friends should help each other stay alive, yes? Solo and Crix said you're terrible about evacuating – you had to be dragged off Hoth kicking and screaming half a step ahead of Vader, for kriff's sake! If you're that attached to staying on base, then the base has to be safer.” She waved one hand in the general direction of the ship's open hatch, indicating the station outside. “Ergo, Golan. I know it isn't new, and there wasn't really time to make it presentable, but -.”

Leia closed the distance between them in three steps and pulled Mara into a fierce hug.

The former Emperor's Hand froze, at a complete loss. Dear Force, are all Rebels this touchy-feely, or is it just Skywalkers?

“It's perfect,” Leia declared, releasing her, “just as it is. And we are going to celebrate. Tonight, at family dinner.”

“I'm sure Farmboy will enjoy that.”

Leia donned her best imperious royalty look. “You are going to enjoy it.”

“I don't think so.”

“20:00 tonight,” the Princess ignored the objection outright. “If you're not here, I'll send Luke to find you.” Without giving her a chance to respond, Leia swept off, indicating she considered the matter entirely closed.

Jade was left floundering in a jumble of emotions she had no idea how to navigate. She heard a twitter behind her and twisted to look over her shoulder.

//You are coming to dinner?// Artoo queried.

“Apparently,” Mara groused. Then she perked up slightly. “You know about these dinners?”

//I always attend. Master Luke says I am family.//

“You have recordings of previous ones in that metal brainpan of yours, then?” Green eyes glittered with an odd combination of cunning and hope.

//Of course.// Artoo's photo-receptor rotated and focused shrewdly on her. //You wish to see them? To prepare?//

“Damn right, I do. Come on, Short Stuff. Let's take this research stint to my new rooms and see how
much I can learn before Luke comes looking for me, shall we?”

Artoo whistled in happy agreement and wheeled after her, delighted.

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“What do you think?”

“It's a pipe. A dirty one.”

Luke rolled his eyes and gave her sense a playful nudge. “I'm going to clean it. It's from the torpedo system of my x-wing – the electrical pulses that triggered the release of the torpedo that took out the Death Star went directly through here. It's the hilt for my new saber.”

The Jedi hid his anxiousness for her validation behind careful shields and waited.

“Good choice,” Mara approved. “Were you able to get your schedule sorted?”

Luke glowed under the approbation. “Yes. I'm released from duty tomorrow and the two days after.”

He went to set the pipe down and cringed when his right hand spasmed, causing him instead to drop it with a loud clang. Quickly, he snatched the metal tubing back up with his left hand and put it safely on the table Mara had dragged to sit directly below the wide viewport in her newly assigned quarters.

“What's wrong with your hand?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” he said too quickly, rubbing the mechanical palm with his other hand, trying to ease the repeating twinge. “I'm just behind on the maintenance.”

Mara eyed the offending appendage critically. “That's not nothing, Skywalker. You need to be able to use your hand.”

“It's all right, I'll do it later.”

“You'll do it now,” she countered, stubbornly. “May as well show me, anyway. I should know how.”

Luke hesitated, tucking his hand into his side against his chest, hiding it behind the opposite elbow. Unfortunately, he couldn't hide his inner conflict so easily, either physically or in the Force, and wondered how much of his own discomfort with seeing himself this way Mara could perceive. Could she feel how badly he struggled with this visceral reminder that he could never escape being Vader's son and everything it meant? Did the despair of meaning so little to the father he had legendized and idolized his whole life leak through their bond?

The thought drove the next words unwillingly from his lips. “I don't want you to see me that way.”

Luke's discomfiture leeched clearly across the bond, and Mara's first instinct was to snap at him not to be so ridiculous. It wasn't his fault that he'd had the misfortune to be sired by a Sith miscreant who was incapable of loving anyone but himself.

That default response was short-circuited by an awkward tug - that same foreign instinct to comfort and protect he'd managed to evoke in her before. Damn bond. She had listened to that prompting last time and, as clumsy as she'd felt the resulting attempt was, it had worked in their shared best interest. Mentally, Mara sighed to herself, then reluctantly gave in.
Catching and holding Luke's gaze firmly, Mara slowly unfastened her jacket and slipped it off her shoulders, her sleeveless under-tunic exposing bare arms. Pulling out two of the well-padded chairs tucked underneath the table, she turned them to face one another. Draping her jacket purposefully over the back of one, she knelt on the seat and held out a hand.

Luke swallowed hard, message clearly received.

His fingers fumbled but didn't tremble when he rolled his right sleeve up to the elbow and moved to lower himself onto the second chair. Bracing his arm against the table's cool surface between them, he took her right hand in his left and pressed her fingers into his palm. Then he slid their joined hands upward, over his wrist and along the ridge in the forearm that mimicked bone.

Mara's touch was steady and confident against his synth skin and Luke let it soothe him. There was no resistance when he cautiously reached for her in the Force, and he was immensely comforted to find not a trace of morbid curiosity or forced levity in her attention – only professional focus on a new skill to learn.

\textit{Nothing to fuss over, Farmboy. Just a different type of scar.}

Her calm seeped across the bond and Luke felt his body relax as it infused him. When he spoke, the evenness of his voice reflected her steadying influence.

\textquote{“The release is here.”}

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Family dinner was everything Luke expected – loud, unapologetically informal, and peppered with the kinds of blushing, eye-rolling and groaning that inevitably accompanied dining with Corellians and their uniquely brash brand of humor. The menu was eclectic and not particularly esthetic, but delicious nonetheless.

He was extravagantly proud of how smoothly Mara integrated herself into the convivial chaos, even after he figured out that she was applying Imperial Intelligence training and techniques to pull it off. His heart ached a little at the dissonance and discomfort he'd catch traces of across the bond (despite her attempts to mask them) as she instinctively contrasted the evening's boisterous conversation and good-natured arguments against the formal State affairs and isolated consumption of ration bars that had defined the spectrum of her previous experience.

On a happier note, Luke thought she was on much steadier ground with Winter and Wedge by the time they both begged off to turn in, citing their plans to start the new-lightsaber-building process in the morning. At any rate, both Winter and Wedge seemed much more comfortable with her, which was a good start.

They took their leave together, but instead of moving toward his door, Luke followed Mara to hers. “Can I come in a minute?”

She didn't say anything, but left the door open when she walked through. Luke took that as permission and followed her in.

\textquote{“If you're here to promise that things like that will get easier with time, don't bother.”} Mara dropped onto the nearest lounger and tugged off a boot.

\textquote{“I was going to ask if you're going to go into a healing trance tonight instead of sleeping.”}

\textquote{“Yes.”}
Both boots off now, Mara took them to the door and lined them up neatly beside it. “Because you need to sleep.”

Luke gave her a confused look. “So?”

Mara didn't look at him, turning her back instead to busy herself arranging the datapads on the table beneath the viewport in neat stacks. “I have nightmares.”

When Luke didn't say anything, she sighed and leaned on the edge of the table, head dipping a little in weariness. “I project, all right?” she grimaced, anticipating just how well this would go over. “The Emperor conditioned me to project my fear and pain before I was old enough to understand that's what was happening. He got off on it - it was a nightly snack of Dark Force energy for him. I haven't been able to figure out how to turn it off.”

Luke dragged a hand over his face, wondering if he'd ever scrape the bottom of the bucket of horrors that had been Mara's life. “I'm sorry.”

“It doesn't matter. A healing trance by-passes dreaming.”

She couldn't use that route forever and they both knew it, but that was an issue for another day. “We need to cover healing trances after my lightsaber is done,” Luke told her. “Bare minimum, I need to be able to put myself in at least a basic one, and we need to find out if I can remote wake you in an emergency.”

“When your saber is done,” she concurred. “Anything else?”

Taking a chance, Luke stepped forward and pressed a quick, gentle kiss to her forehead. “You did amazing tonight, Jade.”

Without waiting for a response – or giving her a chance to protest - he turned on his heel and strode from the room.

Stripping and hurrying through his own nightly routine, he sacked out onto the wide, soft mattress. He felt a brush across his presence and closed his eyes. Made himself be still and calm as Mara's sense fluttered against his, ensuring he was all right before she fell into her trance. He wondered if she was aware that she'd adopted that habit, or if it was simply a subconscious function of the bond. He knew he'd never mention it for fear that she might stop. When she dropped off, he stroked his own presence against the muted outline of hers, a comfortably solid weight in his chest.

Alone in the stillness, his family's happiness still rippling through the Force like a lullaby, Luke surrendered himself to sleep.

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Morning brought the unwelcome news that Luke's leave had been postponed. Intel had scraped together mandatory strategy and protocol meetings for all Squadron leaders in the lead-up to furlough and the anticipated influx of new recruits to follow. Even before those had completed, another delay popped up in the form of an unexpected call to appear before High Command and explain Bilbringi - an inconvenience that even Leia and Madine's best efforts had been unable to deter.

It worked out to be a short meeting. Less than five minutes in, it was clear that there were two primary drivers of the summons. The first was Airen Cracken, who was put out over having been excluded from the adventure - especially since Crix got to go and he wasn't even assigned to
Intelligence, let alone in charge of it. The second was Dodonna, who was simply offended that they’d had the nerve to do anything without seeking permission first.

Mon Mothma spent the duration of the brief assembly just doing her best to remain regally aloof. She mostly succeeded, with the notable exception of the mirth that bubbled off her in the Force when the whole of Luke's explanation turned out to be a bland “she didn't tell me, either.”

Mara cut off Dodonna's blustering tirade with a hand on her hip and a glare that could have carved durasteel. “Our Oath is an independent legal construct between Skywalker and me, and we will run it any way we see fit. If you don't like it, we'll be happy to take our spoils to someone who's less inconvenienced by the lack of advance notice next time.”

Eventually, Luke did get his promised days off and the two secluded themselves in his quarters.

As per Mara's instructions, he spread the parts out in a half circle in front of himself and meditated intensely. Digging deep and unsparingly, he emptied himself of fears, doubts, anger, and sadness. For this moment in time, he accepted himself and his place in the Force completely, just as he was. With methodical, unhurried movements, he ran his fingers over every piece that would be incorporated into his saber, from the hilt to the smallest button. He welcomed each one, acknowledging it's history and enfolding it into himself and his story. Carefully, he wove the pieces together in the Force, melding and merging them.

*Like my prosthetic hand,* he thought with new clarity and peace. *It began apart from me, separate and untethered, but we have become one. Conjoined, whole together. He reached out to the pieces before him, running his palm just above them in a gentle stroke. So it will be with you,* he told them. *Disparate and unique, but whole together. Something more than your sum.*

Luke opened his eyes. “I'm ready.”

Across from him, Mara was still. She'd closed herself off from him as much as the bond allowed, explaining that this was his to do for himself. “I don't want your saber tainted with the feel of me, Skywalker. It needs to be your weapon, and yours alone if it's to serve you to its fullest.”

Now, she levitated the crystals he would need between them. “These crystals were entrusted to me on the promise that I would give them life and a chance to fight again. Do you take that same vow?”

“I do.”

“Then begin.”

Determinedly, Luke lifted the pipe he'd selected and machined to be the hilt of his new weapon. Affixing the ignition button, he attached the connectors and a strip of shielding to the dimetris board, then worked the entire assembly into the shaft. Reverently accepting the crystals that Mara floated to him, he inserted them into their places, then added the high-energy flux aperture to the blade end of the hilt. On the opposite end, he installed the recharging socket. Attaching the leads to a power pack, he let the nearly-formed saber charge for the first time.

As energy trickled in, he saturated the whole of the hilt with the Force. He become a conduit of power, and realized with awe that he was being reshaped along with his saber at an elemental level.

As each piece moved beyond it's former purpose to fuse irrevocably into part of a new whole, Luke felt fragments of himself do the same. The Farm Boy was still there, optimistic and eager. The Rebel pilot was there, reckless and brave but also wiser and more aware. The Jedi remained, a steadfast buffer between the galaxy and the Darkness that would seek to consume it. Vader's son was there,
too, but somehow only the good carried through the process. Guilt and grief and fear fell away, leaving only the Son of Skywalker, accepting of his legacy in all its promises and perils.

And, slipping in at the last, there was the piece of him that connected directly to Mara. The nexu that had first roused to protect her, the friend that ached for her losses and brokenness, the man who held out quiet hope of earning her love.

When the dim beep of the charger registered in his awareness, Luke’s saber was whole and so was he.

Disconnecting the charger, he screwed on the butt cap and tested the weight of his saber in his hand. It felt like an extension of himself, and he smiled. Holding it vertically in front of him, Luke slid his thumb over the ignition. The familiar snap-hiss was music to his soul, and the verdant, coruscated malachite blade kindled a fresh fire in his spirit.

He was Luke Skywalker. Son of Anakin Skywalker and brother to the unstoppable force that was Leia Organa. Jedi Knight and padawan of two of the most revered Jedi Masters in modern history. CorUnum to Mara Jade, the woman had survived Darkness and defied death.

The blade sang to him and, in that moment, he knew that this would be the weapon he wielded when he hewed Darth Sidious in half.

- -

Luke spent the better part of two days sleeping off the after-effects of making his lightsaber. By the time he was up and moving again, Wedge had prepped the shuttle they’d commandeered for the trip to Corellia. He spooled up the engines while Luke made his goodbyes to Han and Leia and found his way to the cockpit.

The Jedi could feel Mara holed up in one of the shuttle’s tiny cabins, but she’d withdrawn in on herself as much as she could. That was disconcerting, but she brushed aside his gentle nudges of concern, insisting she was fine. He let it go for a while, staying in the cockpit until they were safely into hyperspace and reviewing the procedures for their approach and landing on Corellia with his CO. Getting no further response from Mara, Luke bought time by catching up on Rogue Squadron flimsy-work with Wedge.

After a dinner that Mara distantly declined to join them for, Luke excused himself and headed for her cabin. He tapped on the door, and got no answer. He repeated the process. Still receiving no answer, he tossed good manners to the sarlacc and let himself in.

A pocket-sized, disc-shaped portable holo-projector sat on the floor in the center of the small room. Hanging in the air above it were blue-tinted, nearly life sized images of Duchess Satine Kryze and Jedi Knight Vrai Halcyon. The Duchess had obviously been captured at a formal event; she was dressed in a long, fashionably cut gown, every inch of her flawlessly made up and decked out. The Jedi, by contrast, seemed to have been caught unawares, his gaze fixed off-holo, his face creased in laughter.

Mara sat near the head of her bunk, legs crossed, staring at them. “Did the Jedi forbid terminating pregnancies?”

Luke’s heart lurched at the wildly unexpected question. “I don’t know,” he answered honestly. “That’s not exactly the kind of thing Ben or Master Yoda discussed with me. Why do you ask?”

“I was a mistake.”
“No you weren't.” Luke walked around the glowing holos and and sat down on the edge of her bed. “I must have been.”

Mara's shielding faltered in his physical presence, and she suddenly felt suffocatingly bleak. She indicated the data pad displaying the information on the data chip Mirax had sent. “Did you read this?”

He nodded.

“What pacifist would intentionally have a child by a Jedi knowing that if it was a girl, it would be born a weapon? Even if the Emperor had never taken me, never made me – this.” her tone was harsh and bitter, “I would still have been the antithesis of everything my own mother stood for!”

“That's not true,” Luke reproached. “Have you read the rest of it? Battle Coordinators served with distinction for thousands of years at time when there were no wars to fight. The gift can be applied to teaching, healing – all kinds of things that your mother revered.”

“I was born into a war,” Mara said doggedly. “I was never going to be used in a peaceful application.” She blew out a disgusted breath and tugged at the end of her long braid in disgruntlement. “Maybe…” she turned her head to stare at the wall, unable to look at him or at the parents she felt she'd so badly wronged. “Maybe it was better that he took me. That they never had to be disappointed by what I'd become.”

“Don't.” Luke's voice was suddenly hard, and his sense pressed up adamantly against hers, demanding that she feel his virulent protest. “You're not a thing to 'be applied'. If he hadn't taken you, you'd have had choices – like your mother did. Read the data, Mara – as many times as you have to for it to sink in. Your mother may have been a pacifist by nature, but she chose to fight. For her people, for what she believed in.” Luke reached over and carefully pressed a finger to the side of her chin, bringing her head around and making her look at him. “She fought for you, Jade – and your father.”

“They should have terminated me,” she whispered, abject humiliation turning the hue of her sense sallow. “I can't even access my gift – they died for a failure, Skywalker. I was born for one purpose, and I've been unforgivably failing at it – failing everyone – my whole life and I didn't even know.”

Luke gave up trying to respect her personal space. Getting off the bed, he swung around and tucked himself between her and the wall, and leaned in, his chest against her back. She stiffened, but he stayed where he was, his cheek to her temple, his hands rubbing tenderly up and down her arms from shoulder to elbow. It was less than the complete enfolding of her he wanted, but he wasn't sure she'd allow – could handle – any more yet.

“You're letting the Emperor's lies twist your head, CorMeum,” he told her, his voice low and heavy with grief. “You were intentionally denied your birthright by a vile old man afraid of what you could become. That's a lot of terrible things, but it's not failure. And being Force sensitive doesn't negate other aspects of a being's value, you know that – look at Leia. Even if you never touch your gift, you're still brilliant and brave and strong and capable in a dozen other arenas that matter just as much.”

Luke reached out with the Force and slid the projector until it cast its images directly in her line of sight again. “This isn't a punishment, Mara, it's a gift. You get to know who your parents were. They were good people and they wanted you. Corran and Mirax and Rostek want you, too. Just as you are.”
“You think I'm being selfish,” she accused, roughly. “Because you don't know who your mother was. Because your father is a Sith bastard, and I'm being handed family I never asked for on a silver platter.”

“I think you're hurt and scared.” He felt denial surge in her and cut it off. “I would be, too, if I was found by my mother's family and suddenly felt like I had to account for the crimes committed against me and the mess of my life that can't have gone anything like they would have wished.”

He felt a shudder go through her.

“They deserve better,” she whispered, brokenly. “You deserve better.”

“So do you.”

The first mournful mewl was little more than a haggard breath, but it scorched through her chest like it might rend her in half. Mara clamped a hand over her mouth, horror flooding her that even that much had escaped. She was – no, had been – the Emperor's Hand. She did not – could not – cry. It wasn't acceptable.

“It's all right.” Luke's hands were there, gently turning her into his chest, one arm wrapping around her, the other cradling her head to his shoulder as the golden warmth of his Force presence folded itself around her. “You can. I won't tell.”

Given permission for the first time in her life, Mara collapsed against him and sobbed.

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Rostek Horn, Former Director of the Corellian Security Forces, was tall and lean with an aristocratic bearing and a full head of snowy white hair. Depending on his mood, his grey eyes could be warm and inviting as summer mist, or as cold as the darkest iceball in the galaxy. Clad in a formal black suit with a stiff, high collar, he stood motionless, sharp eyes trained on the sky as the shuttle carrying his long-lost granddaughter cut through the puffy white clouds and cobalt sky toward the landing pad.

Security at the estate was run with the same precision that had marked his time in formal service. The ship had passed multiple screenings, and an impressive bank of weaponry and tractor beams had tracked it since it entered range; had it been less than welcome, it would have long since been shot from the sky. But every challenge was met with professional calm and all the right answers. Mirax and Corran had confirmed the voices of Antilles and Skywalker on the comm.

Had he had none of those things, Horn would still have been certain it was the right ship. Though not a Jedi himself, he'd mastered the art of reading Jedi decades ago. Corellian Jedi did not remove themselves from society the way their Old Order counterparts had. As boys, Nejaa and Rostek had grown up together; as often as not it was Rostek's inclination to mischief that had prompted Nejaa to practice and refine his Force use skills – much both their mothers' dismay. Horn had celebrated Nejaa's elevation to Knighthood with the same enthusiasm his friend had cheered his own successive promotions in CorSec. As adults, their well-paired skills saw them routinely partnered on planetary security missions. They had known each other's every quirk and tell.

Thus, though the average observer would see nothing amiss, Rostek could read every tiny, tell-tale shift of his grandson's weight, the way his eyes tracked, focusing and unfocusing as he tried to sneak glimpses of his cousin in the Force.

“Problem?” Mirax asked her husband, pointedly, equally aware of his subtle fidgeting.
“They bleed into each other.” Corran sounded equal parts fascinated and annoyed. “Their presences oscillate in and out of sync. If I didn't know she was there to specifically look for, I could miss her entirely.”

“You think that's new?” Mirax wondered aloud. “He didn't seem to know much about intentionally shielding her when we talked to him two weeks ago.”

“No,” Corran said, thoughtfully, his eyes narrowing at the shuttle. “I think there's a hell of a lot more to that bond than he let on.”

“Perhaps more than he is aware of,” Rostek suggested. “It can be difficult to see the full scope of something when one is at ground zero and has no eyes on the outside.”

“They've got me, now,” the younger Horn said, determinedly. “Us. They don't have to figure it all out by themselves any more.”

Ahead, the shuttle's repulsars flared as it wafted into a flawless landing and commenced its shutdown cycle. A few moments later, the hatch lowered. Wedge emerged confident and easy, followed by Skywalker, and Corran's heart rate sped up. At Luke's side strode a lovely, petite redhead. His investigatively trained eye was immediately drawn to the way she moved – her bearing spoke of noble birth, but it was sharpened by a lithe, almost predatory grace.

“Wedge.” Mirax broke the ice, meeting her foster brother halfway with a hug. “Skywalker. Glad you all made it.”

“Mirax.” Luke nodded respectfully, then gave a half-bow in Rostek's direction. “Director Horn.” His gaze flicked up to the other Jedi and he gave another nod of greeting. “Corran.”

“Skywalker.” Corran addressed the Commander, but his eyes were fixed on the woman beside him. “Mara. Welcome home.”

Luke felt Mara coil more tightly in on herself at the well-intended greeting, the unintentional reminder of the vast disparity between her cousin's perspective and her own. He wanted her to be at home here… and she didn't know what home was.

Rostek's heart twisted in his chest. She has the Halcyon eyes, and her mother's beauty. Oh, Vrai – that you could have lived to see this! He could still picture his younger son the way he'd looked the last time he saw him, alight the way only a man newly in love could be. Imagined that same all-suffusing joy mixed with the insufferable pride he'd have puffed with had he been the one at Jade's side instead of young Skywalker.

“Jedi Horn. Master Trader. Director.” Mara was the holo of politeness and good breeding, her nods and bows precisely calibrated to their ranks, her expression sweet but distant in a way that her grandfather recognized all too well.

How many upper-echelon Imperial children had he seen wear that same mask? Trained to the furthest degrees of duty and decorum, but ignorant of love, every one of them. Beloved child. Is that what he made of you? It shall not stand, I swear it.

Calling on a lifetime of training and practice, Rostek set aside the tsunami of emotions that sought to drown him. Skywalker had warned them that there would be scars; for all her composure, his granddaughter was a trauma victim and he would do well to remember it. Fortunately, trauma did not scare him. One did not dedicate one's life to combating the scum of the galaxy without becoming adept at dealing with the fallout of evil on the innocent.
So he took his cues from Mara and met her on her own terms. If formal was what she was comfortable with, then formal she would have. Adjusting his stance slightly, he adopted the sveltly refined manners he’d have employed if he were still acting CorSec Director and she was visiting royalty.

“Lady Jade. It is a pleasure to welcome you to Corellia. I trust you received the dossier Commander Skywalker was entrusted to deliver to you?”

Mara felt the knots of anxiety in her stomach ease a fraction, and inclined her head in acknowledgment. The appropriately formulaic reply slid off her lips with the ease. “I did, thank you. The thoroughness and thoughtfulness of your inclusions speaks well of how CorSec must have been run under your hand.”

“It is my experience that there is no substitute for appropriate diligence on all fronts,” he replied with professional modesty. “Since you’ve clearly reviewed the documentation, there’s no need to waste time on gratuitous introductions. Would you join me for a late lunch? I've taken the liberty of arranging for some light fare.” He gave a calculatingly self-deprecating smile. “My gardens are famous sector-wide, and I can never resist an opportunity to showcase them to fresh eyes.”

Rostek flourished a hand behind him, indicating the meticulously landscaped gardens that unfolded in complex geometric shapes between the landing pad and the soaring transparisteel windows that covered most of the rear of the three-story villa at the heart of the estate.

This was familiar ground, and a game Mara knew she played well. One look at those intelligent grey eyes, one brush of her Force sense over Horn's perfectly controlled emotions, was enough to confirm that her grandfather knew it, too. This was his home turf – literally – but he was offering to let her dictate the terms of the visit; it was a precious gift.

_Corran and Mirax and Rostek want you, too. Just as you are._ Luke's words replayed in her head and, for the first time, it occurred to Mara that they might actually be _true_.

The rest of the knots in her stomach slowly dissolved, and gratitude fluttered across her sense. She allowed a hairline crack in her strategic facade and let a tiny but real smile peek through to accompany her formal words. “It would be my pleasure, Director.”

“Excellent.” He offered his arm in a courtly gesture. Mara slid her hand into the crook of his elbow without hesitation and smoothly fell into step beside him.

Wedge wasn't sure why formal rules were in effect, but he was game nonetheless. With a gallant bow, he held his arm out to Mirax. She accepted with mock majesty, and they swept off in the others' wake. Left to themselves, Luke and Corran brought up the rear.

“Your grandfather is exceptional,” Luke said quietly. “The only other person I've seen her take to so quickly is General Madine.”

“Yes,” Corran agreed, “he is.” He paused. “You said before that you didn't know if your bond shielded her. It does.”

“Really?” Luke's eyes snapped sideways, and he visibly brightened at the encouraging words.

Corran explained what he'd felt as they mounted the stairs towards the stone landing where a table had been set out. Luke examined the crisp, spotless linen and fine china and instantly felt every inch the farm boy. He decided his own discomfort was more than compensated for by the satisfaction that colored Mara's sense. Family was uncertain ground, but _this_ she could do. The carefully structured
rules of formal dining – and the subtle negotiations that they could be used to work out – were her milieu.

*It's not as hard as it looks,* she assured in his head. *Just follow my lead.*

---

Leia stopped in the doorway of her bedroom and smiled. Han lay sprawled on his stomach across her generously sized bed. He dragged one eye open to appraise her naked form appreciatively.

“What're you doin' out of bed?” he mumbled, rolling over and working a hand free of the covers to wiggle his fingers for her to come back.

“Some of us need to eat between ravishings, you know,” she teased, climbing under the covers to snuggle back into him.

“Royalty,” he complained, mock-seriously. “You're just not built for proper Corellian benders.”

“I don't know,” she stroked his cheek lovingly. “I'm getting pretty addicted to you. By the time furlough ends, I might be able to keep myself going on nothing but you for days.”

Han pulled her into a long, leisurely kiss that made fresh heat pool in her belly and rekindled the lustful need she'd thought well sated. “Good,” he said, when he eventually pulled away. “Because when I get the *Falcon's* galley redone, you're going to be permanently banned from touching anything but the wine rack and conservator.”

Leia pouted. “I'm not *that* bad.”

“Yes,” he told her, bluntly, “you are, Princess.” The affectionate way he combed his fingers through her long hair took any sting out of the words.

“Well,” she said thoughtfully, “*It is* going to be my own personal consular ship. That usually qualifies as worthy of a dedicated chef droid.”

“Maybe I can put in a request for Mara to steal us one next time she takes out an Imperial facility,” Han joked.

Leia shifted to lay her ear flat over his heart, soothed by its steady beat. “Do you think they're doing all right?”

“Long as she hasn't told Luke she expects to die for him yet, yeah, they're probably fine.”

“What?” The Princess twisted her head back to stare at him, disturbed.

Han related his conversation with Mara and Leia was quiet a moment. “You told her we were going to have kids?”

Solo hesitated. “I thought you wanted some. Little hellions to name after your parents.”

She fidgeted with the edge of the sheets, not meeting his gaze. “That was before I knew about… *him.*”

“You're not a thing like Vader,” Han told her, sharply, ducking to meet her eyes in a stern gaze. “He won't even have anything to do with you, remember?”

“That's just because I'm no good in the Force,” Leia protested. “If I had any potential there, he'd be
after me just like he is Luke.”

“You're not like him,” he repeated, tenaciously. “And you can't let him dictate your life.”

She was silent a while. “We would make adorable babies,” she finally admitted.

“Course we would,” Han agreed, returning to finger-combing her hair. He gave her a small grin. “Charming, too, if they take after me.”

She made a face at him, but gave up fidgeting with the sheets to wrap both arms around him. “They'll have the Force, you know.”

“So do you and the Kid, and I keep you anyways,” Han shrugged. Then he asked carefully, “what if they don't?”

“Then I'll be very, very happy for them.”

For a time, they just lay there, enjoying their rare moments of uninterrupted peace.

“Han?”

“Yeah?”

“When they come back, I want to make a lightsaber.”

Solo's eyes snapped open and he rolled his head to the side to look at his fiancee, suddenly grim. “You want in on that Jedi stuff he and Jade are doing?”

Leia shook her head, put a placating hand on his chest. “No – or, not really. I know where I belong, and that's not it.” Her eyes hardened. “But if we're going to have little Organa Solo babies to fill that nursery you've got planned, we need to be able to protect them. I can't afford to let my dislike of my Jedi heritage keep me from a potentially very effective weapon in that cause.” She turned warm, serious chocolate eyes on him. “You won't – that won't come between us, will it? Me studying Jedi arts?”

“To protect our kids?” Han shook his head. “Long as it's my bed you come back to every night, Sweetheart, you do whatever you think you have to.”

Warmth flooded her and Leia rolled over, sitting up fully atop her smugger, straddling his hips. She ran a hand coyly down his chest. “I can think of something I need to do right now, Captain.” She shifted her weight backwards, grinding her core against his quickening member.

Han groaned and gripped her hips. “Please say it's me, Your Highnessness.”

Leia laughed and leaned down to kiss him. “It's definitely you.”

---

Lunch was delicious and, by the time dessert had been served (some kind of elegant mousse Luke couldn't identify but enjoyed), an accord of sorts seemed to have been reached.

In return for her grandfather's generosity in letting her set the terms, Mara tendered a concession to her family's understandable curiosity about her. Dining concluded, the group retired to an elegant but cozy parlor where she sketched a fair – if heavily edited – outline of her training, duties, and lifestyle as the Emperor's Hand. She offered no more detail on the cause of her execution than she'd given High Command, again stating only that she'd been caught aiding enemies of the Emperor.
At her prompting, Luke had largely taken up the story from there. Leia's inclusion of Wedge at Family Dinner meant he had already faced – if not fully processed – the shock of finding out Luke was Vader's son. With Mara's consent, Luke proceeded to drop that same bombshell on her family.

He was bluntly honest about how much of the bond they were figuring out as they went along, and about the risks they faced. He prayed that somehow, amidst all the tumultuous news, the Horns would see and understand what he couldn't say aloud – that he loved her, would never hurt her or let her be hurt by who he was.

“And that brings us to now,” Luke concluded finally. “Nejaa showed up, sent Corran to find us, and here we are.”

The emotions ricocheting around the room were stifling, and Mara decided everyone was due for a break. “Speaking of being here,” she interjected, “I'd like to see the rest of the estate before dinner, if I might.”

“Of course,” Rostek answered smoothly. “I'll have Elegos escort you. He'll show you anything you wish. Commander Skywalker, Captain Antilles – rooms have been prepared for you if you'd like to settle in. I have some business I need to attend to.”

Wedge found Luke sitting on the steps of one of the garden terraces, head in his hands. “You all right, Boss?”


Antilles sat beside him. “Telling people who your father was?”

“Yes. Most of this is his fault.” He stared, unseeing, at the ground. “He's caused so much pain, Wedge. How am I ever going to make up for it all?”

“That’s not your job,” his CO objected.

“Master Yoda thinks it is,” Luke countered, miserably. “He thinks I ought to kill Vader and re-found the Jedi Order.”

“Is that why you didn't go back after Bespin?” Wedge asked, genuinely curious. “Because you didn't want to do what he wanted you to?”

Luke shook his head. “I didn't go back because of Mara.” The Jedi clasped his hands in front of him, squeezing until his knuckles turned white as a fresh bout of anger caught him. “He dismissed her as a lost cause. Didn't want me anywhere near her.” He stopped, struggled a moment, and then said softly, “and if I re-found the Order, I can never be with her.”

Wedge looked at him askance. “You're bonded, Boss. Doesn't really sound like you two can get rid of each other.”

“I mean be with her,” he emphasized. “The Order didn't allow 'attachments.'”

“Oh.” Wedge turned that over in his head for a while. “Maybe Corran can adopt you into the Corellian Order instead,” he suggested, eventually. “They obviously don't have the same hangups.”

Luke opened his mouth to say he didn't think it worked that way, then closed it again. Could it work that way? The Corellian Order was Mara's heritage, after all – all she had to do was decide she
wanted to embrace it, and she was in. And they were bonded. Son of Vader or not, it wasn't like Horn wouldn't have a strong motivation to let him in – if he even considered himself the gate keeper of the remnants of Corellia's Jedi traditions.

“You don't think they're going to exile me from the planet by the time this visit is over?”

The Jedi kept his tone light, joking, but Wedge knew his friend too well to miss the very real concern and hope in his voice.

“Mirax likes you,” Wedge informed him, dryly. “Corran wants another Jedi to hang out with, and Rostek owes you his granddaughter's life. I'm pretty sure they'll let you in.”

- -

“Hungry again?” Corran asked his wife, amused, when he found her in the kitchen, halfway through another cup of mousse.

“There's no one to shoot here, so I'm drowning my frustrations in sugar.” She stabbed her spoon back into the dish with more force than was strictly necessary, then violently threw it across the room to clatter against a wall. “She was a child!” She pinned him with a hard gaze, naturally dark eyes gone truly inky with fury. “He tortured her. She can edit all she wants, but it was right there between the lines,” she dared him to contradict her.

He didn't even try. “I know. I heard it, too. Could feel it in Skywalker, which was even worse,” he sighed, scratching the top of his head as the gnawing grief crawled across his skin and scalp again at the memory.

“It could have been you,” Mirax continued, her sense beginning to vibrate with the severity of her agitation. “It could be our child, targeted like that.”

Corran tried to placate his wife. “Only Halcyon girls can be Battle Coordinators,” he reminded her. “He’ll never want me.” The next part was harder to say, but he choked it out anyway. “And we've had this conversation before. We don't have to have kids until after he's dead – or at all – if you're not willing to take the risk, Sen.”

Her sense went abruptly still. “It's a little late for that.”

Horn felt the floor drop out from under his feet. “What?”

“It's. Too. Late. For. That,” she repeated, slowly, enunciating each word with tight precision.

Corran stared at his wife, gobsmacked. “You're… really?”

Despite the gravity of the situation and the fragility of the grip she was using to hold her wild emotions in check, Mirax felt her lips curve into a bit of a smile. Her husband was adorable when she managed to take him completely by surprise with something.

“We have been trying.”

“I… but…” Horn groped for coherence, even as he thought his heart might explode from happiness. “How long have you known?”

“A few days,” she admitted. “I wanted to see how long it took you to figure it out, mister I-have-to-investigate-everything-even-remotely-out-of-the-ordinary.” She scowled. “I was going a good job keeping it under wraps, too, until this.” She gestured toward the mousse smeared across the wall.
Corran didn't give a womp rat's ass about the mess. Darting forward, he scooped her up and swung her around. “A baby, Mirax!” He set her down, one arm wrapped around her waist, snuggling her to him, the other cupping her cheek tenderly. “Oh, Sen.”

“What if it's a girl?”

For the first time since they'd started discussing his family heritage and the possibility of children of their own, Corran saw fear in his wife's eyes. Meeting Mara had made the hypothetical threats against their offspring viscerally, terrifyingly real.

“He won't get our baby,” Corran slid his hand back to curve around base of her neck, fingers massaging soothingly.

“He got her,” she shot back, maternal instinct and hormones making the words harsher and more cutting than intended. “What's to stop him from taking our baby, too? What gives us any kind of edge over her parents in that fight?”

“Me.”

Mirax and Corran both spun, startled. Wrapped in the intimacy of their shared elation and fear, both had been utterly failed by their usually well-honed senses.

Mara stood in the doorway of the kitchen, a wide-eyed Elegos a silent shadow behind her. Every line of the former assassin's body was taut with tension, and Corran could feel a grim resolve like nothing he'd ever experienced crackle off of her in the Force. Mirax jumped slightly, and Corran realized that the crackling wasn't just in the Force... little sparks of purple light were snapping off of his cousin like static.

“I shouldn't let you,” Mirax found her voice first. “Shouldn't let you go anywhere near him ever again.”

“That's already going to happen,” Mara brushed the halfhearted protest aside. “But this changes things.” She canted her head a second, a slight frown crossing her features as if she were remembering something, then she shook it clear. “I'm not enough like this, any more.”

Before Corran could ask what she meant, Luke and Wedge skidded into the room from the other direction, alarmed gazes darting between the others.

“What happened?” Luke demanded, eying the purple sparks surrounding this CorUnum.

“I have to access my gift,” Mara told him, categorically. “I thought I was enough, like this, but I'm not any more.”

“Why not?” He asked, warily.

“Solo was right. I have to come back.”

Confused, Luke reached across their bond for understanding. When it came, his eyes blew wide and a shock wave of savage emotion rolled off of him.

*You thought I'd let you die for me?*

*It wasn't important.* She glanced at the Horns. *It is now.*

“It was always important, CorMeum.” Luke's voice was just above a growl, and he kept his gaze
locked on hers until she gave a helpless shrug, unable to provide voice to the mental mess inside her.

Mara felt Corran's eyes on her and registered for the first time how close in color they were to her own. *The Halcyon eyes,* Elegos had told her during their tour. Odd that it had taken facing the possibility of her own abuse replayed on a small, innocent piece of her family to open herself to the very real things that already linked them.

She had felt disjointed when they landed, like she didn't fit. Now, suddenly, she had a place here, with these people who wanted her to be part of them. She felt Luke's spike of feeling as he caught the thought, and she buried it away to deal with later. She had a place, but in this moment it not broken, struggling Mara Jade her family needed. It was the Hand.

“*I'll fix this,*” she vowed, hands clenching at her sides. “*I will* find a way to access my gift, and the Emperor will be dead before your child is born.”

Corran stepped from his wife's side and held a hand out to Mara. “*Not alone, cousin.*” Horn was a quick learner, and hadn't missed his grandfather's method, so the words were firm but also distinctly an overture, a request.

Mara eyed the hand extended to her, then ran a glance over Mirax and Wedge, hope radiating off them both so brightly it was almost blinding. And Luke, a seething, roiling mess in the Force, who somehow managed to (mostly) contain it all and give her only a nod of encouragement so slight everyone else missed it.

Grasping Corran's proffered hand, she finally accepted the welcome he'd tried to offer the first moment she arrived. “*Not alone.*”

Chapter End Notes

I know Mirax was kind of quiet this chapter; she'll get a chance to shine in upcoming ones. Promise.
An hour into the impromptu celebration Rostek had decreed to celebrate Corran and Mirax's good news, Mara was still sparking. She'd discreetly inched herself away from the linen-draped tables perched among the riotous blooms of the estate's magnificent sunken garden, worried that the purple bursts of electricity coming off her at an increasing rate would singe little black-edged holes in her grandfather's cherished flora. At least the burbling of the sculpted fountain at her back masked the disconcerting sizzle of sparks hitting water and stone.

She searched her sense for what must have been the twentieth time, scouring for an off switch, a reroute – anything to make herself stop spitting electricity. Tamped down, again, on the distress that welled inside her as the fire prickled along nerves still fresh with the memory of having been charred by similar, if colder, bolts.

Reflexively, she triple-checked her shields and upped her efforts to ignore the barely concealed turmoil bubbling at the edges of her mind behind Skywalker's own shields. No doubt he was still thinking of cornering her immediately following what Wedge had dubbed “The Kitchen Pact”; of the altercation that followed.

“Mara.” Luke's face had been tight, his sense all agitation. “Tell me you didn't mean what you said – about planning to die.”

“Planning to win,” she'd corrected, distractedly, still too caught in the myriad ramifications of what she'd just promised and her own tangle of emotions to fully pay attention to his. “Whether or not I walked away from the victory didn't matter, before.”
“It matters to me,” he'd snapped. “I defied two Jedi Masters for what they did to you – how could you think I'd just turn around and sacrifice you myself?”

“The sacrifice would have been mine.” She'd looked at him then, confused, wariness rising as anger she didn't understand rolled off him in dark, dangerous currents. “Why are you upset?”

His stare had been equal parts disbelief and acrimony. “You'd throw away both our lives – casually – and I'm not supposed to be upset?”

A tiny part of Mara's brain questioned if Skywalker had any idea just how much power was churning around him in response to his ire. The rest of her simply reacted on instinct to the all-too-familiar threat of being the object of a more powerful Force user's wrath. Her adrenaline spiked, and she compulsively dragged every fiber of her shielding as close and hard around her as she could against the anticipated assault. But she didn't back down.

“You'd have been fine.” She bit the words out. “A little pain, maybe, when the bond broke. But it's not as if -.”

She was against the wall, suddenly; pinned in place by Skywalker's body and massive pressure in the Force. Eyes paled to ice bored into her, and she felt his growl in her chest as clear and coarsely as it ground over her ears.

“You're woven into the fabric of my soul, Jade. If you die, you take me with you. Now. Already.”

Terror lit up her brain, and the world went fuzzy and indistinct. The piercing stare blurred as her pupils flared, and she registered – as if at a distance from herself – her lungs constricting, breath skipping as she gasped out an apology. A plea. A refutation. Something – the only word she could form.

“No.”

- -

Luke sipped the cold, frothy ale he held and pretended to listen to the wild story Wedge was regaling them with, nodding and smiling at the all the right places. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Mara edge another step away from the festivities. From him. The expensive drink turned sour on his tongue and his gut twisted at the memory of her face, inches from his, bone white and wild-eyed.

Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to suffering.

He and Wedge had dropped what they were doing and torn across the house when he'd felt her skitter off the rails that afternoon. Skidded into the kitchen, and collided with the staggering, horrifying realization that she expected to abandon him. To evanesce out of existence, stranding him alone with the cold comfort of victory. Because she didn't think it mattered.

He'd tried to quash the torrent of fear the revelation had loosed in his chest, to control his tone and give her the benefit of the doubt when he'd caught her alone, after. It might have worked... right up until she blithely suggested that losing her would be nothing more than a minor inconvenience. Like having half his soul ripped away would be of no more consequence than stubbing a toe or scuffing a knee.

He hadn't pulling on the Force. Certainly he'd never meant to bind her with it, to trap her between himself and the wall, heart hammering as her body was pinned up like a Sriluurian butterfly on display. He'd been so lost in the urgency of making her understand that he hadn't even realized what he'd done until she'd choked out a single word of protest.
It had cleaved through his chest, slamming loose a memory that rocked him to his core: eager, innocent young Mara in Vader's quarters, hanging dizzy and strangled against the Sith Lord's wall. Just like this.

He'd lurched backwards, dropped his pull on the Force entirely, rattled. Watched, sick at himself and at a loss for what to do as Mara gulped for air and straightened shakily. She hadn't said a word, hadn't even looked at him as she'd walked out.

They were both here, now, celebrating with the Horns and pretending nothing had happened. The others were too sharp not to have noticed something was off but, given that no one had so much as said anything – let alone locked him up or thrown him out – he suspected she hadn't told anyone.

Who would she tell? He asked himself bitterly. You were all she had.

Still, he permitted himself a microscopic sliver of optimism when he saw Corran head in Mara's direction. Maybe she wouldn't be entirely alone in the aftermath of their fight, after all.

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“You planning to actually climb into the fountain if that gets any more lively?” Corran gestured to the corona of sparks around his cousin with a friendly grin.

“Force lightening and water are not a good combination,” she told him, seriously, her grip on her empty wine glass tightening just perceptibly.

“You've got experience with that, I take it?” Horn kept his tone mild, but his demeanor slid toward grim.

“I'm something of an expert in the subject.”

Corran weighed that answer before responding. The way she'd said it suggested it was not something she was pleased about, much less proud of. It didn't take much to infer what types of forms her experience had taken, then. So more humor, but a different track? “Sparking something you do often?”

“First time.”

Both concern and hope cropped up at that, and Horn reminded himself not to judge or react to facts when there was still so little information to evaluate them by. “Related to the decision to pursue your gift, maybe?”

“I think so.” Mara hesitated, thought about their agreement from earlier. Not alone. Conceded, “I haven't been able to figure out how to control it at all.”

“Maybe I can help.” Corran set his half-empty glass of ale on the fountain ledge and winked at her. “Halcyon girls aren't the only ones with gifts, you know.”

Mara eyed him suspiciously, even as she set her own glass aside. “And what are you good at, Horn?”

“Absorbing energy,” he told her smugly, extending his right hand. Turning it so the palm faced upward, he cupped it slightly. “It's a rare Force talent, but it runs pretty consistently in the men of our line.”

Mara watched curiously as Horn delicately sucked a handful of the electrical sparks surrounding her
toward himself. As soon as they got within a few centimeters, they dove for his palm like metal filings to a super-magnet. A fraction of a second later, they melted into him, infusing his body with their charge and energy.

“Stuff this small is just a little buzz,” he remarked easily, increasing the pull to bleed off more of the halo of tiny sizzling lights around her. “Do this with a generator or a ship's engine, and you can have some real fun.” He flashed her a mischievous grin as he looked up, but it dropped from his face instantly at her stunned expression and a twist of pain in the Force. “What's wrong?”

“You -.” Mara stopped. Licked her lips. Tried again, her voice faint and thin. “You can always do that?”

“Yes.”

“It runs in our family.”

“Yes. Mara, what's wrong?”

It's too hot. She can't think. Can't let herself think about this. He knew. It hadn't been enough that she'd suffered – her torment had been a private joke at her expense, besides. How could she have worked so hard and still been worth so little? There is the taste of bile at the back of her throat and there is so much ache inside her that she doesn't know if she can swallow it down; if there will be any room left inside for even that much. She wants to break something – anything – but there's nothing here that will do.

Old, familiar Darkness oozes from the ground, licks at her ankles with a forked tongue until she shudders. Revenge, it hisses, seductively. Justice. We can have it. I can make it so easy for you.

“Mara.” Luke is there, now, beside Corran, both of them broadcasting deep concern creeping quickly toward alarm.

“Luke, tell me you see that.”

“I see it.” Luke watched the Darkness swirl up around Mara's calves. Felt it hiss words he couldn't make out. A new brand of fear trickled gelid and viscous down his spine.

Before either of the men could work out how to intervene, Mara gave a vicious kick in the Force, flinging the oily Darkness off of her. Green eyes snapped open, locked on Luke.

“You needn't worry.” Her voice was hollow, eerily detached from the igneous rage spuming and churning through the rest of her. “It doesn't want me, not really.” Her hands clenched into white-knuckled fists. “I'm not enough for it to bother with. Never have been. It just… mocks.”

That was all the explanation they got; she turned on her heel and stalked away. Corran opened his mouth to call to her, but Luke stopped him with a hand on his arm. “Let her go.”

“What the kriff just happened?” Horn demanded.

“What were you doing, with the sparks?” Luke asked instead of answering.

Corran explained, baffled when anguish flickered across Luke's sense before being forcibly dissipated.

Skywalker rubbed his face with his hands as if abruptly drained. “Mara's execution.” he said, finally, reluctantly. “She didn't tell you. He used Force lightening – fried her alive. He used it her whole life,
for the smallest infractions.”

Corran was aghast, and it took several minutes to find his voice. “Insult,” he said, eventually, when he could get words out again. “Insult on top of injury. And she didn't know until now. Oh, Force.”

Seven hours. She’d been sitting, half dressed, in the enormous bathtub in the refresher attached to her suite for seven hours. Mara wrapped her arms around her ribs, tilted her head back and rested it on the cool tile wall behind her. The tub was empty, of course; she hadn’t been joking when she told Corran that Force lightning was not to be mixed with water unless one wanted vast, painful destruction. Which she did, but not here. Not wrought on her innocent family.

And she was nearing the point of emitting full-blown Force Lightning, now. When she’d decamped the party for privacy and space in which to grapple with the latest revelation of Palpatine's cruelty, the sparks had begun to progressively blossom into full bolts of purple electricity, crackling nonstop in fulgent arcs around her. Not yet ready to face anyone, but concerned about the potential damage the uncontrollable discharge might cause, she'd stripped down to a loose tank and shorts and retreated to the fully tiled refresher to burn and think.

The untouchable aura of power that had always hovered out of reach in the background, like a mural painted on a far wall, had started to press in on her invasively not long after she'd settled in. Another hour after that, something in her core had ruptured, spurting sharp, jagged jets of energy between her and the outer rim of the aura. Every flash lit up the power sphere's interior, illuminating the foggy green miasma that filled it.

Most of the energy was swallowed by the haze, dissipating before it got more than halfway through. Here and there a bolt would cut all the way to the outer edge where it stuck and clung, seeming to weld itself into the shell, leaving long thick strands of energy draped across the chasm. It reminded Mara unflatteringly of a dying Bothan well spider, firing sloppy strands of caustic silk from it's burrow into hunters' tightening net as it succumbed to their poisoned darts.

Most recently, she’d started suffering bouts of nasty virtgo, the world tipping and tilting violently for a few moments before she could right it again. It occurred to her that she ought to reach out to Luke, to at least let him know what was going on. But he’d want to talk about earlier and, even this many hours in, she wasn’t ready.

There was a fresh rush of scalding pain along her nerves, and she wrestled again with the flashbacks to her execution that tried to push their way to the fore of her mind.

Stop it, she ordered herself fiercely as the world rocked around her again. Panicking won't help. Just wait it out. You've survived worse. You can…

Abruptly, everything lurched again and she lost her grip on her balance and her shields. Fleetingly, she felt Luke's startled sense graze over her, and then there was only blackness.

“I didn't realize the colors meant anything.” Luke ran a thumb over the hilt of his saber and rolled his head in lazily in Corran's direction.

It was the wee hours of the morning. Nearly everyone else had subsided to the comfort their beds, and the estate was quiet. Both Jedi could feel Mara's shields, high and hard, and neither could bring themselves to sleep until they knew she was all right. Nor could Rostek who, after getting the story
from earlier, had secluded himself in his study to work with Corran's promise to keep him apprised of any further developments.

Unwilling to breech her privacy – she'd holed up in her room, behind a closed door and fierce shields, and refused to see anyone – the Jedi had retreated back to the gardens with a bottle of Whyren's and fallen into easy, rambling conversation about their paths to knighthood.

“You had two masters and neither thought to tell you?” Horn sounded puzzled.

“They weren't overly concerned with much of anything that didn't send me hurtling towards Vader with the intent to kill,” Luke opined, glumly. “What do yours and Mara's mean?”

“You said hers in purple, right? That's halfway between red and blue, and it tends to falls to those who walk the line between light and dark.” Corran motioned toward his own hilt, hanging from his belt. “Silver blades indicate dedication to something larger than oneself – law and order, usually.”

“Aren't all Jedi dedicated to something larger than themselves?”

“Yes,” Horn agreed. “But we don't all serve the same way. Like the Rebellion,” he offered an analogy. “Some of you are pilots, some are ground crew, some Intel, others logistics. You're all devoted to the same larger cause, but you get there through different methods. Individual Jedi are wired differently – connect to the Force in different ways, so how we serve differs, too.”

“What do you mean?” Luke cocked his head intently.

“Lots of Jedi are like you – direct conduits of Force power.” Horn grew more animated as he warmed up to his subject. “You pull and wield energy directly through yourself into the desired end result. Mara and I are different. I'm a converter, she's a hub. That whole bubble of power around her? It's not something she wields, it's something she fills with other people and their power. She brings it all together, unifies it into something more than the sum of its parts – or should be able to, at least. Me, I catch, hold, and convert energy. Like earlier.”

Luke fiddled with his saber hilt, struggling with his frustration. *How did they expect me to rebuild the Order without knowing any of this?* Aloud, he griped, “My Masters never told me about any of this.”

“Sounds like they were pretty selective,” Corran observed, his disapproval clear. “Makes me wonder what else they left out.”

“Redirection and healing trances,” Luke said immediately. “Those were the first two things Mara noticed, anyway.”

“What? I thought everyone learned redirection as a youngling!” Corran looked shocked. “You never did the steal-a-mini-rhyschate lesson?”

“Of course you did,” Corran said, as if suggesting otherwise was ludicrous. “Using the Force takes a lot of energy – you have to stay properly fueled.”

“Yes. Can't say I use them often, though. Bacta's just as easy most of the time.”

“Yeah, but healing trances don't taste disgusting,” Luke retorted with the visible distaste of someone all too familiar with the healing goo's lingering, cloying aftertaste. “Mara's going to teach me – she's an expert.”

“Really?” Horn looked surprised. “Wouldn't have thought the Empire would be short on bacta.”

“She's bacta intolerant.”

“I see.” Corran decided he wasn't ready to push for details on this new facet of Mara's history yet. “Is there anything else I should know, while she isn't here to kill us for talking about her?”

“No med bays, med droids, or painkillers. Ever.” Luke thought for a moment. “Or -,” he stopped mid-sentence when the duracrete shields around his Mara-place shattered and there was an explosion of dizzy anxiety in his chest. He automatically reached for her, but she slipped through his fingers like quicksilver, disappearing. “Mara!”

Corran leapt to his feet a half-second behind Luke as Skywalker bolted upright and took off.


“I don't know.” Luke slammed through the door of Mara's suite without bothering to knock and followed his internal homing beacon straight to the 'fresher. Mara was slumped sideways in the tub, encompassed in a boiling, popping carapace of Force energy.

“What the -?” Corran trailed off as they both jerked to a halt just inside the door.

“Please tell me you know something about this.”

“This goes way above my pay grade,” Corran shook his head. “But I might be able to find us someone who does.”

- -

Of all the places Luke had imagined himself meditating, a refresher had never made the list. But there he sat on the heated tile, back to the wall, passed out Mara to his left, with Corellia's twin moons rising slowly through the large, round decorative window set high in the wall.

To his right, Corran sat facing the tub, eyes closed as he, too, rode the currents of the Force, trying to call out to his grandfather.

“You needn't worry, Luke. She'll be all right.”

Both Jedi's eyes snapped open at the sound of Ben Kenobi's voice in the still air, his glowing blue form coalescing in front of them.

“Ben? What are you doing here?”

“I've come with the Masters Halcyon. They'll be along momentarily – they've less practice with manifesting, yet.” Kenobi looked fondly at his last pupil. “You are walking a path I would not have chosen for you, Luke. But I have come to realize that does not make it the wrong one. The future is always in motion, and your decisions since Bespin have altered it dramatically.” The Jedi hooked his hands in his belt and said firmly, “I failed your father by refusing to see that his destiny did not lie
within the rules of the Old Older.” He flicked a glance at Mara, then back to Luke. “I will not repeat that mistake with you.”

The was a shifting of layers in the Force, and two presences joined them. Oddly, these two remained invisible.

“Ah, there we are,” Kenobi remarked.

“Grandfather.” Relief and triumph colored Corran's sense.

“As summoned.” Nejaa sent a ripple of affection over his grandson. “And I've brought the cavalry. Corran, Luke, this my aunt, Master Tarazet Halcyon. The last Battle Coordinator in our line.”

“Why haven't you appeared?”

Tarazet sighed dramatically. “It's a ridiculous amount of work Corran, darling, and I simply haven't the energy to spare.

Luke didn't care if they were visible or not. He cut straight to the point. “Do you know what's happening to Mara?”

“Just a bit of an episode,” Tarazet reassured.

“Don't ever say that where she can hear you,” Corran advised.

Tarazet's voice turned rancorous. “That isn't supposed to be part of it.” Her tone sweetened again. “Corran, dearest, will you let me use your gift a moment?”

“Sure.” Horn wasn't entirely sure what she meant, but he was game for anything at this point. He yelped when she slid a tendril of Force energy through him. He watched in detached fascination as two orbs appeared in the air between himself and Skywalker. He could feel that it was his power of illusion and projection creating it, but aside from providing the energy, he was a passive observer. The implications were staggering; if he hadn't trusted his aunt explicitly it would have been terrifying.

“This sort of thing is generally frowned upon,” Tarazet warned, “for obvious reasons. But desperate times call for desperate measures.”

There was a light current of energy from the Force ghost, and one of the two orbs being projected between the Jedi enlarged. Golden and flawless, it glittered with warmth and power.

“This is what my power web looked like at the time of my death,” Zet informed them. The orb shrunk, and the other expanded for inspection. “This is what Mara's looks like right now.”

Seen in whole, the misshapen globe barely qualified as a sphere. Where the Master's had been so densely woven as to be nearly opaque, Mara's sphere was transparent and vacant save for what appeared to be a bubbling, spurting crater at its center. Here and there, a few ragged strands of some kind connected the ruptured core to the pocked, uneven outer walls. As they watched, the bilious green haze clogging the whole of the interior caught and diffused a fresh strand launched from the
The sense of wrongness in the Force was so pronounced that just looking at it hurt.

Tarazet adopted the prim, clipped tones of an instructor. “Battle Coordinators are born with very small spheres of power,” she explained. “As a coordinator grows and matures, so does her power. When she achieves the necessary physically and mentally capacities, her innate Force connection will initiate. There are several ways that can manifest, but quasi-electrical sparks and arcing are common. Once the arcing had made the initial connections to the sphere the sparking usually ends outwardly, but can continue for quite some time internally until the preliminary web is in place.”

Corran frowned. “But Mara's been using the Force her whole life,” he pointed out. “Why are the connections only just starting now?”

“Because Sheev is a snot-brained mynock who isn't half as smart as he thinks he is,” Tarazet spat.

“What?” Zet sniffed. “You thought Emperor was his name?”

It struck Luke in the moment before Ben stepped in that it had never occurred to him that the Emperor might have a first name at all.

“Master Halcyon was a venerated member of the Corellian Order when Sheev Palpatine was in diapers,” Kenobi supplied diplomatically. “Having become one with the Force prior to his becoming a Sith, she has reserved the right to refuse to acknowledge his self-elevation.”

“To answer your question, Corran,” Nejaa dragged the conversation back around to point, his tone grim. “Palpatine failed to understand how a Coordinator's gift works. He never grasped that Mara – her intention, her awareness, her soul – was the key. Thus, in the process of gouging out space for himself in her mind, he destroyed necessary elements and connections in her brain. Unable to begin the process without them, the portions of her that control this cycle went dormant. This experience has been so compressed and violent for Mara because her body and sense are trying to make up for lost time.”

“But why now?” Corran pressed. “Why not when she and Skywalker tried to access the sphere at Indigo Base?”

“Because there wasn't enough of her to initiate the connection,” Tarazet said softly, her voice sad. “She was too fragmented – unattached, unmoored. Perceiving herself as temporary. Most of what the sphere could find to work with was remnants of Palpatine-derived wreckage or the pieces of Luke that are fused to her, neither of which are suitable for building the power web. From a functional perspective, she wasn't 'present' and capable until today, when she chose to fully embody herself.”

That was… disturbing. Luke pushed away a creeping sense of guilt that he'd somehow managed to be bonded to Mara and still not fixed that. Taken up residence inside her and taken her into himself and utterly missed how fragile and fleeting she read it all to be. I'll do better, he promised the Mara-place inside him. Forgive me, and I swear I'll do better.

Unable to voice that sentiment in present company, he asked instead, “What is that green fog, eating the starter connections?”

“The atomized, decomposing remains of what should have been Mara's power web,” Zet bit out, acidly.
“The Emperor was too terrified of Mara’s potential to be used against him to allow her any interaction with her gift,” Ben expounded. “But gaining access to such an enormous well of power himself was too enticing a possibility not to pursue.” He spoke with controlled Jedi calm, but Luke could feel decades of grief and guilt behind the words. “In his attempts to force access, the Emperor destroyed that which he hoped to control.”

“Like trying to hot wire a ship and burning out the circuits,” Corran sighed. “Makes a nasty kind of sense.”

“Can it be repaired?” Luke asked quietly.

“Yes,” Tarazet replied decisively. “Mara will have to create most of her connections manually, and she will never be unscarred. It will be a painstaking process, but she can build a full and stable power web.”

“How long will she be unconscious?”

“Her current state,” Nejaa said, heavily, “is only indirectly related to that process.” He paused, groped for control amidst a current of caliginous emotions before continuing. “Luke, you’ve seen the scars inside her mind?”

“Yes. After we bonded. I – they’d been cauterized. Sealed.” He got the impression of a nod from Mara’s grandfather.

“Unfortunately, like many old wounds, they remain more sensitive than undamaged flesh. Combined with her uniquely brutal previous experiences with Force electricity, the initial attempt to construct a power web triggered a trauma reaction. Her mind shunted itself out of her body in self-defense. She’s not so much ‘unconscious’ as ‘away’ in self-imposed exile until it’s safe to come back.”

Corran and Luke exchanged disconcerted glances before Horn asked, “she can do that?”

“It’s a bastardization of selective elements of her gift,” Tarazet admitted, reticently. “She discovered it accidentally as a child, and her subconscious latched onto it as an emergency measure.”

Luke’s heart ached, and he forced himself to concentrate on the moment. “How do we help her?”

“Given sufficient time, Mara Jade should return to her body on her own,” Ben told him. “However, we believe that you have the ability to reach her through your bond and bring her back sooner. Once she is here, Master Halcyon help her begin the healing process.”

Luke set his jaw, firmly. “We’d better get started then.”

- -

Half an hour later, Mara lay on her bed, near the edge. Corran sat cross-legged in plush wing-backed chair beside her, her right hand in both of his, resting on the chair’s well-padded arm as he siphoned off the stream of energy pouring out of her. All around the room, small objects spun and danced in an intricate ballet as he transmuted the power he was absorbing into his favorite form of release – telekinesis. It was something he could only do in the wake of absorbing power, and he had no shame about either practicing or enjoying it now, despite the unwelcome circumstances that had gotten them here.

Weary from the massive effort of staying this far into the living world, the three Force ghosts had vanished once the course of action had been set. Retreating into the flow of the Force, they promised to regroup and gather their energies, and then return. The Jedi had given Rostek an update, and he
insisted on seeing Mara for himself. Now, he sat vigil near the door to the bedroom, that Corran should not be alone in the event something went wrong while the other Jedi was under in search of Mara.

Luke finished draping a thick, fluffy blanket over Jade's still form, carefully tucking in the edges as he wrestled down his own nervousness. When he was content that she was as comfortable as he could make her, he propped himself against the padded headboard, his hip at her shoulder. Resting a hand at her temple, he stroked the delicate skin there gently with his thumb.

Closing his eyes, he let the rest of the world fall away and sank inside himself. For all that she felt distant in an odd, undefinable way, Mara's core was still connected to him. The bond's 'homing beacon' still shone clear and bright. Fresh determination flared. She needed him.

He just hoped she'd be ready to speak to him by the time he found her.

- -

Tracing Mara's whereabouts was different than hopping in his x-wing and chasing her down, he discovered quickly. Instead of crossing physical space, he was digging through dimensions in the Force – at least that was the closest he thought he could get to verbalizing it if he had to. It was a slow, clumsy process to which none of his previous training or experience seemed to apply.

Somehow, eventually, he found himself emerging from the gauzy, clingy layers of the maze he'd been working through into an empty circular room hewn from some kind of weird stone. It took a minute to register that it was raw cortosis ore. A single, large chair of the same stone sat in the middle of the room, adorned with thick, rough-cut steel bands positioned to lock an occupant in at wrist, elbow, shoulder, ribs, hips, knees and ankles. The only illumination was a dull light filtering in from narrow slits set high in the multi-story walls, and his breath showed clearly as billowy puffs of white in the bite of the wintry air.

In the dim light, he could make out Mara’s slender shape pacing along the room's perimeter, the fingertips of her right hand trailing along the wall beside her. Judging by the mottled, layered tracks her bare feet had left in the thick dust on the floor, this was what she'd been doing since she got here. She wore only a thin shift of some kind of insubstantial, murkyly colored material, and there was a worrying, faintly blue cast to her skin. Without thinking, Luke tugged off his over-tunic and started striding across the room toward her.

“Luke?” She turned when he approached, startled.

“Are you all right?” he asked. Then, before she could answer, added, “Here. Put this on. You have to be freezing.”

“It’s always cold here,” she said offhandedly. Still, she let him slide the tunic over her arms, and wrapped the edges together around herself when he let go. “How did you get here?”

“I followed the bond's homing beacon.” He smiled at her, proud of himself for that in spite of everything.

She looked at him incredulously. “To the Oubliette? But this is… I don't even know where this is. I've never known. It's just… away.”

“The Oubliette?”

“Where you go to get lost. To make people -.” She stopped, pressed her lips together in a hard line.
“Make them what?” Luke asked, gently.

*Make them stop hurting you, because it's not satisfying any more when you're not there to suffer.*

Luke swallowed the anger that balled in his gut at that pragmatic assessment and told her, “Your great-aunt Tarazet says this place is some kind of bastardization of your gift. A survival mechanism. She showed up with your grandfather and Ben, to help.” He searched her face. “Will you come back with me?”

She shook her head. “I don't know how. It just happens on it's own, eventually. I go completely numb here and wake up in my body. I've never figured out how to go back intentionally.” A haunted look came to her face. “I used to try, but it just made things worse.”

“You can come back now the same way I got here,” he assured her. “Follow the beacon.”

“How do you know it will work? That I'll find you?”

Luke's reached for the hand she wasn't using to hold his shirt closed. Her fingers were stiff with cold, and he rubbed his own over the back over her hand as he pressed her palm atop his heart until he was sure she could feel the rhythmic thud.

“Because you're always right here, CorMeum. You can never go anywhere you can't find your way back from, or where I can't find you if you need me to.”

Her eyes flicked from where their hands were pressed together to his eyes, and something unsettled rolled across her sense. “Luke… about earlier.”

“I'm sorry,” he interrupted her faltering words, squeezing her hand earnestly. “I'm so sorry, Mara. I didn't mean to -.”

She shook her head, cutting him off. “It's all right. You were angry. Anger brings consequences.”

“Not like that,” he told her, seriously. “Never like that. Not from me.” He cupped her cheek, tipped her head back to meet her eyes. “You are precious to me, Mara. I never want to see you afraid of me again.”

Her brow furrowed. “I wasn't afraid of you.”

“I felt your fear, Jade.”

Mara searched for words, and ended up with only the same messy jumble she'd had while sitting in the tub. “I thought there was more time,” she said, frustrated at her inability to express herself. “Before it would hurt you. I've never…” she closed her eyes, summoned calm. “I'm expendable, Skywalker. I have always been expendable. No one has ever needed me. Getting hurt, risk, dying – it's never mattered.”

Understanding dawned, and Luke reached out, pulling Mara against his chest and wrapping her securely in his embrace, his cheek against the top of her head as she let herself be tucked into his warmth.

“Being responsible for other people is scary,” he confirmed, thinking of the first time he'd flown in command of Rogue Squadron. He remembered with brilliant clarity the moment he'd gone from flying as just another member of the team to the stark, heart-stopped realization that every one of those lives was on his head. In his hands. In an instant, every decision became weighted with the gravity of a solar system.
And he'd been part of a team before that. Part of a family, part of the Rebellion. Taking command of people who went in knowing full well they could die. Mara had hit that moment of realization without warning, found herself responsible for someone she believed could not be allowed to die at all. No wonder she'd been terrified. The relief that she had not been terrified of *him* was sweet and freeing, and he gulped it in like he'd been wandering the Judland Wastes alone and without water for days. He loosed the tight, restrictive shields he'd been keeping his presence behind and reveled in the feel of her welcoming the touch, instead of shying away as he'd feared she might.

“If it helps,” he offered lamely, “I have complete faith in you.”

“You are obnoxiously optimistic,” she groused. But pressed against him she could almost feel her fingers and nose again, so she stayed where she was a moment longer. Hidden in his arms, wrapped in the feel of him, she was able to ask, tentatively, “If I don't make it out of here, if I fall back in, you'll... come for me again?”

His arms tightened around her, and he tipped his head to press a kiss to her hair. There was a whisper, a rustle in the Force that felt like *neverlettingyougomakeeverythingright* -- but when he spoke there was just the simple, solemn vow of a farm boy, murmured like life itself in her ear. “As many times as it takes, CorMeum. I won't ever let you be lost to me.”

Mara let out a sigh, and felt the Oubliette dissolve around them. *Let's go home, Skywalker.*

- -

“He found you.”

Luke opened his eyes, and found Corran's relieved gaze fixed on Mara's face. She nodded wearily, then her eyes darted over his shoulder to where Rostek had appeared.

“Worst house guest ever,” she mumbled to him, grimacing in apology.

Rostek stepped forward, past Corran, and tenderly brushed a hand over Mara's rumpled hair. “You are not a guest, Beloved,” he corrected, firmly but kindly. “This is your home, now.” He smiled at her, an arch, impish smirk that immediately made her feel better in spite of herself. “Besides, everyone knows Jedi are an expensive, disruptive habit. I'd have felt slighted if you hadn't brought any chaos with you.”

Mara managed a weak laugh. “Never short on that,” she promised.

“Excellent. Now,” Rostek reclaimed her hand from Corran and laid it carefully across her ribs over the blanket. “Get some rest. I stock the best caff in the sector, and I can think of nothing I'd like more than for you to take breakfast with me tomorrow.”

Eyelids impossibly heavy, Mara nodded. A moment later she was tumbling into a healing trance, her body eager to redress the day's strains.

Rostek shifted his gaze to Luke. “Are you all right, Commander?”

“Just tired,” Luke assured him. He shot a half smile at Corran, and repeated the man's words from earlier. “Using the Force is hard work.”

The other Jedi smiled back, relief etched in his sense over a sort of frayed, burned-out smokiness. “I feel like I just finished a first-class bender,” he agreed. “You need help getting back to your room?”

Luke shook his head. “Staying here.” It might be inappropriate, but he wasn't ready to leave her yet.
The others seemed to understand. Rostek bid him goodnight and helped an unsteady Corran up from
his chair and off toward his own rooms. When the door clicked shut, Luke wriggled lower on the
bed until he was laying flat beside Mara. Sliding his right hand a few inches across the covers, he
hooked his pinkie into hers. Her resting signature pulsed against his skin. It was a tiny touch, but
enough to reassure himself that she really was with him again. Exhausted, but with fresh hope, he
passed out.

- -

Mara woke with the sun. Though she could have used a few more hours in the trance, upon finding
(much to her delight) that she was no longer spewing electricity, she decided to get up. Extricating
her hand carefully from Luke's, she rose, moving almost silently through her ablutions then slipping
out the door. She was picking her way purposefully downstairs when Elegos found her and directed
her toward a bright, airy room he referred to as the 'breakfast salon'.

Mara savored the early rays of sunshine streaking over the horizon and through the giant windows as
she fingered the velvety petals of one of the lilies in a fluted vase on the sideboard. It was a rare
shade of purple – almost plum.

"Your grandfather made that for you," the butler announced, unexpectedly, appearing and setting
down a silver tray on one of the small round tables behind her. "Crossed the purples of bellflower
and gooseberry, and bred them into a lily. It represents anticipation and unwavering love to those
who speak the language of flora."

"He didn't know I existed," Mara protested, turning around to face him.

"Vrai sent word when he knew Satine had conceived," the butler countered, lifting a spotless silver
pot to pour her a steaming cup of divine-smelling caff.

Mara considered that as she accepted the mug. "Drink with me?"

Elegos poured himself a cup, doctoring it liberally with sucra cubes before joining her at one of the
floor-to-ceiling windows. "When word of their deaths reached your grandfather, he was told you had
died in your mother's womb, your body incinerated with hers." The butler shook his head, a wave of
sadness rolling off of him as he remembered those dark days. "Rostek was heartbroken that he'd
been denied the joy of meeting you." He smiled faintly. "They were so delighted to be expecting a
girl. They already had Corran – a granddaughter to spoil would have made everything perfect."

Mara carefully guarded her composure and sipped her caff, sighing softly at the pleasure of
consuming the first class delicacy for the first time in so long. (The Rebellion didn't spend its limited
credits on quality caff, much to her dismay, and Solo had spent too long knocking around the
seediest parts of the galaxy to acquire appropriately refined tastes in beverages.)

"Was no one the least bit upset, knowing what I would be?"

Elegos lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "Battle Coordinators create harmony," he said, sounding
genuinely surprised. "Who wouldn't welcome that?"

"They create death," Mara tried the same argument on him that she'd used on Luke in the shuttle on
the way to Corellia. Had it only been a couple days ago? It felt like so much longer.

The butler cupped his hands around his steaming caff and regarded her, dark eyes serious. "Halcyon
women have always been a reflection of the times in which they lived," he said, at last. "They select
and magnify the best of what they find around them. In times of peace, they enhance harmony. In
times of war, they amplify the pursuit of justice. Like each of us, they do the best they can with the
time they have been given.”

The words sank into Mara's soul with unprecedented potency.

“I'd like to meditate before I have breakfast with Rostek and the 'Jedi stuff' begins. Have any
suggestions on a good place?”

Elegos considered, then nodded. “To the left of the main greenhouse there is a smaller one. The entry
code is two-seven-seven-four. I would try there, were I you.”

Mara nodded, then lifted her cup. “I can take this?”

He smiled, took her cup from her hands, and placed it on the silver tray. Then he lifted the tray and
handed her the entire thing. “Discerning the will of the Force is hard work, from what I understand.
You'd best take it all.”

Mara gave him a bemused look and dipped her head in thanks. Taking the tray, she left the house,
meandering her way down the garden paths to the indicated place. Balancing the coffee service on
one hand, she punched in the code and waited for the beep and click. Pushing the door open, she
nearly dropped her precious cargo as she was swallowed whole by the fragrant perfume of lilies.

Very carefully setting the tray down on the one of the only unoccupied flat surfaces she could find,
Mara poured herself a fresh cup with unsteady hands and walked slowly to the center of the domed,
circular transparisteel enclosure. Then she sank to the single clear spot on the floor and let out a
shaky breath.

The entire space was filled with her lilies. Lush and vibrant, they sprawled across the floor, inched
up the walls, rambled over the edge of every fountain, bench, and low wall. Every blossom seemed
to radiate exactly the emotions Rostek Horn had engineered them mean. You are loved, they crooned
to her.

Wanted. Waited for.

Mara felt Luke flutter a touch over her, suddenly awake and concerned over her swell of emotion.
She sent a cursory “all's well”, then went back to sousing herself in the feel of the place. It was more
centering and calming than any meditation she'd ever done; almost like being plugged into a battery
charger, she reflected.

She didn't know how much time passed, but the door opened and Skywalker stepped inside. Paused,
in awe of the sensations flooding the enclosure.

Can I join you? Even in her head it was little more than a reverent whisper.

She nodded, unwilling to break the silence with words, and held out her cup. Luke sank to the
ground, sitting so close his knees touched hers. He accepted the caff gratefully, and closed his eyes,
joining her in the quiet revelation of peace.

- -

“You sent caff with them?” Rostek stood in the window of his study and looked out over the gardens
to where the morning sunlight gleamed off the rounded roof of his private greenhouse.

“When have I let anyone go anywhere without caff?” Elegos chided, linking his fingers behind his
back and stepping to his employer's side.

Horn smiled, a small, private smile only those closest to him ever saw. “It is truly your love
“Corran assures me that your love language still sings in that garden. They will not fail to feel it, Rostek.”

“The restoration has begun,” Horn said quietly. “So many years devoured by Dardanellian locusts, as the proverb goes. But we are getting them back, now. The dead returned to us. New life on our doorstep.”

“You will walk that garden, rocking your great-grandson in your arms,” Elegos nodded. “As you once dreamed to do with Mara.”

“The days grow short,” Rostek’s tone turned grim. “And they will be dark yet before we get our new dawn. We must be ready.”

“We will be,” the butler said simply. “But be sure you do not miss the joy of this moment in preparing for those yet to come.”

Rostek chuckled. “Studying the teachings of the Living Force while you mind the estate, old friend?”

“It is the best to annoy you with.”

The old men fell silent, companionably lost in their memories and hopes. Before them, the sun continued its climb, glinting here and there off the transparisteel of the small greenhouse in which a dream long thought lost unfurled a little further into being.

- -

When the chime of the chrono told them it was time to meet the others, Luke and Mara maneuvered through the lush gardens to the designated patio where they found Corran and Rostek waiting with a fresh pot of caff.

“How are you feeling?” Rostek asked his granddaughter, offering up another cup of the perfect brew.

“Better,” she assured him, closing her eyes with a hum of pleasure as she inhaled the rich, slightly bitter aroma of her drink. After her first sip, she took the chair next to his, pretending not to notice his wash of pleasure in the Force at her choice. “Your greenhouse is… unique.”

“It is but a tiny fragment of the glory Force sensitive horticultural masters used to be able to engineer, if what I’ve read is true,” Rostek admitted. “But I take great pleasure in it.”

“It’s a little overwhelming,” Luke commented, sipping another cup of caff himself and thinking that it probably wasn’t a good idea to adopt Mara’s caff habit, enjoyable as it might be. He felt her ripple of amusement, and sent her the equivalent of a mental dirty look. “The scope of what the Jedi once did, all the things they used to integrate the Force into that’s all but lost now.”

“You’re not seriously going to start the Old Order over by yourself, are you?” Corran asked around a mouthful of pastry. “Wedge said something about Yoda trying to convince you to.”

Luke grimaced. “Yeah, it was kind of a penance for my father kripping it up in the first place, I think.” He sighed. “I do want to make up for what he did, and the galaxy does need Jedi again.” He fiddled with his cup. “But I’d be lying if I said I wanted to lead the whole endeavor myself. Especially when the Old Order had so many flaws.”

Luke's eyes slid to Mara, then away. “Yeah, for starters.”

Rostek started to reply, but stopped when all three Jedi abruptly swiveled their heads in the same direction, focus sharpening. Assuming that meant their company had arrived, he waited silently.

As before, Ben Kenobi appeared to the young Jedi while the Masters Halcyon remained present but invisible.

“Welcome back,” Corran greeted, cheerfully. “Mara, this is our other grandfather, Master Nejaa Halcyon, and his aunt, Master Tarazet Halcyon.”

“Hello.”

“Mara,” Nejaa's voice was warm and rich. “It is such a pleasure to finally meet you in person.”

“Likewise.” Cocking her head at them, she asked, “Why are you lurking instead of manifesting?”

“We're hoping for a little help with that from you, actually,” Nejaa answered, unoffended. “If you are willing to link us to yourself, we can stay significantly longer than if we have to remain under our own power.” Here his voice took on an undisguised touch of boyish hope. “If you add Corran into the mix, he can project us so that Rostek can us as well.”

“I don't know how,” Mara reminded him. “And except for this mess,” she gestured to her head, trying to indicate the latest developments, “I haven't been able to access my power.”

“That 'mess',” Tarazet informed her, primly, “is enough for now. If you'll let me in, I can make some temporary connections -- enough to get us started. We can address the rest of the matter once we're all nice and stably here.”

Something inside Mara hitched at the idea of just letting someone in, even someone she had every reason to trust. As if it weren't risky enough on it's own, there was the whole matter of her newest internal mess. Luke had been as polite and delicate as he could when he explained, but she had no use for niceties. Unless this got sorted out, she would continue to exist in the Force equivalent of a putridarium, living and working amidst the rotting, necrotic remains of her own power.

For all the horrors Mara had survived and all the atrocities she had deliberately perpetrated, that was enough to make even her skin crawl. Being in contact with it herself was revolting; the idea of throwing open the door and inviting someone else in to be defiled by it was devastating. She felt Luke's sense brush across her own, a braided sensation of chiding, empathy and encouragement.

She won't judge, CorMeum. And she can help.

Just because you have a history with mucking about in garbage doesn't mean everyone's so comfortable with it, she shot back, defensively.

Luke glowered at her. It was an emergency measure, taken under duress, he retorted, huffily. Then he softened and nudged a little harder.

Kind of like this.

Mara sighed, drawing herself up and quashing her pride with effort. “You know it's disgusting in here, right?”

“I've done my share of my share of slumming, dearest,” Tarazet reassured her. “It will be fine.”
Taking one last fortifying sip of her caff, Mara put the cup down, set her jaw, and nodded sharply. “All right, then. Go ahead.”

- -

Things had not, as it turned out, been “fine”. Tarazet had anticipated being able to slip in to Mara's power sphere, set up a few quick-and-dirty connections, and have them all chatting along in short order. It would be a messy job in an unpleasant environment, but it shouldn't have been hard.

Instead, she'd promptly gotten mired in the decaying ooze. Luke and Mara had both gotten involved to free her and help her find a minimally safe spot from which to work. As the minutes had lengthened after that, it had become obvious that none of this was going to go to plan.

Eventually, they'd split up. Ben and Nejaa returned to the flow of the Force, offering privacy the only way they could. Corran and Rostek had taken Mirax and Wedge out to Coronet City for the day, leaving the estate nearly empty. Luke and Mara had sequestered themselves in the study with the Tarazet. Mara had lain in one corner, under an open window, where the feel of sunlight and the fresh breeze could offer a desperately-needed counterpoint to the gruesome work her aunt was doing internally.

Master Halcyon had explained it clinically as a form of debridement, an unavoidable scraping off of layers of putrid, caked on remains of Force energy that had been corrupted by the Sith's clawing, festering assaults on Mara's power sphere.

All Luke knew was that it felt like she was being skinned alive from the inside out, and that every fourth or fifth agonizing rasp brought fresh memories of the worst days of Mara's life spurting out into her conscious mind like pus from an infected wound. After the third time he'd lost her to the Oubliette, they'd taken a break and rigged a sort of makeshift Force catch using the bond. It became Luke's horrible job to keep her there, present and conscious, when everything in her tried to shunt her away.

At that point, they'd given up all vestiges of propriety or space, Luke laying on the floor on his side, Mara's back to his chest. He wrapped himself around her, equal parts forcibly holding her there and pouring himself into her with every scrap of comfort and strength he could find. Their fingers wove through one another's, and they held on as if their lives depended on it. In a way, they did. All their lives depended on this; that knowledge was the only thing that kept them going as tears seeped down their cheeks and Mara's body shook, hanging perpetually on the edge of shock.

Fourteen hours into their trek through hell, they got their victory.

“Mara? Dearest.” Tarazet was too hoarse to continue, and switched to speaking directly into their heads. It's done, my brave girl. It's all gone.

Unable to do anything more, Mara made a small, vague sound of acknowledgment.

Sleep, Sweetings. Tarazet smoothed a shaky Force touch over them both. It will be easier tomorrow.

- -

Finding them still on his floor the next morning, bloodshot and almost too stiff to move, Rostek flatly refused to let them even consider attempting the next steps in the process and demanded a day of rest. Over Luke's muddled protests, Elegos escorted him to his room, shepherded him through washing up, and put him promptly to bed. His head no more hit the pillow than he was out cold.

A few rooms away, Mirax finished tucking Mara into her bed as well. Rostek released the button that
controlled the tinting of the huge windows, satisfied that the room was dim enough for his granddaughter to sleep and turned to follow Mirax out.

“She looks like hell,” Terrick-Horn scowled as soon as they were out the door. “I'm about ready to run that kriffing Sith bastard through myself if it will give her a break.”

Rostek took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm as they headed down the hall. “I share the sentiment,” he concurred, gravely. “But I believe there are going to be other things our Mara needs from us more in the days ahead.”

Mirax looked at him shrewdly. “You have a plan,” she accused, good-naturedly.

“Don't I always?”

Myri hooked her free hand around Horn's arm as well. “I'd be disappointed if you didn't.”

“I assume your condition hasn't reduced your interest in being involved?” he teased.

Mirax snorted. “Sign me up, gramps. I could use something to blow up right about now.”

“If you're going to keep swearing, would you do it Basic, please?”

“Palpatine is a 'frog-humping son of a drooling whore and a kowakian monkey lizard'.” Without opening her eyes or moving from where she once again lay very carefully still on her back on the floor, Mara translated her aunt's furious string of Olys Corellisi for Luke.

After a strictly enforced day of rest, during which they'd been obscenely spoiled by everyone and eaten absurd quantities of food, Luke and Mara had found themselves back in Rostek's study. It was their fourth day in Corellia and, true to Tarazet's promise, this round of work on Mara's head was far less agonizing. Which was not to say that it was fast, easy, or without its own significant discomforts. But the worst was over, and both Ben and Nejaa had returned. Luke got the impression they'd been stricken by the condition in which Tarazet returned to them after the last session, and by whatever she'd told them about the cost to Mara.

In any case, they seemed determined to maintain a solid stream of support and humor this session, and had been in rare form all day. While he had no previous experience with Nejaa to use for comparison, he was certain he'd never seen Ben so intentionally relaxed or smart-mouthed – alive or dead.

“Is that better or worse than a 'rancor-kriffing doxy bastard’?” Luke asked, somewhat rhetorically. His left hand rested on Mara's stomach, just at the base of her rib cage, and he eased a little more of his own energy into her through it when he felt her muscles contract in a sharp cramp under his palm. She sent a tiny pulse of gratitude, but otherwise her attention was fully focused on trying to control her breathing.

“My favorite so far was the one about deserving to have all the planets in the galaxy shoved up his ass,” Nejaa offered companionably from where he was propped against the adjacent wall, long legs stretched out in front of him, ankles crossed. “What about you, Kenobi?”

“I thought the 'stupid inbred sack of motherless nerf meat' had a rather poetic ring to it,” Ben opined serenely.

“Mock me again and I'll cut you both off,” Tarazet snapped. She'd connected herself first, and her
shimmering blue form sat crossed-legged at the crown of Mara's head.

To Luke's quiet amusement, she had demurred Jedi robes and appeared to be wearing a fancy ball gown. When he'd inquired, she'd informed him with a sniff that if one had any fashion sense at all, they would get immensely tired of wearing the same thing for the entirety of the afterlife and change it up now and then. Since practicality no longer mattered, there was no reason not to wear whatever one wanted. She had distinctly glowered in her nephew's direction as she lectured, leading Luke to suspect this was a conversation they'd had between themselves more than once.

“No one is mocking, Aunt Zet,” Nejaa admonished, his grin giving him away despite the innocent cast of his tone. “Learning the various degrees of cursing is an essential part of Jedi training. How else is one to clearly discern the level of trouble one faces in a given situation?”

“Insufferable, the lot of you,” she groused, irritably. Then, “Aha! Got you!”

Nejaa blinked into sight like someone had flipped the switch on a holo projector. “Well done,” he cheered.

“We might say the same of you, young Mara,” Ben lauded.

“Save the compliments.” Mara extracted herself from under Luke's hand and put both palms on the floor as she rolled precariously to her knees. She closed her eyes against the wave of dizziness. “Just tell me what comes next.”

“Rest,” Tarazet pronounced firmly. “It's nearly dinner time and Rostek will kick us out if we work you too long today, bless his heart. The connections I made need a few hours to settle anyway before we stress them, and you'll want to be fresh for everything there is to tackle in the morning.”

“Right.” Mara slowly sat back on her heels, letting her breath out in an even, controlled hiss as her stomach settled. She had woken up that morning with her ability to pull of the Force modest at best, just as it had been her entire life. It was heady and bizarre to realize that she would go to bed in a few hours connected to a vast ring of power. Power that was hers. Not borrowed or lent or temporary or conditional. Just solidly hers.

It would take some getting used to in more ways than one. Before she'd laid down to let her aunt begin, she'd lived with her feet on solid ground. When she came upright again, it was as if she'd been installed in the heart of a gyroscope. She was still a fixed point, but the galaxy suddenly seemed to move on all axes around her. To say it was disorienting was an understatement.

Tarazet eyed her with concern. Having unofficially claimed Mara as the apprentice she never got in life, she found herself unabashedly protective of her new charge. An irksome trait, considering that incorporeality limited her ability to create a satisfactory fuss. “Luke, darling, you'll see to it that she eats, won't you? And get her safely to bed?”

“Of course,” he promised, then added, “though I'm sure Rostek is two steps ahead of me on at least the feeding her end of things.” He looked from Tarazet to the others. “You'll be back in the morning? Or do we need to summon you, somehow?”

“We'll meet you in the gardens, again,” Nejaa stood, stretching from habit rather than necessity. “Bring Corran and Rostek, will you?”

“Pretty sure we couldn't keep them away,” Luke smiled, rising himself and reaching down to gently pull Mara up. “Until morning, Masters.”

One by one, they blinked out of sight, their presences retreating into the flow of the Force. Mara
staggered slightly as the rings around her shifted, then righted herself. “This is going to be a pain in the ass,” she griped.

“Lucky for me you're keeping all the dizzy to yourself,” Luke remarked, sliding an arm around her waist to keep her balanced as they started toward the door. “One of us ought to be stable. Come on. Corran promised mini-rhyscates.” He grinned at her. “And we won't even have to use redirection to steal them.”

Chapter End Notes

Putridariums are a real thing, and there's a really good post on them over at The Order of the Good Death if you're interested.
Corellia II

Chapter Summary

Mara & co. wrap up their visit to Corellia and set us up to return to our regularly scheduled program of blowing up the galaxy.

Chapter Notes

This is a little shorter that usual, but there wasn't any better place to break it. Next chapter starts right back in with blowing stuff up, and I couldn't bear to rush that just to make it all fit in one chapter. Lots of logistics and set up here, but please bear with me. Thanks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Projected by the beyond-state-of-the-art equipment in Rostek Horn's private, heavily reinforced (and even more heavily encrypted) comm center, Leia's form was crisp and clear. The expansive display plate allowed Luke to illuminate her at full life size and, aside from the faint blue tint of all holos, it was almost as if she was there with him. He was suddenly acutely aware of how much he missed her. Impossible as it sounded, this was the longest they'd been apart since the revelation of their sibling-hood. The pang of yearning to see her folded into the raw ache he'd been carrying in his chest for two days already, adding to the dull throb of hurt and frustration.

A quick flip of a switch and the image froze mid-movement. Luke leaned back in the generously padded seat and stared at his sister, thoughts in turmoil. Furlough had obviously been good for her. She looked rested and energized, a fact he knew was no doubt largely attributable to Han's efforts to keep her occupied with things other than Rebellion business. Luke's mind skittered quickly away from that line of thinking. As much as he wanted every happiness for them, Leia was his sister and there were some aspects of their relationship it was best if he didn't think too much about.

Of course, the reason she'd interrupted his trip with a message at all was certainly cause for enthusiasm in and of itself. Or should have been. The triumph of it in her voice still rang in his ears. The first contingent of troops are back from furlough, and the number of new recruits they've brought with them surpasses all our expectations. We've got talented, eager beings pouring in every day, and it's critical that we get them up to speed as quickly as possible.

Word of Bilbringi had spread, and lit a fresh fire under beings on the fence about joining the struggling Rebellion. That was unequivocally positive. It was the next words out of her mouth, laced with apology but still bordering on an order – because Leia had all but forgotten any other way of asking for anything, these days – that made his stomach knot.

Is there any way you can come back early, to help with screening new pilots?

He had to. Wanted to. Of course he did. It would be stupefyingly unfair for him to stay on Corellia being spoiled by the luxuries of the Horn estate on a private errand – one that tied up Wedge, besides
– when there was so much essential work waiting at Indigo Base.

*I'm not ready.* It swelled inside him – a harsh, instinctive rebuff against the well-intentioned suggestion. Guilt was fast on its heels, biting hard with nasty self-disparagement for his selfishness. He'd already gotten more from this trip than he could have hoped for, and Leia was only asking for a few days.

But there just wasn't enough time. In a few minutes, dawn would break on their ninth day on Corellia. He should have three more days before they left. With one more spent in travel, they'd be back at Zastiga just shy of twenty-four hours before the official end of furlough.

Four more precious days before Mara left him. Complying with his sister's request would cut that down to just over twenty-four hours. Hours. And then she'd be gone.

*Please, Force – I'm not ready.*

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Wedge was blinking bleary-eyed into his caff when Rostek joined the laughing group in the garden for breakfast, as had become their habit in recent days. The sun glittered off the dew sprinkled across just-unfurling blossoms in the elegant stone grotto that Mara had declared her favorite. The air was rich with the perfume of flowering trees and the heady aroma of dark-brewed caff, underscored by a whiff of buttery, caramelized sugar from ever-present platter of flaky, nut-and-spice filled breakfast pastries.

"Come on, man," Corran was jibing. "You really thought you'd be able to drink Iella under the table?"

"She's gotten better since last time," Wedge grumbled, nursing his cup with the exaggerated care of a man so hung over that any sudden moves feel distinctly perilous.

Rostek could only imagine the vast quantities of liquor needed to put a Corellian fighter pilot with Antilles' tolerance in such a state. He allowed himself a small, indulgent smile as he leaned down to kiss Mirax's proffered cheek. "Did you have a good time, children?"

"Watching him and El moon over each other and pretend they weren't?" Corran cocked a thumb in Wedge's direction and snorted. "Absolutely."

"Did not moon," the other man whined, wincing when the pitch of his own tone aggravated the ache between his ears. "Sides, think she cheated. Popped some CorSec anti-'nebriation pill or something."

Rostek chuckled. "It's possible," he agreed. "She is still active duty; she'd have access. I trust Elegos is whipping you up his famous hangover remedy?"

"As we speak," his grandson confirmed. "Luke got a comm from Princess Organa. He should be around in a minute."

"Might I borrow Mirax and Mara in the meantime, then? I've something for them."

"Please," Wedge piped up immediately. "They're being mean."

"Just because you can't hold your drink -," Mara started objecting.

"All right," Mirax cut them off, shoving to her feet and crooking her finger imperiously at Jade. "Leave the man alone and let's go. Rostek is almost as good at giving presents as my dad, and I want
to see what he's got.”

A few more rapid-fire snarks were exchanged before Mara acquiesced, but several minutes and two sub-levels of the estate later both women were watching with interest as her grandfather pressed his hand flat to the scan pad beside a nondescript, unobtrusive door near the end of a corridor.

“I don't think I've been down here before,” Mirax commented.

“You wouldn't have had cause,” Horn told her as a flash of light zipped left to right across the pad, and a polite chime told them his print was accepted. A second later, the door slid open with a soft hiss and he chivalrously motioned them in ahead of him. “It's deep storage. These are old things.”

He followed the women into the spotlessly clean, brightly lit room then directed them to the right. There was a bittersweet hue to his voice when he stopped in front of a tall locker on the far wall and added, “I'd entirely forgotten about this until I listened to Nejaa telling Skywalker about that mission he ran with his father.”

Luke's rapt face, eyes as wide as a star destroyer's sensor dish, floated across Mara's memory. There was no way to know how much had been sturdy fact and how much nostalgic embellishment, but the stories that flowed once Skywalker accidentally discovered that Master Halcyon had spent several months fighting alongside General Anakin Skywalker in the Clone Wars had been wild and colorful. Luke soaked them in like Tatooine sand slurps up spilled water, parched and profusely grateful for every infinitesimal detail of what his father had been like as a man and Jedi before Darkness consumed him.

Unfastening a simple but effective latch, Horn swung the door open and grasped a waist-height rail. With a firm pull, a platform a few inches from the ground rolled out on well-greased bearings, revealing an oddly shaped, sheet-draped object. With a flourish, Rostek yanked the protective sheet away.

“You have a battle droid?” Mara stared openly, deeply impressed... and possibly the tiniest bit envious.

“Former battle droid,” he smiled at her. “As Nejaa recounted, he and General Skywalker captured it and raided it's brain for intel. By the time they were done, they'd gotten too attached to destroy it, so they reprogrammed it to cook for them for the duration of the mission.”

“Scared Kenobi half to death when he showed up unannounced to check in on them,” Mirax remembered the story with a grin.

“I thought he was having Skywalker on with that one,” Mara admitted, watching her grandfather reach inside the droid's chest cavity. The women heard a distinct click; Rostek quickly pulled his hand back and waited expectantly.

“Whoah-oh-oh!” The droid wobbled a moment, it's head bobbing side to side comically before it shook itself into a solid stance. “Where did I go?”

“On a sabbatical, Chef,” Rostek answered, as if the droid had been speaking to him rather than rhetorically. “Do you remember?”

“Sabbatical.” The droid repeated the word speculatively, then nodded vigorously. “Roger, roger. Uh, oh. Update.” Without waiting for response, the droid's head dipped and there was a whirring of servos.

“Sabbatical?” Mirax asked, quirking an eyebrow. “Really?”
Rostek gazed at the droid sympathetically. “Losing his master left Chef a bit… adrift. He suffered something akin to PTSD. In her own grief, Scerra couldn't tolerate him, which rather exacerbated the situation. I didn't have the heart to alter a single line of Nejaa's programming trying to fix or wipe him, so I convinced him to take a break until there was work to do again. He's been 'asleep' here ever since.”

“He sounds as quirky as Artoo,” Mara muttered, eying the droid as it came back online.

“You require sustenance?” Chef asked, hopefully, when his head came up again.

“Not at this precise moment,” Rostek clarified. “Chef, these are Master Halcyon's granddaughters. They're going to be taking an extended trip, and they need someone to run their galley. Master Halcyon would be most pleased if you were willing to accept that responsibility.”

Chef leaned forward, double half-moon eyes squinting at them. “You do look scrawny,” he announced, pulling back with a decisive jerk of his angular head. “We'll need provisions.”

“My House Master, Elegos, will see that you have all you require,” Rostek promised. “But first, you need a thorough cleaning. Do you remember where the maintenance bay is?”

“I took a sabbatical, not a brain wipe,” Chef snipped, affronted.

“Well, then. I suggest you report there immediately.”

“Roger, roger.” Without further ado, Chef hopped over the rail, off his stand, and ambled out of the storeroom.

“Got a bit of a mouth, hasn't he?” Mirax observed.

“A bit, yes. But he's fiercely loyal, and he makes a mean Endwa.”

“And neither of us can cook,” Mara finished for him, matter-of-factly. “You and Elegos are afraid we'll starve.”

“Starve might be an overstatement,” Rostek qualified judiciously, “but between the baby and the emergence of your gift, you must admit you'll both be in dire need of consistent, quality nourishment.” He gave her a pointed look. “The kind you'll not get from a steady diet of ration bars.”

Mara narrowed her eyes and pretended to be put out. “Does he know how to make those mini-rhyscates we had the other night?” she challenged.

Mini-rhyscates had been a revelation. Mara had never been allowed treats of any kind outside of undercover work, and the individual cakes with their decadent fudgy frosting were far too informal to ever have made an appearance at the formal Imperial events she'd worked. Skywalker had been startled to find her and Mirax eating them for breakfast their fifth morning on planet, but she'd dismissed his laughter and questioning with a curt “Rostek said we could.”

Having secured his desired end, Horn maintained a neutral expression at odds with his delicious inner satisfaction. “I'll personally see to it that he's programmed with the recipe.”

“We'll take him.”

When Mara hit the annunciator, Luke indulged in a brief moment's fantasy of simply pretending he
wasn't there and ignoring the soft tone. But that would be pointless. Without opening his eyes, he flicked a finger in that direction and heard the door swish open. Stealth had been too deeply ingrained in her for him to hear her move, but there was no missing her presence in the Force as she approached.

When he'd first seen her, she'd looked like a fractured star. Connected to her power sphere, she'd expanded into a whole galaxy of stars. Vast, gaping black holes blanketed the spaces between the pin-pricks of light in her sense now, but he suspected that when she was done building her web she'd be nearly overwhelming to look at directly.

And she was his. But not for much longer.

“You're angry with me.”

Luke opened his eyes. Found her standing at the foot of his bed, arms crossed over her chest, each hand gripping the opposite elbow in a stance halfway between defensive and wounded. She wore a troubled expression and, though she was not entirely closed to him – he could feel her unhappiness clearly enough – she was shielding more tightly than usual.

“You won't tell me where you're going.”

“It's better if you don't know until after it's done,” she insisted.

“You're part of me.” He didn't bother making any effort to mitigate the accompanying blast of irritation. “We're partners – CorUnums. We're supposed to be in this together.”

“We are,” she shot back, her own annoyance flaring into her tone. “But our vow isn't the only thing you're committed to. You can't just up and leave the Rebellion for a few weeks to run around laying groundwork for our fight with the Emperor. I can.”

“Can you?” he demanded, hotly.

“Excuse me?”

“Building one new connection on your web wipes you out, Mara. You think I haven't seen you, felt you? You think I don't know you've curled up in a ball on the floor of Rostek's greenhouse every afternoon, just trying to take the edge off when you're done with Tarazet?” Luke flung his arms out to the side in exasperation. “And you think I should just blithely let you go gallivanting off to Force-knows-where with Mirax for however long you feel like? To make yourself a prime Imp target while you're like that?”

“Why the kriff do you think I'm so eager to get out and blow shavit up?” she snapped, digging her nails into her elbows, latching on to the sharp spark of pain to keep her focus and control. “Building connections is hard, Luke. It's slow, and uncomfortable and -.”

She cut off the words, but it didn't stop him from catching the rest of the thought: and still triggy every time. Mara jerked her face toward the wall, all defensiveness in the wake of his glimpse of her bruised psyche. She'd always been a fast learner and a quick healer. It was humiliating to be working so hard, enduring so much now and still have so far to go.

“Explain it to me again,” Luke demanded, “because so far I'm not seeing the logic here, Mara.”

The words were bitter and clumsy on her tongue, but Mara forced them out. She had to learn to do this now, she scolded herself. She wasn't a slave anymore; wasn't confined to obedience and compliance or vicious consequences. She had to learn to justify, to explain. To argue for herself and
— as strange as it sounded to say — her point of view, because she got one now.

“I've never been allowed to be angry, Skywalker. Never had an outlet for...” she stumbled on the word fear, still too indoctrinated against showing any such gross weakness to say it even to him. “Stress. Except for my work.” She caught his gaze and held it determinedly. “I survived by working it out. Here it's — there's too much with nowhere to go, no way to process. Zastiga will be the same. With Mirax I can work.”

His irritated, implacable expression didn't change and something in her collapsed a little under the weight.

“I don't — I'm not trying to hurt you, Luke.” She closed her eyes, drew her shields a little tighter about herself protectively. “I know you want more from me.” Her voice fell to something low and — against her wishes — just a little plaintive. “But I need this.”

Luke sat silent a long moment, wrestling with his demons. Fear and frustration clawed at him, barked that she was being unreasonable — that this was a perfect time for her to learn better, healthier types of stress management. She was going to be a Jedi, wasn't she? She'd have to, eventually — so much the better to start now. To not ask this of him. Not to make him open his hands and let go of something so precious, with no guarantees he'd get it back safely. Not when he'd lost so much already.

But he'd spent the better part of a week at the feet of wise men. Ben, Nejaa, Rostek. Had sponged up every shard and shred of wisdom and insight they could offer until he thought he'd burst with it. Squirreled it away to fully process when there was more time, more energy to devote. But it leached out now as a cool, quiet counter-voice to that panicked constriction in his chest.

You're a Jedi, too. Her CorUnum. She's giving her best. Shouldn't you do the same?

Luke swallowed hard, pushed back against the darkness clouding his mind. That little bit of space was all it took to bring the invisible weight on Mara's shoulders into sharp relief. He could think and say whatever he wanted; have all the best points and logic on his side. It wouldn't change how she felt.

“I don't want more from you, CorMeum,” he said at last, heavy and resigned. “I want more with you. If you came back to base...” In spite of his best intentions, his tone turned imploring. “Look at what we have, Mara. Imagine what we could have.”

Her head dropped, chin tucking into her chest. I couldn't have imagined it was possible to have this much.

Fierfek. Luke pulled himself off the bed and paced to where she stood, tense and rueful. Gently, slowly, he pulled her to him, let his arms rest loosely around her as she leaned into his chest, seeking out the solid comfort of his heartbeat, even in the midst of their tension.

“Promise you'll check in every day, so I know you're all right.” Luke dipped his head, rested his cheek against her soft hair and let his eyes shut while he grappled with the harsh realities of the moment.

“I already promised not to die on you,” she muttered petulantly into his shirt. “Keep making promises and I'm going to have to dedicate a whole damn data pad just to keep track.”

Still, Luke felt her concede, and told himself it was enough. It would have to be.
“Mhmm,” Mirax gave a happy sigh and flopped back, sweaty and sated. “I’m going to miss that.”

“Me, too,” Corran murmured against her skin, heavy and panting in his own satisfaction. “Last chance to change your mind.”

Mirax combed her fingers through his damp hair and shook her head. “We talked about this, husband.”

“I know.” He rolled to his back and sighed, letting his eyes fall shut. Tried to hold onto the fleeting high of his release, and avoid the unpleasant realization that he was quickly running out of chances to enjoy it for at least the next several weeks. “Effusus Graviditas. Aka, pregnancy-induced homicidal rage.”

“It's a legitimate medical condition!” Mirax smacked his chest with the back of her hand. “Oof!” Corran caught the attacking hand and brought it to his lips for a quick kiss before releasing it. “Believe me, I know. Booster told me horror stories about your mother, and I never take anything that scares him lightly. If you're going to be homicidal, I'd much rather you take it out on the Imps than me.” He shrugged and rolled to tug her to him, until he was comfortably spooned around her warm, soft form. “Doesn't mean I won't miss you.”

Mirax dropped a kiss on the arm now tucked under her head and snuggled back deeper into him. “It won't be for that long, probably.” She paused, her voice soft and urgent when she spoke again. “I need to help her, Corran.” Her hand slid down and pressed against her still-flat belly, and she felt his move to cover it, his fingers lacing with hers in solidarity. “So she can be there for our baby during her own emergence if we have a daughter.”

Corran rested his forehead against his wife's shoulder and voiced what she would not. “And so we can be prepared to help her ourselves if they both get themselves killed.”

She nodded, wordlessly, and Corran tightened his grip around her just a little bit more. “I love you, Mirax Terrick-Horn.”

---

At breakfast on their tenth and last day in Corellia, fortified by Elegos's finest caff, Mara linked the Jedi present – alive and dead – one more time. Privately, she reveled in how much she'd improved in her ability to smoothly perform that maneuver over the last few days.

It had taken a several tries and some creative experimentation to manage, at first. Despite knowing they’d existed, Tarazet had never had access to a soul bond in life, and was slightly taken aback by the way Luke fit – or, more to the point didn’t – into Mara's rings of power. As part of her, he had unprecedented access to the core of the Coordinator's hub. But he was also an individual Jedi with no small power of his own; as such, he also occupied a distinct place in one of her orbiting rings. This meant that he both failed to appear in places where she expected him and unexpectedly popped up in places he shouldn't have been, according to her standard template. More than once, this had the effect of throwing a hydrospanner into the works when Tarazet tried to show Mara the usual methods for doing something.

Eventually, exasperated, Mara had said, “Wait. Just let me -.” Luke almost fell over as his world tilted sharply before righting itself equally fast. Something had shifted, but none of them could quite verbalize what. When asked, Mara simply shrugged. “I moved him,” was all she could say by way of explanation. Regardless, things worked more smoothly afterward and, once Corran was on board, they were able to puzzle out the mechanics of projecting the three Force ghosts as he saw them
through his gift for illusions in real time, enabling the non-Force sensitives to engage with them.

Reunited, Rostek and Nejaa tried valiantly to contain themselves, but there was no denying the deep emotion that flowed as a constant stream through the whole of every morning that week. Ben was unprecedentedly open, answering every question asked of him with a minimum of “certain point of view” arguments. Combined with the knowledge the others of his generation had to share, it was less like a Jedi conclave and more like standing in front of a turbo hose, being blasted by information.

Luke had thought his training under Yoda compressed and intense; these glorious days put that long, hard month to shame. But this, for all its exhausting intensity, was anything but painful – because he wasn't alone. The others – Jedi and not – struggled with him to keep up. Worked through their own old pains, hopes, and overwhelm with him. It was reassuring beyond words and he treasured every moment.

Now that they had a process down, though, it took only moments to get everyone situated. As had become his habit, Luke almost subconsciously trickled power from himself into Mara, supplementing her own reserves. Hosting three Force ghosts on freshly made connections in an only partially complete sphere was no mean feat and, though she never said anything, her appreciation flowed quietly and consistently back to him across their bond.

“Aunt Zet tells me that we can continue a modified version of what we've been doing here even after you leave,” Nejaa was explaining. “The time differences will complicate matters somewhat, and I'm afraid Mara won't -.” He stopped abruptly, his face splitting in a grin. “Chef?!”

The others looked up, all eyes locking on the gangly droid who ambled to a stop in their midst, then looked between them, slightly alarmed. “What? Do I have something on my casing?”

“Oh, Force.” Kenobi dropped his face into the palm of his hand.


“Who are you talking to?” Chef peered around, suspiciously.

“He's impossible to forget,” Ben grumbled, dragging his hand down his beard in dismay. "I've tried."


“We've had the misfortune of meeting, yes.”

“Now, Kenobi,” Nejaa chided. “He didn't mean to attack you. You startled him.”

“I startled him?” Ben started to protest.

“This is -.” Luke's eyes widened and his mouth gaped as he put the pieces together.

“Who are you talking to?” Chef repeated, noticeably more worked up this time.

“Master Halcyon is with us in spirit,” Rostek answered the droid calmly.

“Spirit?” Chef took a few wary steps back, pincher-shaped hands twitching as if looking for a blaster. “This place is haunted?”

“He's with me,” Mara told the droid, firmly. “So you're going to have to get used to it.”

“You're haunted? Oh, brother!”
Wedge snorted into his mug at the lament. “I thought you worked for Nejaa, before?” he pointed out. “You aren't used to Jedi weirdness, yet?”

“They're not Jedi,” Chef motioned toward Mara and Mirax.

“Mara is,” Wedge frowned.

“No,” Mara shook her head. “I'm not. Force-gifted, yes, but Jedi is a title – a rank. And I haven't earned it yet.”

“You survived a Sith,” Antilles argued. “That's got to count as your trial, or whatever it is.”

“Killing the Emperor will be my trial,” Mara maintained, grimly. “If I can build my power sphere and see Palpatine dead, then I'll consider myself a Jedi. Not before.”

“Trying to make the rest of us look like slackers, Jade?” Corran tossed a breakfast roll at her head.

“Shut up, Horn.” Mara caught the roll easily and snapped it back with unerring accuracy before returning her attention to Chef. “Jedi or not, you come with us, you're going to see a lot of strange things. If you're not up for it, tell me now.”

“You think I can't do strange?” The droid cocked his head, affronted. “Boy, do you have a lot to learn!”

Mirax laughed. “All right, Chef. We believe you.”

They got back into logistics after that, until Wedge's chrono went off. “Time to prep the ships, Boss.”

“Commander,” Rostek said. “Might I have a moment, first?”

“Of course.” Luke rose and bowed slightly to the Force ghosts. “Until next time, Masters.” Then he followed Horn from the garden.

The others dispersed as well, but Mara stopped Nejaa as he made to disengage from her. When they were alone, she regarded him solemnly.

“What is it, my dear?” He asked, eying her tension with surprise.

“Why hasn't my father come?”

“Pardon?”

“You and Zet have come every day. But Vrai hasn't come once.” She forced her tone to stay level and calm. “Does he blame me? For his death. Or my mother’s?”

Nejaa stumbled back a step, his shock hitting her hard and sharp. “No! Oh, Mara, no.”

He reached for her, stopping just short as he remembered with fresh aggravation that he couldn't touch her. For a moment, he glared at his hands as if he could will them to be flesh for just a few minutes. Then he lifted his gaze back to her, eyes brimming with love and old pain.

“Satine did not have the Force,” he told her. “She could not exist in the Flow the way we can. I was there, waiting, in the moment of your father's death. He was being torn apart, Mara. You still lived, and he knew that you would need help someday, when the Force was willing to allow intervention. But if he waited, he would lose your mother completely, and the pain of that was unbearable.” He gave her a small, helpless smile. “I had already lost my Scerra, so I did what any father would do – I
offered to take his place. To wait, and watch, and be here when the opportunity came.”

Mara digested that. “Are they together, then?”

Her grandfather nodded, his eyes shining. If he had been corporeal, they’d have glimmered with tears. “They were reborn together, as a star over Mandelore,” he assured her. “To shine together for millennia, where nothing can ever tear them apart again.” His voice went rough. “It has been my privilege to take his place, Dear Heart. To watch over you, and be part of your life, now. You make us so proud.”

She hesitated. “Do you know what my name was? Before I was taken?”

Nejaa was silent a long moment. “Arajate. It means Defender of Good in your mother's native tongue.”

“Two letters,” Mara whispered. “Just a change of two letters, to twist me from 'good' to 'bitter stone'.” She stood, lost for a moment, before mustering the concentration to ask, “Halcyon, or Kryze?”

Nejaa smiled slightly. “That was still being… 'debated'… when you were born. You can have your choice now, of course. Become Arajate Halcyon or Kryze. Or Horn – Rostek would gladly give you his name.” Then he added, a shade too casually, “so would Skywalker, at that.”

Mara looked scandalized. “Absolutely not!” Catching her grandfather's amusement, she shook her head and shifted back to the previous line of discussion. “It's too late to be Arajate. I am what I am, now – I can't go back. But…” she looked at him, searching. Hopeful. “I do want the name bequeathed with my gift.”

“It is yours.” A single, blue-edged tear escaped, streaking down Nejaa's weathered cheek as he lifted an open-palmed hand to hover a hairs-breadth over her forehead in benediction. “You have become what your mother's people would call 'kyr'am nau tracyn kad' – a saber forged in the fires of death. May the galaxy tremble before your will, Mara Jade Halcyon.”

- -

Rostek led Luke to the large greenhouse beside the one which had become Mara's refuge. In the back, past the long rows rich with color and the scent of damp earth, he unlocked a door. Let them into a private, spotlessly clean and extremely well equipped laboratory. On the center table sat a domed transparisteel terrarium the size of a small carryall. Transfixed, Luke stepped closer.

“Is that one of Mara's lilies?”

“A hybrid of them, yes,” Rostek laid a hand on the dome in quiet pride. “Spliced with a rare species of climbing ivy, with a few of my own personal touches. It's for you, if you'll have it.”

“For me?”

“I created a tree for Corran, at his birth,” Rostek explained. “A promise of strength and shelter, in my own way, I suppose. Then the lilies for Mara. When Corran married Mirax, I made her a moss designed specifically to thrive on ships, to keep the air fresh and sweet while she's traveling the galaxy. I've something special underway for the baby, as well.” He regarded the young Jedi. “You are part of Mara, now, and dedicated to her, even if she is not ready to fully accept it, yet. So it was only fitting that I create something for you, as well.”

“Thank you.” Luke's voice was hushed. “Can I – can it come with me?”
“Of course.” Rostek lifted the terrarium and handed it to the younger man. “I'll plant more in Mara's
garden. A welcome, for when you return.” He rested a hand on Luke's shoulder, and the Jedi felt the
older man's rock solid conviction that they would return.

“Would you give your blessing for me to join the Corellian Order instead of re-founding the other as
Master Yoda wishes?” He found himself asking, hope furled tight and needy in his chest.

“As far as I'm concerned, Luke, you already have.”

- -

For all the emotion involved, the departure from Corellia was accomplished with a minimum of
drama. The Rebel shuttle was docked to the underside of the Skate, and the jump to hyperspace was
uneventful. Once they were underway, Corran and Mirax disappeared into their cabin to make the
most of their remaining time together. Wedge excused himself to get a head start on the work that
waited when they got back to Base.

Luke settled himself on his bunk and tried to meditate. To center himself and find calm. Leia and the
Rogues would need him to be focused and alert when he returned. He was drifting in the shallows of
the Force, struggling to get any deeper, when there was a soft tap against his mind. Mara. He reached
back in welcome and got an image of one of the cargo bays, along with a wordless invitation.
Curious, he sought her out. He found her barefoot, music playing softly in the background.

“You asked me to teach you to dance,” she offered by way of explanation. “This is my last chance,
for a while. If you want.”

“Yes.” Luke discarded his own boots beside hers while she moved to the console to change the
music.

“Is there something you'd like to learn first?”

“Whatever you like best,” he responded immediately.

She glanced at him wryly. “I like some pretty obscure things. It'd do you more good to learn
something applicable at formal Alliance events.”

Luke laughed. “The Alliance doesn't have formal events. Well,” he allowed, “the medals ceremony
on Yavin, I guess. But there wasn't any dancing.”

“Your sister is a Princess,” Mara reminded him, cuing up the music she wanted. “We'll get dragged
to formal events plenty after we win.” She caught the shift in his sense and looked up. “What?”

“We,” he echoed her, eyes alight with happiness. “You said 'we'.”

“Yeah. Leia made me go to family dinner. I don't expect I'll get out of formal events.” Mara gave
him an odd look. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“It's just -.” Luke shook his head, held out his hands. “Never mind. Show me where to start.”

Mara narrowed her eyes skeptically, but complied. A second later, new music flowed over them and
she came to stand directly in front of him. “We'll start here.”

- -

Artoo detached from the wall socket in the corner of Leia's quarters with a happy squawk.
Deploying his third wheel, he rolled expeditiously for the door.

“What's gotten into him?” Leia asked, craning her head up over the top of her data pad to watch.

“He says that Master Luke has returned!” C-3PO translated, excitedly. “He is docking in the main hangar at this very moment.”

“Now?” It was deep in the Teeth’s night cycle.

“You did ask him to come back early,” Winter noted from her seat on the opposite side of the long table, even as the princess dropped her pad and rose, wincing at the protest of stiff muscles.

Leia shook her head, already following the astromech's path out of the room. “Something's wrong.”

Winter was on her own feet at once, and they hurried together toward the hangar in silence. When they arrived, they found a small luxury yacht docked between the newly arrived Alliance shuttle and the Falcon. A handful of bags and some kind of transparisteel enclosure were stacked on the hangar floor, and a man Leia didn’t recognize was maneuvering a heavily-laden hover dolly off the Falcon’s cargo ramp toward the yacht.

Han and Chewie stood a fair distance away, in heated conversation with Mara and a short, dark-haired woman she'd never seen before. Artoo was exchanging a rapid-fire stream of binary with a green and white astromech while C-3PO hovered, regularly bursting out in distressed “oh dears!” and “my words!”.

Her brother emerged from the yacht, and Leia headed purposely in his direction. “Luke!”

“Leia.” He pulled her into a hug, and she embraced him back tightly before pulling away. “What's going on?”

“We're transferring Mara's take from Bilbringi to the Skate.” He cocked his head in the direction of the yacht. “She's going to travel with her cousin Mirax for a while.”

“What?”

A short distance away, Han was asking similar, if less polite questions. “You're replacing us? What the hell for? Chewie an' me did a bang-up job at the shipyards!”

“Yes, you did,” Mara said, holding her ground. She shot a glance at where Leia had arrived and was embracing Luke, then looked between Mirax and Chewie and pointed a finger at the twins. “Keep them busy and off the Falcon.” Grabbing the front of Han's shirt she yanked, and he followed her, scowling, into the ship.

Mara stalked into the cockpit, whacking the control to close the door behind them as soon as Solo was in. “Remember the conversation we had about doing Skywalker dirty work?”

“Yeah,” he answered suspiciously. “What of it?”

She tugged a datapad from one of the cargo pockets on her pants, keyed in a code and flipped it around. Shoving it at him, she demanded, “How much of that do you want linkable to Leia, when this is all over and she's running the new republic? Or Luke, for that matter?”

Han skimmed the list. “Shavit. That explains why you ain't telling the Kid.”

“Exactly.”
Solo gave the pad back and propped a hand grumpily on his hip, the other waving out the cockpit's windows toward the hangar, in Chewie's general direction. “So you expect us to just stay here and sit on our asses?”

“Of course not.” Mara rolled her eyes, stuffing the pad back out of sight. “I expect you to look out for Leia. And Farmboy. And Corran. My grandfather says Jedi come with collateral damage and chaos. That goes double for Skywalkers.”

“You ain't gotta tell me, Sister. I got a front-row seat, remember?” Han punched the side of a fist into the door release. “Com'ere.”

Mara trailed him through the corridor toward his cabin. Inside, he jammed two fingers under his bunk into a hidden latch. The entire frame swung up, revealing a well stocked – and highly illegal – weapons stash. Pulling out a nasty-looking, old-fashioned slug thrower, Han wedged a finger under the strap that had held it in place and popped a second concealed locking mechanism. With a clean snap, a drawer popped out of the bottom of the compartment. One glance was all it took Mara to confirm that this was where Solo kept his 'special occasion' collection.

His hands slid over the inventory with easy confidence and familiarity, until he'd plucked out three pieces. Turning, he proffered them to her. “If you stick with your list, you'll want these.”

Mara accepted them with delight, tucking them into the pack slung over her shoulder with care. “Thanks.”

Han shrugged off the gratitude. “Just make 'em count. If I don't get to go, I'll least I feel like I contributed, right?”

When they exited the ship, they found Chewie interrogating Mirax, apparently not yet convinced she was adequately prepared to chauffeur Mara on her upcoming expedition.

//The Skate has good weapons systems? And a corpse hatch?//

Mirax bristled. “Did you not catch who I am? Mirax Terrick-Horn?”

Chewie's furry face brightened considerably. //Terrick. As in Booster?//

“As in ran-his-organization-for-five-years-while-he-was-in-Kessel, yeah,” she confirmed, lifting her chin, proudly. “And Horn, as in granddaughter-in-law of former Director of CorSec, and wife of a Jedi. Not to mention a Master Trader in my own right.” She jerked a thumb in Mara's direction. “I can keep up with her – and take care of her.”

“I don't need to be taken care of,” Mara groused.

Han eyed Mirax in unapologetic assessment. “You swear?”

Mirax stuck out her hand. “Consider Corran a hostage,” she offered. “You keep him safe and sound for me, I'll bring Jade back in current condition or better.”

“Deal.” They shook on it.

Mara snorted and rolled her eyes. “CorSec is going to love this.” She stalked off toward the Skate.

With everyone assisting, the necessary transfers of belongings and explosives in were done in no time. Corran kissed his wife thoroughly, and then stepped back out of the way. Mara slipped Han a data chip, patted Artoo reassuringly, and endured a bone-crushing wookie hug before promising
Corran she'd bring Mirax back safely.

When she came to Leia, the princess grasped her hands. “Crix will be terribly upset that he missed
you.”

“I've taken care of that.”

Leia knew better than to ask, and Winter interjected quickly, “We'd hoped you'd have time to discuss
Intel with us when you got back.”

“I'm not ready to be pumped for information by Cracken's lackeys,” Mara replied frostily.

“I was thinking something more along the lines of chatting code phrases over a glass of wine,”
Winter countered, calmly.

Mara felt the faintest hint of chagrin at her defensiveness; like herself, Retrac was all but family to the
Skywalkers. She had every reason to play nice, and was a key player in Alliance Intel in her own
right. It would be only natural for her to want to 'talk shop'. Snapping at her might have been a bit
paranoid, even if she did have legitimate reasons to be wary of the inevitable attempts to extract
information she didn't care to part with in the name of furthering the Rebel cause.

With effort, she voiced a small conciliation. “Skywalker knows how to find me if you have a specific
question.”

Winter nodded, accepting it for what it was. Leia stepped forward and embraced Mara with a stern
reminder that that went both ways – she knew where to find them if she needed help. Mara accepted
Leia's hug awkwardly, but with noticeably less discomfort than she had the one before her trip to
Corellia.

Finally, only Luke remained.

“Farmboy.” There was at once too much and nothing at all to say. They had their understanding,
little comfort though it was. “This isn't really necessary. I'll still be there.” She gestured to his chest,
then echoed what he'd said to her in the Oubliette. “There's nowhere I can go we can't find each
other.”

“I know.” Luke stepped closer, caught the hand she'd gestured with and brought her palm to his lips.
The kiss he whispered over it was feather-light but it sent an unexpected tingle down her spine. “The
Force is with you, and so am I.” Despite his reluctance to let her go, there was a bit of mischievous
Rogue twinkle in his eye when he gave her a lop-sided grin reminiscent of Solo and said, “Give 'em
hell, CorMeum.”

Chapter End Notes

Re: Arajate as Mara's birth name - in Mandelorian, aranar = to defend, jate = good. My
gratitude to wookiepedia for it's help in that, as in everything else. : )

Also, fun fact: In the profics, Nejaa Halcyon actually died protecting Anakin Skywalker
and another Jedi from an enemy they were all fighting together.
Naboo

Chapter Summary

We now return to the promised Blowing Up Of Things!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In compliance with standard Alliance procedures, the Skate started its journey with two random jumps away from Indigo. The protocol was designed to prevent the Imperials from tracking their way back to the base in the event a ship was captured. It was entirely unnecessary in their case, of course – the Skate's top-of-the-line systems were programmed with smuggler-grade information concealment across the board. The Empire could strip her to her core and never scrounge up more than two bytes of data from the whole thing. Still, it was only a few extra hours and there was nothing to be gained by pointlessly annoying Teeth's control tower.

After overseeing the second jump, Mirax left the cockpit and joined Mara in the lounge. Jade leaned over the low table, face screwed up in concentration, intently tapping at a data pad. A bowl of Endwa sat steaming at her elbow. Mirax's stomach rumbled. Chef did make a mean Endwa and she was starving. Moody and ravenous seemed to be her default settings these days.

Without looking up, Mara pointed to a covered, brightly colored bowl on the other side of the table. "Chef said you'd probably want that to go on it. Beebleberry jam."

The combination should have been revolting, but Mirax could have clapped with glee. She helped herself to a waiting bowl, scooping a generous portion of jam over her meal. "Mmmm..." she sighed happily at the first bite. "That droid is amazing."

"Artoo recognized him. Says he's crazy as manic-depressive malkloc."

"Skywalker's astromech? Pretty sure he's not all there, himself – no offense."

Mara's lips quirked up as she set the data pad beside her on the sofa and took up her own bowl again. "Probably not, but he's my kind of crazy."

"Speaking of," Mirax asked, swallowing another bite. "You going to tell me where we're headed?"

The quirk expanded to a truly wicked smile. "Naboo."

- -

Outwardly, Theed was a city of art. Ancient, elegant stone buildings gasconaded the pride of noble lineages traced with painstaking care back to the planet's original human inhabitants. Intricate facades lined commodious streets that might have been designed specifically to accommodate vibrant, triumphant parades, each one a marvel of artisan achievement and testament to a collective eye for the esthetic.

Behind those meticulously unspoiled fronts, the metropolis of Naboo's capitol was a seething cesspool of avarice, corruption, and morals decayed to self-indulgent sludge.
Vastly more important to Mara's view, however, was what ran _underneath_ the city: rivers of naturally occurring plasma.

As she'd explained to Mirax over their brunch of Endwa, a map of the Chrommell sector pulled up between them, Naboo was unique. Hovering near the border between the Mid and Outer Rim Territories, the lovely pastoral planet served as both the sector capital and an endless source of fascination to galactic geologists and astrophysicists. It's inner-most core (composed of a common nickel-iron alloy) was surrounded by a plasmic molten outer core found nowhere else in the galaxy. A thin, porous upper crust contained the plasma layer and supported the rolling plains, vast swamps, and ambrosial seas that adorned the planet's surface. Human and Gungan civilizations on planet had been using that plasma as a clean and efficient energy source for centuries.

Emperor Palpatine had been quietly siphoning it off for more nefarious purposes for decades.

“Before he was Emperor, he was a Senator from Naboo,” Mara reminded Mirax, balancing spoon and bowl in one hand so she could click through screens on her data pad and project them over the table between them. She pulled up a complicated concept map reminiscent of a convoluted family tree. “Long story short, he manipulated the political landscape to force the late King Veruna into agreeing to sprawling inter-planetary trade agreements that were unfavorable to Naboo. Then he worked the other side, whipping the insular populace and parochial noble families into a frenzy over the whole thing. With everyone else busy causing each other grief, he was able to set up shell companies under his complete control harvesting and 'selling' a nearly inexhaustible supply of free plasma – directly or indirectly to other companies he also owned, of course.”

M irax gave a low whistle. “His own combination weapons and fuel depot, right under their noses.” She shook her head. “Do you know how many people have spent _years_ trying to figure out what you just showed me?”

Mara shrugged one shoulder, uninterested. “Don't care.” She clicked past a few more screens, then pointed. “That's what I care about.”

M irax squinted. “What is it? A tunnel system?”

Jade nodded, putting her empty bowl on the end of the table and leaning in. She all but hummed with excitement as her index finger traced a section of the illuminated map. “The plasma core runs in a network of labyrinthine tubes beneath the planet's surface. A lot of them are completely inaccessible – buried over here, under the great oceans.” She circled an area with her finger, then adjusted the map away from that portion of the grid to zoom in on a different one. “But in some places – like here, directly under Theed – they're extremely close to the surface.”

“That's why the Emperor can mine it behind a formal facade in the center of the capitol without anyone noticing,” Mirax caught on, scooping some additional Beebleberry jam into her bowl. “He just dug himself an out-of-code basement and – _bam_. There you go. Free plasma.” Sucking a mouthful of jam off her spoon, she frowned intently. “That's got to be pretty risky, though. Opening up a vein of plasma in the heart of the city?”

“Mmm,” Mara agreed, sitting back and folding her arms smugly, her eyes glinting. “It could make _quite_ a mess if one of those lovely, ancient houses along the main street was to have a structural failure right where it _just so happens_ to run along a plasma tube precariously close to the surface.”

Mirax's eyes narrowed, and she skimmed her gaze over the highlighted portion of map again before re-fixing her attention on her cousin-in-law. “Especially if it happened to just _coincidentally_ be one of the houses close enough to Palpatine’s private factory to trigger a facility melt down?”
“You mean like this one?” Mara asked, innocently, cuing up a gorgeous city estate two buildings down from the external facade of the Emperor's covert operation. “That may or may not sit directly alongside the plasma tube he's mining from?”

“Oh, this is going to be epic.” Mirax laughed, her thrill rippling over Mara like a sweet breeze in the Force. “My dad and Corran going be jealous forever.”

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“Anyone home?”

Han thumbed off the welder and rolled himself halfway out of the compartment he was wedged inside. Shoving up the protective face shield, he called, “Over here.”

Crix appeared, picking his way around the tools and parts strewn across the floor with assiduous care. “Ah, Solo. Just the man I was looking for. You don't have any company at the moment, do you?”

“Just Chewie,” Han motioned to the giant furry feet sticking out of the ceiling above them, and the wookie harned in greeting. “The Kid is planet-side with Her Worshipfulness, trying to sort out all the newbies.” He rubbed a greasy hand over his cheek. “Whadda need, General?”

“Considering what I'm about to ask, I would prefer if you'd call me Crix, Captain Solo.”

“Well, that sounds like my kind of business, Crix,” Han pulled himself the rest of the way out of the hole in the wall. “What's goin' on?”

“I'd like to use the Falcon's comm equipment, and make arrangements to use it again in the future on a somewhat ongoing basis.”

Han raised an eyebrow. “You got a whole base and the station at your disposal,” he noted. “Why use the Falcon?”

“Base comms are recorded and can be requisitioned for review by anyone on High Command,” Madine informed him. “And I'd like to have some truly private discussions.”

//Talking to Jade?// Chewie dropped from the ceiling with startling grace for his size, and Madine was reminded that Wookies were natural tree-dwellers, accustomed to loping swings and drops.

“Eventually, I hope. First, however, I'd like to follow up on a contact she offered.” He lifted his hand, showing a slender green data chip caught between two fingertips. “Artoo delivered it this morning at her behest.”

“This way.” Han tilted his head and grabbed a rag, wiping his hands clean as they went.

“Your remodeling is impressive,” Madine complimented as they passed the Captain's cabin and Han keyed in a code to open a triple-reinforced door just beyond it.

“The Falcon's gonna be everything Leia needs by the time I'm done,” Han promised, pleased with the compliment but playing it off casually. “This isn't fully done yet, but it's secure.”

Crix examined the high-end comm equipment and agreed. “It will be ideal, thank you.” He slid his gaze toward the former smuggler. “Would you care to stay, Captain Solo? I believe my contact would just as pleased to make your acquaintance as mine.”
A slow, genuinely pleased smile slid across Han's face. “Only if you give up that 'Captain Solo' stuff and start calling me Han, Crix .”

“The Corellians?!”

If Yoda's outraged shriek hadn't been interrupted by a pungent fit of wet, phlegmy hacking, Ben Kenobi would have chuckled at the sheer indignant rage of it.

The diminutive Master whacked his gimer stick peevishly against the wall of his hut. “No, no, no! Join them he should not! Troublesome they are!” He glowered at Ben. “Her fault, this is. Corrupted by their attachments, the Skywalkers and their mates have always been.”

“Mara Jade was merely the catalyst, Master,“ Ben corrected, gently. “The fault is ours. We failed to learn from our mistakes with Anakin, and repeated them with Luke. Now we are paying the price.”

Yoda's ears flattened in irritation. “Sanguine about this, you are. Too comfortable you have become with those delinquents, hmm?”

“I hardly think the Masters Halcyon qualify as delinquents, Old Friend,” Kenobi observed dryly. “And it's impossible to ignore the positive impact they've had on our young apprentice. Luke is more grounded, more connected to the Force than I've ever seen him.”

The small green Jedi harrumphed, then devolved into another fit of body-wracking coughing.

“You are unwell, Master,” Ben said, gently. “Soon you, too, will be one with the Force. Only Luke, Mara, and Corran will remain to carry on our legacy. Will you not part from them on good terms?”

“A mistake this is,” Yoda grumbled, wearily, rheumatic joints creaking as he adjusted his grip on his staff's knobby head. “Young, they are. And reckless. Of too many variables are they ignorant.”

“It's not too late to help them,” Kenobi prompted, wondering sadly when he had become the voice of reason to the Grand Master of his Order. “If we are to continue making mistakes,” he urged, softly, “let us at least make them new ones, shall we?”

“Leave me,” Yoda grumped, turning his back and crawling with stiff, arthritic movements into the alcove he had long used as a bed. “Meditate on this, I must.”

“Of course, Master.” Kenobi bowed his head respectfully and retreated.

Burrowing into his worn blankets, Yoda sighed heavily and closed his eyes.

Wrong, was I? His downfall will she be? Or his salvation? Short my time is. Decide now what to do with it, I must.

Sinking into the depths of the Force with an ease borne of centuries of experience, he searched for answers.

One of the best things planets that considered themselves favored by the current regime was that they tended to feel invincible. As such, their security was ludicrously lax. One false transponder code, a sweetly faked accent, and two fake ID's were all it took to get full clearance into the port they'd selected on the edge of Lake Country.
“This hairpiece is absurd.” Mirax shoved another thick pin through her silky black hair, wincing as her over-zealous efforts to make the bulky ornament sent the small metal hook gouging into her scalp.

“It was last year’s best seller.” Mara worked another clip into her own fascinator. “The popular one this year is even bigger.”

It was peculiar to have someone to prep with. She’d always prepped for and run missions alone, with only brief consultations with comm or Intel personnel to verify details in the run-up as needed. To have another woman beside her at the mirror, half-dressed as she patiently perfected her infiltration disguise was… interesting.

They’d had to start with a discussion about attire. To Mara’s bafflement, Mirax shared Skywalker’s opinion that scars were not something she needed to obsessively hide. A basic set of underthings was more than sufficient for walking around the ship, as far as Terrick-Horn was concerned, seeing as it was just them and the Skate was their home for the time being. They’d settled on a few compromises in that respect, then managed to get down to the proper work of preparing for the job at hand.

Mirax, Mara discovered, had not exaggerated her skill sets – she excelled at undercover work. They kept pace together dolling up in the extravagant dress regalia common to upper-class Naboo, then hopped public transport to Theed where the two of them had wandered openly through the streets without drawing a second glance. No one had so much as blinked when they meandered around a corner into a slight niche that held a service door to the fine estate she’d selected as their entry point.

Making quick work of the simple lock – apparently no one expected break-ins in this high-end neighborhood, she thought derisively – they slipped inside and eased the door shut behind them. “Welcome to House Naberrie,” Mara murmured quietly into the hushed, shadow-swept space. “This way.”

The heavy brocade skirts of their long, formal, lavishly-embroidered dresses whispered against the hand-scraped wood floors of the airy hall as they hurried through the still house.

“They’ve got a place like this, and they’re out loitering in the country?” Mirax eyed the ornate artwork on the walls longingly as they passed, itching to check it for authenticity and instinctively calculating its value in her head.

“Most of the noble families retreat to their Lake Country holdings this time of year,” Mara told her, absently, her attention focused on counting the distance along the hall until they reached their next turn. “They’ll come back for the Festival of Lights.” She half-smiled to herself. “Except that there won’t be much to come back to, this year.”

“Did the Naberries know what they were sitting on?” Mirax asked, working two fingers under the edge of her headdress to scratch a persistent itch perpetrated by the ornate hairpins they’d used.

“Among other things. One of the daughters of the House was the second-to-last queen. Died under mysterious, tragic circumstances right around the time of the Purge and the formation of the Empire.”
“Enemy of the new Emperor, then,” Mirax guessed. “Eliminated to reduce friction in the regime change.”

“Most likely.”

“In that case, I’m sure she’d have been delighted to volunteer her family home for this endeavor.”

Mara chuckled. “Probably. Here we go.” Mara ducked under a low beam and angled toward the back wall. They were in the lowest level now, thick wooden beams close overhead and gravelly dirt under their feet. “Turn around.”

Mirax complied, and felt Mara's deft fingers catch and tug on the hidden quick-release fasteners they’d sewn into their stolen finery. Seconds later, the rig fell away leaving Horn in her comfortable, practical smuggler's fatigues. She whirled her finger in a circle, and Mara turned, letting her return the favor. She wore a bantha leather ensemble underneath – pants, a silk under-tunic, and a close-cropped jacket. The worn pieces left no skin exposed from heel to throat, but fit with a snug flexibility that spoke of years of hard use. They spared thirty seconds to free themselves of their obnoxious headgear, and then Mara tossed Mirax the bag she’d worn concealed under her voluminous skirt.

“There's a blue case in there – fish it out, will you? I need to cut us a hole.” Pulling her light saber from it's holster on her right thigh, Mara ran her left hand over the rough-cut rock wall. Nothing. Nothing. Warmer. There! The wall grew distinctly warm under her palm, and she knew she'd found her spot. A little more feeling around and she shifted her focal point up a touch. A light ping in the Force told her she was on target, and Mara always listened to that bell.

She thumbed the ignition switch and the purple blade snap-hissed to life. With one last quick verification of her positioning, Mara executed a precise Paparak Cross-cut in the cellar wall. Then she angled her blade another meter or so higher and cut a small, neat square into the wall.

Turning, she found Mirax ogling the requested – now open – box.

“Where did you get a modified Merr-Sonn Class A thermal detonator?!” She demanded.

“Solo.” Mara flicked off and reholstered her blade, then snagged and resealed the box. Rising on tiptoes, she shoved it into the slot she'd carved. “And if I know him the way I think I do, the modifications are going to put the standard twenty-meter blast radius to shame.” She looked meaningfully at her partner in crime. “So we need to make tracks.”

“Copy that.”

Together, they bolted up the flights of stairs they'd just descended. They’d just slammed through the side door when a the ground rumbled ominously under their feet, tiny stones skipping and skidding at the muted thunder.

“The wall just went,” Mara said, tightly. “That was faster than I thought. Let’s move.” Throwing discretion to the wind, they boosted the first speeder they found and careened toward city limits, beings and speeders veering and shrieking out of their way as they blasted through.

“Why hasn't it blown?” Mirax yelled over the noise as emergency sirens – wheezy from decades of disuse – squealed to life behind them as they rocketed free of the metropolis and into the surrounding countryside.

“Reinforced, magnetically-charged box,” Mara shouted back. “I positioned it to drop into the plasma flow when the wall went.” She eased back on the throttle and arced them around, her voice dropping
to a more normal level as they cut sideways, the waterfalls at the edge of the city spilling gloriously over the cliffs to their right in odd contrast to the cacophony of noise in the distance as an entire metropolis panicked without quite being sure what was happening. “The tunnel should take it straight to Palpatine's plant and lodge it somewhere helpful until it shorts out, melts off, and -.”

There was a cataclysmic explosion.

Both women threw their hands up to shield their eyes against the blinding, phosphorescent flare as half of Theed was annihilated. The entire cliff face seemed to shudder, and mammoth chunks broke off, plummetsing into the churning waters below. The teeth-gritting sound of grinding stone reached them even at their far distance as the crust around the edges of the detonation zone crunched, crumpled, and gave way. Mara imagined the Royal Palace Palpatine had once daily swaggered through being swallowed whole by the boiling sinkhole of plasma welling up and washing out from where the Emperor's operation had been.

Suck magma, you son of schutta. Out loud, she finished calmly, “and then the fireworks start.”

Mirax dug a pair of darkened, reflective glasses out of a cargo pocket. “Wish I could see the look on ol' Sheev's face when he finds out about this one.”

“No,” Mara gunned the engine and spun them around. “You don't. He's kriffing hideous.”

Mirax's laughter seemed to bounce off the sky and the roaring water beneath them as they shot off, skimming low and smooth through the misty spray toward their next stop. Mara felt some of the knotted tension coiled in her core unwind. She glanced behind her at the secondary fireballs igniting and pouring fresh plumes of inky smoke into the pristine air of Palpatine's home planet as new gouts of plasma ate their way to – and through – the surface, rolling the collapse and catastrophe outward.

The buried pain inside her unwound a little more.

She was a saber forged in the fires of death. And she was just getting warmed up.

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“How's it going?” Leia rubbed her neck as she leaned over Winter's shoulder, hoping vainly to work some of the ache out before it reached her head. She was too well trained to abandon her princessly posture, but after eighteen hours of alternately being on display as a figure head and rolling up her sleeves to pitch in at ground level to get the new recruits assessed, assigned, provisioned, and settled into their new bunks, she felt like she'd been trampled by banthas.

“Good? I guess?” Winter sighed and pinched the bridge of her aristocratic nose between two fingertips. “Teeth was a fully functional, actively in-service facility when Jade jacked her. Obviously a few crew members saw the end before it hit, because they managed the scramble or erase a few chunks of information here and there, but by and large it's all still intact. It's an enormous boon.”

“Except that its enormous,” Leia grimaced sympathetically, straightening up as her foster sister turned off the screen for the night.

“We've got all our best people – and everyone else we can spare – working on it,” Winter agreed, but there's just so much information. We've already pulled out some high-level files that are proving insightful, but I'm sure there's reams we haven't even gotten to yet.”

“The Empire has gotten more careful about information distribution since Scarif,” Leia observed. “Losing so much in one go really set them off.”

“I'd have been ballistic,” Winter said. “Positively beside myself if we'd had a loss like that.”
Leia laughed and linked arms with her as they headed back toward their quarters. “You've never gone ballistic in your life. Not even when I told that Lieutenant from the Palace Guard you were sneaking off to see Xantier every night when we were fourteen, and he started stalking you, trying to prove it.”

Winter pursed her lips and hid a smile behind a very dirty look. “You were terribly hateful to do that, you know. Xantier and I could have been something.”

“Until he joined the Imperial Navy,” Leia pointed out.

“Then at least I could have been tragically jilted and melodramatic about it for ages,” Winter countered, reasonably. “You know your aunts would have eaten it up like one of their holodramas. I'd have been entertained for years.”

“I can entertain you for years,” a smooth male voice offered helpfully.

The women looked up to see a sleepy Tycho Celchu lounging against the open door of Winter's room, his flight suit shoved down to his hips, arms tied around the waist. Winter frowned. “What are you still doing up?”

“Waiting for you, obviously.”

“He was not.” Luke appeared, Artoo at his heels, looking equally disheveled and exhausted. “We only just got back – last shuttle up of the night.” He covered a yawn and asked Winter, “put him to bed, will you? We've got another long day tomorrow.”

“You heard the Commander,” Winter said, mock-pretentiously. “In you go.”

“Yes, Ma'am.” Tycho winked at Leia, tossed Luke a half-salute and disappeared into Retrac's quarters, Winter on his heels.

“Any word from Mara?” Leia turned to her brother.

“Not yet.” Artoo trilled, and Luke amended his statement. “She sent Artoo a thumbs up, so whatever she's doing, it's going well. But all I've had since I woke up was a solid “busy signal” - like she's focused on something important.”

“Well I'm sure we'll find out what it was soon,” she reassured, reaching out to squeeze his hand. “Get some sleep.”

“Yeah. You, too.”

A quick run through the sonics later, Luke crawled into bed. Closing his eyes, he reached for Mara one more time. This time, he was rewarded with a wash of warmth. Peace wafted through him; Mara was safe and happy, and she'd checked in as promised. Now, he could sleep.

“Change of plans,” Mirax announced. “We cannot blow this place up.”

“We're not changing plans,” Mara countered, unmoving from her position bent over a knot of wires. “I've already hacked my way into the self-destruct. As soon as we find Chef, we're leaving.”

“Only the Emperor would put a self-destruct system in private lake-side resort like this,” Mirax criticized in disgust. “And we can't. Do you know what that is?” She pointed accusingly at the wall
behind Mara.

Jade stood up and glanced over her shoulder at a wall of inlaid stone in a somewhat abstract design. It bore the same hallmarks of obviously expensive taste that blanketed the whole of the sprawling water-front property. The Emperor hadn't lacked for money, and it showed in everything from the crisply starched linens to the graceful lines in even the most mundane pieces of furniture. Unfortunately, since she'd already mentally marked it for demolition, it was all wasted on Mara. So she goaded slightly, “Fancy art?”

“It's an original Durni Mosaic!”

“Your Master Trader is showing.”

“Damn right, it is! Do you know how rare those things are? How much they sell for? Their cultural significance?”

Mara kicked the electrical case she'd been fiddling with shut. “No, but judging by your tone, I'm going to guess 'very' and 'a lot’.”

“Yes! This place has a better collection than most five quasar museums! There's a complete set of the Arneclin Masterpieces upstairs, and a genuine Alderaanean Moss Painting by Ob Khaddor in the hall. It would be beyond criminal to destroy them. It would be – I don't know, sacrilegious!”

“Are you supposed to get worked up like this, in your condition?”

Mirax snorted. “We just blew up a city, and now you're asking about what I ought to be doing in my 'condition'?”

“That was business,” Mara brushed the complaint aside. “This looks personal, to you.”

“It is,” Mirax insisted, fisted hands propped on her hips. “That was a city full of corrupt politicians. This stuff matters, Halcyon.”

Mara was silent for a minute, expression unreadable, and Mirax braced herself to launch into another round.

“There you are!” Both women turned to see Chef in the doorway. “I've been looking all over.”

“Why didn't you use your comm?” Mara asked, frowning.

“Because you never answer it.”

“You've never commed me.”

“Nejaa never answered his.”

“I'm not Nejaa,” Mara replied, irritably. “I'll answer. Try it next time. Did you get what you needed?”

“Oh, yes!” The lights in the droid's little half-moon eyes literally brightened in his pleasure. “The kitchen here was impressively well stocked.”

“Did you have to shoot anyone?”

“Only the prep cook,” Chef told her, carelessly. “He wouldn't tell me where the sucra was.”
“Chef,” Mirax admonished.

“Justified,” Mara cut in. “Can't make mini-rhyscates without sucra.”

“That's what I told him!” Chef gestured vigorously in concurrence. “He wouldn't listen to me!”

“Would you stop encouraging him?” Mirax scowled at Mara testily. “Seriously.”

“I took out sixteen troopers and four house staff getting us in here,” Mara pointed out. “I hardly think shooting one more minor member of kitchen staff – loyal enough to work in the Emperor's private resort, mind you – is a loss to be concerned over. Besides, it got him back here, which is where we need him.” She turned to the droid. “Get a hover-dolly off the Skate. We're taking some art with us, and we need to get it out of here in the next -,” she glanced at the chrono. “Two hours. After that, the troopers and staff who went to help with the evacuation of Theed will be back – or at least checking in – and we'll have trouble.”

“Art?” Chef somehow gave the impression of wrinkling his nose, despite not having one.


“Okay.” Chef ambled off, and Mirax gaped at her cousin.

“We're taking it with us?”

“You want it, and you've got a hold to put it in. Make a list in order of importance and we'll take as much as we can.” She set her jaw. “But I am blowing what remains behind us.”

Mirax weighed Mara's stance for a moment, then started moving. “All right. Mosaic first. Get out your light saber. We're going to have to cut it out of the wall – carefully!”

“General Madine.” The pleasure in the cultured voice matched the pleased expression Rostek Horn's image wore. His gaze, piercing somehow even through holographic translation, skipped over to alight on Han. “And Captain Solo, I presume.”

“Director Horn,” Crix gave a formal half-bow, and Han shot off a jaunty two-fingered salute. “It's a privilege to make your acquaintance.”

“My granddaughter tells me yours is acquaintance worth making,” Rostek informed them. “And I trust her judgment.”

“So do we,” Han said.

“Well then,” Rostek smiled. “I believe we have a great deal to discuss.”

“You should be in bed.”

Fully dressed except for her boots, Mara sat cross-legged on her bunk, engrossed in her reading. “I am in bed.”

“No, you're on the bed.” In the doorway of Mara's cabin, Mirax folded her arms and put on her best 'mom' look. “You should be in it. Sleeping.”
“I don’t sleep. I trance.”

“Fine. Then you should be in it, trancing.”

“I don’t think that’s a verb.”

“It is now.”

Mara finally looked up from her data pad. “Is this going to be a thing? Because I don’t recall signing on for mothering in our agreement.”

“Solo and I agreed I’d bring you back in current condition or better. Which means you have to sleep. Or trance. Whatever.” Pushing her pajama-clad body off the door frame, Mirax walked in and snagged the data pad. “What are you reading that’s so important, anyway? You’ve got the next hit all planned out already.” She tucked her loose dark hair behind one ear as she glanced at the screen, then did a double take. “What the kriff is this?”

“It’s the training manual Imperial Courtesans are instructed with,” Mara answered after a moment, quietly, hands clenching tightly in her lap. “Skywalker wants more from me – with me. And I don’t... I don’t know how. Not -.” She fumbled. “Not the way it’s supposed to be, I mean. I have to learn. Before we go back.”

Mirax very purposefully turned the data pad off. “This,” she said slowly, gently, “is not what he’s talking about, Jade.” She sank onto the edge of Mara’s bed, mentally scrambling for what to say. When she’d told Corran she wanted practice for their daughter, she’d been thinking in terms of Force complications. Not this.

“It’s part of it,” Mara insisted. “And there isn’t a manual for the rest. It's all just…” she looked for a word and ended despairingly, ‘vague and messy.”

Mirax smiled a bit ruefully. Their short time together had been more than enough to determine that Mara didn’t do ‘messy’ any better than she herself did in most contexts. “Yeah, that about sums up men pretty well.”

Mara rubbed her forehead, squinching her eyes shut in frustration. “I don’t want to hurt him. Or fail him. But I don’t even understand what he’s looking for.”

“Well, good news,” Mirax informed her, firmly. “You've got me.”

Jade examined her, dubiousness warring with hope. “You're going to teach me to make Skywalker happy?”

“Yes.” Mirax confirmed. “Consider it repayment for that hold full of irreplaceable art we picked up today.”

“Is there fine print I need to be worried about here?” Mara queried.

“No,” Mirax huffed, rising. “But I am taking this.” She hefted the pad. “I'll give it back with annotations.”

Mara made a face. “Corran's going to think I'm corrupting you.”

Horn laughed outright at that, and headed for the door. “Way too late for that, sister.” She stopped in the doorway. “Oh, and Mara?”
“Yeah?”

“Get your ass in a trance.”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: Palpatine did actually do the whole political manip thing described in this chapter, and he was stealing plasma from Naboo, albeit not necessarily quite as described. He also totally had a private resort on planet, in Lake Country.
Mid-Rim

Chapter Summary

The future is in motion, tossing new factors and old friends into the mix as Luke and Mara work hard on their respective sides of their vow to bring down Palpatine.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the stupidly long time between updates! Life is... unreal, right now, around here.

Also sorry there's more exposition-y stuff here than I'd have liked, but it's necessary to set up for what comes next. This is rougher than I'd like, so please feel free to point out errors/glitches/typos!

SO many optional reference notes at the end... if you're interested. *sigh*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Patience was an essential virtue for anyone hoping to be successful in the Intelligence field. It was not coincidence that Airen Cracken had it in spades. While he waited for the right moment to move, he gathered his evidence meticulously, checking and cross-checking facts and refining his planned approach. Finally, the stars aligned.

He started with a quick stop at Mon Mothma's office. Ostensibly, he was there collecting a signature. In truth, he could just have easily sent one of his assistants for it – what he really wanted was to confirm that she was – as usual on this night of the week, at this time – meeting with General Dodonna and Indigo's psychologist to 'discuss personnel concerns'. He snorted to himself as he left.

That was one way of phrasing it, he supposed.

Hitting his quarters, he tossed the newly signed data pad aside and traded his well-pressed uniform coat for a comfortable, well-worn expedition jacket in a soft dun color. Leaving the top buttons of his under-tunic undone, he rummaged in the boot locker under his bunk that doubled as a liquor cabinet for a bottle of decent wine. Tucking his selection under his left arm, he snagged the palm-sized case of encrypted data chips he'd been preparing for tonight and slipped it into a pocket.

One of the perks of being head of Alliance Intelligence was that it was an extremely simple matter to procure a shuttle up to Teeth without notice or questions and, in short order, he was striding purposefully down the Golan's corridors. He detoured toward the hangar reserved solely for Rogue Squadron, not missing the tiny indicator light on the key pad when he entered his code that told him someone was tracking all entries and exits from the space. If his soon-to-be-hosts hadn't already known he was aboard, they did now. A quick glance around confirmed exactly what he'd hoped: the Rogues were still out on assignment, and Solo hadn't yet returned from his mail run. Perfect.

Withdrawing from the empty hangar, he referenced his mental map of the station and headed for the Command level. Halfway there, he was met by the Princess's flustered protocol droid.
“General Cracken! Sir! I'm so pleased I caught you. I am C-3PO, human -,”

“I know who you are, Threepio,” Cracken interrupted politely. “I assume you're here to escort me to the Princess's quarters?”

The droid looked surprised – an accomplishment for such a neutrally sculpted faceplate, really - then picked right up again. “Why, yes, Sir! She's really quite pleased that you've come up. Not everyone does, you know. General Dodonna, for instance -.”

“Shall we?” Cracken prompted, inclining his head in the direction he'd been going.

“Oh, yes. My apologies. Right this way, if you please, General.” C-3PO bustled off, and Cracken followed, cataloging the details of the station out of habit as they walked. In short order, the gold-plated droid let them into the Princess's personal quarters and ushered his guest left, into Leia's conference room.

“Airen!” Leia greeted, standing from her place at the head of the long, narrow table. “This is a pleasant surprise.”

Cracken's gaze slid over the scene, taking in Madine's half-full scotch glass and the Princess's wine goblet. There were no plates or other signs of a meal, but a short, neat stack of pads, data chips, and flimsy sheets at Crix's elbow told him he'd caught them working on exactly the sort of things he was here to talk about.

“I thought we might have a drink.”

“I'd like that.” Leia was a consummate politician, but her smile seemed genuine. She gestured to the bottle he carried. “Shall we open that, or would you like something a little harder?”

“Let's open this,” he agreed, turning the bottle and presenting it with a cordial flourish. “It's perfecting for toasting.”

“Toast to what?” Leia queried as she carried the bottle to the sideboard and fished out a corkscrew.

“A new direction.”

“For the Alliance?” Madine's eyebrows went up. “Seems a bit ostentatious to set that type of course, just the three of us, behind closed doors.”

And there was the opening he'd been waiting for. Taking the glass Leia handed him with a nod of thanks, Cracken watched her pour her own and slide one in front of Crix before leveling his gaze at both of them and saying sternly, “No more ostentatious than the two of you have been on your own these last few weeks.”

“What?” Leia's tone was sharper now, and her eyes narrowed.

Cracken gestured with the hand not holding his wine. “You've got your own station,” he pointed out. “You own Squadron of crack pilots.”

“Half squadron,” Leia corrected, quickly.

“Only because you refuse to consider fleshing out the ranks,” Cracken countered, “which is simply more to my point. The bulk of Teeth's staff may come and go interchangeably with Indigo's, but this section of the station may as well be your own little fiefdom. The two of you command the personal loyalties of some extremely talented and tightly-knit individuals of crucial importance to the
Rebellion.” He paused, letting the gravity of what he was saying sink in before continuing. “If you were to decide that you didn't like the way things were being run, the resulting schism -.”

“No,” Leia stopped him, her tone twisting from sharp to truly acidic. “My father died for this Rebellion. I lost my family, my planet, everything for this Rebellion!”

“You're afraid of another Bel Ibis,” Madine cut in, shooting a cautionary glance at Leia.

The Princess pressed her lips together in a thin, white line and made herself process that before daring to say another word.

“I am,” Cracken confirmed. He sighed, pulled out the chair opposite Madine’s and sat, leaning back to stare evenly at them. “I was here when he and Mon clashed for the last time. I watched good men and women collect their things, shake hands with comrades they’d fought and bled beside for years – and then walk right out after him.” He pressed a finger to the tabletop in emphasis. “We have never been as strong as we are now. We cannot afford to lose this momentum because the two of you do something stupid – like accidentally start a schism over a difference in philosophy with Mothma and Dodonna.”

“A difference in philosophy,” Leia repeated, glaring at him. “That's what you think this is about?”

“No,” Cracken sipped his wine. “I think this is about Skywalker.” The three heartbeats of silence and two stiffened spines told him he was right on the credit.

“How so?” Madine inquired momentarily, toying with his glass and watching his counterpart intently.

Airen sighed. “I'm neither stupid nor blind, Crix. His CorUnum is tearing up the galaxy – no, don't try to tell me it's anyone else.” He pulled the case of data chips from his pocket and set it on the table. “I ran a resistance cell, remember? I know a frame job when I see one. Hers are among the best I've ever encountered, but you can't really deny she's got a hell of an M.O.” He shook his head and said, amused, “and it's a little harder to cover than most.”

A grandfatherly smile played at Crix's lips as well. “It is, at that,” he admitted.

“Whatever she told you,” Cracken edged the conversation forward with the precise care of a man who knows a sheet of thin, crackling ice is all that separates him from instant, icy death. “You've both thrown your lots in with her – lock, stock and barrel.” He looked between them. “And you don't trust the rest of us to know the secret that won you over.”

Silence stole across the room as Leia stared at the far wall, as if seeing the past and future writ large on the blank holo-screen. Madine rolled the stem of his wine glass between his fingers, the weight of his gaze on the shimmering surface of the wine. Cracken waited; he knew that look. Had worn that weight himself, too many times.

“What do you want?” Leia asked, finally, turning back to him. Her expression was smooth and focused, chocolate eyes razor-edged.

Cracken was reminded for a fleeting moment of her father; he'd seen the same look on Bail Organa's face when his people were threatened, when Leia had been taken. Somehow, he realized abruptly, there were things at stake here for her that hadn't shown up in his research. Something he'd missed; nothing he knew of in the mix should have earned that look. Instantly, he scrapped everything he'd planned to propose and went with his gut.

“To help,” he said simply. “Whatever you're doing, it's working. Whatever you're afraid of –
whatever's keeping you from integrating the rest of us into your plan – I can help. Tell me how. Tell me what you need.”

Leia set her wine down and started to pace. “I don't know if I can,” she said, worrying a nail with her teeth as the politician in her worked through the possibilities. “It's… not entirely my jurisdiction,” she explained, when Cracken frowned.

“Luke trusts you,” Madine told her, quietly. “You know if he were sitting here, he'd look to you for this.”

Leia grunted. “And make some 'farm boy' crack,” she agreed. “The womp-rat. As if being a Jedi doesn't give him insight I'd kill for!” She paced another moment, thinking. Then, she made her decision. Pulling out her chair, she sat down, folded her hands and faced Cracken as one negotiator to another.

“Amnesty for Mara,” she opened the bidding. “Non-negotiable.”

“For what she's doing now?” He pulled out a data pad, opened a new file and starting making notes.

“And what came before.” Leia's eyes flashed with something raw. “No public recounting of her past, either.”

Cracken raised an eyebrow. “That's asking a lot.”

“You didn't make me recount what Vader did to me on the Death Star.” Leia lifted her chin, stubbornly.

_Tortured_, Cracken thought, fingers hovering over the data pad. “You,” he said carefully, “will... encourage her, to tell me what she can? I have to have something. For good faith.”

“Only you,” Madine joined in, nodding solemnly. “Off record. I'll facilitate.”

“Brave soul,” Leia murmured, drawing a smile from both men.

“What else?” Madine continued.

“You'll share Intelligence on what she's planning next with the Council,” Cracken proposed, his expression turning almost scolding. “It'd help a hell of a lot to be able to be proactive here.”

Madine laughed. “It would,” he agreed. “But she won't tell us.”

“Why not?”

“She and Han,” Leia informed him, peevishly, “have it in their heads that they can protect me and Luke from sociopolitical fallout through plausible deniability.”

“Ah,” Cracken failed to suppress a smile. “You've been dealing with this for a while, I take it.”

“Yes,” she griped. “And if I can't budge the nerf-herder, we're not going to get anywhere with her.”

“I may be able to help you make some headway.”

Over the next four hours (and two bottles of wine), the three of them hammered out an arrangement that was as creative as it was simple. The chrono slid past 0100 as they finally lifted their original glasses of wine in toast.
“To saving the Alliance,” Cracken said, lifting his glass.

“To being done with over-protectiveness in other halves,” Leia smirked, tapping the rim of her goblet against his.

“Cheers.” Madine added his to the mix, and they drank to the future.

“No change necessary,” Elegos told the barista, passing a credit chip across the burnished borl wood counter with a nod of thanks. Fragrant curls of steam drifted off the fat mugs he carried as he wound his way through the skein of small, round tables and out into the cool darkness of the narrow, high-walled terrace that ran along the side of the teahouse.

With the other handful of late-night patrons having seen fit to move their conversations indoors (where the environmental controls kept the cafe at a uniformly cozy temperature), he had his choice of seats. He elected for the back corner, where a climbing fern had laid claim to the walls before branching out, creating a dim, feathery alcove pierced only sparingly by the twin moons’ milky light.

Enconsing himself in a comfortably padded chair, he positioned one cup of fragrant Tarine brew in front of him and the other at the place to his right. Removing an antique pocket watch from his coat, he slid it casually to the center of the table where the state-of-the-art disrupter concealed within its gears would prevent anyone from overhearing or recording the upcoming conversation. Satisfied with his precautions, he indulged in idle people-watching though the cafe’s softly lit windows while he waited.

He was a third of the way through his drink when the scroll-work gate separating the private terrace from the public walkway inched soundlessly open, admitting a cloaked shadow, and then shut again. The shadow dissolved into the patio’s darkness-veiled edges before re-materializing within his alcove. Sagging into the waiting seat, it wrapped slender, gloved fingers around the prearranged mug.

“Lovely evening for an adventure, isn't it?” Elegos sipped his tea and watched his companion drink deeply and gratefully of the still-hot liquid.

“This is one adventure I'd hoped never to have,” she replied, her voice leaden with discouragement and resentment.

“Rightly so,” he nodded, sympathetically. “It is a dark day when one Corellian betrays another to our Imperial overseers.”

“I'm sorry to drag you into this.”

Elegos scoffed. “We're ears deep in much worse, my dear.”

Iella Wessiri chuckled into her brew, a hint of a sparkle touching her chocolate eyes as she glanced up at him from under her concealing hood. “I've no doubt of that.”

“If it's any consolation, your misfortune could not have come at a better time.” From within his coat he produced an envelope and passed it to her.

“You found me a way off planet?” Hope touched her tired face as she fished out the enclosed flimsy tickets for the mag-lev subway line from nearby Diadem Square to Juni Station, then on to Coronet City Spaceport. With the deeply engrained habits of an old spy, she automatically began tucking
them – and the various CorSec-quality fake identification documents she found alongside them – into various pockets. No point in unnecessarily flagging official attention if she had to pass through any random stop-and-search checkpoints.

“A friend of a friend happens to be passing through on business, and he’s agreed to give you a lift. The accommodations on the other end will be a bit modest, but you'll be in good company.”

_The Rebellion._ Neither said it aloud, but the understanding was clear.

“You'll find the _Lady Luck_ in docking bay AA23,” Elegos continued. “The captain is expecting you.”

Iella reached over to squeeze the old man's arm. “Thank you – both of you. I can't repay you for this.”

“How many times did you save young Corran's life, when you were partners?” Elegos chided gently, patting her hand. “We are long past keeping accounts.” He glanced at his watch. “You'd best be getting along. There's going to be an anonymous tip on CorSec's holo-line placing you at Peace Station in half an hour. The further you are in the other direction by then, the better.”

Iella shook her head. “When are you two going to stop the cloak-and-vibro-shiv routine and just stage a proper coup?”

“I’ve no idea what you mean,” he replied, innocently. “Now go, and be safe, my dear. We'll wait anxiously to hear that you've arrived.”

“This friend-of-a-friend has contact codes for you?”

“Not personally, no, but we've other ways of keeping tabs.” Elegos grinned and shrugged self-deprecatingly, the mischief dancing in his eyes making him suddenly look decades younger. “As I said, ears deep. I'm afraid we can't help ourselves.”

Wessiri leaned across the table and pressed a kiss to his weathered cheek. “I hope you never can.” With a final, purposeful swig of her tea, she rose and vanished.

Elegos lingered over his own a bit longer before taking his leave. He'd hack the comm lines and route his prank call to CorSec's tip line through the local spice den, he decided as he slid behind the controls of his sleek, late-model speeder. It would make it all the more entertaining later to eavesdrop on their efforts to trace it. Merging gracefully into skylane traffic, he considered just how deep the cancer of Imperial lies and propaganda had spread that one decorated CorSec operative would sell out another. Then his lips quirked wryly.

The Imperials had never truly understood Corellia. Even now, they flitted in self-important circles that barely skimmed the surface of the planet's lifeblood, utterly oblivious to the venomous and unforgiving Colo fish rousing within it's depths. In time, they would pay dearly for that mistake.

“Ah, Captain Jones!” The Aleena Post Master behind the yellowed plastcrete counter beamed, a reptilian smile splitting its wide, round face nearly in half. “I am so glad to see you!” He lowered his voice and leaned halfway over the aged surface, whispering furtively. “I was afraid the new installation might interfere with your return.”

“Why would Trohlu be a problem?” Han leaned his elbows on the counter with casual ease and tapped at the fake trading company insignia sewn to the left sleeve of the faded, dusty coveralls he
used for mail runs. “Ain't like a legitimate trader like me's got anything to worry about.”

“Yes, yes, of course!” the little alien agreed, hurriedly. “Nothing at all! Still, some business beings seem… reluctant to pass too close, now.”

“Paranoid,” Han opined, flatly. “I aint got nothing on my ship that aint properly documented. Right?” He raised his eyebrows meaningfully at Chewie, who huffed and rolled his eyes straight up into his furry brows.

//You enjoy this too much.//

“Exactly.” Han nodded for emphasis, knowing full well the Aleena hadn't understood a word the wookie just said. “That's what I'm talking about.” He slapped a palm on the counter, decisively. “Speaking of business, we've got deliveries to make. Just wanted to check the box here while we were passing through. In case we had any correspondence from old friends.”

“Oh, yes!” The Post Master clapped his long, slender, four-fingered hands. “And from new friends, I think,” he nodded vigorously. “Come see!”

Han exchanged glances with Chewie. Alliance mail was usually just passed over the counter in a worn, nondescript carry-all and they were on their way.

“Here,” the Aleena insisted, hopping off his tall stool and trundling around to unlock a heavily scuffed and dinged door set in the adjacent wall. “Come, come!”

Han pushed off the counter and followed, discreetly loosing his blaster from its holster as they walked. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his co-pilot shifting as well, freeing his bowcaster for a quick draw if their long-time friend had been coerced and there turned out to be a room full of stormtroopers ahead. Intel had promised the listening post on Aleen's sole moon was just that – a small listening post, with no garrison to speak of – but Intelligence was tricky business, and it wouldn't have been the first time they were disastrously wrong on such a point.

One glance around the cramped, over-flowing mail room was enough to reassure Han that no one was hiding out waiting to attack; there was barely room for the three of them among the haphazard stacks of boxes, leaning towers of padded envelopes, and huge wheeled bins stuffed with data cards and old-fashioned flimsey letters. If the maze of smudge-trails on the floor and prolific dust smears on the walls were any indication, the whole mess had obviously been schlepped, shoved, re-piled and otherwise reorganized recently to make room for the enormous, rectangular, environmentally-controlled transport case against the far wall.

“This,” the Aleena grabbed a bag – Han had no idea how he could tell any of the generic, mass-produced totes apart with the writing etiolated long past legibility – and shoved it at Chewbacca. “Is your regular mail. This,” he motioned to the case with a flourish, “is a special delivery. For you.”

“What's in it?” Solo asked warily.

“I do not know,” the little alien shook his head regretfully. “The very nice ladies who left it here for you were most clear on this point.” His already large eyes expanded at least two sizes at the memory. “The striking one, with that mean little blaster in her sleeve, told me she would feed me to a dianoga – one piece at a time, starting with my toes – if I peeked!” His scaly face furrowed. “Alarmingly specific, she was.” He looked between Han and Chewie hopefully. “You know this person, yes?”

Chewie let out a low, rumbling chortle and Han chuckled, re-snapping the holster on his blaster. “Yeah, we know her. You got a hover-dolly we can borrow?”
Liquified rock drifted in languid, burbling swirls, giving off intense waves of heat that rolled upward, appearing on his ocular sensors as endless ripples ranging from crimson to the deepest tones of violet. Vader watched impassively as the vividly chromatic lines wafted over the rounded toecaps of his heavily armored boots, licking at the thick layer of polish until it began to melt, dripping and pooling in thick, syrupy drops on the cratered ground.

It could almost have been Mustafar. But the sky overhead was cerulean, and an intermittent breeze interrupted the stench of char and death every few minutes with errant puffs of air redolent of an indefinable scent singular to Naboo.

Some of stone simmering past his puddling boots had once formed the wide, confetti-strewn streets where he, young and delighted, had watched Nabooians and Gungans march triumphantly. A viscid bubble swelled and popped, flicking burning droplets against the armor-weave of his billowing cloak; every drop might once have been part of the palace from which Padme had defied Sideous's first army.

Padme. G loved mechanical hands clenched into unyielding fists and fury boiled in his chest. Some of those particles – it was impossible to know which ones, now – were all that remained of his wife.

“My body has been returned to the land.”

Vader did not have to turn his head. He was intimately aware of every crease that would touch the fine skin around her eyes when she narrowed them at him and adopted her unyielding “senate” tone.

“As it should have been from the first.”

This argument was old and as well-worn as the streets of Mos Espa; his parry came without thought. “I lost everything for you, my Angel. Would you deny me this paltry comfort, as well?”

“This is not a comfort, Anakin,” she shot back, on cue. “It is a torment – one he put here, to keep you enslaved.”

“It must please you to have finally spited me in this,” Vader rumbled, turning his head to level the full weight of his glare at her ephemeral form. “Or perhaps it is of no consequence, given the magnitude of what else you have denied me all these years. How could you hide my son from me? How can you have claimed to love me, and yet left me to suffer alone all this time?”

“I could not have our son stolen by the Emperor as you were, Anakin.” She did not meet his eyes, her gaze drifting back to the lava. “I wasn’t able to protect you from him, but I could protect Luke.”

“Your deception only delayed the inevitable. The Emperor has discovered the truth of his origins. The only protection for him now is to join the Empire as my apprentice.”

“No!” She spun back to him, hands turning palms up, pleading. “Anakin, no! There must be another way. Together, the two of you -.”

“To overcome the Emperor, he must embrace the Dark Side,” Vader cut in, his anger spilling over. “Take his place beside me. Only then can we overpower my Master. If that girl was doing as I ordered, we might already be confronting him.”

“What girl?” Padme searched his faceplate as if she could see right through it to the expressive face of the man she'd once wed.
“I sent him the Emperor's Hand,” the Sith snarled. “A slave to tutor him in the Dark Side – to make him see that what I offer is the only way. Instead, she did this.” He nodded toward the destruction sprawled before them, and fumed in a way that reminded his wife all too much of the young, impetuous Jedi wounded by the Council’s refusal to grant him the title of Master. “He should not have allowed her to ruin valuable assets of his future Empire.”

He had no doubt that this had been her work. The fools in Imperial Intelligence had sworn up and down that there was no trace of forgery or coercion in the recording that had been making the rounds of the holonet, despite the Empire’s fervent efforts to repress it. They’d scratched their heads and bumbled ludicrous, far-spun theories when Vader demanded to know how a sous-chef in the Emperor’s private estate, born and raised in a family of die-hard Imperial loyalists from the planet’s upper echelons, could have discovered and so spectacularly sabotaged an operation of the size and complexity of the Theed plasma mine. That the ‘conscience-blighted snitch’ (as the media had dubbed him) had conveniently recorded and uploaded a full confession to the holonet from a public terminal on the far side of the continent – just before blowing his own brains out – hadn’t seemed to affect their insistence of its validity.

“But, Lord Vader,” they’d beseeched, choking each word around his suffocating Force grip. “Who else…?”

He’d snapped their necks before they could finish the question. He knew who it was. What he could not grasp was why. He'd sent her to Luke to be useful. Obliterating infrastructure vital to the Empire her new Master was to inherit was an egregious violation of her mission, and starkly out of character for one raised to serve.

She had to be with Luke, or at least on some kind of leash he held. Vader had felt the shift in the Force when his son had claimed her for his own service. How could the boy could lead with stunning effectiveness within the Rebellion, and yet fail so completely to master a single slave? The Sith ground his jaw. It was a lesson that would have to be learned before he would be able to lead the Empire. There were many such lessons – lessons he had meant Jade to teach the boy as part of bringing him around to accepting the inevitability of his fate.

She was failing atrociously. The dark Lord indulged in a momentary fantasy of smiting the Hand for her insolence and incompetence. How delicious it would be to hand her off to Darillion as he'd threatened – just for a day – and make his son watch the consequences of flouting his will so late in the game. He imagined they'd both come out of the experience far more appreciative of the reality of their situation.

Vader banked that temptation, turning his mind back to the immediate moment. Right now, his presence was required in Oversector Outer to address the latest wave of turmoil licking at the galaxy's heels. He'd quash the mess with his signature ruthless efficiency, and send solid assurances back to his Master that everything was under control.

Then... then he could locate the girl, and find out what in the Sith hells she thought she was playing at. She of all people should know that time was short. The Emperor was making plans to turn or execute Luke at the advent of the second Death Star's completion. They had perhaps half a year at most in which to bring him up to speed with all the Dark knowledge he would need before time ran out.

Vader turned sharply, offering no goodbye to the ghost of his wife – she'd be there when he returned, as she always was. She had no choice; even without her physical body imprisoned in an unwanted tomb, his Dark power held her spirit there in thrall. She did not call after him; long experience told her he could not hear her when he got like this.
Gravel ground under his heel as he stalked into motion toward his TIE fighter. The Emperor's Hand thought she was special, but she was no less crippled and expendable than he was. Without power like his to protect her, she was nothing. He looked forward to clarifying that for her.

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Mara mentally squinted, examining the iridescent strand of energy with a critical eye. “A little to the left, you think? A millimeter, maybe. Or two?”

“Did Sheev give you this perfectionist streak? You can't possibly have gotten it from my side of the family,” Zet griped. “And Force knows Mandalorians are more likely to just blow up an entire sector than worry about details like this – no disrespect to your sweet mother, of course.”

“One and half,” Mara split the difference, nudging the tip of the strand the tiniest bit to the side and pressing in to apply her flagging strength into the Force-welding process that would graft the link to the outer edge of her energy shell. “You don't have to stay. I've got this part of the process down.”

“It's just taking forever.”

“Forever!” Tarazet, deeply in her apprentice's head overseeing her work, caught the thought clearly and sighed dramatically. “Mara, Sweeting, you're doing by hand what your body would have done by itself over the course of months – years, even. Four weeks is the blink of an eye, not forever!”

Mara flinched slightly as the graft took, sealing itself with a sharp, brief bite. As she fished another filament free from the loose tangle floating off her core, she checked that math. A week on Corellia (more or less) after the fireworks ended, then three bouncing between the Mid and Outer Rims with Mirax. So, yes. Four weeks already she'd planted herself here during every spare second, hidden away in the heart of the rings of power that encased her. Weaving and welding, implacably expanding the ever-more-complex net that would cradle those she coordinated, manipulating their connections until – together – they became a sum exponentially more than its parts.

She had refined her process; while it was still aggravatingly slow work, (for the most part) she'd learned how not to trigger the delicate nerves and accidentally catapult herself into the Oubliette. As a result, her rate of progress had increased; so had her fury as she increasingly grasped the scope and scale of what her former Master had done to her. Denied her. Of how grotesquely scarred she was now, all the way to her center.

But there had been growth on that score as well. Her rage no longer threatened to swallow her, but simmered quietly its corner while she worked – as if it were a sentient thing that had learned the value of patience. Not that it ever needed to be patient for long – she'd been extremely busy.

“Hey, Halcyon. Catch.”

Mara opened her eyes and caught the data chip Mirax tossed her with ease. “My next chapter?”

“You did your end,” Mirax confirmed. “Here's mine.

“It had better not be half crossed out and scrawled over with expletive-filled tirades like the last two,” Jade warned. “I'm supposed to be learning how this works, not how kriffed up you think Imperial ideas about sex are.”

“If Skywalker knew I even gave you those last two chapters at all, he'd probably have a fit,” Mirax objected. “They were horrible. Who starts a book on sex with all the ways you can get hurt, maimed, or killed doing it?!” She sighed and folded her arms. “This chapter is drier than the sands of Jakku, but at least it will give you some of those instructional details you've been itching for.” She gave Jade
a pointed look. “I still maintain there's nothing quite like hopping in the back of a speeder and figuring it out as you go. Rostek has some very nice speeders I'm sure he'd be happy to lend you.”

“So you've said,” Mara dismissed the idea out of hand. “I'll stick to my research, thanks.”

“Yeah, well, you want another chapter after this, you're going to have to find something else of value to give Skywalker, so start thinking about it.”

“Right.” Mara felt a momentary streak of despair – how the kriff was she going to do that? - but quashed it before it could show. “You going to bed?”

Mirax nodded. “And you should be soon, too. Chef tells me you're not getting nearly as much trance time as you're pretending to.”


“I mean it!” Mirax threatened. “Tell Zet she'd better not be keeping you up, or I'll report her to Corran and Skywalker.

“I'm sure she'll be petrified,” Mara deadpanned. “Get some sleep, Horn. Tomorrow is going to be rough.”

“Worse for them than us,” Mirax smiled wickedly. “Night, Jade.”

After Mirax left, Mara worked another hour on her sphere before Zet absolutely refused to let her do another single strand. Digging her fingers into bleary eyes, Mara conceded and felt her aunt disengage, slipping back into the ethereal mists with a loving caress of farewell. She had to blink at the chrono twice before she could make out the time, and told herself it didn't matter that she was exhausted. She really needed to review the plans for tomorrow just one more time before bed – just in case. But first, she was overdue to check in. Closing her eyes, she reached within herself and tugged back the soft, heavy layers of shielding she'd swaddled around her Luke-place.

- -

“What do you call a person who brings a rancor its dinner?” The inter-ship comms crackled with the latest in Hobbie's endless stream of terrible jokes.


“Yeah, well, I've gotten ten hours of sleep in the last four days,” Klivian grouched. “My memory's a little holey.”

“Something about you ought to be holy,” Corran jibed, flicking his mic live. “I haven't heard language like you threw at those Imps since I was working the lowest levels of Coronet City!”

Skywalker shook his helmeted head and re-checked the data streaming across his x-wing’s busy control board. This was – he hoped – their last duty shift in the Hervvol sector. With the worst of the Imperial thrust diverted, Green Squadron was due to arrive to hold down the fort, allowing Gold Squadron a well-earned reprieve. His Rogues were no less deserving of a break, but the closest they were going to get was a chance to nap in hyperspace.

The cautious brush of Jade's consciousness against his own had Luke scrambling to flip the ship's controls to his astromech. “Artoo, take over, will you?”

The droid warbled happily at the rare invitation to show off his landing skills, and Luke turned his
full focus to Mara. He'd discovered the hard way that if she thought she might be a distraction while
he was flying, she'd withdraw instantly, completely shutting him out and refusing to reconsider
despite his most vigorous protests.

_I used to fly Beggar's Canyon in a beat-up T-16 while arguing mechanics – vehemently – with
Biggs. I think I can handle a well-maintained x-wing in open space!_

_Nothing I have to say is worth getting us both killed for, Skywalker. I'm alive, I checked in. Go fly._

Just like that, she'd been gone and his chance to talk to her lost. But he was a quick learner.

This time, with Artoo handling the return to the Rebellion's temporary base and landing sequence, he
was able to reach back to Mara with a wash of welcome and clearly undivided attention. The reward
was immediate. The thick shields she'd been keeping between them – to prevent dangerous
distractions on the job, she insisted – dropped away and she was suddenly, wholly
there. Luke luxuriated in the feel of her heat permeating every inch of him, dispelling the perpetual, nagging
sense of lack he carried when she was concealed.

_You feel tired,_ she opened without pleasantries.

_So do you,_ he countered. She frowned at him, her sense exuding faint whiffs of disapproval and
concern, and he gave a little.

_Just finishing a campaign in the Hervvol sector. The Imps were a little more attached to it than we
expected, and it was pretty ugly for a couple days. We're headed in for debrief and a quick
maintenance check now, then straight back to home base,_ he reassured. Then he nudged wordlessly
that it was her turn to give. _What's got you stretched thin?_

_The usual,_ she shrugged.

_Your sphere._ He sent a puff of sympathy.

_I just want it done._ She tried to tamp back her frustration. _I'll be able to do so much more, as soon as
I finish._

“Luke?” Wedge's voice came over the speaker, the low-level background static suggesting he'd
already landed and was in the process of popping his cockpit hatch. “You all right? Looks like
Artoo’s flying you in.”

Luke toggled the comm quickly. “I'm fine. Just listening to some rumors.” _Rumor_ being the code
phrase they'd adopted for referencing Mara in public.

“Take your time then,” Wedge returned, knowingly. “We'll start the briefing without you.”

“Thanks.”

_You need to go?_

_No!_ Luke tightened his grip on Mara’s presence reflexively, before making himself relax it. _No,
Wedge just had a quick question._ He picked up where they'd left off before the interruption. _We
should plan a vacation, when this is all over. We'll have more than earned one. Han says they're
great._

_A vacation?_ She sounded dubious, then her mental eyes narrowed. _What do you mean 'Han says' –
you've never taken one?_
Luke gave a self-deprecating laugh. *I lived on Tatooine,* he reminded her. *Even the prettiest bits weren't much to see. But my aunt took me to the Galactic Moon Festival most years, and I always thought that counted.* He peered at her curiously. *What about you? Did the Emperor ever take you when he went on vacation?*

There was a pinch of painful memory from the other side of the bond, and Luke immediately regretted the question. But Mara shouldered through it and answered, *he did, but it was never a break for me. Just a different location with new geography and fauna to throw into the mix of my training.*

Luke caught a twinge of self-consciousness before she followed up uncertainly with, *I got a day to myself once, when I finished a job early. It was… nice.* She broadcast-ed embarrassment at the trite sentiment, but he radiated reassuring approval.


*Aargau. It's a banking world in the Deep Core.* She paused, her attention pulled away, and when she came back her sense was suffused with annoyance. *I have to go.*

*Everything all right?*

*Fine.* She waved off his concern. *Mirax woke up, and now she's in my doorway threatening to comm you and Corran if I don't get my ass in a trance. S he added reluctantly, I told her I'd be in one an hour ago.*

*Mara! You're supposed to be taking care of yourself!*

*Yes, fine, I'm going.* Miffed as she was, Mara managed a brush of affection over him. *Clear skies, Skywalker.*


She seemed surprised, then suddenly extremely pleased. *Sure.*

He lost her then – no doubt to go argue with Mirax about how much rest she wasn't getting – and Luke opened his eyes. Despite his fatigue and that *something's missing* feeling that was creeping back in now that Mara was muffled behind shields, he felt refreshed from their contact.

Opening his eyes and returning his attention to his physical surroundings, he hit the release for the cockpit hatch. The clangs and shouts of the temporary base's main hangar clattered in, and Luke took a deep breath, pulling on the Force for energy before unsnapping his helmet and dumping it onto the powered-down console.

*“Thanks for covering, Artoo.”*

The droid trilled happily as Luke swung up and over the ship's side.

*“Let's go get this debrief over so we can go home.”*

* - *

*“General?”*

The grey-haired man turned away from the wide window and, as always, Sena Leikvold Midanyl found herself irresistibly drawn to the intelligence and intensity in the depths of his tawny eyes when
he looked at her.

“Yes?”

“A message arrived for you, Sir.” She held out a data pad, frowning. “It’s encrypted in a code we
don’t have a key for and the ID code doesn’t have a name attached, but it’s on the approved list.”

Intrigued, the General stepped over and accepted the pad. He skimmed the first line of the message,
then broke into a grin. Glancing up at his second in command, he lifted the pad slightly. “I’ve got the
decrypt code. Thank you, Sena.”

Covering her surprise, she nodded and excused herself. “Yes, Sir.”

Alone, it took the General only seconds to read and reread the entire short message. The encrypt only
looked complex because of the specificity of the key; once you knew it, it practically decoded itself –
that was why he and Rostek had developed it in the first place.

The tides have shifted. A new moon commands the Alliance’s tides, and monsters too long asleep are
rising. Fancy a sail?

Turning back to the expansive view of New Cov’s wild jungle, and the steady throb of activity that
marked the trails and tracks of Peregrine’s Nest, Garm Bel Ibis grinned.

- -

“I know, I know! I’m coming.” Luke ruffled a towel through his damp hair, then threw it at the hook
on the wall, already moving to drag a fresh shirt over his head.

Artoo bleeped impatiently one more time, then rolled himself out the door of Luke’s quarters.

“Yeah, well, you didn’t smell like a wet wookie,” the Jedi grumbled, stuffing his feet into his boots.
In a quick, practiced movement he strapped the hold-out blaster Mara had given him to his wrist and
tugged his sleeve down over it. Then he grabbed his belt and pursued his astromech. His light saber
thumped unevenly against his thigh as he clumsily buckled the belt around his hips and thigh while
crossing Teeth’s corridor to Leia’s quarters.

Despite the earliness of the hour, the ‘War Room’ room was already vibrant with life. Artoo and
Whistler were plugged in side-by-side in a corner, tootling and cooing to each other in conspiratorial
tones. Beside them, Chewie leaned easily against the wall.

Wedge, Corran and Han lounged on the far side of the table over plates in varying degrees of
emptiness discussing the Rogue’s just-completed mission to the Hervvol sector. Luke tossed them a
wave as he made a beeline for the sideboard. He lifted a hand again to indicate hello to Generals
Madine and Cracken, entering a moment behind him, as he poured himself a generous cup of caff.
Doctoring the thick brew as best he could, he wished for blue milk and that majestically thick honey
Rostek had stocked.

Maybe picking up Mara’s caff habit wasn’t such a good idea, he thought for the hundredth time.
Taking an experimental sip, he decided it would suffice and tried to resign himself to the thought that
he might never have caff as good as the Corellian stuff again. Unless, of course, Mara could be
coaxed into bringing a supply of Rostek’s silky, high-end variety beans back to Teeth with her when
she came. He made a mental note to find a subtle way to ask. He didn’t want to add to the pressure
she already felt to finish her sphere, but the sooner he got her back with him in person, the happier
he’d be.
“Luke!” Leia entered with Winter, and Luke quickly set his drink down to embrace her. “Did you see it?” He laughed and let her go, motioning toward the wall to the left of the door he’d entered through. The formerly uniform expanse of polished, bare metal now held an enormous and ornately framed profusion of vividly colored tufts that looked to be distinctly lichen-ous organic matter. “It's a little hard to miss,” he teased. “I didn't realize it was so big.”

“My father particularly liked large canvases,” Winter said, nostalgia softening her regal tone.

“Ob Khaddor was your father?” General Cracken blinked in surprise. “I hadn't realized.”

“It was a well-kept secret,” Winter confided, her cool eyes shifting calculatedly to Luke. “The first of many to be shared in this room, this morning, I think.”

Right, Luke thought, steeling himself. He’d read the amnesty agreement and proposed realignment document repeatedly. Then he’d had Corran, Mirax, and Mara read it, looking for anything he might have missed. Aside from a few small tweaks and Mara's initial knee-jerk suspicion, it had passed muster. They'd all signed it. Now it was time to put his credits where his mouth was.

Leia felt his misgivings flicker through their bond and gripped his arms tightly, pushing back her own confidence as much as she knew how. Trust me. Out loud, she said, “You can't begin to know what this means, Luke. To all of us. It's not just a bout our culture – moss paintings are alive. There are species in that painting that were found nowhere but Alderaan. Plants we’d thought gone from the universe forever. We can replant them, now – propagate them. Keep a little more of our home world alive. It's priceless.” She shook her head, still a bit overwhelmed, then fixed him with a stern look. “You'll make sure Mara knows – understands what this means to her, to us?”

“Of course,” he promised. Then, remembering that Cracken knew about the bond now, he made himself add, “as soon as she lets her shields down.”

“She's blocked you out?” Leia's face creased in concern.


“Sphere?” Cracken inquired.

“Part of that Jedi stuff we promised to explain in person,” Corran piped up.

“Well, tell her to hurry up so she can get back here,” Han interjected. “She's leaving us out of all the fun.” He pointed a finger at the painting. “You can't tell me she didn't have a good time 'liberating' this thing from wherever she found it.”


“Speaking of things we're being left out of,” Madine stepped in. “Shall we?”

“Of course.” Eager to see the latest – he hadn't been able to keep up with Mara's exploits during the campaign – Luke handed his sister off to Han's waiting lap and took his own seat, reclaiming his mug.

Madine activated the holo-display that covered fully the top half of the wall adjacent to the moss painting. A series of images burst to color. It took a moment for everyone to realize what they were looking at and, when they figured it out, most pulled faces at the carnage.

“Who is – was that?” Wedge was the first to ask.
“Tol Getelles,” Winter supplied, sipping from a flute of pale colored juice in one hand and consulting the data pad she held in the other. “Moff of Antemeridian sector.”


“Yeah,” Han confirmed, leaning around Leia to tap a couple buttons on a controller built into the table. The images on the holo-display rearranged, sliding down and the right. In the top left, a glowing map popped to life. “Home of the Perlemain Trade Route.”

The Perlemain. Luke had studied it as a boy during lonely nights on Tatooine, dreaming of his space-faring adventurer father hurtling along it’s starry channels as he navigated his way across the galaxy on an ever-changing bevvy of spice freighters. Together with the Hydian Way and the Corellian Run, the Perlemain formed the holy trinity of trade super-hyperroutes through the galaxy. Nearly all trade – legal and otherwise – used at least one of them during some part of the journey between ports.

“Amazing that Getelles got put in charge of anything that important,” Leia spoke up, stealing a sip of Han's caff. Her smuggler pressed a kiss to her temple, just beneath her circket of braids, then re-appropriated the drink with a shake of his head.

“He wasn't well respected, I take it.” Corran raised an inquiring eyebrow.

“I heard another Senator refer to him once as a 'quibbling, incompetent, boot-licking, corset-laced little sand maggot,'” Leia confirmed, leaning over to tap at the table's buttons herself, bringing up a new set of holos.

“Nice,” Horn chuckled. “Wonder why she went through the trouble of chopping him into pieces. Gotta give her credit for the design she made from the parts, though. Artistic.”

//It's the Black Sun logo.// Chewie pushed off the wall and snagged a fat stylus from the table in a giant, furry hand. Moving to the holo-display, he traced the sharp angles the corpse's deconstructed parts had been laid out in until the criminal syndicate's logo was clearly outlined in the gory arrangement.

Leia blinked. “How on Hoth did you see that?”

“Not the first time we've run across it,” Han said easily. “Not something they do often, mind you. Lotta work for thugs. But it proves a point in a hurry.”

//It is a treatment usually reserved for someone who has crossed the organization in a grave way.// Chewie added.

“Mara Jade is framing Black Sun for the murder of a Moff,” Winter put the pieces together, a bit incredulously. “That's… incredibly suicidal.” She was silent a beat. “And possibly brilliant.” Her fingers started flying over her data pad. “If everyone buys it, the ramifications will be enormous. If the syndicate starts hunting her, though...”

“It'll barely be a blip on the radar screen compared to the trouble she'll have if the Emperor figures out she's still alive,” Han shrugged off Retrac's concern.

“When she returns,” Cracken remarked, “she and I really need to have a discussion about frame jobs.”

“What's she looking to prove?” Corran stared thoughtfully at the display. “Everyone knows the Empire is in bed with Black Sun.”
“Not prove,” Luke shook his head, sipped his caff absently as he stared unseeingly at the holos. He pulled on the Force, willing the facts and ideas floating in the air to coalesce for him. They drifted across his vision like puzzle pieces lazily rearranging themselves. “Destabilize,” he announced as the smudged picture of a possible future sketched itself out in front of his unfocused eyes. He lifted a hand, tracing fingers along a line no one else could see. “Both the Empire and the syndicate rely on order.”

“Order and muscle,” Winter corrected, wiping the holo-screen clear and projecting an entirely new set of images. “In the form of beings, who are going to be paranoid and wary now, and ships – which was the other half of the hit.”

Images of a series of hangars arrayed themselves on the screen, their contents crumpled, blackened and occasionally smoking.

Horn grinned, radiating pride and affection. “A hundred credits says that's Mirax's contribution.”

//That is significant damage.// Chewie surveyed the scene. //How would she manage it, alone?//

“Mining charges, if I don't miss my guess,” Corran took a swig of his caff, then rose and walked to the holos. “We took two crates of blast charges off the Falcon – spoils from Bilbringi, Mara said. Miners use them. Set them up right, you can crack an asteroid open any way you want it.” He shrugged one shoulder and tapped the under-seam of one of the hulls in the holo. “They'd work the same on a ship's hull if you placed them right. One right along here, for example, and you'd do a hell of a lot of damage in a hurry.”

Cracken muttered something about discussing resource sharing with Jade, as well.

“It'd be easy enough if you knew what you were doing,” Wedge agreed with Horn's assessment, leaning forward and nodding as he followed the thought. “Steal a low-ranking deck crew suit, wander around with a hover-sled marked as maintenance equipment and tell anyone who asked you'd been tasked with something painfully boring like checking production numbers on a minor component. No one'd care enough to check up, and you could walk in and walk out.”

//Remote detonate.// Chewie rumbled. //Will they believe that, too, was Black Sun?//

“I'm not sure it matters,” Winter said. “Regardless of who they think did it, the result is the same: the primary Commander and patrol force responsible for inspecting, regulating and escorting traffic along the Perlemain are dead and crippled, respectively.”

“It's gonna be hell out there,” Han predicted with satisfaction. “Massive trade interruptions in everything from Imperial food shipments to spice.”

“Mandatory Fleet rearrangements.” Leia added. “They'll have to pull from elsewhere, shifting the balance of power in other sectors to sort this out. She glanced at Winter. “We'll have to talk to the rest of Command – reconsider our upcoming sortie schedule. We might be able to take advantage of those shifts, hit some new targets.” She looked at the two Jedi in the room. “Any idea when they're going to get around to submitting the itinerary for what comes next?”

“'Soon' was all I got,” Corran shook his head wryly. “Mirax is approaching the peak of her pregnancy-induced-homicidal-rage condition, though, so I'd expect more serious destruction, as opposed to something small and tactical.”

All eyes turned to Luke, who shook his head. “No idea. But she promised its coming, so we should have it soon.”
“In the meantime,” Madine directed, “we have work to do. As you're all aware, under the new arrangement, Rogue Squadron has become a hybrid flight – splitting it's time between standard battle engagements with the Fleet and Intelligence assignments. The Squad's open slots will not be filled by pilots. Instead, they're being assigned to Mara and Mirax. Their technical titles will be Agents-at-Large.”

“That should cover pretty much any chaos they see fit to cause,” Cracken put in, bemused. “It also leaves you a couple open slots, should you find anyone else – pilot or otherwise – you'd like to 'adopt'. As discussed, today is testing day. Agent Retrac and I will run your Squad through standard Intel screening, assign their new security clearances, and assess what we need to do to refine and hone their preexisting skill sets in non-piloting directions that will prepare your Squad for the kind of… unusual situations I expect you'll find yourselves in.”

“And where we tell you – and the rest of the Rogues – as much as we can about Mara,” Corran nodded. “And figure out how Luke and I can advance our Jedi training and applicability here without sending up flares to the Empire that say 'here we are, come and get us'."

“That about covers it,” Cracken confirmed. “Shall we get started?”

“No time like the present,” Wedge rose, and they all took the cue and started preparing to head in their different directions themselves.

“Luke,” Leia signaled her brother and he headed around the table to her. “Let me know when you figure out what you and Corran are doing.” She dropped her voice slightly. “I may not be able to make a light saber until I can get my hands on a crystal, but there are other things I can practice. You're not the only one who has things to be ready for.”

Luke nodded. “I'll forward it as soon as I know.”

“Here, Kid.” Shifting Leia's weight, Han shoved a hand into a pocket and pulled something out. “Almost forgot. This was at the mail drop, too – for you. It's encoded, and unlabeled, but it's definitely from Mara.”

Luke accepted the small green data stick with eager thanks, securing it deep in one of the chest pockets of his uniform jacket before kissing his sister's cheek and jogging off to catch up with Wedge and Corran.

It was a full sixteen hours before Luke could call himself done for the day and drag himself back to his quarters. At his heels, even Artoo seemed tired. The heady scent of Mara's lilies, climbing Teeth's walls along the vine of the hybrid Rostek had created, revived the Jedi a bit, and he retrieved the data chip Han had given him. He plugged it into his private data pad and stripped while it loaded, peeling off mostly everything and dropping into bed with the pad. Tapping in the security code, he keyed up the message.

A holo of Mara appeared, small, blue and crisp. She looked singularly determined, but there was an uncharacteristic undercurrent of nervousness about the tension in her shoulders.

“You asked what dance I liked best,” she started without preamble, glancing off-holo at something. “I told you it was obscure.” Her gaze returned to the recorder, and her chin lifted just a tad defensively. “If you're still interested, it's the Shu-Torun Counter-bore Waltz.” She hesitated, and her gaze dropped. “My dance mistress when I was young made it look inhumanly beautiful, and I… I wanted that. To be beautiful.” She flushed, then, and sucked in a breath. Let it out, and forced herself back to composure. “There's files, here, if you want to see what it is. How it's done. I don't expect you to -,” she added, eyes flying back up to the recorder hurriedly. “I just… you asked.” An
expression that might have been annoyance flitted across her face. “That's all.”

The message blanked out. Hungry to see more, Luke tapped at the attached files. Holo-recordings burst to life where Mara's image had been. A woman's crisp, Coruscanti-accented voice-over informed him that the dance had originated on Shu-Torun, and was traditionally done in the subterranean abyssal rooms of the Court. As she narrated, elegantly dressed couples demonstrated, twirling together with their arms outstretched. The women wore glowing spheres on the ends of their fingers, streaking luminous trails of colored light in circles and swirls that enveloped them and their partners. It was beautiful, and unlike anything he'd ever seen.

Luke watched until he could no longer keep his eyes open, saturated with delight that Mara had shared this precious piece of herself with him. When he finally succumbed to exhaustion, he dreamed of dancing.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, reference notes for the detail-inclined:

* Garm Bel Ibis left the Rebellion roughly 0 BBY (after Bail Organa died) due to a falling out with Mon Mothma, who he felt was consolidating too much personal power, and who he believed might set herself up as Empress. For the purposes of this story, I have wibbly-wobbly-ified the timeline to suggest that split happened earlier.

* Colo fish are giant, exceptionally dangerous creatures native to Naboo (one of the things Qui-Gon and Obi-wan run into in the movie).

* Aleenas are randomly adorable; you should look them up on wook just for a smile. : ) Also, yes, Han's alias is an Indiana Jones reference. Had to. Not sorry.

* Hervvol was a highly contested sector though, again, timelines have been squished here.

* Winter's father was never officially declared in cannon, but wook says it's very possible he was Ob Khaddor, the famous Alderaanian artist.

* Natassi Daala actually used that lovely quote re: Tol Getelles.

* Shu-Torun Counter-bore Waltz is a real GFFA thing, and (as things are currently planned now) it will matter later.
Mid-Rim II

Chapter Summary

Palpatine is creepy and cranky, Yoda makes a decision, and Luke and Mara work on their relationship despite the physical distance between them.

Chapter Notes

This is an interlude of sorts, and could use more editing, probably, but I'm posting it anywho. Enjoy!

“Next Jedi Temple: Coruscant, Corellia, or other?”

Luke kept the forward sweep of his light saber hilt perfectly level before rotating his wrist and bringing it up to salutation pose, shifting his weight. His bare feet dug into the mats and his muscles bunched, the near-hour of slow-motion practice making them start to burn. On the far side of the room, a set of crates in varying sizes spiraled around one another at a consistent pace; as a split concentration exercise it was fairly mild, but he wanted to leave enough attention open to help his sister perfect her form as needed. “Corellia.”

“Coruscant,” Leia said at the same instant, beside him. Her face was screwed up in concentration as she worked overtime to match her movements to those of the Jedi on either side of her. She couldn't spare a glare in his direction but Luke felt her scowl across their twin bond.

On the other side of the Princess, Corran stepped to the side and down, extending his right arm in front of him, saber firmly in hand, and bent his left up at a right angle behind him. Several meters ahead of his saber hand, an elaborate scene played out, the illusion pristinely projected save for the ripple that passed through it as he laughed. “All right. Convince me.”

“Coruscant will be the New Republic's seat of government,” Leia shot back immediately, lifting her right hand slightly and inching her left out a smidge to square her posture with the others'. “The Jedi should be nearby. To offer guidance and protection.” She caught Luke's eye pointedly as they turned in near-unison to face the opposite wall and slid into the next pose in the kata. “And you'll need funding,” she lectured them both. “The closer you are, the easier it is for everyone to see where it's going and be invested in supplying it.”

“Rebuttal?” Corran invited Luke, bending down over his outstretched right leg, sweeping both arms back.

“I don't want to take funding from the New Republic.” Luke stepped out of the kata, hands dropping to his sides, un-ignited light saber hilt grasped loosely in his right. Across the room, the crates settled softly into a neat stack. “Ben and Nejaa were both believe that the too-close ties between the Old Order and the Old Republic were part of its downfall. I don't want to make the same mistakes.”

“You have to start from somewhere,” Leia pointed out, gratefully coming out of the sequence herself
and rubbing at her sore upper arm. Her muscles had some catching up to do to keep pace, but she was determined to get up to par in as short a time as physically possible. Her practice partners could be pulled away by Rogue Squadron duty without warning; she had to make the most of their precious time together. “Given what you’ve done for the Rebellion, I’m sure the High Council will be happy to help.”

“So will my grandfather,” Corran reminded her, the illusion he’d been holding wavering, then dissolving like a desert oasis in shifting light. “We could work out of his estate for years if we wanted to before we’d have to seriously look at any other options.”

Leia frowned at him and turned back to her brother. “We’ll need you, Luke. Both of you – all of you.”

_I don’t want Mara on Corusant._ Luke deliberately set that thought aside. It was true, but Mara would not be pleased if she thought he was giving her mental and emotional health preferential treatment when making decisions about the future of the Order. It would suggest he didn’t think she could handle whatever he dished out, and that wasn’t it at all. “We’re going to follow the Corellian tradition,” he reasoned. “It’s only right that we establish some kind of presence there before anywhere else.”

“What about us?” Leia asked, unhappily. “The challenges and threats aren’t just going to magically disappear when the war officially ends. We’ll be doing mop-up for years.”

“I don’t know,” Luke admitted. “I guess it’s good there’s still time to think about it.”

She opened her mouth to press her point, but Corran’s comm went off.

“Horn,” he answered it.

“Corran? The Princess there with you?” Wedge’s voice sounded annoyed. “Dodonna’s looking for her.”

Leia huffed, but started gathering her things.

“Yeah,” Horn said into his comm. “She’s on her way back to her office. Stall a bit so she’s got a chance to change quick, will you?”

“Copy,” Antilles agreed. “If you guys are done with your practice, you should come check out what Hobbie and Tycho learned to do today. We’re in Hangar Four.”

“Be right with you.” Horn thumbed it off. “Try this again tomorrow? Same time, same place?”

“I’ll be here,” Leia said firmly. She pressed a finger into her brother’s chest. “You’d best have come up with some better logic by then, or the Order will be setting up in Coruscant.” Then she stalked out.

“Tell me again why we have to personally know _every_ woman in the Alliance who would rather eat you alive than compromise on anything?”

Corran grinned at Luke’s exasperated, slightly beleaguered look. “Public service,” he joked. “Can’t in good conscience unleash them on anybody else but the Imps, after all.” he chuckled. “Come on. Let’s go see what the rest of the Squad’s got.”
Iella exploited years of experience in selecting optimal stake-out locations to identify the best, most unobtrusive corner of the Coronet City Spaceport from which to observe the SoroSuub Personal Luxury Yacht 3000 nestled in docking bay AA23. She was a beautiful ship. Fifty meters long, with an artfully sculpted nose and two long engine pods flaring off the back and what looked like an exterior observation lined with viewports up top.

Her pilot, when he emerged, seemed a fitting match for his well-kept ship. Dark skin and darker hair were strategically set off by a loose, egg-blue shirt with just the faintest shimmer when the fabric wrinkled with his movement. Black pants were tucked into polished boots, and a gold-lined cape swirled about his shoulders completed the look. He was either genuinely a gentleman of high breeding or working damn hard to play the part – she couldn't be sure which. At any rate, the way he lingered over the docking ramp, fussily checking utterly unnecessary details while casting casual glances around told her he knew she was coming. It was now or never.

Slipping from her cover, she merged easily into the spaceport's traffic and wove to the SoroSuub. Timing her arrival just as the others she'd paralleled shifted off on different headings, she gave herself as much space as she could – just in case this went to hell.

“Beautiful ship,” she commented easily as she approached, making a show of eying the *Lady Luck*.

“She is, isn't she?” The captain grinned, a disarming smuggler's smile full of perfect teeth and charm. “Not very big, but she's got it where it counts.”

“I heard you might have room for a passenger.”

“Really?” Lando cocked his head, still smiling but letting his brows knit just the right amount in unconcerned, good-natured interest. “Who told you that?”

“A friend of a friend.” Iella kept her words short, her tone neutral.

He shrugged. “Well, I can't say much for the accommodations on the other end, but if you're up for an adventure, you're welcome to join me.”

“We should get going, then.”

“Please.” He motioned gallantly for her to precede him, then followed her in, closing the hatch behind them. “I'm afraid I'm going to have to scan you and your bag for tracking devices,” he told her, seemingly genuinely apologetic. “I can't be too careful, right now.”

Iella handed the bag over without complaint and held her arms out from her sides. “I already did.”

“You'll have to forgive me, but I can't take your word for that.” Lando produced a high-end handheld scanner from a locker near the entry ramp and ran it over her, then her things. Relief settled in as it came up clear.

“I wouldn't forgive you if you did,” she informed him, lowering her arms when he turned to replace the device. “I've got friends on both sides of this trip who don't deserve to be in trouble because of me.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” He held out a hand. “Lando Calrissian, late Barron Administrator of the Cloud City Mining Facility.”

“Iella Wessiri,” she grasped the proffered hand and shook firmly. “Lately of CorSec, until I was outed as a Rebel sympathizer.”
“Tough break,” Calrissian empathized with a grimace. “We should be getting our clearance to leave any minute now – you're welcome to join me, if you'd like.”

She followed him to the cockpit and dropped into the co-pilot seat, taking in her surroundings with a strategic eye while he started firing up the ship. It purred to life with the deep hum unique to truly high-level engines.

“Do you fly?”

“I can,” she allowed. “But I usually don't. I've got more than my share of flyboys in my life, and they never want to share the controls. I save my energy for more important battles.”

“A woman after my own heart,” Lando laughed. “Picking one's battles is becoming a lost art, but it sure can go a long way.”

“Love Commander, you are clear for take-off.” Coronet City Spaceport Control announced over the comm. “Clear skies.”

“Thank you,” Lando commed back. “On my way out.”

“Love Commander?” Iella gave him a dubious look.

He shook his head, ruefully. “A buddy of mine lent me a false transponder code shuffler,” he explained. “He decided to have a little fun at my expense.” His fingers moved with fluid confidence over the controls. “Don't worry, though – I'll get my own back.”

Once they were safely out of atmosphere, Lando programmed in a series of jumps and they retired to the ship's main lounge. “She's got a class 1.0 hyperdrive, so it'll only take us about two days to get to Indigo Base. In the meantime, please consider yourself my guest. Make yourself at home. Can I pour you a drink?”

“Just water for now, thank you.”

Lando poured them each a glass of sparkling water from a cut-crystal decanter.

“So what do you do for the Rebellion?” Iella asked, sinking thankfully into a plush settee opposite the chair Lando had taken.

“There's a commission waiting for me when we arrive,” Calrissian explained, just a hint of pride coloring his tone. “They've had a major influx of new recruits since the sacking of Bilbringi, and Princess Leia has asked me to take on the role of overseeing the onboarding process. Screening, personality and skill assessments, squadron assignments – administration of the whole process, really.”

“She must have a lot of faith in you.”

Lando shrugged. “It's not that different than what I was doing before,” he brushed it off.

“And what brought you into the Rebel fold?”

“I was in the right place at the right time – or the wrong place at the worst possible time. I haven't quite made up my mind yet.” He laughed, but there was a bitter edge to it. “The short version? A hotshot ex-smuggler by the name of Han Solo got the Princess off the Alliance base on Hoth seconds before the planet fell. They eluded the Imperial Fleet by the skin of their teeth, and ended up stuck in the Anoat Sector with a broken hyperdrive, going nowhere fast. Han and I go way back, and my
mining facility was the only place close enough to limp to that he thought they had chance of reaching safely.” He took a sip of his water, then met her eyes grimly. “Vader got there first.”

“You defied Vader?” Wessiri asked incredulously.

“I didn't have the defenses for that!” Lando let out a gust of air in memory of those short, excruciating days. “I tried to warn them off, but I couldn't do anything overt enough to get the message across without tipping off Imperials troops breathing down my neck. Before I knew it, Vader had Han encased in carbonite, the Princess and another friend locked up, and had set a trap for the only known Jedi in the galaxy.”

*Only one known to you,* Iella thought, picturing Corran as she'd last seen him – laughing and blending in to the local bar scene as if he hadn't a care in the world. As if he weren't a massive storehouse of power wrapped in a compact, easily-overlooked package.

“The whole time my people were working behind the scenes, trying to bypass our usual systems without setting off the alarm. While Vader was tangled up with Skywalker, we were able to snatch Han out from under the bounty hunter's nose, catch the stormtroopers off guard, and blaze out under heavy fire in the *Falcon* – Han's ship. At the last minute, we swung back in and plucked Skywalker off the bottom rungs of a weather antenna.” He winced at the memory. “Poor kid was half dead.”

“What were you doing on Corellia?” Iella cocked her head with interest. “Sounds like they had every reason to commission you on the spot.”

“They would have,” Lando agreed. “But I still had a responsibility to my people from Cloud City. We evacuated, but a lot of them lost nearly everything they had. I had to make sure they were accounted for, resettled, before I could join the Rebellion with clear conscience.” He peered at her, curiously. “What about you? What would you like to do when you get to the Rebellion?”

“My former CorSec partner is already there,” Iella admitted. “So far, the full extent of my plan is to find him and go from there.”

“Not a bad start.” He winked at her. “But if you need help finding something, I know just the person to ask.”

“The new head of recruitment, assessment and assignment?” she asked with a smile.

“I hear he's not a bad guy,” Lando agreed.

“Well then,” she said, leaning back and getting comfortable. “Maybe he'd give a newbie a verbal rundown of all the key players – the stuff the don't put in the press releases. I'd like to hit the ground running.”

“Not a bad idea,” Lando conceded. “But only if we can discuss it over dinner. I'm famished.”

The door to the *Falcon's* securecomm room whooshed shut, and Han typed in the code to secure it.

“We good to go?” he asked Chewie.

The wookie grunted confirmation, and spun up the encrypted comm program. They waited. Then a scowling, one-quarter-sized holo of Mara popped to life over the glowing projector disc. She was filthy, though with exactly it was hard to tell, crisp as the holo was.
“Solo. Chewie.”

“Hey, Jade. What have you been mucking around in?”

“Barabel guts. And I'm overdue for a sanisteam. What do you want?”

“I didn't see any Barabels on the plan you sent Madine,” Han sounded doubtful.

“Mirax was… cranky, and I needed information on a new opportunity. We detoured. It got messy. It happens. Tell me what you want or I'm getting in the sanisteam and you can talk to the message loop.”

//He needs a kyber crystal,// Chewie announced. //For the Princess.//

“What for?” Mara asked suspiciously.

“She wants to make a light saber,” Han looked puzzled. “What else would you do with one?”

“You can't just pick up any old kyber crystal to be the heart of a light saber,” she scolded, impatiently.

“Yeah, well, I can't exactly take her shopping for one on Obroa-skai, either,” he pointed out. “You can't tell me you don't have any spares kicking around in one of your stashes.”

“I don't, actually,” she snapped. “I had a hard enough time earning the ones I shared with Farmboy.” She ran the back of a thumb over her cheek to scratch an itch, leaving behind a thick smear of congealed blood, then looked at her hand in disgust. “I might be able to find you one,” she relented. “I'll check some sources.”

“Thanks,” he said, truly grateful. “You need anything – other than a sanisteam?”

“I'd take a copy of the latest draft of the New Republic Common Charter, if you can get your hands on one.”

“That'll make for some dry reading,” Han warned. “But I'll sweet talk one out of Winter for you.”

“Thanks.”

//What do you suppose she wants that for?// Chewie asked thoughtfully when they'd signed off.

“I'm afraid to ask.” Han slapped his co-pilot on the shoulder as he stood to leave. “Which is exactly why I didn't.”

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Hobbling in slow, painful steps across the marshy and uneven ground, Yoda paused to brush a small, clawed hand over the mossy bark of a nearby tree. Reaching out with all his senses, the Grand Master embraced the feel of his home one last time. The planet seemed to reach back, thick mists purling around his ancient form in a parting caress.

Over the long years of his exile, the old Master had communed deeply with this well of power, forging a quiet connection the place that had taken him in at his most broken. They drew strength from one another, this wild world and the finely controlled Jedi who quietly ruled it.

He had hoped to die here. To let these mists usher him to the other side, where generations of padawans and friends waited to welcome him. To leave the meager physical remains of his existence
– his staff, his cloak – to decompose and return what little he could offer to the soil of this place as a
pittance of gratitude for the comfort it had offered him.

But the Force had spoken. It had yet one more task for him to complete before he could take his rest.
One more chance to act in the role of Grand Master, in which he had been so proud to serve.

Pressing forward again, he continued until he reached the edge of the murky Dragonsnake Bog.
Gathering the Force into his aching bones, he closed his eyes. Reaching out, under the water, he felt
his sense pass through the ancient mag field and into the cool, dry bubble of the hidden hangar. With
a whisper of thought, he brought the E3-standard starship lifeboat therein blinking and beeping to
life. A moment later, the repulsars whined and it lifted from the ground, hovering until the pitch
leveled off into a smooth hum. A tug of intention and the craft glided through the field, through the
press of water, and broke the surface. Fat muddy drops rolled down the angled, unadorned sides of
the shuttle and the old Master was struck with the image of the planet weeping at their parting.

The E3’s door whisked open and a ramp extended, it’s end sinking into the slime at his feet. He
stepped forward, hearing his bones creak at the effort. The feel of durasteel underfoot after decades
of only living earth and stone was jarring, and memories of another lifetime swirled around him, loud
and insistent. For a moment, he was back in the cool, sterile bay on Polis Massa, his feet on this very
same ramp, watching two men he loved dearly shake hands. His chest was tight and he bowed his
head because he couldn’t bear to watch them turn away from one another, each clutching a small,
blanket-swaddled bundle to his chest.

Yoda lingered in the moment, knowing even as he did that the tightness in his chest now came less
from emotion – though there was much of that – than from the infection that was slowly killing him.
Limping to the top of the ramp, he turned, taking in his sanctuary a final time and offering it oldest,
dearest benediction he had to offer. “May the Force be with you.”

Perhaps it was age, or illness, or simply overwrought nostalgia. But he was almost certain, as he cut
through the highly charged atmosphere into the icy expanse of space a few moments later, that he
heard it whisper back in the wordless song of the Force “and also with you, old friend.”

“I was fourteen when the Emperor sent me to Aargau.”

The holo of Mara rasped a whet stone over a vibroblade as she talked. It was Luke's third time
watching it, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the graceful way her hands curved down the blade.
The muscle-memory fluidity of it brought to mind dance steps and light saber katas – which was, he
was sure, exactly what she intended. As a defense mechanism, it was ideal. I'm skilled, it said
silently. Dangerous. In control. It was only the way her eyes fixated on the task, refusing to look up
at the recorder, that tipped him off to the truth: it was Mara's version of fidgeting. A nervous tic borne
out of a life-long aversion to - and fear of - vulnerability.

“It's a banking world,” she continued, her tone almost detached. “A mix of Coruscant-style urban
sprawl and meticulously cultivated countryside full of lavish estates. You know, the kind of places
you can court new business deals, keep a scandalous mistress, or go on week-long spice benders
without anyone asking questions.”

Luke had paused the recording here his second time through to look up holos of Aargau. Had gazed,
wide-eyed, at the rolling green hills, mountain-top compounds, and elaborate city spires.

“I commandeered an Imperial Intel agent to take to me to the spaceport and pose as my father.” A
thin, condescending smile twisted her mouth. “I was very proud, because I'd made up the entire
cover story myself and he didn't offer a single improvement when I handed him the script.” She lifted
the blade, examined it, then flipped it over and began the long, smooth strokes again. “We told the
transport captain I was being sent to my mother as part of a split custody arrangement. Of course I'd
done my homework, and made sure to imply – discretely, you understand – that she was a horrible
alcoholic. Just like the ex-wife the captain had recently gotten a messy divorce from.” She shrugged
one shoulder absently. “I was sweet as sucra and quiet as a mouse the whole trip, and he would have
sworn on his mother's grave it was impossible for me to do anyone any harm.”

Not for the first time, Luke wondered how Mara had managed not to go mad growing up. The
starkly dichotomous power dynamics alone – being debased and powerless on her knees before a
Sith Lord in one moment, and having pull equivalent of royalty or an Imperial Moff the next – would
have been enough to send most people over the edge. To create new personalities for herself every
mission and embody them so thoroughly, well, it was amazing she kept any sense of who Mara
actually was in between.

“When I got on planet, I found out that my target had moved up his schedule. I had to scramble to
catch up – I only had a few hours to get into place in my prearranged cover as kitchen help. After
that, everything went like chronowork – just a day early. By 1600 the day of the big event, my target
and his favorite wife were dead and in the cellar – fermenting in a barrel of his best wine. A couple
hours after that, I was back in New Escrow with an entire day left before the transport would be
ready to take me back to Coruscant. I couldn't go back early without the captain asking questions, so
I…”

Played. Rested. Got to be human. Luke's head supplied the words she paused to look for, while his
heart ached that she didn't even know how to describe having real time off.

“… occupied myself.” Mara's hands stopped moving as she lost herself in the memory. “I pick-
pocketed some obsequious banker and bought myself a feast at this fancy little stand at the edge of
the spaceport. Braboli, fried crispic, chandad – I'd never had any of it before. It was all grease and
salt and I loved it.” She smiled to herself. “I boosted a speeder and went back out to the countryside,
to a little lake I'd passed in the middle of nowhere. I stuffed myself, then took all my clothes off and
laid in the sun. Just laid there.” A shadow crossed her face, and her hands twisted on the hilt of the
whetstone. “That was before -.” She stopped; closed her eyes, staved off dark memories and
refocused. Some of the wistfulness returned. “That was it. I swam and napped and ate all day. Stayed
up all night just to watch the stars. Not as an astro-navigation exercise, just to watch.’

Even through the confines of the hologram, Luke could feel the sense of loss when she grasped her
whet stone and blade again with fiercely renewed purpose. “I was back in character by 0600 the next
morning, on the transport and on my way back to Coruscant. To him.”

Like the last data chip she'd sent, this one ended precipitously, just blanking out. He wasn't offended;
he'd been under no illusions that building a deeper relationship with Mara would be a clean or easy
process. All that mattered was that she'd accepted the challenge of more between them. Accepted it
and met it head on, as best she knew how.

Luke reached out and shut the holo-player off. Reaching inside himself, he caressed the spot where
she thrummed in the muted rhythm of a healing trance. Where shall we go? He asked, rhetorically.
When we've had our triumph?

He was certain he could do a hell of a lot better than a banking world to celebrate the fulfillment of
their Oath. And maybe, if he was very careful and exorbitantly patient when she came back to Teeth,
it wouldn't just be a vacation, either. It might be a honeymoon.
Palpatine folded his nude, bony body into the voluminous depths of his vine silk robe. Behind him, Ysanne Isard lay sprawled across his orgy-sized bed in the sleep of the well-kriffed. Bruises marred her milky skin, but the he took no pleasure in them. He took no pleasure in her, tonight, but some things had to be done whether one enjoyed them or not. He'd long considered the bragging rights that came with her status as his bed warmer part of her compensation package. Part of the snare that ensured her undying loyalty. It was a small price to pay, really, for her rabid devotion – even if her pain was sub par at best.

He missed his Hand.

Ysanne's pain was like rank; plentiful but gummy and unpleasantly oily on the tongue. You could tip the bucket back, and it would slide down the throat easily enough and fill a hole if you were starved.

But it was like comparing meatlump to fodu in green fire sauce; one was crude, the other was a spicy, artfully balanced exotic masterpiece. It wasn't Isard's fault, of course. He'd cultivated Mara nearly since birth to be perfect; her suffering had truly been a carefully concocted delicacy. If he'd had any idea how much he'd suffer in the waiting while events aligned to bring the Son of Skywalker into his grip, he'd have held off a while longer on disposing of her.

But there'd been no way to know how nasty a twist events would take after she was gone. How desperately he'd need the sweet tang of her agony to take the edge off the seemingly endless string of Rebel victories and the cascading chaos that blighted his beautiful Empire. No way to know how much he'd miss the midnight ripples of her nightmares caressing his consciousness, feeding rich dark energy back through their bond to nourish him.

Displeasure snarled inside him. He should have known. Should have been able to foresee – that was his talent.

Pacing away from the bedroom, he stalked through the concealed passage toward his throne room. Lowered his body, aching and still bare beneath the robe, into his throne and cycled it to face the starscape. Paper-thin eyelids fluttered shut over yellowed irises and he pulled the darkness to himself, sifting its depths for understanding.

Where was the change? The wrinkle in his meticulously laid plans?

Imperial Intelligence could tell him only the obvious – the Rebels had a new operative. One who matched no previous records of any kind. Elusive. Almost – and they cringed to even say the words to him – almost like a Jedi. They were sifting and re-sifting their data, leaning on every informant they could get their hands on, but there was simply nothing.

Sideous's sulfurous eyes opened and narrowed. Rising from his throne, he stalked back to his rooms. Ysanne stirred when he entered, a feline smile spreading across her face.

"I want you to find out where Obi-wan Kenobi was hiding all those years," Palpatine commanded.

The smile dropped from Isard's face as she sat up, her mood shifting instantly to a mixture of displeasure and sharp pride at being tasked. "Looking for something in particular, Master?"

"He may have had an apprentice other than young Skywalker. Or a child."


A crack of dark energy snapped her head to the side, and her cheeks were flushed red with both the
blow and a fresh bout of lust as she jerked it back to look at him.

“Someone is wreaking havoc on my Empire,” Sideous hissed. “Someone our best Intelligence suggests may fancy themselves a Jedi. Kenobi is our only link.” His wrinkled face went innocently slack. “Unless you can find me another suggestion,” he prompted.

He didn't even have to use the Force to push the idea into her malleable brain; she slithered off the bed, hot with the challenge. “I'll find your troublemaker, my Emperor,” she vowed, falling to her knees and holding out a hand, palm up.

He indulged her, offering his right hand. She kissed the palm, eyes never leaving his face, and flicking her tongue over his dry, leathery skin before letting go. Back on her feet, she moved toward her discarded clothes.

“What shall I do when I find them?”

“Kill them, if you can. But if it is a Jedi, stay with them until Lord Vader can join you. I want them alive.”

“As you say, my Emperor.”

There was a whisper of fabric as she finished dressing and then he was alone again. He considered his bed – still rumpled from their earlier exploits – with distaste, then motioned toward the wall. A hidden panel whirred aside and he stepped through. This was not a path he had walked in many years. He was the Emperor; what he wanted came to him. But he remembered every step, every turn with ease.

A few moments later, another concealed door whirred aside. The revealed room was largely barren, and he passed to its far side in a few short strides. The utilitarian bunk was bare, but a twist of his wrist made a wall panel two feet up from the bed snap open and a pillow shot out from the narrow space behind it. She always had liked feeling hidden, even if it had only been an illusion at best.

A twirl of fingertips, and the pillow wafted into his gnarled hand, the faintest scent of the shampoo she'd always favored swirling behind it. Touching nothing else, Palpatine returned to his own rooms. Draping his robe over the back of a chair, he reclined on his sumptuous mattress. Thin lips curled upward and craven eyes glinted before fluttering shut as the Emperor lifted Mara's pillow to his nose and breathed deeply.

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“Is that Corran's shirt?”

Mara looked down at the old, baggy sweatshirt she wore over her sleep clothes and then up at the half-transparent figure of Luke standing over her. She tried very hard not to pay attention to the fact that he was wearing only sleep pants.

“Mirax is trying to convince me to buy something she calls 'lounging clothes'. She thought wearing some for a couple days might help win me over.”

“Fair logic,” Luke decided. “If I send you one of mine, will you wear that instead?”

“Is there something wrong with his?” she asked, cocking her head quizzically.

“But you’d rather I wore yours,” she prodded, trying to tease out the odd texture of his sense that he was trying very hard to cram away into some obscure corner of his mind.

“Yes.” He stood, awkwardly, looking around at the stack of data pads and the star map hovering over her portable holo-projector. “What are you working on?”

Mara refused to be diverted, her calculating brain working through the possibilities busily, still poking at the edges of Luke's sense, trying to place the irked cast just behind the quickly-spreading chagrin. “Because yours….” she squinted, the answer she found leaving her only more confused. “are yours?”

Luke blew out a noisy breath. “Because you are mine.” He dropped to sit cross-legged facing her. “I want you like this,” he gestured at her careless attire, bare feet and unbound hair, “with me.Not with anybody else's stuff on you, even if it is just Corran's.” He held his breath as she turned that over a few times.

“Like Mirax wouldn't wear yours,” she said, slowly, after a moment. “A… possessiveness thing.”

His gut tightened in concern at her choice of words, knowing full well what possessiveness had looked like in the past for her. “Yes, but not – not in bad way,” he emphasized, wishing strenuously that he had Leia's gift with words. “Not like you're a possession,” he rambled on, worried. “Just -.”

“You're allowed to be possessive, Skywalker.”

Luke was so startled that he blinked owlishly at her twice before getting his voice to work again. “I am?”

“We're bonded,” she reminded him – as if he could possibly have forgotten. “CorUnums. And after the Oath is fulfilled, we'll be something else. But I'll always be yours, somehow.” She gave him a tiny, funny smile. “Kind of late for anything else at this point, isn't it?”

“Yes.” He grinned at her, a stupidly bright Skywalker smile, and the tidal wave of happiness that washed off of him nearly bowled her over.

“You don't have to be that pleased,” she grumbled. “It's not like it was news.”

“Right.” Luke made no effort to stop grinning, but scooched around to sit beside her. “Tell me some news, then. What are you working on?”

Mara automatically reached to move some of the pile over so that he could scoot close in beside her and tilted the data pads she was actively using so he could see them. As these nocturnal visits became more frequent – and they worked out more of the odd metaphysical rules - they found themselves developing habits and routines adapted to the unique logistics of the situation. Each time, there was a little less bumbling and a little more ease in the closeness of the contact.

“Insurrection,” she declared, matter-of-factly. “I'm inviting myself to a meeting between four Imperial conspirators who've been working on a plan to overthrow the Emperor. It won't work, but it will certainly keep the Fleet busy if they tighten up their strategy.”

“Which is where you come in.” A ripple of pride worked its way into the happy affection still pulsing off of him.

“Exactly.” Mara soaked up his approval like a sponge while diligently pretending she was doing no such thing. “This,” she pointed to one data pad, “is everything there is to know about the conspirators. That,” she indicated another, “is my disguise design – I need to go in full cover. I don't
want anything to lead back to me if they're taken. Over there is prep for our next hit – not related to this at all."

“What about this one?” He pointed to data chip set off to the side.

“That's the latest draft of the New Republic Common Charter. Han got it for me.”

“Doing a little light reading?”

“Researching the legal status of concubines.”

Skywalker's face crinkled in confusion. “Why?”

“Mirax keeps asking me about what I want when this is all over. I'll need something that allows me to stay with you, but we won't be CorUnums any more and Force bonds have no legal standing. So I've been exploring my options.”

“That is not a good option,” he protested, vehemently.

“It's not ideal,” she agreed, seriously. “But I'll need some sort of legal right to you after you marry.”

“What are you talking about? I'm not going to marry anyone but you.”

“Don't be ridiculous.” Mara scoffed. “You can't marry me.”


“There are two kinds of wives, Farmboy, and I'm not fit to be either.”

“Want to try that again, with the help files enabled this time?”

“Right. Outer Rim.” She fluttered a hand as if to suggest she should have known everything past Mid Rim was ignorant, uncultured wasteland. “Domestic wives give you a brood of children, keep house, make your dinner and, theoretically, are married for love. Political wives run your business, share your bed only on birthdays and holidays, provide legal heirs, and may or may not hate you in private.”

Luke laughed outright. “Which of those exactly do you think Leia is going to be when she marries Han?”

“Your sister,” Mara said, annoyed, “is the exception to the rule. Every rule, actually.”

“Why can't you be, too?” he proposed.

“I have nothing to offer,” she answered simply. “I'm not the least bit domestic, I've no social or political standing for you to leverage and I can't give you heirs.”

Something in his tone shifted. “What?”

“You're a hero of the Rebellion, Skywalker, and re-starting the Jedi Order in the Corellian tradition. You need a wife who can give you heirs. I can't, ever.” She abruptly went still. Her next words were soft, worried. “I thought you knew.”

“Of course I know,” he replied automatically, his mind working overtime, tracking back over conversations and files shared. She'd read his file, hadn't she? How did she not know? Wait – it had been modified hadn't it? Shavit, he'd forgotten. “I saw your med file – the whole one – before you
erased it. That's not the point, Jade. Even if I could have kids, I'd rather not have any than have them with someone other than you.”

Mara's gaze sharpened. “What do you mean, even if you could?”


“I'm listening.”

Luke sighed, trying to figure out the best place to start. “Beings doing honest work on Tatooine tended to have pretty small families. There just weren't enough resources readily available to support lots of kids.”

Mara nodded. She'd read of similar dynamics shaping the living and breeding habits of beings all over the galaxy on similarly inhospitable worlds.

“It was also pretty conservative once you got outside the 'hives of scum and villany' like Mos Eisley and Mos Espa.”

“Hives of scum and villany? That's a bit melodramatic.”

He smiled slightly. “It was Ben's phrase,” he admitted. “But I think Uncle Owen would have agreed wholeheartedly.” His smile fell. “If the two of them ever talked. Anyway, the end result was that although nobody ever talked about fertility, everybody thought about it – a lot.”

Mara said carefully, “I'm guessing that went double for your guardians, considering what they knew about your bloodline.”

Luke nodded and she could feel a rivulet of misery trickle in to his sense. “When I was fifteen, one of the local girls my age was dating a boy a couple years older. He was kind of a bully – more bluster than brains, my uncle used to say.”

“Let me guess. He knocked her up?”

“Yeah.” Luke stared at the floor. “But the harvest was bad that year, and money was extra tight. She was too scared to tell her folks there was going to be another mouth to feed, so…” his voice went tight and low. “She tried to make herself lose it.”

“Tried?” Mara prompted, when he didn't continue.

“Her parents found her unconscious on the 'fresher floor, bleeding. They panicked, and took her straight to the medical center at Anchorhead. It didn't take long for the truth to come out. Then the poodoo to hit the turbofan.”

“What did that have to do with you?”

“Conveniently,” the wry twist in his voice was bitter, “the Imperial Medical Liaison for Tatooine just happened to have the perfect answer to our worried parents' problems.”

The pieces fell into place for her, there. “The Eugenic and Contraceptive Health Opportunity Initiative.”

“ECHO,” Luke agreed. “Completely free, fully guaranteed contraception for everyone twelve and older. All we had to do was give them a thumbprint in electronic signature and our worries were over.”
“Your thumbprint, and a genetic sample to do with as they pleased.”

Mara remembered reading accolades for the program in classified Imperial documents. Under the guise of offering free repress meds for families on credit-strapped planets or in highly religious or ethically conservative communities where illegitimate children were a problem of the highest order, Imperial medical technicians finagled access to entire populations of youth who otherwise would spend most of their lives mostly or even fully out of reach of Imperial databases.

Every contraceptive implant was administered via hypodermic implant nodule. All of which were first capped with a sterile pad 'for hygienic purposes'. Every cap was then scanned and the results uploaded to the Imperial system 'as evidence that the implant had been successfully administered'.

What most families gratefully availing themselves of the free services never realized was that those caps also contained everything the Empire needed to run a full genetic workup on the individual receiving treatment. Every file was automatically funneled through a screening program that searched for – among other things – matches to known persons or families or importance or interest. Most carefully kept under wraps was the nasty little detail that the implant could also be remote triggered to dispense enough meds to permanently sterilize someone if the screen showed them to be a carrier of distasteful genetic traits. Or, in very rare cases, to overload their systems to the point of septicemia and eventually fatal septic shock in the event they proved to be on an Imperial Wanted list.

“They'd've figured out who you were,” Mara worked through the full scenario out loud. “Vader wouldn't have shown up directly in the file, but you'd have been tagged with a classified flag and pushed up the chain for investigation.” Her nose wrinkled. “But with the whole social mess going on, if you didn't get it you'd draw attention, too.”

Luke nodded, glumly. “I didn't understand why my Aunt and Uncle were so upset. I kept telling them I'd just go get the injection and get it over with. They kept insisting I wait.”

“You didn't get caught, so they must have found a work-around.”

“I didn't know until after Yavin,” Luke's head dropped, and he wrestled afresh with grief and anger. “I wasn't even properly enlisted when they handed me a helmet, pointed me toward the nearest free x-wing and sent me up against the Death Star, you know. It was probably three weeks before all the paperwork was done and I finally got called down to Medical for my intake exam.” Luke was silent a moment before picking up the story, his voice flat. “Everyone is supposed to get started on repress meds when they join, unless they can't for health reasons or don't need to because they can't reproduce.”

“And they checked the box that you were exempt,” Mara caught the memory as it played vividly in his mind. The shock. The confusion. The questions. The weeks of very quiet research – with help from a sympathetic and Outer Rim experienced Med Tech – that followed. The way the older man had sat him down in a private exam room and explained the documents he'd unearthed.

“As far as we can tell, Uncle Owen bribed one of the techs at the Mos Espa Med Center. I got the implant, but the hypospray cap he uploaded into my file came from someone else. It just – he wasn't careful. I suppose he didn't have to be – he got his money either way.”

“He used a cap from someone with a genetic trait on the 'do not allow to pass on' list.”

Luke nodded. “They sent the remote sterilize command to the implant associated with the file – which was in me. I got sick later that season, but we chalked it up the sand storm that just gone through. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. Even if we'd figured it out then, it would still have been irreversible.”
Comfort was obviously called for, but Mara had no idea what to say. Luke felt her searching, and reached over to squeeze her hand, letting her know he understood and appreciated the thought, even if she didn't know what to do with it. His astrally projected hand passed straight through hers with a cool tingle and he made a face, retracting it.

“What about you?” he asked. “The med droids said your internals were… messy.”

“It was an accident,” she said, emotionlessly. “In training, when I was twelve. I took two activated vibroblades straight through the gut. I fought when they tried to take me to the med bay – one of the blades was still embedded and it got really ugly. I nearly bled out before I was subdued and dragged to surgery. They did the best they could, but…”

“But there wasn't much they could save,” Luke finished the sentence. He'd seen enough gut wounds in his short career with the Rebellion to know that even with the best medical care available, people ended up with alternative prosthetic parts and systems filling their abdomens more often than not. They covered the basic functions, but that was about as good as it got.

Mara turned cautious eyes to him. “Did you want children? Before you found out you couldn't?”

“Yes.” There was no point in lying. “I had a dream – a vision, I think, in retrospect, when I was sixteen or seventeen. I was in a field somewhere, spinning a little boy around high over my head.” A sad smile flitted across his face. “He was shrieking with laughter and calling me daddy. I was so happy. I woke up convinced that I could change the Skywalker legacy. Have a kid and be there for him. It was a nice dream, until Yavin.”

He didn't tell her that he knew with certainty now that the child he'd seen in his vision had been hers. The blue eyes had been all his and golden highlights in the boy's hair had been darker, but the distinctive red gold shade was unmistakeable. He diverted before she could catch the suppressed memory, asking, “Did you?”

“I never considered it,” she answered honestly. “It was all I could do to keep myself alive.”

“Does this change the scales?” Luke asked, carefully. “Will you think about marrying me someday, since I can't have heirs anyway?”

Mara shook her head, everything in her sense unyielding. “I'd only be a liability as a wife. More is going to have to be something else.”

Luke wanted to object, to argue that he never wanted to hear such nonsense out of her mouth again. But her body language blared that she'd had all the vulnerability she could handle for the moment, and there was nothing to be gained by pushing now.

“All right.” He shifted a little closer, the edge of his projected presence blurring where it bled into her shoulder. “Tell me what you've got in the works besides insurrection.”

Her spark of relief and gratitude was clear, and she plucked the pad she'd been looking for up with satisfaction, holding it over for him to see. “What do you know about repulsar life systems?”
Brentaal

Chapter Summary

Luke discovers something disturbing, Mara and Mirax cause trouble, and we check in with Vader and Yoda.

Chapter Notes

This is a little shorter than usual, but we'll be back to regular chapter length next time.

The Rogues will start to show up more soon, so if you've got any favorite quotes or character moments for them that might help me keep them in character, please feel free to mention them in the comments! I know I don't do them enough justice.

The Perlemian was a hot mess.

Mara gave Vader due credit; his Death Squadron was steamrolling its way through the chaos with signature efficiency, leaving stringent order – and abject terror – in its wake. But the Trade Route spanned a score of sectors and, with seemingly every upstart group and malcontent in the galaxy taking advantage of the lapse in security enforcement along the infamous super-hyperroute to smuggle, loot and otherwise cause mayhem, reestablishing the Empire's iron-fisted control was simply not something that even a murderous Sith Lord could do overnight. Not if he wanted to still have beings alive to rule and subjugate afterward, at any rate.

She wasn't complaining. With both the Ringali Shell Security Force and planet Sec tied up in that interstellar hive rat's nest, slipping into Brentaal had been almost embarrassingly easy. Mirax had skirred the Skate in over one of the polar ice caps, skimmed the peaks of the Gravaal Mountains, then hugged the steaming Suporro Sea until they reached the secluded little nook along the salt flats they'd selected to conceal it in. From there, it was simply a matter of trekking to the edges of the nearest industrial district and blending with the crowd. They hopped a first-class private car on the mag-lev to Cormond, the capitol, and spent the afternoon loitering at Trade Hall, wandering the lavish gardens and window shopping in the spacious, high-end shops.

When dusk fell, they pulled the hoods of their cloaks up and faded into the smoky, shadowy lights of the city's darker corners. The industrial complex they'd chosen for the evening's activities had been a proper challenge to infiltrate but insufficient to stymie their combined skill sets. At just shy of 0100 hours, Brentaal's double moons – each no more than a sliver – cast almost no light through the building's huge square transparisteel windows, leaving them working in only the light of the glow rods they'd stashed in a circle around their work space on the main production floor.

They were nearly done when Mirax's chrono chirped and she backed out of their staged scene, careful not to disturb any of their fastidiously wrought details.

“That's my cue to go watch the security cams,” she said, the ominous weight of their surroundings and bone-deep awareness of the risks they were taking making her voice come out low and quiet
even though they were entirely alone. “If they're going to reset and break the loop I set up, it'll be soon.”

“I'll finish up here.”

Terrick-Horn disappeared into the shadows, heading for the upper-level security office where they'd hacked the holo-cams.

For a moment, Jade watched her go. She had never expected to actually like working with another person – relying on anyone else for anything – but she couldn't deny that she and Mirax made an excellent team. It was... something to think about. Later. Right now, her hands were full. Literally.

“Another one?”

Mara's heart slammed against her ribs and she jolted, nearly losing her grip on the body whose position she'd been tweaking.

Sith, Skywalker! She hissed, glaring over her shoulder at her half-transparent CorUnum, who had materialized without warning. This is not a good time.

“You know I can't choose when I show up,” Luke reminded her, a touch indignantly. Uncertainty crept in to his voice. “Unless... I can wake myself up, if you need me to.”

Mara blew out a breath and bit back irritation. Skywalker rarely got enough sleep as it was; she couldn't ask him to just stay awake killing time until this was done. Besides, it wasn't like he didn't know what she was -- what she was doing with her days when she wasn't working on her sphere. So what if he saw?

It's fine. She turned back to the body. But you won't like it.

Luke walked around to stand within her line of vision and glanced at the rapidly bloating corpse she was tugging a little deeper into it's slouch against the wall. White dust with an iridescent sheen was smudged across it's bloodless upper lip and crusted into it's flared nostrils. The eyes staring sightlessly into the indescribable heights of the vaulted ceiling far overhead were so heavily veined with burst blood vessels it took him a moment to make out the thin egg-blue irises around the blown-out black pupils.

“It's not appealing,” he granted, somewhat euphemistically, “but no worse than I saw in the alleys of Anchorhead growing up. I'm more concerned about that.” He pointed to the gelatinous, ankle-high slop of Dark roiling around her feet like ebony-capped surf. As he watched, it licked up her shin, slurping in some of the pent up pain and anger trickling like blood down her legs and into the oozing sea.

It's nothing.

She brushed off his concern, leaning down to double-check the exact distances and angles of the spice paraphernalia they’d arranged around in the body. She'd been drilled on these sorts of minutia as an adolescent. She'd spent many nights in her sterile, too-cold room, curled around case reports of 'suicides' and 'accidents' discovered to actually be murders when some enterprising detective or Sec officer went the extra parsec and ran truly detailed sims of the alleged events... only to find that some tiny detail didn't match, blowing the whole cover open wider than a jammed exhaust port. Satisfied that this one was perfect, she inched backward and to the side, prepared to repeat the process with the second body.

It's not important, she insisted. It doesn't want me.

Bending over the fashionably twiggy – and equally bloodshot and spice-daubed – woman who lay half-dressed across the first corpse's lap, Mara couldn't see the incredulity on Luke's face. She didn't have to; it filled the space between them.

“Obviously it does – it's feeding on you.”

_Not exactly_, she corrected, doggedly edging the fresh death stick stubs a hairsbreadth closer to the woman's stiff fingertips. The Dark sucked at her fingertips and flicked at her wrists, but Mara studiously ignored it.

Luke's palms itched with the impulse to yank her back out of it's reach, to interpose himself between her and the parasitic slime. Except that he _couldn't_. Glaring balefully at the darkness, he demanded, “what exactly _do_ you think is happening?”

That's just… Mara's mind searched a word while her eyes scrutinized the scene again. Straightening up, she settled on – _its habit_. To follow me. Scavenge at the edges when _I_ work.

“Habit,” Luke repeated, stupefied. “The Dark Side is just… _casually in the habit_ of following you around, nibbling at your heels, and then leaving.”

Yes.

She said it simply and Luke was struck dumb by the realization that _she actually believed it_.

Too focused on her task to pay attention to his astonishment, Mara shifted her weight and pivoted, making a shooing gesture in his direction. _Move. 'His Lordship' is lopsided and I need to even him out so I can pack this up and join Mirax upstairs._

Luke glanced behind him and found a third disheveled body propped drunkenly against some sort of machinery he didn't recognize. Irrationally careful about where he put his bare – and not _actually_ there – feet, Luke quickly stepped aside.

Given that she would be moving out soon – and in light of the fact that he didn't even know where to begin – he tabled the discussion of the Dark Side situation for the moment to ask, “His Lordship?”

“Rufaan Tigellinus, Grand Moff of Imperial Center Oversector.” Mara put airy arrogance into her tone, enunciating the title just as she'd last heard it announced at one of the Emperor's formal events. He'd been an imperious, self-entitled, xenophobic bastard, and the memory of his snide sneers made her a little rougher with the body than she really needed to be as she manipulated it into exactly where she wanted it.

Luke's eyes went huge and darted around, dread rising despite there being nothing in immediate view to overtly confirm his sudden suspicion. “You're – where is this?”

“Brentaal,” she supplied, clicking off two glow rods and tossing them in her bag. “Intersection of the Hydian Way and the Perlemian Trade Route.”

“Force, that's the _Core_!” Luke's agitation skittered across the bond and Mara felt her own heart pound faster in response. “That close, with this much Darkness – Mara, the Emperor could _feel you_!! This was _not_ part of the plan!!”

“It's _fine_,” she bit out, flipping her bag shut and scouring the area for even the tiniest trace of evidence she might have left behind. “I've been shielding hard and we took every precaution. We got
wind of the Moff's assignment to investigate Governor Maclain -,” she pointed vaguely at the second male body, “and it was too good a chance to pass up.”

“It's a huge risk,” Luke remonstrated, following close behind her as she collected and stowed the remaining glow rods.

“The illustrious Governor is charged with corruption and 'behavior unsuitable for an Imperial diplomat'. We've planted files – made it look like an intentional overdose murder-suicide pact between Maclain and his mistress. It'll upset the entire governing structure along the heart of the galaxy's foremost trade route hub and there's no one suitable to replace Tigellinus, which means Imperial Center Oversector will be under-protected for years.”

“I don't -,” he started adamantly, trailing her towards a set of narrow metal stairs along the left-most wall. Something tugged at him hard and he cursed. “Shavit!”

One foot on the first step, she turned just in time to see the look of frustrated resentment on his face as he vanished. Reaching out across the bond, she caught a quick wave of reassurance – he'd been woken, it was important but nothing to worry about – and a mental squeeze she translated as a stern be careful.

Mara snorted and returned to jogging up the steps. She was always careful.

Lando and Iella stepped off the Lady Luck directly into the flat-out pace that would define their lives on Hell's Teeth. They'd passed the time en route testing the new on-boarding process Calrissian had developed and, between earning top scores across the board and glowing praise from both Corran and Wedge, Iella was promptly appointed to one of Rogue Squadron's two open slots.

To say that the info dump associated with that placement made her head spin was an understatement. That said 'briefing' was in fact hours long and presided over by none other than Luke kriffing Skywalker who unbelievably knew who she was was mind boggling – even for someone of her experience with the implausible, impractical, and extreme.

“I'd ask if you have any questions,” Luke told her, apologetically, as they prepared to end for the day. “But I understand if you need some time to process before you get that far.”

“Actually, I do.”


Iella leveled a finger at Wedge and Corran, sitting at the table with them. “These two di'kuts left you at Rostek's when they came out drinking with me last time?”

“He was busy,” Wedge interjected, preemptively.

Iella's glare gave no quarter before flicking to Horn. “In all the time we were partners, you never thought to mention to me that you had a royal cousin with once-in-a-generation Force powers?!”

“I told you, we thought she was dead. Seriously, El, it's not like we were intentionally hiding anything. It was just chaotic there for a while.”

Iella snorted. “Right, because it's not chaotic now at all.”

“I'm afraid chaos is Rogue Squadron's standard modus operandi,” Luke put in, conciliatorily.
“Having Jedi around just aggravates the situation.”

Wessiri’s lips quirked. “That was a well-established pattern last time I worked with Horn, too.”

“Hey!” Corran protested. “That was not my fault.”

“Right,” she said, skeptically. “I’m sure it won’t be this time around, either.” She sighed. “Poor Rostek had his hands full with just you,” she glowered at Horn. “Force knows he's not going to be able to manage three of you – four when the sprog shows up – on his own, even with Mirax’s help.”

Luke suppressed a chuckle and said with as much seriousness as he could manage, “I know Wedge will be glad to have another experienced hand at Jedi corralling around.”

“On that note, one last question before we wrap up.” Iella directed this one at Wedge. “What and where do we drink to celebrate every time we keep them from committing well-intentioned suicide by faulty Force tricks?”

“Iella’s,” Wedge's said matter-of-factly, standing and gallantly offering his arm. “Right this way.”

Iella nodded at the Jedi, tucked her hand into Wedge's elbow, and let herself be escorted off.

“She's going to fit right in.” Luke glanced at Corran. “But I'm starting to think we might need to make sure she never ends up in the same room with Mara, Mirax, Leia and Winter, all at once.”

“You're right,” Corran rubbed his forehead, cringing at the thought. “We should never, ever let them all meet.”

- -

The night shift personnel still sat in their swiveling padded chairs, silent and slumped. Mara ignored them as automatically as she did the broken fragments of defense droids she neatly stepped over and around on her way in to the manufacturing facility's security office.

“We ready to go?” she asked Mirax, briskly.

Horn was leaning in close to one of the smaller monitors on the far side of the room, white-knuckled fists clenched at her sides. If she’d been Force-sensitive, the murderous wrath quivering around her like freshly plucked harp strings would have sucked all the Dark in the building straight into her orbit as effectively as a grav-well trap.

“They've got slave pens in the bottom level,” Mirax ground out. “There are children in there.”

“What?” Mara strode across the room. “That wasn't in the blueprints.” In seconds she was flipping through the camera system, making a mental map of the situation.

Mirax took two steps to the side and put her own prodigious skills to work hacking into the facility's records system. “Four hundred sixty eight,” she pronounced momentarily. “Humans, Selkath, Niktos, and Wookies.” She turned her head, eyes boring into Mara. “We can't leave them here. BrenSec will be crawling all over this place in a few hours, and if they're still here -.”

“They won't be.” Mara knew precisely how little slaves were worth to the Empire… and just how savagely loyal they could be to anyone who got them out of bondage. “Find us some ships – getting them out of those cages won't do any good if we can't get them off planet.”

“Where are you going?”
“To find the de-chippers,” she replied, grimly. “Everything else is moot if we can't get the explosives out of them first.”

Rostek’s intent grey eyes followed the graceful double helix where it rotated slowly, projected sharp and clear against the backdrop of the lush emerald foliage that sprawled across his laboratory greenhouse. He tapped a stylus absently against the chalk-white fiberplast counter-top as he worked through complex equations in his head.

He’d known almost before he’d begun that the berries on the bush he was creating for his first great-grandchild orange, the color of rebirth and renewal. But the flavor – the flavor remained a puzzle. A child would find a taste profile along the lines of aleudrupe berries delightful, but an adult – or teenager - Horn thought, smiling to himself – might appreciate something a bit more… fermentable. That would require traits closer to those of a Tazanian clait-berry.

The door behind him clicked as the locking mechanism was activated and Rostek automatically saved his work.

“How are you faring?” Elegos inquired, stepping up beside him.

“Fairly enough,” Rostek pointed to a few key intersections on the DNA strand. “I’ve yet to decide what to do about these, but the basic growth characteristics are all in place.” He chuckled. “I’ll have it done before the child gets here, at any rate.”

“Time may be in shorter supply than we think.” Elegos held out a small data chip. “It arrived just now by private messenger.”

Rostek accepted the chip and slotted it into his data pad, surprise shading his expression when he recognized the signature. “Already?”

“Apparently, he was more pleased to receive your invitation that we anticipated.”

Horn cast a regretful eye to his botany project, then shut it down. “We'd best not keep anyone waiting, then. I'll make some comms if you'll see to the packing.”

“Can't let you pack,” Elegos agreed lightly as they made their way out of the solarium. “You'd take weapons and caff and forget fresh socks entirely.”

Rostek laughed. “Given the company I'll be keeping, I rather think I'd get away with it.”

Regardless of species, one did not survive Imperial enslavement by being stupid.

Mara found it no surprise, then, that her approach – which she made no effort to hide – was met with a warning roar from an enormous, darkly furred female wookie.

“I'm not a threat to you.” Mara lifted her hands up and apart, clearly displaying the dechippers she held in each.

The female harned and waved with a meaty paw, summoning a translator from among the knot of humans huddled in a dark corner nearby.

“That won't be necessary,” Mara said. “Unless you are unwilling or unable to speak for your group.”
//You speak my language?// the female rumbled, pleased.

“No,” Mara clarified. “But I understand it just fine. Will you serve as spokeswoman?”

//I will.//

“Then listen carefully, because we don't have a lot of time.”

- -

“Go away.”

“That's hardly an appropriate greeting for your wife,” Padme chided, her gaze sweeping over the interior of the meditation sphere.

“You should not be here.” Vader's voice was an uneven whisper without his vocabulator hooked up, loathsomely weak and un-commanding. It startled him, a bit. He had not heard himself speak out loud unaided since he'd had to have the device repaired in the aftermath of an assassination attempt more than a decade ago.

His angel appeared unphased. “You refuse to let me join my ancestors in peace,” she reminded him. “And I've lost the mausoleum. Why would I not choose to be with my husband?”

*Because you betrayed me. Because you hate all that I have become. Because you never wished me to suffer and that is what having you see me like this is.* The thoughts were a litany of old pain and he did not voice them.

“There is nothing for you here.”

“What is there for you?” she asked, soft brown curls falling over her shoulder as she settled herself onto one of the sphere's consoles, apparently intent upon staying despite his pronouncement.


“He will be,” Vader said with conviction. “The Empire is his. It was always meant for him. He *will* rule it.” Hate flooded through him and, in the privacy of his chamber with young, earnest Padme, he half reverted to the brash, angry young man he'd been when he lost her. “If that *bishwag* doesn't destroy it first!”

“The Emperor's Hand?”

“Yes.” The word came out as a sibilant wheeze of derision.

Padme's eyes were soft on his ruined face. “Why do you hate her so?”

Vader was quiet a long moment, his labored breathing and the faint hum and beep of the machinery surrounding them the only sounds.

“She lived,” he rasped out, finally, the fury in his voice absolute. “And it was a *waste*.”

Padme swallowed back her horror at the cruel opinion; diplomatic training from her long-ago youth instinctively told her she needed to keep him talking, so she prompted, “Why do you say that?”

“She was an *experiment* and a defective one.” Having begun, he could not stop the tirade that spilled
off his jagged, ruined vocal cords. “It should have been our child who lived. Our child that grew up in Coruscant's marble halls at my heels. We could have overthrown the Emperor together years ago, recreated the galaxy in our image – in your image.” He stopped, winded, and panted a moment.

Rage drifted lower, increasingly replaced by grief. “I was so sure you were having a girl.”

“I did.” Fire sparked in Padme's eyes, but she kept her voice level. “We have a daughter, Anakin.”

“No,” he rejected the idea outright. “You gave her to Organa and he took her from me completely. The Princess is no child of mine.” He lifted his duracrete gaze to her and it flickered in a mesmerizing, endless shift between Sithly yellow and bright blue. “There is only Luke, now, and he will be mine.”

- -

Chewbacca heaved the Bosph's body into the Falcon's corpse hatch and huffed in annoyance. //That was the third one. This is getting out of hand.//

“Well, what you want me to do about it?” Han spread his hands, palms out in an “I'm so over this” gesture. “It ain't like I can just go waltzing back to Jabba and pay him off now. Even if I wanted to, which I don't.”

//If this continues, the Princess will find out,// Chewie rumbled. //She will have your hide.//

“Leia is not going to find out,” Han shot back, determinedly. “She's got enough to worry about as it is.”

The wookie harrumphed and ambled down the Falcon's curved corridor. //Then we must reverse the trend.//

“Oh, sure,” Han groused, following him. “We'll just reverse the trend. Just like that.”

//No,// Chewie grumbled, swatting at him. Han ducked out of the way and the wookie brought his paw back around to key in the security code to the comm suite with surprisingly agile claws. //Like this.//

Han dropped into the second chair in front of the main holo-viewer as Chewie punched up Jade's number. “Call in backup,” Solo said, a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. “Not a bad idea.”

The comm went directly into a message loop and, knowing it was secure and only for Mara's eyes, Chewie wasted no time and pulled no punches. //There have been two more attempts on Han's life since you left. We require assistance to keep the situation from escalating.//

Punching the comm off, he chuffed cheerfully at Han. //Now I just have to keep you alive until she gets back to us.//

“Laugh it up, Fuzzball,” Solo grumbled. “We both know I'm tough as a septoid. Calling Jade is just to keep stuff quiet-like...for Leia.”

The wookie rumbled with amusement. //Of course.//

- -

They couldn't have cut their escape from Brentaal any closer if they'd coated the hull in karg grease. Mara ground her jaw, certain she could feel the infrasonic screech in her bones as the Skate screamed into open space scant milliseconds ahead of the interdiction shield rolling across the horizon to engulf
the planet. With Ringali Shell Sec squawking in their comms to return at once for detainment or be blasted out of the sky, Mirax slammed the lever forward and shot them into hyperspace far nearer to the planet than was usually considered safe. When the stars outside the viewport streaked into lines, both women collapsed back into their seats, high on elation and adrenaline.

Mara let herself sit there for a couple minutes processing what they'd done before shifting restlessly and making herself get up.

“Come on, Horn,” she wiggled her fingers in command at Mirax. “Food and bed. We're long overdue for both.”

Mirax's head lolled back against the padded headrest and she smirked up at Mara. “Now who's mothering, Halcyon?”

“I'm not,” Mara glowered. “But if CorSec finds out I let you sleep in your chair up here, half-starved, when there's Chef and a perfectly good bed in your cabin, I'm crinked.”

Despite Mirax's good-natured protests, Jade pushed her cousin through a basic meal and the sonics. Assured that Horn was safely in bed for the night – asleep before her head hit the pillow, no less – Mara took care of shifting the *Skate* to night-cycle mode.

Once she'd cleaned herself up, Mara eschewed the idea of going into a healing trance. Too much remained in flux, too many things awaited her attention. Rest was a luxury, a reward. She hadn't finished earning hers yet.

Linking her data pad to the pocket-size holo-emitter, she projected her most recent working slate onto the empty wall of her cabin. Under each project, she'd sorted every scrap of relevant information, highlighting the challenges and problem areas in red and marking gaps in her intelligence in orange. Critical next steps were marked in green. It was a system she'd used in planning her jobs for the Emperor for years, and the consistency was a comfort now when everything else continued to change rapidly around her.

Chewing on small, pasteboard-flavored bites of ration bar as she paced, she began methodically updating each project file.

*Oath Rigora.* According to her calculations, Tigellinous's death was the last one necessary to adequately destabilize the Empire until after they'd either killed the Emperor or were dead themselves, permanently settling the question of Imperial stability one way or the other. With the multiplier effect Brentaal's bedlam would have on the galactic trade, transit, and security-related pandemonium she'd already set in motion, she'd achieved nearly everything she set out to do in the initial phase of upholding her end of the Oath. All that remained was completing her sphere of power. Which led directly to Phase Two, which involved returning to *Hell's Teeth* to train with Luke, Corran, and Leia.

And now, apparently, she thought with mild irritation, *the Rogues and half of Rebel Intel.*

Regardless of that new little twist, the bottom line remained clear: she needed to finish her power sphere quickly and start making arrangements to return to Skywalker. Even if the idea did tie her stomach in nervous knots.

*Enough of that,* she berated herself. *Focus on your work.* Pulling up the itinerary she and Mirax had drafted, Mara re-checked the amount of time she'd dedicated to constructing her sphere and confirmed that it should be enough.
The second project on her plate was Rostek's Corellian Coup. Mara skimmed over that but found few modifications needed. Everything she was responsible for was well underway.

Third on the list was infiltrating the Imperial Insurrection; like the previous project it was well laid out and needed only minor tweaking so long as she stayed the course.

Next up was preparing for her future role as a Battle Coordinator. For now, it almost completely overlapped with Phase Two of fulfilling her Oath and she moved on.

The fifth category was more vague but no less pressing than any of the others; it was titled simply Skywalker.

He'd reacted poorly to her suggestion that she might become his concubine for legal purposes, so she regretfully marked herself as having made no progress in finding an acceptable construct for their post-Oath partnership. That would require more research, but there was time.

As for their anticipated physical relationship, her review of the manual for Imperial Courtesans was proving unrewarding. There were bits and pieces of practical technique she thought might eventually be helpful, but nothing else aligned with what she'd seen from Luke thus far. It was becoming irksomely clear that she was going to need a different approach. Maybe even the one Mirax had been suggesting from the beginning... just jump in with both feet and let him show her what he wanted in real time. Ugh.

It wasn't that she couldn't learn that way, of course – she had, and still did, all the time. Moreover, she had the best infiltration and integration training the Empire could offer. She was perfectly capable of identifying and following cues to reach desired outcomes in unfamiliar situations.

She just wasn't sure how far she'd get on raw will power and how much intentional reconditioning Skywalker would be reduced to doing before she could follow his cues without flinching, freezing, or otherwise ruining everything when he touched her... Mara shook off the thought. Going into touchy situations anxious never improved the outcomes. She'd simply have to find a way to make it work.

In the meantime, there were other, more familiar ways to go about proving her commitment to him. Things that might take the edge off if other attempts went poorly. Mara skimmed her notes on The Carida Plan and made a series of changes. Finally satisfied, she let her eyes drift to the final project on her list.

Personal. It still seemed bizarre to even have such a category. Just a few months ago, not only would it not have occurred to her, but she'd have had nothing to put on it even if it had. But now, here it was - live and populated with two whole bullet points: Get Solo a kyber crystal for Leia and Fix the Jabba/bounty hunter problem. Those at least she could do.

With her revised project slate illuminated in front of her, disambiguating her life and distilling her to-do list, Mara reached for her comm.

Time to earn your rest, Jade.

- -

“Where's Leia?” Corran strode into the room they'd appropriated for training and dropped to the floor across from Luke.

Corran raised an eyebrow. “At your request, I gather?”


Horn's expression went grave. “I know it's seductive. It offers Force users access to power they can't otherwise reach – at a terrible cost.”

Luke searched his friend's face. “Do you know if there's any history of it stalking Battle Coordinators, specifically?”

“What?!” Corran inhaled sharply. “You think -?”

“I don't know,” Luke shook his head, hastily, and held his hands out, palms flat in a calming gesture. He took a deep breath and let it out, slow and controlled. “I told you I visit her sometimes, when I'm sleeping.”

“Yes.”

“Last night, the Dark Side was… it was feeding on her, while she worked. She said it was nothing – just… habit.”

Corran's brows knit. “Didn't she say something similar at Grandfather's? About it not wanting her?”


“I was taught that the Dark Side was a threat to every Jedi,” Corran said slowly, considering. “I'm betting you were, too, right?”


“But Mara was trained by Sith,” Horn continued reasoning out loud.

Skywalker turned his light saber hilt over in his hands, agitated. “They wouldn't have considered it a threat at all,” he supposed, grimly.

“Just a power source,” Corran followed the idea. “One they wouldn't have wanted her to have access to.”

“Even if they lied,” Luke argued, “she can't have gone her whole life believing it. She has to have tried to access it at some point. Right?”

“Maybe they blocked her,” Corran suggested. “Or maybe her ability to wield more than the basics was tangled up with her gift, and since she couldn't access one, she couldn't get at the other, either.”

The implications of that sat heavily between them for a few moments.

“What do you want to do?” Corran asked, finally.

Luke lifted blue eyes, bright and hard with determination. “I want to get her back here, as soon as possible,” he said, firmly. “With us, as soon as her sphere is done – sooner if she'll agree. I know she's strong, but this -.”

“She has blind spots,” Corran supplied. “We all do. It's why Jedi have never existed in isolation – they've always gravitated toward one another, and established training systems created life-long relationships and networks of Force-users.” His tone grew resolute. “She's going to need us.”
Luke nodded. “All we have to do now is convince her of that.”

Grand Master Yoda welcomed the dawn of his nine hundred and first birthday in the basement archive rooms of the Intergalactic Communications Center on Praesitlyn. In the Sluis sector of the Outer Rim, the heavily forested planet wasn’t far from Dagobah but the ancient E3 escape pod hadn’t been designed for fast travel. It's occupant was in no hurry – the Force would get him there when he needed to be there – and had slept most of the way.

With a lifetime of practice in using his diminutive size and odd, harmless appearance to his advantage – along with the help of a few mind tricks – he had no trouble accessing the restricted and rarely used space. Once he was inside, with all the staff outside having forgotten they'd ever seen him, he had all the time in the galaxy.

The Communications Center had been a key holonet hub for the better part of a century; the flags on the wall and the titles and numbers on the forms they used might have changed when the Empire took over from the Old Republic, but the facility itself otherwise carried on doing exactly what it had always done with nary a blip of disturbance in daily operations or routines. It's sub-levels housed a treasure trove of information and, as expected, the Grand Master found exactly what he needed in the Map Room.

There was a blinding, heart-wrenching moment of being engulfed in memory when the star map illuminated around him.

Lost a planet, Master Obi-Wan has. How embarrassing. How embarrassing.

Thoughts? Anyone?

Master. Someone erased the planet from the Archives.

So many precious padawans in their first steps of learning to trust the Force. The sweetness of their awe and delight glittering like stardust in the air in that sunlit training salon, as every miniscule success or discovery rewrote their understanding of the galaxy and their place in it. The unselfconscious laughter of children who have been playmates since the creche, who knew the shape of each other in the Force before they had words for either.

So many lives, still so new and full of promise, lost together when Vader had painted the Temple walls with their blood.

Yoda yanked himself from the pull of the past. Nothing could change what had been done. But the future – that remained in motion.

If we are to continue making mistakes, let them at least be new ones, he heard Obi-wan say.

Yoda lifted a small green claw, spinning the map, and sank into the Force. It was time to chart a new course.

Luke and Wedge were stuffed into Madine's office, leaning over the deeply buried surface of his broad desk, buried in mission planning reports when Han rapped his knuckles on the frame of the open door.

“Captain Solo,” Madine greeted, waving him in. “What can I do for you?”
“I heard an interesting rumor,” Han said casually, watching out of the corner of his eye as Luke's head snapped up. “Thought you be interested.” He passed a small piece of flimsy with half of Mara's most recent heavily encrypted message to the Falcon printed on it.

*Take company on your next mail run to Garos IV.*

Madine handed the sheet off to his companions.

“When are you headed there?” Wedge asked, curiously.

“Chewie an' me are leavin' tomorrow for a short trip elsewhere,” Han told him. “But we'll be back here for a turn-and-burn to Garos in twelve standard days.”

The General shot a look at Luke. “Have you heard anything about this?”

“No,” Skywalker shook his head. “And it's not on the itinerary. But Rogue Squadron will be happy to accompany the Falcon on this run.”

Madine nodded, pleased. “I'll pass the change along to General Cracken. I assume you'll keep us appraised of any further developments?” He directed the question equally to Luke and Han, both of whom promised they would. “Very well then. I look forward to see what surprise our Rumor has in store for us this time.”

- -

The discrete but insistent priority alert code on her data pad had Winter excusing herself from the High Command meeting almost instantly, her fingers tapping out a hurried *on my way* almost before she'd cleared the door. That General Cracken was on her heels told her he'd received the same message.

They stayed silent until they'd cleared the general population sections of the station, speaking only when they were safe in the levels reserved for Rogue Squadron and Leia's private entourage.

“This is the first time Rumor has contacted us,” Cracken broke the silence. “Do you have any idea what it's about?”

“No,” Winter responded, her measured voice in direct opposition to the hopeful energy racing through her veins. “But if it's anything we're capable of doing, we need to say yes. We need to prove ourselves to her, and this might be our chance.”

Han and Chewie were waiting in the Falcon's comm suite, in conversation with Mara on something else – a conversation that stopped dead when the door opened to let the Retrac and Cracken in.

“Agent Jade,” Winter settled in front of the live, waiting holo. “What can we do?”

“I'm going to kick the Imperial medical system in the teeth so hard their skulls crack,” Mara announced, calmly. “I need a skilled agent who can go undercover for two months. I'd do it myself, but I'm not exactly in a position to do so right now. I thought you might have someone interested in a challenge.”

Retrac's heart leapt – this *was* the break she'd been waiting for. “I think I have exactly the person you need,” she smiled tightly. “Tell me what you have in mind.”
Errant Venture

Chapter Summary

A full of chapter of Corellian hijinks and Han & Mara bonding... because it makes me stupidly happy.

Chapter Notes

This entire chapter is utter self-indulgence; I freaking love the Errant Venture.

Please note that many descriptions thereof have been adapted, borrowed and/or outright stolen from the Profics (primarily I, Jedi).

As usual, timelines are all kinds of wonky. Not sorry, but more details available below if anyone else cares. : )

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

//Was it maroon last time we were here?//

“That's not maroon. It's definitely 'Red Dwarf Crimson'. Best selling color in Imperial circles last year, according to the Galactic Examiner,” Han said confidently, squinting a bit theatrically at the garishly scarlet hull of Class II Star Destroyer looming just ahead.

//Since when do you follow sludge news?//

“It was the only thing to read in the medbay while the Kid and I were waiting for Jade to wake up.” Solo adjusted the Falcon's speed and pitch down slightly and muttered under his breath, “Never seen so many loads of drutash castings in one place in my life.”

Chewbacca whuffed a laugh. //Maybe he selected it to match his cybernetic eye.//

Han snorted. “Booster? I'd believe it. That man wouldn't know taste if it bit him on the cargo hold.”

The wookie's snide reply was cut off by Errant Venture control calling over the comm, “Millennium Falcon, you are cleared to land in docking bay 1701.”

“Copy that, Control. Initiating docking procedure now.” Han flipped the channel off and directed a lopsided grin at Chewie. “Private hangar on Blue Level, eh? We must be moving up in the world.”

His co-pilot rumbled something derogatory and eased them into the designated bay. //We have a welcoming committee.//

“I see her. Come on.”

Mara was waiting when they disembarked, hip propped against a console, arms folded, a bored expression pasted on her face. Han eyed her up and down, taking in the Imperial-collared forest
green tunic with a fashionably asymmetric hem, cropped black spacer's jacket, and tailored but practical black pants tucked into high boots.

“Well, don't you look slick.”

“Mirax made me go shopping.” Jade pushed off the console and tipped her head, her long, neat five-strand braid falling over her shoulder as she indicated that they should follow her. “Part of her nesting phase, I think.”

“Maybe she was just trying to hold up her end of the custody agreement,” Solo offered as they paused at the bay doors to input a security code. When she was certain it had locked, Mara led the way down the corridor. The noise level increased with every step, a cacophony of voices, music, and movement spilling down the hall from somewhere just ahead and to the right.

“Custody? Oh that.” Mara shook her head. “How is Corran?”

“I'm holding up my end!” Solo pretended affront. “Aside from missing his wife a little, he's peachy.”

Instinct made both Han and Chewie step in a little closer to Mara as the trio merged from the side-corridor into the full, riotous glory and raffish noise of Trader's Alley – the galaxy's largest and most exotic cash-only bazaar.

//He is well.// Chewie supplemented Han's assessment, shooting a warning look over Mara's head at a passing Sullustan who was eying her with a bit more interest than the wookie deemed appropriate. The being quickly ducked it's heavily jowl-ed head, averting it's large mousy eyes, and scurried in the opposite direction. //His former CorSec partner has joined the Squadron, which pleases him.//

“Grandfather mentioned that.” Mara glanced sideways at them as she deftly navigated around a stall displaying glamorous fire- and vine-silks in opulent shades of plum and indigo. “What do you think of her?”

“Iella?” Han turned half sideways to avoid being run over by a harried Mon Calamari scuddling by. “Haven't seen much of her, myself. But she's getting rave reviews from everybody, so she must be all right. And Crix likes her, so there's that.”

Mara felt a twinge in her chest and mentally slapped at it. So what if Madine liked her? That was good. Grandfather liked her, so she deserved to have a place on *Teeth*. It was no concern of hers if Iella was making inroads with the Rogues and Crix. If she was there while Mara was away, out of sight and out of mind. It was her own fault, after all, and it wasn't like she needed Madine's affection or approval. She didn't. She didn't need anyone. Except Luke. But that was… different. She needed him to *live*. It was a physical necessity, like air or water. Not… not whatever vapid, mawkish weakness it had been that made her chest go tight just now.

“Good.” Mara allowed herself a tiny bit of relief that the word came out nonchalantly as they emerged into a magnificent central courtyard. It was the product of one of Booster's first projects upon acquisition – a massive refitting effort that cored through three decks in the heart of the ship to create a vast, terraced plaza. The focal point of Trader's Alley, it linked Blue Level – host to mildly-respectable passengers and base of operations for a multitude of traders, pilots, smugglers and mercenaries – with the more elite Diamond Level.

Looming in the courtyard's airy well was one of the most respected pieces of historical art in the galaxy: a brilliant holographic presentation of a series of Clone Wars campaigns. There were five
distinct depictions, Mara had discovered, on a rolling loop. The whole thing had been a gift from Mirax, which was unsurprising, really; there was far too much good taste involved for Booster to ever have selected it himself.

Along the terraced levels, knots of beings mingled and lingered along the outer edges of cantinas and tap caffs, heads craned to see the show or idly people watching as they took a break from the endless hustle and bustle of the most overstimulating mobile shopping and gambling enterprise ever seen.

“Our turbolift is this way.”

//Your grandfather is here already?// Chewie asked as they followed her weaving path through the crowds toward an out-of-the-way corner.

“Got in yesterday,” she confirmed. “Our other illustrious guest arrives first thing tomorrow.”

They turned into a well-guarded alcove, where they were stopped by a flaky-faced Weequay wearing an Imperial style uniform rendered in light green, with sleeves, trousers and buttons of startlingly bright yellow. The effect, Han decided, was more than a little unsettling. Mara produced a pass, which the guard ran through his system before returning it and stepping back, allowing them access to the restricted lift. A few floors up, the doors slid open onto an entirely different aesthetic.

“Welcome to Diamond Level,” Mara said solicitously, providing her pass again to the guards more discreetly monitoring the elegantly arrayed common.

“Never been up here before,” Han looked around appreciatively at the high-ceiling-ed atrium, complete with softly burbling water features and muted, soothing lighting.

“Spend most of your time on Black Level?” Jade asked in mild amusement.

“Go where the business is,” he replied, unabashed.

“Well, you're the consort of the Princess of Alderaan, now,” she pointed out, leading them around a corner and down an empty hall done in refined, neutral colors. “Your business is up here, these days.” Sliding a key card into an elegantly styled door, she waited for the light to indicate it was unlocked, then waved them in. “These are your rooms.”

Chewie accepted the two pass cards she proffered. //Where are you staying?//

“Across the hall. Mirax is a couple corridors over in Booster's private apartments.”

Han turned in a slow circle, taking in the plush, high-end digs. “You didn't have to get us rooms, you know. We've got the *Falcon*."

“You're high level guests,” she chided. “Of course you're going to have quarters. We can't be hauling you up and down from the docking bay constantly.”

//You should get used to it,// Chewie observed. //This will be normal when the war is over.//

“Exactly,” Mara agreed, then frowned thoughtfully. “Is Leia going to make you Viceroy? Or just name you Prince Consort?”

“She's not making me anything,” Han retorted, testily. “She's keepin' me just as I am.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Mara hummed noncommittally, unconvinced, and changed the subject. “My grandfather is tied up in business matters at the moment, and I told Booster I'd see to feeding you
tonight while he and Mirax have some father-daughter time. There are a couple five-quasar rated places on this level, if you want.”

“Or?” Han raised an eyebrow at her lingering tone.

“Or we can go back down-level to a little hole-in-the-wall I found for deep-fried coin crabs and Gravdinian ale.”

Chewie rumbled appreciatively and Han went directly to the door and pulled it open. Giving Mara a chivalrous half-bow, he motioned her through. “After you.”

The small, high-topped table they’d chosen was tamped back into a narrow, shadowy corner that smelled of cigarra smoke and grease. But it had solid walls on two sides, a clear view of the door, and was now laden with deep-fried coin crabs, an exotically spicy Melahnese sampler platter, and a self-chilling bowl piled high with crunchy, browned, bite-size balls of Corellian-style fried ice cream.

“This is my kind of dive,” Han approved, wrapping his hand around the tall, frosty glass of sweetly flavored Gravdinian ale the serving droid had just delivered.

Chewie growled agreement and stabbed a crab with the tip of a claw, picking it off into his mouth with surprising delicacy.

Solo gave Mara’s drink a hairy eyeball. “You sure you should be drinking that?”

“That’s a bit rich,” Mara sniffed, loftily. “Coming from a man drinking one the most deadly alcoholic beverages in the known galaxy.” Closing her eyes, she took a tiny sip and savored the heady burn that spread down her throat and across her chest as she swallowed.

“I’m just askin’,” Han complained, “because I’ve seen one Tarsian ale incapacitate men with three times your body weight.”

“They didn’t have the Force,” Mara informed him, opening her eyes again and snagging a fried crab. “I learned to filter toxins out of my blood stream with this stuff as part of my training.” She chewed a moment before adding, “aside from working events, it was the only time I was allowed to have alcohol. Or sugar. Or anything that might interfere with my performance.”

“Do I wanna know how old you were when you got that little gem of training?”

“No.”

“Right.” Han munched on a ball of ice cream and stuffed down a fresh wash of anger at the Emperor. “The Kid know you eat like this?” He waved at the absurdly unhealthy feast in front of them. “He talks like he's got you pegged as a ration-bars-and-water kind of girl.”

“I don’t eat like this, usually.” There was a rare sparkle in her eye when she glanced at him from under dark lashes. “I'm using you as my excuse – bad influence and all.”

“Glad I could oblige,” Han lifted his drink in mock salute. “I do have a reputation to keep up.”

“Speaking of that,” Mara’s expression turned serious, “tell me about the bounty hunters.”

Han made a face but leaned forward to prop his elbows on the table, picking at the food between them as he spoke. “I used to run spice for Jabba – before I got hijacked by a crazy old man and a
naive farm kid and tossed head-first into the lap of a Princess who can't manage to do without me.”

Mara's lips quirked, but she said nothing, just appropriated a piece of tapas from the sampler platter they shared and waited for him to continue.

//We got caught along the Hydian.// Chewie grumbled. //Boarded by Imperials.//

“You had to dump it.”

“Yeah.”

“And you didn't have the funds to pay him for the loss.”

“If I had, I wouldn't have been working for a slug like him in the first place.” Disgust dripped from his tone.

//He gave us a deadline by which to pay.// Chewie added, //The Cub and his Master were the last fare we needed to collect to have enough credits to do so.//


“They did pay me,” Han admitted. “At Yavin. I was loading up my reward to go pay him off when, well, like you said – Death Star. Again.”

“What happened to the money?”

Han mumbled something dark and inaudible and took a long swig of his drink, glowering at the far wall.

//He used it to buy supplies for the Rebellion.//

“Really?” Mara shot Han a startled look.

“For Leia,” Solo defended. “They didn't have -.” His mouth snapped shut and his jaw ground a minute before he gritted out, “What they did to her – on the Death Star – they didn't have what she needed.” Anger blasted through him, pouring off his sense in the Force. “When the adrenaline wore off, after the battle, she could barely move. Couldn't blink without her whole body shaking, she hurt so bad. An' they couldn't help her. Typical Leia,” frustration and wonder warred in his tone and he threw a hand out in a what the kriff gesture, “she was just gonna suffer through it, keep going through sheer stubborn pigheadedness.”

// He held the chief medical officer at blaster point until he got a list of what was needed, then procured it.//

That… sounded remarkably like something she would have done, Mara thought. “Does she know?”

Han sighed ruefully and rubbed at his hair with a hand. “Found out about a year later.” He smiled slightly. “First time I ever left her speechless.”

“What about the rest of it? You can't have used it all for that.”

“Upkeep on the Falcon. Basic needs for me an' Chewie. They're not payin' us to play errand boys, you know.” He shrugged. “I sorta considered it an advance for keeping Her Worship and the Kid alive, an' we've been workin' off it ever since.”

Mara contemplated that, contrasting its quietly sacrificial determination to the blustery, looking-out-
for-number-one reputation Han worked so hard to cultivate and maintain. No wonder he's trying to keep this quiet, thought. It wasn't just for Leia's sake.

“Besides,” Han stabbed a finger into the table, sternly, as if he could see where her thoughts were going and was squirming a bit under them. “I ain't paying that bloated, overgrown worm a credit. I can keep greasing bounty hunters until he runs out. If it were just me, it wouldn't matter.”

“But Leia matters.” Mara nodded, sagely.

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

He looked at her, expression momentarily going confused. “Okay, what?”

“I'll fix it.”

//Just like that?//

“Yes.” Her brow furrowed and she looked between them, briefly baffled by the indignation streaming off them both. Understanding prodded, and she blinked. “You wanted to help?”

Han rolled his eyes. “Damn right we do! I'm not asking to hide behind your skirts, Jade – just for a little cover fire.”

“Oh.”

He peered at her, with a scowl. “You really thought I'd just dump this mess in your lap and walk away?”


“Well not any more,” Han ordered flatly. “Besides, I already got a plan started, if you wanna hear it.”

“I didn't know you knew how to plan.” She batted her eyelids at him in her best innocent expression, and got a scathingly dirty look – and a snort from Chewie – in return.

“Just because the Rebellion can't plan worth bantha fodder -,” he started.

Mara waved off the protest and signaled the serving droid for more crabs. “I know – just guilty be association, right?” She favored him with a comfortable smirk and leaned in. “So let's hear it.”

- -

It was nearly midnight by the time they made it back to Diamond Level, pleasantly stuffed and just the tiniest bit soft around the edges with the well-sated heaviness that comes from a full belly and the lingering warmth of high-proof alcohol.

Han stopped Mara in the space between their rooms; they were the only people assigned to that corridor and had passed no one on the way up, so he deemed it safe enough to ask, “You know what Rostek offered me?”

“Of course.”
“He said you recommended me.”

“You'll be good at it.”

The confidence in her assertion stroked his ego, but he still had to point out, “You'd be better.”

Mara shook her head, decisively. “That offer isn't open to me.”

“Why not?” he asked, puzzled.

“Grandfather believes Jedi should 'partner with government, not answer to it.’” She settled her gaze on both Han and Chewie for a moment before admitting, “And I think he's done the same mental mapping that I have. When the shavit hits the turbofan, it's all going to happen at once – he has to appoint someone he can count on to be where he needs them.”

//And you'll be with Luke.//

She nodded.

“If I take this...”

“You'll still be with Leia,” Mara interrupted. “As a Liaison, your whole purpose is to represent Corellia's best interests within the Alliance – and we both know that when push comes to shove, that's her.”

“I'd be a general.”

“Not a bad title for a royal consort.”

Han weighed his next question carefully before voicing it. “You said you mapped this out in your head. You haven't had any of them Jedi visions, have you?”

“I don't have visions,” Mara answered immediately.

//Why not?// Chewie questioned, surprised.

It was a lesson learned early and she repeated it by rote. “Visions are the prerogative of the truly powerful.”

“You're going to be powerful, if you listen to Luke,” Han pointed out.

“Which is exactly why I don't and neither should you,” she sniped back, more harshly than she'd intended. “I'm going to be gifted – uniquely capable in a narrow facet of Force talent. It's not the same. But I don't need visions to understand strategy,” she brought the conversation firmly back around. “And everything I know about that tells me this is a good choice. For now, and after.”

Han met and held her gaze. “An' if I say no?”

Mara's voice went softer but held rock steady. “I'll still have you back whenever you need cover fire.”

There was silence a moment, a wordless understanding passing between them. Then Han smiled – a lazy, cocky smuggler smile. “You know, I think I could do with a promotion.”
"Mini-rhyscates? For breakfast?" Chewie eyed the eclectic food selections set out in one of Diamond Level's private dining rooms the next morning with mirth.

"Technically, it's brunch," Mara corrected primly, plucking one off the silver tray and darting her tongue out to swipe at the fudgy frosting. "Grandfather insisted."

Across the room, Rostek looked up from his datapad and smiled indulgently. "Using the Force is a tremendous amount of work," he lectured, mildly. "It is essential to keep Jedi properly fueled."

Han's brows knit. "Is that why the Kid's always hungry?"

"Skywalker," Mara clarified for Rostek. "And yes, probably." She licked a bit of frosting off her fingers and mused, "I always wondered how many ration bars they had to liquefy every day and pour down Vader's tubes to keep him from starving to death." She sucked a fingertip for a second, then added, "and if they had to oil it down so it wouldn't get stuck in the system somewhere."

"That," Mirax announced emphatically from where she lounged, purple-sock-clad feet up on the conference table, picking off a piece of her own cake, "is disgusting."

"Says the woman who eats topatos with vweiulu nut butter at 0400 in the morning," Mara returned dryly.

"That's all the baby, and you know it," Mirax shot back disdainfully.

"Must be inheriting your father's sense of taste," Jade snarked.

Rostek muffled a laugh but Chewie didn't bother, whuffing gently in agreement.

Mirax's intended reply was cut off by her comm sounding an alert code. She promptly swung her feet off the table and stuffed them into her boots. "Company's here."

Mara popped the remainder of her cupcake into her mouth and made quick work of wiping off her hands and mouth. Han watched her do a double-check of her person the same way he was accustomed to seeing Alliance troops check their gear before heading into battle. He wondered if she even recognized that was what she was doing. Waiting until she'd strategically positioned herself against the window-well on the far wall – that not-quite-bored pose she favored, with one hip leaning against the edge – Han surveyed the small, heavily secure conference room.

One wall was comprised almost entirely of windows, offering occupants an impressive view of the local starscape. This morning, transparent shades had been pulled down over them to mute the vibrantly orange glow of the gas giant Reltooine and the smaller shapes of its multiple tourist-trap moons.

The room's main door was set dead center on the opposite wall across a short, rectangular conference table milled from an obviously expensive slab of fijisi wood. To the right of the door, a compact serving table artfully adorned with an array of delicacies – and the ever-present, dark-roasted caff that Han was starting to think might run in Rostek and Mara's veins in place of blood – arced out from the corner in a graceful half-circle. Diagonally, in the far opposite corner, was where Mara had propped herself. It was the closest to a protective, defensive position as one could get in the compact quarters, Han supposed.

They'd left the head of the table open for Booster and Mirax occupied the first spot to the right of that. She'd turned her chair with its back to the table, leaving her facing the door. Rostek sat beside her, similarly positioned. Solo reviewed the lessons he'd learned via Leia and Winter about formal seating arrangements and their meaning, and mentally cross-referenced them with old smuggler's
wisdom. Ambling down to the opposite end of the table from Rostek and Mirax, he dropped into the third seat in, leaning back easily with his elbows on the table's edge. Chewie, apparently approving of his choice, settled his furry bulk into the seat behind Han.

Booster Terrick barely waited for the doors to finish whisking open before stalking in, all purpose and crackling energy. Broadly built and standing six-foot-one, with short, bristly white hair and a matching goatee, the Corellian would have been intimidating enough just as he was. In knee-high dun boots, rust colored cargo pants and a loose tunic the color of fresh butter, with his real brown eye flashing sharp and keen as the red of his cybernetic one, he was generally terrifying to anyone who didn't know him... and to almost everyone who did.

Beside him, a few inches shorter and more conservatively dressed – but no less imposing in his own right – strode a tanned man with unmistakably military bearing. Grey hair twisted back into tight coils brushed his shoulders as he turned his head slightly, taking in the whole of the scene in the habit of a man long-accustomed to walking into contentious situations where details counted and alertness spelled the difference between life and death. He wore a variation on the Rebel uniform Han was used to seeing on Madine and Dodonna; interestingly, it bore no insignia.

Dark, intelligent brown eyes lit up at the sight of Rostek rising to greet him, and he hurried to close the few steps between them. Eagerly, he clasped Horn's proffered hand in both of his own, then pulled the Director forward into a one-armed hug with the familiarity that exists only between old friends. “Rostek!”

“Garm.” Horn returned the embrace, then pulled back, clapping the General on the shoulder. “I cannot tell you how pleased I was to get your reply so quickly.”

“You invited him here,” Booster boasted, moving to stand behind his daughter, one hand falling to rest lovingly on her shoulder. “No one refuses an invitation to the Venture.”

“Terrick hospitality and Horn intrigue,” Bel Ibis concurred with a chuckle. “How could I have refused?”

“Horn?” A woman's voice repeated, obviously taken aback.

“Ah, yes.” Bel Ibis turned, extended his arm to motion his dark-haired companion forward. “Sena, allow me to introduce Rostek Horn, Director of CorSec and Master of Intrigues Extraordinaire.”

“Former Director,” Rostek offered, solicitously, shaking her hand.

“Sena Leikvold Midanyl,” she supplied, violet eyes taking him in with a combination of wariness and awe.

“My Chief Aide,” Bel Ibis said, fondly. “The only reason I don't misplace my own head, some days.”

“Aside from it being attached,” she muttered at him with a frown that suggested this was a recurring exchange. Then she returned her full attention to Horn. “It's an honor to meet you, Sir. I wasn't aware we'd be meeting anyone quite so esteemed.” Her eyes flicked to Booster. “No offense.”

He waved it off. “None taken. But if you're looking to be impressed, who you really want to meet is here,” he patted his daughter's shoulder, all but preening. “My daughter, Mirax. Terror of the Empire and one of the youngest Master Traders in modern history.”

Bel Ibis's eyes widened. “Mirax Terrick?” he asked, incredulously. “Force, can it really have been so long? Y ou were just a child last I saw you!”
“Terrick-Horn, now,” she said, smugly, thoroughly enjoying his struck look.

“You -.” The General caught Rostek's affectionate expression and the irritation that flashed across Booster's and began to laugh, deep and rich. “You married Corran?”

“Much to my father's dismay,” Mirax confirmed, patting her father's hand consolingly and grinning unapologetically.

“A Terrick and a Horn.” Bel Ibis shook his head. “I find myself immensely grateful that you're on our side.”

“Be glad she is, too,” Mirax jutted her chin toward the back corner, and Han followed the General's gaze to Mara, who nodded regally in acknowledgment.

“Dear Heart.”

Rostek held out a hand in Mara's direction and she obliged, rounding the table and coming to stand beside him. Horn's hand came to rest on her back, unaware of the way his pride rippled outward from his palm, seeping warmth and love into the tense muscles and stiff line of her spine, softening her just a bit in ways that she still found new and unexpected.

“Garm,” he introduced. “My granddaughter, Mara Jade Halcyon.”

Had Bel Ibis not had a lifetime of training and experience in the public eye, his jaw would have dropped. “Halcyon? But how -?”

“Vrai's child has been restored to me,” Rostek said, with quiet dignity.

Sena's eyes darted between the two men and Mara, keenly aware that much more was being communicated than the modest words suggested.

“But that would make her...”

Mara held her ground under the General's suddenly searching gaze, lifting her chin just a bit in defiance. Something about the small move made him smile and she felt a distinctly sweet melancholy waft off of him.

“Yes,” he said, his voice gentler, a little far away. “I do see your mother in you.” He shook himself, came fully back to the moment, and returned his gaze to Rostek. “She takes after her father, as well?” he asked, carefully.

“There are no secrets here,” Rostek told him. “They know she is a Jedi, yes. More than that – she carries on the Halcyon legacy.”

“You've a Battle Coordinator?” Bel Ibis gaped, turning stunned eyes back to Mara. “Burning skies, Ros! Does the Alliance know?”

“Sorta.”

All heads snapped sideways to where Han lounged with the sly grin of a Corellian slice hound. Lazily, he asked Mara, “you gonna tell him it gets better, or should I?”

“Captain Solo, of the infamous Millennium Falcon,” Rostek introduced, suppressing his amusement.

“Captain,” Bel Ibis nodded, “it's a pleasure to meet you. Your exploits at the battles of Yavin and Hoth were inspired.”
Han actually sat up at that. “The privilege is mine, Sir. Not many politicians I’ve ever had much use for, but you always topped the short list.”

“Aside from your Princess, of course,” Bel Ibis returned, cheerily. “I assume you're here on her behalf?”

“Not exactly,” Han allowed.

“I've asked Captain Solo to accept a Liaison position between my operation and the Alliance,” Rostek explained, waving them all to chairs. “So technically, he is here on his own behalf, but naturally he must consider Princess Organa's best interests as well.”

Bel Ibis settled into the chair beside Booster, opposite Mirax, and Sena took the one across from Rostek. Mara discretely faded back to her preferred corner, preferring not to sit at all. Sena regarded her warily but the General brushed it off, seemingly well versed in the peculiarities of Jedi.

“Are you going to accept that offer, Captain?” Garm inquired, intently.

“I am.”

“As Liaison, then,” the General pressed earnestly, “do you expect that the Alliance's Jedi will be willing to work with Jedi Halcyon, in a similar cross-organizational cooperative effort?”


Bel Ibis looked at Mara, taking her neutral expression and single shoulder shrug for confirmation, then stared at the group around the table.

“I've never had anything but the highest expectations of you, Rostek,” he said, finally. “But this time, I believe you've outdone even yourself.”

“The stakes are too high for anything less,” Horn said, gravely. “We cannot afford to fail.” His eyes moved to Mara, and his left hand moved to cover Mirax's where it rested on the table beside him. “We must end this war and destroy the Emperor,” he said bluntly. His grey eyes went colder than the core of Hoth. “We have reached the tipping point, old friend. The day we have both awaited and dreaded is upon us. We must rise together or die alone – all of us. There will be no more chances.”

“I have six Dreadnaught-class heavy cruisers, including my command ship Peregrine,” Bel Ibis laid his metaphorical cards on the table. “All recovered from Old Republic Dark Force, all in prime condition and adequately manned, with slave circuits intact. Full compliments of snub fights, each.”

“You've got pieces of the Katana Fleet?” Booster interrupted, astonished.

“I do,” Garm confirmed, enjoying his turn to be smug. “My fleet may be modest, but my people are second to none.” He leveled his gaze on Han. “I've no more trust for Mon Mothma than the day I left the Alliance, but Bail Organa was a dear friend of mine. I will be honored to fight alongside his daughter for the cause we both believe in – if,” he said, very pointedly, “you can swear to me that Mothma will not be allowed to set herself up as Emperor – in name or function – when Palpatine is gone.”

“Leia is going to run the galaxy.” Mara spoke for the first time, her Coruscanti accent extra crisp and pronounced, the icy decisiveness in her tone riveting. “Leia and Madine and Cracken. As a Council.
Anyone else who wants to be involved plays by their rules, or not at all.” She inclined her head just slightly. “I give you my word on that.”

For a moment, Bel Ibis saw an echo of her parents in the fierce, sharp young woman staring him down. *She inherited both their senses of totalitarian loyalty*, he thought. *And these are her people.*

He let his eyes skim the room again, taking in the others gathered. These were his people, too, he knew. He rose, standing his tallest and most proud, and bowed to Rostek, hand over his heart.

“It is an honor to place myself at your service, Director,” he said, solemnly. “To victory or death.”

“Here, here!” Booster pounded the table with the flat of his hand, boisterously. “Solo, grab that decanter!”

Han spun his chair to comply but found that, in a rare display of power, Mara had already lifted a finger and lofted it past him.

Sena had obviously never seen a Jedi in action of any sort before, because she paled slightly and her eyes went wide as dinner plates as the crystal flagon and seven short, flat-bottomed glasses bobbed down the table past her and settled softly in front of Booster.

Mirax and Rostek gave Jade bemused glances while Terrick splashed an appallingly expensive vintage of Whyren's into each glass. “Sorry, darling,” he apologized to Mirax, gesturing toward the juice already filling hers. “That'll have to do.”

“It always does, these days,” she sighed, resigned.

Booster waved an impatient hand at Han, Mara, and Chewie. “Get your asses down here.” He lifted his glass in a toast, voice booming in excitement. “To victory or death.”

Eight glasses clinked rims, and the coup was begun. Corellia's children were rising up... and all nine hells were coming with them.

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Han watched from one of Blue Level's terraced viewing platforms as Bel Ibis's ship – a small freighter, remarkable only in how unremarkably generic it was – jetted away from the *Errant Venture* and winked into hyperspace. After four days of strategizing, negotiating, and laying critical groundwork for the upcoming coup, Han felt like he'd just let go of a high-voltage wire: wrung out as a wet towel, but too electrified and overstimulated to sleep.

Beside him, Mara turned away from the viewport. “You still planning to leave in the morning?”

“Yeah, Chewie's prepping the ship now. You gonna catch drinks with us tonight? I'll take you someplace nice this time, if you want,” he offered gallantly.

“Don't waste the nice stuff on me,” Mara shook her head. “Save it for Leia, And I have to go down-level, tonight, actually. I'm not sure how long I'll be.”

“Black Level?” Han objected. “By yourself?”

Mara narrowed her eyes at him. “I'm a big girl, Solo. I think I can handle it.”

“That place is a pesthole!” He argued, following her as she started to walk away. “Makes Mos Eisley look like a luxury resort.”
“Farmboy says Mos Eisley was a 'hive of scum and villany.’ Mara chuckled as Han drew alongside her.

“Sounds like somethin' he'd say,” Han grumbled. “But I can't let you go down there alone. Kid'd have my head if he found out.”

“Which he won't,” Mara spitted him with a warning glare. “And I've already got a chaperone lined up. But,” she stepped into a turbo-lift and he ducked in behind her as she punched the 'down' button, “if you're feeling that nostalgic to see it again, I won't stop you.”

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Booster Terrick’s office could have been a carnival-mirror reflection of Madine's. Where Crix's clutter had a sort of homey, disheveled feel about it, Booster's was rabidly wild and filthy in ways that made Mara's Imperially-orderly mind twitch. Cracked duraplast boxes leaked streaky red, viscous fluids. Piles of datacards leaned precariously one against another and chairs filled with cast-off clothing sat at haphazard angles to everything and nothing. In the corner, a deactivated 3PO droid stood festooned with a dozen gunbelts – complete with blasters. Jade just barely resisted the urge to steal one, simply to see if he'd notice.

Booster's desk dominated the room and, by comparison to the rest of it, appeared almost neat. A single layer of datacards, datapads, wires and odds and ends had been cleared back from the small open space he was using to flip through a stack of flimsy.

“Ah, there you are!” he greeted.

Mara stifled a wince when he tossed the entire stack he was holding – save a single piece – onto a nearby chair. It landed on a lumpy pile of what she thought might be shirts (that had probably not been laundered in months) and slid off the back to feather out all over the floor. Or, more accurately, all over the other junk that covered the floor.

“I've found just the thing,” he continued, oblivious, marching out and motioned them to follow.

Long accustomed to keeping up with men who were significantly taller than she was – and therefore had a noticeably longer stride – without looking like she was hurrying, Mara easily kept pace as they blazed down the dark, grungy halls.

“It'll be a good fit for the identity Rostek got you.”

“Identity?” Han asked, from Mara's other side.

“He maintains a database of pre-existing data phantoms,” she explained. “Just stuck holographs of my disguised character to them, so if anyone does any checking, they'll find exactly what they need to.”

“We have them here, too,” Booster added, smugly. “And our own Imperial-issue document fabrication machinery. More importantly,” he punched a code into the door of a docking bay and it pinged before sliding open, “we have these.”

The bay was vast and only the front section illuminated when they stepped in. *Energy saving measure, probably.* Han thought, and a smart one. There was so much space aboard an ImpStar that even tiny amounts of waste here and there could add up in a hurry.

The ship's original TIE fighter launch racks still had a few TIEs in them, but Solo noted that many of them were missing parts. *Selling 'em to the second-hand market,* he guessed. It rankled a bit to think
that Terrick could have played any part in getting damn Imperial 'eyeballs' – ships that had stolen so many friends from the Rebellion – functional again, even tertiarily.

*No guarantee they weren't sabotaged or sent with embedded trackers or something,* Han reminded him self. Terrick was a loyal son of Corellia, after all. No reason not to make a profit and take a shot at the Imps at the same time. There was no way to know, aside from asking, and Han chose to just let it go, instead. Maybe Leia's diplomacy really was wearing off on him more than he gave credit for.

More interesting than the TIEs were the other small ships intermingling with them. Han twisted his neck around to examine the unusual suspension collars they'd been fitted with that allowed them to hang from the racks as well. It was an ingenious way to fit a lot more ships in the space.

"That one." Mara pointed. "That one will be perfect."

Booster pulled a remote control out of a cargo pocket – his pants were a gauche shade of painfully bright blue today, Han noted – and a loadlifter droid sparked into motion nearby. Rolling forward, it retrieved a Z-95 Headhunter from the rack.

"It's an older model but fully intact," Booster referred to a datapad he fished out of another pocket while Mara walked around the ship, inspecting it.

"Open it?"

Terrick hit a series of buttons and the ship hummed to life, the top hatch popping open. Mara wasted no time clamoring inside, her small frame disappearing entirely as she crouched down to inspect the wiring and controls.

A moment later, she popped back into view. "I'll take it."

"Cash or credit?"

"Trade." Mara hoisted herself up to sit on the edge of the cockpit.

"For what?" Terrick's eyes – real and cybernetic – narrowed, but his body language screamed interest.

Han could all but see the man's mind ticking over. Booster loved to get a good deal, and anybody who would have the nerve to suggest a trade to him must have something good to offer.

"One v-200 ion cannon."

Both men stared at her, agog.

"Where in Malachor did you get a v-200?!" Booster demanded.

"That's none of your concern," Mara said, coolly. "All you need to know is that I have one, used but in good condition. And I'll trade it for this." Her eyes skittered to Han, then back to Booster. "And a look at the upper levels of this ship."

"What for?" Terrick eyed her twice as suspiciously now.

"I might have a business proposition for you."

"You," Booster informed her, with a mixture of satisfaction and annoyance, "are a Horn, through and through."
Mara hopped off the Z-95, softening her landing with the Force, and strode over to where he stood. “We have a deal, then?”

“Deal.”

Han had no intention of being left out of a chance to explore the upper levels of an ImpStar (while not being hunted by stormtroopers) and, seeing as he knew about everything else, Mara saw no point in protesting when he invited himself to accompany her and Booster up a private turbolift in a remote forward corner of the *EV*.

When Terrick acquired the ship he'd emptied it of anything not immediately useful, selling off the rest to help fund his priority renovation projects. All levels not current in use were wired for only emergency lighting and power, so Booster gave Mara a temporary access code and let her explore, opening doors and turning on lights as she went. Both men trailed at a distance, each trying to gauge and guess what she was looking for as she stood in the center of various spaces, turning in circles, her eyes distant, or scooted herself into access panels to pluck at wiring, or prodded at walls. Han made copious mental notes himself; you never knew when intel on an ImpStar could come in handy.

Finally, Mara came back, conscientiously turning off lights and closing doors behind her.

Despite being on the edge of bursting with curiosity, both men kept their mouths shut as they boarded the turbolift and headed down again. Two floors above Diamond Level, Mara's hand shot out and hit the emergency stop button, lurching them to a halt.

“How much do you want for it?”

“What?” Terrick turned, his cybernetic eye clicking slightly as it focused on her.

“That level,” she clarified, impatiently. “Private access. Remodeling rights. Permanent lease. I can pay in cash or untraceable ship-scale weapons – your choice.”

Booster examined her for a few long, silent seconds. “I'll be broggled! You're completely serious, aren't you?”

“No, I just crawled all over your ship because I was bored,” Mara retorted, impatiently. “Yes or no, Terrick!”


Han just barely swallowed a snort. Twelve? That'd put him back at full military issue compliment!

“Six.”

“Ten,” Terrick pushed.

“Nine, last offer.”

“Done!” Booster looked supremely pleased with himself. “I'll have the contract delivered before you leave tomorrow.”

Mara tapped the 'resume' button and the lift started dropped again. “Make sure there's a confidentiality clause in it,” she warned. “One worthy of my grandfather.”

Booster smiled as the turbo-lift doors slid open onto Diamond Level. “You, Mara Jade Halcyon, are
a delight to do business with.”

“What is it?” Jade asked, quizzically.

“Vrortic cocktail,” Han told her, his stomach growling as if to emphasize the point. “One of the only wookie dishes safe for human consumption. With a non-traditional side of protato wedges, to soak up the juice.”

Mara hesitated. Then, because it was Solo, relented. “How do you eat it?”

“Messily,” Solo laughed. “Like this.” Picking up his fork, he dug in to the tall pile of various types of meat layered with wroshryr leaves that had been soaked in a potent Grakkyn nectar for weeks. “There’s no way to do it cleanly, so dig in.”

Chewie huffed, encouragingly. //It tastes better than it looks.// Cautiously, Mara stabbed at the stack, snagging a forkful of the colorful mess and popping it into her mouth. She chewed a moment, then reconsidered the plate appreciatively. “That’s not bad.”

“Didn't get to eat adventurously with the Empire, did you?” Han asked, casually.

“Non-human food isn't acceptable in Imperial circles.” Mara made a face. “I've eaten the most insanely expensive and rare human dishes you can imagine, but this -,” she looked at the plate regretfully as she speared another forkful. “I'd have needed days in a healing trance after, if they'd caught me eating something like this.” She shook her head. “Mostly lived on ration bars, anyway. There wasn't time for anything else.”

“You'll get plenty of chance to broaden your culinary horizons if you move in upstairs,” Solo said, unsubtly.

//You're purchasing a suite on Diamond Level?// Chewie inquired, curiously, spearing another heaping helping of their shared meal with his unsheathed claws.

“Jade here got an exclusive deal on a private upper level,” Han filled him in.

“That is classified,” she glared at him, then defended, “it's a backup plan. Don't tell me you don't have any.”

“Sure I do,” Han admitted, easily. “Lots of 'em.” He picked at the food a minute. “Just can't help wonderin' what you think it's a backup plan for.”

“It's not for anything, specifically,” Mara groused. “I just -.” She huffed out a breath, and glowered at them. “It's necessary.”

“Okay,” Han said, after a minute. “You gonna tell Luke?”

“Eventually,” Mara hedged. Her tone sharpened and she blurted, “don't you dare -!”

//It is yours to tell.// The wookie assured her.

“You know he wants you to be happy,” Han persisted, seriously. “Kid'd turn the galaxy inside out for you.”

“This will make me happy,” she maintained, stubbornly. “I won't be a burden. Just because the Force
shoved me on everyone -.”

“Whoa!” Han held up his hands. “Hold your Star Destroyers, there, Jade. Nobody got anything shoved on them by the Force.” He heaved a breath. “Look. Your floor up there is yours. None of my business. I just -.” He stopped, at a loss for words, then fixed on her seriously, pointing a stern finger at her chest. “When you get back to Teeth, you open your head to Luke as far as it’ll go, understand? Give him a chance to show you how much he wants you – needs you, crazy Force prophecies be damned! Give ‘im the best you’ve got,” he insisted, “or I'll -.”

//Feed you to sarlacc?// Chewie suggested helpfully, when Han stalled looking for an adequate threat.

“Yes!” Solo stabbed the air, emphatically.

Taken aback by his outburst, Mara sat motionless for a long time, then blinked. Once. Twice. Nodded. Took a deep breath, let it go slowly. Made herself fish out another forkful of cocktail.

They ate in silence for a moment before she said, very carefully casual, “I don't think I've ever heard of a sarlacc.”

“Nasty buggers native to Tatooine,” Han said, pushing a couple fat protatoes to her side of the shared plate. “Jabba's got one as a pet that he keeps in the Pit of Carkoon to feed people to as sport. Supposedly digests you alive over a thousand years.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Mara frowned, spearing one of the proffered protatoes. “And lazy. Most beings don't live anywhere near that long, anyway. What's wrong with a single, well-placed blaster bolt?”

//Not dramatic enough.// Chewie supposed.

“Depends on where you place it,” Mara countered wickedly. “But even if you're going for show value, there's still plenty more practical options.”

“Now that you mention it,” Han chewed thoughtfully, “there was this thing Chewie and me saw one time...”

- -

“Caff,” Mara said, handing the package to Chewie. “For Skywalker. From my grandfather. Apparently Solo told him it was needed.”

//It is.// the wookie agreed. He dipped his giant furry head to peer at her in the dim lights of the docking bay. It was still early enough that everything remained on night cycle settings, and his soft rumble felt loud in the stillness. //You will be all right?//

“It's just a standard infiltration,” Mara assured him. “I'll be in and out, and see you on Ord Mantell next week.”

“Insurrections can get messy,” Han appeared at the top of the Falcon's open ramp. “Don't do anything I wouldn't do.”

“I don't think that rules out much,” she pointed out, wryly.

He gave her that. “Think about what I said,” he reminded her. “About the Kid.” His tone gentled a little, coaxing. “It'll be good, you'll see. All of us together on Teeth – the Empire won't stand a chance.”
She nodded. “Clear skies, Solo.”

“You, too.” He'd made it all the way inside and had started closing the ramp before he remembered and swung out the side of the hatch to call out, “Hey, Jade.”

She was nearly at the bay doors and turned. “What?”

“What's gonna be at Garos?”

“Maybe nothing.” She shrugged, but a mischievous quirk tugged at her mouth. “Maybe something to keep Teeth busy until I get there.”

Han grinned at her. “Now who's going for show value?”

She sniffed. “Whatever. Get lost, Solo. Some of us have work to do.”

Chapter End Notes

*rubs hands together* Okay, I slacked on my reference notes last chapter, but I won't this time!

*Re: timelines. As previously noted, Bel Ibis's fallout with the Alliance has been moved forward a few years for my own personal narrative purposes. Likewise, per cannon (aka Legends/EU), Booster didn't acquire the Venture (previously an Imperial ship named the Virulence) until much later (several years past RotJ). Again, I've wibbly-wobblied the timeline to suit myself. Hence the lack of details about how he acquired it, exactly, here.

*In the Profics, the holo art in Trader's Alley is of the Battle of Thyferra, and manipulated to enhance Booster's role and almost entirely edit Corran's out. Obvs, since that Battle hasn't happened yet at this point, I just subbed in something reasonably close.

*Likewise, I'm keeping most of the Booster/Corran antagonism intact, even though the rivalry between Terrick and Hal Horn doesn't really fit in this timeline.

I'm sure I forgot some notes I meant to add, so don't be surprised if this list gets longer as I remember. : )
“You sure you oughta be takin' that apart right now?” Han's call echoed through the hangar reserved for the Rogues. It was nearly midnight and the cavernous space was nearly empty, every nook and cranny fastidiously neat, the silent hulks of the Squadron's x-wings looming shadowy and foreboding in the dim overnight safety lighting, their noses aligned in a scrupulously precise spear-head formation in preparation for the next day's launch. “We're leavin' pretty early, tomorrow.”

A clang sounded from within the tight circle of illumination flood-lighting the ship at the tip of the spear as a tool dropped from the top of the bi-level maintenance stand snugged up to its nose to the lower platform.

“It needed work.” Even the muffling and tinny-ness that distorted Luke's voice – he was half-buried in the open, partially dismantled cowling – did nothing to disguise the flatness of his tone.

Translation, Solo thought: you needed somewhere without other people and something to do with your hands because your feelings are hurt. He sighed. “I said I was sorry,” he reminded the Jedi. “An' it's not like you'd've even had much chance to talk to her – we were busy the entire time.”

A tool went zinging out of the open compartment, clattering to the ground several feet away. “Then I'd have sat!” Luke wriggled free of the ship's insides and pushed himself up onto his knees on the maintenance stand. “Quietly!” He dropped back to sit on his heels, the holo of dejection. “Do you realize she's been gone as long as she was here? Awake, at any rate.”

Han picked up his friend's discarded uniform jacket and tossed it over the ship's s-foil, clearing a spot on top of a close tool chest just inside the circle of light, and lowered his weary bones to sit on it.

“You miss her.”

Luke rubbed a grimy hand across his forehead, adding fresh streaks to the grubby smears already there. His sleeveless gray under-tunic clung to him in sweaty patches, suggesting that he'd been at his self-imposed project for a while now.

“I'm worried about her, Han. The Dark Side is actively stalking her and she doesn't see it. Isn't the least bit concerned for herself – and that's what I know about! Our schedules are so far off she checks in with Artoo as much as she does with me, and I'm lucky to get a couple hours with her two nights a week in my sleep! It's…” his hand waved, nebulously. “It's just…”

“It's not enough,” Solo finished for him, rubbing his chin with a hand. “Slatt, Kid. I didn't realize things were that bad.”

“It's all right,” Luke mumbled, scraping a blunt fingernail absently over a chip in the snub fighter's heavily-scuffed paint job. Then, more clearly, “If you'd told me, I'd have gone. Command would have had a fit, and that run to the Hudalla Sector we were on would have been twice as ugly without the edge from that Force warning I got. It was probably for the best, just – don't do it again, all right?”
“Not till Hutt's ride swoops,” Han promised. “You want a hand putting that back together?”

“Still avoiding Leia?” Luke smiled slightly but scooched over on the stand, making room for the smuggler.

“Waiting for the right moment,” Han corrected, climbing up and laying flat on his belly beside Luke. “You gotta handle Princesses with finesse, you know.”

“Right.” Amused, Luke shimmied back into the tight confines of the engine compartment. “Hand me that spanner, will you?” Han did and the Jedi continued, “you know why she's upset, don't you?”

“Don't think I coulda missed it with's loud as she was yellin',” Solo grumbled.

“She's scared, Han,” Skywalker chided. “She's got all her shields up and I can still feel it from here.” He poked his head out, frowning. “Don't you dare tell her I said that.”

“Said what?” Han asked, innocently.

“Good.” Luke ducked back inside and Han leaned over the edge to snag the part they were going to need off the stand's secondary level. There was a heavy, steady banging for a minute as Luke 'encouraged' the fitting back into alignment. His hand popped out and Han dropped the part into it. He wiggled it in thanks, then pulled it into the compartment. After a twisting screech, he continued, “You are going to talk to her tonight, aren't you? Because I'd like to try to sleep – give myself another chance to catch Mara.”

“An' you can't with her grousing straight past her shields,” Han rolled his eyes. “I know. An' yeah, I'll fix it. Tonight.”

“Thank you.”

”How come you can't just shield her out?” Solo wanted to know. “Is it the twins thing?”

“I don't know.” Luke reached a hand out and felt around for the gasket he needed. Han nudged it over until it bumped his fingertips. “Ah, there we go.”

Hand and gasket disappeared, and Solo shook his head with a smile.

“Force bonds are complicated,” Luke announced a few minutes later when his head reappeared, picking up as if they hadn't had to leave off for more obnoxious banging and spark-throwing spot welds. “And so far I seem to be doing all my learning about them on the job.” He wiped his hands on a rag Han handed him and admitted, “I'm hoping Mara coming back will help with that.”

“Because she's a Coordinator?”

“Because she has actual experience.” Luke made a face. “Most of it is bad, of course, but it's still valid – and more than the rest of us have.”

“Like crashin' ships,” Solo offered, understanding. “You know what makes 'em fall outta the sky, you can reverse engineer how to keep 'em up.”

“Exactly.”

“Well,” Han slapped his hands on his knees and pushed himself upright. “Guess it's up to me to keep Leia in her own head until then.” Sliding down the ladder to the ground, he stopped and turned around, fishing something out his pocket. “Here.”
Luke caught the small pouch thrown at him and turned it over, surprise and pleasure lighting up his dirty face. “Trammistan chocolate?”

“You don't eat enough,” Han said by way of explanation.

Skywalker laughed. “Who told you that?”

“Someone who would know,” Han answered, thinking of Rostek’s eyes flickering to Mara, furtively enchanted by her artless happiness as she polished off another little cake and returned to their scheming with renewed vigor. Solo knew a smart man and a purloin-able strategy when he saw them and had wasted no time in stocking up on Luke's weakness – chocolate – aboard the EV. “Eat it before you go to bed,” he ordered. “It's good for you.”

“Yes, Sir,” Luke joked, grinning and tapping two fingers to his forehead in a teasing salute.

Han gave him a lazy smile back and then waved his hand in an 'ah, nevermind' gesture before heading out of the hangar. Let the Kid tease; he had a Princess to sort out, and she wasn't going to be nearly so easy to placate.

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“That wraps up Green Squadron.” Dodonna set the datapad on the table with a satisfied click, his angular face relaxing into a pleased expression. “Now only the Rogues remain.”

“Saved the hardest for last, didn't we?” Mon Mothma sighed, her slender body bowing forward as she rested her palms on the wide desk between them.

“They are the most legendary,” Jan conceded. “And, as such, they'll command the highest value in the marriage market. But the work's half done, already. Everyone that we deemed too demanding for previous candidates is likely to be attracted by a Rogue, in spite of his manners.”

“There are still opportunities to work on those, as well, I suppose,” Mon mused. “At least we can be assured most of them will be open to our efforts. With the exception of Captain Horn, they all lack current mates or recurring 'companions'.”

“Skywalker...” Dodonna began, then paused.

“May be at risk of enticement by his CorUnum?”

Jan nodded and added, “And may yet adopt the old Jedi practice of celibacy.”

“He is young,” Mothma maintained, firmly. “With his friends pairing off, he will be more open to influence on that point. We simply need to find him someone too enticing to ignore.”

“I'll review the files again,” Dodonna promised. “I'm sure we can find a suitable candidate.”

“Whomever she is, she must be genuinely above reproach and have a great deal to offer,” she reminded him. “A Jedi and the Hero of Yavin must command a high price – catch us the greatest fish.” She closed her eyes and sighed again. “He is not a resource we can afford to squander – in any respect.”

- -
Han’s feet traced the path through Leia’s suite from memory, without any need for lights. The doors – until recently maintained to the highest Imperial standards – were soundless in opening and closing as he entered the bedroom. The shades had been left open, and starlight streamed rich and clean through the tall viewports in the far wall, casting just enough light over the edge of the single large bed to reveal Leia's shape. She lay on the far side - his side - her back to him.

“Go away.”

He ignored the command, pulling off his boots and leaving them beside the bed. His vest, shirt, and pants followed, ending up draped over the low side table. Without a word, he climbed into the bed and slid over.

“I said -.” Leia started, jerking her arm away when he lifted a hand to stroke her shoulder.

“I know what you said,” he interrupted. “You gonna tell me why you said it?”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” she snapped, dragging the covers up to her chin and huddling further away from him.

“Uh huh,” Han's hand found her hip over the blanket, rubbing in small, soothing circles. “I've heard that before.”

“And you didn't learn, did you?!” As he'd suspected she would, Leia rolled over, half sitting up to yell at him. “You can't just leave well enough alone!”

“Seems to me the Rebellion isn't doing 'well enough', Your Highness,” he countered, unable to help noticing she was sleeping in his shirt. Again. “We wanna win this thing, we're gonna need help – exactly the kind of help I just got us.”

“At what cost?” she demanded.

Solo frowned, an edge of annoyance leaking into his tone. “What do you think they're gonna ask for that's so bad?”

“You!” She shouted, her fist crashing down into one of the thick, fluffy pillows that littered the head of the bed. Her face was flushed and her voice went hoarse. “They took you, Han!”

Consternation set in as the nature of the problem started to take shape for him.

“What if -.”

“Hey,” he stopped her, reaching out to pull her small frame against his chest, arms wrapping tightly around her. “I'll be right here,” he promised. “Right wherever you are, all the way through. Liaison, remember?”

“General,” she griped into his chest, shoving at him angrily. “They made you a general and you'll have to go where you're needed. That's the whole reason you didn't take a commission with the Alliance!

“Liaison General,” he corrected, firmly, tugging and shoving at the covers until they were laying down and she was nestled into him, their legs tangled together, the blankets cocooned around them both. “Only place I'm gonna be needed is wherever you are.” He pressed a kiss to her temple. “Horn said so.”

Leia buried her face in his chest, slid her hands flat against the strong, hard-muscled plain of his
back. “You're the only home I have left,” she whispered into the darkness. “Without you -.”

“Never gonna happen.” Solo slid a hand up her neck to cradle the back of her head and kissed her forehead, reassuringly. “Corellia – it's what I am. What I'm made of. But you,” he kissed her temple again. “You're why I am, Sweetheart. And that ain't any hokey Force mumbo-jumbo, either. It's just fact. Nothing in this galaxy's gonna make me leave you, understand?”

She didn't answer but burrowed a little deeper into him. They laid in silence for a while before she spoke into the stillness. “Han?”

“Yeah?”

“I don't want to sleep tonight.”

“You got better plans?”

“Love me. Until I can't breathe – can't think any more. Until you have to leave with the Rogues.”

He shifted her under him, his mouth finding and sucking lightly on the spot behind her ear that turned her into jelly, every time. “Your wish is my command, Your Worship.”

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The pilot's seat of the Z-95 she'd purchased off Booster was worn, the thick fabric fraying through to the dull, colorless conforming foam of its pneudraulic capillary system peeking out in several places. Pleased as she was to have her own ship – it was really, truly hers, still a new and fascinating concept – Mara couldn't have cared less about the interior aesthetics. The seat still made scores of micro-adjustments to her temperature, body weight distribution and a half dozen other critical indicators every minute, ensuring optimal comfort and physical safety/performance, and that was all that mattered at the moment.

Isolated in the depths of hyperspace, deep behind layers of shielding lest she distract Skywalker, the whole of her attention was focused on sealing the final filament of energy cleanly into place on her power sphere. It went into place and latched with the same routine sting as all of its predecessors. For the span of two heartbeats, she held her breath, feeling as if she hung in a great yawning emptiness, teetering on an unseen precipice.

Then the galaxy fractured around her into a vast swirling dust storm of shimmering luminescence, every atom glittering like a Jazbinan sun crystal caught in a shaft of pure sunlight. The rings of power around her spun wildly in every direction – a gyroscope going haywire – and she gawked in awe as they latched onto and pulled the finest fibers imaginable from each filament like a loom catching thread, weaving them together into an iridescent globe that – with a deafening crack of raw power – fused into a fluid, seamlessly integrated whole.

Stillness fell and she struggled to breathe, staring at her new self in the Force. Then a laugh, utterly foreign in it's sheer giddy delight, bubbled out of her.

“Fierfek - it's done. I finished it.”

Elated, she unthinkingly reached for Luke – and ran directly into the filmy, flexible barrier she'd demanded he erect when he was flying. Reality slammed in and she jerked back, reflexively yanking all of her shields back up, blurring and obscuring her sense. She couldn't disturb him now – it would be dangerous. Selfish.
His mind reached for hers, concerned. *Shavit*. He'd felt her.

*Didn't mean to interrupt.* She hurried to brush off his querying touch. *Just checking in.*

His reply was a quick, affectionate stroke, like fingertips over the back of her hand, before he withdrew, honoring her rules. Once again alone in the vast chasm of space, Mara shivered, something unaccountably cold settling in her bones.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid,* she chastised herself, tickling the cabin heat up a few degrees. *Distracting him like that could have been dangerous. Only the petty and incompetent show off and preen – you know better.*

One accepted accolades when they were earned and offered – and *only* then. She wouldn't embarrass herself or Skywalker by grasping for his attention when it was needed elsewhere. He already gave her so much. Being greedy for more would only make her unworthy of what he was already giving and erase any hope of deserving more. Those were old lessons, both drilled and beaten into her so long ago they were more reflex than belief, now.

She'd promised Solo she'd give Skywalker her best and she'd meant it. She'd never given less than that – nothing less had ever been acceptable. She wasn't going to start now.

Huddling further back into her seat, she reached for the Force. Wondered, as she prepared herself for a healing trance, why something unnameable inside her ached at what should be a moment of triumph.

- -

**Meki Lanith, Post Master of the shabby, middle-of-nowhere city on Gavos IV that the Alliance used as a mail drop, shut down his station the instant Han and Chewie sauntered inside. Hastily, tossed an “out to lunch” sign in the cracked, dirt-caked transparisteel window beside the door as he herded them outside and stuffed them into his decrepit speeder.**

“This is a *mail drop,*” the Zelosian waved his hands for emphasis.

Han made an effort not to show alarm as the unwieldy X-34 zagged hard right when Lanith's hands came off the controls.

“It is for *mail,*” Meki ranted, hands slapping back onto the control stick and zigging them back into line with the established lane, only narrowly avoiding a collision with a much bulkier RGC-18 landspeeder piloted by a bulky, cranky-looking droid. “Parcels! Packages! Data chips! Not *beings!*”

“Beings?” Han yelped, startled. “What're you talking about?”

“I'm *talking* about the ships full of Imperial slaves that dropped out of hyperspace and came looking for *you* at my station!” Lanith turned his head to give them a quick glare. His eyes - the brilliant emerald green that all of his species boasted - widened theatrically when he saw Han's dumbfounded look. “You didn't know?”

From the backseat, Chewie howled a rather explicit insult in response. Han didn't translate.

“Of course I didn't know!!” he shouted back instead, irate. “If I knew you had refugees, I'd've been here to meet them! Hells, how long have they been here?”
“Not long,” the Post Master reassured, suddenly abashed. “I’ve seen to bribing the relevant officials for you, of course. It was impossible to hide them.”

“Yeah, I’d guess it was,” Han muttered, pulling out his comm and punching in a code.

“Read you loud and clear, Falcon One,” Wedge answered, alert and eager. “You get kidnapped, or are you making time across town that fast on purpose?”

“A little of both,” Han answered honestly as the speeder slowed and maneuvered clumsily through the gates of what looked like an abandoned spaceport. “Need you guys to meet me at this location, soon as you can. You might pick up ships on your scopes – they're friendly.”

“Roger that,” Antilles acknowledged. “Luke and Tycho aren't too far behind you.”

“Copy that.” Solo clicked the comm off and stared, astounded, as the bay door of an ancient hangar began to crawl upright with a complaining shriek. All along it's length, beings were lined up, their postures – and then their faces, when they came into view – wavering in that treacherous place between fearful suspicion and blinding hope. As a whole, they were clad in little more than rags – many of the women clutching cloth-wrapped bundles that could only be poorly swaddled infants to their chests.

“They fill two hangars,” Lanith was saying, and Han forced himself to move, to push the rusted speeder door open and climb out on now-shaky legs. “They insisted on waiting for you.”

Chewbacca lumbered out of the speeder behind Han, the pitch of his whine evocative; he'd been a slave. Remembered this moment on the cusp of freedom and -. Han and Chewie both spun instinctively at the indisputable sound of another wookie roaring.

//Chewbacca//

Han gawped, astonished, as Chewie howled in return and loped toward a female wookie. The two collided in an embrace that would have crushed the bones of any other species. Then they were talking a parsec a minute, gesturing wildly.

At that moment, a flight of x-wings dropped out of the sky, arcing overhead with a thunderous rumble and twisting around to position themselves for landing.

All along the line at the hangar door, bedraggled beings grabbed for weapons and shoved younglings behind them, in the reflex of those who have lived besieged. Chewie immediately harned a protest and the female with him took it up, spinning and waving the others down.

A few humans among the group took up the cry, translating, “It's all right. It's the Alliance! They've come for us!”

Cheers went up along the line and Han clapped hand over his mouth, willing himself to composure. You're a General now, dammit. Get yourself together.

A sleek RGC-18 landspeeder spun nimbly through the gates, glissading to a precise stop just as the x-wings settled, dust and sand from the dried, cracked ground whipping up around them. In quick succession, the Rogues popped their hatches, jumping and sliding to the ground and jogging over just as Luke and Tycho joined the knot of beings at Lanith's speeder.

Han could see his own incredulity writ large on the other's faces as Luke, wide-eyed, asked, “What's all this?”
“Refugees,” Han told him, still barely believing it himself and incredibly grateful that his voice didn't crack.

Chewie rejoined them, one arm snug around the female beside him. //This is Ryanta,” he introduced, proudly. //She is the sister of my wife.//

“Malla's sister?” Han gaped. “I thought she was dead!”

//So did I.// The wookie's words were tremulous with emotion – an exceptionally rare occurrence that no one dared comment on.

//We were taken together but separated in our enslavement.// Ryanta spoke up.//I was sent to the Core. This is the clan I have made for myself in my exile.// She gestured behind her. //Come, address Vilne. He speaks for us.//

The Rogues exchanged a look, then followed as one. Ryanta introduced Vilne Astar, a Selkath with mottled blue skin and dark eyes set deep in the sides of his head.

“You were enslaved on Brentaal?” Luke asked.

“Yes,” Vilne’s wide, flat head bobbed, the cephalic lobes bracketing his mouth swinging side to side with the motion. “Until two women released us. They said a Moff had been killed and the Imperials would slaughter us for information in the morning simply for having been in the building where the bodies would be found. They offered us ships, that we might escape.”

“Of all the places to go to celebrate your freedom, why come here?” Hobbie wanted to know.

“Our rescuers said they were with the Alliance - that they had freed us on your behalf. We wish to join you. To help you free others who have suffered as we have.” Vilne looked worried suddenly. “They said you would take us in. Is this not true?”

“It is true,” Wedge reassured, quickly. “I can't promise we've got any open slots dedicated to freeing slaves just now, but we'll find a place for you if you want it. Or help you get transport somewhere safe.”

“Did they tell you their names?” Corran wanted to know. “Your rescuers.”

“Rumor,” Vilne said. “And Sen. I do not believe they were their real names,” he confided.

“They were in the Core?!” Corran rounded on Luke. “Did you know about this?”


“You forgot?” Corran repeated, beyond unimpressed.

“I was distracted by that other thing we talked about,” Luke gave him a pointed look.

“That was there? Have they both gone kriffing thermal?!”

“We can talk about it on the flight back,” Luke cut him off. “Right now, we need to figure out how to get these people to Base.”

“We'll have to slave the ships,” Han interjected. “With a couple modifications, I think I can tie them all to the Falcon. Keep their computers clean, just in case.”

“All right, Rogues,” Wedge stepped up to the challenge. “You heard the man – time to put those
“Skills we've been working on to use.”

“Let me guess: you missed the blaster bolt with your name on it and wanted a second chance to catch it?”

The Stormtrooper snapped around, instinctively leveling his weapon at the half-cybernetic, armor-weave-clad woman before intentionally dropping it's nose toward the ground. “Not what I was after, actually.”

“Thinking of trying to take me alive?” she raised an eyebrow, the motion only barely visible between the hexagonal vocabulator that covered her mouth and nose and the triangular headdress that enveloped her head.

“Hoping you'll take me alive, Ma'am.” He slowly bent over, laying his weapon carefully on the ground, and stood again, hands in the air, gloved palms open facing her.

“Follow me.” She waved at his blaster. “Bring that.”

To the trooper's astonishment, she turned her back on him and sauntered away, her long purple gown swaying around her ankles. Lacking other options, he did as instructed, following her out of the alley he'd tracked her into and back into the street. He followed a few paces behind, trying not to look conspicuous. Happily, Dargulli was a Core world with a high population of troopers, so blending in was easier than it might seem for someone encased head-to-toe in armor.

They were in a middling portion of the outskirts of the capitol, more than two hours away from the carnage she'd left in her wake when she abandoned the top-secret meeting of the four conspirators plotting to kill Palpatine. He'd have lost her a dozen times over if it weren't for that niggling little not-quite-really-a-voice in the back of his head that kept whispering this way.

They walked for a solid ten minutes and then he hesitated for the briefest of moments before following her through the door of a by-the-hour motel with a tiny, business-like sign denoting it as the Sultry Selonian Inn. He hung back as she brazenly bought them a room, then stayed close to her heels as she strode down the halls and climbed the back stairs until they'd reached their assigned room.

Once they were both inside, she secured the door and produced a flask from under her flowing skirt somewhere. “Drink?”

It was against every protocol – and common sense – but that little voice whispered again it's okay. It had never steered him wrong yet, so Kyle laid his blaster down on the nightstand and said, “Sure. Why not?”

The woman flipped over the short, stout water glasses on the side table and poured them each a splash while he unclipped his helmet and levered it off, revealing tousled, slightly sweaty brown hair and chestnut brown eyes set in a bearded, square-jawed face. It felt like an act of trust – and confirmation of his gut – when she pried off her vocabulator and tossed it on the bed before handing him one of the glasses.

“Severeen's,” she informed him, her voice smooth and clipped without the coarse modulation of the prosthetic.
“Thanks.” He lifted the glass slightly in thanks before sipping at it.

She evaluated him with sharp grey eyes. “You have until I finish my drink to convince me this isn't a trap or a waste of my time. Fail, and I'll kill you and dump your body out back.”

The bluntness of her approach was unsurprising, given how she'd spoken to his Masters. He'd had plenty of time to prepare himself while tracking her, and even longer to fully grasp that this was likely to be his only chance. One way or the other, he calculated that he had less than ten standard minutes before he was either starting a brand new life or buying the Depp in an extremely unpleasant and undignified manner.

“I'm a farmer,” he said, going for blunt and broke and praying the strategy worked. “From Sulon.”

Another farm boy. Force preserve me. “Colony moon of Sullust,” she mused, tipping her head to the side thoughtfully and nodding for him to continue.

“Joined the Academy at Carida when my mother died and got offered a 'special assignment' the day I graduated.”

“A special opportunity to serve which of those illustrious brainticks, exactly?”

“Trachta.”

“Ah.” She sipped at her drink. “And you are displeased with the terms of your service?”

“He's a psychotic dwarfnut,” Kyle opined, frankly. “None of the rest are any better. You saw how they are – too wrapped up in their own petty power plays to see what's right in front of their faces.”

“Which is?” She sipped again, slowly, eyes never leaving him.

“Exactly what you told them,” he jabbed the air between them with a still-gloved finger. “The conspiracy to kill the Emperor has a valid purpose but they're not going to pull it off – for all the reasons you so eloquently pointed out and at least a dozen you skipped right over.”

Her lips quirked, clearly recalling the scene they'd both stood in just a few hours earlier. Eloquent wasn't exactly the word she'd have chosen for telling a Moff, two Grand Moffs, and an Imperial General that they had the combined brains of a blister gnat and – if they continued with their sloppily planned little insurrection – about the same life expectancy. Regrettably, they'd been noticeably less receptive to her pitch than the man facing her now, and the whole thing had ended up a bit of a clambake – blaster fire and concussion grenades everywhere – until, from their perspective, she'd simply vanished back into the ether from which she emerged.

“You want to avoid getting carbon flushed when they all get butchered.”

He shook his head, determination pouring off him in the Force, and fixed solemn dark eyes on her. “I want to kill the Emperor – with someone who actually frelling knows how.”

“And who won't turn you over to be mutilated into an Inquisitor when they figure out you're Force sensitive?”

The trooper sucked in a breath and sat back.

“It's all right,” she waved his concern away, taking another sip of her drink. “Your secret is safe with me.”
“You're… the same?” He'd never met another Force user and his heart pounded at the thought that he might, now.

She gave a short, mirthless laugh. “I'm not the same as anyone. But I have friends you'll get along with smashingly.” Her gaze turned measuring. “It will cost you.”

“Anything,” he said immediately. “I've got nothing to lose.”

“My kind of man.” The smile she gave him was was hard-edged but, for the first time, he saw something akin to real kindness in her eyes. “What's your name, trooper?”

“Katarn, Ma'am. What can I call you?”

“Rumor will do, for now. Can you get your hands on a hyperspace capable ship, Katarn?”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

“Good.” Mara leaned forward. “Then here's what you're going to do.”

- -

Leia met Winter in the corridor, both of them striding as fast as they could (without running) toward Teeth's Command Center. According to Han's cryptic comm, he and the Rogues should be coming out of hyperspace with their precious and mysterious cargo any minute.

Madine and (at Han's request) Lando, were already waiting when they got there. Leia couldn't help but notice that it looked like every other person who could find or finagle a reason to be in the Command Center was, too, lining the walls, tucking themselves in out of the way, eager to see what Solo had brought. They didn't have to wait long.

Precisely on projection, the *Falcon* winked out of hyperspace. Leia held her breath as the Rogues snapped into into real space, arrayed around it like an honor guard. She'd only just let her breath out when she sucked it back in with on gasp as another set of ships blossomed into being just above and behind the *Falcon*, flanked on either side by the x-wings.

Madine leaned over the comm and pushed the button. “*Millennium Falcon*, this is *Hell's Teeth*. I see you've acquired some company.”

There was a click, and a light on the comm board indicated they'd switched to an open channel that included both the Rogues and the other small craft. Han's voice, rich and smug, filled the Command Center.

“By your leave, General, I've got four hundred sixty eight newly freed souls here, looking to join the Rebellion against the Empire. They heard a 'Rumor' they could find a home with us.”

Hope rolled off the convoy in fulminant waves, lodging in Leia's chest until she thought it might seize. Luke reached out to her across their bond and she clutched at his sense, steadying herself on his solid presence. At the comm station, Madine seemed no less overcome. The Princess watched him clear his throat and straighten, tugging at the bottom edge of his uniform as if he were about to enter a ceremonious occasion. He cleared his throat again, then spoke loud and clear into the open channel.

“This is General Crix Madine. On behalf of the High Command and all your new comrades-in-arms, welcome to the Alliance to Restore the Republic.”
Han must have clicked something on his end, because the channel erupted with cheers and shouts and the sounds of weeping as the refugees celebrated. Around Leia, the Command Center dissolved into riotous shouts (and more than a few tears) as well.

“Get to your posts!” Madine commanded, turning. “Our new arrivals are going to need our best efforts. Baron Calrission, I believe this is your area of command.”

Lando dipped his head, all excitement and focused energy. “My people will be all over it, General. Can you have the Falcon bring them in to the public access hangars?”

Leia tuned out the rest of what was being said because she realized her link to Luke had altered somehow.

*I wanted Mara to feel this,* he sent in response to her inquiry, his happiness suffuse across their bond. *She reactivated the links she made with me and Corran on Corellia.*

*What about me?* Leia demanded. *Can you pull me in? Can she?*

She felt Luke turn, relay the question, then half turn back to her.

Leia felt the bizarre sensation of something snaking along her bond with Luke – another consciousness piggybacking on their existing link. It reached her and paused just at the edge of her mind, the careful brush identifying it clearly as Mara. Surreal as it felt, Leia reached back for it expectantly, giving wordless but emphatic permission.

A moment later Mara landed squarely in her mental landscape and Leia was vexingly, embarrassingly aware of the maze of walls she'd subconsciously built to keep Vader out and just left there. The way they were streaked with the Force equivalent of carbon scoring from the battle waged for her mind on the Death Star.

She felt a wry quirk that came across something like *you should see mine* – and then Mara was looping what felt like a golden swath of fabric around her, scooping her up and pulling.

Leia gasped and stared, unexpectedly gloriously aware of Luke's shock and utter delight and Corran laughing as clearly as if he were right beside her and not in his cockpit across a wide expanse of open space.

*You finished it?! You finished it and didn't tell me?* Luke's excitement was luminous and spilling over into every corner of their connection, making Leia laugh, too.

*You were busy.* Mara justified, and it was only because of her twin bond to Luke – fully open, and somehow still separate from this larger network they found themselves part of – that Leia caught the self-consciousness beneath the words.

Mara's mental gaze snapped to Leia and the Princess realized she'd been caught. Quickly, she fumbled to reach out in reassurance. *Friends,* she thought, hoping she got the message across and horribly aware that she had no idea how much Mara could see or feel or understand, between her own lack of training and the newness of the bond between them. *Safe.* Accidentally, she also sent something that felt like *I know what it is to not have any idea what you're doing.*

She decided Mara must have isolated their exchange somewhat, because neither of the men in the network responded and she couldn't imagine them *not* if they'd heard.

Instead, Luke was hugging Mara fiercely. *Do you feel this, CorMeum? This is because of you – you*
The words fell off and there was just a stream of abstract ideas like justice and joy and retribution and restitution and, under the rest like the clear, sweet high note of an aria, pure unadulterated happiness.

“Leia?”

Leia jerked out of the link, flinching as the connection broke, and blinked hard until Winter's face came into view.

“Are you all right?” Her foster sister's flawlessly elegant face was close to her own, brow furrowed in worry.

“Yes,” Leia promised, grasping Winter's hand and squeezing hard. “I'll tell you later.”

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“Tatooine.” Ysanne spat the word like a foul taste on her tongue, glaring at the holo map as if it had personally offended her. “Damn Kenobi.”

She's never met the old Jedi, of course, but she'd gleaned enough through the years listening to her Emperor and Vader to decide, scornfully, that this was just the sort of dirty trick he'd play. Hiding away every scrap on information about his life on some Force-forsaken backwater dust bowl of a planet, forcing them to reduce themselves to suffer its indignities if they wanted to learn his dealings during those lost years.

Bastard.

Isard had been born and raised on Coruscant, in the heart of the Core. She could navigate its highest halls of power and the deepest, grimmest levels of the under city with equal ease... but Tatooine was Outer Rim. She might as well banish herself from the galaxy.

But her Emperor had commanded it and so she would go. But Force help any child or apprentice of Kenobi's she found out in those desolate reaches, because she'd love nothing more than a viable target to take out her wrath on... and she hadn't even left her office yet.

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“Commander Skywalker? Captain Horn?”

“Finish the last diagnostic, will you, Artoo?” Luke waited for the cheerful affirmative chirp before clamoring down the ladder from the cockpit of his x-wing. “General?”

“I'm sorry to pull you from your work, but I need you both down on Indigo immediately.”

“Wedge?” Luke called, leaning back to catch his second-in-command's eye and ships and support crew. “Can you run the debrief?”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

After seeing to Whistler and his own x-wing, Corran fell in beside Luke and they jogged down the
“The Rebellion has had several small cells active on Coruscant for years now,” he began. “We had one, in particular, that was working on a special project for us.” He met their attentive faces gravely. “Getting the plans for the Second Death Star.”

Both Rogues stared at him in horror for a moment before finding their voices.

“They're… making another one?” Luke asked, stricken.

“Yes,” Cracken confirmed. “With significantly more security than the last.” He favored them with a brief amused glance. “For understandable reasons.”

“I'm fairly sure I don't really want to know,” Corran said, “but what does this have to do with us – besides the obvious?”

“That cell was murdered recently,” Cracken informed them, grimly. “Or so we thought. Five days ago, one of them – a Bothan by the name of Povetma Lev – turned up at a remote Rebel outpost. It took agents there two days to figure out who he was and forward him here.” His sense turned positively grim. “He's been… traumatized.”

“What kind of trauma, exactly?” Corran's mind was already ticking over with his CorSec training.

“We don't know.”


“Because, lacking any other viable directions, we're hoping you can sense something with the Force that will help. Medically, the scans show anomalies, but we haven't been able to identify them or their cause.”

They mulled that over as they landed on Indigo, where they were ushered directly to med bay. The unconscious Bothan was in a private room, surrounded by softly beeping monitors.

“You ever done anything like this before?” Corran asked Luke.

“Only a little, when Mara got here,” he admitted.

“Here goes nothing, then.”

Both Jedi closed their eyes and reached out toward the spy in the Force.


“I can tell you there's something not right,” Corran shook his head. “But this is way outside my training.” He cleared his throat slightly. “It might not be outside Mara's.”

That was not something Luke wanted to think about. Nor, in present circumstances, was it something he could avoid facing. He reached into himself, to his Mara-place, and tapped lightly at the edges of her sense to catch her attention.

*What's wrong?* She was with him instantly.

He made short work of explaining the situation. *Can you take a look?* He felt her unease clearly.
Luke caught an idea that felt like *invasive* and the discomfiting association it bore to the Emperor's designs on her.

*It won't be like that*, he assured her, quickly. *And if it gets… not okay… you can stop. I'll just tell them it didn't work. But will you give it your best shot for me?*

Something about his phrasing triggered an emotional response that she immediately shuffled away behind a wrinkle of shielding before he could make it out. He felt her straighten up, backbone stiffening, and she nodded.

“I've reached Mara,” Luke told the others. “She's going to see what she can do. Give us a minute.” To Mara, he said, *ready when you are, CorMeum.*

Mara nodded again and took two cautious steps closer. Then, inch by mental inch, she edged closer into his sphere of awareness until it felt like she was leaning close against him, peering over his shoulder. It was… odd, but not bad.

Luke could feel the moment she caught sight of the spy through his physical eyes - the shift as they followed her gaze instead of his own. *That* was alarming but he purposely scaled his reaction back, even as she jerked away, a faintly sick feeling coloring her sense.

*I'm sorry.*

*It's all right*, he soothed. *I just wasn't expecting it. Try again?*

She noticeably braced herself this time before stepping close again. *We need to look inside,* she told him. *If I show you how, will you do it?*

He assented and watched, internally, as she streamed a quick-and-dirty tutorial across their bond. “Right.” Luke inched a little closer to the spy, lifted a hand and rested three fingertips on the Bothan's furry brow. Pulled on the Force as she'd shown him.

“Oh.”

“What is it?” Cracken asked.

“Show me,” Corran asserted.

“CorMeum?”

*Working on it.* There was a pause; then Luke felt the connection shift. Corran came online in Mara's mind, their relative positions rotating slightly as the gyroscope of her power shifted to accommodate. It was beyond fascinating and Luke positively *itched* to get in the same physical space with her so they could explore it more deeply.


“What… is that?” Horn asked aloud.

*Mind smearing.*

“I've never heard of that,” the General said, intrigued.

*There are three ways to alter memory, Mara lectured, pausing for Luke to relay her words to Cracken. Smear, cut, and block. They're pretty much just what they sound like.*

“Why smear?” Cracken inquired shrewdly. “Why not either of the others?”

Mara was silent, the Jedi distinctly aware of her discomfort. Both opted to give her space, waiting patiently as she chose her words.

*It's like burying someone in a shallow grave, she said, finally, reluctantly. Kicking the dirt over top, to hide it from everyone but the Sec agent you want to find it. He... wanted him to reach you, and for you to find it.*

Luke didn't like the sound of that at all.

Horn's CorSec trained mind was already two steps ahead. *He brought us plans for the Second Death Star,* he informed Mara. *A trap.*

*That brainbolted bugslutting mudcrutch!* Mara's fury was scalding and both men cringed back from it, unable to disconnect from the scorching burn.

*Mara, you have to calm down,* Luke said, quick and sternly.

*Calm down! When he's -*

You're hurting us.

The link abruptly went dead, Mara dropping them like she'd been bitten. Both Jedi staggered and Cracken reached to steady them, alarmed.

“It's all right,” Corran assured him, leaning on the wall a moment to get his balance back. “Just growing pains, I think.”

Luke, bent double, hands on his knees while his head stopped spinning, reached back across the bond. Found himself startlingly and unexpectedly perched on a narrow spire rising out of a bottomless abyss.

Mara was there, right in front of him, and he wrapped an arm around her waist to steady himself even as he secured his footing. As he watched, everything inside her - except for the two of them on their ledge - drained in torrential waterfalls, emptying out into nothingness below.

*Mara.* Luke placed his mouth beside her ear to be heard over the noise. *What is this?*

*I didn't mean to hurt you.* She sounded distraught. *I didn't know it would -*

*It's all right.* His arm tightened around her waist, his free hand rising to squeeze her shoulder. *We're fine.*

*It's wrong,* she fretted.

*It was an accident,* he said firmly. *You didn't know. You won't do it again and it'll be fine, right?*

She shuddered in his arms and there was a grinding as the unseen bottom of the cavern resealed itself, her mental landscape shifting back to the pearled channels and swells Luke was accustomed to.
He's waiting for us, she murmured, staring sightlessly ahead. *I took too long and now he's chosen the battlefield. It's a disadvantage.*

*His arrogance will be his undoing,* Luke reassured, feeling the Force in that certainty. *At least now we've got something concrete to plan with.* He felt a tug and quashed his irritation. *I have to go back. Will you be all right?*

She nodded, taking a purposeful but dragging step out of his hold. *You'll tell Corran I didn't… I'm sorry?*

*Of course.* Luke ignored the second tug and reached out to touch her cheek. *You should rest, Mara. We'll see you on Ord Mantell, soon.*

She nodded, eyes still distant and rife with anxiety. *I'll be ready.*
Chapter Summary

Luke and Mara reunite on Ord Mantell. She introduces him to her favorite weapons supplier, he makes her pancakes.

Chapter Notes

Notes: Wookies grooming each other as the highest form of compliment/honor is an actual GFFA thing, as is the annual Blockade Runner's Derby. Also, have some pancakes and fluff before everything gets messy and complicated again!

“You've got the wrong girl.” Mara threw both hands in front of her chest, palms out defensively, and actually took a half step back before she caught herself.

Chewie whuffed, dubiously. //You are not the 'Rumor' who freed Ryanta from Imperial enslavement on Brentaal?//

“That was Mirax's idea.” Furious with herself for having conceded even the tiniest step of ground, Mara planted her feet in the middle of the Falcon's common room and folded her arms, glowering fractiously at the wookie.

“You did not participate at all?// The impudent tone turned serious, his kind, deep-set eyes narrowing in concern. //You are not... badly conditioned to them?//

“Of course not.” Mara bit out, knowing even as she said it that she was 'badly conditioned' to odder things. “But that -,” she pointed accusingly at the hairbrush in the wookie's paw, “is a thing for you, and it wouldn't be right.”

//Grooming another is the highest compliment a wookie can pay,” Chewbacca acceded, solemnly. “And I have promised my life-mate that I will groom you in her stead in gratitude for freeing her sister. I cannot break my vow.// He leaned down to peer at her more closely and said gravely, //she would kill me.//

Mara snorted at that, then pinched the bridge of her nose with a thumb and two fingers. “I didn't do it out of noble ideas. It was just practical. If you want to honor nobility you need to go brush Mirax's hair.”

//Horn will not share her for some time yet, if the levels of pheromones they were both giving off in the hangar was any indication.//

Okay, well, that was true. CorSec had pretty much barreled right off the Falcon and straight into Mirax's waiting arms… and lips. About two standard seconds after that, she’d had her legs locked around his waist while he carried her up the ramp to the Skate, clothing fluttering to the ground in their wake like ticker-tape at an Empire Day parade.
“That doesn't make me an appropriate substitute,” she tried again. Then she flung an arm out, pointing toward the corner where she'd killed Bossk. “You know what I am! What I've done – what I do. Letting you honor me would demean you, and I'm -.”

//Stop talking,// Chewie commanded, //and sit down. The Cub's ship flies much slower than the Falcon. There are several hours yet before he arrives. Plenty of time.//

“But -.”

//I will honor who I wish,// he declared. //And I will keep my vows whether you agree with them or not.//

Mara examined the adamant wookie, the chair, and the hairbrush. “Is that Leia's brush?”

//Yes.//

“At least let me get my own,” she negotiated. “I don't need to demean Leia's things on top of everything else.”

//Sit.//

Evaluating her situation one more time, Mara found no help for it. She sat. Chewie rumbled approvingly. Setting the brush on the console nearby, he slid a claw under her hair tie, adeptly tugging it off. Carefully setting it, too, aside, he began to tug apart her simple, serviceable braid.

Mara closed her eyes, tamping down on her agitation. This was a miscarriage of the wookie's sacred honor – she was not a thing to be venerated. But he'd given his word; refusing him would cause him just as much shame in his mate's eyes as hers saw in allowing it.

“I didn't know you had a wife,” she said, searching for distraction.

//Malla,// Chewie's voice was doting. //She is the heart of my heart.// He curved a claw through her hair, neatly separating a lock and sliding his paw down to grasp the end of it. He applied the soft-bristled brush gently, working his way up the strand, smoothing it patiently in small sections.

“Tell me about her.”

//She is very strong,// Chewie said, proudly. //She is a teacher and caregiver in the nursery ring of our clan - a place of honor and a high calling. She and my father are raising our cub to be a fine warrior.//

“You have a youngling?”

The wookie's touch was steady and gentle – a stark contraposition to the hundreds of times she'd been made up for an Imperial event. She'd made a point of doing for herself as much as she could but, when a State event required preparations she was not equipped to do alone, she'd been assigned a small cell within the Courtesans' wing and several of their staff staff estheticians to attend to her. Her presence there was clear indication that she belonged to the Emperor in some fashion, but the irregularity of it kept her from being considered part of their trusted inner circles. Nervous and resentful of her unwelcome intrusion, they prioritized getting their work finished and her out of their private space over the comfort and pleasantness of her experience. They were never intentionally cruel, of course; nor careless in attention to detail on their assigned tasks – either would have risked punishment. But their haste made them swift and brusque. Her mind had usually been full of other things – mission objectives, Intelligence reviews, or other, larger worries – but she had clear memories of the unpleasantness of the encounters as they yanked, twisted, plaited and painted her hair and features into an art piece compliant with the instructions they'd been given.
This was another kettle of Giju, entirely.

///A son,” Chewie rumbled, proudly. ///Lumpy./// He made a soft, fond sound. ///He grows too quickly, Malla says. She cannot wait for Han and his Princess to make younglings for her to spoil.///

The brush dragged long, slow, and smooth through her hair, a pleasant scrape and tug as it trailed across her scalp, then out and down across the length he held in his furry palm. As each section reached the texture of satin, he reverently set it aside and selected another one, beginning again. The patient, rhythmic motions were mysteriously soothing and that ache was back – the one she'd felt in the Resolute just after she'd completed her sphere.

///You should let Luke do this for you,// Chewie opined.

“He doesn't have time,” she replied, automatically.

///He will make it,/// the wookie assured her. ///Males will always make time to pet their females.///

Not all of them, Mara thought. Still, the thought lodged soundly in her brain.

///Shall I braid for you?///

“That isn't necessary.”

He ignored her, humming happily to himself as he worked her hair into a series of complicated looped plaits. ///There.// He stepped back, pleased. ///When the Cub is jealous, tell him I will teach him how to do this.///

“Right.” Mara was past arguing. Turning, she said, awkwardly, “thank you. I think.” Her face twisted in a moue of concern. “You won’t… tell anyone, will you? I don’t want them to think -.”

The wookie huffed pleasantly. “Be at peace, Little One. You secret is safe with me.”

Luke drew on hazardously frayed reserves of never-abundant patience as he crabbed the x-wing a few degrees to port in accordance with Artoo's quickly trilled course correction. The traffic streaming in and out of the Worlport continent was always massive. Today, a week out from the annual free-for-all ceremoniously dubbed the Blockade Runner's Derby, the space lanes were thronged to capacity. That was intentional, of course. The more ships there were, the less likely anyone was to notice a few false transponder codes and dinged-up old Rebellion ships amid the hubbub.

Academically, Luke understood and appreciated the wisdom of the trip's timing. In the moment, however, his valiant efforts to contain his antsy anticipation were proving barely adequate to the task of tolerating the relative crawl he'd been forced to slow to as they dropped through the first layers of the thick, outer cometary cloud that shrouded Ord Mantell.

Mara's down there.

Their bond's 'homing beacon', which had for so long now been stretched far and thin, was folding and collapsing in on itself as the distance between them closed. Every crease was a pronged stab, half sweet promise of wholeness another step closer and half ratcheting agony as he was that much closer and she was still out of reach – occluded behind soft shielding, maintaining her maddening instance on not talking to him while he was flying unless it was an emergency.

His navigation display pinged, alerting him that they'd entered their final approach. Artoo bleeped
that the necessary confirmation codes had been sent and acknowledged and they were cleared to land. The ship sloughed off speed as they shed altitude. Ahead, the vast overhead doors of the hangar Mara had rented were yawning open. A solid, flat ceiling – some kind of enclosure – occupied the front left corner of the recessed interior. The Falcon was docked in the back right of the space from Luke's vantage point; in front of it was what looked like a Headhunter. In the back left corner, as promised, was the spot cleared for him. With the innate ease of a born pilot and Force-augmented grace, Luke feathered the fighter precisely into place, hydraulics hissing and popping as it settled on its struts.

He'd startled unbuckling the straps that held him in place with one hand the second the ship had touched ground. The instant he hit the first of the shut-down switches, Mara's shields fell away, her presence blossoming vividly to life inside him.

Whole, he thought, the rush of it like a physical high as the empty spaces within him where she belonged refilled to the brim with the sweet fire of her essence in the Force.

Snatching his helmet off and tossing it on the console, Luke didn't wait for the shut-down cycle to finish. Instead, he popped the hatch and vaulted up and over the side of the ship, his boots hitting the ground with a solid slap, despite his use of the Force to soften his landing.

For all her shielding, she'd obviously been waiting – a realization that made his heart thrill – because she was right there. Three swift steps and he was sweeping her into a hug, pulling her body to his as fervently as he wound himself around her gloriously bright, opalescent Force sense. Unprepared for the enthusiasm of his greeting she floundered a moment, then relaxed slightly against him, her fingers curling into the front of his jacket, her head easing forward until it rested cautiously against his shoulder.

“CorMeum.” Luke breathed her in and risked dropping a kiss on her hair before pulling back, grinning from ear to ear. “You're beautiful.”

Her nose scrunched and she looked at him inquisitively, befuddlement coloring her sense. “You like the braids? Or the outfit?”

Luke glanced over her simple attire – cargo pants and a long-sleeved tunic – and lifted a hand to finger her complex hairstyle. “Those, too,” he laughed. “But I meant this.” His sense brushed against her sphere and she could feel his wonder at the luminescent orb.

“Oh. I… that's... good.” There was a flash of surprised self-consciousness and then it was gone, whisked away and replaced with a brisk, business-like demeanor. “I need to go re-close the dome. You should get Artoo down.”

“Sure.”

Now that they were together Luke felt no compunction to rush or push. He turned back to the ship, using the Force to levitate both Artoo and his traveling bag down to the ground. Overhead, the blast-resistant dome ground shut, locking with a prodigious clang. With the late afternoon sun and the planet's two always-visible moons shut out, the low, wide hangar was dim; strips of utilitarian lighting snapped on along the walls about waist-height, bringing the space to a comfortably mild level of illumination.

His wheels finally on the durcrete floor, Artoo zipped off in the direction Mara had gone, tootling excitedly. Luke shouldered his bag and followed, unable to stop smiling.

“Yes, of course I've got codes for you,” she was assuring the bleeping and burbling astromech when
he caught up. “They're up there.”

Artoo rotated his blue dome toward Luke. //You are coming?//

“Yes,” he agreed, amused. “I'm coming.”

Mara rolled open the grate to an ancient-looking cage-style lift and waited while Artoo rolled inside. “You riding with him?”

Luke eyed the contraption and shook his head. “I'll take the stairs.”

She pulled the gate shut, hitting a button so worn its original markings were impossible to make out. “Me, too.”

The metal-grating stairs were shallow and narrow and they moved up them at a quick clip, meeting Artoo at the top and letting him out onto the small, empty landing. Mara tapped a code into the key pad beside a dented and peeling armored blast door.

“Code is herf-krill-forn-thesh-one-seven-wesk-nine,” she told them. The door slotted back impressively quietly for its bulk and Luke followed her inside. “There's a data port over there,” she indicated a nook in the wall to the droid, who eagerly rolled over and promptly plugged in. Mara headed in the other direction. “Caff?”


The left hand wall featured a row of nearly floor-to-ceiling reinforced transparisteel windows overlooking the majority of the hangar. At his back, the wall to the left of the door featured a long narrow work table-cum-desk; to the right was a compact galley-style kitchenette. Behind that were two back-to-back sleeping alcoves, each host to a modest bed and afforded a modicum of privacy by heavy drapes mounted on a sliding rail. In the furthest back corner an open door revealed a tiny fresher. The rest of the space was one large room with modular seating and a single expansive table in the center. The furniture had all seen better days, but seemed sturdy and pragmatic.

“It belongs to a friend of Grandfather's. He's renting it to me for the week.”

Luke watched Mara methodically start a pot of caff, eyes studiously trained on her task. He felt a sliver of awkwardness across the bond, then the firm flex of resolve.

“I've arranged rooms for the others not far from here,” she told him, her tone purposeful and professional. “But I thought…,” her fingers clutched the box of caff grounds so tightly her knuckles went white. “I thought maybe you could stay here with me. There's so much to cover -,” she rushed on. “You don't have to, but -.”

“I'd love to stay here.”

Mara's grip on the box relaxed and relief flowed off her. “The second alcove is yours. Everything's clean. Karrde takes good care of his property, apparently.”

“Karrde?” Luke called back as he moved just far enough into the space to toss his bag onto the bed in the nook that would be his.

“Grandfather's friend.”

“Right.” Luke headed back towards the kitchenette. “Speaking of friends, where's Mirax?”
Skate's docked a couple blocks over.” The caff pot beeped and Mara pulled two fat, insulated mugs off hooks set in the galley wall. “She and Corran will probably emerge about the time Cracken gets here. If they can still move by then.”


“Once she got over wanting to kill everyone, she missed him too.” Pouring thick, deliciously dark brew into each mug, Mara carried one over and handed it to him.

“Thanks. Han and Chewie?”

Mara headed for a pouf couch near the wall of windows. “They got a lead on some hard-to-find spare part for the Falcon and wanted to scoop it up before the vendor realized what he had. They should be back soon.”

Luke trailed her, picking a form lounger kiddy-corner to her seat to sink into. He couldn't keep himself from feeling gently along the edges of her sphere, fascinated by its soft sheen. There was a resonance to it, like a song heard from distance. Melodic, but indistinct.

“You can look right at it, you know.” Mara's eyes dropped to her caff and stayed there.


“It's part of your reality now, too,” she said, still keeping her tone carefully even. “Wanting to examine it is natural.”

That… wasn't right. “I don't want to examine you,” he corrected, gently. “Just… to see you.”

She nodded but didn't look up, her posture still too posed for comfort.

“It doesn't have to be now,” he pointed out. “There'll be time later.” Luke paused a heartbeat, a stab of anxiety driving into his ribs. “You are coming back with me, aren't you?” Mara nodded and the horrible tension eased in Luke's chest eased.

“I promised -.” She broke off, eyes remaining fixed on her mug, body locked in place, and Luke felt a distinct tug-of-war between unease and determination in her sense over the shields she was obviously straining to keep at their minimum standard level. “I've got some things that have to be done here, first. I'm meeting a supplier tonight.”

“And the Rogues come tomorrow,” Luke agreed. “You got the update that Winter can't join them?”

“She and Leia were sent on a diplomatic mission to the Hapes Consortium,” Mara confirmed. “They were a good choice to send.”


“Hapes is an extremely matriarchal culture,” Mara explained, taking another sip of caff. “They value beauty and power above all else. I doubt anyone but your sister and Winter could keep up with them and their machinations.”

“That doesn't sound like fun,” Luke wrinkled his nose. “But I suppose they won't mind – they're both amazing at that sort of thing.”

Mara's comm chose that moment to chirp and she fished it off her belt. Read the text message and rolled directly into an all-business mode. “I need to go,” she informed him, rising. “My supplier is
ready.” She headed for the galley to drop her mug.


“Artoo, can you watch the place?”

The droid chirped a happy affirmative and Mara strode across the room to pat his domed head. “We'll be back in a couple hours. Nobody in or out, all right? You found the defense grid?”

The droid warbled, pleased by the resources available to him. Mara turned to Luke. “You should conceal the light saber,” she warned. “We want to be inconspicuous.”

“Of course.” Luke ducked into his assigned sleeping alcove and pulled a jacket from his bag. Plucking the light saber off his belt, he secured it inside his jacket, then zipped it up, effectively hiding the weapon from view.

Mara swirled a cloak around herself, eyed him up and down critically and apparently decided he’d do. “All right, let's go.”

Three blocks away from the hangar a speeder swung up beside them, Han and Chewie in the front and a handful of servomotors that looked like they might belong to a set of alluvial dampers on the floorboards of the back seat.

“Got your comm signal,” Han said as they climbed into the back. “Where to?”

“Spaceport we docked at last time we were here,” she instructed. “We'll park there and walk the rest of the way.”

“I will stay here,” Chewie advised when they parked. “With the damper motors, the speeder is an attractive target.”

“We won't be long,” Mara promised, drawing up the hood of her cloak and enveloping herself completely in its soft grey folds. “This contact knows me as Celina Marniss,” she told Han and Luke as they wove their way between other parked vehicles toward the exit to the main street. “A freelance security expert and black nerf of a well-to-do Mid Rim family. He's gotten me some very specialty items over the years.”

There was a fond hue to her thoughts that captured Luke's interest. “You like him. Trust him.”

She shot a quick glance left at him. “He made my holdout.”

“Yeah?” Han's brows went up.

“I could have had the Imperial Armory make it but then they'd have had access to my design. So I shopped around.” She frowned at the memory. “It's a pain in the choobies to get anyone to take you seriously about that kind of thing when you're that young, regardless of the size of your credit line.” Her expression smoothed out. “Odiorti was the only one who treated me like an adult, guaranteed the confidentiality of my design, and convinced me that he could make it to my specifications. Once I saw the end result, he had a customer for life. Here we go.”

There didn't seem to be any markings or indicators that Luke could see, but Mara confidently turned them into a featureless alley and then stopped in front of an unmarked storefront. The sign on the door read closed, but she rapped out a short, complicated code with one knuckle. A few seconds
later there was a buzz and a pop and the door unlatched. Grabbing the handle, she pulled it open and they followed her inside.

“Celina! Welcome back, my dear!” The happy call came from the back of the space and Mara headed toward it, returning the greeting with a pleased tone.

“Alpheratz.”

Luke blinked at Mara's unexpected (and flawless) Ishorian accent, which contrasted disconcertingly with the sincerity of her smile. Beside him, Han's eyes widened in appreciation, darting side to side rapidly as they made their way up a narrow isle. Luke could all but hear him making a mental wish list as every over-stuffed shelf proffered yet another shiny, extremely dangerous enticement. If Luke had been asked to design Mara's favorite store from scratch, he couldn't have done better than this, he thought.

They emerged into a narrow cleared space where the main shop counter was. The Diamal in front of it eyed the men suspiciously. “You've brought company.”

Luke felt the wariness in the other being, watched the way he positioned himself defensively – and realized he was doing it in potential defense of Mara, in case she was being used or threatened. He liked the man instantly.

“Friends,” Mara stated firmly. “This is Captain Jones,” she waved at Han.

“Indy,” Han stepped forward and shook the dealer's hand firmly.

“And this,” she indicated Luke, “is my CorUnum.”

Luke was too happy to be identified as hers to think of being insulted that she hadn't invented a name for him.

“Traveling with friends and you've scaled your requisitions list, again,” the Diamal chuckled, lifting the hinged portion of his counter and waving them back. “Your last mission went well, I take it?”

“Smooth as the surface of a neutron star,” she concurred, stepping through the now-open section and motioning the others to follow.

The shopkeeper herded them into his back room and Luke tensed slightly as he heard a series of locks, then relaxed as Mara sent a touch of reassurance. Standard security measure.

Right.

Odiorti began entering a series of codes into a built-in safe on the right wall. “They aren't new, I'm afraid,” he warned, turning the handle and opening the heavy door. “But they appear to be in excellent condition.” The lock beeped and he removed a small pouch. Luke sucked in a breath at the hum of power it emitted. The Diamal looked up sharply.

“My CorUnum is an expert,” Mara inclined her head in his direction. “He… has a sense for this sort of thing.”

“Of course,” Odiorti accepted the explanation with a flick of his ears and motioned them to a viewing table. Clicking on the bright, jeweler-quality lights, he eased the pouch's contents out into view. Four small, colorless, intricately patterned crystals dropped onto a velvet-lined pad. All three of them moved closer and Luke caught his breath again, his eyes riveted of their own will to two of them. He reached out instinctively, stopping only at the last second. “May I?”
“Certainly.”

Oblivious to everyone’s fascinated attention, Luke picked up the two that had caught his attention. “Ohhh…” They began to turn warm in his hand, a soft harmonic tone whispering across his ears. “These two,” he blinked, breaking the spell and looking up at Han. “You want these two.”

Odiorti looked both pleased and curious. “If I might inquire, why those? They look the same as the others.”

They’re…” the Jedi looked for way to describe the blank-slate purity of the tiny treasures he held in his palm. “Pristine.”

“I’ll take ‘em,” Solo said, immediately.

Something dark and unwelcome curled in Mara's stomach. Not shame, exactly, but… inadequacy, maybe. Self-derision. Just a few comm calls and a little patience and she'd managed to procure flawless stones for Leia - for a saber she'd learn to use simply on principle. Luke's saber was a part of him and stocked with twice-pre-owned crystals, heavy with baggage.

*You should have tried,* she berated herself. *Even when he said he didn't want new ones. You should have known better. Lazy. Sloppy.*

Luke's free hand caught hers and she was humiliated to realized he'd picked up on her thoughts – the theme at least, if not the words.

“These are perfect for her,” he said, low but absolutely certain. “And mine are perfect for me.” He waited until she gave a small nod before his eyes flicked back to the other two crystals. “Those…” he cocked his head, frowning at the other two as he felt a tick in the Force. “Are meant for someone else.”

The tick came again, more insistent this time, and Mara started slightly. A look of surprise crossed her face, then an expression that fell somewhere between satisfaction and exasperation. “Katarn.”

“What?” Han asked.

Mara waved the question away. “We'll take all of them – just bill them to my account,” she told the Diamal. “Can you bag them separately for me?”

The shopkeeper hummed an affirmative, quickly bustling the two sets of stones into different pouches, which he presented to Mara. She prompted tossed Leia's stones to Han. The others she slipped into her cloak. “Just the easy stuff left, then.”

“Only you would consider it such, my dear.” Alpheratz shook his head, bemused.

“And you,” she returned, raising an eyebrow.

He waved a hand as if to dismiss her praise, though Luke could feel his pride. “I dabble.”

“Mmm,” she agreed, producing a data chip from somewhere and sliding it across the viewing table to him. “This is the transfer information for the ion cannon and turbo-lasers.” She added a credit chip. “This will cover all the transportation costs and the brokering fee. Booster will be here next week to collect.”

*An ion cannon?*! Luke worked to keep his expression blank but internally he was giving Mara an incredulous stare.
She shot him a confused look in return. *The Errant Venture has a spot for it – they come standard on SD's.*

*That's not... never mind.*

“I have your Braxxon-Fipps at my warehouse,” Alpheratz informed her. “Where shall I send it, and when?”

Mara handed over another two chips. “Delivery there, day after tomorrow, please. Pass codes are in there. And payment in full, as promised.”

“Buyin' a power generator?” Han asked, curiously.

“Brokered delivery of the blaster cannon from Sena's boss.”

The name didn't mean anything to Luke but, since Han understood, he assumed it must have been related to their time on the Venture.

“Oh, right. The Fusion-X he promised you.”

“And some additional parts,” Odiorti reminded them. “I'll send you the standard text signal before I arrive.”

“Excellent.”

Business concluded, Alpheratz ushered them back out front. As Mara swirled her cloak back around herself in preparation to leave he asked, “is the new account number you sent to become the primary? Or just a secondary?”

“Primary,” Mara confirmed. “But keep the old account information, too. I might still tap into it once or twice.”


- -

After dropping Luke and Mara off at the hangar, Han and Chewie decided to go out for the night. Ostensibly they had a hankering to do some gambling; with the Derby approaching, the tables were sure to be full and the takes should be generous. Luke was fairly sure the larger goal was to give him some alone time with Mara, and he was grateful.

“My turn to make caff?” Luke suggested, heading for the galley when Solo and the wookie had left.

“Sure.” Mara sat down to take her boots off, then stood to carry them to her sleeping alcove.

Luke opened a cupboard to pull out the caff and was pleased to find it well stocked with foodstuffs. “Are you hungry?” he called to Mara while portioning out the caff.

“We should probably eat,” she allowed, reappearing. “I have ration bars, or we can order in.”

“There's plenty of food here,” Luke gestured to the cabinet as he put the box back.

“You don't want me to try to cook,” she said, firmly. “I'm not domestic. At all.”

He grinned at her. “I can cook for us, if you want.”
Incredulity colored her sense. “You can?”

“Not gourmet,” he clarified, quickly. “But good enough. What do you say?”

“All right.”

“Here,” Luke patted the end of the counter. “Sit with me.”

She looked between him and the counter. “You're... serious?”

“Yes,” he said, firmly, wrapping shields around his mirth; she'd surely be offended if she caught how adorably and suspiciously confused she looked at the suggestion. “Aunt Beru always said dinner goes twice as quick when you've company while you're making it.”

“Company that can prep for you.”

“No,” he countered, pointing to the spot he'd indicated again. “Just someone to talk to.”

To Luke's surprise and pleasure, that seemed to be the right thing to say, because she boosted herself onto the counter without further protest.

For lack of anything else to do with them, Mara curled her fingers around the edge of the counter as she watched him – now glowing contentedly in the Force – bustle around the compact space. Food prep might have been outside her otherwise sprawling skill sets but conversation, at least, she knew she could do. She'd had extensive training on dialog of every kind, from elite garden-party small talk to interrogation procedures to Intelligence techniques for chatting up any random being in any situation to elicit desired information while leaving them none the wiser.

“Can I ask you something?” Luke selected a skillet and set it on the heater coil.

“That would fall under the general practice of talking,” she pointed out dryly, “which I already agreed to.”

He shot her a crooked grin and pulled a couple boxes and bottles from various shelves. “How are you paying for all this?”

“The food came with the hangar as part of the standard rental agreement.”

“No,” he rolled his eyes at her. “I mean, all of this. The weapons, the hangar, the Headhunter. Where are the credits coming from?”

“I maintain diversified income streams,” she said, crisply, marginally insulted that he'd expect anything less from her. “All good operatives do. It's just best practice.”

“So you're not going to tell me?” He measured ingredients into a bowl and rummaged for a spoon.

The caff pot beeped. Mara huffed and slid off the counter, reaching past Luke to procure mugs and pour for them both. Setting his near where he was working, she took hers and climbed back into her spot before answering. “I rerouted the personal fortunes of the targets I've eliminated since Corellia through a series of back channels and into an operating fund for myself.”

“Really?” Luke looked up, startled. Mara braced herself for censure but got instead only a sense that he was impressed. “That's clever.”

Oh. Reassured by his acceptance of that, she ventured cautiously, “I also have access to a couple Imperial Intelligence accounts, still, as well. They were shared by a handful of deep-cover agents, so
they don't get audited very often. I should be able to keep pulling on them until we kill the Emperor.” A thought occurred to her. “Do you need credits?”

“Me? No.” Luke shook his head and dropped a glop of batter on the skillet with a sizzle. “The Alliance supplies the basics, and we never had much when I was growing up so I never developed a taste for luxuries.” He licked some stray batter off a finger, then took a swig of caff. “I've been saving up my credits to buy something for Leia's birthday, though. She's got more refined tastes, being a princess and everything. That reminds me – I have something for you.”

“You do?”

“A shirt. To replace the one of Corran's that Mirax loaned you.”

Mara nodded and rubbed a thumb on the side of her mug nervously before she caught herself and irritably banished the movement. While they were on the subject… She watched Luke prod the bubbling food, then run a spatula underneath it and flip it cleanly with a fresh sizzle.

“Are you still in the same rooms on Teeth?”

“Yeah.” He flipped another flatcake, smiling when he found the underside the perfect shade of golden brown. “Everything's pretty much just how you left it. Except for all the reorganization of the Rogues, of course.”

“Do you… have company, often?”

“No.” Luke took another swig of his caff and pulled a couple finished cakes off the griddle, plopping new gobs of batter in their places. “Mostly everybody hangs out in Leia's quarters, or the lounge, or the hangar, or the training room. If we can find time to hang out at all, anyway. You've been keeping us pretty busy.” He glanced up with a smile, but it slid into concern when he caught her expression. “What is it?”

“That wasn't the kind of company I meant.”

He waited, but she didn't clarify and he didn't catch on. “What did you mean?” he prompted, finally.

“Do you take lovers back to your room?” Mara made herself ask bluntly, her stomach knotting tensely as she waited for the answer.

The question sent Luke's expression hurtling from confusion to something akin to horror. “No! Of course not. I -.” He stopped, put spatula and mug down, and went to her. Hovered a moment, unsure of where it was safe to put his hands, before finally cupping them around hers over her mug. “I thought we talked about this.” His eyes searched her face. “I belong to you, Mara.”

“We did,” she acknowledged, trying to will her heart back to its normal rhythm from the rapid pace it had kicked up to when he touched her. “But I didn't want to assume… We haven't set terms yet -.”

“Yours,” Luke interrupted, firmly. “Those are the terms, CorMeum. Just yours. Shavit!” He dropped her hands and whirled away, darting back to the heating coil to rescue his flatcakes as the smell of something just on the edge of scorching reached his nose.

Mara watched him, something alien inside her warming at his intense concentration, the sincerity with which he promised her all of himself. She was broken, so horribly broken, and he knew. And he promised anyway. “I thought,” she made herself say, while his attention was still fixed on the food, while she wasn't caught under that too-insightful blue gaze, “that I could stay with you, when we get back.”
Luke pulled the last of the flatcakes off and onto a plate and flicked off the heating coil. “You already said you – wait.” His head snapped up, hope rioting inside him. “You mean… move in with me?”

Was that the Rebellion phrase? Or was it an Outer Rim phrase? Mara wasn't sure – only that it didn't match any of the verbage she'd known in Imperial circles. “Live in your quarters,” she clarified. “Like Solo lives in Leia's when he's not traveling. If -.”

“Yes.” Luke was back in front of her in a flash. “Yes, you should absolutely move in with me.” His left hand came up to cup her cheek, his right falling to her hip. Mara willed herself not to tense. She thought Luke must have caught it because, while he didn't remove his hand, something in his eyes softened. “I won't ask for anything, CorMeum,” he promised, gently. “Not until you're ready, all right?”

She nodded. Cleared her throat. “We should eat, before the food gets cold.”


“I don't know,” she admitted, sliding off the counter and collecting both their mugs as he collected the plate of flatcakes and two others. “I've seen stormtroopers eat them with grum, but grum's never agreed with me.”

“I don't think grum agrees with anyone,” Luke laughed, following her out to the large table in the main room. “We'll try Tatooine style – fewer dishes to wash. Hang on.” He disappeared back into the galley, then reappeared with a bowl of mixed dried fruit. “Here.” Sitting down beside her, he dropped a flatcake on each of their plates. “Like this.”

Mara watched as he made a neat line of dried fruit down one side of the flatcake, then efficiently rolled it into a spiraled cone. Diligently, she copied his method.

“Eat it from the wide end,” he advised. “It keeps the fruit in.”

Duly noted, she followed his lead and found that he was correct. “These are very good,” she admitted, helping herself to another. “Why -,” she stopped, suddenly aware that her question might not be appropriate.

“What is it?”

Mara felt a nudge, an it's okay, you can ask me anything reassurance across the bond. “Why do Rebel men know how to cook?”

“Why?” Luke laughed this time. “You mean other than because we like to eat?”

“Solo knows,” Mara tried to explain herself. “And he says Wedge and Corran can, too. You can.” She frowned, thinking. “But Mirax can't. Can Leia?”

“No.” Luke almost choked in his hurry to answer. “Leia's not allowed – she'll set the entire station on fire trying to make toast. Winter, too.”


“You wanted to learn?”
She shook her head, then shrugged. “Not exactly. I didn't really get to want things, ever, except for rudimentary things like wanting pain to stop, or sleep, or not to fail so I wouldn't get punished.” Mara took another cake, lining up her fruit with far more attention to detail than necessary to avoid the compassionate gaze resting on her. “I asked once, though. If I was going to learn to cook as part of my training.”


“All you have to know is how to steal and kill,” Mara quoted her trainer. She could still picture his darkly scowling face as he said it. “Steal food or steal money to buy it, or kill someone and take theirs. It made sense at the time.” She looked at the flatcake she held. “But it seems… off, now.”

Luke's heart ached for her. “It might have seemed logical to them,” he offered, kindly. “They had funds and power. Most of the people who ended up in the Rebellion couldn't afford chef droids. And they didn't necessarily have other people to cook for them at all.”

“So Solo never had anyone.” Mara recalled what she knew from Solo's Imperial file and what little he'd told her of his life pre-Rebellion.

“He's also Corellian,” Luke pointed out, swallowing the last of his flatcakes. “As a culture, they're pretty family oriented, so family meals are a big deal. Everybody pitches in, everybody learns to cook some. At least that's how Wedge tells it.”

“But Mirax can't and she's Corellian,” Mara pointed out.

“Her father is Booster Terrick,” Luke laughed. “Nobody but you and Rostek want to give him access to or excuse to touch anything flammable or otherwise dangerous unless they absolutely have to.” Mara pursed her lips, about to protest, but Luke continued quickly. “On Tatooine, life was precarious. You were never guaranteed to have each other from day to day.” A sadness washed across his sense. “So everyone learned to be as self-sufficient as possible. Just in case.”

“It served you well,” Mara noted, then cringed a little at herself. “Sorry.”

“You're not wrong,” he allowed, tracing abstract designs on the tabletop with a finger. “My Aunt and Uncle were determined to make sure I’d be okay if something happened to them. They succeeded. That has to count for something.”

“They didn't trust Kenobi to care for you?” Mara asked, curiously.

“I don't think they thought he was particularly able to care for himself.”

“He was a Jedi,” Mara tipped her head in thought. “Mirax says none of us can be left to ourselves.”

“Good thing we've got each other, then.” Luke's eyes flicked up to hers, utterly earnest.

Mara's heart did a bizarre sort of flutter that she'd never experienced before and she locked down on it before panic could set in, sealing it in a box she could examine and deal with later. “Only if you stay in charge of cooking,” she told Luke with a totally straight face. “Because otherwise we're living on ration bars the rest of our lives.”

---

Wedge skillfully navigated the Ready or Not through frothy pink cloud columns, unperturbed by the almost complete lack of visibility. Years of flying for the Rebellion had honed his already keen piloting skills to a razor's edge; maneuvering the innocuous but well-equipped Taylander shuttle...
through established space lanes (while not being shot at, no less) was practically a vacation.

“It's like flying through a puff of spun-sucrea carnival candy,” Hobbie remarked from the co-pilot's seat.

“I was getting more of a Neimoidian Gnatfizz vibe,” Iella commented.

“Carbonated bug guts?” Klivian made a gagging noise. “Who even tries making a drink out of something like that, anyway?”

“Didn't you have a plot to make smoothies for Gold Squadron out of wampa spit, at one point?” Tycho asked, mildly. Having done his leg of flying through the Celanon Spur - clogged with spillover from the badly disrupted Hydian and Perlemian super-hyperroutes – he was happy to be lounging a few seats back beside Wes, now.

“That was justified!” Janson piped up. “They started it with -.”

“Shut up,” Wedge ordered, tilting the shuttle another few degrees as they approached their designated landing pad. “We're here.”

Antilles settled the shuttle tidily into slot at the modest but respectable spaceport they'd been directed to. While he and Klivian oversaw shut down, Madine took the lead on double-checking everything else was ready to go. Everyone was eager to move and they were disembarking in record time. Dressed in casual civvies, they left the ship in twos and threes, filtering into the crowd and heading west, following the directions Han had given them.

The *Naughty Nerf* cantina was exactly where Solo had promised and the Rogues drifted into seats at various tables ordering drinks ranging from Lum to stim tea to sip at while they waited. They killed time chatting aimlessly – mostly about the Derby, which wouldn't attract any attention from passersby should they be overheard.

They only had to cool their heels about ten minutes before Han swung through and collected half of them. Another five minutes and Chewie picked up the rest. A brief walk down the packed, noisy thoroughfare and they were all meeting up at the entrance to one of the most garishly lit, glitzy exteriors on the strip.

“This is where we're staying?” Wes laughed, tipping his head back to stare up at the elaborately arched ceilings of their new temporary digs in merriment. “Really?”

“Yes,” Han confirmed. “Welcome to the *Last Card* Casino and Resort.”

“This was Rumor's doing?” Crix chuckled as Hobbie and Wes animatedly discussed plans for their down time in light of this unexpectedly delightful development.

“She'd never admit it,” Han said, low enough that only Madine could hear, “but I think she's a little anxious about making a good impression. Thought softening 'em up a bit first might help.”

“What makes you think you're going to have downtime?” Tycho was ribbing his squad mates as they reached their assigned rooms and Han doled out passkeys. “I, for one, was actually listening during the briefing, and it sounded like we've got a busy couple days.”

“You do,” Han put in, motioning them all inside one of the rooms. “Since I know none of you lugs ever bothers to read the stuff Winter gives you,” - there were protests from Wes and Hobbie - “here's the plan. The casino runs shuttles to local points of interest every fifteen minutes. Four at a time, you're going to hop on Shuttle Aleph Seven and ride it till it's last stop. Get off, go one block east.
Artoo’ll be hangin’ out at the door and let you in. Once everybody's there, the fun starts. Got it?"

“I assume Iella, Crix and I can go in the first group?” Cracken inquired.

“Yeah,” Han confirmed, then turned to the rest. “An' listen to me. There's gonna be interesting stuff in that hangar, but if it ain't yours, don't touch it or Mara'll chop off your fingers and feed 'em to the least pleasant local wildlife she can find.”

“What if we touch it with our toes, instead?” Wes asked, seriously.

Han grinned. “Make sure you do it while I'm around so I can watch.”

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Luke watched, mystified and worried, as Iella and Mara prowled around each other with the leery caginess of hungry vornskyr for a solid ten minutes. Then, rather abruptly and without clear cause as far as he could tell, they mutually decided that they were, in fact, long-lost nest-fellows. In the space of a blink, the mood in the room sling-shotted from high-voltage tension to wickedly delicious devilry.

Han stepped cautiously back into the room, half-expecting to find every available surface painted in blood-spray. He blinked a few times, just to reassure himself that he was, in fact, seeing the two women bent, heads together, over a holo-map display, conversing in rapid-fire, heavily-explicative-laden Corellian.


“Right.” Han scanned the room again. “Think it's safe for Crix and Cracken to come back in?”

“Yes.” Mara pointed to a spot on the map and spoke without looking up. “We need Crix to confirm a detail over here.”

“Comin' right up.” Han glared at Luke and hissed. “Don't you dare teach Leia that 'enhanced hearing' shavit, understand?”

“Tell that to Mara, not me,” Luke shot back in a fierce whisper, following him back out to the landing.

There was a trill of warning from below and the gathered Rebels all instinctively reached for their weapons, spinning toward Artoo as he rolled in through the service door. A human male swathed in a dark cloak with a beat-up duffel over one shoulder followed, then came to a jolting stop when he saw the collected party. Slowly, he lifted his hands, empty palms up and out.

“I'm here by invitation,” he told them, steadily.

“And you are?” Airen Cracken wanted to know.

“Katarn.” Mara's voice came from behind Luke as she strode out of the apartment, Iella on her heels. Luke felt the man relax as Mara appeared at the railing. Then realized that wasn't the only thing he felt. “He's -,” he started to say.

“Force sensitive, I know.” Mara stopped at the head of the stairs and gestured to Luke. “Katarn, meet my Farmboy – one of those friends I told you you'd get along with. Everything go to plan?”

“Yes, Ma'am.”
“Good, then get up here. You're just in time for the fun to start.”
“Your Highness.” Respectful and brisk, the pilot's words issued from the concealed speaker a few inches from where Leia sat. “We should be cleared for landing in approximately six minutes.”

The reply button was not-quite-hidden behind a fake (but lovely) potted plant; Emissary-class shuttles went to great lengths to feel upper-crust and, when one wasn't engulfed in Galactic War, such details would have counted for a great deal, she supposed. In any event, she was familiar enough with the ship's design by this point that she didn't need to look, but kept her eyes on the last paragraph of the document she was earnestly trying to get through, as she reached over and depressed it to let the crew know she'd heard.

“Thank you. We'll be ready.” Releasing the button and finishing the damned paragraph, she dropped her stylus. “Ugh.” Leia stretched, arching her arms as far up and behind her as she could, then pressed one hand to the small of her back to knead when it twinged in protest. “I'd hoped to get more done before we got back.”

Across from her, Winter set down her own data pad and rolled her neck, pretending not to notice the popping of joints as she stretched, as well. “You know there's no keeping up with all of this,” she chided. “Not when we lost four whole days doing nothing but evading Kalen's attempts to sweep you away to his rooms and seduce you into staying.”

Leia sighed. “The Chume'da was persistent – I'll give him that.”

“And nothing else,” Winter teased. “He was terribly disappointed you wouldn't even kiss him goodbye!”

The Princess grimaced. Between the Chume'da and his younger brother, Isolder, neither she nor Winter had had a moment alone (outside of visits to the 'fresher) during their visit to the ostentatious Consortium. Despite applying every ounce of their combined diplomatic experience, they'd left with frustratingly little to show for their efforts.

“One kiss,” she groused, “and Han would have felt honor-bound to kidnap me from the Alliance for my own safety.”

“Well,” Winter prodded suggestively as she gathered her things. “That could be promising.”
“Don't you dare give him any ideas or I'll tell Tycho you have kidnapping fantasies!”

Winter gasped in mock outrage, one hand flying theatrically to her throat. “You wouldn't!”

Leia snorted and tossed the last of her work into her bag. “Only because I can't spare you.”

“Your Highness.” The pilot's voice broke into the conversation from the speaker again, a quiet undercurrent of concern in it, this time. “We've been diverted from Hell's Teeth to Indigo Base. Councilor Mothma has requested that you report directly to her office upon disembarking.”

Leia exchanged perplexed glances with Winter before leaning over to hit the reply button again. “Let's not keep her waiting then.”

--

“Spinara Plateua, Carida. Home of the Imperial Military Academy.”

Iella tapped a perfectly manicured index finger on the control pad and a crisp holo of the Academy's sprawling campus mushroomed to life over the projector they'd set in the center of the apartment's giant work table. Around the table's periphery, the assembled Rogues and Jedi leaned in eagerly, sharp eyes inspecting the image with curiosity and varying degrees of familiarity, nostalgia, and distaste.

A vast citadel, styled after the ancient buildings of Coruscant and Raithal, dominated the center of the grounds. It's upper walls were dotted with enormous turrets and minarets; a tag on the holo display noted the presence of the Academy's private HoloNet transceiver in the southernmost turret. From this imposing heart, the rest of the facility fanned out in a precisely concentric grid. More impressive buildings (tagged as living and dining spaces, training areas, and administrative offices), drill fields, rifle ranges, storage, and training facilities - for everything from underwater battle tactics to flash-memory instruction in military history - surrounded the main quadrangles. Hulks noted as decommissioned Imperial walkers loomed over major promenades as imposing reminders of the Emperor's might… as did an immense statue of the Emperor, it's hollow stone eyes eerie in the impersonal blue cast of the holo. The grounds backed up directly to a steep cliff on one side, and a ring of dagger-like mountains surrounded the entire installation.

“As most of you probably already know, the Academy is a shared facility that serves the Navy Command Officers' School, the Engineering Academy, the Cliffside Stormtrooper Officer's Academy, and the Imperial Storm Commando School,” Wessiri continued. “It's home to more than one hundred and fifty thousand recruits, cadets, and instructors, and serves as the primary conduit through which the most promising future leaders of the Empire are funneled.”

From where she stood apart from the others, lingering by the wall of windows, arms crossed over her chest, Mara said coolly, “Which makes it a convenient natural choke point.”

Beside her, Artoo chirped inquisitively. The little droid, Luke observed, had wasted no time in reclaiming his self-assigned role as Mara's personal sentinel whenever his master didn't need him. For her part, Mara appeared by turns perplexed, nettled and quietly pleased to have re-acquired her astromechanical shadow.

“He's got a point,” Tycho agreed, craning his neck to glance in Jade's direction with interest. “Carida's pretty well protected. It's been a few years since I was there, but it wasn't easy to get into or out of then – and that was if you were authorized to be there.”

“Which is why we're not going to take it down,” Iella said, an ominous smile touching her lips.
“We're going to let the Imperials do it for us. Mara?”

Jade accepted the summons and strode over to stand beside Iella. A few tapped commands and the holo swooped around, zooming in on one of the two large, blocky buildings hugging the sheer cliff face that ran along the east side of the complex. When she spoke, her tone was clipped and direct. “In the interests of efficiency and an effort to prevent squabbling or animosity between divisions, all of Carida shares a single medical facility: the Combined Forces United Medical Center. Every being on Carida – human and otherwise, student or faculty – goes through there to receive care.”

“And there’s a lot of mandatory care,” Iella informed the group. Kyle and Tycho both snorted – almost simultaneously – at the gross understatement, then shared quickly flashed smiles at their obviously shared background. Iella continued, “On average, each student receives approximately twenty-six vaccinations during their tenure in the Academy.”

“That extensive traffic is what we’re counting on.” Airen Cracken spoke up from where he sat to the women’s right.

“Solo?” Iella asked.

Han tossed her something, which she caught easily. Only Luke caught Mara’s instinctive side-step or the flash of revulsion in her sense.

“Thanks. This,” Wessiri held the object up, “is a standard hypospray. Before use, it is capped with one of these.” She pulled a small round circle of thin, stiff fabric from a pocket and held it over the spray nozzle in demonstration.

There were nods all around; the Rebellion might not be quite as strict as the Empire – or as well equipped – but it required plenty of immunizations of its own.

“Caps are purchased in bulk.” Mara’s arms were folded again, gaze focused on the holo. “The next shipment is due to arrive on planet shortly. We’ll be replacing it with our own set, which are being prepared as we speak.”

Something prickled along Luke’s skin; an unexpected familiarity. Suspicion.

“Each cap is being intentionally treated with a modified form of Ryll.”

“The strain being applied,” Cracken expanded, “is engineered not to metabolize until exposed to a trigger agent. Until then, repeated small doses will accumulate in an individual’s system with each vaccination.”

“Projections suggest we can adequately expose ninety-eight percent of the Academy population within two months,” Iella finished for him. “Starting next week puts us just in time to release the trigger agent into the environmental system and water supply on Graduation Day.”

“An’ what exactly happens when the trigger gets pulled?” Solo wanted to know.

“Due to the wide variety of reactions Ryll can produce – based on species, gender, age, and other factors – it’s impossible to accurately predict the full scope of the outcome,” Iella cautioned.

“It’ll be ugly,” Mara cut in, bluntly. “What flavor of ugly doesn’t matter – we’ll decimate the ranks of the next generation of the Command across all the branches of the Imperial military.”

The was complete silence for a solid thirty seconds. Then Wes slapped a palm on the table with a smack that made everyone jump. “You’re going to start a zombie apocalypse!” He crowed, looking
positively jubilant at the prospect. “In the most regimented, emotionally-repressed spot in the Empire! Guys, they're going to make horror holos about this someday! You'll be famous!”

“Infamous, maybe,” Iella shook her head, trying not to smile at his exuberance. “All things considered it'd be better for everyone if no word of how this happened or who did it ever gets out.”

“How are you getting out?” Wedge leaned in, dark eyes serious. He pointed to the holo. “That's gonna be a hell of a mess when it goes. Best case scenario, they lock everything down. Worst case, we get Scarif part two and the Imps just wipe the entire place. What's your exit strategy?”

“You're coming to get me.” Iella met his gaze. “I hit the release, hop on your shuttle, and we'll burn thrusters. Out before the shavit hits the turbo fans, not a trace left behind.”

“Antilles and Celchu,” Cracken confirmed. “You'll be taking the shuttle in to get Ms. Wessiri – from here on designated Agent Hook – and Pash off planet at zero hour.”

“Pash?”

“My son, Pash is at the Academy,” Cracken's voice stayed perfectly even, but the lines at the corners of his eyes tightened – the only indicator of the emotion he was suppressing. “Undercover. Agent Hook will be giving him a prophylactic to prevent infection and taking him with her when she leaves.”

“Questions?” Iella asked.

“When are you going in?” Corran asked.

“Four days from now.” Iella keyed in a new command and the holo was replaced by a mission calendar. “We're here, obviously.” She pointed. “We have three standard days together here before the shuttle for Carida is scheduled to leave. We've arranged for the usual pilots to come down with something and created fake identities for Wedge and Tycho, who will take their places. They'll drop me and the supplies on planet, then get out and meet the rest of you back at Teeth.”

“You've got a backup plan?” Mirax demanded from her perch on her husband's lap.

“Three,” Iella promised. “All developed with Mara's help, so they account for the latest and greatest information available. Everything'll go smoothly, Myri – I promise.”

“You and Mara worked it out?” Mirax looked between them and appeared satisfied. “That's as good as it gets, then.”

“It could get better if there was some food involved in all this planning,” Hobbie pouted. “I'm starving.”

“We did skip lunch,” Wes sighed dramatically. “I'm so hungry I could eat a rancor.”

“Obviously you've never actually seen a rancor,” Mara scoffed.

“You have? Like, a live one?”

Klivien and Janson both stared at her in rapt attention and Luke felt Mara's tension level go up two notches. He sent a tendril of encouragement. She shook it off, annoyed at having been caught ruffled.

“Yes,” she told them, tone clipped. “And I didn't eat for days.” There had been other factors
involved in that scenario, of course, but she had no intention of telling them that.

“A break is in order.” Madine, who had been observing the new dynamics silently, finally spoke up. “The Rogues are due for a meal and I'm sure Commander Skywalker and Captain Horn would appreciate the chance to properly meet and evaluate the situation with Mr. Katarn.” He looked at Mara. “Do you need to join them or shall we take this opportunity to have the promised discussion with Airen?”

“They don't need me,” Mara brushed off the idea out of hand. “Let's get this over with.”

“Two hours.” Madine stood and addressed the group. “Antilles, you're in charge of the Rogues - get some chow and blow off some steam. Commander, Captain – if you'd make whatever arrangements are necessary with our new arrival, and plan to brief us when you return?”

Horn nodded but Luke said, “I'd like a word with Mara first.”

“Of course. Everyone else, dismissed.”

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There were guards posted outside Mon Mothma's office. There were never guards outside High Councilor's offices – it ran directly counter to their staunch insistence on appearing available. Accessible, even to the rank-and-file. Then again, there were rarely guards waiting to escort Leia off her shuttle and to her next destination on Base, either.

But it wasn't the guards that made Leia's hand dart out to squeeze Winter's arm as turned into the correct hall, and approached the correct door.

“There's a Force user in there,” she whispered, licking suddenly dry lips. “A powerful one.”

Winter's eyes narrowed. “Who?” she hissed back. “The only ones we know are deployed… or Imperials.”

Leia shook her head just slightly. “No one I recognize but -,” her breathe caught. “But they know I'm here.”

Winter laid her hand over her foster sister's in a quick, reassuring squeeze. Then they both took a half-step apart, straightening to their most regal postures. Leia took a half second to wish she'd been in something more official, more commanding of respect than her standard white fatigues. Then the door was whisking open and there was nothing to do but step inside.

“Ah, there you are.”

The door whisked shut behind them but Leia didn't hear it, captivated as she was by the surreal scene in front of her. Mon Mothma's desk had been fully cleared, it's smooth broad surface hosting only two delicate teacups, fragrant curls of steam rising off them. Across from the Councilor, on two thick, fluffy pillows, sat the embodiment of what few tales she and Han had managed to draw out of Luke about his boggy and harrowing weeks of Jedi training.

This is what Luke meant, she thought, distractedly, as the weight of the small green creature's power in the Force settled over her. Her stomach clenched. This is what Luke could feel like someday. She refused to allow the thought that wanted to follow – this is what I could feel like someday.

“Like your mothers, you look.” The ancient Master's gnarled hands twitched on the knobby staff that rested across his lap, and something that might have been the ghost of a smile flitted across his
wrinkled face.

She had no idea what to say. Wasn't sure she *could* say anything – it wasn't just the Jedi's presence that sat suffocatingly heavy on her shoulders. It was an exhaustion, a weariness, a certainty she couldn't put words to that made her chest feel as if someone had dropped an AT-AT on it.

“Leia.” Mon Mothma rose gracefully, nudging her teacup aside and gesturing at their guest. “This is Master Yoda, Grandmaster of the Jedi Order.”

Despite a lifetime of diplomatic training and the crush of questions and accusations that pressed hard under her ribs, the pressure in the room – in the Force – locked her tongue. All the Princess could do was nod.

“He’s asked to speak with you,” Mon continued smoothly, moving around the desk to Leia's side. She patted the younger woman's shoulder encouragingly. “I'll be nearby, if you need me. Agent Retrac?”

“I'll stay,” Winter said, firmly.

Mothma glanced at Yoda, who inclined his head a fraction. Without further comment, the Councilor dipped her head in acquiescence and slipped silently from the room.

“Fear me, you do,” Yoda said when they were alone. His gravelly voice was heavy with something that might have been grief.

“You've come to take my brother away from me.” Anger pushed the fear pulsing in Leia's chest out through her mouth and the words came out more harshly than she intended. “Again.”

The Grandmaster shook his head and ducked a tiny, clawed hand into his threadbare tunic. “Beyond my teachings, your brother is now. Here for Mara Jade, I am.” He held his hand out to her, revealing two small objects. “Gifts for her, have I brought.”

Cautiously, almost reverently, Leia held out her hands, cupping them together so he could tip the objects into them.

“A data chip.” Leia turned it and the oddly-shaped second object over in her palm. “What is the other?”

“She will know,” he said placidly. Then his face furrowed, sorrow wafting through his sense. “Safety was I able to give you, and your brother. Homes, and love. For her, none of those things could I provide. For herself she must make them, now. Help, these will.”

“Thank you.” Assurance that she was not to lose Luke again and a lightening in Yoda's sense – as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders – eased the pressure in the room and some of Leia's better manners found their way to the surface. “May we offer you lodging? I'm sure the Council would -.”

“Finished here, I am.” Yoda shifted and Leia realized part of the reason everything felt lighter was because the Grandmaster was drawing his entire presence inward – creating a massive Force gravity well in himself. “My duty have I done. To my brethren I am free to go.” His voice lilited a little on the last, a note of startlingly beautiful joy in the excruciating weariness. “Only one favor have I to ask.”

“Of course,” the Princess said immediately.

“When over this war is, to Dagobah my things return. Know how and where, your brother will.”
Leia nodded, not really understanding. “As you wish, Grandmaster.”

The Master to seemed to sink a bit lower into his chair, compressed under the Force he was gathering in. “Leave this place you should,” he murmured, rheumy eyes unfocusing. “Coming, trouble is. Very soon.” There was a streak of incongruously happy mischief, a little strangely echo-y, as he chuckled, “but not for me. No, no. Not for me.”

And then he vanished.

Both women gasped as he simply winked out of being. Leia staggered sideways, lightheaded, her coltish Force ability utterly unprepared for the massive pressure gap in the Force when his potent signature collapsed in on itself. Like the birth of a neutron star, it expelled a shock wave that felt like joy, and then it, too, winked out – swallowed up by the fabric of the Force - and was just gone.

“Leia!” Winter caught her, arms encircling her protectively.

“I'm all right,” she coughed, clutching her friend's arm until balance returned.

“Where -?” Winter started.

“Gone,” she shook her head incredulously. “He just – into the flow of the Force, somehow, I think.”

“I didn't know that was possible.”

“Neither did I.” Leia stared at the empty chair, wrestling with the conflicting emotions that surged within her. Finally, she asked quietly, “Does it make me a horrible person to be grateful he's gone, Winter?”

“No.” Retrac hugged her more tightly before letting go and saying firmly, “it just makes you a sister who loves her brother.”

“And his CorUnum.” Leia glanced at objects she still held, a grimness settling over her. “Maybe we should give these to Luke before we tell Mara about them. Just in case.”

“We've got time to decide, still.” Winter frowned. “In the meantime, I'm more concerned about that little 'trouble is coming' bit. Do you think he meant from those -,” she nodded at the objects in Leia's hand, “or something else?”

“I don't know.” Frustration edged Leia's tone. “I got even less of what Mara calls 'danger sense' than Luke did. Something could be practically on top of us and I'm not sure I'd know even if the Force was trying to tell me.”

“Then we'd best prepare for the worst on all fronts.” Winter moved forward purposefully and gathered Yoda's robe and staff, respectfully folding the former and clutching both to her chest. “Give me those, and I'll take everything to the safe in your quarters until our resident Jedi get back.”

Leia handed them over, pulling her Princess-self firmly around her like a protective cloak. She could worry about her own Force-ineptness and what Yoda's visit – and apparent death – was going to mean to the people she loved later. Something might be coming, and her Rebellion needed her. “I'll go find Mon and rally the Council. Whatever's coming, we'll be ready.”

—

As the meeting broke up, Luke caught Mara by the elbow and steered her to his sleeping alcove, pulling the curtain across before turning to face her.
“You're upset,” she started before he could speak.

*Upset* wasn't the word he'd have chosen; off-balance, maybe. Luke took a few deep breaths, letting them out slowly and trying to center himself before speaking. Aware of how little separated them from the larger room, he kept his voice low. Even with all the noise of the others getting up, moving around, and discussing lunch plans, he didn't want to risk being overheard.

“You planned this because of me. What they did to me, with ECHO?”

“Of course.” He felt her sense skim over his, looking to understand his reaction. “They hurt you. I – you're not happy.”

“No, it's not that,” he countered quickly. “I just… didn't expect it.”

“I thought -.” She stopped.

“Tell me,” he coaxed.

“You said you were mine,” Mara wrestled the words out of herself at a rough whisper.

“I am.” Luke assured her, still not making the connection and starting to be worried about how she felt. Agitation ran like a live wire under her skin and Luke caught her hand, rubbing the back of it with his thumb, attempting to edge a little calm into her. “I'm yours,” he tried to wheedle more words from her. “So you thought… thought this would...”

“It should be my place,” she said, tightly. “To get justice. For you. So you'd know -.” *So you'd know I'm trying – for *us*.

Luke was taken aback. “I never thought you weren't trying, Mara.” He kept rubbing her hand, but she could feel some of his own misgivings leaking through along with the reassurance he was going for. “I'm just… not sure that this… revenge for the sake of revenge – it's against the Code. Because it's dangerous.” His voice dropped further, took on a more heated tinge of urgency. “Especially when someone's being stalked by the Dark Side already, like you are.”

Her head jerked down and to the side as if he'd backhanded her.

Wrong. You did it wrong. The castigating voice in her head was cruel and horror coiled low and cold in her gut. *He tried to tell you at Corellia and you didn't listen. Insisted on your own way like a stupid, selfish little schutta. Then everything I did with Mirax – you... it makes me unfit to be a Jedi.” Makes me unworthy of you.

“No!” Luke blurted, face falling in consternation. “No, that's not what I meant at all.”

“But it's true,” she challenged, her head coming back up, eyes searching his face. “You don't think it was befitting of a Jedi.”

“I think,” he said, slowly, his mind racing to find a way out of the viper's nest he'd inadvertently fallen into, “that you were right, on Corellia, when you told Wedge you aren't a Jedi yet. And on Teeth, before that, when you told me you weren't properly trained.”

Tenderness washed over her and Mara choked under the wave of it, her snarled thoughts and self-derision colliding messily with his empathy and logic. “You've been doing the best you could with what you had, the half-truths you were taught. When we get back -,” he was so earnest now she felt it like a physical ache - “we can all train - you and me and Corran and Kyle. Even Leia. We can get proper instruction from Nejaa and Ben – all of us. Maybe – maybe learn to reconcile the kinds of
things that have to be done during a war with the Jedi Code. With staying away from the Dark Side.”

Jade made herself nod, numbly. “You want me to call it off?”

Something inside her bled at the shame of telling Iella she'd been so flagrantly wrong. Of losing her fledgling respect and any hope of her friendship, already. Mirax had promised they'd like one another and in the deepest recesses of her heart – places she'd only just begun to discover she had – Mara had cradled a fragile hope that she'd be right. *This is what you get for wanting something you're not fit for,* her inner voice scorned.

“No.” A chill swept down Luke's spine at the way Mara's face had gone blank and extra layers of shields crept up around her. He got a disconcerting mental image of a child retreating into a cocoon of blankets, trying to hide from the glimpse of a monster under her bed. “No, it's a good plan. We need to do something to disrupt Imperial leadership ranks and – Jedi questions aside – this is just what's in order.”

She nodded again.

“Hey.” He rubbed a hand up her arm, at a loss for how to broach what he felt from her. Went with the appallingly inadequate, “are you all right?”

“Of course.” Mara closed her eyes and when she opened them again everything was gone – where he didn't know – except for a sense of focused determination. “Come on. Back to work, Skywalker.”

He tried again. “Are you sure you don't want us to wait for you, to talk to Kyle? We can. You found him, after all.”

“You don't need me for that,” Mara dismissed the idea again. “You two are going to run the new Order – how new acolytes get handled is up to you to decide.”

“That's not -.” Luke stopped, perturbed by her perspective – *doesn't she understand how important she is?* - but extremely aware that the room behind them had almost completely emptied out. There just wasn't *time,* now, to get into the whole discussion about just how much still had to be decided and future power dynamics and *Force* they'd never even mentioned to her the question of where to base the new Order! Luke sighed. *It doesn't have to be now,* he told himself. *You've still got time here, before you go back, and then maybe Nejaa and Ben can get involved and this won't all feel like such a mess.*

Tension still hummed through Mara and Luke rubbed both her arms again, wishing fretfully for some way to dispel it. “You'll be all right?” he asked, finally. “Do you want someone to stay with you? Mirax or Han, maybe? You know I will -.”

“I'll be fine.”

The words were flat, detached, and enough to leave him very sure that she *wouldn't* be, but there was nothing he could do. He’d asked and she'd refused; he couldn't override that without causing more damage. So he leaned in and kissed her forehead gently. “I'll see you later, then.” Luke made himself let her go and turn back to the main room, pulling the curtain aside and rejoining the others.

Mara stared at his back a long moment before she followed.

She'd spent her life fulfilling other people's directives, becoming anything that was required of her. What Luke wanted was mindbogglingly different than what had ever been sought from her before, but she could relearn – could become what he needed, just as she'd been what the Emperor demanded. And this time, the missing piece was in place: she had access to her gift. This… this was
just a setback. A learning curve. Distasteful, but not disastrous. She could be Skywalker's Battle Coordinator. His perfect Jedi. She'd just have to try harder.

Mara squared her shoulders. She never lost a fight, and she had no intention of losing this one. I can do better, she repeated silently to herself as she strode out into the main room where Cracken and Madine waited. I will.

- -

Despite the deeply cushioned cradle of the form lounger of his meditation sphere, Vader's body was rigidly tense. Plunging a mental fist into the howling wind of the Dark Side – it roared and snapped around him, whipped to a frothing cauldron of blackness by his caustic anger – he gripped a handful of the power and snarled at it.

Show me. Something new.

The Darkness writhed, as if to escape, and he tightened his grip, strangling it until it complied. The dimness of the sphere's interior melted away, replaced by the intensity of vision – familiar, but not.

They are in the Throne Room, beset by static and boiling ozone. Jade is splayed against a console, bleeding and shrieking in fury, the pain of her freshly broken ribs startling vivid in his awareness. Palpatine hisses his delight, drinking her in and Luke darts in, green blade singing as it cleaves the Emperor in two. Vader drops and rolls away from the coming blast, saber snapping safely off as he falls. Breathing heavily from earlier attacks and still shell shocked by his success, Luke remains where he stands.

As Vader had foreseen, a blur of black and red barrel s into his son, savagely throwing him aside half a heartbeat before the massive concussive blast released by the extinguishing of the Emperor's life force. Luke instinctively flings his saber away and tucks in, hitting the ground in a roll. Ending on his stomach, he pushes up on his hands, eyes darting toward his rescuer.

A ring of befouled power slices through the spot where the Jedi had stood with obliterating impact. The former Emperor's Hand is tossed like a rag doll, stopping only when one of the room's thick dura-steel pillars intersects her flight, snapping her neck and dropping her to the floor, limp and cold. The new, unnatural angle of her head starts blood dripping into glassy green eyes that stare blindly at nothing.

"Mara!"

In all the horrors he has survived and perpetrated, Vader has not felt anguish of that magnitude from another being since Mustafar. There is a whip-crack in the Force. Something precious breaks. Vader's helmeted head snaps in his son's direction and sees blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. Cold terror grips him.

"M'ra..." Luke slurs, shoving to his feet. He weaves like a drunkard toward the fallen Hand, cracks spreading outward through his signature from a concussion point at his deepest core. He legs give out and he goes down, hard, but doesn't stop. Crawling – dragging himself – he keeps going, and the cracks within him widen.

"My son." Vader is on his own feet, stalking across the space between them, desperate for reasons he doesn't understand. "No."

Luke reaches the Hand, collapses onto her, one arm flung over her hips, his head pillowed on her abdomen. "We won," he mumbles into her leather-clad body.

"Luke!" Vader drops to his knees beside them, half-rolls his son over. Even smeared with red-black
blood, Luke's smile is the most radiant thing he has seen since Padme told him she was with child.

“We won,” he gurgles.

“What is happening?” The Sith growls.

“Can’t… without her. Tol’ you.” Luke fumbles, and Vader reaches out. Clasps his son’s own artificial hand – the one that is his fault – with his own gloved mechanical hand and thinks “no-no-no-no. Not again. I cannot lose another.”

“There’s... good... in you.” Luke's eyes are fever-bright and his entire body shakes violently. He gives his father one last smile. “Good.”

His golden head falls back, eyes rolling deep into his skull, and Vader feels as if he is in a cargo bay whose doors have just blown off, the violent decompression of such a powerful Force sense being ripped away sending him reeling, emptiness swallowing him whole.

Darth Vader flung the Force away from himself, scalded. The mechanics of his suit sped up, working overtime to compensate for the panic pounding within him – wrecking havoc on his finely tuned systems – as he grappled with the incomprehensibility of what he’d seen.

The sphere's comm chimed. It took an unprecedented two tries for him to depress the acknowledgment button.

“Lord Vader.” Piett's precise, no-nonsense tone steadied the Sith enough to growl back in something approximating his usual ruthless tone.

“What is it, Admiral?”

“My Lord, Commander Bow wishes me to inform you that he and his men have uncovered a well-equipped Rebel cell operating in the planet's southern hemisphere. As per your orders, Sir, they've taken the leaders alive and are holding them for you personally.”

“Have my shuttle prepared – I will leave at once.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

The comm shut off and Vader sucked in his fear, a lifetime of habit automatically transmuting it to fury. Reaching for the Force again, he flicked the controls to begin the process of fully re-suiting. He wasn't entirely clear on what the Force had been trying to tell him, but he had no doubt that whatever this new evil was, it was Jade's fault.

The last piece of his armor hissed into place and Vader surged upright, storming out of his quarters and toward to hangar. Enough. He should never have tried to use her at all. The Rebel scum being held for him would tell him what he needed to know, and then he would find her and kill her. Then he would bring Luke to the Dark Side himself.

Force visions and the Emperor be damned – he could not lose his son again.

- -

“Hey.”

Mara kept her head down, staring at the information streaming along the base of the holo projection that sprawled out over the wide table. “You're back.”
“Yeah.” Luke went around to the far side of the table to stand beside her. Even under the blue cast of
the light from the holo, he could see that her skin was flushed. “Prepping for tomorrow?”

“Another chance to review the details,” she concurred, “since they deferred the second half of the
briefing.”

“Cracken looked a little shell-shocked when he and Madine got back to the casino,” Skywalker
ventured. He'd been more than a little concerned by just how drawn and haunted both men looked
when they'd returned to Rogue Squadron's rooms at the Last Card, ordering everyone to take the
night off.

“He wasn't ready.” She gave a small, humorless laugh. “And I edited. So much.” Mara closed her
eyes and rubbed the heel of a hand into the bone above her right eye, as if she could grind out the
ache there.

“I wish you'd let me stay,” Luke murmured, gently pulling her hand away and resting two fingers at
her temple, letting the Force flow through him and into her, easing the pain.

“Katarn needed you. How did that go, anyway?”

“Well,” Luke admitted. “We gave him what's becoming the standard info dump on the situation and
he took it surprisingly well. He doesn't know of any history of Force-sensitivity in his family, but we
all know that doesn't mean much these days. He's agreed to join the Rogues and eager to train with
us.”

“Good. Did you tell him about the crystals?”

“Yes. He took that pretty well in stride, too.”

“Stormtroopers at his level are accustomed to getting dropped into hell without warning,” Mara
remarked. “Not unexpected that he'd be quick to adapt.”

“He seems to have been quick to imprint on you, too. He was awfully impressed by your showing
on Dargulli.”

Something in his tone brought Mara's head around. “You know nothing happened. I would never -.”

“I know,” Luke interrupted, quickly, startled. “I wasn't implying -.” His head dropped, looking
chagrined and took a breath, blew it out. “I only meant...”

“I know what jealousy feels like, Skywalker.”

“I've never gotten to see you in action, is all,” he explained, embarrassed and self-deprecating. “Han
and Crix were at Bilbringi, and Mirax was with you for Naboo, and later. The closest I've ever
gotten was a couple minutes in ghost-form as you were wrapping up Brentaal. To hear Kyle tell it,
you looked like the embodiment of a War Goddess! Somebody called Kunik?”

“Kunik wasn't an actual War Goddess,” Mara frowned to cover how flattered she was. “She's the
Trianii goddess of bitter retribution and swift death.” Luke's words about revenge from earlier came
back to her in a rush and her heart dropped. Not a something you get to be proud of any more, Jade.

Luke caught the shift in her mood but didn't follow why. “It sounded like you were amazing,” he
said, ducking his head to catch her eye and giving her a reassuring smile. “That's all I was envious
of, Mara.”
Mara's vow to herself to do better pounded in her head, along with a steady drumbeat of confusion, and she tried to untangle the conflicting messages. “Dargulli was okay because it was just work – it wasn't personal?” she clarified. “Doing damage only makes me unfit to be a Jedi if it means something?”

Luke stiffened and he stepped closer, caught her face in his hands. “Nothing makes you unfit, CorMeum,” he said, sternly, his eyes fixed unblinking on her face. “Don't ever think that.” Skywalker breathed out, half frustration and half resignation, and one hand stroked down to her shoulder in an apologetic caress. “And I don't know, honestly, how to tell you where the line is - where things go from defending the galaxy to being too personal, too close to the Dark. I'm sorry.”

“All right.”

“All right?”

She nodded, soberly. “You'll tell me when you figure it out and until then we'll make it up as we go along.”

Luke slid his hands down to catch and squeeze hers. “We'll figure it out together, Mara.” He squeezed her hands again. “For now, how about we go get some dinner? Han said he found someplace with great crispic and something called Gravdinian Ale he said you'd like.”

Mara glanced back at her the holo display and Luke purposefully reached over and turned it off. “It'll wait, Jade. Come on.”

---

“I will not ask you again. Where is the primary Rebel base?”

The Columexi gurgled, bloody froth spilling down his chin and over Vader's gloved fist. The Sith tightened his grip around the man's throat and reached out with the Force, thrusting it up through the man's throat and back into the base of his skull. At his command, it branched out into the Rebel's brain, lancing spikes intruding in every corner. The man's eyes rolled back, body twitching violently as the froth at his mouth became a stream of black-tinged blood.

“Zastiga,” the Sith rumbled, when the Force wrenched the information he sought from the other being's mind and delivered it to him on the metaphysical equivalent of a silver platter. Satisfaction spread through Vader's body and he condescended to kindness. A sharp twist of his wrist snapped the Rebel's neck, and he dropped the body to the decking. “Commander!” Vader roared, cloak swirling and snapping as he turned on his heel. “Inform the Executor that we will be moving out. I want the whole of Death Squadron en route to Zastiga within the hour!”

---

Luke took a second helping of crispic and munched on another bite of the greasy, crunchy food. This meal – stuffed in a booth in a crowded, noisy cantina – was entirely different than the one he and Mara had shared the night before, but he was enjoying it every bit as much. He'd opted to sit out of the game of binspo Han had talked Mara into, preferring to simply watch her. She'd made an effort to drop her shields a little as she relaxed, letting him catch bits and pieces of her thoughts as she mentally chided a passing Twi'lek for offensively bad taste in attire, critiqued a nearby Rodian's choice of personal weaponry (“paltry and cheaply made”), and upbraided the pink skinned, blue-haired Zeltron dancing on the cantina's tiny stage (“there aren't enough pheromones in the galaxy to make up for a spin that sloppy!”). His body prickled with awareness when she brushed against him leaning forward to toss a card triumphantly on top of the pile; the multicolored burst of satisfaction
that flashed across her sense as she splayed the rest of her winning hand on the table made him smile.

“That ain't legal!” Han protested as Mara flopped back into her seat and smirked at him smugly over the rim of her glass.

“It is under Capitol rules.”

“We're not playing Capitol rules,” he leaned forward, shaking his head at her.

//You never specified which set of rules you were under,// Chewie pointed out.

“Which means -.” Mara cut off, nearly spilling her ale as she snapped upright, eyes narrowing to laser focus as she swept them over the room.

The others already had their hands on their weapons in response, doing their own visual scans, when Luke's danger sense caught up and blared warning at him as well. He ignored Mara's stab of irritation at the delay and the cranky how are you still alive? that went with it.

“What is it?” Han murmured, low. “We got company?”

“Sithspit!” Mara dove to the side, throwing her whole weight – and a little bit of a Force shove – into Skywalker's left shoulder, driving them both toward the ground, hard.

The Force shrieked with warning and Luke felt the crackle of a blaster bolt sizzle past his head as it cleared the edge of the table. The room exploded with a new level noise – blaster bolts and the popping as metal and plastisteel instantly melted, splattering in all directions. Luke instinctively twisted in midair, hitting the ground in a roll and keeping his head up. His blaster flew from his holster to his free hand – his hold-out snapping into the other. Hitting the wall, he shoved a leg under himself and pushed up into a crouch, weapons out.

Mara had kept going - straight over him - into an impossibly graceful somersault. She came up on one knee, holdout spitting fire. Behind her, there was a crash and the shattering of glass as Han kicked the table onto it's side, food and ale flying as it went over. Chewie – much to large to hide behind the small surface - jumped out of the way and into the fray to the right, Mara lunging up and to the left.

Get behind the table!

Mara’s snapped command had Luke moving without thought and he leapt over the scorched tabletop to drop in beside Han. They each took a side, ducking around and squeezing off shots as they could.

“Shavit!” Luke landed a solid hit on a hulking human male with a purple cybernetic eye who was crouched behind the bar and watched incredulously as the man grunted, then returned fire barely phased. “I've got a bad feeling about this,” he told Han, pulling back in behind the table.

“ You think?!” Han demanded angrily over the chaos.

Four of them. Chewie's got Cradossk and I've got R'Kyza. Mara's voice, clipped and hyper-focused came in Luke's head. Tell Solo Zuckuss is all his. The cyborg is yours.

For a disorienting but breathtaking split second, Luke saw the cantina through Mara's eyes – through her mind . The whole room lit up in a sort of incredibly personalized, fully internalized Heads Up Display. E verything – every person, exit, potential weapon, useful resource -tagged and geo-positioned, calculations running at light speed even as she was already moving. He felt the shaft of pure energy – a bolt of adrenaline and the high of utter confidence and total control - time to work,
Jade — arc from her sense to his, crackling like lightning across his body, straight out from his core all the way to fingers and toes.

He yelped and heard Han yell, “Kid!” Hands shook him – Solo was patting him down, looking for a wound.

“Kid! Luke! You all right?”

Luke snapped out of it, shaking his head, body still tingling. “Fine!” he promised. Another bolt splattered a fresh round of metal above them and the warrior in Luke kicked back in. “Mara says there's four them – she's taking someone called R'Kyza, and Chewie's got a Cradossk. Somebody named Zuckuss is yours and I've got the cyborg.”

“Sith me!” Han swore, then his face hardened. “Right, listen. Here's what we're gonna do.”

Mara stayed down, running low and swift through the full-scale brawl that had consumed the cantina. Over the smashing, shouts, screams and blaster fire she could hear Chewie's roar. In her Luke-place, she felt Skywalker's sense shift, the flow of the Force increasing and his attention narrowing. Confident that the others could handle the targets she'd assigned, she kept her own gaze locked on the nastiest of the bunch.

Mara pulled in a breath, drawing her Force sense in around herself with it. As she let the breath out, she envisioned her power dissolving like mist. Wafting outward, away.

Nothing happened.

She jerked sideways, squeaking just out of the path of a hollering Dug that went flying past to impact a nearby wall with a bone-crushing crunch. Flattening her back against the side of an abandoned booth, Mara schooled her heart rate back down and tried again.

A knot formed in her stomach as her power sphere flatly refused to be hidden. Finishing her sphere had altered her Force signature, she knew that, but this. Her pulse started to pound again. She'd had no idea that she'd completely lost any of her abilities. Her most basic, primitive instincts screamed at the terrifying knowledge that she'd lost her ability to hide herself. They'll see —.

No. Mara hit the 'empty' button in her head with nearly supersonic speed, the panic dropping away through the gaping chasm in the bottom of her soul with everything else.

On auto-pilot, she side-stepped, pivoting and sliding into the next empty booth. Two Barabels locked in snarling, spitting fist-fight tumbled into the wall where she'd been standing a moment before. She ignored them. In the emptiness of her freshly cleared mind, Mara introduced only the thoughts that would keep her alive in this moment.

R'Kyza is a Gand. Gand feel the Force, but they don't use it. They work as predators, but think like prey. Pick off the weak and lone wolves. Her lips curved up. You're out of your league now, little bug, she thought viciously at the alien. This is a pack and the alphas protect our own.

There was a whisper of movement at her thigh and Mara looked down. She was standing in a pool of Dark ooze, it's tarry fingers clawing their way up well over her knees. Skywalker wasn't going to be happy about that, but there was nothing to be done about it right now. And, she reassured herself, this isn't vengeance. It's defense. That has to be allowed by the Code.

Re-centered, she took a deep breath, brought her chin up, and threw herself back into the fray.
“We need to get out of here.” Luke secured his blaster back into his thigh holster and clicked his hold-out back up under the filthy, singed edge of his sleeve.

“Yeah, the service is terrible,” Solo quipped. He remained crouched beside the dead Transdoshians. Or, more accurately, one dead Trandoshan (whose head boasted more smoking blaster bolt craters than Haruun Kal cheese had holes) and a bloody pile of limbs and other assorted bits and pieces that used to be a second of the reptilian aliens. Wookies and Trandoshans had a long history of hating one another; it wasn’t exactly a surprise that Chewie had been a bit extra harsh in retaliating against one who’d attacked Han, but the mess (especially the smell of it) still made Luke's stomach churn.

“The building is on fire, Han.”

“What?” Solo pulled his hand out of Zuckuss's armor, a handful of data chips and credits in his fist, and skimmed a disgusted glance over the absolutely destroyed cantina. Bodies littered the floor, bar, and overturned tables and, as Luke had pointed out, thick, oily black smoke was pouring out of a back room, orange flames starting to lick around the frame of the door. “Shavit.”

//Where is Jade?// Chewie rumbled.

“Out back,” Luke said. He tipped his head as if listening to something. “Hotwiring a speeder, I think.”

“Time to go, then.” Han stood and tossed a small device – this one lifted from Cradossk's dismembered torso – to Chewie. “You wanna do the honors?”

The wookie caught it with a pleased sound and Luke led the way toward the back exit, following a mental map Mara provided. Sirens wailed to life as they slammed out the dented metal door into a back alley and nearly stumbled over the body of a Gand. His black suit was sliced in a dozen places, his armor poking through the gashed fabric. A helmet and crushed breathing mask lay beside him. Two throwing razors and three hunting knives stuck out of his bony skull.

It should have been nauseating but Luke barely noticed. His blood had run cold at the feel of inky darkness nearby. A second later he was running down the alley, Han and Chewie on his heels. They skidded around the corner.

“There you are!” Mara was behind the wheel of a speeder. “Get in.”

Han clambored into the front seat, Chewie into the back.

“Han, you drive.” Luke vaulted into the back seat and climbed over the wookie. Reaching into the front seat, he slid an arm around Mara's ribs and hauled her backwards.

“Skywalker!” She squawked in protest. “What the kriff -?!”

Solo lurched over into the driver's seat, grabbing the wheel and jamming his foot on the accelerator, peeling them out and into the space lanes, racing away from the cantina. “Chewie!”

In the backseat, Luke had pulled Mara across his lap and was running his hands down her arms frantically. “Get rid of it!”

Chewie lumbered over the seat, slipping into the front beside Han and harned. One claw mashed a button on the device Solo had given him in the cantina. A heartbeat later they were all knocked forward as a massive explosion rocked the area. Only Han's experienced grip on the controls kept the
speeder from being flung into the nearest building. A mushroom cloud of fire and smoke belched out of the cantina's burning remains. Unprepared, Luke lost his grip on Mara and she slammed forward, the side of her head colliding with the back of Han's seat.

“Son of a -.” The rest of the curse was muffled as she landed in a bruised heap on Luke's feet.

“Mara!” He reached for her, but she shoved him off, crawling to the floor on the other side of the backseat and sitting with her back to the door, glaring at him.

“What the kriff are you doing?” she demanded.

“It's feeding on you,” Luke leaned over, swiping at her legs, as if the ooze encasing her up to her shoulders was a physical slime he could wipe off. “Sith, it's everywhere! Make it stop!”

“You want me to politely ask to go away!??” She stared at him as if he'd lost his mind.

“You can get rid of it,” he insisted, “I've seen you.”

“I can discourage it,” she shoved his hands away again, pulled her legs to her chest and balled herself up as tightly as she could against the door, out of reach. “A little. Sometimes. It'll stop, eventually. Just -.” She closed her eyes against the sight of his face taut with anger and revulsion, a sick feeling twisting in her gut. “Just don't look.”

“That doesn't make it -.” Luke nearly stopped breathing as Mara's shields slammed up, a splash of self-loathing fathoms deep and razor sharp escaping before she completely closed to him. “Mara.” His voice went soft with dismay.

She'd gone pale, head tucked down into her right shoulder, away from him. Bunched herself into the corner as if she fully expected him to take her advice – to sit on his side of the speeder, face forward, and pretend she wasn't there until the dark side bled off and she was suitable to be seen.

Guilt hit hard and Luke rubbed his face with his hands. “Han. You'll get us back?”

“Sure thing, Kid. We're gonna do a few loops, lose any tails we might have. Then we're gonna ditch this and swap for something new, but Chewie an' me'll handle it. You go do your Force thing.”

Luke wasn't entirely sure it was the Force Mara needed. “Does this thing have a top?”

“Uhh...” Solo fiddled with some nobs. “Yeah. Coming up.”

Luke waited while the dome whirred out of the back and closed them in, shutting them off from outside eyes or surveillance cameras. Then he leaned over, shimmying until he lay on his side in the backseat, propped up on his right arm, his head near Mara. “CorMeum.” Gently, he ran the knuckles of his left hand down her cheek. “Mara, look at me, please.”

Slowly, reluctantly, she made herself turn back to him.

“This isn't your fault.”

“You don't know that. It could be. It could be like dreaming – I don't know how I project, but it's still me doing it - still my fault. I could be doing this, too. Inviting it -.”

“Stop.” His voice was gentle, but firm. “Will you let me try something?”

“No,” she preempted whatever he was going to say. “I don't want it to touch you.”
“My father is Darth Vader, Jade,” he told her, a faint tinge of ironic humor in his sense. “I’m already touched by it.”

“Not like this,” she insisted.

“Please, Mara. Just let me try something.”

*Give him your best.* Her promise to Han from the *Venture* – she really needed to stop making promises so damn hard to keep – prodded Mara out of her resistance and she unwillingly let Luke coax her up from the floor.

Sitting up, he pulled her against him, her back to his front. “Close your eyes.” He waited until she’d complied. “Shields,” he nudged, gently.

That she gagged on another minute before finally acquiescing, fresh anger and humiliation bubbling up and out – to be greedily slurped up by the dark ooze – at the morass of ugly things he was getting a full view of inside her.

“Lies,” he murmured in her ear, his hands coming up to either side of her head. “You're beautiful, CorMeum.” He drifted his hands down, always keeping them just off her skin and clothing by a hairsbreadth, cupping them around her throat, sculpting them over her shoulders, down her arms to the elbow. “My beautiful Mara.”

Mara's breath caught, lodged in her throat as warmth trickled down her body. It was thick, like honey, and golden, like Luke's Force presence. Like sunrise on a desert world, in the moments when the chill of night is forced back but the full heat of day is still a few minutes away. The slime slithered away from it, like a cockroach skittering back to its dark corner when a luma panel goes on.

Luke wanted to ask why the ooze was so thick, why it had covered her so deeply. He'd thought it fed on her in proportion to the negative emotions she had bottled up to feed it, but maybe he'd been wrong. It had been a good couple days, hadn't it? There shouldn't have been that much built up in her for it to feast on. He pushed the question away, though – kept his focus on soaking Mara with warmth. He could ask questions later. Right now, he needed the Darkness off of her, for both their sakes.

*Beautiful,* he thought at the Darkness as his hands skimmed over her torso, the ooze slithering down her spine, retreating toward her legs. *Mara is beautiful. Loved. Safe. Mine. You can't have her.*

Her head fell forward, eyes shut, something unexpectedly soft in her expression when his hands drifted down to her hips. There was a… *quiet* in her sense he'd never felt before. Not ominous or empty, just *calm.*

“Turn for me,” he murmured, easing her around so that she sat sideways in his lap, half facing him. She shifted, opening her eyes and following the movement of his hands as they chased the ooze off her legs until it finally sank with a hiss through the speeder's floor and was gone. Relief spread through him and Luke let his right hand fall to her hip, pleased that she didn't tense this time – didn't even have to work not to. “Better?” he asked, softly, his left hand reaching up to push back a tendril of hair that had come loose from her braid when she'd been knocked to the floor of the speeder.

She nodded, vividly green eyes wide and solemn. Then, very slowly, she leaned in and kissed him.
Agent Hook is the title Iella went under during her time working for the Rebellion in the profics.

Isolder actually did have an older brother named Kalen; Ta'Chume had him kidnapped and killed because she didn't think he was fit to lead Hapes. It took Isolder six years to find out she was behind it, but then he was (understandably) pretty pissed.

I worked on the theory here that Mon Mothma and Yoda would probably have met before at least in passing somewhere before the Empire took over. Even if they hadn't, they were both well-known enough that she'd have recognized him when he showed up, and Bail was friends with Jedi, so she wouldn't have been overly surprised/suspicious when Yoda announced it was Leia he was there to see.
Chapter Summary

Everything goes pear shaped...

Luke's lips were soft and dry against hers, his hands solid and reassuring where they lingered on her. Mara's stomach clenched when he stiffened for a split second, astonishment blooming across his sense. Before she could recoil in abhorrence at her own brazen hubris, though, he gave a sigh that felt as if it came from the depths of his soul and melted into her. His happiness burst like puffs of stardust behind her closed eyes and she blindly gripped fistfuls of his tunic to keep herself upright under the rush of dizzy delight. He tasted sweet and exotic, like a top-shelf Deltron wine, and – when he angled his head, parting his lips and deepening the kiss ever so slightly – went straight to her head exactly the same way.

She made a soft sound of dismay when he pulled away and felt her entire body flush. She squeezed her eyes shut, tried to school her racing heart back down enough to be able to hear over the pulse pounding in her ears.

“Did I... do it… wrong?” The question, when she managed to get it out, was a barely audible whisper.

“Wrong?” His confusion brushed against her as he slid the hand at her temple down to cup her cheek.

“You stopped.”

He chuckled and she shivered, the air vibrating around and through her with his renewed happiness. “I thought you might want to breathe.”

Was he… teasing her? The idea was startling and she opened her eyes to meet his finally, shaking her head. “No.” Mara would gladly stop breathing – stop anything - start anything he wanted – if he would just keep making her feel like that.

“No?” More amusement, dancing in mischievous blue eyes this time. “So you're saying I could kiss you again. Maybe?”

“Now.”

He swallowed the outright laugh that bubbled up at her command to oblige, leaning into her again to capture her mouth with his own. She thought distractedly that he clearly knew what he was doing – and then every coherent thought was lost to the undertow of pleasure.

*There might be something to that point about breathing,* she allowed when he reluctantly pulled back a second time, leaving her heart fluttering in her chest, cheeks stained pink, and tongue tied. Mara felt as if she'd sprinted halfway across the Imperial Palace's roof and thrown herself off the side with neither Force nor parachute to catch her.

“Mara.” Luke sighed her name and nuzzled her throat. “CorMeum.” His sense was suffuse with contentment. It layered on top of the honeyed warmth that still clung to her bones from his
ministrations a few moments before and she wanted to soak in the feeling. To absorb it until there wasn't room left for anything else and she could believe with his certainty that she was beautiful and safe and... loved.

Chewbacca howled and Mara jerked, the spell broken.

“Sorry to interrupt, Kids,” Han spoke up from the front seat. From the grimace in his voice, Mara suspected he really was. “But we're switching speeders in thirty seconds.” He veered abruptly to the side and the vehicle screeched to a halt. “Everybody out.”

- -

With a fresh vehicle and no one on their tail, they were back at the rented hangar in less than ten minutes. But somewhere in the jumble of rigging the first speeder to self-combust and hot-wiring the second, Mara's danger sense had acquired a dull but persistent hum. By the time he'd pulled her into the back of the second speeder with him, it had seeped through the bond and set Luke on edge, as well. It hadn't taken long for the Jedi's apprehension to spill over to their companions.

The hum mounted in decibels and persistence and, by the time they approached the hangar, everyone was well and truly keyed up. They kept their eyes peeled, darting suspiciously in every direction as Mara hurriedly tapped in the security code to a side door not visible from the main thoroughfare and they slipped inside.

A string of electronic squeals and rapid-fire beeping had them doubling their pace toward the balcony outside the apartment, where Artoo rocked on his wheels and spun his dome in agitation.

“Lock everything down,” Mara commanded. “And slow - Corran?”

“Emergency recall,” Horn announced, appearing in the apartment's open door. “Rogue Squadron's been called back immediately.”

“Where's Mirax?” Mara demanded, slipping past him into the apartment and heading directly for her sleeping alcove.

“Accepted a last-minute request for help from a VIP client just before Leia's recall came in,” he called after her. “Jumped into hyperspace as I was on my way here.”

“The command came from Leia, personally?” Han's tone was sharp. “Is she all right?”

“What happened?” Luke asked at the same time, throwing the question over his shoulder as he, too, ducked into his sleeping alcove to throw his meager things together.

//Unclear.// Artoo answered before Corran could. //But Emergency Authorization codes were used.//

“Chewie -.” Han started, but the wookie was halfway out the door.

//I will start the Falcon.//

Mara was already emerging from her nook, packed bag tossed on the table as she scanned the room, darting around to collect anything of theirs left out. “Did you tell the others?”

//The Carida team will remain.// Artoo confirmed. //The others are en route to their shuttle. They will comm when they begin the start-up sequence.//

“You spoke to Iella?” Mara asked. “They're sure they're covered?”
“She double checked as soon as the word came in,” Horn promised. “The concoction you made is already working its nasty magic – no way the Imperial pilots are going to be fit to fly. You're good to go with us.” He caught a proper glimpse of her and frowned. “Were you in a fight?”

“I'll explain later,” she brushed off the question. “Get on the Falcon.” She turned to Han. “You coordinate the jump once the Taylander is in the air. Skywalker and I will get up there first and do quick loops around to make sure the coast is clear.” Without waiting for an answer, she leaned over the comm unit and started tapping out a series of rushed messages.

“She'll explain when she's ready,” Solo noted, heading for the door. “If Leia called us back, she ain't screwin' around.”

In moments, all three ships were roaring, ready to go.

“Mara.” Luke caught her as she slung her bag into her waiting Headhunter. “Be careful. We don't know what we could fly into.”

“You be careful,” she retorted, flicking her braid back over her shoulder haughtily. “I'm not the one with no danger sense.”

“Right.” He grinned at her. Darting forward, he pecked a quick kiss to her lips, then spun, jogging toward his x-wing.

For a few off-kilter heart-beats she watched him go, then shook herself. There was work to do.

--

Hyperspace was a torment. Luke could feel anxiety along his twin bond with Leia, but it was faint and static-y across the distance. Mara had dropped into a healing trance – more out of principle, he thought, than need - and he knew he ought to have done the same. While there was no telling what things would be like when they dropped out again, it was a pretty safe bet sleep wouldn't be on the agenda any time soon. But his mind was racing with memories of kissing Mara. Of the fight in the cantina and the dozens of questions he'd never gotten a chance to ask.

Why did everyone else seemingly recognize their four assailants in the cantina? Who were they and why were they targeting their group? Was it a planned attack or just a seized moment of opportunity? Was it normal for Mirax to be called away at a moment's notice by VIP clients like that, or could it be connected to the attack? Or the recall? Why had the Dark been so strongly in pursuit of Mara after such a relatively short shoot-out? What could Leia have possibly run into that would make her send out an emergency recall command without any details?

Patience, he told himself, taking up a meditative breathing pattern. There will be time. Everyone will be back in one place, and there will be time.

Luke let the Force wrap around him and sank into it gratefully, reciting the Code in his head as Master Yoda had taught him. There is no emotion, there is Peace. There is no ignorance, there is Knowledge. There is no passion, there is Serenity. There is no chaos...

--

Luke reverted from hyperspace two ship lengths off the nose of an Imperial Star Destroyer.

The comm system exploded with the shouts of Red, Gold, and Green Squadrons as they engaged hot and heavy with a bevvy of TIE fighters.

Skywalker yanked the x-wing's yoke to the side, the tip of his S-foil glowing white hot at the friction
where it scraped the shields along the tip of the Destroyer's nose as he just barely threw himself clear of the impact zone. Artoo and the Force screeched in unison and he spun instinctively into a barrel roll, narrowly evading a flurry of energy bolts that skimmed blindingly past the cockpit.

“Where're the others?!” he shouted at Artoo, looping around, bringing every weapon system up and to bear.

There was a twitter and string of alarmed tootles and tracking lights lit up across his display at the same moment Vader's presence suddenly loomed huge and furious in his awareness, stealing his breath.

“Father,” he murmured, eyes and Force sense scanning across the battle-torn star-scape, even as he dove into evasive maneuvers to avoid the three TIEs that had latched onto his tail. It took only a moment to pick out Vader's modified TIE-Advanced from the swooping, darting mess of snub fighters.

It streaked past the *Falcon* at what had to be nearly its maximum speed, shockingly but blessedly ignoring the freighter, which continued it's drive toward *Teeth* unmolested, the vastly out-gunned Taylander tucked protectively in its shadow. Luke felt a split-second of relief before he caught sight of Vader's target and his heart lurched straight into his throat.

Mara's Headhunter had taken a direct hit and was leaking both fuel and oxygen. As he watched, she ejected a flaming engine seconds before it exploded, narrowly avoiding being blown to bits with it. The *Resolute* streaked away from the main battle – intentionally, Luke felt, though he couldn't have said why – and hurtled toward Zastiga's atmosphere. Mara was going to ground. He reached for her in the Force, but her shields were up high and hard. Dammit he hated that rule of hers!

Desperately, Luke sent a flare in the Force at his father, trying to wrench his attention away from Mara. Over here.

Vader ignored him, swells of ugly emotion washing off of him as he nailed his ship to the trail of Mara's crippled fighter.

“No! No! Follow me! Force dammit!” The Force pinged and Luke had to throw his x-wing into a spin to evade the crackling turbolaser fire of the Death Squadron TIEs behind him.

Artoo screamed and Skywalker pulled out of the spin into a hard zig to evade collision with an out-of-control TIE reeling from a concerted attack by Gold Squadron pilots. A second later he was pulling up and corkscrewing around one of the ships on his tail, depending equally on the Force and his laser guidance systems to peg it squarely in his sights.

Don't touch her, he thought ferociously at his father as he squeezed the trigger hard, blowing a wing off another TIE. Don't you kriffing dare! She dies, I die.

---

“Han old buddy - you're late to the party!”

“Lando?” Han shouted into the comm, pushing *Falcon* into a steep dive, then sweeping out into a punishing climb. “What the hell are you doing in the comm center?”

Only one of the two TIEs on the *Falcon*'s tail managed to duplicate the maneuver, the other crashing spectacularly into the hull of one of the five Star Destroyers bearing down on the station and the Base. *Teeth* spat a fresh round of fire, raking long, nasty gashes in the nearest Imperial ship whose shields were flickering in and out.
“Helping out,” Calrissian shot back. “You're cleared to land if you can get here – we'll keep the little ones off your tail while you get in.”

“Take the shuttle,” Han commanded. “I'll swing close enough to get 'er in your range, then I'm back out there.”

“It's a hell of a fight, my friend,” Calrissian warned, despite having expected nothing different. “That's Death Squadron, in case you hadn't noticed, and from the way they're fighting, somebody pissed in their caff this morning.”

“You see that Headhunter that came in with me?” Han demanded, then broke off to yell at Wes via the comms to the shuttle, “Janson! Get your people on Teeth and get that damn station ready to jump out of here!”

“Negative, Solo,” came the tight reply. “We've got x-wings running and waiting. We hit that deck an' we'll be back out here in 90 seconds or less.”

“Mine better be one of them!” Corran cut in from one of the gun turrets, his words broken up by the sound of the Falcon's repeating cannons ripping through two nearby enemy fighters.

“Dammit!” Han yelled, slamming a hand on the comm button and shutting the link. “Somebody's gotta get Leia out of there!”

//We must go to her.// Chewie leaned on the controls, altering their course and pressing them straight ahead toward the open bay doors.

“If anything happens to Luke -.”

//Jade will take care of him.// the wookie asserted.

“Yes,” Han blew out a breath. “Yeah. All right, let's go. We gotta find Leia and get this thing ready to jump if it all goes bad.”

---

Mara slammed back against the seat as her burning ship carved a deep channel into the thick loam of the Zastiga forest. Metal crumpled around her and she hissed with pain as she wrenched her leg free of the jagged mess that remained of the base of her cockpit. The ankle was badly sprained, but she didn't think it was broken. She slapped a palm on the emergency release, blowing the hatch up and away from the cockpit, ducking back as the fresh surge of oxygen spurned a gout of flame from her sparking console. *Time to go.*

Hauling herself up, she swung her uninjured foot over the side of the ship and teetered for a second on the edge. Tucking her arms in around her head, she rolled down the side of the burning ship. Hitting the ground hard, she continued to roll until she was clear enough to risk kneeling up to assess her situation. She could see a streak overhead closing on her position – Vader's ship. Still, it wasn't like she had any intention of running. She held the power, here – even if the Sith didn’t realize it yet.

Staggering to her feet, she limped toward her Headhunter – now completely engulfed in flames – and used the Force to pry open the hatch on the side and retrieve her bag. Levitating it well clear of the inferno, she slapped out the smoldering embers on it. Losing the ship – the first that had ever truly been hers – was a blow, but at least she still had her arsenal.

Leaving the bag on the ground, she moved a bit further from the wreckage. She selected a huge tree with a wide base and leaned against it, feigning boredom as Vader's ship hurtled into view and
pulled up at the last possible second to pull off a neat landing.

The ship hissed and popped dramatically as it opened, the Dark Lord stalking out and directly toward her. Mara felt an invisible hand grip her throat and squeeze.

“What,” the Sith rumbled in the lowest register his vocabulator could produce, the air crackling with static around them, “have you done?”

“You're going to have to be a bit more specific,” Mara sniped. Despite her rapidly diminishing air supply she not only managed not to wheeze, but to imbue her retort with gratifying disdain. “I've been… a little... busy.”

“You feel like my son.” Vader ground out. “That should not be possible.”

“Soul bond,” she bit out, defiantly.

Vader was so shocked that he actually dropped her.

Mara sucked in a breath and continued with viciously triumphant glee, “Our souls are linked - kill me and he dies too.”

_She dies, I die._ Luke's words echoed in Vader's head and he choked on the gall of it.

“Your power,” the Sith stared at the ball of throbbing Force energy surrounding Mara. “You are stealing it from him?”

“It's _mine._” Mara's eyes flashed, her voice thinning to a hiss. “He fixed me. Gave me what your Master never allowed me – my Gift.”

“That,” Vader denounced flatly, “is impossible.”

“You have no idea what he can do,” Mara accused. “What he _is._ How good.”

Vader's fury made the clearing go cold, the temperature dropping so fast and so far that her breath came out in opaque clouds of ice crystals. “You fancy yourself in love with him.”

Mara said nothing, but lifted her chin rebelliously. Above them, she felt the shift in power as an x-wing slashed around the curve of the planet toward them, engines red-lining in urgency. Luke's Force presence flared white hot, scorching their shields, demanding recognition – attention.

Locked on one another, neither Vader nor Mara responded.

“You are not capable of love.” The Sith's voice cut through the crystalline air like a neuro-whip.

“As if _you'd_ know anything of _that,_” Mara sneered.

An image pressed itself against her brain and Mara gagged at the Darkness of it. An infant, tiny and swaddled in a stained blanket, it's head capped with downy strands of faintly red-tipped gold, lay in a familiar black-leather-clad palm. Eyes already a sharp green squinched shut as a bony hand drifted down to rest over it's soft scalp. The memory was overlaid with Vader's revulsion and Mara half-turned, the coarse bark of the tree digging into her palm as she dry-heaved at the weight of it as the Emperor used the Dark Side to slice into her infant brain for the first time. The memory ended with a baby's frantic squall of pain and terror.

“You were less than seventy-two hours old,” the Sith intoned, frigidly. “When my Master began to shape you into all that he desired. And he has _never_ desired love.”
“He failed,” Mara spat bile and the words.

“What you feel,” the Dark Lord scoffed, “is the gratitude of a street pitten for the hand that lifts it from a slash-hound fighting ring. You lick at my son's fingers in piteous debt for the scraps of kindness he has offered - that is all you are capable of.”

Despair knifed through Mara's heart. “It's not.”

“He is the son of a queen and a Sith Lord.” Every word hammered against her shields in the Force, his condescension thick and black as pitch. “If you loved him, you would want him to be with someone worthy of him.”

“I am a Battle Coordinator,” Mara fired back, an edge of desperation cutting along her heart. “I have a gift. I can -.”

“You are nothing,” Vader spit. “I watched your Master systematically strip you of what scant value you once possessed. Do not presume to tell me that you have anything to offer my son that is worthy of the Heir to the Empire.”

Vader lowered his shields, his memories crashing over her – the worst days of her life replayed in the red-tinged vision of his mechanically-mediated vision. The last image flash-imprinted on the backs of her closed eyes in final condemnation – her nearly dead body, collared and bound, curled into a shipping crate; the fresh scarlet streaks left by the Emperor's Force lightening grotesque against her porcelain skin.


Hit by her distress, Luke shoved hard at her shields and this time she opened for him, reaching blindly for the solidness of his presence inside herself. He flooded into her, worried and irate.

What happened?

The rage and fear in his tone hit Mara like ice water and she spluttered mentally, dragging herself halfway out of the hell of Vader's memories. Nothing. It's all right.

“He is with you,” the Sith growled, hand coming up again, fingers tightening as the invisible grip clenched at her throat anew and dragged her up again, her toes dangling well off the ground. “You have let him serve you, when I specifically instructed that you were to serve him!”

“Is that what you ordered?” she mocked. “It was hard to tell with all the cryptic babbling in your messages.”

“Even you are not so stupid as to have failed to understand me.”

“And I complied,” she hissed.

“You have done nothing but destroy vital infrastructure of the Empire he is to inherit!” the Sith roared.

Above them, only half able to follow the argument through his link to Mara but saturated by the explosive emotions from both sides, Luke gauged the trajectory and decided he couldn't wait any longer. “I'm going down!” he announced, rapidly unbuckling himself. “Artoo, bring the ship down. I'll see you planetside!”

Without waiting for confirmation, he punched the emergency hatch button. Alarms shrieked to life as
the cockpit decompressed. The instant the hatch was far enough back, Luke jumped straight up with a hard Force shove to boost him. The x-wing kept going, rocketing forward, and he locked his body rigidly in a standing posture, arms crossed over his chest, hurtling like a missile straight for the ground.

“He doesn't want your Empire!” Mara gritted out, spots appearing across her vision.

Like a sonic boom in the Force, Luke hit the ground between them, landing in Force-softened one-kneed crouch, one hand flat on the ground, the other outstretched and gripping the hilt of his light saber. The green blade snap-hissed to life as his head came up. Oblivious to the dirt that clung to his palm from the impact, he yanked his hand up from the ground to rip off his helmet, pinning his father under blue eyes blazing with righteous fury.

“Let. Her. Go.”

Vader tossed Mara aside like a rag doll. “My son.”

Mara ducked and rolled, coming up onto hands and knees and then quickly shoving unevenly to her feet, favoring her injured ankle and gasping for air as she glared daggers at the Sith past Luke.

Are you all right?

Fine.

Satisfied with that as he could be in the moment, Luke turned his full attention back to Vader. His voice was measured and even when he spoke, but there was no small amount of very intentionally controlled Force behind them. “Don't touch her again.”

“Have no concerns about that,” Vader growled. “I have no intention of wasting any more time on that bishwag. She has failed me, and she will remanded to the recompense I promised for such a disappointment. I will bring you to the Dark Side myself.”

Luke felt a spike of hate from Mara at Vader's threat and risked a glance back, his gut tightening at the sight of familiar black ooze racing up her body.

Mara, he warned.

She glanced down at herself, following his thought, as if she hadn't even noticed. Scowling, she kicked at the darkness as she had on Corellia and it backed off just slightly. But not entirely. It pooled, thick and deep at her ankles, waiting hungrily. Luke cursed inwardly, but swiveled his head back to his father. One problem at a time.

The air flared around them as the x-wing dropped into the clearing not far from Mara's smoldering Headhunter. It hovered a moment, adjusting its angle, then slowly began to lower to the ground. Mara suppressed a dark smile at the realization that Artoo had aligned the ships laser cannons with the Sith in an entirely unsubtle offer of assistance. They wouldn't need it, but she made a mental note to find something shiny to reward her astromechanical shadow with when this was over.

“Mara is mine, now,” Luke announced, definitively. “She's not going anywhere, and I'm not going to the Dark Side.”

“The Emperor...” Vader rumbled.

“I know what the Emperor wants,” Luke interrupted, ignoring his father's flash of indignation. “And it's not going to happen. Mara is a Battle Coordinator – or well on her way to it. There are four of us, now – Jedi – and two full Rebellions. We will bring down the Emperor – without the Dark Side.”
Luke's voice softened, just a little. “Join us, Father. Work with us. We can still do this as father and son!”

Vader was utterly silent, the emotionless black eye sculpts of his helmet violently at odds with the storm that was his presence in the Force. “You,” he said at length, sounding unexpectedly exhausted and bewildered, “are very like your mother.”

Luke blinked, taken aback. Slowly, he lowered his saber, flicking the blade off.

“She was a queen,” Mara spoke up, cocking her head at Vader and narrowing her eyes in an undisguised dare. *Tell him who she was,* she thought at him. *Or aren't you man enough?*

The Sith snarled, flicking his fingers in her direction, but Mara sidestepped out of the way of the Force-impact. Turning back to face him, she raised an eyebrow in challenge. *That's a no, then?*

“Tell him, Anakin. Please.”

Mara and Luke exchanged a startled, worried glance when Vader's attention snapped away from both of them to a blank space in the air beside him, the intensity of his turmoil ratcheting upward.

Padme wore a golden gown – Force, he'd loved that dress. Loved rolling around in the fields of Naboo with her while she wore it. Loved the way it felt over his fingers when he shoved up over her hips and -. He cut off the thought, but she smiled as though she'd caught it all the same.

“Please, Anakin. Tell him who I was.” Her lips quirked. “It'll give you an excuse to tell Mara that she destroyed my family home.”

Much as he hated it, it was that promised outlet for his roiling anger and pain that tipped the scales. “Your mother was the Queen of Naboo. Padme Amidala Naberrie.”

Luke's breath left him in a rush and his head swam. *My mother. I know who my mother was.*

“And you can thank her,” Vader pointed an incriminating finger at Mara, “for destroying any chance of claiming your inheritance from her.”

Mara shot him a skeptical glare. “She'll disown him for bonding with me?”

“Her home and her crypt were in Theed.”

Jade's heart sank and a sick feeling settled in the hollow of her stomach. She'd robbed Luke of something precious. *You did it wrong.* That horrible voice was back in her head, hissing disgust. *If you'd listened to him on Corellia, you'd never have been on Naboo in the first place.*

“Did you love her?”

Luke's question yanked both Vader and Mara from their respective brooding, the fragility of his expression lancing deep in both their hearts.

“She was my wife,” Vader said, low and grave. “I love her still.” Then his tone changed, sharpened. “Can you not see her?”

“See her?” Luke searched his father's faceplate, quizzically.

“She is here.” Misgivings whispered through Vader's mind, unease snaking through him at his son's shock.


“Why can he not see you?” Vader demanded.

Padme glared at him over her shoulder. “You're the Jedi,” she snapped. “You tell me.”

“I do not know,” the Sith shot back. “You are bound to me, as is he. There is no reason you should not also be bound to one another.”

Luke's grief and doubt were living things, thrashing in Mara's chest, and she flinched inwardly at the thought that occurred in their shadow. Recompense, she told herself, sternly. For what you took from him. Gritting her teeth, she limped determinedly past Skywalker until she was toe-to-toe with Vader.

“Link with me.”

“What?” The Sith glowered down at her.

“Link. With. Me.” She repeated, sharply. “If she's linked to you in the Force, she should come with you into my sphere. We'll be able to see her, as you do.”

“You have no idea -.” Vader began.

“Your son,” Mara bit out, gambling heavily on the rough currents of emotion and thought spilling out of both men in the Force, “wants to meet his mother. You want to connect with him? Prove yourself? Give him this.” She tilted her chin up. “Unless you're afraid?”

His hand was on her throat in an instant, tight enough that she knew she'd bruise.


“If you attempt to deceive me, Little Hand…”


Vader growled, but eased his grip just slightly. “What do you need me to do?”

True to Janson's promise, he, Klivian, and Horn were in their x-wings and launching back out of the hangar bay within seconds of the Falcon and the shuttle landing. Han, Chewie, Crix, and Cracken left their ships still in shut-down mode and ran through the station's corridors, tight faces illuminated by flashing red lights as they raced toward the Command Center.

The deck vibrated under their feet every few seconds as Teeth’s ten proton torpedo launchers flung a new volley of projectiles at the Imperials. Every view port they careened past was alight with green jets of energy crackling out of the station's thirty-five turbolaser batteries to splash across the quickly-blackening hulls of Death Squadron's finest.

“Where's the Fleet?” Han demanded as the final turbo-lift zipped them up toward the central hub. “Why aren't they here?”

“Jan has most of them,” Cracken replied, grimly. “There was a raid planned on the end of the Perlemain these guys hadn't gotten to, yet.” He scowled. “Apparently they missed the memo about
the change in plans.”

Han stifled a nasty reply, forcing himself to focus instead on the imperatives of the moment. “So we're not going to win this?”

“We might fight it to a draw,” Madine said. “But we're going to need to be out of here in a hurry, no matter what.”

“Right.” That was all there was time for before the lift doors opened and they jumped back into the battle.

- -

Mara had already settled her mind into Coordinator mode before Luke realized what she was doing. “Mara, no!”

It's all right, she reassured, without attempting to twist her head around. You deserve to see your mother.

Luke's instinctive protectiveness of Mara warred with the desire of the orphaned little boy inside him to meet the woman who had never been anything more than myth. There was more, there, too. Some undercurrent in Mara he couldn't get a read on, and something off about the way neither of them could feel his mother, even though Vader insisted she was there.

It's all right, Mara assured again, soothing his concerns. Just give me a second.


Something about Luke's touch undid him in ways he couldn't have foreseen, and Vader released Jade. She stepped back, but didn't reach for her throat, much as he was sure she'd have ached to rub it.

Luke left his hand on his father's arm. “Mara is part of me,” he said, seriously, opening himself up to father in hopes that he'd grasp the full weight behind his words. “If you try to use this to hurt her -.”

Vader's shock rippling out through the Force cut him off. Something distinctly akin to horror followed close on its heels.

“You… love her.”

“Of course.” Luke glanced over his shoulder at Mara, then back at his father, perplexed. “You knew I would – that's why you sent her. Because the Begotten Prophesy told you she was meant to be with me.”

Vader felt the ground crumble beneath him, his most recent vision suddenly engulfing him, his head spinning – can't without her. I tol' you. Can't without her…

Mara felt the Sith slide out of control, all his shields dropping as he lurched in the Force. She seized the opportunity, slinging her golden silk loop around him and scooping him into one of her unoccupied rings. All three of them wavered, gasping in momentary disorientation as the galaxy within Mara shifted at the new weight and balance.

“Are you really surprised, Ani?”
Luke spun around, his heart leaping at the sight of a beautiful woman in a gold dress smiling at him. She had Leia's hair and eyes, and he was walking toward her before he realized he was moving, irresistibly drawn to her. He couldn't feel her in the Force the way he felt Ben or Nejaa when they were in Mara's loop, but her face shone with pride and love and it was more than he had ever dared hope for. “Mother,” he whispered.

“Luke, my darling boy.” Padme pressed her fingers to her lips and her eyes sparkled with tears.

Mara pulled back, as far out of Luke's awareness as she could, in an attempt to give him privacy. Padme couldn't touch him in her ethereal form, but he huddled in as close to her as he could while she showered him with soft, sweet words meant only for his ears.

Jade turned to Vader, discretely edging what shields she could sneak past Luke's distracted mind up around herself and the Sith, eyes narrowing and going hard as they fixed on him. He may have been the more powerful but he was caught within her web now and they both knew it.

“Why can't we feel her?” she demanded, voice low and hard.

“I do not know. Truly.”

“Can the Emperor feel her?”

“No,” Vader said immediately. “She was confined to her crypt until you destroyed it.” Mara ignored the implied reprimand there. “Since then, she has been with me as often as not.”

Mara was quiet a moment, a disconcerting idea beginning to form in the hidden core of her thoughts. “Do you control when she shows up?”

“No.”

“Shavit.”

“You know something,” Vader accused.

“No,” Mara glanced at Luke, then shook her head firmly. “I don't.”

The Sith was quiet a moment, thoughts and long-repressed feelings churning within him as he watched his son, silent tears streaking down his cheeks as Padme smiled at him, her lips moving in words they could not hear. “You took me into your sphere,” he rumbled, finally – almost reluctantly. “I could cause you great suffering from this vantage point.”

“Luke is worth the risk.”

The words hung between them, pregnant and challenging.

“You know the Emperor in ways he cannot. Is he correct in his assessment?”

“Yes,” Jade said, without hesitation. “He will take out your Master and he won't need the Dark Side to do it.” She fixed him with an unrelenting, unforgiving stare. “But your participation would help ensure he makes it out alive.”

“To waste his worthiness on you?” Vader growled, his disgust thick between them. “I have seen what the Begotten Prophesy offers those who abide by the mate of its choosing. It is not a life I wish for my son.”

Mara felt the challenge land squarely at her feet and closed her eyes, a deep ache welling up behind
her ribs. *If you loved him, you'd want him to be with someone worthy of him. You are not capable of love.* Her soul pushed back. *I am. I AM.*

“I can't undo the bond.” She swallowed hard, forcing the alien heat that prickled along the backs of her eyelids deep within herself to a box where she could lock it away. “But if you help us – if you give him back as much of the father he wants as you have left in you – I'll help him find someone else. Someone worthy of his legacy.”

She felt the Sith's gaze heavy on her and lifted her chin defiantly, opening her eyes are glaring back at his impassive mask.

“Done.”

The weight of the word, the gravity of Vader's sense where it rested within her rings, threatened to crush her.

“I must go.”

“What?” Luke turned around, face darkening when he left the bubble of happiness he'd been in and awakened to the realization of how distanced he'd unwittingly become from the other two. He glanced between them. “What's happened? What's going on?”

“Not yet, Ani,” Padme protested, her hands reaching for Luke, stopping just short as she remembered her inability to touch him. “Please.”

“There will be another opportunity,” he intoned, folding his arms. “But only if I leave now to call off my troops while there is still a Rebellion with which to partner.” He looked at Mara. “You will leave this link intact, that we may speak without being traced?”

Mara nodded, shying away from Luke's mental touch as it ghosted over her shields, feeling out the shape of them, and the displeasure in its wake when she didn't take them down. “If you end up in a bad place with the Emperor, sever it,” she instructed. “I'll find you after to renew it but he can't be allowed to find it. To know.”

“Of course not.” Vader's gaze shifted to Luke and there was something there, a fragile but determined protectiveness that whispered of the potential for power and fight beyond reasoning. “I will allow nothing to harm my son.”

Mara said nothing, just disengaged Vader from active presence within her sphere, leaving the access line open. Padme vanished and Mara felt Luke's heart fall.

*You'll see her again,* she promised him.

“You're going to help us?” Luke struggled to catch up, staring between them, wide-eyed in a messy soup disbelief, joy, and suspicion.

“The Emperor is a formidable enemy. It will take our combined power to destroy him.” Vader made his pronouncement as if it were the only logical conclusion, and they'd have been idiots to expect otherwise. “We will negotiate the details later. I will contact you when I am ready.”

The Sith spun, cape swirling around him as he stalked back toward his TIE. “See that your Rebellion leaves this place at once. I will falsify the reports of what happened here, but you cannot remain.” Without another word or backward glance, he stepped into his TIE, the ship closing up around him. A moment later, it lifted off, launching into the sky at break-neck speed.
Mara felt jumbled, both heart-sick and elated at once. She'd secured Luke's future; he'd have his life, his victory, and even as much of his family as there was to recover. She couldn't think about the cost now. Later.

Casting a final glance at the TIE's departing shape, she limped determinedly toward where she'd left her bag beside the now-smoking hulk of the Resolute's wreckage. She'd just wrapped her fingers around the strap when Luke's hand closed over hers.

“Let me get it.”

“I can do it.”

“I'm sure you can.” He snatched it up anyway and slung it over his shoulder. “You can also tell me what I missed just now.”

“Vader's going to help us.” Mara decided against trying to reclaim her bag and hobbled toward the x-wing. “But we have to evacuate. Find a new base.”

“Mara.” Luke caught her arm and she glanced down, grimacing to find black ooze as high as her ribs, uncomfortably close to his hand. Luke's eyes were on the ooze, as well, concern laced with irritation pouring off him. “What did I miss?”

“Nothing.” Mara took a deep breath and hit the 'empty' button inside her head, let everything fall out and away. Ignored the disturbed look that crossed Luke's face as he watched her go blank. The ooze thinned and began dripping off her, receding in languid disappointment. “I don't like your father, and I don't like negotiating, all right? But it had to be done and we did it, and now there's other things we have to do. We can get into details later if you want. Right now, we need to go assess the damage to Teeth and reassure your sister you're still alive and well.”

Luke liked no part of that; the part where she was right on all counts least of all. “Let me levitate you into the ship.”

“I don't need help.”

“You don't need to make that ankle any worse, either,” he chided, clambering up the side of his ship with her bag.

Mara ignored both him and the pain in her ankle as she awkwardly scaled her way up behind him. Luke sighed, reaching out and catching her arms as soon as she was close enough, hauling her in with him.

“This isn't going to be comfortable,” he apologized as Artoo cued the cockpit hatch to shut.

“It doesn't matter. I'm going to take a quick healing trance until we get back to the station. Fix the worst of this.”

Luke helped her shift her position until she was curled up in his lap, balled up sideways like she had been in the speeder on Ord Mantell. “Mara?” He asked, wrapping one arm around behind her and reaching over her with the other to finish firing up the engines. “What did he say?”

“We just covered this,” she said, impatiently.

“I mean before that. Before I landed. Father did something - said something? - that hurt you.”

Mara turned her face into the shoulder of Luke's flight suit, inching down a little deeper, making
herself smaller yet as the ship began to lift off the ground. “Lies. I shouldn't have reacted.”

Luke's arm curled a little tighter around her, his other hand occupied with flying. “Lies about what?”

Instead of answering, she dropped steeply into a healing trance. Skywalker sighed. He should have known that being there with him would have no effect on her hard-line position about not being a distraction when flying. He was reminded again that at some point he really needed to get to the bottom of that. He hadn't thought she'd had anyone to lose, but something had obviously carved a deep furrow in her psyche on the point.

Whatever Vader had said or done to her before he got on planet had touched another such well of pain. Luke could only hope that once the Alliance had relocated, once the dust settled down and they had some time together as he'd promised they would, that she'd open up about it. All of it.

They broke atmosphere and the comm lines were suddenly head-achingly full of chatter. Death Squadron was winking out into hyper-space, the Rebel fighters confused and cautiously overjoyed at the sudden retreat.

The chatter on the comm lines went dead as Teeth broadcast an override signal: Immediate recall. All personnel to their assigned stations, on the double.

The Alliance was breaking camp. Immediately. Artoo twittered and cued the x-wing for a landing slot in the Rogue's dedicated hangar.

Luke leaned his head back against the seat, blowing out a frustrated breath, and stared at the station looming large ahead of him. He'd been waiting for this moment for weeks. Planning, impatiently, for Mara's return to Teeth. He'd had so many hopes, so many good intentions. And somehow he'd ended up here – both of them streaked with dirt, her ship gone, and Mara bruised body and mind.

Please, he whispered to the Force. Please, don't let this be a sign of things to come.
Purgatory

Chapter Summary

Life on Teeth in the six weeks post-Zastiga isn't going the way anyone expected.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was hell to write, and thanks are owed to Frangi for letting me whine about pacing and how badly I just wanted to skip this chapter entirely and go straight to the next one, where everything hits the fan in spectacular fashion.

This is seriously in need of further editing, but I'm done with it! (Most of the gaps/questions will be unraveled in two chapters from now, if that helps at all.) Ergo, constructive criticism still welcome, but please forgive the obvious failings... I'm going for better done than perfect here, by a lot!

One week post Zastiga

Goosebumps pricked along Leia's skin as she crawled out of bed, the room frigid compared to the warmth of Han's body snuggled against hers in their large bed. She glanced longingly over her shoulder to where he snored softly. She didn't know when he'd come to bed, exactly – only that it had been far too recently. He'd emerged from Zastiga hellbent on getting the Falcon certified as her personal transport as soon as physically possible, and was burning fuses at both ends to make it happen.

It took only moments to wind her hair in a quick circlet and pull on her uniform, then to lock the bedroom door and the entrance to her quarters as she left. She had few aides, all of them well trained and positively disposed towards Han; they'd be light of foot and muffled of voice until they knew for sure both of the suite's occupants were up and out. Leia missed the days in which discretion had been enough.

Teeth had traded its quiescent thrum of potential for a bone-itching buzz of excited anxiety with a disconcertingly esurient undercurrent. Even at 0300 hours, most of its halls roiled with personnel. Jenth Base was a touch smaller than Indigo had been; with the recent influx of recruits it simply couldn't hold everyone. So the Alliance spilled new personnel into every empty corner of Leia's station like a river overflowing its banks.

The Princess hurried, brisk and silent, towards the Rogue's private hangar. Only their dual status as an Intel unit protected the privacy of their dedicated wing – for now. Halfway down the corridor, she stopped at what looked like the entrance to a supply closet. There was a utilitarian key pad mounted at shoulder height, and Leia tapped in a complex code.

Inside, Mara sat in the middle of the floor, face creased with concentration. Her head was canted, as she listened intently to some indistinguishable sound. Her long-sleeved, high-necked tunic and leather pants were the same she'd worn when Leia saw her twelve hours before. No doubt she'd
come straight here after helping Han and Chewie on the *Falcon* all night. Luke would not be pleased, but Leia was in no position to scold anyone about their obsessive work habits. She settled cross-legged onto the floor across from Mara, returning the redhead's nod of greeting. Finishing her silent conversation, Jade jumped directly to the desired subject without preface. “I've been asking the ghosts, and I think I may have a work-around for the shielding problem.”

“I'm all ears,” Leia made a face. “I hate not knowing how much of my head Luke is seeing as much as he hates being bombarded with my feelings.” She chuckled slightly, rueful, and lifted a hand to knead a knot in her neck. “And it's more than a little awkward to know I've been 'indiscreet' when I was with Han.”

“Every individual has a Force signature,” Mara explained. She produced a data pad and slid it into the space between them on the floor. She drew a neat circle on the pad's blank page.

“Twins,” she continued, “have Force signatures so similar they partially overlap. She added a second circle to the illustration, creating a Venn Diagram, then tapped the shared section. “This is why Luke's regular shielding doesn't keep you out. When he shields, he shields all of himself.” She re-circled the diameter of the first circle.

“Which includes the part that's also me,” Leia caught on. “How do we fix that?”

“Partitioning.” Mara drew a rectangle around the shared section and another around the rest of Leia's circle. “Similar to what you did to keep Vader out. We'll create a door here,” she ran the tip of her finger up and down the barrier line of the rectangle. “You can 'close' it when you want privacy and leave it open when it doesn't matter. Luke will be able to do the same, once I explain the mechanics to him.”

“Why wasn't this a problem before? Growing up, shouldn't we have felt each other? Or on the Death Star, when Vader had me? Or even on Hoth?”

“Best guess? You were both largely dormant in the Force until just before Yavin. And Luke's powers were being purposely diverted and suppressed by his guardians and Kenobi. This part of him,” Mara gestured to their shared mental space, “wasn't active. He didn't know it was there, could only touch or hear it indirectly or when he was in danger.” She shrugged. “The more you've both trained and expanded your awareness, the more tapped into it you are.”

“More signal power.” Leia looked at Jade curiously. “What about you two? Do you share space like this?”

Mara was quiet a moment. Then she leaned over, long braid dipping over her shoulder, and drew a third, separate and smaller circle for herself. Within it, she drew an even smaller circle. Then she placed an identical circle within Luke's space, on the part of him that didn't overlap with Leia. “I have a Luke-place.” Her eyes stayed on the datapad. “A piece of each of us was cut out and replaced with a piece of the other.” She rubbed a finger at the edge of the datapad. “There was so little of me left, before our bond, that I don't have my own Force signature any more – not entirely. It… oscillates, is the word Corran uses. Between mine and Farmboy's. It's not so much an overlap as a fusion.”

“That's why you could reach through him to me, when the Rogues brought Ryanta and her people here.”

Mara nodded.
“All right,” Leia said, all business. “Where do we start on partitioning?”

“With what's already there. We need to look at what you have left over from your fight with Vader. Take out what's in the way, replace what's damaged. Build something intentional, not just emergency bulwarks.”

“Something slightly more attractive, I hope?” Leia grimaced.

“If you want,” Mara agreed. “Are you ready?”

“As I'm going to be. Let's get to it.”

---

Two blips popped into life on the x-wing's dashboard sensor array readout. Half a second later, Artoo was tootling that two small craft had materialized out of hyperspace ahead of the x-wing. Before Luke could ask a single question, a familiar voice was broadcasting over the Squadron channel.

“Rogue Leader, this is Rogue Three. Permission to join the party?”


“Right here, Boss,” Celchu confirmed, joining the channel.

“How did the drop-off go?”

“Like chrono-work,” Wedge replied, grimly. “But based on what we saw, the extraction's going to be a challenge.”

“If it went so well, what took you so long?” Hobbie demanded.

“We had to swing by Ord Mantell to pick up Rumor's cannon on our way back from Carida,” Wedge answered. “It was supposed to be delivered the day after the emergency recall. Her supplier held it, but it needed a lift to Teeth.”

“Thanks for that.” Luke made sure his tone conveyed his appreciation. “I know she wasn't thrilled at the change of plans.”

“Nobody is,” Wes pointed out. “This all-fly-no-rest thing is bantha fodder, Boss.”

“We're not going to get better duty until we finish securing this corner of the sector,” Wedge said, matter-of-factly. “So now that we've caught up, let's get back to business.”

---

Two weeks post Zastiga

“That should do it.”

Leia pried her tightly shut eyes open, only to blink – and then scowl fiercely. “I told you to stop if I made you bleed again!”

“It's fine.” Mara ran the back of her hand across her nose, smearing the blood that dripped down over her chin.
“No,” Leia corrected sharply, “it’s not.” She started to move, halting and hissing when her overstrained muscles locked, sending a stabbing lance of pain up her spine. Still glaring, she rubbed a hand at the small of her back.

“If you don’t restrain someone before doing field surgery, you’re going to get kicked.” Mara repeated the same thing she’d said the last three times her Force work on Leia’s Vader-mangled shielding had drawn blood. She shoved roughly to her feet and strode to the corner of the training room to snatch up a towel. “Psychic damage and repair aren’t any different.”

Leia pushed herself upright, momentarily light headed. She steadied and headed in Mara's direction. Quickly chilling swear made her her clothes stick to her and the sensation made her skin crawl. She rooted in a supply cabinet for water bottles. Taking one for herself, she handed the other to Jade.

“I hope the training you’re doing with Kyle isn’t this hard on you.”

“Kenobi’s doing most of the work with him right now.” Mara splashed some water on the towel to dab at her face. “I host, but otherwise my focus is largely on... other things.”

“General Madine mentioned you had a few projects going.”

Mara tossed the stained towel down a laundry chute mounted in the wall. “You should get going. You’ll be late for your Council meeting.” She made for the door.

“Mara – wait.” Leia dug in her pocket, closed her hand over the things she’d pulled from the concealed safe in her quarters this morning. “I wanted to wait until Luke could be here.” She held out her hand, uncurling her fingers so the two objects lay displayed in the flat of her palm. “But Master Yoda left these for you.”

Mara went inhumanly still, eyes riveted to her friend's palm. “For Luke, you mean.”

Leia’s brow furrowed as she glanced at the data chip and the small, misshapen cube she held. Woven from twigs bound together with dried vines, it was feather-light and seemingly innocuous. Yet Mara stared at it as if it were a live serpent waiting to strike.

“No. He said that he wasn't able to provide you with a safety, the way he did for us – Luke and me. That you'd need these to make a home and love for yourself.” The Princess glanced from the objects to Mara. “You know what it is?”

“He didn’t tell you?”

Leia shook her head.

“Right.” Mara took a deep breath, let it out slowly. “Fine.” Carefully, she reached out and plucked the objects up, stuffing them immediately into a pouch on her belt. “Thank you.” She again turned to go, pausing reticently at the door when Leia called her name.

“What is it? What did he leave you?”

Jade’s hand hovered over the button for the door. “A holochron,” she said finally, glancing over her shoulder, face tight with tension. “He made me a holochron.”

//Get down here.// Chewie's howl cut through the noise of Han's welder and he shut it down, shoving the face shield of the dirty, dented protective helmet up in annoyance.
“Can't you see I'm – oh, hey, Jade.” Solo stopped his complaint mid-sentence as he leaned down from the open ceiling panel and caught sight of a very agitated Mara standing beside Chewie. “What's goin' on?”

“You still have that drawer under your bunk?”

Han raised an eyebrow. “Yeah. You need somethin' special?”

Mara dipped her hand into a pouch on her belt and held out two objects. “Will you store these for me? In there?”

Han gripped the edge of the nearest intact panel and swung down, straightening, then leaning over to peer at them. “They dangerous?”

“To you, no.” Her voice was tight, her lips pressed in a firm line.

Han didn't know what this was about, but he was willing to entertain a little uncertainly to take that hunted look off her face. “Sure, don't see why not.” He plucked the objects up, noting her obvious relief when they disappeared inside his vest pocket.

“Thanks.” Mara spun on her heel and was gone.

“That seem a little weird to you?” Han asked his co-pilot.

The wookie whuffed unhappily. //There is something wrong with her scent.//

“Wrong how?” Solo asked warily; he'd learned long ago never to discount the insights available through a wookie's sense of smell.

//It is… like on Ord Mantell. In the speeder, when the Cub was alarmed. Like… mold, or tar, on her.//

“Shavit.” Han rubbed his jaw. “Maybe I can put a word in with Leia. See if we can get the Kid back for a day or two, sooner than planned.”

//What about those?// Chewie waved at Han's vest pocket.

“Whatever they are, they can wait.”

---

Mara watched the x-wings settle, en masse, to the floor of the hangar. Despite the lateness of the hour, techs rushed about in coordinated chaos, pushing ladders into place and summoning hoists to pull the astromechs free of their slots. Transparisteel canopies popped and hissed as they lifted back, weary pilots shoving their way up and out, stiff from having been crammed in too-small spaces too long.

Glancing down, she watched impassively a second as the ooze at her hips undulated, sucking at the soft fabric of her top. Closing her eyes, she hit the 'empty' button in her head. Let everything fall out and away, lost herself for a moment in the howling rush as everything was sucked out of her. When she opened her eyes, the ooze was retreating, seeping off her boots into the floor.

Satisfied, she wove her way forward, through the techs and support droids toward the nose cone of the only ship she currently cared about. As she went, she dropped her shields. Skywalker's sense rushed in, flooded the cavernous emptiness inside her. The tight knot that never seemed to leave the
center of her chest these days loosened, just a bit.

An invisible grip wrapped around Artoo's stout form and he squealed happily as he started to loft free. Skywalker, already at the top of the ladder, glanced at his hovering droid and grinned. Putting his feet to the outside edges of the metal, he slid down, landing neatly despite his weariness. He barely waited for Mara to settle Artoo safely on the ground before sweeping her into a hug.

“CorMeum.”

“Skywalker.” Mara let herself lean into his chest, trying to bleed the feel of him into herself, but made a show of wrinkling her nose. “You smell like a mantabog.”

“And you feel like a ton of duracrete bricks,” he rejoined, lips twisting in something between a smile and reproving look. “Have you been trancing at all?”

“I've been busy. We can't all spend our days pleasure-cruising around the sector.”


“I cleared my schedule.” She lifted and dropped one shoulder in a shrug. “I thought Artoo might need some intelligent conversation after having been stuck out there with you lot so long.”


Calling farewells to his squad, Luke took her hand. Mara willingly followed him back to their quarters, Artoo trailing along beside, chirping cheerfully.

“I'm going to hit the sani-steam before we pass out.” Skywalker squeezed her hand. “Meet you in bed in a minute?”

Mara nodded. Luke ducked into the bedroom, then disappeared into the 'fresher with a handful of clothing. Jade waited for the sound of the water starting, then turned to Artoo.

“Do you need to recharge?”

//My power cells are fully charged. What do you require?//

“I need you to guard the room while Skywalker sleeps. No one in or out. And we need to set up a rotating security code on the door – it's too easy to crack, right now.” She produced a data chip and the droid rolled forward so she could input it into a slot on his stout, round body. “Specs of what I'm looking for are on here.”

Artoo tooted in surprise at the other specs he found on the chip. //And the force field?//

“If you can.” Mara frowned. “I can figure it out myself, if you can't.”

He blatted. //Easy. I will be done before you wake.//

If he were a being, Mara reflected, he'd have been rubbing his hands together with glee at the challenge. “Thank you.” Leaving him to begin his new project, she hurried to the bedroom. Digging out the shirt Luke had given her and a pair of soft lounge pants Mirax had goaded her into buying, she changed quickly.

She was setting her boots at the end of the bed when Luke appeared. His hair was tousled and damp, his bare chest flushed from steam and scrubbing. Grey, Rebellion-issued sleep pants slung low on his hips, leaving plenty of sculpted muscle for Mara's viewing pleasure. She had the urge to touch him,
and snapped her eyes away, guiltily.

_Not worthy._ The vise in her chest tightened again. _Stripped of value. You promised._

Unable to miss the turmoil in Mara's head – even if her shields kept the details from view - Luke dropped his armful of clothing on the nearest chair and went to her side. “We don't have to do this,” he reminded her, gently. “You can have your own bed. Or I can sleep somewhere else if you'd feel better here, by yourself.”

“No.” The word was half-choked, but the feeling behind it flared in the Force. _Don't go._ “I have to trance. It won't matter, anyway. I –.” Mara stopped; ruthlessly shoved her emotions down and away. “Tell me how it works. Do you have… your own side, or something? The manual didn't –.” She clamped her mouth shut, cheeks flaming in shame at her slip of the tongue. She was _better_ than that, dammit!

_You are nothing,_ Vader's voice snarled in her head, in reply. Mara stomped at it, willed herself to stop flushing and commanded herself to get a grip.

“Manual?” Luke reached out, ran the back of his fingers over her arm in what he hoped was a soothing gesture.

“I researched.” She hesitated. “Relationships.”

“Okay.” He continued to stroke her arm for a moment, battling tiredness and disappointment. He'd been looking forward to sharing a bed with her since the first moment she'd suggested moving in with him. Bought patience all those long nights in his x-wing with the promise that if he just got the work done, he could come back. Have that dream. This… tension… had not been part of his expectations. Awkwardness, sure, but… he tried to imagine what it would be like to have so few reference points for something this commonplace. The cold, treacherous arrangements she must have been taught were 'normal' for the simple act of sleeping in the same bed with another being – by choice – to be _this_ foreign and stressful to her.

“If you tell me what I need to do –.”

Luke lifted his hand to her cheek, stopping her. She looked at him, quizzical and uncertain, and he leaned in.

The kiss was light, and soft. Mara's eyes fluttered closed. Just like Ord Mantell, the feel of him went straight to her head. He reached for her in the Force, wordless comfort and reassurance. She stopped thinking.

Her body softened, and he gathered her into him. His left hand splayed warm across the small of her back, a promise of support and protection. His right tugged at the fastener of her braid, tossing it away somewhere. His tongue licked at her lips, an invitation to open for him. Mara pushed in closer still, both palms flat against his chest, and opened her mouth to his. _This_ at least the manual had covered, and there was no agitation – only curiosity and wonder – when his tongue found hers. He worked her braid loose, strand by strand. The gentle tug and release stirred something in her that she couldn't name. She drifted on the currents of bliss.

_Mara?

“Hmmm?” she hummed._

Luke smiled slightly against her lips at the feel of her, languid and distracted. _I'm going to pick you up, all right?_
She hummed again, breaking the kiss only to tip her head back into his hand as he stroked it up the back of her neck, kneading his fingers into her scalp. Luke stifled a groan as her pleasure at the simple touch rippled between them. Reluctantly, he withdrew his hand, trailing it back down her neck to just below her shoulders. Her eyes came open when he bent, tucking his other arm under her knees, and scooped her up. She blinked, coming a back to herself a bit, but the earlier tension remained blessedly at bay as he used the Force to pull back the covers and climbed onto the bed. It took a moment of rearranging, but he managed to get them settled – himself in the center, Mara tucked along his right side, her head pillowed on his shoulder and the blankets pulled snugly up around them.

“All right?” He grimaced in apology when the words came out on a yawn.

To his surprise, she smiled slightly. She snuggled her head a little deeper into him. “Go to sleep, Skywalker.”

Luke's right hand came up, burying itself in her hair again, and he turned his head to press a kiss to the top of her head. “Sweet dreams, CorMeum,” he mumbled.

She had meant to trance; Force knew she needed it. But still Mara lay awake in the silent darkness, watching Luke sleep.

“You are not capable of love,” Vader's voice rumbled in her memory. “If you loved him, you would want him to be with someone worthy of him.”

The Sith was wrong, she thought fiercely. She was capable of love. She would prove it. Her promise replayed in her head, heavy and acrid. I'll help him find someone else. Someone worthy of his legacy. Isn't that what you knew was going to happen, anyway? Her mind challenged. You told him you weren't wife material. You were very clear that whatever you became to him it would have to be something else.

Well, that was true. That Luke loved her – had told Vader as much – didn't change who he was. Or what she was. What would be expected of him, and required of her. Neither, for that matter, did her vow. What mattered was that they could still have this… however they eventually defined it.

Regardless of of threats, Vader wouldn't give her to Darillion now that he knew Luke considered her so deeply his. It would break the trust between them – trust he needed, if they were to overthrow his Master. She would find Luke a proper wife, as she'd promised, and if he kept her on the side, well, no one had made any promises to his cranky, crazy father on that count, now had they?

Tentatively, infinitely careful not to wake him, Mara laid her hand flat over Luke's heart. Felt it beat reassuringly against her palm.

The Emperor ruined me. But I will remake myself into anything you need, she swore solemnly into the darkness. I'll prove them all wrong.

- -

Three weeks post Zastiga

“You put three of my aides in the med bay!”

Dodonna’s face was cherry-red under his cloud of white hair. He grabbed yet another tuft, yanking at
Mara folded her arms across her chest, the leather of her jacket far too well-worn to creak at the movement. She wore her bantha-leather ensemble every day now, dressed for the battle the days had become. Her sour glare and biting tone dripped disgust. “They were attempting -poorly, I might add - to break into a secure section of the station without authorization. I was entirely within my rights to intervene.”

“It was a prank!” Jan spluttered, livid. “You shocked them unconscious over a silly prank!”

Jade's lips turned down in scorn. “That shame is yours, General.”

“What?! How dare you -?”

“You are a General,” Mara snapped, cutting him off, icy and derisive. “Those people are under your command and we are at war.” One hand dropped to her hip. The other lifted, index finger pointing at him in the same imposing threat she'd grown up watching Vader use. She was darkly pleased to see Dodonna share the same instinctive reaction that most Imperial generals had -- he froze, starting at her in something between terror and hate. “It is your responsibility to handpick a staff qualified and deserving of service at this level. Your job to ensure they are properly trained and conduct themselves in a manner consistent with their positions. Decent leaders also make every effort to use organizational resources efficiently.” She dropped her pointing hand to a hip and glowered at the General as if he were something she'd like to scrape off her boots. “If your assistants have the time, energy and idiocy to engage in this kind of ... malarky, then perhaps there ought to be a reassessment. Not only of their quality and fitness for their posts, but for how many you have in the first place.”

For a moment, Dodonna simply gaped. His mouth worked like a fish's as he floundered, his mind scrambling to reconcile the unexpected tirade with the usually taciturn woman no one could coax two words out of.

To Mara's left, Mon Mothma cleared her throat. “Thank you for your opinions, Agent Rumor,” she said, formally. “We'll take them into consideration. However, the point remains that you have erected a force field across all entrances to the portion of the Base assigned to Rogue Squadron. Fields over which only you have control, and which have now placed three Alliance staffers in the med bay.”

“They will be fine,” Mara scoffed. “The setting wasn't high enough to cause any permanent damage.”

“That is not the point.” Mothma's tone was reprimanding. “These fields inhibit appropriate passage of personnel and supplies into that section of the station.”

“No,” Mara shot back, “they don't. The biometric scanners are directly linked to the official maintenance schedule and duty roster. Anyone who has proper cause to be there will have no trouble coming and going when they're assigned to do so.”

Mon opened her mouth but Mara didn't give her a chance to speak. “The only people having problems with that are the ones apparently incapable of functioning to proper military standard. I suggest that you 'encourage' the maintenance squadrons to do their flimsey-work to spec and on time. Remind them that tardiness is not an attractive quality in an officer.” She sniffed. “That should be more than sufficient to clear up any 'issues'. ” Mara glanced at her chrono. “If we're finished here, I have work to do.”

Leaving the implied and so should you hanging in the air behind her, Jade turned on her heel and
walked out.

- -

Luke banked his x-wing to the right lazily, his eyes skimming across the scanners. There wasn't much in this corner of the sector, but they couldn't give it the all clear until they'd logged a complete scan.

Without warning, he started to choke.

A pungent, charred flavor he couldn't describe blistered his tongue and he hunched, coughing violently. Artoo trilled, loud and worried. Luke waved a hand at him, trying to be reassuring. Nausea contorted his stomach and Luke held his breath, willing it to stop before he vomited all over his cockpit.

“Luke?” Corran's voice cracked across the speakers before he devolved into a fit of hacking himself. “Are you -,” Horn dry heaved, “getting this, too?”

Artoo whistled a response when Luke could not. Instead of trying to talk, Luke reached for Mara, panicked. Her sense was... off, her shields in place save for a small hole that was undeniably the source of the ghastly taste and gut-twisting sickness.


CorMeum? Luke reached across their bond, rougher than he'd intended in his fear.

She jack-knifed away from his touch, instinctively lashing out. Luke jerked back, gulping for air as disorientation and then horror poured through the space between them. In the next instant, shields snapped up between them again, hard and thick.

Oh no you don't. Luke ran his sense along her shields, pushing for acknowledgment. Mara? Mara! Tell me what happened! Are you all right?


“Working on it,” Skywalker croaked back, tightly. “Everybody keep to your flight paths.” Mara?

I'm sorry. Her voice, when her shields cracked, was wretched.

Luke's heart clenched. He ought to be there, with her. Not out here in empty space running pointless sweeps. Careful to control his tone, he asked again, what happened?

A whisper. I fell asleep. A fresh wave of misery. I – it won't happen again. I'm sorry.

Luke just sat, stunned. You... were asleep?

I... project. I told you.

Baay Shfat! Luke felt Mara cringe at the crude Huttese obscenity. That was a nightmare?

You shouldn't be talking to me. You're flying. Her voice lacked the steel those words usually carried.
Sweetheart -.

I'll trance for a while. I won't disturb you again.

Frustration snarled inside him. Mara.

But she was gone, shields high and hard again.

Luke punched the comm button, hard enough that it cracked. “New plan, Rogues. We're finishing this loop, and then we're going back to Teeth. I'll explain later.”

- -

Mara scrubbed her hands over her face, then dropped them back in her lap and stared blearily at the holo-display in front of her.

He's psychotic. Dissociative. What am I going to tell Luke?

She swept her eyes over the piles of information in front of her. Case reports. Medical journals. Highly classified documents from the old Jedi Order and newer files penned by Palpatine's Inquisitors, stolen directly from Imperial Intelligence's heavily encrypted data banks. The evidence was clear. What to do about it was another matter entirely.

Nothing. You're not going to tell him anything until you've proven it for yourself.

Mara glanced at the chrono. There wasn't a lot of time left before Rogue Squadron was due back, but she shouldn't really need long.

You can do this. Just play nice.

Shutting the projection off, Mara pulled her knees up to her chest closed her eyes. She pulled intently on the Force, clearing her mind and drawing in enough extra energy to sharpen it against her exhaustion.

Centered, she began to align her rings. Skywalker and Corran away. Leia and Katarn away. Ghosts away. Vader… she spun the annulus containing the Sith toward herself and reached in. She felt him startle, his rage snapping and popping to life in a thunderous storm around him.

Forgive me. Mara modulated her mental tone to one of intent deference, then swallowed bitterness into her core when he could not see it, and made herself add, Lord Vader. I did not mean to intrude.

His presence was heavy in her Force gyroscope. Luke was positioned so close and so evenly around the heart of her power that she didn't usually notice his weight except as a grounding presence. Vader sat much further out, and it took conscious effort to hold him steady – especially cut off from Luke as she was behind her shields.

What do you require, Hand?

I would make my apologies to your wife, if she is available. Mara did not have to feign her grimace of dismay. She is precious to your son and I wronged her. I would make my amends before they are in contact again. She steeled herself. As… part of my promise. To serve him better.

Mara held herself rigidly in place, refusing to flinch back as the Sith's icy touch ran down her Force signature. Like an index finger trailing down her cheek to her chin as he examined her, assessed her intent.
She is here. You have two minutes. He turned away from her, dismissively. Mara held her breath as Padme emerged, taking her husband's place in the ring. The Queen wore a long, layered gown of purple velvet with puffed sleeves and a turned-up collar. Incongruent with the formality of her dress, her long hair was only loosely pulled back in casual, romantic style. Any other time, Mara would have been grossly uncomfortable with the idea of romance in relation to her Sith tormentor.

In this moment, she cared about one thing and one thing only: Padme felt like Vader.

The weight of the ring did not shift when the two exchanged places. There was no difference – no oscillation, even – in the Force signature.

“You wished to speak with me?” Padme's voice was regal, but kind.

“To apologize, your Majesty.” Mara dropped her chin in something approximating the type of bow one noble would give another. “For destroying your ancestral home.”

“Is that really why you're here?” Padme folded her hands in front of her in a movement that unexpectedly reminded Mara of Leia.

“It would unwise of me to lie to Lord Vader, don’t you think?” Mara arched an eyebrow.

“I think that your former Master made his living by deceit. As his pupil, you must be well skilled in it.”

“I do not belong to the Emperor any more,” Mara said decisively. “I am with Luke, now.”

There was a sudden swirl of black and Vader was there, folding Padme into his cloak and pointing a commanding hand at Mara. “Get out! The Emperor comes, and he must not find you here.”

Mara dropped the connection, spinning Vader's annulus so that he swung away from her, leaving only as much of the link in existence as necessary to call it up again in the future. Seemingly of its own accord, Luke's ring spun back toward her from where she'd angled it away. Dizzy from the suddenly shifting weights, Mara started when she felt someone press against her back. She dug her heels into the floor, positioning herself to escape, when Luke's voice, low and urgent, broke through.

“Hey, hey, hey! It's all right – it's just me.”


“Fierfek, it's everywhere.” Luke's hands started long, smooth strokes down her arms. He touched her this time, pressing warmth and light into her more strongly than he had last time. With the direct touch, the ooze bubbled and sizzled, half dissolving before it could flee from his possessive warmth.

“What were you doing?”

Mara left her eyes closed and let her head fall back against his shoulder. “Confirming bad news.”

---

Four weeks post Zastiga

Luke trudged into his quarters and tried to set his helmet on the low table near the door. Tried because he was so tired he fumbled the simple movement and nearly sent the already battered headgear clattering to the floor. Beside him, Artoo was already scanning the room; he warbled unhappily.
“Again?”

The droid chirped and rolled away, planting himself beside the sofa. His electronic eye rolled toward the wall behind it, then back at Luke, and he chirped again.

“Not in this – hang on.” Luke sat down on the floor to pull his boots off and just left them there directly in front of the door. He shoved off his flight suit, leaving it, too, where it dropped. Then he peeled off the clammy, sweat-soaked sleeveless undershirt and socks for good measure. Clad only in the loose, antimicrobial, moisture-wicking pants he wore under his suit for long flights, he walked over and crouched beside Artoo. Pushing the couch out a bit, he felt around until he found the concealed edge of the wall panel. Prying it open with exhaustion-clumsy fingers, he slid it out and shoved it behind him.

She shouldn’t have been able to fit. The space was small and cramped, obviously not intended for anything other than to promote air flow. But Mara had backed herself into it on her side, one arm crammed up under her head, neck at an angle he knew would have been excruciating after only a few minutes if she’d been awake instead of in a healing trance. She was still nearly fully dressed.

“This has to stop.” Luke told his mechanical friend, quietly, rubbing his face with his hands. “I’m done arguing with Command. Send a message to the rest of the Squad – we’re not flying tomorrow.”

The droid chirped understanding and then rolled his electronic eye at Mara and cooed softly. Certain that she wouldn’t wake unless they used a trigger phrase or she hit her pre-set time limit, Luke sighed and reached in, carefully working a hand under her until he could shimmy her out. Pulling her limp form from behind the couch, he lifted her and staggered to bed. Artoo rolled ahead of him, extending his pincher arm and pulling back the covers.

“Thanks.” Luke set Mara down on the bed, making sure she was in a position that wouldn’t cause her discomfort when she woke. Then he climbed over her and collapsed onto his side of the mattress. After a moment, he rolled over onto his side and slid one hand onto her hip; the touch was chaste, but he needed to feel her. To remind himself that she was here and, bleak as it seemed some days, there was hope in that.

His eyes felt like grit-paper and he closed them, knowing sleep would swallow him whole in a moment. “Artoo,” he mumbled. “Try to stall her if she's up first tomorrow, will you?”

The droid gave a dubious but affirmative tweet and Luke passed out.

- -

The bed was empty when he woke, the suite completely quiet. Luke groaned as he sat up, muscles protesting as he drew his knees up and rolled his neck, and then couldn’t decide whether he was more inclined to laugh or cry at the ration bar she’d left on the stand beside the bed. Teeth had two full mess halls – both serving better chow than the Rebellion had ever seen, compliments on the influx of new volunteers, many of them former Imperial slaves with few skills outside the domestic. Still Mara ate ration bars. Almost exclusively. Suggestions that she take meals in the mess were met with stony – and baffling - refusal.

Mission, the note underneath the ration bar read. Last minute, from Cracken. I'm sorry.

Skywalker dropped his forehead to his knees. The chrono said it was only 0400. He still needed hours of sleep to catch up. Mara should have, too. But the taut stretch of their bond's homing beacon – strong and easy to read, even with her shields high and hard – told him she'd shipped out hours ago.
“Kriffing hell.” Knowing he'd get no more sleep in his frustration, Luke shoved out of bed. Maybe he could find out where she'd been sent. Or something – anything – to explain why it had had to be her sent away when they'd finally – finally - had a shot at seeing each other for more than a handful of hours at time.

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Five Weeks Post Zastiga

Luke dropped a half-full bottle of champagne squarely in the pile of assorted odds-and-ends that qualified as the ‘pot’ for the passionate (and dirty) sabacc game currently underway at the crowded table in Wedge's quarters. “From Leia.”

Wes's eyes lit up. “Garwillian champagne!”

“How’d the ceremony go?” Wedge asked, tossing another card onto the table.

“About how you'd expect.” Luke flopped backward onto the suite's sofa, tugging open the collar of his dress uniform. “We got through the formalities pretty quickly, Lando made an impressively long toast, and then…”

“And then the Princess and Solo decided to 'christen' her new diplomatic transport?” Hobbie chortled.

Skywalker sighed, his face crinkling in long-suffering embarrassment. “Yeah.”

“Glad that's done,” Tycho observed, adding a bit of folded paper – an IOU of some kind, probably – to the pot. “Winter says they've been pushing hard to get through the red tape. She told me she thought for sure Rumor was going to throttle one of the flimsey-pushers to death if they came up with one more delay in the review.”

“Speaking of,” Kyle spoke up. “I heard Madine came back today. He able to get you any new info on where Cracken sent Haleyon?”

“No,” Luke answered, resentfully. “But I did figure out why she left in such a hurry, and without telling me.”

“Lemme guess,” Katarn folded, and lifted his gaze to Skywalker. “Cracken agreed to lean on the oafs overseeing the paperwork for the Falcon's certification if she took the mission.”

“What?” Corran exploded. “He blackmailed her?”

Katarn shrugged. “Not a surprise, really. She definitely didn't go because she wanted to.”

Artoo, who had been huddled in the corner engaged in some conversation or entertainment of his own with Gate and Whistler, blatted suddenly – harsh and angry.

“What's that?” Luke rolled his head to the side, eyes narrowing at his astromech.

//Councilors Mothma and Dodonna requested he find a way to get Agent Rumor off the station.//

“How do you know?” Hobbie asked, curiously.

An indignant tootle. //She copies me all of her most interesting file hacks.//

“She's been hacking Council files?!” Luke sat up. “Since when?”
//A few weeks.// Artoo did not sound the least bit concerned about this revelation. //It was necessary. For safety.//

Luke shot a glance at Corran and found his own fury and confusion reflected back at him. *What the kriff is going on while we're not here?*

- -

Mara stalked up the ramp of the dingy, cramped shuttle Cracken had assigned to her mission. “That's the last one,” she snapped at the pilot. “Get us off this rock and back to *Teeth*."

“Yes, Agent,” the man agreed quickly, eyes darting anywhere but at her.

Mara ignored him. He was an Intel pilot – they were trained to see no more than absolutely necessary, and remember even less. She didn't know what jobs he usually got, though, because he was clearly terrified of her. Sealing the hatch she'd just come through, she left him to handle the process of departure.

It was only a few steps to the closet-sized space she'd been given as “quarters” and Mara shut herself inside. A lifetime of habit had her stowing her small bag of tactical gear before she did anything else. Then she stripped out of her things and shimmied into the miniscule sani-steam. It was sonics only, but right now she'd take it.

Dialing up the controls, Mara huddled in the transparisteel tube, arms wrapping around herself. She leaned forward, letting her forehead rest on the wall, the cold seeping through into her bones. The ooze slid up her chest, crawling up between her breasts and she gagged at the feel of it. It was impossible to ignore these days. It was a fight, every minute she was awake, to keep it beneath her ribs. Vainly, she hit the 'empty' button in her head.

As with the last few times she'd tried, the results were lackluster. The ooze backslid, but clung at her thighs instead of being sucked away with the mess in her head.

*Why doesn't this work any more?* A lance of despair stabbed at her. *I used to be able to do it. I was capable.*

*You haven't lost all your skills,* a mocking voice in her head hissed back. *You took out all Cracken's targets easily enough. Didn't even leave them enough time to scream.*

Mara shivered, from the ice of the voice or the cold of the transparisteel, she didn't know. *The Falcon* -.

*You know where your value lies,* the voice laughed back, sibilantly. *You'll never be good for anything but this.*

Jade shoved at the controls, turning the sonic shower off. She still felt filthy, but there was no help for that. The sonics would never touch the ooze, or the voice. Rifling through her pack, she dragged on the warmest clothes she could find and curled into a ball on her bunk.

*Luke.* She wanted him. Badly. Wanted his warmth to drive away the ooze that lapped at her throat and squished between her fingers. Wanted to feel him solid and reassuring beside her in their bed – the bed she couldn't bring herself to sleep in without him. Hells – she'd be happy just to hear his voice. Listen to him tell her anything – anything at all, just to hear him. Have him with her.

*Selfish,* she chastised, shivering again in the darkness. *It's not your time. You saw the schedule – he'll be at the ceremony now. He deserves his happiness – they all do.*
Anger streaked through her, and Mara latched onto it. Grasped its heat and pulled it into her, willing to scorch herself if that was what it took to not feel so damn cold for a little while. *You promised you'd given him your best. This can't be your best – it can't. Do better, dammit. Prove them all wrong.*

The hum of the ship's engines changed as the jumped into hyperspace. Mara curled tighter around her self-loathing, and started counting the minutes until they made it back to *Teeth.*
Quatervois

Chapter Summary

Quatervois (n): A crossroads; a critical decision or turning point in one’s life.

Chapter Notes

This is a short (for me) chapter and mostly set up for what comes next, but I offer it as proof that:
(a) I am not dead
(b) I am still writing
(c) Gift is not dead!

Next chapter will hopefully go up in June and then I'll be back on track for my long-hoped-for regular updates from there!

As a reminder, since it's been so long, we pick up with Mara off-station on a last-minute mission she was blackmailed into by Dodonna. Luke & co. recently discovered that Mon Mothma and Dodonna have been manipulating schedules, keeping the Rogues off station, and started digging into why. Luke, Tycho and Wedge are (supposed to be) on their way to pick up Iella Wessiri and Pash Cracken before the Carida operation goes down. Everything is messy, no one is happy and it's all about to get worse in a big way!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Shuttle Discipline,” Teeth’s flight control center called crisply over the shuttle’s speakers. “Status report.”

Wedge stabbed the comm button with a finger. “Ready to go,” he gritted testily, glaring at the unit. “As soon as you give the third member of our party back. Just like the last two times you asked.”

“Copy.” There was a pop as the line closed momentarily, then another as it opened again. “I have word that Commander Skywalker will be en route to you in approximately five standard minutes. You will be cleared for departure as soon as he arrives.”

“Copy that.” Wisps of stylishly cut white hair fell over Tycho’s forehead as he leaned toward the comm unit to make sure the mic picked up his curt reply. Then he keyed it off, waiting for the tiny green indicator light to turn red before muttering, “we’d damn well better be. It’s not like we’re on a tight timetable or anything.”

An ear-piercing whistle sliced through the air and both men swiveled their seats toward the hatch that led to the rest of the shuttle. From the vicinity of the open bay door at the rear of the craft a familiar voice hollered, “Hey! You guys in here?”

Tycho tipped his seat as far back as it would go and yelled down the narrow central gangway, “cockpit!”
Booted feet stomped down metal deck plates. Corran appeared in the entryway, grim-faced, Wes and Hobbie on his heels.

“We are you still here? And where’s Luke?” Horn demanded.

“Command called him away,” Wedge griped. “Some hush-hush, high-priority meeting just before our scheduled take-off time.” He gestured irritably toward the vessel’s main viewport. “Control says he should be on his way back in five.” He eyed them – Corran’s dark glower, Wes and Hobbie’s glimmering eyes and barely-contained laughter. “Why? What’s going on?”

“That digging we’ve been doing with Artoo and Whistler?” The Jedi shook his head. “You’re not going to believe what we found.”

Luke pressed his lips together, resisting the urge to ask the Command aide he was following through Teeth’s corridors if they could walk a little faster. He should be in hyperspace right now, hurtling toward Carida to snatch Iella and Pash Cracken back to safety. The station wasn’t on fire, what could possibly merit this mysterious last-minute delay?

He took a breath. Held it. Let it out. Repeated the subtle breathing exercise as they walked. By the time the aide deposited him at the correct door with instructions to go right in, he’d achieved a measure of inner quiet. Squaring his shoulders, Luke strode into the room.

It had been an officer’s lounge during the station’s Imperial life, small but plush. Thickly padded chairs in muted greys, blues and golds encircled low tables of patterned, polished formplast. A small bar dominated the right wall, a powered-off server droid drooping in the corner behind it.

“Commander Skywalker.” Mon Mothma’s soft, perpetually composed voice lilted. She lifted a slender hand, motioning him to approach.

To her right, General Dodonna sat ramrod straight. His hands rested lightly on his thighs; edgy expectation seemed to ripple along his bony frame. Opposite him, the third member of the party unfolded herself from the low cushioned seat. She stood an inch or so taller than his own height, and Luke’s first impression was of one of hard, lanky angles despite the ornately sweeping structure of her garment. Her shoulders were bracketed by engraved gold battle-ax-head sculpts; a matching winged headpiece caged a wealth of tight cinnamon curls. A starched blue-and-gold collar arched from the base of the sculpts, framing the whole of her head. Below it, layers of rich, byzantine-ly embroidered vine-silk fell away in neat, sharp lines. Lapis blue eyes stared at him appraisingly from her long, stern face. If Dodonna was giving off edgy ripples, his patrician guest was all but making the air around her quiver with aggressive determination.

“Madam Councilor.” Luke’s eyes flitted back to Mon Mothma as he stopped just outside the seating circle and returned her greeting with a brief, respectful dip of his head. Caution crept up his arms, crawled across his shoulders. He clasped his hands behind his back in a variant of the standard at-ease position.

“Have a seat, Commander,” Dodonna’s invitation was formal but almost gruff.

Skywalker didn’t move. “With respect, General, there’s a shuttle waiting on me.”

“Of course.” Dodonna’s brows dipped in toward his nose in displeasure. “We regret to have delayed you, but Her Majesty wished to meet you sooner than later.”
Luke’s eyes slid to the noblewoman.

“I am Trios,” she announced, eyes still boring sharply into his face. “Queen of Shu-Torun. You will be my Liaison.”


“Shu-Torun has been much abused by the Empire,” Mon Mothma put in, watching them both carefully. “Her Majesty seeks to bring her planet into the Alliance’s fold.”

That… didn’t add up.

Vexation swelled in Luke’s chest. He didn’t have time for this – whatever this was. He acknowledged the feeling. Let it crest and wash back out of him like a wave receding from shore before he answered.

“I’m sorry for your people’s suffering. I know you’ll find the Alliance a much better partner for your world.” Luke shifted his attention back to the others. “But with respect, Councilors, I’m not sure I’m the best being for this assignment. I’m so rarely on station -.”

“You will be when you return from your current mission,” Dodonna interrupted. “We’ve already seen to it.”

More manipulation of schedules. The accusation was distasteful on his tongue and he swallowed it. Now was not the time.

“I’ll look forward to working with you, then, Your Majesty.” It was the correct thing to say. Leia would be proud. He gave a half-bow in the queen’s direction. “But now I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse me. My mission has a very solid deadline and cannot be delayed any longer.”

“A man of action.” Trios tilted her head, pursed her lips. “Good.” She moved abruptly out of the seating circle. “I will accompany you to your ship, that we may speak privately before you depart.”

Luke’s eyebrows almost shot straight up his forehead; he checked the urge just in time. “I’m afraid it’s in a highly secure area, Your Majesty -,” he began.

“You are my Liaison,” Trios interjected, crisply. “I have been promised access to everywhere you are.”

That was not going to stand – Luke would see to that. Later, he told himself, firmly. His skin itched with the need to be off the station before they lost any more time.

“This way, then, Your Majesty.” Luke gestured with a calm he did not feel toward the door. He cast a glance back at the others. They looked smug as lothcats with mouthfuls of juicy rodent. Irritation exacerbated the prickling, driving it across his body until his toes itched with it.

Trios stalked out of the room. Luke gave the two High Council members a curt nod and followed.

Lost in the fugue of his own mood, Crix Madine ignored the bustle of the hangar as he strode toward it’s wide-open cargo door. Through the flow of techs, pilots, and support droids he caught a glimpse of a familiar, equally-unamused figure lounging against the corridor’s far wall directly opposite the hangar door. Without giving any other sign of having noticed him, Madine tipped his head to the right. Katarn casually pushed off the wall and blended into the flow of traffic.
Reaching the exit himself, Crix turned right. Two minutes later Kyle appeared at his shoulder, seamlessly falling in and matching his steps to the General’s.

“Did you have fun on your field trip?”

“No,” Madine’s lips twisted down. “It was a complete waste of time. But you already know that.

“Did you find out where they sent her?

“Not the where, but I did discover the what. We need to talk to Solo. Now.”

“You can’t be serious.” Wedge squinted at Hobbie, willing this entire day to be some kind of bizarre hallucination he could wake up from.

“I know I’m a genius,” Klivian said, leaning back in his chair and placing a flat-palmed hand on his chest dramatically, “but even I couldn’t make up something like this.”

Corran’s head snapped around and the others followed his gaze toward the rear of the shuttle. “Kyle and Crix are coming,” he told. “With Solo.”

“I think we’re going to need to move this conversation out of the cockpit,” Tycho stood. “Cargo hold?”

Wedge glanced out the main view port as the other Rogues filed toward the back of the shuttle. *Hurry up, Luke.*

“You are a Jedi.” The Queen’s voice was clear and clipped.

“I am.” Luke dipped into the Force and applied the redirection technique Mara had taught him. He knew better than to use his powers carelessly, but he felt every second of the trek back across *Teeth* acutely. The danger to Iella and Pash increased every minute their rescuers failed to get into hyperspace. He couldn’t afford more delays.

Trios kept up with his pace easily, her austere focus undeterred by the unfamiliarity or publicness of their surroundings. “You are powerful?”


“It is also Vader’s ally,” she snapped, glaring at him. “To which of you will it answer more?”

Luke side-stepped the question. “You’re familiar with Darth Vader?”

Trios thrust her right hand upward. Her long, bell-shaped sleeve fell away. A golden prosthetic gleamed from fingertip to wrist. “My father did not wish for Sho-Torun to remain at the whim of
Vader and his emperor.” She dropped her hand, her tone icy. “I was his third child – the most expendable – and it fell to me to lead Lord Vader into the trap my father had set. I failed. Now I am all that remains of my House. If I satisfy Lord Vader, he will allow me the privilege of continuing to rule and stoop to keeping Sho-Torun’s nobles from overrunning the planet with their avarice.” She turned a sharp, hungry eye on him. “But with a Jedi as my Prince Consort no one will challenge my right to rule.”

Luke started. “Your Majesty -.”

“I do not require you to love me,” she cut him off, waving her real hand dismissively. “I am informed you are already keeping a woman – Jade something, was it?”

Ice formed under Luke’s skin.

“She is of no concern to me,” Trios continued, unaware. “So long as you keep her quietly and in her place.”

The part of Luke’s brain not flaring with fury and alarm registered that they’d reached the force field Mara had erected across the Rogues’ small, protected portion of the station and his feet stopped before he’d fully processed why. Trios continued a few more steps then stopped, frowned, and turned.

“This is your hangar,” she surmised, eying the force field. “Complete your mission safely, Jedi Skywalker. We will negotiate terms in more detail when you return.” She began to stalk back the way they’d come.

Speechless, Luke pressed his palm to the scan plate, then stepped across as when the field momentarily dropped for him.

“Jedi.”

He turned at Trios’s summons, the field flashing back up between them with a blue crackle.

“I have been promised your cooperation,” the Queen warned, eyes sharp on his. “And I have much to offer you. It would be best if you did not plan to play coy when you returned.”

Luke turned on his heel and strode away.

That Luke could feel the gnash of emotions from the larger-than-expected knot of beings in the rear of the shuttle when he hit the hangar door – even over his own anger – set off a whole new set of warning bells in his head. He broke into a jog. Someone must have been watching for him because the shuttle’s cargo hatch began to open as he approached. He didn’t slack his pace until he was inside, the door already closing behind him. He surveyed the assembled group and felt his stomach wind another notch tighter.

“What’s going on?”

“They sent Mara to eliminate Alliance targets,” Katarn spoke first, his voice dark.
“What?” Disbelief flooded him, white-hot wrath spilling through in its wake.

“That messing around with schedules they’ve been doing?” Corran added. “It goes a lot deeper than we realized.”

“They’re marrying people off!” Wes crowed. He sounded nearly hysterical, though with mirth or incredulity it was hard to tell. “Just pairing them up with the selected beings as ‘liaisons’ and pushing until they think it’s their own idea!”

“They’re tryin’ to give Leia to that Hapan bastard, too,” Han ground out. “That trip she went on was nothin’ more than introductions. Lettin’ him and his mother see if she was good enough breedin’ material.” A few ugly words followed – not all of them from Han.

Luke didn’t hear them over the rushing and pounding of his blood in his ears and the sudden awareness that the air in the shuttle had started to hum with a low-level electric sort of buzz. “They?”

“Dodonna and Mon Mothma,” Crix supplied, grimly. “Though Airen and I may as well be considered complicit for all that we should have realized and didn’t. Worse, I’m beginning to think we’re entirely useless.” His voice turned hard. “The Daedalus Mission has been green-lighted, under the command of Baron Calrissian. All the Rogues not headed to Carida with you leave as soon as your CorUnum returns.”

“Enough.” Luke’s right hand fist over the hilt of his light saber where it hung at his belt, then released as his body moved from the tight coil of rage into action. “We’re leaving.”

“Yeah.” Wedge, standing nearest the hatch to the cockpit, nodded. “Control cleared us -.”

“No.” Luke interrupted, shaking his head. “I mean we’re leaving. Kyle, can you fly an x-wing?”

“Not as pretty as the rest of you, but sure.” Katarn leaned forward in his seat, eyes glinting with curiosity and eagerness.

“Good. Put everything you have in the cargo compartment of my x-wing and fly that. Hobbie, Wes – when Mara gets back, I need you to stall for time.”

Wes gave him two thumbs up. “You got it, Boss.”

“Corran, help Mara pack everything of hers and mine. Stuff it in our x-wings and take it with you. Comm us when you’re done with the mission – we’ll stall, too, and try to find somewhere safe to rendezvous.”

“What about us?” Tycho asked, frowning.

“I’ll find a way to make sure you’re not disciplined for our departure,” Luke promised, sincerely. “Crix -.”

“No, I mean don’t we get an invitation?”


“We’re volunteering,” Wedge said, firmly, throwing his lot squarely in with the others. Then his mouth twitched toward a grin. “You know what Rostek and Myri say about Jedi.”
“We need looking after,” Corran chuckled, ruefully.

“Skywalkers more than most,” Han agreed. He met Luke’s eyes. “I can’t go with you, Kid, but I can find my way along on the Daedalus run. Bring Lando back.” He gave the group a cocky smile. “Keep you all from being charged with kidnapping a Baron, at least.”

“Thank you, Han.” Luke gave his almost-brother a small smile. Han belonged to Leia and he’d given his word to Rostek that he’d serve as Liaison to the Alliance when the Corellian coup happened. He couldn’t leave with them and Luke would miss him dearly.

“You tellin’ Leia?” Solo asked, carefully.

“Not yet,” Luke said, firmly. “It’s best if she doesn’t know. She won’t leave – she can’t. This is her life. The Organa legacy. Better to let her just be mad at me later.”

Han nodded, seeing the logic. “About somewhere to go,” he said, pushing himself to his feet and heading toward the exit. “Jade might have an option or two for you, there. You should ask.”

Luke cocked his head, curious what Han knew that he didn’t. The suggestion had been much too casual to actually be casual. It was a hint and it took no small amount of self-control to stop from immediately reaching for his Mara-place with questions.

“I’ll do that. Thanks.”

“All right, Rogues,” Wedge slapped his hand on the frame of the hatch toward the cockpit. “You’ve got your assignments. Get to it.”

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**Carida**

“Where have you been?” Iella grabbed Pash's arm and yanked him through the doorway. She punched the control panel and the door shut, sealing them into the half-darkness of the small lab. “You're late.”

Cracken was white as a bleached sheet. “I… they…. they tried to eat me, ma'am.”

“What?” Iella skimmed keen eyes over the cadet's torn and bloodied uniform.

“They're crazy,” he whispered. His wide, terrified eyes made him look even younger than he already was. “I knew they'd get weird, but – but not like this!”

“Fierfek.” Iella checked her wrist chrono. “I only just added the catalyst to the water system an hour ago!”

“Please tell me our ride is here!” Cracken pleaded.

“They're running late, too.” Wessiri’s lips pressed together unhappily. “But they should be landing just as we get to the rendezvous point. Let's go.”
“Hey, Horn.”

Corran crammed his duffel a little deeper into the x-wing’s miniscule cargo hold and backed out from under the raised hatch. He shoved it shut as he straightened up. “Yeah.”

Solo shot a quick glance around, then fished in his vest pocket and leaned closer to his fellow Corellian. The shadow of the ship’s bulk loomed around them, hiding them from any passersby. “Look, Jade asked me to hold on to these.” He held his open hand, palm up, close to his chest protectively.

Corran’s mouth started to gape before he caught it “She… Mara gave you a holochron?” he asked, incredulously.

“Didn’t say what it was, just asked me to keep it safe.” Han shifted his weight from one foot to the other uncomfortably and his tone got a little coarser in unhappiness. “Look, whatever it is, she doesn’t like it. Scares her.” His eyes narrowed and the index finger of his free hand shot out, pointing fiercely at Horn. “Don’t you dare tell her I said that. Just – look, I dunno how all this is gonna to go down, and I don’t want to end up with something she or the Kid needs locked in my safe, all right?”

“But you don’t want to give it to her, either, if it makes her that anxious,” Corran nodded. He held out his hands, cupped together, palms up. Solo tipped the misshapen, twiggy little cube and the small data chip into his hands. For a moment he held them reverently, staring in fascination before securing them gingerly in a pouch on his utility belt.

Han watched, hazel eyes sharp and curious. He jutted his chin toward the pouch. “You know about those things?”

“ Heard of them,” Corran shook his head. “Never seen one. They’re…” he tried to remember how Rostek had described them. “Like a holocube, sort of, except a Jedi – a Master – can put a piece of himself in it. Link his life essence to it. Supposedly, that sliver of sentience serves as a combination gatekeeper and guide. Keeps people out if they’re not meant to see or leads them deeper in, helps them navigate if they are.”

Han grimaced. “That explains a lot. Don’t think I’d want to sit down and get cozy with a little green troll who left me to the Emperor’s whims, either. Luke’ll wanna see it, though.”

“It’s from Yoda?” Corran asked, startled.

“That’s what Leia says,” Han confirmed. “Swung by just before Zastiga and left it, before he died or whatever. Data chip, too.”

“Right.” Horn grumbled. “One more thing to deal with when we find somewhere to land after Daedalus.”

Chapter End Notes

If you want to see what I was going off of for Trios and her outfit, it’s here: https://jedimordsith.tumblr.com/post/173223851360/i-got-to-work-on-gift-today-cant-
begin-to-tell
Carida & Daedalus

Chapter Summary

In which shavit hits turbofans, rather spectacularly, and Mara's fight with the Dark Side ooze plaguing her comes to a head.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is an experiment in pacing as it relates to urgency and drama. It didn't quite work out as I'd hoped, but I'm happily open to any and all feedback on the subject.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ysanne Isard tugged impatiently at the rough-spun, colorless scarf wrapped around her face until it came free. When it sagged loosely over her right shoulder she reached around it to her darkened goggles. Crooking an aristocratic finger through the wide strap, she yanked them off her head. They dangled off her finger, clinging like the stench of Coruc'sant's filthiest under-levels as she mounted the coarsely hewn stone stairs at a brisk, impatient pace.

She loathed the scarf. And the goggles. Abhorred every last piece of crude swathing she was forced to wear to keep from burning to a damn crisp if she so much as thought of stepping outside. Curse Kenobi for living on this Outer Rim hellhole! She hoped he rotted in every Corellian hell for getting her dragged out here to trace his steps!

This is grunt work that ztalvese little Hand should have been assigned, she sneered, inwardly. Thin red lips twisted into a ferocious scowl, acrimony coursing through her veins with a vitriolic sting. How many nights had she woken alone in her Master’s bed to find him pacing the floor wearing little more than a vague smile, his tongue sliding over papery lips, eyes unfocused, seeing elsewhere? Seeing her.

Vader had condescended to explain it once. Had folded his arms and lectured her – (lectured! of all the nerve!) on the “mysteries” of the Force. Explained, in a tone that suggested he thought her a pitifully stupid child, that their Master fed on his Hand’s nightmares. Took from them both sustenance and pleasure Isard could never offer. She'd made it her purpose, after that, to quietly and subtly make the girl’s life as hellish as possible.

Her steps picked up pace, kicking loose stones from the crumbling stairs as impotent fury built in her chest. Jade might be dead, but her ghost lingered. The Emperor still wandered his rooms most nights, sniffing sharply now and again like he was scenting the air, chasing the traces of his pet that inexplicably lingered. Even dead, the girl managed to remind Isard that she was not, and had never been, enough.

Fury and scorn made her cheeks flame as she barreled across the hut’s threshold. They stripped the professional edge out from her voice, reducing it to a peevish snap when she caught sight of the trooper waiting for her and barked, “well? Don’t keep me waiting!”
“Ma’am!” The stormtrooper’s armor creaked in protest as he went from full attention to an almost hyperextended posture, body rigid with tension, salute Academy crisp. “We found these. Per mission parameters, we haven’t touched them.”

His deference and obvious terror did little to soothe Isard’s blistered ego. She stalked toward the chest he’d motioned to. It was small, sturdily built and unadorned. The troopers had blasted out the lock and Ysanne shoved the lid back, heedless as it toppled with a crash to the hut’s bare rock floor. Her breath caught.

Tugging off her glove, Isard dipped her hand into the pile of unpolished gems. They were cool to the touch, granular against her skin as she let them sift through her fingers. Dragite. Barob ingots. Luxum. Damind. Even an Ankarres Sapphire. Prohibited, all of them.

Prohibited because they were ideal for building lightsabers. That was classified, of course. Only her almost unsurpassed clearance allowed her to discover it. Now it made her heart pound, rage and frustration making her want to fling the chest at the nearest wall. Had Kenobi had been planning to raise an army? How many dujikri apprentices would she have to hunt down before she could go back to Coruscant? Back to civilization and the basic amenities any sentient should demand as their right? Back to her Emperor.

Her Emperor. She’d sworn to root out any Force-strong brats Kenobi had been foolish enough to train. She could not leave until that job undone. Isard glared at the chest, teeth clenching. It was time for a change of tactics.

“This doesn’t make any sense.” Lando frowned and leaned closer to the three-dimensional blue hologram hanging in the center of the Falcon’s War Room. “None of this matches the initial intel. Command should never have authorized this mission.”

“We can still make it work.” Ooze inched up Mara’s side. Air bled from her lungs. Chewbacca shot a worried glance in her direction. Mara didn’t let herself look at him. “Scrap the original plan,” she said, stubbornly, barely keeping her voice even. “We can reverse wire the supplemental power generation system.”

Across the table in the Falcon’s War Room, Han squinted at the schematics. He quickly picked up her train of thought. “When they go to kick it on it’ll blow. Take the main system with it.”

“Leave them adrift,” Mara agreed, shifting her weight. “No mining capabilities. That’s the target.”

A tendril of ooze slid up her back. She clamped down on the urge to reach for Skywalker. She pushed back sharply. The ooze flattened, seeping further across her skin. A queasy chill spread up her spine.

For a fleeting moment, Mara yearned for Luke so intensely it terrified her. His fingertips on her ribs, caressing. Chasing the sticky, inky cold away. That was all she needed. The golden warmth of his presence soaking through her.

Greed makes you unworthy of what you have. The old lesson was a slap in the face. Mara’s backbone stiffened. You’ve cost him enough – now you want him to fight your battles, too?

Shame washed over her, made her head dip. She didn’t deserve comfort. Luke was angry and his squad was in danger and the mission was a disaster waiting to happen. It was her fault, all of it – she
should be fixing it, not wallowing in selfish daydreams like a petty child.

“What about the storms?” Lando asked. He picked up a datapad and wiggled it in the air. The most recent atmospheric surveys of Genarius’s surface fluoresced across the screen. Last minute intel updates suggested that the Daedalus Gas Mines Company’s brilliant but invasive new technologies had severely destabilized the enormous gas giant they mined.

“Things really go bad,” Han said slowly, thinking aloud, “those Bubbleships and Sweepers they got oughta be enough to stabilize things. Long enough for help to get there, anyway. Or for them to get out. Look.” He let out an annoyed huff. “None of us like it any more’n you do, all right? But it’s gonna happen – the sooner we get it done the better.”

Lando eyed his old friend with a look Mara didn’t like. One that suggested he saw too much. The look vanished abruptly, replaced by a suavely sanguine expression. “Sure,” he said, easily. “No reason we can’t.” He cocked his head. “I’ll go update the rest of the team.” Turning on the heel of his flawlessly shined boots, he pivoted. His blue and gold cape swirled around strong shoulders and trim hips as he strode away.

“You look like shavit,” Han said bluntly as soon as Calrissian was out of earshot.

“Thanks,” Mara grumbled.

“You should catch some rest. We’ll make sure you’re up before the fun starts.”

Mara shook her head. “I need to move credits around. Luke will need them.”

Han came around the table, stood close and leaned down a bit to look her directly in the eyes. “He’s gonna need you. In better shape than this.”

Mara opened her mouth to disagree. It wasn’t the retort she’d intended that came out. “Something’s wrong.” Shavit. Mara cursed herself. The ooze swelled. Curved around and up, under her breasts.

“What?” Solo tensed.

“When a Skywalker mate has served their purpose, they die,” she blurted. Icy, ink-thick tendrils snaked down her arms. Stop talking, stop talking, stop talking!

Han’s eyes narrowed. Chewbacca whuffed in concern, snuffling the air warily. If the ooze smelled anything like it felt she must reek of putrefaction.


“I can still be removed,” Mara gritted out. “By the Force. There are ways – I think -.” She swallowed. “On my last mission -.”

The Falcon wrenched. Mara’s feet were off the floor. Impact. Pain blossomed in her shoulder. Instinctively, she rolled, coming up into a crouch. Yellow strobes slashed the room’s warm, comfortable lighting into ribbons. Alarms rent the air.

They were under attack.

“Academy, this is the shuttle Discipline, do you copy?”

Static.
Wedge and Tycho shared a glance. “This wasn’t in the plan,” Antilles said, after a moment. “They shouldn’t have lost all comms.”

“Or all the people manning them,” Tycho murmured back, eyes flicking over the screens. “We’re on the right channels – there’s just no one there.”

“Except them,” Wedge nodded out the viewport toward the three Star Destroyers hanging on the horizon.

“And they’re ignoring us.” Tycho shot an uneasy look over his shoulder at Luke. “You got anything, Boss?”

“Nothing good,” Luke’s voice was soft and as distant as his gaze. “Something’s wrong.”

“We noticed,” Wedge grumbled. “Can you be more specific?”

Luke’s lips twisted wryly before dipping back into a moue of concentration. “Anger, fear, euphoria – it’s… the Academy is just boiling with it.” After a few beats he added, “the ships, too. Not so bad, though.”

“Iella?” Wedge asked, aware it was a longshot.

Luke shook his head, coming fully back to himself. “There’s too much mess to pick her out. Nothing on the screens?”

“Not yet,” Tycho said grimly. “But we better find her soon or this could get real ugly in a hurry.”

“Chef!” Mirax Terrick-Horn called into the Skate’s comm system. “Buckle in somewhere. We’re leaving.”

“Roger, roger,” the droid’s idiosyncratic reply popped out of the speakers.

A light appeared on her dash – indication she was cleared to take off. She didn’t fit the pilot’s seat as well as she used to. Luxury yachts weren’t designed with baby bumps in mind. It wasn’t too much of a stretch yet, though. With the grace of long practice, she lifted off. Moments later she was breaking atmosphere. She’d made enough money on this trip that she wouldn’t need to work again until well after the baby was born.

Punching in a new course, her lips curved down. From the sounds of Corran’s last message, that financial gain might be the only good thing to have happened in the preceding weeks.

“Don’t worry,” she said aloud to the baby she carried. “I’m going to get all this straightened out before you get here.”

The Skate’s computer blinked its readiness and she reached for the hyperdrive lever. Three jumps. She knew the first two already. The third – her final destination – had better be waiting for her when she came out of her second jump or there would be hell to pay. She pulled the lever.
Mara pulled on a pain suppression technique as she swung herself down into the Falcon’s lower gun turret. Her left arm tingled, even as she let her right take most of her weight. Separated shoulder, she guessed. Great.

“- gotta be kriiffing kidding me!” Han was grousing when Mara slapped the headset down over her ears.

“What?” She demanded.

_Flick. Flick. Flick._ Control switches snapped under her black-tipped fingers. The enhanced targeting array burst to life. It rotated, searching out prey like a starving animal. She matched it, stretching out with her senses, looking for the threat.

Threat. Her danger sense hadn’t warned her. It had _never_ failed her like that before. Or maybe the warning had just been swallowed by the nebulous fear that had hung about her like an ebony fog since she’d snuck out of skywalker’s bed to embark on her last mission.

Cold seeped deeper into to her bones.

“Bounty hunters.” Solo spat.

“I see them.” Mara gripped the handles of the gun mount. _This is your fault, too. You promised to help him deal with Jabba. If you hadn’t waited so long_.

Mara ruthlessly cut off the thought. There would time to hate herself later. Right now, she needed to _act_. She forced herself to focus on the targeting array. Black cracks split the pristine targeting sight. Swearing, she darted a hand forward. The surface under her fingertips was smooth as glass. She blinked. The cracks spider-webbed outward.

Mara’s stomach dropped. She blinked again. Entire chunks of her vision were gone now. Ooze clawed at her temples. Everything blurred. Sound and light – everything receded. Each breath burned.

_They still need me._ Determination surged from the core of Mara’s being. _I’m not done yet._ Finding a tiny sliver of light in the darkness trying to swallow her, Mara dug in and held on.

Iella’s message was half static. It took them four tries to reroute, patch and signal boost it enough to understand.

_Pick up point Alpha destroyed. En route to point Beta. Pash with me. Don’t land – hot pick up a must._

Wedge hacked a satellite feed while Tycho redirected the shuttle, rushing them around the curvature of the planet toward the secondary pickup point. Tarkin's Teeth was three hundred kilometers from the Academy. A desolate, mountainous training ground. Remote and unforgiving, it was, as of that moment, untouched by the inferno of madness that had engulfed the Academy.

When the holos came up, they discovered Iella hadn’t been exaggerating. The original landing point was a maze of smoking, burning fighter hulls. Bodies in maintenance crew uniforms ran amongst the open fires that burned freely across the melted tarmac. They attacked the wrecks and one another as if seeing monsters. There was nowhere to put a shuttle down, and no way they could have gotten more than a few meters into the billowing thick, toxic black smoke before suffocating themselves
even if they could put down.

Grimly, Luke switched off the holo. He resisted the urge to reach for Mara. To look for reassurance that the mission was going better than his. Wedge and Tycho needed his attention here. All of it. There was nothing he could do now for those suffering at the Academy, but there was still time to save Iella and Pash.

Barely.

Pash Cracken scrunched down. His arms were tight around Iella’s waist and he ducked his head down against her shoulder. He didn’t want to see this. He didn’t want to hear it, either. But there was no way to block out the horrifying symphony of noises that reached him even over the howl of the air and the whine of their stolen 74-Z speeder bike.

Iella hunched over the handlebars, Pash pasted to her back. Veered the speeder bike sharply sideways. Half a second later and they’d have speared straight through the body flung into their path. It was too chaotic to say for sure, but she thought it had been a victim of the rampaging combat arachnid ahead and to the right. The usual neat-as-a-pin grounds had begun to resemble Cularin’s Bollin Exotic Animal Emporium. Rare, deadly animals kept on Academy grounds for specialized training roamed freely.

The arachnid turned three of its fifteen multi-faceted eyes on them as they whistled past. A mouth full of razor-sharp teeth dropped open, shrieking an ultrasonic challenge in their direction. Iella ripped her eyes away from their salvation - a hollering squad of crazed cadets armed, inexplicably, with what looked like mess hall chairs. Their suicidal charge recaptured the creature’s interest, the speeder bike momentarily forgotten.

Iella grimly fixed her eyes forward. Gruesome squelches and crunches erupted behind them. Her stomach rolled. She tried not to imagine the spikes and thorns of the giant spider's gem-like armored carapace slicing through their bodies. It’s twelve legs impaling their corpses as it scuttled to meet the next attack.

The pick-up point. The only thing that mattered now was making it there. If they stayed at max speed they’d be there in 20 standard minutes. She didn’t slow down as they hurtled through the outer gates, now hanging drunkenly off their mounts. There were two sentry points between them and rescue. There was no telling what shape the sentries would be in. Iella thumbed the controls for the Ax-20 blaster cannon mounted on the bike and prayed she wouldn’t have to use them.

- -

Mara had crawled, skulked and wriggled her way through ventilation shafts, service ducts, and engineering access ports all over the galaxy. Fritz Harammel was decidedly the cleanest facility she’d ever had the displeasure of sabotaging. That its Twi’lek engineers took pride in every detail of the unique little fiefdom they inhabited was obvious in the small army of cleaning droids that roved even the lowest levels of the city’s hanging spire, hungrily gobbling up the slightest specs of dirt and vigorously scrubbing imagined scuffs off walls. If they could see the black ooze soaking her from toes to collarbone, she thought every single one might converge on her in a frenzy.

Corran, Kyle, and Chewbacca nearly had when she’d hauled herself, tooth and nail, out of the
blackness that had nearly swallowed her. Mara tasted the fresh bitterness of self-recrimination. She’d missed the fight entirely. It was only by the grace of the Force that the bounty hunters had been underinformed. Tried to take the *Falcon* while it had half a flight of antsy and bored fight pilots on its tail. By the time she came to, the bounty hunters had been dispatched and the Rogues had landed on the barren rock in the Cularin system where they’d planned to stash the x-wings for the mission. Chewie had hoisted her limp body out of the gun turret, and she found Corran and Kyle hovering suffocatingly close when her vision cleared.

If Fritz Harammel hadn’t already spotted them – hadn’t already been on the comm offering them an escort in – she was certain they’d have scrapped the mission. Taken her straight to Skywalker, to be one more burden in his lap. Unable to back out, they pressed in. Insisted on working as a team, instead of dividing and conquering which would have been faster. She could feel their worry reverberating in the space around her, despite their efforts to suppress it. It somehow turned her personal misery into an echo chamber, bouncing every pang of dejection and self-loathing back her two-fold. Ooze circled her throat and her breath caught.

*Focus.* Mara stared at the wires in her hands. Forced herself to pick out pointless details as she twisted their stripped ends together. She put renewed effort into tracking the updates as Janson and Klivial reported their progress stealing tibanna gas canisters, stashing them in a sealed, pressurized crate. When they weren’t breaking through, Lando’s smooth voice murmured in her earpiece. He had Toquema, the head of the station, and the whole of this staff thoroughly charmed.

She crawled down to the next node. Her fingers slipped stripping the next wires, blood beading along the cut, staining her hands and the wires red. The black cracks reappeared across her vision. Mara choked. *Just a little longer.* She rested her forehead against the cool metal of the duct’s wall. *Just a little longer.*

“Shuttle, identify yourself.”

“*Now* you wake up?” Wedge huffed at the comm in irritation and banked the shuttle hard around a cliff face. The engines whined in protest and the safety harnesses dug hard into pilot and copilot’s shoulders as their bodies strained against the accelerating g-forces.

“Shuttle, this is Star Destroyer *Eminence.* You are flying in a restricted area without an approved flight path. *Identify yourself.*”

Tycho jammed a thumb against the internal comms switch. “Luke, we’ve got them on the scanner! Four sentries on their tail. You ready back there?”

“Ready and waiting,” Skywalker returned, confidently.

“*Shuttle,*” the Star Destroyer’s officer sounded truly irate now. “You will identify yourself – at once - or you will be destroyed!”

“Good!” Tycho was thrown back hard against his seat as Wedge threw the shuttle into a steep dive. “Because we’re about to have more company!”

“*That’s it.*” Han’s voice was terse in Mara’s ear. “We’ve got as much gas as we’re getting and we’ve wired enough to take this place out. Everybody get back here, on the double.”
“Copy.” Mara shoved her tools in the thigh pocket of her utility pants. She struggled to breathe as she wriggled her way out of the tube.

Corran was waiting for her and his jaw tightened when she dropped to her feet on the deck beside him. “I know,” she said, pre-emptively. “Don’t say it.”

He nodded once, jerkily, and they took off at a jog across the huge, open engineering bay. Ahead, in the next compartment, she could feel Kyle, waiting. In her ear, Lando’s tone dropped with concern. “What’s that?”

A strident alarm split the air. Red and orange emergency lights flashed wildly. The polished metal surfaces of the room instantly became blinding as they reflected the strobing bursts of color.

“What just happened?” Han demanded over the comm.

Mara spun around, scanning the machinery along the walls for indicators. She pressed a finger hard to her earpiece, trying to hear the head engineer’s response to Lando’s sharp query. Noise. Movement. Shouting.

Another voice, picked up on Lando’s comm. Toquema, the head of station. “Two planetary storms just collided. The encounter has changed their trajectories – both are headed directly toward us.”

Mara’s eyes snapped to Corran’s. “Get everyone out,” she hissed into her comm link. “Now!”

“It’s nothing to worry about,” Toquema was assuring Lando, blissfully ignorant of the ramifications this freak weather change would wreak. “We have back up power for exactly this reason. We’ll just tap into the -.”

The massive floating city shuddered, then rocked under a chain of concussive blasts. Mara ran toward the center of the bay. Every floor located in the long, hollow core of the station’s spire opened in the center to a plunging shaft surrounded with transparisteel windows. Aesthetically, it was a nice touch. An elegant way to draw the swirling, colored lights of the gas giant into the recesses of the city. To make the whole feel connected. Tactically, it was a weakness that might now kill them all.

“What blew?” Katarn demanded over the comm. “Everything we did should have shorted – not blown!”

Every light on the station blacked out.

Into the suddenly oppressive darkness, eye-searing white-gold sparks bloomed. Pressing her face against the transparisteel, Mara watched as gouts of flame exploded out of the decks on all sides, as far up and down as she could see. It was a dazzling pyrotechnics display fit to rival any Empire Day fireworks pageant.

Warning flared into life at the base of Mara’s skull. “Take cover!”

Snaps, violent as the cracking of a madman’s whip, assaulted her ears and Mara gasped, pressing her eyes shut. Not now. She was awake – she’d never had flashbacks when she was awake. She didn’t – she couldn’t. There wasn’t – more snaps, and time seemed to rip. Remembered pain sliced across her chest and she curled forward. Hissing, like a cacophony of anger serpents, rushed in from every side so loud it drowned out every other sound.

A body slammed into her shoulder and drove her to the ground. Mara’s head slammed the ground hard but she instinctively threw her weight to the side and rolled away. She shoved to her knees,
dizzy and heart pounding. She wrenched her eyes open long enough to see the inner column thick with swirls of white gas. Then she threw herself back to the ground, arms over her head.

It was not a second too soon. Her cheek hit the cold metal floor. The reinforced transparisteel behind her shattered. Mara buried her face in her shoulder as shards tinkled to the ground around her. The back of her neck blistered as an inferno of flash-burning tibanna gas, freed from its snapped hoses, rolled across the ceiling above her.

_Mara!_ Corran’s cry in her head brought her back to some semblance of sense and she distantly realized he must have been what knocked her down. Away from the transparisteel before it blew.

_I’m fine,_ she sent back. The harsh assertiveness of her mental voice belied the way her arms shook as she shoved back into a kneeling position. An inky, amorphous hand curled tighter around her throat and a cackle sounded in her ear.

Mara clawed at the darkness, trying to drag it down, away from its stranglehold, but made no ground. Corran scrabbled to her side, clutched at her arm then yanked his hand back, horrified.

“Mara!”

His voice was a shout to be heard over the whistling of the solar and planetary winds ripping through the station’s now-open core.

_Later,_ she gasped. Grabbing his arm, she dragged them both into a crouching run.

Luke checked to make sure the safety harness belted around his waist and thighs was securely latched to the inner hull of the ship, then took a deep breath. It wheezed slightly through the full-face protective mask he wore as he let it out, centering himself in calm.

Pain slammed across the bond and his chest seized. Instinctively, he threw up a protective shield. Almost simultaneously he reached back across the suddenly open bond. Mara’s mind was a firestorm of unintelligibly overlapping reality and memory, pain and anxiety scorching across both. Before he could call her name, a horn blared and the hatch release lit up, the urgent yellow screaming for attention.

Luke’s chest heaved once, anguish twisting in his gut. _Han and Corran and Kyle have her. There’s nothing you can do, now. Focus._

With massive effort, he blocked out the bond as fully as he could. Wresting his attention back to the moment, he slapped the release. Howling winds blasted his mask with grit for a fraction of a second before he took two running steps and launched himself out the back of the shuttle.

The turbolifts didn’t work.

Mara and Corran forced the doors open. Swinging inside, Mara grasped one of the handholds that lined the sides with sweaty palms and yanked herself up toward the next. Horn was right beneath her, keeping pace. In her earpiece, she could hear panicked chatter from the upper levels where Lando was yelling at the engineers to evacuate.
“No!” Toquema shouted back, distraught. “Our work -.”

“Is about to fall into a gas planet,” Lando snapped back. “The repulsars have failed. The backups have failed. Half the spire is gone! Evacuate – now! Or you’ll go down with it.”

The turbolift door beside Mara wrenched open. Instinctively, she snapped her wrist, hold-out blaster coming to hand.

“Just me.” Kyle threw his hands up, palms out.

“Katarn.” Mara retracted the blaster. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” His eyes slid over her form. “Ma’am -.”

“I know.” Mara thrust herself back into motion. Black cracks split her vision again. They had to get to the Falcon before she lost the ability to see completely. “Get moving.”

Conduits along the side of the turbolift shaft sparked and spit flame without warning. The higher they climbed, the hotter it got. Sweat rolled down the back of Mara’s scorched neck, made her clothes stick. With every grasp of a rung, every lurch up to the next, the words repeated in her head. A horrible, nauseating mantra.

This is your fault.

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Luke swung his right arm, relying on the Force to guide it. He felt the resistance, pressure as the glowing blade batted aside a blaster bolt that would have cored through his stomach. In his left arm, he held Pash Cracken’s unconscious body half behind him. The ground beneath them was falling away fast as the safety line towed them up at reckless speeds.

To the east, Iella streaked away, trying to draw the pursing sentries away from the shuttle before she risked looping back. Laser bolts spat at her from every side. Luke didn’t need an astromech calculating the exact odds to know they weren’t good. Craning his neck, he squinted up. Tycho, presumably also secured by a safety line, leaned as far as he could out the open hatch. Luke glanced at the boy he held and back up.

Shutting off the saber, he fumbled it back onto his belt and angled his body against the cord suspending him. With a mighty, Force-assisted shove, he flung Pash toward Tycho. He watched through grit-scoured goggles as Celchu caught the young cadet, twisting his arms around his limp body to drag him inside to safety. Luke didn’t wait. Hitting the guide switch on his harness, he plunged back down for Iella.

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Molten bits of metal fell around them like acid rain as they jinked and juked across the bay from the turbolift shaft to where the Falcon hovered, engines white with energy, ramp half down and waiting. Following Imperial protocols, the walkways were flat and open. There were no handrails to guide them as they pelted through the billowing smoke, nothing to hold on to as the city rocked and its list became pronounced.

Chewbacca’s roar in her earpiece was deafening. //It is going to ignite!/

“Genarius.” Lando sounded dumbstruck.

Mara didn’t catch what came next. There was only the solid metal of the Falcon against her palms as she flung herself inside with Corran and Katarn at her back. The up-thrust of the floor beneath her knees and the dropping of her stomach as the ship hurtled out of the bay, even as the ramp hissed all the way closed. She staggered upright in the direction of the nearest viewport.

The burning hulk of Fritz Harammel was falling, the gases of Genarius’s volatile atmosphere burning away in rainbow colored rings where it passed through. The colors got darker as the city dropped deeper, vivid orange overtaking everything else.

“Hydrogen -,” someone was saying over the comm.

“You destroyed a world,” the voice in her head crowed.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. Mara teetered. The ooze crawled down over her skull and up her chin. Tendrils shot up, filling her nostrils and sinking down her throat.

Failure, the voice in her head chortled. Nothing but a failure. And now your failure is complete. You are finally MINE.

Luke staggered into the cockpit, one arm around Iella. “All accounted for. Let’s go.”

Wedge spared a half-second glance at Iella, the relief on his face saying everything there wasn’t time to say in words. She smiled tightly at him as Luke lowered her into a seat. Her clothes were torn, her pants still smoking at the thigh where a blaster bolt had caught her. She was filthy, head to toe. But she was alive. Pash Cracken was banged up and old cold but safe, strapped into a seat in the back of the shuttle.

Dropping into the seat opposite Iella, Luke decided not to belt himself in. He might need to jump up in a hurry if the Star Destroyers overhead decided to attack for real now that the sentries were out of friendly-fire range. Planting his feet and pushing his shoulders back into the seat to anchor himself, and secure in the knowledge that Wedge and Tycho had the piloting more than covered, he risked pulling back the mental curtain shielding him from Mara.

Blackness swept over him, thick and muffling. His already elevated heart-rate doubled.

Mara?

She reached back, groping blindly, her sense bleak and despairing. Luke grasped for her. He tried to latch on, but she slipped through his fingers. Acrid ooze dripped across the connection and he swiped at it, trying to brush enough away to catch her. Mara, what’s happening?

I’m sorry. Her sense fluttered over his, fragile and unsteady. Yearning and regret saturated his name when she whispered, Luke.

Something opened – a maw, gaping and lathered with rabid foam. For an instant, Mara hung at the
end of Luke’s fingertips, distraught. Then she was gone. The maw snapped shut, swallowing her whole. Her sense disappeared, leaving a ragged-edged hole in his chest.

“Mara!” Luke screamed, his fingers clawing at the control panel beside him as his mind tried to claw through the Force.

The shuttle titled dangerously sideways, barely evading a laser blast from the *Eminence*. Luke was flung out of his seat. He landed in a heap against the back wall of the cockpit. The bruising impact never registered. His mind was still shredding layers of the Force, searching for any trace of Mara.


Skywalker gave no sign that he noticed. “Corran!” He cried, instead, his voice strained. “Fierfek!”

The air in the shuttle shimmered with vibrations. Everything rattled violently.

“Shuttle Discipline -,” the *Eminence* began over the comms.

Tycho punched the comm button viciously, cutting off the sound feed. “We can get past them,” he bit out, “but only if this thing doesn’t come apart around us, first.”

He hadn’t expected a reply, but Iella replied tightly, “understood.” Her hand ducked into her jacket. It reemerged with a blaster. She thumbed the setting over to high stun. “Sorry, Commander.”

The bolt nailed Luke to the back wall of the cockpit. He slumped onto his stomach, silent and motionless. The rattling fell silent.

“Wedge,” Iella ordered darkly, tucking the blaster away again. “Get us the kriff out of here.”

Chapter End Notes

(1) Isard’s derogatory words at the beginning of the chapter are in common Sith. They mean "stupid" and "damn," respectively.

(2) Fritz Harammel is an actual GFFA thing. Operated entirely by Twi’lek engineers, it was a rare thing in the Empire, due to its anti-alien bias and general subjugation of non-human species.

(3) Actual scientists do in fact believe that it is possible to ignite a gas giant planet with sufficient energy inputs, depending on the chemical makeup of the gas giant in question. I am not an actual scientist myself and have, therefore, taken liberties with this possibility for dramatic purposes.

(4) All questions related to the ooze that swallowed Mara whole will be answered in full in the next chapter.

(5) Thank you to everyone who listened to me whine about the issues I had writing this chapter, as well as everyone who is still reading despite how long it is taking me to write this story... I appreciate you!
Jade Level

Chapter Summary

Mara discovers the truth about the ooze. Luke & co. try to find their footing as secrets come out and new realities are grappled with.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Babble in a score of languages rolled off the walls and swirled back through the thousands of beings crowding the floor. The sound washed over Luke in surreal waves as he threaded his way through Trader’s Alley behind Wedge. Vivid splashes of color splotched across the massive, three-story bazaar in every direction and his stomach rumbled at the mouth-watering aromas issuing from food stalls and shadowy cantina doorways that pocked the far edges of the level they were on. Sweet and savory scents drifted down from the brightly lit tapcaffs that lined the open edge of the three-story marketplace’s upper level. The Errant Venture was unlike anything Luke had ever experienced.

This is where Mara chose to make her home. The thought was bewildering and painful. He still didn’t know what to do with the idea– any facet of it.

Skywalker was vaguely aware of the ease with which Wedge navigated the maze of stalls, the rest of their little party in his wake. He watched, detached, as Antilles nodded to vendors or lifted a hand in acknowledgement when someone called his name. He’d grown up on the ship, fostered by its Captain after his parents’ deaths. For all the years he’d been away, it seemed there were plenty here that still recognized him with fondness.

Most of the trek across the bazaar was a blur for the Jedi, his attention focused on the disorienting black hole where his Mara-place had been. He knew she was here – knew the Falcon had arrived a full day ahead of them. But where the bond should have been, where that welcome collapsing sensation in his chest should have actively tracked his progress toward her, there was only blind darkness.

He registered the private turbo-lift, with its two Barabel guards costumed in eye-searingly garish uniforms. Managed a greeting for the now-visibly pregnant Mirax, who embraced Wedge and Iella fiercely before dispatching an unhappy Pash Cracken with one of the guards to separate quarters. Then they were in the turbolift, being whisked up to Jade Level.

Mara stood alone on a narrow, crenelated pillar of stone. The landscape of her mind fell away beneath her, transformed into a nightmare of grooves and gouges running with liquid tar and magma. The stench of death suffused the dim, smoky air.

A small noise of irritation escaped her. She didn’t have time for this. Whatever was wrong with her had to wait. Genarius was imploding, the Jedi were on the run – she should be working. Squinching her eyes shut, she pushed, trying to compress everything around her. To stuff it down and extract her awareness. Revert her active presence back to the outside world.
Nothing happened.

A cackle echoed off the stone-like ceiling far overhead. Mara’s eyes flew open. The shadows around her moved, flowing lighter and darker as a shape coalesced in the air at her feet and then floated to eye-level. Crackles of electricity snapped in yellow and blue around a pulsing black star the size of an atromech’s dome.

“What are you?” Mara demanded, hands clenching at her sides. “And what the kriff are you doing inside my head?”

“I am Ziakas,” the dark star’s voice was deep and malevolent but warbly, like a long-distance transmission coming through interference. “And isn’t it obvious, Emperor’s Hand? You have become my possession.”

Jade Level was under massive reconstruction. Wide, matte-grey wall panels leaned against struts in stacks. Bundles of wires – only half of them connected – bunched in plain view inside the open wall compartments. Supplies lay in neat piles at evenly spaced intervals as far down the corridor as he could see. The layout had obviously been changed, too. No Star Destroyer Luke had ever seen came standard with a spacious entry hall for the turbolift to empty into. He wondered if Artoo had a full set of Mara’s plans for the space.

“No, you’re not,” Han’s voice, raised in frustration, carried clearly down the hall. Luke automatically headed toward it, the others trailing.

“You an’ me an’ Chewie and Cracken’s kid are getting on the Falcon and going back to Teeth. Tomorrow.”

“I’m not asking your permission,” Lando wasn’t yelling, but he wasn’t budging, either. “Jedi Horn and I have already agreed -.”

“You saw the data chip,” Han interrupted. “Leia’s gonna need all the help she can get.”

“That mission is for Jedi,” Kyle interjected, “not the Rebellion.”

Another mission? How could they be planning another mission now? Luke turned into the open doorway. Reassurance at seeing his friends whole and safe warred with irritation at having somehow fallen so far out of the loop during the brief jumps from Carida to the Errant Venture. Questions he hadn’t meant to ask spilled out, staccato in his sharp desire for answers. “What mission? What data chip? Where’s Mara?”

“Kid!” Han’s eyes swept over Luke and then past his shoulder to take a head count of the others. “Janson and Klivian are getting food.” Han waved an arm toward the door, as if to reference their imminent return. “We can talk details when they get back.”


“Wedge, Tycho, Kyle,” Mirax commanded. “Come help me grab another table from the next room. We’ll need more seating if we’re all going to convene in one spot. Corran,” she shot a glance at her husband, her expression creasing slightly, “take Skywalker to Jade.”

Corran tipped his head and Luke followed him, Han falling in beside him as they crossed the long,
mostly empty room to a door set off to the side. The instant Luke stepped through the doorway, Artoo began to squeal and rock on his wheels. He did not, however, move from his post beside the repulsar bed that comprised one of the room’s two lonely pieces of furniture.

“He hasn’t left her side since we got him out of your x-wing,” Corran said. Sadness and anger threaded through his words when he added, “he says she won’t feel safe like this without a guard.”

Luke side-stepped around the portable table laid out with basic medical supplies and rested a palm on Artoo’s domed head. “Thank you.”

//Her tones did not wake her.// The little droid moaned. //Her vitals do not match.//

“It’s not a healing trance,” Luke explained, his palm sliding off of Artoo’s head as he stepped closer to the bed. “I don’t know what it is.”

Opposite him, a bank of floor-to-ceiling viewports lined the wall. The field of stars beyond them washed the room with a hot, hazy white glow that threw the repulsar bed and Mara’s still form into relief. Blue and purple bruises fading to yellow on their edges splotched across her jaw and temple. A myriad of tiny slices speckled her cheeks, as if she’d been caught in the backlash of shattering glass. Dark circles ringed her closed eyes. Blankets covered her from the waist down. Above the waist, she’d been stripped down to her undershirt. Compression wrap wound over her shoulder, across her chest and around her arm, binding her left arm securely to her side. Luke’s fingers went to the needle inserted in her right forearm, brushing over the small, neat square of tape that held it in place.

“I did it myself,” Han appeared at his shoulder, his voice gruff. “Her rules. She had to have a nutrient drip – been out too long.”

“Thank you,” Luke said, again, hoarsely. Seeing her – feeling her – like this made his throat tighten and his chest ache. They’d done everything right, with compassion and real concern besides, and he was grateful. But the body on the bed was a shell. His searching senses found no trace of Mara’s usually iridescently bright presence anywhere.

“Her shoulder isn’t serious,” Corran walked around the opposite side of Mara, facing Luke over her motionless body. The starlight from the viewports outlined his shoulders in light and threw his face into shadow. “A quick trance will clear it up as soon as we can get her in one. We can’t get one to take the way she is now.”

“She isn’t there,” Luke said, quietly. He touched Mara’s cheek, gently. “Her body is… empty.”

“I know,” Corran said, darkly. “And the news only gets worse from here.”

“I am no one’s possession,” Mara said, flatly. She folded her arms across her chest. Ziakas chortled. The sound grated across Mara’s nerves like nails on a chalkboard. “Aren’t you, little Hand? I’ve seen, you know. I was there when you belonged to the Emperor. I stayed with you when you were claimed by Vader. I’ve thrived on your submission to Skywalker. It seems to me,” the dark star sneered, “that you have spent your life belonging to anyone you could find to take you.”

“You’ve been around?” Mara suppressed the stab of pain at his assessment of her life and injected scoffing doubt into her voice. “I don’t remember you.”
“You wouldn’t,” the creature hissed, angrily. “Our Master took so much of you I had to stay all but dormant for a decade.”

Our Master. He could only mean Palpatine. Mara’s gut twisted, an old memory surfacing.

“Master?”

“What is it, child?”

“The Inquisitor.” Seven-year-old Mara glanced at the door where the Emperor’s most recent appointment had just exited. “What kind of creature is his pet? I haven’t learned about them in my lessons, yet.” She hadn’t thought high-ranking Imperials were allowed to have pets, and she’d never seen anyone else – even Vader – have the gall to bring a creature in front of the Emperor. The man hadn’t even looked at it, either. Just let the pulsing blob of energy bob behind his shoulder the whole meeting.

*The Emperor chuckled. The sound trickled down Mara’s back like icy slime. She squashed the feeling, focused on her kneeling position. Back straight, head down, no slouching.*

“It was not a pet. He does not know it follows him.”

“A derraphin!” Mara exclaimed out loud, shock making her rock on her heels. “You’re a derraphin. That lying dotkohu!”

The creature cackled, rolling in the air in glee.

“Oh, fierfek.” The full ramifications began to sink in and Mara felt light headed.

“Yesss,” the dark star cooed. “Now you understand. But it is far too late.” It cackled again. “I’ll leave you to wallow, little Hand. Don’t bother to suppress it – there’s no one to see now but me. And your despair tastes so delightful.”

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Luke sat on the edge of Mara’s bed, holding her right hand carefully in his. At the head of the bed, sensors beeped in a slow, steady rhythm. A few feet away, Artoo was plugged into a wall socket, recharging. Although the Jedi sat silently, his mind churned.

“I wish you’d told me about the holochron,” he said, aloud. “Han says you didn’t even want to look at it.” He stroked her hand with his thumb, careful not to disturb the I.V. “It’s for you,” Luke continued. The chances that she could hear him were almost non-existent but the silence was too heavy. He had to break it, and maybe spilling out the mess in his head would make sense. “A… program, I guess. Master Yoda – the bit of him that’s in the holochron – said a great Jedi healer named Vokara Che developed it for Jedi who’d been… brutalized. To help them reintegrate into the Temple.” Frustration crested. “There’s nothing else on it. Nothing that can help us reach you.”

Luke lifted his free hand to his forehead and rubbed at it wearily. “I know you didn’t look at the data chip. You’d have told me. Or taken it to Leia.” The data chip. Stolen secrets, and a warning from his old Master.

*C* **Clones.** The Emperor had a fortress full of clones of himself. If they tried to take him out, he could pull on the life forces of the clones to strengthen himself. If they killed him, he’d simply fall back into one of their bodies. It chilled Luke’s blood to think of an army of Palpatines, waiting in the wings to
reclaim Mara and wreak fresh havoc on the galaxy as soon as everyone let their guard down.

“Or maybe Han,” Luke didn’t keep the hurt out of his voice. “He seems to be the only one who knew about this place. And the bounty hunters – which *neither* of you mentioned. *Why* didn’t you *tell me?”*

Mara’s face remained expressionless, but even unconscious her features had not smoothed into anything serene. There was a pinched, pained tightness underneath her stillness that he was powerless to soothe. Luke’s shoulders slumped. Behind him, the door hissed open.

“You should get some sleep, Boss.” Wedge’s words were phrased as a suggestion, but the tone implied there wouldn’t be any negotiating the point. “We’ve got a bunk for you.”

“I hate that she’s alone in here,” Luke replied, quietly.

“She’s got Artoo,” Antilles countered, stepping closer to rest a hand on Luke’s shoulder. “And we’ll seal both the doors – this room and the outer one, until we’re up in the morning. She’ll be safe.”

As if to support Wedge’s assertion, Artoo unplugged and rolled back over beside the bed, whistling encouragingly. //I will guard.//

“I know.” Carefully laying Mara’s hand back over her stomach, Luke slid off the bed. Bending over, he brushed his lips across her forehead. “Come back to me, CorMeum.”

Straightening his shoulders, he followed Wedge out of the room.

Mara sat on the ground atop the stone pillar, one knee drawn to her chest, staring at nothing while her mind whirled.

*Lying dotkohu.*

The Emperor had told her that derriphin could only be attached to the strong. The powerful. They’d kill a weak being quickly – suck their life out and leave them a shriveled, empty skin. Derriphin were rare, but powerful Force users could summon them from across the galaxy and tame them – shackle their wills - with the Dark Side. If they could be slipped past the shields of a competitor, he or she was as good as dead, with a little patience. Mara remembered clearly both the relief and the suffocating shame when her Master had sniffed derisively and peered down his nose to inform her that *she* would never merit one.

Bloodthirsty leech.

She wondered how young she’d been when the Emperor slipped Ziakas into her mind. How long it had lain, half-dormant in her abused body, feeding on the scraps of pain and terror the Emperor left behind when he drank his fill of her every night. Fury burned inside her.

How could she have been so *stupid? So blind* as to actually believe that her ever-deepening downward spiral had been evidence of the Prophesy? A sign that the Force was going to remove her from Skywalker’s life, now that she’d “fulfilled her purpose”? But she’d been so certain.

*You read it wrong,* her inner voice accused. Mara snorted to herself. That much was obvious. It had
made sense at the time – or seemed to. The bond, preventing her from dying. Vader and the Alliance both intent on matching Luke with someone better than her. The ever-strengthening ooze. The knowledge that the Oubliette already existed – that there was already a perfect place for the Force to drag and drop her when it was done using her. It had felt like finding herself in the middle of a choreographed dance – everything in place, every step pre-ordained. The trap door at the end of her proscribed steps unavoidable.

Except that wasn’t how it worked at all. Everything she’d done, she’d done to herself. She had chosen to serve Luke rather than partner with him because it was easier, more comfortable to run in those older, unhealthy patterns. She had let Vader destabilize her faith in her new life and skew her vision of what she had to offer. She had stayed closed-off and tight-lipped where she didn’t have to, leaving resources on the table and compromising everyone’s safety – an inexcusable sin.

Unacceptable. The voice in her head was that of a childhood instructor, now, harsh and unyielding. Do it again. And get it right this time, damn it.

Mara cast her gaze around, considering. I’m not dead.

She wasn’t sure where she was, exactly, but definitely not dead. And if she wasn’t dead, she could fight. More than that, she realized, brightening. She knew who -and what – her enemy was, now. That gave her an advantage she hadn’t had before. It occurred to her, then, that that would not be her only new advantage.

Hope and determination swelled inside her. She’d fed – richly sustained – not one but two greedy Dark Side creatures most of her life. She’d lived blinded and shackled and caged. Even when she’d begun to come into her power, she hadn’t grasped it for what it was – who she was. She’d told Han once that she was gifted – capable enough in a narrow range. But if that had been true – if that had been all that was true about her – she’d never have been assigned a derrphin, let alone survived it.

She wasn’t just gifted. She was powerful.

“I’m a Battle Coordinator,” she said, slightly awed by the taste and feel of the words on her tongue. She’d only ever said them once before, but she hadn’t really claimed them, then. Merely flung them at Vader as she flung everything else she could find, desperate and distraught. Now, she made them her own.

She’d been living her life like a tenth-rate support-squadron pilot accustomed to flying dawdling little spaceport-bound service vehicles who, when promoted to a state-of-the-art fighter, kept trundling the same well-worn routes at little more than walking speed out of habit and reluctance to risk the rough ride into the glorious stars above.

No more, she promised herself. I am not blind, anymore. I am not afraid.

The air around her altered, a heavy sacredness spreading out from where she sat. Like spilled oil, it coated every surface and perfumed the air. Every sound deadened. Every ripple of movement stilled. Mara knew, abruptly, that she had stumbled into a rite, ancient and rich with meaning even if she did not know all the words or steps. Slowly, she leaned forward, easing into a reverent kneel. Without knowing why, she rested her hands side-by-side, palms up, on her knees. The quiet seeped through her and settled into her bones.

Speak child. They were not words, exactly, but the command was clear. Claim your place in the Force.

“Kyr’am nau tracyn kad,” Mara spoke, the words crisp and strong. “I am Mara Jade Halcyon, a
saber forged in the fires of death.” She lifted her eyes to the cavernous blackness overhead and took a deep breath. “I am a Jedi.”

Comfortable weight materialized in her palms. With a surge of gratitude her fingers curled around the beloved hilt of her lightsaber. Above her, glittering silver bands of light broke through the darkness, curving through her personal sky like planetary rings. The dark cracked and split and started to fall in jagged chunks, sound rushing back as they crashed into the ground far below her.

Laughter, joyful in a way she’d never experienced before, bubbled out of her and Mara let it, startled and delighted by the unfamiliar noise on her lips.

*I hope you enjoyed your taste of me, Ziakas,* she thought, flippantly. *Because you’re about to find out you bit off far more than you can chew.*

Rising to her feet, Mara reached for the rings of her power where they arced overhead and *pulled.*

Crix Madine caught Leia just as she was returning to her office. “Your Highness, may I have a word?”

“Of course,” she motioned him inside. A quick glance around showed the office to be empty. As soon as the door shut, she said preemptively, “if this is about Rogue Squadron, I have no idea what’s going on. The only person I can get a hold of is Han and he’s giving me almost nothing.” She gestured, irritably. “Mara’s hurt and they put in somewhere to get her care. But I have no details. At all,” she bit out, furiously. “I don’t like it.”

“Me either,” Crix murmured. “You’ve heard the latest chatter on Imperial channels?”

Leia nodded once, curtly. “They’ve done damage control at Carida but they’re projecting a solid year before it’s back up and running. Minimal body count, by their standards, but the fallout is ten times what we projected.”

“And the other half of the mission?”

Crix’s tone was level but Leia’s shoulders hunched, exhaustion and distress weighing on them a moment before she answered. “Genarius is no longer a planet. It’s a star. Fritz Harramel is a total loss. The closest Sector Governor claims to have survivors, but he’s sitting on the numbers – there’s no way to know how many died.” The Princess gave a resentful huff. “Mon and Jan are fit to be tied, and everyone should have been back by now.”

Madine looked at her for a moment, silently.


“How much do you know about Queen Trios?”

Leia blinked. Then her eyes narrowed. “From Shu-Torun? The one Mon and Jan have been entertaining? Just that she’s been asking an awful lot of questions and is unhappy about something. Why?”

Crix sighed. “I’m sure Han and Skywalker have their reasons, but there’s something you need to know. Will you join me for dinner in my rooms? This is going to take a while.”
Breakfast came early. At Mirax’s direction, Chef spread out the generous leftovers that remained from dinner the night before and brewed copious quantities of Rostek’s good, dark-roasted caff to wash them down with. Though he was far from refreshed, having had a much-needed meditation session with Corran and Kyle before joining the others, Luke felt reasonably re-centered as he slid into a seat across from Han.

“This is a working meal,” Corran announced from the other end of the table when everyone had taken their seats. “Since she’s got the best handle on who heard what yesterday, Iella’s going to get us started by reviewing all the essential points.”

Luke scooped a tangle of spicy prunchti noodles onto his plate, pleased. He’d been submerged in Jedi issues from the moment they set foot on Jade Level the day before and wondered how long it would take to get caught up on what the rest of his Squad had been learning in the meantime. A review over breakfast was ideal.

Iella made quick work of reprising what little they knew about the continuing fallout at Carida and Daedalus. She mentioned briefly that there had been no change in Mara’s condition and that the “Jedi artifacts” had yielded no further assistance. “You’ll start seeing construction droids in a couple hours,” she continued, checking off items on her list between swigs of caff. “We’ve talked to Booster and renovations will continue on schedule and per Jade’s standing instructions unless or until she wakes up decides otherwise. The emergency codes she gave Artoo will allow us to stay here for the foreseeable future, but we need to start making serious decisions today.”

“Where are the x-wings?” Wedge asked.

“Blue Level. A couple hangers down from where you parked the shuttle, for now,” Han answered. “Jade Level is gonna have private hanger bays but they aren’t done yet. The ships are safe enough where they are for the moment, and Artoo said Jade has enough credits that the cost doesn’t matter. The shuttle’ll go back to Teeth, with us,” he said, gesturing at Chewie and Lando.

“While we’re on the subject,” Lando spoke up. “I’ve been speaking to Jedi Horn and I’d like to stay.”

“I told you -,” Han started, angrily.

“Stay and do what?” Luke interrupted. He scooped two sticks full of noodles into his mouth and chewed while the Baron explained.

“Whether you stay here or go somewhere else,” Lando said, leaning forward, earnestly, “you’ve officially put the Jedi out into the galaxy independently. You’re going to need an administrator - someone to handle the interfaces while you get set up.”

“He has a point,” Tycho mused, pausing with his juice glass halfway to his mouth. “We’ve made the split – if you don’t formally establish the Order as its own sovereign entity, we’ll all just end up wearing somebody else’s uniforms sooner or later.”

Luke glanced down the table at Corran.

“I know we talked a while back about going with just the family-based model of apprenticeship – not even having a Temple, but I think having an administrator is a good idea regardless,” Horn asserted. “We need strong steps forward, right now, and there’s going to be a lot of wrangling to do.” He grimaced. “And we’ve got a lot on our plates already.”

That was true. Luke shifted his gaze to Han. “You disagree.”
Han shook his head. “They’ve got a point,” he allowed, begrudgingly. “An’ it’s not like he couldn’t do some good. It’s just -,” he leaned forward, elbows on the table. “This’s all still interconnected,” he reminded the table at large.” Solo poked a finger against the tabletop for emphasis. “If he’s here, he ain’t somewhere else – and there’s gonna be lotsa places we still need good people before this thing is over.”

“If we’re going to consider larger perspectives,” Iella put in from the other end of the table, “then now is the time for me to point out that you’re all getting ahead of yourselves, anyway.” She tilted her nearly-empty mug and circled it in the air to collectively indicate everyone at the table.

“Clarify,” Mirax demanded.

She didn’t sound upset, Luke noted, draining the rest of his caff. Just – *keen*. A businesswoman rising to the opening of what promised to be rigorous negotiations.

“You’re trying to make decisions about the future,” Iella observed, matter-of-factly. “But you have no idea how you want your decision-making process to work. There’s no codified internal power structure yet.”

“We don’t know whose votes count,” Wedge translated, his mouth pursing as he considered her argument.

“Exactly. Are you giving everybody a vote? Only Jedi?” Iella motioned to Kyle. “Does he get a full Jedi vote, even though he’s still supposedly in training? What kind of majority do you need to pass a motion? The more decisions you try to make before you sort out the basics, the more likely it is we’re going to end up back in messes like the ones we just survived.”

“I hate when you’re right,” Corran grumbled.

From the greyish-green hue of his sense in the Force, Luke guessed Horn wasn’t any more excited about the idea of getting mired down in the technicalities of re-founding the Order just then than he was.

“I’m always right,” Iella smirked at him.

General debate broke out around the table about their options. What kind of structure they’d need, where to begin. Luke leaned into the Force, only half listening to the others as he cast about for wisdom – any kind of insight.

“You could ask Leia,” Han suggested in response to a remark from Kyle that Luke had missed. “She’s got a good head for this kind of thing.”

“No Leia,” Luke said, louder than he intended.

“Everyone stoped to look at him.

“We need advice,” he allowed, “but I don’t want Leia involved until we’ve got something in place.” He met Han’s eyes. “I won’t compromise her standing in the Alliance by getting her involved now.”

“Rostek.” Corran snapped his fingers.

Luke nodded. “And Ben and Nejaa, if we can get them here without Mara.”

Kyle lifted a finger, politely interjecting himself into the conversation. “If this were a mission,” he said, his own command experience showing, “and I was in charge, I’d be dividing and conquering,
“I agree.” Luke sat up a little taller. “Iella, Mirax – you’ve got the most organizational experience here. Can you draw up something to get us started? A list of basic questions or decisions we need to start with?”

“A multiple-choice Jedi business plan?” Iella’s lips quirked. “You got it.”

“Wedge,” he said, sliding his gaze to his squad mate. “I’m officially handing leadership of the Rogues off to you. I have no idea how we’re going to integrate the squad into the Order.”

Wedge nodded once, quick and decisive. “We’ll do some legwork, Boss. Get you some suggestions.”


“Chewie an’ me’ll talk to Rostek and Winter,” Han spoke up. He gave Luke a lopsided smile. “Entirely ‘hypothetically’ on Winter’s end, of course. Find out what you’ll need to meet Corellia and the Alliance on equal footing.”

Luke smiled warmly at his almost-brother. “See if you find an option that doesn’t involve dress uniforms,” he joked. Then he turned to Lando. “I can’t promise anything long-term until the rest of this,” he waved his hand around the table, “gets sorted out, but for now the role of Administrator is yours if you want it.”

Lando grinned. “I’m on it, right away,” he promised. “If you’ll lend me your droid, I’ll see what I can find on the renovation plans and financial situation.

Luke shook his head. “You’ll have to go to him - Artoo won’t leave Mara until she wakes. I’ll ask him to share with you whatever he has, though.”

“I can help you with provisioning options, too,” Mirax told Lando. “We have Chef. If we can get some basic cooking utilities rigged up we won’t necessarily need to rely on take-out every day for our meals.” She focused on the Jedi. “What are you three planning to get into?”

“We’ll try to contact Ben and Nejaa, first,” Corran made the command decision. “See what they can tell us about everything we’ve got on the table right now. What happens after that depends on what they say.”

Luke scooped the last of his meal onto his food sticks, shoveled it into his mouth and then rose to clear his place. For the moment, they were safe. Everyone was fed and he could feel the room steadily filling around him with a low, invisible hum as the harmony of shared purpose permeated the space. A fresh, hopeful energy he hadn’t felt since the first night on Ord Mantell sang in his veins. He opened himself to it, drew it deep inside him and let it flush out the frustration and anxiety that had taken root as of late.

Reaching for his Mara-place, Luke ran a mental hand over its cold, empty edges. *Come back, CorMeum. This song we’re starting to sing isn’t complete without you.* The Force whispered past his ears. Not words that he could make out, but murmurings, sweet and soft. Like Aunt Beru had made when he was small as she paced up and down the single hall of their tiny home on Tatooine, rocking him in her arms in the cool of night when he couldn’t sleep. There were no promises and no answers in it, but Luke accepted the comfort for what it was and then turned his mind fully to tasks at hand.
They managed to get Nejaa for about four minutes. They held onto Ben for not quite ten.

“This is a lot easier when Mara’s awake,” Corran grumbled when Kenobi vanished mid-sentence.

“It is,” Luke nodded, his eyes lingering on the place where their ghostly mentors had been. “But we got enough, for now.”

“We probably should have seen that much ourselves,” Kyle’s brows knit thoughtfully. “The starting a council, bit, I mean. It makes sense.”

“Maybe, but we still have to figure out who we want on it,” Corran pointed out. “Just having one is no good if it isn’t comprised of the right beings.”

“They shouldn’t all be Force users,” Luke stated, decisively. He stood and started pacing.

Corran gave him an amused look. “You’ve been listening to El- that line about Force users needing looking after - haven’t you?”

“A little,” Luke admitted with a small smile of his own. “More than that, I’ve been thinking of family.” He felt an old, familiar ache at the loss of the Lars. “My aunt and uncle didn’t have the Force – didn’t even know much about it. But they were wise in their own way and they loved me. Without them I wouldn’t even be here. Same for Leia and the Organas and you and Rostek.” He looked at Kyle. “I imagine your father was much the same, given how you turned out.”

Sadness touched Katarn’s sense, but he nodded gravely. “Both my parents were good people. No way to know, now, if either of them had any connection to the Force, though.” He tipped his head in Corran’s direction. “Your wife will want a spot on the Council. You know that, right?”

“It’ll save time,” Corran said with a matter-of-fact shrug. “I married a damn smart woman. If she’s not on the Council, I’ll just end up discussing things with her before I cast my vote anyway.” He tilted his chin up slightly. “Selfish as this is going to sound since it will inevitably one day belong to my kid, I suggest we create a permanent Battle Coordinator seat.” He paused, shooting a cautious glance at Luke. “Unless, of course, you and Mara -.”

“No,” Luke bit the word out. “We won’t.” He took a breath and moderated his tone. “But you’re right. Battle Coordinators have a special gift and we’ll want them permanently on the Council.”

Kyle intentionally glossed over the tension and ticked off on his fingers. “Everybody’s been kind of assuming you two will co-lead, which makes sense. With Mara that makes three and Mirax is four.”

“Co-leads should be written in to the charter – or whatever we use to document this,” Luke agreed. “You’re on the Council, too – don’t try to get out of it.” He chuckled at the face Katarn pulled. “I think Wedge should be, too. On behalf of the Rogues. As long as we’ve got our own Squad, they deserve a say.”

“Six is no good as a number, though,” Corran argued. “You need an odd number for breaking ties.”

Luke nodded. “That’s -.” He doubled over, gasping, as energy careened through him. Iridescent and bright as the twin suns it all but split his chest, filling his Mara-place and overflowing out in rush that made his fingers and toes tingle.

He didn’t hear his name when the others shouted it. He was already running – barreling through the door and down the hall, around corners. He heard Artoo’s trilling even before he got the door open.
Mara stood unsteadily beside the bed, one hand holding onto it for balance as she wobbled, the fingertips of her other hand caressing Artoo’s dome. The I.V. tube and the wrap that had bound her shoulder lay discarded on the floor. She looked up as he tore in, lifting her right arm to wrap around his neck as he swept her up, his heart overflowing with relief and joy.

“CorMeum.” Luke crushed her to him, burying his face in her neck and burrowing his sense as deep inside her Force presence as he dared, drenching himself in the desperately-missed – and entirely new - feel of her.

“Luke,” she whispered, her voice raspy. She clung with her good arm, pressing her face against his heart, and inched her left hand around his waist as far as she could without straining her shoulder.

Feet pounded behind them and Artoo hooted triumphantly at Corran and Kyle as they crashed to a halt in the doorway.


Jade reluctantly pulled away enough to lean around Luke’s arm and nod greeting to the others. Luke made himself loosen his grip but didn’t let her go.

“Caff?” Mara asked, hoarsely.

Corran laughed at the hopeful expression on her face. “You stay awake and as bright as that, we’ll get you anything you want.” He ducked back out of the room.

Kyle opted to follow, shooting a quick grin at Mara before purposefully shutting the door behind him to give them a moment.

“Are you all right?” Luke asked, as soon as they were alone. He feathered his fingers over the cuts on her cheek. “We couldn’t heal you. Couldn’t reach you – we tried.”

“I’m fine,” Mara said, firmly, her voice getting a little stronger. She leaned back to meet his eyes, her own bright but serious. “I need caff and a sani-steam,” she amended, “but, first – kiss me.”

Luke blinked, startled. Then, still cradling her in his arms, he happily dipped his head to hers without asking any questions. Her mouth was warm and pliant under his, and she pressed into him, wonder saturating her sense. Luke hugged her tighter, losing himself in the taste of her. A spike of pain streaked across the bond and he hastily pulled back a little, his right hand darting up to support her arm and ease it safely against her side.

He met her wide eyes, swept his gaze over her flushed and battered face.

“Something’s changed,” he said, softly, searching her expression. “Something important.”

Mara shook her head. “Not something, Farmboy - everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Derriphin are an actual GFFA thing. I have taken some liberties with how they present when attacking a person.

Dotkohu= bastard
Intimate Explorations

Chapter Summary

Luke and Mara finally get some time alone. They spend it naked.

Chapter Notes

There is zero plot this chapter. It is all smut and only smut. If that's not your thing, please feel free to pick up next chapter. If, like me, you're wondering how on Hoth we got this far into things with no smut, please enjoy!

Also, please note that in light of Mara's traumatic history and Luke's intense awareness of how much trouble they've gotten into in recent chapters by NOT being clear with one another, there is a LOT of communication and possibly excessive consent in this chapter. You've been warned.

Loathe to let Mara out of his reach, let alone out of his sight, Luke claimed one of the sand-colored conform loungers Mirax had borrowed from Booster until they could acquire their own furniture. Planting his feet on the floor on either side of the padded bench, he tucked Mara between his legs and let one hand rest unmoving on her hip. Mara sat with her legs crossed at the ankle and pulled up toward her chest. She'd tucked her injured left arm between her thighs and chest, and her nearly-empty second mug of caff was perched atop her knees. Artoo hovered close by, unwilling to get far from his self-assigned charge even now that she was awake.

Mirax, Kyle, Wedge and Lando were off ship procuring a sizeable quantity of furniture, equipment and supplies to outfit Jade Level for their immediate needs. The rest of their party trickled – and then streamed – in as word of Mara’s awakening reached them.

“We’re going to have to start a new archive,” Iella frowned when Corran finished repeating Mara’s explanation of derriphin. “This kind of information needs to be on searchable record somewhere.”

Luke felt a tap on his shoulder and looked around, surprised and then confused when there was no one there.

“That was me.” Mara craned her head around to peer at him. “You felt it?”

He nodded, intrigued.

“Nejaa,” she explained. “Corran, we have company.”

Luke watched, fascinated at her new degree of clarity and control, as Mara swung the rings of her power sphere into a new alignment. With previously undemonstrated precision, she scooped her grandfather and Ben into the armillary sphere of her control, clicking them into place alongside Corran’s ring. Wordlessly, Luke offered her a line to his own energy to bolster her depleted reserves, pleased when she accepted it immediately.
A second later, two Force ghosts popped into view. Several of the non-Force users in the room jumped.

“Whoa!” Wes leaned forward with the enthusiasm of a child at a circus. “Are they real?”

Nejaa snorted in amusement.

“Grandfather. Ben.” Corran greeted them cheerfully. “Welcome back. Everybody, if you haven’t already met them, this is my grandfather, Jedi Master Nejaa Halcyon, and Jedi Master Obi-wan Kenobi.” Seeing the next round of questions bubble up on Wes’s expression, he added quickly, “I’ll explain the mechanics later.”

Greetings were exchanged all around and then Nejaa turned to Mara, glowing with warmth. “Dear Heart,” he reached out with a hand, his palm hovering just over her head in an affectionate touch metaphysics wouldn’t quite allow him to complete. He smiled. “Forgive me – Coordinator Halcyon. I am so proud of you. If I still had my physical form, I would mint your Jedi Credit myself.”

“I don’t think-,” the words were out before Mara realized what she was doing. The instant she did, they died on her lips.

She had earned her place as a Jedi. It was hers and she had claimed it rightfully. It was not greed or arrogance to accept honest praise hard won, and she’d best get used to her new title sooner rather than later.

“Thank you,” she said awkwardly to Nejaa, with a small, self-conscious dip of her head.

“How long can they stay, now that Mara’s here?” Iella asked Corran. “Because if she can hold them for a while, we could have the first Council meeting before Solo leaves.”

“Council meeting?” Mara asked.

“Your grandfathers and I have advised your fellow Jedi that a critical part of launching the New Order is establishing a Jedi Council,” Kenobi informed Mara.

“Apparently I was out longer than I thought,” she winced.

“Not really,” Corran reassured her. “It’s just been a busy couple of days.” He directed his next words to Iella. “We need the others back first and,” he raised his eyebrows pointedly. “I think Mara needs some *rest* before she plays host to two Force ghosts for a couple hours. We weren’t able to heal her while she was out.”

Iella’s eyes flicked over Mara and, by default, over Luke.

“Right,” she said, briskly. “Council meeting tomorrow after breakfast.”


“Where is she resting, Boss?” Wes asked. “You need me to keep the bunk room clear for a bit while you do the healing thing?”

Mara swiveled her head to look at Artoo. “Did you put them in my room?”

//Your rooms were not covered by the emergency codes.//

“Wait, what?” Corran looked between Mara and Artoo, confused.
“I wasn’t expecting company this soon,” Mara said, defensively. “I set up the protocols in a hurry.”

“Are they on the far end of the level, or something?” Wes looked puzzled. “We didn’t find anything finished in this section or on the Artoo’s maps.”

//They are hidden on the maps.// Artoo bleeped impatiently, as if offended the implied error.

“Okay,” Iella cut in. “We can sort that out later. For now, let’s just accept that Jade has a room, doesn’t need to stay in the bunk room, and that Skywalker needs to escort her to said room so she can heal before tomorrow. Clear?”

After another minute of back-and-forth on logistical details in preparation for the following morning, the group broke up. Luke retrieved the bags with his things and Mara’s while she collected the clothes still stacked beside the medical bed she’d been in.

“Where are we?” Mara asked Artoo when they regrouped.

A holo-map popped to life above his dome with their position marked in a neat red x.

“Thanks.” Mara set off down the corridor, Luke falling into step beside her. Artoo trundled happily along behind. Luke counted the turns as they made another left and Mara stepped into a short, bland hall. Luke vaguely remembered the rough schematics Artoo had shown them indicating that this entire section was just empty utility rooms still waiting for remodel.

Mara took the first door on the left. Luke followed her, noting the holding bays along the sides that suggested this was a closet primarily intended to house cleaning droids. Stepping into the shadows of the last bay on the right-hand wall, Mara flipped open a maintenance hatch to reveal a top-of-the-line security scanner. It took a retinal print and hand print to confirm her identity. Then, to Luke’s astonishment, the bay’s back wall – which had looked entirely solid – slid apart. Artoo followed them through and the door promptly sealed shut behind them.

They all stopped, scanning the apartment laid out before them. To the right, a narrow rectangular galley was tucked into the corner. The counter separating it from the living area was bar height. Four stools were tucked neatly underneath it and glassware racks lined the underside of the shallow cabinet above. The space was spotless – the appliances still had their protective plasti-film coverings on. To their left was a spartan but elegant living space in warm hues of green and blue. A high-end comm and work station nestled in one corner. Beside it, recessed into the wall, was a niche.

Artoo squealed with delight. //It is finished!!//

Mara cocked her head in his direction. “You should give it a go. Make sure it’s up to spec.”

With a whistle of delight, the little droid wheeled directly for it. Luke watched as a frosted glass door slid down as soon as the droid was inside and sealed with a hiss. A moment later there was the sound of rushing liquid.

“It’s a deluxe droid port.” Mara explained, leading Luke further into the apartment. “It’s got all the standard comm and energy plug ins, plus built-in extras like an on-demand oil bath.”

Luke didn’t want to imagine what that must have cost. “You’re going to spoil him,” he accused, playfully.

“It was intended to be a bribe.”

There was a small ‘fresher on their left past the living area, then a large, impressively equipped work-
out room beside it. The full length and height of the wall to their right was comprised of weapons
lockers. Not what Luke would have thought to put in an apartment, but he couldn’t actually claim to
be surprised to find them in Mara’s private space. At the end of the short hall, they stepped into the
bedroom.

The bed was large, covered in a sumptuous navy duvet and topped with a pile of pillows. The back
wall was all viewport, offering a gorgeous view of the stars. Recessed luma panels gave off a soft,
even, muted light. The floors were covered in plush, cream-colored carpet. To the right there were
doors Luke guessed led to a closet and the refresher. The walls were the ship’s original, unadorned
gunmetal grey and the air smelled faintly of something herbal and soothing.

“It’s beautiful,” he said quietly, torn between being comforted that Mara had created such a retreat
and deeply dismayed that she had intended to reside in it alone.

“You could share it with me. Since you’re not going to marry the Queen.”

“I was never going to marry the Queen,” Luke reminded her, firmly.

“I know that now.” Mara’s chin dropped and she rubbed at her forehead, wearily. “I hate that I didn’t
see it before - any of it. I had everything wrong and that thing was inside me – eating me alive - and I
couldn’t see.”

“We’ve all been blind to things.” Luke stepped closer and stroked a hand over her hair, comfortingly.
“But we’re making changes.”

Mara nodded, silently, accepting the reality for what it was.

“Why don’t you take a shower?” Luke suggested. “You’ll feel better, and we can talk about what
comes next when you’re done.”

Mara was quiet a moment, then asked quietly, “do you want to shower with me?”

Luke stared at her, certain he’d misheard. “Really?”

Embarrassment made Mara’s skin crawl, but she pushed back against it. She wasn’t the Emperor’s
Hand, now. There was no cause to be ashamed of this. “When I was locked in the derriphan I…
missed you. I wanted you to be there, touching me, like you did on Ord Mantell. But more.”


He pulled her against him, wrapping his arms around her tightly and closing his eyes as he grappled
with the riot of emotions churning through the bond. It was impossible to tell which were hers and
which were his own, but it didn’t matter, really. He held her tightly until the rush settled, like a river
finding its level. Then he loosened his hold, took her hand, and led her into the ‘fresher.

The ornately tiled room was done in layered hues of cream and blue and was as big as the quarters
Luke had shared with Wedge on Hoth. An enormous huge sunken tub dominated the fall wall and a
walk-win shower the size of a speeder took up most of the left wall.
“It’s modeled after one of the VIP suites on Diamond Level.” Mara offered by way of explanation. “It was easier to use Booster’s standard layout than design my own.”

Luke shook his head but didn’t comment. Instead, he motioned to her left arm. “Can you lift at all?”

“Not high enough to get my shirt off.”

“We’ll go the other way then.” Gently, Luke slid the straps of her undershirt off her shoulders and down her arms. The stretchy neckline gave way and he tugged the whole thing past her hips and down her legs until she could step out of it. He helped her out of her socks while he was there.

Rising, he was intensely aware that in the months they’d been together, the weeks they’d shared his rooms on Teeth, they’d never seen each other unclothed. Although they’d touched one another it had, by most standards, been nearly chaste. This was precariously uncharted territory.

“Mara,” Luke ran his fingertips over her shoulder, then up and down her arm lightly while he picked his words. “I need you to tell me if I do something you don’t like. If something isn’t okay.”

Her face scrunched, her heart sinking. “Because I’m damaged.”

“No!” he said quickly, catching up her hand and bringing her palm to his lips. “No, Sweetheart.”

Again, he stumbled a bit with how to say what he meant. “You… I’ve been learning a lot – realizing a lot, while you were away and while you were out. About how you think – how you were taught to think, about some things.” Anger on her behalf flared and Luke pushed the words out on a harsh breath. “They taught you to want to please at all costs. But this… can’t be like that.”

Mara’s brow furrowed, frustration biting at her. “But I want it to be good.”

“It will be,” he assured her, quickly. He met and intentionally held her gaze. “But only if you tell me what does and doesn’t work. This – love – it’s not a thing you do right. It’s something you - we…”

Mara frowned, begrudging the part of her brain that acknowledged the fairness of his point and resenting the pall that the lack of certainty and control had thrown over her mood. Trying to regain some command of herself and the situation she commanded, “you have to, too.”

“I know.” He slid his arms around her. “I will.”

He kissed her then, slow and easy, pleased when her body began to ease against his, her frustration sliding back toward comfort. Luke trailed kisses across Mara’s jaw to her throat, taking his time tasting her. His mouth was warm and he kept one hand splayed at the small of her back, protective and reassuring.

Gradually, Mara inched her good arm higher around his neck, their bodies naturally pressing together as they sought more of one another. Her hair still smelled faintly of the char and smoke she’d escaped at Genarius, but her skin was soft under his lips and her sense was rosy-hued and diffuse as she lost herself in his touch.

Luke let his free hand roam lightly across her to torso in smooth, languid strokes. Passing her ribs, he twisted his wrist to drift the back of his fingers lightly over the wrap that covered her breasts. Her breath caught, a bright flash of sensation going off like a flare across her sense. Immensely satisfied, he did it again. Mara’s fingers curled into his hair and he hummed lightly against her skin at the touch. He inched his kisses a little lower, flattened his palm over her ribs – and startled when she flinched away, part of her sense snapping shut like a frightened tortapo jerking its limbs inside its shell.
Luke froze, unsure what had triggered the response. “Talk to me,” he prompted, softly, when she remained rigid and silent. Keeping one hand at the base of her spine, he eased the other to the back of her right shoulder where it’d been safely positioned before, kneading tight muscle gently.

Anger flashed across her sense. Not at him – it didn’t arc out, but cut deeper in on herself.

“Hey,” Luke pressed a kiss to her temple, slow and soft. “What did we agree?”

“Discovering,” she gritted out. “Not right or -,” she couldn’t finish and worked her jaw a moment before pushing out a breath, cracking the hard locks of her instinctive shielding. “Here.” She took his hand and maneuvered it so his thumb touched the mid-point of her lowest rib on her right side.

“Not okay,” Luke said aloud, marking the point on a mental map.

Mara shook her head, then dropped her forehead to his chest. “Force piked,” she said, thickly, struggling with an ocean of resentment and the vividly-remembered fury of utter helplessness. The memory leaked across the bond - being strapped to a med table, a Red Guard jamming a Force Pike into that same spot every time she’d tried to free herself after he’d growled at her to be still. “Even healed it -.”

*Hurts* was the wrong word, but she didn’t know a better one for the sharp, gouging discomfort, the way her nerves clenched, waiting for the blast of electricity they’d learned to expect the next instant.

“Just here?” Luke asked, resting his thumb over the spot where she’d set it. “Or here, too?” He swept his thumb forward and back along the length of the rib very, very lightly.

“Just the center. Always the same spot,” she answered, tightly.

Hate stabbed at Luke at the petty cruelty of that. He made himself acknowledge it, then let it go. That wasn’t what was important now. What Mara needed was important and he focused on that, instead. “Thank you,” he murmured, pressing his lips to her temple. “For telling me.”

She nodded again but her sense was still murky, her shields still partially closing her off.

“Take a couple steps for me,” Luke asked, nudging her backward.

She complied, curiosity sneaking in. Moving his hands to her hips, Luke boosted Mara up until she sat on the vanity’s wide Sittana-marble countertop. “Okay?” he asked, stepping between her legs.

Mara glanced behind her and found plenty of room between her back and the wall. The counter wasn’t uncomfortable and the warmth of Luke’s body close to her own re-sparked her desire to have his hands on her.

“Fine.” Examining their position again, she asked, “time for the wrap to come off?” The interest in her voice surprised her and she reminded herself firmly that embarrassment had no place here.

“If that’s all right,” Luke’s hands stayed firmly at her hips, waiting for her answer before he moved.

“Yes. Will you kiss me more?”

He grinned. “Always.” He dipped his head to hers, this time teasing her mouth with his lips and tongue until she opened hers, almost shyly, for him.

Mara shifted her weight, squirming her body tighter in his when Luke’s tongue flicked at hers. She tangled her right hand in his hair as the kiss deepened. He tasted like *Luke* – sunshine and earnest
sweetness, and she mimicked his movement, daring to explore his mouth, too. A shot of delight arced through her at his groan, the way his hands fisted in the wrap he’d been unclasping. His hips pushed toward her, the lightsaber on his belt clattered against the vanity cabinet.

Mara snorted and pulled back a little. “Maybe you should lose some clothes, too.”

“Mmm,” Luke agreed. He took a half step back, reluctantly giving up Mara’s kisses for a moment to finish unwinding the wrap and set it aside.

Mara watched the fabric come away, then looked away, trying to swallow the ugly feeling that rose.

“Not all right?” Luke asked, softly, dropping his hands to her hips again.

“No, it is.” Mara closed her eyes and made herself put words to the loathing. “When my clothes come off I look like his. Like the Emperor’s Hand. Not like me.” It had bothered her before – since she’d become Luke’s, really – but now that she more clearly identified as a Jedi, it was that much more galling. “I hate that.”

“Then we’ll find ways to change it,” Luke promised. “To make you feel more like you.” He risked running the back his fingers over the tip of her right breast.

Mara sucked in a breath and shuddered. It was impossible that such a slight touch should feel so good. It sent a tingle down her spine, dazzling and unexpected. “Oh.”

Luke’s lips curved up and he leaned into the surprised delight bursting across their bond. Like a sugar rush, it went straight to his head… and other parts of his body.

“Good?” he asked, unable to keep a bit of teasing out of his voice in his happiness.

“Get some clothes off and do it again,” she demanded.

Luke made quick work of his belt, slinging it onto the counter behind her, then stripped off his tunic and undertunic. Stepping back in close, he ran the backs of his fingers over both her nipples. They pearled at the attention, hardening to flushed points. Luke felt his own body stiffen further in response, making his clothing uncomfortably restrictive. He was going to have to lose his pants soon. Unsure how ready Mara was for that, however, he directed his energy toward her pleasure. The better she felt, the more likely things were to go well when the next round of clothing came off. Leaning in, he mouthed along her shoulders and collarbones, lingering at places that made her breath catch. He kept his hands on her breasts, keeping his touch carefully light. Triumph spumed inside him as a captivating flush worked its across her chest and her back began to arch, pressing her breasts up, silently begging for more.

Mara’s head tipped back, eyes falling shut as she spiraled. Luke’s mouth was warm against her skin, the press of his lips leaving a trail of dampened, sensitized flesh in its wake. She was vividly aware of the flush staining her skin, the heat in her cheeks. There was a disconcerting dampness gathering between her legs, but she couldn’t focus on it because; Luke’s touches were dissolving her ability to focus on anything at all. Her breasts felt swollen, and electricity crackled through her with every achingly soft stroke of his fingers against her skin.

Someone had flipped a switch somewhere, she thought, fuzzily. Reversed the laws of physics, somehow. The electricity took a familiar path through her body, blazing out along every individual nerve ending. But no agony screamed in its wake. Instead, there was pleasure. Pleasure - as intense and mind-wrecking as the pain had always been – streaked out, invading every cell. It wrapped
around her, drove through muscle and bone and -.

“CorMeum?”

The concern in Luke’s voice hauled her back, out of the well of sensation she was drowning in. Mara’s head felt absurdly heavy as she tipped it forward, blinked weighted eyelids in an attempt to bring his worried face into focus.

“Hmm?” Ridiculously, she found she could manage no other sound. Her entire body was tight, coiled and vibrating.

Luke slid one arm around Mara’s waist and rubbed at her bicep with the other. “Are you all right?”

“Mmm.” Summoning real words was a struggle. “It’s… good,” she managed, at a loss to explain any more clearly. She took in his flushed cheeks, bright eyes. The way his mouth was reddened and full from its pursuit of her. But he’d stopped. Anxiety crept in. “Not… for you?”

Luke couldn’t help his smile at the question. But Mara was still shaking, her sense like a lightening storm seen far off in the distance - bright flashes and sparking static. It was beautiful – gorgeous, even – but he thought there might be danger there, too.

“It’s good for me, too, Sweetheart,” he reassured. Relief spread between them and Luke felt a twinge of guilt. Mara was not the only one who needed to be verbalizing, here. He could better. “You zoned out on me a minute, there,” he explained. “I think maybe we should take a break for a minute. Get in shower. Are you okay if -?”

“Yes.” He can take off the rest of her clothes. Take anything he wants. Her body is still humming, though the thrum had backed off enough that she guessed her limbs might obey now if she attempted to move.

The response came faster than he’d expected and Luke kissed her again, slowly and tenderly, before easing her off the counter. He made sure she was steady on feet before he knelt to help her out of her remaining clothes. He kept his sense snug against hers and his eyes on her face as he undressed her, drew his hand up the outside of her leg, then her hip, as he rose. He caught a dart of the same self-loathing there had been when he’d uncovered her breasts, but she breathed through it. It dissipated and he let it go, all the more determined to help her find ways to be comfortable with her body in the days to come.

“Set the water to whatever you like.”

Mara nodded, the heated tile floor warm against her soles as she walked toward the shower. Her legs wobbled as if she were drunk or drugged and she put more effort into focusing. Fabric rustled behind her as Luke unfastened his remaining clothes. Then her fingers found the controls and the rush of water drowned out everything else. It took three tries to adjust all twelve of the showerheads recessed into the walls and ceiling and dial in the temperature somewhere high enough to create clouds of steam but not quite hot enough to scald.

Mara tipped her face up and let the water cascade over her, the steamy fog enveloping her giving the world a muffled and surreal detachment. She found herself oddly aware of her pounding heart as she settled a little more back into her body from whatever intoxicating place Luke’s kisses had driven her. She felt Luke more than heard him when he joined her, oddly grateful that he didn’t touch her immediately. Instead, he stood a few steps away, letting the water soak him.

Guilt and awe trickled, intertwined, across the bond. “This is an obscene amount of water for a single
shower. I’ve never seen anything like it.” He hesitated. “But it’s amazing.”

Amusement and affection, entirely unrelated to anything physical, percolated in Mara’s chest. The feeling and the mundanity of the topic re-centered her completely in her body. “It gets cycled through an independent filtration system - the best on the market. Then back into circulation.”

“So, not wasted. That’s good.”

Satisfaction lodged inside Luke. Their new home was sumptuous and efficient, which meant he didn’t need to feel the least bit guilty about indulging for the moment. More importantly, Mara’s sense had lost its nervy, staticky feel. He half-turned, his eyes sliding over her body in profile. Her hair was darker when it was wet, something closer to garnet than ruby and gold. It clung to her skin, water droplets rolling off the tips to join a million others traveling in runnels over the curve of her hips, her muscular thighs. She did look like the Emperor’s Hand unclothed, he thought, his heart clenching. Lean and honed and mapped with web of scars that left no part of her untouched. But she was his. Fierce protectiveness roused inside him and Luke stepped toward her, remembering at the last second to ask before he wrapped his arms around her.

“Can I hold you?”

“Yes.” The word came out breathier than she’d intended, but Mara’s heart rate was already picking up again. Luke’s possessiveness shimmered between them, taking her breath away. After having spent her life desperately striving for scraps of approval, Luke’s seamless devotion and untainted desire were dizzying.

His arms curved around her and Mara let herself be pulled back against his chest. His body was angled, the left side of his hip and chest bracing her back and bottom. His erection bobbed at her right thigh, but did not press into her. Mara struggled, resentful that he felt he needed to tread so carefully with her and yet immensely grateful that he had.

Reaching out in the Force, Luke tugged the self-bubbling loofah from its hook on the shower wall. He stayed quiet, giving Mara space to work through the mess of her conflicting feelings as he ran the textured puff gently over her back. The suds flowed off her in streams, leaving her skin pink and clean behind them. Here and there, he adjusted their position to give himself access to different parts of her back and legs. He was squatting, moving the puff up the back of her legs when he felt her struggle subside. Still, he kept his constant contact with her, one hand always steady and reassuring on a hip where he knows it is safe to touch.

There was a moment of tension – another flinch and snapping shut of her shields – when he swept the loofah just beneath her left shoulder blade. Again, he waited, still and unjudging, his lips at her temple as she worked through it. This time, she bit out an explanation without prompting.

“My brave Mara,” he murmured, nuzzling her throat as he slowly resumed his movements.

As before, she slowly softened back into him. By the time he began at the front of her shoulders, she had relaxed again. He stayed behind her, keeping his body a solid pillar for hers as her sense unspooled. He watched her, indulgently, as her head lolled against his shoulder, her eyes closed and her expression rapt. The water running down her breasts made him ache to taste her, there. To run his tongue around her nipples until they were taut and begging for attention – he wanted to lap at the pink tips until he’d memorized the ways it made her move and feel and sound.

His cock was straining for him stomach, now, aching with arousal. He schooled himself to patience, directing his attention further down her body. There was no red-gold hair beneath her arms, no fine curls between her legs, only smooth bare skin. He wondered if that was her choice or if, like so many
other things, just one more decision she hadn’t been allowed to make for herself. He shuffled the question away for another time, kept the loofah moving until he’d washed almost every inch of her.

He stopped at the top of one of her thighs. “Mara?”

“Hmm?” she turned her head, her nosing his chest like a tooka seeking affection.

He smiled at the mental image, but nudged her slightly across the bond. This was important. He pressed his fingers against her thigh, drawing her attention to them. “Mara, can I touch you -?”

It occurred to him then that he didn’t know what language she’d be most comfortable with. For the moment, he allowed himself to rely on the bond, imagining his soapy fingers slipping between her legs. They’d have to talk about it later – vocabulary, and what she preferred. But that needed to happen when she was rested and coherent – not when she was already languid and drifting in his arms.

Her abdomen and thighs clenched of their own volition and Mara pressed her cheek a little harder against Luke’s chest. “You won’t – not inside me.” The anxiety was back and Mara fought it. Looked for words, as he’d asked her to. “I want to – I want us -.”

“Shhh,” Luke’s lips were on her forehead, her soaked hair, patient and encouraging. “Go slow.”

Mara couldn’t help the noise of frustration that escaped her. She didn’t want to go slow. She didn’t want to be damaged – to be the one making this hard between them. She was ready for more – she was… but maybe not that. Not yet. “Can you… can you not -?”

Mara felt Luke’s amused chagrin as it became apparent she’d run into the same problem he had. But she was clearly aware that she was the source of the problem – he’d be fine with whatever made her comfortable. Only she didn’t know what made her comfortable – was too distracted now to think it through. She’d have to improvise for now. Taking a breath, she gathered her determination.

“I want you inside me,” she made herself say, as if were perfectly normal and not something she’d never imagined being able to speak aloud in her life. “But not… not yet. Can you… touch me, without… without that?”

Luke’s pride washed over her and Mara sagged in relief. The arm he had around her tightened, keeping her secure against him.

“Yes,” he kissed the sensitive skin just below her ear, making her sigh. “I can do that. Thank you.”

Kneading the loofah, he worked up lather on his hand, then transferred the poof to the hand wrapped around her ribs and dipped the other between her legs.

“Ohhh.” The word came out somewhere between a gasp and a moan, one of the few sounds Mara has allowed herself. She wasn’t sure she’d meant to allow this one, but her bones were melting inside her. Everything was giving way, like lava pouring down a mountainside.

Luke’s slick fingers were painstakingly gentle as he stroked her folds. He didn’t linger, but Mara’s entire body was alight, her breath fast and shallow when he drew his hand away. To her surprise, when her skin was rinsed clean, Luke turned to her hair.

Mara lost whatever sense of time or self she’d had left as his fingers massaged her scalp. In a steady, unhurried rhythm, he scooped and lifted her hair, gathering it and working the cleanser through. Not entirely lucid, Mara wondered with a sort of blissful detachment if her blood had been replaced with champagne because every part of her seemed to be fizzing and tingling from her skull to the soles of
Luke kept a close eye on Mara’s sense as he angled her to rinse her hair, then carefully squeezed its length in handfuls, wringing most of the excess water out. She’d come partially untethered again, her sense wild, bright and uneven. He turned slightly as he gathered her hair and twisted it up on top of her head. She shouldn’t feel simple touch this deeply, should she?

The sugar-rush sensation came back and this time Luke was struck by the analogy. There had been few sweets on Tatooine. Poverty and the harsh climate made the standard moisture-farmer diet bland on average, savory when they could get the spices. Once, maybe twice a year on a supremely special occasion there’d been fruit – dried, or even fresh. The first time he’d tried chocolate – even the cheap, mass-produced stuff the Rebellion was able to get now and then – he’d been dumbfounded. Awestruck by the sweetness on his tongue and high as a kite from the concentrated sugar – at least until the inevitable crash.

Watching Mara, Luke wondered if this wasn’t the same for her. She’d had so little physical contact most of her life – and no pleasure of any kind to speak of. It wouldn’t really be a surprise if Her tolerances for it were nonexistence as well, would it?

Oddly both hyperaware of and detached from her body, Mara felt a bump against her thigh as Luke twisted behind her. He is hard. Because of me, she thought, fascinated. Curious and comfort-drunk, she reached down with her good hand and brushed her fingertips against it. Behind her, Luke sucked in a breath and went still.

Horror curled in Mara’s gut and she yanked her hand away. She hadn’t asked. He’d been so careful with her, how could she not have even asked, and –?


Relief was sweet and heady and she hurried to respond, his hand reluctantly letting go of hers as she wrapped her fingers cautiously around his solid length. He was hot and thick under her inquisitive touch, almost velvety under her fingers. She glanced down, unable to reconcile what she felt with remembered horrors.

Luke strained with the effort of keeping still. He hadn’t expected her to touch him – certainly not yet – but if she was unexpectedly comfortable with it he was desperate and determined to let her explore however she saw fit.

“Will you -,” Mara hesitated, reminded again of the need to discuss terms. “Would you touch me, again, while I touch you? I want to -.” She winced but, already committed, made herself finish the thought and hoped Luke would understand her intention through the fumbling, ungraceful words. “I need rewiring. This,” she squeezed his erection lightly. “With feeling good. Please?”

For all her certainty that she’d put that horribly, Luke’s hand curved around her hip and she got only a sense of eager willingness and pride through the bond.

“You’ll tell me if its too much?” Luke prompted. “You know we can stop. It’s okay.”

He was throbbing under her delicate touch and really, really didn’t want to lose the feel of her hand wrapped around him, the glorious, shiver-inducing friction of the heel of her hand grazing his swollen tip. But he would turn his blaster on himself before he’d push her in this – risk ruining the trust and security between them in this moment.
Mara nodded and inched her legs apart. Her hand moved slowly, sliding over his wet length, fingertips tracing the prominent vein along the underside.

Luke muffled his moan in her hair and took a few steps back. The shower spray was a soft mist intermingled with the vapidous clouds of steam, and the transparisteel wall was smooth and sturdy at his back as he readjusted his stance. Enveloped in the foggy cocoon of the shower, Luke cuddled Mara close and dipped his hand back between her thighs. Her folds were slick with arousal, and Luke took his time. Tenderly, he explored her, massaging her inner walls, spreading her slick and coaxing more from her. He tried, over the pressure building at the base of his spine, to map Mara’s every response.

She was spiraling on him, again. Her hips moved, snapping sharply when the pad of his finger brushed her clit. Rocking, slow and longingly when he dipped his middle finger just barely between her folds and dragged it slowly along the length of her slit. That staticky energy was building inside her again – higher and hotter than it had been before. Mara whimpered, her body arching as he added a second finger, keeping one stroking her slit in a steady tempo, the other circling her clit.

Luke was leaking profusely, Mara hand – moving unconsciously now, as she was lost in herself – smeared the pearly drops from his tip back across his length. He tried not to look, certain he’d lose the fierce grip he was keeping on his control if he let himself see her hand, her wrist, streaked with _him_. Closing his eyes, Luke sucked in breath, using every ounce of his control to focus on his fingers, on keeping his touch light – just barely there. Mara planted her heels and arched harder, pushing her chest up as she rocked on his fingers. Unable to help himself, Luke reached up and cupped one of her breasts, pressed the peaked tip into his palm. Mara whined, the heel of her hand pressing down, scraping down his engorged cock.

It was a step too far. Pleasure collided with pleasure in the space they shared between them, surged past the boundaries of control and dragged them under. A firestorm of colored bursts erupted across the bond, then raced through their bodies in tandem. Mara cried out, folding in half over the arm Luke held her in place with, trembling violently. Luke gripped her ferociously, both arms clamping around her ribs even as his hips snapped and he staggered blindly, emptying himself with the exigency of a dam breaking.

Luke had no idea how long it took him to remember to breathe – to remember that he _could_ and become aware that he was _not_. Gulping for breath, he let his shaking knees give out in a mostly-controlled slide down the shower wall. Mara turned into his chest, buried her face in crook of his neck, still trembling. Cradling her between his knees, Luke buried a hand in her bedraggled hair, curling his body around hers.

“CorMeum?” His voice was a croak and he cleared his throat to try again. “Mara?”

“I didn’t know that was possible,” she whispered against his shoulder. “That much – _good_, all at once.”

An exhausted grin split Luke’s face and he ducked his head to press a kiss to her cheek. Then, when she lifted her head, to her lips, slow and tender. “I meant to ask,” he told her, awash with contentment and amusement and suddenly very aware of how tired he was. “To give you a choice, about coming. Actually, I’d planned for there to be a bed involved, when we did this the first time. None of this was… quite as I planned.”

“Hmm,” Mara acknowledged. She dropped her head back against his shoulder. A renewed awareness of her injuries, the relief of being clean and the heavy-limbed satiation of their new intimacy caught up with her all at once, and left her head swimming. “Don’t take this the wrong
way,” she said, groggily, “but I think I need to sleep, now.”

Luke shook his head. “You need a healing trance. I should have made you do one before we got this far.” Still he couldn’t bring himself to regret it. “Come on.”

The air dryer outside the shower quickly blew them dry, and in moments Luke had Mara tucked into the apartment’s giant bed. Settling beside her, he discovered that the bed was absurdly comfortable. The mattress was perfectly firm, the duvet thick and satiny against their bare skin. Luke settled on his back, wrapping an arm around Mara when she tucked herself into his side. She rested her head over his heart.

“Tomorrow,” she yawned, “I want to sleep, not trance.”

“Tomorrow,” he agreed with a smile, shimmying his body until he could rest his cheek on the top of her head and then waving the lights into darkness. He waited until Mara was fully in her trance, then sank into slumber still smiling.
Schisms & Splices

Chapter Summary

Now on their own, the Jedi plot a course forward and begin preparing in earnest for the showdown to come. Finding herself scorned, Queen Trios makes fateful decisions of her own that change Imperial plans.

Chapter Notes

And we're back! A chapter a week until we're done, people! Whoo hoo! (Thanks for sticking with me!) :)

This chapter picks up right where the last one left off.

Please note that the "schism" referenced here is the Jedi leaving the Rebellion to set out independently, in case that wasn't clear.

Two Days Post Schism

Luke woke to an empty bed. He sat up abruptly, anxiety shooting through his chest, and reached out for Mara. Relief hit when he found her calm and close by. She reached back, chagrined by his concern. Scooting to the edge of the enormous bed, he rolled out, located a pair of pants and pulled them on as he headed down the short hall. Tiny, soft lights he hadn’t noticed the night before were illuminated in the ceiling, giving the illusion of stars far overhead. The aromas of Rostek’s famously good caff and cocoa wafted toward him and Luke breathed them in, deeply.

He found Mara in the tiny kitchenette, unwrapping fat mugs from their protective plasteen coverings.

“Good morning.”

“I didn’t mean to worry you,” she made a face. “I just wanted caff.”

“Pour me some and I won’t hold it against you.”

He walked around the counter and brushed a lock of hair back over her shoulder. Leaning forward, he kissed her temple. Mara turned her head, seeking his lips with her own. Immensely pleased, Luke lingered, sliding an arm around her waist and tilting his head to draw out the kiss.

The caff pot beeped. Reluctantly, Mara pulled away and reached for it. “I’m done making mistakes,” she informed him determinedly as she poured for them both. “We’re together and we’re going to act like it. Properly. Like we did last night.”

“Last night’s rules still apply,” Luke reminded her, accepting the steaming mug she handed him. Before she could remind him, he added, “for both of us.”

Mara wrapped both hands around her own mug and nodded solemnly.
“Come on, I want to try out our new furniture.” Luke coaxed one of Mara’s hands off her mug and twined his fingers with hers, leading her toward the sitting area. “Did you get enough time in the trance?”

“Yes. All healed.” She settled beside him on the lounger, then pulled her knees up and twisted a little to face him, her face going pensive.

“What is it?” he asked, lifting his mug. The cocoa-and-caff was rich and thick on his tongue, redolent of cream with a hint of some kind of exotic honey. Artoo hadn’t been the only one Mara intended to spoil, he suspected.

“I’m not,” Mara answered, broodingly. “Healed, I mean. Inside. I killed the derriphan but…”

“Not being eaten alive isn’t the same as being well.” Luke supplied the words she struggled to find.

She met his eyes over the caff. “Everything I did – everything I thought - before Daedlus was wrong. And it wasn’t just the derriphan. The Emperor – my head - I’m… damaged. I could have gotten everyone killed, Skywalker.”

Luke took another sip of his caff, turning his response over in his head carefully before speaking.

“Daedlus should never have happened,” he told her seriously. “The Rebellion should never have authorized it when it did. I should have refused the mission as the Rogues’ commanding officer. Corran and Han should have called it off the minute they got a look at you. But you’re right – you had just as much responsibility to call it off as the rest of us and you didn’t, because you weren’t thinking clearly.” He slid his hand over, resting it on her knee and rubbing her soft skin with his thumb. “And while I agree with Nejaa and Ben that killing the derriphan counts as your Trial, it isn’t enough by itself to make you a good Jedi. Enough to make you safe in the field.”

Mara thought of Corran and Mirax’s baby and felt a deep pang. She’d promised to protect it, to teach it. Promised to protect Luke and Han, to help her grandfather – and she was… not capable. Useless. Worthless. They’d all invested so much and -.

“CorMeum.” Luke’s voice cut through her plummeting thoughts.

Mara gripped her mug until her knuckles went white and hauled her thoughts back to level ground. Luke watched her, then said quietly, “Have you considered – do you know Master Yoda left a program for you? On the holochron.”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What kind of program?”

“Therapy,” Luke said, bluntly, knowing that she’d rather take the blow and get it over with than dance around it. “Some course the Old Order used to help Jedi who’d suffered trauma. You could - working through it might help you.” He gazed at her, solemn and intent.

Her gut twisted as her mind slid straight into an overlapping mess of old conditioned responses. Therapy is another word for incompetence. Yoda! Don’t trust him. He wants to steal you – erase your mind! Therapy – euphemism for prying your mind open, scraping it out, implanting -.

“Hey!”

Mara blinked, the stark white and stainless-steel landscape of a remembered Reprogramming Suite demonstration blurring then evaporating from her vision.
Luke’s hands were on either side her face, both their mugs somehow gone, his blue eyes close and worried.

“Shavit,” Mara croaked, grounding herself in his gaze and trying to pull herself back from the emotional hole that had nearly swallowed her. “That…” anger sparked and she found her voice. “Why does that feel worse without the damn derripphin?!”

He smiled at her, a little ruefully. “Probably because you see it for what it is now. So… therapy?”

Mara blew out a breath and rubbed her forehead. “There wouldn’t be enough headache relievers in the galaxy – even if they did work on me.” She scrunched her eyes shut. “But fine – if that’s what it takes to be not…” she stumbled on the ugly words that wanted to spill out. “To be a real Jedi, then therapy.”

“There are other ways of getting rid of a headache.”

Mara’s eyes popped open. Luke had somehow reclaimed his mug and was sipping his caff much too innocently. Had he seriously just suggested -?

He raised an eyebrow. “You did say you wanted to properly act like we’re together.”

He had a point. Mara watched him with concern while she found her mug on the side table on the other side of Luke and lofted it back to herself. “You are aware I expect Yoda’s program to cause a lot of headaches? And that I’m not – last night I couldn’t even -.”

Reassurance flowed across the bond and Luke’s fingers found hers again. “We’ll make it work, CorMeum.”

Well. That was that, then. Mara sipped her caff, suddenly wishing she’d made a bigger pot. The immediate future promised to be extremely interesting.

Mirax ambushed them the instant they stepped within sight of Jade Level’s primary gathering room. Laying claim to Mara, she shoved a plate of Chef’s infamous mini-rhyscates into her hands and steered her toward Lando in a barrage of questions and logistical chatter.

Luke surveyed the rest of the organized chaos that consumed the space. The Rogues were arranging newly-acquired furniture in a giant circle under Iella’s supervision. In the center of the space, Corran perched on an improvised scaffold. Standard test images flickered in and out as he brought a state-of-the-art holoprojector freshly installed on the ceiling online.

Han, Chewie, Artoo and Whistler appeared to be finishing the set up on a portable comm center in the far corner. In the near corner, Chef fussed over a generous spread of food and caff that filled the room with cheesy, buttery, and sweet scents. Luke suddenly realized he was starving.

Wandering in that direction, he waited until the droid’s back was turned and snagged a scone from a precisely stacked tower of savory pastries. Sharp cheese and smoky bantha bacon burst on his tongue on the first bite and he all but groaned in appreciation. Making a mental note to personally thank Rostek for sending Chef with Mara and Mirax, Luke inhaled the rest of the flaky rectangle in the time it took him to cross the room to the comm center, nodding and half waving at the others as they called greetings.

“Hey, Kid.”

“Nah, I think we got ‘er,” Han dusted off his hands. “Droids are running a diagnostic now.” He ran a critical eye over his friend. “You don’t look like hell anymore.”


//The cub is well, also? // Chewbacca asked with a welcoming whuff.


“Yeah?” Solo asked shrewdly, lifting an eyebrow.

Luke flushed slightly. Glancing around, he dropped his voice. “She let me touch her, Han.” His whole body warmed at the memory of her bare skin pressed against his in the decadent shower. “And it wasn’t just surviving the Derriphan - she feels safe here.” His face fell. “I knew things were bad on Teeth, but I had no idea a change of venue would make so much difference.”

“Nobody’s perfect, Kid – not even Jedi.” Han clapped a hand on his shoulder in brotherly affection and empathy, then motioned grandly at himself. “Present company excepted, of course.”

Chewie gave a low, amused rumble.

Han scowled at him. “Laugh it up, fuzzball.”

Behind them, Artoo trilled triumphantly. //All systems are online.//


A shrill whistle cut through the air, prompting everyone to turn. Wedge had taken over Corran’s perch. Taking his fingers out of his mouth, he announced, “Everybody get some food and get in the circle – time to get started!”

“Do you want the good news or the bad news?” Mirax Terrick-Horn stood, hands on her hips, in front of the lounger she and Corran had claimed.

The whole of the Jedi’s small contingent had arrayed themselves on loungers and couches, plates of pastries and butter-heavy finger-foods balanced on their laps, mugs of caff in hand or resting on the nearest flat surface. At Mirax’s question, all eyes swung toward Luke and the oversized chair he was sharing with Mara.

From where she perched on the chair’s fat, well-stuffed arm, nibbling another ryshcate, Jade fielded the question before Luke could speak. “Bad news,” she demanded, decisively.

“Establishing a Council is unwise and infeasible at this point in time.” Mirax glanced at Iella.

“We looked into a plan, as you requested,” Wessiri confirmed, crisply. “And the assessment just doesn’t support the formation of administrative overhead right now. Much simpler structures will meet all of our current needs and give us the flexibility we’re going to need over the next couple months.”

“I assume you have suggestions for those structures?” Wedge guessed.
“Of course.” Iella thumbed the control for the holoprojector. “Lando keeps his post as Administrator and Mirax steps in as Comptroller. Between them, they make Jade Level run – stock provisions, oversee renovations – and serve as primary gatekeepers. That leaves our Jedi free to focus on the things only they can do.”

“That sounds like the good news,” Tycho commented.

Mirax grinned. “No, the good news is that Jade authorized you louts an obscene budget for new ships.”

Wes and Hobbie whooped. “New x-wings?!”

“Anything you want,” Iella corrected. “With Wedge’s approval,” she clarified, quickly. “You’ll need a cohesive unit, and the specs will need to support defense more than offense. And you’ll be responsible for designing and setting up Jade Level’s hangar, once you’ve picked ships.”

Han raised his voice over the excited chatter that followed. “What’s happening to the ships you’ve got?”

“We’ve giving them back to the Rebellion – slaving them to the Falcon when you leave,” Corran said. “We don’t want to be beholden – or chargeable for theft down the line if anyone decides to get difficult.”

“Fair enough,” Han allowed, gruffly.

“That just leaves our actual Jedi,” Mirax said, when that was settled. “Corran?”

“Kyle and I are going to take point on the Wayland investigation,” Horn announced. “Figure out a plan for neutralizing that before we take on the Emperor. Luke?”

Luke slid his hand into Mara’s, entwining their fingers. “Master Yoda left Mara a holochron and we’ve agreed that she’ll stay here on ship until she works through it,” he said, firmly. “I’ll be staying with her. I’d like for all four of us to do some practicing with her gift, as well – honing it before live combat is going to be essential.” He glanced at Han. “I’ll also coordinate with Han and Rostek – we’ve made commitments that will need to be upheld.”

“That settles it, then,” Iella said, obviously satisfied. “We have our plan – time to work it. Everybody dismissed.”

Luke helped Han and Chewie collect Pash Cracken from the suite they’d stashed him in and walked with them through the Errant Venture to where the Falcon was docked. Chewbacca made his farewells and hustled Cracken inside, leaving Han and Luke alone.

“Are you gonna be all right?” Han asked, seriously. “I know things are lookin’ up and you got help here and all, but,” he trailed off, frowning.

“I’ll miss you, Han,” Luke said simply.

“Yeah,” Han gave him a sheepish half-smile. “Gonna miss you, too. Especially when your sister tries to kill me for not bringing you back.”

Luke laughed, then turned serious. “Let me know when you’re ready to talk about taking on Jabba.
We’ll have your back. We’ll see you on Corellia, soon, too.”

“Lookin’ forward to it.” Solo gave a quick nod. “Take care of yourself, Kid – Jade, too.”

“I will. May the Force be with you.”

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*Two Weeks Post Schism*

“Princess Leia,” Trios emphasized the other woman’s title, twisting her lips on the word as if it were distasteful, and looked down her aquiline nose derisively. “I understand that you are new to your position and I appreciate that there are certain things you must do to keep up appearances. But I’m sure when you have all the facts, you will realize that my arrangement is not something you can afford to discontinue so carelessly.”

“It’s Counselor Organa-Solo, now,” Leia replied, crisply. “And while I can certainly respect your frustration, the Alliance does not sell its people for political gain. We are not slavers.”

Trios folded her arms. “I’d have expected more pragmatism from a woman in your position,” she accused, coldly. “Though I suppose you never had the opportunity to be anything more than a figurehead playing at Rebellion before Alderaan was destroyed.”

Leia bit her tongue, barely keeping her fury in check. “I empathize with your position,” she finally said, icily. “You bear a heavy burden. But there is nothing the Alliance can do about Shu-Torun’s internal affairs and Jedi Skywalker is a free man. He has refused your advances and there is nothing we can do about that, either. If you’d like to discuss a treaty,” she swept a hand out, palm up, “I would be delighted to oblige. Otherwise, I’d hate to take up any more of your valuable time.”

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“Back here, please.”

The olive-skinned Mirialan motioned Mara and Mirax into a small, private cubicle in the back of the shop. The door slid shut, cutting off the noise and motion of Blue Level. The room was brightly lit with clean, white light but Mara was relieved to find the luma panels recessed overhead and evenly distributed. The walls were painted a warm, neutral color and the temperature had been raised to spa-like levels.

“Madam Terrick-Horn tells me this is your first time,” the artist said. She picked up a flat, carved hardwood box and turned back to Mara, dark eyes serious. “And that needles are… a challenge.”

“I’m prepared,” Mara said, firmly.

“But you’re going to let her use the mildest numbing agent we have reason to believe will work,” Mirax prompted, sternly.

Mara’s lips pursed.

“There is no shame in it,” the artist chided, gently. “I myself use it when having my sisters work on sensitive areas.” She tapped a long, delicate finger to her cheek where four precisely symmetric squares were inked in ebony. “The gods honor our achievements, not unnecessary pain. Here.” She opened the box and held it out. “Choose.”
“I recommend the blue,” Mirax opined. “Spicy, but not too much.”

Mara took the suggestion and plucked a single stick of incense from the box. The Mirialan took it from her and returned the box to a side table. Lighting the incense from a small candle, she pulled it through the air, smudging the scent around Mara, murmuring.

“A prayer,” she explained, carrying to stick to a burner. “That you might be favored by the gods by for your courage.” She gestured to the padded lounger in the center of the room. “Remove your shirt when you ready and sit.”

Mara unfastened her belt and put it on the table provided, trying to ignore the way her heart rate picked up.

Ignore you should not, Yoda’s voice scolded in her head. Feel. Accept. With you, the Force is. Handle it, it can. Room there is in the Force for all feelings.

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Decisively pulled her tunic over her head. The air was warm on her skin and she latched onto the sensation.

Not cold, she told herself. No surgical lights. No restraints. No guards. This is safe. You chose this. It’s fine.

Mirax walked to the portable lounger that Ekka, the artist, had thoughtfully placed in front of the subject’s chair for her and sat heavily, her hand rubbing her the small of her back. “Don’t tell my father,” she complained. “But I’m going to have to start wearing that damn support belt soon if this baby keeps growing.”

“He will,” Mara said without thinking, her attention on the feel of the wrap between her fingers as she unwound it from her chest.

“It is to be a boy?” Ekka asked, with interest. “Have you chosen a name?”

“We don’t know,” Mirax said, narrowing her eyes at Mara. “Unless – Force help my idiot husband if he told you something and didn’t tell me!”

Mara froze, her hands fisting tight around the wrap in front of her bare chest. “I -.” She stopped. Tipped her head. Reached out, tentatively, to the bright little life sleeping inside its mother. Her lips quirked as sudden, almost hysterically giddy laughter threatened. “It is – a boy. I don’t – I didn’t realize I knew. Miri -.”

“I know.” Mirax’s eyes were instantly damp and she scrubbed at them with the heel of her hand. “Damn hormones.”

Safe. Mara thought, bubbly lightness effervescing through her – her own, but Mirax’s, too, filling the tiny space. Safe. The Emperor had no use for a male Halcyon child. Even if they somehow failed – if every possible thing went horribly wrong – the baby would still be safe.

Ekka looked between them, curiously.

“Get your ass in the chair, Halcyon,” Mirax demanded, gruffly. “If we stay like this, half of the Honor Guard will be down here in a minute hollering about upset Jedi and imagining the worst.”

Mara tightened her shields a bit further, hoping she hadn’t leaked either her fear or her surprise to Luke. It took effort to make herself put the wrap down with her tunic, to make her feet carry her to the chair. Through sheer force of will, she lowered herself into the chair, facing Mirax, her legs on
either side of the seat, her chest against the padded, blanket-covered back. Mirax reached out and gripped her hands.

“You don’t have to -,” she started, regretting the words even as she couldn’t help them.

“Shush,” Terrick-Horn said, shortly. “You can hold mine when the baby is born and we’ll consider ourselves even.”

Mara nodded, silently and squeezed her friend’s hands.

“I’m going to apply the numbing agent,” Ekka said calmly from behind her. “Just relax, Madam Jade.”

Luke felt Mara’s shields drop and immediately caught a teasing, phantom whiff of garlic noodles.

*Dinner at home?*

Luke grinned and sent back enthusiastic agreement. Mara’s sense felt disheveled and fatigued, but there was a strong undercurrent of satisfaction there, as well. Evidently, she considered whatever therapy exercise she had borrowed Mirax to help her with a success. And *home*… There was no end to the contentment that welled in his heart at the quiet awe that tinged her sense every time she referred to their apartment as home.

“I still think the Delta-9 is your best bet,” he told Wedge, answering the question his friend had asked before Mara unwittingly interrupted. “You can’t beat the maneuverability of an Aethersprite.”

“You think?” The Corellian frowned. “Hobbie’s been researching the Alpha-4 Nimbuses on that front.”

Luke made a face. “V-wings are small,” he pointed out. “Tighter than x-wings. You won’t have much leg room.”

He stayed a while longer debating with the Rogues – now the Jedi Honor Guard – their options for new fighters. In the back of his mind, he kept tabs on Mara, following her at a distance through her “coming home” rituals. Master Yoda’s program strongly encouraged small rituals as grounding points and there was no missing the perfect way the idea fit with Mara’s deeply orderly nature.

When she’d finished and felt settled, Luke excused himself, leaving the others to their debate. Mara was in the kitchenette when he let himself in, pouring hot, fragrant tisane for them both.

“How about the new tunic?” he asked, fingering the soft fabric when she approached and appreciating the way the dark navy hue set off her natural coloring.

Mara tilted her head up to kiss him before answering. “Not the only thing that’s new.”

Luke felt the flicker of unease in her and kissed her again, one hand falling to her hip, the fingers of his other hand combing through her loose hair. *It’s all right. Whatever it is.*

Pulling back, Mara held his eyes on more second, then turned around, scooping her hair over one shoulder.

Luke sucked in a breath. “CorMeum…”
“It’s my lilies,” she said, hurriedly, as if he hadn’t immediately been able to tell. “And the vine grandfather made for you. “I wanted -,” she stumbled. “You said -.”

“It’s beautiful,” he breathed.

Relief rushed across the bond and Mara’s shoulders sagged as her tension evaporated.

“Can I touch?”

She nodded, and Luke gently brushed the sides of the open-back top away, his fingers tracing the pinked skin of her back. It was only an outline, but the coal-colored ink climbing from her left hip to her right shoulder was unmistakably their combined plant – the same one they were training up the wall of their bedroom with the help of special sunlamps and Rostek’s detailed instructions.

Wanted, Rostek had told them. In the language of flora, Mara’s lilies declared her wanted - longed for. And the climbing ivy – growth. Connection.

“I’ll get more,” Mara told him. “Everywhere. Have them colored in. The scars -,” she looked over her shoulder, eyes bright with hope.

“Barely show,” he confirmed, unable to contain his smile. “You won’t even notice them in the mirror anymore.”

Luke had a dozen questions and no idea which one to ask first. His stomach resolved the dilemma by choosing that moment to rumble, loudly. Mara’s lips quirked in amusement and she stepped away from him to round the counter and pull a flimsiplast take-out box from the warmer.

“Food first, questions later Farmboy.”

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**Three Weeks Post Schism**

The office Ysanne had commandeered was pitiful. Oh, the Imperial Liaison she’d thrown out of it had been insufferably proud of his local kinetic art pieces and his heavy boa-wood shelves covered with collected flotsam. But to her acculturated eye it was a pathetic hovel. She missed her well-appointed suite on Coruscant. Missed the aceptic scrubbed air, the endless scurry of harassed aides, and the pervasive presence of her Emperor. Damn Kenobi for getting her dragged out here. Weeks she’d been here and nothing.

“Madam Director.” A stormtrooper appeared at her door, his helmet dipping respectfully. “There’s a holo for you. Coming in from Mid-Rim. Classified.”

“Send it here,” she commanded, squaring her shoulders and tugging at the edges of her uniform. It was impossible to have things properly starched here. One more reason to hate the gods-forsaken planet.

A moment later the sad excuse for a holoprojector crackled to life. Ysanne slid a critical eye over the stately, hard-faced figure. “Who are you and what do you want?” she demanded, irritably.

“Madam Director,” the woman said, the ice in her tone matching Isard’s. “I am Queen Trios of Shu-Torun, and I have information I believe you will be most interested in.”
The Emperor’s thin lips curled up. He traced skeletal fingertips through the holographic words projected in front of him. *She lives.*

He chuckled, a thin, eerie sound. Isard’s disgust and wrath leaked through her professional wording. Her obsession with tormenting his Hand had always been an amusing diversion. Now it was exponentially more so, if only because the Director remained deliciously clueless of the true scope of what she’d stumbled into.

She couldn’t know what Mara’s reappearance meant. Couldn’t appreciate that if it was not death that had broken the bond he’d forged into his Hand, then there remained only one other possibility: another Force user had snapped it. A powerful one. More than that, to keep her alive this long they’d have been forced to bond to her themselves – something she’d not have allowed willingly.

As he’d always suspected they might try to, someone had stolen his Hand. The only question was whom.

Kenobi was verifiably dead. That decrepit little troll Yoda might have masterminded it, but he’d felt the old Master’s passing. If Yoda had taken her for himself, she’d have died with him. That left precious few options.

The Emperor’s smile widened. Lifting a gnarled finger he activated the comm device in the arm of his throne. A moment later, the head of his Red Guard swept up the stairs to kneel at his feet.

“Tsarvong,” Palpatine said cheerily. “We must adjust our plans for Endor. Our guests will be bringing my Hand with them. We must make sure she is clear about exactly how much we missed her.”

“I will see to it personally, My Emperor.”

“Good.” Sideous steepled his hands, his eyes glinting a sulfurous yellow from within the depths of his hood. “Good.”

*Four Weeks Post Schism*

“According to Master Yoda’s information, the Emperor’s cloning facility is located at Mount Tantiss in the planet’s northern hemisphere.” Kyle zoomed the holo in on a huge mountain. “The schematics are incomplete, but it appears nearly the entire mountain has been hollowed out.”

“The top quarter seems to be royal apartments,” Corran picked up. “Beneath that is a series of storerooms. Third tier is the cloning complex. A single Imperial garrison lives and patrols out of the bottom levels under Commandant Milosh Muhrlein.”

“Do we have records on Muhrlein?” Luke asked. “Do we know if he’s Force-sensitive?”

“Nothing on record,” Iella frowned. “But that’s no guarantee.”

“The Emperor wouldn’t put anyone with training there,” Mara spoke up. She’d had a rough morning and stood apart from the others, arms folded across her chest. “Too much risk of betrayal. If he has the Force, it’ll only be minor.”

“Well, that makes our lives easier,” Wedge said, cheerfully. “Main hangar’s down here – swarming with troops. We’re hoping to go in up here.” He pointed to an indicator near the top of the mountain
“marked “emergency shuttle hangar.”

“Shouldn’t be anybody up there,” Tycho clarified. “And if we can get into the computer system before they shut everything down, we should be able to lock them out of the upper levels. We can run down, blow up the cloning chambers and get out before they get in to us.”

“Hobbie and I will create a diversion,” Wes piped up. “Attack down here, by the Command Wing.”

Luke examined the map, silently, trying to identify the niggling thought at the edge of his mind.

“You’ve got doubts,” Corran observed. He shook his head. “So do we. But based on where everything is, we haven’t found a better way in yet.”

“I can’t tell you what it is,” Luke tipped his head, brow furrowing. “Just something…”

“It’s not you,” Mara said shortly. She tapped her temple. “It’s me. I should remember – something – but it’s…”


Corran and Kyle both glanced between them, picking up on Mara’s mood clearly. “We’ll be doing more of this tomorrow;” Kyle said, diplomatically. “Maybe it’ll be more cooperative then.”

Mara said nothing, just stalked out.

Corran sidled over to Luke as the others started to disperse and asked quietly, “bad session?”

Luke nodded. “I don’t have details, just – she leaked more today than usual. Thinking about the people the Emperor made her kill.”


“Thanks. Mirax is still free to go with her tomorrow to Ekka, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Corran smiled slyly. “She’s using it as captive audience time, you know.” At Luke quizzical expression, he elaborated, “teaching Mara about raising kids – lullabies, bedtimes, that kind of thing.” He laughed. “She’s determined Jade won’t get out of anything just because it’s a boy.”

Luke’s lips quirked. “That has to be interesting.” Then he frowned. “I have to go. Mara -.”

Corran held up his hands. “No explanations necessary. See you tomorrow.”

Mara was in the workout room when Luke got to the apartment, going through lightsaber katas with fierce determination. He stopped in the doorway and waited.

“I’m fine.”

“You didn’t do your rituals.”


“Mara.”
“I killed them.” She repeated the kata, less gracefully this time, every muscle taut, self-hatred pouring across the bond around her shields. “I didn’t even think about it. They were just – just jobs. They had families. Lives. And I – I didn’t care.” Slash. Slash. “It didn’t even occur to me to care.” Jab. Slash. Stumble.

“CorMeum.”

Mara hit her knees, the lightsaber snap-hissing off. “I wasn’t human,” she whispered. “How can I -,” her words cut off, lost.

Luke walked across the padded floor and sat down beside her, cross-legged. He held out his hands, palm up. “Emotion,” he prompted, gently.

Mara remained on her knees, head down.

Luke stayed where he was.

With a rough breath, Mara forced her body into meditation pose. Placed stiff fingers atop his.


“Emotion,” Mara ground out. “Yet peace.” She was silent a moment. “I believe peace is attainable,” she managed, after another moment, adding in the extra lines the holochron was teaching her to apply when everything spun out of control.

Luke squeezed her fingers encouragingly, then supplied, “ignorance.”

“Ignorance yet knowledge.” Mara’s chin lifted a little. “I… the Force is my ally. I choose…” her voice cracked. “To listen now.” She pulled a hand from his to dig the heel into one eye. “Why doesn’t it hate me?” she demanded. “All I hear is -.”

“Is what?” Luke lifted the palm of the hand he still held to his lips and opened his eyes.

Mara shook her head. “I don’t know.” She loosed her barriers, let the feelings wash over him.

Tears pricked the back of his eyes. “Forgiveness,” he said, thickly. “The word you’re looking for is forgiveness. There are room for all feelings in the Force,” he added, repeating what the holochron told her daily. “Let them go, Sweetheart.”

They stayed there, on the floor with no barriers between them, for a long time. Luke couldn’t excavate Mara’s grief for her, nor release it into the Force on her behalf, but he could bear witness and he did. Until, with iron fist determination, she scraped herself clean of dark emotions and abusive thoughts and both her hands found their way back into his upturned palms.


Luke opened his eyes, leaned over and kissed her temple. “I’m proud of you.”

Mara managed a nod. “I think… I’d like to do my rituals now.”

“I’ll find us some food.”

Luke was pulling some leftover Melahnese out of the warmer when something flared on Mara’s side of the bond. He quickly put the container down and turned to find her hurtling down the hall toward the door. He felt the now-familiar sensation of her power rings swinging as she summoned Kyle and
“What’s wrong?”

“The window,” Mara shoved her feet into her boots. “Artoo!”

“What?” Luke glanced down the hall toward the bedroom, thinking she meant the viewports.

//Here.// Artoo trilled, popping out of his droid port and rotating his dome with interest.

“We have to talk to the others.” Mara keyed the door open. “I know how to get into Mount Tantiss.”

“Lord Vader. This is an unexpected surprise.” Queen Trios stood rigid in front of the full-size holo-projector. “To what do I owe the honor?”

“Do not play coy with me,” the Sith growled. “You have been in communication with Director Isard. What did you tell her?”

Confusion and fear shot through her, but the Queen kept her face regally neutral. “I merely passed along intelligence I received about the whereabouts of a Rebel who might be of interest to her.”

“What Rebel?” Vader demanded.

Trios felt a chill go down her spine, but held her ground. “No one of consequence, my Lord,” she said smoothly, striving for a dismissive tone. “A girl. Jade something. My intelligence suggests she’d been causing trouble here and there and that she was headed for the Outer Rim. I thought the Director might like to send agents to intercept her.”

Vader held out a gloved fist and Trios felt her throat constrict. To her horror, her lungs seemed to compress. She gasped for air, flushing and wheezing in panic as her body refused to take any in.

“Where?” Vader snarled.

“T-Tatoo-ine,” she croaked, clawing at her throat. “M-my- Lord!”

The pressure released and she collapsed, crumbling to the ground, gulping, hot tears pricking the corners of her eyes.

“Pray that I get to her before the Director does,” Vader rumbled, stabbing a finger in her direction. “Or your life and your planet are forfeit.”

The holo snapped off and Trios’ head dropped, her forehead resting on the cool stone floor of her castle. What had just happened?

Somewhere in her head she heard the soft, reproving voice of her sainted, long-dead mother. *Wishing others harm leads to evil.*

“I was justified,” she snarled back in a pained whisper, squeezing her eyes shut. “I did it for Shu-Torun.”

Vader was the only thing standing between the righteous order of her rule and the bloody tyranny of greedy noble Houses. Given the slightest chance – a single drop of blood in the water – they would bring to ruin everything her father, sister and brother had died for. But Vader was a vicious and capricious bastard. She couldn’t allow herself to continue to rely on him a second longer than necessary.
Skywalker was the only thing that could stand between her and Vader. Her only hope for true security. For powerful heirs that would not be subject to the same helplessness and demeaning groveling she endured. That it had not been his idea or preference to wed her was of no concern – she’d made him an offer far more generous than anyone had any right to expect. He had no right to refuse.

With the orchestrators of their meeting dethroned, however, the Jedi was playing coy. Organa may have been infuriatingly silent on where he’d gone, but others had been more bribable. Details were sparse, but she’d managed to wrestle word of a mission to Tatooine. She neither knew nor cared what took the Jedi to such a forsaken hell-hole. Since her informants also assured her that his woman was gone – almost certainly the same place he’d disappeared to - it had been safe to assume she’d go with him on his mission.

No reason to dirty her own hands, though. Trios pushed herself until she sat upright. With Isard – and now Vader – after Skywalker’s woman, it was only a matter of time until she was dead. Skywalker would be fine, surely. And, distractions removed, he’d be far more amendable to her offer. He had to be.

Slowly, Trios pulled herself to her feet and brushed herself off. Dialing a new code into the comm station, she lifted her chin imperiously as the nervous, mousy image of her Chamberlain illuminated.

“What is the progress on my Consort’s rooms?” she commanded. “They must be ready before he arrives – and I expect him soon.”
This chapter is set in the middle of the last chapter and it's smut only. If that's not your thing, please skip it and pick up next chapter!

[Set in the middle of Chapter 30]

Mara fisted her hands in the soft, dark sheets. “M-more.”

Luke hummed against her. Mouthed another soft kiss high on the inside of her thigh. Felt her shiver. “You’re sure?”

She whimpered as he gently rotated the finger he already had inside her, then gasped, “yes.”

Slowly, Luke eased a second finger inside her alongside the first. Mara’s body clamped down hard and her sense jerked back, the increase in stimulation prompting it to instinctively pull in on itself. Luke kept his hand still and his own sense open and returned his tongue to her core. He resumed lapping at her as he had been, in long, lazy strokes, until the clench of her muscles softened and she started to move in small, still uncertain movements unconsciously seeking friction. She reached back out for him, re-twining her sense around his own.

“Up.”

Reluctantly, Luke inched his kisses higher. Sucked lightly at her hip bone where the dimmed lighting cast shadows across her pale skin. We don’t have to do it this way.

“I can,” Mara insisted. Her hands shook a little on his shoulders. “I’m better.”

“I know,” he agreed, very lightly stroking with the fingers still inside her.

“I want to,” she asserted, stubbornly.

Luke trailed kisses across her ribs, above the outline of the next round of tattoos. Dutifully, he scooted a little higher along her body. Felt her go rigid as more of his weight settled against her. He stopped moving, lifted his head.

“All right?” He couldn’t keep the concern out of his voice.

Mara nodded, jerkily, her lower lip caught tightly between her teeth. Her face and chest were flushed and damp with sweat, and another tremor ran through her.

“Sweetheart,” Luke started to push himself upright, to slide his fingers from her, but Mara squeezed her thighs, trapping his hand, and clung to his shoulders.

“I can.”

Luke frowned. This was a symbol for her, he understood – being under him, on her back as they made love. A signifier of something important reclaimed, progress made. Her mind wanted it,
desperately. Her abused body was slower to let go of its conditioned responses. She was holding her own, but the struggle was painful to watch.

“Maybe -,” he pushed himself up higher, shifted his free arm to brace an elbow on the pillow by her head, hoping he could convince her that was enough – that they’d pushed sufficiently for tonight and she should just let him pleasure her in a way she actually enjoyed -.

Panic detonated across the bond and Mara’s body seized under him. Her eyes blew wide, sightless in adrenaline-fueled terror. The thin shriek that tore from between her suddenly bloodless lips cut through him like Hoth wind.

“Oh, no.” Luke immediately shoved back, pulling himself away from and off of her.

Mara rolled sideways, scrunching into a fetal position, her muscles visibly locking up. Luke felt her shields try to slam shut, only to splinter under another wave of obliterating, physiologically-induced anxiety. He slid off the bed, falling back onto his rear and folding forward, his head bent over his knees, unable to do anything more than ride out the storm with her.

He was groggy when it finally passed, unsure of how he’d ended up laying on his side facing away from the bed. He gave a low, involuntary groan when he pushed himself up onto his knees. Turning around, he crawled to the edge of the bed.

Mara lay where she’d been, still balled up in one corner of the mattress. Goosebumps pricked across her bare flesh, chilled from dried sweat and pale now that the flush of arousal had passed. Her sense was cold and hollow.

“Mara?” Luke got as close as he dared. “CorMeum, I’m – I’m going to touch you, all right?”

Her reddened eyes cracked open. “I thought I was better,” she whispered. “I was so sure…” Her face crumpled. “I wanted to.”

“I know.” Luke brushed away a strand of hair clinging to her damp cheek. “And you are better – so much better. Just -,” he stroked his fingers over her temple. “Just not ready for that, yet.”

Mara’s thoughts were murky and grey with weariness. The only thing Luke caught with clarity was the pervasive and familiar refrain of you deserve better. Healing, he was learning, was a circular process. A war of persistence in the small things, over and over and over, until - like drops of water – they eventually, agonizingly slowly, carved away mountains into new, better shapes.

So do you. He threaded the thought into the fog of her exhaustion but didn’t push. Just stroked her, soothingly.

“You’re on the floor,” she said, after a while. She sounded confused, as if she’d just noticed.


He felt the dark thoughts well up in her – he doesn’t to touch me now. I’ve ruined it this time. Luke held his breath, in hope. Let it out again when newer, healthier thoughts kicked in. Space. It’s just space. You have to ask. Those are the rules.

“Will you… come back to bed?”

Luke’s heart squeezed at the roughness of her voice – at how hard she still found it to ask for anything. “I’d like that.” Unfolding his stiff body, Luke stood. “Can you move for me a little? We should get under the covers.”
With obvious effort, Mara worked her body loose of its protective ball and over so that he could join her and get the thick blankets over them both. Luke lay on his back and opened his arms, inviting Mara to snuggle against him however she was comfortable. When she was settled, he waved the lights completely off.

“Luke?” She said quietly in the darkness after a few moments. “I will be better.”

He kissed her hair, stroked a hand down her bare back. Let her feel his unshakable faith in her through the bond. “I know.”

Two nights later, Mara came to bed naked.

Luke forgot about the datapad he was holding, his eyes fixed on her lean form as she approached. She watched him back, feeling softly around the edges of his sense with her own.

Luke chuckled. “If you’re looking for approval,” he set the datapad aside, “I didn’t think I was being subtle.” He held out a hand. “You’re so beautiful, CorMeum.”

She accepted the hand, let herself be drawn into bed – into his lap. “Before I… before the other night went wrong, you suggested a compromise.” Her eyes searched his face. “Could we – I’d like to.” She stopped, her lips pursing.

Luke stroked her thighs, low by her knees, with warm, patient hands. His heart warmed to watch her implement the holochron’s lessons – putting herself through the exercise of finding words. He could feel her discontent with the ones she found, but she forged ahead anyway.

“I still want you,” she stopped again. Corrected. “Your… cock, inside me.” Her eyes darted over his face, relief clear in the way her expression relaxed at his grin, the squeeze of his hands on her legs. “But not on my back.” Irritation threaded through her, but she pushed it away resolutely. “Like this.” She gestured between them. “Is that… acceptable?”

“It sounds wonderful,” Luke assured her, one hand sliding up to her hip and lifting the other to cup a breast. “Can I start here?”

Desire slid across the bond, warm and liquid and Luke leaned forward, catching a soft pink nipple between his lips. Mara made a low, contented sound that went straight to his groin and braced her palms on his shoulders. Luke took his time, alternating between her breasts, always with his mouth on one and his fingers on the other until both her nipples were hard rosy points and her whole body was flushed. Mara drifted on the high, still startlingly sensitive to every sensation.

“Luke,” she murmured, when his fingertips brushed between her legs. “I should -,” her eyes fluttered open, a slight frown stealing across her features. “I should pleasure you before -.”

“Not tonight,” Luke shook his head, then sucked in a breath at the images between them as she imagined kneeling between his legs, stroking and kissing. “Not tonight,” he gasped again, twining the fingers of his left hand with hers. “I want -.” His turn to find words. “You’re so bright when you come for me.” He brushed his fingers against her again, felt himself harden further at the sinuous way it made her move over him.

“A good ride.” A rueful smile twitched on her lips. “The other night was a bad one – I owe – you want a – a good one, now.”
“Yeah.” Luke hitched his hips, pushing at his shorts. Mara scooted off him, helped him get them off and discarded, then reclaimed her place over him.

“Go slow,” she commanded, as his fingers found her again, traced teasingly light over the slick flesh at the apex of her thighs. “I don’t – don’t want to come, until you’re inside me.”

“Hmm,” Luke agreed, knowing even as he did that would be a challenge. It was so easy to take her over the edge. Easy and gratifying – but not what was called for tonight. Smoothing one hand up Mara’s back, he applied his mouth to her breasts again and set his fingers moving torturously slowly.

She rocked against his hand, taking first one finger and then a second, eagerly. Luke’s mouth wandered across her chest, her shoulders, her throat – mapped her pleasure at every touch. His body was molten their shared need, lust and desire and love flowing back and forth between them in an endless, seamless ribbon.

Mara caught his face between her hands and kissed him, her sense heady with determination and want.

I’m ready.

The thought came across the bond, clearer and steadier than the tides of sensation and emotion it floated on. Luke eased his fingers from her, his hand soaked with her slick, and braced the back of her thigh. I’m all yours, Sweetheart.

Mara shifted her hips, rose up on her knees. A tremor went through her and Luke pressed his lips to her collarbone. “Go slow,” he repeated her own words back to her.

She nodded, but couldn’t answer around the breath she was holding. With one hand, she reached between them and positioned him. Her pulse pounded in her ears as she lowered herself just to where the blunt tip pressed against her entrance.

Luke, she thought, focusing on the feel of him.

Luke wrapped his arms around her and caught his breath as she lowered herself down. Inch by torturous inch she worked herself down onto him, sheathing him in wet heat. Delicious pressure clawed up his spine and he pressed his forehead into her shoulder and tried to breathe through the intensity.

Mara lost all sense of time or coherence. There was only wonder and sensation – a deep, pleasurable stretch unlike anything she’d known before as she took Luke inside her. The hard heat of his body where their chests pressed together and his arms locked around her back. Pressure – in him, in her, she couldn’t tell. Everything was too close, like their bodies had become as permeable as their minds. It didn’t matter – it was all pleasure. All sweet and hot and she teetered on the cusp of too much too much too much.

Luke’s hands fell to her hips and nudged. She let him guide her into a barely-there rocking motion, gasped at the way it sparked a shot of gloriously bright electricity straight through her core – and then they tipped just enough into too far.

Mara’s breath caught on a cry and they were tumbling, senses still entwined bodies still taut - their shared release crashing over them and washing them both out to a sea of stars.

In the afterglow, as she settled back into her own body, Mara felt a shaking start in her core. It bubbled up and out of her lips as a laugh. It dissolved into a giggle that consumed her until tears streamed from the corners of her eyes. She felt Luke’s chest move as he chuckled against her, one of
his hands lifting to brush at the tears escaping her eyes.

“This is new,” he murmured, turning his head to graze his lips across her temple.

*It was good,* she thought at him. The words were grossly inadequate, but there weren’t any others. She couldn’t imagine ever finding words for the shocking, unfathomable openness that was somehow alive in her chest. *I was better and it was good and* -. She pulled his sense to hers, tried to show him the expansive new space within her filled with something bright and clean and -. 

“Freedom,” he supplied, his lips finding hers as love and triumph and fierce, fierce pride rushed between them. “The word for that feeling, CorMeum,” he said, huskily, “is *freedom.*”
Han and Leia get a glimpse of the developments on Jade Level. Then the team splits for the long-anticipated mission to Tatooine to eliminate Jabba's bounty on Han one way or the other and to partner with Rostek Horn and Garm Bel Iblis in overthrowing the Imperials on Corellia.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Six Weeks Post Schism

“Luke isn’t here?” Leia cast her gaze around, taking in the guarded turbolift shaft, Lando’s charming smile, and the distinct lack of any sign of her brother.

“Upstairs,” Lando’s smile broadened. “Come on, I’ll take you up.”

A moment later, Han, Leia, and Lando were whisking their way up away from the Errant Venture’s bazaar past numerous empty floors.

“He knew I was coming,” Leia griped. “He couldn’t be bothered to come out and meet me?”

“You’re early,” Calrissian pointed out, mildly. “The Jedi are still in session. Besides,” he folded his arms and cocked his head. “It’d be bad form.”

“Bad form?” Han raised an eyebrow. “To greet your family when they come to see you?”

“You’re not here as family,” Calrissian shook his head, reprovingly. “You are family, but you’re here on a State visit. If Jedi Skywalker dropped everything to meet you, he’d have to do the same for everyone that came calling.”

“And that sends the wrong message,” Leia’s lips curved down. “It makes you look subservient.”

“Exactly!” Lando exclaimed, spreading his hands. “Setting proper boundaries from the beginning makes people take you more seriously. That’s what the Order needs right now, if it’s going to survive in a viable form after the war.”

Leia looked at the Baron shrewdly. “As a New Republic representative, I can’t say I like it. But as Luke’s sister -,” she reached out and squeezed Lando’s arm once, warmly. “Thank you.”

He swept into a courtly bow as the lift came to a soft stop. “It’s my pleasure, Counselor. Now, allow me to welcome you to Jade Level.”

Han gave a low whistle as they stepped out. “I like what you’ve done with the place.”

“That’s right!” Lando turned, surveying the space. “The Atrium wasn’t set up yet last time you were here. The plants are gifts from Corellia – Director Horn’s private gardens. He made some of them himself, actually.” He chuckled. “The ugly ones are gifts from Booster. Except that one.” He
gestured to cluster of hardy green fronds in its own raised bed. “The Chintassa grass is from Taanab. Eventually, we’ll have native plants from all of the Honor Guards’ home worlds here.”

“If you’re accepting gifts,” Leia said, as they followed Lando through the still unfinished conservatory space, “I’d be happy to give you seedlings of Alderaanean moss.” She felt Han’s hand catch hers and squeeze gently. There was so little left of her home world that every seed was precious. “Our children will come here someday,” she asserted, butterflies still fluttering in her stomach to say it out loud. “I want them to see their heritage represented.”

“You getting started on that right away?” Lando asked with a grin. “Corran and Mirax’s baby could use some playmates.”

“Hey,” Han swatted at his friend’s shoulder. “We’re here on an official visit! At least pretend you’ve got manners!”

Lando laughed. “Of course, General.” He held an elbow out to Leia gallantly. “Come, let me give you the official tour.”

The Order had clearly been busy.

When Han had returned to Teeth with Pash Cracken and a string of empty x-wings in tow, he’d described a nearly-empty shell of a floor with exposed wiring and barely enough furniture to function. Now the lift opened onto a spacious garden, aromatic plants already beginning to flourish in an orderly geometric arrangement of raised beds. Spaces were chalked out on the floor for benches, fountains and other accessories that would someday fill in the gaps. She could already envision it, lovely and soothing.

Past that, there was a wide-open, well-lit gathering space. A long refectory-style table dominated one side, a deep counter with a closable window separating it from what she guessed were cooking facilities of some kind. To the left of the dining area was a lounge. The walls were still bare, ship-standard metal plates but the furniture was tasteful. Its warm colors and organic lines all but begged her to sink into the thick cushions and relax.

Corridors ran in a classic Imperial grid configuration. Lando took them left, pointing out the hall of still-under-renovation suites the Rogues – now the Honor Guard – had already moved into.

Leia felt Luke’s presence suddenly brighten in the back of her mind and knew he must have emerged from whatever exercise he’d been doing. Calrissian stopped them beside a walled off portion of the floor where the sounds of massive construction thudded and buzzed even through the heavy plating.

“Our hangar bay,” he said, proudly. “Hopefully next time you’re here, you’ll be able to land in style in our personal hangar. We’ve got a small fleet of Delta-9s and Alpha-4s clustered downstairs in Booster’s hangars but the Guard can’t wait to get them up here.”

“You gonna have room for the Falcon?” Han asked. “It is her worship’s flagship now.”

“Leia!”

The Princess turned just in time to be swept into a hug. “Luke!” She wrapped her arms around her brother, tightly. When she pulled back, still holding onto his shoulders, she was struck by a sense of lightness.

“Or should it be Counselor Organa-Solo?” he laughed, blue eyes sparkling. “And General Organa-
“Solo?” He reached around his sister to clasp Han’s hand, pull him into a hug.

“We’re still sorting out titles,” Leia informed him, primly. “For this visit I propose that we use informal terms of address and then retroactively correct the documentation to whatever we decide on later.”


“I’ll see to it,” the Baron agreed with a chuckle.

“Did you see to taking him shopping, as well?” Leia asked, fingering the sleeve of her brother’s smartly fitted black tunic. “I know he didn’t pick this himself.”

“There’s been some disagreement about the adoption of a standardized uniform,” Lando informed her, amused. “Mirax and I are doing what we can to keep our Jedi looking authoritative and professional until the issue of dress code gets resolved.”

“I’m sure Booster doesn’t mind all of you spending Mara’s credits in his bazaar while you wait,” Han said, dryly.

“Not so much, no,” Skywalker agreed with a chuckle. “Speaking of Booster,” he said to Lando, “did they get their key cards?”

“They’re all set,” Calrissian confirmed. “We already dropped their things in their guest suite on Diamond Level, so I’ll let you take over from here. You know where I am if you need anything.”

“Thanks.”

The Baron took his leave and Luke promptly hooked his arm through Leia’s and caught Han’s elbow with his other hand, leading them in the opposite direction. “Tell me everything,” he demanded expectantly.

“Oh, no,” Leia retorted. “I want the rest of the tour first.”

Luke shook his head. “Tomorrow. When you’re acting on behalf of the Rebellion. Tonight,” he said, firmly, “you’re family and I want you to be our first real guests – mine and Mara’s, I mean.”

“We get to see your secret hideout, huh?” Han sounded pleased.

“Secret hideout?” Leia questioned.

“The suite is our private space,” Luke explained, taking them past the dining area and Atrium and into a seemingly unoccupied portion of the floor. “We’re still working out all the details of semi-communal living,” he told them as he bent to let the concealed scanner take a retinal print. “But we know having our own separate spaces is part of it,” he added, as he led them inside.

“Oh Luke, this is delightful.” Leia did a full turn, taking in the apartment. It was fastidiously neat, but starting to show the tell-tale signs of actually being lived in and loved. On the wall to the left of the entry climbing ivy and aromatic lilies were crawling up a lattice. “It feels… comforting,” she said, curiously.

“It’s the lilies. They’re the ones Rostek engineered. We had them in the bedroom, but they seem to do better out here for some reason, so we moved them.” He headed for the kitchenette and pulled glasses off the overhead rack. “Emerald wine?” he asked. “I think we’ve got Ruby, too, if you’d rather.”
“Emerald please,” Leia said, turning to face her brother. She could feel Mara nearby, but shielded. Her expression softened into real concern and she dropped her voice. “How is Mara?”

“She’s good. Really good.” Luke paused, wine bottle in hand. “It hasn’t been easy for her,” he admitted. “There have been… setbacks. But the holochron Master Yoda left has been helping – both of us. Her control over her powers is growing, too.” He looked at her hopefully. “You could join us tomorrow for practice, if you want. See firsthand.”

“I’d like that,” she said, sincerely.

“What about me?” Han asked. “Don’t I get to come?”

“Of course.” Luke finished pouring and handed them both glasses. “You’ll find we’re very inclusive around here. Intentionally.”

“Because your handlers believe you need supervision,” Han joked, letting Luke steer them toward the couch.

“So far we’ve yet to prove them wrong,” Luke shrugged, blithely. Then he straightened and turned.

Mara emerged from the hallway clad in a soft navy top and casual cargo pants, skin pink and damp, her hair over her shoulder in a loose braid. Her sense opened up and Leia was startled by the change from the last time they’d seen each other. It was richer, now – fuller, and far more level.

“Leia. Solo.”

“Mara.” Leia was off the couch and across the room, delighted when Mara accepted her hug without hesitation. To her surprise, there was skin under her hands when they pressed against Mara’s back – quite the change from the woman who had worn no less than two layers around Teeth at all times.

“It’s General Organa-Solo to you,” Han puffed out his chest.

Mara snorted. “Too much of a mouthful to yell in combat,” she shook her head. “It’ll have to be formal address only.”

“Now that Mara’s here, you have to tell me everything,” Luke insisted.

“Doesn’t she get wine?” Han asked. “It’s too good a story not to have wine.”

“After lotion,” Luke said, stepping back into the kitchen and coming out again with a bottle of skin cream in hand. He looked to Mara. “Is it all right if they see? You don’t have to.”

“It’s okay.” She turned around.

“Look.” Luke inched the mostly open back of her top a little to the sides.

“Oh, Mara! It’s gorgeous.”

Lilies in violet, amethyst and plum climbed a strand of verdant ivy across Mara’s back. The once glaring Force lightning scars seemed to disappear into her skin by contrast.

“When’d you get that done?” Han asked, impressed.

“It’s a work in progress,” Mara answered as Luke began to work a handful of lotion into her skin. To Luke, she added mentally, I already put lotion on my chest.
Pity, he thought at her, cheekily. Her lips quirked and Luke dropped a kiss to her shoulder. “All right, now wine.”

He fetched two more glasses of wine and then took a thickly stuffed chair adjacent to where Han and Leia were settled on the couch. Mara hesitated beside him for a second, then sank to the floor at his feet. She followed up with a second nonverbal cue, pulling off her hair tie.

Luke replied with a mental nudge.

Grimacing internally, Mara reached along the bond. She hated asking for things directly, but learning to do it anyway was one of her therapy tracks so she bit the blaster bolt and asked, touch me, please?

Luke was quick to reward her effort, warmth caressing her across the bond as his fingers slid into her hair.

Mara gave a silent sigh of pleasure as Luke’s fingers combed through her locks in long, lazy, calming strokes. Then she fixed her gaze on Leia. “I heard you made Crix marry you.”

“Barely even let me set foot off the Falcon,” Han boasted. “Hauled me straight to Madine’s office and demanded I marry her. Practically a blaster rifle wedding!”

“You had to be hauled because you were too afraid to walk off and tell me you didn’t bring anyone back with you!” Leia swatted at him but couldn’t suppress her smile. “Coward.”

“Hey,” Han spread his hands. “I ain’t crazy. Crix wanted to volunteer for that blaster bolt, I wasn’t gonna get in his way.”

“He told you before Han got back?” Luke asked in surprise, pulling his fingers through the silk of Mara’s hair again.

Leia nodded, her expression darkening. “We needed to have our plan of attack nailed down – we couldn’t wait.” She frowned and sipped her wine. “Mon and Jan were furious when Crix ejected everyone but the council out of chambers and revealed that you’d left. That was one of the ugliest meetings I’ve ever been in.”

“But you won,” Mara observed

“Theyir choices were limited,” Han shrugged. “They could step down into support roles, like Leia and Crix offered, or they could let ‘em go public with the whole scheme and the real reason you all left. Especially since Ackbar and Cracken supported the change.”

“It would have been the end of their careers,” Leia agreed. “And probably would have caused a large percentage of the marriages they’d engineered to end in divorce, wasting their effort and hurting the Alliance. They were too invested to let that happen.”

“But you won,” Han said, eying his wife proudly. “High Counselor of the Alliance to Restore the Republic.”

“That’s less glamorous than it sounds.” Leia rolled her eyes. “There’s been a lot of damage to undo.” She squared her shoulders. “But it’s stable and safely in Crix’s hands. Officially, this is a diplomatic visit recognizing the legitimacy of the New Jedi Order and confirming our partnership toward restoring safety to the galaxy. Unofficially,” she glanced at Han, “it’s about catching up on the plans for Tatooine and Corellia. This nerf-herder is my husband, now – I need to be able to take him places without worrying about bounty hunters.”
“There’s been a change of plans,” Luke said, his fingers kneading the nape of Mara’s neck where a knot was trying to form. “Mara and Han are going to Corellia with the others. Rostek’s ready to make his move. You, Kyle and I,” he told his sister, “are going to Tatooine.”

“What?” Han sat forward, aggressively. “No – Leia’s not going anywhere near Hutt territory! She’s too – she’s running the Alliance. She can’t just jaunt to the ass-end of space-.”


“Doesn’t make it not a hell hole,” Han shot back, stubbornly. “Look, we can just go after -.”

“I’m in,” Leia said decisively, right over top of him. “When do we leave?”

Three Days Later

Mara surveyed the bag she’d packed for Corellia, triple checking her weapons stash, then did the same with the bag Luke had prepped for Tatooine. Turning on her heel, she stalked into the hallway and grabbed two more thermal detonators from the weapons lockers. Luke emerged from the ‘fresher as she stuffed them into his bag.

“You didn’t think four was enough?” he asked with a teasing smile.

“No,” Mara said, shortly, yanking the closure on her own bag shut.

“Are you worried about me, or yourself?” he asked, walking over and putting a hand on her arm. There was no judgment in the question, but it was clearly a prompt and Mara blew out an annoyed breath.

“I won’t fail.”


Mara was silent a moment, then said, “Jabba wasn’t your commitment – he was mine.”

“You can’t seriously have thought I wouldn’t go along once I found out.”

She glowered at him. “I was thinking like the Hand then, not like a Jedi,” she reminded him. “I had no intention of you finding out until we got back.”

“Uh huh,” he shook his head. “Well, you’re a Jedi now.”

“Yes, I am - and Jedi should keep their word,” she persisted.

“That’s true.” Luke pushed his bag aside and sat on the edge of the bed. “What do you think the holochron would tell you if this came up in a session?”

Mara glared at him. She hated this technique.

Luke caught her loathing across the bond and shrugged at her. “It works.”

It did. “You,” she hissed - frustrated with herself and the Emperor who’d made her this way and war and the damn Hutts and everything else -, “are going to be an excellent teacher.”

Mara folded her arms and repeated the Jedi Code to herself, working her way back toward her calm center. “Pride.”


She growled and rubbed her forehead.

“Words,” he coaxed, his hand finding her hip and squeezing encouragingly.

“Jedi…” Mara pieced words to her thoughts. She doubted it would ever come naturally to her, but she’d become functionally literate in the skill since they’d taken up residence on Jade Level. “We’re an Order. Parts of a whole. Interdependent.”

“And we’re all depending on you to do what none of the rest of us can,” Luke reminded her. “So me going to Jabba in your place isn’t a favor or shouldering a responsibility – it’s just trading off. Strength for strength.”

“And you’re not going to do anything stupid that I wouldn’t let you do if I was there,” Mara skewered him with a look.

He rolled his eyes at her. “I already know you made Leia promise to keep me on a tight leash.”

“I can’t afford to be distracted at key moments because you,” she folded her arms and lifted her chin, “decided to be reckless.”

“I’m not going to be reckless!” he protested. “We have a plan, remember? We’re going to keep everything quiet and low-key. We’ll be in and out with no fuss at all.”

Mara snorted. “Try that line on someone you’re not bonded too, Farmboy.” She sighed. “Just – try not to have too much fun without me, all right?”

Luke wrapped his arms around her waist and smiled. “Not even a little,” he promised.

“You sent for me, my Master?” Vader rumbled.

“Lord Vader,” the Emperor’s voice was clipped. “I grow weary of young Skywalker ignoring the invitation I sent him. Director Isard has received information that may assist us in convincing him to stop this pointless dallying. It would seem, Palpatine’s lip curled, “that my Hand is alive.”

Were all of his functions not ruthlessly regulated by machinery, Vader’s heart would have skipped a beat. There was no way to lie to the Emperor by pretending not to know – truth could not be faked in the Force. He sidestepped, instead, focusing on his notorious irritation with Jade’s existence – an annoyance that was only resoundingly stronger now that she’d managed to manipulate her way into his son’s heart instead of taking her proper place at his feet. “How is that possible?”

“I do not yet know,” the Emperor replied, thin lips curling in a small, vicious smile. “But I very much look forward to asking her.”

Vader’s mechanical fingers clenched into a fist. That could not be allowed to happen. “What are your orders, my Master?”

“Go to Tatooine,” Palpatine demanded. “If Director Isard has Jade in hand, you will travel to Endor and await my orders. If she does not, you will do whatever is necessary to capture Jade alive. She must be forced to reveal everything she knows.” He steepled boney fingers. “If Skywalker is not...
preparing to meet his fate at Endor, I will send another invitation he cannot ignore.”

“It will be done,” Vader ground out. “My Master.”

Leia stretched, rearranging herself in the booth with exaggerated carelessness. Unlikely as it was that anyone would notice her in the pall of smoke that hung over the cantina, and unlikelier still that they’d find anything of note in her old clothes and small stature, ingrained paranoia prompted her to take extra precautions. Her brother’s home world was proving every bit as dangerous and unwelcoming as his stories had made it sound.

“What do you suppose is going on?” she asked, keeping her voice low.

“I don’t know,” Luke murmured back from the depths of his cloak. “I’ve never seen this many storm troopers on Tatooine before.” It occurred to him that there might have been back in that violent, chaotic last day before he left, the homestead still billowing smoke behind him. He let the thought go – Mara wasn’t the only one working through old wounds and grief thanks to Yoda’s holochron.

Kyle, outfitted in nondescript traveling clothes, well-worn and the color of sand, meandered in their direction from the bar. Easing his way onto the torn and poorly padded bench beside Leia, he slid glasses of watery ale toward them with the lazy shove of a half-drunken spacer.

“Isard’s here,” he muttered under his breath. “Ransacking ruins and canoodling with Jabba.”

Leia stifled a snort and Kyle snuck her an amused half-smile. “Not my word,” he shook his head. “Bartender’s.”

“Ruins where?” Luke asked, tilting his head to discreetly draw the hood of his cloak a little lower and pretending to sip his drink.

“Gritt Kott salt flat?” Kyle crinkled his nose. “Accent was weird.”

“Great Chott?” Luke guessed, giving the words an old timers’ inflection.

“Yeah, that was it.”

“Anywhere else?”

“Jundland Wastes.” Kyle flicked his eyes over the room and back to Luke. “Sound familiar?”


“That can’t be good,” Leia frowned into her glass. “But you haven’t been here for years. What could she be looking for?” When her brother didn’t answer, Leia looked up. Luke and Kyle were staring at each other, their faces suddenly grim. “What is it? What do you feel?”


“Dear Heart.” Rostek Horn greeted Mara with open arms. To his delight, she somewhat awkwardly stepped into them, allowing herself to be embraced.

“Grandfather.”

She stepped back and Rostek caught her hands, turning them over. Vividly green vines covered the lightning scars on the backs of her fingers, interspersed with tiny blossoms in deeply hued shades of
purple. The flowering vines twined around her wrists and up, disappearing into her sleeves.

“Are these your lilies?” he asked, his throat tightening.

“And Skywalker’s vines.”

She had covered over her scars with a flagrant declaration of defiant hope. Rostek’s heart squeezed. *Oh, Nejaa. Do you see what children we have? What did we ever do to deserve such treasure?*

“She’s turning into a regular work of art,” Corran stepped off the ship behind his cousin. “Getting them everywhere.” He grinned. “I think the plants you sent for the Atrium inspired her.”

“Corran.” Rostek squeezed Mara’s fingers before releasing her to embrace his grandson. He laughed as he pulled away. “Your sweet wife tells me that others were inspired, as well.”

“It’s become a challenge,” Mara confirmed, bemused. “Organa is donating Alderaanean moss and each of the Honor Guard sent for something from their home planets. Even Booster has taken to picking up exotic plants of us every time the *Errant Venture* stops in port somewhere.”

Rostek harrumphed. “I cringe to imagine the weeds he is seeding your garden with.” He held his arm out to Mara, who looped her hand through it and led his grandchildren toward the house where Elegos waited. “But that is a matter for another day. Right now, I have promised Elegos that he can stuff you both with his renowned csolcir while we review final plans for tomorrow. We will feast and scheme and then make it an early night so we can overthrow the government before dawn.”

“After caff?” Mara clarified, eying him side-long with a curve to her lips that made Rostek’s heart swell.

“No coups before caff,” he intoned solemnly, his eyes twinkling. “House rules.”

“Carbonite,” Vader growled, pacing the back of his private shuttle. “I am going to freeze her in carbonite and bury her in the darkest corner of -.”

“Director Isard?” Padme asked, smoothing her skirt over her knees, “or our son’s bondmate?”

“Do not refer to her that way,” he snarled. “She is a nuisance -.” He swung to face his wife, then immediately spun away again. She was clad in the white, wrapped ensemble that she’d worn when she’d accompanied him on his futile quest to save his mother. The memories threatened to drown him and he redirected his rage at Jade. “Her carelessness -.”

“You don’t know that she was careless,” Padme cut him off, annoyed. “You said she’s not even here.”

“I said,” he snapped back, “that I cannot *feel* her. I feel only our son. But that means nothing if she is once again hiding in his presence.”

“Our daughter is there, as well,” Padme pointed out, narrowing her eyes at him. “Don’t tell me you haven’t felt her, too.”

“Organa’s daughter,” Vader raged. “She is not mine – you saw to that.”

“I was already dead,” his wife informed him crisply.

The Sith stopped short and swiveled his head, fixing his faceplate on her. “Are you here for a reason, or do you simply delight in hurting me?” he demanded.
“I am here,” Padme folded her hands primly in her lap, “because you won’t let me go. As we’ve discussed before. However,” she continued, “since I’m here, perhaps we should discuss what’s going to happen.”

“What would you know of the future?” Vader sneered.

Padme lifted a slender-fingered hand. “You’re going to a planet you hate,” she ticked off a finger. “Controlled by Hutts,” she ticked off another. “On which Ysanne Isard is looking for our son’s bondmate.” She ticked off a third. “What chance do you think you have of this not ending in ‘aggressive negotiations’?”

“I will not negotiate,” Vader snapped, folding his arms across his chest. “Our son will agree to accompany me to Endor. Isard will comply or be destroyed. Together, our son and I will kill the Emperor and bring peace to the galaxy.”


Vader’s cloak flared around him as he stalked to her side. The gloved tips of his fingers fluttered alongside her cheek, never quite touching. “Tell me,” he commanded, low and gravelly. “Tell me what you would have me do, my Angel. What price must I pay to end this torment? The Force has shown me nothing else, and I cannot continue without him. Luke… is my last hope.”

“Ani.” Padme lifted a hand and cupped it over his glove. For a moment, Vader swore he could actually feel her touch. She blinked rich, chocolate-colored eyes at him once and then whispered, “there are other ways.”

Like a Colo fish rising from the depths and devouring everything in its path, Rostek’s forces swallowed the Imperial presence on Corellia whole and spat out nothing but bones.

At 0358, Iella and Wedge blitzed the Imperial garrison in the resort town of Tyrena. By 0405, half the populace had been roused from their beds by a chain of thermal detonator explosions. By 0410, riots filled the streets as Corellians of every stripe and caste grabbed their personal arms and leapt into the fray. By 0420, a quarter of the town was in flames but every member of the garrison was dead or captive and word of the Free Corellia movement was spreading across the planet like wildfire.

At 0400, Kor Vella - the isolated outpost that housed the Empire’s primary intelligence and communication station – was quiet, personnel only just beginning to rouse from their beds with groggy thoughts of a new day cycle. At 0403, Corran, Ellegos and a small, hand-picked team of Corellian loyalists slipped inside through a hole Horn’s white lightsaber blade carved in the wall of an ill-used corner of the base. At 0406, the power went out base-wide. It was the last anyone heard from the inhabitants until 0430, when Corellia is Free began broadcasting on planet-wide on a triumphant loop on every Imperial channel.

At 0402, Garm Bel Iblis’s fleet snapped out of hyperspace into Corellian space, weapons primed and itching for a fight. The night shift officers on duty on the languidly patrolling Imperial destroyers were dead, floating in space among the debris that moments ago had been their ships and crews, before they could key a single comm code for help or warning.

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At 0359, Mara Jade reached out across their bond for Luke. He was settled – on the verge of sleep – but reached back, acknowledging her touch with fuzzy happiness. Gently releasing her touch on him, Mara focused her mind on the moment, double and triple checking her links to Corran, Wedge, and Iella. She couldn’t communicate with the others the way she could with Corran but, from weeks
of practice, they’d found that she could pick up sensory impressions and sending along information. This would be the first real-time trial run of her gift in combat.

Corrans’ ring, she noted – aligned with her own, now – felt like a door between them. A portal she could reach through to see, hear and touch as clearly as if he were right beside her. Wedge and Iella’s rings, by contrast, functioned more like dual-controlled billboards lining a Coruscant skylane. Their sensory impressions and intentionally projected thoughts streamed around their rings in images and disjointed snatches of text and, with concentration, Mara could project her own back at them in similar fashion. It was an imperfect system, but also gloriously beautiful and astonishingly advantageous.

Even as she centered her focus, a tiny part of Mara marveled at the reality that she was a Jedi. Part of an Order, and a family, with friends who trusted her – her, the former Hand of the Emperor – inside their very minds. It was… she didn’t have a word for that, actually.

Beside her in the lift, Rostek rolled his shoulders, then re-squared them. Dressed to the nines in his former Director’s uniform, he looked magnificently regal. On his other side, Han’s fingers readjusted their hold on his unholstered blaster. He was dressed as he always was and shot her a lopsided half-grin and a wink when their eyes met.

“The others are in place, Dear Heart?” Rostek asked her, his voice low and rich with control and command.

“Everyone’s right on time.”

“Well,” Han’s smile widened with an electric, edgy energy. “Guess that makes it our turn.”

Mara curled her fingers around the ebony hilt of her lightsaber and lifted it. “Hotia Bey Ihn Khasaan’l Fho Suman ali al morhi, Avo.”

*Today is a good day for someone else to die.* It was a classic Corellian battle phrase – one Coran had taught her, expressly for today.

“Hotia Bey Ihn Khasaan’l Fho Suman ali al morhi,” Han nodded, quick and sharp.

“Hotia Bey Ihn Khasaan’l Fho Suman ali al morhi,” Rostek repeated, solemnly as the lift slowed and bumped softly to a stop. Then the doors slid open and the fight began.

Chapter End Notes

The Delta-9s and A-4s listed are theoretical updated versions of the ships the Jedi flew in the Clone Wars informed by the recc’s made by notables such as Anakin Skywalker and Plo Koon.

I stole the Corellian battle phrase at the end from the Mandalorians and translated it into Olys Corellisi because I could.
Mara’s world reduced to a hail of blaster fire, shrieking sirens, smoke, and shouts. Wielding her lightsaber in one hand and her blaster with the other, she felt fluid – as though she’d partially melted into the Force that poured through her, moved her within her rings as if time and gravity had ceased to fully hold her. Friends and adversaries streamed by and seemed to stand still, all at once.

The sun broke over the horizon, wreathing Coronet City in a halo of misty pink and orange that spilled through the Capitol’s vast windows casting shadows across the bodies prostrate corpses that littered the seat of government. Slowly, sound seemed to recede. The bodies hurling themselves at her slowed, then stopped.

Han moved through her line of sight, keying open formerly locked doors on three sides of the room, letting their allies flood in and leap to their pre-assigned posts. He was rumpled but appeared unharmed, waving and barking instructions with confident urgency. Knowing they’d need a report, Mara surveyed her sphere.

ALL CLEAR Wedge and Iella’s rings shouted, triumphantly.

CORELLIA IS FREE proclaimed the radio waves broadcasting loud and clear through her doorway into Corran’s attack point.

“Today,” Rostek’s voice pulled Mara back into real time and she dropped her arm, her blade snap-hissing off.

“Corellia has reasserted her dominance in the galactic landscape,” Horn continued, his voice deep and resonant with power. “Today, the Five Worlds Government begins anew and we shall never – never – bow to another power again.”

Mara heard the click of the comm unit.

“Cut – we’re off air, Sir,” the comm officer announced. “Message is being broadcast on repeat.”

She reached out to Bel Iblis. He’d been the most wary of allowing her into his head, but had been too proud – and too determined to have every strategic advantage – to refuse when he’d learned the others were already connected to her. THE SKIES ARE OURS his mind read. She half-smiled at the
stoic determination with which he projected and the relief that he unwittingly radiated when she touched his mind with acknowledgment and released the connection.

“Excellent, Captain,” Rostek commended, crisply. “Continue with set up – we need to ensure all essential tasks are seamlessly transferred to my appointed personnel as soon as possible.”

“Selonia just reported in,” Han spoke up from where he leaned over another control surface on the opposite side of the room. “Imperials there are on the run – straight in Garm’s defensive line. Shouldn’t be –.”

Distracted by disengaging, Mara didn’t feel the itch of warning on her scalp until it blazed to scorching.

She spun, lightsaber hilt dartsing up – but knew even as she did that she was too late. The retort of a blaster broke the hum of professional chatter and a shockwave of pain in the Force made Mara stumble. A dozen blasters snapped back over a cacophony of panicked shouts.

“Director!”

“Chancellor Horn!”

“Somebody get a medic!”

Han’s voice cut through the others “Back up – give him space! Jade! Get over here!”

Corran’s anxiety and frustration felt like a brush fire, burning hot too close and Mara slapped it away – focus - as she threw herself forward, shoving between others and dropping to her knees.

“Get back!” Han commanded the others roughly. “Give her room.”

“One of the Imperials wasn’t dead, Ma’am,” the Captain to her right said, hurriedly. His expression darkened. “He sure as hell is now, though.”

“Grandfather.” Mara leaned over Rostek, pressed a hand to his cheek as she took in the wound high in the center of his chest and felt out his rapidly failing Force presence. Her chest clenched. This couldn’t be happening – she’d promised she wouldn’t fail – they were counting on her – they’d trusted her – .

Her rings shifted. Mara’s eyes flew up to the ghostly embodiment of her other grandfather, then back down, searing denial bubbling up within her.

“What?” Han demanded, following her gaze then snapping his eyes back to her face, his own tightening. “What’d you see?”

“Nejaa,” Mara said, tersely, struggling for control against the suffocating terror filling the room as the others faced the prospect of losing their beloved leader.

Rostek’s eyes slitted open and a smile cracked his lips. “Nejaa,” he whispered. “My… old friend. I - ,” he drew a gasping, rattling breath. “- am honored. To… die. As – you did. For – Corellia.”

Corran’s agony ripped through Mara’s chest, its weight equal to her own. On the other side of the galaxy, roused by the onslaught of unshielded emotion, Skywalker reached for her, his ring swinging of its own accord and notching into place with hers. His horror and grief collided with Corran’s pain, escalating the pressure in Mara’s chest to unsustainable levels.
“No!” Clasping Rostek’s face between her hands, she threaded her hold on him in the Force more tightly. “I forbid you to die. Do you hear me?! You do not have permission to die.”

Rostek smiled at her sadly, his spirit slipping away despite her grip. “Forgive – me. Dear… Heart.”

“No,” Mara said viciously. Twisting, she met Han’s eyes, her mouth flattening into a hard line. “Solo – take over.”

“Right.” He nodded, expression harried and unhappy for a split second before he took a deep breath and jumped back into action with typical Corellian ferocity. “Back to work!” he shouted, gesturing sharply. Grabbing the two men nearest her by their jackets, he hauled them up and pushed them toward their stations. “You heard the Jedi - Chancellor’s gonna be fine. Come on – get moving!”

He rolled straight into firing off commands but Mara stopped listening. Across her connection to Iella she projected HAN’S IN CHARGE.

Delving inside herself, she grasped her rings. I need you. All of you.

She felt Luke’s attention shift as she started to swing the rings into a new alignment. Luke. Corran. Nejaa. She dropped Wedge, Iella and Elegos – there could be no distractions now.

Presences snapped to full awareness in Kyle and Leia’s rings. Luke must have woken them. Neither was strong enough to move their own rings, but both reached for her. We’re here.

Mara fought the sudden and sharp urge to weep. She swallowed past it, her voice rough but strong. “Tarazet!”

Her aunt had become an infrequent visitor, insisting that Mara focus her energies on her healing, but materialized now in her Jedi Master robes, glowing blue, every ounce of her usual mirth gone from her sense. “I’m here, Dear One.”

“Help me,” Mara demanded.


“You have earned a rest, young Rostek,” Tarazet smiled kindly, sinking to her knees at his feet as Nejaa moved around and knelt opposite Mara, one phantom hand falling to his friend’s shoulder. “But your grandchildren are not yet content to let you have one.”

Mara closed her eyes. Let go of everything that was not this moment. Immersed her attention in her grandfather’s wound. “So much damage,” she mumbled, tightly.


Mara opened herself, sparing nothing. Energy surged in and she grounded herself more deeply in her internal gravity. Focus. Unity. Heal.

She didn’t feel the burned edges of Rostek’s uniform coat under her palms, or the coldness of his skin – only the heat of the angry burn that scorched his chest. Remove the heat.

It was an exercise she’d dozen scores of times on herself, but now it was as if the whole of the Force moved with her thought. Heal.

Mara ceased to be aware of herself. Time became meaningless. There was only Tarazet’s guiding
voice, the feel of Rostek’s body under her palms, and the Force – surging in from every side and narrowing through her in previously unimagined intensities. She and her sphere hung in space – flawlessly aligned and deeply, vibrantly alive.

Rostek’s chest heaved. “Dear… Heart.”

The words were hoarse but elation rocked the sphere. Mara found herself suspended, half in her body and half in her head with Luke’s arms around her, his lips on her throat, his laugh of joy reviving her urge to sob.

“Let go gently,” Tarazet’s instruction drifted through the split layers of Mara’s consciousness, taking shape slowly.

Mara sent a wash of depthless gratitude across the rings before attempting to pry her grip loose enough to let anyone go. Her entire essence felt clenched and locked and she thought she might dissolve entirely if she let go of just one strand too many.

Nejaa. She reached out with faltering but determined hands, moving one ring at a time. Tarazet. Leia. Kyle.

Corran resisted briefly when she tried to let him go – like a hand, reaching through the door between them, clasping her wrist. Is Han still there with you?

Mara dragged one eye open and flinched at the light.

On the opposite side of Rostek’s body, Han stopped pacing and dropped into a squat, ducking his head to catch her eye. “Jade? You all right?”

Mara managed a single, painful nod and closed her eye again. He’s here, she told her cousin unnecessarily. He’d seen, of course, and squeezed her wrist before allowing himself to be released.

Luke. Inside herself, Mara turned her face into his, her lips finding his mouth. He kissed her hungrily, residual energy burning off them both like sparkling mist. I did it – we did it! We’re ready.

CorMeum. He pulled away with a shaky breath, adoration cascading off him and spilling over her like a waterfall. You were amazing.

Her lips curved and she felt warm to her bones. I was, wasn’t I?

Weariness started to creep in and with it guilt. She’d wrenched him from sleep, and Force knew how long –.

Worth it, he interrupted her thoughts, firmly. Now let Han take care of you, please. It was an admonishment, not really a request, but she nodded anyway. He kissed her again, lingering and longing, then reluctantly disengaged.

Exhaustion hit like a speeder bike and Mara folded over Rostek’s chest. Strong arms caught her.

“Whoa!”

“Solo?” she croaked, automatically tensing at the feel of unseen hands. There was movement and she tried to open her eyes, but they were leaden and wouldn’t respond.

“I got you,” his voice was calm and steady by her ear, now.

Mara relaxed. Solo. Safe.
“Medic is here – says Rostek is good as new. Let’s get you on your feet.”

“Stay -,” she managed, clinging to his shoulder as he hoisted her up. “With Rostek.”

“Way ahead of you,” he promised, sliding an arm around her. “You let us non-Jedi handle the easy stuff, huh?”

“Solo,” she murmured, turning into him, mouth close to his ear, vision still blurry. “We’re ready. For the Emperor. I wasn’t sure -.”

He turned them. She heard the door snick shut and a hum – realized they were the turbolift. He was warm, body and presence and she leaned a shoulder against his chest, shivering as her body sought to rebalance. “We’re ready.”

Ysanne Isard sat in the back of her speeder, squinting out through her goggles as it raced across the sand, and fumed. Vader!

What did that oversized mechanized monstrosity think he was doing?! Jade was hers.

He was a formality – backup, in case some crazed, half-trained padawan of that madman Kenobi who had been lurking around in the desert for years popped up and had to be eliminated. She hadn’t spent weeks on this sand-blasted waste-of-rock planet for him to sweep in and steal custody of the Emperor’s brat out from under her nose!

She sneered against the protective scarf wound around her face. Vader avoided the Outer Rim almost as much as she did. What did he know about Hutts? She’d bribed Jabba personally with enough to practically buy another planet. If that black-clad di’kut thought he’d get anywhere with his usual crude intimidation measures, he was in for a nasty surprise.

Vader growled. Idiot girl! The one time he had reason to condescend to reach for her through the ring she’d established for him, she’d locked him out. More gallingly still, she’d had the nerve to somehow lock Luke away from his reach! Manipulative little schutta – she was going to get them all killed

Well, he wasn’t going to sit around and wait on her convenience. Stalking out of his quarters, he headed for the Executor’s bridge, cape swirling around his boots. It was time to pay Jabba a visit.

“Any word from Mara?” Kyle elbowed the door controls and set the tray of bland but nourishing breakfast gruel one of the lower bunks. The hostel was clean and the prices somewhat less than exorbitant but he wouldn’t be leaving them much in the way of positive reviews on the food quality.

“Han commed,” Luke said, from the other bottom bunk as he finished pulling on his boots. “Rostek is fully healed and has the Five Worlds government fully up and running. They’ve got him under round-the-chrono guard. Mara and Corran got less sleep than we did, but they’re en route back to the Errant Venture with orders to sleep some more in hyperspace.” He paused. “She feels… good,” he added, his expression softening. “Tired, but good.”

“That was quite the test of her skills,” Leia stepped through the door to the tiny attached fresher, sticking a final pin in her hair. “How much of a problem is it going to be that we’re behind schedule?”
Luke chuckled. “Hutt's aren't exactly morning people,” he told her, dryly. “Everyone in the Court will be a little drunker than they would have if we'd been earlier, but that's about it.” He frowned. “Vader's closer than he was last night.”

But not, he noted curiously, calling to him as he usually did when they were anywhere near each other. The only other time he'd seen that happen was at Zastiga – when his father had been laser-focused on Mara. Unease rose inside him.

“You sense it too,” Leia said, warily. “I don't like this.”

“Me either,” Kyle shook his head. “But we're not getting out of anything now.” He pointed his spoon at another bowl. “Eat up – looks like we're going to need the energy.”

---

*My son.*

Luke paused, his fingers curling around the controls to the speeder he’d just slid into. *Father.*

*Stay where you are. I am coming to you now. Do not allow your… bondmate to interfere with our ability to speak again.*

*Interfere?* Luke's brow wrinkled. *Oh* - the sphere. Mara had shut out all of the non-Jedi rings. He’d have to remember to tell her that locking in like that could forcibly keep others out. *That was… not intentional. But I'll be here,* he added quickly at the feel of his father's flaring temper. *We'll be here.*

“Luke?” Leia sat forward in the seat beside him, her eyes darting around the hangar. “What is it?”

“We're going to have company.” Luke reached for Mara's presence inside him, stroked his touch lightly over her sleeping sense, then withdrew. Tempting as it was to ask her to bring up the rings – connect him more closely to the others – he decided it would be better to wait. He didn’t want to interrupt her sleep if he didn’t have to. Depending on how the coming conversation went, sleep might become a precious commodity for all of them.

“Good company or bad company?” Kyle asked from the backseat.

“Vader.”

“What does he want?” Leia demanded, irritably.

“I guess we’ll find out.” Luke hopped out of the speeder. No point in staying in it if they weren’t leaving.

“Does he have company?” Kyle asked, as he and Leia followed suit. He looked at Luke meaningfully. “Of the not-real persuasion?”

“Good question.”

“I have a better one,” Leia scowled. “What are you two moon brains talking about?”

Luke frowned, unsure how to best explain. “Our mother – father sees her. Or thinks he does. She's… she’s not really a ghost. Not like Ben and Nejaa. More… like a memory. Or a projection. You won’t be able to see her unless I wake Mara up and have her connect us. Either way, it can be… odd.”
“Oh, no!” Leia shook her head quickly and threw up a hand, palm out. “I’m not going anywhere near that monster’s head.”

“If he talks to her, just don’t engage,” Luke advised. He didn’t have to agree with his father and sister’s adamant refusal to acknowledge each other, but for the moment whatever caused them all the least amount of pain was the best course of action. “I’ll handle it.”

“Well don’t do anything stupid,” Leia sniped. “I promised Mara I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.”

Amusement rippled through him and Luke gave her his best Han impression, spreading his arms, tipping his head and letting his lips curve in a rakish smile. “Hey, it’s me.”

“Nerf!” She swatted at him, but Luke felt her spirits lift a little even as she shook her head and rolled her eyes skyward in exasperation. “All of you – one big herd of nerfs!”

The twin suns reflected off polished white armor and people scattered in the streets as the phalanx of stormtroopers jogged ahead of him, armor plates clanking in a distinctive rattle of warning. Vader’s cape billowed behind him, the thick red-black smears of blood soaked into it visible only as darker patches on the thickly woven ebony fabric. It flared as he turned abruptly to stalk between two troopers into the hangar when he felt his son waiting.

There were three of them. His son, Organa’s daughter and another he neither recognized nor cared about.

“Where is Jade?”

“She’s not here, Father.” Luke appeared utterly unconcerned. “Did you need to speak with her?”

“You,” Vader pointed a gloved finger at his son, “will send for her and then you will come with me.”

“He will not!” Organa’s daughter shot back, bristling. Brandishing a blaster pistol she pressed closer to Luke’s side. “If you think -.”

Had he been less irritated by the heat and the sand and Jade’s abysmal failure yet again to function as he expected, Vader would have been bemused by the tiny Princess’s defiance. Had she learned nothing from Bespin? He could snatch that pistol away and crush it before she ever got off a shot.

“Leia.” Luke cast a reproving look in his direction as if reading his thoughts, even as he placed a calming hand on his sister’s arm. “Where would you like to go, father?”

“The Emperor grows weary of waiting. If you and his Hand do not accompany me to Endor, he will select another planet to destroy as Alderaan was.” Vader made himself ignore the gasp and flash of rage that came from the Princess. So much rage. She could be so strong -.

He cut off the thought, ruthlessly.

“I’m prepared to go with you,” Luke assured him. “But I need a few hours before we go. I’ve promised Leia -.”

“I am aware of your intentions,” Vader rumbled dismissively. “But Jabba is no longer a matter of concern.”
“What the hell does that mean?” The brown-haired man beside Organa demanded.


“He was no longer of use to the Empire.”

“Thank you.” Luke was looking at him with something soft in his eyes. Padme had looked at him like that.

“I did not do it for your convenience,” Vader snapped, grappling clumsily with old emotions he’d believed long stricken from his shriveled heart. “He and Isard were colluding against the best interests of the Empire. Their elimination was necessary.”

“You killed Isard, too?” The boy with his children – no! His son and Organa’s daughter – radiated incredulousness.

“She still lives,” he growled. “For now. Sarlacc digest their prey…slowly.” There was a strange mixed feeling from his son – queasiness overlaid with relief and protectiveness. He knew about Isard’s hatred of his bondmate, then – and was inferring. “That was not for your benefit either,” he clarified, shaking his finger in his son’s direction.

“Of course not, Father.”

*Insolent boy.*

“Kyle,” Luke turned to the man with him. “Take the Leia back to the Fleet. Then get the Honor Guard and get to Wayland as quickly as you can. Leia -.”

“You can’t just go with him -.”

“It’ll be fine,” he soothed, taking her hands in his.

A memory lurched to mind – he’d held Padme’s hands that way, once – comforting, soft - no.

“We knew this day would come, and we’re ready,” Luke asserted. “We can end this, now.”

Leia glared over her brother’s shoulder. Vader stood his ground, grateful that for once Padme had not appeared to torment him. There was no need, now. They had their understanding.

“I don’t like this,” Leia announced, but then sighed harshly and squeezed her brother’s hands. “But I trust you. Take care of yourself, little brother.”

Luke smiled. “You’ll be with me the whole time,” he reminded her, tapping his temple. “Mara will connect us.” He pulled her in to a tight hug. “May the Force be with you.”

Luke was waiting alone in the *Executor’s* hangar when Mara and Corran’s shuttle landed. He stayed where he was, under the catwalk near the doors, and let them come to him, knowing that Mara wouldn’t want to be exposed in the open any longer than necessary. She walked with her spine locked, grim and determined, her shields battened down over the emotional turmoil of being back on Imperial decking for the first time since she’d been dragged off it more than half a standard year ago. Beside her, Corran portrayed a cool Corellian lack of concern – utterly false, but visually convincing nonetheless.
“CorMeum.” As soon as she was close enough, Luke pulled Mara into his arms. I missed you.

She didn’t answer in words but pressed her sense against his in a way that left no doubt the feeling was reciprocated.

“Corran.” Luke kept one arm around Mara and reached to embrace his friend with the other. “I’ll show you to our quarters. We’re to meet with Father later to review what he knows.”

“Is it true he killed Isard?” Mara asked quietly as they maneuvered the corridors. The ship shuddered ever so slightly under their feet as it jumped into hyperspace.

“Yes,” Luke gave a half-smile. “Though he insists it wasn’t as a favor to us.”

“The enemy of your enemy is your friend,” Corran shrugged. “War makes strange bedfellows.”

“Speaking of,” Luke asked. “Everyone else is in place?”

“All in here.” Mara pointed to her head. “Everyone’s connected and scrambling resources into place. We won’t be alone at Endor.”

“Even Booster’s coming,” Corran added, shaking his head. “Can you believe that?”

“Really?” Luke looked between them, startled.

“Med droids tell him Mirax is due in two weeks, but he’s convinced she won’t make it that long,” Mara said, a welcome whiff of amusement sneaking into her sense. “Some superstition about first Corellian babies always being early. He refuses to let her off the Errant Venture until the baby’s born, and she refuses to be left out of the fray. Apparently, him taking the ship in battle was a ‘compromise’.”

Corran snorted. “He just wants to use the weapons Mara gave him,” he opined, derisively. “He’s been itching to find a reason since they were installed. Still, it’s keeping my wife safe, so if you tell anyone I’ll deny ever saying that.”


Late that night, Luke stepped into the ‘fresher of the elaborate quarters they’d been assigned for the trip to Endor. Mara stood in the sanisteam, her forehead against the etched transparisteel enclosure, shields still heavily battened down. Luke’s heart ached and he stripped of his clothes to step in beside her.

“Hey.”

“I won’t be our weak point.”

Luke coaxed her against him, wrapping his arms around her and tugging damp locks of hair away from her face. “I’m sorry, CorMeum,” he said softly. “Father was… out of line.”

“No,” she countered, burrowing into his embrace. “He wasn’t. He was right – the Emperor knows all my weak points – he engineered them. He’ll hammer them. But I’m not her - the Hand. I’m a Halcyon – the Halcyon. I won’t fold.”
Luke’s arms tightened protectively. “I didn’t imagine he’d bring Darillion into it. But we won’t let him near you – Corran and I - you know we won’t.”

“It’s fine,” she insisted, roughly. “I’m not bound this time – I have my gifts. If he comes within reach I can kill him a dozen different ways.”

Luke pulled back a little and framed her face in his hands. “You’re not alone this time, CorMeum.”

She laughed and gestured shortly to her head. “I know – I’ve got a head full of people, remember?”


She shrugged. “Yeah.”

“Want some help with that?”

Mara’s eyes narrowed. “If that’s supposed to be a pickup line, it’s terrible, Skywalker.”

He grinned. “Maybe. But it’s going to work.”

She pursed her lips and glared at him, even as she reached behind her to shut the water off. “It is. This time. But don’t ever try it again.”

“Never,” he promised, leaning in to kiss her. “My word as a Jedi.”

Chapter End Notes

As it has been so long since his name was mentioned, Darillion is the scumbag referenced in the beginning of this fic that the Emperor used to rape Mara as a last-ditch attempt to force her Coordinator’s gift to surface so that he could hijack it. In case it isn’t clear, he’s brought the dirtbag to the Death Star II with the intention of threatening Mara into compliance with his wishes and/or punishing her for defying him and collaborating with his enemies. Vader informed Luke, Mara and Corran of that turn of events when he met with them for a briefing on the upcoming confrontation between their arrival on the Executor and the last scene of the chapter.
Endor I

Chapter Summary

The fate of the galaxy hangs in the balance in the skies over Endor.

Chapter Notes

Recommended listening for this chapter is Halestorm's *The Reckoning*. (Although Halestorm's *Fire* would also be appropriate.)

All ship names not taken directly from the GFFA verse are borrowed from the Halo books.

Mirax leaned against the wall beside the door of her quarters on Jade Level and pressed her palm against her swollen abdomen, gritting her teeth against the tight contraction of muscle. “You had better not be serious, kid,” she grumbled, then breathed out as the contraction passed. The baby kicked. Hard.

“Tomorrow,” she told it, seriously. “You can be born first thing tomorrow, all right? Just – not today.” The baby kicked again. “That better be agreement,” she warned, snaking one hand behind her to dig her fingers into the ache at the small of her back. “Because your father is out there, and he promised to be here when you were born – and I intend to hold him to that.”

-          -

A dozen Dreadnaught-class heavy cruisers snapped out of hyperspace into a perfect half-circle around *Teeth*. On the station’s bridge, Chewie half-turned in his seat at the weapons’ station.

//They are here.//

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“Agreed.” Rostek’s eyes slid away, then back. “We’ve reviewed the battle plans you sent. You remain intent on taking the station into battle yourself?”

“I do.” Leia lifted her chin. “We’ve packed the bays with fighters, but otherwise evacuated all but a skeleton crew. The station can take a tremendous amount of damage, if necessary, and we need that option. General Madine will lead the Fleet from *Home One*.”

“What’s Booster doin’ here?” Han asked, his holo image frowning and cocking a thumb over its shoulder.

“He’s decided to join us,” Leia said, simply. “My understanding is that Mirax is directly linked to Mara and the *Errant Venture* will act independently in accordance with the Jedi’s needs.”

“I imagine we should have expected no less,” Rostek smiled. He gestured toward the third holo-figure on Leia’s table. “General Bel Iblis will lead the primary Corellian Fleet from the *Peregrine*. General Organa-Solo and I will flank with our own divisions on the *Ready or Not* and the *Pillar of Autumn*, respectively. General Wessiri and Guard Antilles should be on Endor already, staging the takedown of the shield generator Vader identified.”

“I assume you received the same admonishments I did?” Leia asked, raising an eloquent eyebrow. Rostek smiled, the blue of the holo washing out the infamous storm-grey of his eyes but doing nothing to hide the mischief in their depths. “About being too valuable to die and keeping back if necessary? I may have heard something of the sort, but I’m afraid my memory isn’t what it used to be. I may… forget, in the heat of battle.” He looked at her kindly. “Something your father was known for doing, if I remember correctly, Your Highness.”

*Your father.* Something soothing slid across Leia’s soul. *I’ll make you proud, Papa.* “So I’ve heard,” she tilted her head. “Let us hope we both live to answer for our forgetfulness, Chancellor.”

“I have no fears on that account, Your Highness – the Force is with us.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself. Chewie -,” Leia turned her head to catch Calrissian’s eyes. “Verify everyone has the coordinates for the Moddell sector locked in. We’ll jump as soon as we get word from Jedi Halcyon.”

- -

In the back of Vader’s *Lambda* class T-4a shuttle, Mara sat cross-legged in the center of the floor, deep in meditation. To either side, Luke and Corran mirrored her position, their calm presences resonating in focus with hers. At the far end of the cabin, Vader stood, arms folded, staring.

*Kyr’am nau tracyn kad. I am a saber forged in the fires of death.*

*Mhi cuyir a kad nau’ur kad o’r tracyn be kyr’am.* Luke and Corran answered. *We are a saber, forged together.*

*It’s time.* Mara sank deeper into her center, grounding herself. As she always did – always *would* – she reached for Luke first. Pulling him to her, she centered him in his unique notch, half in her core space and half in his own ring. He settled in with a comfortingly familiar weight, the gravity of his power a reassuring anchor.

She reached for Corran, next. Then Vader. One by one she pulled each of the others in, the astroglobe of her power sphere layering in with rings, all but Luke rotating freely around her axis. Energy crackled as she linked them, their life forces absorbing and reflecting, feeding into one
another to become something astronomically more than the component parts.

Roll call.

Systematically, Mara moved through her connections, pinging with now as she went and feeling the others respond, seeing and feeling their movement around her. She watched through Leia and Bel Iblis’s eyes as the Fleets jumped into hyperspace. Watched through Kyle’s as the Honor Guard reverted to real space over Wayland. Checked in through each pair of eyes until she was certain nothing had been missed.

There was a hum and a faint feeling of weightlessness – the shuttle was landing. They had reached the Death Star. Darkness crept in around the edges, darting directly for Mara and licking at her skin with a forked tongue.

*I am not afraid of you,* Mara told it, coolly. *I am beyond your reach, now.*

Pushing upward, she rose smoothly to her feet, Luke and Corran following almost perfectly in time with her motion.

Mara lifted her eyes to Vader. “We shouldn’t keep the Emperor waiting.”

---

“Are you all right?” Lando tucked a hand under Mirax’s elbow and eased her out of the lift onto the Errant Venture’s bridge.

“The baby has his father’s timing,” she grunted.

Lando’s eyes flew to her abdomen, then back to her face. “Booster’s got the med bay all prepared -.”

“No.” Mirax gripped his arm as another contraction hit, hissing. “Until that idiot Jedi family of mine is safe, I’m not leaving this bridge.”

“Uh huh.” Lando acknowledged, skeptically. “We better hope your baby is more cooperative than every other Jedi I’ve ever met, then. Come on.”

---

Iella passed the macrobinoculars to Wedge, her eyes narrowing. “That doesn’t look like a skeleton crew to me.”

Wedge pressed the device to his eyes, scanning the elevation and distance figures the readout provided out of habit before starting to count. “Looks like somebody didn’t follow Vader’s orders.”

“That or he lied about giving them,” she said, darkly. “Which doesn’t bode well for our Jedi.”

“Hang on.” Wedge felt the now-familiar press of Mara’s mind against his, got a flash of temper that made him wince, then reassurance. “Mara -.”

“I know, I felt it.” Iella shook her head. “If she says it’s okay, we keep going.”

Wedge slunk a sly sideways grin at her. “We have done worse. Recently, even.”

A smile quirked the edges of Iella’s lips. “What did I tell you about flirting on missions, Antilles?”

“I think I’ve been getting mixed signals, actually,” he nudged her. “*During* missions -.”
“There!” She interrupted. “Shift change. That’s our cue.” She shot him a smirk. “We’ll resume this conversation later.” Leaning in, she whispered, “and I guarantee you’ll get the message loud and clear.”

The throne room matched the memories Mara had shared exactly, down to the huge round, multi-paned windows at either side and atop the dais framing the high-backed chair at its center. Two matching control centers mushroomed out of the deck plates just beyond the flight of long, shallow stairs leading up the dais, their outer edges glowing the blue of sleep mode. Two mechanical arms hung suspended and motionless over the chair and a catwalk slunk through the air just over head height off to the left.

Through the sphere, Luke felt Mara comparing the space to her memory and Corran mapping it in time with his own scanning. Stepping off the access bridge, Luke slid into place at his father’s right, straight-backed and confident. Mara and Corran fell in at his own right, the four of them moving in seamless coordination across the dimly lit room, starlight falling in barred streaks across the dark decking.

Mara’s eyes flicked to the base of the stairs, remembered lightning and shame crackling across her memory. She’d nearly died at the base of a staircase identical to the ones before them. Her resolve, now, not to be prone there again was seamless, relentless. Never never never never.

Darkness flowed down the stairs like tarry water, bubbling and foaming in malice. Mara plowed through it, mounting the steps without hesitation, the fitted, high-collared cream tunic she’d chosen glowing in the pale starlight. Beside her, Corran’s Corellian green flowed with the light, popping where illumination caught it and blending into shadows when the light rippled away. At Luke’s left, his father’s cape fluttered against his arm, black against black as he kept pace despite the difference in their strides. He’d known since Bespin that this day would have to come, but in the moment it felt too surreal to grasp.

On the fourth step, Mara’s rings shifted as the Fleet winked into real space just beyond the station. Wedge and Iella’s rings sparked with color as the shield generator station exploded into an active war zone. Mirax’s ring rippled as something – a contraction Mara supplied – clawed at her attention. Corran’s sense contracted as fear dug in – too early, I’m not there, they’re in danger – then leveled as both Mara and Mirax pushed back, their steadfast surety in Mirax’s safety and that of the baby stabilizing him.

The push and pull and motion brought reality rushing back in to sharp clarity. The deck plates were suddenly gritty under Luke’s boots, the air cold on his cheeks and hands, the darkness pouring off the Emperor thick and greasy against his skin.

On the sixth step, Leia’s presence flared as Teeth caught up with its comrades. Energy surged as adrenaline rushed through the Corellian and Rebel fleets, bodies and minds leaping into action against the amassed Imperial navy.

On the seventh step, the throne began to turn. From beneath a dark hood, two yellow eyes glinted. An eerie, icy voice slithered through the shadows, the power behind it spreading and clinging to all it touched.

“Welcome, young Skywalker. I’ve been expecting you.”
Chewie’s roar sounded over the rushing in Leia’s ears as Teeth’s systems decompressed, venting everything nonessential and rerouting all power to the weapons systems and the shields directly protecting the station’s bridge.

“Home One and Peregrine have launched their fighters as well,” Winter announced from the station she’d commandeered. “Engaging with TIEs... now!”

“Find us something to fire at!” Leia demanded, leaning over the War Table. An Imperial Super Star Destroyer launched a vicious volley in the direction of Home One. She jabbed a finger at a holo, lighting it up red on the display. “That one – Chewie! Get us positioned to fire right there.”

He howled in response but Leia never took her eyes off the holo display. Sparks flashed as ships on both sides took hits and Teeth rocked as a shot impacted its bulk.

“This isn’t going to last long,” Winter called in warning.

“It doesn’t have to,” Leia gritted back. “Just long enough.”

“I don’t think they’re real happy to see us,” Wes hollered over the comm.

“No one’s ever happy to see your ugly face,” Hobbie shouted back, banking hard.

“Maybe they just need a closer view,” Tycho shoved his throttle full forward, barley evading the blasts coming off the stronghold’s laser turrets. “Fall in!”

“Katarn – you ready?”

Whistler, who had volunteered to accompany Kyle out of pique when he’d learned he couldn’t go with Corran to the Death Star, squealed loudly over the comm. //AREADY GONE. //

“There! Forty degrees -,” Tycho started.

“I see him!”

“Well, I’m not getting left behind!” Wes announced, barrel-rolling his Aethersprite toward the mammoth transparisteel window inset in the side of the Wayland citadel’s throne room.

“After you,” Hobbie said, cheerfully.

Wes swallowed his smart reply on a deep inhale as, at the last possible second, he yanked up on his ship’s throttle, skimming its belly in a straight vertical climb up the side of the fortress. Three, two -. On one, he mashed the eject button and rocketed into freefall.

“Oh gods, oh gods, oh -.”

He slammed flat against a massive, unseen fist and found himself hurtling horizontally toward a tiny ledge just below and the left of the window.

“Gotcha!” Kyle reached out and hauled Wes onto the ledge, pushing him close against the stone as Hobbie’s fighter screeched past in the same gravity-defying maneuver. “Door’s there – get inside.”

Gravel skittered from under Wes’s boots as he twisted around and he gripped the craggy rock face as
he side-stepped his way toward the gaping hole to his right. The edges still glowed faintly red from where Kyle’s saber had carved through and Janson skirted them carefully as he ducked inside.

“Nice place,” he muttered to himself, scanning the vast, silent room.

“Yeah.” Hobbie popped his head inside, then shimmied his body in. “Come on - let’s kriff it up.”

“I had begun to think,” the Emperor said conversationally, “that you misunderstood my invitation.”

His thin lips curled and his yellowed gaze slid to Mara. “But I see you were merely… distracted.”

Boney fingers extended from the billowy sleeves of his cloak to hook around the edges of his arm rests. “How very nice of you to return to me my Hand.”

“No yours,” Mara gritted icily.

Luke could her clinging to her center, vividly aware of the damage she would unavoidably wreak if she gave in to darker feelings and scorched the whole of her sphere with them.

“It is you who misunderstand, Your Highness,” Luke said calmly. “I am not here to offer you Mara – she controls herself, now. Rather I am here to offer you a choice. Renounce the Dark Side and return the galaxy its rightful rulers – or be destroyed.”

Beside him, Vader all but exploded with irritation. You cannot just announce -.

Through the sphere the three Jedi felt the motion before it began, their hands darting out without conscious thought to grab their own sabers as Vader swung his from his belt directly at the Emperor’s head. The light appeared to flatten into a ribbon of red as the other blades snap-hissed to life, the Jedi falling a few steps apart from one another and dropping into battle stances.

“Father -!”

With a deftness his shriveled body should not have been capable of, the Emperor ducked then popped back upright cackling, blue lightening pouring off his fingers. Doors snapped open all around on both sides of the throne room, Red Guards flowing in like a bloody tide, their Force pikes crackling.

Thrill surged across the sphere as Mara leapt off the throne platform, her amethyst blade arcing toward the rushing Guards.

Luke pivoted on his heel, saber snapping up into ready position, and charged down the stairs, slicing through a wave of Guards. This wasn’t the plan!!

We had a plan? Corran thought back cheekily, his mental voice taut as he leapt over a Force pike aimed at his legs and swung, decapitating the Guard attacking him. What’d we waste time on one of those for?

Ignoring the temptation to roll his eyes, Luke twisted, fending off another Guard. A plan had been a long shot. When this is over, he thought back, you and I are going to have a drink and watch Mara and my Father argue about who was supposed to be in charge.

I can hear you!! Mara yelled in their heads.

Sharing one last silent mental grin, Luke and Corran ceased their commentary and plowed into the next round of Guards.
“Get off my bridge!” Booster thundered, his entire face as red as his cybernetic eye.

From where she was wedged into the corner weapons console, Mirax lifted the nose of her blaster slightly without bothering to look in his direction. “I said no. Lando – see if you can get a status check on the Ready or Not. It looks bad.”

“You can’t shoot me, I’m your father!” Booster flung his arms out.

“You’re also distracting me in the middle of a battle!” Mirax snapped back.

“I’m distracting?!” he demanded indignantly. “Your baby -.”

“Will take hours to be born,” she interrupted, gripping the edge of the console as another contraction hit. “And I want my husband to be alive to meet him. The sooner this -,” she gestured with her blaster hand toward the holo display of the battle, “is over, the sooner I get off your bridge.”

“Ready or Not’s in bad shape,” Lando interjected, gruffly. “ Took a couple shots to shield the Pillar of Autumn.”

“Can you -,” Mirax stopped on a gasp.

“Oh, kriffing hell!” Booster stalked over to his daughter. “Take the Captain’s chair, if you’re going to stay. I’ll man the weapons.”

Mirax lowered her blaster hand and let her father bodily lift her out of her seat.

“Yaron!” Booster snapped at his helmsman. “Get us closer to that damn Death Star. We need to get this battle over with – now!”

Hobbie skidded around the door frame, jerking to a halt just in time to avoid tripping over a tangle of wires as thick as his arm. “Tell me we’re almost done,” he demanded. “Cuz Wes and I have jammed every blast door between here and the garrison, but they’re not gonna hold for long.”

“Thirty seconds,” Tycho said, tapping rapidly at the keys of a control console. “Kyle’s done a full sweep – says all the clones are definitely in here. He’s taken out all the guards and we’ve rigged detonators. I’m back-feeding the power system, which should hopefully do some pretty serious damage to the rest of the complex – distract them while we make our escape. Where’s Wes?”

“I sent him ahead,” Klivian replied, tightly. “He took a blaster bolt to the thigh – needed the extra time to get back up.”

“All right.” Kyle appeared. “We’re clear. Let’s get out of here.”

Together they bolted back up the circuitous route they’d pieced together from the plans Yoda had provided. Alternating between maintenance access shafts and the Emperor’s private passageways they wove back and forth across the empty upper levels of the complex toward the Throne Room they’d entered through.

Wes stood propped against the wall beside the entrance they’d carved for themselves, all his weight on his uninjured leg. A large, angry burn wound scorched across his left thigh. “Not as bad as it looks,” he insisted when he caught them eying it. “Nothing I can’t patch up fine in the ‘sprite on the
way back.”

“Guess it’s go time, then” Tycho said, grimly. With a swift jab, he activated the detonator. The entire mountain shook. Half a second later, every alarm began to blare.

Hobbie grabbed Kyle’s shoulder as he wobbled, the Emperor’s clones shrieking into the Force as they died, filling his head with a ghastly, inhuman howl. “Right,” he gasped. “We’re done here.”

An impatient astromech trill came through the comm.

“There’s our rides,” Tycho said, moving to support Wes the way Hobbie had Kyle. “Let’s go.”

“Hey, Your Worship.” Han’s voice, almost impossible to make out through the static and screech of tearing metal came over the comm.

“Han!” Leia leaned forward, as if it would somehow take her closer to him. “You’re launching escape pods?”

“Yeah,” he broke off cursing, and then they heard him shouting, “go! Go! Come on, now!” His voice came back, rough and rushed. “I got a plan,” he said. “If it doesn’t work… well it’ll be one hell of a ride. Chewie – If I mess this up, you take care of Leia. I’m counting on you.”

“Han!”

The comm went dead. Leia spun around. “What is he doing?!” she demanded.

Chewie harned, long and unhappy. //Undoubtedly something very stupid.//

“He’s shunted all power to his engines,” Winter reported, tersely. “Full power – Ready or Not is moving.”

“Keep firing!” Leia cried. “We’ve got to give him some cover!”

Chewie’s large paw curved around her shoulder as the Ready or Not barreled through the center of the battle.

“Message received, General Solo,” Rostek Horn’s voice broke through the comm chatter. “We’ll have the shields down for you.”

They watched in horror, Teeth’s lasers still spitting out continuous cover fire, as the Pillar of Autumn, Peregrine and two Alliance corvettes barraged the Imperial battlecruiser Ilthmar’s Fist with weapons fire.

“Oh no,” Leia locked her spine against the sudden urge to crumple when she realized what her husband was doing.

A stream of data appeared on the holo display as the Fist’s shields failed just as the Ready or Not made range. With a wild Corellian yell, Han plunged the ship straight down through the battlecruiser’s center.

- - -

Wedge flung himself down into the underbrush, grabbing Iella and rolling her beneath him as the shield generator station exploded in a massive mushroom cloud of fire and roiling black smoke at
their backs. Debris rained down, hissing and sizzling on the ground and in the underbrush as it smoldered and burned.

“We did it.” Iella’s voice in his ear was breathy with thrill and triumph. “The shield is down!”

Wedge rolled to the side, panting, and stared into the sky. Even in full daylight the exchange of laser fire and explosions of the space battle overhead could clearly be seen. “It’s up to them, now.”

Iella’s hand found his and gripped tight. “We won’t lose. We can’t.”
Endor II

Chapter Summary

Surprise! The Emperor dies. : )

On the Peregrine's bridge, Garm Bel Iblis felt the press of Mara's mind at almost the same instant that one of his officers cried out.

"The shield is down! The Death Star's shields – they did it!"

"Concentrate fire!" Garm ordered. Flicking the comm switch, he broadcast to all ships in the combined Rebel and Corellian Fleets. "This is it, gentlebeings – the battle is ours! Take them out!"

Luke cut down the last Red Guard in front of him and spun, prepared to take out the one he felt running up behind him – only to find a familiar violet blade arcing through the man's chest.

"Vader needs help," Mara bit out, racing past him before the body had even hit the floor.

Luke launched into motion after her, both of them taking the stairs three at a time.

"Take these guys!" Corran yelled as they neared the top. "I can help Vader!"

Without pause, Luke threw himself into Corran's place, their hours of practice allowing him to seamlessly step into the fierce combat while Horn dropped, extinguishing his saber, and rolled clear.

Mara veered the opposite direction, diving toward the Emperor. Panic screamed at the back of her mind as the Emperor swung one hand, still pouring blue lightning, in her direction, her body tingling with remembered agony. But she wasn't alone or unarmed now, and she caught the dark fire on her blade, planting her feet and pushing back.

At the receiving end of the Emperor's other hand, Vader, too, had dug his heavy-booted prosthetic heels into the deck plates. Ozone boiled around his red blade and his armor smoked and peeled from the heat of the assault.

Distantly, Vader was aware that his life-support systems had begun to fail. That they weren't regulating his breathing or the electrical impulses of his nerves correctly any more. But he didn't feel it – he felt Light. Rushing and blindingly bright. Light he hadn't dared to touch – to look at - in decades. It consumed him and he guzzled it like a man parched from days in the desert gulped cool, sweet water.

"Oh, wow."

The lightning vanished.

No, Vader realized – not vanished, redirected. Horn, the Jedi his son claimed was related to Jade, was somehow pulling the Emperor’s lightning into his hands. Sucking it down with smug, wide-eyed jubilation.
“That’s a rush.”

“You are no match for me, boy,” Palpatine snarled, redoubling the energy he poured into his lightning.

“We are more than enough!” Jade darted forward, swiping at the Emperor with her blade. With a howl, Palpatine cut off the lightning from one hand and Force shoved her back viciously, flinging her into one of the console circles.

“Mara!”

Luke’s shout overlapped Jade’s own shout of rage and pain and Vader felt the reverberation of the impact across the sphere, even as he and his son both closed in on the Emperor. Palpatine cackled, hurling insults at them as he darted away, lightning cutting off entirely as he ducked a hand inside his robes and pulled out his own crimson-bladed saber.

“Corran!” Mara hollered, levering herself to her feet. “Fry the control systems!”

“On it!” With a clean, Force-assisted leap, Horn crossed half the throne platform and dropped into one of the mushroom towers. His entire body crackled with contained energy and he grinned at the sparks that snapped off his hands when he interlaced his fingers and cracked his knuckles. “I’ve always wanted to try this.”

Planting his hands on the console, he closed his eyes and reached down with the Force, finding the wires and cords that led to the station’s critical systems. Then, with a firm push, he thrust all massive dark energy he had trapped within himself through them. Destruction rippled out in resounding waves, explosions rocking the Death Star - levels collapsing, control surfaces across the whole of the station shorting out and catching fire. Corran’s head spun, but he pushed harder, emptying himself of everything he had, forcing the damage to the furthest edges of the Imperial monstrosity. You will never harm anyone with this abomination again.

Getting back into their fighters was more challenging than getting out, but the Honor Guard managed. Getting out of Wayland’s atmosphere was easier – the stronghold garrison was too busy trying to rescue their own from the imploding citadel to chase them as they streaked toward the stars.

Wes gritted his teeth as he wound an emergency bacta wrap around his leg. “R4 – open the comms, will you?” When the astromech complied, he asked, “Katarn – what’s the word from the others?”

“Imperials are still putting up a fight,” Kyle reported back. “But Mara’s promising they’ll have it all mopped up before we get back.”

“So, we’ll be just in time for the after-party, then,” Hobbie said cheerfully.

“We better be!” Tycho joked. “I didn’t all this to miss out on the celebration.”

“Then we better get our choobies in hyperspace.” Wes pressed the last of the patch into place.

“I’m ready.”

“All right,” Tycho manipulated his controls to synch the four ships. “We’re on our way home in three, two, one.”
“Scan for the *Falcon*,” Leia ordered Chewie.

Winter shot her a worried look. “Leia, nothing -.”

“Han’s not dead,” the Princess said decisively. “I can feel it. He got out somehow. We just need to find him. And then,” she grumbled under her breath, “I’m going to kill him.”

---

His son was glorious, Vader thought, pulling on the Light again to move his failing suit, to swing again at the Emperor’s withered and whirling form. Jade had taught the boy at least some things, because he moved now as he had not at Bespin. There was a fearless, practiced grace to his form, despite the ruthless efficiency of movement he applied. Righteous anger and determination shone from his young face and he looked so like Padme that Vader’s heart clenched.

No... proud as his fatherly heart was, that had been his suit failing a little further, he realized. The Emperor has not been a Sith Lord for decades only to go down easily now. Jade has been delayed in rejoining them by coordinating the outside battle through her sphere, but Luke held his own alone, his determination to protect everyone he loved fueling him with a power the dark side could not match. But even he could not fight forever.

A pop, a hiss and then agony. Vader stumbled, realizing as his mechanically-mediated vision blurred that the Emperor had wrenched loose something vital in his suit. Clarity came then, clean and cold.

Vader shut down his saber. With inhuman effort, he lifted his a hand and reached behind him with the Force. Calling upon the Dark for one last time, he snapped the bone in Jade’s left forearm.

He felt her shriek more than heard it – felt her pain flood the room and the sphere. Raised his leaden head through sheer force of will. He has gambled everything on this, on his vision -.

Luke’s face contorted with Mara’s agony, but the Emperor – the Emperor crafted Jade’s suffering for a lifetime, refining it into the finest delicacy. He had been without it too long, now, to resist when it is poured out for him like amber wine in a crystal goblet.

Yellowed eyes slid half-shut as he drank deeply, rolling the feel of her suffering across his sense as he would wine over his tongue. Delight hissed off his desiccated tongue and between papery lips before turning into an enraged gasp.

Luke’s stomach twisted at the viscous darkness that pooled around the Emperor as he savored Mara’s pain. The hilt of his saber dug into his hands as he gripped it with every ounce of his strength. One step, another. He brought the blade back, then swung it down in a precise, merciless arc.

Drunk on Mara, the Emperor could not redirect his attention or bring his own saber to bear in time. An arc of green light sliced through him from throat to hip.

Luke’s world was surreal again as the cauterized, bisected halves of what had been a man fell away from each other and toppled at his feet. He was still staring, shell-shocked and panting, when an invisible hand closed on him and threw him across the platform.

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Booster swung around, eyes wild when his daughter began to laugh and then almost immediately to sob.

“Calrissian!” Booster pounded up the four steps from the command well to where Mirax slumped in his chair. “Get a ship – anything you can find – and get my good-for-nothing son-in-law back here, now!”

“Right away!” Lando grinned.

Booster heard the other man giving orders, but didn’t listen. Instead, with gentleness most would not have imagined his giant frame capable of, he lifted his sobbing daughter into his arms.


-          -

Luke barely managed to put himself into a roll when he landed. His shoulder jarred harshly and his head smacked the decking and began to throb, but nothing broke. He skidded to a stop before he hit anything else and swallowed a groan as he pushed up to his hands and knees.

“Luke.” Mara’s hand curled around his arm, the tip of her braid falling across his cheek as she leaned over him.

“I’m all right.” He reached up and back, his hand finding her hip as he sat back onto his heels. “Are you -?”

“Fine.” Red-black blood trickled from one of her temples, wisps of that had come loose from her braid sticking to it and smearing the mess across her pale cheeks. She cradled her left arm to her stomach, but Luke could feel she already had pain suppression techniques in place, muting the problem for the moment. “I need to help Corran and the others,” she said, her fingers squeezing his arm. “But Vader -.”

“I’m on it.” Luke staggered to his feet, then hurried up the stairs toward his father’s weak presence. “Father?” he asked, doubling his pace when he got closer. “What are you -?”

Anakin Skywalker shoved his charred black helmet off his head and gasped weakly. “Obi-wan.”

Luke dropped to knees. Ignoring the pull of strained muscle in his jarred shoulder, he heaved his father half-upright, supporting him against his chest and knees. “Father -.”


“You need your helmet,” Luke said, reaching for it, even as his father’s praise filled an old, deep emptiness inside him.

“No.” Anakin’s eyes drifted away. “Your mother. She was right.”

Luke followed his father’s gaze in confusion. “Right about what, Father?”

“I didn’t – have to save her. Just – to be -with her.”

“I don’t understand.” Even as he said it, Luke’s heart sank – because part of him did.

“Obi-wan,” Anakin said again, eagerly this time.
Luke’s eyes widened as light seemed to open up a few feet from the bottom of his father’s boots.

“Anakin.” Obi-wan’s voice was different – younger, and infinitely warm. When he materialized, he looked younger, too, and there was no blue surrounding him. He appeared fully corporeal.

This is how Father remembers him – still pictures him, Luke realized.

“Ani.” Padme stepped out of the light, as solid as Obi-wan. She beamed at Anakin and held out her hands. “We’ve waited so long.”

Luke watched, his voice caught on the lump in his throat and the squeeze of his chest as his father’s spirit sat up and then stood, stepping completely free of his ruined body.

“My Angel.” Anakin, tall and golden haired, clad in Jedi robes and a leather tunic, wrapped his arms around the two people he loved most in the galaxy. “My brother.”

Luke felt Mara’s presence wrap around him, then her body at his back, angled away to protect her broken arm, her good arm wrapping protectively around his chest. His hand grappled for her wrist, clung to the security and certainty of her as Corran dropped unsteadily to his knees beside him, one of his hands finding Luke’s arm.

“My son.” Without released Obi-wan or Padme, Anakin turned, his eyes bright and warm.

“You knew,” Luke said, softly, a piece of his heart aching. “You knew it would end this way.”

“I did,” Anakin agreed. “I was never meant to live without your mother,” he shook his head. “Any more than you were meant to live without Jade.” His lips quirked in a playful, rueful smile Luke could never have imagined on him. “Appalling at that idea is.” Anakin stepped backward toward the light. “We’ll be waiting for you, when it’s your time,” he said, his voice going echoey as the light began to swallow him. “We love you, Luke.”

The light surged, then vanished, leaving the three of them alone in the dim, corpse-strewn wreckage of their victory.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

And so the journey comes to an end.

Chapter Notes

***THANK YOU***

Gift has been a massive labor of love for three years and I have been blessed and honored by every person who took time to read, leave kudos or comment. I would never have survived or finished without you, so thank you, thank you, thank you!!

In the years following Endor, the galactic landscape reshaped dramatically.

Under Rostek Horn’s leadership, and then that of Iella Wessiri Antilles, the Corellian Five Worlds government would thrive. Wedge left his position as the head of the Jedi Honor Guard to follow his wife back to Corellia where he joined CorSec and they raised two daughters, Syal and Myri.

Facing a total loss at Endor, the Imperials surrendered. In the years after the battle, they allowed planets that wished to secede to do so, but also welcome several new ones. Eventually, the Remnant consolidated into the New Empire. Though not beloved by its galactic neighbors, it was never again at war with them, either.

Shu Torun suffered a bloody civil war that ended when Trios married the most powerful of her planet’s nobles. Together, the crushed the opposition but left the planet struggling to recover for years. At the end of its Civil War, Shu Torun left the Empire and joined the New Republic, but the Queen and her consort consistently made a point of staying well away from Jedi Skywalker and Jedi Halcyon whenever they found themselves in the same vicinity.

When Moff Jerjerrod surrendered the Death Star, he gladly complied with Corellian demands that he hand over Darillion to be tried for his crimes. Quickly found guilty, the former Imperial nobleman was sentenced to life in the spice mines of Kessel. He served ten miserable years before being gruesomely eaten alive by an energy spider.

The Death Star II, renamed Sanctuary, was massively renovated and became the home of a central alliance that brought together the New Republic, the Corellian Five Worlds Government the New Empire and the Jedi Order. Home to both the Jedi Praxium and Rostek Horn’s “pet retirement project” known simply as The Academy, it’s once grim interior filled with life, light and culture. Many former Imperial slaves, including those Mara and Mirax rescued at Brentaal made their homes there, thriving in the trades and services that sprang up to keep the giant station running under the deft hand of Baron Administrator Lando Calrissian.

The Academy taught non-Force sensitives and prospective Jedi alike, bringing together the most brilliant young minds from across the galaxy to learn, live and train together for months at a time. It
was far from perfect - differing ideologies, old bigotries and cultural conflicts made for rough going some days, but there was also a distinctly gorgeous hope watching a room full of young beings of every origin and species struggle toward common ground under the joint watch of instructors who had once stood on star destroyers intent upon annihilating one another.

The Jedi carried forward the “family” model they’d adopted during the war, welcoming initiates’ families to move with them to Sanctuary and be remain their supports and loved ones as the initiates traveled the paths to becoming Jedi.

Despite Leia’s position as the High Counselor of the New Republic and Last Princess of Alderaan, Han and Leia had their first set of twins, Jaina and Jacen, a year after Endor. Han resigned his commission and devoted himself to his family. Eighteen months later, Anakin came along. To Leia’s exasperation, two years after that, despite the best repress meds available, they welcomed another set of twins, Breha and Beru. Chef moved in with the Solo family permanently and, despite the mechanical machinations of the Solo children, remained an integral part of the family’s functioning for decades.

Corran and Mirax welcomed their daughter, Jysella, two years after Valin and a second son, Kieran, six years later. Booster doted on his grandchildren wildly (even if none of them were named after him, as he insisted they should have been). The week that she turned 12 years old, Jysella Horn’s Gift emerged. To her utter delight (and that of her brothers, who avidly followed her around, sucking up errant sparks with their own gifts), she sparked brilliantly orange for two solid weeks before her sphere settled in and she began a proper apprenticeship with her beloved Aunt Mara.

Declaring that Luke was a threat to the galaxy unwed (“just look at Trios” she argued), Mara resigned herself to marrying him for everyone’s safety. They were wed a month after Endor and, in lieu of a ring, she had ornate aurabesh letters spelling out Skywalker inked down her left arm, intertwined with the vines and roses that spilled over from her back and chest. When Corellia awarded her bloodstripes for her role in overthrowing the Empire, she had them inked down the sides of her legs. When she looked in the mirror, she no longer saw scars of her old life but vivid testament to who she had become. She grew slowly but steadily into her role as Coordinator, demand for her assistance growing as word of her abilities - and the many incredible way they could be used in peacetime - spread.

For his part, Luke had Halcyon tattooed down his arm in matching letters. He refused to stop calling his wife “CorMeum,” despite the formal contract inferring the title having been fulfilled, and thus ended, at Endor. When the pressures of rebuilding an Order from scratch became too pressing, he would steal his wife and the SoroSuub yacht they’d bought just for themselves as take “research trips” across the galaxy.

And often, in the dark of night, he’d lay in bed with his arms around Mara and silently thank the Force for the incomprehensible gift he’d been given so many years ago in an innocuous, Force-sealed crate.

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