# Defining Destiny

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# Defining Destiny

by Phaedra Dahl

## Summary

The merged story of ‘Insomnia’ and ‘A Friendly Word’ -- I have since posted the merged story as "Parallel Paradoxes" into the proper order, with the addition of a few chapters that I felt were missing.

Summary: A friendly truce between Luke and Mara has emerged since Wayland, and possibly more, but they still have a long distance to go between what they want from each other, and what other forces have in store for them.

## Notes

Setting: Coruscant, a year after ‘The Last Command’

Characters: Luke, Mara

Hi y’all, so this is the first chapter of the merged stories…and just so you know, I will put in which characters are in each chapter so you will know if it’s more of ‘Insomnia’ which features more LM (and some smut and mush every so often), or ‘A Friendly Word’ which features L or M with others (no smut, but can get a little trashy)...I hope you like the merger.
So now that we got the kissy-smoochy out the way between LM, I think you guys will want them to rush into bumping uglies…Don’t worry my little smutlings…I’ll get there…and when I do…you’ll truly enjoy it. ;)

Interesting fact: when I write, I can’t end on an uneven number page #-- it drives me crazy. I know my OCD is showing, but I thought I’d share.
What Nobody Knows

**

All I Ask - Adele

I don't need your honesty

It's already in your eyes

And I'm sure my eyes, they speak for me

No one knows me like you do

And since you're the only one that matters

Tell me who do I run to?

**

There it was. Staring at her all morning.

Mara looked over at the single yellow rose with red edges. Every time she looked up, it was there.

At first, when she brought it into the office with her, and put it into the glass vile, she would look up and sigh as she gazed at it; the memory of the night before and the ‘first date’ he had made for her. She sat there, grinning like an idiot, looking at it, hugging herself.

When she looked at it, she got a warm feeling in the center of her chest, and had filled throughout her with happiness. She thought about his dreamy eyes and how sweet and kind he was. And his kiss; his hungry lips—that made her warm in her core.

She hated it. She wished she could see the humor in it, but this didn’t feel humorous to her.

Mara hated that it made her feel this way. She was not the type of woman who walked around in a cloud of love-struck dizziness. This was not her; and she’d be damned if she was going to let it continue another moment!

She turned her chair around, not facing the insolent flower that was judging her.

That’s right—things needed to get done, and she was going to do them! “I’m just going to work on this report, right here, and not look over my shoulder….not at all….not going to do it.” She thought.

Sooner or later, it would happen, she had to turn and face the judgmental bud. And then the feelings would be back again, and she would cringe at herself.

Why did she let him have this power over her? It wasn’t so long ago when her feelings for him swung the other way, and her feelings for him controlled her too.

When she thought of how close she had been to killing him; and she had been so very close- if one day she had given in to her compulsion, he wouldn’t be here. He wouldn’t have even known it was coming; she knew she could have been that stealth about it, so cold and fast that it could have been done- without a second thought.
Mara remembered how she was going to do it, too. On Wayland, she would ask for some sort of Jedi instruction, he would willingly accept this because his weakness was that he was too eager, and offer his lightsaber to her “for training purposes”, and when he was in range or standing in front of her, she would turn on the blade - cutting him through the chest. She could see the look of betrayal on his face now, in her mind as she remembered it; his eyes not believing that she could do this, and the realization that he would have been so trusting of her - and then, as the life left him, his eyes going dead. And she would feel only relief, and then nothing.

She shivered with the recall of such a memory that brought her back to the present. She truly wondered sometimes if she was really a different person than she was from a year ago.

Mara felt differently, and although she didn’t always like what she was feeling, it was better than feeling angry or numb all the time.

And then there was him... and his stupid, idiotic, idealistic, sweet, adorable, tender, very desirable… grrrr!

Mara turned away from the rose one more time. This was never going to get better; she shouldn’t have brought it to the office. But, when she wasn’t looking at it, she could smell it too.

The comm pinged in the corner of the office. ‘Good.” She thought, “A distraction.”

Answering the call, an Ithorian appeared on the other side; B’xunay Tuks, her lawyer.

“Good Morning Miss Jade.” B’xunay greeted her.

“Good Morning.” Mara returned her politeness.

“I’m calling to inform you that you have been schedule to appear before the investigation in two days’ time. My office will send you all the necessary paperwork. We believe that you will be required to testify for at least a full day, possibly more.” The lawyer warned.

“Also,” the Ithorian’s head gestured in a motion the was impossible for Mara to read the meaning, “We feel obligated to tell you that Lt. Bremem has hired one of the most prominent defense lawyers available.” She paused before continuing, “This will not be as easy as we once thought it would.”

Mara knew what she was referring to; Mara would have to steel her emotions in order to get through this.

She nodded back to lawyer. “Thank you for calling. I’ll prepare for it.”

The call ended.

In her office, she sat back in her chair, thinking of how easy it would be to go to the hangar, power up the Z-95 and just leave… to go anywhere. That’s what she should do; just run away from it all… from this stupid job, from this planet that held so many memories for her, and from him.

She turned her chair, and that blasted rose came back into view.

Mara sighed again, rubbing her head.

Maybe she should see him? Maybe he would be able to help with the tension that was starting to build in her?

It was building in her, she knew it. It had been building since the night of Leia’s party, and the first
time the voice had come back to her. Since then, she had kept it mostly under control. It wasn’t until after their sparring session in front of the doctors, and the resulting kissing session that the pressure was building again.

And the voice…and the words.

She thought she could hide it, denying it. So far, she had done her best. They, he, had no clue that she was even having these images pressed upon her.

Mara wouldn’t even think them now; just to do that would cause the chills, and she had reacted badly to last time the dream had come to her.

She hadn’t even told him about the dreams, or visions. She was too ashamed that her mind had went back to what she knew; the killing without remorse, without a thought. Even now she couldn’t bring herself to think his name at all this morning. As much comfort as he could give, and would give her; it was wrong to go to the man that she envisioned killing again.

Or was it? What if she told him…told him everything? Could he take it? Would he take it?

There was only one way to tell. Mara checked her calendar before she reached out to him. Was it possible that this would be the wedge that would drive them apart? She knew that she truly wanted to see if he would be a glutton for punishment. What would make someone keep taking on the sort of wreck that she was?

It was inevitable, he was either going to hear what she was capable of now, or hear it in the coming days.

She centered herself before she reached out to him. He was easy to find; he shone like a bright beacon. It was something that she had tried to warn him about- the day was going to come when someone, not her, would find him simply by sensing him. Mara shielded herself naturally, knowing that it did, and could save her life.

She reached out, tenderly touching his mind. There he was in the library, pouring over more of the writings from Dr. Massian; reading both the writings he was given and cross-referencing them with other books.

When he sensed her; he stopped, and she could feel him smile.

<Hello there> he beamed.

<<Hi yourself!>> she sent over, masking her darker feelings again.

<<I wanted to thank you for last night>> Mara directed to him, earnestly. <<I had a lovely time.>> She was telling the truth; it was an amazing night, one that she never would have ever seen herself ever having.

<Of course.> He sent back. <I was wondering if it would be too soon to ask for a second date?> He flirted.

<<A second date?>> She smiled; he always too eager. <<I think I could arrange that….but…>> there were more important details at hand. Would he even be asking if he knew?

<But what?> He was concerned.

<<I was hoping to see ‘The Jedi’…for now.>> she sent over. If she asked to see ‘The Jedi’ instead
of the man, he would know the difference.

Mara could sense that he was wondering why she had asked that, but he didn’t ask why. He knew if she was asking that there was a reason, and that was good enough for him.

<Sure, when were you thinking of meeting, and where?> He asked.

<<This afternoon?….the hangar?>> she asked.

He seemed shocked that she wanted to meet that soon. <Let me contact Wedge?—and I’ll let you know what time works best?>

<<Perfect…thank you.>> She eased of contact with him.

Within fifteen minutes, she had a comm messaged from him. “One hour?” was all it said.

**

True to his word, Antilles had planned to not fully clear the deck but moved the duty roster around so that no one would be around the door when Mara was to slip through it.

She was early, and walked around her ship, checking to see if there was anything out of place. Any prying eyes would see her pick up a few tools, and move them from one side of the pit to the other, without drawing attention to herself. If she wasn’t there the next minute, they would assume that she went aboard and was checking diagnostics.

At the perfect moment, Mara walked over to the door and tapped the key card to it. The door slid open silently, with no fanfare.

Unlike the previous night, there was no table in the middle of the room, and no holo-theatre set up, but the old sofa was still off to the side. The magic of the previous night had dissolved.

Under the X-wing, she could see someone moving, tinkering with the underbelly of the ship.

Mara ducked under the repulse lifts of the *Falcon*, and watched him for a moment. He did love fixing things. It was his nature.

She knew that he was aware that she was there, but he couldn’t quite pull himself away until whatever was giving him grief, was finished. When he was done, he stood back, contented, rubbing the grease from off his hands. He looked over at her.

“Hi there!” Luke called to her, smiling. The echo in the hangar bounced his voice around the room.

Something in her made her choke on her words before she spoke, so she swallowed them back. “Hello.” She said as she approached him, briefly grinning.

Mara could tell that he wanted to hug her in greeting but she sent him the nonverbal message that it wouldn’t be a good idea.

Luke furrowed his brow. “Is there something wrong?” He looked her up and down to make sure she wasn’t hurt.

The mewing, love-stuck girl inside her, was fighting the urge just to rush into his arms and let him hold her until the galaxy dissolved. But the real Mara kept her distance from him, and shook her head.
“There is something wrong.” He said; he hung his head. “Did I do something again?” and he looked up.

Mara shook her head again. She wrapped her own arms around herself before she spoke. “You didn’t do anything.” She said. “You’re doing everything right.” His eyes begged her to explain. “I just got my notice of when I’m supposed to testify at the Bremem hearing.”

Luke sighed, relieved that she wasn’t moving away from him. “And you’re nervous?”

She nodded, but couldn’t look at him.

“There’s something else too?” He asked, even though he knew the answer. “Do you want to tell me?”

<<I don’t know if I can.>> Mara sent over to him.

“I don’t understand, Mara.” He walked closer to her. “What do you want to tell me?” As he approached her, he could feel it - her fear. He had never been able to sense it from her before; it was one of those things that she shielded from him.

She waited, and made up her mind to say what she had been thinking. “What if you can’t take what I need to say?”

“Maybe I can?” He said simply, not coming any closer; he knew how he could scare her away.

“What if it changes the way you feel about me?- like right now?” Mara asked, her voice trembling.

“It won’t.” He said, standing his ground. “I won’t.”

She turned her eyes towards him. Luke stood a ‘safe’ distance from her, but moving, not budging. His eyes were earnest and strong; he was prepared to listen.

Mara relaxed slightly. “How do you know the difference from a dream and a Force vision?”

He wasn’t prepared for that question, but she was talking to him, and not running away. He thought about it before answering. “Well, from my experience, a dream seems more distant and vague, whereas a vision complete submerges you into it – it feels real, it’s harder to come out of a vision than it is a dream.”

She nodded. All of her dreams and visions were vivid and slightly obscure.

“Have you been having visions, Mara?” Luke asked.

“I don’t know.” She whispered. She thought she had no right to ask, but she forced herself. “Have you had them?”

“Yes.” He said.

“About us?” She said, really not wanting to hear the answer.

“Yes.” He said, turning from her, looking around the room, anywhere but where she was.

<<Please tell me?>> She reached out to him.

Luke turned back to Mara, “What if it changes the way you feel about me?” It was his turn to be scared of her reaction. “I feel the same way about my visions, as you do about yours.” He paused.
“Will you be able to take it if I did reveal them?”

Mara could sense he was hiding them, and whatever was in them, from her. If she was expecting him to be able to handle the burden of her visions, then she should be able to handle his. “I can.” She said strongly.

He nodded. “The first one I had was the night of the auction.” Remembering it now went to a dark place. “You weren’t you…you were Liana.” He paused as he saw her wince at the use of that name. “I was me, but I was disconnected, and somehow not myself; but I knew it was me.” He looked at her directly. “I took you as my possession.”

“We were intimate?” she asked.

He nodded his head slowly indicating a confirmation of her question. “You didn't belong to me...you were a possession of the Emperor. What started off as tender, turned…wrong.” His eyes closed, fighting the dark emotions of the vision. “I hurt you.” He fought it again. “And, in the vision, I enjoyed it…hurting you.”

It took a moment before she could speak, and that was after she realized how much this vision pained him; and it pained him more to tell her.

“Have you had other visions of us?” Mara brought herself to ask.

“Yes and no.” Luke said. “Mostly pieces of visions…like I’ve seen them before when they happen…but nothing concrete.”

“Like what?” She asked.

“Like when I held you in my arms after the Katana battle; before they took you to the medical ward.” He said. “I briefly saw us kissing… we were happy.” He gave her a slight smile. “I’ve had other visions like that.”

“Sometimes visions don’t show us an accurate past or future.” He continued. “Master Yoda said that the future was always in motion; there no reason why a possible past couldn’t be as fluid either, showing what could have been.”

“When I first saw you in a full vision, we had never met.” Luke explained. “It was a vision of the possible past; of Jabba’s palace...your mission...it succeeded.”

Mara was listening to him intently. “How long have you been having visions about me?” Now, she was concerned.

He smiled, serenely. “In one form or another?- all my life.”

She looked at him, shocked, and amazed.

“I knew that you wouldn’t believe me if I told you, but since you asked.” He had calmed himself to explain to her. “When I told you that your hair reminded me of the sunset- it was true. I saw you hair in a vision….long before we met…before I ever left the farm. When we first held hands- I had seen our hands holding in a vision. I saw your eyes in a vision too.” He explained. “I’ve never told anyone this, but when I started to piece it together; I knew…it was you.”

“You meant something to me even before I met you…even before I started training to be a Jedi… a simple farm kid kicking around dust.” He confessed.
Mara was quiet for a moment, trying to process what he had just said. He was right; had she had known about his visions, it would have driven her away. Now, though, something was different. She could take it. She didn’t need an explanation as to why she could understand it, but she just did.

He had humbled himself to share this with her; risking all the progress they had built up over the past year. And knowing that it might drive her away, he wanted to let her know that he could be vulnerable with her, as he couldn’t be with anyone else.

Mara came to realization as well. “I want to tell you about my visions.” She said weakly. “At least, I think they’re visions. I’ve never had them before. I never had visions when I was in service to the Emperor.”

Luke nodded, and listened.

She thought about it for a moment. “It might be better if I showed you…” She offered out her hands.

He understood, just as they had connected before they dreamed together, he would be able to see what was in her mind.

As he took her hands, Mara could feel the warmness of his skin. She reached out to his mind; intending to show him the vision that came to her the night after their disastrous sparring session.

The image that appeared in his mind briefly showed an encounter with Vader, as it merged into amidst a jungle. He pulled out of the vision immediately.

“What was that?” He asked.

“The jungle?” She looked at him.

“No, before that…” He said. “About Vader? What was happening there?”

“It was nothing… just a memory that occurred before the vision.” Mara defended.

“I don’t think it was.” Luke said. “I think it was part of a vision- they may not have been related but no reason why it wouldn’t have any significance.” He was stubborn on this. “Tell me about it?”

“There’s not much to tell.” She sighed. “It was before Endor. I had snuck aboard *The Executor*. I was trying to stay out of his way. I was there to commandeer a TIE fighter, and be on my way. It wasn’t the first time Vader had threatened my life.”

He looked shocked staring at her, but she continued, “He didn’t like me. Only the previous time we had met, he flat out told me that he would kill me if I interfered with his plans. So I didn’t inform him that I was coming aboard.”

She stopped to breathe again. “On my way to the hangar, he found me and stopped me. He put me up against a wall; and I thought he was going to kill me. Then, he stopped. And let me go. *The Executor* headed for Endor, and I headed for… Jabba’s palace.”

“That wasn’t the whole story.” Luke said. “Show me the memory?” He asked.

“Are you sure?” Mara asked. She knew that memories of his father were not pleasant for him.

He nodded.

She reached out to him again; showing him her race for a TIE before being discovered… the fear she felt approaching the hanger… the dark figure and red saber waiting for her… the clench around her
neck, and hardness of the wall on her back…then, unexplainably, the removal of the threat…then Vader’s mask coming so close to her face that she could see through the red plasti film of his helmet, seeing a human eye within…and then, the mechanic breathing, and his words. “I won’t kill you…not now…he will cherish and love you…much more than you deserve….he doesn’t know what you are. I won’t take away his happiness away from him.”

Mara pulled back from the memory. She now understood the ‘he’ Vader was referring to; and ‘he’ was standing in front of her.

Luke came back from the images, looking at her. He nodded, and understood what his father had done, and why.

They looked at each other for a long moment. Mara felt like pulling her hands away, and he must have felt the switch in her muscles because he just held them ever-so-slightly stronger. His thumbs rubbed the back of her hands, telling her it was okay to continue.

She closed her eyes, and reached out again to show him the vision that followed the memory. His sense came into the vision, and she could tell that he recognized the jungle. Then the images flowed; they were making love- tenderly and lovingly…and then it changed, she showed him her growing belly…and then the rot that ate her from the inside…and the pain, the all-consuming pain…and the fear that consumed her too.

He pulled away, panting from her pain; his chest heaved, he was doubled over from it.

Mara saw what her vision had done to him, appalled, she started to move for the door; regretting that she even showed him.

“Mara stop!” He yelled, he panted a few more times because of the intensity of her vision. “I can take it….I can.”

Before taking another step, she turned around to be sure.

“I’m sorry.” He said. “My visions were never as painful as yours was. I didn’t expect it…that’s all.”

He held out his hand, showing that neither she, nor her visions frightened him.

Mara came back to him. Instead of taking his hand, she stepped into his embrace.

She clung to him as he slowly rocked her back and forth. She felt him reach out to her mind.

<In your vision…we were lovers?> He asked.

She nodded, against his chest.

<You have my child.> He commented.

She could feel it come across her, both thoughts filled him with calm, peace, and ultimate joy. It was contagious, the thought that they could be happy together. It filled her with warmth.

But the feeling didn’t last long before she said, “But the last part of the vision…the pain.”

<I know.> He sent across to her. His voice try to soothe her. “I don’t think it means what you think it does.”

Mara sent him a wordless question.
“I don’t think that it means that having a child, will cause you pain. I think it means something else.” He paused. “I think it means that if you deny yourself to be happy, that it will cause you greater pain.” He hated to use the imagery of the vision, but to him it made sense. “If you keep closing yourself to opportunities, losing those moments will eat away at you.”

“How can you be so sure?” She asked, still taking comfort in his arms.

“I don’t know for sure…it’s only what I feel.” He confessed, “But I don’t see pain like that, when I look into the future.” Luke’s hope always scared her; he was so sure of the positive of everything.

<<Show me? >> Mara asked.

He nodded, <They’re just snippets; they don’t always make sense.> and he reach out to her. She closed her eyes, seeing what he saw.

The images flipped past her mind; the possible past of Jabba’s palace, Mykrr, Katana Battle, Wayland, kissing, holding, intimate times, and again and again, a jungle, the stone pyramid in the jungle, a child – a boy, then another child – a girl…with red hair, another child- but vague, times together, times apart, but all through it, them together, with each other through happiness, sorrow, victories, defeat, love, anger, reconciliation….

She broke away from it; it was all too much…too fast. Now, she was panting from the intensity of the images in his mind.

When she found her voice, she asked, “Are these visions or what you want for us?” Somehow, the thoughts of these images, angered her; if there was chance that these were his wishes, and not sent through the Force. She’s be damned if she was going to be manipulated by his wants.

“Can’t they be both, Mara?” He asked. He could feel her fear that he was trying to persuade her to go where she wasn’t ready to go. “These things; they don’t have to happen today, or tomorrow, or a year from now, or five years from now—there’s no timeline.” His voice went quiet. “They may not even happen. But…”

“But what? Luke?” She was angry without knowing why. “You’ve already decided who I am going to be…what I’m going to do with the rest of life….before…before I have even decided what I want?”

“No, I haven’t.” His temper was now flaring too. “I wouldn’t do that. I have no intention on forcing you into anything…I just don’t want you to say ‘no’ before you’ve given yourself a chance to say ‘yes’!”

She couldn’t look at him. Mara was fuming on the inside, not believe that he didn’t want to control her life, just as He had. “What if there’s no chance to ‘yes’ to anything?” She growled at him.

“Why do you do that? Why do you shut down any possibility?” He snarled back.

“Because there isn’t one!…not one possibility!…of anything!” She snapped back at him, in anger and frustration.

"You don't know that!" He fought her, for their sakes; he couldn't see why she didn't see their future as a possibility.

"There are some things I know that you don't!" She yelled at him.

Mara turned on her heel and marched over to him, grabbing the sides of his head, and dropping all
the shielding she had built up to keep the voices at bay.

As soon she did, he was bombarded with all the images…and the voice booming over and over again.

*YOU WILL KILL LUKE SKYWALKER. YOU WILL KILL LUKE SKYWALKER. YOU WILL KILL LUKE SKYWALKER. YOU WILL KILL LUKE SKYWALKER.*

The images, Vader, himself, the Emperor, the sabers, red, green, blue, magenta; her angry face standing over him as he died at her hand…The pain, the gut wrenching pain, squeezing him from within, pumping his sides within its grip.

Luke dropped to his knees, as she released him.

Mara ran for the nearest bin, and heaved her stomach contents into it, just as she had done before. The resulting tears on her face were from the force of her heaves. When done, she choked and coughed the phlegm from her mouth, and fought to remain standing.

She turned to see the result from the images she had sent to him. It reality, she didn’t expect him to still be there. Silently, she hoped that he had left.

He hadn’t. Still on his knees, with one hand bracing himself from the floor, the other holding in his chest, panting, and forcing himself to shallow.

Her arms, holding onto the sides of the bin, shaking. She forced out the words to him as he still recovered. “Tell me now, Luke…do you still think there’s a possibility? Of anything?”

Mara pulled herself away from the bin when she felt confident that her body wouldn’t react again. She walked to where he was recovering, and stood above him, fighting the feeling of pity for him. The Emperor’s Hand wouldn’t have felt pity, just contempt. After all, he had wanted to see it…all of it. This was his reward for asking.

She turned to walk away from him. Her old instincts would have thought of him as weak, not able fight such a barrage.

“Yes.” He said, recovering his voice.

Mara turned back to him, not believing what she was hearing.

Luke’s head hung low, but she sensed him gathering his strength. “Yes” he repeated, “I still believe that there’s a possibility….for everything.”

“How?...how can you?” She asked, shaking her head.

He lifted his head to look at her. “Because if it didn’t bother you – you would have never shown it me, which tells me that you don’t want it; the voice, the visions….and don’t want to do it -killing me….and that gives me hope….and the possibility.”

He motioned himself to stand, finding his strength. He brought himself to his full height.

“I can take it.” He said, not flinching from her.

“Why?” Mara’s voice trembled in her ears.

Still not moving, Luke said, “Because I don’t want you to do it alone.”

She still didn’t believe what he was saying- maybe he didn’t either.
“Do you hear it all the time, like you used to?” He asked.

“No.” she paused. “I’ve only heard it twice since Wayland.”

“And when you do- is it the same, as it was before?” He wanted to know.

“No.” She murmured. “It feels distant… I’m not sure if it’s back…or just my memory of what it used to be like.”

Luke nodded, still keeping his distance.

Mara let her eyes look around, avoiding him, in case they might give her away, and confess how these visions really made her feel; powerless when she had worked so hard to truly give up her previous life.

“You’re not powerless against them, Mara.” He whispered, as if he heard her. “You’ve been holding them back, and that’s why they feel stronger than they are. But, you’re stronger now.”

“Do you want to kill me, Mara?” He asked.

She shook her head, indicating the negative. She could feel the moisture coming to her eyes. She really didn’t want to feel this way about him- and she didn’t, her life wouldn’t be the same without him. It wasn’t just about the training he had started to give; their time together had changed into so much more than that. Mara knew that their relationship had the potential to be something truly great; she could sense it every time he held her, or kissed her. Even in her visions, their life was strong and meaningful. She couldn’t bring herself to say it, or think it just yet; it wasn’t a word she could use.

Mara could feel a warmness coming over her. «Is this you?>> she asked.

<Yes.> Luke said. <Is it ok?>

It felt good, she had to admit it. It soothed her. She let herself be enveloped in it. She knew there was one last thing he had to hear.

“Luke, in the next few days…you’re going to hear it…the truth about me.” Mara sighed.

“I know.” He simply said. “I’m ready.”

“How can you be so sure?” She wasn’t even convinced herself; how could he be?

“Because you’re not the same person now as you were then- I know it.” Unwavering to the last, his voice could convince her of anything.

“Why are you so forgiving?” Mara questioned his motives, but she could feel him coming closer to her.

“I have to be...I’m the son of Darth Vader… I understand what it means to carry the burden of a life that is gone but not forgotten.” Luke rationalized.

He came within steps of her. <<Can I hold you?>>

<<Do you think that I want to?>> She asked.

<<I’m not asking for you... I’m asking for me. I really need to hold you now.>> Luke had the ability to be strong even when he was humbling himself; something she didn’t understand, but was willing to
oblige if it meant doing something for him that wouldn’t hurt him.

Mara took two steps towards him. Then, after considering, she came closer to him, until she was in his space. His arms wrapped around her. She placed her head on his shoulder as she wrapped her arms around him too. *Why are you so good to me?*

*Do you really want to know?* She heard his mind. If was different then their normal mental conversations; these ones really had no words, just emotions.

<<Not yet.>> she answered.

<Ok.> He said. <Let me know when you want the answer to that, ok?>

Mara nodded against his chest.

<Would it help, if we meditated a bit together?> Luke asked, and she could sense that was what he wanted; to clear the dark energy from the room, and from them.

<<Maybe.>> She didn’t want to move from where they were now. Reluctantly, she admitted that when she was in his arms, everything stopped spinning, and things made sense.

<Can I?> He sent over an image of him stroking her hair, as he held her.

Mara closed her eyes, and nodded.

She knew he had made the conscious choice to use his left hand over his right, as it stroked the side of her head, gently petting her hair.

It was lulling her into a place that felt safe, so she let it continue for what seemed like a longer time than she would normally let anyone hold her.

<<I think I’m ready to meditate now.>> She touched his mind.

<Ok> He paused. <Where do you want to go?> In his not-so subtle way, he wanted to take her to a place where she would feel comfortable. <Could we go see the ballet again?>

She smiled, and nodded against his chest.

TBC
The first thing she knew when she woke up in the morning, is that she just wanted the damn day over; even before she left the covers of her bed.

It was the day that Mara was to testify in front of the investigation into Lt. Bremem, and everybody had warned her that it wasn’t going to be pretty.

When she was informed that the day had been scheduled, she felt her life go into a tail spin. Lucky for her, the one person that she was sure was going to run from her, surprisingly didn’t. Luke stood there and took it; every bit that had been building up in her.

He even offered to come and sit by her while she testified. Mara declined the offer; for his sake, and for hers. He didn’t give up though, and vowed to be in the gallery; she accepted it as long as he didn’t reach out to her- she knew she would become distracted if she felt his touch, no matter how comforting it might be.

The day in between is what kept her calm. Mara didn’t even go into the office; there wasn’t much to do there anyways, just shuffle papers. She went to the gym to stretch out her angry muscles, then she tried to meditate in the afternoon.

The fact was, that she was getting too comfortable in her ‘acceptable’ life. Something was burning in her to be reckless and wild again. When Karrde gave her a deadline to close up the Smuggler’s Alliance, she was glad. She was not going to be trapped in an office, pushing paper.

Mara knew she was going to miss Luke when it came time to leave, and she tried to think of ways around that. Maybe Karrde wouldn’t mind a Jedi following them around? – But most likely, not. But she couldn’t think about that right now. Today was about getting through the day.

Ever since Luke had shown her his vision of what their life could be together—it scared her. Belonging to one person again was not what she had wanted. No matter that he was willing to belong to her- Mara felt caged, and trapped when she thought about it. But now, she was yearning
for an outlet for the restlessness that was building inside of her—she just needed a physical release…a
sexual one, to prove that her life would be anything but mundane.

It had been her crutch in her former life, and knowing that life was going to be on display today, she
had to accept aspects of that former life. She had used her body to get done what needed to get done.
And she had used her body for her own selfish pleasure; she didn’t bother to learn names.

What irked her the most about Luke’s visions; he was treating her like a delicate doll. He had shown
her a life of security, ~ and commitment, but what she really and truly feared that sort of
commitment.

Her own visions had shown how tender he could be, but at the heart of her vision was an undeniable
lust for each other.

Now, she had to admit that being treated as gingerly as he had been treating her, was a special thing—and she enjoyed it. But she was a grown woman, and had needs.

If she didn’t truly care about him, and just wanted a physical release, then any one of his flyboy
buddies would have sufficed by now—and she would have used them and left them just as she wanted.
But now that Luke was in her life that was not an option. She craved him, and only him …no one
else was going to do…and she was growing tired of being treated like some untouchable virgin
queen.

After this hearing was over, she was determined to show him what she really wanted.

Until then, she would have to remain in her state of just wanting him, and get through the day,
hoping that she could preserve some of that unchecked energy into doing what she needed to do.

This was not the morning to be pent up.

A quick shower, and start to the day was what she needed.

**

Going through the halls of what used to be the Imperial Senate, now New Republic—was as stoic as
it ever was; it didn’t matter whose name was on the outside of building. The white, pressed maconite
walls still threw echoes from one end to the other. If you were alone in the corridor, you could hear
your own footsteps, as well as hearing if you were being followed.

Although, Mara had helped to reveal all the secret passages in both the palace and senate halls, she
knew which public entrances would be the quietest because they always were. So when she asked
her lawyer to meet her in a certain corridor, the Ithorian was surprised but didn’t refuse.

Mara still had lingering doubts about her lawyer. Ithorians weren’t known for their ability to be
assertive, and she really hope that B’xunay would be able to keep up.

Through the doors, B’xunay was already waiting for her. They had chosen to meet an hour before
the hearing was expected to start.

“The press is already gathering in the outer corridor.” B’xunay said in her low guttural voice.

“I would assume so.” Mara said. “They weren’t camped out in front of my building this morning.”

“They were interviewing Jedi Skywalker as I walked by.” The lawyer commented. “He’s very
diplomatic.”
Mara could hear the Ithorian’s appreciation of Luke- it wasn’t a surprise, everyone was impressed by him; everyone except former die-hard Imperials.

“Yes, he is.” She commented.

B’xunay’s eyes blinked slowly at Mara, knowing that Jedi Skywalker was a sensitive subject for the human.

“I feel that I should inform you of how these proceedings will commence.” Mara listened intently to the lawyer. “There are five councilors hearing the testimony for evidence supporting the charges, and then a moderator. Lt. Bremem has his own counsel, and either he, or myself, or the councilors will be asking questions of you.”

“Who are the councilors?” Mara asked.

“There is quite an assortment.” B’xunay paused. “There’s Mak Se’zala; a junior Bothan senator” she chuffed, making a guttural tone. “Under Fel’ya’s thumb no doubt.”

Mara gave her a strange look; it was nice to see that her representative could be a little snide.

B’xunay continued. “Uboo Mek, the Sullustan representative, Gita Maz- a Twi’lek junior senator, Edik Hunt- a former Imperial commander from Tammek, and Ask Teem- the grandson of Ainlee Teem, the Grans representative from Malastare.”

Mara nodded.

“Given the selection of councilors, it’s seems a fairly even split of Republic representatives, and those with Imperial sympathy.” B’xunay noted.

The way that she said that, just now. “Do you think that I have an allegiance with the current Empire?” Mara asked.

“No, I was merely commenting that it would be of benefit, should your past weigh heavier than your current state.” B’xunay was being realistic and Mara tried not to hold it against her. “Lt. Bremem’s representative is of more concern- Nang Vijaan has been known to take delight in harassing those with an Imperial past.” B’xunay chuffed again.

Mara didn’t know much about Ithorians, but she could sense that Nang Vijaan irritated B’xunay.

B’xunay’s chrono chimed. It was time that we’re on the move to the hearing room.

As soon as Mara was spotted down the hall from the room, both her and B’xunay were rushed with attention from the media. In Mara’s opinion, it took longer than she preferred for security to come between her and the media.

Question, after question, Mara simply responded ‘no comment’. She could hear B’xunay chuffing, showing her annoyance as well, as they entered the room and took their position behind one of the desks at the front.

As Mara was about to take her seat, she felt a warm caress on her mind. She turned to look up into the gallery, and although her face didn’t change, she returned the soft touch when she saw him. Luke was watching her, as those around him were watching for any reaction from him. They would have to wait a long time to get a reaction —when he was in ‘Jedi mode’ there was very little anyone could do to pull him out of it.
When Mara sat down and got as comfortable as she could be, as she pulled herself up to the table, in front of the phonic receptor, and casually clasped her hands in front of her on the table. She remembered the instructions she received on reading body language; such a pose would suggest that she was honest and composed. B’xunay reached over and patted the top of Mara’s resting hands, in a sign of solidarity. It felt strangely pleasant.

Mara sat there breathing deeply, trying to remember her calming techniques—they were helping, but she didn’t want to sink too deeply into them as she knew she had to stay alert.

A quiet chime sounded, and the room began to settle. To Mara’s direct right, the empty table soon filled with Lt. Bremem and supposedly his lawyer, Nang Vijaan. Bremem was looking older than Mara remembered but no less smug since she had encountered him in the past year. Vijaan, a human, although Mara couldn’t tell from which world, however, looked polished and relaxed as if he was looking forward to the day.

The councilors filed in and sat on a raised dais across from the desks that faced the front of the room—in a standard hearing configuration.

The moderator sat on a lower level, faced both Mara and Lt. Bremem’s positions, in between both desks. He was human, older than Mara but younger than Bremem. His name plate simply said “Baies Odgo – Moderator”.

A chime sounded one more time, calling the session to order.

The Bothan councilor, Mak Se’zala, took to the podium. “We have come here together for the explicit purpose of determining if there stands enough evidence against Lt. Danak Bremem to levy the charges of fraudulent representation of his office, embezzlement of Republic funds, and the selling of information to foreign powers which would constitute treason.”

The Bothan went on to explain all the technical charges laid against Bremem, and recap the previous days information.

Mara listened intently, and from the sounds of it, they had lots of suspicion but very little, solid evidence.

Con. Se’zala instructed that the moderator would control the flow of the session, and would direct the questions, and keep track of points of order.

Moderator Odgo swore in both parties, to an oath of honesty, and offered Bremem’s lawyer, Vijaan, the option for opening remarks, which he declined. Then, he offered the same opportunity to B’xunay.

The Ithorian accepted, and stepped up to a phonic receptor, and prepared to speak.

“Honored representatives of the New Republic, and my learned counsel. I come here today, on behalf of my client, Ms. Mara Jade, with the expressed concern, and request as to why her presence is required at this hearing. Ms. Jade is a private citizen of the New Republic, and has come to this hearing, of her own volition and without reluctance to assist in this matter. However, we do request, at this time, that the council excuse her, less a just cause can be determined to the relevancy of her testimony. I call upon the council to make a ruling concerning this issue, at this time.”

Mara sat back and looked at B’xunay, and appraised the lawyer with more respect. It didn’t even dawn on her that she may not be needed to testify unless it was truly necessary.

The councilors huddled amongst themselves, briefly, and then if coming to a decision, Mak Se’zala
returned to the podium. His Bothan fur ruffled before he spoke. “Although we respect that Ms. Jade has inconvenienced herself in order to be here today; and we recognize this and appreciate the effort- we feel that she may have information that will further this hearing most expeditiously. Therefore we cannot excuse her from giving testimony. And we may proceed.”

Mara was not entirely surprised that they denied it- it must have just been a point of order for her lawyer to object to being brought to testify in the first place.

Moderator Odgo stepped up and instructed Vijaan that he could begin questioning.

Vijaan was a slender man, but he moved like a man that was bigger than the area he took up. As he approached the podium, he stopped to pour himself a glass of water and took a sip- all while looking at Mara over the rim of the glass, then he cleared his throat and began to speak.

“Ms. Jade, we thank you for your presence here today and we will try to make this as brief as possible.”

‘No you don’t, and no you won’t- you will draw this out for as long as you possibly can.’ Mara thought as she politely gave a tight grin, and kindly nodded back.

She could sense that he was looking forward to breaking her; he was in for a surprise.

Vijaan cleared his throat again, and spoke clearly, “Will you please give us your occupation for the record?”

“I am the Liaison to the New Republic as a representative for the Smuggler’s Alliance.” She answered.

“And please describe what the Smuggler’s Alliance is?” He asked.

“The Smuggler’s Alliance is a co-operative of both small and large independent traders who wish to remain anonymous, yet still agree to provide an asset to the New Republic.” Mara’s voice was clear and succinct.

“What sort of ‘assets’ do these ‘independent traders’ provide to the New Republic?” Vijaan asked.

“Most of the traders provide information, on various subjects, that they are privy to during their travels, in both the core and rim worlds.” She answered.

‘What is the nature of the information that they provide?’ He asked.

“It can be anything from shortages in supplies that could affect prices of goods, or they can provide information that can affect security of different worlds.” She explained.

“How do you obtain this information?” Vijaan was looking as his notes and not at her as he asked.

“I usually receive it through a secure comm channel, and relay it to the New Republic Intelligence.” Mara said.

“How secure is your comm channel?” Vijaan would pick at small details and be thorough.

“The codes are changed at sporadic intervals, are multilingual and alphanumeric –and the length of sequence chain varies. Therefore, the highest level of security.” She answered.

“Are you sure?” He asked to reinforce the belief that Mara had that he would be precise.
“It has yet to be cracked, by internal or external sources.” She concurred.

“How do you know?” Vijaan eyes narrowed as he asked.

“We receive reports on the configurations daily and attempted access of our system.” Mara could be precise as well.

“Do you now?” The snide tone was barely noticeable, but Mara was able to pick up on it.

“Would you like to see the reports?” She countered.

B’xunay got up from her seat. “Interjection” she called. “We would like to enter into evidence, these reports showing the configuration and access history to Ms. Jade’s comm unit.”

The page came and picked up the report from B’xunay.

Con. Se’zala spoke into the phonic receptor, “We believe that the burden of proof has been met to accept this evidence. You may continue Con. Vijaan.”

Vijaan took a sip of water before continuing. “You had said that you receive information regarding the pricing of goods, and information that is of a security concern. Can you provide us with an example of the type of information that would affect security?”

“No, I cannot, as that information is restricted.” Mara answered.

“Why is it, that a public citizen, such as yourself, has been given access to such restricted information?” He queried.

“I was given a security clearance level of C6 by New Republic Intelligence, in order to handle this information.” She said flatly.

“And by having this clearance level, did it allow you to access to information from the New Republic to deliver to others within your Smuggler’s Alliance?” Vijaan wanted to clarify Mara’s position.

“No, the information that I had access to only flowed into the New Republic Intelligence, never out of it.” She replied.

“But you were privy to other sources of information? Ones that obtained information from less credible sources?” He asked.

“Yes, it was the nature of the Smuggler’s Alliance to obtain information from where it could, regardless of the source of the information, and deliver it to New Republic Intelligence.” She was keeping her poise.

“Is it safe to say that not all of the information that you provided was always accurate?” He asked.

“That’s the chance you take when information is given by second –hand.” Mara concurred.

“Quite.” Vijaan took another sip from his glass. “And in exchange for the information that was given, what would the Smugglers receive as a form of payment?”

“I’m not sure as wot what you mean as ‘form of payment’?” She asked for clarity.

“Well, they gave their information willingly, and they expected what in return?” There was a definite snide tone in his question.
“For some of them it was a point of pride; to be included in mainstream business. Some of them would receive recommendations into the Trader’s Guild sponsored by the New Republic. They also had access to lobby for the removal of certain goods from the restricted transportation list. But none of this was expected. All channels and processes were followed.” Mara explained.

“It seems that this all seems very legal, doesn’t it? However, your own boss, Captain Talon Karrde, still delves in restricted goods, does he not?” Vijaan may have thought he had her cornered.

Mara kept her cool, and answered. “To the best of my knowledge, he does not.” Beside her, B’xunay was preparing documents to deliver to the page. “As these documents and transport manifests can prove. He was recently accepted as a member of the board to the Trader’s Guild, and as you may be aware that the Trader’s Guild restricts members who have any involvement in illegal dealings.”

“So he has become a legitimate trader instead of a smuggler— that is convenient.” Vijaan was digging in for a long fight.

“Not really.” She answered curtly.

“How so, Ms. Jade?” Vijaan was looking at her intently.

“Many of the small operatives were considered smugglers until the goods that they had been carrying were removed from the list of restricted goods. Some of these items were neither destructive to one’s person, such as the running of spice, nor destructive in nature, such as unsanctioned military equipment. Items such as those were never carried by Talon Karrde’s organization, at least during my employment with him.” Mara shallowed after her statement, as her throat was becoming dry, but she refused to drink from the glass in front of her.

“And what sort of goods would these smaller operatives be carrying that would remove them from the classification as smugglers?” He asked.

“Certain food stuffs, certain luxury items…bacta, at one time was restricted, so was tabbana gas. These items, bacta and tabbana gas, are still restricted somewhat as to amount that can be carried for transportation at one time, due to safety concerns, but they are no longer fully restricted as they were under the Empire.” She replied.

“I see, and you feel that this has been a benefit?” He queried.

“It’s regardless of my personal feeling towards this issue. However, there are immense benefits to legitimizing traders instead of ostracizing them as smugglers. It has both financial benefits by increasing trade, and eradicating criminal activity.” Mara explained.

Vijaan nodded, but paused before asking his next question. “How would you categorize the Xin-tu-nix Trading Group?”

Mara prepared herself to answer. “Xin-tu-nix was a break-away group from what was once a previously held Hutt conglomerate. The size of the group rivaled that of the size of Talon Karrde’s organization. However, that changed as Xin-tu-nix tried to acquire Trader’s Guild membership. They lost several of their numbers and territories when they agreed to go legitimate and to stop transporting restricted items. However, that did not stop them from constant lobbying for the removal of those restrictions.”

“Have you had any other dealings with them?” Vijaan was once again feigning disinterest as he read his notes.
“About a month ago, I was able to determine that Xin-tu-nix was selling forged importers licenses. I passed on this information to New Republic intelligence. And since then, I have learned that they have lost their membership to the Trader’s Guild due to other reasons other, but including the selling forged documents.” She explained.

He brought his attention back to Mara, now that what he was reading had no interest for him. “Let’s go back to your previous statement, concerning goods that were restricted by the Empire. Why were such items, as bacta, tabbana gas and military items restricted by the Empire?”

Mara could sense that he was looking to entrap her. “I hesitate to speculate on the reasoning as to why the Empire would restrict them. I have no absolute information, enabling me to answer that question.”

“But if you were to have guessed, what would be your assumption?” He prodded again.

B’xunay tapped three times on the desk beside her. And Mara remembered the signal that would trigger her response. She casually said. “I decline to answer that question. I refuse to make an assumption.”

Vijaan stared at her as he took another sip of his water. “I believe that you do have the knowledge that would answer my question. Let’s start with your experience in the Empire prior to the fall.”

Mara felt herself slightly tense, but she sensed that it was in reaction to the room’s response at the future line of questioning. She began to relax herself; nothing that Vijaan could bring before her would surprise her, and she kept her stoic visage.

“Were your previously employed by Emperor Palpatine’s regime?” His voice took on a harsher tone.

“Yes.” She answered simply.

“You don’t seem nervous addressing this question? Vijaan was hoping to illicit a response from her.

“Why should I? - 80% of the persons in this room were employed by the Empire; a higher percentage if you include those that were educated in the Imperial system.” Mara answered curtly.

“Yes, but your particular history, is what we should be concerned about. Isn’t it?” Vijaan took another sip before continuing. “Now, what title and position did you hold within the Empire?”

B’xunay stood up before Mara could answer. “Objection! This line of questioning is immaterial to this proceeding.”

Vijaan addressed the councilors behind him. “My dear representatives, my line of questioning goes to credibility of the witness.”

Com Se’zala simply said, “Overruled- please continue. Ms. Jade, please answer the question.”

Mara sighed deeply, but continued. “My title was ‘Emperor’s Hand’ as I was employed with the Empire.”

“Please explain the nature of your employment?” Vijaan asked directly.

Once again B’xunay stood up and said, “Objection – immaterial to this proceeding.”

Vijaan responded, “Goes to credibility of the witness.”

Se’zala overruled the argument and instructed Mara to answer.
“I dealt with matters of internal security for the Empire.” She answered vaguely.


B’xunay stood up again. “Objection! –immaterial to this proceeding.”

“Goes to credibility…”

Overruled- and Mara was told to answer. This repeated interchange told Mara that this would be a bone of contention between the two lawyers.

“They were mostly to ascertain the verification of information, and dispose of any threats against the Empire.” She answered.

“You were a spy and an assassin, in the name of the Emperor, is that correct?” Vijaan narrowed his focus.

“Objection!” B’xunay said loudly. “This line of questioning is immaterial to this proceeding!”

“Councilors,” Vijaan pleaded, “this goes directly to the credibility of the witness!”

Se’zala eyes narrowed on Mara before he directly said. “Overruled- please continue. Ms. Jade, please answer the question.”

“That is correct.” She replied, not wavering.

Mara could hear the whispers behind her coming from the gallery.

B’xunay stood up again, “Interjection.” She claimed. “May I have a chance to ask Ms. Jade a few questions concerning her service with the Empire?” B’xunay sounded empathic as she asked, and was granted the chance to intervene on Mara’s behalf.

B’xunay stepped from behind their desk to stand at a podium adjacent to the podium occupied by Vijaan. “Ms. Jade, when were you called into service to the Empire? - when did you perform your first mission?”

It took a moment for Mara to recall, but she answered, “Approximately three standard years before the destruction of the first Death Star, the Battle of Yavin.”

The Ithorian head motioned with interest. “How old were you at the time?”

Mara swallowed before answering. “Approximately 15 years old.” It was much easier for her to keep her composure against Vijaan.

A guttural tone from B’xunay was heard before she asked. “Will you please explain why you say ‘approximately’?”

“I have no knowledge of the exact date of my birth…I was taken from my home, and raised and trained by the Empire since I can remember.” Mara answered stoically.

“You were stolen from your family, and made to serve the Emperor?” B’xunay quickly asked.

“That is correct.” She answered.

“And that is how you came into service with the Empire? The Ithorian reiterated.
“That is correct.” She answered.

Satisfied she had done Mara justice, B’xunay said, “No further questions at this time.” and returned to her seat.

Vijaan clearly sensed the attempt to generate sympathy for the former Emperor’s Hand, but he had other plans. “Are you Force-sensitive, just as the Emperor was, Ms. Jade?”

B’xunay stood again. “Objection! –inmaterial to this proceeding.” She claimed.

Vijaan gave a frustrated sigh. “ Goes to credibility of the witness.” He explained.

B’xunay interjected before a ruling could be given. “How is ‘force sensitivity an issue of credibility’? Many force-sensitive person’s credibility is not being questioned!

“Hiding talents can be considered deceptive.” Vijaan argued back.

Se’zala’s fur ruffled, but he said “Overruled- please continue. Ms. Jade, please answer the question.”

Mara reluctantly began to speak. “I make no secret that I am Force-strong; it’s what made me a target for Imperial Training.”

Vijaan must have picked up on the choice of words she used. “You said ‘Force-strong’ rather than ‘Force-sensitive’; why is that? Is there a difference?”

“A ‘Force-sensitive’ person may experience talents due to the Force, but may not be adept to using all the skills that one who is ‘Force-strong’ can use.” She explained.

“So, say for example, A Jedi is ‘Force-Strong’?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“The Emperor was ‘Force-strong’?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“And you are ‘Force-strong’?” Vijaan asked.

“Yes.” Mara repeated her answer for the third time; narrowing her gazing, knowing that he was trying to show a correlation between her and the Emperor.

“I see, and this skill made you invaluable to the Empire?” He was on the hunt- Mara could sense it.

She was determined not to flinch; she could feel him coiling himself, readying to strike. She had to find a way to defuse his candor.

“No one was invaluable to the Empire- everyone was replaceable….even the Emperor.” She answered in a more-noticeable curt tone. From behind her, she could hear soft chuckles of amusement by her comment from the gallery.

Annoyed by her tone, Vijaan asked directly, “But you were loyal to him?”

“Yes.”

“You did his bidding without question?” He queried.
“Yes.”

“You acquired information that endangered the lives of the citizens of the galaxy, for him, didn’t you?” He was on the out-right attack now.

Mara held her poise; he was not going to win this. “I was not aware of the impact of the information that I had carried, nor the result of it—just that I was requested to carry it.”

“You murdered in his name, did you not?” And there was his central attack.

Mara could hear B’xunay thumping her hand on the desk in series of triplicate, but she answered anyway; it was either answer him directly or forever have her reputation in question for the rest of her life “I eliminated threats to the Empire upon request.”

“You murdered in the Emperor’s name did you not?” Vijaan’s voice grew louder.

She sat, clenching her hands in front of her but refused to answer.

“Shall we examine some of those ‘threats’? - You weren’t shy about your position; you shouldn’t be shy about these ‘threats’ now?”

Vijaan turned to a screen beside him and up popped an image of an Imperial officer. “This is Turgus Atiem…governor of the P’tak system….found with micro-dermal burns from the result of a lightsaber, directly through his cranium. Believed to be selling equipment to the Rebel Alliance…had a family of 3 three children—did you know this?”

Mara didn’t answer but didn’t remove her eyes from the screen either.

“I could go on…” the image flicked to another Imperial officer. “Wessel Nadine, senator of Gilliak, found disemboweled via micro-dermal burns, was a Rebellion sympathizer who harbored operatives there.”

Another image flipped, and Vijaan continued, “Malek Gazzine, director of Yarsus Academy found with a garroted neck due to the belief that he was training Rebel Alliance operatives.”

Mara swallowed with the new image on the screen. “Acus Tayzeem, director of procurement on Tissiat, accused of selling supplies to the Rebellion, found decapitated by micro-dermal burns.”

“Shall I go on?” Vijaan taunted, as image after image flipped up on the screen, and he produced files and handed them to the page. “All of these men are suspected victims of falling under the judgement of The Emperor’s Hand.”

Vijaan sounded like he was addressing the gallery. “In total…three hundred ninety-six is the count from Imperial personnel records that had indicated that these men met their demise by the Emperor’s Hand during your time of activity. Care to explain?”

“No.” Mara answered simply.

“And why not?” Vijaan hissed.

Mara’s eyes narrowed now on Vijaan, using some of his own tactics, she said, “Because you said ‘suspected’ – without undeniable proof that I had any involvement with some, or all of those instances, and then I have no explanation.”

He was not letting up on his chance to entrap her. “Yet you claim that you’re title was ‘Emperor’s
Hand’? We can assume if these murders are the work of the ‘Emperor’s Hand’ and you claim that you were The Emperor’s Hand, then we can assume that this is your work?”

B’xunay stood rapidly before Mara could utter another word. “Objection! – speculation!”

Vijaan turned back to the councilors and addressed them. “Unless Ms. Jade can produce that she was not ‘The Emperor’s Hand’, therefore she providing false information to this hearing. We have to assume that she is culpable of some of these atrocities, if not all of them. And if she is providing false information to hearing, then we have to assume that all of the information she has provided, and that of any future information is susceptible to being false as well.”

Se’zala was enjoying this, Mara could sense it. She thought she saw his lips twitch a slight smile before he said, “Overruled- please continue. Ms. Jade, please provide an explanation to the question.”

Mara resisted the urge to shake her head, but looked directly at Vijaan as she answered. “It was known that there were at least two Emperor’s Hands working at a time. I do not deny that I performed the action of elimination in some of these instances, but I do not claim any of them directly.”

“Then we have to assume that you performed all of them.” Vijaan snapped.

B’xunay voice bellowed, “Objection!”

“Withdrawn!” Vijaan said off-handed.

A chime in the distance broke the tension growing in the room. Con Se’zala stood up and went to the central podium, and announced, “We will now take the midday break for one hour. Councilors? - Please return in a timely manner, and we will resume this questioning. Ms. Jade? - please be advised that you are still under oath during this break.”

Mara sat in place until the room emptied. B’xunay shuffled papers in quiet beside her, while other filed out.

When the room was empty, including Bremem and Vijaan, Mara reached out to glass of water in front of her and guzzled it down; pouring herself a second, and gulping that down too. B’xunay looked at her with interest.

“If you were that thirsty during the session, why did you not drink?” the Ithorian asked.

“Because.” Mara murmured, “Vijaan was imploring an old interrogation tactic of drinking water in front of me- it’s called ‘sympathetic mimicking’. It’s a subliminal message as to whether he can lead me to where he wants to.”

B’xunay made a guttural tone again, which Mara interpreted as amusement. “I was wondering why he was drinking so much water.”

“Yeah,” Mara agreed, “He was trying pretty hard to get me to follow him.”

B’xunay made a ticking noise, which Mara took for a laugh. “He must have been praying for a break in session.”

From the corner, a uniformed security officer approached them. “If you would like, we have arranged a private room to take your meal? – Will you follow me?”
B’xunay nodded. “I hope you don’t mind, but I asked a favor from Chancellor Organa-Solo to make available some security precautions for you. You will not have to go into the general populace without accompaniment.” They got up from the table to follow the officer. “I’ve also arranged a small lunch for you.”

“Thank you.” Mara commented, as she followed the others to a small room off to the side of the hearing room.

Inside the sterile room, a small meal was waiting for both her and B’xunay.

“I’m really not hungry.” Mara mumbled as she stared at the plate of a small salad, and some other vegetables.

“I understand. Most people are unable to eat due to the tension of a hearing. You are doing quite well.” B’xunay said.

Mara could sense that she was holding back. “But?” she asked before she took a bite of the salad, and then pushed the remainder around the plate.

“Although I wished you would have taken my suggestion to refrain from Vijaan’s line of questioning- I can see that it may have worked out in our favor.” She looked at Mara. “Though Se’zala seems to favor him, my sense is that the other councilors do not.” The Ithorian took a seat across from the other woman. “And your unflinching honesty is refreshing for them- most try to hide their Imperial past, no matter the level of activity.”

B’xunay chuffed slightly. “However, I am concerned that he will go on a further attack this afternoon.” Her eyes blinked heavily. “Drink lots of water before this afternoon’s session, Mara Jade; you will need to resist his tactics even further.”

**

Before the session resumed, Mara took her seat behind the desk, and took up the same positioned she had remained in during the morning session.

A tingle in the Force came to her, as she was trying to center herself.

<How are you doing> He asked.

She smiled to herself. <<I’m fine, Luke.>> She sent it back to him.

<Ok, I’m still here.> He sounded nervous.

<<I know, thank you.>> She sent him a sense of her appreciation before she pulled back her presence from him.

The councilors entered. Then from the opposite side of the room, Vijaan followed by Bremem entered and took up their seats at the adjacent table. Bremem was still too smug for a man in his situation.

Over the past year, Luke had been teaching her to read other’s feelings, and she was suddenly curious as to why Bremem was so confident for a man who was risking everything.

This would be a good time to use those split concentration techniques to see what spiked in Bremem even though she was under the gun.
Con. Se’zala called the session back into order, and asked Vijaan to resume his questioning. Mara noticed that his water glass was no longer present beside him.

Vijaan cleared his throat; this was probably a nervous tick now that Mara recognized it.

“At this point, I would like to resume where I left off before the break.” It sounded like he was making a statement rather than posing questions. “We were able to ascertain that you worked for both Talon Karre’s trading organization, the you held a public office with the New Republic, but prior to this, you were employed by the empire in the role of ‘Emperor’s Hand’.” He summarized.

Vijaan took a deep breath and returned his attention back to Mara before he continued. “As your position as ‘Emperor’s Hand’ what sort of methods did you use to obtain your information?”

“I used deductive skills to obtain information, as well as other skills.” She answered.

“Would you use your skills in the Force to obtain information?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“Would you threaten? Cajole?”

“If I needed to.” She said.

“And what about sexual favors?” Vijaan sneered.

B’xunay jumped up to show her anger and chuffed before speaking. “Objection! This line of question is immaterial to this proceeding.”

Vijaan somehow knew it would be ruled in his favor, so he casually answered, “Goes to credibility of the witness.”

B’xunay argued back, “How can what Ms. Jade had done in the past be crucial to her credibility now? We’ve already established that she under the control of Emperor at the time of her service. Therefore asking questions of this nature are just meant to destroy her reputation.”

Vijaan retaliated by arguing. “It will show a pattern which we intend to demonstrate.”

Se’zala was entertained, and wasn’t about to stop this now. “Overruled- please continue. Ms. Jade, please answer the question. And Vijaan? Get to your point quickly.” He warned, but not truly insistent.

Vijaan turned back to Mara. “Have you ever used sexual favors to obtain information? To get what you wanted?”

Mara had to control her seething, and took long slow breaths as to not indicate that she was not relishing answering this question.

Se’zala felt she was taking too long. “Ms. Jade, please answer the question.” He repeated.

Her face didn’t move from its placidity, as she answered simply, “Yes.”

The gallery whispered with more speed behind her.

“I see.” Vijaan commented snidely. He smiled as he motioned for a glass of water.

B’xunay stood up, feeling there was a break. “Interjection?” She asked and was granted the
opportunity to question Mara again.

B’xunay took her place at the podium before asking, “Ms. Jade, as ‘The Emperor’s Hand’ were you given access to information that you have since proved useful to the New Republic and its citizens?”

“Yes.” Mara said calmly.

“Are you able at this time, to reveal that information, without causing any breach in security?” Her lawyer asked of her.

“Yes.”

“Please explain?” The Ithorian blinked to encourage her.

Mara began to explain. “Over a year ago, the information that I had as Emperor’s Hand lead to the destruction of the Wayland Cloning Facility, which was under the control of Grand Admiral Thrawn. The destruction of this facility removed the threat of entering into another civil war with a boundless supply of clones that would have been available to the Grand Admiral.”

B’xunay was not going to stop to try and remove the damage that was done. “Are there other instances, where your training as ‘Emperor’s Hand’ had proven to be an asset to the New Republic since the fall of the Empire?”

“Yes,” Mara paused before continuing. “I was able to assist at the battle for the Katana Fleet, during which the New Republic forces encounter an Imperial resistance to the removal of pre-Clone War Dreadnaughts. Thereby not allowing those ships to fall into the hands of the Empire.”

“And what was the result of your assistance on that matter?” the Ithorian asked.

“I was wounded.”

“To what severity were you wounded?”

“It was life-threatening, if my ejection seat was not found. I had depleted oxygen, a concussion and I needed severe neural regeneration, which lasted over a month for treatment.” Mara explained.

B’xunay seemed to stand a little taller before she asked the next question, “And for your assistance with regards to the destruction of the Wayland Cloning Facility, were you not given a complete exoneration for any and all of your activities that were performed during your duties as Emperor’s Hand?”

“Yes”

“And was your exoneration dependent on your assistance at Wayland?” the lawyer asked.

“No, it was not.”

“Please explain?”

Mara knew that further explanation was needed because of the interview B’xunay had given her prior to this hearing. “I was given the exoneration after returning from Wayland- I neither asked for the exoneration, nor was my assistance dependent on receiving one.”

“Then, why did you assist at Wayland?”

“Because I hold no loyalty to the current Imperial infraction.” Mara answered simply.
“Thank you Ms. Jade.” B’xunay stepped away from the podium.

Vijaan stepped up to his podium, and took a sip of his water.

“Let’s talk about your assistance to the New Republic, and prominent members of the New Republic. Do you have a relationship with the current Chancellor, Leia Organa-Solo, and her family?”

“Yes” Mara sensed a sudden and sharp spike from Bremem with regards to this line of questioning.

“Please describe the nature of this relationship?” Vijaan asked.

“We’re friends.” she said.

“What sort of friends? Would you say close, semi-close, or casual friends?” he queried.

“Casual friends.” She answered.

“How often do you meet with the Chancellor in private?” Vijaan sounded as if he was truly interested in who would have access to the Chancellor’s ear.

“Probably once a month.” Mara answered.

“What sort of things do you talk about?” he asked.

“As the Liaison from the Smuggler’s Alliance, I bring to her attention whatever issues that may be of concern. As a friend, we talk about various things.” She said.

“Such as?”

Mara humored him. “We discuss people we knew in the senate during the Empire- from various academies that we had attended. We talk about her children and how they have grown.”

“Her children?—why is that a concern for you?” Vijaan seemed amused that a person such as The Emperor’s Hand would a care about children.

“I saved them from being abducted before Wayland. I feel protective over them.” Mara changed her tone to indicate that Vijaan should not question her motives concerning the Organa-Solo children.

She could hear appreciative whispers in the gallery. But she could still sense that Bremem was on edge about this questioning.

Vijaan, however, wanted to keep the focus on other possibilities. “Do you use your time with the Chancellor in order to influence she decisions with regards to the Smuggler’s Alliance?”

“No.”

“How do we know that you don’t?” He asked snidely.

There was nothing Mara needed to hide about her relationship with Leia. “She has no direct power to influence the decisions that are desired by the Smuggler’s Alliance. All of the necessities that the Smuggler’s Alliance would require operate under other guilds and those guilds use lobbyists for further their goals.”

“And why is that?”
Mara explained. “Because the doings of the Smuggler’s Alliance is not entirely relevant to the workings of a galactic republic; and that is why our meetings are generally social.”

“I see.” Vijaan paused for a sip of his drink. He was no longer trying to lead Mara, but he used the water as his prop by which to indicate that he was about to go on the attack. “Speaking of the Organa-Solo-Skywalker clan; you have ties to all the members of that family? You are friendly with all of them; is that correct?”

“I have social relationships with all of them; yes.” Mara felt weary of the next questions, and had a stirring suspicion as to where they were going. Bremem’s tension seemed to ease off as the question were moving away from the mention of Leia.

“I understand that you receiving Jedi training from Luke Skywalker; is this true?” Vijaan asked.

“Yes”

“How often do you meet with him… for training?” Vijaan asked. Mara sensed the pause in between his words, hinting at a double entendre.

“I meet with Jedi Skywalker approximately once a week for training sessions.” She answered cautiously, hoping that invoking the title of ‘Jedi’ would show a bit a distance between the image and the man.

“And the nature of your relationship with Luke Skywalker- how would you classify it?” Vijaan was pretending not to be interested again.

“He is both a teacher” she paused, “and a friend.”

“What type of friend is he to you? Close? Semi-casual, casual?” and before he finished his question, he added, “platonic?”

Mara paused; Luke was so many things to her, burgeoning on more, but at this stage in whatever they were becoming, she opted for the easiest way to explain who he was to her. “We are close, platonic friends.” She knew it was not a truly accurate description of what she felt for him, but it was also no one else’s business what went on between them.

“Tell me, Ms. Jade, do platonic close friends spend the night at each other’s apartments? – and leave in the morning wearing the same clothes that they arrived in?” Vijaan was snarling, as two images appeared on the screen behind him; one of the evening that Mara returned after being subpoenaed, entering Luke’s newly decorated apartment, and one of her leaving the following morning. Both images were time stamped.

The gallery now went wild with a flurry of whispers. So much so that Se’zala had to call the session back into order.

B’xunay jumped up again. “Objection!- relevance!” She chuffed. “What does this have to do with the nature of this hearing!”

“No.” Mara whispered. “I’ll answer.” She said in a louder voice.

The commotion stopped, and Mara spoke. “Jedi Skywalker and I have a unique relationship. We are both the products of the Empire, however, on different sides of it. When we first became friends, it was difficult for both of us. We both suffered from insomnia due to our experiences. Through training in the Force, we realized that if we meditated within close proximity to each other, we were able to sleep through the night. The images that you displayed are those of one such session, where
we meditated and slept platonically, throughout the night.”

Before she continued, Mara’s tone turned protective. “Luke Skywalker is a noble and honest man. And although the nature of our relationship is not relevant to this hearing, I will defend that it is none of anyone’s business as to the terms that we have set within our relationship—yet I have spoken about it in order to defend Luke’s reputation. If you cannot believe that two consenting adults can have a platonic relationship, then I assess that it is you who needs a further education in relationships. And I will not speak more on the matter.”

Vijaan swallowed from being put in his place.

“Let’s return to your activities with assisting the New Republic, shall we?” He cleared his throat before continuing.

‘Yes, let’s.’ Mara thought.

“Over the past year, were you part of providing assistance to New Republic Intelligence?” Vijaan asked.

Once again, Mara felt a spike from Bremem.

“Yes, I was.” She answered, but stretched out her senses towards Bremem.

“Can you please explain your efforts with NRI?”

Mara relaxed into her explanation. “I assisted in finding and tracking some of the hidden entrances and passageways within the palace.”

Bremem was definitely nervous with this line of questioning too…so both the mention of Leia, and the discovery of the secret passageways set him on edge.

“Can you please explain to us what that work entailed?” Vijaan asked.

“I would locate one of the passageways, and place a beacon inside the tunnel. I would then turn the responder to the beacon over to NRI.” She answered.

“Would you tour these passageways?” the lawyer asked.

“There was never a need to tour them; I was just to assist in locating them.” Mara answered.

Bremem’s energy was starting to get to her. She was very tempted to shut down her senses and shield, but something told her to keep it open.

Before Vijaan could ask another question, Mara continued. “The only place that I did tour, were the secret residences, on the east side of the palace.”

Vijaan stumbled a bit. “Ah-Would you please explain?”

“The Emperor had secret residences for visitors, as well as residences for himself and his entourage. They were located on the east side of the palace, with a private landing platform leaving at the base of the mountain.”

Bremem’s senses were twitching wildly now.

Vijaan stumbled again. “Ahh…secret residences?”
Mara could sense that something was up here, so she continued. “Yes, the residences, contained the artwork, and valuables that Lt. Bremem is accused of selling to the Xin-tu-nix Trading Company…is that not why we’re here?”

Vijaan was shaken, and trying to recover.

B’xunay was making a low ticking noise again, and though Mara could sense that she wanted to stop her, B’xunay was enjoying this.

Mara didn’t let up. “I went down into those residences with Leia Organa-solo as she had expressed interest in seeing them.” –A large spike from Bremem- “ and to recover some of my personal effects while I lived in the palace. She would make an excellent witness to the valuable that were down there, as well as the possessions that I recovered from my former dwellings.” She paused. “And before you ask, I sought counsel to inform me that any possessions that were ‘gifted’ to me during my employment were to remain as my possession regardless in the change in political power.”

Mara turned to B’xunay. “Isn’t that correct counselor?”

B’xunay made that contented guttural sound, and said, “That is correct, under the Law of Property, Section 23993, subsection 456 – possessions gifted to an employee after the termination of employment, retain the possession of the employee.”

The other councilors started whispering amongst themselves. The gallery was buzzing with Mara’s words. Vijaan was still trying to recover from losing control of the questioning.

Edik Hunt, the former Imperial commander, stood up, and walked to the podium. “Ms. Jade, we were not told about these secret residences.” He motioned to one of the pages. “Can you please show us where these residences are located on this map we received from Lt. Bremem?”

The image of a map the palace appeared on the screen; showing the secret passageways that Mara had spent a year indicating.

Mara looked at Hunt, “May I come closer to examine the map?”

“Yes, please, Ms. Jade.” Hunt motioned for her to come forward.

As soon as she got up out of her chair, Bremem’s sense was thrown into full blown panic.

Mara looked at the map. She looked at it a second time just to be sure, before turning to the council members. “The location of the secret residences should be located in this area.” She pointed to the east corridor of the palace facing the mountains. “But it doesn’t appear to be on the map that was presented to you by Lt. Bremem.”

Se’zala fur raffle rapidly. “How can we be so sure that these residences existed?”

Mara looked directly at the Bothan, and repeated her claim. “Chancellor Organa-Solo was with me when I accessed them, and she witnessed what I removed from my former residence. If you have any questions as to the validity of my claim, then this council could always summon her.”

The Bothan clearly didn’t like being told what to do. Mara wasn’t about to let him escape unsinged. “Although, perhaps that Lt. Bremem did not reveal the existence or location of the residences that he was trying to conceal something.” Mara turned to go back to her chair. “Just a thought.”

Vijaan then found his voice. “This is unacceptable! I call for an adjournment until we can discover the validity of these claims!”
The gallery wasn’t even trying to be quiet now, and clear voices could be heard.

Ask Teem, from Malastare stood up. “I agree we should adjourn and hold a special hearing concerning this matter.”

Mara had always hated bureaucracy, and now it was threatening to infringe on her again. She addressed the councilors, “Learned Representatives.” They stopped their bickering to look at her; she could play their games, and speak their language just as well as they could. “In the best interest of the public, I suggest that I take several representatives of the current NRI staff to the residences, so that they can secure the passages, and assess their condition.”

The councilors looked at each other, and huddle amongst themselves for what seemed like several minutes. Vijaan had returned to Bremem’s side and it seemed he was not happy with his client.

Mara looked over at B’xunay, and the Ithorian’s neck folds were rippling, which Mara read as delight.

When they recovered from the shock, Se’zala addressed the room to bring it to order. “We have determined that we will accept Ms. Jade offer to locate the residences, with the accompaniment of the interim head of NRI, Commander Coran Horn, and a small team of NRI officers.”

B’xunay remembered that she was representing Mara, and stood and addressed the councilors. “I would like to make the motion that after Ms. Jade has assisted the New Republic Intelligence department, just as she has done with providing previous assistance to the New Republic, that her presence be no longer required of this hearing, and that she be dismissed without prejudice.”

Se’zala looked at the other judgmental glances from the other councilors. “Agreed; Ms. Jade’s assistance will no longer be required of this hearing, and she will be dismissed.”

“Without prejudice against her?” B’xunay repeated.

“Without prejudice against her.” Se’zala repeated.

A few more moments, and the NRI team entered from the side of the room.

“Ms. Jade” Se’zala said, “If you would care to go with these agents and locate the residences, we would be greatly appreciative.”

Mara gave the Bothan a tight smile, but followed the team out into the hall, with B’xunay in tow.

The team was positioned in the bent diamond shape, Mara noticed. The man directly to Mara’s right, looked at her from the corner of his eye until what seemed that he couldn’t contain himself.

“That was amazing what you did in there…I thought Se’zala was about to lose it.” He said in a noticeable Corellian accent.

Mara smiled slightly. “It had to be done.”

“I’m Corran Horn, by the way.” He extended his hand to Mara. She gladly shook it. She stopped in her tracks and looked at him.

“I think you should go meet Jedi Skywalker, Commander Horn. You two might have something to talk about.”

Mara lead them to the entrance to the residences, and briefly explained the design of the curved
hallways, and what could be found inside. Since she no longer had the entrance key, because it was sent to Bremem after she located the entrance, Commander Horn was able to pry the door open. Mara was able to explain that she had disengaged all the security functions from the control panel, but still urged them to show caution in case of sensor traps.

Commander Horn, was impressed with her descriptions and location of different items.

Mara did not want to re-enter the residences, and Horn accepted that at face value. He wouldn’t want to go back to some place like that either. He called for a transport for both Mara and her lawyer, as well as accompanying guards. He suspected there were some heated words today, so he didn’t want to take any chances that something could happen. Even with the media, he assumed that they still would be in the hearing, just in case anything else should happen- once again- not take the chance.

The shuttle that came for them, allowed both Mara and B’xunay to be escorted by two guards. In the back of her mind, Mara wished that she had worn her lightsaber today.

B’xunay sat beside her, and Mara heard several ticking noises from the Ithorian before she spoke. “I wasn’t sure about you when you came into the office. I want to apologize for any preconceived notions I may have had against you.”

Mara appreciated her genuine feeling. “Thank you.” She said quietly.

B’xunay chuffed before she spoke. “I want to let you know, that I too was once a servant of Empire, and I understand the darkness of what you must have encountered.”

Mara knew that Ithorians had been forced into slavery, among other things, and although she wanted to ask, she knew better not to.

The shuttle approached Mara’s building. Before she left, she turned to her lawyer. “Thank you for all you’ve done for me. I appreciate your help and your loyalty.”

B’xunay bowed to her client. “I sincerely hope that you and Jedi Skywalker find the peace that you deserve.” She hesitated, then, said quietly. “May the Force be with you.”

“With you as well.” Mara said, and bowed before leaving the shuttle.

Her day was over, and her life could continue.

TBC
Could have, Should have, Would have

Chapter Summary

Summary: real friends know when you’re putting on an act- and the show is over.

Setting: Mara’s apartment; evening of the hearing

Characters: Luke and Mara

Chapter Notes

I wanted to post this last night, but it didn’t get done in time…you’ve been so patient.

Midnight Bottle- Colbie Calliat

I’ve got a midnight bottle,
gonna drink it down
A one way ticket takes me to the times
we had before
When everything felt so right
If only for tonight
A midnight bottle gonna ease my pain
From all these feelings driving me insane
I think of you
and every thing’s all right
If only for tonight

See the end of the chapter for more notes
He waited in the hearing room until everyone had left. It was good to have the attention off of him. When Vijaan started asking Mara about their relationship, Luke Skywalker wasn’t sure how it would end up. But Mara took it on the chin as she always had, and wasn’t about to be pushed around about anything.

Mara had remained in control of herself for the entire proceedings and didn’t let her temper get the better of her, which Luke knew that there was a good possibility of that happening. She had stayed in control of her feelings and stayed on track. All those in the gallery were impressed with her strength.

But Luke knew it was all an act. He could feel her holding on, and she was at the end of her tether. He knew that she had too much pride to let anyone see her crumble- she wouldn’t allow it. Also, he knew when it would be allowed to fall apart- and that time was nearing.

The gallery and the entire hearing room had been confined with in the room, until it was confirmed that all security precautions had been taken. NRI was probably securing the entrances to the secret residences inside the palace that Mara had mentioned, and that Bremem somehow forgot to reveal. They didn’t want the attention at the hidden entrance, and didn’t want an audience when they went inside. It would compromise the evidence if there was any.

Bremem was so arrogant that a hearing would take his words over Mara’s that he didn’t report the secret residences of the maps he provided. And Mara called him on it.

It took over an hour before the room was released.

He didn’t rush out of the hearing room when it was over. He made sure that he kept to his usual pace, even though he wanted to take off at break-neck speed to find her. Those few reporters who had the nerve to stop him after what Mara had said in the hearing, all they got from him was ‘no comment’. Luke knew that Mara would appreciate that.

The media, in fact, was not interested in him, for a change. They were following Lt. Bremem and his clearly angered lawyer. As they followed them, Luke headed in the opposite direction. He wasn’t worried about anything that she would do, he just wanted to be with her, and comfort her—he suspected she would need it.

When he was alone, he checked his comm. Three messages blinked. One from Leia – who confirmed that she just got subpoenaed to testify the following day. And two from Karrde- at the beginning of the day, he told Luke that he would be keeping track of the hearing from wherever he was; the second message asked if Luke could check in on Mara. Karrde knew as well as he did, that what everyone saw today from her was a charade, and things could turn behind closed doors.

Luke knew that there was still a chance that he would be followed, so before he headed to Mara’s apartment, he stopped several times. By his third stop at the library, there were only one or two people following him. He stopped at one more place; the greasy spoon G’hasian place down the street, and picked up dinner. He could now go directly to Mara’s.

His comm pinged before he got to the entrance- one more message from Karrde asking if he could confirm if Mara was alright. Luke messaged back quickly, confirming that he was just arriving and would let Karrde know if there was anything to worry about.

At the entrance of the Ambassador’s Building, there was noticeable security; clearly there to protect a star witness. They were checking all residents and visitors, Luke stood in the lineup for questioning. Strangely, there was no media here either. In the corner, he spotted one of the guards on duty; Iella Wessiri- Wedge’s current interest.
She must have seen him in line, and came over.

“Hello Jedi Skywalker” she said very professionally.

“Good Evening.” He replied.

She looked over the papers on her clipboard. “Unfortunately, you’re not on the list of approved visitors.” But then she looked away. “Come with me, if you please?”

Luke followed the brunette around the corner from the lobby. Iella smiled openly without prying eyes. “There’s a turbolift beyond those doors.” She point in the corner. “It’s the maintenance lift—here’s the pass code. It will take you to her floor without any stops.” She handed him a pass card.

He smiled, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome… and please let her know how well she did today?” Iella winked then turned back to head for the lobby.

Wedge is one lucky man- he thought.

The lift stopped at her floor promptly. And there were no reporters waiting in the hall- security had done its duty diligently.

He rang the chime, not knowing in what condition he would find Mara; she was unpredictable. Somehow the door opened slower that it had before.

On the other side, she didn’t even pretend to be surprised he was there.

“Hi” Luke said quietly.

“Hi” Mara sniffed.

“Can I come in?” He asked.

She didn’t even protest, and stepped aside for him to come in.

Luke noticed that within the time that it took for him to come over, Mara had pretty much dismantled her façade of control that she had earlier. Her hair was down; she was wearing a black night shift, with a large grey sweater over it, and some rather oversized socks on her feet. Her eyes were red and although it didn’t look like she had been crying recently; it did look like she had been crying since coming home. He also couldn’t help but notice the faint smell of alcohol on her breath.

She walked past him, down the hall. “It’s on the cabinet.” Mara’s back was to him, but she point back to the cabinet in the foyer.

He headed into the kitchenette to put down the food. There, he noticed the first bottle of Whyren’s Reserve in the sink, and a second bottle had been started.
He looked through the cupboards to find a tumbler, and poured himself a drink. It went down as smooth as it usually did, but the burning was the thing that got him every time. He cringed, shook his head slightly. He could sense that she wasn’t moving from the living room, yet.

Luke opened the bag from the restaurant and started to make as much noise as he could while he searched her kitchen for a plate. In between ‘searching’, and actually finding one, he poured himself another drink- he didn’t know how much he would need to consume to catch up with her.

He didn’t judge her- in fact, this was the one he was going to let her have without trying to pull her out of it. If Mara wanted to wallow for a while- she was entitled to. No one having what she had been through today would have done otherwise.

The sound of preparing food must have caught her attention because silently, she must have prodded over to the kitchen. She appeared from around the corner that joined with the dining room and watched him gulp down his second glass of Whyren’s. Her head rested on the corner of the wall.

Luke looked over, and gave her a slight smile. She looked over at the food he was putting on a plate.

“T’m not hungry.” She mumbled.

“Oh this?” he motioned to the food. “This isn’t for you…it’s for me. I’m going to need my strength if I’m going to see you through this.” He picked up a piece of the crispy breaded b’nadi, dipped it in the sauce and popped it in his mouth.

She was looking at the plate of food like a starving rancor. He knew she probably hadn’t eaten all day. As greasy as the food was, it smelled great.

He took a step away, pretending to look for something else in cupboards. That gave her enough space to reach over and take a piece off the plate and pop it in her mouth.

“You want to talk about it yet?” Luke asked from behind the cupboard doors.

“No.” She mumbled with food in her mouth.

“Okay.” He said. “Then let me talk about it.”

Her reddened green eyes met his for the first time since he through the door. “People are very proud of you- whether you believe that or not.” He said.

He stepped towards her. She popped another piece of food into her mouth. Luke put his hands on her shoulders, but kept her at a distance the she would be comfortable with. “I’m very proud of you.” He said, never breaking her gaze.

She looked away, and choked a bit. Her head dropped and she slid herself into his chest as his arms wrapped around her. “I don’t know why.” She whispered.

“Because you were strong in the face of adversity; you did what you needed to.” He said into her hair.

She pulled back and looked at him as if he had lost his mind for even being there.

Luke closed the distance, and touched his lips to hers; softly pursing against them, telling her that he cared. The tingle went through him as it always did as he kissed her. But it wasn’t that kind of kiss.

He pulled away. “Let’s go talk.” And he motioned for her to go into the living room where it was
clear that she was camping out.

Mara took the plate from the counter, and ate another piece on her way out. Luke picked up his tumbler and the Whyren’s to bring along with him.

Through the balcony window, he could see that the sun was setting and the mountains were glowing. He was tempted to ask if she wanted to go there, but decided that she probably felt safer inside than outside in the world.

Mara huddled herself in the corner of her “L” shaped sofa, her own tumbler was half filled on the low table beside her. She tuck one leg underneath her, and began to devour the plate of food.

Luke sat down in the middle of the sofa, giving her lots of room. He poured himself another glass of the whiskey that he had become accustom to when he flew with The Rogues. His third glass went down easier than the first two.

“I didn’t know you could handle it.” She said, eyeing him, as she put down the plate and picked up her own glass.

“I wanted to catch up to you.” He replied. “You look like you got a head start on me.”

She glared at him as she put down the liquid with ease, and put the glass back on the table. He turned and filled hers and his back up without asking, and silently telling her that he had no judgement; just giving her permission to let off some steam.

“Why do you think that I want the lightsaber back?” Luke finally asked.

She didn’t look or sound drunk, although he had never seen her in that state, or even trying to get there- so if she was, he wouldn’t know it. From her sense though, she was apprehensive about talking.

“You heard everything today…do you think I still deserve it?” She sulked as she went for her own glass. Mara pulled her leg out from under her and stretched both of them out towards Luke on the sofa.

“Yes, I still think you deserve it…and you’ve earned it.” He said without even thinking about a reply.

He turned and picked up her feet and moved closer so that her calves rested across his lap. “By the way” Luke played with her un-uniform saggy socks, “These are ugly.”

“I made them,” She said quietly. “On a trip from Dantooine.” She took a sip of her drink. “I was trying to learn…they’re warm and comfortable.” She wrapped herself closer in her sweater.

“Oh.” He said, feeling a little embarrassed. “Then, they’re perfect.” He looked at her and smiled.

“Why do you think I’ve earned it?” Mara asked, forgetting his comment.

He thought about it for a moment. “Because I don’t think many people could have lived through what you did and have come out as well as you have.”

She snorted slightly, “You think I came out well? –Did you not hear anything in there?” Her tone sounded angry but he could sense that she was more-angry at herself than at him.

“Yes, Mara, I heard every word.” Luke said, confidently, but not looking at her. “You’re not a bad
person—if you were, you wouldn’t be able to have any compassion, and you have loads of it.”

“I murdered people and you heard the other things they said about me.” She said. “You saw the images and the numbers…that wasn’t even all of them.”

He chuckled sarcastically to himself, and reached across her legs and poured himself another drink. He motioned to offer to top up hers as well; she nodded, accepting the offer.

Luke picked up the tumbler, and before he drank, he said, “Do you want to know what’s funny?” He turned to see her staring at him, and continued, “I’ve killed more people than you.”

She raised an eyebrow, challenging him. So he answered, “One million, one hundred and seventy nine thousand, two hundred and ninety three…give or take…on my first day out.”

Mara knew what he was referring to; the first Death Star. He drank down his tumbler, and looked at her expecting her to do the same.

“That’s not the same.” She said, relenting on her glare, and softening her eyes.

“Feels the same.” Luke said, relaxing back into the sofa. “Felt the same when I first saw the wall in the palace with the numbers and names on it.”

Mara sighed. The Empire’s propaganda machine knew no limits and she could distinctly remembering when the garish monument went up in the main hall. “I don’t know why The New Republic didn’t take that thing down when they came to power.” She mumbled before taking another sip.

“I asked them not to.” He said as he exhaled; he could feel her surprise. “Those men gave their lives, just as the Rebel pilots did—someone should remember them. It wasn’t their fault.”

After a moment she broke the silence. “It’s still not the same.” She said into her glass before finishing it.

“No?” He asked incredulously, slightly insulted that she still wanted to compare the loss of a life or lives.

“No, it isn’t the same, and you know it.” She raised herself up from the back of the corner. “I had to look them in the eye before I killed them…so, no, it’s not the same.”

The bottle of Whyren’s slid down the table towards her, and she picked it up and filled her own glass. He shouldn’t have been surprised that she would have the where-with-all to move it with the Force, but if she wanted a drink bad enough, it would suffice.

Her voice went dark, like the times when she had threatened him when they first met. “I liked how they purposely only mentioned the ones that had anything to do with the Rebellion…trying to make Malek Gazzine a saviour for training Rebels….he wasn’t training Rebels….he was raping children. He just chose to rape the wrong one and it got back to the Emperor.” Her eyes went narrow. “I enjoyed that one…I really enjoyed it…I took my time with it too…they didn’t say that at the hearing….that he had several ligature marks around his neck before I choked the life out of him…. I used a plasti-steel wire for that…it was easy to sneak in…nobody looks for those when they pat you down. Messy though…first and last time I used it.”

She took a swig of her drink. “Do you remember the first one they mentioned…Turgus Atiem?—lightsaber through the skull?….they forgot to add that I was krieffing him at the time…under orders, you know… Yes, he may have been married with children…a “family” man… but he liked
prostitutes…young ones…thought he had won a prize or something when he was given one of the Emperors’ harems…thought he was in for the ride of his life that night. He didn’t even see it coming…all I had to do was put it to the side of his head and turn it on.”

She took another swig. “So you see? They were right…I am an Imperial whore.”

“No, you’re not.” Luke growled at her. “You were never a whore…you were a child who was abused and manipulated…I know it.”

She shook her head. “When are you going to stop using that excuse?—I don’t even use it.”

“It’s not an excuse…it’s the truth. I know.” He kept up his tone; he was firm. “I heard Him spin his tale, and weave His spell, Mara…He was truly gifted when it came to getting what He wanted from people. He made them believe what He wanted.” Luke moved the bottle back to his direction, with a wave of his hand. “Look what He made my father believe.”

He paused. “As strong-willed as you are…you still didn’t stand a chance.”

She sunk back down into the sofa with a quiet snort, and crossed her arms again her chest. Luke could sense that she still didn’t let herself off the hook.

He had gotten a long list of answers while he listened today, but there were still a few questions he had. So far he had put up a resistance to the alcohol, but he was starting to feel emboldened by the lack of inhibitions that was coming on. Things were feeling slower. He wanted to feel drunk— it had been a long time since he had. It still had the power to make him feel normal.

The room was getting darker as the only light was the sunset when he first arrived, had now disappeared. Now, shadows were cast around the room, playing with his perception. He waved his hand looking for any light source, and the lights came up, putting the room into a glow.

“I want to ask you something…it’s been on my mind for a while now…but I didn’t want to ask you until now.” Luke felt his tongue getting thicker, and his words were slower.

Mara looked up at him, feeling strange that he had held something back from her—Luke wasn’t known for keeping his thoughts from her. “What did you want to know?” Her voice sounded slower too; maybe the drink was catching up with her too. “I’m an open book today.”

He felt he should ask her before he lost his courage. Luke turned to her and took her hand in his. “I want to know.” He looked deep into her eyes, knowing that she would take it seriously. “I need to know.” He paused. “Did my father ever hurt you?—did he ever touch you?”

He knew she could see the pain in his eyes—just the thought that she was ever hurt by his father—that his father would have ever sexually touched her; it would have crushed his soul.

Mara’s eyes never left his face, and looked clear. “No” she said, “Never.”

Luke relaxed, and massaged her knuckles in his hand. He hung his head and sighed, relieved, released her hand.

“Do you really think he was capable of that?” Mara asked quietly.

“He tortured his own daughter— I stop doubting what he was capable of, long ago.” Luke looked off into the distance, not looking at her. The drink was making him melancholy— it was not his turn to be that way; he was supposed to be there for her…not the other way around.
He looked at the bottle on the table- it was almost empty, which was not a good thing.

“Do you want s’more?” Luke’s words slightly slurred as he motioned to the bottle.

Mara raised her eyebrow, changing the tone of the moment, amused at his inebriation.

“I think you’re drunk.” She said proudly that she wasn’t as effected as he was.

“I’m not.” He defended. “It’s just been a while since I’ve had some.”

“Then you won’t mind, if I got another bottle?” she asked.

“Not yet.” Luke said. “I have one more question for you.”

“Really?” She scoffed. “And what would you like to know?”

“I have a theory.” He narrowed his look at her, daring her, changing the tone of their conversation once again. “I don’t know if you’ll even tell me…but I’m gonna ask cuz I wanna know.”

“Go on then…” Mara waited. Her eyes narrowed playfully, not glaring, daring him back to come up with his oh-so important question.

“When you went into the private residences with Leia…” He was trying to think of how to form the question; it had been burning in him for some time now- this drink was not helping any. “And you went to your former apartment…and you brought back my dossi…my file…” He got it out. “…those dresses, and jewelry, for the auction?- were they yours?” He looked at her directly. “Did you donate them?”

She looked at him coyly. “I’m not telling.” She looked very proud of herself. “I’m not under oath now…I don’t have to answer that…and we’re out of whiskey.”

She slipped her elegant legs from his lap, and made to stand. Probably too rapidly, as Mara went to get up, she faltered slightly, and wavered towards Luke.

He caught her easily as she started to fall; and she giggled at her blunder. Luke brought her close to him. His breathing was deep, only centimeters away from those petal lips, and suddenly her lips looked like they needed his. “You would have looked amazing in them…and out of them.” He said in a husky tone, alcohol aiding him.

Mara’s hair fell into his face, and he could smell her perfume, mixed with the spicy scent of whiskey. Luke was aware that her bare legs had been stretched across his lap previously, and he had resisted the urge to stroke the soft flesh.

Even with the amount of alcohol he had consumed, he knew that using this night to his advantage was not what he wanted.

He pushed the tresses away from his face, running them between his fingers, and ‘accidentally’ intentionally touched her cheek as he put her hair back into place.

Rather than putting his lips to hers, Luke helped Mara stand back up.

She looked almost disappointed that he didn’t follow through. Angrily, she huffed off to the kitchen, and he could hear her banging around as she ‘searched’ for the next bottle.

Now, she was angry with him for turning her away. From the sofa, Luke shook his head and raked his hand through his hair, seeing the error in his noble ways, then got up, getting his balance, and
walked into the kitchen.

She was frustrated; opening and closing doors, grumbling to herself.

He took up the position with his head against the wall, sheepishly.

“Mara-“ He started, a bit a whine in his voice, slipping in for good measure.

She turned around with her eyes furious, and on the verge of tears. “Do you even want a physical relationship with me, Luke? I’m standing right here, wanting you. We’re adults!”

Locked onto her eyes, he couldn't deny that it was something that he wanted to occur, but right now, in this moment, he knew that she would be, unconsciously, using him to find some sort of safety net... and he, as much as he wanted her, would just be using her for a physical desire that he wanted to satisfy too.

He waited until he could feel her calm down. He knew what he was about to say made perfect sense, but that wasn’t what she wanted to hear at the moment. “You want me for the wrong reasons, right now. You’re in no condition- I’m in no condition.” He shook his head futilely.

“Luke-“ She began to ask again, with a pout in her tone.

It was frustrating for him too. Maybe he hadn’t expressed what he really wanted, and he wanted her, so very badly.

He raised his hand to stop her. This time the drink in his system was going to help. Walking over, he stood in front of her, and leaned in closer to her. He closed her in by putting his hands on the counter top behind her; trapping her between them- and her eyes widened with the audacity he displayed; those succulent lips opening as she gaped at him.

She could have not predicted the words that were about to come from his mouth as Luke’s voice got low, and deep; deeper than she had ever heard it before.

“Mara,” He said slowly. “I want you to understand that, although, I do very much want to take you upstairs and do things to you that would make a Corellian blush- but I’m not going to tonight. Neither one of us is in the right state of mind for that; and mostly likely, won’t remember it—and I want you to remember it, and I want to remember it.”

He stood up straighter, bringing himself even closer to her. “But let me be quite clear on what will happen when the time is right for us to spend the night together.” His voice was almost a whisper, forcing her to listen intently his words. Mara watched in amazement as his crystal blue eyes deepened in front of her, turning to sapphire without even blinking.

At such a close distance, she could feel the heat coming off his body, and hear his deep breathing that he was using to maintain his control. Her eyes were dizzy, from not knowing where to look; his dark eyes and his plump bottom lip made her dart her glance back and forth, watching closely for any indication if his resolve had failed.

“I intend to make love to you in such a manner that there will be nothing left of you for another man to ever visit. No man will ever be able to touch you the same way that I will. And no man will leave you as satisfied as I intend to satisfy you. I want to touch every part of you; your mind, your heart, and your body. I want to hear you moan my name like you did in our visions, until your voice is hoarse. I want you to quiver with the thought of my touch, and my body inside you.”

He paused, dipping his head slightly, still keeping her rapt attention. His volume grew, ”Am I making
myself clear?” Luke's voice was strong, bold and demanding at the same time.

His words made her core involuntarily throb just once; and she knew, without question, his intent and his desire for her. She shuddered. There would be no need to ever ask that again.

Without a question, Mara knew that he was wasn't calling on the Force as others would in situations to increase their presence; this was just... him.

Gulping, she wordlessly nodded, with her eyes still wide from both the promise and the curiosity if and when he intend to fulfill what he was promising.

And with that, Luke stood back, releasing her. "Good.” He said definitively, looking away from her, swallowing himself. “Now, get upstairs and put yourself to bed.” His commanding tone left no room for argument. He levied his hand and pointed the direction out of the kitchenette, towards the staircase that he knew lead up to her bedroom. “I’ll be up in a minute.” He said quietly.

Mara raced around the corner, and he could hear her bumpy walk up the stairs.

Glad she was out of his sight, he breathed heavy, gaining control- if she had asked one more time, then answer would have been yes, and yes again- a thousand times yes. His rock-harden cock was screaming for what he had just denied himself.

His eyelids felt heavy- no doubt on account of the drink. His body felt sluggish- but he was not going to use the Force to flush it out of himself. He had earned this. The stairs accommodated him by having two sufficient walls between them for which his hands to help hold him upright.

At the top of the stairs, Luke headed for the ‘fresher. This was the one room he hadn’t seen on his first trip to her apartment. Mostly because he was curious, and secondly, he still need some time away from her to get his body back into behaving.

The door wooshed open too quickly for his liking. The room was grand; a shower with the option for either water or sonic…the corner tub was deep, and probably not meant for bathing, as it had jet nozzles, and a large vanity with two sinks.

“Still better than mine.” He mumbled, envious, shaking his head, and turning off the light as he left the room.

The door to her bedroom had been left partially open and a dim light left a trace on the hallway floor which he followed as it opened for him at his approach. Through one eye, Luke looked around the room just to get his bearings. The rest of Mara’s furniture and belongings had long arrived, and had been put to use, since he was last there. The bedroom looked more lived in, and the closet was full.

A slumpy grey sweater was discarded on the floor, and Mara was under the covers. She had pulled the covers up to her neck- but not asleep, not even trying to be that way.

Luke sat himself on the edge of her bed with a heavy flop, and came to a decision.

His boots dropped on the floor with a 'thud' when he took them off. His belt followed with a quieter ‘thud’.

His shirt put up a bit of fight but both it and his undershirt found their way to the floor too. He hesitated one more time, before he decided that his trousers would be lonely if they didn’t join their buddies on the floor; leaving him in just a pair of snug boxer briefs- he had slept in more…hell, he had slept in less too.
Although he wasn’t fully aware of things, he was aware that Mara had been watching him disrobe, and she liked it.

Luke opened up the covers and slid into their softness.

Mara had put herself on the side farthest from him, and he didn’t like it. One more unnecessary use of the Force wasn’t going to jeopardize him; her body slid over to join him. She gasped with surprise, and possibly sheet burn, but Luke wrapped his arms around her, with her head resting on his chest.

“We haven’t slept together, under covers, since Wayland.” He commented, barely making the words out.

But something was out of place. He could feel the scratchy, saggy socks still on her feet, now resting up against his leg.

Agitated, Luke peeled back the covers, and took each foot, one at a time, and pulled off the sock that was already coming off. “They’re still ugly.” He mumbled.

“My feet get cold.” She said defending the knitted monstrosities.

“I’ll keep you warm.” He said as one of his hands, stroked her calve as he went to lie back down.

Taking her in his arms again, he nuzzled his cheek into the top of her head, then rested his chin against her forehead, and closed his eyes.

He could feel her energy and excitement at him being so close, but he wasn’t about to entertain it. “Go to sleep, Mara.” He ordered. “We’ll talk in the morning—and you’re keeping the lightsaber.” He yawned. “You’ve earned it…..we’ve earned it.”

And the night took them.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Happy Birthday to me! :)

Please leave comments in lieu of gifts? :)

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TBC
My Game-My Rules

Chapter Summary

Summary: There are somethings you just don’t do to someone…and leaving them unsatisfied is one of them. Two can play this game.

Setting: Coruscant; public gym and private hangar

Characters: Mara & Leia, Mara & Luke

Chapter Notes

**
I’ll warn you now- so that I don’t get hate mail…It’s going to take me a while before I release the next chapter after this one.

I want to write the best, most-gloriously, smut scene that I have ever written…and for that, I’m willing to make the sacrifice…for you?-I will…I don’t mind.

But in the meantime, please enjoy this tease.

**

She was angry. No one could get her as angry as he could either.

Mara Jade punched the bag in front of her. She swung her body around and kicked it so that the bag shook on its base.

First, he got drunk with her. Then, he had the nerve to promise her with the best sex of her life and not follow through?

She turned to deliver several more hits to the ‘chest’ of the bag, and just for good measure, a knee to an imaginary groin.

Two days ago, they had woken up next to other, both suffering to some degree. He had made some excuse to leave, and gave her the slightest kiss on the forehead and left.

To the forehead? -those type of kisses are reserved for mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmothers.

He couldn’t get out of there fast enough! Mara hit the bag where a head should be; the frame shuddered again.

She knew that she needed to work off this tension. What would have helped after testifying, would have been a seriously good kriiffing.

But did he help her?
It had been a while, and the area around her was devoid of men; but the women in the gym seemed to understand, and still gave her some space.

If he thinks he’s going to get away with that and not have any repercussions then he is as delusional as he is handsome!

She knew she wasn’t risking touching the dark side of the Force because she wasn’t reaching out, but boy, was she close. She knew she was definitely projecting because she felt his touch earlier in her workout, but as he felt her annoyance, he had the smarts to back away.

Mara didn’t even notice the presence come up behind her.

“I’m going to guess that, that bag…is my brother. Am I right?” The princess tone was there, but none of the pretentiousness.

Mara stopped and realized she was breathing hard. In between her huffs, as she caught her breath. “At least the groin is.” She answered.

Leia chuckled. “That poor bag.” And handed the other woman a bottle of water. “It was Han’s groin when I first found out I was pregnant.”

Mara accepted the bottle, still not wanting to touch the Force in the state of mind she was in. “I just don’t understand him.” She panted. “He’s so confusing at times.”

They walked over to the corner bench where no one could listen in.

Leia nodded. Her brother didn’t always make sense to her either. “What did Luke do now?” she asked.

Mara swallowed some of the water. “It’s not what he’s done—it’s what he hasn’t done.” She cast a glance at the other woman—she was his sister after all…did she really want to hear this?

“How about I take off my invisible ‘sister hat’ and you tell me what he didn’t do?” Leia had the ability to objective, even when it came to Luke.

Mara shook her head. “He’s so…so confusing. Sometimes I think it’s me who’s trying to avoid a relationship, and then other times, I think it’s him.” She took another gulp of water. “Then again” she looked away. “I don’t think a relationship would be the best thing right now.”

Leia stayed quiet and waited to hear the root of the problem.

Mara sighed. “He came over the night after the hearing…to make me feel better.” She looked over at Leia. “He stayed the night, but not in a romantic way…but he made his intentions known. Anyway, in the morning, he raced out of there.” She shook her head again; she had been doing a lot of that lately. “And I haven’t heard from him since.”

Leia seemed to think for the few moments. “Well, it’s official.” The look on her face told of how unimpressed she was. “My brother is an idiot.”

Mara snorted. Truth was truth.
“I was ready to defend him, but…nope…he’s an idiot.” Leia said blankly. “If it makes you feel any better, Han’s an idiot too…and they spend time together, so it’s probably catchy.”

“It’s like he’s dangling a carrot out in front of me…a carrot that I don’t even want sometimes…” Mara looked at her feet. “And then when I’m about to make the decision to bite it, he rips it away.” She looked back at her friend. “I don’t think he knows how long it takes for me to want to decide to even chance taking that bite….It makes me not even want to be with him sometimes.” She said regretfully.

Mara sighed. “It’s at the point where I know we shouldn’t be together…it wouldn’t be fair…to either of us.” Leia was listening. “It’s not fair to him…he’s been keeping himself here when he should be pursuing his search for more Jedi, but doesn’t, because of me…and it won’t be fair to either of us when I leave in four weeks.”

Leia nodded. “Luke doesn’t have a good history of falling for women who have easy situations…it’s like he prefers it that way.” She considered her next words. “But if it matters, I think that you’re the first one that he’s truly wanted to work through anything with.”

Mara chagrinned. “That doesn’t make it any better.” She paused, “Do you think he understand what a ‘casual relationship’ could be?”

“Oh, I think you and I both know that the two of you are way beyond that now.” Leia said with a raised eyebrow.

“I don’t think so.” Mara began to whisper. “We just started kissing, and not much beyond that…yes, our friendship is deeper, but not from a physical side….I just want him.”

“Really?” Leia was surprised. “I thought you had already…..” She tried to think up the right word to use, it was her brother after all.

“Nope.” Mara sulked. “Not one bit…he threatened…but nothing.”

“But it’s been over a week…they must have kicked in by now…” Leia thought out loud.

“What was supposed to have ‘kicked in’?” Mara asked.

Leia grimaced. “He started repress meds….that’s why I thought you and he had already… ‘Touched the Force’ together.” She winked.

Mara looked a bit shocked, but Leia continued. “I didn’t know that he had come off them. I know, before he met you, he got pretty depressed when he found out that Jedi were forbidden to have relationships…and he stopped socializing for a while. I tried setting him up with women, but that was a huge mistake.”

“I don’t think of him being that naïve.” Mara said.

“Oh, he isn’t…he’s just at a battle between his old-school upbringing and what he really wants.” Leia confessed. “He was quite the flirt when he was with The Rogues…and a bit of a lush too…I didn’t recognize him then.”

“Really?” Mara asked. “I still haven’t seen that side of him.”

Mara sat there for a moment, considering the princess's word- then an idea sprung into her head.. “I think I might have figured it out.” She got up to leave.
“Can I ask what you’re going to do to him?” If this was going to be amusing, Leia might want to help.

“I’m going to bring out ‘the flyboy’.” Mara said. “Thanks for the talk Leia…I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Clear skies, Mara.” Leia winked. Her brother had no clue what was in for him.

The smuggler winked before leaving.

**

It didn’t take her very long to find out where he was finding out. Luke Skywalker was not a master of going deep under cover. He didn’t learn the art of varying his hang outs enough yet. He was a creature of habit. And Mara was in the mood to break his habits.

If he wasn’t in the sky, then he could be found fixing his toy.

Mara had gone to The Rogue hangar with the intention of using her keycard to silently access the Solo’s private hangar. She had shielded herself since leaving the gym. She had made it home and changed into her leather bodysuit- he wouldn’t forget it anytime soon.

Although she didn’t think of it as particularly sexy, the suit had the ability to turn men into drooling doofuses. This was confirmed when she stepped on deck, and strode over to her Headhunter. The one called ‘Jansen’ dropped his clipboard, and the other twit…what was his name?…’Hobbie’… almost walked directly into a repulse lift he was supposed to be inspecting.

Commander Antilles gave her an appreciative nod, but otherwise went back to his list, laughing at the other two.

She left her hair down, with a wave in it, and a spray of perfume on her collarbone before she left her apartment…Skywalker was in trouble and didn’t know it.

The door, as always, was silent so there would be no announcement of her entrance. Her shields held too. She checked the fitting of her leather gloves before walking closer.

In the hangar, music was playing loudly, and an arch welder sparked from the underbelly of the X-wing.

She watched him for a while- she wanted to time her appearance for the perfect moment.

His dirty flight suit was stripped down to his waist, and his damp undershirt was stained with grease and dirt. He was clearly exerting himself as a sheen of sweat was on him. He looked…perfect.

She would have fanned herself, if she didn’t want the scent of lust to leave her if she was going to do this. She adjusted the zipper of her jumpsuit a little lower- nothing unseemly, but just enough.

Two can play the pent-up game.

“Artoo!” he called over his shoulder to the droid. “Can you bring the hoist over?…I almost have it out, and I don’t want to hold it while I work on it.”

Ahh…he was working on the motivator for the booster…not a heavy part, but awkward to get at… would require that he keep his hands above his head if the hoist didn’t come over.

Perfect.
The droid was tugging the hoist over to him at a steady pace. Mara stepped in front of the direction it was heading in. She bent over the little droid, and spoke in a tone that wouldn’t be heard over the music “Don’t worry, Artoo I’m here to help...he won’t need the hoist until I walk away...ok?”

The droid beeped affirmative, not realizing he was now an accomplice.

She walked up directly behind him, and watched him reach out with the Force for a torque wrench, and watched as it travelled over to him; his arms above his head, waiting for the hoist.

Time to let him know she was there. Her turn to reach out through the Force and turn the music down a bit. She stepped right behind him. “You should really use pneumatic wrench.” She said into his ear.

The wrench dropped mid-air. His back straighten immediately. “M-Mara?”

She dropped her shielding, confirming her presence. “Yes.” She purred, as she pressed her chest up against his back. “You won’t have to shift your weight as you crank it- less likely to drop it.” Her arm grazed across his as she reached up to inspect what he was working on. She felt the zing as their skin touched, so he must have felt it too.

“You think that’s what I should do?” Luke gulped.

“There’s lots of things I think you should do...this would be one of them.” She commented as she brought her arm down, and let her hand touch the side of his upper chest and slid down to his waist. His body twitched again when she touched him.

Time to go in for the kill. She came around under his arm to stand in front of him.

She was face to face with him. His blue eyes wide with surprise, not leaving her face. She inhaled deeply- the scent of pure man mingled with her perfume.

“Hi.” She said quietly, sweetly, coyly. She brought her right gloved hand to her mouth, and bit into the top of middle finger, pulling the glove from off her hand.

“Hi” he squeaked out. “I didn’t...expect...”

“Shhh.” She brought up the index finger of her uncovered hand to his lips. “I know.” She said in a husky tone. “But I thought you could use my help.”

He looked down to see that she was wearing the black leather jumpsuit, and his eyes went wider; a slightly shiver came into his biceps from the strain of his arms bracing the motivator he was holding above his head.

“I was missing you, too.” Mara came closer to his face.

He licked his suddenly dry lips.

Mara closed the distance, and pressed her lips to his. She took control of his mouth, her tongue pushed its way into his mouth. To her surprise, his tongue responded in a very unchaste way, entering her mouth.

She took this opportunity to slide her hands up and down his chest, feeling every ripple of muscle under his taunt skin.

She hummed as their lips dueled, growing in fervor.
"You left me with needs, Skywalker." She sent over to him. "...not nice of you." She ‘accidentally’ pinched his nipple through his shirt to make her point clear.

As she pulled away from the kiss, she took his bottom lip in between hers, and sucked on it slightly, and as a parting gift, let it slide between her teeth before releasing it.

His eyes slowly opened- pure sapphire. His hard chest heaved.

Mara, with her body pressed up against him could feel that something else was hard too, and she made sure to press her pelvis into his sensitive area. With her own motion, she could feel her own arousal growing.

“You promised me a second date.” She knew that he could see the lust in her face. “I want that date.”

Her bare hand came up and caressed his face, which he turned into and his eyes fluttered with the touch.

“Tomorrow night?” she asked in a teasing tone.

He was speechless, and just nodded; his arms clearly quivering.

“1900 hours.” She stepped away from him, so that he could see her figure in the bodysuit; she turned around so that he got a good view as she walked away. “Don’t be late.”

“Oh,” She looked over her shoulder. “And send ‘The Flyboy’…‘The Jedi’ isn’t invited.” She ordered, not giving him an option.

She saw him swallow heavy, and turned back towards the door. From the corner of her eyes, she could see the little droid trying to make it over to his master with the hoist in tow.

Before the door closed, she heard something fall that was heavy.

TBC
When he got off the turbolift, he hesitated before walking to her door. His chrono said he was five minutes early. He tried to decide if it would be rude to ring her chime early, or crazy to pace in her hallway for five more minutes.

Truth be told, he didn’t know which version of Mara he would get tonight. Part of him knew that ‘vamp seductress’ was lurking around the corner, as he found out yesterday; but whichever version
of her that was on the other side of the door, he would prepare himself for.

He decided that he would rather be rude than crazy.

Luke Skywalker pressed the chime to Mara’s door.

The door opened smoothly, and waiting for him was a version of Mara he had never seen before.

Her golden red hair was down and in its natural state of soft curls, framing her face perfectly. She wore a flowing, layered dress in shades of green, ranging from a pale opal to dark hunter. Her eyes were softer and rounded, and looked happy to see him.

It took a moment for him to find his words, as it always did when she caught him off guard.


“Good Evening” she beamed back. “Please come in.”

He stepped inside the dimly lit foyer, and the smell of something delicious permeated the apartment.

The door closed behind him, and he could feel that her energy had changed from the previous day; it was calmer and relaxed— which he rather enjoyed.

“I brought this for you.” He held out a single red rose.

Mara stepped closer to him, and he caught the faint scent of her perfume—it was lighter than what she usually wore, but intoxicating nevertheless. Even closer, she took the rose gingerly in her hand, and she whispered, “Thank you” and came in and placed a soft kiss on his lips.

It wasn’t a passionate kiss, but he welcomed it just the same. Her hand slid into his. She pulled back from their joined lips.

“Luke” she said quietly, “I want to apologize for yesterday.” Her eyes said it all; she was embarrassed. “I was angry with you, and I behaved childishly…teasing you.”

Luke could feel his heart sink a little. “You didn’t mean what you said?”

“Oh no…I meant every word of it.” She smiled. “But I shouldn’t have done it like that.” A look of concern came across her face. “How are your arms?”

He smiled back. “They’re fine… the motivator, not so much.” He gave her a mock-stern look.

Mara comically grimaced. “I guess I owe you a day rebuilding a motivator then?”

“Not really.” He chuckled, and came closer to her now. “I got Wes and Hobbie to help me out…” He dipped his head; liking their first kiss of the evening, he wanted another one and placed his lips to hers. Breaking away he finished his thought. “...as long as I can get you to show up on deck in that jumpsuit again…that’s all they wanted in payment.”

She snorted. “Figures.” Mara brought the rose to her face and took a deep inhale of its fragrance. She walked towards the kitchen in search of a bud vile for the flower.

He followed closed behind. “So do you want to tell me why you were angry with me?” Luke leaned on the frame of the entrance.

As she looked through the cupboards to find the flower vile hiding spot, Mara turned over her
shoulder to answer. “The other morning…you left so quickly…I thought…” She paused; she didn’t know what she thought, but she was hurt.

Luke looked down for a moment, sensing her feelings of being abandoned, and cringed. “I knew I should have said something.”

He watched her find a vile and fill it with water, before placing the rose in it proudly. “I got called into an emergency meeting… for NRI…”

“And you weren’t allowed to mention it?” she said knowingly, finishing his words.

“Exactly.” He said quietly. “Although, it might help if I talked to you about it. I don’t know what to make of it.”

“Are you allowed, now?” Mara looked at him cautiously. “Or do I need a higher clearance level?”

“It’s not that—it will be public news sooner or later…maybe…but I don’t want it to ruin the mood tonight.”

Mara turned to him, and he could feel that she was reaching out to read to senses. He didn’t hide them from her; something about the meeting had him irked, and feeling not right about what was going on.

Her eyes narrowed, if sensing that whatever it was, could possibly thwart their plans to enjoy their time together. “Maybe later?” She smiled back, knowing that he knew she would listen, but he too was not in the mood for the outside world to come crashing in.

Luke smiled at her, watching her move; she was so different tonight, no hard edges to her personality were visible. He knew that she reserved that side those for those in the outside world- it was a gift to him that she didn’t feel the need to hide behind that persona with him.

She sensed his gaze, and questioned him. “What is it?”

He stepped towards her and took one of her hands. “I’m sorry- I should have told you before I left….I wanted to…It was a hard day for you, and I should have been there for you.”

“I’m not made of eggshells, Luke…” Mara shook her head. “You don’t have to tell me everything…but next time?” She stepped closer to him, and one more quick kiss, “You’ll just tell me something?”

He nodded, captivated by her softness.

Mara kept his hand in hers as she led him into the dining room and past the empty table.

Luke gave her a look, wondering where the good smelling food was.

“We’re eating on the balcony tonight.” She winked at him. “You’ve never been out there.”

Mara stopped at the balcony doors and gave him a warning look. “Before we go out there, I want to warn you.” She paused. “I spent a lot of time looking into this…and if I didn’t do it right, please don’t tell me, ok?”

Luke chuckled at her nervousness. “Mara? How bad can it be?…it smells great.”

“Well, I wanted to do something special….you did our ‘first date’…I wanted to do something special for our second date.”
The plexiglass opened, and they stepped out on to the balcony. Mara pulled a controller from her pocket, bringing the balcony to life; flaming torches lit up in the corners and soft music began to play in the background. The balcony was lined several small trees and flowering vines, facing the glowing mountains of the evening.

A warm light breeze barely caused the flames on the torches to flicker. Mara had set a table in the middle of the large balcony. And she was still holding his hand as she brought him to the table. She placed the controller down on the table.

In the middle of the table was a stand with two burners under it, and several metal pots off to the side of the table.

“I was told that Dantoosh was a traditional Tatooinian meal…is that right?” She asked with questioning eyes.

Luke looked at the setting. “Wow…it’s been so long since I’ve had it…I can’t even remember the last time I had a Dantoosh meal.” He shook his head, amazed as he took the seat across from her. “I think the last time was for Aunt Beru’s birthday…I don’t remember how old I was.”

“Well, I don’t have a loyal droid to help me out, so excuse me while I play double duty here…hostess and waitress.” Mara said as she took her seat.

She placed one of the pots over the burner, and Luke watched as she added some ingredient to it. “N’kar oil is already in there…crushed roasts keeks…” The keeks started to fizzle immediately and smell wafted in the air, making his mouth water. “Naptee spices…and three different ages of Ronto cheese.” Mara whisked the ingredients, and Luke watched it like he was a little kid, mesmerized.

Mara had thought of everything. “And while we wait for that to be ready…I was able to find some…um…let me see if I’m saying this right…Moo-et-ting?”

Luke snorted, “Mawl-it-tang.” He corrected her. “Where did you find that?” shocked that she was even able to get it off the planet.

“I have my sources.” She winked. “I heard it was pretty rare…did you want some?”

“It is.” He nodded, agreeing to the drink he was very rarely allowed to have when he was younger. “You’re only supposed to have a little at a time.” He watched her bring out two small snifters, and pour the syrupy golden liquid into them, filling them only half way. “Do you know how they make it?” He asked, excited to have some.

Mara was very proud to show how much she had studied up on fine dining on Tatooine. “The vendor told me that it’s made from a type of honey suckle bush, and that it takes thousands of buds to make a single ounce.” She held her snifter up, as she slid one over to him.

“Very good.” Luke was impressed. “Do you know it’s originally a Jawa drink? --We used to have a honey suckle bush in the courtyard…it was small, but every time it bloomed, Aunt Beru used to harvest the buds before I got a chance to get to them.”

“Why is that?”

“The little buds are filled with a nectar, and if you pick them at the base, you can suck it out. …it’s like candy.” He confessed. “I used to sneak handfuls…but that was before I knew it made this.” He held up the snifter.

“No traditional Tatooinian toast for this occasion?” She asked with a raised eyebrow.
“I’m afraid not…Tatooineans aren’t the most optimistic people…we don’t toast to much…but if we had one, it would be something like ‘May you not die in a sand storm’.” Luke said blankly.

Mara snorted. “Alright, here’s to not dying in a sand storm.” –raised the tiny glass and took a sip.

Luke was smarter and waited, and watched her, as the taste hit her; she coughed and choked on the bitter taste. He winced in sympathy, but he knew the taste would change after she swallowed it. He knew he had better join her, otherwise she might not appreciate that he held back.

The liquid rushed down his throat, and he shuddered with the bitter taste, but as he swallowed he could feel the taste change in his mouth. The bitterness changed to the sweetest honey taste that left his tongue tingling. It tasted like home.

“I should have warned you about that first kick.” He said as he watched her recover, and the flavour must have changed for her too. “If they made it right… and if you have too much, it can make you go, literally, blind.”

Mara blinked her eyes to make sure they were still working. “You’re not kidding.” She swallowed a few more times. “No wonder I got a strange look when I ordered it.”

The ronto cheese had started to bubble, and few more whisks and it was ready. Mara brought out several skewers and a plate of different vegetables, and a second plate of breads some fruit; all of which Luke recognized.

“Do you know what you have here?” He asked.

“I think so…the vendor was very helpful.” She said. “You’ll let me know if it’s wrong, right?”

Luke shook his head. “No I won’t…this is too nice to ruin it if it isn’t…besides it’s still delicious.” He speared one of the pieces of bread, and dipped it in the sauce, blowing on it slightly, then, he offered it to her.

In the background, the music changed songs; slow and melodic.

He watched as she leaned in to accept it off the small spike, and nodded as she closed her mouth around the piece. “I have to wonder why you chose this meal though.” He thought out loud as he put one of the vegetables on his skewer. “This type of meal takes a long time.”

Mara paused before she reached out for her skewer, pierced one of the small pieces of fruit, and dipped it in the warm sauce. “I wanted for us to talk, I guess.”

She blew on the warm sample, then, she offered it to him. Luke took her hand on the skewer and guided it into his mouth. After he swallowed, still holding her hand, he asked, “What did you want to talk about?”

“Us.” She answered simply.

He nodded. He knew this conversation would happen sooner than later.

“I was thinking about how much time I have left here…and what would happen after I leave.” She said quietly.

He wasn’t going to interrupt her, and just let her speak.

“Luke, I don’t really want to leave…” Mara looked away from him, as if looking for the words. “I
don’t want to leave you…but you know I can’t stay.” She shook her head. “And I know I’ve been keeping you from your work too…you would have been on your search for more potential Jedi by now if it wasn’t for me.”

He rubbed the top of her hand. “Who is to say that I would have done, Mara…part of the reason I’m still here is that I know I need to learn more, and that wouldn’t have been possible if not for you, and meeting the doctors.” He nodded. “So, yes, I stayed for you, but for all the right reasons.”

Mara looked at him. “I’ve asked Karrde if you can access to our communication system…so we can keep in touch…” she waited to find the words again, ‘I’ve asked him if you could come to some of the bases…if you want to…’ she panicked slightly, thinking she over-thought this. “I don’t know if you even want to…I’ve never asked you…”

“Shhh…” He soothed her. “I’d like that very much….” Luke felt like his heart would burst of his chest; he finally knew for sure that she wanted to be with him. “I know it’s not possible for us to be together all the time, but I’d like that very much.”

Her face started to relax, and he said to her, “We’ll figure it out as we go.”

Mara asked, still not satisfied, “Are you sure?”

Luke reached over and pierced a piece of fruit with a skewer, and dipped it into the sauce. He waved it slowly in the air, cooling it, before offering it to her. “Yes.” He watched her lips accepting it. “I think I was waiting for you to ask…I didn’t think you wanted me…to be with you.”

Her mind touched his, <<I do.>> it whispered to him.

She broke away first, and turned her attention to the dinner. “I should put the broth on now.” Mara moved the cheese sauce off to the side, and added the second pot to the burner.

Luke watched her- a slight breeze came up again and caught a bit of her hair, and she pushed it back carelessly. He marvelled at her, such a contrast in one person that he had never seen before, and she wanted him to be with her, even that meant risking what she had worked so hard for.

The sun was setting, Mara reached over to the controller, and turned on some of the balcony lighting- brightening the space but still kept the mood.

“You did an amazing job with this.” He looked over the table.

“I haven’t even gotten to the good part yet.” She winked, as she got up from the table, and pulled a cask from the cooler.

“What did you find?” Luke was eager to see what else she could find from his home world.

“I was told that this was the drink to have at every meal…but I’m a little doubtful.” Mara’s face dropped a bit.

“I was told that this was the drink to have at every meal…but I’m a little doubtful.” Mara’s face dropped a bit.

“Why? What is it?” He was curious now.

“It appears to be some sort of blue milk-like drink.” She held up the container.


“Is that was it is?” Mara looked a little upset. “If I had known…”

“No..no…it’s okay.” He re-assured her. “I haven’t had it in a long time…it will be fine.” Luke the
cask from her and poured himself half a glass, and drank it down immediately. “Mmmm…” He said, remembering the chalky flavor in his mouth.

She glared at him. “I’ll go get some wine.” She left the table and came back with two glasses, and bottle of some sort of Coruscanti blush wine, pouring a glass for each of them. “I’m sorry…I didn’t know.”

Luke chuckled as he picked up the glass of wine. “My inner five year old really enjoyed that.”

Mara snorted shaking her head. “Well, this will be a lot better.” She brought another plate out, with an assortment of different meats on it. She pointed to eat one. “I was able to find …dewback …ronto …bantha, and skarp.”

He looked surprised. “Skarp? I didn’t realize it was in season.”

“What is it? I just bought whatever the vendor suggested.” she asked.

“Well” he thought of the best way to describe it. “It’s probably the closest thing to an aquatic animal Tatooine has…it’s a snail that comes out every three years if, and when there’s a rain storm. People search the ground from them. Then they take them out of their shells and pound the life out of them.”

Mara’s face dropped, and blinked rapidly, staring at him. “Sounds tasty.”

Luke outright laughed at the face she was making. “Ah...it is...just don’t get anything salty on it, otherwise it will shrivel up.” He took another skewer and pierced a piece and put it in the bubbling broth. “You’ll have to try it…it actually really good with some…” he looked around, “Did they give you any sauces for it?”

“Oh, right here.” She brought out a set of six sauces. “They’re supposed to go with each type of meat.”

“Yes they do.” He smiled, and pointed to one of the small bowls on the plate. “The creamy one there…that goes well with skarp.”

Luke looked over at her as she was watching him arrange things on the plate. “So, what you want to do is put some the vegetables in the broth…and when they’re ready, they’ll float to the top.” He added some of tupeets into the pot. “Then you start the denser meats.” He placed some of the ronto onto two skewers and put them inside the pot too. “And then, and this is one used to be my favourite… you take the stems off the ghaooms, and put some of the ronto cheese in them, and let them float like little boats in the broth until the cheese has melted.”

Mara watched him take delight in the preparing their meal. “And you said you weren’t a very good cook.”

“No” he corrected her. “I just don’t have a lot of practice.” He took out the first skewer he put in. The skarp had changed colour, from a light gray to brown. He took a fork and removed it from the skewer; it broke in half easily, and he put some of the creamy sauce on it. “Here, try some.” He held out the piece on a fork for her.

She looked at the meat slightly skeptical.

Luke popped a piece in his mouth. “Mmm...just like I remember it.”

Mara looked again at the meat he was offering, and leaned in for it; if he liked it, it couldn’t be all bad.
“It’s different.” She said as she chewed. “Not bad though.”

“It’s better if it’s battered and deep fried… the taste is sweeter if it’s prepared that way.” He said, smiling.

The melody in the background enhanced the surroundings.

“There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about.” Mara looked inside the pot and watched ghaooms floating they looked almost ready.

“Oh?” Luke took two other skewers with bread on them and dipped them back into the cheese, and handed one to her.

“Well, Karrde got a very interesting invitation.” She was looking for a way to bring it up. “The Republic is planning a Grand Reception for the Corellian Delegation…a Grand Ball?”

She took the skewer from him, and bit off the piece.

“Yeah…actually Han is extremely excited about it- which is strange…he usually hates these sorts of things.”

“And you?” Mara asked slowly. “Do you hate these sorts of things?”

“I haven’t been to many of them since I’ve got here.” Luke confessed. “When I first arrived, there was a party or ball every week…and Leia tried to get me to go to as many of them as I could…well, she set me up as an escort to some politician’s daughter, which usually ended it disaster…poor girl’s toes. So I slowly began to not like them…and stopped going…they’re kind of boring, and the clothing is uncomfortable too.”

She nodded. “But this one is a Grand Corellian Ball…there’s a very strict dress code; High Corellian Style…and of course, the pinnacle of the evening will be the Corellian Waltz… it’s a one of kind experience.”

“I think I might enjoy the after party better.” Luke winked at her. “Han’s in charge of organizing that one, and his ‘committee’ has already reserve the palace rooftop, and bought almost every bottle of vintage Whyren’s Reserve.”

“Solo has a committee?”

“Yeah, Leia is going to regret that one…Wedge is in charge of entertainment…and Coran Horn is in charge of food.” He skewered two pieces of dewback and put them into the broth.

Mara sipped her wine. “Have you met Coran Horn yet?”

He shook his head. “Not yet…though people keep telling me I should.”

Mara hesitated. “I think you should meet him…I did…” When she paused, Luke looked at her, sensing it was important. “I think he might be a potential Jedi.”

He looked a little shocked, “How do you know?”

“He escorted me to back home after the hearing…I had this sort of ‘tingling’ at the back of my mind while I spoke with him, and when I shook his hand, I got this sort of strange sense off of him… it could be nothing. I just wanted to reach out to him and see if he could hear me…but I didn’t— you know how long it took for me to let you into my head…” Mara looked at him earnestly. “But
“You’re not the first person to say that to me.” Luke looked back into the broth, and started to fish out the ghaooms, and place them on a plate. “Leia said something like that too. But…”

“But what? Why aren’t you jumping on this?” She watched him add a bit of one of the sauces to the ghaooms.

“What if I’m not ready to train someone else?” He asked honestly. “You were practically trained, and, for the most part, you know about as much as me…you just need more practice…but starting fresh with someone, I don’t know if I can do it without risking…” His voice faded away. Luke knew he didn’t need to say more; Mara would understand.

“It wouldn’t hurt to meet him- but it’s not like he’s seeking you out either. He’s been planet-side for some time now. Maybe he’s just a leery about meeting you? You do have quite a reputation.” She raised an eyebrow at him.

“I do?” He was slightly surprised.

She snorted, amused that he wasn’t aware. “Yes…Stoic, reserved, and learned Jedi…with his head in a data pad or reading old books lately…so devoted…so brave…so detached and yet so worldly.” Mara teased as she mimicked the way people talked about him. “Good thing those people who call you that, don’t know the real you, farm boy.”

Luke chuckled; he offered her one of ghaooms on a fork. “Wouldn’t that be a surprise for them, if they ever knew, city girl?”

“You know, I can feed myself?” She looked at the fork presented to her.

“I know.” He said. “It’s just, this is what my aunt and uncle used to do when we had Dantoosh – they weren’t always the most affectionate with each other. I thought it was sweet when they would do it.”

She nodded, and took the bite off the fork.

“Maybe that’s another thing you and I have in common.” He looked over to her. “People see us in different ways than we really are.” He bit into his own piece.

“I like it that way.” She said in between chewing. “Makes them think twice before doing something stupid…like pulling a blaster on me.”

Luke chuckled again, remembering what a special thing it was to get to see this softer side of her. He doubted anyone else would be so lucky.

“So warn me about this High Corellian Ball…what should I watch out for?” He asked.

Mara watched him take the dewback out and let it rest on a plate while she spoke. “Well, there’s the traditional clothing, I suppose. I have no idea where I’m going to find a hooped gown in such short time.”

He stopped her. “Wait…You’re going to be there?”

“Yes, if Karrde decides to attend. I told him that he had better make his mind up quickly- there’s a lot of preparation for an event such as this.” She smiled back, as he realized that she wouldn’t be away for too long.
“Then I had better learn this Corellian Waltz.” He winked. “And I hope you can find steel toed shoes to match your dress.”

“If that’s your way of asking me to dance, you had better be the first one to race to my dance card that night.” Mara gave him a stern look as he looked back questioningly. “It’s customary to have a dance card for ladies at a Corellian Ball. Gentlemen fill them out before the dance, and pick which dance they’d like to have. It’s all very formal. You’re going to have to ask your Corellian buddies all about it.” She warned. “There’s lots of rules to one of these.”

“I had no idea. I thought it was just going to be the same type of social event they always have around here.” He started to feel a bit worried.

“And the Corellian Waltz?—it takes years to learn the full dance. School children start to learn it. The dance is close to nine minutes long…most people drop out after the third movement…but it’s beautiful to watch…all the swirling of the couples and intricate steps.” She nodded. “You should see if Han or Wedge are taking any classes to brush up on it before the event, and try to get some pointers for yourself.”

“They were definitely taking it seriously when they were talking about it.” Luke thought out loud. “I didn’t realize what a big thing it would be.”

He turned his attention to the steaming dewback on the plate, and sprinkled some spice on it. “Okay, now, this is how you eat dewback… Place it in your mouth but don’t chew it yet…then take a sip of the Mawlittang, and then chew very small bites…Ready?” He picked the meat up on a fork and offered it to her.

Mara took the meat off the fork, and did as he instructed. Luke watched her face to see if she could taste the change in the food. He knew she tasted it when she closed her eyes and savored the flavour. When her eyes came back to look at him, he knew she was hooked. “We didn’t have much in the way of varying food, so we had to make do with different flavor combinations. Did you like it?” He asked.

“That was really good…I didn’t expect the Mawlittang to change the flavour that much…what does it taste like without the Mawlittang?” Mara looked like a child as she opened her mouth expecting another bite.

“Oh, no…this one’s mine.” Luke shook his head. “You’re going to have to wait.” He cut off a small piece and popped a piece into his mouth and took a sip from his snifter; but he left a smaller piece on the plate, and offered it to her.

She pouted slightly, but accepted the smaller bite he was willing to share.

Mara put down her snifter, and watched him add more meat to skewers and put them in the broth. “So I imagine they will probably have a meal with this Ball.” She continued to explain what he could expect. “But the dancing is, of course, the main thing. Do you know why there are large rings on the floor in a ballroom?”

He shook his head as he watched the pot, but still paying attention to her.

“They’re specifically for the Corellian Waltz.” She said. “In the palace ballroom, there are four rings in the marble floor, but most rooms can only fit two or three. The idea is that the more proficient you are at the dance, the smaller the ring that you follow when you dance. Also, if you’re in one of the smaller rings, the higher you’re placed socially – at least that’s what I was taught.”
Mara paused, as if remembering watching the dances and being there. “The Corellian Waltz is actually a take on a folk dance that originated on Corellia, and incorporates many of the movements that were also popular on Selonia and Drall—so Solo is probably going to want this to be done perfectly, and he’s going to be unbearable.”

She stopped, realizing that she had been talking for some time. He was taking out the skewers and placing the pieces of meat on the plate in between them.

Luke was grinning at her. “I think Wedge is more anxious about it- he wants to take Iella. Han is looking forward to the after party more; he hates fancy things.”

“Iella?” Mara asked. “Yeah, I guess he would be.”

“Yeah” He looked at her, wondering what she knew.

“I understand that she’s having some difficulties…I feel bad for both of them.” She said.

“How do you know this stuff?” Luke shook his head as he looked at her.

“You should really hang out at the palace gym more often.” She gave him a knowing glance. “The things I hear there. Besides, if I told you where I got all my information- what fun would there be left?”

“I can think of a few things.” After seasoning it, he held out another piece of meat for her to eat.

<<I bet you can.>> She sent over as she took the morsel in between her lips and slid it off the fork, savouring the taste as he watched her.

“What else do you know?...huh? What do you have lurking around in that pretty head of yours?” Luke’s eyes narrowed at he, waved the skewer at her.

Mara tried to look around the balcony playfully, and tried for a look of innocence.

He laughed at her. “You do ‘innocent’ just as well as I do ‘covert’.”

“I’m trying to put in the effort.” She defended herself. “It’s not as easy as you make it look.”

“You don’t say?” he played her own snarky tone back at her, teasing.

Luke looked at her across the table, just watching her; he didn’t need to say anything else. A trembling began in the pit of his stomach; a desire to hold her in his arms in that moment.

The music in the background changed the tempo again, and Luke recognized the song. He took the controller from the table and turned the volume up just a bit.

“I think I’d like to dance with you.” He said with no pretense. “Will you dance with me?” He offered his hand to her. “I will promise not to hurt your feet.” He looked at her feet, encased in dainty slipper-shoes, and he grimaced. “Maybe not.” He said quietly.

Mara took his hand, and he guided her to the open area of the balcony. The wind whipped around them. The edges of the hem of her layered skirt lifted up and then fluttered back down.

Luke held her right hand gently in his palm, and let his other hand slip behind her waist, bringing her close as her opposite arm slid around his neck. They swayed in time to the tempo of the music.

He reached out to her before sending the words. <We’ve never danced together before.>
up at him, looking peaceful and comfortable in his arms. <I don’t know why.>

“You never asked before now.” Mara said quietly.

The music played in the background, the words barely audible.

“Haven’t I?” Luke looked back at her. “I should have.” < Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?>

Mara blushed. “No, you didn’t…” Her voice was just slightly louder than a whisper.

“I should have done that too.” He confessed, matching her tone. “You look beautiful in green…you always do.” Her eyes were glowing in perfect hue with the tones in her dress.

Her mind reached back. <<Thank you….you look very handsome tonight too.>> The hand that was around his neck, move to stroke the navy fabric of his jacket, then it went back to where it was most at ease, draped over his shoulder, relaxed under his hair line at the back of his neck.

They swayed back and forth in time to the slow tempo of the music. Luke’s hand that was placed and her back, brought her closer to her to him, and Mara took the suggestion and rested her head on his shoulder.

After the first verse of the song, her voice broke the silence. “Luke?” she said quietly. “Have you ever been in love?”

He sighed, feeling very much in love at the moment, but knowing any confession of it would scare her, right then and now. “Yes.” He answered.

Mara thought about it before asking her next question. “How did it feel?”

He smiled. “The first time, it felt both wonderful and awful.” He waited before continuing to explain. “You see, I was ten and she was twelve…plus, she was the only girl within a fifty kilometer radius, so my chances weren’t good. Then, when I told her that I liked her, she made me eat sand, and that was when I knew it was over.”

She snorted softly on his chest, and tapped his back for making a joke at moment like this.

“Hey, I was crushed.” He said into her hair. “The next time I fell in love, it didn’t work out either. But I think in both cases, it wasn’t real love.”

“What’s the difference?” Mara asked, her voice still quiet.

“I think I was more infatuated with them, and not in love. It was superficial and didn’t last long.” Luke paused for his own reflection, thinking about his own feelings in the moment, and how much he cared for the woman in his arms.

He spoke slowly, carefully picking the right words. “I think real love goes deeper than anything that can be found and lost in a weekend – it means wanting the other person to be happy, even if they aren’t with you…and when they are, its knowing them better than anyone else does- and them knowing you…its caring for them without any judgement….and knowing they feel the same for you.”

<<I’ve never been in love.>> She thought to him. <<I don’t know what it feels like.>>

Luke could feel a slight tremble in her as she thought those words across to him.
He let his eyes flutter closed and reached out for her. <What do I feel like to you?> He knew if he gave it a name, he suspected she would run from him.

Slowly, Luke felt the wave come over him; warm, safe yet a touch of danger to her feelings, calm yet passionate at the same time, camaraderie and still challenging, friendship mingled with trust, awe and...and he knew what it was...desire, to be closer to him than anyone else.

She loved him- even though she didn’t know what it was; he knew, and he felt elated. There were no words for the joy he was feeling in that instant.

The wave fell away, leaving the feeling that resonated with him, as he pressed her to his chest. He could feel his own heart beating hard in his chest; surely she must have felt it too.

<I feel the same.> His mind whispered back to her; sending her the wave of emotion that he had for her, and their friendship.

Mara stirred, but didn’t pull away from him. Unlike how her feelings for him, made him unceremoniously happy; he could sense that she was scared of his feelings. Why? He wordlessly thought.

Into his mind came a series of muted images; people she thought cared about her- she could never tell- they didn’t stay long enough in her life for her to have any security of knowing if they did.

Through he his own experiences, he knew that people cared about him- even though they had been ripped from his life- he had the luxury of at least knowing he was loved.

Mara never had that.

That thought broke his heart.

Luke held her closer to him- if holding her could make her feel secure, that he had no intention to withhold anything from her.

Mara pulled away from him bit, but stayed within his embrace. He could see that her eyes were like two emeralds, clear and pure, just there for him.

They had stopped dancing, and just held each other. Luke dipped his head, and let the moment take them to another place; pressing his lips to hers.

Soft and gentle, his lips felt the tender caress of her delicate mouth, pursing gently, conveying how much he truly cared for her.

She moved her arms around his neck, and his arms wrapped around her body; wanting to hold as close as he possible could.

Gradually, he deepened the kiss. His tongue pushed past her lips, gently exploring her mouth; and feeling her exploration of him too.

His hands slid up and down her back, gliding over the layers of the semi-sheer fabric, feeling the tight muscles in her shoulders, the dip at her waist and round of her hips.

Mara’s hands slipped into his hair, and stroked from the nape of his neck, letting her fingers trace into his thick locks.

She pressed her pelvis into his body; Luke could feel her surrendering to his passion, and he pushed
back, letting his body naturally respond to her.

She emitted a soft throaty moan, as his lips punctuated his thoughts.

They broke apart momentarily. Luke saw a reflection of the desire that he felt for her looking back at him.

Mara’s hands slid to the front of his chest, and slid under his jacket, wanting to feel closer to his skin.

A breeze whipped by, and she must have felt the contrast between the air and the heat radiating from his body; she shivered minutely.

He could feel her tremor; he liked it, and wanted to make her quiver again.

His hand came up to her face, and he watched as his touch affected her; drifting fingertips along her jawline. His thumb stopped at her bottom lip; her lips pursed at it.

He moved in to capture her lips again; hungry and with fervor. Faster now, wanting devour all of her.

His fingers slipped into hair, letting her mane fall through the comb of his hand.

His other hand, slid down her back, following the curve of her body until it cupped the firm cheek of her bottom; and squeezed the supple flesh, bringing her closer to feel the affect she had on him, pressed her against his hardness.

She pulled back from his mouth, still touching his face, panting, to whisper, “Inside?” she asked.

Luke nodded as he was at a loss for words.

Guided by her lips, he followed where they went, until they stopped at the door back into her apartment. There, their lips broke again, and her neck called to him. Her head tilted back and allowed him access to sensitive skin on her alabaster neckline.

He sucked deeply on her neck, and she moaned between parted lips.

Unconsciously, she pressed the door release; it slid open to allow them more privacy inside her home.

Now she wanted his skin- wanted to feel and touch his body. As Mara’s starved mouth found his, her hands slid his jacket from his shoulders, dropping it to the floor.

Steps further inside her home, his belt dropped to the floor with little consideration as it would have hindered her progress.

She recklessly pulled at the bottom of his shirt until it came away from the waistband of his trousers, and her greedy fingers found the fasteners for his shirt- tracing the muscles that were once cover, she pushed the fabric away from his chest, leaving that on the floor too.

Not to be outdone by her, Luke’s hands were more than occupied, feeling her body through the soft fabric encasing it.

Finding the fleshly mounds of her breasts, he could feel the perk of her nipples, wanting to be free in his hands; he massaged them through the fabric, listening to her delighted moans in his mouth.

He fought the urge to be a brute and rip away what was keeping him from her skin.
He gathered up the fabric that kept her body from him, until he could feel the soft velvety skin of her thighs, and bare buttocks.

Mara fought with the fastener of his trousers. His hands left her body only to aid her, popping the fly free, as his quest was hers too – to touch as much of each other as possible; skin on skin.

He needed air, his chest heaved, but his closed eyes could feel her lips on his jugular, licking and sucking along his collarbone.

He kicked his boots free from each foot, discarded somewhere along with the dainty shoes which once graced her feet.

Luke needed her mouth again, to capture it, to demand of it, to own it. His tongue slipped back inside her mouth- how wet it was for him. The feral animal in him wondered how wet she was in other places- places he craved even more than her mouth.

He backed himself to her sofa, and broke their contact to drop backwards on to it. Intent to pull her to him, she resisted. He watched a wicked glint come into her eyes, then dissolve into a knowing look at how the dress she wore had frustrated him and separated him from her skin.

Mara stood above him, unclipped the belt at her waist, tugged at the shoulder tie of the tissue soft fabric, and it all fell away, pooling at her feet; leaving her body exposed, with the exception of flesh coloured fine lace that covered the center of her womanhood.

Just the light from the open balcony cast shadows on her pale, perfect, pristine skin. Firm, round, proud breasts with rosy-brown areoles greeted him.

Luke’s warm hands reached out for her cream-silk thighs, and brought her closer to him, jealous of the air for touching her before he could. His mouth was level with the perfect buds of her breasts. His hands cupped her sweet ass, and brought her body so that he didn’t strain and he took the perked tip into his mouth.

His tongue swirled around the sweet bud; he grated his teeth gently on its dimpled surface.

Mara tilted her head back, her lips moving, but no words came from it; begging for more of the glorious feelings of his attention.

He switched to the other breast, which had been patient, was also peaked seeking his attentive talents.

The velvet skin under his hands, warmed with his constant massage.

However, he yearned for something else. Something he promised her that she would do for him; something primal and selfish of him- he knew it, but he wanted it more than anything.

Luke broke his ministrations to her sensuous orbs. She looked confused when he stopped, and stood in front of her. He took her shoulders and turned her front away from him; putting her back against his feverish chest.

Mara could feel his hardened cock, still encased in his trousers, pressed between the cheeks of her bottom. He grinded his bulge against her teasing her and tempting her with his promised size.

He directed her right arm, so that it draped around to the back of his neck, and her left arm was guided back to his waist.
In the moonlight, he could see the freckles that dotted the fair skin of her shoulders; making a path for his lips to follow. Where her neck met her shoulder, he bit down, harder than he should- she gasped, and twitched against him.

The back of Luke’s right hand caressed down her underarm until it came to the under rise of her bosom. The hand kneaded the flesh; he caught her nipple between his thumb and palm, and tugged, and rolled it. She purred with anguish at how marvelous it was. But her purring was not what he wanted- he wanted more…he had made a promise, and intended to keep it.

His left hand- his more sensitive hand, had plans of its own. The fragile lace that covered the place that he wanted the most; his fingernails traced the edge of it until he met the front of the crux of her Venus. Fingers slipped under the lace, slid past silken red-gold curls, to separate the inner folds; already slick and damp core. His thumb tucked under the hood of her jewel, making small circles. He could wait no longer, and his middle and ring fingers found the center of her core; dipping in and out of her, bringing with them more of her juices.

Mara was lost in the exquisite pleasure; the man she adored as he was loving her, perfectly, tenderly, hungrily.

Until now, Luke had resisted the urge to touch the Force, knowing he didn’t need it, but it didn’t feel complete if he couldn’t connect with her like the intimate touches he was giving her now.

<You feel beyond the stars, Mara…so right, so perfect…so wet.>

She felt the touch of his mind, yet she could not find words to respond. Her mind was adrift on the wave of pleasure that was threatening to crash.

He could sense it coming, and both hands made their motions deeper and harder; he bit into her shoulder again. She gasped loudly and then held her breath; with the exhale of her lungs, she shuddered, and bucked back on him as the wave hit.

“Gods!” Mara moaned to the open room.

Luke’s hand came from her breast to turn her face towards him so that he could net her rapture in his mouth, and kissed her mumbling lips.

His fingers, still inside her, felt her muscles clench and release around them at the moment of her climax. Her nectar covered them. Nothing so luscious, nothing so decadent, nothing as sweet as the taste of a woman…his woman; he brought his fingers to his own lips and tasted her essence.

Luke pressed his eyes shut and he savored her taste- a flavour uniquely her.

Mara’s breathing was regaining its regular tempo, yet her savage instinct wasn’t yet satisfied either. Still breathless, she turned her body to face him. Her dazed porcelain doll features, searched his face.

He grinned at her predicament, and blushed before coming to her lips again, kissing her deeply. She could taste her own flavour on his lips mixed with the spice from their meal and the sweetness of the liquor that blended perfectly.

His hands stroked her back, appreciative.

She hummed her contentedness between their lips, lost to him. Her hands had other ideas. They were aware of the state of undress that he was in as compared to her. She wanted his nakedness as unabashed as she was now.
With the fastener of his trousers undone, the fly gave way easily because of his girth pushing it open. The trousers dropped unceremoniously, and he stepped from them, leaving the tight black boxer-briefs stretched over his manhood.

Mara’s hand glided across the sheen knitted fabric, resting on the bulge of him; she slid her hand the length of his shaft, up and down over the fabric; gently, she squeezed the rigid mass.

He broke away from her mouth, panting.

Merciless, she repeated her movements until she could feel that the tip of the shaft had saturated the fabric with his excited pre-cum.

It was not to end here, not so quickly. So the offensive material had to go, and gave away easily, releasing the beast that it kept inside.

His black bottoms soon shared the floor with the slip of lace that had covered her.

Their lips separated and she could now appreciate his skin. The light coming in was all that was necessary to know that he was indeed bronze all over; even the part of him with had been concealed – he was certainly not the scrawny farm boy anymore.

Her core thudded inside her to remind her that it was starved for him; hoping that she could accommodate him inside her.

She smiled looking into his face.

Luke brought her face to his, not to resume kissing her just yet, but to feel his cheeks on hers, mumbling how much he exalted her; whispering her name over and over again.

She backed him to the sofa, and guided him to lie down, outstretched on the suede. She straddled his legs and relaxed her body on top of him. It was her turn to adulate his body.

Mara’s eyes locked on his gaze, and Luke swallowed, expecting the unexpected. His hands still wanted to touch her, so he let them graze where her skin was available to him.

Her face came up to him, and placed a tender kiss on his lips, then she lowered those same lips to his chest.

Her firm tongue traced and line from his abdomen to the center of his chest. The wet line tingled from the air of the room. He closed his eyes, as if it was possible to feel the things she was doing to him more intensely.

He could feel her fingers circle his nipples- a mouth replaced her finger around one nipple while her other hand’s flattened palm continued to make circles.

His eyes popped open as he felt her teeth take a nip; she wore a wicked grin, and she opened her mouth in the direction of the nipple she didn’t assault. She exposed her teeth, teasing another nip.

He gave her a warning look, but her lips pursed then descended on his other nipple; and his eyes closed again.

When her mouth moved away, he was tempted to open his eyes, but Luke felt a shift in her weight, then without warning he felt her tongue on his shaft. He gasped, eyes flying open. Her wet mouth osculated his most sensitive area.
He knew he wasn’t going to last long – and the promise, his promise to her, was not completed yet.

He drew his hand down to stroke her cheek, and although he didn’t want her to stop, he needed to take her attention away to something that would pleasure them both.

Mara looked up at him, and Luke brought her back up to his chest. He kissed her tenderly; the lengths of their bodies resting against each other, just momentarily.

He brought her up, to sit on the sofa, while he kneeled between her legs. She understood his intention, so she flattened her back on the lower portion and brought her pelvis closer to the edge of the cushion; positioning herself to let him enter her.

Luke looked down on her, asking her with his eyes, if this was what she wanted. She hummed and nodded. He slowly left one of her legs to place on his shoulder; he turned his head and gave her a tickling kiss on her inner thigh just to hear her giggle.

Mara’s eyes closed from the ticklish touch, and then she felt him push her folds apart, entering her. She gasped for air at the pressure. She sensed that he was afraid that he was hurting her. Her eyes opened and blinked slowly to convince him to continue.

Luke tilted his head back as he pushed himself into her fully. Her glorious tightness accepted him.

She moaned from the impeccable pleasure and pain as he stretched her.

Slowly, he rhythmically moved, pushing himself inside her; his speed and depth constant as he found the pace the delivered her the most amount of pleasure.

In and out of her tightness, her tautness, her constrictive divine pussy, her juices slicked engorged shaft; he could feel her building to another climax, as he held back his own. ‘Too soon’ he thought for himself and willed control over his body.

He increased the speed of his pace. Then he whispered into her mind. <Say it, Mara..Say what I want to hear…what I promised you that you would say.>

Faster he pushed, as she was on the cusp now, panting and quietly grunting with his intrusions into her body.

Building and building within her… he could feel it…

Then she held her breath…her “tell” that she was about to erupt.

<Say it now!> He ordered her.

Mara arched her back off the sofa, and bellowed into the night’s air, “Luuukkkke!!!!”

Her muscles contracted around him, and her body spasmed as he still pushed into her, and her juices were making a puddle in the fabric of the sofa.

He stopped his movements-holding back his own eruption, not ready to join her just yet.

Her body still twitched as it recovered, but her face smiled at him as he watched.

Luke hovered closer to her, to bring her back to reason with kisses- but it was still his will to drive her to state where reason had no place.

Still inside her, he lowered the leg that was over his shoulder, and pulled her closer, placing her arms
around his neck. He lifted her so that she could sit astride him on the sofa.

As he sat down, she flinched with the pressure inside her as it filled her in a different angle, but then relaxed down on to him.

Luke gingerly brushed away the hair from her face that had struck to her cheek from the heat of their bodies.

Mara had come back to reality and looked into his eyes. He fluttered kisses over her face until she giggled again. The kisses moved from her face until they found her lips.

Mara seized his mouth on hers. Almost spent, she knew what he wanted.

At the pace of her kisses as she administered them, she began to rock her pelvis; allowing him to slide smoothly deeper into her.

She raked her hands through his hair. Their tongues fought each for who was hungrier. Her pelvis, no longer rocking, but moving up and down on him, was bringing them both close to another pinnacle.

Luke’s hands, on her hips, pushed her pace, gained speed and ferocity. He wanted to hear it one more time- he slipped one hand between their bodies, and found her clit. Her mouth broke free as he pinched the tiny bud repeatedly.

“Say it again.” He grunted through his teeth. “I want to hear you say it again.”

Mara was fighting back the apex, resisting his order, but her defiance had a limit- not for him, she’d give in and let it come one more time.

She held no breath this time as she yelled his name again...and again...and again....as the quake within her came again.

He didn’t stop this time, and continued into her until he felt his explosion of pleasure. Luke fulfilled his promise to her and moaned her name as loudly as she had moaned his, joining her in her zenith.

Mara’s head fell on his shoulder as he slumped back on the sofa, both of them gasping from the euphoria.

Luke’s arms wrapped her shaking body, stroking her back, wanting to warm her; whispering sweet words to her.

He held her for a long time, periodically kissing her, stroking her hair. When she kissed back, and started to caress him; he knew she was recovering as he was.

Luke felt her mind reach out to him...scared, trembling, but trying to be brave.

<<Do you love me?>> she asked.

Her head lifted, and he looked directly into her eyes as they began to tear.

<Do you really want to know?> he asked, brushing away the tears that began to shed from her eyes.

She shook her head, afraid.

He leaned in and placed a kiss to her scared face. <Ask me again when you’re ready to know?> His face telling her it was okay.
Mara relaxed back into the comfort of his arms.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Dave Matthew's Band: Say Goodbye

"Go back to being friends
But tonight let's be lovers,
We kiss and sweat
We'll turn this better thing
To the best
Of all we can offer, Just a rogue kiss
Tangled tongues and lips,
See me this way
I'm turning and turning for you
Girl, just tonight " 
The morning came with just a ray of sunshine peeking through the curtains in her bedroom.

Luke Skywalker opened one eye and sensed that he was in her bed, alone.

<<In the shower…be back shortly.>> her voice said in his mind. He smiled, then closed his eyes and drifted back to slumber again.

He had no idea how much time most have lapsed; all he knew is that after he had opened one eye, her naked form had come back to the bed and nestled into his naked skin. Not resisting, he pulled her closer; not awake and not asleep. Peaceful.

In this dreamless state, he could feel her cool skin pressed up next to him. Her hands drifted on his chest lazily. Mara shifted her position; her chest was pressed up to his now, her damp hair on his shoulder.

He concentrated on his breathing; feeling the rise and fall of his own chest with her. Her body felt perfect beside him. As he let his hands glide over her skin under the sheets, she mumbled something incoherent; sounding contented though.
Her body; soft and yielding in his hands. His mind gifted him with the images from the previous night, and how she glowed in the dim light. Luscious and supple. Her body, so graceful, seemingly fragile, but ever so strong.

He suppressed a yawn, and made the motion to roll towards her. His hands, hungry for her flesh, traced the side from her hip up.

He cupped one of her full breasts, and dipped his head under the covers to taste her skin again. She hummed, and encouraged him to continue.

Luke’s tongue found the sensitive tip of her breast and rolled it around in his mouth.

Mara gasped unconsciously, and she ground her bottom into the bed; she mouthed soundless words, and smiling. A flush creeping up over her porcelain skin.

He lifted his head, and with drowsy eyes, he loved to watch her getting aroused- it was the one state that he knew she couldn’t escape from. He watched her respond as he let his hand slide down her abdomen directly to her vulva.

Tracing his way through her curls, he let one finger slip between her folds, and tease her hooded jewel. She was already wet and soft.

Her eyes were closed and she was breathing deeply; head tilted back, enjoying the sensations that her body was feeling. A blush coming to her cheeks.

Luke leaned into her neck and began to kiss the available skin.

He had been semi-erect since first missing her body. Now, since he had her with him, he hardened fully, craving her.

She must have sensed his wants, even with her eyes closed; Mara moved her body to allow his fingers more access to her, but also allow him to come between her legs.

He brought his body to where she wanted it, and removed the attention that his fingers were giving her; placing the head of his shaft at her entrance, he reached out to her before entering.

<Good Morning, My Angel> and with that, he slid into her, nipping her neck at the same time.

Mara gasped, eyes opened, surprised but not entirely.

His sapphire eyes pierced into her; she gave him a lusty smiled, and her hips lifted to encourage his movements.

Luke moved his pelvis back and forth, in and out of her; smooth, slow and precise. The friction between their bodies was still there from the previous night. The perfection of the feel of being inside her was more incredible than anything in the galaxy.

He knew he couldn’t withhold his climax for very long because of the urgency building in his belly. He bent over her, and she closed her eyes again as he kissed her deeply.

She must have known that his body was impatient, and took one of his hands and guided it between their bodies to her clit- he knew what to do; and pinched the hood in tempo with his thrusts.

He gained speed, not stopping but wanting to watch her capitulate her pleasure to him. Her eyes opened again, lost for the moment.
She sucked in air and held it- eyes blinked then closed; she arched her back and he felt her internally clench around his cock as she moaned. Several more thrusts, then he joined her; his hot seed spilling into her, and letting his body spasm in the most pleasurable way.

Luke lowered himself to her, finding her lips and not stopping his pursuit of kisses. Her hands raked through his hair, and glided up and down his back in an appreciative manner; she hummed.

He felt the touch of her mind, at peace, and happy. <<Good Morning, farm boy.>>

Their mouths broke apart, and he watched her smile up at him. “Good Morning.” He whispered; his throat dry and voice hoarse.

“That” her voice low and husky, “was a very nice way to wake up.”

“Yes it is.” He conceded; his voice returning to normal volume. He rolled onto his back, taking her with him.

“Especially, after an amazing night.” Mara assumed the position into the crux of his shoulder, with his arm wrapped around her.

He sighed. “I enjoyed it, very much, too.” Her hair was still damp, but it was soft enough to nuzzle into. The soft curls had started to form in it. Absent mindedly, he slid a finger inside one of the curls, and watched as the tress uncoiled from his finger as he pulled it away- a smiled like a little boy.

They lay wrapped in each other’s arms, waiting for nothing- there were no expectations here- just enjoying the quiet and being together.

Luke could feel her peace wash over him; he wasn’t even aware that he had reached out the Force, but it flowed back and forth between them. It must have been there, and she must have sensed it too.

A small decorative box that had been resting on her nightstand, raised from where it was, and smoothly bounced in front of them. It made a swirling circle like a slow moving tornado, then shifted its axis and eclipsed, then back to the slow bounce.

<Is this you?> he asked, pleased that she was playing.

<<Yes…is that okay?>>

He raised his hand and the small box started to make a crisscross pattern. Her hand came up and the box alternated between the circle pattern, and crisscross in perfect rhythm.

He clasped her raised hand and brought it to the center of his chest.

Mara shifted and came close to him and put her mouth to his- the box still moving in syncopation.

He pursed his lips to her- the box never faltered.

<<I like this version of split concentration training.>> She pressed her mouth deeper to him.

The box faltered slightly, and Luke returned it to the side table.

<Sorry…the Jedi isn’t here right now…you’ll have to leave a message at the tone…and he’ll get back to you later….~Beep!~>

She giggled between their lips, and then poked his sides; he snorted as he pulled her away.
He yawned and stretched. Luke knew that the day was encroaching soon- and soon he would have to go back to the world; he just didn’t want to be the one to say it first.

Mara, as perceptive as ever, knew it too, so she quietly said to the air, “The day isn’t going to wait for us.”

He nodded. “Do you have a plan for this attack of the day, or are we just going to do it as we always have, and hope for the best?”

She stretched and yawned. “Well, I think we should just go charging into a room full of Stormtroopers on this one.”

“For the record…” He stretched again. “That, was never me…that’s Han’s move.”

Mara snorted. “I know, I saw the vid.”

She rolled away from him, and slipped her naked body from the sheets, unashamed. She reached for a black satin robe on the floor beside the bed. “I think you- should jump into the shower…while I go downstairs, and put your clothes into the sonic cleaner….then, I will jump into the shower again.”

She mock-glared at him.

Luke stretched again, over-dramatically for comic effect; trying to be cute so that she would agree to his next statement. “We could always go into the shower together?” He raised an eyebrow.

Mara walked to his side of the bed, glowering at him. She sat down beside him, as he sat up. He reached out to cup her cheek and bring his lips to hers; kissing her gently. They lips parted but she rested her forehead against him. “You know that I’d like nothing more than that…but…” she responded.

<i>Know.</i> he agreed. He knew it but still didn’t like it.

“How about this?” and looked her in her vivid eyes. “I will take that shower…and while you are in your shower…I will make you the best breakfast omelet that has ever been made?”

“That’s a deal!” Mara agreed. She got from the bed and headed to the closet to pick out what she would wear for the day, but caught a glimpse of a naked Luke on the way to the ‘fresher. <<Cute butt.>> she sent over.

<i>You can’t resist it.</i> He teased.

She snorted and shook her head.

She picked a few pieces of clothing and lay those on the bed, then hurried to the lower level to find his clothes….and hers too.

The room wasn’t in tremendous disarray but it might have well been. In their haste to make it upstairs- as it was all a blur- the evidence of their love-making was all over the sofa.

Normally, she would have been irate about the stain, but with each step she took, her insides reminded her of the feeling he sent into and through her.

It had been a while since she had been with a man like that…in fact, she had never been as passionate as she was with him. She smiled girlishly at the thought- he did do what he promised he would do- she doubted anyone else could make her feel the same way he did, ever again. Damn him!
His jacket, shirt and trousers were easy to find…though one sock eluded her. She marched back upstairs, searched the bedroom and found the renegade sock, then over to the sonic cleaner, and put them inside, and set for ‘refresh’, then sent him a message. <<Clothes will be ready in five minutes…cleaner is in the hallway…clean towels in the linen closet beside the bath.>>

She could sense some confusion in him, then, he figured it out. <You have more cleansers than I do.> he sent across. <Thank you.> she could feel a warm smile from him.

She snorted…such a little boy sometimes.

Back downstairs, she made her way to the balcony to retrieve the food from last night. Very little went to waste, and she transferred the food from the portable cooler to the one in her kitchen. She paused at the ‘bantha milk’ and took a whiff and cringed. How could he drink such a thing?

Upstairs, she could hear him leaving the ‘fresher. He was probably walking around with a towel around his waist. Mara closed her eyes and pictured him, tanned and toned, and then dropping that towel.

<<Get you mind out of the gutter, Jade.>> He warned.

<<Get out of my mind, Skywalker!>>

<<Stop projecting!>>

<<Gggrrr!>> she growled back at him in their brief exchange.

She bounded back up the stairs to meet him at the top of them. Sadly, he already had his trousers on. Mara gave him her best angry-glare, putting effort into it.

“Oh, you don’t scare me anymore…” Luke teased, doing up his shirt. “You’re about as vicious as a kitten.” And leaned in for a kiss.

“Do you think I’m really going to kiss you after that comment?” She glared.

“Yes I do.” He puckered up even more. “And if anyone asks, you held me down and had your way with me…That’s my story and that’s how I’m going to keep your reputation intact.” He puckered again, waiting for his kiss, and winked at her.

She sighed, and gave in, kissing him.

“I didn’t know you were afraid of me?” Mara asked. “Good to know.”

“I was…and I still am when I know you’re hiding that tiny blaster on you…and possibly one or two vibroblades…but not for me…for anyone else who makes you angry.” He raised both eyebrows and widened his eyes.

“One more kiss?” he asked, “Before you go into the shower?”

Mara came close to him, not resisting- she couldn’t. “Greedy boy.” she said between their lips.

They switch positions on the stairs as they embraced.

“Get yourself into the shower, dirty girl.” He swatted her butt as she passed. “Then get that sexy butt downstairs…I’m starving.”

One more glare at him, and as he stepped down a few stairs, she whistled, he looked up, and Mara
dropped her robe.

His mouth gaped open.

“Not Fair!” she heard from him as the ‘fresher door closed.

**

She smelled the food as soon as the ‘fresher door opened.

Mara could feel her mouth starting to water. She usually didn’t have much of an appetite, and she was more-thirsty than she was hungry when she woke up this morning…but now…

She raced back to the bedroom and grabbed her black dressing robe, wrapping it around herself, and went down to the kitchen.

He was reading his comm with a serious look on his face when she got there. The world had found him.

“Trouble?” She asked.

“Not yet.” He said blankly, still reading. “Just a reminder from Leia that I’m supposed to be meeting the delegation from Malastare today. The New Republic wants Jedi representation.”

“Malastare?” Mara looked at him.

“Yeah” He confirmed. “They’re petitioning for full access into the New Republic.” He shook his head. “I thought they already were included.”

She saw that he had made a carafe of caf for her, so she poured herself a cup; adding her cream and sugar. “No, they weren’t…on account that the Grans refuse to recognize Dug representation in their government.” She took a sip of the one drink that soothed her mornings.

Luke looked at her questioning, so she continued. “Malastare has two species; Grans and Dugs – very opposite beings, and neither likes the other one. It goes back for generations- I don’t even think they can tell you where it started. But the Grans gained control and…” she paused for another sip, “The Emperor got along more with the Grans than he did the Dugs. The Grans like their money, and the Dugs like gambling…so there you go.”

He shook his head. “How about that I send you in my Jedi robe, and you can meet them?”

“Ah…no.” She said diplomatically. “Your robe- your problem.”

He had a plate of food between them, and she reached for the fork and the plate.

“You’ll get a robe of your own soon.” He mumbled, and reached over for her caf and took a sip. He looked at the mug as her swallowed. “I didn’t know it could taste like that.”

“I put in too much sugar and cream…that’s what Karrde tells me.” She replied.

He turned to watch her, with the plate up to her chin, eating quickly.

“We were supposed to share that…” Eying the plate, he smirked at her, but happy she was enjoying it.

“Go drink your blue milk- this is mine.” She smirked back. He chuckled at her.
She slowed her meal, and left more than half on the plate and but it back down on the table.

“I almost forgot about that!” He said. “Is there any left?” He turned to go back into kitchen.

“You really liked it?” She sound skeptical as she asked.

“I did when I was younger.” He answered. “Did you put it in the cooler?” As he was searching her cupboards.

“Yes…isn’t that where it’s supposed to go?”

“No…actually you keep it at room temperature, and you need to strain it twice before drinking it.” He opened the cask, and put it on the counter.

“I didn’t know that.” She smiled.

“That’s okay…I will teach you the finer points of high Tatooinian dining.” He winked.

Luke walked back over to the table, and bent to kiss her, then and picked up the plate, and started eating the omelet from the shared plate.

“And what does today have in-store for you?” He asked.

“Boring.” Mara snarled. “Contract negotiations…some small trader is trying to not get out bid by a bigger operation, and we have to mediate.” She looked up at him. “Trade you?”

“Ah…no thank you.” He pressed his lips together. “You don’t want to wear the robe…and I don’t want to shuffle paperwork.”

“I’ll have you know, that I just don’t shuffle paperwork.” She handed him the caf mug in exchange for the finished plate of food; watching him take the last swig. “I also get to threaten people who don’t do what I want.”

“With what?” he asked seriously, “Paper cuts?”

Her brow furrowed at him. “Just for that…you are not allowed to watch me get ready for the day.” She stormed towards the stairs, and she could hear him following her.

“If you do it right, it could take them 48 to 72 hours to die….just saying.” Luke said behind her.

Mara turned around, furious at him for teasing her, only to be met with his smirking adorable face. He bounded up two more stairs and planted a solid kiss on her.

She waved a finger at him. “You’re not funny, and you’re not cute.”

He kissed the tip of her finger. “I’m hilarious, and I’m very adorable…I heard you think so.” He tapped the side of his head.

She huffed away from him.

Luke let her storm off into the ‘fresher. He knew just how far he could push her temper before it became real and he really didn’t want to push it that far.

From his position on the stairs, he could look directly into the ‘fresher and watch her from a safe distance; her hair flipped over, and she waved the drying unit around until she was satisfied.
Luke ventured closer to the ‘fresher to watch her set up two heating units on the countertop. As she waited for them to heat up, she started to brush her teeth.

<<Does this amuse you?>> She asked as she scrubbed.

“A little.” He answered. He reached out for the tube of toothpaste and put a bit on his finger and scrubbed his own teeth when he realized that he hadn’t yet today.

Mara gave him a questioning look, perplexed.

She offered him a small cup of water, and he swished it around in his mouth, and spit into the sink beside the one she was using. “Thank you” he said in between rinsing. “I wasn’t anticipating needing a toothbrush.” And he rinsed the sink.

She spit into her sink, then rinsed. “You didn’t plan last night?” She asked coyly as she looked at him in mirror.

“Not one little bit.” He smiled proudly back at her.

He leaned in for the fresh kiss, and got one.

Luke stood back and watched her continue her routine, as it was clear the she had one; although it wasn’t quite clear what order she did things in as she jumped from one task to another.

He watched as she washed her face, and applied one of the many creams she had in the drawer in between the sinks. Then she began to use one of the heating tools to her hair. He was disappointed when he saw that it straightened out the wavy locks; he pouted slightly.

“You like it when my hair is curly?” Mara asked, looking at his face in the mirror.

He nodded.

“It’s a lot to maintain…plus, in this season, it gets curlier as the day goes on.” She explained. “If I straighten it, it’s softer, and seems like more to run your fingers through.”

He smiled, and continued to watch her.

Next she put on a head band and her hair pulled away from her face. She brought several small bottles of different colours and started to apply them.

“I didn’t know you wore make-up…” He commented. He leaned back on the door frame with his arms crossed as he watched.

“I wear it every day when I’m in the Capital…every woman does.” She replied. “When I’m in the field, I don’t bother.” She was swiping some powder to her cheeks with an angled brush. “…but here… I feel the need to…I don’t wear a lot” She was putting light brown on her eyelids. “…besides, if I did wear more than I do now…I’d still be me, only in colour.” The last thing she put on was a lip tint, just enhancing the natural tone of her own pink lips.

She pulled the hair band out, releasing her tresses, and turned to him. “Less than five minutes…and done!” She announced.

Luke was amazed; she still looked natural but with only slightly more colour. She looked amazingly beautiful.

Mara stepped closer to him, and kissed him again, as if hearing his compliment. She stepped past him
and headed for the bedroom.

Luke checked his face in the mirror to make sure that he wasn’t wearing any of hers.

She must have sensed what he was doing, because he heard her from the bedroom. “It’s long-lasting…doesn’t wear off…besides, it’s not your colour.”

He chuckled, and followed the sound of Mara’s voice. He wanted to come close to her again, but it was nice to admire her from distance, and to watch her being her; not having to engage or entertain any one.

He marveled at how graceful she was in everyday life; she had an innocence to her movements --not aware; this was just pure her. His heart was consumed by her, and she had no idea of how deep his feelings truly went.

She went into the dresser at the far end of the room and brought out some other pieces, and she arranged her clothes again on the edge of the bed. Meticulously.

Then she turned to him, knowing that he wouldn’t move from the spot he was in, she undid the tie to her dressing gown, slowly.

<Don’t tease.> he warned her.

“Fine then.” She dropped the robe without ceremony to reveal the lacy black bra and panties she wore.

He exhaled slowly, knowing that they were not going to head back to bed that morning, but he mentally stored the image in case he needed it later that day.

She chuckled at him, knowing what it was doing to him, but she carried on getting dressed and covering what he was already seeing. <<I’m glad you like what you saw.>> She commented.

“I did…and I do.” Luke said out loud. “I must admit I was a little surprised…”

“At what?” she turned and looked at him sharply, sliding on her pants.

“Your two friends there…” He waved his finger back and forth, indicating her breasts. “I wasn’t expecting them to be so…” He searched for the right word. “full.” He winked and gave her a sultry smile.

Her eyes narrowed at him for being so perceptive. “I usually wear two compression shirts when we train together.” She mumbled, as she pulled her tunic over her head, not moving one hair.

He mouthed, “Oh.”

“Besides…” She said louder, “I thought you were a leg man?” She came closer to him, and walked over to the dresser beside the bed.

“All right?” Luke shook his head. “Nope… don’t get me wrong…you have amazing legs…but I have a thing for breasts and butts…I like my women with dangerous curves…and you…” He came closer to her, “…are perfection.” He moved her hair away from her neck, and placed a delicate kiss on the exposed skin.

She snorted softly at the tickling of his kiss.

Mara picked up one of the small bottles on the dresser, and removed the cap. He watched her take a
step away from him and spray her neck with a fine mist. A scent arose in the air…the scent of her.

“And done.” She said proudly. “Come on…” she directed him, “we have to get going.” And she
head back down stairs.

Luke followed her, admiring her round backside. Once again his thoughts must have given him
away because she pulled down her tunic a bit more, covering what he was admiring.

He sighed, giving in that he wouldn’t get what he wanted. By the time he got down the stairs, she
was slipping on her half boots, and fixing her belt around her waist, and then she clipped her
lightsaber to her belt without a thought.

He didn’t comment that it looked good on her, but refrained, knowing that only a few nights before
she was ready to hand it back to him. If she felt that comfortable wearing it, he wasn’t about ruin it.

“So what’s the protocol here?” he asked sincerely. “Do we leave together?” He wrapped his arms
around her waist, pulling her closer. “Do you leave first?…do I leave first?” He dipped his head and
found her lips again. “Do I throw you over my shoulder and we go back upstairs, and call in sick for
the day…and I make passionate love to you again?”

She broke away from him…but very tempted. “You are insatiable!”

“Can you blame me?” He was blushing but very sincere on his last offer. “How about dinner
tonight?-I know this quiet little Correllian place?…they have a seat in the back for me…no one will
see us.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know, Luke…”

“How about dinner at my place then?” He looked very eager. “We can do dinner and holovid…..”

She was about to agree when his comm pinged its urgent tone. He ignored it, and didn’t let that stop
him. “Please?” he asked.

Before she could reply, her comm pinged its emergency tone, then his pinged again. Both comms
were going off demanding attention.

Luke sighed and took his comm from off his belt to look at the message.

Mara stepped aside, and looked at her comm.

Both of them registered alarm at close to the same time.

“I have to go.” His voice turned serious, and the fun was over. “I have an emergency meeting with
NRI in thirty minutes. They want the Jedi.”

She nodded. “I have an emergency message from Karrde. He wants me to use the highest level of
security to contact him. I have to get to the office.”

His eyes said it all, something was not right in the galaxy.

One more kiss…one deep kiss, and he was on his way.

<<I’ll let you know about meeting later?>> she sent to him, but he was already down the hallway.
He touched her mind to wordlessly agree.
Mara tried to hide her anxiety about contacting Karrde. He was worlds away, in a different time zone, but somehow he needed her to contact him immediately.

When she got to her office, she did a quick sweep for listening devices, and any other foreign object that might hide such a thing. Finding nothing, she felt confident to open the secured comm way to Karrde. She keyed in her pass code for the first level of security, then she used her fob for the sequential code to gain access.

The screen blinked several times as it reached the party on the other end. It flickered, then came to life.

Ghent was behind the camera on the other end. His face looked pale, as if he knew something too. “Hi Mara.” He said bleakly, “Karrde’s right here.” And he switched seats with the other man.

Karrde’s usually calm demeanor was gone. He was not happy, and Mara could see what she thought was fear in his eyes.

“Hello Karrde.” She greeted him without smiling, sensing the situation was grave.

“Mara” he greeted her blankly, “We need to get you off Coruscant quickly.” He sighed before continuing. “There’s trouble coming. Leave what you need to, and come find me. Ghent will send you the rendez-vous point, then send you further coordinates when you get there.”

“I don’t understand.” She said. “What’s happening?”

He swallowed. “Byss.” He said, staring at her through the screen. “Imperial warlords are flocking there. Something is going on.”

She shook her head but didn’t comment, waiting for him.

“This morning we intercepted a deep space message, addressed to NRI headquarters. It was a recording of an Admiral Zharm…did you know him?”

Mara nodded. “He was extremely militant, and extremely loyal to the Emperor…but not so much as he thought he could run his own little Empire, and tried to take control of the Ipsis Sector.”

Karrde looked away, lost in his thoughts, and spoke. “I was going to play the recording for you, but I’ll just send you the files….you may need to take it to Organa-Solo as soon as possible. I’ll warn you it’s not pretty….after he surrenders his share of the fleet to the New Republic, he takes his life at the end.”

She listened to his words, then questioned, “Blaster in the mouth?”

Karrde nodded.

She nodded back. “That’s how most of them did it, after Endor. The others that fought on were either greedy for power, or too proud, or too cowardice to do it.” Her voice cold.

“Mara” Karrde paused before he continued. “He says some things in the vid…things like that he’s being over-powered, and not sure of what to make of what’s happening…but then he also says…” Karrde stopped, and the muscle in his cheek twitched. “that the Emperor is still alive.”

Mara blinked a few times, to make sure that she comprehended what he was saying. ‘Alive?’ she thought. ‘Impossible…I felt his death…I saw his death.’ She felt a shiver coming into her. Her breathing was increasing.
Karrde watched her face go white as a sheet, seeing the stress on her face. He did the only thing that he knew he could, and started talking, to keep her in the present and aware. “Mara…it’s not true…it’s probably a lie, aimed to set the Republic off kilter. One last stab by a desperate man…there’s no evidence of anything.”

He watched as she clutched her chest, and labored her breathing. “Mara, the only thing that we know for sure is that Zharm surrendered his fleet, there’s a building project at Byss, and he has evidence of a weapons test of what they’re building there….that’s all…there’s absolutely no proof that the Emperor is alive….none whatsoever….it’s only rumor by a doomed man.”

“Mara?” he asked.

“Mara?” he said even louder.

“Jade!” his voice stern and loud.

She snapped her head in the direction of his voice. She looked into the screen, becoming aware again of the meaning of his words, and repeated. “Just a rumor…just a rumor.” She repeated it back to him.

Karrde’s voice was stern and authoritative; the only things she could rely on in time of a crisis were direct, unflinching orders. “You need to leave in twenty-four standard hours to meet at the rendezvous coordinates in three standard days. You need to deliver the intact vid to Organa-Solo. And you need to complete these tasks. Do you understand?”

The colour was starting to come back into her face. She nodded back.

“You’ve never let me down before. Do you understand?” He asked, still keeping his stern tone.

“Yes Karrde.” She answered, regaining her calm. “I understand.” She sighed. “I’ll be there.” She tried to force her lips to smile tightly to show that she was in a clear and present frame of mind.

Karrde’s face softened. His shoulders dropped, and he nodded, relieve that she controlled herself. “Good.” He watched her and waited a bit to see that she was indeed, able to follow through.

“Clear skies, Mara… and we’ll see you soon.” He said in a tender tone.

She nodded, and said softly. “Clear skies Karrde.” Cutting the connection on the comm when the files were received. She took the data card in hand, and turned away from the unit.

She started to inhale deeply, trying to bring the calm and peace into her, just as Luke had taught her. She reached out to him, across the city, in the palace. She sensed his shock and surprise- he was just hearing the same news she had just heard.

<<Luke?>> she called out to him.

**

Han Solo was pacing the hallway a short distance from the NRI briefing room when he saw the recognizable form of a Jedi speeding towards the room. Luke was adjusting his Jedi robe as he came up to Han.

“Hey Kid.” He greeted the other man.

“Hi Han.” Luke grimaced looking at Han’s face, and knowing whatever waited him was not good.
“I see that today’s meeting pulled out all the important people.” Han growled as they began to walk together towards the room. “Fel’ya is here.”

Luke rolled his eyes but kept walking. “And Leia is not happy?” He asked in low tones, knowing that the hallway liked to throw voices.

Han stopped in the hall and tried to lighten the mood. “Well, she was very happy last night…and then again this morning.”

Luke stopped a few paces ahead of him, and turned to look at the other man.

Han was wearing the biggest lopsided smuggler’s grin. He pulled his collar of his shirt aside to show some rather passionate love-bites on his lower neck and collarbone. “You don’t have say anything, but before I got these, she mumbled something about ‘Damn Luke-not shielding’… care to explain?”


Han took a few steps to fall in line with his brother in law. “You and Jade?” he mumbled over.

From the corner of his eye, Han saw Luke nod sheepishly. “Good for you, Kid…good for you.” He said quietly, smirking, and slapped the Jedi on the back.

Han stopped at the door of the room. When Luke turned to look at him, he shook his head and said, “I wasn’t invited…I’m still being punished for Wayland….good luck in there.”

Luke nodded and replied glumly, “Thanks Han.” If it wasn’t for the fact that he was the New Republic’s only Jedi, he would be on the same side of the door as Han. A government tended not to forget when you sneak out a former Imperial operative and disobey a direct order. Han was still in the dog house for his part in saving the galaxy again.

The doors closed on the room, and session was called to order.

Luke walked to his reserved seat in the room. They had given him one for these types of meetings. There were two other empty seats at his table, whereas the other tables were full and some had delegates standing behind the ones that were sitting.

He knew what the empty seats beside him meant- a reminder to get more Jedi. And until he did, this would be his lonely seat; his job, his duty.

But today, the room wasn’t full. He noticed only key members were in the chamber; key security members.

Luke watched Leia come into the room, and the delegates hushed at giving her their full attention. Beside her, the Bothan delegate Fel’ya, and on the opposite side, a man Luke didn’t recognize, but the new man took up the seat for the head of NRI- so he assume that this man was Corran Horn, of which he had heard so much about.

Luke pulled out his data pad and prepared for the meeting.

Leia called the session to order, and addressed the room. Looking very much like the Rebellion princess her remembered, her voice took on the authoritative tone that Luke was used to.

“Delegates, and key members of the security council.” She began. “I have grave news from the Outer Rim Territory. A message was intercepted from deep space. Warlord Admiral Zharm has surrendered his share of the remnants of the Imperial Fleet to us. However, after the time of his
surrender, Admiral Zharm made some remarks concerning the state of Byss, then he took his own life.”

Luke could feel in the room both the celebration at gaining new military vessels, and the shock at the situation.

Leia continued. “Our team was able to piece together of the received vid from their outpost, we understand that there has been a weapons test that occurred, and the Admiral also makes the claim that Emperor Palpatine is still alive.”

Luke felt the room gasp as the separated parties began to huddle and talk amongst themselves.

He controlled his own shock. There was nothing new about this news; there had been several reports over the years since Endor about the Emperor being alive- all that turned out to be untrue. Something in the pit of his stomach told him that this maybe wasn’t a rumor, but he just didn’t want to believe it.

It was then that he felt the touch of Mara’s mind, calling his name. Her shock, her pain, her anguish, called to him. He reached out to her, assuring her that everything will be alright. That, was not what she wanted to hear right now.

<<Where are you?>> She asked, hasty in her tone.

<<Chamber 9115, in the security wing…it’s a closed meeting.>>He answered back.

<<Can you get me in? I have the full recording, and more.>>

Luke called one of the security droids over, and inscribed a message to Corran Horn. The droid immediately went to Commander Horn’s side and delivered the message. He watched the other man’s face as the commander read the message. Horn looked at Luke and nodded once.

Fel’ya stepped up, holding up his hands. “Colleagues” he addressed the room. “Before we come to a consensus of action we must review the recording.” He motioned to one of the pages; the lights in the room dimmed slightly, and the screen came to life.

The grainy image cleared to man in an Imperial Navy uniform, trying his best to look as stern as he could, but physically, he was trembling. The audio changed in volume as he spoke; his words cutting in and out. The words that were recognizable were ‘surrender’, ‘Byss’, ‘World Destroyer’ or ‘World Devastator’ and ‘Emperor’, and ‘alive’. Then, the man but a blaster to his mouth, and fired. The transmission cut.

The attendants in the room erupted in words, and mumblings. Luke could feel the panic surge, pressing in on his senses; he started shielding as to not absorb any of the erratic energy.

The room started to regain its composure, and the conjecture has started. Some of the room wanted to send a team to investigate, some thought it was nothing more than rumor and tripe, and a distinct portion wanted to send the Jedi out immediately. Luke sat back in his chair, saying nothing, but internally, hating politics.

Leia called the room to order again to let the organized debate begin on to what should be done. Representatives got up one at time to begin their argument.

A door security officer rushed over to Corran Horn, and whispered in his ear. Horn moved back, and paused.

Luke looked over at the man. Corran Horn was slightly younger than himself, but he could sense
something coming off the man. Maybe Mara was right about Horn’s Force talents; maybe it was time to test them.

Luke relaxed his mind, and reached out to the other man. Looking directly at him, he touched his mind. <Mara Jade is at the door…she has information that could help us.> Luke told him.

Horn’s eyes jumped right to the Jedi, as he heard what Luke just said to his mind. His eyes were wide, and blinked rapidly.

Luke assumed that no one had ever contacted him like that before. <It’s okay…it’s just me…I can’t read your mind…just sending you a message.> He sent over to Horn.

Horn, still watching Luke, spoke in low tones to the officer- the officer nodded and moved back to the door.

Luke’s attention was taken away from Horn, as Mara entered the room from the back. Silently, and without notice of the other key security members, she walked down into the chamber. He sent her an invitation to sit at his table.

She didn’t look in his direction, but took the seat at the end of his table, with one empty seat between them.

Luke could feel the touch on his mind as she sat down, assuring him that she was fine.

Luke sensed someone else’s attention on Mara- that wasn’t pleasant. Borsk Fel’ya sat up when he saw her sitting at the Jedi’s table, his Bothan fur ruffled.

The Bothan stood up, and interrupted the debate. “We have a visitor in our chamber, perhaps she would be so kind as to introduce herself to the chamber, and state her business here.” Fel’ya snarled, and gestured in Mara’s direction.

Mara stood up, and Luke watched as she kept the same composure as she had shown days ago during her questioning at Bremem’s hearing.

“My name is Mara Jade. I am the Liaison to the New Republic on behalf of the Smuggler’s Alliance.” She said clearly and confidently to the room- the room responded in whispers. Luke sensed their ambivalence towards her and her Imperial past that had been revealed days ago.

But she continued. “I have brought a copy of the video that you have just seen, and two other files.” She handed the data card to a droid. “These files were obtained by one of the associates of the Smuggler’s Alliance who was travelling close to the Byss system, and intercepted the transmission. They were sent to me by a secure comm channel this morning by Talon Karrde.”

Fel’ya’s fur still rippled as she spoke. Luke felt the distain he had for her, bordering on contempt. Since Mara had revealed how close her connection had been to the Empire, and the Emperor, there had been a distinct suspicion of her, and her motives; no matter if she helped the New Republic gain access to battle-class Dreadnaughts, save the galaxy from another civil war, and almost gave her life. The Republic was not about to forgive her for her past.

Corran Horn took the card from the droid, and place it in the player.

Mara sat back down, and Luke could sense that she was preparing to watch the vid.

The image was clearer, and the sound was fully complete. The Admiral’s voice was proud and stern, just as any Imperial’s had been, but it began to tremble and flounder over simple words as he spoke.
A bead of sweat was clear as it rolled down the side of his face, his eyes quivered. At the end, he gained his composure just before he raised the blaster to his mouth. And the video cut.

In the dim light, Luke looked over at Mara; she didn’t flinch. Like a statue she sat, not moving, staying composed…not a crack. Luke knew that this was not good; she was shielding, not letting anything slip, even to him.

Horn then motioned for the droid to play the second file. It was an audio file- series of blips and squeaks, clearly an Imperial code of some sorts. The third file contained the same sorts of sounds. Luke vaguely remembered hearing something of the sort on Hoth when a probe droid was discovered.

The lights came back up in the room, and the attendees were no less disturbed than the first time they had seen the message.

Even Fel’ya was rattled, and an agitated Bothan was not a good thing; and Luke could sense it was directed at Mara. He cleared his throat, looking at Mara directly. “We thank you for your assistance here, and you are dismissed.” He growled in her direction.

Corran Horn stood up, and interjected, looking at Mara, and asked, “Ms. Jade, do you know anything about the two other files that were intercepted?”

She nodded, and asked quietly, “Can you please play the first one again?”

Horn motioned at the droid, and recording replayed sounding of bleeps and squeaks. Mara listened, eyes on the ground, concentrating.

“Again please?” she asked- it played again.

“One more time?—and may I have piece of filmsy and something to write with?” she asked.

Fel’ya was at the end of his patience. “This is all very entertaining but we have droids who can decipher code…”

Horn looked at him, and interrupted him. “If she can do it now, that will save us time from cracking the code…”

The Bothan’s fur puffed at his chin and he growled in the direction of Horn. “I’m sure the Emperor’s Hand has more important things to do than be here…”

Luke jumped from the table and pounded his hand on the table, glaring and pointed directly at Fel’ya, “Don’t you ever call her that again!” His voice enhanced by the Force. “This Republic has asked for her service before, and she’s done it- without hesitation- she is no longer in alliance with the Empire, and it would be good for this committee to remember that.”

Leia stood up at the same time that Luke did, but his words carried in the room first. She looked over at her brother, sensing his anger. She sent him calming thoughts, bringing him in focus. She knew that he was protective over Mara- for many reasons, other than he was in love with her.

Those in the chamber seemed shocked that the Jedi responded in such a manner. Luke adjusted his robes, and sat back down, now disgusted with those around him. He had to breathe deep several times to bring calm back into himself.

Fel’ya sat back down in his chair, slowly, watching Luke in awe.
Corran Horn motioned for the droid to play the recording again at Mara’s request.

One more time, and she scribbled something down on the filmsy, then handed it over to the droid to give to Horn. “I believe those to be the coordinates of where the fleet is resting, and the recognition code that should be hailed when approaching the fleet.” She said to the room.

Horn nodded, accepting the filmsy. “I hate to ask this of you Ms. Jade. But would you consider listening to the second recording again?”

Mara nodded. Her face distant as the file played. When it finished, she squinted at nothing in the air, and looked up about to ask for it to be played again. The room was silent as she listened. Her eyes darted back and forth, in concentration.

She looked up Horn again, and he motioned for it to be played again…as the sounds started, she spoke as it played, “…confirming location of test site…. Aniad system determined, and location set…target determined and confirmed…target locked….test commence….test initiated….test confirmed….target destroyed….completed assessment of functionality of World Devastator…confirmed fully operational…..” She paused, and swallowed before she said, “…inform his Majesty.”

Mara sat back into her chair, putting her head down, and controlling her breathing. The room was in awe of her.

Luke watched her; her hand resting on her lap started to shiver, only perceptible to him. He reached out to her, covering her in warmth. He knew he couldn’t hold her right then and there, but if he could, he would never let her go.

Mara looked up at Corran Horn, and stood up. He acknowledged her. “May I please be excused from this assembly? – I feel that I have nothing else to submit to this meeting.”

Horn looked at her, amazed that she was even keeping it together. “Yes you may, Ms. Jade. The New Republic is once again in your debt- We sincerely thank you.”

Mara turned heel on the chamber and walked towards the doors without looking at Luke; but he felt the touch out her mind as she left. <<I’ll be in the hangar, please come find me?>> she begged him.

<Of course.> he answered. <As soon as I can.>

The meeting resumed- and Luke felt her shields agonizingly crumble.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

**
I’ve recently done ‘reader math’…because I’m an accountant in the real world…and because I’m anal like that…

So I have figured out that there are about 50-100 or so, of you that read each chapter…now, that number significantly increases when I post smut…so I’m a-thinking that means that some of you are re-reading the smut chapter…ah…my little smutlings…how I love yee.
I appreciate each and every one of you. You keep me going. I must admit that the last time I went on a writing kick, it didn’t last long and that was mostly because I didn’t get any feedback….none whatsoever, so I’m really enjoying this.

This is not a beg for feedback but just to let you know that it really does make a difference.

Thank you so much for reading!

**
She paced around the shipping hull inside the Z-95 Headhunter. She mentally checked off all the things that she was able to recover from her office and apartment since she had returned from the unscheduled morning meeting.

She was still numb, and distinctly not allowing herself to feel anything. Not here, not now.

Mara Jade started to recall her steps after the morning meeting.

The office was easy- it was designed to be dismantled with minimal amount of effort. Before beginning the takedown, she checked her comm unit one more time.

There, she had a sudden explanation as to why Karrde wanted her out of the system so hastily. He had sent over the encrypted message of a death mark notice.

*Her death mark notice. A price was now put on the former Emperor’s Hand, to be silenced at all costs; forty thousand Imperial credits for a confirmed kill.*

It was dated for the day that she had testified at the Breemem hearing. Her quarry had a few days head start and were probably already making plans, and tracking her movements- she would have been.

She was a risk the Imperial fractions were not willing to take; one their own who had turned against them, and had done it openly.

It now made sense why Karrde gave her the information that he did. He had also sent over one more...
file, to be given to the head of NRI.

Mara keyed in the comm number for Coran Horn- the benefits of being a former spy was having access to information that people didn’t believe you could have access to. She set up a meeting in the Rogue’s hangar at 1500 hours.

She looked around the office, deciding what to take. She had specifically set it up with the need to have it taken down in less than an hour.

Smugglers had never been trusting of any sense of permanency, and that suited Mara just fine.

Her apartment was more effort. She had just started to get memories there.

As she went through the kitchen, disposing of food that would never get used, then boxing what could be donated, and finally leaving specialty foods that she had bought for a specific person—she left those in the cooler-so that he could come retrieve them.

Lucky for her that she was never a truly sentimental person, so her home lacked nick-knacks and other items that would require to be packed and cherished enough to be thought of.

But while in her apartment, she pushed the dining room table and chairs to a corner, to bring inside the smaller furniture that was on the patio. It looked like a necessary congestion, and she tried not to think about how much she enjoyed being on that patio in the evenings.

When she came to the living room, a small stain on the sofa reminded her of how it got there. Just the night before, it was evidence of their love-making. It had to be removed.

A little cleanser, and a slight scrubbing, and the stain lifted. Gone.

In the ‘resher, she packed all her personal items in one case.

In the bedroom, she packed what she deemed would be necessary in camp or in the field.

Since coming to the Capital, she hadn’t felt the need to be fully armed when she walked around the halls.

She had been only wearing his – her lightsaber on a daily basis; more for comfort than anything really need to protect herself.

Mara removed a black box from under her bed, and opened the lid. Her wrist holster and blaster rested inside, next to two vibroblades. She wrapped the holster around her forearm, and picked up the blaster. It felt right and comfortable in her hand and head; like something that knew her as much as she knew it. She dropped out the power pack to check it. The newer pack was fully charged. It was a gift from him.

She slipped the pack into the blaster, and the blaster into its holster.

The vibroblades fit neatly into the sides of her boots.

She packed the clothing that she assumed she would need, efficiently into a case. No room for soft sheer dresses; only work tunics, jumpsuits and coveralls.

Mara turned her attention to the dresser beside the bed. She picked up the small vile that was mingled among the other decorative bottles. She wrapped it with another piece of clothing to protect it inside the case.
She lifted the top shelf inside her jewelry box, and pulled out the small black velvet bag that she had retrieve from her former suite, she would carry it downstairs with her, outside of a case, and would later tuck it inside her jacket for safe keeping.

She packed all the undergarments she would need too. Nothing lacy or seductive- no room for it.

She changed the sheets on the bed, and made sure to tuck all the corners down. Making it as she would like it, should she ever return- knowing that was probably not going to happen.

She took her cases downstairs.

She took the case for the portable comm unit and placed it beside the antique cabinet in the foyer, knowing that she was leaving it there for someone to find.

And she did one more sweep of the apartment.

As she came back into the kitchen, a single red rose in a vile on the counter made her stop.

She choked. Surprised by her own feelings, she felt her eyes immediately watering.

No.

She stopped herself. There’s no time for this.

‘You do not cry.’ She told herself; and she choked it back again, not allowing a tear.

And walked out of the kitchen…

Mara walked to the foyer and put on her jacket, concealing her wrist blaster, placed the small black velvet bag inside the left pocket; she lifted her cases to leave the apartment.

Seeing that she had space in her arms to carry one more thing, she looked back at the kitchen.

Her face softened.

In a rush, she dropped the cases, ran to the kitchen and picked up the tender rose vile and nestled it in her arms, making sure not to crush it, and then positioned the handle of the cases in her hands as she left the apartment.

How could she leave something so precious to her?

And now, there it was, tucked into a corner of the galley of the Headhunter; the red rose in its vile. She secured it there, making sure it had enough water for the trip. Its fragrance was already filling the small space.

Back in the cargo hold, Mara checked again the fastenings of her cases in the storage, and satisfied that she had brought what she needed, she walked back towards the cockpit.

She confirmed her time for departure. Antilles was able to get her a window for 0800 hours the following morning- just in time for Karrde’s time allotment. She checked the coordinates that were sent to her, and plotted her trip in the nav computer.

She heard something outside the ship. Then it became clearer- a voice was calling from the deck.

Mara left her seat, to see who it could be and reached out. It didn’t feel like him—she wasn’t ready to see him just yet. What would she tell him?
She walked down the ramp to see most of the body of someone wearing a NRI uniform. The body ducked below the ramp, with a face that she recognized.

“Hello there.” He said. “I came when the meeting broke up, just as you had requested.”

Corran Horn stood at the base of the ramp looking up at her.

“Yes, please come abroad.” Mara said, and waved him up the ramp.

Most people didn’t get a personal invitation to her ship, but he did.

He had a gate to his walk that Mara sensed was uniquely a Corellian thing, and his allover sense was one of that of a capable man with the smarts that one needed to survive in the galaxy. Also, he had a distinctive Force aura, even if he wasn’t aware of it.

He looked around the ship, appreciating the compact size, with all the amenities, and nodded with his own thoughts of approval.

“I’d like to thank you again for your assistance this morning…I don’t know what we would have done if you weren’t able to crack that code on the spot. It probably would have taken a droid at least a week to do.” He said, trying to read her.

She knew this—everyone tried to read her at least upon meeting her for the first time.

“You’re welcome.” Mara said in her stoic tone, and she put on a polite smile, just to confirm that she wasn’t a droid as most people thought she was when they first met her.

Horn wasn’t a stranger, as they had met the day of the Bremem hearing, but it was brief and not much was said. Plus, she had been in a less than receptive mood at the time.

“I called you here because I have some more information.” She said, “But I couldn’t pass it on to you in the session.” She motioned for Horn to sit down in the galley with her.

“Of course.” He said. “Out of curiosity, I was wondering why?” His eyes looking at her, but not with suspicion as she suspected he would.

Mara turned to the console, and started to transfer the data she had received to a card. “Talon Karrde had enemies in that room.” She looked back at the other man. “And so do I… if you haven’t noticed. If I had come out with this information outright, I probably would have found myself in a detention cell by now.”

The card reader blinked and she took it out and handed it him. Horn looked at it, then back at her.

“It’s more data on the status of Byss, and the surrounding system. It will show the plots of several large vessels- most likely Victory-class Star Destroyers – all massing in or around Byss.” Mara said.

She sat at the station, and looked directly at him. “I don’t like to give my opinion on certain things, but in this instance, I think you should know that Imperial fractions are probably planning a series of hit and run attacks—it’s the usually pattern of this sort of massing—to head out from one direct point and scatter…no one direct enemy to fight, and random.”

She looked away. “It would surprise me if one of these attacks didn’t include Coruscant. Thrawn was planning it- it wouldn’t be uncommon for another Admiral to attempt the same thing. And given the speed of how quickly they are coming together, it wouldn’t surprise me if the planet had less than sixty days before that attack.”
She was holding something back, but she had nothing to lose. She wasn’t sure if she should say it; open accusations don’t go away easily, and it could just as well be interpreted as revenge against someone who didn’t like her, but it was true, and maybe Horn already knew. “Watch the Bothans… they’ve been playing both sides for a while now…they want to be on the winning side. When they start to leave, an attack isn’t far behind.”

Horn’s eyes widened, and he nodded. “I’ve heard the same thing.” He mumbled.

Mara looked at him, slightly surprised.

“My wife…” he paused. “She has certain contacts as well.” He chuckled to himself, and flapped the card in his hands. “You smugglers are a tight knit bunch…but when you want to help out…you have your own terms of what ‘helping’ is.”

She sat quietly, waiting for him to explain.

“My wife’s name is Mirax Terrik.” He said, hoping she would catch on. Mara sat back for a moment. “Booster Terrik?” she asked.

Horn winked. “You got it…she’s his daughter.” He looked at her. “So I’ve got a soft spot for smugglers. I understand them better than most do.”

She nodded. “I was supposed to be negotiating a bid proposal for one of his smaller associates today…before…”

“Really?” he looked surprised. “Sometimes the galaxy is smaller than everyone thinks.”

Mara nodded in agreement with his statement. If she was in a better mood, or any mood at all and not the state where she couldn’t feel anything, she would say that Horn was pleasant and comfortable to be around. Furthermore, he seemed to be comfortable with her and her past and present.

“I’ll be sure to pass this on to the next Head of NRI. He’ll sure have a pile of stuff to deal with.” He said.

“You’re not staying as the Head of NRI?” she asked.

“No” he paused to scratch his head. “Since they decided to fully prosecute Bremem, they also decided that they need a more permanent option for the position…. Besides I’ve been called to join The Rogue Squadron…which is kinda more where I’d like to be…there are a lot of veterans that are coming back too… and they’re calling up ranks.” He figured that she would probably know before the general populace anyhow. “We’ve had other threats that we have to deal with too.”

Mara’s lips tighten. “I understand. The New Republic has no shortage of enemies.”

They stayed quiet for a moment, and she could sense there was something that he wanted to ask her. His mind was flipping over and over again.

She narrowed her eyes at him, it was starting to irritate her, her patience was limited today, and it finally got to her. “So what did you want to know? – you’re trying to figure out how to ask me something.”

Horn looked a little shocked at her. “Um…yeah…but I didn’t think you’d answer it.”

“You can ask.” Mara encouraged him. “I don’t get offended easily.”
He took a moment, and pointed to gesture rather than accuse. “Right then, before you asked if I had any questions…did you- did you just read my mind?—I-I know you’re training to be a Jedi, and I thought…”

She shook her head. “I can’t read your mind, but I can read your senses…when you’re projecting….that’s how I knew.”

He nodded. “And Jedi Skywalker…can he read minds too?”

Mara shook her head again. “No… but he has been known to do the ‘Jedi Mind Trick’…he doesn’t like to do it, but he can.”

Horn looked a little shaken.

Mara felt she shouldn’t pursue it, but she didn’t have the luxury of time to draw out what she wanted to know. “I understand that you’re Force sensitive.”

He looked at her, extremely surprised. “I-I don’t tell anyone…how did you…?”

“Iella Wessiri mentioned it to myself and Jedi Skywalker.” She said. “She said you had a lightsaber, and that you were ‘strange.’” She smiled tightly. “We’re all called ‘strange’ until we figure it out…our connection to the Force.”

She continued. “You seem a little on edge this morning when I came in the room….did something happen before I got there?…other than the obvious.”

Horn looked around, but then back at her. “Yeah, Jedi Skywalker…he…uh…” He tapped the side of his head a few times.

“He spoke to you in your mind?” She asked.

He nodded.

“Yeah, he likes to do that.” She grumbled. “I told him not to do it unless he warns the other person first.”

“It felt like…like…” He tried to find the right words.

“Nails on a board?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Exactly.”

She grimaced and nodded. “He was testing you… to see if you were Force –sensitive as he suspected.”

Horn watched her for a further explanation.

“I’ll let him know not to do that again. He’s sometimes too eager to be in contact with other Force-users.” She said. “I’ll also let him know that your information isn’t general knowledge.”

He seemed to relax at that. “So he won’t make me join him?”

“No…he’s just curious right now. He’s working on learning more before he takes on another student.” She confirmed. “But when you’re ready, I’m sure he’d answer any questions for you. He’s more approachable when he’s away from the public spotlight.”
She put on a smile for him that was a little brighter. “Perhaps when the Rogues ask him out for one of their drinking parties?…he’s been known to join them for those.”

Horn smiled bigger to her. “Maybe I just might do that.”

But he paused again. “I have really no place to ask this…and it’s none of my business…we just met…but… are you and he?…ah, forget it…I’m sorry I even thought about it…” He dropped his head, started mumbling about how stupid it was to ask.

Mara stopped and thought about it. If Horn was looking to be a Jedi- they would have no secrets eventually. Besides, he had divulged what he sought to protect, there was no reason to let this one slip.

“Yes, we are…rather recently too.” She said quietly.

Horn looked up at her, and smiled. “Ahh…I wasn’t sure…but the two of you…when you’re together…there’s just a….I dunno….it just seems right.”

He shook his head. “My wife always worried if I was to try to become a Jedi that we would have to separate…and…”

Mara nodded. “That was the Old Order—Luke hasn’t decided anything like that, yet…he also doesn’t feel it’s his decision to make.”

He nodded his head slowly, appearing to be glad to hear that the rules weren’t set in stone, as if this Jedi-thing didn’t sound like a bad idea. “My grandfather…” he said, “was allowed to have a family by the council.” Horn smiled.

“I understand.” She said.

He relaxed even more. “Ah…I should be going…Jedi Skywalker seemed eager to find you earlier….he’s probably on his way over here.”

“He has a meeting with the delegation from Malastare this afternoon.” Mara confirmed. “He might be around later.”

She hadn’t reached out to Luke after the meeting, and she could sense that he was indeed eager to find her. She didn’t look forward to it; with him, she was able to let down her emotional guard that she had spent years building. It surprised her that within a few hours that she was able to put most of it back up again, or did she?

Horn got up and saunter back towards the ramp—Solo! That was who his walk reminded her of!

“Thank you again for all the information. I hope to see you again soon.” He said grinning politely.

“You’re welcome, and thank you too.”

“Clear Skies, Jade.” And saluted her.

“Clear Skies, Commander Horn.” She raised the two fingers to her temple, and saluted him in a manner that still felt way too casual for her.

“Ah” He turned around, “Call me ‘CorSec’.” And winked, then walked away.

Mara watched him walk down the ramp.
Then, as easily as she was able to put on the fake pretense of being amicable, the tenseness started to grow again inside her.

She waited for a bit, standing at the top of the ramp. There was an airflow there that came into the ship. It caught the fringe of her hair and lifted it then brought it back down. She stood there, trying to let in the calmness that eluded her, and it gave her time to think.

Once, she was able to get her emotions under control, and the shock of the news; she could think these things out clearly.

Horn wasn’t a stupid man, and he wasn’t flippant about the information she gave him, or what he had heard in the morning. Perhaps if he wasn’t reacting severely to the information then maybe she shouldn’t either. After all, he dealt with the direct sources that confirmed this information, or he was just good at hiding what he was feeling, just in a different manner than she did?

Somehow though, it just didn’t feel right; any of it.

The Imperial fractions, she knew, hated each other. Each warlord, each man who named himself an ‘Admiral’, was fighting for their own interests. Why would they agree to join forces now?

Could another ‘Thrawn-type’ find the charisma to bring them together? Or have enough power to scare them into obedience?

What sort of leader could do such a thing?

The only answer she had was –The Emperor.

Mara shook her head. Surely, she would have sensed Him by now, if He was alive?—but that was impossible. Or was it?

The things she saw Him do. The things He could do. All that power.

Images flashed in her mind – images, that she didn’t want to have; crashing in on her again. She could feel the pain and cold coming in to her; knowing they were just memories did not make it any easier to fight off.

She stepped away from the space, back into the craft, and started breathing deep to clean out these feelings.

‘If Luke was here, it would be easier.’ she thought, ‘He does this without any effort.’

As an afterthought, it occurred to her that she couldn’t always rely on him- she would have to learn how to fight these feelings. Just as she once fought off the compulsion to kill him, she could fight the Darkness that wanted to overtake her….by herself.

He seemed to know when she needed him- a warm touch was on the outskirts of her mind. Staying back, but present. Wherever he was right now, he must have sensed that she wanted him to be there too.

<Soon> he said. <I'll be there soon.> He could sense the lingering reprimand that she gave herself for relying on him. <I need you too.>

She composed herself. <<Where are you?>>

<The Malastare meeting is just breaking up in the palace. I'm on my way.> He sent back.
<<I’m at the Headhunter.>> She informed him.

He seemed a little surprised that she was there and not in his personal hangar, but accepted it as the location as to where to find her.

While she waited, she prepared her cabin for the night. This hangar was secure. If she went out into the palace, there might be a chance, however slim, that a bounty hunter was looking for her.

Normally, she would have blown off anything of the nature of a death mark – she had several placed on her over the years, but she knew what sort of deception could lurk in the palace. Now, she was not only in jeopardy, but those around her too, including Luke.

She packed her things that she would need on this trip away in the drawers, and made her way back to the galley.

Mara could sense Luke before he got there. And without invitation, he bounded up the ramp into the Headhunter.

He looked taxed, but it didn’t stop him from immediately coming close to her, and wrapping his arms around her.

Mara just let him. She didn’t lean into it, and she didn’t wrap her arms around him too. She didn’t know why.

She was numb, and not sure of what to do.

He must have sensed it, and felt her body not respond to him in the way he was used to.

Luke pulled back from the embrace and looked concerned into her blank eyes. “Mara?” he whispered. “Are you alright?”

She blinked heavy, looking into his face, and forced a tight smile. “Yes.” She said devoid of feeling.

His face sank into deeper concern. “No you’re not.” He growled, wrapping his arms around her again. He reached out, and found the words. <You’re safe here…I’m here…you’re safe.>

It was like he gave her permission to feel again, and all her emotions dropped.

She clutched his shoulders and her body began to convulse involuntarily as she started to tearlessly sob.

“He’s back, Luke…He’s back.” Her hands dug into him as if to burrow herself in his protection. She felt her body begin to give way, and slump to the deck.

Luke caught her, and lowered to the floor with her, rocking her in his arms; shocked with the level of fear coming off of her.

It was her body releasing what she had tried to hold in since she had heard the news, and watched the video. Over the past year, she had learned to start to feel again; having to close in her emotions, even for as short a time as it was, had severe repercussions on her.

He held and rocked her until the seizures in her limbs stopped. She lifted her head and he saw the shaking in her eyes.

“It’s a rumor, Mara…it’s nothing more than a rumor.” He said to her, also trying to convince himself.
She swallowed, and was fighting to bring back her composure.

“No, Luke…it isn’t.” Her eyes started to clear, and logic was coming back. “There are signs…signs that everyone is missing. And…” She looked directly at him, “you’ve felt it too…the darkness.”

He sighed, knowing that she was partially right. “I have. But, there’s always some sort of darkness in the galaxy that I can feel…that I can sense. It’s always too allusive to pinpoint.”

“But you know this is different, you can feel it, right?” Her voice was begging him. <<Please don’t think I’m crazy.>>

Luke looked away from her, then back at her face. “Yes…this is different.” He brought up his hand to rub his face. “It’s not a distinct as it was when He was here…but there’s something. I still can’t sense what it truly is, though.”

“I heard it, on the recording.” Mara was trying to find logical proof to her reasoning. “When they said ‘Inform His Majesty’—they wouldn’t have used those words if they didn’t recognize someone in that position…they just wouldn’t have…it’s not protocol.”

He was stroking her hair, trying to get her to further calm herself.

“The warlords…” She was swallowing hard, choking it back. “The Admirals…they wouldn’t even join up with Thrawn…they wouldn’t come together unless…someone ordered them to.”

Her breathing was starting to return to normal. “And Zharm…the only reason he wouldn’t join Him is because he knew that he couldn’t…Zharm had started to make his alliances on Ipsis refer to him as ‘Emperor’…Palpatine would never allow someone who assumed the name to live…Zharm knew he was doomed.”

Luke listened to her; all of it was making sense, he couldn’t deny it. Her reasoning made complete sense.

“Mara” he said, “I saw Him die…on the second Death Star…it’s not Him.”

Her face blanched at him. “I saw Him die too, Luke…and I saw Him come back too. You can’t tell me that you don’t believe that he had the power to come back.”

His face looked at her as if he disbelieved her words. “What do you mean that you saw Him come back?”

Mara swallowed before beginning. “Before the second Death Star, one of His advisors, Kren Blista-Vanee, was suspected of treason. The Emperor felt that Vanee would only attempt a coupe if he felt that Palpatine was weak enough to overthrow.”

She could feel herself tensing up again with the memories. “Palpatine arranged to stage His death in front of Vanee. Only, He didn’t die, He transferred his energy into one of those holocrons, similar to what Deek and Almae showed us…I didn’t know what it was at the time…and I saw Him do it.”

She continued but her eyes came back from their far away place. “When Vanee’s assistant tried to destroy His empty body, Palpatine had His proof of treason; except, Vanee’s assistant was working alone, and was immediately terminated; Vanee had all suspicion removed from him. And Palpatine was able to come back into His body.”

Her voice and body were sturdy as she told him; not wavering on any of what she just told him.
“He cheated death once…He could do it again.” She said quietly.

Karrde once told Luke that he would never hear the full story of Mara- and all the things she knew—he didn’t doubt it, but he had hoped that one day he could know her better than anyone else did, and know these things too.

If this was an example of the things that she saw in Palpatine’s court, then he truly questioned if there was going to be any end to it; for the galaxy, and for her.

Luke watched her face intently, waiting for his Mara to come back from the past in her mind; just by holding her, he could feel her relaxing into him; not putting up the illusion of feeling, but actually feeling again.

“Do you sense Him? Do you hear Him?” He asked, not wanting to hear the answers.

Mara knew the only way to answer his question was to see for herself. She knew she had the ability to reach across the galaxy. Since Endor, she had refused to do it.

At first, she believed that all of her power had only come from the Emperor. As she learned more about her power, she had also begun to fear certain aspects; if she had any abilities that seemed beyond the capabilities of any other Force-user, she was leery of it.

Even Luke, with all his strength, did not have the ability to communicate beyond the distance of a planet or a system.

But she knew she had to answer the questions he had posed at her for herself, even if that meant reaching and possibly touching something that she feared more than death; Him.

She needed the answer, and she needed it now.

With Luke beside her, she felt that she could bring herself back- he grounded her like no one else did.

So, slowly, Mara relaxed her mind and closed her eyes….and sent out her senses.

Luke felt her stretch out her senses as far as they could go; her sense in the Force, so broad and grand as he never felt her reach before. She had always been so guarded of her talent in the Force, protective, and only revealing what she wanted him to see.

He felt the surge of energy come within her. The sheer scope of her power would be immeasurable if she would only let herself be fully trained.

Luke looked at her in awe; it was both a thing of beauty and of strength- the power within her. He was dumbfounded. Not since Master Yoda had he sensed anything remotely close to another’s Force power. Here, Mara’s power was raw and carnal…and electrifying.

Mara withdrew her senses, panting from the exertion. “No” she finally said. “No, I can’t feel Him.”

Luke blinked away his amazement at her, and felt the peace coming into her at finding nothing.

Although the moment didn’t call for it, he so much wanted to press his lips to her and swear his undying love for her. She was truly his match, he knew it…he had always known it from the moment they had met….he was determined to make her his.

He smiled at her, rubbing her shoulders. He touched her mind. <See? There’s nothing there.>
She nodded, leaning into him, relieved.

Luke held her there for a while. When she pulled back, he could see more of the composed woman he knew.

Her hand reached out and touched his face, thankful for him.

Mara leaned in, and found his lips. She closed her eyes as she pursed her mouth to his. <<Thank you.>> She sent over to him.

He pulled back slowly. <You’re welcome.> He sent serenely over to her. “Now, let’s get you up off this deck.” He smiled at her, and got a genuine smile back.

Luke stood up and held out his hand to bring her up. She stood up with no effort, and into his embrace.

As he held her, he looked around at the familiar galley- similar in many respects to the Skipray Blastboat they had shared while on their way to rescue Karrde off the Chimera. Only, the galley on the Headhunter was more-spacious, and looked more lived-in than the Skipray.

He paid a bit more attention to the galley now; he started to notice that it was full, as if she was preparing to go somewhere.

Luke turned to look at her. Mara’s face dropped a little.

“I didn’t get a chance to tell you this morning, after the meeting…” She started. “Karrde ordered me off the planet.” Her voice got quiet. “I closed down the Smuggler’s Alliance today, and I leave tomorrow morning.”

Luke shook his head. “But you can’t leave…we just…we just started…” He was at a loss for words.

“I have to, Luke.” She couldn’t look at him as she told him. “It’s my…” she paused, knowing that it was a feeble excuse, “job.”

She could feel his anger rising.

“It may be your job, Mara…but it’s our lives!” He said slightly louder than his normal speaking voice. “We’ve made so much progress…you’ve made so much progress…does he not know this?”

“It’s not a question of us, Luke.” Her own voice grew in volume as she spoke. “There’s something coming—you heard the reports today…the planet has maybe sixty days before an attack…maybe… and that’s if the Imperial forces haven’t already starting making plans.”

Her eyes glowered at him, but not because she was angry with him, just angry at what a twist their lives had taken in such a short time. Only this morning they were wrapped in each other’s arms, bodies pressed together- now the galaxy was forcing them apart.

“And, Karrde is thinking of my safety too.” She walked away from him, and pressed the display on the console.

Luke walked over to the image and saw the message calling for her death notice.

“They’re probably already looking for me, and targeting me for a mark.” Her voice softened, and his face lost its hard edges.

“It’s safer for me in Karrde’s camp. I can hide there, rather protected. My movements won’t be
predictable.” Mara reasoned with him.

She walked towards him, and took his hand, coming into his space. “I’m not leaving you…I’m just leaving here.”

Luke looked into her eyes, seeing the same pain he was feeling in his chest. He knew she didn’t want to leave…she didn’t want to leave him.

He reached over for her cheek and brought her in for a kiss. It was hard enough for her to do what she did today, he didn’t need to add to the pressure with his own demands of her. If she had to leave to be more protected, then he could accept that, eventually.

<I don’t like it.> He confessed, and resigned himself to her leaving.

Mara sensed his pain; it was hers too.

<<Do you sometimes feel that we’re being punished for our happiness?>> She asked him.

His lips left hers, and he rested against her forehead. <It feels that way, sometimes…doesn’t it?>

Her anguished eyes agreed. She stepped back to the console.

She felt she had to get out what she needed to say, and it made sense to her to start with her instructions.

“I’m leaving you my apartment key, and there’s a portable comm unit…one of Karrde’s special ones, by the cabinet in the foyer…there’s a pass key for it, and sequence code fob to log on…you’ll be able to contact me wherever we go.” She thought she was rambling, but didn’t care.

“I’ve already spoke with Karrde- he’s given permission for you to visit our bases—you can rendezvous with us whenever you can. The only thing he asks is that you bring something other than an X-wing, and not to broadcast on a New Republic channel…if you need a scrubbed one, I can get one for you.” She was babbling now.

Luke listened to her, amazed that she had still the presence of mind to think of him, in her world, and was making the effort to see that they were not separated. He felt more secure that he was not losing her. It was just a hurdle they had to face. And face it together, just apart.

“You need to get Leia, Han and the twins off the planet soon…some rim world…one that has no possible reason to be on anyone’s radar. The doctors…you have to get them off too…and all their information.”

He stepped up to her. “Shhh…” he wanted to quiet her racing mind, “It will all get done in good time…all of it…I promise.”

Mara nodded. It was starting to dawn on her that they had precious few hours left together.

“What time is your departure window?” He asked quietly.

“0-800 hours.” She answered back.

Luke nodded silently, and making a decision. “I’m going to call in a favor of the Rogues, and get an escort for you off planet until you’re in hyperspace.” He said.

Mara opened her mouth to argue, but he put up a hand. “I’d feel better if you did.” He looked directly into her eyes, leaving no room for argument.
“And while I go do that, go pack an overnight bag. You’re staying at my place tonight, not on this bucket of bolts.”

Luke turned his back to go down the ramp. <I’ll be right back.>

She smiled and shook her head at how protective he could be of her.

Mara went to her cabin and packed the essentials for an overnight stay. She wished she brought with her something some attractive than her black sleeping shift- he had seen her in it already, and not at her best that night. Though it was cozy and made her feel safe…just like the ugly socks he hated; she stuffed them in her bag too.

Luke came back into the ship. “Okay, Wedge is on it…he’s going to fly it himself…and I’m going to be his wingman.”

Mara shook her head. “Please Luke, just Wedge, okay?” she went quite again, and made a confession that was all too true for her. “I don’t think I’ll be able to leave if I see you tomorrow morning.”

He came in close, and nodded, understanding her meaning. Having her beside him for one more night was his selfish wish.

She looked over at the duffle bag, and he swooped down and picked it up, and put it over his shoulder, and put his arm around her to guide her out.

Mara sealed the hatch, and followed after him.

She could sense the eyes of the other Rogues on them as they left together; all of them were smiling.

He sensed it too. <They like us.>

She nodded. << Coran Horn says that we feel right.>>

Luke looked over at her as they walked. “When did he say that?” He had stretched out his senses when they got to the corridor, determined that nothing was going to happen to her on their way to his place.

“He came over to meet with me today…I had some other information for him.” She said, her voice distant as she was sensing for the same thing he was.

It wasn’t common knowledge so she switched to a way to communicate without sharing with the palace. <<He said you reached out to him today.>>

Luke cringed. <I got the feeling he didn’t like that.>

<<He wasn’t prepared for it…that’s all…like the first time you tried that with me.>>

Luke shot her a sideways glance, still alert.

<<He doesn’t want his Force heritage revealed…he’s quite protective about it.>>

She could sense that he wanted to ask more. <<His grandfather was granted permission by the Jedi council to marry and have a family.>>

He nodded.
<<I told him to come and find you when there isn’t a crowd. He has a lot of questions. He’s stepping down from the Head of NRI…and he was asked to come join Rogue Squadron.>>

Luke nodded again, still concentrating, and mumbled, “Yeah, Wedge was trying to find a way to ask me to come back too.”

They had walked to the Palisade Building with not a hint of any danger, or press.

<I don’t sense anything.> He commented, as he called the turbolift.

<<Me neither…I figure that forty thousand Imperial credits isn’t what it used to be…besides, anyone who is willing to go after that bounty, and get paid in Imperial funds is probably so sloppy that we would sense it a mile away.>>

They got on and up to his apartment with no incident. When they got inside, Luke put down her bag in the bedroom and walked around the apartment to pull the drapes closed.

Mara watched him, as she took off her jacket, and started to disarm herself, still keeping everything in reach.

When he was satisfied, he turned back to her, and tried to sound as normal as possible. “So, I did promise you dinner and a holovid tonight, right?” He was trying to lighten the impending mood of the night.

Luke watched as her wrist holster and blaster came off, and the vibroblades came out of her boots as she slipped them off, and she unclipped her lightsaber from her belt, then undid her belt.

Mara looked up at him as she was getting a strange reading from him, and raised an eyebrow.

“That, was quite possibly the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen you do.” Luke smirked weakly at her.

She snorted just once.

“Why do you do that to me?” She shook her head. “How is it that you get me to laugh, even when I don’t want to?”

Luke was still smirking, as he took off his Jedi robe, and laid it over a chair.

She walked over to him and eyed him up and down. “This is very nice, Jedi.” She murmured as she fingered the dark leather tabard he was wearing. “You look very official.” She said, appreciating him.

She placed a soft kiss on his lips.

<You like it?> He asked.

<<I do.>>

He was going to miss the touch of her mind on his.

“How about I make some dinner?” He said when they lips separated.

“What are you going to make?” She asked.

“I don’t know, but I do have food in the house – so that’s a start.” He answered honestly.
He turned away from her and started to rummage through his kitchen. Mara came up beside him to add to the search party in his kitchen.

“How about this…you go change into something more comfortable, and I’ll dig up some food?” He asked, trying to take on the tone from this morning when they had teased each other.

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“Okay.” She capitulated quickly and kissed him on the cheek and headed for his bedroom.

Before she passed through into the next room, Luke looked back, watching her again, still amazed that she was even there with him.

Mara entered the room that was so him; the blue walls and the warmth of the sand beige. ‘He did this for me.’ She thought.

She found her night shift and quickly changed into it. She also found her ‘ugly’ socks at the bottom of the bag, and slipped them on.

She brushed out her hair too, knowing that at some point tonight he would want to stroke her hair. She didn’t see the reason for his compulsion, but enjoyed it anyway.

As she was about to leave the room, there was a small sculpture was on his dresser that she never noticed before, that caught her attention. A jagged piece of glass with colours swirled into it—flames of orange and purple. She thought it seemed right at home in his room; a piece so beautifully complicated that unless you stopped to notice it, you wouldn’t see the complexity—just like him.

When Mara came out the room, and he was still in the kitchen, scurrying around it, putting the finishing touches on two plates, and he had poured two glasses of wine.

Luke stopped and grinned and looked her up and down, and his face fell when he saw what was on her feet; the ‘ugly’ socks. He glared at her, only briefly.

He sighed; it they made her relax, then he would accept it.

“I’ll be right back.” He said, and as he passed her on his way to the bedroom, his arm slipped around her waist and pulled her closed.

His lips were so sweet. Mara became very aware of the feel of his mouth, knowing that she would need to remember their time, now, until the next time she would see him—and that was to be yet determined.

He headed for his bedroom.

Luke emerged from the bedroom quickly, wearing a simple t-shirt and black sleeping pants. He smelled the air in appreciation.

Mara was already sitting on his sofa, eating from her plate, and leafing through one of the older books he had on the resting table.

It was the title that caught her eye. ‘The Delicate Balance of Negotiating Force Bonds and Unions’ by some Master whose name she couldn’t pronounce.

Her brow was furrowed as she read, and re-read some of the section— the language was difficult to follow, probably translated from another into Basic. The section she was reading spoke of temporary bonds with non-Force users.
Luke had silently walked up beside her with his plate and sat down– not wanting to disturb her.
“Anything interesting in there?- I haven’t gotten through it yet.” He said quietly.

Slowly Mara pulled her attention away from the book to look at him. “Did you know that you can
bond with a non-Force user? It says that’s it’s not as strong as when two Force-users bond, but they
recognize the validity of the bond.”

He nodded as he chewed his food, then swallowed. “I think Han and Leia have a bond- but they are
probably not aware of it. The book says that a lot of bonds are unintentional; they happen on their
own, in the spur of the moment- but that Force-users must be aware that they can happen, and
negotiate the possibility of a bond before it occurs.”

He took another bite of food, and absently said with food in his mouth, “But…” then swallowed. “I
don’t put much stock in this particular book….it seems to go against other writings, fore bidding
attachments…It seems to me that a bond is the ultimate attachment, but I’m not ruling it out either.”

Mara looked at him. “There’s something else?”

He nodded, taking a slip of his wine. “The Master who wrote this was a Fallanasi…the Jedi called
them ‘The Great Deceivers’ – I don’t know why, but I understand that some of their teachings
directly conflicted with the Jedi and although there’s no direct disagreement between the two, they
both seem skeptical of each other’s teachings.”

There was no prejudice in his tone, just being conversational, and she could tell that he was putting a
lot of thought into what he was reading- and reading it with an opened mind.

“Um” he put down his plate and got up to go over to side table. “I want to show you something.” He
pulled out an old holo- probably Clone Wars era, and brought it back to her.

“It’s a holo of the last sitting Jedi Council.” He said as she took it from his hands.

Mara looked at the faces looking back at her. All of them stern, but she could see the compassion
there too.

Luke leaned in over her shoulder. He pointed to a small greenish alien on the side. “That’s Master
Yoda.” He said smiling. “He hadn’t changed a bit when I met him….gimmer stick and all.”

“Did he really poke you with it?” She asked, still looking at the holo.

“You bet…wanna see the marks?” He teased by trying to raise the edge of his shirt.

“No thank you…maybe later.” She smiled back at him.

He went back to the holo. “And see?—the man with the auburn hair and beard…that’s Ben…
Obiwan Kenobi.”

She squinted and brought the holo close to her face, and nodded in appreciation of him. “Why did
you call him ‘Ben’?” She asked.

“I don’t know.” He thought about it. “I knew him from when I was a child…he was always on the
periphery - I used to bump into him at markets…and several times when I was in trouble. When I
look back on it, I knew he was watching over me.” He sighed at the memories. “But I think I was the
one who started calling him ‘Ben’…may be I couldn’t say ‘Obiwan’- I never asked.”

Mara was watching his face as he spoke, and sensed his enjoyment about speaking of his friends and
mentors.

Luke caught her looking at him, and leaned in for a kiss, knowing that she was enjoying listening to him. He turned his attention back to the holo. “And that man…with the arms crossed, looking…well, for lack of a better word, cocky…is” he paused, “the only image I have of my father.”

Mara pulled the image in closer than before, examining the features of the man Luke had pointed out. She studied the face of a man in his early to mid-twenties, smirking at the camera as it recorded that moment in time. His shaggy dirty blond hair, and glint of mischief in his blue?- it was hard to tell… but probably, blue eyes. There was a scar that was healing over his right eye…and the cleft in his chin- Mara recognized it immediately. But not a trace of Vader.

“You look like him.” She whispered.

“You think so?” he asked quietly. “Aunt Beru said I did too…I don’t quite see it…he was clearly taller than me.”

Mara nodded, and she reached out to touch his face, studying his features. “You have the cleft on your chin…and dimples on the sides of your mouth…and the shape of your eyes…the shaggy hair of the same colour…which, by the way, you need a haircut….your posture sometimes reminds me of him.”

Luke nodded, and came in to kiss her for her kind words. <I wish I knew him better.> His lips pulled back and he spoke. “I feel close to him while I’m studying. I like to think that he had to read and learn the same things that I do now.”

She stayed silent and let his comment hang in the air between them. It was the exact reason why he needed to share what he was learning and not delay it. Mara broke the silence. “I think that while I’m away, you should start your search for more students and potential Jedi.”

He looked at her, and started to shake his head. “I don’t think I’m ready to do that.”

Mara got up from the sofa and walked towards her resting jacket. “No Luke, I think it’s time. You always keep your promises…and you promised to restart the Order.” She fished inside one of the pockets and pulled out the little black velvet bag. “I was waiting to give this to you, but I think you should have them now.”

She came back to the sofa, and undid the tie from around the top of the bag. She took his hand, and opened his palm; pouring in to it approximately ten milky coloured crystals.

The small rocks felt alive in his hand, and his mouth was agape as he came to the realization of what they were. “Caber Crystals.” He stared at them. “How did you get them?”

“It doesn’t matter, does it?” She shook her head; she would tell him one day, but not now, it wasn’t relevant. “You’ll need them for your new students.”

He rolled them around in his palm. He picked up each one in turn, staring at them.

Mara stopped him, before he picked up another one. “There’s only one in that bunch that you should never give out…I can’t tell you from the shape, but when you single it out, you’ll know.”

Luke looked at her, and nodded. He didn’t want to put the crystals away; they felt as each one had a story and whispered their truths to him. He placed the small bag on the table and gently rolled the
crystals onto the bag.

He looked at them, then he turned back to her as she joined him again on the sofa; she was finishing off her meal, and then putting down her plate for good. “Am I ever going to know all of you? All your secrets?” He mumbled.

She turned her head quickly. “You already know more than most…and you want to know more?” she asked.

“I always do.” He whispered, but feeling thankful that she had let him in as much as she had.

He turned to face her, and his crystal eyes were bright and honest; the reason she trusted him so much, she never saw deception there— the reason she could let her hatred dissolve.

His lips called to her now; they never lied to her. Mara turned to place her mouth to his, not pulling away to stop. There was nothing else that mattered than one more night with him.

She felt his hands slide around her torso, taking her into his embrace. His palms spread across her back, warm and tender yet so strong, making the day disappear with their touch.

He was taking his beats from her mouth, if she was to increase the passion then he would respond. And it wasn’t that she didn’t want to feel his body inside her again, but it’s not what she felt she needed tonight. She just needed…

<<Luke?...please just hold me tonight?>> She begged to his mind.

<Of course.> He said, without expecting anything more of her. He knew the day she had, and would never ask of her what she wasn’t ready to give.

He only broke off their kiss and embrace to take her to the bedroom, to hold her in his arms.

She smiled as he put his arms around her waist from behind her, and walked her to the back room, nipping at her neck.

Upon entering the room and the lights came up, he put his hand on the control and dimmed them to a comfortable level. He nestled into her neck.

She reached back to touch his face, and to bring his lips back to hers. His eyes were dreamy as his lips came closer, and just peaceful.

He broke their embrace just to go to the side of the bed that she preferred, and pulled back the duvet and sheets for her to slip into.

Mara sat down into the soft sheets, and lifted her feet; just as she did, she caught his glare at her socks again. She glared back without any real anger.

One day she would fight for the rights of her ugly friends on her feet, but not tonight. She slipped them off before sliding her feet under the covers. He seemed happier now.

Luke took up his own side and outstretched his arms like he did once before when he knew that he could hold her.

She snorted before taking up her place with him.

<<I don’t know why I didn’t let you hold me like this on Wayland.>> She thought over to him, sending him the enjoyment that she felt when he did hold her.
You weren’t ready. He answered back quickly. I really didn’t think you were going to go for it, anyhow… it still surprises me that you let me do that.

She realized how much he knew her even before she was ready to let him. You knew that I wasn’t going to kill you… didn’t you?

Luke thought about it. I didn’t know for certain… but I could sense that you truly didn’t want to… at least, you didn’t want to do it for reasons, other than your own.

She listened to him; not getting angry, but resigning that it was true.

Are you still angry with me? He asked.

She could sense that he truly wanted to know, as if it would cause any break between them. No… I forgave you… and I don’t even think about it anymore… it’s just when I heard the voice again – it scared me. I didn’t want to feel that way again about you.

He kissed the top of her head, and pulled her closer. Thank you his mind said to her.

What am I going to do while you’re away? He asked.

There’s always the comm unit… you’ll be able to contact me… and. She turned to look up at him. If you really miss me, you can get the Rogues to take you out to a bar in the lower levels… There’s a Changling who does a wonderful impersonation of me… and she’s not a bad dancer either.

“What?” He asked loudly.

“She’s really quite good… makes a lot of money being me.” Mara snuggled herself into his shoulder a bit more. “She used to be a front person for Gardola the Hutt, so she was looking for a change in position. I told her not to be me outside the club though… too much of a risk.”

“You gave her permission to look like you?” Luke was still a little shocked.

“Why not? It’s honest money… and I hear she cleans up every time I’m in the news. I’m sure she’ll be busy again.” She really wasn’t bothered by it, even she had taken jobs dancing in dives when she had to.

“I’ll keep that as an option.” He grumbled into her hair.

She knew he had no intention of seeing the other ‘Mara’. She snorted. You can be such a prude sometimes.

“I am not.” He was still grumbling. “I just don’t like the idea of others seeing you like that.”

It dawned on her. You’re jealous. She said realizing that it just wasn’t his protective feelings for her.

Luke sighed. I am. He admitted. I don’t like someone thinking of you, the way that I do… and I don’t like it when they see you as a thing, and not a person.

She was quiet for a while, and he could sense that she was looking for what to say.

“Luke, we haven’t talked about it, but…” Mara paused, if reconsidering what she was about to say. “… if you want to see someone else while I’m away… you should.”
He pulled her away from his shoulder to look her in the eye. “Why would I do such a thing?” He sat up in the bed.

She could see the hurt in his eyes. “Because you’re a man…and you might want to…not be alone.” She looked away; sorry for bringing it up. “I don’t want you to feel that you’re tied to me…if you want to see someone else casually for a night…I’m okay with that.”

Luke’s face dropped. “Why would you be okay with that? I’m not…and I’m not okay with you being with someone else either.”

Mara looked at him honestly, and sent out her feelings. “I don’t want to be with anyone else either…but I’m not being naïve to think that it couldn’t happen.” She touched his mind to assure him that she truly didn’t want anyone other than him, and that looking for another was completely out of the question for her. “You flew with the Rogues, you know exactly what can happen in the heat of the moment. I just don’t want you to feel guilty if it does.”

He seemed to relax at her feelings as he felt them. He knew that she genuinely didn’t want anyone else. “I won’t be looking.” He grumbled again, and sunk back into the bed, offering up his arms again.

She went back into his shoulder.

Just so he didn’t feel alone in his jealousy, she said in a tone that would satisfy him. “Good.” She sneered.

He hugged her tighter, indeed satisfied with her answer.

It took several minutes before she felt that his agitation had wear away, and his simmering hurt faded too. It wasn’t a pleasant subject but it wasn’t fair to keep him on the hook to something that might keep them apart for longer than would be expected; no matter how deeply they might feel for each other.

Mara decided another tactic to get him talking.

“I like the sculpture on your dresser.” She said meekly, looking at the glass piece that she had noticed earlier, resting in front of them. She blinked heavy, and yawned.

Luke seemed to like this, and took to the conversation. “I saw it at a market on Tak’inoq…the vendor claimed it was a genuine Tatooinian glass sculpture.”

He breathed deeply, and let a yawn slip out. “I never found one myself but I always wanted to.”

“She smiled, feeling dreamy and relaxed. He had a story for everything. “You make the place sound so magical and mystical sometimes…storm glass…night lilies in a canyon…sunsets…. You should really go work for their tourism board.”

Luke smiled. “They wouldn’t have me….they didn’t like the slogan I came up with; ‘Tatooine- come for the sunburn, stay because you got kidnapped by a swoop gang.’…it didn’t test very well.”
She giggled at him, letting his voice start to lull her.

“It had its moments.” He confessed. “I don’t know, could you really see yourself living with a penniless farmer, but never having to deal with the galaxy again, and not caring…not getting involved?”

“It depended on the farmer…would he have incredible blue eyes, and gentle hands?…would he kiss me so that I could feel it in my toes?” She played along.

“Yes, but you’d get freckles.” He kissed the top of her head.

“Deal is off- no freckles.” She hissed, closing her eyes briefly.

He chuckled, and squeezed her again.

Mara turned her face up to him because she was missing his lips, both for kissing and watching them while he spoke. “So what’s the sunshine situation like on Yavin?” She punctuated her question with a kiss.

Luke gave her a strange look.

“I need to know if I have to be on the lookout for any special SPF if you’re going to have your Jedi Academy there…when I come to train.” She gave her pragmatic reasoning, rather indignantly; letting her eyes slip closed again.

“What did you use on Tatooine?” He asked, then yawned deeply, relaxing to cradle her body next to him, rather than cuddle.

“125.” She said quietly, feeling the urge to sleep.

“125?…seriously?—that’s like wearing paint!” He sounded surprised, but quietly so.

“Do you see any more freckles than necessary on me?” She asked, and he shook his head; she nodded once, confirming that it worked to her satisfaction.

“Well, you won’t have to use anything quite so strong.” He said, almost whispering, letting his eyes close too. “The jungle canopy shields a good deal of direct sunlight. You should be more concerned about getting some anti-frizz hair stuff.” He patted her head for emphasis. “The humidity is quite high.”

“Great.” she growled, with eyes fully closed.

Mara could feel her mind finally in the state of rest, so she asked. <<Show it to me?>>

He smiled with his eyes closed. <Of course.> He let himself fully reach out to her.

In her mind, a field of green forest appeared, and slumber began to take effect.

**

Luke awoke with a start in his empty bed. He reached out frantically for her, and not finding her.

He rolled over to check his chrono… 0815 hours. Kriff.

He felt the touch of her mind on him, like a tender caress to him, feeling her sadness at leaving.
<<May the Force be with you, Luke.>>

He relaxed back into the bed. <And you too.> He sent back to her.

TBC
Ten days. She had been gone for ten days, and he rubbed his face as he stopped to remember that she wasn’t there.

Luke Skywalker wasn’t one to easily admit that he was giving up, but now he was fully ready to give in and admit that he missed her.

Each day that had passed, he had made sure that he was occupied with one thing or another, just to keep himself from thinking about it.
On the first day, he went to her apartment to retrieve the comm unit that promised a communication from her.

He walked around the empty rooms, wishing she was there; hoping that she would walk through the door but it didn’t happen.

On her patio, he wanted to look at the mountains in the daylight, knowing this was her favourite view. As he walked back inside, he saw the sofa that they had made love on, only two nights before. He smiled.

He had told her that no man would compare to him, but in truth, he knew that no woman would ever compare to her either. She could humble him with one look and it ached.

In her bedroom, he lifted one of the small bottles of perfume that he saw on her dresser, to his nose, and inhaled— it was her… as sensual and as exotic as she was.

He had to leave; it would be all too much if he didn’t.

Luke was prone to wallowing if he didn’t do something productive, so forcing himself to set some goals was his only option.

After that first day, he made a point to keep on track.

He went to see the doctors, and asked their permission if a team of librarians and droids would help them catalogue their collections and transfer it to a digital format; making it more-portable for him, and saving all the information in the process.

They had agreed to that easily, knowing that their collections were valued, and cherished.

He also made a point of dropping hints that he needed some individuals to head to Yavin IV, in preparation for his school that would be there.

Dr. Massian seemed particularly pleased that Luke had considered his advice to move the Jedi away from the center of politics; and Luke was sure to credit the doctor with that decision.

Deek and Almae expressed their interest in Yavin IV when Luke described it to them. Even Dr. Dram was fascinated as Luke explained that the planet was undiscovered territory with no explanation as to why the Massassi people disappeared off of it.

He described the temple that he stayed at during the battle, and how the structure had mystified him, with its decoration and script.

Now, if only someone would move there to study the structures and research the history? It was a stretch but not impossible.

He could sense that their minds were working and wondering if he was offering what they thought he was. It would take a bit longer to convince them to leave Coruscant in favor of Yavin IV, but he had time.

For the time being, they were more concerned but preserving their research and books, and that consumed their time.

When he wasn’t visiting the doctors, he was reading the information they had given him, and started plotting out where to start his search for potential Jedi.
The most likely points were placed where Jedi had their temples and learning institutions. Dr. Massian agreed, and Dr. Dram was excited to help Luke plot those places on a star map.

It was disappointing when Luke went to research some of those worlds to find out that that some of the planets had been rendered inhabitable by the Empire. Though, there were other worlds that were untouched, probably because of their locations. Even Dathomir had been isolated enough to not be touched by the Empire. These places of interest gave Luke hope.

When he asked Dr. Dram about ways to tell if someone had Force potential, he got a full seminar on the techniques both the Jedi and the Empire to determine if some fell into the specific criteria.

Blood test was the most likely way. A count for something called midichlorians was the easiest test and least intrusive. Dr. Dram pointed out that even the Empire abandoned this idea and technique because it proved unreliable.

Luke knew from his own experience that it took the Empire a good deal of time to abandon this test. He remembered his aunt getting him to avoid any sort of Imperial testing of his blood.

The Jedi had used a series of tests to determine if a candidate was eligible for training. First, there was heredity - was a candidate part of a Force-user lineage. Secondly, did that candidate show Force talents? Third, there was a mind probe for an area in the cortex—at least in a human brain; it may have been located in different areas, depending on the species.

It was this test that Luke found most fascinating—if he could just probe another potential Force-user’s brain to locate the spot to confirm their talents- it would help him immensely.

He found himself missing Mara again. It was hard to tell if she would let him search her mind, but he was sure that if he convinced her enough that she would let him do it. He secretly liked knowing that he had the power to break through her barriers; and that he was one of a few who could do that.

Luke’s other goals included talking to Leia and Han about relocating too.

They were not as open to suggestion as the doctors were. There was no excitement to sell this as an option for leaving.

Leia was too seasoned, as was Han, to know what a move really meant; it meant war, again.

This only thing working in Luke’s favor for his argument with them was that there had been an attack in one of the Rim Worlds. Reports of the system being overrun with Star Destroyers, and capturing the system had entered news reports. The attack had very few casualties, and the world had given up without a fight; saving itself from further destruction.

Leia was becoming leery. As a politician, she couldn’t work openly to head an evacuation, as that would cause panic. But as a Rebel leader, she had contacts that could start the ball rolling on establishing a resistance to the new Imperial threat.

The underground Rebellion was still kept intact, and very few people knew of its existence. The New Republic would have been weary of a standing militia, ready to fight, belonging to the general interests of whoever was in command of the Republic.

The Republic had learned its lesson from voting in emergency military powers to a leader, and would refuse to do that again.

Luke was satisfied that Leia took it serious enough to even give a new base a name. They were in a search for a ‘Pinnacle Base’. 
In the days after Mara’s departure, a recognisance team was sent to investigate Byss. They had asked him to go along, but it was voted down as the council deemed it wasn’t required of him, just yet.

Luke resented being ordered around like he was hired out on a whim, and he didn’t like having to report to others that had motives that weren’t pure either. He knew that many delegates were playing both sides and had tried to make contact with the Imperial infractions to curry favor.

On day six since she had left, he finally got a message from Mara on the special comm unit that she had left for him. She confirmed that she had made it to Karrde’s camp without an issue. In her words, he read her pain at missing him. She was able to hint that Karrde was on the move again, that their camp was only temporary, and they were headed to one more permanent, hopefully.

At night, as he lay in bed, looking up at his ceiling, feeling sleep coming to him; he could swear that he felt the touch of her mind; soft touches caresses his mind. He dismissed it as far-fetched and wishful thinking. They had tried to test her limits once, and it didn’t extend past the system, as far as he could sense her.

Although, during the day, he had sensed her touch too….he wasn’t sure, but it felt like a touch on his mind -her touch.

So on the tenth day, he was beginning to wallow. Everything reminded him of her.

When he walked into the gym, he could remember seeing her stretch before their sparing sessions; her body graceful and strong.

At lunch at the diner, he watched a Tek’tiknik salad get delivered to the table behind him, and he knew that was her favourite at that place; she would always ask for more dressing when she got down to the bottom of the salad.

As he worked on his X-wing that afternoon, he remembered how she thought his welding jobs were too sloppy and he shouldn’t use that much flux on the seems- and when she did it, you couldn’t even tell where the mend had been.

By dinner time, the ache in his chest was starting to get unbearable.

In his bedroom, he saw the bottle of perfume her had taken from her apartment and sprayed a bit into the air, just so it felt like she was there. He cringed as he did it- people would think he was crazy… maybe he was.

As the evening came on, and he was about to spend his lonely night staring at the mountains, his comm pinged an urgent tone.

Luke picked it up and read the message. It was from Wedge, asking him to come to the Rogue hangar tonight—Code: Pink.

He shook his head. Of course this would happen now.

He sighed. He knew he had signed on for this brotherhood the moment he became their leader in the Rebellion. And Rogues do not abandon their brothers in their time of need.

He found his flak jacket and slid it on; still shaking his head that he was doing this. It was heavier than he remembered, and they hadn’t had such an emergency for a while now.

Besides, maybe this is what he needed.
Luke made his way back to the hangar. He keyed in his entity code for the deck, and made sure to leave the Jedi behind for the night.

He felt the wave of sorrow come towards him as he walked closer to the pit.

Hobbie’s head was down on one of the desks, a half empty bottle of Whyren’s in his hand. Wes was already patting his friend’s back in sympathy.

Wedge turned towards Luke as he approached. “He got dumped.” Wedge whispered. “Pretty bad too.” He looked back. “I have to get more bottles…we’re going to need them.”

Luke nodded and walked closer, shaking his head in sympathy.

“I don’t understand it…we were getting along so well.” Hobbie sobbed as he lifted his head to take a swig from the bottle. When he saw Luke, he forced a smile. “Luke!—you’re a Jedi…you’ll know.”


Hobbie got a serious look on his face as he tried to find the right words. “Luke—do you think women are thinking something?”

Luke looked blankly at his friend, trying to find a good answer for him, and all that came out of his mouth as, “I need a drink.”

The bottle on Hobbie’s hand lifted up, and Luke nodded in appreciation before he took it from the other man, and chugged back a good hard swig. He handed the bottle back to his friend, after he regained his sight, and answered, “Yes…I think women are thinking something.”

“I knew it!” Hobbie pointed at him. “I knew it!—they can’t do what they do to us without thinking something.” In drunken logic, he thought he was making sense. “They think stuff…oh yeah…and they think it all the time…but they don’t want us to know the stuff…they just want to think it.”

“Why’d she do it, Wes?” His attention turned to the one next to him. “Why?” And Hobbie’s head went back down on the table as he moaned.

Wes took the bottle from Hobbie’s hand and helped himself to a drink. He wasn’t looking too sober either, come to think of it. And he hiccupped before he spoke. “You can’t think like that, bro… there’s ‘nothers out there…just waitin’ for you.” He patted the other man’s back with a heavy hand.

Wedge walked up with another four bottles of strong ale in his arms. He handed one to Luke, and he turned away from the group to face Luke.

“He was only with her for a few weeks but I’ve never seen him like this before.” Wedge looked over his shoulder back at his distraught friend. “I guess he had higher expectations for this one.”

Luke popped open the bottle and brought it to his mouth. He shuddered as the taste hit him. It had been a few weeks since he had indulged, and that was with Mara. Before that night with her, it had been a long while since he had let himself go.

Luke hopped up on the table across from the others Rogues and Wedge took the table beside him.

“You know, I feel bad for the guy.” Wedge leaned over to Luke, taking a sip out of his own bottle. “I know what he’s feeling; only I know my girl is coming back.”

Luke looked over at his friend. “I didn’t know Iella wasn’t here?” he asked.
“Yeah” Wedge’s head dipped. “She went back to Corellia—there’s been some movement on her divorce, and Corellian law states that you have to see the other party in person before anything can get finalized.”

He explained, “Literally, in the process, you have to come face to face with your former partner…It’s like they want you to be able to spit in the face of the other person before things are signed off….things can get pretty nasty. Corellian divorces take years to resolve.”

Wedge’s mood lifted. “But when she gets back- she’ll be free…and we can take things further.” He smiled.

“Really?” Luke asked, appraising the other man.

Wedge looked around at who was paying attention. “I bought a ring set.” He whispered over to the Jedi.

Luke was a little shocked, but Wedge pulled a small box from his flight suit, and discreetly showed him the contents. There were four rings with small stones on them stacked together.

“It’s a traditional Corellian courting ring.” He explained. “You give the first ring when you want to announce your intentions, the second is when you want to ask the question, and the other two are for how many children you are asking to have.”

Luke looked over at his friend, surprised that Wedge had put so much thought into this. He could also see that the other man was blushing.

“That’s how my parents did it…and that’s how I’m going to do it.” Wedge mumbled confidently as he put the small box back into his pocket. “We still have to keep it quiet until things are finalized—it’s bad luck to start a new relationship when the old one isn’t finished…and it’s really frowned upon in Corellian society to date a married woman. But when she gets back…”

“Good for you buddy.” Luke smiled, and offered his bottle to knock against the other man’s. “Good for you.”

They both took a swig at the same time, and then turn their attention back to the sobbing man with his head down.

Luke could sense someone else approaching, and the other man walked up to the table beside Wedge.

“So what am I missing?” He asked.

“Not much.” Wedge commented quietly as he handed the new man a bottle. “Hobbie lost a girl…again.”

The other man took the bottle and hopped onto a table, watching the display.

“Hey Luke” Wedge nudged him in the shoulder, “This is Corran Horn…newest member of the Rogues.”

Luke leaned forward to look around Wedge, and nodded his welcome. “We’ve haven’t had the chance to officially meet yet.” And he extended his hand. “Welcome aboard.”

Horn’s eyes darted nervously at Luke’s hand but then shook it without hesitation. “A pleasure to finally meet you…I heard so much.”
Luke hadn’t stretched out his senses as he took the other man’s hand. Mara had distinctly warned him not to make that step and Horn seemed to relax when he felt he wasn’t being mentally searched by the Jedi.

Wedge nudged Luke again and winked. “Horn’s known Iella since they were kids…I blame him.”

“You’re very lucky I like you Antilles…you almost weren’t good enough for my girl.” Horn mock-growled at him.

All three of them chuckled.

“So how often does this happen?” Horn asked; gesturing in the general direction of the broken man with his head on a table and taking a sip from his own bottle now.

“Let’s see…” Luke thought out loud, “I think the last one was for Wes when he was dating the brunette last year…what was her name?”

“Danka.” Wedge said.

“Right, Danka-I-wanna-thankya…” Luke took another drink from his bottle. “And before that…wasn’t it you, Wedge?”

He nodded. “Yep…yep it was…almost two years ago.” Wedge grimaced and follow Luke’s suit, taking a sip from his own bottle. “Mika…her name was Mika.”

“Hey…it’s been a while since you had one of these, Luke…when was the last one for you?” Wedge and Horn both watched him.

“After Endor…her name was Gaeriel Captison…from Bakura.” Luke said quietly.

“Right…right…has it been that long?” Wedge said remembering. “Didn’t she have a thing against Jedi, and that’s why you were a sob-sucker?”

Luke looked over at his so-called friend, while Horn chuckled behind him. “I don’t remember being a ‘sob-sucker’…”

“You don’t remember much from your own Code: Pink, buddy…No one does.” Wedge teased. “You were wailing away, just like Hobbie is now…but much worse.” He started making a big pouty face, “Why couldn’t she just see the REAL me, guys?” Wedge mimicked the whining and blubbering Jedi.

Luke glared at his friend, realizing how trivial he thought he knew what pain was at the time.

“At least I didn’t keep singing a stupid song over, and over…and over again.” Luke’s eyes shifted over to Wedge as he brought the bottle up to his lips. “My heart- my swollen broken heart- how it aches for you-oooo!” He clutched his chest and sang out of tune, mimicking Wedge back at him.

Horn was in full laughter now, at the two other men, when they turned to glare at him.

“Sorry fellas.” He took a sip from his own bottle. “I met and married the girl of my dreams a long time ago…and haven’t regretted a day of it since.”

“Really?” Wedge asked. “Not one day?”

Horn took another swig, and swallowed hard. “Well, maybe just the day I met her dad…I couldn’t forget that one…with even alcohol.”
Their small conversation must have caught the attention of others. Hobbie lifted his head again and saw that Horn had arrived.

“Corsssec!” Hobbie sat up, wavering slightly. “Sm’here…” He waved the other man over.

“Was that Basic?” Horn asked Luke and Wedge.

“It means ‘come here’ in Rogue.” Wedge muttered.

The other two followed behind Horn as he came closer to the ailing Hobbie. Wedge went over to Hobbie, and pried the now-empty bottle from his hand, and replaced it with a fresh one of ale.

Luke stood by Horn, waiting on Hobbie.

“I gotta know…” The inebriated man tried to lock onto his target. “Do you think women are thinking something?”

Luke raised his hand to rub his own face, but covered his mouth as he whispered over. “Just say yes.”

Horn looked at the poor slub. “Yes…they are…thinking something.”

“I knew it!” Hobbie raised his hands in the air as a sign of defeat. “I knew it!” Then he forgot what he was doing as a new bottle of ale had magically appeared at his side; taking a swig he put his head back down again.

Wedge sighed. “I better order some food- this is going to be a long night.” He walked over to the comm station.

Luke and Horn went back to the table and hopped back on top of them.

Horn leaned over to Luke. “So how long does one of these things take?”

Luke scratched his head as it was getting a bit fuzzy, and he looked at his own bottle that was not quite half way down. “Well…usually it lasts until he finds another girl, or passes out….My money is on the later as we don’t seem to have any female Rogues around.”

Wedge came back and sat beside Horn. “Chitza is ordered…although I don’t know how long we’re going to last on this.”

“Hey Wedge?” Luke said, sounding slightly louder than he liked. “How come there aren’t any female Rogues around?”

“No true…” Wedge answered before swished back some from his bottle. “We got four of them in this next class…and out of the all of the class, I think all four will make it….so plenty of female Rogues…I’ll have you know….and smart too….they already came over early in the Code: Pink to have a drink with Hobbie before they beat it out of here- before it got ugly.”

“Does it always have to be another Rogue?” Horn asked, sounding way too sober.

“Nope.” Wedge said. “But that used to be that way because they were the closest females around. Right Luke?” The Jedi said nothing but just took a swig from his drink, looking a little guilty for ‘fishing off the company pier’ once or twice himself.

Wedge continued, "But that’s going to change…New Republic Rules: no fraternizing allowed…so only option: we take him out somewhere…”
“Hey Wes!” Wedge clearly got an idea. “Sm’here!” as he waved him over.

Wes stumbled over with less effort than Luke thought.

Wedge put his arm around the other man. “What say we take Hobbie out, and find him another girl?”

Wes shook his head. “Negative on that, Chief. He won’t make it out the door. Besides, all he’s gonna wanna do is go find her…she works at The Angry Mynock.”

Wedge nodded. “Looks like we’re hunkering down, men.”

Away from Hobbie, Wes didn’t look in too bad of a situation, as he slung his arm around Luke’s shoulders. “But after he passes out, we can always go to The Wiggling Twi’lek…I hear they have this Changling dancer who looks just like Hotpants.”


“Mara?—you call Mara ‘Hotpants’?” He must be feeling the alcohol because Luke wasn’t even angry- he started laughing…and laughing hard. He grabbed his sides, and soon Wes, Wedge and Horn joined in killing themselves laughing. Luke was still laughing, and wiping tears away from his eyes when the other men had slowed their laughter.


As he regained his composure, Luke put an arm around Wes, and looked him in the eye. “Ahh Wes…she’ll kill ya.” Luke shook his head. “No judge…no jury…she’ll make it painful…and she’ll kill ya….if she ever heard you call her that.”

Wes nodded; looking slightly scared.

Hobbie lifted his head again when he sensed he was alone, and moaned. Wes walked back over to be with his friend.

Luke turned his head to look at Horn’s bottle compared to his own. Horn took the hint and brought the bottle to his lips.

“Speaking of…” Horn looked for the right name to call her. “Mara…have you heard from her?”

Luke looked down at his boots. “Yeah, she’s safe.”

“So when is she coming back?” Wedge asked. “I have seen her name on the arrival schedule.”

“She’s not.” Luke mumbled. He could tell that the other men were surprised. “The Smuggler’s Alliance has been shut down, and Karrde has called her back into camp permanently.”

“Sorry to hear that Luke.” Wedge murmured. “I liked her…She is good people.”

“Smart too…” Horn added.

“It’s not all that bad.” Luke said. “She’s going to send me the co-ordinates when they get to base…but I don’t know when that will be. I guess, I’m just missing her right now.” He dangled his feet, as he took another drink.

“It takes a while to get used to.” Horn said, and joined him with a sip from his own bottle. “When
my wife goes on delivery runs, I miss her something terrible too—so I understand...you never really get used to them not being there...but when they get back...” He winked and grinned.

Luke looked up at the other man, wondering....

“My wife’s father is Booster Terrik...the Smuggler Boss....she helps him when he needs a special delivery done.” Horn said casually. “So I understand the smuggler lifestyle.”

Horn took another go from the bottle. “Besides, when you visit a base, it feels kinda...dangerous.” He smirked.

Luke nodded. “I’ve been to one of their bases...it wasn’t half bad.”

“She runs with Talon Karrde, right?” Horn asked. Luke nodded. “Then, she has the best of everything...he doesn’t cut corners...it’s not his style...takes care of his people...good man.”

“Isn’t your wife, Mirax, away right now too?” Wedge asked.

“Yes.” Horn confirmed. “In the Versnay System...she’ll be back the day after tomorrow.”

“So, we’re all without women right now?” Luke asked.

“Sounds like it.” Wedge said, as Horn nodded.

“Do you think they miss us, as much as we miss them?” Wedge asked, sounding wistful.

“You mean...” Luke interjected, “Do you think, that we think, they’re thinking something?” He smirked.

The other men chuckled.

“Ah Boss...that almost made sense.” Wedge said, noticing a delivery droid coming close with the Chitza. “Food is here.” He announced.

“Not yet.” Wes called over. “We’re almost there.” He was helping his friend now to hold the bottle up to his mouth.

“Don’t overdo it, Wes...” Luke warned. “Remember the last time.”

“The last time, we had that Hapan cider that gave us all gut rot.” Wes reasoned, as he took the bottle away from Hobbie.

“Don’t remind me.” Wedge murmured.

“Hey Hobs!” Wes unnecessarily yelled at his friend that was right beside him. “Why ya drinking?”

Hobbie eyes were slits, and his mouth lulled open. “My no-no.” he mumbled.

Luke leaned over to Horn “That's Rogue for 'I don't know'.”- Horn nodded.

Wes picked up his friend’s arm, and let it drop with a ‘Thud!’ on the table. “And we’re done here.”

“Right.” Wedge said. “Luke- you’re on head duty...Horn- you take starboard and I’ll take port...Wes you got the feet?”

The men assembled quickly and assumed their positions and lifted their friend. Hobbie put up no
struggle as they got him to the recovery room for the night.

Wedge put the necessary pillows under their friend, resting him face down, hanging slightly off the cot, with a bucket on the ground below his face.

Luke put out the two bottles of water, and painkillers, and several pieces of greasy taco meat that would take the edge off in the morning.

Wes put out the tarp on the floor; they had learned from the ‘gut rot’ experience, and a change of clothing for his friend.

Before they closed the door, they gave their fallen comrade a salute, and closed the door for the night.

Horn just stood back watching in amusement. “So this is what a ‘Code: Pink’ is.”

“Pretty much- drink until you can’t remember her name…or yours.” Luke said. “Let’s go eat.” And slapped Horn on the shoulder as he walked past.

And they walked back to the pit.

Wes turned on the public comm station, and the music started.

Wedge brought the chitza closer, and brought out napkins, but no plates…real men don’t need plates.


Horn’s head turned quickly to look at Luke.

“Ahh” Luke said with food in his mouth, and swallowed. “I’m not really looking…mostly reading at the moment. There’s lots to learn that I didn’t know.”

“Like what?” Wedge asked with a mouth full of food, without swallowing first.

Through the years The Rogues had supported him in his quest to become a Jedi. They might not have known or understood everything, but they always seemed interested and were never scared of his talents.

He considered it for a moment, and Luke said, “Well, like how Jedi used to live…most of it seems pretty impractical…but right now, I’m looking at the trial levels that each Jedi had to pass in order to get to the next level of training.”

Horn had gone quiet, but now it seemed perfectly natural to ask. “So what are the levels?…just wondering.” He asked without looking in Luke’s direction.

Luke finished his bite. “Um…first level, resist the draw of the Dark Side which takes someone from a Padawan- a learner, to a Jedi Knight…then the next level takes a lot longer to get to, but it seems to be to touch the Dark Side but come back to the Light, which takes a Jedi Knight to a Jedi Master…then there’s a Grand Master level…but the Council didn’t have one of those for many years, and the position was only instilled during upheaval.”

“So where are you at?” Wes asked.

“Ah Wes…I left the Jedi at home tonight…he’s no fun.” Luke grinned, lifting the mood from Coran Horn.
“On the contrary” Wes smirked back. “I know for a fact that the Jedi is a lot of fun.”

Luke narrowed his eyes at the other man.

“You know what I’m talking about…” Wes hinted. “Come on Luke…do it to me…here and now… come on…I’ve had enough to drink…you can do it…I’m letting you…”

Luke crossed his arms on his chest. “You really think that I should do that?—can’t I just balance some bottles for you?”

“Nope…do it.” Wes stood up with his arms stretched.

“Alright, just this once…” Luke’s eyes fluttered shut, and he raised his hand.

Wes lifted off the ground about a meter, laughing, and bounced slowly a few times in mid-air, and then he came back down.

Wes collapsed into his chair, having a good chuckle. “Thanks Luke…that was fun.”

Luke shook his head and bit into another piece of chitza.

“Remember that one time on Lerrik when you did the Jedi Mind Trick on that gunner from Blue Squadron…” Wes was enjoying this. “You made him drop his pants and walk into the infirmary.”

He started laughing, and the others joined in for a chuckled.

“He was half tanked anyway…it was no real trick…” Luke said.

Wes, still laughing, “He ended up scaring that female medic…”

Wedge laughed too. “I heard that he married her!—did you at least get an invite to the wedding, Luke?”

Luke sat up in his chair, looking indignant. “No I didn’t…”

The guys just laughed at him.

“We should pay some cards or something…Luke?-you in for Sabaac?” Wedge asked.

“Nah.” Luke shook his head. “You know I’m a horrible at Sabaac and I end up losing money to you guys.”

“Why do you think I asked you to play?” Wedge snickered. “I’m a little short this week.”


“So Jansen—why aren’t you the one crying in your ale like Hobbie?- you guys usually are dating at the same time.” Luke asked, reaching back to grab his bottle, and took a drink to wash down his food.

“Ah yeah…about that.” Wes sputtered. “I just asked someone out…and she hasn’t said yes yet.”

The three other men gave him the look; asking him to explain.

Wes took the challenge. “She’s a junior aide for Tanaab.” He beamed. “I just met her.”

“There’s something to be said for dating girls from your home world.” Horn said. “They get it…no
explaining necessary.”

“I don’t know,” Luke said. “It’s sometimes good to have someone who appreciates it…hearing about a world they don’t know.” He hadn’t thought about her for most of the night, but right then, he started to miss her again.

Wedge nudged him. “Let me know how it goes when you throw Mara over your shoulder, take her back to your hut, and Claim her, okay?”

Luke shook his head, blushing. “People don’t have Claimings anymore…it’s very seldom.” He mumbled.

“What’s a ‘Claiming’?” Horn asked.


“It’s not a ‘quickie’ marriage…the traditional ceremony lasts hours…” Luke argued, hearing a whine in his own voice.

“Just warn her before you do it to her, okay?” Wedge smirked.

“Speaking of tradition…” Horn turned to Wedge with a questioning look. “Did you get the rings?”

Wedge nodded.

“Let me see?” Horn asked, but had a stern tone in his voice. “As her longest friend and close acquaintance of the family, I have the right to agree to your courtship.”

Wedge fished inside his pocket, and produced the small box. Horn opened it, and handed it back to Wedge, and nodded. Wedge beamed.

Luke checked his chrono…it was past midnight. ‘Day eleven’ he thought to himself.

“Well, this has been delightful as ever, but…” Luke got up from his seat, barely feeling the effects since he had something to eat to soak up the booze. “…I’ve got a meeting in the morning.” He dropped his napkins into the side bin, and pulled some credits from his pocket to catch up with Wedge for the chitza and ale.

Wedge held up his hand declining the offer. “You know you’re always welcome to come down here, right? It doesn’t just take a Code: Pink to come over.”


Wes got up, and gave him a slap on the back too. “Don’t be a stranger, Luke.”


“Want some company on the way out?” Horn asked Luke. “I have to comm the wife…and she’s about to wake up where she is soon.”


“Don’t forget to check on Hobbie.” Luke warned to Wedge and Wes.

“Will do, Boss.” Wedge saluted him.
Luke and Coran turned to leave, and walked out of the hangar.

“Where are you headed?” Luke asked.

“They put me up in the Palisades but I’ll be moving closer to the hangar soon.” Horn answered.

They got down most of the corridor, at this time of night, the hallways were empty, and so Luke turned to Horn. “I wanted to apologize for contacting you during that meeting, over a week ago…Mara told me that you were uncomfortable with Force contact…I didn’t know…I’m sorry.”

The other man, waved it away. “She explained that it comes naturally to you…and even that she took some time to get used to it.”

Horn shook his head as they walked together. “I didn’t know what to expect from you. I really thought that you were going to demand that I drop everything and join the Jedi.”

Luke nodded. “I get that a lot…people have general misconceptions about Jedi…reading minds, stealing children, being stoic…I could go on.”

“Yeah, but now I can see that isn’t true.” Horn said. “You seem like a pretty normal guy…and you surround yourself with Correllians and can handle your ale…so that’s a good thing.”


“But I’d like to be able to do what you do…” Horn spoke slower. “To reach out like that, when you lifted Wes…to find that peace, and calm. To respect it…The Force.” He paused. “I’ve felt it all my life…I’ve been denying it too.”

“I understand.” Luke said quietly. “The Force has a calling that draws you in…once you sense it, you can’t turn it off…you want to know more, you want to feel more.”

Horn nodded. “I’d like to know more…not just for me, but…” He wasn’t comfortable with saying it openly, but he knew that the other man would understand. “…my wife and I want to have children…I want them to know and understand the power that they might have too.”

Luke smiled over to the other man. “When you’re ready- let me know? If you don’t mind a little bit of stumbling, then I don’t mind showing you a few things….things that will help with your flying too.”

Horn seem to accept the invitation. “I just might take you up on that. My wife keeps bugging me to contact you.”

“She sounds like a special person.” Luke smiled.

“She is… smuggler women, huh?” Horn chuckled. “A special breed, they are.”

“They are indeed.” Luke agreed, thinking of his special smuggler woman too.

They had made it to the lobby of the Palisade, and had called for the turbolift.

“Can I give you a bit of a suggestion…if you don’t mind?” Horn said as they waited.


“If you’re missing her…get her pillow and switch it out for yours.” Horn looked at the Jedi as they stepped on the lift, and lift started moving. “Now, you may think I’m crazy but, it does work…it’s
like she’s around…and another thing…don’t count the days that she’s away…count the days until she’s back…it will go faster.”


“That’s a good start… I did that too, but trust me on the pillow.” Horn said as they stopped at his floor.

“I’ll give it a shot.” Luke said.

A quick salute, and a ‘clear skies’ and the two men separated.

When Luke got into his apartment, he felt the urge to go over to her apartment at that moment to go get her pillow, but resisted.

Before bed, he sprayed her perfume one more time into the air, letting the scent fill the air; it was like she was in the room. Luke fell asleep, knowing that she was somewhere in the galaxy, and safe.

**

In the morning, he awoke to the blinking of his comm unit. ‘Read-me! Read-me! Read-me!’ it said to him.

Luke walked over to it, and pressed the message button.

A date, a set of coordinates, and the message “See you soon farmboy- M” appeared.

Luke closed his eyes, and smiled.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Here's an interesting fact... this chapter took 16 pages to write... and the previous chapter was 24 pages... I have this thing about ending on an even numbered page.

Never, have I written so much-- except in university when I was writing my thesis (which is not done yet, btw).

I don't use it anymore, but I used to write late at night- which I only do now when I'm writing smut- but I used to drink a particular type of wine, and write, and then in the morning take out the swear words that I had typed into my thesis... there's nothing like doing a ctrl+f on the word 'fuck' and having 16 hits.

But now, writing L&M fics, I don't use the wine.

Thanks for reading! :)}
Mission Accomplished Part 1

Chapter Summary

Quote: “You can grow a beard when you’re old and gray…being either stranded on a lonely island, or a desert hobo…until then, no.”


Chapter Notes

**
I've got nothing…

Ahh…you’ve waited for it… SMUT WARNING! (Like you didn’t see that coming)

**

Dantooine- Day 1

He was getting jittery. Hanging there in orbit was not his favourite thing to do. It had been hours since he had entered the planet’s atmosphere, and although he was not flying his X-wing, he really didn’t expect it to take this long to gain access to land.

Luke Skywalker had now spent three days, going on four, in the cramped A-wing. Granted, he had gone into a hibernation trance for a good deal of the trip, so most of the unpleasantness was over.

He followed the coordinates that Mara had left for him, leading him to Dantooine, on a hemisphere that he was unfamiliar with. He hailed the spaceport that she had indicated, and they had yet to provide him with clearance to land—and that was close to two hours ago.

He tried one more time, giving them his name- a fake one, and his channel frequency- borrowed. This time, with a bit more promise, they took the information; assuring him that they would be right back.

With no Artoo to keep him company, Luke could feel that the cockpit was getting too close for his liking. In his X-wing, he had the luxury of flattening out the seat and sliding into the aft section if he felt the need to stretch—no such luck here. So there he sat…

He looked around at the star lines, and it dawned on him; could he sense her from this distance? She was his reason for this trip anyhow….and he missed her terribly…more than terribly, but there was no word for it.

The ache in his chest had grown since she had left Coruscant and it only had dwindled briefly, when he took Corran’s advice and started counting the days until he saw her again.

In total, it had almost been three weeks since he last saw her.
He had also taken Horn’s advice, and retrieved her pillow on his next visit to her apartment. He hated to admit it, but he actually slept better with it resting under his head. It had her energy to it, and it soothed him.

He was about to try and reach out for her in the Force when his radio cracked into life, and he got permission to land. Finally.

He started to make his descent towards the planet.

Luke knew he was late too, which didn’t make things any better. The A-wing was nowhere as fast as his X-wing, but it had shields, and sufficient fire power if he needed it. Plus it reminded him of when he first joined the Rebellion, as they had made him take the initial flight test in an A-wing before they put him in an X-wing, headed for the Death Star.

He followed the directions he was given to the spaceport, and found his dock easily too.

After he landed, he stripped off his flight suit- glad to be rid of it, and wearing his civilians. Luke scratched his face, rubbing his hand over his stubble, thinking that Mara might enjoy his scruffy look, feeling that it was appropriate for visiting a Trader’s Base. He even borrowed a longer jacket from Han- as a bonus, the jacket covered his lightsaber. He slung his bag over his shoulder, and pulled his case behind him.

On his way to go rent a speeder to head for the base, he walked out of the space port and waiting there were two familiar faces sitting on a transport unit in front of him.

“Well, well, well...” One of the men said. “Strange, who you run into in the Rim.”

“Good to see you too, Aves.” Luke smiled at other man. “And you too Chin.”

Chin was already lifting Luke’s case to put into the speeder. “What say we get you over to the Boss, hee?”

“I won’t disagree with that.” Luke smirked. “I hope you guys haven’t been waiting long?”

“Nah, I think Mara was getting antsy when you were late, so she contacted the Space Port and asked if anyone was requesting to land.” Aves started up the transport, and headed out. “She didn’t know what name you were using, so when she saw ‘Owen Lars’ on the roster, requesting to land for a second time, she told them to give you direct permission—she told them that you were a client. She was fuming.”

“We not wait too long.” Chin added.

“You would have been waiting longer if she didn’t have the rep that she does with them.” Aves said. “They have a bad habit of waiting on a bribe before letting people land.”

“I didn’t think that was very prevalent out here?” Luke asked; Dantooine wasn’t known for corruption like Tatooine was, and it was farther into the Rim unlike the later.

“It not.” said Chin. “Spaceport -it privately owned. Karrde pay big time for docks.”


“So how long has the Boss locked you in for?” Aves asked over his shoulder.

It had been a while since he had been there, and it hadn’t changed much since his days with the Rebellion. Dantooine with its roving landscape, going from hilly grasslands, mild climate, and random forests—it was for the most part, pleasant; and he looked forward to being there.

“So, how long before we make it to the base?” Luke asked from the back seat of the transport, he let his eyes flutter closed, and reach out for her.

He could sense her presence, but she wasn’t reaching back. Mara had closed herself off from his communication. As he opened his eyes, he was aware of his own disappointment.

“About twenty minutes, hee.” Chin spoke over his shoulder.

Those were the twenty longest minutes of Luke’s life, or it seemed like it.

He looked out the window of the transport as they approached the stone structure that he supposed was their new base. It looked like an older villa, similar to the ones in the area, surrounded by a high stone wall. As the gates opened for their transport, Luke could see that there was also a very large storage area to the side of the residence. The grounds looked landscaped, and the residence appeared to be quite comfortable.

The transport moved along the side of the storage building, and turned the corner to approach the building from the back. It slid to a clean stop inside one of the raised doors that were available.

As Luke disembarked the transport, he felt the subtle pull on his mind that could only be Mara, but it withdrew as quickly as he felt it. He smiled. <I’m here.> he sent to her, whether she was listening or not.

In truth, he was getting nervous. He hoped that she was as eager to see him as he was to see her, but for some reason, it didn’t feel that way.

He lugged his bag from the back, and Aves brought out his case, and passed the handle over to Luke.

“Right this way, Mr. Big Time Client…” Aves chuckled at him. “The Boss is probably in the east building.”

“Looks like a nice place.” Luke commented as he fell in step with the other men.

“It be.” Chin said proudly.

“I hope the Boss stays here for a while…not like Feeka…that was nice too, but we high-tailed it out there about two weeks ago.”

“Oh?” Luke added extra curiosity into his voice, but kept calm.

Aves began to explain, “Yeah, it may not look like it here, but we’ve got extra security here….on account of…”

“Nahch!” Chin hit him in the chest, signaling the other man not to speak about it.

Aves leaned into Chin. “It’s not like he’s not going to hear about it…he’s a Jedi remember…”

Aves looked back at Luke. “Mara had two attempts on her… one before and one while we were on Feeka.” He gestured around. “That’s why all of the females here, dress the same.”

Luke looked around and he could see several female crew members moving around, doing their
work; all of them wearing the same jumpsuit, and same hood, either up or down – they probably have been instructed to wear it up when outside the compound as the colour of Mara’s hair was her calling card. He nodded, and appreciated that Karrde had gone to such lengths to protect Mara.


“You sure would.” Aves said, smiling. “I’ve never seen Mara train or anything, but she took them out within seconds…especially with that lightsaber…I’ve never seen anything like it…fast as lightning.”

He could sense that they were proud to have such a skillful person on their team. If Mara’s reputation before that counted her as deadly, then now, she must seem indestructible.

He knew she wasn’t indestructible though, and the thought that anyone was out to harm her, concerned him greatly. It more than concerned him that they would have a chance to succeed; it scared him, and then involuntarily, that fear turned to anger in the pit of his stomach. Luke breathed deeply to clear out his feelings.

The men kept walking over to another group, and Luke saw a woman wearing the same outfits as others, standing next to Karrde. No matter with the hood up, Luke knew who it was immediately just by her movements, and her aura.

His heart leapt, but he pushed down the urge to sweep her up in his arms. He knew that their relationship was not a known thing. As far anyone knew, they were only friends and he was training her as Jedi- that’s all. He didn’t even know if Karrde knew that their relationship had changed.

As they got closer, Luke could hear the conversation, and silently begged for her to speak so he could hear her voice. She hadn’t even looked in his direction.

Then Karrde turned in his direction, and members of his party turned too, to regard the new comers.

“Ah…Skywalker…so glad you could make it.” Karrde greeted him warmly. “I heard you had some trouble getting landing permission.”

Luke, smiled politely, and looked each member in the eye, then stopped at Mara, and then back to Karrde. “Yes, but lucky I had some help to get through it.”

His heart sunk a bit; she didn’t portray any reaction to seeing him. Her face didn’t changed, her eyes didn’t light up- nothing.

She walked on the opposite side of Karrde, farther away from him than he would have liked.

“Well, let’s get you to your quarters. I’m sure your flight wasn’t a pleasant one in a…what did you come in on?” Karrde asked.

“An A-Wing.” Luke answered. He wanted to reach out to her and get some reaction, but she had her shields up, and hadn’t spoken a word to him yet, not even through a mind touch.

“Oh yes, an RZ-1… I forgot that the Republic had those in their fleet. How did you like it?” Karrde lead them through the storage area and into the residence structure.

“I didn’t.” Luke responded conversationally. “It’s a lot slower than my X-wing, shields are good, but not much room in the cockpit.”

“Good to know.” Karrde nodded. “I was looking at purchasing some reconstituted starfighters…to
run escort duty on some of my shipments…I can cross A-wings off my list.”

The residence was quite nice, with homey touches of art work and open air areas. It felt more like a home than a place of business.

“I’ve put you up in our guest section.” Karrde said casually.

“Not a storage shed this time?” Luke remarked.

Karrde chuckled. “Well, if it makes you feel more at home, I can oblige.”

They walked through a corridor and into the courtyard of the main building. The courtyard had a fountain in the middle and lush plants and flowers around it- not what you’d expect from such a base.

Every few steps, Luke could see Mara on the other side of Karrde, but she mostly kept the same pace as the other man. It was starting to drive him crazy, knowing that she was so close.

“I hope you don’t mind, but we’re having a bit of a reception tomorrow night, and I’d like to be able to introduce you to few people?” Karrde asked.

“Oh” Luke said. “I’m afraid I didn’t bring anything suitable for a reception.”

Karrde looked him up and down. “Something can be arranged for you.”

They came to a set of stairs, and Mara lead the way. Luke watched her go up the stairs, admiring her shape, and he remembered what her shape felt like in his hands.

“As always Karrde- you’re a fine host.” Luke commented.

“Ha!” Karrde said. “I’m buying your services…you don’t know it, but you’re very valuable to me.”

From his tone, Luke could tell that Karrde was finding this humorous. “How so?” He asked.

At the top of the stairs, the group fell back into the same order, and Mara was still away from him. He reached out to her now as they walked, begging for her to say or do anything to register that he was there. She did not.

“Two of my guests tomorrow have very large opinions about the Jedi, and as it fits in with your schedule with Mara; while you’re here it would be good for them to see and meet you.” Karrde directed Luke down a corridor. “And not to mention, it’s good for my reputation.”

“Well, then…” Luke said, “How can I say ‘no’?”

“You won’t want to- I assure you.” Karrde stopped at a door and smiled.

Mara stepped in front of them to open the room. As the door swooshed open, she walked directly into the room without looking back at him.

Karrde looked at his chrono. “It’s about four hours until the evening meal, and I’ve got a holo-call to make. Enjoy your stay Skywalker and we’ll catch up later, perhaps?”

“I look forward to it.” Luke smiled, and watched Karrde walk away.

He paused before going into the room, and shook his head. She was doing this deliberately to him, avoiding him.
Luke walked into the center of the room, and she had her back turned to him. He put down his bag and tilted up his case into a resting position. He sighed, feeling that maybe she didn’t feel as strongly for him as he felt for her.

The door behind him closed smoothly.

“Mara…I…” He began to say.

She turned rapidly and came at him. She pressed her mouth to his, and he was lost in the moment as her arms slipped around his neck.

All of her shields dropped, and he could feel the ache that she felt missing him, and how happy she was to see him, followed directly behind that, desire; washing away the ache and happiness.

<<Gods, I’ve missed you.>> Her mind touched his with elation.

It took him a few seconds to start kissing back, but when he did, there was no holding back. His mouth was hungry for her, and his hands began to stroke her body.

<I’ve missed you too.> he sent over to her.

He could feel himself becoming hard with her pressed next to him.

Her tongue entered his mouth, and he didn’t resist. Luke slipped his tongue in her mouth to the sweet taste.

He didn’t mind it either as he felt her peeling off his jacket, then undoing his belt. Her hand pressed against the bulge in his trousers, and he moaned into her mouth.

His own hands weren’t above stripping her right there, just to feel her skin in his hands.

The first thing to go was that ugly hood, so he could touch her soft hair, and see its glorious colour. His fingers slipped into her mane, and brought more pressure on their locked lips.

They broke apart, both panting, lips reddened, foreheads touching.

Her eyes closed as he nuzzled his cheek to hers, feeling the tender skin next to his.

“Shower?” she said in a husky voice.

Her eyes moved up to his face so that he could see the darkened spheres, with heavy lids. Her mouth was slightly opened, waiting.

Luke slowly smiled, still touching her face, and nodded slowly.

He resumed discovering her mouth, and her hands removed more of his clothing. Her hands worked efficiently to pull his shirt up and off, until the discarded shirt allowed her to let her hands roam freely over his chest. Her fingertips were like fire on his skin.

It was easy to find access to her skin too. He reminded himself to thank Karrde for the simple design of her jumpsuit. He still took his time, sliding down the front zipper, and inching down the material over her shoulders, letting her breasts push the fabric open. Erect nipples were eager to be received by strong hands.

They were backing into the ‘fresher, when he pushed her up against the door jamb by accident, but not entirely; doing so just meant that his body could push into hers. They stayed there, with their
mouths claiming dominance over the other, until he wanted more of her skin, and went to her neck to suckle against the soft alabaster area under her ear and jawline.

He took the opportunity to kick off his boots as he heard her discard her boots first.

One of her hands cupped his ass and squeezed. "I really missed you." Her voice in his mind was dark and seductive too.

Her other hand tugged at the fly of his trousers, and even then bulge did not put up an argument; they came away too so that he could step out of them.

"Yeah? How much did you miss me?" His own voice was imbued with his desire, and sounded starved.

She let the remains of her jumpsuit drop, leaving her only wearing a gray compression top and simple black panties.

One of his hands had rested on the door jam, and she found it, and guided it to the outside of the front of her panties. "Feel." she ordered; his palm cupped her mons.

She had soaked through the simple fabric with her yearning for him and her wetness. Luke moaned as he crushed himself against her.

His other hand slipped under the compression shirt and found a breast and started rolling her nipple between his fingers. This time, her mouth broke free; she moaned and panted, and then she dove at his neck, nipping and sucking.

They rounded the corner of the jam, and were now inside the ‘fresher making their way to the shower alcove. They stopped again at the glass wall of the shower.

Mara pulled back only for a moment to take off the compression shirt and tossed it behind them. Her eyes looked him up and down, admiring what she had been missing, and still surprised at the passion within him.

He couldn’t take it anymore, and came to her, pausing in between the fierceness of their passion, to look her in the eye.

His eyes searched hers, getting lost in them. She smiled at him…a genuine smile. His brow furrowed, and then he smiled back; so very happy.

His mouth slowed its pace, and touched her gently. He wordlessly told her how much she meant to him, and how happy he was that she was safe, and that, if given the choice, he would never let her go.

She responded, with her arms around his neck, her hands slipping into his hair, and her roving fingers.

Their lips pursed tenderly now, not rushed, just enjoying each other; the molten lust not far behind.

His hands were back on her skin, letting her curves dictate where they should travel; her skin cool and velvety. The edge of her useless panties stopped his hand’s progression. All it took was the hook of his finger to bring them down, and lower them enough that she could wiggle free of them.

But his boxer briefs still remained on him. Mara’s hand glided over the front of the material, over his erection; he winced slightly as he was extremely sensitive to her touch. She let her fingernails trail up
and down the shaft, through the fabric, without truly touching or gripping him. They teased- they taunted. She rolled the waistband down and the fabric followed, letting him spring forth to his full rigidity.

Luke moaned between their lips, celebrating the freedom of his body now.

Her insides throbbed when remembering what he felt like, and would feel like inside her again.

She reached back into the shower, and turned on the water without looking. Her fingers caught the falling stream, and when she was satisfied, the hand came back to him.

The unintentional water droplets trickled down his back; cooling and thrilling the sensations on his skin.

Sensing that he enjoyed the feeling, her hand reached back again, and brought more water to run down his back. The moisture farmer in him knew it was a luxury, and it felt exhilarating every time real water touched him.

He moved her in closer to the warm rain inside the glass walls.

The tepid water covered both of their bodies, tiny drops that tingled on already sensitive skin.

The temperature of the water was a contrast to the cold marble wall that Mara found herself up against.

Luke wasted no time as he guided one of her legs up, without her losing balance. No mockery, no torment; he knew she was slick and ready as he plunged himself into her unyielding core.

“Luke!” She bellowed at his admission into her. Her fingernails dug into his back from the awful gratifying agony of him filling her.

He braced her with his knee and he lifted her other leg, and kept her planted against the wall as he began to move inside her.

She hooked her hands behind his neck, braced against him too.

Barely moving; measured, slow, sluggish, dense, and daunting, he fought against the resistance of her hot opening.

His speed increased minutely, as if he was taking his time to feel every ripple of pleasure joining with her body gave him.

He broke from her mouth as he breathed heavy through gritted teeth, placing his forehead against hers, as the water pelted his back. “Gods!” he whispered with a growl, and then called her. “Mara… my Mara..”

Luke’s tempo quickened; the urge to claim her climax came upon him. Hungered, starving really, the ravenous demand to have it sooner rather later drove him harder and faster into her.

She didn’t need any further coaxing, and he stopped moving as soon as she held her breath, then moaned, and bucked back at him in small spasms, gulping at air.

He knew he had succeeded as her cheeks fully flushed, and her eyes, scattered, tried to draw focus. He reached out to her in that moment. <Can I join you?> he pleaded.

Her eyes found his face, and breathlessly nodded, smiling.
Luke’s paced was even faster than before, pummeling himself inside her. And then, one, two, three deep thrusts and he emptied his erupting cum into her.

He found her lips and his groin muscles slowed their pace, slowing the pumping inside.

When he stopped moving, he swallowed hard, and gained his vision. Mara’s bright eyes looked tenderly at him, her wet hair, darkened and plastered to the side of her face, cheeks rosy, and lips made plump from kisses…she looked magnificent.

He boyishly smiled at her. A grin began to grow on her face too.

“Welcome to Dantooine.” She purred.

Luke kissed her tenderly and then fluttered kisses on her face, and she giggled. As he was still in her, he could feel her muscles move with her laughter.

He let one of her legs down, and slowly pulled himself from out of her. She gasped when his head slipped out; he sucked in air at the same time due to his sensitivity.

Knowing that she was stable, he let down her other leg.


Mara hummed contently with the contact.

She slipped out of his arms, but not too far away, as she reached for the cleanser bottle on the shelf.

“Hi yourself- dirty boy.” She teasing sneered at him. Taking the cleanser, she put some into her hands, then to his chest, and started to lather him. “How long were you in that A-wing?”

“Too long.” Luke said as he leaned into her touches, and came close to her neck and nipped.

Mara sighed. Not ashamed of her nakedness with him, her body had a marvelous sheen to it as the water rinsed over her skin.

“How long to shave?” she asked with a mischievous tone.

“You don’t like it?” He tried to sound hurt- she didn’t like his scruffy look- but his voice took on more of a whine than he liked. After all these years he still couldn’t get rid of it. “I thought it made me look more like a smuggler.”

She shook her head slowly, showing that she was not impressed.

“Really?” He said. “I was thinking of growing a beard.”

Mara glared at him briefly. “You can grow a beard when you’re old and gray…being either stranded on a lonely island, or a desert hobo…until then, no.”

He chuckled but then winched as her hands had travelled to his manhood, still sensitive.

“Alright…you win…it’s gone.” He said quietly, and he came back to her for a round of tiny kisses.

She reached back for another bottle, and squirted some liquid into her hand. “Head back please.” She said in a stern tone.

Luke gave in, and tilted his head into the running water, wetting his hair.
“This” she said teasingly. “…is shampoo…There is more than just one generic cleanser out there.” She rubbed the liquid into his hair, and the suds came alive. “I thought you were going to get a haircut too?”

“I forgot.” He forgot everything as her fingers massaged his scalp.

“Rinse please?” She said, guiding his head to tilt back under the running water. “We can arrange something.” She mumbled. She moved his hair around until the bubbles washed away, and his face came back to meet hers.

Her eyes are bright and alive, as green as the hillsides.

“Okay…take care of me.” He whispered. <I’m nothing without you.>

Mara’s grin broadened with his thought. “Turn around please.” She said with a smirk.

More of the same body cleanser, and she rubbed his skin with expert precision. Her hands glided over his firm backside and squeezed at his cheeks again. “You have butt dimples.” She purred into his ear, over his shoulder, and then giggled slightly.

<You like them.> He loved touching her mind; it was so much more intimate than the spoken words. “When do I get to clean you?” He asked, his voice husky.

<<Do you want to?>> she asked. <<Or do you want to watch?>>

Both options sounded very good to him, but he missed her so, that he didn’t want to be away from her more than he had to. “Let me clean you?”

“Alright.” She said, and he turned to face her, letting the water rinse down his back. “I’m all yours.”

Luke caught her words, and held on to them.

They switched places in the shower, the water now running down her back, and she anticipated where he would want to clean her, and tilted her head back into the water, letting it saturate her hair.

He reached back for the first bottle of cleanser that she had used on her, and some of the liquid oozed out into his hands, and worked up the lather before touching her skin.

As his hands approached her, his lips came to hers too. He pursed gently against them, savoring her mouth; his hands started at her abdomen.

He was able to feel her flat stomach, and touch the lengthwise dents of her ab muscles; she shook as he tickled her tiny belly button. He worked upwards, to her breasts, cupping the soft mounds. Her body was enjoying the attention, and her nipples perked again. He knew he would get a mouthful of cleanser if he were to put his mouth to them now.

Mara leaned back into the water again, arching her back, and let the water roll down her front. Luke caught his breath at watching her; he could feel himself start to harden again.

There was no hiding his reaction, and she smirked; enjoying his arousal at her body. “What have you been feeding that thing, flyboy?” She teased.

He stepped closer, letting the water run down between them. “Redheads.” He mumbled as he started at her neck. “It’s starving…not a good enough of a good quality of stock around…it’s developed a taste for the finest and won’t have anything else.”
She snorted.

It was too soon for them to join again; he just wanted to be with her, in his arms, so he willed his body to calm but stayed still aroused.

He switched cleansers, and reached for the shampoo. She turned away from him, arching her back as he brought some of the cleaners to her hair.

<<Make sure you get the ends…>> She instructed him.

Right. He was supposed to be cleaning her hair, and not looking at her sweetheart shaped ass. <You have butt dimples too.>

Luke fingers started at her scalp, and worked the lather through the length of her wet tresses. He reflected at how quickly her hair had grown since he first met her; it was past her shoulder plates, mid-back, now…it used to be just at her shoulders when they first met….it made a tiny thin braid when she restrained it. Now, it was thick and lush.

She turned away from the downpour of water, facing back to him, and arched one more time, letting the water rinse her hair.

Mara came closer to him, and pressed her lips to him, letting him feel the skin on skin contact. She slid past him, and exited the shower, much his dismay.

Luke turned to see that she had retrieve a fluffy towel, and was holding it open for him to come join her. He walked over into its warmth as a surprise.

“Karrde doesn’t spare any expenses for the guest suites.” She murmured, sensing his surprise. “Towel warmers.” She said.

He nodded approvingly.

She patted him down, and wrapped the fabric around his waist. Luke took over and tucked in the ends, securing it in place.

He turned to see her wrap one around her body. With another one, she was rubbing her hair, trying to pull out the moistures from it.

She gracefully walked over to the sink counter. “He even goes so far as to provide his guests, with shaving kits.” She said as she picked up a small leather bag resting beside the sink, and displayed it as a model would.

Luke grimaced. “I get it…no more desert hobo.” And he took the case from her, and looked into the mirror. In his mind he defended the stubble on his face; ‘when it grows in, it would look good’ he thought.

“No it won’t.” She murmured as she walked by him, back into the bedroom retrieve their clothes.

Luke worked the shaving cream into a lather and brought it to his face, as he watched her through the mirror, as she switched out her towel for a bathrobe.

Mara looked over her shoulder at him, with a sultry glance as she let the towel drop.
Don’t tease.> He warned her.

He brought the shaving blade up to his face, and glided it along his skin, removing the short facial hair that she didn’t like, and revealing fresh skin.

“I’m not teasing.” She said. “I like it when you watch me… I didn’t used to…but I do now.” She brought out a second robe from the closet. “Did you want one? –they’re warmed too…”

Luke shook his head. He made another swipe down the opposite cheek before asking, “Karrde really does give you all the best, doesn’t he?”

Mara turned to put the other robe back inside the closet. “Of course… it’s his style.” She walked back over to him, and watched as he continued to shave. “I think, from his past, as a smuggler himself, he knows what a base should and shouldn’t be.”

“He seems to have done pretty well here.” Luke looked around for a face cloth, and she handed one to him.

She nodded. “I think he almost likes this place as much as he liked Myrkrr.” She looked away. “I like it here too…” And paused, “But its missing someone.” She mumbled.

He soaked the cloth, then blotted his face… stubble gone.

Mara’s hand reached out to stroke his face, touching the soft skin, and seeing her farm boy back again. “Besides, as bases go… this one is bigger than any other one he has had…and it blends in well here… looks like the other ranches around here…and the government doesn’t give him a hard time, so long as they get their cut.”

Luke looked inside the case to find a tiny bottle of after-shave. He slapped it on his cheeks, and turned to her to get her approval.

She smiled and came in to kiss him.

“Aves and Chin mentioned you had some trouble getting here.” He said quietly.

She snorted angrily, and walked away from him into the next room. “Oh… that.” she muttered. “It was nothing… amateurs… nothing out of the ordinary.” She said.

Luke looked at her, questioning the sincerity of her statement, and followed her.

“It’s true… one of them even had the old notice on him when we were on the run from Myrkrr… he wasn’t even aware that there was a new bounty on me… brain-burnt on death sticks too.” She defended.

Mara dropped down onto his bed, stretching across it as she watched him roll his case over to the dresser.

“If you say so.” He shook his head, as he pulled his fresh sleeping pants from his case.

<<It’s fine.>> she sent over.

“Alright.” He murmured.

Then he decided to switch the tone, and turned away from her, and looked over his shoulder, mimicking the teasing look she gave him before she took off her towel- he blew her a kiss into the air.
She giggled at him. “Don’t tease.” She warned him as he had warned her.

He dropped the towel, revealing his tanned and toned fine ass. She giggle more, enjoying the view.

Luke slipped into the sleeping pants and joined her on the bed, lying across from her.

“So are you hungry?” she asked. “You have a cooler and small hot plate in here.”

He thought about it, and he was, but he didn’t want her to leave him. Her eyes narrowed, and she got up from the bed and walked over, just a few feet away from him, and started to make something.

“So tell me all the news from the Core?” She asked while she looked in the cooler and cabinet in the room. “Leia? Han…the twins?”

Luke repositioned himself so that his back was against the headboard of the bed, sitting slightly upright. “Jacen has several teeth…and Jaina is starting to talk…they’re both trying to walk…and they’re getting big.” He smiled, proud of his niece and nephew.

Mara looked over at him as she made a quick plate, and poured a large carafe of water. She put them on a tray, and walked back over to the bed. “And what about Pinnacle Base on Da Soocha…it is ready yet?”

He didn’t even try to suppress his shock. “How did you know that?” He sat directly up. “I didn’t even know where it was!”

“Oh?” she put on a mock innocence, “Was I not supposed to know that? – okay, I’ll forget it.”

“No- seriously.” Luke looked at her directly, “How do you know that? If there’s a breach in security…I need to know.”

Mara put the plate down beside him and between them, and met his look, assuring him. “Leia asked Han to find a scrubbed channel and hailed us…we’re running supplies and equipment there. Karrde is helping out and I’m one of the few people who know about it…we’ve got very safe routes that we’re running…we don’t take the same route twice.”

Luke sighed, glad that there wasn’t an information source that he didn’t know about. “Thank you…I was beginning to worry.” He looked down at the plate as she poured a glass of water; she had brought some cheeses and some small fruits and vegetables.

“What about the doctors?” She asked as she handed him the water after taking a sip.

“You’ll be very proud of me…your devious talents must have rubbed off.” He smirked at her as he took the glass, and offered her a piece of cheese from the plate. Her mouth touched the tips of his fingers as she took it from him, and she tilted her head back and she chewed.

“Really?” She smirked. “Do tell?”

“I convinced them to come to Yavin IV and start an archeology project.” He beamed.

“You did what?”

“Well, first, I got them to work with the Coruscant librarians – to conserve their research and data…remind me to give you the data cards of their research later.” He started to explain. “Next, I got them thinking about doing some research on Yavin…and ‘wouldn’t it be fascinating to study a civilization that no one had studied before’. Repeated it to her in the same tone he used when speaking to the
doctors.

“The amazing part…” He took a piece of fruit for himself and popped it in his mouth, chewed once and swallowed. “They actually went for it!—and much bigger than I would have hoped.” He smiled. “They were able to get funding from five different universities – all giving approval to have their students come and study there.”

Luke was still stunned. “Almae and Deek will head some of the digs and research. Dr. Dram will be doing double duty; teaching seminars, and mapping the area plots…and Dr. Massian is coming out too. Although, I think he has a crush on one of the librarians…he’s going to be teaching again. It’s amazing.”

Mara shook her head, disbelieving that he did it.

“They’re moving there after its confirmed safe to go…the set up from the Rebellion is still there, so it should be fine- maybe a little tune up, but plenty of room…so in about two weeks, they leave…and they’ll be save there.” He said.

She smiled, but then narrowed her eyes. “And there was one more thing you had to do…” And she popped a few pieces of fruit into her mouth.

“Yes…” He swallowed the food he had in his mouth and took a sip of water. “I was just getting to that.” He offered her one of the small vegetables, she shook her head, so he ate it.

“So Dr. Dram came up with this idea that there was good chance that if a location had a former Jedi Temple, then there might be a remnant Jedi population…. And as it happens, Dantooine has an abandoned Jedi Temple.” He smiled proudly. “I’m here for work and pleasure.” He winked and came in for a kiss.

Mara obliged him, holding his face to hers for a longer moment, remembering what she adored about him. “You did it…you really did it.” She was impressed, but… “Why do I think there’s something else?”

Luke looked back at her, knowing what she was asking. “They sent a recon team to Byss to investigate.”

“They asked you to go, didn’t they?”

“Yes.” He said. “But it was voted down, for now.”

“But, there will come a time when it won’t be ‘voted down’?” She glared, not at him, but at the situation.

“I suppose so…but not now.” He sighed as he could feel her temper rising.

“Why did Horn send a recon team? –He should have sent in mercenaries…they cost more but they’ll get in.” Her gaze had gone away from him, and she was speaking out loud.


Mara looked at him; he could see the wheels turning in her head, but she kept silent. Instead she just nodded then sighed.

“So tell me about the guests that are coming tomorrow night? And why am I expected to be the
entertainment?” Luke asked, trying to change the tone.

She tightly grinned over to him, knowing that he was trying to sway the conversation.

“You’ll like them.” She said. “It’s a delegation from Naboo.” She took another piece of food and popped it in her mouth.

“Naboo?” He smiled.

“Yes…a Gungan, named Boss Ma’noch and a human named Cormix. They’re distributors and looking for independent traders to carry their goods.” She said. “The Naboo don’t like Trader Federations but need smaller traders…but they love Jedi.” She winked. “Plus, I thought that you could talk to them about your Naboo heritage. I’m sure they could tell you more about Theed than I could.”

“Theed?” he asked.

“The Naboo capital…beautiful city…ancient and modern at the same time.”

He nodded. This trip was going to be much more than he hoped for.

Mara looked at him, he sensed a serious moment. “They don’t like talking about galaxy politics…or history. You should avoid it at all costs.” Her eyes had changed.

“Why?” He asked.

She got quiet, and said, “Naboo was Palpatine’s home world.”

He understood. No planet would claim Palpatine if they had to.

Luke met her eyes. “I’ll be on my best Jedi behavior…I promise.” He smiled.

Mara looked back at him again. “Yes, but first we’ll have to get you in presentable condition.” She got off the bed, and went into the bathroom, bringing back their clothes. “I’ll make the arrangements to get you some appropriate clothes for tomorrow night, and I’ll make an appointment with Karrde’s esthetician.” She glared at his hair, and started to fold his clothing and place it on the edge of the bed.

“Karrde has an esthetician?” He asked.

Mara smirked at him and his naivety. “He has one in the nearest town…he’s pretty good too.”

He watched her get dressed. She wasn’t going for seductive now; she had someplace she needed to be.

She came back to the bed after putting on her jumpsuit, and leaned over and kissed him. “You look tired…Did you want to get some sleep and I’ll come and get you for evening meal?”

Luke nodded, and he reached out in his senses. She received them gladly and sent back her own to him. He could feel the wave of relief from her that he was finally there.

Mara checked her chrono, and grimaced. “You have an hour and a half…will that be enough time?”

“Just enough.” He said, getting up from the bed to get another kiss before seeing her out.

Luke pressed his lips to hers; their contact stayed in place, and he could feel the peace coming into him. “I’ll see you later.” He whispered, and she slipped out the door.
He walked back to the bed, set his chrono for slightly over an hour and got under the covers. He could still feel her touch; she wasn’t pulling back.

Just knowing she was there made him sleep peacefully, awaiting his wake up call from his Mara.

TBC
Mission Accomplished Part 2

Chapter Summary

Quote: “Luke…we’re being attacked by Ewoks and we need you to save us all…”

Characters: Mara; Mara & Karrde; Smugglers; Luke and Mara…

Chapter Notes

**

So, yeah…then this happened…

I did get a little mushy towards the end…try not to judge me…it was a long week.

SMUT WARNING!!!

**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dantooine- Day 1 continued…

She walked down the hall to his room. With no one around, Mara permitted herself to smile. She even caught herself uncharacteristically humming a tune as she walked.

Yes, she was happy- if this is what happy feels like.

Luke was here.

He brought with him, not just a presence, but security and safety; both which she still lacked when they were separated.

It made her ponder why she couldn’t find those things without him. She was independent person and could take of herself. She had survived just fine without him before she knew him.

But if she was being honest with herself; no, she didn’t survive ‘just fine’ before him. Her life was always in some sort of turmoil, whether it was emotionally or physically. There was some sort of upheaval going on. It wasn’t until she started to work for Karrde that she had found some sort of permanency; maybe not in location, but certainly in her life.

And it wasn’t until Luke came into her life that she actually started to live again. Life wasn’t so bleak. She didn’t notice a changed, but those around her did.

Aves had commented once that she wasn’t as quick with her comebacks she once was ….and only once did he mention it. Since then, she still kept her famous sneering jibes, but even she noticed that the tone of them had changed.
She had lost her general malice for the galaxy…and blamed Skywalker. He was making her soft…but she was okay with that. The malice may be gone, but the general distrust would not leave.

Mara got to the door of Luke’s room. She stretched out her senses to find him. And sensed nothing—he was there, but he was not responding. Strange.

She sounded the chime, and waited. He didn’t answer the door.

Taking out her pass card, she gained access to his room as the door slid quietly open.

There he was, stretched out, still asleep in the bed.

He was on his stomach, head turned away from her, right hand under one of the pillows, the covers reached his waist, and…he was snoring, slightly.

Mara approached the bed silently; she knew what could possibly happen if you woke a sleeping Jedi too quickly.

She lifted the pillow that was covering his right hand, as it was making a noise. The noise grew in volume as the pillow lifted; it was his chrono in his hand sounding an alarm- he didn’t move. Mara slid it out from his hand to turn it off, and saw that it had been sounding for close to thirty minutes.

She rounded the bed to see his face; his handsome face, breathing hard and deep.

His left arm had slumped off the bed, and she slowly picked it up and brought it closer to his body.

She crouched down on the floor in front of him.

In this moment, he was unguarded and unprotected. The assassin in her still saw an opportunity- it was just a reflex that she never could shake, even though she had no intention on hurting him.

What she felt was quite the opposite; she felt things that she had never felt for anyone else. Her heart welled with emotion watching him- emotions that she had never had before…and all of them at once.

She wanted kiss him, hold him, talk to him, listen to him, be part of him, let him be part of her, make-love to him again…

Wait, did she just use the word *love*?

No. It was just sex. Good sex. Great sex…but *just* sex.

She sighed. She could deceive others, but she couldn’t deceive herself, not anymore, and not with him.

With one finger, Mara gently stroked some of his overgrown hair away from his face. Yes, she loved him. If this is what love feels like…she did *love* him.

She choked on her feelings; wanting to cry and laugh at the same time.

But she held it in.

The one thing she knew was that she wasn’t ready to hear it back, not from him, not yet. Soon. But not yet…it would be too much if it were to happen now.

She called quietly, “Luke?”
Again, she called, “Luke? – it’s time for evening meal…”

He grunted once, acknowledging her presence.

“Luke… we’re being attacked by Ewoks and we need you to save us all…”

He mumbled something that sounded like a plan, but still didn’t fully wake up.

“You’re tired, aren’t you?” She asked him. “Did you want to continue to sleep?” She brushed his hair again.

He grunted something that sounded like an affirmative.

“I’ll bring you a plate of something, okay?” She leaned in, rubbed his back and kissed his cheek.

He hummed something, then grunted.

Mara let herself out, and made her way to the dining hall.

She had never seen him sleep like that. She, herself had slept like that once, in his arms, on Wayland.

She remembered that sleep too, and counted it among one of the best night’s sleeps she had ever had; mostly because it had been so long she could sleep.

She shook her head, still marveled that he affected her life so.

Before she reached the dining hall, she spied Karrde, reading his data pad, as if waiting for her. Mara made sure to set it in her mind to wipe her feelings, and remove her grin from her face.

“Ah, Mara” Karrde looked up and around as she approached, “No Skywalker?”

“He was indisposed, and could not make the meal this evening.” She answered blankly. “I’ll bring him a plate, in case he changes his mind.”

“Sleeping?” Karrde asked, and she nodded. “I’m not really surprised. He was in that A-wing for close to four days… four days of breathing recycled air, then breathing fresh air, takes its toll on a body… even on a Jedi. Plus the air here is especially fresh- you slept for almost fourteen hours when you first arrived.”

Mara nodded.

Karrde started to walk towards the dining hall. “We should check his air regulator on that A-wing… those things are unreliable. They should never have put a hyperdrive on such a small fighter. I was hoping to ask him to run an escort duty on his way back to Coruscant. Do you think he’d mind?” He glanced over at his lieutenant to get her sense on his question.

“I don’t think he’d mind.” She kept her comments to minimum concerning the Jedi, as to not reveal any of her feelings. “We could ask him.”

“Good… good.” Karrde said, nodding; he watched her from the corner of his eye while they walked. “I had a strange thing this happen this afternoon, after Skywalker arrived… maybe you could shed some light on it?”

“Of course.” She said, keeping her gaze ahead of them.
“My vornsks…Dang and Sturn…vornsks are hunters by using Force-sensitivity…both male…both neutered…” He paused. “They started mating with each other….you wouldn’t know what that was about?” Karrde’s tone was almost humorous.

Mara portrayed no emotion. “Mmm…strange indeed.” She said.

They had come to the opened door of the dining hall.

“Keep it discreet, Mara…and we’ll be fine.” Karrde murmured before they entered the room.

“Meeting after the meal.” He informed her before heading to his seat in the hall.

She could feel a blush coming on, but she took a cleansing breath and walked into the room behind Karrde.

**

The evening meal was uneventful. Several people were disappointed that the Jedi wasn’t there. Ghent seem particularly upset, but then brightened with the idea that Skywalker would be around for several more days. Somehow, a Jedi had gotten a camp of smugglers to like him in a very short time.

She found it particularly amusing that a table full of smugglers wanted to be a Jedi- and the Jedi was trying to grow a beard to look like a smuggler. Boys.

After the meal, Mara walked to Skywalker’s room, balancing a warming tray in her arms. She knew he would be hungry when he woke up, regardless if he was having side effects of fresh air intake.

As the door opened, she could sense he was pretty much in the same state was when she left him. With one hand she balanced the tray, with the other, she palmed the dimmed switch to raise the lights slightly.

Mara placed the tray on the countertop by the cooler and hot plate. If he woke in the night, the food would be waiting for him.

He had moved since she was last there, and had rolled over, covering himself with the sheets and duvet. He was now on his back, his right arm raised above his head, but the left side of the bed was empty for another body.

She watched the rise and fall of his chest, and she wondered if it would be too much of an imposition if she was to join him for the night.

If he was awake, they would probably be spending the night together anyhow.

She would consider it later, after her meeting with Karrde.

But out of curiosity, Mara walked over to him and touched his face; he absently grinned and hummed as his face turned into her touch.

<<Okay Luke …one grunt- I come back and sleep beside you…two grunts- and you get the bed all to yourself tonight…what will it be?>>

He grunted once- slightly louder than the others.

She snorted and bent over to kiss his cheek. <<I was hoping you’d say that…see you later then.>>

She dimmed the lights, quietly left the room and headed to one of the conference rooms.
Karrde’s evening meetings were usually short and to the point. Very seldom were they ever very serious either; merely a way to outline the following day.

Mara knew though, that tonight might be different. With guests arriving, Karrde would want everything planned for their visit.

The two guests were pretty much strangers to all of them, but they passed the vetting for clients, and passed Karrde’s own personal inspection of their distribution chains. So it was just the matter of negotiating prices, delivery schedules and any special instructions.

Even with those tangibles nearly ready to go, something about this deal didn’t sit well with her. It had been nagging at the back of her mind.

When she stopped to examine it, it wasn’t the clients that set her on guard- they passed even her senses in the Force. There was something else, and until she figured out what that was, she wouldn’t be happy.

Mara had yet to mention her apprehension to Karrde, yet she senses that he had questions for her. In the past, he sometimes took her advice when she got these gut feelings, but not always.

Although he might respect her Force talents, he still didn’t always trust them, and for the most part, she was learning to trust them too.

When she opened the door to the room, the other associates involved in the communication were already speaking.

She walked towards her seat, beside Karrde.

On the opposite side of him, his vornsks each lifted their heads in her direction; she glared at them and then they put their heads down, looking rather guilty.

She took her seat and continued to listen to the conversation already started, and she opened her data pad.

“…what we’re really concerned about, is the conditions inside the containers of the goods.” Armeth was saying. “We may have to have techs on board to make sure that the goods arrive in deliverable and usable condition to the final client.”

Karrde was stroking his chin as he listened to the other man. “I don’t remember that the product would be so volatile during transport. Are we sure that sending a tech with every shipment would be necessary? - it would drive up the cost, and although our profit margin could assume it, I would hate to eat that cost.”

“I think we should.” Armeth said.

“Well…” Karrde turned to Mara and made eye contact. “This will have to be one of those things that we discuss with our guests when they arrive.” She took the queue and made a note on her data pad. “As for our other arrangements for our guests; have we been able to establish their hailing code to the spaceport so that they don’t encounter the same issue as Skywalker did?”

“Yes Boss.” Aves said from down the table. “We’ll even be in town when we expect them to land too….and the transport has already been cleaned for their arrival.”

Karrde nodded. “So I believe that the only thing left to discuss is entertainment…” He turned to Mara. “The usual will be fine for the evening…a quiet Sabaac game where the guests win…all of
you will be compensated from the petty cash reserves, of course. However, I was hoping that Skywalker was here so that I could ask another favor of him.”

Mara raise her eyebrow as she looked back at him.

“But perhaps, I should ask you…” Karrde was looking at her. “Would you be opposed to a lightsaber demonstration for our guests and staff?”

She waited for a moment. “I’m not entirely opposed to it- both Skywalker and I have sparred for demonstrations before, but I don’t know what purpose it would serve?”

“Oh, purely entertainment value.” Karrde said. “Some of the staff have never seen you use one before, and Skywalker’s reputation is legendary. Aside from that, it would assure our clients that we can protect their supply if we have a potential Jedi on staff.”

Mara looked down and then back up. “I’ll ask him if he would consider it before we agree.”

Karrde’s eyes narrowed at her. She subtly looked at the room then back at Karrde.

He took her meaning, and turned his attention to the others. “I think this meeting is adjourned. Good work everyone, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The others got up from the table and nodded their goodbyes, and left.

When the door closed, Karrde got up from the table and walked over to the small bar in the corner. He poured two small glasses of Bakuran nectar, and brought them back to the table. He handed one to her, expecting his answer.

“I’m sorry Talon.” She said. “I just don’t want this sparring session to trivialize my, our training….it’s not for entertainment…it’s a matter of life and death that I’m training for, not to be ooh’ed and aww’ed at.”

He nodded. “I understand…but there’s something else – you haven’t been happy since we took this client, and I want to know why.”

Mara shook her head. “I can’t tell you…I don’t know myself…but it doesn’t feel right.” She looked at him. “If it matters, the other staff don’t know that I’m not pleased….I’ve kept my feelings to myself.”

“I know that.” He gave her a tight smile. “I’ve put my trust in your feelings, and you’ve never let me down.” He looked away. “Do you think that Skywalker might help you sort of your feelings on this matter?...I don’t know if the Jedi have any particular abilities for insight such as this.”

She took a sip of the nectar, paused for its affect, and then smirked. “He can’t predict profitability, Talon.”

“But if he could?” He grinned back at her.

“He’d be placing bets on pod races.” She said into her glass as she finished its contents.

He chuckled. “Somehow I don’t see him doing that.”

“Probably not.” She agreed.

Karrde looked away, then back at her. “I have no right to ask…”
“But you’ll ask anyway…”

“Yes, I will.” he said quietly. “When did the two of you… have a change in your dynamic?”

Mara let her stoic face soften. “It changed right before I left Coruscant.” She said.

Normally, she wouldn’t add anything to a simple comment, but with Karrde it was different. “It was a surprise to me too.”

“Really?” He looked taken back. “It was pretty obvious to everyone else.” He sipped his own nectar. “Especially from Skywalker’s side.”

She gave him one of her trademark glares, but lacked the anger that went with it.

“Don’t play coy with me Mara…” He smirked back at her look. “You knew he was drawn to you from the moment he met you. I must admit I was very surprised when you were able to convince him to come and rescue me from the Chimera. But it was when I saw the vid from the Quenfis, when he saved you at the Katana Battle, I knew I had lost you to him….at least from his side. There are things a man will do when he’s in love with a woman… and one of them is to do anything she asks, the other, is save her life.”

Karrde sat back into his chair, measuring her response to his last words. If she was shocked by his use of the word ‘love’ she didn’t show it. “I wasn’t sure about your feelings for him though. I thought you would take longer to come around. My money was on at least two, maybe three years… maybe even five.”

He paused, and looked directly at her. “Just promise me that you’re happy with him, and I’ll be happy for you. And promise me that I won’t lose you to the Jedi, and I’ll be happy for you there too.”

Over the years, the tone of their relationship had changed, but Mara could always count on Karrde caring about her.

She relaxed in her chair. “To be honest, I don’t know how I feel about any of it…and all of it.”

Mara looked at Karrde. “I do care for him…but I don’t know about the Jedi.” She looked at the glass in her hands, wishing she had more of the nectar and the euphoria it brought on. “I don’t know if I can dedicate myself to one person, and one cause again. But I’m happy when I’m with him, and I promise you that I won’t leave you…at least without a sufficient replacement.” She winked at him.

He chuckled. “Then, that’s all I ask.” He got from his chair and walked over to her, and place a kiss on her forehead. “You don’t need it, but you have my blessing.” He said solemnly and made his way to the door.

He whistled, and the vornsks came to their master. “Good evening Mara…I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She nodded and watched him go; a feeling of relief washed over her.

**

Mara stopped at her own room before heading over to Luke’s room. She needed the bare essentials for the night and the morning; so it didn’t look like she had spent the night, but merely, and conveniently was there to escort him around the base.

Karrde’s words stuck in her mind, about the recycled air in the A-wing. So she stopped off at the
medic room for a pulse-ox reader and a small oxy tank, just in case.

She made her way to his room. Getting in and out of his room would be harder in the coming days, with guests and staff being down this hall, so she should enjoy the privacy now.

His door slid open, and the lights were still dim at she had left them. She placed her items on the dresser that was closest to the door, and looked around the room.

It was clear that he had been awake since she was last there. The plate on the countertop showed signs of being picked through, and the drink had been half consumed.

However, he was asleep now, facing the door on his side, left arm under the pillow under his head, right arm extended to ‘her’ side of the bed.

Nothing seemed more right than to be beside him.

Mara put on her sleeping shift, dimmed the lights. She lifted his arm as she slipped under the covers, and let his arm down over her and she lay beside him.

He mumbled something then responded by pulling her closer.

The last thing she did before she closed her eyes, was to gently kiss his mouth.

<<Good night Luke>> her mind whispered, taking in the protection she found in his arms.

**

Dantooine- Day 2

Mara awoke with a start. Her internal clock had set itself to wake her without the need for an alarm, and it was pretty accurate too.

She knew she needed to be up and out early as the transport was headed into town and she had goals today. Goals that mostly centered on him.

With a warm arm slung over her waist, and he was spooned in behind her, breathing into her hair. It felt wonderful, and she really didn’t want to rouse to meet the day. But she did want to look at him while he slept peacefully.

Mara wiggled herself to see if he would pull her closer or loosen his grip. His arm went slack, and she knew she could turn over without disturbing him.

She shifted her hips as far back as they would go, still keeping his arm around her, then she turned her shoulders in to him, and turned her head into and around her pillow.

Now facing Luke’s sleeping form, she was able to see his face, upfront and undisturbed. She couldn't resist touching that face, and her fingers traced some of the points of interest.

He had faint scars on the right side of his face by and under his eye; she figured that the episode, whatever must have cause those scars, wounded him pretty deeply in order to be visible after a bacta treatment.

She noticed that his nose was slightly pushed to the side, but it suited him just fine. There was a small mark, also on his right side, just below his lower lip. His lower lip was definitely more-plump than the upper one.
Small lines, that were deeper when he smiled, were beginning to show, as well as slight indents where his dimples were. And of course, the distinguishing, trademark Skywalker cleft in his chin.

She was mystified by him with so much of a contrast in the same man— a cautious man and reckless boy; a hardened warrior and a tender lover in one body too.

Mara moved herself closer to him, and pressed her lips to his. His mind was still asleep, but he hummed approval as he kissed her back as a reflex.

She wondered wickedly if she could wake him like he had awoken her back on Coruscant with the same sort of physical arousal.

She pressed her lips to his again, only with a bit more pressure, and pursed repeatedly, but not hard enough to wake him.

He half moaned-half hummed contently, rolled a bit away from her on to his back. His front was now fully available to her.

Mara let her hand slide over his lean muscular chest; she inched towards him and nipped at his neck. He seemed to like this, as he started to unconsciously grin.

She let her finger tips slide down his sternum, stopping off at his first exposed nipple, and circled it until it perked up. His body was very responsive; she didn’t even have to touch the other nipple to see it perk up too. He snorted softly as it must have tickled.

She put her lips back at his neck, and kissed tenderly- he hummed- her hand ran up and down his chest in time with her kisses.

His hot skin warmed her, and she wanted to press herself as close as she possibly could to him.

She backed away to remove her sleeping shift, and tossed it away from them. Now, she shivered as her cool skin touched him.

Her body wanted him; her thighs rubbed together, and she could feel the involuntary wetness starting between them, and the quiver in her core.

Under the covers, her hands discovered that his sleeping pants had slipped down past his navel, revealing the start of the curling dark blond hair that lead to his manhood.

Her fingertips went directly to work, just tracing the muscles of his groin that curved and directed her to the part of his body that had resplendently pierced through her, and touched her so deep, where no one else had.

His hum had turn into a muffled growl.

She wanted him, on her own terms, at her mercy, and for her pleasure; and as an afterthought, and a side benefit, he would enjoy it too.

Her fingers kept tracing the muscle, her lips pursed on his skin. <<Luke? I want you.>> she thought over to him. <<I want you now. Can I touch you?>>

His body responded by beginning to harden, and he growled quietly.

Mara smiled as she watched his breath deepen and he half-growled as he exhaled in tempo, approving her touches.
Her hand slid over the fabric covering his bulging shaft, moving the soft knit up and down. His girth seemed to grow in her hand, and she could feel the throb in his veins.

Her mouth kept its pressure on his jugular, and she moaned with agreement of his body. She could sense that he was waking slowly.

Luke clearly wanted the attention she was giving him, as he sighed, and his own hand went to free himself from the fabric that encased him.

With his eyes closed and his breaths still deep, he released himself, stroking himself unconsciously.

Mara slipped her own fingers to her clit, and rubbed herself as she watched him. She felt the flush rising in her skin, climbing from her center, up her chest, and into her face.

She could take it no longer. She removed his hand from where she wanted to be, and straddled him, sure to not bring her weight down.

When she was in position, she took his girth in her hand and moved him between her womanly lips, slicking the head of his shaft; and lowered herself onto him.

Slowly, she moved down, and panted from the pressure; letting his width open her in perfect pleasure… so satisfying, so appeasing.

She closed her eyes and tilted her head back with relief as she slid her own hands to her breasts, and squeezed them as the shiver of his deep inner touch filled her.

His hands had moved to her thighs; palms against the silk skin.

When she opened her eyes, she saw that his eyes were mere slits, watching her through their heavy lids, a grin on his lips.

Mara’s face was one of satisfaction and seductive predator. Her body was gratified with obtaining what it wanted, but her conquest wasn’t complete.

Her pelvis began to rock at her leisure, grinding to find the right spot that touched the place of ultimate elation.

Luke’s hands rubbed her thighs, wanting to conduct her pace. She would not have it- this was for her- he was for her…all of him.

She took his hands in her own, and interlaced her fingers with his; balancing herself better, gripping and releasing his fingers as she timed her movements.

Mara decided to show him why she had captivated the most powerful men in the galaxy as she had danced.

Her pelvis changed its rocking movement, still slow and methodical, motioning into small circles as her hips rotated.

She raised and lowered herself onto him; finding inside her a new sensitivity, then switched rotation direction in perfect tempo of slow-slow, quick-quick.

He moaned, as if he didn’t like that she had taken the pace away from him, but had enjoyed relinquishing his power to her, making her in charge of his pleasure, and her own too.

Mara closed her eyes again as she increased her speed. She had found the place of satisfaction that he
touched her on the down-thrusts. The heat was building up in her body, travelling up her neck again, and coming in waves on her flushed skin.

She could feel the increase in her juices too, without her will, but met with her approval as they added to her sensitivity, and she knew he adored how her body responded to him.

When she opened her eyes, she was met with his; staring at her in pure anguish watching her. Deep sapphire filled with desire and passion.

She didn’t flinch away from his gaze, and only met it with a challenge. Her eyebrow raised as she changes her motions again, pushing the circles of her rotating hips to her right- forcing his internal strokes to the corners of nerve bundles seldom touched.

She gasped, looking at him.

His head tilted back, as he began to pant, heavy and hard.

She was relentless, and she switched the rotation to her left; forcing him to the other side of her depths.

She moaned; breathing hard, regarding her prey.

He moaned; his mouth mumbling without coherence, begging and pleading for mercy. She refused.

The grip of his hands had begun to tighten on her hands. She took his wrists and guided his hot open palms over her the cool skin of her breasts. He squeezed her mounds as mercilessly as she rode him. She winced, then moaned as he clipped her nipples in ecstasy.

The assassin in her told her it was time for the kill. She held his gaze, strong and determined, the motions of her hips stopped.

Mara sat tall on him, placing her hands on his belly, and by tilting her pelvis, she took him deeper in her than he had been before.

Luke’s eyes questioned and beseeched, until awareness came to his face, then shock, then pure astonishment.

“Gods!” he moaned loudly into the air as he arched his back off the bed, then relaxed back down.

Concentrating, she controlled and coordinated her internal muscles to clench and release him, in ripples up and down his shaft without moving her body. Her muscles worked in unison, pushing his sanity to edge of reason, and putting her climax first.

She felt it; on the verge, not far off now. She clenched around him, holding it as she held her breathe, and released, then repeated that action several more times.

Finally, just on the cusp; she held a deep breath for longer, and worked her muscles fast inside her, clenching around him, and releasing rapidly – all the pressure, all the longing released in her body in hard, deep throbs; the most intimate pulsed thudding in the center of her core.

She tilted her head back and moaned, rapturously in satisfaction. She was lost in her pleasure, dizzy and very aware of the feelings in her body. She began to relax, riding the waves.

His feral animal took over, demanding his release too. Quick, without warning, he lifted her weight, and flipped her on her back. His erection was angry and fierce; his pelvis rocked hurried in and out
of her. The friction driving him passed reason.

He wanted her, as his, one more time before he would have his apex.

“Give it to me, Mara…” he growled between his teeth, in her ear. “I need to hear it….”

No warning for her, and her body convulsed again and again. “Luuukkke!” she bellowed, giving him what he needed.

Right behind her second climax, his came, shooting his seed in hard spurts from his body; denying it for longer than expected, it was a combination of pain and pleasure. He vocally thundered his relief at his release.

His body came to rest on hers, holding her to him.

They both panted, joined together.

She felt his touch in Force of how magnificent she had made him feel. He didn’t want to move; he was lost for words.

Mara felt him move though; knowing he might be causing her discomfort.

Luke pulled back and looked into her face, grinning up at him.

“Good Morning.” She said, faking the casualness of it all.

He chuckled softly, still feeling her around him. “Good morning to you too.” He leaned in to kiss her.

Mara wrapped her arms around him and let herself be taken in by his kisses.

She could feel him move again, wanting to withdraw from her body. <<I wish I had thought of bringing a towel over…>>

<Why?> he asked as he pulled out of her. It was then that he knew; a small flood of her essence left her as he did.

He broke away from their kisses. “Did I do that to you?” He was surprised, but proud too.

“You know you did.” She gave him a teasing glare.

“Sorry.” He blushed.

“No, you’re not.” She quipped.

He smirked, like the flyboy she knew was lurking behind the Jedi. He got up from the bed and retrieved a towel from the ‘fresher, warmed for her comfort.

Bringing it back, he helped her by sliding it underneath her to catch any more fluid. And he lay back down beside her, still wanting to bask in their wake-up call.

Mara’s hand came up to touch his face, and encourage his lips back to hers.

His hand caressed the flat of her stomach, as he kissed her gently; she giggled between their lips at his unintentional tickling.
Her mind jumped to a thought. «Gods! Karrde’s poor vornsks…please say you were shielding?»


Mara started to blush, then her hand came over her mouth as she started to full out laugh. “Last night…” she said between snickers, “they started mating…” she snorted repeatedly, “because they sensed us.”

Luke started chuckling at the thought.

“Karrde was amused but I’ll bet he won’t be so generous the second time.” She snorted again, and another thought occurred to her. She gasped, “Poor Chin!—he’s probably walking them right now!”

Luke couldn’t contain his laughter on that one, and let out a full whole-hearted laugh and Mara joined him. When his laughter died down to a chuckle. “Ah, now I feel bad for Chin.”

Mara shook her head at him, and pointed her finger into his chest. “You…are going to have to learn to shield more often.”

He looked at her, conceding. “Yeah, you’re right…but Han wanted to write us a thank you note for the first night we were together.” He raised an eyebrow at her.

“Leia?—she felt us?” She looked shocked.

“He showed me the love-bites that she left.” He said, slightly amused, but not thrilled that it was his sister.

Mara glowered at him. “Must be a Skywalker thing.” She crossly muttered.

“What is?” he asked, casting a glance of his own.

“Leaving bite marks.” She poked his ribs. “It took nearly two weeks for the ones you gave me on my shoulder to disappear….I couldn't wear anything off the shoulder.”

“I did?” he said, surprised. “I didn’t know I did that…I’m sorry.” Concerned filled his eyes.

“It didn’t hurt…just inconvenient.” She smiled at him. “Just a warning…one of these days, I’m going to mark you up and there’s nothing you’ll be able to do about it.”


He watched her, admiring and appreciating her body next to him.

Mara stretched, putting her arms over her head, and he went to lean in to capture her nipple in his mouth.

She stopped him. “As much as I would want this to continue…we have breakfast and a transport convoy that we have to make…and your presence was sorely missed last night.” She rolled to get up from the bed.

He rolled onto his back, hoping to convince her with his body’s reaction to her again. “What happened last night? I don’t remember anything after I went to sleep for a nap.”

Her eyes narrowed at him. She knew what he was trying to do; he was attempting to convince her back into another passionate session. This was the second time that he was trying to convince her of such a thing, but duty called.
“You basically passed out.” She found her sleeping shift and put in on. “I came up with bring you down for the evening meal, and you weren’t having any of it.”

She walked over to the dresser retrieving the pulse-ox meter, and walked back to him. “Afterwards, I brought you a meal before I had to go into a meeting, and you were still asleep. Karrde suspects that there might be something wrong with the air exchanger in your A-wing.”

She brought the mask to his face. “Take a deep breath and blow into this.” She instructed him.

Luke inhaled deeply and let it out into the mask, as he listened.

“And you were still asleep when I came back last night.” She looked at the meter, and showed him that the results were normal. “It wasn’t that you were asleep- it was that you were pretty much unresponsive that concerned me. But the air here has been known to do that to people...knocking them out...so just a precaution.”

Mara smiled at him, satisfied that he was okay.

He took her hand and brought it his mouth to kiss it. <You take good care of me.>

<<Someone has to.>> She smiled back, and looked down at her chrono. “We have to hurry. I can only make so many excuses.”

She walked into the ‘fresher and turned on the shower. “I’ll be right out!” She called to him as she scrubbed herself removing any lingering evidence of their intimacy.

It was a fast but sufficient wash. She quickly brushed her teeth, and then she wrapped herself in a towel before coming back into the bedroom.

He was making himself more at home in what would be his room for the next few days, as he put away his things into the drawers of one of the dressers, and laid out what he intended to wear for the day.

He had retrieved his sleeping pants as a matter of modesty while he unpacked.

Luke turned to watch her put on the day’s jumpsuit and hood, and he studied her feelings. She looked up at him, then back down. “They don’t know...about us.” She said quietly. “I’d like to keep it that way.”

“I understand.” He mumbled. He watched her clip on her belt, and he could see that her lightsaber didn’t hang at her waist, but was positioned behind her back, clearly for appearance sake.

“Karrde knows.” She said in a more optimistic tone. “He’s very happy for us.”

And the smiled came back to his face. “He is?” Luke asked, surprised.

“Yes...” Mara said, “so long as you promise not to go running off with me, leaving him in the lurch.” She smiled as she pointed him in the chest.

“I make no such promise.” He smirked. “It’s taking everything in me not to carry you off right now.” He winked. “Why do you think I bought the A-wing?—it only fits one, barely...so I wouldn’t be tempted.”

She snorted, and then shot him a strange look as he took out her pillow from Coruscant from his case.
Luke must have seen the look on her face. He sheepishly looked at her. “I need you to ‘recharge’ it.” He said, seeing the look on her face.

“I sleep better on your pillow when you’re away.” He explained quickly. “It’s an old trick…Corran Horn suggested it…and it works.” He sighed exasperated, at how silly he must sound. “Just indulge me on this, will you? —and sleep on it while we’re together?”

She shook her head and snorted. “Okay. For you?- I’ll do it.”

He came close to her, resting his head against hers. “Thank you.” He simply said, and kissed her tenderly.

She checked her chrono. “You had better hurry up…we’re going to miss the meal.”

“Yes—I’ll be right back” He kissed her once again and headed for the ‘fresher.

Mara could hear the water running, and several splashes. She decided to open her data pad, to schedule a housekeeping droid for him and to check the day’s itinerary. She cringed as she saw something on the schedule entitled: ‘Skywalker/Jade Entertainment?’.

When she heard the water stop running, she called out to him. “Karrde’s asked us to do a lightsaber demo, if you’re up for it?—for his guests.”

His head appeared around the door of the ‘fresher, with his toothbrush in his mouth, and a baffled look. He disappeared, and then came back into the room, with a towel around his waist. “I didn’t think you would want to do another one of those?”

Luke started to dress as they spoke.

“It was different with the doctors—they appreciated it, and respected it.” She said as she shook her head. “This feels more like a show…a performance.”

He seemed to consider it, and then looked at her. “Let me think on it?” He asked. “I want to get a sense of those who will be watching before I agree to it.” He came over and kissed her to reassure her that he would agree to nothing if she didn’t feel comfortable.

Mara nodded; he always knew the right thing to say. She looked back down at her data pad, and looked back up when she sensed that he was ready, as she put away the pad.

He was standing by his case. His back was turned to her, but she caught him looking at something small in his hands, then hiding it behind his back as he turned to face her.

“What have you got there?” She asked, surprise that he was being so secretive.

He swallowed nervously. “Nothing.” He was blushing.

She raised an eyebrow, feeling a little hurt.

He sighed. “I have something for you…but I don’t know if you’ll like it.” He was nervous as he brought out the small box, turning it around in his hands.

She waited for him to explain.

“I don’t know…” he mumbled. “The guys…they were talking one night…about home-world traditions…and it got me thinking.”
Waiting, she felt herself getting nervous too.

He walked closer to her, holding the box out. Luke’s blue eyes were big, hopeful and clear.

Mara’s hands took the box from him, and he stepped closer to her, as she opened it.

Inside the box rested a small intricately carved pendant on a leather corded rope. Her fingers grazed over it appreciatively, smiling.

“It’s a Japor Snippet…I carved it for you…Japor is a type of petrified wood from Tatooine, it gets this pearlized look after years.” She noticed a tremble in his hands as he took it from the box, and loosened the leather, offering to put it on her.

She nodded, stunned, lifting her hair and hood in silence, full of emotion; still listening to him.

“It took some time to find it, and the jerba leather…it’s for good luck and protection.” He said quietly as he put it on her.

Mara stared down at the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, staring at the small details on it…he made it for her.

Luke came around to see her reaction. “Those symbols are for the two suns…they’re supposed to be at the height of the day, when they meet…the two lovers.” He said quietly, remembering the story he had told her during their first meditation on Wayland, when she had slept beside him.

She looked at him with tears in her eyes again, touched by his effort. She lunged at him, kissing him with deep abiding passion. <<It’s beautiful…I adore it.>> She let the happiness wash over both of them, and letting her tears flow. <<You’re so good to me.>>

<Do you want to know why yet?> He asked as he felt her emotion, kissing her too.

She was trembling as she pulled back, happy, but scared too. She shook her head. <<Not yet.>>

He nodded, holding her face gently in his hands, he came in and kissed the tear lines on her cheeks. “When you’re ready.” He whispered, and wrapped his arms around her, and rocked her slowly.

When her trembling stopped, she released her grip on him. Wiping away the remnants of her tears, she said, “We had better get down there…they’ll be waiting for us.”

He smiled, nodded, and then reluctantly let her go. They headed for the door.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

I can’t promise that you’ll enjoy this chapter…it did end on 17 pages- which irks me greatly.

You know…I just glanced at how many words I’ve written for this story alone…I remember the days in high-school when I used to almost pass out when I was asked to write 1000 words…I’m not going on 73,000…unbelievable.
Mission Accomplished Part 3

Chapter Summary

Quote: “Dear Thosis! Look at those pores!”


Chapter Notes

**

So this chapter is mostly plot, with some interesting information. I can’t have smut all the time, you know...I can’t...but I’d like to. ;)

Please stay for the plot...it will be worth it in the end.

And there’s a little of girl-on-girl fighting here, just to keep it interesting.

**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dantooine Day 2 continued...

Luke followed Mara down the opposite corridor from which he arrived, to another flight of stairs.

She was quiet, and he could sense that she was starting to put on the ‘layers’ that she would need to cover up what she was feeling.

He was glad that she liked the pendant he gave her, and he was truly touched that it meant so much to her. Of all the jewels and finery she had worn over her life- this little piece of wood, he sensed, was beyond value to her.

At the base of the steps, she paused to check her data pad.

“Checking the game plan for today?” He asked.

“So far, we’re on schedule...but we’re a little late for breakfast.” She said absently as she read.

“How tight is the schedule?” Luke tried to peer over her shoulder and see the details. “I’d like to get in some meditation and reading?”

“I think I can put that in for you. There’s some free time blocks this afternoon....”

They started moving down the hall.

“And what about tomorrow?” Luke hoped they hadn’t planned his entire visit. “I was hoping we could take a look at that lost Jedi Temple tomorrow, and possibly the next day.”
She looked up at him and smiled her eyes bright. “Your day is completely free tomorrow- with the exception of a meeting with Karrde in the morning. I’ll see if I can break free. But don’t get used to it- these things tend to change. I’ll block out the rest of your day now, so that you don’t get overwhelmed with requests.”

“Do you do this for Karrde too? - keep track on him?”

“No…we both make our own schedules… but you’re special.” She winked at him as they approached two large doors. <<Shields up please.>>

From the corner of his eye, he saw her face drop, all emotion leaving it.

<I have to learn how you do that.>

She glanced at him, and pushed the doors open.

The dining hall was filled with people congregating at every table. It reminded him of the Rebellion mess halls on their bases with a mixture of humans and aliens at just about every table chatting, laughing.

Mara guided him over to the serving station. “We don’t stand on ceremony here. “ She said as she opened the lids to one of the first trays.

The smell wafted up, and Luke inhaled deeply. He was starving. They went down the line of food and beverages, and he hoped his hunger didn’t show by the amount of food he took. He did noticed that Mara must have felt the same because her plate was no different than his.

Karrde was sitting at a table among a group of people that Luke didn’t recognize.

“He’s waiting for you.” Mara mumbled. “Go ahead…I’ve got to talk to Dankin this morning.” And she nodded to a table adjacent to Karrde’s.

Luke walked over to Karrde’s table.

“Good Morning Skywalker!” Karrde greeted him. The rest of the table looked up, and nodded to him in turn.

“Good Morning Karrde, and to all of you.” Luke took his seat.

“It looks like you’ve recovered from your oxygen overdose?” Karrde took a sip of his drink.

“It seems that way.” Luke chuckled. “I’m surprised it hit me that hard.”

“I’m not.” Karrde smiled. “The air here does have a higher concentration of oxygen to most planets, and I find that it’s cleaner too. All of us had a similar experience when we first got here.”

Luke nodded as he started his meal.

The table seemed to hush when Luke sat down, and they all watched him for the first few minutes. They were new faces to him, and they seemed to be affected by his reputation more than his presence.

Karrde must have sensed this too because his next words surprised even Luke. “He is human… he does eat and sleep… and he can’t read your mind.” He said to the table disapprovingly.

“They usually aren’t this shy.” Karrde leaned over to Luke. “Let me introduce you.”
Karrde started, on his left, with the person opposite Luke. “This is Niche- ground logistics.” The next, “Jedson- also ground logistics…best team in the Rim” The men nodded.

There was an empty seat, next. “Aves will be back shortly…and you know him.” Karrde continued. “And beside you is Armeth- science tech and specs.”

“It’s good to meet all you.” Luke smiled, and waited, but he could feel it coming.

Niche started. “You really can’t read minds?”

Luke shook his head, and swallowed his food. “I can sense feelings, but not read thoughts.” He inwardly sighed, and wondered if he should really be letting people know his weaknesses. Mara seemed to take delight in others keeping their opinions of her, no matter if they were true or not. But in this instance, it broke the ice, and made others relax.

Jedson seemed a bit more reserved. Luke recognized the man’s face markings; tattoos down the side of his face- tribal markings from Hikdith. He must have been staring because he could sense Jedson pulling away, so he said, “I’m sorry…I’ve never seen the markings of a Hikdithian before…I understand that they are symbols of your clan and history…it fascinates me.”

Jedson seemed to like this, and was impressed. “Thank you.” He said quietly. “Not many know the meaning of them.” He relaxed. “Do you the Jedi have such markings or traditions?”

Luke smiled. “The Old Order did…most of the learners would start off with a small braid that would grow as their training did…a padawan’s braid…the braid is then removed with a lightsaber when they become a Knight. I never had such a braid.” He said regretfully. “And then as they progressed, it was their clothing that set them apart…there’s an importance in tradition.”

Jedson smiled and nodded, accepting the Jedi’s answer.

Luke turned to Armeth, skipping over Aves’ seat, and sensed that he was trying to form a question. He took the opportunity to get in a few more bites.

“Did you really kill Jabba the Hutt?…and kill the Emperor?” Armeth blurted out; he seemed shocked that those words even came out of his own mouth.

Luke smiled, and stopped eating. “I didn’t kill Jabba—my sister did.” He paused, giving Leia the credit where it was due. “But we did rescue our friend from his clutches. As for the Emperor – Vader killed the Emperor…after I was battling Vader.” He sighed. It was a myth that was never going to leave him, and a secret that he wish he could share, but couldn’t- not yet.

“I have a question.” Karrde chimed in, and wanted to change the tone. “I understand that you’ve recently gained a source for Jedi materials…what are you going to do with them?”

“Well, it’s hard to explain…they’re not all Jedi materials.” Luke took a bite of his meal and swallowed it down before continuing. “Most of the material is from what’s called ‘The Journal of the Whills’…and they contain information that all Force-users can use…you see the Force is neutral…its’ all around us…everyone had access to it.” Luke looked around the table. “It’s just certain people that have a stronger connection to it, and can use it.”

He took another bite, sensing that meal time was almost over, and swallowed. “Eventually, I’d like to have that material made available to anyone who wants to read it…it’s not just mine…it belongs to the galaxy.”

Karrde chuckled, but the rest of the table sat in awe. “That’s a very Jedi thing to say.”
Luke chuckled back at him. “Yes it is, isn’t it?”

It was then that Aves showed up, and plunked himself between Jedson and Armeth. “What did I miss?” He bit into his food. “Hey Skywalker—they finally woke you up, huh?”

“Morning Aves…yeah, they were able to finally yell loud enough at me.” He winked.

The rest of the meal was fairly casual, and those at the table seemed to relax more as they talked about things they didn’t think a Jedi could talk about. They spoke about the latest Teeshball game and what a travesty that G’doark didn’t win as Luke had money on that game. Luke explained to the table what a Code: Pink was, and his visit with The Rogues. All stories eliciting laughs at his expense and getting more comfortable with him.

The tables around them were breaking up, and heading out of the hall.

Aves stretched and looked at his drink. “I’d better get another one for the road since I’m driving transport today.” He looked up at Luke. “I hear you’re going in Mara’s speeder into town?”

“I suppose so.” Luke answered. “I really don’t know what we’re doing today.”

“I think she’s got it all figured out.” Karrde interjected. “She did message me that you would let me know with regards to the sparring demonstration. I understand your reluctance- we can cancel the other alternatives if you change your mind.”

Luke could sense the disappointment in the others at the table, but it was up to Mara essentially, and he knew that she was still apprehensive. “Thank you for understanding Karrde.”

He didn’t even hear Mara come up beside him.

“Good Morning Karrde.” She said.

“Mara.” Karrde nodded in greeting. He narrowed his eyes, a bit of a glare, at her briefly, but Luke caught it.

“Are we ready to go?” she asked. She seemed in a hurry to get of there.

“I’m good.” Luke assured her, he followed her out.

As he walked slightly behind her, he could sense something wasn’t right. <Did I miss something?>

<<We’re stopping at the med center first…how good are your healing techniques on non-Force sensitives?>>

“Chin got injured walking the vornsks this morning.” She said quietly. “I want to go check on him.”

Luke cringed.

“It’s on the way to garage…” She continued. “And your first appointment is in an hour, in town.”

“Do I get to know what the schedule is?” He asked.

“It’s pretty simple.” She said as they walked. “In town, you have your first fitting with the Karrde’s tailor. Then, you have an appointment with his esthetician for your hair cut.” She grumbled. “Then back to the tailor to pick up your clothing…then we meet our guests at the Spaceport…then back here for mid-day meal…”
She looked again at the schedule. “I’ve put in a block for us to train and meditate this afternoon, but your evening is all booked up.”

They rounded a corner and stopped at the nearest door; the med center.

It turned out that Chin’s injury was merely a bit of leash burn from the vornsks pulling too hard on their restraints. Either Chin was too embarrassed, or too shocked, but the words he used to describe their behavior were ‘too frisky’. Luke suppressed a chuckle, but knew he had to take his shielding more seriously.

As they left the med center, Mara shot him a glare.

<I’ll take the blame for yesterday…but you started it this morning.> He replied back to her look. He sighed. <Lesson learned.>

She nodded and led him to the garage.

Luke could see Aves and Dankin entering a slightly larger transport than the one that he was picked up in. Mara was walking towards a slick two-seater speeder.

The coloring of the speeder was painted in low browns and beiges, but the lines and booster size suggested that it could blast past most other speeders with ease.

Mara must have sensed his appreciation. “I’d offer to let you drive, but we’re part of a convoy today, not a pod race…Maybe tomorrow.” She said as she pulled up her hood around her face, covering her hair.

Luke smirked at her; she knew him too well. “Right.” He sighed.

She drove behind the transport, keeping a safe distance back, but it gave Luke a good chance to look around again.

“I don’t know why Dantooine wasn’t more colonized- it’s so pleasant here.” he thought out loud as he gazed at the green scenery.

“I think it had mostly to do with its location, being on the far Outer Rim.” Mara commented back. “But, also, the government forbade non-resident ownership of land…and that existed long before the Empire….even Karrde rents his land from a long-standing owner. That’s why it’s never been part of any real conflict. When the sleeper cell of the Rebellion was forced out by the locals, it fell off the radar for any real trouble.”

She was concentrating on driving, but she could feel his sense at how peaceful it seemed. “It would be a nice place to get away from things for while…they still don’t like outsiders. They only like us because we keep to ourselves and spend money in their town…and we don’t bring trouble.”

Luke listened to her, still looking out the window. “Do you think Karrde will stay here longer?”

“He certainly likes it here…but not the location…the travel times cut into his profits.” She explained. “So it’s always a fight of one against another.”

The town was made up of stone buildings, much like Tatooine, but larger, more-grand, and cleaner. He recognized the spaceport, as the transport ahead of them pulled into it. Mara drove passed it.

She kept going down the main road. “We’re headed to the center of town.” She said. “A lot of the tradespeople here are off-worlders, catering to the residents…so you’ll get an interesting mix from
She slowed the speeder, and brought it to a stop on one of the side streets; some local children were playing further down the corridor.

Luke came out of the speeder and walked over to Mara’s side. He observed that she looked up and down the street, although it was for the most part, empty; he thought it was just one of her reflexes—but then he watched her glance stop on the children, and paused.

The street was relatively quiet, a few people and one or two speeders.

She turned back to him and smiled. “Onnek is expecting us.” She said. “He’s high Corellian, and so is his taste. Don’t let him bully you around; if you don’t like something, let him know.”

Right, they were headed to the tailor’s. He had never really been to a tailor until Leia had forced him to go to one. He just didn’t see the need for it, but he quickly found that living in the Core, that people didn’t see his way of thinking about such trivial things as he did.

Mara crossed the street and entered a doorway. Luke followed a few paces behind her; he had learned to keep a distance from her when they were in public.

She opened a door inside the alcove of the building, and light bells rang as they entered.

It was a quick fitting with the assistant- Onnek doesn’t see the client until the final fitting, Luke was informed. If the snooty tone of his assistant was anything to go by, he could delay the delight for as long as possible.

The long tunic and trousers met with Luke’s approval; nothing fancy, he liked the dark blue and the material that were selected.

He could sense that Mara approved of it too, as she smiled at him from across the room as he was fitted. He could sense her attraction to him as he was dressed up- maybe this was the reason that it was so important to other people to dress up. He knew he adored it when she was dressed up; but then she could tramp through a forest for four days, wearing the same thing and he was just as attracted to her. He really wanted to kiss her then.

Mara scheduled the next fitting, later in the morning, and Luke saw her drop a few credits on the counter before they left.

Before they left the building and into the street, Luke reached out for her hand. Mara turned, surprised that he did that in public. <No one can see us here…I’m missing something.> He leaned in and kissed her.

<<You looked very handsome in that tunic.>> She said as she didn’t resist his touch of his lips.

<I could tell you liked it.> He ended their touch with a nuzzle of his cheek on hers, shielded by the alcove.

She nodded, enjoying his touch, regretting and missing it as she pulled away. “We have to get going.” She mumbled.

Mara walked into the street, and passed the speeder. He fell into step beside her.

<Can I hold your hand?> Luke asked, eager to feel her contact again.
Not here…on Coruscant, there are more people in the street. Here, the watchers can see everything.

Watchers? He sent his senses out. Yes, there were indeed people he couldn’t see, watching them. He wondered why; it seemed so peaceful here.

It’s peaceful because they want it to be. She answered. It’s still lawless out here. The Republic or the Empire doesn’t exist; so small towns have to make their own laws and enforcement. Lucky for them that the people who have the resources are ethical enough to like peace, and see the profit in stability.

He looked over at her, silently asking her to explain.

Karrde could easily become the next Jabba; he has the money, the power, the influence, only…he isn’t interested in it. To him, it’s easier to control the corruption rather than to cause it himself.

And that’s why you’re loyal to him; he prefers ethics to corruption? He rhetorically asked.

He’s figured out the difficult balance between making a profit, and keeping his dignity…and he’s willing to keep his ethics over a profit any day. She smiled over at him, confirming it.

I’m sorry I ever questioned your loyalty to him Luke sent over to her. On Coruscant, when I asked you to stay…I now know why your loyalty runs deep to him.

Mara had few people she could respect throughout her life. Karrde was good to her, and good for her. Luke wouldn’t stand in the way of that, even if it meant sharing her with Karrde.

They passed the children playing, as it was clear that they were headed into a different building. Once again, Mara’s head was turned as she watched them play, and then drew her attention back to her mission.

They headed into another alcove.

“Tabord is waiting…he’s from the Core too.” She said as they went up a short flight of stairs. “And he’s about as ‘Core’ as they come.” She raised an eyebrow.

Luke stepped into the room and his nose was assaulted with the fragrance and fumes of the room. It was over-powdery, over flowery, and just over.

A large man came out from the back with a bright coloured tunic.“Ahha Marra…darrrling, I was expecting you…” He glanced in Luke’s direction and looked him up and down. “And your friend.” He grumbled, and then shock as he came in too close to Luke. “Dear Thosis! Look at those pores!”

Mara stifled a snort. “Oh, but Tabord, if anyone can help him—it’s you.” Her hand gestured in a manner that Luke had never seen before.

“He does have good bone structure…” Tabord looked at Luke from side to side.

“You’ll work your magic…I know you will.” Mara said. “He’s from Tatooine…any chance you can put a little sun into his colour, without chemical?”

“Hmm…” Tabord narrowed his eyes. “Possibly.”

“You’re a genius Tabord… you really are…I wouldn’t trust anyone else.” Mara’s voice was sweet and saccharine.
Luke knew it was all for show, but anyone else would have been taken in. It boggled him at how she could morph from one version of herself to another so quickly.

“Alright!” Tabord announced. “I’ll take him.” He looked over at Mara. “But you, my darling, I see you’re on my schedule too. You have perfect bone structure and pores; what could you possibly need?”

She gracefully brought a hand up to her forehead. “Brows.” She whispered as if self-conscious.

When she put her hand down, Tabord looked at her, examining her face. “Of course…and while you’re here…we’ll do something about that dry patch.” He spoke quietly, but his finger wiggled at her, gesturing to her face.

Mara brought her hand to her chest. “Oh, could you, Tabord? You’re an angel!”


Luke sighed as he sat down.

“And you, sweet Mara…you know where the back room is…I’ll be right there.” Tabord said to her sweetly.

Mara walked away from him, smirking. <<Have fun.>>


“Now, let’s see what I can do with this!” Tabord said as he started to move Luke’s hair about.

Over an hour later, and after a few low-key insults thrown his way, Luke was just about done. Tabord had refused to let him go until he got a proper shave after his hair cut, and had put some cream on his face when Tabord had referred to Luke’s pores as ‘big as the craters on the fifth moon of Iyargo’.

Mara came out from the back room, just as Luke was about lose his patience. She chuckled as she watched Tabord fuss over him, putting the finishing touches on him.

Luke looked up at her. She had a little redness around her eyebrows, but her skin glowed. He could see some fine freckles on the top of her cheeks he didn’t notice before, and her eyes shone.

They had put him in a chair, with his back to the mirror and had watched as his hair fall about the floor; so he had no idea what they were doing to him. He was sure if he told Tabord to ‘take a little off the top’, that he would have met with more verbal abuse.

She stood in front of him as Tabord finished. She smiled seductively at him, and nodded. <<You clean up very nicely, farm boy.>>

She turned to the other man. “Tabord! A triumph once again!” And kissed him on the cheek. “Whatever would Karrde do without you!”

The chair turned around back to the mirror, and Luke saw himself in the mirror. It was shorter than he usually wore his hair, but it looked good. Tabord had left some length on the top, and he wasn’t sure how he did it, but it did appear that his hair on top was a bit lighter. A strange thing too, his skin looked tighter. Luke touched it, just to be sure.
Luke nodded his approval. “Thank you Tabord…I like it.”

“And you thought you wouldn’t?” Tabord looked offended.

“Thank you so much Tabord!” Mara interjected, walking Tabord towards the door with Luke in tow. “I will contact you to make Karrde’s next appointment- he’s so looking forward to it….As always a pleasure.”

Mara let Luke go in front of her as she separated him from Tabord. “We will see you soon.” She ushered out the door, as she pulled up her hood.

<Well, I’m glad that’s over.> Luke huffed in his mind, sulking like a child.

“I warned you that he’s very ‘Core’.” Mara leaned in and gave him a consolatory kiss. “You do look very good though…I like the cut.” She purred.

“Yeah?” Luke leaned in for another kiss. “Think I could pass among Karrde’s hoity friends now?”

“Nope.” She said quietly, taking the opportunity for another kiss. “You’re too genuine…you’ll have to work on being more devious.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. <Okay, I’ll work on it.>

<<Please don’t.>> She thought over.

Mara checked her chrono. “We have some time to kill before we have to go pick up your tunic, and meet the guests…are you hungry? There’s a market not far from here…."

“Sounds good.” He said. Anytime that they could spend alone together was more than he could hope for.

As they walked, some children ran passed them, towards a gated-residence, and she smiled. Luke was about to ask her about her interest, but then she was the first to speak.

“So tell me about this Jedi Temple that you want to visit tomorrow?” She asked quietly.

He looked over at her, and responded in the same tone as she did; he knew Jedi weren’t always popular on some worlds. “It was called the Jedi Enclave…it’s past the Khoonda Plains…there’s not much of it left, I’m afraid.” He paused. “It was built during the Old Republic, and was a training ground for those that the Jedi would become Jedi Masters.”

He looked around and could sense the watchers- no threat, just doing their job. “There was a Sith War there once, and the Temple was leveled. However, there is a subterrarian temple that is supposed to be imbued with the Force.”

They were walking into the entrance of a courtyard. He continued. “There’s a town nearby, I’d like to check for any sensitives there.”

Mara nodded. “Well, you’re on the correct hemisphere for it…it shouldn’t be more than an hour away.”

The market place wasn’t very big with few stalls dotted around a semi-covered courtyard.

Mara stopped at the second booth to purchase a local drink. She handed one of the cups to him. “It’s called ‘maffra’—it has some puree fruit and glacial water in it….you’ll like it.”
He could sense that she wasn’t sure about his plans, and took a sip of the drink. <You don’t like my plans, do you?>

<<I read the history of the Jedi and Dantooine—just don’t expect a warm welcome.>>

<I never do.> He thought over to her sardonically. <But I’m happy when I get one.>

They walked past some of the other stalls, and Mara stopped again at a fresh fruit stand. Luke peaked over her shoulder as she was buying a small box of drizzle berries.

<Your favourite…having a craving?> He asked.

“You remembered.” She smiled and sounded surprised, as she offered him one.

Luke picked a few from the box and popped them in his mouth. They were bitter on the initial bite, but sweetened as he chewed.

“You’d probably like them in chocolate.” She said.

“That would be good.” He said as he picked a few more, imagining the flavor.

They rounded the market and were almost back to where they had started.

“I was hoping to find something to bring back for the twins.” He said. “I know they wouldn’t know the difference, but I still like to think of them.”

“Of course you do.” Mara said. “You’re a very proud uncle. And they know more than you realize.”

They left the courtyard, on their way back to the tailor’s.

“You think so?” Luke asked, interested on hearing her input.

Mara gazed was ahead of them, looking at the children still playing in the street.

“Yes. I don’t know about Jacen— because I haven’t spent much time with him, but Jaina is very aware and can communicate very clearly when she wants to.” She said.

“Is that why you talk to her like she’s an adult?” Luke asked. “Leia says that you do.”

She snorted. “Mostly. Not being able to communicate like those around her, annoys and frustrates her…especially when anyone other than her parents, and you, ‘baby talks’ to her. Both of them understand more than you think.”

He nodded. There was a subject he wanted to broach with her but he had stopped himself from bringing it up.

“Do you want children, Mara?” Luke asked quietly as she was watching the children ahead of them. Silently, he begged for the answer he wanted to hear. He got nervous, “I’m not asking for right now…but in general.”

“I don’t know.” She said looking down. “There’s a lot to think about…” She got quiet and mumbled. “Maybe…someday….if…”

“If what?” Luke asked in the same tone she was using.

“If…” She looked up at his eyes, about to answer, and then looked away. “We’re here.” Her voice
got louder, changing the subject. She knew she had done it; moved away from something that was making her uncomfortable to think about.

He nodded, and would not bring the subject up again until he felt he could- but she didn’t say ‘no’, and that was all he could ask for. It gave him hope.

He knew they had both seen children in their visions; he wanted so much for her to want children as much as he did – a real family. Then, he reminded himself that everything with Mara is done in small steps, at her pace. If she wanted children, then it would be when she wanted them, and not before.

He still smiled that she didn’t say ‘no’ outright.

She still wouldn’t let him say three simple words to her, and until they crossed that barrier, he would put the option for children on the back burner.

Luke followed her back inside the building alcove, but before they went inside, he reached out for her hand. “Hey..” he said quietly, and she turned to him. He reached up to her cheek. <All in good time, okay?> He kissed her slowly.

Mara nodded, and gave him a tight smile before they walked back into the tailor’s.

The man Luke supposed was Onnek greeted them; an older man, calm and subdued- not like Tabord but just as snotty in his undertones. He called Luke ‘disproportionate’- someone his size shouldn’t be so broad in the shoulders, wide in the upper arm, and narrow in the waist.

Luke was glad to leave, feeling slightly judged and like a gawky teenager again. Mara must have sensed it so she sent over soothing feeling, telling him that she had no problems with his ‘disproportions’ and actually enjoyed it, sending her desire of him, both in and out of clothes, through.

He smiled as they left. “Where to now?” He asked.

“We’re going to head to the spaceport.” She answered. “They should be finished checking you’re A-wing, and our guests should be landing soon.” She looked up towards the sky, but didn’t see a dot in it.

Luke went to the opposite side of the speeder. “What are they checking on the A-wing?” He asked.

“The air regulator.” She powered up the speeder. “Karrde was concerned. But as always, it serves two purposes.”

“Really? How?” Luke asked. He was learning that nothing was straight forward with her life.

“Well, it makes sure that you’re safe.” She said plainly. “And it tells spaceport staff that you really were a guest of Karrde’s and that they should let up on visitors just in case they might be someone important.”


She snorted. “You almost sounded like a smuggler just then.”

“I’m trying.” He agreed.

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Luke checked on his A-wing. It was a good thing that the techs looked into it- it did have a slight
malfunction. It had been set for a Dug and not a Human. However, he knew that a few percentage point differences could either keep him alive or cause him harm. Thank the Force for hibernation trances which was able to conserve his oxygen.

The techs made the changes on his A-wing with no difficulty, and stared at him as if his flight and landing were a miracle.

By the time he made it over to the adjacent dock, the guest’s cruiser was cleared for landing.

Luke had to restrain himself as he watched the shining sleek silver cruiser land. He had seen nothing like it; stylized and clean. It was a thing of beauty and envy for the entire crew watching.

Mara leaned over to him, nodding to the stylized floral insignia on the hull. “That’s the symbol for Naboo sovereignty. Their royal houses use it frequently.”

Luke heard her, and nodded, but he was too taken in by the ship to turn his head.

The repulse lifts let off their exhaust and the plank lowered. A male human, similar in age to Karrde, with long dark hair, dressed in a fine jacket led the way.

“That’s Cormix.” Mara whispered. “He used to be part of the resistance on Naboo. He helped fight off the Empire when they tried to lay siege to it after Endor. The Emperor had left instructions to attack certain worlds in retribution for his demise- Naboo was one of them. Luckily, they were able to defend themselves.”

A tall humanoid alien followed him. He was lanky with a drawn out face, long segmented ears and small whiskers surrounding his mouth. He was dressed in a long over coat that had many stands with beads on them.

“That’s Boss Mo’nach. He’s an Ankuran Gungan. His father fought during the Great Gungan-Naboo War with the Trade Federation blockade. He’s highly respected among his people.” Mara whispered.

Another figure came down the plank- one that Mara didn’t recognize.

She walked slowly behind both Cormix and Boss Mo’nach. She was slightly taller than either male, and bigger and broader. She had dark tanned skin, and a facial tattoo of a yellow and red stripe that went across her face from one ear to another.

“Kiffar.” Mara muttered. “They have a Kiffar body guard. Karrde doesn’t know about this.”

Mara walked out of the hangar, and headed for the speeder. Luke followed. She pulled out her comm link.

“Jade here.” She said into it, in rushed, hushed tones. “We have an unexpected issue. Our guests have a Kiffar body guard. Karrde doesn’t know about this.”

Luke could hear words coming back to her, and her resignation. She signed off, and then headed for the speeder.

“We weren’t supposed to be a part of the welcoming committee anyhow.” Mara muttered as they got into the speeder.

“Is it really such an issue?” Luke asked. Other than just polite behavior of informing your host, he didn’t see what issue of etiquette had been broken.
“We vet everyone who comes into camp—that’s the way Karrde likes it.” She explained. “That’s how we keep incidents down and that’s how we keep our privacy.”

She seemed to be relaxing, but still didn’t like the idea. “Karrde says that he was informed this morning after we left.” She sighed. “He says he got her file and he’s willing to accept it, if his guests want it that way.”

They had left ahead of the transport, and as they rode back to base, Luke tried to ease her tension. “I’ve never seen a Kiffar before…only heard about them.” He said. “I know that there was once a Jedi Master who was a Kiffar…”

She was right—there was something not right there. It wasn’t any sort of immediate danger, but it was odd that they thought that Karrde couldn’t protect them.

She drove uneasy. “They’re a warrior class, both men and women learn to fight in physical combat.” She was thinking as she spoke. “Even I learned some of their fighting techniques…mostly with a quarterstaff and hand to hand.”

Mara looked over at him and smiled. “When we get back, you’ll have time to change into something to meet the guests at the midday meal, and then the afternoon is yours…” She sighed. “I have a meeting after the meal, with Karrde and our guests, but then I can meet up with you for some training… if you’d like?”

Luke smiled, sensing that her feelings had changed. “I’d like that. I’ve missed our training sessions.”

“You missed me socking you in the chin and kicking the wind out of you?” She snorted as she drove.

His eyes narrowed. “You think you’re so smart?- I know where your ticklish places are…and you think you can fight dirty?”

She fully smiled at him. “You bet I do…you haven’t learned all my secrets…”

“I hope to.” Luke said smirking. “One of these days…”

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He was able to take a shower and dress quickly and simply—something that looked more like a Jedi than his previous outfit from the morning.

Luke smoothed out his tabard over his tunic and clipped his lightsaber to his belt just as the chime rung in his room.

The door opened without fuss, and Mara walked in.

She had washed and changed too since they had returned. She wore a simple green tunic which set her eyes off in a captivating manor; her lightsaber hung at her waist.

Luke felt his heart leap whenever he saw her wearing the lightsaber proudly on her. He stepped towards her, knowing that this might be the last time for a while that they could touch, and came close to her for a kiss.

Mara slipped her arms around his neck as she reveled in his touch, pressing her lips on him.

<<Gently.>> She warned. <<I promised Karrde that we would be discreet.>>
Luke hummed between their lips, and released her slowly.

“I don’t remember agreeing to that.” He said in a husky tone. “But I’ll behave.”

She looked him up and down. “No robe?”

“Do you think I need it?” He asked. “I was going to wear it to dinner tonight.”

“No, you look like a Jedi enough for their liking.” She appraised. “Dinner should be fine.” Her chrono sounded. “We should be on our way. They’ll be here shortly.”

Luke had heard noises from the rooms down the hall from him, earlier while he was getting ready, so he assumed that the guests had made it safely there.

He followed Mara down the back stairs, and down the corridor to the dining hall. The room had been configured differently than the morning. A long rectangular table with seats on either side was in the middle of the room, with satellite tables surrounding it.

Karrde and several of his key people were there already. Other staff stood off to the sides, waiting as well.


“Skywalker, how was your trip into town?” Karrde looked him up and own. “I see Tabord has been at you.”

Luke grinned. “I surprisingly like it…I think he did a good job.”

“He always does.” Karrde returned his grin. “Whether you want it or not. He called me a ‘greasy soonk’ the first time he met me… but he gives a great shave, so I forgave him. He’s in love with Mara, you know.”


Karrde crossed his arms across his chest and came in closer to him. “What did you think of our guests?” He said quietly as he turned his back to room, covering his mouth and stroking his beard.

“Interesting.” Luke responded lowly. “I agree with Mara that the third party seemed out of place.”

Karrde nodded, and stood facing the doors again. “You’ll let me know if anything changes?”

Luke nodded, keeping his senses alert.

Dankin arrived, guiding the guests to the dining hall. They approached Karrde, and Luke watched as they exchanged pleasantries.

Although, the Kiffar stayed back and surveyed the room. Her gaze came to stop behind Luke, seeing right through him, then moved away.

Luke turned his head slightly, to see in his peripheral vision that Mara was behind him.

Karrde was introducing his key staff, and Mara stepped forward, smiling politely, shaking each of the guest’s hands; the Kiffar held back, not making familiarity with anyone.

Jannit Mo’nach.”

Luke stepped forward and bowed to each of the men.

The man Mara had identified as Cormix stepped forward offering his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Jedi Skywalker. I can’t tell you what an honor it is.” His dark brown eyes were receptive, and Luke could sense only the desire for a profitable trip from this visit.

“Then you should understand that the honor is mutual, Captain Cormix.” Luke replied.

He then turned to the Gungan leader. “Boss Mo’nach, it is an honor to meet you too.”

The Gungan bowed again, not offering his hand. “We-sa being liking the Jedi too. Good herstory for us.” He chuffed pleasantly.

“So I understand.” Luke bowed in return. His senses told him that the Gungan didn’t particularly like business meetings away from his home world which would explain a bit of his formality. However, Luke also got the sense that Boss Mo’nach had met a Jedi before.

Mara must have sensed it because he felt the touch of her mind. <Ask me later?> he sent back.

Cormix turned his attention to the female Kiffar standing behind him. “And this is Nalla Vos-fane, our personal associate.”

Karrde and Mara bowed politely to her, and Nalla stared at them, then slowly returned the bow, creating a bit of tension by pausing to do so. She turned to look at Luke; her stern eyes locked on him.

Luke bowed and smiled politely; she softened ever so slightly at him.

Karrde led the way to the table and the meal being served.

The discussion during the meal centered on their trip. As it turned out, they had adjusted the oxygen mix in their cruiser twelve hours before landing, to get used to the heavier air, thus avoiding the lag that other experience when they arrive on Dantooine.

Luke listened quietly, but filed that suggestion away for a future trip.

Half way through the meal, Captain Cormix turned to him. “So have you ever been to Naboo in your travels, Jedi Skywalker?”

Luke swallowed his mouthful before replying. “Sadly, I haven’t. Though I’ve been informed that now I must.” He smiled.

“And why is that?” Cormix asked, looking curious.

“Besides hearing about how beautiful Theed is, and the amazing Gungan underwater cities- I’ve recently found out that my heritage is approximately forty percent from Naboo.” Luke bit into another piece of food.

“Really?” Cormix sounded surprised. “Well then, we’ll be sure to claim you as one of own as soon as you land. May I ask how you discovered this?”

Luke nodded. “I was involved in a program that maps genetic heritage, and since I was unfamiliar with mine, I participated – the results showed my link to Naboo.”
“Amazing.” Said Cormix. “Then you will have to come and visit.”

Boss Mo’nach chuffed. “Tis an honor dat you know of my people. Long have we being missing Jedi on Naboo.”

“I understand that Boss Mo’nach’s father fought in the war with the Trade Federation.” Luke paused, remembering Mara’s warning about history, but continued. “So did my first Master- I’ve read his writings on the matter, and he had much respect for the Gungan people.”

“Who’sa was t’our Master?” The Gungan looked amazed.


“Kenobi?” The Gungan chuffed louder. He pulled something from his pocket.

Boss Mo’nach dropped down several small metal pieces on the table and handed one to Luke.

“We’sa still remember t’im.”

Luke looked at the piece, and saw the profile of a man with a beard on it. It looked like Ben. He looked back up at the Gungan, and nodded. Luke examined the piece more closely – the star date on the piece was slightly before the age of the Empire.

“We have long memories on Naboo.” Cormix said.

Luke smiled, noting that it was time to change the conversation.

Karrde sensed it too, and interjected, taking the conversation in another direction.

As the meal ended, Luke was dismissed, and he watched Mara leave with the party.

He watched Nalla; she was staring directly at Mara as she was conversing with the guests. No, not staring; glaring.

Luke stretched out, and sensed the Kiffar anger directed at Mara.

Mara must have sensed it too. Before leaving the room she touched Luke’s mind, telling him that she was already alerted to it.

He knew he couldn’t protect her, even though he wanted to, very much. He had to remind himself that Mara was very capable, and he should trust her judgment.

But there was something else that Luke sensed. Cormix was looking at Mara too; like Lando used to look at her. He was standing next to her, leaning in close as he spoke, smiling more than he did when he spoke to others. Mara didn’t seem to be bothered by it, and was not reacting to it.

<<It’s alright Luke.>> she sent over to him. <<He’s just flirting…harmless flirting.>>

Luke turned from the dining hall and headed to his room. He now had something to meditate on… controlling his jealousy….and attachments.

**

Luke had set his timer for the hour that Mara said she would be arriving.

He had indeed concentrated on his jealousy, and how to avoid in it with attachments. And had brought calm into himself as he tied to find the root of his feelings.
As he concentrated, he felt that trust was one of the issues that led to his feelings. He trusted Mara; she was not looking for anyone other than him, but he didn’t trust the men that approached her.

One of the things about being discreet about their relationship was that no one else knew that there had been some sort of commitment in place.

He and Mara hadn’t outlined any particular rules to their relationship, but he still knew there was commitment. She hadn’t felt any sort of attraction to Cormix, even though he was a rather attractive man, and was giving her attention.

Luke trusted her.

The second motive behind his jealousy was harder to admit to. Luke sometime still felt like the backwater bumkin farm boy…not as sophisticated as others that surrounded Mara.

Although she enjoyed his simplicity, he wondered if there would be a point when she wouldn’t find him as attractive because of it.

It was his self-esteem that needed some work sometimes.

As he meditated, he came to the realization that jealousy, in general, doesn’t show how much you care about a person; it just reveals how insecure you are – and that became his focus for meditating.

Luke let his mind explore how this related to the attachment that he was forming to Mara.

Did it affect his growth by hindering the lengths he was willing to go, if it meant being away from her for fear of losing her?

His mind thought of the material he had been reading recently about bonds, or unions, in the Force. If he bonded with her, there would never be a need for her or him to ever question their feelings ever again- he would know it, without doubt.

He knew what her constant touch would feel like; he had already sensed her untapped power when she had reached out across the galaxy, trying to sense darkness- he saw her potential. He had felt the trickle of her mind on his as they had played with waves of sense when they were separated nights on Coruscant.

To have those feelings from her every day for the rest of his life was what he craved.

Mara was his equal and he knew it in his soul.

But wanting to bond with her was his selfish wish, which led back to insecurities; a circle that needed to be broken.

The timer sounded, rousing him from his meditation. Luke could feel relaxed, and more-centered.

Luke got up from the floor and stretched, bringing life back into his heavy limbs.

His door chime sounded, and it didn’t open immediately.

Luke walked over and opened it.

Mara had her eyes closed as it opened. She opened her eyes slowly as it did. <<You were meditating, weren’t you?>> Her green eyes were dreamy as if sensing his peace and calm.

<Yes.> he thought back, glad that he was having this effect on her. <Why didn’t I sense you?>
“Because I was shielding.” Her eyes narrowed, and she poked him in the chest for emphasis.

He sensed the difference as he felt her shields fade away, then they came back up again.

“How do you keep them in place so well? You don’t even think about it…I have to think about it every time I do it.” He shook his head.

“I had to.” She murmured, looking back at him. “You ready to go?” she asked, as her eyes took on more energy.

“Where are we going?” Luke asked.

“I need to work off some tension, and I need your help to figure something out…” She unclipped her lightsaber, and started tossing it in the air playfully.

He narrowed his eyes, suspicious of her.

“I liked the last time I used Vapaad against you…let’s see if I could do it again?” She teased, walking close to him and pressing herself up against him.

“Let’s not.” He said, and leaned in and kissed her hard. <I can play that game now too, Mara.> He sent her an image of her moaning his name. She shivered in his arms.

“Where do you want to practice?”

“There’s a very large shed where no one will be for the next hour or so…we could go there?” She said, pulling back on her plan to tease him.

Luke nodded, clipping his saber to his belt. “You’ve been working on touching the Force, since the last time?” He asked.

Mara huffed as she headed for the door. “I started meditating on my way over here, when I started sensing you…doesn’t that count?”

“No—and you know it.” He chided.

“I find it hard to get the time to meditate out here.” She groaned as they walked down the front stairs. “There’s always something going on….some late night meeting.”

“You could do it if you really wanted to…would you like me to talk to Karrde about it?” He asked.

Mara glared. “No—I’ll talk to him.”

She led the way to the main floor, and they walked through the courtyard he had first seen when he came in.

<<This is where I meditate when I get the chance…just so you know I’ve been doing it.>> She commented cheekily.

<Good.> He said, not letting her off the hook.

They walked through the first large garage, and Luke could see several teams loading flatbed containers attached to transports.

<<We have a big shipment going out tomorrow.—that’s why I’ll be able to get away. There won’t be anything to process, it will all get done today.>>
Luke nodded. She had cleared her calendar for him.

<Any reason why Karrde wants to meet with me tomorrow morning?> He asked.

<<He probably wants to see what information he can get from you. You’d be surprised what he can find out from a simple conversation…and probably to threaten you not to take me away.>>

“Of course.” Luke chuckled. <If I had you all to myself, I’d never let you out of my sight.> He sent warm feelings over to her.

Mara gave him a look over her shoulder to cease and desist.

The empty shed was indeed large.

“This could have been quite homey…all it needs is a few boxes, and cot.” Luke nodded. “Please let Karrde know that I’ll stay out here next time.”

He sent her the images from Myrkrr and his stay there.

“When you like your wake-up call with or without threats?” She snipped back to him.

Luke chuckled at her; glad that they could joke about it now. “Oh, with threats…how else do you get up in the morning?”

He looked around the shed, there wasn’t much in way of terrain, but there was a lot of room…a good ten meters by ten meters to move around in.

He set the timer on his chrono for one hour.

He turned to see her with her eyes closed, and he could feel her drawing power into her.

Luke let his own eyes flutter closed, and stretched out to sense when she was ready; and opened his eyes.

Mara smiled back at him serenely, but he knew this was to put him off guard.

They ignited their sabers, and saluted.

Luke was first off the mark and gave her a Force-push, throwing her off balance. Mara’s eyes widened, surprised by his aggressive move.

Their sabers clashed; hitting back and forth as they dodged near misses.

Luke jumped over one of her slashes, and she flipped away easily from one of his advances.

<<You’re footwork is better...>>

<Thank you…I was taking dancing lessons with the Corellians…>

Mara raised an eyebrow before she made contact with his blade. <<Dancing lessons?>>

Luke smirked at her. <I was trying to learn the Corellian Waltz to impress a girl.>

The blades made a quick volley of hits.

His face dropped a bit. <The Ball got canceled.>
<<I heard.>>

<But I’m still keeping up with my classes. I have a goal.>

<<Really?>> Mara was amused.

Luke advanced on her. Mara flipped away from him. <Okay, Leia is making me… but I really want to ask this pretty girl to dance someday.> He winked, and held out his hand, and her feet dragged towards him without her will. <Reach out Mara…you’ve pulled back.>

She raised her hand, and Luke’s knee gave out and he dropped to the ground, forgetting dragging her closer; and she attacked.

Their sabers **hiss-snaped** as they engaged. They were pushed up against each other, not giving up on either side.

‘Time for some Vapaad.’ Luke thought. <So what’s with the Kiffar hating you?>

That did it.

Mara pushed off of the struggle rather than advancing. <<I think it has to do with my history. She was a resistance fighter on Kiffex…and she does not like Imperials.>>

Luke could sense her reproach.

<<My reputation has spread since testifying, and the bounty on my head.>>

He nodded. <You think that’s it?> He asked as he lunged.

<<That’s all I sense…do you know differently?>> Mara met his strike and blocked it, kicking him in the gut, sending him back.

He shook his head, and took a swing towards her back, which she blocked easily.

The sound of the sabers must have carried; there were a few people at the door of the shed watching.

Luke could sense them but he didn’t know if Mara did.

<Did you want to stop?> he asked.

<<No, they might as well see this…>> She made another swipe at his legs. <<They’ve called others.>>

<They have?>

<<Didn’t you sense it?>> She asked, as she tried for a Force push on him, stopping him from coming forward.

<<Karrde wanted his demonstration…if they get here soon, they’ll get one.>>

<I guess so…if you still want to continue?>

Luke flipped over her shoulder, coming at her. Mara lifted her blade and blocked him.

He reached deeper into the Force as they moved, hoping that she would stay concentrated on him instead of the others.
Their blades started to dance more smoothly as he was used to between them; no tricks, no displays of power, just sheer skill on skill- blocking and hitting in quick movements.

Mara was locked on him, reaching out with her strength, and he could feel it. It was intoxicating to him, her pure raw power. She was working without thought, just on instinct and through the Force. Their movements were in sync and there wasn’t a swing or swipe that each one couldn’t block. Even as Luke evaded her with a flip; she was right under him, waiting. When she twist-flipped to get ahead of him; he anticipated where she was to land and met her.

Their eyes locked on each other.

The timer sounded, which broke her concentration, and Luke swung away at her wrist, twisting it, causing her saber to go flying away from her.

He stepped back as he had disarmed her, and shut down his blade.

Mara reached back as he had disarmed her, and shut down his blade.

They were breathing hard, watching each other. He smiled, and Mara bowed conceding defeat.

Behind them, a crowd had gathered, and applause erupted from them.

Luke turned around to see that nearly all the staff were there, including Karrde and his guests. He saw Aves hand Chin a handful of credits.

Mara walked up beside him. <<I guess Karrde got his demonstration.>>

<I guess so.>

Karrde was still applauding as he walked towards the two of them. “Thank you” he mouthed.

Karrde turned back to the crowd, and checked his chrono. “Everybody, dinner is in thirty minutes! I’ll see you there.”

The crowd dispersed, with chattering among them; talking about what they had just seen.

**

Luke showered and dressed for dinner, wearing the new tunic and trousers, with his Jedi robe over them.

He looked back in the mirror, admiring that it came together nicely.

It was strange that Mara wasn’t there. He liked it when she was there, and they moved around each other like they had lived together forever. It felt very natural in the mornings; he could get used to it.

The door chimed, and he left the ‘fresher to open it. On the other side; Luke caught his breath -Mara was there, looking glorious.

Mara was dressed in a simple shimmersilk dark brown long tunic, belted at the waist, wearing her lightsaber, and matching trousers. Her hair was up, twisted at the back of her head, and around her neck, shown off proudly, was his pendant. Her hand came up and touched it; she smiled back at him.

“Ready to go?” she asked quietly as she sensed his feelings.
She looked down the hallway in both directions before she stepped inside.

Luke turned and rushed to her as she did, pressing his mouth to hers. *<Gods, you look amazing.>*

He could feel her appreciation of how he was dressed too; feeling her desire for him too.

She broke off the kiss. “We can’t right now, Luke.” She took a step back from him, breathing hard. “Later- there will be a later tonight.”

He inhaled deeply, willing his body to behave. He nodded, agreeing to the condition of ‘later’.

Mara controlled the flush coming up on her skin, and turned back towards the door. She checked the hallway she walked into it, leading the way.

Luke felt her control her emotions, bringing back her stoic level.

He followed her to the back stairs. At the base of the stair, were Karrde’s guests, and bodyguard.

“That was a very impressive display this afternoon.” Cormix said. “Do you spar often?” He was looking at Mara as he spoke.

“Jedi Skywalker and I spar when we have the chance.” She squeezed Luke’s arm as she spoke. “Otherwise I have a training remote that I use.”

“So you get no real practice unless Jedi Skywalker is here? Remarkable.” Cormix said.

The others nodded their approval.

Luke was curious of the Kiffar, as her hatred of Mara had slightly dissipated since their demonstration. Vos-fane looked over at Luke, and he tightly smiled. “I understand that they are skilled warriors on Kiffar too.”

Vos-fane looked at him, surprised.

“Yes, they are.” Cormix answered.

The group had come to the opened doors of the dining hall. People were gathered in groups talking amongst themselves. Serving droids were offering various beverages.
Karrde noticed their entrance and approached them. “Come in, my friends.”

He came close to Mara and took her hand from Luke, transferring it to his arm; showing that she was not with the Jedi in any sort of intimate form. Karrde offered her a drink from one of the serving trays.

Mara smiled politely at him.

The evening progressed nicely. Drinks were shared, and dinner was delicious.

Karrde was sure to sit Mara between Cormix and Boss Mo’nach, and she kept the conversation going with all three men easily.

When there was a lull, she would glance over at Luke, smiling while she was talking, and unconsciously touching her pendant at her neck, indicating that she really wished to be closer to him.

Luke was seated with Aves, Ghent, chin and Dankin; immersed in smuggler stories, and fending off questions about lightsaber battles.

After dinner ended, Karrde was speaking with his other guests quietly as Luke came up. “Ah Skywalker, we were just discussing the possibility of Sabaac game…would be interested?”

Luke smiled. “So long as Aves takes that skifter out from up his sleeve.”

They turned towards Aves.

Aves glowered, and put his hand up his opposite sleeve, and removed the card.

The group laughed.

“I have no problem being the referee.” Luke said.

Cormix turned away for a moment, as his bodyguard was asking for his attention. He turned back to the group. “Will you please excuse me for a moment?” And he stepped a few paces away, listening to Vos-fane speaking closely to him. He nodded then came back to the group.

“I have a request of you, Karrde, and Ms. Jade- if she wouldn’t mind.” Cormix looked uncomfortable, but continued. “My associate Vos-fane has asked for a show of talent between herself and Ms. Jade.” Cormix sighed.

“The Kiffar are particular for fighting as entertainment, and she was impressed with your abilities this afternoon.” Cormix’s eyes begged for Mara not to accept. “She would be honored if you would consider it?”

<Don’t do it.> Luke sent over to Mara. <Please don’t do it.>

Mara looked at Luke, and then at Karrde- they all waited for her response. Her face didn’t change but her body straightened a bit. “I would be honored.” She said clearly. Her gaze looked over at Vis-fane, and bowed slightly.

The men were surprised, and shocked.

Mara walked over to Vos-fane.

The women standing face to face, Luke could see that Vos-fane was a head taller than Mara, and at least two of Mara wide.
Mara stood looking the other woman in the eyes and not flinching. “Ma holicht namb dost inna meche da koodish vast pond ni gilk dav n’gee.” Mara said, and then gestured over to the group of men. “Tooka ist wag meest natcha Force goomay fier cha.”

Vos-fane nodded, and bowed.

Mara bowed back, and turned to come back to the group. “In twenty minutes, and we’ll meet in the gymnasium.” Mara reached for a passing serving tray, taking a glass from it, and throwing it back.

She then turned, and left the dining hall.

Luke watched her go, staring at her back.

**

The word must have gotten out about the evening’s entertainment, as it appeared the whole camp was there.

Luke could see credits being passed back and forth among the staff. Karrde and his guests sat off to the side. He looked as weary as Luke did, but both men knew there was no stopping Mara once she put her mind to something.

Vos-fane was already stretching and warming up on the large area of mats that were arranged on the floor.

Mara came in, dressed in her workout wear, and the group erupted in cheers. She brushed it off, and walked towards Karrde and Luke.

As Luke stepped forward, she held up her hand to keep him at a distance, and looked him hard in the eye. “I agreed to no Force use and we’re using quarterstaffs only…no open-hand combat.” She told the group.

<Why are you doing this?> He asked angrily.

<<Honor.>> She said simply.

Mara turned and walked in the direction of the mats, and Vos-fane.

Luke nodded, and took his seat. He knew it was going to take everything in him, not to interrupt if it came down to it.

He reasoned why he thought Mara was doing it. Vos-fane had been staring Mara down since she got here. The only way to earn her respect was to put in an effort in combat. Win or lose- Mara didn’t walk away from a challenge.

Vos-fane held out a staff for Mara; and Mara accepted it.

Vos-fane’s face changed, a smiled at the other woman, as she bowed. Mara’s face didn’t change and bowed too.

Mara didn’t need the Force to know that was when her opponent was going to strike, and Mara’s staff blocked the cheap shot.

Vos’s eyes widened. Mara’s eyes narrowed.

The two began making a circle, taking small hits against the other’s staff.
It was Vos who stepped in first, aiming high then low against Mara’s staff. Mara blocked and struck back. Vos was probably expecting a volley and two shots, like she had just delivered- Mara had gone for three, and landed her last swing on Vos’s shoulder.

Vos looked at her shoulder, where the hit happened, and then turned back to Mara.

The circling ended, and Vos moved in.

The clacking of the sticks were the only things that could be heard as the gymnasium had gone silent.

Luke watched mystified as Mara kept her guard up, using her speed to avoid shots, and maneuvering to places where her opponent couldn’t hit. She was truly a skilled warrior, even without the Force.

The speed of the fight was building in intensity; the volleys were building faster.

Vos-fane was angry that she couldn’t land a good hit; Mara was just satisfied that she was able to block.

From his seat Luke could sense that something was about to change.

Another couple of interchanges, and Vos-fane reached out and punched Mara square across the left side of her face, causing Mara to take few steps back; realizing that Vos-fane had broken the rules.

The crowd knew this too, as they ‘awwed’ over the hit.

Mara shook it off, and resumed her defensive position. She let her speed be her asset, and came back with a series of fast attacks, hitting Vos-fane in the back, then the gut, and then a cut to the chin; causing the other woman to drop to one knee.

Vos-fane took the advantage on the ground, and a series of hits to Mara’s leg, and swipe at her ankle, and Mara was on her back.

As Mara went to stand, Vos-fane’s staff directly hit Mara’s ankle that had given way, and Mara took a knee. Vos-fane moved in quickly, attacking from above.

Mara blocked the attack, and brought herself to her feet.

Luke could see Mara was favoring her left ankle now and had turned it away from her opponent.

Vos-fane was pleased with herself, as she paced in front of Mara, then lunged for another attack. This time, Mara wasn’t having any of it, and with speed and agility, Mara managed to come around on Vos-fane’s shoulder, wedge her staff against it, and then the sickening sound of a ‘pop!’ could be heard as Mara dislocated the other woman’s shoulder.

This only made Vos-fane more angry, and reached over with her opposite arm, and grabbed Mara, flipping her forward on to her back, and fending off an attack on the ground, until Vos-fane backed off.

Vos-fane’s left arm hung limply from the socket. She banged her shoulder a few times with her right hand fist, until a ‘snap!’ was heard, and she stretched out the arm, showing it was back in place.

Mara got to her feet, still watching her opponent. Luke could see the red welt starting to form on her left cheek bone where she got hit. He could sense that she was tiring too.

They engaged each other again, both with speed and aggression. Vos-fane began on a direct attack on Mara’s staff, hitting it repeatedly, until it broke in two in Mara’s hands; that’s when Vos-fane hit
Mara doubled over, and Vos-fane grabbed Mara’s mid-section. Mara twisted in the hold, trying not to expose her collapsing lungs. Vos-fane went for the area available to her, and started hitting Mara’s upper right thigh with her staff.

Mara cried out in pain as it was clear that the woman was trying to break her leg. Using the two pieces of her staff, Mara abandoned all forms of protocol in a normal quarterstaff fight as it seemed her opponent did, and went for a direct hit on the back of Vos-fane’s cranium; taking Vos-fane’s attention away from Mara’s leg.

Luke held on the edge of his chair. He had promised himself that he wasn’t going to interfere, but his concern for Mara was getting to him.

Mara used the two pieces of her staff to move even quicker than before. She battered the upper body of Vos-fane quickly, landing several blows to her face and head.

Vos-fane was disillusioned and didn’t know where to hit, missing several blows, and striking at things that weren’t there.

One swift turn around and Mara landed a hard hit to Vos-fane’s head, sending her toppling over, face planting on the floor.

Mara backed away from the other woman’s body, panting, and waiting for her to get up. Vos-fane lay on the mats, face down, semi-unconscious.

Luke could hear the crowd count to ten, then erupt in cheers. As he got up from his seat relieved that Mara had won, watching her limp away, he watched Mara’s face change.

Mara’s danger senses were sluggish and came up just in time to warned her after Vos had made the motion with her stick to swipe at Mara’s legs in a poor sportsmanship effort to still injure after a fight; sending Mara on her back.

Luke and Karrde rushed towards Mara, as they watched helplessly as she fell backwards hitting her head on the floor where there were no mats.

Luke dropped beside Mara and lifted her shoulders up. Her eyes fluttered then closed again. He picked up her body and yelled to Karrde over the sound of the crowd. “Where’s the med center from here?”

“Follow me!” Karrde yelled back.

Luke looked over at Vos-fane before leaving with Mara in his arms, wearing a sickly grin, as Cormix and Boss Mo’nach huddled around her.

**

Luke leaned over her, as Mara’s eyes opened and the room came into focus.

Without missing a beat, Mara asked. “Did I win?”

Luke snorted, but the concern came back. “Yes, you did.”

She nodded, and closed her eyes again, and opened them again. “Good.” She said quietly. “I hurt.”

“And you will…for a while.” Luke’s voice was distant.
Mara looked around, thinking she was in the med center, only to discover they had taken her back to her quarters and familiar surroundings.

“You have a mild concussion.” Luke said.

“Why does it feel like my face is about to explode?” Mara’s left hand reached up to her cheek, only to be reminded of the shiner under her eye.

“Night or day?” she asked.


He had placed his hands over the angry bruise that was forming on her right thigh. Pulling on the force, he was healing any internal damage that may be there.

Mara looked down at herself. “Who put me in my night shift?” She felt something on her feet- her ugly gray socks.

“There was no one else around.” Luke said, his voice still distant.

Mara smiled. “Socks are for when I feel emotionally bad…..” She told him.

Luke chuckled, then pulled himself out of his concentration. “It’s not great but it’s a start- the muscle will be sore tomorrow, but the bruising has gone down.”

Mara looked at her leg, and all that remained was a greenish shape on the side.

Luke was looking at her with a tight grin, concerned. “Now, let me see about that face.”

She held up her hand. “Nope. I have to wear this for at least a day.” She said.

He sat across for her on the edge of her bed, shaking his head. “Why do you have to do that?”

Mara sat up slowly. “If I don’t then she can’t take any pride that she got in a few good hits…it’s almost better than winning sometimes.”

He wanted to hold her, and crush her to his body. “I was concerned.” He said quietly. “You could have gotten killed.”

“But I didn’t.” She said, watching his face.

“You could have gotten permanently damaged.” He sighed.

“But I didn’t.” She whispered.

“You could have…”

Mara closed the gap, and kissed his lips.

<<But I didn’t.>>

Luke tenderly, and gently put his arms around her, kissing her with as much passion as he could without hurting her.

They broke apart, and he stared into her eyes.

“I’m going to go get you something…you must be hungry, and you’ll need water.” He made sure to
touch the right side of her face, avoiding her shiner.

He got up from the bed, and helped Mara sit up, placing pillows behind her. He handed her a cold compress for her face. “I’ll be right back” he said before he reached the door. “Don’t close your eyes again…you’re supposed to stay awake for a minimum two hours with a concussion.”

“You should know.” Mara snidely replied. “Have they opened the ‘Luke Skywalker Wing’ at the Coruscant Med Center yet?”

He snorted. “No, but I did get to trade up from that free colonoscopy to a free brace leg anytime I want one.” He sighed. “I’ll be right back.”

And Luke walked out and away from her door. He walked a few paces and reached out for her. And stopped, something wasn’t right.

Mara’s sense screamed out for him, but no sound came from her room.


Holding Mara down, straddled across her was Vos-fane, with her hands around her throat, choking the life out of Mara.

Even the sound of Luke’s saber igniting didn’t distract her from throttling Mara.

Mara’s hand was out-stretched reaching for her saber on the dresser.

In a few quick moves, Luke had taken off Vos-fane’s arms and killed her quickly. Luke pressed the emergency alarm on Mara’s wall then came over to her.

He pushed the libs away from her neck, as Mara coughed and gagged, trying to bring air back into her lungs.

Within seconds a crowd had shown up at Mara’s door. Luke shut down his saber, and came closer to Mara, taking her in his arms and rocking her.

Karrde broke through the group at the door. “Gods! What happened?”

Luke looked up at him. “Vos-fane was trying to kill her.” He said plainly.

Karrde spotted a comm unit on the floor. “Is this yours or Mara’s?” He asked before picking it up. Luke shook his head.

Mara was coming around, and took her head off Luke’s shoulder.

Karrde opened the comm unit, and flipped on the screen. “I know why.” He turned the screen to Luke, showing him the death mark notice.

Mara’s death mark notice.

Luke nodded, and held her more-tightly.

TBC
Dear Budha!—32 pages! I need a drink!

Here’s an interesting tid-bit…I have found out that you guys much prefer the smut scenes when it’s written from Luke’s POV…I get more comments…

The last chapter had over a 100 hits to it, but not one comment…it was written from Mara’ perspective and her wants and needs…and her riding Luke like he was Seabiscuit, getting all lusted up for him....and nothing from you guys...

So I figure either, you liked it and didn’t want to say anything OR you hated it, and still didn’t want to say anything.

So, I’m not saying I won’t write anything from her POV again, I’m just more conscious of it now.

This is not a judgment—I just find it interesting…that’s all.

I just hoped you enjoyed it either way. ;)

Yeah, I’m a comment-slut….
Mission Accomplished Part 4

Chapter Summary

Quote: She sees too many sides of The Force; the light, the dark, and the gray.


Chapter Notes

**
So another 34 pager-- I must like you guys or something...or I love writing Luke and Mara stuff- both are good in my book.

This one took me a while to push out. I started thinking about plot- and the trouble is, I want to jump ahead to those places where I know the plot will get interesting. I wish I could just write in little stories, and none of them makes sense until later. But since that isn’t going to happen, you will just have to suffer through plot like I do.

By the way, I swiped a little line from the latest ‘Aftermath’ book…they won’t mind… they have my money.

So enjoy…and you didn’t think I was going to miss this did you: SMUT WARNING!

**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dantooine Day 2 continued...

Mara was gaining awareness in small steps.

Most of her senses, however, were alerted to the emotional states of those around her rather than what was actually happening.

She could feel Luke’s anger and protectiveness over her, as he lifted and carried her to his room.

She could feel Karrde’s concern and his anger towards his guests, but most of his anger directed himself for not being more cautious.

In Luke’s room, she didn’t even feel the need to protest as he put her into a healing trance.

And when she woke up briefly, she could feel the concern pouring off of Aves as he was assigned to guard her while Luke was away.

She slipped back into sleep and let the healing begin again, wondering where Luke was but lacked the strength to reach out.

Captain Cormix, and Boss Mo’nach were on their way, alerted to what had happened.

Karrde sat in his chair behind his desk, and Luke could read that his senses were just as concerned for Mara as he was.

Luke looked at the other man. “You know, I heard about the other two attempts on her life.”

Karrde sighed. “It’s a risk with the job.” He mumbled. “Mara knows that.”

Luke glared at him, knowing he was just trying to downplay the incident for his own benefit, but he sensed that Karrde took it very seriously.

“Mara knew there was something up.” Karrde hung his head. “I should have listened to her.”

Luke reluctantly took to a chair.

“How was she doing when you left?” Karrde asked, wearing a worried look.

“She went into a healing trance with no effort.” Luke said quietly. “She should be fully recovered by tomorrow – her wounds were superficial…mostly bruising, no real damage.”

Karrde nodded.

A chime sounded, and the doors opened.

Ghent walked into the room. “So Boss, good news…kind of…” He glanced over at Luke, and then back at Karrde.

Karrde nodded, encouraging him to speak.

Ghent, in his usual manner, was very conversational about the information he found. “I was able to trace the origins of the notice back to a Guavian Death Gang…at least that’s where the address originated, anyhow. It looks like Vos-fane had connections to them about a month ago… and she had several past contracts with them.”

Ghent looked over at serious face of the Jedi, and his conversation tone changed. “But this one, just trickled through them – they had no interest in taking the contract. I know we had business with them not too long ago. However, I think Vos-fane might have known who our potential clients were through them, as Cormix and Mo’nach were looking for other traders to carry their wares before they came to us.”

“Thank you Ghent.” Karrde mumbled, lost in thought.

Ghent took the hint and left the room.

“Guavian Death Gang?” Luke asked. “Aren’t they Spice smugglers?” His eyes narrowed at Karrde. “I thought you didn’t have any dealings with Spice?”

Karrde’s head came up and looked directly at the Jedi, without flinching from the gaze. “I don’t. However, in this instance, I offered refuge to an old acquaintance of mine, Namta-Tik, who I know for a fact doesn’t run Spice; it was over a month ago…for repairs, nothing more, then sent him on his way. He didn’t even come into the base.”
Karrde sat back in his chair. “He must have heard that we had a bigger client coming on…and it wouldn’t have taken much to find out who the client was…” He became silent, narrowed his eyes, and mumbled. “I’m going to have to close ranks again….everything on a need to know basis…this is what happens when people get too comfortable in one place.”

Luke nodded, still not happy. And he wasn’t happy with Karrde’s clients either.

The door chimed again, and Chin ushered in Cormix and Boss Mo’nach. Luke stretched out his senses, looking for any deception or compliance.

Cormix was the first to step forward, shaking his head. “Karrde, I had no idea…she was vetted, and then re-vetted before I took her on.”

Luke could sense his nervous energy, and his desire to wish this issue away.

“I knew she had no love for former Imperials, and I thought when she challenged Jade, that it would be finished there… I didn’t think she was going to try and kill her.” Cormix continued.

“Do you usually travel with a bodyguard?” Luke asked, looking directly at Cormix.

The Naboo captain turned to him. “Not usually. We felt it was an extra degree of protection due to the nature of our product- many parties would like to get their hands on it.”

The Jedi’s eyes narrowed and much to his dissatisfaction, he didn’t sense any deceit. He nodded over to Karrde. Strangely, Boss Mo’nach had been silent on the issue, for Luke stretched his feelings over to him.

From what he could sense, Boss Mo’nach had no regrets that Mara had been attacked- he had no love for those who had an Imperial past- it was on the forefront of his mind. ‘She got what she deserved.’ Luke heard. But Boss Mo’nach’s feelings were on the greater matter for him that the business deal could be potentially ruined by this incident.

Although, Boss Mo’nach’s sediments towards Mara grated on him, Luke couldn’t find deception in him either. He nodded to Karrde again.

Karrde got up from behind his desk and looked at Cormix.

“Karrde, I apologize sincerely for this incident…whatever we can do to make it better…” Cormix pleaded.

The Trader nodded, and looked the other man hard in the eye. “We use our people, and only our people.”

Cormix nodded, feeling reproached, still offered his hand for Karrde to shake.

All seemed to be forgiven, and the guests left the room.

Karrde watched the men leave, then looked over to Luke. “Do I need to ask your feelings on this? If there was any deception in them, I couldn’t detect it. I think Vos-fane was acting on her own.”

Karrde nodded, looking away. “Good.”

He looked up. “I was going to wait until tomorrow to talk to you, but now seems as a good time as any.” He sighed, and went to sit behind his desk.
“I’ve never asked you this before, and I’m sure Mara wouldn’t be please if she knew I was asking.” Karrde paused. “How far along is she in her training?”

Luke leaned back in his chair, knowing what the other man was asking ‘when will you take her away from me?’ He felt no need to hide anything, so he answered truthfully, “She has some ways to go…it’s difficult to tell; in many ways she’s ahead of me, in other ways, she’s behind and far behind.”

“I worry about her.” Karrde said quietly. “Did she tell you about her nightmares?”

Luke nodded, knowing what those were like for her, and how she suffered with insomnia due to them, but he had sensed that it had been some time since she had a full attack of them.

“She had a bad one; when she first got here.” Karrde’s voice was dark with remembering. “I think it was more of a night-terror than a nightmare. She was sleepwalking, and she was in the kitchen. Aves saw her and came to get me. She was about to hurt herself with a knife before we stopped her. When we woke her, she didn’t remember anything.” He paused. “The following day was the Imperial attack G’d’aark.”

Luke sat up staring at Karrde. “She didn’t tell me about that!”

“She didn’t remember it the next morning, so I’m not surprised that she wouldn’t tell you.” Karrde sat back in his chair.

Luke hung his head. “Nightmare and terrors don’t go away with training.” He sighed. “For me; they increased.”

“I was afraid that you would say that.” The trader said.

Karrde shifted in his seat and stared at Luke, until Luke looked up; feeling the stare of the other man.

“You love her, don’t you?” Karrde asked him blankly.

Luke had felt his heart breaking when the attack on Mara occurred; instilling all his fears that she would be taken from him without notice. Now, knowing that her mind threatened her too, hurt even more.

“I do.” He said, not avoiding the contact, and feeling the ache in his chest even more deeply.

“I want you to know that I would gladly let her leave with you if I thought that she would be more protected with you than she would be here, with me.” Karrde didn’t avoid honesty with the Jedi either. “Coruscant is not the place for her right now- she’d be more at the mercy of any random assassin. Although I know she can handle herself, she doesn’t need to be fending them off every day.”

Karrde sighed, his gaze softened. “I need her, and I think you need her more. I understand what loving her entails.”

Karrde walked over to his side bar and poured two glasses, and came back, offering a glass to the Jedi.

Luke nodded, recalling a memory. “A year ago- when you told me that there were other parties interested in her…you were referring to yourself?”

Karrde grinned tightly. “Partially. I’ll admit I was interested…but that was it, fleeting. How could a
man not be taken in by her? But you—you love her, and no one would stand in the way of that; not the way you look at her, and not the way she looks at you.” He took a deep swig from his glass.

Luke looked down at his glass, and raised his eyebrows quickly before taking his own deep swig from the glass. ‘She won’t let me say it. Three little words.’ He thought to himself.

“Our goals are the same, Skywalker; keep Mara safe, and hope for peace. And since the latter is out of our control, we might as well work together on the first goal.” Karrde permitted a tight smile.

Luke snorted softly, agreeing that was both of their intentions.

“I’ll try and keep her here for as long as I can…she won’t like it…and you are always welcome to visit.” Karrde resigned.

Luke nodded. At least Karrde didn’t want to stand of their way- the rest of the galaxy, not so much. “Thank you for that.” He said quietly. “Was that the only thing you wanted to talk to me about?”

Karrde glanced back at him. “That Jedi insight probably told you that it wasn’t?” And he went to sit down back behind his desk. “Mara had certain reservations about this particular deal…I was hoping that you might have some senses on it?”

“I don’t know much about it.” Luke said. “She hasn’t said anything, and I haven’t asked.”

Karrde nodded, appraising the Jedi more and more; he always kept true to his word. Skywalker had no interest in his business unless it affected him, Mara or the galaxy. “They’re wanting to ship a certain product for testing, at the moment. It’s a type of algae that grows in the depths of the Naboo oceans- it’s renewable, and it has immense healing properties. It could rival that of bacta. However, it is extremely sensitive to heat and light…and for us, the issue is that it is incredibly dense which means we need a freighter that can haul the weight that they are talking about.”

Karrde got thoughtful. “I think Mara is concerned about the end use of the product. It can regenerate skin at a rapid pace, and although it’s intended to be used for medical and cosmetic purposes, I think Mara feels it can be used elsewhere.”


“She’s been leery about us handling it.” Karrde paused. “She didn’t want to say it but I’m think she believes it could be used for cloning. So she’s been accepting of it so long as we control who it will be going to, and not into the hands of trader who would less discerning about where it gets to.”

Luke nodded. “How much better than bacta is it? And could it grow clones?”

“I’m not a scientist, but all the techs, such as Armeth, are very excited about it. It can grow skin up to ten times faster than bacta- and yes, Armeth did say it could be used for cloning.” Karrde said.

Luke sat quiet for a few moments. Mara’s instincts are usually never wrong about such things. His own feelings were growing in apprehension. There might not be any sort if intention of the part of Cormix and Mo’nach, but the end client was unclear – it was too far in the future, and as he knew the future could move on a whim.

Luke shook his head. “I can understand her feelings. I have them too, but it’s too illusive to know right now. I wish I could help more.”

“Well, there is one way you can help me.” Karrde replied. “We’ll be leaving with a shipment of it in two days to Ord Mandel. If you stay on for an extra day, I would be obliged if you wouldn’t mind
running escort duty? It will give you a chance to get more perspective on our operations with them.”

Luke sighed. He would get an extra day with Mara, but that would make him late for his arrival on Coruscant, and he felt it was necessary to be there as much as he could. One day wouldn’t make that much of a difference.

Karrde must have sensed that there was a bit of opposition. “I’m sure if Mara plots your nav computer, she could program one of her signature double jumps. I have no idea how she does it, but she can shave almost full days off of trips sometimes. And I wouldn’t need you to touch down, just as long we have no issues getting into the system, and landing.”

“Can I let you know tomorrow?” Luke said. He now had more to think about, and his immediate concern was healing Mara. He got up to leave, feeling no less relaxed than he did when he arrived in Karrde’s office.


**

Mara could feel another presence in the room; warm, bright – ‘Luke!’ she thought in a haze.

The first presence left—must have been Aves. His sense wasn’t as bright as Luke’s, but it was just as concerned.

She felt a dip in the bed as he came near to check on her.

<<I’m not dead.>> She sent through to him, willing her senses to clear.

<Good.> He wasn’t laughing though.

Mara could feel his extreme concern and fear. She opened her eyes, and her vision was adjusting to the dim light. She could see him coming into focus.

His crystal blue eyes looking at her, studying her face, she saw.

She opened her mouth to speak, but she couldn’t make the words come out, so she whispered to accommodate her throat’s ability. “Does it really look that bad?”

His face said one thing but his voice said another. “Not as bad as it did.”

“Well…” he said quietly, touching her skin. “The bruise under your eye is almost gone, and the one on your hip too. You’ll be a bit sore tomorrow; healing trances tend to stiffen up the muscles.”

She closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of his fingers touching her. Unlike how they usually felt; warm and hot. Now, they felt cool and energized; soothing.

She opened her eyes, and smiled at him. <<Luke, I’ve been beaten up worse…this is really nothing.>>

“No, it isn’t.” He said firmly. “Don’t brush this off.”

Mara tried to speak again, wanting her volume to equal what she was feeling, but it wouldn’t come, so she whispered, straining her voice. “I’m not brushing it off, but I’m not going to live my life scared of what’s around the corner.”
She tried to sit up, her body felt sluggish. Her voice was barely making any noise now, so she mouthed her words in a hushed tone, softer than a whisper. “There is always going to be something that puts my life as risk, Luke. This was one instance. I’ve been here close to a month, and nothing has happened. The previous instances happened on my way here. And before that, and before you became so aware of my life, I’ll have you know that I was shot at, and threatened on a fairly regular basis.”

His eyes flashed angry at her for a moment, surprising her.

<<What is it?>>

Luke looked at her. “I seem to be the only one here that is concerned about you more than you are concerned about yourself…”

He got up from the bed. “Do you even care?”

Mara felt his ache, and he worried that she didn’t feel the same way as he did.

“I care.” She croaked out; she brought her hand up to her throat, swallowing, trying to bring moisture in to it.

But she knew he needed an answer before her throat could rebound. <<I care very much. I’m an adult, and I make your own choices- knowing the risks.>>

She watched him as turned away from her.

Luke’s voice wavered as he spoke. “Do you realize that you now have someone else who cares about you?” He asked to room, not able to look at her. “And that maybe not taking risks is something that you should be thinking about?- It’s not just ‘you’ anymore.”

He looked over his shoulder; he huffed. “You didn’t even ask me, for my opinion, before you got into that fight.”

<<You would have said ‘no’.>>

Luke looked back again. “Yes, I would have…but I would have agreed to what you wanted to do. I know you’re an adult.” He paused. “But I still care.”

Mara watched him, trying to understand. She had hurt him, and she had to admit where she had went wrong.

She sighed and reached out to him again. <<It’s hard for me to think about you sometimes…I’m not used to being part of an ‘us’. I’m trying…I’m sorry, Luke.>>

She patted the side of the bed beside her, wanting him to be closer.

He turned, walked back to bed with his head down, and sat down on the bed. When he raised his head, she could see the tears in his eyes.

<I almost lost you.> His mind touched her, and she could feel his pain.

Mara reached out her hand to his face. <<I’m sorry.>>

She leaned over to place her lips of his. She could feel his need to hold her closer than he could, knowing that she was still in pain; so his kiss was soft but unyielding, not allowing her to forget what she meant to him.
In that instance, and strange feeling came over her; he felt cold, not warm like he usually felt. She felt his fear, and pulled back from him suddenly. It wasn’t in his body that was cold…it was in his presence.

“What is it?” He asked, surprised at her.

She shook her head, still looking at him, astonished; then relaxing…her life was just threatened—probably just lingering. Mara relaxed more, and tried to smile.

Luke smiled back at her, and stroked the hair from her face. As he did, he looked again at the bruises around her neck and still seeing an inset of handprints clearly. He winced.

“I think you should go back into another trance, and I’ll work on your throat.” He said quietly.

Mara nodded, and looked behind her before leaning back.

She snorted— he had put her pillow from Coruscant behind her. She leaned back on the pillows he had propped up.

<<Take me somewhere?>> She asked, closing her eyes.

<<Where would you like to go?>>

<<Somewhere you haven’t shown me before…>> she could feel his cool fingers on her neck, knowing that the healing was starting, and closed her eyes.

In her mind, the vision of a snow covered landscape, and a dark starry sky, came into her mind. The undisturbed snow twinkled like diamonds from the ambient light. She had the feeling of a warm blanket being placed around her, as her sight was directed upwards in the vision.

<<Where are we?>> She asked.

<Hoth.> He replied. <At night…wait for it…>

As the light from behind them dimmed, the sky came alive.

Waves of green, gold, orange, and blue started to dance across the sky; wildly and to a tempo of their own.

<They call it Aurora Borealis…> His voice was fading into the back ground.

Mara watched the waves dance with awe as she sunk deeper into the healing, and the warmth was returning within his presence.

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**Dantooine Day 3**

Luke shifted in the bed. He had slept in an awkward position all night; trying to lie down while he touched her neck and throat.

He had propped Mara up on a set of pillows, and he had ended up leaning against her all night. He removed his hand, and sat up to examine her marks.

Mara’s head was lulled to the side, in his direction.
He sighed—she truly looked like a doll when she slept; one of those china dolls that you couldn’t touch. But he could touch her, and hold her and kiss her.

She hummed quietly, and Luke brushed away some of her hair from her neck to check on her healing. The hand print on her neck was barely visible. He hoped that her throat had healed too as she was in pain as she spoke last night.

He got up off the bed, to round the corner and take a look at her upper right thigh. He slid the cover off of her, and she shifted away from the cool air. Sure enough, the bruise also had a faint hint of where it was.

He was about to check the side of her face when there was a quiet tap at the door.

Luke walked over, and touched the release.

“I did know if she was still sleeping.” Aves whispered on the other side of the door, as he peered into the room. “She isn’t a morning person.”

He was carrying a food tray, as was Chin and Dankin who were accompanying him.

Luke smiled, and let them in. “She’s still in a trance.” He said in a voice above a whisper.

He looked at the three trays.

“We didn’t know she would want, hee.” Chin responded.

“So we brought a little of everything.” Dankin chimed in.

Luke nodded looking at the men; thinking it was good that Mara had others who thought about her as much as he did.

“When she wakes up, I’m sure she’ll appreciate it.” Luke said. “I’ll be bringing her out of it soon… did you want to stay and talk to her?”

Aves shook his head, and so did the others. “Remember?” he said nervously, and pointed at Mara, “…not a morning person.”

‘Really? She likes mornings when I’m around’ Luke thought to himself.

So he nodded, agreeing with them.

“I see you didn’t much sleep?” Aves asked, looking up and down the Jedi.

Luke looked down at himself. His new tunic was open, showing his under shirt, and the new trousers were crumpled from sleeping in them. It sure didn’t look like he had slept comfortably.

“I’ll live.” He answered the others.

“She doesn’t even look like she was in a fight last night…” Dankin said as he stood at the foot of the bed, clearly keeping a safe distance.

“She’ll be fully healed when she wakes up.” Luke said. “She heals quickly.”

He wanted to change the subject, and keep it light. “So, how much did you guys make on the fight last night?”
Aves smiled, Chin frowned, and Dankin had a slight grin.

Luke nodded. “I’ll let her know who to thank for breakfast- and she’ll appreciate that you came to visit.”

They took the hint, and said their goodbyes before leaving.

Luke looked over at her while she was still in the trance. He thought about it for a moment and decided that she would be safe while he took a shower, and changed. Mara would not put up with his appearance if she was awake.

He grabbed his personal bag, and went into the shower, but kept his senses open just in case she decided that she was ready to come out of the trance a little early.

In the shower, he let the hot water pelt his back. It felt so good. Uncle Owen would have cursed him up and down; but there was something about a water shower that a sonic one just couldn’t compare.

Luke looked at the containers before using them; he knew better than to use the same cleanser for his body and hair. Mara would be proud.

He had to admit that, other than the previous night, he was enjoying his stay at Karrde’s base. The room was nice, the food was good, and the company was particularly beautiful. He could get used to it.

He came out of the shower, and heard something in the bedroom. He wrapped his towel around himself and went out into the living area.

Mara was starting to shift around in the bed. Her unconscious mind had enough of healing, and wanted out.

Luke threw on some sleeping pants and a t-shirt quickly. He walked over to her, and placed his hand over her forehead; lifting the veil on her mind.

She started to mumbled; making small noises.

He could hear a bit of hoarseness in her voice so he got up to go get her a glass of water. He made it back to the bed quickly, afraid he was going to miss his favorite thing when she was waking up.

Her eyes fluttered, and soon the glory of her green eyes glowed; alive and awake. Luke sighed.

“Good Morning.” He whispered.

She opened her mouth, but nothing came. So she cleared her throat. “Good Morning.” She whispered to him, and smiled.

Luke offered her the water- her eyes not leaving him, smiling.

Mara sipped it slowly, swallowing hard as her throat started to loosen up; still gazing at him with bright eyes.

<What is it?> He asked, feeling uncomfortable under her gaze.

She shook her head, and handed the glass back to him, and then leaned in and placed her lips on his. <<I was just thinking how handsome you really are…how blue your eyes are in the morning…how much I enjoy your kisses…how wonderful you are…and how much I…how I…>>
<Please don’t stop…> he begged her; feeling that she was losing her nerve to say what she wanted to, as his lips pursed against hers.

<<…how much I care about you.>> Mara pulled back from him, still smiling at him.

Those weren’t exactly the words that he wanted to hear, but he would take them nevertheless.

Her hand flew to her neck, and started looking around, in haste, when she felt nothing there…

“I took it off you while you were healing.” Luke said, knowing that she was looking for his pendant. He turned to the dresser behind him and retrieved the small box that he had presented it to her in.

He watched her face calm down, and he sensed she was about to reach out to him again, avoiding speaking. “Use your words.” He said quietly, slightly smirking as if he chastising a child.

She cleared her throat again, and her voice came out hoarse, still. “Can I please have it? I was missing it.” Her voice was quiet, but probably from lack of use rather than injury.

“Of course.” Luke took it out of the box, ready to put it around her neck again, taking pride that she liked it.

As he lean in to place the cord around her neck, Mara took the opportunity to start nibbling on his neck that was so close to her.

Luke stayed close to her, after the pendant was around her neck, just to feel her lips on him. His arms wrapped around her and pulled her close.

“I didn’t think you would like it this much.” He had closed his eyes, and just enjoyed her lips pressing on him.

Mara nuzzled her cheek next to his. “How could I not?—it’s like you’re with me when I wear it.”

He could feel the warm air from her breath on his neck as she spoke, but it also warmed his heart. He pulled back.

“Okay” Luke said, “We have to get you moving.” He got up off the bed and came over to her side to help her up.

Mara looked at his hand and frowned. “Why?” she pouted.

<Why what?> he asked, still holding out his hand, waiting for her.

“Why can’t we stay in bed for a while?” She smiled at him, letting him know what was on her mind. “And why do you think I can’t get out of bed on my own?”

Luke smirked at her. “Well, I have a sneaky suspicion that Karrde will be by soon…” He moved his hands back but kept them close by as she slid out from under the covers. “And second, you can get dizzy from being in a healing trance.”

Mara glowered over at him, but still took it into consideration as she raised off the bed. Her muscles felt tight, almost painful as she moved towards him.

He watched her, and backed away as she seemed to be moving on her own. “I want to get you moving because I was still hoping you could get a break by joining me at the Jedi Enclave today.”

She took a few steps, balancing herself. She stretched her neck; tilting it from side to side. Then, she
raised her arms over her head, and wiggled the rest of her body around; willing feeling back into it.

She caught the scent of food, and turned her head to see the three trays on the countertop.

“Food…” she gazed in the direction of her desire at the moment. Muscles be damned, and stammered over to the counter.

“They brought *everything.*” Luke mumbled, slightly chuckling- not at her movements but at her motivation for moving.

He had observed that Mara didn’t have a large appetite but rather a small one but more frequently than most meals schedules; making up for the amount of food that he usually ate at one sitting. However, when she was really and truly hungry that she could eat just as much as him.

She lifted a lid of a tray, and the smell of the food wafted.

Mara ignored serving utensils and went directly using her hands, making a makeshift sandwich with what she could find with some waffles, drizzle berries, eggs, some sort of meat…and stuffing it all in her mouth.

“How’s it?” She asked with her mouth full.

Luke just stood back in amusement and saw another side to the refined lady he thought he knew. “What was that?” He asked with a raised eyebrow.

She turned to him, and swallowed deeply; realizing that she had forgotten her manners, she blushed and covered her mouth. “Who is ‘they’?” She asked again, sans food in her mouth.

Turning her attention back to the trays, looking for her favourite breakfast beverage.

“Aves, Chin and Dankin were all here…to check on you.” He smiled.

Mara found the caf, and then added an obscene amount of sugar and cream to it. She took a deep sip, and closed her eyes, satisfied. “They were?” she asked.

“That was sweet of them.” She commented as she turned and offered him a sampling of her mish-mash breakfast. “I’ll have to go see them before we go.”

“It was.” Luke saw what she had made, and shook his head, declining her artistic rendering of a breakfast; deciding he would have whatever was left after she rampaged through it first.

She was in full ‘devour mode’ and nothing was interrupting her, “I’m going to finish getting dressed while you finish breakfast…” He said, still amused.

Mara looked back to him. “Dow ir ee murmur it der?” She took a sip of her caf as the looking she was getting from him told her that he didn’t understand any of the words that were coming out of her overly stuffed mouth. She swallowed down her food, and tried it again. “How are we going to get there?”

She became distracted as she turned to watch Luke dress. He had his trousers pulled up to his waist, but had left the fly open as he was pulling an undershirt down over his head. His muscles were all stretched and taught. She shook her head and reserved that image for later.

Luke pulled down the shirt and caught her look, and smirked. “Well, I was hoping we could ask Karrde to borrow something…it would be for just overnight. Do you think he has something on
hand to lend?"

Mara watched him put on his over shirt and start to do it up. “I’m sure something could be arranged. There’s probably a spare Skipray hiding somewhere….with two cabins.”

She caught his look, and answered quietly. “For appearance sake.”

He nodded, knowing that although the smugglers now knew that he cared for her, as they had observed the night before, but they were still not privy to an actual relationship between them. He would keep up the charade if she still thought they were fooling anyone.

Luke watched as her as she had a change of mind about breakfast; slipping on his boots.

“I think my eyes were hungrier than I was.” She mumbled as she slowed down to regard the serving trays of food.

He walked over to her, and touched her shoulders, and chuckled. “They sure were... I don’t think I’ve ever seen you do that.”

Mara turned back to him, frowning. “I don’t think I’ll do that again either.”

He gave her a consolatory hug. “Well, we have another problem…”

She looked back at him, questioning.

Luke smiled. “How are we going to get you dressed? I can’t have you running through the halls in your night shift.”

She looked down at herself, resigned that he was right, and thought about it for a moment.

“How are we going to get you dressed? I can’t have you running through the halls in your night shift.”

She looked down at herself, resigned that he was right, and thought about it for a moment.

“Loan me your Jedi robe?” She raised an eyebrow.

He frowned, thinking about it, and left her side to go retrieve it. Handing it over to her, he stood back waiting to see the result.

Mara slipped into the oversized brown robe for her petite frame. It was soft and warm, and it had a strange sense to it. It felt heavier than it looked, like it carried more purpose. She wanted to take it off —agitated, not ready to wear it yet; but she knew it was a necessity to get some clothes for the day.

Luke watched her as she slipped it on. It looked good on her; his robe was a bit too big for her, but he could see her wearing one soon.

He came closer and adjusted it on her. “Not bad…but not yet, I think…just for now.” He said, lifting the burden off her. “When you’re ready.” He whispered.

Mara eyes looked up to him; knowing what she was feeling.

He nodded.

She paused for a moment, and felt unsure. “Can you come with me?” She whispered. It might be all too real to be back in her room alone, after what happened the night before.

Luke saw the hesitation on her face. “Of course.” He replied. “Did you want to go now?”

She nodded. “People will probably still be at breakfast.” She assumed the hallways would be empty.
Luke agreed, and watched her wrapped his robe around her body and made her way to the door.

**

The hallways were silent and empty of the way to Mara’s room.

Inside the room, Karrde had clearly ordered a house cleaning droid as there was no evidence from the previous night.

Luke didn’t have much of a chance to look around her room before, but now that she was doing double duty of packing for their trip and finding clothes for the day; he was given a chance.

It was a simple room, but just in Mara style it was tastefully decorated and cozy. He saw a few personal items scattered around; holos of friends and places. An array of small perfume bottles. He recognized the one that he was using back on Coruscant- she must have replaced it. If her simple ‘fresher had a towel warmer, he would have gladly stayed in her room rather than the one he was given; her room felt more like a home.

Mara was quiet as she dug through drawers and packed a small bag. When she went into the ‘fresher briefly, she emerged dressed in some simple workout pants and top. She looked happy to hand him back his robe; staring at it briefly as she did, then looking at his face, and giving him a tight grin.

Luke knew that she took the meaning of the robe seriously, and that was what irked her about wearing it, and not the actual robe itself. Seeing herself in it, just made it even more real for her than he supposed she was comfortable with.

“Did you want to come back to my room to get ready?” He said quietly, knowing that she was still uncomfortable with being in her room.

Mara’s face brightened, and nodded.

They walked silently back to his room. Luke reached out to her. <Are you okay?>

She looked down as they walked. <<I didn’t even sense her being there…I wasn’t prepared…I’m never ‘not prepared’ for anything.>>

He could feel that she partially blamed herself for Vos-fane’s attack. <She wanted to attack you…whether it was in front of an audience, or alone…she was trying to get to you; you wouldn’t have be able to avoid it.>

<<But I would have been prepared….I’m getting soft.>> She didn’t want to admit it, but he was causing her to lose to attention at where it had always been; distrusting and anticipating the worst.

She snorted at herself. <<You’ve made me an optimist.>>

Luke grinned quietly; not really knowing if that was a jibe at him.

As they came up the stairs to his room, Karrde at the guests were in the hall way, and Luke could sense their apprehension at seeing Mara again. All they wished for was to avoid seeing her.

Mara must have sensed them too, and lifted her head high as she walked towards them.

When Luke and Mara came closer, Karrde nodded in their direction.

Luke stopped at his door but was surprised as Mara stepped towards the group. He couldn’t hear what was being said, but it was clear that Mara was being congenial for the sake of the business deal.
He could sense that both guests were relieved that she was not bearing any animosity towards them.

They bid their farewells, and headed down the opposite staircase as Mara returned to him.

<That seemed awkward.> He commented over to her, as he palmed the door release on his room.

When she was inside his room, she commented. “They seemed sorry…Karrde will be back shortly; they’re leaving for the spaceport.” He could sense that she wanted to change the subject. “You won’t get to see that Naboo cruiser again.” And she grinned back at him.

“Did my envy show that bad?” Luke smirked at her. She could tell that his inner teenager wanted to race that sleek cruiser all over the planet, without thought or reason to speed. “I’ll bet I could get it up to at least 7, maybe 8 Machs.”

Mara’s eyes narrowed. “You know that top speed inside a stratosphere is Mach 5…so don’t even start dreaming.”

Luke pouted as he came over. “How fast does a Skipray go again? Didn’t you promise me that I could ‘pod race’ one?”

“I don’t think I ever said that, flyboy…let alone promise.” She turned to walk back to him, thinking that she could convince him out of that thought with a kiss, but the chime at the door changed her mind.

Being closer to the door, Luke palmed the release and Karrde entered, looking relieved.

He nodded over to the Jedi. “Good Morning Skywalker.” And then turned his attention to Mara. “And you look resplendent.”

She snorted. “I wouldn’t say that…”

The smuggler chief came closer to her, examining on her where there should have been bruises. “Well, you look almost fully healed.”

Mara nodded.

“I should hire Skywalker on as medic.” He looked over at the other man with a questioning look.

She snorted again. “He’d be in there every week putting himself into a trance after racing your speeders.” And she shot Luke a glare.

“Then, I take back my offer.” Karrde looked over at Luke; seeing him smiling at Mara for her joke at his expense. “Thank you for coming over. They were relieved and it seemed to break the tension.”

Mara waved it away; she knew that a business deal rested on it, and despite the incident, the clients have nothing to do with the motives of their associate.

“I’m glad you came over Karrde.” Luke said, wanting to change the subject. “I was hoping I could convince you to let me borrow Mara and a Skipray until tomorrow.”

“Jedi business?” He asked, raising an eyebrow.


“Have you thought about my request?” Karrde eyed him.
“A fair trade?” Luke asked and nodded, knowing that the smuggler liked a deal.

The men shook hands and Mara watched with amusement at how easy they had negotiated things.

“I’ll ask Aves to prep bay 6 for you…If I don’t see you before you go, have a good trip and let me know when you’ll be expected back?” Karrde coolly smiled to them.

“Of course.” Mara watched him turn to leave. She saw him give Luke the slightest of nods before he left the room.

When the door closed, she turn to Luke. “Do I want to know what that is about?”

He was looking down at his data pad. “What?”

“That…” she said as she came closer. “You and Karrde…what was the deal?- or is it something secretive, that I’m not supposed to know about?”

“Not much.” Luke said absently, still studying his pad. “He asked me to fly escort to a delivery on my way back, for one of Cormix and Mo’nah’s deliveries…just to get my sense of it.” He looked up at her, to see if she approved.

“Well, now you can be a smuggler, just like you’ve always wanted.” She bent over to give him a kiss.

Luke was looking forward to leaving base with her for a couple of days, especially if it meant moments where they didn’t have to hide from prying eyes, and pretending there was nothing between them. And he was definitely looking forward to exploring the former Jedi Temple.

She backed away slowly, her eyes vivid green, and he could sense that she was looking forward to it too.

“I’m going to go into the shower.” Mara beamed back at him. “But before I do, I’m going to message Karrde and get your itinerary for that shipment…” She picked up her own data pad. “…then, let Aves know to stock the Skipray…and check our own flight path…and…”

He got up from sitting on the bed, pulled the pad out of her hands, and smirked at her. “Get in the shower…otherwise we’ll never get out of here.” Shaking his head.

Luke got a glare from her for his troubles, but she went into the ‘fresher. He heard the water turn on, very tempted to join her. It took a few deep breaths not to imagine her back under the running water…but he was able to restrain himself.

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They left from bay 6 by mid-morning, and in a little over an hour they were closing in on the area where the abandoned Jedi Temple should be.

Luke slowed the speed of the Skipray so that he could look out the view port and observe the area.

Mara looked over at him from the co-pilot’s chair. “So what is the structure supposed to look like?”

He was gazing out towards the horizon as he explained. “It should be on the eastern plain…a round, stone building with three support arches….if it’s still there.”

His voice was distant, but Mara could sense the hope in it.
“I looked into the area, from locals, and there is a town approximately five kilometers past this temple.” She must admit that she was eager to see it too.

The Plains of Khoonda were lush and green and dotted with blba trees. The Skipray’s afterburners caused the grasses to ruffle in waves as it skimmed along; headed east, and the proximity meter pinged.

“We should be there shortly.” Luke murmured, adjusting the controls to slow down further.

Mara was still watching him, curious. When he went into Jedi mode, he was sometimes a different person; quiet, inward and distant. She hadn’t decided whether she liked this version of him. Yet, to all those around him, it always commanded respect.

“Do you have a plan for how we’re going to do this?” She asked quiet, knowing that he was reaching out to sense the pull of the Force that a place like a Jedi Temple would have.

After a moment, he responded. “I was hoping that we could go into the town first – there might be someone there who knows the structure and can act as a guide.”

“And to see if any of them are Force-sensitives around?” Mara knew him better than that, and a quick visit into the town wasn’t what he was after. “I won’t expect a friendly welcome out here then.” She said glumly.

“Maybe it will be different this time…” He said.

Mara could sense a change in him abruptly.

“There is it.” Luke sat up straighter in the pilot’s seat.

A stone structure appeared from above the grass lands. It was circular; two of the three arches were still intact. As the Skipray circled it slowly, the remnants of an outline of a courtyard could be seen, and the faint footpath could be seen as well.

“It looks like it’s still visited.” Mara commented as she noticed the path.


“It’s not very big.” She said. “I thought it would be bigger…didn’t the Jedi send those that were on the way to become Jedi Masters here?”

“From my readings, most of the Temple is underground and it should go deeper than we would expect.” He said.

He circled it one more time, and then slowly pulled away.

“You said five kilometers to the town?” He asked, confirming that he was listening despite his distance.

“Yes, just keep going east.” She replied. “It’s actually two villages in one. A Dantari Reservation merged with a colonist’s settlement—and those colonists have been there for generations…probably since the Jedi were here.”


Mara turned to him, chagrining. “We should have brought the Verpine instead; it’s smaller…less intimidating and I don’t know if they have a dock.”
“It will be fine.” He assured her.

The town was made up of low stone buildings, narrow streets, very little in the way of technology; a landing Skipray would surely attract attention, but Luke was able to find what looked like a landing clearing, and touched down with no effort.

Before they disembarked from the Skipray, Luke stood looking at his Jedi robe, considering if he was going to wear it.

“I think they’ll recognize your lightsaber—so you won’t need the robe for overkill.” Mara said as she came up beside him, adjusting her hood over her hair.

He smiled, for the first time since they left Karrde’s base. “You think so?” he asked.

“I know so…you ooze ‘Jedi’ when you do these things.” She smiled back at him.

<Jedi ooze?- I don’t like the sound of that.> He thought over to her.

“And I think it’s time that you practiced your shielding.” She nodded.

“Alright. He capitulated to her. “I’ll try…”

Mara turned to him and with a sing-songy voice, replied. “There is no ‘try’…”

<I should have never had told you that.> He glared over to her.

She took the control for the hatch, and the ramp lowered. “Jedis first…”

She sealed the hatch before they walked away.

The town was quiet for approaching midday with few people in the street.

Luke walked the street just ahead of Mara; he could sense watchers in this town too, but rather than enforcing laws, they were merely watching the new comers.


“They don’t like outsiders.” Mara agreed. “The best thing we could do it buy something and gain some trust.”

“Right.” He agreed with her. “There must be a local watering-hole.”

An older man was walking in the opposite direction of them, coming in their direction.

“Good Morning.” Luke greeted him. “Pardon me, but can you please tell me who I can see about docking my ship for overnight.”

The older man looked him up and down and then over to Mara.

She watched him, and suddenly felt a jab at her mind. Luke must have felt it too because he turned to her. The man must be Force-sensitive, at least to some degree.

The older man stepped back from them in amazement, and then Luke sensed the fear.

“Oh no.” Luke said to the older man, sending out calming sense. “We’re just here to look at the old Jedi Temple, nothing more. We’re not here to hurt anyone, or to do anything—please don’t be
afraid.”

The man seemed to relax. “Olek.” he said, pointing down the street. “You want to go to the tavern and speak with Olek.”

Luke nodded, and sent out his sense. “Thank you.” He smiled kindly to the stranger.

Mara stood back and watched the man walk away from them, and saw him look back at her.

<Did you sense that?> Luke asked her.

<<Yes…we scared him.>>

<I don’t think it was fear, I think it was surprise.> He sent back to her.

They continued down the street to the tavern.

The tavern was just as suspected; dimly lit and few tables and chairs scattered about. Luke descended the steps into the room first, and Mara followed behind; keeping a close eye on the several patrons in the room.

Luke approached the bar. The bartender turned to him, and he nodded in return. “I’m looking for Olek.” Luke said politely, “Do you know if he’s available?”

“I’m Olek. The bartender answered in a gruff manner.

Mara came up beside Luke. “No, you’re not, but he’s here.” The bartender narrowed his gaze at her. “Please ask him to meet us in the corner booth?” She motioned over her shoulder to the alcove. She turned to walk away, “And don’t think of pulling that blaster on us—it won’t end well for you.”

Luke watched the bartender lower his arm that was behind the counter, and then turned to join her.

Mara slid into the seat as Luke took the one opposite to her.

Within moments, Luke could sense a nervous presence coming closer. An older man, possible twenty or so year older than Luke approached. Despite his presence, he had the look of one who was reasonably in control of himself.

“Good Day Off-worlders. I am Olek, Chieftain of Danthuth.” He said confidently, willing to accept whatever they were going to do to him.

Luke got up from the booth, and bowed to the man. “Greetings Olek. My name is Luke Skywalker, Jedi Knight. This is my student.” He gestured to Mara. “I seek your humble permission to stay in your town overnight, and to search the former Jedi Temple nearby. We come in peace and hope to leave in it as well.”

The man was taken aback. “Jedi?” he whispered. “Have you come for the children?”

“No.” Luke said quietly. “We have just come in the search for knowledge.” He looked around the tavern. “And to offer knowledge to anyone who wishes it.” He smiled serenely.

Olek watched him suspiciously.

“Please, come,” Luke offered, “and join us for a drink, and please ask any questions that you might have.”
Olek waved his hand, and Luke noticed that the other patrons began to relax and take slightly less interest in them.

“We have not had Jedi here in many, many years.” Olek murmured as he watched Luke take a seat, and then he joined him.

“There are very few Force-users since the War.” Luke said calmly.

Olek nodded. “The last ones to visit here were from the Empire—they came to the former temple too.”

Luke nodded, letting the man speak.

“We don’t get many off-worlders here.” Olek said. “They are either here for Dantari strong arms or to make trouble.”

The bartender delivered three drinks to the table. “Thank you Miktosh.” Olek murmured.

He looked back over at Luke. “I’ve not seen Jedi since I was very young. They came here too, looking at the ruins. You don’t look old enough to be one.”

Luke smiled. “I’ve only been one for going on five years now.”

Luke’s demeanor always could relax the tensest situation, and Olek seemed to relax as her looked over the younger man.

“And you have a student?” Olek looked over at Mara, “Then you must be a good one.” He took up his drink and begun to drink.

“He is.” Mara mumbled, and then took her drink.

Olek closed his eyes, and Mara could sense it as he probed Luke’s mind; Luke responded by letting him, showing him no fear, no malice, and revealing his intention was just as he said it was.

Olek’s eyes opened, and he sighed, then smiling. Mara could feel him welcoming both of them.

He nodded, and looking at Luke differently, with no fear, as if they had been friends. “We are pleased to have you.”

“Thank you Olek.” Luke smiled. “We would not like to inconvenience anyone and our trip will be of a short duration.”

Olek nodded quickly, and waved to the bartender. “Of course…of course. Although it would be good if you could stay longer. Many of us here have the ‘touch’…descendants of the Jedi, but not the strength.”

Luke nodded, understanding his meaning. His assumptions were correct; there was a connection between the townspeople and the Jedi.

“I understand.” Luke said. “I am not looking for more students at this time, but any of those who have the ‘touch’ are more than welcome to ask.”

Olek shook his head. “They won’t ask, but they will be curious.”

The bartender brought over a plate of food. Olek turned to him. “Miktosh- these are Jedi, here to see the Temple. They are friends –spread the word.”
Mara watched him go.

Olek motioned for them to join him, as he picked up a piece of meat off the platter and dug in.

“A warning- there will be some who still believe that you are here for the children.” Olek said in between bites. “They used to come here when they were at the Temple – not during my age, but during my father’s age. They would take the children into the Temple, and then most would return and some did not.”

Luke nodded. “The Temple was for the selection of those who were chosen to go on to become Jedi Masters, and their training. I figured that the Jedi would have sensed some of their own among your people.”

“You mean that they had their own children here?” Olek chuckled. “Yes, they did…no attachments allowed, but no rule against physical boundaries.”

Luke had a tight grin- the legend of the Jedi continued.

Olek continued. “During my youth, there was only one strong enough. Her name was Celine.” His memories became dark. “The Empire…the Empire, and not the Jedi, took her.” He paused. “The rest of us – they left us alone.”

They finished their food in relative silence, knowing that they would have shared the same fate.

When they were done, Olek got up from the table. “I will make arrangements for your ship and then, I will take you to the Temple myself.”

Luke was about to protest, but Olek started again. “If I go with you, no one will question your motives, and you will come to no harm. Besides I have not been out there in at least four annuls.”

“We saw a path into the Temple.” Luke said, getting up from the table.

“Yes” said Olek. “People still hunt inside the grounds.” He looked over at Mara. “Come girl, I have much to show the both of you.”

Mara slid out from the table and fell into step behind the two men.

They left the bar. Townspeople stopped to see the strangers walking beside their chieftain in an easy manner, and Mara could sense their animosity leaving them. She watched to see Luke and Olek speaking amongst themselves.

Olek leaned closer to Luke as they walked. “Your student is very pretty.”


The older man directed them through a courtyard to a clearing where his speeder was parked. “It won’t take us long to get there…longer if walked, but not difficult.”

Mara took the back seat as they sped away from the town, and the older man asked Luke several questions. She listened as Luke gave him a brief history lesson as to what had occurred during the war, as it was apparent that news did not travel quickly out on the rim.

Olek seemed relieved that the Empire was, for the most part, defeated but feared that lawlessness would return, or worse, some other warlord who wanted to rule over the planet that cared not for the
politics of the galaxy and just wanted to be left in peace. She could sympathize with him, and his
people.

The stone structure was ahead of them, and grew larger as they got closer. Olek maneuvered the
speeder to the east side of building, indicating that was where the entrance was.

The older man got of the speeder. “It’s been awhile since I was last here.” He looked up at one of the
arches. “I don’t know how stable the inner building is, but I always sleep better after coming here.”
He popped opened a storage compartment on the speeder, and pulled out three directional lanterns;
handing one to each of them.

He walked ahead of Luke and Mara.

Luke looked at her, and reached out for her hand, and squeezed it. <Ready for an adventure?>

<<Just remember, it was you who wanted to come here.>> She squeezed his hand in return.

Olek was already at the entrance when Luke and Mara approached, and he seemed a bit nervous.
“The only thing I ask is that we do not go down any further than the first two levels.” He swallowed.
“There is something not right there, and no one goes down there. It’s cold.”

Luke nodded. “I know there was once a Sith War here. Both Jedi and Sith alternated being here.” He
looked over at Mara. “There’s probably a stain.”

Mara shivered, remembering the stain left at Endor by Palpatine, and she nodded.

Luke knew the risks too; he had encountered a stain on Dagobah.

He watched Olek enter the Temple with no fear. As he stepped inside, it was like a flood of
tranquility came over him. He turned to see if it would absorb Mara too.

As she stepped into the threshold, her eyes fluttered closed for a moment and opened to find him
looking at her; she smiled serenely, feeling it too.

It wasn’t completely dark, as natural light did filter in, but the lanterns did help.

“You two are getting dreamy.” Olek said from farther away from them. “I can tell, but you’ll miss it,
if you do too deep into the feeling.”

Luke approached him, and Olek shone his lantern on the wall, and pointed to the images. “The Jedi
code in pictures, and in scripts from around the galaxy.”

Luke gazed up at the images, and he reached out to touch the carving, feeling the energy imbued in
them.

“We haven’t even come to the first level yet.” Olek waved them closer. “When we get in closer, it
will get stronger.”

The floor descended on the outer wall, sloped to lead to the next level. Ahead of them was a second
threshold, and Olek passed it without feeling anything but peace.

Luke stopped before it, as Mara came beside him, and looked at the archway.

“What is it?” she whispered.

“I don’t know.” His voice was distant, “But it will feel different past here.” He stepped beyond the
arched, and senses came alive; it was as if the room was alive too, past and present existed in the same space.

Olek was beyond him, but he could barely hear his words.

The corridor hummed and murmured; it called to him. It recognized him. ‘Son of Skywalker’ it called and repeated and repeated as he walked further in; welcoming him.

He turned to see if the room was having the same effect on Mara. It was if she glided in the area, her face at pure peace, her eyes, even in the dim light, were pale green.

He smiled to her and extended his hand; she took it and they shared the waves of calm.

Olek was ahead of them, watching with amusement; he recognized when others were affected by the ruins.

As they came closer, his words were making sense. “This was the Masters Chamber.” Olek gestured to a room off to the side.

Luke looked inside the circular room to see twelve seats surrounding the room. The floor design showed points from each chair that met in the center of the room. He wanted to walk in, but felt unworthy to do so, yet.

It didn’t welcome him, but it didn’t reject him either. He stepped back from the doorway to continue to follow Olek.

Further down the hallway, Luke turned back to see Mara- she was nowhere to be found in the corridor. He stopped Olek, telling him that he had to go find her.

Luke walked back to the Masters Chamber, and looked inside. Olek came up beside him, sensing that something might be wrong.

Mara stood in the middle of the room, on the spot where all the points converged.

Luke was hesitant to enter the room, but went to see her.

Her eyes were closed and he reached out to her, then stepped back from her. Olek came beside him. Luke nodded and guided the other man outside the room.

“She’s having a vision.” Luke explained to the other man. “She’s in a deep trance.”

Olek looked at him with concern. “Will she come out of it?”

Luke nodded. “When she’s ready or when she’s been given what she needs to have.” He looked in her direction, slightly envious but happy for her. “We can carry on, she’ll find us when she’s ready.”

Olek lead him into other corridors and rooms on the same level, sure to keep close in case she needed them.

“These were classrooms.” Olek told him.

Luke looked at the small tables that were in a circle, sensing that the attention was focused in the middle of the room, as an instructor spoke. “They taught children in this room.” He could sense their youthful energy and their inquisitive minds; pure in their pursuit for the goals of The Jedi, peace and justice.
“You won’t find any teaching materials, I’m afraid.” Olek said sadly. “All technology was removed from here a long time ago.”

“Sometimes learning doesn’t require the subject matter to be written down.” Luke said back to him. “I’ve learned a lot just by walking in here.” He looked around the space. “This… this is what I need to strive for.” He took a deep breath.

They walked into another room, and Luke could feel the excitement in the new room. He looked around and saw small scorch marks on the walls. Then he noticed more of the marks dotting the room, and then covered up, and then marks on top of those. Over time, the room was giving away its secrets.

He chuckled and turned to Olek. “They taught the children how to handle lightsabers in this room.”

“How do you know?” The older man asked. “I thought there was a fight in here because of the marks.”

Luke walked over to a wall and touched one of the lower marks. “These singes are from a training remote, but not from a blaster or anything else.” He chuckled. “I had several of them on my clothes depending on the setting on the remote.”

Olek found it amusing.

They left the room and followed the corridor into a slightly deeper level.

Olek stopped at one room, and ushered Luke inside. The natural light poured into the room, and green vines were starting to overtake the walls from the outside, as if they wanted into the space.

Luke looked up into the lecture hall.

Rows of seat curved, all giving their attention at where he was standing. He could sense that this room was one of study yet conjecture and debate, but with the purpose to search for knowledge.

He stood in the room, taking in the environment. I’m here for knowledge too. He told it.

The voices came to him again. ‘First of the new’ they repeated and repeated. ‘Learn’ they repeatedly begged.

Luke nodded, accepting their message to him. He left the room and made the motion to go down further.

Olek raced in front of him, stopping him. “We don’t go any farther. I will show you the grounds, but I will not go past the next threshold.”

Luke looked ahead of the man, and saw that even the natural light refused to go past the next archway that lead downwards. He still stepped closer to it, passing Olek, sensing that the area had a message for him too.

It was perhaps five meters away, but Luke could feel the coldness encroaching on him as he got closer, and the peace was leaving, clearing his mind but not for the better. The oppression and anger-fueled power lust stood at the threshold; not allowed to touch the other space, but like a caged animal, it paced and snarled, wanting to escape its confines, searching for a way to do so.

Luke put out his hand to come within centimeters of where the arch began. He must have misjudged the distance; the frozen air snapped at his hand, and wanted to drag him into the space. It was a
frenzy of energy at his touch. ‘Son of Vader’ it called…Vader it repeated…Vader it echoed….You belong here…Son of Vader...

Luke jumped back, saving his hand from the frigid air and surprised at himself that his curiosity had brought him so close. He backed away looking at the threshold, feeling the calm coming back into him; letting it warm him.

Even in the dark cave of Dagobah, he had never sensed anything so dense. The Emperor, himself, didn’t exude the venom that he sensed from those depths.

He didn’t dare turn his back on the space, until he came beside Olek.

“I told you that it was bad.” Olek murmured. “Those that go down there, come back wrong.”

Luke nodded, and swallowed; he turned away from it, but didn’t forget.

They walked back up the corridor, and the light streaming in had started to change direction, indicating a time shift in the day.

As they walked towards the Masters Chamber, they saw Mara sitting outside it, on the ground; her head resting on her arms that were crossed on her knees pulled up towards her.

Luke’s instinct was to run to her, but her senses weren’t damaged; she was just merely exhausted from her vision. Olek raced ahead of him to check on her.

Luke approached her and crouched down beside her. It had been a taxing day for her already, within a day of an attack on her life, a healing trance, and now a Force vision. He reached out and stroked her hands in front of her.

Mara lifted her head with effort.

He smiled at her, and wordlessly questioned her condition.

She sighed, blinked slowly, and let him know that she was done.

Luke helped her up, but resisted more assistance when she gave him a slight glare when he motioned to try and lift her.

She swayed a bit before walking, but gradually got stronger.

Olek watched her, and Luke answered his question. “She’ll be okay; she's just exhausted.”

“I have some water back at the speeder.” Olek suggested.

Luke nodded. “Thank you for all you’ve done today- we greatly appreciated it.” He placed his hand on the man’s shoulder smiling appreciatively.

**

She had kept quiet on their way back, drinking the water provided to her. Even Olek kept looking at Luke for his reassurance that Mara was alright.

Luke had no idea what had happened to her but he did try to reach out several times before they reached the town; her shields were locked up tight and nothing was getting through.

They made it back to the Skipray, and Mara briefly thanked Olek for his help, and said good bye for
the night before she went up the ramp.

Luke watched her go, knowing that he had to keep his distance until she was ready to talk; he knew that forcing things out of her, never ended well for him, or anyone else. He also bid farewell to Olek and thanked him for his help before joining her inside the Skipray.

He sealed the hatch and walked around the small vessel until he found her, in the cockpit, looking out at the horizon.

<Do you want to talk?> He reached out one more time, sensing that her shields had lessened since coming back.

Mara turned her face back to Luke, then back to the horizon. “What if I’m not meant to be a Jedi, Luke?” She sighed, and shook her head. “I just don’t have the outlook on the galaxy that you do.”

Luke lowered himself into the co-pilot’s chair and listened.

“Not everyone needs to be saved. It’s impossible to keep the peace, all the time. Sometimes the dark needs to exist.” She finished her thought.

“I don’t think I can do it.” She said quietly. <<The Force told me so.>>

Luke could feel her holding back. “What else did it tell you?”


He nodded. It was his fear as well. He was working on the issues that he knew would put him jeopardy; his fear of losing her, and his jealousy.

But never once, did he consider that she was holding him back. If fact, she was always the catalyst to push him forward. Didn’t she encourage him to continue his learning with the doctors? Didn’t she push him to find new students?

“Maybe your vision showed you your own fears?” he said.

She watched the horizon for a long moment, thinking about his words.

Mara’s voice broke the silence; her tone stern and definite. “Promise me something—you always keep your promises…so promise me something…”

“What would you like me to promise?” Luke asked.

“Promise me that you’ll never turn to the Dark side because of me…never.” She turned to him, with concern in her eyes.

He watched her face as he reached out and took her hand in his, then, he reached out in the Force to touch her mind; speaking to her heart and her soul. “I promise I will never turn to the Dark side because of you.”

Mara’s eyes softened at his words. Slowly her senses began to relax, and she became at ease again.

Luke, still holding her hand, pulled her closer to him, wanting to feel her in his arms. She slipped onto his lap, and he wrapped his arms around her.

She closed her eyes, and let his warmth filled them both. She turned to him, and as he had done so often to lighten her mood, she gave him a soft fluttering of kisses on his face.
He turned away gently to avoid the onslaught, but enjoyed, and chuckled quietly as she delivered them. He rocked the chair back and forth, enjoying her in his arms.

Evening was approaching outside.

“Are you hungry?” He whispered as he nuzzled into her ear. “I am.”

Mara looked into his crystal blue eyes, and nodded. She reluctantly got up from his lap, allowing him to stand up.

“My turn to scare up dinner?” He asked playfully.

“Your plan to come here—your plan for dinner.” She said simply. “Besides, Karrde sent me some files. I should go over them before we return tomorrow.”

“Ration Bar Surprise…it is then.” Luke smiled and leaned in for one more kiss before leaving for the galley.

Dinner was made quickly, and Mara surmised that he must have been hungry. It was tasty considering they had simple supplies on board.

They made small talk while they ate.

Karrde has sent over Luke’s itinerary for running escort; he was to leave with the shipment the day after tomorrow at 0600, and the nav file would be sent to Luke’s A-wing for download.

Mara had been sent her next duty too, and didn’t relish still staying on the planet for a while longer.

The conversation took a dip with the realization that their time together was once again limited, but gradually, the talk came back to their familiar banter; where they were comfortable again.

Luke came to the conclusion that he much preferred the Headhunter to the Skipray, and Mara came to the conclusion that he only preferred it that way because he managed to crash a Skipray the first time he flew one on Myrkrr.

“I didn’t crash it.” He defended. “I did that on purpose.”

“On purpose? –Really? Do enlighten me as to why you did that on purpose.” She asked, leering at him over the table.

“Well, you were following pretty close to me, and when I saw the Star Destroyer in orbit- the only choice I had was to go down…so I did.” He explained.

“Uh-huh…and the fact that you were wobbling around like you had no control over the stabilizers had nothing to do with it?” She sat with her arms crossed on chest as her look asked him to explain.

“Are you going to tell me that you never got into a craft and had issues with flying it?” He mimicked her body language, challenging her.

Mara glared at him. “Yes, I did…once.”

He glared back, and raised an eyebrow.

“It was a T-65.” She growled.

“An X-wing? Really?—now, I want to know…what problems did my sweet little X-wing give
“The S-foils have drag on them and when they open, they cause a weird lift kick-back thing.” She narrowed her eyes again, knowing that he had experienced the same thing.

“Only if you open them without decelerating first, and then the drag is virtually nothing.” He got up from the galley table, clearing their plates.

“An X-wing is like a woman” He said with his back turned to her. “You have to know all her secrets to find out what makes her work perfectly.”

A dish towel resting on the ledge flew at him, slapping him in the side of the head after the last word left his mouth.

Luke turned to her, chuckling.

“So now I’m an X-wing?” She bit out, knowing that he was teasing.

“No” He back-tracked. “If I had to pick, I would say that you were one of those slick Naboo cruisers…with clean and graceful lines…” He walked over to her, sitting in the galley. “But I would still need to learn how to fly you.” He smirked. “Find out all your secrets.” He winked.

Mara raised an eyebrow, and shimmied off the seat to come up to him; watching his eyes turn to sapphire in front of her.

“Well, that all depends on the secrets you’ve already learned.” She purred.

He tried to lean in for a kiss, but she dodged it, still challenging him to answer. He narrowed his own eyes back at her.

“I’ve learned that you have a ferocious sweet tooth…you love anything with sugar.” He said.

He was rewarded with a kiss.

“I’ve learned that you have to have things in a particular order, and if I’ve put something down in the wrong place- you will put it where you think it should go.” He gave another answer; getting another kiss; deeper this time. They stepped towards the cabins.

“I’ve learned that you are very sensitive to the feel of something. If you don’t like the way something feels, you won’t wear it or touch it.” Luke watched her face as she thought about it, then gave him another kiss; placing her arms around him and another step towards the cabin corridor.

“You are very creative and you like making things…like your ugly socks.” He smiled.

“They’re not ugly.” She defended the mismatched pair she relied on. “They’re unique.” She still rewarded him with a kiss, and another step.

“You’re just as sentimental as me, and sappy holovids make you cry…but I’m the only one who gets to know this.” His hand came up and touched her face.

She kissed him again, letting his tongue inside her mouth. <<I’ll still threaten to kill you if you tell anyone that, Jedi.>>

He hummed and chuckled between their lips.

She pulled back, as they were at the cabin. “Do you want to know some more secrets?”
“Yes.” He whispered in her ear as he went for her neck, pressed his hot mouth to her skin.

She palmed the door release, and dimmed the lights as they stepped back inside. “I get really turned on when I see you in your uniform or flight suit.” She turned and nipped the available skin on his neck.

He hummed in appreciation.

She pulled at the edges of his shirt; pulling it out of the waistband. Her hands travelled over his backside. “You might like my curves, but I’m a butt girl…and you have a very nice one; it drives me crazy.” Her hand cupped his ass cheek and squeezed for emphasis.

He grunted between his lips and her collarbone. He pressed his body against her so that she could feel what she was doing to the rest of his body.

Luke was staring to let his hands travelled her body too. He started to undo the closures on her tunic, stopping to curve his hands over her breasts under the fabric.

He came back to her mouth, starved to feel her lips again.

Mara’s hands from the front of his trousers, and opened them without a fuss. She rubbed her hand over his bulk, feeling it grow under her touch, begging to come out.

“Do you want to tell you my other secrets?” She purred.

He hummed the affirmative as he went back to her lips.

She pulled back from his kiss, and a wicked look came into her emerald cat eyes. “Okay, then you have to promise not to touch me while I tell you them.”

Luke looked at her like a pleading man; he loved nothing better than to touch her, but then nodded, agreeing.

She guided him to the nearby chair; sitting him down, and giving him a kiss for agreeing to her game.

“You’re not allowed to leave this chair until I tell you that you can.” She gave him a stern look as she gave him the rules. Then she walked back over to the bed, and turned back to face him.

“When you kiss me right here…” Her fingers moved up and down her jawline. “I get bumps, and it makes me shiver.” She removed her tunic from off her shoulders. “See?”

Mara let her tunic slip a bit more, as it fell off her shoulders.

She stopped to kick off her boots and slid onto the bed further. She undid the fastener on her trousers. His eyes were glued to her.

“When you kiss me here…” Her fingers drifted down her sternum. “It makes my nipples hard.” Her chest showed how slow and deep her breathing had become.

He watched as her nipples perked though her compression shirt, and he let his own hand drift over his hardened crotch; she didn’t say he couldn’t touch himself, massaging through the fabric of his trousers.

She rubbed her breasts through the compression shirt, watching his face. She then slipped her hands under the shirt and removed it in one movement; the fullness of her breast revealed, knowing that he
loved to watch the voluminous mounds rebound, with the rosy-brown tips hardened.

“But when you put your mouth on my nipples…” Her hands cupped her own breasts and she started to massage them and tweaked the dainty pinnacles as he would. “- that’s when I start to really feel myself get wet, and the tingling starts.”

Luke watched her face, as she bit her bottom lip and tilted her head back; he could see the flush rising from her chest, the blush coming to her fair skin. He wanted to leave his chair, envious of her hands, but he had promised; his own breathing was becoming heavy.

“How do you want to see how wet I am, Luke?” She practically moaned his name.

He swallowed and nodded slowly.

Mara slid her hands down the sides of her body, and kneeled on the bed; sliding down her trousers to reveal her light gray panties, that now had a wet patch at the front of them.

Luke gasped as he watched her wiggle out of them, showing more of her wetness. Her scent came into the air- a scent more-sweeter than the juiciest nectar.

“Wanna know another secret?” She whispered.

He nodded, powerless to what she was doing to him. He slipped his hand inside his trousers, rubbing himself carefully, not to push himself over the edge- he wanted to be inside that wetness when he did reached his climax.

She brought her legs up and spread them open so that he could see the darkened crotch.

She moved the saturated fabric of her panties to the side to show him her womanhood. “I touch myself when I think about you.” Her fingers pushed past the red-gold curls and opened her own lips, showing him the rosy pink hooded bud.

He watched as one of her fingers started to make circles on her hood; his mouth agape as he could see that her core was becoming wetter and wetter.

Mara started panting as she spoke; her fingers moving faster. “I think out how incredibly thick you are and how badly I want you hard and fast in me.”

Luke couldn’t blink, alternating between watching her fingers and her face; waiting for her ‘tell’ that she was coming for him. His own hand stopped because he knew he was close.

Her nipples perked as if ice had touched them, then she tilted her head back and held her breath; the shudders came and gasping in bursts. “Luuuke” she moaned quietly, bring her head back to look at him in the eyes.

“Take me?” She mouthed the words to him.

With amazing speed he left the confines of the chair, releasing himself from his remaining clothing, and found himself between her thighs.

Even though she was dripping wet, he still pushed against her tightness, filling her as she moaned for him.

She wanted him hard and fast, and he obliged. He moaned her name with every thrust into her, bringing her hips to him.
“Come again for me?” Luke pleaded to her. As soon as the words left his mouth, he felt her muscles squeeze around him, and she arched her back, shivering.

It was rising in him, ready on the verge of eruption, still thrusting into her. He felt all his body tense before he released himself, spasming into bliss and beauty in heaves.

“Mara…my sweet, beautiful angel…my Mara.” He called, falling towards her to capture her lips with his again.

She pursed her lips with his; each of them slowing their fever as passion remained but the tenderness emerged too.

He shifted himself to remove himself but to take her in his arms.

Mara lowered her head to his shoulder; completely spent, and joyously so.

Luke stroked her hair feeling her exhaustion coming to her. She looked up at him, smiling, and kissed him solemnly, then nuzzling back to his shoulder.

**

Later, as she slept wrapped in his arms, Luke looked down at her; so peaceful.

“Do you want to know my secret, Mara?” He whispered, not waking her.

She hummed and shifted slightly, wordlessly agreeing to hear what he wanted to say.

“I love you, more than I loved anyone.” He said, then placed a kiss on her forehead and joined her in slumber.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

**

Mara’s Vision:

The room went into a tailspin; like walking into a wave of water, unable to move from it. She tried to fight it but it was futile. Her body moved slowly; she turned her head, imperceptible to those around her, and she watched Luke watch her get further emerged into her vision.

The edges blurred around her until she was in another place and time.

Mara found herself standing in a room elaborately decorated; tapestries hung from the walls and the colours were vivid yet soothing.

She stood in the middle of a circle of large chairs. Several different species sat in each chair; all looking at her with skepticism— as if she was being judged.

A small grey-green alien spoke to her, pointing a finger at her. “Too old are you, one
who calls herself ‘Mara’, to begin training.”

She looked at him with curiosity; ‘Yoda’ she wordlessly said.

Several of those in the circle nodded in agreement with his assumption.

“We have trained ones that were older than her.” A male human with kind eyes said to the older Master. “And with great success.”

“Son of Skywalker was an exception.” She heard from behind her; another Master objecting.

“Lead him astray she has.” Yoda said looking at her. His gimmerstick sailed over to him as he came off of his chair, hobbling in her direction. “Delayed his search- promise he did to restart The Order.”

Mara felt uncomfortable from the Master’s gaze.

“Yes, but he delayed it of his own free will...he needs further instruction, we all know that.” The kind-eye Master commented.

“She was able to resist Palpatine.” Another voice said behind her.

“It was never her destiny to be a Jedi- we all know that.” The Kel-dor Master beside the kind-eyed Master, making a hiss from his facial mask.

A serene Togruta, from across the room, regarded her with sad eyes. “Skywalker’s attachment to her; puts him in jeopardy to the Dark side.”

The male human with the kind eyes, hung his head and nodded. “It’s not of her doing- purely his issue; something he must work on.”

“Yes, but she drives his passion and his fear – attachments are forbidden when they caused chaos.” A Cerean male said sternly.

Yoda took several steps towards her, looking her in the eye. “A Jedi, do you want to become?”

They all seemed to be listening for her answer.

“I don’t know.” Mara’s voice felt sluggish coming from her. “I don’t know what it all entails.”

“She sees too many sides of The Force; the light, the dark, and the gray.” The Cerean male Master interjected.

“Trust yourself, you do not to The Force.” Yoda huffed. “Until do that, you do, Daughter of the Kynthelig, you will never be Jedi.”

“Do not be afraid to lose your freedom.” The kind one said interjecting again, ignoring the others. “There is freedom in sacrifice too. Fear is your greater enemy, dear Mairi.”

She looked at him, and the name he had called her echoed to her; it was familiar, soothing, stirring something in her. Mairi...

The kind one got up from his seat, and came closer. “Master Yoda is right- you must
learn to trust your instincts and trust in the Force- for yourself and for Luke.”

“You will find your way.” He stepped beside Master Yoda. “When the obstacles are gone, then, will your attachment be able to grow and succeed. Until then, May the force be with you, child.”

Mara could feel the edges of reality pulling her back, and the images and the figures faded; leaving her more unsure about her life than when she walked into the Temple.

Her fears and hesitation were theirs as well. She breathed clearly, coming out of the vision.
Chapter Summary


Characters: Luke & Mara, Smugglers and other Force beings….

Chapter Notes

**
So I am a really bad speeler...and I rely too heavily on autocorrect and spell-check-- I hope you are just reading this now because I've combed through it twice to make sure I got all of my boo-boos.

Chapters are getting longer and longer to write...especially this section of the story… and that’s why it’s taking me longer to churn them out.

Thanks for being patient with me. I’m enjoying writing this as much as you are enjoying reading it.

SMUT WARNING…a very slippery Smut Warning… (I’m serious thinking about calling these warnings ‘SMUT FEST’ instead…a ‘warning’ sounds so severe, and not fun at all.)

**

Dantooine- Day 4

Something was tickling his neck. It wasn’t unpleasant- or the contrary, it was nice; but it still tickled.

He shifted, and the tickling stopped, but now, he realized something warm was slightly on top of him.

Once again, not unpleasant; it’s just he wasn’t expecting it, and it was snuggled right up against him.

As he woke up, it was clear that the ‘who’ that was right beside was very pleasant indeed. Her naked flesh pressed to his.

Luke opened his eyes slowly, and looked down to see a mass of red-gold curls sprayed over his chest. In the nook of his arm; a sleeping Mara dozed peacefully.

Never, did he think she would have come to him so quickly. It was a miracle that she was in his arms and in his bed.

He marveled that she had developed feelings for him too; feelings that were so different from what she had felt since they had first met.
It was easy for him to love her; he practically had fallen in love with her since the moment he had opened his eyes on Myrkrr. He had been struck in an instant by her beauty but it was so much more than that.

Even now, her gruff exterior was only saved for those who didn’t know her, but now, in his arms, she seemed fragile, a thing of untouchable splendor; and she had let him in.

He sadly smiled, knowing they didn’t have much time left on this trip, and he was going to revel in each moment they shared together.

He watched her. When she was unguarded, she looked much younger than she was. Her fair skin didn’t age as quickly as his own tanned skin; he could see the difference in tone as their skins were pressed to each other.

When he looked, he could see the small freckles at the tops of her cheeks and across the bridge of her nose; as the sun had picked and chose where to kiss her.

She had darker eyelashes in light brown, and perfectly shaped eye brows; even when they arched at him to show her disapproval.

Her hair was so soft, like strands of silk, and her curls kept their shape as he petted the strands.

Luke brushed her hair away from her temple, wondering what the Force had truly shown her during the previous day at the Temple.

She was strong in the Force, he knew it; why she would doubt her future, concerned him.

Just like it did with their relationship; for every step forward she took in her training and knowledge of the Force, she would take two steps backwards because of her doubt.

His own visit to the ruined temple had left him with questions concerning himself.

The dark recesses of the corridor called to him, and called loudly. When he reconsidered it, he was caught off guard by the clear strength of the power it had against the light.

It was such a contrast that it irked him; not necessarily that it was stronger than the light, just that it was more demanding against the peacefulness.

He wondered if Mara would consider revisiting the Temple. Now that he knew what to expect in the deeper corridors; he still wanted to explore them.

She had pleaded with him not to let himself be turned by the Dark side because of her, and he would resist it by any means, but he still needed answers.

She shifted again, as if hearing his internal conversation and distracted him, turning into his neck. He now discovered what was tickling him earlier, as her breath touched a sensitive area of skin just below his collarbone with each exhale.

As her skin slipped and moved against his skin, it felt electric, sending a surge of energy into Luke, and shooting right to his groin.

She hummed then, mumbled something, and Luke decided that it was time for her to wake up.

He tilted her beautiful face towards him, trying not to surprise her. <Good Morning Mara> and gently pressed his lips to hers.
She sniffed and backed away from him slightly, and turned her head back into his shoulder, burying her face.

<It’s time to get up.> He urged again.

She mumbled a rejection of that idea.

<Are you sure?> He slid his hand up and down her back. <Good things happen when you’re awake.>

Mara lifted her head, eyes closed. <<Like what?>> her voice was gruff and she was not buying what he was selling.

He shifted so that he was lying beside her, as her head was tucked into the pillow and not his shoulder. <How about that I make you breakfast?> He placed a kiss on the available skin of her upper arm.

He got a grunt for his troubles – that was not a compelling enough answer to coming out of her cocoon.

<But I’m hungry, Mara…even you need to eat.> He added some extra whine in the voice in her head.

<<No….day: bad.>>

Maybe there was another way to wake her.

<But I’m really hungry…if you don’t wake up, I’ll just have to find something else to nibble on.> He placed a series of soft kisses down her arm until he got to her elbow, and nipped at the edge.

She protested slightly, pulling her arm away.

<Oh, that was tasty…I’ll bet I can find something just as yummy…>

Her hair had covered her face, and he moved it aside to access her shoulder; placing a few more kisses and nips; careful not to leave any marks.

She wiggled, but couldn’t quite escape his touch, in the small bed, pressing her skin on his with her movements, drove his hunger.

<<No?...I’m still hungry Mara…>

He removed some of the covers off of her back, exposing the perfect curved line of her back. He was enjoying this, and he adjusted himself to hover just over her back, dotting random areas with kisses, as she squirmed slowly, and snorted into the pillow.

Her skin was cool as he let his hot hands glide over her skin. He could feel his body responding to the view and the touch of her pure flesh; it was awakening his own desire.

He pulled the covers down a bit more to expose her bare backside, and the round, firm, heart-shaped ass. Fleshy and soft, he regarded it as a thing of beauty.

<Now…I’ve warned you…I’m very hungry…> He inched up and closer to the cheek of her buttocks; his hand warning her of where he would strike as he massaged her skin- she hummed approvingly.
Without warning he dipped down and nipped cleanly at her cheek.

Mara’s head popped up from the pillow in protest. “Ow!” She squeaked.

“Nope, I’m still hungry.” He lowered his head and nipped at her other cheeky.

“Luke!” She protested with a giggle.

He didn’t want her angry, so he went back to the first cheek, and leaned over and kissed it deeply. 
<Mmmmm, sweet.>

She wiggled, which only enticed him more.

Mara twisted her body and turned over, exposing the front of her body to the cool air of the cabin; looking up at the man who so rudely woke her up. Her annoyed gaze dissolved as she saw the look on his face.

Luke was wearing nothing but an animalistic grin. He raised an eyebrow, watching her plump breasts dimple from the air. <Good, I’m starving…> he came down much slower than she would have thought, his mouth descending on the closest available breast.

She gasped as he came in contact of her supple mounds; and winced out of ecstasy.

His other hand found the available breast, and started to massage the sensitive skin; squeezing and rolling her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. He alternated between gentle ministrations and possessive clasp of the flesh at his command.

He pulled back. <Still hungry.> He reasoned as his mouth and hands switched breasts.

Mara clenched her eyes shut and dug her bottom into the mattress as he delivered some exquisite sensations. She hummed with glee as she savored his attention, feeling a deep throb inside her. Her breathing was slow, rhythmic, and resonant.

Luke’s hot hand left her breast and slid down her stomach, past her navel, and approached the soft red-gold curls covering her womanly depths. He cupped his hand and palmed the mound between her legs, feeling the moistness that had seeped through to the outside lips.

He hummed at her breast, knowing that she was enjoying what he was doing.

Her legs opened to allow him access to her.

He was going to tease her now, and instead of letting his fingers delve deeper, his palm just rested outside goddess depths, massaging her outer lips.

She moaned in protest of being deprived of his intense touch inside her.

He knew better; the longer he delayed it, the wetter she would be; as evidence of the juices that were starting to make his hand slick, and that was what he was after.

His lips left her breast, and his gaze followed the trail of deep blush on her skin until he came close to her face with her eye clenched shut, just feeling what he was doing to her.

He wanted her wet, and dripping. He wanted her writhing for him. He wanted her teetering on the edge of paradise.

His mouth came into contact with hers, and hummed as his tongue forced its way into her mouth.
<I’m starving, Mara> He took over one of her hands and guided it to his heavy manhood, now screaming for attention.

She pumped his shaft slowly, and he sucked in air through his teeth. <We’re both starving…and there’s only one thing that will feed my hunger….>

Her eyes still closed, and she nodded, knowing what he was asking for; all she wanted to do was feel him.

His kisses left her mouth, and trailed down her body; he pressed his mouth firmly against her lower abdomen, placing his kisses closer and closer together on her velvet skin.

She felt the shift of his weight in the bed as he positioned himself. She wanted to open her eyes as his mouth left her body; missing the contact. But when she felt herself wanting to give in and look for him, that’s when she felt her woman lips open.

<I’m famished…> and he descended with the most intimate kiss.

Shock and the titillating sensation made her lift her hips, and his searing hand guided her back down, as his mouth latched on to her thrilled bud, sucking the soft fold of skin.

Mara gasped loudly, as he gently pressed the hood between his teeth and the base of his tongue; he released it, and she exhaled. Her breathing turned to panting heavily, unable to contain herself.

His tongue did circles over her hood; making her squirm in delight.

She opened her legs wider to let him in, and she felt his hands glide to the front of her thighs, bringing her closer to him.

His hot tongue pushed inside her core; she tried to buck away as a reflex, but he held her in place, lapping up her juices, and humming with his own pleasure.

<Delicious…so sweet…> She heard his voice growl in her mind.

His mouth went back to her hooded jewel, and he shook his head as he bore down hard with skin nipped in his mouth.

She was lost; her mind reeling, unable to form words at how phenomenal what he was doing felt; moaning to the air.

<I want more…> He told her hungered mind.

She felt a finger enter her deeply, and his lips moved back to giving her clit uninterrupted bliss.

His finger hooked inside her, and touched the bundle of nerves on her front wall; stroking, coaxing and demanding a deeper release.

Caressing in a steady tempo; his single finger was joined by a second finger, bringing her even closer.

It was building in her, the pressure, rising up her body, the tension; not her normal climax. The speed of his fingers increased, and applied more pressure.

Without warning, her body erupted, sending one hard convulsion through her, and leaving her body in an upsurge of liquid essence; followed by mini convulsions throughout her body. She moaned loudly, letting her body release.
He responded by vigorously lapping the emerging juices. *So sweet...so glorious...so perfect...*

She was still delusional from the sensations that she didn’t feel his body shift again, and lifting her hips to meet his groin; but her eyes flew open, and she gasped loudly, as he pushed his thickness into her.

Mara stared up at his feral face; his sapphire eyes were like the blue of a flame’s deep intense heat.

“Starving...” He growled as he pumped into her; hands on her hips, bringing her to him.

Luke grunted, almost pummeling himself into her; wanting, needing, craving her release again.

Only this time, he reached his climax before she did again. He thrusted into her with each spurt inside her.

As his release subsided, he slowed his pace, rocking his pelvis, and slid his fingers between their joined bodies, and pinched her hood, knowing that she so very close to coming again.

She held her breath, and within seconds he felt the pulse of her muscles around him, almost painful to him now, but exceedingly satisfying to watch her climax.

As she came down, she moaned his name repeatedly; begging for his mouth to deliver appreciative kisses, for which he obliged.

Mara could taste she own sweet flavor on his mouth as his tongue dipped inside her mouth; she hummed in gratitude, as her pulse slowed. She could feel the pounding within his chest too, as theirs came together.

Luke rolled over onto his back taking her with him, breathing hard, staring at the blank ceiling of the cabin.

They were quiet, listening to their breathing match pace....waiting, and holding each other.

He could sense that she wanted to say something that she found amusing, but rather than wait, he said, “I’m still hungry.” -his stomach rumbled; perfectly timed with his comment.

She snorted softly. “I want waffles.”

“Where am I supposed to find waffles?” He looked down at her, to see her smirking.

Instead of waffles, she got a deliberate tickling for her insolence. Mara only wiggled closer to him, and sound kissing made him stop tickling her.

She looked up at him, green eyes bright and round. “Good Morning” she whispered.

“Good Morning.” He smiled back at her, holding her.

“I think we may have made a mess.” She looked around at the state of the bed, and the room.

Luke chuckled. “It appears we did.” He rubbed his face as he surveyed the room. “How much do you want to bet that the population of Danthuth will increase in nine months?”


She swung her legs out from the bed, without a concern for her state, annoyed at him. She looked
around for her night shift, and finding it in her bag.

“Mara…I was shielding, but I know I let it accidentally slip a few times….while I was distracted, but I brought it up again.” He said, watching her go. “Why does it bother you so much?”

She walked into the ‘fresher without looking back. “Because, it gives us away every single time you let it slip.”

He could hear the hum of the sonic jets from the smaller room; sad that the shower only had room for one person.

“I don’t like it when other people know my business.” She called from within. “Besides that, eventually we are not going to be the only Force-sensitives around, and it would do you good if they didn’t hear every single thought in your head; friends or foes… no matter if it’s about us, or not.”

Luke sat up, and sensed her frustration. He heard the interruption of the stream, which meant she was in the shower.

“You have the opportunity to practice now…you should take it.” She called.

The whirl of the jets stopped. And he could sense now that she had said her peace, her frustration was leaving her.

Mara walked back in to the cabin; sheet towel wrapped around her, her skin sleek from the sonic cleaning. She watched him to see if he had took into consideration what she had said.

Luke, grinned tightly, looking at her. “Yes, I know you’re right.” He conceded. “I just can’t do it as easily as you do…I know, I never had to.”

He patted the edge of the bed, and she walked over, leaned on the ledge, wrapping an arm around him.

She looked at him, pleading in her eyes. “I’m not asking you to shut off your feelings—their part of who you are. And if it wasn’t for the fact that you care so much; I wouldn’t be learning how to care too…”

Now, worry came to her face. “But, Luke, one day, someone is going to use them against you. I never want to see that.”

He nodded.

“I’ll make you a deal.” He looked into her eyes, with honesty. “If I practice my shielding; will you practice reaching out in the Force more?” He knew where her weakness was too.

She glared, skeptically at him.

“I practice my footwork when you asked…” He reminded her.

Her gaze relaxed, and thought about it for a moment.

“Yes.” She nodded approvingly, and leaned in to seal the deal with a kiss.

“Good.” He jumped away from the bed, showing off his naked self, headed for the ‘fresher. She watched his adorable butt leave the cabin.

When he got inside and turned on the sonic jets, he called to her. “Did you hear that?”
Mara was drying her hair. “Hear what?”

He head poked out from the doorway. “I was just shielding, and I amended the deal…If you let down your side; I get to do anything that I want to you.” He winked, and then hid for cover.

She flung her towel in his general direction. “Jedi.” She huffed.

Luke came out the shower to an empty cabin, and got dressed. In the hallway outside the cabin, he followed the smell of food to the galley.

Somehow, Mara had taken the supplies and had made an incredible breakfast, and certainly better than he could have thought was possible.

He stood before the galley watching her move around; putting the finishing touches on the meal. She poured herself a caf, oblivious to him watching her.

She was transferring some of the food to another plate and turned in his direction, and jumped; shocked to see him.

“See?” He said. “I can shield when I want to.”

Mara glared at him as he walked to the counter where she had left the food.

“I’m sorry…I didn’t mean to scare you.” He smiled, taking a fork to sample what she had made.

Her eyes softened, until…

He reached across the counter and took the mug of caf she had made, and took a sip.

“Since when did you start drinking caf?—and drinking my caf?” She glared. “You know, I’ve killed men for less.”

He smiled at her, knowing it disarmed her quickly… although sometimes it could swing the other way too, and annoy her greatly.

“You make it better than I do. I like the way you make it.” And he threw in one more compliment for good measure. “I like it better than my hot chocolate, sometimes.”

She watched him as he took another sip. “I’ll make another one.” She mumbled.

Luke made amends by offering her a fork of the egg skillet she had made, which she gladly took; he then helped himself, and chewed quickly. He swallowed.

“I don’t know how you managed to make this.” He said as he loaded his fork again. “I had no idea we even had food like this.”

Mara looked over at him, eating her breakfast. “What did you use to make dinner last night?”

He was chewing while he thought about it, and swallowed again. “I told you, it was called ‘Ration Bar Surprise’.”

He swore he could hear her growl, as she turned to make more breakfast for herself.

By the time she had turned back to him with her own food, he had finished off the first plate of food,
and was drinking her first cup of caf, standing at the counter across from her.

She shook her head and with fresh plate of food in hand, she dared to ask, “So what’s the plan for today?”

Luke smiled. “Well, we’ve got a few options.” The last swig of caf went down good. “I was thinking that maybe we go back to the Temple, to take another look around and spend some time meditating. Now that we’ve been there, we know what to expect and won’t get so absorbed in the atmosphere.”

She sighed. “So I wasn’t the only one who was affected by it?”

He reached out and took her available hand. “No, you weren’t.” He paused. “I was pretty taken in by it too…it felt like I was walking in water, everything felt slow, and…”

“Alive.” She finished his thought.

“Yes.” He said, watching her face, knowing that her last visit had taken a lot out of her. “We can shield against it, now that we know what we’ll be facing.”

Mara wasn’t showing any reluctance in her features to go there, and smiled lightly to him, and nodded.

“Or…” He smirked back at her, his eyes going dark, and his voice low. “We can go back there and wreck the other cabin, now that I’ve refueled.” He winked.

A grin spread across her face. “Well, we will need to have evidence of using two cabins.” She said in a husky voice. “It will mean no visit to the Temple though…Karrde is expecting us for evening meal, and things tend to take longer at the Temple.”

Luke pouted. “What time is it now?” He was sure it was still fairly early on in the day.

“It’s almost midday.” She grinned to him. “We took our time waking up this morning.”

Mara round the corner of the counter, coming close to him, and reaching out for the front of his tunic, pulling him closer. “But that other cabin isn’t going to mess itself.”

His lips were looking just too good to leave alone, and she came closer to them, pressing her mouth on his.

He responded by wrapping his arms around her, and taking his time, kissing her firmly. Then his logical brain caught up with him. As he broke off the kiss, he whispered a whine. “But I really wanted to go back to the Temple.”

She sighed. <<You don’t make things easy on a girl, do you?>>

He shrugged.

<<You’re very lucky that you’re cute.>>

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They quickly packed up their belongings, and Mara ordered an immediate housekeeping droid on their return to clean the Skipray upon their arrival back at Karrde’s base.

She headed for the cockpit. “They brought your A-wing to the base.” She said to Luke, seated in the
pilot’s seat. “It will be fueled and prepped for tomorrow’s departure.” She said quietly.

He turned his seat in her direction. “Hey…” He reached out and pulled her to his lap, nuzzling into her. “I’m not leaving you…I’m just leaving here.” He repeated her own words back to her as he whispered in her ear. “I’ll be back.” <You know this.>

Mara looked into his pale blue eyes that could make her believe anything. “I know.” She pressed her lips to his. <<I’ll still miss you.>>

Luke rested his forehead against hers. “No sense in missing me while I’m still here.” He whispered.

<<When did you get to be the pragmatic one?>> She moved her cheek against his.

<You’re rubbing off on me.> He was going to take every chance to feel her next to him before he was to leave, and he could feel her soft cheek on his.

He looked down to see the leathery cord of his pendant around her neck; the pendant resting against her chest inside her jacket, and he smiled to himself.

Mara took her time removing herself from his lap, and took the chair beside him, adjusting the controls. “Okay Captain…let’s get going.”

He looked over to her, and smiled as he brought up the repulse lifts, and engaged the down-thrusters.

The Skipray lifted vertically, clearing the buildings of the town with ease, and turned West, towards the Temple.

Outside the cockpit, it was a pleasant day on Dantooine again; sunny and clouds in the distance. It wasn’t the first time since arriving that Luke was enjoying the remote planet.

As it sailed across the grasslands, rippling the green below, he looked over at Mara; she had been quiet for the few moments, appearing to be deep in thought.

<Did you want to pilot on the way back into the base?> He asked, touching gently on her mind.

She glanced over at him, and stretched in her chair. <<I don’t mind…I know you like flying.>>

<And you don’t?>

<<I do…but I know you enjoy it too; I can fly a Skipray anytime I want to.>> She smiled over to him; clearly, still in thought.

The stone structure appeared in the distance; stately and serene emerging from nature and yet being one with it.

The Skipray circled around to the east side of the building, on the side of the entrance. Luke landed it expertly, approximately one hundred meters away as to not disturb the tranquility of the space.

He looked over at Mara. “We’re here.” He said watching her face. “Are you ready?”

She sighed, and reluctantly answered. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

He stopped. “What’s wrong?”

Mara looked at him. “Yesterday.” She paused. “It felt like I wasn’t supposed to be here.”
“Your vision?” He asked quietly.

Her brow furrowed. “Yes... the building felt calming...refreshing...welcoming...but the vision didn’t.”

Luke nodded. “I think visions aren’t meant to be comfortable. They like to show us things that we don’t want to think about or feel.”

“You’ll be more prepared this time.” He reasoned. “I found that the Masters Chamber wasn’t welcoming to me either... other rooms, however, drew me in.” He lightly smiled. “I was pleasantly surprised by their energy.”

Mara leaned back in the copilot’s chair, thinking.

“If you don’t want to go...we don’t have to.” Luke said quietly; hoping she would change her mind, but not forcing her.

She turned her head and looked at him directly. “No” Her voice sounded assured. “We should go. I need to go.” And she gave him a tight smile.

Luke nodded, and got up from his chair and left the cockpit, as she followed.

They gathered some supplies for the trip; taking some much needed light-torches and water.

Mara sealed the hatch after they departed, and together, they headed in the direction of the entrance.

The entrance welcomed them just as it did before, and as Luke entered, could feel the serenity come back into him.

The whispering voices called his name, drawing him in.

Mara kept by the doorway, watching him walk ahead of her, and stood looking up at the first arch before she walked in.

As she stepped inside, a warm wave of energy whipped by her; she smiled, not feeling rejection, but acceptance.

The flood of peace wasn’t as strong as it was during the previous day. She felt more in control of it, and didn’t allow it to absorb her or distract her.

She was able to finally look at the structure, and see its beauty; noticing the small details of the remaining artwork and decoration of the building.

The natural light of midday streamed in through the open windows and cracks of the building; filling it with the natural feeling of warmth, radiating. The lighted torches might prove to be unneeded.

The pictorial story of the Jedi Code was masterfully painted, and she could imagine the vivid colours that were once used in the image; hues of colour still remained.

Mara was slowly beginning to accept her talent in the Force, but here, now, looking at a representation of the code that she would have to abide to, felt odd to her. So many aspects of Jedi life felt disconnected to her; she felt like she had to directly challenge them, and hoped that Luke wouldn’t feel that she was challenging him.

She walked down past the Masters Chamber that had lured her in the previous day. Today, however, it did not call her in as it had before; it seemed ‘untouchable’ today.
Now that she knew that it had been reserved for Jedi Masters, she paused at the doorway. She felt unprepared to enter it, and it didn’t call to her- which eased her feelings.

Further down the corridor, she saw Luke, looking at one of the walls too, and she hastened her steps to join him.

He looked over to her as she came beside him.

Even though they had their shields up against the effect of the Temple, they could still read each other without words.

His hand reached out to point to various areas of the image before them.

The image was of another temple, atop a rocky hillside, shaped differently than the Jedi Enclave; showing different species, dressed in different colours, with different colored lightsabers, some without a lightsaber, coming to one place.

Mara looked at the image more closely, seeing a figure in a dark cloak and a red lightsaber; she pointed to it immediately.

Luke leaned in to inspect it.

She started looking at the image more closely, and recognized a symbol on one of the figures approaching the temple. Fallanasi she thought over to him. She remembered seeing the symbol on the cover of a book that he was reading from the doctors.

He looked over, and nodded; recognizing the symbol too.

It must have been a representation of visiting The Guardians of the Whills, and how all Force-users relied on them.

Luke stepped back, with more understanding and nodded.

He turned to see her face, as she stared at the image, and one figure in it. He followed her gaze to a figure with possibly red hair, and wearing a symbol of a triangle formed by a singular line in a looped pattern; a triquetra.

Mara blinked a few times, and turned to him; meeting his eyes, and smiled calmly.

He offered his hand, wanting to share with her this experience; she took it, walking with him.

They walked hand in hand down further into the hall.

Luke showed her one of the rooms he had been in yesterday; a training room.

Several small chairs littered the room, and the wall paintings that were previously vivid and bright, still had their peaceful and joyful message even thought they had faded over time.

Mara closed her eyes and felt the youthful energy of the room. It wasn’t just in seriousness that the younglings trained, but also with games and playing. She could almost see the faint visions of children at play, but also learning, in the room.

She snorted quietly, and smiled; turning back to see Luke leaning in the doorway, watching her and smiling too.

He stretched out his hand again, and she took it; he pulled her close to him, pressing his lips tenderly
She heard the word echoing in his mind; children was his desire, but of no immediate urgency … someday his mind resonated.

She sighed, and looked into his bright blue eyes filled with love for her. She knew the word now for when he looked at her like that. She wondered what he saw when she looked at him; did he see her apprehension?—she hoped not, because if he did see any doubt; it was the doubt inside herself, and not in her feelings for him.

Luke walked with her out of the room, and headed down the corridor to the next room.

Mara walked past him, and into the next room.

The walls had scorch marks that someone had tried to cover, and then cover again. She looked at him with a question.

<Training remote scorches> He answered.

She nodded, amused that she wasn’t the only one who accidentally decorated a room when she had set the remote too high.

The room had a playful energy, but imbued with the seriousness that training with a lightsaber required. Unconsciously, her hand went to her left hip, touching the gifted saber at her side; appreciating her training.

Mara turned and looked at Luke again—his energy was wanting to show her something.

Luke was eager to take her to the lecture hall and see if she would have the same reaction that he had there. There were other smaller rooms along the way to the hall, but large room had a greater draw.

He entered the room from the doorway he had used before, and the large lecture hall was no less impressive than it had been. It still called to him, and it seemed glad that he was returning.

They walked into the main floor, and the curved seats raised up around them; the seats were the audience, and Luke and Mara were at center stage.

When Mara entered, the room jumped with curiosity at the newcomer. She took a step back when she felt the energy, but returned when she felt that it was welcoming.

Strange that such a place was excited that she was there. The energy swirled with words…

'You have questions' it said to her.

'Ask…we will answer’ It echoed.

She turned to Luke to see if it had spoken to him too.

<That was for you, I think.> He raised her eyebrows in a knowing glance. <I think it would be a good idea to meditate here and see what you can find out.>

Mara sighed, knowing he was right. <<Join me?>>

Luke came closer to her, and nodded. <I’ll help you get started, but I’d like to go see another part of the Temple while you’re meditating…is that okay?>
her eyes blinked slowly, accepting.

He guided her to a stone chair, and took up the one across from her.

Mara sat, crossed legged, as she had seen him do on many occasions, and relaxed her mind further than it already was.

He reached out for her, and she could feel his connection, but she was surprised that she could feel herself submerging herself in The Force without his help.

Luke closed his eyes, feeling that she was already in a trance-like state.

She slipped farther away from him.

He felt her going deeper as she started a conversation with the room by herself, and he withdrew his presence in her meditation.

Luke opened his eyes and watched her, as her face made expressions as she was fully immersed. He gradually got up and backed away from her, turning to leave the room.

Out in the hallway, he turned his head in the direction of the dark threshold, and walked towards it; not afraid of what it held, but curious as to why it had been allowed to exist in such a place of otherwise relative calm and peace.

The wall of cold under the threshold didn’t seem as strong as it did from the previous day. Now that he was prepared for it, the sense of darkness wasn’t as strong either.

He pulled out one of the light-torches and shone the beam into the corridor, and it was as if the hallway gasped and pulled away from the glow.

Multiple voices mumbled in the corners of the hallway, all watching him. They weren’t as eager as they were before; there was no chomping or snarling at his presence.

Luke stepped across the threshold with no fear and walked into the dark.

Mara slipped easily into the recesses of her mind.

The image brought to her was of the same room she was seated in now; however, in her vision, the walls were of colour, and the room had living energy to it.

In the vision, she opened her eyes, she was among a different time.

She looked around the space.

Figures were departing the lecture hall, as if a class had just dismissed. All, but one figure remained—the Jedi with the kind eyes from her previous vision.

“Hello again, young one.” He smiled at her in greeting. “I am very glad that you have returned.”

Mara swallowed, feeling insecure.

“Don’t worry.” He said coming close to her, and taking up the seat that Luke had sat in. “We have all the time you need.”
She was quiet, as her mind reeled with questions, but the most immediate one came to the forefront.

“Who are you?” Her voice sounded strange in her ears.

He smiled. “In life, my name was Qui-Gon Jinn…Master to Obiwan Kenobi and of Anakin Skywalker.”

She raised her eyebrows and nodded.

“They sent me to you.” He said, waiting for her response.

“Who did?” She asked.

“The other Masters…you sensed their doubt about you, didn’t you?” He smiled.

“Yes” she conceded, showing she wasn’t amused.

“They sent me because they believe that I have the outlook on The Force that you seek.” His kind eyes narrowed slightly. “They can be a bit abrasive sometimes.”

She snorted. "I can be a bit abrasive sometimes.. they were down-right mean."

There were so many things about The Force that she didn’t know, so she was curious. “Where did they come from?”

“They are one with The Force now, just as I am.” He looked around at the room. “We are called here when we are needed and to protect it.”

A thought dawned on her, she wondered…“How is it that Luke hasn’t seen you?”

“He doesn’t need to…he has no doubt.” The Jedi Master answered, and then chagrinned, “He has other weaknesses, but doubt isn’t one of them.”

He looked her directly in the eyes. “You, however, don’t trust your strength or your power. Why is this?”

Mara knew what he was asking, and she also knew that he already had the answer, but wanted to hear it from her. “Palpatine.” She sighed. “He told me that he gave me my power.”

Jinn nodded, understanding how she was manipulated. “Strength in The Force isn’t transferable.”

His eyes were patient, and he explained. “The Dark side works in deceit of self- if you believe that your power comes from another, then you will always rely on that. But in truth, The Dark feeds from your fear, your anger, and your hatred- when you lose control of your feelings then, you give your power away.”

He smiled. “That is why to be at peace, and calm, is the Jedi way.” His demeanor changed and questioned her back. “But you don’t believe that, do you?”

She shook her head.

Jinn nodded again, and understood. “My view of The Force is more fluid than the other Masters.”

He grinned, and watched her response. “We disagreed often on many factors. I challenged their conventional notion of what a Jedi could, and should be.”

He chuckled. “They called me a ‘Gray Jedi’ even though I treaded in The Light.”
Jinn got up from his seat, and walked about the stage of the lecture room. “But my students, followed the more traditional view of The Force, and Jedi methods.”

He turned to Mara. “Now, Skywalker has the ability to remake The Order- not falling to the hurdles and conflicts that we had faced in our compliancy.” He raised an eyebrow to her. “I sense you agreed with him?”

She answered. “Sometimes.” Then she shook her head. “I don’t understand why there has to be such a controlled method for the study of The Force and the ways of The Jedi.”

He chuckled. “That it because it is your way. You were not intended to be a Jedi…or a Sith… You are a descendant of the Kynthelig.” It was easy to see the questioning look on her face.

“The Kynthelig are gone now, sadly.” He sighed; she sensed his pain. “They were Force-users. Great foreseers…great at sensing the future…knowing things before they happened.”

Jinn smiled tightly. “They were also great warriors and strong of mind – they had to be, to be able to distinguish the past, the present and the future….They cared not for the nature of The Force that was used, but the end result, and what it served; that’s what mattered to The Kynthelig… the true Gray Jedi.”

He came back to the chair across from her and stood behind, rather sitting down. “Kenobi shared your heritage. Although, he did not always embrace their beliefs- he felt a conflict. He desired to follow the control of the Jedi Order, but his nature wanted to feel past his present moment, into the greater world. Does this sound familiar?”

Mara nodded, and smiled to herself; it sound too familiar as she had accepted it within herself. “Yes” she said, “But the Masters still rejected me because of my involvement with Luke.”

“They didn’t reject you…they questioned you.” He corrected her.

“A different point of view.” She huffed back at him.

He sat back, amused by her and her use of phrase that irked many, and annoyed more than a few Jedi students. “They know your strength. It is Skywalker’s ability to allow his emotions to control him that they question. As Anakin’s son, they fear his propensity to fall to the Dark side by his feelings.”

Jinn, then took the seat across from her again. “In the past, unions and attachments were only allowed if those involved had learned to control their fear of loss, and put the call of The Force ahead of their relationship—if they proved they could do that, the relationship was allowed.”

He nodded. “Of the two of you, Skywalker still has the greater fear…it could consume him, as it did his father.” He paused, unsure if it was his place to reveal such things. “As you learn, your fear will dissipate…and your fear is of your own feelings, not for Skywalker.”

In a conversational tone, he asked, “Why do you fear your love for him?”

Mara swallowed, taken back by the question. “I’ve never loved anyone before.” She could feel her fear rising but set it free by voicing it. “What if what I’m feeling isn’t real?” She hung her head. “What if I love him, and he doesn’t love me enough to stay?- like so many others.”

Jinn reached out his hand to her, offering his touch in the vision; she accepted it. “Others have loved you, young one. You were loved long before Palpatine took you away.”
Mara could feel the tears welling in her eyes with his words.

He continued, knowing that she knew the truth. “You knew those loved you in Palpatine’s court – those sent to look over you…not your fault that they were taken from you, either. You knew love, and you know that you have it now.”

The tears started to roll down her face; unguarded and unsuppressed.

He paused as he watched her bring composure to herself, and then continued. “He fears the loss of you, and you fear the loss of his love…his love will not fade, and but his fear will; when it does, your attachment will succeed. And the love that you looked for, will be with you.”

Mara could feel her pain fading. She still had more questions. “Why are the Masters so distrusting of Luke?”

Jinn hung his head, and sighed, then looked back at her. “That is my failure; I failed Anakin.” He sighed. “Luke is different than you. He was never supposed to be born into existence. It was Anakin’s defiance of The Order that allowed Luke, and his sister, to be conceived.”

He explained, knowing that he may not be revealing all that she wanted to know, but he served to answer what he could. “Anakin had a purpose, and he chose to ignore that purpose. Thus, throwing the galaxy, and The Balance, into chaos. His son, pays his price whenever the sway of Balance comes into question- when a shift emerges.”

He looked her in the eye, trying to explain. “Luke now holds The Balance in place, instead of his father- it is his burden.”

Mara nodded, listening intently.

Jinn’s eyes filled with concern. “But he doesn’t hold it fully. If he falls to the Dark side, then the galaxy will pay the price.”

His gaze softened, but pleaded to her. “The galaxy needs the Jedi to hold The Force in balance- that is your goal. If you chose to do nothing else, then become a Jedi to help hold The Balance; assisting Luke, for yourself, and for your children.”


Jinn got up again and stood beside the chair. “You will become a Jedi when you are ready. No one will push you when you are not ready- not even Luke.” He regarded her with appreciation. “When you are ready; you will know.”

Mara could sense his presence pulling away, and yet she had so many questions she still needed answered.

He smiled sadly, regretting that his time was coming to an end. “Until then, you will be strong and learn your way. Ask questions, and challenge him…it is your nature.”

Mara was surprised that he knew that about her.

His eyes narrowed, pushing the truth on her. “Don’t deny that.”

She nodded, accepting it. She could feel herself coming out of her vision, feeling more relieved than she did from the previous day.
Jinn’s kind eyes smiled again. “May The Force be With You, child.” He stepped back, and slowly faded before her.

The colours of the room faded out too, and Mara opened her eyes; looking around.

The once bright room had started to dim with the late afternoon light.

Mara rubbed her eyes, feeling the tears that she had shed through them, and wiping away the moisture.

Then, she looked around the space, reaching out for Luke, but didn’t sense him.

Slowly, she got up from the chair, and stretched her muscles; bringing life back into them. She felt refreshed and at peace now. Master Jinn had answered her most immediate questions, for the most part.

She had more questions, but now she had replaced urgency with patience and feeling more-certain of her purpose.

Mara left the lecture room and saw that the hallway was deserted; she could still not sense Luke anywhere.

The darkening hallway did not help either, so she turned on her torch and decided to search the corridor for him.

“Luke?” She called; her voice echoing, and feeling like her call disturbed the quiet of the space.

She looked in the direction of a hallway that was farther and deeper down into the structure; she stepped towards it.

Within meters of the new threshold, she could feel the cold…and she back away. Surely, Luke wouldn’t have ventured in there.

Mara turned and went back to the rooms they had already explored.

She called his name again as she walked, just wanting to sense him; regretting that she was the one who had asked him to start shielding.

She came to the lightsaber training room and peeked in- he was not in there.

They had missed several small rooms, and she walked in those, hoping to find him. Maybe he had gone off to meditate in one of them?

Mara shook her head, starting to feel frustrated that he had wandered off, leaving her.

She came out of one of the small rooms, and turned her head in the direction of the dark threshold. To her surprise, there he stood, looking into the corridor, not moving.

He didn’t even respond as she sent out her senses, and she came closer. He stood motionless.

Mara came around to see his face.

Luke was staring at the dark hallway, his face gaunt but indignant; fighting something inside him.

“Luke?” She called softly, not wanting to startle him.
He blinked a few times, and the colour returned to his face. He looked over to her. “Mara.” He said numbly.

Her eyes begged him to tell her what was wrong.

“We should go now.” He said, then turned abruptly and headed for the main entrance.

Mara raced to keep in pace with him. He wanted to leave, and leave quickly.

She reached out for his arm. “Luke?- what happened? Did you go in there?”

He was silent, and single minded in his focus.

Only when they exited the Temple did he turn to look at her. When outside, he breathed quickly and clearing the fog in his mind.


He turned to her, and reached out, and brought her into a tight hug. She could feel a cold shiver leaving him and warmth returning. It was deeper than the cold she had felt in him before now; and she felt uncomfortable by his presence now, wanting to break out of his embrace.

He just held her tighter to him.

Mara just let him. Whatever happened in there had took its toll on him. She put her head to his shoulder, showing him that she wasn’t going to leave him, and she could feel his body relaxing, and return to holding her in affection rather than fear.

She waited until he was fully relaxed and breathing in the soothing tempo. She reached out to him. <<Luke?>>

“Yes.” He answered, in a distant voice.

She pulled back a bit, wanting to look at his face. “What happened?”

His blue eyes were crystal clear but blank, and solemn. “I’m not ready yet.” He said quietly.

He looked up at the sky, seeing the sun starting to descend. “We should head back to base- they’ll be expecting us.”

Luke looked down at her concerned expression, and his hand came up to stroke her face. <I’m not ready to be a Jedi Master.> He said to her mind. <That’s all.>

He smiled before he dipped his head to meet her lips.

Mara pressed her lips against him, wanting to sense his warmth, his light, and dropped her shields to him, hoping he would do the same.

He hummed between their lips with her contact to him. When he backed away, he smiled, and his blue eyes shone.

They walked back to the Skipray in silence, but Luke held her hand, not letting her go.

She still kept her concern for him- he seemed different, and although he did not say it to her, she was sure that he had been in the dark corridor.
When they got to the Skipray, Mara unsealed the hatch and went up the ramp first. She stopped at the top to see that he was gazing back at the Temple, silently wishing it goodbye.

Luke turned and head up the ramp.

As he passed Mara he stopped, and squeezed her hand, and smiled.

“Do you want to pilot us back to the base?” he asked.

She sealed the hatch and followed him to the cockpit, and before she responded, he took the copilot’s chair; prepping the ship for takeoff.

Mara watched over at him before she answered. “I guess so…” And took the seat available to her.

One more look in his direction- he was not looking at her deliberately, and she went to her duty to pilot the ship.

She sent one messaged to base with their estimated time of arrival.

The Skipray raised up, and turned west, headed back to Karrde’s base.

**

The trip back to base were unnerving to her. Luke said very little and she could tell that he was putting on a show for her that everything was fine.

He was bothered by what happened and refused to divulge any details.

If she had behaved how he was behaving, he would have stopped her in her tracks and demanded answers.

But Mara gave him his space, knowing that he needed time to recover. He may know when not to taunt her anger, but she knew he had a tipping point too. Luke had a long fuse but all it needed was a quick spark to set it off- and it burned hot too.

As she landed at the base, she could see a ground crew waiting for them.

“It’s good to be back.” He mumbled, unclipping his restraints.

“Is it?” Mara turned her seat in his direction. “You still haven’t told me what happened back there? Do I not get to know?”


He rested his chin on his hand. “It’s something I have to accept for the time being—that’s all.”

Mara’s eyes narrowed. “Then why are you shielding from me now?”

He rolled his eyes, uncharacteristically of him; and glared at her. “You aren’t happy when I don’t shield…and now, you’re not happy because I am shielding? Please Mara, make up your mind.” He got up out of his chair and stalked away from her.

She left the cockpit and caught up to him, knowing that he had gone to the back cabin to retrieve his bag; she stood in front of the hatch opening. “Even when you are shielding, you have never shielded your feelings from me!—why now?”
“Because maybe there are some things that I want to keep to myself?- does that sound familiar?” He glared at her. “How many things to do keep from me? How many things do you withhold- that you don’t want to tell me?”

She felt exposed. Yes, it was true. There were some things that she needed to keep from him; but they never involved holding back her feelings for him- even if she couldn’t find the right words for what she was feeling.

He saw the pain in her eyes, and then relaxed his guard, looking down. “I’m sorry Mara. I got some things I have to process from today’s visit.” He looked back up, and she could see his remorse for lashing out at her. “It’s just…something you can’t help with.”

<<Why didn’t you just tell me that?>> She looked at him, feeling suddenly vulnerable.

Luke dropped his bag, and came to her, and wrapped his arms around her; knowing that he wanted to make his last few hours on Dantooine count.

<<I should have…I will…next time.>> He tilted his head to kiss her again. <<We both have to get used to being an ‘us’.>>

She nodded as their kiss broke off. <<Us>> she repeated.

Mara sighed and stood aside, as she released the hatch.

Luke waited until the ramp descended before he left; knowing that they were still keeping up the pretense that they weren’t romantically involved.

She watched him go and then went to go get her own bag, and leave the Skipray.

**

Mara headed back to her own suite after leaving the Skipray.

She glanced at her chrono as she walked, and figured she had enough time to get a real shower and check messages before the evening meal.

She briefly thought about Luke, and sent him a warm touch rather than fully reaching out. Mara was determined to give him his space, and let him recover from whatever happened.

The door slid open to her suite. As she stepped inside, and looked around, she could not feel the any lingering effects of her attack. It stilled weighed on her that she had missed the sense of another being so easy—all blurred out by Luke’s presence. She had let herself become too focused, too distracted by him.

‘No wonder happy people look so stupid.’ She thought to herself. She would have to teach herself to learn how to split her concentration on things other than flying rocks.

Mara dropped her bag, and started to disrobe – a real shower would feel so good right now.

As she had stood under the downpour and let the warm water rinse over her, she thought about the words of Master Jinn.

Her strength and her power were all determined by her, and not by anyone else- even by Luke. It was a simple notion, but still foreign to her. She knew it was her doubt that was holding her back.

As she dressed for dinner, she positioned Luke’s pendant over her tunic. She was very proud of it,
letting her fingers traced over it. Her eyes fluttered closed and she could see him making it; his hands working in minute detail, so careful, so precise- made love and care. Her eyes opened, and she smiled.

Mara knew that she would see Luke tonight at dinner, but she also remembered that she would let him come to her- when he was ready.

She left her room and headed for the dining hall; her data pad tucked under her arm for the meeting that was sure to transpire after the meal – Karrde was routine like that.

She liked routine, for the most part. It gave her purpose and it made her feel in control of what was around her. Sometimes this Jedi stuff was just too unpredictable for her liking.

The presence of others soon came around her, and she had to pull herself out of her self-imposed, too self-aware state.

Karrde was already in the dining room when she got there. He glanced up and waved her over before she had collected her meal.

He turned his back to room as she came close. “So, did you have good time?” He asked quietly.

“Yes. Thank you.” Mara smiled at him. “Did you miss me?”

“Of course I did.” He looked at her incredulously.

Karrde paused and turned to her. “It case I didn’t mention this before, that’s a very nice pendant that you’re wearing…Japor snippet, I believe?” He said in his usual cool tone.

“Yes it is.” She responded in the same tone.

Karrde nodded, smiled, and then turned the conversation again. “Aves couldn’t find the files on the Cha’For account, and Dankin has no idea under which data sheet you have the tariff schedules for Berchest."

He turned back to the room. “I have no idea what would happen if you ever left me.”

Mara mock-glared at him. “You would get along just fine, and you know it.”

“But I wouldn’t like it.” Karrde winked at her. “Welcome home.” He said quietly. “Meeting after the meal?” He reminded her before he turned his attention to another crew member.

Mara nodded then walked away, and spotted Chin in line for dinner.

“So what did I miss?” she said as she walked up beside him.

Chin turned and chuckled to her, glad to see her. “You no miss nothing, hee.” He helped himself to some of the food from the steaming serving tray. “I won da bet to fly A-wing to base.”

He shook his head. “Dat is small cockpit…so tiny.” He offered to fill her plate with the same thing he was serving himself.

She snorted, as she accepted the helping. “Yes, I know.”

It was easy to slip back into the comfort of friends. And she smiled to herself. Yes, it was like a home.
As she got to the end of the line, she sensed Luke’s arrival.

From the corner of her eye, Mara watched Karrde greet him and introduce him to more crew members.

For the most part, she kept her distance from Luke during dinner. Those she sat with asked her about her trip and heard about the abandoned Jedi Temple. Mara didn’t bore them with her experiences, but kept them intrigued about the building and surrounding area.

Towards the end of the meal, she felt the soft tugging on her mind; she didn’t respond.

The small tugs persisted until they turned into a warm wrap around her which she couldn’t ignore any more, and his voice came into her head. <Hi.> he said meekly. <I miss you.>

She could feel that his presence, the one she recognized, had returned; his cloud had lifted.

<<I miss you too.>> she sent back.

<Come see me tonight?> he asked, humbly.

<<I have a meeting with Karrde after this meal…but I can come over afterwards….>>

>Please?> His mind said sweetly.

Her sense told him that she agreed.

Before she could let it slip, she brought up her shields, and looked around at those at the table, making sure that none of them saw her dreamy grin; keeping her placid face, but warming in her heart.

When evening meal was over, she headed directly for Karrde’s office.

The room was empty, but his console was on.

Mara shook her head as she entered Karrde’s password, and snorted. He thought it was a secret.

She expertly pulled up both the Cha’For account files, and the tariff schedules for Berchest.

Her data pad pinged, and she looked down to see the rendezvous schedule for Cormix and Mo’nach’s delivery to Ord Mandell. She sighed, knowing that Luke would be running the escort to the surface.

The doors behind her opened and Karrde and Aves filed in, along with others.

She locked the station and turned as Karrde approached.

“I was able to pull up those files you were looking for.” She said in her normal stoic demeanor.

“As always, thank you Mara.” Karrde grinned before he took his seat at the meeting table, waiting for the last members of the party to join them.

Mara took her seat to the left of Karrde, and opened her data pad.

The last people arrived; strangely Armeth and Luke. Both men sat at the far end of the table. Mara kept her focus on her data pad, but sent over a slight touch to Luke.
She lifted her head when Karrde began to speak.

“Good Evening everyone. I will keep this meeting brief- just to confirm the procedures for the following day.” Karrde announced.

The meeting was indeed brief; it reviewed the transfer of the shipment, and the pleasant surprise to the transport team that Skywalker would be running escort with the delivery.

The departure time was cleared with the spaceport for 0600 hours the following morning, and the team groaned at the thought- which meant that some of them would be waking at 0400 for prep time…and some of them, in traditional smuggler fashion, wouldn’t bother sleeping at all, saving sleep for the hyperspace jump.

Before the meeting broke, Karrde sent one glare around the table warning the team that should anyone decide to shirk their duties and delay departure by any tardiness due to a late night Sabaac game, he would be very disappointed. There were several guilty looks, but all promised.

As the meeting broke, Mara could hear Aves offering Luke a seat at the Sabaac game they were not supposed to have. Luke graciously declined, in favor of the last hot shower, and soft bed that he was going to have for the next few days.

Mara lingered behind until Karrde gave her a nod to let her know that she was not needed. She turned before departing to see Luke approach Karrde and she overhead him thanking Karrde for his stay.

She touched his mind as she left the room. << See you in the courtyard?>> she asked.

She sensed his smiled as she walked away, and waited until then.

TBC

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Luke’s Walk into the Dark Hallway:

He stepped across the threshold with no fear.

Son of Vader it called…and called again… and again. This time it wasn’t taunt, it was a greeting; each voice greeting him as one of their own, then fading away.

The walls were hushed, watching him, allowing him in but he could feel the cold, the death; just as he did at the cave on Dagobah.

He could hear the murmurs; voices huddles in every corner, speaking to him but also avoiding him.

Finally, one single voice engaged him as he walked. Why is it that you do not fear us as you did? The voice asked in a curious tone.

“We all call upon the One Force…” Luke answered with the truth as he walked in, “Only we use it differently, for different purposes. I have no fear of other Force-users.”
Naïve…Fool…Simple…Gullible…

“Yes, I may be all of those things…” He still continued to walk. “But I am still a Jedi.”

_But yet you seek the Dark, why is that? Does it call to you?_ The voice teased.

“Yes.” He said simply. “Each may feel the pull of the Dark side; some, greater than others.”

_Yours is greater… Yours is greater… Yours is greater… Yours is greater…_

_Ask your student why the Dark calls…she knows…she has lived in it….._

Luke stood, not venturing farther. “Why would Mara know?”

_Sidious… Sidious… Sidious… Sidious…_

_She saw it…in her Master…in your father……in you._ The voice said.

“Saw what?” Luke moved his beam around in the direction of the sound, trying to pinpoint it.

_Weakness… Weakness… Weakness… Weakness…_

The voice ignored his question. _Why have you come, child of The Chosen?_ It hissed.

_Ask… Ask… Ask… Ask…_

“I need answers.” He said the walls, knowing that it heard him.

_The turn… The turn… The turn… The turn… he wants to know why he turned…_ the many voices swirled around him.

_You have questions as to why your father turned, do you?_ The single voice hissed.


_You want to avoid his fate?_ It asked.

“Yes.”

_You cannot… You cannot… You cannot… You cannot…_

Luke walked further, allowing his beam to shine on the walls, stopping at the images he saw there; hooded figures, no different in representation from Jedi, only darker and with red sabers.

_You want it…_ The serpentine voice spoke.

“What is it that you think I want?” He asked to see how well they knew him.

_Power… Power… Power… Power…_

_Your power…your father’s power…Sidious’s power…HER power…can be all yours._ The voice’s ambiance began to clear.

Luke moved his light around the room; the beam bounced back at him briefly, and he move it to where he thought it was reflected.

_The light caught the edge of a large mirror mounted on an adjacent wall; Luke walked towards it. He_
could see the reflection of the beam but not of himself.

*Your Father craved it…The Power…he could grasp it but he couldn’t control it…it did not bend to his will…* The voice explained.

Luke saw and image in the mirror; a distant one, coming clearer…a figure, casting the bearing of Vader, coming towards him in the glass.

The figure in the mirror, dressed in black, with its head hung low, walking with purpose; the hood of its black cloak covering the face, until it came within a meter of the mirror edge.

*Why do you fight it? You know what your destiny is…you’ve have this vision before…The Power can, and will, bend for you…* The voice informed him.

The hood figure in the mirror removed his hood, and Luke was looking back at himself; the image of himself, with yellow-rimmed orange eyes looking back at him through the glass.

“This is not new to me. Yes, I’ve seen this before and it has not come true. I did not suffer my father’s fate.” Luke said confidently.

*The future is always in motion…motion…motion…motion…* 

*But fall, you will, just as your father fell…its unavoidable…you need to touch The Darkness….even your Jedi teachings tell you so…* The voice spoke the truth.

He nodded; he knew that the time would come, if he wanted to be a Jedi Master that he would have to touch the Dark side, and return.

“But it is possible to come back…Vader did.” Luke argued.

*Not a true Sith… Not a true Sith… Not a true Sith… Not a true Sith…*

*Tell yourself such lies, you do…to ‘come back’ is not the issue…you must want to come back, once you’ve tasted The Power… the voice expounded …do you think you can come back? Will want to come back?*

“I will.” He answered, his desire to fight against the voice, rising in him.

*Your failure…Your arrogance…and you will take her with you…on your dark journey…* 

“No, she will not! Mara will not fall to the Dark side. She has resisted it before.” Luke spoke, denying any possibility. He sensed anger at the back of his mind.

He backed away from the space, heading back towards the threshold that would keep the Darkness at bay.

But the voice grew in volume.

*She will fall greater than you can imagine….because of you…and you’ll take her power as your own…you won’t care that you would have destroyed her…your love for her isn’t as strong as you think…your love for The Power is greater…* 

Its intensity grew with Luke’s retreat away from it; he sped up to flee from it; feeling fear behind the surge of anger he just felt.

*You’ll thrive on her pain…you’ll yearn for her agony…you’ll take your pleasure and lust while you*
destroy her, over and over again... and rejoice all while you do it... telling yourself that you can come back... but in your heart, you’ll know that you love The Power too great to abandon it... The Power...

Arrogance... Arrogance... Arrogance... Arrogance...

Luke’s speed towards the threshold increased, but now it seemed farther away than the distance he thought he had traveled in.

And then, you will let your hatred and guilt consume you.... and you’ll never be able to come back...

And you know it....

Know it... know it... know it... know it...

Your fault... Your fault... Your fault... Your fault...

Your failure... Your failure... Your failure... Your failure...

Luke reached the threshold and stepped back over it, into the light, as the last words echoed in the distance.

He stood looking into the void, trying to bring back his calmness; borrowing it from the lighted space.

He shivered.
Dantooine Day 4 continued…

The courtyard was lit by the faint glow of the solar lights dotting the perimeter. The fountain had incandescent glow of the sub water lighting, and the light bounced off the spouting water. The trickling noise echoed off the stone courtyard walls.

The flowers were still in bloom at this time of year, and their fragrance filled the late evening air.

Mara enjoyed using and walking through the space as often as she could.

She had to admit that her life at the base didn’t allow much time to sit and quietly reflect, but then, her life never did.

The night’s sky was starting to appear, and the brightest moons were the first to shine. As the sun dropped, the stars started to emerge.
She walked slowly, lingering along the stone path, looking up at the sky; waiting for him.

“I sometimes forget how beautiful the sky is.” His voice broke her reflection.

Mara turned to see Luke watching her; his serene grin was bitter sweet.

She looked back up at the stars again. “You probably don’t get to see them at all on Coruscant.”

“Only when I truly want to.” He walked closer to her.

Luke stopped and looked around, and sensing that no one else was nearby, he came closer still.

Mara nodded. “Anyone, who would be out here, won’t be leaving tomorrow…or they’re at Aves’s Sabacc game.”

He chuckled. “He keeps asking me to play.” Luke looked down.

She smirked back at him. “That’s because he heard that you’re bad at it, and wants boasting rights that he took money off Luke Skywalker- Jedi Knight.”

He looked back up, chuckled again, and stepped beside her. “I should just give him my twenty credits now, and be done with it.”

She shook her head slowly, looking into his face. “That’s not the smuggler way…no pride in it…at least let him arm-wrestle you for it?”

Luke’s eyes were pale crystal blue; reached up his hand and caressed her arm. “Is there any other smuggler’s ways that I should know about?”

“I’ll have to think about that.” Mara said coyly, and turned to walk a bit down the path from him, keeping out of his reach. “There’s usually a song…one that they pick up while working in the hull… probably a catchy tune that comes on through sub-space comm frequencies…and then, they’ll end up singing it around deck.”

He walked the few steps to be closer to her, and his hand stroked down her back. “I don’t sing very well…is there anything else?”

She left his touch and took a few more steps away, following the circular path around the fountain. “Depending on how many days and nights you’re in hyperspace- there’s at least one night of drinking copious amounts of alcohol…Karrde usually allows one.”

Luke followed her, coming in closer than he did before and trying to dip his head towards hers, for a kiss. “I’ve done that before…but I’ve learned my lesson, and very seldom do I ever drink ‘copious amounts’ anymore.”

Mara pulled back and took a greater distance than she did before, and walked several meters away from him, avoiding his attempted kiss. “And then, there’s having a person waiting for you in every port of call…” She looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

He nodded; understanding what she was doing by keeping her distance- just as he had been distant earlier in the day. He sent out his sense to her to apologize, followed by warming waves.

He walked over to her, slipping an arm around her waist, and definitely bringing her closer to him. He whispered in a low tone. “I have one only person that I ever want to see in a ‘port of call’; and I think she knows that.”
Mara shivered; when he used that deep voice it had almost the same effect as when he sent over warm tendrils of touches, making her very aware of what it was going to be like when he presence wasn’t beside her.

She turned into his embrace, and tipped her head to meet his face. “She’s a lucky girl.” She whispered.

“She’s a very patient girl.” Luke said, rubbing his cheek next to her. “…smart…gives me a hard time whenever she possibly can…and she’s beautiful too.”

Mara hummed with the contact of his skin. She tilted her face to his, and his mouth touched hers, commencing the fluttering in her stomach. Every time he kissed her, it was like the first time at the gym, and she could feel herself falling under his spell all over again.

His hand held her back while the other hand snaked in to her hair at the nape of her neck; he deepened his kiss, savoring the feel of her lips. He pursed against her mouth, tenderly, lovingly and woefully.

/I don’t want to let you go./ Luke rested his forehead against hers.

Mara sighed. “This only feels like it does because it’s the first time we’ve had to do this… It will get easier.”

“It shouldn’t get easier.” he said. “I would imagine that I will hate leaving you at much as I do now, and every time we need to be apart.”

She shook her head. “I’ve never realized how melancholy you can be.” She teased.

“And you’re not going to miss me?” he asked, sounding hurt.

“Not one little iota.” she said flatly, and took a few steps away from him.

He looked at her with a bit of a shock on his face.

“I have lots of things to keep me occupied here.” Mara continued, as she began to list her activities. “I have paperwork- there’s at least three hours of my day. Then, there’s chasing around Karrde to make sure he doesn’t change anything on me. Of course, dealing with staff, and managing shipments and future business. All of it is very exciting.”

Luke stayed put, watching her, and pouting a little.

She turned back to him. “But then, I’ll look at my chrono, and try to figure out what time it is on Coruscant, and think of what you’re doing right then.” She stepped back in his direction. “And there will be the nights, when I look up at the sky, and wonder where you are.” Her eyes softened, and she dropped her teasing. “And I’ll miss you terribly.”

Mara stepped back into his arms, as he mock-glared at him for playing with his feelings. “Is that what you wanted to hear, Skywhiner?” She looked up at him, teasing again.

Luke kept up his glare, knowing he wasn’t as good at it as she was. “One of these days, I’m going to come up with a good nickname for you and then you’ll be sorry.”

She flinched as he tickled her ribs, now that he knew she was ticklish, but only with him.

“And to think that I thought this was the perfect romantic place to show you my new dance moves…
but since you’re teasing me...” He tried to play aloof.

Mara stopped wiggling under his touch, as his words caught her attention. “Dance moves? Why out here?”

“Weren’t you the one who told me that a Correllian Waltz was done around a circle?” He looked around the pathway of the courtyard.

She raised an eyebrow but was amused nonetheless, as he looked around and tried to figure out if it was possible.

Mara looked at him, slightly skeptical. “Did they teach you the beginning?”

“You mean the ‘overture’?” He stood tall, looking to see if she was impressed that he was studying.

“Very good.” She smiled at him, fascinated. “Yes, did they teach you that yet?”

“They did.” He looked proud as he stepped back from her. “So first, I approach the young lady, and bow once and ask her to dance.” He bowed, and offered his hand to her.

She took it and watched him.

“Then, once I guide her to the circle on the floor, I am supposed to introduce her to the couple on the left and right of us, on the dance floor.” Luke mimicked turning to the imaginary couples on both sides of them; bowing slightly to them.

“Then, once more, I thank my partner for the dance by bowing to her, and she returns the favor by curtseying.” He bowed a little deeper this time, and Mara curtsied back.

“By this time, the overture is wrapping up, and the tempo should come up. I was told not to rush this part, because it’s bad manners, plus I’m supposed to be showing off how beautiful my partner is, right now.” He winked.

“Now, I’ve only learned the first two movements...but I think I’ve got them down pretty good… didn’t even step on poor Winter’s feet at the last practice.” Luke got into position; offering his left hand to her.

Mara snorted, but stepped forward as he held out her right hand in his left hand, and he slid his right arm at her waist.

Luke raised his head up and looked beyond her, then remembered something and looked down. “Now, remember that I can’t carry a tune even if it has handles- so no laughing at me.”

She could see that he was taking this very seriously. “I promise.” She said sweetly.

He cleared his throat, and started to count. “One- two- three. One-two-three…Da-da Da Da-dit-da”

As he sang the melody, and periodically counting out loud, Mara allowed herself to be moved a quarter of the ways around the courtyard without her toes being stepped on. Although he got most of the melody of the song correct, his timing was very good; even the difficult second movement.

Luke stopped and stood back from her. “And that’s all I know.” He blushed.

“Very good.” Mara praised him. “I’ll bet that since you know a few Corellians, that you didn’t realize that their society could be so strict?”
Luke relaxed. “I seriously had no idea! I really wished Han had warned me about that. Even Wedge is very traditional.”

Mara took his hand as they walked around to the side of the courtyard. “You mean to tell me that you didn’t take advantage of any of the Correllian traditions when Han and Leia got married?”

“Like what? Was there something I was supposed to do?” Luke asked; wondering if he made any mistakes.

“Did Han show you the ring and ask you if it was okay?” she asked.

He thought about it. “Yes, he did that.”

“That’s a traditional thing- he’s supposed to make sure it meets with your approval, as her closest male relative. It’s to make sure that he’s able to take care of her, and provide for her.” She explained.

Mara looked at Luke and wondered. “Did he offer to let you hit him?- the hardest punch you could dish out?- right to the face?”

His brow furrowed as he remembered. “Yes, he did that too.”

“Did you do it?”

“No” Luke chuckled. “I thought it was just something he was doing because he was slightly off-kilter, and drinking the night before the wedding.”

She chuckled with him. “I’ve been to enough Corellian weddings to know that if the groom doesn’t have a shiner, then its bad luck. You’ve doomed them now.” Mara shook her head. “It’s to prove that he can protect her, and take on anything from her family.”

He cringed. “Yeah, I guess I did doom them.” He shook his head. “I didn’t know…I should have asked. I guess I’m not very traditional.”

She watched him. “Oh, I think you are…in lots of ways.” Her hand came up to touch the pendant around her neck.

Luke shrugged. “I guess I am sometimes.” He watched as she fingered the pendant with appreciation.

“What about you? Do you think you’re traditional?” He asked, curious now that she had mentioned it.

Mara looked up at the stars and thought for a moment. “Sometimes …I don’t think I’m traditional, but I’m more sentimental…if that makes sense.” She glared at him, knowing she was sending a wordless threat not to reveal that about her to anyone.

“I can see that.” He nodded; agreeing to both the statement and the subtle threat.

“But I think that out of the two of us, you’re more traditional than me.” She commented, looking away.

“Why do you think that?” He grinned at her; amused at her perception of him.

“Well, Karrde did warn me not to let you…and how did he put it?...oh yes, let you ‘claim’ me?” She looked at him incredulously. “What was that about?”
Luke sighed and rolled his eyes. “Oh that.” he mumbled.

“Go on, explain, please.” She knew the farm boy was the bashful-type; she was going to enjoy watching him squirm a little.

He rubbed his face uncomfortably, and mumbled something.

“I’m sorry… I didn’t quite hear that… What was that?” Mara asked, knowing that he was uncomfortable talking about it.

He huffed then said, “It’s a traditional Tatooinean marriage.” And then he started to blush. “It’s called a ‘Claiming’.”

She smirked at him, watching the bright pink come into his cheeks. “I’ve heard about them… I just wanted to see if I could make you say it.”

Luke glared at her without any real malice. “My aunt and uncle had one. It’s a very symbolic ceremony.”

She didn’t intend for him to get upset, so she softened her next words. “Well, I’ve heard the jokes about them, but I don’t really know the tradition. Why don’t you explain it to me?”

He looked over at her in the starlight, and sighed; it wouldn’t be the most romantic thing to do, but it wouldn’t be the least either.

“It does get abused by off-worlders.” He grimaced. “But basically, the tradition comes from a time when the colonists couldn’t access a magistrate to perform a ceremony… or they couldn’t leave the farm… so they developed their own ceremony. And then when a travelling magistrate would come by, and they would get their marriage documents back-dated to their Claiming date. So it’s a recognized legal marriage.”

Mara with a teasing look on her face, poked one more time. “And what about the rumors of a twelve hour sex-fest?”

She thought she had seen him blush before, but the flush in his skin went darker, as he tried to avoid her gaze.

“Okay” he mumbled. “There’s that too…” Luke was trying to be sincere, and he took the tradition seriously. “And it’s not a ‘sex-fest’.” He grumbled.

Luke sighed and got quiet again as he tried to find the right words. “There are certain words that have to be said… and sometimes it does take up to twelve hours or longer… and while they make love.”

Mara looked him up and down. “Twelve hours, or more, huh?”

He blushed some more. “Um… there’s this tea… made with the root of the Night Lily… and it helps… um… well, it keeps the ceremony going…”

She couldn’t help but giggle at him and his shyness, but she let him off the hook. “I hear the vows are very beautiful though.” She said quietly.

He looked over at her, locking his eyes deep into hers. “They are.” he whispered. “A Claiming might sound barbaric, but the intention is to claim the other person, as much as they claim you; body, mind and soul.” He breathed deeply. “The shared intimacy is what makes it special.”
<<You want to have one someday, don’t you?>> Her mind touched his, realizing that he was taking it very seriously. <<Why are you being so shy about it?>>

<Maybe…someday…I don’t know.> His gaze didn’t draw away from her. <It’s a pretty private and personal thing.>

Mara nodded, and came closer to him. “See? I told you that you were more traditional than me.”

Luke watched her, and took her in his arms. “I guess you’re right….Han says it’s old fashioned.” He said quietly.

<<I think its sweet….and you’re quite the romantic too.>> She wrapped her arms around his mid-section and put her head on his shoulder; feeling safe and contented.

“I have my moments.” He closed his eyes as he nuzzled into her hair, holding her.

<Let me hold you tonight?> He asked in her mind.

She eased in his arms, basking in their mutual glow, and she reached back. <<Are you sure? You seemed to want to be alone earlier.>>

“I’m sure.” he whispered, pulling her tighter in his arms. His mind touched hers again. <I didn’t mean to block you out.>

Mara nodded slowly. “I know….you needed time.” She whispered.

Luke kissed the side of her face, thanking her for understanding, even when he didn’t fully comprehend what happened; she accepted him.

She sighed and turned her face up his. “Well, you should be in bed soon…you have an early day.”

He looked down at her, sensing a shift in her energy, he loosened his hold on her.

Somewhere inside her, she suddenly felt the need to reach for something that made sense.

As she broke away from his embrace, she went on. “We’ll have to run diagnostics on your A-wing in the morning, and you’ll have to be at the briefing before you take off, and then you’ll have to be paced with the freighter…..”

He watched her go on until he had about enough. “Does your brain ever shut off?” He interrupted her latest list of things that needed to be done.

Mara stopped as she was walking away from him, lost in her thoughts. She blinked a few times, looking at him. “No, it doesn’t…doesn’t yours?”

Luke shook his head, watching her; what a complex thing she was. It must have been a survival thing for her, to control what she could when other things were out of her control. It wasn’t the first time he had watched her go from a serene countenance to pacing and listing.

He walked over to where she had selected to start pacing, and place his hands on her shoulders; looking into her eyes, trying to quiet her scattered mind. <Let’s go upstairs?>

That stopped her, and comprehension set in. She made the effort to bring the calm back into herself; feeling that’s what he wanted for the night- just them, no outside world tonight.

She nodded, and accepted his hand to take her out of the courtyard. He guided her to walk in front of
On their way back to his room, they developed a way to walk together. He placed his hands into each of hers at her sides, and every few steps he would put his arms around her and pull her into a hug from behind. As she tilted her head into this embrace, he would lean down and kiss the available skin on her neck. This repeated several times before they got to the staircase.

Luke went up the first few stairs, and then offered his hand to her. Mara would come up the few stairs and he would kiss her as reward for following him; until they reached the top of the stairs.

Mara guided him to his door with kisses, but she could detect a bit of hesitancy in him; he didn’t advance the passion between them as he normally liked to. He was holding back and she sensed this was something deliberate that he was doing.

<<Is there something wrong?>> She asked before they entered his room. <<Don’t you want to…for us…to be together tonight?>>

Luke shook his head as the door opened for them. He sighed. “Of course, I do.” He whispered. <I just want to hold you for the night.>

She looked at him, not quite understanding.

He touched the light switch on the wall and brought up the dim lights of the room. He turned to her, and took her back in his arms.

<It’s like the night before you left Coruscant…do you know how hard it would have been if you had left after…we were intimate?> He nuzzled into the side of her face, feeling her tender skin, and relishing it, trying to imprint every last moment with her.

And she could feel why; he would have felt more abandoned then he already did when she had left – he didn’t want her to feel that way come the morning.

<<I’ll always want to be with you…>>

Mara could feel his ache as he reached out; he wasn’t hiding it from her. She could hide her pain any longer either. <<We’ll see each other soon.>> She kissed the side of his face. <<This isn’t an ending, Luke.>>

<<I know…but…> All he wanted was to be close to her; he didn’t want to finish his thought.

She looked about the room; he had neatly stacked his things in the corner, ready to be packed. His flight suit was waiting for him. He clearly had to time to think about leaving; probably for longer than he would have liked. She nodded.

On the dresser closest to the door, her night shift was folded, and a group of twelve data cards rested beside it.

She stepped over to the collection, and picked up a few of the disks, knowing it was a distraction. “What are these for?”

“Those are about a quarter of the collection of the doctors.” He grinned, also glad there was another topic. “There will be a quiz when I see you again.” He smirked.

The tone wasn’t lifting but they were making the effort to change it; he wasn’t leaving- they were looking forward to seeing each other again.
Mara turned back to him, and was glad for the mercurial tone. “Okay teacher, I promise to study hard. How about I change into this…” She picked up her nightshift. “…and you assume the position, and then you give me some of the finer points that I should study?”

Luke smirked, knowing the game that she was playing. “Well, how about you go get on that, and I will meet you in one hundred and eighty seconds at our designated rendezvous spot, and we both assume the position, and we can discuss the next lecture topic…”

She picked up the shift, chuckling, and walked passed him on her way to the ‘fresher, stopping for a kiss. “If you say so.”

She could feel his eyes on her. He might not want their bodies to join for the night, but he still wanted her.

She hated to admit it, but he was right. One night of just holding each other would feel right.

Mara looked in the mirror as she undressed and slipped into her night gown; adjusting the pendant around her neck so that it was visible outside the gown. Then she undid her customary braided, petting out the plates, wishing she had a brush with her.

It still boggled her mind that in the next room was her lover, Luke Skywalker—how did she get here? But now, she wouldn’t have it any other way.

She exited the ‘fresher; he was already in bed with a snug t-shirt on and presumably the soft sleeping pants.

Luke looked up from his data pad as she came towards the bed. He internally sighed, looking at her, wishing that every night would be like this night.

“Anything interesting in the galaxy?” she asked as she got into the bed from the opposite side.

“Not much… but here’s something you might like to see….” He leaned over and put his arm around her to show her the pad. “Leia sent me a vid…Jacen is starting to walk…”

He played the grainy image for her. The toddler had managed to pull himself up on a nearby table and take a few wobbly steps towards his father as they cheered him on; at the end of the vid, Jaina had started to cry a bit watching her brother.

Mara cringed. “Ahhh…good for Jacen… poor Jaina, she looks left out.”

Luke looked at her. “You think so?”

She nodded. “You’ve never been jealous of Leia for anything?- even the smallest thing?”

He transferred the pad to the other hand and put it down on the nightstand beside the bed. “I don’t think so… it’s sometimes hard to remember that we’re siblings…we were friends for so much longer.”

Mara lay down beside him, allowing his arm to wrap around her some more. “When did you find out that you were related?”

She could sense a bit of reproach in him with her question, and feel that he was uneasy about it.

“I found out before Endor.” He said quietly. “Before then, we had a strange dynamic.”

“How so?” She watched his face, as he was remembering, and then she saw him cringe, then blush.
“Well…” he began slowly. “…when I first saw her, it was in a hologram… I was… drawn to her… I can’t explain it.”

Mara could sense what he was about to say; the awkward farm boy had no idea that the beautiful princess was his sister— it must have been a strange dynamic indeed.

“Then, when we rescued her off the Death Star -- after that, it was strained by being a third wheel… Han was attracted to her too.”

Mara put a hand on his chest to stop him from explaining; she could tell it was causing him pain. “I understand.” <<You didn’t know… you were confused.>>

Luke looked down at her. “I was…it didn’t feel right… and I knew that even though we were just friends, it sometimes felt different… neither one of us could define it.” He sighed. “Then, there was Han… and they were always fighting… there were times when I knew that she just spent time with me to make him jealous.”

He looked back up and moved to lower himself into the pillows. “It wasn’t until Han was away that our relationship changed… that it felt more like family, even before we knew it.”

Mara nodded. She had learned that the term ‘Han was away’ was code for being encased in carbonite.

“She was so sad during that time.” He paused. “I found out that she told him that she loved him… and then, as Han would say, ‘all bets were off’… I knew that she was his.”

He looked back down again. “We spent lots of time together during that time. Leia cried a lot… but only in front of me… and all I could do was to be there for her. That was probably the first time I felt like a brother to her, without knowing.”

He pulled her tighter. “It wasn’t until right before Endor that I found out… then after Endor, we were able to confirm it… and told Han.” Luke snorted lightly. “He looked so relieved… he almost didn’t believe us.”

His hand came up and started petting her hair. “We’ve always felt like a small family… it was just the way it came together.”

Mara had been watching his face all along while he spoke; she had often wished to have a family around her, and slowly she was still learning what that meant.

She smiled at him, and rubbed her hand on his chest; there was no need for any further explanation.

She sensed there was something he wanted to ask, but was withholding; only one of her trademark glares would bring it out.

Luke cringed a bit, seeing that she must have sensed that he wanted to ask her something; something that he had no right asking.

He paused. “Wasn’t there ever an awkward moment between you and Karrde?” He cringed again after he asked, knowing that it could either way, and totally ruin the moment between them.

Mara relaxed, still looking at him. “There was… once… when I got promoted… but nothing ever materialized. It was right before we found your fighter.” She raised an eyebrow. “Since then, there’s been nothing. But if you were to ask, he does feel like, I guess, family.”
He was happy with that answer. He knew from Karrde’s sense that the smuggler was protective over Mara too.

They were quiet for several moments, as he kept running his fingers through her hair.

“I can braid hair.” Luke said out of the blue. “Leia taught me…while we spent time together.”

Mara looked at him with a smirk. “Can you?”

“I can…I know the differences between a 3-braid, a 4 braid, and inside and outside…and she even taught me the Alderaanian braid.” Then he mumbled, “It was good therapy for my new hand.”

“I’m going to be the best uncle ever when Jaina gets old enough and has enough hair.” He said proudly.

Mara chuckled. “You already are.”

“I just can’t figure out how you do your braid…” He moved to look down at her head, as if seeing the braid that was there earlier in the day.

“I’ll have to teach you.” She patted his chest again. “It’s not that hard.”

He nodded and resumed stroking her tresses.

She had to admit it, she was never much for being handled so tenderly, but she could get used to it.

Mara stretched out her senses and adjusted the lighting down a little lower.


She snorted. <<Did you want to get out of bed?>>

<You win.> He conceded.

“Speaking of which…” She shifted herself so that she was on her back but still wrapped in his arm; looking over at the disk collection on the dresser. “What disk should I start with?- have you read them yet?”

Luke turned his body in the same direction, spooned up behind her; he put his chin on the side of her head. “We started with the oldest books first, so the material is a little all over the place.” He yawned. “I’m still trying to define the difference between the ‘Unifying Force’ and ‘Living Force’ …they are almost identical but there has to be some sort of clear distinction, but so far, nothing I’ve read can give me one.”

“Dr. Dram did have some really interesting information on different Force techniques the Jedi used.”

His speech was slowing, as he was now in a more physically comfortable position with her, that he closed his eyes as he spoke. “Did you know that there’s a way to go invisible?”

Mara was running her hand up and down his arm that had found its way to the curve at her waist; under her pillow, she had found his hand, and their fingers were interlaced.

“Invisible?...really?” She asked, as she closed her eyes too.

He nodded against her head. “It’s not just a mind trick either…you actually manipulate light to bounce off around you to make yourself disappear.”
His breathing started to slow and they were both quiet.

“There’s some more information in there about other Force users too…” He mumbled. “Voss Mystics…Jenassarri… the Kynthelig…”

Her eyes opened, and looked over at the disks. Fighting her desire to sleep, she instead chose to the imprint the word on her brain; the Kynthelig.

Mara closed her eyes again, relaxing back to the edge of sleep, feeling the warm body behind her; the disks would be there in the morning and he wouldn’t be. She mumbled, “Uh-huh.”

“They all had writings on those disks…” He mumbled.

“Uh-huh.” She mumbled again.

Her breathing feel inline was the depth and pace of his, and she could feel herself finally letting go.

<<Good night Luke>>

<Good night Mara>

She felt a kiss on the side of her head before slumber took her.

**

Dantooine Day 5:

Mara woke up in small steps. At first she could sense someone moving around her; he was trying not to wake her. She could tell he was packing up his things while she slept.

She had this awareness because she could sense when he was looking over at her, and his attention is what woke her, not his movements or sounds.

She could sense when his attention came off her, and that was when she decided it was time to sit up.

Even in her haze, she could tell when he was dressing. Mara blinked the sleep out of her eyes, to watch him pull up his orange flight suit, over his fatigues.

When he turned around, he was surprised to see that she watching him, for a change; and he smiled.

“I was counting your code cylinders.” She stretched and yawned.

Luke looked over at his left arm, and then looked back at her. “I guess I forgot to take them out of this suit when I retired.”

Mara slid her legs out from the bed, and stretched again as she stood.

He smiled serenely as she walked over to him. “I didn’t want to wake you.” He said quietly, under the pretense that she was going to able to go back to sleep while he was still there.

She helped him put on his chest and back padding. Her delicate fingers adjusted the straps on his flak padding. “Why are you up so early? You’ve got almost two hours until departure.” She said in the same quiet tone.

She looked into his crystal blue eyes, before she came for a kiss, trying to convince him to stay, or at the very least, to come back to bed.
His hot lips pressed against hers; wanting her to beg him to stay. But in the crisp light of morning, reality wasn’t far behind. With her eyes closed, her lips hovered just slightly touching his.

“We’ve got a ground crew to run diagnostics.” She whispered between their lips.

He nipped a few times at her lips, knowing it was futile to resist her. “I like to run my own diagnostics.” He mumbled.

As she pulled back, he watched her face, memorizing all the details of what she looked like in the morning; her soft green eyes like dream-laden mist, the soft pink on her cheeks like the most-precious rose, her hair like the flames of a wildfire.

<<Liar.>> She thought over to him, as their lips met again.

<You’ve got me.> He admitted meekly. <I couldn’t bear to leave you.> Savoring her mouth, but resisting the urge to drive the passion between them; it was hard enough to leave, but to leave after making-love would be unbearable.

If he imprinted her on his memory, he hoped it would be enough to keep him satisfied until he saw her again. The hardest part was not knowing as to when that would be.

<<I know.>> she sent back. <<Why do you think I left when you were sleeping?>> She sent him the brief image of herself leaning over him and placing a quick kiss on his cheek before she left Coruscant.

He broke off their kiss, sighed and nodded.

“There could always put me into a trance, and then leave?” She said in a hushed tone.

Luke snorted softly. “Is that what you want?” He wasn’t sure if she was playing with him.

“I’m mostly serious.” Mara knew she would lie awake otherwise, with her mind racing until she knew he had departed.

He nodded. “If that’s what you want…”

It wasn’t her nature to avoid pain, but at all costs, she was wanting to avoid this.

Mara turned and led him to the bed. She slipped back under the covers, and he crouched down beside her, taking her hand.

<Where do you want to go?> He asked, as he watched, her eyes got heavy.

<<Take me somewhere that we both enjoy?>> Her other hand reached up to touch his face. <<I’ll miss you.>>

<I’ll miss you too.> He stifled his desire to say three more little words, instead Luke leaned in to kiss her forehead. <<Close your eyes?>

She nodded, and let her eyes flutter shut.

In her mind, the view of the Manarai Mountains on Coruscant appeared, just as evening was encroaching; they glowed pink with yellow and orange hues. It was the view from their spot on the palace balcony, and she could feel the warm wind whip past her face as she was drawn deeper and deeper into sleep.
Luke watched her drift back into peaceful slumber. He would get through this; other couples do it all the time. He would be back. He promised himself, but it still hurt.

Before he left, he reached over and took her pillow, and put it inside his case, knowing that was what got him through the last time they were apart. Besides, she was clutching the pillow he had been using for the past few days now.

At the door, he turned back one more time to watch her. *His Mara.*

*

When she opened her eyes again, Mara checked her chrono; 0643.

She sighed knowing that he was gone. Still, she reached out, hoping he would sense it. <<May the Force be with you, my Farm boy.>>

**

3 Days out from Dantooine; along the trade route: Myto’s Arrow

Coming out of hibernation trance had its drawbacks, but when his body was ready, he knew it. Luke stretch and yawned as much as he could in the tiny cockpit.

It had been nearly three days since he had left Dantooine, and even though he knew he was going to return to Coruscant earlier than he originally anticipated, he still wished he was there now.

Aside from wanting out, he was annoyed that he knew he wasn’t pulling his fastest speed either, just to keep in line with the freighter that would be on his tail after he entered Ord Mantell.

The worst part, is that they weren’t even going to Ord Mandal; they were travelling to a moon on its far side, Quantxi. A tiny outpost, with little or no resources, but perfect spot for dropping off a shipment.

Luke wasn’t even required to touch down; just make sure there’s no issues when landing, then he would be free to go. He had promised Karrde a smooth delivery.

He shook his limps just to get them feeling again, and raised and lowered his shoulders to get the stress out of them.

He had approximate less than an hour before he was pull out of hyperspace and complete his task. It would give him time to think about his visit, and try not to think about her.

The ache in the pit of his stomach was back whenever he thought about her.

Luke looked out at the star lines rushing by; it had been quite the trip. He had to admit, aside from the attempt on Mara’s life, it was a good trip. Even though the visit to the Jedi Enclave was eventful, and not necessarily in a bad way; he had learned more about himself, and he had to accept it- he just wasn’t ready to be a Jedi Master. Why did he keep thinking that he should be one?

In the back of the mind he knew it was true. He thought the reckless young man was gone, but there was still the nagging feeling that he wanted to do things faster and better than he ever had before- and that he would take any chance to do them.

‘That was not the way a Jedi should act.’ –this was phrase he was finding himself say to himself over, and over and over again.
A Jedi was not supposed to want to be out in the thick of things; fighting his way through any challenge.

A Jedi was not supposed to let his emotions override his common sense and go into things that would tempt him to the Dark side.

A Jedi was supposed to be at calm, peace, and not know passion.

A Jedi was not supposed to fall in love.

He sighed. All the things he was sure about, got turned upside down by her. All of it.

All of the calm and peace that he could bring into himself, all the wisdom that he could acquire with self-study, all of the fear that he kept locked inside himself - all of it was released by her.

And yet, there were so many things about her that would bring all of those things from chaos back to tranquility.

When he held her in his arms after they had made love, he felt more at peace than at any other times in his life. When she challenged him in their study of the Force, he gained critical thinking and felt himself growing in his strength.

But the fear still remained - if he would let it; and it was beginning to be not to just center around her either.

Without much time to think about it further, his sub-space comm pinged - a hailing frequency from the *Stacked Deck*.

“Lars here.” He answered just in case anyone was listening in.

“Well Hello there!” Aves blasted over the unit. “Just checkin’ if you got enough beauty sleep.”

Luke chuckled. “Yes, I’m just fine, but I could use a few laps around the block when I get out of here.”

“Good, good.” Aves said. “We missed you at the party. Next run we’re going to have to work on getting a cylinder so you can be aboard with us.”

“Why? - so you can try and get me drunk, *and* beat me at Sabacc?” He asked.

“Who told?” Aves almost sounded hurt. “I bet it was Mara...you know, she can be a little lippy sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” Luke asked dryly, trying to sound as abused as everyone else was by her tone occasionally. Secretly, he thought, ‘I wouldn’t have her any other way.’

He heard Aves chuckle. “So you ready to pull out yet?”

“Just about...” Luke commented. “How did you want to do this?”

“I was thinking that we should give you a forty-five second head start on us?” Aves said.

“Will that give you enough time to slow down? – you’re pulling a heavier load this time.” Luke suggested.

“Right...okay, sixty seconds...would that work for you?”
“That sounds about right.” Luke agreed. “Wanna send me the marks and I’ll set them?”

“Mara should have programmed them in for you, but I’ll send them again, just in case.” Aves said.


“Great!” Aves’s voice crackled over the comm. “We’ll see you in fifteen minutes. By the way, do you have time to touch down, or are you taking off again?”

“I’m afraid I have to take off…they’re expecting me back home.”

“So I’m not going to get that Sabaac game anytime soon then? Luu-ars?” Aves was trying to goad him into a game again, and then remembered who he was supposed to be talking to.


Aves signed off.

Luke checked his nav computer, and sure enough, Mara had sat the coordinates, and she had taken the time to set in the coordinates that he would need for his return trip to Coruscant. He looked at the second batch of coordinates and saw that he needed a second jump to Qatar. That second jump however was the one that would bring him home even sooner than he expected. She was a miracle worker.

He checked his levels of his power and oxygen to make sure he’d be able to do the extra jump, and sure enough, he had sufficient levels of both. The readouts confirmed it.

The proximity alert sounded, and Luke started the timer to pull back on the thrusters, and begin to pull out of hyperspace, just before the *Stacked Deck*.

Something in the back of his mind told him to prep the shields for entry. It wasn’t normal procedure, but he was never sorry when he listened to his instincts.

Putting up shields before pulling out of hyperspace could cut into his power supply, so he readied those too for entry.

The proximity alert chimed again and started its countdown, in 10…9…8…

Luke cut on the sub-light engines, and readied the shields. He reached out with the Force, expanding on his awareness.

The star lines slid to stop and bursts of power erupted in front of him.

Immediately, a blast of light burst in front of him.

Not entirely a surprise to him, the sense in him had been growing since the countdown. He arrived at a firefight, and twisted the A-wing to avoid the on-coming beams.

What was a surprise were the two Star Destroyers directly in front of him.

Luke evaded the TIE that was suddenly on his tail with ease and even managed to take one out. He flipped open his comm and emergency hailed the *Stacked Deck* to warn them.

“*Stacked Deck* respond to *The Lars*…take evasive action upon entry…repeat, take evasion take upon entry…confirm message!” He sent through, hoping that they heard him.
In front of him, he caught the insignia on the side of the one of the X-wings he saw engaging the nearest TIE fighter, and switched to his New Republic channel.

“Blue Squadron- this is Luke Skywalker, formerly of the Rogues, in A-wing 9617… do you require assistance?” He hailed the nearest fighter that he recognized, as he followed a TIE that was pursuing another A-wing.

Luke fired and destroyed the TIE efficiently as he maneuvered to assist another fighter.


“Yes, Blue Leader – where can I be of assistance?” Luke fell back into line easily as he spotted what battle position they were using.

His alternate comm pinged beside him as he switched channels and caught the message already on progress, “…Deck responding to The Lars…confirm coordinates!...”

Luke sent back the coordinates now that he knew the position of the Star Destroyers, and hailed them again. “Prep shields on entry and take a dive…” he sent back, then flipped his comm again back to the New Republic channel and caught the tail end of his instructions there.

“…-ing 9617 confirm position…confirm position of 1-9-5-3….” Kiles’s voice sounded rushed.

Luke moved into the stance where they needed him. “A-wing 9617 confirming into position of 1-9-5-3 now, Sir.”

Sure enough, it looked like Blue Leader had a TIE on its tail. Luke followed close behind; the A-wing was still too sluggish for his liking, and when the fighter was within range, he dispatched it quickly.

Out of the portside view, he saw the Stacked Deck pull out of hyperspace, and took a dive, just as he told them too. Their action was to catch the gravity well and to head towards the planet, even though Luke knew they were headed to the moon on the opposite side of the planet- this would take them out of the path of the battle and he would catch up with them shortly.

He moved his A-wing to provide support to Kiles as it looked like he got a little cooked by the last TIE.

Luke was rounding another pass to assist when a cold wave touched him, and then pulled back.

He didn’t have time to react when a frozen grasp hit him and stunned him.

SKYWALKER! a voice called to him.

He jarred in the tiny cockpit and recognized it immediately- Palpatine!

SKYWALKER it called again, hissing, but it almost sounded welcoming. I’VE BEEN EXPECTING YOU….YOU WILL COME BEFORE ME....

And then the contact broke off as fast as it came.

Luke was still shaking off the cold as he watched one of the Star Destroyers fire up and come out of the orbit of Ord Mantell, then disappear into hyperspace.

Some of the TIEs were making a last ditch run at the Republic fighters as it appeared they were about to be abandoned by the Star Destroyers, without time to make it back before they were trying
As Luke regained his composure, he took out two more fighters, and watched the second Destroyer fade away, leaving just a clean-up job.

He let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding, when Kiles hailed him again.

“Thanks A-wing 9617, we haven’t had to do that in a while….” The voice sounded relieved, as it was apparent that the fight was over.

Luke knew that their lines were sloppy but wasn’t about to tell them that after losing a few members of their team. “You’re welcome Blue Leader. I have to go find my quarry now…Clear Skies.”

“Clear Skies!” He heard back on the comm before he switch back to the borrowed channel and hailed the *Stacked Deck*.

“Aves? You there?” Luke followed the same dive as they did, and gave himself no time to recover from his encounter.

The comm crackled and the familiar voice came back on. “What was that?!!?” Aves yelled through the comm.

“That,” Luke sighed ruggedly, “was an Imperial hit-and-fade attack…that we walked in on.”

He slowed his breathing, and forced himself to start to relax. He pressed the comm again. “Everyone okay on board?”

“Yeah…” Aves didn’t sound happy. “Thanks to your warning.” The other ship paused, then hailed back. “What’s your feelings on this…do we continue on?”

Luke didn’t know what to tell him; his senses were in a knot, rattled. He told them what he thought they wanted to hear. “I don’t think you should have any problems now…but I’ll land with you…it would be expensive if you had to come back.”

He heard the other man chuckle, “The Boss would be so proud to hear you talking like that now.”

Luke had a tight smile with those words, but his mind was still in turmoil as he swallowed hard.

Could it be possible? Palpatine? Mara had warned him- she said it was possible…but was it truly?

It felt like Palpatine…or did it? It had been close to six years since he had sensed him.

It was certainly his voice- Luke could never forget the voice that told him that he was about die, before the shards of electricity had hit him. He shivered involuntarily with the thought.

The *Stacked Deck* came in sight, and Luke hailed them his position as he came alongside the freighter. It was tugging at a speed below his, so he adjusted to move within the same speed.

They were able to catch the belt that allowed them to reach around the planet and head for the moon with no further incidents.

Luke followed them down to the surface of the moon, and dock securely. He landed, and took a few moments before leaving the cockpit. It was first time he wanted to stay inside the A-wing, instead of coming out. Mara had the perfect technique to mask her emotions- it was time to learn how she did that.
He took one more deep breath before he left the cockpit to go meet the crew, and stretch his limbs.

As Aves and his crew came off the *Stacked Deck*, they were all relieved that the Jedi had helped them.

The A-wing was refueled within the hour, and even though it took several times to turn down the offers for a drink, Luke was back in the sky on his way to Coruscant.

As soon as he cleared the moon, he changed his nav path to make a direct path to Coruscant, and not risk a second jump. He knew doing the second jump would save him time, but he didn’t know what he would be flying into—so better not chance it.

Luke sent off his recording of the fight to NRI ahead of him, and copied Leia on the message, before he jumped back into hyperspace.

Once he had a secure path, it would be time to hibernate again, but to mediate too, making sure he wasn’t jumping to conclusions about what experienced.

This wasn’t the first time he was ambushed by a Force-user during a fight. C’Boath had reached out to him the same way; but C’Boath’s contact and sense in the Force, was never like Palpatine’s.

As his mind relaxed, and the veil came on, he felt another cold shiver. *Palpatine*.

TBC
Chapter Summary

Quote: “If I show up at your door, chances are, you did something to bring me there.”

Characters: Mara, Karrde, Luke, slavers and crime bosses, oh my!

Chapter Notes

**
So in the last chapter, I had Luke dance...now it’s Mara’ turn. I really have nothing to say other than if you want to know what song I was writing to as she dances, it was Mark Ronson’s ‘Feels Right’...it makes me shake my booty.

And Dear Budha!...just when I thought I had written my longest chapters....this one comes along....over 40 pages!

Oh yes... and SMUT FEST! **BIG!** BIG SMUT FEST!!!...there’s at least 15 pages of Smut in this chapter alone...someone is going to need to be a clean up somewhere...

**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dantooine- Karrde’s Base

Mara looked at her terminal and watched the prices of goods refresh over the screen. She scrolled down the list looking for N’Keeb Bismuth metal; the price kept changing daily, sometimes twice in a day.

It had been four days since Luke had left.

In between waiting for her screen to refresh, she had gone back to his message twice already, confirming that he had arrived on Coruscant. He had arrived a day later than she had planned for him but when she heard the reason for the delay, she let it slide and was not going to make it an issue.

Aves sounded more nervous than Luke did in his message. Although, everything considered, it was probably second nature to Luke than it was to Aves, to run into an Imperial attack.

Once again, this attack was random, and with very little casualties. However, the after-effect was felt. Ord Mantell had surrendered to Imperial Forces shortly after the attack with little effort.

With no blockade or embargo in place, it was business as usual for most traders.

Karrde was on the fence about it. He knew he had openly defied the last Imperial regime, but Thrawn was gone and whoever was running things now, no one was sure of.
Mara read Luke’s message again, and avoided anything about the attack. It was like she could hear it in his words, and she could tell that he was missing her even though it had been a few days.

The screen beeped when it was done refreshing, and she went back to the page; feeling like a silly girl who had to keep reading a note that her boyfriend passed her in class.

The doors slid open, and Karrde walked in, deep in thought and reading his data pad.

Mara could sense something wasn’t right in his world. She turned in his direction; it wasn’t normal for him not to greet her when he entered a room.

She turned her chair fully and watched him for a few moments. He was in deep concentration, and forehead pinched a few times as he read.

When he was done, he sighed and looked up, and then he turned his head towards her.

“Hello Mara.” Karrde was faking cheer for her, and he knew it was unnecessary; she could read him.

She just glared at him. “What’s wrong?” she growled, “And how is it going to affect us?”

She could sense in him that this was not good.

Karrde slowly sat down in the chair across from her, and she could tell he was looking for the right words, his usual cool demeanor faltered. Seldom did she ever see the cracks in his countenance before.

He seemed to regain his cool tone before he spoke.

“Well, it appears we are back to being ‘smugglers’ again. The Traders Guild has revoked our trading license.” He said calmly.

Mara felt a bit shocked. “But we worked so hard to get the license! We met all the criteria…and then some. Did they give any reason for their change?”

“The new head of the board is a Grans from Malastar, and heard that we still operate in some Imperial controlled worlds.” Karrde raised an eyebrow at her.

“How did they come to this?” She knew she was angrier than he was, but at the back of her mind, she started to worry about all those smaller outfitters who she had tried to help over the past year, hoping they wouldn’t be affected either.

Karrde sat and thought about it. “No doubt, the Grans is probably in league with the Bothans…But also…There has to be a leak somewhere in our information system.” He looked into nothing as he spoke. “Someone has to be providing them with details on our deliveries.”

He sighed. “I would fight it, if I felt like fighting it. The truth is, war is coming, and war is always profitable for us; no matter who wins.” He looked at her. “You think I’m being callous, don’t you?”

Mara shook her head. “No, sadly, it’s the truth.”

“We can still keep to policies, but the real trick is not to get swallowed by it.” He nodded to her.

She knew he valued his ethics above anything else, and war made strange bed-fellows. One could find themselves doing business with the likes that you normally wouldn’t risk associating with.

Karrde took a deep breath before he continued. “The next bit of news has me more concerned; some
of it is business related and some of it is personal. I need your feelings on it…its very sensitive. Some
of it concerns Skywalker.”

He had her full attention. “We may only have about a week before the news will drop…and in actual
fact it’s out to ruin Organa-Solo, not so much Skywalker…but no doubt he will be affected too.”

She furrowed her brow as a creeping sensation came up her neck; she almost knew what this was
about. Secretly, she wondered how long it was going to take before it was made public.

Karrde’s face blanched. “Has Skywalker ever told you anything about his family? –his mother?…his
father?”

Mara dropped her head, and nodded.

“Then you know?” He asked, surprised.

She nodded again. “I found out on Wayland, and he confirmed it.”

“Please tell me?- so that I know that it’s true.” His voice was flat.

She looked back up, directly into Karrde’s eyes. “Luke and Leia ... their father was Darth Vader.”

Karrde’s face dropped. It took him a few moments, and then he shook his head. “I had no idea.” He
mumbled.

Mara kept quiet and let it absorb the information. “I would have told you before now, Talon, only, he
didn’t give me permission to tell anyone else…but he doesn’t avoid it if he’s asked.”

“I can imagine as to why he didn’t want it out…” He was still trying to digest the information, and
reconcile what he knew of Luke and what he knew of Vader, not able to see one man in the other.

He paused then he turned his head abruptly in her direction, realizing that she knew both men;
Vader, from her Imperial past, and Skywalker was now her lover.

Without thinking, he blurted out, “Skywalker? Is he anything like his father?” – fearing for the
galaxy.

Mara sighed. “He has his father’s power…sometimes, he has his father’s temper…but he had never
uses it. Luke is too well aware of what could happen if he did.”

As he recovered, Karrde nodded and simply said, “This is purely designed to be an attack on
Organa-Solo…someone wants her out. Our only concern is how we’re going to get this to her?”

“Luke has access to my private comm.” She reminded him, feeling guilty for not telling him about
Luke’s parentage before now. “We can send him a message. We know it’s secure- it will warn them,
at least.”


Mara didn’t bother to turn away from him; she could sense there was something else that he was
reluctant to talk to her about. People walking around her on tender hooks annoyed her greatly, but
she was willing to make certain allowances for certain people- but even Karrde was given a limit to
her patience.

She summoned her gentlest manner that she could pull off at the time. “Is there something else?”
Karrde relaxed his body in his chair, and he sighed deeper before speaking. “I want to ask you something…but I want to ask the version of you before you came into my employ. I don’t want to insult you, but I know your moral compass has a different leaning than most people’s does.”

She could see that he was uncomfortable. Her eyes and demeanor cooled. “You want me to think like a spy and assassin, while you ask me something?”

“Yes.” he said quietly. “We have a threat, and I want to know how to remove it.”

Karrde wasn’t a cold man, but he knew the realities of the galaxy and of his business. It was a sad fact, but as she reminded Skywalker when they would spar; the galaxy wasn’t fair, and sometimes things needed to be done to protect yourself, even if you didn’t like doing them.

She wasn’t beneath doing them.

Mara nodded. “What needs to be done?”

“It was Haboon Waqueen who told me about the Organa-Solo leak. We have to find a way to pay him for his information.” He said blankly.

Haboon Waqueen was a notorious slaver, and rumoured to have his fingers in several spice runners. Mixing business with him could ruin Karrde’s reputation but sources did have to be paid.

“There’s another issue, too.” Karrde said, with malice in his voice. “I was able to find the source for Vos-fane’s attack on you.” He paused. “We’ve also found out that this party has a contract on Organa-Solo as soon as the news breaks about her heritage. They figure she won’t be able to protect herself.”

Mara tilted her head, being almost amused. “Do I want to know?”

“You might not.” He said. “But I’ll tell you anyhow because I know it will put them at risk, and not me.” He paused. “It’s the former governor, Gilk Cassis of Tanaab.”

She looked somewhat satisfied. “The Warlord of Tanaab…now, Crime Boss?”

Karrde actually chuckled sardonically. “That’s the one. The only man who could make the step from being an Imperial Governor, destroying and selling his people, to step even lower to become a crime boss. What I fail to understand is how the government can harbour him.”

He watched her face. “Do you know him?- did you know him, when you worked with…”

Something in her manner had started to change, and Karrde could see the assassin’s instinct coming back, as if it had never really left, and was lurking under the surface.

She smiled, not friendly smile, but one of cruel satisfaction. “I did.” The memories came back to her. “He was slippery as an eelchin. Any and all evidence that other operatives could get on him, somehow ended up pointing to those around him, but avoided him entirely. He was being watched- he knows how to make money and pay well to those around him. It wouldn’t surprise me if Waqueen was working with him.”

“What makes you say that?” Karrde sounded surprised.

“Waqueen is running his operation on Tanaab too.” She raised an eyebrow. “Convenient? Don’t you think?”
“How did you know this?”

“One of his runners that we had contact with, had Tanaab licenses with him.” She said coolly.

Karrde nodded, and waited. He didn’t want to ask, and knew he shouldn’t but… “What do you think we should do about this?”

“Which version of me do you want to answer?” Her face was blank.

He simply nodded, indicating he knew which version was best suited for a job like this.

“We go to Tanaab. Pay Waqueen for his information, and I kill Cassis.” Mara blinked solemnly.

Karrde looked down. “You have no problem with this?”

She sighed. “When I was in service, I used to have a motto…do you want to hear it?”

He looked up at her stoic face, and blinked once, accepting what she was about to say.

“If I show up at your door, then chances are, you did something to bring me there.” She got up from her chair. “When did you want to go there? I’ll need time to prepare.”

“The sooner the better.” Karrde said quietly. “Will three days be enough time?”

“More than enough.” Mara said.

She touched his shoulder reassuringly as she left the room. She had a mission to plan for.

**

Coruscant

Luke sat in his meeting, listening to those around him drone on. They were deciding on the terms of the vote, and how to word it properly before they could vote.

He may have looked attentive, but in his mind he was rolling his eyes with the tediousness of the event. The only reason as to why he was still sitting there was because they were trying to decide to send him out with the next mission to the Dalcretti System.

Located in the Inner Rim, Dalcretti was known for harbouring splinter cells of the Rebel Alliance, and a known resistance to Imperial rule. They would be able to provide the best information regarding the new Imperial threat, and it had the best eye on Tanaab, without affecting it. Tanaab had been put on the short-list for a possible hit and fade attack.

While he listened, he looked down at his comm to see that he had a notification.

Luke opened the message to see it was indicating a message on his secure comm unit from Mara. He smiled inwardly, hoping it was a message from her with their next meeting.

He crossed his arms cross his chest and listened to the conjecture one more time on the wording of a certain paragraph; he knew what the outcome would be - he knew he was headed to Dalcretti to make contact with the cell. At least, that’s what he could sense from all the representatives around him.

He let his mind drift.
Two days back in the system and he was ready to fly anywhere to find her. He briefly thought of how much he had to control himself on their last night on Dantooine. Not only did he have to resist his desire to physically be with her on their last night together, but he fought with himself not to let three words spill out of his mouth.

And he wanted to say those words to her now…more than anything to bring some light into the galaxy for himself.

It was his encounter with the dark voice at Ord Mantell that still jarred him. He had sat down with Leia when he returned and told her about the voice.

It had sounded just like Palpatine; dark and sinister. The essence had felt like him too; malicious and condescending- an aurora of ultimate darkness.

Leia had listened and not said anything. Her dark eyes stared into a void. She believed him but could not fathom the ramifications of this new threat.

Mara, would be another issue. As soon as Luke would tell her that he directly sensed Palpatine, he was sure she would probably melt down.

She had begged him to kill her when there was a possibility of C’Boath forcing her to join him. If a resurrected Palpatine reached out to her, he knew that she would crumble; either inwardly, and try to hurt herself, or outwardly…no matter how she would protest…would she be tempted to join a new Emperor?

He sighed, and looked around him again, bringing his awareness back to the present.

Thirty minutes later, the wording had been perfected, and the vote commenced.

As a non-voting entity, Luke sat and watched as his fate was decided. It was semi-unanimous that he was being sent to Dalcretti immediately. He just nodded when they asked him to accept the mission.

The hall filed out before him. Before he left the room, he was already contacting Wedge to see if he had anything lying around, other than an A-wing, to borrow for a mission.

A Y-wing had recently been scrubbed and would be made available to him. It would have to do.

Luke made his way back to his apartment; at least there would be a message for him from her.

Back in his apartment, R2 rushed to meet him at the door.

“Hi R2.” He said and patted him on the dome as he came in.

The droid blipped, and chirped a few times as he followed his master around.

“Yes, R2…we’re leaving in the morning for Dalcretti…the Y-wing they found for me has an astromech port…no leaving you at home this time.” Luke was always amused at how little things could make the droid happy.

Now, to the work at hand. Luke retrieved the comm unit that Mara had left for him. He flipped the console and entered in his code, and then entered the sequence fob’s code. The screen paused before her message appeared.

He smiled as he opened it, as it was entitled ‘Greetings Farm Boy’.

As he began to read the message, his face dropped. He closed the message, and sat back in his chair.
Bad news best be delivered in person. Luke got up and flipped open his personal comm, hailing his sister.

Leia’s face appeared on the scene without delay. “Hi Luke! What a pleasant surprise!” She smiled as she had one of the twins in her arms and had found some personal time during the day.

Her face stopped when she got the sense off of him. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “I need to come over.” He said firmly. “I’ll be there in ten minutes- please call Han, and have you office swept?”

Leia swallowed. “Of course Luke…we’ll see you soon.”

And call ended.

Luke turned back and opened Mara’s message and read it one more time just to be sure. The bombshell that he knew one day that would drop- that day was finally here and there was nothing he could do about it.

He closed everything up, and with his trusty droid in tow, he made his way to his sister’s home.

**

It was early evening before Luke returned to his apartment. During his meeting with Leia and Han, he received another notification of a message from Mara, and was eager to read this new message, hoping it had good news in it.

Leia and Han took the news that it would be leaked that Leia was the daughter of the second most-hated man in the galaxy…first, in some worlds…and subsequently, the galaxy’s last Jedi was also his son.

It was becoming a good time for them to start heading to new base anyhow, so the timing worked well.

The only thing was left to decide, was how she would deal with it.

Mon Mothma was called to help sort out some of the details. She didn’t seemed surprised at all by the news.

It was decided that Leia would step down immediately, sitting health issues- which wasn’t exactly untrue, she had caught a stomach bug and she was taking time to recover - and that, was already public knowledge.

Luke had noticed in the past few weeks that things around the Capital were starting to change. Senators were calling in their appearances for sessions, and the citizens were starting to move to lower ground; the streets had seemed more-empty as Luke walked them.

Luckily, the doctors would be heading to Yavin shortly, and he would meet them there after this mission.

It was like the planet knew something was about to happen. The only sign that he was watching for was the senators who were supposed to leave the planet. For the most part, the Bothans looked comfortable, and not reacting to anything which made predicting anything very difficult.

He had his own people that he was going to have to prepare before the news broke.
Luke was scheduled to leave at 0700 the following morning. He cringed before he sent the message, but asked Wedge to meet him earlier than his scheduled departure. He sighed; he hated to leave it to Wedge to break the news to the other Rogues, but he knew they would appreciate being told before the rest of the galaxy.

Silently, he knew he was going to lose a few friends over with the realization that he was Darth Vader’s son. He had lived with it for close to nine years now but he still recognized that it was going to be a shock to those who knew him.

Luke looked over at the other comm unit, and opened it again; a new message blinked…it read:

_I hear you’re headed to Dalcretti…how about a little trip to Tanaab?_

_See you soon handsome Jedi –M_

She had also sent a long a list of instructions, coordinates and pass codes.

He smiled. Tanaab…it was too perfect. He stilled wondered how she could find things out before anyone else did.

Alright, he was going to Tanaab before heading to Dalcretti.

Time to pack.

**

_Tanaab_

The jump to Tanaab was fairly quick; a day and half in a roomy cockpit was a dream. The Y-wing still wasn’t as fast as his X-wing, which R2 pointed out immediately. The little droid could be more impatient than he was sometimes, but he kept his master company and was helpful as ever to start finding a way to communicate with the Rebel cell on Dalcretti.

Luke reread the details that Mara had sent and was a little surprised by them. He wasn’t scheduled to meet up with her at all from the sounds of it.

It was Karrde was requesting a meeting, and in one of the most dangerous places on Tanaab too.

Luke knew that every planet had its underbelly. Even Tatooine looked unassuming, but scratch the surface and everything was controlled by a Hutt who was pulling strings with various gangs and bought out the Imperial Governor. Nothing had a pure motive in the galaxy; corruption was always lurking not too far away.

As he approached the planet before him, he thought of what had transpired before he left Coruscant.

He had stopped to talk with The Rogues, and drop the news of his parentage. They were all shocked but understood why he had kept it from them.

Most of them stayed quiet, however it was Wedge who first stepped up and told him that it didn’t make a difference to him.

“You can’t choose your family.” The squadron boss said before he gave Luke a brotherly hug.

It took a little longer for Wes and Hobbie to come around.

Wes had agreed that there was no way that Luke could have done what he had done during the war
if he was on the opposing side- so there was no question of loyalty with him. This was just unfortunate, but he still hugged Luke.

Hobbie came around after Wes did; smiling sadly at his friend before giving him a hug too.

Corran Horn just sat off to the side, thinking quietly to himself. Luke watched him, and let him have his time with it. It had an entirely different meaning for Horn; he was thinking about joining the New Jedi Order, and now that it was going to lead by the son of the most powerful Sith Lord…

Luke turned his attention to Wes, while Horn stewed it over.

Wes, was a native of Tanaab and could possibly shed some light on local customs- anything that would help Luke blend in.

When Luke told him where he was headed, Wes grimaced and stepped back. “You want to go there? Why would you want to do such a thing?”

“I don’t have much choice in the matter, Wes. It’s where my contact wants to meet.” Luke answered simply.

Wes shook his head. “Alright, but you’re going to want to use both a blaster and a lightsaber…if they don’t try to roll you before you get there…they’ll roll you on the way out.” He paused. “I think I have someone who might be able to help you. She’ll push you to get paid upfront – don’t let her…give her 50% when she shows up and the rest when you make it out there alive. Let me get her info.”

Wes walked away to go find his data pad. That gave Luke the opportunity to turn and see Horn who was now watching him.

Horn’s face didn’t give anything away, and Luke didn’t dare reach out to read his senses. Luke walked over and quietly said, “So, you think your father in-law was difficult…” He knew it was a bad joke, but he had nothing left to come up with.

Horn snorted and shook his head. “I had no idea…I really had no idea.”

“No one did.” Luke reminded him. “I didn’t even know until a few years into the war.”

Horn looked at the other man. “I have to ask…I have no right to, but I have to….do you feel tempted sometimes…to use…?”

Luke knew what he was asking, and he lowered his head. “Not all the time.” He said quietly. “Most of the time, it’s because I’m conscious of it, and trying too hard not to touch the Dark side…it’s constantly on my mind. That’s probably more the pull than any other factors.”

Luke sighed. “Once I began to forgive him, it was easier to keep myself in a state of calm and peace to avoid the draw. But I’m aware of it, and try not to let other things influence it. Being afraid of possibly falling to the Dark side can lead to actually falling to the Dark side because of the fear…so I check to make sure that’s not going to happen.”

Luke flexed his right hand unconsciously. “I have other reminders too.” He mumbled.

Horn nodded, understanding that Luke knew it was not just a point of pride not to fall to the Dark side; it was matter of life and death too. He turned to the Jedi and offered him a hug too, accepting him.

Wes came up and handed Luke a data card. “That’s her information…if she’s still running in the
gang. She’s at least good for a transport. Drop my name and tell her ‘Dickie says hi’.”

Luke raised an eyebrow, but didn’t ask the question- he really didn’t want to hear the story behind that, and thanked Wes for the information, if he should need it.

Luke departed from the hangar, knowing that he still had a group of friends who supported him. And now, hovering in orbit around Tanaab he had little choice but to think until he got clearance to land.

Luckily, Tanaab was more efficient than Dantooine, and it wasn’t long before he was given a clearance code and started to make the descent towards the planet.

Luke didn’t bother making any arrangements for accommodations. He had a secure, private docking bay and had paid enough to keep it that way; Karrde had given him the name of the owner and had assured him that there would be no issues.

Other than sleeping space, the dock had everything that a traveller could want- a fully stocked cooler and the ‘fresher even had a water shower, if you wanted to pay an extra few credits for it. And the Y-wing had ample space to open up a sleeping pallet.

R2 could wait with the ship and keep an open channel on a comm just in case Luke needed to make a break for it.

It was late afternoon by the time Luke landed, and if he followed his directions he would a bit early, but not entirely so.

He adjusted his tunic- the one Mara bought for him on Dantooine. It would fall in line with his personae for this trip. A reasonably wealthy friend of Karrde’s, just popping in for a visit.

The Force would help with avoiding any other attention that he might attract.

It seems that most people in the galaxy might know his name, but couldn’t point out his face, except on Coruscant where celebrity was everything.

As the precaution, he hooked his lightsaber under his tunic, and attached a blaster at his hip.

As a prominent business person would do, he rented the best speeder money could buy. Luke had to admit that there some perks to going undercover as a friend of Karrde’s.

The speeder pulled up to the location that Luke was given, and he was surprised as he looked at the luxury hotel before him. The valet took the speeder to park and Luke strode into the lobby.

At the front desk, the droid asked a few questions, Luke passed them off in a slightly arrogant tone, and asked for the manager.

A well-dressed Crinian approached him, and bowed indifferently. “Good Afternoon Sir, how may we assist you here at The Onyx?”

Luke returned the bow. “I’m here to meet a friend. I was told that I need to go to ‘the heart of the jewel’.”

The look in the Crinian’s eyes changed from cool indifference to utmost obliging. “But of course Sir. Right this way.”

The Crinian lead Luke passed the main reception lobby to a back corridor. Unlike other back corridors, this one retained its grandness from the lobby, and even more so in ways of security. There
were several guards in the hallway, all of them in a state of readiness.

They reached the doors to a turbolift, and the Crinian turned to him. “Your pass key please, Sir?”

Luke pulled from his pocket a small chipped card that was waiting for him at the dock.

The Crinian placed the card in the reader, and the reader responded with a blip and a green light. The Crinian turned back to him, as the doors of the lift opened, and handed the card back to him. “Have a very good evening Sir.”

Luke nodded and stepped into the lift. There was only one option to press, so he keyed in the destination.

The doors closed and Luke watched as the counter indicated that he was going down.

When the lift stopped and the doors opened, Luke was surprised to see the sprawling club that was before him. The loud music was the first thing to assault his senses. The dim lighting with the occasional flash of colour didn’t elude him either. The smell of alcohol and cheap perfume were the next; and the overall allure of purchased sex hung in the air.

Aside from the decorations, it was like most other clubs he had been in on Coruscant. The walls were lined with holos of all sorts of sporting events around the galaxy- to make sure that patrons were all update to date on their betting.

The scantily clad waitresses moved around fluidly, while on center stage a dancer was earning her wage. The stage was designed with stairs around it so that the dancer could interact with those in the audience; encouraging patrons to touch and sample the goods.

Despite the clear intention, there was definitely more of an air of sophistication here though, as the club was quite clean and well kept.

The tempo of the music playing wasn’t as jarring as it was in other clubs he had been in; there was no pulsing hard beat. It was all designed to be as seductive an atmosphere as the owner clearly wanted it to be.

There were no patrons out in the open. The walls of the club had little alcoves where parties could meet without drawing attention.

Luke walked up to the bar and ordered a Whyren’s Reserve -Neat… and specified that it was to be from a NN 182 batch- nothing else would do.

The bartender, unusually polite for a place like this, returned with the drink, and asked if there was anything else that Luke needed.

Luke calmly said. “I like to gamble. It there a place that has a clean set of cards?”

The bartender nodded. “You want alcove nine, Sir. He’s been waiting for you.”

Luke nodded, picked up his drink and left more credits than was necessary on the bar before he walked over to the indicated alcove.

Before he got there, a puff of smoke came from it recesses and as Luke walked into the air, he could smell the distinct scent of Karrde’s brand of cigarillos.

“So what is a guy like you doing in a nice place like this?” Luke said coolly as he rounded the edges
of the alcove.

The other man drew one last inhale from his cigarillo, and let it out slowly as he spoke. “You think this is nice place?” The last of the smoke left his mouth. “I’ve got you fooled.” Karrde smiled as he gestured for Luke to take a seat.

Luke chuckled before he sat down in the comfortable chair.

The music was changing and a new dancer was about to take the stage as the former dancer walked down the steps and headed to another alcove; Karrde’s gaze was watching it all with feigned interest.

Luke brought the drink to his mouth. “I wanted to thank you for the information that you gave me and my sister. We’re trying to figure out how and why it appeared now.” He said into the glass before he took a sip, and then relaxed into the chair as Karrde’s posture suggested.

Karrde bought the cigarillo up to his mouth again. “No need to thank me. I figured I owed you for your assistance at our latest drop…and now, it’s me who has a tab with you.” His attention was purely on the dancer on stage.

Luke looked in the same direction as Karrde was watching. The slim dancer was certainly graceful…a little too graceful. Luke relaxed his senses but was surprised to find out that it wasn’t Mara on stage. In fact, he didn’t sense her anywhere.

There was a mixture of different aliens, along with human waitresses, so she could have been disguised as one of those. It was still very possible that she was hiding in plain sight with her ability to shield from him.

Karrde shook the ice in his empty glass in his hand, and a waitress came by.

“Nam too kay?” she said smoothly, her voice hissing.

“I’ll have another one, and so will my friend.” Karrde said.

Luke watched her walk away and reached out his senses, too. It must have shown on his face because Karrde looked amused.

“Yes, she’s here…somewhere.” As the smuggler took another drag on his cigarillo. “But she’s working.” He exhaled; the smoke billowed. “As soon as she’s done, she’s all yours….so long as her price doesn’t go up too high.”

Luke looked over at the other man.

Karrde chuckled softly. “Oh, you didn’t realize you were in one of the galaxy’s most exclusive brothels, did you?”

Luke’s eyes widened briefly and he took a deep sip of his drink.

“You see those numbers on the board behind the dancer?” Karrde directed with a nod of his chin. “Each one corresponds to one of the waitresses, who also happens to be a dancer, among other things.”

He watched the Jedi for any reaction. “Mara is number eighty-four. She hasn’t costed me a great deal of money yet, but I imagine she will if the bidding closes after she dances, and not before.”

Luke’s vision zeroed in on her number on the board, and he watched as the tally of the credits
flipped, then paused, then flipped some more. The sum was already at a level of which made Luke look like a pauper, but watching the tally also made his temper rise.

“Don’t worry…she won’t leave here with anyone but you.” Karrde smirked. “As a gift to my new client.” He winked.

The waitress returned with the drinks, and placed them on the table, dipping slightly. “Astish mying nat oost?”

Karrde put his hand in his pocket, and pulled out what Luke thought were some credits as a tip. “Thank you my dear, we’ll be sure to enjoy them.” Among the credits was a small data card that caught Luke’s eye.

Her hand slid over the credits and card, picking up both of them. “Ach tanny nech.” Her voice said smoothly.

It wasn’t until then that Luke noticed their waitress. Her dark short hair and purple eyes threw him, but the shape of her face that he couldn’t forget.

As she turned and walked away, he saw the number disk clipped on her waist – 84…he smiled as he saw her take a few more steps, then as if feeling his attention, her half covered bottom did a little shake then kept walking.

Karrde huffed as he must have known that she did something. “Is there any way you can please tell her to stop doing that? She has ten more minutes left on her bidding, and her price keeps going up.”

Luke snorted. “I’ll let her know.”

<Hey Sexy> He sent over to her. <You’re costing your boss a pretty penny. How about you knock off the rump shaking until bidding is over?>

He watched her walk over to another alcove to drop off a drink, then head back in their direction.

<<Oh, you mean, I shouldn’t do this?>> He watched her stop at a nearby nook and bend over to pick something up. Whoever was sitting inside, at the table was sure to get a view of her shapely behind.

Karrde groaned and Luke’s eyes went to the bidding board as her numbers spiked again. She wasn’t the highest on the tally, but she wasn’t the lowest either.

“I wish we had more time to plan this.” Karrde grumbled. “They wouldn’t be so interested in her if she wasn’t so new.”

Luke nodded, and only five more minutes left to her bidding. “So why are you here? I thought you, and her, were going to stay planet-side for a while.”

Karrde’s face changed ever so slightly, then resumed its previous look. “I needed her skill set.” He said nonchalantly. “We needed to pay a source, who happens to own this club, and…” He paused. “There’s another issue that we need to deal with.”

He took another drag on his cigarillo, and a sip of his drink. “And she was getting punchy with the idea of being cooped up on base while everyone was away.”

Luke nodded. He knew there were aspects of Mara’s job that he didn’t like, but it was her life, and she knew the difference between right and wrong- most days.
He sat back and watched the next dancer, it was all he could do to keep from watching the board behind her for the next five minutes.

He could feel his anxiety, but Karrde looked perfectly relaxed.

Luke sensed that she was about to return. Now that he knew that she was there, his desire for her started to rise. How could it not in a place like this?

Aside from the hair, and her eyes, it was fully her in that skimpy costumes, and she filled out the few inches of material that it was made from. Everything about her exuded her magnetism, drawing him to her.

He wanted to hold her and kiss her, and yes, make her moan as he krifffed her like there was no tomorrow.

He blinked a few times and took a swig of his drink to gain some control over his lust that had suddenly come out of nowhere.

Mara, as their waitress walked back to them, and put down another round of drinks that they didn’t order. She consciously bent over a little more in Luke’s direction and he got a marvelous view of the most amazing breasts in the galaxy.

A small green chip dropped on the table from between her fingers.

“I’m glad he was pleased.” Karrde mumbled, as his hand slowly came out and covered the chip. “It’s costing me more than I bargained for.”

“Ninechi.” She said, giving him another glance at her curves as she turned to leave.

Luke breathed deeply and calmed his body, yet again, and checked the board behind the dancer. Thirty seconds left to go on the bidding.

He started counting down with the clock as it got to the last ten seconds. The numbers jumped a few more times in those last seconds, but Karrde’s confidence didn’t waiver.

It was indeed a small fortune, but a necessary part of the rouse for a cover.

Several other waitresses’s bidding were also done at the same time as Mara’s. Luke watched as they put down their trays and went to different alcoves. The dancer on stage walked off and headed in the direction of a particularly secluded alcove.

New waitresses took the floor.

In his gut, Luke knew this was wrong. He had seen it for most of his life on Tatooine. With a shortage of women on a planet, it had made for a lucrative business that Jabba had controlled. Sadly, he couldn’t take any shame in it, after all his first time had been with a hired female; she, at least, was gentle with the shy, virgin farm boy. He had no regrets.

“Well...” Karrde said as he backed up his seat; he placed a key card on the table. “Have a good night, and this should put us just right back to about even, don’t you think?”

Luke snorted quietly, and slightly blushed. “I think it’s me who owes you now.”

“I’ll remember that.” Karrde got up from the table and bowed slightly before turning and walking away.
Luke sat back in his chair, and waited for Mara. If she was going to be like the other waitresses, she would find him. He had to admit, it would be kind of fun to play the patron of a lady for hire; he wouldn’t deny having that fantasy once or twice.

He felt the touch of her mind right before the music started. <<Shielding please.>> She warned.

The hard rhythm of the music came on. <<It occurred to me that you’ve never seen me dance…>> He knew this performance would be for him.

The beat came up and it reverberated so that the floor pounded with the bass.

She came out on the stage, locking her eyes on him, and his eyes did not leave her wanton stare. Her body was lean and flexible; it moved with the rhythm of the music, with a little bounce in it, some of her soft curves bounced along with it.

Luke could feel his breath deepen and he could feel his trousers becoming tighter. He knew what that soft flesh felt like in his hands.

She writhed her shoulders against the pole and slid her back down it. <<So how do you want me tonight?>> Her hips rolled in beat with the music, reminding him on how smooth her movements could feel when she rode him.

<<There’s so many positions we haven’t tried yet.>> One of her legs stretched straight in the air with her flexibility. <<We haven’t done it standing up yet…I bet I’d be really tight for your thick cock if we did it standing up.>>

As she grabbed the pole and pulled herself around it, he got a good view of her shapely ass. <<There is one spot you haven’t taken me yet…I wonder if it’s tighter than my pussy….could it take you?>>

He was in agony, praying for the song to end.

Other patrons were trying to look in on the alcove that she was dancing for, as it was clear that they were left out.

She slid to the floor of the stage and crawled to the edge, biting her bottom lip and letting her eyes drift down, then up his body. She clasped her breasts in her hands, squeezed and when she released them, he could see that her nipples had perked through her snug top.

As she got to the edge of the stage, she stood up in one fluid motion, and stalked down the few stairs to be in front of his alcove. She stretched out her leg and her boot caught the front edge of his chair, between his legs, and pulled his chair towards her.


Mara straddled his lap, not even touching him as her hips rotated hovering over his groin. Her face came close to his, and he could feel her hot breath on his cheek. <<Do you feel like taking me upstairs for the night?>>

He nodded, unable to speak.

<<Good. Meet me at the back lift…not the one you came down on…>> Her eyes drifted to his crotch as she thought the words ‘down on’.

As the music died, she bounced away to the back of the stage, leaving him sitting there, panting for a few moments.
Luke sat there, slightly stunned but extremely aroused. She was going to be his for the night.

As he made his way to the back lift, several patrons stopped him on his way and offered him more credits that they assumed he paid for her. He refused all of them but was very amused that one of them offered nearly three times the final bid.

He approached the lift, and the doors opened. He looked around and she came up beside him. She wrapped her arm around his neck as they entered the lift together.

She palmed the key from his front pocket and tapped the card reader- the doors closed.

Luke dove for her mouth with his lips and she moved away. <<No kissing the lips of the merchandize.>> She directed his mouth to her neck. <<At least until we get to the room…there are eyes in here.>>

She tilted her head back and moaned as he nipped at her jawline, and his hands started to roam. He reached out to her as his hands squeezed her flesh. <If I ever think that we shouldn’t be together before one of us needs to leave, can you please remind me of what a bad idea that is, okay?>

She could feel how hard he was as he pressed up against her. <<I know…we’re never doing that again…I’m so wet for you right now.>>

Luke moved his head away as her mouth devoured his neck. His hand had found its way between her legs, and he could feel her wetness through the material over her, driving him to the point of insanity; he moaned.

He wanted her so very badly and the lift ride would be ending soon. He could take it no longer and his other hand met between her legs. He ripped at her stockings, tearing them open, and pushing aside the bit of fabric covering her, so that he could mercilessly plunge two fingers inside her sacred depth; she gasped at their intrusion into her.

“Gods!” He growled through gritted teeth. <So…hot…>

She moaned as his thumb started to roll her hooded bulb. She began to pant hard as he pumped his fingers quickly, and putting pressure on the delicate nub.

He nipped at her neck. <I don’t care who is watching…I want you to scream for me.> His pace doubled in speed and intensity.

She threw her head back, held her breath, then bellowed loudly and quaked against him.

He still propelled his fingers inside her, and let them slow, pulling them from her; he rubbed his fingers against each other, feeling her glossy essence that coated them.

She leaned her head against his shoulder as she recovered.

Luke brought his fingers to his mouth and tasted her deific nectar and thought how shamelessly he delivered his intimate kiss between her thighs, and how badly he wanted to taste her again.

The lift doors opened with no warning and they made their way hastily past the foyer and into the adjacent room.

It took seconds for her to pull the lenses from her eyes, and rip off her wig, allowing her wild mane of fire to flow freely, and he sighed, knowing that it was her in his arms.
Now in the room, Mara pressed her hungry mouth to his. It was if they were starved for each other; pursing against each other in a frenzy passion.

<<Onnek be damned.>> she thought and tore open his tunic, hearing the fasteners go flying; her hands wanting his hot flesh.

Her costume put up no fight as his hands shredded the flimsy material that kept his hands from her velvety body; her breasts burst forth as the material gave way.

Luke’s mouth left hers only to greedily suckle her ripe nipple and roughly squeeze her other breast with his hands; she gasped loudly with his zealous attention.

Mara’s hands worked with speed and efficiency, removing what was left of his clothing, so that their skin was finally touching.

His mouth fervently found her mouth; their tongues twisted and toyed with each other.

<<Make me scream again, Luke…>> She begged.

He hoisted her leg up, as she had done as she had danced, and without concern if she was ready; he delve his abundant cock into her taut goddess cunny.

She bucked at the pressure, feeling him stretch her open, just like he did when he demanded her.

“Stars!” Luke moaned to the room as he moved inside her. His movements slow and precise, fighting against the friction of her pussy; feeling every nuance of her body. He could feel the skin of his cock sliding up and down his shaft with his effort.

Mara dug her nails into his back, which only encouraged him to keep his deliberate pace. She begged for air; it was both paradise and torment with which he was thrusting into her body. She felt like he was tearing her in two, but revelled every single second, not wanting it to stop.

As her juices began to flow, he increased his speed, pumping with the tempo in his body. He was determined to hear her undulate, and see her lost in delirium. He could feel the heat of her chest against his as he crushed his arms around her to balance her body; knowing that the flush was creeping up her skin.

Just as his fingers showed no mercy, his cock riled within her, gaining momentum and gaining pace. He reached his maximum velocity, pushing, and pushing, and pushing to let her body encompass every inch of him.

She held her breath, paused, and yelled at a volume he didn’t think she was capable of; he felt her muscles throb around him, wildly spasming internally, and her body released its desire to remain standing.

Luke could take it no longer, and lost himself; moaning her name as he unleashed his searing load. As he came down, he strained to keep them both upright; both their quivering bodies struggled to maintain equilibrium.

He lifted her, and stepped back to come down on the chaise at the end of the bed.

The furious fight for culmination and capitulation was over; now, they were just lovers, bound to each other.

She straddled him and rested her head on his shoulder, with her head turned to his face, panting,
recovering.

His hand came up to stroke her cheek, and he looked down at her angelic face.

She looked up at him, and their lips met, kissing each other with exhausted gratitude. She could feel his hot hand caressing her back, fingers spread wide and stroking, easing her muscles.

Luke lips were imbued with the longing that he had felt while they had been separated and he implored her to return his affection.

Their kisses were tender and sweet, needing each other.

Mara never felt so worshipped as when he just kissed her as they basked in the afterglow.

They would stop and look into each other’s eyes; his sapphire spheres studied her emerald orbs, still mystified and stupefied by what he saw there.

He smiled, bringing his forehead against hers, and stroking her cheek.

“Miss me?” his voice cracked as he spoke.

She snorted. “It’s only been six days….and yes, very much so.”

Something caught his eye, and he reached out as the object came to his call. He handed her the soft towel, with a raised eyebrow.

“What makes you think I’ll need this?” she looked at him incredulously.

He sighed before he came in for another quick kiss. “I think I know my girl.” He said quietly, kissing her.

Mara could feel that he was uncomfortable inside her, and she raised hips, feeling him withdraw. Even though she knew it was coming, she still gasped, and put the towel between them, catching the evidence of their union.

Luke groaned then sighed as he left her body, still wanting to cradle her close to him.

She shifted her weight to make them both comfortable; giving him playful kisses.

He took the opportunity to look around the room; to see what they had done to it, but also to see what amenities it had.

He whistled as the grandeur caught his attention. “This is very nice.”

She giggled as he was adorable when he was being his farm boy self; his ability not to be jaded was one of the things she admired about him.

The room was large, decorated in cream and gold accents. The bed was clearly made for the purpose of entertainment with lush coverings in various textures meant to heighten the senses.

The large picture window was covered in long fabric drapes, but in front of it was a deep large round tub, and his eyes widened at the sight of it.

Mara saw what caught his interest. “It has power jets in it…feel like taking a bath with me?” She raised her eyebrows.
“Really?” He looked surprised, but not entirely.

<<The room is ours.>> She nuzzled to his cheek. “You have me for the night…I’m here to *serve.*” Her voice dropped in tone, indicating that she was willing to play along with a fantasy if he wanted one.

“You can take me anywhere you want to…” She kissed the soft side of his face. “We can go to the casino and spend some of Karrde’s credits…or we can stay right here, order something to eat, and take a hot bath together.” She made the last option sound very good.

<I just want to be with you…> Was his answer, enjoying her closeness.

“You don’t want to show me off to the high rollers? Two Force-users on a gambling floor?- we could make a killing.” She teased.

“Nope.” He nipped at her cheek. “I like option number two.” He squeezed her buttocks.

<<Me too.>> Mara leaned in and kissed him soundly. “We can order a Qi’mek Tar…”

Luke watched her. “What’s that?”

She chuckled. “It’s amusing…it literally means ‘messy sex’ in Tammeck…but it’s supposed to be a shared, mish-mash of a meal.” <<I like it when you feed me.>> She winked.

She slowly slid off him, with a bit of a groan; her internals were a bit sensitive.

He pouted until he watched her pick up a data pad, and return to him, and resumed her straddling position on his lap.

Mara flipped though the options on the pad. “Let’s see…first, do you want spicy or savory?”

Luke saw her available earlobe, and went in to suck on it. “Savory.” He whispered.

She moved to allow him more access, tilting her head. “Flavorful or sweet?” Her eyes flutter closed as she enjoyed what his lips were doing.

His hands were snaking their way around her body, and he cupped one of her breasts. “Mmmm…sweet.” His mouth left her neck and found her dimpled nipple, swirling it was his tongue.

Mara gasped, and struggled to concentrate. “Alright…” She sighed. “I’m going to assume that champagne will be satisfactory…”

“Uh-huh.” Luke mumbled as he sucked the delicate tip. He came up. “Better order water too…” Then he went back to the rosy bud.

“Ooohhh” She huffed “…right.” Feeling the tingle in her depths.

“I’ll order clothing later.” She absently mumbled and closed her eyes as she dropped the data pad to the floor and tilted her head back, and felt his other hand grasping at her other breast.

He pulled back and watched her, as he rolled both her nipples with his thumbs.

The flush was coming to her skin again, and he loved watching it creep. Not only did her skin become aflame, but if he reached out and felt her senses, he knew that she desire would be building again too.
As the blush travelled he watched the fair flesh reveal its secrets, faint freckles that dusted her collarbone appeared before the skin turned the pink haze.

Luke wondered how far she close she was again; touching her with the right pressure, in the right places would make her succumb again.

His hands started to work her mounds too, mentally wanting to watch her have another solitary climax. She was astonishingly beautiful as she came; a thousand supernovas could not compare.

He touched her senses to see how close she was.

Mara was lost to the world around her, eyes closed, the heat was building her core again, and he was doing it to her. Her breaths becoming deep and laboured.

His hands were dynamic, gripping and releasing her breasts; his rough thumbs rolled and tweaked her nipples. She mumbled something incoherent; if he just tugged at the buds, she would be at the edge again.

As if he heard her want; he pulled at the sensitive peaks. <Say it…please say it?> He soothingly implored.

Her mind was adrift but as the first wave hit, she exhaled, whispering, “LLuuuuke!”

He smiled, witnessing her splendor, and knowing he was the one who she allowed to bring her to such a place. He kissed her neck tenderly, slowly; switching his ministrations to gently massaging her flesh, bringing her back down.

Her eyes came back and looked into his face, searching it for the reason that her mind couldn’t recover at the moment. She saw the man who cared for and cherished her, wanted her to be a part of his life; her heart welled.

“Luke…” The words came slowly, and were on the tip of her tongue. “…I want…to say…I…I think…” She struggled. “…I…” She trembled….

The door chime rang; she blinked and jolted as reality hit, and the moment was lost.

Mara awkwardly moved her hips off of his lap swiftly, and reached out for another two towels as they flew to her hand. She wrapped her hair up in one, and wrapped the other around her body, and raced to door; glad to be away from him.

Luke’s eyes were wide; was she just about to say the words that he longed to hear from her?

He watched her as she let the droid and cart in with their food. For the second time, he wanted to cut a droid in pieces for interrupting them.

She nervously glanced over at him, as the droid left; knowing that she almost made herself vulnerable in the most open way, in a manner that she would never forgive herself for.

She needed to be away from him…now. Right now.

“I’ll be right back.” She said quietly, and walked hastily to the ‘fresher.

Luke watched where she had gone, not believing what almost happened either. But now, behind the door he could feel her senses unravelling; chaotic and frantic. He was scared for her. Love shouldn’t make someone flee.
He didn’t feel dejected though; he knew this was something in her, something she didn’t trust in herself. He had felt her feelings for him and he knew exactly what she felt—she loved him, but the words just wouldn’t follow her feelings yet.

He relaxed, closing his eyes; he sent out his warm tendrils to her, softly touching the edges of her mind, wrapping her spirit with comfort. <When you’re ready, Mara…when you’re ready.> He sent across into the other room, pleaded her not to run from him.

He waited, watched the door and listening for any sort of movement from beyond.

It was a long few moments, and as a last resort, Luke wrapped the towel, from his lap, around his waist and walked over the large tub by the window. He turned on the taps, and ran his hand under the water, testing the temperature, adjusting it slightly.

He looked back at the ‘fresher door, and reached out again. He could sense that the panic was over, and she was returning slowly to her contented state. He smiled as he sensed her curiosity at the sound of the running water.

He knew she still needed some time, so he prepared the room for when she was ready to come back out.

He found a controller for the room; lowering the general room light, turning on the ambient lighting around the tub, and controlling the sound system— he found a comm station with soft music. The controller also allowed for the drapes to open, and adjusting the privacy setting on the window so that one could see out, but no one could see in.

The night sky was stunning and speeders rushed by in the distance. Tanaab wasn’t as busy as Coruscant but it was an amazing sight as high as their room was.

Luke was bringing the trays of food, and bottle of champagne and glasses over to the tub when the ‘fresher door opened. He smiled over to her. “Hi Beautiful” he said quietly.

Mara stood at the jamb, and blushed slightly. ‘Hi.’ She said meekly.

He held the smile on his face, and offered his arms. She smiled back and allowed herself to be wrapped in his warmth. He rocked her for a few moments. She looked up at his face and when he looked down, she kissed him; sweetly and tenderly, thanking him.

The tub was just about filled.

He let her go, and she gazed at the set up appreciatively.

She dipped her toe into the water, and nodded, agreeing to the temperature.

“What is it?” She asked.

Luke shook his head as he watched her drop her towel, and she stepped down into the deep tub; her nakedness gloriously on display for him.

The water depth reached to her knees and she extended a hand for him to join her. He walked over and dropped his towel before he stepped into the tub beside her.

Mara caught a strange look on his face as he joined her. “What is it?” She was wrapping her hair into lose bun at the top of her head.
He chagrined, “My uncle would have a fit if he saw this tub…” He mumbled.

She chuckled. “I bet he would. Feeling a little self-indulgent?”


She looked behind him and indicated him to sit down into the water, resting his back and on the molded seat of the tub.

Mara lowered herself across from him; the water covering her to her shoulders. “Ready?”

“Ready for wha---?”

She pressed the button on the side of the tub and jets came alive as he spoke.

His eyes popped then relaxed as he felt the pounding of the force water on his body. His eyes rolled shut and he leaned back, feeling the most decadent thing he had ever felt.

She giggled, watching his face.

She moved a few things around so that they could have access to them while they were in the tub, and poured two glasses of champagne; letting him have his moment, enjoying the jets.

Mara came closer to him, and he opened his azure eyes as he felt her touch under the water. She handed him one of the glasses, and touched his inner thigh, indicating that he should open his legs.

She turned with her back to him, and relaxed so that her back rested just left of center on his chest; and sighed.

She took a sip of her champagne. “Could you get used to this?”

The night’s sky danced before them; the world seemed in more of a haste than it usually was, but it didn’t matter to them.

“Gods…I so could.” He mumbled into her neck and he nuzzled her skin. <Don’t tell Han?>

<<Why not?>> She asked.

<He would think that I had gone soft.>

She nodded. <<Okay, if anyone asks, I had to drag you kicking and screaming into the big comfy tub.>>

He laughed softly.

She reached over to one of the platters, and back handed, offered him one of the samplings.

“Chocolate covered drizzle berries.” She said.

She felt, rather than saw, his mouth come over her fingers and take the candy from them.

“Mmmm…nice.” He said.

His hand came around to her face, with a piece of cheese that he knew she liked. She sipped her champagne as she chewed; the flavours blending.

Luke kissed the back of her neck. “So I was thinking about something…” He said, as she watched
his hand reach over to the plate with the cheese on it and offered her another piece.

“I think we should have cute little names for each other.” He said sounding confident in his decision.

“You what?” She turned around to make sure it was him that was suggesting such a thing. Her body floated off him in the water, and her bottom rose up because of the jets pressure.

“Just in private.” He looked so innocent. “Other couples have them.”

Mara turned her shoulders back around, and skeptically leaned back on him again. “I don’t think they do.” She grumbled.

“Yes they do.” Luke insisted. “Han calls Leia ‘Sweetheart’…and Leia calls Han, well, ‘Scruffy Nerf Herder’.”

Mara snorted loudly.

“No, no…she says it in an endearing way.” He lightly argued.

She thought about it. “Well, I already call you ‘Farm Boy’.” She smiled.

“I know.” He grumbled.

“You don’t like it?”

“You don’t think it means I’m a hick or something?” He pouted.

She turned around so he could see how earnest she was. “No, I like it…it means I get to see the real you…no Jedi…no hero…just unpretentious, unassuming, amazing you.” Her hand touched his face.

He snorted. “Okay, only you can call me ‘Farm Boy.” He looked off to the side, hoping it would grow on him. “Besides, it’s going to be one for you that I’m going have trouble with…and I feel bad that I don’t have a term of endearment for you.”

She glared.

“It’s true!” He protested. “It’s very hard to come up with something that will stick.”

Mara continued to glare as she let herself float in the water.

“I can’t very well call you what The Rogues do!... Although, I kind of want to.”

“What do The Rogues call me?!?” Mara looked at him with the flare of her temper.

“No, maybe I don’t have a nickname for you…it doesn’t matter.” He back-pedaled.

She came right into his face. “Spill it Skywalker.”


“Hotpants?” she repeated loudly. “Hotpants? – who calls me that?”

“Wes and Hobbie.”

Her mouth was agape. “Why those two reprobates!”

Luke started to chuckled. “I told them that you’d kill them…but…”
“But what?”

He smirked. “I kind of like it.” He said coyly.

“I don’t.” Mara turned around and floated over to the opposite side of the tub, and huffed in the corner.

Luke playfully pouted, and he moved to joined her. “Okay, no ‘Hotpants’…there is another one I thought of…”

He went to nuzzle her, and she wiggle to move away from his touch, not quite ready to forgive him for his insolence.

“What about ‘Kitten’?” He whispered in her ear, taking a chance to nip at her lobe. “They’re cute…” he nipped again. “They’re ferocious…” He took a suckle at the lobe. “They respond to being touched…” He licked the lobe, and she shivered. “They are very particular about who they let be their favourite…”

Under the water, she felt his hands sliding up her hips.

“I can add things to it…” He teasingly suggested, his hands made circles on her hips. “Cuddle Kitten, when you want to be held…” He kissed between her shoulder blades.

She smiled at his tease.

“Hell Kitten when you’re clearly fixing for a fight…” He switched sides and kissed her opposite shoulder as she glanced over.

She glared, but it lacked conviction, and her deep breath was telling her that she was about to give in.

“And my favourite…when I’ve got you all worked up…” His hands slid up from her hips, to cup her breasts again, pulling her back to his chest. His voice was dark, and deep. “My little Sex Kitten…” and right into her ear, “Do you want to purr for me?”

She gasped, then wiggled away from him, floating back to the corner where they started.

He grinned mischievously at her. <I think you do…> The playful look turned into lust, and he floated back to her.

Mara sat in the molded form of the tub, and he cornered her. She shook her head slowly.

Luke nodded deliberately, and leaned in for a kiss.

His mouth was hot and craving, pursing at her lips. His tongue teased at the entrance of her mouth and she let him in.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and surrendered to his wants, as they were hers too.

No one had the ability to breakdown her walls, in every sense. She never felt more complete than when she was with him.

Rather than be his victim of a tease, she knew what got him too. She slid her hands from around his neck until they were underwater. She found his thighs, and dragged her nails down them. His skin dimpled even in the warm water, and he hummed, enjoying the touch.

Her hands travelled back up on the inside of his thighs, until one of her hands found and cupped his
tender sack. She rolled the soft flesh in her hand.

Her other hand found his thick shaft, already hard, and pumped it slowly.

He sucked in air through gritted teeth, and then resumed his plunder of her mouth, driven by what she was doing to him.

Mara pushed the skin down of his phallus, exposing the tip of his head.

He exhaled hard as she did that, letting her know how sensitive it was.

Her hand worked expertly; her thumb circled the very tip, and she interspersed it with pumping his shaft. She deepened her kiss with the movements of her hands.

Luke broke from her lips as he tried to catch his breath, and then, when hunger came back, he claimed them ferociously.

She gave a throaty hum, and her hands stopped what they were doing, as she pulled back from him.

He looked at her lost as to the reason why she stopped.

She floated to the side of the tub, and he watched as she folded one of the towels that were abandoned. She patted it; indicating that she wanted him to come and sit on the edge of the tub.

Luke stood up in the tub, water flowing off his tanned skin, shaft engorged, and he lowered himself to the seat where she wanted.

Mara stood up in the tub, as the water dipped down her, she slid her hands down her own body, and came to the edge of the tub where he was sitting.

There was a lip molded into this side of the tub, and she knew just what it was for. She rested her knees on it as she leaned in to kiss his neck.

Her hands stroked down his chest. <<Lean back, please.>> Her voice was husky in his mind.

Luke braced himself with his hands, slightly behind him.

Her hands drifted down his abdomen. She smiled as she traced his groin muscle; it was her favourite and a distinct turn-on touching the curves that lead to his erection.

Her hand wrapped around the generous organ. She pumped the flesh, panting in tempo; opening her mouth to do so.

His chest was heaving as he was taking deep breaths through a tight mouth; his eyes refused to move off her- he wanted to watch every movement.

Her eyes, glanced down at his manhood, then back up at his begging eyes. She licked her lips as she lowered her mouth slowly down.

Luke forced himself to swallow, briefly closing his eyes; they flew open as her mouth engulfed him and his head dropped back.

Mara licked up the veiny rod; the skin soft and hot. Her tongue made circles at the tip, tasting the salty pre-cum.

She hummed as she delved down, and her mouth accommodated him. Her hand wrapped around
and followed her mouth with every stroke.

Inside her mouth, her tongue moistened the skin, heightening his sensitivity.

Her own sex throbbed, knowing what it felt like to have him deep inside her.

Deliberately, she looked up into his eyes while she administered, and he accepted, her offering.

<<Didn’t you want me to purr for you?>>

Luke nodded; too engrossed by her actions to form words from his mouth or in his head.

He gasped loudly as he felt her tongue roll inside her mouth, fluttering rapidly against his rock hard cock as her mouth worked up and down.

Mara could feel a definite pulse in his member, and she knew his rapture wasn’t far behind. She used her spare hand to rotate his jewels, being as tender as she could.

His hand came up and stroked her jawline; touching the side of her face. He could feel the hum of the purring on him.

She increased her speed, and tightened her mouth around him.

He panted harder and harder in time with her movements.

In her hand, she felt his sack constrict, as a warning.

“Gods! Maaararaa!” He moaned.

Hot juices hit the back of her throat in spurts and she swallowed them down quickly. She hummed with satisfaction, and licked her lips as she pulled away to watch his face.

Luke was still panting hard, but he reached out for her face, and brought her in and crushed his lips to hers. “I want you.” He hissed.

He pulled her forward, his cock still hard and straining, and she straddled him as he slipped into and spread her Venus depths.

Mara smiled in ecstasy, feeling him inside her again.

He lifted her with easy, and carried her to the edge of the bed, and lowered her back down. Her legs dangled over his forearms as his hands commanded her hips and he began to move in and out of her, building in speed.

Luke bared his teeth. “Purr for me again, my little kitten.” One of his hands went between their bodies; pinching and twisting the hood of her clit.

She stumbled to make her tongue roll while she gulped for air.

Her hands clenched her breasts, squeezing while he watched. But she was able to purr resonantly as she arched her back and galaxy exploded in her mind and body; convulsing with each spasm.

He slowed his thrusts, until he just couldn’t move anymore.

Luke absently, held out his hand and called the forgotten towel to him. He leaned in to kiss her, helping her recover.
Her eyes fluttered open, and her breathing was coming back to normal. She smiled, and giggled. <<Okay…We can try ‘Kitten’ for a while…>>

He laughed at her; his eyes sparkling.

He looked down at their joined bodies; she could tell what he was thinking and she lifted her hips gently. He placed the towel underneath her.

“Ready?” he asked quietly.

She reluctantly nodded, as she knew this was not going to be pleasant for their raw bodies.

He withdrew, and she puddled into the towel.

<<You are such an egomaniac…you love it when I do that!>> She glared at him, still recovering. <<Remember, it’s involuntary.>>

He snorted and smirked as he leaned to kiss her open thigh, making her squirm. “I do.” He swallowed. “That’s when I know I’ve done it right.” He winked.

Mara went to sit up, balancing herself.

Luke leaned in and brushed some of her unruly hair away from her face before he tenderly kissed her.

He stroked her cheek. <Are you thirsty?...I can bring you some water?>

She nodded and hummed, “Uh-huh.”

“Be right back.” He kissed her cheek, and then went to go retrieve the water carafe and a glass for her.

He poured into a large glass, and handed it over to her.

She gulped it down, watching him over the rim; handing the empty glass back to him.

He filled it again, and drank half of it, handing the rest back to her.

Mara looked about the room, and chuckled. “So how is R2 about cleaning up after you?” she said, before sipping from the glass. “Or should I look for my own housekeeping droid?”

Luke looked around, seeing that they made another mess. “Well, he’s not that keen on it…he most likely would set this place ablaze, destroying evidence, rather than cleaning it up.” He saw her amused look. “Astromechs are like that…cleaning is not their primary purpose.”

She chuckled, polished off the glass, and handed it back to him. “There’s robes in the ’fresher if you want one?”

She gingerly slid her body off the bed, walked over to the tub, and stepped down into the water. She cringed as the water had cooled since they had been in it. She splashed about, quickly washing herself, and then got out and padded her body down with the fairly unsullied towel, and wrapped it around her.

Mara pressed the control on the side of the tub, the jets stopped and pulled the release to drain it. Picking up the controller, she closed the drapes and turned off the ambient lights.
She turned to look at him.

Luke nodded. He was quiet; his mind was partially unsure of how long they had to be together.

“What is it?” she asked unobtrusively.

He smiled. <And tomorrow?... this was…amazing…but what happens tomorrow?>

Normally, she was the pragmatic one, and reality encroached on her mind first; very seldom did he go back to the real world before she did.

She walked over to him, stopping to pick up the data pad on the way. She sighed.

“I have a job tomorrow…early.” She said, looking down at the ground. “Then, Karrde and I are headed back to Dantooine.” <<I know you’re headed to Dalcretti…>> She looked up again to meet his sad eyes.

He nodded, accepting her body as she leaned into him. He smiled. <Okay, we’ll enjoy the time we have.> His voice was firm, and he kissed her. “I’m going to take a quick shower.” He motioned towards the ‘fresher. <Wanna come?>

Her shocked face amused him.

“No?” he smirked. “Okay, I’ll be right out.” And he walked into the next room.

Mara quickly picked up what was left of her costume and trashed it. His clothes were a little shredded too…

She looked on the availability from the hotel and ordered them both up a set of fresh clothes.

By the time he had come out the ‘fresher, a droid had delivered a new set of clothing for the both of them.

Luke looked at her with amazement as she slipped into a glimmer silk short nightgown. And somehow she had found a pair of nacroob knit sleeping pants for him.

She smiled. “It’s not uncommon for hotels to offer this service now…they have boutiques on the main floor.”

He looked over at the bundle of clothing for him to wear in the morning. She really did take care of him.

<<Come to bed with me?>>

<Of course…>

Mara walked over to the side of the bed that she normally slept on, and slipped under the covers.

Luke walked over to join her; slipping into the opposite side. He stretched out his arms and waited for her.

She rolled towards him, putting her head against his chest, and listened to his heart beat.

His arms wrapped around her, holding her close.

She looked up at him, with half closed eyes, and he knew what she was waiting for. He bent his
head and kissed her gently.

She nestled against him, eyes now fully closed and he sensed her drifting off.

With his shields in place, he knew he had kept it from her…his one regret.

Should he tell her about his contact with Palpatine?

He looked down at her, and knew that he did the right thing by not telling her.

Luke closed his eyes and let sleep take him.

**

**Morning on Tanaab**

Luke woke to an empty bed beside him. He knew that there was good chance of this.

Mara was here for reasons other than him.

She must have sensed him, and must have just recently left; he felt she was near.

<<I’ll see before I leave…I promise.>> Her voice was rushed but confident.

And then she cut her contact immediately after those words; which worried him more than her absence.

Karrde had been vague about their reasons for being there last night, and it nagged at him.

Luke wasn’t as green as they liked to tease him for. He knew that he was running with a criminal outfit. And criminal outfits don’t work within the laws of regular government.

But he knew Karrde, and he knew Mara, and unlike Karrde, Mara was just starting to develop her guidelines for her own ethics. He knew she stilled waived between doing the necessary thing and doing the right thing. What was once clear cut and simple for her, was now an ethical dilemma.

Luke knew he was the main factor for this. She glared at him every time he questioned his motives and every time he questioned her motives, as well. There were many things that she was going to give up as a Jedi; her immediate jump to confront, with death, those that stood in her way, would be her issue.

Kill it, rather than reason with it, was what she knew. And killing she was good at. But now, Luke realized that killing did come with an emotional toll. She wasn’t immune to it anymore.

He really hoped, that wasn’t what Karrde had sent her here to do.

Luke walked into the secured dock to find Karrde waiting there for him. The smuggler sat in one of the chairs around the pit, reading his data pad.

R2 rolled up to his master and spurted a long list of bleeps, burps, and twitches as his dome rotated.

“It’s okay R2…Karrde’s a friend.” He said to the little droid.

The astromech didn’t seem to believe him as it rasped that idea.

“He is too.” Luke growled at him. “Please go prep the ship?”
The droid twilled off towards the Y-wing.

Luke walked towards the other man. “Good Morning Karrde…to what do I owe this pleasure, again?”

The older man looked up from his data pad, and smiled at the new comer. “Good Morning Skywalker. I’m just waiting on Mara to finish her meeting. She seems to be running behind.”

Luke knew there was something to this ‘meeting’ that Mara was aloof about.

She liked to think that he wasn’t able to play their games, but he knew more than she thought he did.

“ Aren’t you worried about her?” Luke said, watching for a reaction. “It’s pretty dangerous where she’s going.”

Karrde looked at him, wondering if he knew the full truth. “I don’t know. Mara can take care of herself.” The smuggler called his bluff. “Did she tell you about where’s she’s headed today?” Karrde asked the Jedi directly.

Luke sighed and shook his head, his jaw locked.

“Look Skywalker…” Karrde began to explain. “There are things Mara has to do. For the record, I don’t need to ask her to do them- she just does them.” He paused. “If it makes a difference to you, she now has a moral compass…much more than she used to. But there are just somethings that she can’t unlearn.”

Luke glared at him, and tingling crept in his neck, and with it an awareness of what Mara was doing right now. “She’s gone to kill someone, hasn’t she?”

Karrde’s eyes looked away, but then came back to the other man, and nodded.


“She had to…she wanted to…” Karrde started.

“Had to? Wanted to?” Luke’s voice raised. “What’s sort of a reason is that?”

“Luke…” Karrde said quietly. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you this, but she’s gone to eliminate a man named Gilk Casis…have you ever heard of him?”

“No” Luke wasn’t losing any of his ambivalence until he got the full story.

“Casis used to be the Governor of Tanaab, but he sold his people out to the most ruthless Imperials. Since the rise of the New Republic, he’s held this government at ransom, and running his own little crime syndicate.” Karrde paused. “One of the things he does is sell information, and the other thing he does is sends out contracts on other people.”

Luke was still glaring at him, so Karrde got to his point. “He was responsible for sending Vos-fane to attack Mara. And he’s also responsible to leaking the information about your heritage. To add to it, he ordered a hit on your sister.”


“Mara is saving the New Republic precious time and effort…and saving Leia too.” Karrde murmured.
He watched the Jedi as the realization came on him. “That club you were in last night?—belongs to one of his underlings…someone who wants to rise up in the world…not the nicest guy either, but no Casis. I was paying my contact who sold Casis out; giving me the news that there would be a leak, and warning me about the contract on Leia.”

Karrde relaxed back, now knowing that he wasn’t keeping anything from the other man.

Luke’s face said it all; it lost its animosity. Now, you could see the sadness in his eyes; not for himself, but for what Mara had taken it upon herself to do in order to preserve her friends.

Luke’s hand came up over his mouth, and he slouched into the nearest chair. “And she’s still in trouble, isn’t she?”

Karrde nodded. “If this doesn’t good well, then yes. Casis isn’t kind if he suspects something.” He looked at the other man. “We’ll know soon. Mara said this wouldn’t take long.”

Luke’s face went blank for a moment, then came back. “She’s shielding…and tightly too.”

“You have that sort of contact with her?” Karrde asked.

“When she lets me in.” Luke said grimly. “Shielding was a survival technique for her…she sometimes does it without even thinking about it….whenever she wants her privacy.” He sighed. “It can isolate her, and I don’t know if I can help her or not; unless she drops the shield, and then, it might be too late.”

Karrde got up from his seat and started pacing. He checked his data pad; it was past the time that Mara said she would be done. “I’m sure she’s fine.” He hoped.

Luke paced the floor of the hangar, waiting in silence. He stopped every so often to reach out for her, but sensed nothing.

Karrde’s data pad chimed, and he opened it, checking the time. He cringed and closed it again.

Luke’s walk wasn’t making the time any easier, he turned to Karrde, about to offer to go find her when he felt it; her touch. As clear as if she was right beside him.

<<Luke! Ask Karrde to prep the ship…we have to blast out of here… my ETA is 5 minutes.>>

He wanted to ask a volley of questions.

<<Yes, I’m fine…I’ll be there shortly.>>

Luke turned to Karrde, his eyes distant; still straining to keep contact. “Mara is alright…she’s on her way…she wants you to prep the ship…you’ll have to make a run for it.”

Karrde got up from his seat and swallowed. “I’ll be right back…I’ll go start the sequence.” He left the hangar.

Luke exhaled, clearing his senses. “R2!” The droid chirped. “Lifts up in five minutes! We’re running escort for Karrde!”

The droid chirped heading for his socket.

He could sense the tightness in the air before she got there.

His hand went for his lightsabre as the side hangar door wooshed open.
She looked different; her eyes had no life to them, but she felt satisfied. When she saw him, her shields dropped.

Luke half-ran to her, and wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her into his embrace.

Mara exhaled hard, and let him hold her. “It’s over, Luke…Leia is safe.”

“I know.” He said. “I know.” He kissed the side of her cheek, knowing how much sacrifice it took for her to do that.

She let him rock her as the numbness that was needed to do this job, was leaving her.

Karrde stood at the doorway just watching them. Skywalker did have a miracle effect on her; he could make her human in an instant. If this is what Luke did for her, than he would make every effort for those two to be together.

Mara looked into Luke’s face, as her eyes warmed, and blinked with feeling. She leaned in and pressed her lips to his. <<I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you…I needed to do it…please understand?>>

<I do, Mara… I do.> He kissed her back, but he could sense that she knew they had no time to waste.

He rested his fore head against hers.

“Luke…I…” She searched for the right words.

“You have to go.” He finished her thoughts. “I know.” He sighed. “Get to your ship and I’ll follow you out.”

Mara broke away from him and walked towards Karrde, she turned back before she was at the door, to see her farm boy one more time. She turned back and followed Karrde into the next hangar.

With no clearance, both ships took off immediately; one right after another.

Luke followed the small cruiser out of orbit until it cleared the gravity well, and watched as the afterburners flared before it disappeared into light speed.

He felt the touch of her mind before the ship vanished.

<Mara’s Mission>

The building that Gilk Cassis had holed himself up in was clearly designed to impress. Clean lines, lots of glass, and lots of metal. And empty; telling her that no one came into this building unless they were supposed to be there.

Mara strode in confidently into the lobby.

She had no appointment, no calling card, but they seemed to be expecting her.

The first set of guards motioned her off to the side; out of the way of prying eyes if there was even the remote chance of other people being around.

**

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Mara strode in confidently into the lobby.

She had no appointment, no calling card, but they seemed to be expecting her.

The first set of guards motioned her off to the side; out of the way of prying eyes if there was even the remote chance of other people being around.
The lobby was too pristine to dismantle a body; the floors might get stained.

The first detector they had her walk through was to find any weapons that she might have on her.

As it beeped when she walked through it the first time, she promptly removed the weapons that were in plain site; a random blaster from her hip holster, and one vibroknife from her boot.

When she walked through it again, and it beeped. She stepped aside, and removed the concealed weapons.

The security guards all had their hands on their blasters as she moved; she knew that they would not hesitate to use them.

Mara met their eyes and didn’t flinch. They knew who she was, or had heard the rumors; probably warned to be prepared for anything.

Her movements suggested that she was following their silent orders, and she moved slowly and placidly; she pulled out the small blades that appeared to be decorations on her jacket.

The last bit that she sensed surprised them, was her hair clasp; she removed it, releasing her tresses, and hit the hidden button that turned the edges meant to catch hair into a series of blades.

All of her weapons, deadly in her hands.

She walked through the detector again- no beep sounded.

The head guard nodded, and motioned for her to follow him. Two other guards walked behind her as she was lead to a turbo lift.

They filed into the lift and she didn’t bother to move her head to look at the other men, but she could sense they were uneasy with being so close to her in confined quarters.

She didn’t breathe too loudly should it cause them to go for their blasters.

The lift came to a stop just before the top level of the building. Cassis had made a fortress just as much as he had made a castle for himself.

The doors opened and the guards walked forward; she kept in line with their positions, not diverting at all from them; clearly Imperial trained.

As they stepped off, another four guards joined them. She was motioned over to another detector, and the head guard presented her with a white cotton robe.

She raised an eyebrow, as it was clear what they were telling her to do.

The head guard held her questioning glance sternly, and she caught it ever-so minutely; his glare faltered, and he swallowed quietly.

Mara watched his face and held her eyes on his as she slipped her jacket off her shoulders; folding it precisely, and handing it over to one of the guards beside her. She kicked off her half boots; unbuckled her hip holster; folding it too, and handing it over.

She unzipped the front of her jumpsuit, revealing her nakedness to the guards; eyes not leaving the guard in front of her. She folded it too, and once again handing it over.

She stretched out her hand, with the palm up, asking for the robe.
She shook it out, then slip one arm through the sleeve, and then the other arm. She wrapped the thin fabric around herself, noticing they had removed the belt.

The head guard motioned her towards the detector. She knew it was a body scanner, so she walked into the downward beam, and stood, letting her hands drop to her sides; the robe opened slightly- she let it.

The scanner beeped a negative, indicating that she was entire organic materials and no foreign objects were found on her.

The head guard nodded, and motioned her to follow him again.

Mara fell in line to their position again; only the head guard lead the way; the other guards stayed behind.

As she walked down the corridor, she saw other guards behind security monitors, watching every second of every room; except Cassis’s office; he was the type to not allow it.

At the end of the corridor, as they approached, large thick metal doors opened for them. The guard stopped short of the doors and gestured for her to go in.

Mara walked into the sparse room, stopping before she reached the middle of the room, and the doors closed behind her.

The room faced a wall of windows, looking out on Tanaab. The rest of the walls were silver metal. The floor was cream coloured carpet. Aside from the texture of the metal walls, the only things in the room was a small pillow on the floor, and an unlit burner beside it.

To her left, the metal wall revealed its hidden door as it slid open and Cassis entered the room.

He was just as she remembered, perhaps aged slightly. He was of medium height, and at one time medium build, but now excess had added to his waist.

His greying hair was slicked back, and his brown eyes narrowed as he saw her. He wore a decorative robe and carried only one piece of filmsy.

Some twenty years, plus, older than her, he stood at the doorway, regarding her; showing no emotion.

Mara recalled reading in her dossier on him that he favored the style and fashion of the Jinitsi; their simplistic decorations and streamlined aesthetics.

He may have bought his style, but at his essence, he was vulgar, rude and not below using anything he could to advance his own position or offset an opponent.

She could sense he was intrigued as to why she was there, and like a good Imperial, she waited until she was spoken to.

He kept his glare, and kept his distance as he walked closer to her. When he was satisfied, he spoke.

“Emperor’s Hand…what a pleasure and honor it is that you’ve come to visit me.” His voice was deep and trying to be friendly, but ending up sounding condescending. His mouth smiled but his eyes didn’t.

Mara’s mouth upturned slightly, indicating that she posed no threat to him; green eyes following him
like a cat. “Cassis.” She said dispassionately.

He eyed her up and down and she could feel his leering gaze. “The years have been good to you.”

It wasn’t the first time a governor had made the mistake of thinking that she was only in the palace for pleasure, as much as she was there to do the Emperor’s bidding. No doubt, the rumours of her bedmates travelled. The fact that those bedmates were nowhere to be found was obscured by fantasy.

He walked a bit closer to her. “I must admit that I’m surprised to see you.” He paused, tilting his head to the side. “Well, perhaps not.” He eyed her up and down, knowing that she was at a disadvantage of having no weapons, and no clothes.

“We were able to track you.” He watched her face for any expression. “You were one of the operatives that didn’t have your beacon removed after you left service.”

She raised an eyebrow slowly.

“You didn’t think I knew about those did you?” Cassis was proud of himself. “Yes, I knew about your homing implant, and every other agent’s too.”

He was clearly enjoying being superior to her. “And you thought they were only supposed to be turned on when your body temperature dropped to eighty-three degrees…to find your dead corpse.”

He jerked his chin in her direction. “Shows what you know. I’ve been able to use them to locate your covert friends. How did you think I was able to send Vos-fane to find you on Dantooine?”

“Seems more than one former agent has come out of the woodwork, since the regrouping of the new fleet.” He muttered.

“You’ll excuse me if I don’t offer you a refreshment…I doubt you would take it, and I would hate to arm you with a sharp piece of glass.” He said snidely. Clearly, he had heard of her reputation.

He looked smugly satisfied with himself. “I suppose you’re here to beg for your life?”

Mara’s look didn’t change. “No.”

Cassis was entirely amused. “No?” He walked a little closer. “Then, I must admit I’m at a loss as to why you’re here.” No, he wasn’t; he knew why she was there.

She waited as his fake curiosity brought him in. “I’m here to offer my services in exchange for dropping your contract on me.”

“Oh, well, now I am intrigued.” He was three meters away now, still what he thought was a safe distance. “Please do explain.”

Her eyes were blank as she spoke. “I want to exchange my contract for that of the one on Organa-Solo.”

His pupils dilated, she noticed but his voice was controlled. “That is very amusing.” His upper lip curled. “What would your boss, Talon Karrede, have to say about that? Isn’t she in his pet politician?”

“Hardly.” She snorted. “He’s had business with the New Republic, but it was purely for profit.” She paused, playing a touch of humility. “He doesn’t know I’m here.”

“Acting on your own accord? Still hate the Rebel Scum, do you?” Cassis hummed.
He walked across from her, coming closer, a clear visage of lust. “And what of the rumours, of you in Skywalker’s bed? Does he kriff you as hard as Vader did to his own whores? I hear Daddy liked it hard and rough.”

Mara blinked once, still not showing emotion. “He does.” Her lip twitched, for his satisfaction.

Cassis smiled nastily. “Well, Daddy Vader had his little redhead in Shira Brie, and now his son dips his cock in your ginger honey pot.” He was still trying to get a rise out of her. “Rumor had it that Daddy sent his son a gift in Brie also. I’ll bet the Jedi pumped her full too. Who do you think she preferred; father or son? So, you, clearly, weren’t junior’s first redhead.”

She said nothing, silently watching.

He backed off as, clearly, she was not bothered. “Convenient, it would be for you, too? No? Sleeping with Organa-Solo’s brother...”

“They trust me.” She said blankly. “That’s how I’ll get in.”

He laughed. “You are one cold bitch. Do you know that?” He walked over to the pillow on the floor, still holding the filmsy in one of his hands, and motioned for her to join him.

He knelt in the Jinitsi way, and rested his palms on his thighs.

“Why do you think I was so successful.” She said, walking in front of where he was kneeling. His eyes followed her movements as she knelt to the same position as he did; her robe opening.

Cassis’s lips parted as he exhaled, watching her come down. “I see the drapes match the carpet.” He sneered.

He cleared his throat, not liking to have his power taken away from him by her body. “You were successful because the Emperor favored you. But you weren’t good enough to catch me.”

Mara gave him a tight smile. “I was never assigned to you.” She paused. “But I did finish Acer.”

He smiled broadly. “I know... He was about to betray me... I must say, that was expertly done.” He leaned in. “As a point of professional pride, what did you use?...you can tell me.”

She held her smile. “Neurotoxins and a highly effective coagulant.” The corner of her mouth pulled to one side, and then relaxed. “I had to apply them internally.”

Cassis was riveted. “And how did you do that?”

“I fisted him.” She said blankly.

He laughed crudely at the misfortunes of his colleague. “I’ll bet he died with a smile on his warped face.”

“He did.” She said.

Mara could sense that he was losing his apprehensions about her.

Cassis turned on the burner to his right side.

She knew what it was for; she was to memorize the details then destroy the order. He liked his old fashioned ways because there was less of a trail.
He hesitated before handing the filmsy over to her; there was a quiver as he handed it over to her.

Mara took it from him with one hand and looked down at the instructions, reading some of the details.

She looked up. “You want it to be public. That’s an unusual request.” She turned her glance over to the burner, while she expected an answer.

Cassis sighed. “Yes, well the New Emperor wants a show of loyalty. I have no intention of joining up with the new command, but I’ll need to court their favor just as well. Nothing proves loyalty more than a public gift.”

She started folding the filmsy in her hands, preparing it for the fire. “I have no intention of joining the new command either.”

“He has called out to you yet?” Cassis said conversationally. “I’m sure He will soon.”

He watched her hands, folding the filmsy; dismissing it as a habit. “Well, if Karrde shucks you to the curb for this, you can always come and work for me... You will need to... Skywalker will be after your throat after you kill his sister.”

Mara looked at him. “I doubt that will ever happen.”

It was less than a second and with Force-enhanced reflexes, he wouldn’t have seen it coming, the two fast-moving strikes. Cassis’s face froze; unable to yell, unable to move, his eyes faded away.

“Karrde pays better than you do.” She said quietly, then dropped the piece of filmsy she had shaped into a fine dagger, into the burner.

Cassis leaned forward to bow deeply.

Mara leaned forward, bowing to him as well.

Smoothly, she got up from the kneeling position, turned and walked out of the room.

Cassis’s body didn’t move.

She retrieved her clothes, her weapons and left the building without being stopped.

By the time she was walking out of the lobby into her waiting speeder, she sensed the panic from inside the building. They must have found the body.

She sent out her senses to Luke, asking him to tell Karrde to prep the ship.

They would need to have leave in a hurry.

**

TBC

Chapter End Notes

**
So what do we think of the nickname ‘Kitten’ my little smutlings? –your input is wanted…

If you come up with one…I have no problem testing it out in a story. Wink-wink!

That’s right…begging for comments again…y’all were silent on the last chapter…just saying.

Who do I have to have Mara kill with a piece of filmsy to get you to leave a comment?

How much girl-cum do I need her to shoot all over Luke in order to get you to write something?

'Are you not entertained?'--sorry it's really early in the morning and Russell Crowe came to mind.... Seriously!

:) --just kidding, I like having her kill people and get juicy for Luke...whether you're reading and enjoying or not.

**
Recovery & Resuscitation Part 1

Chapter Summary

Quote: She would take care of him if he made it Dantooine- she would yell at him first for getting himself into this…but then, she would help him.

Characters: Luke, Mara, Dankin, medics…and Noghri

Chapter Notes

**
I’ve never been much of a writer…but as it is for me, when I write…I write with parts of a story in my head…chapters within chapters.
So when it comes to writing LM fanfiction, I have a way that I want their story to play out…and in this chapter, well, I shamelessly stole my own plot bunny.

Somewhere along the way, I like to think that all my stories are connected, no matter if they were written with the same tone or not.
I thiefed from my own story…just a little… well, okay, a lot… there’s one or two bunnies that I’m holding for ransom, from ‘The Many Faces of Mara’ in this story… please don’t judge me too harshly. If you like this chapter, then I’ll put back the bunnies, unharmed…if not, then I’m having rabbit stew. –wicked grin.

Also, I have no idea how to play Sabacc, I just write things…please don’t point out if I did something wrong?

Sorry, I’m still a little dehydrated from my smut on the last chapter…this one is all plot and relationship development…yawn!
Please enjoy…

I still should be working on cosplay…35 days until con.

**

Leaving Dalcretti

He hurt.

Everything hurt.

With every breath, he could feel the pain in his lungs. Maybe he had a few broken ribs, along with the singe of a blaster burn.

He had barely made it off of Dalcretti.

Luke shifted his weight inside the cockpit of his damage Y-wing, to accommodate his comfort, and
trying to relieve his pain. The Jedi techniques for controlling pain and healing were failing him.

This was his second attempt at a trance, and it wasn’t coming to him.

He had let R2 take over piloting, and with systems failing on the Y-wing, he knew he was not going to make it to Yavin to get help. He needed to stop somewhere along the way.

Luke grunted as he eased his sides and shifted again; he listed off the options to him.

On limited power, and marginally working shield defenses, he had few options.

He couldn’t go back to Coruscant; since the news of his parentage broke, both he and Leia were outcasts. That alienation had extended into other worlds too, as he had just found out. So, he needed a place that either didn’t know, or didn’t care about who he was.

The limited power on the Y-wing meant that he needed somewhere close; within a safe distance, hopefully, on the way to Yavin.

He was injured; he needed medical treatment, preferably sooner than later.

In a whim, he checked how far he was from Dantooine. He grimaced. He knew it was a long shot, but she was there.

Luke had lost count of the days since he seen her.

He had started to count the hours while Dalcretti, hunkered down with a Rebel cell, but he lost count after the first few days as his mind was occupied with other things while he was there.

‘A week?’ he asked himself…maybe more…probably more.

She would take care of him if he made it Dantooine- she would yell at him first for getting himself into this…but then, she would help him.

It wasn’t going to help him to daydream about her now. Although, perhaps the reason his mind kept drifting was from not longing, but from blood loss.

The star chart told him he was also delusional. Dantooine was not an option; it was too far out of the way.

Last resort. “R2?” Luke winched as he spoke over the comm to the droid. “We need a safe place…with a medical center…within the area…what have you got?”

The droid twittered, and bleeped. He listened as the droid whirled threw its data banks, and then it chirped a confirmation, sending the data over to the readout in front of Luke.


R2 blipped and twittered back at him, and Luke read the translation.

‘Politically neutral…private medical facility…along the Parlemian Trade Route…’ He huffed a few more times, as his sides hurt from trying to stay upright, and he relaxed back down into the reclining seat, just to think about what he read.

He sat up briefly just to check the rest of the details on The Roche Belt…asteroids were not his favourite, he grimaced.
That’s not true at all…he actually loved dodging asteroids; as fast as his X-wing was, it made him feel like a kid again, but right now, he was not in his X-wing, and it was out of the question.

So Roche was colonized by Verpines; they had no allegiances either way – a plus…private medical facility for the miners of the asteroid belt- a plus…and it was a bit of a stretch, but there was lots of traffic on the Parlemian Route—if he ran into trouble, he could possibly get a lift – a plus. And as an extra plus, the Parlemian Route crossed with the Gordian Reach, leading right to Yavin.

“R2?” he called, bracing his side again. “Do we have enough power to get us there? And what’s our time frame?”

The droid twittered back. The power was good as long as they didn’t pull max speed on the hyperdrive, and he could try for another trance while R2 got them there…a few hours would help him.

Last question: “Okay R2?- Do you think you can handle the asteroids?” Luke knew he may not be able to pilot the way there.

Roche wasn’t a fast moving belt, and as long as the Y-wing shields held, it could take a few hits without doing any real damage. The truth was that Luke hoped he could ditch the Y-wing as soon as possible and get a friendly ride to Yavin.

R2 whirled and hummed, not sounding extremely confident.

“You can wake me up if you want me to take us through…but can you get us there?” Luke said over to the droid.

The little astromech considered it, then chirped an affirmative.

“Alright…let’s get us moving…and don’t forget the wake-up call?” Luke remind him. The droid chipped back, and he involuntarily chuckled, but his sides reminded him that wasn’t idea.

He relaxed back down into the seat, and begun to relax his mind; a few more hours…just a few more hours.

The third time was the charm.

**

Roche Asteroid Belt

In the distance, he could hear the whistling and chirping of his droid. The noise grew louder, then louder; and Luke was becoming more aware of it.

His hand hit his visor as he tried to rub his eyes, but he was reminded of the pain in his left side as he did.

He also felt more pain as the repulse lifts engaged, and the Y-wing bounced absorbing the shock when it touched down on a landing platform.

Luke raised up his seat and looked out the viewport of the Y-wing to see that they had arrived at the medical center.

The rocky terrain had been paved over to allow easy access inside the domed facility, but the atmosphere was still hostile, and Luke brought up his mask over his mouth as he prepared to
He was confident he would be able to walk himself inside, after all his legs weren’t broken….maybe.

The canopy of the Y-wing opened and he felt the dense air hit him. He was on an asteroid so the gravity could shift without warning. Until he was inside the complex, he wouldn’t be entirely safe.

Luke undid the connectors to his crash harness and looked over the edge before he motioned to stand up to see that R2 had already freed himself and was waiting for him. The droid, and his terra-grav sensors would help him to the doors, meters away.

He prepared himself, calling the Force into himself not to feel the pain, as he pushed himself to stand, and step outside the canopy. He slipped down to the ground and place his left hand on the dome of the droid; the right hand wrapped around his ribs, holding himself.

R2 lead the way as his master limped beside him.

Luke was breathing hard, holding his left side all the way. He had no idea what he must have looked like, but he knew it wasn’t good. He had tasted blood in his mouth more than once since leaving Dalcretti.

The first hatched opened easily as they approached, and the second opened immediately after the first hatch closed and the air lock had been engaged.

When he was inside the complex, Luke pulled off his mask and stopped to lean against a wall and rest. He closed his eyes for a moment, waiting until he was ready.

He must have gone unconscious; a shake at his shoulder, reminded him that it hurt too, but what surprised him was the tall insectoid aliens hovering over him.

He had never met a Verpine, but he knew of the species. They didn’t speak Basic, but the ones that weren’t cloned drones, were intelligent and telepathic.

“I need medical attention.” He said knowing they understood him; he could sense it through the Force.

Luke sensed they were concerned for him and were trying to find a way to transport him to another area for assistance.

“I can walk.” He said. “I can follow you.” He huffed out of his ailing lungs.

They looked at each other, and motioned for him to follow them. R2 chirped concern as Luke pushed himself from the wall and followed them. The droid stayed beside him for balance.

They walked down a short corridor and through another set of doors into a waiting room.

Luke stumbled to the first desk, and braced himself on the high counter as a med droid approached.

In its calm voice, it said. “Greetings human, what services may we provide you with today?”


“Medical history is preferred.” The Med-droid informed him.

Luke motioned with his hand and R2 rolled around to the other side of the desk, extending his input arm.
“That will be sufficient, human.” The Med-droid said.

Even though he was fighting the pain, Luke had the wherewithal to mumble. “R2, protocol 115.”

There probably wasn’t the need for one of his aliases, but why risk it. R2 would load a false name, but not a false medical history, and most important in a place like this, not a false credit availability.

The data retrieved twirled around as R2 inserted his arm, and the light blinked green.

“Do you need to be analyzed, human?” The Med-droid asked.


One of the Verpines motioned to him, and Luke staggered to follow him behind the desk into the med unit.

The Verpine stopped in front of a hover bed, and it lowered to allow Luke to sit down.

The center wasn’t extremely busy, but humans and aliens bustled by, as they prepared him to be examined.

The Verpine tilted his head in opposite directions, and Luke sensed the Verpine’s desire for his relief and contented that it could provide assistance.

Luke looked up into its eyes. “Thank you…for all you’ve done.” He said.

The Verpine bowed and moved away.

R2 rolled up beside the bed, and Luke patted his dome. “You did good.” He mumbled.

While he waited, he took off his helmet with his left hand as right was clutched against his ribs. He briefly wondered how long he was going to have to wait to see a medic, as he watched the persons pass him by in the hall.

He lowered his head to control his breathing and call on the Force once again to control the pain. His senses were aware, so he felt the shock when someone recognized him.

The person approached and Luke looked up to see a face he knew.

“What are you doing here?” Dankin asked.

The smuggler was amazed, and worried; so Luke knew he must have looked bad.


“I’ll say so.” Dankin replied, looking the Jedi over.

Luke didn’t know him very well, but he knew Dankin was a friend to Mara, so he was safe with him.

Suddenly, it dawned on him. “Why are you here?”

With his senses open, Luke felt the apprehension that bordered on fear, in the other man immediately.

Dankin hung his head. “Mara.” he said quietly.
The distress must have shown on Luke’s face before he could find words to get further information.

“No, no…she’s okay!” Dankin said quickly. “She’s just here to have some voluntary procedures… that’s all…she’s alright…she’s just undergoing them now…she’ll be fine!”

Luke, in his pain haze, didn’t realize that he reacted by standing up and going for his lightsaber; no wonder Dankin had backed up with hands raised.

“Where is she?” Luke asked haggardly, as he lowered himself back down.

“She’s having the procedures right now…she should be out within the next two hours.” Dankin repeated, watching and amazed at the pain threshold of the Jedi. “We just got here yesterday.”

“We?” Luke asked.

“Yeah, Karrde sent me and some Noghri with her.” Dankin explained.

“Noghri?” He looked at the other man, but he was getting dizzy.

A medic came over to them. “Excuse me, Gentles, but we must get Captain Cathro to an examination bay.”

Dankin nodded, as he realized that Luke was using an alias.

“I want to see her.” Luke grumbled, sounding determined but his body was being uncooperative on the point.

“I’m sorry.” The medic said. “But you are in no condition to move, Sir.”

Dankin must have saw it, so he said the only thing that might make the Jedi willing to get some treatment. “She’ll kill you if you don’t go with them…to get some treatment.”

Luke snorted and waivered, before he nodded and lay down into the hover bed to accept treatment.

As he hit the bed, things started to blur. He felt the medic fight at his flight suit for skin.

“I want to see her.” He heard himself say before the darkness came.

**

Dankin saw the Jedi and was in disbelief. He may not be as connected with the legendary man, but he knew him well enough that seeing Skywalker in a medical center, and in his condition, warranted a call to Karrde.

After a quick message, his boss instructed him to have one of the Noghri moved to cover the unconscious Jedi. Then, see that medical services were extended to Skywalker. And when they were able, have the Rebel hero moved to be with Mara; they could recover next to each other.

Dankin wasn’t sure for the fuss, but given the latest rumors about Skywalker and his sister, he knew the only option was to do it.

Besides, maybe as the Jedi recovered, he could be the one to talk him into a Sabacc game, and then he would have bragging right over Aves.

As a benefit, he knew it would also make Mara happy.
Dankin grinned before he went to work, making things happen.

**

Luke opened his eyes slowly. He still hurt.

It was a different version of ‘hurt’ this time. This time, it was the hurt of healing, and not the hurt from being injured.

He blinked a few more times because he didn’t believe what he was seeing.

Staring back at him, were the most beautiful pair of green eyes in the galaxy; and with those eyes, the most beautiful face.

She was concerned, but managed a smile.

He smiled back; it didn’t hurt.

<Hi.> He thought weakly.

Mara snorted quietly. <<Hi there. I’ve been waiting for you to wake up.>>

He breathed deeply, cleanly…lungs still hurts. <How long have I been out?>

Her face was concerned. << For over a day now…about 32 hours.>>

Luke was gaining his awareness. He could see R2 in the corner, quietly chirping and plugged into a power unit.

The room was reasonably nice for a med ward; with all the conveniences that Karrde’s money could buy for Mara.

He was lying on a hover bed, on his right side. She must have been on a hover bad too, as they were eye to eye.

A memory of recovering together after Wayland flashed in his mind.

He remembered that they had held hands across the beds, and he panicked— he couldn’t feel his right hand—he flex it.

“Ow!” She winced.

He looked over and saw that were indeed holding hands, except his right hand was missing its synth flesh…no wonder he couldn’t feel her hand in his.

“I’m sorry.” His voice cracked and came out as only a whisper.

Her gaze softened. “You didn’t know.” She whispered. “I missed you.”

Luke smiled back. “I missed you too.” He tried swallowing to bring moisture back into his mouth, but all he got for his efforts was a nasty taste.

He recognized the taste immediately; he must have had a Bacta dip while he was out.

Mara chuckled slightly. “I made sure that they rinsed you twice…to get all your goo out.”

He tried to chuckle; his left side admonished him with pain.
She moved away from him; her own movements slowly and gingerly, and Luke could see the she was wearing a simple sleeping set in a soft grey, her hair pulled into a ponytail, and bare feet; around her neck was his pendant, kept close to her heart. She looked gorgeous.

She turned back to him, moving delicately, favoring her body, and holding the room control. He watched her press a few buttons. She then lay back down across from him, and he assumed she took his hand again because of her position.

“They’ll be here with some water.” She said, still watching his face. “You missed midday meal…”

Luke sighed; he wanted to shift position but that would mean he couldn’t see her.

Mara’s eyes narrowed. “I can move around, you know.”

He looked back at her, and she nodded. He rolled onto his back, and tensed up for the pain that would occur…and it wasn’t as bad as he thought.

She reached across at the controls on his bed, and it rose so that he was still reclining, but could he could see her.

“So why are you here?” He finally asked, the curiosity was getting to him. “Dankin said something about it being ‘voluntary’…”

Before she could answer a service droid rolled in with some crackers and a large pitcher of water. The droid proceeded to pour two glasses of water and placed the pitcher and crackers on a small hover table that both of them could access; and rolled out of the room.

Mara sat up and reached for the water, pushed the table in his direction; distracted by the crackers which it seemed both patients were only allowed to have.

It was Luke’s turn for his eyes to narrow. “Why are you avoiding the question, Mara?”

“Why are you here?” She abruptly asked him.

“I think my condition is pretty clear, it’s yours that I’m more concerned about. And why did Karrde send Noghri to guard you?”

She lay back down on her back and crossed her arms on her chest; looking up at the ceiling.

Luke sighed; she wasn’t ready to answer his question, so he thought the best way to get her talking was to start talking himself.

“They found out.” He said, looking straight ahead. “They didn’t trust me to begin with…because I had resigned my commission. Most of them had fought with the Rebellion all their lives, and thought that I was a deserter.”

He closed his eyes, but continued to talk. “I thought I was going there to find out about Imperial activity in area, and I found out that there’s something out there greater than, and much more serious than the Empire.”

That caught her interest and she turned on her side to look at him again. He could sense that she was curious.

Luke reached for the water, and took a sip before he continued. “It’s not an ‘Empire’ yet…and I’m not entirely convinced that they’re not one and the same…but it turned out to be a Storm Trooper
training facility of some sorts.”

He coughed a bit. “And then there were the Star Destroyers…definitely Imperial design…Victory Class…hovering in orbit. We followed the drop of the several shuttles, but apparently our group was known to local authorities, and one of our raids…they were waiting for us. Clearly, they knew we were coming.”

His chest heaved. “We were locked down for what seemed like days. While we were stuck…the news…it came across the comm…about me and Leia.”

Luke went quiet, trying to remember what was said and what happened. His mind was still figuring out the details.

“They turned on me.” He said. “They thought I had betrayed them…and at one point, they were going to barter their freedom for my life over to the Imperials, or whatever they are.”

“I was able to get out of there…I was trying to head to Yavin.” He rolled his eyes. “I’ve been in worse shape.”

He looked over at her.

Mara watched him; her eyes were disappointed for him. “Tanaab is now under Imperial control.” She said quietly.

“There’s been four other attacks since you left.” Her voice was a little louder. “But not Coruscant…yet. Just disrupting standard trade routes and supply planets, for now.”

Luke nodded slowly.

“How long have I been gone?” He asked.

“It’s been almost two weeks since we were on Tanaab.” She answered.

He shook his head. “Two weeks?” He closed his eyes; his head hurt. “Leia…I have to contact Leia.”

“Karrde did that when you came here.” She said. “To tell her what you did to yourself…and that you were under care.”

He snorted instead of chuckled because the first choice was less painful. “He told on me?”

Mara mock-glared at him. “If he didn’t…I was going to.”

“Snitch.” He jibed.

“Jedi.” She shot back.

Luke smiled; at least he could count on Mara’s acerbic wit to keep him entertained.

“Okay…now it’s your turn…why are you here?” He asked again, sensing that maybe this time she would tell him.

“I’m trying to erase my past again.” She whispered.

Mara sighed. “When I was in service…we, special ops…we were all implanted with a homing beacon. It was designed to send out a signal if your core temperature went below eighty-three degrees.” She was looking off into the distance.
She looked back at him as he furrowed his brow, not quite understanding.

“It was to find my corpse...if I ever went missing...it was implanted at my spine.” She swallowed. “I found out, while on Tanaab, that it could be turned on even if I wasn’t dead...to track me, and my whereabouts.”


Mara shook her head. “I wish it was simple, but it never is. Karrde sent me to a medic on Dantooine, and he wouldn’t remove it. We tried a second medic, and they refused too...and a third. So we had to search for someone...and someplace that would remove it with no questions asked. This place...is for pure profit...they don’t ask.”

She chuckled, angrily. “Turns out, it just wasn’t a beacon though. I found out this morning that it’s been triggering adrenaline doses by shocks to my nervous systems since it was first put in my body...causing among other things, insomnia, paranoia, rapid heartbeat, and as it affected my brain, it also causes mood swings.”

“So that wasn’t your charming personality that I fell for?” Luke asked, trying to lighten the mood.

She tilted her head to side and gave him a glare, then softened, and grinned tightly for his attempt at humor, and snorted.

“And here I thought it was that jumpsuit and my blaster that you fell for?” She sent back to him snidely.

He snorted.

They had to joke; both of them had horrible things done to them in the name of other people’s causes – if they didn’t find amusement somewhere, and at least with each other, they would be very different people.

Mara looked down, her serious tone returning. “Apparently, it increased a portion in my brain...”

“Your medulla oblongata...” He said.

She looked at him, astounded. “How did you know that?”

Luke sighed. “When you were in for neural regeneration, after the Katana Battle...the neurologist told me that you had an enlarged medulla oblongata...it wasn’t damaged, just enlarged...he wanted me to give him the okay to fix it...I told him to leave you that way you were...but I thought they would have told you or Karrde about it at the time.”

“You were around during my regeneration?” She asked, surprised.

He nodded. “Every day for your conscious treatments...” He smiled. “You had no one to visit you, other than Ghent...and you were very entertaining.”

“I don’t remember anything...”

He smiled. “They told me you wouldn’t...that’s why I visited you...we weren’t exactly friendly at the time.” He closed his eyes again, suppressing his pain.

They were so different now from what they were then; their relationship had most-certainly changed but they had also changed as people.
He had promised himself that he wasn’t going to tell her about her time in the med ward, but it was
time that they started to have no secrets from each other.

“The flowers!...that was you?” She was shocked as it dawned on her.

He opened his eyes to see that she had gotten off her bed and had come over to his.

He nodded, and weakly smiled.

She reached across the bed, and kissed him passionately.

Luke had almost forgotten what her lips felt like without touching them for nearly two weeks. They
were soft, firm, tender; pursing against his own and leaving him breathless but he wanted more…and
working past the pain…he still wanted more.

<<Thank you….for being you.>> She sent over to him; he sensed just how much that little gesture
meant to her. She was very alone at the time, and he was confused and conflicted by everything that
he felt for her.

When their kiss broke, his cybernetic right hand came up and touched her cheek; she didn’t flinch
away from it. He had no sensation in it because of the missing synth flesh, but it was just a reflex
action of wanting to touch her skin.

“I should go back to my bed…I’m not supposed to be out of it.” She said, still desperately looking at
his face; her eyes were on the verge of tears. “They threatened to tie me down when I first saw you
come in.” <<I wanted to be with you….it scared me to see you like that.>>

She moved as if she, too, was in pain…there must be something more…

“I didn’t think having an implant removed would take you this long to heal?” He asked.

Mara slipped back under the covers of her bed, and turned to face him.

“They had to make sure there was no damage to my spinal column, but I’m not just in for that.” She
said in hushed tones, lowering her head.

Luke could sense there was something else besides these procedures she had; it was something that
had lingering emotional pain for her too.

She had things done to her against her will; the Emperor broke her in so many ways that it would
take years to find all the pieces and put them back together.

“I tried to have my tattoo removed.” She said glumly. “But they won’t do that on account of the type
of ink that was used. Apparently, titanium ink will cause immediate blood poisoning if it tries to be
removed from the body.”

“Tattoo?” He asked quietly. He didn’t recall seeing any mark on her.

“It’s an Imperial insignia between my toes on my left foot. All special forces had them.” She said,
keeping her head down. “I’ll have it for the rest of my life.”

Something told him, that wasn’t the end of it either.

“Mara” He said quietly. “What else did they do to you?”

There was silence from her. And Luke could feel his concern growing.
In the quiet of the room, he heard her swallow, and sniffle a few times; holding back.

"<Please tell me?> He sent over.

She seemed to get her composure, then turned to look at him; her eyes filled with unshed tears.

"After Wayland, while were recuperating, I had a full physical. I hadn’t had one in years…they poked and prodded everything.” She sighed. “I knew about it before then…I just didn’t bother to have it seen to.”

“I was on the run before I came to work for Karrde. And when I started working for him, I was so busy that I didn’t have time for such a thing. Also, I didn’t think I’d ever have the sort of life that could allow for…” She swallowed. “children.”

Her face went distant. “They told me when I had it done that it would remove any distractions that I might have. I wouldn’t have a normal cycle that other women do. I wouldn’t have any accidental inconveniences. And for Palpatine, I wouldn’t have any accidental apprentices.” She shook her head. “Or adversaries.”

“They put another implant in me, to chemically sterilize me.” She said.

The realization horrified Luke.

She continued. “And because of years of being ignored, there was also some other damage.” Her eyes came back to him. “So, I’m here to have those things fixed…hopefully. They won’t know until they run some more tests. And I’ll need another procedure.”

Luke was at a loss for words – that’s why she didn’t want to discuss children.

She sighed, and pulled up more of the blanket over herself.

"<I really want to hold you right now.> He relaxed, trying to control a rising anger in him. So he sent over as much of his sense of comfort that he could; wrapping and warming her as he would have if he had her in his arms.

He watched as one tear rolled to the side of her face. He had never seen her truly cry about anything.

Mara blinked a few times, to remove the other tears threatening to leave her eyes. She closed her eyes as she accepted his feelings around her.

“I didn’t even think I would want children…ever…” She mumbled. “…and then…”

<What?> he asked gently.

<<You came along…and the visions…>> She blinked. <<…and I saw Leia’s children…>>

“I know.” He whispered. “I never thought of it…and then when I learned who my father was, I was convinced that having a family would be out of the question….” He paused. “And then, I also thought I wouldn’t find anyone that I would…care for…that would want to have a family with me.” He knew he had chosen his words carefully; this was not the time to spook her with his feelings.

She stared into his eyes. <<You know, I was going to say something to you, back on Tanaab…I wanted to…and then, I couldn’t…I still don’t know why I couldn’t…but then, I saw you when you came in here, and I thought it was time to stop playing with these coincidences we seem to find ourselves in…and I really want to…>>
“Luke…” Her voice trembled. “…/…”

He could feel his heart suddenly pounding…it was pounding hard…

The sensor beside him beeped loudly, too loudly. And then a Med-droid rushed into the room….with its sensor receptacle extended. “Cardiac Arrhythmia! Warning Cardiac Arrhythmia!”

Behind it were two other medics.

They sprang into action on him, and flattened out his bed; one medic had the defibrillator paddles out ready to jump-start his heart, the second medic was readying into inject his intravenous supply with the necessary drugs. The Med-droid was assessing his condition.

Luke was not receptive to any of it. “I’m fine!” He yelled. “I was just surprised by something!” He fought them off with his one good hand, frustrated.

The galaxy had a cruel way of not letting him hear what Mara wanted to tell him.

R2 had gotten into the melee too, and had his arc welder extended, willing to protect his master.

They seemed to back off when the Med-droid confirmed it was not an attack, but just an anomaly. They still didn’t seemed completed convinced. One of the medic suggested that he required a sedative.

“I don’t want a sedative.” Luke growled, as he watched one of them push a dosage into his infusion serum that was currently providing him with liquids.

He heard the Med-droid suggest a pain suppressant as well; and a second type of liquid was added to his drip.

“I–don’t-want-a-pain-thingmie…” His words slowed; the sedative was kicking in, and his will to fight was leaving too.

He heard the medics say a few things to Mara before they left the room.

It was getting blurry in his vision, but he wasn’t sleepy. He forced his head to lull towards her. His eyes blinked heavy.

“I can see why you don’t like med centers now.” She said, amused by what just went on; her voice distant, but he could understand her.

He didn’t hear the exact words, but he heard Mara talking to R2. Mara lay back in her bed, and R2 rolled over to the controls beside Luke’s bed.

The bed moved by the little droids instructions, and rotated so that Luke’s feet was facing the direction of the head of Mara’s bed.

The upper portion of his bed began to rise slowly, and so did Mara’s bed; they both reclined, so now they were facing each other, and he could see her directly across from him with no effort.

“Thank you R2.” She said as the little droid went back to his corner.

Her face was sympathetic, but relieved that he wasn’t having a heart attack.

He sighed; unable to form words, but aware.
She chuckled. “I’ll have to remember how they did that, if I ever want to win a fight with you.”

Luke snorted a smile; he hoped… and hoped that he wasn’t going to drool after they drugged him.

Her bed moved down the length of his bed so that both beds were butted up against each other on his left side, and she could reach out and touched him.

Mara’s hand stretched the distance, and stroked some hair away from the side of his face; his skin tingled.

<<Can you hear me?>> She asked. <<Is everything clear in there?>>

<<Mostly.>> He answered, still annoyed at the medics.

<<I think you needed the pain meds…>>

<<Whose side are you on?>> the voice in her head was a grumpy Jedi.

The hover table slid up beside her on the opposite side of the bed. In his blurry vision, he could see her bring up the water bottle with a slift in it. She brought the slift to his mouth. <<Drink.>> She gently ordered. <<You’ll have a headache if you don’t.>>

Luke obliged; he was in no position to argue with her.

<<I don’t even know what’s wrong with me. – Why they would think I’d be having a heart attack anyway?>>

<<They didn’t tell you?>> She was surprised.

<<I passed out before I went in for a dip in the goo.>> He could feel he couldn’t use big words, but he wasn’t sleepy, just woozy. In fact, he started to feel pretty good; the pain meds must have kicked in.

He heard her call to R2 again and request his medical pad.

Once she had the pad in her hands, she started to flips through the screens. He sensed her surprise.

<<Wow, they really did a number on you…>> She looked over at him <<Do you want to know? It’s sometimes better not to know.>>

<<Just tell me if you still think I’m cute…>> He thought he was smirking, but given that his muscles felt like mush, he wasn’t sure.

She snorted. <<You’re a little banged up, but nothing that won’t heal…and yes, I’ll still think you’re cute after you heal.>>

<<Good.>>

<<Well, they’re making some new synth skin for your hand…so that’s good.>> She was reading the pad again. <<They’re hoping to do the graft tomorrow, if you seem up for it.>>

<<What else?>> He asked, not relishing the thought of a future skin graft.

<<Micro-fractures on your right thigh…two broken ribs on the left side…caustic dermal abrasion on left chest, translation: blaster burn…ruptured eardrum…and mild concussion, again…and various cuts and scrapes.>>
She put down the data pad, as it had no good news and picked up his left hand in hers; feeling her skin next to his, felt right.

<<How about I trade you?>> She asked, knowing that he was going to fade on her soon.

<What do you want to trade?> He wheezed a bit.

<<I’ll take your micro-fractures, for my locator implant…>>

<Deal.> He thought. <Here, their all yours…Can I have your tattoo? I always wanted a badass tattoo…>

<<Deal.>> She snorted. <<I’ll take your rupture eardrum…I hear the dizziness can be quite pleasant if you just give in to it….in exchange, I will give you my shriveled-up ovaries….this should be interesting.>>

<No deal there.> He coughed a bit. <You’re going to need those, besides, I think they are still functioning - just hiding is all.>

<<You think so, huh?>>

<I do.> He tried to smile.

<<There will be some fringe benefits to this…or so, it was eluded to.>> Her mood seemed to be lifting.

<Yeah? What sort?>

<<Well, since I never fully went through “puberty”… my breasts are supposed to get bigger…and I will have urges.>>

<No teasing! I have a catheter in!> He groaned. <Your breasts are perfect as is. Any bigger, and it would be a waste….but fun.> He thought he winked, but it could have been a heavy blink.

He coughed again, and she brought up the water to his mouth again. He sipped. <And if you had any more urges, it would kill both of us.>

<<But what a way to go, don’t you think?>> She joked.

He coughed a bit while he was drinking; clearly amused.

<Okay, I’m fading here…> He thought over to her weakly. <But I have to know…why did Karrde send you with Noghri?>

He could sense something from her; it his state it was hard to determine what it was.

<<There was some fallout from my actions on Tanaab. Cassis had more allies than we thought, and those allies thought that they should pick up the torch where Cassis left off and extended my death mark. Only, they weren’t as well-connected as Cassis was, and they got side-swiped when the Imperial attack came.>>

She shifted in her bed, tiring also. <<Karrde was still nervous though. So he called in a favor and was able to get in touch with the Noghri. Turns out, there were two young warriors who wanted to see the galaxy. They were very excited to see you. I let them sniff your hand, by the way.>>

Mara watched his face, and it was clear that she was losing him to the meds, and fast.
Luke nodded. He didn’t want to close his eyes, but he couldn’t resist, and she must have sensed it. He had put up a good fight, but he needed to rest.

Mara reached out her hand and stroked his hair from his temple. "Its grown so much since Dantooine … Tabbord would have a fit if he saw it."

"Sleep Luke." She said to his mind.

"I’ll be here when you wake up."

She squeezed his hand, if he could feel it, and watched him give in without so much as a ‘good night’.

Briefly, she wondered if she could reach out to him now, and practice her healing techniques. She had seen how he did it on her, on Dantooine after her attack.

She would need to reach into his mind, but only on the surface, nothing too much of an intrusion.

Mara relaxed her mind, and start to touch the fringe of his mind. With the drugs in his system, she sensed that his usual blocks were down and his mind was at the most vulnerable; all of his unconscious thoughts were available for her to probe.

Images came into her mind, without even attempting to see them. She preferred that she didn’t see them; it felt like she was intruding on things he kept to himself, though most of the images were ones she already recognized. Luke was an open book to her; he only kept things from her that he thought would hurt her, and even then, he would talk to her about it.

Here, he was so unguarded and she could sense his power in the Force; it was limitless and truly powerful, more powerful than she had ever experienced.

Whereas Palpatine had knowledge, and Vader had brute strength; Luke, had the potential of both, but he had what neither of them had.

He had a softness to him, that at first, she had misinterpreted as weakness- because she had been taught to care was weakness. In him, it wasn’t; it could command as much respect with it, as Vader did when he had used fear.

Who else but Luke would visit his enemy in a medical ward when he thought that she would be lonely?

Mara snorted, at herself, and at how foolish she had been to doubt him, or to ever think that his capacity to care was a weakness.

As she searched his mind she found the place that would trigger his healing ability. To her untrained sensed, it seemed it was only blocked by his pain, and his concern… for her.

She simply removed the blocks; it was like blowing away feathers. And she could feel the healing starting to take effect; his mind would take over.

As she withdrew, there was something else…. An area of his mind, darkened; it was blocked and was extremely guarded by his senses. He was protective of it… no, not protective if it… but protecting those, should it ever be unleashed. She could sense it was being guarded by fear- fear that it had potential to cause destruction.

She backed out of his mind, and away from the dark area.
Equally alluring, as the dark area was revolting; she sense another area of his mind. His hopes and dreams; visions and feelings leaked out from that area freely.

She caught a few of the images…but the ones at the forefront on his mind, were ones of her.

Mara knew that the revelation that she was trying to prepare her body to possibly have children would give him hope…it gave her hope too, like she could have a fresh start- no longer be someone who took life, but one who was able to create life too.

She caught glimpses of his hopes. She watched him play with a toddler who had big blue eyes and floppy blonde hair, like his father…a little girl with unruly red hair, staring up at him, calling him ‘Daddy’…he would bend and melt to either one of them, loving them…loving her.

The breath caught in her chest, and she pulled back from his mind, slowly.

When she opened her eyes, several hours had passed, and she felt slightly dizzy.

Mara looked around the room.

Dankin must have come in, while she was in a trance, and now he was asleep in a chair in the corner.

R2 was still in the corner, in low power mode, waiting to be called on.

She turned to look at Luke. The side of his face, directed at her, was showing signs of healing…the welts and abrasions were still there, but not as angry as they were when she had first gone into the trance.

She sighed. She had told a bit of a white lie, when he had asked. His face was pretty badly banged up. The split in his lip was now healing. The bruise on his right cheek that went down to his chin, had started to fade. She wouldn’t know if his bloodshot eye was healing until he woke up. The rest of the small scrapes shouldn’t be an issue now, either.

She also wasn’t about to tell him how close he was to dying from the internal bleeding he had. He was very lucky he was able to walk in as it was.

It broke her heart. And it was true too that when she saw him, she decided that regardless of her own fears, she was not going to go another day without telling him how she felt about him. He needed to know…he deserved to know; and for herself, she needed to have her love returned now.

Mara snorted as she reached up to brush more of his hair aside…he was never going to be the type to care about his hair. Her farm boy…her perfect Farm Boy…

Her own body wouldn’t allow her to move closer to him, so she kissed his hand before releasing it. As she reached for the controls to his bed, the pain in her lower abdomen stabbed into her.

She let his bed relax from its reclining position; she did the same to her bed, and relaxed down.

Mara lay in the room, looking up at the ceiling, rubbing her lower belly and thinking about what she saw in his mind. His mind was hopeful and optimistic about the possibility of having a life with her…she envied that.

In the past two weeks, she had dreams that had come into her mind too, unbidden, but they were not of a possible future; they were of the past.
Since her mission on Tanaab, she had woken up to images that she thought she had forgotten about.

She hated to admit it- Cassis had gotten under her skin before she finished him. It was his words about Luke that angered her the most. And it was the doubts that Cassis had put into her mind that bothered her even more; that she was doubting Luke.

The name that kept coming back into her mind; Shira Brie.

Yes, Brie was Vader’s puppet…and rumored lover…no, ‘lover’ was the wrong word; ‘plaything’ was a better.

Brie had always been a pain in Mara’s side. Brie was snide and over confident, and made herself obvious whenever possible.

While in training, Brie would turn up at the same Academy as Mara. Yes, they were similar in appearance with regards to the red hair and green eyes.

Brie’s face was rounder and her features were bolder. Mara’s face oval and with the exception of her eyes, her features were fine.

And in personality, they were polar opposites. Brie was loud and outgoing during their schooling, while Mara preferred to stay low-key and unassuming.

Even when Brie moved to special ops, in service of the Emperor, leaving Vader; she had the nerve to refer to herself as a ‘Hand’ when she was never given the position.

And yes, she was Force-sensitive too.

What really irked Mara, was the possibility that Luke might have shared his bed with Brie; that, was at the front of her mind, and had gnarled at her since leaving Tanaab.

When he said he saw red hair and green eyes in his visions…were they hers or Brie’s?

She was jealous.

She was jealous, angry and resentful- not at Luke…at Shira Brie.

Luke probably not have had a clue that he was being played by an Imperial agent; as naïve and green as he was at the time that Brie would have been in service under Vader.

But, somehow, and for some reason, Mara also wanted to reach out and kick him right then and there.

This was all new to her; she had never been jealous before.

In all fairness to Luke, neither one of them had discussed past relationships or liaisons; he had been vague, and didn’t discuss anything about his life unless he had to.

Mara knew he was extremely uncomfortable when discussing his confusion when it came to Leia, and if that was any indication, then he would probably be just as discreet with his feeling for others.

Mara resigned herself to ask him about it one day, but for now, jealousy would have to be her own issue.

There was something else that she was yearning to ask him- also stirred by Cassis and his arrogance.
She had felt it, with every single Imperial attack, the growing darkness.

Cassis had hinted to it, and she had not slept well since his words haunted her. “Has He called out to you yet?” Cassis had asked.

She shivered. Just the thought that she would have His touch on her mind again filled her with dread.

Since leaving Coruscant, she knew that the rumors had to be true, but she buried them deep down inside her. There were just too many things that would make them true.

Cassis had almost confirmed it, as much.

*The Emperor… Palpatine.*

And the Darkness was growing, and growing; she sensed it everything she tried to meditate. It was beginning to consume her thoughts so she had recently stopped meditating because of it.

Did Luke know? His recent brushed with new Imperial activity….

Surely, he wouldn’t have hid something like that from her?

Mara looked over at his sleeping form, tempted to enter his mind once again, but resisted. He would never do such a thing to her; she wouldn’t not do it to him.

The time would come when she would have to decide if she had the strength to not to join Palpatine again.

Would she be able to resist His draw? Could she be strong enough? Would she crumble?

At one time, He was everything to her; father, counselor, mentor…owner.

It was the cruel truth. He owned her, to do His bidding, to serve His purpose. And she did.

But she also knew the harsh truth; she would also have to face any backlash from Him.

He was not the type to allow her to live; after failing Him in so many ways.

She looked over at Luke; he was her greatest failure. Now, she loved him.

Palpatine would be sure to punish her for that…and punish Luke…

She blinked, and tried to relax her breathing. She knew she was to have another procedure in the morning; it wouldn’t do to be exhausted and anxious.

She closed her eyes and redirected her mind to a place where she was happy with Luke…their first morning together, after they had first made love…and he woke her up with his loving….and he was here now…safe…

**

*Roche Medical Facility: Day 2*

Luke awoke this time, not to a beautiful face, but to a set of cards that were propped up in his left hand.

A hover table was set up in front of him, and his left hand was slumped over holding those cards
loosely in them.

On the other side of the table, Dankin was studying his own cards, and then looked up.

“Oh…you’re awake now…shavit, I was winning too.” The smuggler grumbled.

Luke swallowed hard and tried to remember what happened…drugged, then talking to Mara…

“Mara?” He croaked. Where was Mara? And why did she let this happen to him?

The other man reached across the table and put a slift into Luke’s mouth. Luke obliged by drinking the water presented to him; he was thirsty and his head hurt.

“She’s having her second procedure now.” Dankin said. “She’ll be back after they come for you.”

Luke blinked hard a few times, and gently shook his head.

“I heard they had to drug you last night…something about your ticker going on the blink.” Dankin had sat back down on the edge of Mara’s bed, rearranging his cards.

“You are looking better though…I don’t know what they did, but looking a lot better.”

Luke nodded. He huffed, and looked down at his cards, then over at the ones being played…and reached over with his right hand and dropped the Endurance card for a negative eight on the smuggler.

“Hey!” Dankin protested, and folded his hand. “You were more fun to play with when you were unconscious.”

Luke smirked. “I’m not as bad as Han likes to tell people I am.” He mumbled.

“Well, you have about thirty minutes before they come to get you….want another game?” Dankin asked.

He nodded. “I think I’m fresh out of credits because of this room, though.”

“There’s always pride in just playing.” Dankin smiled as he shuffled the cards.


“That sounds fair.” He agreed.

Dankin was an interesting guy like most of the smugglers in Karrde’s crew. He was probably a few years younger than Luke, with dark hair and eyes. When in a group, he was quieter than Aves or Chin, but one-on-one, he was congenial and lacking some of the pessimism that could persist among smugglers.

“Set ‘em up.” Luke tapped the hover table.

“Okay, here’s my first question…if I win this round, you have to answer it… you and Mara…you two are together aren’t you?” Dankin said as he handed the cards over to Luke.

Luke nodded, and dropped the fifteen, The Evil One. “Okay but if I win, you have to tell me what happened on Tanaab. Mara said there was some fallout.”

Dankin frowned, and dropped a minus seven. “Oh, I’ll tell you that one for free.”
“Good.” Luke said and dropped a thirteen, Demise…for a total of twenty one…Pure Sabacc.

Dankin threw down his cards, and glared at the Jedi, then smiled conceding the win over the quick game.

“Well, there’s not much to tell.” Dankin started. “Cassis was done…Waqueen took over, but he wasn’t as strong as Cassis, and when the Imperials showed up, he folded, and let them overrun it…they set up roots there too…a new governor and everything too.”

The smuggler dealt another hand, but they clearly weren’t keeping to the bartering for belting rules, because he continued. “I’m telling you…now that Mara off’ed Cassis…no one is going to piss her off…ever!...if the rumors on how she did it are true.”

They played quickly again and this time Dankin won; Luke huffed.


“Oh no, I need an answer to my question, first.” Dankin looked over at Luke…waiting…

Luke sighed. “Yes, we are involved.”

“I knew it!” The smuggler beamed. “You better not hurt her.” Dankin muttered as he dealt again, he looked up. “Though, given how she did it…if you did hurt her; she’d probably hurt you first.”

Luke looked at him, skeptically. “I don’t plan on hurting her.” He said quietly.

“Good…anyhow…” Dankin continued. “Here’s the story on Tanaab…this is what I heard some a guy who knows a guy, who was a guard for Cassis…”

Dankin leaned in. “She got him with a single piece of filmsy.” He raised his eyebrows, in shock.


“Yeah…at least that’s what they think did it.” The smuggler was in disbelief too. “I didn’t think it was possible but, get this…they disarmed her…then stripped her down…so, now she’s got no weapons, no clothes…and she goes into Cassis’s office, and leaves less than five minutes later…and all Cassis had on him was one piece of filmsy- so says one of his goons. They find the body but can’t find what did it…no weapon found, except for a piece of burning filmsy, and two small stabs into his neck.” He motion to the side of the neck and then under the chin.

Dankin relaxed. “I am not pissing Mara off…ever.”

“I didn’t know she could do that.” Luke mumbled; and Dankin was right, he was not going to piss her off.

“Not in the manual of ‘How to Become a Jedi’?”

Luke snorted. “No, not in the chapters I’ve read.”

The cards were dealt again.

“I’ve got another question…” Dankin asked, sounding leery.

Luke could sense what it was before Dankin finished his sentence.

“Was Darth Vader really your father?” There was a touch of fear in the younger man.
Luke played his cards, and asked his question. “Has Mara dated anyone in the crew?”

Dankin played his cards, and won.

Luke grimaced, and looked back at the other man. “Yes, he was. But my father’s name was Anakin Skywalker.”

The smuggler didn’t celebrate his winning, but simply nodded and gave the Jedi a tight grin.

Dankin started to deal again, and Luke sensed that he got more than he wanted when Luke had answered his last question; like, he owed Luke an answer to his question.

“She hasn’t dated anyone on our crew…and she never really ‘dated’ anyone…she had, well, to use the vernacular, ‘casual encounters’ at some of our ports…but she was pretty selective.”

Dankin looked up at the Jedi before he played. “One or two guys that she would see regularly…and not the type that you would think she would go for either.”

He looked one more time. “She didn’t sleep around…if that’s what you were asking.”

Luke nodded. Now, he felt bad for even asking. He knew Mara wasn’t type to have a line of lovers behind her; she just wasn’t. He knew better.

Dankin dealt the last hand of the deck. “Can I play with your lightsaber?” He asked comically.


Dankin chuckled. “Fair enough.”

Cards went flying and in the end, Luke won again.

As the Jedi started to shuffle the deck, the Med-droid rolled in, ready to transport him.

Luke glared over at the droid, but knew it was their duty, and then looked over at the other man. “Well, this was fun. You can tell Aves you won, and tell him that you took me for at least fifty credits.” He smiled, and pushed the hover table back.

“Gladly.” Dankin replied as he watched the Jedi’s bed engaged its lifts, and start to turn to head out the room.

“See you later.” Luke waved before he left the room.

**

He flexed his right hand as they moved him back to his room in a hover chair. They told him to; to let the new skin get familiar with the movements.

It tingled and it seemed heightened. It was distracting, and he hated having it done. He swore that the next time he had sufficient damage done to it that he was not having the skin replaced again.

It was a painful process also; grafting to nerve endings.

As Luke looked down at the hand, to him, it didn’t look like his hand – it was too new, and the skin didn’t look like it belonged to him. There was no cut mark on his thumb when he forgot to wear his works gloves while fixing something on his X-wing...there were no callouses, and his nails were too clean. He would have to fix that soon.
As his hover chair turned the corner to go back to his room, he thought about the rest of his prognosis. The micro-fractures in his leg were also healed. The blaster burn on his back had a bacta patch on it and the skin would be healed in a day or two. His ribs had already set and the medics were shocked at the progress.

And last but not least, they had removed that kriffing catheter! He grimaced when he thought about it.

Secretly, Luke suspected that Mara had something to do with his rapid healing. He knew she was talented in the Force, but up until now, he had never seen her show any other talent other than in combat.

He smiled to himself, looking forward to seeing her back in their room when he returned.

As he approached the room, the two Noghri were waiting for him. One stood on either side of the door, and they looked at him as he was about to enter. He greeted each of them as he passed.

He looked forward to speaking with them as well. It may take others to get used to the Noghri, but Luke felt at ease with their manners and politeness. He could tell from their mid-belts that they were novice warriors among their clans, but he also knew how skilled they were already.

Luke sensed Mara’s presence as soon as he entered the room. He frowned; her awareness was half present. Clearly, she was sedated and possibly on pain killers.

He looked over as the bed beside him, and she was huddle up under the sheets, with her back to him. He didn’t sense that she was aware that he was there.

The room was empty, aside from him, so there was no reason why she didn’t sense him.

It was then that he realized while she didn’t sense him; her shields were locked up as tight as a drum.

The Med-droid assisted him back into his new bed, and he waited until it was gone to reach out and touch her.

<Mara?> He called.

He could feel her coming back to him…but the pain…he could feel that too.

It wasn’t traumatic, but along with the pressure; he could feel it.

<<They didn’t warn me that it was supposed to be like this.>> She said over to him.

“Do you want me to call a medic?” He asked, picking up the room controller beside his bed.

“No. Every woman has to go through this…” She mumbled, knowing this was her punishment for putting off her treatment for so long.

Mara rolled over to look at him; her face pale, and her eyes, clearly uncomfortable.

Luke nodded, wanting very much to hold her, again.

<<My cycle…they expect me to go through this every standard twenty-eight days.>> She sighed.

He cringed for her. <I had my catheter removed…trade you?>

She snorted. <<No.>> Then she sighed. “What else did they do to you? You’re looking better.” She
said quietly.

Luke smiled. “I have a new hand.” He held it up to show her.

“It looks different.” She frowned.

“I haven’t dipped it in grease yet…” He answered.

Mara nodded. “And you’ll have to bang it around a bit too….does it hurt?”

“It’s just tingling now…which is normal. It will take a day or two before it bonds with the nerve endings…but I’ll be able to tell if I’m holding you hand.” He smiled tenderly. “I’ve missed doing that.”


He chuckled, with only a twinge of pain in his side. “I’m glad you’re interested in the well-being of my body.” His eyes narrowed. “I have a feeling someone did something to me while I was out…”

She smiled slyly.

<Thank you> He sent over. “And what about you?” He was stilled concerned.

“I’ll be fine. Only five to seven more days of this…” She blinked slowly. <<There’s no trance that can help with this.>>

Mara looked at him, wondering. <<We’ll have to use some other protection for a while. I have to come off repress meds for at least six standard months.>>

Luke nodded. <I was thinking about that. Well, trying not to think about that…catheter and all.> He grinned. <We’ll get through it.>

He lay across from her, just looking at her. It was so quiet between them, and he had the urge to fill up the space, but no words needed to be said.

He touched the controls on the side of his bed, to bring it up next to hers. He snaked his hand across to her.

He could feel her cool hand touch his.

She was the first to break the silence. “Midday meal should be hear soon.”

He nodded, watching her.

“I don’t know about you, but I’ve graduated to solid food now.” She said absently.

He nodded, still watching her, gently grinning.

She went quiet, but it was clear she was getting uncomfortable.

“How’s your arrhythmia doing?” She asked quietly, looking into his eyes.

“It’s good.” He answered, watching her back.

She nodded.
He could feel a little tremble in her hand.

“Dankin should be back soon.”

He nodded, knowing she was avoiding what she was wanting to say.

“He went to go visit his husband, Nattan… he’s a miner out here…they see each other for only few days every three weeks.” She babbled.

Luke nodded, caressing her hand in his. She was nervous; he could feel it.

He sighed. <When you’re ready.> He sent over. Please don’t force it.

She nodded, and closed her eyes.

He could feel the cramp of pain go through her, and her body tensed.

Mara released his hand and brought up her legs to huddle in her bed until the pain passed. She reached over to her opposite and pressed self-medicate unit, releasing a small dosage of pain relief. She breathed heavy until it kicked in.

He winced for her. <Thank you.> He sent over to her. <You’re doing this for me…for us.>

Mara’s eyes flashed up at him, looking annoyed. “I’m doing this for me.” She said through gritted teeth. “I wouldn’t be doing this at all unless I wanted to, or needed to…for my health.” She corrected him.

Luke felt a bit reproached by her reaction. She was right. <I’m sorry.>

“Is there anything I can do to help?” He asked, feeling sheepish now.

Her face softened. “Yes…and no…I just want you to hold me.” Her voice was a whisper. She still hated being vulnerable, but at least it was with him, and no one else.

<As soon as they give us one recovery bed, I will…I promise, I will.>

He reached out his hand again, and she took it without question; they let the silence take over again.

Luke caressed her hand with his right hand.

“You’re good therapy for me.” He said, trying to get her to smile.

“How so?” She started to relax her body.

“I was told to keep my hand moving…I can’t think of a better way to do that.”

She smiled.

They didn’t have to wait too long and a servo droid came in to bring in their meal.

Real food, even med-center food, never tasted so good. He had survived on ration bars before, but for the days before Dalcretti, he had no food whatsoever. Being fed through a tube didn’t count either.

However, it was Mara who surprised him. She must have been starving. She ate her meal and wanted more.
She was sure it was just a symptom of what her body was going through but she ended up eating her meal plus another half serving.

Luke learned that she was going to have to be gone for some time during the afternoon. She had to have a physio session, to check if she had any lingering spinal damage from her implant removal.

Soon after he watched them take her away, he asked R2 to bring over his comm unit.

It took him a few tries to get through, and he wasn’t entirely sure of the time change, but he needed to contact Leia.

He knew the asteroid field was likely to interrupt the communication, he also knew he had to chance it. Something was nagging him to do it.

By his fourth try to get through, he was about to abandon it, when the signal kicked it.

The image on the other ended flickered to life, but it wasn’t Leia who he saw.

“Han!” he exclaimed.

The former smuggler on the other side, rubbed his face. “Hey Kid! You’re alive!”


“Yeah, but I’m glad you called.” Han said, yawning slightly. “Karrde told us where you were, and that you were convalescing again.”

“Yeah, I got a little banged up.” He grimaced.

“Leia said that they should have never sent you out there…that group was more militant, and that all they needed was a courier, and not a Jedi.” Han said solemnly, knowing that this wasn’t the first time that the Republic had sent the wrong person for the job they needed to be done.

Luke had to agree with him. Sometimes, it just felt like they sent him out, just remind themselves that they had a Jedi at their disposal rather than considering the need and resources.

“I’m sending over my report to you now. I don’t know if I’ll be able to get through again….Roche isn’t very reliable.” He frowned.

Han nodded. “So what’s the plan from here Kid?”

“I’m going to try to make it to Yavin IV. I was supposed to head there after Dalcretti anyhow.” Luke explained.

“Well, the doctors are there already, and they have a better comm unit than Roche—if I remember correctly, the Alliance left some good stuff there when we were making a run for it.” The Corellian yawned again.

“Right.” Luke grinned. He hadn’t been back there is the destruction of the first Death Star, and part of him was curious to see it again. “Any other news I should know about?” He asked.

“Yeah.” Han frowned, and paused. It was never good news at this time of night. “More systems are falling to the new Empire.”

“Mara’s with you?” Han asked.

“She was here when I arrived…it’s a long story.” Luke hoped his brother in-law wouldn’t ask.

The former smuggler nodded, and yawned again. “Well, we’re all fine here…twins are doing great…and I do have some other good news for you…” He grinned his lopsided grin.

Luke raised his eyebrows.

And it looked like Han was almost blushing. “You’re going to be an uncle again.” He winked.

The Jedi was shocked.

“And we blame you.” Han added. “She’s close to two months along…happened around the time of ‘bite night’.” Han glared. “Thank Jade too.”

Luke cringed. “You’re welcome…and congratulations?”

The other man beamed a bright smile. “You bet it is.” Han might hide it well, but he loved being a father, and to add to the group of Solos couldn’t make him more-happier, no matter if they were at a secluded base.

Luke sighed and smiled at his friend. “I wish I was there right now.” He mumbled.

“No you don’t.” Han’s smile dissolved. “Leia fights an uphill battle every day since the news broke about Vader. She’s fighting for her reputation, and yours too.” He paused, knowing the seriousness of what he was about to say. “Since we didn’t have contact with you, and the Imperial attacks increased, the rumor going around was that you were at the helm of the New Empire.”

Luke shook his head. He really shouldn’t be surprised. It wasn’t the first time the “government” had turned on him since he had started his Jedi training. He knew most of it was fallout from the Imperial rumor mill, but it still didn’t place his trust too highly in politicians again. Unless he was in the public eye with everything he did, there was not going to be a change in that opinion.


Han yawned again. “If it was me, I’d go over to Yavin and hunker down. I know Leia wants to ask something of you, but she has to go through the right channels in order to do it.”

“But, hey Kid, you at least have some friends here.” Han smiled. “And while you’re recovering, why don’t you take a redhead and call us when you get to Yavin?”

Luke snorted. “Will do, Dr. Solo…give the twins a hug from me, tell Leia that I love her, and take care of yourself, you old pirate.” He winked.

“You too, Kid...and Jade too.” He yawned again.

“May the Force be with you.” Luke said quietly.

Han simply smiled and the image faded out.

Now to figure out how to finish healing and get himself to Yavin.

TBC
Recovery & Resuscitation Part 2

Chapter Summary

Quote: (see the song quote below)
Characters: Luke, Mara, Dankin, medics… and Noghri… doctors, students...

Chapter Notes

**
Sorry for the delay on this chapter. Darth Real Life has reared its ugly head again…
work and cosplay… less than thirty days until con!

Well, now I hoped most of you have seen Rogue One by now, and have a visual for
Yavin IV. I don’t know about you, but I had to watch ‘New Hope’ right after watching
Rogue One again…

So I watched it and tried infuse some of it into this story. Hopefully your mind will take
you there too.

So in this story, we go back to Yavin…I borrowed some of the imagery, but I’m also
adding my own. I know I didn’t do it justice, but I used my memories of Lake Louise,
Alberta, Canada for the description of the lake in this story… please Google it…it’s an
amazing place… if you get the chance to go, do it!

I know I quote a lot of songs, but they seem appropriate at the time. So I’m going to
leave another here. Now, I prefer the Barenaked Ladies version of the song, but it was
actually written by Bruce Cockburn.

Lovers in a Dangerous Time:
When you’re lovers in a dangerous time
Sometimes you’re made to feel as if your love’s a crime
Nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight
Got to kick at the darkness ’til it bleeds daylight

And now, to the second best moment that you’ve been waiting for… enjoy.

**

Roche Asteroid Belt- Med Center

It didn’t take him very long to get his clearance for release from the Med Center. Luke Skywalker
could be a very good actor if it meant getting away from any sort of treatment.
He was still ordered bed-rest for at least another week to make sure his ribs healed properly.

He was desperate to get the clearance, as Mara would be released within two days of her last procedure, and wanted to time his release with hers.

And as soon as he was able to stand, he made a point of going over to her bed, to sit with her and hold her as her cramps of pain came and went. Thankfully, those cramps seemed to diminish with time.

He couldn’t resist it, just being close to her; it had a healing effect on him, and he hoped he had the same for her.

He stayed close when she was napping, but when she woke up, he was rewarded by her bright eyes, and soft lips on his own.

They still had to stay reasonably secretive about their relationship. Even though Dankin knew, Mara was leery about being affectionate in the other smuggler’s presence.

Mara, pragmatic as ever, found a way to get Luke to Yavin IV with very little fuss. Dankin would take all of them to the small moon, then carry on, heading back to the Dantooine base.

She had even figured out a way to stop with him for couple of days, then arrange a pick up for herself—all for the low, low cost of an ‘as-is’, in need of repairs, Y-wing, which Dankin would gladly take back to the base.

It was still going to take more than two days to get to Yavin, and Luke tried to make himself as useful as possible on one of Karrde’s Verpine Freighters, but it was clear that Dankin and Mara had everything under control.

And Mara wasn’t going to let him over-do himself either; when she caught him practicing with a training remote in the cargo hold, she took his lightsaber away, and told him to go meditate; returning it to him, later, after he promised not over-work himself.

So Luke ended up using his time to talk with the Noghri and find out about all the goings-on of Honoghr. One of the young warriors was from clan Khim’bar, and the other from clan Bakh’tor. Both were eager and talkative with him; traits that were unusual among the Noghri.

Luke tried to teach them the finer points of holo chess, and as soon as they picked up on the strategy, he lost as many as he won.

When she wasn’t checking commodity prices and checking trade routes, Mara, strangely kept her distance from Luke. However, she made a point of telling him, that it wasn’t him, that her body was adjusting.

Moreover, she was just frustrated that, this natural cycle, was taking too long for her liking. It wasn’t a distraction, as she was told it was- it was nuisance.

They still found time to get quick moments alone. The hold was quiet and private, and he could kiss her for as long as he liked, until she sensed that their missing presences were noticed. Also, one of the Noghri had walked in on them more than once.

It felt like stolen moments, and he secretly liked it. His libido was returning with his strength but he knew Mara’s body wasn’t quite ready yet- that’s where separate cabins came in handy.

At what surpassed for ‘night’, he would reach out to the cabin next door, and sense her presence. It
seemed like an eternity, but it reminded him of those first few steps that they took together, getting to
know each other.

Mara chose to use to her down-time to her advantage. Luke had sensed her trying to meditate
through her discomfort, and with effort, she was actually succeeding. It was amazing to watch
another Force-user use their gifts; he wondered what it was like for her to watch him?

In the ‘evening’, as they tried to get on Yavin time, Luke noticed another little quirk in Mara. He
watched while she was trying to make another pair of ‘ugly socks’. While she worked the needles
and yarn in deep concentration, she had this adorable habit of sticking the tip of tongue out of her
mouth, and sometimes she would absently switch to chewing on the corner of her bottom lip.

He wondered if he should mention it to her, but decided not to as it would end his enjoyment just to
watch her.

He was also amazed at how fast she was able to work. She finished one sock the by the end of the
first day in hyperspace and had started the second. And truth be told, these ones didn’t look as bad as
her favorite pair.

As they neared Yavin, the pretense was starting to fall. Luke knew there was something lurking with
Mara. He had sensed it while they were recovering, but bringing up some things when she had no
way to escape if she felt she needed to, would backfire on him.

He was beginning to feel guilty too, for holding back from her. He knew he had to eventually bring
up things he didn’t want to. In the back of his mind, he had tried to file away his contact with the
supposed Palpatine. He had neglected to mention it to her when they were on Tanaab, and now it
was eating away at him.

Even on his trip to Dalcretti, there was mention of the Emperor by name. Those communications had
caused further friction with the group he was with; being the son of Vader did not bring him any
friends.

When he tried to meditate in the hold, the voice…*that voice* came back to him. He heard it as plain as
if it was happening again; the cold and anguish came to him. Mara had rushed in when she sensed he
was in distress and broke his concentration, but he had brushed it off; telling her that it was just
reliving his latest injury.

Luke reassured her that it was nothing and that he would talk to her about it when the time was right.

On Yavin, they would find the time. He needed to; he had to.

By the beginning of the third day, Dankin had called him up to the cockpit as they approached the
far moon.

Luke sat comfortable in the copilot’s chair as he keyed in the clearance codes, and he hoped
someone was home, and awake at the board.

It was early morning on the moon, but the codes were recognized, and granted permission to land.

It had been close to nine years since Luke was on Yavin, and it felt like a homecoming of sorts.

He hadn’t had much time after the destruction of Death Star to actually get situated at the base. They
had stayed only a few days before they were on the run again, and most of that time, Luke was in
turmoil and shock.
Only Han was able to get through to him and helped him break out of his mind in order to keep moving, keep going.

Luke sighed as Yavin came into view; he wasn’t sure what he would feel when they touched down. Would it feel like a homecoming? Would he be able to start a Jedi Academy at a place that had so much destruction and history?

Mara entered the cabin and sat behind him. “That’s it?” She asked as she adjusted her crash webbing, preparing for landing.


The Verpine freighter shook slightly as it hit a debris field; Luke knew what that field was made from particles from the remnant Death Star. Over time, it littered the orbit outside the moon.

He lowered his head, solemnly, until they past the field.

Once inside the stratosphere, the moon was a green as he remembered it; Luke smiled, starting to feel refreshed just looking at it.

Dankin was able to follow the beacon to what used to be the Alliance’s base landing pad.

Luke noted that the aerial towers surrounding the base, dotted and rising from the jungle were still in place; where Alliance guards stood monitoring the coming and goings of fighters.

Outside the base was fairly low-tech, as it didn’t attract attention. Inside the structure, shielded from probes by the stone, the base was a maze and an odd assortment of new and old equipment- some donated, some stolen. The Rebellion would take what they could get.

The academics had arrived at Yavin before Luke had left for Tanaab, and now, he would get to see what they were making of the old base.

Luke was glad to provide his new friends with first, a safe haven if something should happen Coruscant, second a place to store their information concerning the Jedi and Force teachings, and thirdly, a new adventure for them.

As a benefit to coming here, Yavin would provide them a source for their research too; it was a mystery as to what happened to the Massassi people.

The freighter touched down without an issue, and Luke could see out the view port, that a party was waiting for them on the sides of the pad.

Mara watched his face as he turned to her, and smiled.

Inwardly he sighed, he knew each of them was shielding for their own reasons. Other than in the night, they hadn’t touched their minds to each other, they hid their true thoughts, and they communicated very little with the mental touch for the past few days. It felt lonely, but necessary with others around.

He touched her shoulder as he walked past her to go to the entry hatch.

The repulse lifts were still hissing, as the ramp lowered. With a strained gasp, and favoring his left side, Luke grabbed his carry case and headed for the ramp, with R2 wheeling up behind him.

At the base of the ramp, he inhaled as much as his bruised ribs would allow; the sweet smell and
humid air was fresh and cleansing—the memories flooded back.

As he exited, he saw the Y-wing looking sad and ill, towed behind the freighter; he was glad to be rid of it. But before it was to be hauled away, he would retrieve his other belongings.

The others disembarked behind him, slowly. The Noghri were excited and went directly to the edge of the landing pit to touch and smell the vegetation.

Mara and Dankin both stood back as Luke went forward.

Waiting for the freighter, a group of three strangers waited off to the side of the pad; two humans and a Mon Calamarian.

One of the human males stepped forward as the Jedi approached.

Luke raised his hand in the air as he greeted them; Mara watched from a distance. At first they seemed leery of him, and he must have either disarmed them with his personality or said the magic words of ‘Terratique’, ‘Massian’ or ‘Dram’, because they all seemed to relax if on que.

It was hard for her to pay attention; the Noghri’s excitement, and the pull of the Force were certainly electrifying. She had her reservations about why Luke would want to start an Academy here, but when they stepped off, she could feel it—so full of life, and of lives.

Luke, then turned to them, and motioned them over.

“I guess that means us.” She murmured to Dankin, who, in turn, nodded. “Don’t look so nervous. They’re students not soldiers.” She whispered over.

Dankin sighed. “Sorry- they don’t seem to be expecting us.” He said quietly.

“No, they don’t—do they?” She asked under her breath.

Regardless of their feeling, they strode over to the students.

“I just can’t believe I’m here…Yavin…” Dankin commented before they reached the group.

Luke smiled, and made the introduction, starting with the human male.

“Jade and Dankin— I’d like to meet Nadal Toban, student of meteorology.” He then motioned to the female Mon Calamarian. “This is Kal’een, student of botany.” And he motioned to the female student. “This is Peffar Jimmack, student of history and research assistant to Dr. Dram.”

Luke then turned his attention to his party. He pointed to the two inspecting the greenery. “Over there are, Fir’caw from clan Khim’bar, and Kik’nor from clan Bakh’tor; both Noghri from Honoghr.”

Then he turned his attention to the others. “This is Dankin, a trade associate.” His eyes sparkled as he looked at her. “And this is Mara Jade, my Jedi student.” He smiled.

The trio bowed respectfully, and the smugglers bowed in return. It wasn’t the human male who came forward; it was Peffar Jimmack.

“Jedi Skywalker!” She exclaimed, “We were expecting you over a week ago…so we are ecstatic to see you…Dr. Dram could speak of nothing else…as well as the other doctors…you’re just as we were told…however, I did expect you to be older, since I’ve seen you on the holo for a while now, and always so polished…and now you’re here! We’re ecstatic…just ecstatic!”
Her voice was squeaky and Mara had a hard time listening to her. <<Do you think they’re ecstatic?>> She sent snidely over to Luke.

He glanced over at her; letting her know that her dry comment hadn’t been lost on him.

Jimmack started walking into the base, clearly expecting the party to follow her as she spoke. Luke appeared to be paying attention.

Mara stepped in line between Nadal, and Kal’een. She turned her attention to the other students as Luke was being directed inside the former base.

“So Dr. Toban- what sort of weather can we expect in the next few days?” She asked pleasantly.

He blushed slightly, and began to speak with a slightly stutter. “Um..it’s actually, just Toban—I haven’t gotten my doctorate yet…and, um, I don’t know…we just put up some of sensors, and…um, are just starting to get readings…from what I can tell, um, the Moon is in what appears to be a ‘winter’ season, so the weather will probably vary greatly.”

Mara nodded, and then turned her question to Kal’een, hoping for more of an answer. “And Dr. Kal’een…I suppose the vegetation is in a winter dormancy right now?”

The Mon Cal’s eyes swiveled in Mara’s direction. “That is correct Jade. However, prospects look very favorable for ample study in future seasons. We’ve already been able to ascertain the several species of plant encircling the base.”

Toban chimed in. “We, um, work in tangent with the other students to ‘make a map’ of the ecosystem, and of the history of the moon.” He smiled.

“What about any predators?” Dankin grimaced.

Kal’een turned her whole head in his direction. “We’ve only encountered the ‘crystal snakes’ that Jedi Skywalker was able to warn us about. There doesn’t seem to be any larger predators yet.” She said blatantly as only a Mon Cal could.

Mara stopped in her tracks. “Snakes?” she asked.

The party stopped, and Toban answered, looking at her. “Yes, I got bit the first day, but after we turned on the sonic pulses, we haven’t had any more incidents…um, besides, the side-affects to being bit aren’t all that severe.”

Mara nodded, and continued to follow the others. Luke was about ten paces ahead, and she glared at the back of his head. <<You forgot to mention snakes, Jedi.>>

Luke responded by looking back and giving her a tight smile.

He stopped inside the hangar to let the others catch up with them, and Mara could hear Jimmack still talking.

“… and that’s when I started studying with Dr. Dram.” Jimmack was talking more to herself than to Luke. “And I must say that I’ve taken quite an interest in his collection of Jedi writings and artifacts. You see, he believes in the interdisciplinary form of study and that subjects are relatable to other areas of study…that’s why we’ve formed a collective here.”

He smiled gently, and held up his hand. “Will it be possible to see the doctors soon?”
“Oh yes,” Jimmack was really chipper for such an early morning. “Classes haven’t started yet, and although Dr. Almae is due to go out with her husband’s team, I’m sure they’ll make time for you.” She smiled and ushered them out of the hangar. “Right this way to the quarters.”

Mara was sure that Luke knew his way around this base, but he followed anyhow. They were led into a smaller hangar, and two small all-terrain transports looked like they were in the process of loading students.

Jimmack’s attention was drawn away, speaking with another student.

A small woman turned in their direction, then came rushing towards them, and Mara recognized her immediately.

“Luke! Mara!” Almae beamed as she spoke. “We are so excited that you’re here!” she said as she approached and embraced them. “Deek is headed off to explore with some of the students today, but he should be here any moment.” She waved her hand. “I will join them later…first, we should get you set up and I want to catch up with you, too.”

“We have so much to tell you.” She excited and filled with hope. “We are loving it here...so much to see and learn.” She looked behind her. “Oh, and here’s Deek!”

She called over to her husband. Mara observed that he looked slightly out of place, as an academic would, wearing combat fatigues, and an oversized vest with multiple pockets.

He greeted them, and Luke introduced the new comers, in Dankin and the Noghri. Deek made the offer for Dankin and the Noghri to join him and his expedition, siting that they had more than enough supplies and would be back before the evening meal.

Dankin freely went with the students to see what they had found so far in their studies. Mara smiled as she watched him go; Dankin always seemed out of place among the smugglers- he would have made a great student as resourceful as he was.

The Noghri had chosen to follow another group of students into the part of the jungle that had already been explored, and pathways were starting to be established. The two young warriors were exhilarated by the prospect of a planet so full of life.

They watched the transports leave with the promise of visiting later.

Almae linked her arms in between the two Jedi and starting walking further inside the base. “So, how long to we have you for? Dr. Massian will be thrilled to see both of you. We were expecting Jedi Skywalker sooner.”

Luke grimaced, looking around as they walked. “Yes, well, I had a bit of a delay in my travels.”

Mara smiled politely. “We were both detained at a Med-center, but we’re feeling much better now.”

“Oh, that’s very good to hear. I hope it’s not contagious?” The doctor asked concerned.

“No, not at all.” Mara answered, and tried to steer the conversation away from any other such questions. “I’ll be here for another day or so before my transports comes. Dankin and Noghri will be leaving after evening meal…and Luke?” She looked over at him, hoping to lure him into the conversation as it appeared he was getting distracted.

The mention of his name brought him back. “Well, I guess that all depends on what messages I have waiting for me, but I hope to stay at least two weeks, maybe more.”
Mara was a little surprised that he had decided to stay in one place for such an amount of time.

“But I’m sure that will change when I do check those messages.” He finished.

“Well, Luke, I’m sure this looks very different from the last time you were here?” Almae asked, and he nodded in response. “We have almost eighty students here…all studying in different fields.”

They walked at a casual pace. “The ones you met this morning at the landing pad, were the unfortunate ones that were studying at our comm center, and really don’t have much experience with such a thing.”

Mara nodded. “You should really have a class of comm protocol, and set up a monitoring schedule. It would make things easier for people to contact each other.” She suggested. In the back of her mind, she immediately went to the possibility that such a lax in security will eventually cause them more problems.

“I’ll mention that to Deek and Articus- they seem to have taken on some of the administrative duties and assignments.” Almae led them into a smaller room. “Taxon?” she called. “Luke and Mara are here!”

The room was almost an exact replica of Dr. Massian’s home, with the exception of the stone walls, brighter lights, and the room seemed a bit bigger; but all of his books were there.

He chuckled as he turned in his hover chair, with his foot raised. “Luke! Mara! My two favorite Jedi! You’ll have to excuse me if I don’t get up for you.” He winked. “I took a bit of a tumble the other day.”

Almae walked over to his side. “Someone wanted to try, and climb one of the adjacent pyramids.” She grumbled.

“I almost did it too!” Dr. Massian boasted. “And I would have too, except for a moss covered stone…so slippery.” He shook his head.

“We’re just very lucky you didn’t injure yourself more severely—The pre-med students don’t show up for another three weeks.” Almae scolded.

Dr. Massian dismissed her comments, and came closer to the new comers. “So, have you been reading? Were you able to figure out some of the more-difficult texts?”

Luke smiled and sat down across from the doctor on a nearby footstool. “I’ve gotten into some of the writings about different Force gifts, and different paths…” He chagrinned. “But I’m still trying to decipher the differences between the Living Force and the Unifying Force.”

The doctor then looked over to Mara, raising an eyebrow to check her studies as well.

“I was hoping that you would have some other writings on the Kynthelig?” She said. Luke turned sharply to look at her, surprised. “I read what was on those first data disks.”

“The Warrior Seers? Of course, I have more information on them. Do you know they were great artists too?” Dr. Massian came closer to her. “Yes, their art was based on one single line that they would draw with twists and turns making crests and images, but the line would always come back to the same spot where it had originated from; symbolizing the never-ending flow of the Force. They meditated while they drew, often drawing their visions.” He turned away from her. “I think I have a book on their art somewhere here.”
As he looked over his collection, Dr. Dram and his assistant appeared, and greeted them.

The conversation switched into a discussion of what Luke had found at the Jedi Enclave on Dantooine, and Dr. Massian seemed to forget his search.

Both Mara and Almae stood of fringes of their conversation, as they seemed to be absorbed talking amongst themselves; even Dram’s assistant was looking a little bored.

Almae touched Mara’s arm, indicating that perhaps they should move on, as they moved out of the room and into the corridor.

“I’ll help you get set up for your stay.” Almae said quietly, linking her arm into Mara’s, with a familiar sort of way, that Mara didn’t object to.

Mara could sense a sort of reproach in the other woman. “So, Luke looks like he’s been through a thrasher mill. Can you talk about it?” Almae asked as they walked.

“He had some trouble with his latest mission.” Mara commented, trying to be as vague as possible.

“Yes.” Almae agreed. “I would imagine it was on account of the news of his parentage. He told us before the news broke, but it was still a surprise to others that we know.” She looked ahead of them, respectfully. “He’s such a gentle man that I just can’t see where anyone would get such an opinion of him.”

“He has his father’s power.” Mara said quietly, regretting it as soon as it left her mouth.

Almae looked over at her, and nodded; knowing that adding anything might damage their friendship, but Mara could sense that she wanted to ask more.

“Some of the students might not understand.” Almae spoke honestly. “And then, there will be others, for whom it matters not.” She paused. “The rumors haven’t been kind.”

“I know.” Mara said.

“And the other rumors too.” Almae continued. “About him being the new Emperor…we never believed it and seeing him here…and in his condition.” She shook her head. “After all he’s done for us.” She looked over at Mara. “Dr. Massian might not realize it, but Luke saved us from what will eventually happen to Coruscant. We knew war was coming.” She smiled appreciatively. “We know this.”

They walked in quiet for a few moments, and then came to several small rooms from off the corridor.

“We were able to tell that these were living quarters during The Rebellion.” Almae said, her tone returning to its usual grace. “Now, I’ve heard that you and Luke prefer to sleep in close proximity to each other. Would one room be sufficient or two for you?”

Mara didn’t meet her gaze, but answered. “One please.”

Almae stopped and nodded. Mara could sense a playful nature coming over the other woman.

“And would two beds…or one be sufficient, as well?” The doctor smiled.

Mara snorted softly. “Does it show?” she asked, strangely feeling comfortable to blush slightly.

Almae grinned like a cat. “Only to those who have been in love—it’s in the way he looks at you.” She winked. “I’ll show you how Deek and I arranged the beds, and I’ll get you some extra
mattresses.”

Almae led to her to a quieter area of the lodgings, so that they could have their privacy. The two women finished arranging the room quickly.

It wouldn’t be the most comfortable bed that she had ever slept in, but it would be with Luke, and she was sure he wouldn’t complain either.

As she looked around the semi-finished room, Mara commented to the other woman. “I know Luke has some things in the Y-wing that he’ll want to bring over.”

“Yes. Of course, we can bring a lifter over with us.” Almae said, and paused. “I have something to ask of you two, as well – if you think he’ll be comfortable about it?”

“What’s that?” Mara asked, as she arranged some of the bedding.

Almae sighed. “How do you feel about discussing history?”

Mara glanced over, and resigned herself to answer the other woman who she knew had no intention to offend her. “I’ve tried to make peace with my past. Somedays it’s easier than others. I can’t speak for Luke, though. Why do you ask?”

Almae went for the door to leave the room. “Well, we have several history students who are studying, among other things, the time during The Rebellion—it might be interesting for them to hear first-hand accounts of the time, from both sides.”

Mara followed behind her. “I can ask him- I have no objection to it. However, my experience will differ greatly from his.” She answered.

Almae, hooked her arm back into Mara’s, and Mara didn’t object again- it felt sisterly, somehow, and slightly strange, but in a good way.

“I just think of how the two of you came together.” Almae said, knowing that no one was around to hear them. “Two different sides of the war…two different personalities…” She looked over. “Do you ever discuss politics?”

Mara shook her head. “It’s never come up.” She wondered why such a thing never made a difference to either of them; she never even asked him.

Almae nodded, letting the subject drop.

They were able to retrieve all of Luke’s belongings and bring them back to the room. R2 had followed them on the second trip.

By the time they were done, it was time for midday meal, and they went to break up the discussion that was in full progress in Dr. Massian’s room.

Luke was in the middle of the story of how Yoda had tricked him when they first met; they laughed at the cost of some of Luke’s reputation which only seemed to amplify their opinion of him.

Mara leaned on the door jamb and watched him, appreciating him. When a lull in the conversation appeared, she reached out to him. <<Hungry Jedi?>>

Luke looked over at her; his blue eyes bright and content. He nodded, and the others realized what time it was.
He walked beside her, and she could feel that his memories were starting to come back of The Rebellion headquarters.

The mess hall was in the same place, and he looked around the room, pausing at certain places in the room, and then coming back to the present.

His observations were only perceptible by her, and Mara knew what to look for, as his mood was starting to shadow and draw inward.

By the end of the meal, he had gone completely quiet, and spoke only when he asked if he could have the afternoon to explore on his own.

Mara watched him go, preferring to keep to herself for some time too, and knowing that he needed the time to be by himself.

Her body was starting to get back to normal, for her. The bleeding had slowed, almost stopped, and although she was glad to see it go, it felt strangely comforting to know that her body hadn’t been damaged as badly as she thought it had been by the chemicals that were designed to shut down her reproductive system.

Perhaps, it was the sense of ‘living’ that she felt, and came to a full understanding when she stepped off the Verpine freighter. The essence of life and living, and that power came vivid for her.

She could smell it in the air, she could sense in all around her. The moon was alive, and thriving. She knew immediately why Luke had selected this place for his future Jedi Academy; it was imbued with the very thrive of the Force.

From the landing platform, she regarded the outside of the temple. Its layered stone structure pointed to the sky, being enveloped by the greenery from the jungle. It looked peaceful and asleep in time.

But there was another side to the moon, and the Massassi Temple.

Mara walked around the ancient temple. It was surreal to her. This was the place where the Rebellion truly took shape. It grew into a group that she came to regard as her worst enemies.

The things that she was told about the Rebels and their cause still echoed in her mind now.

*Criminals, all of them. Thieves, liars, terrorists, traitors. There’s only one way to deal with them-crush them, all of them. They call for chaos- we call for order.*

She was never sent to Yavin IV after the fall of the first Death Star. Although she did read reports that came from the search of the base.

Standing there now, those reports were accurate of what she had read; the equipment that was discarded revealed no secrets, no notes as to where they had moved to; just as missing as the Massassi people who had once lived on the moon- they left no evidence and they weren’t giving up their secrets.

On Hoth, it was a different story. After Vader had left the base, Mara had followed the Snow Troopers around, and further inspected the base, collecting for Imperial Intelligence. The Rebels had left a plethora of evidence and information there. At the time, she wasn’t hunting a rebel pilot.

She walked through the maze of stone passage ways until coming to what looked like command rooms. Star chart screens were toppled over and cracked. She could see that their innards had been dismantled; no doubt taken back to Imperial Intelligence headquarters to be further dissected.
Mara walked into another area, finding crew quarters; small and compact, allowing for only two people- that seemed to be the standard. She wondered if Luke’s former room was still intact. Did he go in search of it?

It the main hangar, diagnostic machines were pushed into corners and vines from the walls were now covering them, absorbing them into the history of the building.

It may have looked like she was casually strolling and admiring the ancient site, but in truth she was looking for Luke.

He had disappeared after speaking with the doctors and students, and after midday meal. She had sensed his melancholy spirit set in when they had landed.

And like he had promised on Dantooine, when he was in this sort of mood, he didn’t close off his feelings to her, but he was certainly hiding himself somewhere in the temple grounds.

Mara wandered down along corridor. She had resisted the urge to reach out with the Force and read the building. It was a talent that she had used as the Emperor’s Hand, and like so many of the skills that she had used then, she felt uncomfortable using them now.

She reasoned with herself that she was not using these gifts now to track down and eliminate her quarry. That, using her gifts now served a different purpose.

Her mind relaxed, and she placed her hand of the cool stone wall as she walked; letting her fingernails trace its surface.

Images rapidly flew through her mind; tall lanky humanoid aliens, dressed in beaded clothing walked the halls in respectful silence. She felt the air move past her, and she could see the rush of people running in orange flights suits, panic and yet, pride and hope.

In her senses she caught the presence that could only be one person; Luke had walked this hall, and recently.

She retracted her senses, knowing that she would be able to follow him.

She came two large doors that were slightly askew, and pushed one of the two open.

The large open air section of the temple was a courtyard…The Great Hall. At the far end, between two obelisks, a raised platform with steps leading up. She recognized it immediately from Imperial Intelligence- this was where the medal ceremony was held, celebrating the survival of the Rebellion; where Luke had received a medal.

There he was now, looking anything but the savior of the galaxy. He sat off to the right of the high platform, sitting on the stone steps, head down; he was lost in his solitude. He looked small compared the Hall’s grand setting.

Mara walked quietly into the area. It was a considerable distance between the doors and the platform, her steps were absorbed by the sounds of the jungle. The place had a tranquil calm to it, but Luke’s state disturbed her.

She came to the base of the stairs, just below where he was sitting. He was shielding, and tightly too. He didn’t look up.

Mara turned to let him be; sometimes it was better.
“Don’t go.” He said.

Mara turned back to him.

Luke raised his head; his face sullen, a state of sadness that she hadn’t seen from him before.

“I thought it would be different coming here.” His eyes blinked hard.

She walked closer to him, not saying anything; it was her job to listen now. She came up the stairs and sat down beside him.

Luke turned in her direction, but looked past her at nothing.

“It was all a blur…during the Rebellion…I was only here for a few days…I think…it felt like less.” He confessed. “Everything was a blur.”

He spoke slowly, and more to himself than to her.

“It had only been two days before I got here that…I had a family…I had a friend…I had a mentor.” He whispered. “I didn’t even have time to grieve.”

“When I first arrived here, we had just escaped from the Death Star. They didn’t even ask my name and put me into a simulator.” He sighed. “They filled out my data while they tested me. When they asked me ‘next of kin’… I floundered… I stumbled, and then I said ‘no one’.”

He sighed. “Then I was taken to the debriefing room, and told we were going to head back there….to the Death Star.” He paused. “I wanted to go…I wanted to pay them back for all that had happened…for Uncle Owen, Aunt Beru…for Ben.”

Luke closed his eyes and put his head down. “Then…and then…it was all a blur again. They told me that I had switched off my targeting computer…I lost R2 during the fight….Biggs… I remember searching for Biggs….and then…he was gone.”

He inhaled deeply. “The trench run… it was over so quickly…and Han was there…covering me.”

Luke looked up again, looking out to the room. “I was so proud to get that medal. I thought that this, …this would make up for all the loss.” He snorted and shook his head. “I have no idea where it is now.” He smiled briefly.

“After the ceremony, when they were packing up…fleeing…” His head went down again. “I was in my room…they gave the hero a private room for the night…after they told me the number…one million, one hundred and seventy-nine thousand, and two hundred and ninety-three.”

“While the rest of the Alliance celebrated, I lay in the dark of my room and repeated that number over and over again. I thought about them…all of them… one million, one hundred and seventy-nine thousand, two hundred and ninety-three of them…and it didn’t make a difference, I had done it…but I still hurt….nothing was going to bring them back…bring back those I had lost.”

“I grieved for one day… I tried to remember that last thing I said to Uncle Owen…to Aunt Beru…I think it was something about wanting to leave the farm…I didn’t even say goodbye that morning…I left early to look for R2.”

He stopped talking and looked around at the hall. Mara wanted to talk, wanted to ask him; but she just sat in silence until he was ready. She postured herself to offer her hand without reaching out; Luke would do it if he wanted to.
He looked down at her hand, and emotion overtook him. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to
him, burying his head on her and sobbed.

Mara sat, shocked; she was confused. Her instincts took over and she wrapped her arms around him,
holding him just as he had done with her so many times before. She could feel his grief and knew
that this was the right thing for him to do right now. It would cleanse him in order to be here; for the
moment and for any future he would want to have on Yavin.

As much as her own emotions confused her, seeing it in others confused her even more. However,
Luke was special; she never looked down on him for his ability to feel so much.

In fact, holding him now, and comforting him felt good and cleansing for her too. He could trust her
with his feelings as she could with hers.

She could sense his feelings now; grieving for his family, his friends, and even for those he didn’t
know aboard the Death Star- he held no malice for them.

In her mind, she knew that they only held hatred for him at the time; it seemed odd that he didn’t feel
that way about them.

Survivor’s guilt- she had heard it called once.

She could feel the tears welling in her eyes, just for him and what he was going through.

<<You need this…>> she sent over. <<I’m here.>>

He hugged her tighter as his cries died down.

Mara stroked his hair and he gradually loosened his hold on her.

Luke sat back up, his face tear-stained, but his spirit looked as though it was recovering. He smiled
tightly at her as he brushed away the wet tracks on his face.

She reached over to help him, and then leaned in to give him a kiss of comfort.

He closed his eyes, and let her; he could feel the wrap of her warm touch around him.

<<You taught me how to do this…>> She thought, pressing her lips to his.

<What was that?> he asked, immersed in their embrace.

<<Care.>>

They broke off their kiss, and he smiled…a genuine smile. His blues eyes were round and bright and
clearing again.

Mara knew the sadness in his heart wasn’t gone yet, and it probably would never be, but it didn’t
seem to consume him now.

He leaned in to kiss her, and she could sense his feeling of appreciation for her; he put his forehead
to hers, just touching her.

Luke looked around the Hall, and sighed.

“It is beautiful here…” Mara said quietly. “…so alive.”
He smiled, serenely. It was time; he got up from the steps and offered his hand to her. “I want to show you around.” He said. “I’m not ready for a run in the jungle, but would you like to see that clear lake?”

She nodded, glad that his spirit was lifting. Despite his memories, he did love being here; all the green.

They walked out of the hall and down a corridor and onto the landing pad. The Verpine was being refueled for its departure later that day.

The pathway was well-tread, and clear enough for two people to walk side by side.

Luke had warned her about the humidity and she could feel that the air was thicker on the path as the dense greenery surrounded them.

He stopped on the path and looked around, as if trying to remember the direction of the lake, then made a decision and lead her off the pathway.

As they stepped into the thicket, the smell of the fresh grasses and trees increased. Mara had been brought up around durasteel and plastifilm all her life, and she had been in jungles and forests before, but this jungle seemed more-friendly than any others that she had been in.

Luke moved through the area like he had lived there all his life.

His pace slowed and he looked over to caution her. “It drops off just past here...and the rocks can be slippery...so watch your step.” He pushed away some of the branches in front of them to reveal the rocky shore line of the bluest, clearest lake she had ever seen.

Mara looked out on the small lake with awe- it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. The lake was edged with flat smooth stones and dense bushes, a small waterfall emptied into it, and as promised, so clear you could see to the bottom.

“There were flowers around the edge too. I guess they're out of season now.” Luke said quietly, not wanting to break the spell of the site.

She nodded, speechless.

He watched her and smiled. “I learned how to swim here...I had never seen so much water in one place before.”

He took her hand and led her around the shoreline. “Han decided he needed to get me out of my mood before we were supposed to leave here.” He explained. “He and Chewie brought me down to this lake, and while I was just looking at it, as you are now, Chewie picked me up and tossed me in the lake as if I weighed nothing.” He chuckled.

Mara watched him, enjoying this memory.

“I flailed around, yelling that I was drowning...” Luke smiled over to her. “Then, Han told me to stand up.” He looked like he felt a little foolish. “So I did...and the water only came just above my knees.” He blushed.

She snorted, imagining the floundering farm boy.

“Han later taught me how to swim, after I got used to the water. We waded out farther into the lake and he balanced me, and showed me how to breathe properly. It took a few tries, but I got the hang
of it.” Luke watched the lake, still amused.

He paused and nodded, before moving on.

Mara could sense he was tiring. He was only barely out of the Med Center, and he had talked them out of holding him for longer even though more rest would do him good.

“Let’s head back?” She asked so that he didn’t have to.

His hand stroked the top of her knuckles, and he nodded. He pointed to the corner of the lake. “I think there’s a path over there…if I remember correctly.”

As they walked, he commented. “I’m surprised that the students had worn so much of it back in, and so quickly.”

“It sounds like they have quite the operation, doesn’t it? And all in two weeks.” Mara agreed, amazed.

They walked back onto the path and into a small clearing. Mara stopped in her pace, and Luke felt the tug on her unmoving body, and looked back at her.

“I’ve been here before.” She mumbled.

She was looking around at the clearing. “Or, at least, I think so…maybe not.”

He watched her, his face furrowed.

It dawn on her, and she dropped his hand and walked over to a twisted tree, and reached out to touch it.

The tree from her vision; the first vision she had about her and Luke, making love up against the flowering tree. It was the first time that she had ever thought that there was a possibility of loving him.

It wasn’t flowering now but she could see where buds would be forming soon.

Luke came behind her, waiting for her explanation.

She turned to him. “From my vision.” She answered his question.

He smiled slyly, and bashful. He nodded, remembering as she had shared that vision with him; when he knew that she had thought of a physical relationship with him.

Mara put her back against the tree and turned to him, smiling at her farm boy.

He stepped towards her, reaching out to stroke her face. They hadn’t really had a chance to be alone with each other; watching Noghri and Mara’s body hadn’t allowed it.

Looking into her eyes, Luke came into her space, and dipped his head, placing his lips tenderly against hers.

Mara accepted his affection easily; she longed for it, with no complications. His mouth was hot and wanting; his tongue tantalized her senses and she explored his mouth too.

Their kiss deepened; Mara could feel his hands on her sides, pulling her body to his.
Her deep breathing was starting to increase, and yet he paused, pulling back.

<Are you okay?> he asked, concerned about her body, and her feelings.

<<What about you?>> She asked, her eyes coyly flirting with him.

<I hurt in the right places.> He smirked and place a quick kiss on her lips.

The humour left her face, and she looked at him in his perfect crystalline eyes; round, azure and immense. Her hand came up to his face, stroking the side that had been bruised only days ago; her heart welling again with feelings.

Luke froze. The air was suddenly thick between them and the moment was not lost. He knew that there was no chance for interruption here. His stomach fluttered, and hung on her every word that he sensed she wanted to say.

Here, now…this was the right place.

He silently begged for her to speak…

The tremble came to her, but Mara forced her way through it. “Luke…” She said quietly. “I think… I think…” her voice and eyes waivered, then her eyes became sure. “I think, I love you.” She whispered, finally, and still scared by her own feelings.

He blinked, swallowed, exhaled the breath he didn’t know he was holding, and waited for the world to drop on them. In a split second, the words rushed to leave his mouth; words that he had been holding onto for close to a year.

“I love you too, Mara Jade.” He said slowly, trying not to rush it, clearly and assured; smiling relieved.

Luke came closer and placed his lips to her again, and pursed tenderly, lovingly against the woman he had adored from the moment he had seen her, blaster and all.

He repeatedly his words of love in his mind, over again, wordlessly sending them over to her.

He could feel her tremble slow, and begin to accept him and his words. He knew he had long been comfortable with the idea of loving her; she would take some more time to become comfortable with the idea of loving him so that she wouldn’t regret it. He would make sure that she would never regret it.

He needed to see her beautiful eyes; the rich, vivid emerald had darkened into forest orbs. They were watering with her feelings, and he quickly kissed the edges of them as they fluttered closed.

Mara felt nervous, unsure of what to do with herself.

Luke knew, he always knew. His arms embraced her, washing over her with his sense; pure and unyielding.

It was beginning to feel too much for her in that instant, and he must have sensed it, and pulled away. He simply took her hand in his.


He put his shields up as they walked, but he couldn’t contain his happiness. She finally said it! The one woman that he had wanted to say it, had finally said it.
But it was building in him.

He kept looking over at her, then ahead of them, and then back at her.

He knew that he was pushing her limits of comfort.

Mara halted, and looked at him. “Okay, what is it?”


She glared, this time with intensity.

“You love me.” He mumbled. “I love you.” He said a little louder, blushing.

“Are you going to make a big deal out of this?” She asked, a little annoyed.

He came in closer to her. “I’d like to, if you’d let me?” He smirked. “I’d like to yell it over the Coruscant skyline, and have it blasted over the open comm waves…if you’d let me?”

He stared intently at her lips. “But, I’d settle for hearing it from you as often as we can say it to each other.”

It always made her uncomfortable when he got this intense, and his lips were very tempting.

<Will you say it again, now?> His eyes pleaded.

“I love you.” Mara whispered.

Luke closed his eyes, reveling in the sound, and he kissed her gently.

<How about one more time?>

She snorted. “I love you.” She said at her normal volume.

He pressed his lips to her again; and raised his eyebrows and stared her down, asking for another admission.

She huffed, humoring him. “I love you.”

“And I love you.” He said slowly, and truly heartfelt before he pressed his mouth to hers again.

Somehow her kisses seemed sweeter, more-tender, and everlasting than they did before she uttered those words. He knew she loved him before she’d said them, but now, it meant more.

As their kiss broke, he nuzzled his cheek next to hers, feeling completely vulnerable to her.

Mara’s cool hand touched his cheek, keeping him close to her; she’d allow it now.

<<I’m still not comfortable with people knowing yet.>> She confessed silently to him.

<I know.> He agreed. <But I think we’ll have keep our secret better…most people have guessed about us, and those that don’t, already know.>

She pulled her lips back. “Like who?” She asked, surprised.

Mara chagrinned. “Yes, they know.” She paused for reproaching herself. “Almae asked me if we wanted one or two rooms, and I let it slip. She showed me how to push the beds together, like how she and Deek had theirs.”

He smirked. “We are the worst at this.” He stroked her hair by the side of her face. “I think it shows too much…how much we care about each other.” He whispered the last few words. “I don’t regret it.”

She went serious. “I do. I don’t want anyone to ever use me against you, and vice versa.”

She had to step back from him and look him hard in the eye to let him know that she was absolutely sure about what she was about to say.

“Luke, you promised once that you would never turn to the Dark side because of me. I want you to promise that you will never give in to anyone who threatens me…I know you will try to do everything to protect me, and us, but if it comes down to it, I need you to promise that you will act for the greater good and not in my best interest…do you promise?”

Her eyes blinked solemnly, waiting for his reply.

Luke dropped his head, thinking about what she was asking of him. He reached out to hold her hands in his. “I don’t know if I can promise that.” He said in earnest.

“You have to.” She said quietly.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to do that, if it came down to it.” He confessed. <I can’t let you go.>

He looked at her, with a sudden realization. “Could you promise the same thing to me? – that you would just let me go?”

Mara looked at him, with surprise. “That’s not what I’m asking of you.” She could sense that he had a growing hurt from this thought; she started to feel a pain in her chest.

“I could never just let you go.” She said. “But after fighting for you, with everything I could give, I would think that you would want me to preserve myself…and that’s what I’m asking of you, Luke. I would rather you went on, than needlessly risk yourself for me.”

Her explanation didn’t satisfy his question. “Why would you want that?” He asked, still shocked that she would ask such a thing after professing her love for him.

She relaxed. “Because, Luke, that’s what keeps us apart. That’s the Jedi answer- we have to not be afraid to lose each other. I need you to not be afraid to lose me, if it came down to it; and I want you to know that I’m not asking you to risk yourself for me.”

She spoke quietly. “This was why the Jedi didn’t allow attachments.”

He was firm, and shook his head. “I can’t do that.”

“Then, I can’t be a Jedi…” Mara said, looking at him. “…or we can’t be together. Because that fear—that fear, will make you break your first promise to me.”

Luke stood back from her, not believing what he was hearing. “But why?” He whispered.

“Because I love you more than I love myself.” She said; loving him felt wonderful, but hurting him felt like a knife in her heart.
He looked away from her, considering her words. Mara would rather die than have him risk himself. She was so much braver than he gave her credit for.

Luke nodded, understanding what she was telling him, but he still didn’t like it. “I can’t promise that right now…” He resigning himself to the fact that he knew she was right, but doubting he had the ability to be as strong as she was. “I promise that I’ll think about it.” He sighed.

<<That’s all I ask, for now.>> She sent over her touch to his mind, telling him that she didn’t mean to hurt him.

He reached over and physically pulled her gently into his arms, holding her tightly. <I’m not ready to think about it.>

“I love you.” He whispered to her, wanting back the euphoria he had only moments before.

“I love you too, Luke.” She said, sending over to him the joy that she felt knowing he felt the same.

He just held her for several moments, not wanting to let her go, but knowing he had to let her go eventually. He could sense her feelings for him, and the elation started to return.

She truly loved him, and just like he feared losing her, she feared telling him how she felt. If it was within her power, she would never fear that again.

Mara felt him relaxing his hold on her. <<Time to go?>> she asked gently, truly not wanting to let go of him either.

He nodded.

They took turns periodically smiling back at each other on their way back to the base, and taking chances to steal a few more kisses along the path that they knew the students travelled.

When he returned, Luke was surprised to see all the work that Mara had done to the small room, and he looked at the cots that were pushed together to form one bed.

“It was the only solution.” Mara murmured.

He nodded and returned with an appreciative kiss for her effort.

The gray bedding may have been dismal, but they both couldn’t stop looking at each other affectionately.

Luke held her and swayed at the end of the bed.

“So my little kitten…” He nuzzled into her ear. “How are things?” As his hands wrapped around her body.

“Is that your casual way of asking if my cycle is over?” Mara allowed his soft kisses at her earlobe, melting into them.

“Yes.” He hissed in her ear.

She pulled back. “Nope…not over.” She answered blankly, giving him a mock-glare.

Luke’s shoulders dropped, and she could feel the disappointment.

“But today is the last day.” She said coyly. <<Give me until tomorrow?>> She curled back into his
embrace. <<I’ve missed us.>>

He stroked her hair, knowing that he had little choice in the matter, and respected her, and her body.

“Of course.” He said sweetly, kissing her temple, and telling his own body to behave.

“Besides, how do I know you won’t pass out on me from lack of oxygen?” Mara glared at him, for real this time. “Your lungs haven’t healed…and I saw you limping this afternoon.” She poked him in the chest for emphasis.

Luke backed away, still smiling.

“Okay, I’ll rest.” He capitulated.

“I love you.” He whispered, smiling, as he began to unpack some of his things, putting them into the utilitarian storage units he was familiar with.

Mara turned to her own belongings. “I love you too.” She said in hushed tones, and smirked at their new games of who could say ‘I love you’ in the most discreet way.

She caught his mood shift a bit.

As he worked, he asked, “Do I really only have you for one more day?”

She stopped and turned back to him. “I’m afraid so.” She frowned. “I was supposed to go back with Dankin, but I bought myself some time. Aves will be returning to base and he’ll be taking a route close to here, so he’ll be able to pick me up.”

Luke sighed, and nodded; knowing that every second they were together was on borrowed time. He also knew that they both had things that they wanted to say, and the time would come when those things had to be said.

Mara hung her head, as if she knew too. “Karrde is moving the base again.” She looked up at him with sad eyes. “Dantooine is too remote, and the route is too open for attack.”

“Does he know where he’ll be moving it to?” He asked quietly. “I hear Yavin is a nice place.” He tried for humor but he knew it failed.

She shook her head. “I don’t even know. There was talk of moving it back to Myrkrr, but I don’t think Karrde wants to revisit it.”

Luke looked over at the comm unit case that she had put on the nearby desk. “I know.” He said, accepting it. He wasn’t ready to think about them being apart again.

“Should we go down for evening meal?” He asked, wanting so very badly to change the topic.

Mara came close to him, frowning, and caressed his face, concerned for his healing. “Are you sure you want to go down? you’re looking very tired. I can bring you something?”

“I’ll live.” He smiled, and came in for a kiss. “And I’m hungry.”

She snorted. “Figures. Okay, and then you’re coming up here to rest.” She pointed a finger at his chest.

“Yes ma’am.” He gave her a salute and followed her out of the room. <And if I have told you in the past thirty seconds…I love you.> He winked as they walked into the general populace of the mess.
<<I love you too, Farm boy.>> She winked back.

The doctors greeted them, and they were rejoined by Dankin and Noghri.

They listened over the meal about one of the dig sites, and Dankin saw actual Massassi writing and artifacts. The Noghri were able to find another pathway for the students, and had climbed one of the older pyramids in the area, getting a better view of the area.

Both Dankin and Noghri seemed almost sad to have to leave after the meal.

Toban came by during the meal to deliver the weather report for the following day, and it did not look promising. He predicted heavy rains with a possible electrical storm in the evening.

It was decided after the meal that the students would bring some of the equipment inside the base. As the weather was new to all of them, it was better to take the precaution than to be regretful of not doing so.

After the meal, Luke politely excused himself, citing his healing injuries, and returned to their room, but not before saying his goodbyes and thank you to Dankin and Noghri.

They watched him walk back into the base from the landing pad.

“Is he going to be alright?” Dankin asked.

Mara nodded. “He will be when he gets some rest—this has been a hard one for him.” She said honestly.

“He sure does care about you.” Dankin gave her a sideways glance as they walked to the ramp of the Verpine.

“I know.” She said quietly, then turned to the other smuggler. “And if you tell anyone…” She pointed her finger playfully at his chest.

Dankin raised his hands and smirked. “Don’t worry… I have no intention of telling anyone… unless there’s money on it.”

She smirked, and snorted. “Take care of yourself, and let Karrde know that I’ll be back soon?”

“Sure will, Mara…and take care of yourself too.” Dankin wasn’t much on emotion, and tried to turn to leave. “Take care of the Jedi too.” He turned to go up the ramp. “Clear Skies Jade.”

“Clear Skies.” She called after him, knowing that he was getting too comfortable with her, which made him strangely uncomfortable.

Mara walked back from the pad and watched the Verpine freighter lift then head into the dimming evening sky. The boosters engaged, and it became a dot on the horizon.

She walked back into the base, and past the other quarters where she noticed that students were gathering in each other rooms for conversations.

They were an interesting bunch, and she had felt their mixed feelings about her and Luke at the evening meal. There was certainly those amongst the group who had strong leanings to both Republic and Imperial sediment.
It was strange to think that there were some who still held to an Imperial way of thinking. She justified it that not all beings knew of Palpatine’s ways, and that those ways may not have affected them directly.

Equally so, were those who were staunch Republic supporters, to the point that she could sense their suspicion of Luke, and the rumors of his recent Imperial involvement.

She sighed. The galaxy was too large sometimes.

As she got to their room, she reached out her senses to find that Luke’s presence was indeed tired from the day. He also had an emotional ride, but she hoped it would end on a good note.

Mara prepared herself before she went into the room, and let her shields drop at how happy she was that he had told him that she loved him. She had waited for as long as she could, and now that she had said it, it felt like a bubbling in her stomach when she thought about it.

If she was going to fall in love with someone, it might as well be her Farm Boy.

The door silently opened, and he was on his right side, under the covers, eyes closed, but dozing.

Mara dimmed the lights around the room, and changed quickly into her night shift.

Luke seemed to notice her presence and opened his eyes to catch a glimpse of her night shift descending on her body; he smiled knowing that she was coming to join him.

<<<Hi Sleepy.>>> She turned back to him.

“Hi there.” He yawned, and made room for her on the left side of the bed, which would put her on his right, still favoring his ribs. “I think one more trance, and I should be good.” He commented.

“You think so?” Mara looked at him shrewdly. “Still working on that medical degree, Dr. Jedi?” She said snidely. “Just because you convinced those medics on Roche to let you go, doesn’t mean that I’m convinced.”

He snorted, wrapped his arm around her as she leaned into his uninjured side. “Alright. I’ll take it easy…sounds like I’ll have to, according to the weather tomorrow.”

Mara squeezed herself up against him; even with two cots pushed together it was a tight fit- not that she was complaining.

He was warm and his bare chest was muscular, and made a good place to rest her hand. She really couldn’t wait much longer for this ‘womanhood’ thing to fully end and to be with him.

She looked up at him, watching his eyes close again; she tapped his chest to remind him of something important.

Luke opened his eyes, looking down, he smiled, and leaned in for a kiss.

She hummed between their lips, feeling her happiness threatening to totally ruin her reputation.

“I love you.” She whispered one more time, closing her eyes, and relaxing her body against his.

Their kiss broke, and Luke rubbed his cheek next to hers, feeling his own happiness in the moment.

“And I love you too.” He whispered back, closing his eyes, and letting his mind rest, and dream…and hope.
Yavin IV

Mara awoke to the rumbling in the distance. Even in their small stone room, she could hear it.

Toban's weather prediction was indeed correct, and she could fear the chill in the air from the approaching storm.

She could smell the rain in the air.

Slowly, she sat up in the small make-shift bed, and looked over at the person who kept the bed warm with her.

Strangely, Luke was turned on his formerly-injured, left side. He was in peaceful slumber, and she reached out to see if his mind was at peace too.

She was sure if she left to go take a brief shower that he wouldn’t miss her.

Mara slid out of the tiny cot, and Luke hummed as if noticing the weight shift in the bed, but not
much else.

She gathered her things, and did not relish the idea of using the communal showers, but she had been in worse places, and would have gladly preferred that the descriptive word for those places was ‘communal’ was rather than the ones she could have thought of.

She looked back before leaving the room, as the door silently opened for her; and smiled as she watched him still asleep.

Outside the door, R2 had parked himself overnight in an alcove and had powered down. His dome rotated in her direction when he sensed her movement.

Mara smiled over at the little droid, loyal to the last.

She knew it was early; the lack of active minds told her so. A cool wind came down the corridor, and made her want that warm shower sooner than later.

Almae was kind enough to show her where to find all the amenities during the previous day’s tour; it was base-living at its best, communal everything.

Luke had hinted to private rooms, and secretly she wished for one of those rooms, but knew it was too much to ask.

The walk to the showers wasn’t a long one. At the stone entrance, Mara’s hand searched the wall for the switch to turn on the lights.

The room came to life as it was illuminated. It was large, and from the looks of it, clean. The Rebellion must have done a lot of work to the ancient structure to have so many functioning services.

Mara knew from her experience that the Empire was in a mad hunt for this base. The Rebels had eluded them for some time; she might even say that they were desperate to find it.

By the amount of renovation to the structures, perhaps the Rebels were here longer than the Empire had estimated, and were able to put down roots.

It was still strange to be in this place.

The Evac units were before the showers, and she was relieved that the bleeding had stopped. It had stopped the previous day, but she just wanted to be sure.

She walked over to the nearest stall, and stepped inside. She disrobed at turned on the spout.

The first deluge was freezing cold, and then turned into satisfying warmth. Nothing could make her feel more placated than a hot shower; it could wash away so much with it.

But on this morning, Mara didn’t want it to wash away anything; she wanted to bask in it.

She closed her eyes, tilted her head back and let the water run down her head, shoulders and back. She hummed contentedly as she thought of the previous day, and wondered if it had all been a dream.

Did she really tell Luke Skywalker that she loved him? –she did. She smiled.

She recalled the look on his face when she told him- he was shocked, relieved, and elated. His blue eyes shone and sparkled back at her.
It was easy for him to return her feelings; she knew he had been keeping it in for some time now. Luke didn’t hide much when it came to what he was truly feeling.

And it was true, when she saw him come into the Med-center, she wasn’t going wait any longer than she had to in order to tell him how she felt about him.

It was hard to get those words out; she almost didn’t say them. She forced herself, and glad she did.

Mara rubbed the cleanser into her hair, and thought about Luke, sleeping back in their room. She was amazed about the emotions he had shared with her. His breakdown beleaguered her.

It was not common to see anyone in the military have regrets or sorrow; in the Empire, it was not permitted. An enemy was someone who should not be pitied. To have pity, was to have weakness. And weakness was not allowed.

If you had weakness; it was either broken out of you, or you were destroyed. No question.

But Luke’s caring didn’t scare her, or cause her to think less of him. And he cared about her.

The cleanser rinsed out as she tilted her head back. She then rubbed the cream rinse into her hair—with the humidity here, she was going to need it.

As the cream set in her hair, she worked the body cleanser into a lather and began cleaning her extremities.

Her body felt different; it seemed more sensitive, especially her breasts. She was told to expect this as her body would start to make its own hormones again, but she didn’t expect it happen so quickly.

In truth the past few days, she was certainly more than willing to be with Luke, but she was unsure if he would want to in her state.

During the past two weeks while they were apart, she had thought a lot about him. He had surprised her in many ways, including his skill as a lover.

His lips were so tender and strong when he kissed her; making her body tremble. His hands moved about her body with such strength and gentleness; always wanting her. And when their bodies joined, it was so achingly satisfying, taking her to places she had always longed for.

They were meant for each other in so many ways. Yet, in her happiness, there was the lingering thought that she could have destroyed it all. He was supposed to be her last mission. She shivered at the thought that there would have been the possibility of never knowing his love.

Mara rinsed her skin and her hair one more time, and reached out to their bedchamber, searching for his presence; checking if he was still sleeping.

Sure enough, his sleepy presence was resting, but she could sense that it wasn’t as peaceful as it had been when she had left.

Mara closed down the shower and dressed quickly. She wasn’t worried, but she knew the signs that would indicate that he was on the verge of a bad dream.

Normally, she wouldn’t be concerned; everyone had bad dreams from time to time. Luke’s dreams, however, could turn violent, and if he should reach out in the Force, even unconsciously, the results could be destructive depending on the dream.
She had also learned not to wake him during these dreams, but just to soothe him by gently touching his shoulder or stroking his hair; some sort of subtle touching, and he would calm himself, and go back to resting.

Mara walked with a bit more speed back to their room.

She turned on the lights, dimming them so that he wouldn’t be startled when he woke up.

Luke was clearly experiencing something unpleasant in his mind. He grunted and his legs started to thrash under the sheets.

Mara came around the bed to his face, crouched down beside him, starting to slowly stroke his hair, and she gently rested her hand on his available arm. He sighed, and seen to calm with her contact.

She was about to pull back, and let him continue to sleep, but his peace was short-lived.

Luke started mumbling angrily something to someone who was clearly not there. His body jerked, then tossed about again.

She stroked his arm, with more intent, only it didn’t calm him. He thrashed about again, worried, not angry.

She called his name softly, trying to hush him, and bring him away from what was causing him pain.

“Mara” he mumbled; concerned, his face twisting in pain.

No longer satisfied with keeping him calm, Mara gently rubbed his shoulder and called his name louder, hoping to wake him. “Luke?” she called in normal volume, hoping to bring him out of his experience.

Instantaneously, Luke sat up, with fear and shock on his face, and grabbed her biceps, calling her name as he did so.

His eyes wide, and his breath panting from shock. His hands dug into the skin of her upper arms.

“Luke?” Mara called again to bring him back to the present. “You’re alright…you’re here…I’m here.” She said softly. She watched his face; concerned for him- this was not a normal nightmare for him.

He shook and blinked several times before he came to the realized, and recognized her words.

“Mara!” he said tenderly, before relaxing his hold on her arms and bringing her to him. “You’re alright…you’re alive.”

Luke held her tightly to his chest, and she could hear his heart pounding wildly.

His breathing was returning to normal, and his pulse slowly dying down. “I dreamed you died.” He swallowed. “Myrkrr…you were on Myrkrr…and the Death Star…another Death Star…” His eyes met hers, still scared. “I couldn’t save you.”

Mara watched his face; his handsome face, blanched and scared for her. “I’m here, Luke.” Her hand came up and touched his cheek. She smiled gently, soothing him. “I’m always safe when I’m with you.”

He let out a few cleansing breaths, and soon a smile graced his mouth.
She leaned in and pressed her mouth to his, letting him feel how close she was to him. And she knew he was recovering as he hummed with appreciation of her tenderness.

Mara touched his mind, just to ease him more. << I love you.>>

She could feel his fear receding, and he stroked her back as he held her.

<I love you too.> His mind touched back, and he sighed relieved.

Luke pulled back, looking at her. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I haven’t had a dream like that in a long time…”

She nodded. “I don’t think you dreamed at all while we were on Roche…” Speaking gently to him. “And you went through so much before you got there…so I’m not surprised that you’re having a bad dream now.”

“It’s just your mind working out what happened there, and what you’re feeling being here again.” She rationalized for him.


He hung his head. It was time, he knew it. There was no hiding it anymore.

“It’s not just that.” He said quietly. “There’s something else.” He lifted his head to look into her eyes. <Something that I’ve been keeping from you.>

Mara sighed, knowing that this moment was coming. She would have had to been blind not to see it or sense it.

“I know.” She said quietly. “You’ve been distant. I figured you would have told me, but for whatever reason, you didn’t want to…but I knew you would eventually.” She met his eyes. “It’s not like you to keep things from me.”

Luke’s eyes drew together, knowing that she was able to see through him; he felt relieved that she wasn’t angered with him, but he knew that could change.

“I have an idea.” She spoke quietly. “I have somethings to talk to you about too.” And she paused, knowing this made sense, in the moment. “Why don’t you go take a shower? And when you come back, we can talk?”

She reasoned, “We’re not expected anywhere yet today…”

He shook his head; amazed at how she could always have the presence of mind that he seemed to lack, and a state of objectiveness that he envied.

“How do you think of these things?” He asked.

“I can’t take all the credit.” Mara got up from his side of the bed. “I spoke to Dankin about it- since he and Nattan get precious little time together. He said that, when they have time together, they immediately talk about all the things that they think will be difficult.”

She rummaged through her supplies, making a kit for him to take into the shower, knowing that he had never heard of cream rinse. “Afterwards, they spend the rest of the time being together, enjoying each other, instead of having things over their heads that could keep them apart.”

Luke nodded. “Remind me to thank him.” He mumbled.
“If this works, then I’ll thank him from the both of us.” She winked, and handed him the supplies. “Here, take this…before all the hot water is gone.”

He smirked. “Did you like the communs?”

“Much more than I expected.” She answered. “Now, go.”

He put up no argument for her, and got up from the bed. Still, unsure if she would remain this receptive while they talked, but at least a shower would give him time to figure out how to breach the topic with her.

Luke wrapped his robed around himself. He came close and took the supplies from her. “You win.” He whispered before he kissed her soundly. <I love you very much.> He sent over.

<<I know.>> She sent back.

Luke cringed briefly; those words didn’t seem right coming from her.

<<I love you too.>> and she followed them up perfectly.

He smiled, and gave her one more quick kiss before leaving.

**

By the time he came back, Mara had tidied up the room and dressed herself for the day. She had left her hair go naturally wavy, and braided it loosely over her shoulder.

Luke had noticed that when she was away from base she preferred to dress more-casually then she usually did; somehow softer. Not so regimented. He liked it.

She wore a light brown tunic that had a hint of pink to it; it made her skin look flawless. Peeking out of the neckline was his pendant, and he grinned to himself.

“How was the shower? Was there enough hot water?” Mara asked as she pulled on her half-boots, tucking the hem of her trousers into them.

“Yes.” He said, still grinning for no apparent reason other than she looked beautiful. “But, it turns out that I’m still attractive ‘for an old guy’.” He grimaced.

“What was that?” She asked, amused.

“Yeah, that’s what I overheard in the shower.” Luke pouted. “I think it was Dr. Dram’s assistant talking to another student. Clearly, no one told her about ‘communal protocol’.”

He took off his robe, and looked into the side mirror to see if he could see any of the bruising that had been on his chest just days before.

Mara chuckled at him. “Well, you have to keep in mind that you have about ten years on these students, not to mention, much more life experience.”

She came over, and inspected his skin for where the bacta patch had been; and nodded, accepting in had almost fully healed. She let her finger graze over his skin; enjoying the tingling feeling that came whenever she touched him.

“Besides…” She nuzzled close. “I think you’re very attractive…even though you keep banging yourself up, for whatever reason.” Kissing the side of his neck.
“I wouldn’t worry about it.” A snide tone was in her voice. “I don’t trust anyone named ‘Peffar’.”

“Yeah?” He turned his head to receive another kiss. <I think you’re beautiful. I’m still amazed that you’re with me.>

She snorted between their lips, and blushed slightly.

Their kiss broke, and he could sense that she wanted to get the unpleasantries out of the way before the day got any longer.

Luke stepped aside to retrieve his clothing for the day, and started to dress himself.

Mara walked to the other side of the room just to give him space.

“So I was thinking, that maybe we start by talking about small things we didn’t tell each other, then build up to larger issues.” She said, sounding very analytical.

He watched her from the corner of his eyes as she spoke. He had accepted that it was just part of her to compartmentalize things that she could control. It was amusing, but it worked for her as a coping mechanism, and he wasn’t about to change that for her.

Luke turned to her, keeping his tone solemn as he was taking this seriously. “Alright, do you want to go first or shall I?”

Mara turned to look at him. “Well, I kind of already went first, last night…when I told you that Karrde is moving the base again. No one else knows that…not even Dankin. We’ll most likely lose people.”

Luke nodded realizing that it was a bigger issue than he had first thought, and how it would affect her. Mara enjoyed being there, at the base on Dantooine, it was starting to feel like a home to her, and it was something that she wouldn’t usually share with other people than him.

He nodded. “That will mean that we might have to be away from each for longer, doesn’t it?”

“Probably.” She said remorsefully. “Especially if Karrde doesn’t know how much he wants to get involved in this war, yet. He prefers to stay neutral, but that isn’t an option anymore. He has clearly chosen a side, and he doesn’t like it. Which means…”

“Which means, you have to go with him.” He finished her thought.

She nodded.

“Okay.” He sighed. “We’ll get through this as we always do…we’ll make something work.”

“How?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t know.” He said in the same tone. “But I have noticed that the Force seems to favor us right now. How else do you explain us being at the same Med-center at the same time? Coincidence?” He smiled.

Mara rolled her eyes, but then smiled back. “Alright…your turn.” Her smile fading, waiting on him.

“Right.” Luke leaned back on the dresser behind him. “Leia is pregnant again.” He raised his eyebrows, waiting on her response.

She tilted her head. “Why didn’t you want to tell me about that?”
“Well…” He paused, selecting his words. “I didn’t want to upset you, considering what you were in the Med-center for. What if…”

“What if I found out that I couldn’t have children while in treatment?” She finished his thought this time; now, appreciating that he was concerned for her emotional state.

He nodded, watching her face.

“But there’s more to that…isn’t there?” Mara’s eyes narrowed to not-quite a glare.

“Yes.” He frowned. “If what I’m feeling is correct, and we’re about to be in the middle of a war…and short on friends right now…is it really a good idea for her to be having a child right now? And what if it affects her health? Or that of the baby?” He sighed.

She nodded, understanding his protective feelings over his sister, and of the rest of his family.

“You can’t make her decisions for her, Luke.” She sympathized. “Leia is an adult, and she has Han. And that smuggler will make sure she’ll be safe.”

Mara sat down in the small chair in the corner of the room, facing him. “But, you’re not quite done…are you?”

Luke looked at her, remembering why she made for a good interrogator; she had an uncanny ability to read more than what had been said.

“No.” He said, not looking away. “There’s a good chance that Leia is going to ask me to go back into action, and join up with the new resistance she’s been forming.”

She blinked a few times, absorbing what he had said. “Do you want to go back into action?” she asked.

He hung his head. “I don’t know. I don’t think I have much of a choice.”

“Why is that?” She was getting indignant about it.

“It’s what I signed up for…as a Jedi…I have a duty to the…”

“The Galaxy? Really, Luke?” Mara’s temper flared. “Being a Jedi doesn’t mean that you have to rush off to every conflict that comes around.”

He looked up at her again. “No, it doesn’t. But it does mean that I do have a responsibility to fight for those who can’t.”

She shook her head. “I just don’t understand why.” She mumbled. Mara tried to calm herself. “But they haven’t asked you yet?”

“No, not yet…but I can sense that they will.”

She nodded, realizing that they would have to broach that subject when it came down to it. “I think you know how I feel about it, but essentially, it will be your decision.” She mumbled, and looked away.

Luke nodded, and waited before he looked up at her again; knowing that she needed time before they continued.

He waited, knowing that it was her turn to bring up the issues that she had been harboring. There
was something strange about what she wanted to say…it felt like she had something she wanted to ask him, but was afraid to.

Avoiding to say ‘your turn’, so he wordlessly thought it, knowing that she would pick up on it.

Mara looked over at him nervously, and opened her mouth and closed it again, as if reconsidering.

He could see her make a decision before she spoke.

“Luke, you know that I’m new to this ‘relationship’ thing.” She swallowed, and saw him nod before she continued. “That I’ve never had to think about the way I feel about someone before…” He nodded again.

“I think I might have some latent jealousy.” She admitted.

He raised an eyebrow; she was embarrassed because she was jealous? This was new.

“Over me?” He asked, surprised that he had ever given her a reason to feel that way.

“Yes, somewhat.” She said humbly. “And I don’t know how you’ll feel about it. It’s so far in the past that I shouldn’t even feel this way…but I do.”

Mara shook her head and stood, and started to pace.

Luke recognized this pattern with her too; she paced when she was over-thinking something.

“Why don’t you just tell me what it is? …Or… tell me how you came to feel this way?” He asked quietly.

His reasoning must have made sense; she stopped her pacing in the small room, and looked over at him.

“When I had my mission on Tanaab…” She paused, not sure if she needed to remind him, but decided to continue. “…my mark said a few things to me. He was a former Imperial—a high ranking one too. He knew a lot of information that not everyone was privy to. He also knew a lot of information that most people just thought was gossip…only, some of it turned out to be true.”

Luke frowned, unsure of where this was going.

Mara looked at him. “He brought up a name from the past…and he mentioned that you were involved with them…and it’s bothered me ever since I heard it.”

He sat up at her words. “Who?” He asked; he couldn’t fathom who she could be thinking of.

She huffed; clearly this person irked her. “Shira Brie.” She said firmly.

His eyes widened, and he repeated the name in his head; memories came to him…redhead, and Imperial agent.

“Yes, I knew her.” He admitted.

“Did you sleep with her?” She asked, standing tall.

Luke felt her shields immediately come up, protecting herself against the answer. He looked her clearly in the eye.
He sighed. “Yes.” he answered, not wanting to lie to her. He watched as her eyes as they wavered. “You knew her?” He asked quietly, already knowing the answer.

Mara turned away from him. “Yes.” She hissed. “We were often mistaken for each other.” She said with a coldness in her voice that he hadn’t heard for a long time.

He cringed, but reached out to her mind, and asked, <What do you want to know?>

She said nothing, still turned away from him.

Luke decided that it was best to volunteer information, knowing that she might not know what to ask.

“She joined up with the Rebellion just after Yavin.” He said. “She worked her way through the pit crews then came on with one of the other squadrons. After a few skirmishes, she was transferred over to The Rogues while I was just beginning to form the squad.”

He could tell that she was listening, so he continued. “From what I remember, she was pretty forward with everyone.”

Mara snorted loudly, and he could tell what opinion she had of Brie.

“She made the rounds of the squad first.” He confessed. “But that was after… she had a sob story, and I was so naïve that I fell for it.”

“I didn’t even show her any special attention…it was she who made the first move.” He tried to passively to defend himself, but he knew it was futile.

Luke scratched the side of his face, feeling embarrassed for himself. “I think she started with Wedge first, then Hobbie, then Wes…and I think even Dak, before she came on to me.”

“I can’t even remember it…I was spending a lot of time being a Rogue at the time.” He tried to imply the sort of living that flyboys were known for.

He stopped, sensing that she wanted to say something, but with her back to him, he wasn’t sure, so he continued. “Shortly, afterwards, she thought we were together, and we were sent on a mission, in stolen TIE fighters.”

He paused, as this was not a pleasant memory for him either. “A ship came between her fighter and mine, and with the comm being down and unsecure, I didn’t know if the fighter on the opposite side was friendly or not…I reached out with the Force, and I felt that it was definitely an enemy that was approaching, so when the chance emerged, I shot it down. It turned out to be Brie’s fighter.”

Mara turned back to look at him, surprised. “You were the Rebel who shot her down?”

He nodded. “Yes…when I got back to base, I learned it was her that I had shot down…a member of my own squad. The Alliance pulled my rank because of it, saying that I took too many risks.”

Luke sighed. “I was new to learning about the Force, but from this, I started to question it –only a few people knew that I was looking into becoming a Jedi, so it was easy for them to dismiss me. Even Leia couldn’t defend me.”

Her face softened as he spoke but he knew that she still needed to know.

“I spent my time away from the Alliance looking for any evidence that she was ‘an enemy’.” he
explained. “I found it, and I found out that she survived the crash.” he said quietly.

“She lay a trap for Vader to find me.” He said. “Only, he didn’t know that he was my father at the time. I was just the Force-sensitive pilot who destroyed the Death Star.”

Mara nodded and looked away again. There was something else to this, and Luke sensed he was going to have to explain further.

“Mara…” he implored quietly. “I felt nothing for her…other than that she was part of the squad, and I would have slept with just about anyone that night…I was lonely, and we were on the run.” He knew it was no excuse, but maybe she would believe him.

He reached out to her, asking gently, <Why does this matter to you?>

She turned away. “I knew her.” Her voice was distant, remembering. “We were always being compared to each other. I never liked her.” She huffed. “I like her less now.”

Luke could sense something; it felt like doubt? He was about to asked when she said what she was thinking. He felt the flicker of anger from her too.

“When you said you had visions of me…how did you know it was me, and not her?” Mara turned and looked at him. “What if she was supposed to be your redhead that you dreamed of? -the hair like a sunset?- the eyes?”

And there is was; her jealousy looking him in the face.

Luke shook his head immediately. “Never.” He said. “It was never her…it’s always been you. I know.”

He came off from his leaning on the dresser, and walked to her, offering his arms. “It’s always been you.” He whispered. <Your hair, your eyes, your smile…you.>

He could feel Mara’s shields and animosity drop as she came into his arms. He rocked her tenderly, letting his love for her flow.

Mara tilted her face towards him, blushing slightly. “I feel silly for feeling this way.” She confessed. “I know.” He whispered. “If you only knew how easily I get jealous, then you wouldn’t feel that bad.” He let his confession join hers.

Her eyes questioned him. “You get jealous? For me?”


He reached up to tilt her chin to his lips, and pressed his mouth firmly to hers. <You will never need to doubt again, ever. I promise.>

She hummed with contentment, relaxing into him.

Their kiss broke, and Luke could feel the air begin to clear a bit.

“So you learned the full truth about Shira Brie?” Mara asked, just to be sure.

“I think so.” Luke said skeptically; there was something in the way she had asked that maybe there was more. “She was an Imperial agent, trying to trap me….isn’t that all of it?”
Suddenly, he could feel that there was indeed more, as Mara backed out of their embrace; the tension came back into the room.

He frowned, waiting for her to expand on the lingering subject between them.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Luke.” She said. “Sometimes, it’s better not knowing.”

“I think you had better tell me.” He said apprehensively, knowing that if she didn’t tell him, it would leave something that she still kept from him.

Mara back further away from him, and he sensed that she braced herself for what she was about to tell him.

She looked down. “By sleeping with you…that was one of the ways that Vader was able to confirm that he was your father…she was able to get a genetic sample from you.”

Luke’s back stiffened as she spoke, realizing the truth in her words.

She started to pace again, and it rambled from her mouth. “I didn’t know that Vader was Anakin Skywalker…all I heard about you was that it was confirmed that you were the ‘son of a Jedi’, Anakin Skywalker…and then when the Noghri called you ‘Son of Vader’, I knew that they were one in the same…it suddenly made sense.”

She started to twist her hands as she spoke. “Brie came back to court after she was repaired…she was in Vader’s service until then, and then switched to become part of the Emperor’s operatives…she called herself a Hand, but she was never appointed to the position.”

She started to slow her words, knowing that any one of them could hurt him. “She was dismissed from Vader’s service around the time that she learned of you…I suppose it was Vader’s idea… that he couldn’t have her in his service any longer.”

Mara stopped and looked at him, and spoke the next words even slower. “Luke…Shira Brie was Vader’s mistress…she was also discovered to be his secret apprentice…The Emperor wouldn’t allow either.”

Luke’s eyes widened, shocked, and he could feel the anger seeping into him; now knowing that he had shared a bed with his own father’s former lover. “How do you know?” He hissed.

She breathed heavy before swallowing and continuing. “I know because I saw her in the medical wing several times.”

He could see the pain in her eyes, but she knew she had to tell him. “Unlike me, she was never sterilized… she was there having voluntary procedures done to remove her…accidental inconveniences…and she wasn’t shy about who the father was.”

Mara could feel the air in the room growing denser; she knew it was Luke’s anger, not directed at her for telling him, but at his father.

It was just one more thing that Luke would have to learn to forgive; his father had sent his own mistress to seduce his son, have that son dejected by The Rebellion, and to trap him.

Luke’s eyes went distant, staring into nothing as his chest heaved, and then his head dropped.

Mara shook her head, regretting being taken in; she knew she had been emotionally manipulated and made to think about things that she hadn’t thought about in years.
“Cassis.” She whispered angrily. “It was Cassis who brought all this up…he taunted me with it. I thought I had buried it, but it kept gnawing at me…not just your relationship with her…but her relationship with your father…I didn’t know if you knew.”

“I didn’t know.” He growled.

Mara sensed his feelings; angered, hurt, and deceived. He had tried to convince himself that his father was really, and truly a good man, behind it all, but the truth was that, although Anakin Skywalker may have been a good man, Darth Vader was not.

What he did next surprised her. She watched as Luke opened his hand wanting her to touch him then, not rejecting him for the sins of his father.

Mara walked over and offer her arms instead, and he accepted her arms around him. <<I didn’t want to hurt you.>> She sent to him.

<I know…I know.> He soothed her, as well as himself.

She stroked his hair; feeling him take comfort that she loved him no matter who his father was.

She could feel his anger hovering, fresh and raw, but he still needed to be comforted.

They were quiet and something still lingering between them; their conversation was not finished.

An odd thought crept into her mind. Somehow, I don’t think Dankin and Nattan would talk about the same things we do. She thought silently.

Luke must have heard her dry comment, and he snorted at her dry comment; still holding her.

He sighed, releasing his firm hold on her, and looked up at her face. He knew it was his turn to potentially hurt her.

He reached out to touch one of the wisps of hair that had escaped her braid; it twisted into a perfect ringlet on the side of her face. Absently, he tugged on the end to straighten it, and release it to watch it spring back into shape, and he briefly grinned.

Luke swallowed. “I guess it’s my turn now…” he said regretfully.

This wasn’t done yet. It wasn’t a battle, but it sure did feel like one.

<<I think I know what you want to tell me…>> She sent over, feeling the impending sense of doom in him.

He looked into her eyes, seeing that she probably already knew.

“The Emperor…” he whispered.

“…is alive?” She finished his words.

Luke studied her face as he saw the emotion of compassion that she had for him, leave, replaced by numbness. It was if a curtain fell over her.

He had feared that she was going to breakdown as she had on Coruscant when the rumors had surfaced.

He looked away before he came back to her eyes. “I heard Him.” He paused, “When I was flying
escort with Aves to Ord Mantell.”

She seemed to be surprised that he had such a contact and didn’t tell her. The numbness dissolved quickly, and he could see the panic come over her.

Rumor was one thing, but for Luke to have actual contact.

Mara fought to find the words. “W-what did he say?” She uncharacteristically stuttered, as horror crept in.

He could feel her body start to shiver, and he knew she was fighting to control it.

“He told me that He was expecting me…that I would come to Him.” he said slowly, not wanting to cause her further panic.

Luke felt her body tense and want to pull away from him; to run, to run anywhere but in that moment. But he held her close to him.


Mara’s face had gone pale, and she looked at him, shocked. “How?” her mouth said the word, but her mouth was too dry to make the sound.

Luke, reproached himself, knowing he did bring this on himself. “I went into that Dark hall at the Jedi Enclave…I thought I could handle it…I thought I was ready.”

“I’m not.” he confessed.

<<Ready for what?>> She asked, still unable to speak.

“To be a Jedi Master…I thought I had advanced enough… I haven’t.” Luke searched her eyes.

“After that, the shadow, of the Dark side, seemed to linger.”

Mara looked away. “I know…I sensed it in you…you were…different, cold.”

He thought he had hid it, but it clearly was more-visible than he liked.

“He must have sensed it too…after He sensed me.” He rolled his eyes; knowing that he had done it to himself by opening himself up; regretting even bring tempted to touch the Dark side, but also his inability to shield himself.

Mara shook her head, refusing to look at him, and pushed herself from his arms.

She started to pace again, semi-frantically away from him. “I don’t believe it.” She mumbled.

“It wasn’t Him.” She said, then repeated it again to herself. It wasn’t Him.

Luke watched her, wanting to agree with her, wanting to stop her distress, but he knew he couldn’t.

“Mara…” He called gently to her, trying to get her attention.

She turned to look at him; his blue eyes honest and open, not hiding what he felt, sensed and heard.

“It wasn’t --It isn’t!” She said directly at him. “I would have known…He would have reached out by now…Cassis even said He would.”
“Cassis?” Luke questioned her. “How would he know?”

“He said that the New Emperor was reaching out to His former operatives…Cassis wanted to know if He had called me back yet.” Her eyes were wide and afraid, but she was holding her emotions together, better than she had before. She must have been preparing herself for this eventuality.

Now it was Luke who had his doubts. “Would you go if He called?” he asked, avoiding her gaze now, and wanting an answer.

Mara stopped and stared at him, and the audacity that he would even ask such a thing.

“Why would you think that?” She asked, her volume louder than she had ever spoke to him. “Do you think I’m stilled tied to Him? That I would want to serve Him again!”

“No” Luke sighed, knowing he had touched a nerve that she didn’t know was exposed. “I don’t think that at all…but I’m asking because I don’t think you’ve thought about it at all.”

The cold look in her eyes told him that she felt betrayed by his words.

“I don’t think you would ever go back to him…but if He did contact you, like he did me, how would you feel, Mara?” He got up from the edge of the dresser, and walked over to her. “How would you react?”

He reached out to put his hand on her shoulders, and she twitched away from his touch.

“Have you thought about it, or have you avoided thinking about it? Dismissed it?” He hated to point it back to her, but he knew that she needed to address this before she would not be given an option.

She was still angry with him. “This isn’t about me.” she hissed. “This, is about how you hid this from me! You didn’t want me to know…like I was some sort of child who couldn’t figure out what I would feel!”

“Do you want me to deny that I wanted to protect you from this?- Well, I won’t!” He snapped back, feeling his temper rise. “I’ve seen what just the prospect of Him returning could do to you, and I won’t apologize for wanting to keep that from you…until I was certain.”

Luke drew his anger back; it wasn’t right to direct it at her. “I didn’t want to admit it to you because I didn’t want to admit it to myself.” He willed himself to bring back his emotions.

He turned away from her, knowing that she was watching him; walking back to lean on the dresser, giving her some space.

He closed his eyes. “What if He is back, Mara?”

He rubbed his face. <Will this ever end?> he asked. How long am I going to have to fight this? “I felt Him…I know it’s Him.”

Luke looked her in the eye, and he could see that her animosity towards him was dissolving being replaced with doubt. Mara was a fighter, and she would fight this if she knew there was a chance that he was wrong.

In a moment, Mara walked over to him, with her hands outstretched. “Show me.” She demanded. “I won’t be satisfied until you show me.”

He sighed, knowing this would be the only way. Reaching out, he took her hands in his, and
touching her mind.

The images flew between them both; the battle over Ord Mantell…the X-wings, the TIE fighters, the Star Destroyers, The *Stacked Deck* taking a dive…then, like a shot to the chest, *the cold*…and the voice…*His Voice…His Presence.*

Luke pulled back, breathing hard; it was too much for him, so it had to be too much for her. He could feel the shiver deep inside himself all over again.

Mara stood with her hands frozen in the same place where he had held her hands; her eyes closed, her breathing staggered. She shuddered.

Slowly, she opened her eyes; her face numb again. She lowered her hands and stepped back. She stared away from him into nothing.

He swallowed, waiting on her opinion; letting his breathing return to normal.

“It wasn’t Him.” She said in a hushed tone. “It wasn’t Him.” She repeated at her normal volume; not angry or scared.

The colour started to return to her face.

Luke frowned at her; not believing what he was hearing.

Mara met his eyes. “It sounded like Him…And I’ll admit that this presence was dark and cold…but, it wasn’t Him.” Her eyes flashed with some fear, but then blinked again and her agitation seemed to be leaving.

“It wasn’t Him.” She said one more time.

He shook his head. “Mara…” He was about to disagree with her.

“Luke, it wasn’t Him.” She said it again. “It must be a clone…or something…but it wasn’t Him…not from what you just showed me.” Her eyes pleaded with him to believe her. “I should know, Luke…I would know.”

She swallowed. “I had His voice in my head…and I’ve had His presence around me for almost my entire life.” Her voice didn’t waivered.

She said it one more time, enunciating every word. “It was not Him.”

Luke nodded, still not quite agreeing with her assessment, but agreeing that if anyone should know what Palpatine’s touch on a mind should feel like- it would be her.

He still couldn’t fathom what these implications could mean; whoever was in control of the new Imperial uprising certainly had a following. It would be possible for the new leader to be a clone of Palpatine. He did have a full set of cloning cylinders on Wayland; it would be possible to have another set stashed away somewhere.

Whoever it was, or whatever it was; it was clearly touching the Dark side too. But the touch was too defined to be anything like he had seen in C’Boath whose Force use was erratic and unpredictable. This Force-user knew what they were doing with their intention and their power.

And they had to be stopped.

This was going to have to be a discussion between him and Leia; he would even share Mara’s
assessment when the time came.

But now, there were no other issues between them, and it was time to repair what damage had been done.

Luke knew it was his turn to humble himself; he did, after all, keep this from her, his venture into the Dark hallway and his contact with the supposed-Emperor.

“I’m sorry.” He said, reaching out to her, sending her a true apology. “I shouldn’t have kept any of this from you.”

He offered up his hand, asking her for a little bit of contact, telling him that he was forgiven.

Mara turned, and came towards him, pushing the hand aside, wrapping herself in his arms and placed her lips to his.

She sent over her feelings of how relieved that they were finally able to remove this block between them.

She pressed her mouth firmly to his, and Luke absorbed it; feeling like he had been missing her touch and her contact for too long.

Luke reveled in the touch of her mouth; adored it, savoring it. Feeling her forgiveness and finally allowing himself to enjoy being with her, with nothing looming. The outside world, and all its troubles, could wait.

All he had thought about on Dalcretti, when he had a spare moment, was how he missed her, and longed to kiss her like he was doing right now.

Her body felt perfect in his hands, sprayed across her back, and he could feel her hands holding him to her.

He smiled, between their lips, as he felt her tongue touch the edge of his lips, knowing that she was back; in spirit and mind.

Luke tightened his hold on her, pressing his body to hers, and letting his tongue deeply explore her. He moaned into her mouth, letting his body behave how it wanted to in the moment.

Mara felt the heat of his body through his clothes, pressed to her, and his arousal growing; she couldn’t deny her own arousal. She had dreamed of him for the past few weeks.

When she felt his hand cupped one her breasts, and squeeze the flesh; she gasped, knowing what their bodies could do when they came together.

In her mind, she remembered hearing rumors about how good ‘make up sex’ could be, and wondered if they were true.


She pulled back from their escalating kiss, and smiled slyly to him, touching her forehead to his. <<Yes…I’m fine…we can be together.>>

His eyes were as deep as sapphires, and she realized how much she had missed that colour, seeing them longing for her.

Luke dipped his head, ready to capture her lips again, wanting to drive his passion for her.
The knock at the door stopped him.

Luke tried again, ignoring whoever was at the door, but unfortunately, Mara had heard it too, and she turned her face in the direction of the sound, breaking the momentum of their passion.

He cringed, and sensed who was on the other side, and his frustration started to recede.

Mara apologetically shrugged. “We knew this quiet wouldn’t last.” She whispered, saying what he knew was true. She stepped out of their embrace and towards the door.

He let out a little exasperated growl as he sighed. He adjusted his tunic, pulling it lower to cover how excited his body was just moments ago.

She looked back at him, to make sure they were both in presentable condition, before she release the door.

It slid back to reveal Almae and Deek standing there, talking amongst themselves.

“Mara!..Luke!” Almae greeted them. “We missed you at morning meal…is everything okay?”

Mara stepped aside to let them into the little room. She looked over at Luke, unsure what to say.

“We had some things to talk over.” Luke said diplomatically to the couple.

Deek stepped over to him. “Oh good…I thought the weather had scared you away.” The doctor smiled to both of them, not aware that there had been any interruption.

Almae smiled over to Mara. “Well, morning study assemblies and lectures were about to start.” She looked hopeful between the two.

Deek raised his eyebrows to Luke. “We were hoping that we could get both of you in on our history discussion this morning.” He tried to make in sound appealing. “We’re discussing the rise of the Rebellion…it would be interesting to have both of you give your opinions, and insights.”

Luke felt a little taken a-back by their request, and he looked over to Mara before answering. They had already re-hashed history this morning, and he was unsure if they really wanted to do it all over again for the second time today.

Almae interjected, hoping to sell it to them. “You wouldn’t have to speak, just let us know if we’re on the right path…we’re trying to make a time line right now.” She cast her smiling gaze between Mara and Luke.

Mara eyes met Luke’s, and her eyes brows raised; reaching out to him. <<I think we’re being tag-teamed here.>> She softened her look. <<It’s up to you…I’m fine with it.>>

Luke scratched the side of his neck and contemplated it for a moment.

After a few moments of making them wait, he sighed and looked over at Deek. “Alright, we’ll do it...on the conditions that Mara can get her cup of caf and I can get something to eat before we go into the gundark den.” He said with a smile.

Mara smirked over to him, as she attached her lightsaber to her belt. <<Good call…I definitely need my caf this morning.>>

“Excellent!” Almae exclaimed, linking arms with Mara, and leading her out of the room.
Deek beamed at Luke. “Brilliant! Capital!” He was no less excited then his wife about the prospect of having both a former Imperial agent, and a former Republic General speak to his class.

Luke took the hint from Mara, and attached his lightsaber and followed Deek out of the room.

Across from the room, R2 chirped contentedly; his dome swiveled when he heard Luke’s voice with a greeting.

R2 saw the party leave his master’s room and disengaged from the power unit to follow quietly behind the party.

The sound of rain and gentle trickling could be heard in the hallway, reverberating against the walls.

As they walked down the hall, Luke turned to the doctor. “I’m surprised that you are having such a discussion here.” The Jedi pondered out loud. “Wouldn’t it be more suitable to discuss Massassi history- from what you could find of it?” Luke asked.

Deek looked in his direction. “We did try to do that, but we also wanted to encompass the other history of these building as well. And part of that history is The Rebellion…”

Almae looked over her shoulder to add to her husband’s answer. “All the students here are still on their usual university curriculum, so they often are taking subjects by distance study to coincide with their studies here. They also study a wide variety of subjects.”

Mara nodded, understanding what it meant to study more than one discipline at a time.

They stopped at the mess hall, and Luke grabbed some breakfast for himself. Until he also noticed that Mara had made two cups of caf instead of just one for herself, and he gave her a look down then back up at her.

<<I can’t have you drinking from mine in public.>> She thought over to him with sympathetic eyes.
<<Even though I like it when we share breakfast.>>

He gave her a knowing smile; having to hide their relationship was going to take more practice on his part. Luke took another plate and put some food for her on the second one; feeling slightly disappointed.

Once they had food and beverages in hand, they followed the doctors to the former antennae room that was being used for classes.

As they walked, Mara turned to Almae. “So what are the plans for after the midday meal?”

The doctor gave her a quizzical look.

“All the students here are still on their usual university curriculum, so they often are taking subjects by distance study to coincide with their studies here. They also study a wide variety of subjects.”

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“I think both Luke and myself would like to get in some time for our Jedi studies while we’re here.” Mara answered.

<We do?> Luke asked over to her, a tad surprised that he wasn’t forcing further studies on her; sometimes it was like twisting her arm to get her to practice, or study.

<<We’d get some time to ourselves…alone…hopefully.>> She answered him.

<I love you.> He sent over his warm sense to her.

<<I love you too.>> She thought back to him, sending back her own touch to him.
“I don’t believe there are any plans…Deek?” Almae asked her husband.

“None that I’m aware.” The other doctor answered.

Mara grinned politely at them, and nodded over to Luke.

They entered from the back of the class that seemed to already be in session. There must have been about thirty students who were in a discussion amongst themselves.

Luke and Mara sat at the rear of the class, and Deek and Almae headed to the front to direct the session.

They took their seats, and R2 wheeled up beside them.

Mara passed Luke a cup of caf, and in exchange he passed her a small plate of food; both watching with interest as the Terratiques clearly had everything in hand.

There were several students who were watching via holovid, and the receptor followed both doctors as each of them took turns recapping what had been previously been discussed in class.

The light in the class dimmed and a time line came up that was projected in front of the class. Almae took the first turn and indicated the time period several years before the Battle of Yavin; the event which the time line seemed to center on.

Mara looked over at Luke, wondering if he was experiencing any of the feelings that he had the previous day. She didn’t want him having any flashbacks.

He must have sensed her concern because he looked over at her and gave her a tight smile, indicating he was fine with it. <What about you?> His interest returned to the front of the class, but his attention was on her. <Weren’t you active during this time?>

She sighed, knowing that he realized it too. <<Yes, somewhat...>> She took a bite of her food, and a sip of her caf. <<I was mostly on courier missions at the time, but I knew of almost everything that was happening...the palace was buzzing with it.>> She sent back over to him.

They were retracing a portion of the time line and Mara shook her head a bit with their dates.

Deek must have caught her reaction and he raised his hand to stop his wife’s description.

“You’ll have to forgive the interruption, Dr. Terratique.” And he looked more intently in Mara’s direction. “I almost completely forgot that we have special guests in class today.”

Luke caught on to where this was going and put his plate of food aside. <It looks like we’re on.>

Mara cringed. <<Sorry.>> Her food was quickly forgotten.

Almae stepped beside her husband. “Yes, we’d like to introduce our guests… former Rebel Alliance General, and Jedi Knight, Luke Skywalker…”

The room gasped, and Mara knew that their reaction was probably due to the rumors circulating about him recently, as well as his reputation for this particular action, and the fact that he had returned to the same location.

Luke stood up and started walking to the front of the class.

Deek cleared his throat before he spoke. “And, of course, we also want to welcome Mistress Mara
Jade…former Imperial Operative, and currently part of the Trader’s Guild.”

And now the room, audibly murmured, as she got up to join Luke at the front of the class. The rumors concerning the former Emperor’s Hand had more time to take shape and spread than the ones on Luke.

Almae could sense that her guests were sure to cause quite a bit of discussion. “Now, I couldn’t help but notice that Ms. Jade had a disagreement regarding our current time line.” She looked directly at Mara. “Can you please indicate where we are incorrect?”

Mara stepped up the line and started to point to place approximately a year before the Battle of Yavin.

“This area...” she said. “Um, you have it indicated as ‘The Dismissal of Lower Council of the Imperial Senate’ – this, in fact, around five years before the Battle of Yavin.”

Mara looked around the class before explaining. “The Emperor removed the council in order to expedite the further growth of the military, and to place sanctions on some of those systems that were involved in the council, who would have opposed the expansion.”

Almae nodded, and then turned to the class. “Do any of you have questions for our guests?”

Almost all the hands rose up, representing each student, wanting to ask something.

Deek pointed to a female student at the back of the class.

The student stood up and smiled nervously before asking. “How old were you at the time of the Battle of Yavin?”

Mara sighed, and looked directly at the girl. “I was approximately eighteen standard years old at the time, and I had been in service for three years.”

The classroom murmured.

Almae motioned at Luke. “And Jedi Skywalker, how old were you at the time of the Battle of Yavin?” she asked.

Luke cleared his throat, and then answered. “I was approaching twenty standard years of age, during The Battle.”

“And this was your first military campaign, was it not?” Deek asked.

“Yes.” Luke said quietly. “I had no knowledge or military experience prior to the Battle of Yavin.”

From out of nowhere, a student asked. “And Ms. Jade…where were you at the time of The Battle?”

Mara tried to see who asked the question, but she instinctively answered. “I was on Coruscant at the time, preparing for another assignment.”

“What do you remember about the events leading up to the Battle?” another unorthodox question from a random student.

Mara sighed. “There’s not much to tell…at least from my point of view. The days leading up to the Battle went rapidly, and the changes came fast.”

She walked forward to the class. “First, there was the purging of Jedha. It was under Imperial
control, providing a resource, and it became *compromised*. So it became a testing ground for the first power-level of the Death Star—how the power could be isolated to destroy a specific location. The Senate was told it was a mining accident to hide the use of the Death Star.”

She looked out in the dim light, nervously, knowing that she had been on the wrong side for so long, but at the time, it was such a different story.

“Why was it destroyed?” – a louder voice called out, asking.

Mara turned in the direction that the voice came from. “The Imperial operation came under guerilla attack, attributed to the rebel organization of Saw Gerrara…it was deemed “compromised” and Grand Moff Tarkin decided to eradicate it. The word “compromised” was an official term that was used for any situation which could not be contained or controlled.”

She blinked a few times, and stepped back a bit. “After Jedha, there was a Rebel attack on the records facility on Scarif. The second weapons test of the Death Star occurred there. After that facility had been compromised, and it was deemed a tactical measure as it was believed that the information held at Scarif needed to be contained.”

Mara walked over to the time line, and expanded the image to see if these items were included on the time line.

They weren’t. She looked over at Almae who was vigorously taking notes, so Mara continued. “Just after the Attack on Scarif, it was learned that the plans for the Death Star had been stolen, and efforts were made to recapture those plans, headed by Darth Vader.” Mara looked over at Luke.

He looked back at her, listening; not judging her.

“It was at this time, that it was believed that those plans were in the hands on a Rebel Leader, Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan.” She said quietly.

“And then the Empire decided to destroy her planet!” – a voice in the dark commented, sounding angered.

Mara breathed deeply before continuing. “No, not at that time. The Imperial Senate was then dissolved. The Emperor wanted to remove any bureaucracy that he might face if he chose to use the Death Star.”

She swallowed, knowing that she might be revealing too much in her next few sentences; things that were not common knowledge. “It was purely Tarkin who decided to destroy Alderaan. The Emperor preferred not to reveal the capability of the space station at that time and He was quite displeased when Alderaan was destroyed.”

“How do you know this?” – male Crinian in the front row had leaned in and was listening intently.

Mara smiled tightly, as a show that she acknowledged his question. “The Emperor’s operatives on the Death Star were watching both Tarkin and Vader. Tarkin was under investigation for possible treason …and so was Vader.”

She sensed surprise from Luke, but he didn’t interject and relaxed back to listening.

She looked down. “I don’t remember much from the Destruction of Alderaan…I passed out when I sensed it. It was overwhelming.” She swallowed, before finishing her thought. “I was in the Senate Library at the time…and it was like there was screaming in my head… and then… darkness. When I came to, and was able to move, I went my private chambers to await instructions…from the
Emperor…I felt His call.”

She exhaled before divulging the next event that she was aware of. “After Alderaan, the sleeper operatives were called into action, to start shutting down several functions of the Death Star, once it was determined to be fully functional, in all capacities.”

Mara’s eyes flickered over to Luke, then back at the classroom. “If the Death Star wasn’t going to be destroyed by the Rebels, then it was going to be destroyed from within.”

“Why was that?”- one of the students asked from the holo class.

She turned her attention to the projection screen. “Tarkin’s next target, after Yavin, was going to be Coruscant.” Her eyes looked off into nothing, as she explained. “If he had succeeded in destroying Yavin, with the Rebellion eliminated, and the galaxy in fear and chaos, it would have been perfect timing to turn on the Emperor, and destroy Him and His power structure in order for Tarkin to establish himself as Emperor.”

There was a collective sigh, then murmuring from the class as they came to the understanding of how ruthless the Empire could be, especially against one of their own.

Deek came forward and nodded. “So, the Rebellion did the Emperor a favor by destroying the Death Star?” he asked.

Mara turned to look at him. “Yes…” she snorted softly, as the joke that was on them. “It was what He hoped for, actually. Very few things happened under His rule that weren’t of His design.”

“While the rest of the galaxy mourned the loss of Alderaan and it drew more aid to the Rebellion…‘The Tragic Destruction of the Death Star’- as it became to be known in Imperial society, was used as a propaganda topic, pointing out the terrorist actions of the Rebellion.” She glanced around the room. “So He made it work to His advantage.”

Mara looked down again. “The true intent of the Death Star was never realized.” She murmured.

“What was the intent? To terrorize people…to have them live in fear?” – the angry voice called out again.

Mara squinted into the dim light of the room, and steeled herself against the voice’s harsh tone. “If you think that my explanation of events demonstrated that I agreed with the actions of Empire- it doesn’t. I disagree with them, in this instance. However, the intent for the Death Star was never to hold the galaxy for ransom—from what I knew. It was intended as protective measure and was supposed to be sent into the Unknown Regions, to patrol for any possible threats….not to be turned on systems that were already under Imperial rule.”

“The Rebel Alliance was nothing more than a mere annoyance to His Majesty…like swatting at gnats. It was fractured and squabbling amongst its own members, up until the Death Star it was seen as nothing more than trivial….a nuisance that would eventually destroy itself.”

Luke sat up as she spoke—her tone. She had reverted back to a tone and language that he recognized as very Imperial-sounding. He had never heard her sound like that.

Mara must had caught it too because she took a deep breath and her shoulders relaxed from the authoritarian position they had assumed.

She paused and realized where she had faltered. She could still sense the lingering hostility.
Her voice became sympathetic and less defensive. “I had no control over the wishes of the Emperor…no one did…it was quite the other way around, I can assure you.”

The class fell into silence, contemplating what had been revealed. Mara stepped back to stand beside Luke, wanting to feel safe next to him.

She sensed his touch on her mind before she heard the words. <I didn’t know that you sensed Alderaan’s destruction…Obiwan did, but I didn’t.> he confessed. <I guess my connection to the Force wasn’t as strong as yours at the time.>

<<Possibly.>> She answered back.

Almae had sensed that the class was ready to resume after Mara’s revelations so she stepped forward. “Jedi Skywalker, if we may call on you to expand on some of the details from the Rebel Alliance perspective; we would greatly appreciate your insights?” The doctor was now turning the tone of the room.

Mara crossed her arms against her chest, and as Luke stepped forward he grazed her hand, telling her that he supported her.

Luke walked to the front of the class, and the tone in the room changed; gone was the tension that Mara had experienced.

“I don’t know how much I can tell you about this point in the Alliance.” Luke said wearily. “I can expand on the history after leaving Yavin, but before The Battle, I’m afraid my experience will be somewhat lack luster.”

“But you were aboard the Death Star?” – the captivated Crinian asked at the front of the class.

Luke seemed to be surprised that they were aware of this fact; it was not common knowledge. “That is true.” he said congenially. “I was aboard the Death Star, in a most accidental manner.” He paused. “I was also aboard the second Death Star- but I’m sure that is a story for another class.”

Mara sat back a listen to the class embrace him as he told his story of coming on board the space station and the rescue of the princess who would later turn out to be his sister.

He motion for R2 to come forward, and replayed the message from the princess in distress. It was amazing that the droid’s mind hadn’t been wiped.

It was such a chaotic story of misadventure that, if one didn’t believe in how the Force worked its way with its wants and needs, this story would have never happened.

R2 projected the second image of the data read-outs on the Death Star and the room was mesmerized as Luke explained the attack tactics that were used.

It was still a marvel to anyone with military training that the attack even succeeded. There had to be something, other than luck, on their side.

It was the first teaching in the Force that Mara had to give in to; that nothing happened, or moved without the Will of the Force.

As she listened to Luke, she marveled at how easily he had surrendered to that Will. He held no grudge against it, for all the twists and turns his life had taken.

Mara was still a little ambivalent to the Force, it was what had singled her out, made her a target.
A small epiphany came to her; perhaps this was another block for her to becoming a Jedi.

If she couldn’t accept the Will of Force, and where it chose to take her; it would restrict her growth, to become a Jedi, or any other type of Force-user that she chose to become.

The students threw questions at him, like they had done her. The questions ranged from ‘How comfortable was Stormtrooper armor?’ to ‘Has this base changed since you were here?’, and everything in between.

Luke was his usual charming self; a sweet mixture of genuine sincerity, and inexplicable strength in the face of adversity which commanded respect.

Mara envied at how uncomplicated he could appear, but she knew a very different story. Luke was a very intricate person and she loved every piece of him, even the Rebel.

She sighed as she listened to his voice; soothing and captivating.

The topic had changed while Mara was in reflection about her Farm Boy; he was now fielding questions about Jedi abilities, and ‘no, he can’t read minds’ and ‘yes, he can use the famous Jedi mind trick’ but prefers only to use it during life and death situations.

He looked over at her; she figure he must has sensed her thoughts. <<Do you know how much I’m in love with you?>> She thought over to him.

He turned back to the class, still speaking to them, but reached out to her. <If its anything like how much I love you, then, I think I know.>

The angry voice from the back at the class hurled a question about his parentage, and the friendly tone started to change.

Deek stepped up before Luke could answer. “Well it looks like our time is up here…and midday meal will be available in about twenty minutes… So I’d like to thank our guests, Jedi Skywalker and Ms. Jade for their input in today’s discussion.”

Luke smiled over at Deek, and before the students started to move, he turned his attention back to the student who had asked the last question, and included all the students, addressing them. “If you have any further questions, I would be glad to answer them during my stay.”

The students seemed to accept this rather than having the question that they seemed to want answered, taken away from them out of convenience.

Luke walked back over to Mara to stand beside her, as they watched the students leave.

Mara felt a flicker in Luke’s attention directed to one student; she assumed he had found the one argumentative scholar amongst the bunch, but didn’t single him out further.

They gradually filed out the class in groups, discussing what they had heard.

The doctors waited to come over to Luke and Mara until the class room was empty. They looked at Mara in an apologetic manner; they knew that Luke was going to be more well-received than the former Imperial- Mara knew it too, even before the class started. This was nothing new to her.

Almae stood beside Mara, and lowered her head. “I’m sorry they treated you that way.” She said quietly.
“You shouldn’t be.” Mara returned. “I expected it.”

Both doctors seemed surprised.

Luke grimaced looking at them. “History written by the victors.” He said simply.

Mara nodded, and joined in his euphemism. “And those who refuse to study history, are doomed to repeat it.”

The doctors broke into smiles, knowing that their guests held nothing against them.

Mara offered her arm to Almae to hook into hers.

Luke shot her a look and she shrugged as she walked away with the other woman.

They walked into the mess hall, and started to take their meal.

Luke and Mara were surrounded by the doctors; even Dr. Massian, and Dr. Dram, and his assistant, joined their table.

Periodically throughout the meal, students would come up to the table and ask to have their holo taken with Luke. He, of course, obliged; even Dr. Dram’s assistant, Peffar, eventually asked as well.

Mara held in the comment that she wanted to make, about Peffar really wanting to take a picture with such an ‘old guy’, but she didn’t utter a word, knowing that Luke didn’t mind the attention.

As the meal winded down, and students started leaving the mess hall for their next classes. The doctors excused themselves to go teach those classes, leaving Luke and Mara in the hall.

Luke watched as Mara pushed her food around her plate, not eating, but clearly not ready to give up on her plate.

The rain still continued outside, and it echoed throughout the building, inside the mess hall, sporadically interrupted by a rumble of thunder in the distance.

Luke tilted his head listening to the sound. “I’d love to go for a run today, but I don’t think the rain will let me.”

“I won’t let you.” Mara grumbled at him, pushing her plate back.

He challenged her by smirking in her direction. “But I’ve been dying to get some movement…I think that’s why I haven’t been sleeping well.” He mumbled.

She looked up at him, and nodded, then cringed. “I think you might be right. My body hasn’t been exactly active either for the past few days. Maybe some light exercise might be in order.”

He smiled, knowing that he had won part of the battle with her. “What did you have in mind?—I was thinking of exploring the other side of the base. It doesn’t look like anyone has been on that side yet.”

Mara frowned. “And what would be there?”

Luke tried to recall. “I think there might be some other residences… like the one that Leia used to have…and I know there’s an observation level- it was used as a meeting area.”

He sighed. “I’d like to scout out some areas that would work for when this becomes a Jedi Academy
She smiled, feeling his contagious enthusiasm. “Alright…but maybe we swing by our room and get
the training remotes?—if we keep it on a low setting then we should both be able to get some
exercise in.”

“No sparring?” He pouted. “I like it when we spar.”

Mara gave him the look. “You know I like it when we spar too, but you were ordered on bed rest,
and you haven’t exactly taken it.” As she got up from the table, taking their plates to be cleaned, she
gave him a glare. “You should still take it easy.”

“Besides, I have a fun idea in mind.” She smirked at him.

“Yeah?” He asked, now following her. “What sort of fun?”

“You’ll see.” She teased.

Luke followed her back to their room, and watched as she retrieved her own training remote and
asked for his.

She linked them together and to the portable power unit, charging them and sharing programing. She
also picked up her comm unit and place it and remotes into a bag and slung it over her shoulder- to
be prepared while they explored the rest of the Temple.

Luke prepared by finding torches for them to use. He was insure if the power would be up in the
section of the Temple that they were headed to.

It was Mara’s turn to follow Luke out of their room. R2 led the way as he still had the schematics to
the old Rebel base in his drive.

The astromech rolled through the hangar to the opposite side of the Temple, sensing other power
sources, and no doubt remembering that he had been here too during those fateful days.

This area must have been what it was like when the doctors and the students had first arrived.
Equipment was in pushed in corners; clearly not valuable enough to be taken away while the base
was being evacuated. Vines and moss had started to consume them.

Luke stopped at a few rooms along; just peaking inside them to see if they were usable, then carrying
on.

The temple was designed with no stairs, but unlike the Jedi Enclave where the pathway descended,
these pathways went up and gradually got steeper. That didn’t stop the determination of the little
droid leading the way, and R2 seemed to take pride that he was able to assist.

From what Mara could ascertain, they were approaching the two higher levels of the Temple.

Luke seemed relieved when they got to a corridor which seemed to mimic the one their current
residence was situated on the opposite side of the temple.

Other than some moss on the walls, the rooms on this floor looked like they were in pretty good
condition. Some the former furniture was still in them too and it looked like their former owners had
taken enough time to wrap them in filmsy to protect them from the elements.

These rooms looked larger and not the same spaces that the ‘grunts’ would use, as Luke called them.
Mara watched as he seemed drawn to one of the residences in particular. As soon as the door opened, she could sense his happiness at finding the place.

Luke turned back to her, and motioned for her to come inside the space.

“I think this is it.” He said triumphantly.

“What is?” Mara asked as she walked in.

“The place where I’ll live when the Jedi Academy starts.” He answered. “This will be my quarters.”

She looked around and appraised the space.

It seemed to be not as large as his residence on Coruscant, but it didn’t look like in was a hut in the desert either.

The main room was sufficient, with a kitchenette off to the side. The alcove off the main room was open to the elements, and although now it was showing a downpour, Mara could see how it would have an amazing view, looking out over the jungle, when the weather was better. It also lent a generous amount of natural light into the room.

Luke had gone farther into the residence and was looking at the smaller rooms attached to the main one.

She followed him around as he inspected each room. Clearly, there had been one master bedroom, one ‘fresher, and two other smaller rooms. He seemed quite pleased with the prospects.

“Well…” He turned to her. “What do you think? Do you think you can do anything with it?”

Mara frowned. “What do you mean ‘do you think I can do anything with it’?—what am I supposed to do?”

Luke looked a little dejected. “I thought that we could live here…when you come to visit.” He said quietly, his excitement dying down.

It dawned on her then; he wanted this to be their future home…together.

“Are you asking me to live with you?” She asked, just to clarify his intentions.

His eyes brighten when he realized that he hadn’t even asked her yet, so no reason to feel dejected.

He stepped towards her, and took her hands in his; hope in his eyes. “That’s what I was hoping for…would you consider it?”

Mara looked at his earnest expression, feeling a lump in her throat. She looked around the room, as looking into his eyes became too much; the automatic fear that she had when anything was too emotional for her.

Luke sensed that he was losing her to her feelings, so he decided to try and distract her. He took one of her hands, and led her around the space.

“We can put a sofa here…a holo unit can go on this wall.” He gestured to the wall between the bedrooms. “We can use the smaller rooms for our offices…or something else later…”

“You’re so much better at decorating a place than I am…I thought you could have fun with it.” He added in for emphasis.
Mara blinked, still surprised at the prospect. She hadn’t even considered it. But the initial feeling that was sinking in was one of joy. It would feel wonderful to have a home with him.

*A home.* The word warmed her.

But a thought interrupted her thoughts. “They would know.” She said, realizing what living together would mean. “We wouldn’t be able to hide us any longer.”

Luke stopped his growing excitement. “Yes, we would be together…openly. Are you ready for that?” He asked, watching her face.

“We *are* the worst kept secret in the galaxy.” He appealed to her dry sense of humor.

“We would still stay a secret for a while….there’s more than enough space to make it look like we’re just sharing a residence…when you’d be here.”

Mara stepped back from him, taking her hand away from him. She started to walk around the space, looking at it objectively, and touching the objects that were left there.

Luke watched her, just giving her some space, knowing this might sell it to her. At least she wasn’t in full panic mode.

He could feel her accepting the place and he wasn’t about to celebrate just yet. She would let him know when she was ready. But she wasn’t rejecting it immediately; the wheels were turning.

He followed behind her, still keeping his distance, as she walked into the master bedroom, and stared at things that weren’t there yet. The natural light beamed in from the window.

“You don’t have to answer just yet.” He said quietly, knowing that he probably rushed this on her too quickly.

Mara looked back at him, and smiled tightly, then nodded; agreeing that she’s think about it before answering.

She looked down at the ground, and he thought he could hear, in her mind, how she was thinking of covering the floor, and with what, then the vague notions of color started to float across her mind.

She walked over to him, and embraced him. “Can I let you know?” She asked as she looked into his eyes.

“Of course.” Luke said as he touched her hair, and leaned in for a kiss. <When you’re ready.>

He was the first to pull back from their embrace, even though he was truly enjoying it.

“I have something else I want to show you.” He beamed, and took her hand to lead her to another place.

Mara sighed, and accepted his direction. He was happier now since she had seen him on Tanaab, and she wasn’t about to stop that.

There was something boyish about him when he got excited, and she knew this was the side of him that others didn’t see.

Publicly, he was ‘The Jedi’; stoic and wise, and other times he was ‘The Hero’ - only few others ever saw ‘The Farm Boy’.
R2 led them out of the current residence and up to the higher level.

“This should be the observation area that I heard about.” Luke commented over his shoulder to Mara. “I was never up here, but it was used for meetings and as a relaxation area for off-duty staff.”

He walked in line with the droid and looked over as the droid twittered.

“Well, that’s good news.” He said to his companion.

He turned back to Mara. “R2 says he has sensed electrical conductivity out here….which means we have power on this side too.”

She tilted her head, still amazed that he could decipher that from the chirps, whirls and beeps of a droid.

At what seemed to be the top, the space gave way to an open area that had large open alcoves at approximately every quarter of the circular room; letting in the breeze and light.

From a shielded alcove, you could see out over the jungle, yet still under the protection of the covering.

Littered in the room, were discarded and uncovered tables, now covered with moss, but it was clear from this room that it was used more for recreation than the rest of the building. It had that sort of tone to it. Several of the pieces of furniture that were wrapped up were two-person recliners, and padded pieces that one would see on a patio or balcony.

Luke looked around the room and nodded. He went to each alcove to look out and appreciate the view.

Mara could see the potential for all the spaces he had showed her. But they were going to need a lot of cleaner to remove all the moss that had grown since the almost nine years since the Temple was habited.

He went over to one of the covered recliners and pulled off the wrappings to check to see if the furniture was still usable.

The filmsy came off easily, and the fabric-covered piece under it seemed to look in good condition. It was even dry with no mold or moss.

He moved the recliner into place in front of one of the alcoves, and plopped down on it; looking rather satisfied.

Mara grinned as she joined Luke on the recliner, putting her legs up, and he wrapped his arm around her.

<<It is very beautiful up here.>> She sent over to him; looking out on the dark green tree tops.

His sense was relaxed and contented. <Your eyes are the same colour when you’re happy.> He thought back. <This is what I thought of when I saw them.>

He turned to nuzzle into her.

Mara enjoyed his warmth; both physically and emotionally. The damp cool breeze made his attention even more welcoming.

She placed her mouth on his; letting him know how she agreed with his assessment- that it was
peaceful up here; quiet and private…but cold. She shivered.

<I wish I had thought to bring a blanket with us.> He thought as he pulled back from their tender moment, looking into her eyes, and wishing they could spend more time cuddled up here.

R2, who had been reasonably quiet, chirped off to the side, indicating that he wanted his master’s attention.

Luke shot his look over to where R2 was trying to get his attention, and decided he should go over.

Mara lifted her head to let him have his arm back, and got up to join him.

Luke got there first. “It looks like he’s found an alternate way down…should we try it?” He asked.

“I think that’s a good idea.” She agreed. “If not for anything but to get warmer.”

He walked ahead of her, shining his torch in the area now devoid of natural light. “You did suggest that we try some exercise—that will warm us up. Should try and find a place to practice?” He smiled back at her.

“You’re the teacher.” She smirked as she followed him.

The corridor led down to the opposite side on the Temple, past the room that they were currently staying in.

Mara appreciated the ingenious and simplistic design that the former designers, the Massassi, created. The Rebellion had only added to the functionality of the space, adding the power supply and the necessary living areas to make the Temple workable and more-modern.

It was still the middle of the afternoon, and classes were still in session, so the base looked semi-deserted.

Luke directed them across the main hangar to one of the smaller off-shoot hangars. “Will this work?” he asked he knew that she wanted to get in some light saber practice.

Mara looked around the fairly empty and open room; she nodded.

“So what’s your fun idea?” He asked teasingly.

She put down her satchel, and pulled out the two training remotes. “Well, I don’t know if you’re aware, but Ghent programmed our remotes to have a sound-activated function.”

She unplugged the charger, and the connecting cables between the two remotes. Pressing a few buttons, the remotes turned on and hovered in the air, waiting.

She looked over at the Jedi, with a playful raised eyebrow. “Are you game? They’re programmed to read and respond to the tempo of the music on my comm.”

Luke backed up and took his lightsaber from off his belt, getting ready. “Now, this sounds like fun.”

Mara chuckled as he prepared himself for a fight. “Now, I’m going to put on the playlist I usually use; it starts off slow and then builds… So, someone who just had broken ribs won’t tire himself out.”

“I have no idea who you’re talking about—I feel fine.” He smirked over to her.
“We’ll see.” She said snidely, knowing that he liked to put on a show if it avoided medical attention.

He looked over to her, taking his attention off the remote. “So what type of music do you have on there?”

Mara checked her comm to see if the pairing between the remotes had occurred, and put it off to the side. “There’s a little bit of everything on here… some classical…some popular…no ‘Lapti Nek’, if that’s what you’re asking.”


She shot him a sly look. “Max Reebo’s band was playing it before you showed up at Jabba’s….it was catchy.”

He put his hands on his hips. “You remembered that?”

“Yes.” She returned his look, as if he was expecting anything else from her. “I have a good memory for music.”

He shook his head, still astounded. “What else have you got?”

Mara took the saber from off her belt, and stood behind him, facing her own remote. “There’s some Teggrans on there… Quinoc Teams…Vichtoo- a few songs by him…lots of stuff.”

Luke turned on his saber with a **snap-hiss**, and the remote in front of him came to life, wavering back and forth. “Vichtoo?—wasn’t he banned?…and wasn’t he executed?”

The music came up from her comm, and he could hear Mara open her saber, making its own **snap-hiss** sound.

He could feel her relaxing and reaching out with her senses into the Force.

“He was…on both accounts.” She said absently.

The tempo was slowly and the music was soothing. The remotes each shots in time to the music, which each of them were able to counter.

“Though…” Mara continued. “Given the things he was saying, I’m surprised he was allowed to live for as long as he did.”

“Really?” Luke asked as he volley another shot away from the remote.

She chuckled. “Yeah…it was quite amusing, until he wasn’t…he was quite the death-stick junkie too.”

She volleyed a few of her own shots. “He used to claim that death-sticks had nutritional value… and when he was up on them that he claimed that he could see the Force. Not to mention, he stopped hiding his subverter messages in his music, and openly taunted the Imperial wrath.”

Luke snorted, responding to his own remote; it was leisurely but still unpredictable as it was when training something that had no living energy that could be read- it relied purely on his instinct.

The music was older, but he recognized the song. It was melodic story of a stay at a hotel in the distance and a stranger at night. He repeated some the words that he knew as a few more shots came in his direction.
He knew that the words of most popular songs at the time were laced with double-entendres; hiding the fact that the songs were about rebelling against the Empire.

“Wasn’t Quinoc Teams banned too?” he asked as it dawned on him.

“Yes.” She answered, casually battling her own remote.

“And come to think of it, The Teggrans…banned also, no?” Luke came to realize.

He heard a series of shots volleyed behind him.

“Yes.” She answered, off-handedly.

The music was growing in pace and shots were still coming at a causal pace, but seemed to speed up.

Luke let the music and training envelope him a bit more. The current song ended and another one started with a faster pace. He listened to it; he recognized this one too…another song with a hidden rebel tone.

He chuckled to himself, and he caught Mara’s sense at his amusement.

“So...” His tone was certainly teasing as he knew he had caught her in something, but wanted more proof. “How long have you had this collection of banned music?”

They fought their own perspective remotes back to back. She answered from over his shoulder. “I’ve had it for a long time...when I was in service...I used to collect it before it got destroyed.”

“Heh-huh.” He said, keeping his thoughts to himself.

“Spill it, Jedi.” She growled.

Luke smirked broadly, knowing that she couldn’t see the expression on his face, so he could get away with it. “Oh, I was just wondering what a good Imperial girl, like you, would be doing with a bunch of Rebel music...that’s all.”

He sensed it before it came; a tap upside the back of his head- and he immediately started chuckling. “Hey! I’m just pointing it out.” He argued.

He could tell that she found it just as amusing as he did, and he really wasn’t in any sort of trouble.

The song changed and the new tempo was indeed faster than the first song.

Luke recognized this song too; it was one that his aunt and uncle used to sing to each other- a song that came out during the Clone Wars. It brought back good memories for him. He remembered watching them dance around the kitchen while Aunt Beru made dinner, and he would smile while he watched.

With the tempo, the shots from the remote were constant and timed to the beat. It was easy to anticipate when they were coming. He knew a part in the song and started to hum along with it.

When the moment took him, he sang along, sensing Mara’s amusement. “And all night’s magic seems to whisper and hush…” His footwork fell in time to the music. “Can I just have one more Moondance with you…my love.”

Mara giggled.
“Okay.” He growled over his shoulder. “I know I can’t sing.”

“That’s not why I’m laughing…this is one of my favourite songs.” She said over her shoulder back at him. He could sense her smiling. “I’m enjoying that you know the words…that’s all.”

“Alright then…” his embarrassment faded, a bit.

And a thought dawn on him. “What’s the last song on your playlist?”

“A classical number…quite long…fast tempo.” She called over. “I doubt it that we’ll get there.”

Before he could ask, she commented. “It’s another ‘Rebel Song’. She gruffed. “But it’s from the Corellian Rebellion…and the song is quite long…like, nine minutes long.”

The song was dying down and a new one was starting.

“Are you ready for this? The tempo ready picks up from here…” She said.

Sure enough the driving beat of the music was ready and certainly faster than the other song, but not quite challenging yet.

Luke smiled as he rejected shot after shot; his feet seemed to have a mind of their own. This was a refreshing change from practicing alone with his own thoughts, but soon the Jedi would have to return.

Mara had used Vapaad, on him more than once; it was time to return the favor and use the Jedi and Sith fighting technique to distract your opponent with an emotions.

<So why don’t you reach out to me in the Force when we’re being intimate?> He asked to her.

“Ouch!” she yelped as he heard the zing of a shot hit her. And then he sensed her annoyance.

The following shots didn’t land their mark and she returned them easily.

<<We do touch each other in the Force when we’re alone…we’re doing it right now.>> She answered him.

<No, we don’t.> He sent back. He defended a few more shots. <We communicate, like we’re doing now…but you don’t ever seem to want to touch the Force fully when we’re making love. Why is that?> Luke was not prepared to drop this subject.

He heard a few shots zip past her and land on the ground.

She seemed to think about it for a bit. <<We already have a good connection…do you think we need a better one?>>

It was his turn to think about it. <No, we do pretty good…but I’m curious…I’d like to try it.> He smirked over to her.

The song changed again, and this time it was the song that she danced to at the club on Tanaab. He remembered it well; he could barely walk to the turbolift, his body had responded to the way her body had moved.

The floor throbbed with the deep bass of the song, and the remote seemed angry now.

<<And I think you could talk more when we’re making love…we should try that first.>> She
thought over to him.

He heard her volley some more shots.

It was getting difficult now to keep his mind on the shots from the remote; his lungs were starting to get heavy.

<But you don’t want to touch the Force?> He asked again.

<<It just seems a like unnecessary – that’s all. I’ll admit I’m intrigued, though.>> She blushed as she thought about their contact.

Clearly, the want and need had been building between them again. However, it started to cool as Luke sensed other presences approaching.

<We should turn down the heat…we’re attracting attention and we’re about to get an audience. Do you want to stop?> He asked, disappointed at the prospect.

A blast zipped past his shoulder from her remote; her concentration must be leaving too.

<<One more song?>> Her voice in his head sounded like it was tiring too. <<Leave them something to think about?>>

The current song was ending was ending. He saw her comm fly past him to her command.

<<Something not too fast for the attractive ‘old guy’?>> Mara asked.

The remote paused in front of him, as if thinking, giving him a break. “I’m not old.” He grumbled, and he looked around to see a large group of students watching, including the Doctors Terratique, Dr. Massian smiling, Dr. Dram grinning ear to ear, and his assistant Peffar watching in shock.

<Let’s do it.> He wasn’t about to let them get to him, and besides, he was having fun with this.

The comm hovered back to the place where it was formerly resting.

The beat kicked in and the remote swirled in front of him; challenging him.

Luke pulled on the Force for more strength and speed. Mara must have sensed it too because he could feel her pull too.

The song was peppy and upbeat and returning shots was truly fun.

Mara could hear the ‘oohs’ and ‘ahhs’ from the watching group, and not a shot escaped either one of them.

They were perfectly in tune, and to the observers, it did look like they were having a dance.

<<Want to switch places?>> She asked, knowing it would be a challenge to assume the attack of a different remote mid-session.

<I’m game.> He sent back to her confidently. <On the count of three?>

<<Back to back? Ready?>> She was just as confident as he was. <<One…two…three!>>

They each took three paces back and turned, facing the other’s remote and fending off a new attack strategy.
The song was building in tempo and the height of the song was coming; the shots equally matched it. Luke was smiling as he fought off the onslaught; her remote may have been set higher than his. Even with the draw on the Force, his lungs were now really starting to burn.

Mara must have sensed his discomfort. “Do you want me to stop the song?” She asked over her shoulder, concerned for him.

“No…it’s almost done.” He called back. “I’m good.”

Mara could sense more people coming over to watch and the last thing they needed to see was Luke Skywalker pass out because his lungs were still healing, even if he didn’t want to admit it.

She was going to give the song another thirty seconds then let it end.

Happily, she didn’t have to; the red light on her remote came on, signaling that it was losing power.

“My light just came on.” She said over to him.

“Mine too.” He said.

She could hear the relief in his voice.

The remote labored to force out the last few shots. To be fair, they weren’t exactly fully charge when they started, and Mara couldn’t recall a time when the remote lost power before she did.

As the song ended, her remote’s light was blinking, telling her it was done too.

Luke reached out his hand and called Mara’s comm to him, turning off the music, and shutting off his lightsaber with a dignified whoosh-snap.

Behind him, he heard Mara do the same.

The room was in awe as they turned away from the crowd. There was a momentary silence, and then applause came.

Mara had retrieved the remotes and was putting them back into her satchel as Luke came over to her. She glanced over at him, and caught his smirk.

“One more time, and we’re going to have to start to charge admission.” He mumbled to her.

“We’d make a killing if we did.” She mumbled back dryly.

They turned back to the assembled group and the doctors came forward to thank them for the display.

Luke smiled and made pleasantries with the students as he walked away.

Mara sensed there was something happening with him, and she excused them from further comments, saying that they needed to go meditate now.

The group accepted this and slowly retreated; the mysterious Jedi had their ways and they needed to practice in their own way.

Luke had gotten ahead of her, headed back to their room.
Mara caught up with him, and when they were out of sight of the students, Luke started coughing hard, holding his left side.

She steadied him and put his left arm around her shoulders as she held him up, making it back to their room at a slow pace.

“I knew we shouldn’t have done that last song…you weren’t ready yet.” She grumbled.

“I’m alright.” He said between coughs. “I should have taken it slower…I thought I was more-healed than this.”

They got to the door, and it opened quickly for them.

“You’re not arguing about this with me?” Mara asked.

Luke flopped down on the bed and stretched out his chest, relieving the tightness. “Why should I? You were right.”

Mara wasn’t going to crow about this too loudly; she too had internal issues that were still healing, and her lower back, where the stitches where her implant was removed, had started hurting during the session.

Neither one of them broke a sweat or truly over exerted themselves, but it felt like what they needed. She watched him as his chest raised and lowered without interruption; which meant he didn’t injure himself.

“I’m going to go get you some water.” She said as she palmed the lights in the room, dimming them so he could rest a bit.

Luke looked up from the bed. “I’m sure it’s close to evening meal…”

She took the hint. “And you want to eat in here tonight?” she asked.

He nodded, but then seemed to reconsider. “Do you think it would be rude?”

She sat down beside him on the bed, allowing him to lower his head back onto the pillow. She reached out and stroked some of his hair off his face, and smiled.

“No, if I explain that you need some time to recover from your still-present injuries – they’ll understand.” She said quietly.

His eyes were half closed from the soothing contact.

“I’ll find you something good.” She said before she leaned over and placed a soft kiss on his mouth.

He closed his eyes fully, and started to rest.

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Mara had managed to have her meal and make it back to the room in less than an hour.

She nestled the thermo container of soup in the crux of her arm, and carried the rest of the food and water back to their room.

She knew that Luke would still be asleep, but when he woke, he would be hungry and ready to eat.
He always was.

The door opened and she went inside, placing the food on the small desk.

Luke, turned on his left side again, was still sleeping. Although, it looked like he had moved from the bed since they had returned, and possibly he wasn’t as deep in sleep as she thought.

He mumbled when she sat down on the bed, and he rolled onto his back and in her direction when he felt the touch of her hand on his shoulder.

In the dim light of the room, his eyes blinked to adjust, and smiled as he saw her face, just looking back at him.

“Hi.” She whispered. “Did you have a good sleep?”

Luke sat up facing her, and rubbed his eyes. “I think so…it wasn’t a deep sleep but it will make up for last night.” He grinned somewhat.

Mara reached over to one of the containers that she had brought with her, and offered it to him. “Water…drink. I don’t want you to get dehydrated.”

He snorted slightly, taking it from her. “With all the humidity here, I think that would be impossible.” He said before he sipped some of it down.

“Well, get used to it.” She said, watching him. “Toban said that we should expect the apex tonight, with an electrical storm, and then it should die down by morning.”

“Translation?” he asked before he took another sip.

“No comm access until morning.” She said.

Luke smirked. “Whatever shall we do?”

Mara knew exactly what he had in mind, but her sensibility wouldn’t allow it just yet. “I know exactly what we should do.” She purred to him. “Healing trance!”

He groaned. “Not fair.”

“You need your strength…here…soup.” She reached over to the small table and handed him the thermo container. “Prove to me that you’re on the mend, and we’ll see.”

He sighed before he sampled the hot soup. The first taste wasn’t bad, and Mara produced fresh bread that the students had baked to go with it.

Luke was surprised they could make such a thing.

“Almae was telling me at dinner that the students take turns cooking and cleaning.” Mara said as she slipped off her half boots, getting ready to relax for the evening.

She arranged her pillow at the top of the bed, brought up her legs and leaned back onto it, still watching him.

“I was able to get comm access at their station and boost my signal.” She said off-hand, almost too casually.

Luke shot her a sideways look as he took another mouthful of soup.
“Aves will be arriving in the later morning tomorrow, and leaving after midday meal.” She said quietly.

Luke nodded; she would be leaving, and coming back who knows when.

He tried to smile, for her sake, but didn’t quite manage it to be convincing. He swallowed the food in his mouth, then whispered, “We’ll figure it out.”

Her sad eyes told him that she knew it was inevitable.

“We always do.” He said, trying to convince himself as well.

“I told Almae and Deek about the observation area, and offered to show it to them tomorrow.” Mara said, changing the subject.

Luke nodded, knowing that she had slipped back into talking to avoid uncomfortable silences.

Mara sat up from her position and removed her belt, to get more comfortable. “I have a holo on my comm…we can watch that for a bit tonight?” She asked.

He snorted softly, and wordlessly nodded.

This was starting to get more difficult as time went on. It was easy for them to come together, but being apart was getting harder.

“I think we need to talk to Karrde.” He finally said.

“About what?” she asked, surprised.

“About having a meeting schedule, like Dankin and Nattan have.” He said.

Luke looked over at her. “I plan to stay here for the next little while.” He explained. “I probably won’t be going back to Coruscant in the foreseeable future.” He shook his head, regretting leaving his home for the past five years. “It would make sense if you came to visit me here.”

Mara seemed to think it over, and her eyes went distant considering his words.

“My offer to Karrde still stands.” He suggested. “I have no problem with Yavin being a safe haven for him and his crew if they need a pit stop.”

She nodded, remembering that he had made the offer, if not for anything but just to get to see her more frequently, and because he considered Karrde a friend.

“I’ll let him know.” She said quietly, not wanting to think about any of it, right now.

Luke got up from the bed, and put the container back on the small desk, giving her a bit of space in the small room.

He came back and sat down on the bed, facing her.

Mara looked up at him, and met his eyes.

He came in close. “Hey…I love you…we’ll get through this.” His eyes were so crystal clear, even in the dim room.

She smiled and leaned in to meet him. “I love you too.” And placed her lips to his, feeling like it had
been a while since they had touched their lips to each other. 

As he returned her kiss, he inched up the bed to come closer to her.

She let go of her comm, and slid her arms around his neck as he leaned forward, deepening the tender moment.

Soon, he was lying beside her, and their arms wrapped around each other, softly kissing, and enjoying the quiet.

When the kiss broke, Luke’s hand came up and stroked her cheek; the skin was soft and supple.  

<Gods, do you know how beautiful you are?> He asked, dazzled by her.

Mara put her hands on his cheeks and brought him back in, to press her mouth to his.  <<And do you know how handsome you are?>>

She could feel that he didn’t think of himself that way, and never had.

Her lips moved from his mouth to his temples, and purse gently against the skin.  <<You have the most amazing blue eyes…so magnetic…they draw me in every time I look into them.>>

Luke opened his eyes briefly to see that she meant what she had thought.

She put her lips to his check, and then switched and gave the other cheeky attention.  <<I love it when you smile…and I get to see your dimples.>> She nuzzled his cheek next to hers.

<<And this?>> One of her delicate fingers came up and slid along his bottom lip.  <<I love sucking on this lip…do you know what your kisses do to me?>>

Their lips met again, and she took a nip on his bottom lip for emphasis. He moaned slightly and pulled her closer to him.

His eyes fluttered open and she could see the deep sapphire jewels looking back at her.

<<This, this is just adorable.>> She playfully and lightly pinched the dent in his chin, smirking at him.

He grinned and a blush came to his cheeks.

Mara was seduced to kiss that mouth again. <<I love just kissing you.>> She sent over to him.

Luke gladly gave in, and made sure she knew how much he enjoyed it too. His tongue dipped between their lips and he felt her body relax back against his.

It was nice just being together; no outside world, no demands.

She had almost forgot what it was like just to kiss someone, and to be kissed.

It made her tingle right down to her toes.

Luke wasn’t advancing his passion; he held it in check. If his body was still recovering, so must her body, as well.

He was not going to rush it if she wasn’t ready- nothing was worth putting her body in jeopardy of healing how it needed to.
Mara smirked as he nipped at her lips, and snorted softly.

“What is it?” he murmured between their lips.

She snorted a bit louder. “I feel like a teenager, making out with her boyfriend, past curfew on a weeknight in the dorms.”

He chuckled as he kissed her soundly. “It does feel like that, doesn’t it?” A few more nips on her lips. “Like we’re being bad?- and are going to get caught any moment.” He teased.

She giggled at the notion.

Luke sighed; finding a loose red-gold curl by her face and letting it slip between his fingers.

Wordlessly, he sat up from the bed, and removed his boots that he had forgot to remove previously, and grimaced at his mistake; sometimes the farm boy manners came back.

She had slipped off her belt before resting, so he followed suit and dropped his belt beside the bed.

He got comfortable beside her again; playfully and lovingly.

Mara brought her face close to his to resume kissing him. She slid her hands over his chest and started to undo the fastenings of his tunic, knowing that he liked it when she took off his clothing.

She could feel the heat coming off his hard chest, as her hands slipped under the covering, touching his undershirt that clung to his body.

<Are you undressing me now?> He asked, as she turned her head, and he started softly kissing her jawline.

She hummed. <<We don’t always have to be in a rush…>>

His lips left her skin, and his face came nose to nose with her. Mara snorted as he was literally in her face.

“I think I will start with the items that put up the least resistance.” He teased.

Luke reached up and tugged at the end of the tie holding her hair in place.

“That was simple.” He winked.

He sat back as he watched her pull her hair free from the plaits; the billowing waves sprung back to life.

Mara smiled at him seductively.

“You’re wearing too much clothes too.” She teased, knowing that they were taking their time together.

She sat up, and grabbed for the black sock on his left foot. It came off without a fight.

She looked back at him, and simulated a sexy shiver. “Oooohhh” She teased.

Luke watched her with amusement, as she reached for the second sock and yanked it off, slightly less seductively than she did the first one.
He chuckled as he watched her twirl the socks as chest-level before she tossed them aside.

“You have it easy.” He smirked. “Women’s clothing puts up more of a fight.”

He looked up and down her body.

“At least these come off easily.” He rethought his attack as he pulled at the sock on her right foot, revealing her small foot.

He yanked the sock off her other foot too, and started to play with her toes, curious of how ticklish she could be.

Luke started with her big toe on her left foot. “This little ghafoom went for breakfast…”

“Quit that! Give me back my foot!” She yelped while giggling.

“This little ghafoom went for lunch…”

She squirmed as he selected her second toe.

Mara laughed a bit more before she noticed that he had stopped laughing and enjoying the moment.

He was just looking at her foot; in between her toes to be quite accurate.

The small symbol—there is was, between her toes, in dark black titanium ink, etched into her body against her will; an Imperial insignia.

Her permanent mark, designed to find her corpse.

Luke let her foot go, and put it down on the bed with unexplained tenderness.

He couldn’t avoid it when it was looking at him, reminding him that she had belonged to someone else at one time. An owner’s mark.

She wouldn’t have called in slavery…living in a palace…but it was.

Just days ago, she had implants removed to erase the other signs of ownership on her body, and now, Luke knew that he was asking her to give herself up again, but this time, to him.

He had asked her to come live with him, and even though his intentions were honorable, he had still expected her to belong to him too.

He turned back to her, seeing that she was wondering why he had stopped.

“Did I rush the question of us living together on you?” He asked, with concern on his face.

Mara looked at him, perplexed. “No, I don’t think so.” She could sense there was more to this, but didn’t push the issue. “It would have been the natural progression of things.”

Luke thought about her words. “Would it?” He decide just to say what he was thinking. “It doesn’t feel like I want to own you…does it?”

She shook her head, putting the elements together. “No, it doesn’t.” She inched her way over to him. “You’re protective, and sometimes a little possessive…but it never feels like you own me.”

“I think we would have eventually “lived” together at either your apartment or mine, if we had
stayed on Coruscant.” She smiled over to him.

“Is that what you’re afraid of? That you wanted to own me?” She asked.

He cast his eyes down, feeling bit embarrassed.

“I don’t understand.” She said quietly.

<I don’t understand it either.> He thought over to her.

He looked back up to her, knowing that his change in mood had caused her to worry.

“But when I do; I’ll tell you…I promise.” He said quietly.

Luke leaned over, wanting to get back the moments that they had shared previously. He tried to regain the passion he was feeling, and rethought his approach to remove her clothes.

His fingers started to concentrate on the opening of her tunic, and his lips wanted to be more occupied than with speaking his thoughts.

Mara wasn’t ready to let this change in him pass without more on an explanation. She backed away from him, and retreated off the bed.

“Luke, there was something going on right then…what was it?” Looking him hard in the eyes, she was not going to let this go.

Dismissively, he shook his head. “It was nothing.”

“I don’t think it was.”

She could see the frustration building in him as she waited for an answer, until it was becoming unexpectedly uncomfortable between them.

Finally, Luke confessed, “I don’t know how to explain it to you, let alone define it for myself…”

Mara looked at him and nodded. She felt the need to be away for him, if only to give herself a break.

She turned away from him, gathering a few of her things. A gnawing was building in the pit of her stomach; they had been so open during the day, but something was threatening to build a block again.

When she had the things she needed in her arms, she turned back to him. “I have to go the ‘fresher. I’ll be right back.”

She didn’t need to see his face to sense that this had beleaguered him, as she rushed from the room.

Mara was bewildered by her own actions, but her gut told her that something was at the back of his mind; maybe it was something that he wasn’t even aware of.

An ugly truth that she now recognized; he did want to own her – maybe not the same way Palpatine did, but he did think of her as very much his.

She smiled politely to passing students in the communal ‘fresher, so that they wouldn’t suspect anything was out of the norm.

She undressed, and realized that she had grabbed her long sweater and not her night shift in her
haste. Nevertheless, she wrapped it around her body.

Her mind reeled to fight against what she suspected. Luke was not the type of man to feel this way; he was logical and reasonable. He knew the destruction of being owned to Palpatine had done to her, and he, himself, would never inflict that on her again.

But he had consciously thought about it.

Mara looked at herself in the mirror as she prepared for bed by brushing out her hair, washing her face, and brushing her teeth.

It had been some time before she convinced herself that Luke would never own her; in thought or action – that she had been in the wrong to think that way of him.

It must have taken her longer than she thought to get ready. By the time she returned to the room to explain herself, Luke had changed into his sleeping pants, dimmed the room lights and was semi-asleep, facing away from the center of the bed.

Mara quietly, put her things down, and rather than changing into her night shift, she left on the wrap sweater, hoping it would entice his feelings again to remove it off of her as some sort of reconciliation.

She slipped into the opposite side of the bed, and reached out to put her hand on his shoulder.

Luke must have sensed what she had been thinking; with her contact, his shoulder twitched away from her touch.

“Good Night Mara.” He mumbled, not turning back to face her.

Whatever had happened between them, he had interpreted as some sort of rejection.

They fell asleep with their backs to each.

The rumble of the storm outside could be heard.

**

Mara awoke in the night; feeling alone and cold.

In the dark, her hand searched the opposite side of the bed, hoping to find Luke, and his warmth.

She found nothing. Luke had been beside her; keeping her warm against the damp and cold.

She sat up in the bed, and feeling slightly disoriented until she reached out with feelings, sensing him.

He was not far away in distance, but in his mind, she sensed he was far from here emotionally.

Perhaps the day had revealed too much for him or perhaps it hadn’t yielded the answers he wanted either.

Mara wrapped her sweater tighter around her naked body then it already was. She had worn it to bed in hopes that Luke would remove it from her body, but he was under the delusion that she refused to be with him; appalled of him by her thoughts.

His mood certainly turned in an instant, which was not normal for him.
Wherever he was, she wanted to be with him.

Mara picked up the blanket off the bed, and left the left the room. She walked along the corridor, trying to get a sense of his mood.

Mara placed her hand on the stone wall outside their room, and got her bearings as to which direction he had headed.

Luke was uncanny in his sense, and she picked up on his trail almost immediately; he had headed in the direction of the upper observation deck.

As she walked along the dimly lit hallway, the storm outside echoed against the walls. The sound of thunder that she knew followed the unseen lightning, resonated throughout the stone building.

Occasionally, the wind whistled through, bringing a chill into the air, but as she came up to the top landing, the wind had stopped.

His presence was there in the dark.

He had faced one of the recliners in the direction of the storm and he was watching it intently.

She could sense him drawing on the Force. Luke had stopped the wind from blowing through the building at this level, but the natural chill in the air still persisted.

Mara approached the back of the recliner and saw him gazing out as the lightning raked across the sky.

“I couldn’t watch it for the longest time after Endor.” he said quietly, looking out at the light show.

Luke looked up at her; his eyes, strangely, at peace. “I used to wake up at night still feeling it cursing through me.”

The warm rumble in the distance was a contrast to the coldness of the streaks lighting up the sky.

Mara walked around to the front of the recliner and sat beside him. He had taken one of the blankets from the room and had wrapped it around him.

“I didn’t want to turn my back on my back on the storm- I didn’t trust it.” He said.

She knew from her past, watching the Emperor inflict the same method of death on others, and from her own experiences, that if the level of pain that Luke had endured was anything to what she had seen, then it was astounding that he was even alive after it.

That sort of trauma would stay with even the strongest person.

He looked back out across the jungle top to see another series of electrical currents strike down, and the rumble followed it soon after.

“I’ve learned to put that aside, and just watch it now.” he said, mesmerized by the site.

Mara could feel his draw on the Force even clearer now; he just wasn’t using it to stop the wind blow through the level, but he was also protecting the building against a strike.

What she felt from him was and odd mixture of intrigue and anger at the storm; and controlled peace.

She knew he was powerful. She had seen him draw on the Force in marginal cases, but she had
never seen him do something as powerful as to control the weather around them, and to shield something as large as the temple pyramid.

It caused her to be both drawn deeper into his spell, and yet, fear his capacity in the Force.

Mara turned her glance to the alcove and saw the latest hit of lightning and then turned back to him, avoiding the view.

“I still can’t look.” She said quietly. “I’ve seen it too many times for it to mean anything more than …death.”

Luke turned his face back to her, and suddenly she felt his sense envelope her too in the span of his protection.

He smiled tightly, glad to reassure her.

“Luke…” She began. “I didn’t mean to turn you away this evening.” She swallowed, coming closer to him. “I do want to be with you.”

He blinked slowly. “I know you do.” He whispered, looking at her lips. “We had a very heavy day… for both of us…it was the right choice.” He looked away, back at the storm.

Another crack of lightning and the thunder that followed almost immediately after it; signifying that the storm was approaching rather than receding.

Mara watched him become distant again. “I don’t think it was.”

She leaned over, and pushed the blanket that he had wrapped around him open, wanting to be close to him. The blanket that she had brought with her, she opened and she spread it over his legs and hers as she came in to claim the warmth of his body.

She put her head on his shoulder, and he seemed to welcome the contact; he wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

Her body was soft as a woman should be; Luke’s eyes fluttered closed briefly, reveling in the contact on him, and then looked out again.

She rested her hand on his bare chest, feeling the muscles underneath it, looking at the skin, his skin, under her hand.

Several more lightning strikes appeared, without the accompanying thunder.

Mara could sense the darts of energy without seeing it; her attention was drawn elsewhere.

Instead, she could feel how the storm was feeding him, and his energy. But instead of being erratic, he was centering it inside himself; controlled and calm. And his chest heaved steady with each of his breaths.

He looked down at her; watching her face. In his eyes were questions that had yet to be answered, yet they held all the answers.

There was something about his power that was seductive, and made him even more attractive to her. Instinctively, she pressed her lips to his collarbone.

And her surprise action made him shiver; his skin dimpled in the area of her attention.
The sky lit up again and rumbled its fury.

She pressed her lips again on his hot skin, shifting her weight to give his skin even more attention.

His arm that was wrapped around her body, pulled her closer.

Mara worked her lips towards the supple skin of his neck. As she pressed her hungry mouth against the area, strong muscles twitched, and craned to allow her more skin.

It had been more than two weeks since she had felt the deep heat building in her core; her body was aroused, and starved for him.

Luke’s attention was taken away from the storm outside, and drawn to her now with just as much attention.

She looked into his eyes with her desire reflected in them.

The lights from the outside flashed violently.

He had asked her to touch him in the Force earlier in the day. Tentatively, she relaxed her mind, stretching out with her feelings, finding him and softly, slowly touching his vast power with her own inexperienced strength.

He must have felt the shift, allowing her to become closer than they have ever been together.

Mara watched through the dim light, his eyes; deep dark sapphire seeped into the crystal gaze.

She locked on his eyes, and while he watched, she deliberately pursed her lips on his skin that was most available to her, directly above his heightened nipple.

He inhaled deeply, and energy in the night lit up the sky in response.

He looked disappointed as she backed away from him, still locked on her eyes; now feral and wanting.

He could sense it through her feelings in the Force, just how much she desired him.

In the available light in the room, Mara slipped the edge of her sweater from her shoulder, revealing her flawless porcelain skin. The fluid fabric slipped off her other shoulder, and slid off her soft skin.

She watched as his eyes followed the drop of the fabric, past her shoulders, and her proud breasts with hardened nipples were exposed. Her skin glowed in the dim light.

Electricity sparked and streaked; back-lighting her form.

Mara shifted her weight again, and moved in such a manner that the remaining fabric fell away from her body as she came towards him. She raised up, straight on her knees beside him; her full body on view for him.

She straddled him above his knees; leaning forward to let her hands slid up his thighs.

She tugged at the material of his sleeping bottoms, pulling the material towards her wanting his skin to come in contact with hers.

A flash, followed by an immediate crack and rumble proved that the storm was coming closer.
She closed her eyes, and sent her sense over to him again; desire, heat, besought…for him.

Luke shifted his hips letting the fabric leave him; captivated by her sense, drinking it in.

He had hardened almost immediately with her first kiss on his collarbone; his body screaming to bury himself between her thighs. His rigid shaft was already too hot to be affect by the cool air of the night when it was exposed.

With the hot skin now available to her, her hands slid up his thighs and on to his abdomen. She moved her body, cat-like, up his thighs until she hovered above his hardened cock.

Their eyes lock on each other; their breathing in unison, deep and steady.

The light flashed behind; the crash sounded.

“i don’t want to hurt you …” he whispered; knowing that he very well could given her cycle had just ended.

Mara’s hand floated back down his body, between their bodies, and wrapped her hand around his thickness and pumped it slowly.

“You won’t.” She said, matching his intensity. “Do you want me?”


His manhood had produced a bead of pre-cum at the head, her thumb found it, and worked it in deliberate circles at the tip.

He sucked in air loudly at the sensation.

The sky snapped with forked energy and an angry boom.

His hands had found a resting place on her hips, and his newly sensitive right hand made the motion to go between them and aid her arousal by wanting to prepare her.

Mara pushed it away. “I don’t need it.” she said in a husky tone. “I’m ready for you.”

She had asked him to talk to her when they were being intimate, she had decided to show him how to do this.

“I’m already exceeding wet.” She licked her lips. “When you enter me, I want be as tight as I can for you.”

The room was lit again by the lightning, and the walls shook from the sonic boom.

She took his shaft and slid it in between the lips of her hovering vulva.

“Do you feel how wet I am now?”


“Do you want to enter me?” She already knew the answer.

He nodded again.

“What do you want??” She asked and his reward for answering would be their joining.
He swallowed, his voice deep. “I want to be deep inside you.”

Mara tilted her head back as the splendid initial pain came and went, and gradually accepted his length into her body, easing down. “Open me, Luke.” She moaned until he was into her to the base of his cock.

He exhaled hard. “Gods…you feel….so wet…so tight.” He hissed.

The electrifying feeling over his body was reflected by the lightning, agreeing that they should be joined, and the thunder echoed it approval.

She took his hands and brought them to her breasts, where he took over and massaged the tender, soft flesh.

Mara leaned to capture his lips. As she did, her body lift, sliding up his shaft; and as she suckled on his mouth, she brought her body down at an agonizingly slow pace.

With another purse on his mouth, she raised herself up on his shaft; and another brought her down.

“How do you want me?” She asked between their mouths.

Up she went, snug around his engorged rod, as her tongue darted inside his mouth.

Flashes of light gave him a better view of her form in front of him.

He answered as she descended down. “I adore your body- I can’t stop thinking about you.” He was lost to the sensation of her flesh. “I always want to be with you.”

His hands squeezed her breasts with his words, causing her to gasp, and his thumbs pushed into her nipples, making rings around the dimpled tips.

She was barely holding on to her control, feeling the flush on her skin. “How do you want me?” She managed to ask as she rose up again.

Their lips consuming each other in a dawdling speed and matching the movements of their bodies.

Another shot of light and sound to encourage their passion.

His yes begged, not knowing how to answer.

As she lowered, she asked, “What’s your fantasy, Luke?”

With their connection in the Force, images, from him, flashed in her mind; the courtesan dress from the auction, hand buried and tugging at her hair, and taking her from behind.

He moaned at the thought, and the administrations she was doing to him now; lost in passion.

Luke shook his head, knowing that he gave himself away, denying that it was his deepest desire, to have her like that.

Mara raised herself again, and thought about what he wanted; knowing that there was a distinct difference when someone took another person in such a manner, and when someone decided to give themselves to someone like that.

She involuntarily moaned as she came down; making a decision.
“Luke…” she whispered into his mouth, “Take me…I’m yours.”

The boom and light came together; heightening everything.

She sensed his surprise that she would allow it.

“But” he forced the words out, “I might hurt you.” It was reason he had denied himself this up until now.

“You’ll never hurt me.” Mara said as she raised herself off his body, and sucked in air as his girth left her body.

She pushed the blanket from off the rest of his body, and turned away from him, offering him a view of her back and shapely bottom. She looked out over the jungle; the sky clashed again.

It would be a lie to tell herself she hadn’t thought about him like this; something about it would feel so against her nature, but so right with him.

Luke moved to come behind her, and she could feel his hot skin touch hers.

Mara lowered her front, pressing the palms of her hands down on the recliner and presenting him with her feminine opening as she separated her thighs.

His hands came to her hips, and she felt him position himself at her entrance.

“Are you sure?” He asked as his hands skimmed over her hips.

“Yes.” She assured him.

Parting her folds with consideration, he spread her open as he entered her, pulling her hips towards his groin.

She heard him gasp with relief and pleasure; the sky cracked again.

He pulled back and then into her again; stretching her.

Progressively, his speed increased; rocking his pelvis in and out of her, smooth and flowing.

The lightning pulsed in the sky with his movements. Periodically the thunder sounded.

Mara felt the heat building in her. It was so much pressure, but elation at what he was doing to her. She could feel her moisture leaving her body and seeping down her inner thighs.

Faster he moved and she took one of her hands from balancing herself, to find his hand and guide it to her breast. And he clasped the mound in the tempo with his thrusts.

Luke looked down at where they were joined and he could see himself entering her miraculous depths; not believing he was having her like this.

He was grunting now as his speed was banging up the soft cushion of her buttocks; fighting the resistance her body put up.

He was caught off guard when she began to moan louder.

The sound of the storm almost drowning her out.
“Luukkkkkeee!” She screamed, and he sensed it was with pleasure and rapture.

He could feel her throbs on his cock, but instead of stopping, he pursued to what he wanted. He warned her by sending her the image of what he wanted. She didn’t reject the thought.

His opposite hand snaked up her back and into the nape of her hair. He grasped a handful of the copper tresses, and pulled them towards him; causing her body to lift, no longer able to brace herself, and he continued to fill her relentlessly.

Her mouth agape, hands out in front of her. The flash of light in the sky gave him the perfect view of how she was at his mercy.

Lust overtook him, still thrusting hard, bodies slapping against each other, he bit down on her where her neck met her shoulder, sucking hard.

She moaned and whimpered with every entrance; but echoing incoherent gratification.

He could feel his climax upon him, swift and suddenly. But not content to not let her witness the power she had over him too.

Flash after flash in the sky accompanied his hedonism.

With his own legs, he pushed apart her thighs, released her hair, and pushed her to lie flat on her stomach. He brought himself out of her with no warning, and took her outside leg and swung it passed him so that she was on her back, sprawled with her legs open; he slid back into her and resumed bucking into her.

Mara watched his face; hungry, feral, and as his head threw back and his hot fluid filled her, satisfied, calling her name over and over again….and then the words, “I love you.” over and over again.

He leaned down over her, kissing her repeatedly.

“I love you too.” She heard herself say, repeating it, alternating from his undulations; still lost in her own feelings.

The light show had died down, and rumblings in the distance said that the storm was moving on.

They kissed and panted, exchanging breaths for kisses, still hungry for each other, but exhausted.

Luke stopped moving inside her; letting them both recover, and relaxed himself from inside her.

He retrieved the blankets and wrapped her in his arm inside them.

<You bring me peace.> His mind said to her.

They retired to sleep in their current position,

<I can be the calm, after the storm, with you.> He said to her, kissing her firmly.

Mara closed her eyes, and shielded her mind as she spoke her thought to herself.

No Luke…you’re not the calm…you are the storm.

TBC
**
So this will be my last chapter for the next little while...Con is coming in 2 weeks and I’m really behind…so wish me luck!

Expect the next chapter in 2 weeks’ time, but I hoped you enjoyed this latest chapter!

Cheers!

**
Recovery & Resuscitation Part 4

Chapter Summary

Quote: Please love me too? His mind begged to her.

Characters: Luke, Mara, Doctors, students…Yavin

Chapter Notes

**
I know…I know…I’ve been away for a bit…and you’ve been so patient <3 <3 <3… I promise I will keep up the story. …now that con is over… and only 144 days until the next con! Yay!

So if you’re following my escapade into cosplay—the costume that I worked so hard on—well, failed—the wig didn’t fit at the last minute… and I cried, and put on something else.

In other news, our 501st Garrison raised close to $7500 for Make A Wish Foundation! And I Jawed out for the occasion.

But that’s not why you’re reading…you want story…don’t you?...

Well, here you go!

...oh yeah… SMUT FEST!

Ps. I’ve missed you….did you miss me?

**

He shivered.

He shrugged his shoulders to bring up the blanket covering him a bit more. The cold rarely bothered him.

Lost between night and approaching dawn; still dark in the upper level of the temple, and out beyond, the sky rumbled as the storm moved on and the night departed.

He shivered again; vaguely awaking to his surroundings.

Luke opened his eyes sluggishly and reluctantly. A strange awareness was coming to him.

The warm figure wrapped around his body provided comfort as he held her closer to him. She hummed sweetly as she unconsciously appreciated his gesture of pulling her closer.

The recliner on the upper level of the Massassi Temple had provided a temporary bed for the night;
his back rested against the inclination and she rested against him.

He adjusted the blanket again so that he could see the pile of red-gold hair and her delicate hand resting on his chest.

Quickly, in that moment, a deep stab of pain hit his heart.

Such a sight would normally touch his heart with warmth and love, but not this morning.

Luke, inwardly, started to rebuke himself.

Last night, she had given herself to him, in a most-trusting way.

She had come to him, drawn in, and had invited him to take her body how he wanted her.

And how he did repay her trust? Her love? …

He knew for certain that he hadn’t stepped over any boundaries; he didn’t push her limits or hurt her. But what she didn’t know, and what he would never reveal to her, was that he very much wanted to.

He wanted to grab and tear deeply into her flesh, force himself harder, faster and viciously into her, pull tighter on the soft locks of hair that now graced his chest, and all for his pleasure, hearing her moan and beg—\textit{he wanted it, craved it, yearned for it}.

Luke gulped the frozen air around them, as the thought came to him again. It scared him at how easily that desire came to him during the previous night.

What had started as devoted and loving, and become dark, possessive and punishing.

Consciously, he didn’t feel that way. He loved her and wanted every moment they had together to be pure and tender.

But something must have been beneath the surface of his feelings; a surface that was so thinly veiled that with the mere suggestion, it could be unleashed.

Luke shivered again and looked down at her again; feeling his heart break from what he could have done.

He pulled the blankets around them again; wanting to protect her, from himself.

It was early, very early. He reached out to their surroundings and could sense that there were no other conscious minds around them.

Without his control, the wind came from the jungle and whipped through the observation area, bringing the smell of fresh greenery and growth.

It was time to move, and they could do so, unnoticed.

Luke shifted his weight, raising his back off the recliner, slid a hand under her knees, also bracing her back and cautiously lifted Mara’s yielding body easily.

The blanket about his shoulders stayed in place as he silently carried her back to their room.

The journey was quiet, and she stirred briefly when he initially lifted her.

Her body was light and small in frame with her fine bone structure, but her muscles were lean and
deceptively strong.

She stirred again when he paused at their door to open it.

Inside the room, their bed was waiting for them. The blankets were askew from when she had left the room to come find him.

Luke lay her down compassionately on her side of the bed, and watched her relax into a sleeping position. He pulled up the available covers over her when she began to respond to the change in air temperature.

Silently, he begged that she not remember him as he was last night.

He watched as she turned to his side of the bed and her hand slid across the mattress to try and find him.

After what had occurred, she still wanted him near; still wanted him.

He wouldn’t deny her anything.

Luke made his way to the other side and slipped under the covers to join her.

As soon as Mara found him, she unconsciously brought herself closer to him, letting his arms wrap around her.

Their naked skin touched again; as if being fresh and new. The thrill, the energy- a surge, went through him, as it always did when he touched her.

His mind flashed on his vision, then flashed on their union, and the internal storm that drove him; he berated himself again. Luke fixed his eyes closed, wanting to wash away the Darkness that had come to him.

How could he take something so pure, and want to twist it?

He loved her, with all his heart – and he wanted those untainted feelings back.

Mara hummed, as if hearing his thoughts and activity. It was waking her.

Luke hushed and soothed her as he petted her hair. He smiled as he remembered the first time he saw her.

The light from the window at the base on Myrkrr was back-lighting her figure, and, as his vision came into focus, her fiery tresses, so well-contained in a single braid, still bounced off the rays of sunshine with their golden sheen.

He had to control himself not to gasp in front of his captor; not to reveal that he was instantaneously taken in by her.

He opened his eyes and looked down at her, now, cradled in his arms, completely his. And in truth, he knew he belonged to her too.

Calmly, he reached down and gradually tilted her chin up to his face. So perfect were her features; so fragile, so doll-like.

Luke pressed his mouth to hers, feeling their velvety texture; imprinting this on his memory.
All his love for her merged into this moment.

If he couldn’t take away what happened in the previous night, he would do what he needed to do to replace those feelings within him, and for her.

He sensed that her mind had relaxed back into peaceful slumber, yet, he also knew that part of her mind was always awake.

Luke decided that if she was going to wake, then she would be woken by the most-tender loving he could give her.

Under the blankets, he moved his hand over her body, and with his senses extended, he could feel what touches pleasured her the most.

When his hot hands stroked the cool skin of her back, she responded by pulling herself closer to him, and nuzzling against his chest.

His hands slid to her shoulders, and her cool skin dimpled with his touch.

He caressed her outer arm, and he picked up one of her hands and examined it against his own.

The bones were fine and almost weightless against his workman’s hands. He thought, as he regarded her skin, that she must have been diligent to wear work gloves to protect such unblemished skin.

So soft, and so refined; he brought her knuckle up to his mouth and gently pressed his lips to them.

Mara hummed ever so softly.

Luke turned her hand over and saw the fine lines of her palm- like an intricate lace design. He brought the palm to his lips and kissed the tender skin between her thumb and forefinger. As he did, her fingertips trickled on his cheek.

She hummed again.

Quickly, he glanced down at her face to see if he had awakened her.

Mara’s face betrayed nothing as she was the image of peace; Luke grinned at her tranquil visage, glad that he could make her feel safe with him.

He caressed her wrist and gently pulled it away from her body, exposing her inner forearm. He brought the heighten flesh to his mouth; pressing his lips to the finest skin of her pulse point – the faint scent of her perfume filled his nostrils and he inhaled deeply as he kissed down her inner arm.

She sniffed and flinched a grin at the tickle of his kisses; pulling her arm back close to her body.

Luke released her arm and let it relaxed back against her. He watched her, knowing he had just found another ticklish spot on her; another secret that he was granted.

He curled his fingers inward on his palm, and stroked down her cheek.

Her arm, that he once held, slid up his chest and around to his back; he could feel her fingers dangling against his skin.

He positioned himself higher in the bed so that she would fit into the nook of his neck better. His opposite hand, pinned under her, traced up and down her back.
But the minimal amount of skin was touching him, and he wasn’t satisfied with just the gentle tracing; his hands cupped her shoulders, and relaxed his full palms against her cool skin.

Mara sighed into his neck; her hot breath on his skin, exhilarating his primal ambition and igniting his senses to the effect she could have on him too.

Luke slid his available outer hand from her back, down her shoulders, coming into contact with the side of her torso.

His hand moved to the dip in her waist, the curves that invoked his desire, and over her hips. He made circles with the heel of his palm at the junction of her hip.

She shifted slightly, showing that the joint moved at his mere suggestion.

More of her flesh pressed against him; Luke had sworn that what he was doing now was for her pleasure and not for his, but he would be a fool if he didn’t admit that he was receiving the utmost enjoy in holding and touching her.

His hand kept making a circular motion at the top of her outer thigh; he could feel the powerful muscles beneath his hand, concealed by flawless skin.

Her leg unexpectedly moved up against his body, granting him the permission to continue his touch, his exploration into her desires.

Luke cupped her knee, bringing her leg up higher up on him.

He could feel the rise and fall of her body against him now; her breathing had deepened as he explored her frame.

Luke turned his head and tilted his face down; he started to kiss her temple, and periodically pressed his cheek against hers, then press his lips against her cheek.

The cool skin on her calve warmed as his hand massaged the chiseled muscles; up and down, moving her skin.

He made a path of sliding down the side of her leg, and dragging his fingers tips as he came up, varying the pressure applied on her skin.

Mara sighed between his kisses on her cheek, and, still under the spell of slumber, she turned her face to meet his lips with her own.

Their lips idly pressed against each other, progressively feeding their mutual appreciation and passion for each other.

His hand found a new trail on her inner thigh; pushing her muscles. As he stroked higher up on the supple flesh, just the tips of his fingers would brush up against the soft curls as he met the crux of her womanhood.

On his first stroke, his thumb grazed the hairs; on the second pass, his thumb and forefinger touched her outer lips.

Mara moved again, rolling slightly to her side, taking Luke with her, so now her outside leg rested on his opposite outside thigh, opening her, and granting him more access to her body.

He pulled his face back to look at her, watching her eyes flutter and open slowly; slits of pale
precious peridot regarded him.

She grinned serenely.

“Don’t stop.” She hummed, and she closed her eyes again.

Luke dipped towards her mouth, pressing his lips just on the corners of her mouth.

He rubbed her inner thigh again before venturing closer to her center of her pleasure.

Knowing that she was delighting in his contact, encouraged him with even more fervor to make her blissfully fulfilled.

His breathing began to match the tempo her heaving chest; in unison.

On his hand’s caress down her inner thigh, he applied deeper pressure, and climbed back up the thigh making circles with his hand, letting his fingers deliberately come in contact with her curls and fleshy lips.

He moved the heel of his hand to her pubic bone above her sacred depths; arousing and engorging, awakening her deep yearning.

As tempted as he was, rather than slipping his fingers into her folds, his hand cupped her entire mons, making slow rotations and applied pressure, moving her outer lips back and forth. The skin was growing warmer beneath his hand.

Mara broke away from his mouth to gulp momentarily into the open air before finding his lips again with renewed with desire.

Her own hands now slid up and down his back with the pace of his ministrations, pressing her chest up against his; tender porcelain breasts pushed up and constrained on his tanned skin, breathing matching stroking.

Luke could feel his actions were having the desired affect; the soft curls on her outer labia were now damp.

Capitulating, he slid two fingers wantonly in between her major and inner lips, coaxing more of her divine nectar to flow.

She moaned, and then her tongue tentatively explored his mouth, deepening their kiss, goading their shared passion.

Her hands slid farther down his back, finding the arch of the muscles that made his firm buttocks, and squeezed and release the skin under her hands.

He responded with a throaty growl, equaling her hunger.

Mara moved her hips; rocking them forward encouraging his hand’s journey, luxuriating in the sensations.

The heat was rising up her body from her core, hovering on the brink of apex.

She could feel his hardness pressing up against her, being ignored. Her nails dragged along his skin, teasing and showing their direct path following the curve of his groin muscles.

Luke broke his mouth from her immediately, and looked down at her.
Her emerald eyes opened to look into his pleading azure gaze.

He tenderly took her hand away from its travels and placed it back at his waist, then his fingers went back to their desirous work.

“Just for you.” He murmured before capturing her lips again, telling her that she need not indulge him, this time.

As the words left his mouth, he slipped fingers inside her, showing his meaning.

Mara arched towards him, pressing her skin against his, closer if it was at all possible to be in more contact than they already were.

His fingers pushed her folds apart, and delve into her core, coaxing her pleasure intently and attentively, unhurriedly, soothingly stroking her exquisite pussy.

Until now, Luke had resisted touching her mind and senses with the Force, feeling that the power exchange they had experienced the previous night was spurred on by their mutual Force touch, and wanted to avoid the possibility of that happening again. But he felt this was acceptable to give himself this one pleasure; the ability to sense her.

The yearning in his gut to feel what she was feeling, to sense if he was truly pleasuring her, was something he was now craving; it made him feel emotionally closer to her than he had ever felt to another person.

She turned her face and whimpered into his neck, as she felt his essence reach out to her, desiring her and loving her; her body, her mind, and her soul.

Only Luke could make her feel this way; she reached back to him, wanting to feel him as well.

The heat and trembling was building in her, and now he could sense it.

As his fingers inveigled her depths, he could sense the quiver of her delicate bud seeking his attention too.

His thumb slid back the hood that protected it from being over stimulated, but now was titillated as he rolled and twitched the nub.

Mara panted hard, heavy, breaths; she pushed his hand away, holding it back momentarily, as she felt her climax encroach unexpectedly and rapidly upon her.

“Too much” she hissed.

She held his wrist, not wanting it to move far from her, not wanting him to think that she didn’t appreciate what he was doing to her.

As her breathing returned to a calmer pace, she looked up to his face; his handsome face, questioning why she had wanted him to stop, blue eyes flashed their concern.

She released his wrist, and her hand came up to touch his face; she smiled, relaxing the tension in his face.

Her slender fingers slid down his sternum, down his chest, past his navel, his groin flinched with her touch between their bodies, and she found his harden shaft; she stroked him with enticing allure, knowing that he was denying himself for her pleasure.
Mara nuzzled her face close against his cheek. “I want you.” she hissed, “Just you.” You-pleasure me too. She thought over to him.

Luke’s eyes rolled and closed; relishing her words and touch, and secretly devoting himself to her entirely; anything she needed, anything she wanted, was all hers.

Guided by her, he slid his erection into her without further hesitation; culminating in their shared gratification.

Even as shallowly as he began to rock his pelvis; she gasped as his action caused the ripples of thrill over her body. She shivered at the sensation.

Hastily, and wanting more of her, Luke pulled her hips forward, no longer straining his length to be inside her, deeper he slowly pushed.

Once they had established their languid rhythm, his hand crept up from her hip along the dip in her waist, up the edges of her stomach, and cupped her tender breast that pressed up against him.

He kneaded in rhythm with his measured thrusts.

Mara melded her hips into him, meeting his body, craving him deeper inside her.

They rode the sensations together; their energy mingled in perfection. Their mouths pursing their hungry want of the other.

The Force flowing like neither had felt ever felt before.

Luke broke away gulping for air, knowing how close he was to his release, but he desired to watch her; he placed his forehead next to her, mumbling and letting his words flow.

“I love you.” He declared, again and again, “with all my heart.” He confessed.

Please love me too? His mind begged to her.

When his thoughts stopped racing he listened; her words, her sweet words, mumbled, tangled as they left her petal lips, incoherent, but he caught the words “love” and “you” repeated breathlessly in her state, and she moaned his name quietly to herself as if it was sacred to her.

Their power, and strength, together, swirled around them in the Force, as if bursts of wind carrying twists of colour waves.

This- This was the moment he wanted to have with her after professing his love for her, and having her return it to him; not the previous night.

He clenched his eyes shut, willing his body not to hit his zenith, not yet; he slowed his movements. And then reluctantly opened his eyes to see her face watching him.

Her eyes searched his face, and he watched her emotions visible only to him as they have never had been before; fear leaving and replaced by trust, agony replaced with joy – flush coming into her cheeks.

Then, she halted her movements and held her breath, ever so quietly.

He paused, watching her eyes close and he felt it; her body throbbed with him encased inside her Venus walls.
Tensing and then released at her climax, and not just limited to her orgasming vulva, the spasms danced throughout her body; skin fully flushed; mouth panting for air.

Lost in how rapturously beautiful she was in moment; Luke allowed his body to follow her.

_Gods be damned!_ His mind implored. Nothing more glorious in the galaxy existed for him; just her…_just his Mara._

Hot and hard, eruptions left his body, filling her. He tilted his head back and moaned hoarsely.

Their shoulders heaved with their breathing, and their hard-beating hearts pounded against their touching chests.

The morning’s cool air was not evident as the two lover’s skin glistened from their afterglow.

Breathing slowed, and recovery from passion to reality emerged.

Luke blinked hard to gain focus, realizing that she was looking at him as he came back from where the ecstasy had taken him.

A sly smile grew across her face; from porcelain doll to pirate, right in front of him. She unleashed a series of soft snorts, adorable and contagious—so much so that he couldn’t stop himself from smiling and chuckling quietly back at her.

Just enjoying being together; peaceful, and in love.

Mara closed her eyes again, brushing her cheek on his chin.

Mouths touched, appreciative, in harmony that they had come together so perfectly and profoundly.

He could feel her relaxing back into drowsy state again; knowing that it was still early in the morning.

Her hand came up from under the covers, and began to stroke his hair, invoking her wish for him to join her in their dreams.

He sighed, closed his eyes, and gave in; anything for her.

He hummed contently as sleep came easily to him now.

**

Mara woke with a start; her internal alarm was unsympathetic and consciously cruel when it came to how mornings started.

No matter how tired she might be, no matter if she had plans for the day ahead, and even if she encountered a rare day off— the alarm in her mind would wake her at the same time every day, mercilessly.

Now that her mind was now fully awake, her body refused to move.

And why should it? She could feel him, Luke, pressed up against her back, spooned tightly up to her.

She grinned to herself, and wiggled a bit back to feel more of his skin touching her.
She was proud, and dare to say it, happy…truly happy.

Even as his breathing tickled the hair on the back of her neck, which in the past would have annoyed her; she reveled in it now.

Luke had made love to her with such intensity that, at some points, had scared her. She had made herself vulnerable and had shared intimacy in ways she never thought that she would ever be capable of. Yet, when looking into his eyes, all the fear fell away.

And now, she was not scared; not of her feelings and not of his power or love for her.

He groaned from behind her, as if hearing her mind at work.

Mara reached out with her feelings to him. <<Are you awake?>> She tried to make her voice sound sweet and tender, trying to suppress her energy and giddiness.

He grunted once, burying his head to her shoulder.

<<I thought farmers like to get up in the morning.>> She teased.

Luke grunted again, but with promise.

<That’s a lie> His mind touched back. <I don’t know who keeps spreading such falsehoods.>

She chuckled. <<Well, I know you like mornings more than I do.>>

He snorted, and the arm draped over her waist pulled her tighter. <Once again… untrue.>

Mara felt his hot lips on her shoulder; placing small kisses on the skin.

<Go back to sleep?> He asked, sounding like he was half way there.

She closed her eyes, and tried, really tried, but her mind just wasn’t relaxing.

Aside from the euphoric feelings brought on by their love-making, she wanted to race into the day, for some unknown reason.

The excitement had waned a margin by the thoughts that had had now come to her consciousness.

A growing list of tasks had started to form in her mind. And regretfully, it had already reminded her that Aves would be picking her up just after midday meal, taking her away; and the pain in her chest started.

Sorrow? Heartache?—is that what they call it?

As if hearing the activity, he reached out, <And that’s why I suggested that you go back to sleep….midday can’t come if you don’t wake up to meet the morning.>

She could feel his regret at having become aware that it was, in fact, morning.

Luke took his arm from off her waist and rolled onto his back; stretching and yawning in their tiny shared-bed, he began to fully wake up.

Mara shifted her weight and moved within her space to turn to see him monopolizing a good deal of the two cots that had made one bed.
She furrowed her brow as she saw the space that he had taken up since they had returned.

Luke was rubbing the sleep from his eyes when he stopped and looked over at her to see her frown. He grinned apologetically for taking up more than his share of the bed; her face softened when he offered up his chest, just to hold her for a while longer.

She nuzzled into him, refusing to be out in the cool morning air, and refusing to go back to sleep; just wanting to linger close to him.

After listening to her shallow breathing, he asked quietly, “So why is your mind racing?”

Mara didn’t need to turn her head to know that his eyes were still closed; as much his senses were extended to feel the activity of her mind, she knew that he was at peace, and trying not to think.

“I don’t know.” She mumbled into his chest, half lying; she knew why, she just didn’t want to admit it.

It was her way. It had always been her way to organize her mind, quickly and efficiently, without emotion; it made her life easier if she could avoid feelings.

He never avoided feelings; he rushed into them, fighting or embracing them with abandon. How she envied him sometimes.

“I don’t like it either.” He said quietly, dispelling her previously held notion. “And I don’t embrace all my feelings.”

Luke squeezed her frame. “Right now, I don’t want to feel what I know I will feel later in the day.” He kissed the top of her head. “I’m trying to avoid it at all costs, like you are now.” He mumbled.

“How do you know I’m trying to avoid it?” she asked, masking her sarcasm, and failing miserably.

He snorted. “Because, you’re doing what you usually do.” He kissed her head again. “If you were out of my arms, and out of the bed, you’d be wearing a hole in the floor with your pacing.”

Mara glared at his chest, and tried to wiggle away, even though she knew he was teasing; his arms kept her in place.

His mind touched hers again. <There, there, my little hell-kitten…I’m not letting go of you just yet.>

She wiggled again, trying to break away, slightly indignant.

<Oh no…I’m not ready to let you go until I hear what I want to.> He taunted her, and held firm.

Exasperated, she huffed on his chest, and stopped moving, and she gave in. <<What do you want? >> she asked gruffly.

Luke chuckled at her miniscule grump. His hand came up and stroked the hair on the side of her face. <I want to hear you purr.> He teased with a distinctive husky tone.

He felt the slight flare in her temper before her face turned up at him, with her eyes a-blaze with mischief.

He smirked, letting her know he was in a playful mood too; he could feel her temper fizzle as she inched towards him.

Mara closed her eyes before she placed her lips against his; pushing her lips passionately, devouring
him, demanding his surrender that he shouldn’t have dared to tease her.

She knew what drove him wild, and as she pulled back from the kiss, she caught his bottom lip in her teeth; she shook her head slightly, with the captured lip, and released it, watching it plump back up, and his eyes opened slowly- not teasing, no humor but replaced with desire.

She raised one eyebrow seductively, and sneered delightfully at him. “Purrrrrr” she answered him, slightly snarling, rolling the ‘r’ with her tongue.

He chuckled, hard, as his sides started to hurt, reminding him that he might still have internal damage.

Luke dipped his head, wanting to capture her lips again. “That’s a good kitten.” He murmured before trying to return the kiss.

She wiggled away again, successful this time, and poked his sides; he flinched away from being her intended target, avoiding her suddenly sharp fingers jabbing his sides, snorting as he did so.

“Maarraa!” He whined in protest, almost falling out of the cot, dodging her attack.

She snorted at his folly, and watched as his only defense was to yank the covers that separated them.

For her to claim victory, he rolled out of bed away from her, taking part of sheet to cover himself.

“There.” He frowned at her, looking down at the cot from a half standing position, comically covering what she had already seen and admired. “I’m the first one out of bed. Are you pleased now?”

She smirked, reclining and stretching her form out to cover the cot; she yawned and claimed the space just as he had. “Partially.” She yawned again, mimicking him, and then smiled at her success for winning the bed.

The other success was watching his naked form scramble for cover; he was cute when his modest farm boy tendencies slipped past the secure man that he was.

Mara skirted back to the other side of the bed, giving him room to come back, offering him an option with a smirk on her face.

Luke smiled, and came back to sit on the edge of the bed. He reached across the thin mattress to touch her face, and leaned in for a consolatory kiss, conceding his defeat.

“I think we both know that it’s time to get up.” He regretfully admitted between their lips.

She could feel the ache in him starting to grow now too.

As a diversion, she shifted her weight away from him, finding it easy to go back to being ‘all business’ again. She sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the small bed frame, looking away from him.

“You can use my kit for the communals.” She said quietly. Unwillingly, her stoic nature was returning, and she didn’t know how to stop it.

She sensed, rather than saw, him nod in agreement.

She sat like that, looking into nothing, as she heard him shift around the room, getting dressed to roam in public places, gathering his things, readying himself to go take a shower.
Even more, she appreciated that he knew that she just needed time to digest what was going on in her mind, by herself, not forcing her.

He broke her solitude avoidance when he mumbled, “I’m ready…I’ll be back in a few minutes.” And he leaned over to kiss her before he left the room.

Mara turned her face into the kiss, and then watched him leave the room.

She stared at the door; missing him while she was still here was a bad habit for her to get into. It was unavoidable that she was leaving, and she knew it.

Karrde needed her. He wasn’t even thrilled that she had taken the time off for her medical procedures, but realized that it was necessary. He was left unimpressed when she said that she was following Luke to Yavin to get him settled. Karrde had conceded, knowing he could win no fight when it came to her feelings for the Jedi.

She needed to be back at base. *She knew it*- it was unavoidable.

The day would come when she wouldn’t have to leave, but it wasn’t going to be today.

She looked around the room, her senses coming back to her. It would pain her too greatly if she had to start packing in front of Luke. It would pain him too.

Mara forced herself off the bed, and search for a night shift to cover herself because when he returned, she would head for the showers.

As she pushed herself off the bed, her lower abdomen cramped, and she clutched the area and sat back down, breathing hard.

The medics had warned her that this would happen after her first period, and told her, in the future, to expect some mild pain after sexual intercourse, but that would eventually stop too.

The pain was just a shock but not extreme or concerning, so she moved again, and with no further discomfort.

Luckily, the room was small so she didn’t have to look very far to find and pack up her belongings. As she rummaged around, taking inventory of her things, she reminded herself to make a trip back to the upper level to retrieve the sweater that she had left there from the previous night.

Mara smiled to herself at the memory; the storm, and Luke. *And Luke.*

He had been so commanding of her body, and secretly she enjoyed it.

The memory of the night that he came to her apartment on Coruscant, the same night after the Bremem hearing, and had ordered her upstairs to her own bedroom. She had secretly enjoyed that too.

There were few people that she would ever let command her, and fewer yet that she would give in to. Luke fell into a category that, not only did she trust herself with him, but she didn’t resent him when he asked her to give in to him without question; nor did she berate herself when she did.

Something about him, when he took charge, thrilled and excited her. She knew it was not his general nature, but it could make her shiver, and let him take command.

It was against his nature to be overly assertive, and it was against hers to give in.
Yet, somehow, she had sensed his reproach this morning, when they had made love in the early hours. Like their time together was his form of an apology?

She thought about it. Did he regret being assertive over her?

It would have to be something that she would ask about later.

Now, where did her socks from last night go? She asked herself.

Mara spied the errant item over on “his side” of the small room, under the table on which now rested his opened comm unit.

She dove under the table to retrieve the item, and uncharacteristically bumped her shoulder on the side of the table on her way up, bringing his comm unit to life.

She turned her head to see the flashing signal, and was thinking how she was going to remind him that he should lock his unit when in unsecure areas, when the names on the messages caught her eye.

He had two unread messages waiting from his sister that were days old. But the one that sparked her interest read: “Urgent- Classified- Meeting Request”, from the office of General Crix Madine.

Mara quickly closed the screen down, knowing that she had just seen something she wasn’t supposed to, and she moved back to “her side” of the room.

She ran that name through her memory, and as a reflex, she glared at thin air.

Crix Madine- General of the Rebellion, now New Republic, and architect of the attack plans on the second Death Star.

What was left of her Imperial leanings, resented the man; he was a traitor, and defected from his Imperial service to join the Rebellion.

She took in a deep breath, held it and let it go, and released her resentment. That was in the past.

But in the present, he had contacted Luke, and something told her that it wasn’t a pleasant call to catch up on the good ole days from the war.

She turned back to look at the comm unit, knowing it was unlocked, and her inner spy wanted to suddenly know what it contained. She turned away, denying herself.

Mara moved about the room, doing what she needed to, but absently as her mind started to think of all the possibilities of why Madine would want to meet with Luke.

As she finished packing her things, she couldn’t help but let her mind ponder all the implications.

She swallowed and reminded herself that it wasn’t any of her concern. It was Luke’s business, not hers.

He had meetings and missions long before she came into his life, and he would continue to do so as long as he felt he had an obligation to the New Republic – it was his job.

Just as her job was a commitment to Karrde and his organization.

She would just have to let it go…unless…unless Luke mentioned it- she promised herself. *Yes, only if he mentions it…*
She decided to start to make a mental list of the other issues that she had to do before she was to
leave, to keep her from thinking of the obvious.

The Terratiques- yes, she had to meet with them, to give them a crash course in comm center security
and protocol.

And Dr. Massian- to meet with him, and get more information from him concerning *The Kynthelig.*
He had sparked her interest when he said that he had an entire book of their writings.

And Luke…*and Luke.* Just what would she say to him before she left?

They had shared so much in such a short amount of time; he had even asked her to consider that they
share living accommodations, here, on Yavin; essentially asking her to come live with him.

Such permanency would never be allowed in her life before now.

She had to admit that she was a coward when it came to one of them having to leave. She preferred
to be asleep, or for him to be in that state—it was just easier.

Mara was starting to lose herself in thought, replacing concern and devoid her emotions; it was
involuntary and automatic, she had no control over her coping mechanism.

She didn’t even sense Luke’s return before he entered the room. The door *swooshed* open, and she
jumped slightly.

Luke smiled at her as he entered; his hair looked half-damp, and his eyes sparkled. “Hi there
beautiful.” He greeted her before coming close and leaning in for a kiss.

She looked up at him, and mechanically returned his smile, letting her lips touch his.

Just his contact brought her back to the present, and she touched his face, not wanting the moment to
end.

His warm arm wrapped around her and brought her up from the bed, to stand next to him, letting him
hold her.

As the kiss ended, he rested his forehead against hers. “Better hurry.” He whispered quietly, but not
letting her go. “Before all the hot water is gone. It’s like they knew we were awake.”

She knew he was trying to keep it casual, delaying the inevitable, and preserving their time together.
With effort, she would try to do the same.

Mara smiled as he handed over the shower kit that contain some of his things, and some of her
supplies too. She looked down at it- their things mingled together- and then up at him.

Luke relaxed his hold and she slipped away from him, passing him.

Mara stopped before the door and looked back at him, and smiled before leaving.

**

He watched her leave, puzzled.

Through his senses, Luke could feel her confusion and her desire to avoid her departure.

He had to remind himself that it had only been a little over a year that she had started to open herself
to feelings. She was still a stranger to most of them.

Sometimes it felt like she was putting on a front of what she thought emotions felt or looked like to any outside party- like she was pretending to have them when the situation caused her confusion as to what she should truly feel.

He looked around the room, and noticed that she had tidied it as she had packed- probably another control tactic.

Looking at her travel case of “her side” of the room only gave him a prang of hurt which he knew would develop throughout the day.

Perhaps using her technique of avoiding each other would be the best thing.

A random thought crossed his mind, and some harkening of bad advice once bestowed on him.

Han had once told Luke that he would purposely try to anger Leia before he went away, so that it would make leaving easier. And then, upon his return, they would make up.

Luke shook his head; just because the older man was family, didn’t mean that Luke needed to take his advice; they were not all golden treasures as the former smuggler liked to think they were.

Fights with Mara were not pleasant, and he knew that she didn’t enjoy them, nor did she have them with him just for the sake of an argument.

No, when she left today, he would make sure she would want to come back, and come back to him.

He snorted when he saw that she had laid out her clothing for the day with precision, but it disappointed him to see her work jumpsuit at the top of the pile; gone, were the soft tunics and sweaters that she had worn with a graceful ease.

Luke turned away from the area to concentrate on his own goals for the day, and the first goal was to get fully dressed.

He had unpacked most of his belongings as he assumed that this would be where he would stay on Yavin for the next little while.

Looking into the single drawer that the room allowed him, he chose his clothing for the day. As he did so, he casually glanced over at his closed comm unit on the desk adjacent to him.

He didn’t remember closing it. In fact, it had been open and had gone dormant before he had retired to bed last night.

Did Mara close it? Did she see the messages that were waiting there for him?

Luke was sure she would have said something if she thought she needed to.

He began to dress himself for the day.

He cringed. *He knew* what type of messages that were waiting there for him.

He suspected that the first message from Leia would be about the twins, Han, her current status, and checking on his recovery from the Med Center on Roche.

The second message from Leia would be all business; probably which systems were calling for help, tactical analysis of current attack plans that she would want him to review, and a request for him to
join their fight.

The message that he dreaded the most was from General Madine.

As soon as Luke saw the blinking indicator of that meeting request’s arrival, he knew it wouldn’t be good.

He couldn’t deny that he was avoiding all of them, and he knew exactly why he was doing it to.

If he was to open any one of those messages, the world would find him and interrupt his time with Mara.

Yes, the first message from Leia was several days old, and even though Madine’s message had arrived within the past daily cycle, Luke had been given a taste over the past few days to see what it was like not to have his life monopolized by other people and their “needs”.

It felt, for lack of a better word, normal; this must be what life would be like if he wasn’t at the beck and call of the galaxy.

He had to admit it felt good. It felt even better when he had someone to share it with.

But, if his life had shown him anything, he had learned that there was a price to pay for his happiness.

If he wanted the freedom of keeping his X-wing and granted living quarters on Coruscant, he would be required to attend and consult on security issues affecting the galaxy.

If he wanted to be gifted a planet on which to build a future Jedi Academy, he would be expected to go on missions that he didn’t necessarily agree with, putting his life in jeopardy.

Even though these terms were unspoken and unwritten, it bound him, not just by his ethics and desire for peace, but by some sort of need for repayment. And he resented being indebted to anyone.

Luke finished dressing and clipped his lightsaber to his belt. Looking down at it, he knew that when he became a Jedi, it meant a life of servitude. Maybe his outlook had been wrong. He wasn’t in debt to the New Republic but only fulfilling a promise that he had made.

He sighed, knowing that his life was still not going to be his own…until…until…He had no definitive answer.

The door slid open, breaking his thought, and Mara had returned.

She smiled politely at him.

Luke’s shoulders relaxed; he could feel that she was blocking herself again. He didn’t resent it, and he was beginning to get used to it; letting her cope how she needed to.

She had turned her back from him and had started to put away her things into her case, and fumble around; trying to find a way to stay occupied.

“I had just enough water.” She said quietly, breaking the silence, finding a way to thank him for his earlier concern.

He walked over to her, coming behind her and putting his hands, casually, at the top of her arms.

“‘That’s good.” He said before he leaned in and kissed her cheek, not asking any more of her.
Luke removed his hand, and turned to walk away. “I’m going to go back up to the top level-” He said decidedly, knowing it would give her more space, even just temporarily. “-Just in case, we forgot anything up there.” He added.

“And then we go down for breakfast?” He asked her, hoping to break the wall she was inadvertently putting up.

“Uh-huh.” She murmured her agreement, and turned to give him a tight grin, showing that she wasn’t fully numb.

He smiled, just looking at her.

Mara blinked heavy, breaking her self-imposed trance, and gave him a genuine smiled.

Luke nodded once, and turned to leave the room.

**

Luke made his way back from the upper level to their room, with a blanket under one arm, and trying to fold Mara’s sweater between his hands.

R2 twittered a greeting from the alcove across from their room.

“Good morning to you, too.” Luke answered him, and walked over. “How did last night go?” he asked, “No electrical surges?”

The little droid chirped and then sputtered.

Luke chuckled and patted its dome. “Good to hear.” He stopped and looked at his loyal astromech, crouching beside the data unit and looking quickly at the readout.

“Mara is leaving today.” He said glumly. “I was thinking that maybe we should upgrade your programming to recognize her.”

R2 raspberried and twittered the very thought of it.


The response he got was a series of hoots, bleeps and a down-toned whistle.

He nodded. “Okay, not until we’ve done a memory back up and increased your storage.” He cringed a bit; he knew he had been putting those two things off for a while, and felt bad that he had been neglecting his friend. “Maybe, we get you a deep oil bath too?” He suggested optimistically.

The little droid beeped back enthusiastically.

“Am I interrupting?” Her voice came from over his shoulder.

Luke turned to see Mara leaning on the door jamb, just listening to them. She had dressed for the day, jumpsuit, lightsaber at her waist and half-boots, hood in hand, and hair pulled back in a tight braid; ready for business.

Luke responding dryly, “Just guy-droid talk.”

As he stood up to meet her, he saw that his pendant was once again around her neck, just under the collar of the jumpsuit.
She nodded, wearing an amused face, but then shook her head, clearly not understanding how he spoke to that droid in the way he did.

Luke met her eyes, not looking away, walking closer to her and extended his hand to touch her upper arm, rubbing it slightly.

Her eyes regarded him, as if studying his face in the moment; she blinked, then stepped aside, into the corridor, to allow him into the room.

Luke dropped the blanket and sweater on the cot, abandoning them in favor of being in her company, and then returned to join her in the hallway.

“Are you hungry?” He asked quietly as he walked up behind her, following her down the hallway in the direction of the mess hall.

“Somewhat.” She answered back in the same tone.

She may not be as shut-off as she was before he had left the room, but he knew she was trying to stay not blocked off for him, and he appreciated the effort.

“Maybe they have waffles.” He mumbled, knowing that there were simple things that could delight her.

She looked over her shoulder at smirked at him. “Maybe.” She said before she turned to look at their path.

Luke could feel the spike in active minds as they walked towards the mess hall.

As the hallway widened, he came to be in step beside Mara, and a thought occurred to him. “Do we have any plans for the day?” He asked.

She sighed before answering, suppressing the only thing that they both were trying not to think about. “I was hoping to find time to teach Almae and Deek how to set up their comm station and protocol.” She said. “Do you want to help? You probably know the system better.”

He smiled, and furrowed his brow. “What makes you think that I would know that?” He asked out of curiosity.

“I heard they got the comm station from leftover Rebellion equipment, as well as donations. I thought you might have experience with it, is all.” She explained.

He felt the touch of her mind before he heard the words. <<We could spend more time together.>> She sent across to him.

They entered the hall before they could finish their conversation openly.

Luke was more than willing to do something that would keep her close to him for as long as he could, so assembling a comm station was an approved chore.

Luke simply agreed with her idea, and showed her that he welcomed their time together by brushing up against her as they stood in line for the food prep stations; a gesture that the audience of the mess hall wouldn’t notice.

“I think that would be a great idea.” He mumbled as he levied some food on his plate.

When they got to the beverage area, he caught her glance and sense to see if he wanted a caf. He
nodded slightly, and looked over her shoulder as she prepared two mugs, and then she handed one to him.

Mara turned to look for an available seat; seeing the group of doctors waved them over. Luke just watched her, not wanting to look away.

<<You’re not being very subtle this morning.>> She sent over to him, as she began to walk over to their party.

<No, I’m not…am I? Do you want me to do better?> He asked dryly and slightly sarcastically.

<<Only if you don’t want our relationship to be splashed across the holo news by the afternoon.>> She answered, sounding a bit perturbed by him; her walking pace had gained some distance between them and he took the hint.

The conversation at the professor’s table was in full swing as they arrived at the table.

Luke noticed that her tone changed as they approached the table, and she smiled sweetly to those who were not engrossed by the discussion, and she took a seat beside Almae, leaving no room beside her. He took up a seat across from her at the table, sitting beside Deek.

“…You can’t think that the Massassi people didn’t have some sort of hierarchy to their communal living. It’s evident in all the art we’ve found already.” Dr. Dram enthusiastically argued from the far end of the table, opposite to Luke.

“That’s just the point Dram!” Deek responded, irked. “You are assuming that they lived that way. We’ve also had evidence that they are had smaller households- with the absence of communal living. You just can’t apply one finding—that hasn’t even been dated—to all generations! It’s generalizing that will stagnate our studies here!”

Clearly, it was another heated debate that seemed to go nowhere.

Dr. Massian, looked over Deek to Luke. “You would think that these two were on debate teams, by the way they argue.” He winked at the Jedi, letting him in on a joke.

Almae’s glance looked over at her husband and Dr. Dram disapprovingly. “They were…” She grumbled. “…In their post-graduate studies.” Her look was neither impressed nor engaged by their antics.

“I’ve never studied debate.” Luke said, hoping to sway the topic. “There was no one to argue with on Tatooine.” He took a bite of his food, and then swallowed. “But my sister is great at it. Don’t get in a discussion with her – you’ll never win.”

The doctors each chuckled at the thought of it.

“Yes.” Dr. Massian interjected, “I once heard her open the debate against the dissolution of the military act. She was quite young at the time… it was before the war. I was amazed at how poised and collected her argument was for one so young.”

Mara nodded. “It’s a skill as much as it is an art form.” She said before taking a bite of her meal.

“The Sith were great debaters.” Dr. Dram added. “From what I was able to read, they were constantly debating and re-evaluating their beliefs and training methods…but that was also before the Rule of Two.”
Luke nodded, realizing Dram was merely adding to the conjecture and not pointing out the differences between Jedi and Sith.

In fact, sometimes, he wondered what truly kept the schools of thought apart, but had never been given the opportunity to ask a Sith for the reason for the venom between the two groups, and doubted he would ever get the chance.

“But that sort of constant debate can also lead to fragmented thought. I’m sure it had something to do with leading up to the eventual ‘Rule of Two’.” The Jedi thought out loud.

Luke looked around the table to see faces that regarded him with curiosity.

Mara just looked down at her food; he knew she had lived it, and didn’t need a further lesson on the Sith.

“The ‘Rule of Two’ became the Sith practice of only having two full members…Darths.” He explained. “One Master and one apprentice.” He finished quietly.

Dr. Dram nodded in agreement, with his mouth full of food, unable to add to the discussion until he swallowed. “I am in total agreement. It led to several Sith Wars when they had larger numbers.”

Mara, had tried to distance herself but she could also sense that others at the table were not keen to listen to stories of Jedi and Sith.

She raised an eyebrow. “Are we going to debate why debating can be a bad thing, now?” She asked in a mercurial tone, trying to divert the conversation.

Almae covered her mouth and chuckled at the other woman’s reasoning, and smirked as she joined in. “I would like to propose a new purpose…and the men can sit here and discuss the pros and cons of debating while Mara and I go off and do actual work.”

Mara turned her head and smirked at the doctor, and the back at the others at the table, waiting for their answer.

The others at the table turned their attention back to their meals, including Luke.

After a moment or two, Deek raised his head sheepishly, turning to Luke. “I understand that you and Mara have offered to help set up our comm station properly. I’m afraid we haven’t been the best at keeping it up. It wasn’t one of our priorities when we arrived, but it seems that it will have to be as we will be expecting more students and deliveries soon.”

From the far end of the table, a voice added. “The students will be thankful for a full console that can boost their signals. They’ve had trouble being able to make contact with their families and such.” Peffar seemed uncomfortable when all eyes turned to her.

“I don’t know how much help I can be- I’m not a comm technician – but I’ll give it a chance.” Luke answered. “Mara had mentioned that a good deal of your equipment is remnant from the Rebellion.”

Dram seemed a bit disappointed that he couldn’t continue with his conversation on the Sith, accepting that Luke being around for so time longer, and watch the Jedi at work would be more than satisfying, he answered, “I’m sure you’ll have no problem with it.”

The remainder of the meal was brisk and conversation changed topics quickly.

Luke periodically looked up and watched Mara as she was engaged with others; he caught her
glances back at him several times.

Both of them were trying hard to do the difficult dance of knowing the inevitable but putting on a brave face.

When the meal broke, Mara walked beside Peffar, out of the mess hall, and in the direction of what would be the comm center.

Luke remained a bit behind, watching her go, as he had been approached by several students, asking questions, which he did congenially, and knowing he was giving Mara the space that she seemed to need at the moment.

It seemed that the attention directed at him was not going to end, so he was relieved when Deek came up beside him and reminded the group that there were duties and classes that needed to be attended.

Deek ushered Luke in the direction of the comm center.

“We’ve been quite lucky being here.” Deek said over to the Jedi as the two men walked. “The scenery is quite pleasant, and the resources have been astounding. We were quite happy to have this opportunity, and for the invitation.”

Luke nodded, knowing the implications. “I hope it’s going to work out well for you, and for your studies. I’m looking forward to it.” He said.

“So, you’ll be staying here for a while, then?” Deek smiled as he asked.

“I hope to.” Luke answered, and sighed. He wanted to add that he would be staying alone, but felt it was unnecessary.

By the time the two men reached the comm center, they entered a room where it was already in disarray.

Peffar stood inside the room, shaking her head, slightly amazed. “She just went at it.” The student commented. “I couldn’t stop her.”

Deek seemed to be shocked, but Luke could see what Mara had started doing.

Colour wires lay on the floor in straight lines, the input box was devoid of any input, just to organize its reception, and the service desk was pulled away from the wall.

It was almost comical as Mara’s hand would come up every so often, feel around for a tool and then go back to work behind the desk.

Almae was standing beside the desk, taking notes as Mara dictated them over.

“...And you should always have someone on duty...all day...every day.” Mara’s voice was slightly louder than her normal speaking voice. “They don’t have to be totally concentrated on the unit, but someone has to be here.”

Luke stood back and watched, admiring how pragmatic she could be sometimes.

“When it comes to passwords and landing confirmations—you should work out a schedule, far in advance, of what those acceptable words should be.” Her hand came up again, putting a tool back on the top of the table. “I don’t think you will really need to have more than a two code clearance- one
alphabetical, and one numeric- but you need to have more than you did when we came here.”

Luke could sense that she was satisfied, and heard her movements from behind the desk.

Mara stood up, catching the site of him, watching her; she grinned quickly, but wanted to go back to her work, if only to keep her busy.

“There.” She said, sounding satisfied. “Your system won’t lose power or burn out. I put on the bypasser to attach to the main board.”

She stepped out and around from the desk, and Luke stepped forward to help her move it back up against the wall.

“Where do you want me?” He asked, not quite sure where he could be of the best help.

Mara’s eyes flashed at him, then, back to business. She stepped over cords to move the far side of the room, and pointed to several boxes. “I was thinking that maybe you and Deek, go assemble the remote beacon at the East temple’s platform. I was telling Almae that it might be the best place for unscheduled landings.”

He knew it was a tactic to keep him away from her. He bit the inside of his lip, trying to remind himself that she was doing this for some sort of preservation, but it was starting to get frustrating.

He simply nodded, readied the delivery dolly that was loaded with boxes, and looked over at Deek. “It sounds like they have this part under control. Feel like building something?” He asked with a bit of mirth in his tone; if Mara could put on an act, then so could he.

Luke pushed the dolly from the room, without looking back. It was a petty gesture, but he was done trying to polite about it. Mara had raked him over the coals when he had shut her out after their trip to the Jedi Enclave; and now she was doing it to him. Maybe giving her a true amount of distance would bring her back.

**

In a little over two hours the comm station was fully set up.

When Luke and Deek returned from assembling and remote beacon, the room was no longer a catastrophe, and there seemed to be a self-congratulating tone among the occupants.

Peffar had been put to work, bundling the cables.

Almae stood over a completed and functioning console; designing a schedule for those who would be monitoring the system.

Almae turn to husband to explain the system further. “Deek, I had no idea that it had this sort of capability.” She said encouragingly.

Even Peffar looked satisfied with the work they had done.

“Did you know that our system has multiple channel capability?” Almae asked her husband. “And high volume capacity? –that’s what Mara said.”

It was then that Mara entered from the small antennae room that was off to the side of the main room. “Well, the docking stations for personal comm units are all wired up now.” She said.

She looked over, seeing Luke again, and grinned to him, softer now, seeming apologetic. Whatever
cloud that had set in, had passed.

He could feel soft tendrils touching his mind again, and then understood why she felt the need to distance herself from him.

Completing this task had served to make her feel useful and not lost in her mind.

He reached back letting her know that his time away from her, made him feel the same way.

All that was needed now was a test of the system’s installment.

Peffar was eager to test the personal docking station and went into the antennae room, hooking up her small unit and attempting to send out a message to her family.

It turned out that ‘The Yavin Center for Cultural Study’, as it was being called now, had been granted a large endowment from Hageet Tech Comm to test equipment, range, and included a fund for all the costs associated with a fully functional comm center.

The two rooms had been arranged for maximum efficiency- no doubt, by Mara.

The small antennae room would be for personal messages and allow to boost reception of users own units with available docking stations, or to use the common frequency.

The main unit would be for direct communication to the base for scheduling, galactic news feeds, and the first point of contact, and fully monitored -all incoming messages would to be treated with priority.

Further protocol was developed so that any unexpected arrivals were to be sent to the adjacent temple where Luke and Deek had set up the beacon. It had been strictly a landing pad at the time of the Rebellion’s occupation, and no reason for it not to be again.

Luke had suggested that they start to design other protocols too, for security measures, including an evacuation plan in case of natural disaster or attack- which was not out of the question now that Yavin might just become a point of notice once again given the recent activity there.

The doctors had questioned his seriousness, but when Mara pointed out that pirate gangs would love to raid unsuspecting group of relatively unarmed students, they changed their minds quickly, even going so far as to note to request weapons in their next operating budget for just such an instance.

But the doctor’s attention was also occupied with learning all the intricacies of their fully functional comm center.

It was then that the comm unit pinged, as if it knew it was being discussed.

A message notification flipped up on the screen. Almae sat down, proudly behind the console to open it, and began to read.

“Freighter Etherway requests permission to land in approximately ninety minutes.” She looked over her shoulder at the others, slightly confused.

Luke looked over to Mara to see her shoulders drop; she nodded to Almae.

“Please reply ‘Extract Confirmed for ninety minutes’, and direct them to follow the main beacon to the landing pad.” Mara said quietly.

Almae silently turned back to the console to type in the message, as a tightness had suddenly come
into the room that was palpable.

“Thank you.” Mara whispered. “I need to go prepare.” She excused herself from the room.

Luke stood in place, regretfully feeling her shields immediately shut her off; he let her go, resisting the urge to follow her.

**

The pain in her chest had started to grow as she walked away from the newly set up comm center.

As much as it had provided a great distraction for her, it couldn’t put off her departure forever.

Mara had gone back to their room and retrieved her case, and was now pulling it towards the landing pad. She evaded looking around the room; trying not to remember her time here, and with whom.

She knew she had more than enough time before the Etherway was to arrive, she just needed to be out of the comm center after the message arrived; the walls had started to close in on her there.

And Luke—And Luke, and the look on his face when Almae read the message.

He was getting good at masking some of his feelings, but he still didn’t have a conscious grasp on how to stop them from showing on his face, or in his senses.

Mara walked down the hallway, gladly not to be in a race to the pad, when she reminded herself that her path was going right past Dr. Massian’s office.

She wasn’t in a rush to leave just yet, and another friendly distraction was a welcomed one.

Besides, she had to admit, she liked the man.

Inside the alcove that led to his office, she stopped, and rested her case, and ventured further inside.

“Hello?” She called ahead of her. “Dr. Massian?”

She knew he was probably still hobbling around. At breakfast, she saw that he had abandoned his hover chair for a cane to support his weight.

The thought of him trying to climb a temple pyramid made her smile; he intended for nothing to stop him, and she could respect someone like that.

As she called out, she walked.

Among the books and cases, Dr. Massian sat in his office, injured leg resting on a small pedestal in front of him, reviewing lesson plans.

“It’s rude to linger in doorways, young lady.” He smiled at her. “Please come in.”

Mara smiled back, and didn’t mind being reminded that he thought of her a student first.

“I’m leaving today.” She said quietly, “…and I didn’t get chance to thank you for all the information that you’ve been able to provide to both of us.”

The doctor waved his hand, brushing off her gratitude, and then gestured to the chair across from him, inviting her to sit down. “Oh, it’s me who should be thanking both of you. Never in my life would I think to ever have met a Jedi…let alone two of them.”
Mara smirked and sat down, and resisted the urge to remind him that she wasn’t a Jedi.

She looked down at his leg, as he rubbed the area, then back up at him. “Is it still hurting?” She asked concerned.

“Not more than it has been.” Dr. Massian seemed to be the sort of man who didn’t complain about ailments unless he was truly suffering- another thing Mara could respect about him.

“May I?” She asked, as she indicated that she wished to help.

On her recent stay on Roche, she had discovered that she had a bit of a healing touch, and was curious if she could do it with non-sensitives. Luke had given her no instruction on it, but she had seen him do it a few times, and was inquisitive more than anything else.

The doctor’s eyes went wide, and nodded, as he watched her lean over and touch his out-stretched leg.

Normally, she would be hiding her talents, but Dr. Massian had seen her use some of her rudimentary gifts, and was extremely appreciative for the display. She didn’t feel ashamed for another display, now.

Quietly, she closed her eyes, and reached out her senses.

It felt strange to try something by herself without Luke around, but since her visit to the Jedi Enclave on Dantooine, she had replayed the message that was given to her; her power was her own and not given to her through another person- so no reason why she couldn’t try a technique by herself.

Mara moved off her seat, and knelt beside the pedestal. Her hands touched the injured ankle, and she could sense that it wasn’t ankle that was causing the discomfort; it was the calve muscles that had started to seize up from lack of movement that was causing him pain.

She moved her hand over the discomforted area, sending warmth into it, soothing it rather than healing it.

Dr. Massian closed his eyes, feeling the relief from the pain.

When satisfied, Mara removed herself, and went back to the adjacent chair.

It took several minutes before Dr. Massian opened his eyes to look at her, refreshed and amazed.

“That was incredible.” He said softly, and smiled. He shook his head in calm astonishment. “Truly amazed.” He whispered, “Never in my life…” He repeated.

She smiled and chuckled slightly. It quietly dawned on her that this might be why Luke does what he does; it felt good to help someone else.

“Do all Jedi learn to heal?” He asked.

Mara furrowed her brow. “I don’t know.” She answered without reserve. “Luke does it…but part of me supposes that he does it out of necessity.”

She caught a strange look from the doctor, and answered his unasked question, “Luke has a tendency to get himself injured.”

The doctor nodded.
Mara looked around the room, at the old books on the shelves. She liked being in this room, and around all this knowledge.

It was like something she didn’t give herself the luxury to do.

Knowledge always had some other purpose in her life; it was always to gain the upper hand, to know something that her enemies didn’t, it was never for the sheer pleasure of just learning.

The appreciation must have shown, as a sly smile crossed the doctor’s face; knowing that her gratitude that she expressed was not just lip service. As much as he respected her gifts, she respected his gift to the Jedi.

Mara looked back at the doctor, and a question that she had burning in her since she had arrived, came back into her mind.

“Dr. Massian, you had said that you had a book about *The Kynthelig*?” she asked, hoping that he had remembered.

Her question broke his repose, and he became more animated. “Oh yes!” He smiled. “I completely forgot that I supposed to show that you.” He said apologetically.

He motioned to get up from his chair, but Mara stopped him. “I can get it for you.” She suggested. “Just indicate where it might be, and I’ll gladly go get it.”

He nodded and then looked at the bookcase before him, and started to search the mass of documents, and his eyes stopped. “That’s it!—the third volume from the right.” He pointed to the shelf, second from the top—still too high to reach just by himself.

Mara was suddenly eager to get her hands on that book, and she could see the faded green spine sticking out, and the triangle symbol that she had seen at the Jedi Enclave, screaming that this was what she was after.

Without a second notion, or the thought to use a step-stool, she reached out with her feelings, and the book moved from its location and floated into her waiting hand.

It marveled her as she touched the pages; there was energy here, as old as the book was, it was still there.

Dr. Massian chuckled softly beside her. “I’ve never seen someone so interested in *The Kynthelig*. They were the forgotten tribe. Most of their lore now makes up fantasy and fairytales.” He said to himself, rather than to her.

“Pardon my intrusion,” he said, and Mara looked up at him, knowing it was impolite to be so engrossed. “But, you’ve sparked my curiosity, young lady, as to why such an interest in them? Surely, although the Jedi considered them friend rather than foe, their teachings aren’t exactly along the same path?”

Mara shrugged, knowing that he wanted an answer, she shook her head. Normally guarded about her intentions, she let those barriers drop. “I recently found out that I have a possible heritage and
connection to them.” She confessed.

Dr. Massian sat up straighter in his chair. “Oh yes?” He asked, riveted now. “Yes… I can see it now that you mention it.” He smiled, studying her. “You have a look about you, just as they were rumored to… fair skin, jewel eyes, hair like flames…”

He leaned closer to her. “Do you have their temper to match the hair?—Fierce warriors they were!” He winked, then chuckled.

Normally, she would have been offended, but instead, she joined his chuckle, and nodded slightly, remembering that Luke had been on the receiving end of that temper as she admitted to it.

Dr. Massian went quiet, still looking at her, his expression went serious. “Have you ever had visions?” He asked, watching her. “Do you know things before they happen? – sense the future?”

Mara stopped and looked at him. No one, including Luke, had ever asked her directly before. She’d be hard pressed to try and explain what it was like, but for him, she’d make the effort.

“I do.” She said, and then smiled tightly, hoping that her admission wouldn’t frighten him. “Mostly, just in the sense that I feel things before they happen. Luke calls it my ‘danger sense’, and he says it’s well-developed.”

She could tell that he wanted her to continue. “I’ve had visions. Sometimes, what I’ve seen, happens—sometimes it doesn’t.” She looked down, and mumbled. “The future is always in motion.”

The doctor nodded, listening intently; she could sense what his next question was, so she answered without needing to hear it.

“Visions aren’t always pleasant. I don’t always like getting them.” She looked back up at him. “They come without warning, or willing them, and they can be very disruptive.”

“They feel too real.” She said blankly.

Dr. Massian sat back in his chair and his eyes narrowed, considering her words, and then nodding.

“Visions were known to drive other Force-users mad.” He said, at last. “But not The Kynthelig. They were comfortable with them, trusted their visions, used them as tools, and not use them as direct messages but as interpretations.”

He smiled broadly. “If you have their gifts, then I’m sure you will learn to use them well.”

Mara looked down at the book in hands, and closed it. She started to trace the ingrained triangle design on the front with her finger, following the undisturbed line.

“The Triquetra - The symbol of The Kynthelig.” Dr. Massian whispered. “Drawn with one singular line.” He explained. “It’s meaning -the past, present and future; all on one line… with only pauses as the points, indicating definition, but not ending.”

She continued to trace the pattern, being mesmerized by it. It was then that her comm pinged in her pocket, breaking her concentration; the timer she had set, warning her that her ride was arriving.

She blinked, bringing herself back to where she was, and looked over at the good doctor.

“That’s my ride.” She said regretfully.

He nodded.
She raised herself off her chair with a sigh, and offered the book back to its owner; feeling sad to see it go.

Dr. Massian shook his head. “It belongs with you.” He said, refusing to accept it back.

Mara genuinely smiled to him, looked down, feeling what she supposed was humility at his gesture.

She extended her hand. The doctor clasped it between his two hands.

“Thank you.” She said, her voice cracking slightly.

He nodded.

She sighed, slumped her shoulders, and turned to leave.

She stopped at the door, and turned back; the doctor was watching her go.

“May the Force be with you.” She said quietly before leaving the room.

**

Mara didn’t need to see the Etherway land. She had seen it so many times.

This time, she didn’t want to see it land, but she headed in the direction of the landing platform, regardless.

The morning air on Yavin was still damp, and a cool fog descended over the jungle. A light breeze rippled past her.

The sooner she could get her things settle aboard it, she would be satisfied. It was still delaying the unavoidable; all the time that would be taken up by small things; landing, refueling, checking co-ordinates, sending out contacts, etc.

She just wanted to rip off the bandage rather than watching it be peeled away slowly.

As she approached, she saw Luke standing on the edge of the pad, his arms crossed against his chest, his hair ruffled with the breeze, and watched intently as the Etherway touched down; repulse lifts cushioned the landing.

He didn’t turn to acknowledge her and she could feel the aura of pain come off him.

She shut her feelings off from him; sometimes she didn’t always do it to stop him from knowing what she was feeling - sometimes she did it so she wouldn’t have to sense other’s feelings, too.

When she came closer, saw watched his shoulders raise and lower with a sigh.

“Are you ready?” He asked quietly; she assumed because he didn’t know what else to say.

<<No.>> She sent over to him, but said quietly, “Yes.”

Luke turned to her now; his pale crystal eyes, sad, but he grinned tightly. <I’m not ready either.> He confessed as he swallowed.

The plank descended from under the freighter with a hiss, and a figure emerged.

Mara looked away from him, to see who was coming towards them, and she furrowed her brow.
Armeth walked towards them; she had been expecting Aves.

Armeth was not a stranger to her, but she didn’t have quite the relationship that she had with Aves and others in Karrde’s camp. Her reputation often put an immediate wedge between new crew – a wedge that she was happy with.

Armeth looked around the pad eagerly, and then up at the pyramid temple, in awe.

“Wow!” he said as he approached Mara and Luke. “Dankin said this place was amazing—he wasn’t wrong.” He looked back at the other two. “Hi Mara!”

She smiled coolly, and Luke looked over at her, seeing the business persona take over, that she reserved for work.

“Armeth.” She greeted him. “I suppose your run to Vaal was successful?”

“Huh?” he asked, his attention still looking at the structure behind them. “Yes, we made the drop without any issue.” He was actually looking at her now. “You feeling better? I heard you needed a tune up?” He asked smirking.

She raised an eyebrow, knowing that he was referring to an inside joke at the base, at her expense. “I’m not a droid.” She said with an icy tone. “And yes, I am. Thank you for asking.”

Luke snorted once beside her, then looked down, having heard the comments once or twice about Mara and the thoughts that she had been ‘assembled incorrectly’ at one time, or having a malfunction in her personality imprint chip.

“Good to see you again, Armeth.” Luke greeted the other man.

“Skywalker!- good to see you. Dankin said you were here too.” The smuggler seemed to be an agreeable person.

“Well, I hate to break up this reunion…” Mara said curtly. “...but the power units are over there.” She pointed to the opposite of the pad. “and the manual hook up has a universal gage, so it should be easy to manage.” She raised an eyebrow, indicating that time was time to work, and intended for Armeth to refuel the Etherway.

She started to walk towards the freighter with her case in tow, hoping to get it stored. “I’ll be right back, and then we can go for midday meal before we depart.”

Luke went to go help Armeth refuel; he just couldn’t bring himself to be close to her right then, and knew better than to force it. But he watched her walk up the ramp into the waiting freighter.

She quickly found the unused cabin, and stored her things; there would be time later to unpack.

Mara walked back through the small freighter to the galley, and looked around, accepting that this would be her home for the next couple of days until they returned to Dantooine- only to uproot her home there too.

She walked into the cockpit to do a preliminary check of the system.

She found that the nav computer already contained the coordinates, and felt pleased that she scared enough of the crews to follow the basics of orders to always keep their next destination programed.

As she looked out the view port, she could see both Armeth and Luke looking back at the temple
and animatedly talking, gesturing at times to the building.

She narrowed she sights on Luke. He was being pleasant but quieter than normal; both of them were doing so. Watching him, she let her shields start to drop at this safe distance.

A bolt of pain hit her chest watching him; the heartache coming on her. She watched as he suddenly clutched his chest too, and then looked back at the freighter.

Immediately, Mara brought up all her shielding again; protecting him and her.

She took several cleansing breaths and prepared to go meet up with them outside the freighter. She checked her chrono, knowing it was close to midday meal.

She wanted to stay inside the freighter, to hide from the others, to hide from him, but she knew it wasn’t an option.

Mara made her way to the ramp and walked down, ducking at the bulkhead as she reached the bottom.

She walked over to the two men and caught the tail-end of their conversation. Luke was telling Armeth of how much hadn’t changed since he was here with the Rebellion, but at least the food was better.

It was an easy segway when she suggested that they made their way to the mess hall.

Luke glanced over at her, and flashed his own pain as he walked close to her; trying to send her reassuring waves.

In the mess hall, they gotten ahead of the students, so acquiring their meal was easy, and they made small talk about establishing the comm center.

As the hall got busier, and the table was joined by the doctors and several students; Dr. Massian noticeably absent as his legs was causing him some pain, probably due to the weather.

The conversation swayed into Armeth discussing his own education on Sellonia’s Science Institute, and how the campus on Yavin was bringing back memories.

Mara listened, but not truly listening, and pushed her food from one side of the plate to the other. She would randomly look up to see that Luke was doing the same as he shot casual glances her way.

The meal broke up with little fan-fair, and the students and doctors prepared to go back to classes and studies.

Deek, Almae and Dr. Dram made a point to wish her the best, and hopes to see her again soon.

Mara thanked them for their hospitality and expressed her wish to be back soon as well; she watched Luke lower his head at the comment.

Soon they left the mess hall to head for the landing platform. Luke followed behind as Mara asked Armeth random questions about shipments and delivery statuses – just to have something to say and not linger in silence.

Luke could hear the tension in her voice; she was fighting a losing battle. He caught a few words of hers, saying that she needed some help to check something in hull before they took off, as Armeth was supposed to be starting up the prep sequence.
He was surprised when she asked him to join her; knowing that she wasn’t actually asking for help, but just wanted a moment alone together.

Armeth was the first up the ramp and headed for the cockpit.

In silence, Luke followed Mara into the hull.

As the door closed, he felt her shields dropped, the heartache rushing in as she turned to him. In dire desperation, she step closer to him, and pressed her mouth on him.

Luke had never felt such a wave from her before, and responded by holding her close to him; kissing her fervently, begging and pleading for this moment not to end.

They had been too polite to each other and it had back fired on them; letting the other have their space. ‘Space’ was not what they needed to do when this was going to occur again.

Luke could feel her tears on his cheeks, and still surprised that she was responding this way.

<<How do you do it?>> She asked into his mind, trembling in her senses and in his arms. <<How? >>

<Do what?> he asked, lost in the feel of her in his senses, and pursing against her mouth, enraptured, refusing to relent, letting his hands roam.

<<How do you feel all the time? I can’t do it…I hate doing it.>> Mara hated admitting her faults, she hated admitting them even more when she knew it was of her own doing.

His lips were firm, and tender, gently exploring her mouth, never ceasing his desire for her.

<It’s not the benefit that it sounds like it should be…> He answered her question as best as he could at a time like this. <Sometimes, I wish I didn’t.>

Her hands clung to his shoulders, pressing herself up against him as much as she could; she could feel a shudder in him too.

Mara could feel his hand stroking the back of her head, over her braid, petting and soothing her.

She pressed her mouth against him again, and started to pull away, just to look at him.

Luke smiled meekly, and raised his hand to stroke away the tears on her cheeks. “I love you.” He whispered.

She just nodded, trying to find words.

He wrapped his arms around her pulling her against his chest. “You ask me to make promises to you…” He said into her hair. “Will you promise me something?”

Mara sniffled slightly, feeling somewhat like a child in the moment, and then nodded again.

“Will you think about what I asked you?- about coming to live with me?...when you visit…when you can.” He nuzzled his cheek against her. “You don’t have to answer now…just, please think about it?”

He squeezed her a bit. <When you’re ready.> The touch of his mind was sincere and earnest, just like him.
She choked minutely, feeling how much he truly wanted to make her a part of his life. She moved to look at him, met his azure eyes, and smiled lowly, agreeing to consider it.

“How about one more lesson, Jedi?” Her voice cracked as she spoke, but raised an eyebrow, showing that she knew it was just a difficult moment, but she was still the same when her heart wasn’t breaking.

He smiled. “Of course.” He whispered, putting his forehead against hers. “What would you like to learn?”

She hesitated, unsure of how to ask. “Will you stay in contact with me?...as we depart...” Her voice died away, knowing the he understood what she was asking of him.

She felt his reply as she experienced his sense even more strongly than she did before; strong, reverberating, and steady.

“Like this?” He asked, his voice in low tones.

She nodded in agreement, sending out her essence to him as well, as she leaned in for another kiss.

Luke hummed, enjoying her touch. One last kiss. He told himself.

For now. She added to his mind.

Behind them, the hull door slid open, and they stopped as they both sensed the surprise by Armeth. He flustered as he apologized at seeing Karrde’s Lieutenant and the Jedi kissing, and mumbled something about being behind schedule and then quickly removed himself.

“You have to go.” He said after resting his forehead; telling himself as much as he was reiterating it to her.

<I know.>> She sent over, pulling back, but holding his hand as she reached for the door release, and leading him out of the hull to the ramp.

One more look, one more touch; Luke swallowed his feelings that were rising up in his throat just looking at her.

<<I love you, you know.>> She sent over, just feeling his sense.

<I know.> He smiled, remembering why he loved her so much.

The sound of the ignition firing broke the spell, and he knew it was time. Luke backed away from her, and turned one more time before he went down the ramp.

Mara watched him go, pressed the release to close the hatch and then walked hastily to the cockpit so that she could see him out the view port.

Through the shield she could watch him walk off to the edge of the pad and into the hangar, knowing that he was retreating to some place quiet to stretch out his feelings to her.

As she sat down into the co-pilot’s seat, she could still feel him, knowing that he could still feel her too.

Armeth was talking through the departure procedure, but she didn’t hear his words. Instead she excused herself while they lifted off, and moved herself the galley to concentrate on sensing Luke.
She reached out deliberately. <<Say something…>> she pleaded, wanting to hear his voice. <<Anything…tell me the story of ‘threading the needle’?>> She asked.

The *Etherway* lifted off smoothly.

<Do you really want to hear that?> He asked, finding it amusing that she asked.

<<Yes. You’ve never told it to me…keeping talking so I can sense you.>> Mara clenched her eyes shut, sitting down in the galley, concentrating on him.

<<Okay…>> he thought over to her. <<Well, Windy, Biggs, and Fixer were sitting around, one day, at Tocsche Station, talking about some off-worlder who claimed that he could maneuver into his hopper into Beggar’s Canyon…the one I showed to you…and then Cammie came up to us, and she said that there was no way that any one of us could ever do the same thing.>> He was rambling, but it sounded like he was content to do so.

<<Biggs?—your friend in the Rebellion?>> she asked, showing him that she was paying attention.

She could hearing the sub-light engine engage, and braced herself, knowing that their connection could cut out in any moment.

<That’s right.> he smiled across the distance. <He was one of the best pilots that I knew…and a good friend….anyways, he was the one who started putting bets on each of us…you know, rating who was the one who could do it. Fixer voices up and says that the Canyon wasn’t a challenge but the Needle was. I don’t remember, but I think I was the one who said that I could do it.>

<<I think you know who was the one who started it…it was you, wasn’t it?>> Mara knew there was the possibility that he didn’t hear her, but she could still feel him.

<<Yeah, I guess I was.>> he chagrinned. <<So when I got out there, I was the first one to go…and the T16 wasn’t as fast as my X-wing. I made it most of the way…and I barely nicked the wing, but the yaw always had a tilt in it.>>

His voice started to sound distant in her mind. She reached out, trying harder than she had before, keeping her contact. He must have felt it too, because she could feel him barely holding on with his contact.

Knowing that he was drifting away, she felt him reaching as far as he could.

<I love you.> He said into the distance.

<<I love you too.>> Her mind desperately yelled back to him.

<May the force be with you, my love> It was barely audible in her mind, and his contact faded away.

Mara sat in galley, opening her eyes, staring at nothing and realized that she was breathing hard; holding onto the last words she heard from him.

When she collected herself, she walked back into the cockpit. Armeth greeted her again, but she didn’t hear him.
As she looked at the proximity meter, she was shocked, and sat back down into the co-pilots seat, aghast.

Never…never in six years since Endor, had she been able to maintain contact, estimating that it was the farthest distance she has ever been to touching other mind since the Emperor.

TBC
Chapter Summary

Quote: He was about suggest that a person, who spends their life committed to the representation of her people and the galaxy, puts her very life on the line and make sacrifices over her personal well-being in order to see to the welfare of those who both agreed and disagreed with her, was more than justified to use whatever title she wanted.

Characters: Luke, Han, Leia, Crix Madine, Doctors, Students, Mara (mentioned)

Chapter Notes

**
Sorry folks…pure plot on this one…and maybe some whining…

Please leave comments...I'm feeling lonely ( see?-- whining, right there.)

**

Yavin IV

He opened his eyes slowly, still grasping for any sense of her that he could.

He closed his eyes again, *and stretched*, really stretched out his feelings, trying to find her again, but…*nothing*.

Luke let out the breath he was holding, as he could feel the residue of her presence around him.

He had made it to the side hangar while they were lifting off, where they had practiced only the day before, and had maintained contact with Mara for as long as he could.

Her presence moved farther, and farther away as the *Etherway* faded into hyperspace, Luke had struggled to keep her near.

Now, it felt like there was a void in the room; empty space that surrounded him, just the echo of her.

For him, Mara could light up a room.

He had to admit that these departures were getting harder to get through; agonizing and real.

They were going to have to find a better way to get through them too.

They had both failed miserably when it came time for Mara to leave. She spent the day trying to avoid him, and he had spent the day feeling frustrated and annoyed with her.

Luke shook his head; just when he thought he was about there, or getting close, he had failed when it came to understanding her.
Admittedly, they had come together, before she left, but it had been a hard day up until then.

Mara didn’t make it easy on him; he snorted, he knew there were times that he certainly didn’t make it easy on her either.

He looked around the hangar, and could feel the loneliness setting in; she would not like it if he was to start to wallow on her behalf. But he was not ready to move yet.

He sat for several more moments; her aura still clung to him, and he enjoyed it. He figured he would have to ask how far they had made it before the connection had cut off; he was curious.

He wished that, someday, he’d be able to keep contact with her the same way that Palpatine had been able to do, only not twist it; he wanted her to feel his loving presence around her, and he wanted to be able to feel her too at any given moment.

*Maybe it will just take practice?* He thought passively.

Luke scratched his head and looked around the hangar. Unlike Mara, who planned every moment of her day, he really had no idea as to what he was going to do for the rest of the day.

She would have planned things, to keep her mind busy, to avoid her feelings. Perhaps it was good way to go, but Luke knew he didn’t have it in him.

He knew what he had to do; there was no avoiding it anymore. And with the comm center assembled, and relatively quiet, with students in classes for the afternoon; he had no excuses left.

Still, he could put it off a little while longer; and a thought crossed his mind.

It was on his way back to his room, and no reason not to stop there.

If he was going to make Mara a priority in his life, he had better start working towards that. And that meant, making living arrangements.

Even if she didn’t move in with him right away, he should try to make a place where she would want to stay.

Luke pushed himself away from the ledge of a moss-covered diagnostic unit, and began to walk in the general direction of the corridor that led up to the private units.

It wasn’t a far climb, and the floor was about on the same level and elevation as the room he was staying in now.

It was simple to find the suite; he didn’t need to mark it, it just called out to him.

The door slid open easily, and the room before him welcomed him inside.

It still had the allure that it had when Luke had shown it to her.

Although the walls might be covered with moss, the space called to him and promised him with a future.

Even Mara seemed to enjoy being there when he had shown it to her.

Luke begged for her to like it, to want to come back, to see it as the opportunity that they needed…to make it a home, with him.
When he had first asked her, he felt her freeze up at the thought. As her mind relaxed into the idea, he could feel her enjoy and envision living there.

She did mention that it would probably be the natural progression of their relationship; eventually living together.

The front door opened directly into the residence; into the main room.

He walked deeper into the residence and looked around, closer now.

From the look of other areas of the temple, The Rebellion had done little to disturb the original design and building of the temple. They had simply put up walls, plumbing and electrical where they had needed it.

Even the power and plumbing didn’t disrupt the harmony; Luke knew from his experience setting up the Hoth base, the only thing that the Rebels had added was the power generator, and that had relied heavily on solar power, but the remainder rested heavily on the natural environment.

On Yavin, they had done the same. Both temples had a power generator that worked on regenerative solar power; aside from providing power, it also ran the pumps which controlled water flow and recycling.

Luke knew why the hot water in the morning was such a luxury and on short supply; the reserves were heated by solar thermos design.

He wondered briefly if even the private residences were tapped into the same line as the smaller living quarters. He figured he would find out if he dared to take a shower in the middle of the day.

In the main room, the former residents had left a small sofa, covered in filmy. He opened it up to check its condition; sadly, it didn’t fare as well as the recliners on the upper floor. The material was slightly damp and a musty smell came from inside the bag.

The other pieces left around the room showed signs of being absorbed into the walls by the moss blanket that started to cover them.

Luke walked over to the kitchenette. The counter tops were in good condition, just in need of a cleaning.

There was obviously a nook for where a cooling unit was supposed to go.

With one cooking element, and a small oven would be sufficient for when he didn’t want to eat in the mess hall.

Yes, the kitchenette would need a little work; the prevailing moss had won over just about every surface.

Luke opened the nearest cupboard to him; a small lizard dropped down and scurried across the counter, down the side of the lower cupboard, across the floor and disappeared out through the alcove.

*Mara is not going to like that.* He thought to himself.

He started to make a mental list of things that would be needed to make this a home. Aside from needing moss remover, and the missing the cooler unit – there were no dishes, no cutlery, and no glasses, mugs.
He turned on the tap at the small sink, hoping that the plumbing still worked in this remote section of the temple. Thick, brown and rusted liquid poured out, but then the spout sputtered and the liquid started to clear, giving him some hope.

He walked away, with the spout still pouring, in hopes that it would only get better.

One of the selling features he had shown Mara was the view in the main living area.

Luke walked over to the alcove and looked out over the lush green of the tree tops into the horizon.

It wasn’t a balcony, it wasn’t platform, but a small ledge extended past the opening.

The first thought that occurred to Luke was that they would have to do something about that; it would be a tragedy if a child fell out there.

A Child? He stopped; eyes going wide that, that, was his first thought. Not the safety of anyone else, but to a child—**his child**?—his child with Mara?

He shook his head...no, he must be thinking of his niece and nephew.

He walked away from the opening now, wanting to dismiss the thought. He walked back to the kitchenette and turned off the running tap, figuring it was running for long enough.

He looked back at the alcove, and then around the open room.

An image suddenly flashed in his mind; Mara with a swollen belly, eating drizzle berries from a bowl standing over the counter where he was now. She looked stunning and glowing.

The image faded, and he stepped back from the counter; taking a clearing breath as he did so.

He might not have full visions like he heard that other Jedi had, but when images flashed in his mind, they were strong and they felt very, very real.

*A pregnant Mara*—he smiled.

*Gods*, it was something that he wanted, so very badly. The thought made him smile.

A stab of pain hit him in the heart, and he had to make himself push himself through it. *She’ll be back*. He told himself.

He had to get himself away from the present space, otherwise he was likely to go into wallowing, so he walked over to the nearest room.

The master bedroom, other than infected with moss, was sufficient. Approximately the same size as his bedroom on Coruscant, the only things that might need improvement here were the addition of more storage, and possibly some type of flooring. The idea of his feet meeting with the cold, slippery stone in the mornings, was not ideal.

Luke scratched his head; the small window in the room would need some sort of covering, to protect from the elements and, of course, whatever might crawl through it.

He left the room and inspected the other rooms.

The ‘fresher unit was in reasonably good condition. Moss had only crept in on the stone surfaces. Luckily, the counter, sink, Evac and shower surround were all white plasti-steel; a little bit of cleaning and it would be ready to go.
Luke turned on the tap in the small room too, and was met with the same response at the kitchenette tap. However, the Evac refreshed easily and with no issue.

He cringed and debated if it was worth it to turn on the shower faucet, knowing that more brown goo was likely to come out of there too. There would be time later to investigate that.

The other two rooms were less and less effected by the moss growth and would be fairly easy to clean up.

He was now back at the door, and turned to look at the room one time before leaving. He sighed, knowing that he could see himself learning and living here in peace, if the galaxy would allow it.

He left residence and started to plan his attack on how to get it in working order on his ways back to his current room.

The best solution would be make a list of the things he would need and wait for the next supply delivery to the Moon.

The hallways were quiet; afternoon sessions had started and most of the students were either listening to lectures or out in the field due to the good weather.

Luke approached his smaller room, R2 chirped pleasantly as he walked by.

Once inside he looked around at the small space, wondering how the two of them had managed to not suffocate in the cramped space compared to the other residence that could be their future home.

On the bed was a crumpled blanket from the night before. He picked it up, and her wrap sweater fell from it hiding place.

He brought the soft grey fabric to his face, and inhaled deeply; the smell of her freshly cleaned hair filled his nostrils. She would make fun of him if she saw him now.

One of these days he was going to have to find out her coping methods when he wasn’t around- he was sure that she had them, but as yet, had refuse to divulge them.

He folded the soft garment and placed it on one side of the bed; it wasn’t her pillow, but it would do.

Regretfully, Luke turned his head to see his comm unit resting on the small desk.

He had seen it there this morning, reminded him that he had a life that he needed to return to.

There was no more putting it off; his body was almost fully healed, and Mara was not here- he regretted using her as an excuse but it was valid one. As soon as the galaxy found him, his life would not be his own again.

He picked up the little comm unit and charge cord, and knew where he was headed for the next while.

He knew he had to boost the signal, so the only option was to use the newly put together comm center.

Strangely, he supposed it would be flooded later on in the day, as soon as the other students caught word that they now could contact the outside world.

As he exited the room, he stopped to pat R2 on the dome. “How about we go see how Threepio is doing with Han and Leia?” He asked the droid.
The little droid’s dome rotated, and his receptor arm disengaged, and started to follow his master.

Luke passed several classrooms as lectures and study sessions continued. Briefly, he wondered if the doctors would mind if he were to sit in on some classes.

He didn’t have much of an education, and it would be nice to expand on some knowledge. Also, it would give him an opportunity to learn some teaching techniques.

The central comm area was already inhabited by two students he recognized from the previous days but couldn’t place their names. So many students had approached him and asked him questions or asked to have their holo taken with him.

Luke didn’t mind. Eventually, they would figure out that he was a regular guy, and the interest would die down as he blended into their crowd.

He excused himself and went inside the smaller comm room, and took up the docking station at the far end, away from prying eyes.

He didn’t like using the public space, but his comm unit had such a low frequency and the stone walls were blocking transmissions that he had no other choice.

However, he did talk Ghent into putting a scrambler on his unit. It may not have the protocol Mara’s personal unit had, but it would take anyone a long time to find him or locate his originating signal.

The first thing he did was to reply to Crix Madine’s meeting request; knowing that it would take some time for the General to return his call.

The second call he tried to make, was, of course, the most important.

Luke keyed in the contact coordinates, and waited.

He knew he would probably have to try several times to get through, and to be quite honest, he had no idea what time zone his family was in. He hoped that he wasn’t contacting them in the middle of the night.

On the second try, he got through.

The image froze and crackled before becoming stable, and a familiar face appeared on the other end.

“Kid!” The former smuggler looked surprised. “We were wondering what happened to you!”

Luke cringed; he knew he should have contacted them sooner.

“I was a bit busy.” He said sheepishly. “Mara just left this morning.” He answered the unasked question.

Han just nodded and didn’t make an issue of it. “Everything going good between you two? You healed up yet?” He smiled his pirate smile.

Luke caught his meaning. “Yes, we’re both fine…I’ve still got some resting to do, but nothing too severe.” He looked away then back at the image. “Mara is feeling better too.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve been waiting to hear from you. Good thing you called too, I was about to head for bed.” Han look earnestly back at him.

Luke sighed at the sight of his brother in-law; it was relieving to see a truly friendly face.
The smuggler didn’t even wait for Luke to ask, he proudly began to boast. “The twins are walking now…both of them. Although Jaina wants to start running. She’s even trying to talk.” The older man chuckled. “But the only word she can get out is ‘gack!’ …everything is ‘gack!’… Everything for Jacen is ‘beck!’.”

Luke chuckled, imagining the twins causing havoc.

He continued as the Jedi listened. “Chewie is back from Kashykk, and the rebuilding there is going well. They did have an attack in a nearby system, so he’s worried that there will be an attack soon on Kashykk. But the Wookies are better prepared now. They have their defensive shield in place.”

Luke nodded, knowing that Han was making small talk, avoiding the bigger topics, or just leading into them.

“Lando is thinking of entering the smuggling… sorry, ‘trading’ business again, and keeps trying to find a way to ask me to join him.” Han raised his eyebrows.

“You want to join him—don’t you?” Luke asked, already knowing the answer.

Han had been itching get out from under the thumb of politics and duty, just as much as he had. Han opened his mouth to reject the notion, but Luke knew him too well.

“Can you blame a guy for thinking about it?” Han gave him a lopsided grin.

“Well, if you really want to sell it to Leia…” Luke couldn’t believe this was even leaving his mouth, and it came out of nowhere. “I have an idea…”

“Oh yeah, Kid – what have you got?” The former general was intrigued.

“It’s not risky, and just needs a bit of start-up capital…” The Jedi suddenly turned business man; Mara would be so proud. “How about running supplies into Yavin? There’s a whole bunch of students here who would probably like a taste of home every so often…and there will be more students arriving shortly. Of course, no contraband… and it would be simple things like food, clothing and sometimes specialty items.”

“That’s eighty potential clients right now that have their parent’s credits to spend.” Luke winked over the comm to his brother-in-law.

Han’s eyes lit up, and then narrowed, as if thinking it over. The Kid was right; it would be an easy run and lots of opportunity for profit.

Not wanting to show that this idea intrigued him, the older man, played down his interest and nodded slowly.

Luke snorted; he suddenly realized that Mara was better at hiding her feelings than Han was which probably made for a better smuggler.

“How are you doing?” Luke asked, sensing that there was something that wasn’t being said.

Han’s face lost its front, and the act was over now that the pleasantries were dispersed with.

“Well, you know how it is…I’m fine.” He said quietly, and looked down. “Leia, not so much.” He mumbled.

Luke started to feel the hair on the back of his neck stand up. “What’s wrong?” He asked slowly.
Han started to rub his temples, and mumbled. “What isn’t?"

Han looked back up at the screen before he started to explain. “The whole thing has been a mess since the Vader news hit.” He shook his head. “Aside from dodging accusations about you, and then some leveled at her; she now has to build another Rebellion from the ground up.”

The smuggler sighed. “Everyone who was once on the team, has joined up with the New Republic or has gone back civilian life. And the New Republic isn’t letting any of them out to play – you know what bureaucracy looks and sounds like.”

Han looked less than impressed. “They’d rather sit in a meeting a debate it, than to actually do something about it. Some of the systems are starting to leave, and fending for themselves due to lack of support.”

A cold look came into his eyes. “Fey’la is still holding on though. He wants to rule a Republic when there won’t be one left. Mon Mothma spends her days arguing with him. The whole thing is at a stalemate.”

Han looked directly at Luke. “He’s the one who first accused you of being the new Emperor.” He tilted his head. “I must say, it didn’t have the effect that he thought it would. It back-fired on him—people just aren’t willing to change their opinion of you – Leia, however, he painted her as quite the villain…saying that she was in league with her real father all long to cut her losses to rule the galaxy based on whichever side won.”

Luke shook his head, not believing what he was hearing, and feeling slightly guilty that he wasn’t there to support his sister.

Han continued. “Of course this doesn’t help her condition at all.” His voice sounded sad and worried.

Luke leaned into the screen, his mouth open ready to jump.

“Don’t worry Kid—she’s alright. It’s just…” The sadness and exhaustion was starting to show on Han’s face. “…well, she started bleeding a few days ago.”

Han hung his head. “Ackbar was able to get a Mon-Cal healer in here, and she’s doing much better and so is the baby. I’m making sure she isn’t over-working herself. This isn’t like the twins when she had a staff to look after everything.”

Luke covered his hand with his mouth as he tried to absorb all that his brother-in-law was telling him; watching the other man’s shoulder’s slump, clearly thinking of the possibilities of what could have happened without a healer.

“As long as she’s taking care of herself now?” Luke asked, truly concerned and really worried for his sister.

“She is.” Han grinned tightly. “I’m making sure of it.”

Luke nodded, and then a thought occurred to him. “Admiral Ackbar is there?” he asked.

Han chagrinned. “No, but a lot of the old players are doing double-duty…Ackbar, Reikan, Dodonna…Madine. They can’t openly join up, but they’ve been sending their support, in whatever way they can.”

Luke sighed, and then remembered he had responded to a meeting request earlier, and looked up at
the former general.

“So, Madine asked me for a meeting…idea what that might be about?” Luke asked; not really sure if Han would know, but maybe he would pass it on to Leia.

Han frowned. “No idea…but I know he’s been calling in ranks lately…in just about every branch. If I were a betting man…” He winked at the Jedi. “…my guess is he’s about to ask you to volunteer to rejoin the Rogues…well, not ask, probably more like ‘volun-told’ to join the Rogues again.”

Luke nodded; those were his suspicions as well. He was going to have to weigh what the pros and cons were to joining again. If his life wasn’t his own now, it would be less so if he was to join up with the Squadron and be back in full service.

“Hey Kid…” Han’s cheek twitched before he spoke. “You know Madine has no love for Vader, right?”

Luke nodded and knew what Han was inferring.

It was well known that Madine had met up the Dark Lord before he defected to the Rebel Alliance; having a lightsaber put under your nose will make your mind up fairly quickly.

Fleeting, Luke wondered if Madine was going to use his animosity towards Vader against him. It wasn’t like Madine to do something like that; although he might have it in the back of his mind. Madine was a tactician and he was a great one to make pieces fall into place. It wouldn’t be like him to be influenced by his personal feelings.

The tone on Luke’s comm unit sounded; he had put one in to remind that his calls were timed in order remain untraceable.

Han must have heard it too. “Time’s up, huh, Kid?”

“Yeah…it’s the signal tracking timer.” Luke said quietly. “When’s another good time to call? - I want to talk to Leia…”

“Sure…sure…” Han leaned away from the camera to look at something off screen. “Ah…she has meetings in the morning, but looks like she’ll be available in…” He started to use his fingers to count the hours. “In sixteen standard…you gonna be awake?”


He gave a lonely smiled across the galaxy to his brother-in law. “Tell her that I love her, and hope to see all of you soon.” He tried for a real smiled, but it just wasn’t happening.

Han nodded on the other end, and tried for a fake smile of his own. “I’ll tell her.”

Luke nodded back, and reached over to cut the call, and said one more thing before he closed it. “Han- May the Force be with you.”

The smuggler snorted, and nodded back.

Luke closed down the call, and leaned back in his chair.

He knew he should have called earlier. If Leia and the baby were any real risk, Han would have told him. His family was his greater concern.

Politics came in second.
Again it was happening, the galaxy was breaking apart. There were days when going back to a moisture farm sounded like a very good idea.

He didn’t have much time to think it out further; a message came back with a response from Madine’s office, scheduling a meeting for fourteen hours from now.

Perfect, he could have his call with the General and follow it up with his sister, knowing that although he didn’t want to bother her, she would probably more than happy to weigh in with her thoughts on what Madine was going to ask of him.

Luke closed his comm unit and went back to leaning in the chair, swivelling, rocking back and forth, as he thought of the implications.

He sighed when he came to the conclusion that he couldn’t solve anything right now. He was too far away to be of assistance to his sister, and he was unsure if he truly wanted back into the fight with Rogues.

Behind him, he became aware that there was a changing of students watching over the comm center, and the new group was becoming interested in him. It was time to go.

On the way back to his room, he started thinking about what he did have control of- it would be what Mara would do.

He had his surroundings.

Since he had arrived, the jungle was calling to him to take run in it. He knew Mara would never allow it, and maybe his ribs would disagree too, but a light jog might help clear his mind.

R2 followed behind him as he went back to his room to change into something more appropriate for a run.

The droid twittered a few times at him. Luke supposed he was asking about Threepio.

“Sorry buddy, I didn’t see Threepio there…just Han.” He looked back over his shoulder. “Maybe tonight we can talk to him after I talk to Leia.”

Luke seemed to hit the corridor at the right time; lecture sessions were breaking up, and new ones were reforming, so the hallway grew in population. But Luke headed against the traffic.

Something caught his attention and he could hear his name being called, and he stopped and turned to look among the crowd.

Peffar Jimmack was waving her arms in the air, hoping to catch his attention, and he nodded to show that he saw her, and waited for the hallway to clear.

“Jedi Skywalker!” Peffar sounded exasperated, fighting against the crowd. “I’m so glad to see you! Dr. Dram asked if you would be so kind to come by Dr. Massian’s office after evening meal. We’ve come across some writings that might be of interest to you.”

She smiled sweetly with bright eyes, waiting, and expecting…and hoping.

Luke returned the smiled with a polite one of his own. “Please let Dr. Dram know that I’d be glad to.” He nodded.

Peffar’s smile held for a moment longer than Luke preferred and he started to feel a bit
uncomfortable.

“If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to go get some exercise in and meditate.” He cleared his throat and began to turn away. “Thank you for the invitation and I’ll see you later.” And he turned back to head towards his room.

R2 waited until they were farther down the hallway, and he rasped a reply.


When they reached the nook across from the room, Luke turned to the droid.

“Hey buddy, I have a job for you…” he patted the little droid’s dome. “I need you to pull up and run the diagnostics on the electrical and plumbing for the building, and create a map for me…do you think you can do that while I go out for a short run?”

R2 twittered and chirped an affirmative.


R2 plugged back into the receptacle and went to work right away.

Luke went into the room and changed into more appropriate clothing.

**

The promise he made to himself about not running didn’t last very long. He had reached out to the Force before he even arrived at the edge of the jungle and it was calling him to stretch his limits.

Luke had made it up to the first marker made by the students, at a slow pace, but that didn’t last for very long.

When he was past any inhabited areas, he increased his speed, and after his first kilometer he was incorporating jumps and flips as he dodged the natural obstacles that lay before him.

Although Yavin lacked the dimness of Dagobah, it was still damp and humid which Luke didn’t seem to mind.

As he ran, his mind cleared.

It was as if he was still sporting a back-pack with the green Master inside and he could hear the words in his mind.

Yes…run…yes…A Jedi’s strength flows from the Force…but beware of the Dark Side…anger, fear, aggression…the Dark Side of the Force are they…

Luke jumped another log.

You will know…when you are calm…at peace…A Jedi uses the Force for knowledge and defense…never for attack…

He flipped easily over several downed trees.

He knew better and started to let reason win; up ahead, he knew the crystal lake was before him.

He eased down his speed, as his lungs were reminding him now was a good time to do so.
His mind went back to the memory that followed that run with Master Yoda. *The Dark Tree.*

Luke slowed down to a light jog as he approached the clearing.

He shook his head with the memory. Looking back, he knew he had failed the test that Master Yoda had given him, the moment he didn’t listen to Yoda’s advice, and took his weapons with him inside that cave.

Expecting to act with aggression was an open door for the Dark Side.

He sighed; one day he was going to have to give a test like that to one of students.

The lake came into view, and Luke pushed aside some branches to stand beside it and collect his thoughts.

He had learned so much since his time of Dagobah, but he still needed to learn more.

He inhaled deeply as he took in the view and the sounds; the small waterfall rushed and birds called in the distance. It wasn’t a bright and sunny day, but sunshine filtered through every so often, and it was warmer than it had been since he had arrived.

It was still relaxing to be there, and peaceful. His mind felt centered. He closed his eyes, feeling the flow of the Force.

Images flashed before him; *Han, Jacen, Jaina, Leia holding a baby, Mara, Wedge, the Rogues, words, more words, ‘welcome back’, ‘welcome back’...the rush of star lines, space, TIE Fighters exploding, Star Destroyers ...*

Then something came unbidden to him…

...*a vacuum, destroying as it went...any resistance, and a world was annihilated...death...cold...the laughing...the maniacal laughing of...Palpatine...*

Luke pulled himself from the images.

In that instant- a cold shot hit him deep in his chest; feeling the loss of so many lives all once. Lives that called out, without warning.

*Fear...pain...death....then...nothing.*

Luke didn’t realize he had been so affected, holding his lungs and breathing hard.

This wasn’t a vision. This wasn’t a random feeling. Somewhere, something in the galaxy had happened.

He stretched out with his feelings, trying to find it, but it was clouded from him.

He breathed hard, lungs heaved, senses rattled, catching his breath, recovering his senses.

As he recovered, it became clear of what kind of threats were out there; they were real and relentless.

Suddenly, he knew he had no choice but to return to service. They needed him. Not just a galaxy at large, but *his friends* needed him.

He accepted that their fate would be his own. If not, how could he face himself again if he let them give themselves when he didn’t; it wasn’t a choice anymore.
He walked away from the pure lake and followed the path that would lead him back to the temple.

*And Mara... how am I going to explain this to Mara?* He asked himself.

He knew she got her hackles up whenever the question of his servitude came up. She felt that he over-extended himself.

Perhaps this time she would feel different if he explained it to her.

He knew she feared for his safety and that’s why she didn’t enjoy hearing about his work and missions. She also thought that the New Republic used him for the wrong reasons; and here, he had to agree with her.

*Send a Jedi to do a courier's work.* She huffed once.

He shook his head; she could get so irate sometimes about the littlest thing; the wrong word, the wrong phrasing, the wrong look...and she was off like a canon.

Still, she wouldn’t hold that anger for long. As soon as she erupted, the bad feelings left her too.

Luke thought about it; *Maybe that’s why the Dark Side doesn’t cling to her? - She lets her anger and negative feelings out regularly and she doesn’t hold on to them.*

Even when she hated him, she was able to see past her feelings and accomplish things with him. The hatred lingered but it never was her motivation- and that’s why she never slipped to the Dark Side.

He hated to admit it, but it worked for her. She was so complex; he was never going to understand all of her.

He stopped along the path, realizing that he was now at *their tree*. He hadn’t intended to go there, but here he was; the tree where she told him that she loved him.

Luke walked over to the twist trunk and touched the side of it.

He remembered reading that on other worlds, lovers carve their initials into trees, but he shook off the idea as he knew it might injure the tree.

He closed his eyes and remembered what she looked like as she told him; so nervous, so unsure, but so determined. Her eyes greens waivered, then gathered strength and stood firm.

He had never seen her so vulnerable...so *beautiful* before.

He opened his eyes, feeling her warmth again. It still amazed him that she said those words first; it was the last thing he expected from her. He assumed that it would take at least another year before she’d be comfortable with him.

*Gods,* she could bring him to his knees so easily; if she only knew.

He turned and leaned back on the tree, also remembering the vision she had shown him before the Bremem hearing; making love up against this very tree.

In the vision, their love and passion for each other hadn’t dwindled, but had become something more than just wanting each other, going past a pure physical need for each other.

In the moment when she showed it to him, it was less than romantic, but as soon as he saw it, he knew that he had found a way into her heart, and it would just be a matter of time that vision would
come true.

Yes, Mara would be coming back. There was no reason to doubt it.

It gave him something to look forward to.

In the distance, Luke could hear the transports returning from their journey out to a dig site, breaking his thoughts and solitude.

Their return now only could mean one thing- it was close to evening meal, and he had better make it back before the students coming in from the field would take up all the hot water again.

**

The evening meal was interesting to say the least.

On his way into the hall, Luke was approached by a couple of students who had worked up enough courage to talk to him.

They followed behind him in line for the food service, and Luke could feel the awkwardness of their energy.

As it turned out, they were from Tatooine, and after they got over their initial state of awe, they loosened up and invited him to eat with them.

Both of the students hailed from Mos Espa, and had attended their training there.

Toak Dustkicker was studying atmospheric pressure alongside Nadal Toban. He found it amazing that a planet could have some many seasons and regions with varying temperature and climates.

Luke listened as Toak describe how he was going to use what he studied here; a singular-typed terraformed planet, studying the weather patterns and apply his knowledge once he returned. The goal was to be able to predict sand storms and their patterns with more accuracy than Tatooine currently had.

Veen Lonerock was studying cultural dynamics while working on his thesis about the family units of the Tusken Raiders. He was on Yavin studying the effect that colonization had on Massassi people, and so many unanswered questions about them. He was going to apply his knowledge to further cultural study and preservation of the Tusken way of life.

Being on Yavin excited Toak, but Veen wasn’t impressed with the difference in weather he had experienced so far.

It was during the meal that Luke noticed that both men wearing several layers of clothing to keep from feeling the chill.

The conversation quickly drifted into talking about the planet that Luke still considered home.

Toak mentioned that he had been out to the Lars homestead to pay his respect to the family, as it was now a tourist attraction; he assured Luke that it was a dignified one.

Veen seemed more interested in how close Anchorhead was to the Jutland wastes, as it was home to many tribes of Tuskens.

Luke answered all their questions in order, but he felt in was more of interview than and conversation.
It wasn’t until Luke turned it around on them and asked about pod-racing in Mos Espa. He was never allowed to witness the spectacle- he assumed it was for fear that he might actually take up the sport.

Mos Espa was famous across the galaxy for the big Boonta Eve race, and each year he would beg, BEG his uncle to take him.

Veen chuckled, recalling his time at the race, as a child. He got spit on by a Ronto.

“You’re lucky it was only spit.” Luke commented wryly.

Toak had a cousin who used to bet on the races, and did pretty well until he lost to an associate of a Hutt.

“Hutt math, when it comes to credits, is never a good thing.” The Jedi cringed.

The one thing all the men could agree on was that they missed the food.

Toak missed Skarp. Veen missed Dewback. Luke hated to admit it, but he missed Bantha milk. And they all had a family recipe for Mawlitang that came with instructions of how much you could have before you had a chance of going blind.

All three agreed that a water shower was the best thing in the galaxy.

Luke relaxed as they spoke; it was like being back at Tosche Station, talking about everything and nothing. His ears welcomed the sound of a Rim accent.

As dinner died down, Veen came forward. He scratched his head, a bit nervous before he spoke, “Well, Toak and I were wondering if you played Teeshball?” He looked around. “Ah, there’s a few teams of three…and we need another player…would you be interested?”

Luke looked between the two men, amused. “Are you sure you’d want me?” He asked, sounding like the farm kid that always got picked last.

Toak’s face lit up. “You bet!” he motioned to a table of students two table over. “Those Corellians are always spouting off about how good they are. It would be nice to teach them a thing or two.”

Luke chuckled. “You know that I don’t use the Force when I play sports, right?” He wanted to be perfectly clear.

Their faces dropped slightly, but they still seemed fairly sure that they wanted him, and invited him to next game which was the following day just after midday meal.

After a little convincing, Luke agreed.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Peffar off to the side, clearly waiting for him.

He departed from his new friends and walked over to Peffar.

As he approached her, he tried for distant conversation. “So, I was wondering, do you know how competitive the Teeshball games get around here?” He asked as he looked over his shoulder to see Veen and Toak leave the hall.

“Nobody has been hurt yet…if that’s what you’re asking?” She answered blankly.

Luke raised his eyebrows and nodded once; it clearly wasn’t of interest to her.
Peffar motioned him to follow her, and she started explaining that, as a student of history, she was starting to write a paper about dynastic families of the core worlds. Luke listened without really listening; he was sad to say.

He tried, he really did, but there was something about her voice that just went in one ear and left the other without retaining any information.

Peffar preferred to use the language of academics, and something got lost along the way with the words she flung around.

It wasn’t until Luke heard her mention ‘Leia’ and the ‘House of Organa of Alderaan’ that he started to listen closer.

Just as Peffar was starting to win him over with her knowledge of Leia’s career as a senator and representative, she had to go ruin it by mentioning that the royal title was not hereditary in a linear sense, and that technically, Leia was no longer a ‘princess’.

He was about suggest that a person, who spends their life committed to the representation of her people and the galaxy, puts her very life on the line and make sacrifices over her personal well-being in order to see to the welfare of those who both agreed and disagreed with her, was more than justified to use whatever title she wanted.

He stifled his comment and tried invoke a bit of his sister’s diplomatic skills; he just smiled politely.

Luckily, they came up to Dr. Massian office, and the conversation ended.

Dr. Dram was waiting by the door, looking at his data pad, and looked up as the two approached.

“Luke, I’m glad you could make it.” Dram was always excited to see him.

The Jedi looked over at his traveling companion. “Peffar was kind enough to come find me.” He smiled politely over to Dram assistant who beamed at the recognition.

Dram nodded over to her, in thanks before she departed, and led the way into Dr. Massian’s office.

“We were wondering what you knew about Force-enhanced techniques?” the doctor asked over his shoulder.

Dr. Massian was sitting in the corner chair with his foot up, and looked up from his data pad as the two men entered; greeting each man with a smile.

“Did he ask you?” Dr. Massian looked excited as he asked Luke.

“I believe he was just coming to that.” Luke looked over at Dram.

Dram took up a small chair beside Massian and waited for an answer to his question.

Luke tilted his head to the side, as if considering the question. “I guess it depends on the techniques you are asking about – there’s basic ones, for example, strength and speed. I have used ones for enhanced vision on occasion.”

“It’s been my experience that some techniques, that while they might enhance natural skill, they always come at a price later on.” Luke continued. “For example, when I used enhanced vision, I found that the result was often either decreased vision or headaches sometime after I required the skill. I’ve also supposed it was because these are techniques that are not used frequently.”
“Hmmm…” Dr. Massian rubbed his face and narrowed his gaze. “Dram and I have been wondering about that ourselves.”

“We came across some writings by Master Ghosse.” Dram started to explain, pulling a data card out and handing it to Luke. “Well, some of my students, who are studying kinetics and physical studies, came across it, and were interested if it was truly possible.”

“Master Ghosse seemed to believe that a Jedi had to work both the mind and body, and that enhanced skills were to be trained just as much as maintaining the body.” Dram explained.

Luke nodded. “I quite agree with him. It’s essential for training and maintaining strength…and of course, it can have some calming benefits as well.”

The doctors seemed pleased with his answer.

Dr. Massian adjusted himself in his chair. “It just so happened that Master Ghosse wrote a full instructional manual on how to achieve and maintain Force-enhanced speed.” He said pointing to the data card in Luke’s hands. “At least, we hope it’s a full manual.”

Luke looked down at the card, fascinated now.

“We believe that Master Ghosse’s technique might even go far beyond what is assessed as basic ‘enhanced’ skills.” Dram added.

Massian reached over and tapped Dram on the leg. “Go on, and ask him what you need to, so that we can get on to have a nice visit without it looming over us.”

Luke smiled, looked down and then back up at the two doctors.

Dram cast a glance over at Massian before he started. “My two students that I had mentioned are doing their post graduate studies, and they would like to do their thesis on that.” Dram pointed to the card in Luke’s hand. “But they didn’t have a subject who would follow Master Ghosse’s regiment or schedule.”

Luke could see where this was going now; he was to be the subject. An interesting idea. He could train to learn a new technique while helping out, but he cringed at the thought of being studied.

The apprehension must have shown of his face.

Dr. Massian spoke up, “At least meet with the students? I’m sure that once you hear the parameters of their research that you might feel differently.”

Luke nodded once. “Okay, I’ll meet with them and hear what they have to say.”

Massian clapped once. “Capital young man! Just Capital!” The doctor winked, and offered Luke the chair across from him. “Now, with that out of the way, I believe, you had promised to explain levitation to us.”

The older doctor had a gleam in his eye and sense of intrigue that was irresistible.

Luke chuckled as he sat down.

“Well…” He began, while the two doctors listened. “…there are two ways that levitation is possible…the first, requires movement of the object…the second, and more difficult, is manipulating the air around the object…both work, but each requires a different form of concentration…it’s not just
the matter of wanting the object to move…”

Luke spoke for some time explaining the techniques, and Dr. Massian was still amazed when he demonstrated the levitation of a small object.

Before it got too late in the evening, Luke found a way to excuse himself for the night, explaining that he had an early morning comm call.

On his way back to his room, Luke tried to not let his mind become re-occupied with what would happen during those comm calls.

*The future is always in motion.* He reminded himself.

**

Luke knew that his appearance was a bit out of the ordinary, but Leia had taught him proper comm protocol, and she instilled in him, that even if he wasn’t present with the party he was addressing, he should still dress for it.

He felt a bit awkward for putting on one of his better shirts and jacket, but General Madine would be one who would likely notice if Luke was to answer a meeting request wearing sleeping clothes.

In the wee hours of morning on Yavin, the general population were expected to be asleep, that’s why when he approached the comm center, he found the two students, who had been put on duty, fast asleep; one behind the board, with his head down, and the second one had put two chairs together and made a small bed.

Luke didn’t even bother them, and slipped past into the small room, and set up his comm unit, and waited for the call to come in.

He sighed; preparing his mind for the eventual conversation; he still had come no decision if he was ready to come back into service.

But if he was to come back, he had a few conditions that General Madine was probably not prepared to be faced with, at least not immediately.

He didn’t have to wait very long, and the party on the other end called in ahead of time.

Luke waited patiently until the screen booted up, and the image of the General came in to view.

Madine was a serious man and Luke had only seen him break into a grin once, momentarily.

The man on the opposite side of the call started first. “Greetings Jedi Skywalker.” He said stoically, and without expression.


The General took a breath before he spoke. “We’d like to take this opportunity to thank you for both your assistance that you were able to provide to Blue Squadron over Ord Mantell, and your efforts in assisting the remnant group on Dalcretti. Both activities warrant our appreciation for your efforts.”

Madine looked like he was neither pleased with Luke’s efforts nor pleased that it was Luke who was able to assist them.

“I was glad that I could be of service to the New Republic.” Luke replied, matching the tone of the other man.
The General replied by blinking once. “As you may or may not be aware, the recent Imperial activity has caused the New Republic to engage in protective measures of systems who require our assistance. And although we present a strong front, we require further assistance.”

Madine reached offside of the frame.

“I will be sending you the encrypted data file on the situation – We believe your R2 unit will be able to decipher the code.” The General’s tone was beginning not to sound harsh, but rather beleaguer.


Madine continued, “Recent reports include eye witness testimony of the use of what Imperial communications are referring to as a ‘World Devastator’. It has recently been used on the world of Ji’nam which resisted the most recent bombardment of the Imperial fleet and attempted acquisition of the world.”

“If I may inquire?” Luke asked. “How recent was this attack?”

Madine nodded once. “Within the past twenty four hours.”

“And how much of the world is left?” Luke asked, not wanting to hear the answer.

“The environment is still hospitable, but the surface isn’t.” Madine’s cheek twitched slightly. “There were no civilian survivors. This information is confidential and has yet to be released to the general public.” There was a slight waiver in his voice.

Luke nodded again, suppressing a shudder; now realizing what the darkness was that he had sensed during his recent stop by the clear lake.

“Jedi Skywalker,” Madine’s voice had regained control. “On behalf of the New Republic, I formally ask for your assistance by returning to your commission as General of Rogue Squadron, and resuming your duties under the Special Operative branch of the New Republic militia. Do you agree to this request?”

Luke let out an inaudible sigh; he knew this was coming.

“General Madine, I am honored that you and the New Republic would think so highly of me as to request my return.” Luke had prepared, before-hand, on what sort terms he would agree to. “However, at this time, I cannot agree to those terms.”

Luke could see Madine’s jaw lock.

The Jedi continued. “Although I am proud to serve the New Republic, I cannot return to a position on Rogue Squadron that would over-shadow that of their current commanding office, Commander Wedge Antilles. If I was to return, I would only do so under his command, taking a lesser rank. Also, I would ask for some time to consider your request.”

Madine’s eyes twitched, barely perceptible. Luke knew that in that moment that he had earned some of the General’s respect.

“I will take that under consideration, Jedi Skywalker.” Madine paused. “I will send you the ‘terms of offer’ for you to review. We would need your answer in five standard days, if they met with your approval. Basic Training will commence in fifteen standards days.”

“Before that time, we will make arrangements to send for you. I believe your current location is Yavin?” Madine asked.

“Yes it is.” Luke answered; hiding a grin. This was the most conversational mood Madine had ever been with him.


“Thank you, General.” Luke replied, and as a gentle reminder, he added, “May the Force be with you.”

Madine eyes blinked with acknowledgement of the phrase of the Jedi, seemed to relax, and he bowed slightly before ending the call.

Luke let his body relax into the chair. There it was- they had finally asked him. There was no avoiding it now.

He had all but said ‘yes’ to them in that moment, but years of training had told him not to be so eager to jump on a request of this nature.

He had spent some of his first few years with the Rebellion running all over the galaxy on missions that had a slim-to-none chance of success. That was mostly due to the fact that he didn’t know what he was signing up for at the time.

If Madine sent a ‘terms of offer’ document, Luke would be able to review the spectrum of assignments he would be expected assist on.

He shook his head and rubbed his brow.

*What would Mara think?* He asked himself.

Normally, it would just him making this decision, but he had asked her into his life. For some reason, she always seemed annoyed when the New Republic came calling on him.

Despite her Imperial past, she really didn’t have a leaning in either direction politically, so her motives weren’t influenced in that aspect. In fact, he didn’t know any of her political leanings- another question for her.

Luke knew what irked her. It was the same thing that irked him about her job; they both put their lives on the line when it didn’t necessarily warrant it.

Even when it did, he knew he hated it when she would rush off without consulting him.

This cycle had to stop.

Luke decided that he wouldn’t make a decision until he consulted Mara. If he didn’t agree with her assessment, it would still give her an opportunity to sound in, and at least let her know that she was part of his decision making now.

Besides, Luke hoped that she had some insight that he didn’t; she had an uncanny ability to sense things that weren’t visible or predictable.

Yes, she was going to have to be part of his decision-making if they were going to have a life together.
He hoped that she would see it his way and see that he was not doing this for glory or the thrill of a fight, but it was time to stand with his friends again, finishing a fight that should have been completed five years ago.

Without malice, it was time for the Empire to come to an end. It was time for the galaxy to heal, not unravel again.

Luke checked his chrono and it was well before the time that Han would say that Leia would be available, but there was always a chance that she just might be free.

He was eager to contact her, for many reasons, other than he just plainly missed his sister. Their relationship had changed over the years, but in one aspect, they were always the same; she was still one of his closest friends he ever had, and he valued and loved her.

He keyed in the contact data and watched as the system attempted to contact her.

The status marker on the call showed that his location information was halted, and he knew what that meant. Clearly, Leia’s comm had higher security protocol now, and the system was checking his credentials before sending his call through.

Luke reach over to his comm unit, while waiting, and changed the scrambler settings to ‘refresh’ instead of timing out his call; he really didn’t want to end a call with his sister if he didn’t have to.

The screen crackled and he prepared himself to see her face by smiling for her.

It took a moment for her to appear but when she did, and saw him, the stress from her face disappeared and softened into a smile reserved just for him.

She tilted her head to the side, sighed, and smiled to him. Luke wasn’t sure, but he thought he could see her dark brown eyes get a little moist.

“Well, you’re in one piece.” She said with a hint of disapproval, but still smiling.

Luke smirked. “You know I tried to make it two…to make more of me to spread around but the medics wouldn’t hear of it, so they put me back together.”

She snorted and shook her head.

“I miss you.” She said quietly.

“I miss you too.” Luke looked down then back up at the screen. “So tell me all the news of the family. I hear I’m going to have to start catching running toddlers soon.”

“You will, but I think Jacen has his uncle’s accident prone streak and keeps running into things. He had a little fall this morning. Did Han tell you that Jaina is almost talking?” She seemed relieve to talk about anything but work.

“Yeah, I guess I should get a Basic to ‘Gack!’ dictionary.” He winked. “Are they around? Can you move the camera around so I can see them?” He asked, hoping to get a glance.

“I actually just got them down for a nap.” Leia said regretfully. “And I’ve been given the instructions to start napping too.”

Luke grimaced. “Han told me that too….how are you doing? And the baby?” Now that he looked closer, he could see the dark circles under her eyes.
She sighed. “Better… much better…now that Cighal is here. Ackbar recommended her…she’s amazing.” She paused. “I think she might have some skills with the Force…when she leads me to meditate, it’s almost as if I can hear her mind touching mine. She also uses her hands to sense where any issue might be.”

Luke concentrated on her words. “Are you sure?”

Leia nodded. “I think you should meet her…preferably before you end up at the Roche Medical Center again.” Her eyes narrowed, implying his recent stay. “Which leads me to ask, how are you doing?—and don’t say ‘fine’.”

Luke cringed, knowing the jig was up, and it was time to confess. “Okay, I won’t brush it off…but I’m feeling much better now…my lungs will need another day or two, but everything else is healed.”

“Yes, I heard.” Her eyes looked tensed, and she whispered, “What happened Luke? I got your report but it didn’t say how you got into the mess you did.”

Luke hung his head. “They found out.” He said, not wanting to mention ‘Vader’ but knowing it would probably cause her stress to hear it. “They didn’t trust me, and then when the news hit, they turned on me.”

Leia nodded; he didn’t need to explain what he was referring to, she had experienced first-hand.

“We lost Dalcretti as it was; being that it was so close to Tanaab- it just followed along when the attack came. We’ve lost contact with the cell that was there.” She said, just in case he wasn’t aware.

“Yes.” He said glumly. “Mara told me.”

“Mara?” Leia asked.

He nodded, and gave a slight smile. “She convalescing at the same time I was, on unrelated matters, on Roche as well. It was the Force that we were able to meet up…at least I think so. And she told me.”

Leia listened but her eyes narrowed a bit, and Luke could sense that she wanted more information.

“Before I headed to Dalcretti, I met up with Mara and Karrde on Tanaab.” He explained. And there was no point to mince words with his sister, and he knew that she knew which information was available to share, and which wasn’t without being told. “She was on Tanaab to eliminate Gilk Cassis.”

Leia leaned back in her chair somewhat, her face betraying nothing, but Luke could sense that the wheels were turning.

She looked away. “I knew of Cassis.” She said after a moment. “Several underground contacts were able to find a death notice put on me originating from, they supposed, was Cassis. But the contract was suddenly ended – apparently dead men can’t pay their bounties.”

Her eyes came back up to the screen, and she nodded solemnly. “Please thank Mara.”

Luke grinned tightly back at her; he knew what toll it must have taken for his sister to have the news that her life was on the line, and he knew the toll it had taken on Mara to make sure that didn’t happen.
Leia’s face relaxed, somewhat, and a hint of mischief came into her eyes, refreshingly. “Speaking of Mara?...” She smirked. “Dear brother… Care to tell me if there’s anything I should know?”

Luke snorted and he stuck his tongue in his cheek before he spoke. “There’s been some pleasant events recently.” He said in the most-vague way possible, blushing slightly.

Leia lit up, waiting.

“There’s been some words said.” Luke gushed a bit. “And a question asked…”

Leia gasped, and sat up, smiling.

“Oh no!” He corrected her, before she got too excited. “Not that question…I just asked her to come live with me on Yavin!”

Leia shrunk back down into her chair, looking slightly disappointed.

“But there were three words said.” Luke blushed in a darker shade on his cheeks, and broke into a smile.

Her eyebrows raised with promise, followed by a glare. “Did you say them or did she say them?”

“We both did.” He announced proudly.

Leia’s eyes softened and her smile beamed back at him. “I’m so happy for you!”

“I am too.” He whispered, still blushing. “I miss her though. She just left yesterday.” His smile was bitter-sweet.

She reflect his smile back at him, understanding what it was like to be away from the one you loved. “I bet you do.” She sighed. “It doesn’t ever go away…people will say that it gets easier…but it doesn’t – they just say that.”

“We’re trying to make it work.” Luke said hopefully. “We want to make it work.”

“Then, that’s half the battle.” Leia encouraged. “You asked her to come live with you?” She frowned.

“We hope that Karrde can give her some time off at regular intervals so she can come visit.” He smiled. “I’m hope to make some living arrangements that will suit both of us; for living and training.” He shrugged. “She seemed to like it here.”

Leia nodded. “So maybe it was Mara’s influence on you to suggest to Han to get back into the trading business?”

Luke could hear the amusement in her voice, so he knew he wasn’t in deep trouble. “It was just an idea.” He defended. “I was hoping to get see both of you, and the twins that way.”

He tried smiling a broad grin in his defense.

She tilted her head, and pursed her lips, feigning her displeasure, but it broke as she chuckled somewhat. “Very clever, brother.”

She flashed her eyes at him, appreciating the man he was, but became serious again. “Are you ready for Mara to come live with you? Do you think you’re comfortable enough in your relationship to have her around?”
Leave it to Leia to find things that he hadn’t even considered. “I think so.” He answered, but still unsure. “We know we still have things that we have to work out, besides, staying together for short derations will let us learn more about each other.”

It sounded reasonable to her, so she let it go.

Leia’s face became serious, more than it had so far. “I heard Madine contacted you.” She said; the poise of a princess and commander came back to her.

“He did.” Luke said blankly; still processing the offer. “He requested that I return to service. I haven’t seen the duty details yet, but he requested that I return to the Rogues, and Special Assignments.”

Luke tighten his jaw. “I’m sitting on the fence about this one.”

“Luke” she said, without hesitation. “We need you. Normally, I wouldn’t ask, and I haven’t asked. Madine is working with us behind the scenes. It’s most likely that the Special Assignments will involve working with our group.”

She continued, “I can’t promise that it won’t be as hazardous as some of your other assignments, but I know it will be more meaningful than some assignments that the New Republic sent you on previously.”

She lowered her head. “I wish I had the power not to send you on those missions, but it was out of my control.”

“I know.” He said quietly; never did he hold any resentment against her. “And I know about Ji’nam.”

Leia’s eyes widened and then relaxed, but looked at him with the sadness that he had seen in her when Alderaan was destroyed; waiting on his answer.

“I’ve all but decided to join up.” He sighed. “But I have to talk to Mara first…it’s something new that we’re trying.”

Leia nodded, feeling relieved that he was ready to come back; once again, proud of her brother.

“We’re trying to be a couple.” He said meekly.

Both of them understood that lives outside of duty still needed some sort of normalcy, in whatever form it took. Luke was determined to take it where he could get it.

Leia smiled softly, then looked offside if the camera and frowned back to him.

She didn’t have to say a word; her world was waiting for her.


“I know.” He gave her a tight grin. “I know.” He sighed. “Give the twins a hug from their uncle, and show them my picture every so often, so that they don’t forget me?”

Leia nodded, her eyes getting moist again.

“I promise that I won’t try to lure your husband into any shady business deals.” He tried to make her genuinely smile, and got it.
“I love you, little sister.” Luke said without being provoked.

“I love you too, little brother.” She winked at him, sharing their in-joke. “I’ll see you soon.” She said, both of them knowing that the word ‘soon’ was a relative term in their world.

Luke reached up and touched the screen, wanting to be close to her. Leia reached her hand back on her screen.

“May the Force be with you.” He said before he closed the call.

TBC
Chapter Summary

Quote: “If you get enough whisky into her, the dancer comes back.” Aves said, smiling from across the room.

“Get too much whisky, den da spy show up.” Chin added with a warning look.

Characters: Luke, Aves, Chin, Dankin, students, Mara (mentioned)

Chapter Notes

**
Okay…I get it…you guys prefer chapters with smut …

Hey, I like the smut too…but I can’t have it every chapter…have to have some plot in there…have mercy on my poor hands as they type!

And once again, this is mainly plot….and I promise to have Mara back shortly…promise.

On a side note- thank you for all the comments I’ve had on this story so far…I really and truly appreciate all of them. My only comment about Archive of Our Own – is that I wish there was more of a forum to talk about character development…right now, these characters live inside my mind, but clearly everyone has a different view of what and who they should be…and I wish sometimes that I could talk it out—and that’s why I love comments SO much….that, and my never-ending quest to make Mara canon again!

And introducing, a new character: Mara the micro-manager!– gotta love her!

**

Yavin IV

He didn’t hear his name over the first page that called across the temple.

And he thought he was hearing things when he heard the second one; it was like a flash-back to hearing his name over the PA system on Hoth, and slightly surreal.

The midday Teeshball game was breaking up anyhow, so Luke quickly excused himself and walked at a brisk pace to the landing pad. Toak and Veen watched him go after their recent victory.

As he headed in that general direction, his pace increased.
It wasn’t that he sensed danger, but there was some sort of urgency that he was feeling that was growing with every step.

At the corridor before the hangar and platform, he met Toban, who was looking nervous.

Toban ran along-side Luke, and matched his pace.

“I didn’t know what else to do.” Toban said hastily. “They landed…they had all the right comm clearance codes…but we weren’t expecting them…and they asked for you…I think they’re smugglers.”

Luke looked over at the student, and began to slow his gate. “Were they friendly?” He asked.

Toban nodded. “Reasonably.”

“Have you ever met a smuggler before?” Luke asked the other man.

Toban stilled looked nervous. “No…not really…but I’ve heard things.”

“Well…” Luke smiled; sensing that the other man had heard only the bad things. “You’re about to have your opinions challenged.”

They rounded the corner to the open hangar, and Luke could see exactly who was arriving.

Groups of students clustered around the hangar, leery of the new arrivals. Afternoon classes hadn’t called them back yet, giving them time to gawk.

The Lastri’s Ort rested on the main landing pad. At the bottom of the ramp, a bearded blonde man stood with his arms crossed against his chest, cigarillo hanging from his mouth, data board under one arm, head tilted to one side, looking not impressed.

Luke, glanced over at Toban as they approached, still sensing the other’s nervous energy. He inwardly chuckled.

As they approached, Luke pointed to the ship, and yelled over to the man standing under it. “Hey! You can’t park that thing here! We have standards here!”

The blonde man dropped the cigarillo, crushing it out with his foot, and yelled back, “They took you in…means they got ‘low standards’…so we figured we had a pretty good chance!”

Luke broke into a smile, and came in closer.

Toban stood back, nervous energy leaving him as it was apparent that the Jedi was on good terms with the new comers, and feeling he wasn’t needed, he stepped back.

“Aves!” Luke greeted the other man. “What in the Emperor’s black bones are you doing here?” He came within a few steps of the smuggler and gave him a friendly slap on the shoulder.

“It just so happens that we have a special delivery…” Aves smirked. “…for a one, Jedi Luke Skywalker.” He made the last few words sound high and mighty. “You wouldn’t know where we could find the poor ta’goot, now…would you?”

“Oh, he’s probably off meditating somewhere…” Luke crossed his arms against his chest, amused. “I can try and find him, but he’s not much fun.”

“Yeah, that’s what I heard.” Aves replied, smirking. “Especially when he plays Sabaac with
someone else and doesn’t invite his buddy Aves along.” He glared.

Luke chuckled, shaking his head. “You know, I heard Jedi are a forgetful bunch.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Aves mock-grimaced. “Good to see you Skywalker.”

“You too.” Luke smiled back, his face dissolving into a bemused look. “I’m still curious as to why you’re here…not that I’m complaining…there were no deliveries scheduled until later.”

“I told you…it’s a special one.” The smuggler replied, putting on a haughty tone. “And…we have special instructions…and since I like my face where it is, I’m going to follow them.”

He handed a filmsy covering over to Luke. “Here, read…and depending how you take it, then we decide what comes off the ship.” Aves growled and pointed to the hull of the Lastri’s Ort.

Luke took the filmsy, sceptically, and opened it.

It read:

Dear Luke,

You made me promise to think about something, and I have.

The answer is: YES.

I’ve made some arrangements to help you out.

Don’t let the crew slack off- tell them that I’ll know if they do.

See you soon, Farm boy.

-M

Luke covered his mouth with his hand.

She had been gone only four days, and he got his answer. He beamed like the twin suns.

Aves looked at him, like he had lost his mind; grinning from ear to ear. “I’m going to take it, that whatever was in that, made you happy?” He said, entertained.


Aves shook his head, then smirked, guessing what it was that made him happy. “Good.” He said bluntly, and turned to look up the ramp. “You can bring them down now!” He yelled inside the ship.

The smuggler motioned Luke to walk to the aft of the ship.

With a hiss of a release, the back dock started to lower the carrier platform.

“I don’t know how she did it…” Aves said. “But she must have been shopping all the way back from here to base.”

Luke watched as the platform lowered, seeing several hover palettes come down, with two familiar faces bracing them.

When the platform stopped, Dankin, was standing on the ledge. “So where do you want them?” He asked, wearing the same smirk as Aves.
“What are they?” Luke squeaked, surprised by the sheer volume amassed on the four palettes, each one bigger than the next.

“We think you know, hee. Jedi.” Chin nodded beside Dankin.

Aves came to the platform and helped unload the hover palettes, pushing them with ease.

Luke helped move the wrapped delivery with curiosity as to what Mara was thinking and what could possibly be in them.

He stood looking at them with awe until Aves chimed in.

“So you have us for exactly one standard daily rotation, and we have been given specific instructions by Her Grumpiness.” Ave huffed, holding up his data pad. A thought immediately dawned on him as he looked sharply at Luke. “Ah…Don’t tell her that I called her that, will ya?”

Luke snorted. “I’ve called her worse at one time.” He mumbled, recalling the epitaphs he had for Mara before he had gotten to know her better; the times when she stilled pulled a blaster on him.

Luke looked over at the other men. “I guess we had better follow her instructions then?” He turned to Aves, “So what do they say?”

Aves adjusted his shoulders. “Well, first off, she had the palettes numbered and we’re supposed to load them into the residence in that order…” He showed Luke the instructions. “See? ‘In that order’ – that’s what it says, and that’s the way she wants it.”

Residence? Luke mouth dropped open; Mara had went shopping for their residence. He smiled, surprised again- she wasted no time.

“Alright…” Luke scratched his head and looked at the team of smugglers she had sent to help him. “I guess I’m leading the way…which has a ‘number one’ on it?”

Chin moved the palette into position, showing Luke the best way to push it along.

Dankin was next in line, Aves took up the third palette and Chin took the fourth; all following the Jedi.

Luke led them into the hangar and towards the corridor that would lead to the larger residences, and to the one he had picked out for himself.

Behind him, he could sense that the others were slightly distracted. He turned back to see them glancing up at the temple, in awe.

“So this was the place?” He heard Aves ask, an unusual serious tone in his voice. “The place where the Rebellion was?”

Luke turned back, and they still followed. “Yes it was… this was the main hangar…for Y-wings and X-wings…My X-wing was docked at the further platform though…” He pointed to the antennae hanger as he pushed. “…we’re going to go past what used to be the command center shortly.”

He could sense that the mirth disappeared as they seemed understand that they were treading on hallowed ground; a place that changed the galaxy, a place that fought for the freedom of the galaxy, and that the man that was at the center of that fight, was now pushing a hover palette in front of them.
They had gone quiet, realising the importance of the place.

Luke looked back when he sensed that they had stopped. Dankin met his eyes, and then looked down. Aves and Chin looked at him, taken aback, suddenly unsure of themselves.

Luke gave them a tight grin. “At least the food has improved…” He said wryly. “…you guys are in for a treat tonight. Remind me to give you the five credit tour.” He smiled, trying to get them to relax.

In an instant, they seemed to relax, realising that he hadn’t changed.

“Yeah?” Aves called to him, “What are we having?”

Luke chuckled and started to push his palette again. “If I remember correctly, its Igvic stew with freshly baked bread…and you’ll get some if you get there before me.” He called back.

In his senses, he could feel them relaxing back to their usual casualness with him.

It always bothered him when people revered him; he felt embarrassed, feeling out of place. He still respected them to feel that way, sensing that they didn’t know how to express their gratitude, but he preferred that they didn’t single him out. Many lives were lost here; he was just one life.

Luke turned his attention back to his task at hand. The hover palette wasn’t as difficult to manoeuvre as he thought it would be while pushing it uphill to the upper level.

Mara must have designed it to fit perfectly into the corridor; it wasn’t too high, not too wide.

He still was amazed that she had thought of this; trying to think of what she could have possibly sent, but was thankful for her connections to a freight company.

Luke stopped and palmed the door release. He pushed the palette inside the residence, hoping that the others had no issues making it up the incline, as each palette was progressively bigger than the next.

Dankin pushed his palette inside, followed by the other two, and easily the palettes fit.

Luke looked at his palette feeling intrigued, and somewhat, like it was Life Day; that this was some sort of present to he was getting to unwrap.

The palettes were wrapped in opaque plasti-filmsy, so each one held secrets.

Aves started looking around, with Chin following him. Dankin headed to the alcove in the main room.

“So this is it?” Dankin asked. “Where you’re going to live?”


The questioned lingered in the air, but none of them asked: “With Mara?”

“Well, time’s wasting.” Aves chimed in. “Let’s see what the instructions say…Let’s unwrap palette number one.” He mumbled.

Dankin walked over, removed a small vibro-knife from his pocket and sliced a nice smooth line down the film, releasing the goods from inside.

He groaned as soon as he saw the contents at the top.

“We should have never lost that bet.” Aves mumbled. “That can’t be just it?” He asked louder, walking over to inspect the package. “That can’t be it.” He said again, trying to convince himself.

He looked at the manifest, then back at the palette and grimaced.

“We promised, hee.” Chin reminded him.

“What do the instructions really say?” Dankin asked, looking over Aves’s shoulder. He was silent for few moments, reading.

“Nope, it looks like Mara wants us to help you clean the place up…so that’s what we do.” Dankin’s eyes were following the words on the page.

And then he started reading her words out loud, “…and since you lost to me, all is fair and square. If it makes you feel any better, there’s a case of oleman ale in the middle of palette number two- but not before you’ve helped Luke.” Dankin looked up at the Jedi pleading.

Luke, just grateful for the delivery, was now grateful for the help.

He smiled over to them. “I didn’t think she’d actually do something like this.” He said to them. “But I wouldn’t put it past her either.” He sighed.

Aves looked over at the two other men, then back at Luke, and smiled. “We’d be happy to help you out…and Mara…” He growled, but then winked. “And get to the middle of palette number two.”


Chin handed out the enviro suits and Dankin began reading the cleaner instructions.

With the four of them at work, it took less than an hour to apply the cleaner and wait for the time it would take to activate.

Mara had done her work; she had picked a cleaner that was friendly to the environment, but it was fast acting and didn’t need to sit for very long.

Luke got a hold of the data pad and read her instructions. She had clearly written them for Aves or one of the other crew members; her tone was all-business.

They were able to work their way down in the palette to reveal some snap-together naqroob flooring intended for all the bedrooms, and very large wardrobe that she had wanted to the placed at the far wall of the master bedroom, and from the sounds of it, the rest of the palettes promised more to come.

But the instructions said to clean the walls and floors first.

It was time to rinse the moss remover, as per the instructions, bedroom first.

“So you lost a bet?” Luke asked as he started to work in his chosen corner, starting from the top and working down, scrubbing.

The moss came off easily with very little effort.

He heard some grumbling behind him.

“It was sure ting.” Chin said. “She bet on right pod, and right money.”
“She swears she wasn’t using the Force…but I’m not so sure.” Aves grumbled.

“It was either pay her the money, or come visit you.” Dankin added in. “I think we made the right choice.”

Luke got the feeling that, reluctantly, the others agreed with him.

“Why is that?” Luke asked.

“Well, given out other choice of picking up the rest of the base or coming here…we prefer your company.” Aves admitted.

“Karrde closed up the Dantooine base?” Luke asked, trying to keep it conversational.

“Nah- He keep it open for local business, hee.” Chin said.

“We’ve all picked up and located, either to duties on the Wild Karrde or running in teams.” Dankin filled in the information.

“I’ve been trying to get in touch with Mara, and haven’t had much luck.” Luke said quietly; thinking of how badly he missed her, but also wanting to update her on his call with Madine. “I figured she was busy.”

“She’s been going like a wipvong- running on all six legs, since she got back.” Aves said. “We all have. But as soon as Karrde’s done with his trade summit, she’ll just be pulling her usual duties.”

“Plus the comm system on the Wild Karrde was hacked. Ghent had a fit.” Dankin gave up the information.

“Nacht!” Chin growled over.

“No…” Aves said. “It’s okay- he’ll find out soon or later.” Aves looked over at Luke. “Ghent thinks it was planted by a rival gang- but it’s fixed now.” He paused. “There’s about to be a trading war…you know…fighting for routes…and selling each other out to whoever is running the sector. Karrde is trying to avoid it…that’s what the trade summit is for…settle some old business…plus to drum up some new contacts.”

Aves cleared his throat from the opposite side of the room. “Which brings me to my other business at hand….So Skywalker? If, say a respectable trader, such as myself, wanted to stop by to, perhaps refuel and possibly stay for a night, here on scenic Yavin…what would be the going rate for such a thing?” He asked, trying to sound as casual as possible, and failing miserably.

Luke chuckled. “Doing double duty Aves? Helping me out and getting info for Karrde?” He looked over around at the other men. “Mara told me that you smugglers like to do that…and I’ve seen her do it too.”

Aves sheepishly turned back to his corner, not that he had been the most discreet about what he was asking, but now the jig was up.

The other two smugglers just seemed amused that the Jedi had caught on to enough of their business dealings to know better.

Luke worked on his wall and started to think out loud. “Hmm… if that was to happen…I would say that the cost of the fuel, plus a special rate on shipments, delivered by, say, an attractive redhead on a semi-regular basis, might be fair deal.”
He tried for the same tone as Aves had set. “And of course, they’d have a whole platform to
themselves at the East temple….lots of room and privacy there.” He looked back over his shoulder,
seeing that Aves was nodding. “If you want to let Karrde know…” Luke shrugged.

Mara had once explained what Aves’s job entailed with the organization. Aside from running the
occasional shipment, Aves was the communication officer; just about all information that Karrde
needed or wanted, about business and non-business issues, came through Aves directly to Karrde.
Aves was the filter to Karrde’s ear.

Luke knew he had just dropped the right words and the right price.

“Well, I can ask Pavtik- he’s got red hair, but you’re not his type.” Aves snidely remarked.
The room went quiet and then laughed at Luke’s expense.

“Yeah, but does he fill out one of Mara’s jumpsuits the same way she does?” Luke argued,
chuckling with them. “If he does, then I’m listening.”

“Only she do that.” Chin laughed.

“That she does.” Dankin agreed.

Aves chuckled. “I’ll tell him.”

The work went fast, and they backed out of the room, washing out the moss, and back into the main
room, where the enzyme cleaner was ready for them to start working in there.

“I wish we had some music.” Dankin said, cleaning his new wall.

“I have to agree with you there.” Luke said.

Aves stopped for a moment, pulling the data pad from his pocket. “You know what…I think there’s
an aud-unit on the manifest.” His finger flipped a few screens, and stopped. “Look at that…it’s even
on the first palette!”

Luke shook his head; she really thought of everything. “Now, if we only had her music collection.”
He mumbled.

“I got!” Chin pulled a data card out of his comm. “Some of it. It big collection.”

Sure enough, Mara had acquired a fairly sophisticated, but simplistic aud-unit. Aves appreciated the
sound quality as the first song came over it, nodding his head with the catchy beat.

“I haven’t heard this one in forever.” Aves said, going back to work.

The work seemed to go easier; all of them scrubbing down the walls.

Luke decided it was time to share his musings, and see if they caught on. “You ever notice that
Mara’s collection has an awful lot of banned music on it…music that might have a bit of subversive
undertones…”

“I see where you’re going with this…” Dankin said from his side of the room. “I couldn’t put my
finger on it…but now that you mention it…”

“What?” Chin said, looking over his shoulder. “What you mean?”
Aves started chuckling, realizing what was being said. “I get it!” He laughed even louder. “Our little Imperial Princess has quite the stash of Rebel music!”

Luke turned around nodding. “You bet she does!”

The smugglers laughed; knowing that they dare not mention it to her.

They worked their way out of the bedroom, and into the main room; the ‘fresher and smaller rooms, they decided to divide up the spaces.

“I’ll take the ‘fresher.” Luke said. “And then, I guess we can work separately…first, um, Mara’s room...” he pointed to the larger of the two rooms. “And then the office.”

Aves leaned on his scrubbing tool and narrowed his eyes at the Jedi. “What do you mean ‘Mara’s room’?”

Both Dankin and Chin gave Luke an odd look.

“For when she’s here…to train…and visit.” Luke said quietly. He wasn’t quite sure how much they knew about his relationship with their boss’s second in command and wasn’t ready to give it away.

Aves looked over at his two other smugglers and then back at Luke, still slightly glaring at him, and then back at the others. “Are we buying this?” He asked Dankin and Chin, thumbing over at Luke.

The two other men shook their heads slowly.

“Okay Jedi...let me give you a piece of advice...don’t lie...you’re bad at it.” Aves said smugly. “We’ve seen the way you look at her...and we know she has a major case of the ‘screaming thigh sweats’ for you…but we had better get this out of the way now.”


“I don’t know if anyone has done this to you yet, but in case they haven’t…I’ll take the honor on myself, and on behalf of Karrde’s organization.” Aves said with some pride.

The smuggler’s voice got darker. “If you ever, ever hurt her...or do anything to cause her pain...We...WE will find you...and I might not know everything about Jedi, but I know they can die.”

He took another few steps closer. “And we know how to hide a body.”

Aves smiled, not a friendly smile, and slapped Luke on the shoulder.

Luke looked down at his side, feeling the sting at the contact, and swallowed, not in fear, but out of appreciation that other’s cared about the woman he loved.

“I don’t plan on it...” Luke said, looking at each man in turn. He hesitated, wanting them to understand that he was as serious as they were with their threat. “I love her.” He said, knowing that sharing this information would be kept among them. He sighed.

Dankin’s eyes lit up. Chin nodded.

Aves took a few steps back and stared at Luke. “Ah Shavit!” He said loudly. “I thought the two of you were just kriiffing...but then you go and spoil it all by telling us that you love her?”

The smuggler walked away into the other room, disgusted, and wanting to suddenly go back to work.
Dankin and Chin came closer, and patted Luke’s other arm, congratulating him.

Aves appeared from around the corner. “I guess I’m going to have to get you some blast-proof armour as a house-warming present, aren’t I?” He chuckled. “She has a wicked aim.”


They went back to the work at hand.

In the space of four hours they had removed all the moss from the walls and floors, and had cleaned all the available surfaces.

They were about to prepare to start laying down the naqroob flooring when Luke checked his chrono and let them know that evening meal would be served in thirty minutes and they didn’t want to miss that.

In the mess hall, Luke introduced the new arrivals to the doctors and some of the students.

Aves had mentioned more than once, wanting to meet any cute co-eds, so Luke happily made the introduction to Peffar and some of her friends.

Chin had started up a conversation with some of the botany students; interested in some the trees he had seen on their way in.

Dankin was sitting beside Almae, listening about their recent discovery of a partial domicile in the Eastern region.

Veen and Toak seemed amused at the types of friends that the Jedi had acquired; they had their own stories about traders and smugglers on Tatooine.

As they sat at the table, Toak chuckled. “What’s the difference between a trader and a smuggler?”

Veen shook his head.

“A trader hasn’t pulled a blaster on you yet.” Toak answered, lowly.

Luke smirked. “I wish it wasn’t true.” He looked over between the two students. “Say, what are you guys doing for your free day tomorrow? Got any plans?”

After the meal, Luke took the crew on a quick tour of the temple, explaining the future plans for the location.

“Tomorrow, I’ll take you to the Great Temple. It’s better to see it in the daylight.” Luke commented as they came back to his new home.

It was truly starting to feel like one.

He was able to find out that Aves and crew had plans to stay on the Lastri’s Ort for the night, not wanting to put anyone out.

“Really?” Luke asked. “I was hoping we could get to the middle of the second palette before calling it quits?”

“I think we can do that.” Dankin said. “If not, just to set up the cooler unit and to be able to have some nice cold ones for tomorrow.”
The next goal was the naqroob flooring. It snapped together quickly and Chin appreciated how Mara had bought the right thing.

“She tink of ev’rything.” He hopped up and down on the new boards, putting them into place. “Good for this weather too, hee.”

With all the bedrooms done, the men were on the verge of calling it quits for the night but not before they attempted to locate the ale and place it in the cooling unit.

Dankin sliced the wrap off the second palette.

Chin handed Luke piece after piece to the wardrobe that was the first thing on the task list for the next day.

Aves took stock of the inventory as it came off the palette.

It became apparent that Mara had also ordered a bedframe, a mattress, side tables, lamps… among other things; but Aves was also reading ahead.

Luke just shook his head; overwhelmed. She had thrown herself into the idea of living with him. And like she had done with her own apartment on Coruscant; she had started with the bedroom first.

“Oh cool!” Dankin said excitedly, as he found another box. “I was wondering what she was going to do this.” He was turning the box over for instructions.

Luke came over to look at what Dankin had found, and nodded.

Mara had found an electro-sonic, solar powered, window protector grid – with several functions for protection from weather and wild life. It even had a remote for controlling the light factors.

It was Aves who found the ale first. He was also talked out of opening it then and there.

Tastes better cold- was Luke’s argument. So into the cooler it went.

With their goal achieved for the night, Luke walked them back to landing pad.

Waiting for them were two of Peffar’s friends that Luke recognised.

“Well gents,” Aves grinned. “It was a pleasure, and we’ll see you in the morning…coming Chin?” He said, making eyes at the two females.

Aves and Chin walked briskly to the edge of the pad, greeting their lovely visitors.

Dankin turned to Luke. “You know he’s just going to give them the ‘dangerous lifestyle’ story, right?”


Dankin chuckled. “True…that’s how I met Nattan.”

Luke snorted, preparing to leave them to their own means for the night. “Alright, as long as you wake them up loudly in the morning.”

Dankin nodded. “See you in the morning, Skywalker.”

Luke saluted the other man. “Thanks for your help today…”'Night Dankin.”
Luke watched Dankin walk up the ramp, and watched as Aves and Chin were taken on a tour of what they had already seen.

He turned back and head back to his new residence.

His mind was still active about all that Mara had done. She was constantly turning his world on end, and she had done it again.

He had to admit, as much as he wanted to put the rest of the residence together that night, he knew it wasn’t going to happen. But his inner child wanted to go and wrap more of it to find out what she had sent.

He walked into the residence and the room was aglow; the sun was just starting to set on Yavin. He hadn’t watched any sunsets on the planet yet and the alcove in the main room proved to have a great view of it.

Watching just one sun still marveled him, and felt a little wrong, but it captivated him too.

Today was a big win for him; at the back of his mind, he truly hoped that he’d be able to make a life here.

Madine had called him back into service, and he had all but accepted- and those thoughts reoccupied his mind, and the eventual conversation that he was going to need to have with Mara. He grimaced. He had already sent a message off to Madine, asking for an extension, since he was unable to contact Mara, but assured the General that he would be able to make it to Basic Training. He had requested to add one more thing to the conditions of their offer to him. Madine’s face almost cracked into an expression as Luke made his request. Knowing that his request was confidential, Luke was sure it would surprise Mara too when she found out. He just hoped that it wouldn’t scare her away.

Luke turned back into the main room, and took a look around at the work they had done. It was a totally different living space, free from moss, than it had been that very morning.

He walked over to the second opened palette, looking for more things that Mara had sent.

He was able to find all the pieces of the bedframe and took them into the bedroom, placing them on the floor where he thought them should go.

There were only a few pieces to the side tables, and he was able to find the lamps that she had bought.

The wardrobe, he wasn’t about to touch until tomorrow- that was a two person job- even a Jedi could admit that. The mirrored doors were quite heavy, and the last thing he needed to do was to break one of them.

At the bottom of the second palette, she had used softer packages as padding around some of the other pieces.

He picked one up and turned it over; in her hand-writing ‘Luke’s pillow’ and on another one ‘My pillow’.

He smiled, and ran his fingers over her words; she had such an artistic hand. It betrayed that she had
a gentle nature, but he wasn’t about to say that to anyone.

He smiled, feeling an ache in his chest, in this bitter-sweet moment. He really wished she was here to share this with him; she had put so much work into it too.

Several other packages were there; written on them was ‘sheets’, ‘towels’ and ‘bedding’.

Part of him wanted to open the vacuu-sealed shapes, but he knew that they would open biliously, and he’d never be able to put them back together.

On his way into the room, he turned on the aud-unit, letting the next song play.

Lighting a glow rod, Luke walked back into the bedroom carrying his wrench set, and sat himself down on the floor, fixing on assembling the side tables and bedframe before stopping for the night.

He nodded along as he worked, recognising several songs that came over, and chuckled to himself as he recalled that Aves had called her an “Imperial Princess”.

In many ways, she was; raised in a palace, given the best schooling and training, educated on etiquette and breeding. It wouldn’t be wrong to assume that she was.

But it would be wrong to assume that’s all that she was. Luke knew better. He could see her in his world too.

She never shied away from hard work, and had no fear about getting her hands dirty.

Luke smiled at remembering when she had helped him on his X-wing and had gotten a bit of grease on her cheek.

As she attempted to remove it, she just made it worse and moved it around her face until both cheeks and her nose were covered.

She threw a wrench at him for laughing at her, but that was also in their early days of getting to know each other after Wayland.

It took a long time to find out what triggered her temper and how far he could push it, and he was happy to find out it just wasn’t him, personally, that did it.

In truth, he hated it when they fought; sometimes he had no idea what they were even fighting about. Yet sometimes, getting into a fight with her was the only way to get her talking to him, which would turn into yelling. Even when he agreed with her, they could get into an argument.

He accepted that, at the time, they were both testing each other’s limits.

Those first few months after Wayland were the hardest for him. He was thrilled and exhilarated that she was planet-side with him.

He wanted to see her every day; talk to her as much as possible, follow her around like a lost baby bantha.

He had to tamper down all of his normal instincts and excitement at having her around. As Han said, ‘play it cool’.

Leia’s advice had turned out to be just right; see her when she wants to see you – not any more.

And now, Mara was agreeing to live with him, when she came to visit. Still unbelievable.
Luke got up off the floor and hitched the corners of the bedframe together, put the small tables on either side of the frame and placed the lamps on them, and stood back to admire his work.

It was perfect, just perfect; Mara had found a bedframe with a soft headboard in dark brown leather. Luke traced the stitching with his finger, admiring the quality.

He turned to put down his tools and caught the reflection of himself in one of the mirror doors leaning up against the wall.

He cringed; sweat soaked, moss-stained and dust all over him- better hit the showers before retiring.

Satisfied, he could sleep tonight, with dreams in his new home, with his Mara.

**

The Lastri’s Ort looked deserted as Luke approached it.

The morning dew and fog was rising from the jungle, and he knew it was early by his own account.

He could sense the sleeping presences inside the freighter and wondered how he was going to wake them.

Luke pulled his comm from his pocket and sent a message to Dankin, and then stood back and waited.

Sure enough, Luke could feel one of them waking up; the others soon reluctantly followed.

Luke stood on the landing pad, drinking his caf, regarding the freighter.

Han had explained to him once that, to a smuggler, ‘morning’ was technically any time that you chose to wake up.

So Luke was neither demanding nor resentful that these smugglers were probably experiencing a true morning.

He sent another message inside, that he was waiting and that the fresh caf was particularly good this morning.

He could now hear noise from within, just before the ramp lowered.

Dankin was the first to emerge, yawning and rubbing his face, blinking at the barely rising sun.

With half-opened eyes, he greeted the other man. “Morning Skywalker.”

Luke took a sip of caf, looking over the rim. “Morning Dankin…where the others?” He asked after he swallowed; knowing better than he let on.

Dankin sighed, and rubbed his face again. “They had a late night.” He looked over at Luke with a knowing glance.

“Oh” Luke mouthed, and took another sip.

“They said that they would meet us at your residence.” Dankin commented. “So—the caf is good?”

Luke smiled and led the way to the mess hall.
Morning meal in the mess hall was relatively empty; even the doctors were not in sight. It was a free day and the students had planned it accordingly, which meant sleeping in.

However, some students were still going out about their duties.

Nadal Toban came by with the weather report for the next few days, and sat down to join the two men for the meal.

As they spoke, Luke thought to himself that Toban made the right choice. Dankin was probably the least threatening of Karrde’s crew, and on the plus side, the two of them had met before.

Toban was one of the students who was still on the move for the day. He was headed out to go check his sensors that he had left at the top of the East temple, and was excited for the read-outs.

Luke and Dankin finished their meal and made their way to Luke’s new residence.

“I’ve never asked before…” Luke said looking over at Dankin as they walked. “…but how long have you and Nattan been together?”

Dankin smiled back. “About six years now. We met while I was studying…and there’s not much more to say about that.”

Luke nodded, sensing there was definitely more to say.

Dankin looked over at the Jedi. “Nattan is almost finished his rotation at the mining facility on Roche, and we’ll be able to finally find a place of our own soon.” He looked forward as they walked. “And Karrde plans to put me in a more permanent location.” He smiled.

“It’s hard being away, isn’t it?” Luke said glumly.

“Sometimes.” Dankin said. “Some days are harder than others- but we make do.”

“I wanted to thank you.” Luke mumbled.

Dankin looked over at him curiously.

“You gave Mara some advice about communicating…” Luke said as they approached the residence. “And it really helped us….so thank you.”

“Anything for her.” Dankin said quietly. “Keep her happy, okay?”

Luke snorted before he hit the door release. “I intend to.”

The aud-unit was already blaring loudly, and two smugglers were in the main room yelling over the volume.

Luke and Dankin stood there for a moment before Aves and Chin turned in their direction, and stopped their discussion.

Luke walked over to the aud-unit and turned the volume down a bit. “Do I need to ask?” He said, almost comically.

“I d’was telling tim that we ‘semble in da room, hee. It too big to ‘semble here.” Chin pointed over to Aves.

Aves shook his head. “It’ll fit…it’ll fit.”
“Care to break the tie?” Dankin looked at Luke.

The Jedi looked at the directions, then at the proportions of the wardrobe, and then at the size of the door; and came to very logical conclusion. “What does Mara say in her instructions?”

Aves huffed as he picked up his data pad, read it, and then looked up. “The lady says to assemble it in the room.”

Luke nodded. “Then that’s what we do.” He motioned to ask to see the data pad.

By Luke putting together the bedframe and side tables last night, they were already ahead of schedule. And on the schedule was an ale break. It was then that Luke noticed that Aves and Chin had already helped themselves to an ale each.


Aves smirked. “It’s seventeen hundred hours somewhere.” He looked at little sheepish. “Sorry about not meeting you for the meal this morning…we were…um…”

“Dodging your dates from last night?” Luke asked, smirking.

“It’s not dodging…we just didn’t want to wear out our welcome.” Aves defended himself. “Those girls had two years left to their studies…that’s two years too long for me and Chin to have to make drop shipments here.”

Luke nodded, chuckling. “You’re a romantic Aves…you really are.” He turned his attention back to the list and read aloud. “Install bedroom window protection grid…”

“Dibs!” Dankin said loudly, and then realized that he had been too eager. He dropped his head, walked over, picked up the box and made his way into the bed room.

“Okay,” Luke said with promise. He looked at Aves. “If you and Chin are working on the wardrobe, then I guess that means I got to open palette number three.”

The men had their jobs, and Luke didn’t mind his job at hand.

Inside the next, much larger, palette, he found another window protection grid- only this time it was for a bigger window. Without looking at Mara’s instructions, he assumed that it was for the large alcove in the main room.

He found the slats for the bedframe and the vacuu-sealed mattress for the bed. He moved those into the bedroom.

Aves and Chin were arguing on which way a door should open on the wardrobe, and asked for Luke’s advice.

With a sigh and a scratch on his head, Luke gave them the best possible answer he could; always thinking How would Mara want it?

Dankin was content with his job, and being almost completed; he was looking forward to doing the alcove in the main room.

Laying down the slats, Luke then released the mattress. After reading the instructions, he learned that it would take the majority of the day for the mattress to relax and fully form, but it looked promising.

From the main room, Luke heard his name being called.
Veen and Toak had showed up, just as promised. Luke gave them a quick tour and saw the look on their faces at the size of the palettes that had arrived.

They helped Luke get out several more pieces of what looked like something that needed assembly.

Luke read Aves’s data pad to see where they were at. He nodded when he realized what the pieces were; Mara had sent a small sofa and foot rest, for the main room. Veen and Toak now had a job.

Mara had sent a second bed and frame, much smaller in size; Luke knew this one was to go into the second bedroom.

She was trying to keep up the pretense that they were just good friends and nothing more, giving herself a separate bedroom.

To the students, it may appear that way, and Luke would try and keep up that story. He quietly moved those pieces into the smaller bedroom for him to assemble later.

The next pieces off the palette needed some explanation from Aves’s data pad. When Luke saw the assembly instructions, it left no question that Mara had also sent a holo-vision stand.

Veen and Toak finished assembling the small sofa, and the foot rest that came with it, in record time.

Toak had made the mistake of turning on one of the taps in the kitchenette, and was met with more brown goo. He appointed himself the task of fixing this, and asked to use some of Luke’s tools.

Veen was more than happy to help Luke assemble the holo-vision stand than to deal with brown goo.

When the stand was done, it took a student to remark, “Now all you need is a holo-vision set.” Veen smiled.


Sure enough, on the manifest, Mara had sent along a sufficiently sized holo-vision set, a two terrabyte drive, and the instructions on how to attach the aud-unit into the set, and use the drive to access the data.

Veen and Dankin seemed interested in setting up the new electronics, if not, just to get the aud-unit playing through some half-decent speakers.

Toak had gotten clean running water out of the kitchenette and was on his way to the ‘fresher to see what he could do in there.

“Wow!” Veen said, shocked. “Have you seen the music collection on this drive?” He was using the remote control and flipping through the selections on the holo-set. “It takes up…like…half the drive!”

Dankin seemed equally amazed. “The other half is taken up with holo-vids.” He shook his head looking over at Luke. “You’ll never be able to watch all of it.”

Luke stood beside them as he watched file after file scroll on the screen. Mara had sent a little bit of everything; workout vids, historical vids, comedies, and just about everything else.

He caught the title of one folder quickly, called ‘Jedi’ and he smiled; something to explore later.

Aves and Chin emerged from the bedroom; they were victorious in their task, and not shy about it,
until they saw the holo-vision set and assembled sofa.

As per Aves’s suggestion, it was time for a self-congratulatory ale.

While the others took a break and celebrated, Luke walked into the bedroom and marveled at the transformation. The wardrobe at the far end took up almost the full wall; with hanging space and drawers- she had found the right unit.

The mattress was starting to relax and was filling up nicely; and was going to look very inviting at the end of the day.

Luke came back into the main room when he heard the cheering.

Dankin had gotten the replay of latest Teeshball finals to play from his comm onto the holo-vision set.

With ales in hand, and friends huddled around a holo-vision set, Luke bemused that his residence resembled the Rogue pilot-ready room after running manoeuvers.

Luke watched the replay for the next few minutes, enjoying his own ale, and smiling to himself.

As much as he wanted to drop down on the sofa and cheer with them, he knew there was more work to be done.

“Skywalker!” Aves bellowed, standing up with second ale in hand. “I’m starving…any chance we can get some food from the mess hall?”

Luke looked over at Toak and Veen, perhaps they knew- both had worked shift in the hall.

“Oh, there’s a way.” Toak grinned. “But I’d better go…fewer numbers attract less attention.”

“Why don’t you check the manifest?—it’s not like Mara not to send something like that. She loves her snacks.” Dankin suggested.

Sure enough, he was right, but it looked like all the smaller items were at the bottom of palette number four- which they hadn’t even opened yet.

Since palette number four held all the treasures, they quickly finished off what was left on palette number three.

Luke moved all the small packages from palette number two into the bedroom; the pillows, the bedding, towels, etc. - getting them out of the way.

The last items off palette three were two sonic cleaners; one for clothing and one for the kitchenette.

Dankin sliced the wrapping off palette number four, and although it looked bigger than the three before it, it was mostly made up of smaller boxes.

“This is so cool.” Veen said as he was handed boxes and started stacking them according to room.

“Where did it all come from?”

“Mara...” Luke said. “My Jedi student who was here.” He looked over. “Did you get to meet her?”

“She’s going to be a Jedi?” Toak asked. “What a waste.” He mumbled, and then remembered who he was talking to. “Um...I’m sorry...she’s just really pretty.”
Veen looked a little embarrassed too, as the smugglers were now looking at them with a narrow gaze. “We thought she was a dancer or something…then, I heard that she used to be a spy.”

Luke smirked, and looked back at the smugglers, telling them to relax. “She was.” He said. “On both accounts.”

“If you get enough whisky into her, the dancer comes back.” Aves said, smiling from across the room.

“Get too much whisky, den da spy show up.” Chin added with a warning look.

They all had a good chuckle at Mara’s expense, knowing it wouldn’t reach her ears.

“You know Skywalker, I got a theory about that girl.” Aves said, from safely in the kitchenette, and with third ale in hand.

Luke walked over to him, opened the cooler, and got himself another ale. “Oh? Go on…I’d love to hear it.”

Emboldened by the tone of the room, Aves stepped forward. “Okay, so we know that she used to be a dancer, right?” He looked around, getting approval for the first part of his story. “Now, I’ve known plenty of dancers….”

“And this might help you out…” He glanced at the Jedi just to make sure he wasn’t stepping on any lines.

“Every dancer…” He continued. “…every dancer has their special song. You know, their ‘specialty song’ – the song that they just can’t stop moving to.”

“I bet if someone found ‘Mara’s song’, that, they would be a lucky man.” Aves winked, and held up his can of ale to toast Luke. “That’s all I’m sayin’.”

“Well, that’s great Aves.” Dankin said from the sofa. “But Skywalker has a terra-byte of music to go through in order to find ‘the song’ – that’s close to three months’ worth of music!”

“Not true.” Toak said. “I bet if he looked through the file folder names that he’d be able to narrow it down.”

Veen nodded. “She probably labeled the folder for the songs she likes to dance to.”

Luke shook his head. “Alright, alright…can we please stop talking about Mara dancing, okay?” This discussion was bringing up memories from Tanaab when she danced for him there- how could he forget.

“You right.” Chin added. “We talk about how good shot she is.”

“Did you see that one time that she took out that slinger from Nook’s gang when we were on Danfar?” Dankin said quickly.

“He must have been two hundred meters away!” Aves said. “I’m never making her mad.” He mumbled, and looked over at Luke. “Sorry, man.”

Luke waved it away; still glad he got to see a different side of her.

Dankin finally got to the good stuff on the palette and Luke could sense it.
“Ahh…she sent a personal caf maker…this one is her favorite.” Dankin announced, handing the box over. “Which means…yup…she sent a case of her favorite caf… and a case of hot chocolate?” He looked at the Jedi; giving him a strange look.

There were several other chocolate items in cases, so it was suspected that these were for Luke, with the exception of a case of drizzle berry jam.

Sets of serving plates, cutlery, glasses, drinking vessels, kitchen gadgets—she had sent it all.

Towards the bottom of the palette, there were a few other boxes; labeled ‘For Luke’, so the crew just left those alone.

Looking at all the things she had sent was just making Luke miss her more; it was like she was there, but wasn’t, at the same time.

There was one way around this – since their work was pretty much done; it was time to call it quits, at least for the smugglers. Luke knew that they had a schedule to keep, and it was an imposition enough that they had even stopped to drop off the shipment.

Luke felt thankful for having such friends; he found it easy to include people that Mara counted on, in that group. They were like family to her, and now, they were becoming like family to him.

It seemed like they were all ready to stop for the day, and now everyone’s stomach was growling as bad as Aves’ was.

Toak had access to the mess hall’s kitchen and figured that since today was free day, that there would be a healthy dose of just about everything.

They were about an hour ahead of the midday meal, but it seemed to sop up the ale that was drunken on an empty stomach, and it would mean that Aves and Chin could still keep a low profile as to avoid an awkward departure.

Aves seemed to prefer his morning ale with some vobata juice- took the sting out of it.

It was a mix of leftovers from the past few meals, but it tasted great.

Chin started a conversation about the best food they ever had; his was namtooboush on Chrismath.

For Dankin, it was meal of fazoo fish and cream sauce that he could still taste. Aves’s best food was at the smallest Hitthitian joint on Gintai; best japow ever. Veen and Toak each swore that each of their mothers made the best Ronto roasts with tuptup sauce. Luke admitted that he loved just about anything Correllian; those spicy flavors agreed with him, and thinking about the Correllian burger at the tapcaf on Coruscant was making his mouth water.

Luke knew the crew would be leaving soon, and it was nice to sit back with them. He hadn’t been on Yavin long, but he was missing his friends, so he appreciated their visit even more.

He could sit back and listen to their stories of trying to get crews off Dantooine, stories about outrunning the law, and out-smarting a rival gang.

The meal break began to wind down, and they knew it was time to leave.

Karrde had them on a schedule, even for this stop, regrettably.

Veen and Toak made their excuse to go back to their studies, sensing it was time to say goodbye.
Luke made sure to thank Veen and Toak for all their help before they went back to their free day events.

Mid-term exams were coming up, and they needed to get to studying. However, Luke asked them to come over the following night to watch one of the holo-vids from the drive, which they were eager to take him up on. Entertainment was a premium on Yavin.

Luke walked the crew back to the landing pad, and offered to stop off at the Great Temple; but they turned him down.

He could feel an awkward sense coming on them. It wasn’t unusual for smugglers not to say ‘goodbye’; Mara once told him that it was bad luck, and most of them stayed away from saying it, rather, they preferred to talk about the next time they were going to see you.

“We’ll take you up on it next time.” Dankin said with a smiled before he headed for the ramp.

“Next time, you show us more da jungle, hee?” Chin said, and turned to follow Dankin.

Aves stepped up to Luke. “Well, Jedi, it’s been fun.” He put a cigarillo in his mouth, and looked out over to the other smaller pyramid. “East Temple, huh? I’ll see what I can do.”

“Aves…” Luke stopped the other man before he was about to go up the ramp. “I really need to speak with Mara, soon.” Luke said in a hushed volume, but emphasized the last word. The tone he used, left no indication that this was just of a romantic nature; whatever the Jedi needed to say to her was important, and couldn’t wait.

Aves met his eyes, and nodded with seriousness, showing that he comprehended, and gave the Jedi a tight smile before ascending the ramp.

Luke stood back to far edges of the pad and watched the Lastri’s Ort lift vertically, and hover into take off position, and then it sped off into the distance.

**

Luke made his way back to his new home, and started to think of all the things that he would have to move over there from his little cramped space, including R2 who was going to like sharing a residence with his master again.

As the door opened, he was reminded it was partially assembled, and partially a mess.

He snorted and thought, What would Mara do?

The easy answer sent him to the bedroom; she would finish the master bedroom off first- everything else could wait.

He unwrapped the bedding from vacuu-film, and was surprised by the colours she had chosen; deep purple sheets, green/purple/grey/white coverlet for the bed.

Just when he thought she couldn’t surprise him, she had bought the best pillows ever, Luke observed as he crushed the plush pillow to his face.

The whole experience was a surprise; from her accepting his offer, to her sending all these things to fill up their home.

*Their home.*
Yes, it would be their home…*together.*

TBC
Time is of the Essence

Chapter Summary

Quote: She looked over her maps of the nearby world that she was headed to; learning the geography, and on a night approach too. This was not going to be an easy feat for most people, sneaking in and out of such a complex, but then, Mara Jade was not most people.

Characters: Luke, Mara – do we really need anyone else?...yeah, a few others appear.

Chapter Notes

**
Once again I got derailed…but this time it was for a very good reason…someone turned me on to other fanfiction… and I suggest you take a good look at it… The Gift by JediMordSith (Thank you JediKnight27 for the rec!)

I love reading other fanfiction… one; to make sure I’m not scamming anyone else’s plot (I borrow bunnies, but I put them back), and two; to get impression if my characters need a different direction.

I also got distracted by cosplay…again… next con, less than 100 days away. :O

So I have a beef with the art that depicts Mara… and this is where my writing pulls a little joke on them. Somewhere, Timothy Zahn described her as being slim and having a dancer’s figure. BUT somehow…artists have taken that description and have run with it. We’ve all seen the images where Mara sudden has a chest of an inflated silicone toy. So, part of this story is me just taking the piss at those images, and trying to explain how she goes from being slim and flat, to being a porn star.

Aside from actual real story, I did have a bit of fun referencing one of Mark Hamill’s early movies—I hope you like the joke.

Also…there’s more dancing… Song inspiration for the dancing; TLC’s “Red Light Special”, and Ria Mae’s “Take Your Clothes Off” ~ wink!

Somewhere in this chapter is some plot…I think I managed to put some in.

And as always…. SMUT FEST!

**
Come on Get Higher By Matt Nathanson

I miss the sound of your voice
And I miss the rush of your skin
And I miss the still of the silence
As you breathe out and I breathe in

I miss the sound of your voice
Loudest thing in my head
And I ache to remember
All the violent, sweet
Perfect words that you said

I miss the pull of your heart
I taste the sparks on your tongue
I see angels and devils
And God, when you come
Hold on, hold on, hold on, hold on

If I could walk on water
If I could tell you what's next
I'd make you believe
I'd make you forget

So come on, get higher, loosen my lips
Faith and desire and the swing of your hips
Just pull me down hard
And drown me in love
So come on, get higher, loosen my lips
Faith and desire and the swing of your hips
Just pull me down hard
And drown me, drown me in love

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**

Along the Gordian Reach Trade Route…

It was the middle of the night when she left Maridun.

Karrde had given her an assignment.

Wasn’t she just fulfilling his wish? Wasn’t this what he wanted?

He had said she was to complete this task, and had twenty four standard hours to do so. Given that the daily rotation of Maridun was thirty two hours, she would be back before the next day.

She had to make the ache go away.

*I’m sure he didn’t expect for you to do what you did in order to accomplish this...* Her mind spoke to her.

She shrugged it off; a mission was a mission, and she had no intention of failing on this one.

*Mind you, stealing an unattended Corellian Corvette in an evening gown was probably not what he intended either,* but with the number of drunken delegates at the trade summit, she doubted anyone would notice.
Most Corvettes were larger cruisers, but not this one; it was more like a personal yacht and had been trussed up with all the fancy gadgets and requirements for living high.

She had no idea who she was infringing on, and didn’t really care.

*Fools,* for making it so easy on her.

As soon as Karrde gave her the okay, she went into action.

The Amanin were great hosts and Karrde assured her that the party would go on at least during the time that she was gone, maybe longer. Many deals and arrangements would be brokered with drink at this summit.

But her time frame was so short, Mara had no other alternatives.

The Amanin were proud to host this summit; they were suspicious of the Hutts that operated on their world, but not of humans. Especially when the human in question was Talon Karrde and he graciously brought enough oleman ale to keep the summit pleasant for the next few days.

She looked over at the nav computer, and standard light-speed; she had calculated that it would take three hours to the neighboring system, and three hours for the return trip, and approximately one hour to refuel and prep for departure…that would give her less than eighteen hours to complete her mission.

She had already been in hyperspace for over an hour now, and if she pushed the engines, she should be able to get there faster. Presumably, the Corvette could take it, but since this vessel was unfamiliar to her, she decided not to chance it.

She looked over her maps of the nearby world that she was headed to; learning the geography, and on a night approach too. This was not going to be an easy feat for most people, sneaking in and out of such a complex, but then, Mara Jade was not *most people.*

Perhaps she could hack into their system and follow their landing beacon. She had done it before without fail.

For some reason, no one ever protected the coding of their beacons- a random thought that she would remind Karrde of when she returned; if and when they found a new base, their beacon should have its code changed regularly.

Mara knew her destination was monitored and she already had the proper clearance codes to land, so getting in was not going to be an issue. The issue was going to be doing it undetected, and making it to her target without being noticed.

She had to make the ache go away.

Maybe Luke was right for calling her a cat – *a kitten* - she had to admit that she liked stalking prey; it was a challenge for her. And if need be, she had no problem playing with her prey either.

In this instance, her prey would be unsuspecting of her attack, as long as she took precautions.

It would be deep into the night, possibly early enough to be called ‘morning’, when she would arrive, and her target was known to sleep on a regular schedule.

She looked down at what she was wearing; maybe it wasn’t the best idea to not bring other clothing?
Her strapless burgundy velvet evening gown was sure to stick out like a sore thumb, or maybe not. The dark color would certainly blend into dark hallways, and if she was caught, she could claim that she was a gift, a surprise.

It wouldn’t have been the first time that she gained access to a location by using her appearance to suggest that she was there for things other than her covert mission.

It wasn’t her favorite ploy; a good operative should be able to reach their target without having to use excuses, alibies, or flimsy stories. But a good operative always had a back-up plan too.

She snorted; it was amazing how many times the ‘paid sex’ story worked. It should have failed more times than it worked- but it always worked.

Mara hated to admit it, but she was excited to be on this mission. She was starting to grow restless since Karrde had packed up the Dantooine base and temporarily relocated it to the confines aboard the \textit{Wild Karrde}.

It’s not that she didn’t enjoy the luxury freighter, but it just wasn’t home; it didn’t feel like one and it certainly didn’t look like one.

The \textit{Wild Karrde} also failed in one general aspect; it still wasn’t big enough to keep all the crew members that she wanted to have aboard.

Aves and Chin were running shipments together; anything that had a touch of danger to it was what they preferred. Dankin and Armeth had teamed up, and were running some of the easier deliveries. Ghent was hiding somewhere on board, showing up for meals and meetings.

Mara would find her days, recently, sitting beside Karrde as he holo-conferenced with clients or if he welcomed guests aboard for meetings.

She missed the star lines. She missed the freedom of running a shipment. She missed not feeling confined. And she was literally confined aboard the \textit{Wild Karrde}.

Here, running her own mission, and her own goals; here, she was satisfied.

She had to make the ache go away.

She looked over at the nav computer; less than an hour to arrive at her destination; she’d be cutting the sub-light engines in less than twenty minutes.

Suddenly, she got the feeling of butterflies in her stomach; adrenaline was kicking into her system. It was strange to feel it.

Ever since she had her implant removed, she was slowly discovering just how much of her personality must have been controlled by it. That little bit of metal had been gifted to her in order to control her more than she already was.

Feelings and thoughts were coming on stronger to her now, and of her own free will.

Although, she was also sure that some of these new-found feelings must have been brought on by her body making new hormones too.

She had started to count her days since leaving the Roche Medical Center, and she was able to sense the difference in her body as she was about to approach day number fifteen—just like the medics had
told her.

It also helped that when she stretched out in the Force, she could feel the more-subtle differences, and sensing her body ovulating for the first time was both foreign and stupefying to her.

She was already bracing herself for her cycle to renew by day twenty eight. She had already warned Karrde, that even she didn’t know what to expect. This was all new to her.

The one thing that she didn’t enjoy was that she had grown out of some of her clothing at the present, and during these days in the middle of her cycle; she was starving and eating everything in sight.

Even at the summit this evening, she was ducking behind pillars in order to pull up her dress as her breasts suddenly didn’t fit within it anymore. Not that she was complaining—they looked amazing.

Mara smirked; they felt pretty good too.

She’d be lying if she didn’t say that she hadn’t tested them out; with roaring hormones and being away from Luke, there were nights when she had ‘sampled the merchandize’ for her own benefit, if not just to relieve frustration.

One of the side effects of having her implant removed was now, her mind seemed clearer and one thing that she could do, more than she could before, was imagine. The implant seemed to block some of her creative thinking; and that led to thinking a lot about a certain Jedi.

Raging hormones and a creative mind made for some interesting scenarios that she’d like to put him in.

She had to make the ache go away.

The proximity alert broke her train of thought, and she reminded herself that she had a mission to complete.

She narrowed in her focus as she pulled back on the hyperdrive lever; star lines slowed, and a moon came into view.

Mara looked at the alert one more time and figured that she would be in range shortly. She didn’t want to hail the in-coming comm station too soon, just in case they would notify others that she was approaching.

But first, a random thought popped into her head; with the Corvette on automatic, she felt safe enough to step away from the controls.

Surely, a flying hotel suite would have what I need. She thought as she moved to the back aft of the vessel.

She didn’t have to look too far. In side one of the cabinets of the galley was what she was after. She didn’t even bother looking for a tumbler when she pulled the top off the decanter of Whyren’s Reserve, and chugged back a swig.

She cringed after it went down. NN182 batch…good stuff…

It would calm her excitement and allow her to start to mask her presence. Just for good measure she brought up her shields, hiding her presence in the Force.
Mara walked back to the cockpit and saw that she had less than ten minutes for approach. She hailed the comm center and gave the proper codes.

The receiving party sounded tired and sluggish—probably asleep while at the board, but had enough common sense to ask for her vessel’s name.

She hesitated, unsure of the name but then came up with one; and so Corellian Corvette *Stolen Moments* made its way to the designated landing pad.

As the yacht approached, Mara could see that there were no other ships on the pad; not surprising given that this world was remote and didn’t have much to offer.

The Corvette touched easily and with little fuss, and she started shutting down the systems; leaving to let the remaining systems shut down by themselves.

She adjusted her dress from slipping down again with a grumbled, and threw the glimmer silk chiffon sash over her shoulder, knowing that it would look effortlessly placed.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the polished surface of one of the support brackets inside the yacht.

Her hair remained piled up in soft tresses by the ornate hair comb Karrde had bought for her when she was sure he was, at one time, trying to seduce her; stay strands randomly framed her face.

She looked at both side of her face, wondering if she needed more colour on her lips; the diadem earrings reflected the light, and she was satisfied with her appearance.

One more time, she hitched up the dress, wishing for her smaller breasts back, and head for the hatch and down ramp.

The hatch dropped relatively quietly compared to some other ships she had been on, but then, those ships weren’t designed for comfort as the Corvette had been.

There was no landing party on the pad and all was still; just the way she had designed it.

Above her, the pure ebony sky was dotted with starlight—the only light available to her, and a light wind came through the nearby trees.

Stealthy and silently, Mara made her way across the pad, and into the main hangar.

Following just on clear instinct, and with careful footsteps, she found the rarely used corridor that would lead up to the room where her target was resting.

The only noise she could hear was the soft ticking of the heels of her shoes on the stone slab floors. For a moment, she considered taking them off, but, if caught, it would need some explaining that she didn’t want to prepare a story for.

Inside the structure, the floors were illuminated with guidance lights; so inconvenient for her target that she would have no obstructions to find him.

Noise in an adjacent corridor made her flatten herself against a wall.

She could hear herself breathing, and held in the air until others passed.

Mara thought of breaking her shielding but decided to keep them in place until it was safe to do so or she was ready to reveal herself.
A little higher up the corridor and she would be at her target’s threshold.

With a slight coaxing the door release gave in, and she slipped into the residence.

Her footsteps would be imperceptible now as she walked with soft feet and lifted her heels off the ground.

The small sentinel droid that stood on guard in the corner must not have had its sensors set on high; she slipped past it without any effort.

And now she was at the bedroom door of her target.

From inside her gown, she pulled the small magnetic trigger disk, and placed it on the door control. It fizzled with a quiet hiss, rendering the mechanics temporarily useless.

Mara manually pushed the door open without a sound.

She slipped inside the room, closing the door behind her.

There, in the bed, was her target sleeping peacefully.

Up until now, she really hadn’t thought of a plan of attack; the mission had been all that she had thought about, and getting there was less of a battle than she thought it would be.

She reached under the slit of her dress and removed the vibro-knife that was strapped to her left thigh. She went to the other thigh and removed the small blaster strapped on it.

Mara crouched on the floor and left her weapons there; she wouldn’t need them, and then came closer.

The light from the window shone down on her target; he was the vision of peace.

*Such a shame to ruin it.* She thought sarcastically with a smirk.

She bit the inside of her lip as she hesitated before approaching him.

Slowly she lowered herself on the edge of the bed, and closed in. She leaned over him, and pressed her lips against his.

The aching stopped.

He hummed with the touch.

Mara pulled back, and narrowed her eyes; she expected a much greater reaction.

If it was her, he would be lucky to still have his lips at this point.

So she tried again, putting more pressure on his lips with her mouth. She knew he was waking when he started kissing her back.

His blue eyes flutter open, and in the dim light came to the realization of the vision in front of him.

“Are you a dream?” He mumbled, and smacked his lips and closed his eyes again.

Mara decided to drop her shields, letting him know that she was real. “What do you think?” She whispered, and prepared herself.
In an instant the lights flipped on and he was sitting up in bed, blue eyes wide open and his handsome face aghast.


She gave him her best pirate smile; eyes sparkling with mischief. “Hello Farmboy.” Her voice was low and seductive, leaving him without doubt as to the reason she was there.

He was still in shock, so she took another chance, and closed the distance between the two of them, and crushed her mouth against his. Given that his mouth was still agape, she could easily dip her tongue inside.

He gave a throaty hum as his hands brought her closer to him and his mouth started responding in kind.

Their lips fought each other, pent up passion spilled over.

In between the frenzy, words escaped his mouth. “Why?” he asked, not requiring an answer. “How?”

She panted as his lips freed her mouth and found her neck. “Karrde…trade summit…stole ship.” She replied.

As her mouth found his neck and both sets of hands stared to roam, he asked, “How long?” just before he hissed as she bit at his exposed skin.

“Less than eighteen hours.” She replied before their mouths found each other again.

With a wave of his hand, the lights dimmed down to a more romantic degree, but still able to see his treasure, his Mara in front of him.

He pulled back, and took a good look at her, assessing her appearance.

No wonder he thought it was a dream, Mara could morph herself into anything and anyone. Before him was a vision of regal beauty; wrapped in rich lush fabric, ears dripped with diadems, and red-gold hair coiffed to perfection.

He would have thought her a queen, or a princess or someone of royal birth, clearly from some high court, not visiting a Jedi.

He swallowed, overwhelmed.

Mara smiled back. “Like what you see?” She asked, finding his countenance adorable.

He nodded speechless.

She looked down his exposed muscular chest, then back up at his face. “I like what I see too.” Her shoulders had started to raise and lower with her deep breaths, wanting him so very badly.

“Do you want to see more, Jedi?” The husky overtones of her voice made his heart flutter, his pulse raced, and his cock hardened.

He grinned wantonly back at her, fully sat up in the bed against the headboard, and nodded slowly.

Mara backed away from him, and he frowned, missing her closeness but watched her intently.
She slid off the side of the bed with graceful ease, and backed away from the bed so that he would be able to see all of her.

With the seduction of a cat, her dainty feet kicked off the heels one at a time.

She watched his face as he licked his lips as she moved.

With her right hand, she elegantly reached up and over to remove the comb that held her hair in place. Her smooth tresses fell from capture with one fluid movement and with a shake of her head.

She saw him suck in a hard breath of air, knowing that he adored her hair and his hands would soon be stroking and entangled in it soon.

Her left hand moved leisurely and lithely to her right shoulder to remove the chiffon sash and let it fall off her shoulder; revealing her alabaster skin.

He knew that, when the flush came to her, that skin would reveal the tiny freckles hidden on the surface.

She turned away from him, and looked back over her shoulder; wanting to see what this was doing to him.

Her hand reached to her back, and gradually pulled down the hidden zipper of her velvet dress. She turned back to face him, using the opposite hand to hold the front of the dress.

She released her hold, and dress stayed in place weakly. With one shake of her hip, it fell to the floor.

Luke’s eyes widened and mouth dropped even more.

She stood before him wearing black lace panties, and a black lace bustier with cups overflowing with her expanded chest.

Mara knew that this was doing to him. She knew that black was his favourite colour on her; her fair skin glowed against it. Through her senses, she could tell that his libido was no longer regulated by common sense.

He was dumb struck as she stalked towards the end of the bed, and slid on top of it. As she crawled towards him, she pulled at the covers, hoping to reveal that a certain Jedi was sleeping naked; he did in her fantasies.

He didn’t put up a fight for the covers and let them go without notice. His expression slowly changed from shocked to a growing feral grin brought on by her.

From Mara’s view, the heat in her was growing as his torso became exposed, then his toned abdomen, and smooth the curve of his groin muscles.

She straddled his legs as she crawled; the covers removed, and proved her assumption about what Jedi sleep in was correct, and unmasked his thick phallus, straining, glistening, waiting to be inside her.

It was her turn to gasp as she exactly how magnificent he would feel buried in her depths.

She stopped and kneeled at his thighs, reaching out with her hands to slide up the searing skin of his body.

She only got a split second notice in her senses as his hands reached out for her and pulled her closer
to him, pressing his lips on her again.

No whirl wind of passion this time as they came in contact; lips pressed together with the hungry intention of sustaining the adoration rather than having it end too soon.

Mara wrapped her arms around his neck, just wanting to feel him again. This time, she was the first to reach out her senses, stretching out her feelings in the Force; showing him how she missed and longed for him.

Luke’s senses received her feelings, and shared the memory of his heart ache for missing her. His hands stroked her body.

His fingers found the lower edge of her lace panties and followed them to the top of her heart-shaped bottom.

Mara could feel the tug of the flimsy lace covering her intimates, and then it stopped.

Her own fingers were too busy, dragging on the fervent skin of his torso; tracing every muscle, stopping to encircle his nipples, making him hum between their lips.

Luke’s hands cupped her ass, squeezing the cheeks, causing her to sit up a bit more.

Their lips broke away, and gazed at each other.

Luke slipped his hand between their bodies, and she could feel the lace being pulled away from her body; rubbing against her enlivened clit.

The lace was soaked with her juices, and he loved taking them off her, if only to feel her wetness now touching his skin.

Mara looked shocked and amused that he could remove them without any trouble to her.

He chuckled at her before he discarded the useless scrap of fabric by a toss with one finger.

His hands went back to cup her ass and squeeze the rounded mounds.

She took the hint and couldn’t deny herself any longer. His weighty member rested between her thighs, and she lowered herself down on his length.


He didn’t look away and didn’t want to look away, wanting to see what he was doing to her too, as he felt her constricted, astonishing cunny envelope him.

Mara panted from torturous carnality of being stretched open by him; moaning as she went as low as she could go, taking him all inside her.

Concern rushed to his face, sensing that she was in pain, but she smiled, feeling fully filled and fully gratified.

He stroked her cheek, pleading that it was not him that was hurting her.

She closed her eyes, and began to rock her hips; sending her senses to him of how pleasurable he was making her feel. Satisfied, her gaze met his.

In a sitting position, the lovers could look into each other’s eyes, face to face, consumed by their love
and what their bodies were feeling.

Mara took Luke’s hands and guided them to slip into the over-flowing cups of the bustier. She let them go when they started massaging the overly-sensitive mounds; his thumbs found the hard tips of her nipples; so ripe, so tender.

She rocked her pelvis faster on him; painful, pleasurable, rocketing her senses beyond the galaxy as only he could.

She levied her weight and began to lean back, allowing the plunge of her hips to stroke his shaft in longer movements with every rock.

He began to moan louder, and grunted through gritted teeth; his hands worked with the rhythm of their bodies.

She missed his mouth and came up to capture his lips. Through pursing mouths, as she thrusted down, she began to moan, whimpering his name.

Luke could feel the thrill in her skin, the growing heat coming up. More than anything he wanted for them to climax at the same time; something they had not yet achieved together.

He had been on the brink for some time now, and had waited until she was ready.

He moved his hands to clasp her ass and lift her, easing her on to her back, slowly and gently.

As Mara’s back leaned on the mattress, the tops of her breasts slipped away from her bustier. Luke saw, and his mouth came to suckle the delicate skin as he lowered her down.

He maintained the speed she had established as he propelled himself inside her.

Steadily, his pace quickened, knowing she was so very close; with one hand he found the hood of her clit and rubbed the sides the pupice, creating friction.

As the new sensation hit her, her hips bucked up, allowing him deep into her.

Luke sensed it, coming on fast and livid in lust; Mara’s breathing told on how close she was.

She gave herself away and Luke summoned his own pinnacle to hit.

As the air released from her lungs, he shot his hard, hot seed in tumultuous spasms, feeling her muscles seize around him, sending his mind spinning and her senses into euphoria.

Super Novi exploded around them; incomprehensible words were bellowed; names and words of love spilled from both of them.

Luke collapsed forward, falling beside her, but conscious enough to reach over and stroke her hair; promising his love so long as there was breath in his body.

Mara repeated his name quietly and hoarsely through dry lips; her body still quivering.

They lay recovering, waiting for the other to say something, yet the silence was comfortable, without words needed to fill the air.

Mara swallowed, trying to bring moisture into her mouth, but it was Luke who broke the silence as he chuckled quietly.
She glanced over at him, still panting slightly, wondering what he found amusing.

“Eighteen hours?” he asked wryly. “Do you think we’ll survive?”

She could help but snort. “Probably not… you wanna find out?”

He chuckled harder, and reached over, stroking her hair, admiring her. “I love you.” He said, quietly, but proudly.

She could feel the wrap of warm blanket around her after the words left his words, and she knew that it was him, sending her his love.

Without hesitation, she reached out her feelings too. He closed his sapphire eyes, and felt, just felt her feelings for him.

Her emerald eyes flashed at him, smiling, she said, “I love you too.” She shifted a bit of her weight. “Who else, in the galaxy, would I steal a ship for?” She said with cool satisfaction.

His eyes opened and Luke frowned. “I thought you were kidding.”

“Nope.” She grinned at him. “Mara Jade- ship thief. I can add it to the list of my many talents.” She winked.

She pouted a bit. “But I don’t know if I want this going around. It was too easy to get that ship- they left the start-up instructions right beside the controls….so not so much ‘stealing’ as it is ‘borrowing’.”


She stuck her chin out. “I’ve got some professional pride.”

He looked at her, amazed, wearing a smirk.

“I wouldn’t grin too much either, if I were you.” She poked him in the chest, causing him to flinch. “That R2 unit of yours is the worst sentinel droid I’ve ever seen….didn’t even twitter when I came in.”

He leaned over for a kiss. “That’s because I gave him protocol to recognize you.”

Mara was a little surprised by the gesture. “Why would you do that?”

He kissed her again. “Because I want him to listen to you just as much as he listens to me…” He kissed her again in between his reasoning. “…he’ll be as much your droid as he is mine.” Another kiss. “Get used to long conversations and not winning at holo chess ever again.”

Her eyes said it all; she was touched and amused, but mostly touched that he was making room for her, and sharing everything he had.

He could see that she was becoming uncomfortable in the moment, so he decided to change the tune. “So what type of ship did you end up stealing?” He asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Borrowing.” She said, pointing him in the chest. “I borrowed a Corellian Corvette….a real nice one too….it’s got a very nice red interior…and the take-off sequence is the fastest I’ve ever seen.”

“A CR-90!—that’ huge!” He exclaimed.

She shook her head. “No…no, a CR-15…one of the personal yachts.”
He sighed. “Good, I thought you had brought an armada here.” He rested back down. “A Corvette huh?—those are one of my favorite ships…and red?—very nice…the only color I’d ever have one painted.” He smiled looking over at her.

Mara rolled her eyes. “Flyboy.” She scoffed.

Luke chuckled at her, then rolled onto his back looking at the ceiling; finding her hand to hold.

They both lay at the foot of the bed, looking at nothing.

“You know,” He said, breaking their comfortable silence. “I only asked Aves for you to comm me…”

“I know.” She sighed. “It sounded like whatever you needed to tell me, would be better in person.”

Mara sat up, almost falling out of her bustier again, she reached around and undid the small hooks that held it in place, and tossed it over by her dress.

She jumped a little when she felt his hit fingers trace down her back, knowing that he just wanted to touch her.

She turned back to see him watching where his fingers had treaded, a wistful look on his face; lost in thought.

Luke blinked a few times, and then met her eyes. He could tell she was waiting for him to explain the need to talk to her.

He sighed. “I guess we should make the most of our time, and use the ‘Dankin Plan’ for communication?”

Mara gathered the sheet around her, and moved herself to sit, resting against the headboard, where she could watch him; giving them both some distance, and feeling like they were going to need it.

“Is it really that bad?” She asked.

“It depends…” He started, unsure how she would react. “I know it’s serious…it is for me, at least.”

His eyes flickered off to the side, hesitating.

For all the things he knew about her, he still had no idea what could set her off when it came to making her angry. He could sense when she was about to explode, so he treaded that line carefully, but, now was a different matter all-together.

“I don’t know how you’ll take it.” He said quieter.

“Luke…” Mara breathed out his name quietly, asking him to stop beating around the bush.

He looked away again, and then back at her face.

“General Madine has called me back into service with the Rogues and Special Operations.” He said quickly. “And I’ve accepted…I’m going.”

Her eyes widened briefly and then relaxed; waiting on him.

Immediately, her shields went up; he could sense it and there went his chance to sense what she was feeling.
Luke let out a hard exhale before he continued. “I know how you feel about the New Republic, and the missions they send me on, but this will be different. It will be better.” He huffed, “Whatever ‘better’ might be.”

Mara’s cheek twitched, and quietly she asked; holding onto the last shred of bitterness. “How?”

He had some time to think about it, and had reasoned it out. “They won’t be able to use me as the ‘token Jedi’ anymore. I’ll be insulated as part of a group. No more courier jobs…no more goodwill ambassador …no more ‘Look! We have a Jedi’ jobs…”

Luke looked away. “I’ll be working with, and protecting, the people I care about.” He said quietly. He looked back at her face as she stared off into the distance. “I wanted you to know. I wanted to ask your opinion before I made my decision…but the deadline…I had to give them my answer.”

Mara nodded, still with the vacant look on her face. “When do you leave?” She whispered.

“Basic Training starts in eight standard days…but they’re having some trouble getting a transport to come get me…I might have to start a little later.” He answered her.

She blinked a few times, coming back from where her mind had gone, and met his eyes. “I understand.” She said quietly. “I knew this was coming…when I saw the message notification from Madine on your comm unit.”

Luke nodded; just as he suspected, she had been the one to close his comm.

“And Leia…how does she feel about this?” Mara asked.

Luke tighten his lips before he spoke. “She’s in favor of it. She says they need my help. The outline of my duties has me working directly with Leia’s group, but not in so many words, of course.”

“On the outside, it will be business as usual for The Rogues…but on the inside, we’ll be running special assignments to the new Resistance group that Leia is building.” He explained.

He could sense that after the initial shock that she was coming around; he still wasn’t sure how she felt about it, but she was trying to truly listen, and her shields started to relax and let some of her senses out.

“You’ll be ‘General Skywalker’ again?” Mara mumbled.


Her eyes met his immediately, taking on an angry look, as if they had insulted him with a lower rank. “I asked for it…I couldn’t upstage Wedge…he’s worked so hard with them.” He explained.

He gave her a tight smile. “Besides I learned from you how to be a bit devious.” She tilted her head, wondering his meaning, before he continued. “As a lesser rank, all my assignments have to be approved by my commanding officer…which means…”

“Wedge won’t let you go, unless you tell him to.” She finished his thought, and narrowed her eyes at him, appraising that he did pick up some of her scheming talents.

“Exactly.” He nodded once.

Luke sat up, and came closer to her now, feeling that it was safe to do so. Sitting beside her at the headboard, he reached over to hold her hand in his.
Mara shook her head. “I should have tried sooner to contact you…”

He could sense that she was feeling guilty for the delay.

“Aves told me about the hack…you didn’t have much of a choice.” He sighed, feeling his own guilt come on. “I really didn’t want to make this decision without you.”

She squeezed his hand in hers. “I know.” She gave him a tight smile. “I can sense it….you wouldn’t if you didn’t have to.”

Mara stayed quiet for a few moments, just looking at him, her gazing softening as time passed, until finally she spoke. “I think that I would have encouraged you to go. I might not like it, but you’re right. With Wedge as your commanding officer puts a red line in place that they just can’t step over now.”

Luke nodded, relieved that she was accepting it. “There’s something else that I have to tell you.”

He cringed a bit before letting it out. “I’ve listed you as ‘equivalent to spouse’ on my documents.”

He could feel the electricity of the shock go through her; her senses blared as he had said the word ‘spouse’, and panic set in racing her mind.

And her shields were back up again, locked as tight as a drum.

He could feel her wanting to pull back her hand immediately, but he held it firm, and her eyes looked frazzled, wavering.

“It doesn’t mean what you think it does…” The words rushed out of his mouth. “…I just wanted you to have access if you ever need to get in contact with me. They won’t stop you, if I’ve given you the clearance.”

Mara’s eyes went wide. Her opposite hand moved slowly to her chest. Her breathing increased, and increased; bordering on hyperventilating.

When she found her voice, it quivered. “I thought…I thought…you were asking…me to…um…”

She mumbled, swallowing hard, senses in full panic.

Luke wanted to reach out and hold her, but he knew if he did, that she would make a break for it as he attempted it.

He pet the top of her hand. “I’m sorry….I didn’t mean to say it that way…I know we’re not ready….” He said quietly. “It was the only way.”

_Someday…soon and someday._ He said to himself.

“It was the only way…” He repeated, and filled in the blanks quickly. “…if I need to get information to Leia…the New Republic isn’t talking to her at the moment, but they’re willing to talk to you… and if you had access to information to me, and could pass it along to Leia, if need be…”

“I just came for a visit…that’s all.” She said, senses were beginning to ease down; her energy was still erratic, still a chance of bolting. “I didn’t come for a prop-prop-prop…” Her voice uncharacteristically stuttered.

“Mara” Luke called to her, and waited until she looked at him, pleading for him to take it back.

He called her name again, feeling that it was bringing her down. “How about this?” He said quietly,
forcing her to listen. “I won’t ask you that question. Ever.”

Her face phased from relief, to confusion, to anger in nano-seconds. “What?” She asked, this time, yanking her hand back.

“I won’t ask you the question that you thought that I was asking you.” He said confidently, consciously avoiding the words that would set her off. “If you want us to go there…then you have to be the one to ask me, okay?” He raised an eyebrow.

The moment had gotten too serious too quickly, and there was no stopping it.

He knew what might calm her, and reached out his feelings to her. <When you’re ready.> He sent to her, showing her that he meant it. He repeated it again, and then waited, and sent it over to her one more time; feeling the phrase calming her as it had done in the past.

Slowly, Mara slid her hand back over to him, until she was relaxed enough to turn to him, and give him a small smile, and the panic attack was over.

Luke knew she was coming back to him, as she blinked at him, then smirked and, to show that she had fully relaxed, she hunkered down beside him, letting his arm wrap around her shoulders.

He reached up and stroked her hair, petting the strands, calming her, soothing her further.

He knew she was fully back when he caught a touch of mischief in her, and heard a little maniacal snort.

“Do I dare ask?” He mumbled as he nuzzled into her hair. “What are you thinking, Hell Kitten?”

She tapped his chest, reminding who was in charge, and snorted again. “I out-rank you.” She said snidely. “Lieutenant.” And snorted one more time for good measure.

Luke looked down at her. “And how is that possible? What was the last rank that you held?”

Mara pulled back from him, and narrowed her eyes, daring him. “The last level of training that I received was Commodore- First Class.” She said proudly. “Unofficially.” She mumbled.


She rolled her eyes –Rebels, and their lax rules. “It’s a ‘Deck Commander’ for the fleet.” She answered, glaring.

He frowned; yes, she out-ranked him. Reluctantly, he gave her a hap-hazard salute.

He gave her his own wicked smirk, trying to match her signature look. “So I guess I have to obey your orders, Commander?” He winked.

Knowing that she couldn’t resist it, he came in close to her face, noticing that her glare wasn’t holding.

“Request permission to kiss the Commander, Sir?” He whispered, looking at her lips.

Her glare broke, and she breathy sighed. “Permission granted.”

“Aye-aye.” He said in a husky low-tone before placing his lips on hers.

His arms wrapped around her body and he pulled her closer, easing both their bodies up against each
other.

Mara snaked her arms around his neck, melding to him, savoring the feel of his lips on her own.

Luke hummed with their contact, easing down deeper in the bed, slowly pecking her lips, tenderly, until he looked at her in his arms.

His serene eyes took her in; totally and willingly, in awe of her. He stroked some of the hairs away from her face, captivated.

“I don’t know if I’ve said this before…” He hesitated, giving her a squeeze, “…but I wanted to thank you for all you did for this place…our place.” He smiled. “You gave me quite the pleasant surprise.”

“The delivery?” She asked, reaching out to playfully pinch the dimple in his chin, flashing her contented eyes.

He nodded. “You thought of everything.”

“It’s the bed, right?” Mara smiled proudly.

Luke chuckled. “Yes…it is so totally the bed.” He shook his head. “I don’t know how you find them! You always have the best beds that I’ve ever slept in…the one you had on Coruscant, and now this one! And why are they always better than the one I have!”

She leaned over. “You’re welcome.” And planted a kiss on his lips, and lingered there.

He placed separate kiss on her lips, “And thank you for the wardrobe.” Followed by another kiss “And thank you for the cooler unit.” He delivered another kiss. “And for the holo-vision set and audi-unit.”

Mara stopped him. “Excuse me—that was two things…you owe me another kiss.”

“That, I can do.” He smirked before paying his dues, and put his lips back on her, pursing and wanting her again.

Luke’s hot hands and lips, lulled her senses.

He pulled her with him as he rested his back down into the bed, cradling her in his arms. As their kiss broke, he held her against him, closing his eyes, and finding peace, seeking slumber.

His mind was a drift, feeling her close, sensing her presence; he sighed, preparing to return to sleep.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Her curt voice broke his quietude.

His eyes still closed. “It’s called ‘sleep’. I hear good things.”

Mara sat up from his embrace. “No, you’re not. I’m here for the next fifteen hours plus, and you want to sleep through them?”

She was indignant and staring at him- he could feel it through his closed lids.

“Maarrraaa…” Luke whined, trying to pull some covers over himself. “It’s almost dawn here. I mean, this…you coming here, is wonderful…but…”

“But what? Farm boy.” She growled.
He opened one eye to see that she was perfectly serious; he opened the second eye to see that she was not happy.

He sighed; she was right, he shouldn’t squander their time together.

Luke raised himself up on his elbows and didn’t flinch at her scowl. “I love you.” He said sweetly, knowing it had the power to disarm her, and besides, he meant it.

“I love you too.” She said in a soft tone.

“This is your time.” He said. “What did you want to do together?”

Mara raised an eyebrow, locking his gaze. “Talk.” She answered.

“Talk?” he asked, confused.

She nodded.

“Talk about what?” he asked again, still confused.

“I don’t know…lots of things.” She sighed, suddenly confused by her own behaviour. She relaxed beside him, shoulders touching.

Mara looked over to him. “What have you been doing since I’ve left?”

Luke smiled. Sometimes he still forgot that she was new to having a relationship with someone. He rolled onto to his side, and propped his head up with his hand, and reach over to touch her; his finger trailed gently down her arm.

“Let’s see…” He started. “I’ve been miserable, then I joined a Teeshball team, got inducted into service, and in my spare time, I’m a Rutini pig for some kinetic students.”

“What?” She looked at him, expecting him to explain further.

“Well, you left, which made me miserable.” He stopped and looked at her. “By the way, how far did we make it while we were connected? It felt like it was quite the distance, but I wasn’t sure.”

Mara thought back, and remembered. “About 6 light years.” She frowned.

“Was that good?” He asked.

She shook her head. “It’s not bad, for a start. I was less than a lightyear away when I first sensed you when we found you floating in space, before Myrkrr.”

He nodded, impressed that they were able to achieve such a distance. “Is it always disorientating when contacting from that far away?”

Mara lay down in the bed, and mimicked his position, leaning with her hand on her head, facing him. “Sometimes, it depends on who you’re connected with.”

<Me?> he asked over to her, knowing that the other that she used to contact was Palpatine, and he really didn’t want to invoke His name right now.

She thought about it, and then replied, “No, you just…faded away.”

Luke smiled. “I felt you after the connection faded, like an aura. Is that normal?”
She nodded, trying to think what it was like for her. She hadn’t really stopped to ever think about it.

“It felt like you were still in the room.” He said quietly. “Anyhow, after you left, I came in here to mope.”

Mara snorted, but then gave him a disapproving look.

“When I mope, then I get hungry.” He smirked. “So at evening meal, I met two students who happen to be from Tatooine.”

Her eyes brightened as he spoke.

“You’ll like them…Veen and Toak…they’re…well, they’re not farm-stock.” He looked sideways.

“What does that mean?” Mara asked, truly curious.

Luke furrowed his brow, thinking of ways to describe them. “Well, they’re from Mos Espa, which is ‘big city’ for Tatooine. They know what a moisture farm is, but haven’t worked on one.”

“I get it.” She sensed what he was saying. “We used to say the same thing about people on Coruscant- you can live near the palace, but unless you’ve lived in it, you don’t know. So what you’re saying, is that, your tan is darker than theirs.” She winked.

“Right.” He drawled out. “They asked me to be part of their Teeshball team, and we’ve been playing every day after midday meal, ever since.”

“I didn’t know you played Teeshball?” She was amused.

He nodded. “Han taught me and got me hooked. I have a solid rule though –I don’t use the Force while I’m playing- which, doesn’t always make me the first pick on a team. But I like playing.”

Mara reached over and pushed some of his hair out of his face, absently; happy that he had found some other peers. Unlike her, he made friends easily- how could they not like him?

She could sense a change in his mood; feeling sad…lonely…powerless.

“I contacted Leia after you left too.” Luke frowned, and then tried to smile. “She’s had better days.” He said quietly.

“It’s been rough for her since the news broke.” He sighed, looking away. “I wish I could be with her. She stays strong for all the wrong reasons sometimes. Internalizes it, until it wears her down.”

She felt a wave of sadness from him.

“She almost lost the baby; she started bleeding.” His eyes came back to Mara. “She’s recovering now, learning to deal with the stress of being pregnant and leading another group…but it’s still not good for her, or the baby.”

Luke reached out and rubbed her hand as he felt her shock and concern for him and his sister.

“I guess that’s why when Madine asked me to come back to the Rogues-I agreed.” His eyes asked her to understand. “I couldn’t just let Leia and Han, and Wedge, and the others take this on again…when, I could be helping them.”

Mara sighed, and sent out her feelings of acceptance. “Luke…for those reasons, I will never be upset because of your sense of duty for your family and friends. It’s who you are.”
Luke stretched over and kissed her soundly; thanking her for knowing this one thing about him. He rested his forehead against hers, enjoying their closeness.

She felt they needed a lift in the mood. “So how did you become a Rutini pig?”

“Oh that.” He snorted, and relaxed back, but still close to her. “Dr. Dram had some Kinetic students who happened to be reading some of his Jedi documents. They’re actually trying to study the body movements of the Massassi people, working with the biology students.”

“Kinetics, Jedi documents and you? Why does this sound like trouble?” She asked wryly.

“It’s really fascinating.” He spoke, but she looked skeptical. “No, it’s true. Master Ghosse wrote this instructional guide to learn and to use enhanced speed. The first part of the experiment involved that I run some circuit training. Then, I reach out in the Force, and run the course again—checking the time difference. Once I’ve done that, I used Master Ghosse’s technique by meditating…and it’s not so much that I change in my performance, but it seems to be a manipulation of time that is perceived by others.”

“I’m not sure that I’m understanding this concept.” She said, frowning.

Luke got an excited look in his eyes. “It’s like, I’m going at the same speed, but I’m able to control the pace of time, by slowing it down, to appear to go faster.” He shook his head. “It’s getting the students to understand what I’ll telling them, that’s the hard part. They still think I’m moving at a ridiculous speed, when I’m really not.”

The realization dawned on Mara, amazed. “They just don’t understand how the Force works….but I didn’t even know that it could work that way.” She said.

He smiled. “I didn’t either. It’s so strange when I do it. I can’t maintain it for long, though. I can make it through about half the course before I have to stop; my concentration ends. So that’s what I’m working on, how to maintain it.”

She knew he was powerful, but she was still in wonder of the depths of his power; she was feeling equal parts reverence and trepidation. The fine hairs on her arms began to stand slowly.

He must have sensed it, and started to rub her forearm. “You must be cold.” He smiled, oblivious. “Did you want me to get your sweater?”

They had been lying there, skin on skin, but as usual, she had the lower body temperature.

“My sweater?”

“Yes, you left it here.” Luke blushed. “I’ve been using it. It’s under your pillow.”

Mara reached under the pillow she was resting on and pulled out her soft gray sweater that she had worn the night they had made love on the upper level.

She was glad to have it, and slipped it on, wrapping it around her body, and lying back down.

“I have to ask.” She looked at him, like he had lost his mind. “Is this like what you were doing with my pillow?”


“Okay.” She just nodded and accepted it.
He waited. “Well?”

“Well what?” She looked at him, questioningly.

“I want to know what you do when you miss me.” He said, challenging her. “Don’t you do anything?”

Mara kept her cool; the blank face descended over her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Luke narrowed his gaze, not losing contact with his target, scrutinizing her. “You _do something_… don’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She repeated, but faltering.

“I think you do! You just don’t want to tell me— _because_…because it’s far more embarrassing than holding a sweater…isn’t it?” His senses told him all he needed to know, but he wanted to hear it from her; still kept his piercing gaze.

She returned his look with one of her own, only slightly harsher, warning him. Her eyes, blinked, unsure of herself - _fear_ - and he caught it.

Karrde had told him once that Mara was still learning how to feel emotions; this must have made her question her own feelings and if she was responding appropriately.

“Okay.” He backed off, knowing she had a limit when she felt cornered. “You’ll tell me, eventually…and I bet it’s good.” He gave her a defeated smile, letting her know it was all in jest and he wouldn’t hold anything against her.

He caught her smirk before he looked away; she could have her small victory.

Luke looked past her, and out the window; a shadow was passing over the temple, which meant that the sun was rising. They had talked out the rest of the night.

“Are you hungry?” he asked her because he was starting to feel the need for food too. “I also have this amazing caf maker.”

“So I heard.” Mara smiled, coming in closer for a kiss. “I could eat.” She said between their lips.

Luke grinned, and got up from the bed, showing off the butt that she professed to think was adorable, as he went across the room for some sleeping bottoms.

He turned back to the bed to see her biting her lower lip, clearly, enjoying his demonstration. Rather than end her enjoyment, he slowly put on the bottoms and stretched a few times before returning.

Her senses were jumping, and heated by him; intoxicating him as he came back to the bed, thinking that they could work up more of an appetite.

Mara locked eyes with him, and never left his gaze as she slipped out from the bed, wrapped her sweater around her body, walked over to him; nuzzled up into his neck. “I’m hungry, Jedi.” She purred. “Let’s go raid your cupboards.”

Her hand slipped into his, and Luke led her out into the newly organized kitchenette.

She tip-toed behind him, like a child on the cold stone, grinning.

As the humans approached, Artoo twittered and came to life, bleeping notes to his master.
Luke took notice and stopped. “Well, you let her in…” He said to the droid, and getting a series of hoots and whistles back.

“I’m not upset…” Luke argued back. “…but you could have warned me, buddy.”

Artoo gave a sad, down-toned note, apologetically, and Luke turned his attention back to the very beautiful woman beside him.

“My kitchen is your kitchen.” He said, in low tones, not quite sure how she was seducing him with her appetite.

Mara nodded; seeing the caf machine on the counter. “I think we should start with some caf…have you figured out the machine?”

Luke reached behind her and pulled out a pod and a mug for the machine, and walked over to the machine.

She giggled as he over-dramatically placed the pod in the top, and the mug under the receptacle, and pressed the button to start brewing, with a graceful hand flourish.

He came in closer and wrapped his arms around her waist, from behind, letting his fingers draw along her neck as he moved her hair aside, and nuzzled into her neck as the machine went to work.

The bitter aroma wafted through the air and she leaned back into his kisses.

<<I like mornings with you.>> She touched his mind.

<If we could stay like this forever, I’d be happy.> He responded, rocking her in his arms.

She snorted quietly in agreement, closing her eyes and just savoring being close to him.

The machine gave a little hiss and spit when it was done, reminding them that there was another world.

Luke retracted his arms and went over to the cooler; taking out the creamer, stopping at a cupboard to retrieve the sugar, some bread, and a spoon. He returned to her side.

Facing the spoon handle in her direction, he gave her raised eyebrow.

“I have never been able to figure how you make caf taste that way it does when you make it. So I am going to stand here and watch.” He announced.

Mara giggled again at him. “It’s an incredibly difficult recipe.” She said, amused. “You just add sugar until the person who is standing beside you begins to bulge their eyes.”

Luke stood there watching her place spoonful after spoonful of sugar into the caf; he could feel his gaze start to widen- and she stopped.

“And then you add creamer until the mug is almost full.” She stirred the mug and then handed it over to him, for him to sample.

He took a sip, and then nodded. “Yeah, that’s it, alright.” He smirked at her, “And Karrde thinks you add too much sugar, huh?”

She tilted her head, before she took the mug back from him. “So what are we having for breakfast?” She asked before she took her own soothing sip of caf.
Luke stepped over to the opposite counter. “I was able to procure some bread from yesterday’s batch…and it’s very good.” He opened up a cupboard and took out two small jars. “Besides, I’m curious to try this chocolate hazelnut spread that you sent along.” He read the label before coming back beside her.

She smiled over at him. “You know, there’s a reason I sent it to you in case, right?”

“Really?”

“Yep…” Mara took the other jar from him, seeing that he remembered that she liked drizzle berries, and he had brought out a jar of her jam. “It’s addictive. I figured you would like it.”

He motioned to offer to toast some bread for her. She nodded, turning, leaning, resting her hip on the counter top, watching him make her breakfast while she sipped her caf.

He moved about the small area; putting the bread into the toaster, getting plates ready, and putting out knives. At one point, he turned to her, swooped in for a kiss and a sip of caf, and went back to work.

Luke turned around from his work, a frown on his face, looking for something in the room behind them. “I should really message Peffar.” He mumbled, as if remembering.

Mara looked up at him. “Peffar?” she asked.

He sighed, and spotted his comm unit on the other side of the room. “Yeah, she likes to join me on my morning runs. She usually shows up pretty early.” He walked over and picked up the device, and began typing quickly. “I want to tell her ‘no run today’.” He spoke absently as he typed.

He came back to the kitchenette and finished the toast.

“How often does she come here?” Mara asked quietly.

“Um, just about every morning since you left.” He said casually, not really thinking about it. “She found out that I had relocated here, a few days ago, and now shows up here.”

He turned back to Mara with plates in hand, to see a questioning look on her face.

“What is it with you and stalkers?” She asked, shaking her head.

“Huh?” He looked bewildered. He motioned that he was headed for the sofa.

Mara followed behind him. “Peffar?” she asked.

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“What is it with you and stalkers?” She asked, shaking her head.

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Mara followed behind him. “She obviously has a crush on you.”

Luke yawned as he sat down, placing the plates on the foot rest. “I don’t think so…she’s just a kid…and she thinks I’m old…probably thinks she’s helping the ‘old guy’ with his exercises.”

“Or…” Mara joined him on the sofa, and accepted the napkin he was offering. “…she’s attracted to the slightly older, but cute, savior of the galaxy, Jedi Knight in shining armour.” She said snidely.

“I don’t think so.” He dismissed it; in his senses, he could feel that Mara wasn’t necessarily happy about it…could it be that she was jealous again?

“I think so.” She said confidently. “Here’s what I think is going to happen.” She took a bite of her toast, chewed and swallowed. “And if I’m right, you have to concede that she has a crush on you. Deal?”

“I think, Peffar is going to ignore that little message you sent, and is going to show up anyways… wearing the cutest, pinkest outfit she has…still wanting to go for a run.” Mara announced.

Luke chuckled. “Alright, if you say so.”

Mara could sense that he wasn’t comfortable with the idea- he never was. He didn’t like the idea of being worshipped and shied away from it.

She had to admit that she wasn’t enjoying what she was feeling either, so she decided to change the topic.

“Have you looked through the holo-vids I sent on the data drive?” She asked, hoping he had.

He was busy chewing, but nodded, then swallowed; looking at the first bite he had taken with the chocolate- hazelnut spread.

“What is it?” she asked.

He turned to her. “That was really good.” He smiled. “A whole case, you say?...to myself?”

She chuckled. “Good thing you still go on runs...just pace yourself, okay.”

Luke nodded, agreeing that this could go bad, real quick if he developed a taste for the spread.

“I looked at the names of some of the folders on the data drive, but I didn’t really look into any of the folders.” He told her, flicking on the holo unit, and activating the drive. “Is there something that you wanted to watch?”

He felt a little disappointed that holo-vids might occupy their time together. He switched on the holo-unit, and started looking at the folders.

“No…” she said before taking another sip of her caf, then offering the mug to him. “But I thought there might be something you would want to. There wasn’t any folder that called out to you?”

Luke narrowed his eyes at her, surprised that she would ask something like that. “Actually, there were two that caught my eye.” He turned his attention back to the holo-unit. “The first one, you called ‘Jedi’.”

He got to the folder and opened it. Seeing there were about a hundred vid files before him.

“It’s what I could pull from a record source that I used to have.” Mara said quietly. “Most of the vids are from official ceremonies and public events on Coruscant… that date before and during the Clone War…and the events took place at the old Jedi Temple.” She shook her head. “Sometimes the sound cuts out on them…but I’d thought you’d like to see some of the old Jedi.”

She took a quick bite as he was still skimming through the dates of the vids, and swallowed. “I thought Dr. Massian and Dr. Dram might like to see them also.”

Luke turned to her, eyes and smile beaming. “You are amazing.” He said before leaning over for a kiss. “Where did you say you found these?”

“One of the old libraries on Kaktar…they haven’t changed their records in over twenty years, and I knew they didn’t destroy the images and vids that they were supposed to.” She smiled back at him, and accepted another kiss.
“What was the other folder that caught your eye?” Mara asked, curious but also wanted to see if it was the one she had purposely placed on the drive.

Luke shook his head and snorted. “Strangely, it was the one entitled ‘Pod Racing’—you think you’re pretty good at figuring me out, don’t you?” he chuckled.

Mara beamed back at him. “Sometimes, but in this case, I think you should go open it.”

Luke broke his gaze from the woman he loved, to look at the holo-unit and scrolled, looking for the folder.

“I was on Vaal, on our way back to Dantooine, and I had some time in a market place, and I came across this vid for sale – so I added it to the collection.” She explained.

She stopped eating and put down her food and caf, because if this had the impact on him that she thought it would….

He turned back to her after he opened the folder. “It’s called ‘The Greatest Pod Races of All Time’?” He turned back to the screen, and began to read the description of the vid. “…From Malastare to Tatooine, join us on this sky-rocketing adventure and watch the most skilled pilots in the galaxy!”

Mara nodded. “Open it…” she said, tampering her own excitement. “You want vid number three.”

Luke narrowed his eyes at her, but quickly changed his expression when he sensed the anticipation in her that bordered on nervousness.

The holo-unit took a moment to load the vid, and then the title came up.

It was the Boonta Eve Classic, from a star date that was about fifteen years before the Clone Wars. The sound from the vid was indeed crackly, but the vid had sub-titles.

Luke looked over at her, and she motioned for him to keep watching.

The names of the racers scrolled on the screen: Neva Kee, Mars Guo, Teemto Pagalies, Selbulba…Anakin Skywalker.

Anakin Skywalker!

Luke immediately sat up, and leaned in to the screen.

“Did you see that?” He asked her, excitedly. “Do you think it is…? Could it be?”

“I think it is…” she said satisfied that his senses went off, probably more that hers did, when he saw the name. “…who else do you think it might be?”

He watched the vid play on, intently, and excited.

He paused the vid as the racers walked onto the track, and got up from his seat and came close to the screen, then resumed the vid, and watched as a boy, about nine or ten years old with floppy blonde hair, waved to the crowd and got into his pod racer.

The voice-over on the vid announced that Anakin Skywalker was the only human, in known history, to ever complete a pod race.

Luke asked over his shoulder, “What did they just say?” He was too enthralled by the vid to comprehend the words.
“They said that Anakin Skywalker was the only human to complete a pod race.” Mara repeated for him.

He nodded, and started to move back to his seat as the race begun. His mouth dropped open and his heart sunk as he watched the first moments of the race and his father’s pod failed to start, then, with a gasp of relief as the pod activated and raced to catch up.

Mara sat back and watched him, as he was glued to the vid. She knew this was a special moment for Luke. She had to watch the vid several times and remind herself that the boy, in that vid, would someday help rule the galaxy. But for this moment in time, he was just a little boy with a gift for flying.

Luke moved with the screen, and swerved and leaned in while he watched the pods maneuver the course; like a little boy too taken in, and reacting naturally.

He held his breath in the last moments of the race, watching Selbulba’s pod get destroyed and his father come in first place.

He turned to Mara, his eyes on the verge of tears.

He turned back to watch as his father was greeted by a tall older male, an older female, a young female, and… a Gungan?

Luke reversed the images, paused and went back to inspect the people standing around his father.

He pointed to the screen. “Do you know who any of these people are?” He turned back to ask Mara.

She shook her head. “When I was at the library, I did a search for ‘Anakin Skywalker’ and ‘Boonta Eve Classic’, but nothing came up.”

“I think this woman…here…” He pointed to the screen. “…might be my grandmother, Shmi… Anakin’s mother… my aunt had a holo off her…and it looks like her…but the holo was faded.”

Luke looked again at the screen, in amazement.

“I think the man might be a Jedi.” Mara said quietly. “I might know who he is.” She said even quieter.

“Who?” Luke asked, over his shoulder, still looking at the screen.

“Master Qui Gon Jinn.” She said, almost certain. The man in the vid looked like the Master who had addressed her at the Jedi Enclave, and had mentioned that he was the instructor to both Obiwan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker.

Luke tilted his head back in her direction, running the name through his already racing mind- it sounded familiar but couldn’t place it.

But the girl – the girl in the vid…there was something about her; something that drew Luke in. The image was hazy, but he could make out that she had long dark hair, and her clothes—those weren’t from Tatooine—clearly, an off-worlder. But his father, even at such a young age, was definitely connected to her, somehow.

And a Gungan? Tatooine was not a place for a species that lived mainly in water. Another mystery.

Luke came back to the sofa and played the rest of the vid. He reached his hand over to hold Mara’s,
as the results of the race came up.

His father’s race time was fifteen minutes, forty-two seconds; which was a record that was unbeaten for close to ten years.

He sat back, shaking his head, astounded. “I have to show this to Leia.” He mumbled. “This is amazing.”

Luke turned to look over at Mara, his eyes wet with unshed tears. He pulled her in closer, kissing and hugging her.

“Thank you” he said between their lips. “Thank you” he mumbled into her hair as he held her. “Thank you” he said again, kissing her soundly.

Mara accepted them, but it the air in her chest made it hard to breath; she suddenly felt uncomfortable with his gratitude.

“You want to watch it again, don’t you?” She asked, knowing that it was something special for him.

He nodded, reluctantly, as he knew it would take time away from being together.

“That’s okay.” She said as she reached out to touch his face. “I’ll go into the shower, and you can watch the vid again.” She smiled, and gave him another kiss before getting up from the sofa.

Luke had already restarted the vid and paused it, by the time she came back from the kitchenette after placing her dishes there.

Mara stood behind him at the sofa, and wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek.

She slipped away back into the bedroom, as he began to play the vid again.

As she walked into the other room, she was happy that she could do this for him; he was beyond stars for a chance to see his father again, and in a different light. She didn’t want to recall the images that she had left him with during her last visit; a little boy winning a pod race was much more enjoyable than a tyrant who sent his own whore to seduce and trick his own son.

Inside the bedroom, Mara stopped to retrieve her dress but more importantly, to retrieve what was in the dress. In a hidden pocket, she pulled out the Japor Snipet pendant, and held onto it with the intention of putting it on after her shower.

She glanced around the room, and appreciated the esthetics and the way the wardrobe had come together. When she had ordered it, she hoped that it was going to fit on the wall.

She opened the upper door on the right, and saw nothing in it. Disappointed, she closed it, and tried the door on the left; finding Luke’s clothes, or the ones he had with him when he left Coruscant, hanging there.

She smiled. He had saved one side of the wardrobe for her; was waiting for her to join him.

Soon, she thought, very soon.

Mara picked one of his older shirts, and left the bedroom.

Back in the main living space, she snuck by him, while he re-watched the vid, probably for the third time, and went into the ‘fresher.
She knew he needed time alone to watch and absorb all that he saw. It was emotional for him, and although she didn’t quite understand all what he was feeling, she was glad to provide him with that.

The ‘fresher wasn’t anything fancy, but sufficient- it was the one room she didn’t inspect when Luke had initially shown her the residence. But he had made great work of it.

Everything was neatly arranged, and he had assembled the shower caddy properly so that it fit in the corner, and every one of the types of cleansers that she had sent, looked used.

She was going to try and make a ‘Core’ man out of him yet. She huffed as she thought of his old habits….using one cleanser for everything.

After the shower, she padded down her body and put on one of his older shirts; rolling up the cuffs, adjusting her pendant around her neck, but surprised and disappointed that the closure on the front of the shirt couldn’t contain her chest.

Mara frowned as she tried to adjust her breasts inside the shirt; Luke couldn’t possibly be smaller than her.

It was little gap in the front of the shirt between the closures, but it annoyed her greatly.

It would have to do.

As she left the ‘fresher, Luke was standing at the front door, talking to someone. He had his arms crossed against his bare chest, as if trying to hide his skin, and he leaned uncomfortably against the door jamb, trying to look casual.

Casual was not what Mara sensed from him; nervous and uncomfortable was what she was sensing.

She listened as he spoke to the person on the other side of the door.

“…yeah, I don’t think a run today is good…uh, you see, I was going to meditate soon, and um, physical exertion doesn’t…ah…” He blathered.

Mara rolled her eyes, and her ire was rising. She could sense who it was on the other side. If she was a ‘kitten’ then her fur reflectively spiked, and she was about to hiss and swipe in her own way.

She sighed. She really didn’t want to do this to him, but she also really needed to stake her claim, now.

She looked down at the gap in between the closures on the shirt, with a plan in mind, undid it, showing just the right amount of skin.

Coming closer to the door, she wrapped her arm around Luke’s shoulder, making him jump a little, and swung around to his other side, revealing herself to the person waiting past the threshold.

“Lukey…Sweetie… you’re almost out of hair conditioner…you should really get some more.” Mara’s voice took on a tone he had never heard before; higher pitched and too sweet to be believed.

“Oh, Peffar!” Mara regarded the other woman, resonating with saccharine, as the young student’s eyes went up and down the new comer, stopping briefly at Mara’s chest. “So good to see you again! I didn’t expect you.”

Mara looked over at Luke, who had gone into full-blush mode, and then looked back at the flustered student. “What a cute, pink, workout suit! I have one just like it in grey.” She was over-grinning in
the most uncomfortable ways.

She smirked over at Luke who was still stunned. “So my Jeddy-bear…are we going to meditate now?”

He nodded blankly, as he had caught a glimpse at the pendant, and then her chest through his shirt.

Mara placed a hand on his chest, bringing him backwards into the room. “Okay…it was nice to see you Peffar.” Her voice now had a sing-song quality to it. “See you soon…Bye-bye now.”

The door slid quietly shut.

She turned to see Luke’s mouth agape. He blinked a few times, trying to figure out who had stolen Mara’s body and replaced it with someone he didn’t recognize, until her sweet smile dissolved into a wicked smirk.

“So?” She asked.

He shook his head. “What?”

“I think someone needs to tell someone else, that she was right.” Mara crossed her arms against her chest, pushing up the already plump skin.

Luke chuckled. “Okay, okay, you were right, I was wrong. She has a crush on me.”

She grinned with satisfaction.

Mara had once been taught that only woman knew truly how to destroy another woman. This was a minor victory, but there wouldn’t be another battle, at least with Peffar. “She won’t be asking for another run.” She mumbled with a touch of snark, as she walked back over to the sofa.

“But I have to ask…” He said, chuckling to himself. “Lukey? Sweetie? Jeddy-bear?-what was that about and where did you come up with those?”

She glared at him, as only she could, and answered smugly. “As soon as you told me that you were entertaining the nickname ‘Hotpants’ for me.”

“Allright, Kitten, you can pull those claws back in now.” His voice had deepened, leaning in, and captured her mouth.

To Mara, it felt strangely good to just do that; very satisfying indeed. Whatever wicked thought that inspired her actions just now, at the door with Peffar, was also demanding that she rip off his sleeping pants and claim more of her territory.

She loved the way he kissed her; firm, strong, leaving no question as for the passion he felt for her. She pressed her lips against his with clear intention; nipping and open-mouthed, not satiated.

His skin, always warm to the touch, always irresistible, always welcoming her hands to feel him; she ran her hands, with fingers spread open, down his chest, past his hips and cupped his tight ass, squeezing.

<So, you’re not going to tell me what that was about, are you?> His voice came into her mind, sensing that her desire for him was more than what it appeared.

<<It was…nothing.>> She answered back, concentrating on his lips and where her hands would like
to go next.

<You were jealous, weren’t you?> He sounded disappointed, and a little surprised.

He could feel her pulling back; shying away from her feelings again, her hands retracted from roaming him.

<<She gets to be here…with you.>> Mara pulled back from their kiss, looking him in the eye, confused by what she was feeling.

Luke looked back at her with understanding; he reached up to touch her cheek. “You think of me as belonging to you?” He asked quietly.

She shook her head vigorously, denying what she felt and assumed that it was wrong for her to feel like that. Her thoughts rambled…He didn’t belong to her, and she didn’t belong to him…he was free…she was free…didn’t belong…

“Mara…” he whispered her name. “I do…I do belong to you.” He gently kissed the corner of her mouth. <You never need to doubt it.>

She felt his hot hand slide around her waist, wrapping around her, and roaming over her curves; sending a tingling sensation over her body.

With one hand, he cupped her cheek and lifted her face; kissing her temples, nuzzling against her cheek <…And I always want you…just you….no one else.>

Feeling the pleasurable torment as he cupped and kneaded one of her flourishing and tender breasts, she whimpered.

She could feel how hard he was as he pressed up against her, wanting her as close as they possibly could be. She responded by pushing her pelvis up against the thick bulge in his sleeping pants.

<<I thought you wanted to meditate?>> She asked seductively, finding his mouth and applying delicate kisses.

Luke hummed. <I’m feeling very peaceful right now….no reason we can’t do both.>

Mara felt his senses reach out for her; he was very much at peace, just as when they were about to meditate together.

The Force began to flow from both of them.

He ran his hands up and down the sides of her body, pushing the fabric over sensitive skin.

It was like a dense, warm cloud descended on her.

She reached back with her own sense to him; playing with colours in his mind.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, allowing herself to be guided where he wanted.

He started walking her backwards to the bedroom.

<Do you know how grateful I am to the Force for letting me find you?> The warm cloud wrapped around her senses, making her feel more protected that anything could, only him.

<<It wasn’t easy…>> she conceded. The waves of colour formed sharp tails that only curled then
relaxed; yellow churned into orange.

There was no haste, no world to infringe on them here. It was safe for both of them.

<No it wasn’t.> He agreed. <We still have a ways to go…but we’ll get there…> He pursed and pecked at the lips that kept him prisoner.

In the bedroom, his hands slipped under the shirt that she was wearing; her skin was cool and smooth. So soft… his mind whispered.

He slid his hands up her body, lifting the shirt away from her form, and discarded it to the side.

She rested her hands on his chest as he encircled her.

Luke broke away from her mouth to look into her eyes. Those jewels of precious stone; cool, seductive.

<What was it?> He asked, looking deeply into her soul.

Her eyes looked back at him; the waves of colour spun in circles in his mind; blue changed hues into shades of purple.

His sapphire eyes pleaded. <What was it that made you change how you felt about me?>

Mara didn’t know how or when he had removed his sleeping pants, but suddenly his hot skin was against her, all of her.

Locked on his gaze, she couldn’t look away. <I don’t know.> Her mind raced to think about it. She could feel his encouragement to slow her thoughts; to become at peace, he didn’t need all the answers.

She searched her memory; when did she start to let her hatred fade? Could she have ever truly hated him? –Not Possible…Never…I could have never hated you.

The cloud in her mind cushioned her senses, appreciative at her effort.

Submersed in the Force, and their thoughts; their bodies came to rest and became entangled on the bed.

Mara tilted her head back as he kissed her shoulders. <<I suppose it was when I came to find you on Jomark…>> She answered him as best as she could.<<<…to rescue Karrde…when you agreed to help me without question.>>

They reclined together on the bed, Luke rest between her thighs as she lay on her back.

She let her hands drifted over his back.

<Anything for you…anything you would have asked.> He said to her mind.

His kisses trailed down her sternum, coming to her breasts. The plump mounds were anticipating his attention and had perked.

The waves of colour changed their hues; cool purple changed into deep plum, and wisped in vivid red with the thrill in her senses.

Luke dipped his head and suckled the bud closest to him.
Mara gasped, and lifted her hips off the mattress only to be tampered by his weight; feeling the heat building in the pit of her stomach and the quiver in her. She opened her legs, wanting him; the fever was relentless.

She knew he still wanted to know, the moment, the very moment that she fell in love with him.

She slipped her hands into his hair, and raked her fingers through the thick dark blonde tresses.

He switched to the other envious nipple, sucking, and swirling his tongue.

When she lifted her hips in response this time, he slipped his broad shaft into her depths; her knees bent up and opened to accommodate him.

Luke moaned, deep and throaty, as he entered her, and-rocked his pelvis.

<<At first, I just wanted to kriff you…as hard as I could…punish you…hurt you…rip out your heart…make you feel my pain.>> She confessed; her mind and thoughts wouldn’t stop.

<<Coruscant…>> She said loudly into his mind. <<…when you came to take me to Wayland…and on Wayland…I started to want you, then.>>

Oh Gods!…he felt so good inside her…and his mouth; Yes, harder, suck harder!…I’m so close.

With one hand he braced his weight, with the other he found her other breast; kneading the flesh, twisting her nipple, driving her to the edge of reason.

His thrusts were slow a deliberate, paced, and long; almost pulling out before he penetrated her again.

Luke listened to her; his mind divided between what he was doing to her, and actually listening. He had wanted her in the very instant that he had met her, and now he was hearing her make her confession for the first time.

As the colours in his mind danced, he kept her wrapped in warmth, allowing her safety.

<<Then, when we returned…in the Med Ward…the anger was gone…and you, you were there.>>

“Luukke!” She moaned as her cunny pulsed.

He only stopped his body for a moment to revel in the constrictions around him, savoring them, but she still hadn’t confessed yet; he resumed his pace, desiring more of her.

Mara still breathy moaned; her mind trying to find the answers.

<<I knew my feelings had changed the night after we sparred, and we fought…and I had that vision of you…by our tree.>> She knew it wasn’t a complete answer. <<After that, I didn’t want anyone but you…not like that…never before.>>

Luke looked up to see her flushed face, her eyes lost in pleasure until they found his. He braced his weight with both hands, as her hands reach out to touch his forearms.

Her eyes met his eyes; seeing that he understood what she telling him.

She tilted her pelvis forward, and moved it so that it met his body rhythmically.

<<That vision…I felt it…I didn’t know what it was at the time…love…I knew that I loved you…}}
later, when I knew what it was.>> She confessed.

“Luke…” She whispered his name. <<Sometimes I still don’t understand it…I don’t understand it…not all of it…how I can feel so much for you.>> Her eyes began to tear. I’m broken.

His heart ached in his chest. <You’re not broken…you’re new.> He dipped his head to kiss her. <And I love you…just as you are.>

“I love you.” He whispered again.

His paced increased between their bodies, pushing faster into her as pelvis rocked. His left hand went to her waist, and started to slide down her body, intent on going between them, to bring her further pleasure. It flattened on her stomach, grazed past her navel, and pressed against her lower abdomen.

Luke’s hand stopped. With the Force flowing between them, he felt something; something in her body…something different. His hand slid over the area on her again, searching for it, the sliver of light.

When he found it, it wasn’t alarming- it was electrifying, from the brief sense he had of it; he wanted to desperately sense more of it.

Mara must have suspected what he found in his search. She took his hand and guided it to the spot, until the look on his face radiated his surprise.

<<I’m ovulating…my procedures worked.>> She told him.

His breathing had deepened; he smiled, relieved, he beamed back at her, and wanting more than ever to bring her to another climax, and wanting to join her.

His hand found the center of her sensitivity; tweaking the hood insistently, rubbing the sides against each other.

She moaned loudly, breathing irregular.

Through the Force, he felt the crescendo of her pinnacle, and relaxed; meeting her pulses with his own, dropping his head, finding her lips, and impulsively kissing her between words.

Luke swallowed as he came around, looking into her eyes, watching her pant; breathless and flushed.

The Force was still whirling between them.

“I love you” she said quietly.

He came to rub his cheek against hers. “I love you too, Mara.” He whispered into her ear; hot breath making her giggle.

He lowered himself, and rolled to the side, taking her with him, and wrapping his arms around her.

The Force lingering, but the connection started to fade.

Mara rested her head on his shoulder, and traced patterns on his chest absently. “Can we meditate like that more often?” She asked wryly.

Luke exhaled deeply, considering her suggestion. “I don’t think we’d accomplish much, in regards to helping the galaxy, but for the sake of our personal peace, I think it would be beneficial.” He smiled
down at her.

His hands rubbed her shoulders, keeping her close. “That was a nice surprise.” He murmured to her. “When I sensed the change in your body… it was like…”

“A little shot of electricity?” She finished his thought.

He nodded.

“I know.” Mara said quietly. “It was a surprise to me too.”

It hung in the air for a few moments.

“I’m still on repress meds, by the way.” He said, almost inaudibly. He knew that both of them might want the possibility of having children one day, but today was not the day to start that.

She responded by hugging herself closer to him, understanding his meaning, and not wanting to rush into anything either.

It wasn’t the time; the galaxy was about to go into another war, he was about to leave to go back into service, they were still getting to know each other, who knew when they would see each other again. Everything about her body was still new to her.

Luke glanced outside the window, and the shadow of the temple had moved on an angle; the day had grown since she had arrived - time was slipping from them. He held her tighter.

He sighed into her hair, and looked over at his comm sitting on the side table; not really wanting to let the world encroach on them, but deciding if there was an alternative.

Mara sensed his distraction, and absently reached behind her and handed him the device, frowning.

“Did it show?” He asked, regretfully.

She tapped the side of his head, and then nestled back down onto his shoulder. “Broadcasting.” She mumbled.

“Oh” he mouthed.

He flipped on the unit and sent over a quick message, ‘No Teeshball today- got company.’ He knew the party on the other end would not show up at his door. But it was almost time for midday meal.

Luke looked down at his resting goddess on his shoulder, and ‘broadcasted’ over to her, smiling.

“Yes, I’m hungry too.” She muttered with eyes closed, just taking her leisure lying beside him.

He smiled, and pressed the summons button on his comm.

Artoo rolled into the room, and bleeped a greeting to the two resting humans who appeared to have been wrestling to the point of exhaustion, and were now recovering. Although, his master seemed contented, if not, somewhat dehydrated.

“Artoo, would you be so kind as to retrieve our midday meal for us at the mess hall?” Luke asked, and receive a contented series of chorts from the little droid before left.

“He’s very helpful.” Mara snuggled again on him.
“He is.” Luke agreed. He could feel that she was getting too comfortable; her body was growing heavy against him, and her breathing was deep and regular.

“Hey.” He nudged her. “If I can’t sleep, then you can’t either.” There was no real intent behind it. He didn’t mind if she wanted to catch some rest.

“No…you’re right.” She looked up at him, and sat up, flipped her hair over her opposite shoulder, and stretched a bit. “Keep me awake.” She prodded as she lay back down.

“With what?” He asked. “I can think of something, but I don’t think you’re ready for round two.”

Her green eyes flashed at him, and his smirk. “What? You’re ready to go again?”

He nodded, and leaned in for a kiss. <Yes.> his voice was deep and seductive. <What about you?>

“Okay” he said quietly, leaving the option open. <When you’re ready.> He teased.

Luke flipped through his comm, with one arm still wrapped around her.

Mara glanced up to see what captured his attention. She glared up at him. “So nice of you to be patient.” She grumbled; watching the files he was scrolling through on the comm unit.

He snorted quietly.

“Wait.” She said abruptly. “Go back…what was that?”

He hummed a questioning sound, and flicked back to the previous files, one by one.

“That one.” She pointed to the one on the screen. “Rejected First Date?” She asked.

Luke shrugged. “Well, when I was planning our first date, I took a bunch of questions that I didn’t want to ask you, and put them in this file….most of them came from Wes or Hobbie, anyhow.”

She adjusted herself, and sat up. “Well, this might prove interesting.” She looked over at him. “What were you afraid to ask me, that you can’t ask me now?” Her eyes narrowed.

She watched as his face started to blush.

“I still don’t want to ask you some of them.” He said, embarrassed that he even kept the list.

Mara nudged his arm, not relenting on her curiosity.

“They are not going to be golden gems.” He said with a raised eyebrow.

“I think I can take it.” She dared.

Luke tilted the screen in her direction so that she could read what he didn’t want to ask her on their special night together.

Mara looked up at him, shook her head, and asked in a tone that told him how impressed she was. “What’s the weirdest place you’ve done it?”

He chuckled. “It gets far worse…”

She kept reading. “How much money do you make?” She said out loud, and then pff’ted it.
“What are your kinky turn-ons?” She snorted, and looked at him directly in the eye. “That’s easy… drizzle berry jam, a Jedi, and stun cuffs….next question.”

Luke chuckled, and then stopped because her expression was dead-pan.

She looked at the screen again. “Oh…here’s one…and this I’m curious about...” She raised an eyebrow, challenging him.

He nodded.

Mara stared deeply at him, trying to be very serious as she asked. “Tell me about the first time you had sex…and this one is mine: how did you get so good at it?” She winked, then reverted back to her serious face.

He laughed, blushed, and looked away. “Do you really want to know?” He asked sheepishly; the farm boy was returning.

She nodded, not looking away from his face.

Luke looked off into the distance, swallowed before he spoke. “I had just turned eighteen, and Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru were visiting some friends on the other side of the Jutland Waste, so they weren’t going to be back for a few days.”

He sighed. “Biggs and Deek were headed to Anchorhead for the night and took me along. We weren’t there very long and I, for once, had some money to spend.”

He cringed. “There were these travelling caravans…and…and…”

“You paid for some entertainment?” Mara asked.

He nodded. “It wasn’t uncommon. There was fifty kilometers between us and the next homestead…and only one female among the next three homesteads, and she was promised by the time she was nine…I…um…so I…”

“I was so nervous.” He closed his eyes. “She was nice about it, though…and gentle. I remember it being over pretty quickly.” He blushed. “And then, not again until I was with the Rebellion.”

Luke looked down at her. He expected to see some sort of judgement, but he saw none.

As he looked at her and felt reluctant to ask her about her experiences; something told him that they wouldn’t have be pleasant, and he ran through a thousand scenarios, but none of them ended with it being her choice.

“Mine was pretty fleeting too.” She volunteered, meeting his eyes.

“He was older.” Mara confessed, looking at him. “He was my flight instructor. I had a crush on him.” She snorted, and looked away. “That’s probably where I get my thing for flight suits.”

“I was fifteen, and I had just learned how to double-jack in a TIE…it was exhilarating.” She said wistfully. “And when we landed, I kissed him. And then one thing led to another, and we ended up in a supply closet.” She could hear the regret in her own voice.

“It hurt.” She said quietly. “It wasn’t what I expected…everything I had learned about biology was from a class.”

“On my next training session, he was gone- replaced by someone else. I never saw him again.” She
looked away, blinked and returned her gaze to his face.

Luke reached over and stroked her cheek. He knew what she meant; people disappeared from her life regularly. He heard her words, but not spoken to him. I didn’t get attached…until now.

Quietly, they held each; knowing that their experiences, although not ideal, had made them who they are.

She smiled, still curious. “And part two?” She asked with a raised eyebrow.

He smirked. “And how did I get good at it?” He blushed harder. “Well, that’s a different story.”

She rubbed his chest, encouraging him.

Luke didn’t sense any jealousy from her, so he continued. “We had arrived at our second base since leaving Yavin, and the Rogues were just starting to form. There was a mechanic with Blue Squadron, and she was in the pilot lounge one night after we were running a perimeter check. The guys were making jokes, and I just sat there, laughing along, not knowing what they were laughing about. After the guys left, and I was about to leave- she called me on it….called me ‘green’ and ‘virgin’.”

He chuckled. “She was right.” He sighed. “She was older, and offered to show me what to do…with no attachments- is what she said. So after running maneuvers for the day, we would meet up …and she taught me a few things…more than few things…anatomy, among them- stuff they don’t teach farm boys, and how not to rush things.”

“I didn’t see her when we moved to Hoth…I don’t know what happened to her. I didn’t even know her real name.” He whispered.

He sat for a few moments, looking out at nothing, until he looked down. “And you? I’ve been meaning to ask where you learned that ‘internal thing’ you did to me on Dantooine.”

Mara smirked; her eyes tilted their shape, and darkened, knowing exactly what he was referring to.

“Well…” She cleared her throat. “After I was moved into the palace, in the secret residences, I was placed in the entertainment quarters. There were a lot of women down there- the courtesans. Most of them were pretty lonely when they were by themselves, but as group, they would socialize among themselves regularly. I wasn’t really part of their group- it was frowned on- dancers don’t associate with courtesans.”

She stuck out her chin and rested it on his chest. “One day after dance class, I was walking by one of the rehearsal rooms, and one of them…she was quite high-ranking among them…one of the ones who didn’t huddle with the other girls…she was ’stretching’ in poses…she saw me lingering in the doorway, and asked me in.”

“I remember thinking how exotic she was. She was very beautiful…like a piece of art. At first we avoided talking about the services we provided in the palace. One day, she asked me if I was truly a dancer – she had never heard of a dancer staying a dancer, something always happened to change that…and just in case, she could help show me a few things.” Mara recalled.

“It wasn’t sexual, but the things she told me about men…and the ways to move my body. She told me ‘men want what they can’t have’ – ‘always make them think they can’t have you, and they’ll want you even more’.” Mara looked away. “She taught me how to detach myself – be there, but be in your own world. And how to fake a climax… ’Never come unless you want to…don’t give them that power’ she used to say.”
Mara snorted. “She told me to clench my muscles while I was in boring situations… I also did it while in hyperspace… it would help me get **tighter**, and if I were to climax, it would feel harder… plus she told me about the ‘internal thing’. I got very good at it very quickly.”

“I know she didn’t **disappear**…” Mara said quietly. “She became a mistress for a Moff and moved to a private residence that he had bought for her. It turns out we were very close in age.”

“The things she told me… that’s why I don’t begrudge paid entertainers… they’re more truthful than most people think.” Mara smiled at him, and he knew why she didn’t judge his first experience.

Luke looked at her in amazement; she could have held opinions about people and beings very easily, but didn’t. Somewhere, and somehow, she had learned not to be judgemental- so very unlike the atmosphere she was brought up in.

For what could have a disastrous moment on a first date, both of them now had shared a more intimate with more understanding than they had before.

A hoot and whistle broke their solitude. Artoo rolled in with two trays of food on his extended serving tray.

Luke looked down at her. “Here or out there?” he asked. He really didn’t want to leave the huddle they had gotten comfortable in, but his appetite was winning, as his stomach growled.

<<Out there?>> she sent over.

He gave Artoo a hand motion and the droid turned around and headed back into the other room.

“How about a quick shower before we eat?” He smiled serenely, remembering their first shower together.

“I get to wash you?” Mara asked – he nodded. “Deal.”

He slid out of the bed, and offered his hand to lead her to the ‘fresher.

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In the shower, he was very diligent about cleaning her properly, and only got cleanser in his mouth once when he tried suckle on her earlobe while washing her hair.

She giggle at him wickedly for his attempt, but rewarded him by patting him down after the shower, rubbing his tight shoulders; sometimes it seemed like the galaxy rested on them.

Returning to the bedroom, he found another shirt for her, and smiled as he saw that it fit her chest better, and donned a new pair of sleeping pants for himself.

In the kitchenette, Luke warmed up their midday meal and brought it to her in the main room.

Mara had accessed his comm and was flipping through the rejected questions again, amused, as she ate.

“What sort of friends do you have?” She asked him. “I’m glad you had the good sense to reject most of these.”

“Rogues.” He answered before starting his own meal.

They shared a drink between them, and when done, Mara got up to refill it. “Did they really think
that either one of us would answer ‘What other species would you prefer to be and why?’” she asked when she came back.

Luke chuckled. “I told you that they weren’t all golden. And for the record, it would be ‘Ewok’, and because they’re cute – just don’t make them angry.”

She mock-glared at him, still not impressed. “And why did they think we would want to know so much about credits? There several questions about it.”

“You don’t want to know about credits?” He asked, half-serious.

Mara frowned. “Not really…no. Why? Do you think we should talk about it?”

Luke leaned back on the sofa. “We will have to talk about it eventually. You will have to know that living on a veteran’s pension doesn’t pay as well as it should. And I think the Republic was using Pre-Clone Wars schedules when they were looking at Jedi allotment fees.”

“I guess I should ask Karrde about it.” She said, thinking out loud. “I’ve never had to ask. I’ve always had the credits on my debit card whenever I needed to use it.”

She looked over at him, then back at her food, and her shields flipped up. Luke could feel it; there was something that she was thinking that she didn’t want him to hear.

He waited; feeling her relax. “Are you going to tell me what you were thinking to make your shields come up?”

“Something that I had no right to.” She mumbled before she put a forkful of food in her mouth.

Luke watched her. “There’s not much you could say that would offend me… come on, what is it?” He asked, trying to reassure her.

Mara bit the inside of her lip, and looked over at him, and then sighed. “Vader.” She said quietly, looking off to the side, ashamed that she was even thinking it. “Vader’s estate… whatever happened to it?”

“Vader’s estate?” he asked.

“You and Leia… technically, you’re his heirs.” She said, regretting she brought it up.

Luke shook his head. “There is no ‘estate’ – I assumed it went back to the possession of the Republic after the Empire fell. I’ve never looked into it.”

She nodded. “Yes, most of it would have- anything that was deemed communal property… like residences that were under Imperial control, but all of his personal wealth and belongings wouldn’t have… it would have been left in trust for his heirs.”

He frowned, and got up to take his plate back to the kitchenette. This conversation was making his mind turn. It was amusing and nothing he took seriously.

“There couldn’t have been that much.” He mumbled.

“Maybe, maybe not.” Mara said. “He had a lot of personal wealth… credits, property, planets.”

Luke turned his head sharply to look at her. “Planets?”

She sighed. She didn’t know it was something that he never considered; keeping her shields at bay,
ready to use in case she needed them.

He came back and sat down beside her. “What else?” he asked, his eye wide. “How much?”

She cringed. “I think Vader’s wealth was last valued at fifty billion credits…before Endor.” She whispered, remembering seeing the figures.

It wasn’t that she was checking for Vader specifically, but it was often a trigger for investigation if a ranking officer’s wealth drastically increased over a period of time. And the Empire was very thorough; they had resources, and ways of finding out such details that no one ever considered. So it wasn’t out of her scope to check financial documents regularly.


“Well, I don’t think that included the value of the planets.” She reasoned. “The property register’s office would probably know.”

Mara watched his face. “That is, if he left a will.”

He shook his head. “It’s impossible. – isn’t it?” He looked at her. “Improbable –right? It would never belong to Leia and me? – would it?” Then he looked into nothing. “There has to be some sort of legal issues that would block it…wouldn’t there?”

Mara got up from the sofa, walking over to the kitchenette, giving him some space. “I was surprised by the laws too.” She said.

As she walked back, she thought out loud. “It turned out my personal possessions still belonged to me…according to the property laws. I thought they were forfeited as Imperial property.” She sat down beside him, as he was still reeling from the shock. “That’s why I was able to donate all of it.” She said. “There were no restrictions, and, as it turned out, that was valued at close to a million credits.” She mumbled.

Luke paused in his stupor and turned to her. “What possessions, valued at a million credits, which you donated?” He asked slowly. His eyes narrowed.

Mara’s eyes went wide, and her shields went up immediately; solid and holding. “Oh…nothing.”

She got up from the sofa and went into the bedroom.

He got up and followed close behind. “No…I want to know what you mean by that.” He was insistent, and watched her pick up and fold her dress that was discarded on the floor.

“It was nothing.” She flustered, not looking him in the eye.

In her mind she started to berate herself…going soft…how could you let that slip…stupid mook…rookie mistake…too trusting…

Luke watched her, and he knew, but needed to hear it. “Mara.” He called softly.

She stopped, and looked at him; face gone white, eyes wide.

“I’m just going to ask you one last time, and I want you to tell me the truth.” He said gently. “Did you donate those dresses and jewelry to be auctioned off for the War Orphans Association?”

She took a step back from him. She looked away, then back at his face. And nodded slowly.
“Did you do it for me?” He asked in a hushed tone.

Mara nodded again. She cast her eyes away from him. “You weren’t supposed to find out.” She muttered.

In two strides he was beside her, and captured her in his arms, kissing her.

“I love you.” He said between their mouths. “I love you with all my heart.” His mouth couldn’t press any firmer against her. “Do you know this?”

He sent her images of how he thought of her in each and every dress that night after she had left the party.

There was a green silk one that stuck in his memory; imagining her dancing in his arms wearing that dress.

<Why?> He asked. <Why did you let it all go?> Still kissing her and holding her; his hands caressed her back. <Didn’t you want it all? Need it?> He knew that her life had been hard after Endor.

Mara was breathing hard, and opened her eyes slowly to meet his face. “They didn’t mean anything to me…and you do,” she whispered. <<It made you happy.>>

Luke placed his forehead on hers. <It sure did….and made others happy too.> He kissed her forehead, then rocked her in his arms.

“I guess I loved you before I thought I did.” She said looking into his eyes.

Sighing, he thought, _How am I going to be away from you? You’re my world._

<<When did you know…that you loved me?>> Her eyes wavered.

He smiled, and stroked some her hair away from her face. “Do you really want to know?” He asked. <Are you ready to know?>

“Yes.” She said without hesitating.

<It won’t scare you?> He asked again, to be sure.

She shook her head; her eyes steadied.


“Impossible.” She breathed out.

He snorted against her skin. “It’s true…but sad.”

He closed his eyes, and kept rocking her. “When I crashed the Skipray, and you had me on the ground, as the Storm Troopers were inspecting the crash…you had your arm around my shoulders, blaster at my temple, and your hot breath in my ear…_I could smell your perfume_…I wanted to grab you and kiss so badly in that moment.”

She twitched, remembering that very instant.

“When I saw you use my light saber, cutting the branches to make the travois for Artoo…that went straight to my groin. I never wanted someone so badly.” He whispered in her ear.
“The fear I felt when the vornsk attacked you.” He kissed the side of her head. “And when you told me why you hated me so much…” His voice drifted off, knowing it pained them both. “I still loved you.”

“When do you want me to stop?” He asked. “I even loved you when you took that stupid plant and puffed up my face.” He snorted, knowing that she had enjoyed doing that to him.

“Did I ever tell that I saw you in a vision right before we met? -the one about a possible past?” He looked into her eyes. “I saw you at Jabba’s…but in the vision, you succeeded.” He said quietly.

Mara looked at him amazed; searching his face to see if he was telling her the truth. She shook her head.

Luke smiled, expecting some sort of sweet words from her.

She opened her mouth, shaking her head. “You’re insane.”

He frowned. “That’s not quite the reaction I was expecting from you.”

“You are insane.” She repeated it slowly. “What sort of person falls in love with someone who wants to kill them? Seriously?”

“You weren’t going to do it.” He reasoned with her.

“Oh, yes I was. I had it all planned and everything…” She backed away from him. “…and you with those big blue eyes!” She waved a finger at him.

“Don’t you remember what you asked me before you left Myrkrr?” She grilled him. “You asked me if I was still going to try and kill you—and when I told you that I was…you said ‘Good- that means I get to see you again’!”

Luke was shocked at her reaction. “Why are you so angry?”

Mara turned on him. “I don’t know!” She stewed for a few moments. “I love you!” She said in a louder gruff tone.

He chuckled, feeling that she was not entirely serious, but rather found herself confused at his revelation. “Well, good. I love you too. Now, kiss me.” He said sternly.


In two steps she was in front of him, kissing him.

He chuckled in between their lips.

“Shut up.” She mumbled with his lips on her, and started chuckling too; at him, at their predicament, at them.

“What a pair we make, huh?” He asked when their kiss broke.

Mara nodded, and looked weary as she put her head on his shoulder. All these feelings, all this emotion was not what she bargained for when she first arrived.

“I have an idea.” Luke said quietly, sensing that she was getting to the end of her emotional tether. “You may not like it, but I think we both need it…” He nuzzled into the soft nest of red-gold curls. “We should take a power nap….just a short one.”
He sent her the image of them huddled together on the sofa, with the warm afternoon sun coming through the window, a fragrant wind coming into the room, some soft music coming from the aud-unit, and wrapped in a blanket.

“Is that your plan of attack?” She uttered from his chest.

“I’ll go high, and you go low, and we’ll meet at the rendezvous location in T-minus thirty?” He gently teased.

“Deal.” She began to detact herself from his embrace. “And…go.”

Mara grabbed the available pillow off the bed, and saw that he had grabbed a blanket.

She walked into the main living area, sat on the sofa, placed the pillow in the corner, and flipped on the aud-unit until she found her collection of classical music, and started to play softly.

Luke adjusted the settings on the window grid, walked over to Artoo, giving the droid instructions to wake them in two hours, and then joined her at the sofa.

She yawned, just realizing how tired she must have been.

He lay down first, behind her, resting his back against the frame of the sofa. She lay down beside him, her back pressed against his chest. Her arm slipped under the pillow to find his hand. He placed his chin on the side of her head, wrapped them both in the blanket; under the blanket he draped his arm at her waist.

“We do this really well.” He said.

“We had practice.” She said, closing her eyes.

He snorted. “Yes, we did….lots of practice.” He closed his eyes, enjoying her closeness. “Which one was your favourite?” He whispered.

Her breathing became regular. “I think it’s still the first one…the canyon.” All of his talk about Wayland must has summoned the memory of the night they had slept beside each other. The best sleep she had in years. “I want to see it someday…in person.” She whispered back.

<You will.> He sent over to her. <I promise.>

There was no need to travel any place in their dreams together, so long as they were together in the here and now. Each moment was a gift, and they knew it.

Slumber came to them in their home. Together.

**

Mara awoke slowly; the music still played in the background, but now she had the blanket and sofa to herself.

She reached out her senses, searching for him.

He was nowhere to be found, just his droid hovering beside the sofa, guarding over her.

“Artoo? Where’s Luke?” She asked as the haze began to fade. She yawned and stretched, sitting up.

The little droid bleeped and twittered, rotating his dome as he wheeled over to the aud-unit.
As the music played, a particular electronic symphony, the astromech whistled along with it, to her amusement.

“You like that music, do you?” She smirked, watching a droid rock back and forth with the tempo and melody.

Mara didn’t bother to worry herself at the missing Jedi; if the droid wasn’t worried, then she wouldn’t worry either.

She pulled the blanket around her body, getting up. She walked over to the large alcove window, and looked out.

Inhaling deeply; the smell of the jungle filled her nostrils; fresh, new, moist, alive, thriving.

The flora was starting to come alive; the winter dormancy period must be over. The tree tops promised to be a vibrant green; the green he promised were the colour of her eyes.

She smiled; thinking of how he could break down her walls so easily.

Closing her eyes, she rested her head against the frame; feeling at peace in the moment.

“Mara…” He called. “Kitten…I’m home.” He came through the door; it was him, but yet it wasn’t. “You should have seen it…classes today… those new students have real potential.” He took off his boots, looking at her, wearing one of his Jedi tabard, lightsaber on his belt. “And Leia’s kids are really picking up their new curriculum.”

He came closer, and Mara could see he was a slightly different version of himself, perhaps a bit older.

“And how’s my beautiful wife?” He smiled sweetly, as he came closer.

She felt a ‘pull’ on her self-sense and felt detached; a figure of herself moved towards him. She became an outside observer.

The other version of herself turned, and she could see herself with a swollen belly, as he came into caress and hold her.

“Hello Farm boy! We’re fine. The nap did me some good.” The other version of her answered. “Both of us…now, we’re just hungry.” The ‘other her’ took his hand and guided it over her belly.

He came for a kiss before looking down, watching their hands. He bent over. “Don’t worry, little one…” He said to her belly. “You’ll be in classes soon too.” He looked back up at her. “How did your comm call go with Karrde this morning? Were you able to get that routing problem solved?”

The ‘other her’ smiled. “I was able to negotiate the new contract and the runners should have no problems with the tariff ports. So…yes, I had a successful morning too.” She tipped her head to come into contact with him, and kiss him.

Mara gasped loudly, eyes flying open, pulling herself out of the vision. The images dissolved immediately. She held her chest and breathed heavily, trying to regain herself in the present. It had felt so real; she could feel his touch, the child inside her, in the same place where she was now.

This vision, although not expected, left her feeling loved, truly encompassed in love, and happiness, the likes she had never known before.
She looked around the room, and the thought dawned on her; this was going to be their home. *Their home*—She repeated it. Where they were going to live, and have their lives happen. Whatever was going to come their way, this would be the place where it would happen.

She swallowed down the feelings that were threatening to over-take her.

Mara turned to look out across the jungle again, to get her bearings. The breeze, the view; all brought calm to her again. She could feel the peace returning.

The door to the residence opened slowly, and Luke returned – as he was now; she pinched her arm quickly, just to make sure.

Somehow, as she had slept, he managed to untangle himself, get dressed and retrieved dinner for both of them.

His face brighten when he saw her by the alcove. He was holding a tray with two meals on it, and walking in the direction of the kitchenette. It must be time for evening meal.

“Hi there! You were sleeping so peacefully, I didn’t want to wake you.” He said with a smile.

She smiled broadly, and quickly moved to be near him.

Luke put down the tray in time to turn and be greeted by her arms wrapping around him, and pressing her lips on him.

<<I love you.>> She sent over her senses.

<I love you too.> He answered, slightly surprised.

As the kiss broke, he mumbled, “Don’t thank me just yet—I think the chemistry students made dinner.”

Mara snorted, and then frowned as she looked at ‘dinner’. “You weren’t kidding.” She said wryly.

“It smells good though, so it can’t taste all that bad, right?” He asked, not entirely convinced.

“I’ve had worse.” She said before she picked up a utensil and scooped what she supposed to be some sort of stew, and offered it to him to sample first.

Luke furrowed his brow. “Scaredy Kitten” He mumbled as he guide her hand to his mouth, and gulped down the spoonful.

He nodded as he thought about it. “Not bad.” He said after he swallowed. “It needs something though…”

He turned and took out what was left of the bread from the morning. “Chemists know how to make bread, but not true for stew.” He said as he reached for a knife.

She snickered at him; her eyes sparkling with love. The feeling from the vision hadn’t left her yet.

Luke raised an eyebrow, sensing this wasn’t her usual playfulness.

He was in the mood to indulge her though, and offered her up a spoonful of the stew which she took, guiding his hand.

Mara suddenly cringed at the flavor, swallowed quickly, and looked around for something to drink.
“What was that?” She shivered.

“It wasn’t that bad. Yoda’s stew was far, far worse…and I ate that for days on end.” He said, surprised that she didn’t like it.

She grabbed a piece of bread and chomped on it, trying to rid her mouth of the taste.

“At least let me put something on the bread before you devour it.” He suggested.

She handed the rest of the piece back to him, and looked at the tray for the other food, and decided that the salad looked acceptable.

Luke worked his magic and handed the bread back to her; clearly the stew was all his tonight.

He filled two glasses of water and handed her one.

As he watched her eat, he still wondered where she put it. She could match him in appetite, but she could take down a meal quicker than he had ever seen, like it was a race.

“Wha?” She said with her mouth full. She gestured to her head with her fork. “Dur tink tin tuntin.”

He dropped his chin and shook his head. “Care to repeat that?”

Mara frowned, became aware that she forgot her manners, swallowed and tried it again. “You’re thinking something.” She raised an eyebrow.

He smiled. “I was just thinking of how much healthier you look since we first met.”

“What do you mean?” she asked before she bit into another piece of bread.

Luke looked her up and down. “Both of us weren’t sleeping well at the time…and that can have an effect on health. I know it did on me.” He met her eyes. “And now, you fill out your jumpsuits a lot better…you just look healthier.”

Her frown got deeper, and her lip twitched to the side. “Are you telling me that you think I’ve gained weight?” She put down the bread, and pushed the salad to the side of the counter top.

She crossed her arms against her chest. “You knew! I told you that my body was going to change after Roche!”

He shook his head. “No, no…that’s not what I meant. Yes, you’re beautiful, and you’re bit more-curvier now, but I like it…I love it…you’re so much healthier now. You were just skin and bones on Myrkrr…you weren’t sleeping, eating ration bars, and stim pills…and don’t think that I didn’t notice.” He warned.

“So, yes, you have gained weight, but in the right way.” He gave her a friendly grin, hoping that she wouldn’t be upset with him. “I’ve put on weight too since I started sleeping better. Leia has been after me for years about it. That shirt you were wearing this morning…that was the size I was when I left Tatooine…I finally grew out of it.”

Mara looked away and then back at him, dropping her arms and picking up the salad again. “I didn’t think anyone noticed the stim pills.” She mumbled, before putting some in her mouth.

As he took a spoonful of the stew, he sent over to her. <I noticed because I cared.>

Luke looked down at the bowl in his hand. The stew did not taste better as you ate more; in fact it
started to taste worse. He abandoned it, and saw that he had half a salad left because Mara had eaten the other half.

She grinned as she handed the remainder of the salad to him, and offered him a piece of bread as a consolatory gesture.

He looked over at her as she started to tidy up the kitchenette; he caught her glancing over at him, smirking.

“Okay, *Kitten*, it’s my turn to ask what you’re thinking?” He watched her like a hawk.

Her big green eyes flirted over her shoulder back at him. “I have an idea.” She said, her voice and movements were cheeky and sly.

Mara turned to him, tilted one shoulder forward, and wearing just one of his shirts, she looked the very essence of coy. “How many drinking games have you played?”

“A few.” Luke said wearily, and watched her, amused; no one could surprise him quite like she could.

“I have an idea for Jedi-drinking game.” She winked. “But without the drink…perhaps we find another way to reward each other?”

She came close to him. “Wanna play?…Oh, and I’ll need pants.”

He narrowed his eyes, appraising how much trouble she had in mind, nodded, and left to go find her a pair of his workout pants.

When he came back, he handed them over to her, and turned around when she went to put them on.

“Luke!” She sighed harshly, “You’ve seen me completely naked…on several occasions, including today…why are you turning around?”

He blushed as he turned back, and shrugged; the farm boy resurfaced at the strangest times.

“What’s your game?” He asked, wanting to avoid her tease.

Mara looked around the room until she saw the cap to one of his water bottles. “Okay, here’s the game…you have to *call* this to you…” She held up the bottle cap. “Without looking at it…and if you do it, you get a kiss.”

“Do I get to see where you place it?” Luke asked, amused at her idea of fun.

“Of course…at this game, I’ll play fair.” She winked. “Oh, and no breaking anything, and no using the Force to move things out of the way.” She held the bottle cap up. “And, in order to go up a level, you have to repeat the last challenge.”

It sounded like an easy game, but Luke could recall that calling items to his hand that he didn’t have a direct line of vision to could be a hard task, especially if the item was small, and especially if things were in the way; he had to think of how the item needed to move around the obstacles.

“And just to be fair, you have to use your right hand.” She added, knowing that his right hand needed some work since having the synth skin replaced on Roche.

“First one who can’t do make it, has to do whatever the other person wants.” Mara smirked wickedly.
He nodded once. “Okay, you’re on. And you get to go first.” He held out his hand for the cap.

Luke took the cap and she watched as he walked into the bedroom, with a direct line of sight, she saw that he placed it at the base of the wardrobe on the far wall, on the floor. He returned to the main living area, and stood beside her.

“Too easy.” She mumbled, turned around, and in a split second the bottle cap flew across the room into her hand at her side.

“Your turn.” Mara walked back into the bedroom, and placed the bottle cap where he had placed it. Before she made it back to the living room, the bottle cap zipped past her on the floor and flew into his right hand, with his back turned.

She walked but beside him, and granted him a kiss.

Luke smiled and chuckled. “I think I like this game.”

He held up the bottle cap, and she watched as he walked back into the bedroom, opened the wardrobe door, still in direct line of sight, and closed the wardrobe door.

He walked back into the living room to stand beside her.

Mara turned around, looked at him.

He could see over her shoulder, behind her, as the wardrobe door opened, and the bottle cap hovered, smoothly flying through the air to her hand as she reached back.

She smirked and walked back into the bedroom, placing the cap inside the same wardrobe, and walked back to him.

She made it back before the cap did this time.

Luke leaned in for another kiss, holding it longer than the little peck from the first round.

He took her hand the led her back into the bedroom. He opened the opposite wardrobe door, showing her his flight gloves resting on the base, and placed the cap in the palm of the glove, and closed the wardrobe door.

He walked ahead of her into the living room.

Mara came back into the room and stood beside him. She humphed once and turned around; her hand reached back. Her eyes went distant for a few seconds, and within a few more seconds, the cap appeared flying in the air to her hand.

“Very good.” He smiled at her.

She glared at him, then smirked. “I know.” She said before she walked into the bedroom, and then came back. “Your turn.”

Luke sighed, and turned his back, facing the kitchenette; his eyes rolled briefly, and the cap appeared, and flew into his right hand. He held it up in victory.

She smirked as she came close to give him his prize; sliding her hand up his chest before she kissed him.
The game progressed as they played nicely for the next few rounds, and the rewards increased in passion.

They each were able to increase the levels of difficulty by making the furniture an obstacle course, and going so far as to included Artoo in the process.

The rewards now, not only included a kiss but full touching of each other to the point that if either one of them was to lose, it truly wouldn’t be a loss if it meant indulging the other one’s fantasies. The only thing that the victor would really claim would be pride and ability, and, of course, bragging rights.

Even Luke had to admit that they were now at a level where he questioned his ability to first, remember the full course, and second, wondered if he could get the cap to still come to him.

She had done the previous round of the challenge and was now watching if he could pull off the new portion. She crossed her arms over her chest, and was biting her knuckle, rocking back and forth in anticipation that he couldn’t do it and she would win.

He glanced over at her while she smirked. “What happens if I don’t make it?” He asked, not truly afraid, but she could be creative when she wanted to be.

Mara raised an eyebrow. “I told you before: drizzle berry jam and stun cuffs. Quit stalling Jedi.”

He frowned, turned to face the wall between the kitchenette and the alcove, and cleared his mind, his eyes rolled back and his right hand reached out.

The wardrobe door opened- the cap came out of the hand of the glove- the wardrobe door closed- the cap slid across the floor- under the bed – back to the far wall of the bedroom- back under the bed- back to the wardrobe- it slid up against the out wall of the bedroom- into the living room- serpentine around the legs of the sofa- the cap zipped under the holo-unit stand- into the ’fresher- back into the living room – around Artoo three times – into the far wall of the kitchenette- the cap zig-zagged against the cupboards until it came out – and flew directly into his hand.

“Woo Hoo!” Luke raised his hands over his head, celebrating his win. “Alright Jade…you’re turn.” He beamed over to her, holding up the bottle cap.

She shook once. “Fine.” She snarled and went over to the wall where he had just stood, and turned to face it.

He came back from the bedroom where he had placed the bottle cap inside the wardrobe, and in the palm of the hand of his glove- the unofficial starting point of this challenge.

“The crowd waits in anticipation, as Jade steps into position…” He gave is best holo-reporter voice. “And what is on everyone’s mind is…Can she do it?”

She looked over her should to glare at him. “Can it, Skywalker.” She growled. “I can do it.”

Mara closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, concentrated, and reached back her hand.

The wardrobe door opened- the cap came out of the hand of the glove- the wardrobe door closed- the cap slid across the floor- under the bed – back to the far wall of the bedroom- back under the bed- back to the wardrobe- it slid up against the out wall of the bedroom- into the living room- serpentine around the legs of the sofa- the cap zipped under the holo-unit stand- into the ‘fresher- back into the living room – around Artoo two times – into the far wall of the kitchenette- the cap zig-zagged against the cupboards until it came out – and flew directly into her hand.
“Ha!” she cheered as she turned around, holding the cap up. “In your face Jedi!”

She walked over to him, intent on stirring him up again with a full-on kiss, with hands roaming, as their prize for reaching this level.

Luke held up his hand. “Ah-ah-ah.” He said stopping her. “I’m going to have to call on the judge to make a ruling…”

She gasped at him, with her mouth open.

“Judge?” He asked. “Did she complete the circuit accurately?”

Artoo came to life from his statute position, beeped in their general direction, and then his dome rotated back and forth; shaking his head, and giving a sad whistle.

“What?!” She frowned and walked over to him and his bias droid. “I completed the circuit.” She pouted.

“Judge?- Can we have an instant replay please?” He said.

Artoo tilted forward and the blue light from his projector beamed a holo of the course in action, replaying her run. He paused the vid before the cap was to travel around him, as he had caught her mistake too, and played the remainder of the vid slowly.

“As you can see here, in slow motion, the cap travels around the droid only two times, not the required three.” Luke had put on his holo-reporter voice again. “And you know what that means…”

“Gggrrr!” Her body shook with her fists at her sides, and then snorted angrily. “It means you won.” She murmured, as she mock-glared at him.

“That’s right, I won!” He crowed.

Artoo played a little fanfare.

“Luke Skywalker has won the First-Ever, Jedi Bottle Cap Obstacle Course!” He bowed to an imaginary audience. “And the crowd goes wild!” He cupped his hands over his mouth to make the sound of applause.

She turned back to him, trying to keep her glare, and losing her frown; he was just so adorable when he got excited about something.

“Alright, alright…you won.” Mara looked at him with a distinct level of desire in her eyes. “What do you want as your prize Jedi Bottle Cap Obstacle Course winner?”

“Ooh.” He blue eyes darkened right in front of her. “I’ve been thinking about this one for a while….can’t stop thinking about it, really.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Have you now?”

Luke walked over to her, wrapped his arms around her waist, as she crossed her arms across her chest, refusing to hug him back.

He leaned over to whisper in her ear, but exhaled once on her earlobe because he knew she couldn’t resist it. “I want to see you dance again…for me….just for me.” He said in a low tone.

Mara tried, but she couldn’t help it- when he used that tone; she shivered. She turned her head to
look directly into his eyes.

“Like you did on Tanaab.” He said quietly, distinctly, holding her closer.

She relaxed her arms and slink them around his neck and pulled him close. “Okay.” She seductively hissed. “You win.”

Leaning in to kiss him, she sucked on his bottom lip before releasing him.

“I need to do a few things…” She purred.

Luke smiled, as he could sense the wheels turning in her mind. “Okay, I’ll be right here.” He gestured to the sofa, before he let go of her.

He sat down, and watched her as she got the room ready; he was tempted to close his eyes, but she didn’t take too long in the living room.

Mara turned on the aud-unit, queued up her song choices, paused it, and handed him the control.

Walking over to Artoo, she guided the droid aside, and whispered instructions to him.

Then, she walked towards the bedroom, paused at the doorway, winked at Luke, and disappeared; the door closed behind her.

Luke could hear some noise from within the room, and then a few minutes later, he could feel her sense reaching out to him.

<<You can dim the lights now, ask Artoo to do his thing, and start the music…>>

He obliged and sat back down on the sofa, with his legs stretched out, facing the wall with the alcove.

Artoo projected a spotlight to the bedroom door, and the music had a steady, languid beat.

He smiled as her bare foot peaked through the door, revealing a bare calve, and watched as the foot stroke the corner of the door, teasing.

Mara stepped through the threshold, wearing his orange flight suit. She had piled her hair back up with her comb.

Luke chuckled a bit, never thinking of the flight suit as sexy, until he saw her move her body, and then he attention was drawn on her; amusement fading to desire.

The beat of the music made her move in tempo; slinky and in positions that showed off her flexibility.

Her hips swirled, and she started to pull down the front zipper; locking eyes with him. A sly smile came to her lips.

She turned away, removing the corner of the flight suit, to reveal a bare shoulder; the skin that he yearned to kiss, and then pulled the fabric back up.

Turning to face him, she raised one hand above her head, and the other hand dragged the zipper lower, still twisting her hips.

She brought both hands to her chest and clasped her breasts before she grabbed the sides of the
zipper and pulled the flight suit open to reveal that she was wearing the jacket to his khaki fatigues.

Luke snorted once, still captivated by her movements; feeling his body harden.

Mara stripped off the shoulders of the flight suit, tying the sleeves just below her waist.

As she raised her arms up, he could see the flat of her bare stomach and the ridge of her abs.

She was now using the edge of the sofa; she turned and braced her arms on the ledge, arched backwards, and with first few buttons undone on the jacket, he could see the round mounds of the tops of her creamy breasts as gravity pushed them up.

There was about a foot of space between his feet and the end of the sofa. She turned in time with the music, stepped over the arm of the sofa and was now kneeling high with his feet between her thighs.

Luke’s breathing was deep and controlled, locked on the sight in front of him.

With one finger, she popped open another button on the jacket, pressed her breasts together; the alabaster skin glowed in the dim light.

She crawled up to his knees and raised herself up again, rotated her hips, and popped another button from the jacket.

Suddenly modest, she feigned her attempt to keep herself from revealing more skin. While one hand held the front of the jacket closed, the other hand slipped inside and below the waist of the flight suit, simulating touching herself for his pleasure.

She bit her bottom lip and rolled her head back, and then locked eyes with him; deep dark hunter green, pupils dilated.

Mara was within arm’s reach; she knew he was controlling himself and enjoying watching her.

She popped the last button on the jacket; it held in place as her hands came back and rubbed up and down her sides as she lowered the waist on the flight suit exposing the bare skin of her abdomen, parallel with her hips.

Crawling a bit farther up his legs, she now straddled over his clearly hardened cock; straining, wanting to be inside her instead of his trousers.

Her eyes flickered down to see his hands clenched in fists at his sides, craving to touch her, denying himself.

She rocked and rotated her hips, mimicking the motions of riding him, and growing in speed, casually brushing up against his monumental bulge.

As the intensity in the heated contortions grew, simulating her climax, she reached up and pulled the comb from her hair, letting the tresses fall in orgasmic chaos. Her shoulders pushed her chest forward and her arms back as the jacket slid off her arms, revealing the black lace bustier.

Luke moaned; his face in anguish. So close but denying himself still.

It was time for her to touch him, rewarding him for being such a good boy.

Her hands moved to the sides of his groin, and slipped under his shirt. She dipped her face to meet just above his encased manhood, made eye contact, and as she pushed the fabric of his shirt up, she breathed hot air on his skin up the middle of chest. When she got to his collarbone, he aided her by
removing the shirt over his head and tossing it aside.

Mara came face to face with her lover; his pleading lips and hungered expression.

One more motion, and she went to stand. Looking down on him, she rotated her hips one more time, and with a flick, the bottom of the flight suit fell, exposing the golden-red curls covering her womanhood at his eye level.

Luke closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply; the sweet, delicious aroma of his woman.

In seconds, his hands reached out, no longer denying himself, taking her down to the sofa; he moved with expert speed, and she was prostrated before him, his fingers were unexpectedly deep inside her, coaxing her already damp core.

Mara wailed to the open air at the glorious sensation.

“So wet…so perfect …” Luke hissed before he descended on her mouth, pummelling her mercilessly with his fingers as she moaned.

His available hand yanked at his waistband to free himself, as he sucked at her lips and watched her writhe, panting and moaning his name.

Luke removed his saturated hand from between her legs and with a throaty grunt, deliberately thrust himself into her just once and held her there, torturously.

She was breathing hard and heavy, watching him, watching her as he brought his fingers to his mouth to taste her essence, and savour it.

<So sweet> His mind touched her.

Mara reached to her back and undid the hooks holding the bustier in place, freeing her breasts.

She reached out for him and wrapped her arms around his neck, willing to be taken anywhere he wanted her.

Luke hooked under her legs and lifted her so that they were joined, with her legs around his waist.

He stepped free from his trousers as he stood, and carried her to the bedroom.

Against the first available wall, he planted her and pushed himself deeper inside her as she moaned at the movement.

Rigid, thick and relentless, he plunged into her bucking hips repeatedly.

In the rage of their lust, she found his mouth, feverishly pursing on his lips wanting more and more of him.

He broke only to touch foreheads with her, breathing in unison.

She heard his mind. Mine! Mine! Mine! He mentally grunted with every force into her.

It thrilled her, knowing he wanted her so badly and knowing she did, in fact, truly belong to him of her own free will.

Then she heard his other thoughts. Gods, I love you…I’ve never loved anyone as much as I love you….please don’t leave me…never leave me…never…please…be mine…forever…
Mara responded by releasing her voice into the air. “I love you Luke…only you…always you…” And her climax hit with such startling intensity that it surprised her as her body involuntarily spasmed in pleasure.

“Gods!” He bellowed, feeling her rapture. He took her to the bed, laying her down, and in several more jettisons with his pelvis, he feral growled as he erupted his semen into her walls.

They struggled for air, dazed and enthralled, just looking at each other, and periodically kissing the other’s lips.

The Force whirled around them as it always did after reaching their pinnacle; bringing joyous peace.

This time, there was something different; there was no draw, no crave to reach out in the moment and call on the energy field that fed off the very life of the galaxy. It was around them, among them, between them, almost tangible.

As Mara looked at Luke, she could see the energy field around him, beckoning her to join her soul to his; granting them permission.

He must have felt it too; his eyes wide, stunned yet transfixed that the Force was allowing their joining, their union, and their bond.

Then, Luke felt it; the cool sliver of fear from her, and her shields came up, breaking the flow of the energy, ending the possibility.

He felt betrayed by her until he looked into her eyes, seeing the tears forming.

She understood what could have transpired between them—something that was too grand for her, and too much for her to take.

“I’m sorry.” she whispered, hurried. “I’m not ready, Luke…I’m so sorry…I’m not ready.” The tears left her eyes, falling back into her hair line, as she was still trying to recover from their passion.

She might have been able to accept belonging to him, but that had been an accessible goal. A bond in the Force was just too much to ask of her right now.

He dropped his head and nodded; he understood—they both weren’t ready yet.

He lifted his gaze, and looked on her, reassuringly, and stroked her cheek, removing the trails on the side of her face.

Luke cupped her cheek tenderly and came in to kiss her. <When you’re ready.> He sent over to her, along with his desire to make her happy and never to fear that he didn’t care for her.

He sighed, and rolled to his side, holding her tight to him, and waited for her to relax.

He looked out the window at the darkened sky over the forest; his heart ached. Their time was almost over.

Mara sighed and looked up into his crystal blue eyes; he smiled bravely to her, not wanting to show her that he would beg her to stay if he knew that it wouldn’t break her heart too.

She nestled down on his chest. With his arm wrapped around her and their hands clenched together on his chest, she started to relax and closed her eyes.

“I love you, Luke.” She uttered as if the words were sacred.
He closed his eyes, nuzzling the soft curls next to his face, imprinting the feel of this very moment that he knew he would have to hold onto until they were together again. “I love you, Mara.” He sighed.

The quiet of the night encroached.

**

He woke up to the dim light of the room, and glanced over.

She was putting in her other diadem earring, and then adjusted the sash of her burgundy velvet dress; looking at herself in the mirror of the wardrobe.

“What time is it?” he said, groggy.

She came close to him, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Time for me to go.”

Mara reached out and stroked some of his hair away from his face before she leaned over to kiss him.

“You were a dream.” He mumbled, and took her hand and kissed it.

She looked at him, rest there, and imprinted the moment on her memory.

“How long is Basic Training?” She asked, looking woefully.

“Two weeks.” He exhaled.

She nodded; knowing that it would probably be much longer than that before they would see each other again.

Luke moved to leave the bed. “I’ll get dressed and come with you to the pad.” He said quietly.

She stopped him. “No, it’s better if you don’t.”

He looked at her, and saw the pain in her eyes; he nodded and relaxed back down into the bed.

“Close your eyes.” She whispered.

He did.

He felt the brush of her lips on his mouth; he wanted to crush her to him, never let her go- but he did.

He did let her go.

<I love you.> He sent over to her.

<<I love you too.>> She sent back.

Somehow their Force auras felt like ripples in the water, meeting each other, changing the pattern and making it more intricate.

And then, she was gone.

Luke lay with his eyes closed, trying to find her but to no avail. He knew she had walled herself up to protect her own feelings; it was still a disappointment.

He lay breathing loudly, trying to find a way to go back to sleep.
Slowly, he felt the touch of her mind one more time.

<<May the Force be with you, My Love>>

He smiled.

**

She landed back on Maridun in record time, placing the Corvette back on the same pad that she had taken it from.

Mara checked her reflection before leaving the vessel. Her hair had a bit more wave to it, but the comb held it in place. She adjusted the diadems earrings. The only thing that gave her away was the pendant around her neck.

She removed it, kissed it, placed it inside the pocket hidden in her dress, and then walked down the ramp.

Without missing a beat, the party was still going strong.

Karrde was speaking with a Crinian and an Ithorian in the corner of the room.

She took a goblet of wine off of a passing tray, and joined him at his side; smiling politely, listening in on the conversation, as if nothing happened.

Karrde smiled over to her as she slipped her arm into his, knowing that she was part of his pretense.

The words, she didn’t hear; her mind was thinking of her time, her mission.

Honesty, she was surprised he was still standing if he had been awake all night. She dreaded the sort of deals were struck while she was away, and the headache of the paperwork that would be before her.

But that was for later.

This was her world- for now.

For now, she would have to find another way to make the ache go away.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Ok...if you were not entertained...then I've got nothing...

That was 64 pages of story! --27,000 words! Seriously!

Now...my hands hurt...if you'll excuse me, I'll be over here...making cosplay. :P

:)
Chapter Summary

Quote: Wedge looked up from his terminal. “It’s like I’m expected to be your personal social director…then did you start getting invites for senator’s birthday parties? Do they always ask for ‘Rent-A-Jedi’ these days?”

Characters: Luke, and Rogues ~wink!

Chapter Notes

**
I got nothing…it’s going to be plot for a while sweeties…but don’t worry my little smutlings, it will be back soon.
I promise. ~wink
Still, try to enjoy it…picture Luke in his fatigues from Empire Strikes Back, and we’ll get through this smut-drought together.

**

Coruscant- Day 1 as a Rogue again

Each planet had its own smell. Luke knew this from his days travelling for the Rebel Alliance.

In fact, it was the first thing he did wherever he got off a transport; to inhale deeply and assess his surroundings.

Coruscant was no different. It was mixture of dank pollution, cement, steel and artificially beautified spaces. But no one noticed because it was The Capital after all, and people were able to forgive its impersonal air.

Coruscant hadn’t changed much since he had left it; it never did. It could move as fast as it wanted, but in essence, nothing really did change.

Fashions and fads moved fast here, but little did anything else, and since those things didn’t concern him, he didn’t really take them into consideration.

Politicians and their staff still moved around the corridors of power with ambivalence. People were still in their own worlds, with their own goals.

The only thing that had changed was the tone.

When Luke first moved to the galactic capitol, people were optimistic and willing to start new, but that was a little more than two years ago.

Now, people were leery, and waiting for the sky to fall on them.
He could feel it as they walked past him.

As much as the government was pushing the message that The Capital was a safe place; people knew otherwise, and couldn’t be swayed.

The public transport dropped him off within a short distance to the Palisade Apartments.

He was alone for the first time in twelve days. He had started two days behind everyone in Basic Training, and was thrown into it from the start.

It had been good for him. He remembered what it was like to have a regimented schedule again.

It was strange to watch the new recruits; most of them were about the same age as he was when he blasted off Tatooine.

He had started to notice how much and how little the galaxy had changed since then. And as he aged and changed, the issues of the galaxy didn’t.

He had noticed it when he was on Yavin, with the university students, but it was during training that he truly felt the difference.

The cadets were new and fresh and didn’t have a clue as to what they had gotten themselves into.

The one thing that Luke could admire was the pride they felt; he had felt it too- the first time he got his fatigues, the first rank badge awarded to him, and just the knowledge that he was trying to make a difference.

Those who didn’t recognize him, regarded him with odd curiosity – the older guy with something to prove.

When the tags and uniforms with name badges arrived, he could feel the air change around him, as he put on his new fatigues; the ‘Skywalker’ name stood out like a blinking sign, even more so, when his rank badge arrived.

As he put on the new fatigues, things just seemed to fall in-line for him.

By the last day of training, those around him had started to loosen up, but he was glad to be heading to the Rogue’s hangar today.

Artoo had been sent ahead of him to go through his own sort of ‘training’; mainly to get a good cleaning and systems analysis, to see if he needed any upgrades to meet the current specs of astromech droids.

With Luke’s clout and insistence by Wedge, Artoo was going to avoid the memory wipe that was protocol. However, that came at a cost.

Due to the sensitive information placed in the little droid, it was decided that Artoo needed to be outfitted with self-destruct capabilities- a thought that Luke didn’t relish, but was willing to make the concession if it meant getting to keep his droid, memory intact.

Luke was due at the Rogue Hangar in the next three hours, and he was given some time to do some necessary things to get the rest of his life in order.

He walked through the foyer of the apartment building that he had once called ‘home’; wheeling a large transport case behind him.
It felt vague and not much more than just a residence; impersonal, just like the city.

Inside, he stopped and looked around his apartment; it was just as he had left it before he had headed to Dalcretti.

He walked around the rooms collecting things that he would want to come join him on Yavin IV, as that was his home now.

Sadly, he was hoping to make his home here on Coruscant, but life changes.

He could at least appreciate the work he had done to decorate it, and why he had made the effort. If only briefly, it felt like a home.

Mara had enjoyed the changes he made; he was trying to show her that she belonged in his world too.

In the bedroom, Luke stopped and picked up the Storm Glass sculpture, and wrapped it gingerly in some clothing that he packed.

He knew Yavin was lacking in personal touches, and this one piece of art would make it more like a home than it already was.

Before he left, he looked into the shipping bin and saw that there was more room than he had expected.

Luke hadn’t planned on it, but no reason why he shouldn’t make an unscheduled stop – it was on his way to the shipping depot.

No one even noticed him in the lobby of the Ambassador Suites and he made it up to Mara’s apartment with no issues.

He had once asked if she wanted anything from there as well; she professed that she didn’t want or need anything from the place. A life on the run, taught her not to attach any feelings for things that couldn’t be packed up within minutes.

Her apartment felt different from his residence. Whereas his apartment was just a place to live, her apartment was a place where they had made memories.

He paused and reflected when he stepped out on the balcony at Mara’s apartment.

As he leaned on the railing, and the wind whipped by, he was taken back to their first night together. He hadn’t planned it; it just happened in the moment, and it was more than anything he could have hoped for. And she was…Gods…incredible.

Since their last night together on Yavin, they had found ways to communicate. Every other night, Luke had a comm message waiting for him on his personal channel.

She knew that all of his communications were being watched and read, so written between the lines that she wrote, was what she really intended.

“Shopping trips” meant that they were running deliveries, and any type of “weather report” would tell him how they were doing.

According to Mara, Karrde was running operations and trying to consolidate the various smuggler gangs to work together as one bigger unit.
Mara didn’t like it; she thought it was more trouble than it was worth, but it was a good shot at keeping the peace and not to start a smuggling war while fighting off the new Imperials.

She didn’t feel like going through the regular system yet, even though with her special status would allow for direct communications, she refuse to do it; still not trusting the New Republic.

Mara was also able to get information from Leia, as she recently been to the Resistance base.

Leia was doing much better and Han was helping Karrde; Jaina had learned three new words, and Jacen was trying to catch up to her.

Anyone reading the messages that she sent would think that everything was on the up and up.

He knew that she was only sending what information she could, but at least she was communicating with him, and it made him miss her much less.

In her bedroom, he stopped at the bedside table, and picked up the small box that rested there.

Luke looked at it with fondness, remembering how she had made it levitate, and they played with it, floating in front of them, in perfect order, as they basked in the afterglow of making love.

One more look around the place, and despite her insistence, Luke made the executive decision that her side of the closet on Yavin needed some things in it.

He packed some of her clothing that he felt would be appropriate for life on the small jungle moon, into the available space in the shipping bin.

He was trying, since she had left Yavin, not to wallow in missing her. It was not going to do any good to constantly think about her…and her wry snarky side that still came out when he least expected it, the giggle that she felt safe to do just in front of him, the way her hair would wildly curl naturally after a shower, her adorably wicked smirk, her beautiful eyes, her soft mouth, her skin like velvet, and the way he needed her too.

Satisfied, he sealed the shipping container and headed to the shipping depot.

With the container sent off, and rucksack over his shoulder, Luke stopped to check his comm.

He frowned, and looked around. Getting his bearings, he knew he had time to do one more thing before he was expected to show up for duty….and admittedly, it was on his way.

Sighing, he knew it was a long shot, but Mara had mentioned it on her visit. It had been sitting at the back of his mind since then.

_Vader…Vader’s Estate._ Those were the words she had used.

The Property Register’s Office stood between the shipping depot and the Rogues’ Hangar, and the walk was relatively short.

With no excuses left, he decided it was time to stop in, and make the necessary inquiries.

Luke wasn’t an unknown in Coruscanti society, and several people recognized him when he stepped into the Office. He did get several glances just for the look of his uniform alone.

Perhaps the tabloids neglected to mention that he was returning to service.

After being handed to one person after another, he was directed to follow a representative into one of
the smaller offices. It turned out his inquiry sparked several interested parties.

He knew that he wasn’t going to get all the answers he wanted – these things take time, even in the most efficient situations.

Luckily, Luke came prepared. He had contacted the law firm that had represented Mara during the Bremem hearings, and they would gladly represent him if he needed it.

They asked him to fill out the necessary documents, explaining it would take some time before they could find out the contents of the estate for either Anakin Skywalker or Lord Darth Vader.

However, the assessor was able to tell him that there was an estate file for General Anakin Skywalker which had never been processed through escrow as a descendant had never been discovered, but the estate had other entries added to it after the establishment of the Empire.

Once again, he would have to wait until all the documents could be released by the courts before he could view them.

Luke thanked them for their help and left the information for his lawyer, should the assessor have any questions.

With a red stamp and the rote phrase of ‘four to six weeks’ for an answer, he witnessed bureaucracy at its best.

As he left the Office and made his way to the hangar, he didn’t want to think of the implications of either estate. He had always assumed that there would nothing left of either one, so he never even considered it.

There was no point in considering it now, at least until something was discovered.

The cloud that had descended on him, talking about his father, was starting to lift. It was a reasonably nice day for the Capital, and the walk was pleasant.

It seems that a walk in the present was also going to be a walk into his past.

Luke passed the security check points as he entered onto the military installation.

The main door to the hangar opened smoothly after Luke touched his new key fob to the sensor; it felt like coming to a different type of home when he walked onto the deck. He recognized this life immediately, and his place within it.

Wing pilots were running laps on deck, a pit crew was working on an X-wing in the corner, and squads were learning maneuvers around a white board; there was a precision here that he sorely missed.

He knew he was no longer a civilian with special clearance, so his first stop was to get his boarding assignment and meet with his commanding officer.

Luke made his way directly to Wedge’s, um, Commander Antilles’ office.

The door was open and he could hear part of a conversation as he waited for permission to enter the office.

“…I don’t care where those spanners got shipped to!” Wedge yelled into the receiver of his comm unit. “I needed them here three days ago! We have assignments, and I’ve had a put crew on hold
since then.”

Wedge paused for moment. “Just get them here!”

Luke watched from the window, seeing Wedge slam the receiver down, he waited, counting to ten in his head, and then cleared his throat.

The Corellian turned his chair around to see his new recruit, and smiled, motioning him into the office.

Luke dropped his rucksack and saluted his commanding officer. “Lieutenant Skywalker reporting for duty Sir.”

“Really?” Wedge said, nonchalantly. “Is this what we’re doing today? You’re going to give me grief now too?”

Luke didn’t break into a smile, but he wanted to, knowing that Wedge found this as ridiculous as he did; he kept up the pretense. “No Sir. I have no intention of giving you grief, Sir.”

He kept up his salute as well; knowing that he was not allowed to relax the salute until it had been returned.

Wedge leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms on his chest, thoroughly tempted not to return the salute, just to see how long his old friend could keep it up.

Instead the Commander grimaced and returned a hap-hazard salute. “At ease Lieutenant.” He said snidely, and glared at the Jedi. “Do you want permission to take a seat too?”

“Just trying to make a good impression, Sir.” Luke smirked as he assumed a relaxed position, arms behind the back, and legs in a ready stance, and still very proper.

Wedge rolled his eyes. “Okay, okay…I get it…here’s your standing order, Lieutenant…don’t you ever get this fancy on me again…I’m not calling you ‘Commanding Officer’ or ‘Sir’ unless on deck…now, take a damn seat!”

The Jedi was getting his rocks off by teasing his friend; knowing that neither of them was inducted with the sort of formality that they had to adhere to now.

“Aye-aye.” Luke chuckled as he dropped down into the seat beside Wedge’s desk. “Far be it from me to disobey a direct order.”

Luke took a good long look at his friend; some people just were meant for bureaucracy, and Wedge just wasn’t one of them. “How ya doing, Wedge?”

At least Luke could still make him smile, though this time Wedge smirked, not quite ready to forgive his friend for being so formal with him. “Which answer do you want? The ‘Commanding Officer’ answer, or the ‘friend’ answer?”

Luke chuckled, starting to feel the tension leave the room. “Let’s start off with the ‘friend answer’ –I have a feeling that I’ll be spending more time with the ‘Commanding Officer’ for the next while.”

“Good.” Wedge moved his hover chair to look out his window onto the deck to see who’s around, and with a wicked glint on his eyes, he triggered the window tint, and closed the door.

Without a second thought, the CO reached into his lower drawer to retrieve a bottle of Whyren’s
Reserve and two small shot glasses, filled each in turn, and placed one in front of Luke.

With one raised eyebrow, Luke watched the other man throw it back, not touching his offering. “Not even midday…” He mumbled.

Wedge shivered after the shot went done. “Well, I’m good…the guys are good…Iella is great.” He smiled widely at his friend. “She accepted the rings, and now I have to find a way to buy a bigger ring.”

Luke chuckled. “That’s great, Wedge! When did this happen?”

The Commander easy back into his chair. “Last month…her divorce came through and I wasted no time in asking.” Then he leaned forward, to show his friend his left cheek. “You can hardly see where Horn hit me before I popped the question to her.”

Luke briefly remembered what Mara had told him about Corellian wedding traditions, and the blows that had to be thrown in the name of tradition.

Wedge leaned back to relax. “What about you? How’s the family? Leia, Han…twins?” He paused, and smirked. “Jade?”

Luke leaned back in his own chair. “Family is great…twins are walking and talking. Han is good. Leia is getting by.” He knew he had let a woeful tone drop with his last statement, and he knew Wedge had caught it as a concerned look came to his brown eyes.

“Leia” Luke sighed. “Since the news hit about Vader…it’s been hard for her, both professionally and personally.” He touched his face, and looked back at his friend. “She’s pregnant…so I get to be an uncle again.” He smiled.

Wedge smiled back, but in the Jedi’s eyes there was something bitter-sweet; something he was not ready to talk about.

Luke smiled again at his friend; his eyes lighting up. “And Mara…she’s good, we’re good…better than good.”

“Yeah?” Wedge nodded, understanding.

The Jedi blushed, and looked away. “Yeah, there were three very important words that were said, and we’ve set up living arrangements on Yavin.”

Wedge sat up in his chair, at attention, surprised. “Really? You’ve shacked up with her?”

Luke smiled the broadest smile he could muster. “I wouldn’t say ‘shacked up’…when she can stop by, which isn’t very often, but, yeah, we’re going to try living together.”


But a shadow came over the Commander’s face and things got silent for a moment before he asked quietly. “Yavin?- how was it going back?”

Luke dropped his head. He knew that his friend couldn’t bring himself to go the base that had been his home before the battle.

Wedge had been on Yavin IV much longer than Luke. He had made friends with the other pilots and wings that were sent up to the Death Star, and didn’t return.
Wedge’s pain was different than Luke’s, but no less significant.

“It was hard...” Luke mumbled. “…passing through the debris field…I’m not going to play it down.” He lifted his head to make eye contact with one of the few pilots to make it back with him.

“But the base…” He finished. “In some ways it’s just like it was. With all the university students there, it’s different. It’s like it has a new life to it.” His lips drew a tight line. “It feels appropriate to have so much life there that isn’t there preparing for a fight. And the students…” He paused. “…they know what happened there and are respectful.”

Wedge looked away, and considered Luke’s words, then, returned, grinned tightly.

They both knew that all a soldier ever wants; is for their sacrifice to be remembered…that’s all.

They sat for a few more moments, looking at nothing.

Wedge broke the tension by snorting once, nodded. “Alright...And now for business.” He said sternly before reaching across his desk, taking the neglected shot of Whyren’s back and poured it into the bottle, before putting the bottle away.


Wedge looked at him with all seriousness, shaking his head. “I can’t have my Lieutenant drinking the first day on the job.”

Luke just rolled his eyes, and snorted. He knew that Wedge took his job very seriously and everything else was fair game.

The Corellian sat up right in his chair. “So, I gotta say I’m surprised that you didn’t take back your old commission...what’s up with that?”

There was no other way to explain it, and Luke knew he could talk freely in here. “It just didn’t seem fair when Madine asked.” He said blankly. “They should have made you a General a long time ago.” He muttered. “It just didn’t feel right.”

Wedge nodded. There a loyalty that no one could break and he should have known that the Jedi would have seen this as a test.

“Yeah well, I didn’t want to make my career on making friends anyway. It’s their way of giving me a slap on the hand for making some of the calls that I made, and not playing by their rules.” Wedge grimaced.

“I was wondering what that was about. Madine came in here grumbling about you returning, and then he drops the bomb that you were coming back as ‘First Lieutenant’.” He continued.

“I didn’t ruffle any feathers by coming on as Lieutenant, did I?” Luke asked, concerned. He knew that a structure had been in place for some time, but in Rogue nature, everything worked without any real prevalence of military order.

“Are you kidding?” Wedge chuffed. “You should have seen Jansen’s face light up. He’s hated every moment since he got promoted…and now that you’re here, low man on the totem gets the job. Besides, now I can give you and Tycho each a wing to command, and less problems for me.”

Luke snorted hard and shook his head. “Well, as long as I can be of help.”
“You sure can…that’s your desk, by the way.” Wedge’s face grew a grim smile, and pointed to the adjacent desk. “…the one with all the filmsy on it, and back-ordered recs.”

The desk was over flowing and cluttered with sheets of filmsy in every shape and colour; Luke just simply rubbed his face.

Wedge turned to his terminal, and muttered, “I’ve got you starting in standard sixty; courses, and then on the desk for the rest of the day…just to get your bearings.”

“Your call sign will be ‘Rogue Five’.” He looked up to see the newcomer smiled tightly and nod.

He typed a bit more. “And I’ll send you a copy of your duty roster too. You’ll let me know if you need more time during the day for ‘Jedi things’?- I’ve added them in there, by the way.”

Luke nodded, appreciative for his friends. Wedge must have remembered the time that Luke needed when he was initially training to become a Jedi.

“Hey, and being your CO doesn’t come with any sort of fringe benefits…” Wedge looked up from his terminal. “It’s like I’m expected to be your personal social director….when did you start getting invites for senator’s birthday parties? Do they always ask for ‘Rent-A-Jedi’ these days?”

Luke couldn’t do anything but grimace and shrug; glad that his plan was already working for him, but cringed that it was imposing on Wedge.

“I’ve said ‘no’ to all of them, by the way…maybe they’ll get the hint that we’re on duty and not running a hosting service.” Wedge grumbled.

Wedge stopped and looked over at his old friend. “I don’t know who has got it in for you, but we’ve already got an assignment request for you that I wasn’t sure if I should turn down or not.”


“I haven’t accepted it yet, and thought I’d run it past you.” Wedge looked at him with a frown. “They want you out by the end of next week. It’s running protection duty- you and Hobbie will be escorting a transport back to its home planet.”

Wedge sat back in his chair. “The request came from Fel’ya’s office directly and the delegates asked for you, specifically. They’re from Tatooine. The New Republic is courting Rim Worlds now. I figured that they wanted a chance to meet you and have a photo op for ‘home town boy makes good’.- that sort of thing. It’s a 5 day jaunt; 2 to get there, 1 to shake hands, and 2 to come back.”

Luke raised his eyebrows; it had been a while since he had been back to his home planet. It wouldn’t be an unpleasant trip if they were going to one of the major cities. And he did have some questions that he needed answers to that a side trip just might yield. Still, he didn’t feel the need to jump on it just yet.

“Can I think about it?” He asked.

Wedge just looked over at him and nodded. “Oh, but before you get started, you had better go to your quarters and store your gear…I’ve got you rooming with Horn…unless the Lieutenant has a problem with rooming with a lesser officer?”

Luke could hear the impending dismissal in the other man’s voice. “No problem, whatsoever.” Getting up to leave, he smirked before he headed for the door.
“Better get out there…it’ll make me look bad on your first day if you’re late.” Wedge turned back to his terminal, but gave his friend a true smile.

Luke looked at his duty roster that appeared on his comm, and then back at his old friend, with shock. “You have me running laps in twenty minutes?”

“That’s for calling me ‘Sir’.” And Wedge dismissed him with a lazy salute.

Luke sighed, saluted back and left, shaking his head.

**

Luke pressed the chime on the door before it swooshed open to allow him entry into his boarding assignment.

Corran Horn dropped what he was doing immediately and stood to salute his new Lieutenant.

Luke did the only thing that made sense and saluted him back, before he broke into a smile and mumbled, “Only on deck.”- With a wink.

Horn immediately relaxed back at his desk, turning his chair in the direction of the new comer. “Hey Skywalker, how ya doing?” He said smiling.

His rucksack fell off his shoulder with a ‘thud’ and he looked around the room appraising the details. “Not too bad now that I know who I’ll be rooming with.” Luke looked over at the other man. “How you doing Horn?” He grinned with the familiar sense in the room.

Luke took a closer look around the room. Being a senior officer certainly moved him up a grade.

The space had more room between the bunks, bigger bunks, there was a work station for each person and instead of living out of his rucksack, and he had been granted a rolling chest of drawers.

Horn pointed over to the bunk opposite where he was sitting, indicating where Luke would be resting – it was hard to tell; one shouldn’t be able to tell whose bed was whose if each bed was made properly.

“I can’t complain.” Horn responded. “It doesn’t help if I do. But the wife is good, and the new ‘Boots’ are working out.” He grinned over.

Luke smirked picking up on the lingo, and started to unpack, as he looked back. “So no ‘90 day blunders’ in the new group?”

“How you doing Horn?” He grinned with the familiar sense in the room.

Luke nodded. He had a chance to look over his duty roster and noticed that Wedge had given him the ‘Green Wing’ – Wing B; all the newbies.

Part of him was glad to have that assignment; no bad habits to break. They probably needed lots of work, but they had some time before they were to start running maneuvers in the new few days.

And he had faith in Wedge’s selection process. People didn’t make it onto the Rogues unless they deserved to be there.

“Anything else I should know that the Commander may have missed?” Luke asked as he placed his things in the dresser.
“You mean like, why the whole place is as itchy as a pleechip?” Horn said with darker undertones than Luke expected.

The Jedi looked over his shoulder at the other man. “Yeah, something like that.” He mumbled.

“Blue Squadron lost two taking on a hit-and-fade attack three days ago at Maridun.” Horn said quietly. “The Elomin lost a whole team taking on a Star Destroyer by themselves when they just happened to be out running perimeter checks – just wrong place at the wrong time, you know. And of course you heard about what happen at Ji’nam when the planet put up resistance to the Imperial attack.”

Horn paused. “But then again, these are the things that the Republic doesn’t want getting out.”


He turned to see Horn nodding. “That’s why most of us are here.” The Corellian agreed.

Luke walked away from his dresser only to feel a sudden freeze in the room. It wasn’t a touch of the Dark Side, but rather, surprise, emanating from Horn.

Turning to look at the other man, Luke to could see that his eyes were transfixed at the item on top of Luke’s dresser.

Luke followed Horn’s gaze to his lightsaber, sitting out, proudly, resting in a display cradle.

He turned to his new roommate. “Does it bother you?”

Horn just shook his head uncomfortably, still looking at the item. “I keep mine kept hidden, is all.” His voice almost inaudible. He tilted his head. “Well, it was my grandfather’s…”

Luke grinned tightly. “I had my father’s for the longest time…now, Mara has it.” He explained. “I had an archeologist tell me that they are considered works of art, just as much as they are considered weapons.” He tried to keep his tone as conversational as possible.

“I don’t wear mine on deck….on duty and missions, I do…but never on deck.” Luke included those details just to make Horn relax a bit more.

“I’ve never even turned it on.” Horn finally looked up at the Jedi before and started to realize what rooming with Skywalker would entail, wondering if Antilles knew something or planned this.

Luke turned back and closed his last drawer, having unpacked. “Maybe someday you will.” He said with a shrug.

He may have made a commitment to restart the Jedi Order, but he had promised himself that he wouldn’t train anyone who didn’t want to be trained. If Horn wanted to start on the path, then Horn would have to take those steps, and take the initiative.

“I meditate in the mornings…and before I go to sleep.” Luke said. There was no point in hiding what he needed to do to keep his structure, his peace, his regime and his time that he needed to commune with the Force. “And in the afternoons, or evenings…whenever I can find some time, I work with a training remote and practice my lightsaber skills.”

Horn nodded absently.

“I’ve tried other things.” Horn confessed as he began to relax, sensing that there wouldn’t be the
push that he thought there would be. “Without much luck.” He grumbled.


Horn shrugged, and twitched a bit; unsure if he should be even touching power he didn’t understand. “Um…like moving things.”

Thinking back to his first experiences, Luke snorted quietly. “I think that’s where everyone starts.” He suppressed grinning, thinking back to his time with Mara. “Got a bottle cap?” Their little game would be a great training tool.

“Huh?” Horn looked at him like he was a nerf.

He shook his head. “Never mind… for another time.” He mumbled.

“You’re welcome to join me when you want to…even just to watch.” Luke suggested without any real commitment.

From the expression on his face, Luke could tell that Horn was truly thinking about it.

He looked up at the Jedi, and then grinned serenely. “I just might…I just might.” And nodded.

Luke sighed; relieved that his presence wasn’t going to alienate him from others.

“Well, I am due to run some laps…” Luke began to excuse himself.

Horn started chuckling. “You called Antilles ‘Sir’, didn’t you?”

Luke rolled his eyes, grimaced and then snorted. “You know it.”

Horn gave him a lax salute without getting up.

The newcomer returned the gesture before leaving the room.

**

Luke twisted his torso to the side, feeling the muscles become taunt. He switched sides, and pulled the muscles in the opposite direction.

He had abandoned his jacket by the side of the hangar, where the other jackets were waiting.

He only needed to complete a light jog around the hangar of five laps. Secretly, he was looking forward to them.

The group that was scheduled for the warm-up were going to be his new wing, and this run would give him time to assess them.

Aside from the exercise awakening the mind, it also served to let the runner’s mind to open freely.

Luke knew that infringing on thoughts was not what he was after. He would merely sense who they were as people.

Wes Jansen stepped to the side of the hangar and sounded the bell to signal the start of the run.

As the pace started, the group slowly dropped back behind Luke, even though he was keeping a particularly sluggish pace on his first lap.
He knew immediately why they were doing this.

Once again, his name proceeded him, as well as his rank.

As he ran by Jansen, on his way to way start his second lap, he have him ‘the look’.

Jansen knew exactly what to do. Luke wasn’t the first Lieutenant to have a wing intimidated by his presence and rank.


Soon Luke was being passed, and he could watch them from behind the pack as they ran.

At first, all the sense he could get from the group was general consensus of a sigh at being ordered to pick up the pace.

A fleeting thought cross his mind. To his recollection, he could never remember a time when there was a full house of the Rogues. Now, for some reason they were pushing to have two full wings; twenty five members in total. It would have to be something that he would have to ask Wedge about.

As he ran behind the pack and looked at them individually, he could start to sense the differences. The Sullustan who was proud to be there. A Crinian who reacted out of fear. A female Twi’lek with something to prove. The two Bothans seemed to be in competition only with each other. And as always several hot-shot human males who could now boast that they were Rogue members.

As they ran, their personalities became more apparent as some broke off from the group and ran ahead.

It was those who kept to the pack that Luke was interested in, and he watched the formation that they ran in, judging how they would fly together.

He would make a cohesive team out of them yet.

By the final lap, Luke had started referring to them in his mind by the call signs he would use.

R4 and R5 looked like they’d be able to fly in formation together. While R10 and R12, who ran ahead of everyone, would be the ones to watch to see if they broke with patterns.

As a group they stretched one more time, for a cool down, before retrieving their jackets and heading over to what was called ‘the pit’ for a briefing and study session.

Luke hung back behind the class and watched as Jansen began running through formations.

It was interesting to see that R10 had chosen to sit with R5, and R12 was now sitting with R8; perhaps the lone wolves that he thought he had on his hands weren’t going to pull the group away.

While Jansen spoke, it became clear to Luke that this was his training too.

Although he and Wedge came up with many of these formations, he now had to call them by their rightful names.

The ‘Swooping Mynock’ was replaced by ‘Formation Six’, and attack pattern ‘Delta’ was replaced by ‘Attack Nine’.

So in a way, it was like going back to school for him too, which suited him fine. He would have the night before he was to assume command of the wing. That meant he could read up on all of his new
pilots before he assigned them call numbers.

Jansen was a fine instructor and even spent the final quarter of the class discussing the pros and cons of each maneuver, and fielding questions.

At the end of the session, he looked up to Luke to see if the Jedi had anything he wanted to add. Luke shook his head gently. The class was dismissed.

Jansen smiled over to his friend as he approached, stopped short and saluted the new Lieutenant properly.

Luke kept a stoic face as he saluted the other man. Then, they both relaxed after the last student had walked away...

“So, what do you think of the new wing, Lieutenant Skywalker?” Jansen chuffed over before he smirked.

Luke stuck his tongue in his cheek before he spoke. “You’re not going to let that go are you?”

Jansen raised one eyebrow in an amused way. “You can have the title all you want, but we’re still going to call you ‘Boss’….except when you’re on the desk.” He winked. “Nobody gets any respect working the rec desk.”


“Seriously man….” Jansen grinned. “It’s good to have you back. And all and all, the wing isn’t looking so bad.” He glanced at the pit and then back.

Nodding, Luke said, “There’s some real talent there…I can tell…if they only let go of their egos and start working as a team, this might work.” He paused, hoping for the best. “Have they been in the air together yet?”

Wes shook his head. “Not yet, we’ve been having trouble getting and keeping commissioned ships. And we won’t be getting the new Incomm T’s until we’re called into service.”

“Yeah, they recommissioned my X-wing too.” Luke pursed his lips. “I was hoping to have them up running formations as soon as possible.”

“You thinkin’ of trimming the fat, Boss?” Wes narrowed his gaze.

“Not yet.” Luke replied. “But that all depends on what we’re dealing with.” He looked over at the pit. “You got some hot-shots though….”

Jansen’s face broke into a huge grin and slowly nodded, recognizing the future Rogues. “Yeah, we do.”

Luke snorted once. “Okay…okay…I see that look…I know what it means, and we may have been hot-shots out of the sky when we started, but it sure took us a while to become The Rogues.”

Wes had the good sense just to maintain his knowing smile.

“Now, why don’t you show me that Sarlaac Pit that you called a desk, and then we’ll talk…” Luke mock-glared as he headed in direction of the office.

“Right this way, Boss.” Jansen gladly led the way.
Within the first thirty minutes, Luke had dismissed Jansen as it was clear that he had no idea what had become of his desk before the Jedi turned up.

Luke safely assumed if an order was older than six months and had no delivery to go with it, it was either denied, or it just was never showing up.

That, being determined, cleared a lot of paper off his desk immediately, and put it in recycling.

Silently, Luke wished Mara was here.

The first thing she would have done when she saw the desk would have been to blast the predecessor who had owned this desk between the eyes.

The second thing she would have done, would be to have this desk organized with such efficiency the likes of which the Republic had never seen. He cringed Imperial Efficiency.

Right. He thought, Think like Mara –what would she do?

As soon as he made that his mantra, the office seemed to organize quicker. Eventually, everything had a place, and those things that didn’t have a place, would soon find one after he sat down with Wes one more time.

By the time Wedge swung by the office before evening meal, the desktop was virtually clean, and he stood back in amazement.

The Commander whistled. “Wow, I always wondered if that desk was the same colour as mine.”

Luke leaned back in his chair. “Well, I’m hoping it will stay this way for a while…that is, until we appoint a staff sergeant?” He asked with a raised eyebrow.

Wedge chuckled mildly. “You find it in the budget, and I’ll consider it.”

“We were able to find credits when we had no budget, I’m sure we can find it now.” Luke swiveled back in his chair, and locked down his terminal for the day.

“Is this where I get see the magic show you put on for senator’s birthday parties? Jedi pulls an extended budget out of his hat?” Wedge smirked, know that it was all in good fun.

Luke knew that Wedge respected him as a Jedi, and this was just his way blowing off some steam. “You should see what I can do some balloons and lightsaber….worst balloon animals ever.” He commented wryly.

Wedge smiled with a snort. “Come on Boss, you remember the way to the mess hall? Hobbie still has that hollow leg…better get to the line before he does.”

Getting up from his chair, Luke followed his Commander. “I remember.” He muttered before the door closed on the office.

**

After the meal, on his way to the main deck, Luke walked past the open door of the pilot’s lounge which was full of life.

With his lightsaber clipped to his belt and the training remote under his arm, as much as he wished to
join them, the day had been busy and he needed to clear his mind if he was going to get any sleep later tonight.

He knew that Horn was watching the board tonight, and since the planet was on unofficial high alert, that he would be there all night.

As serious as immanent attack was, Hobbie asked over the meal if Luke would still be able to get into his kit in less than sixty seconds.

It was subtle reminder of what life being ready for action meant. In the back of his mind, Luke truly hoped he be able to do it after all this time.

He needed the time to reflect on what the day had meant, given all the things that had happened and his place in it.

On the main deck, he knew that Horn could see him from the window of the office, while still keeping an eye on the alerts.

The dim lights on the deck made for an excellent outline of where to practice.

Luke set the remote for one hour and switched it on. The little ball came to life, hovering before him.

He backed away, giving himself the space he needed.

Relaxing his mind, he closed his eyes and reached out in the Force; calling the power into himself.

Immediately, he could feel the curiosity coming from the office, and several other minds that he didn’t realize were watching him directly throughout the day.

Secretly, it was only Horn’s attention he was seeking. He had learned this technique when dealing with Mara’s skittish issues; if he just ‘ignored’ her and went about his business, her own inquisitive nature would take over, and she’d be drawn in- but of her own free will.

The same method was proving useful here. Even with his eyes closed, he knew that Horn was standing and looking out the office window, watching him.

Luke pushed all of the other distraction out of his mind, and centered himself. Others could watch, but he was here for his practice and his peace of mind.

The saber ignited with a snap-hiss, and hummed as if it had missed its owner.

The green blade glowed like a beacon in the open area and the sound carried.

Luke had to admit that it had been some time since he had practiced. During Basic Training they didn’t take into consideration any time that he would need, and he had to find a way just to meditate.

The remote spun aggressively as Luke turned to face it.

The little device had been set to run a progressive program; starting off slowly and increasing in speed and requiring more stamina.

It hissed as it moved to the right of the Jedi facing it. Without warning it shot off two quick blasts which Luke deflected with ease, the lightsaber hummed as if it had been awakened.

The sphere rotated left but then zipped back to the right and volleyed a succession of shots; each one being returned in the direction of the remote.
Within minutes the remote was firing high and low shots with a speed that might astound any other person but not Luke; it was refreshing, invigorating and calming him.

He moved around the deck, coming from each direction and responding to each deliverance.

His mind was able to see beyond what was in front of him and the Force flowed easily.

Luke wondered if it was right to feel more at ease, and at peace, in combat than it was during meditation; that’s what it felt like for him.

He could see past the here and now; images and feelings flowed. The snippets of visions echoed in his mind; The Rogues, the new recruits, brief battles, near misses, heavy battles, new friends lost, a flash of Mara, their time together, Leia, Han, and then….

In his mind, he felt it again, the distant Darkness had grown stronger, as if it was pleased with itself that the fear in the galaxy was growing. The cold shiver…

As his practice continued, he was no longer fighting the remote, but the Dark that threatened to encroach on him.

The Darkness he fought just wasn’t the obscure source, he knew, it was in him too.

He had to find the peace and light again, and not sink into the mire. He had the power to control his feelings and the will not to let it overtake him.

Whatever that was happening out in the galaxy would soon be upon him, and he had better be able to defend himself, and others.

In his mind he forced back the Darkness, imagining an influx of light overtaking the dark.

The remote was now putting up a hard fight, blasts shooting fast and relentlessly.

Luke reached back into his mind, thinking of the teachings of Master Ghosse, feeling the crawl of time; he touched the essence that controlled the very pace of space around him, and slowed it down.

He moved at his same speed in the sluggish environment; the blasts moved in slow motion towards him and he was able to deflect them as if they were nothing.

Within what felt like minutes, but he knew were mere seconds, the remote alarmed loudly before it stopped in mid-air, shut itself down and dropped to the floor of the deck with a Clank!, giving up before the timer sounded.

It couldn’t respond to the speed that Luke had been moving at, compared to its sensors.

Luke inhaled deeply and sharply, pulling himself out of trance that he needed to be in to work at enhanced speed.

He breathed hard from the concentration and not from the exertion, but it was easy to misinterpret the signs.

He shut down the saber with a snap-whoosh and placed it on his belt.

As he recovered, he sensed the minds behind him. A group of pilots had left the lounge and were standing at the rail, watching in awe and stupefied.

Luke turned around to see them now, and met some of the faces. Wedge, Hobbie, Tycho and Wes
all were nodding and smiling, as they had seen it before, but still appreciated the show.

Turning to look at the office, Horn’s mouth was agape, but then closed, his eyes drifted then came back up to Luke, and grinned tightly; seeing what he could aspire to.

Luke returned the grin and then quietly walked over to the remote to retrieve it, and walk silently back to his room to go study up on his students for the rest of the night.

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Coruscant- Day 2

Luke made his way to Wedge’s office.

He was due to follow the Commander, along with Tycho, into a general meeting with the New Republic hierarchy.

It wasn’t the first time he had been in a meeting like this, with the red tape flying fast and loose. But it was the first time that he had ever felt the suspicion from the other members sitting in on the meeting.

As soon as Luke entered the room, behind Wedge, an immediate hush fell over the room, and then the whispers began.

It was like a wave that started off quietly, grew in intensity as it went around the room, and then hushed as it got closer to him.

Luke wasn’t oblivious to the rumors; everything from bedding a former Imperial assassin to being the mysterious new leader of the Imperial Infraction, calling himself Emperor. But what he caught in the echoes every so often—Son of Vader, and the words repeated frequently until it boiled down to one word…Vader.

How come they can’t learn ‘Anakin Skywalker’? Luke thought as he took his seat beside Wedge, and opposite Tycho.

The voices died down as Tycho leaned into Wedge, and motioned Luke to come forward. “You would think that they haven’t seen a Jedi before.” The Alderaanian murmured between them, and grinned at Luke.

All three of them knew that Luke’s presence had caused a stir but no sense in indulging them.

The meeting was called to order as General Crix Madine took to the podium.

As he spoke the room didn’t relax, in fact, it got more-tense than it had been already.

More trade routes had been attacked recently by the Imperial Infraction, and the targeted freighters were quite specific as to the goods that they had been carrying; tabanna gas raids, iron ore deposits headed for refining, bacta shipments, and more concerning, water deliveries to drought effected worlds.

Madine spoke of training teams for defensive tactics, and providing protection to transports to dignitaries wishing to return to their home worlds.

Luke could see it in his eyes; Madine was fighting a battle on his front too.

All communications were referring to the recent activity as the Imperial Infraction and minor
skirmishes, rather than calling them by the names that they truly were: the resurrected Empire, and open attacks.

They distinctly played down the level of destruction, and no one wanted to mention the world that had paid the price of resisting.

Ji’nam was still on everyone’s minds, and the words ‘World Devastator’.

Worlds that in the past year were considering becoming part of the New Republic had pulled back behind their borders and began protecting themselves.

Madine was clearly struggling to call things as they are and not mince the nice political landscape. No matter what the General may have thought about him, or his father, Luke could respect the man.

As the meeting broke and The Rogues headed back down the hallway to their hanger, Wedge muttered, “Well, that was nice and vague.”

Tycho cleared his throat while covering his mouth, just in case others were listening. “Why isn’t he talking about the direction he’s heading us in?”

Luke listened while not commenting; keeping his ears and senses open.

“He just doesn’t want there to be mass fear…it just doesn’t help us any…I’m totally expecting-” Wedge broke off what he was about to say as his comm pinged with a message. He looked between the two other men. “Speak of the devil.”

Wedge read the message, and then growled under his breath, and muttered, “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Tycho looked forward as he walked, not betraying his curiosity. Luke mimicked the other man’s composure and gate.

“They’ve pulled Blue Squadron out of action and are moving them to The Liberty.” Wedge said in a low tone.

Tycho hissed as he inhaled. “That could only mean one thing.” He said mimicking The Commander’s tone.

“Yep.” Wedge said in a non-committal way.

The group turned the corner to the safe confines of the Rogue Hangar.

Luke could suddenly sense the rising anger in both men.

“Remind me again of how we make enemies?” Wedge said before leading the group into his office.

Tycho took the chair across from Wedge’s desk, as Luke leaned against the wall; they all waited until the door slid shut.

“They sense an invasion, and are just leaving us here to defend a whole planet while they take their favorites and make a run for it.” Tycho growled now that they were safely inside Wedge’s office.

Wedge sat down and looked over at his two Lieutenants, and then out across the deck. “That’s right—we’re about to be sacrificed because Fel’ya is playing both sides…and Madine knows it but his hands are tied.” He said quietly.
Luke let out a long breath, sensing what he knew would be coming. “But they don’t suspect it just yet. They know they have time.” He added his opinion. “With the disruption of trade routes, they’ll bleed the planet of resources before it happens. And make sure we don’t have what we need.”

It didn’t take a genius to know what was going to happen in the event of an Imperial attack.

If Coruscant was attacked, and the powers that be merely surrendered, that would mean that the military force would fall under the jurisdiction of the new power. And since most of The Rogues were still considered defectors by the Imperial Armed Forces, they would most likely be executed for high treason. So the New Republic would start off by making friends with the arriving Imperials by handing them a bunch of ‘war criminals’.

Wedge looked between the two men. “There’s not much we can do to get off this planet. They’ll be watching our every move.”

“Unless…” Luke added with raised eyebrows. Both men turned to look at him. “…unless we’re called off planet and into duty. We wouldn’t be required to return to base if we were far enough away.”

He let his thought hang in the air before he added. “How many squads can The Liberty hold?”

Tycho and Wedge sat quietly, considering Luke’s words. Even Luke paused trying to remember the size of the Mon Cal Cruiser, and if it had the capacity.

Tycho looked over at Wedge. “Would Madine go for it?”

“I can easily suggest sending Wing B to go get some practice before asking them to return…and if they took their time doing that…” Wedge completed the thought.

Luke soon got the feeling that Fel’ya wasn’t the only one who was playing both sides. Madine may have looked like the poster-child for supporting the New Republic, but he clearly saw the bigger picture if he was willing to work with Wedge and Leia behind the scenes.

“Right.” Wedge said under his breath. “We’ve got time…time to think and time to plan.”

All of them knew the problem couldn’t be solved in that very moment, but it wouldn’t be forgotten.

In the meantime, life went on and appearances needed to be kept up.

It was still on Luke’s mind as he went for midday meal, and he tried not to think about it as he prepared for the afternoon’s training session with his wing of recruits.

Maybe it was what he had heard that morning, or maybe, as he sat listening to Jansen run through the simplest formations, and he sensed that the pilots didn’t quite comprehend the material, that drove his frustrations.

In the middle of training, Luke got up from his seat at the back of the class and stepped forward.

Wes seemed a bit taken a-back as the Jedi stepped to the front, but he knew Luke had his own way of doing things that usually worked out for the better.

“Good afternoon Rogues.” Luke addressed them, and he was met by a “Good Afternoon Sir!” in unison.

“I’d like to start off by having you sit according to your call numbers…” He began.
Luke pointed to a female human and a Crinian. “Sintu, and Balmae – you will be R1 and R2 respectively. Please come and sit up at the front.”

The pilots looked at each other as they were expected to move around.

“N’getuamy and Riegl – you will be R3 and R4.” Luke pointed to the next seats that the pilots should take.

He quickly had them in order and sitting where they should. He sighed before he spoke. “You’ll excuse me if I refer to you by your call signs from now on. Please don’t think that is a lack of respect on my part, or a refusal to get to know you.” He walked to other side of the pit, trying to make eye contact with each pilot. “You are part of a team now. If the team doesn’t succeed, you don’t succeed.”

He walked over to the opposite side of the pit. “Your call number indicates that you are part of that team – it is your safety net while in the air – it is what you are to be identified as during formations and maneuvers. It will save your life during an attack, and it protects your other wing members from being singled out. Failure to recognize your call sign or failure to use call signs for your fellow team members will result in automatic dismissal from this Squadron. Is this clear?”

Luke stopped in front of the class.

“Yes sir. This is clear. Sir.” was the response he received.

“Yes sir. This is clear. Sir.” They responded in unison.

*Good he thought, they’ve been taught to give the right answers.*

Luke started from the very basics, and explained the Bent Diamond Formation when flying in a full squad.

He went even so far as to get the group to stand up in the formation shape, extend their arms as if they were S-foils, and walk around one of painted circles on the landing pads.

Wes assumed the position of the transport they were protecting- and Luke had them mimic the maneuvers they need to perform if the transport was attacked, by having half the Wing break off from a protection formation, into an attack stance.

It took several tries, but eventually the Wing was able to do both a starboard and portside maneuver to protect the transport, aka Wes Jensen, group into an attack formation and reform.

He could hear their minds as they prepared to be dismissed; on the ground, practicing formations and break-aways was one thing, but in the air, was totally different.

Luke smirked as he dismissed them. *Only different in your mind,* He thought.

Wes followed him to the office after class, just to check on any incoming recs.

As they approached, Wedge was receiving the shipment of delayed spanners with a grin on his face and handed the filmsy to Luke after he signed off, sending the spanners directly to a waiting put crew.
“You know what that means?” Wedge asked the two other men. “We can have Wing B in the air as soon as tomorrow if they get those installed.”

Luke sunk down into the office chair that he claimed as his own. “Good, they need to start working together as soon as possible.”

“Are they that green?” Wedge asked, taking his own seat.

Wes looked over at Luke, and answered for the both of them. “They know how to fly, but the formations were a bit sluggish.”

“They got the moves by the end of the session, but I think we’ll need some good runs before we make any calls.” Luke said, while he leaned back looking at the setup of the call signs he had designated earlier. “Still, I think we got some A-Wings in there.”

Wedge sat up. “Yeah?- Who?”


“So your lead and tail…do they know why you placed them there?” Wedge asked.

Luke shook his head. “But if we get them up in the sky by tomorrow, then they’ll know.” He gave a promising grin.

Wedge’s mood improved greatly from the morning if his new Lieutenant told him that he had some promising talent.

“If you do get to go up tomorrow, I’m going to need you to test the new T-70’s.” Wedge looked over at Luke. “All A-Wings are required to fly them now.”

Luke frowned a little; he loved his T-65, and shrugged, giving in. “Anything I should know about the 70’s?”

Wes cleared his throat. “No kick back when the S-foils open…which is nice.”

“I like the targeting computer better.” Wedge added.

Luke nodded, and thought he might enjoy playing with a new toy.

The remainder of the afternoon he pushed filmsy around the desk, getting even more issues resolved, but hoping he would have a chance to go over and visit his T-65 X-wing, check the new spanners, and double check the fighter in general.

Something told him that it was important to do so, and before they got up in the air.

At evening meal, Luke observed part way through the meal, that what he had said about call signs was accurate as he noticed for the first time in years that Rogues even ate in formation; Wes was Rogue Six, and he sat directly to the right of Luke.

The thought made him snort; some things never change.

After the meal, there was distinct difference from the night before. While the pilot’s lounge was thriving with entertainment generated by Wing B, the main deck was silent, and Luke saw several A-Wingers, including Wedge inspecting the T-70’s, and Horn wasn’t alone at the board tonight, Hobbie sat beside him.
The word about this morning’s meeting must have reached their ears.

Before Luke went to meditate, he put out his flight suit as he remembered to have it while on duty; he placed his calve flares around the ankle of his left boot, laced his suit into the crash webbing, prepped his flak vest and helmet.

He wasn’t sure if he could suit up in less than sixty seconds but now he had a fighting chance.

In his senses, the Force told him that tonight wasn’t going to be the night for an attack, but it wasn’t in Rogue nature not to be prepared for such a thing.

Even Hobbie’s general humor was gone, and he seemed weary, but gladly accepted it when Luke offered to sit with Horn for the first half of the night.

Luke dropped down on the sofa, forgoing meditating for one night, adjacent to Horn’s post. “So is this your last night on the board?”

Horn was watching the comings and goings of several of the hangars around the palace, and monitoring some of the activity that was seeking permission to land in orbit. “Yeah…it’s the schedule.” He looked over his shoulder. “You know the routine; three days on day shift, three days on nights, and three days off.”

“Actually, because I have the B-Wing, Wedge won’t put me on the desk until they’re ready.” Luke commented.

Horn nodded. “I guess we’re just being jumpy.” He mumbled.

“I don’t think so.” Luke muttered absently, looking at his boots. “I don’t particularly like the idea of being bait.”

Horn snorted once, agreeing with him, and waited. He looked back several times at the Jedi who was, Horn assumed, supposed to be meditating now, but instead was sitting there keeping watch with him.

Corran had watched him practice with the lightsaber the previous night, and was in awe of what he saw. He had never, in his wildest dreams, imagined that anyone could move so quickly, and with such precision.

Yet, here he was- hero of The Rebellion, the future of the Jedi Order, sitting unassumingly beside him.

He waited a few more minutes, pretending to scour the screens, and then, taking a chance, turned to Luke. “I have a bottle cap.” Horn said, holding up the small item in his hand.

Luke looked up from the strap on his boot that was out of alignment to the man who looked like he regretted showing him the small item.

“Are you sure?” Luke asked, his voice calm and slow.

Horn nodded, and then his voice caught up with him. “Yes, I’m sure.”

Luke smiled, reassuringly. “Well, there’s two ways you can do it…and if you understand the differences, it makes it a lot easier.”

“First, you have to start off by getting your mind prepared for any task that you call on the Force
for…” Luke began. “So close your eyes, and clear your mind of thoughts…which sounds easy, but it takes practice.”

Corran closed his eyes, and slowly, began to breathe deeply.

“I usually focus on a place that I feel at peace…there’s a canyon on Tatooine that brings me peace.” Luke’s voice was deep and low.

After several moments, Luke could feel the other man’s apprehension slip away, and could feel him reaching out past where he was. Needless to say, Luke was impressed.

“Now, as you open your eyes, see the bottle cap before you.”

Horn opened his eyes, and looked down at the bottle cap resting in his hand.

“Imagine that the air, between the bottle cap and where you want it to hover, has mass and gravity to it, and then, because of the hard air…the bottle cap to rise up from where it is now because of the hard air.”

The bottle cap twitched; Horn’s eyes widened, but then narrowed again, as he concentrated, the cap twitched again, and began to rise. It got about ten centimeters in the air and then came back down smoothly.

Horn turned in the direction of the Jedi to be met with a serene smile.

“And that was the difficult way to move objects.” Luke said quietly, and impressed that Corran seemed to get the concept quickly.

Horn shot him a nasty look.

“Want to learn the easy way now?” Luke asked with a smirk and Horn could feel himself relaxing.

“I taught you the difficult method first because now, the second method will seem much easier- if you can do the hard one, then you can do the easy one.” Luke explained, without an apology.

Luke sat with the Corellian until Hobbie came back to assume the watch, taking up Luke’s position.

During their time together, Luke was able to show Horn how to levitate and manipulate, with reasonable control. It took several tries, but Horn began to understand that his frustration at not being able to move the cap was contributing to actually not being able to move the cap. When he let those feelings go, and feel an actual connection to the Force, he was able to better grasp the technique.

Luke assured him that with practice and attuning himself to the Force that his control would get better.

And as a side bonus, Luke explained to him ‘The Bottle Cap Game’, leaving out the romantic details, and only keeping in how it inspired goals; no reason that learning couldn’t be fun.

Before Luke left, in favor of Hobbie, he could feel that Horn had relaxed his initial reservations, and was actually feeling more-confident now.

And that’s all he could ask of him at the moment.

Luke saluted both his friends before he headed back to his room, and walked back slowly.

The noise from the pilot lounge had died down and wasn’t even a hum now. The other Rogues were
satisfied with their ships and had headed to bed for the night.

Luke had to admit that he found the day tiring; both mentally and physically. Anxiety was contagious and he hated to admit that he was drawn in by it; it had taken concerted effort to push it away during the day.

Finding his night clothes, slipping into them, Luke lay down on his bunk, staring at the ceiling, and preparing to relax his mind. He sat up.

Something told him to check his comm unit. Sure enough there was a message waiting there for him.

Mara was asking about the weather where he was, and was it cold? - meaning, she wanted to know about the political atmosphere.

She went on to say that she had heard that the ‘blue birds were going home to nest for a while’.

Luke grinned at leaned back on the bunk. One of these days he was going to have to figure out how she got her information. Only Mara could find out that Blue Squadron was going to dock with The Liberty in such a short time.

He hadn’t thought about her all day, until he explained The Bottle Cap Game to Horn.

She had truly enjoyed challenging herself and challenging him.

Luke closed his comm unit and lay back down in his bunk, and closed his eyes, just to see her face; vibrant green eyes sparkled at him, celebrating her misplaced victory, her indignant pout and how easily she gave in to him.

He smiled at the thought; her child-like smile, the soft touch of her lips, and the way her body melded into him as they had taken their nap together.

Luke rolled over, and imagined that she was there beside him now, as the night took him.

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Coruscant- Day 3

Word that B-Wing would finally get into the sky was probably circulating.

Luke could feel it at morning meal, and at midday meal, several members were already in their flight suits in anticipation of the afternoon course.

He had kept it under wraps since Wedge had told him that pit crews had completed their work and there would be enough astromechs for each pilot, but clearly word had gotten out.

Luke confirmed the rumors by changing the orders to his Wing, and letting them know to suit up for 1400 hours, as soon as Wedge gave him the departure clearance.

As he approached the flight deck, a familiar little droid rolled up towards him, beeping and chirping excitedly.

“Artoo! It’s good to see you too!” Luke greeted his loyal friend, as he had missed him over the past three days. “Did you look at the T-70’s? We’re going to be flying one today.”

The astromech swiveled his dome and chirped and then rasped to the idea.
“You don’t like that? Why not? I’ve been told they’re faster…and more responsive to droid commands.” Luke reasoned in an optimistic tone.

Artoo responded by chirping and beeping in an undecided way.

“Well, come meet the Wing, at least…you’ll be flying with them today.” Luke smiled as the droid passed him on the way to the pit.

All the recruits were standing around the pit, waiting on the Lieutenant, refusing to sit in their suits, too eager to be in the sky.

Luke briefed them quickly, as they weren’t the only ones who wanted to be out in space.

He gave them the rendezvous point as to where the dead simulator transport would be waiting for them, and what type maneuvers they would be covering. Janson would accompanying them, and assisting Luke in calling commands.

They broke and headed for the flight deck, getting to their respective X-wings, with their own droids waiting for them.

Wes headed to his new T-70, already online with the tower to confirm their clearance and relaying it over to Luke.


“Yes Artoo, we’re taking a T-70 and that’s final. Sintu is flying in our T-65.” Luke explained; wondering how he allowed the droid to become so moody.

He walked past where his former fighter was resting, and watching Sintu do her checks before she was to mount the cockpit.

Luke walked over, and she seemed to be surprised that he was even stopping to talk to her.

Sintu saluted her Lieutenant, and held it until Luke returned the gesture.

“Watch the push back when the S-foils open, the nose tends to lift.” He warned her with a smile.

Sintu, for her years, relaxed the tension in her posture as he spoke to her. “Yes Sir.” She said confidently, and returned the smile.

“Remember to take the lead out there.” Luke said, making eyes contact, so she knew that he meant it. “That’s why I put you in that position.”

She brightened but also taken a-back. “Yes Sir.” She said proudly.

Luke looked over the T-65 in front of him. “And be good to her. She saved my life many times.”

“I will, Sir.” Sintu said, smiling broadly; she looked back at the fighter and then at him, knowing that she was proudly flying his X-wing today.

He gave her a lax saluted and then turned to walk away.

Luke suddenly turned back to see her climbing up the ladder to enter to cockpit and start her pre-flight sequences.
It wasn’t the pilot he was concentrating on, it was his former fighter. The tingling in his mind was subtle, and he frowned as he looked at it.

He was passing the diagnostic unit, and stopped to look at the readouts. He read them twice and checked the time stamp on the report to make sure it was done recently.

Everything appeared to be in order, but Luke still couldn’t bring himself to look away, even as he walked towards his deck.

Artoo had made it to the deck before him; the pit crews had already placed him in his socket, and he was happily running pre-flight sequences.

Luke climbed up the ladder to cockpit and dropped down into the seat. He looked around at the controls, noting if there had been any changes that Incomm had made without telling him.

He smirked— that had been Wedge’s joke; nobody had logged more hours with their T-65, so Skywalker might as well be Incomm’s spokesmodel, and not make any changes without his approval.

Putting his helmet and visor in place, Luke hit the controls to lower the canopy, and commenced the radio test.

“All pilots; this is Rogue Five. Call in and confirm nav computer co-ordinates for rendezvous point.” He ordered.

One by one each gave their signs and confirmed the star markers for their meeting place.

“Rogue Six will be joining us today, so be nice to him….but just for today.” Luke said as he started the vertical lift take off, and rotated towards the hangar opening.

“Rogue Five, we have you and your team confirmed for take-off. Please confirm.” The tower messaged over the frequency.

“Rogue Five- confirm.” Luke answered, moving into position. He could see the other fighters taking their position behind him.

“Rogue Five; you are cleared at mark 3-5-6.” The tower sent over.

“Wing B, this is Rogue Five. Follow me on the mark.” Luke’s hand wrapped around the throttle, and thrill of taking off entered him again.

The afterburners surged and each fighter in turn followed the set that took off after the preceding one cleared the space.

Luke switched to his private channel and hailed Jansen.

“That didn’t sound too bad Boss… it’s like you never left.” Wes's voice sounded as cheerful as it always had over the comm.


“Ah, no one ever forgets the thrill…they only forget how just much they really enjoy it.” Wes laughed.

Laughing along with his wingman, Luke couldn’t deny it; he closed the private channel and opened up his frequency to the team.
In position, Luke led the way out of the atmosphere, passing all the traffic hovering over Coruscant, waiting for their landing permission.

He was hoping that seeing a wing of fighters leaving the planet wouldn’t spook anyone.

Luke looked at the proximity display, seeing that his wing kept their formation; his attention zeroed in on Sintu again, then back to the stars ahead of him; the tingling was back again.

“R7 and R8, tighten up your positions...you’re falling out of line from R9 and R10.” Luke said before he noticed that they took his advice and adjusted their levels.

“Yes Rogue Five.” He heard them respond.

They were headed less than a light year away to where a dummy transport was hovering in space. It would take less than twenty minutes to get there.

Luke spotted the transport on his proximity alert only slightly before he could confirm visuals on it.

“B Wing- confirm visuals on transport and call in.” He spoke over their open channel.

All the pilots confirmed and called out their names again in order.

“Rogue Six, assume perimeter of stimulation area, and hold position.” Luke ordered.

“Yes, Sir.” He answered; Wes flew out ahead of the Wing, circled the transport and then maintained his location on the far side.

“B Wing- lock S-foils in attack position and assume Bent Diamond Formation as approaching transport.” Luke ordered as he looked out his canopy, and then back at his screen to check if they were falling into line.

“R5- you’re drifting, pull up to R6.” Luke noticed.

The radio channel crackled and then a voice came over it. “Rogue Five, this is R1. I seem to be having some problems...my hyperdrive is increasing in heat signature.”

Luke frowned as he looked at his receiver, knowing that R1 was Sintu.

“R1- what is the diagnostics by your astromech?”

“Astromech not reading changes- manual controls picked up the incline, Sir.” Her voice sounded steady.

Luke reached out his senses again, and felt it before her words came over the comm; fear...and justified.

“Sir, my readouts are confirming that the increase in temperature from the hyperdrive motivator.” Sintu said over the comm, her voice sounding increasingly nervous.

Luke opened his mouth to reply, but was stopped.

“Sir, it’s getting hotter Sir....” Her voice was rushed, scared.

“All pilots move immediately into position around Rogue Six – R1 eject immediately!” Luke said rapidly.
“But Sir, I can hold it…I can…”

“Eject now Pilot! That’s an order!” Luke’s voice was controlled as he cut her off.

Out his viewpoint he saw the other fighters move to join Wes on the far side of the transport. Sintu ejected her chair as they cleared her.

Luke maneuvered his fighter around to face her. “Artoo, prepare for catch and capture—it’s going to be fast buddy.” The droid chirped a confirmation.

His fighter swooped around and picked up Sintu’s chair, and headed for the remaindered of the group. He looked ahead of him to join the group and was just passing the dummy transport as his senses flared right before his former X-wing exploded behind them.

Safely out of range of the explosion, Luke let out the air was holding. “R1 confirm status?”

The radio crackled. “Safe Sir.” Sintu answered.

“Good.” Luke said, keeping his cool. He switched channels and hailed the hangar for a transport pickup.

He dismissed the remainder of the team and gave Wes the instructions to lock down the Wing when they got back.

Meanwhile, Luke waited, hovering in space protecting Sintu in her ejection chair until the transport arrived and picked her up.

On his way back, he sent a report back to Wedge on an emergency channel, and knew that the Commander would lock down the hangar.

When he landed, Luke first headed to the transport where Sintu was disembarking to check to see if she was alright. Other than being a little shaken, she was fine.

Luke left her in good hands for a debriefing with Tycho and Hobbie, and headed for the pit to check in with his team.

Wes was instructing them in the procedural protocol of such an incident which was tantamount to ‘remember, but don’t talk about it’.

Luke confirmed to the team that Sintu was alright, and this may have just been due to technical issues. However, at the back of his mind it didn’t feel that way.

He could sense that the Wing was relieved, and he dismissed them.

Wes walked beside him as Luke headed to check the technical readouts of his former X-wing. Wedge had beaten him to it, and was handing them over to NRI for investigation as part of procedure, but the look he gave Luke as did so, left no question in the Jedi.

Luke was slotted to fly his former X-wing- this wasn’t technical, this was personal.

Someone wanted the Son of Vader dead.

TBC
Finding Foes, Friends and Family

Chapter Summary

Quote: “I ain’t going to hug you or anything yet…” He said as only he could. “I'll leave that for Chewie.”

She snorted, and exchanged smirks with him.

Characters: Mara, Aves, Han Solo, Lando Calrissian, and others

Chapter Notes

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Ah, more plot…that’s just it.

I’m hoping that y’all are enjoying it…even just a bit?

Just keep thinking of Luke in his fatigues…close you eyes….can you see it?…more smut later- plot now.

**

Somewhere in Deep Space Seswenna Sector

“What the Kriff!” Mara grumbled loudly as she got up from her seat and started to run towards the aft section of the *Wild Karrde*.

This was the second alarm to go off in the hull in so many days.

After Karrde had agreed to pick up some new crews from other groups, there had been several incidents that were making Mara question his sanity for doing such a thing.

Two of Karrde’s newer crew members ran behind her as they approached the hull; one of crew members, who she couldn’t remember his name in the moment, handed her a room control as they ran along.

The door to the fifth hull storage slid open to reveal a crew, frozen in position, unloading a shipment while the alarm sounded louder in the room and sprinkler system rained foam and water down on them.

She could see the reason for the alarm immediately. With a distinct glare she raised the control above her head and shut off the foam fire retardant system as it billowed down on them and switched off alarm, and held that glare as she walked over to the soaked loader and yanked the melting and smoldering cigarillo from his mouth.

Her green eyes, usually cool and distinctive, were now wavering with anger; her hands held firm at
her waist, hovering above the lightsaber dangling from her waist.

The loader looked rapidly from her face, then to her hands, and then to her lightsaber; trying to watch all three, wondering which one she was going to go to first.

“What do you not understand about the orders ‘No Smoking in Aft Quarters’?” She growled at him.

He must have stood a foot taller than her, but he seemed generally shaken that she was angered with him- as all of them did once they heard who she was.

No matter what rumors that were circulating about her being a personal assassin for the Emperor, it was the way that she did in Cassis that made her famous lately.

The loader tried to mumble an excuse as to why he was disobeying orders, but he didn’t get very far.

“Complete your task, then come find me in the office, get your final pay- minus costs for cleaning this up, and then get off my ship.” She snarled as she picked up some of the foam and dropped it again to illustrate her point.

She turned her back on them, looking at her crew members. “You got blasters?” She asked; they nodded. “Watch them.” She ordered before walking away.

Mara shook her head, walking back to the office, and taking a look at her gloves, and wondering how she was going to get the fire retardant foam off of them.

She had no idea what Karrde was thinking. He had told her, and at the time, she agreed that it made sense, but she also warned him that taking on other smuggler’s misfit crews, who weren’t as well-trained as their people, would be trouble.

It was turning out to be true.

Besides the occasional alarm, there had also been an increase in thefts on board, and Ghent was put on high alert as their systems had no less the six attempted hacks on it.

Karrde had been trying to bring together as many smugglers as he could since the fall of the Smuggler’s Alliance, hoping that there could be some order during the chaos of war.

The only one that he seemed to be trusting was Booster Terrik and his gang, but he still wouldn’t let the other smuggler boss near his beloved Wild Karrde.

Booster ran a tight ship, and although his reputation wasn’t always as clean as Karrde liked, he still delivered on his promises, and that was something that Karrde could respect.

It was these ‘one-off’ haulers and loaders were the problem.

They came on board the Wild Karrde, thinking that they had a reputation only to find out that they were a little fish in a great big pond. And while on board, they were actually auditioning for a spot to join the crew.

So far, none of them had worked out.

She stalked towards the office and left directions with her admin, Nagreen, to prepare the pay vouchers for the crew of The Viper, and not to give them one credit more.

Mara walked into her office, dropped into her seat, and hailed Karrde on the comm. He was going to find out just what happened when the cat was away.
The only good side to this was that Ghent had the good sense to do a ghost data dump while these other ships docked- it gave him all the information that he needed to trace who was working for whom.

While the crew plugged into their system to download their manifests, the ‘Karrde was actually retrieving information from them too.

The foreign crews might try to hack them, but luckily Ghent was still the best hacker in the galaxy, and had gotten all the information about them and their vessels within seconds of them docking.

He could access everything, from recent manifests to flight data to see where they had been.

For a shifty lot, smugglers never seemed to erase their previous route history.

As Mara waited for the comm, she pulled up the report on The Viper, their crew, and why they would find it necessary to try and burn down or flood the Wild Karrde.

Karrde and Aves had taken off three days ago to go and talk down the latest in jumpy clients, leaving her in charge of the comings and goings a board the Wild Karrde.

They were due back in two more standard days, but until then, the chaos would be hers to deal with.

Since leaving the trade summit, over three weeks ago on Maridun, the Parlemian Trade Route had been attacked by the Imperial Forces.

Now, like many trades routes, it was being patrolled by Imperial shuttles and freighters and their escorts.

All traders and not-so legal traders had to find alternative routes.

The thought of it made the skin crawl on Mara’s neck. It was a little too close to Yavin IV for her liking. Her inner tactician told her that Yavin was just crawling with innocent civilians that could be taken hostage.

However, the only thing that kept that thought at bay was that she knew that it wasn’t common knowledge that there was a school there now.

It had also not been made public about Luke being granted the planet for use for his Jedi Academy.

The comm unit pinged, signalling that it was connecting to the other party, and she turned in its direction.

The screen took a moment to respond but then Aves’ face became visible.

“Jade.” He gave her the slightest grin, and figured why she was contacting them.

As much as she liked him, she just couldn’t put on a show. “Aves… Is Karrde there?”

The man on the other end, leaned back in his chair and looked around his area. “He’s just finishing up with his meeting. from the looks of it.” He paused and looked back at her. “Is the Wild Karrde burning down yet?”

Without any touch of humour, she answered blankly. “Yes.”

Aves sat up in his chair about to respond.
“Well, it was a false alarm.” Mara said coolly. “We need some help, and I was hoping you’d be able to get in touch with some freighters – *ones that we trust.*”

“What’s happening?” He asked.

“I’ve had to remove almost every crew that has shown up here…and I don’t particularly like having our hailing frequency available, by the way…” She sighed. “We have to get some teams to second-leg the shipments.”

Aves took on a knowing grin, almost smirking. “Well, that’s what happens when you fire the crews.”

Mara’s temper was notorious around those who knew her; it was infamous among those who just knew the name but didn’t actually know her. So far, she had been able to keep her cool without pulling out her blaster.

As she had started speaking with Aves, the data on the crew of *The Viper* came up.

Her eyes narrowed to the report that she read off screen.

“If you can tell me why I shouldn’t have fired them for first of, flooding Hull 5, and second, apparently they been running Spice for the Hutts out of Ryloth, and third, they did a live transport, six days ago, to Morra- which means they were transporting for slavers….and that’s just what I could find out for the last standard week.” She glared as she read and repeated the details.

“Do we really trust them with our shipments? I think Karrde would agree with me.” She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms on her chest.

“The hulls are getting full, Aves, we need runners. Can you get them for me?” She asked, softening her look.

She knew, as well as he did, that if they couldn’t deliver the goods, that the *Wild Karrde* would just become a floating warehouse which cause two more problems.

With a full hull, they were burning precious fuel as the weight of their freighter taxed the system, and started eating into their profits.

Also, it meant that they would be sitting mynocks if they were attacked by either pirates, or worse, right now, the Imperial Infraction.

The ideal situation for a freighter the size of the Wild Karrde, was to have the shipments come in and then leave almost immediately, and never at full capacity.

Aves knew that this was a problem too; he looked away and then back at her, dropping his tone, knowing that she was looking out for everyone.

“I’ll see what I can do.” His mouth tugged to one side, as he mumbled. Aves looked up to her.

“We lost one.” He said quietly.

Mara blinked and looked at the screen again. “What?”

“We lost another client.” He said quietly, looking down. “We not running in Imperial areas, and that’s where they need us to go.”

She sighed to herself inwardly. Karrde refused to go into Imperial territory.
One of the reasons that she respected Karrde so much was because of his ethics, but now those ethics were causing business to stop being successful.

“So we need to find a way to run in Imperial sectors without the Imperials knowing that it’s us— not drawing attention to ourselves, right?” She said, succinctly summing up the problem.

It wasn’t Karrde’s ethics that was the problem, it was that he was afraid of endangering his crew.

Aves raised his eyebrows and nodded.

Mara nodded, putting it at the back of her mind. In the meantime…

“So, can you tell me who the freighter that we are expecting today is? It has your name on the docking schedule. Who is the mystery crew?” She asked, as it had been on her mind since she had seen it earlier on the roster.

And that’s when she got even more suspicious; Aves broke into a big grin.

“Oh…just friends.” He said, still grinning. “Don’t worry; you’ll like them…well, maybe.” He sat up straight. “Just don’t blame me if you don’t, okay?”

Mara narrowed her gaze again, and called herself to relax. Luke had accused her on a few occasions of giving the Dark Side a door; working with people like Aves was like giving the Dark Side a revolving door.

“Do you still want to talk to Karrde?” Aves asked, not waiting for her verbal revenge.

She took a deep breath. “No, I’ll message him later and give him the details of the latest crew…and I’ll prepare for my surprise.” She ended it on a snarly note.

“Clear Skies, Mara.” Aves tried to grin again.

“Clear Skies, Aves.” She said, then gave him a grin of her own.

The comm closed, and she sat looking at the screen for several moments.

It was her own fault, she assessed, that she felt so responsible for Karrde’s business. If she didn’t care then it would be so much easier.

Since working for and with him, she had grown to think of his business as hers too. She just wasn’t in it for the money, but also the pride that she could take in its success.

If she dropped the pretense, she was afraid.

She was afraid for Karrde; this was just the beginning of this conflict, if her senses were anything to go by. Few people survived conflicts with their ethics or themselves intact.

Having seen it time and time again; self-preservation, in whatever form it chose, won out over ethics and reputation almost every time. The most-noble person could be brought to their knees when their livelihood was in jeopardy.

Mara dreaded what would happen if Karrde came to such a thing. She prayed it wouldn’t happen.

She would have to think on it, or as Luke would remind her, meditate; meditation could give her the insight that she might need.
She frowned. She knew she hadn’t been keeping her promise to him to practice her Force skills. He would be disappointed; more than disappointed. He would have thought that she had down-right stopped practicing.

In truth, she had.

Mara was finding it harder and harder to concentrate lately. Whenever she did, a shadow and memories would cross her mind.

And the memories that entered her mind were not what she wanted to ever see again.

On the contrary to being besought by images of killing and her missions; she was given the images of what pleasures that came with living in the palace.

The opulence, the regal air, and the prestige she had when she roamed the halls of the palace as a visible decoration.

Yes, she had claimed to hate that side of her personae, but a small part of her enjoyed the luxury. Even more so when she used to perform in the Grand Ballroom.

She missed those moments; sorely and affectionately. She could almost hear the music in her ears of the Imperial Orchestra and how she hid her marvel at being in such a place and time.

Remembering a time when she danced for the noble families of the core worlds; the moment as the spotlight fell on her, and she was not a spy or an assassin there and then- she was a dancer, graceful, skilled, and treasured.

Those memories were then followed by a lust that craved those days again; she had felt it creep in. She wasn’t even aware that she had wanted that life back, but as she tried to meditate, the feeling would come back.

The cold cloak that she had created and drawn around herself for all those years, bringing back the hurt and pain with it. She found herself putting back on the callous mantle of Emperor’s Hand, in her tone and demeanor recently, and she didn’t like it.

Mara stopped and thought about Luke.

It had been over three weeks since they had seen each other. She knew because she had seen the reports that he was attending General Meetings for the New Republic militia, such as it was.

The New Republic seemed to be comfortable with the idea of having small branches, but no one would ever dare to vote in any sort of standing military- not even as a preventative measure.

The worlds who made the suggestion were slapped down immediately for even suggesting such a thing.

So, The Rogues were delegated to running protection missions, when, in fact, she knew that they also ran covert missions too, which wasn’t of common knowledge.

Her sources weren’t what they used to be, but she could still get a deal sometimes, and end up trading very little information for what she needed to know.

The most recent intel that she had been given concerned her greatly, and she wasn’t sure how she was going to ask Luke about it, without alerting to those who read his mail that there was a source leak, although she was dying to ask him.
The “incident” on a “routine training mission” had been blown over by the media, and no one was reporting on it. But her sources confirmed that it was B-Wing of the Rogues were flying formations when one of the older T-65’s exploded in restricted space around Coruscant.

She only knew of one person who flew an older model T-65, and since she had heard from him after the incident, some of her fears had been removed.

Still, she knew that a new hatred for him had grown in the galaxy.

Initially she had brushed off the importance of the rumors that she heard about Luke, his ancestry and that he was possibly the new leader of the Imperial Infraction. Now the rumors had an ugly tone to them, usually followed up with a threat of some kind. The circle was tightening around Coruscant as the rumors drew closer to him.

Mara stopped, and flipped the screen on her terminal; the holo image came up.

There he was, walking with Antilles and Celchu; the image was only taken a few days ago.

She smiled, blushing as her heart warmed; he looked so very handsome in his new fatigues.

Leaning back in her chair, she started to sway, and absently, she fingered the pendant around her neck, thinking of him.

Could she? – if she tried really hard…could she touch his mind now?

She had tried several times since he had entered Basic Training but she had gotten no response.

Once again, she chastised herself for not bonding with him in the moment that it came to them. It had been her only regret since leaving Yavin.

If they were bonded he would hear her.

She had been reading the material he had given her from the doctors, and found the volume on bonding which he had been reading before she left Coruscant.

Aside from reading that bonds were often negotiated on the pretext that Jedi assumed that a bond would occur eventually. They would discuss what a bond would entail, and how it would affect them. The underlying factor was that if a bond occurred it was the will of the Force, and not the want of the Force-user.

She knew what had happened between them was special- it felt special. Once again, she gave into her fear, and denied Luke the experience.

But she didn’t want it, not the bond…not yet- she just wanted him. She couldn’t come up with any other reason as to why she denied it for herself too.

Mara looked up from where her mind had drifted, and didn’t particularly like how introspective it had become.

Instead, she quickly sensed if anyone was around, or about to appear, and she accessed her personal drive from the terminal, and pulled up her file that she kept.

She called up the first holo; Luke at the reception for the War Orphan Association- he was smiling and shaking hands with several guests. She liked this one; he looked so polished and styled that night.
The second image she called up was one where it was clear that it was taken by a tabloid without his knowledge. They had captured him playing with his niece and nephew; he had one in each arm, resting on his lap.

Several other tabloid holos of him; some of the featured her while they walked or were talking, but they seemed just to get a side of her, and never her face- which she preferred.

She promised this would be the last holo she accessed; Liberty Day Celebrations from three years ago. He looked as solemn as those around him were joyous. She had kept this holo for a long time now – before she encounter him in deep space, when her resentment had a strong hold on her.

She used to look at the holo and wonder what was on his mind in that moment; he had nothing to be reflective on- his side won…wasn’t that enough for him to celebrate?

Now that she knew him better, she could see what he was thinking in that moment. When he broke down on Yavin in grief, she felt it and knew it. He was consumed for his actions, and for him, it wasn’t a moment to celebrate, but to reflect on the loss that had occurred on both sides.

Sighing, she thought of her pacifist Jedi.

Gods, she missed him.

She closed down her terminal, knowing that she had to prepare for her ‘surprise’ crew that was due to arrive in less than twenty minutes.

The shipment manifests would have to be checked before they were due to arrive. If they brought more than they could fit, she’d have to turn them away- no matter who they were.

“Fifty thousand metric tonnes of hauling weight isn’t what it used to be.” She mentally grumbled.

Presumably, the Wild Karrde could take on more, but there would be no way that they would be able to make a run for it if attacked.

As she came out of the office, she looked over at Nagreen and received a nod, confirming that the crew of The Viper had been and gone, without any issue as she suspected.

Mara walked in the general direction of the aft section; she would do the prep work herself for this new delivery.

She was half way to the section when her comm pinged a notification that the freighter that she was expecting had arrived early, ahead of schedule.

Rolling her eyes, “Could this day get any worse?” she asked herself as she increased her speed, walking to the hull.

The comm buzzed to get her attention.

“Yes?” Mara answered the only way she knew how; directly.

“Oh…Jade…” The nervous voice of the new crew member whose name she still couldn’t remember…Kirwayne!—that was it. “Uh… we’re going to need a bigger hull than the one that the new shipment is scheduled for.”

“How is that possible?” she almost yelled back over the comm.

“We were expecting a SoroSuub 3000, ma’am.” Kirwayne said over the system. “And now we’re
told it’s a Corellian YT-1300 freighter.”

“But a SoroSuub 3000 is bigger than a…” her voice trailed off as she realized who was attempting to dock with the *Wild Karrde*.

“Send those nerfs to hull eight, and put them under guard.” She ordered with a smirk.

Only one man would fly around in a SoroSuub Luxury Yacht 3000 in the middle of a war, and only one other man would chauffer that same man around in an YT-1300.

“*Solo.*” She said under her breath as she changed directions and headed for hull eight; it should hold the width of the *Millennium Falcon*.

Mara knew when they had docked because she felt the bounce as she neared the hull; the ‘*Falcon* wasn’t known for its graceful landings.

The makeshift guards of Kirwayne and what’s-his-name were waiting there for her.

She watched through the port as the airlock sealed in the freighter, and filled the hull with breathable air.

It didn’t take long for the ramp to lower, and a Corellian with an unmistakable gait appeared, looking around the hull.

Mara looked over at the two men waiting with her, and dismissed them, but Kirwayne kept close.

She sighed; Luke’s family and friends…no sense in meeting them at blaster point now.

Looking back into the hull, she saw the Wookie follow slightly behind Solo, and then turn back and growl something to someone inside the freighter.

Mara sent out her senses, hoping that it would be Organa-Solo, but hissed when she felt the presence.

*Calrissian,* she pouted internally.

And sure enough, wearing his standard blue cape, the suave man appeared at the base of the ramp.

Solo had turned back and was addressing him directly, and from the sense of it, Calrissian was getting an earful of just what Solo thought of the cape.

As the hull door opened, Mara caught the last words coming from Solo to Calrissian, “…and just don’t blow it!”

Solo turned back in her direction and was all smiles, as lopsided as it was.

“Jade…what a pleasure. Good to see you again.” Solo was turning on the only charm he had left and they both knew it.

Although, now seeing them, Mara could feel her gruff demeanor start to fade away as she reminded herself again that this was *Luke’s family.*

She consciously softened her face, relaxing the tension she had felt from the previous delivery, and tried to smile.

“Good to see you again Solo…and Chewbacca.” She nodded in the direction of the Wookie; but she
couldn’t muster the grin for the other smuggler; something about him set her off. “Calrissian.” She growled her greeting.

Lando strode towards her as if he floated on air. Solo simply rolled his eyes and put his hands on his hips, like he had seen it all before.

“My Darling Mara…how good you look.” Calrissian brandished his charming smile. He reached out and picked up her hand that was hanging limp at her side, and kissed the knuckles of her gloves; never leaving eye contact.

“What is that intoxicating fragrance you are wearing?” Calrissian winked.

“Fire Retardant.” Mara said blankly, unimpressed. She turned to Solo.

“So what have you brought me?” She asked, slightly concerned, knowing the hauling capacity of the ‘Falcon. She brought up her data pad; she may have to call in some loaders.

“No, we’re not here for what we have for you…” Solo walked closer, a glint in his eye. “…it’s what we can do for you and what you have for us.”

Mara raised an eyebrow.

“We heard you needed some carriers.” Solo grinned, sounding glad to be running a shipment.

“Who told you that?” she asked, feeling her face twist at the notion.

“People.” He said blankly, not revealing anything.

She turned her head and looked at him from the corner of her eye, blinked over to Calrissian, and then back at Solo.

Kirwayne had entered the room and was looking at the underside of the YT-1300 looking for the computer access port, holding the relay dock. This was Ghent’s standard procedure for finding out information on their guests.

It must have caught Solo’s attention as he called out to the young man. “Hey Junior! If you’re looking for a place to put that thing, I can give you a few suggestions, but one of them won’t be anywhere near my ship.”

Kirwayne looked at Mara, asking for some sort of direction from her. She nodded and waved him off again.

She looked at them quickly, assessing them, and noticed that both Solo and Calrissian had their blasters holstered and Chewbacca didn’t have his bow-caster anywhere to be seen; it was a sign of trust.

“You must be hungry.” Mara tried to grin pleasantly.

Chewbacca howled in her general direction and Solo turned to her. “We could eat.” He agreed nodding his head.

“A meal with you would be delightful.” Calrissian winked before he offered her his arm.

Mara ignored his offer. “Right this way.” She walked towards the hull seal.

They followed beside her and she turned to Solo as they walked through the ship towards the mess
“So how’s Leia doing?” She asked quietly.

“Well, other than being pregnant, she’s recovering from the latest snafu of running an illegal resistance.” Solo mumbled, not sounding as if he enjoyed the idea of another war.

“This time, worlds are starting to find out about them.” He continued. “I don’t know how, but we’ve been getting all sorts of assistance requests.”

“I thought those were supposed to go through the New Republic, especially requests for aid.” Mara said, as she glanced over.

“They are.” He grumbled. “Only, the requests aren’t going through as quickly as they should be. Fel’ya is dragging his heels about calling a session to order.”

Mara shook her head. It didn’t sit well with her that after Leia had stepped down, Leia should have never give in to peer pressure by stepping down, even in the face of the Vader news.

Mon Mothma had received emergency power and that Fel’ya first step was to knock her down and have himself voted in as ipso-facto leader of the New Republic, interterm until a full elections could be held- and that’s when the attacks seemed to hit.

It wasn’t surprising that he wanted all of the power but none of the problems.

Solo’s mood brightened. “But the twins are doing great…remind me to show you the latest vid of them. They’re talking, but sometimes it seems like they have their own language when they talk to each other.” He beamed as the proud father that he was.

Mara looked over at him, and truly smiled; she did love hearing about the twins.

“And you don’t look too badly off either.” She glanced over. “If you’re running shipments for the Resistance- it must be agreeing with you.”

“Hey Jade- you had better watch it… that almost sounded like a compliment.” Solo smirked.

“Almost.” She said blankly.

“Well, we also came to celebrate.” Calrissian said slightly louder. “Our book is ready to come out. We’re just working on a title and then it will be ready for release.” He winked at Mara. “I’ve brought you an early edition.”

Solo nodded. “It’s pretty good. Leia was just finishing it before we left.”

“Perhaps after we conclude with business, I can whisk you away to a nearby system for a congratulatory dinner? Or something else?” Calrissian crooned over to her, flourishing his cape.

Mara stopped in the middle of the hall, and caught the look that Solo gave to her. She knew what he was thinking, and clearly, not everyone knew.

“Calrissian…” She said with no tone of malice, fighting it back. “I will not be going anywhere with you. I’m seeing someone…and it’s rather serious.”

“Ah lovely Mara…it can’t be all that serious if he would leave you here alone. What sort of fool would do such a thing?” His dark eyes flirted over.

She cleared her throat. “Luke.” She said quietly but proudly.
She looked away, and she knew that Solo could see her composure break. When she looked up, she grinned- a true grin; her cheeks involuntarily gaining a rosy tint.

Solo smiled lopsided as Lando’s face dissolved, and Chewbacca chuffed in contentment.

“All bets are off.” Solo murmured over to his friend.

Mara knew that the phrase was code for ‘they’re in love and they know it’.

Calrissian nodded, but not entirely disheartened. “Well then…I wish the best for both of you.”

She relaxed her posture, and smiled. “Thank you.”

She could see out of the corner of her eye, as Solo puff up with pride for her.

Finally, she had said it, out in the open.

It was probably the first time she said it, to anyone outside the close knit of those who dared to ask, and that included Karrde; everyone else had just supposed and had given into gossip.

She turned and started walking again. For such a small moment, it felt like it had been a monumental thing to admit that she was in a relationship with Luke; her heart warmed again, with love for her Jedi, but she clamped it down quickly again.

They came to the mess hall, and the door slid open for them. The hall was empty, but the food prep unit was automated, so a crew member could eat any time of the day.

Mara had forgotten that she had missed midday meal, so pausing now would be a good way to take a break.

Solo asked about Yavin and the conversation started from there as they served themselves.

As they walked up to the line, Mara’s comm pinged. Offering her guests to help themselves, she excused herself to answer it.

“Jade.” She answered.

“Is it true? Are Solo and Calrissian on board?” Ghent’s voice couldn’t hide his excitement for the legendary smugglers.

“Yes- it’s true. We’re in the mess hall…” The comm broke off and Mara looked at the unit in wonder, before clipping it back to her belt.

She was just about to tell Solo about what had been happening at Yavin, and loading her plate when Ghent came through the mess hall doors.

He adjusted himself awkwardly as only he could before coming forward. She had to chuckle to herself because she knew that Ghent regarded Solo, Chewbacca and Calrissian as smuggling gods, and couldn’t get enough of them.

Mara just hung back and watched as Ghent shook hands with each of them, but regretted when he tried to shake hands with a Wookie, and almost had his hand shook right off him.

Ghent was rubbing his shoulder as he sat down between Mara and the guests.

He looked excitedly at the older men, waiting on their words.
After a few questions about what they were doing now; as it turns out, they were just running simple shipments to and from the Resistance base.

Ghent turned to Mara. “You do know that the ‘Falcon made the Kessel Run in twelve parsecs!”

“That’s right it did.” Han said before swallowing down his mouthful.

Ghent asked a few more questions, before he got to the point. “So you don’t plug in to other systems when you dock.” He said, questioning why they didn’t follow his procedure, picking at a plate he had procured for himself.

If there was one freighter’s history he would love to pick through, it would be theirs.

Han shook his head and stretched. “Nope…it’s the old school way…but it also means that we don’t get hacked.” He winked, knowing exactly what Ghent was up to.

“So you’re here to pick up a shipment?” Mara asked.

Calrissian had gone quiet since Mara had told him that she was unavailable, but now he seemed to recover and started talking again. “That’s right- just running a shipment back to base.”

“How are you going to get it back?” Ghent asked. “There must be at least three Imperial patrols between here and there—on the normal trade routes.”

“That’s the trick.” Solo smirked. “We don’t use the regular trade routes. We use our routes; always have- always will.”

Mara sat up and looked at him. She could sense something…something that made her senses tingle.

Solo scratched the side of his head. “I remember this one time, when Lando and I were running some …well, we were running something… And we were out in the rim, using a borrowed Imperial ID…”

“Where did you get the ID from?” Mara asked quickly, curious, but also because the tingle told her to.

He looked over at her, shooting her a strange look. “A friend…anyhow…” Solo continued. “This Imperial cruiser pulls up beside us as we’re just ready to leave the atmosphere…got the nav computer ready to go and everything.”

Ghent was hanging on his every word.

“Did it work? Were you able to get passed the patrol with the fake ID?” Mara asked with haste. “You were able to fly in Imperial Space with a fake ID?”

Lando answered for him this time. “Like snakes in the grass- they asked us two questions after we gave them the ID, and they sent us on our way.”

“The only thing about borrowed ID’s is that you have to change them more frequently…” Solo added. “…otherwise, they catch on.”

“Who would know how to use these ID’s and ‘special’ trade routes?” She asked, the feeling growing more and more intense.

Her questions put a total halt into the flow of his story telling, but Solo humored her. After all, she had this look on her face like Luke has before he gets an idea.
And as he answered her, he could see it, something she was thinking. “Any of the old guys…” He said slowly. “Anyone who did runs under the Empire and during the war.”

Calrissian added. “Lots of the old guys are looking to get back in the game but don’t know where to start…it’s been a while.”

“Can you trust them?” Mara asked without thinking.

Solo got up from the table and wasn’t exactly comfortable with her level of sudden excitement. “I couldn’t trust them before, Kid, but I’d trust them more than some of these part time loaders.”

She followed him, getting up with him, and looking at him intensely. “But they know all the best routes, right? --not the general ones either? They can avoid the Imperial patrols? They have experience doing this?”

Pausing before she asked, “How many do you know?” and before he could answer, she looked over at Calrissian. “Can you get in touch with them?” and then back at Solo. “Are they willing to run sectors?”

It was all starting to fall into place, at least in her mind.

If they could get in contact with some of the old smugglers who ran shipments with experience getting past an Imperial blockade, and had their own ways of getting around the galaxy, then they just might have a fighting chance of sourcing out their shipments.

They weren’t running contraband, they wouldn’t handling Spice and slaves – and they’d be making an easy profit.

“Whoa! Whoa! Whoa Kid!…slow down.” Solo held up his hands. “Who says they’re going to work for you…you got quite a reputation, by the way…I heard about Cassis and the filmsy.” He stopped and looked at her, and smirked slightly. “Very impressive, by the way…I always hated the guy, myself.” He said quietly.

“They wouldn’t be working for me…they’d be working for Karrde.” She said, a smile coming to her face.

Mara kept her gaze, and alternated between Solo and Calrissian. “How fast can you get them into play? Who do you know in the sector?”

They looked at each other, and then back at her.

Solo shrugged; he knew a few people but didn’t know if they would take a hailing from him. Calrissian knew a few others.

Mara looked over at Ghent. “Can you boost our hailing frequency?”

He nodded without hesitating, especially when she asked a direct question.

She looked back at the two ‘respectable’ former smugglers. “Can you let them know that we pay cold, hard, credits for confirmed deliveries…and if you can get them here in the next twelve hours, I’ll even be able to get a bonus for the both of you…as a finder’s fee.” She smiled.

Solo frowned over to his friend, and looked at his best friend, and then back at her, questioning.

“Look Solo…” Her eager tone changed; she switched to negotiating tone. “I’ve got hulls bursting at
the seams….and I have yet to meet a team that can do a two leg delivery without causing me trouble or has the smarts to pull it off.”

Mara assumed her business personae, and straightened up her posture. “What say we do this… if you do one of the runs personally, I’ll throw in an extra 20 percent?”

“We aren’t running Spice…we’re running food stuffs and goods, mostly.” She said, reasoning and implying it would be a nice easy run.

She narrowed her eyes, and knew what needed to be added to sweeten the deal. “If all goes well, then, you and your crew…” She looked over at Chewbacca and Calrissian, knowing that they liked hearing those words, reminding him of the old days. “…come back here, and I’ll buy the first round of Whyren’s… and Karrde just got a batch of NN182…” She said in a seductive tone that she used for only when she wanted to truly get her way.

She saw Solo’s eyes widened when she made the offer. He was tempted. He liked the way she had said ‘crew’, and she knew it.

Mara had one more card that she could play, but she knew it was too soon to play it. It was a valuable one too, and if she played it too soon or too often, it would lose its impact- but if she needed to, she would. She could always add that she was practically family – Solo wouldn’t flinch at helping her then.

If this worked out, and he could get more of the older smugglers to jump on, and this turned out to be a permanent thing- it could possibly save Karrde’s business too. She was thinking ahead.

Solo turned away from her and looked at his friends, and stepped away from her and Ghent; the other followed him.

They huddled for several moments, probably weighing the pros and cons of running a job.

The murmuring died down from their camp and then Solo turned and came back to her.

“Okay, I’m not saying we’re going to do it…but if we were…where would be running to, and what’s the cargo?” He looked her hard in the eye, all business.

She preferred this version of Solo; sharp and keen.

Mara crossed her arms on her chest, and raised one eyebrow. “Because I like you so much…I’ll let you have your pick.” She smirked, giving him back his business tone. “We’re in the Seswenna Sector, close to Elrood…so I’ve got a food stuff run to Van Sluis, or just some general goods crates that are due to Sullust…not more than a day’s trip out of your way but close to the way back to your base…you pick.”

She paused. “How much can you hold? – make both runs, and I’ll buy the first two rounds.”

Solo’s mouth twisted. “You can keep the second round, if you explain to my wife why I’m late.” He muttered.

He looked back one more time. “Okay we’ll do it.” He then smiled, and she could see the gleam in his eye.

Mara held out her hand, and he took it gladly; sealing the deal.

**
In a two hour time frame, both Solo and Calrissian were able to confirm three more ‘former’ smugglers who were in the area and looking for runs.

By end of this working day, she would have five out of the six hulls cleared, and good news for Karrde.

It felt like a load was off her shoulders.

Mara walked back to her quarters briefly, she needed to get something for Solo before he left. She pulled out a sealed crate that she had kept under her bed, and carried it in front of her as she walked back to the aft section.

_The Falcon_ was being loaded now, and it would be ready to leave soon; carrying the shipment that was intended for it, plus two other shipments.

Solo assured her that it would fit, and although she thought he was crazy for taking it on, she was very happy for his visit.

The door to hull opened easily and Lando, having removed the cape, was pushing one of the hover pallets to the lowered supply deck from _the Falcon_.

Even Ghent was helping out; as it turned out, Solo had said something along the lines of ‘if you load it, then you’re part of the crew’. If that’s all it took to claim he was part of _the Millennium Falcon’s_ crew, then Ghent wasn’t above getting his hands dirty.

Chewbacca roared in her direction as greeting and she came to look over his shoulder at the manifest he was filling out on a piece of filmsy.

“Not on a data pad?” She asked the Wookie.

He chuffed back an answered at her, but what she was able to understand was //it burns easier//.

She nodded and understood. “Makes sense.” she commented.

If they were ever boarded, or inspected at a port, there would be no record on their vessel of this being a commercial delivery.

She then continued to walk towards Solo with the crate out in front of her, hoping to catch his attention as the other _Wild Karrde_ crew members helped load the rest of the shipments.

He was supervising their work, but stopped when he noticed that she was coming towards him.

“Whatcha got there, Jade.” He asked absently, as he ran some preps for his ship.

She smiled tightly, still feeling like on the outskirts of a friendship with the man who was like a brother to Luke. “Just a few things for the twins that I picked up along the way.” She said quietly.

Solo turned to her, surprised, and smiled, relaxed, and realizing that she was now family too.

“Follow me, Kid.” He said as he led her up the ramp of _the ‘Falcon’_.

She followed him into the galley, and put the crate down on the holo chess table.

“It’s not much.” Mara mumbled. “I hope they haven’t grown out of it. But Luke was saying that he was looking for things for the twins on his trip to Dantooine. I didn’t want them to think that I forgot about them.” She rambled uncharacteristically of her.
Solo dropped into the chair in front of the control panel, and turned to look at her as she spoke.

When she finished, she was avoiding eye contact, and he waited, and waited for the air to get a bit more uncomfortable for her.

“So Jade, the jig is up now…you know that right?” He said smoothly. “You aren’t fooling any of us now.”

She turned and looked at him sharply.

“We can still dance around it in front of Lando, and Luke’s other friends, if you want…but the both of us know that there’s no going back.” He grinned ear to ear. “You’re family now…The Kid loves you…you love him…and you’re in.”

Mara opened her mouth, only to close it again, and nodded, sheepishly, and afraid- of what?- she had no idea.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Solo said slowly. “I felt the same way.” He paused. “You’re wondering how you ever got into this situation? How could you tie your life to one person and their life? – and worse yet, how could you invite them into your life?”

He stretched back in the chair, confidently. “And even worse…look who you got yourself in with? Luke Skywalker…and the rest of his crew…what were you thinking?”

“Am I right?” He smirked at her.

She kept her stoic face as she held his gaze, but her senses trembled; he had just voiced all her fears, all at once.

“I have some good news for you though.” His smirk changed to warm wistful smile as he looked off into the distance. “It’s the best thing you could have ever done.” His eyes came back to meet her.

“Luke loves you.” He said blankly. “You couldn’t have done better. He’s going to love you like you never thought was possible. You’re going to be so happy that you won’t know what to do with yourself.”

“And I should know.” He smiled again. “I never thought anything like that was possible until I let Leia love me, and allowed myself to love her back.”

“Those Skywalkers…” he chuckled. “They can make you do anything…like believe things are possible…damn them.” He smirked again.

“And I’m going to just say it…” He paused, teasing her. “Now, you’re part of a family… Yep, you are…no getting away from it now.”

He looked off again. “Something you never thought would ever happen to you, and you didn’t know how much you wanted it until it happened.”

“Wanna know something else, Jade?” He asked as he got up from his seat and took a step towards her.

Mara blinked rapidly, not sure if she wanted to hear his next words.

“We’re glad to have you.” He said quietly. “We needed you. Luke needed you.”

She could finally sense it from him. Although he wasn’t Force-sensitive, Solo had good shielding for
his feelings and thoughts. He was hard to read, but now, she could feel them. He actually liked her.

He had spent most of his life being alone, and liking it that way, but it took a lot for him to accept people into his life – in some ways, they were similar.

Mara looked up at him and dropped her wall, and smiled at him; a true and a real smile – one she usually reserved just for Luke.

He shook his head in a jaunty way, knowing that she was relaxing. “Welcome to the family.” He winked.

She rolled her eyes, and blushed at the feeling of being welcomed. “Thank you.” She said in a tone above a whisper.

“I ain’t going to hug you or anything yet…” He said as only he could. “I’ll leave that for Chewie.”

She snorted, and exchanged smirks with him.

“Now, I don’t usually stick my nose in where it isn’t welcome…but…” Solo held up his hand and looked like he was about leave, but then he turned to face her again. “I’ve got some advice that I think you should hear.”

He straightened himself up, and looked at her. “Now, I’m the guy that you want to talk to when you’re thinking of putting these things off…and why that’s a very bad idea.” He looked serious, so Mara took him seriously. “I’m going to give you the same advice that I gave the The Kid, okay?”

She nodded.

“Don’t wait…don’t wait to tell him, each and every day how you feel, okay?” Solo was extremely serious. “I learned that the hard way…while I was away.” He said quietly.

Right, ‘away’ was code for ‘in carbonite’ she reminded herself.

“And besides…” His tone brightened as he motioned for her to join him as he walked down. “The Kid is a total mush…he lives for it…indulge him a little…throw him a bone will ya?”

Mara snorted. “Okay, I will.” She still spoke in hushed tones.

“Good.” Solo nodded once and walked off his ship with Mara walking behind him.

**

*The Millennium Falcon* was ready to depart just as the first of the other smugglers was arriving.

Mara watched it depart from the port window of the hull. She corrected herself; she watched her family leave.

It would take some time to fully think of them that way, but she didn’t rebuff the idea entirely.

Her mind was taken away from those thoughts for the rest of the day.

And considering it was thrown together. All the remaining shipments got sent out with relative easy.

Only one crew gave her attitude, and that was mostly regarding her age, but when they found out she was capable, they cut her some slack.
Two of the other teams were able to call on some of their associates, and the other supplies in the Wild Karrde’s hull were all parcelled out over the next three standard days.

If these shipments went well, there would be more business to go round.

It was late into her day, literally the middle of her night cycle, when they were done, and Karrde and Aves would be coming back soon.

Knowing that, didn’t make the tension in her shoulders release.

Mara kept replaying Solo’s words about waiting to tell someone how you feel, and telling her that Luke was ‘mushy’ – like she hadn’t figured that one out.

She flopped down on her bunk, and turned to look into her quarters in the dim light.

The only light, in fact, was shining down on her comm unit, beckoning for her to come and use it.

She had Luke’s personal comm address. He would get a message, if she sent one.

Biting the inside of her lip, she stared at it.

Then, she glared at it, as if it had silently challenged her.

She swung her legs out, and sat up, got up, and stalked over to the comm unit.

Sliding into the chair, she opened the top of the comm, and started a message. She paused after she entered his address, and stared at the screen.

‘Tell him how you feel.’ She repeated in her mind.

Her fingers hovered above the keys.

She took a deep breath, relaxing her mind, and reaching out to the Force.

Slow, at first, and then her fingers flew; words left her mind and went directly into the message.

Without reading it, she sent it off, closed her comm and went back to the bed.

Mara rolled over, pulling up her sheets, she smiled to herself, closed her eyes, and thought of a roving canyon on a desert planet somewhere.

“Good night Luke.” She whispered.

TBC

**

Mara’s Comm Message to Luke:

Dear Luke,

This is very hard for me to write. First, I’m not a very good writer; second, words don’t come easily to me- you know this.

But someone recently told me that I should write to you and tell you how I feel – that it would be easier over a comm message than in person.
So, this is me telling you how I feel.

When I wake up in the morning, I miss you.

I miss listening to you as you breathe deeply, and when I put my head on your shoulder, and just knowing that you’re there, as it puts me back to sleep.

I miss our first kiss in the morning.

I miss the smell of your aftershave when you come out of the shower.

I miss sharing my morning meal and caf with you. There’s no one else I rather do this with.

At midday, I miss you.

I miss talking to you. I miss hearing about what you’ve been doing up until the point when I get to see your blue eyes again.

I miss your smile.

I miss it when I can’t hold your hand.

I miss it when you aren’t there to kiss me unexpectedly.

In the middle of the afternoons, I miss you.

I want to find you and kiss you for no apparent reason.

I want to tell you about something interesting I read, or heard, or something silly.

I miss watching you talk, and hearing your voice.

I miss touching your mind just to sense you.

In the evening, I miss you.

I miss how you can eat anything placed in front of you, and always give it a chance, even though we both know how wrong it can be.

I miss hearing you sing off key, just to make me laugh.

I miss the sunsets on the top of the palace, watching them with you, and only you.

I miss your arms, and how they hold me close.

I miss the dimple in your chin.

I missing kissing your lips when they’re hot and firm.

I miss the sound of your voice in my head.

I miss the shiver I get when you run your fingers through my hair.

I miss the sound of your laugh- you have a great laugh, by the way.

I miss the rough patch on your left hand and how I feel it when you touches me, and run your hands over my body.
I miss when our bodies touch and how no one has ever made me feel the way you do.

When I was last with you, you had asked me if there was anything that I do when I find myself missing you.

The truth is, that there is nothing I can do but miss you. There is nothing that can replace you and how you make me feel.

I tried looking at holos and vids of you- but it didn’t help. The ache of missing you only grew bigger.

The only thing that makes the ache of missing you go away, is knowing that we will be together soon- and I hold on to that.

I hope that you are safe, and I hope that I will see you soon.

And that’s really all I can say.

I love you.

~Mara
Coruscant- Rogue Hangar

Luke pressed the chime on the door before he entered.

He knew he didn’t have to; it was his right as a senior officer, but he did it out of common courtesy.

He mentally counted to ten before he entered.

The door slid open and he walked on through.

The other officers were gone, with the exception of those who had passed the simulators in order to join The Rogues.

There were four of them who were coming onto the Rogues officially, and Luke couldn’t be more proud of them. The remaining eight plots had headed off to Gold Squadron with glowing recommendations.

The only one left packing up their gear to move it to the more permanent residences was Sintu. She was the last to get her notification and Luke wanted to welcome her personally.
As soon as she saw him, she dropped her things and saluted him, and held her position firm.

He could at least appreciate her dedication.

Giving her the same respect, he saluted her, and then said quietly, “At ease.” He paused, smiled, and gave her a look. “At ease permanently, actually.” He said in a more-congenial tone.

Sintu smiled back and giving him a quizzical look as well.

“You’re now part of the Rogues…that means you’ll have to start slacking off like the rest of us do.” He said crossing his arms on his chest.

“I didn’t think that all of you ‘slack off’.” She said, keeping her grin. “But it certainly looks more relaxed than most Squads.”

Luke glanced off to the side and nodded. “That it does. We take the job seriously. On our downtime, we stop with the formality.” He reiterated.

Sintu shuffled as she moved her rucksack unnecessarily around on her bunk; he could sense her nervousness.

“We got off to a rough start, didn’t we?” He said quietly.

It had been over a week since he first took his wing into training and Sintu was almost a victim of an attack that was supposed to be destined for him.

The incident had yet to yield any results of the investigation; but his senses told him as much that it was meant for him.

The air around him had been filled animosity, outside The Rogues, so much so that Wedge had suggested that Luke not attend the General Meetings until things died down a bit more.

Since then, Luke had been grounded, and Wes had been running drills and simulations with the B-Wing.

Sintu wordlessly nodded, and then made eye contact. “Thank you.” She said quietly, knowing that he saved her life, and it was not his fault that her life was put jeopardy; being a Rogue meant your life was constantly under a threat.

“You’ve done really well since then.” Luke said. “Are you ready to be a Rogue?”

Her brow crinkled and she nodded quietly again.

“Well, you’re going to have to get much louder than that if you’re going to make it.” Luke said loudly at her, but with a mix of humour. “Otherwise, Hobbie is going to eat all your food. Jansen is going to take any drink you’re offered, and Horn…I don’t know what he’ll do, but he’s Corellian, so it won’t be good.”

Sintu looked away and then back at him. “I don’t know how to be loud.”

Luke narrowed his gaze. “I think you do…you just needed permission to get that way. And if you were waiting for it…tonight is the night.”

She looked surprised.

“They told me to come get you. Hobbie is probably at the chitza already. Jansen opened the ale, and
I’m sure there’s some story going around the pit.” He informed her.

Luke wasn’t sure if he should let her know, but forewarned is fore armed. “We’ve done away with hazing- unless you’re from another Squad…but you should probably have a good dirty joke ready, or at least a funny one.”

“I do have one warning.” He looked at her, knowing she was tougher than she seemed. “It may seem like a boys club out there, but it really isn’t.”

“I know.” She said. “I don’t think anyone has treated me different or special since I got here.”

“Good.” He cringed. “Because when ale is involved, they can get a little nasty. Has anyone told you about a ‘Code Pink’?”

Sintu was starting to relax. “Yes.” she said with a snort.

He nodded once. “We just don’t do those for the guys…but come to think of it, we do them more for Jansen and Hobbie than anyone else.”

A thought came to him. “And if Hobbie ever asks you if women are ‘thinking something’- just say ‘yes’ and walk away- it’s just better that way.” He really didn’t want to explain more than he had to.

Sintu snorted. “Sir, it’s really okay…I have three older brothers…I know what it’s like.”

“Good. Now, it will be like you have eight older brothers and four older sisters.” He conceded.

“That’s another thing…now that you’re a Rogue, you’re going have to stop calling me ‘Sir’.” Luke fidgeted in place, just once. “Everyone one around here goes by either their last name or some sort of nickname…so call me ‘Skywalker’ or something else.”

She nodded, and then gave him a look. “I’ve been meaning to ask…why do they call you ‘Boss’ when Commander Antilles is technically the ‘boss’?”

Luke rolled his eyes. “That goes back.” He grumbled. He was comfortable being their leader, but never thought of himself as their boss.

He stepped aside, and directed her to leave the room with him. “Okay, and what happens in the pit, stays in the pit. Once you’re Rogue, anything that is said to you, is kept amongst the Rogues.”

Sintu fell into step beside him. “Yes Sir…I mean, Skywalker.”

He looked over at her and smiled that she was catching on. “Another important thing, how do you like your chitza, Sintu?”

She looked over at him. “Spicy.” She said blankly.

Luke snorted. “Then you’ll want to watch the one that Antilles takes. I swear he has no taste buds left.”

As they walked towards the pit, Luke could feel that she was becoming more comfortable with him.

“I understand your from Darpa, it’s in the same system as Ralltiir- that’s where Hobbies is from, but don’t hold it against him.” He said, getting closer to the pit.

The rest of the Rogues sat around the pit; some on the chairs that made up the class room, some on the floor, and some leaning on the rails.
With the addition of the four new members, there wouldn’t be a full house, but now they had a full wing plus four alternates.

Luke could see that Celchu was standing up in the middle of the group telling a story, and demonstrating a dive that he was taking during some sort of maneuver.

“…and then the simulator just stopped. And there I am, just hanging in place…and after about twenty minutes of hanging there, the crash webbing was getting really, really uncomfortable, if you know what I mean.” Celchu just stood with one leg on the ground and his arms outstretched.

The group surrounding him started chuckling and laughing at him and his predicament.

Luke circle around the outside of the group to where the chitza and ale were residing.

He held the lid open while Sintu helped herself to some of the offerings, before he loaded his plate. Gladly, he poured her a large enough cup of ale until the foam reached the top.

Luke motioned over to the side of the pit where Wedge was standing; Wes and Hobbie were sitting on the floor, joined by two of the other graduates.

“…and you know what I say?” Hobbie was looking over to Wedge. “Once you see one woman naked, you pretty much want to see the rest of them naked too.”

Hobbie looked up to see Luke cringe, shaking his head as Sintu followed him.

Luke looked over to her to see if she could take it, expecting some reaction from her.


They all turned their heads in her direction.

Sintu smirked before she spoke. “Why buy the pig when all you want is a just little bit of sausage.” She winked.

For a few seconds they were struck speechless, then the group of them burst of laughing.

Hobbie moved over to make room for her; surprisingly, Sintu accepted and sat down beside him.

Luke walked over to Wedge as the Corellian gave him wide eyes.

“You got a live one there.” Wedge murmured over to him, pointing his chin in Sintu’s direction.


Wedge took a swig of his ale before he turned to his friend. “So, are you ready for your trip tomorrow?”

In between the week of being grounded, and given the chance to fly anywhere, Luke had accepted the mission to run escort to the delegates back to Tatooine.

He figured it was time to go back; something told him that it was.

Wedge had taken every precaution since the previous week’s incident, and going so far as to not assign Luke an X-wing until right before they were due to leave.
“I think so.” Luke said after he swallowed.

Wedge looked over at the Jedi. “How long has it been?” He asked quietly.

Luke took a bite of his chitza and stared off into the distance. After swallowing, he said quietly. “Since Jabba’s.” He squinted, then relaxed. “I really haven’t thought about going back.”

Wedge nodded.

The saying ‘you can’t go home again’ was never more true than it was for Luke. There were no good memories he could return to.

There were rumors, of course. Supposedly, the Lars homestead had been cleaned up, purchased and was up and running again.

Anchorhead and Tosche Station experience a boom in the cooler season due to tourists wanting to see where Jedi Luke Skywalker hailed from.

In truth, Luke was almost liking the thought of going back, if not just to see the suns set. And if there was time, maybe visit over the canyon that still stayed in his mind every night.

“Ah, Hobbie came and got the package for delivery that you two will take along.” Wedge sipped his ale again. “You okay with making a side trip?”

Luke sighed. “Yeah, it’s been long overdue. I should have done it the last time I was back…but....”

No one begrudged him for not making the delivery the last time he went to his home-world. It was a well-known fact that if Skywalker was going to return to Tatooine, that Imperial outposts would be watching his familiar haunts; that included the cantina at Tosche Station, the Lars homestead and the homes of any friends.

“You know Hobbie requested to go with you on this one.”

Luke looked down into his drink, and nodded slowly. “I understand that he and Biggs became quite close while at the Academy.”

Wedge sighed. “Hobbie has never forgiven himself for not being Biggs’s wingman at Yavin, you know.”

“I know.” Luke looked up; he never forgave himself for not being a good wingman to his fallen friend either.

At the time, he felt that Biggs was there to protect him, but in his gut, he also felt that he should have been protecting his friend too.

They stood quietly eating their chitza and sipping their ale for a few more moments.

Wedge was in the midst of swallowing as he spoke, trying to change the tone. “So what’s up with your astromech, by the way?”

Luke raised his head and looked at the Commander, with a raised eyebrow.

Wedge nodded in the direction of the hangar where the X-wings were docked.

There, in the dim light, the little droid was encircling each X-wing, one at a time, and then once around the area.
“He’s on patrol.” Luke said, trying to hide his amusement. “He’s making sure that no one goes near the X-wing we might use.” He snorted at the end- only his astromech droid would be so diligent.

Wedge chuckled. “Figures.”

They both knew the seriousness of the attempted assassination that was made on Luke, but Rogues, generally, had a target on their backs, no matter who they were.

The investigation into the attack on Luke had yielded few results and wasn’t likely to yield any more, as the evidence was blow into bits around the simulator site.

Luke took a swig of his ale and swallowed it down. “That was a good idea you had of moving most of the B-wing off to Gold Squadron when they passed the simulator.” He said over to the other man.

“Yeah well, The Golds are flying out of The Emancipator, so there will be lots of room for them there.” Wedge motioned to wipe his mouth, but actually covered it, before he continued. “They lost three yesterday.” He said quietly.

Luke straightened up, surprised that he was just hearing this now. It was true that during the previous day’s exercises that he paused unexpectedly; something in the Force had touched him, and Darkness cut into him, again, as it had on Yavin, at the time that Ji’nam was attacked.

He had wanted to contact Madine and ask him personally, but he knew he didn’t have that protocol anymore.

But it was much more than just losing three pilots…there’s was something else that had happened. He felt it.

He looked over at Wedge and studied his face. He could see it now that he was looking for it.

Wedge’s eyes were red, tired, distressed; his senses, now that Luke reached out, were trembling, not with fear, but seething with anger.

“And what else?” Luke turned away from the pit and looked at his friend directly, asking quietly. “What else happened in the past day?”

Wedge stared past Luke, at those around in the pit, all of them having a good time, celebrating.

Luke watched Wedge’s eyes glance over office then back at Luke.

“You’re perfectly right Lieutenant; I should give you your full itinerary.” Wedge said louder. “Why don’t you follow me to the office to come get it?”

Wedge turned and started to walk towards the office. He discarded his plate and greeted other squad members as if nothing had happened along the way.

Luke mimicked him, and fell behind somewhat as to not betray that anything serious was going on.

As they entered the office, Veragnath stood up and saluted them.

“R12.” Wedge said as he saluted him back. “You’re excused for the next hour. Go get some food before it’s gone.”

“Yes Sir.” The Elomin smiled, and got up and left the office.

Wedge dropped in front of the terminal that R12 had just vacated. He leaned into the screen,
Luke sat down on the sofa where he had been keeping company with Corran Horn on some of the previous nights.

“So what do you know?” Wedge mumbled, before turning to his friend. “And how did you find out?”

“I don’t know the specifics, but I know it was serious. I felt it.” Luke left out the details.

Although Wedge understood that he just knew things, there was no need to explain that it was the Force that told him, or how it told him.

Wedge raked his hand through his hair and looked back at Luke.

“There was an attack on one of the moons of Trallus…and…on Fondor and Kitel Phard.”

“But those are Core Worlds!” Luke sat up.

Wedge held a hard look as he spoke. “Fondor and Kitel Phard are gone…wiped out. *The World Devastators.*” He hissed a sigh. “Without warning…they didn’t even put up a resistance, just used for target practice.”

Luke breathed hard, remembering the stab in his chest when he had felt it.

“That’s why we sent reinforcements to The Golds and *The Emancipator.* They’re going to start patrolling the Core Worlds.”

“So it just wasn’t convenient that you were able to get them off-world?” Luke asked, already knowing the answer; but glad that the pilots that he had just trained would be somewhat protected.

Wedge nodded and then sighed. “I do have some good news though…”


“Yeah, Madine is working to get us off in teams…running escorts.” Wedge softened his gaze, and looked at his friend knowingly. “You and Hobbie are the first- you’ll be the welcoming committee for us when we regroup on *The Liberty.*”

Luke furrowed his brow, waiting for more details.

“The Blues are being moved to *The Emancipator*…and we are going to assemble on *The Liberty.*” Wedge explained. “*The Emancipator* is mainly a Bothan crew…Fel’ya protecting his own.” He raised a knowing eyebrow. “When we move to *The Liberty*, which is still under direct control by Admiral Ackbar and the Mon Cals, we will return as *Red Squadron* and use just our call numbers.”

Luke sat back and covered his mouth, hiding his smirk.

They had figured it out; how to get off the planet and how to not to become deserters. Under a reformed squad, they wouldn’t be neglecting their duties.

“Good job Wedge.” Luke murmured; trying not to register his agreement with this plan.

Wedge smiled tightly. At least he had some good news.

“It’s all your fault, you know.” Wedge said, and then turned back to the screen to watch it for few
minutes.

“How do you figure that?” Luke asked, sensing a playful tone in the other man; a feeling that Wedge was trying hard to muster in the face of the news he just delivered.

“I was remembering that terrible joke you told while we were hunkered down on Kuat that one time, when Madine and I came up with this plan.” Wedge said, talking and listening while watching.

“How do you figure that?” Luke asked, his memory escaping him at the moment.

“I think you said Solo told it to you.” Wedge looked back at him. “The one about the Rebel pilot who gets caught, and the Imperials are questioning him, and in order to get him to answer, they cut off his finger, and ask him where it sent to…pilot says, ‘do a fly-by and send it to my parents on Anoath’…so they do…next round of questioning, Imps cut off his leg, and ask him where he wants it sent to…pilot says ‘do a fly-by and send it to my parents on Anoath’…next time, Imps cut off his other leg, and ask ‘where do you want it sent to?’…pilot says ‘send it to my parents on Anoath’…Imps say ‘No! This we cannot do!’…pilot asks why…and the Imps say…”

“We think you are trying to escape!” Both of them said in unison.

Luke nodded and groaned.

Yes, it was not one of his better jokes, and he did hear it from Han; but he could see why Wedge thought of it.

At the time that he had told the joke originally, the Rogues that were with him had very little chance of surviving, so the joke was told during a time of desperation; much like what was facing them now.

If Wedge could assign small teams to go out, not return to Coruscant, but to regroup on The Liberty, then they wouldn’t be sitting mynocks when the Imperials arrived at the Capital; they would be escaping in small parcels.

All this, would, of course, be legal and done under the direction of General Madine who would allow the small escorts runs.

“That was a really bad joke.” Luke confessed, slightly chuckling and cringing at the same time, and knowingly appreciating what his commander was doing behind the scenes.

Wedge chuckled wearily. “Yeah it was.”

Luke snorted again. “It’s been a while since I’ve been on The Liberty. Anything I should know?” He was expecting to get a list of general rules.

“Nah, it’s under Ackbar, and he loves Jedi…so, you’re in good.” Wedge shook his head. “Whenever he and Jansen are apart, they seem to get into trouble separately.”

Nodding, Luke recalled that Hobbie had a different idea and definition of ‘fun’. Also, the other pilot was prone to be a bit of a downer when he and Wes were separated.

Luke looked down absently. “So full kit tomorrow? I assume Fel’ya wants ‘the Jedi Lieutenant’ to greet the delegates?”

Wedge snorted. “Yeah, if you got anything shiny- wear it. Remind them of who is following them home. Fel’ya will like that. I’m sure his minions will be on the platform waiting for you, and
Luke sighed before he got up, knowing he should call it a-night to get a good start on the day.

“Right.” He said as he slapped Wedge on the shoulder as he headed for the door.


The Jedi turned to his friend; Wedge stared off into space then looked at the other.

“We going to get out of this, aren’t we?” The Commander asked the Jedi for his insight; as he made eye contact. “Our number isn’t up yet, is it?”

Luke shook his head. “I haven’t seen it.” He said bluntly; telling the truth as he knew it.

Wedge nodded his head; sighing he gave his friend a salute.

Returning the gesture, Luke left the office and headed for his quarters.

He made his way back without being noticed.

The door of his room slid open easily. As it did, a boot flew across the room into the open hand of Corran Horn.

The other Corellian cringed. “Woops. I guess I should have sensed you.”

Luke stood just at the threshold just in case another missile was headed his way, but he still smiled.

“You’re getting good at that.” Luke said. “You’ll be ready for the Bottle Cap Championships soon.”

Horn just chuckled and nodded. “Maybe…just maybe.”

Luke started to pack up some of his things into his chest of drawers. “Not going to join the others? You have to put the new Rogues through their paces.”

Horn got up from his bunk. “I just got off a comm call, but you’re right; I should go get something to eat before Hobbie gets it all.” He sighed. “But I’m on call tonight, so gotta watch the ale intake.” He headed for the door.

“Jansen is handing it out, so I’m sure there won’t be any left.” Luke advised.

Looking about the room, to see if he was forgetting something, he called over his shoulder. “Horn! - you left your comm open.”

The Corellian came and shut down the unit. “Thanks Boss…I was just talking to the wife.”


“Mirrax is running shipments again with her Pops, so he’s got her run off her feet. Seems all the smugglers are having trouble finding and keeping people. The Imps are watching all the trade routes that they’ve taken over.” Horn rubbed his face. “I’m glad she’s off the system, but I still don’t like where she’s at.”


“Oh, that reminds me.” Horn came closer. “Mirrax says that she saw Jade a few days ago; she
doesn’t know her very well, but they seemed to get along. Seems Karrde is picking up some of the old guys to run shipments past Imperial patrols—he and Booster are sharing runners.”

Luke’s face brightened at the mention of Mara’s name. He hadn’t heard it spoken out loud for a while, and he knew he was missing something.

“Don’t get too happy,” Horn said, seeing the look on the other man. “The wife wants all four of us to do dinner sometime.” He rolled his eyes.

Luke pursed his lips and nodded slowly. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Both of them knew it was a long shot, but they were trying to keep a bit of normalcy where they could.

“Well, if I don’t see you in the morning…Clear Skies Skywalker.” Horn gave him the lax salute that was common with the Rogues.

“Clear skies.” Luke returned the saluted, but added. “May the Force be with you, Horn.”

The Corellian nodded once and left to join the others.


The rest of his packing was done. With the rolling drawers, packing his ship in the morning would be easier than it had ever been before.

A thought crossed his mind, and he pulled out his remote comm relay. He fingered the switch and heard a trill on the other end.

“Artoo, you can cease with the patrol tonight, and power down. I’m going to need you fully charged for tomorrow, buddy.”

He heard several indignant beeps on the other end, but cut off the droid. “That’s an order, Artoo.” He said, leaving no room for discussion.

A sad blurb came over the channel and then it ended. Luke just shook his head; only his droid was eccentric enough to behave like this.

His flight suit was ready, and as instructed, Luke was able to find his badges for distinction and add them by his rank badge.

He still felt silly doing it, but it was requested.

He was able to find out a bit about the delegation from Tatooine and was surprised to hear about the mix.

Leading the party were several colonist farmers and business owners, from various parts of the desert world. A Twi’lek emissary, a Jawa representative, and a female Tusken were also included in the group.

There were so many reasons for him not to want to go back, but just like going to Yavin, it had to be done.

His memories weren’t all bad. And the time had come.

He would just have to feel whatever he would feel in the moment, and leave it to the Force to tell
him otherwise.

Luke readied himself for bed. He picked up his comm unit and sat down on the edge of his bunk.

He flipped to his saved messages.

He began to read the one message that could bring him centered, yet still make his heart ache.

As he read it, he could hear her voice in his head; if he closed his eyes, he could see her.

‘I miss sharing my morning meal and caf with you. There’s no one else I rather do this with.’

He thought of her green eyes staring at him over the rim of the caf mug that they shared between them on Yavin; flashing coyly, tasting the sweet mixture.

‘I miss it when I can’t hold your hand.’

He thought how soft her skin was and how small her hands were in his; so smooth, they never looked like they had installed a motivator, upgraded a weapons system or cleaned a blaster- but they did. And those same hands also caressed his cheek and touched his body.

‘I miss the sunsets on the top of the palace, watching them with you, and only you.’

He remembered the first night he saw her up there. It was a week after Wayland, and just as his breath was caught in his chest the first time he saw her; she took his breath away as he saw her staring out at the mountains, wind whipping by and blow the flames of her hair. It had become their place; reserved for them.

‘The truth is, that there is nothing I can do but miss you. There is nothing that can replace you and how you make me feel.’

He smiled sadly; it was the truth for him as well.

Since he had received her message, out of the blue, he had cherished every single word of it. It was so unlike her, but at the same time, it was so like the version of herself that she only allowed him to see; the true Mara.

Luke sighed and closed his comm.

Soon, he told himself.

Soon, he told her, somewhere in the galaxy.

He got up and placed his comm unit on top of his carry-on, reminding him to take it with him, in the morning.

Quietly, he dimmed the lights, leaving enough for Horn to see by when he returned.

Luke came back to his bunk, lay down and turned to face the wall. Closing his eyes, One more lonely night, he thought again.

And without hesitation, he whispered. “Good Night Mara.”

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Coruscant- New Republic Landing Pad
“Rogue Five request clearance for landing.” Luke spoke over to the security tower that was watching the landing pad.


Both X-wings came in slowly as they encircled the New Republic landing pad.

Flying in the familiar T-65 felt good and reassuring. Wedge had offered to send them in the T-70’s but Luke suggested to him that the newer model would stand out too much on the desert world.

Luke looked outside his portside view as they circled and could see the senatorial guard waiting on either side of the transport for the party to arrive to the landing pad.

His private comm channel crackled before it came to life.

“How do you think we’re under dressed?” Hobbie asked snidely.


“You too?” Hobbie snorted.

The hailing notice from the tower interrupted them.

“Rogue Five, Rogue Four – you have clearance to land on pad 12-45 and 12-47 respectively.”


With one arch, the fighters moved into position, and landed on either side of the transport.

The boarding party was due to arrive, so both pilots disembarked their fighters and stood on guard at the bottom of their mounting ladders, waiting as statutes, in the relaxed position.

The only thing that was able to distinguish the two pilots apart was the various decorations of honor and the lightsaber that hung at the waist of one of the pilots.

Hobbie had been told to look for his distinctions too, but it had taken him a while to find all of them. And Luke was pretty sure that he borrowed some from Jansen to accommodate the collection he was wearing as they had fought in similar battles together.

The doors to the landing pad opened without any warning and the party walked through. Aside from the delegates, Luke could see that two Bothans accompanied the party.

The older Bothan looked like he was directing the group, and Luke could hear his parting words to the assembly of visitors.

“And of course, Chancellor Fel’ya would be glad to hear all of your issues, and we look forward to discussing these issues further. On behalf of the New Republic, we would like to have you escorted back to your home-world with an honor guard.”

The Bothan looked around and gestured for both pilots to come and join him.

Neither Luke nor Hobbie bulged; standing their guard.

If Fel’ya wanted a demonstration of how well-trained his standing military was, far be it from the First Lieutenant of the Rogue Squadron to disobey his orders, or to follow civilian codes of conduct.
The older Bothan’s fur ruffled slightly, and he motioned again. The pilots remained where they were.

Luke could sense that Hobbie wanted to move forward just to remove the awkwardness, but Luke held firm.

The landing pad’s doors opened again, and General Madine walked through, joining the group. As he stepped through the threshold, both pilots came to attention and saluted.

The Bothan spoke lowly to him as he approached, clearly not happy about the pilot’s response.

Madine stood back, and glanced over to both saluting pilots. Luke swore that he could see the tug of a smile on the General’s face from amusement that his pilots were causing the councilor.

He turned in the direction of Hobbie and saluted him, and then to Luke returning the salute.

Luke and Hobbie still held their positions.

“Rogues.” Madine said clearly. “Fall in.”

The pilots pivoted on their heels and approached the General in unison. When they stopped before him, Madine ordered, “Report in.”

Hobbie stepped forward, removed his helmet, tucking it under his left arm. “Major Derek Klivian, Rogue Four, reporting for duty, Sir.”


“As you were.” Madine said.

Both men relaxed into a less formal position.

Turning to the Bothan, Madine said, “All you had to do was ask them in the correct manner, Councilor Tag’ma…with all respect.”

“I see that now. Thank you.” The Bothan curtly answered.

Tag’ma stepped closer to Luke. “Lieutenant Skywalker, our party had expressed an interest to have a personal introduction – if you would be willing.”


He noticed the female Tusken he was told about, and remembered his lessons from when he was a child.

Tusken females held a place of reverence among their tribes, and were asked to be given demonstrations of respect in order not to be offended. This particular female had several womprat tusks on her garb; signifying her high distinction.

“If you’ll excuse me for a moment, Councilor.” Luke said, without waiting for permission, he approached the Tusken female, and took a knee in front of her, looking down; he presented her with his lightsaber, holding it up to her.

He knew what he was doing by addressing her first was showing her respect; it would set the tone for how the rest of the delegation perceived him.
Without looking, Luke could sense that she raised up her hands, facing the palms forward. “Paaassss eeg na’mut.” She hissed to him, and she made a clicking sound three times.

She lowered her hands, and stepped back.

Luke raised his head and got up, bowed and backed away from her.

He has passed the test; by offering her his weapon, he had put an element of trust in her- she had considered him sufficient to protect her.

A memory of his aunt came to him; unlike his uncle, she didn’t bear the Tuskens with the same resentment, and seemed to respect their ways. It wasn’t uncommon for Aunt Beru to leave water out in the open for the Tusken travelers when Uncle Owen was away.

Luke came back to stand beside Tag’má, now ready to meet the rest of the delegation.

Tag’má looked put out. However, the remainder of the group looked impressed, and proud of the Jedi.

Luke and Hobbie met all the members of the delegation, and were told that a reception would be waiting for them when they landed at Mos Espa to welcome them.

They fell into line behind General Madine, as the party was preparing to depart.

Madine turned to them one more time. “To your stations, Rogues.”

“Yes Sir.” They responded, saluting their senior commander.

Madine returned the salute, and the pilots turned and made their way back to their perspective ships.

Luke climbed the ladder, and mounted the cockpit. He watched the delegation speak to Tag’má as he started the pre-flight routine.

Although he couldn’t hear what was being said, the older human male, Geen Sunrider, did not look satisfied with the meeting, and neither did the others.

Luke reached out, trying to get a sense of what was being said.

Fear and frustration was rampant in the group. He had to admit it was odd that some many inhabitants of Tatooine had come together to be heard. It was virtually uncommon for a Tusken, a Jawa, and humans to be seen in the same place.

A crackle from his comm unit broke his concentration.

“Rogues, this is transport 7-5-3, I’m sending you our course to leave airspace, and our trajectory for our return to Tatooine.” The voice said.

“Confirmed.” Luke said as the files arrived to his unit.

He reviewed them quickly but carefully. If the transport had selected to follow a general trade route, they may run into an Imperial patrol.

Luckily, it was clear that the nav computer had found an uncommon route.

Luke switched over his comm to hail Hobbie.
“Looks like we’re going to have to keep in pace with the transport, you okay with doing that?” Luke asked the other pilot.

“Sure. I have no problem taking a nap for almost two days.” Hobbie’s voice sounded amused, but not impressed.

Luke snorted before responding. “Yeah well, try to get on Tatooineian time as soon as possible after we hit light-speed.”

“Hey Luke…” Hobbie said, watching the group board the transport. “It is true that you take naps in the afternoons?”

“Just during the extremely hot season, and then you work at night after the temperature drops.”

“Can you really make a pillow from sand?” Hobbie asked.

“No—you’ll get sand lice.” Luke chuffed back; the ignorance of off-worlders. “And don’t drink yellow water either!”

“Why?”


“Thanks for the warning, Boss.” Hobbie got in.

“Looks like we’re ready to go, better switch over for the tower.” Luke said, knowing that this was probably just the beginning of questions on his home-world.

He switched over his comm and muted his receptor. “…Confirm tower, this is transport 7-5-3, we are ready for take-off.”

“Transport 7-5-3, this is New Republic Tower, you are cleared for take-off, and your path is clear, you may leave when ready.”

“Transport 7-5-3 to Escort – confirm for take-off.”

Luke responded. “Confirmed Transport 7-5-3. Rogue Four and I will do a sweep then clear your pocket.”

“Aye-aye Rogue Five.”

Both X-wings lifted, tucking their repulse lifts under, hovered, and then Luke led the way with one rotation around the pad.

And the X-wings took up position to allow the transport to vertically lift between them.

The transport set the pace for moving out of the atmosphere of the planet, but as soon as they cleared the gravity well, the transport hailed them once again before counting down to light speed.

The star lines blurred a familiar site to Luke; he relaxed back inside the canopy of the X-wing and opened his data pad.

He had six hours ahead of him before nightfall on Tatooine, and he wanted to take his own advice and get on planet-side time as soon as possible.

He had saved several volumes of Jedi teachings on it, and he had missed reading while he had been
in Basic Training.

The volume he had started and put down, then started again, was written about Force Bonds.

Ever since he and Mara were given a chance to bond, he wanted to learn more, should it ever occur again.

He hoped it would occur again; he desperately wanted it to.

The energy in that moment made his head swim in euphoria, like he was drunk with awareness, knowledge, and most of all, feeling and knowing Mara more than he ever thought possible.

He was about thirty minutes into reading when his radio crackled.


He reached over and pressed the closed channel frequency, allowing both ships to communicate easily.

“Yeah, I’m up.” He answered. “What’s up on your side?”

“I dunno…” Hobbie said. “Just thinking.”

Luke had felt it in the past few days at the hangar. Hobbie was trying to find a way to talk to him- get his head right about what was going on in the galaxy again. Almost all the other Rogues who had war-time experience had sat down with each other; it was something they shared; an experience that they couldn’t have with anyone else.

Luke cleared his throat. “What’s got you thinking?”

“Have you met Jansen’s new girl?”

It wasn’t the question he was expecting, but it was probably a start.


“That’s her.” Hobbie grumbled.

“You don’t like her?” Luke asked.

“I don’t like Wes when he’s with her…he gets all …all…goofy.”

Luke chuckled. “The right woman can do that to you. Mind you, so can a lot of the wrong ones…”

His mind brought up an image of the girl who could make him ‘goofy’ in an instant. “He looked pretty serious about her.”

“He is.” Hobbie grumbled again. “He’s even talking about asking for a leave and taking her home when she goes back.”


“I know, right?” Hobbie sounded hurt that he was losing his buddy.

“You gotta be happy for him though…he’s dated a lot of…well, women who weren’t right for him.” Luke tried to reason. “What about you? No one of interest since your ‘Code Pink’?”
There was silence for a few second. “Nah…but there is this one girl. I’ve had my eye on her, but now, she’s off limits.” Hobbie said.

“Who?” Luke asked, truly amazed; he hadn’t sensed anything from the other pilot before.

With the hangar on lockdown, it would have been pretty hard for Hobbie to have met someone, unless…

“It’s Sintu.” Hobbie said, almost regretting it.

“Sintu?” Luke asked, sitting up in cockpit, looking at his comm unit in disbelief. How could he not see this was happening?

“Her name is Charma…she has three older brothers…big ones…The Sintu family is famous, you know? In the Darpa system.” Hobbie said.

“They’re a family of professional fighters…her brothers each hold a title. I used to watch her dad fight on the holo when I was a kid.” He continued.

“She’s real smart too but hates watching the fights. She likes sports, though. We both like swimming and Teeshball.” Hobbie explained.

“She likes spicy food.” He paused. “She does this cute little half smile when she’s shy, but she’s really funny when you least expect it.”

Luke chuckled to himself; it had finally happened, Hobbie was smitten.

“Ahhhh, why did you guys have to pick her?” Hobbie suddenly moaned over the comm. “Why couldn’t you send her to Gold Squadron like the others, and kept anyone else…like Bandtoo?—what was wrong with Bandtoo? He wasn’t so bad? So what, that he overheated a coolant unit? He could have been taught!”

“Now…we can’t…” Hobbie’s voice fell away.

Luke knew, as well as Hobbie did, that the new rules for fraternizing among Rogues were serious, and meant to be taken that way.

“Maybe it’s a good thing.” Luke said after a moment.

He didn’t need to be a Jedi to sense that Hobbie was probably looking at his own comm unit with a glare.

“How can this be a good thing?” Hobbie asked snidely.

“It will give you time to actually get to know her, instead of rushing into things.” Luke reasoned. “Think of it as a really long first date….with flying…and probably running missions.”

“You can learn more about her…become friends first.” He added.

Hobbie seemed to think about it, as his line was quiet for a bit.

“It worked for me.” Luke said quietly.

The radio crackled again. “You and Hotpants took your time, didn’t you?” Hobbie asked.

Luke rolled his eyes at the name Hobbie used for Mara, but just accepted it. “We took a long time.”
It had taken over a year, but it did happen. Mara eventually came around, and sooner than Luke expected.

A moment passed, until he heard a chuckle on the other end.

“Okay Luke…we’re friends… you can tell me …how blue were your balls by the time you finally got around to sealing the deal with her?” Hobbie was pushing a line, but given the conversations they had in the past, this one was tame.


“Yeah, see…I don’t want to get like Hoth. Ever.” Hobbie said seriously.

Looking at the comm unit and still chuckling, Luke said, “I’m sure they won’t.”

There were several moments of silence, and Luke could hear ambient noise from Hobbie’s side, but not much more.

“I wish I had brought some music.” Hobbie mumbled over the comm. “I bet you’re just going to meditate, aren’t you?”

“I have music.” Luke said. “Hotpants…um…Mara had a whole collection of it…want me to put something on?”

Luke called up some of the folders on his data pad.

“And I don’t usually meditate unless I’m on a solo flight.” He said absently as he searched the files.

“Oh.” Hobbie said almost apologetically.

Hobbie was the one Rogue who never asked any questions about the Jedi way. It was almost as if he didn’t know what to say, so he preferred not to say anything on the matter.

Luke found a folder that he had entitled ‘Rebel Music’; it was some of the banned singers and songs in Mara’s collection- it was also some of the best music.

The first song started.

“I remember this one!” Hobbie said excitedly on the other side.

“Yeah, Mara saved these songs before they got destroyed…she has a whole terabyte of music.”

“Seriously? Hotpants has this type of music?” Hobbie asked, surprised.

“Yes, she does.”

Luke refrained from giving his insight into her rebellious collection, and just sat back and enjoyed the music.

The music played on in the background for over an hour while Luke read, and Hobbie just listened.

It was strange flying alongside someone again. So many of Luke’s missions in recent years had been just him; ‘Jedi Missions’ he had called them.

Sometimes they were on great importance, for example, tracing down the clones that Thrawn had in play. But most of the time, they were to prove that the New Republic had a Jedi, and would be more
of the holo opportunity than a mission.

Luke sat up and checked the position of the transport to see if they had maintained their flight path. Seeing that they had, he relaxed back down into his reclined seat.

On the other side, Luke could hear Hobbie movement, and the sound of a ration bar being opened. Thinking this was good idea, Luke reached over to his own foodstuffs, and withdrew a ration bar.

He continued to read until it was clear that Hobbie was growing restless.

“Hey Luke…” Hobbie called. “What do I need to know about moisture farms? Biggs’s family has one, right?”

Luke yawned and looked at the receiver. “Yeah, they do. One of the biggest just South of the Jundland Wastes, made up of all the farms they bought over the years.”

“They’re rich?” Hobbie asked.

“For Tatooine, they are.” Luke said. “More-wealthy than my aunt and uncle.”

He paused, thinking if he should say it or not. “There wasn’t good blood between my uncle and Huff Darklighter, Biggs’s father. They were always fighting over the property rights to several vaporators….but the vaporators had been there so long that no one could remember who they belonged to…but when they broke down, Uncle Owen used to claim they belonged to Huff- but if they were producing water, they belonged to him.”

Hobbie snorted. “Sounds like a fight with the neighbors.”

“It was.” Luke conceded.

He never got caught up in his uncle’s feuds; which happened regularly. Uncle Owen often swore that Luke needed to be aware of the arguments for the day when he would assume the farm.

“You should be ready to be met with blasters when we arrive, though.” Luke informed the other pilot. “Without an open comm unit, they might not know that we’re coming. I’ll check the directory when we land, but it’s doubtful.”

Luke thought about it even more. “We’ll have to fly higher on our way there. Sand People like to take aim at low flying crafts and speeders.”

“Like the one that was one the platform? She was a Tusken, right?”

“Yeah.” Luke snorted, but grew quiet. “It was strange that she came off-world.” He paused. “She must have held a place of respect in the tribe. Most Tusken don’t speak with colonists or off-worlders.”

“Huh.” Hobbie said absently, thinking about what just said.

“Remind me that we should do a fly-by of the Stone Needle…did Biggs ever tell you about the Skyhopper he built and tried to fly it through?” Luke smiled, remembering back.

“The one he crashed?” Hobbie snorted. “He was surprised it even lifted off!” He started laughing.

Luke started laughing too. “Yeah, when we did the engine test once, he was standing behind it, and it shot the biggest, blackest cloud of after-burn…Biggs had on this new suit, and he was covered in
soot from head to toe…I think my aunt had to dye the cloth for him because he couldn’t get it all out.”

“Yeah…he told me all about it when I was in the Med Ward for my arm…” Hobbie started to get quiet again. “He kept telling me about this annoying kid who followed him around, and bested him at flying every damn time.”

Luke snorted. “I have no idea who he was talking about…” He paused, thinking back on his friend. “Did he tell you about the time we were attacked by Dewbacks?”

Hobbie chuckled.

“We had to spend a week, hammering the dents out of my speeder after that.” Luke recalled. “He invented ‘Sandsurfing’ – did he tell you that too?”

“A repulse lift and speeder!—what were you guys thinking?” Adding in what he knew, Hobbie chuckled.

“Did he ever tell you that he used to send me to deliver notes to the girl he liked?” Luke remembered. “I used to swipe my uncle’s speeder to cross the Wastes…she lived on the opposite side from him…I lived closer, so I became the go-between.”

“Kandji?” Hobbie asked. “Did you know he kept a holo of her with him?”

Luke could feel a pain in his chest; he remembered when she died, and how consumed with grief Biggs was. “Yeah…he really loved her. He was going to marry her.”

“He never spoke about it.” Hobbie commented. “But he sure did love her.”

“They were promised when he was ten years old…they didn’t meet until later…and he fell hard when they did.” Luke said quietly.

The air became thick and quiet as they each had their own memories of their friend.

Luke swallowed hard; surprised by his feelings, not ready to cry, thinking that he had already had his moment of grief.

Hobbie coughed, then cleared his throat. Even though they were separated, Luke could sense that the moment had caught up with the other pilot too.

A few more moments…


Luke shook his head. “There’s a lack of women on Tatooine… it’s not uncommon for marriages to be arranged. Usually, people get promised in marriage by the time that they’re ten or eleven…the boy’s family has pay a ‘bride-price’ to the girl’s family before the wedding…but as serious as it sounds, if the couple don’t get along, no one is forced into marriage…it’s more like ‘reserving’ a spouse…it’s not an absolute.”


Luckily, Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru weren’t wealthy enough to pay a ‘bride-price’ for him. He always thought of the process as strange and awkward; and he was already awkward enough in his youth and didn’t need help.
“Why is there such a shortage of women?—and people, for that matter? – if there’s nothing else to do; why wouldn’t there be a higher population?” Hobbie asked as if it was the logical conclusion.

Luke looked over at his comm unit with a surprised glance, furrowing his brow that Hobbie was thinking out loud.

He thought about it for a moment. “Well, for starters, it’s not the most hospitable places. It’s hot. There’s lots of things that can kill you. Aside from that, there used to be several radiation storms that made some people sterile. The storms aren’t common anymore.” He said. “That’s why my Aunt Beru couldn’t have any children.”

The other pilot was quiet for a few minutes while he considered it.

“Any other traditions I should know about?” Hobbie asked.

“I’ll let you know as we go along.” Luke said; nothing immediate stuck out in his memory. “But I hope that you brought sun-screen lotion.”

“That…” Hobbie snorted. “I brought lots of.”


The music filled up the space between them.

**

**Somewhere in Space- Day 2**

He was going on ‘Tatooine time’ now. It was an effort to go to sleep, but Luke had managed to get in about five hours.

The rules were simple; get up early, avoid the heat, take naps or hide indoors, and then, resume the rest of your day—but ‘get up early’ was a standard rule for life on the farm.

He flattened back the seat in the cockpit, unhitched his crash webbing, and back-rolled into the aft section of the X-wing.

There wasn’t a lot of room, but just enough to do some crunches and reverse crunches; just to keep his muscles from the atrophy that could happen if he stopped moving for too long.

He stretched his back as the tight muscles protested.

After a quick Evac flush, and he was ready to crack the sealed heat pack and have his delicious, pre-packaged, nutrient-enriched pouch for what passed, and could be loosely described as ‘food’.

Luke tried not to let his mental sarcasm set the tone for his day.

He rolled back into his seat as he shook the package of ‘food’ before opening it.

Looking over to his data pad, he selected another folder of music for his day.

Pausing at the folder he had found on Mara’s drive that was labeled ‘Luke’; he had loaded it on his data pad out of curiosity.

It turned out that he had found her collection of love songs; he smiled as he thought that he was the one to inspire the list of about fifty songs or so. He knew she had a sensitive side- it was only a
matter of time before she was to give herself away.

Luke decided that Hobbie would probably not like to wake up that particular set of songs, so he selected something else; and turned the volume low just in case the other pilot wasn’t awake yet.

He turned to his controls and checked the status of the transport; everything was fine, and they maintained their speed and course.

Turning to check his own system, he saw that his droid was in hibernation and running on low power. He smiled.

During the previous night, Artoo had taken to ‘singing’ to him every-so often; something the little droid hadn’t done before.

When Luke asked him about it, Artoo had responded over the translator screen that he had heard the music that was playing when they were on Yavin, and liked it.

After further questioning, Luke found out that it was an electronic symphony that Mara had on her drive that had inspired the little droid.

Again, it had come back to Mara.

He hit the edge of his visor as he rubbed his eyes.

In Basic Training and in The Rogues hangar, he had very little time to think about her, other than the occasional message from her, and in the evenings before he retired for the day.

Thinking about her before he went to sleep actually made him sleep better as he revisited the places they had gone together in their dreams.

Now, with only star-lines ahead of him, he could think about her.

She looked beautiful in the mornings; her hair in disarray, her sleepy eyes, and how she magically woke up at the smell of caf being brewed.

Poking at the contents of the food packet, he tilted the package in his mouth; it was like having breakfast with her, only it wasn’t.

Mara had a way of making caf that made the bitter drink tolerable, and she prided herself on it.

He sighed; it wasn’t just that he missed their romantic time, he missed her, *his friend*. She understood him on more levels than anyone else could, including his family.

He knew she still kept things about her life to herself, but from what he could ascertain, both of them had similar lives.

Brought up in isolation, with guardians instead of parents, fostered without knowing who you were or where you came from, and very seldom, were there any other children around.

And then, being trained for a purpose that you never intended or would wish upon anyone; these were things that only she could relate to.

And they had found each other- by the most unlikely of means.

It was closing in on two years since she had found him in space, since he saw her face for the first time, but it felt like he known her for much longer.
When she had let her hatred of him dissolve, that was when they had truly started to become friends.

He could tell her things that he couldn’t tell anyone else, and she could do the same.

She didn’t judge or question him when he had an idea or plan- she just went with it; and likewise, he did the same for her.

As she started to let herself rediscover her talents in the Force, they had both expanded their training.

Even if he wasn’t physically attracted to her, he would still say that he loved her as his friend too. The fact that she was stunning, and he was so very deeply in love with her, was just a bonus.

She certainly had a way of finding out things. Luke had lost count of the number of times that she was ahead of the galaxy, or the common knowledge, on so many things.

Mara had a way of looking at things that he never considered.

For example, Vader’s Estate; he never once considered that there could be anything left of it. He hadn’t even mentioned it to Leia.

When she read anything about Force teachings, she always looked at them with a somewhat critical, if not skeptical, eye; never taking anything at face value.

She challenged him when other people thought he was above it.

Whereas, he preferred to take action, she preferred to think before doing anything.

Luke paused to stop to think about his father, and Mara’s opinion of him.

Although Luke had assumed that Mara and ‘Vader’ had polarizing opinions of each other, he could not discern of what she thought about ‘Anakin Skywalker’.

They hadn’t had this particular conversation, yet.

A fleeting thought passed through Luke’s mind; what would his father have to say about Mara? Would Vader be answering or Anakin?

Perhaps it was because Luke had so many questions about his father. And it was Mara who had revived his curiosity.

In the gift of holo vids that she had left with him, the vid of his father’s pod race as a child that stood out.

Luke had watched, and re-watched that vid so many times since he had first seen it.

He had almost paused it frame by frame, if he could.

Coming to the conclusion that the older woman in the vid was definitely Shmi Skywalker, his grandmother, and that the older human male was Jedi Master Qui-gon Jinn, the others still remained a mystery.

Who was the Gungan? And who was the young female?

Going back to Tatooine, more-specifically, Mos Espa, was probably determined by the Force, and by some of the information that Luke was given by that vid.
He had a place and time where his father was with a Jedi Master...was this where Anakin’s training began? – The Boonta Eve Classic in Mos Espa.

There would be only one way to tell.

In Mos Epsa, Luke would be able to have access to the slave records, and find out what happened to his father.

It wasn’t a surprise that Anakin had been a slave; he was told that Grandfather Cliegg had purchased Shmi in order to free her, and marry her.

Luke always thought it was romantic that he had done that.

Aunt Beru always made it sound as if they were truly in love, and her opinion of Grandmother Shmi painted the former slave as the most caring woman who would have loved to have a grandson, and grand-daughter.

The last time that he was planet-side, he didn’t have half the information that he had now.

The last time he was planet-side, he didn’t even have his father’s real name; Ben told him when he returned to Dagobah after rescuing Han from Jabba’s.

Then, at the back of his mind, and the questions that had been burning in him since he had accepted the truth. He didn’t need Yoda to confirm that Darth Vader was his father; he just needed the Jedi Master to acknowledge it.

Why did Anakin turn to the Darkside?

What was the push that sent him over to the path of death and destruction?

And what consumed him so greatly that his life, from that moment on, was nothing but pain and hatred?

Luke watched the star-lines, thinking on all of this.

His contemplation was broken by the sound of Hobbie coming to life; he could hear a few coughs and general movement on the other end of the comm.

Luke looked down at the packet that had gone cold in his hand; it didn’t taste any better cold than it did warm, so he continued to eat it until he heard more sounds.

When he heard Hobbie grunting on the other end, he assumed that the other pilot was maneuvering about the cockpit just like he was previously doing; probably stretching too.

Luke heard Hobbie grumble something about foodstuffs, so it was time.

“Morning Hobs.” Luke said, leaning closer to his receiver.

Hobbie was just finished a yawn, and then returned with, “Morning Boss. What did I miss?”

“Oh, these fast moving streaks of light...that’s all.” Luke yawned and stretched in the seat. “What do you have planned for the day?”

“Well,” Hobbie was probably starting breakfast, as Luke could hear the wrapper from the heat packet being unwrapped. “I was thinking of going out and running a few laps, then I was going to meet with the Ambassador for tea, and then I was thinking of redecorating the inside of my X-
wing… it’s so last year.”

Luke chuckled. “Right…are you going with sepia or chromium blue for the trim?”

“Shut up…Jedi, it’s too early.” Hobbie chuckled as he had been usurped as resident smart-ass; he started eating.

There was chewing sounds from the comm. Luke took the opportunity to look over the itinerary for their visit; the file had arrived overnight, along with their clearance codes for the planet.

He yawned again, glanced over at his oxygen meter and then back at the itinerary. Ever since flying the A-wing to Dantooine, he remembered to check the stat on the system.

“So it looks like they’ve given us thirty minutes to get cleaned up after we land before we need to go shake hands.” Luke said, reading the details.

“Oh, I think we both know who is the one that they want cleaned up for the pictures.” Hobbie said back. “And it ain’t me.”

Luke snorted, and rolled his eyes.

“I don’t think they’re going to jump at that.” Luke mumbled. “…given the recent news.”

“You mean the Vader thing?” Hobbie asked.

“Yeah.” He said quietly.

“Well, I think you balance it out…really…if you think about it…” Hobbie thought out loud. “One son of Tatooine does bad, and the other one does good…”

Luke stopped and listened to the other man’s ponderings; given that almost anyone who cared had an opinion, as he was finding out, it would be good to hear what those around him had to say. It was a simplistic idea, but it seemed to fit.

“I think good counts more than bad.” Hobbie concluded.

Luke knew that the other pilot was capable of more complicated thoughts, but he was able to boil it down to something that he was comfortable about. None of the other Rogues had spoken about it to him, with the exception of Horn, since the news had broken.

“Thanks.” Luke said, making his response fit the comments.

The chewing sounds continued for a moment. “Hey Luke…I never asked you…” Hobbie paused; probably rethinking if he should be asking. “But when did you find out? About Vader, I mean.”

He nodded.

“After Hoth…on Bespin, when I went to help Han and Leia.” He answered.

There was another pause in the conversation, and then… “Your hand!” Hobbie exclaimed. “Was that Vader? I heard it got damaged in a lightsaber fight…”

“Yeah…he wanted me to join him and Empire. He told me after he took my hand…”

“Wow.” Hobbie said quietly.
At this distance, Luke couldn’t sense Hobbie’s feelings, but he could guess; it seemed to astound people who realized it after it was disclosed- Vader had tried to kill him, on several occasions because he had resisted joining his father.

Luke’s right hand clenched and relaxed, as a reflex, as it seemed to whenever the topic came up.

“But you didn’t…join him.”

“No, I didn’t.” Luke said blankly; it was clear that Hobbie was trying to work this out.

“Were you tempted?” Hobbie asked quickly; not realizing what he was asking.

“Only once…and not for the reason you would think…..” Luke let the words hang out before he felt the need to explain them. He had no desire for the power or the privilege his father was offering, as tempting as it might have been to some people. “I wanted the pain to stop…I wanted my friends not to be tortured on my behalf…”

“Huh.” Hobbie was still pondering, and then, “Does your hand ever go numb? – my arm sometimes gets ‘tinglely’ and then I can’t feel anything for bit.”

Luke snorted to himself; only Hobbie could turn a conversation about Vader into about cybernetic limbs.

Just as Luke had his right hand replaced, Hobbie had a cybernetic left arm that few people knew about. He also had the talent to make a blaster burn on his leg turn from a limp into classy swagger.

It was the virus he had incurred on a mission while he was on Yavin that Hobbie regretted the most; watching his friends leave for battle without him, and watching so few of them return.

They all had some sort of regret.

“You need to change the power source every once and a while…I just had mine replaced, and the synth skin too.” Luke informed him.

“I can’t remember the last time I did that.”

“It’s just like your ship.” Luke said as he started to read the itinerary again. “You wouldn’t let that go without a tune up…”

Hobbie must have been reading it too. “Looks like they gave a big window before we need to leave. Why did they give us such an early clearance for the following day?”

“In order to meet the rendezvous with The Liberty, on the following day.” Luke explained as he had read further. “They’ll be swinging by the Rim in order for us to dock.”

“Yeah, I heard about that.” Hobbie growled. “Then, we become Reds again.”

“You don’t like that idea?” Luke asked, not sure if Hobbie knew the full scope.

“I like it better than being target practice for Fel’ya.”

From his tone, Hobbie had a full estimation of what would happen to the Rogues if they didn’t become Reds.

“And then we’ll be the welcoming committee for the rest of them. Wes and Horn are due to arrive after us.” Hobbie said. “One thing though… Wes and I came up with a good acronym for RED.”
“Yeah, what?” Luke asked optimistically, as Hobbie’s teasing tone suggested.

“Rogues-Extremely- Dangerous.” The other pilot chuckled.

“Right…that’s it.” Luke snorted. “You remember the protocol for that too, right?”

It was asinine, but it worked, legally anyway.

“Yeah, yeah…” Hobbie brushed it off, but repeated the procedure just in case he missed a step. “We report in using only our call-signs, not proper names, and we surrender our fighters.”

“Yup, that’s it.” Luke confirmed.

What they were going to do was questionable, and it was not like they were leaving Coruscant undefended – that was Luke’s only issue with Wedge’s plan; he didn’t want innocent citizens to pay for their desire to be away from a fight they knew they couldn’t win.

Wedge had assured him that the planetary guard would take over in lieu of Rogues. There was more planetary guards than there were Rogues anyway; sheer numbers would win out.

Rogues were just convenient to send in first, in case of an attack, and thought of as expendable, as it turned out.

“So how do you want to handle the rest of the day, after the reception?” Hobbie asked, bringing the conversation back to their itinerary.


“There’s a few things that I wanted to do while in Mos Espa but they shouldn’t take very long…so we should be over to the Darklighter Farm by mid-afternoon. I’d like to swing the farm on the way back, if you’re okay, with that? – and maybe stop at Tosche Station.” He just said what was at the top of his mind, but he really hadn’t given it deep thought.

“I’ve never really toured Mos Espa…I’ve only ever been there once when I was a kid…but didn’t stay for very long. I heard they have an amazing market place.” He paused. “You’ve seen pod racing, right? Ever hear of Mawlitang?”

Luke thought back to his first and ever trip to region’s unofficial Capital; the family had just come in for the day. It was the Desert Fire Festival, and Luke was excited to be there.

He had found a droid at a junk shop and fixed it right on the spot, bringing it back to life while Uncle Owen looked around.

The shop owner, a Toydarian, asked him his name. When Luke told him, the flying alien turned to Uncle Owen and asked if he could buy Luke, offering several thousand credits, and was rather insistent.

Uncle Owen flatly refused, rushed him right out of there, and they never spoke about it again.

The memory slipped back as Hobbie voice came across.

“That sounds like a plan…I’ve seen pod racing…and Biggs told me about the liquor that can make you go blind…I’m looking forward to trying that!”

“I bet you are.” Luke said, smirking.
He could hear Hobbie finishing up his rationed meal and then he heard the sound of Hobbie accessing his own data pad.

“Hey Luke, any chance you got more of that music we were listening to?” Hobbie asked. “I’ve got to make myself a copy of that collection…”

“I sure do.” Luke found some files, and let the music play.

The remainder of the ‘day’ in space was spent alternating his reading between the new flight and attack patterns; it had been a while since he had truly reviewed them, and most of them, he knew under different names, and reading from his Jedi material.

Occasionally, Hobbie would interrupt his reading for a brief conversation, picking topics out of the blue, and then abandoning them- ‘space talk’ the pilots called it, just so you weren’t alone.

Luke had found a new manual, written by a Vos Mystic, on types of energy that was used by Force-users; it spoke of Force-push, Force-barriers, absorbing Energy, and releasing Energy; by means of either Force-Lightning or Force–Repulse.

Luke read, fascinated by the ways to over-come Force-Lightning; he was already familiar with the receiving end of that particular skill. It seemed to be a Force talent that only Sith used, as the emotion and skill that was needed to generate and maintain it came from the Darkside.

But, absorbing Energy seemed to be a uniquely Jedi skill, or at the very least, a neutral skill. It required years to practice it, and the Masters who wrote the text referenced Master Yoda as being one of the few who acquired the talent.

Luke sat back as he read the words that spoke of his former Master, and smiled to himself. Regretfully, he would have loved to have the time to have learned all of this from his teacher and mentor.

The text spoke of how Energy absorption was both effectual and ineffectual; the key to mastering this technique was practice, and being prepared.

Force-Repulse was a skill that Luke had never heard of.

As he read on, the skill and the technique drew him in. It seemed that there were only a handful of Jedi and Force-users who were familiar with the skill as it was deemed too deadly if used to its maximum power. And Sith seemed not to be able to access the skill, as it was a defensive move rather than an offensive attack.

The Force-user could generate a sonic boom that was so controlled and so confined that it would only effect those it was intended to effect. It could be destructive, but also used as a protective measure, due to that it also required learning Force-barriers to protect the user wielding it and others.

Luke found the instructional area of the manual, and read the section about building a barrier.

In the confines of the cockpit, he relaxed his mind as he read, and when he felt he was ready, he removed his left glove, and held up his hand.

With clear intention, his eyes rolled back as he reached out. He could feel the energy massing in his hand.

Luke kept his eyes closed as he heard the спits of energy at his fingertips; when it felt different, he
opened his eyes, still focusing his concentration.

As he opened his eyes, he saw a small blue-purple orb, perhaps thirty centimeters in diameter, hovering in front of his hand.

In awe he watched it; it sputtered and died as he lost concentration.

Luke sighed exasperated, the words of Yoda came back into his mind, “Control, you must learn control.”

<Yes, Master Yoda.> he told himself, but excited he was able to achieve what he did. Maybe outside the cockpit, and with a bit of practice.

He tried it again periodically when he took a break from reading, and was able to maintain the small bubble for longer periods of time, but it took a greater amount of concentration than he was capable of in the moment.

The fleeting thought crossed his mind that he should probably find some writings on maintaining concentration.

He chastised himself; it always came back to the words that Yoda had used that reminded him where his downfall was.

* A Jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind. *

This one a long time have I watched. All his life has he looked away... to the future, to the horizon. Never his mind on where he was. Hmm? What he was doing. Hmph. Adventure. Heh! Excitement. Heh! A Jedi craves not these things.

You are reckless!

Luke checked his chrono; it was almost unofficially ‘night’ on Tatooine, and he had yet to meditate for the day.

He reminded himself with another pilot flying with him, that it probably would not be the best idea to become so engrossed.

He would have to come back to the idea of having a ‘serious mind’ and what that meant, as it seemed to be the key to concentration.

Checking in with Hobbie before he retired for some sleep, they both confirmed their wake up time in order to be prepared for planetary entry with the transport.

Luke closed his eyes for the ‘night’, he thought of all the things that he was ‘serious’ about, and vowing that his Jedi studies was one of those things.

As always, he reached out and said ‘goodnight’ to Mara with saying ‘May the Force be with you, My Love’ to the galaxy.

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*Somewhere in Space; Approaching Tatooine- Day 3*


He heard the words, but it took him a moment before he registered them.
Luke checked his chrono before responding; it was well before his scheduled wake up time.

“What’s up, Hobbie?” he answered back.

“Nothing…’cept the transport is hailing you.” The other pilot informed him. “And I just won’t do.”

Luke yawned and stretched in his seat; his senses weren’t heightened so he didn’t feel any distress.

“Right. I’ll switch over now…you want to listen in?” He asked.

“Will do boss.”

Luke pressed the comm buttons and responded to the transport. “Transport 7-5-3, this is Rogue Five. How may I be of assistance?”

“Rogue Five, this is transport 7-5-3. We’ve received warning from Mos Espa of an impending Sand Storm affecting the landing area.” The voice of the transport pilot sounded annoyed.

“We’ve been given the option of increasing our pace, and arriving before the storm hits, or adjusting our speed and landing after the storm…just wanted your opinion Rogue Five.”

Luke thought about for a moment before asking. “What’s the opinion of the delegation? Have they been informed of the situation?”

“They have.” The transport pilot responded. “They would prefer to get ahead of the storm.”

“Can you pull that, Captain?” Luke asked.

“We can.” The pilot said confidently.

“Alright then, send us your marks and we’ll follow you.” Luke instructed him. “By the way, Captain…I never caught your name?” He asked.

“Kosior, Sir.” The pilot coughed a bit. “It’s a pleasure flying with you, Lieutenant Skywalker…um, I mean, Rogue Five.”

“Thank you.” Luke said quietly. “And the pleasure is all mine.”

The transport signed off their comm and the new directive for their flight arrived.

“Did you catch all that Hobs?” Luke asked.

“Yeah…I don’t like the sound of this storm.” The wingman sounded nervous.

Luke yawned and sighed again. “Probably nothing to worry about. Sand Storms are unpredictable and can shift directions quickly or peter out on a whim. The delegation probably just wants to get home sooner, that’s all.”

The nav computer bleeped as it registered the new flight pattern, which seemed to awaken Artoo from his hibernation.

“Morning Sunshine.” Luke said over to his droid. “Did you catch all that? We’re going to boost the engine and take it up a notch.”

Artoo chirped that he much preferred the higher speed, and was grateful for the change of pace.
“Hobs, it looks like they moved up our welcoming party and we’ll be having brunch after we arrive. Does a warm real meal suit you?” Luke asked as he read the new itinerary.

“As long I don’t have to cook it, it does.” Hobbie retorted. “There won’t be anything weird on this meal, will there?”

Luke snorted. “No…there shouldn’t be…you’ll like Bantha milk, I promise.”

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“It’s an acquired taste…acquired.” Luke re-iterated sarcastically.

Hobbie snorted loudly in disbelief.

Luke ran through his morning routine, and still had a ration bar for breakfast even though there would be a meal later on; his stomach suggested it.

They would be arriving approximately three hours before their expected time, when it would still be considered early morning planet-side.

Maybe it would be slightly after suns-rise, which, just like watching the suns setting, was a thing to behold.

Mos Espa wasn’t a hugely modern city, but it had all of the conveniences of most worlds. The buildings were old stone and cement; built to withstand the harsh climate and storms.

The people were just as hardened by the environment.

When Luke was a child, the city was still under Hutt control, as most of the planet was.

Tatooine may have had an Imperial Governor during his youth, but the ‘rule’ of the planet fell under the Hutts, and regional swoop gangs…and sometimes Tusken Raiders.

Mos Espa was built on gambling, and that money kept it rich; those riches made the Hutts wealthy and bought influence to keep the Empire out.

His inner farm boy was getting excited to see the ‘Big City’ again. Luke smiled as he thought about it; he had visited much bigger, richer, and extravagant planets, but those just didn’t feel the same.

The countdown clock had started on the nav computer, and within an hour, they would be touching down.

He would be home.

The trip wasn’t going to be necessarily filled with excitement, but Hobbie still volleyed questions over to him as they prepped.

Luke answered all that he was asked; Hobbie must have been hungry because he kept asking about food.

By the time the clock was almost ready to finish its countdown, Luke could taste the Ronto roast with tuptup sauce in his mouth- it was something that he couldn’t forget.

The transport hailed him one more time to confirm their marks, and that the X-wings would enter before them.
With a thirty second head start, the transport, being heavier, would have time to slow down after coming out of hyperspace to be met with the X-wings.

Luke switched over his comm to Hobbie, as he followed the senior officers directions.

Pulling back on the throttle, the star lines slid to a halt and the stationary planet appear in the distance.

The names ‘Dustball’ and ‘Floating Rock’ came into Luke’s mind; there is was.

The swirling winds on the surface could be seen outside the atmosphere as they approached; beyond that, a vast planet of beige sand awaited.

The X-wings held their position, and waited on the transport.

Soon the canopy ship appeared and slowed down to meet its escort.

Luke opened the channel to the transport and listened for the directions coming from the planet.

He smiled as his heard the genuine Rim accent from the tower operator, and the unpretentious attitude of his language.

The operator confirm the local time and temperature, and also confirmed that the Sand Storm had shifted position.

Hobbie coughed in protest when he heard the morning temperature, and Luke just snorted.

They followed the transport as it declined towards the surface. Once inside the atmosphere, the transport headed for the destined hemisphere.

Luke switched over his comm channel to Hobbie.

“How does he know where to go? It’s all beige?” Hobbie commented. “And the heat? Already?”

Luke shook his head. “They have homing beacons out here, you know…. And it’s a dry heat.”

In the distance, Luke knew where they were. He could see the Jundland Wastes beyond where they were approaching; the arch of the massive canyon looked miniscule from where they were.

He switched back his comm, forgoing the insightful comments of his wingman.

The transport was conversing with the tower, and given directions to the docking bay.

The X-wings hovered as the transport reached its dock and lowered to the pad.

The tower then commented to the transport’s escorts.

“Unidentified star fighters, please confirm your approach vector?” The voice asked.

“Tower, this is New Republic, Rogue Five and Rogue Four, respectively. Please indicate our landing directives?” Luke said over the comm.

“Rogues, huh?” The tower asked. “We don’t get your type out here.”

Luke smirked as he looked at the comm; it wouldn’t be home unless they didn’t take him down a notch.

He decided to play along. “And what type would that be? Do you think we’re geefs who don’t know
which end of a womprat means trouble?” He let his Rim accent out on that one, dropping low tones at every chance.

“Um…” The tower was not expecting that from a New Republic fighter pilot. There was a paused before the tower replied. “Rogue Five?- do you know how you milk a Dewback?”

It was a test and a joke, and Luke knew it. “Tower? Do you think I was born on a Bantha-back yesterday?"

He could hear the tower operative chuckling, recognizing one of their own now.

“Rogue Five and Rogue Four, you’re on landing pads sixty-three and sixty-four…respectively. Welcome back Rogue Five.”

Luke caught both the tease from the tower for using hoity words, and the subtle wink with the welcome.

“Appreciated, Tower.”

He signed off and Hobbie followed him in.

“A friend of yours?” Hobbie asked.

“Nope, just local.” Luke said as they circled the docking and found their stations.

They touched down without any issues.

Luke had observed as they approached that the narrow streets were just starting to get busy; it must earlier than he thought, or maybe city people didn’t get up as early as farm-folk.

He caught himself and cringed as he had mentally used the term ‘farm-folk’.

Artoo twittered and beeped out as they landed; commenting about how many oil dips he needed after leaving this planet. Luke quickly promised that he would get one when they docked with The Liberty in two days’ time.

Luke paused before he opened the canopy of the X-wing, knowing what to expect, he sighed.

The canopy’s airlock hissed as it released and opened; Luke inhaled deeply.

He could smell it; the heat, the sand, the grit in the air.

Flipping the webbed ladder over the side of the X-wing, Luke fully stood up for the first time in two days, and stretched himself before climbing over the side.

At the end of the ladder, his boots touched the fine sand that covered the landing pad; he heard the subtle grind as he walked.

Luke looked down at his feet and then back up at the clear blue sky, feeling the heat on his face; he smiled.

Artoo had already popped himself out of his port, and was triling to be let down.

With a wave of his hand, the droid descended to join his master on the ground.

“I think Hobbie’s droid is staying with the ship.” Luke suggested. “Can I leave you here, in charge,
to keep an eye on R8?”

Artoo seemed to prefer this option, rotating his dome in the direction of the terminal and joining door, and whistled in agreement.

The aft section of the X-wing was already lowering with his gear; it would feel good to get out of his flight suit.

Luke stretched his body again; the X-wing might have a basic grav system but it didn’t help when getting joints to move.

Luke stripped off his flight suit in favor of his fatigues, and made sure he transferred over his rank badge and distinctions.

He adjusted his belt, making sure his blaster was prominent and his lightsaber was available to him.

Grabbing his rucksack and securing his fighter, Luke could leave the docking pad to go find Hobbie.

“I’ll keep my comm open if you need me.” He said to Artoo before he departed.

The door to the adjacent pad opened, and he walked on through.

Hobbie was at the aft section, gathering his gear; stretching out his body before he lifted the weight.

“So this is it, huh?” Hobbie asked, squinting into the bright sunlight, trying to hide in the shade of his fighter.

With his flight suit off, Hobbie adjusted his belt too, and noticed Luke’s blaster, so he did the same.

“It is.” Luke said. Knowing that the other pilot didn’t expect much from the planet. “We should probably get a speeder and head to our hotel – our itinerary got changed. They moved everything up.”

“And where do we get one of those?” Hobbie asked as he wobbled a bit; finding his balance and securing his own fighter.

He followed behind Luke, and they both needed a slower pace, waiting to find their legs again.

Luke headed for the exit. “There should be speeders available close by. Watch your wallet.” He said over his shoulder.

As soon as they entered the street, instinct told him to follow the cluster of Jawas that walked by; they would know where a speeder rental could be found or at the very least, where an abandoned one could be stolen from.

Sure enough, rounding the corner from dock, a group of speeders were neatly in a row. The cloth canopy that protruded into the street told him that the vendor could be found hiding underneath it.

Luke walked under the canopy, sensing other presences.

“Off-worlders! What can I do you?” A loud, robust voice came from behind one of the speeders.

Two Fameens walked together towards the fighter pilots.

One of them nudged the other one. “Namee je watta eckt fierfek.”
Before they came closer, Luke responded to their comment of ‘watch me take these suckers’ in Huttese, with “Tup nine chee-opa.” Loosely translated meant, ‘But not today.’

The Fameens paused as they had been found out. One of them stepped forward. “Of course gentles, let me show you what we have available…”

For the right price, Luke and Hobbie loaded their gear into the choice speeder.

Luke smiled to himself as his hand ran along the lines of the X-34; this one was gray, but his former speeder was scorched brown with accents of rust, and decorative dents from the good times he had. It was still the fastest on that side of the Wastes.

Hobbie was shielding his face in the passenger seat as they drove away.

It was early morning and the heat was rising slowly, and hotel was also nearby.

Checking in at the hotel was taking some time.

The host was suggesting to the party ahead of them that they should take the scenic higher rooms, looking out over the city.

Luke held back and waited. When it was their turn, he asked for the rooms in the subterranean area.

The host looked at him strangely, an even Hobbie turned to look at him.

Luke handed over his ID; the host paused as he read the name. There was no using an alias on this trip.

Although he hated playing his name up, this would be the moment to take advantage of it. The host suddenly became more-friendly and accommodating as he handed over their room information to them.

Luke and Hobbie walked away from the desk.

“Did we just get some sort of deal?” Hobbie asked.

“Kind of.” Luke mumbled as he walked together towards the stairs that led to the lower levels. “The tourists ahead of us are paying to stay on the hottest levels and there will be an energy surcharge for the coolant units when there isn’t much to see.”

He looked over at Hobbie. “We, however, will be staying below ground where it’s cooler, naturally, and less of a chance to be robbed.”

Hobbie smirked. “Can I safely assume that everyone here will be out to get me?”

Looking over at his friend, Luke raised his eyebrows, as they approached their side by side rooms. “Yeah…pretty much.” He said without any apprehension. “Oh, and another thing…don’t take a water shower if it’s offered…only sonic while we’re here.”

“They?” Hobbie dared to ask.

“First, you might think the water gets out the sand, but it doesn’t- it will clump on your skin. Second, they’ll charge us through the roof for it, and it’s not pure.” Luke said with a wink he entered his room. “See you in thirty?”

Hobbie looked horrified but nodded anyway.
Luke showered and before he got dressed in his fresh fatigues, he covered himself in sun-screen lotion. He may have most of a permanent tan, but he didn’t need a burn.

As he waited outside Hobbie’s door, he hoped that the other pilot hadn’t chosen to take a nap – there would be time for that later.

Luke waited a few more minutes, and then knocked on his partner’s door.

The door slid open, and Hobbie emerged looking like the fine Rogue that he was; Luke looked him up and down.

“I even put on my sun-screen.” He commented over.


“What? Why would I do that?”

“You can get burned through clothing.” Luke said blankly.

“Are you serious?” Hobbie stared at him, and then turned and walked back into his room.

A few moments later, he returned.

“All greased up now Boss.”


“And look at you…” Hobbie said as they began to walk. “Don’t you clean up all nice….will they recognize you?”

“Well, I’m taller and older now, than the warrant holo they probably have of me.” Luke commented.

“Warrant holo?” Hobbie asked.

“Yeah, wanted for stealing Imperial Intelligence Data….the plans for the Death Star.” The former farm boy tried to sound innocent of the charges.

Hobbie whistled and then chuckled. “You had no idea, did you?”

“None whatsoever.”

As they reached ground level, Luke sighed, taking-in the site of the busy street ahead of them; people vying for shade now that the suns had risen fully.

They walked over to the speeder, and although it was a quick ride, Hobbie wasn’t prepared as he thought he was; covering his head with his hand as they rode.

They passed several creatures on the way to the place where the reception was to be held. Luke pointed out several different creatures and local species as they passed them in the streets.

When they arrived at the Grand Hall, Luke observed a trickle of sweat going down Hobbie’s cheek, when he, himself, barely felt the heat.

This was a cooler season for this particular hemisphere; if Tatooine was to have a ‘winter’ this would
They parked the speeder, and made their way into the Hall.

The first door sealed shut before the second one opened. Hobbie jumped as it did, but relaxed as Luke stayed still waiting on the second door to open.

Luke looked over to Hobbie. “It’s for retaining the cool air. This is a big show for us- to see how modern it is here.”

Sure enough the second set of doors opened, and they were met with a breeze of cool air; Hobbie sighed in relief, Luke walked through.

Some of the delegates were waiting for them, but only the humans; the Jawa and Tusken representatives seemed to have disappeared.

Geen Sunrider was the first to come forward and approach both pilots. He seemed to be nervous and unsure of himself.

Luke could sense it immediately, and rather than maintain a formal tone, he smiled warmly at the other man.

“Sunrider!” He greeted him from farther away than what seemed dignified on Coruscant, and extended his forearm in greeting.

The other man seemed to relax immediately, smiling in return, he extended his forearm and came closer. “Skywalker!” he addressed Luke, taking in the other man’s inner arm and squeezing it.

Hobbie must have noticed the type of handshake done out in the Rim, so he knew what to expect when Sunrider addressed him.

It was considered an old-fashioned gesture in the Core, and a welcomed and friendly one in the Rim.

“I must say, we were surprised when we found out that the New Republic was sending you with us.” Sunrider said looking at both pilots. His tone suddenly changed. “If they didn’t brush us off as they did, we would have thought that they didn’t like us.”

Sunrider looked around, but realized that the men in front of him had no control over what happened in galactic politics, so he changed his tone again. “I’m forgetting my manners…please come meet the others.”

As they walked over to the other group, Luke turned to the local representative. “Sunrider?” he asked. “Are you any relation to Myslek Sunrider?”

“Yes.” The man looked astounded. “He’s my cousin…how do you know him?”

“Then, you would have known my aunt, Beru Sunrider….she married Owen Lars out of Anchorhead.” Luke explained.

Sunrider chuckled. “Yes I do!…I was at their Claiming reception! That would make us almost family!”


They approached the rest of the group.
From the looks of them, Luke could ascertain that they were mostly farmers or simple business men, as they had abandoned their fancier clothing that he had seen them wear on The Capital, in favor of more practical clothing.

Sunrider made the introductions, and some of the names Luke recognized; Stormrunner, Sandstar, and Fixstone.

Luke made sure to reach out to them in the familiar manner, grasping their forearms in turn, putting them at ease, and allowing them to sense that, regardless of his reputation, he was still one of them. He also insisted that they call him ‘Luke’ or ‘Skywalker’.

When he introduced them to Hobbie, the other pilot instructed the group to leave formality behind also, and even suggested that they call him ‘Hobbie’.

There was a reporter who captured the meeting, and took holos of all of them for preservation and for publicity, siting that it was a great honor for the hero to come home.

Luke smiled through it all, but he could sense the tension in the group and that they were waiting until they all could speak freely.

A meeting room was set up for the morning meal buffet with offerings from various regions of the planet.

Hobbie stood beside Luke as he pointed out which foods Hobbie would probably prefer.

‘Don’t take the bottled water at the end.” Luke murmured. “It’s rude – they only did it to accommodate us. Water is rare and precious- take the vroot juice instead…the orange one…just as refreshing and more calories, it will cool you down.”

Hobbie nodded and did what he was told.

They sat around a circular table, all talking about their trip to the Capital.


Stormrunner seemed more skeptical and hardened by his trip. “Just a bunch of waste…that’s all it is…just because they can, they show it off.”

Luke remembered the ‘us and them’ sediments expressed between the Rim and the Core. “You get used to it….to the cold and the waste.” He rolled his eyes as they looked at him.

“I thought it was spectacular.” Fixstone said. “I’ve never seen so many aliens in one place!...and the buildings!...and all the speeders!”

Luke smiled over to him, knowing what that excitement felt like. “I did too when I first arrived, but living there gets to be too much sometimes. People find ways to quiet their minds…I like watching the sunset on the mountains.”

“Of course you do!” Sunrider said. It was a common and valued thing to watch a sunset.

“I go swimming.” Hobbie said. “My home world isn’t nearly as busy as Coruscant, and I sometimes find it overwhelming too.”

The group nodded their approval; it wasn’t just them who felt out of place there.

“How do you manage with only one sun?” Stormrunner asked; his face softened as it seemed that
Skywalker hadn’t been seduced by the draw of the Core world.

Luke swallowed his food and chuckled before answering. “I put on an extra layer of clothing.” He winked.

The rest of the table laughed at the comment.

As the meal started to end, Luke could see that Sunrider was looking at him from the corner of his eye, then over at the two servers that were employed by the Great Hall, then back at him.

Luke narrowed his gaze, and he motioned for one of the servers to come over.

The young man seemed surprised that he was singled out, and stepped carefully beside the famous hero.

Luke motioned him to come even closer; the young man bent over. “Why don’t you and your friend help yourself to a plate of food, and water, and give us some time to talk alone? – we don’t need to be fussed over.” He winked. “I won’t tell.”

He had just used the right words and right tone; he wasn’t a hero, just another hometown boy who didn’t want special treatment.

The young man smiled and nodded, but stood in place. “Would it be too much to ask…” the kid said in a shaky voice, “to take a holo with you, Sir?”


The young man signaled his friend to come over, and Hobbie took the necessary holos; both boys, really, gathered plates for themselves and left the room, closing the doors behind them.

Sunrider snorted once, seeing that Luke knew what needed to be done, and did it as not attract suspicion.

Luke sat back in his chair and looked around the table; he looked over to Hobbie and then raised an eyebrow at Sunrider.

Sunrider nodded once, agreeing that he found it acceptable for Hobbie to stay.

“You wanted to speak with me?” Luke started off by asking outright. He knew that cutting to the quick would be the way they would handle what they had on their minds.

Sunrider looked around the table at the other men; he had been clearly appointed to speak on their behalf.

“We need help.” The farmer said simply. “We represent the farmers and business men of the area. There’s about to be another Great Drought, and side-worlds are starting to deplete our water reserves.”

“We don’t have enough to farm- to grow our crops.” Stormrunner added. “At least when we were under control by the Empire, there was water…and even if we had to pay the premiums to the Hutts…we still had water.”

“It’s going to be bad…real bad.” Fixstone said quietly.

“Worse than the last one.” Sandstar added.
Luke nodded, he was just a child when the last one hit.

He remembered eating rotten food day after day just to get the moisture from it. Owen kept some of the food he could grow, and traded what he could just to keep things going, but sometimes things got bad.

They were able to make it through by keeping the solar dome in place and cooling what areas they could so not to fry the food in the ground. The dome slowed the growing season, retained moisture but it came at the cost of the yield it was able to give; just growing enough for the family, and maybe some to store or trade.

When money ran out, bartering started. They were lucky, and could keep most of what they had, but there were other families that didn’t fare so well, and the stories of desperation were rampant, as was the lawlessness.

For over six seasons, it was hand to mouth, food was rationed.

But when the Great Drought broke, and when the rain that was supposed to come every three years showed up three years too late, it was a time of celebration and mourning for all.

“We may have a season or two to prepare.” Sunrider said looking directly at Luke. “We were asking the New Republic for assistance to fill the reserves.”

Luke nodded. “And everything else has been tapped? No cloud seeding? No well digging in the canyons?” He asked staring off into space, trying to think of the options; his face clearly displaying his concern for them.

They could see that unlike the Bothan councilor, he was not paying them lip-service and was thinking of ways to help them.

“We’ve appealed to Ryloth for their reserves. They turned us down flat, but still haven’t stopped taking our food off planet.” Sandstar said. “Cloud seeding is far too expensive and runs the risk of contamination; we would chemically burn our fields as we were trying to feed them.”

“And we can’t get anywhere near the basins that we would need to dig wells because of the Tusken tribes.” Stormrunner informed him.

“How low are the current reserves?” Luke asked.

“Less than fifty percent.” Sunrider said grimly.


“We’ve got other problems too.” Stormrunner growled.

Sandstar sighed. “We were also asking for protection- to instill some sort of policing of the planet. We don’t want it to go back to the Hutts ruling everything again.” He said in a harsh tone.

“And bringing back slavery.” Fixstone added.

“They already have!” Sandstar growled.

“What?” Luke asked, sitting up. “It was out-lawed by the Empire, and maintained by the New Republic.” He was surprised. “Well, for most species…humans.” He said quieter.

“What Fixstone is referring to, are the ‘indentured servitude’ laws that have been reinstated.”
Sunrider informed Luke. “People gamble— they get into debt— lose everything—and sell themselves into work contracts that can’t ever be paid off.”

Luke nodded; listening.

“Plus we have Swoop Gangs that are running the Lower Quad.” Stormrunner said. “We just need help.”

He stayed quiet, looking around the table at the concerned men, Luke sighed.

“I wish I could give you the answers you want right now.” He said quietly. “I know some people who might be able to help with transporting water in.” He scratched his head. “But I can’t make any promises without talking to them first.”

“We have credits.” Sunrider said. “We’ve pooled our resources, and we can pay…if you think that will help. Things have been different since the Hutts lost most of their power— there’s been money to go ‘round. But a Drought will give them a chance to get rich again.”

“Credits might help.” Luke said tightly, thinking out loud. “Whoever you would get to run shipments will want to be paid.”

He could form all the plans in the galaxy but unless he talked to someone who could tell him if it was possible to bring in just the amount of water they were talking about—it was still astronomical….liters upon hundred thousands of liters would be needed.

When it came to protection, there was just one solution he could think of right off the bat, but that would need to be talked through too. Luckily, he knew the right person to talk to about that immediately.

Luke always thought that Tatooine would make a prime spot for a base for the Alliance, and now the Resistance; with a military presence, it would certainly slow down the tyranny out on the Rim.

Leia would think that he had lost his mind, but if he argued it right, she might agree with him.

Luke looked around the table, as a thought occurred to him. “Are you the committee that is representing the citizens? Or is there another governing body?”

“We have no representation in the New Republic Senate.” Sunrider said bitterly. “They won’t allow us because we won’t be able to represent all the species who reside here.”

It was true that the population of Tatooine was made up of those from all over the galaxy; narrowing it down would be a huge task, and they still might not meet the New Republic’s criteria for entrance.

“That’s why you brought Jawa and Tusken representatives with you.” Luke said; it was all making sense.

Sunrider nodded. “We also have no governing body—no one can agree and it’s too hard to govern such a wide space. Law is kept by those who want it kept.”

Luke nodded, and then shook his head, and looked down for a moment.

He looked up and met each man’s eyes. “I can’t promise to resolve anything, but I can promise to try.”

Uncle Owen once told him, if he was going to make a promise, look the person in the eyes when
You said it— they’ll trust you more.

“There is one thing that I will need from you…” He said. Since leaving the planet he had learned a thing or two about governments and how they worked. “If I can get you help, you’re going to need to organize yourselves better. You’re going to need some sort of governing group— a contact group that represents all Quads and hemispheres.” He paused. “Can you do this?”

Sunrider looked off, and the other men seemed to consider it.

“Even if it’s just one or two people from each Quad, to make a committee to oversee things, and be contacts.” Luke suggested.

Looking at the other men, Sunrider began to nod. “I think we can do this.” The others began to nod in agreement.

Luke looked over at Hobbie, who had been silent through the entire discussion, gave him a look. Hobbie nodded once.

“Good.” Luke said. “I’ll get your contact information, and try to start something.”

He felt relieved; he wasn’t promising the galaxy, but he was promising something he could give; hope.

The group seemed satisfied that someone had finally listened to them, and for the remainder of the meal, the talk resumed back to differences with living on other worlds, and local details.

Luke was able to find out about the tourist industry that had sprung up in his name.

Sandcrawlers had been converted into roaming hotels when the tourists came in, and there was a direct path in and out of the Jundland Wastes, including a stop at Tosche Outpost as it was called now since it had been upgraded; it was threatening to become a town.

Beggar’s Canyon and the Stone Needle had been declared landmarks and were now protected areas.

Luke snorted when he heard this.

“When I was I kid, all I could hope for was that I didn’t become a stain on the wall of the canyon, and now, you’re telling me that tourists pay to see it?” He asked as they were preparing to make their departure.

“Not only that…” Stormrunner chuckled, “We got groups going out to the Dune Sea to see the ruins of Jabba’s sail barge in my territory…there’s at least one stupid tourist who falls into the Great Pit of Carkoon per season- the Sarlaac has never been so happy.” He growled at the end.

“Have you ever seen it?” Stormrunner asked Hobbie.

Hobbie looked slightly terrified and shook his head.

The group had walked to the front doors, and Hobbie looked outside, dreading returning to the heat.

After exchanging contact information, they seemed to be more optimistic now about their future.

Luke took his chance to embrace each man’s arm again, sensing that he had earned their respect and their pride; it was humbling to see how much faith they placed in him. He hoped he could live up to it.
“I won’t forget.” Luke said as his parting words to Sunrider.

Sunrider smiled, holding Luke’s forearm, he said, “I know you won’t…we’re family…almost.” He winked.

One last wave, and Luke and Hobbie headed outdoors to their waiting speeder that was conveniently parked in the shade.


“Yeah.” Luke said as he adjusted the controls. “We think so.”

“Uh-huh.” Hobbie murmured as the engine started up.

Within a block of leaving the Great Hall, Hobbie asked, “So what’s the plan, Boss?”

Luke sighed, trying to put what he had heard on the back burner until he could truly think about it.

“Well, we’ll head back to the docking bay, and take the X-wings to visit the Darklighter homestead.” He looked up and then back at the road. “It’s going to be midday soon, and travelling out in the open, for that distance will do us no good. We’ll get cooked on the way.”

“By the time we get there, they should know we’re coming- I’ll send them a message before we depart.” Luke said. “I suspect they won’t invite us for longer than they have to…that’s just the way Huff is.” He grimaced at thinking of addressing Biggs’s father. “And then, if there’s time, we can stop off at the Lars homestead, and maybe Tosche Outpost…maybe.”

“Sounds like a plan, Boss… a good plan.” Hobbie said as they entered the docking bay.


TBC
Chapter Summary

Quote: Now, he would carry a piece of jade with him wherever he went.


Chapter Notes

**
You guys have been so patient…reading chapters with no smut in them…

This is a heavy chapter in some parts…but please try to read through.

I know nothing of military procedures…so I just made it up…If you are with the military or know someone who is, first off, Thank you…next, I hope I did justice…just know that I wanted to.

We’re getting there…almost done with plot…

**

Tatooine- City of Mos Espa

Luke dropped off Hobbie at the docking bay to prep the ships, and to find some shade from the heat.

He told the other man that he had an errand to run, and it shouldn’t take more than an hour. It had almost slipped his mind, but this was also one of the tasks he had set for himself.

Luke followed the map to the records office; there, he hoped he would find what he needed.

The building for central records wasn’t any different than the buildings around it; stone and stucco covered the brown walls, and the sign that was written in the four major languages of the area was what set it apart.

The office was small and only a few people in line ahead of him. The department was a mix of all the necessary filings for all sorts of situations; property registration, magistrate adjudication, library of records and any other data that one could want to live either legally or otherwise.

As he waited, Luke looked around the office and saw a packet marked ‘Claiming Regulations’ hanging from a rack beside him.

He reached over and picked it up, started leafing through the filmsy forms and wondered when ‘did it become so formalized?’

Aunt Beru told him that it was private event between a man and a woman; afterwards, usually a
week or more, or after growing season, the couple would celebrate with family and friends, and when a magistrate would come by, they would register they marriage.

Now, there seemed to be forms, and witnesses were needed for certain procedures, and it looked like a ceremony had to be performed, at least by comm-vid relay.

Luke grimaced; secretly in the back of his mind, he did always want to have a Claiming. Maybe, just maybe Mara would consider it; if she wouldn’t consider it barbaric or consider it at all.

She had become pretty agitated when he had even mentioned giving her the simplest of rights to information on him.

Yes, he had decided that he did want to marry her; in his heart that he knew he did.

Reading on, the ceremony stayed pretty much the same, and still in private.

If he had to admit it to an off-worlder…yes, it was ‘sex-fest’ as he heard it called so many times before.

Basically the couple would still be secluded for up to fourteen hours, during which they pledged their love and dedication to each other, and it would be assumed, if not expected, that they would be intimate several times during their seclusion; the rule was ‘suns up until suns down’.

Luke didn’t think he was blushing but the lady behind him was smiling directly at him, and he sensed it as he looked up.

“She must be a lucky girl.” She murmured.

Luke swallowed hard; the farm boy was back, and he blushed some more as he looked at the woman. “I’m the lucky one.” He said quietly.

“But you have no ring.” The woman said, motioning to his hands. “You must not have been promised for very long.”

Luke looked down to see that she was right; there was no indication that he was in the position to be Claimed.

Mara wore his pendant but he had nothing to remind him of her on his person.

He simply nodded and looked away.

Moving up in the line, he smiled politely to the woman behind him to excuse himself, and walk up to the counter.

“Yes?” the teller said without looking up; his voice blank and rote.

Luke cleared his throat before he spoke. “Um, I’d like to have copies made of former slave files.” He said quietly.

“Filmsy or electronic?” The teller asked without looking up, typing into his terminal.

“Electronic, if possible.” He answered.

“Are you of relation to the former slave?” The teller was inputting the data as he spoke in monotone. “It is against regulations to release any slave files to persons of non-family relations. You must be within at least one generation gap to access these files. Are you of at least one generation of the
family member who may or may not, have been a slave?”

“Yes.” He said.

Still not looking up, the teller handed over an input unit. “Please swipe your ID card through the receiver, and type in the name, or names, of the persons you are requesting.”

Luke did as he was told; he swiped his ID card and typed in the names of his grandmother and father.

He supposed the system paused as it took into account the requested names.

“The charge of fifty New Republic credits, or seventy-five Imperial credits, per file.” The teller blinked slowly, still waiting on the system. Without looking or still making eye contact, he motioned to the input unit again. “Please swipe your debit card for payment.”

Luke swiped his debit card this time, with a grimace.

Within seconds, the system beeped, and the teller seemed to read the results on the screen; his eyes widened and his face dropped, and he turned his head slowly to finally make eye contact with the person in front of him.

“It’s you.” He said quietly, and in shock. “I heard you were in town, but I never expected I’d ever get to see you in person!”

The teller’s face slowly began to smile, and his voice got loud. “Luke Skywalker is standing right in front of me! Here! In our office!”

People stopped and paused and looked over at the man at the counter in front of the teller; so much for going in quietly.

There were others, coming out from offices as soon as they heard, and walking over just to stand in front of Luke.

He smiled, and said ‘hello’ to all the faces; he could see that holos were secretly been taken of him as the questions started.

‘How long are you planet-side?’ –“Not long” he answered.

‘Are you really a Jedi? Is that your lightsaber?’ –“Yes, and yes.” He said quickly.

‘Your aunt and uncle would be so proud- I knew them you know…well, not well, but I heard of them. Did they know you were Jedi?’ –“I think so.” He grimaced.

‘Are you back to start farming again?’- ‘Did you miss the heat?’- ‘The princess- is she really your sister?’ –‘What is it like to live in The Capital?’ –‘Are you married yet?’

Luke took a step back from the barrage; it was less than ten people, but their enthusiasm surprised him. He had no idea that people knew so much about him.

He looked over to the teller, and pleaded for some sort relief.

The teller, from behind the counter called out at the room, and it returned back to order, even though Luke could still feel their excitement.

The young man kept looking back up and smiling over as he finished off Luke’s request.
He handed over the data input unit one more time. “We’ll need your contact information, Jedi Skywalker…” He said with his eyes wide, still enthralled. “To send the files to…to…you should have them within the next rotation.”

Luke sighed and nodded. “Thank you for all your help.” He said looking over at the teller, and then smiling back.

Seeing that his time was over, the teller’s face got solemn. “Thank you.” He said, and Luke could feel the weight of his words were more than just a simple expression of gratitude; it was on a grander scale.

He nodded and turned to leave.

Luke gave a simple wave to those in the room who were watching him go, before he slipped out the door.

Walking back to the speeder, he let out a hard breath, and dropped the packet on the seat beside as he got in.

He looked back down at the packet. In the confusion, he never put back the Claiming documents that he had been looking through.

Cringing, he really didn’t want to go back to return them, so he decided he would keep them for the time being, and began his trip to the docking bay.

Inside the conjoined docks, Hobbie was sitting in the corner, feet up, reading his data pad.

“Hey Boss, get everything done?” Hobbie asked he checked his chrono, seeing that it was less than the hour that he thought that he’d be waiting.


Looking around the dock, two droids twittered back and forth. “What’s up with those two?” Luke asked as he watched the droids move back and forth against each other.

“I think they’re fighting but I can’t tell…something about, who’s in charge of whom…I think.” Hobbie said, his face twisted, trying to comprehend droid logic.

Luke just shook his head. “So, do you want lifts up in fifteen? I’ll contact the tower to see if we’re good to go.”

“Are they going to let us take off so quickly?” Hobbie asked, bringing his attention away from the droids, and closing his data pad as he stood.

“This isn’t exactly Coruscant…I think the tower can fit us in…and no need to send a flight path either- there’s no one to monitor it anyway.” Luke said before he whistled to get Artoo’s attention; the droid had his arch welder out and had directed it at Ar-eight.

With his target forgotten, Artoo retracted the welder, and rolled in his master’s direction; raspberriying the other droid as he left.

Luke paused and looked down. “Hobs, do you still have the package?” He asked quietly. “How do you want to do this?”

Hobbie got up from his seat, and nodded. “I’m not sure.” His tone matched the other pilot. “Do you
Luke nodded; he raised his head to look his friend in the eye before he turned and headed for his
dock.

Before mounting his X-wing, Luke sent a message to the Darklighter farm; but with no response, he
hoped they wouldn’t be caught off guard by their visit.

The tower was much more accommodating than when they had arrived; Luke assumed it was
because people seemed to know that he was in town. If the tower suspected that two New Republic
fighters were docked, then chances were that one of them had to be Jedi Luke Skywalker.

“So you’ll follow me?” Luke asked over the comm channel to the other fighter. “We have to keep it
at Mach Five for a bit, but we may have to dodge some things.”

“Like blasters from Tuskens?” Hobbie asked.


They headed West of Mos Espa, throughout the vast desert, with the suns behind them, and a sea of
beige sand ahead of them.

“This is called the ‘Tranquil Sea.’” Luke said as they sailed over the area that had nothing
distinguishing about it.

“I’m glad you thought we should take the ‘Wings…I’d hate to be in a speeder through this.” Hobbie
said.

“I’d have to turn you over after you got done on one side.” Luke agreed.

“We can push it a bit more out here…and go up to Mach Six…there’s no traffic. Follow my mark.”
The Jedi suggested.

The fighters boosted their speed across the great plain, slightly higher above the sand as not to disturb
its peacefulness.

Far from being one color of beige, the desert was actually a mixture of earthy tones. Luke knew that
the colour changes signified the different minerals that were mixed in with the sand.

Luke’s X-wing took a soft angle to the left and headed towards the dark cusp shape in the distance.

Below them, it looked like a herd of animals were crossing the desert, over a hundred of them,
creating strange patterns in the sand.

Luke slowed down to under Mach Four.

“Those are Banthas.” Luke said. “They migrate across the Sea twice a year…looks like they’re
headed out now.”

“Do they do anything?” Hobbie asked.

“Tuskens ride them- they’re easy to ride. You can get milk from them. Their fur makes nice
blankets.” Luke thought about openly. “Oh, and they sure are tasty with some vornkeets.”

Hobbie chuckled. “Bantha steak it is for supper then.”
“Nah, not me.” Luke joked. “I have my mind on some Ronto roast since we landed.”

Luke maneuvered the X-wing to the right to catch the current, and angled off, bearing down on the canyon they were coming up on.

“We’re approaching Beggar’s Canyon now. We won’t go in, but you’ll be able to see the twists from up here.” He said.

He slowed the speed of his fighter as they approached the start of the canyon, so he could see some of the swerves and turns that he used to dodge in his youth as they followed it.

Hobbie whistle as he must have looked down into the cagey cavern below. “You used to fly inside this Boss?”


The Canyon was more than ten kilometers long and each turn more deadly than the next. Luke had studied the pattern above the canyon long before he ventured inside it.

At the beginning, the Canyon started flush with the desert, but soon the cliffs and edges raised and lowered on the sides, making the border treacherous to handle in a speeder too.

“What did you used to fly in there?” Hobbie asked.


“Would it fit?” Hobbie asked.

Looking down, there was no way that some areas could accommodate the width of such a ship, as little as a T-16 is.

“It was a tight fit.” Luke said. “The first time I did it, I nicked one of the wings, and my uncle just about killed me.”

Hobbie snorted. “No wonder you were such a hotshot when you came on board.”

Luke chuckled back and just as he was thinking the same thing.

They slowed down even more to an open area over-looking the canyon. A herd of long-bodied animals were below them, grazing on the canyon floor.

“See those down there…those are womprats. I used to use them as target practice.” He gave a hard chuckled. “I told Wedge, at Yavin that shooting down the Death Star would be like bull’s eyeing them.” He shook his head at naïve he was then.

Hobbie snorted. “Farm kid.”

“Yeah, the things I’d tell that kid if I could.” Luke murmured.

“Like what?” Hobbie asked.

“Like, not to be so damn whiny.” He said blankly.

Hobbie started laughing. “Yeah, you were a bit of a whiner when I met you.” He waited. “Skywhiner.”
Luke chuckled; there was going to be no escape from that nickname.

The canyon closed up and opened again until they were nearing the end where it opened to a large area.

Luke brought them down lower so that they could circle the area and come in closer to one of the structures.

There it was, ahead of them – The Stone Needle.

Hobbie gasped. “Is that it? That’s what you guys used to fly through?” He went quiet. “How wide is the opening to that thing?”


“But a wingspan on a T-16’s is what?...”


Hobbie whistled. “You guys were nuts.” He said blankly. “Biggs too.”

Luke snorted a few times, admitting to himself that yes, they were. He did one more rotation and then lifted out of the canyon.

He pulled the X-wing to soft angle another turn around the town and headed West of it.

Keeping the relaxed speed, they passed a farm below them.

Luke knew the place; The Windmaker’s Homestead. Old man Windmaker used to yell at Luke as he sped by in his speeder, but after Luke came to fix his vaporators once, the old farmer let up a bit on him and didn’t give him a hard time after that.

“We’re coming up on my family’s farm.” Luke said quietly.

His mind flashed on the last image he had of it; house billowing smoke and finding his charred aunt and uncle.

He had tried to push it out of his mind since then, and the memory of what he did after he found them.

Still in shock, Luke dug a pit beside the other graves by the home, with the wind still carrying the smoke blowing in his face; as if it was nothing out of the usual, emotionless, numb, scared, and angry.

In his mind, he could still smell the flesh on their bones as he lowered them into the pit, and then covered their bodies with sand.

He had stood there for some time before leaving, over their resting place, feeling lost, confused.

Luke, in the cockpit of the X-wing now, sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

He didn’t remember how he returned to find Ben and the droids, but he did, remembering that it was the fear of being found by the Imperials that kept him moving.

That day was the beginning of the loss for him; he never knew either one of his parents, but he still knew what it had meant to feel their absence, now that the Empire’s wrath had touched him
personally and had set him on his journey.

He looked out the view from his cockpit, and slowed his speed as the vaporators that marked the perimeter of the farm came into site.

“Luke…” Hobbie’s voice broke his thoughts. “How does a moisture farm work? I don’t see how anyone can grow anything in sand?”

It was a good question but hardly anyone ever asked it.

“The vaporators collect the moisture from the atmosphere, which runs to a condenser…there can be one condenser for about four vaporators. The condenser then feeds back into the farm…or sometimes they can be remote, in which case you have to go bring back the water to the farm…” He sighed, remembering having to do that with some of the older units.

“And the water feeds the underground farms, usually with aid of a solar dome.” He explained. “The ground under the sand is extremely fertile—more fertile than other planets that surround Tatooine actually, but without the direct moisture, nothing can grow.”

“A solar dome?” Hobbie asked.

“It’s a removable dome that gets hoisted over the growing area during the day…keeps the moisture in and doesn’t fry the food…but if you keep it on for too long, the air exchange can damage or slow down the speed at which the food grows.” He explained further.

“My uncle was a wiz at figuring out when and how the dome should go on…it’s like he had a second sense for it.” Luke said fondly. “He never could figure out vaporators, but that dome, he had down to a science.”

The farm came in sight; Luke could tell as the curved roof of the entrance to the main house told him. Gone was the scorches and dark streaks over the domed roof; clearly they had re-laid stucco on the walls.

As they came closer, Luke could see that they had built a second dome entrance on the opposite side of the sunken courtyard.

Luke slowed down even more to see more details, but hoped he wasn’t disturbing the farm.

At the height that Luke hovered, he could see a brief bit of green inside the courtyard, and the family vaporator in the middle; he wondered if someone had started growing honey suckle bush again that Aunt Beru prized.

To the south of the home, the solar dome in place, as he expected it would be at this time of day.

He could feel the emotion rising in him; the eagerness to drop down and inspect the farm, and the sadness - this wasn’t the right time.

Luke pulled up his X-wing, knowing that Hobbie would follow suit, and headed East of the farm.

He increased their speed through the second plain that they needed to cross but slowed down again as they came to what appeared to be a small town.

“That’s Anchorhead.” Luke said. “And Tosche Station used to be on the outskirts.” As he looked down, it looked like the town had not so much grown but just spread in the direction of what used to
be the small outpost/watering hole.

“If we headed directly West of this, we would come to the Jundland Wastes, and passed that, Mos Eisley.” He said. “I met Han and Chewbacca there.”

“Weren’t they smugglers at the time?” Hobbie asked.


They were all on the run from something that day, and since then.

“We’ll be at the Darklighter Homestead in less than five minutes.” Luke said quietly. “Have you thought about what you like to do? I’d like to make the introductions, and say a few words…but…”

“I know.” Hobbie said solemnly. “I’m not expecting to get hugged for this one…I doubt, if it was my family, they would be welcoming either.”

They flew in silence, passing the vaporators that marked the Darklighter farm; the homestead was coming up on them.

The domed burrows, marking the entrances, were larger and more ornate than what was the Lars homestead. There were two sunken courtyards that were joined by a covered walk ways; several solar domes dotted the area around the home.

Luke circled the home once, and prepared to land within a hundred meters on the main entrance. He touched down and waited for Hobbie to do the same beside him.

He removed his helmet and gloves and waited for the other fighter to fully land.

He looked over to the other fighter and saw Hobbie move to his own aft section, probably to retrieve the package that they were sent to deliver. When Hobbie reappeared, Luke released the hatch of his X-wing.

They climbed down their ladders in unison, and started walking towards the home. Hobbie had the box tucked under his arm.

The sound of their arrival probably notified the family and Luke could sense several persons inside the home, as they walked in the direction of the entrance.

He stopped within twenty meters of the opening, and waited.

The person who came from the structure was not who Luke was expecting and Hobbie looked over at him to see how to respond.

A young man emerged; he had the classic Darklighter dark hair and eyes, but his clothing told a different story.

He wasn’t dressed in the same style that came with the family’s reputation or wealth. He must be a hired hand, and expendable to go out and greet strangers.

He walked nervously towards the fighter pilots, holding a blaster riffle in his arm; clearly not experienced as it was a long range weapon and wouldn’t do any good from this distance.

“Greetings!” Luke spoke louder against the hot wind, raising his hand in the air in a show of peace. “We are here to speak with Master Huff Darklighter.”
The man stopped and squinted to look at them. “Who may I say is here?”

“Please tell him that Jedi Knight Luke Skywalker and Major Derek Klivian, are here to see him, representing the Alliance to Restore the Republic, and on behalf of the New Republic.” Luke said, sounding very formal.

The man’s eyes widened, he nodded once and turned back, rushing into the building.

An older man soon appeared; wearing finer garments, dark hair and moustache greying, but a stern look to him.

Behind him, several hands, including the young man they had met stood behind at the entrance to the dome, waiting behind.

The older man, Huff Darklighter, stopped several meters before them, and looked back and forth at them; his face registered several emotions; anger, sadness, confusion in the moment.

Luke could see the family resemblance now. Biggs always said that he would look like his old man when he grew up, and now it was obvious as Huff looked like an older version of Biggs.

Huff swallowed, looking hard into Luke’s eyes.

Luke had known this man since he was child, and here they were, both men looking back at each other.

He let out a sigh, knowing what he needed to do. “Attention!” Luke said loudly, bringing his posture up, and Hobbie jolted to the same.

“Present.” Luke walked forward as Hobbie came to the same pace.

They stopped in front of Huff Darklighter. “Halt.” He ordered; one hard step indicated to cease.

“Salute.” The fighter pilots raised their right hands to their foreheads before the civilian, and relaxed.

“Master Huff Darklighter, on behalf of the Alliance to Restore the Republic, and the worlds that assemble within the New Republic of Freed Planets, we would like to thank you for your son’s sacrifice in the service to the galaxy.” Luke paused to swallow. “To honor the name of Airman Biggs Darklighter, we present you with your son’s metal of distinction, earned during the Battle of Yavin IV against the Imperial Death Star.”

Luke turned to Hobbie, and took the small case and opened it; the metal rested inside with letters of gratitude from Mon Mothma, and Leia, representing the leaders of the Alliance and New Republic.

He continued before he wouldn’t be able to. “He has been given recognition on the Wall of Honor in the Galactic Senate, and his name is remembered on Liberty Day.”

Huff’s eyes looked down at the metal in the box, and then back up at Luke; his lip began to quiver at Luke’s last spoken word.

Huff came closer to them.

“At ease.” Luke said quietly, and saw from the corner of his eye that Hobbie’s shoulders relaxed.

The man’s gaze was fixed on the box as he walked towards it; he tightly smiled at Luke, and that smiled then bent into a frown as tears came from his eyes.
Huff looked at Hobbie as he was standing before him. “Did you know my boy? Did you know Biggs?” He asked.

“Yes, Sir. I knew him; we were bunkmates in training, and I was his wingman.” Hobbie answered quietly. “He was one of my best friends.”

Luke could sense Hobbie was on the verge of tears himself but years of training told him not to break.

Huff nodded, and took the box gingerly from the other pilot, closing the lid. He turned to Luke, and looked him up and down.

“Luke…you’ve gotten taller.” Huff said without thinking, straining to keep his composure, but kept his distance, unsure if he could approach the hero.


Huff’s eyes started to water again, and he looked as if he was about to fall. Luke reached out and caught the older man, going down with him.

“I didn’t think this day would ever come.” Huff went to his knees, mumbling. “As long as no one came, it was like he was still out there…” Luke sat beside him in the sand. “Like, he had just forgotten to comm us.”

The man rocked back and forth, sobbing, and Hobbie came down to sit beside him too.

“When his mother, Vita, passed I had nothing to tell her.” Huff looked at Luke. “She always thought that he was with you…her mind was going you know, she thought Biggs was late for dinner because you two were out in the speeder, or something…she never knew.”

“I knew…I knew it in my heart when I heard about the Death Star…and then his locker arrived.” Huff cried.

He looked over to Hobbie. “Tell me he was a good man…tell me he did right?”

“He was.” Hobbie said without a doubt in his voice. “He did.”

Huff slowed his breathing and started to become more-composed upon seeing that his son’s friends came for him.

“I wish we could have been here sooner.” Luke said, with his head down. “I’m sorry we didn’t. You deserved better…Biggs deserved better.”

Huff reached over and touched his shoulder; they all shared the same grief.

After several moments, the pilots helped the man to his feet, and Huff regained himself, becoming the hardened man that he appeared to be on the exterior; adjusting his clothes and bringing back his dignity, even though those around him didn’t think any less of him.

Luke could sense that Huff was confused about what to do next; he wanted to be the gracious host, but he also wanted to be left alone with his thoughts.

As much as Luke wanted to reminisce, he too felt the same way, and knew a visit could be taxing on the older man.

“You’ll beg our pardon for arriving without much notice, and we don’t want to impose on you
now.” Luke said, speaking what everyone was thinking. “So we’ll be taking our leave.”

Huff nodded, and seemed relieved.

“But the next time, I’m planet-side, I would like to come and visit, if you’d be acceptable to that?” Luke asked.

Huff smiled and nodded; sure and confident of both men. “You would be most welcome…and you too.” He said looking between them.

The young man who first greeted them came forward, to steady the older man. “Come on uncle…let’s get you into the shade and something to drink.”


The young man nodded. “I’m surprised you remembered me.” He smiled tightly.

Luke didn’t remember the man, but he did remember the kid- the ten year old kid that used to follow his cousin and his best friend around, trying everything they did, and failing.


“He’s living out of the Lars homestead now…your old home.” Huff said. “And works for me on the side.”

“I really want to be a pilot.” Gavin said excitedly, and then he looked back to younger girl. “Rasca… come help uncle.”

The girl came to help Huff.

“You’ll make a fine farmer, Gavin.” Huff said before he looked at both pilots and said his goodbyes before retiring into the house and shade.

Luke grinned and shook his head slightly; so many times he heard those same words from his uncle.

When his uncle was gone, Gavin turned back to the two men in orange flight suits. “So how do I get there?” He asked with the same intensity that he declared his mission. “How do I become a Rogue? ...just like Biggs.”

Hobbie covered his mouth and chuckled sardonically. “No one wants to become a Rogue. We get inducted.”

Gavin swallowed hard, feeling this was his last chance to impress one of his heroes and an off-worlder. “I’ve threaded the Stone Needle.” He said abruptly.

Luke paused, and stared; he wasn’t so quick to shoot down the boy’s dreams, and narrowed his gaze before commenting.

“*Hobbie is right*, it does take a while to get onto our wing.” Luke said but not as dismissive as his companion. “How old are you now? Seventeen? Eighteen?” He asked.

“I’ll be nineteen at the end of this season.” Gavin said proudly.

Luke nodded, and motioned for the young man to follow him back to their X-wings.

“Gavin, in the coming seasons, your uncle, your family, is going to need you, probably more than
ever.” Luke said, trying not to give away too much or to scare him. “The galaxy is about to go into another war. If you promise to stay here and take care of them, I will personally come back and get you for tryouts to the Academy.”

The young man was about to interrupt in recklessness that Luke could appreciate; the desperation, the eagerness.

Luke just raised his hand to stop the young man before he spoke. “Gavin, I came here today to do one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do…and that happened over nine years ago.” He paused. “You saw it.” He looked the youth hard in the eye, summoning his Jedi ways. “Don’t make me come back here with the same news to give your family, when you’re not ready yet.”

Gavin stopped in his tracks, and heard the words; really heard them and what Luke was trying to say.

“If Luke’s giving you a sure thing later, I’d wait it out and take it.” Hobbie said sternly.

He looked at the two pilots, and nodded if somewhat reluctantly.

“Okay.” Gavin mumbled and looked down.

“Are you at least keeping my work area clean in the garage?” He asked.

Gavin’s face lit up, realizing that the place he called home once belonged to Luke. “Yes, I am.”

“Good.” Luke said, and then sighed.

Luke pulled a card from his jumpsuit. “Here’s my contact information. Keep in touch and let me know if you, or the family, need anything.”

“Yes Sir.” Gavin said, his face looked satisfied. “See you soon.” He said as he started to step back.

“Hey kid…” Hobbie quipped. “Rogues say ‘Clear Skies’- got it?”

Gavin nodded again. “Clear Skies!” He turned to leave again.

Luke looked over at Hobbie, watching Gavin leave. “You ready?” He mumbled as they walked to their fighters.

“You bet…ready for a drink.” Hobbie mumbled back.

Luke snorted and each of them headed for their cockpits.

As the canopy lowered on his X-wing, Luke could see that Gavin had stopped at the doorway of the home to watched them depart.

“Looks like was have an audience, Boss.” Hobbie’s voice came over the comm. “Should we give him the ‘Air Show’ version of a take-off?”


“That’s what I was thinking.” Hobbie retorted. “Maybe a little open S-foils too.”

Luke chuckled. “Alright… on your mark, and we’re heading West, okay? I’m following you.”

There was no reason not to have a bit of fun; Biggs would have appreciated it.
The fighters vertically lifted off, and in a tight formation, the S-foils opened, and Hobbie led the way with a loop around the homestead, and then sped off away with a boost of power that was clearly higher than a Mach Five.

Luke didn’t need to look back to see Gavin watching them, because the farm kid in him would have been watching and impressed.

**

On the way back to Mos Espa, Luke decided to forego stopping at the old farm. If Jula and Silya Darklighter were looking after it, then he knew it was in good hands.

He also didn’t feel the need to stop at Tosche Station; part of him didn’t want to rehash the past any more than he already did. He just wasn’t ready.

Just stopping at the Darklighter Homestead was enough; he didn’t bring up his shields while there and all the emotion that he felt coming from Huff Darklighter was still with him. He needed to clear his feelings.

Hobbie was relatively quiet on their way back, but seemed to enjoy it when Luke took the lead on the way back. They managed to catch the tailwind from the canyon, diving down into the cavern and taking the last easy stretch of it before coming out.

It was late afternoon when they returned to the hotel, and prepared to leave for the following day.

Luke had promised Hobbie the biggest Bantha steak, and bet him twenty credits that he couldn’t eat it all in one sitting.

After a shower and a change into civilian wear, Hobbie was the first to greet Luke, appearing to be ready for the evening.

He frowned when he saw the jacket slung over Luke’s arm.

“It gets cold at night.” Luke said simply, not answering his unspoken question.

Hobbie simply nodded.

At the front desk, Luke was able to get directions to a reasonable restaurant from the host, and then directions to a semi-legit cantina on their way back.

No matter if Mos Espa had been gentrified for tourists, it still didn’t stop Luke from donning his blaster and lightsaber.

Before leaving the hotel, Luke checked the map one more time. He knew where they were headed; most cities and towns on Tatooine were laid out the same, but the route he wanted to take went right through the local market.

They walked the dusty streets; the shadows from the buildings were welcomed as the suns still beat down.

Walking past the stadium, Hobbie paused to look at some of the holos on the walls of former racers.

“How fast do you think they get up to?” He asked.

Luke squinted, looking at the holos, seeing the different species who took home the prizes. “I don’t know…maybe Mach 3, maybe Mach 4…and that’s without a hyper-drive, just power pods…and in
an open cockpit.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Hobbie said, sounding impressed.

“My father won a race once.” Luke mumbled. It was time to dispel the myth of Vader as not being human.

“Did he?”

“He was nine, maybe ten years old. It was the Boonta Eve Classic…before the Clone Wars.” Luke said, backing away from the holos.

“You’re kidding?…nine or ten?” Hobbie asked as he backed away too, and they started moving. “Is that where you got it from?”

Luke snorted. “You mean the flying, or the desire to do something stupid?”

Hobbie smirked. “Both.”


They entered the area for the market place, with the intent to cut across it to get to the restaurant.

The market place was filled with stalls that carried every sort of wares from the planet; food, clothing, and decorative items.

For early evening, it was still thriving—busy, but not too busy.

“Mind if we look around for a bit?” Luke asked. He had been thinking of getting something for the twins, and was starting to feel like bad uncle for not seeing them.

Hobbie shook his head and seemed to be interested too.

As they walked, Luke pointed out some the fruits and vegetables that the vendors were selling, and some of the more exotic things.

They stopped at a booth of glass sculptures; the vendor was entertaining some other patrons as they looked over his wares.

“This is storm glass.” Luke said. “During sand storms, you can get lightning…it hits the ground and melts the sand, making these sculptures.”

Hobbie nodded and picked up a piece was seemed genuinely interested.

Something from the corner of his eye caught Luke’s interest; he touched Hobbie’s arm, indicating that he was would a couple of booths over.

The booth itself was rather plain, and empty of any tourists or patrons. The vendor was selling jewelry made from different semi-precious stones that could be found in the area.

The nephrite beads made for simple necklace, and the tremolite beads were fashioned into a set of earrings.

“I see you are man who knows quality when he sees it.” The Tokodanian vendor said from behind the booth.
Luke smiled, enjoying the sales pitch. “Well, I don’t know about that, but I am looking for something for my sister… and for…”

“Your wife?” The Tokodanian jumped to his feet.

“Um…maybe…” Luke said, not realizing that he may be looking for something for Mara too.

Picking up the set of tremolite earrings that had caught his eye, Luke handed them over to the vendor, thinking that Leia would like them, but he really didn’t see anything that would suit Mara.

“You are looking for something else?” The Tokodanian asked. “I have special, that I do not put out…new…just made.” He turned and retrieved a small case from behind him.

Inside the box was laid out a collection of deep green, stone pieces; earrings, beads, pendants, and rings.

Luke looked over another set of earrings that Mara would probably like; they were simple but the colour was dark and rich. He pointed to the ones that caught his eye.

“You have good taste…very nice…very nice.” The Tokodanian seemed happy to have a sale.

But something made Luke stop and look again. He reached out for a simple ring that was sitting in the case.

“Oh that…” The Tokodanian said. “Man’s ring…too big for ladies.” He was busy, preparing to wrap up the earrings.

Luke turned the ring over in his hand and looked at the design on the band.

Carved into the cool, fine, green stone were the two circles with a dot in them; it was the symbol of the meeting suns, the lovers, as they met – the same symbol that he had carved into Mara’s pendant.

Absently, and out of curiosity, Luke tried on the ring on his left hand, and looked down at it as it fit him perfectly.

He had never been one for any sort of jewelry; it never felt right on him- but this did. Simple and understated, it felt good.

Luke slipped it off and handed it to the vendor.

The Tokodanian seemed surprised, but gladly accepted to add the ring to the off-worlder’s purchases. “Once again, good choice…not many appreciated my work, or the stone.”

“You make them?” Luke asked, as he knew that this was probably the introduction into the haggle that was about to happen; you wouldn’t want to take away from someone who worked so hard to make what they were selling.

“Yes…I spend much time, carving and polishing each piece.” The Tokodanian wasn’t haggling just yet but taking pride in his work. “See this…this ring…simple, yes? But time it took, to shape and smooth…then carve such a small design.”

The Tokodanian was showing the ring back to him. “One of the hardest stones too…such quality of green is not seen here, I pick each stone. This one you pick, is called the ‘Dream Stone’ because of colour… good for knowledge and creativity…special for symbol of faith.”

“This stone…hard, very hard…yet soft sometimes, in areas…has a will of its own…but beauty and
The Tokodanian smiled proudly. “Jade.”

Luke looked up at the vendor immediately, his eyes rounded and a smile began to grow; he nodded. Without much of a haggle, Luke made a deal for the three pieces, but told the vendor not to wrap the ring, and he placed it on his hand before he walked away.

Hobbie walked up as their finalized their transaction.

Bowing and thanking the Tokodanian vendor, Luke walked away.

He glanced down, looking at the green ring on his finger, as they walked. It would take some getting used to, but now he had something remind him of Mara, and everything about her.

Now, he would carry a piece of jade with him wherever he went.

Luke looked over at Hobbie, watching him smile meekly. “Just something small for Charma.”

Hobbie muttered as he tucked a small package inside one of his pockets.

Nodding, in understanding, Luke looked over to the small packages being wrapped. “Something for Mara.” He mumbled in return.

Hobbie smiled, and neither one of them needed to say another word on the matter.

They walked across the remainder of market, and Luke stopped one more time when he saw some stuffed Bantha toys. Hobbie smirked, but he knew they were for Luke’s niece and nephew; he frowned when he saw that Luke bought three of them.

“Leia and Han have one on the way.” Luke said quietly informing him; it wasn’t common knowledge just yet.

“So you’re going to be an uncle again?” Hobbie asked as they walked away. “That’s nice.”

“I think it is.” Luke replied. “I wasn’t sure…kids are…different.”

Hobbie answered. “I’ve never really thought about it….don’t have much in common with them.”

“I didn’t either, until Leia put one in my arms.” Luke snorted. “They’re like little drunks…arms and legs all over the place…drooling and not making much sense.”

Hobbie started to chuckled. “Never thought about them like that…maybe we do have something in common.”


They walked for a bit more, making it to the end of the market. “Does Mara want kids?” Hobbie asked. “I mean…I assume you two are going to…” He suddenly realized that he might have been putting his foot in his mouth.

Luke snorted. “We haven’t fully talked about it yet…we’re still kind of new…and she’s on the other side of the galaxy right now.”
“Yeah…here’s one for you…” Hobbie turned his head to give Luke a look, as they crossed the street to the restaurant. “How is it that you keep running into smugglers? I could go almost my whole life without meeting one of them, but you…”

Shaking his head, Luke plainly answered. “I have no idea…Mara found me….and Horn has a bunch of them too, you know.”

They walked into the restaurant; The Suns Aster. Luke smiled when he saw the name; it was a term for when off-worlders stare at the suns for too long, leaving them into seeing just a cluster of light in their vision for some time before they could recover again.

“I know.” Hobbie looked at Luke surprised. “Did he tell you that his father in-law is trying to get a decommissioned Star Destroyer airborne…to use as his base? Is that crazy or what?”

It wasn’t a fancy place, but it smelled good and Luke had to admit he was craving a good old home meal.

They sat them quickly, and Luke caught glances from other patrons as they were seated towards the back.

“I never heard that one.” Luke said as he took his seat, took a quick glance at the menu and put it down again. “I heard the man was a bit of an eccentric, though. At least from the way that Horn talks about him.”

The energy was starting to grow in the room, and so were the mumbles.

Hobbie was studying the menu when he stopped and looked over at Luke; the other man had his head down, and then he looked around the restaurant as it had gone silent.

“Hey Boss, I think they’re looking at you.” Hobbie said under his breath.

Luke looked up slowly, but not at the rest of the room. “Yeah, I got the feeling that they were. They’ll go back to their business soon…that’s just they are way.”

As true as it was, the murmur in the restaurant seemed to rise again as conversations went back around the tables. Luke brought up some of his shields to block out the attention he was getting; they may not be looking at him now, but he could sense casual conversation.

Hobbie leaned over, gestured to his head, and whispered. “You didn’t just Jedi-brain them did you?”

Luke smiled. “No…it’s not like them to cause a scene…that’s all.” He murmured. “And I wouldn’t do that.”

“Okay, Boss, walk me through the menu.” Hobbie said, staring at the folder, still. “I think you said something about steak?”

As promised, Hobbie ordered the biggest Bantha steak on the menu, and he did managed to finish it.

Luke savored the first bite of the Ronto roast; it wasn’t as tender as how his aunt used to do it but the tuptup sauce was creamier, and he grinned like a kid again.

After settling up the bill, Luke was asked politely for a holo, to which he obliged as he stood shaking hands with the manager, and he complimented the chef before he left.

“So where’s my twenty credits, Skywhiner?” Hobbie asked as they started to walk back to the hotel.
The suns were starting to set, and the sky was turning the first waves of colour.

Luke fished in his pocket and handed the metal chit over to his friend. “I’ll admit it…I didn’t think you could do it.”

“Oh, it was out to get me, that’s for sure…but that was tasty.” Hobbie held his chest for a moment. “And I’ll have the meats sweats later, but I won’t regret it.”

Luke snorted as they headed for the now empty market area. “Trust you to keep it classy, Hobs.”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m not ready to call it a-night yet.” Hobbie faked a yawn with a stretch. “And I’m feeling thirsty.”

Chuckling, Luke said. “For once, I can agree with you. Let’s go drop off our wears at the room, and then, I think we need a drink.”

He looked over at Hobbie. “Now, I have your word…no going full Rogue tonight…we have to make a clearance time tomorrow.” He warned.

“No problem Boss…I promise not to go full Rogue, if you promise not to go full Jedi…I hear that you can’t feel it anymore.” Hobbie smirked. “And where’s the fun in that?”

“I can still feel it.” Luke said indignantly. “I can just choose not to feel it sometimes.”

“Yes?” Hobbie asked. “And how’s that working for you?”


Hobbie starting laughing hard, knowing it was probably true.

In the empty space, Luke could feel his sense start to tingle, but unlike the restaurant, this wasn’t a pleasant distraction. He sighed, and then mumbled. “Uh-oh.”

“We got company, Boss?” Hobbie said quietly, as his hand went to casually rest on his own blaster.

Luke could feel it coming closer. “We sure do.” He said under his breath as they still walked. “Let me handle it?”

“Sure, but I got your back.” Hobbie said, looking forward.

They were coming to arch way in the square; the perfect place for an ambush.

“They’re going to stop us before the threshold.” Luke whispered, “And try to box us in from the other side.”

“Got it.”

“Ta beachy mode nav, ovv-vorlders.” The voice from behind them said.

The Rogues stopped, only to avoid be part of the classic pincher movement that was planned for them.

Luke turned in the direction of the voice, to see three aliens waiting for a response. “Tee-ma boda mesa gooma fanga wa.” He said, knowing his Bocce was broken, but it still got the point across.

“This is trouble that you don’t want.” He said as waved his hand at his waist-level, not being obvious
about the gesture as he called on the Force.

The largest of the aliens shook his head, as if feeling the effects, and came forward, clearly the leader of the group, and pointed sharply in their direction. “My-oto fier domo boska Jedi fee-get nook.”

Luke sighed, relaxing deeper into his strength and placing his hands at his waist, hoping that the aliens would see the lightsaber hanging from his belt. “I may speak like a Jedi, but who’s to say that I’m not one. It’s still not a good idea.” He said to them. “Why don’t you tell your friends behind the archway that they don’t need this trouble either.”

One of the aliens looked at the lightsaber, and nudged his companion. “Veck, eesta lightsaber gost met.”

The large alien then noticed the weapon, and his eyes widened. He pointed at the cylinder. “Toma ick lightsaber, neek?”

“Yes.” Luke said calmly. “It is my lightsaber. Please don’t give me a reason to use it.”

The aliens seemed to consider this, but only briefly before they responded. “Vasa teemo daaka diya Tevyets dei Wasaili meek.” And then they came towards him.

Within seconds, Luke Force-pushed those that were waiting for them on the other side of the threshold out from where they were hiding, only for them to see what their team members were rewarded with; he ignited his saber, fended off several blaster bolts, nicked one of the would-be assailants in the shoulder as the others decided they would prefer to run off instead.

He stood paused in a defense ready stance, just in case they would even think retaliating. When he was sure they were gone, he closed down his saber and returned it to his belt.

Hobbie had his blaster in his hand, after getting in a few shots too, and holstered it. “Well, that was fun.”

“Yeah.” Luke said dismissively, turning back to the hotel. “Whoever is watching, will change their minds now too.”

In his mind, he tried to translate the last words before they attacked; ‘pay big, they will, the Followers of Yonder, for it’. His Bocce wasn’t the greatest, but there was something about a group willing to steal his lightsaber to sell; even more interesting, there was group who actively wanted to buy it.

They returned to the hotel with no further issues, and left without any hindrances to the night ahead.

Luke remembered the directions to the cantina that was literally, around the corner from the hotel; it would be less of a stagger to get back.

The cantina was half a story into the ground, like most shady holes. It reminded Luke of the cantina in Mos Eisley; the droid sensor even scanned them on the way in.

The scents and sounds came towards them. A band played in the corner, and patrons crowded the bar in the center of the room.

Dotted around the fringes of the place, were the scattering of working girls from just about any colour or species anyone could want.

Hobbie smiled broadly, appreciating the place for what it was. Luke spotted a corner booth and nudged his friend in that direction.
It wasn’t long before a droid came to take their order, and Hobbie raised an eyebrow when Luke ordered four shots right off the bat.

The droid came back quickly, placed the shots in the middle of the table and Luke swiped his debit card before the droid rolled away.

Luke picked up his first shot and held it up; Hobbie did the same.

“To Biggs.” He nodded.

“To Biggs.” Hobbie repeated.

They both took it down quickly. Luke grimaced and waited for the taste to change; Hobbie coughed and sputtered, shocked that a drink disagreed with him, but he could then taste the change in flavor.

“What was that?” Hobbie asked.


“That’s the stuff that makes you go blind?”

“That’s it.” Luke said, picking up his next shot, and daring Hobbie with a look.

Hobbie picked up his shot, if somewhat reluctantly.

“To the glorious dead.” Luke said.

“‘To the glorious dead.”’ Hobbie said; knowing he was toasting to his fallen comrades.

They threw it back in unison, and Hobbie still shook his head after, even though he knew what to expect.

Sitting in silence, they reflected for a few moments before the droid came back again, and Luke ordered two pints of a local ale; Hobbie nodded his approval.

Luke eased back into the seat, and looked around at the cantina, and noticed something.

The ale arrived, and Luke pondered it further, looking out in the room.

He sat up as the realization came to him as he looked at the working girls. All of them, no matter the species, but if they had hair, it was coloured red, or hues thereof.

The expression on his face must have shown because Hobbie started chuckling, that grew into full blown laughter.

“I was waiting for you to notice.” Hobbie chuckled. “Even since the rumors about you and Hotpants hit the waves, that’s all you ever see in dives anymore…redheads as far as the eye can see.” He took a good chug of the ale.

Luke’s mouth was agape. “Are you kidding me?” He asked, reaching for his own ale.

“Nope.” Hobbie still chuckled. “It’s not so much as fad in the Rim anymore, but it was for a long time.” He chuckled again. “Oh! And green contact lenses…and black leather outfits.”

Hobbie smirked. “Don’t worry Boss…me and Wes stopped letting them sit on our laps, after we were sure about the two of you…it would just be too weird.”
Luke looked back at his friend, still in shock that working girls were imitating Mara, and he caught the meaning of his last words. “Well, thanks for doing that… I appreciate you not indulging your fantasies about the woman I love.”

“No problem, man… I got your back.” Hobbie said confidently, ignoring, or not catching Luke’s sarcasm.

“And no what Wes says… we only saw that Changling dancer who impersonates her, three, maybe four times, before we stopped going out of respect to you.” He was perfectly serious.

He closed his gaping mouth into a bent frown, and then opened his mouth again. “Once again, thanks.” Luke growled, before he took a deep sip of his ale.

Hobbie, nodded once, accepting the gratitude of his friend, and then finished his ale. He sat back, enjoying the place.

“You know… this place isn’t so bad.” Hobbie said. “I mean, Tatooine isn’t so bad… quiet on the desert, but on a whole, not so bad.”

“We’ll put that on the posters.” Luke said, frowning, still not happy about the former observations. “Tatooine: not so bad.”

“It could be worse.” Hobbie said. “Take Ralltiir for example… we’re over-crowded, although not as bad as Darpa or Coruscant… we’ve got industrial smog covering the planet, even on the country side… and the wildlife is out to kill you… nothing like fuzzy Banthas.”

“But I could see why you would want out of here.” Hobbie finished up his thoughts. “That heat will get you.”

Luke snorted. “You know what’s really funny… this is the cool season.” He raised his eyebrows, then finished his ale.

“Really?” Hobbie asked. “It gets hotter than it did today?”

“Yup.” Luke said. “Every year is made up of two seasons. But years aren’t called ‘years’, locals call them ‘Seasons’… it’s made up of a hot season, where the hemisphere is tilted towards the suns… and then the cool season, where we tilt away from the suns, and is the better growing time.”

Luke looked around the cantina. “That’s why you won’t see any farmers here, not at this time of year. They’re in the fields. That’s why there are tourists here.”

“That makes sense.” Hobbie nodded. He went to stand. “I’m going to buy the next round.”

Luke watched him go up to the bar, and then he looked back around the cantina, and snorted again, shaking his head. What would Mara say if she saw this? She seemed to be okay with knowing about the Changling dancer, but this was going a step too far.

In seriousness, Luke didn’t know how long he could take it, watching all sorts of ‘Maras’ walking around. Once he had started thinking about her, it was hard not to stop, and then all he could think about was her.

The drink wasn’t probably helping, but he had stopped himself when he started thinking about the night on Tanaab when she was his dancing girl; feeling her body, watching her skin flush, and hearing her scream his name in passion.
Gods, he wanted her so badly then...and now. What he wouldn’t give to have her just for one night; just to get him through tonight.

Tomorrow, bring her pillow with you into the cockpit, and smell her perfume. He told himself. That will get you through...it will.

Luke shook his head; it must be the drink. He breathed heavy, relaxing, and started to clean his system a bit before Hobbie came back with another round of ale.

He had closed his eyes while he waited; wishing away the images in his mind.

Hobbie cleared his throat trying to get the attention of his friend. “Hey Boss, look what I found!”

Luke opened his eyes to see Hobbie holding two pints of ale with two Twi’leks hanging off him. “I figured you didn’t want another redhead, but maybe you wanted to see something in blue?”

He turned to the Twi’lek on his right, and lowered his voice, “And what a lovely shade of blue, it is too.”

She blinked her large eyes at him, and then slid over to Luke, sitting herself down across his lap.

“Chut chut” Luke said nervously as she sat down.

“What does that mean?” Hobbie asked as he sat down, and the green skinned beauty assumed a position on his lap.

“It means ‘hello’ in Huttese.” Luke said as the Twi’lek offered the ale that Hobbie put in front of him. “Most Twi’lek speak it.” He turned and smiled at her.

Hobbie turned to the lovely girl on his lap. “Chut chut.” He said smiling.

Luke took a large swig from what he was offered, and the turned to the girl on his lap. “Arni’soyacho.” He said, and she seemed even happier to give him more.

“What does that mean?” Hobbie asked, forgetting that Luke was even there.

“It means ‘Thank you’ in Ryl.” Luke said, after he had another swig. “One of the few phrases that I learned.”

He was uncomfortable with the girl on his lap; it felt wrong, even though he was pretty sure that Mara wouldn’t find anything wrong with it, and would probably laugh at him for being a prudish farm boy.

“Well, then...” Hobbie, still smiling at his girl, “Arni-...Arni-...ah, what he said.”


Luke nodded, as he was offered some more, and he didn’t want to be rude.

Hobbie was speaking close and low to the girl on his lap; she giggled and bounced at the right moments.

The band in the corner started playing a fast song, and Luke took notice.

As he was being drowned in his drink, he stopped, and put the glass down. “Calla, this is a great
song. Do you like to dance?"

The blue Twi’lek helped him put down his glass on the table. “Tes, mesa dance…Sagla too.”

“Will you dance for us?” Luke asked, knowing it would remove her from his lap; he held up a twenty credit chit for her.

Sagla wasn’t as interested in her friend, but she started purring and trilling on Hobbie’s lap; and Luke could see the signs that his friend was in trouble.

Calla slid off his lap, and distracted her friend to come join her, and Sagla seemed reluctant until she saw the credit piece; then she joined her friend.

Hobbie turned to Luke, looking disappointed. “Okay, I know you have someone waiting for you…but really? Come on, man! I’ve been on lock down just as long as you!”

Luke nodded over to the dance floor; Hobbie turned his head to watch two of the most graceful creatures he had ever seen.

“Sorry man…I didn’t realize that you knew what you were doing.” Hobbie’s mouth gaped open as he watched the two girls as they danced seductively with each other.

“I just thought I should warn you about Twi’lek girls.” Luke said. “That sound she was making…that purr sound…it’s a Twi’lek mating call. They can get pretty possessive and mean if they think you’re not going to pay up for them.”

Luke took a swig of his drink by himself. “The next stage after making that noise, is crossing their lekku twice…it means they love you…but most of that is an act.” He warned.

“And…” Luke leaned over, trying not to be heard by anyone but Hobbie. “They want off this planet pretty badly, and they’ll try anything to get off. They’re probably ‘owned’ by this bar, in order to get more drinks into us.”

Hobbie was listening and he grimaced, knowing that his dreams of Twi’leks were dashed. He sighed, knowing that the Jedi was probably right.

“So, you’re going to get us out of this?” Hobbie asked.

“Us?” Luke snorted, but gave into his friend’s pleading look. “Sure…but you buy the next round…with the droid.” He paused. “And I’ll come up with a story that will make Wes jealous.”

Hobbie laughed. “Okay, you’re on.”

The song finished and the girls came back to their table, before they could sit down, Luke took one hand from each girl and placed them in his palm, and then covered them with his other hand.

Using his best Huttese, he told them how beautiful they were, how they were not good enough for poor farmers such as them; and how as much as he would like to take them back to his farm, they were just too special to come and live with him and his poor farm hand- whose birthday they were out celebrating.

In Luke’s palm, their hands would have felt the credit chits, as they smiled, and nodded before graciously leaving.

Hobbie sadly waved goodbye to Sagla, but his mood brightened as the servo droid came by, and he
ordered another round.

“So we dodged having Twi’leks wives…that’s not so bad.” Hobbie said as he offered up his pint for a toast.

Luke laughed. “I thought you had eyes on Charma?”

“I’m not dead.” Hobbie said incredulously.

“Yeah.” Luke snorted, taking a gulp from his pint. “And that’s why you’ll always be single.”

“What?” Hobbie asked with ale in his mouth. “What do you mean by that?” He asked after he swallowed.

“Even Charma can’t keep your interest.” Luke said plainly, knowing that he could. “You see, Hobs, one day you’re going to meet someone that, not matter how attractive, no matter how willing the next girl is- you will not want anything to do with the other one—because you’ve already got it all with the girl you’re with.”

“You think so?”

“Yes!” Luke said. “Mara wouldn’t mind that a Twi’lek sat on my lap and flirted with me…but you know who does?” Hobbie shook his head. “I do! I mind that I can’t yell it from the rooftops that I love Mara and I don’t want anyone else because I can’t get any better than her!”

“One day it hit you face and then you’ll know what I’m talking about.” Luke said exasperated. “But until then, if Charma doesn’t make you want to stop and think about her first…then, you can’t make it happen.”

“You make it sound like a bad thing.” Hobbie said, frowning before he drank from his pint.

“It’s not a bad thing, Hobs…if that’s what you want.” Luke said. “And I won’t say another word on it.”

“I just think it suits me better…and Wes too.” Hobbie admitted, mumbling into his pint.

He took his swig and looked up. “You can’t tell me that everything is perfect between you and Hotpants…you two must have to have some issues.”


“You do?” Hobbie grinned, proud to prove his point. “Like what?”

“Well, for starters…” Luke said. “She’s always having to rush off somewhere…where people want to kill her… we can can’t be together for too long…and when we can…I dunno…” The drink was starting to catch up with him again; he was getting melancholy.

“Well, well, well…trouble in paradise.” Hobbie leaned back in his chair, grinning. “Turns out the Jedi doesn’t know everything.” He reached over and slapped the other man’s knee. “You can tell me…I’m the Lover Doctor…what’s up?”


“Come on… I know Quinna taught you what you know…just as she taught the rest of us…but I know there are things she left out of her ‘virgin flyboy handbook’.” Hobbie winked.

“Yeah, the hyper-drive mechanic with the amazing ass, and _big on personality._” Hobbie cupped his hands in front of his chest. “She made the rounds, but I think she stayed with you the longest.”

“I wasn’t a virgin when I was with her.” Luke growled, slightly surprised that others knew about her.

“But you might as well have been one, right?” Hobbie asked.

Luke glared as he took another swig of his drink.

“So tell me, what’s the problem with Hotpants?” Hobbie asked again as he took another gulp. “Is it something she does? – because I really don’t see that being the problem.” He finished his pint and put it down hard on the table. “It is something you do? –or don’t do? – because I can really see it being your fault, you know.”


He glared, but knew he would have to eventually seek help from someone, and with Hobbie having been half-tanked by the looks of it, he might as well talk to him about it.

Luke rolled his eyes, and then whispered it.

“What?” Hobbie motioned to his ear. “I didn’t really hear that.”

Luke rolled his eyes again. “She wants me to talk more…while…we’re being intimate.”

“And you don’t?” Hobbie looked at him like he was crazy. “What’s wrong with you?”


“What do you mean ‘you don’t know how’?”

“I just don’t know what to say.” Luke explained. “I talk to her with my mind, and she says that she doesn’t want that…I get the feeling she wants to hear me talk to her…out loud.”

“Oaky, okay…let me get this straight.” Hobbie was staring to use his drink-logic to figure this out. “You talk in your mind?”


“Sounds kinky.” Hobbie blinked. “I wish I could do that—I’d never talk to another woman again.”


Okay, no- I’ve got this.” Hobbie got excited that he could help his friend. “You see, most women, if they want you to talk to them…it means they want you to get _really nasty_…even Hotpants.”

Hobbie mumbled under his breath, hoping Luke wouldn’t hear. “ _Especially_ Hotpants, I’m sure.”

Luke sat up, ready to defend Mara’s honor.

“No, no…wait before you hit me…it’s true.” Hobbie argued. “The trick is that you just can’t go right to the nasty…you have to start out with the sweet and romantic.” He smiled.

“You start off at the top, and work your way down.” Hobbie explained. “You start with her hair…”
what it reminds you of…how soft it is…how it smells.”

“And Hotpants has great smelling hair…you should have no problems with that.” Hobbie held up his empty pint glass, hailing the droid again.

Luke leaned back crossing his arms on his chest, wondering where and how Hobbie got to smell Mara’s hair, but also listening because he was starting to make sense.

“And then, the lower you go, the filthier you can get.” Hobbie said after he ordered with the droid. “You can say just about anything…Oh! I don’t forget to tell her what you’re feeling too…they love to hear that…don’t tell them too much, but they want to hear about themselves and what they do to you, mostly.”

“You know…” Hobbie sat back. “You have a great voice. I bet we could make money off you just talking dirty over an audio file. ‘Luke Skywalker- Nasty Jedi’- it doesn’t even have to be all that bad—just you reading basic maneuvers in a really sexy voice…diving…aiming your target…plowing a trench.”

Luke started chuckling.

Hobbie leaned in, expelling his wisdom. “It doesn’t even have to make sense…oh! And tell her want you want to do to her, _they love that_...it can be the wildest things that you’ve ever wanted to try, and they’ll go along with it...women just love hearing anything when you start doing the right things to them...you do the right things to her, don’t you? You don’t forget about _the little man in the speeder_, do you? –because, _that_, is _very important._”

“No, I don’t forget about ‘the little man in the speeder’.” Luke growled.

Hobbie took the pint off the servo droid’s tray. “Good, because Quinna would be very disappointed if you did…she prided herself on teaching that one.”

“And another thing about talking dirty…” Hobbie sipped the foam off the top of his new pint. “You have to practice…I used to do it while on long flights…comm off, of course.” He winked.

“I didn’t realize the Quinna made the rounds.” Luke said before having another swig; realizing he was now a pint behind Hobbie.

“She did.” Hobbie said over the rim of his pint. “But she was a good sport about it.” He swallowed. “She must have had a thing for farm boys… Biggs went with her too.”

“Biggs?” Luke just about choked on his ale as he finished his pint.

“Yep, before we got to Yavin...but she moved on quickly.” Hobbie smiled, and knew what Luke was feeling. “She made everybody feel special.”

Luke looked down. “Yeah, she did.” He held up his empty glass in the air.

The droid passed by, and stopped to exchange empty for full.

Luke took his new glass and held it up. “To Quinna...wherever she may be now...thank you for making farm boys and flyboys smile.”

“To Quinna!” Hobbie agreed and clanked his pint against Luke’s.

They helped themselves with one more round before they made it back to the hotel in a somewhat
bumpy fashion.

Luke knew he was going to feel it in the morning, and drank a bottle of electrolyte juice before going to bed but he knew Hobbie wasn’t going to do the same.

As he fell into the bed wearing the same clothing he went out in, he could hear a reprimand from Aunt Beru in his head.

“Yes, Ma’am.” He mumbled before sleep took him.

**

Luke’s chrono sounded. He promptly shut it off, and closed his eyes again.

Luke’s comm sounded. He shut that off too, and closed his eyes as the swirling room made them hurt.

The wake-up call sounded. Luke grunted and got to his feet to shut it off across the room.

It wasn’t the effects of the drinking last night, he told himself, it was from the heat…maybe he didn’t drink enough liquids during the day.

He went into the ‘fresher and started to make himself ready for the day; Evac, showering, and shaving, just for good measure.

One more bottle of electrolytes juice, and he was almost back to himself.

* I can sleep after we jump to hyperspace. He told himself.

He reached out, with his senses, next door to check on Hobbie, and sensed that his fellow Rogue wasn’t up yet either.

Luke threw on some fresh fatigues, left his room, and went to pound on Hobbie’s door.

The door slid half way open. Luke, now much more awake than he was twenty minutes ago, was looking at a half-awake Hobbie.


“Yeah, yeah.” Hobbie responded before the door slid shut again.

Twenty minutes later, a new version of Hobbie appeared in fresh fatigues, and ready to go.

Luke had taken the liberty of lifting a few electrolyte juices, and handed one to his friend.

At check out, Luke left a healthy tip just in case Hobbie did to the room what Luke thought he might have done.

Stepping out in the street, Luke wished he had his helmet with its visor to block out the light from the dawn that was breaking.

In the speeder, neither one of them said a word, and dropped it off without an issue.

As they walked into the dock, Luke felt his comm buzz with a notification.

Luke waved Hobbie off to prep, while he went to go check on his fighter.
He checked his incoming message. It was from Wedge with instructions as to how they were going to do this.

With his X-wing fueled and just running through its pre-flight sequence, Luke hailed Hobbie’s comm.

“What’s up Boss?” Hobbie asked quietly.

“I got instructions from the Chief.” He said. “We’re supposed to enter Coruscant into the primary nav system, but after we lift, we’re supposed to manual override to the new co-ordinates to rendezvous in twelve hours.”

Hobbie yawned. “Roger that Boss. Get that R8?” He asked over to his droid. The droid beeped back.

“I’m sending the manual co-ordinates now.” Luke said.

“Got it.” Hobbie answered. “You prepped?”

“I’ve got about five more minutes… I was going to get our clearance.” Luke responded.

“Good plan.”

Luke’s comm buzzed again, and he checked the message. It was from the slave registry office.

He was suddenly very awake.

“I have another plan.” Luke said slowly. “Why I don’t take first shift while you sleep after we jump, and then we switch off? — so long as you keep your channel on?”

It would give him time to read the files that just arrived.

“Sounds like a very good plan, Boss.” Hobbie said before he yawned again.

Luke hailed the tower and got their clearance; they could take off any time for the next thirty minutes.

As soon as Luke was ready, he hailed Hobbie again, and confirmed the lift off.

Speeding out of the atmosphere, Luke had Artoo set the manual coordinates to override.

Artoo entered the new destination and was starting to countdown to their jump. Luke looked back at the beige planet he was leaving.

He knew he was coming back; it still wasn’t finished for him, and part of him still thought of it as his home. But this time, he wasn’t fleeing for his life.

The nav computer beeped.

On the open channel, Luke said, “Rogue Four - on my mark.”

He reached over and pulled back on the throttle; the stars before him becoming streaks of light.

Within ten minutes of making the jump, Hobbie agreed it was time for him to take a nap. “See you in five hours.” Hobbie said before all went quiet on his end.
Luke leaned back in his seat, and called up the message from the slave registry on his comm, and transferred the files to his data pad, for easier reading.

He looked at the files before he opened them, not sure if he should. So far, he was blissfully unaware of what his grandmother and father had gone through.

To his knowledge, Luke knew for certain that Shmi wasn't Force-sensitive; it was Anakin who was extremely powerful, but how did he get that way?

At the worst, they could have lived in squander and been beaten daily. At the best, they could have been given their freedom – but Luke knew the truth lay been somewhere in between.

Luke pressed his lips together and decided to start off at the beginning.

He opened the file on his grandmother first and began to read.

The first thing he noticed that the file was somewhat backwards; it had the most recent entry at the front, and the oldest information at the back of the documents.

Also, the star dates were different; they had used pre-Clone Wars dates, which became harder to track since the Empire had started using different dates when it came to power, and the Alliance had started using different dates since Yavin.

He would just have to grin and bear it, and estimate dates and ages.

As suspected, his grandmother Shmi Skywalker was purchased by Cliegg Lars and given her freedom almost immediately on the day that she was purchased; the two documents that indicated this, had the same star date.

They were married within a few days of being granted her freedom.

Luke opened the holo file, and for the first time, he saw his grandmother.

Her kind eyes smiled out at him from the holo; her dark hair pulled back, and he could see what years of living on the harsh planet had done, her skin aged by the sun.

He smiled back at the holo, thinking to himself that he thought he had seen the same kind smile on Leia more than once.

Luke did the math on the star dates, and at the time she was freed, she was over thirty standard years old, but he remembered that her headstone on the farm had put her at around forty plus years when she died.

Grandmother Shmi was freed for over ten years of her life, approximately.

Luke nodded and went back to reading the file.

Before Grandfather Cliegg married her, she was owned by a Toydarian by the name of Watto.

Luke looked up, and his mind flashed back on his first trip to Mos Espa as a child- a Toydarian did offer to buy him when he heard his name.

He looked back down and kept reading.

Grandmother Shmi was a house slave for Watto; her duties were largely domestic, with some assistance to Watto’s business, a junk yard.
Further back, there was transfer of property documents that showed she was owned before coming to Watto.

The documents revealed that she had been given in payment of a debt to Watto, and the previous owner was…

Luke flipped the page on his data pad.

Gardola the Hutt.

He let out a hard breathe.

Gardola was known for being not kind to his property.

Luke read on and saw that his grandmother was listed in ‘somewhat poor condition’ when she was transferred. Medical records showed that she was dehydrated, under weight and malnourished; like a discarded animal.

She was also a house slave for Gardola, and it seemed that she spoke Huttese rather well, and was used as a translator.

Her health record shows that she not able to work for a short period of time in her early twenties.

Luke flipped the document to see the reason, and he frowned when he read the words for her leave; it was listed as ‘acquired additional property’, which meant that she had a child at the time, his father, that now became property of Gardola too.

There wasn’t any further information, other than her annual health records which didn’t seem consistent as there were years that were missing in between visits.

At the very back of the file, was her ‘Acquirement Forms’ that detailed when she first became the property of Gardola.

From what he could tell, Luke saw that her parents must have been slaves too, or at least her mother was, because all that was listed in the place where a name should be on the birth certificate was ‘Property of Durga’, another Hutt.

Luke flipped forwarded to her acquired documents, and read that she was gifted to Gardola by Durga, around the time she was the age of three standard years old.

He couldn’t read any more on her because his mind started to imagine what she must have been through at the hands of Gardola, and working in his household.

It was rumored that Gardola used to buy slaves simply to have hunting parties with them.

Luke swallowed hard, pushing down the anger that was massing in him. He had to close his eyes, and try to find the light again.

He waited, finding his composure, finding peace; he opened his eyes, ready to continue.

Luke flipped back to the beginning of her file to look at her again, and her smile.

His fingers drifted over the image, thinking that she must have been held onto the light in order to still smile like that.

Uncle Owen never spoke about how she died, but Aunt Beru told him when he was older. Like
many farmers, she had been abducted from the farm and taken by the Tusken Raiders; after a time of being away, she was found and her body was brought back to the farm to be buried.

She never said it, but Aunt Beru implied that Grandmother Shmi had been tortured before she died, and succumb to her injuries.

It was a sad fact that Luke had heard before; many people were abducted by Tusken, never to be seen again, and when found, their bodies told a horrific story.

He hung his head, after looking at her picture.

Luke sat back in his pilot seat and looked at the chrono, seeing that he had over two hours before he had to wake Hobbie, and unsure if he was ready to read his father’s file.

He sighed, and knew it was time; it was time to know.

When he opened the file on his father, he immediately flipped to the back, wanting to start the story at the beginning.

At the time of his birth, Anakin Skywalker was declared property of Gardola the Hutt through the ownership of his mother.

When slaves had children, either by accident or by design, it was always considered a lucky thing to add to one’s property.

Once again, on his birth record, only his mother was listed, but this time, the record included her name. Beside the box for his father’s name was the word ‘None’ instead of being blank.

Luke eyes squinted at this information. He was hoping that a listed father would be the key to Anakin's strength in the Force.

Just like his mother, Anakin’s first health record appeared when he was about three years old; he was in reasonable health, if not somewhat small for his age, but the doctor had noted he was perceptive and alert. The information regarding his blood data looked like it had been scratched out with the comment; Data Incomplete.

Several other health checks, as he aged, marked how quickly Anakin had grown, and at the age of six, he was listed as a mechanic for Gardola, and was healthy as opposed to his mother.

But later in the same year, it looked like he was transferred in ownership, according to the star dates, to Watto, along with his mother.

Anakin’s file had more details, and it turned out that Watto was really after owning Anakin, and not Shmi, but had taken her because she wasn’t considered of use to Gardola anymore, and was part of a secondary wager.

Luke saw the sum of credits that was lost in the wager, and now this amount was included in Watto’s personal wealth, as he acquired the property. Less than four thousand credits had bought his father and grandmother.

It looked like Watto took fairly good care of Anakin and his mother; they were listed as living in the slave quarters of Mos Espa at the time of the census, but it looked like they were working every day.

They were even granted a small living allowance.
Anakin was listed as ‘mechanic’ and ‘shop boy’ for Watto’s business.

Health records were kept in good order, and only once was there any concern.

After the first year with Watto, Anakin had contracted a severe fever and took over a month to recover.

Luke looked up; he remembered having something similar as a child. Uncle Owen was away, and that was the first time Luke remembered seeing Ben, but he was in and out of a haze brought on by the fever; part of him thought he had made it up.

He recovered but was weak for some time afterwards; it must have been the same for his father.

Two years of health records later, at the age of nine standard years old, there were ‘Transfer of Ownership’ and ‘Free Claim’ documents in the file.

On the day that Anakin was transferred in ownership due to ‘debt/wager’ he was granted his freedom by…


Mara was right.

Anakin was given his freedom by an off-worlder, Qui-gon Jinn; was the name that was printed in the file.

Looking at the star date, it matched the same date he had seen on the holo vid of the pod race, and it all made sense.

Watto must have made a bet with the Jedi, and lost; giving up ownership of Anakin.

The value of Anakin at the time was over ten thousand credits, but that also included the cost of some ship parts, and a racing pod.

Luke looked at the list of the parts that were included in the transfer; a hyperdrive for a Nubian Cruiser.

His mouth dropped open; how did a Jedi acquire such a refined ship as a cruiser from Naboo?

Again, it had come back to Naboo.

Luke promised when he got the chance, he would access all he could on Naboo during the same star date; perhaps Mara would know? She seemed to know a lot about that system.

There was another detail that Luke read; Anakin had a locator chip implanted in him as a slave, and had it removed when he was granted his freedom.

Luke flipped back to Shmi’s documents; she, too, had a chip. It was located at the base of her spine, whereas Anakin’s was located on his shoulder.

Luke stared for a moment; Mara had a locator implant in her.

His heart had been aching since he opened his grandmother’s file, but now it hurt even more; Mara had been a slave – though she probably wouldn’t have seen it that way.

He sighed again; wishing he could have erased all of their pain.
There was a feeling of being down-trodden that came from the knowledge that you were a slave; like you were a second class citizen.

Even Luke had experienced it somewhat when people learned that his grandmother was a slave; there was a way that you were looked at and not ever good enough- still a ‘thing’ rather than a person.

He flipped back to his father’s file, and opened the holo file.

A boy with bright blue eyes, floppy blonde hair, a slight dent in his chin, and wearing a large grin, appeared.

Quickly, he pulled up the file that Mara had given him as part of his Imperial dossier, and retrieved the holo of himself around the same age, and placed both holos beside each other.

Luke choked back his tears; Aunt Beru always said that he looked like his father, and now he could see it.

He sat staring at the boy, who would become the man, who would be his father.

Somewhere, and at some point, that boy knew pain and suffering.

Luke knew that he wouldn’t be given all the answers, but if this was the time that Anakin was separated from his mother, that maybe this was the start of when Anakin began to know anguish and loss.

If he had been taken, or if he had gone willfully, with the Jedi, leaving behind his mother to slavery, it could have been potentially devastating for him.

Perhaps he didn’t know what he was doing?—what sacrifices he was about to make at such a tender age?

Luke thought of himself at nine years old; he certainly wouldn’t have been able to comprehend those sorts of consequences.

He closed the file on his father, and opened up the vid of the pod race to watch it one more time.

His father was indeed and gifted pilot to be able to fly such an unwieldy craft.

And at the end, Luke slowed down the vid and watched the persons in the vid as they celebrated; Anakin had just won his freedom beside from winning the race.

Luke smiled as the boy rejoiced.

In the corner, his chrono sounded. It was time to wake Hobbie.

Luke wasn’t sure if he should; there was no point in switching off if he wouldn’t be able to sleep after what he had read.

But he knew he needed to rest, or perhaps meditate undisturbed.

He hailed Hobbie to wake him up.

When Hobbie started using full and complete sentences, Luke knew it was safe to go meditate.

He leaned back in his seat and gave Artoo permission for a wake-up call.
As he closed his eyes, all he could see was the beige of the sand, and rays of sun beating down, as the visions took him.

**

They docked safely with The Liberty.

After disembarking, they did what they were told and checked in with the deck officer, using only their call signs of ‘Red Five’ and ‘Red Four’, ignoring their ranks.

It annoyed the deck officer, but he seemed to catch on by the time he asked their names and ranks for the third time.

Luke told him that they were officially surrendering their X-wings over to the New Republic.

The deck officer snorted at that because the T-65’s already had New Republic markings on them.

As they finished getting their droids and personal belongings off of their ships, they heard the call “General on Deck!”

Luke dropped what was in his arms and stood at attention.

He looked under his X-wing to see the Hobbie was doing the same, and they made eye contact.

To their knowledge, this vessel was under the control of Admiral Ackbar, and there shouldn’t have been any other high-ranking official on board.

“At ease, Reds.” A familiar voice said from behind him.

Luke turned to be facing General Madine; a crack in Madine’s countenance told him that he was glad to see them.

The look on Madine’s face told Luke all that he needed to know. Madine had known where they had been; delivering the honors to a fallen comrade, and returning to their service.

He breathed in heavy and looked at both men.

“Don’t get too comfortable, Red Five and Red Four- as soon as the others arrive, we need to put you to work.” Madine saluted them, and walked away.

Luke could feel it; he was about to go back into action again.

TBC
Shake Hands with the Devil-Part 1

Chapter Summary

Quote: “But, it’s like the two of you are collectable dolls, and each side wants you. You’ve got ‘Vader’s son and Emperor’s Hand’ or ‘New Jedi and his Student’.”

Characters: Aves, Mara, Karrde, Ghent, Mirax, Booster, and original characters

Chapter Notes

**
Okay, so first I lifted the title from a book…a GREAT book…about the war in Somalia…in seriousness, read it, amazing.
But the title fit, so I borrowed it.

Also, a SPOILER warning for some of the new canon… yep, I took it…and I’m borrowing that too, but I’ve twisted it a bit. I’m hoping it will work.

And the surname, “Dengar”- yes it has belonged to several characters long the way, but I figure just as “Antilles” seems to be a pretty common name, so is “Dengar”.

And, sorry, still not smut in this one…but cumming soon (see the pun I just did there? – sorry)

Please read and enjoy.
**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inside The Mid Rim- near the moon of Shili

“I gotta say that I don’t like this at all, Boss.” Aves called behind him to the man in charge of the smuggling group.

The Skipray lay floating in space, at the ready, but with most of the systems shut down, and waiting.

“Don’t be so nervous, Aves.” The cool, calm voice of Talon Karrde answered back. “If Mara isn’t bothered, then you shouldn’t be either.” Karrde paused. “Mara- are you nervous?”

She adjusted the controls in front of her. On limited power, she could barely get the read-outs that she wanted. “I’m not nervous, but I still don’t think this is a good idea.” She growled.

They had been sitting there for close to thirty minutes, making that party that they were expecting for their rendezvous twenty minutes late.

“When our work is done with Booster, you should buy him a new chrono to celebrate.” She said smugly to Karrde.
“Now Mara, you know that he can be somewhat unpredictable. You should be able to appreciate that in his character.” Karrde said, but he had to admit he was starting to feel slightly nervous about waiting out in open space with no power.

Presumably, it meant that they shouldn’t be detected by any scans that were running through the area; there wouldn’t be a hit on Imperial sensors.

Deep in Imperial held space was not a place to plan a meeting anyhow. Mara couldn’t justify Karrde’s risk on this one, but he had assured her it would be worth it.

If they were caught, they most likely would face death, especially her. The Imperials already wanted her dead for treason, among other things. If their new leader fashioned himself after the Emperor, then he would want to use her as an example—on that, she could be sure of.

In an instant she caught it in her senses, and she froze in her seat; reaching out as best she could.

“They’re here.” She said absently, straining to fully touch the minds aboard the other vessel. “They’re trying to lock onto us. We should feel the tractor beam shortly.”

Karrde smiled knowingly; he was not regretting letting Mara train with Skywalker. At one time her gifts were erratic and unreliable, but now, she seemed to harness some control over them.

Aves stirred as he felt the controls being taken away from him, and the Skipray pulled towards the much-larger Corellian Corvette.

“I wonder where ol’ Booster came up with that.” Aves muttered as he saw the ship before them. “I thought he was working out of The Pulsar Skate until he can get the wish-bucket in the air.”

“We’re meeting on neutral ground.” Karrde informed them. “This is Narv Dengar’s ship, the Novex.”

Aves turned his chair completely around. If the Skipray had other crew members in it, he wouldn’t say what he was about to, or question Karrde’s authority, but he knew that he could say it here. “I really don’t like this. What do we know about Narv Dengar?”

“Ghent?” Karrde called, as he pressed the ship’s comm unit. “Please inform Aves.”

Over the comm, Ghent’s voice came loud and clear. “Narv Dengar; smuggler since six years before Yavin, mainly an operative in mechanical devices, and carrier of scrap metals, estimate hauling capacity is sixty thousand metric tonnes. Although Dengar doesn’t usually handle freight, he uses his Corvette for transferring goods between jumps. He’s also an expert in selling Imperial ID’s that are not forgeries; they are current but out of circulation and undesignated.”

“Anything else Ghent?” Karrde asked.

“He likes to be called ‘Captain’ and his favourite colour is blue.” Ghent cut the comm.

“See Aves…” Karrde said. “And you thought hacking the drop ships was a bad idea.”

Mara snorted quietly. She didn’t know if that last statement was true, but she suspected that Ghent was trying his hand at humor.

Something told her that there was more. “There’s nothing else?” Mara asked.

“Like what?” Ghent’s ambient voice asked.
“Like an Imperial past…” she said quietly. Mara wasn’t sure, but her senses said otherwise.

“Well…” Ghent paused, probably looking through his files. “Uh-oh…He was removed from Imperial service about ten years before Yavin. He was given a ‘dishonorable discharge’; while as an Ensign he tried to take command away from his Captain though an unsuccessful coupe…and…uh…”

“Uh…what?” Aves asked.

“It looks like most of his crew have Imperial pasts.” Ghent said, almost apologetically for not listing those things first.

Mara looked over at Karrde as she spoke. “Thanks Ghent.” And she closed the comm channel.

It wasn’t uncommon to have an Imperial past, but it never did sit well if someone tried to hide it.

She tried to remember if she had ever heard of someone surviving an unsuccessful coupe aboard a ship, and living to tell about it.

Perhaps it was merely sabotaging another’s career rather than a take-over; that type of coupe usually garnered praise and not censure by ‘dishonorable discharge’, if it was successful.

“He’s also agreed to be our meeting place with Booster as we divide up the territories.” Karrde said coolly, but now slightly more skeptical. “I still expect this meeting will go well. Booster trusts him. What do you think, Mara?”

“I don’t know what to think.” She said quietly. “But I don’t expect for it to end in blaster fire; at least not from Booster.”

“How so?” Karrde placed his unlit cigarillo in his mouth and watched out the view port as they were just about to dock with the Novex.

“I met Booster’s son in-law.” Mara said. “He’s with the Rogues now, and flies with Skywalker.”

“Oh?” Karrde seemed surprised. Though not really, the information that Mara kept to herself was mostly on a need-to-know basis, and she revealed it as she saw fit.

This little tidbit might be of assistance if this went wrong; would Booster risk causing issues for his son in-law and the Rogues over business? And given the rumors about Skywalker and Jade; would he want to be on receiving end of any retaliation?

These were all assumptions, but ones that had to be made regardless of who Karrde was dealing with. A smuggler’s ethics could change on a whim if profit or peril was at stake, and reputation could get thrown out.

Karrde’s reputation was one of a two sided coin; caring and ethical versus callous and calculating; especially since Tanaab.

Other smuggling groups were sure that the elimination of Cassis was a power play rather than for personal motives, but it served to instill the fact that nothing transpired without Karrde’s authority and he had the power to do so.

He didn’t expend resources, to take over where Cassis had left off, showed that he had insight, avoiding when the organization got annihilated as soon as the Empire showed up.
It made several groups breathe easier that Karrde wasn’t after that sort of power. If anything, it gave them a modicum of trust in him, so long as you remained on his good side.

The sound of the locks inside the Skipray was welcome; Mara switched on the auxiliary power now that they could. Being part of a large ship would read as if it was one vessel, not two. They would need that power if they needed to escape suddenly.

She prepped the nav computer for their next stop before she left the terminal, as was their standard protocol.

Karrde pressed the comm again, before he got up. “Ghent, you know what to do.” He implied that the hacker was to go to work.

Mara unfastened her crash restraints and joined Karrde as he was preparing to leave the Skipray and greet their hosts.

Karrde looked back at Aves and knew that the Skipray would be in good hands while he was away.

It was agreed upon that each party would bring only one associate with them, and no weapons.

Karrde glanced at the lightsaber at Mara’s waist and raise an eyebrow.

“It’s a symbol of my training just as much as it is a weapon.” She said, reading his thoughts by the expression on his face alone. “Do you want me to leave it with the ship?”

“No,” Karrde said slowly. “But would you have any objection if they asked you to remove it?”

Mara narrowed her gaze, but then moved the obvious weapon to the clip on her back, keeping it with her, but hiding it from direct gaze.

It was piece of Luke, and furthermore, it brought her peace just to have it on her; strange, that a weapon could make her feel that way.

She stood beside Karrde, waiting for the airlock to seal.

“Who do you think Booster will bring with him?” Karrde asked conversationally. “Care to make wager?”

“I thought you refused to enter into any more wagers with me?” Mara smiled keenly over to him. “On account, that you lost the last one.”

“I’m a betting man, but I’d rather have your insight.” He said, without really asking.

“I think he’ll have his daughter with him.” Mara said, sure of it.

“What makes you say that? He’s been trying to keep her out of the business for years, although, she does seem to work it perfectly well.” Karrde almost sounded surprised.

“I think I’ve seen it.” Mara said quietly.

Since Solo and Calrissian arrived on the Wild Karrde nearly four days ago, Mara had made a promise to herself that she would start meditating more-regularly. She owed that much to Luke, and to her training.

She now found herself meditating in the mornings, before she began her day, but it was the meditation before she retired that she was having trouble with.
At first, it was just to relax her mind, and to let her sleep. But she soon found out, that meditation only works for sleep when Luke was there to guide her.

If she meditated, she found herself flooded with images, and with sensory input that she had never experienced before. It was like a veil had been lifted and her mind was inundated, finding it hard to concentrate.

She could piece together the images as they came to her, and as they occurred; most of the images seemed to be clips of Deja vu.

Part of her supposed this new found awareness had something to do with the removal of her implant over a month ago.

Although, most of her paranoia and involuntary stress had left, due to the infusion of artificial adrenaline into her system, she had been given the gift of a clearer mind…most days.

The door hissed as it indicated it was ready to open, and the hatch slid freely, joining the two ships.

Karrde strode ahead of her by one pace into the Novex. At the far end of the corridor, two men rounded the corner.

From the cut of their militaristic clothing and the precision that they walked with, Mara guessed that this was Captain Dengar and his assistant.

She caught the faint sense of military training in both men; it wasn’t unknown for those with a military past to keep up the skills that they acquired through training, but it would be interesting if Dengar was able to maintain that with his staff as well.

The two men stopped short of Karrde and Mara, and bowed slightly. Dengar went into a position that Mara recognized immediately; he left his right at his side, while his left went behind his back. Dengar must have been with the Imperial Navy for quite some time, or schooled at an Academy.

“Greetings Talon Karrde, I welcome you aboard the Novex.” said the older man.

He was about Karrde’s age but it was clear he kept to a regimented system; clean cut and postured his quasi-military style.

Karrde stepped forward. “Thank you for your welcome and your hospitality Captain Dengar. Your assistance is greatly appreciated.”

Karrde turned to Mara, and motioned her to step forward. “May I introduce to you my Lieutenant, Mara Jade.”

She mimicked the bow that she was familiar with from the Imperial ranks, but noticeably kept it less formal.

“Captain Dengar.” She greeted him and grinned politely. There would be no flirting here, as she sometimes had to do in certain situations, nor was it needed.

“Oh, and this is my assistant, Lemay.” Dengar gestured with his hand, and Lemay came forward and bowed.

“Shall we?” Dengar motioned to return in the direction from which he had arrived, and suggested that they follow him.
Karrde fell inline beside him and they began to converse about casual things; the first topic was how to maintain such a grand ship as *the Novex*.

Dengar fell into the flattery very easily, and spoke about the design and the engine.

Mara tried to keep her concentration as she listened from behind them, but the man walking parallel to her was distracting.

Lemay seemed a little less regimented than his Captain; Mara could sense that somehow it was she that was making Dengar’s assistant nervous….no, not nervous, excited…for some reason. He kept looking over at her as they walked; and it wasn’t the sort of ‘looking’ that she was used to.

She pulled up her shields to block him out, and strained to hear more of what was being said.

Dengar was leading them to the conference room, where Booster Terrik was waiting for them, and already Mara could sense Dengar’s frustration at having to deal with such an unorthodox person.

According to his reputation, Booster was no different than most smugglers; he was distrusting of people, cautious and neutral on every subject unless it affected his bottom line and profit.

When Dengar stopped he glanced over Karrde’s shoulder and watched Mara; he smiled slightly to see that she had stopped in the formal Imperial position, with her arms behind her straightened back.

She inwardly smiled, knowing that he would be looking for that in her.

“Well, I’m sure he makes a very good business person.” Dengar said, somewhat condescendingly, adding to Karrde’s comments.

“He makes a profit.” Karrde said blankly.

Dengar’s eyebrows raised and then lowered; he ushered them through the next passage way into an area that meant more for visitors.

There was a small foyer before they entered the meeting room.

The doors slid open; at the far end, Booster Terrik stopped pacing as a young female stood off to the side, waiting.

Karrde looked over to Mara and nodded, seeing that she was indeed correct that Booster would bring his daughter.

Booster Terrik was a man to be reckoned with; he had the history of hardened and embittered man, but he would occasionally break from his reputation and do something out of the ordinary. He was an expert tactician, and saw three steps ahead of everyone.

His towering figure, dark hair and prosthetic red eye were off-putting if you weren’t expecting it.

Karrde liked him, but like all smugglers, he didn’t entirely trust him, but in Booster’s case, he was willing to make an exception; he wanted to.

Mirax Terrik was different than her father; she still had some rough edges on her refined corners, but her shrewd blue eyes said that she was just as perceptive as her father.

Mara held off on her judgement of the other woman. She knew that she had a reputation of her own to deal with. And on a personal note, who knows what her husband, Corran Horn, may have told her.
Karrde approached Booster with a friendly handshake, while Mara and Mirax greeted each other with a friendly nod.

Dengar made the pleasantries, offered refreshments served by his droid, and suggested that they begin their meeting.

Dengar and Lemay sat at the top of the oval table, while Karrde and Mara sat opposite to Booster and Mirax.

Mara listened carefully as the smuggler bosses went through what successes and what troubles they had been encountering; all of they agreed that there was enough business for all.

Shortages of reliable runners, they agreed, was a major issue; it seemed any marginal person with a ship had called themselves a smuggler but knew very little about it being a business, these days.

The Imperial areas were now a concern, and travelling through them without any issue; those runners that did travel through the areas were unethical, and just as dangerous as the unexperienced.

Dengar even admitted he was getting leery of the force that was massing in the Deep Core; it struck without reason, and more merciless than the former Empire.

An Imperial at heart; Dengar seemed to appreciate the structure and regulation but not the destruction that came with it.

Booster seemed relatively quiet. For someone that protected business, Mara wondered if he protected his thoughts too.

She looked down, feigning entering data, and reached out her senses. Luke hadn’t taught her more than the basics, but she had started expanding her own gifts that she had before she had met him.

Being Emperor’s Hand had taught her to read body language and infer what thoughts were lurking behind their emotions.

Booster had an unprotected mind, and with every word that Dengar uttered, he was hiding his distain. He didn’t trust Dengar one iota. Strange, since Booster was the one to suggest this meeting, and Karrde seemed to think that Booster trusted him.

Mara then turned her attention to Mirax; she mimicked the feelings of her father while she appeared to be listening.

Mara sighed quietly. Karrde had warned her, in private, to keep her awareness open during this meeting.

As they continued to speak, and make some suggestions as to how they could work together, Mara jotted down some notes.

She knew that she would have time to discuss any concerns before they came to a decision or terms of negotiation.

She looked up from her data pad to see that Mirax was looking at her directly; with eye contact, Mirax closed her eyes then looked over at Dengar, closed them again, and back at Mara.

Mirax sat back in her chair, crossed her arms on her chest and turned her attention to what her father was saying.
Mara noticed that Mirax’s hand that was away from Dengar, was moving, as so Dengar of his associate could not see it.

As to not arouse suspicion, Mara turned her chair in the direction of Dengar, but watched from the corner of her eye at the movements Mirax was making.

She caught on pretty quickly; Mirax was using an old version of a signal language that was used for those could not speak. She was making letters. Mara had learned it as part of her espionage training.

Soon the small gestures were spelling out words. The same words over and over again. It’s a trap. Dengar lies. Trap Karrde. Trap Booster. It’s a trap….and it repeated.

Mara leaned forward on the table, when it sounded like there was some conjecture between Karrde and Booster.

Mirax leaned forward too, touching her data pad, she rested the hand, which was facing away from the group, flat on the table.

Mara recognised it immediately. Using her hand that faced away from the rest of the group, she gently starting tapping her finger, barely making any sound. At first the rhythm was consistent, like the beat in a song, but as it appeared that she was growing distracted, the rhythm changed, the tapping changed, interspersed with the rhythm.

When the message was sent Mirax sat back in her chair, still watching the discussion.

Dengar then stood up in the meeting, and announce. “Well, gentlemen, it looks like we have some terms that we each need to discuss with our colleagues, perhaps we adjourn now and meet in thirty minutes for a meal, and then resume our negotiations?”

Karrde and Booster agreed with Dengar, deciding it was best to take a break from the negotiations.

The parties got up from the table and left the room, heading back to their own vessels.

Karrde and Mara walked back in silence. Although given the pleasant look on Karrde face, no one would have suspected that he was fuming under it all. However, Mara could sense it, and she knew better than to reveal it now.

Once inside the docked Skipray, Karrde headed to the aft section, and triggered the cleaning droids to drown out any sensors that might be able to hear what he was going say.

He waited a few moments and then turned to Mara. “The nerve of that man! Dengar! Invites us here only to serve us up to the Imperials! I wonder what sort of deal he’s going to get out of this?” Karrde spewed elegantly as his personality would allow. He was fully aware of the deception of Dengar without the information that Mara had.

“He’s giving us one sector, and Booster another…and the codes to pass in it – if we don’t agree to his terms, he’ll sell us out. He’s as much said so.” Karrde fumed.

“I don’t think he’s going to wait that long.” Mara said.

Karrde looked at her. “How do you know?”

“Mirax told me as much.” Mara replied coolly. “She said it’s a trap that he’s planning for both you and Booster.”
“When did she say this?” Karrde looked at her amazed.

“In the meeting.”

“In the meet—? But how?” He couldn’t fathom.

“I have my ways…and she has hers.” Mara answered.

“Is she Force-sensitive?” Karrde asked rapidly.

“No.” Mara said shaking her head. “I think we should follow along and spring it on him. He’ll think that we’ll be expecting a larger issue, but he’ll wait for something small that won’t ping on our radar. Then, we buy out his contacts and put him out of business.”

Karrde leaned back on the crate behind him and stared at her in amazement.

“I suggested the same thing to Mirax, but I told her that I would talk to you about it before any decision is made.” Mara explained.

“Maybe while we’re at lunch I can talk to her a bit more.” She said.

“Do we know what type of trap that he’s planning? Or did you two take over that too?” Karrde asked, feeling left out.

Mara shook her head and snorted. “No, we didn’t have time to discuss such a thing…maybe during lunch.”

Karrde shook his head, and Mara could feel his disappointment; he always wanted things to be simple and straightforward, the business man in him would prefer it that way.

“This was never my intention.” Karrde said before putting his unlit cigarillo in his mouth, out of frustration. “We were supposed to be heading a in a direction that would make us legitimate, not delve deeper into being smugglers again….and making friends with the likes of…Dengar.” He mumbled.

“Instead, I’m making shady deals, and undercover enemies.” He growled. “This war…this…whatever it is…has taken us here.”

The doors of the hull then opened and in walked Ghent carrying his data pad. “I’ve got all the info for you, Boss.” He smiled. Nothing delighted Ghent more than hacking someone who thought they were un-hackable.

Karrde stopped looking at her incredulously, and turned his attention to Ghent.

“So it turns out that Dengar has been working with a supply depot, on the skirts of the Deep Core, on Stylion VI. A supply shuttle comes in, but doesn’t leave…at least not as a supply shuttle anyhow…it gets scrapped…and who buys the scrap?” Ghent beamed.

Karrde nodded. “Dengar.”

“Yep.” Ghent continued. “He also buys the ID that came with the shuttle. By the time the shuttle is reported missing— it’s not such a big issue because the goods it was carrying have arrived and are in inventory…besides, the goods are often more valuable that then shuttle anyhow…so perhaps it was just a clerical issue that the shuttle isn’t running?”

Ghent tried to sound like the Imperial logic machine as he ran through the scenario. “No big deal,
we just wait it out and perhaps it will show up again…Uh-oh. A bigger issue has come up. Let’s de-
activate the code, just in case, but stop looking for the shuttle…and that takes about thirty days….ah,
the lifespan of an Imperial recognition code.” Ghent was pleased with himself.

Karrde snorted. “Good work Ghent.” He sighed. “And what about his crew?”

Ghent propped himself up on an adjacent crate and looked between Karrde and Mara. “Well, let me
tell you…you have not seen a collection of more fanatic former Imperials like this, in a long time.
They loved the Empire but hated the Emperor….go figure.” Ghent glanced over at Mara to make
sure he was safe to continue.

She nodded once without malice.

“Each one of them had some sort of Imperial rank or service…but they got dismissed or their service
ended…and Dengar likes it that way. He has them listed as rank, instead of position on his
roster….except for one.” Ghent explained.

“Lemay.” Mara said.

“Yeah, how’d you know?” Ghent asked, giving her a strange look.

“Just a hunch…but mostly, he didn’t move like an Imperial.” She said blankly.

“He sure doesn’t.” Ghent agreed. “That one is a special kind of crazy. So Lemay doesn’t have any
Imperial background but it turns out that he fell out of sorts with the cult he was following.”

“Cult?” Karrde asked.

“Yeah, he was part of group of fanatics that would collect relics…and get this….Sith relics. He went
to public with one of his stunts to acquire some things, and the group didn’t like that…they’re low
key, very underground.” Ghent said. “At first I didn’t know what some of the acronyms were in his
file but then I did a search for them and they led me to a group called The Acolytes of the Beyond…
spooky, no?”

Mara sat up and listened.

“So the Acolytes collect these relics and destroy them…they believe that they are sending them back
to their masters, and the master will grant them power. There’s a whole underground market for these
things.” Ghent’s eyes went wide. “Dengar hired Lemay to help get some of these relics to barter on
the market. But it turns out that Lemay has a talent for organizing …hence Dengar keeps him on the
front line too.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.” Mara whispered, her eyes staring off into the distance.

“Oh yeah…there’s a whole bunch of different groups out there…most of them harmless, pacifists...
just Jedi worshippers, like The Church of the Force…but then, there are these whackos.” Ghent just
nodded along to her.

“Jedi worshippers?” She asked, completely unaware.

“Mostly on the Rim…and guess who their hero is?” Ghent smiled, amused, as if it was a joke.
“Skywalker…he’s like a God to them….trying to bring back the Jedi Order….oh, you’re on some of
the sites too.” He looked at Mara.

“Me?” She repeated loudly.
“Yep…for both Jedi and Sith worshippers…you’re like a mother to them both. I’m surprised that Lemay didn’t fall down at your feet, and kiss them when he saw you.” Ghent got distracted and started picking at something on his fingernail as he spoke, but then his attention came back to her. “You got both sides; the Emperor and the new Jedi.”

“I can show you the sites if you want? It’s kinda funny how they either pit you and Skywalker against each other, or put you together. But it’s like the two of you are collectable dolls and each side wants you. You’ve got ‘Vader’s son and Emperor’s Hand’ or ‘New Jedi and his Student’.” Ghent looked up, and then realized what he had just said. “Um…sorry…I didn’t mean it like that.” He back-peddled.

“Ah…yeah, Dengar…” Ghent tried to get back to business. “It looks like he just wants to serve up anyone who the Imperials are looking for, and trying to tag this ‘missing shuttle routine’ on them when it hits the fan…and if he can sell out a few ‘friends’ along the way—it’s even more profit for him.”

“Oh, one more thing.” Ghent looked excited. “It looks like he’s been teaming up with spice runners lately. I get the feeling he wants to net them too when this comes down.”

Karrde sat quietly for a moment before he looked at his hacker. “Were you able to get through to the Pulsar Skate?” He asked coolly.

“Nah.” Ghent said flippantly until he realized that Karrde was serious. “I’d have to go through the Novex’s system and that would leave a trail.” He paused. “But I was able to get to their backdoor comm system…we’d be able to contact them without Dengar knowing.” He suggested if somewhat feebly.

“Thank you Ghent.” Karrde said dismissing him, but looking at Mara and her withdrawn expression. He needed her with her head in the game, and not thinking about what was out in the galaxy.

“No problem, Boss.” Ghent said, glanced at Mara, before walking away.

When the doors closed, she looked up at him again. Her eyes were back, and fully concentrating on the situation at hand.

“So how do you want to play this?” Mara asked, pulling herself away from her thoughts.

Karrde waited for a moment. “Find a way to get the word to Booster to negotiate for this deal like he would with any other…like the rabid mynock, he can be. I’ll do the same, and then we’ll meet up to sort this out between ourselves.”

“For now?” Karrde gave her a raised eyebrow. “We go to lunch.” He said walking towards the door.

Mara sighed, nodded and followed behind.

**

The meeting room was furnished with a simple buffet, and seemed more-relaxed than their first introduction to the space.

Music filled the empty area so that it would encourage conversations.

Karrde had engaged in a discussion with Booster about fuel rates, and where to access the best terminals.
Mara excused herself from Karrde’s side to sample a small meal and retrieve a beverage.

She assessed the room earlier on, but now, with the light music playing, it had been designed so that conversations were inaudible. Dengar had definitely been sly in his selection.

After she filled her glass, and began to walk away, she felt a presence approach her while she was within feet of the serving area.

“I hope you don’t mind, Lieutenant Jade, but I’ve been hoping to meet with you for quite some time.” Dengar’s voice was smooth and casual, but imbued with all the tones that she was familiar with.

“Oh?” She said as she turned with a raise eyebrow. “May I ask, as to why?” Mara kept a pleasant, but tight, grin on her face; one that Dengar would have recognized as controlled.

He stood in front of her, with both his arms folded behind his back, and Lemay behind him, in the same position.

Lemay’s eyes were round and wide, looking at her, but Dengar looked relaxed.

He moved in closer to her, and turned away from the wall. “You’re reputation proceeds you.” Dengar said, smiling. “Emperor’s Hand.”

Mara could sense nothing but appreciation for her; not malice, no sort of back-handed compliment, he genuinely was in awe of her, and her role in the former Empire- and it gave her something to play on.

He knew he could call her that because no one else would hear it; she was correct when she assessed that the room was designed to absorb sound.

“Quite.” She nodded with the cool refinement that he would have come to expect from someone in her position, and held her gaze on him, and only him. “I don’t think it's my reputation that proceeds me, merely the reputation of the position of ‘Empire’s Hand’ that you became aware of.”

She waited; not giving away more than she had to. She knew his type; he would reveal himself without being provoked if he felt he needed to prove something. Her scrutiny had the ability to make his type succumb.

“Yes, I was made aware of the position during my service to the Empire.” He said confidently.

“As many were.” She said blankly.

“Yes, well…yours was an interesting position in the structure of Special Imperial Operations.” He wavered marginally but kept up the façade. “I understand you reported directly to the Emperor. I came to understand that there were persons who did a position similar to yours…they were merely a rumor, ghosts, cogs in the machine of the Empire, but a necessary cog.”

Dengar stepped closer to her. “I appreciated the efficiency of which your job was performed, and the necessity of it as well.”

“No, you didn’t.” Mara held her blank expression, calling his bluff. “You feared it, just as everyone else did. Yes, I may have been a rumor, but like all good rumors, it was rooted in the truth. You secretly wished my presence upon those who were not worthy to surpass you or worthy to wear the uniform. When one of them was struck down, you celebrated.”
Dengar tightened his posture, and smiled cruelly; enjoying that she was so succinct with her appraisal. “Karrde is most-fortunate to have you in his employ. Perhaps, if you find yourself in a position to change alliances, you will consider joining my organization?” He asked because he knew he could get away with it.

She allowed her lip to twitch. “I thank you kindly for the offer, Captain, and I must say that I am impressed with the order and skill that you command your crew.” She said smoothly. 

Mara knew she was playing on his vanity, and she allowed a brief grin.

“Coming from you, that is a compliment.” He said with a satisfied smile. “I must say when I heard that you were assisting the current government, I became concerned. However, I was sure that there were other motives behind your actions.”

She let her grin dissolve before him. “Captain, there is slim satisfaction in self-preservation rather than wasting opportunities; as we were both instructed during our training.” She paused. “Karrde, and the New Republic are temporary. Order always has longevity.” She said quietly.

Mara knew she had chosen her words carefully; if Dengar remembered his training, he would have heard that same type of phrase used, and respected it. She also inferred that his knowledge was on the same level as hers, which she knew he would eat up, being the snob that he was.

“Besides, I had no intention of aiding a lesser regime than the one I was accustomed to.” She cooled her eyes, displaying her contempt for those who tried to usurp her Empire. It was all an act, but Dengar seemed to believe it.

“But now?” He whispered, as he came even closer. “With the current situation, you don’t find yourself ready to resume your duties?”

“Just as you, I served order and the consistency that was the Empire, Captain.” She said quietly. “Until I am satisfied that this Empire meets those criteria, I am reluctant to give my support.”


He sighed slowly, maintaining his eyes contact with her. She sensed that he was regretting what had to be his future actions if they were to impact her.

He nodded once, in thanks for their conversation.

Dengar turned slightly, still keeping eye contact with her. “Lemay- retrieve a beverage for me.” He casually ordered.

“Allow me?” Mara said quickly, reached out with her available hand, and a bottle flew from the table to her.

She presented it to Dengar, as Lemay’s eyes shot wide, and his mouth quivered.

Dengar’s eyes lit up as he took the bottle from her. “So the rumors, of your gifts, are true?” He hissed.

“Yes, His Majesty wouldn’t have employed me otherwise.” She said calmly.

His face registered a brief panic.
“And then other gifts have been distorted by fiction.” She said. “I think it was Jedi who spread the false insinuation that Force-users could read minds.” She was sure to drop her tone as she said ‘Jedi’. “They liked to use their propaganda for their benefit.”

Dengar raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, you’ll forgive me if I entered the previous session wearing my lightsaber.” She said, feigning casualness.

She heard Lemay’s minute gasp.

Mara reached behind her and unclipped the cylinder, and now held it in her available hand. “I consider it a statement to my dedication, rather than a weapon.”

Even Dengar’s pupils dilated when he saw the item. “What an exquisite example of artistry.” He said reservedly.

“Clone Wars Era.” She said holding the item out in her hand. “Of course, it formerly belonged to Lord Darth Vader…” She returned the saber to her back clip, and continued. “As he was, before he gained his glorious accession through the instruction by His Majesty. I use it to remind me not to become weak of spirit.” She snarled the last sentence.

She could feel the spike in Lemay’s senses; thrilled, and enthralled, but he stood frozen slightly behind Dengar.

“No need for apology, I understand entirely.” Dengar said, still mesmerized by her. “Although I understood that you were under the tutelage of Jedi Luke Skywalker.” He growled the name.

“Yes, he gifted me the lightsaber when I started training with him.” She said with a slight drop of smugness. “Once again, there are lies spread by Jedi and their supporters.” She murmured with a snarl. “However, as you can see, the Jedi is nowhere around. I no longer need his guidance, or his naivety.”

Mara stepped closer to Dengar, as a means to suggest that she trusted him. “I’ve been told that you are interested in certain artifacts?” She said, above a whisper.

“I am.” His eyes gleamed.

“Then…” Mara let her green cat like eyes lure in her prey. “If you have the means, I have it on good faith that a certain… harbour is up for the taking. And I can confirm its location.”

“Emperor’s Hand- you do me great honor to share this knowledge.” He narrowed his gaze, trying to reason her motives. Dengar smiled, and waited.

“I also understand that you know how to get certain artifacts into the hands who will use them to advance our cause to reinstate order in the galaxy.” She said in low tones, but not masking her distain, giving him a clear reason as to why she would want to reveal this information; it wasn’t for profit, it was for pride, playing on his desire for the return of the glory of the Empire.

“If one was in the know, it is rumored that Lord Vader’s former palace has not been accessed.” She said quietly. “Bast Castle on Vjun…it’s extremely difficult to get to, but it was his sanctuary.”

Bast Castle was the rumored former home of the Sith Lord, surely Dengar would have heard the name before. But if the acid rain of Vjun wasn’t a deterrent, than the imposter home would make sure you didn’t tell anyone else with all of its treacherous secrets. Few entered, and none left.
Mara knew the one true home of the Sith Lord, as well as anyone else that was summoned there, or instructed to visit it at the Emperor’s bidding, and it was not Bast Castle.

Dengar rolled his eyes with exhilaration. “Thank you. It was a pleasure.” He hissed graciously, backing away from her, as if she was holding court.

Mara moved away from the area when she saw that Dengar was moving towards Karrde and Booster; Lemay made for an excellent shadow, but he still watched her, so she waited to relax her formal stance slowly.

She saw that Mirax Terrik was by herself at the serving station, and Mara made the mental excuse that she needed something else in order to go over and talk to the other woman.

“The nobcha isn’t bad for being in the Deep Core.” Mara murmured as she came up beside Mirax.

“I wouldn’t know. I’m still enjoy my Corellian food.” Mirax said as she turned to Mara.

The two women regarded each other with indifference, at least to the appearance of those around them. To appear to be on more-welcoming terms would be out of character for both of them, and they knew it.

Mara had nothing against the other woman; in fact she wished to know her more. Corran Horn and Luke were Rogue roommates on Coruscant, and it would be good to share what she knew with someone who could understand.

Corran Horn also impressed her as the sort of man who wouldn’t take just any woman for a wife. No, his wife would have to be someone who could handle herself.

“There’s a really good Corellian tapcaf that I used to go to on Coruscant, when I was working with the Smuggler’s Alliance.” Mara said.

“The one that made those greasy burgers?” Mirax asked with a smirk. “I know someone who used to just love them.”

“Me too.” Mara smirked back; she knew they were talking about the men in their lives. She had a quick vision of Luke as he finished one off, and started on a second one, at the midday meal they had after they had just sparred together.

A thought popped into her mind; Mirax wasn’t using her married name, ‘Horn’. She also just referred to her husband as a ‘friend’. Perhaps her marriage wasn’t common knowledge; Mara decided to respect that.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been on Coruscant.” Mirax said. “I hear the seasons are changing.”

“Yes.” Mara said. “I think the birds are leaving before the weather gets cold.”

It was a simple code language but each of them understood the other; they both knew that the Rogues were leaving, headed off planet, and both women knew the reason.

Mara knew from her messages with Luke that he would be leaving in the next day or so for Tatooine. What he failed to mention in his communication was that his side trip would end up with him boarding The Liberty, and regrouping with the rest of the Rogues. But he couldn’t tell Mara directly because his communications were probably being read. Luckily, her sources also confirmed as much.
She wondered if Mirax knew the same.

“I hope the birds find a warmer nest this year. It’s going to be a cold winter.” Mirax said.

Mara’s mouth smirked in a direction away from the rest of the group but so only Mirax could see.

Mirax knew.

“Yes it is.” Mara said casually.

Mara turned her head as she got the sense that her attention was needed elsewhere. She turned back to the other woman, and tilted her head obligingly before she turned and walked away.

As she walked back over to Karrde’s side, she wondered if Luke would mind going to dinner one night with the Horns. She could get used to Mirax’s company.

The meeting was about to resume again, and Mara took notes beside Karrde as they began to finalize the deal.

Booster argued against Karrde paying a lesser share because of the volumes he carried.

“I have a higher turn-over rate, as you are aware.” Karrde said staring down the man across the table. “It makes sense that I should receive a lower rate due the repeat business I would be bringing into the sector.”

It was then that Booster made it personal, and stood up pointing his finger at Karrde. “You have been running your share of the sector for too long…and not putting back in…and everyone knows it!” The older man said in a loud voice. “Don’t come in here with your ways and think you’re above it all, Karrde!”

Mirax looked over at her father and gave him a look before he composed himself and sat back down.

Karrde kept his cool. “Perhaps, if we can all be reasonable, then we can agree on an escalating scale that would apply to us all.”

“Of course, Captain Karrde.” Dengar said, amused that the two men were fighting over his services.

The arguments went back and forth until Dengar made the deciding factors, and the two other bosses agreed.

Booster even shook Karrde’s hand after it was done.

If it wouldn’t amount in eventual sabotage, then it would have been a half decent deal, and very profitable to all those concerned; such a shame that it would end with Dengar turning on them.

Dengar made a point to thank each of his guests; he paused at Mara, and she made the motion to bow in military fashion, refraining from saluting him. Dengar returned the gesture proudly before leaving.

Karrde and Mara entered the Skipray and opened the comms; knowing that Dengar was probably listening.

Karrde gave Aves the order to take off, when they have been cleared, without any further words on the matter or the meeting.

As the Skipray disembarked from the Novex, Aves waited until they cleared the ship.
Out the view port, Karrde could see the *Pulsar Skate* dropping from the *Novex*, just as they had, but headed in the opposite direction.

“Well, that was unpleasant.” Karrde said as Mara watched him with a smirk. “What were you able to find out from your conversation with Dengar? - I saw you speaking with him at the meal?” He placed his unlit cigarillo back in his mouth and leaned back in his chair.

“Other than you don’t pay me enough and that other parties are interested?” Mara raised an eyebrow smirking back at him.

He knew she was joking; it had been a long-standing joke that she got a job offer at almost every meeting she attended, but Karrde knew she was loyal to him, and would only consider leaving him for one man, and that man was a Jedi, and not another smuggler.

Karrde snorted as he waited for her to explain.

“Nothing more than to find out what sort of Imperialist he really is. And the extraction was correct; he’s in it for the profit but loved the order, not the regime.” Mara answered.

“If it makes you feel better…” She smiled with curled lips. “I did send him on a little snoot chase.”

Karrde leaned forward, amused.

“I told him of Vader’s long, lost castle on Vjun that hasn’t been touched. His relic hunter won’t be able to resist.” She kept Karrde’s gaze. “And who knows, he might make it out of there alive, but I doubt it. Vader designed it for those who were looking to assassinate him.”

Karrde snorted, and then stopped. “Does Skywalker know of the place?”

“He’s never asked.” Mara said quietly as she turned back her controls. “Do you want me to hail the *Pulsar Skate* now and find a safe port? I have their input code.” She asked behind her shoulder.

Karrde made a disgruntled cough. “I’m not going to even ask how you got that, but…yes, please do.”

Mara smiled as she used the information that Ghent was able to retrieve, and the code that she had obtained.

Mirax was smooth; Mara had to give her that. She had managed to give Mara the code in plain sight of everyone while they spoke. When they met again, they would have to have a chat about other techniques for communicating.

“Want me to take over?” Mara asked Aves, as it was clear that his skill as the communication officer would be needed to diffuse their signal and make it untraceable in deep space.

He didn’t object as she took over the controls of the ship, and then typed in the next available jump after they stopped at this one.

Karrde typed in a message over to Booster’s ship, and got a reply. The communication was quick and then died without a notice.

Sending the co-ordinates over to Mara, she looked back at Karrde after he sent them.

“Is there an issue, Mara?” Karrde asked, as he looked up from his comm.

“This is in Mandolorian space.” She said blankly. “Are we sure we want to go there?”
“This was Booster’s suggestion, not mine. It’s had no Imperial attacks and it’s relatively clean, for us, anyhow.” Karrde nodded. “I think it will work. How long until we’re there?”

Mara sighed and tuned back to the console. “Nine hours.” She replied.

“Good, we have time to plan.” Karrde said, satisfied.

**

The Hovering Spaceport of Null

Docked beside each other, the Skipray looked like a small insect next to the *Pulsar Skate*, and Karrde knew that Booster was probably getting a good laugh out of that.

Mara followed him the hatchway and tried to keep his pace. Karrde was taller and he seemed to be excited about this meeting as he walked with a faster gait; more excited than he was about meeting on the *Novex*.

One of Booster’s loader lackeys met them at the port, and walked them half way down the bay to an adjoining corridor and pointed them in the right direction.

They walked to the end of the hallway and the door opened up for them. As they got close, a voice called from within.

“I’ve been waiting for you Karrde! I ain’t got your money to squander time, you know!” Booster yelled.

Karrde walked in smirking. “And you won’t have it, throwing it at the money pit you want to get in the air, called the *Errant Venture*.”

The room they entered was more of a cantina than it was a meeting room; it looked like it served as a mess hall as well.

“It was a bad idea naming a Star Destroyer that doesn’t fly, you know…and I don’t care if it will make a good floating base.” Karrde joked.

Mara could sense both men’s tones, knowing that the entire animosity on the *Novex* was staged for Dengar; just as her feeling towards the Empire, Luke and the Jedi were.

“When the paint job is finished- it will be the best thing that I’ve ever done…it’s just not a good time to be flying around in a Star Destroyer.” Booster said as he came closer, grinning.

“So I don’t know what you thought, but I couldn’t wait until that gloob shut his Imperial clap-trap.” Booster snarled, talking about Dengar.

“I couldn’t agree with you more.” Karrde said as he sat down in one of the chairs and tapped the table, expecting a drink.

Booster came close, carrying a bottle under one arm, and several tumblers in the other. He placed the items on the table, and looked over at Mara. “You don’t talk much, do you Red?” He looked at her directly.

She narrowed her eyes at the name he called her, but like Karrde; she decided that she liked him.

“When I need to.” She said, letting a grin slip out.
To the side of them, the door open and Mirax appeared, carrying a data pad. She smiled warmly as she saw who was gathered in the room.

Karrde stood up to greet her again, and she displayed the same professionalism that she had before as she extended her hand.

She picked up the bottle that, clearly, her father had brought out, frowned and shook her head, putting it back on the table.

Booster started to talk about Dengar, and Karrde was chuckling about all the names that he had for the man.

Mirax reached across the table and tapped Mara’s arm, and nodded her head in the direction of the bar behind them, giving the bosses time to vent about the meeting.

Mara excused herself and followed the other woman to the adjacent rail, and took a seat on a high chair as Mirax went behind the bar and pulled out something that was more-suitable.

She poured two glasses of a fine Corellian red wine and passed one over to Mara. “I thought you’d like a real drink and not the grease remover that my father is about to serve to Karrde.”

Mara smiled. “Yes, this is much more palatable. Thank you.”

Mirax looked at her before she sipped her wine, with her hard blue eyes. “So, how do you want to do this?” She asked blankly.

Raising an eyebrow, Mara knew what she meant immediately. “I think we should agree to like each other- it will go much better for both of us, if we do.”

“I agree.” Mirax offered her glass. “To amicability.” She toasted, and sipped.

“To amicability.” Mara did the same.

Mirax came from out of the bar and sat beside Mara on a high chair. “So I have to say that you’re not anything like Corran described you.” She waited to see how the other woman would react.

“Oh? I’m not surprised…he’s seen several different versions of me, and probably not the version you saw at the meeting.” Mara replied, dropping all edge and sarcasm, as she didn’t feel the need to use it here.

“I agree. I don’t think he met you at the most auspicious time, given how you had just testified at the Bremem hearing.” Mirax said looking at her wine. “And the second time he met you, you had just deciphered Imperial code in front of room full of scared councillors.” Mirax looked up, grinning. “So most of what he knows comes from Skywalker.”

Mara nodded; she wasn’t sure if Horn had told his wife about her and Luke, but now she knew.

“He seemed nervous to meet Skywalker. I tried to put him at ease.” Mara commented before she took a sip of her wine.

“And you did.” Mirax said. “And me as well. All the things we heard about Jedi, said that they didn’t marry or have relationships, and Corran had been having such bad dreams before he came to Coruscant.” Mirax muttered. “He knew he was eventually going to meet up with Skywalker.”

Mara grinned tightly. “It’s hard to explain Jedi relationships. Skywalker’s reputation can be
intimidating, but once you get to know him...he’s quite different.” She explained, but saying his name was making her chest ache.

“I hear they get along quite well. Corran says that he’s learned a ‘Bottle Cap Game’?” Mirax said with a questioning look on her face.

Snorting, Mara had another sip before she answered. “It’s a training game...it teaches and at the same time it challenges a person.”

“Well, he likes it.” Mirax looked relieved. “He didn’t think he would. He’s been scared of his family’s legacy.”

“Skywalker would understand that.” Mara said knowingly, and implied what everyone now knew.

“I notice that you don’t use your married name. Is there a reason for that? I don’t remember the name ‘Horn’ being particularly synonymous.” Mara asked.

Mirax glanced over to the table with her father. “Someone isn’t a fan of him. He’d rather not be reminded that I’m married.” She grimaced. “And Booster calls him ‘the cop’ when he sees him.”

“Corellian Security Corps does have the reputation.” Mara smiled.

“They do. I kept telling Iella not to join because of it, but she wouldn’t listen to me.” Mirax shrugged.

They had both almost finished their wine, and Mirax offered to refill Mara’s glass, and topped off her own glass as well.

“Yes, her and Wedge looked very happy the last time I saw them.” Mara said, recalling seeing them together at the party that Leia had for the twins; it seemed so long ago...before she had liked Luke, before she had even kissed him, before she admitted that she loved him. The ache came again.

“You know Veggies?” Mirax asked. “Oh, of course you would...he and Skywalker are friends too.”

“Veggies?” Mara asked, almost chuckling. “That’s one I’ll have to remember.”

“I’ve called him that since we were kids.” Mirax looked over at her father again. “Boost wanted me to marry him and not Corran...but, what can I say...it was the uniform that did me in.”

She sighed. “At least he’s Corellian...that’s what pops says.”

“It could have been worse...the Rogues like to give out nicknames.” Mara said with a growl.

Mirax chuckled and made eye contact with her. “At least you got a good one.” She raised an eyebrow, showing that she knew the moniker that Mara had been saddled with by the Rogues. “Mine’s Angelface.”

Mara kept a blank face and said. “I’ll still trade you.”

Then, they both chuckled at their misfortune of meeting the squad that their men flew with.

Mara sighed. “Still, I’m glad that they’re leaving Coruscant.” She said quietly, looking into her glass.

“Me too.” Mirax said. “Corran will be meeting Luke and Hobbie in three days’ time, and I couldn’t be happier. They were like sitting mynocks just waiting there.” She paused, and looked over before she spoke. “I heard about the training accident.”
Nodding, Mara whispered, “It wasn’t an accident.” She got the feeling that Mirax knew it wasn’t either, but was just trying to be polite.

She decided it was time to switch the topic; she was staring to think about Luke again, and she just couldn’t allow herself the luxury without displaying how much she missed him.

“So, I’m going to guess it was CorSec who showed you how to send signal code, and read seismic datting?” Mara asked.

“Kind of.” Mirax said. “While I was flying on the Lusankya, after Wedge commandeered it; I spent some time reading all the data CorSec had lying around. We had time, he taught it me – it was his way of courting me.”

Mara had heard of New Republic’s capture of the Super Star Destroyer approximately a year before she joined up with Karrde, but never knew who was responsible for it.

“And that’s about the time we got married, too.” Mirax finished.

“Horn’s a teacher too? No wonder he and Skywalker get along.” Mara was really trying not to use his name, but she couldn’t think of a way around it.

“It’s more like he’s a tormentor…kept teasing me until I understood it.” Mirax smiled sadly; this talk of her husband must have been getting to her too.

“So how did you know about the trap that Dengar is planning?” Mara asked, changing topics.

Mirax sat back and smiled. “I saw his client list for Imperial ID’s. He’s in league with the Ba’naad Group.”

Mara hissed as she exhaled. The Ba’naad Group was responsible for causing all sorts of trouble before the Smuggler’s Alliance formed; they were pirates rather than smugglers, and sold their wares to the Hutts, or anyone else who would buy them.

“He has payments going both ways; for the ID’s he supplies, and services rendered when he sics them on another client.” A glare came across Mirax’s face. “There’s nothing Dengar would love more than to take both Booster and Karrde down, and he knows they both need Imperial ID’s to survive.”

“That’s all we were able to hack before we would get detected.” Mirax said.

Mara sat back in her chair, crossing her arms against her chest, and thinking. “I’ll have to ask our information officer what he was able to find- we didn’t get that far when we were discussing Dengar.”

“But you were able to find out other things?” Mirax asked.

“Just some interesting side notes on Dengar and his group of former Imperials.” Mara looked over.

Mirax smiled slyly. “Like that Lemay? Did he say anything to you? I didn’t hear one word out of him. He gave me the creeps.”

Shaking her head, Mara thought back. “No, not one word either. But I got the feeling that he wanted to.”

“Yeah…” Mirax nodded. “I bet Dengar was enjoying your company.” She suddenly looked over to
the other woman, to see if she offended her.

Mara waved her hand, wiping the comment aside. Mirax was going to have to say much worse if she wanted to offend Mara; there wasn’t anything she hadn’t heard before by implying her Imperial past.

“Lemay is a special kind of crazy.” Mara whispered; repeating Ghent words to describe him.

In the nine hours that it took to get to the Null spaceport, Mara had looked up the things that Ghent had mentioned. It boggled her mind that people would be so obsessed with Force-users, though, Luke’s public face and deeds had made him seem god-like and invincible some times.

So far the Church of the Force seemed harmless, and was actually quoting some of the things that the doctors on Yavin had been talking about; the neutrality of the Force, and how the Living-Force should be a power for peace and good in the galaxy.

The Acolytes of the Beyond appeared to be the instigators of several terrorist acts in attempt to steal items that were rumored to belong to Sith practitioners. After the damage had been done, most of the items had turned out to be forgeries, but people were still getting hurt in their quest.

The sites regarding her and Luke were disturbing; they had decided that there was already a relationship, and a union.

Some sites rejoiced at this assumption, that Mara could be brought to the Light, and this meant an issuing in an new era of peace and justice- a return of the Jedi Order, started in love.

The sites that hailed Luke as The Son of Vader, and his consort, The Emperor’s Hand, already declared that they were behind the Imperial resurrection, and welcomed it with open arms, ready to worship the dark powers willingly.

The sites that scared Mara were the severely fanatical ones, on both sides, that already pre-supposed that she and Luke had conceived a child, she was now pregnant, and they were looking to steal and worship that child as soon as it was born. A symbol for both Light and Dark worshippers of the Force.

She supressed an involuntary shiver; her greatest fear, her child being stolen.

“You can say that again.” Mirax said, snapping Mara out of her thoughts.

“Pardon?” Mara asked as she was lost in her own world for a bit.

“Lemay.” Mirax said. “I don’t like his look.”

Mara nodded, remembering her place in the conversation.

She looked over at Karrde as the laughing had gotten louder from his table.

“Do you suppose that they figured everything out?” Mirax said glaring over at her father and boss.

“Not one iota.” Mara said, now staring at Karrde, looking relaxed and not caring.

“So what should we do about it?” Mirax asked snidely.

“Plan this out, and let them know after the fact.” Mara huffed.

“Spring the trap?” Mirax asked.
“I think Dengar is going to hit Karrde first.” Mara said, still looking at her boss.

“Agreed.” Mirax said. “I think Booster played up his dislike of him just enough to make it sound like Karrde was the bigger fish.”

Mara sighed and turned back. “So now we have to figure out how Dengar plans to do it.”

“I think I have a way to find out.” Mirax said. “Do you feel like going for a walk? There’s a cantina several block away on Null- it’s not much, but a bunch of runners hang out there. I’ll bet they’ve heard of Ba’naad getting the jump on teams.”

Mara smiled, and got up from her seat. “Lead the way. And you wouldn’t happen to know if there’s a good tapcaf on the way… I could sure use a Corellian burger.”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Mirax grinned and started putting on her jacket. “Perhaps on the way back?”

Mara pulled up her hood, hiding her hair and walked over to Karrde.

She touched his shoulder and he looked up at her. “I’m taking a walk, Boss.” She said, not waiting for an answer.

Booster saw Mirax join her, and then went back to his conversation with Karrde.

**

“So this is Null?” Mara said as they walked.

Aliens and species of every type walked the crowded ways. The spaceport hovered above the planet, so it often got thought of as one and same.

The citizens of Null, planet-side were extreme restrictive, and Mara couldn’t remember if she had ever met anyone from Null. The rumor was that the planet had very few residents, and was almost entirely run by droids.

The spaceport was mainly used to drop off shipments, and automated transports would take them down to the planet.

“This is Null.” Mirax said. “Booster likes it. And they like him, and the stuff he brings.” She looked over. “I like it for the shopping.”

“I can get just about anything I could possibly want; legal or otherwise.” Mirax said, dodging the people in the street. “I got a Daftmar dress here once… same one I got married in.”

“Daftmar? I haven’t heard that name in ages.” Mara smiled; she remembered seeing the designer in the court, dressing some of the ladies. For a Crinian, he had good taste.

“Want to make a stop?” Mirax asked. “There’s a shop up ahead that’s one of my favourites.”

“Maybe on the way back?” Mara suggested; it had been so long since she had actually gone shopping, and though it wasn’t her favourite things to do, she had thought that she’d like to get something for the next time she saw Luke. She liked to surprise him.

Mirax indicated that they needed to turn, and as they did, the entrance of the makeshift cantina appeared.
Walking inside, Mirax sat down at the closest available table. Mara sat across from her, and relaxed.

It wasn’t long before a dark skinned Vorg came up, and chuttered at them.

“I’ll have the house ale, and so will my friend.” Mirax ordered. “Have you seen Stacks?” She asked, holding up a credit chit.

The Vorg chuttered again, and then huffed.

Mirax placed the chit on the Vorg’s serving tray. “Please tell him that Little Boo is here.”

The Vorg chuttered once before leaving.

They didn’t have to wait long before the table got approached by random loaders, offering to buy them drinks.

Both of them knew better; in a place like this, taking random drinks was not a welcomed thing. Mirax had a direct line of sight to the bar and the Vorg that was delivering them, so that she could see if they were tampered with.

When the drinks arrived, Mirax placed another chit on the Vorg’s serving tray, and she sat back, not touching her drink.

Mara sensed it before it happened.

From the opposite side of their table, the wall sculpt moved and slid over. Through the grid a voice came.

“Little Boo! I’m surprised to see you.” It said.

Mirax laughed. “Why are you hiding Stacks?”

“Higgta...the Nekfar, that I’m hiding from, I owe him money.” The voice said beyond the grid.

Mara just kept looking out at the cantina as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

“Who’s your friend?” The voice asked. “She’s cute…for a human.”

Mara glanced over and nodded, letting Mirax know it was alright to drop her name.

“Maybe you’ve heard of her, and her association with the Wild Karrde.” Mirax hinted.

“No?” The voice hissed. “Not her…Jade?”

Mara turned in the direction of the voice, only to pretend that she was interested in her drink, but only played with it, to look over at the grid. “Greetings.” She said blankly, keeping the cool that she was known for.

“Greetings.” The voice sounded thrilled; Mara could sense that he was excited to meet her too. “May the Force be with you, bringer of peace and justice.” He said, sounding full of reverence that Mara didn’t expect.

“Stacks is a follower of the new faith.” Mirax said pretending to be talking directly with Mara.

Mara looked down at her drink, then back up at Mirax. “May the Force be with you.” She said quietly.
She had not said this phrase to anyone else other than Luke; it felt strange saying it to anyone but him.

Not sensing any sort of fanatical behaviour, Mara relaxed; she just sensed sincere respect.

Mara looked over, through the grid, and she could see large oval gray eyes through it. “We need your help. Will you help us?”

“Yes, of course.” Stacks said, without hesitation.

“We need information on the Ba’naad Group, and how they’ve been getting the jump on runners.” Mirax said.

“Oh, that.” Stacks said, pulling himself away from looking at Mara. “They are sneaky, you know. Dirty pirates now. It’s the same old, same old- a hit, scrap, jump and dump.” He sounded unimpressed.

“The only thing that’s changed it that they seem to know where and when…like someone is setting them up.” Stacks said.

“I’ll bet no one gets a jump on you?….being a Force-user.” Stacks asked, his attention on Mara.

“Not lately.” Mara said over her shoulder, still looking out at the cantina.

“What happens?” Mirax asked, looking directly at Mara and avoiding the grid.

“Oh, they plant a dummy shuttle with a sensor on it. Some scavengers come by, and Wham! Ba’naad Group drops in, pillages the crew that stopped…takes everything…sometimes they take the crew… when they don’t, they leave them floating in deep space with a scrapped ship- engine gone.” Stacks sounded angered by such a thing.

“I’ve heard of two teams that become frozen by the time someone found them.” He said.

Mirax nodded. “Thanks Stacks, that’s what we needed to know.”

“Did I help the Jedi?” He asked eagerly.

Mara wasn’t about to correct him that she wasn’t a Jedi, but turned to the grid. “You helped me.” She said facing him. “And I thank you.”

She leaned in closer to the grid. “And now I’m going to help you. You owe Higgta two thousand credits?” She said shortly.

“How did you know—oh…of course you did.” Stacks smiled, implying that a Jedi would know everything without being told.

All Mara could see was the gleam of his white teeth through the grid. “Considered it paid.” She said.

“Oh thank you…thank you most gracious Jedi.” A claw came through the grid and rested on one of the nooks.

Mara uncharacteristically reached over and touched his claw. “The Force craves life.” She said before she got up and walked over to the bar, inquiring about Higgta.

When she returned to the table after paying Stacks’s debt, Mirax was ready to go.
“I think you made a new friend.” Mirax said. “He said he will remember this for the rest of his life.”

“So long as he doesn’t get into anymore debt with a Covarian, he’ll live to tell about it.” Mara said as they walked.

Walking back towards the docks, the same way them came, and passed the shop that Mirax had suggested.

Mara sighed at the entrance and went in. She may not know when she would see her Jedi again, but she knew it would be soon, and maybe she’d have something new to wear for him.

**

The two women arrived back at the Pulsar’s lounge, and found Karrde and Booster in an argument.

Mirax rolled her eyes as she came to stand beside her father, and Mara stepped beside Karrde.

Karrde looked at her. “So, have you two figured it out?” He asked, calm and collected despite Booster’s demeanor.

“Of course.” Mara said.

“Good.” Karrde got up, thanked Booster for his hospitality, bid farewell to his lovely daughter, and followed Mara back to the Skipray.

Mara said goodbye to booster, and her possible new friend.

“Do I get to know this time?” He asked as he leaned over to Mara as they walked.

“Do you want to?” she retorted.

“Tell me in the morning.” Karrde said as they reached the entrance to the Skipray.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

**

Alright...I get it..you guys are really missing the smut....not one comment on the last chapter...so either you were bored or just tired of the story line...

We’re getting there...I promise... this chapter, the next one and then one more non-smut chapter full of exciting, and...oh, who am I kidding...yes, I want to write a smut chapter just as much as you want to read one.

Sorry for plot.

I hope you like this last bit.

**
Shake Hands with the Devil-Part 2

Chapter Summary

Quote: “Yes, that’s exactly how we know it’s her.” Namta sneered. “She’s famous for it…along with slicing throats with filmsy.” He looked at the guards. “Keep on her. If she even moves in a direction out of the ordinary, blast her. I’ll still take a death bounty.”

Characters: Mara, Jedson (original character), Namta-Tik (original character), Guvarian Death Gang, Karrde, Aves, Chin and Ghent

Chapter Notes

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Okay…only one more smutless chapter after this one…I really and for-truly promise… I miss the smut too…

It’s a short chapter…and now it the part where we start connecting some dots…

Enjoy!

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Space around Ruusan

“I gotta say that I don’t like this at all.” Jedson said from the front P’ithnae freighter.

The words might have been exactly the same, but still sounded different with a Hikdithian accent.

“You sound like Aves.” Mara muttered as she controlled the small freighter. “I don’t like it either.” She said louder.

“So, yes, we to be bait for the Ba’naad Group?” Jedson said, over his shoulder, from his station.

Mara snorted. “Bait is such a negative word.” She commented back, but she couldn’t disagree with him.

Her danger senses had been going off since they disembarked from the Wild Karrde; leaving it back by at least a light year away.

It had been almost ten standards days since she and Karrde had met with Booster and Mirax, to find out they were only being set up to be handed over to the new Imperial regime.

She had followed up with the information that Mirax’s contact had been able to provide, and she had discovered that most of the attacks by the Ba’naad Group were occurring in the Kastolar Sector.

The sector had been under Imperial control since the attacks had started a few months ago, so it was
either that the Ba’naad were going to get them, or the Imperials directly, if caught.

If this was how they were going to spring the trap, they had to allow themselves to get trapped in the first place.

She was able to find the dead ship by the P’ithnae’s sensors, and now they were approaching it, displaying that they were cautious about it- if anyone was sensing them.

As they came closer, Mara recognized the vessel immediately; an Imperial Freighter.

Not as big as Shuttle, but it’s hauling capacity was still impressive at full weight; by all means, to find an abandoned one would have been considered a lucrative score.

She checked the reads-out and it showed that there were no lifeforms aboard it.

If anyone knew Imperial procedure, a freighter would have had two TIE escorts if it was flying this deep into space, but that was usually dependent on how precious the cargo was. During times of war; all cargo was precious, so it was strange not to have an escort.

Mara looked at the specs read outs too; seeing that the ambient temperature of the internals was negative twenty degrees Celsius. She mentally did the math at how fast a cabin could cool. She estimated that the freighter had been there approximately twenty six hours, or so it would seem.

The scenario fit the game that the Ba’naads were playing…abandoned ship, with a possible sensor left on it, probably the Ba’naad were sitting a less than a light year away, and could be at their location in less than five minutes.

Little did the Ba’naad know that someone else knew their game.

Carefully planned, Mara had designed for the Wild Karrde, and the Etherway to show up in the next twenty minutes regardless if anything was to happen; both ships had enough fire power that would make the Ba’naads to consider their next actions.

Both she and Jedson were already in their sealed suits, and if they maintained their directions, it would appear that their small freighter was inspecting the Imperial vessel, and they could attach an air cylinder and jump over.

In all estimation, they had to behave as if this wasn’t a ploy; they used all regular space protocol and practices, just in case someone was watching.

Mara punched the controls and sent over an open comm message to the Imperial Freighter, checking to see if they needed assistance, while the P’ithnae freighter kept its distance.

She circled it once, in a non-aggressive manner, but also checking if she could see a motion sensor from the outside; nothing was visible. If Ba’naad had planted anything, it would be aboard the freighter.

“Feel like taking a walk?” She asked as she turned to Jedson.

They were on the clock on this one. If the Wild Karrde was to show up too soon, it would blow their own attempt to capture the Ba’naad.

The bigger issue of course was that Captain Dengar would have been behind the attacks and selling traders and smugglers out to the Imperials to make himself rich, but, probably more importantly, in his mind, he would be in league with the Imperial infraction.
This would kill two mynocks with one stone; take down the Ba’naad Group, and eliminate Dengar.

Mara knew who would doing the pick-up from the fallout too; Karrde and Booster were in the position to make deals with Dengar’s contacts that was selling Imperial ID’s; although a risky business, it would keep things moving.

The one issue that had bothered her since the Imperial Infraction had reared its ugly head, was that the New Republic had yet to engage the new power. Worlds were mounting their own counter-offensives, but there had been little or no response from the New Republic to come right out and attack the Star Destroyers or make plans to stop the World Devastators.

The Republic was in the hands of Fel’ya, and she doubted that he had enough strength to see it through if the Republic was openly attacked. In perfect Imperial style, the galaxy was ripe for the taking.

Mara positioned the P’ithnae freighter to move alongside the Imperial vessel; she looked over at Jedson, he was preparing to put his helmet on over his half-tattooed face. He looked at her with leery eyes. For a warrior class, he sure was tentative when it came to uncertainties.

She got up, strapped a carryall to her body and walked to the aft section to attach the cylinder so that they could walk across to inspect the Imperial freighter; a-fixing her helmet as she did so.

When the cylinder was prepped, she engaged the magnetic lock to the outside of the freighter; she hoped that it would trigger the motion sensor that was placed there by the Ba’naad. Setting their own sensors on high, she hoped that they would get a read out as soon as it sent out its signal.

Jedson was waiting for her at the hatch; he grimaced through the helmet as she came up beside him.

The lock engaged, and the Imperial freighter shook as it did.

Mara heard the ping of their own sensors picking up the motion detector left by the Ba’naad.

The cylinder locked, and the hatch door opened.

She was the first to push off, and take the three meter leap over to the Imperial freighter.

Mara latched on to the side the ship, and started to work with unsealing the door that would gain them entry to other ship. Jedson came beside her; he looked around nervously as she worked, keeping his blaster drawn, just in case.

The door opened slightly after the code was descrambled.

Mara manually pushed it open to allow the space to slip inside; Jedson followed her and sealed the door behind them.

“What do we do now?” He asked, his voice muffled inside his helmet.

“Inspect it, I suppose.” Mara said, walking on the main deck.

Nothing seemed out of place on the freighter; the controls and power had been shut down. No blood on the floors and nothing broken in the main section showed no signs of a struggle. The strapping seats showed perfect wear for the age of the freighter; it was not a new model, but it was still in use in some parts of the galaxy, and she wouldn’t have expected any less for a freighter that was roaming about the Rim worlds.
Time to go to work; Mara pulled out the device from her bag placed the system override unit to the main controls, and put it on standby power. She checked the power gage to see that it was full.

A full power gage would have given any other group hope that they could move the freighter without so much effort.

Recovering an Imperial freighter would have been one success, but the next one would have been to see what was aboard the freighter.

She opened the trapdoor that lead to the hull in the underbelly. The Imperials had designed it for quick hauls, and not for comfort of their crews, so everything was rudimentary.

From the top, she could see that there was indeed a shipment inside, and several cases lined the walls.

“Coming?” Mara asked Jedson as she was about to drop down into the section.

He nodded, eager to keep close to her, even in the small space.

Mara slipped down into the hull, and stepped away from the ladder for Jedson to join her.

She switched on her light to take a better look at the shipping containers.

The Ba’naad had done their research; if someone had docked and inspected the holds they would have been looking at a full shipment of refracting power parts, perfect for making about fifteen thousand Blastech E-15 rifles and E-11 blasters.

There were several other containers, but no time to look at them now.

In her head, Mara could envision those weapons in the hands of several squads of pristine white Storm Troopers.

If it was anyone else, they’d be dancing for joy at their score, and seeing credits before their eyes.

She was just thinking of the best way to deactivate them, and then she felt it; the freighter jarred – a tractor beam had locked onto it.

Grabbing one of the bracing slats, she prepared herself so that she wouldn’t get thrown about the hull. Jedson was already holding one but the movement caught him by surprise, and he grunted as the freighter started moving without any will.

Mara thought quickly if the cylinder they used to walk across would break with the movement, and decided then, not to count on it being operational as an option of escape; their suits were going to have to save them if need be.

It was a bumpy pull and most likely have caused anyone else to panic; she simply climbed back up the ladder to see if where they were taking them and see if the Wild Karrde would have enough strength to take it on.

On the top level, she looked out the viewport and hissed.

Jedson came up beside her to see what she was seeing.

She turned to him. “Have you ever heard of the Ba’naad Group having a Nantoon Cruiser?”

Jedson shook his head.
Ahead of them hovered the large cruiser, painted red and black- not the usually vessel associated with the Ba’naad Group. No, this vessel was the calling card of the Guvarian Death Gang.

The Guvarian Death Gang had sprung up in the wakes of Jabba’s regime and the Empire falling. Notorious Spice runners, who demanded absolute loyalty from their members, even going so far as to have them cybernetically enhanced, replacing their working minds with droid-hive culture, only a few humans, and aliens remainder untouched when they joined. Their reasoning for the transformation: droids can’t get addicted to Spice. Strangely, most of those that were changed owed money to the Gang for the Spice debts.

Mara looked outside the opposite viewport, and watched as the cylinder did indeed collapse with the movement, but the P’ithnae freighter was also being taken.

She checked her chrono and saw that they were inside the twenty minute window before the escape plan would be showing up.

Mentally, she did the calculations; at seventeen minutes now, minus eight minutes to dock, minus three minutes to unseal the Imperial freighter, another minus three minutes to engage in the boarding party, leaving three minutes for any other issues…and there was always issues- they’d be cutting it close.

If they didn’t fight their way out, the Guvarian Death Gang would become suspicious, and be on the look-out for a trap.

Better to cause them as much trouble as she and Jedson could; Mara checked her carryall for the detonators and grenades that she carried.

“Follow me.” Mara motioned Jedson to follow her back to the hull.

If a boarding party was determined to enter, then the easiest place would have been the hold ramp. She and Jedson could quickly move the containers around to build a makeshift barricade that would provide some cover as the got boarded.

Mara helped Jedson push the containers in front of the ramp.

“We’re going to fight our way out?” He asked.

She could see that the warrior in him needed time to put on the personae, and ready his mind to fight.

“We are only going to fight as much as we have to.” She said. “I wasn’t expecting the Guvarian Death Gang, but we can work with this, and maybe find out a few things.”

Mara used her shoulder to move another container over. “Try not to hit too many of them.” She said. “We just want to cause them enough problems until Karrde shows up. Besides, we want to be able to interrogate them later.”

Jedson looked surprised as she used the word ‘interrogate’ but it was a word she was comfortable using; it was not out the realm of things she was capable of.

“If you keep up the fight here, I’ll go through the top floor- they’ll be expecting that we would use it as an escape. And then you know the plan – surrender.” She filled Jedson in on the rest of the plan and gave him the direct order.

The loud clank sound stopped Jedson from asking anything else, and Mara came up beside him to crouch behind their barrier.
They were probably on the dock inside the cruiser; she could sense them at the ramp now. Cybernetic humans felt differently; similar to the clones that she and Luke had encountered, with the same sort of fog, but with cybernetics their minds focused differently, purposeful, and single minded in their task.

She waited until the ramp started to lower with a hiss, and the exhaust cleared.

The first bolt whizzed by her and she started to return blasts with several volleys that followed. Jedson got a few good shots. Mara touched his shoulder as she made her way over to the ladder to go up to the main deck.

She was almost at the top when Jedson started to surrender. The hatched suddenly opened, and claw reached down and grabbed the back of her flight suit, pulling her up and out.

Mara fired blindly at her attacker or attackers, until she could see distinct targets, taking each one down and fighting and flailing at whatever was holding her.

She sensed it before it hit her- a sharp stab into her hip – suddenly her legs went numb and stopped kicking and moving. A stun stick, designed to stop the fight but keep a victim aware, rendered her bottom half useless.

Mara used the butt of her blaster to hit whatever was holding her up. The commandos of red face guards descended on her as what was holding her dropped her.

She was disarmed, and she could hearing Jedson giving in too. She looked up to see a Covarian that had been holding her up.

Rather than walk or carry her out, the Covarian that was holding her was dragging her by her collar. He ripped off her carryall from her back. She still struggled until she had two blasters pointed at her.

The Covarian towered over the guards and his large bulbous head teetered in anger – she could feel it; if it was up to him, he would have destroyed her. He was indoctrinated now and followed orders; the Guvarian Death Gang had even found a red and black uniform to fit his massive size and proportions.

Unceremoniously, he dropped her like a ragdoll on the deck. Mara could see them walking Jedson towards her; his hands at the back of his head, his eyes darting from side to side.

She could also see that they had brought their P’ithnae freighter into the hull too.

They brought him beside her, and Mara could start feeling her legs under her again or at least the pain of sitting on the limbs that had given way. The effects of a stun stick didn’t last long, the lingering and phantoms aches lasted longer- she’d have her legs back soon.

They were surrounded by the red armored cybernetic guards; the Covarian wisely chose to stay behind them.

“And what do we have here?” A voice beyond them asked. The accent didn’t give much away, but Mara could guess who it was.

“When did Talon Karrde start salvaging ships out in deep space?” The guards parted space for him to come forward, and he came into view.

Namta Tik was all that you’d expect from the Spice runner. He had used the stuff himself, on and off, and it showed; his sunken eyes, and greased hair made him even less personable. Dressed in the
red and black Guvarian uniform, it was clear that he had been inducted into their culture.

He walked closer to Jedson while keeping an eye on her. “I’m surprised to see you, Jade…alive.” He said snidely. “I thought I had made it easy enough for Vos-fane to find you.” He said referring to the Kiffar sent to Dantooine to assassinate her, and almost did.

“And you.” He turned to Jedson, looking at him. “You’re of no use to me.” And shot him at point blank range.

Jedson had no time to react, and slumped over after the blaster shot before he could put his hands up.

Mara stirred for effect, but then she felt bad that she had lead Jedson down this path. They were supposed to be kept alive, at least according to the rumors.

“Did you check her for weapons?” Namta asked the Covarian. The alien sputtered back at him. “A bag full of explosives, huh?”

Namta looked back at her. “I wasn’t expecting that of you, but knowing what I do, then I would expect for you to travel with gifts for us.”

She had kept quiet, and knew it wouldn’t be much longer now before the Wild Karrde would show up.

“Pick her up.” Namta ordered, “And don’t hurt the merchandize. Dengar will want to see that we caught her.” He turned to walk away.

“Won’t the Ba’naad be upset that you’re infringing on their business?” Mara asked, as a diversion to keep him on the deck.

Namta turned, walked back and crouched over her.

If there was one thing smugglers couldn’t resist, it was reveling in the glory over another organization.

“They got sloppy and left survivors.” Namta said. “Survivors talk…they talk in cantinas and spread rumors, making business bad.”

He examined her face, still inside her helmet, and decided it needed to come off.

Namta roughly pulled at the seal, and dropped the helmet loudly on the deck beside Jedson’s body, and it rolled away.

Mara watched it move; so much for using it when it came time to escape.

“Also…” Namta said coming close to her face. “Dengar thought he was being too nice lately. And since he put a bounty on you to come back to him alive rather than dead- we get to collect on two items of business with him.”

He backed away. “He gets proof to sell out Karrde to the Imperials, and then you get to be a present for his little pet, Lemay.”

Mara knew that she only blinked once involuntarily, but Namta must have taken it as more.

“Oh, so you know about Lemay, the sick kriffer.” He said as he stood back up to full height. “He added to your bounty personally…wants you that badly... Lucky for you that you’re still worth more alive than you are dead.”
She was hoisted up under her arms, and the Covarian tried to make her stand up, testing if she could walk on her own.

As her feet touched the deck, the shots of pain came up her legs, and she balanced herself before he let her go.

Mara felt something pet her head, and the Covarian sputtered again. Something had caught itself in her braid at the back of her head, and was pulling her neck up at a strange angle.

“Yes, that’s exactly how we know it’s her.” Namta sneered. “She’s famous for it…along with slicing throats with filmsy.” He looked at the guards. “Keep on her. If she even moves in a direction out of the ordinary, blast her. I’ll still take a death bounty.”

“Namta…” Mara called. “This won’t end well for you.” She warned.

“Oh no?” He mocked her. “Your Jedi isn’t here to save you…I hear he’s on the other side of the galaxy, flying with the Rogues again.” He walked over to her, and examined that she was still held in place by her braid. “Oh yes, we’re keeping track of him too.”

Namta turned and walked to leave the deck, confident, with Mara still in the clutches of the Covarian. He directed the others to follow him.

“I don’t need him to save me.” Mara growled below a whisper.

With a snap-hiss, her lightsaber came to life that she drew from behind her back.

With the first motion, she detracted herself from the Covarian, and swung her saber so that she cut him as well as her hair; sheering off her braid, and leaving the Covarian mortally wounded.

Namta went for his blaster, and his guards were already firing in her direction.

The mindless cyborgs went down easy; they weren’t prepared for such style of attack.

Their leader was making a run for it, firing blasts away from him as he went. Mara knew if he made it off deck that he could hole himself up in any number of places on the Cruiser. Not to mention, he probably had reinforcements on the other side of the blast doors.

Namta had no source of cover, so Mara deflected one of his shots and it grazed his leg. She deflected another shot, and it whizzed past his shoulder, singeing the fabric of his jacket.

Mara cursed out loud at herself for missing the shots as she came after him; secretly wishing she had paid more attention when Luke was showing her how to re-aim the deflections.

Namta turned completely around as he fired off one more shot, and she sent it back in his direction directly hitting his knee cap. He dropped to the deck, but refusing to give up without a fight, and still firing at her.

Lucky for him, she had been instructed to keep him alive.

There was a brief pause in their fight as the lights flickered on deck, and Mara knew exactly what was happening.

The *Wild Karrde* had arrived, and had used the recently acquired ion beam blaster to temporarily disable the Nantoon Cruiser.

The fear in Namta’s face showed, and she could see the motion he was about to make; within steps
she approached and kicked the blaster free that he was about to level at his own head.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Mara hissed. “There’s someone who want to ask you a few things first, before your life is yours to take.”

The saber hovered in front of him; the hum warned him not to move, as she wouldn’t kill him, but she would make his last few moments very painful.

Mara crouched down beside him, and reached out her hand, calling his blaster to her.

He watched, with shock, as the blaster flew through the air at her command, and rested in her hand.

“I’m going to assume this was all your crew…” She waved his blaster around, pointing at the unmoving red guards, “I can’t sense anyone else on board.”

Namta’s eyes narrowed with the words she used.

“Oh, did Lemay not tell you that I could do that?” She used the mocking tone that he had once used on her. “I guess he missed that one too.”

She could hear another cylinder being attached; Karrde must be on his way over. He must have found the hatch on the outside of the cruiser.

To her surprise, it wasn’t Karrde who appeared but Chin and Aves.

Aves came closer to her first; Chin had stopped and looked sadly at the remains of Jedson, and bowed his head.

“No Booster?” Mara asked from the corner of her mouth.

“Nope, we took it over.” Aves said back to her, before looking at who she had on the ground.

“That him?” Aves asked, wearing a frown, and keeping his blaster trained on Namta.

Mara sensed he was just as surprised as she was to discover it wasn’t Ba’naad running the operation. “That’s him.” She mumbled as she shut down her lightsaber, placing on her back clip. “What are the orders?”

“Karrde’s gonna want to see him.” Aves growled.

“With or without vornsk?” Mara asked with a sneer.

“I can only guess which one you think would be more fun.” Aves walked over to Namta, and dragged him to his feet.

As Mara walked to Chin, she touched his shoulder. He was looking down at what used to be his friend. “Namta did it, at point blank range.” She said sadly, and then kept walking.

She didn’t have to turn back because all she heard were the sounds of Chin exacting some revenge on Namta with his fists.

**

Namta sat in chair, with his arms bonded behind his back.

The *Wild Karrde* crew took some mercy on him and bandaged his leg. Mara made the point that it
would be a shame for Namta to die because of a blood infection while she was getting some answers from him; it would be most unsatisfying for her.

She knew Luke would disapprove of her methods, but she really didn’t feel like being a Jedi right now.

After they took Namta aboard, they went to work on the Nantoon Cruiser, stripping it of most usable parts of the engine.

Ghent came over and hacked it all.

In the time it took to bandage Namta, they had all the information they needed; on the Guvarian Death Gang, on Dengar and his whole operation.

They had also taken the P’ithnae freighter back into a hull, and as spoils, they took the Imperial freighter too.

Mara sat across from Namta with her small hold-out blaster in her hand, not saying a word, watching him get more and more uncomfortable in front of her.

He must have been coming down off of a hit from Spice; he was sweating, and his muscles twitched.

The door opened and Talon Karrde strolled in.

He looked over at his lieutenant, and nodded.

“I’m not saying anything!” Namta said loudly. “To you, or your Force Freak!”

It was then that Karrde turned to Namta, and really looked at him, shaking his head.

“Namta.” He said coolly. “How long has it been since I last saw you? A few months, maybe more? How long did it take for you to go back to Spice after you left Dantooine?”

Karrde stood beside Mara, still looking at a man he once thought of as a colleague. “I heard your partner had a child recently…a boy, if I’m not mistaken.” He shook his head. “Such a shame…such a shame.”

“I’m not talking.” Namta said without much conviction in it.

“You don’t need to, Namta.” Karrde said calmly, placing the unlit cigarillo in his mouth. “We have what we need.”

“In a few minutes, we will return you to your ship.” Sounding almost conversational, Karrde sounded like he was giving Namta hope. “It will, of course, be inoperable.” He paused. “The hyperdrive is gone, the core engine too. What we left you with is more kind than those that were your other victims.”

Karrde sighed. “You’ll be kept alive for the next fifteen days before the system fails and ration bars run out.”

Karrde looked over at Mara. “And my lieutenant was kind enough to hide a blaster somewhere on board if you become desperate enough…or the withdrawal from Death Sticks drives you mad.”

Namta twitched in his seat, and he was about to speak.

“There’s no bargaining here, Namta.” Karrde looked him, hard in the eye. “If and when the
Guvarians find you, or the Imperials, they will assume that you stole from them…with their freighter gone, and their promised goods.”

“You have no future…anywhere in the galaxy…my only hope is that your child doesn’t follow your foot-steps.” Karrde said.

Mara got up from her seat; she could sense the others in the hall, waiting to return Namta to his ship. She went to stand beside Karrde.

“Good bye Namta, our working relationship is over.” Karrde turned and walked out of the room, with Mara behind him.

Chin was head of the crew that walked in after them.

Karrde strode down the hallway towards the back hull where they had docked the Imperial freighter.

When he and Mara had left the corridor, he broke his silence. “I’d just like to say that most women can’t pull off such a length of hair…but on you, it looks good.”

Mara knew he was masking his anger and disappointment with his comment; she couldn’t help but be amused. Karrde had often joked that her hair would be the end of her, and it almost had.

She absently ran her fingers through the shortened locks that now ended at her chin, feeling the charred ends that the lightsaber had left.

“Don’t let Tabard see you like that.” Karrde looked at her with raised eyebrows.

“I won’t.” she said quietly. “Is there any good news on this?”

“Somewhat.” Karrde said aloofly, still simmering.

He hated loss; he had almost lost her, and he had lost a valued crew member.

Mara reached out to feel the full extent of his emotions; anger, betrayal, and desire for revenge. But he could be just as pragmatic as her; using his negative feelings as motivation to get things done.

“Ghent is working on it.” Karrde looked over at her as they walked. “We have the name of Dengar’s contact, and I’ve decided that we will just buy our ID’s directly from him…unless you can think of a reason why we shouldn’t.”

She snorted. Karrde had a way of asking her to use her past without coming right out and asking.

Mara chagrinned. “Only if the contact hasn’t been on anyone’s radar…meaning how many ID’s is he letting out? Is his behavior traceable?”

“I have a team inspecting the cargo of that Imperial freighter now.” He said.

“You should tell them not to open any of the cases.” She said quickly.

“Why?”

“We can use them.” Mara answered without quite knowing why it was important.

“If you say so.” Karrde took his comm off his belt and spoke into the device as they stopped in the hallway.
Mara leaned on the opposite wall and considered what had made her just suggest not to use any of the cargo. Her attention was drawn away when she sensed something in Karrde.

“Alright, we’re headed there now.” He closed his comm, and then looked at her. “We should make our way down to the hull directly.”

Mara kept up with his pace as they made their way to the back hull.

The doors opened and Aves was standing at the back of the Imperial freighter, counting the containers.

“Are those what I think they are?” Karrde asked.

“Yeah Boss –they’re parts for rifles and blasters. There’s no way we can resell them…they’ve got Imperial serial numbers all over them.” Aves said.

“Did you open a case?” Mara asked.

“Not yet.” Aves replied.

“Don’t.” Mara said. “The Imperials will know if they’ve been tampered with. If you break a seal or have a quantity change from the manifest in the system- they’ll know.”

Aves nodded, and then sighed. “There’s another thing…something you won’t be happy with.” He said quietly.

Karrde gave him a questioning look as Aves took them to the back hull to look at the containers.

“We found four of them…and empty by the weight of them.” Aves pointed at the large square cases.

All of the empty totes bore the symbol of Commix and Mo’nah’s trading company; the algae that was designed to regenerate and heal ten times faster than bacta.

Mara shivered; it was now in the hands of the Imperials.

Karrde nodded knowingly, and then he knew that Mara’s fears had come true. Who knew what purposes the Imperials were using it for.

“We need damage control.” Karrde said. “Remove the empty totes from the freighter, and pack it back up.”

“Yes Boss.” Aves said, and then turned to the team that was helping him.

They began reloading the freighter.

Karrde walked back to the hull door and stopped before it, turning to Mara her looked over at her. “Any ideas?” He asked.

“Several.” She said, without hesitation.

“Let me hear them?” He asked, knowing he was about to get an earful.

Mara sighed. “Those cases from Commix and Mo’nah had serial numbers on them…I’d start with tracing who we shipped them to…and if they’re not on our manifests, I’d get more concerned.”

Karrde nodded, agreeing with her.
“The next thing I’d do is render those blaster parts useless…a good exposure to some radiation should fry the internal components but not damage them, so that they appear to be usable, and keep them in sealed cases.” Mara said confidently.

Karrde nodded. “What else?”

“We use them as a way back into the good graces of Dengar’s contact…offer them as gift- they’re off the record, so he could sell them in underground, and he’ll see that as a token…Or…” She said, supposing and thinking of the long term solution.

Karrde narrow his eyes at her. “Or what?”

“You won’t like it.” She said blankly.

“I don’t like anything about today, so it doesn’t really matter if I like what you’re about to say.” Karrde chomped down on his cigarillo in frustration.

“I know someone who could use them and the freighter….with a side benefit to us.” Mara met his look and held it.

“Who?”

“You won’t like it.” She said again.

Karrde distinctly frowned at her.

“Do you trust my judgement?” Mara asked, holding firm.

“I’m learning to…and from this…” Karrde gestured towards the empty totes. “…I should have listened more.”

Mara could sense his anger; anger at Namta for killing his crew member, anger at himself for not listening to her before now. She didn’t blame him; even she couldn’t give him a direct answer when they first took the offer with Commix and Mo’nach.

“I’ll make you a deal…you let me handle this freighter, and I’ll let you handle the information Ghent can get and how we’re going to handle the totes.” She looked at him, challenging him.

Karrde paused, looking over at her.

Mara knew what he was turning it around in his head; he was wondering if this was going to make or cost him credits….and behind that, how would he eventually be associated to what was about to transpire.

But he came to a conclusion. “Alright, you have your way.” He held out his hand, and she shook it. “I’m going to assume that you will tell me anything if I need to know, but until then…you will do what you need to.”

“That’s a safe assumption.” Mara said.

Taking back her hand, she glanced over as it was being reloaded. “I have to go to work now.” She said, sounding very determined. “Our sub-space radio is up and running now…with all the protocols for hiding our signal?”

“As far as I know it is.” Karrde said.
“Good.” She said. “I have to go find a Mon Cal cruiser that’s on patrol.”

Mara turned and left the hull.

TBC
Weapons of Choice- Part 1

Chapter Summary

Quote: “Let’s go cause some trouble.” Luke said with a grin; they all grinned back, accepting the mission.


Chapter Notes

**
I’ve got nothing….just writing so I can get to where I want to be at in the story…

I hope you like it. ~wink.

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Aboard The Liberty- In the Expansion Area

Luke groaned as his feet hit the deck of The Liberty. After a four day mission, with very little sleep, he was ready for a shower and his bunk, such as it was.

Even Jedi need sleep.

He had been back from Tatooine for a few days, before they had sent him on this latest mission.

He raked his hand through his greasy hair and waited until Artoo descended from the lift, and disengaged from the hoist. He twittered in his master’s direction.

Luke looked over at the little droid, patting his dome, and trying to pull some of the greasy debris off of the chrome.


Artoo whistled lowly.

“Yeah, we both need to clean up.” Luke agreed. “You head for an oil bath and I’ll head for the shower? And then we should both power down?”

The droid liked that idea and chirped back, before turning and heading for maintenance.

Luke stood and watched Artoo go. He was thinking about how he should really be the one to do the maintenance inspection, until he sensed someone approaching.

“Hi Wedge.” He said before turning around, and giving his commander a salute.

Wedge cringed as he saluted back. “You know I hate it when you do that, right?...when you know
it’s me before I get there.”

“Sorry. “Luke mumbled as he became to walk in the direction of his room, keeping his head down. “Habit.”

“Yeah well...” Wedge muttered, brushing it off. “Good work on capturing those pirates around Tholarin. The Umbarians have been living in terror since they arrived.”

He looked over at the tired pilot, and watched him.

Luke yawned, and he could sense something in Wedge. “Thanks.” He said absently. “Still no directives to engage the Imperials yet?” He asked out of habit; since that seemed to be the question that all the pilots had been asking lately.

“None.” Wedge murmured; disappointed, himself, that they still couldn’t do their primary goal. “But we do have something in the works that’s a little off the radar.”

Wedge let a few moments pass for his words to sink in. “How long will you need before you’re up and running again?” He asked the other man.

“I need ten hours.” Luke said without really thinking about it. When he did, he started doing the math in his head…and hour to shower and eat, eight hours to sleep, and another hour to… He was so tired that he lost his trained on thought.

“Why?” Luke asked, now that he could sense a tingle of excitement in Wedge.

“That depends if you want to know?” Wedge asked quietly. “And how much trouble you want to get in to?”

They were half way across the deck, and Luke could see the entrance to the pilot quarters ahead of him, but he still stopped and looked over at his friend.

He sighed. “Tell me.”

“Because if you don’t want to get into trouble, don’t…don’t-don’t…don’t look behind you.” Wedge said, almost feeling bad that Luke had other plans.

Luke dropped his shoulders and turned around to see the far end of the deck.

His eyes opened more than they had in the past twenty four hours. He almost didn’t believe what he was seeing before him.

Two pristine TIE Fighters, and one, what looked like a small Imperial Shuttle, sat in the corner of the hangar.

“Oh no.” He muttered. “Please say that you don’t want me to fly one of those things?” He turned back to Wedge.

“Fly?- no.” Wedge commented. “Escort?- yes. But that will all be explained at the unofficial meeting. This one is off the books.” He said.

“You said you needed ten hours?—I can give you eight, if you’re in? We’ve got a time stamp on this one before it goes sour.” Wedge explained.

Wedge slapped his shoulder. “Thanks Buddy…See you in my office in eight standard?”

Luke kept nodding and waved his commander away as he walked in the direction of the quarters, still not sure what he signed up for.

At this point, he was using the Force to keep his body upright. He knew it was unjustified, but it was also undignified to lie down on deck and start snoring.

The doors to his room slid open, and the bright light hit him.

“Hey! You’re back!” Corran Horn said a little too loudly.

The training remote spun slowly in front in front of the man holding a lightsaber awkwardly.

“How did it go?” Horn asked, watching the remote and not his roommate as Luke dropped on his bunk.

Luke knew he was a mess, and was messing his bunk, but didn’t care. He rolled over to see what Horn was doing.

“We did what we needed to do.” Luke answered as best he could remember.

He watched the other man take a few practice swings. “Your shoulders are too tight…you can’t give yourself the full range of motion.” Luke suggested.

“Yeah well, I can’t practice out there.” Horn said absently, still watching the remote, and nodding in the direction of the deck.

“Why not?” Luke asked as he decided to get up and take off his flight suit. “I do….all the time…the squad even kinda likes it.”

His flak padding dropped the floor with a thud, and his suit felt like it was glued to him as he moved his shoulders to shimmy out of it.

“I guess I’m just not ready for them to know yet.” Horn said. “What if they start looking at me differently?”

Luke yawned before he bent over to pick up what he had just dropped on the floor. He started to prepare his next flight suit in the method he was taught.

“You’d be surprised.” He said over to Horn. “When I first started Jedi training, they thought that I had lost my mind. Now…well now, they still think I’m a little off, but at least they respected the training all along.”

Luke gathered his things that he would need for the communal showers, including his sleepwear. “If you decide that you want to start training openly, let me know? I can talk to Wedge or Ackbar about it…and maybe the squad – they know something is up anyhow.” He turned to look at Horn.

“They do?” Horn stopped and dropped his lightsaber down. The remote, still working, shot at him directly.

With his senses, and his awareness in the Force, Horn simply raised his hand as the expected shot came towards him.

The bolt, instead of delivering a shot of ting, simply passed into his hand.
Luke watched and frowned as Horn didn’t jump in pain from the blast.

Horn shut down his lightsaber and was still waiting for his answer. The remote went into hibernation.

“How did you do that?” Luke asked, as the words caught up with his exhausted brain.

“What?” Horn asked perplexed.

“The bolt?—it was supposed to sting you…or singe you, depending on the setting…you just absorbed it.” Luke said, still not completely comprehending what he just saw.

“Oh that?” Horn shrugged. “Yeah, I’ve been doing that since I was a kid. Anything with power really…it’s the reason I don’t wear a chrono…I suck the power right out of that cell.” He explained flippantly as he looked at his own hand.

Luke groaned; he was just not ready for this now. Normally, he would be excited and wanting to try more things, but Horn wasn’t ready to train fully, so the point was moot.

“You were saying that they knew?” Horn asked, seeming uncomfortable about it.

Luke shook his head as he walked towards the door. “They see you studying and with the bottle cap…so they suspect something… Wes just about asked me once.”

Luke turned to leave, but then turned back. “Just think about it….but in the end, it’s your decision.”


Luke nodded, and then left.

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He came back to an empty room. Horn must have been on duty.

Luke checked his chrono and set the alarm for six hours in time.

He was almost too tired to sleep. Four days on duty, he estimated that he got, maybe…maybe eight hours sleep…maybe.

He had just run this mission with Wes and two of the new Reds, and if he thought Hobbie could be a chatterbox sometimes, then Wes was much worse.

However, Wes did have a habit of taking quick ‘power naps’ to reinvigorate himself which Luke could envy.

Whenever Luke tried to nap, he seemed to go down for hours.

He closed his eyes in his bunk, and thought of the last great nap he had.

They were on the sofa on Yavin, in their residence; the cool breeze with a warm sunbeam came through the large window in the main room. He was spooned up behind her under the cozy blanket, and he could smell her hair as he nuzzled into it.

Her body was so soft as he wrapped his arm around her. Under the pillow, their fingers interlaced.

They were so at peace in the moment, so unguarded, and so very much in love.
In his bunk, Luke drifted off to sleep remembering the sound of her breathing, and the feeling of her presence all around him.

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The cruel alarm sounded, and Luke slapped his chrono in punishment for waking him up.

He was having a good dream too; the one where he was watching a class of students become Jedi, with Mara standing beside him.

He yawned and sat up, swinging his legs out of the bunk.

Luke stretched and looked around the room, trying to remember the previous day, or night, or whatever it was aboard the Liberty.

He decided that it must be midday, as the chrono indicated. That would mean that a hot meal would be available in the mess hall.

With very little thought, other than a cup of Mara’s caf would hit the spot right now, Luke got up and made his way to the communal showers to wash off the stick from deep sleep.

He made the mistake of looking across the hangar when he left his room, to see the TIEs, and shook his head.

Right, he was on a time limit.

First thing: become human again; take shower and eat.

Luke accomplished the first item on the list relatively quickly. He never liked sonic showers very much, but they did the job.

When he had a water shower for the first time in his life, on Yavin just after the Death Star, he knew he could never go back to ever enjoying a sonic one.

It went: water bath or swimming, water shower, and then sonic, in order of his preference now.

He got into his fatigues, and rushed to the mess hall; knowing that Wes probably got there before him.

There was no line up ahead of him, and Luke could see the Reds, formerly, the Rogues, congregating in a corner, occupying a table in the hall.

Luke collected his food and made his way over to them, briefly greeting other crew members on the Liberty; people he hadn’t seen since his days in the Rebellion, and there were more of them coming every day.

Luke approached the Red’s table with caution; he hadn’t heard the full conversion but he could sense it was heated as he walked.

“…they won’t talk to us! They won’t even eat with us!” Bror Jace, Red 11, said loudly.

“Yeah, it’s like we’re not good enough for them.” Erisi Dlarit, Red 9, agreed. “Dirty Imp mercs.” He grumbled.

Luke brought his tray and sat down beside Hobbie, and nudged him. “Who are we talking about?” He asked quietly.
Hobbie leaned over. “The former Imperials…the mercenaries they’ve paid to go on the next mission with us.” He said extremely quietly, before leveling a fork of food in his mouth. “It’s a good idea…but their team…it’s been…well, handled in the Imperial fashion…and the squad doesn’t like it.”

Luke pressed his lips together to form a straight line and nodded.

Hobbie sighed, looking at his food and not the rest of them. “They won’t associate with us, even though we’re expected to pick up the pace with them.”

Luke could sense a bit of resentment from him too.

It was normal for all fighter pilots to get along, in some fashion, regardless of what side they were on; it showed solidarity and it developed some sense of protection for them. If this group of new mercenaries was refusing to associate with the Reds, it was a huge slap in their face.

Luke ate the rest of his meal in silence as he listened to the anger brewing.

As he walked out, Hobbie fell into step beside him.

“You going to Wedge’s meeting?” Hobbie asked.

“Yeah, he asked me to go on this next trip.” Luke said nonchalantly, not knowing if Hobbie was included.

“I’m headed there too.” Hobbie mumbled. “He says it’s off the books…but it looks pretty big not to be spotted.”

Luke followed Hobbie’s line of sight over to the TIEs.

“I don’t like it.” Luke said. “It reminds me of the last time that we flew TIEs on a mission.”

“Yeah” Hobbie said in hushed tones.

He remembered too the instance when Luke shot down another Rebel pilot when they flew TIEs, believing that the other pilot was an enemy and not one of their own. Luke was ostracized for a short time, but it turned out that it was an Imperial operative hiding in their ranks.

“I don’t think we’re flying them.” Hobbie said. “I think we’re flying with them.”

Flying with someone, and refusing to bond with the other pilots was even a bigger insult; Luke considered as they rounded the corner to head into the meeting room.

Wedge was at the front of the room, and Wes and Tycho were already there as well.

The door closed behind Hobbie and Luke, and Wedge looked over to them. “We’re just waiting on someone else, who should be here shortly.” He said as the pilots gathered in closer and took a seat, looking at the diagrams on the display board behind their commander.

Luke centered in on the one ship he didn’t recognize, as he looked at the specs.

Hobbie pointed it out first. “An Imperial freighter?” He asked over to Luke. “Where did they find one of those?”

The doors to the opposite side of the room opened and General Madine walked through.

All the pilots stood up immediately, and Wedge, saluted, holding their positions until the General
returned their gesture.

“Reds.” Madine acknowledged them. “As you were.”

The pilots sat down, and Wedge stepped off to the side, waiting to be addressed.

Madine stepped in front of the group. “We’ve been given an interesting proposition, and opportunity.” He said clearly.

“A smuggling group was able collect an Imperial freighter, with cargo, destined for delivery. We have been given this opportunity to use this freighter and its contents, as a way to access information from an older Imperial outpost.”

Madine looked around the room. “The mission is to escort the freighter, and it’s two escorts TIEs, to the moon of Mimban, where our team wait for them to return from the base of Gyndine. The team aboard the freighter will deliver the goods to Gyndine, while one of the TIE pilots will plant a decoding device inside the base when they submit their mission report. This device will send out encrypted codes to us regarding attack plans and locations of Imperial vessels. Our second part of the mission, may involve providing a distraction if our TIE pilots need to make a get-away. Then, we escort the team back to the Liberty.”

“Sounds risky.” Tycho said, voicing what everyone was thinking.

“It is.” Madine said. “That is why we have employed former Imperials to carry it out. Previous missions such as this, may have been successful, but not in the long run, they always generated suspicion and our endeavours never lasted for as long as we would have liked.”

Madine swallowed, and Luke could sense some self-reproach. “These former Imperials understand protocol, and have history and training, so that their behavior will not look foreign to any other Imperials that they will encounter.”

“They certainly aren’t making any friends here on deck…” Wes said. “Not socializing with the squad and walking around in their uniforms.” He huffed. “TIE helmets always give me the creeps.” He mumbled.

“They aren’t supposed to.” Madine said blankly. “Their commander was very specific about it. No socializing, no fraternizing until the mission is over- said it prepared them for this mission, going back to their regiment.”

“Makes things tense on deck.” Wedge muttered from the sides. Luke knew his friend hated it when things got tense. People thought with their feelings and not their heads when it came to it.

Madine nodded, agreeing with the sediment. Having former Imperials in their ranks was one thing, but to have ones parading around in uniform and behaving as they were, raised the hackles of both those that had fought against the Imperials during the war, and those that had escaped from Imperial service.

“We have a time issue as well.” Madine continued. “The ID on the freighter will end shortly, and their systems will register it, and it’s cargo as missing- and then, our opportunity is lost.”

Sooner this mission was over, the better. It would end the high-riding emotions.

Luke looked down, and reached out his feelings. For all intents and purposes, it was relatively easy mission for the Reds- the Imperial mercenaries were risking much more. His instincts, and the Force told him, it was a good mission.
He looked up at the General. “When do we leave, Sir?” He asked.

The side of Madine’s mouth tugged, almost a smile. “In three standard hours. Your ships will be prepped, and directions and nav co-ordinates will be sent.”

Luke nodded, and looked at his fellow Reds.

They looked back at him.

“Let’s go cause some trouble.” Luke said with a grin; they all grinned back, accepting the mission.

**

Luke had packed his case, and managed to jot off a message to Mara before he was ready to leave.

He wasn’t able to contact her while he was on his previous mission, and he felt bad for leaving her such a quick message; saying he missed her, and asked her to let Leia know that he was alright.

He didn’t even have time to read her message to him that had been sitting there for days.

It ached.

*Gods*, it ached; he just wanted to see her, or hear her voice, anything…*anything*…never mind holding her, or kissing her…or…

*His Mara*…

Maybe if he asked for some sort of leave, he could meet her on a nearby system, but Wedge still gave him a glare whenever Y-wings were brought up in conversation since he had lost one on his last trip to Dalcretti- that, told him that asking for a leave was not a good idea.

Luke left his room and pushed his case over to the deck, trying to push Mara out of his mind for now, where his X-wing had been cleaned and prepped for him.

Artoo twitter from his hatch, already docked, looking clean and ready to go.

Luke snorted. “Yes, I’ll be right up, as soon as we get clearance.” He called up to the droid.

He was packing his case in the storage compartment as the other pilots came around him.

Tycho walked over making eye contact, but soon his attention was drawn where Wes and Hobbie were looking.

Luke craned his neck to see what they were seeing, and walk through their midst to follow their vision.

Coming towards them and marching in formation, were the Imperial mercenaries, hired for this mission, and keeping in Imperial protocol, as it would appear.

They march in order of their positions and ranks; the two TIE Pilots lead the way, with the Freighter Pilot and Officer behind them.

As the group got closer to the Reds, Luke could feel the animosity among his friends. “Let’s be professional.” He uttered, and stepped forward, hoping to lead by example.

The Reds fell in line behind him as the Imperial group came before them.
“Attention!” Luke called, and the Reds brought themselves into position.

The TIE Pilot at the front of the group raised its hand, and the group stopped.

It was hard to tell who was under the black mask and helmet of the TIE Pilot, and Luke tried to get a sense of the person, but got nothing, other than it was another living human being. Sometimes, when he encountered a mind under control, it was hard for him to read, but the sense of this person before him was also shrouded.

The TIE Pilot turned on heal, in the direction of the Red group, and stepped closer to its leader, and held its position.

Luke didn’t sway under the scrutiny, and waited with the rest of his group, waiting for the Imperial mercs to return the salute.

The TIE Pilot stood just about eye-level with him, and then looked him up and down; the mechanical breathing under the mask was eerie, and unsettling, not unlike Vader’s own mask, but quieter. Whereas Vader’s hissing was for intimidation, the Pilot’s mask hissed out of necessity.

Luke could see from the insignia and rank badge that he was dealing with a pilot that bore the rank of Commander, so honoring the rank in the New Republic, he didn’t drop his salute, even though he could sense that he wasn’t about to get one from the pilot before him, looking into the black plastic-steel eyes of the helmet.

At long last, the TIE Pilot responded, “Lieutenant.” The mechanical voice said, and then turned heal and returned to its group, leading them away.

Luke let out a sigh, and dropped his salute before turning to his fellow pilots. “Well, that was uncomfortable.” He said in a low tone.

“To say the least.” Tycho snarled.

Luke shook his head. “They are risking more than us…still…” He argued their case, trying to excuse them.

“Still doesn’t mean they can’t respect us.” Hobbie grumbled, finishing Luke’s thought.

“I agree.” Luke said, but then looked up at his wing members. “Let’s get this done.”

They wished each other ‘Clear Skies’ and made their way over to their ships.

Luke dropped down into his cockpit and looked over at the Imperial team as they were headed to their own ships. He placed his helmet on and locked in his crash webbing, and checked his panel, looking up every so often to see what the Imperials were doing.

His instinct was right; the other team was risking more. And the Force told him that this mission, if emotions didn’t take over, would be successful.

Trust in the Force. He reminded himself, as the canopy on his X-wing descended.

He still watched the Imperials as the pre-flight sequence warmed up the engine, and he locked coordinates.

The Imperials were the first to leave the hangar; the TIEs first, and then the freighter.

The Red’s X-wings followed in formation behind.
The Commander TIE Pilot hailed the channels and counted down the mark to jump into hyperspace, which Luke agreed with.

The Reds assembled in a diamond formation behind the Imperials and watched as they cleared the air space of the Liberty, and do their jump.

“Reds cleared?” Luke asked; his X-wing hovered, waiting on his team.

“Red Four confirmed.” Hobbie said.

“Red One confirmed.” Tycho said.

“Red Two confirmed.” Wes said.

“Let’s do this.” He said. “On my mark.”

One by one, the Reds joined the Imperial team in hyperspace and along the same co-ordinates.

About an hour into the flight, the comm channels opened, and they started to talk amongst themselves.

Tycho was starting to see someone in secret and Wes was teasing him about it.

Hobbie told them about his trip with Luke to Tatooine, and mentioned that he heard that Lando Calrissian was looking for investors on his newest ventures. He and Wes were seriously considering it.

Luke relaxed in the cockpit, knowing that they had six hours ahead of them to get to their destination. He pulled out his comm and data pad.

He turned on the music and let it play, as he sat back reading more of the Jedi manuals; looking for the information he had read on absorbing energy, as what Horn had said and did in front of him, had been on his mind.

Just as he got comfortable, his hailing signal blinked, coming from the Imperial group.

Luke turned down the music that was playing in the back ground so that the other Reds could listen in, and opened the channel to the Imperial merc that was hailing him.

“Red Five, here.” He said.

“Lieutenant.” The mechanical voice addressed him. “Open comm communication is prohibited during designated flights. It is against protocol. Please see that your wing members abide by these terms.”

The transmission cut, and Luke stared at his comm unit, and exhaled slowly.

He opened the channel knowing that the other Reds had heard that. There was a bunch of groans on the other ends, but before the complaints started, Luke addressed them.

“He’s right. We’re playing by their rules now…for all of our safety.” Luke said over the comm, as he turned off the music.

“It’s a short run.” He reminded them. Six hours to get to the Moon of Mimban, hold up there for three hours, then six hours back to the Liberty; fifteen hours and they’d home safe, and done with the Imperial mercs.
“When we get back, and after we’ve had a mission report, then we can let loose. First round is on me in the lounge.” Luke said in a tone that left no room for argument.

“Yes, Boss.” Was the response he received in turn as they cut their comms down, with the mission in mind.

*It was going to be a long six hours.* Luke thought as he relaxed back to reading in his cockpit.

**

On his mark, the X-wings of the Red Squadron pulled out of hyperspace. Luke breathed easy as the Imperial team came into view in front of them.

And just to show that they weren’t a bunch of rag-tag Rebels, Luke had the wings call in over the open comm for the Imperial mercs to hear.


“Yes Red Five.” was the answer he got from his team as they seemed to have caught on to the behavior that was expected of them.

Luke hailed the Imperial TIE that had contacted him sooner.

“Lieutenant?” The mechanical voice said.

“Commander, we await your further orders.” Luke replied.

“Proceed as determined, Red Five.” The voice said, sounding astute and precise.

Luke noticed that the pilot didn’t close off his comm to Luke; he had left it open so that Luke could hear the command given to the team to approach the Imperial post.

Sitting back, Luke listened in as they maintained comm silence unless it was necessary.

When they were out of range, the frequency went dead, and now it was just a waiting game.

It was a fairly easy assignment, now that Luke knew of the details.

The Imperial team was to land, and the freighter team was to deliver the shipment, as if it was any other shipment.

The freighter pilot and the officer would stay with the unloading crew, as was procedure, and then be released to return to their base, as was dictated in their orders.

The TIE Pilots, however, had more a risky operation.

As per procedure, they would enter the base, give their mission report, and while filing that report, one of them, the Commander- Luke called him, would attach a device to one of the comm units, that would access the backdoor network of the Imperial Communication System.

Somehow, any outgoing comm messages would have other information attached to it, a “ghost cypher” was what it was called, sending out the information that the New Republic needed.

The team would then leave the base, on time, and flying in precision again, with nothing out of the ordinary for them or the base.
The Imperial mercs would then fly back with the Reds to the Liberty, and the New Republic would be responsible for destroying the evidence, and the mercs would be well-paid and be on their way.

It was an easy plan, or so it would seem. The issue would come if they ran into trouble.

If the Imperial mercenaries sensed that things weren’t going right, they were to release a beacon that would call in the Red Squad for an attack on the outpost, thereby allowing the mercs to make an escape, and hopefully, after they had attached the device.

If this happened, it would appear that the TIE Pilots were just defending the outpost. The freighter pilot and officer were to escape in the freighter that they arrived in; appearing to preserve their cargo on behalf of the Empire. Freighters were never really considered in a fight— that’s why they always had an escort.

So Luke sat back, calling on the Force again, to see if he could sense anything that was transpiring. No visions came to him; the future is always in motion Yoda had said. But in his sense, he knew this would be a successful mission; the pilot in him, however, did not to count on it yet.

He waited.

At around the two hour, thirty minute mark, his comm and proximity alert buzzed.

The Imperial ships were coming back, and their ships were blips on the screen.

Luke sighed in relief before he answered the hail from the TIE Pilot.

“Red Five, prepare to leave after our mark.” The voice came back over the comm. “Package delivered.”

The Imperial ships passed by where the Reds were held in position, and after they cleared the area, they disappeared into lines of light as they hit hyperspace.

Luke opened up his frequency. “Reds, you heard him…let’s head home.”

Never did they sound more-relieved when they registered their call numbers and prepared for the return trip in hyperspace.

The four X-wings reformed into position; Luke wished the TIE Pilot Commander had been there to see how well they did that, and then one by one darted into hyperspace themselves.

**

Six hours later, on the deck of the Liberty, Luke disembarked his X-wing with another successful mission completed.

Success registered to him as; he had lost no one and the task was accomplished.

Tycho, Wes and Hobbie joined him as they walked in the direction of Wedge’s office to deliver their mission report.

There wasn’t much to tell him, nothing deviated from the plan; except Hobbie mentioned the ‘snootiness’ of the Imperial team.

“They can be ‘snootty’.” Wedge said. “You should see what we’re paying them.”

The Reds were dismissed, and as per they own protocol that they had one last wrap up by Luke’s X-
“Well…” Luke look at each of them. “I think it’s time for a drink…provided that none of us is on call for the next few hours.” He knew they were all on call, but one drink wouldn’t hurt.

He stopped before leaving. “I think we should invite the mercs.” He said quietly. “Let’s go over and make the offer. The mission is done- they should stop behaving like Imperials now.” Luke suggested.

There was some rolling of eyes, but they agreed it would be in good faith to do it, and make the others feel welcome – it was their success too.

“Who wouldn't like a free drink?” Wes said, giving in. “Right Boss?”

“Right.” Luke said as he started to lead them over, possibly ever regretting making the offer.

TBC
Weapons of Choice- Part 2

Chapter Summary

Quote: “I’m only going to answer this once…” Luke said. “And when she gets here, you all had better be on your best behaviour…I’m not saving you, if you make her angry… and for the record, it’s always Endor.” He winked.

Characters: Luke, Wedge, Wes, Hobbie, Tycho, other Red members, and Imperials?

Chapter Notes

**

Do you realize that I have written 30 …THIRTY chapters for this story…amazeballs…more if you consider Insomnia and A Friendly Word…

I am astonished with myself…I really didn’t think I would get this far or even have enough to write. All I had ever been told while in school, that I just wasn’t a writer and to get over it. I knew I had stories in me, but I had never gotten them out.

I told my husband the other night about how many chapters I was at – cuz he doesn’t read my fanfic unless I tell him to – and he was amazed too.

I love writing Luke and Mara…I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again…they are my Barbie and Ken dolls. I loved the thought of them being together from when I first read Heir to the Empire…and every book afterward waiting for them to get together.

~frowny face~

I really hope that they bring Mara back somehow…but I don’t think that’s going to happen. I think the powers that be have determined that Luke will be alone in canon now. ~bigger frowny face~

So, here’s the deal…in celebration of this being my 30th chapter…the first 3 people to leave a comment, with their email address, I will send Chapter #31 (Weapons of Choice- Part 3) to them before I post it on AO3, and they will get to read it and critique it three days before I post it…see this thing I did with 3’s right there?…Deal?

Cool. ~wink!

Enjoy…oh yeah…SMUT FEST! ~big smiley face!~

**

Aboard New Republic, Mon Calamari Cruiser, The Liberty

It was short walk across the deck to side of the hangar where the Imperial mercs were assembled after the mission, but it might as well have been a long one.
Only Luke felt that he held any hope that the Reds would be warmly received by their fellow pilots.

In fact, Luke could feel the negative feelings growing in his team as they crossed the deck. Hobbie, in particular was not enjoying having to deliver the invite to the Imperials.

The group of mercs had returned to deck before the Reds had; clearly they had met with General Madine to make their report.

They stood clustered together, and the freighter pilot looked over the commanding TIE pilot’s shoulder to acknowledge the group that was coming towards them; his face flashed a smile before going stoic again.

Luke came up behind the Commander TIE Pilot, and cleared his throat as not to sneak up on the person in the masked helmet.

The other mercs still stood in relative controlled positions as the Commander turned around to see who was disturbing them.

Luke exhaled slowly, and tried to muster a smile, with the other Reds behind him.

“Hello.” He said warmly. “Well, my team just wanted to come over and thank you for flying with us, and the work that you’ve done. We were wondering if you would all care to join us in the pilot’s lounge for a drink?” Luke smiled again. “The first round is on me.” And he nodded welcomingly.

A loud hiss came from the commanding TIE pilot’s mask, before stepping closer to Luke.

“Lieutenant…” The voice said, sounding annoyed, if that was possible as mechanical as the voice was. “I have neither dismissed my team, nor given them orders to be relaxed in their duties. Your presence here is not appropriate or required until our work is completed.”

Luke was at the end of being polite or accommodating to someone who was no longer entitled to a rank, and who was infringing on the New Republic’s vessel.

“Can you give me one good reason as to why I should listen to you?” Luke said, his tone flat, and simmering. He could feel the tension of his teammates growing behind him.

The TIE pilot took another step in his direction; standing upright, and in line with Luke’s face.

“That’s because, Lieutenant… I out-rank you.” The Pilot said, returning Luke’s tone, and held their position.

Luke inhaled deeply, bringing calm into himself, not letting himself get absorbed into the anger around him. “Care to repeat that?” He asked calmly.

A hiss came from the TIE pilot before they spoke.  “I out-rank you, Lieutenant.”

“That’s it.” Hobbie muttered and taking a step forward before Luke raised up his arm to block Hobbie from getting in fist to cuffs, as now the Imperials had taken steps towards the Reds.

The TIE Pilot raised up their hand and pointed directly at Luke. “Control your men, Lieutenant.”

“Or what?” Wes said loudly, standing behind Luke's opposite shoulder that was holding Hobbie back.

It was then that Luke caught it in his senses as they began to tingle; things weren’t as they appeared.
Luke turned his head to the side, to almost reprimand Wes, but then turned back towards the TIE pilot. “And why should I do that?” He asked keenly, losing his animosity as his curiosity took over.

The TIE pilot backed away, and went to remove their helmet to address Luke directly.

He felt it immediately and gasped before the helmet came completely off; dumbstruck.

Her short red-gold hair flipped out of the helmet, and she caught his expression. “Because otherwise it will be hard for me to buy them drinks… And it should be me who buys the first round, don’t you think?” Mara said in a slow cool voice.

“And I still out-rank you.” She said with a wink.

Luke’s mouth dropped open and he stood staring at the woman he loved without expressing anything.

Mara called over her shoulder. “Team dismissed.”

It was then that all the regime fell away from the other pilots behind her. The officer took off his hat and loosened his collar and walked towards the Reds with an out-stretched hand, willing to make the introductions. The freighter pilot, took off his gloves and walked over with the other TIE pilot who had also taken off his helmet.

Luke just stood looking at Mara not saying a word.

When the teams looked like they were talking and engaging each other pleasantly, she looked at Luke and gave him a smile.

He returned a smiled, but then his face dropped into a frown.

Mara looked at him perplexed; this was not the reunion she was hoping for.

“How could you?” He asked; his voice gruff. “How could you go on this mission without telling me?”

He turned back to her, and glared, waiting for her answer. “You knew this was dangerous…and you didn’t bother to tell me?...at any point in time? You could have hailed me privately, and told me…”

Mara opened her mouth to reply, but his hurt was surprising to her, and nothing came out immediately.

“You could have been captured.” Luke said angrily, taking a step towards her.
“But I wasn’t.” Mara squeaked out.

“You could have been injured.” He said; the fear coming across in his senses, and taking another step to her.

“But I wasn’t.” She said, wanting to touch him, if he would let her.

“You could have told me.” Luke said quietly, his anger fading, as he was in her space now, looking at her face, examining it.

“But I…” Mara ran out of excuses. <<But I missed you.>> She reached out to his mind.

It a heartbeat, she dropped her helmet as her arms wrapped around his neck and his hot lips were on hers. They pursed wildly against each other; greedy, hungry and insatiably.

His hands began to take off the flight suit she was wearing; it was identical to the ones that the Republic used, but in black…and he needed to touch her and know she was real.

<<I missed you too.>> His mind scrambled for thoughts as the only thing he could think about was her.

He only moved his body that he could throw down his flight gloves to the floor, so he could work faster at finding her skin.

Mara darted her tongue into his mouth, as they began to pant between their feverish kisses.

Her hands worked off the strap of his flak pad, and let it drop to the ground. She too had to admit defeat and remove her gloves.

They broke apart momentarily as Luke wanted to lift off her black flak pad from her. As it dropped beside his pad, his hand came up to caress her cheek.

Mara’s eyes fluttered closed; the touch, his touch, she had been craving for close to two months was now here.

When her eyes opened, they were dark and full of mischief. “Well, what have we here…a Rebel Lieutenant?” Her voice was deep and throaty.

“I’m at your mercy, my Imperial captor.” Luke smirked, using his own dark tone as he rested his forehead against hers.

His hand reached out and she heard the lock click on the door as the lights dimmed in the room, as he commanded it with the Force.

“What should I do with you now that I’ve caught you?” She said snidely, sliding her hands down his covered torso.

Mara kicked off one of her boots, knowing that she would need to, if he was game to what she was thinking.

“Who’s to say that you’ve caught me?- I can just as easily claim that I’ve caught you.” Luke walked behind her, and she could feel his eyes on her body.

In an instant he hooked her arms, pinning them back, but playfully so, pushing her chest forward.

“You’re on my ship now, under New Republic control…” He whispered in her ear.
His hot breath made her pant openly until she stopped herself by biting her lower lip; his lips began their torment at her earlobe.

“How should I torture you… you… Imperial Brat.” He hissed, before he bit into her neck.

One hand held her arms back, but the other hand started to unzip the front of her suit until it stopped below her navel.

His lips still pursed at her jugular as his hand ventured inside her suit, finding one breast, he squeezed.

Mara moaned loudly into the empty room but then clamped her mouth shut, unsure if sound carried out into the adjacent deck.

His fingers found her perked nipple and teased it.

She could feel her knees weaken and the deep throb inside her, just once. She swallowed and remembered that she wanted to touch him too, oh-so very badly.

She moved quickly out of his hold, now she braced his arms behind his back with one arm, and let the other hand first travel to his well-defined ass.

“No so fast, Rebel Scum.” She breathlessly said in his ear. “How do I know that you’re not carrying any contraband in my sector?”

She dragged her lips along his skin, and he tilted his head to allow her as much access as he could.

Her hand travel to the front of his suit, and stroked deeply into the fabric over his torso, past his waist and rested where the fabric had become taunt against his bulge.

“What is this?” She teased cruelly as she rubbed her hand up and down the mound, feeling the pulse under her hand. “I think I should hold this against you.”

She could see his wicked smile as he was enjoying what she was doing. “No ma’am… I’d rather that you’d let me hold it inside you.” He growled. “Inside your wet, sweet pussy… Imperial Brat.”

No more toying with each other, and flight suits seemed to be ripped from bodies in a haze as their mouths found each other again.

Under shirts and under garments got ripped where they put up resistance.

“Rebel Scum” Mara moaned as Luke ruthlessly drove his fingers inside her. He didn’t need to prepare her, she had been ready since the mission started; knowing he was near, she could feel herself getting wetter as she thought about him.

Her flight suit had been roughly taken off her shoulders, her compression shirt pushed up to her neck, and one leg had found its way out of her flight suit and panties.

Mara soon found herself propped up on a steel display case; the cool metal on her bare ass heightened her senses.

With his flight suit and boxer briefs dropped below his waist, his undershirt, ripped open so that his skin touched her skin, one thrust was all it took as Luke buried his rippled cock inside her as deep as he could go.

She moaned once as he delved into her, and then continued to moan in spasms between gasping for
He held himself there, refusing to move, biting his lip as he wanted to moan her name at the astonishing feel of her body joined with his.

Luke looked at her face, as she panted hard and repeatedly, when he saw that she had climaxed from wanting him without him noticing, and she was now recovering; her eyes dazed, her skin gloriously flushed.

He knew he wouldn’t last long either, but he wanted to see her come again for him.

“Imperial Brat” He whispered, knowing that she heard him.

With another deep hard thrust, as their bodies came together it made a bang sound on the steel that she was resting on.

Luke did it again, fighting her tightness, reveling and enveloping her sense in the Force with his; the bang was loud enough that it must have carried outside the room.

And again, deep and hard into her, with a bang against the steel.

“Rebel Scum” Mara panted, knowing those were only words she could muster; egging him on only because it was pure rapture feeling him inside her.

He hoisted her hips higher. “Imperial…” and before he got the next word out, he began. “Brat.”

Pounding her with fury and lust-fueled desire on the metal case, hearing the banging ring in his ears as he kissed her with frenzied anguish. He wanted it, needed it, yearned for it, craved it...nothing more divine in the entire galaxy than bringing her to bliss.

Her moans almost matching the volume of the bangs, until she held her breath, and then let loose with “Rebel Scum!” as she lost herself again for him.

Wave after wave, he felt it through his senses, her body in absolute chaos.

Luke threw back his head and let his body fill her as he released his own climax, matching her in intensity, and choosing to moan her name, muffled into her hair; painful and perfect in the moment.

“I love you.” He repeated as he heard her whimpering the same into his neck as she came down from her heightened state.

He swallowed hard, finding her lips and covering them in between his words of love. Luke couldn’t find the reason to form any other words with his mouth.

<Oh, Gods…I’ve missed you so badly…so very, very badly.> His mind touched her, letting the pain in his heart dissolve now that she was here.

Mara’s soft hand came up and touched his cheek, Luke leaned into it.

<<I’ve missed you too…I thought about you all the time.>> She confessed to him.

Their breathing was returning to a normal pace, and they pulled back from their kisses to truly look at each other.

His blue eyes sparkled joyously, and looked at her in wonder.
Mara was the first to giggle, as she looked past his shoulder and into the pilot-ready room, seeing what they had done to it.

Her green eyes danced looking at him.

Luke chuckled and leaned in to kiss her some more before he retreated again, just to look at her.

“I love you.” He said again but this time with reason and competency as he looked at her.

Mara smiled; truly smiled, just for him. “I love you too.” She said.

**

It wasn’t the hardest mission they had been on, but to return the pilot ready-room and themselves to prior lust-tumble condition was not an easy feat.

Zippers on flight suits hid the fact that there weren’t any usable under garments.

Luke stood at the door of the room until he was sure that there was no one else on deck that could see them leaving.

A plan was made to regroup in an hour, as if nothing happened, giving them both time to clean up and make themselves presentable, and agreeing to meet up in the pilot’s lounge separately.

Mara didn’t want to stop touching him, but she forced herself to let him leave first.

Reluctantly Luke left after giving her another series of kisses. Anyone looking at him would see that his lips were inflamed from kissing her.

Without distraction, Luke made it to his room, and the door couldn’t slide open face enough.

Horn was there, packing up his case. He turned around to see his flustered roommate.

“Well, I hear that Jade’s on board.” Horn said with a wink. “I’ve been given orders to bunk with Antilles for next few nights.” He smirked at Luke.

Luke nodded wordlessly, and he was sure that he wasn’t blushing but couldn’t be sure.


Luke let out the breath he was holding. Although he had started shielding the moment he saw Mara, he couldn’t remember if he had shielded during their entire interlude.

He smiled as he collected his things to head for the communal showers. Not only would this shower feel relaxing, but all the tension he had been holding since coming to Basic Training had started to leave him.

She was the reason for it. Luke knew it without denying it. Mara could soothe him as nothing else could.

He was elated that she was here. Horn had mentioned that vacated their room for a few nights? Did he know something that Luke didn’t know?

A light blinked from Luke’s comm sitting on his dresser. He opened it to see that Wedge had granted him ‘on call without any designated duties’ for the next thirty-six hours. Luke smiled, closing the
An hour couldn’t come soon enough. He reached out to her several times, just to feel her presences before he was to see her again.

His heart jumped.

Looking around his room, Luke tried to move some things around to make it look less like a military barrack but he doubted she would care, just as long as they were together.

Giving up, he left the room ahead of schedule to go to the pilot’s lounge.

It wasn’t anything more than an unused room with a bunch of tables in it that the pilots used after a mission to sit and talk. Nothing special about it, and they were sure it would get turned back into something useful soon- so every day was one more day that they could enjoy it.

Serving as makeshift bar, each pilot had found an area to keep their reserve of their favourite drink. Therefore, ‘buying a round’ consisted of sharing your stash.

Luke’s stash of ale was relatively full. He had never been much of a drinker, but liked one every once and a while.

Tonight, he would be buying the round, and cheer came up for him as he entered the room.

His group of Reds, and the mercs had taken up two tables, and had clearly opened someone else’s stash before Luke got there.

Luke stopped over at his cooler before joining them and saw that it was his stash they were already drinking. He helped himself to two bottle before he walked over. Should Mara show up, he knew she would want one.

The group was having a good laugh as Luke walked up and dropped down into the nearest chair.

Hobbie stopped the conversation, and held up his bottle of ale. “Wait, wait, wait here, gentles…I give to you, the man of the hour, our very own Lieutenant Skywalker….but you may know him as…” He paused for effect.

“Rebel Scum!” the rest of the table yelled out in Luke’s direction.

Luke covered his face with his hand. “Okay…okay…get it out now before she shows up.” He growled at the rest of the table.

“I didn’t know you and Jade had such cute nicknames for each other.” Tycho said smirking.

“Were the two of you re-enacting ‘The Battle of Hoth’ or ‘The Battle of Endor’ in there?” Wes asked, grinning from ear to ear.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Hobbie asked the man sitting next to him.

“It means who got to be on top, Hobs.” Wes chuckled back.

The mercs were quiet but shared in the chuckling.

“I’m only going to answer this once…” Luke said. “And when she gets here, you all had better be on your best behaviour…I’m not saving you, if you make her angry… and for the record, it’s always Endor.” He winked.
The Reds erupted, having a good laugh, and clanking their bottles together.

The door opened and Mara strode in, dressed in her casual work suit. She spotted Luke and walked over.

Tycho got up and offered her his seat next to Luke, holding it out like gentleman.

She looked prepared for what they were going to throw at her; Luke had already mentally warned her.

Each of them smiled and greeted her in turn, until it came to Hobbie.

“Hey Hotpants! How you doing?” He asked boisterously.

“Not bad, Nerfnuts…how about you?” Mara retorted without a pause.

Luke coughed on the ale he had in his mouth, and the others started snickering, watching the exchange.

Hobbie visibly pouted as he took a sip of ale.

“Jade!” she heard from behind her. “It’s so good to see you again.” Horn greeted her as he joined the group.

Mara smiled back at him. “Good to see you too, Corsec.”

She felt a touch on her mind, but it wasn’t Luke.

</Look what I’ve learned./> Horn raised his eyebrows and nodded before sitting down.

<<Very good.>> She congratulated him. <<Come and see me before I leave... I have something for you, from someone.>> Smiling at Horn.

Horn nodded.

The conversation around the table became mixed; Reds and mercs talked freely.

As it turned out, one of the mercs was from Tanaab, and Wes and him spent the evening talking about local things and places they knew.

The other two mercs were smugglers that Mara knew in her travels that had worked off and on for Karrde, but all of them had an Imperial past in the role that Mara had cast them in.

The gathering didn’t last very long; all the Reds were on call, and they knew where their duty lay.

The mercs were ready to call it quits too, having travelled half way across the galaxy for this job. The New Republic was putting them up in the unused quarters.

Luke was sure to shake each of their hands and thank them for their service. He even offered them a piece of advice- to take their showers after getting morning meal, when the caf was still fresh.

They took it all in stride but no longer thought of him as the enemy.

Mara said a few words to them too, knowing that she would see them when she returned to Karrde’s fold.
When the groups had left, Luke looked at her in the fairly empty room, and grinned, offering her his left arm to walk back to his room.

As they left, Mara took his arm, and moved it around her shoulders, pulling herself closer to him.

They didn’t talk but looked over at the other periodically, just grinning like idiots.

Luke leaned in and kissed her cheek as they came to his door. He palmed the release behind him, and let her in.

Beside his bed sat an unfamiliar travelling case; she must have come into the room after him.

Luke turned down the lights in the room, still grinning at her.

“So whatever shall we do?” Mara purred to him, wrapping an arm around his neck.

“Well…” Luke came in to capture her lips again. “We can always start with the Dankin Plan?” He said, but not really convinced. “Because I really want to know what happened to your hair.” He said point blank.

His fingers now slid through the shortened locks that framed her face.

“You don’t like it?” Mara tried to sound hurt, as if her new look was by her design, but didn’t manage it as she kissed his lips.

Luke pulled back and frowned. “I was a little shocked when I saw it, but now I’m getting used to it. I’m not buying it that it was planned.” He said before kissing her again.

“Okay…” she said as she switched to nuzzling her cheek next to his. “It was either my hair or my life…I chose my life.”

She sensed he was surprised, but it died down pretty quickly.

“My turn.” Mara whispered before returning to his mouth. “What’s with the ring?”

Her hands had slid down his arms and their fingers were interlaced in each hand; she held up his left hand, with the green stone ring on it.

Luke drew his attention away from her mouth to look at what she was referring to.

“Oh…” He said, trying to come back to those perfect petal lips. “I got it on Tatooine…to remind me of you…it’s made from Jade stone.” He tilted his head, one more time, and then broke away.

He then stepped away but not very far. “I saw that you’re wearing the pendant I made for you.” He had observed that earlier while they were enjoying their reunion. “And I had nothing on me that represented you.” He fetched a small box out of his top drawer of his dresser.

Luke came back and showed her the ring at a closer look.

Mara took his hand in hers and examined it; running her finger over the carved design.

“It has the same symbol that’s on your pendant…the suns, the lovers.” He said quietly. “It’s like you’re always with me.”

He stopped, knowing that too much talk of commitment scared her. “Is that okay that I have that?” He asked, fearing that she would see it as anything but a desire to keep her close to him in this way.
Mara smiled meekly, and nodded, feeling truly loved by him.

Luke took back his hand and opened the little box, revealing the jade earrings he bought for her.

“They’re not much, but I thought that you’d like them.” He looked earnestly into her eyes.

Her smile grew, and she nodded as she took them from him. Mara reached up and took his face in her hands and brought him closer, tenderly touching his mouth to hers. <<Thank you.>> She thought over.

His hands moved to her hips, and he swayed her as they kissed.

<You know what I want to do more than anything right now?> He asked.

<<Go to sleep and not wake up until we’re ready?>> Mara answered seriously.

Luke pulled back from their embrace. “How did you know?” He looked at her. “I mean, I was thinking it…I haven’t slept well in weeks…and I…just didn’t want to say it. I mean, I want us to be together…but..”

“You could really use a good sleep?” Mara asked, her eyes half closed.

Now that Luke looked at her, he could see that she was exhausted too. Their time away had been taking its toll on her too.

“Will you hold me tonight? Just us…just us together?” She said, still holding his hands.

Luke nodded, giving himself permission not to put up the charade that it didn’t bother him.

Mara moved her hands over the fasteners of his fatigue jacket and pushed it off his chest. Catching it, she folded it and tossed it over to Horn’s bed.

Luke undid her belt from around her waist, rolled it over his hand and reached back and placed it on his dresser.

They both kicked off their boots as Luke found humor in it, mocking a strip and he teasingly undid the grips of his boots.

Mara chuckled at him, watching him ungracefully try to undo the simple straps. She rewarded his clumsiness with kisses as they came back together.

Luke unzipped the front of her jumpsuit as she opened the fly on his fatigue trousers.

They weren’t in a rush and leisurely kissed in between fumbling to rid their bodies of clothing.

Soon their flesh touched.

<Sleepwear?> Luke dared to asked, hoping for the answer of ‘no’.

Mara shook her head, as if hearing his wish. <<What if Horn comes back? What if Wedge needs to talk to you? What if…>>

He cut her off. “Okay…Bottoms it is.” Luke went to his dresser and pulled out the nacroob ones she got for him on Tanaab; they had become his favourite pair, anyhow.

Mara opened her case. “I got something for you too.” She smiled playfully, and pulled over the short
glimmer silk night shift in deep hunter green.

Luke watched as she turned away, and the fabric poured over her body as it came down.

The color set her eyes a glow, and her fair skin look luminescent in the light.

Through the soft fabric of the sleep pants, he began to harden again at the sight of her.

She turned back to him, and eased against him, feeling the want of his body.

Luke stroke the side of her face. “Later.” He whispered. He had what he wanted now; she was there, with him.

He lifted the covers of his bunk and Mara slid in; Luke came in after her.

Opening his arms, she nestled down into the nook of his shoulder with his chin on her forehead.

He waved his hand and lights closed.

Wrapping his arms around her, he whispered quietly as his eyes closed in peaceful bliss, “Where do you want to go?”

“Anywhere you are.” Mara mumbled into his chest, grinning.

And sleep took them.
Weapons of Choice- Part 3

Chapter Summary

Quote: Luke sat back as he witnessed the miracle: Hobbie didn’t snap back, and Mara didn’t snap his neck. Things can really change.

Characters: Luke, Mara, Wedge, Wes, Hobbie, Tycho, Corran Horn, other Red members

Chapter Notes

**
Ah...Jedi Love....
SMUT-FEST
**

Aboard The Liberty

He hummed, with his eyes closed.

It was pleasurable.

He felt it along his skin; the soft strokes on his chest, then down his torso.

He hummed again.

And moved. This time stretching so that the touches wouldn’t stop; he would allow them to roam.

The gentle rakes of her nails went down his skin; barely touching, barely scratching.

His lips twitched as his skin flourished with sensitive bumps.

He exhaled deeply; eyes still closed.

“Stars...” he mumbled; feeling the finger tips outline his muscles, following the ridges of his abdomen.

The soft tips grew in size as slender fingers gained more surface area, and then her palms flattened out on his bronze flesh.

The corner of his mouth pulled to the side, feeling the distinct touch along his groin muscles.

Back and forth in the defined grooves, the intent was clear.

The flutter in his stomach started.
If he concentrated, he could start to feel the blood rushing in his veins.

The flutter in his stomach rapidly turned into a hunger, a lust, a desire.

He could feel his body, involuntarily responding, and hardening, with the attention he was receiving.

“Stars...” he mumbled again, turning his head to side of his pillow, willing to keep his eyes closed.

The digits that had been so meticulous as to find ways to touch him, were now intent, and kept their pace and on route on his groin.

His body pulsed hard once as the soft fingers began to caress the taunt skin of his pubic groin.

He harshly sucked air into his lungs as he felt her fingers stroke down the sides, almost onto his thighs, and then cup his satchel.

Pleasurable, relieving, yet almost painful, he relinquished his control, and let himself just feel in the moment.

With eyes still closed, he pressed his lips firmly together, not wanting to utter anything to break the spell, and turned his head to opposite side of the pillow.

Her dainty hands rolled the delicate glands in a languid pace.

A surprise; he wanted to sit up when he felt her lips kissed the pubic muscle, and even more so when he felt her hot tongue graze along the skin.

Now, he tilted his head back and breathed deeply, giving in.

As she kissed his heighten flesh, he wanted to touch her, and resisted by sliding his hands under his pillow.

Her lips, her kisses, taunted him; she licked and kissed every bit of his flesh but the mass that was screaming for attention.

"Gods..." he moaned, begging for her to deliver some of her talents for part of him that yearned for her the most.

Her mouth pressed more firmly against his skin, her tongue darted teasingly, and her hands alternated between rotating and constructing his jewels.

"Please?" He begged for mercy in his mind.

"Mara..." he moaned openly, hoping if she heard her name that she would end his torment, but he knew it was futile; he would have to submit to her wishes.

Her hands kept in contact with his skin as they moved away and onto his adjacent opposite thighs; they rubbed up and down in the area surrounding his manhood.

For a moment her mouth removed from his skin, and he was tempted to open his eyes, but he clenched them more instead.

In his mind, he could see her eyes; vivid, lurid and seductive, green and alive, and shrouded in lashes.

"Aaaahhhh!" he exhaled loudly as her mouth descended on his engorged cock as he least expected
Her hands planted themselves on either side of his groin, and helped to balance her as her moist mouth took him in.

She withdrew slowly and hummed as she went; the vibrations thrilled the thick shaft.

She went down again; her tongue inside her mouth pressed firmly on his skin.

As she pulled back, her tongue forced his erection to the roof of her mouth and grazed gently against her teeth on retreat.

He hissed; finding both pleasure and pain.

Her mouth delivered expert attention, forgoing to overly stimulate him, and simply encased him with moist rhythmic strokes.

She pumped him repeatedly as his breathing grew faster.

<Please?> he begged again, his senses trembling, seeking permission to open his eyes; wanting to watch her, wanting to see her.

Up until now, she was a fantasy in his mind. He wanted her to be real.

Her mouth stopped, and she said in a voice that he longed to hear. “Open them.” She whispered.

As he did, Luke looked down to meet with the dark orbs of jade looking back at him before her petal engulfed again.

He wanted to tilt his back in glory, but he couldn’t; mesmerized and trapped by her.

Her lashes fluttered, and then her eyes came back to lock on his gaze as she ministered to his body.

Working faster, her hands now cupped his glands and worked them in tempo with her mouth.

The skin on his shaft was now slick and moved, being drawn taunt and released; the ecstasy was coming upon him.

He started to moan her name quietly, watching her.

Looking past her face he saw the flush on her skin; the precious porcelain tops of her breasts moved with her body.

Soon, it was upon him, and he tried to hold it back until he could warn her. His hand came from under the pillow to touch her shoulder.

She knew without being told, and encompassed him one more time, holding him as hot spurts entered her mouth.

Luke moaned her name loudly, without a care for volume; his opposite hand, under the pillow, gripped a tight fist of the fabric and held it as his body shuddered.

He panted and sputtered as the convulsions faded away; he closed his eyes again as a reprieve, waiting.

Swallowing from the dryness in his mouth, his senses started to clear.
Luke took both of his hands and touched her shoulders as to bring his Mara near to him, on his chest.

He opened his eyes to see her smiling face in the dim light of his room, and he kissed her firmly. His sense reached out to her.

Feeling her satisfaction at making him overjoyed, he wanted nothing more than to reciprocate.

Mara slid her arms around his neck, and melted against him as they kissed.

Luke regained his equilibrium pressing his mouth against her, now allowing his hands to touch her skin, and move the soft shimmer silk of her night shift over her flesh.

They softly pursed at each other’s mouths, just being together.

He kneaded the tension in her shoulders, and then slid his hands, massaging as he went.

She hummed in approval of his touches.

Her senses reached out for him too, and she could anticipate it when he rolled her onto her back.

The night shift moved up her body; the fabric allowed his groin to align with her pelvis.

Luke’s hands moved more of the fabric out of way as he rubbed her body.

He broke to flutter kisses over her cheeks to hear her giggle, then went back to her mouth.

His fingers gently tugged on the fabric she wore, dropping the thin straps off her shoulders.

Milky-skinned, full breasts push against his chest; he could feel her hardened nipples pressed to him.

His hand slid down her body, down the ridges of her stomach, and past her navel.

He was ready again, and opened her thighs and guided himself into her; pushing past the red-gold curls of her labia, and snuggly inside her wet core.

Mara gasped between their lips, but resuming kissing him as he began to rock his pelvis; in and out.

Her depths tingled and pulsed; nerve endings danced chaotically.

She hummed with every entrance he made into her.

Breaking from his lips, she whispered, “Luke” and then again, in time with his movements.

The heat was rising on her skin, coming up from her core; the blush of euphoria that only he was able to give her.

Never, had she ever wanted someone the way she wanted him; all of him, and greedily, just for herself.

As he rocked between her thighs, she brought her knees up, allowing him deeper; touching the place she knew where she could hover on climax.

And then, he found it; she yelped with the stimulation and began panting as the bundle of nerves started to be tormented.

To keep herself from moaning too loudly, she turned her mouth back to his and pursed wildly and whimpering as she went.
So close… she thought…so close….yes, bring me…

One more deep inhale and holding it…centering her attention…she relaxed as she exhaled, and the pulsing started its slow thud inside her.

“Luke” she moaned, breaking from his mouth, she closed her eyes just to feel it.

He took the opportunity to watch her, and feel across the Force, how much she felt by him.

Luke rocked a few more thrusts until his muscles pulsed again; devoid of emptying of any seed, but as a reflex action instead, he couldn’t contain himself in the face of such beauty.

He cradled her in his arms until they both became aware.

She smiled as she reached up and touched his face. "Good Morning>> “I love you.” She whispered.

“Good Morning” his voice cracked, looking at her. <I love you too.> He examined her face, lost in her.

Chuckling, she watched him, wondering what he found so stupefying until he broke until a wide smile.

“We have the best wake-up calls…you know this, right?” He said in a deep throaty voice.

Mara snorted. “Yes, we do.” She paused. “It’s a wonder why anyone would want to get out of bed.”

Luke looked at her as if he was considering getting into a discussion. “I don’t think they do…I think they do it out of necessity.”

She humored him. “Quite right…for instance, now, I’m hungry.”

He raised his eyebrows as she was game to what he was saying, and he nodded, playing along. “I see, and if I said that I had to go to the ‘fresher…you’d be…?”

“More than understanding.” She said finishing off his thoughts.

Luke snorted, and withdrew from her body with a sigh; she squirmed a bit to allow him to move.

He kissed her again in appreciation before he slid from out of the covers and off the bed, towards the ‘fresher, paused to look back at her smirking, shook his hips and carried on.

<<Tease.>> she sent to him because he knew that she liked his backside as much as the front.

Mara rolled on her back in the small bunk, stretching and yawning; feeling quite satiated in the moment.

She knew she couldn’t control the blush on her cheeks or the warmness that enveloped her; still surprised that she had a capacity to feel such things or that she would ever have the opportunity to feel them.

It was all his fault. She grinned and sighed contentedly; thinking that those words had an entirely different meaning at one point, not so long ago, in her life.

When he emerged from the room, she jumped from the bunk, adjusting the green shimmer silk shift back into place, and walked towards him.
They exchanged kisses in the middle of the room, and hands started to find flesh again. She broke it off with a warning mock-glare, as he smirked, and headed for her turn in the ‘fresher.

When she returned, he was frowning at his comm unit.

“Do I have to ask?” she said, as his attention was drawn to it.

Luke rubbed his face and then looked at her. “I have a meeting in an hour.” He said, dropping his head, knowing that he was still officially on duty on The Liberty.

Unlike being ‘on leave’, being ‘on call’ did not remove all of his responsibilities.

“Okay.” She said reluctantly. “I told them so long as they don’t send you on any mission while I’m here…that would be alright.”

Luke looked up at her, surprised.

“You, and your time, are my payment for the mission to Gyndine.” She said. “No credits, just you.”

“Madine looked like he was about to explode when I asked.” Mara explained further. “But it was the last request I had when I was putting this mission together.”

“How did you manage that, by the way?” Luke asked as she slipped onto his lap, taking his comm from him.

She hummed before she kissed him, and then looked at him. “Are we still on the ‘Dankin Plan’? Are you ready to start talking or do you want to wait until after morning meal?”

He smirked. “Right. Shower, food, meeting, and then ‘Dankin Plan’.”

“Good call, Farmboy.” She smirked back. “Now, how do we do this?”

Luke came up with a plan very quickly, as he knew the looks he would get if he was late for his general meeting.

Mara would go into the communal showers first, and he would soon follow behind. They would regroup back at the room, and head for morning meal, or whatever was left of it, together.

They had their way through the first part of the plan, and Mara was almost fully dressed when Luke returned back to the room; her shortened hair curved, framing her face, and he grimaced slightly at seeing it again.

He dressed quickly, and she watched as he put on his fatigues; she came over and adjusted his insignia, making sure it was straight on his uniform.

Mara sat back on the bunk, putting on her boots; Luke came and sat between her legs, and took each foot in-turn, and tied the laces of her boots, and then helped her off the bunk.

“It won’t look strange for us to come to the meal together?” She asked, wondering if they still needed a reason to hide their relationship.


The hall way was empty as they walked side by side, hands not touching but grazing as they swung at their sides.
“Yes, you’ll have to tell me how you got to commit mutiny while still coming off as a hero.” She mumbled, referring to the squad name change.

“My talent for falling into things.” He mumbled back, leading her to the mess hall.

Mara looked over at him as they walked. “Why ‘Red Five’, by the way? Wasn’t that your call sign on Yavin?” she asked.

Luke looked over at her, surprised, but not really. “It was.” He wasn’t sure if he should reveal this or not, but figured she probably knew. “They chose to bury the command levels within the ranks so that we’re less of a target. But in this case, they just had an opening, and I’ve flown with Wes as my wingman before.”

Mara nodded as they entered the room.

She could see that the Squad was at the far corner of the room, causing a ruckus with their talking.

Luke showed her over to the food station and started to make a tray for himself, sensing that she was still uncomfortable in front of others with their usual closeness.

She took her own tray but paused at the caf unit, and made two cups instead of one, and place one of them on his tray.

He smiled knowing it had been while since he had the perfect cup of caf.

When they got to the end of the line, Luke walked towards the Reds’ table, and reached out to her. <We don’t have to eat with them unless you want to.>

<<No, I should get to know them more, don’t you think?>> She asked back.

He could sense that she was tensing up. <They’re not all that bad...I promise.>

She followed him over.

When Luke got to a corner of the table, he noticed on the opposite side was free where Hobbie and Sintu were sitting beside each other, in close conversation.

Both he and Mara were acknowledged with head nods, with the exception of Horn who glared briefly at them, and then went back to his meal.

Sintu looked up across the table, and Luke cleared his throat as he noticed. “Ah, Airman Sintu, this is Mara Jade. She recently helped us on a mission.”

Mara extended her hand across the table. “Hello.” She said simply as she took the other woman’s hand.

Hobbie was trying not to look at her, and his sheepish sense stemmed from the nickname she had given him the previous night.

“Good Morning Major Klivian.” Mara addressed him in a friendly manner.

He seemed to sit up as it was apparent that she wasn’t holding anything against him. “Good Morning Ms. Jade.” He responded, without any wit.

“You can call me ‘Mara’.” She mumbled, looking down as she prepared to eat her meal.
“And you can call me ‘Hobbie’.” He mumbled back, as they both buried the hatchet, and not in each other’s backs.

Luke sat back as he witnessed the miracle: Hobbie didn’t snap back, and Mara didn’t snap his neck. Things can really change.

It was a quick meal as the Squad were all headed into the meeting. Mara walked with Luke until they reached his room.

Before she returned to room, she explained that she had her own work to do.

“Maybe I can find someone to give me a tour. I’ve never been on a Mon Cal cruiser before.” She said as Luke smirked.

He wanted to kiss her before needing to leave, but refrained, knowing she understood. Walking away, he turned to look back to look at her before moving on.

**

The meeting was relatively short; outlining the mission that just got completed by members of the Red Squadron, and the former Imperials.

New assignments were handed out; putting teams on patrol in the nearby sectors, and investigating some activity on a close moon.

Luke’s comm buzzed in his hand while in the meeting, directing him to Madine’s office after he was finished here.

A message quickly popped up from Mara. ‘Any idea why Madine wants to see me?’ it read.

Luke typed back quickly, saying he was included on that meeting and he would see her there. In his senses, he hadn’t realized that she was touching him too, and he could feel her relax after he sent his message back.

Madine seemed to make her nervous for some reason, and he was sure that it had to do with their Imperial pasts.

The meeting broke without any ceremony, and Wedge came up to him as the other Reds left.

“Wanna follow me to Madine’s office?” He said to Luke. “I understand that you got an invite too.”

“Mara did too.” Luke said, holding up his comm. “She’s on her way.”

Wedge nodded. “Yeah, sorry about interrupting your break. I’ll try not to ask too much from you.”

Luke nodded and snorted. “I don’t expect much of a break.” He came closer to his friend. “It’s just nice that she’s here…that’s all I can ask for.”

Wedge nodded, and smirked. “Yeah, well, I just have to wait a bit longer.” He looked over at his friend. “NRI is sending over a group to investigate why there are so many Red Squadron members aboard the Liberty…and guess who they’re sending over?”

Wedge and Iella were getting to see each other; this was good news indeed.

Luke smiled. “I’ll give you a hint when you get your orders to be ‘on call’…break your comm unit immediately…this way, you can’t get any other orders.” He winked.
Wedge snorted. “I’ll remember that.”

Mara rounded the corner, looking very fitting in her jumpsuit and short hair.

Wedge looked over at her and then back at Luke as he didn’t expect the short hair either, but left it without saying anything.

She greeted Luke’s Commander and friend, and they started to walk towards Madine’s office.

“I didn’t realize that a Mon Cal cruiser’s selenium drive was double ray-shielded to refract the energy more efficiently.” She said as they walked.

“Mentally storing blueprints, Jade? -if you ever need to sabotage one.” Wedge asked with a chuckle.

“You bet.” She said looking ahead with a straight face.

Wedge stopped chuckling as Luke began to.

“She’s joking.” Luke muttered. He turned to Mara as the door to Madine’s office opened. “Tell him that you’re joking?”

They stopped at the threshold, and Mara walked past the two men with her eyebrows raised and stoic face.

Luke looked at Wedge. “Seriously, she was joking. I swear.”

Wedge shook his head as they entered the office.

Madine greeted them as they assumed a salute to him; Mara simply nodded in greeting, although Luke noticed that her arm twitched as if she wanted to salute Madine out of habit. Madine had been a General in the Imperial Forces as well.

Madine came behind his desk and gestured to the seats in his office. He cleared his throat and looked over at them as they sat down.

His face briefly cracked a grin; the first Luke had ever seen from the man.

“We received our first readouts from Gyndine.” Madine said proudly. “The ghost cypher is working.”

A display screen opened behind him, displaying star chart. “We’ve been able to ascertain that the Imperial Fleet has broken off, and it looks like they will be rotating their attack pattern as they near the Core.”

Several red dots appeared on the chart, indicating where the Fleet was.

Luke could sense the relief in the room, emanating from both Wedge and Madine. Not knowing where your enemy was, was nerve-racking, and could cause more problems if they employed guessing-game tactics.

“And using the intel that Ms. Jade was able to provide was invaluable.” Madine looked directly at Mara; she simply nodded in return.

Luke could sense that Madine was apprehensive about her; almost scared? He thought it was a strange thing to feel about someone who had helped the New Republic recently.
“In the coming days and weeks, we’ll be able to design our attacks properly.” Madine said.

“General, if I may?” Mara asked from her chair. It wasn’t common to interrupt a General, but as a civilian, she had the luxury to. “May I suggest that using this information be tapped only randomly. The Imperials run algorithms to spot attack patterns.”

Luke heard her mind: &lt;&lt;And when that doesn’t work, they had Thrawn.&gt;&gt;

Silently, he agreed with her, but still watched Madine for his response.

Madine simply nodded. “Thank you, once again for your input, Ms. Jade.”

He seemed neither putout nor vexed by her presence or opinions, but still weary of her. He stood to dismiss them.

The Reds jumped to salute, while Mara extended her hand. And Madine looked at it carefully before he took it to shake.

He saluted his men, and dismissed them.

Mara followed behind Luke and Wedge when leaving the room.

Wedge relaxed, and was about to offer that they meet in his office when his comm buzzed and he was directed somewhere else. He excused himself and suggested that they meet up later.

Luke and Mara watched him walk away as they began to stroll the deck of the hangar.

“So, do you want to tell me why Madine is afraid of you?” Luke asked casually.

“You felt that too?” She said, feigning its importance. After a moment of Luke waiting for a response, she said, “He saw me in action, once.”

Mara stopped and looked at Luke. “As the Emperor’s Hand.” She said simply. “One of his fellow Generals had been selling information back to a senator that was extorting a rival senator…but the information was really just blackmail.” She paused. “The other General needed to be eliminated.”

She began walking again, and Luke could feel her masking her feelings. “Madine saw what happened when you betray the Empire.” She said quietly. “I think, secretly, he knows he wasn’t supposed to live after that.” She looked anywhere but Luke’s face. “I think he still thinks that I’m going to finish off the job.”


“He never really had much faith in Force-users.” She said. “I don’t think that he does now either. There was a lot of propaganda going around the Empire about Jedi and Force-users—that’s probably why he treats you the way that he does.”

Luke walked slowly beside her; so it wasn’t just him who picked up on Madine’s feelings.

“And then, there’s his famous defection to the Rebellion after…Vader almost killed him.” She finished.

They were walking in the direction of the TIE fighters, still docked in the hangar, for no other reason than it was a place to walk.

Luke wanted to change topics; he didn’t want their time together consumed by their pasts.
“You never did finishing telling me how you put this mission together?” Luke asked.

Mara looked over at him, knowing what he was doing by changing the topic.

So he let her talk; telling him about her problems with loaders and running shipments in Imperial sectors, and then how she met up with Han, Chewie and Lando and the help they provided her.

Luke snorted when she described Han as “salty”, but he got the sense that she was starting to like him.

She told him about meeting Booster and Horn’s wife Mirax, the trap that was planned for Karrde, the run-in with the Guvarian Death Gang and how she lost her hair and Jedson.

Luke sighed at hearing the sad news; he had only met the Hikdithian once on Dantooine.

He stopped to look at her again; not just looking at her hair, but sensing how close he was to losing her again. This time, although he was concerned, it didn’t fill him with the fear that it once did.

He could sense that she was holding something back in her story, but he let her speak as they walked around the Imperial fighters and freighter.

She told him about her plan to use the Imperial freighter for one last run, frying the blaster components they delivered, and the missing deliveries of Commix and Mo’nach’s algae.

Then, she spoke of Ghent’s programming of the ‘ghost cypher’. Using her knowledge from past Imperial access codes, they picked an outpost that hadn’t been upgraded since Thrawn or the fall of the Empire, so all of her codes would still work.

The ‘ghost cypher’ was fairly simple; if a communication was sent out by the outpost—as it usually was to confirm the receipt of incoming messages- buried within the outgoing message would be an encrypted file that was zipped to hide its size. When the file was decrypted and unzipped, it would have an exorbitant amount of information contained within it.

Luke was amazed that they could do it.

Mara even offered up that, along with her time with Luke’s free time being her payment for the New Republic’s gratitude, Karrde would have access to the information that they received as well, as to avoid any Imperial patrols so that he could run hid business without any issues.

At least now, he had a partial answer as to how she got some of her information; she bartered for it.

The only disappointing thing in her story was that they weren’t able to capture Dengar and turn him over to the Imperials or the New Republic, yet.

She waited as they seemed to be walking back towards the X-wings now. “Your turn.” Mara said.

Luke looked over to her, and smiled, missing their conversations, and her friendship…just missing her.

He told her about Basic Training, and feeling like an old man next to the new recruits, about his trip to the property register’s office and his father’s estates – which he was still waiting on, coming back to the Rogues, starting to train Horn with the Force in small doses.

He stopped and felt like she wanted to say something but she kept quiet, and let him continue.

Luke explained what had happened on the training mission when his X-wing was sabotaged, and the
growing resentment in the Security Council towards him, so much so that it was distraction and he couldn’t attend them anymore.

Returning to Tatooine; seeing Biggs’s father, and how he wasn’t ready to see the farm just yet, but he had picked out the spot he was going to take her to when he could show her the suns setting.

He stopped in inspect the underbelly of one of the X-wings, and called over a ground-crew member when he noticed something out of place.

Luke resumed by telling her about the trouble the farmers were in. He knew she could feel his helplessness at trying to find a way to aide them.

Mara agreed that transporting water would be pricey, and might bankrupt the farmers in the long run.

“Too bad you can’t transplant Hoth on to Tatooine…snow weighs less than water to transport.” She commented off-handed, not really meaning it.

Luke paused and looked at her. “Why couldn’t you?” The idea was gaining ground in his head. “Seriously, why couldn’t it be done?”

She looked at him as if he had lost his mind, but decided to think this out-loud. “Well, for one, it would have to be temperature-controlled units doing the transporting… and a temperature-controlled defrosting method so that you don’t lose anything to evaporation.”

“But you, yourself, said that transport rates are first based on weight and then by distance, and then by difficulty in transportation.” Luke reasoned with her. “And you said that rates are on a sliding scale—the more frequently the deliveries are made then the cost goes down.”

Mara sighed. “Do you have any idea how many deliveries that you would have to make in order to fill up their reserves?” She shook her head. “It would be…difficult…time consuming.”

“But not impossible?” He asked, getting eager.

“It would be extremely costly.” Mara said firmly.

“But, Karrde has been known to lower his rates for good causes, right?” Luke asked again.

She sighed again, seeing him excited about this idea, and she shook her head; she had no idea where his excitement came from, but once he latched onto an idea, he stuck with it.

“If you’re serious, I’ll look into it…maybe there’s some place closer than Hoth that has ice they don’t need.” She answered back.

Luke stepped in closer to hug her, quickly, before anyone would see. He wanted to kiss her; just maybe she could become an optimist.

They went back to walking, and around the deck they could hear the pounding of feet as the Reds had started running laps for the day.

Mara turned to Luke. “So how long has the Hobbie-Sintu thing been going on?…she seems nice, by the way.”

“You picked that up, did you?” Luke smiled. “He told me on the way out to Tatooine, but can’t do anything about it now because of the rules.”

She nodded, her green eye sparkling as if someone else in love made her happy.
“He is trying to be ‘friends’ with her.” Luke explained. “But it still didn’t stop him from almost getting a Twi’lekk wife.”

Mara snorted. She remembered a time when she and Luke tried to be just friends, and that turned out well.

“I talked him out of it.” Luke chagrinned. “Ah…there’s something I should tell you about…and cantina girls…”

“That they all seem to have red hair, lately?” Mara asked snidely, but amused. “Yes, Karrde mentioned it too. It was the black leather bodysuits that he noticed first.”

She walked closer to him, hidden underneath one of the X-wings. “Did you feel tempted to ignite your lightsaber with any of them?” She asked in a purring tone; the same tone she used when she had once teased him while he was holding a motivator above his head.

Luke looked her hard in the eye. “Not one bit.” His voice deep as he shook his head slowly. He wanted to take her in his arms again and make her remember why he never thought of anyone else. Instead, his eyes rolled closed and he sent her the image of her in the black velvet dress, the night of the War Orphans Association’s auction, as she turned around and he saw the pure skin on her back, and how badly he wanted her right then.

Luke opened his eyes and watched her swallow and then blush, turning away to walk some more.

He smiled and followed her.

He continued his story about finding his grandmother and his father’s slave records. He told her about how they were treated, but left out the part about the locator implants, knowing that she would be able to connect their situation with her own in good time.

She just listened, not judging him; he was afraid that she might. Those from the Core worlds never seemed to understand the problems of slavery and the stigma that came to the generations afterwards.

Mara just took his hand briefly, when she could and squeezed it, and then released it.

A chime sounded on deck, and Mara froze.

Luke smiled. “It’s just the midday meal notification.” He explained and started walking off the deck towards the mess hall.

“Today is a PE day.” He said as they walked. “It’s combat training this afternoon.” He winked. “I can ask if you want to join in.”

“Do you think that I want to?” Mara wasn’t sure if he was teasing or not, but it sounded like fun.

Luke chuckled before answering. “Oh, I always thought you would enjoy throwing…what did you call me yesterday?…oh, right…Rebel Scum around.”

She stopped before they entered the hall. “No, you see, you’re wrong there. I just enjoyed throwing you around.” She winked, and walked through.

The tables were assembled just as they were at morning meal, and the Reds were sitting in pretty much the same order as they had before.

They sat across from Hobbie and Sintu again.
The conversation was about the up-coming combat class in the afternoon.

Mara found out that the woman across from her was part of the famous Sintu Wrestling Family.

“I can put any man into a triangle choke.” Sintu said quietly. Hobbie seemed to beam with pride.

Mara snorted, knowing that she could too, and admiring the Reds more now.

It was Wes that invited her to the class since he was leading it. He dropped subtle hints that she might show them the Imperial way of combat training.

Luke looked over at her and sent to her. <Only if you want to.>

Mara agreed and after the meal, she and Luke walked out to the deck where they had placed some mats on the floor.

She sat off to the side, watching, as Luke had sat beside Horn and they were talking between them, while Hobbie and Tycho worked on how to break from a hold.

Mara frown as their struggle was taking too long for her liking. She like things quick and liked to take her opponent down, and then incapacitate them as efficiently as possible.

She shook her head as Wes was talking about getting out of a half-nelson; the method he was suggesting left your opponent able to recover.

He stopped the class to look over at her.

“Ms. Jade, did you have something that you wanted to add?” Wes wasn’t being condescending, if she knew a better way, he welcomed her knowledge.

Mara got up from her seat and came forward. “Well…” she said tentatively. “What you really want to do is not give them a chance to recover…to come back with an attack.”

Luke had stopped talking to Horn and they were both watching her now.

She turned her back to Wes. “Here…put me in the hold…and tightly.”

Wes stepped behind her and slipped his arms under hers, and then interlaced his fingers at the back of her head.

Mara began to explain. “The victim will start to usually start to flail, which is why you are using this hold…. But if you, yourself are in this hold, the best thing is to use your weight against them—they are expecting that you will move away from them but not downwards.”

The class was watching intently.

“If you drop, and twist your rotator cap slightly, you can break the hold.” Mara said.

“Ready?” she asked Wes, behind her.

Before she waited for his full answer, she dropped her body weight, raised her arms above her head and slid out from the hold. On the ground she turned, grabbed his knee caps and pulled them forward, causing him to fall backwards on his momentum, landing solidly with his back on the floor and the wind knocked out of him.

She got up while Wes still recovered; half the group smiled, and other half widened their eyes. Luke
pressed his lips together as to not reveal how amusing he found this.

“Of course, now, you would finish him off with a blaster, if you had one…” Mara said as she offered Wes a hand to stand up.

He smiled as he came up.

“And as for taking an opponent into a frontal hold….there’s so many more effectual things other than a hold…in a hold, people can make noise.” Mara explained as she walked over to Hobbie, who was still standing off to the side from his demonstration.

As she stood in front of him, the group watched. “It’s better to save your strength for other fighting, if you just need to stop someone.” She said.

With a quick motion of her hand, she chopped Hobbie on the throat above the collarbone with the back of her hand; he started choking immediately.

Mara started to walk behind him as he continued to choke. “He can’t make noise.” She said. “He’s as good dead…what you want to hit is the soft tissue of the thorax.”

Mara indicated on her own throat, as Hobbie dropped to his knees gasping for breath as she spoke. “It takes a bit of training to locate it on someone else, but you want it just below the carotid artery – you can see it on their exposed veins.”

Hobbie was starting to look a little blue as he held his throat.

Standing behind him, she delivered a small punch in between his shoulder blades to release the nerves, and Hobbie then fell forward, braced himself and gasped for air, now that he could. He staggered away from her and joined the other Reds as they watched.

The class went on, and Wes spent some time learning a few more moves from her.

As Hobbie recovered sitting beside Luke, he mumbled, “I’m never calling her ‘Hotpants’ again.”

Luke simply smiled, knowing that this could go either way.

After the class, Luke came to walk beside Mara. “Did you learn all of that in your pilot combat training?” He asked, feeling fairly neutral on her training, but now aware of the potential she had.

There was something in her Force aura that didn’t seem right.

She could sense it. “You don’t think it’s fair?” Mara asked, almost defensively.

“It’s not that…”

“The galaxy isn’t fair, Luke. If something stands between you and your goal, it’s safe to assume that people will want to kill you in order to keep you from that goal…and sometimes…most of the time…they can’t be reasoned with.” She said blankly.

“It just seems drastic.” He said, neither agreeing with her nor arguing.

“Drastic, is learning now to mercifully snap a neck rather than to let them choke to death in front of you.” She said emotionlessly. “It still ends the same way.” She whispered.

She blinked a few times, as if she was pulling herself out of a spell, and Luke could sense the difference.
Underneath it, she still had a killer instinct; she was learning to not rely on it, but it still scarred her, and she knew it too.

Luke remembered now what he had read in one of the books the doctors had given him; ‘the Force moves differently around those that are about to kill’.

She walked a few more paces in front of him, heading towards his room, with her head down.

It wasn’t that she was proud of her skills, far from it. She was ashamed that they were still with her, and with very little provoking, they could be brought to the surface again.

He followed her, letting her be away from him a bit. He knew she had limitations and she was reaching the end of hers.

She had reached the room before he did, and the door slid open again when he got there, and closed as he stepped in.

She sat on the edge of the bunk with her head down. “Do you ever think that there will be a time when I won’t be a murderer?” she asked him quietly.

Luke came closer to her. “You’re not a murderer.” He said firmly. He knew she hated the excuse that he used for her, but it was relevant, and accurate, even if she didn’t feel it was.

He came closer, and reached under her chin, tilting her gaze until her eyes met his. “I love you.” He said.

She nodded, feeling his warmth cover over her, knowing that she had missed his contact in the past months.

“I love you too.” She mumbled, coming towards him to find his lips and to kiss him.

Yes, his love would cleanse her, wiping away her past; it was pure and real.

Luke wrapped his arms around her, as he kissed her, filling her with the joy that she gave him, filling the void.

Mara simply let him.

He rocked her in his arms until he felt her feelings fall away.

“I have something that I want to tell you.” He said quietly into her hair, hoping that she would be happy too.

Mara looked up at him, forcing herself to smile as he seemed optimistic.

“Horn wants to tell the rest of the Reds that he’s started his Force training.” Luke said with promise. “He wants to do it tonight, in the pilot’s lounge. He’s hoping that we can play a game of ‘Jedi Bottle Cap Racing’ in front of them, so that they won’t be so spooked by it.”

He beamed looking at her.

Mara stared off into the distance, her face going blank again.

“Luke…” She paused. “I don’t think he should.”

He looked at her, slightly surprised, and then his face dropping as he caught the reproach in her
senses.

“You should call him here.” Mara said, concern filling her eyes. “We need to talk.”

TBC
Chapter Summary

Quote: Mara turned, walking over to his dresser, and opened the top drawer. “I found this.” She pulled out the packet of documents that Luke had forgotten to rid of; she showed him the paperwork for a Claiming.

Characters: Luke, Mara, Wedge, Wes, Hobbie, Tycho, Corran Horn, other Red members

Chapter Notes

**
Plot…serious plot…mostly plot…and then a bit of fun.

Not a Smut-fest…and a tad of naughty imagery and language somewhere in there.
~wink.

**

Aboard The Liberty

He watched her nervously pace in the middle of the room while they waited for Corran Horn to appear.

He had seen her do this before, whenever something became too much for her, when her mind wouldn’t stop.

“You’re doing it again.” Luke mumbled; not looking at her, but not looking away either.

Mara stopped her walking and looked over at him.

“You’re shutting me out…shutting down.” He said quietly, trying not to be annoyed at how easily she closed him out in her senses and from her thoughts.

The concern on her face dropped, and her feature softened towards him.

“You know I don’t do it on purpose?” Mara said apologetically, meeting his steel blue eyes. “I don’t even think about it when I do it.”

Luke was leaning up on his desk, with his arms crossed against his chest, while they waited for the other man to appear. “I know.” He said calmly.

Silently, he wondered how many of her other coping mechanisms were born out of necessity of living under the Emperor.
He looked at her, and saw the concern still in her eyes. Rather than letting her worry in her mind, he stepped forward and offered his arms.

Mara stepped directly into them, not resisting even her usual impulses to stand on her own. Luke never made her pay for feeling vulnerable with him.

He was surprised at how she clung to him. Whatever she wanted to talk to him and Horn about, it had her truly worried.

Luke held her, and wrapped her in his senses too, knowing that in the past it could soothe her.

He felt her mind reach out to him as she became more-calm.

<<How did you know?>> she asked, holding onto him. <<How did you know the moment that you became a Jedi? —did it feel different…than before?>>

Luke smiled, resting his chin on her head; as long as she was talking, she was alright, even if it was just in her mind.

<i>I didn’t know right away.> He confessed; he had never thought about it, or examined it, no one had asked him before. <i>I just felt more aware… in tune to things around me, I guess.>

He paused to think about it.

<i>I didn’t have to think about reaching out in the Force- it just became more-present, it was just always there, instead of choosing when I touched it.>

Now, the Force swirled around them; slow and lingering.

This was the first time he had ever spoken to anyone about his experience; sharing this with her made him feel closer to her as she listened.

<<Would you do it again?>>

Luke froze; he had never considered that he wouldn’t have done it any other way.

<i>Mean, would you decide to be a Jedi again, if you could?..knowing what you know now?>>

Mara clarified her question; of course, he would want to save his father again, if given an option.

He paused; there were so many confusing things that he had since encountered after he took on this mantle of rebuilding The Order. Although, he was just beginning to see the scope of his task, he knew it was important.

And the work, which seem insurmountable, would take years to rebuild, and hopefully, he wouldn’t have to do it alone.

But to Luke, being a Jedi, always served a purpose that was bigger than him, and it strove towards a greater good.

<i>Sometimes, I wonder if I would.> He answered her without thinking about a full response; not being so selective.

If they were going to be together, a sure way for intimacy in their relationship was to become less guarder about thoughts and feelings.

<i>But when I do question my choice, it mostly comes from my selfish wants…> He admitted to her.
I want my freedom…I don’t always want the responsibility…I don’t want to be the defining factor making decisions that will influence generations.>

Mara came off his chest and looked him in the eyes, just listening.

<Other times…> He continued, looking back into her cool green eyes, being honest with her. He stroked a strand of hair that framed her face. <I don’t think I could stand by and let things carry-on as they have, and as they do…I feel too much of a call not to do anything about it.>

<And now, knowing that it still isn’t an easy road…Yes, if I was to have to make the decision again…I would still choose to become Jedi.> He said firmly.

She nodded and then went back to holding him.


There was something here at play, other than just her personal self-doubt. Something that scared her, far beyond the commitment it would take to him, or to the Jedi Order.

<What are you afraid of, Mara?> He asked gently, holding her tighter in his arms; wanting her to share with him in the same way he had shared with her.

She backed away again, to look at him.

Mara opened her mouth to answer him, just as the door slid open and Corran Horn entered. She closed her mouth and tried to step away from Luke.

Horn stopped after a few paces into the room, and saw that Jade was upset about something, and Luke was clearly comforting her as his arms were wrapped around her.

Luke dropped his arms, releasing her, and Mara walked away from him now that someone else was in the room.

Horn was surprised that she would allow Luke to be so tender with her; she just didn’t seem like the type of person to be so, for lack of a better word, sensitive. At least, that’s what he observed about her, and the opinion he held.

Mara turned her back to Horn, but when she turned around again, back was her controlled visage; it was Luke who looked concerned now.

“Luke tells me that you want to reveal your Force-gift to the rest of the Red Squadron?” Mara asked Horn calmly.

Horn stood and looked at her for a moment.

Luke had told him that she was hard to read, and when she wanted to be; that she could completely disappear in the Force and hide her presence. She may not have been hiding her presence, but she was definitely hiding what she was truly thinking.

“I’ve been thinking about it.” Horn said with his Corellian accent.

Mara nodded once. “There are many things that can come from it…as you are probably aware.” She paused. “I get the feeling that the Reds have been supportive when Luke was training.”

She walked away from both men, clearly thinking, and then turned back. “I’m not sure if Luke is aware of this either…” Her eye flicked over to him. “…but I’ve recently encountered something that
She swallowed before talking.

“When I was growing up in the palace, there were many rumors about the Jedi...they were children-stealers, they read and warped minds...they were terrorists, saboteurs, and traitors, trying to overthrow the government.” She looked off to the side. “And that was just the murmurs...things that were said in private were much, much worse.”

“On a recent trip, I was made aware that there are more issues out there, than basic Jedi hatred.” She said, looking at Luke, as she touched her hair.

“One of the people that I encountered worshiped...The Sith.” Mara started to look uncomfortable. “There were others, that appreciated the Jedi...they called themselves The Church of the Force, and seemed to be an effort for good.”

“Some of them worship Force-users directly...Luke, in particular....” She looked away from him. “And me.” She said quietly.

“If you reveal yourself...it’s something that you can’t take back.” Mara looked at Horn.

His face didn’t mask his feelings, as he thought about her words.

Luke, however, couldn’t be quiet.

“What do you mean they worship The Sith?” Luke’s voice was slightly louder than he intended.

She sighed, not startled by his reaction, and looked at him, knowing this would require more explaining than perhaps Horn was ready to hear. But he should be made aware of it.

“Luke, they worship you as the ‘Son of Vader’...they worship me as ‘The Emperor’s Hand’...they are searching for Sith artifacts...holocrons, lightsabers, robes, possessions...anything that belonged to a Sith...there’s lots of forgeries floating around.” She said without holding back.

“They call themselves ‘The Acolytes of the Beyond’...there are other groups too, but this one seems to be the largest and most-persistent.” Mara said, gathering herself.

Luke nodded. On Tatooine, the group that was going to ambush him and Hobbie said that the ‘Followers of Yonder’ would pay for his lightsaber; it was probably the same group.

“One of them was willing to pay a living bounty on me in order to deliver me to them.” She touched her hair again.

“They want Leia’s children too.” Mara said blankly, as she looked at Luke as she felt his shock. “I’ve already warned her.”

She sighed, and walked to Luke’s bunk and sat down on the edge of it.

Mara shook her head. “The other groups, that worship Jedi, sound just as crazy, but for other reasons...”

Looking between the two men, she had come to the conclusion. “Just because they claim that they want the Jedi to succeed, doesn’t mean that they will let us.”

She looked at Horn. “Just be sure that you know what you’re getting into.” She paused. “Luke and I can’t go back...away from the spotlight, but that doesn’t mean you have to step into it too.”
Horn kept his composure, his eyes looking off into the distance, having heard her words.

The room was silent; Mara looked over to Luke who looked back at her.

“Is that how you lost your hair?” Luke asked. “They had you trapped, and you needed to get away?”

“Yes and no...” She replied as she glanced over to Horn, who was waiting for her answer just like Luke was. “They wanted to trap Karrde, and I was part of the package...it didn’t help that Dengar also has a thing for former Imperials. It was his assistant that was a part of The Acolytes.”

Dengar. Luke nodded, remembering that she explained how he fit into the pieces.

Horn nodded too; clearly he must have heard of Dengar from his wife.

Luke looked at her now; wanting to walk over to her and hold her close to him, and never let her go, but he held his place.

Dropping his head, Luke said. “I’ve heard of The Church of the Force.” Lifting his head, he alternated his glances between Mara and Horn.

Looking at Horn, Luke said, “We have friends...academics, who shared their knowledge with us. They have an acquaintance who is a Follower.” Luke looked at Mara. “And...they seem to trust him.”

<<Who is this?>> Mara asked him, surprised.

“His name is Lor San Tekka.” Luke answered her, with Horn listening. “He’s a former professor of Literature and History, and a friend of Doctor Massian.”

“I haven’t met, or communicated, with him yet.” Luke continued. “But, the doctors trust him and believe that he truly wants to help establish the Jedi Order again.

“So, as Jedi, and Force-users, we do have supporters.” Luke said simply. “There will always be enemies.” He sighed.

Supporters of the Jedi wasn’t a bizarre concept to him, so it shouldn’t be foreign that there would be Sith supporters too.

Horn nodded, realizing that he just wasn’t alone anymore. Here, were two other Force-users who weren’t afraid of their gifts, and although the galaxy may not be the most-welcoming place, they were ready to face it.

Looking at Luke, Horn asked directly, “The Rogues...they accepted you? You felt safe? They kept your abilities a secret?”

Luke grinned tightly, thinking about his friends. “Yes, I did...and yes, they did.”

Horn looked down at his boots, thinking.

“Do you think that they’ll protect me as well as they did you?” Horn asked.


After a moment Horn looked up, looking at each of them in turn. “I’m going to do it.” He said clearly. “I want them to know, just The Rogues...um, Reds.”
Horn smiled slowly. “Will you help me?”


Mara took a bit of a pause. It wasn’t her decision to make, but Horn now knew the risks.

She forced a grin. “Gladly…Luke knows that I want a rematch of ‘Jedi Bottle Cap Racing’ anyway… it will be good to have someone else to help me gang up on him.” She tried to sound happy for him.

Horn felt confident, and nodded. He made arrangements to meet them in the pilot’s lounge later, and how he wanted to go about making this announcement.

Before he left, Mara stopped him. She went into her travel case and brought out a box. “I think someone was thinking of you.” She said as she handed the box over.

“Yeah, I heard that you two had met.” Horn blushed taking the care package from Mara that his wife had sent.

“We had fun.” Mara wasn’t sure how to describe her meeting with Mirax Terrik Horn, but in all estimation, she knew she had met someone she could relate to.

Horn gave her a lopsided smile, similar to another Corellian that she knew. “She told me that too.”

Looking between the Jedi and his other student, Horn’s expression on his face changed, and then he turned to leave the room. “Maybe before my wife comes to visit, maybe Luke can teach me how to shield my presence…seems like he needs bit of practice too…and since the two of you do it so well.” He said smugly, over his shoulder as the door opened.

“Thanks for the delivery Jade.” Horn said and went on his way; the door closed behind him.

Mara stood looking at the door, knowing that Luke was behind her. Despite Horn’s remarks to lift the mood, she still seemed guarded and had put on the pretense for Horn.

He waited, until he sensed that he could continue where they had left off before Horn had come in.


She stayed looking at the door.

Luke could feel her shields starting to rise again. Then, they stopped, and he could feel her willingly force them back down, not closing herself off. She was trying.

“They want all of it…and they want us…Luke…they’ve already put us together.” Mara said blankly.

“Did you know that there’s a rumor that I’m already pregnant, and they want to make sure that our child is raised to the Dark.” She choked, and then cleared her throat.

<<Our child>> Her voice sounded haunted in Luke’s mind; he felt the shudder in her senses. A flicker across her mind of a memory of her own and then buried deep.

“I know some of your reasons from what you just told us…about the followers… they scare me too, about how dangerous they can be.” Luke confessed, trying to convince her as well as himself. “But I don’t fear them, Mara.”
“How can you not fear them?” She turned around, angry, spitting out her words.

Luke shook his head. “They don’t seem real.” He said. “Not like a real threat.”

He opened his arms, hoping she would back to them. “And we will take them on together… not alone.”

Mara slowly shook her head, keeping her eyes on him. “That’s the difference between you and me, Luke. You may have been orphaned, but I was stolen…I know the difference. I know how real a threat it can be.” Her voice wavered over her last few words.

He watched her in silence.

Buried inside her was a child that was taken away from a family; raised, tortured and twisted. Yet, somehow she had clawed her way out of it.

“I promise you that no one will ever take our child.” Luke said firmly, reaching out in his sense. “I promise you.” He said in a solid voice; knowing that he would never let anything happen to her, or their child, if they were to have one.

He was surprised that she had spoken freely about a future together. On Yavin, she couldn’t bear the idea that he already thought of her as ‘equivalent to spouse’. Had something changed?

For a moment, her face held its worried look, and then, after she let his words sink in, the immediate panic began to dissolve; she started to relax, knowing that Luke never made a promise that he didn’t intend to keep.

When she was ready, Mara walked over to him, and let his arms wrap around her again.

He rocked her gently to soothe himself, and her as well.

The revelation, that the galaxy might not be ready for Jedi, even if he was the only one, was not an encouraging prospect.

“There’s something else…isn’t there?” Luke said into her hair. “There’s something else that scares you?”

She took a deep breath before speaking. “What if I don’t want to become a Jedi?…What if I can’t do it?…What if I’m not meant to do it?…” She paused, and Luke could feel a spike in her senses. “And what if you don’t want us to be together if…”

He pulled back from their embrace, not believing what he was hearing. She thought he wouldn’t love her if she didn’t follow his same path.

Mara looked up at him; her eyes round and waiting.

The words rushed out of his mouth to show what he truly felt. “I love you…I will always love… if you become a Jedi or not.”

She paused after his words; her eyes still questioning him. “Are you angry with me for not bonding with you when we had the chance? –I’ve read about bonds now…the Force chooses when a bond should occur, not us…what if I caused us to miss our chance?”

Luke brought her back in against his chest, not wanting to let go of her. “No, I agree that we weren’t ready… we just weren’t ready, Mara, regardless of what the Force wanted. If a bond is meant to
truly occur, we will get the chance again…*I feel that*… I know it.”

He began to sway again; more out of reflex – the thought of losing her, for any reason, still had a hold on him.

“I’m not angry.” Luke said. “I’ll admit that I was disappointed, but I know you have your reasons, and in this case, I think your instincts were correct. But…”

Mara looked up at him. “But what?” she asked before he could finish his thought.

“I can’t help but thinking that the Force wanted us to bond for some other reason than what we feel for each other.” He said plainly.

Since they had last seen each other, he had been given time to think about it.

“Bonds just don’t occur just for emotional reasons…they occur as a means of protection too. And just because you aren’t a Jedi, or might not become one, doesn’t mean that two Force-users can’t bond.” He knew he was grasping at straws, but she might listen to reason.

“Mara, I know that I’m the one who’s ready for so much more between us…” Luke shrugged, with her against him. “I guess I just want it to start as soon as possible…but, I know I have to wait…and I will wait.”

His rational side knew that this would be the worst time for them to do anything else than what they were doing now; she was on the other side of the galaxy and he had duty to the New Republic now.

He looked down. “I’m too eager…still reckless.” He mumbled; knowing where his weaknesses lay.

He caught her senses before she spoke.

“But you won’t stop wanting it?- right? Thinking about it, dreaming about it?” Mara’s senses flashed, made of confusion, mostly, but not anger.

He looked at her quizzically; sensing that her emotions had turned from fear into something…*different*…

Mara shifted, backing out of his embrace, walked over to his dresser, and opened the top drawer. “I found this…last night, before I met you in the pilot’s lounge.” She pulled out the packet of documents that Luke had forgotten to rid of; she showed him the paperwork for a Claiming.

“I’ll admit I was surprised when I found them…” She started to say.

As much as he wanted to deny that, to give her the excuse for why he still had them, perhaps it was time to have this discussion.

“It’s not wrong to dream, Mara.” Luke stated simply, sensing that she wasn’t going to be happy. “It’s not a demand…it’s a ‘want’…and in the meantime, we can decide what we ‘want’ together.” He defended himself, weakly.

He shook his head, and turned around to go back to leaning on his desk; in his opinion, she wasn’t about to come back to his arms, not yet anyhow.

“I completely forgot that I had that…it was an accident…” He rubbed his face. “I picked it up, not intending anything, just something to keep my mind off the real reason I was at the property office on Tatooine…and I just forgot that I took it with me.” He continued to shake his head, looking away
from her.

Then, he felt it; she wasn’t angry with him, she wasn’t even scared. There was no panic in her senses whatsoever.

“I started to read it…I didn’t know what a real ‘Claiming’ was.” She said quietly.

Luke kept his head down, listening to her words.

“When the time comes, I’m not entirely opposed to it.” Mara’s tone didn’t sound like a woman afraid of his feelings, or his dreams.

“It is a beautiful ceremony…” She confessed, taking a few steps in his direction. “And private.”

He slowly raised his head to look at her face.

<<I’m still scared about children…>> Her eyes told him all he needed to know on that subject. The idea of her children being stolen filled her with dread.

<So am I.> Touching her mind and trying to ease her fears.

He asked. “But the ceremony?”

Tentatively, he dared to voice his question. “Are you thinking about it?” He paused, and then decided to chance asking.

“Are you asking me to…?” His brow furrowed, not knowing what to expect, but his senses tingled, and tingled strongly.

When they had last spoke about the possibility of getting married, after she had an attack of panic, he had told her that she had to be the one to ask him if she wanted to get married.

So Luke watched her very carefully for any sign. The tingle in his senses flared, as if something was about to happen.

Mara glanced off to the side of the room, and then back at him. And a grin grew.

Her comm buzzed, breaking the moment; but she stilled looked at him, grinning, not moving.

The comm buzzed again, as they were frozen looking at each other. She glanced over at the device, frowned, and annoyed.

Mara huffed once and walked over to the comm unit, and read the notification because her senses told her that she needed to.

Luke’s eyes followed her, eagerly still waiting her response.

“I have to go speak with Antilles to give him the recognition codes for the Etherway for tomorrow.” She said, not looking at him, reading her message; knowing that their time together was almost up.

Mara clipped the comm to her belt and walked towards Luke. She stepped in front of him, reached over and kissed his stunned face.

As their lips broke separated, she whispered between them, so that her lips grazed his as she spoke. “As for your questions… the answer is: when you’re ready.”
One more kiss and she turned and walked out of the room.

Luke sat there dazed. She had all but admitted that she wanted to get married to him.

When his mind caught up with him, stunned, all he could say to an empty room, “That was my line.”

**

Mara took her time with Wedge Antilles.

She decided that he was another Corellian that she liked; one of Luke’s friends that was included in his circle of ‘family’ too.

Wedge seemed to be interested in the doings of a smuggler organization. Mara guessed that like Luke, he secretly harbored the idea of joining a smuggling group and playing by his own rules.

It seemed to surprise him that Karrde’s group had so many formal rules to it, with regards to docking and procedures.

“It’s a business, like any other.” She informed him. “Despite the appearance.”

Wedge smiled. “I guess so.”

“I hear that shipments to the Pinnacle Base are going well, too.” He said.

Mara raised an eyebrow; it was Wedge’s way of showing that he knew things too. Not everyone was privy to the knowledge that a new rebellion, a Resistance, was growing again.

“It is.” She replied blankly, not giving away as much as she knew. “They’re much more organized than they used to be.

Wedge smiled lopsided; he knew that her Imperial upbringing probably made the Rebellion out to be some sort of a rag-tag bunch without rules. And for the most part, it was…but a successful one,

He got up from his desk to show her out, exchanging pleasantries along the way.

She shook his hand as she thanked him for her stay, and the accommodations that they had made for her.

“I hope I didn’t disrupt any of your assignments because of my request…or cause any disharmony.” She said; knowing that, even with her begrudging respect for the New Republic, all military had their rules.

Wedge shook his head. “Nah, I think what got them more was before they knew it was you.”

He tightly grinned. “I’ll admit that I didn’t know it was you who was heading up the Imperial Team – Good work on that, by the way. We are now able to plot our defense plans with more accuracy now.”

Mara nodded. “That was my only regret, and despite what it looks like, I didn’t do it to hide from anyone, including Luke.”

“The team that I had assembled, had been out of Imperial training for so long that they forgot the regiment that they needed. Not to say that the New Republic doesn’t have any regiment- it’s just different.”
Tilting his head to the side, he said. “There, I have to agree with you. Some people fit into Imperial Training… The others?- they join the New Republic.” He winked.

“Now, you won’t make Skywalker to too many laps on my behalf?” She said snidely, with a touch of humor.

Wedge snorted. “Of course I am…it’s my job.”

He paused and decided to take the chance, knowing that not many people dared. “You make him happy. I haven’t seen him this happy in years…you’re good for him.”

He paused one more time, and although it might be futile and bad for his health, but he chanced it anyhow. “Don’t ever make him unhappy, Jade.”

Mara grinned; her estimation of Antilles just rose by ten notches. Not many would have the guts to loosely threaten her. “I don’t plan to.” She said simply, holding her grin.

Wedge nodded. “As always, a pleasure seeing you, Jade.” He offered his hand. “Clear Skies tomorrow.”

She took his hand, shaking it with respect. “Thank you for the stay, Commander, and Clear Skies.”

Mara turned and strode out of Antilles’s office and turned the corner to head back to Luke’s room.

Not sensing him at all, Luke came up behind her, and then dropped his shields. <We’re not done yet.> He thought over to her.

Clearly, he had been waiting for her, and now that she could sense it, he was agitated.

Mara didn’t betray any bit of surprise. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She said casually as they walked.

“You know.” Luke growled over at her, not angry but just talking so that others didn’t hear him. “You can’t just say something like that and then leave me sitting there.”

She stopped and turned to stare at him, not saying anything.

“Mara…” He whined, and then looked around to see who might witness him chase after her like a love-sick Falleen.

“There’s not much else to say right now.” She said, and reached out. <<I’m not panicking when I think about our future.>>

“I count that as a success.” Mara said openly. <<Isn’t that enough for now?>>

She dropped her teasing demeanor; as much fun as it was riling him up, it was, in fact, the truth.

Luke stopped, and realized that he would just be being selfish if he was to ask more of her now. She was right; it was enough to thinking that she wasn’t as afraid as she used to be.

At one point in time, this would have been something that would have caused her to take two steps back, away from him. They were gaining some ground now; she had now taken one step forward.

He smiled; relaxing in that thought that she was willing to make the effort again.

He dropped his head, and shook it before he looked up at her coyly. “You don’t make it easy, do
“If I made it easy, that would mean that I wasn’t trying…wouldn’t it?” She smirked. “I like to think that you prefer it this way…and it works out well that I’m good at not making anything easy on you.”

Luke snorted, really wanting to kiss her in that moment. “It does.” He agreed with her. <I love you, Kitten.> 

He was about to step closer to her; her eyes were telling him that she wouldn’t deny him.

<<I love you too, Farmboy.>> Her mind touched his.

The chime sounded across the deck.

Luke sighed; one of these days, they were going to be somewhere that noises, devices, and droids wouldn’t interrupt them.


She nodded. “I’m going to freshen up…coming?”

Luke came and walked beside her, just enjoying feeling her presence again.

“Did everything go alright with Wedge?” He asked.

Mara knew he was avoiding the obvious, but given how disastrous it could get when they both knew that she’d be leaving soon, he was trying to be pleasant about it.

“It did.” She said without elaborating. “It just feels like I just got here.” She thought out loud as they approached the door of his room.

The door slid open.

Once inside, Luke reached out for her hand and gently pulled her in close, now that he could, in private.

“It still doesn’t feel real for me.” He said, looking into her eyes. “I still can’t believe that you’re here.”

His mouth came down, and covered her lips.

Mara could feel his passion through her whole body; the thrill went right through her, as it always did.

“So unfair.” She mumbled as their lips broke apart. <<I just found you.>>

He knew that she was talking about the whole time since they had revealed their feeling for each other; it was like the galaxy conspired to throw their lives into chaos just for its sheer amusement.

It had been close to four months since their ‘first date’, a milestone for each of them; Luke’s heart jumped as he thought about it. Nothing could make him feel the way that she did.

He nuzzled his cheek against her cheek, as he felt her feelings come across too, pure love washing over him.
She sent him an image of them sparring together, when the doctors were watching, and his face as she sent him images of them kissing.

He snorted, recalling how much he would have gladly taken her on the floor of the workout room, regardless of who was watching. And perhaps she would have agreed it to; she did spend the session teasing him with those images of how she wanted him to kiss her. But at the time, he was shocked and aghast that she thought such things about him…and then, he became aroused by those same thoughts, knowing that they mirrored his own.

Mara broke their embrace. “We have to get to the mess hall.” She said reluctantly.

“They’ll miss us.” Luke said before he came in for another kiss; neither one of them was moving in the direction of leaving.

“They will.” She mumbled between their lips. “I bet they saved us seats…” Her hand started to roam over his torso.

Luke pursed against her mouth again. “And left us a serving each, and extra dessert…” His hands slithered from around her waist, down to her hips.

“It would be bad if we missed that…” She agreed with her lips pressing on his.

“Bad…very bad…” He agreed, as he wanted to lead her over to his bunk.

He sensed it; her mind flashed on Horn – they would be abandoning Horn if they didn’t show up.

Luke stopped his attempt at moving her to the bed, and he sighed – that regretful sigh of being a bad friend if they didn’t show up.

He let go of her, and stepped back, trying to gain control over his body. He dropped his head, and pointed to the ‘fresher. “You first…” he grumbled.

Mara sighed, and nodded. She touched his shoulder as she walked by. <<Later…>> and she sent him one last quick image: her head thrown back in rapture, moaning his name.

Before the door closed, she heard him retort, “Tease!”

**

During the meal, Luke announced to the group that Mara like to buy them all a round of drinks in the pilot’s lounge after the meal, to thank them for their hospitality.

The Reds were growing more accustom to her and her ways; up until this point, they seemed to be a little stand-offish, as a group. One on one, Luke’s friends were warming up to her. Their general opinion of her started with the phrase, ‘once you get to know her…’.

At the meal, they sat separately from each other.

Luke sat with Hobbie and Sintu again; he wanted to make sure that Hobbie was recovering after his encounter with Mara. Other than his ego being bruised, he seemed to be alright.

Luke glanced down the table as he watched Mara conversing with Wes, Tycho and Horn.

She looked over at him a few times as she spoke.

Wes seemed interested in some more of Mara’s training, and she obliged him. Tycho had the opinion
that Alderaanian martial arts seemed to get overlooked.

As the meal began to break up, they were still talking and now Horn was speaking about Corellian dance-fighting.

“I’ve seen it.” Mara said. “It’s very good for balance…but a little impractical to study as a discipline.”

Horn frowned. “I don’t think so. It builds muscle memory.”

Mara chose to grin tightly. “That it does.” She decided to end their conversation on a position note.

She reached out towards Horn. It was strange to sense someone else’s mind other than Luke. <<You ready to do this?>>

Horn avoided her gaze but lifted up his tray to return it to the station. <As ready as I’ll ever be./>

<<It won’t be that bad.>> She followed him and place her try down on top of his.

Luke followed close behind.

“Pilot’s lounge?” Luke asked as they looked at him.

Horn pursed his lips in a straight line, and then answered, putting on his usual bravado. “Let’s do this.”

The three of them walked over to the adjacent room in relative silence, and Luke could sense Horn’s nervous energy.

The room was empty, as the Reds were probably just stopping at their rooms before coming over, but they would be there soon.

Luke came up with the idea to bring in Mara’s music collection to play in the back ground, and went back to his room to retrieve his data pad.

Mara went to the cooler that she had brought in when she had first arrived to the Liberty, and removed several bottles of ale, lining them up on the counter.

Horn had been quiet until that point. “So when did you know that you had a Force-gift?” He asked.

“I didn’t know that I didn’t have one.” She said blankly, arranging the bottles. “I always knew… that’s why He chose me.”

Horn nodded, realizing that this might not be a good line of questioning for her.

Mara sensed that he reproached himself for asking, but then she decided to answer it the best way she knew how. “He, The Emperor, told me that my talents came through Him…Luke taught me otherwise.”

She handed him a bottle, and offered to toast it together.

Horn smirked over to her, and tapped his bottle against hers.

“So, other than the obvious…why does Booster calls you ‘the cop’?” She grinned amused at him, changing the subject.
Horn cringed. “Mirax didn’t tell you that it was my father that sent her father to Kessel?”

Mara’s eyes widened. “No, she failed to mention that.”

“She forgave me…but Booster hasn’t… yet.” Horn said after swallowing the mouthful of ale.

He looked at the bottle he was drinking from. “Good stuff.” He murmured.

“Yeah, I figured that they wouldn’t have it out here.” She said dismissively, wanting get back to the story of why in hot-hells did Booster get sent to Kessel.

Before she could ask another question, Luke walked in with Wedge and Hobbie.

“I think you should play ‘The Rebel Collection’.” Hobbie said as he winked at Mara. “Hiya Jade.”

Mara narrowed her gaze, knowing exactly what he was referring to.

Wedge came and sat beside her at the makeshift bar. Mara handed him an ale.

Antilles looked at the label, then took a swig, and swallowed. “Thanks Jade.”

“No problem Veggies.” She mumbled.

Horn almost spit out the mouthful of ale he had, and started chuckling. “Did I forget to mention that Mara and Mirax have met?”

“Yes, you did.” Wedge muttered before he took another sip. “Hey Horn, did I forget to mention who will be running laps tomorrow in front of the Squad?”

Mara snorted.

Luke and Hobbie came over after they had set up sound equipment, and the music began to play over the system.

“So Jade, I never did find out how you got your hands on this music.” Hobbie said as he took a bottle from her.

“Simple…” she said. “I knew someone in the ‘Department of Information’ – which was really just the first stop on the way to anything that was being censored. They made a copy, and then sent it up the chain to where all copies were to be destroyed and cases were to be escalated.”

“So I ended up with quite a collection.” She ended her story quickly.

“I’ll say so.” Wedge added. “If what Luke has is anything to go by, it looks like you saved anything and everything… I even saw things that my parents used to listen to… Bordellato… Vinchini… Narra…”

Mara smiled. “Bordellato was one of my favorites to dance to.”

Luke and Hobbie looked perplexed.

“It’s a great story.” Horn said.

“A great Corellian story.” Wedge added.

Mara snorted about the Corellian pride. “It was banned because of its message.”
The two men proudly smiled.

“It’s a true story that happened during the Corellian Rebellion; between Sellonia and Trallus.” She explained. “There was this woman, Dellato, was Sellonian; she seduced the invading Trallus officers, one by one, and killing them off…she worked her way up the chain of command, eliminating each one as she went… until they caught her, and defiantly, they hung her.”

“I saw it danced once.” Horn said. “It was amazing.”

“It’s a long song.” Wedge added. “And well, they didn’t usually let children know that meaning of it.” He smirked over to Horn.

The others looked at them, but Mara held a knowing smile.

“The rhythm of the song is constant, and song is seductive.” Horn explained. “So it’s kinda a point of Corellian pride…if…”

“…If a man can keep up with the beat of Bordellato in the bedroom.” Wedge said proudly, before he sipped again from his ale.

Mara shook her head and rolled her eyes. “The song is thirteen minutes long.” She muttered. “And for the record, it’s the female dancer who does all the work in that performance.” She winked.

Luke chuckled before he took a sip from his own drink.

Soon, the rest of the Reds showed up, and sat in groups at the tables.

Mara witness Luke look over at Horn, and though she didn’t hear the mental conversation between the two, she could assume that she knew what it was about.

She watched as Luke stepped away, towards the center of the room.

He tapped on the side of his bottle, until the voices in the room died down, and he had their attention.

Wedge came off his seat at the bar to stand beside Luke.

“Friends…” Luke addressed them. “As some of you are aware, that myself and Mara Jade are Force-sensitive…we’d like to announce that there is another Sensitive among us.”

The group stopped, and Mara could sense that they weren’t scared, but curious.

Luke continued. “This person has labored with the idea of telling anyone else, but has decided to share this with all of you”

Wedge stepped up. “It goes without saying that this falls under our promise to each other as Reds.”

He said, looking out at the room; knowing that they all shared in their circle of protection. As their commanding officer, he knew they would respect this oath.

Several heads nodded, and looked about the room.

Mara didn’t sense any sort of shift in the room, yet.

Standing beside her, Horn cleared his throat, directing the room’s attention. “It’s me.” He said. “I’ve been training with Luke since he joined us on Coruscant.”

The room, seemed surprised, but not shocked; they were surprised that he was telling them, but not
that he was Force-sensitive.

Horn turned his head and saw Mara grinning; she nodded to encourage him.

“I don’t know if I’m going to be a Jedi, but for right now, I’m just learning.” He finished.

Luke smiled over to his friend. “So, I’d like to invite you to congratulate Corran in his endeavor.” His put his hands together and started the quiet applause, and he was quickly joined by the others.

“And in celebration of this occasion, we’d like to invite you to enjoy watching one of our practice sessions.” Luke smirked as Wedge, standing beside him, looked surprised, and went back to his seat at the bar.

Luke stepped over to a table beside him and took a bottle cap in front of Tycho. “Normally, the studies of a Jedi are a fairly serious matter. However, every once and a while, we can get a bit of fun out of it.” He held up the bottle cap, smiling. “So for one night only, we’d like you all to experience what has been nickname ‘Jedi Bottle Cap Racing’.”

Horn walked over to Luke, holding up his own bottle cap.

She felt it was her turn, so Mara walked over to the other men. She looked out over the tables until she saw what she wanted.

Hobbie jumped when he saw the bottle cap in front of him rise and fly across the room into Mara’s hand.

“Thanks Hobbie.” She remarked with a wink.

“The rules are pretty simple to the first round.” Luke said as he walked over the nearest wall and placed his bottle cap on it and stepped away as the cap stayed in place.

Mara and Horn did the same; both of them backed away from the wall with a hand extended, holding the small object against the wall by use of the Force.

Luke’s cap started to move. “The first one to have their cap make five circuits around the ceiling… wins.”

The cap slid up the wall to the flat of the ceiling of the room.

Mara directed her cap beside Luke’s on the ceiling. And slowly, Horn moved his there too.

Wedge, for his logic, could sense that the room was taking this more-seriously than they should. “Five credits says that Jade beats Skywalker.” He called out.

“I’ll take that!” Wes said from across the room.

“Five credits says that Horn makes the course!” Tycho added in.

“I’m on that one.” Hobbie said skeptically.

The room started chattering as predictions and bets were handed around, all staring at the ceiling.

“We need an official?...” Luke asked.

“I’ll do it!” Sintu stepped up, amazed, still watching the ceiling where the caps now rested. She picked up one of the leaflets off of a nearby table, and waved it as if it was a racing flag. “On your
mark… get set…” She paused. “Go!” She waved the flag.

The bottle caps started off at a pretty steady pace, and Horn kept up with both Luke and Mara. By the fourth lap, he was straining to keep up with them, but he was holding his own.

Horn’s bottle cap fell a bit behind, but he finished it just slightly behind the other two.

“Official call…” Sintu announced. “Skywalker, first place…Jade, second…and finishing the course, Corran Horn!”

The room cheered them on, as credits were passed from table to table.

Luke stepped up, as his bottle cap dropped from the ceiling into his hand. “Well, you all seemed to like that…who is up for a round of ‘Jedi Bottle Cap Obstacle Course’?”

After a brief explanation of the rules, Luke got the other pilots involved.

Most of them moved to sit around the bar area to view the event better, and Wedge decide he would keep score on one of the display boards that was in the room already.

Some of the Reds decided they would help out by creating the course as the next levels would come up.

And the rules were applied; Luke had to perform his course, with his back to the course and using only his left hand. Mara also had to complete her circuits with her back to the course. Horn, however, could face forward during his turn, given that he was new to learning the skill.

Luke explained that moving smaller objects wasn’t necessarily more difficult, but that the concept of them was often the struggle; size matters not, he told the group.

Luke came back from the other side of the room, where he had placed the bottle cap in order to start the game when Mara spoke up.

She looked at Horn. “So has Luke explained the use of Vapaad on an opponent yet?” She grinned wickedly, glancing over at Luke.

“What’s Vapaad?” Horn asked.

“It’s the use of emotional manipulation in order to distract your opponent.” Luke growled, glaring at Mara. “And in case that you weren’t aware, someone likes to fight dirty.”

Horn chuckled. “Isn’t this just a game?” He asked.

Mara’s gaze had locked on Luke. “No…it’s a re-match.” She growled back.

“No cheating Jade.” Luke warned, as he turned around, facing away from the bottle cap starting point.

Her mouth opened in order to refute his allegation, when the bottle cap slid across the floor and into Luke’s hand.

She growled as Luke walked away to go place the bottle cap at the starting point again. As he walked back, the cap slid past him and into Mara’s waiting hand.

Giving him a little shove in the shoulder as he passed, Mara wasn’t about to give in without a fight, as she walked over to place the bottle cap for Horn’s turn.
Surprisingly, the bottle cap passed her as she came back to the bar. Horn had progressed farther than she thought; his control and speed impressed her.

It was Horn’s turn to place the cap at the starting point.

Wedge marked off that they all had finished the first round successfully.

By the fifth round, and the spectators had caught on to the game, the bets were flying.

It wasn’t a difficult course, but Mara remembered that the concentration that was needed to keep an exercise like this could take its toll as well.

Horn was holding his own with Luke and Mara, but he began to get a bit of sweat beading on his forehead.

By the tenth round, Horn was finding it hard to hold on, and even Luke had to admit that the course has gotten more difficult, and Reds had gotten quite bit louder than he thought they would.

Horn took a good swig of ale before he attempted the last of this round. He reached out his hand and directed the bottle cap through the course.

The Reds had gotten involved by adding things to the course, and there were some points now, where there wasn’t a direct line of sight of the bottle cap; they had made tunnels with turned over chairs, and serpentine shapes with empty ale bottles.

Horn’s cap was about to make the last series of passes when he lost control of the small object. It had gone behind one of the tunnels, and refused to come out.

Corran frowned, and reached out for it, and after a few moments, he exhausted his strength; putting his hand down, and breathing hard.

He looked over at Luke and Mara. “That’s it…I think I’m done.”

“One more try?” Luke asked, please that Horn had made it this far, but still as a teacher, he felt the need to push his student.

Horn rose up his hand to try again, and waited. The bottle cap, wherever it was, refused his call. He broke his concentration again, and panted as he released his hold. “Nope…now, I’m done.” And he shook his head.

There was a sigh from the rest of the group, and Wes stood up to collect his bets. “I told you that he would make it this far!”

Horn seemed to like the idea that they were betting for him instead of against his efforts.

Wedge called the room to order again. “I see we still have two competitors…and I hear this will be a re-match?” He said.

Mara looked over at Luke. “You’re going down…you know this, right?” She smiled wickedly at him.

“Gloves off, Jade?” Luke asked, putting on his game-face for this one, and smiled back.

With Horn out of the way, he knew that she was going to start her usual tactics.

“It’s on.” She said before she went to go pick up the bottle cap and put it back at the beginning.
The betting started a furry as it was now serious.

Luke stretched and shook out his hand, as he readied himself for the next round.

The addition to the level was declared, and Luke turned around to start the course- a hush fell in the room.

The small cap followed the entire path that was predesigned and the addition before it flew into Luke’s hand – and a cheer went up and he held up the bottle cap.

He walked back to that starting point, and locked on her eyes as he walked back.

<<You’re not going to win this time.>> Mara declared.

<I think I will> He answered smartly. As the bottle cap started to move with her turn, he sent over to her. <Do you know how wet you get when I suck on your nipples?> and sent over the image to match.

The bottle cap immediately paused.

Then it resumed its pace, arriving at her hand. She let out a hard breath, and turned her head in his direction as he looked away, wearing a smirk. “Don’t start with me.” She warned.

Luke smiled seductively at her as he held her hand for a moment before he took the bottle cap from her. Their flesh zinged against each other.

He walked back to the starting point. <I have no intention of starting something that I can’t finish, Hell-Kitten.> He sent over to her.

The addition to the course was suggested. This time when he attempted his turn, he had to rise up his shields and block her out, to her surprise; there would be no retaliation from her.

On Mara’s turn, Luke started talking to her immediately in her mind.

<Do you remember that night, after Bremem’s hearing?- I wanted to take you so badly right there on your kitchenette counter…you would have let me too.> He reminded her of the tone he had used with her that night, and he knew that it thrilled her to her core. She wasn’t normally a submissive person, but with him, it wouldn’t be a fight.

The bottle cap paused several times before it completed the course.

Mara refused to make eye contact with him as she walked back from placing the cap at the starting point, but Luke could see the blush on her cheeks; she had thought of that night, and how commanding he had been towards her… and she liked it.

On the next rounds, Luke sent her an image of a fantasy that she knew she had; the bottle cap halted completed.

He looked over at her, and she quaked in her place, trying with all her might to get that blasted cap back on track. It wouldn’t budge.

The room fell silent and waited with baited breath.

“Ahhhh!” Mara moaned as she dropped her head, and gave up. “Kriff it!” She muttered under her breath, as she turned to glare at Luke.
He crossed his arms on his chest, and grinned that stupid shavit-eating grin.

“I give up.” She mumbled.

And the room cheered.

Mara stewed while looking at Luke. «Just wait until you get back to the room, Farmboy.>>

He was accepting congratulations, but still locked his deep sapphire eyes on her. «I think we both know who is going to be in trouble when we get back to the room, Kitten…are you going to purr for me?»

She responded by smiling slowly, secretly hoping that she was the one ‘in trouble’ as he had promised.

TBC
Weapons of Choice- Part 5

Chapter Summary

Quote: Now, she could sense that he was purposefully taking his time, torturing her as punishment, but she still watched in the mirror, with her back to him. She hugged herself, even though it was warm in the room, her skin still dimpled.

Characters: Luke, Mara

Chapter Notes

**
So I committed the cardinal sin of fanfic, I stole my own plot bunny…from the chapter ‘Could Have, Should Have, Would Have’-- I really enjoyed writing that chapter and wanted to use some of the energy that was stored there. These past 5 chapters were kind of a ‘remember when’ for the early days of LM’s relationship from my stories….

And, in case you didn’t think this would be here… SMUT-FEST!..12 pages of SMUT-FEST!

And pillow-talk with plot! ~wink!

**

Aboard The Liberty

Mara said her ‘goodbyes’ to the Reds quickly. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the look that Luke was giving her, and it made her nervous…and eager to the point that she could start to feel her skin simmer.

As he looked over the shoulder of one of his friends, his face may had been cordial, but his piercing sapphire stare told her that his thoughts were otherwise occupied.

Luckily, Mara was closer to the door of the pilot’s lounge then he was, and was able to excuse herself before she knew that he’d be able to get away.

When she left, she had heard the group starting to ask him about different training methods.

Mara’s gate on the metal floor of the deck on that way back to Luke’s room, was rhythmic. The sound fast foot footsteps echoed her eagerness.

She and Luke had spent the latter half of their game, playfully teasing each other…until it changed in tone.

Somehow, he had tapped into a memory that had been floating around on her head lately; the night that he came over after the Bremem hearing.
Possibly aided by the drink in his system, Luke had been very commanding that night. It surprised Mara that she would let him be that way, but when she thought about how deep his voice had gotten and look in his eyes, it made her heart skip a beat.

It was that resonate voice that he used, that Mara longed to hear, and perhaps the reason why, on her last visit to Yavin, she had mentioned that she would like to hear him speak more to her.

There was something of the low tones of his voice that didn’t leave her mind.

Despite his farm-boy mannerisms, she knew what was lurking in the shadows; she had pushed it out of him more than once.

It wasn’t dangerous, it was seductive of how commanding he could be at times.

The door to the room opened; she grinned with glee that perhaps she could coax it out again.

Mara knew that Luke wasn’t far behind her.

Reaching the room, the lights came up with a glare. Mara rushed around the room, turning them down to a light glow.

She quickly grabbed the green silk night shift that she had worn the previous night. With speed that surprised her, she stripped down and slid on the short gown. She touched her neck with the perfume that she had brought with her, and then stored it away in her case.

In haste she went around the room, moving things out of the way, but avoided the area where Luke had assembled his flight suit; she knew why it was like that, in that configuration.

Mara reached out her senses, and she could tell that he was about to leave the pilot’s room, but he was not alone, trying not to be impolite. But he too, would rather be in his room with her than lecturing on the Force right now.

As a last thought, she went back and fumbled through her well-packed case to find her data pad. She flipped through the files to find the right music, and set the volume accordingly. The soft, seductive music played in the background.

In her mind, she suddenly, felt and heard his heavy, racing footsteps on the metal floors of the deck, now that he had left the lounge too.

Mara turned to the large mirror on the wardrobe doors, and flipped her hair over, then back again. As short as it was, that little action put some volume in to it, and pre-empted the tussled-look that it would soon have.

As she looked at herself, she could see the flush on her cheeks and perk of her nipples that the thought of wanting him caused her. Not to mention, the fluttering in her stomach had begun; no one had ever made her feel this way.

The door opened. Luke strode through, determined, and his eyes darker than they were since she had left the pilot’s lounge, if that was possible.

He stopped just inside the threshold of the room, letting the door close behind him.

Mara looked over her shoulder at him, from where she stood at the mirror. She swallowed slightly, as she found that her mouth was suddenly dry.
From his serious face, she wasn’t sure what sort of mood he was in, but in his senses, a dark cloud had set in; she wasn’t afraid of this veil on him.

Luke stood watching her, his gaze intense, and his shoulders raised and lowered with each deep breath he took. He crossed his arms against his chest.

Mara could feel his eyes on her, and she turned back to the mirror to feign adjusting her hair uselessly. His eyes were like fingers, and she could almost feel a touch on her skin.

She looked back over her shoulder again, to see what he was doing, if anything, for the mirror provided no assistance to see him at this angle.

Her own breathing became faster, but deep.

A grin grew on Luke’s face, and as Mara’s eyes drifted down his body, the fabric of his fatigues across his groin was taunt and being tested.

She opened her mouth to say something, but she was at a loss for words, so she closed it again.

“You lost tonight.” Luke said slowly, still holding his look, beating down on her. “You know what that means…”

He walked towards his bunk; keeping a distance, but stopped directly behind her.

Mara turned her head back to look in the mirror, now could see his reflection just standing slightly to the side of her.

She met his eyes through the polished glass, and shook her head slowly.

“I get what I want.” He said quietly, deeply, emphasizing his words.

Mara held herself to keep from showing the shiver that just entered her.

She played with the end of a strand of hair by her face, as she watched him take off his jacket of his fatigues.

Underneath, he wore a simple t-shirt that was still snug enough that it stretched on the muscles of his upper arms and across his chest.

Luke wasn’t a big man, but his frame and his build suggested someone who had worked all their life, gaining physical strength and power in his compact shape.

She could see the outlines and the curves of his body though the stretched fabric. She knew that skin well; it was warm, smooth and still had a light bronze tone to it.

Mara continued to watch him as he broke his gaze, and started to remove his boots. Rather than the clumsy effort that he had put in the previous night, he was strangely meticulous this time, sitting down on the edge of the bunk, pulling away the straps that held his footwear in place.

She watched, with interest, the movements of his body. Slightly disappointed, Mara bit her lip, when he stood up and turned away from her as he undid his belt and then the top button of his trousers.

Luke didn’t remove his trousers immediately. He could feel her eyes on him, curious and wanting; he wasn’t about to end the show for her.

He stretched his shoulders before he started to lift the edge of his t-shirt from the waistband of his
undone trousers; Mara would get a view of his back, and the muscles in his shoulders.

He didn’t have to reach out very far in his senses to feel her desire for him; her mind was electric with her thoughts and energy driving her mad, and he tampered down his own excitement.

Still facing away from her, Mara’s curiosity was sparked when he started to remove his belt. Her eyes followed his hands as he undid the thigh strap on his right leg; he was slightly bent over, which also gave a fine view of the curve of his buttocks.

Once the strap was removed, he wrapped his belt around his hand and placed it and his blaster pack on top of his dresser beside his lightsaber.

Now, she could sense that he was purposefully taking his time, torturing her as punishment, but she still watched in the mirror, with her back to him. She hugged herself, even though it was warm in the room, her skin still dimpled.

Luke turned back, not looking at her, but giving her a side profile view as he unzipped the fly of his trousers.

Mara shifted her weight, rubbing her thighs against each other in anticipation, pushing the lips of her vulva together, feeling the friction.

The waistband lower, and Mara watched it travel down, and then her gaze traveled back up his body; revealing the black boxer briefs that encased the tight angle of where the top of his thigh met the curve of his buttocks, and the distinct concave of his aroused manhood.

Luke stepped out and away from the trousers; she didn’t notice when he used the Force to call them to his hand, and began to fold them, cruelly slow, knowing that she was still watching him.

She had watched him that night, after the Bremem hearing, as he undressed in front of her for the first time, and he knew that she liked watching him just as much as he liked watching her.

He placed his folded trousers with the rest of his clothes, and then slowly turned back to looked at her face in the mirror; his eyes were beyond sapphire, his pupils dilated and his gaze concentrated.

Mara gasped slightly, and then pressed her lips together to keep from saying or uttering too much, locked on his eyes.

He stepped towards her and stopped; he tilted his head and now, his eyes drifted down her body and then up again.

“Take it off.” He ordered, under control and deeply, as if her night shift offended him. “I want to see you…all of you.”

Mara’s mouth open as if to naturally resist, but then she closed it again, knowing that she would still give him what he wanted.

She looked away, not watching his face.

Slowly, she moved, slipping the small straps of her night shift from off her shoulders, and controlling them as they slid down her arms, revealing the swell of her breasts as the fabric floated away from her body.

The silk puddled on the floor at her feet, leaving her exposed to his eyes.
Her hands hung at her sides.

All she could hear was his deep breathing. And he was silent, and watching.

Mara suddenly felt self-conscious of her body as she could feel his eyes on her. She dared to look up, into the mirror.

Timidly, she chanced it; Luke was looking at her in marvel and awe.

“Do you know how beautiful you are?” He asked, his voice imbued with desire.

He wasn’t looking at all of her body now, just her hair. “It shines like gold in the sunlight…do you know that?” He asked.

Mara shook her head just once, slowly, under the spell of his presence.

“And your eyes…” Luke stepped closer again; coming only one pace away from her. “As vivid as a precious jewels.” He smiled sardonically. “I’m still learning, you know…to read them.”

She raised her eyebrows in a flash, amused. There was a heat starting in her belly and travelling up her skin; the involuntary flush of her skin that he longed to see.

His smile started to fade, but his lips stopped in a slightly up-turned position, telling her that he was pleased.

“And your skin…” He said huskily. “There’s nothing else that I’d rather have touching my skin…so fair…so perfect.”

Mara felt the touch on her mind, as he did before he wanted to communicate with her through the Force. This time though, he pulled back, and changed his mind.

Luke stepped closer to her again. This time, he was directly behind her, looking back at her in the reflection of the mirror.

She could feel the heat radiating off of his body. By now, she desperately wanted him to touch her, to come in contact with her, to let his hands slide down her skin.

Her lips parted and she sucked in air quickly when she sensed that he might move, but he didn’t.

His eyes had left her face and were looking at her breasts now, Mara noticed.

Proud and round, the rosy-brown tips were hardened without the aid of any attention.

The flush on her skin had travelled up to her neck now, displaying the fine freckles across her collarbone.

“I imagine that’s where you touch yourself first when you think about me?” He asked, not requiring an answer.

His eyes flicked up to see her reaction to his question; she nodded once.

“Touch them.” He said simply. “I want to see how you touch them when you want me.” He spoke quietly, yet in control.
Tentatively, Mara’s right hand came up to her collarbone, and her graceful fingers began to slide down her collarbone, intent on its path on her heaving chest.

Luke watched over her right shoulder as her hand cupped the supple mound, pushing it up until the mass filled her hand. With her thumb, she made circles around her own nipple while using her hand to squeeze the flesh.

Her eyes rolled closed. She bit her lower lip, thinking that her hand was his hand, as it did in her fantasies when they were separated.

The rest of her skin around the area dimpled up her sternum and down her arm to her elbow, making the flesh come alive.

“Relax your legs.” He said, bringing her back to reality.

Mara’s eyes opened, and she knew what he was referring to; she stepped one of her legs off to the side.

She watched in the mirror as he witnessed the lean, shapely muscles obey him; his scrutiny admired the shape, and travelled back up by means of regarding her backside too, and then to her shoulders, and resting at her face.

“That’s not the only thing you do when you think about me, is it?” Luke raise one eyebrow and turned his face slightly.

She shook her head once, still massaging her breast.

“You touch yourself in other places too, don’t you?” He questioned.

Mara nodded once.

“Show me.”

She looked off to the side; his tone, she wasn’t sure if it was a question or a demand. She felt reluctant to show him the most-intimate way that she pleasured herself in his name.


Mara looked back at his face, and his features had been slowly softening, but now he took on a stern expression that told her there were no options here.

Her unoccupied left hand slid over her hip, gazing her abdomen below her navel, and skimmed the skin until her red-gold curls.

His eyes fixated on the way that she used her thumb and her fore-finger to open her majora lips, the remaining digits oscillated back and forth; started off measured and then increasing in momentum.

She fluttered her eyes closed again as she let her fingers slip inside her.

Her hand noticeably worked with superb, smooth movements.

Hearing him hiss in air, she opened her eyes. The motion of his shoulders, and the anguish on his face, told her that he was touching himself as he watched her.

She felt the touched of his mind again; he was truly resisting the urge to speak to her in this manner, and finding it hard to deny himself that comfort.
Instead, she felt him reach out in the Force, unifying the both of them.


Mara nodded. Her fingers were doing what came natural to her, without tease, but with intent, bringing her closer to her first wave of ecstasy.

“How wet?” He asked quickly.

She was about to answer, gulping, but then he spoke.

“Stop.” He uttered.

He exhaled slowly, she sensed he was gaining control over himself as he closed his eyes and the movement of his body stopped as well.

He must have been close to rapture himself, and knew that she was too.

He took one more cleansing breath as he opened his eyes, tilted his chin down, and regained his composure.

“Give me your hand.” He jerked his chin at the left hand.

Mara moved gracefully, bringing up the hand that had almost brought her to climax.

Luke’s eyes flashed down to her other hand as it slid to the opposite breast and started massaging the heightened flesh. He grinned with satisfaction that she was still wanting to please him.

She looked away as his hand cupped her left elbow and guided her fingers to his mouth.

She gasped as his tongue swirled around each finger, licking her juices from off of them.

“So sweet.” He hummed before taking the next finger into his mouth.

Mara rolled her head back, thinking of how expertly that same tongue had made her clit dance with excitement.

The thought of his lapping tongue and his expert intimate kiss made her gasp.

Luke looked at her, holding her look as his mouth descended on her smallest finger.

She opened her mouth, surprised, as she finally felt his touch; his hot right hand came up on her hip.

The palm of his hand flattened on her skin, flourishing the area with small dimples, making circles at the joint.

He took the elbow that he was holding in his left hand and moved up her forearm, overtop her hand, interlacing his fingers between hers. He led her hand to rest on her abdomen.

He came in close; his heated skin came in contact with her backside. He must have removed his bottoms without her noticing, freeing himself.

His solid girth pressed against the cheeks of her buttocks.

His opposite hand was now jealous that he wasn’t touching her skin. Without a second thought, his right hand stopped at her hip and came to relieve her own hand’s ministrations to her breast.
It slipped under her hand, and cupped the soft flesh of her breast. He pitched her nipple, making her gasp with a twinge of euphoria.

“You’re sopping wet now, aren’t you?”

She nodded; there was no denying it, and no stopping it either.

Mara watched him lean in and kiss her shoulder, his eyes not moving from hers; she shuddered.

He pinched the delicate nub again, she gasped loudly.

“Is your pussy twittering?”

She nodded again, feeling slightly embarrassed.

He pinched the tip again, and squeezed the mound at the same time.

“What does it want?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but her voice was gone.

He pinched and squeezed again, not releasing, holding her breast tightly in his hand.

“It wants you.” She whispered. Her voice sputtering, and then she bit her lower lip.

He must have been satisfied, somewhat; Luke released his grasp of her skin, but not his hold.

“What does it want?- tell me?” He hissed. The pinch and squeeze followed his question.

“Does your sweet, wet pussy want my cock inside you?” He asked in her ear.

“Yes.” Mara quivered.

“Tell me.” He ordered. Both his hands squeeze the flesh beneath them.

She winced. “My sweet, wet pussy wants your cock.” She uttered.

“How do you want it?” He grinned slyly before he kissed deeper on her shoulder.

Before she could answer, his voice charmed her. “Are you going to tell me that you like it slow and gentle?...pretending that you’re a good girl?” He asked before he pressed another kiss at the join of her neck and collar.

“Or are you going me that you like it hard, fast and deep?” Luke bit into the skin on her neck.

Mara couldn’t control herself anymore, moaned, and bucked back at him.

He smiled, looking back, through the mirror, at how helpless she was.

Luke took her left hand that had been rested on her abdomen, until now, and guided it forward to the frame of the mirror in front of them.

He removed his right hand and took her right wrist to guide her hand to the opposite side of the frame.

In this position, Mara tilted her body forward, causing her backside to push put and present herself to him.
Luke’s eyes had gone so dark that they were almost black now, his breathing, she noticed, was deep and labored.

He went between their bodies, and she could feel the moistened tip of his swollen phallus at the entrance of her fervent cunny.

In her mind, she wanted to implore him to just enter her now. *Please? ...please?* Her mind pleaded. *Oh, gods, please?*

“Say it.” He demanded. “Say, what you just secretly begged for.”

Mara swallowed. “Please?” she asked nervously.

“Please what?” He taunted her.

If he wanted her to be his bad girl, she decided that she would do so. “Please *kriff* my sweet, wet pussy?” She intentionally lisped, and smirked.

He smirked back at her, pushing his tongue inside his mouth into his cheek.

She sucked in air deeply when she felt him move. Only he didn’t enter her; he rocked his cock back and forth between her labia lips, covering his cock with her juices.

The ridged veins on his shaft on her lips, and the nudge of the tip of his cock on her clit, was driving her insane.

“You do know what I love?” He asked, still staring mischievously into her eyes; he knew what his motions were doing to her.

“I love the moment right before I enter you.” He explained. “When you’re all wet and *worked up*… when you’re just ready to explode…when I can tell that your pussy is so *twitchy* that nothing will satisfy you until I enter you…and you moan.”

He rocked faster and then began to slow as he felt he was sufficiently lubricated by her.

“You moan so loud that I’m sure everyone knows what I’m doing to you…” He continued. “…and that you *love it*."

A flash of anger came over her face at being found out.

“And do you know what I love even more?” He asked, his smirk replaced with a look of a predator about to descend on his prey.

“I love it just as I enter you…and you’re tight….so *tight*….so *snug*…fits me like a glove.” His eyes briefly. “*So perfect*….and then…”

Mara felt him reposition himself so that he was on the cusp of her entrance, but not moving.

“And then…” he continued. “I love the sound of our bodies as I *kriff* you senseless.” And with that, he pushed his girth inside her, forcing her lips apart.

Her mouth gaped, and she moaned as he promised that she would, her legs shivered.

Luke held himself inside her, feeling his own pleased fulfilled in the moment; feeling glorious, amazing and indescribable. He panted through clenched teeth, bringing himself back under control.
Mara’s arms held steady, braced her body away from the mirror; she could see the look of insurmountable, beguiling, anguish on his face in the reflection.

She looked away, and swallowed, then came back to his face as she began to feel him move inside her.

Back and forth, in and out, pumping and pushing; he pace was hungered and deliberate.

Luke’s right hand came back to her hip, and pulled her body back to him, helping him keep his speed. When he established their speed, his hand slid under her breast, and squeezed the swell in time to his movements.

He would speed up without warning; the sound of their bodies coming together, and the sound as he grunted and she panted filled the room.

He slowed, coaxing her moans, eliciting his name slipping from her lips.

Mara wanted to remove her hands from the mirror frame; wanting to dig her nails into his thighs as she arched her back and tilted her pelvis which would allow him deeper inside her.

He must have heard her thoughts, and the position that she wanted to be in. But instead of obliging, Luke’s left hand came off the mirror and hooked her arms behind her, but more firmly than they had been only the day before when they playfully teased each other.

Now with her hands behind her back, she could plant her palms on his abdomen, sprayed open on his flesh.

In her new position, Luke hammered into her with resounding speed again.

He could feel it coming; she sat at the top of a crest for some time now, and he waited for her ‘tell’.

Unexpectedly, he felt the spasm of her muscles around him, fanatically pulsing; moaning in spurts, she let loose an incoherently string of what could have been words.

He held her body to avoid her falling towards the mirror.

Luke stopped moving. He waited until she dropped her head and started taking cleansing breaths.

Mara, when she started to recover, looked up into the mirror to see him smiling; he had watched her fully climax for him, and he was enthralled.

<So beautiful> She heard his mind say to her. Clearly, it had slipped out.

“I love you.” She whispered to him in the mirror.

He licked his lips and leaned in to kiss her shoulder. “I love you too.” He whispered back before he gestured to release her arms.

Mara shook her head and stopped him. “No…I like it.” She said in a sultry voice. “Take me again?” she asked. “Make me come for you, again.” She said.

Luke raised his eyebrows in mild shock, and smirked. “Anything for my lady.” He said and kissed her shoulder again.

This time, he slid his right hand down the front of her body, past her navel, moving her lips apart, he found the hood of her clit, and moved the nub with his thumb, as his thrusts started again.
She hummed, rocking her head from side to side, enraptured with him.

He chose to gradually increase his speed, and truthfully he doubted he could last much longer; watching her in the mirror just fed his lust and the trill in his stomach was starting to be painful, demanding a release.

As a distraction, he started to kiss her neck and earlobe, just wanting more and more of her flesh on his.

“Mara…” He moaned into her neck. “My sweet…precious… Mara.” He whispered.

His groin banged up against her cushion back side, and he could see every thrust he made into her if he looked down.

Now, he was ready, but wanted to witness her climax again.

Without mercy, he pinched the hood of her clit, and forced himself harder inside her. The sound of the smack of their skin coming into contact echoed.

This time, she stopped moaning, and held her breath.

Releasing the air from her lungs, her whole body began to convulse; legs threatening to give way as they twitched too.

Luke couldn’t deny himself any longer and didn’t pause for her to recover. He didn’t break his pace, speed, or intensity.

He threw his head back as his body exploded a searing delivery into her walls. He bellowed into the night, and then came forward, resting his head on her shoulder, and kissing the skin on her neck.

His hand released her arms and he braced her as her legs fully shook. It was his turn to use the mirror frame to support their weight as they recovered.

Luke leaned on the frame, holding both of them, waiting for each of them to regained their strength.

She panted hot air from her mouth; his hot lips still at her earlobe.

When she could find the words, she gasped them out quietly. “Have you ever been like this with anyone else?” she stuttered quietly as her body still periodically, and involuntarily shook. She was curious if he had been this constant as a lover.

Luke paused and then smiled; she wasn’t asking out of jealousy, she wanted to know if she was the reason he responded this way.

He kept the same deep voice but came in closer to her ear. “No…” He paused and blinked slowly, considering his words and meeting her eyes in the mirror with a loving look. “Only for the woman who will be my wife.” He dragged his lips down to her shoulder and tenderly kissed her flesh.

He reach out to her mind for the second time since he had come into the room. <Only for her…only, ever, just for her.>

Mara trembled with his words. Before her body gave way, he must have sensed it, and caught her in his arms; pulling her up and cradling her as he took her over to the bed.

He lay her down, with room so that he could lie beside her.
Resting in his arms as she fully recovered, looking up at him, Luke stroked her hair away from her face, letting his finger graze along her skin. Her eyes fluttered closed, enjoying that he was near.

He leaned in and captured her mouth as he descended, delicately pursing on her soft lips.

“I love you.” she whispered, and added the soft moan of his name.

Luke’s arms braced her tighter. “And I love you… always.” He kissed her tenderly. “… and forever.”

They lay there, holding each other, as the music play softly in the back ground. Slowly, kissing each other, savoring their time.

His eyes were returning to an azure blue, but still remained deep an mystical. Mara knew it was out of her nature, but she reached up and stroked his cheek; still surprised that someone like him could be real.

People in her life always were something else than they pretended to be, for better or worse.

It was refreshing that with him, she got to see a person so genuine.

True, he had different aspects to his personality, and his abilities were beyond the capabilities of rational thought, but the man in front of her was always true to himself.

He was someone that she always wished she could be. As much as his love made her feel redeemable, she never felt as pure as him.

Looking back at her, he must have sensed that she had gone too far into thought and wanted her back in the moment with him again, and he kissed her soundly; capturing her lips, and he hummed playfully.

Luke had taken her hand that was resting on his chest, and played with it; slipping his fingers between hers, bringing her knuckle up to his face to nuzzle on his cheek and to kiss the top of her soft skin.

“Do you know how rare you’d be on Tatooine?” He asked; the question sounding odd to him too.

Mara was still recovering, her mind was at all limits, but she could still reason what he was saying. She shook her head gently on his shoulder.

“Look at this?” He said, holding his arm next to his, showing her the difference in their skin tone. “I looked almost pale when I went back… but they would think you were some kind of goddess if they saw you… your hair, your eyes, your skin.”

Mara snorted; she knew he was being comical for her benefit.

It was true that fair skin just wasn’t a desired attribute on the rim, the Core worlds admired it too.

“Definitely not some dirty farm hand.” He mumbled before letting her hand back down to his chest.

After a moment, she cleared her throat. “I get freckles easily.” She said softly. “.. too easily.”

She felt him shift a bit to look down at her. “I used to have an esthetician droid that used to remove them from me.” She mumbled.

Mara sighed. “A Q4 droid, designed for beauty treatments.” She huffed. “There’s a lot of maintenance to living in the Core.”

“Like what?” He squeaked, almost mocking her.

She sighed again before she began to list off her treatments. “Brow shaping, brow tint, eyelash tint, anti-aging eye treatment, pore cleansing, pore toning, lip tint, body scrub, skin plumper, manicure, pedicure, foot facial, moisturizing, detoxifying, laser skin treatments to remove wrinkles, age spots, freckling, scars…not to mention the hair removal…under arm, facial hair, bikini line…Basimillian…”

“You had facial hair?” He asked, surprised.

“Just on the sides…” She defended herself, self-conscious now. “My hair line came a little low…just baby hairs..” As she touched the side of her face beside her ear.

“What’s a Basimillian?” He asked.

She growled a bit, and he felt her stiffen up a bit. “It’s a procedure that they do on Basima.” She tilted her face up to look at him. “You know on Basima that they have a thing with body hair—they consider it “not pure”…so they remove all their hair…all over their bodies.”

“It was popular on the Capital for a time to do that…remove all your body hair, except on your head…especially on your genitals…and men too.” She tapped his chest for emphasis.

Like gasped. “How did they do that?” He wasn’t sure if he wanted to hear the answer.

“They put on this sticky film, and then rip off the hair.” She said simply, and she felt him twitch from the thought.

Mara chuckled at the thought of him fidgeting if he was ever to get something like that done.

“No, thank you.” He mumbled, then snorted at the thought.

He held her in silence, rocking her in his arms, and periodically kissed the top of her head.

The Force was still between them, like a thing present in the room.

“Did I show you the new skill I learned?” Luke asked.

He didn’t want to fall asleep. The idea that she would be leaving soon hung at the back of his mind, and he wanted to be present for every second until the time came. So he was determined to keep talking, even if it lasted right up until the end.

“No.” She said quietly.

“I was reading about Force-energy…” Luke explained. “Aside from Force-Push, Force-Lightning there’s a technique to absorb Force energy…”

Luke shifted his weight, and Mara obliged by coming off his shoulder and relaxing back down as he got comfortable.

“I think Corran has the gift…the readings said that only certain Force-users have it, and I keep getting shocked when I try it with the training remote.” He frowned.

“But when I try creating a Force-Shield, it seems to work.” He looked down at her. “Do you want to
Mara nodded, intrigued that such a thing could exist. She sat up a bit more, and pulled some of the sheets around her.

Luke reached out his hand, and slight sparks came from his fingertips until the arcs of energy formed a small sphere in front of him.

She gasped at the sight, and reach out her hand to touch it. The edges of it sizzled back, but it didn’t hurt her as it put up resistance to her touch.

“It’s like a shield…I can make bigger ones too.” Luke said, keeping his concentration on the task. “It’s the first skill to learning Force-Repulse.”

He could sense her question before she asked it.

“Force-Repulse is supposed to be like a sonic boom that can incapacitate, damage or kill.” He said quietly.

Luke was gentle person, and never relished the thought of ever training to kill someone, but knew it was necessary as a means of defense.

“The first step in learning to put yourself inside the Force-Shield.” He said.

He exhaled slowly, and the bubble faded.

“I have trouble doing it with my right hand.” He added as he flexed his left hand before bringing it back to his chest, taking her hand again.

Mara looked at him in amazement; his strength in the Force was truly a thing to be feared, and respected.

He looked back down at her. “And you? Have you been working on anything?”

She smiled. “Yes.”

“Yes?” He asked, slightly surprised.

“Yes…but it’s more subtle than what you’re been doing.” She said. “I’ve been meditating more lately. It’s strange to have to quiet my mind. I suppose it was because I was so dedicated to the job at hand, that it became my focus instead of my intentions.”

He radiated with pride for her. It wasn’t an easy thing to learn to control your mind, and most teachers had overlooked the importance of the strength of the mind in their writings; most of them assumed that a Jedi in training already had mental strength, which wasn’t always the case.

Luke pondered that thought for a moment; perhaps that was why the Jedi had started training children; they could learn to center their minds habitually far easier than adults could. Then, they would have the necessary frame of mind for learning the harder skills later.

He let the idea slip as he looked back down at her; he sensed that she wanted to add to something.

“I’ve been seeing things lately…visions.” Mara said, and for some reason she felt unsure if she should have told him. “Snippets of visions, really. Most of it seems unimportant…but I’m not flinching from them.”
Luke squeezed her shoulder, and then tilted her face up to kiss her. <I’m happy for you.> He sent over.

She felt relieved that he was communicating with her like this; surprised that she had missed it.

He sensed that she wanted to ask something but was afraid to. He gently sent his feelings out that she could ask him anything.

“Luke…” She said quietly. “Could you please show me the files you got about your grandmother, and father?”

Mara knew it was a long shot; he felt protective of his feelings about his past, but he had shared so much with her recently, it didn’t seem improbable.

He tightened a grin on his face and nodded before he reached out, and his data pad came to his call.

Luke removed his arm from around her shoulders to access the data on the pad.

Mara sat up, pulling up the sheets, and leaned to read over his shoulder.

He called up the first file on his grandmother, producing the holo of a woman. “That’s Shmi… Anakin’s mother…my grandmother.”

Mara’s fingers reached out to touch the screen, admiring the holo.

Luke could feel that she genuinely warmed to the image, and he adored her even more in that moment.

“She’s got such kind eyes…” She remarked, looking at the woman who was a relative stranger to her.

He watched her, captivated at the image. “Leia sometimes tilts her head the same way…I think they have the same grin too.” He said.

Her fingers touched the holo again, and lingered there before she withdrew.

Luke flipped to the next image of Anakin.

Mara looked up at Luke immediately, recognizing similar features that she had seen from the Imperial dossier on him.

The nine year boy looked back at them.

“You were right.” Luke said. “It was Master Qui-gon Jinn who was in that holo vid with him. He also signed Anakin’s freedom papers.”

“Anakin won his freedom in that pod race…” He said quietly. “And left to join the Jedi.”

He accidentally flipped to the next he had of his father. He had transferred the image of the last sitting Jedi Council to his data pad, and had cropped the image so that just his father was visible.

Anakin stood tall among the other Jedi Masters; the other shoulders that stood beside him, in the framed image, stopped short of where his shoulders ended.

His arms were crossed on his chest, as Mara had noticed the posture in Luke before.
The look on his face was one that Mara couldn’t define; Was he proud? Was he arrogant? Perhaps this was his common expression?- she couldn’t be sure.

According to the star date on that holo of the Jedi Council, it was close to the beginning of Anakin’s fall, and the demise of the Jedi. The Purges would start within a month of this holo. Did Luke know this?

Luke must have assumed that she was thinking when he spoke. “I haven’t heard anything about his estate.” He said quietly.

Mara feared that was what he assumed she was thinking about. “I didn’t know that you had inquired about them until you told me yesterday.”

She eased back down beside him. “Are you nervous?”

Luke closed the data pad and came back down beside her. “Not really…I don’t expect much.” He paused and looked over at her. “Do you know anything? About where he lived?”

She nodded slowly. “A few of the places…”

“Where?” he asked quickly.

“Luke…” She didn’t want to deny him this, but maybe it was better if he didn’t know.

“If there are Sith relic hunters, I’d rather be able to stop them before they cause too much damage.” He thought out loud.

Mara nodded. “He had several residences…” She began. “I guess you know about the one on Coruscant…but that was destroyed immediately after Endor…even before I escaped from the planet.”

He wanted to ask about her statement, and escaping from a home she had known all her life, but she thought out loud to avoid the topic.

“Where was it?” he asked out of curiosity. He may had been walking on its ruins all along and not known it.

“Where the Inter-galactic Bank stands now…that building came up so fast that no one had a chance to remember it was anything else.” She said. “But, he didn’t spend much time there.”

Mara shifted a bit away from him as she thought about it. “There was Bast Castle on Vjun…but that was just a decoy. He had it registered as his primary residence but it was nothing more than a way to trap any would-be assassins.”

She sighed again, and an image came to mind. “There was his residence on Mustafar… I saw him there once or twice. I got the feeling he preferred that one.”

“Mustafar?” Luke asked, knowing that it was a planet of molten iron ore. “Why?” he asked in a whisper.

Mara shrugged her shoulders, but knew part of the answer. “I had heard that he sustained a series of injuries there…I always assumed it was because he liked the solitude, and that no sensors or electronics worked there.”

“My father had a home on Mustafar.” Luke said to himself, his face frowned.
“Luke, it wasn’t a home…” Mara corrected him. “It was just a place…and it wasn’t your father who stayed there…it was Vader.” She tried to say in a gentle tone.

He looked back at her, and held her tighter. “They were one and the same, Mara…I still try to reconcile it, but I have to make myself think about him that way.”

She nodded, accepting his answer, but she only knew one side of the man that Luke called his father.

Luke swallowed hard, and then dared to ask what had been at the back of his mind. “Do you fear me?” He whispered.

Mara sat up and looked into his eyes. “No…” she paused, “…sometimes I don’t understand your power, and that scares me… but I don’t fear you.”

He reached out and caressed her cheek. “It scares me too, sometimes.” He smiled weakly. “I love you…beyond the stars.”

Mara leaned forward and kissed the man she had grown to love; not the hero, not the Jedi, just the man…and occasional farm boy.

“I love you too.” She said as she rested her forehead on his. “I especially love it when you put up a fight.” She snorted.

“You played dirty tonight.” She wasn’t angry with him, she was almost proud of him. “And how did that make you feel?”

“A little naughty.” He smirked at her, glad that she could change the tone of their conversation.

“Is that how you devious types feel on a regular basis?” He wrapped his arms around her and leaned her back on to the bunk, looking down on her before he descended for a kiss.

Luke moved to kissing her cheek and down her neck.

Mara enjoyed his attention and let him explore. “What do you mean ‘you devious types’? Were you including me in there?” She pretended to be annoyed.

He broke off his kisses to stare her down. “Oh, I think someone who sneaks aboard a Mon Cal Cruiser to hide her presence as a TIE Commander is pretty devious.”

She smirked. “Yeah, I did that…didn’t I?”

Luke lean in again and kissed her soundly. “And I think someone who sneaks on planet in the middle of the night to spend almost eighteen hours with someone before he goes off to Basic Training is pretty devious.”

Mara held her smirk. “Yeah, I did that too.”

He kissed her one more time. “Not to mention, someone who hides her identity to donate a million credits worth of items to a charity…one might call them devious as well…but what do I know?”

She giggled as he fluttered kisses over her face.

“One of these days, I’m going to out-devious you…and then you’ll be sorry.” He warned, teasing her.

“Do you think I keep too many secrets?” Mara asked, joking in the moment.
“Yes, I do.” Luke said, slightly serious. “Just once, I’d like to know one of them…just one that you
wouldn’t tell anyone else, and I would even let you pick which one you want to tell me.”

She smiled back. “Alright, I’ll tell you one…but there’s so many to choose from…”

He watched her think it over, so he decided to kiss her neck while she thought about it.

“Oohh!” She half-moaned, enjoying what he was doing but also because she thought of something
that he wanted to know.

Luke backed away, looking annoyed that he had to stop but also sensed that she was going to tell
him something important.

“Do you want to know how I know what you’re doing, and where you have been sent?- your
missions?” She asked.

It was something that had stumped him for some time now, and his eyes widened, and he nodded.

Luke sat back, watching her, truly curious.

“It was Ghent…we when were on Coruscant, after the Katana Battle, after I was recovering and he
was helping to track down Delta Source…” She said.

“I had him put in back door coding that would report anything that came across the info feeds about
you… I had him use your name, your code name, your call signs…anything.” She told him. “It
reports directly to my secure comm channel….and that’s how I know.”

“It even sends me the gossip too.” She looked off to the side. After she had said it out loud, it
sounded creepy to her, not loving or caring, and not the intention that she had originally designed it
for either.

Mara looked back to him. “I can ask Ghent to deprogram it, if you want.” She suddenly felt sheepish
about it.


She nodded.

“Why did you put it in?” He asked, sensing something behind it.

Mara looked off to the side again. She sighed, and rolled her eyes. “I put it in because I was going to
track you down after the Katana Battle…and…”


“You make it sound so impersonal.” Mara said. “I don’t know what I was going to do, but it was a
good tool to use… there was usually other details about things, other than just you, that were
included in those messages.”

He looked back at her, remembering a time when a moment like this, them in bed together, would
have been impossible to imagine.

“I’m glad you changed your mind.” He huffed, still unsure if hearing this would make him sleep any
better tonight.

Mara sat up, and came close to him. “Me too.” She whispered before she pressed her lips to his, and
brought him back down with her, resting her head on a pillow.

He rolled so that she was on his left side, and that she could lie on her favored right side.

Luke looked across the pillow at her, and stroked the ends of hair that framed her face. He cringed a bit and then gently tugged on the end. “I like it….your hair…it does suit you.” He sighed. “I don’t like how you got it…but I could get used it.”

Mara childishly stuck out the tip of her tongue. “I don’t and I can’t wait until it grows back.”

“Oh, Thank the maker!” Luke said quietly. “I was hoping that you’d say that…I mean, don’t get me wrong…I’d just miss it if it wasn’t longer.”

“So nice, Skywalker… it’s my hair!” Mara growled over at him, and then chuckled, knowing that he adored her hair, for some reason that she just couldn’t comprehend.

He chuckled back at her. When she put her head back on his shoulder, he began to stroke the silken tresses again.

Luke stifled a yawn, still looking at her.

Mara grinned back. <<You’re tired.>> She rubbed her hand on her chest. <<You should sleep…you’re on active duty tomorrow.>>

“I don’t want to sleep.” He said quietly. <If I close my eyes, you’ll be gone when I open them again.>

She turned her head into his shoulder, and yawned. <<I could always enlist…is there room on the Squad?>>

Luke snorted, closing his eyes half way. <There’s a no fraternizing clause…we wouldn’t make it past the first day.>

She blinked with heavy lids. <<But wouldn’t it be fun figuring out how we could get a dishonorable discharge together?>>

He yawned again, and chuckled softly. <I think, just thinking about some of the things that we want to do together, would get us that discharge.>

Mara snorted into his shoulder, closing her yes and opening them again. “I love you…” She said seriously and quietly. “I’ll miss you.”

She closed her eyes for good.

Luke stroke her hair a bit more. “I love you too….and I miss you, *always.*”

She hummed is response, as she heard his words.

He closed his eyes and joined her.

**

In his haze, he heard the words as he fought to stay asleep, because he knew what he would feel if he truly woke up.

*May the Force be with you, my love.*
He awoke; lying in his bunk with his eyes open, looking at the ceiling of his room.

She was gone again.

Luke sighed. She had convinced herself that it was easier this way; he wasn’t so sure. It still ached from missing her, like half of him was missing.

He was sure that the day would come when he would regret not seeing her off; not kissing her one more time, not holding her one more time, not hearing her voice one more time, and then…

He shook his head, refusing to think about it.

Luke swung his legs out his bunk and saw that his room still looked the same after the night they had together.

He rubbed his face, hoping that he didn’t dream her visit; it had gone by so quickly.

Standing up, he stretched, and walked over to his dresser, opened the top drawer and took out what he needed for the day.

He stopped. Smiled, and closed the drawer. His smile grew.

He was sure that she had put them back after they had spoken…but now…

The documents for a Claiming were gone. She had taken them with her.

TBC
Chapter Summary

Character: Luke

Chapter Notes

Okay...I had promised that I hadn't abandoned this story...and just to prove it, here's a quick story treatment...a full chapter is coming very soon.

X my heart...it's on it's way...

So in the meantime, enjoy...

**

**Aboard The Liberty**

She was there.

Trapped within his arms.

Her back against his chest.

Her raw power coursing through him.

Enhancing his own strength.

Magnifying and amplifying all the potential in the galaxy.

Working as one unit, surging with unlimited power.

All at his command.

She had resisted, until he compelled her.

Now, the galaxy bended to him, and his desires.

He stood on the precipice of bringing his peace and order over all those who resisted him.

And she.

And she would make all of his commands come to fruition.

With the apex of power; he smiled slyly, celebrating his victory.

Yes; he thought, and now, it's all mine.
With a start, Luke sat straight up in his bunk, breathing hard and heavy.

He quickly looked around his quarters, almost not believing that he was awake now.

The sound of the engine of *The Liberty* whirled absently in the background, bringing calm into his familiar surroundings.

With one hand he wiped the sweat from his brow; it had been so long since he had a dream that had been so vivid and all-encompassing.

*Mara*; he gasped thought. *What did I do to her?* He asked himself, holding his hand against his forehead in disbelief.

Quickly, he looked around the room; Horn wasn’t here to sense his dream. But, Luke knew the repercussions from that would have been disastrous. *What would Horn have thought?*

His breathing was starting to return to normal from the shock of the dream, and Luke leaned back into his bunk.

Shifting his position on his opposite side as to reprogram his body, in hope that it reprogrammed his mind so not to return from where it had been.

In the dim light, he dare not close his eyes, and blinked into empty air, staring at the wall, and calming his mind.

It wasn’t the amount power that he was able to use in the dream that bothered him. It concerned him that he would hurt Mara.

But what concerned him more, was that he *enjoyed* the feeling.

Staring at the wall, his shadow didn’t betray that for a brief moment, his lips had flinched a grin.

He closed his eyes, and started what he needed to do in order to return to sleep.

TBC
Plausible Pauses

Chapter Summary

Quote: Jaina burped.
Jacen yawned.
Mara sighed, accepting that maybe her child-rearing skills weren’t quite up to par. “I guess that means that maybe you two are ready for a nap?” She asked at her audience.

Characters: Mara, Dankin, Leia, Winter, Twins, Han

Chapter Notes

So it’s been a while since you’ve gotten a full chapter…I really hope this story hasn’t lost its momentum. I will be writing more often now that con season is over for me.

It also doesn’t help that Darth Real-Life has been kicking my butt lately. But that too, has come to the end….hopefully.

His weekend is Thanksgiving in Canada…so this may sound corny, but I am very thankful for A3 and you, my readers.

I didn’t think anyone would want to hear what was rambling around in my mind—so I thank you for your interest and I hope that I can meet your expectation.

By the way, I missed you all since my last “real chapter”.

Cheers, Phae

Entering the Cyax System

History was a changing thing.

Da Soocha was off-limits, by all assumed galactic rights. No one should have been colonizing the moon.

Although controlled by the Hutts, they refused to inhabit the moon due to a religious belief that the magical properties of the planet’s water would transform them, for better or worse. Hutts, superstitious by nature, were convinced it was for the worse.

In recent years, it had become a home to Mon Calamari refugees, seeking asylum, after the underwater plant life on their home world of Dac had been poisoned by the Empire.

Now, the water world had been terraformed by large platforms which had created villages, which grew into towns, which then grew into cities, and since then, only a few metropolises began to grow.
After the death of Jabba the Hutt, none of the Hutts seemed interested in the moon, so it had been relatively left alone.

Mara sat back in the cockpit of the *Etherway* and mentally recited Da Soocha’s history.

She always liked going into prepared to a strange world that meant knowing the history and political climate of a place.

Now, Da Soocha was being used by a small outpost of Rebel Freedom Fighters under the guidance of Leia Organa-Solo, and those who supported her.

But this was no Rebel Alliance, as they had liked to call themselves. This was a Resistance.

Mara pondered that word too. *Resistance*. What were they resisting this time? Did they know who their enemy was?

Organa-Solo had helped to form the current galactic government, and had been voted in as Chancellor. That same government had turned their back on her when her parentage had been found out.

Mara snorted contemptuously.

Palpatine had warned her about the fickleness of the galaxy; it could turn on a whim. The only way to stop turning, was to control the whims, and to be the puppet-master of the wants and needs on the galaxy.

Those who failed to learn that lesson, also failed at playing the game of survival, and found themselves on the losing end of, usually, their life.

Mara snorted again quietly; politics held little place in her heart. She would much rather be not affected by them at all.

In the end, it just didn’t seem worth it to become involved with the control of worlds that she had very little, or nothing, in common with. Her business was her own concern.

Though, in the back of her mind, she knew that wasn’t true either.

It was over a year ago, she had helped the New Republic avoid another civil war with Thrawn and his Imperial remnant.

Now, another war loomed before the galaxy. Silently, she questioned what she would be prepared to do for this one. Would she follow Luke as he rushed into the battle? - she knew he would, without question. Or would she try to stay neutral as Karrde had attempted?-but failed.

The proximity alert sounded, and Mara pulled back on the levers, bringing the star lines to a halt.

The large blue moon floated before her.

It looked peaceful and calm. No wonder Organa–Solo had chosen it to hide out on.

There was something about coming here that her mind had told her was a necessity. Aside from the delivery that was required for the moon, and the new base, she knew that she had to see Organa-Solo too.

Mara relaxed her mind; *Leia*, she repeated. *Perspective family members call each other by their first names*; she reminded herself again.
All this lack of formality didn’t sit well with her; even calling Luke’s friends by their surnames, or nicknames, irked her. Using titles and addressing people properly kept them at a comfortable distance, and Mara preferred that way.

It had taken her close to a year to refer to Karrde by his first name of ‘Talon’, and only then, when they were alone and not discussing business.

Mara transmitted the codes that she had been given to allow the Etherway down to the planet, and waited for their response.

Thinking back, it had also taken her awhile to become familiar with Luke. And still, when she wanted to distance herself from her feelings for him, or fell back into habit, she referred to him as ‘Skywalker’ from time to time.

Sometimes, this still felt all very new to her; all this lack of formality. She felt like an outsider who tried to blend in.

No matter how much training she may have been given to act in a certain manner around certain people, the one manner she couldn’t put on was casualness. It alluded her, and annoyed her greatly that a mannerism that just came naturally to some people, didn’t come easily to her.

The only one person, that she didn’t feel herself pretending for, was Luke.

He had this way about him that accepted her at her face value, never scratching the surface to force her to react unnaturally. Somehow, by getting to know him, he had broken down her walls, and she never felt she had to protect what she was feeling with him.

He did push her limits but only to the edge that she was comfortable with; very seldom did he ever go past that.

But, he wasn’t here now.

No, it had been close to seven days since she had left the confines of the Liberty and rejoined her smuggler life.

In a matter of hours, after stepping aboard the Etherway, and after it departed from the Liberty, Mara found herself with Dankin, on their way to make a delivery. Then, on returning, they were given the instructions to come to the new base.

She had resisted the urge to reach out and tell Luke that she was on her way to visit with his sister, but thought better of it; he had enough distractions.

They all had the same distraction, Mara felt from the members of Red Squadron; they were waiting on instructions to engage the Imperial Fleet.

Most of them kept their opinions to themselves, which was the custom, but Mara could feel the growing restlessness when she was with them. Even Luke was frustrated that they had not been given orders to attack or defend New Republic citizens from the hit and fade attacks that were still going on.

He knew that there was a threat but was powerless to do anything about it.

Mara knew that it wasn’t his nature to sit there and let things happen to other people and she was sure that eventually he wouldn’t put up any resistance and then act on his feelings rather than obeying orders.
Of all the things she had talked about with Luke, during her short visit, she had to admit that she was partially serious when she had suggested enlisting with the Rogues, now the Reds- if only just to be with him.

Though, she naturally assumed they wouldn’t take her because of her Imperial past.

Even as the words left her mouth, Mara convinced herself that it was a bad idea.

Luke had scoffed at it, and reminded her that there no fraternizing allowed now.

As much as she wanted to be close to him, it was the idea of being part of a controlled unit that she longed for. But after she witnessed the lax atmosphere aboard the Liberty, she doubted that she could ever join such a unit.

She smirked as she recalled reprimanding Luke, as a Lieutenant, for letting his team be so unguarded as to converse over an open comm channel while on a mission.

The Empire would have never allowed such a thing, and neither did she.

The frequency alert pinged inside the cockpit, interrupting her thoughts. The recognition codes had been accepted, and landing directives followed for instructions to land.

As Mara set the co-ordinates, she felt a touch on her mind. No, it wasn’t a touch, it was more like a fluttering, and then it passed.

She smiled; it must have been Leia and her limited Force abilities.

Luke had been teaching his sister Force skills, on and off, but he had never mentioned if Leia had held on to any of them.

Perhaps Leia wasn’t as strong as Luke was, or maybe it just wasn’t her gift to become as powerful as her brother.

It wouldn’t be a long stretch to assume that her aptitude for Force skills may be slightly diminished.

Mara could recall hearing about the purges of Force-sensitives, and finding out that some offspring of Jedi sometimes didn’t display any talent for the Force whatsoever. They, regardless of their talent in the Force, of course, would still conveniently disappear.

Inside the cloudy atmosphere, a beacon guided the Etherway to the correct landing platform.

The door to the cockpit opened and Dankin walked in and took up the co-pilot’s seat beside Mara.

He was absorbed in reading his data pad, and confirming the shipment.

“I see we have twelve palettes to deliver.” He commented absently.

Dankin looked up and over to Mara. “Have you ever been to a Rebel base before?” He asked without any pretense as to why he would ask such a thing.

“Only after they were abandoned.” Mara mumbled, thinking back to the time when she had infiltrated Vader’s legion as he searched the Hoth Base for the rebel who had destroyed the Death Star. Her mission was to keep an eye on the Dark Lord for any sign of betrayal; the Emperor was being suspicious of his apprentice again.

She shook her head slightly to remove the thought.
He nodded and went back to reading his data pad. “Is there a reason why I didn’t get to see the co-
ordinates on this one?”

She glanced over at him, then back at her approached vector, appraising him for being so astute.
“Plausible deniability.” Mara answered him.

“How?” Dankin looked up at her.

Mara rolled her eyes, but didn’t hold it against him. “It means that, if you’re asked, you have no idea
where we are…no names, no co-ordinates or what we’re carrying.”

She could sense that he was frowning as she watched the horizon line, so she gave him a further
explanation. “Karrde, and this group, want it that way.”

And that was all the information that Dankin was going to get; he wasn’t even allowed to disembark
with the delivery or have contact with the signees.

Mara would be front and center for all connections.

She doubted that Leia or the Resistance would have a concern if Dankin knew that the group they
were delivering a shipment to, was the new version of the Rebel Alliance, or knew who was
involved, but the instructions stated secrecy, and that’s what they were going to get.

Dankin knew that the group was a fracture of other Rebel cells, and that was all he was allowed to
know.

Most likely, he would go sleep off the stop in his cabin, which could be a welcome relief sometimes
as down-time was a precious commodity.

Even Mara had no idea what they were actually delivering to the group. Each leg of the order was
handled by a different set of people, so that no one knew the full story. If it worked properly, it
would run like a well-oiled machine; just the way Mara had designed it.

Mara set the codes for beacon on the Etherway and the ship would guide itself into the correct
hemisphere and landing pad.

Inside the stratosphere, for a water world, the weather did seem to vary.

The last water-based world Mara had been on was Kamino, and she had gotten the general
impression that all water worlds experienced the same type of perpetual rain. But on Da Soocha, that
seemed not to be the case.

As the Etherway approached the terraform platform, it looked like a storm had just passed, and there
was a ray of light beaming down and then disappearing again.

The instructions were fairly clear, and a precise time was given for them to arrive.

Under one of the terra-platforms, Mara could see the opening that was supposed to be the hangar. If
they had arrived at any other time of day, the doors would be submersed under at least ten meters of
water.

Dankin adjusted the controls and helped her guide the craft to be in line with the opening hangar
doors.

Without a pause, the doors closed behind them, hiding the base and their arrival.
She landed the crafted expertly as the repulse-lifts adsorbed the shock of the vertical landing.

“Well, I guess that’s it for me?” Dankin asked subtly.

Mara turned her chair in order to stand. “Agreed. And not unless you want to stare at wall for next eight hours?”

She knew what he was asking, and didn’t hold it against him. “I would recommend a good shower—as they’ve promised to hook us up with a water main. Then, I would suggest a good sleep.”

Mara paused, and then gave him a bit of a grin. “But I also supposed it’s been a while since you’ve heard from Nattan. We’re close to the Roche Belt. If you scramble the comm signal, I’ll bet you can get good reception from here.”

Dankin smiled, and then nodded knowingly. She had just come from being with the person she loved, and understood the need and desire to want to stay close to that person.

Without commenting on her status, Dankin’s grin grew. “You always have the best plans.” He said to her, by means of thanking her for the downtime.

Mara nodded once, and headed to the aft section where her equipment was stored.

She removed her blaster from at her hip, not feeling the need to be armed here, and moved her lightsaber to the front hook, knowing that Leia would see it there when they met.

Picking up her data pad, she called up the encrypted delivery manifest and headed for the down-ramp of the hatch.

The hiss sound of the unsealing hatch was probably heard across the empty hangar deck.

Mara walked down and out with little ceremony, and looked around at the collection of ships.

The motley ensemble was made up of just about any make and model that could pack a punch in battle. Some of the ships, Mara hadn’t seen in years and to her recollection, she was sure that most of them had been decommissioned.

There wasn’t a lot of them- not an armada by any means, but just enough to cause enough trouble if they seriously wanted to.

And in the corner, sat the grand-daddy of all the troublesome ships. Looking like the leader of the gang was the Millennium Falcon.

From the far end of the deck, a set of doors opened and group started heading towards the Etherway.

Mara spied out at the group; it looked like they were prepared for the delivery, bringing their own hover palettes.

Behind the first group, came a slightly smaller group of persons, and she could sense the presence immediately.

Talking among the other members, the petite frame of Leia Organa-Solo was finishing off what looked like to be a meeting that refused to break up.

The others, in the group around her, seemed frustrated; there were a lot of hand gestures in her direction, which she seemed to take with grace, and ignored for just misplaced passion.
Leia spoke with each member of the group before they departed, until she was the only one left standing.

Mara had handed off the manifest to the team that was now unloading the shipment, in order to go meet with the other woman.

She walked closer to the far end of the hangar, accessing the other as she went.

Luke had mentioned that Leia had some bleeding early on in this pregnancy, but was now feeling much better.

At this distance, Mara could see the bulge in Leia’s belly that she was trying to hide with a longer over-tunic. In fact, no one would know she was obviously pregnant again unless they were privy to that information.

At close to five months along, Mara figured that Leia would be showing much more than she was.

As she got closer, Mara envied Leia’s hair; thinking of her own missing tresses. The former princess always had it nicely coiffed and styled sleekly.

Leia’s smile began to grow as the smuggler approached her. “Well, this certainly is a pleasure. Hello Mara.” She said, truly happy to see her friend.

Mara paused for a moment and wasn’t sure if she interpreted her senses well. Had Leia just thought of her as friend? Before sensing if she had made it awkward, Mara smiled back.

“I wasn’t sure if I’d even see you….but it’s good to.” Mara replied. “How are you doing Leia?” she consciously softened her voice and tried to casually grin as she fell in step with the other woman.

Together they walked back to the hangar door that led deeper into the base.

“It’s been an interesting few months since we last saw each other.” Leia’s voice sounded pleasant but Mara could sense that under it there lurked something else.

Unlike Luke, Leia had learned to hide her genuine feelings, masking them and using graceful misdirection to throw someone off the scent.

“I guess that all depends on your idea of ‘interesting’ is.” Mara responded wryly.

Leia smirked in the other woman’s general direction. “It’s not what it used to be.” She answered with her own wry tone.

“Oh,” Mara asked with a raised eyebrow, sensing that there was some playfulness in Leia’s tone, and that the former princess was glad that she didn’t have to keep up an image for appearance’s sake.

“Care to elaborate?” the smuggler asked.

Leia’s smirk grew. “Only when we’re away from prying eyes.” She said quietly.

The halls they walked may have been empty, but on a quasi-military base, both of them knew that you were never alone.

As they walked, Leia began to speak as if she was speaking to colleague while Mara listened to the roles and the goals of the Resistance. An aide approached them as the leader spoke and asked her to review the data pad he presented to her.
Leia acted as if everything that she was saying was standard, and in truth, as Mara pretended to listen, both of them knew that they were just playing a role until they could be behind closed quarters. If Leia didn’t keep speaking it would seem odd to those in the corridors, not to speak to a guest.

But Mara could sense that Leia was eager to not hold back; something was boiling under the surface.

One more turn in the hallway, and Leia had led her to their private residence.

The door slid open with little fanfare, into a sitting room that looked like any other in the galaxy.

Two sofas faced each other for conversation, with a low table in between. There was a small dining area that had two highchairs around it; beyond that, a door that led to, presumably, a kitchen area.

The opposite side of the room showed a hallway that, if all estimations were correct, led to the bedrooms or office.

Leia had walked ahead of Mara as they entered. When the door behind Mara closed, Leia turned around, her face beaming with a huge grin.

“So I need to hear it from you!” Leia walked in closer and grabbed Mara’s biceps. “Is it true? You and Luke?”

Mara was speechless, and taken aback; she nodded wordlessly, surprised that the princess was so candid. She assumed that Leia had heard the news from either Luke or Han, but still unsure of what they had told the other woman.

“I’m so happy for you!” Leia exclaimed and pulled Mara in for a sisterly hug.

She stood there, taking it, wrapped in the embrace by Luke’s closest family member.

When Leia pulled back, she broke her smile as she glared at the smuggler. “What is it?” Leia asked Mara accusingly.

Mara sighed, relieved that she was no longer in the Wookie-hug of the petite, yet deceptively strong, woman. “I’m still not used to it myself.” She said, bracing herself for a volley of questions that she assumed would follow.

“Used to Luke? - or used to people knowing about the two of you?” Leia’s glare had turned into a scrutinizing look; unsure of how stand-offish Mara was being.

“I guess, people knowing about us.” Mara mumbled.

Leia uncharacteristically humphed. “Well, it’s still a rumor more than anything—and from Luke, all I seem to get ‘we’re happy’.” She dropped down onto the sofas, favoring her belly as she did so, and then gestured for Mara to do the same. “So, now I want some real answers.”

Mara shook her head and reminded herself that she needn’t be so on-guard with Leia; they were friends, sort of, after all.

Leia must have felt secluded out here, with no actual friends around for the past few months. The only one she had to depend on was her former smuggler husband, her aide, Winter, and the odd guest that dropped by. Mara assumed that would have probably been Calrissian- and he didn’t seem like one for much of girl-talk. So Mara would have to humor her.
“What do you want to know?” Mara asked as she lowered down on the sofa.

Leia, girlishly bit the inside of her lip, and then just blurted out. “I want to know everything!”

Mara snorted and shook her head; it wasn’t like the Rebel leader to revert back to a teenager again, and wanted all the gossip going around the Academy.

“There’s not much to tell.” Mara reasoned. “We’re still trying to figure each other out.” She paused and looked at Leia’s eager face. “Luke isn’t the person that I thought he was when I met him…and he’s not the Jedi everyone thinks he is.” She shook her head again. “And he’s…he’s not what people expect him to be, especially with me.”

Leia rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes…I know all of that. My brother has many different sides to him. But I want to know is, how he is with you?” She sat up and lean forward across that table. “You know, he was not my brother for longer than I’ve known him to be my brother—so you can tell me anything!”

Mara was a little shocked by what she thought Leia was asking. Did she really want details about Luke in an intimate manner?


Mara snorted. “Yes- he’s all of those things.” She could feel herself blushing, and pulling away.

Leia’s eyes narrowed again. “Okay, what is it this time?”

Mara shook her head, and in exasperation she resigned and confessed, “I don’t know how to do this.”

“What?”

“Girl-talk.” Mara answered. “I’ve never had anyone around who I could, or would want to, talk about these things with.” She sighed, and repeated quietly, “I don’t know how to do this.”

It was then that Leia pulled back her eagerness, and understood what Mara was saying.

After a moment, Leia got up from her side of the sofa and came to sit next to Mara on the opposite sofa. “I came on too strong, didn’t I?” She asked quietly.

Mara nodded, looking down, but then looked up. “A little.”

Leia sighed. “I guess I’ve been on this base too long…I just wanted to hear something that didn’t involve this blasted war.”

Mara stayed quiet for one moment longer.

“He’s surprisingly romantic.” She said quietly, breaking into a grin; humorin Luke’s sister. “I didn’t think I would like that sort of thing, but I do.”

Leia began to look optimistic again, but stayed quiet as to not impede on the things Mara wanted her to know.

“Our first date, I think you know about?” Mara asked – Leia nodded slightly.

“He turned the hangar into a starlit evening.” Mara looked down at her hands, and could feel her face fully blush with remembering that night. “He even asked questions that everyone asks on first dates—it was very sweet.”
Leia was doing her best to hold back, but her face was just as eager as it was when she had pounced on Mara before.

“He’s a good kisser.” Mara confessed, and then rolled her eyes for even saying it out loud.

“He likes to stroke my hair, which I don’t understand.” Mara mumbled.

Mara tried to think about other details that she didn’t mind escaping into general knowledge. She looked at Leia who was waiting as patiently as she could.

“And I was the one who first said ‘I love you’.” Mara said quietly.

“I know!” Leia exclaimed loudly and joyfully, and lunged forward to wrap Mara in a hug again.

“Luke told me! I couldn’t believe it when he did, but so I’m happy for the both of you.”

“I mean, since Myrkrr, we all knew that he was absolutely smitten with you.” Leia continued, releasing Mara from her embrace. “I’ve never seen him behave like that – for anyone. But I told him, when you first came to Coruscant, that he should leave you alone…let you get used to being back…don’t inflict yourself on her every day…you do things on her schedule—that’s what I told him.”

“Oh, he can be so stubborn sometimes…and won’t listen to anyone.” Leia went on. “He was going on at one point, before he met you, about how Jedi were meant to wander the galaxy alone. He would whine and carry on, and then he would sulk for days. I’m just glad you were there to put an end that sort of nonsense from him.”

“He’s a bit of a whiner—did you know that?” Leia asked sternly, annoyed at her brother; Mara nodded, acknowledging his shortcoming, not daring to stop the rant that the princess was on.

“And I love him, but for Force’s sake, the man can be such a little boy sometimes – worse than Han. If I had a credit for every time I went into his apartment, only to find some greasy motor, or new electronic toy, and some new gadget, on his kitchen counter that he was trying to fix- I’d be a wealthy woman.” Leia warned.

“He is not the greatest house-keeper. You should know that upfront.” Leia kept going. “He once went for a whole week, sleeping without bottoms on because he didn’t do laundry.” She paused only to take a breath. “I walked in on him, walking around his place without any clothes on once because he had worn everything he had owned and was waiting for the sonic to finish cleaning a load.”

Leia crossed her arms against her chest. “He can cook- when he wants to, but sometimes that can be questionable. Do not, I repeat, do not let him make ‘Ration Bar Surprise’ for you.”

‘He’s good with the twins, but only the things that don’t truly involve a mess…don’t ask him to change a diaper, but bottles he can do.”

“He eats like a teenager. He’d stuff his mouth with Corellian burgers all day long if I’d let him.”

“He’s speed-demon. He loves anything that can go fast…and he wants anything that can go fast, to go fast. I finally had to take away his speeder on Coruscant after the number of infractions he got on the general pace lanes.”

Mara mumbled something quietly, but Leia continued.

“Aside from being stubborn, sometimes he can be a little addle-brained too. Sometimes, I think he’s got sand stuck between his ears.” Leia paused and turn to Mara. “What did you say?”
“I said…” Mara looked at her friend sheepishly, “*But I love him.*”

Leia stopped immediately, and then smiled serenely, calming herself.

“But of course you do…who wouldn’t?” She asked slowly and gently, remembering who she was talking to. She was just glad that someone loved her brother, even with all his faults, as much as she did.

Both women knew there were much more serious matters at hand, but they also knew they needed to take time for things that made up their lives.

“Everything else, we’re slowly negotiating, when we can.” Mara finished quietly.

She could sense that Leia wanted to ask more, and she could hear words like “marriage…children…Jedi” yelling around in the other woman’s mind, but Leia dared not asked about them.

Mara held in the snort that she wanted to let loose; and she thought Luke was too eager, his sister had him beat.

Where Luke’s wishes were vague and had the term “eventually” attached to them; Leia was already mentally picking out Mara’s wedding gown and figuring out the seating arrangement for the reception. And if her senses were as perceptive as she hoped, Mara thought she heard possible baby names floating around in Leia’s head for a niece or nephew.

Leia exhaled slowly, as it was clear that she was trying to bring down her own excitement over the prospects of having a sister-in-law and all the possibilities for her brother.

“Well, where are my manners…you must be hungry, or thirsty.” Leia said, resuming her regular countenance, but still grinning. “It’s past midday meal, but I usually have a snack in the afternoon, after the twins go down – would that be alright?”

“Of course.” Mara said, and grinned back.

The door to the residences slowly opened, and Leia’s aide, Winter appeared.

Mara had met the woman on a handful of occasions, and was still impressed with her demeanor; so poised, and so aloof. It would be hard to read anything off of her.

Still, Winter had been kind enough to help Luke decorate his home when he wanted to show Mara that he was ready for a relationship.

Mara internally sighed; it was going to take more of an effort to get used to having a circle of family around her.

“Greetings Mistress Jade.” Winter bowed graciously, and then turned to Leia. “Your Highness, the twins are ready to go down for their nap.”

Leia pushed herself off the sofa to get to a standing position, and motioned Mara to join her. “It’s been a while since you’ve seen them – why don’t you join me?”

Mara kept her grin and got up to follow Leia.

The Organa-Solo children held a special place in her heart. It wasn’t just saving them from Thrawn’s clutches that endeared them to her. When she looked at them, she saw such innocence that she had never seen before.
Aside from the fact that she could sense the Force strength in both of them, it made her feel connected to them as well.

It was refreshing and overwhelming to be around the twins, and she found herself actually enjoying it.

Down the adjacent hallway Leia walked into the small room where two carriers were sitting side by side.

The two women came around to the front of the rocking carriers, and Mara was met by the bright eyes of chubby cherubs that were the Solo twins.

Jacen had a head full of brown hair and his hazel eyes perked up at the sight of his mother and the presence he recognized as he chewed on the teething ring in his mouth.

Jaina’s full head of hair was darker than her brothers, and her dark brown eyes were inquisitive. She bounced her carrier more when she recognized who had accompanied her mother.

Mara was shocked to see both of them; they had grown so much since she had last seen them at their first birthday. She lowered herself to the ground so that she perched right in front of the carriers, and without a second thought broke into a smile to see the twins.

“Hello you two!” Mara said; her voice soundly higher and in a sweeter tone than she thought she was even capable of.

Her heart immediately warmed, surprising her.

She switched her glances from one twin to the other, as it was apparent that they remembered her as they bounced and made noises to match their excitement.

“Well, it looks like they have missed you too.” Leia said from her standing position.

Mara forced her attention away from the twins to look over her shoulder at their mother who was smiling serenely at the sight before her.

Mara smiled back, and was about to say something, feigning how much it meant to her to see the twins again, when Leia’s comm pinged.

The Rebel leader sighed and took the comm from her waist; reading the message, and sighed again.

“Mara, would you mind watching the twins for few moments? I have a call coming in that I really can’t delay.” Leia asked, slightly unsure of the other woman’s skill with children.

“They’ve been fed, changed, and bathed... so all you really have to do is keep them calm, and put them down for a nap.” Leia explained.

“I should be back in a few minutes. You could tell them a story, or sing them a song...” Leia gestured to the bookcase behind her where rested several volumes of stories appropriate for the younglings. “Do you know any lullabies?” She asked nervously, and glancing at her comm and sighing one more time.

“I’m sure I could figure it out.” Mara said as she looked back at the twins, but before she could ask anything, Leia was almost out of the room, promising to be back shortly.

Mara watched her go, and then she turned back slowly to the twins in front of her, suddenly afraid to
move or do something wrong in front of them.

She had only ever been alone with one of the twins before, but not both of them at the same time. Even Luke had taken some time to learn how to deal with both of them together.

Jacen gave her a reprieve and continued to chew his teething ring, while Jaina looked expectantly at Mara, waiting for something magical to happen— or at least, that’s what the pressure felt like to Mara.

*Okay, I can do this;* Mara thought to herself, *I have babysat what seemed like a whole freighter full of children sometimes. This should be easy…right?*

Mara looked back and forth between the two children, starting to feel unsettled about the whole thing, until she could sense the apprehension in the children; her nervous energy was making them nervous as well.

Just as Luke had done with her, Mara reached out with her Force senses to calm the children, and decided that there was no reason to be afraid of a few moments to look after them.

She turned to face the one with the chew toy first. “Hello Jacen…I understand that you have started speaking recently and I’d like to congratulate you on your achievement.”

He may not have understood what she was saying to him, but he could sense her intention.

Jacen paused for a moment in his chewing to give a look of comprehension, and then went back to chewing and bouncing, mystified by the woman in front of him.

“And you, Jaina…” Mara addressed the girl with the perceptive eyes. “You’re looking much-grown since I last saw you. I’ll bet you’ve had a lot of changes.”

Jaina also stopped her bouncing at being addressed so precisely, and then bounced again to show that she was alright with Mara’s manner.

Jaina had once mentally communicated with Mara, so it seemed natural that Mara reached out to her again.

Mara looked between both of them again. “I want you to know that although I haven’t looked after very many children…and by ‘very many’, I mean, *none*…I intend to be a sufficient caregiver to both of you for the short deration that your mother has promised that she will be away.”

Mara felt nervous, and then remembered Leia’s instructions to tell them a story. She looked around the room for anything that might inspire a story.

Spying a fluffy stuffed animal, she reached over and picked up the toy to show to the twins.

She examined the toy in front of the twins. “See? It’s a figra… the biggest of the cats on Wavvov.” Mara animatedly made the figra moved in front of the pair. “When a figra talks, it makes a *gggrrrrrr* sound.” She tried to mimic the sound.

The two looked unimpressed, and Jacen started to frown with the ring still in his mouth, and then his frown started to turn into a pout, threatening a set of tears; Mara was losing her audience.

“Ohay…” She scrambled for ideas. “Do you want to hear a story about *your grandfather* and cats?”

Jacen’s frown stopped and his eyes brightened as if he understood what she was saying. Jaina brought her hand to her mouth and started sucking; her dark eyes, wide with anticipation.
Mara sighed and reminded herself to try and keep this story as youngling-friendly as possible.

“Once upon a time…” she began, keeping her tone slow, steady, yet upbeat, “In a part of the galaxy, long ago…your grandfather lived in a palace…the same palace as you used to live in.” Mara brightened as she started to tell the story.

“And in the palace, lived an old man…who wasn’t very nice, as it turns out. But the old man had four big, black, fluffy cats.” Mara picked up the figra toy again, and held up four fingers for each of the cats.

“Their names were Nemesis, Narcissi, Nefarious, and Nebula. Now each cat was very different in personality from the other ones.” Mara paused, recalling her own memories. “Nebula was my favorite because he used to follow me around… he used to turn up in my residence even though I had no idea how he got in. Sometimes, he used to sleep with me. He used to hiss at everyone else, but he liked me.”

“Nemesis used to steal people’s food, and would jump up to the highest spot he could get to, only to look down on everyone.” Mara took the figra and made it jump up the top of each of the twins’ carriers in turn, as both sets of eyes followed the toy.

“Narcissi would pretend that he loved you, and would wrap himself around your legs, loving you up…until the very last moment when he would turn around and bite your hand if you tried to pet him.” Mara took the figra and gently tickled each of the twin’s faces with the soft fabric; both Jacen and Jaina gurgled as the plush fabric touched their faces.

“Nefarious was…well, stupid. That cat had a death wish and would constantly eat something or do something that would risk his health. He got singed once by sleeping in the afterburner of a speeder and lost all his whiskers.” Mara sat a frowned for a moment, thinking back.

“But he was best friends with…guess who?” She asked the twins as she picked up the figra again. “That’s right! His best friend was Nebula!—or “Nebbie” as I called him.”

“Nebbie would keep Neffie out of trouble.” She smiled at the twins at they watched her with interest. “But sometimes, they would get into trouble together.”

“And one of the times that they got into trouble, was with your grandfather.” Mara explained.

“Now, your grandfather didn’t like a lot of things. But one of the things that your grandfather did like was capes!” Mara saw a blanket resting beside a night table in the room. She leaned over and picked up the blanket and put it around her shoulders, making it resemble the cape she was talking about. She paused for a moment, only to think how not to scare the younglings. “The old man had made a rule that no one was allowed to hurt the cats… no matter what the cats did…even if they were bad and mean.”

Mara took the paws of the figra and made it make a swiping motion towards the twins. “Ggrrrrrr!” – each twin giggled slightly with amusement.

“Your grandfather didn’t like the cats- not at all. In fact, he would sometimes Force push them away, so that they wouldn’t bother him.” She wasn’t sure she was explaining it properly, but continued. “Because…and I don’t know if you know this… but cats, if you don’t like them- they just want to love you even more.”

“And there was no one else that they loved more than your grandfather.” Mara smirked as she recalled the images in her mind.
“So one day, your grandfather comes to talk to the old man in the great, big room…and your grandfather is wearing his favourite cape.” Mara came up on her knees to act out what she was explaining. “So Vader…I mean, your grandfather, gets down on one knee in front of the old man, as a sign of respect, and starts talking to the old man.”

“Now, he is down on his knee for long time…and during that time, Neffie, who is not very smart, decides that your grandfather’s cape looks like a good place to take a nap.” Mara snorted quietly before finishing her story. “Soon, Neffie’s best friend, Nebula, comes around and he decides that the cape looked like a very good place to have a nap too… only, your grandfather didn’t realize that while he was talking, that two cats had come to sleep on his cape.”

Mara took the figra and placed it at the end on the makeshift cape that she had made with the blanket. “Your grandfather went to go stand up, and sensed that the cats were sleeping on his cape…only, now he couldn’t stand up fully…he had to walk out crouched-like because he couldn’t stand up, he had to leave the big room with the cats riding on his cape, and he wasn’t allowed to hurt or move the cats in front of the Emperor… um, old man.”

She snorted. “I had never seen him do that…it was so funny! I couldn’t laugh at the time, and no one else could either, but it was hilarious!”

Mara chuckled, and then stopped as the twins were watching her as if she had lost her mind.

“And that’s the story of your grandfather and the old man’s cats.” She finished the story quietly. “The end.”

Jaina burped.

Jacen yawned.

Mara sighed, accepting that maybe her child-rearing skills weren’t quite up to par. “I guess that means that maybe you two are ready for a nap?” She asked at her audience.

Jaina yawned this time, and Mara took it to mean that they were both ready to go down for a nap.

Getting up, and putting down the blanket and figra toy, Mara turned to approach Jacen first. She had watched both Leia and Han handled the children before so she knew how to pick them up.

Jacen transferred easily to her hip as she headed in the direction of the cribs.

She walked over to the first crib but got the sense from Jacen that he wasn’t comfortable going into this particular one. Mara turned and brought him to the second crib, which he seemed to like this idea better.

She flattened him out on his stomach and moved the teething ring away from him, but still accessible.

Jacen fussed a bit making noises that he wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of a nap, but slowly resigned to it.

Jaina went easier, and seemed to like the idea of being held again by Mara.

She had to admit, something just came more-natural with her and the little girl. Secretly, Mara knew that she wasn’t supposed to have a favourite, but she couldn’t deny that she had one.

Jaina fussed a bit like her brother, and they both seemed to get upset when Mara went for the light switch in the room to dim the lighting; they must have thought that she was departing.
“Did you think I was going to leave?” Mara asked to the twins. “No, I won’t leave. I’ll stay until you fall asleep…and I might even still be here when you wake up.”

She could sense that they wanted to see her. Mara sat down on the floor of the nursery so that she could see into each of the cribs and that they could see her through the bars.

“Your mother said that I should sing you a song…” Mara thought out loud. “I don’t know any lullabies…I’ve never had anyone sing them to me.”

She thought on her feet, and knew that there was no one else around to hear her if she did start to sing to the children.

As if on instinct, she started off quietly humming a tune that seemed appropriate. In the back of her mind, Mara knew the tune had words to it, but she couldn’t recall them at the moment.

The twins seemed to be enraptured by the sound she was making; the melody was low and soothing, and Mara thought she was getting most of it right.

She looked over at Jacen as she starting singing gibberish to the tune that was coming out of her; his eyes blinked heavy. He had found his teething ring which was now slack in his mouth as he closed his eyes watching her.

Mara switched her attention to Jaina, who was still clearly more-awake than her brother, and her eyes were concentrated on the song.

As the gibberish that she was singing seemed to come from nowhere, Mara was almost sure that some of the sounds she was making were actual words…\textit{maybe.}

Jaina started blinking with as heavy lids, until her eyes closed, and she snorted softly while chewing on air.

Mara repeated the tune a few more times until she was sure that both children were asleep before she silently got up off the floor.

She continued the song as she padded her way over to the door.

She cringed as the door opened with a \textit{hiss}, so accommodated by singing a bit louder as she exited and closed the door.

Once on the other side of the door, she stopped singing quietly, and stood at the door for a few more moments to listen, if there should there be any crying from either crib.

Mara sighed out the breath she didn’t realize that she was holding, and smiled to herself; she had just put two children to bed on her own. She didn’t think she would ever be capable of doing such a thing, but now she had proof that she could do it.

She stood there smiling to herself, relishing in the moment. Mara crossed her arms on her chest, and gently hugged herself.

She jolted with a start before she heard the words.

“Mistress Jade!” The golden droid exclaimed. “What a pleasure it is to see you again.” The protocol droid wobbled from side to side, and extended one of its crooked arms in the air.

Mara knew that Luke enjoyed this droid, and found it comical; Mara just found it annoying like so
many other protocol droids she had encountered.

She frowned was back as waited on the droid to enlighten her.

“Her Highness, Princess Leia, has instructed me to direct you to her study.” It tilted its head before it turned and shuffle-walked down the hallway. “This way, please?”

Mara followed the five, or so, steps that it took to come to a door on the opposite wall.

“Her Highness will see you now.” The droid announced formally.

She snorted at the prissiness of the droid as she approached the doorway; slightly seeing the humor that Luke saw.

“Thank you, droid.” She tried to hide her snarl in the undertone as she walked into the adjacent room; she still hadn’t forgotten that it was this droid that had interrupted what was supposed to be her first kiss with Luke. Still, she tried not to hold any malice against it, because it was Solo who had commanded the droid to do so.

Mara walked into the room with the golden droid in tow.

Leia sat behind a large dark desk as she was typing furiously. She looked up and smiled briefly before returning her attention to her terminal as Mara approached.

“I’m just finishing my closing remarks.” She said without looking up. “And done.” With one final keystroke, she looked satisfied as she looked up.

Mara took one of the chairs in front of the desk, and looked about the room.

For only having been there a short time, Leia had managed to make her office look like it had been lived-in for years.

“I’m going to assume that the twins didn’t give you any trouble?” The former princess asked.

Leia grinned at her from the other side of the desk. Then her grin faded. She swallowed and stared off for a moment.

“I didn’t know that my father didn’t like cats.” She said quietly, as her eyes came back. “It must have been quite the sight…did that really happen?”

Mara raised an eyebrow, wondering how she knew the details of the story.

Leia held up a small speaker on her desk. “Baby monitor.” She said casually and apologetically.

Mara snorted as she realized that Leia probably heard all that went on in the nursery while she was there. “Yes, it did.” She confessed.

Leia nodded knowingly, and paused. “There’s so many things I don’t know about him; so many things that I don’t want to know, and many things that I can’t help but know.”

She looked down at her hands, forgetting there was someone else in the room. “Luke knows much more than I do…he told me about finding the slave records of our grandmother and father…and researching Vader’s estate…but, somehow, I’d rather not know.” She growled her last few words.

Leia’s glare held for a moment, and then she looked back up at Mara. “I remember the Emperor’s cats and how they used to roam the palace.” She smiled briefly. “I saw one of them bite the hand of
The Qi’fet delegate at a party.”

The Rebel leader sighed. “And that song…” she said, changing the topic, “Threepio was able to translate some of it.”

Mara frowned; to her, it was merely a jumble of sounds and didn’t mean anything to her.

The droid perked up. “Oh yes, Princess Leia is quite right. However, it is not commonly heard outside its home system, and the form that you were using had a local dialect…from the words that I could decipher.”

Mara frowned again, which the droid must have taken as a queue to continue.

It twitched as a sign of excitement. “I am fluent in over six millions forms of communication and could readily translate some of the words you were using Mistress Jade.”

The droid took a few steps towards her. “The words you were singing come from a folk song. The correct words are: Mo run geal dileas, dileas…Mo run geal dileas nach till thu nall…Cha till mi fhein riut…A ghaoil…Cha ‘n fhaod mi…O choin a ghaoil ‘s ann tha mise tinn.”

The droid attempted to repeat the tune that Mara had sung with surprising ease.

“The translation is: My faithful fair one…My oh, my rare one…Return my fair one, now hear me cry…For thee my maiden, I am sorrow laden…Without my fair one, I will pine and die.” The droid paused. “Quite haunting and morbid, but it is not my place to judge.”

Mara turned her head to side, not believing what she was hearing. Something in her stirred, and without a beat in between, her shields came up.

Leia flinched slightly, as if feeling the change over the smuggler.

Without being stopped, the droid continued. “As I have mentioned before, it is not commonly heard outside the system of Stewjon, and at the time of my programming, it was placed in my semi-deceased language data bases. If you would prefer, I can retrieve other samples of this language for you?”

Mara shook her head, and closed her mouth. Looking over at Leia, she swallowed. “No. Thank you for your information.” She said quietly.

The princess’s eyes were keenly focused on her friend, waiting for a reaction, but she turned to the droid. “Thank you Threepio for your assistance. I will call for you, if needed.”

The droid left without another word.

And Leia waited until it was gone from the room. “Have you ever been to Stewjon?” she asked the other woman.

Mara looked off, feeling distant, and then her face returned to its usual calm visage. “No…never. I must have heard it at a performance in the palace or something of that nature.” She commented dismissively.

“Of course.” Leia nodded, and then took the other woman’s demeanor as a signal to pick another line of conversation; after all her guest wasn’t known for being candid about her life, even if they were almost family.
“Well, I might as well tell you what that conversation was about.” The Rebel leader’s tone changed from being relaxed to one, that Mara read as being meant for business.

If there was one thing that Mara greatly respected about the woman in front of her, was that she knew how to read the tone of a room; the office was made for business, and business was about to be addressed.

“When you were on the Liberty, what would you say the atmosphere was like?” Leia asked as her eyes narrowed.

Mara shook her head. “I would say that the Squad seemed to be frustrated…I even sensed that from Luke too.”

The Leader nodded. “Yes, I assumed they would be.” She then shook her head. “Since I stepped down, it’s like the whole galaxy has been holding its breath, waiting for Fel’ya to respond to the Imperial attacks, or, at the very least, acknowledge them.”

Leia adjusted her position to make herself more comfortable, favoring her belly again. “It seems that he wants to ignore that there is even attacks going on. So far he has refused to call on the standing military to defend other Core Worlds. But today…of all days, he made a mistake.”

“The representative of Fondor called on him, during session, to make decisive action against the ‘Imperial Threat’, as they are calling it now on Coruscant. Fondor had recently been attacked and now Fel’ya can’t ignore it now that it’s on record. However, he told the session that he wants to call a hearing on the validity of the threat.” Leia looked satisfied.

Mara nodded. “Well, that won’t buy him any friends…it’s a stalling tactic.”

“Exactly.” Leia’s eyes narrowed again, and then flashed over to the other woman.

Feeling a slightly touch on her mind, Mara wondered if the princess was trying to probe her thoughts, or merely sensing the situation.

With her eyes kept on a tight gaze, Leia dared to ask, “Do you still have any contacts in the espionage game?” Then, she shook her head. “No, I’m sorry…I shouldn’t have asked that of you.”

Mara exhaled slowly, knowing where this was going. “You think Fel’ya is in league with the Imperials?- and you want proof before passing it along to those who would know how to use it?” she asked.

Leia grimaced. “Yes I do…but I just don’t know how to prove it.”

“There won’t be a direct line.” Mara said. “That will be the hard part….Bothans don’t like straight lines. They never did, even under the Empire. Their philosophy had its teeth cut on running the espionage game…whatever you know, they’re two steps ahead.”

Leia rolled her eyes. “Don’t remind me.” She leaned forward on her desk. “That back door that you had put in, at the time of Delta Source, to keep track of my brother….could it pull any other information?”

Mara raised both eyebrows.

“Oh yes, Luke mentioned that to me.” Leia said smoothly. “I was waiting to mention it you… very clever of you, by the way.” She winked.
The smuggler, crossed her arms on her chest, and placed a mental reminder to be sure to chastise a Jedi the next time she saw him; they were going to have to have a talk about what should and shouldn’t be common knowledge.

“I suppose it could be used for other information, but it won’t be that easy. Fel’ya wouldn’t let that slip. He most-likely has an aide running his communications… does he have any long-term staff that have been with him for a while?” Mara said, thinking of possibilities.

Leia thought back. “There is one that came with him from Bothwali…I think he is a family member, if I remember correctly.” She tapped the side of her head. “I suppose that I could have someone research it.”

“If I were a betting woman…and I’m not…I would say that Fel’ya’s time is almost up.” Mara commented.

“Why do you say that?” Leia looked at her inquisitively.

It was Mara’s turn to narrow her eyes. “Well, from my experience, if the Imperials were using Fel’ya to deflect attention away from their attacks, and ignoring that they gained more territories – but now, Fel’ya has shown that he’s lost control by allowing his motives to be questioned in an open session. It shows that he’s lost control. And it there’s one thing that proves that he’s a useless pawn to the Imperials, is that he can’t control the ebb and flow that he needs to.”

“He’s useless to them…” Mara summarized. “An attack on Coruscant is eminent…it’s been long enough since the attacks started without the Capital being a target…Fel’ya, first, denied the Imperials their prize of capturing the Capital in a timely fashion, as well as the war heroes, The Rogues…” – Leia’s eyebrows raised. Yes, she had been aware of that plot too.

“And now, he shows that he can’t keep an upper hand on the senate.” Mara exhaled. “If he has one more slight show of weakness, he’s doomed…and going to take the Capital with him.”

Leia blinked hard. “Yes, it would come down to that, won’t it?”

“I have to ask though…” Mara decided to break with the politeness that she had been demonstrating this far. “Why haven’t you just blasted the bastard since you knew what he was about? – That’s what the Imperials would have done, and run him over.”

The Rebel leader smirked. “You don’t know how good it would feel to do such a thing, and many would have celebrated it.” She paused. “I guess I still hold out hope for some sort of decency in the senate.”

There were perks to thinking of Mara as family too; there was no need to play the proper princess all the time. “If I could rewind the years, I’d go right back to after Endor, and done it all differently.”

“Oh?” Mara sked, surprised she was hearing this. “…How so?”

Leia looked at the smuggler; regret entering her eyes. “We made lots of mistakes.” She sighed, rubbing her forehead. “We shouldn’t have taken so long to take over control of the senate. We shouldn’t have set up Coruscant as the Capital…we should have moved it to Corellia or Chandrila, or some other core world. We shouldn’t have kept the same design to the Republic as pre-Empire; we knew its design failings and we should have made changes…less centralized. We should have acted quicker.”

The room seemed darker and harder now.
Mara never thought she would have heard a confession like that from such a powerful woman and leader. The Emperor would have never had fessed up to his own errors, so it was astonishing to her to hear something like this.

It was silent for a longer time, and then a thought that been sitting in Mara’s mind came forward, and, unchecked, left her mouth. “So is that what you’re rebelling against this time? The order of the current government?- putting up a resistance to them?”

Leia frowned in response before answering. “Certainly not.” She said with some ambivalence. “Even the Rebel Alliance was a desire to return the will and control to the people of the galaxy, not to control them and make their decisions for them. We wanted a return to democracy. This is purely a resistance to any form of tyranny – but…” She sighed. “…it seems to include the New Republic and those who refuse to act in the best interest of the people.”

“It has always been a fight for the will of the people and to protect them…and it will never be anything else.” Leia defined her ideology simply.

Mara studied the other woman’s face, and when satisfied, she nodded, agreeing with the sediment.

If it was anyone else spouting these political ideals, Mara would have doubted their sincerity, but Leia had the Skywalker earnestness about her. Mara had seen it in Luke, and now she had absolutely seen it in his sister- without question.

“Good.” Mara mumbled, still not sure that she should continue. If it had been a year ago, she would have willingly watched and stood by as the New Republic imploded on itself.

Now, though, she had friends; friends that would be affected by the outcome of this new war.

Somehow, she had unwillingly gotten back to helping the New Republic by willingly helping it.

“You should have some of your sleeper cells awaken.” Mara murmured, uncomfortable that her skills were being used again.

Leia looked at her curiously.

“You know…” Mara looked the princess directly in the eye. “…Like the ones you had in place on Ghuktag and Chi’nuk that were feeding details to the Rebellion about financial dealings of the Empire. Those are centers for the Banking Guilds; if Fel’ya is buying his way into the good graces of the new Imperials, then they would know first.”

A short snort came from the princess. “I didn’t realize that anyone knew about those cells.” She raised an eyebrow.

“I did.” Mara said curtly. “I wasn’t supposed to know how and when the Empire laundered their money, but I knew about the sleeper cells and how they could disrupt Imperial business. I was chasing someone else at the time when I found out about them, and decided to keep them in place, without revealing them, just in case I needed them.”

Leis nodded, a smirk coming to her face. “That’s a good plan. I will have to ask if they are still in place.”

“I’m sure they are.” Mara said confidently. “They helped reveal the Xin Tu Nix Smuggling Group when I needed them. However, if you’re going to approach them now, you should know that they’ve turned into a bit of a mercenary gang; buying and selling information, rather than in it for the cause of the Rebellion.”
The name of the group that Mara helped take down before the Bremem hearing rang in Leia’s mind; it wasn’t every day that a smuggling group and the head of NRI had been taken down at the same time.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” The princess said coolly.

Mara offered the other woman a tight smile.

“I guess I can trade you for the information that you’ve just given me.” Leia said. “Your source in the palace isn’t going to be able to give you the whereabouts of my brother for the next little while.”

Mara sat up in her seat. “I didn’t expect them too.” She said casually. “I’ve stopped using them.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Mara replied. “After I told Luke about it, I felt bad about using such a tool…I haven’t checked the reports since I left the Liberty.”

In a flash, their conversation and taken on its schoolgirl tone again, and Mara was back to talking about the boy she was in love with; she blushed.

Leia tapped her comm pad. “Part of the communication I received was a plan for members of Red Squadron to make contact with Resistance fighters on Ovanis. Luke will be heading the mission.”

Mara furrowed her brow; trying briefly to recall any details about Ovanis, but nothing came to mind.

“It solves two problems.” Leia explained. “The NRI is sending a team to investigate the appearance of the Red Squadron, along with the subsequent disappearance, or disbandment of the Rogue Squadron.”

She knew that Mara understood the situation precisely; if there were no members of Rogues Squadron on board the Liberty to interview, then there wouldn’t be much of an investigation. Sending the Squad on missions removed them from suspicion and availability.

“The other issue is that the Squad will now feel like that are doing what they are meant to do. This mission, Luke’s mission, will provide valuable information on Ovanis – we suspect that something is about to happen there.” Leia divulged.

“Of course, this is all speculation.” Leia acknowledged, and shook her head again. “There’s no telling the rumors that you can trust coming out of Byss these days, and the reborn Emperor.”

Mara jolted with the last two words that Leia had used, but kept silent, hoping that Leia didn’t notice her reaction. She only swallowed hard, trying not to let those words echo in her mind.

Nodding in agreement with Leia’s statement, Mara was sure that she had kept her poise long enough.

“Would you look at the time!” Leia exclaimed as she looked at her chrono. “Han should be returning soon, and I believe I promised you some refreshments…and I’m starving!”

She got up from behind her desk to come around, motioning to leave the room. Mara took the hint to join her.

“Hungry all the time?” Mara asked, trying for more of the ‘girl-talk’ they had shared earlier.

Leia snorted softly. “You have no idea…and for things that I can’t explain. Vorkeets and giffer jam of all things!”
Rubbing her belly as she walked out of her office and towards the living room area, Leia continued. “I must say I was surprised that this pregnancy has been a lot harder than it was to carry twins, but both Han and I are happy for another baby.” She glanced over her shoulder, smiling. “He’s going to be a handful, this one is…I can tell.”

“He?” Mara asked. “You can tell already?”

“Oh yes.” Leia said, walking through the living area and into the kitchen. “I knew about the twins before Luke could sense them, and I knew about this one almost immediately. It was like he was screaming at me.”

She took out some fruit and cheeses from the cooler unit and offered them over, before turning to make beverage for both of them.

“I think that family can have a close connection in the Force, even if there is no Force sensitivity, and strangely, I seem to feel it more when I’m pregnant.” Leia said as she popped a piece of cheese in her mouth.

Mara smiled as she watched the other woman; yes, family seemed to have a greater connection in life, and the Force, more than it ever had before.

**

After the twins woke from their nap, Mara got the chance to feed Jacen, and witness for herself the wobbly steps of Jaina.

The evening carried on without any further talk of wars or politics, which suited Mara just fine.

Even Solo seemed to be in brighter spirits since the last time she had seen him aboard the Wild Karrde.

He had decided to take some advice Luke had bestowed on him, and an idea for new trading business with very few risks.

Leia didn’t look amused, but Solo took pride in running a junket out to the moon of Yavin on a fairly regularly schedule to deliver those worldly goods that every student seemed to need. It apparently included the latest music, tech toys and chocolate that Solo was prepared to deliver at the reasonable profit.

To top it off, he was able to inform Mara that all the doctors were in good health, including the spry Dr. Massian.

The eight hours Mara had allotted for the delivery were now coming to a close, and she could feel that she would be missing this, for lack of a better word, family.

Solo must have picked up on it, and promised to see her back to the hangar with little fan fair, assuring her that it was not because he liked her.

He had the good sense just to stand at the hangar doors and watch her take the walk to the Etherway by herself.

But Mara could still see the old smuggler watching the ship as she started the preflight sequence. When he seemed to be satisfied that she knew how to start her own ship, did he retreat back behind the doors, after giving her a lax salute.
The hangar doors opened, as Mara assumed the tide would be low again, and *Etherway* lifted off without any issue.

**

As the *Etherway* hit hyperspace, Mara settled in for the journey to rendezvous with the *Wild Karrde*.

She called up the search engine data base with two words on her mind: Stewjon and Ovanis.

TBC
Chapter Summary


Characters: Luke, Wedge, Wes

Chapter Notes

**
Okay folks…I won’t lie…without giving any spoilers away…it’s going to get a little darker from here on out.

I’m digging through plot here…so hold on, it’s going to be a bumpy ride. ~wink

**

Aboard the Liberty

Luke rubbed his face in the nook of his elbow, as his gloves were covered with grease. Futilely, he tried to revive himself.

He reached up again, placing the wires back into their configuration; he soldered the small area, being mindful as to not connect the wrong wires as he done earlier. A rookie mistake; one that he shouldn’t have made, if his mind had been on his work.

Pulling back, he looked at the open hatch on his X-wing, confirming now that it had been done correctly, before closing it.

Once again, his weary eyes needed to be rubbed to correct the haze in his vision.

Two nights ago, his dream still haunted him and since kept him awake; afraid to dream, afraid to be tempted by the power.

He knew it. There was no denying it.

He sighed; feeling defeated by his own self-imposed exhaustion.

Granted a respite from his thoughts he felt the buzz of a notification on his private comm.

Luke reached to the unit on his belt, flipped it to life, and stared at it while reading, and frowned.

He looked up to see who was around him. Then he sensed who was around, and then put the comm unit back on the clip on his belt.
Slowly, he began to put away his tools.

The *Liberty* had made maintenance crews available but Luke was of the mind that he preferred to work on his own ship. And by that definition, *his ship* was any ship that they assigned for him to use.

Since his own X-wing had been destroyed in a ‘training exercise’, they had given him a relatively good conditioned replacement. But, to his liking, it still didn’t feel the same.

He had many X-wings over the years, always having to abandon them at some point to make a necessary escape, but he had been with the last one the longest.

This new one was lacking the history that he had with the previous X-wings given to him.

There were no comfortable spots where he had worn in the dash controls on long flights. There wasn’t the permanent stain around the canopy from the water level when it was submerged in the murky swamp of Dagobah. There weren’t the side by side welding spots on the under belly where Mara had shown him up by beveling her seals perfectly.

Casually, Luke removed his other glove, and stored the rest of his tools back in the kit that the maintenance officers had lent him.

He knew better than to read a comm message then take off running towards Wedge’s office.

It didn’t take long for him to realize that there were ‘eyes’ on the *Liberty*, and they were still on him.

Mara had only been gone for five days and a holo had shown up in the galactic newsfeed from the first night that she had been on board; Luke’s arm wrapped over her shoulders as they walked back to his quarters, and a headline speculating the change in their relationship.

Someone on the crew had taken the holo, and had somehow gotten it back to Coruscant. Luckily, it failed to source the location of the image; the media was more excited about their relationship than they were about where it was taken.

So, he knew now that all his actions were still being watched again.

With tools away, Luke stretched his shoulders and headed in the direction to the senior officer’s offices.

As the thought of Mara crossed his mind, the images from the dream came to him unburdened and flashed before he willed them away.

He had convinced himself that it was a dream, *just another dream, and not a vision, not real, not a possibility of it coming true*; something his subconscious mind was figuring out but it still left him unsettled.

The whole ship was unsettled; no reason why his mind wouldn’t be either.

Luke walked across the deck with ease, but he knew that if Wedge had sent the request through his personal channels that there was something that was not common knowledge at play here.

He looked across the hangar to the area that used to house the stolen Imperial vessels; they had already destroyed the two TIE fighters that were used in Mara’s mission. The B-Wing had enjoyed blowing them to pieces. Now, the only Imperial freighter sat, waiting for its turn as target practice.

Walking down the hall to the office that was assigned to Wedge, he smiled and nodded at several
crew members as he passed them as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

The doors to Wedge’s office area opened for him, without needing to press the signal for the request to enter. Luke walked in, and passed the foyer directly into Wedge’s work space.

“I would have thought you would have rushed down here.” Wedge said without looking up from his terminal as he typed.

Wedge’s concentration was turned away from Luke, so that he only got a peripheral view of his commander.

“Well, if I started running… other people tend to start running too. They think I know something, and they will just follow suit.” Luke replied.

Wedge snort. “Yeah, I guess so, huh?”

He turned in his chair to see Luke after he finished typing.

It was now that Luke could see the large bruise under Wedge’s left eye; turning from green to dark blue.

Luke winced. “Ow!- where did you get that from?”

“Oh this?” Wedge gently touched his cheekbone. “Compliments of Horn before he departed.” He winked.

Luke frowned, not sure what to make of it; Horn had left the previous night on a mission, and he seemed in good spirits. Wouldn’t Horn be in the brig if he hit a commanding officer?

“It’s part of the news that I wanted to talk to you about.” Wedge started to explain.

Luke sat down in one of the chairs across from Wedge’s desk, preparing himself. There was something out of the ordinary; he had sensed it when the teams of Reds started leaving a few days ago, with undetermined return dates.

“Unfortunately, most of you won’t be here to enjoy it with me.” Wedge sighed.

“Iella is coming aboard with the inspection team from the NRI…she’ll be here tomorrow, standard midday time.” Wedge said, a huge grin appearing on his face. “And hopefully by evening meal, she’ll be my wife.”

Luke gasped; his mouth left hanging open, forming a smile for his friend. He suddenly remembered the Corellian wedding tradition of taking a hit right before the wedding.

“Ackbar has agreed to marry us… hence, the shiner from Horn… Tradition and all.” Wedge nodded, blushing.

Luke shook his head, at a loss for words, but all he could muster was “Congratulations!” He paused. “Wow, this was really unexpected. I mean, I knew you were thinking about it….but…”

Wedge nodded, still grinning. “I know, it’s been on my mind for a long time… and I thought, why not now? – We’re both not going to be planet-side for a while… she’s been married before and not interested in a big ceremony, and I really don’t have any family that expects anything from me, except my friends… and Ackbar didn’t choke on air when I asked him.”

“Well, then I say, do it!” Luke chuckled, still a little surprised. “I’m sure we can throw together
“I mean…” Luke began to think about it. “I’m not my sister…Leia has a real knack for making events, but I’m sure the remaining Reds can come up with something.”

Wedge shook his head. “As much as I would love for the whole squad to be here, I’m afraid that isn’t going to happen.” His smile started to take a downturn.

Luke narrowed his gaze at his friend, and sense that he didn’t need to ask; all was about to be explained.

“I have to get as many Rogues off the Liberty as possible before the NRI show up.” Wedge growled. “Fel’ya has asked for an investigation on where the Rogue Squadron has gone.”

“We fall under Madine’s command, so being on Ackbar’s ship isn’t going to look good.” He explained. “It also isn’t going to bode well that I have Luke Skywalker on board.”

Luke nodded; his name was synonymous with the Rogues. If he was here, then so must the squad.

“Even under the name ‘Red’- there’s only so much protection we can have.” Wedge muttered.

“So much for hiding in plain sight.” Luke followed the other man’s mutter with one of his own.

“You got it buddy.” Wedge leaned back in his chair. “No Rogues on board, and NRI can’t interview them. No Reds on board – then, even better. Some of the B-Wing will stay…their call signs wouldn’t have changed, and most of them know the politics that we’re playing. Those that don’t the game also don’t have the knowledge as to why we are doing what we do.”

Luke nodded, agreeing with the idea even though it was somewhat deceitful, but it was the lesser of the two evils; serve a squad up for sacrifice, or move them away to be used for protection missions.

“But that just isn’t it, is it?” Luke asked.

Wedge gruffed and leaned forward, looking annoyed. “You know that I hate it when you know something before I’m about to tell you…don’t you?”

Luke shrugged, knowing that his friend was trying to be humorous and teasing him about his Jedi abilities.

Wedge paused, breaking from the line of conversation that he started. “What does it feel like before you know something?” he asked seriously, and out of curiosity.

Luke raised his hand to scratch his forehead, showing that he wasn’t taking it as serious as Wedge was. He shrugged again. “I don’t know how to explain it…it comes different ways. Sometimes it feels like a voice at the back of my mind with direct answers, other times, like just now, it’s like a sense I get when you know someone is about to bluff in Sabacc.”

“And you know this for sure…no doubt that you might be wrong?” Wedge asked, still leaning forward to question his friend.


Wedge leaned back, nodding. “Just curious.” He mumbled.

The Jedi smirked; throughout the years, random questions about his abilities had come up, and he
knew they just came from a place of true curiosity, so he humored them as best he could.

“Yeah, you’re right…there is something else.” Wedge said louder. “And this one we have to keep off the books again. If anyone in the New Republic caught wind that we were acting against the Empire, like we did on Jade’s mission, then we would really be in hot water.”

“We’re not supposed to attack an enemy who is threatening free-worlds?” Luke asked incredulously, surprised that he could sense his own bitterness at feeling frustrated.

Both men looked at each other; they knew very well that their main objective was to protect the people of the New Republic, regardless of who the enemy was, but until the New Republic recognised the new Imperial threat or even acknowledge them- they didn’t exist.

Leia had taught Luke a few lessons in galactic politics; by point of order, if no one brings it up in a standing session then the problem never happened.

Nothing got under Luke’s skin like red tape and bureaucracy; and that sediment was shared by the rest of the squad.

“We make the hits when and where we can.” Wedge said; agreeing with Luke in the way that he could. “In this case, it’s off the books and they asked for you personally.” He raised his eyebrows. “Only, this time it isn’t a birthday party.”

Luke didn’t stop him, but waited for a further explanation.

“You and Wes, and a few other of the R’s, need to go make contact with a splinter cell of Leia’s resistance group on Ovanis.” Wedge explained. “You won’t meet with leader of the cell- he doesn’t meet with anyone…apparently, he’s quite highly placed in his government and needs to keep his cover.”

Wedge turned and typed a few keys on his terminal, then looked back at Luke. “They say there’s an Imperial building project that supposed to happen there shortly- we need to make sure that they don’t want to build anything there.”

Luke shifted in the chair. “That doesn’t sound like the sort of thing that they need me for?”

“I agree with you there… I offered Hobbie first- you know how he likes to blow things up. But the second-party asked for you specifically. He runs a missionary service with the Crèche and will put you in touch with the Resistance. I ran his name through a few data bases, and all I could get is a few low-key things…he used to be a librarian on Coruscant…and a professor, I believe…now, he’s found religion.” Wedge rolled his eyes on his last words.

Luke nodded; a shiver coming up his spine, until he whispered the name “Lor San Tekka”.

Wedge sat up in his chair again, and frowned. “Would you stop doing that? – you can’t tell me that you knew the name before I even told you!” He leaned back with his arms crossed on his chest, waiting. “How did you come up with this one, now?”

Luke shook his head, not finding humour in the moment. “I had just mentioned him to Mara while she was here…it just seemed the way things go sometimes.”

“Mmm…” Wedge snorted. “Coincidence then?”

“Figures.” Wedge snorted again, still waiting for an explanation. “So what it is with this one?”

Luke could read the expression on his friend’s face, asking him to fill in the blanks. “He’s a colleague of the doctors that I had relocated to Yavin IV—he’s also a member of the Church of the Force…they worship Jedi.”

Wedge leveled a finger at his friend. “You promised that you weren’t going to run off and do ‘Jedi things’ when you took this position…or at the very least, you promised me that you were going to warn me if you felt the ‘call’ to do something like that again. Please say this isn’t like the time after Hoth when we didn’t see you for weeks?”

Turning his head to the side, Luke thought about it, and sent out his senses. Nothing had come to him in his daily meditations that would send him on another random journey.

“I don’t think so.” He answered his commander honestly.

“Good.” Wedge gruffed. “I shouldn’t even let you off the ship with X-wings, but there’s no other way to do it. Less X-wings – means less Rogues for the NRI crew to see.”

“I’ll send you the details to your personal comm system— you’ll have to communicate on public channels for this one…you remember the protocol?” Wedge asked.

“I don’t think I could ever forget.” Luke grumbled, looking down; knowing that he needed to refresh his code language skills and re-assume one of his code names.

The room went quiet and Luke looked up to be met with a hard stare from his friend.

Wedge’s gaze softened, and Luke could sense that there was something that the other man wanted to ask him.

Sighing, Wedge’s eye narrowed again. “Can you tell what I’m thinking now?”

Luke shook his head, and sighed; too tired to muster humor.

“I was thinking that you look like a pile of shavit.” The Corellian answered simply.

The Jedi blinked hard, about to dispute it.

“No—no… you have to agree with me there.” Wedge still held tight to his opinion. “Horn said that you haven’t been sleeping lately.”

Luke rolled his eyes, and opened his mouth, but was cut off before he started.

“I get it.” Wedge continued. “You miss Jade. You had a nice visit…and now you miss her…I get it.”

He leaned back in his chair. “I know I’m going to miss Ellie…” He whispered his last few words, looking off into the distance. “There will be a lot of sleepless nights after she leaves.”

The commander sat upright in his chair. “But promise me that you’ll get some rest before you leave tonight. There will be plenty of time to do your research on this mission while in hyperspace.”


It was Luke’s turn to narrow his look across the desk; Wedge was holding something out on him again.
Wedge fidgeted in his seat for a moment. “What?” He blurted under the Jedi’s scrutiny.

“You know…” Luke said, not entirely sure what was about to be revealed but he knew it would affect him; he could sense it.

Wedge sighed. “Okay…okay. To prove that the Rogues aren’t here we also have to get rid of all your records…that means medical records too.”

Luke shook his head, wondering.

“Effective immediately, we need to take everyone off of voluntary medical treatments.” Wedge raised his eyebrows.

“So?” Luke failed to see how this impacted him.

“Ah… how do I put this?…”

Luke could sense this topic was making the Corellian uncomfortable.

Wedge got a strange, awkward grin on his face. “The infirmary is empty – we have to stop unnecessary ‘scripts… that includes… repress meds.” He winced. “Me included.” He grimaced.

The Jedi mouthed an “Oh”; his eyebrows rose.

“I know what you’re going to say…I’ve had this conversation with just about every male on board…” Wedge started to defend the new policy. “The females don’t seem to mind… but the males are quite unhappy about it.”

“And at least, Jade just left…it’s not like you can’t make other arrangements before the next time you see each other.” Wedge blurted out.

Rolling his eyes, and shaking his head, Luke just accepted what he was told. He shouldn’t have been surprised. His time during the Rebellion taught him what was necessary and what wasn’t.

Wedge was right; his chances of running into a fertile Mara right now was not likely, and technically, she should be going back on repress meds herself soon. They would come up with a solution if the Force threw them together again- which seemed to be the way of things lately.

“Okay.” Luke said, giving in without a fight; he must be more-tired than he thought he was. “We will make do, if and when…” He said quietly, being forewarned.

Wedge still held his lopsided, uncomfortable, apologetic grin for a few more seconds before relaxing his face. Clearly, having this conversation with his Squad had prepared him for strange moments.

“And last but not least…” Wedge added. “This arrived right before I sent you this meeting request.” He turned away to reach over behind his desk for a packet wrapped tightly in filmsy. “It looks very official so I knew it had to be passed on quickly.”

Luke took the packet and looked down at it in his hands.

It was sent via the lawyers he had contacted concerning his father’s estate; there were several legal and governmental seals on the outside of the packaging.

Suddenly the wrapped packet seemed heavier with his recognition of what it was, and it also felt like it was on fire.
Luke blinked hard, rapidly, then looked up at his friend, suddenly awake and aware, and gave him a tight grin. “Thank you.” He whispered quickly, before swiftly placing it on the edge of Wedge’s desk in front of him as if it was hot, backing away a bit, and just looking at it.

Luke’s hand came up and covered his mouth; he leaned back in his chair, looking at the packet, partially crossing his arms on his chest. The packet sat there.

Wedge had the good sense to stay quiet; he knew that whatever was in that bundle had some sort of significance.

Luke’s eyes flickered up at Wedge’s face; realising that someone else was in the room, then moving to acceptance- Wedge was one of his oldest friends, and didn’t need to be told if something was confidential.

“Have you ever wanted what to know something?—but at the same time, not to know it either?” Luke asked quietly.

Wedge kept his eye-contact and nodded slowly; he had accepted Luke through thick and thin, without question.

Luke reached out, and tapped the packet. “This, this right here might hold a whole bunch of answers…that I didn’t want to ask the questions to.”

“Could be good.” Luke tilted his head; he took his hand back, not wanting to be so close to the packet. “…but could be very bad too.”

Wedge was still quiet, but his brow furrowed as if he wanted to ask, but he knew better.

Luke looked at him again, sighed, and then answered Wedge’s lingering unspoken question. “It’s the estate documents for my father… and for Vader.”

Wedge sucked in air and backed his chair away from the packet resting on his desk, looking at it; knowing the significance.

Both men could walk into the fiercest heat of battle without hesitating, but at that moment, neither of them wanted to touch a packet of filmsy.

“Yeah…” Luke said quietly. “I didn’t think it would ever show up…I didn’t think there would be anything…Mara…she thought that there might be something left in Vader’s control after the fall of the Empire.” He sighed. “What if there is?”

He put his elbows on his knees, leaning forward, but not touching the packet either. “What if there isn’t?” Luke’s eyes stared at the packet. “But what if there is?—I didn’t even want it.” he whispered.

Wedge stared at the bundle, watching it, willing it to open just as Luke was.

The only sound in the office was the hum of the air exchanger, and both men breathing deeply.

Never the one to shy away from anything, Wedge broke the silence. “Do you want me to open it?-for you?” He asked quietly.

Luke blinked and looked over at his friend, and considered it for a moment. His gaze flashed back to the packet; truly examining it this time, and seeing that there were actually two packets wrapped together, making one.
Did they separate the estates? –quite possible; one looked bigger than the other.

Luke shook his head. “No…” he whispered. “No, I'll open it myself. I'll have lots of time in hyperspace.” He looked up at Wedge, meeting his eyes, “I’ll need something to drown out Wes.” and gave the other man a tight smile.

Wedge held a serious look until his face flashed with the recognition that Luke had just dropped a joke at the legendary motor-mouth of one Wes Jansen; then, he flashed a smile.

“Okay—just offering.” Wedge smirked; glad that Luke had removed the burden from him. “You know I’m here for you?” He said quietly.

“I know.” Luke responded emotionlessly; his eyes locked on the packets, mind racing with the implications. “I know.” He nodded; his eyes blinked, starting to relax.

Luke could sense it was time for him to go. Tentatively he reached out and took the packet from off Wedge’s desk and tucked it under his arm.

“When do we leave, Commander?” Luke asked, bringing himself back to business.

“21 hundred Hours.” Wedge answered without pausing.

It didn’t give him much time.


“I’ll save you some cake.” Wedge grinned. He got up from around his desk just as Luke got up. “Clear Skies Red Five.” He said stoically, giving his Lieutenant a proper salute.


**

Somewhere in Hyperspace

“…and that would be how I was able to find the winch that I needed to hold up the ship’s engine.” Wes’s voice sounded very amused at the story that Luke was trying to ignore.

Luke stretched in the pilot’s seat of his X-wing and looked at the comm speaker, sensing that Wes’s story had finally ended.

Three hours into a flight and Wes had yet to stop talking. The music Luke offered to play didn’t stop him – he would just sing a long or have a story about each song.

Now Luke could sense that Wes was looking to tell another story, and although Wes’s voice could lull Luke to sleep, he wasn’t ready to take a nap.

Luke turned to his comm, “That was a great story buddy…but, ah, I have some stuff I have to read before we land…is it okay if I just play some music again?”

“No problem Luke…” Wes agreed. “You don’t have to tell me to keep it down…I know when to shut up…people used to tell me to shut up all the time…and you know what I did? - I shut up, that’s what I did…I remember this one time that I almost starved because I didn’t tell them that I was hungry…I was walking with…”
Luke pressed the mute button on his own mike, and turned down the sound on his speaker as to not interrupt Wes’s story.

He let out a sigh.

There used to be missions where Luke could listen Wes go on for hours; and he would, uninterrupted, and to varying degrees of interest.

It could be entertaining, or it could be annoying, but Luke could never tell which one it was going to be.

Today, it was a little of both.

Luke tilted his neck, back into the rest of his pilot’s chair, looking out the canopy at the star lines going by.

He knew he had two clear options before him; close his eyes and try to sleep, or, open the glaring packet that was behind his chair.

Luke had tried diverting his attention from Wes’s stories earlier on in the flight by running diagnostics on his X-wing; checking and re-checking the calibrations, and checking on the positions of R11 and R12 as they flew with him in hyperspace.

He tried reading up on the details of Ovanis but didn’t get too far with that either; partially because Wes’s voice was droning on in the background, and partially because he was trying to avoid that packet.

Luke had nothing else to be a distraction; that packet wasn’t going to open itself.

If he could rewind his day to any moment, he would go back to when Wedge offered to open it for him- the answer would have been a resounding ‘yes’, just to take the pressure off.

He closed his eyes, and reached back behind his seat, placed his hand on the packet and brought it around to the front.

Mara had once said to him ‘you don’t miss what you never had’; she had been talking about her family that she never knew. But in this case, Luke was possibly facing the family that he knew, and details that he didn’t.

Mara might have been right when she thought that statement was a total lie.

Luke did miss being part of a family, and knowing his father. He knew it had been out there all his life; whispers about his name, Skywalker.

Uncle Owen constantly played down the man’s reputation, calling him a navigator on a Spice freighter.

Ben had said his father was a Hero and General in the Clone Wars.

It wasn’t until Luke joined the Rebellion that he began to hear the other murmurings; ‘The Hero without Fear’ was what they used to call General and Jedi Anakin Skywalker.

That all crumbled that day on Bespin; trying to save Han and Leia.

The Hero turned out to be a Monster.
Luke sighed, still looking at the packet.

That Monster did _turn back_ into the Hero – was it wrong to think that the Hero was lurking there all the time?

He had told himself so many fables about his father that he had grown comfortable with them; the truth might pale in comparison.

One more sigh, Luke felt a surge of impulse, pulling at the filmy that wrapped the packets.

The legal house had done it’s diligence to wrap the two packets and there was more than one layer of wrappings.

Luke could feel the frustration building in him as he took off the film, until finally he had two sealed envelopes in front of him; one large than the other.

Attached to the smaller of the envelopes, was an even smaller letter; it seemed it imply that he should read that first.

The white filmy of the letter was crisp, and although it looked very formal, the possibility of opening it didn’t scare Luke.

It opened unceremoniously, with little trepidation.

It was from the lawyers; Luke began to read to, almost too fast that he had to go back and read it again to make sure that he got all the details.

The letter detailed the process that the lawyers used to access both estates, and that most of the paperwork inside each packet were merely the documents from the court’s decision to release the estates to Luke.

In the case of Anakin Skywalker, there were no named descendants, and that the estate was made available five years after the rise of the Empire; the court declared Anakin Skywalker, late of the Jedi Temple, deceased.

It seemed in present day, the courts didn’t have much regard for Anakin’s estate either; the packet was small and didn’t look like there was much of a fight there.

However, in the case for Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith, Supreme Commander of the Imperial Forces, as the estate called him; it appeared that the courts took an issue to Luke’s claim, and there was some debate about it, judging by the size of the packet.

However, as it turns out, Luke Skywalker had been named heir, specifically, in the documents by his father, _to all the entitlements within the scope of the law, and thereby the state acquiesces to his petition for a ruling._

He re-read that last statement; his father had amended his will to include Luke, by name, at some point, as his heir.

He looked out at the star-lines and they raced by, thinking of the implications; Darth Vader had acknowledged him as his son. He shook his head and went back to the packet.

Luke began to frown as he read the portion below, from his lawyers, stating that although Leia Organa, Princess Royale of House of Alderaan, may also be heir to the property, she was not named in any of the documents, nor has she petitioned for their access. The state placed a ruling that she has
two years to place a claim on any of the entitlements to either estate.

He sighed, knowing that there was little chance that Leia would want any part of it.

After Endor, she still shivered at the thought of Vader being her father, regardless if Anakin had been brought to the Light, and regardless of the number of times that Luke reminded her of that.

It was enough, by ways of forgiveness of her heritage that she even agreed to have children, should they share their grandfather’s legacy. Han had revealed that to Luke, in confidence, believing that her brother could help convince her into starting a family.

In truth, Luke shared that fear with her. But at times that fear seemed so distant, until he met Mara.

Leia had also used Vader as an excuse not to dedicate herself to Jedi training. She took very few lessons from Luke, and only when she had a specific skill that she wanted to learn; everything else fell to the wayside.

She flat-out refused to learn to use a lightsaber, or touch a lightsaber, even Luke’s, and an absolute ‘no’ to touching the lightsaber that formerly belonged to their father.

It was a huge step for Leia to accept the information that Luke had found out about Anakin’s slave records. It was a bigger step that she didn’t return the holovid file of Anakin’s pod race; Luke didn’t know if she had watched it, but he hoped she had.

Leia, like Mara, had her own schedule on what she would be comfortable with, and not before then.

Luke had to remind himself that it was Vader, and his forbidding history, that had led both of them to their present states. Leia had been forced into hiding once again, ousted from her service to the galaxy.

He frowned, knowing that this time the impact would last a whole lot longer than either of them would be prepared for. He also knew that, so far, he hadn’t been as publicly affected by the revelation as she had.

Luke held both packets in his hands, and decided that he would start on the smaller packet, assuming that it was Anakin’s estate.

He placed the larger packet off to the side, deciding he was not ready to deal with Lord Vader, not now…maybe not ever.

He turned over Anakin’s packet in his hands, still unsure of whether he wanted to open it, but decided he would do it.

Luke closed his eyes as he ripped the seal away, and opened the filmsy casing; he pulled out the contents.

He opened his eyes, and saw the data card clipped to the layers of filmsy, and another small sealed packet.

The pages of filmsy seemed to be the legal proceedings in order to release the estate, and data card actually details of the estate.

In a moment of impatience, Luke hunted around his seat to find his data reader with feverish hands until he found the device.
Quickly, he slipped the data card into the reader, and switched on the screen, skimming the words that appeared before him.

There were several files on the card. According to the first page, the files were arranged by years of service to the Jedi Order.

His eyebrows drew together; it wasn’t just an estate he was handed, but the history of his father. His anticipation grew.

Too eager to continue reading, Luke paused to swallow before he opened the first file.

An image of a contract appeared.

He read the ornate script on the image, when he made the conscious decision to slow down his mind, and be present in the moment and not rush.

When he began to process what he was seeing, he became aware that he was looking at the contractual obligation Anakin had placed himself in; it was the copy of the oath Anakin took, binding himself to the training of the Jedi, with Obi Wan Kenobi listed as in charge of his instruction.

Anakin couldn’t have been more than nine or ten years old at the time, so in lieu of a signature, only an “X” appeared; Luke remembered that very few slaves were taught to read or write.

It seems there was a ceremony binding student to master, making the arrangements of training formal. It was in this document that Anakin was referred to as ‘Padawan Skywalker’.

Luke had learned since first hearing the word ‘Padawan’, that it meant ‘student’; he smiled to himself thinking of the boy starting a new life.

There was a second page to the contract; it was an accommodation from the governing body of Naboo, siting Anakin, and thanking him, for the protection of the sovereignty and freedom of the people of Naboo. With high recognition for distinguished aid provided during the Battle of Naboo.

A large seal graced the bottom cover of the page; he remembered the symbol that Mara had pointed out to him as the royal crest of Naboo.

Luke looked up from the reader, trying to sense these associations. His father was nine years old at the time; what could he have done to warrant royal recognition during a battle?

Was this where Anakin’s association with Naboo began?

Was this a step that would lead to finding his other missing half?

Was Anakin’s father from Naboo? - No father had been mentioned on Anakin’s slave record.

Was his mother from Naboo? – could this be when and where Anakin met Luke’s mother?

Egged on by the questions in his mind, Luke flipped back to the main menu on the disk to see that there was a medical file on his father, as well.

Choosing to ignore that file for the time being, Luke went to the next series of documents.

There seemed to be a history of missions that Obi Wan and Anakin had been on together; ambassadors, missionaries, teachers, protectors; the list went on.

An odd comment appeared that sent a cold shiver into Luke: the expense of Anakin’s training was
granted by the patronage of the Palpatine Family of Naboo.

It was no surprise to him that Palpatine hailed from Naboo—Mara had told him as much. What was a surprise, that at such a tender age, Palpatine had already taken an interest in Anakin?

Luke suddenly got a protective drive to push away anything that had to do with the Emperor from his father – Anakin was just a child at this point in time.

Did Palpatine start his planning of his future apprentice now? Was Palpatine biding his time until he had need of the Jedi in training?

Luke tampered down the anger that followed the desire to protect his father, and he went back to the files.

He read through them; some of the notes were short, others had such details, but some words started to pop up as a description of Anakin’s habits and reactions, and repeated. *Reckless… Impulsive… Frustrated… Arrogant…*

It looked like the Jedi Council had taken great interest in Anakin’s behaviour, and there was often the efforts made to advance his training where they could; referring to him as a “special case” and “Chosen” for certain tasks that were above other Padawans.

Luke frowned at the words they had used; why was “Chosen” capitalized. A fleeting memory flashed in his mind; the dark voices on Dantooine had called him ‘*Child of the Chosen*’…could this have something to do with it?

Luke looked at the age of the details, trying to figure out the age of his father at this time in his life. He assumed that these must have occurred during the mid to late teen years of his father’s life; and somehow Luke could sympathize with his father’s feelings, having felt that same way at that age, but looking back, those did indeed seem like warning signs, but not a cause that would spell out impending doom.


Almost ten years had gone by without having a connection to the planet, but now it had appeared again.

Another file called to him. Opening it, another accommodation appeared.

It always puzzled him why official documents needed such a fancy script on them; it often derailed the significance of the achievement, but he supposed, to those it mattered for, it would be impressive.

This time was an award for the service that Anakin was able to provide during the Battle of Geonosis; gaining special recognition for being injured in the line of duty, and alluding to a promotion.

Luke looked up for a moment, frowning at the idea of Anakin being injured.

History had taught him that the Geonosians had strong ties to the Empire; a good deal of battle droids, ship designs and weaponry came from Geonosian design.

Luke flipped back to the main menu to access his father’s medical history; his eyes scanning the file for an injury that would be so severe as to be mentioned.
Sure enough, Anakin had his right arm removed, just above the elbow, causing him to have a mechanical replacement. The procedure, it seems, had the added disadvantage of repair because it was caused by a lightsaber that had cauterized the limb at the same time that it sliced off the appendage.

Luke winced, remembering his own injury, and the rehab that he had to go through to make it feel like it was a part of him.

Anakin chose to have his recovery on Naboo for a short time.

Reflectively, Luke looked at the date of the documents. Finally, a date he recognized.

The dates tied in to the time right around the beginning of the Clone War.

More…more, he wanted more information. The voice, at the back of his mind that would tell him to expect something, was now yelling at him to continue… Keep digging, it begged. So close…she’s here….

Luke went back to next available document; another contract, the promotion. Anakin was promoted to the rank of full Jedi Knight because… and Luke struggled to read the script… defeat of evil?

He knew from his own readings that the next step, after being a student, was to resist evil in order to be raised to the level of Jedi Knight.

At this time, the small flimsy envelope caught his attention; Luke had favored the data disk over the contents of this small packet. He looked back and forth between the packet and the disk, and chose the disk.

He went back to his father’s service record and continued where he had left off, after Anakin has received his title of Jedi Knight.

Not long after returning to service, Anakin went into action with Obi Wan, and they continued their service around the galaxy until both were given their own command unit of clones; the list of battles and awards were stacked so high that Luke couldn’t possibly go through all of them, but pledged, that at some point he would.

He stopped; Anakin had been given a Padawan of his own, a Togruta female.

Luke remembered seeing a Togruta once, at Tosche Station. He stared as he marveled at the beautiful skin patterns and large head montrals, but what left him in awe was the rumor of what great pilots Togrutas were. Luke begged Uncle Owen to stay a little longer so he could overhear the stories that the Togruta was telling.

He returned to reading, seeing that Anakin’s Padawan had left the Jedi Order at some point, after years of service. Luke felt disappointed for his father; it must have been like a dagger to have his student walk away.

So many times, it had been a reason for Luke to refuse to take on students; mostly because he felt he lacked knowledge to pass on, but also, a part of him knew that there would come a time when a student might turn away from his instruction- and what a crush that would have been.

According to the dates, it was within months of the forming of the Galactic Empire, and the start of the Jedi Purges; he slowed his reading, searching for anything that would be a clue…a clue to why Anakin inevitably fell to the Darkside… anything… please let there be one shining reason…let it all make sense…
Luke paused, and dropped his head, and rubbed his face; he knew he hadn’t gotten the rest that he promised Wedge that he would, but he couldn’t stop now.

It was so close…something was so close; he could feel it.

His eyes scanned the reader to get to the part where he had stopped reading.

Another star-dated appeared, and another accommodation was given to Anakin; this time for saving the life of Chancellor Palpatine? With the aid of Obi Wan Kenobi—they had both been recognised for their achievement.

The dates and events that followed where fast and furious; Anakin was then appointed to the Jedi Council, at the request of Palpatine, but not granted the rank of Jedi Master – an odd request that the Council allowed.

The ties between Anakin and Palpatine were coming closer, or maybe they had always been there, and no one cared to notice.

Luke remembered Yoda being very gruff and specific about those he chose to promote, and accept. He assumed that the Jedi Master would have been the same way about someone who was ordered to attend the Council as member, but not granted the rank that would have placed them there.

And to Anakin, it would have been a moment of both pride and disgust, knowing that his presence wasn’t requested, it had been ordered. And sitting on the council without the rank of Jedi Master would have been like dangling a goal in front of him, like a taunt, encouraging his frustration.

And then…there was nothing.

The dates, the details all ended.

Luke moved the page up and down, hoping there was just a glitch in the file; perhaps it was loading. But there was nothing left; he had reached the end of the history of his father.

He exhaled sharply at being denied a conclusion; the story was over.

The last date was within days of the forming of the Empire. And Palpatine had clearly had his clutches in Anakin from the very beginning.

Something in Luke was rising; he wanted to break free of his cockpit. He wanted out. He wanted to yell and scream to the galaxy, scream at an absent father, with the only question that burned in his mind: Why? Dear Stars…Why?

It was the exhaustion that was fueling this now, and Luke fought to keep it inside him; the anger, the outrage.

He fought to bring the peace and light into himself; controlling his breathing, he closed his eyes, out of habit and knowing it would bring his emotions under control.

Luke didn’t know for how long that he sat there; eyes closed, feelings subsiding, frustration fading away.

He tried to force himself to see the positive in it; he now had more information about his father than he ever had before.

His father wasn’t monster that people believed him to be; he saved lives and protected people, for, at
least, some part of his life.

Anakin was indeed a Hero.

Luke closed down the data reader. He was done reading for the night.

Out of curiosity, he flipped through some of the lawyer’s transcripts of the proceedings, as just a matter of getting his mind off of the moments that had just passed.

Finding the last few pages, his eyes started to read the some words from a paragraph; talking about the transfer of property on Naboo.

A small parcel of land, on the ‘lake country’, was gifted to Anakin, shortly after the Battle Geonosis, according to the date. It was granted by someone named Ruwee Naberrie.

It seemed that the land reverted back to Naberrie after Anakin was presumed, and declared dead by the courts.

Luke frowned; Naberrie had done something strange. At the end of his life, Naberrie had returned the land back to Anakin’s estate, and any descendants of Anakin Skywalker.

Luke froze. Why would a man leave property to a dead person? Unless… unless he didn’t believe he was dead…and unless he knew that Anakin had at least one child.

He gasped before reading on.

Sure enough, in the final settlement pages, Luke, as beneficiary, had inherited a small military pension that had been eaten away at by banking and trustee fees leaving less than two thousand credits, the deed to a small section of land on the envied lake country on Naboo, outside Theed, and the contents of a treasury box that had been held by same bank as the pension.

He sat back; feeling slightly relieved, and still feeling unsatisfied.

Looking up through the X-wing’s canopy, the stars still rushed by, and Luke tried to recall what portion of the galaxy he might be in now, wondering how far he was from Naboo, feeling it held more answers. Could he make it there now? He knew he couldn’t; just wishful thinking.

Luke looked down at the small packet that sat in his lap. He had almost forgotten about it, and was willing to ignore it.

It was probably the contents of the treasury box. He wondered what so worthy of storing in a box for close to thirty years.

Sighing, he tore off the seal, and turned over the packet so that the contents would drop into his hands.

What came out surprised him.

A lock of dark blonde, braided hair, neatly tied at each end; one end slightly aged and singed.

Luke held it up, knowing immediately what it was. It was his father’s Padawan braid…only severed off with a lightsaber when Knighthood was achieved. This was a part of Anakin.

A pain shot in Luke’s chest as he felt he couldn’t swallow, and tears were coming into his eyes from nowhere.
He used the back of his hand to wipe at his cheeks when he felt wetness on them.

Luke exhaled slowly before he decided to look at the other pieces that had fallen out of the packet.

A folded piece of paper struck him as odd. Filmy had been use for quite some time; this piece of paper seemed ancient by comparison.

Luke unfolded it gingerly, knowing that it was fragile, and gasped.

The royal seal of Naboo first caught his eyes, and then the words beneath it: Certificate of Marriage.

The words were faded, and some of them were missing but it felt electric to even hold it. He started reading…

*On this day of* -words faded… *joining of one, Anakin Skywalker, of Tatooine, with love and devotion, in perfect harmony and trust, to* – Kriff! Faded words again! *of Naboo, with the intention to form a lasting union of their souls.*

The paper was beyond damaged at the end of it, and there was barely an ink marking on it, baring the signatures of both of his parents? and witnesses.

Luke’s hands trembled. There it was; proof that his parents were married. There was always some suspicion that they may not have been. Jedis were rumored to keep secret families all over the galaxy; emotionally bonded to each other, but no legal entitmelents. He begged that this wouldn’t have been the case with his father.

Still in shock, Luke absently reached for the other piece of paper, a smaller, thicker piece. *What did they used to call these? Photographs?* - in a time when holos weren’t always common, and paper was still in use.

He turned it over; gazing back at him was the image of a man and woman, holding hands, smiling back at him.

The young man with cropped hair, standing tall in his Jedi robe, smiling with joy the likes Luke had never seen before- his father.

The woman, still nameless, her petite frame being towered over the man standing next to her, her face- her pure, perfect face, framed with embellished lace, love shining in her dark eyes, matching her smile with his.

Luke shook as he looked on the face on his mother for the first time.

TBC
Chapter Summary

Quote: Luke cringed visible, and looked down bashful, but still finding himself at ease.
“I learn from her as much as she learns from me.”

Characters: Luke, Wes, Reds, and Lor San Tekka

Chapter Notes

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And so it goes on… yes…I’m getting there… I swear…turn on the lights, it’s about to get darker in the chapter after this one.

~wink!
**

Inside the Atmosphere of Ovanis

“Luke?” Wes’s ambient voice called over the comm. “Are you sure you want to go in this way?”

As they flew in formation, keeping a steady speed, Luke could sense the nervousness in the other pilots, and Wes’s attempt to talk him out of it.

“It’s the best way to avoid their sensors.” The Jedi answered simply. “At this speed, and to this remote location, we won’t appear as anything other than a brief blip on any equipment.”

“It’s not that I doubt you, Boss…” Wes countered back. “But I don’t feel like becoming a blip on the floor of this planet.”

Luke frowned at the comm off to his side; it wasn’t like Jansen to question their methods. “Come on…it will be just like the time we arrived on Qui’air…a Zero G drop until we bottom out, then coast down all nice-like.”

“I don’t remember it being ‘all-nice like’. I remember Hobbie barfing in his helmet after we landed.” Wes’s voice came back, still unconvinced.

“Then who was it that was yelling ‘woo-hoo’ over his comm as we went down?” Luke asked.

“Okay…” Wes acknowledged, and Luke could hear the surrender in his voice. “That was me.”

Luke smiled tightly over at his comm upon hearing Wes give in.

The fact was that the team was nervous, not just Wes. Luke may have his apprehensions about this mission, but he had no doubt that they would be successful.
Ovanis was a small world, located in between newly Imperial held space, and bordered on the edges of Mandalorian territory. It wasn’t known for much; meaning it had little to offer in the ways of technology, resources, or even strategically.

In short, no one would fight over it, or for it.

The rocky terrain, heavily changing climate, and breathable air just made it a hospice over the years for those who basically wanted out of the influence of the galaxy. The peoples of Ovanis wanted to remain unnoticed and left alone.

The planet’s thirty six hour day cycle would probably prove to have it its limitations too, but being that most of that time was spent during night hours, it could prove be an advantage when it came to sneaking into an Imperial facility.

Over the years, Ovanis slowly became inhabited by Ottegans, Trandoshans, and lastly humans. All of them were drawn in to the mystic religion of the planet and fell under the banner of calling themselves Crèche. Soon, after generations lived there, they came to recognise themselves as one people, regardless of species.

The religion itself seemed basic and peaceful; the main objective was to protect a large blue egg inside a mountain. This egg was supposed to hatch a being that would be peace to the galaxy.

Luke didn’t scoff at their beliefs. He admired them. Any faith that wanted to bring peace, he felt he had no quarrel with.

It was the matter in how they chose to protect their desire for peace, and how they brought about peace that concerned him.

The Empire had claimed it wanted peace, and look what it did in the name of maintaining it.

Luke sighed, thinking over his mission here; it was as simple as the planet itself.

He was to make contact with the missionary Lor San Tekka; a friend to Dr. Massian and the Terratiques.

San Tekka would presumably give him, and his team cover, while they investigated a building operation nearby.

It was rumored that the rising Imperial fraction had started a building facility for TIE Fighters. And the second part of their mission involved destroying the facility and convincing the Imperials that Ovanis was a bad place to set up camp.

Luke grimaced; he didn’t relish these types of missions. If history had taught him anything, it was that there was always some sort of fallout from these types of missions. The fallout would usually land on those left around. He may have been given a direct mission, but secretly he hoped that he could find a way so that retribution wouldn’t fall on the innocent inhabitants of Ovanis.

Artoo chirped behind him, reminding him that it was almost time to cut power, and go into a free fall drop towards the planet.

Luke switched his comm over onto public line and sent out the code to the other X-wings for the count down.

As the counter hit its mark, Luke pulled back on the power, and the engine of the X-wing immediately ceased, keeping only survival equipment and comm frequencies with power; even
Artoo shut down briefly.

He braced himself as he felt the small fighter begin to drop. The ship shook and rattled against the clouds as dropped though them; he could feel the pull of gravity dragging it down to the surface of the planet.

Through the clouds, in the coming darkest of evening to this side of the planet, their ships fell uncontrollably down.

Luke watched his manual proximity sensor carefully; it was getting closer to when he needed to resume power and coast down gently. Something told him wasn’t going to be that easy. Something said they’ve found you. They’re tracking you- stay hidden just a little longer- just until they aren’t interested anymore.

The time passed for the power to be turned back on, yet still Luke continued to drop, knowing that the other fighters were waiting on his signal. Just a little longer, he told himself.

Then, he felt it, like a twist in his stomach, and he flipped on his power; the controls coming to life as quickly as they had shut down.

Luke looked over at his reads out, and the other fighters had done the same. Their speed had slowed from the free-fall, and then all of them, the other X-wings too, were coasting down to the surface.

He checked the sensors again, this time he used a broader scope, and let out the breath he was holding; a large identified vessel was in the area, and they had missed it. He couldn’t get a read on it; it could have been smugglers, or pirates, or worse, Imperials.

He still maintained radio silence, but he could now see Wes’s X-wing out his port-side canopy, the other X-wings were in line on his starboard side. They were close enough to sense and read their feelings.

Wes was barely holding on; he was nauseous and regretting this mission.

R11 was a Sullustan, named Twomb, who loved these types of drops, but was afraid for other pilot.

R12 was an Elomin, named Vircent, who, although he liked him, Luke wondered why Wedge had allowed him onto the Rogues. He had no combat background. He was a good pilot, and had good common sense, but no experience.

This is how you get experience, Luke reminded himself. You live it. And if you live through it, you do it again.

Vircent was out cold in his cockpit. Twomb had slave-rigged Vircent’s X-wing to his own, suspecting something like this would happen.

Wes was going to have to give them the lecture about chewing Halla-leaf before doing a drop like this; it will help with the nausea and keep you alert.

Here, they were gliding in blind, for the most part. With manual sensors, Luke could follow the coordinates, and, hopefully, not be too far off his calculations.

This side of the planet was dark as it was night on this hemisphere. Knowing Imperial habits told them that this would be the time when sensors would be on high alert.

The area that they were headed to was hidden in the side of one of the larger mountains. Although
calling them ‘mountains’ wasn’t an exact description.

A better description would have been ‘large hill made of shale stone’. In fact, the majority of the terrain of Ovanis was shale stone; a high metallic content, but otherwise useless as it was quite fragile and broke easily.

So, coming in during the pitch of night, hoping to land on a large hill made of dark stone, was not the ideal way to start a mission.

Luke felt his controls shutter, and Artoo bleeped in the background, presumably warning him for the turbulence he was facing.

He glanced again at the manual sensors and followed their instruction, and his senses as opposed to what he wasn’t able to see. Luckily, the other fighters had followed his lead, and repeated each of his steps.

He reached out in his senses just to feel secure in his decision to bring them down immediately; a wave of calmness came over him, reassuring his plans.

The X-wing touched down with no issue, as did the three others beside his.

Luke shut down the remaining systems on the X-wing before he popped the canopy.

Expecting to have a Storm Trooper guard drop on them, he was surprised that there was nothing that sent off any of his warning senses.

The canopy opened with a slowing hiss, as the air pressure adjusted.

Luke sat in his pilot’s chairs, as something didn’t feel quite right; it wasn’t danger, but he felt that they were not alone, and being watched. It wasn’t friendly, but it wasn’t unfriendly either; just cautious about the new arrivals, just as the new arrivals were cautious about the world they had just landed on.

He checked at his chrono and frowned; they were behind on their schedule. According to plans, they should have landed and been headed away from their current position, by at least three kilometers to the East by now.

Luke got up from his seat, and collected some his belongings to place in storage while he was away from his ship.

He picked up the packet containing Anakin’s estate and gingerly closed it, protecting the contents. The packet containing the information on Vader, he tucked up under his arm without issue; it was something to think about at another time and when he was ready to look at them.

Since opening that packet on Anakin Skywalker three days ago, and reading more of the detailed files, it had felt like he was mourning his father all over again since Endor. It left him feeling both emotionally elated and exhausted.

He threw the rope ladder over the edge of the cockpit, and made his way down to the ground.

Artoo had removed himself from his hatch and was twittering quietly in the aft section of the X-wing, taking readings and bringing down his Master’s storage cases.

A quick glance before moving to the back told Luke that that other pilots were following suit, and doing the same thing as him.
Wes, left to his own devices was already acclimatising himself by stripping off his flight suit and outfitting his gear with all that was needed in order to blend into his environment.

Twomb had his arm slung over Vircent’s shoulder, propping him up; clearly the Elomin didn’t take the drop very well.

A quick change into more suitable clothing and Luke hoisted his carry pack onto his back, ready to start the journey east.

He sighed as he placed the packets at the back of his storage unit; regretting that he brought them with him on this trip. So many times that he had to abandon his ship in past, it would be tragic if he had to abandon these documents too if he needed to make an escape.

With the instruction that the astromechs were to be kept with the ships, the quarry of Red Squadron members started their walk.

Vircent was starting to recover; his face was gaining color, and Twomb and Wes took turns glancing over and checking on him.

In this open area, there was very little talking unless you could hear the person right next to you; who could tell if there was a sensor in place to pick up noise. The only sound to be heard was the crunching of shale stone under their feet as they walked.

Little was needed to be said; they all knew this was the type of mission required that you keep your mind on the objective, and very little on anything else.

The only hope Luke held for any reprieve would come in the form of meeting his first contact.

Lor San Tekka was as allusive as he was reputable. He came with good recommendation from Dr. Massian, so Luke didn’t need to take a far step to trust him as their contact. He decided to reserve his thoughts on the man until they actually met.

Now, on the ground, they were making good time, catching up where they had lagged behind, and were at about the five kilometer marker when they came upon what looked like a large wave of shale stone in their path.

As they came over a dune made of stone, Luke sensed it immediately, and raised his hand to halt the others.

The eyes that had been watching were not going to remain in the background for any longer. He felt their sense before them even started to move.

They were suddenly surrounded; he could feel it. Luke’s eyes darted around the area, his hand hovered over his lightsaber at his waist. He refused to draw it; his sense told him it was unnecessary. They were being assessed, not hunted- there was a distinct difference.

As they paused, the areas of the ground around them began to shift. From under dark gray capes, camouflaged by the piles of stone, four figures started to move, revealing several life forms.

Wes made a sound like a low growl, as they were being closed in, indicating that he was not alright with this situation.

“Don’t fire on them.” Luke said quietly. “They’re not here to hurt us -they’re here to help us.”

“I hope you’re right about this.” Wes muttered.
One of the forms came forward, his hood covering his face. He raised his hands to lower his hood in a sign of trust to reveal his identity; a human male with kind eyes.

Luke, without fear, broke his stance, and relaxed, sighing, feeling no threat.

The man came towards him. He was dressed in simple clothes under his cape that resembled the rocky surroundings. His head was shaved, and he bore a large blue oval on his forehead that had been tattooed into his skin.

The stranger bowed before coming in closer. “Walker of Sky…we were told of your coming.” His accent was thick, yet his words were understandable. “I am Cloud from Wind. I am to be your guide to take you to our Pride. Will you come with us?”


“It is our thanks that we must give to you.” Cloud from Wind said, bowing slightly. “We hear that you are a bringer of justice….so says the elder. We thank the Giver of Peace for your presence here.”

The other figures lowered their hoods to reveal their shaved heads, and forehead markings. They bowed in unison towards the other fighter pilots.

Luke turned to see Wes lowering his drawn blaster and returning it to its holster; Twombs and Vircent had done the same.

“Come.” said Cloud from Wind. “Follow us. The night is long but the journey is short.”

Without any further ceremony, Cloud of Wind turned and walked away.

Luke looked over to his team before nodding, and following Cloud of Wind.

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As they walked, off in the horizon, Luke could see the light coming from the Pride camp.

It reminded him of the Tusken travelling villages that used dot along the ridge of the Dune Sea; nomadic tribes on their way from one place to another.

Cloud of Wind said very little on their walk from their landing site to the village; only that they would returned to collect the fighters and bring them under cover at some point.

Reaching the village, Luke now understood what Cloud of Wind had meant; he could see that their living spaces, although not permanent, were made with the shale stone, layered and built-up, protecting whatever was inside them from sensors by the high content of metallic ore of the stone.

Coming into the town, Luke and the other Reds seemed to be drawing interest as people emerged from their dwellings, curious. Their faces all bore the same blue oval tattooed on their foreheads.

Walking into the center of the village, a new presence was felt, one that seemed out of place amongst the tribe of Crèche.

From one of the huts, an older man appeared; his clothes seemed out of place to be among the tribe. He bore no markings as the others did, and he had a presence of an observer to this fascinating world.

He continued to walk towards them. As he lowered his hood, he smiled at them; his voice was warm and welcoming, with a slight Core accent. “Welcome my friends…please come. We offer our
hospitality and our protection, such as it is.”

The older man came forward still, looking at Luke, drawn to him; his arms outstretched.

Luke could feel a tug on his mind; a touch a sense, that he was being prodded, and then then the sense merely disappeared.

Wes and the other Reds stepped up beside him, as if feeling uneasy about this clandestine meeting at night, in the shadows of the shale hills.

“I am Lor San Tekka.” The older man introduced himself. “Friend to the Crèche, and leader in the Church of the Force…and for the time being, a mere helper here.”

San Tekka was younger than Dr. Massian, but older in knowledge, Luke observed. His face had shown the years of wear, but his eyes shone brightly, and his spirit was accepting of his guests.

He gestured with his hands, and spoke quickly in a foreign language to the Crèche who had just guided the Reds to the village.

From one of the huts, a small skift was pushed out. It looked they intended to ride it back to the X-wings, along with the supplies needed for the task.

“These four men will go back to your landing site, and help hide your ships.” San Tekka explained. “There’ll be no patrol tonight, but in the morning, they will likely to do several passes.”

“Thank you for your hospitality…” Luke began.

San Tekka raised his hand, stopping with the traditional formality. “Oh, think nothing of it, young Jedi. It is I who is thankful for your arrival.” He walked closer to Luke, smiling, and beaming at him.

Luke had read about the Church of the Force, and knew what San Tekka was displaying was just another form of worship for the Jedi, and not necessarily for him personally. Through his travels, people may have respected the title of Jedi, but there were also those who resented Luke directly; of this, he was aware. But San Tekka didn’t seem to be swayed by the latter.

They turned to watch Wes and the other two Reds, join the men from the village go on the skift. Once aboard, Wes gave Luke a lax salute, indicating that he okay with the presents situation, but Luke could sense that he was not entirely comfortable with it either.

“Come, come.” San Tekka said over Luke’s shoulder. “We have much to discuss before morning comes, you and I.” He turned and walked towards his hut, as Luke followed.

“Your compatriots will be just fine with this tribe of Crèche. They will protect them.” San Tekka explained. “And while you’re here, we will hide you among the pilgrims.”


Stepping into the hut, it was lit with old fire lanterns, dotted around the room. The room looked like in encompassed all necessities for living; books were piles in the corner, small decorative items were placed on small tables, and fire burned in the center of the room with a cookery set on it and funnelled up and out of the hut.

“Yes, this group of Crèche is making their yearly pilgrimage to the Mountain where the Giver of Peace rests. We’ve been waiting for you in order to continue along our journey.” San Tekka went straight to the middle of the room, and poured some water into a kettle.
He turned back to Luke after placing the kettle on the cooker, and gestured to a chair for the Jedi to take. “Their path will take you past the Imperial facility. We will hide you among the pilgrims until you get there, and then, you can continue with your mission.” He coughed slightly before continuing. “The Imperials care not about the Crèche’s faith, so long as it doesn’t interrupt their plans.”

Luke smiled and nodded; it seemed that his covert operations already had the assistance it was going to need.

San Tekka lowered himself in a chair across from Luke, and paused; studying the young Jedi.

“I’m not much more than an observer here. I had hoped that perhaps that the Giver of Peace was going to be related to a Jedi prophesy, but I’m afraid, it isn’t. Simple lore.” San Tekka explained, smiling. “Oh, the Force is at work here, but not in the same means that will have such far reaches as the return of the Jedi Order would – it will affect those that are here, and build their faith, but not past Ovanis, I’m afraid.”

San Tekka continued his visual appraisal of Luke. “Now, Taxon has told me that you have just started your studies into the Journal of Whills, and other writings. Is that true?”

“Yes. So much of my training was over-looked and done in such haste.” Luke began to feel himself relax around the other man, so long as he invoked the name of Dr. Taxon Massian.

“It was the nature of the war.” San Tekka murmured, understanding Luke’s predicament precisely. “Oh, you’ll forgive my touch on your mind earlier. I rarely get a chance to use it on such a powerful Jedi…it’s been quite some time. And now you have discovered my limitations to my abilities; the sensing of others and a slight aptitude for foretelling, but much beyond that…it comes and goes.”

Luke sensed that the older man wanted to continue to speak, and in truth, he was willing to let him continue.

When he sat and listened to Dr. Massian, he had learned so much more than if he was the one to do the talking.

“Older?” San Tekka then chimed in. “You think I’m as old as Taxon?” He coughed. “No, not as old as him…I’m younger than Kenobi would be but greater in age than your father.” He adjusted his position. “And I may be older than you, but I’ve learned how to shield my thoughts. You, however, seemed to have forgotten that lesson. I heard your mind from the moment you landed, and my skills are quite diminished.” He raised his eyebrows in a chiding manner.

“I-I’m sorry.” Luke stuttered, caught off guard, and realizing that Mara had been right about his inability to shield. “I didn’t mean to imply that it was bad thing, just observing.” He had chosen his words carefully, knowing that San Tekka would respond to the last word of his sentence- the other man liked that word.

Snorting, San Tekka still grinned. “Yes, I knew you weren’t insulting me, young man. I was just testing my gifts, as limited as they are. And your Padawan is right- you should practice your shielding.”

Luke cringed visible, and looked down bashful, but still finding himself at ease. “I learn from her as much as she learns from me.”

San Tekka then surprised him by chuckling. “We are all students, Jedi Skywalker. When we refuse to learn, then we refuse to live. It doesn’t matter where the knowledge comes from, so long as we accept that
Luke watched as the man reached over to place another log onto the fire in the middle of the room; warming the space from the cold night air.

“I am historian, or least I was when I was on Coruscant. I am an observer of all those things around me. I look at things and events and I try to figure out how and why they happen.” San Tekka turned his head in the direction of the kettle when it began to sing.

He took the pot away and put it to the side of the cooker. Opening the top, Luke watched as the teacher placed several spoonfuls of leaves into the pot to let them brew; a pleasant aroma started to fill the air.

“As I child, I was put before the Jedi Council, and they deemed that I did not have enough gifts to be trained. But Master Plo Koon, in his generosity, encouraged me to keep close to the Order, feeling that I would need them as much they needed me.” San Tekka sat back into his chair and turned to face the man that he was speaking to. “I became a record keeper, a librarian, a historian, recording the Jedi and their smallest of details. As Articus Dram was in marvel of them, I was allowed into their sanctum- not part of their society, but not rejected either.”

He snorted a few times as his face looked away, and his mind went to a place in the not-too-distant past. “Master Yoda would nod to me on his way into study halls as I listened to him lecture on the Living Force. Master Shaak Ti would let me record her songs of peace as she would sing during her mediations. Master Ki-Adi-Mundi loved to tell a good riddle, and would often stop me with a story of a newest puzzle of circumstance to test me. And your master, Master Kenobi would like to argue with me regarding his views; he enjoyed it when I would take a contrary point of view from him.” His face came back from the past, but there was a definite aura of peace coming off of him.

“He was very fortunate; not like those others that the Jedi rejected for training. The Jedi let me linger in their shadows- while others were cast away.” San Tekka levelled a finger across at Luke, and wagged it. “Now you- don’t you do that when you start your school. You promise me that you will include everyone? - even those with just a touch of sensitivity, but no true talent. They need your guidance too.” His hand dropped as if he realized that there would be no need to give such instruction to the young Jedi.

“If there was one fault of the old Order it was that they left so many behind, to fall into idleness with their meager talents, or worse, fall into darkness unwittingly without the stamina to protect themselves against being manipulated.” San Tekka sighed.

Luke studied the man again; like the doctors, San Tekka was giving him advice on where the Jedi had gone astray. Although he had no clue how and when he would be starting his Jedi Academy, he was filing all these suggestions in his mind.

The look on San Tekka’s face changed again. “I respect the Jedi, and all Force-users. It’s a marvelous gift to be able to use such power and sense beyond yourself; to feel so connected to the galaxy.”

He shook his head, as Luke watched. “There are so many Force-users; you know…many that have been lost along the way…many that were inducted into the Jedi. So much so, that I don’t think that the Jedi even realized how influenced they were by other paths- that the true path of the Jedi got lost.”

San Tekka sighed. “That is what my followers and I believe; that the Force should be held with great respect, and great awe above anything else, including those that can use the power of the Force. And
at its purest, Life creates it, and binds us together.”

Luke closed his eyelids, and inhaled deeply, remembering the words from Master Yoda, and smiled.

“The Jedi are just one fraction of the potential of the Force, but an important one.” San Tekka levelled his finger at Luke again. “You know your job in this galaxy, and we will hold you to it.” He warned.

San Tekka then broke into another smile, showing that there was no malice to his threat, and Luke smiled back, enjoying the company of this man. In fact, so much of this encounter up until now had reminded him of his time, and getting to know Master Yoda; he had forgotten how he missed those days.

San Tekka sat up, brightly. “Where are my manners? –Would you like some tea? It’s a cold night out there, and you’ve were walking for so long. I’m sure you haven’t tired, being a Jedi, but the cold affects us all at some point.”

The historian got up from his seat and picked up the kettle to walk across the room. He assembled two clay mugs, and poured some of the hot liquid into each mug. He reached over and dropped a syrupy liquid into the tea, stirred each and turned to come back to his company. He offered one of the mugs to Luke.

Sitting back down into his chair, San Tekka regarded Luke again over the rim of his mug before taking a sip and then putting the mug down; he kept his scrutinizing gaze, as Luke just responded by looking back, unflinching.

“I was just thinking of how much you remind me of your father.” San Tekka broke the silence. “Anakin Skywalker would return to the Jedi Temple in between missions, striding in. He was taller than you, of course. He was quite the imposing figure.” He paused, coming to a conclusion, he grinned, but his grin faded as he spoke; his voice going fading. “But you, you smile more easily than he did. There’s kindness in your eyes too, and not the distance that there was in his.”

San Tekka shook his head, as if removing the thoughts that had come to him. “Ah, there I go again, being too casual. You don’t know me, and here I speak to you like I’ve known you my entire life—and that you’ve known me the whole entire time.”

“Haven’t you?” Luke asked, before blowing on the liquid inside his mug, and taking a brief sip. “I understand from Dr. Massian that you’ve ‘studied’ me since the beginning of the war?” He smirked after his comment; hoping to surprise the other man that he wasn’t as oblivious as it may seem.

“Well, of course, yes!” San Tekka chortled. “As soon I heard that the Rebel who destroyed the Death Star was a suspected Jedi, or a child of Jedi, I ran directly to my books and started guessing who it might be.”

Luke frowned, surprised again that he had lived in infamy.

San Tekka placed his mug beside him, and got up to walk over to a stack of books; taking the largest volume with him. The book looked heavy and worn, with pages of both filmsy and paper sticking out of it erratically.

Sitting back down, San Tekka placed the book on his lap and flipped through the pages until he looked up at Luke, satisfied. “You’ll beg my pardon, but how goes your sister, the Princess, and her current pregnancy?” He asked with his stylus at the ready to write down the details.

“She’s fine…healthy.” Luke answered without thinking that he shouldn’t dare to give out that
information. He felt like he had been lured into this conversation.

San Tekka regarded him for a brief moment and then looked down at his book and scribbled some words. "It will be a boy this time, I think." He slightly coughed, and then went back to writing in his book. "At least, I believe it will be." He muttered before looking up at Luke. "I have been wrong before, but not often."

"I have a feeling about him. He will need special attention- they all will." San Tekka said to the open air, and not just to Luke.

Luke watched the eccentric teacher; his logic told him not to be leery, but his senses were not alarmed by this man’s familiarity with him. So many other people kept their distance from him, and here was a stranger who seemed to be like an old friend who was merely in the background of him life all along.

San Tekka was stopped writing in his book, when he flipped to another section. "And Corran Horn- has he started a family yet? It’s getting harder to keep track of them….all of them, not just Horn." He looked up again. "He comes from Nejaa Halcyon Line…did you know that? So he’s bound to have a larger family…three, possibly four children, I would guess. All future students of yours, I am sure."

Luke simply shook his head to indicate the negative, as Horn was concerned; not sure what to answer.

"I see my questions puzzle you?" The other man asked.

Luke nodded, still unsure, and slightly speechless; imagining that a man had kept records of families of Jedi for generations.

"Just my hobby." San Tekka said calmly. "I’ve being tracking Force-strong children since I lived on Coruscant. It’s getting harder to do so these days. Since the Purges stopped, and the hunt is over, there’s more and more of them."

"Maybe not Jedi, but certainly potential Force-users. Surely, you’ve felt it? – the little minds?" San Tekka got up from his seat and retrieved the kettle and brought it back to the cooker before sitting down again and placing the book back on his lap.

Luke frowned; he hadn’t truly thought about it.

"I don’t know what it feels like to you, but to me it feels like tiny ‘pops’ in my senses. I guess for you, it must feel like a blinding light? – the awakenings?" The teacher asked.

Luke tightened his mouth and shook his head again. "I don’t always feel it." He murmured, surprised that someone else could feel them. He had not thought to mention it to anyone before, and had often disregarded the senses of others that he felt over the years. He inwardly chagrinned, knowing that there was just another lapse in his training that he had ignored.

"No?" San Tekka asked, surprised, and frowned. "Pity. You should be more open to them. It feels like small miracles, all over the galaxy." He adjusted his robes when sitting back down, smiling wistfully. "The new ones are going to be a handful. Some of them come from no family history of Force-users whatsoever."

San Tekka returned back to his book. He flipped to another section of pages in his book. "And your student, and lover – Mara Jade? If I may be so bold… is she with your child yet?"

"What?" Luke asked surprised, breaking from his train of thought, that this stranger before him
would dare to ask such a thing, just when he was starting to get comfortable with the man.

“Oh, I was just humming the rumors. I beg your forgiveness- that was too forward of me again.” San Tekka went back to his book, and started organizing a few pages. “There will be time for a family for the two of you.” He smiled apologetically, as if accepting his blundered for being too casual. “Much later…but a family, none the less, and a powerful family.” He whispered.

“She’ll look beautiful with a rounded belly, no doubt, and you’ll be the proudest father ever – of that, I’m sure.” His words were quiet, but San Tekka knew that he felt compelled to say them.

Luke looked off into the distance; it was true that he wanted a family with Mara, but he didn’t think he had been so transparent that it was this visible.

“Oh, I’ve left you unsettled, haven’t I?” San Tekka sighed, feeling truly regretful of starting this topic. “You’ll pardon my curiosity. What is it that disturbs you about my questions?- that I have them and that I know the some of the answers, or are you uncomfortable with your own history, and subsequent legacy, that you will fulfill in one way or another?”

“Mara and I…I thought our relationship wasn’t as well-known as it appears to be.” Luke murmured before drinking a bit more of tea, burying his discomfort. “She’s my student.” He said, trying to still hide their relationship in clearly a futile effort.

San Tekka gently smiled, and nodded, turning his head to the side. “Oh, despite your refutations, there’s no way anyone could look at the two of you and not know there was love there. Maybe you two were platonic, but somehow, that changed – didn’t it?”

Luke sat straight-backed, making himself physically uncomfortable and he was beginning to feel emotionally as well; he didn’t like having his life on display. Mara had warned him of as much when she visited on the Liberty; that these believers of the new religion knew too much about them already.

San Tekka was relentless, but not maliciously so. His wonder came out of concern; that he wanted to see Luke and Mara succeed. So he spoke in a gentle tone. “I think in the beginning, she was quite reluctant to your training, and her feelings for you- given her history with the Empire. And she must have had a severe loathing for you, and for what you needed to do on the Death Star? –Killing her Master, sending her life into chaos. Imperials, or former Imperials, don’t do well without order in their lives- I know this. She must have overcome her feelings in order to care for you the way she does.”

“And you? - the holos from the Katana Battle showed it all. I saw them- the still images. You were placing her in the stasis pod. The look on your face was one that only others that have known love, -true love- would have understood. So, yes, I am sorry that I may have inferred too far into your relationship.” San Tekka’s eyes looked regretful but not remorseful for bringing up such a topic.

“I assure you that my interest does not come from idle gossip, Jedi Skywalker.” The teacher said, as best as he could explain it. “But your future with her, together, holds the future outcome of the Jedi Order – and that is my concern.”

Luke sighed, relaxing himself; it was reasonable to realize that his life choices would affect generations of Jedi to come.

“But that’s not entirely it either.” San Tekka rested back in his chair, closing his book and putting it off it the side. “I think it’s your own legacy that bothers you the most, does it not? The gaps in your knowledge also extend to your own family, doesn’t it?”
As Luke looked at the other man, he could see the willingness to help. “I don’t know much about my father. I’d like to know more.” He confessed, surprised that he was letting the words pass his mouth.

His mind flashed on the unopened packet that held the details of Darth Vader, and opened one that left him with more questions about Anakin Skywalker.

“Ahhhh… and there it is.” San Tekka smiled over. “You’re uncertain that you can carry the burden of your father’s reputation… the Hero with Fear, I would too if I were you…and such a large shadow he casts as a Jedi, does he not?” His gaze narrowed. “Well, what do you know?”

Luke sighed, knowing that he had revealed too much, but felt safe here. “I know that he was called The Chosen, but I don’t know why.”

“The Chosen One.” San Tekka whispered; his eyes looking off. “…The one who was destined to bring balance to the Force.”

San Tekka got up from his chair and went over to fetch another book, bringing it back. “Would you like to read the original text from which that prophesy came from? – It’s quite jumbled, but there was a large debate as to whether it was literal or figurative for the longest time.” He offered to the book to the young Jedi.

Luke shook his head but leaned forward to listen more-intently.

“This is one, this book, which old Taxon couldn’t get his hands on. He wants it very badly, and I assume that one day I’ll give it to him to add to his collection.” San Tekka sat back down in his chair, and tapped the top of the book.

He opened the ancient document, and flipped through a few page before stopping. “Right here, it references the mediations of a Jedi Master of the Old Republic, before the Great War between Jedi and Sith. Do you know of this War?” He looked at Luke with raised eyebrows, checking to see if the young man had studied his history.


“See? - it’s such a vague notion, of a ‘Chosen One’ that the original Jedi Master’s name has been lost to history. It wasn’t until five hundred years ago when Master Fierchi wrote the poem that inspired the idea. Some Jedi didn’t even believe that it was a prophesy. They thought it was supposed to be a metaphor for all Jedi to aspire to – bring balance into yourself, and the Force will respond.”

“Master Fierchi speaks of the purest form of the Force, creating life where there was no possibility of life starting ‘Growing a tree in the desert’ and bringing forth a being made of the essence of the Force; The Chosen One. Levelling the faiths, joining them together, bringing them asunder; bringing balance and peace.”

“What does it mean?” Luke looked away, thinking to himself, trying to under such language; perhaps it was symbolic rather than literal.

“Have you not questioned why your father was so strong in the Force?” San Tekka took pity on the young man who was asking questions. “Why you are so strong?”

Luke looked back at the teacher and shook his head, and then he changed his mind and nodded to agree that he had thought about it.

“Anakin was created by the Force – born of a human woman but conceived by the Force; Chosen to walk the difficult trail to unify all Force users.” San Tekka replied, knowing that he was asking a lot
of understanding for a concept that seemed simple but was highly complex.

“I always supposed that it was his power that led to his fall to the Darkside.” Luke whispered.

San Tekka nodded before continuing. “I’m sure that had something to do with it, but I also suppose that it was his predicament that led to his fall too.”

Luke turned his head; his eyes asking for a further explanation.

“Can you imagine being taken away from your family, only to be told that you are expected to be this great saviour, brought into living for one purpose only? That must have been a lot of pressure for such a young mind to take. To live up to those expectations must have been unbearable; such a heavy burden on one so young.” San Tekka sighed.

“I felt pity for him. They never should have told him – in my opinion. He should have been set upon his path and left to determine what he was prepared to do; not given the order to ‘bring balance to the Force’. ” The teacher said quietly, sharing his thoughts.

Luke watched him, hoping for a further explanation.

San Tekka’s look hardened and then directed at Luke before he spoke his next words. “It’s your task now, and how does it feel being on your shoulders? An imaginable weight, I suppose? Or maybe you don’t realize the scope of your task of rebuilding the Jedi Order as well. And you’re an adult. Think of a child being told this was his path in life?”

“That just couldn’t have been it?” Luke mumbled to himself.

“That just couldn’t have been what? - the reason for his fall into Darkness? No- I don’t believe it was just that either, but it’s a start, don’t you think?” San Tekka relaxed but still held the intensity that he had before. The teacher was slowly being replaced with the missionary, concerned for the future of his faith and where it should be placed, and in whom. “You are right about the amount of power he was able to wield.”

“How often, in your training, do you stop yourself from your potential, afraid that you won’t be able to contain all the power you feel? You do it, don’t you? Limit yourself? Deny all those things that you could be capable of because of you fear to know your true power?” San Tekka asked, not accusing, but conversational.

San Tekka looked away, back into the past again, making it relevant on the present. “It must have been the same for your father. Only unlike you, whereas you fear over-using your strength, your father wanted more – or, at least that what I felt while I watched him. He knew he was destined for all this potential but he felt like he was being held back from what they truly wanted from him.”

“But Anakin was put on the Jedi Council…” Luke argued passively.

“Yes, by Palpatine’s wishes.” San Tekka said, and Luke realized that this man truly knew what he was talking about. “Frustration led to resentment, led to distrust, which led to hatred; living with it for years. If that isn’t one route to the Dark Side, then I don’t what else is.”

San Tekka’s eyes came back from the past. “I’m sure that wasn’t the only reason for his fall, but I can’t answer all your questions, and these are just my feelings, nothing more.” He turned and looked at Luke again, examining him; taking in his measure. “And now you…you are The Chosen One… chosen to keep the peace, and restore the Jedi Order.”

Luke looked away, knowing that there was truth in hat he was hearing, but he still didn’t want to
believe it. He swallowed, wishing away what he knew he couldn’t avoid.

Perhaps there was something that kept Anakin in the Light or so long, under such pressure; an anchor, keeping him grounded.

From the corner of his eye, looking over at San Tekka’s book that the other man had been writing in, a thought came to him. “You said that you keep records on Jedi’s families?” Luke said cautiously. “I don’t know who my mother is.”

“No?” A ripple of surprise came off San Tekka. “It should be simple- there were so many clues that were right in front of everyone. Their relationship wasn’t sanctioned- did you know that? It would never have been allowed either; given his position as The Chosen One and her position as…” his voice trailed off.

“Even Kenobi was forced to give up his relationship with the Duchess of Mandalore in favor of service to the Jedi- The council would not allow it.” San Tekka thought out loud, revealing that he knew the Jedi as people, and not just figureheads.

“Yes, many high-standing women fell in love with Jedi. It was the same as it was with your father and those he was sent to protect. Though, I believe it was he who first fell in love with her- they were so young when they first met, that it’s hard to tell.”

“Do you want me to tell you?” San Tekka paused. He had over-stepped so many social boundaries on this meeting, he thought it better to ask than to over-step one more. “I have her name right here, but I warn you that it might only leave you asking more questions than having a momentary answer.” He pointed over to his book. “Or do you want take this quest on yourself? – get to know her on your own terms?”

Luke swallowed hard; the easy answer was right there in front of him. He wanted it so badly. After seeing the holo of his mother, he wanted to know her more too, and not just Anakin.

What was she like? Was she kind, yet sad, as Leia had described her? Or did she smile often like she did in the holo? Did she laugh?- what did her laugh sound like? What did she smell like? Luke choked on his feelings; suddenly feeling empty and orphaned.

“I will tell you this, the information you seek is still out there. Her work and her legacy are still very vivid in the minds of her people.” San Tekka said strongly.

“The Naboo” were the only words Luke could muster out.

“Yes exactly! Then, you know where to start. Palpatine didn’t destroy it all.” San Tekka’s voice sounded hopeful; his facial expression may have portrayed the same feeling, but Luke wouldn’t know as he was looking away.

“I remember her.” San Tekka said, reminiscing again. “Although, this is all subject to disbelief, but given the number of times that they, Anakin and her, were seen together, and the rumor of her pregnancy- it had to be her. Then, of course, her friendship with the Viceroy of Alderaan- who else would she had trusted her daughter to?”

Luke mumbled the one name that had stood out in his father’s estate; “Naberrie”.

“Yes! That was one of her many names.” San Tekka confirmed. “The Nabberries are still a prominent family on Naboo, the last time that I looked.”

Luke looked up into the older man’s face; seeing compassion for a lost son, not a Jedi.
“All it would take would be a flip into a history book to find out more. Are you ready for that?” San Tekka asked gently. “Theirs was a complex relationship forbidden and hidden for so long. When looking back, I don’t understand the reasoning behind it for keeping them apart. It could have made him stronger, more secure – but once again, just my opinion.”

If he could see himself, Luke would have seen how gaunt his face had become with the emotion that he was holding in. Surely San Tekka must has seen, known and felt it too.

“Oh look at me, going on. Dawn will be upon us soon, and the Crèche will hide your ships here at camp.” San Tekka got up, and started putting away the kettle. “The shale stone has been known to throw off sensors. We will spend the next few days, hiding you among the pilgrims, and then you will be on your way with your duty. And I will be on with mine.”

“You’re not following with us?” Luke asked; his mind going back to his mission at hand.

“No, my journey lies into another path.” San Tekka came back and stood beside Luke’s chair. “Such is the life of an adventurer – a title that I scoff at, but one that is fitting. But if you ever have need of me, it would be an honor and privilege to serve the Jedi once again. It is my life’s task, and one that I’m proud of.”

Luke heard the man’s words; knowing that was a debt that Lor San Tekka intended to pay. He glanced at his chrono, and it was very late into the night on Ovanis, almost coming to dawn.

“I tell you, my young Jedi friend, if my years of experience have shown me anything, it is to impart my knowledge whenever I can not to hold it to myself.” San Tekka stood looking down at Luke. “And for you, all I can ask is that you shouldn’t be afraid of your gifts. Stretch broader, go farther than you ever thought possible, and do it in the faith of Force. You were gifted so that you could take on these tasks- and you won’t do it alone.”

Luke got up from his seat, and met the other man face to face; listening to his words.

“However, if you don’t heed to the Power of the Force now; if you don’t acknowledge your father’s errors, you may regret it when the time comes to use all your gifts before you’re able to truly take the measure of your power. Don’t fall prey to your emotions over things that cannot be changed. Only you have power over the future.”

Luke nodded, hearing the truth being imparted to him.

“As for your legacy? that too, will come in time.” San Tekka smiled again; friendly. He walked to the opening of his home, with Luke following behind. “History is not just a thing of the past; it lives and breathes alongside us, in what knowledge we choose to carry with us.”

Luke joined San Tekka as they walked side by side out of the domicile and into the center of the village.

No one was around, and the dawn was not breaking on the horizon just yet, with at least few hours left to the night.

They stopped, and turned to face each other.


There was something so familiar about this gesture that it made Luke flash on a memory of Ben.
But he stepped back, and Luke released his senses, knowing that San Tekka would feel them, and feel them in the essence of the words he was about to say. “May the Force be with you.” His voice was laden with thanks and gratitude for this evening that had passed. Luke bowed.

Lor San Tekka closed his eyes, and exhaled deeply at hearing those words; feeling them as only one who had touched the Force could, even with his limited skills.

Luke turned and walked over to the hut that had been assigned to him and the Reds.

The historian opened his eyes to watch the Jedi, then he turned, satisfied, and entered back into his home.

TBC
The Call

Chapter Summary

**
Just a quick Treatment…not even a real chapter…just meant to torment you ~Wink!
**

Leaving Ovanis

They had made the jump.

They had gotten away. Barely.

The Star Destroyer that had come out of nowhere when they were leaving the planet was a surprise, if not a bit of overkill for four X-wings.

Now, there was only three X-wings making their escape.

By all accounts they had made it. And now they were in the middle of space, careening through the stars to presumably safety.

It didn’t feel like safety.

He was still panting, from exhaustion, and from their narrow escape; his body still shaking uncontrollably as he tried to hold on.

Luke could feel his hands shaking on the controls; it had been years since he felt this way, running on pure adrenaline.

Now, the energy was leaving his body, and demanding all his strength in its place. Luckily, he still had presence of mind, but even that was beginning to leave too.

He had slaved Wes’s X-wing, and Twomb’s too, to his own; he knew they wouldn’t last.

As he sent out his sense, he knew there were new few options to him.

Wes was conscious, but in pain and desperately dehydrated.

Twomb was hanging on, but his life energy was fading.

And Vircent…gone.

“Artoo?” He called through his own pain. “How far are we to Roche Medical Center, or something similar?”

The droid bleeped back quickly, as if he knew the direness of the situation.

Luke opened his eyes as if he didn’t realize he even closed them, now feeling his own pain, and read the droid’s response on the screen.
“Negative. Roche System under blockade by Imperial Forces – next medical facility within estimated 9 hour travel. Scheduled stop with in approximately 53 minutes.”

He let out a hard breath. He had scheduled a stop after jump into hyperspace, knowing that they would need it to assess their condition – Wes would make it, but Twomb, probably not.

Luke could feel his breathing increase in speed. He looked over at his canopy; the crack in the shielding was growing, depleting his oxygen.

53 minutes…and one chance to survive.

“Artoo?” He winced as he spoke, trying to relax his mind at the same time. “When we get to out stop, maintain limited power systems and life support.” His mind was preparing for the hibernation. “If a freighter hails us at our stop with my personal recognition codes…grant them access.”

The droid beeped back.

Luke leaned back his chair, feeling the cold that came on before he went into hibernation, and relaxed his mind further.

He was tempted to call out to Leia; she had heard him when he was in jeopardy before.

But now there was only on person on his mind; she would hear.

<Mar...Mara, please hear me?> He sent out his senses, and waited.

Stretching even further before the darkness of hibernation came, he called again.

<Mar...please?> He begged to her, and to the galaxy.

<I love you...> His mind faded into the deep sleep with thoughts of her.

TBC
Walls, Weapons and Warriors -Part 3

Chapter Summary

Quote: She snorted slightly at his modesty. Get a few drinks in him and I’m sure it would be another story. Flyboys!

Characters: Wes, Luke, Mara, other Wild Karrde crew

Chapter Notes

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“When Tomorrow Comes” by the Eurythmics (Curse you! 80’s radio station!)

Underneath your dreamlit eyes
Shades of sleep have driven you away
The moon is pale outside
And you are far from here
Breathing shifts your careless head
Untroubled by the chaos of our lives
Another day - another night
Has taken you again my dear
And you know that I'm gonna be the one
Who'll be there
When you need someone to depend upon
When tomorrow comes...

**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Leaving Space –Spar Sector

His brown eyes blinked hard. Her face flashed before him. He almost didn’t believe what he was seeing.

She lifted his head, gently, placing the mask around his mouth, and then supporting his neck as she lowered his head back down.

He let a hard breath, and as he exhaled, he rasped, “Hotpants!” His voice barely audible. Closing his eyes again he smiled, not seeing the frown on her face.

Sighing, “Yes Major Jansen…it’s me.” Mara said through gritted teeth. *This is what I get for saving a man’s life,* she thought.

She back away from him, checking the controls of the pod, and seeing that his body was receiving
the fluid drip she had put into his arm.


Mara looked over her shoulder at the other stasis pod, to the man she loved.

The Jedi’s eyes were closed, appearing to be resting peacefully in a hibernation trance. Other than a few frostbite burns on his skin, he seemed okay. And bacta patches would take care of most of the damage before he awoke.

“He’s resting.” She answered, knowing that Jansen needed his rest too, so she kept her answer short.

She reached up with a soft cloth to start to remove the large blue oval from off his forehead. All of them had come in the same condition; head shaved, and bearing the oval.

Rather than ask, she knew if must have been part of their disguise, from wherever they had been. She had her guesses; she had been listening in to the Imperial codes that had been flying back and forth over interstellar waves.

When she heard of a bombing of a TIE facility, she had her suspicions.

“Twomb?” Jansen asked; his eyes sad, probably already knowing the answer.

Mara sympathetically grimaced, and shook her head slowly; the Sullustan was already gone from internal bleeding when they found them. “We put him in cryo.” She whispered.

Jansen closed his eyes and nodded.

She padded the freshly cleaned skin of his forehead. “You should sleep now. I’ll come wake you when it’s time to eat.”

Jansen kept his eyes closed and nodded again.

She could sense that he had surrendered to the rest that he so poorly needed. Closing the pod capsule, she then turned and looked at the other stasis pod before approaching it.

From this vantage point, Luke looked like he was sleeping peacefully, but Mara knew that was deceptive.

She sighed and motioned towards the other pod, and read the output data. At least his breathing has returned to normal. She thought.

During a hibernation trance, a body could adjust to what it needed and what was available; lack of oxygen, then breathing slows down, appearing almost dead. Here, with ideal circumstances, he was simply in a deep sleep. But it was the type of sleep with no dreams, and no true rest.

Mara raised the capsule, and the dome hissed as she opened it. Gods, she internally gasped, looking at him.

She removed her glove, and reached over to touch his face; feeling his skin, feeling the life inside of him returning. She stroked the shorn hair on his head; at barely a centimeter long, it was coming in lighter even though it was just fuzz.

Physically, he wasn’t as bad as Jansen; the frostbite burns due to exposure, dehydration, empty stomach, and exhaustion. Jansen had a blaster burn on his shoulder, which was also dislocated.
Between the two of them, they had managed to use all of the med bay’s bacta patches.

But Luke; in his sense, even though in hibernation, Mara could feel his sadness, his feeling of loss.

She began cleaning the blue oval from off his face too, and shook her head, understanding the reason for his sense of loss. Rogue Squadron usually travel in teams of even numbers, very seldom if ever, do they travel in odd. He must have lost more than one member, and to have slave-rigged his X-wings to the others, he may have been sure that he was going to lose more if he didn’t do anything.

*Oh Luke, she thought, why do you take on so much? You don’t have to save everyone.*

She checked his intravenous tube to make sure he was getting the proper fluids too. Wherever they had been, clearly didn’t have enough water to stay hydrated.

The fluid tubes were on an eight hour cycle, and that would give them enough time to start to heal.

Mara leaned over and pressed her lips against the sleeping Jedi, softly, and hoping that his mind would let him know that he was safe.

She had heard his desperate call in her mind. It screamed to her with his fear that he would never see her again.

She had woken during the night cycle upon hearing and feeling it. As soon as she did, she ran to the communication console and ordered Ghent to start scanning the area; sending out recognition codes that she knew the New Republic used. She even sent out a few codes that she knew that had been broken during the last days of the Rebellion, looking for him.

As a last ditch resort, she sent out ones from her personal comm, trying to reach him.

Soon, all of her messages started to come back with the same co-ordinates, so she knew she had contacted him, or at the very least, his R2 unit.

Mara directed the *Wild Karrde* off the Shapani Bypass to immediately go to the co-ordinates that she was given. The *Wild Karrde* showed up approximately half an hour after the X-wings had arrived.

She sighed, adjusting his blanket higher up on his body, rubbing his chest and then closing the capsule over his pod.

The med droid blinked in cognition that it was on duty over its patients.

Mara nodded. As much as she wanted to watch over him and Jansen, she knew that she had to do what she needed in order to prepare to get back to business. The best way to prove that there wasn’t a wing of Rogues on board was to pretend like there wasn’t.

Aves was with her when they docked the X-wings in the largest hull they had available. She would just have to move the duty roster around to keep people away from hull eight, and the three X-wings hiding in it.

Next, she would have to figure out a way to keep them hidden after they recovered. Loaders and haulers were always coming and going, if any of them saw that Luke Skywalker was on board the *Wild Karrde*, even in the condition he was in, it would definitely make a circle in the underworld of smugglers. Harbouring both of them could get dangerous.

Not to mention the rest of the crew. Aves didn’t mind Luke being around; even Ghent would be game to it. When Dankin would return, she knew she could count on him for his digression. Nagreen
and Kirwayne would keep their mouths shut too.

But there were at least twelve other crew members on the ‘Karrde at any given time.

The next thing was to figure how she was going to get them off the ‘Karrde, and when.

Docking with a New Republic Mon Calamarian Cruiser sent a specific message.

Mara rubbed her head as she walked away from the med bay. One problem at a time, she told herself.

And Luke? She sighed still rubbing her head; what would he do about his feelings. He was notorious for closing in when things got too much for him – and he thought I’m difficult.

She had eight hours before they were to wake up in order to figure it out, and she would.

**

He yawned. When that didn’t hurt, he decided to stretch. His body protested but he did it anyway, favoring his shoulder that he felt still ached.

The smell of food is what woke him – real food.

“Glad to see where your priorities are, Major Jansen.” She said smugly.

He looked over at the redhead that was reading the data on his stasis pod.

She must has opened the capsule and let the smell of food waft in.

“I was brought up right.” He said with a smile, winking at her. “So, will I live?”

Mara looked at the chart. “It seems that way…no matter how hard I try.” And granted him a smirk, and knew that he would appreciate it.

Wes slowly sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the pod, trying to get his bearings. He looked over at the adjacent pod. “Luke isn’t up yet? Is he injured?” He asked, concerned.

Her smirk faded. “No, he was mostly just dehydrated, like you.” She backed away from the pod, giving him some space, manoeuvering the hover table into place, and placing the service tray of food on it.

She placed the tray before Jansen, expecting him to devour it. “I wanted to talk to you before he woke up.”

Jansen looked around, feeling uncomfortable in the dressing gown he was placed in. “Um, sure…but you’ll excuse me if I ask…”

Mara backed herself away a bit further and pointed to the door in the corner. “‘Fresher is in there, Major Jansen.” She knew what waking up from a pod sleep could do to a body; biological functions couldn't be ignored.

He got up and bashfully clamped the back of the gown before he left the room.

She snorted slightly at his modesty. Get a few drinks in him and I’m sure it would be another story. Flyboys!
“I’ve left a change of clothes in there for you.” Mara raised her voice, hoping he heard her.

A few minutes later, Wes returned to the room, wearing the crew jumpsuit, looking more comfortable.

He sat back down on the edge of the pod, preparing to enjoy the meal that she had brought.

Taking the first few bites, he nodded his approval. “Mmm, this is good. We haven’t had food for the past few days.” He said.

“I know.” Mara whispered, as she took a seat. “Both your stomach and Skywalker’s were empty… and with the dehydration we couldn’t put a feeding tube into either you- you would just regurgitate.” She looked over at the other pod. “He’ll be hungry too when he wakes.”

Wes snorted as he shovelled more of the food into his mouth, chewed, then swallowed. “You don’t know the half of it. I lost a weeri eating contest to him once.” He pointed his eating utensil in the direction of the pod. “That Jedi has a hollow leg on him.”

He was looking at her as he sipped his caf; she was looking at Luke’s pod, the concern on her face.

“So, you want to know what happened?” He asked, deciding it was okay to talk to her.

Mara drew her attention back to the man in front of her. “Yes…please? Major Jansen.”

“Wes.” He corrected her.

She nodded. “Wes.” She repeated, knowing that he was one of the circle of friends that Luke considered ‘family’. “What you can…whatever isn’t confidential.” She knew military protocol well enough that she wasn’t going to get the full story.

“There’s not much to tell.” He began, taking another sip of caf. “We were on a mission.”

“…to Ovanis.” She interrupted. “…to a possible TIE manufacturing plant.” She shared the knowledge that she had.

Wes frowned.

“Leia told me.” She said quietly, sensing that he was unsettled about his mission being known.

He nodded, and then went back to his plate. “That’s right. A pretty easy mission too; go in, take a look around, and blow the kriffing place to hell.” He looked up, forgetting it was her that he was talking to.

Mara simply nodded that she didn’t mind his language; she had heard far worse…she said far worse.

“So in order to not get spotted, we had to blend in with our surroundings.” Wes reached up and rubbed his shaven head. “Good thing that I can pull off this look.”

She nodded, starting to feel irritated that he was taking his time getting to how and why they were stranded in space.

“We followed the pilgrims for the first two days. Luke spent most of his time talking to this older man who wasn’t quite with the group, but they seemed to respect him.” He put another forkful of food in his mouth and washed it down. “So old guy leaves, and around the third day, we noticed that Imperial Troops were starting to follow the group – nothing major, just here and there. We find out from some of the people in the group that they heard that the Imps would pull out some of the men to
go work in the plant- and they wouldn’t return.” He sipped his caf again, and looked around for another cup.

Mara got up to retrieve the carafe and poured him another cup.

Wes nodded in thanks, and continued. “We thought ‘Great- this will get us into the plant’. And it did.” He took a longer sip, and then looked at the cup in appreciation as he swallowed. “They came for the men, and they took us along.”

He yawned, and then went back to his food. “Being the loyal subjects of the Empire that we are, while we worked for next few days, and we happened to plant the detonators that we had on us-thank you very much.” He smiled at giving back what he got to the Imperials.

“When we got all of them situated, we released the rest of the prisoners before blowing the place.” His smile faded. “That’s when thing went sideways.”

Mara leaned in, listening.

“We suspect that there must have been a spy among the workers. The fire fight as we were leaving seemed to be ready for something...more troops than necessary..” Wes said shaking his head.

He swallowed, but without any food in his mouth, looking distant. “They knew we were there. And they knew who was there. There’s no way that they could have had that much support without knowing...preparing for it- it was just too much for a standard commando team of four.”

She nodded, still listening.

“Most of the prisoners escaped…there were some that fought on their side…it made it hard to tell who was an enemy.” Wes paused. “And Luke…”

He looked over at the pod. “I think he knew that they were after him.” He looked back at Mara. “Why else would they send in an AT-AT on unarmed prisoners?”

Mara sat up; knowing that he was right. Imperials didn’t bring in heavy artillery unless they needed it.

“But…” Wes went back for a forkful of food, chewed and swallowed. “In he went, doing what he does…”

He stopped and looked beyond her. “I’ve never seen him do that...ever...I didn’t know he had it in him.”

She wanted to ask, but held herself waiting; her usual cool nature was leaving her.

Wes stared straight ahead. “He went right in, moving faster than I’ve ever seen him move...with his lightsaber, taking out Troopers...and then when the AT-AT started firing on him, he simply raised his hands, standing in front if it... and then I saw it...” His voice lost its volume, replaced with astonishment. “The sides of the AT-AT just started crumpling, falling in on itself...the legs buckled, and then the cockpit crushed...causing the rest of it to explode.”

He blinked a few times and looked over at her. “Luke did it.” He whispered; in slight fear and awe.

The room was quite; Mara held his look, sharing her own of trepidation. She knew Luke was strong, but she hadn’t seen him do such a thing either, with such power.
Her memory flashed on Vader; once she had seen him rip a Cruiser from the sky, and throw it as if it was nothing.

Wes still stared. “But that wasn’t just it.” He blinked once, but kept his gaze. “We escaped, but they must have figured out who had helped us. It took us two more days to get back to the village. When we got there, the people were in the middle of the town, and surrounded by AT-ST’s.” He swallowed. “They started to execute them…for helping us. They waited until they knew we were arriving for us to watch.”

He blinked hard again; a dark look coming on. “We took them on when we were trying to get to our fighters. Luke made quick work of the AT-ST’s…” He looked at his shoulder. “I got a little cooked.” He sighed. “Twomb got caught in a blast but was able to move.”

Mara nodded; the internal bleeding on the Sullustan.

Wes shuddered slightly, and then went back to pushing his food around on the try. “When we took off, there was a blockade waiting for us- a Star Destroyer. See? -overkill.” He nodded, making eye contact with her.

She sighed, looked away briefly, and then back at him.

“R12- Vircent didn’t make it out of that one before we jumped to hyperspace.” He raised his eyebrows and looked down at the tray. “Luke slave-rigged us after the jump, and set co-ordinates…I guess…I passed put just after the jump.” He looked over at the other pod again. “But then he’s here too…so I don’t know what happened next.”

“There was a crack in his canopy.” She said, filling in the blanks for him. “Luke had to go into Jedi hibernation in order to survive- lack of oxygen and frostbite.”

Mara looked into Wes’s eyes. “We found you and took you on board.” She told him.

Wes gave her a tight smile. “Thanks for that, Hot-…um, Jade.” He nodded apologetically for almost using the nickname, and remembering the moniker that she gave Hobbie the last time he called her that, but also, now he respected her for saving his life.

“I’ll put it on your tab.” She growled as a warning.

He smiled broader; happy that she wasn’t going to hold it against him, and happy that she saved his life.

“And now, I have to figure out how to get you off my ship.” She grimaced.

Luke had tried to explain the Rogue-logic to her; they lived in the moment and tried not to hold onto things. Jansen wasn’t fully returning, but he wasn’t as unsettled as he was when he was talking about their mission now. She chalked it up to battle experience.

“Are we really that much of a bother for you?” Wes asked.

Mara shook her head. “You aren’t.” And then narrowed her gaze at him. “But your reputation is. Plus, if a blockade is lingering around here, it won’t take them long to find out what happened to you.”

She got up from her seat, and removed the tray from in front of him. She motioned to offer him some more food; he shook his head, and held his stomach indicating that he was satiated.
“I’m supposed to be picking up some new crew members in the next day…I’ve told the current crew that we’re taking on four, instead of two.” She explained. “You and Luke can work as a loader team.”

Wes got up from the pod, as it seemed that she wanted to leave the med bay.

“I’ll come back for Luke, but I’ll take you to your quarters now.” Mara said statically. “You’ll have the day to rest. I’ve moved your R-unit to your room – it’s not to leave there unless I say so.”

Wes nodded.

“I’ll give you a name to use while you’re on board- and no talking to other crew members, unless I say so.” She warned. “There are too many strangers that are coming and going for shipments for you not to be spotted.” She grimaced. “Especially Luke” she murmured.

Mara shook her head. “The rest? - I haven’t figured out yet….but we’ll get you back to the Liberty…somehow.”

She motioned for him to join her at the door. “This way please.”

Wes nodded. “Thank you, Mara.” He said quietly and warmly, from behind her.

She looked over her shoulder, and nodded before leading him out.

**

The room was dim, and he wasn’t where he expected he would be. He expected to be dead.

The bed was soft and he was resting on top of the covers, wearing work coveralls.

His eyes adjusted to the lack of light.

“There you go…now I get to see those blue eyes that I fell in love with.” Her voice was soft and gentle.

Her face came into focus. “Mara” his voice cracked, relieved.

“We have got to stop meeting like this.” She frowned, faking amusement for his sake. “First, on Roche, and now just off the Shapani Bypass to find you…broken…again.”

Luke closed his eyes, feeling her sense around him, and exhaling with relief. “You heard me… calling to you.” He whispered.

“Yes.” She said quietly. “We found you. We have the other X-wings on board too.”

He turned to look at her for more information.

Mara reached over and stroked his face. “Wes is a few doors down, in one of the crew dorms.” She paused. “Twomb didn’t make it.”

He sighed and nodded; his eyes going distant.

She waited until his look came back to her face before speaking. “I brought you a tray of food, when you’re ready to eat.”

He nodded; his face still looked gray to her.
“And you can take a real water shower in my ‘fresher…Aves gave his water allotment to Wes, and I’m giving you my allotment. I can take a sonic one later.”

Luke looked at her and frowned.

“We only can carry so much water on board, so we have a rotating shower schedule until the next recycling.” She explained, and then gave him a brief smile. ‘It can be the best five minutes of your day.”

He smiled as he sat up and looked at her with marvel. <I love you.> saying softly into her mind.

Luke reached over and touched her face, bringing her closer, and touching her supple mouth to his own. No food, no water could satisfy him quite like the touch of her lips against his.

<<Stars, I love you too.>> she sent over her desperation at finding him, and how relieved she was when she found him, as her lips pursed on his.

He pulled back and hummed, just looking at her.

Something itched, and he went to scratch the side of his neck only to find the bacta patches attached there. “Wha?” he croaked.

“You had frostbite from the exposure because of the crack in your canopy.” Mara glared, just mildly, at the thought that he would dare to even fly if he knew he had a crack.

Luke cringed, coughed a bit, bringing some moisture into his mouth. “No other choice.” He said quietly.

“I know.” She looked down, giving in to feel the seriousness of the moment. “Jansen told me.”

He looked up at her, surprised that she was able to get the details of a covert mission off of someone as seasoned as Wes.

Mara backed away from him. “Go…use the ‘fresher…take your shower, and then come out here and eat…and then you can tell me your side of things.”

Luke moved his sluggish body, and she came closer to help him balance to get off the bed. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder as support but also enjoying how close she was and that he was actually touching her, not just dreaming. “Yes ma’am.”

He shuffled a few steps with her help, and then, reluctantly removed his arm, to make it the rest of the way on his own, but not before getting another kiss. He headed off into the ‘refresher.

Mara watched him, and waited for the door to close. She mentally counted to ten before reaching out to him. <<Somebody has to.>> she answered back.

She felt it as the shock hit him. <<Yes, I know what you look like that…and I still love you…but
Tabord would kill you if he saw it.>>

Sensing that he was rubbing his shaved head, she wondered how long it had been like that; it had started to grow back.

<Ten days…on Ovanis.> he answered.

Mentally, she did the math. <<So, fifteen standard days?>> she figured.

<That sounds right.> He confirmed.

Mara heard the shower start, and felt his joy at the feeling of the hot water. She pulled back her senses only to let him have his privacy while he began to collect himself.

She started arranging the room while she waited.

She had woken Jansen just after the midday cycle on the ship, and Luke she let rest until after evening meal. While the crew ate in the mess hall, she had him moved to her room.

His R2 unit was plugged in to the power unit in her suit; she knew he would want his droid close by, but couldn’t chance it roaming around the ship.

Luke appeared as the ‘fresher door opened, and he looked bashful only for a moment before he walked across the room wearing nothing but a towel. Seeing his storage unit, he went right to it.

“I almost forgot what one of those felt like.” He said, smiling with bright eyes for her.

His teeth started to chatter as he riffled through the unit looking for something suitable.

“We’re approaching the night cycle.” Mara said, giving him a clue at what he should be selecting.

She sat at the small work station, and turned her attention away from her comm unit to watch him dress.

“Aves is on duty tonight, in my place.” She said quietly.

Luke looked over at her with a smile, before he dropped the towel, and slipped on his sleeping pants.

“Karrde isn’t around?” He asked; sensing that she still found him attractive but not in the mood to seduce him tonight.

Mara snorted once; sensing his feelings at her thoughts. “No, he isn’t…but he will be in a few days, when I initiate my plan of getting you off this ship and back home to the Liberty.”

He found one of his favourite sweaters, still feeling the chill, and raised it over his head to slip it on.

“And how are you going to manage to do that?” He asked.

“Well, I figure the attention will be drawn away from the X-wings that we will be transferring over to a nondescript freighter in lieu of the ship that Karrde just purchased.” She explained.

Luke frowned at her, and then his attention went to his storage unit to look for something to put on his feet.

Mara got up from her seat and walked over to her own storage unit. “You’ll be interested in the new freighter he just bought. He’s trying to come up with a clever name for it, but no luck yet…it’s designed for the sole purpose to haul water…a lot of it.”
She walked over to him with a grin on her face. “It will be making one strict delivery route…back and forth…delivering water to Tatooine.” She slapped his chest with a pair of grey ugly socks, as he beamed at her, not realising what she had just given him.

“He’s doing it then?” Luke’s spirit brightened and he broadly smiled at her.

Mara smiled back and nodded.

He hopped across the room, putting each foot into the socks, trying to get to her to hug her. Reaching her, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tight. “You did it!” he cried as he rocked her.

“I was able to do it…there would have been a difference.” She mumbled as she let him hold her. “It’s not a perfect plan…but if they keep to the rationing schedule, it will work. Armeth worked long and hard on it.” She closed her eyes and gave in to his embrace. “Karrde didn’t want the Hutts to get a foothold again.”

“It doesn’t matter- the how.” He said clutching her. “It just matters that it’s happening.”

She pulled back and looked into his eyes, beaming and bright, but behind them she would deceive herself to think that everything was alright.

Luke leaned in and kissed her soundly. <Thank you.>

Mara hummed, trying to take in the moment, not to remind herself that he was close to death if she didn’t find him in time.

His stomach broke up their tender moment with a loud growl. They both looked down and snorted. “I guess I know which part of you likes to wake up last.” She murmured, retracting from his hold and moving over to the serving tray. “I’ll take that as my queue to feed you.”

He was still smiling as she brought it over and pointed her chin as a direction to sit down on the edge of her bunk.

Luke ran his hand on his head, expecting hair, and grimaced. “I thought I was getting used to it.” He murmured as he looked at the plate she had prepared.

“I thought I was going to take off a layer of skin, trying to get that blue off your face.” She sat on the far end of her bunk watching him dig in. “Do you want to tell me about that?”

He looked up from his plate and over at her. “Do you mean that you want to start the ‘Dankin Plan’ now?” He asked after swallowing.

“No time like the present.” She said smugly. “But this time, let’s start off with small things?”

Taking a sip from his drink, he nodded. “You first.”

“I saw Leia.” Mara said bluntly.

Luke looked over at her, surprised.

“I had a scheduled stop after getting picked up from the Liberty. I didn’t know we were headed there until after I had left, otherwise I would have told you.” She smiled. “You should see the twins- I took holos.”

Mara got up from the bunk and retrieved her data pad, opened it, and handed it to him upon
returning.

He paused and flipped through the images, smiling. “They’ve gotten big.”

“They’re both walking but they need motivation to do it…Jacen walks from food, and Jaina walks for hugs. Ty have this strange way of talking to each other, just chirps and bips, but they seem to understand each other.” She wanted him to hear this; it would make him happy.

“I put them down for a nap.” She said quietly.

Luke looked up from the data pad, shocked.

“Both of them.” She said proudly. “I told them a story and I sang them a lullaby.”

He looked taken a-back.

“Don’t give me that look…they’re just over a year old.” She glared; he shouldn’t be that surprised.

“What?” he smirked. “I’m happy for you…I always knew that you could do something like that.” He cast his eyes down, back at his food. “Change a dirty diaper, and then we’ll talk.” He murmured.

She glared harder at him, knowing that he could feel it. “Alright…your turn.”

Taking his chance to eat a few more bites, he figured out what he was going to tell her. After taking a big mouthful, he swallowed. “Wedge and Iella are getting married.”

Mara gasped. “When?” she asked excitedly.

Luke paused. “Well, in actual fact, I bet they’re already married.” He took of his drink, thinking about it. “Yeah, they were supposed to get married after we left. She was coming on board to do an inspection for the NRI, and Wedge was going to marry her the same day that she was to show up.”

She lowered her glance. “How?”

“Ackbar was going to perform the ceremony.” He answered. “Horn even punched him before he left – tradition and all.”

“Well, as long as things are done right.” Mara smiled.

He was finishing up his meal and started looking around for something.

She sensed it and went over to bring over a cask of water, and another container; he looked at her. “Hot chocolate.” She said, knowing that he wouldn’t turn it down.

“You know me too well.” Luke pushed the hover try away and got comfortable with the container of hot chocolate in the nook of his arm. He sat with his back up against the headboard of her bunk and brought his legs up, waiting on her.

Mara took up a similar position at the foot of her bunk, their legs touching against each other in the middle. She knew it was her turn.

“Karrde found out what happened to those deliveries of algae from Naboo.” She said, regretfully. “We know they got diverted to a third party, and ended up getting sold to the Imperials.”

She shook her head. “There’s a good chance that it’s getting used somewhere in the deep Core—that’s as far as we could trace it.”
“We’ve cut off delivering it though. Commix agreed that to stop sending it out. It’s a huge cut to our profits, but Karrde has found other clients that will make up for it soon.” She explained.

Luke nodded, knowing that her concern was past the business end of it; he knew it had potential for harm as well.

Not waiting, or wanting to talk about it further, she jumped at the lull before he could respond. “Your turn.”

He merely sighed, knowing that they were getting into heavier topics. “My father’s estate documents showed up.”

Mara sat up, taking greater attention to what he was saying.

“I haven’t opened Vader’s estate yet…but I opened Anakin’s.” He said calmly. “There’s not much left of it…but I know more about his life…and…” his eye looked peaceful for a short time. “I saw a holo of my mother.” He smiled.

“That’s incredible, Luke!” She was truly happy for him. When he spoke of his family, she knew one of the missing parts was his mother. As much as he had chased the history of his father, he had a huge hole where his mother should have been.

“I don’t know her name yet…well, I have part of a name.” He shrugged. “I haven’t had time to tell Leia -a contact told me that our mother was a close acquaintances with Bail Organa. I’m hoping that Leia might know something more.”

“How common can a name like ‘Naberrie’ be on Naboo?” He asked rhetorically.

“Naberrie?” Mara asked; the name sounded familiar but she wasn’t sure how. Maybe Palpatine had dropped it in passing; he did always have a snide comment regarding his home world.

Luke nodded, but his senses began to turn. “I have been able to open Vader’s estate yet.” He whispered. “I can bring myself to do it yet.”

Mara just sat and listened.

“He named me in his estate.” He looked down at his hands. “Before Endor- he named me as his heir.”

Lifting his head, he met her eyes. “I don’t know how I feel about that yet.”

She sat quietly, watching him after he looked away from her. “I don’t know how I’d feel either, if it was me.” She looked away when she felt his eyes back on her. “I suppose I’d feel pretty confused by it…and knowing what I do, I’m not sure that I’d appreciate it.”

Mara looked back up at him. “I guess one part of me would be angry with him- it’s a pretty manipulating thing to do that claim someone as your heir, like that…wills are written with the specific intent to be read upon a death…it was clear that he wanted you to feel something if he had died.”

Luke nodded, understanding what she meant.

“On the other hand…” Mara thought out loud. “Perhaps he gave you his estate because he wanted to make amends for his life, and knew that you could do something good with it?”
His eyes went unfocused, and nodded. “I didn’t think about it like that.” He looked back at her, and grinned tightly. “You could be right on both accounts. I guess I won’t know until I open it.”

She gave him back a tight grin.

He sat thinking about it, an adjusted his position in her bunk, shifting the pillow at his back.

“I’ve got nothing left.” Mara said blankly. “I’ve told you the good and bad…and now I think it’s your turn.”

Hanging his head, he gave in to resignation. There was little he could do to get away from her when she was intent on something. “Where do you want me to start?”

“Start with something that wasn’t so bad…and go from there.” Mara leaned back on the foot rest, assuming that she was going to get more of a story from him than she got from Jansen.

“I met Lor San Tekka.” Luke said directly.

“The Leader of the Church of the Force?” she asked.

“That’s him.” He said. “He asked for me specifically for this mission. He was our contact to the resistance group- which turned out not to be much of a help in this case. The only thing that they were able to give us were the structural drawing of the manufacturing plant.” He grimaced.

“But San Tekka turned out to be an interesting fellow.” Luke seemed amused. “He’s quite the eccentric- when I got old, that’s how I am be, by the way…just warning you.”

“Desert hobo, and eccentric…got it. I’ve been forewarned. Go on, please.” She humored him.

“He keeps records on Jedi children.”

Mara frowned.

“He’s got a page for Corran Horn and Mirax…and pages for the Skywalkers too. He asked about Leia’s pregnancy.” Luke didn’t look too comfortable talking about this. “You were right- they are keeping track of us. You and me.” He raised his eyebrows. “It been suggested that I should get you pregnant as soon as possible.” He growled. “Which reminds me, I’m off my repress meds.”

She didn’t know how to respond to this; any of it. The news that the public was demanding a child, the fact that someone was keeping track of them, and then she blurted out the only thing she could think of. “I just started my cycle yesterday- we’re safe.” She said quietly.

“Good.” He grumbled, regretting that he sprung this on her.

“For the most part, he’s helpful and wants to be that way.” Luke sighed. “He knows a lot about the Jedi, and details about them personally.”

“Did you know that Ben Kenobi had a lover?- the Duchess of Mandalore!” He said, still trying to think that one through.

“Satine Kryze? – she was Kenobi’s lover?” Mara gasped as Luke nodded. “She was the last Duchess that I knew of…we studied her in the history class at the Academy. She died during the Clone Wars.”

“Well, San Tekka knew all sorts of details about other Jedi too.” Luke eased back against the headboard, and yawned slightly. “His group is mostly in favor of Force-users being balanced, and
neutral. I don’t think he’s of any threat to us.” He rubbed his head again, and remembering where his story was supposed to be going. “He was on Ovanis working with the Crèche. They’re the ones with the shaved heads and blue oval tattoos.”

Mara could feel the darker tone coming on to him.

“We had to blend in, as if we were pilgrims. Hence the shaved heads.” He touched his scalp again. “San Tekka was recording their history and their faith. The Crèche believe that this blue egg that is kept in a mountain, will someday hatch a being that will save their world. San Tekka thought there might be some sort of Jedi lore to it and was there to get the details. He helped us assimilate into their group.”

“We walked with them for almost three days…” He started.

“Luke,” She stopped him, feeling it might be too much to relive all of it. “Jansen told me most of it.” She paused, and then looked at him directly. “He told me about the AT-AT.”

He looked back at her, unflinching. “I took it down.” He said, his eyes getting a hard look into them. “I had to do it.”

“I know.” Mara said quietly. “I’m glad that you did…you helped those prisoners escape.” Her eyes didn’t flinch away from him, and desperately wanted to know the answer. “But what I want to know is what it felt like, Luke.”

His eyes softened, as if searching for an answer for her. “I don’t know.” He finally said. “I don’t remember it.”

Luke got up from her bunk and walked over to the hover tray and took the water cask to pour himself a drink.

He turned back to her. “I wish I could tell you more, but all I remember is being driven by one goal, and one goal only…to take it down.”

He knew what she was asking; did he use the Dark Side to make it happen?

“I remember a huge power surge in me before, but after it happened, I felt, strangely, at peace…and then, relieved as the people were freed and we were able to make our escape.” He drank a bit, relieving his dry mouth. “But I don’t remember actually doing it.”

He drank a bit more water before continuing, and placing the cask down. He started pacing slowly in the middle of the room.

“I know what I do remember. I remember the attack on the village.” He turned away from her. His shoulders started moving with the deep breaths that he was taking.

Mara sensed that he was trying to calm himself.

“I heard the order that they gave to the Troops.” His voice was low and dark. He turned back around to her. “Did you ever hear of ‘Order 37’?”

She felt a cold shiver go straight through her; she knew that order well. Sitting up, she swung her legs off the bunk and looked down at the ground and nodded.

“Did you ever have to give that order?” Luke asked her directly; his voice cold.
She sensed that he needed to know; he was prepared to hate her if she answered his question with the wrong answer. It was there, in his mind, on the edge of throwing their relationship away, if he thought she was capable of carrying out such an order.

Mara looked directly at him, and held his eyes. “No.” she said confidently. “I never had to give that order- my missions weren’t like that. I was a shadow…a rumor… if I had ever been caught, by Rebels or Imperials, I would still have never given an order like that.” She didn’t flinch. “Never.”

“Then, you know what it is?” He asked, the cold not leaving his voice, as if he almost blamed her that such an order existed in the regime that she had once dedicated her life to.

She nodded once.

“What is it, Mara?” He wanted see and hear that she knew the ramifications, or if he heard otherwise.

“It’s a contingency order.” She said blankly, the words coming from her were the ones that she had memorized. “It can only be given by a Level Four Officer, or higher. Order 37 calls for the capture of a single wanted individual through the mass arrest, threatening of a civilian population…and,” She paused, and shivered. “…and execution of a civilian population if demands have not been met… or as retribution if the population was shown to be in collusion, or suspicion of collusion, with the wanted party.”

“It was designed to set an example of what could happen if you crossed the Empire.” She lowered her head, knowing that she had been a part of the mechanism that designed such a tool. “It was also code named The Inquisitor Protocol.”

Luke could feel her anguish at having to even describe such an order, and he knew immediately that she could have never called for such a thing. Of all the things she did while being the Emperor’s Hand, mass genocide wasn’t one of them.

He breathed a sigh of relief and came closer to her. “I’m sorry.” He whispered as he sat down beside her. “Those people…they had helped us and they were paying the price for it.”

She could feel his heartbreak as witnessing it, and then his remorse for asking her about in the manner that he did.

Then something else came across his senses; he still kept his head down. “I acted in anger, Mara.” His voice was low, and she could feel his overwhelming regret.

“It was blinding, but I knew what it was.” He sighed. “It was white, hot, rage.” He shook his head. “I’m never felt anything like it in my life…nothing so powerful. And I killed all of them…all of the Imperial Troops that were there.”

She could feel something different in him; he was calling on the Force to heal his spirit for his mistake.

“I shouldn’t have done it.” He murmured. “And I don’t know how to fix it.”

“Oh Luke…” She called and wrapped her arms around him; trying to send him some comfort.

He turned and accepted her arms, pulling her closer into him. “I now know what it now feels like to use that power.” He said into her shoulder as he let her hold him.

“Mara…” He said quietly, “I liked it. It felt stronger…like I accomplished more, even though I know I didn’t. There was no peace that came after it…that’s how I knew that I acted in anger…it was like a
gaping hole in me afterwards, dark and empty, painful.”

He hugged more-tighter. “I don’t know how to fill that hole, Mara.” He said into her shoulder.

“Oh Luke,” She repeated and began to stroke his head. She wanted to have the answers but she couldn’t find anything.

He just held her longer, not wanting to let her go.

She breathed heavy, finding some of her peace and sending it to him.

He wasn’t drying, he was shivering; he knew what he could have done with his feelings that were out of control.

“At least you acknowledge it.” She said quietly, at last. “You could have just denied it to yourself.” Stroking his head a few more times before he pulled back and looked at her. “The result of that, would have been worse.”

Luke looked into her eyes; seeing compassion and understanding. He nodded, accepting what she was saying.

“And regardless of what you were feeling, you did what needed to be done.” She sighed.

“It still doesn’t feel right.” He said quietly.

Mara shook her head. “Oh, I don’t think you should excuse it, but I don’t think you should let it consume you either.” She reached put to hold his hand. “You’re remorseful that you touched the Dark side- if only ever so briefly…and you did it when trying to save other lives…that’s enough for a moral-compass check for me.”

Luke sat just looking at her.

“You were starving…probably a little delirious from dehydration too…it would surprise me if that had something to do with it. Emotions run wild while the body is out of sorts.” She squeezed his hand.

He wasn’t completely fine, but he wasn’t as distraught as he was while he spoke.

“Come on…” She whispered. “I think after a good night’s sleep, you’ll feel better.”

His eyes brightened, then frowned, looking around the room; thinking that he might have to go share quarters with Wes.

“You’re not going anywhere…you’re staying with me.” Mara softly grinned at him. “I’m greedy that way. I want you all to myself.”

Her hand came up and touched his face. “I need you too.”

Luke smiled and turned his cheek so that his lips touched the inside of her palm, and kissed it.

“Okay, you’re the boss.” He gave in. “Where do you want me?”

Mara looked over at the bunk. “Well, you’ll be on the inside, against the wall.” She got up from the bunk, preparing for the night. “I’m still on call, and it would be strange if I needed to crawl over you if they call me.”
“Right.” Luke grinned. He stretched before getting up, and opening the covers.

She dimmed the lights, and looked over her shoulder to see that he had already made himself comfortable in her bunk.

Luke’s eyes were closed and he was enjoying the feeling of her sheets.

“I don’t know where you find them.” He shook his head, and then opened his eyes to watch her dress. “You always have the best beds…the best sheets.”

Mara slipped off her jumpsuit. As much as she wanted to play seductress, and Force knows that she did… she also knew that it wasn’t in the stars; her body reminded her with a cruel cramp as she thought about it.

“I value sleep, where and when I can find it.” She found her night set and slipped the shirt over her head, and slid on the bottoms over her panties, becoming a bit self-conscious.

Luke had never been around, since Roche, when she was on her cycle. She hoped that he wouldn’t be repulsed that anything her body decided to do.

When she was ready, she turned and looked at him. “Beside you need your sleep too. You and Wes are my new loader team, working hull seven.”

He looked surprised.

“Oh, I’ve put you with Kirwayne- he knows who you are, so he’ll be your main contact.” She walked towards the bunk. “You won’t be working directly with any of the haulers either…they would all talk to him – they know the routine.”

Luke scratched his face, feeling the stubble.

“You wanted to be a smuggler.” She said snidely, for his amusement. “Got to start on the bottom of the ladder.”

He snorted, as she got into bed beside him. “Aye-aye Boss.”

Looking for ways for them to get comfortable, and not disturb his bacta patches, he started fussing.

“I’ve thought this.” She said quietly. “In the interest of science, let’s trying something.”

“The last time you said that, you held my hand for an entire day and damn near kissed me.” He smirked. “What’s your plan?”

She lay down beside him, and opened her arms. “I think I should hold you for the night…and try it the other way around.” She patted her shoulder closest to him.

Luke raised an eyebrow, and then shrugged, giving in. He lied down beside her, and gently put his head in the nook of her arm; figuring where to place his hand, he let it rest on her stomach.

They lay like that, silent for a few moments.

He shifted his weight. “Nope, this doesn’t work. It was a nice gesture, but I can’t sleep like this.” He said, sitting up.

“Why?” Mara asked, a bit hurt.
“Well, for one thing, I’m at eye-level to your breasts… your beautiful, soft, perfect, succulent breasts.” His voice filling with lust.

She smirked at his predicament, knowing that he wanted a physical reunion as much as she did, but he chose to respect her body’s right to renovate.

But she was tired too, having spent the day worrying about him, and wanted her own sleep. “How about that I spoon behind you then?” she asked with a yawn.

He nodded, and came down for a deep kiss before turning over and facing the wall.

Mara cupped her body next to his, and she could feel him backing up to accommodate to feel her touch. She wrapped her arm around his shoulders, hugging him to her.

“I love you.” She whispered into his ear.

He pulled her arm closer into him. “I love you too.” He said quietly. “Thank you, Mara.”

She nestled against the side of his head, and thought over, *Good night my handsome man.*

*Good night my beautiful girl,* he thought back.

And sleep took them.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

"Shelter from the Storm" by Bob Dylan (damn you, 60's Radio Station)
'Twas in another lifetime one of toil and blood
When blackness was a virtue, the road was full of mud
I came in from the wilderness a creature void of form
"Come in," she said,
"I'll give you shelter from the storm."

And if I pass this way again you can rest assured
I'll always do my best for her on that I give my word
In a world of steel-eyed death and men who are fighting to be warm
"Come in," she said,
"I'll give you shelter from the storm."

Not a word was spoke between us there was little risk involved
Everything up to that point had been left unresolved
Try imagining a place where it's always safe and warm
"Come in," she said,
"I'll give you shelter from the storm."

I was burned out from exhaustion buried in the hail
Poisoned in the bushes and blown out on the trail
Hunted like a crocodile ravaged in the corn
"Come in," she said,
"I'll give you shelter from the storm."
Suddenly I turned around and she was standing there
With silver bracelets on her wrists and flowers in her hair
She walked up to me so gracefully and took my crown of thorns
"Come in," she said,
"I'll give you shelter from the storm."

Now there's a wall between us something there's been lost
I took too much for granted, I got my signals crossed
Just to think that it all began on an uneventful morn
"Come in," she said,
"I'll give you shelter from the storm."

Well the deputy walks on hard nails and the preacher rides a mount
But nothing really matters much it's doom alone that counts
And the one-eyed undertaker he blows a futile horn
"Come in," she said,
"I'll give you shelter from the storm."

I've heard newborn babies wailing like a mourning dove
And old men with broken teeth stranded without love
Do I understand your question man, is it hopeless and forlorn?
"Come in," she said,
"I'll give you shelter from the storm."

In a little hilltop village they gambled for my clothes
I bargained for salvation and she gave me a lethal dose
I offered up my innocence, I got repaid with scorn
"Come in," she said,
"I'll give you shelter from the storm."

Well I'm living in a foreign country but I'm bound to cross the line
Beauty walks a razor's edge someday I'll make it mine
If I could only turn back the clock to when God and her were born
"Come in," she said,
"I'll give you shelter from the storm."
Chapter Summary

Quote: He thought about it before answering. “I wake up, fight for a shower, fight for food, run several laps in a group, and then go about the rest of the day, plotting to overthrow a regime.”

Characters: Luke, Mara,

Chapter Notes

**
Plot…plot…plot… just plotting along.
I’m getting there…don’t you worry.
Slight SMUT FEST- but not a full-blown case of the SMUTS
**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Aboard the freighter, Wild Karrde**

Something woke him in small stages. At first it was just in the background, but now that he concentrated on it, he could hear it clearly.

He opened his eyes, listening. Then he smiled.

Luke turned his body inside the sheets in the direction of the sound that woke him.

Somehow during the night, Mara had turned onto her back, and with her head tilted, she softly snored.

The dim light in her cabin cast a glow on her face, and Luke lay there watching her, and grinned.

Her soft, pouty lips were pointed upwards, and unguarded. It really wasn’t a ‘snore’ that she was uttering; it was more like a nasally hum. It was adorable.

He knew that he was watching something special.

Very few times was she so genuine, when she was awake, that he could see her hidden underneath the layers that she felt that she needed to protect herself.

As much as she felt safe around him, she still would place personae on with him sometimes- usually, without her realizing that she had done it.
Luke sniffled in the dry air of the cabin. Space could be so cold and airless that the recycled air
couldn’t be kind on the senses.

He shifted in the bunk again, giving her more space, and decided that she shouldn’t stay like this.

Knowing better than to wake her, or move her with her consent, he reach out and stroked at the
edges of her hair.

“Mara,” he whispered. “I’m going to move you…so that you’re more comfortable.” He paused. “Is
that okay?”

Her mouth closed, and she hummed once before slightly turning to her side.

Luke smiled again; she was helping him move her.

_You’re half way there, Kitten_, he thought before wrapping his arm around her waist and moving her
so now he was resting behind her, with her face out towards the cabin.

Her snoring stopped, and she hummed again appreciatively.

He didn’t close his eyes though; he lay there, just sensing her, listening to her breathing.

A fleeting thought passed through his mind; he wondered if she was dreaming, and what she was
dreaming about.

Though he could sense that something wasn’t right, and that she had shifted in the awkward pose for
a reason.

With his hand slung over her waist, he could then sense why she wasn’t comfortable and had moved.

Luke flattened his hand on her stomach on the outside of her sleeping pants, and slowly moved his
hand down passed her naval to her lower abdomen.

It wasn’t pain. It was pressure, just sitting there, wincing and spasming slightly.

_**Her cycle,** he thought._

Unlike the time that he had sensed her body ovulating, this felt different. _She_ felt different.

Aside from going through the concern about him, her body was changing, causing her more stress.

He frowned and chose to simply rub the area, hoping that it would relieve some of the discomfort she
was having.

_**She’ll look beautiful with a rounded belly** – his mind flashed on the words of Lor San Tekka._

Luke closed his eyes, and clamped them shut, not wanting to hear them again.

_**She’ll look beautiful with a rounded belly**- they flashed again. He sighed._

In truth, those words hadn’t stopped flashing around in his mind since he had heard them.

Whenever he got a bit of rest on this mission, he would hear them and then picture her, rosy and
glowing with child.

Luke shifted his hand back to her waist. He didn’t know if it was merely the testosterone surge that
accompanied the withdrawal from repress meds that drove his desire or if he truly wanted a family with her.

He sighed again. No, he wanted a family with her.

He smiled when he thought of the idea of her putting the twins down for a nap, and the holo of each of them on her lap.

*You’ll be a good mother,* he thought over to her. *When we’re ready…*

Luke leaned up and looked down upon her one more time before gently kissing the side of her face, and resting back down.

He closed his eyes this time, and now had something to dream about.

**

He sat up panting hard…and…and embarrassed. His screaming erection was almost painful, and now he was on the edge of unwillingly climaxing.

Luke sat breathing cleansing breaths, willing his body to behave.

He looked over at Mara’s sleeping form; she hadn’t noticed or stirred because of his reaction.

Trying to remember at where his mind had taken him, he blamed his dream that almost cause him to have a nocturnal emission.

*Stang!* He mentally cursed. *Stupid repress meds…and the effect of coming off of them,* he thought. *What are you?* He asked himself. *Eighteen again? - can’t control your own body?*

He knew what the symptoms and the repercussions of coming off of them so quickly; as his testosterone levels became higher, so did all the attributes of being a teenager. Luckily, he didn’t have skin break outs either or yet- he was unsure, it was different from the last time he came off the medication.

*Mara would understand,* he told himself. *She’s basically going through puberty too, and all the new things she has to deal with her body.*

It still didn’t make him feel any better, as he lay back down beside her. He refrained getting too close until he had fully regained his control.

She must have senses that he was mentally active because she started to hum louder, and he sensed her waking self.

Swallowing, he hoped that his embarrassment would soon be gone as he watched her become conscious.

She was usually awake before him, so it was nice to watch her, until she shifted her weight and took most of the covers with her.

He held onto the last edge of the blankets for himself, and tugged a bit, hoping that it would wake her.

Mara snorted with the struggle and pulled at the blankets again, but he refused to let them go.

Luke snorted a few times when it became apparent that she was pretending to be asleep, clenching
her eyes shut.

He leaned over to her. “If this is your new version of a wake-up call, you’re going to need more practice Jade.”

She grunted once, turned in his direction and mumbled. “You’re the one with the active mind this morning.”

“You heard that?” he asked, feeling awkward with her.

She yawned. “No, but I could sense that you were thinking….a lot.” She stretched, and opened her eyes.

“Good Morning Farmboy.” She whispered, looking at him.

Luke smiled, watching her. “Good Morning Kitten.” He leaned in for a kiss; truly feeling her lips on his, the thrill and the electricity.

Mara hummed with delight, but then she stopped, and pulled back suddenly.

He looked at her, wondering.

Her eyes flicked back and forth, sensing something that she didn’t want to share. “I’ll be right back.” She said before she awkwardly rolled out the bed and made her way to the ‘fresher.

He could sense that she wasn’t shielding as much as she normally did, and he could feel her relief.

While he waited, Luke reached over to her night stand where her data pad was, and tapped the screen once to check the time.

She must have it set for its daily rotation, according to the schedule set on the freighter. By all accounts, it was morning, if not early in the morning.

He heard some noise from inside the ‘fresher and was tempted to call out to her until the door opened and she came back to the bed, crawling in.

“False alarm.” She said quietly.

Luke assumed that he must have looked flustered because she started to explain.

“There’s at least one day out of my cycle that it the absolute worst. I think that today might be the day.” Mara said in a hushed tone. “I’m still not used to them…and everything hurts.” She pouted.

He gave her a sympathetic grin, and rubbed her shoulder. “You’ll tell me if there’s anything that I can do for you?” He asked.

“Make me a man?” She asked with a snort.

He chuckled and hung his head. “Nope- the Force can make lots of things into realities, but that isn’t one of them.”

“Are you sure? - you haven’t finished reading all of those books from the doctors yet.” She pointed out.

“Pretty sure.” He confirmed, with a smirk.
Mara rolled her eyes, and then looked up at him. “So what time is it?”

“Almost 0-500.”

“Good.” She stretched one more time. “I’m on time.” And yawned.


She gave him the briefest glare. “For the day…and you have a schedule to keep too. I can’t have my new loader team late for their first day of work.”

He still looked puzzled so she carried on.

“We’re on a standard twenty-six hour day rotation. We have three shifts, and work around the clock; receiving and sending out shipments.” She explained. “The roster works like this: three days on ‘day’ shift, three days on ‘midday’ shift, and three days on ‘night shift’, and then three days on call – for everyone…me included.”

Mara rolled out the bed for the second time. “You and Wes will be on day shifts, and Aves has agreed to switch his day shifts for my night shifts, while you’re here…until we get to the rendezvous point in order to transfer your ships over to the other freighter.”

“We have over two, almost three standard days until we get there.” She finished as she walked over to her storage unit.

Luke seemed to think it over. “So where are we heading? What’s the big plan?” He asked. “Do I get to know?”

She smiled slyly, bringing out her clothes for the day. “We’re headed for Null Outpost. Remember when you said you wanted to meet Horn’s father-in-law?”

His eyes got wide.

Mara rolled out a small mat in the middle of the room, preparing. “Mirrax Horn is going to help transfer your X-wings back to the Liberty en route for a delivery, but you’ll get to meet the infamous Booster Terrik.”

He breathed out hard, flabbergasted.

She could see that he was trying to form the question. “Booster was the intermediary for Karrde to buy that new freighter that will transport the water to Tatooine.”

He watched as she began to stretch her body in a pose, loosening her muscles from their stagnant state.

She bent over, her arms bending backwards, but she turned her head in his direction. “He will probably want to meet you…both of you…and give you a hard time. He’s just like that.”

Releasing the pose she was holding, she then changed positions, and held her pose. “This way, Mirrax gets to see Corran- she’s misses him terribly…with the Liberty basically on lock down, and no one allowed on leave, this is her only chance to see him.”

She lifted one leg off the floor and placed it on her inner thigh to form the next pose. “But when you’re talking to Booster- don’t tell him that we, Mirrax and I, that came up with this plan. He’s not exactly thrilled with Corran.”
Mara turned away from him, and bent over backwards, planting her hands on the floor, and pushing her stomach outwards. “Did Corran tell you that it was his father that sent Booster to Kessell? – and that Wedge used to work for Booster?”

Luke shook his head; he just watched her and the amusing shapes she could put her body into.

She rolled from her current shape to facing downwards, and then dipped so that her stomach and legs lay flat on the floor as she pushed her chest off the floor. “Did you know that Booster wanted Mirrax and Wedge to get married? But Mirrax wasn’t interested and neither was Wedge. I think it Mirrax and Corran who introduce Iella to Wedge.”

She let out a long breath before relaxing and lying on the mat, looking at the ceiling. “MIRRAX knows all the best places to shop on NULL- I think that’s where Booster hides out when the heat is on.”

Mara turned to rest on her side, looking at him, as she brought her leg up close to her chest, stretching her hamstring muscles. “What is it? You’ve gone quiet.”

Luke smirked. “I didn’t know you could do that…is that part of your usual morning ritual? I don’t think I’ve seen you have a ‘normal’ day.”

She switched legs as she frowned. “Well, what you do in the mornings?”

He thought about it before answering. “I wake up, fight for a shower, fight for food, run several laps in a group, and then go about the rest of the day, plotting to over throw a regime.”

“Yes, well, I like to save my anarchy for the afternoons, after I’ve finished my paperwork.” She said dryly.


Mara relaxed and got off from the floor, came close to him, and granted him a kiss in exchange for the data pad in his hands.

He made room for her as she sat on the edge of the bunk.

“What do you want for breakfast?” She asked. “What do you think Wes will want? - I was thinking of ordering it up and having it sent to his room, and then I can give both of you, and Kirwayne, instructions for the day.”

He frowned. “Have I met Kirwayne?”

“No,” She answered while she typed. “But he’s met Han…and he was there when we brought your X-wings on board…so there’s no hiding you. I think you’ll like him…he’s a little bit Dankin, and bit Aves.”

She paused. “He’s smart too…but don’t tell him that I told you that. He’s afraid of me, and I like it that way.”

Luke snorted, and nodded, agreeing to her terms. “So what else do you do in the mornings?” He asked, truly curious.

Mara put down her data pad, and looked at him, sensing he was trying to find a way for them to be somewhat intimate, but he might be disappointed. “Since you’ve asked…believe it or not, I usually meditate…just like a good Padawan…like my Jedi taught me.”
“Do you?” he asked.

“Don’t you find that you get too relaxed afterwards? I prefer to meditate at night before going to sleep. I use it to think about the day, to think about the following day and the things that are happening in the galaxy.” He said, wanting to compare notes. “It calms me, and soothes me.”

She got up from the bed and went back to the mat on the floor, sitting cross-legged. “I find when I start meditating that it’s too stimulating to do at night…I see too many things, and I use the rest of the day to sort them out so I don’t have to think about it at night.”

Mara waited as he seemed to think it over. “Did you want to join me? We have about an hour before we’re due to meet Wes.”

*Oh, she knew the right thing to say,* he thought. Luke got up from the bed to join her on the floor, sitting across from her in the same fashion.

“I can’t remember the last time we actually meditated together…really meditated, do you?” He watched as she closed her eyes and started breathing deeply.

“Like this?” She asked. “I think it was before I moved into my apartment on Coruscant, when we first started training together.”

Her breathing was steady, and soon his matched her. “Um-hmm.” He hummed, closing his eyes.

“You were trying to show me how to get centered quicker- but after that, we decided to meditate separately.” She said slowly.

“We got in a fight that day… I can’t remember why.” He murmured.

“As we were leaving, that girl from the office of the Ambassador for Utapau started flirting with you.” Mara snarled through her lips.

Luke opened one eye and looked over at her; her face was deceptive, she looked like she was at peace but her senses said otherwise. “Is that why you told me to go ‘kriff a rancor’ that day?”

She snorted, but not in humor. “It was because you told me that I would look good with my hair up like hers.”

He cringed. “Did I really say that? I don’t remember.” He tried to remember back; he knew it was at a time when she had just agreed to start training with him. They still weren’t sure how they felt about each other.

“Yes, you did.”

“I’m sorry.” He whispered, realising where he had miss-stepped with her. <You always look amazing…and I love you.>

Mara snorted again, but this time in humor, and he could feel her relaxing. <<Suck up.>> she exhaled. <<I love you too.>>

“What do you want to meditate on?” She murmured.

“Why don’t you guide us? I want to see how your method differs from mine.” He murmured back.

She exhaled, slowly, again. “Okay but hold onto your senses…life moves pretty fast.” She said between the split in her lips.
With his eyes closed, Luke’s brow furrow, trying to understand what she meant. He reached across their joined knees, and found her hands, wanting to connect with her.

Sensing that she was starting to reach out with the Force, to a larger world, he followed where she was going, and stretching out in his on senses.

With no warning he jolted, and then his mind was bombarded with images and sounds; it flashed on the traffic jam of speeders on a highly industrialized word, it flashed over to what looked like a leader from Brignig delivering a speech in a public platform, it flashed over to a mountain side view on a remote world, it flashed on Leia? briefly as she was meeting with a group of people he didn’t recognize, switching to a placid beach, switched to a green glowing city with an eerie fortress, it switched again watching an explosion of a building, switching to aerial view of the Massassi Temple on Yavin.

Like trying to find a holo-station, her mind just kept bringing up images at will and not stopping on any of them. It was chaotic and wild, and it was getting too much for him.

When he couldn’t take the onslaught any longer he pulled back his senses, which seemed to stop her. He was breathing heavily, and backed a bit away from her. “What was that?” Luke asked, panting.

Mara opened her eyes, not disturbed by what she was seeing. “That was my morning meditation…and all the things I see.” She looked at his puzzled look, and tried to explain. “From my sense, that was a vision of the future…those things haven’t happened yet…they’ll probably happen today.” She paused.

“I saw Leia in there too.” She smiled. “I haven’t seen anyone that I recognize for quite some time. I see you, regularly.” She tilted her head to the side. “You’re usually doing something mundane, like running through flight manoeuvres, or reading, or in a lecture…and then it flips to the next image.”

He was astonished. “You see all that in your meditation?”

She looked over at the chrono. “Well, no…we were only in there for less than three minutes…we could have seen more.” She frowned, realizing that maybe her method was the wrong method, and maybe she should be doing something else. “The images wake me up, and then I can go about my day.” She mumbled.

Luke swallowed, preparing himself to make contact with her again. “Mine aren’t the same.” He explained. “It doesn’t mean that yours are wrong…just different.”

“I guess the point of it, is that you feel more connected to the Force by the end of it.” He said, looking at her, trying to find a justification that he could understand for himself. “Didn’t you ever meditate when you were in service with…” His voice trailed off.

Mara looked away from him, and shook her head. “Hardly ever…and most of the time, when I did, He wanted to know what I saw…he kept asking me, over, over and over again.” She hung her head. “I just thought that’s what happens.”

“Do you feel more connected with the Force, after you meditate?” Luke asked, trying to change the tone.

She looked up at him. “Yes…like I have a place in the galaxy, like I’m a part of it…that my story for the day helps makes up the life that is going on in it.”

Mara relaxed and smiled back.  

“The one thing that concerns me is that you don’t seem to be able to control it.” He said. “That the images are so random…can you stop it and center on one images for a time before to goes to another place?” He asked. 

She thought about it. “Sometimes I can pause on things…sometimes I can control the pace of the images; they slow down and then speed up again, like a wave.” 

Luke looked across at her; the teacher was coming back. “What about asking the Force a question and letting it answer you? –or trying to reason out why you have certain problems?” 

Mara shook her head. “I just let whatever wants to come…come. I thought it was what the Force wanted me to see.” 

He rubbed the tops of her knuckles with his hands. “Why don’t we try this? We pick one image that we just saw, and try and concentrate on it?” 

She looked doubtful. “I don’t know if I can go back to one image, but I might be able to stop on one if I slow down the images.” 

Luke nodded. “Let’s try that.” He closed his eyes. 

Mara closed her eyes, and he could feel her reaching out again; this time not as frantic as before. 

This time, he felt her slowly reach out in her senses; the images started to come again. This time, though, her mind paused on each one before he sensed that she felt that she needed to move on. The flipping images slowed down gradually until her mind stopped. 

It was the image of a leader of Brignig addressing a group of people. Luke recognized the alien race and their clothing. He couldn’t understand their language but through the Force he could sense their emotions; distrust, fear, anger. 

He sensed again trying to listen to their words, hoping that he could interpret what they were saying. 

“…We have no other options.” The leader in the middle said. “The Empire has promise us that no harm will come to us if we join with them again.” 

“We are members of the New Republic!” One from the crowd shouted. “To leave them would be treason! We have a responsibility to the galaxy to maintain that!” 

“The New Republic has been in chaos since it started. At least under the Empire we had protection!” another voice yelled. 

“We lost our freedom! Others lost their lives!” 

“The Rebel Alliance isn’t here to protect us either!” 

The leader raised his hands higher to quiet them slightly. “We’ll have to hear what the terms are from Byss, and then go from there to make our decision.” 

“Or we’ll have our decision forced upon us!” 

“We will save our planet from the World Devastators!” 

The voices yelled back and forth amongst them, as the image started to fade out.
Luke lost the train of the image and he could hear her breathing as he started to come back to the present.

Slowly he opened his eyes, and looked over at her; she was frowning but her senses were coming back.

Mara blinked a few times to look over at him.

“What do you feel?” he asked.

Breathing normally, she said quietly, “I don’t feel refreshed. I don’t feel energetic now.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry. I was hoping that something different would have stood out.”

Mara nodded, and her hands slipped out of his hands as she went to move herself from off the floor. “I wasn’t expecting it to be all ‘sunshine and rainbows’, but I wasn’t expecting to see something so detailed as that.”

Luke sat looking at the floor. “I wasn’t either…I’ve never seen anything so vivid.” I have to contact Leia…to tell her…to warn her, he thought.

“No?” she asked. “This time, it wasn’t as strong as they usually are.” She was pulling some clothing out of her storage case.

He looked up at her. “Maybe tonight, we try it my way?” He asked.

Mara smiled. “Just as long as you’re not too tired from doing a long day labour?” She asked. “Loaders are in high demand if they can work fast.” She winked.

Luke ran his hand over the stubble on his head. “Right- I forgot that I’m a working man today.”

She came back over to him, and leaned in for a kiss. “I’m going to take a sonic, and then you can have it.” She gave him another quick kiss. “And then we can both head over to Wes’s room.”

With another kiss, she smirked. “Are you ready for me to be the boss today?”

He reached out to cup her cheek and bring her in for one last kiss. “Yes ma’am.” He whispered between their lips.

<<Good answer.>> She touched his mind.

Mara stepped away and into the ‘fresher to start their day.

TBC
No sooner did he drop the weight of the cloth on the clip, and he heard it.

“Daddy!” For someone so little, her loud voice could sure be heard when she wanted to be.

He smiled and turned around, and looked down to see the sweetest face, with a mass of curly red locks and great big green eyes.

“Well, hello Kitty-cat.” He said sweetly, ducking down to come face to face with the four year old.

“You’re late!” She pouted, then glared adorably, just like her mother, but lacking any malice.

He offered his arms and she accepted them willingly as he scooped her up. “I’m sorry, Precious… class ran a little long.”

She seemed to consider this as she began to play with the edges of his tunic. “You should go kiss mommy to say sorry.”

He chuckled at her assertiveness. “You think I should do that?”

“Yes.” She said definitively as they walked towards the kitchen.

Looking up from the meal that she was preparing, his other red-haired, green-eyed beauty just smirked at him.

“Okay then…because you said so.” He came in close to his wife, giving her his own smirk, placing the tiniest peck on her cheek. Turning to the little one in his arms, he asked, “Like that?”

The little girl glared harder at her father. “No.” she said curtly.

“How about like this?” He asked the little one before turning to his wife and snort-pecking around her face, while the little one giggled.

He got a tap on his shoulder, and then a gruff whine. “Daddyy!” She had her mother’s pout and had developed his natural whine.

Her glare had turned into a big smile. “No…like this.” She kissed the inside of her hand. “Hhhmmmm-smack!” She waved her hand in the air with great fanfare.

“Okay…just like that?” He asked in seriousness.

The little one nodded, returning his serious look.

He looked over at the woman who was looking at him with love in her eyes. He leaned in, placing his lips against hers, feeling the *zing* through his body as it always did, and then pulled away, still looking in those marvelous eyes that captivated him.

Forgotten was the child in his arms until she started to wiggle, she slipped from his arms and his attention was momentarily detracted to make sure that she touched the ground safely. “Was that okay?”

She nodded and then must found something else of interest as she bounced away to go sit in front of the holo-player.

“Yes, it was.” His wife purred, catching his attention. <But I could use another one Farmboy.>

He turned back to her, smiling, and leaned in closer, wrapping his now-available arms around her.
She reciprocated by wrapping her arms around his neck.

Their lips met, and pursed against each other; he could sense the thrill going through her senses. Pulling back she looked at him with love in her eyes.

“Hello Mr. Skywalker.” She mumbled, her voice husky, keeping her face close.

“Hello Mrs. Skywalker.” He replied, keeping his voice low. “How were your classes this morning?” He started to ask as the door whooshed opened, and in walked their sulking nine year old son.

He watched as the boy with floppy blonde hair dropped his book bag after entering and dramatically plopped on the sofa with a grunt.

“Owen…feet off the table.” His wife called.

The boy grunted and did as he was told.

He looked back at her with raised eyebrows. <Do you know what that’s about?> he asked.

She looked over his shoulder into the other room; watching their little girl take delight in bouncing around her brother, and the boy putting up with her. <<I have no idea…maybe you should talk to him? He’s been a little sullen lately.>>

He was about to lean in for another kiss, when they both turned their heads towards the ruckus in the next room, and because their senses told them to.

The little girl’s energy was greatly annoying her brother. “I told you that I don’t want to play!” His voice was raised, and both parents witnessed him give his sister a Force-push away from him.

“Owen!” They both said in unison.

He walked away from his wife to come closer to the children.

“He’s just mad because Ciara picked Nelson to be her partner in sparring class!” The little girl pointed at her brother, and then lunged as she danced at him again, laughing.

“I am not!” the boy protested with a whine, sulking even more.

“You are too! Stupid-head!” The little girl kept laughing.

At that point, even a non-Force sensitive person could have felt it as their mother’s attention came their way. “Moira Leia Skywalker! You leave your brother alone!”

The girl then took the threat seriously and backed away from her brother, going back to her toys in front of the holo-player.

He turned to look back at his wife to see her “mom face” falling, and going back to a relaxed position.

<I think I know what this is about> He grimaced. <I’ve been busy lately…I haven’t be spending much time with them…I think I can fix this.>

She looked at him. <<You have an idea?>>

<Yeah, and it might give you a bit of a break too.>
She raised an eyebrow at him.

He turned back to the room and went to go join the boy on the sofa.

He flopped beside the boy, and mimicked his position. After a few moments of silence, “So do you want to talk about it?” He murmured over.

“No.” The boy mumbled back, but then looked up at his father with his sad blue eyes. </She only likes Nelson ‘cause he’s tall./> His voice whined over. </She didn’t even look at me when they were picking./>

He felt bad for his son, knowing the rejection at such a tender age. Reaching up he ruffled the boy’s hair. <She will someday, son…someday.>

The boy’s face had a twitch to one side, and then he looked up at his father again.

“How about you, and your sister, help me out tonight? The freighter needs some fixing, and I need an extra set of hands….what do you say?” He asked, knowing that the boy couldn’t resist getting to work with some tools.

His face blossomed into a smile as he looked up at his father; he nodded vigorously.

Looking at his daughter, he caught her attention. “Hey Mimi…what’s say you come help Daddy and Owen work on the ship tonight?”

She dropped the toy of the ground and got up, rushing towards the couch, climbing up on her father. “Can I hold the tooque wrench?” She asked, getting excited.

He laughed. “Kitty-cat, it’s a torque wrench.” He corrected her. “…and you have to apologize to your brother first, for making him mad.”

She looked over at the boy. “Sorry.” She said quietly, and then looked back at her father.

He looked over at his son, giving him the ‘father-look’; the boy looked down and mumbled, then looked back at his father. Still seeing a frown, he said it louder, “Sorry Mimi for pushing you.”

“It’s decided then…” He looked over his shoulder at his wife. “The Skywalkers are going to work on the freighter tonight after dinner.”

The little girl went back to play with her toys, and soon her brother happily joined her on the ground.

He watched them for a few moments, contentedly before getting up and walking back to the kitchen.

<<You did that very well.>> His wife smirked as she handed him the bowl of salad for the meal.

He placed it on the table, and came back. Walking into the kitchen, he stopped behind her, and placed his arms around her waist, rocking her as she continued to prepare the meal.

<Thank you> He said before planting a kiss on the side of her cheek. <Maybe after ‘Daddy-time’… and after they’re asleep…we can have ‘Mommy-Daddy time’?> He asked seductively.

She seemed to move more with his body before answering. <<I am between cycles, and they say it’s the best time to keep trying…>> She turned into his body. <<Plus, you were very cute there.>>

<Yeah?> His hands slipped over her belly to her hips. <Oh…you are.> He said noticing the change in her body.
Her lips brushed against his, and her pelvis pressed to him, sending his senses skyrocketing. <<And I do have a bottle cap...Jedi.>>

<Yeah?> He asked more-eagerly this time.

<<Yes>> She purred back, kissing him more-passionately.

He returned her kisses, and started stroking her body as it pressed up to him; all things forgotten.

Their bodies wanted to become one, and he wanted nothing else in the galaxy, other than her.

Desire and heat between them sped up and threatened to be unleashed; whirling chaotically out of control...until...until...

Chapter End Notes

So I don't know if noticed...but I like to have a bit of meaning in the name that I pick...for example the names of the children in Luke's dream...might seem obvious where those names came from...Moira- a take on Mara's name, and Owen- for Luke's uncle.

However, to prove that I do research these things... "Moira" has a Greek origin, meaning "destiny" or "chosen path", Celtic variation is Mhairi or Mairi.... Owen- also has a Celtic background, meaning "young warrior".

Ah-ha...not just a pretty face...one of the many reasons why it takes me days, almost a week, to knock off a chapter. ~Wink! Thanks for reading!
Walls, Weapons and Warriors -Part 5

Chapter Summary

Quote: Maras pouted and sighed, “It has the worst sense of humor…worse than the Force.”

Luke snorted into her hair. “Yes, the Force is not known for its ability to make people laugh.”


Chapter Notes

**
Okay…I get it…you guys didn’t like the last chapter… no comments=no like... 100 people read a chapter, and nothing...
~pout~

I figured it out… you’ve been waiting for it…

SMUT FEST…enjoy it.

~pouts again~ I'll be over here...thinking up more chapters.

**

Aboard the freighter, Wild Karrde

He was sure to be careful that he wasn’t followed on the way back to her quarters; she had been insistent on the point. The work-day was done.

Luke had listened to all of Mara’s rules for being onboard when she debriefed the group of them in Wes’s room that morning.

Kirwayne took notes; just to be on track.

Wes would be the keeper of the manifests and make sure that the loads were accurate, favoring his shoulder still. Luke and a droid crew of two helped move the hover palettes off the cargo ships.

Only Kirwayne was to have interaction with the in-coming freighter crew, confirming the delivery and having it moved to the next hull for transport off the ‘Karrde. Then, he would arrange for the pay voucher for the freighter crew.

Mara made sure that they looked the part, and explained that they would have to carry blasters as it was not expected, but anticipated, that there would any trouble. It would look out of sorts if they didn’t have them, she explained. She even went so far as to cover their short hair with caps.
As she had told him, Kirwayne proved to be easy to work with. In between deliveries, he took the time to further explain life on the *Wild Karrde*.

“When the Boss is away, Jade is in charge.” He said blankly, as he checked the next scheduled arrival. “When she’s off duty, then Aves is in charge.”

“He been on night shifts lately…I think it’s because when he took them from Jade, it means he gets to spend time with her assistant, Nagreen.” Kirwayne said. He looked at the other two men. “Nagreen is also in charge of pay vouchers, and you’ll meet her before you depart.”

Luke looked over at Wes, and then back at Kirwayne. “We’re getting paid?” He asked.

“Oh yeah.” Kirwayne looked up from his data pad. “Jade thinks of everything. She didn’t want anything out of the ordinary for you guys. And it will come in handy when we dock at Null…that place is amazing.” He smiled as young man would who knew that he was about to be let loose in a haven of the underworld. “We’ll be there for more than half a rotation…it’s kind of like ‘shore leave’ for some of us.”

Wes suddenly got the same gleam in his eye as Kirwayne. The other Rogue turned to look at his Lieutenant’s frown.

“We’re still on duty.” Luke murmured, but not harshly so. Wes and the rest of the Rogues had been cooped up on the *Liberty* for far too long. So giving the other pilot a gentle reminder not to live up to their reputation would be a good thing.

The next delivery came in, and went just as smoothly as the others before it.

Kirwayne remarked that they had become the fastest team that he had seen in a long time, and if their current positions didn’t work out, they would be welcome back at any time.

They were even ahead of schedule for midday meal. Mara had left instructions that meals were to be brought to them, and not eating in the mess hall. There was too much of a chance that they would be recognized by crews that merely passing by, and the *Wild Karrde*’s other crew members that weren’t familiar with them.

In the afternoon, they got so far ahead of schedule that they started taking even unscheduled stops; other ships were re-routed to their hull for unloading.

“We better stop this.” Kirwayne said after the last freighter depart. “We’re going to make others look bad.”

Wes seemed to consider it. “So what do you normally do in between each load?”

Luke leaned on the wall of the hull and listened, taking a chance to rest for a bit, and drinking some water.

“Well…” Kirwayne looked nervous as his eyes flickered over to Luke; he knew that the Jedi and the Boss’s second in command were close.

“I won’t tell.” Luke said simply. It was amusing to get other’s perceptions of the woman he loved. If they only knew how gentle she was behind closed doors.

The loading clerk smiled and nodded in the direction of a table and set of chairs. “I like to practice my Sabaac skills.” He removed a deck of cards from his jacket pocket. “Aves usually runs a game when he’s on night shifts at the helm…Jade doesn’t know about it.”
“I think she does.” Luke said, smirking. “She knows everything…trust me.”

“Does she know how bad you are at cards?” Wes asked, beaming, knowing that he took many credits off the Jedi.

Kirwayne brightened up when he realized that he didn’t need to be so guarded around them, knowing what he said and did wasn’t going to get back to Mara.

“Yes, she knows that too.” Luke responded, as he motioned in the direction of the table.

Kirwayne started shuffling the deck. “What do you want to play for?” He asked amused that he was going to be playing with two of the most seasoned fighter pilots in the galaxy.

They decided that they would play for stories, rather than anything of monetary value.

The Rogues shared stories of their escapades, and Kirwayne shared his tales of the smugglers life. It turns out that Kirwayne joined Karrde’s group when they were on Dantooine, and this was his first time off-world so it was good that he lost more hands than he won.

The game was played until the next shipment arrived.

Later in the afternoon, Ghent arrived at the hull. He seemed eager to see Luke again, and took the opportunity to tell him about his chance to become part of the crew of the Millennium Falcon, smiling as he did so.

He had come down for two reasons; first to check the upload connections in hull eight. He had been receiving a great deal of information and was surprised by the mass that had accumulated.

Kirwayne assured him that it was simply because his team of loaders were so efficient, and they had more shipments processed than what was initially scheduled.

Luke and Wes chuckled at the notion, but didn’t brush it off either.

The second reason Ghent had come down was to deliver a scrubbed data pad to Luke and Wes. “Jade said you would need it to make your report.” He looked between the two men.

Staring at Luke, Ghent said, “I’ll have your R2 unit encrypt it before we send it. There will be no trace of where we’ll be sending it from either, but it will get to the Liberty before you do.”

She really did think of everything, Luke thought. Mara knew protocol and knew that they would have to submit a mission report. Rather than wait until they returned, when details might be lost, she was giving them an opportunity to inform their commanders of their whereabouts as well.

Kirwayne noticed that she had put in an hour for it on his schedule, he mentioned, surprised. He followed Ghent back to the helm, giving the Rogues time to file their report.

Even Wes was a little taken back. “She sure knows her stuff, Boss.” He mumbled over to Luke.

The Jedi just nodded, and began the report.

When the hour was over Kirwayne returned with a smile of his face, and invitation for both of them to join Aves’s game for the night.

Luke declined, but Wes jumped at the chance.

Now that the day was over, Luke was glad to be back at Mara’s cabin.
The door slid open quickly for him, and he was greeted by his trusty astromech.

Artoo’s dome twirled excitedly to see his master.

“Yes, Artoo, I’m fine…Mara made sure of it. Have you been busy all day? I heard you help Ghent encrypt a message for us?”

The droid beeped and blurted several times.

Luke looked around as he listened. He was covered in grime from lifting all day, and decided not to sit down on any of her furniture. Instead, he decided to strip out of the coveralls and changed into something else.

He turned his attention back to his little friend. “Hey buddy, in case I didn’t say it before…thank you for finding Mara…the both of you saved our lives.”

Artoo trilled again and rolled over to Mara’s audio player, and extended his arm, pressing a few buttons. The sounds of the electronic symphony played in the room, and the droid rocked back and forth to the sounds joyously.

“She gave you more music to listen to?” Luke chuckled, amused that it was all the droid wanted as a reward.

The room was about half the size of his shared cabin on the Liberty, but everything was well-placed and appointed as he assumed it would be for her.

She had images from other worlds; Luke saw several pictures of mountain tops, and recognize the view from the palace on Coruscant. He smiled.

The book collection in corner varied in selection, ranging in topics from fine art to advance engine repair.

He was learning more about her on this trip; that’s for sure. Sometimes he was positive that she still kept her true self hidden from him, not out malice, but out of simple self-preservation, and that she didn’t like being exposed.

Sighing, he dropped the coveralls off, and made his way to the ‘fresher.

Looking into the mirror, not seeing himself; the nearly shaved head, and short grating hairs on his face. He rubbed the stubble, and knew that she hated it.

He turned his head to the side, and peeled off the bacta patches on his neck that were still too itchy. Underneath, the skin looked a little red, but otherwise healed.

He went back into the main room and found his shaving kit in his storage unit and returned to the ‘fresher. The one thing that he could do for her was to remove what annoyed her.

She probably was glad to have you safe and didn’t care enough to mention it, he thought as he rubbed the lather on his cheeks.

When he was done, he examined each side of his face to see if it would meet with her standards.

Now, to make the rest of him more-human and not smelling like a sweaty Tauntaun. He rubbed the dry cleanser over his body and head, remembering from the night before, and the luxury of a water shower.
Even life on the Liberty didn’t afford having one of those; Karrde did provide for his team.

He stepped into the shower stall and pressed the buttons for the sonic cleaning. The warm air rushed at him, and he moved around, making sure it got him from all angles, blowing off the cleanser and the dirty that came with it.

Stepping out the stall, he felt more-revived and more like himself. As an extra touch, he took out some of the cologne that Leia had purchased for him, when she told him that gentlemen use it, and slapped it on his chest.

Luke walked back into the main room, and went back to his storage unit to look for something to wear for the evening. Chances were good that he wouldn’t be roaming the freighter, but he still wanted to look good for her.

Rummaging through his storage unit, his hand stopped when he felt the flimsy edges of the packets from his father’s estates.

Luke pulled them out, and frowned, looking at them. Anakin’s packet as already opened and he had read it over several times now; going into detail and reading all the material that he had skipped over before.

Vader’s estate documents still remained sealed.

He sighed and placed them on top of his storage unit, supposing that he would want to share the holo images and details of Anakin’s life with Mara at some point during his stay.

He selected a simple dark blue tunic and his favourite brown pants. Once more he went into the ‘fresher to make sure he looked alright, getting unnecessarily nervous to see her.

She must have sensed it. <<I’m on my way…jittery Jedi.>> She sent across.

Luke smiled with the touch of her mind.

He heard the swoosh from the other room as the door opened. “Honey, I’m home.” She called sarcastically to him.

Coming out to join her, he could see that she was distracted by reading her data pad; she looked up and over to him, her green eyes lit up and shone brightly for him.

His grin grew broader as he came close to her, with one thing on his mind.

Data pad forgotten, Mara slid her arms around his neck and took the chance to feel his lips on hers again.

Her lips pressed hotly on him. <<I missed you today>> She let her tongue entered his mouth, and he hummed as his body responded as a starving man would.

<I missed you too. > He confessed as his hands started their exploration of her.

Mara pulled back and looked at him incredulously. “I haven’t been gone all that long.” She looked down at their bodies pressed together, and back up at his face, seeking some explanation for his sudden hardness pressed on her.

Luke let out a long hard breath, regaining control on his body, and he blushed. “Sorry.” He mumbled, pulling back from her. “It’s the side effects of coming off the meds...” It was clearly
something he was not proud of. “I can’t control it.” He grumbled under his breath.

He hoped that this wouldn’t happen. She didn’t need him dry-humping her or his involuntary hard-on reminding them that they had to refrain for a bit longer until they found another method of birth control.

She smirked, amused. “I’m flattered, actually.” She blushed for him, but came close to him, and kissed the side of his clean face, rubbing the soft skin against her cheek.

<<We can…if you want…>> she sent over seductively. <<They say it’s the safest time to come together…plus it’s supposed to help with cramps…that is, if you’re okay with it?>>

He turned his head to be met with her darkened eyes. “Are you sure?” He asked quietly, not wanting to rush anything on her.

“Only if you are.” She whispered back, taking a chance to nip at his lips. Then her body decided to reprimand her for wanting him.

As their skin was touching, he could feel a sharp twinge of pain coming through her, and he winced for her.

“I guess your body says ‘no’, then?” He asked, as he switched to hugging her against his chest.

Maras pouted and sighed, “It has the worst sense of humor…worse than the Force.”

Luke snorted into her hair. “Yes, the Force is not known for its ability to make people laugh.” He just held her for a few more moments. “So we’ll find something else to do tonight?”

She sighed and let him go. “I supposed so.” She grumbled and backed away to place her data pad on her desk and went to her own storage unit.

“I see you’ve had time to shower and change since coming in.” Mara looked over at him, appreciating the effort he made.

Luke decided a safe distance would be across the room, on her bunk while she made herself comfortable. “Us hard working-men take the breaks where we can find them.” He said dryly.

“So I’ve heard.” She said from over her shoulder. “There was one loader team who got quite high praise from some of the crews today…and although Kirwayne is on track for his bonus, I need you to quit it. You and Wes are getting noticed. So to keep that from happening for another day, I’m going to shift your duties to the maintenance crew.”

He smiled, and slightly cringing at the same time. He really didn’t mean to cause her more trouble.

“I figure if I let you play with some of our toys, that you can’t do too much damage.” Mara pulled out some clothes, and walked over to him.

She handed him her data pad. “Please say you won’t burn us down, and you won’t over tweak anything, and I’ll be happy.”

Luke looked down at the data pad.

“It’s for you to order dinner for us…one of the servo droids will bring it here.” She explained. “Kirwayne is eating in Wes’s quarters tonight…and of course he’s trying to hide that he has the intentions of joining Aves’s Sabaac game tonight.”
He chuckled. “I told Kirwayne that you knew about those.”

“Of course I do…why do you think I let it happen?” She leaned in for a safe kiss. “The deal is; end it early, keep it friendly-no high stakes, and don’t let it be too widely known.”

Luke looked back at the data pad, reading the details. “You have quite the selection of food for a freighter.”

Mara was about to make her way into the ‘fresher. “Karrde sometimes entertains clients on board so we have to be prepared. Besides, the freighter crews like to stop to get a warm meal—it keeps hostilities down.” She turned and walked into the smaller room.

Luke could hear the sonic shower start to run, and promptly ordered dinner for both of them. So we’re having that night-in of dinner and holo that we always keep promising, he thought. How very normal of us.

Moments passed and she came out, looking fresh; the cleanser had softened her hair, and the short locks were starting to form gentle curls.

A simple tunic and loose pants made her looked relaxed.

“Did you pick something good?” She asked, eying him as she put away some of her supplies. “The Effar steaks, I heard, were good…I haven’t tried them yet.”

Luke sat up in her bunk watching her. “Then I made the right choice.”

Mara smirked as she sat down at her desk, and opened her console. “There was something that I forgot to do today…it won’t take more than a minute to send myself a reminder for tomorrow.”

“Actually I was very surprised today how everything ran.” Luke mumbled. “I always got the opinion from Han that smuggling was such a rag-tag operation…your operation runs so much more like a shipping business that I doubt anyone would know the difference.”

“The Traders Guild knows.” She snorted. “and Solo was what we call an ‘independent’; he saw the supplier and the end-user…plus, he was running Spice for Jabba the Hutt, so his smuggling career was more-risky than most.”

She turned her chair towards him. “That’s where it comes from…the “lifestyle”… the riskier the shipment, the more reward at the end. The things that Karrde carries are neither contraband nor risky…for the most part, but they can be on certain worlds. For example, Hapan silk…not risky, not protected, but sought after on the other side of the galaxy.”

Mara turned back to her console. “We delivered a set of blaster parts to a group of freedom fighters who were defending their land…they had credits so we sold what they wanted to them. Was it illegal?- yes, on their world it was, but would it been illegal on other worlds?- no, it would have been fine.”

“We’re the negotiators, the middlemen…our suppliers don’t know who the end-user will be, and the end-user doesn’t ask how it came into our hands.” She typed a few words. “That’s how both sides like it, and in the process, we make a profit.”

“If I had my way…that’s what I’d be doing…” She murmured as she worked. “I’d have my own freighter and buy and sell my own goods that I wanted to transport…making my own way…seeing other worlds.”
Luke sat up and listened. “I didn’t know that’s what you wanted to do…why didn’t you tell me?”

She stopped what she was doing and looked at him, realising what she had just said. “It was a pipe dream…it was never going to happen.” She shook her head.

“We could make it happen, Mara.” He said. “You could have a shipping business…it would be a good way for me to meet and see other Force-users.” He paused. “Would Karrde let you do it?”

“I’m not under contract to him.” She said quietly, considering what he was saying.

But then Luke could feel it, a twinge of guilt coming off of her; she felt a duty to stay with Karrde, and didn’t want to leave him just yet.

He came from off the bunk to stand by her. “Hey, if and when you’re ready…let’s talk about it. I’d support you if you wanted to do it.”

“What about the Jedi Academy?” she asked, looking into his eyes. “That’s your dream.”

Luke nodded, and turned back to lean on the edge of the bunk. “I don’t seem to have very many students right now…it might take a while to get started…longer than I hoped for.” He rubbed his head. “And from what I spoke to Lor San Tekka about, and others, I get the sense that having one central location for Jedi isn’t enough. They shouldn’t be tied to a school, or a place, or a world…they should be back with their people, or on other worlds, helping other people…and not just on-demand warriors.”

He looked back at her. “So travelling around with a very attractive trader would suit me just fine.” He smiled. <We could make it work.>

“Did anyone ever tell you that you’re too damn optimistic sometimes?” She mock-growled.

He chuckled. “All the time…all the time.”

Her door signal buzzed and Mara got up from her desk. “Don’t think the day won’t come when you won’t have any students…someday you’ll have so many that you won’t know what to do with them.”

She opened the door and the servo droid rolled in with the trays. It was then that Artoo took the opportunity to come forward and bleeped a greeting to the other droid, extending his arms to lift the current tray, taking it over to another shelf area.

The servo droid left and Artoo chirped at both of them. Mara walked by and patted his dome. “Thank Artoo.” She said under her breath, still feeling strange talking to a droid the same way that he does.

“I know that I’ll have students soon.” Luke came over to her and the tray. “I’ve felt them.”

She looked over at him curiously. “You’ve felt them?” She asked.

He came in for a quick kiss, and then took a plate from her. “Yes…they feel like little ‘pops’ in my senses during the day…I had started to ignore them, but after talking with San Tekka, I can’t anymore.”

Mara’s eyes got wide, and her mouth dropped open. “Is that what those ‘ticks’ are?”

“You feel them as ‘ticks’?” He asked.
“Just like tiny prickles on my skin…sometimes three or four times a day.” She explained.

Luke smiled. “Yes, those are new Force-users…being born.”

Her eyes blinked rapidly. “But there’s others…”

He nodded. “The stronger senses? – yes…San Tekka called them ‘awakenings’…I think he meant that it was the first time someone was using their Force-gifts.” He sat back down on the edge of the bunk and balanced his plate on the nearby table. Her cabin wasn’t designed for an eat-in experience.

“C’Boath had said that he could feel you when you used your gifts.” He said quietly. It was coming up on almost two years since he had encountered the insane Jedi clone, and he could still remember every chilling moment.

Mara turned her head away, surprised that she was truly having a greater connection to the Force since she had met Luke. “It feels like something touches my arm…like sweep, and then it’s gone, when it happens.”

Luke snorted. “For me -it feels like a tap at my shoulder and then a crawl up the back of my neck.”

And before he could add it, she said, “It’s happening more often.”

“I’ve noticed that too.” He picked at the food on the plate. “I guess that means it’s time for me to start a Jedi Academy.” He mumbled.

She pulled her chair up to the same table he was using and put her plate down beside him. “I guess so…they will need a teacher.” She took a bite and swallowed. “You should have them come to you.” She decided.

Luke looked at her as he chewed and thought about what she was saying.

“It’s should never be the teacher who picks his pupils…they have to have the want to come and learn…and there’s no better way to show their desire to learn then for them to come and find you.” Mara explained. “You said that you didn’t think that children should be taken away from their parents and made to train just because they have the gifts. If the child asked to come and study with you…that would be different. If they have the ability to ask, then they should have the maturity to want to pursue the study.”

She took another bite, chewed and swallowed. “You didn’t ask me to come and learn from you…you waited until I wanted to know something.” She took a sip of her water. “You didn’t force Corran to pick up his skills- you waited until he had the questions.”

Luke narrowed his eyes at her. “You are so smart…I really wish you were around more often…I miss your insight.” He smiled. “You have this way about thinking about things that I don’t…See? I kept wondering how I was going to get students, and feeling bad that I hadn’t taken any action…and you just solved it.”

He reached his hand over and placed it on top of hers. “You really do complete my missing parts-you know this right?” <And I’m so grateful to have you.>

She smiled, and then blushed, looking away, feeling too many things at one time. <<You fix me too.>> She couldn’t look at him right then, it was getting to be too much. <<You make me feel things that I wouldn’t have thought possible. I think more emotionally with you then I do by myself.>>
He could feel her getting choked up, and it was the last thing he wanted. Time to change the tone.

Luke waited by taking another mouthful of food and swallowing it down before changing the topic. “Artoo really like the music that you keep picking for him. He was playing another electronic symphony that you had.”

Mara brightened up and looked over at the resting droid. “He sure has a lot of personality…I’ve never heard of an astromech droid being so animated. Has he always been like that?”

“Since I got him.” Luke smiled. “Sometimes I think of him a pet and then other times as a friend. He been around when I haven’t had another living person with me, that he keeps me company.”

He took the finishing bite of his food. “Plus, I hadn’t had his memory wiped, so he knows more about me than most people do.”

“You’ve never had his memory wiped?” She huffed. “Well that explains most of his attitude…that model of droid was pre-dispositioned to mimicking behavior…no wonder he can be a bit uppity.”

“You think I’m uppity?” He asked, smirking, as he watched her push the food around on her plate; a sign that she was done.

She watched as he took the plate from in front of her. “No…I would say that you’re more ‘quirky’.”

“Quirky?” He frowned from over his shoulder as he placed the plates back on the tray, and brought back the water cask.

“Different…unique.” Mara smiled.

Luke came back to the edge of the bunk. “Well, you’re odd and eclectic…so there.” He stuck out his tongue a bit at her.

She laughed; full out laughed at him. Still smiling, she looked up at him. “I love you.” Her brow pinched together slightly; still not believing that she was saying that to him.

He smiled back, and leaned forward, whispering, “I love you too.” He kissed her gently, and then just looking at her, amazed that she was even with him.

*I think in the beginning, she was quite reluctant to your training, and her feelings for you... And she must have had a severe loathing for you... sending her life into chaos. Imperials, or former Imperials, don’t do well without order in their lives.*

San Tekka’s words came back to him again, and he shook his head trying to get the voice from his mind.

Yes, Mara had overcome so much to feel the way that she did about him—something that he had to remind himself not to take for granted.

Then suddenly Luke leaned in again, slipping his hand into her hair and holding her lips to his. <**Stars,** do you know how much I really love you?>

Pulling back from his kiss, she looked dazed. “I think I do…” She whispered.

Luke placed his lips to her again, not wanting to let her go.

“I know you do.” Mara murmured between their lips. She could sense it in him, something had gotten serious in his mind.
Sitting back, she watched him carefully. His blues eyes were crystal clear, and intense. She knew that when they looked like that, he had something else on his mind.

Unlike him, she didn’t feel the need to go charging off into situations; she would rather wait them out until she had a better vantage point. But now, he was playing his cards close to his chest.

Mara turned to retrieve her data pad. “So what do you want to do tonight?” She asked, gently prodding an answer from him, to ascertain where his mind had went.

Normally his senses were an open book, but she could feel that book start to close, and recoil.

Luke swallowed. “I want to ask you for something, and I don’t know how to do it.” He said without any pre-amble.

She simply nodded and waited for him.

“I haven’t wanted to do it since they arrived…but you have perspective that I just don’t have sometimes.” He paused. “Would you stay with me while I open Vader’s estate?” He asked, as he knew he needed her for her strength to get through it.

Mara sat up straight in her chair. “You want me to be here when you read it? – you don’t want to be alone?” She was surprised. “It just seems like an extremely personal thing… don’t you want to share this with Leia?”

Luke leaned back on her headboard. “Leia wants nothing to do with it. She never has.” He sighed. “I don’t blame her.”

Her eyes went wide and then she nodded her head. “If you need me to be here…I’m here for you.”

He moved from off the bunk and touched her shoulder as he walked passed her to his storage unit and retrieved the packet.

Coming back, he sighed as he sat back on the bunk, with the wrapped packet in his hands. He turned it around in his hands, waiting.

Mara sensed that he needed her closer to him; she got off from her seat and joined him. She sat back up on the bunk and crossed her legs, so that she be close to him, and offer what support she could.

“Do you want me to be pragmatic?” She asked.

Luke looked up at her as an alternative from staring at the packet in his hands; he raised an eyebrow, wanting to hear her idea.

“You don’t have to open it.” She said simply. “It can stay the way it is right now…and right now, it’s nothing, just filmsey…it doesn’t mean anything.” She swallowed. “We can burn it in the reactor, and you would never have to know what’s in it….That’s the first option.”

He grinned tightly; considering, but then shook his head. “You know that isn’t a choice.”

<<I wouldn’t think any less of you if you did it.>> She sent over to him.

“No, I have to do this.” He said with sudden conviction, and tore off the seal as he exhaled deeply.

Mara touched his leg, as he paused after that one motion.

<That felt strangely satisfying.> He commented.
Luke closed his eyes as he tipped the packet over and let the documents drop into his hands; they felt heavier out of the packet than they did when they were in it.

Three small holo disks fell to the side, and Mara reached over and picked them up. Holding them loosely in her hands.

He opened the large document, and his eyes darted over the first page, seeing all the legal stamps on it, but not seeing any of the words.

Having been through Anakin’s estate, he knew what to expect; most of the pages were not about the actual estate at all, but rather the legal arguments in order to release it him.

His eyes caught his own name several times, calling him “the petitioner”. Flipping to the next page, he read more of the issues with the actual estate.

The estate had been left without an executor, which made Luke scoff sarcastically, knowing the name of the Super Star Destroyer that was last at the command of Vader.

It was left in probate since the death of Darth Vader had been confirmed, even though a named heir was in place on the documents.

Luke flipped forward a few more pages, as it was being determined what property the estate could still claim a right to, as reclamation rights were being questioned on some of the larger parts. The courts wanted to make sure that certain things were returned to the proper parties, and Luke had no intention of contesting their decisions.

Mara inched closer to him as she felt his frustration at reading through the legal manoeuvering and minutia.

Unlike Anakin’s estate, being full of details of his life, Vader’s estate was nothing but property- it was merely static possessions with no feelings, and the arguing to get those pieces of property.

In impatience, Luke dropped the document beside him, flushed with irritation. “It’s just arguing … over…stuff.” He said, annoyed. “I don’t even know what they’re arguing over.”

He looked into her eyes, and saw only concern for him.

“Do you want me to look it?” Timidly, she asked, but knew he would refuse.

His emotions were erratic; the build-up to this moment was letting him down. Mara could feel his disappointment; he was expecting to find all the answers to the other half of his father, and he was finding nothing.

Luke picked it up again, shaking his head, and flipped back through the pages as he tried again.

Mara shifted her position and came to sit beside him on the headboard, looking over his shoulder as he read. This seemed to relax him and he leaned into her shoulder, letting her look.

She wasn’t a lawyer, and it looked like a good deal of the estate went back to some of the original owners.

She pointed when she saw something of interest; he narrowed his gaze at where she had indicated.

“See?” she said with a tight smile; her finger followed the lines on the document. “They got their world back.. the Noghri get their world back…Honoghr goes back to the ownership of the clan
elders.” Mara turned to look at him. “They will be able to represent themselves in the New Republic.”

She looked back at the document; she could sense that he was just watching her. “And Ziost too…it goes back to the governing body there.”

“These are all good things.” She said in a whisper, but didn’t sense a change in his melancholy spirit.

Mara looked at him, seeing it neither pleased nor displeased him; Luke sighed, and went back to the document.

He saw the tab sticking out from the last few pages, and knew what it meant. It would be a tally of the remaining items in the estate.

His thumb rested on the tab before he flipped to those pages.

He exhaled, closed his eyes, and flipped to the pages.

Slowly, Luke opened his eyes, and looked down.

Mara sat back, waiting for his reaction; this moment was more-personal than it had been so far.

His eyes went wide, and he looked up and then immediately looked back down. His eyes moved rapidly, paused, went back to the top of the page, and rapidly went through the page.

He closed the page and placed the document on his lap.

She didn’t dare ask, but she very badly wanted to.

“The estate…” He said quietly, “..is rich….very rich.”

Luke shook his head. “I don’t know how much five hundred million Imperial credits are worth in Republic currency, but it seems like a lot.” He breathed heavy.

“It’s mine.” He whispered.

“I don’t want it.” He said immediately, almost inaudibly.

He was numb, and not feeling shock, or anger, or anything. He knew he had to go on; he was only at the first page of the property details and there looked like there were more to come.

Looking out, he slid the paperwork over to her.

Mara swallowed and picked up the filmsy. She went to the pages where the tab started.

Luke was right. There was over five hundred million Imperial credits in the Grand Republic Bank waiting in trust for him on Coruscant.

It wouldn’t have been unusual for Vader to accumulate such wealth; his personal expenses weren’t extravagant as the Emperor’s were. There were no grand palaces to maintain, no staff to pay for, and Vader never needed to buy influence; he was never making a power play.

She flipped to the next page and read some of the details there. Most of the planets that were in his control had gone back to their owners; the planets were no longer under Imperial punishment by Lord Vader.
Only three planets remained under his control.

Mara looked down at the disks now in her lap, and then she looked over to Luke; his eyes had gone blank, and she could sense that he was lost.

<<Luke…>> She called to him delicately.

Gently, she touched his arm, hoping to bring him back from where he was.

He turned his head to look over to her; she gave him a tight smile, and handed over the disks.

“They’re all that’s left…and the credits.” She said quietly.

Luke looked down, and picked up the first disk. He thumbed it on, and a planet appeared, floating above the read out.

It was an official deed to the planet.

“Vjun.” Mara hissed and shook her head.

He looked over to her; seeking more answers.

She sighed. “Bast Castle is on the planet. Vader claimed it as his primary residence but it was nothing more than a trap…it’s empty, with the exception of all the death traps.”

Mara shifted her position, to touch him a bit more; feeling cold.

“It has acid rain, and most space-crafts can’t land there.” She mumbled.

He closed the image and picked up another disk.

Flicking the next image to life; a class five planet floated before him.


She rubbed his shoulder, feeling hopeful. “I haven’t either…but look at the details…breathable air, large grass lands, varying climate…it looks very pleasant.”

Mara gazed again, looking for the location. “…And look! It’s on the Outer Rim, by Dantooine, and has a small human population.”

He forced a smile for her, but that turned into a frown. “I wonder how he got it.” Luke murmured.

“Does it matter?” She asked.

“It does.” He sighed, and then shook his head. “…maybe not.”

Mara flipped back through the pages to see if she could find anything about the planet. Luke just stared at the hovering image.

Her senses flinched and Luke turned to her, drawing his attention away from the planet that he now owned.

“He bought it.” Mara murmured. “Bought it after Hoth…and before Endor…in your name, not in his own.”

Luke’s eyes met hers, pondering what this could mean. He swallowed; his father was gifting him a
He knew what it felt like, but he didn’t want to say it out loud.

She caught it, fleeting across his senses, almost hearing the words from him. “What is it?” She asked hesitantly.


At that time, he had been recovering from his latest row with the Dark Lord, and his right hand flexed with the memory.

Closing the disk and tossing it aside; he picked up the next one.

Luke looked over to her before he opened it.

Mara watched his face; this was bringing him no joy to open these documents and deeds. He would have rather thrown it in the reactor as she had suggested.

She almost knew what to expect; she hadn’t seen the planet’s name on any another documents until now.

Luke’s thumb moved, and the holo-doc came to life. Floating above the small disk, was the red planet; Mustafar.

She relaxed her shoulders, maybe she was expecting this, but he wasn’t; he body stiffened as he read the details. The planet, and fortress was his.

“You’ve been there right?” He asked solemnly. “If you had to go back, you’d know how to get there?”

“Yes.” She answered slowly.

Luke closed the disk, reached over to take her hand, and sat silently.

Mara didn’t move a muscle, and waited. He had never been good at shielding to her, but now, she couldn’t read him, one way or another.

He looked away, and then down at the disks.

“You know, Ben Kenobi talked, in his journal, how Darth Vader was born on Mustafar… ‘from out of the ash and iron’…” He said finally. “Why would he choose to make his home there?”

“He didn’t.” Mara spoke. “It chose him… I don’t know for sure, but maybe he was ordered to reside there. It would be a very Palpatine-thing for Him to do.”

Luke looked over at her.

“To keep Vader close to a source of his pain… a reminder… a torture for him.” She said quietly.

She felt it; a dark veil coming on him.

“A cage.” He growled. Luke swung his legs off the bunk and pushed himself away from her, only pace about the floor.

Mara felt the anger boiling in him, and she knew she had to diffuse it. She decided to keep him
talking and not let it sit internally. “What did you expect to find in these documents, Luke?”

“I don’t know.” He grumbled as he paced in the small space. “I wanted… something.”

“What?”

He started breathing hard. “…Answers.”

“Like what?”


“What made him a monster?” He asked in anguish.

“Why do you have to know?” Mara asked, feeling his pain.

He turned to her without thinking; his face twisted over all the different things he was feeling. “I came from a monster… what if I am the monster?” He growled unexpectedly.

Shocked, she wanted to go to him. She opened her mouth to refute it, and her body moved towards him; to stop his pacing, to stop his train of thought.

Coming in front of him, she held him at his shoulders, and looking directly into his eyes. “Luke, you are not your father… you never have been… you will never be him.”

“I love you.” She said strongly.

“My mother loved him.” He countered. “And her love didn’t save him.”

“You are not your father.” She said again with conviction. “I don’t love a monster – I love you.”

Luke stopped and finally saw her aggressive stare, breaking through his haze of resentment towards his father and himself.

His face softened, seeing her, concerned for him, and still loving him, regardless of where he came from.

“You do, don’t you?” He asked, feeling the tension leaving him. He rolled his eyes, and called on the calm and peace that only the Force could give him.

Mara sensed it and relaxed, and pulled him to her; she held him. <<Of course I do.>>

She guided him to come and sit back on the bunk.

He came willingly, realising that he was hurting her by his self-pity.

Mara placed herself beside him, wrapping her arms around his mid-section.

Luke leaned over and placed his lips to hers; feeling the electricity exchange between them. He wanted to feel it more… he just wanted to feel anything other what he had been feeling up until this point.

He pulled her closer to him, and was surprised that as they kissed, Mara’s hands had slipped under his shirt, her hands slid over the skin on his chest and sides; he could feel her desire for him.
She was the first to break the kiss but stay nuzzled closed to his face. <<I love all of you.>> She tenderly thought to him.

Her fingers came up and traced the available skin on his neck where he hadn’t been burned. <<I love this part… when you’re straining to do something, it stretches smoothly and sleekly.>> She pressed her lips against the heightened skin, and little dimples appeared down his neck to his shoulder tip.

Her hand, under his tunic, lifted the fabric and slipped it off over his head.

Under her spell he just watched her glowing eyes, vibrant and alive. Her eyes closed slowly; her lashes fluttered.

Mara moved so that she was sitting behind him now, and he felt disappointed that he couldn’t watch her, but her hands kept constant touch on his skin.

Her hands moved to his shoulders, and she began to rub the tight muscles, rubbing away the stress, rubbing away the tension; he closed his eyes. He winced but then relaxed as her touch felt soothing.

<<These shoulders carry so much on them.>>

He jumped a little when she placed her lips against the skin between his shoulder blades. The heat and the thrill to have her just touching him was driving him wild.

Mara dragged her lips along his skin, going to one shoulder, and then to the next, only to kiss the tips as her hands massaged the flesh.

She pressed her lips against the back of his neck and her hands slid down his arms, rubbing the tired muscles as they went.

His biceps flexed as she caressed his upper arm.

<<These arms were meant for holding me, and I adore them… I feel safe, and loved when I’m in them.>>

Her hand travelled back up his arms, still kissing the back of his neck; he dropped his head to his chest to accommodate her, absolutely enraptured in what he was feeling.

The soft tips of her fingers came around to his front and traced his collar bone; her fingers spread out and started to work the muscles on his chest, as she continued to kiss the back his neck.

His hand came up and held one of her hands. <You don’t have to do this for me.> He thought over to her.

<<I’m not doing this for just you, Luke… I want you… I always want you.>> She kissed his skin deeper. <<I’m doing this for me… I crave you.>> Her voice was deep and husky in his mind.

He released her hand and let her continue. Closing his eyes, clenching them shut, and just feeling her.

<<Do you want to know the first time that I wanted you?… that I caught myself, thinking about touching you, and being with you?>> her voice purred in his mind, playfully.

He shook his head, but desperately wanting to hear; he always felt so alone in his pursuit of her that he didn’t think there was a time she could have wanted him.

“Wayland” she hissed in his ear. He raised an eyebrow without looking up, surprised.
Her breath was hot on his skin. “You were changing your clothes one morning…in a clearing…in the thicket…and I saw you…”

She pushed her chest up against his back, wanting to be closer to him.

“Your shirt was off, and I saw your tanned skin…and the lean curve of the muscles on your chest.” She lisped perfectly close to him. Just for emphasis, she stroked the skin she was talking about; sending him the images of what she saw that day.

<<I wanted you.>> She clipped one of his nipples, and he didn’t flinch but gave in to the jolt.

She moved around and came to his side again; he looked up.

“Did you know?” Her eyes were dark and beguiling, and her mouth pouted, waiting.

He was mesmerized, and shook his head slowly.

Locked on his eyes, she slowly came forward and kissed his shoulder, just once.

He saw the corners of her mouth moisten.

Once more she came close and gently nipped at his skin, and then pulled away, with a momentary bite of her own bottom lip which dissolved into an impish grin.

Her hands wrapped around him to his back; graceful fingertips traced up his skin, and cruel nails contrived to drag down his back.

“I wanted you so very badly then…” She whispered. “Denied myself…I don’t know why.” The words rushed out of her mouth.

He leaned in to capture her lips, trying to wrap his arms around her, and she pulled away.

She gave him a mock-glare, and her features pinched, reminding him of their time in a forest together. “Oh No…you don’t get to do what you want…it’s me who has the want.” Her voice was deep and sultry.

Her green-jeweled eyes went down his chest and came up. “And what I want is…” Her eyes fluttered and he saw in his mind that she wanted more of his flesh to touch.

Without hesitation, he obliged, slipping off his trousers, but never being very far away from her touch, and came back to the bed.

His body was begging for anything that she would offer; any touch, any stroke…anything, just to be satiated.

And raging for her, beyond being satisfied with just the touch of her eyes and watching him, bellowed his stout erection, fiercely hard to the point of being almost verging on painful.

He leaned in again, trying to be content with just the touch of her lips on his. Centimeters away from her mouth, she simply refused to press her mouth to his, and hovered before his imploring frown.

She reached to touch the feverish skin of his chest.

He witnessed her marvel, with adroit attention, at the tautness of his hot flesh.

This time, it was she who couldn’t resist his mouth, as it had gone slack with panting. Her lips were
firm and deliberately directed the speed and pressure of her mouth; he was a victim, lured in by her and now captured.

Fingertips, and nails twisted his senses as they switched, gliding over his skin.

She hummed contently knowing that she could feel that he was tormented by her provocations.

She sucked air from between their lips, and nipped corner of his mouth as he whimpered; feeling her hands slide down his groin, and ignoring what needed relief.

“Do you know what I want now?” She asked; her cheek rested against his, listening to him swallow hard.

Again he attempted to touch her, and with one hand she pushed it away.

She tisked at him, and now truly mocking. “Naughty boy…who gave you permission?”

He smirked, sensing that she was playing with him but on the edge of that, he caught that she was perfectly serious, so he stopped his pursuit.

“What do you want?” He whispered against her cheek, hoping to arouse her desire to want to be touched.

She vindictively pulled back away from him, and he suddenly felt a shiver, as the heat from her body was removed. He whimpered again.

Moving back to the foot rest, she stayed there, farther than an arm’s reach from him; still watching him like a cat.

She sensed that he was desperately missing her presence.

“Consider that your punishment for not asking first.” She chastised him with a glare.

Instead she turned from him, and lifted the bottom of her tunic, raising it over her head to reveal a simple black brassiere against her silken skin.

She looked over her shoulder to see that her prisoner was still in the chains of his own making, wanting her.

With a roll in his direction and dancer’s grace, she elegantly slid off her bottoms, exposing the black panties that clung to her curvy shape.

His face betrayed that he was willing to grovel for anything from her, but in his senses she knew that he was coming to limit of the antagonizing that he could, and would, take.

His chest heaved, and his gaze darkened as she came back to him, resuming her touch.

The torridity between them was causing her to want to surrender too, and she thought of wavering, allowing his touch. But no…he was hers and hers alone.

She approached him by sliding her hands up his thighs, and she could sense that he felt that he would be denied yet again.

“You had asked me what I wanted?” She questioned, masking her intentions.

He looked away, feeling that he would not be given any reprieve. “Yes, tell me?” He asked,
humbled.

Her fingertips rested at the top of his thighs. “I want to watch you…as I touch you.” She whispered.

Her fingers wrapped around his shaft, and with the first stroke down he moaned loudly, calling out, as his skin was drawn tight, exposing the head of his manhood.

She came in closer, up against his body, flesh on flesh, and one hand slide behind his back, as her chest pushed against his.

Indolently, her other hand, stroked up his rigid lance, and he sucked in air harshly.

“You’re just as hypnotizing to me, as I watch you come, as you think that I am.” Her lips were at his neck.

He tilted his head back with his eyes shut. He could feel the hot breath at his jawline.

Now, her hand began exploiting his desire with its movement.

Up and down his veined scythe, she coaxed his climaxed; varying her speed and pressure.

Teasing, as she tickled the skin with a feathery touch.

Demanded, as she gripped his thickness, feeling the throb under her fingers.

He moaned with every change in sensation; his breathing speeding up, matching the tempo of her enticement.

He began grunt and pine with every stroke.

Now, she added a slight twist in her motions; he shuddered with the new movements.

“Mara!” He moaned again; begging. “Don’t tease me like this.” He appealed.

“Oh, I don’t think I’m teasing you…” She snidely jeered him.

In truth, it was unduly cruel to her, not to be joining her body with his; if anyone was being derided of release it was her.

“What do you want?” She spitefully questioned him.

“To come.” He panted out; his pelvis started to rock with her motions.

She didn’t stop her manual manoeuvres. “What are you waiting for?” She viciously vexed him.

Several more strokes and he managed to utter the word, “Permission.” He exhaled quietly, gulping at air.

Too engrossed by him to notice, she continued with her toying of him, as she watched, truly watched, the control she had over him in that moment. You are mine, she thought to herself.

“Permission granted.” She hissed.

One of his arms came up and gripped her against him, digging his hand into the flesh of her bottom.

He bellowed with his release.
She chose there and then to muffled the sounds by capturing his mouth on hers, pursing wildly against each other.

The searing spurts came from him in shocks until he couldn’t move anymore.

He braced himself with his opposite hand on the wall beside her bunk, on the verge of losing his balance after losing his senses.

He clutched her to him; the hand that was on the wall, left its position to come and cup her cheek keeping her mouth busy with kisses, dipping his tongue between.

She could sense that he was regaining his composure, but it wasn’t fulfilled; it wanted more.

Without warning, he lifted her, almost weightlessly, with strength she knew he had, but rarely displayed. She found herself straddling his leg, with her back against his blazing chest; he had positioned her in this way.

Now, his lips were flaming on her shoulders, dragging across her skin. She felt the tug at the clasp of her brassiere, impatient and hungry, and fabric gave way, dropping to the floor in front of her.

Her hands jumped to cup her exposed breasts; she could feel his intention.


“Shhh…” He hushed her. <I know.>

His hands came over her shoulders and drew her hands away from her proud breasts, resting them on the side of his thighs. <I promise that I won’t hurt you.>

“They’re sensitive.” She blurted out quietly, warning him.

She didn’t see him smirk, but she could hear it in his voice as he whispered in her ear, “I hope so.”

His hands weren’t as toying as she had been; he wanted her release as much as she wanted to have one.

They rounded her hips and slid up her body, cupping each breast.

She turned her face into his neck as he watched over her shoulder.

His perfectly calloused hands made for excellent texture and contrast to her smooth skin. They squeezed and released her rounded mounds and alternated between gentle cupping and forceful pressure.

He moved his hands so that her beautifully aching areoles were between his thumb and forefinger, while the remainder of his fingers kept massaging the under bust.

As he tugged at the tight little tips, she began to pant.

“Turnabout is fair play, Mara.” He growled into her ear.

It was then that she could feel a touch outside her mons, through her panties, but both his hands were occupied.

She gasped when she realized that he was using the Force to bring on her climax.
She could feel a ‘flicking’ at her clit, and with the evoking efforts on her sensitive buds; her mouth dropped open, moaning.

The movement between her legs deepened in pressure, moving more than just the tiny hood, but not penetrating her.

*Give in,* her mind told her. *Give in to him…come for him.*

“You should take your own advice, my little Hell-Kitten.” He baited her, sucking at her neck.

She felt him smile against her skin. “I won’t make you beg…like you did with me…you know I enjoy this too much.”

After a few more moments of astonishing agony.

“Mara?” he said, “You can come when you want to.”

At hearing his words, she held her breath and escaping out in convulsions, shuddering, letting the waves of pleasure ripple over her skin, filling the needs that only he could.

He could tell that she was depleted as she leaned back against his chest. He took one of her limp arms and put in around his neck, and lifted her onto him as he lay back down in the bed.

She stayed like that, crunch up against him; her head in the nook of his arm, resting against his chest, listening to his heart beat.

A hand came up and touched her hair, caressing her jawline.

“I love you for loving me.” He said sweetly. <…when sometimes I can’t love myself.>

She closed her eyes, resting against him, feeling and filling his soul just as he had done with her; making her feel whole when she thought that no one would ever want her. “I’ll always love you Luke.”

TBC
Walls, Weapons and Warriors - Part 6

Chapter Summary

Quote: Considering how many little spats they had in their first year since Wayland, it was surprising to hear that; sometimes they just fought for the sake of fighting without much of anything behind it.


Chapter Notes

**
I got nothing…just plot…pure and simple….

~Sigh~ I guess I could wait around for comments…. ~Sigh~

**

Aboard the freighter, Wild Karrde

Cradling her next to him all night, he didn’t stir while they had slept.

He was quiet all morning; barely saying a word to her, even though he looked at her with love in his eyes. So she knew he wasn’t brooding, just pensive.

Mara watched as he prepared himself for another day of working on the freighter.

Luke took a quick sonic shower and dressed; he quietly asked to see Wes for the morning meal, siting that he had some things to discuss with his fellow Rogue.

She could see that his mind was at work; that he was trying to hide what he was feeling and thinking. He knew he wasn’t very good at keeping anything from her, so he chose to just avoid her, if possible.

She returned the same reserve tone with him.

Before he left, Luke was sure to hold her as he kissed her before leaving. Mara could feel his love wash over her and he didn’t need to say another word on it.

Sometimes, it was better to let him be by himself and let him work out what he needed to than to push the point.

He would come around when he was ready to. On a freighter the size of the Wild Karrde, he had no other choice.

At midday meal, she slipped down to aft section to go see him and Wes.
Now, Ghent was sitting with them, exchanging stories, with a portable comm unit beside him; an array of tools was spread out over the place.

As she checked the work, Ghent assured her with the new by-pass system and wiring that they would be able to run more-efficiently.

“When did you become a mechanic?” She snorted looking at the hacker.

Ghent sheepishly looked down, but still sat visiting.

Mara simply nodded, still watching Luke from the corner of her eye.

She left the area, without another word, after seeing him, smile at her, truly smile; he was still quiet. She walked back to the helm, thinking about him; remembering the first time he came on board the Wild Karrde.

It was less than auspicious; his X-wing was stranded, dead, in space. And she- she sensed him, calling the freighter to a halt, dropping out of hyperspace to find him.

In that very aft section, she was made to work on some mundane task that Karrde had put to her, keeping her away from Skywalker, lest she rip out his eyes when she saw him.

But now, that time seemed so far away.

Dropping down into the pilot’s chair, she glanced at all the read outs but didn’t really see them.

Luke’s behavior was puzzling, but not unexpected, after hearing the information from last night of Darth Vader’s estate. There was a lot to think about.

He certainly didn’t think about the money, Mara reflected. Most men would have thought they had won the lottery and start planning a life unlike their own.

Not Luke, he hated it. To him, it was blood money; earned through lies, deception, torture and misery, and he could take no joy in having it.

The planets… Vjun was a lost cause. Even if he was given it, no one would want it. The life that lived there existed purely on survival.

Ilia was different; it looked like a beautiful place to visit. But Luke once again rejected it, calling it an apology.

It didn’t feel that way to Mara; never in her life did she ever hear Vader give anything like an apology, and she doubted he was capable of it. But to Luke it must have meant something else.

It was Mustafar that Luke responded to. Even before he was granted it, he had expressed interest in visiting the planet.

Mara wrapped her jacket around herself as she sat at the console. The planet may be heated iron ore but the thought of going there, sent a shiver to her.

She gazed out at the star lines going by; her mind going back to a different place and time.

She could hear the clank of her footsteps on the walkway above the molten pit, walking towards him; the smell of the sulfur in the air as she breathed.
“Lord Vader.” She bowed, hiding her impunity, showing respect for the man that she had little respect for.

Was he a man? She asked herself, shielding her thoughts; The Force told her that he was.

His mask hissed; the sounds of his breathing echoed on the walks as the steam rose up to the platform.

“Emperor’s Hand” He addressed her, keeping his distance, and refusing to return the bow. “Your arrival was… unexpected.”

“Our Master sent me to deliver His orders, personally.” She informed him, as she stood in the relaxed military position.

She could feel a twinge of interest in his senses, among his over-powering brooding. Vader never hid his feeling from other sensitives; he preferred to let them know that he hated them openly.

“Yes.” He exhaled.

For some reason, she didn’t fear him, as she rightfully should, and boldly addressed him. “His Imperial Majesty requests that you are to return to The Executor, and rendezvous at the co-ordinates on this data card. There, you shall await His further instructions.”

The card left her hand to fly to his. She didn’t budge; it was something she had come to expect from him.

“And what of the progress of the New Death Star? Has He given you permission to release those details to me?” His voice bounced off every angle in the room.

“Yes Lord Vader.” She answered curtly. “Progress had been delayed, and He is most-unsatisfied.”

The project was months away from completion, if not years. The weapons system was in the process of being installed, and a temporary shielding generator had been put in place to protect the Emperor’s favourite project.

She heard him seethed the name in his mind; Jerjerrod

Glad that Vader now had a source for his displeasure, she felt removed from it.

“And other news from the Empire?”

Sensing that was an order, and not a question, she still paused as not to appear too keen to answer him.

“There are reports of a gathering of various warships outside the Sullust System but those reports have yet to be confirmed, my Lord.” Confidently, she held onto what other details that she knew; that the suspected Jedi Rebel was due to join them soon and his traitorous friends too, no doubt.

She may be a spy and assassin, but she was the Emperor’s spy, not his. If he wanted information, he could call out to his own crew of informants.

Secretly, she knew he had been tracking the Jedi Rebel, almost years in the pursuit of one person, and trying to hide it from the Emperor, wasting resources.

On the verge of treason and he hasn’t a clue, she thought smugly. If I had my way, I’d tail you at every turn, and you’d never get a moment’s rest.
“Your feelings betray you, Emperor’s Hand.” His back was turned to her, and she straightened her posture with his words.

“Your skills in the Force have not prepared you to hide all your thoughts.”

In an instant, his lightsaber appeared in his hand; the hilt preparing to ignite. “If you cross my path… if you dare to interrupt my missions…” His voice boomed without changing in volume. “Then you will know the power of my wrath, young one, and I shall enjoy breaking you.”

Without thinking, she ended her over-confident stance and took a step back.

“Now go… and report to Our Master that I will do as He has bid me.” His voice was monotone with his command.

He did not turn around to see her bow and whisper, “Yes Lord Vader.,” before she made her way back to her ship.

Now, at the helm of the Wild Karrde, she exhaled, releasing those memories.

If she could go back to that moment in time, what would she have told him? – Someday, I’ll love your son…I’ll sleep beside him as he holds me after we’ve made love…. I’ll kiss his lips and let him worship my body… And someday, I might carry the children that will make your legacy….and there’s nothing you can do about it.

Mara blinked a few times, fully waking herself from the past. Even now, she still held no love for the man; she didn’t even have the pity for him that Luke took on. Vader made the world that he lived in. And Luke, she knew, wanted a glimpse into that world.

He was right about one thing; Vader was a monster, and so much more that she hoped he would never know it all.

If Luke had seen some of the things she had seen, then she doubted he would ever feel redeemed. A thousand lifetimes could not make up for Vader’s past.

She sighed; she knew she had to get passed this in order to get through her day.

Knowing that she couldn’t do it at the helm, she looked around the console at the other crew members, and felt confident in their abilities. She got up from the pilot’s chair and left.

It was a short walk to her office, and she could hide in there with very little distraction.

Nagreen looked up from her desk as Mara walked by. She paused at the other’s woman’s station just to retrieve any details that might be outstanding, and chose to sequester herself inside the office.

Karrde had designed it just as he had his other offices. He might like to think that he was unpredictable, but Mara knew otherwise; he liked precision, and familiarity, though he professed otherwise.

She walked over to her desk that sat adjacent to the larger desk console that was center in the room.

The desk was grand and seemed imposing in such a small room, but Mara knew that she would often catch Karrde sitting at her smaller desk off to the side; he claimed it was because he preferred her chair. Mara knew it was because he was uncomfortable with the status message that the large desk gave.
She sat down, agreeing to an invisible Karrde that yes, sometimes familiarity was a good thing; she could rely on her job to keep her mind on other things.

Sighing, she resigned that paperwork wasn’t going to do itself.

By the time she looked up again, it was later into the day, coming up on the evening, and the tedium was almost over.

Mara looked around her console, finishing anything that wasn’t in the queue for the following day.

The hailing codes for the *Pulsar Skate* were already in play. The Null Space Port had already reserved their dock beside the other massive freighter; it would make the transfer of the X-wings less obvious as they were to dock.

MIRRAX’s coded message left Mara with the impression that, although Booster wasn’t thrilled about having other Rogues on board his ship— even in his absence, he would eventually grow to accept it.

The other female smuggler seemed to be excited at the prospect of coming aboard *the Liberty* to deliver the X-wings and their errant pilots.

MIRRAX asked several questions about the quarters, and, did Mara think that she would have enough time to visit with Corran, her husband?

In others words, she was getting excited to see Corran again; it had been far too long since they had seen each. MIRRAX estimated that it had been over two months.

Mara smiled, starting her message back to her associate, and now friend? - As it would seem, the comm unit pinged beside her.

AVES was about to come on the evening shift, so it was no surprise when his voice came over.

“Hey Jade” He sounded sleepy, as if he was just waking up. “I’ve got a Priority 7 for you coming in from the Boss… did you want to take it?”

A personal hailing from KARRDE sounded like an important thing.

“Sure, patch it over, and I’ll pick it up.” Mara glanced at the chrono and tried to figure out what was the time of day where KARRDE was; she knew he was making his way to meet them at Null.

She turned and situated herself in front of the interstellar comm, waiting for the indicator to blink and for KARRDE’s face to appear.

The screen came to life quickly, and he materialized, looking as casual as ever.

These were the type of calls that she wished that she was in the same room with him, so that she could read his feelings. Just like her, he had developed an air that always misdirected his intentions.

“Good Morning Mara.” He said serenely.

“KARRDE.” She grinned back politely, noting the time difference where he must have been.

“I hear we’re doing well on this drive.” KARRDE looked off to the side to retrieve some documents that were just outside the frame of the comm’s camera. “Yesterday looks like it was particularly advantageous… bringing in, and shipping out over one hundred and twenty-five percent?” He raised his eyebrows.
“This wouldn’t have anything to do with the new loaders we’ve seemed to have hired in the past few days?” He asked serendipitously, and knowingly.

He was toying with her; he knew who was on board and why. His smirk told her so.

Mara sat back in her chair, and narrowed her eyes at him, sporting back. “Yes, team one has been working at higher than normal capacity, but I moved them to maintenance. We didn’t want unnecessary attention if we were able to move so much in a short time.”

She knew what she was telling him; if word got out that the *Wild Karrde* had such a quick turnaround, questions would start flying.

Also, smugglers, being a jealous lot, wouldn’t like the idea that Karrde could do more business than anticipated.

He seemed to understand as he nodded approvingly. “Yes… and I’ve made the *special arrangements* that were requested. You have my permission and everything should be ready to go.”

Mara mentally frowned, and then visibly frowned; she hadn’t heard of any other “special arrangements” other than the ones to return Luke and Wes to the *Liberty*.

Karrde must have seen her face, as it was unusual for her to let such a thing slip. “I had a request from a certain party to allow you on a sabbatical.” He explained slowly, “And for the use of one my ships.” He raised an eyebrow.

She relaxed her face, but inside, she was surprised. “Yes, of course.” She said coolly.

“And you’re alright with the time frame? That amount of time away, won’t cause any issues?” She asked neutrally, knowing that her face had already betrayed her once before.

“Two standard weeks was more than sufficient, was what I was told…is that not the case now?” Karrde asked, returning her own stoic tone.

He knew.

He knew that there was something that she didn’t know, and he was somewhat, and strangely, proud of it.

Luke must have asked him to give her some time off, and to borrow a ship. But, somehow the Jedi neglected to ask her about it, going over her head to her boss instead of going to her directly.

“No, that will be fine.” She gave him a tight grin. “Thank you for accommodating the request.” She said politely.

In the back of her mind, she knew that Luke had flinched, wherever he was at the moment, when he sensed her anger come straight for him. Reflectively, she sensed back his desire for her not be angry, but to be patient.

<All will be explained.> Luke quietly sent back to her.

“Of course, Mara – *anything that you need.*” Karrde stopped his bravado briefly, sensing that something had just cause a rift between the two parties, and he was concerned for her welfare.

“When I see you tomorrow, can you please bring those new contracts for the Hosnian shipments?” He went back to business again to divert her attention.
“Yes.” She sighed, releasing her anger, and agreed to return to those things that needed her attention. “Did you want to see the profit margins as well?”

“Yes please.” He raised an eyebrow, questioning her status. Karrde was a master at non-verbal cues, something that she greatly appreciated.

“Perfect. Everything will be fine and prepared.” She replied, referring to business and her personal situation as well. “We shall see you tomorrow?” She asked lightly, knowing very-well that she would.

He nodded, putting his unlit cigarillo in his mouth. “Until tomorrow, then.”

Mara nodded once. “Clear Skies, Karrde.”

“Clear Skies, Mara.” And he closed the comm.

She sat upright, not by surprise, but by indignation. Of all the nerve of him…going to Karrde… making plans without asking me first. She thought angrily.

She felt a wave of peace come over her that she knew was from him. Mentally, she threw up all her shields and shut it out; it would have felt like a slammed door to him.

Whatever he wanted to say, whatever he wanted to ask her, she just wasn’t willing to hear at the moment.

Mara turned back to her desk, determined to ignore him, keeping herself busy until she was ready to talk to him.

It was close to when she would normally be off-duty and be heading for evening meal, but this time, she refused.

She could easily spend her time getting ahead of the day. It was one way to get her anger out; she worked it out of herself.

As she immersed herself, and lost concentration of her shields, she could feel him on the fringes of her mind, gently tugging to get her attention.

Finally when she had enough, she reached back. <<No!>> she shouted at him. <<I’m not ready to talk to you!>>

She felt it recess as she went back to her work.

Time must have passed.

The door opened to the office, but no one came through it, until Aves peaked around the corner.

“Ah, there you are.” He grinned awkwardly, trying to play down the situation that he knew about. “Skywalker was looking for you, and asked me to come find you.”

She looked up at him, and grumbled, “So he got you involved too?”

Aves knew better than to make her angry with him, and wanted to keep the attention on the one that had put her in this mood.

“Ah…no.” He almost stuttered. “It’s just that it was passed evening meal… and…” He took a step back from her. “It’s my shift…so I thought…”
“That I would want to go back to my cabin?” She asked, trying at dropping the snarl in her voice.

Aves was unusually anxious. “Um…yeah?”

Mara dropped her stylus, and looked at the other man. She didn’t trust Aves to give her an opinion about her life, but she did trust him.

Under careful scrutiny of his senses, she could feel that he felt bad for Luke and that maybe her anger wasn’t justified, but had no intention of telling her that.

She glanced at the chrono and saw that it was passed two hours when she should have been off-shift.

Mara sighed and got up from her seat; she still gave Aves a weary stare as she walked by him. As a consolation, she then gave him a friendly touch on the shoulder; forgiving him for being a man like Skywalker.

It wouldn’t be a long walk back her cabin and she tried to decide if she was still angry with Luke; she decided that she was.

It felt like betrayal that he had gone to Karrde first before talking to her. She had no idea of his intentions but he clearly wanted her to join him in wherever he thought he was headed…and she had three guesses as to where that might be.

Behind that reason, was one that she felt she should lump Karrde in with his accomplice; neither one of them had treated her like she was a person unto herself. Skywalker had assumed that she belonged to Karrde, and Karrde thought she should be in Skywalker’s possession. It felt like she was being passed around without her consent.

Mara shook her head as she turned to walk down the corridor to her cabin; she could feel it at the end of the hall, he was meditating, and waiting for her to return.

It felt like walking through water, and the essence enveloped her as she walked. To anyone else, she doubted that they would have sensed a thing, but to her, it was a beacon that he was shining brightly.

She still refused to reach out for him even though he was calling to her very loudly, in his own way.

*Do not get drawn in*, she told herself. *Do not give in to him. He’s at fault here, even if he wants to justify it –let him know that he’s done wrong.*

Standing in front of her door, her hand hovered over the release.

She huffed before touching the pad, setting her anger where it should be.

The door slid open slowly, and she braced herself before she entered.

Normally, she would be enthralled with the aurora that he was emitting; it was intrinsic and alluring.

He sat in the middle of the room, legs crossed, and his hands resting on his knees.

From his back, she assumed that his eyes were probably closed too.

Random objects floated above their places in the room, either by his will or just merely because his mind was just that relaxed.

Mara walked around to the front of him; she wanted to sit down, and assume the pose, and join him. But in her state of mind, she knew it wasn’t a good thing.
She looked over and saw that he had procured an evening meal tray for her; one was untouched and
off to the side.

Luke knew that she had come into the room. He sighed when he realized that she wasn’t going to
join him.

The floating objects lowered back to where they had been resting in a sign of regret and resignation.

He sighed again slowly, as coming back from his meditation.

Mara crossed her arms on her chest, and tilted her hip out, waiting for him, and anchored herself
because she knew he could disarm her very quickly.

Underneath his brown lashes, his eyes fluttered, and then opened, looking low and then coming up
to see her; his steady crystal gaze didn’t waiver.

Luke grinned peacefully, but he was smart enough to read her.

“Hi.” His voice cracked, with what seemed like his first words of the day.

Gradually she raised eyebrow, her features stayed remote. “Hello.” She said blankly.

He stretched from his position, looking down, rubbed his hand over his scalp and scratched a bit
before looking up at her again; preparing for his side of the confrontation. It was going to be
inevitable.

“Mara…” He said quietly. “I was going to ask you…”

She narrowed her careful gaze at him, listening for the words that she wanted to hear.

He rolled to get up, and stood where he was, not approaching her. “But I wanted to ask Karrde first
if it was possible, before I asked you.” He shook his head. “I had no intention of not asking you…of
doing anything without your consent.”

The air got thick before she spoke.

“Look, Skywalker, I have no idea of what you think you wanted to ask me, but I’m pretty sure you
can guess what the answer will be now.” She said blankly.

“Mara…” he started.

She held up her hand and stopped him right there. “How dare you!” her voice raised slightly above
her normal speaking voice. “How dare you to go over my head to Karrde and ask for me to take a
break to go off wherever with you!” She waved her hand in the air. “I’m not a child to be ordered
around by you or Daddy Karrde!”

Luke crossed his arms on his chest and went to lean on the edge of her bunk. “Well, you can sure act
like it.” He grumbled under his breath.

“What was that?” She hissed.

He looked up at her, not flinching. “You heard me.” He glared back at her. “You shut me out today.
I felt your shields come up when I wanted to talk to you about it…you wouldn’t even give me a
chance.”

“You locked me out.” He said sternly; she knew that doing that to him was damaging to him.
“How am I supposed to act when I’ve been handed around like a possession!” She shot back.

She retreated away from him in the tiny room. “I assume that you want to go off to Vjun…or Mustafar…is that it? – and didn’t bother to ask me.”

“I bet you asked Wedge first before you asked me, if you could go running off?” She glared. “Didn’t you?”

“No.” He said sharply. “I didn’t.” He growled.

She knew that he was breaking military procedures, but still she didn’t balk at it.

“I told him that I needed to do something and that I would be back shortly after I did it…I told him it was Jedi business.” He said, calming himself.

He hung his head. “I’m sorry.” He said simply, not avoiding it. “If I’m guilty of anything, I’m guilty of not going about this the right way.”

Luke looked at her with those earnest blue eyes, upset by what he had done. “You’re right, I should have asked you first…and it’s not an excuse, but the opportunity presented itself before I had a chance to speak with you about it.”

He looked into her eyes. “I’m sorry Mara.”

Luke always apologized when he knew that he was in the wrong, he meant it, and he never did it again.

Mara blinked away from him, still feeling hurt; she could feel unwanted tears coming to her eyes. “You made me feel like He did…” she said quietly. “Ordering me around, making decisions for me without ever thinking about what I wanted.”

She couldn’t think of a moment in her life, during her services to the Emperor when her wishes were her own.

“I’m sorry.” Luke said again, realising that he was dealing not just with his own actions of today, but years of her life being under someone else’s thumb.

She didn’t melt to him, or give in too quickly as she thought she would, but she did feel her senses soften with his apology.

Mara stepped towards him.

It still didn’t feel resolved between them, and she knew it was her turn to make amends. He may have acted out of carelessness but she acted with intent.

His eyes hadn’t taken their gaze off of her, when she looked over to him. She could feel the words in her throat wanting to come out, even though she was never good at apologizing.

She exhaled and relaxed her shoulders, dropping her crossed arms.

“I’m sorry for shutting you out.” She said, without avoiding his look. “I was angry at you, and I didn’t know how to deal with it right then.”

Luke grinned tightly, and got up from the bunk. He took a step in her direction; remembering that sometimes her emotions could be volatile for her.
He could sense it now, she didn’t know how to respond; part of her wanted to keep the argument going because conflict was what she could understand.

He often sensed it when they used to argue before they had confronted their feelings for each other—she knew what a fight was, and she knew that she had to put one up, but what she didn’t know was how to end one without feeling like she had lost.

With the pause in the conversation, she started to get nervous that things hadn’t been resolved yet. Luke could see it, but he also wanted her to understand.

“Do you know what it feels like from my side when you do that?” He asked, holding her look.

Mara shook her head; she had never had a connection to anyone to compare it to.

“It feels like you’ve died.” He said simply; she could feel his pain. “And I can’t find you.”

He swallowed hard; loss always hit him, especially of those that he cared about. “It hurts.” He whispered.

Up until now, she had never considered what it felt like for him. He was just always there. She supposed if he had cut off contact from her, it might feel the same way…and that would be…devastating.

“I’m sorry.” She said, realising her part in fostering the anger.

She took another step towards him.

Without hesitation, he came close to her and opened his arms which she gladly stepped into and wrapped her arms him too.

She could feel his love wash over her.

Luke cupped her cheek and looked directly into her eyes. “I’m sorry for hurting you.” He said sweetly.

Mara felt the only thing that she could say back, “I’m sorry for hurting you, too.”

He smiled before he placed his lips against hers, but he could feel that she was reluctant, even though his kiss was soothing her.

He pulled back and looked at her. “What is it?” he asked.

“I’m confused.” She said, looking blankly at him, and looking a little lost.

“What just happened here?” She asked, unsure.

“We had our first fight as a couple.” He said, slightly amused.

“Oh…” she replied. “How did we do?”

Luke nodded, somewhat. “We seemed to have fixed most of it.” He said quietly.

His hand slipped from her cheek, to under her hair, and she could feel his fingers pull through the
strands. He hummed in appreciation to be this close to her.

But he pulled back gradually, after he nuzzled her face.

“You must be hungry.” He said sweetly, still enjoying being close to her and caring for her too. “I asked Kirwayne to bring your dinner meal in here.” He smiled. “And he was even able to find an extra dessert.”

Her eyes still looked lost, not sure what to do in this instance.

“It’s not a power pack for your blaster, but I was hoping it was a start.” Luke smiled again at his feeble attempt to see her smile, referring to the ‘sorry’ present that he had bought for her after one of their really bad fights.

“I hate it when we fight.” Mara mumbled.

Considering how many little spats they had in their first year since Wayland, it was surprising to hear that; sometimes they just fought for the sake of fighting without much of anything behind it.

He walked over to retrieve her dinner tray and bring it back to where they had eaten the previous night.

“There’s only one fight that I don’t regret having with you.” He said, placing the tray on the small desk beside her bunk.

That comment seemed to get her out of her haze, and she blinked angrily at him for saying such a thing. “And which one would that be?” She frowned as she approached the small table.

“The one after the twin’s birthday party.” Luke said. “Do you remember it?”

Mara sat down slowly. “Yes…I remember all of them.” She still didn’t seem contented to be able to do that.

“Then you’ll remember what happened that night, after we both went home?” He reached over and squeezed her hand. “That was the night that I admitted that I had feelings for you…if it wasn’t for that fight, then who is to say how long we may have stayed apart, or waited before we got together.”

She pushed around the food on the plate, not finding any of it appealing. “I still didn’t like that fight.” She thought about for a moment. “I preferred our fights when they were about nothing.”

He watched her, trying to remember to which one she was referring; it seemed like every time they trained together, it ended in a fight, so there were many to choose from.

“Like the time we got in a fight about that holovid series…you said that you liked how they had changed the plot line and added new characters. And I said that you were off your gourd, and that there was nothing wrong with following the same characters that people have come to know and love.” Mara listed off the heart of their argument.

Luke narrowed his eyes at her, and then relaxed, and he smiled. “I was trying to find out if you wanted to go to a holovid with me.”

She looked at him, surprised. “Oh.” She mouthed. “I guess I didn’t read the signals on that one.”

Tilting her head to the side, she asked, “What about the time that you said that Incomm made a far better hyperdrive than Kuat Industries?”
It was clear that she wasn’t having any of the meal before her. Luke took one of the utensils, and speared one of her vegetables, and popped it in his mouth. “I still believe that one…and they do.” He said after swallowing. “And that time, I was trying to get you to come with me to the aeronautics exposition.”

“Are you saying that all of our fights since I arrived on Coruscant were just a bad attempt to date me?” Mara asked, feeling miffed at him for his lame effort, and herself, partially for not seeing what he was trying to do.

He thought about it, and then nodded. “Pretty much.” He smiled and leaned in for a kiss. “Good thing that I wore you down.”

She sat there blinking, but accepted the kiss with eyes open.

Her mouthed dropped open with the realization that, yes, he was truly that bad at trying to ask her out.

Blinking again, she closed her mouth and looked at him as he was teasing her; she was flustered, and still a bit confused.

Luke took pity on her state, and motioned towards the tray to get her mind off of it.

“Not hungry?” he asked, gesturing to the tray.

Mara came back from where her mind was, and looked at the tray. She shook her head and moved her hand across her lower abdomen unconsciously.

“Are you okay?” He asked concerned. <I didn’t hurt you last night, did I?>

She frowned. “No, I’m fine.” Looking up at him with sly eyes, she asked, “Did you not enjoy last night?”

He looked off to the side, and smirked casually. “Yes I did.” He said quietly. “You know that I did.”  
&lt;But I think we’ll wait until you’re feeling better to do anything else.&gt;

She pouted, but gave in, dropping the idea of make-up sex, but not truly stopping from thinking about it.

“So did Kirwayne talk up Null to you and Wes?” Mara asked, knowing that he knew that she wanted to distract both of them.


“You can.” She sighed. “I’m going to buy a night at one of the hotels for us…one that has unlimited hot water.”

“You were looking forward to your water allotment…weren’t you? – and you gave it to me.” He said, feeling somewhat guilty.

Mara got up from her seat, and walked over to her storage unit, thinking that even a sonic shower would feel pretty good right now. “Sometimes five minutes just doesn’t cut it…and you needed it more than I did.”

She looked over her shoulder. “You can make it up to me?”

“You’ll think of a way.” She said coyly. << You always do.>>

Turning back to him, with her night clothes clenched to her chest, her face looked serious again. “I think we should talk about the other thing you want to do at Null, don’t you?”

“I haven’t gotten around to asking you yet…” His voice trailed off, still trying to avoid the inevitable.

Luke got up from the bunk and came closer to her. He touched her shoulders to look her in the eye. “Mara, will you come with me to Mustafar?” He asked in earnest and slight dread. <<I don’t think I could do it without you.>>

She looked away, knowing that she would give in too quickly if she kept looking at those blue eyes.

All that came into her mind was the last time that she was there, and behind that, the doubt she had. <<I don’t think you’re going to find what you think you will, or want to, if we go there, Luke.>>

“What do you want to find?” <<I don’t even know what you want to get out of this.>> She asked, still looking away from him.

Mara tuned her eyes back to him; she had to see his face when he answered.

“I know what I want to find.” He said, and stepped away from her. His head dropped to chest, feeling foolish for ever thinking it, but it needed to be said. “I want to find one…just one remnant of Anakin somewhere, I guess.” He mumbled. “One thing to prove that he wasn’t always…Vader.” <<I want to find my father.>>

She watched him, not entirely understanding his compulsion, his quest that he set himself upon.

She had never felt the drive to find her family, and the meaning behind it.

Mara paused; no, that wasn’t entirely true.

Since visiting Leia and knowing the strange lullaby that she sang came from Stewjon, she had started to study the planet; it stirred something in her.

The slim chance that this world might have some sort of connection with her past puzzled her.

Mara looked at him with less judgmental eyes, now that she felt what it was like to search her own truth.

So maybe she did understand his need to find his answers; it didn’t sit right with her. He had to know one more thing before she agreed to this trip.

“Luke, you’re asking me to go back to a world that I turned away from six years ago…to assume that role in order to access the things you seek. Are you prepared to see that world that I lived in?”

She asked as she steeled herself for his answer.

His eyes dawned with the realization of what he was asking from her. “Will you do that for me?” He asked quietly; knowing that she may decide not to assist him.

Mara shook her head. “I don’t think you’re going to find what you’re looking for…I think you’ll only find the answers that you don’t want.” She said bluntly. “But, I will go with you.” <<I love you.>>

He stepped closer to her, and kissed her cheek. “Thank you…my best friend.” <<I love you too.>>
Chapter Summary

Quote: Luke reveled in the contact; the feel of her soft lips against his own. How he had thought about those lips for the first year after he had met her, and kissing her now was more than he thought it could feel like, just being with her.

Characters: Luke, Mara, Mirrax Horn, Talon Karrde, various smugglers

Chapter Notes

Oh...I am just dragging my heels with this one...it feels a little dialed in to me...I'm so far ahead of the story in my head that now I have to have motivation to write the rest of it.

And ~GASP!~ someone on the inside has given me Last Jedi Spoilers...that I totally regret.

So, now I must muscle through it...

If you are seeing The Last Jedi...I hope fanfic will keep you going.

By the way, I did write little piece about our favourite redhead in another story, called "The Legend of Luke Skywalker: Odyssey" I hope you get a chance to read it and tell me what you think.

Aboard the Wild Karrde

He didn’t sleep.

Well, he didn’t sleep for the full night.

Mara had felt Luke shift his weight more than once. Although he tried to hide it from her, she could still hear his active mind that was keeping him from slumber.

For the few moments that he could find some rest, it was her turn to be kept awake by the unbidden images coming from his mind.

They had discovered earlier on in their friendship, that they could share thoughts and feelings without truly trying, and all that was really needed was close contact to the other; touching.

In the small bunk, with his body pressed beside her, Mara could sense all his mental activity.

The images flowed when he was unguarded, and she caught flashes of them; the molten planet of myth, the pyramids of Yavin, a baby that cried then settled quietly, a small rocky island surrounded
And then the images would twist; *the looming shadow, a crackle of lightning, the maniacal laugh in the distance, black plated armor…*

He would stir, and then check to see if she was sleeping. Lying beside her, he would then start to analyze what those images could mean.

It was his investigation that was now keeping her awake.

Mara kept her eyes closed throughout, and tried to concentrate on her own dreams or fabricate ones that would let her mind rest.

She could have been feeding off his erratic energy, but her mind went straight away to the work that would be required for the coming day. Mara, at last, flipped over in his direction, and opened her eyes in the dim light.

Luke frowned and looked over to her.

“Was I thinking too loud again?” He asked remorsefully, whispering for no other reason than he thought he should.

Mara could see the pain on his face, and reached up to cup his cheek. “I wouldn’t think any less of you, if you were.” She whispered back. “But I have my own thoughts to keep me awake.”

He nuzzled into her hand and turned his face to her palm, kissing the inside of her hand.

Luke squinted his eyes. “Okay…” he still whispered. “What keeps you awake? Maybe if I knew your problems, and you knew mine, then we could both commiserate?” He smiled, knowing it was probably futile.

“Right now?” She whispered back, knowing that they weren’t disturbing anyone but themselves.

He nodded, looking solemnly into her eyes.

“I was just thinking about…” She paused, not sure if she wanted to reveal it. “You called me your ‘best friend’ last night.” She looked away briefly. “I’ve never been anyone’s *best friend* before.”

Luke raised an eyebrow; amused but didn’t want to seem heartbroken at hearing that.

“You are.” He said simply. “I can tell you things that I don’t tell anyone else… *I trust you…* you make me laugh…and I love each and every one of your freckles.”

Mara knew he was serious at the core of his meaning, but she didn’t mind that he tried to lighten it.

She pulled the covers up closer to herself; he had left off his list that they both felt safe to be vulnerable with each other.

She supposed he was her best friend as well, but didn’t like the emotional choking feeling she got when she thought about it.

She simply nodded. <<Your turn.>> She sent over to him.

Luke looked away for a moment. “I’m not sure that we can trust Booster.” He said staring out into the darkened room. “I’d like to…” He paused, “but given what I’ve heard about him, I’m not sure.”
He looked back at her. She had met the man; Mara would know if he had anything to be concerned about.

She watched his face and she knew that behind what he was saying was something more serious that he was building up to.

“He’s hard to read…sometimes.” Mara looked at the ceiling of her bunk. “I didn’t know what to make of him when I first met him.” She shifted her weight and turned in his direction. “Have you ever heard snippets of people’s conversations in their minds?”

He nodded.

“I can’t with him.” She said. “He’s very protective.”

Luke twitched his cheek.

“But I don’t think he’ll be of any concern…it’s Mirrax who is running Wes, and the X-wings, back to the Liberty.” She smiled keenly.

He smirked, knowing all too well that his roommate had been missing his wife too. So there was bound to be a happy reunion.

<You turn.> He sent back to her. Luke turned on his side so that he could watch her.

“Where do you want me to start?” Mara looked blase about the rest of the issues on her mind. “Will Nagreen remember that Mikos gets only twenty percent of his payment due to his contract with Karrde? How are we going to meet our schedule in the Hosnian System if we are hauling a full load? Did Ghent get the equipment fixed on the sub-space frequency transmitter? How much are we going to have to pay in backed tariffs to the Da’nark Trade route? Will this place fall apart when I’m gone?”


He reached over and rubbed her shoulder. “This place will be fine without you. Karrde will make-do. He did it before…he will do-so again.”

Mara glared at him, partially because he might be right, but mostly because he didn’t know what he was saying. “Karrde has lost his password to just about every terminal in this place…if I don’t keep track of them, he locks himself out. Regularly.”

Luke paused. “Alright, then we will keep our honing beacon and comm unit open.” He said, resolving all of her issues at once. “They will be able to find you, night or day.”

She blinked once accepting his overly-simplified answer.

She didn’t want to say it; he knew that it was his turn, and she knew what was on his mind. She could hear it. Vader.

He was quiet.

Reaching up he stroked one errant short curl that framed her face, and watched it slip between his fingers.

“What is it like there?” He finally asked, knowing what she understood what he was asking; his voice cracked with the words as he tried to keep his voice low.
Mustafar, he’s asking about Mustafar.

Mara sighed, deciding to answer him. “Hot.” She said. “Intimidating; it was meant to be.” She sighed again. “A fortress…but also a prison.”

His eyes rolled, giving in to a bit of the pain at hearing this, but still he persisted. <Show me?> He asked with his eyes closed.

His hand reached out, asking for her to join him.

His skin was warm as she slipped her fingers into his left hand.

Reluctantly, Mara’s eyes closed; he wanted to see this. Maybe he wanted to know what he would be facing. Maybe he wanted to know what to expect.

Vader- he won’t be there, she reminded herself before she opened up the images to him.

In her mind, she showed him of what she could remember; all the details.

The flight in to the landing pad, and the view of the lava fall that came from under the fortress.

The pointed towers reaching skyward, looking formidable and threatening.

The steam as it rose up from the grated walkways.

The doors that paused before opening, reminding you that you were asking for permission before you were allowed to enter.

The heavy doors that she had to pass by that forbid her entrance to any of the rooms beyond.

The sound of her footsteps on the metal flooring; how could a place seem sterile yet dissentient at the same time?

What she knew of Vader’s inner sanctum was limited; she had seen the room of the combination bacta tank and meditation chamber, but she had never seen him in there, using the facility. It was just something she didn’t allow herself to see. It was easier to pretend that he wasn’t human.

The lush visitor’s room, that she was allowed to stay in, didn’t feel safe enough to sleep there.

“I know there’s a private hangar, but I’ve never seen it.” She said with her eyes still closed, holding the connection. “And other rooms…beyond.”

Mara opened her eyes, and looked at his face.

Luke relaxed, and came back from where he was.

“I wasn’t there for much of anything other than to deliver messages.” She whispered. “I get the feeling that he didn’t even like me being there when I had a purpose.”

His cheek twitched again, and then he nodded and looked away. “What did it feel like being there?” He asked.

“Feel like?” she repeated; she knew what he wanted to know, but she wasn’t sure how to answer him. “It didn’t feel like anything. I wasn’t there to feel. I was there to do a job.”

In her mind she gave him one more answer. <<I wasn’t allowed to feel.>>
Luke turned back to look at her. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her closer to him.

In the past six years, Mara had spent that time unravelling the pent up emotions and stoic walls that she had to learn in order to preserve herself. It would be wrong to expect her to be able to recall feeling anything during her life before the fall of the Empire.

She gave a little snort on his chest, and Luke looked down questioningly.

“I don’t think Vader would like the idea of us very much.” She whispered sarcastically.

“No?” Luke asked. “I think he would.” He sensed that she was about to scoff at him. “Or at the very least, he would get used to the idea.” He added, knowing that her first statement was probably correct.

He reached up and stroked her cheek. “I love you…does his opinion really matter?” His blue eyes were so very intense. “It doesn’t to me.” He whispered sincerely.

Mara sat up a bit, bringing herself closer to him. “I love you too.” She kept her voice in a hushed tone, and pressed her lips against his.

Luke reveled in the contact; the feel of her soft lips against his own. How he had thought about those lips for the first year after he had met her, and kissing her now was more than he thought it could feel like, just being with her.

Simple, yet complex- just like her.

He shifted his weight to take more of her into his embrace, but didn’t dare escalate it; it was just enough to have a quiet moment of simply holding and kissing her.

The Force must have approved, because there was a strong presence that compelled them together.

Mara pulled back a little; her eyes were a vivid green. Then they closed, and she nestled herself against him, and he could feel that she was at peace.

It was clear that she didn’t fall back asleep; he could hear her mind still working.

“I need your help today.” She said to his chest.

“Anything for you.” He said back quietly.

She moved again to look into his face. “Will you help me dock the Wild Karrde at Null?” She raised an eyebrow, slightly challenging him, yet appealing to his not-so secret desire to be a smuggler. “I need someone to watch the port-side thrusters…it’s a tight fit into the birth.”

Luke smiled; she really didn’t have to twist his rubber arm in order to ask him to co-pilot with her. He would have done it without her even having to ask.

“Oslo almost nicked it the last time we were here…I really don’t want to have to explain that one to Karrde.” She was clearly unimpressed.

He nodded, and leaned in for one more kiss, repeating. “Anything for you.”

Mara smiled back. She hated to admit it, but he was a great pilot and it was something she greatly enjoyed watching him do.

“Will you do something for me?” He asked. “Since we’re both awake now?”
“Oh?” she asked with a bit of a feral grin, hoping that he was asking what she thought he was.

Luke blinked solemnly. “I was hoping that we could meditate together, again…but my way?”

“Not my way?” She pouted just a bit, knowing that he left overwhelmed my her method for meditating.

She could see it in his eyes. Although he very much wanted to entertain her, the Jedi was back, and he was not giving in to her charms.

Mara pulled herself away from his embrace and rolled out of the bed, making her way over to the light controls and raising their brightness accordingly.

She turned back to hold her glare at him as he grinned watching her; his peaceful eyes told her that he was dedicated.

Pouting even-more, she picked up two pillows and tossed them to the ground in the middle of the room, and gracefully sat down on one of them.

Crossing her legs and straightening her back, she closed her eyes and rested her hands on her knees with the palms facing upwards.

Mara opened one eye and managed to glower at him. “Like this?” she asked, not thrilled that he wanted to do this.

Luke slid from out the covers and assumed the same position across from her. “Yes.” He said simply while taking her hands in his. “Try to enjoy it?” He asked of her.

She huffed but closed her eye, and gave into the sensations that were already flowing around them.

**Null Space Port**

“Watch the starboard…let’s take her easy.” Mara murmured as she directed the docking of the *Wild Karrde*.

Kirwayne was on her right, being nervous that he might damage his boss’s precious flagship.

Luke sat to the left of the helm, guiding his side of the freighter in, slowly.

Wes Jansen sat behind her. He was given the job to control the auxiliary boosters, should they need them.

She could sense Luke’s surprise when he saw Booster’s ship, the *Pulsar Skate*, waiting for them at port.

The ‘Skate was easily five times larger than the ‘Karrde, and Mara knew that Booster took great pride in that.

Karrde may have larger and grander camps, but Booster had larger ships and chose to make those his home and base.

She felt relaxed bringing the *Wild Karrde* in this time. Last time, it was total chaos with a foreign crew.
Maybe it was Luke’s presence or the meditation that almost put her back to sleep, but nothing phased her.

They locked on easily; it was tight fit but all systems confirmed that they had docked without any issues.

Aves turned from his seat. “We’re confirmed on the platform and are opening the rear hatch…the gravity field is operational.” He announced to the helm.

Mara reached over and opened the comm. “Attention Crew of the Wild Karrde, we have reached our destination of Null Outpost. You will be expected to attend a brief meeting dockside in twenty minutes, and then you will be granted furlough of standard thirteen hours.” She glared at the comm unit. “Failure to return to duty will result in termination.” She released the hold as for the freighter crew not to hear her sigh. “Departure will be at 0-nine hundred hours tomorrow. Thank you.”

She looked at Luke as she released the comm. He had sat up at attention, listening to her message, and she caught a wry look from him which she amused was him impressed with her ability to command a crew.

Mara unhooked her crash webbing and turned to remove herself from the pilot’s seat. She walked over to the console to check the readouts.

Luke paused and then got up to stand beside her, as the rest of the team at the helm started to depart.

Kirwayne looked excited as Aves slung an arm around the other man’s shoulder, boasting about the great big world out there.

“What was that look for?” Mara murmured under her breath as she came beside Luke, pretending to read the same data that she was.

He glanced over, and flashed a smirk. “Your tone…I was thinking of saluting you, but then, I thought that you’d like that too much.” He murmured back.

She was about to comeback with a retort to that fact, when Wes came over to both of them.

He looked so different from the time that she had seen him on the Liberty. Luke’s new haircut, she was able to get used to, somewhat, but on the other pilot, it looked like he was an escapee from a mental asylum.

Both Wes and Luke had assimilated into their roles of smugglers and looked the part. Both of them had found clothing that looked worn-in and had not inklings of a uniform at all. Neither one of them had chosen anything that would make them stand out.

Mara had decided that she could get used to Luke looking a bit more…what was the word he used this morning? - scruffy.

She had no idea where he had found it but the heavy see’ok leather jacket actually looked good on him.

“So what’s the plan, Boss?” Wes asked the Jedi.

Luke simply turned to Mara, and glanced over at his friend. “Her ship…she’s the boss.” He raised an eyebrow.

Mara could sense he was more-playful than his restless night should have allowed; she simply chose
to disregard it as just one of his quirks.

Wes waited to hear what she had in store for them.

“Let’s give the crew some time to disembark, while we make our way to Hull Eight.” She said plainly. “When I get the que aboard the Pulsar Skate, we can start to move the X-wings over to their open hull on the opposite side of the freighter.”

“Sound easy enough.” Wes commented with a nod.

“I don’t anticipate any issues.” Mara said calmly as she started to leave the helm. “Booster will probably want to meet with both of you, once you’ve docked… but Mirrax will be taking Jansen to the Liberty by herself.” She strode slightly ahead of them as they left the helm, heading to hull eight, leading them through the less-travel routes inside the ‘Karrde.

Her voice dropped as not to carry in other areas, as they walked. “Are you ready to go?” She asked as she turned to look at Wes.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” He didn’t seemed convinced, as he looked over to Luke.

“Well, we’ve sealed up the crack on Skywalker’s X-wing, so that shouldn’t be a problem for maintenance to replace it once you’ve returned.” Mara adjusted her gloves as they approached the hull. “And it should be a quick jump over to dock on the Pulsar Skate.” She pulled out her comm, and keyed in the notification to Mirrax. “The door should be open and we just fly right on in.”

She palm the door release, and waiting for them, with the ships prepped for takeoff, were the R2 units already in their hatches.

Picking up a helmet that used to belong to Twombs, she frowned; it was bad luck to wear a dead man’s kit. She knew it; they knew. But then, she was never one of the superstitious types.

Luke touched her shoulder as he walked by, and fell into step with Wes as they walked in the direction of their perspective ships. He glanced over once to see her climbing the ladder and dropping down into the cockpit of the X-wing.

Wes followed his gaze, and paused. “Somehow, she doesn’t look quite right in there, does she?” His head tilted looking at the former Imperial, now smuggler sitting in the X-wing cockpit, running through diagnostics. “It’s like she’s wearing a colour that doesn’t look good on her.”

Luke looked at his friend, amused and somewhat insulted; everything looked good on Mara. True, she did look out of place in an X-wing, even though she could handle the craft. “She’ll get us there.” He said simply.

“Ah Boss, I have no doubt on that.” Jansen winked and headed for his ship.

Within minutes of running a preflight sequence, the booster had little to do once they left the hull of the Wild Karrde.

Hull eight was conveniently located at the back of the freighter; a slight dip below the other freighter, just for clearance, and they were safely transferred to the other ship.

Luke was the first to land, and started shutting down after he landed inside the roomy hull of the Pulsar Skate. He watched as Wes came and landed beside him.

Mara’s X-wing was last to dock, and they all waited until the hatch to the hull was sealed before
As Luke came down his ladder, R2 met him at the platform, already whistling and tweeting.

“Yes, yes…” He said patting the droid’s dome, “We’ll be moving you to the other ship shortly. I wouldn’t think of going anywhere without you.”

Both Mara and Wes were walking over to him, when the access doors opened.

Mara didn’t even looked over her shoulder but sent out her touch to him. <<Here we go…remember, no fast moves around Booster.>>

The welcoming party that was walking towards them, was led by, who Luke assumed was Booster.

Corran Horn did not lie; the man was a mix of pirate and business man. Booster’s glowing red cybernetic eye could be off-putting if you weren’t prepared for it.

Next to the smuggler boss was an attractive woman with dark hair and bright blue eyes. Luke smiled; no wonder Corran talks about his wife regularly.

Mara stepped forward, and Luke could feel her personae change again, taking on the harder edges that she needed to do her job.

“Terrik.” She said simply. “A pleasure, as always.” Her tone took on her cool demeanor.

“You can dispense with whatever pleasantries Karrde taught you – I know you’re good. It’s these two that I want to meet.” Booster muscled right past her to the pilots.

Mirrax sighed as she came to stand beside Mara. “He’s a little more than grumpy to be letting the ‘Skate go for the next week or so.” She mumbled to the other woman, and then smiled. “But it’s good to see you.”

Mara turned around to watch Booster interrogate Luke and Wes. “It’s good to see you, too.” She mumbled back, returning the smile.

Luke looked calm, but Wes looked scared as Booster pointed aggressively at them, questioning them.

“I like the new hair on you.” Mirrax mumbled again.

“Thanks.” Mara returned the low tone, reaching up to unconsciously tug at the shortened ends. “Compliments of the Guarvians.”

“I heard about that.” Mirrax sounded concerned. “Karrde wasn’t happy, neither was Booster.”

Mara simply nodded. "We got the codes, among the other things... and business is going well."

"That it is," Mirrax said under her normal tone. "Pops is happy...happier than he portrays."

“So that’s your Jedi, huh?” Mirrax asked with her gaze locked on Luke.

“That’s him.” Mara tampered down the blush coming to her cheeks at hearing him referred to as "hers". “He had a haircut of his own on this past mission.”

“I see that.” Mirrax replied. “And glad to hear that. I was hoping it wasn’t standard issue for the Reds now. I like Corran’s hair.”
Mara could almost hear the pout in the other woman’s voice. Mara wasn’t initially happy when she saw Luke’s shaved head, but she was just glad he was alive.

“Still, he is cute, for a Jedi.” Mirrax murmured again.

Mara looked over to see the other woman give up a touch of a grin. “I like to think so.” She murmured back, suppressing another round of blushing.

“I have news.” Mara said in a voice little louder than what they had been using.

“Yeah?” Mirrax asked as she turned to look at the redhead.

Mara’s arms were crossed on her chest, with her fingers resting on her biceps.

Mirrax’s eyes watching the movement as Mara’s fingers tapped on her own upper arm. Then, she registered the message and her face lit up, and she beamed. “They are?” She asked excitedly.

“When?”

Mara tapped again in a quick series.

“Who told you?” Mirrax asked quickly, knowing that it might distract her father, but he seemed to be enjoying himself giving Skywalker a hard time.

Mara tapped again.

“No?” Mirrax gasped.

Mara nodded.

“Well, Null is a good place to get them a wedding gift.” Mirrax smirked. “I’ll tell Booster later…he’s going to be disappointed.”

“The one that got away.” Mirrax whispered; happy for Iella and Wedge, but sad that her father would have to give up hope.

They both watched as Booster gave up trying to ruffle Luke, and turned his attention over to Jansen. Only this time Booster wasn’t intent on cracking the other pilot; he seemed to take to Jansen easier. Maybe it was Luke’s reputation, or maybe Booster knew that Jansen would be staying on longer, but he seemed to relax after letting Luke off the hook.

Jansen had offered to give Booster a better look at one of the X-wings, so Luke felt he had been dismissed as Booster and Wes began to walk away. He took it as an opportunity to go meet Horn’s wife.

Mara’s eyes lit up as he walked over; he had assumed they had been talking about him when he noticed them as he spoke with Booster.

The other woman, Mirrax, however, seemed to tense up a bit.

Mara looked over at her and she sensed a difference, and then looked back at Luke wondering if he did anything.

He just simply started to grin warmly at the other woman. When he came in closer, he spoke in the low tones too, as to not draw Booster’s attention away. “And you must be Mirrax? I’ve heard so much about you.” He extended his hand in greeting.
And Mirrax looked down at it, back up at his face, and quickly over his shoulder to see that her father wasn’t paying attention. She pushed his hand away, and stepped in and wrapped her arms around his neck, and hugged him tightly.

“Thank you…thank you for all you’ve done for Cor… he’s been simply lost without your training.” Mirrax’s voice cracked, and it surprised Mara that she would display so much emotion for meeting someone for the first time.

Quickly, Mirrax broke off her hug and stepped back, assuming her cool nature once again. She swallowed hard before fully coming back to herself, and smiled.

Luke had seemed phased briefly, but then relaxed. “He’s very talented, and I’m proud to call him a friend, as well as a student.” He said quietly.

Mara glanced back over to Wes and Booster, seeing they were coming towards them; she made eye contact with Luke.

And when they were in earshot, Luke’s voice picked up. “…and I’ll have my astromech give you all the recognition codes. If there’s any way that Major Jansen can be of service to you, for aiding us, he will gladly oblige.”

Marrax nodded along.

“Well…” Booster voice boomed in. “It looks like they won’t give you any trouble.” He looked at his daughter and then a warning look at each pilot.

His attention went over to Mara. “And you, Red, I hear you have something for me, too?”

Mara crossed her arms on her chest, only to pull out a data card from her side pocket, and ignore the name he called her. “Here you go, Terrik… the credit transfer and those profit projection files you asked for.”

Booster merely grumbled at the unflappable smuggler, and started to leave the deck.

The smuggler boss was leaving the hull, when Mara felt the touch of Luke’s mind. <You’re right. I couldn’t read his thoughts or feelings. What do you think that means?>

<<I’ve got two theories…>> She looked over her shoulder to see Mirrax speaking with Jansen. <<It either means; what you see is what you get…or he’s so well guarded, that subconsciously, he knows how to protect his thoughts. Sometimes Karrde gets like that too.>> Mara looked back at Luke.

“Do you think we should go see the christening of Karrde’s new freighter?” Mirrax asked as her and Jansen joined the other two.

Luke looked over at his droid rocking under the X-wing, presumably saying ‘goodbye’ to the ship.

Marrax drew his attention away. “Oh, we’ll have your things transferred over to the Verpine once the pageantry is over, and there’s no one on the dock.” She said to Luke. “In meantime, Karrde is very proud of the Letter Raine.”

“Letter Raine?” Mara repeated after letting the name of Karrde’s freighter, meant for transporting water, rolled around in her head for a moment. Then she groaned as she got the bad joke Karrde had once again named one of his ships.

Luke just softly chuckled, and Jansen smirked at the oddities of smugglers.
Mirrax led them off the deck and through the *Pulsar Skate* to boarding ramp that allowed them to dock with Null Outpost.

“I’ve never been here.” Luke said as he squinted at the bright spot lights in the otherwise dark spaceport.

“Me neither.” Jansen agreed, looking around.

“No?” Mirrax said confidently. “I’m not really surprised. The Empire wanted nothing to do with the place, and so neither did the Rebellion. If I remember correctly, the Null authorities, such as they are, wouldn’t allow either to intrude on this place. And since the planet Null is off-limits to any off-worlders, it just made sense not to have any interest.”

Mara pondered the other woman’s words.

“That’s probably why there isn’t much trouble here, and now.” Luke theorized.

Mirrax snorted as they walked past the *Wild Karrde*. “Yeah, it may look like that, but *here* is where trouble starts. The deals are brokered *here*...the plans are made *here*. Booster likes it because it means he can keep his ear to the ground. And they’ll fight you to keep it that way.”

On the other side of the ‘*Karrde*, groups of people had congregated around another freighter.

Luke could hear Karrde’s voice proudly announce the name of the freighter, and receive a groan, then subdued applause from the group. Karrde announced the crew that would be taking the *Letter Raine* on her first voyage, and Luke was surprised to hear that Kirwayne would be joining the crew.

Knowing that it would be making the trip from wherever they had determined had water to spare, and then back to Tatooine, Luke reached out to Mara, gently. <If anyone is going to end up with a Twi’lek wife, it will be Kirwayne.> He lightly joked.

He saw the corners of her mouth tug, finding his comment amusing.

She shifted, and he saw it as her opportunity to move closer to him, and for a brief moment she reached over and squeezed his hand and then relaxed.

Mara still watched Karrde with interest, but Luke could sense that she was happy for him; this ship would be a life-saver for the farmers on Tatooine and the impending drought.

There was something about her, being in her element, among the smugglers that made her even more-attractive, he thought to himself as he watched her a bit more before turning back to see the presentation.

He would never admit it to her, but her hard edges were just as seductive as her soft side.

It was, after all, how he first thought of her, as a smuggler, when they first met. He soon learned that she was so much more.

As he listened, his mind wandered. With all the issues that had impeded his sleep, he didn’t feel ground down by them. Not since they had meditated this morning together. In fact, he felt optimistic even though he knew that the trip he had planned for both of them would be less than ideal, or pleasant.

*One night, to be just us. He thought. And then, to the mission ahead.*
Luke looked over at Mirrax and began his plotting.

As Karrde finished talking and the group broke up, Mara watched as Luke walked over to speak with Mirrax. She was about to join them when Karrde approached her.

“Well, Jade, how’s my freighter, pilot rescue service and floating med ward doing?” Karrde asked in a smug tone, watching the figure who he now recognized as Skywalker from the side of his eye.

Mara could sense that he was surprised by Luke’s appearance, but went back to the issue at hand, and why his freighter had been selected to rescue New Republic militia.

She knew he always preferred to stay neutral, and only make a decision when he had no other choices, but that was a battle he was losing.

“I think you’ll have a very healthy credit tab with the New Republic, if that’s what you’re asking?” She responded in her usual indifference.

Karrde’s eyes narrowed slightly before putting an unlit cigarillo in his mouth, and began to walk in the direction of his own beloved freighter. “And Booster? Was he happy with the data you were able to give him?”

“As happy as Booster can get.” Mara mumbled as she joined him.

“Good.” He replied. “And your situation? Is everything alright there?”

She kept in her scoff, knowing that Karrde was referring to her spat with Luke. “Yes, the situation is resolved.” She replied professionally.

He simply nodded.

“We plan to depart when there’s less attention around the docks.” She answered quietly, anticipating his next question.

“Ah yes…” He said, as if remembering. Karrde pulled out a data card, giving it to her. “Before I forget… Give this to him, will you? He wanted to know where to buy a certain item, or items, while he was here. An unusual request, but I understand that they will be a necessity…and usable information, if I so need it.”

Mara raised an eyebrow. “Of course.” She said, slipping the card into her jacket; Luke was up to something and had yet to inform her, but she dare not reveal that he had neglected to reveal his plans to her too.

Karrde nodded again. “So I probably won’t see you until you return?” He asked unassumingly.

She could feel a prang of hurt; as much as he was her boss, he still enjoyed her company. “Probably not.” Mara said quietly.

“I’ll make the usual arrangements to have your things transferred over with the delivery palettes.” He said.

Karrde noticeably sighed; knowing that she wouldn’t be on a pleasant journey, and not of her choosing.

This side trip was under the guise that she would be making a delivery at the end of it, to cover her tracks.
She could sense that he wanted to say more, but chose not to.

“Clear Skies, Jade.” His blue eyes narrowed again after meeting her gaze.

“Clear Skies, Karrde.” Mara returned to him, and then cringed. “I left your pass codes with Aves… for all your terminals.” She said without betraying anything else.

Karrde grinned once knowingly, and looked past her to point his chin, indicating that they weren’t alone anymore. He simply turned and headed into his freighter; knowing that here was not a place to have a reunion with the Jedi without giving the other man away with his recognition.

Mara could sense as Luke came up behind her, and she turned to meet him.

She glanced around before speaking. Gently, she palmed the card off to him “Karrde left that for you.” She said blankly.

Luke nodded and then made sure not to walk too close to her as they made their way over to the Verpine Cruiser that they would be taking on their trip together.

He let her walk ahead of him, up the plank, and waited until they were inside to inform her; he could feel her ire raising again.

“I hope he was able to get me the contact that I need here.” Luke said as he watched her walk over to the console and check the readouts.

Luke looked around the galley, and seeing a reader in the corner, approached it. “I didn’t know if he could get them or not…but it seems he has.” He said as he read.

Curiosity got the better of her, and Mara came over, as she sensed that he was even surprised to be receiving this information.

What she saw, shocked her. “Proton torpedo specs?” She asked loudly.

Luke sighed and then transferred some of the data over to his comm unit. “Yes. “ He sighed again. “When we leave Mustafar, I don’t want to leave anything behind.” He said quietly as the first dark tone of the day finally touched them.

Mara then knew why he had kept this information to himself, and she was alright without knowing.

She looked into his eyes, examining them. She saw his determination.

For all the teasing she could give him about being a naïve optimist, it was moments like these that she knew that wasn’t an accurate portrait of him at all.

It was a fight for him to stay on the light side of aspects of his life, and not to get consumed by those darks points.

She knew from her own experience, it was not an easy thing to do, and many times, she had been weak enough to wallow in the mire.

All Luke was asking of her, was to help hold himself up through this.

And she’d do it…for him.

“Karrde was able to find someone willing to sell them to me.” He finished off his thoughts. “Care to join me meet the contact? I could use your devious talents.” His mouth tugged to one side with an
attempt at a grin.

Mara watched his face. She could see the pain behind his eyes. Nodding, she agreed without a
debate or comment.

Leaning to read the data again, she pinpointed the location of where he was supposed to meet his
contact, and loaded them on her data pad.

According to the details, it was Mara, herself, who the weapons dealer would be expecting, and not
anyone else.

“I guess I’m leading the way?” She asked.

Luke turn in the direction of hatch and adjusted his cowl around his face, disguising his features.
“After you.”

Mara moved his lightsaber from its back clip to the front, and adjusted her hold-out blaster for good
measure. She removed her jacket, revealing her signature outfit before leaving the Verpine Cruiser.

Luke walked behind her, but near enough to appear that they were together.

He had never seen anything like it. From the way that Mara had described it, he was expecting
something less civilized, but no-less motely.

But Null looked like the industrialized depths on the Coruscant underground; ships and space crafts
of all sizes and descriptions became part of the city as they were abandoned or welded together to
make the streets.

Luke remembered the warning that Obi Wan had given him about Mos Eisley; Null could far, far
worse, or so it would seem. A wretched hive of scum and villainy would be too good a description of
the place.

Mara scoffed at him as they walked. “It’s not that bad.” She said in low undertones. “Yes, it’s
lawless, but that’s what keeps it reasonably safe – no sort of animosity is allowed to brew here.”

Her hair was uncovered and she wore her leather jumpsuit, her forearm blaster and lightsaber were in
clear view.

He wasn’t sure why she was wearing this particular outfit, until he realized that crowd parted for her
as they walked, and the men’s heads turned, and then looked away as if realizing who she was.

Luke sensed it now, the grudging respect for one of Karrde’s most-notable staff; it wasn’t just sexual
as they looked at her.

<<They’re not looking at you…just me.>> She pointed out as he followed her. <<That was the
plan.>>

He pulled back his senses, but kept them open, and he grinned to himself; she had made herself
more-visible to hide him.

<<They will recognize you in a Coruscsanti minute.>> She sent back to him. <<…And not in a
good way.>>

She turned a corner to a quieter street, so he came in closer to walk beside her.

“Where are we going?” He asked quietly, as it didn’t look like the exact location that was shown on
his map.

Mara turned her head to look at him; the goggles that Aves gave him to hide his eyes were somewhat off-putting.

She was about to answer him, but then turned back to watched the street, as the back of her mind started tingling.

Stopping, she looked up and down the street, as the tingling had grown stronger.

“I feel it too.” He said under his breath.

Mara narrowed her eyes in one direction and then turned to continue walking. Luke narrowed the gap between their walking paces.

“I guess they lost interested.” He said simply.

“Or they figured that you had me marked already.” She commented, and then briefly checked her data pad. <<This is the place.>>

Luke looked at what appeared to be the hatch door to a hull that was welded onto the side of a building.

Mara approached the key pad and typed in some digits, reading them off of her data pad.

With a hiss, the seal swung inwards and allowed them to enter.

She confidently walked through, with him in tow.

He had no danger senses with him about this place, even though logic told him otherwise.

<<Karrde got the ‘okay’ from Booster on this place.>> She tried to ease his concerns. <<They will want to keep him happy, so we’ll make new friends.>>

Luke reached out to sense any other beings around. He caught the sense of movement before he knew what was there.

From around the corner, an older protocol droid appear, walking in its jaunty manner that he had come to associate with Threepio.

The droid stopped before them, flexing it arm in the air. “Teesha goma fanga wha?”

Luke blinked in surprise; it was strange to hear Huttese so far away from the Rim worlds that the Hutts controlled or had a presence on, and Null was closer to Madalorian space too.

“Mieka…dosoo taysk…vis nacht…” Mara stuttered over the words, and Luke could sense that she was trying to remember how to speak the language.

He stepped beside her and lower the cowl of his hood. “Boonway taba nabee maya goma oonst.” He said. “We have an appointment.” He repeated.


Mara glared at him, slightly, but appreciated that he didn’t leave her hanging. <<Did I ever tell you that you make Huttese sound sexy?>>
<No, but maybe later I can give you a lesson in grammar, young lady.> He smirked before bringing the cowl back up over his mouth.

Luke knew his role here; Mara was to do all the talking. She had the reputation, he didn’t.

The droid led them down a corridor to an antennae room.

The room was small but with bright colored drapes hanging down.

“Yousa here?” A voice called from behind one of the drapes. “Karrde girl, yousa here?”

“Yes I am.” Mara called out.

Luke could sense that she didn’t have any idea what to expect either.

The fabric moved, and a Maswa appeared.

He was about to smile but something told him that this Maswa wasn’t like the friendly ones he had read about in story books.

The Maswa were small, shorter than Ewoks, and their fur rippled reminding him of the Bothans, but their long snorted faces were distinctive. In the stories, Mawas often helped people, but if they didn’t like you, they could be viciously cruel.

“Me ik Pi’qik.” The Maswa introduced herself.

Luke got the sense that this Maswa was female.

“Greetings Pi’qik. I am Mara Jade –Booster Terrik referred me to you.” Mara ducked down to come face to face with their host.

The Maswa’s slit eyes blinked at her, but then looked past to Luke’s form.

“This is my employee.” Mara explained. “He knows the specs that we require.”

Luke was about to join Mara, at eye-level with Pi’qik when he felt it, a sense coming over him, picking at him, jabbing and poking at him in his senses.

Mara turned her head sharply at him as she must have felt it too. And then it left.

Pi’qik snorted heavily and stepped back from Mara. “Yedha!” she exclaimed. “Yedha! Yedha!” She repeated loudly.

The Maswa back away. “No Yedha here!” Her little body wobbled back and forth as she tried to get away from both humans. “Yedha bring bad…always bad!” Pi’qik went back behind the drapes.

No sooner than she moved out of sight, an alarm sounded, and the protocol droid returned. “I will ask that you vacate the premises immediately. My master does not wish to do business with you.” The droid’s tone was prim but the sediment was not lost.

Slowly, Mara got up and backed away; her danger senses were at full height.

Luke did the same and kept his hands raised; he turned to leave the way they came in.

They left without any further explanation.
Out in the street again, she looked at the building in disappointment. “Well, I guess that ends that option.” Mara said smugly as they came back into the alley. “I didn’t know that Maswa didn’t like Jedi.” She gruffed.

“What was strange was that she felt us first before she reacted.” Luke said as he turned and looked at the building before coming over to her. “If Pi-qik was Force-sensitive, then it was unusual for her to react like that.”

Her eyes flicked up and down the street again, feeling the tingling again. “Let’s move.” She mumbled, as the tingling was back again. "For my experience, it's not so unusual for another Force-sensitive to not like other Sensitives."

He turned his head with her comment; there was something else behind it, and he silently asked for her reasoning.

Mara simply shrugged and kept walking. In the back of her mind, she answered him. Vader.

<I guess I don’t have any other options.> He sent over to her; she felt a slump in his senses.

They made their way to a busier street; with more people around them, there was less chance of an ambush.

<<I do have one person I can try, but…>> she sent back to him.

<But what?>

<<I’ll have to go alone.>> Mara glanced over at him to see him straighten his back.

“We should find someplace to think this over.” Mara paused and looked up and down the street. “And I’ve got to suss him out.” She looked at her data pad. “Figure out where he’s hiding these days.” She mumbled.

He stood by her silently. <Well...Do you know where the Icarus’ Wings is?> He asked.

Mara looked up from her pad. “Why do you ask?”

From the goggles over his eyes she had a hard time reading his senses. Luke brought them down so that she could see him.

Among the other people, Luke made sure that his body language wasn’t suggestive, but he wanted her to know that he didn’t want this time to be all-business. “Mirrax suggested it. They have real water showers.” His eyes darkened. “Just for tonight.” He whispered.

He saw her eyes light up, and then simmer right down; she nodded the tiniest of twitching in his mouth to a grin.

“Good.” He said in harder tone for anyone listening. “We’ll go there and then, you go do what you need to.”

Mara set her shoulders, and turned in the direction of one of the finer hotels on Null.

She felt relieved that Luke wanted sometime for them to be alone on this trip. He had been somewhat stand-offish since they had opened the documents to Vader’s estate, and the night that followed. It wasn’t normal for Luke not to want to be affectionate; she sensed that he wanted a do-over for that night. She wondered why he regretted it.
With a few twists and turns in their path, they arrived at the *Icarus’ Wings* in relatively short time.

As they approached the structure, she had to admit that as it had been assimilated into the spaceport, the pre-Clone War luxury yacht didn’t look out of place; it had been welded and attached to match its surroundings. She was sure that the inside didn’t match the outside.

“I didn’t bring anything with me.” She mumbled, thinking that her travel case was probably on the Verpine Cruiser, back at the dock, by now.

Luke looked about their nearest surroundings as he noticed a few of the close by shops. “I’ll figure it out.” He mumbled back to her.

Mara’s comm pinged a few times on the way there and she was eager to check the messages. She stopped before they entered the building; reading the messages, and growled under her breath.

“Do I want to know?” Luke asked, knowing that it was his quest for torpedoes that she was venturing on.

“Maybe.” She mumbled absently. “I now have the contact name.” She looked up at Luke. “I don’t like him, but he’s reliable, if anything…and won’t ask too many questions- just the way I like them.”

Luke raised one eyebrow and was about to ask.

<<My contact is Niles Ferrier.>> She answered simply.

He looked away, remembering his dealings with the ship-thief and their encounter. <I don’t like it.>

<<We’re meeting in a cantina not far from here.>> Uncharacteristically, she stepped in closer and touched his arm. <<It’s in public and no one knows that I’m buying them for you. He’ll just think that I’m making the deal for Karrde and one of his ships.>>

Luke swallowed hard, and then softened his gaze. He couldn’t live his life walking around her, waiting to catch her or coming to her rescue.

He broke with character and came closer to her, and touched her arm. <Why don’t you go to that meeting?> He grimaced.

She could tell that he was happy about her going off alone, but he trusted her judgement.

<I’ll get the room ready for us.> He sent over.

Mara nodded, and then looked at the entrance of the hotel, and then back at him. “I’ll be back in less than two hours.” She said, thinking that she would rather join him than leave.


Hesitating, about to step up and put her lips to his, she then remembered where she was, and who she was supposed to be now, and simply squeezed his arm before releasing it, and turned to walk away.

She could feel his attention still on her as she blended into the crowd. Unlike when she traveled with him, she didn’t want the attention on her. Now, she pushed their curiosity away.

Null had developed its neighborhoods, and finding this waterhole would be an easy feat.

Niles Ferrier was not capable of truly hiding out. He like his growing infamy in the underground; not
just a ship thief anymore, but an arms smuggler too.

Mara got the feeling that there something more to it when she had mention his name to Luke.

Luke was the type of person who assumed the best, instead of the worst. And she found herself amused at the types of people he had met in his travels; it was entirely possible that perhaps he had met Ferrier before. Both Solo and Calrissian had a plethora of questionable contacts.

She checked her comm for the coordinates of the cantina and checked the street for anything out of the ordinary. Then she looked up at the sign above the alcove and growled under her breath. *I’d really hate to die in a place like this.* She thought; it boggled her mind how many places like this made her invoke that sediment.

Walking in was no better than it looked, and the smell of such a place hit her but she didn’t let it stop her from approaching the bar.

The cantina didn’t offer much in the way of beverages, but the house ale seemed not to be too repulsive.

Taking a high stool in the corner made her appear as if she was available.

As rendezvous went, she knew the protocol; let the other assess you, and let them approach- it made for good business terms…and keep your blasters under the table.

Mara felt something move and wipe across her skin, and she turned in just to see the alien move to her right side and take a seat beside her.

As it shifted weight she could see it now, but up until this point it had absorbed any light that was around it, making it appear invisible.

“I heard you had *heighten* senses.” He said before sitting himself down on her left side. “My Wrath seems to like you though.”

Niles Ferrier’s sharp look didn’t take her by surprise, she was used to dealing with his type before. He didn’t bother cleaning himself up; he preferred his appearance to be somewhat off-putting, but Mara just looked at him keenly, trying not to flinch at the smell of heavy cigarillo smoke on him.

She saw her ‘in’ by the moment of his eyes as they went down her body and then came back up again, and then darken.

*That damn jumpsuit… every kriffing time…it gets them.* Mara growled to herself.

Using it to her advantage, she smirked and then let it disappear; appearing too eager would be unnatural for her.

“What else did you hear about me Ferrier? Because I’ve heard a lot about you.” She let her eyes flirt, but nothing else.

He put his tongue in his cheek and opened his mouth to answer; no doubt in some cheeky retort with double-entendres.

But she didn’t feel like playing right now. “I hope you heard that I pay well.” Mara dropped all of her ruse at pleasantness and dropped her tone so that he knew she meant business.

Ferrier didn’t look at her as he raised his glass to signal the bar tender for a refill. “That I did.” He
said grimly as it was apparent that she wouldn’t stay longer, or for anything else, than she had to get business done.

The bartender returned promptly, and Mara dropped a few credits, buying his drink as a gesture of good faith; Ferrier watched keenly and nodded before he took his first sip.

“I understand that I have something that you want.” He said after swallowing. His look hardened, “And you have something that I want...so what’s say we do some business, Gorgeous.” He smirked, seeing how far he could push her.

Mara blinked stoically once at him, allowing him some pleasure in thinking that he could out-maneuver her.

“I’ll send you the specs that I need.” She said quietly, pressing her comm unit.

Ferrier still kept his eyes on her, as he removed his comm unit and glance down and then back up at her, and then back down; not spending too much time away from watching her.

Mara knew what he was up to; it seems her reputation for Cassis was still in the air. No one wanted to be caught off their guard, and she was reminded of such when she felt his “Wrath” bump her shoulder.

He whistled appreciatively. “Karrde sure wants to pack a punch on this one, doesn’t he?”

Ferrier’s eyes were trying to burrow into her without much success. “Wanna tell me why he needs two long range X29 proton torpedoes and launchers?”

She made her eyes go round and mimic other vapid behavior that men found appealing. “He’s remodeling… and figures this will be a faster demolition.” She said with a smirk.

Ferrier chuckled, amused, and then dropped his tone. She could at least respect that he took his business seriously. “I don’t have that caliber in stock...I could get it for you? It will take a few days.”

Mara shook her head, turned back to the bar, and went back to her drink as she mumbled. “No good. Our ship is leaving in less that thirteen. What have you got?”

He took up the same position too. “I can get one 44-8 refractor…it’s compounded with a targeting system, so it will do the job… and the plating has been sheared so it won’t appear on any scopes.”

She lifted her glass to her mouth. “Cost?”

A 44-8 refracting charge would more than fit the bill; it was well-known for being able to hit its targets.

Ferrier shifted in his seat. “For you…and maybe a bit of your time.” His hand dared to reach over and touch her elbow that was resting on the bar. “Three thousand.”

Mara took a sip, and swallowed, ignoring his advance. “Done….without my time.”

He smiled at how easy she had accepted the first part. “Well, then if I can’t get the second leg of my deal...how about an exchange?” His finger still caressed her available skin, as he hissed; knowing he was doing something beyond dangerous. “I need to know where the Imps will be in the next week, and I hear that Karrde knows.”

She took another sip from her glass before she turned to him, with her data pad in her hand. “Stay
away from Gervanii and surrounding systems.” His comm pinged. “That’s half now, and we’ll see you at 0-800 to load, to give you the rest.”

Ferrier had the smarts to simply smile and back away, getting off the chair. “Always a pleasure, Jade.” He smirked. “It’s too bad that you didn’t want to take me up on my other offer…you could have helped my reputation, and I, yours.” He paused. “Maybe next time?” He smirked.

Mara gotten what Luke had needed; there was no reason why she couldn’t have fun with this. As she slid seductively slow off the chair, she rested her hand on his shoulder and leaned in closer to him. “Oh Niles….” She said sweetly. “The next time we meet…if anything of yours, touches me…I keep it.”

“See you tomorrow.” She said curtly.

She patted his shoulder as she walked on by and out the door of the cantina.

Back out in the streets, she pulled her comm one more time, and sent a message to Luke that she was heading back to the hotel.

Casually, she sent out her senses to find him, and touch his mind.

Tonight was theirs.

Tomorrow was another story.

TBC
Walls, Weapons and Warriors - Part 8

Chapter Summary

Quote: In the coming days, she would know what his family had been about, and then, she would decide if she truly wanted to carry on that legacy.

Characters: Luke and Mara

Chapter Notes

**
I got nothing…except, this is me asking for more comments (I seriously need them now to keep me on track of this story)

And for the record… when I write a "smut chapter", I make more speeling mistakes, by far... it's kinda sad...and yeah, I did that on poipose: Bad Spellers of the World Untie!

SMUT FEST…enjoy it on the evening before ‘The Last Jedi’

Cheers!

**

Null Space Port: Icarus’s Wings Hotel

One quick glance, onto the street, over her shoulder, to make sure she wasn’t being followed, and she disappeared into the lobby of the hotel.

Luke hadn’t been left alone as long as she initially thought she was going to be gone. He seemed relieved to sense that she was coming back to him, yet a bit flustered- like she was too early? <<Too early for what?>> She sent back to him.

His senses merely floundered a bit and then dissolved, which made her more-eager to get to wherever he was.

The “hotel”, such as it was, was a repurposed luxury yacht that lived up to its one-time grandeur.

It was clearly pre- Clone Wars, when people valued the appearance of things and not just their function.

The inlaid wood could have reminded her of certain parts of the palace, but the warm tones of the natural marble made the environment seem welcoming.

Mara smiled; Luke would love a place like this. He just seemed to fit into this sort of old-world comfort.
The concierge at the desk seemed to recognize her, and she assumed Luke must have left a description. And the hotel didn’t look very busy; so perhaps they were their only patrons and their attentiveness would make sense.

The droid inside the turbo lift seemed to take delight in exchanging pleasantries. Given that Mara had just come from one of the grimmest locations, she was sure that she was tainting her surroundings.

Her mind remembered that Luke had promised her running water, and she smiled again. She fingered the key card impulsively in her hand, wishing the lift to move faster.

Stepping off the turbo lift, she could sense his excitement too, and she blushed as she started to walk towards their room.

Although part of her wondered what he was up to; he had been so allusive the past few days; his emotions were up, then down, and hard to predict.

Mara paused at the door, reaching out to him to let him know that she was there.

She was about to tap her card on the sensor, but the door slid open for her casually.

He stood on the other side, smiling with his warm eyes.

“It’s done.” She said, trying to get business out of the way before she entered for her sabbatical for the night.

Luke nodded once, sighed and stepped aside so that she could come in. “Then, I invite you to relax and let everything else go.” He said in soothing tones.

Mara followed him inside.

Somehow, he must have gone shopping; he was wearing a very casual tunic, and light colored pants—not the smuggler outfit he had arranged for himself earlier.

He walked behind her to give her a chance to look around.

They had decorated the room in lush fabrics of thick burgundy velvet, and rich dark-brown wood paneling.

A large bed was in the main room, with two very comfortable-looking sofas arranged juxtaposition to it.

He turned back to bring her a goblet of champagne.

She raised one eyebrow before taking it from him and watched as he went to work.

He bent down and started to undo the strappings of her boots as she took her first sip; savoring the taste, and washing away the bitterness of the ale that she had at the cantina with its sweet flavor.

She put up no opposition to have her boots removed, and lifted each foot as he slid each boot off in turn.

Mara raised the other eyebrow. “So…What did you do?” She teased him with a gruff tone, and then smirked.

“You think I did something to warrant giving you some attention? That I’m trying to make up for something?” Luke tried for his most-innocent of looks as he came up to meet her, playing along her
She narrowed her eyes. “Most men do.” She muttered, and sipped from the glass again, enjoying the sweet flavor.

He came around and encircled her waist in his arms, holding her from behind. “I’m not ‘most men’.” He purred seductively into her ear.

Had he seen the look on her face, grinning wickedly, remembering that statement was never more-true; the things he could make her feel.

She had not kissed him since they had landed, and she had forgotten how much she could miss his presence. Shivering, she leaned back into his embrace, and closed her eyes.

His hand left her waist, and came to rest on her shoulders. Slowly, they started massaging the tight muscles in her back.

Mara let one little moan escape her mouth as he rubbed. *How long has it been since you’ve had a good massage?* She thought to herself. *Was it in the palace?*

Her thoughts washed away; he seemed to have found a knot in her shoulder blade and was working it out.

“How come your muscles are so tense?” He asked, his voice quiet but still deep. “I saw you stretch this morning.”

She lulled her head to one side as he pressed her angry muscles. “I don’t slouch.” She managed to get out. “My body is always ready to respond.” She muttered; her mind flashes on some of her dancer’s training and some lecture about muscle memory, and then came back to the present.

“I managed to do something.” He purred again, marginally increasing his volume as to wake her from state that she was relaxing into.

She hummed, as if asking.

Luke chuckled at her predicament; amused that she could be business one moment, and so totally relaxed with him, the next.

“Come on…” He whispered into her ear. “Into the ‘fresher…I have something to show you.”

Mara let him rock her body as they waddled together into the adjacent room. She drank another sip of the champagne as they went, finishing it off.

“Is this you being romantic?” She asked with a touch of mischief, after she swallowed.

He chuckled again. “Only if you let me…and… if you *co-operate*.”

Their waddling had become almost comical, and Mara allowed herself to laugh as he started to remove her waist holster, and then her wrist holster; setting her weapons on the counter.

His fingers felt so gentle, so electric, as they moved over her skin. The flesh involuntarily dimpled. He may like to tell her how rare, and precious her pale skin was, but the truth was that his bronze complexion was equally a marvel to her.

For years he had been off the twin-suns planet, but he still kept some of that tone with him. She
smirked, knowing that his golden skin was hidden by most of his clothing.

Maybe it was the ale she had earlier or the champagne that she was having now, but she allowed both to go to her head, feeling safe with him.

They rounded the corner into the smaller, yet equally grand room.

At the far end, Mara gasped as she saw it.

“I specifically asked for a room with a tub.” Luke smiled, still holding her from behind.

He could feel her excitement as she saw that he had surrounded the rim of the bath with candles, and a spicy aroma filled the room.

“I’ve already filled it, so I hope it isn’t too hot for you.” He voice had gone low again.

Mara almost pouted when she felt one of his hands leave her, but she stifled it when he only reached over to turn the lights down low in the room, and soft music started to play.

She sensed he had a question, so she jumped to answer it before he had a chance to ask. <<My cycle is done.>>

The farm boy blushed, but the grown man knew he could have asked in a mature way.

She turned to look into the adjacent mirror.

The vanity in the ‘fresher allowed her the perfect view to see him lean in before he kissed her bare shoulder.

<<Good.>> he thought over to her, and looked up to her in the reflective glass with those piercing azure-blue eyes.

She shivered again, remembering their last night on the Liberty.

Watching the reflection, his hand came up and gently tugged at the pull of the zipper on the front of her jumpsuit, she was mesmerized by his actions.

<<I always wondered what it would take to get you out of this thing.>> He smirked.

Mara snorted gently. “All you had to do was ask. You truly wanted to get me out of it, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Luke said lowly and definitively, as a bit of blush came to his cheeks. “Come on…you knew what it was doing to me on Myrkrr…didn’t you?”

The zipper was coming to her navel, and the swell of her breasts had opened the snug leather confinement, exposing more of her flawless skin.

She rolled her eyes with mischief. “Yes.” She whispered as she watched him kiss her shoulder again.

“Cheeky.” He whispered before he buried his face into her neck, delivering little kisses against her pulse point.

Mara snorted softly as he tickled her. She closed her eyes and lulled her head back against him.

The surroundings had put her in a relaxed stated so quickly that she didn’t dare fight it when she realized what he was doing.
She asked- she knew that she might have been tempted to feel manipulated that he was drawing her in, but she knew why he was doing it, and wasn’t about to stop him.

The Force whirled around them, and she sighed and simply gave in, joining her presence in the same current of peaceful energy.

She felt the heave of his chest as he sighed before answering. “Yes, I was…” <I need it right now… is that okay?>

Mara opened her eyes, and saw that his expression told her how very badly he wanted the tranquility that the Force gave him, now.

She gave him a gentle smile through the glass, and nodded.

Luke smiled back, but then his gaze went back to what his hands were doing; the zipper was just below her navel, almost at the end of its journey.

He looked down and then back up at her face in the mirror; azure eyes had changed to sapphire, deep and round.

The zipper stopped at her lower abdomen, and she found that she was breathing slow and heavy. When she looked up at her reflection, her own eyes were the colour of the darkest emerald.

He took her glass away from her and gently guided her to turn away; peeling the jumpsuit from her body.

Despite its appearance, she never felt desirable as she slinked out of the garment; it clung unnaturally tight to her form, but somehow he had managed to remove it without a fight.

The benefit of this suit is that it didn’t require any undergarments, but unfortunately, it left her skin feeling clammy.

Luke must have senses that she wasn’t entirely comfortable, so instead of stroking her skin, like he wanted to, he stood back and appreciated her shape as he folded the garment placing it off to the side.

Mara was surprised when she felt his hands start to caress her hair. She felt him fumbled with the tresses. When she realized what he was attempting to do, she reached up and assisted him by twisting her shortened locks into a roll. She felt him slide the hair clip in place, sensing his satisfaction.

His body radiated heat as he came behind her to guide her into the tub.

He watched her as, like a child, she cautiously tipped her toe into the water, and finding that was acceptable he held out his hand so that she could balance as she stepped into the tub.

Luke helped guide her down as she began to lower herself.

Mara watched him as he grinned, helping her.

She sniffed the air, appreciatively.

“It’s jasmine and camellia.” He whispered. “That’s what they told me at the shop… I just thought it smelled like you.” He blushed, as he knelt down beside the tub. “I added it to the water… do you like it?”
She watched his face as she leaned back in the tub, against the towel roll he had already placed there, and nodded.

Her body was already thrilled that he was close by, and had touched her with such tenderness. Now, her rosy-brown nipples came just below the water-line and were exposed as the water ebbed in the tub; her desire for him, and the contrast of the cool air and warm water made them sharp unabashedly.

The flickering of the old fashion candles cast shadows on his face that accentuated the golden glow of his skin.

Luke leaned in to brush his lips against hers, and looked contented as he back away; she didn’t notice that he dipped another towel into the water.

He brought up the moistened cloth and leaned in again to capture her lips again as he squeezed the fabric, releasing the water, letting it roll down her exposed skin.

Mara hummed with his touch. <<You’re spoiling me, you know.>>

He was about to back away again, when she reached over to cup his cheek, just to keep him close to her for a while longer.

The water sloshed a bit and droplets damped his tunic, but didn’t seem to matter.

<I had a shower before you arrived.> He sent back. <It’s only fair that you get spoiled now.>

“This is very nice.” She mumbled between their lips; the electricity of his touch causing a fluttering in her stomach.

Luke brought up the cloth and again squeezed the water from it so that it went down her opposite shoulder; he pursed his lips lazily against hers, feeling the magnetic draw of her and not resisting.

“It is, isn’t it?” he hummed, looking at her.

He had teased her for her ‘cat-like’ qualities, but he did enjoy watching her bask it such a relaxing moment; very few they could find one together.

“Would you like another glass of champagne?” He murmured while her lips were close. “I have drizzle berries too.”

Mara’s eyes lit up, and she nodded, but then whimpered as he moved away to retrieve her glass. She moved in the tub, so that she placed her hands on the ledge and lowered her chin on them, to watch him slowly get up and leave the room to refill her glass.

She took the moment to look around and see that the steam from the bath was now fogging the mirror. The candles still flickered about the room.

It wasn’t excessively fancy, but he had done this for her.

In that moment, her heart began to well, and she could feel tears starting to form in her eyes.

Never – never in her life had anyone cared for her so kindly or gently, -or passionately, as he had. Never had anyone made her feel as loved as he did.

Luke came back a few seconds later to see her face, and he dropped down beside the tub, with concern. “What’s the matter?” He whispered, and came in to kiss the tracks of the wetness on her
“You l-love me.” She stuttered, trying to control her feelings again. “Don’t you?” She sniffled, still overwhelmed.

He shook his head in disbelief that she was even asking. “Of course, I do.” He kissed her gently. “Very much.”

Mara blinked the rest of her tears away. <<I still don’t understand it.>>

<You will.> He sent over. <When you start trusting your own feelings…> He kissed her one more time for good measure. <…and trust mine.>

He reached over and bought her the refill of her champagne, and some fresh drizzle berries.

Sniffling one more time, she brought the glass up to her mouth and took a sip, and smiled at him, nodding. She watched as he popped a few drizzle berries into his mouth before offering her some.

“This must have cost you a fortune.” She mumbled before she placed the berries in her mouth and savored the flavor.

Luke simply smiled serenely, refusing to let her think about such problems, and placed a kiss soundly on her lips.

The music emitting from his data pad, changed tunes, and the new selection caught his ear. He smiled larger.

“Do you recognize it?” He asked as he offered her more berries from the platter.

Mara narrowed her eyes, seeing that he was avoiding answering her question. But now her ears peaked at the music playing softly and she smiled.

“It was the song that was playing on my balcony…that night….” She whispered. Her grin grew to match his. “You asked me to dance…”

He nodded. <That was almost six months ago…did you know that?>

Mara nodded, not leaving his eyes as she placed a berry on her tongue and let it slip inside her mouth. <<It was over six months ago.>>


She nodded again, confidently. “We can always ask Leia how far along she is…” Blushing, she smirked at him, knowing that their passion had been sensed by others, resulting in his sister’s current pregnancy.

He cleared his throat. “No thanks.” He murmured. “I trust you.”

His eyes glanced down and then back to her face. “You were… amazing that night.” He leaned in to kiss her cheek. “And every night after that.”

Pressing his lips to hers, his mind whispered. <So beautiful…so soft…so incredible.>

Mara reached back. <<You made me feel so special…you always do.>>

<I can’t help it.> He nuzzled close to her cheek. “I love you.” His voice deep and warm.
She felt it, and her doubt that maybe she didn’t do enough for him; he must have felt it too.

<You brought me to a source for Jedi information… you furnished our home…you’ve saved my life on more than one occasion…you visit with my family…> “I think I owe you a bath just for talking with Han as much as you have.” Luke said wryly, and kissed her temples.

Mara snorted quietly.

<You do more for me than you realize.> His mind touched her senses.

She nodded.

“And now, I’m going to get you out of that cooling water before you start shivering.” He said sweetly.

Luke reached back for a large bath sheet, and stood up to open it for her to step into.

She reached over and pressed the release for the drain as she stood; the music played, and she hummed with the tune.

He watched the water bead down her body with hungry eyes.

Stepping over the ledge, she came into the embrace of the soft towel, and relinquished the rights to pad herself down to him.

“It’s not warmed.” He said, looking at her earnestly, and apologizing for the conveniences that were lacking outside Karrde’s bases.

“But I think that I can find other ways to warm you.” He said as he encompassed her body.

Mara raised an eyebrow, seeing the challenge. She was tempted to take the towel away from him, but he persisted.

“No…” he said determined. “There’s a right way to do these things…”

She smirked, amused.

“We have to start off at the top.” Luke smiled playfully as he took her left arm inside the towel, and gently tapped at her skin. “Rubbing will only chafe your skin.” As the towel receded, he place his lips to her knuckle and kissed the top.

His lips made a line of succession of small kisses until he reached her shoulder, and then fluttering kisses, making her giggle, around her collarbone.

Mara snorted loudly when it got too much.

He then took her other arm in the towel, repeating his processed of padding her skin and then following it with kisses; wanting to hear her laugh out loud again.

She gave in and laughed freely; surprised by the sound that she was capable of making.

“Turn around, please?” he whispered while still at her neck.

She gave in again, without arguing.

The towel pressed at her shoulders, and she could feel him massage the joints as he went down just
to her waist.

This time she felt soft cool air as he blew a line across her skin; the flesh dimpled, and he placed his lips to it, warming it.

Mara could sense that he wanted her turn around again, into his waiting hands. She could anticipate where he would want to travel next because she wanted to feel his sensual touch too.

The quiver in belly began to grow.

Waiting for her, his mouth was slightly slack, and he licked his lips slowly before looking into her eyes.

There, the pools of dark blue had lost their humor, replaced with want and desire for the skin he was graced with touching.

She could see the rise and fall of his shoulders from his heavy breaths as his eyes drifted down.

As if feeling his touch already, her breasts dimpled with excitement.

Gasping, barely audible, as the lush fabric cupped her under bust; he was diligent, and serious about his task before him, tenderly pressing the fabric against her.

<Still sensitive?> Luke’s mind asked quietly, as he switched to her other breast.

Mara nodded once, just watching him; captivated and expectantly.

He leaned in slowly, still locked on her eyes, looking at her as he approached, his mouth opening with his plump lips at the ready to graze along her skin.

Pressing once to the top of her breast bone, he then dragged his lips to the fuller skin, where the mound became full, luscious and soft. His toweled hand pushed the mound up to meet his lips, and he pursed at the flesh until he couldn’t deny himself any longer and engulfed the hardening bud with his mouth.

Thrills and ripples of sensation caused a blush to immediately appear on her skin; no warning, no creeping flush.

She moaned quietly.

He smiled mischievously as he saw it come on, turning his attention back to the task at hand.

His tongue whirled and sucked against the tighten tip; massaging the rest of her flesh with his hands.

She hummed without apology, enjoying the feelings.

Through her senses, she could feel his impatience that was fighting with his desire to take things slow and relish each moment.

His passion took him for a second and he cupped her opposite breast without relinquishing the other one first, and squeezed.

She gasped and he stopped to see that he might have been tad too rough; he frowned until she reached down and cupped his cheek to lean in to kiss his lips, encouraging him again.

With a second breast, he nuzzled his face against the velvety skin before finding her other nipple.
The quiver in her stomach had turned into a fluttering that was building in her.

Looking down, she watched as his teeth gently grated over the tip that had perked with his attention.


He looked up at her, seeing the affect he was having on her. He didn’t want her to expend all her energy there, so he simply turned to the mass in his hand and kissed the mound before releasing it.

She looked a little disappointed until his hands guided her to turn around again, and she realized that he wasn’t finished with what he had started.

Hugging her chest to keep the warmth that he had delivered, she was surprised as he padded the towel against her bottom; he gasped and pinched her cheeks.

She looked over her shoulder, irritated with him, but then was treated to the look of him delivering little kisses to her heart-shaped backside.

He hummed, teasing her temper.

<Don’t pretend that you don’t enjoy it.> He taunted her back.

She huffed a bit, but gave in with a snort as it did feel good.

Feeling that now he was paying more serious attention to her body, she turned to face him, at his direction.

He was eye-level with her abdomen as he knelt before her; his eyes flashed up once at her face, seeing that she didn’t suspect what he would do next.

His lips met with her stomach and grazed down past her navel, pursing and breathing hot air on her.

He stopped and regarded her lower abdomen with keen awareness.

Mara watched as his hot hand rested on her lower belly; she could sense that he desired something more from her, and this part of her body was sacred to him, just above her womanhood.

With a surge of want, his pressed his lips firmly to the area, almost as if he was pleading for it to fulfil his wants.

She reached down and stroked his head and then to his cheek as his face turned to kiss her palm.

Without thinking of what the words meant, she reached out to him. <<Soon Luke…someday soon… it will happen.>> Mara gulped at the implications of the words that had just left her thoughts. Was she truly saying what she thought she was?

The fluttering in her had now changed to wave of heat.

He looked up at her, and nodded. His impassioned look morphed after he eyes flashed down at his eye level, seeing her womanhood before him, and then back up at her with an impish grin.

Kissing her belly one more time before he lifted her left leg and placed her foot on his knee, he returned his care, starting to pat the skin of her inner thigh with the towel in his hand. When satisfied, he placed his lips on her knee, delicately kissing her skin.

Leaving the towel behind, his hands travel long her inner thigh, massaging ahead of his lips until
they came to the crux of her hip and divine cunny.

She thought he would stop there, but instead, with delicate precision, his fingers parted her red-gold curls and folds, exposing the engorged nub.

Without hesitation, he tilted his head, and licked his lips before his tongue darted out, flicking at the sensitive bulb.

Mara shuddered with the feeling of this assiduity; she gasped as he rested his head against her thigh, holding her there as his mouth began to suck the tiny taro.

Alternating between licking and taking the hood into his mouth to swirl it around, he resisted sliding his fingers into her depths; he wanted her ready for him.

She began to pant and placed her hand on his head, stroking the short blonde hair, not wanting him to stop but at the same time, it was almost too much; the pit of her stomach was now fluttering in hot waves, and she felt her core throb for him.

<Do you want me to stop?> his mind asked.

It took a moment before she realized that she heard words. “N-no.” She panted, shaking her head, and then clamped her lips together to muffle a moan.

<Anything for you.> he sent over. Yet he didn’t heed her request, and did stop, only to kiss her right above her curls.

Her hand, that was stroking his hair, was now using his shoulder to balance herself as he lower her leg down from off his knee. Her senses quivered and on the verge.

Luke switched his knee that he was kneeling on, and brought up her opposite leg as she recovered from over stimulation.

The towel was virtually useless; her skin was now hot, and the water had evaporated off of it, but he still made the motions to pat it dry, and mimicked the attention he had given her other leg, placing his kisses starting at the knee and working towards her core.

Mara whimpered with every kiss, expecting the same reception when he met her Venus mound, already twitching for his touch, his lick, his hot mouth, his hunger.

He looked up at her anguished face; he could feel her flustering and knew it was he who had brought this on in her.

He parted her folds again, taking great care to be gentle and not portray how badly he wanted to feel her climax in his senses. He would try to restrain himself and coax it slowly again.

With a lick on her clitoral hood as a warning, he descended again, cossetting the bundle of nerves, toying and tempting them again.

He shook his head as he latched on with fervor, sensing her building thrall; the sparks that came from her senses were fabulously chaotic.

“Luke” she moaned unexpectedly; drunk on the sensation.

Her protestations only egged him further; he wanted to hear her below his name again and again into the night.
Even with a designated goal before him, he threw those plans away and slipped two fingers inside her, feeling her wet, hot core.

She gasped loudly. Her head tilted back; the hand not used to keep her balance massaged her tender breast as she breathed hard with an open mouth.

His fingers stroke with the tempo of his lips as they sucked and nibbled.

<Are you close?> he asked; his voice sounding husky and full of his own desire. In truth, his trousers had become uncomfortable from the moment he had first seen her bare skin before him.

“Ugh-huh” She managed to get out as she reluctantly nodded, still enthralled.

<How close?>

She panted rapidly as his intensity had increased. “Very” she whispered.

He shook his head, with the hood between his lips; he could feel her nails dig into his shoulder as she fought to keep standing. She moaned, and then whimpered.

Gradually, he slowed his pace and intensity; knowing he did not want to have her spent here.

“Luke…” calling his name as she exhaled, got his attention. “…I love you.” She exhaled again.

He hummed his satisfaction at hearing those words; he could not hear them enough. He hummed again, only to bring her down and withdraw the attention.

When he backed away, he looked up to see her flushed face, and those rosy cheeks, lost and on the edge of rapture; he smiled, watching her state.

It took a few moments before she looked down at him, becoming aware, her breathing becoming less erratic, and her composure returning.

He placed her leg down off his knee, and went to stand; her hand still gripped his shoulder as she wavered a bit.

Reaching up, he removed the clip that held her hair in place, and watched her hair relax into waves that framed her face. He stroked out the tresses, watching his fingers slip through the strands of fire.

Leaning in, he tilted her chin up and met his mouth, and kissed her with hungry passion.

Mara could taste her own flavor on his lips, but didn’t give it a second thought, wanting him and responding as she dipped her tongue into his mouth, letting her arms wrap around him.

He was now breathless, and his own desire was at the breaking point; she could feel his senses trembling.

Resting his forehead against hers, he panted, “Come to bed with me?” his voice was half-command, half-pleading.

Lost for words, she let her eyes flutter closed and nodded without a fight.

He directed her arms around his neck, guided her to wrap one leg around his mid-section, and then he lifted the other one into place.

She snorted once quietly as he lifted her and carried her into the next room.
Their lips met as they travelled; suppressing the frenzy that was threatening to erupt.

She could feel his hardness struggling, straining, so close to her core now but kept trapped by his trousers, with her legs wrapped around his mid-section. She wanted his flesh, to touch her, and sear her skin; the electrifying energy which she fed off of.

He placed her on the edge of the bed and the decadent velvet felt glorious against her bottom.

Now she could slip her hands under his tunic, and force it from him; it slipped easily off over his head, and he returned to her mouth expediently.

More, she wanted more, demanded more, of him, and his skin, on her, touching her body. She crushed her mouth to his, moaning for more.

He didn’t need to feel her desire across their shared sense in the Force, but he did, and he let it fill and fuel him. He could feel his own phallic pulse as his trousers needed to come off.

He needed to be inside her, he needed her to moan his name, and he needed to climax into her at the will of the galaxy.

She didn’t need any further provocation, and her fingers went to work at freeing him.

The energy in the room, and senses between them, approved of their union; Mara had intentionally kept her feelings open to him and the Force, wanting it to be their ally now.

He freed himself; hard, hot, hungry for her and to become one with her.

About to join with her, he remembered himself, and he cringed only momentarily.

She moaned in protest when he stepped aside, out of his clothing and retrieved the small package on the bedside table.

His lips came back to her to distract her as he fumbled with the plasti wrapping, and then she understood. No matter how engrossed he was, he thought of her safety first.

She could tell when he was ready and he hooked her knees, pulling her to the edge of the bed. Resting her knees in the crux of his elbows, his hand hungrily pulled at her hips.

No warning, no further tease or taunt, he slid his thickness into her, moaning with relief between their lips, he then whispered her name as if it were a prayer.

Mara watched his lost face, in such pleasure that they had joined; her senses danced and rejoiced at feeling him beginning to move.

She pulled her hips closer to edge of the bed, her knees till up, and allowing her body to move with him.

Leisurely, he progressed, strong slow strokes into her; he pursed his mouth against hers with every beat.

“So beautiful” he whispered, yielding to his own feelings.

In the Force, he was like a bright star, burning and pulsing in life and in love.

Mara lifted her hips to meet his groin, pushing back and meeting him as he entered her.
All her love, all her wants and desires came down to how she could share them with him. She hoped she was everything to him, that he was to her.

“You are…” He said through gritting teeth, hearing her unguarded thoughts. “And so much more.” He said before finding her mouth again.

She could feel it now, as the head of his shaft teased the right bundle of nerves inside her. She mentally begged for him to increase his pace but not move away from that place.

“Yes” she hissed from her lips. “…right there.” She instructed him. <<Keep going…>> she pleaded.

Inside her, her juices flowed willingly, heightening those nerves that were in a synaptic spasm. Every movement by him, only went to bring her closer to apex.

Luke smirked at her desire for him too, before he plundered her mouth, wanting to capture the moans that were escaping because they belonged to him, he made her this way, and only he could do that.

His hot hand came up and cupped her breast and squeezed in time with his pistol movements.

Tentatively, he increased his speed as he sensed his mission as it was; she was so very close and had been teetering there for some time.

He had shown amazing restraint up until now and with his hormones raging, screaming at him to stud her, he needed to feed the call, and give in.

Abandoning all reason, he went with his gut instinct and broke free from his reserve. It wasn’t enough to make her moan, he wanted to hear her scream for him, see her bewildered, watch her lose control as much as he did.

All this and the Force approving while waves of knowledge and power wrapped the lovers; it was not controlled but wild and uncaged.

Luke could feel it as if it was tangible, drawing him in, wanting more of him, and not wanting to share him with anything else…except for one thing…it wanted her as well.

High on his senses, he pushed himself again and again into her, as fast as he could muster holding off on his own climax that was threatening to arrive.

And then, without warning she felt it- no time to hold her breath and control it- her body responded in deep pulsating throbs that made her shoulders crunch repeatedly inward.

Mara bellowed his name with very little coherence.

And he could feel it then, her power, her essence in the Force, like a supernova, raw and exposed. He knew what he had been missing all his life and reached out at the same moment, feeling his impending orgasm.

The eruption from his body only forced his power to extend from him, and engulfing her as well. It belonged to him now; her strength mingled with his own, and he could see and feel the galaxy in all its mass and grandeur before him. It was his for the taking.

He could see it all; the Light and the Dark. So much power… could this even be real?

In his senses, he could feel it; The Dark… had found him, as if it was staring back at him, and then it was gone.
Suddenly, he felt it. The ground shifted, the air sparked. It was more than just their passion, and it was blinding and astronomically powerful.

And now, to his relief, the aura of *The Light* only remained, filling him with peace and placidity.

In an instant, it was gone; he was left there panting from his rapture, her face was close to him and he turned to feel her shivering in his arms.

He kissed the side of her face until she turned to him; her eyes unfocused and breathless. She was like a doll in his arms, weak and surrendering.

Lifting her, he bought both their bodies onto the bed, then collapsed and lay there in silence, their bodies were virtually immobile.

The moments had passed into minutes, and he lost track of how long they were in that state.

They lay beside each other, bodies still partially entangled, the dew of afterglow on their foreheads as they breathed heavily in unison.

As he became more and more aware of his surroundings, he felt the complete and utter bliss that surrounded them.

Luke reached over, weakly, and motioned for her to come closer to him; he wanted to share his euphoria with her.

In her daze, Mara wanted to be with him too, and sluggishly willed her body to move. She came to rest her head beside his shoulder, rather than on it.

His hand came up, and, exhausted, dropped down on her upper arm, in an attempt to hold her.

As her breathing returned to normal, she dared to whisper, “What was *that*?”

A few more ragged breaths, he swallowed the air. “You felt that too?” He asked, knowing that she did indeed feel it, knowing that they had generated it together; just confirming that they had a shared experience.

She nodded against his shoulder.

<It was... *unbelievable*…> his thoughts trailed off, dazed.

In the heat of their passion, through their union in their conjoined senses, in a drive to touch the Force, something had happened.

A distinct surge in their power had left them both drained beyond what they had previously experienced when they had meditated, sparred or made love.

They knew it; it was undeniable. Passion and strength had interwoven to cause the world around them to quake; the ground had moved.

It was something that neither of them had thought was possible before; the rawness of it all.

The one thing that they both knew was that they had not bonded; the Force hadn’t permitted it. And both felt somewhat disappointed given that they had experienced what their combined powers could do.

But the Force had permitted their brief joining, if only to show them what they could be capable of.
Luke marveled at her; she had kept her potential under wraps. He had only seen a brief glimpse of her capacity once, and then she had shrunk away from it.

 Joined with his power, they, together would be unbeatable, against whatever would befall them.

 Mara shivered; she could sense that he was pleased with what had occurred- she was not entirely sure that she was.

 It scared her; he scared her. She had now seen it; all his power, all his strength. She shouldn’t have been surprised by it, but she was surprised that he was willing, and able to unlock her strength too.

 Reaching out to him, she probed his senses.

 She could feel that it was subsiding in him and it wasn’t a lust for power, merely, pleasure that his abilities didn’t shun her away from him; it was a fear that he harbored and thinking that would keep him isolated.

 No, when she re-examined it, she didn’t fear him. She knew he seemed to have control over his thoughts and feelings.

 The Force was now like a slow cascade, like waves breaking on a beach; calm and tranquil.

 Mara hugged herself closer to Luke’s body; there were other things that had been on his mind the past few days.

 He took her in his arms, as she began to shiver, and pulled the covers up over both of them.

 <What are you thinking?> He asked gently. <I can hear your mind at work, but I can’t hear your thoughts.>

 Mara snorted; she was well-aware of the limits of the Jedi senses, and knew that he would never push past them for his own goals.

 She watched the rise and fall of his chest as he held her, and decided that she would say the first thing that came into her mind.

 “You want a baby.” She said, in a quiet tone, aside from the rush of power emanating from both of them, came the knowledge beyond what she had previously known. She assumed that he wanted a family, but not she had no question just how deeply he hungered for one.

 Those around him had started their lives together, his sister, his friends- all were starting families; it would be natural that he wanted one too.

 Something had also provoked this drive in him; she had become aware of it when she felt the lust in his dreams. And then tonight, as he worshipped her body- he had deliberately stopped, and paid homage to her lower abdomen that would someday hold life.

 She felt him stir.

 “Yes.” Luke said, without any regret in his voice. It was then that he let his shield down on the matter; what he felt in his heart.

 Mara felt the full weight of his desire; not just in having a family, a home, with her, but the act of making a family. He wanted to feel the life that they would create together; it was the very essence of Jedi code- to encourage the creation of life. At the forefront of his thoughts was a desire to
impregnate her.

“…But, I’m aware that we aren’t ready.” He whispered, absolutely knowing the reality of their situation. <We will be…just not now.> He kissed the top of her head. <I’ll be safe with you- I promise.>

She nodded, realizing that he would never go against her wishes to wait...or even reconsider having a family.

Snuggling closer to him, she wasn’t aware that she had tensed up before she had asked him that question. She knew his dreams were the same as hers; a place where they could finding belonging, and increase their fold into as family – a real family.

Mara tilted her head towards him, and gently placed her lips on his.

In the coming days, she would know what his family had been about, and then, she would decide if she truly wanted to carry on that legacy.

She closed her eyes, still feeling his essence and Force around them.

<<I love you.>> her mind whispered over to him.

Luke shifted, only to hold her in a position that he could join her in slumber. <I love you too.>

They lips met once more before resting peacefully.

As she drifted, she heard the words repeat in her mind…

SON OF VADER

TBC
Walls, Weapons and Warriors - Part 9

Chapter Summary

Quote: He quickly thought of the person who was most likely to have an angered partner and tried to imitate them. He shrugged as Han would, and gave her a lop-sided smirk. “Hey, I’m a Jedi, not a poet…not good with words.” He winked.

Characters: Luke, Mara, Karrde, Niles Ferrier, others

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Chapter Notes

Do you know that it has been 1 year since I started this story? --1 year since I wrote and published "Insomnia"?

It was just going to be a one-off type of thing and now, it has grown.

You know, I started writing last year because...and this is going to sound really cheesy, but it's the truth... I started writing because of the death of Carrie Fisher. She was, and will forever be my childhood hero. It wasn't just that she was Princess Leia, but it was everything else that she was, including a writer. She and I had lots in common - at least I thought so. Books, and reading was one way out of her life...and the same with mine.

This past year has not been easy for me, both professionally and personally, but writing helped get me through it.

And having readers enjoy my work has been a great validation- more than you could know.

So thank you for reading and keeping with me this far.

I have more stories in my head...they are lurking...and I put them in PDF or Word Doc format whenever I can. (there are a few besides this story on AO3 ~wink!)

And for you, I will try and get them out.

Thanks again, and cheers! Sincerely, Phae

**

Null Outpost

“Mara!” Luke called to her.
“Wait!” He whined after her as she raced ahead of him.

He was surprised by her sudden reaction.

She was fine when they woke up; better than fine. And now, she was clearly *not fine*.

If it had not been that they needed to be at the dock at a specific time, he was sure that they would still be in bed enjoying an elongated quiet moment.

Waking up, she had been affectionate and loving. He was surprised that she was still so relaxed after the previous night. For him, he was overly-energetic; he felt like running a marathon, still high on the energy surge.

But when they went to check out of the hotel, the concierge apologized for the turbulence that Null Outpost had experienced.

“I’m sorry, Sir- in all my years of residing here, I’ve never felt such a thing. I believe on terra-forma, they call it an ‘earthquake’…but a small one. The civic engineers are looking in to it, or so I’m told.”

As soon as Mara heard those words, her demeanor seemed to change; she became quiet and introspective.

Luke could sense that she was resisting the urge to throw all of her shielding up; against, him, against her feelings, against the world.

As she walked at her rapid pace, she wasn’t running away from him, but from everything. She wanted nothing more to protect herself inside a cocoon until she had time to digest what she had just heard.

Even at such an ‘early’ hour, the Outpost was alive and thriving; the narrow corridors had all sorts of beings coming and going.

Luke could sense that it made matters worse that he could hear people speaking about the seismic ‘bump’, ‘jump’, ‘hiccup’ or whatever words they used to describe it, as he passed by – if he could hear it, than Mara could definitely hear it.

He was catching up to her now. No one seemed to notice him, hiding in his smuggler garb among the crowd.

Coming directly behind her, within a block of the dock, he reached out his senses. <Are you going to talk to me?> He asked, feeling his temper rising.

Mara stopped in her tracks, and he came around to face her.

She stared blankly at the ground and waited for him to come closer. “We did it.” She whispered. “We caused it.”

“You don’t know that.” He replied in the same low tone. “*I don’t know that.*”

She looked over at him with a skeptical look, but started to walk at a reasonable pace; he kept in line with her.

He could feel her start to calm her senses, but no less weary.

Luke kept silent as they walked; she needed time to think this over, alone.
However, in his mind, he knew what had occurred. The Force had literally surged when they were together. It was marvelous and unexplainable—nothing like what he was aware of.

But it had scared her.

They were coming closer to the dock now, and he could feel her starting to put up her guard. He had come to recognize this as her way to differ herself when she was with other people; the harder edges in her personality, and the authoritative style that her reputation had been built on.

Within about fifty meters of the dock, he felt it; she reached out to him, briefly retreating from her outward personae, softening for him. <<I love you.>> she sent over to him in consolidation.

Luke understood, and nodded; she may not be confident in everything, but she was certain that she loved him.

He pulled up his cowl around his face, and smiled beneath it. <I love you too.>> he sent back without needing to think about it.

The *Pulsar Skate* was showing signs of activity. Mechanic loaders and droids were moving large crates into an open hull.

The *Wild Karrde* looked asleep, but the small Verpine Cruiser, on the opposite side, looked alive with a loading crew ready and waiting for Mara to tell them what needed to be done.

Luke stopped, and let Mara carry on.

In between the *Wild Karrde* and the Verpine Cruiser sat Karrde’s new ship. He stood looking at the small freighter that Karrde had named the *Letter Raine*.

Snorting quietly under the cowl, he was amused at the name. But in seriousness, he knew that this ship would be saving lives on Tatooine.

He was able to accomplish one thing that the farmers had mentioned to him. Soon he would have to talk to Leia about the second issue; securing the peace.

When he thought about it, the two issues really went hand in hand. If the water supply was no longer in jeopardy then the lawlessness would settle down at least to some degree. He doubted that Tatooine would ever be as peaceful a place as other Rim worlds.

Standing and admiring the sturdiness of the ship, he watched from the corner of his eye as Mara went about her work; taking a data reader in hand and organizing the transfer of pallets onto the ship.

It was good to give her this distance; they would be in close quarters for the next few days, at least, and there was no sense to pushing her limits here.

Luke’s senses rippled and he felt the other man approach him.

“So what do you think of my new toy?” Karrde’s voice was cool and collected as ever, as he spoke over Luke’s shoulder.

Turning around, Luke lowered his cowl ever-so slightly, revealing his smirk. “I wouldn’t have picked *that* name, but otherwise, I approve.” He said with a grin. “And, of course, I don’t have your talent for creative names.”

Karrde chuckled once, and raised an eyebrow. “Not many do.” He placed his unlit cigarillo in the
corner of his mouth. “But then, not everyone has your talents either.”

Luke relaxed and crossed his arms on his chest, and shook his head. “I have no idea to what you’re talking about.” He kept his smirk.

The smuggler chief walked closer, and both men appeared to be appreciating the freighter in front of them.

“Oh, I think you do.” Karrde said with a bit more of edge in his voice.

Even without his Jedi sense, Luke could feel that the other man’s mirth had changed without looking at him.

Karrde shifted his body weight. “You somehow convinced my lieutenant that you needed her on this little side trip of yours.” He now, crossed his arms on his own chest. “Even though you didn’t clear it with her first… I thought that would have been your downfall…but it wasn’t.”

He inhaled deeply. “You sound almost disappointed that it wasn’t.” Luke said quietly.

The smuggler cleared his throat before he spoke. “To be honest, I am.” Karrde adjusted the cigarillo. “Aside from these apparent, unscheduled rendezvous that you two seem to have…” he cleared his throat again. “that also takes away from my business.” He said under his breath. “You’ve changed her.”

Luke looked up to see that Karrde was looking across the dock, watching Mara.

“The Mara that I first knew, wouldn’t have stood for one iota of what you’re asking of her…let alone, that it’s you who’s doing the asking.” Karrde said blankly, simply watching.

“You make it sound like that it’s a bad thing that she’s changed.” Luke replied, matching the other man’s tone. “She wasn’t allowed to be herself. It was you who told me that…don’t you remember?”

It was unfair for Luke to bring up one of their first conversations concerning Mara, but it was a fair observation.

Karrde’s eyes shifted over to the Jedi, and his demeanor seemed to lighten. “Oh, I remember…but I certainly didn’t expect her to change this much, and in such a short time.” He paused. “Luckily, a select few even notice the difference…when she allows it.” His senses seemed to uncharacteristically tighten. “It could be dangerous for her to let all of her guard down….that’s all.”

Before Luke could assure him that Mara was still the same cautious and tactical person that she always was, Karrde motioned in the direction of the Verpine Cruiser, taking his comm from his pocket and pressing several buttons.

“I see the delivery party has arrived.” Karrde remarked, but Luke could sense that he was anything but relaxed as they watched what was to transpire.

“We will just have to make ourselves less visible.” The smuggler said casually.

It was then that groups of people started to emerge from the Wild Karrde; moving pallets, and looking busy as the dock became more-inhabited.

Luke snorted and nodded slightly; Karrde knew who Mara was doing business with, and there was no way that he would give a seasoned ship-thief like Niles Ferrier the jump on any of his ships, even if the rumors about Ferrier switching careers to an arms-dealer might be true.
Turning away, and not watching them directly, Luke could see that Ferrier had his gang, and the delivery, in tow. He decided that since their last encounter, if Ferrier recognized him, things might not go well. Best to keep to this side of the dock, but keep his eyes open if this went bad, and go over only if she needed him.

From the other side of the dock, Mara had made the best effort to take her mind off of things by throwing herself into her work.

The Verpine Cruiser was all but loaded, and the inventory seemed fully complete, but she doubled checked the manifest just to be sure.

Thankfully, Luke seemed distracted, and she only needed to look over to him once to see that she needn’t worry about his attention. Karrde was also there, and she surmised that they were probably discussing the new ship before she turned back to her work.

She gruffly sighed as her senses tingled and she could tell that Niles Ferrier was approaching; his alien muscle had a distinct sensation, but Ferrier was also the type of character that gave off his own odor- if Force senses could have odors.

Mara turned and faced the causeway as the group approached; she adopted her readied stance so that it appeared somewhat casual, shifting her weight with one hip out, and crossing her arms on her chest; her weapons clearly visible on the protruding hip.

She saw the air ripple before the available light hit the large alien that was coming closer and she stepped aside as it brushed past her.

“Good move, Beautiful.” Niles Ferrier appeared on the other side of the beast. “Most people get their toes stepped on before they catch sight of him.” He smirked, amused by his own joke.

Behind him, two other men approached, pushing a hover crate, and stopped several meters in front of her.

“Ferrier.” Mara replied coolly.

“Did you miss me?” He smiled as he walked towards her. “Because I sure missed you…and your credits.” His tone changed mid-sentence from flirting to business.

She chose to ignore his bravado, and preferred the business side first. “Did you bring what you promised?”

Ferrier faked a hurt look before he returned back to the crate, and hit the sides, indicating that his men were to open the goods for inspection. “Have you ever heard that I don’t deliver?”

His professional pride grew as big as his grin as the crate opened with a hiss. The sides dropped down to revealed the dense cylinder that she knew could level a small city if planted properly.

Mara stepped closer to look at her purchase. “You said that the plating was sheared?” She reached to her side, and Ferrier’s men seemed to flinch but then relaxed as she produced her data reader.

She ran the scope along the sides of the metallic canister, checking the readouts.

“I wouldn’t have said it if it wasn’t true.” Ferrier almost growled but kept his cool as the quality of his goods was questioned.

Walking around the crate, Mara checked for any corrosion on the canister that might impede the
scopes. “What sort of targeting programs are needed for the interface?” She already knew the answer, but it would be suspect if she didn’t ask.

“Just a co-ordinates calibration… nothing out of the ordinary.” Ferrier pulled his pipe from his pocket, and fidgeted as he watched her make her inspection. “It does have a remote homing locator, but I suspect that you don’t want to get anywhere near your target once you flip the switch on it.”

She stood back and waited a few moments to make him sweat it out. When she was ready, she nodded with approval. “It’ll do.” She said confidently.

Walking over to Ferrier, Mara put her reader back on her belt and pulled out her comm. “Fifteen hundred, I believe, was the remaindered of the agreed amount?” She started typing as she spoke.

Ferrier spoke slowly. “Why be hasty, Gorgeous? For you?- I’m willing to make another deal.”

Mara stopped before sending the funds and raised her eyebrow, seeming amused.

She may have seemed attentive, but from over Ferrier’s shoulder, she could see Luke adjust his cowl to cover his face, and walking towards them.

Ferrier must have sensed the movement because he turned in time to see one of the loader team members come close and stop at the plank of the Verpine Cruiser; he turned back to her, not giving crew member any more consideration.

“What say that I throw in the installation for free?- installing a 44-8 Refractor is a tricky thing.” Ferrier’s eyes glinted as he turned his attention back to Mara. “And then, perhaps…” he motioned as if he was going to touch her arm like he had done the previous night.

Her amused eyebrow-raise changed into a blank stare, watching his movements with exact precision. If the moment was right, Mara would have let a snort slip as she watched him change his mind in mid-movement; the warning that she had given him on their last encounter must have sunk in.

“No thank you.” She said in a less-than gracious tone. She pressed the last buttons on her comm, and watched as Ferrier checked the payment that she sent; he smiled.

“That’s what my crew is for.” Mara motioned for her unnamed crew member to come forward and take possession of her purchased.

Luke tried to move less like himself, and kept his eyes down, away from Ferrier’s gaze. He walked towards the hover crate, helped close it up, and then push the crate away from the group, heading towards the loading section of the Verpine Cruiser.

Lucky, he had witnessed Dankin unload it once, so it looked like he knew what he was doing. He could sense Mara’s gaze on him as he moved away.

“Suit yourself.” Ferrier shrugged, simply glad that he got his money without a fight; in their world, sometimes business was done at the end of a blaster. “I’ll send you the activation codes now.”

Mara nodded as she glanced at her comm one more time.

Now, she could gift him with a polite smile and kept it congenial. “Ferrier, it was a pleasure doing business with you.”

Wisely, he kept his distance and smiled back, bowing slightly. “And you’ll be sure to let your friends
know where you got such a fine piece of merchandise?” He backed away, signaling his gang was no longer needed; they started to walk away.

“Pleasure Jade.” Ferrier smirked once more before he turned his back on her and headed to join his group down the causeway.

Mara stayed on the dock watching them go; something told her to watch him.

She stayed there until Ferrier was no longer in sight before, satisfied, turning and retreating inside the Cruiser.

**

Once out of sight, he rounded the corner behind his men.

“You sure were right about her, boss.” One of his men commented. “Eyes like a falcon…always watching.”

“That isn’t the half of it.” Ferrier snarled. “All of those stories about her are true…she’ll cut you down sooner than look at you if she suspected anything.” He turned produce his pipe from his pocket and lit it with a shaky hand; breathing a sigh of relief.

Ferrier titled his head a few times, just to catch sight of his Wrath. Finding the alien in the shadows, he came closer. “So was that him? Did you get a good look?”

The alien garbled back an answer.

“Yeah, but was it Skywalker? And you’re sure you stayed far enough away that he didn’t see you, or sense you?” Ferrier asked quickly, waiting.

The Wrath garbled again.

Ferrier nodded. “Good. I’ll let them know, and give them beacon codes that once that thing goes off, they’ll be able to find him.”

He took out his comm and started to send his message. “He might have gotten away from them on Ovanis, but I’ll doubt he’ll be so lucky a second time.”

Finishing his message, Ferrier started to walk away. “Someone on Byss wants him bad enough to tangle with both of them.” He muttered. “Not my concern ’cept for the right price.”

The gang followed their leader down the streets.

**

Luke could hear the start-up sequence of the Verpine Cruiser from the aft section, as he secured the explosive charge.

He looked at it one more time; by all accounts, something like this was relatively safe until it was activated. Mara seemed to know what would do the job that he needed, so he didn’t question it.

The hull was already cold but had room past the pallets, and he noticed several exercise mats that were stored in one corner.

He pushed past the pallets in the hull to make his way into the living quarters of the ship.
As the doors opened, he heard the familiar twitter greet him. “Hi Artoo…did you miss me?”

Bleeps and blurps came at him as his astromech wheeled towards him.

Luke crouched down to inspect his droid. “Yes, I understand you were left alone for the night…we couldn’t have you following us on this one…but maybe on the next one.”

The droid chittered and chirped some more.

“The ship’s computer doesn’t like you?” He asked amused. “How can that be?”

Artoo gave a raspberry and then a sad hoot.

“Well, next time you should let him win a few games at holo-chess? And maybe you should watch that mouth of yours?- nobody likes a smart-droid.” Luke teased the little astromech as he looked at the familiar galley.

Nothing had seemed out of place, or changed on the ship, since his trip from Roche Medical Center to Yavin IV when he accompanied Mara, Dankin and two Noghri; teaching the finer points of holo-chess to the later on the journey there.

Luke got up and patted his little friend’s dome. “It will be okay.” He said.

Looking around, he wondered what the food prep unit had been stocked with this time; Mara had taken off so quickly this morning that neither of them had time for a morning meal, and he was starting to feel the effects of it.

The whirl of the sub-boosters came up, and that was an indication the she was ready to go.

“Better go lock yourself down, Artoo. It sounds like Mara is powering her up.” He said as he watched the droid wheel back to his port.

He glanced around the galley one more time before he decided he would ask about food after they had left the dock.

Luke sighed before he approached the cockpit door, wondering what version of Mara he would get now.

She didn’t seem as tense as she did this morning when she was on the dock with Ferrier. But then, he felt her senses were in the moment and not thinking about anything else.

The door opened with a quiet whisper, and for a moment he watched as her hands went back and forth over the console, preparing for departure.

She stopped, as if acknowledging his presence.

“We’re almost ready to depart.” Mara said quietly to the air, not looking back at him.

Luke’s cheek twitched before he came forward and took the co-pilot’s seat; she wasn’t ready to be okay with him just yet.

“I could tell.” He kept a quiet tone as he replied. “I heard the engine come up. When is our window?” He asked as locked his crash webbing and leaned over to look at the sequence readers.

“We can leave when we’re ready.” She said, not looking at him.
This time he tried to make her more-comfortable to talk. “You know, I was wondering something…” He turned in her direction, hoping for a response. “…why doesn’t Karrde have a fancy name for this ship.”

Mara frowned for a moment, but was distracted as she was programing the sensors. “That’s because it’s not his ship, unofficially.” She paused, realizing that there was no need for her to be so tense now. “He bought it, but Dankin is slowly buying it off of him. I think Dankin wants to make it his home when Nattan’s contract is over.”

Sighing, she was still not looking at him. “So we are not allowed to lose or damage this ship in any means.” She mumbled, double checking her settings for no other reason than it looked like she was busy.

She was about to reach over the console to the reverse thrusters when Luke caught her hand.

“Mara…” He said as she turned to see why he had stopped her. “You don’t have to go on this trip. I can do it alone.” Luke said; he had been considering it since his words with Karrde on the dock. He was asking a lot of her, and to be fair, he hadn’t given her a chance to refuse.

Her green eyes had lost their harsh edge that they had shown Niles Ferrier, but now they looked lost. She looked at his face and searched it, if his words were true.

“You don’t have to do this.” Luke repeated; meeting her gaze. <There’s still a chance for you to back out.> He thought over to her.

“I do.” He said quickly. “But, I realized that I didn’t give you much of a choice…and then this morning.”

Mara blinked rapidly, breaking the haze that she was in. “No, I agreed to go with you, Luke.” She squeezed his hand. “You need me on this one…you won’t be able to get in without me.” She sighed.

“And as for this morning…” She looked away, and whispered, “…last night…and what happened…” She looked back at him. “Can you give me some time to think about it?”

He smiled, and breathed a sigh of relief that she still wanted him around. “Yes, of course.” He gave her hand another gentle clasp before letting it go.

She relaxed and then turned back to the console.

Luke took another chance to watch her before he adjusted his controls, and started to set the coordinates in the nav computer. “Alright Captain…confirming course set for Mustafar.”

And he waited on her command to leave port.

The Verpine Cruiser slid backwards from the dock after it disengaged.

With afterburners flared, it left the gravity well, before reaching light-speed into hyperspace.

**

He awoke with start; sitting upright immediately.

Luke looked around the small generic cabin and remembered where he was.
There was no bad dream to wake him, no sudden disturbance, simply, his mind had had enough of sleep.

They had agreed to sleep in shifts in order to get on planetary time before their arrival on Mustafar in thirty hours.

It was simple idea, and there wasn’t much of discussion about it. In truth, he was glad for the rest, and Mara seemed relieved as she still needed time apart to process her feelings.

He was scheduled for four hours but didn’t make it.

Luke checked his chrono and confirmed that he had a little less than an hour to his allotted time left.

He looked around the room again and thought how lonely he had been the last time he was on this particular ship. Mara had been right on the other side of the wall, in her own cabin, and he could sense her; their bodies were healing so the distance between them was a good thing.

But now, there was something else between them, and he had agreed to let her have her chance to get some perspective before he was going to breach the subject with her.

Now, after some sleep, Luke had decided that there was more than one subject at play here that needed some further discussion.

Whether or not she would indulge any of the topics that he wanted to bring up with her, was another matter entirely.

The first issue on his mind was the Force surge that they had experienced together.

After it had occurred, he wanted it to occur again just for the opportunity to examine it again. He wondered if he looked into the readings of Force powers, would he find anything he needed. It had seemed like such an odd thing.

It was time to find her.

Luke pulled the covers from off his body and rolled to a standing position; the cabin would allow his body to stretch a bit but it wasn’t much bigger to permit more movement.

He pulled the small scratchy coverlet and tucked the rock that surpassed for a pillow under his arm and headed for the galley.

He had seen Mara set up there, making herself a small work-station but keeping in safe distance to the Verpine’s console.

She would probably still be working there; it was her way to distract her mind – control what you can until you can’t.

There were so many rules to way that she chose to keep her world in check, and he wasn’t about to disturb any of those. However, he did wonder if they were at the stage yet where she would allow him to start to break down those walls.

He knew, though, that some walls were meant to stay in place, just as a matter of her personal security. He hoped that one day that she would let down those walls too, at least with him.

The door opened smoothly, and Luke trudged his way to the galley, deciding that he would try for a jovial tone even though the nature of this trip sure didn’t warrant it; he would keep up the pretext if
he needed to.

She looked up at him and then back to her work, and then paused, checked her chrono and then back at him again.

Artoo was by the ship’s galley console, monitoring; she had put him to work.

“I missed you.” Luke mumbled as he came closer to her, still a bit drowsy now that he was in her presence.

Mara gave him a tight grin. “You have almost an hour left?” she asked as she went back to her data pad, but didn’t seem to mind that he was there.

Since this morning, she had refrained from being affectionate with him; they hadn’t kissed since leaving the hotel. Luke wanted to get their routine back on track, and he didn’t mind chipping at the wall she had around herself now.

He leaned over her and she reflectively looked up, he came in for a gentle peck on her lips, reminding her that he was there too.

That seemed to do it, and she smiled briefly and then went back to her work.

Luke looked around at the galley, trying to think of the best way for him to try and get some rest out there. He decided that he would join her on the bench seating. He walked around to her opposite side and placed his pillow beside her hip, and adjusted the blanket on his shoulders as he was about to lay down beside on the galley bench.

Mara watched him inquisitively from the corner of her eye as she typed. “Are you sure you want to do that?” She asked quietly. “Isn’t your cabin a better place?”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” He mumbled as his head hit the pillow. “It’s stuffy in there…and I’ve been spoiled. I don’t think that I can get a proper sleep with this *inferior bedding.*” His voice took on an accent on his last few words.

With another chip in her wall was coming down, she snorted and looked over at him; his hand right hand was exposed from under his pillow as he rested on his side, relaxed and almost waiting for the touch of her hand.

She couldn’t resist.

She broke her attention away from the screen for one moment to place her hand in his, and gently squeezed before going back to her work.

“You almost sounded like you were from the Core for a moment there. Was that a warning that I shouldn’t buy such nice bedding for you to get used to?” She asked quietly, knowing that he was trying an attempt to get some rest.

Luke’s breathing was deep but he could hear every word and sense her nuance. “I’ll admit that my Core accent needs work…and it may never come off as posh as yours, but I’m trying.” He smirked with his eyes closed. “And yes, you did ruin me for other bedding…I miss my pillow.”

That got her attention.

“Posh?” Mara repeated. “You think that my accent is posh?” She almost sounded offended.
He breathed deeply again, just to show her that he was perfectly comfortable making that sort of comment; Core people always took too much concern as to how they appeared. Even Leia was known to take on a Core accent when she spoke sometimes. But it was fun to rile Mara up a bit.

“Okay… maybe not ‘posh’…” He conceded. “Prissy.” He said with a yawn.

Her mouth agape and her work forgotten, she turned in her seat to look down at him with his eyes closed, resting peacefully.

“Prissy?” She repeated, this time louder.


He could hear a slight indignant nasal huff from her; the direct opposite of an amused snort. He smiled to himself- she was back. He supposed she was probably glaring down at him now.

“I’m sorry that I don’t butcher Basic like y’all.” She said smugly. “Perhaps I should end my conversations with a preposition? Or maybe I should learn how to speak using more-remedial words?… less syllables are less likely to confuse the ‘paple’.” Her mockery Rim accent seemed to get thicker.

He chuckled. “That’s it…now you’re getting the hang of it.” He mumbled; showing her that it didn’t bother him as much as it seemed to bother her. “Keep that up…and then I can respectfully bring you to meet da folks o’er da doons.”

Luke reached over with his available hand and touched her thigh. “I love you and your proper accent.” He said, slightly dozing.

Mara huffed one more time but a moment later, he felt her hand rest on his head and gently stroke the longer stubble with affection.

At least he knew that he could get away with teasing her.

“I love you too.” He heard her whisper.

With his eyes closed, time must have drifted and he regained his missing sleep until time passed and he felt her weight shift.

He opened one eye and watched her walk over to the console, just to check on the status reports.

“So, are we still afloat?” Luke asked with a yawn, sitting up and huddling in the blanket around his shoulders; space was still colder to him and could chill him to the bone easily.

“For now.” She said absently, still watching the reports.

By all accounts, they shouldn’t enter any issues in the next twenty six hours, but she never supposed anything during a hyperspace flight.

Mara turned to look at him.

He was sitting upright and waking up; it seems this last little bit of sleep had been the most deep he had.

She decided that he needed something to wake him up.
Walking over to the food prep unit, she made a quick mug of stim tea for him; it was Karrde’s favourite, and she knew that Luke had it once on Myrkrr.

The spicy aroma began to waft and his eyes opened more in appreciation.

She brought the mug over to him and placed it on the galley’s table top in front of him.

As he reached over for it, he reached out and touched her mind as he took a sip. <Thank you> he said sweetly.

Mara could feel a bit of shiver as he did so; it had been some time since his senses against her own had felt odd and out of place. But she smiled back as if nothing was out of place.

She observed that he had changed out of his smuggler’s garb, and as a matter of comfort had picked an older set of fatigues from his travel case; the loose tunic looked like a well-worn piece.

Sitting down beside him, she knew that her turn to take some rest, and she was looking forward to it. But something need to be done before she did.

“We should probably talk.” She said, not eager at all for this.

Instead of jumping on her words, Luke simply nodded, and waited for her to pick a topic.

Mara swallowed before continuing. “I don’t know what you think will happen when we get to Mustafar, but I have my suspicions.”

He raised an eyebrow as he took a sip of the tea.

Looking away from him. “I’m hoping that we find it deserted.” Then, her eyes came up to his face. “But if we don’t, I think we should prepare in advance.”

Luke looked off in the distance as he considered her words; she could tell that he was reaching out to the Force for some guidance, sensing what was in store for them. Perhaps some Jedi insight would be the key.

He nodded, and his eyes came back to her. “I agree and I don’t think that we’re going to find it abandoned.” His eyes squinted on the last words; whatever the Force told him was vague, but it was somewhat absolute to give him a partial answer.

Mara nodded long with him.

“What do you think we need to do?” He asked, unsure with what estimations would be, but sure that she knew what to possibly expect.

She inhaled deeply. “I’ve been thinking about it. If we go in, my former position might allow me access…it wasn’t like Mustafar was on anyone’s radar, and the chances are slim that codes and security procedures would have been upgraded since Endor.”

“It’s you that I’m more concerned about.” She said without a hint of mischief. “My first idea was to use you as a prisoner. Whoever is there is most-likely to recognize you as the Rebel that was being hunted, if they recall it at all. It has been six years.”

Her lip twitched. “But then, that idea wouldn’t allow you access to the castle, as they would expect you to be imprisoned, and not the son and heir of their Lord. It would under-mind you.”

“Once again, this is only if they hadn’t been informed of the outcome of the war, and are not
currently involved with any Imperial reports.” Mara turned her attention back to him.

“Do you think it could really go down like that?” He asked; the thought of playing this ruse was not one of his favorites to perform.

She tilted he head. “It’s hard to tell.” She paused, and he could tell that she was trying to pick her words.

Luke reached over the table and touched her hand; approving that that she didn’t sugar coat this for his sake, but appreciating her effort to avoid being blunt.

“Vader wasn’t the type to suffer fools gladly. He preferred to have loyal and competent people around him. He had little patience for anything else if his servants couldn’t read a situation or anticipate his needs.” She surmised almost all of her feelings. “That being said, whoever is likely to be there, will be alert and aware, if not suspicious of anyone they perceive as a threat… or illegitimate.”

He nodded; she always had the pragmatic sense to think beyond the immediate, and seeing the full picture.

“Why don’t you rest first?” He said with a tight smile. “And while you do, I will meditate and think about it. And then, we can discuss it when you wake?”

Rather than resist, Mara nodded, and closed down her data pad, and prepared to go to the cabin for her turn at rest.

She got up from the table with little thought and took several steps in the direction of the cabins, but then stopped and turned around. Her face softened, then came over to him.

Without words, she leaned down and pressed her lips to his, and really kissed him for the first time in hours.

Luke smiled between their lips, feeling her love.

His hand came up to caress her cheek, his fingertips barely touching, as she pulled away, just to remind her that he truly cared.

She nodded as if he had made a mental comment, and then she turned and headed towards the cabins.

He just watched the area where she had disappeared for a few more seconds than what was absolutely necessary but her presence lingered and that kept him riveted.

Luke inhaled and exhaled deeply, breaking the spell that she could weave in him. He wasn’t ashamed to admit that she totally owned him, and he went willingly to be her captive.

He smiled and shook his head at his predicament, as he got up from the galley bench and walked over to the food prep unit, deciding it was time to eat.

Over a year ago, she was still spitting blaster bolts at him if he said the wrong thing. And she, she could get his dander up and make him think the most un-Jedi-like things in a heartbeat without trying.

Six months ago, he would have never thought that they would be this much enamored with each other.
They had come a long way since then.

He found a food packet and read the contents, and decided to give it a try, placing inside the heater, and setting the timer.

Thinking about Karrde’s words was starting to get to him; did he really change her for the better or for the worse? Was it detrimental for her?

He tried to think about how he was as a person before he met her.

In truth, before Myrkr, he had started to commit himself to a life of solitude, hiding from friends and family, and favoring peace; wrapping himself in his own wall of stoicism, and using the Force as a barrier –that’s what he thought Jedi life required of him.

He rarely socialized; Leia had called him a ‘hermit’ more than once. He rarely laughed. No one dared to challenge him. No one wanted to be examined by his presence and people had grown uncomfortable being around him.

The timer pinged and he turned to retrieve his food.

He brought it back to the galley, and sat down. He poked at the packet and let the steam rise from it.

Maybe knowing Mara had changed him too?

In short, before her, he was lonely, closing himself off and he was getting used to it.

Encountering Mara shook him out of that. Regardless if they had been destined to be in love or not, or even if they had been destined just to remain friends; he was glad that she was in his life, and couldn’t imagine it any other way- nor did he want to imagine it any other way.

She was developing her own bright light in his life.

Given what had happened the previous night, if that was just an example of what they could do together, then if they were bonded, the possibilities were endless.

He pushed at the food when he decided it was the right temperature and took a bite. While he chewed, he wondered what had actually occurred.

It wasn’t a bonding – which, secretly he wished they had been given a second opportunity.

The ‘surge’ – which, he decided to call it, without any other explanation, was strange to feel. It wasn’t welcoming or comforting – the after effects were, but not in the moment.

He took a few more bites, trying to remember what he was feeling at the time. He couldn’t remember; he was so enraptured by her that anything else wasn’t at the forefront of his mind.

He remembered reaching out to her in the Force, gently probing her senses. He smiled; it was incredible to feel her against him when they made love.

They had played with ‘colours’ when they were first getting to know each other; making love and touching each other in the Force only made those colours more vivid and alive, from his perspective, bringing serenity and peace.

Even without trying or being intimate, her Force-aura intoxicated him.

And he had been around other Force-users, but being in their auras had never felt anything like being
in hers.

Luke hurried the last few bites, and decided that he would take the opportunity to meditate on this issue; he doubted that Mara would want to explore this topic with him.

Briefly, he wondered if she was available to rest. He stretched out his senses into the cabin which she now occupied.

Yes, she was asleep. And dreaming? He touched her mind, but not waking her; wanting to see if she was dreaming peacefully.

She was.

He caught a glimpse of those images from her mind, and pulled back before he thought it was an intrusion on her personal space. Smiling, she dreams of dancing, he thought to himself.

Now, he could meditate without worrying that she was still disturbed.

After putting the food container into recycling, he went back to the galley, folded the blanket he brought with him and dropped it on the floor.

The floor is almost too good for you, he thought sarcastically at the scratchy thing before descending, but you’ll do.

Crossed-legged, he sat on the floor and closed his eyes; inhaling deeply and exhaling slowly, reaching out in his mind, his senses and the Force.

When he had first started meditating, as Master Yoda had encouraged him to do, he didn’t enjoy it. All the images he saw, and all the feelings were overwhelming. But now, he could slip easily into the relaxed state, control his progression and center his mind on a goal.

Concentrating, he brought his mind back to last night, before the surge had occurred. The images and feelings flashed; their bodies intertwined, her lips, his lips, his hands, and the feel of being joined with her.

He tried to distinctly focus away from their passion, and center of how the Force was responding to them.

Slowing the images down, he first felt his power building inside himself – he mistook it for his passion for her, but it wasn’t. He had no control over it as it came, and then he felt her responding to him, as if she had no control over her ability.

He tried to the slow down the moment to a pace that he could examine every minute detail.

And then, he felt it – there was a moment when Darkness crept in. Like it was watching them; looking directly at them…as if a third Force entity was present.

Then, it was gone…. disappeared, not leaving a trace and then, the overtaking purity of their love resumed. And he felt it again, the surge, experiencing it all over again.

It felt as if it was passing through him again, strong and fierce, but not damaging- merely just the remembrance of it.

Luke gasped, pulling himself out of the vision. It was too much to relive, but at least now he had a partial answer as to what they had experienced.
Someone else was there. Their use of the Force was a beacon that called attention to them….no, not *their use*…his use.

He cringed; he knew that he hadn’t been shielding at the time.

Something Dark had found them and it was his fault.

The surge had been a reaction of their union as it forced away the Darkness, and it was the overpowering of their Light that had cause the shift.

He dropped his head to his chest with regret as he exhaled.

Could it have been the same Dark presence that he had recognized as Palpatine at Ord Mantell?

Swallowing, he thought of the implications. No, this didn’t feel that strong, or like a conscious presence.

*But what was it? Who was it?*

“You’re thinking too loud again.” Mara mumbled from the doorway, rubbing her eyes.

Luke looked up immediately, caught off guard that he was too wrapped up in his thoughts that he didn’t sense her approach.

She had taken his suggestion, and had changed into more comfortable clothes for her nap, and for the trip. Rubbing her eyes and yawning, she didn’t notice his surprise.

He got up from the floor to come beside her.

“I was trying to figure out what happened last night.” He said as he came closer to her.

She allowed a kiss from him as it was apparent she was finishing waking up.

“I know.” Mara took two fingers and tapped the side of his head twice after she placed her lips to his.

“I heard.”

She yawned again. “But I didn’t hear your conclusion.”

“Do you want to?” Luke asked, knowing he had told himself not to keep anything from her again, even if he thought it would be damaging.

Mara’s eyes came into focus and she was awake now. Motioning over to the galley bench, she knew she had to sit down to hear this. “What are your thoughts, and I’ll tell you mine.” She said.

Reluctantly, Luke lowered himself beside her and took her hand.

She raised one eyebrow at the gesture. <<Is it going to be one of *those talks*?>> She asked rhetorically.

“I hope not.” He murmured under his breath, before he increased his volume. “I think I know why we had *the surge*.”

She waited patiently to hear his thoughts.

“I think it was a natural response to a momentary experience of…” He paused, “…*the Darkside.*”
Luke squeezed her hand, and swallowed before he continued. “I think that after the Dark receded so quickly that our Light just seemed *that much stronger* and caused the rift.”

Mara looked out into the galley, her eyes going blank. She sat, considering his words. “I agree.” She said finally.

“But I think there was more to it than just that.” She said in a voice that didn’t waver. “I think we invited it in.”

“I’ve been thinking about it.” Mara continued. She looked down, trying to find the right words. “I don’t think we should use the Force when we’re being intimate again. I think that we’re just asking for trouble.”

She sighed and looked down; he just wasn’t to blame here, it took both of them to cause this. “Don’t get me wrong. I’ve never felt the things that I do when I’m with you, but I think to use the Force when we’re together, making love, is just greedy on our part.”

She looked up at him, sincerely. “We’re being selfish, and that’s what invited the Darkside in…if only just for a moment.”

Looking at him, her eyes softened. “*There is no passion, only serenity.*” She quoted.

Luke smiled and squeezed her hand. “When did you get to be such a good student as to quote The Code back at me?” He snorted quietly; proud that maybe some of his teachings had gotten through.

He forgot that Mara wore her Force-talents internally, and didn’t show how gifted she was openly. To him, it sounded like she was taking her studies more-serious than he had realized.

She looked at him coyly. “I read more than I let on, you know.” Starting to grin, she added, “Maybe someday, I’ll know as much as you.”

Luke snorted once again. “I think in many ways that you already do…*maybe more.*” He leaned over and kissed her soundly on the cheek. “I’ve never disregarded your knowledge.”

“I am very happy that you are one smart cookie, and I would never want it any other way.” He murmured by her ear, taking a chance to nuzzle her cheek, and kiss her one more time.

“Cookie?” She asked, mocking her annoyance at his use of words.

“Cookie.” He kissed her cheek. “Cream puff.” Again, he kissed the side of her face. “Sugar tart.” And another kiss. “Anything that’s sweet…and could possibly hurt me if I had too much of it.”

As he pulled away, he saw that her green eyes were slits and now she was really glaring him.

He quickly thought of the person who was most likely to have an angered partner and tried to imitate them. He shrugged as Han would, and gave her a lop-sided smirk. “Hey, I’m a Jedi, not a poet…not good with words.” He winked.

That did it; she snorted and then smirked at him.

The expression on her face dissolved, and he knew he had to add something to serious side of their conversation. “I agree with you.” He said as he hung his head. “We shouldn’t reach out in the Force while we’re making love again.”

Luke looked up at her. “And I think it’s about time that you teach me something.” He cringed a bit.
“I think you need to teach me your techniques for shielding. You seemed to have it mastered, and I haven’t. I think I need to.”

Mara looked at him surprised that he would want to do something like; he was such an open person, it was just part of his nature.

She nodded. “Okay, when do you want to learn?” She asked, not sure if she could teach something like that, but she was willing to try.

Luke sat up straighter, taking notice and becoming alert. “How about now? –we have the time.”

She considered it, and then nodded in agreement. “Alright…” She pondered it for a moment. “I trying to think of how to teach this…I had to learn it out of necessity, but to teach it is a whole different matter.”

His eyes squinted. “Well, why did you have to learn it? Maybe if I knew the ‘why’- we could both figure out the ‘how’.”

“Why?” She asked. It seemed simple enough to her. “…so that other Force-users couldn’t hear my communications with the Emperor, I guess.”

She got up from the bench and started pacing slowly. “So that others couldn’t hear what I was thinking… so that I could hide my presence until I needed to be seen.”

“Most of it was that I could get the jump on my targets.” She said quietly to herself, examining where her knowledge had come from. “Non-sensitives still have sixth senses that warn them when something is lurking.” She muttered.

She stopped and looked away. “I once got so good that the Emperor couldn’t hear me.” She looked blank. “He was most-displeased.” She whispered.

Her eyes flashed and she came back from the past.

Mara cleared her throat, and looked over to Luke sitting on the bench, just watching her; his eyes concerned that this would be damaging to her.

But she continued as she came up with an idea. “Do you remember when we were on Wayland… and at night, when the Myneyrshi and the Psadans would approach the camp?”

Luke frowned, but he did remember.

“You told me to look for differences in their minds in order to identify their numbers.” She explained. “Most thought has a pattern to it. Most patterns are repeating.” She paused, trying to think up the way to say it. “If you erase the pattern, then you erase the trace of the thought.”

He was still frowning.

“Um…” She floundered, until an idea came to her. She got up, walked over to the kitchenette, and came back to him with a tee-shee fruit and placed it on the galley table.

“Start thinking about the fruit.” She said. “Just think about it…describe it in your mind.”

Luke crinkled his brow but obliged, and started thinking about the fruit.

Mara didn’t need to close her eyes or try so hard. “…it’s round… it’s yellow…it’s sweet…my I really hate them when they get bruised and sour…” She started to say, repeating all of his thoughts as
he thought them.

He looked over to her.

“That’s what it’s like when you’re ‘broadcasting’, but most of the time, it’s not on one central thing. Central things are easy to pick up on. When the mind is being absolutely direct, it makes it easier to hear the direct thoughts.” She said. “Now, this time, think about the tee-shee but instead of using words, go back a layer and think about it in the abstract.”

He looked over at her again, and then back at the fruit.

She paused, and inhaled deeply, trying to sense him.

Luke looked over at her.

“See?- that time I couldn’t follow where the train of your mind had gone.” She explained. “It was just the matter of changing how you processed your information.”

“From there…” She said, “…you keep changing the pattern in your mind, don’t think so directly. And that’s what makes the shielding of your thoughts. Shielding your presence is just a deeper level of that.”

Stopping and considering it again. “The next stage is ‘blocking’. But that’s more of a defensive technique…if another Force-user is trying to probe your mind or use coercion on you.”

He looked at her. “Did you have classes on this? Or did it just come to you?...out of necessity?” He asked; it sounded like it was a mixture of both, and all of it.

Mara had been excited to share this knowledge, but with his question, she looked away. “I had no other choice.” She murmured. “I was punished for my thoughts if they weren’t right.” She whispered. “I was punished if I was caught.”

She looked back at him. “I had to learn any way that I could.” She said louder, answering his question.

Luke had reached out to touch her mind, to see what she was feeling, and he couldn’t sense anything. Just like her lesson, she had buried her thoughts, hiding them away beyond what he could touch on the surface.

He nodded and decided to drop the subject on her past. When she was ready, she would let him know more.

“Okay…” he said in a happier tone. “…I’m a quick study…challenge me…teach me more.” He smiled at her.

Mara turned to him, and her eyes flashed before they brightened, happy for the chance to do something for him.

“Well, practice makes perfect.” She said, as she got up and headed back to the kitchenette to look for something else.

“Yes, teacher.” He said with a smile.

They had the time, and it was just the beginning of truly learning about, and from each other.
TBC
Long Shadow Cast- Part 1

Chapter Summary

Quote: She didn’t want to humor his delusions any longer and this was just the beginning of the thing she would see here; if he couldn’t handle this, than the trip had been in vain.

Characters: Luke, Mara, Vanée, and droids…and the past

Chapter Notes

**

Someone turn on a light, it’s about to get dark.

Mature subject warning from here on out….just saying.

I had to watch Rogue One several times, just to get the ‘receiving room’, where Vader meets Krenic, just right…

Hopefully it paid off.

**

Hyperspace- on course to Mustafar

The star lines blurred by at such a speed that any inexperienced pilot was liable to be disoriented, but not Luke, and not Mara.

He was waiting for her in the cockpit, sitting in the co-pilot’s seat; his mind away, ahead of them in the future thinking where this trip would take them.

It had been almost thirty hours since they had left Null Outpost, and they had spent their time together becoming students again.

She had taught him the easier steps to shielding, and he was getting better at it.

When he woke from his stints of rest, he had set his mind to the mental patterns that she had taught him.

Mara still claimed that he wasn’t quite there yet, but since they had started, it was taking her longer and longer to penetrate his thoughts.

He could feel it now. Even though she was in the back half of the ship, he could feel her infringing on his mind, trying to get a foothold in order to sense his feelings and his ponderings. He could feel her frustration too.

It had started as a game, but sometimes she took it a little too seriously. She didn’t like losing.
And she wasn’t ‘losing’ per se, he had explained to her; she was gaining in experience as teacher.

She had just given him a tight grin and brushed it off until she was ready to try again.

It was a tactic that they both knew they were using to avoid the upcoming events. A tone was descending on both of them as the seriousness of their trip was becoming obvious.

They had decided to hold off on a plan until they were in orbit of Mustafar, and plan their entrance based on the reception they would receive after they had hailed Vader’s castle.

Luke scratched his scalp, thinking not to over-think it.

The nameless castle bothered him, and what lurked there.

In his meditation, the castle was not empty, but beyond that, he couldn’t see what occupied it, and Mara was vague as to who or what could be there.

Perhaps she didn’t want him to dwell on it, or perhaps she knew something about the way his father lived that she knew he wouldn’t approve of.

Luke already knew what sort of possibilities of information about his father could be there. The galaxy had provided him with truths, half-truths, and outright lies about how the Dark Lord resided. The stories swirled around from his days in the Rebellion, and hearing the sorted details of Vader’s limitless cruelty and power.

Torture, murder, genocide, choking, rape, pillaging, devastating… the list went on.

He shut his eyes to all of it; he knew what his father had done and although the incidents and the people were countless, in the end, his father had found the Light.

Did it matter to the galaxy? - No, it did not. They still thought of him as beyond human; too inhumane to exist.

Did it matter to him? – beyond the stars, it did. He was there to feel it and would never forget that it was possible to be redeemed.

But what did matter to him was the reason behind it all; why did his father fall? And why did it take him so long to come back?

Those were the questions that he needed answers to. If it meant going into the world that his father used to inhabit, then he would do it.

He begged that he had the strength to keep the Light with him as he did it; not just for his sake but for hers too.

Luke wondered how very close Mara had been exposed to the Darkside; he had often wondered about it. Would he see it now?

The door slid open to the cockpit, and Mara strode in, and lowered herself into the pilot’s seat.

Before he spoke, he looked at her, taken a-back by her appearance.

He had seen her in Imperial military-wear before, dressing as a TIE fighter pilot, but now, she sat, wearing the black jumpsuit that bore the highly-visible Imperial insignia on her shoulder, and what looked like tactical armor on her shins and breast plate. Her short hair was pulled back in a severe fashion.
Well aware that her former position was a necessity to gain access to Darth Vader’s residence, she assumed the role too easily for his comfort.

He had never seen her look so *Imperial* before, and he was stunned.

Luke broke the spell he was in and turned to her. “So what’s the verdict?” He asked, trying to draw away his adverse reaction to her appearance.

She adjusted a few controls and checked the count down. “Oh, I think we will have plenty of power to maintain the shields after we land.” She looked over to him. “And I’ve given the task of monitoring them to your astromech droid.”

Luke nodded. “Do you really think that will be necessary?”

“It can rain molten iron ore, Dankin would have a fit if we got a scratch on the hull.” She commented with no sense of humor. “And I don’t know if we’ll be able to take cover in a hangar.”

He nodded again; she knew what they were up against, not him.

“We have ten minutes before we pull out of hyperspace.” Mara murmured. “You still have a chance to change your mind.” She said reluctantly.

All the way along the trip, she had casually asked if he was still sure that he wanted to do this. When at last, he asked her why she kept questioning it, she divulged that she still didn’t understand his need, nor did she want to go back to this life.

“No,” he answered in a low tone. “I have to do this.”

Luke looked over at her again, seeing her softer side disappearing before his eyes. “I just don’t know if I can pull it off.”

Mara exhaled and turned back to him. “Maybe we’ve been going about this all wrong… Maybe you just need to be you instead of putting on any harsh tones and over playing it.”

She had been rethinking their plan.

“I don’t think it would be good to pretend you are some sort of Sith Lord.” She said turning back to the console. “If you simply refused to make eye-contact with anyone and spoke to me through the Force- letting me be your mouth piece, then I think that will get us farther.”

“Being mysterious will throw them off.” She commented. “Any servants will be falling over themselves to make sure that they don’t displease you in the first place rather than wait for your wrath. They know that Sith can be unpredictable, and one that won’t communicate with them, claiming to be Lord Vader’s son, will be off-putting and a challenge.”

“Especially, when you have the documents to prove it.” She murmured.

She looked him up and down. “You will need to put on your Jedi-blacks.” She suggested. “It will be what they expect of you.”

Luke nodded. “Keep quiet and do as you tell me?”

“Pretty much.” Mara said without emotion.

He snorted quietly and sarcastically. <It will be like the first time we met- you, telling me what to do-all over again.>
She snorted once, silently agreeing with him.

Luke exhaled; if she was starting to put on her emotionless mantle, then so should he.

He undid his crash webbing, and went to stand. Stopping to put his hand on her shoulder, he leaned over to give her one kiss before heading back to his cabin to change.

Passing the galley, Artoo whistled mournfully as he walked to the corridor leading to his cabin.

He had tried to keep the small space as tidy as possible, and had succeeded in that aspect, but he still wasn’t comfortable.

Accessing his storage case, he started to riffle through it and find *his* Jedi-blacks, as she had referred to them. And he began to dress.

Thirty hours in flight, and they hadn’t slept beside each other in that time. Not out of any hostility, but out of necessity; Mara had been adamant about sleeping in shifts. She was sure that something wasn’t right.

He thought as he yawned, putting his linen tabard in place.

When she was pressed, she answered that she was watching the heat signature of the refracting charge carefully. Although it was a slim chance that it would become volatile, she wasn’t happy that it was stored on board and not in a launching cylinder.

It still was a viable excuse not for them to share a space, that, and that the cabins wouldn’t allow for it.

“Dankin has plans to renovate once he has full ownership.” She had said when he asked her about the cramped quarters. “I’ve already told him where he should get the bedding.” She had commented wryly when they were together.

It was a good thing that the trip was short, the tone had started to switch between them. It wasn’t fun, and Mara knew that it weighed heavily on him, without needing to be told.

As he put his belt in place, he recalled that after she had found him looking through the estate documents again, and at a moment when he was feeling a wave of anger at his father, she stopped giving any wry comments or trying to make his smile.

Looking at the bed, he had dropped the deed disk to Mustafar on it. Picking it up, he rolled it around in his hand, trying to decide if he was going to keep to this plan.

Mara was sure that if she played to the story that he was Vader’s heir, that the others would acknowledge it… if there were any ‘others’.

Luke looked about the room, seeing if he was forgetting anything, before he clipped his lightsaber to his belt. He slid on his black leather gloves, and then placed his black cloak over his arm before leaving the room.

In the galley, he caught a glimpse of himself in one of the reflective surfaces as he laid his cloak over the side the bench.

He stopped to make sure that he looked the part. It had been over a year since he had worn this particular outfit… on Myrkrr in fact. And before then, he couldn’t remember.
As he viewed himself, he adjusted his gloves, and he could see why Mara suggested that he wore this particular outfit.

At the time that he had selected it, over six years ago, when he was on his way to rescue Han from Jabba the Hutt, he had merely picked it because he felt it made him look older, and that the colour of dark grey and black suited his mood at the time.

Since then, his “Jedi wardrobe” had changed somewhat.

He had been gifted a thick brown robe, which he preferred over the black cloak, and chose to wear it for official functions. Other than that, his clothing hadn’t changed much from loose tunics, jackets and trousers; there was no ‘Jedi fashion plate’. Although Leia commented once or twice that he should try to look more the part of a Jedi.

Looking at his reflection again, he grimaced at his shorn hair; at least it was coming in.

Turning away, he headed back to the cockpit; they should be almost ready to come out of hyperspace.

Luke sat down into his seat, and latched his crash webbing. He caught something in her senses.

“What is it?” He asked quietly, not wanting to break her concentration.

“I was just thinking that we should have stolen a shuttle or something…It wouldn’t be unusual for me to arrive in a non-Imperial vehicle, but it would be for sanctioned visitor.” She was thinking too far ahead again, seeing the plot-holes in their ruse.

“It will be alright.” He said, wanting, but refraining, from reaching out to hold her hand. “We will deal with it, if the question comes up.”

Mara unhappily sighed loudly; out of her control and without a contingency plan made her uncomfortable.

“Well, it’s about to come up.” She muttered. “We’re about to pull out of hyperspace.” She glanced over at him. “Prepare to meet my mark.”

Luke reached over to the thrusters, and readied them for their decline as he watched the count down.

The slurred star lines came to a halt, and he decelerated the power, helping to slow the craft.

Just outside the orbit of the molten planet, Luke watched as they approached. The black planet hovered before them, looking ominous.

“We have to go in easy.” She said. “I have to find the right hemisphere in order to make contact with the beacon. The range is limited.” She mumbled, taking herself through it rather than for his knowledge.

He watched as she keyed in a second location into the nav computer and placed it on reserve.

Luke hadn’t been hiding any of his thoughts from her since she had arrived in the cockpit, and without provocation, she said. “It will make an escape easier if they don’t accept my codes.”

He nodded, seeing that she had planned a getaway if they needed it.

The Verpine Cruiser entered the atmosphere easily, and coasted inside the gravity well of the planet.
Inside the cabin, Luke could feel a heat change as he spied the rivers of ore on the planet’s surface, making veins of orange, yellow and red.

In the sky, he could see no star or sun as he wondered what time of day it was.

“The nearest system does not affect the day cycle here… all planetary heat is generated from Mustafar’s core.” She said, as if hearing his observations.

Mara guided the craft around to make an approach; the beacon indicator sounded, and then blinked. She looked over to him before she reached over, and sent out the recognition codes. Staring at the console, her eyes didn’t move as she waited for their acceptance; Luke could feel her tension, but her face didn’t portray any emotion. As the time passed, he moved his attention from her to look at the console and watch the receiver too; he tried using cleansing breaths as he waited. A memory flashed in his mind; the moment as they had hovered over Endor, waiting for an opening in the shield generator. He had felt his father’s presence there, and his own presence almost betrayed the entire mission. Later, he knew it had all been part of Palpatine’s plan; putting the bait in front of his apprentice. Luke inhaled deeply, and exhaled slowly, letting that memory recede.

The receiver pinged, and he saw her shoulders relax as the readout came in. Mara looked over at him, and gave him a tight grin. “Someone is home.” She said quietly. He returned the grin, and decided now that it was okay to reach over and touch her hand. She looked back at him, and blinked once as she recognized his gesture. It took her a moment before she squeezed his hand back, and then resumed her duties.

The Cruiser glided smoothly as it came lower to the surface, and Luke could see that those veins of ore that he thought were small tributaries, were actually wide thick rivers, flowing at a significant speed. In the distance, he could see a building, mounted on the side on a ravine, towering over the flowing gorge.

“That was the former processing plant.” Mara murmured from beside him. “It hasn’t been in operation since the Clone Wars when Vader assumed control of the planet.”

He nodded as they passed it by. Luke watched in the distance with anticipation to see the towering turrets of the castle that Mara had shared images with him.

As the dark dot on the horizon became visible, he could feel his chest tighten, and reminded himself to calm his senses. The Cruiser slowed its approach speed as they came closer yet. The obsidian finger-like spiked spires were coming closer now and no longer just a fantasy in his mind.
From out of the ash and rubble, the monolith structure assumed command of the surrounding area, permitting the lava to flow beneath it.

Mara circled it once, and began to lower to the awaiting platform.

The repulse-lifts cushioned the landing, and she began to start the shut-down sequence with methodical skill as the platform retracted inside the castle.

Luke watched all of this wearily.

When she was done, she turned to him. Her eyes softened. “Ready?” she asked.

He sighed and then nodded.

Mara undid her crash webbing and headed for the aft section of the Cruiser, and he followed behind.

In the galley, Luke reached for his cloak and adjusted it around his shoulders.

Finding the deed disk, he held it out for her to take. As he dropped it into her hand, he let his fingers grace her palm in a gentle touch.

Before she turned to prepare herself, she looked at him. He wasn’t a tall man, but when Luke assumed control of his reputation and full mantle of Jedi, he was certainly a striking figure with all the implications that came with it.

Mara couldn’t deny that part of her was attracted to it.

She went back to assembling her uniform.

Luke looked over at her one last time, watching her put the last pieces of her official uniform in order; placing her cape on her shoulders, and bringing the hood into place, she adjusted the clasp under her chin. His mind zeroed in on a detail.

Reaching out, he asked without any preamble. <How long have you had that uniform? Did you keep since…Endor?>

“I didn’t know if I would ever need it.” She mumbled, not making eye-contact with him.

His father’s lightsaber was visible from her waist.

His frown furrowed with the implications, but before he could ask, she began amble.

“Protocol dictates the order for precedence.” She said in a strong authoritative voice, her chin raised, and her eyes blank. “Senior officers are to precede ahead of junior officers, with the exception of visiting dignitaries. In which case, the envoy shall precede the dignitary including, but not limited to, ten standard paces ahead.”

He could feel her take on a distinctly harsher countenance than the one she assumed when she was with smugglers; this personae was truly imperial in nature. It astounded him as he felt it come on.

They stopped at the top of the hatch, the ramp hissed as it lowered, announcing their arrival.

With the ramp down, a wave of heat and humidity came into the ship.

Luke flinched as he watched her turn on her heel in military-fashion as she began to disembark.
Raising his hood to cover his features, he remembered that he was supposed to keep within ten paces of her.

From under his hood, Luke mentally counted her footsteps before he followed.

Mara had set her shoulders back, and her muscles remembered the cadence and the positioned of her arm-swing as she walked into her past.

The steam rose from below of the metal grid, and the scent of sulfur was almost overwhelming; the sound of her steps echoed.

She could sense Luke behind her; he was uncomfortable with what he saw in her. *He wanted this,* she told herself, *and he was warned.*

*Were you warned?* She asked herself. *Do you know what you’re doing?* She asked again in a moment of self-doubt.

*First rule of authority; act like you’re not wrong.* She reminded herself in one last comment.

The hooded figure at the end of the landing platform stayed in placed.

As she approached, Mara could feel an eeriness about their arrival. In disbelief she recognized the figure.

Vanée, her mind hissed, *it can’t be? Has he been on duty all this time?*

He had been a member of Palpatine’s inner advisory council; which was really a farce. It was nothing more than a group of old men who thought they had any real power or sway.

Early in her career, Vanée had been a prominent member until one of his servants tried to make an assignation attempts on the Emperor. Since that day, he had taken a back seat on the council and had been relegated to being the humble servant of Vader. His demotion was briefly elevated when he had been sent to accompany the Emperor’s arrival on the second Death Star.

Mara tried to search her mind if she could recall if Vanée had been ordered to return to Vader’s castle. *He must have been, she thought, in order to be here now and not have been taken down.* He was older than she remembered.

Vanée had been a proud man, and if the attempt on the Emperor hadn’t taken him down a few notches, then his pride would have. The Emperor was keenly aware of those who were fighting for power and influence around Him, and contempt was all He had for Vanée, but He respected for his fortune.

He was a broken man, but even a broken man could be dangerous, she reminded herself.

The sounds on her boots on the grating were the only sound, and despite the heat, Vanée seemed to shiver with her approach; he cowered as she came closer, and bowed deeply.

Mara stopped within paces of him; she stood tall. “Vanée” she said clearly, addressing him.

From under his hood, he looked up at her with worried eyes. “Emperor’s Hand, you do us great honor with your arrival. However, My Master is not here to bid you welcome.” His voice waivered. “He has not been here in some time.”

She kept her straight position, sensing that Luke was approaching behind her by at least two meters;
she watched Vanée try to look beyond her at the cloaked visitor behind her.

“When did you last attend your Master?” She asked slowly, possibly knowing the answer.

Given that Vader’s castle was off the radar, and did not receive communications regularly, it was indeed possible that Vanée never heard the news of the Death Star’s destruction.

“Emperor’s Hand?” He asked, confused by the question.

Mara set her mouth, and could feel Luke coming closer, so she straightened her back. “I regret to inform you that Lord Darth Vader, Supreme Commander of Imperial Forces, has perished aboard the Death Star.” She swallowed, appearing to be moved by her announcement. “In his place, he had ordered the relinquishment of his estate, and titles, to his son and heir…” She turned to the side, and dropped to one knee with her head bowed. “Luke Skywalker.” She produced the deed disk from her pocket and turned it on.

The small planet hovered before Vanée’s eyes, and she could feel his shock; he looked to her supplicant form, and slowly looked down and, without question, took to a knee as Luke approached, following her example to humble herself.

She lowered her head, as she reached out to Luke, opening to communication with him.

“My Master would like you to honor his father’s demands.” She said, knowing that Luke could hear her.

Luke stopped before them, and she could tell that their positions disturbed him. However, he kept his silence.

She sensed that Vanée was floundering, unsure of what to say, but he knew what was being asked of him.

He shook his head in disbelief, but seemed to remember himself and who he was in front of. “Y-y-yes… of course.” He stuttered. “If I may be of any means of assistance to the New Master.”

<<Luke…>> she thought over to him. <<Step closer to me and turn, but say nothing.>>

He did as he was told.

“My Master is pleased for your efforts in maintaining his father’s residence.” She said blankly.

Vanée bowed lower in thanks; she could sense that he was shivering from shock at the news. After coming up, he motioned to open the doors behind him, allowing access to the new comers.

As the doors slid open, Vanée took his position to the left of the opened door.

Without being told, Luke strode past her and Vanée, paying no attention to either them outwardly. As he passed, he reached out in his senses, feeling the fear and apprehension in the manservant.

The black landing platform led to a black receiving room.

When Luke had distanced himself into the room, Mara got up and followed behind him.

The receiving room was nothing more than a larger platform that where the lava flowing beneath it; this was the most any visitor usually saw of Vader’s castle. Vader only permitted a select few past the next set of doors, past the receiving room.
Vanée stayed where he was and watched the newcomer, trying to determine how to respond.

Mara lowered her hood and Vanée could see her fully, and truly acknowledge that she was indeed the Emperor’s Hand.

“My Master expressed that he would like to inspect his father’s former, now his, residence.” She said.

Vanée’s eyes widened when he heard words; realizing that Vader’s son could mentally communicate with her. He was as gifted in the Force as was his father.

He bowed again, and kept his head lowered as he rushed ahead of Luke to open the next set of doors.

Without any restrictions, Luke walked stealthily into the next waiting chamber.

Mara stayed where she was and watched Luke progress farther ahead, exploring on his own; there was something that she knew that she needed to do, and she regretted it, but knew it was a necessity.

Vanée was about to follow his New Master, he supposed, until he saw that the Emperor’s Hand had not moved. He was torn with meeting to the needs of his New Master, and meeting his old obligations.

The Emperor’s Hand seemed to be in service to the New Master, and she was not known for taking orders without exception.

Mara came closer to Vanée. “What was the date of your last transmission and directive?” She asked.

His voice quivered, and he lowered his head. “I beg your pardon and mercy, Emperor’s Hand, our last transmission was over six years ago; a priority beacon message. Then, we were given instructions to co-operate with Operation Cinder. However, you are the first envoy we have received here since then. And we have not received any further instructions with regard to Operation Cinder.”

“Operation Cinder was not successful.” Mara said; her eyes going distant, remembering the order that had been set in place in case of the Emperor’s demise.

She narrowed her eyes at the meek form before her; not everyone was aware of the reasons for the order, but he may have knowledge of its existence.

Mara sighed, and knew that this would break the man; it had almost broke her when it happened. And to be truthful, it was breaking a small part of her to relive it now.

“Vanée, I have news of Emperor and the Empire.” She said, dropping her harsh tone. “The Emperor is deceased, and the Empire is in ruins. The Rebel Alliance attacked and destroyed the second Death Star, and all those on board.”

If he was reading her face, he could see that her words were true, and the pain that lingered there.

Her eyes flashed away from his face momentarily, and then back at him, watching the horror and shock wash over his features.

Years of being in service to Vader, and the Empire had destroyed him. He was but a shell of a man, lost with no possible direction for his life, and she knew it; he had waited six years, waiting daily for Vader to return, keeping his post.
Mara exhaled slowly. “Your services are no longer needed.” She said; her voice cracking. “You have been dismissed…and should you choose, you will be compensated.” She felt the quiver in her lower jaw, but respectfully bowed to the older man before she turned on heel to follow Luke, and leave Vanée alone on the platform.

She was three meters from Luke when she felt it, and stopped and closed her eyes.

Luke turned around when he sensed it immediately, and went to rush back to the room from which he came.

<No!> she heard his mind scream as he came to the realization.

Vanée had stepped off the platform and into the abyss of lava.

Mara stopped him. “Don’t.” She said holding him back. “He’s gone.”

Luke’s shocked face stared at her in disbelief. “You knew.” He whispered. “You knew that he would take his own life, and didn’t try and stop him?” He was verging on anger.

“It was his choice.” She answered without remorse, looking blankly away from him.

He gasped at her with the apathy that she was showing; his mouth hung open, speechless.

This was not what he had been trying to teach her for the past year; a respect for life, finding calm and peace. He could have assured Vanée that there was a life beyond this moment, a life out of servitude.

Mara shook her head. “He wouldn’t have survived…not without being able to serve…he would have been totally lost.” She said. “It would have been cruel to not let him have the choice.”

Luke swallowed and looked at her harshly. “How can you be so sure of that?” He asked, breathing hard.

Her eyes came back to his face. “Because I was faced with the same choice.” She whispered. “But my choice was taken away from me…otherwise…” She looked back to the platform, and then back at Luke.

Stepping away from him, she went to the door controls, and closed the doors to the receiving room.

The closed doors blocked out the heat and the smell.

Luke watched her and realized the desperation she must have felt in those moments after she had sensed the Emperor’s death; dizzying chaos, paralyzing fear, and a total loss of self and identity.

An ache in his chest reminded him that he could have lost her at her own hands before he had ever gotten the chance to know her.

She walked back with her head hung.

And finding new sympathy, Luke broke with the protocol that she had wanted to play, and hurried his steps to meet her. He took her shoulders and pulled her to his chest, feeling her shiver against him, despite the heat.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered to her, holding her tightly. “I had no idea to what extent that you’ve been through.”
He could feel her dropping the act that she had portrayed in front of Vanée, wrapping her arms around him and held him, and allowing herself to be held.

“I love you.” He whispered as he rocked her. <I love you so much...I never wanted this to hurt you...I asked too much of you...we should have never have come here.>

Her mind touched back. <<I love you too.>> She held to him a little longer. “I’ll be fine.” She said quietly. “I need this... as much as you do.”

It had taken her sometime to admit it, but it was the truth; time to bid farewell this part of her life, and move on.

Mara pulled back, and looked into his eyes and could see that he didn’t hold Vanée’s actions against her.

She looked away from him and around the foyer to the castle that she remembered well; the layout came back to her.

Sighing, she looked at him. “Where do you want to start?” she asked, wanting to get this over with as soon as possible.

Luke looked around the sparse room; there were no decorations of any kind.

The walls were either black or dark grey. Recessed lights were blank and vapid, only serving their purpose. A large staircase was front and center while side corridors led off in either direction.

“A protocol droid should find us shortly.” Mara said. “We can ask that our things be brought to the guest chambers, and a meal be prepared in the dining hall.”

“We don’t have to role-play anymore. Vanée was Vader’s only living servant. All others are droids.” She whispered.

Luke looked over to her, once again remembering that she had lived in stately palaces and castles, and was more-familiar with the workings of them.

“Where do you want to start?” He asked her directly. “You’ve been here before.”

She nodded and then sighed, saying. “I guess we should start outward and then look in... begin with those things only a guest would see, and then to the private sections.” She gestured to the grand staircase in front of them.

“Most of the residences were designed in the same manner.” Mara said as she led the way, walking up the stairs. “They had either a circular or oval design so that each location would be accessible and the layout recognizable. Only remote or ancient palaces had different floorplans- ones that were of alien design.”

She noticed the floor, and looked at the polished surface, without a hint of dust or dirt; clearly the housekeeping droids were still in use. Perhaps the rest of the droids were in working order as well.

Luke followed close behind her. Walking up the stairs to the center platform reminded him of approaching the Emperor’s throne.

He opened his senses, trying to get a feel for the place.

Unlike the Imperial Palace on Coruscant, where he found no trace of the Emperor and the lingering
evil, he could sense no evil here, but there was certainly an aura of oppression.

It was not welcoming, and it did not feel like a home. It felt like a sanctuary that not only protected but also imprisoned by its master’s own making.

The walls were of a heavy stone, and he supposed it was because they wouldn’t melt or be affected by the heat. Buried into the black granite, were flecks of red grit, the only other form of decoration were subtle carvings that weren’t visible until one came closer, and then they glowed with a crimson reflection as the light hit from different angles.

As they climbed, Luke could feel the temperature control of the cool walls from the hot air.

He kept his pace with Mara, and although she didn’t move faster than her normal gate, he could tell that she was headed somewhere.

“I wanted to show you Vader’s private hangar, later.” She said. “I figure you would like to see some of his prototype TIE fighters.” She forced her tone to be more-conversational.

“Did you know that he designed some of his own models?” She asked smiled briefly; knowing that father and son were akin to working with their hands.

Luke smirked and gave a short snort; she knew him well to know that he would want to see something like that.

“He wouldn’t allow anyone else to work on them.” She said as they were approaching the landing. “If the Emperor’s envoy couldn’t find him in his meditation chamber, then he was usually in his hangar, working on his ships.”

Before them, on the landing, the staircase split in two, and gave options as to which direction to head in. It was clearly a place that visitors were allowed to see; the lighting gave more detail to the environment, and the granite walls were a slightly lighter colour.

She turned to look at Luke; he could sense that she wanted to say something that he might enjoy, but she stopped, and her face sunk as she looked at the wall behind him.

Luke turned to see what she was seeing.

From a distance, it had looked like it had been more of the carved stone, but at this closeness, in was clear that it was more than just a bit of decoration. He stared up at the blood-red script on the wall.

It had been an optical illusion that didn’t reveal itself until a visitor would have been directly in front of it.

The letters looked like Aurebesh, or Basic, as it was commonly referred to, but made in a more-slashing type of font, and he could not decipher any of the words.

Mara came to join him, looking up, examining the piece before them; he could feel that she was uneasy about being in front of the decoration.

“What is it?” He asked under his breath.

She looked away.

The silence hung in the corridor.

“The Way of the Sith” She said simply. Her eyes went up and looked, following some of the script.
“Written in the ancient text of the Sith.” She whispered.

“Can you read it?” he asked, eager.

“No.” She said blankly. “But I can recognize several words.” She paused. “Only Masters and apprentices studied the language. Only Masters and apprentices spoke the language. I was not allowed to become an apprentice.” Her voice almost sounded regretful, as if it was something that she had wanted at one time- to be Palpatine’s apprentice.

Luke looked at her as she spoke, frowning. He nodded. “Do you know what it…” He had almost got the question out before she began to recite.

Without looking at him or the script, the words flowed statically from her; another set of rules that had been drilled into her.

“Peace is a lie…” she looked anywhere but at him as she spoke slowly and clearly; her words reverberated against the cold granite walls. “There is only Passion…Through Passion I gain Strength…Through Strength I gain Power…Through Power I gain Victory…Through Victory my chains are Broken…The Force shall free me.” She said with perfect tempo, her voice didn’t waver and the corridor threw a strange echo as the words left her mouth.

Luke shivered; he doubted that she could recite the Jedi Code with the same conviction that she had just displayed.

Or was this just another display for her Master’s loyalty and trust that she had learned to perform for Him?

Since he had met her, and had started to get to know her, he never be sure what she had felt; did she believe any of it? How far did her indoctrination run? Was it just a show that kept her alive- a survival technique that she had developed like any other skill?

He was about to ask, but his senses told him that something was approaching.

Mara turned too, sensing that they were not alone.

A protocol droid approached; its arms bent and its head tilted as it shuffled it’s walk. It was dark chrome but had the familiarity as any other C-unit would.

Stopping at the base of the stairs, and observing the visitors, it spoke. “Greetings, I am C-4R6, and I am here to assist you.” The voice was static, as if it was programmed to try to be friendly but failed. “Please identify yourselves.”

Luke made the motion to descend the stairs, to address the issue.


The voice of the droid took on a curt tone. “You are unsanctioned intruders. The weapons scanners have identified lightsabers.”


From either side of the staircase, droidekas rolled up beside the protocol droid, and unfurled their rapid-firing blasters in ready position, aiming at both targets, engaging their visible shields.

From the top of the steps, Mara called out. “Stand down! Obey protocol 9-1-6-2!”
The droids didn’t move or relax.

“Code name, please?” C-4R6 asked in a polite manner.

“Position: Emperor’s Hand – Code name: Wysteria” Mara said in a louder voice.

It took a moment, but the droidekas shields dropped, and they lowered their weapons, preparing to return to their storage places.

“Destroyer!” Mara said loudly, “Return to your bases, activate order 7-7-8, and shut down.” She ordered.

The droidekas’ arms retracted and they rolled away from where they had come from.

Mara walked down the stairs to come beside Luke. “Security systems engage if recognition codes aren’t given or movement is detected.”

He nodded; by walking down the stairs without first identifying himself, he had inadvertently set off the security system.

“C-4R6, this is your new Master, Luke Skywalker. You are to obey him as you would me. Change your settings to 3-2-A.” She addressed the droid.

“Yes, of course, Emperor’s Hand.” The droid responded as nothing was out of the ordinary.

Mara turned to Luke, waiting for him, asking him to give a command to the droid to see if the programming change had been immediate.

“C-4, please take us to the guest quarters.” He said ambiguously, unsure of commanding a droid that he was unfamiliar with.

“Yes Master Skywalker.” C-4 replied. “Right this way.”

The droid began to ascend the stairs, leading the way to the right side of the staircase, and they followed.

Luke stayed behind C-4 as they went up past the landing without any issue, but he turned back to see the Mara stare at the script on the wall before she joined them.

She looked over to him as they climbed; she hadn’t been shielding him, but it was hard to read her emotions, if she was feeling any.

Thinking that he was losing her, and losing himself to the melancholy of Vader’s castle, Luke came closer to her, and took her hand as they walked.

<\I need you.> He thought over to her.

C-4R6, unlike other protocol droids Luke had encountered, was less than talkative and there was no pleasant conversation along the way. If Luke wanted any information, he would need to ask.

“C-4, what is the planetary hour?” He asked, unsure.

“We are at 2100 hours, Master Skywalker.” C-4R6 responded.

“It’s a thirty four hour day.” Mara murmured beside him. “But without a sun to orbit around, most visitors go by their biological clock.”
Luke squeezed her hand, thanking her. <How do you feel?> He asked, hoping that she felt the same way he did.

After thirty hours on the Verpine Cruiser, with his emotions running high with expectation, and getting little more than four hour intervals of sleep, all he wanted was a meal, a shower, and a bed that he could rest in, preferably beside her.

“Master Skywalker, will you require one chamber or two?” C-4R6 asked without any pretext.

Mara’s eyes relaxed, and he could see that she just wanted the same things he did, and to feel safe; and she did, when she was with him.

Looking at her as he answered, “One, please.” He squeezed her hand in reassurance.

“Yes, Master Skywalker.” C-4R6 replied.

“The Ambassador’s Suite.” Mara said.

“Yes, Emperor’s Hand.” C-4R6 replied to the request.

The droid ambled in front of them, and there was nothing to distinguish one room from the next as they went down the corridor.

At the very end of the hall, the doors opened with their approach.

C-4 entered the room ahead of them, and stopped at the doorway.

Luke entered the grand room holding onto Mara’s hand, but she let her hold slip as he was taken in by the chamber and walked ahead of her.

She turned to the droid, and Luke could hear her giving instructions to have their belongings brought to their room; he walked to the large window and watched the horizon of the planet’s surface, the flowing lava was mesmerizing.

“…And we would like a meal prepared for thirty minutes in the private dining room.” Mara instructed the droid.

“Yes, Emperor’s Hand.” C-4 bowed before being dismissed, and the doors closed behind him as he exited the room.

She paused, regarding him there, giving him his space.

She undid the clasp on her cloak, and let it fall off her shoulders. Then, she draped it over a chaise as she went to go join him at the window.

Luke shook his head as he turned to her. “I can’t believe we’re here.” <This was not what I had expected.> His eyes looked around the room before coming back to her face.

She was about to ask, but he just shook his head again in disbelief. “I don’t what I was expecting… but it just feels so… empty.” He said quietly.

“And I feel…” He was at a loss for words, as she came in close to his side.

“Numb.” Mara whispered as she leaned into him.

Luke nodded and wrapped his arms around her, feeding her comfort as much as he was taking from
her.

It didn’t break the rules of not reaching out in the Force when they were together, but he felt they both needed to draw on the comfort that it could bring; feeling familiar, safe and a source of protection for both of them.

The waves wrapped around them, and he felt her sigh deeply against him, breaking the shroud she had put around herself, and bringing in calm and peace; he held her tighter, soothing himself too.

They must have stayed like that for some time; a soft chime sounded before the doors opened, and several house-keeping droids pushed their travel cases into the room, and then left without further notice.

Mara pulled back first, but Luke wasn’t about to let her go without putting his lips to hers, reminding her how much he truly loved her, and never, never would let her past change how he felt about her.

Her lips pushed back and as heard his intention, and repeated back the same thoughts that she had regarding him; Vader have been his father, but he was a different man.

As they broke, Luke caressed her cheek, before he looked around the room again; the farm boy was in awe.

The room was as sparse as the rest of what he had seen of the castle, but the walls had intricate patterns of inlaid granite in different colours of gray, brown, gold, and black.

A large bed, larger than any standard size that he had seen before, was covered in black silk with a canopy that started the headboard and rose at least five meters above it, as golden crystals dripped from the ceiling.

His eyes were wide, taking it all in.

Mara quietly snorted; she enjoyed seeing this wonder in him.

They could pretend that this was some sort of luxury resort- that they were on a holiday, if only momentarily before reality set in.

She could see his brow furrow as he regarded a set of doors on either side of the ones that they had entered through, and she knew what he was perplexed.

Pointing to the door on the left side of the room, she said, “That, is the ‘fresher.” Then she pointed to the opposite door. “And that, is the private dining room.”

Luke nodded, feeling less foolish now.

She squeezed his hand in hers, and leaned closer to him. “Do you want to see how big the ‘fresher is?” Her voice whispered against his cheek as if it was a secret between them.

Without much provoking, he followed where she led. They stopped at the chaise to drop his cloak on top of hers before they proceeded; he removed his gloves and left them there too.

Mara palmed the door release, and it silently gave way.

It was brighter than the bedroom; gold granite covered the walls, and golden fixtures. A large water shower unit, and a huge bathtub finished off the room.

One single moment of levity, or as exhaustion must have set in, Luke snorted loudly, almost a
chuckle. “That’s a golden Evac unit!” He said in surprise as he turned to smile at her.

She snorted once. “Yes it is.” She said un-phased but the opulence, but amused at him.

Like a child, Luke walked over and pressed the release button on the unit just to make sure, and watched it drain.

“So, are you more tired, hungry or in need of a shower?” She asked, knowing which one she preferred.

His eyes relaxed, and dropped any pretense. “I could use all three equally.” He confessed. “That bed looked almost as good as the one we shared on Dantooine.”

She nodded.

“But I could use a meal too.” He turned to look at the rest of the room. “And that shower looks like the best thing I’ve seen in a long time.”

“Well, anytime that you’re ready for it…” Mara commented as she walked over to the counter with the sink; she pushed on the front of the cabinet and it exposed the storage unit behind it, revealing any and all sorts of products. “…everything is here for you.”

She walked back into the main room, and Luke followed. “And in here…” she touched a section on the wall to expose a large wardrobe. “…is any piece of clothing that you might need.” She side-stepped, and pressed another section, exposing another wardrobe. Side stepping again, she did it to the next four sections.

Luke stepped up to the nearest compartment and touched one of the lush garments hanging there; it was as fine as the dresses that she had donated for auction. All of the clothing that hung there, made all of his existing clothing look like rags.

She had gone over to the chaise, and started to remove her breast plate and shin armor; no longer feeling the need for it.

“There are various sizes.” Mara said. She came back to regard the female selection of clothing, fingering a hanging dress as memories took her back to a time when clothing like this would be part of her daily repertoire.

A soft chime rang three times, taking their attention away.

“The meal is ready.” She informed him, looking over to the other door on the opposite side of the room.

He pulled his attention away and joined her as she was as hungry as he was.

The doors opened as they approached, and the smell of real food, not just ration bars, wafted in.

The dining room was set for the two of them, in no-less grand fashion than the rest of the experience.

The service droids were ready to attend them.

With very little ceremony, after Luke and Mara had sat down, the food was presented before them.

Even though the castle had been uninhabited for over six year, the food prep units must have been maintained because the food still seemed fresh.
She had given no instruction as what needed to be served, so whatever instructions C-4 had sent to the prep unit on their behalf, there was an abundance of food to choose from.

They ate in silence, mostly due to the toll that the emotional overload had taken, and probably from hunger. But looking across the table also said that no words were necessary.

A question came into his mind, and he wanted to know out of curiosity; how did Vader eat? – But he put it aside. He would ask what he needed to, after they had some sleep.

Now, his mind was wondering if it was possible to sleep here; Mara had commented that she never felt safe enough to sleep here.

The remainder of the meal was removed and Mara walked back with him, through the joining door into the suite.

Their cloaks had been moved from off the chaise. “Probably placed into the side dresser.” Mara murmured, as she was accustomed to this sort of treatment, much more than he was.

She went to open one of the wardrobes. “Why don’t you treat yourself to a set of Hapan silk nightclothes?” She pulled out a set of black sleeping pants and robe that seemed to be his size.

“It will just go to waste otherwise.” She said quietly, knowing that this sort of extravagance was routinely taken for granted.

He nodded, and looked over to the ‘fresher. Luke looked suspiciously at the clothing, before taking them from her.

“Go…” She said, looking tired herself. “I’ll be here when you come out.” She gave him a tight grin.

Luke stepped to her and gave her a kiss on her cheek before he left.

Mara watched him go; they were both too tired to do anything else. She didn’t move until the door closed behind him.

She turned back to the wardrobe, in search of something for herself.

When she was in service, she hadn’t taken the opportunity to use any of the clothes that had been provided. She was supposed to be a ghost, leaving no trance that she had ever been there. But she had always wanted to…maybe once or twice.

Wearing something that didn’t belong to her felt better than living in her own clothes sometimes.

The only thing that she seemed to find, that she was even interested in, was a Hapan silk long nightshift for herself; all the other clothing was not reflective of who she was now.

She fingered the material, and watched it change in colour from deep purple to midnight black; the silky material felt good and she remembered having something like it once.

Taking the nightshift off the hangar, she draped it over her arm, still appreciating the feel of the fabric.

Luke came from the ‘fresher without an announcement; he wasn’t shielding from her but his presence didn’t seem as outwardly expressive as it normally did.

Both of them were numb from the entire experience so far, and it would be wrong to pretend that they were feeling anything else.
Mara headed in his direction to meet him.

They exchanged a brief kiss as it was her turn to make use of the facilities.

Inside the ‘fresher, after the door closed, she went to the shower, and adjusted the controls to a water temperature that she would find pleasing.

Looking into the grand mirror over the sink; the cool glass started to fog with steam, but she could still see her reflection.

She motioned to wipe the glass without knowing why; her appearance was anything but attractive, she thought. Her eyes looked sunken and dark circles had started to form from lack of decent sleep.

Disrobing, she then stepped into the comfort of the shower and washed away the residue from living aboard the Verpine Cruiser; thinking of the last time water had touched her skin. The bath, she reminded herself; when Luke had lovingly tended to her, making her feel his love. She smiled, and then let it fade.

As she got out of the shower, she remembered the placement for all the necessities, and pressed one of the drawers so that an array of towels and toiletries were available.

She wrapped one towel and used another one to dry her hair. The humidity of Mustafar would help it naturally curl, so no need to fight it.

Mara held up the nightshift before she slipped it over her head and down her body; the plum colour was her favorite and she admired it greatly, smoothing it over her form as it cascaded down.

As a last touch, she found her pendant that she had tucked inside one of the pockets of her jumpsuit and placed it around her neck.

She adjusted it, and smiled at her own reflection. Her fingers grazed over it, thinking, that she may not wear it openly, but it gave her great comfort to know it was with her, always – she would never be without it.

When she emerged from the ‘fresher, the lights in the room had been turned down.

Mara looked to the large window to see his form standing in front.

He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, surveying the horizon, in a posture that was only too familiar to her.

Only this time, when she recognized where she remembered the stance from, she didn’t flinch but only accepted it without a fight; Vader used to assume the same posture when he was at the helm of the Executor, looking out at the stars.

It didn’t irk her because she could feel what he was doing there. He was meditating, and she could feel the Light that he was calling on to bring him serenity and the strength to be here.

She went to join him, wanting to be enveloped by his peace and possibly call him to join her in the bed. She wanted that for no other reason than she doubted that she would be able to sleep without feeling him beside her.

His shoulders rose with a deep breath as he became aware that she was near, acknowledging her.

Luke turned in her direction, and she came closer to him, stopping within an arm’s reach.
His emotionless face, broke as he saw his pendant around her neck.

Coming closer to her, she saw the green ring on his finger of his left hand as he reached to touch the pendant at her collar.

“The jerba leather cord broke, from wearing it too much.” She whispered. “I had to put it on a chain…I hope you don’t mind.”

He shook his head. “Not at all.” He whispered, and his hand came up to touch her cheek. “I’m just pleased that you like it.”

Swallowing, he said, “I didn’t think you did…I didn’t see you wear it since you picked Wes and me up.”

Mara slightly smiled before she spoke. “I can’t always wear it front and center, but I always have it with me.” She snorted quietly. “Armeth called it a ‘Tatooinean engagement ring’ – that’s when I knew that I couldn’t be so open about it.”

Luke grinned tightly, and nodded; his eyes moved from the pendant at her neck, to look at her face, her hair, and her.

His hand caressed her cheek again tenderly. <So beautiful…> His mind spoke. “I love you.” He said quietly, coming closer to her.

“I love you too.” She whispered before she closed the distance and placed her lips to his.

They held each other in silence; too tired to move, too in love to be away from each other.

When their kiss broke, she asked him what she needed of him. “Come to bed?”

Luke nodded, but then turned his head to look back out at the horizon, his eyes narrowed. “In a moment?” He asked.

Mara gave him and tight grin, but understood; he wanted to finish his meditation. “Come when you’re ready.” She whispered and leaned in for another kiss before she eased away from him, and then headed to the bed.

She took the side of the bed farthest away from the window, and turn away from it; blocking any light that came from it, and blocking out its existence. It would be easier to sleep if she didn’t remember where she was at the moment. She closed her eyes, futilely, and forced herself to slow her breathing.

When he finally came to bed, he chose to lie beside her, one hand in hers under the pillow, leaving the remainder of the grand bed empty.

Luke wrapped his other arm around her waist as he spooned in behind her.

He didn’t know why he wanted to ask, but he asked anyhow. “Will you show me Naboo?” He whispered into her hair.

Mara smiled as she gentle squeezed his hand. “Of course.” She replied quietly. She closed her eyes and opened her senses to him.

An image of a magnificent dome building entered his mind; as the sunlight beamed down on the grand building, the stone glowed, and the vines that crept up the side of it, made it seemed like it
was asleep in time.

He sighed, going deeper and he let the sleep take him.

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Into the night, she woke as a shiver came to her, surprised that she would feel such a thing; Luke was normally close enough to her that she could borrow his body heat if she needed it.

Mara sat up, pulling the covers up, and looked around the room, not sensing Luke anywhere close.

She could feel his presence, but not close by.

In her senses, she could feel that his was uneasy with his surroundings, as rightfully he should be. But something was different, and she could feel his inner struggle.

Getting up from the bed, she found the silk robe to match, covering herself, and wrapped it around her to go in search of him.

Leaving the suite, she walked down the hallway, back to the grand staircase, and not surprised to find him there, at the landing.

Luke stared up at the Sith script on the wall, unmoving, caught in a trance by it.

Mara stopped a few steps before coming down to the same level as the landing; she didn’t want to invade his space.

She was about to turn around and head back to the suite, now that she knew where he was.

“Why did you learn it?” Luke asked, not turning to see her, still looking at the script. “You weren’t a Sith.” He said quietly.

She could sense that he was seething under his calm appearance.

She shrugged, still staying a distance from him. “I was told to.” It was a simple answer, but it was also the best.

“Do you think that he believed it?” Luke asked, not turning to see her, his eyes fixated on the wall.

He was here to get the truth and wouldn’t accept anything less than that; Mara knew it and wasn’t going to keep it from him.

“He did.” She said simply. “Why else would he have it displayed in such an open manner?- for visitors to see.”

Luke wasn’t happy with that answer, and he exhaled harshly.

Mara knew it coming time to not hold back; she didn’t know how much he knew about galactic politics before he joined the Rebellion, but she was sure it wasn’t the same of what she knew while she grew up in the court.

“Not everyone knew that Palpatine was a Sith… he claimed that he was attacked by the Jedi, that it changed his appearance.” She came down a step. “Palpatine was the one who exposed the treachery of the Jedi, showed them to the Republic for the traitors that he claimed them to be. But then Vader appeared, out of nowhere… and the Empire became aware that Vader was a Force-user, but the likes of which they had never seen before… they still assumed that Palpatine wasn’t.”
“I even remember hearing courtiers discussing it…calling Palpatine a ‘humble man who only had the best interests for the galaxy’.” She knew that they both knew that it was a blatant lie.

“Given his orders to hunt down all the Jedi, Vader would have believed each and every one of those words….and the intended malice behind them.” She finished quietly.

He didn’t like her answer, and he glared over at her for being so honest, but he wasn’t angry with her.

He looked back at the script that seemed to bleed from the wall, and shook his head. “No…I don’t believe it.” He whispered, still clinging to his ideal thoughts for as long as he could.

Mara stepped down again.

This was the first proof that Vader was Vader, and not Anakin.

She didn’t want to humor his delusions any longer and this was just the beginning of the things that he would see here; if he couldn’t handle this, than the trip had been in vain.

“What did you think Luke? – that, this ‘Sith thing’, was just a role he was playing? That he didn’t want to do those things? That he was just pretending to be a Sith all along?” Her voice was steady and she was trying to be sympathetic.

“If you do the math, Luke, you’d see that he was a Sith, much longer than he was a Jedi, regardless of what or who he was in the end- don’t pretend otherwise.” She said bluntly.

His face hardened, and jaw set, seeing where she was going, and saying what he already knew, but now, he was aware that someone else knew the awful truth too.

“The fact is…and you might not want to believe it…but he lived it.” She came closer and nodded towards the Sith Code on the wall. “No matter what you think, he got to the point when he liked it.”

Luke’s chin jutted out; his solid expression didn’t change, but his eyes darkened.

“I know…” She whispered. “I did.”

“He liked the power…he liked the prestige…he liked the fear that he could instill…he probably loved some of it.” It was as much Vader’s truth as it was her own.

“Loved it more than he loved the Light…Loved it more than being a Jedi…” She went on because it wasn’t finished yet. “He was a greedy, self-destructive monster…who loved nothing and no one… and only thing he did right, was to die, trying to save you.”

“There’s your truth.” She finished.

With nothing more to say, Mara turned and head back up the stairs. There was no point to returning to sleep.

The day was about to start.

TBC
Vader’s Castle, Mustafar

It was done. She couldn’t take it back, nor would she want to.

Mara wasn’t angry; she had just expressed what she knew to be true about Vader. Everything that she knew, she had experience directly. There was no other way to approach it.

Regardless if she hated the man, she hoped that Luke would come to believe it, but she doubted that would happen on her watch.

Back in the room, she tried to sense if he was following her, returning. But he did not.

Clearly, he didn’t want to pursue this discussion, and, to her relief, didn’t want to escalate it.

She stood, looking around the room; this is was not foreign to her, she had lived this life before.

She had lived this lie before.

Peace is a lie…

The words held a different impact from the first time that she had heard them. She closed her eyes, hearing them again in her mind.

“She’s a Na’vi who suppressed her emotions. She’s a Lithe who prefers to work above ground. She’s a Skrull who believes in peace. They’re all lies the Na’vi made up to make it easier to live under human rule.” The Emperor’s voice hissed in her memory.
They were in His private meditation chamber.

It was a sealed pod; dark, dank, deprived of any other senses.

Inside the secluded casing was pitch black, nothing was visible, but she knew He was in there with her.

As a child, she was scared; scared of the overwhelming darkness, scared that she couldn’t see anything before her, scared that she was alone with Him.

She could feel Him leeching off of her fear; celebrating it.

“Reach out in your feelings, right now…with your immediate senses. Do not think about it and surrender to the moment.” He ordered her.

The fear overtook her, and she did as she was told; letting the fright, and the panic take over her…letting her desire to be freed from the capsule and unleashing her passion have control over her feelings again.

Unsure of what she was supposed to do; the pod just seemed to shake with her terror. The quaking grew stronger, as if she had hammered on the walls with her tiny hands turned into massive fists, until gaps in the pod cracked and light from the adjacent room streamed in.

The pounding continued until all of the seals broke and the pod released, exposed to the rest of the room.

Her little form was huddle on the ground, breathing hard, exhausted from the mental effort.

She had expected Him to be angered with her, and she began to whimper, assuming that a punishment was about to follow.

But instead, when she paused, she sensed nothing but pride coming from Him.

Looking up into His glowing red eyes, she saw that He was smiling, looking satisfied, and proud.

Proud, that He had discovered something in her, and that she was capable- and that He was the one to bring it out of her.

“Do you feel peaceful?” He asked snidely.

She shook her head; she was not at peace, she was still scared…waiting.

“Do you feel powerful?” He asked, waiting with a raised eyebrow.

She looked around at what her feelings had done, and then back at Him, and suddenly the distress was leaving her; she started to share the same pride that He had felt in her abilities.

She nodded as her body relaxed from the tension, filling with confidence.

His smile grew. “Good…good.” He sneered. “Peace takes time to prepare…it is a delusion that it is even achievable. Passion is immediate, a stronger and a natural response… it is honest and direct.”

She watched intently, watching His cloaked figure hover paces ahead of her, listening to His words, and she knew He was trying to simplify it for her child’s mind.

He grinned as if He knew that He didn’t have to humor her as He would with any other child; she
was different.

“Then, you know which gives you more reliable, don’t you?” He asked with His eyes narrowing.

She nodded, almost feeling happy that he was pleased with her and her performance.

“Then you know which is more powerful?” He said, leaning to look into her eyes. “And then, you know which one you should use.”

Her little form took to one knee, and she bowed before Him with her lesson learned. “Yes, Master.”

Mara inhaled deeply, bringing herself out of the memory. Her eyes flashed as she looked around the room to see if she was still alone.

She hugged her body, as she thought about her memory.

Was peace a lie? This was one of her first lessons as she had come to study the Force.

When she thought about it, as an adult, she knew now that she preferred it when she used Peace over Passion.

To her, Passion was the automatic and raw response; it wasn’t controlled and could do more damage than one could intend when using it.

And Peace… since she had returned to using the Force, she had to admit that although it took longer for her to learn how to use it, but Peace had a subtle skill.

She preferred it now; preferred as a more-reliable source for accomplishing what she needed to. Although, sometimes passion still won out.

Mara looked over at the door; she preferred it when she was in Luke’s company and his peaceful aura enveloped her, and them.

She wished he was there now if only to draw upon that peace.

Her mind flashed to another issue; why did she have such an adverse reaction to Vader, and the way that Luke felt about him?

She walked closer to the window and looked out, watching the molten river; so beautiful, yet so dangerous.

Aside from the heinous acts that she knew Vader had accomplished, it was something different that was now fueling her animosity.

When she questioned about how much Luke thought about his father, she could feel it again, and it was still foreign to her. It felt like a twist in her gut but she had felt this before; she was jealous.

Again, these things called ‘emotions’ had beleaguered her.

But jealousy, she knew.

She had felt it when she thought of other women who wanted to have time with Luke. She had felt it when the Emperor had turned her away, time and time again, for His preference for Vader as His apprentice. And now, she was competing with Vader again for another’s attention.

And yet, Vader was so undeserving of it.
And Luke’s attention was so misdirected; if he was looking for a hero, he had picked the wrong side of his father’s dichotomy.

Mara exhaled, strangely feeling peace that came when she discovered something about herself that she didn’t know previously.

Now, she truly wished that Luke was here, so that she could explain it to him.

She sighed; he would learn soon enough what she knew.

Without him there, she decided that she should start her day, and this was what she was familiar with…too familiar.

The Ambassador’s Suite was like any others, in palaces all over the galaxy.

Although she had never stayed one, she knew all the features of them. She had usually stayed in the lower servant’s quarters, or a vacant nook, if her presence was not supposed to be noticed. The only reason she would have been in this suite like this, was to spy on whoever was occupying it.

Walking over to the room controls, she summoned C-4, and once it arrived, she gave it instructions for her ‘morning’ meal, along with the instructions for Master Skywalker.

After the droid left, she made her way over to the wardrobe to find her own belongings, and selected appropriate clothing for the day. She glanced over at the darker colour selection that she sometimes preferred, but decided on a lighter palette today.

While she dressed in her tunic and pants, she was sure that Luke would return.

By the time, she had prepared herself, the meal was ready.


Regretfully, she thought that she might have chased him away, and had made him think that she was angry with him, when that wasn’t the case.

She relaxed her mind and reached out for him. \<<The meal is ready.>> She sent out simply; it would be his choice to respond or not.

Mara walked towards the dining room, and glanced at the door, expecting it to open. When it was clear that it wouldn’t, she continued her walk into the adjacent room.

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He watched as she stormed away, all he could feel from her was confusion and resentment.

Luke glared as he watched her leave, and then looked back up at the script, and switched to glaring at it.

She was right about his father, but not entirely.

As much as the Jedi Code had brought him comfort and peace, he knew that these words, etched into the wall had brought his father the same sort of comfort, regardless of the intent.

They were just words, but they echoed in his mind.

Without knowing that they were part of the Sith Code, there would be very little in the way to
distinguish them from the Jedi intentions.

However, The Sith Code was written with a self-driven purpose; The Jedi Code was not as specific to the user of the Force, choosing to act for all, not in the interests of one, and not in the interests of the self.

His mind concentrated on the wording of the last two lines.

*Through Victory my chains are broken… The Force shall free me…*

Although he could not read the script, he looked for where those lines would approximately appear, and regarded them.

He felt particularly drawn to them.

As a former slave, Anakin would have been drawn to them too; possibly feeling for the first time in his life that he was in control of his destiny.

It was the Jedi who had ‘won’ the rights to him for their Order; releasing him from one form of slavery and expecting his servitude in exchange.

What did the Sith ask of him? – Here, they offered freedom through his own actions.

And yet, they did not.

No, not ‘they’… just **Him**. One Master, and one apprentice.

The Emperor demanded more commitment than the Jedi did. Without absolute proof, he still knew.

“*You, like your father, are now mine.*” Palpatine’s words were fresh in his mind.

“*It is useless to resist, my son.*” His father’s response reiterated how indoctrinated and bonded he was to Palpatine.

His father had made himself a slave to another Master all over again, trading one for another.

Servitude was one thing, but loyalty was entirely a different; servitude was demanded, but loyalty was given.

Was it wrong to think that Anakin felt loyalty to Palpatine? And how did Palpatine gain such trust?

Luke’s mind flashed over to Mara, and he looked in the direction of the suite; she had been loyal to Palpatine too. How did He gain her loyalty?

There was more at play here than just a simple Master and apprentice relationship.

He thought of his own dedication to the Jedi and what had driven his own desire to join The Order.

He hadn’t heard of the Jedi until Ben Kenobi had told him about his father, and showed him his father’s lightsaber.

But Ben had earned his trust with the kindness that he showed Luke, and he earned his loyalty with the sacrifice he made on the Death Star in order to save others.

There was no push to join the Jedi, just the mere suggestion- no demand. It was Luke’s will to follow that path.
The demand that Yoda made of him was one of dedication to his studies; not to Yoda himself, not following Yoda’s will— but to follow the will of the Force.

And his servitude was to that of the galaxy; to protect those who could not protect themselves, uphold justice and peace— no Master other than a teacher who earned respect, from their dignity and their knowledge.

The Force was your Master; its will was your obligation.

Wrapped in his thoughts, he stopped; feeling the hesitant touch of her mind, calling him.

Luke sighed, and looked back at the direction of the suite. Apprehensively, his eyes narrowed, wondering if he should go to her.

*Mara,* he sighed internally, *why do you hate him so?*

When the time came, then he would ask.

_Sometimes, I hate him too._ Luke thought, speaking to her absent presence. _Sometimes, I love him… despite of everything he did._

He looked back up at the script. Turning away from the wall, he headed in the direction of the suite.

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Mara pushed her food around on the plate.

She looked at the plate, and recognized the same pattern on the fine china from other Imperial residences. She supposed that Vader didn’t pick it, or even cared. Besides, all of the surroundings been constructed to put the visiting dignitary at ease.

She wondered if had ever been used before; Vader was not known for having guests, yet all Imperial residences had been prepared should the need arise. All of them had a Royal Imperial suite, should the Emperor visit.

A thought brushed her mind; why did she ask for the Ambassador’s Suite instead of the Royal one?

Again, a reflex action didn’t sit well with her that she still thought of that suite being available for the Emperor, and Him alone.

Sighing, she turned her head when she felt Luke approach, and dining room door opened for him.

Luke’s face had softened since she had seen him, and she knew that she had relaxed her own harsh visage.

His lip twitched, almost achieving a grin.

He wasn’t happy, but he wasn’t angry at her either, and she relaxed as she watched him take his seat across the table from her.

“The caf is particularly good.” She murmured to him, trying to make an effort to break the ice.

Luke nodded, and then looked up at her, with his clear blue eyes. “Thank you” he said quietly back to her, acknowledging her effort.

The serving droid brought the offering that was prepared. Most of it looked too fancy to eat, but he
picked one of the dishes and was about to make the faux-pas of reaching for it himself as the droid brought it towards him and placed it down.

He looked down at the serving utensils, trying to remember the training that Leia had put him through, as he recalled that he had to start with placing his napkin in his lap first.

“You don’t have to be so fancy for me.” Mara said as she looked at him, her green eyes were subdued, as she must have seen him pausing to flounder.

“I know.” He said, “But I still want to try.” He gave her a slight grin.

There still something that lingered between them; they would forgo it for now.

Mara nodded, and went back to sipping her caf as she waited for him, but didn’t rush. She watched him over the rim of her cup in silence.

In his delay of arriving in the dining room, he had taken the time to change from his nightclothes into basic clothing. She had favored for something lighter coloured; he had selected something in dark browns.

After a few bites, Luke looked up at her. “I’d like to leave the day after tomorrow, if that’s alright with you?” He asked calmly.

She nodded. “I’m ready to leave at any time.” Mara replied as her expression didn’t change.

Luke picked up his cup and nodded before taking a sip of caf.

The room was so empty that only the sound of cutlery on the plate could be heard, as he continued to eat.

He swallowed. “Will you show me where the private chambers are?” He asked, knowing that there was possibility that she would say no.

Mara put down her cup and looked across the table at him, and replied without any malice. “Of course.”

Luke nodded, his eyes looking away from her. “Good.”

He knew that he shouldn’t expect her to apologize for the things that she had said, and he wasn’t asking her to. But when he still looked at her, across the table, unflinching to her gaze, he wasn’t going to back down, or back away from what he wanted from this trip.

The droids returned to clear the table.

“She should we go?” he asked.

Mara nodded, got up from her side of the table and then motioned towards the door.

Luke got up and followed her out.

He walked slightly behind her was they walked through the main room and out into the corridor. There, he fell into step beside her.

Part of him wanted to reach out to her; take her in his arms, yet he knew that he would flounder in what he would say. There was no logical sense for what he was feeling, and why he felt it so strongly for his father.
He wanted to kiss her, if only for a reprieve from all the other things that he was feeling.

He wanted to hear her speak gently to him, if only to know that she was able to understand what he was going through.

He just wanted some sort of release from this moment, but he knew that he wasn’t going to get it. Sometimes Mara’s nature wasn’t to comfort or console; but not now, and he doubted that she would recognize that he needed that from her.

As they walked down the stairs and past the landing, he felt a spike in her sense, yet she kept going without a word.

On the main level, she led him to a corridor that was hidden behind the base of the stairs.

Unlike the other doors that responded as they approached, this door refused them entry until Mara typed in another code from her memory. The door rose without any other protestation.

A long corridor awaited them and Luke felt it immediately.

Mara must have felt it too; he saw her shiver before she boldly went forward.

The aura, the presence, had changed going from virtually no sense of his father, Luke was inundated with a heavy, oppressive gloom.

Unlike the cave on Dagobah, which was angry and filled with hatred, here the Darkside was sad, dreary, depressed- it was like a wave of sorrow.

It was hard for him not to get immersed in it.

Mara turned when she had sensed that Luke had stopped, and she could feel what he was doing.

He briefly meditated, calling on the Lightside to push away the Darkness.

Not entirely successful, he still tried, and it didn’t feel as overwhelming as it once did; he was able to continue.

Mara didn’t seem as affected as Luke was; she had lived with these senses for most of her life and had built up a tolerance to being affected by them.

She had once felt them severely, but it was taught out of her to respond to whatever she was feeling that didn’t serve her goals.

Stopping at a large door, she watched Luke carefully.

Part of her fear for bringing him here was that he would be drawn into the Dark power that resided here, or confused by the negative feelings. So far, he had found a way to keep them at bay.

She had no intention of apologizing for her words earlier, but to make a small consolation, she had decided that they should stop here first.

Luke came closer before she pushed the door release.

“I had promised to show you Vader’s private hangar.” She said, sounding somewhat gratified that he had followed her this far.

The lights came up and illuminated the large room; a set of stairs led down to the main floor.
Luke’s eyes widened as he saw at least four Advanced TIE Fighters in various states of disarray, tools were left on workbenches, engine parts were on hoists, and other large pieces were waiting to be assembled- just as his father had left it. And his heart leapt.

A visible sheen a dust covered every surface. Clearly, the housekeeping droids had not been permitted into this sanctum.

A low rumble could be heard within the room, and there was a noticeable spike in temperature. Mara supposed in may have been due to the proximity to the lava flow beneath them.

Luke moved ahead of her, and descended the metal grated stairs to the lower level eagerly.

She could sense his excitement as she followed.

He headed to the closest craft, and he reached out to let his hand graze the solar panel, appreciatively.

“I always hated seeing them…but they are fast.” He murmured.

“They are.” Mara agreed, keeping her distance from him. She watched him being in awe. “I always felt vulnerable flying one.”

Luke looked back at her over his shoulder and nodded.

Who wouldn’t feel insecure in a craft that had no shields, no hyper-drive and no life support systems? TIE pilots were expendable, but in their zealous training they didn’t know it.

“But Vader’s Advanced Model was different.” She said, looking around the hangar. “It was a heavier craft, in general, with shields and a hyper-drive.” She commented, pointing out the differences between an Advanced TIE and a standard model.

Coming closer to the TIE, Luke saw the work bench beside the craft, and picked up the dusty data pad beside it. He blew away the dust, and then pressed the power button, bringing the device back to life.

He waited until the screen flashed, and he saw the readouts.

He looked back at the craft, and then back at the data pad.

“That’s probably why he was trying to override gas exchange off of the engines… trying to boost the power.” Luke said; he looked back at the fighter, and saw where his father had almost achieved it too.

Frowning, he reached over to the opened panel. “It looks like the power coupling caused a lag in the efficiency.”

Luke looked over the array of tools on the workbench, and grabbed the electrical current meter, tucked it under his arm, he also picked up a pneumatic wrench, deciding that he needed to pry off the existing coupling, switch out the low capacity wires…maybe switch to fibers optics for better efficiency…

He stood back and scratched his head. “How in blazes do you get at the auxiliary frame?” He mumbled to himself, looking at the puzzle before him; he tried to get low, seeing where the trail of wire led.

Walking around the solar panel, he followed the lines.
Wishing he had brought his work gloves with him, he could see that the gauge of the wires that were being used would have caused some energy lag. He spotted a bit of corroded connections, and wanted to spot-weld them immediately, shaking his head.

Mara watched him, wondering what had peaked his interest. She frowned; she knew he would be interested but she didn’t think he would get so immersed so quickly.

She hung back, just watching him. Walking over to adjacent work station, she regarded the supplies that were waiting, letting her hand absently graze over the plasti-steel wire and tools, appreciating them for what they were.

And she could appreciate them; when she was learning how to be happy after the fall of the Empire, she was just a hyper-drive mechanic out on the Rim, glad to have a purpose again, and at the end of her day had felt like she had accomplished something.

A tight grin, and she moved on, looking at all the work that Vader was willing to put into a craft. He was meticulous, she had to admit to herself, looking up at the transparisteel viewport.

She looked back at Luke as she watched him rub grease off on his trousers, as he went to select another tool from off the bench; wondering where did he get the grease from.

Mara walked back, closer to him, to see what he was doing.

There was no way that these ships were ever going to fly, or that he was ever going to pilot one…

Luke moved the tools around, looking for the right one, and must have senses her curiosity.

“He was on to something.” He said absently, and eager to see something completed. “If I was here, I could have told him to put in simpler regulator…then, it would have worked.” He shook his head.

She furrowed her brow as she watched his moment of mania; experiencing anxiety over something that would never work, and someone that wasn’t there.

She sighed, and regretted that this was their first stop.

“Luke…” She called gently to him. She called to him again, wanting to call to a halt his desperate behavior.

He stopped his frantic search, and looked over to her, and the hastiness in his actions ended. He looked at the bench, and realized what he was doing.

So desperate to find any connections to his father, he was willing to assemble a TIE fighter.

Luke slowly put down the tools in his hands, and stepped back from the bench; feeling foolish.

He looked regretfully at the TIE and then looked down at the ground, knowing that she was there to witness this moment.

“Life just seems easier when you’re working on something.” He mumbled, not wanting to look at her. It was something that he had told himself repeatedly when things got too much for him; his ship was always waiting for him.

Mara stepped closer to him. “I know.” She said gently, without any malice or hint of distain for Vader and trying not to be confused by her own feelings in the moment.
Luke took some time before he could meet her eyes.

To avoid making either one of them feel uncomfortable, she let her hand drift over the work area beside her as she came closer to him; sensing the aura that was left there.

Her eyes fluttered, *just sensing.* “He enjoyed being here.” She said as she stepped closer. “He felt *free* here.”

“Show me?” Luke asked whispering.

She looked back at him, frowning that he didn’t know how to sense it for himself.

Maybe he was too involved in the place, and couldn’t concentrate to find it, or maybe he had never had to use this one sense before; Mara came closer to him.

She took his left hand by the wrist and guided it over a different area from where he was working. “Sense it like you would *the air.*” She said quietly. She knew it was an obscure thought, but he seemed to get the idea behind it, like reading a room full of people, but deeper.

He looked at her, before he followed her directions, wondering how she had learned such a thing.

“I had to learn to use it to track people.” She answered him with a blank expression.

Luke nodded; he had done it before, and just didn’t think of using it here. He let his eyes roll closed, sending out his feelings, and relaxing.

Mara released his wrist, and saw him walk slowly around the area, feeling the emotions that were in the environment.

Auras tended not to last long in places, but personal items sometimes held more, usually the feelings that someone had while they had held them.

Vader’s tools and belongings in this room didn’t reveal much to her, but the look on Luke’s face, as he examined the area, told her differently.

His brow furrowed and then released the tension; he smiled in some parts, cringed at others, and sighed when he felt a sense of achievement.

He exhaled and opened his eyes, and grinned serenely, as if he had found part of what he was looking for.

Luke turned back to her when he was done searching the area. “Thank you.” He said quietly, sighing.

There was so much brewing under the surface of his face; he was trying to fight it.

Mara gave him a tight grin and began to ascend the staircase from which they had come; there was more to see.

Luke followed behind her, and looked back when he reached the top of the stairs.

As much as he enjoyed seeing and feeling the essence of the room, he was not oblivious that these same ships were the ones that tried to kill him on many occasions.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Luke closed the lights and walked out of the room to follow her.
Further down the corridor, Mara stopped at a crossroads in the hall; neither option that was presented to them would be pleasant.

He joined her; he raised an eyebrow, finding the words to ask.

She decided to be direct. “Which would you prefer… the meditation chamber or training room?” She asked, looking in either direction.

Luke paused, and looked at her, scrutinizing her senses, seeing if her feelings had changed any towards his father, knowing that she had just saw a human side to the man.

She wasn’t blocking him, but her feelings had not budged.

He set his jaw, and nodded, seeing no change in her. “Whatever that you feel would be best.” He answered.

Neither, she bitterly responded silently, but turned and led the way to the meditation chamber.

She hadn’t been to this room when she had visited here, but she had been in Vader’s other meditation chamber aboard the *Executor*, and in other residences that he had briefly resided in, so she knew what to expect.

The Emperor’s inner sanctum was just as dark as Vader’s had been, and she knew that well.

Through an archway, they stopped at a junction, and Mara touched a side console. After revealing the control panel, she keyed in her entry code that allowed her access to any Imperial residence.

Vader may have thought that his castle was impregnable, but the Emperor would refuse to be locked out from any place which He had granted to anyone, including Vader.

The lift arrived immediately, and they walked on. In an instant they arrived at the vast chamber; the only available light were the multi-oblong lights from the back wall.

Under like the hangar, the room was sparse, from what Luke could see of it.

He felt a shift in her senses as she tensed. <<Stay here.>> she ordered, as she took the first few steps forward into the room.

“Lights!” She said loudly.

Immediately, Luke sensed it rather than saw it and drew his lightsaber from his waist, preparing to defend her.

With her motions and the light up, two ominous Imperial Red Guards moved towards her with their weapons in ready position.

It was like a replay of the images he had seen aboard the Death Star. Although he had never seen an Imperial Guard in action, he knew that their reputation was deadly.

Mara stepped forward. “Omicron-Theta-Rho-Kappa-1-1-6” She said, responding to their advance.

They halted, but stood ready.

“By order of His Imperial Majesty, at the request of The Emperor’s Hand, you are to return to your posts and shut down.” She bowed to both of them, and watched.
Both guards paused, and then bowed, and moved with gliding grace to the far right corner of the room where appeared to be statues.

Even thought they were battle droids, she knew that they would respond to commands that would have been given to any member of the Royal Guard, as if they were human.

Luke watched, still ready, in case they didn’t respond appropriately. He exhaled watching them, wondering why they were in this room in the first place.

Now that the threat was removed, he looked around the room, and understood.

Even before the lights came up, he recognized the large cylinder in the middle of the room – a bacta tank.

Dread started to slip into his senses; his natural aversion to the medical device.

It was much larger than the ones that he had the displeasure of using himself. Off to the side, the hoist and respiratory mask hovered; he shuddered as he saw it.

Most of the tanks that he had been dipped in were temporary and didn’t look as permanent as this one did.

This tank was set into the stone, immovable.

If his father used it frequently, out of his suit, then he would have been susceptible to any attack, almost powerless, but from the use of the Force. Hence, the need for the Royal Guards- anyone seeing them would have thought twice.

Over the initial shock, Luke could feel it now; the aura of the room, and he touched his chest.

Sadness, resentment, anger, loathing, fear, hatred – all seemed overwhelming instantly.

Luke found himself taking a step back and panting because if it.

Once again, Mara didn’t seem affected as he regarded her. <<I lived with it.>> She looked at him before she turned away.

To say that she wasn’t touched by the room, was untrue. Her breathing was heavier, and she did feel the negative emotions, more than she ever had felt them before; reminding herself that she used to live in such an environment with all its oppression.

As he recovered, Mara walked casually around the room, looking at the apparatus in the middle; she had never seen it up close, but knew this was one of the many ways that Vader would meditate.

Her motions were just an excuse to step away from Luke, and headed in the direction of the droid guards.

She resisting her desire wanted to go to him and hold him as she could feel the aching grief that he sensed.

She wanted to wrap her arms around him and buffer him against all the pain.

And she needed him too; protecting both of them both from the desolate energy, taking comfort together.

It was overwhelming to her too, but she knew to expect it; the Emperor’s meditation areas were as
emotionally dark, if not more malevolent than Vader’s.

She noticed the subtle differences though; the Emperor’s space harbored anger and His overall self-importance as an immediate sense, whereas Vader’s housed deep sadness.

Blinking, she tried to rid herself of the thoughts that she was having, thinking of Vader as human.

_He wasn’t_. She told herself.

As proof, she found herself in front of a wall of mechanical appendages.

Recssed into the wall, and hidden in the shadows, arms, both left and right, and legs with knee extensions, hung from hooks in front of her. Assembly parts and grid masks for breathing stayed in parts; their wires jettisoned out in various directions, waiting to be connected.

As the initial feeling of the room passed, Luke could feel the oncoming cold and shiver that he came to associate with the Darkside; it was unmistakable as it followed with dread and it seemed to be centered around the bacta tank.

He looked at it, coming closer. He knew what he was seeing, the medical device served two purposes for his father; allowing for a slight reprieve from his pain and allowing him to concentrate in his meditation.

Luke looked at it, feeling his own anger just simmering, even more that he was in this space.

_“He would call out to me.”_ He said quietly, but the echo in the room increased the volume.

Mara turned her head but stayed where she was.

_“He would call out to me…”_ He repeated, staring at the tank. “…regularly, for most of that first year after he told me… After Bespin.” He swallowed; bringing moisture into his mouth and choking down his feelings. “Calling, and calling, and calling… trying to get me to join him, trying to wear me down.”

Mara watched as Luke relived the memories. She knew to which he was referring. She had sensed the desperation in Vader after Bespin, but she didn’t know why he was driven, more than ever, to find the Rebel pilot.

She watched as his nostrils flared, and he controlled his breathing, controlling his emotions again; refusing to acknowledge what was right in front of him.

Turning back, she held in her own anger, and trying to gain some reasoning on why she felt it so strongly again.

Luke must have recovered because soon he was beside her and regarded the automated parts that would make up Vader’s body.

The silence in the room broke as she heard the quiet noise of the servos in Luke’s right hand flex as he observed the display.

She could sense what he was thinking; he was reliving the moment that his hand left his body- she felt the wave of resentment come off of him. Surprised, she turned, watching.

His eyes had darkened, and his jaw clenched.

Perhaps he was coming to the conclusion that she had asserted since they had ventured here.
Mara looked back at the mechanical pieces; she had sensed Luke’s pain. The pain that Vader must have endured would have been much greater.

Her mind flashed on the number of times that she had used her own lightsaber to remove the limbs of her adversaries; she took a step back from the area.

And Luke frowned at her; thinking that she was further repulsed by the memory of his father.

His mind flashed on words of Ben Kenobi, *He is more machine now than man. Twisted and evil.*

He shook his head, still refusing to give in and believe it fully, but he knew his faith was wavering.

Mara backed away from the hanging limbs.

There was something macabre about seeing them there; as if they were about to come alive without an owner.

Her mind flashed on the man responsible for most of the Emperor’s experimental monstrosities.

*Cylo,* her mind whispered in a chilling voice. *The Emperor’s biological engineer.*

She swallowed, and tried to halt her chill, when she remembered her one and only encounter with the man who had offered to have her cloned, without the Emperor’s permission. He had implied that it would only benefit the Empire; his voice intense, and his one human eye ecstatic with fanatic frenzy. He had scared her, which was not an easy thing to do.

She took a few more steps away, not turning until she felt comfortable to do so. She found herself walking behind the bacta tank in the middle of the room.

Looking up as she walked, she distracted herself by tracing how the bacta was delivered to the tank, and how it drained.

Absent from her immediate attention, she suddenly halted just past the tank, and looked at the opposite blank wall, knowing it was not what it appeared to be.

Mara stood, staring at the wall. *It’s hidden,* her senses told her. *Look beyond.*

She frowned, keeping her distance, until Luke came beside her and regarded the same wall.

Only he wasn’t showing any restraint, and walked closer to it.

Luke placed his hands on the cold stone and moved his flat palms around, searching for something.

“It’s on the other side.” He said, trying to explain what and why he was doing this. “Something we need to see.”

Mara came closer, to a different section of the wall and did as he did; running her hands over the surface, hoping to find something…anything.

She felt a spike in his sense, as if he had triggered and effect. She withdrew her hands as she felt a rumble in the stone, and backed up.

In front of Luke, the wall moved forward, and then split to reveal a large display case.

Backlit, and expertly displayed, a collection of Jedi lightsabers was showcased. There must have been fifty, or more, of the beautifully crafted relics.
At first, Luke grinned seeing all the amazing examples of the Jedi artwork and weaponry. But his smile quickly faded as he started to estimate how many were there, and the reasoning that their owner’s had given them up.

The only explanation was that this was his father’s trophy collection of those Jedi that he vanquished and eliminated in his hatred and anger.

Luke felt his heart sink, knowing that there was no other explanation.

Mara looked at the collection; a pain in her chest stabbed her sharply as she knew what this represented too. *You had a same collection… once.*

It was true; she had kept souvenirs of some of her kills- it was done at the Emperor’s request, most often as proof that her task was completed.

Her brow pinched as she recalled that she used to keep her collection beside her cache of weapons, and would often look at them, remembering with distain those who had dared to even fight back, refusing to accept their fate and take their punishment.

She clenched her eyes shut.

Luke turned to her, seeing that the collection upset her. It upset him too.

All of them there. Each one was unique, belonging to a Jedi who had stood against his father.

_Were they friends? Did they know each other?_

He reached out and picked one up; the hilt seemed smaller than the others. He turned the small cylinder around in his hands, inspecting the engraving in the metal, seeing how it was constructed with care and thought.

He turned it on, and the short yellow blade extended; the saber had a slightly higher pitch than his own.

Luke knew that each one would have been bonded to its owner; the process for constructing a saber demanded it; he closed his eyes and got a sense of who wielded this saber.

He gasped and shut it down immediately, placing it back on the display with care… it had belonged to a child…one who had tried to stand his ground against his father.

His father had given no mercy and took no pity against a child.

Luke shivered with the thought and hung his head.

This was not a planet of nameless people he was destroying- this was a child- one that had to stand in front of him, looked at this child’s eyes before he cut him down.

He tried to control his breathing and his feelings; everything in him wanted to explode and scream at the walls. _Why? His mind yelled… Why were you so threatened by a child? You kriiffing monster!_

Mara felt his flood of emotion and stepped back from him; Luke looked over to her. She could see his haunted face, twisting with his personal hell.

Watching her withdraw from him only fueled his feelings, and his sharp stare made her stop and resume to stay by his side.
She knew she had promised that she wouldn’t abandon him, but that was at a time when she thought it was only the memory of Vader that she had to deal with. Now, she was seeing just how similar she had been to the Dark Lord.

She was a cold killer just as Vader was— they may have been given different assignments, but, in truth, they were the same.

*Does Luke see it? Is he even aware?* She asked, but desperately shielding her thoughts. *Does he see it in me?*

Luke exhaled hard, gaining his control over his feelings for the repeated time since they had begun their exploration of the castle.

Looking at all the lightsabers on display, his attention was drawn to another one, in the top row; beside it were several empty cradles as if his father was expecting to collect more.

Luke sighed as he reached out to take the simple looking hilt from off the wall. He didn’t need to reach out his feelings, didn’t need to get a sense of who it had belonged to; he knew.

“Oh Ben” He sighed, heartbroken, as he held his Master’s lightsaber in his hands.

All the memories came flooding to him, with nothing to hold them back.

He remembered his childhood and the friendly shadow-figure that always seemed to be there, yet not, watching over him.

The time he had desert fever and almost died; Aunt Beru was crying as the shadow placed a cool hand on his forehead, and then he woke up, revived. He thought he had dreamed it all.

The set of parts that some Jawas had given him to repair the family’s Skyhopper; the smiling shadow who watched from the sidelines as a little boy, who loved fixing things, celebrated at the gift.

Waking up in the canyon, after being attacked by Sandpeople, in search of a wayward droid, to find the hooded stranger who wasn’t one.

Watching as the same man was cut down savagely, disappearing in thin air and leaving behind only a robe and the cylinder now in Luke’s hands.

The sound of the familiar voice that had put him on his journey; the words that stayed with him that encouraged him to stay strong… *The Force will be with you. Always.*

“Ben…” He said again; hearing the same voice that had called to him all those years ago, feeling regret that he was helpless in that moment, knowing that the Jedi Master had sacrificed himself in order to save Luke and the others.

Luke placed it back it the display cradle, and let his hands graze over the fine metal of the hilt respectfully.

His eyes now looked at the entire collection, and his mind reeled with agony. *So many lives… so much death…*

After a moment of repose, he turned his attention to the left side of the display that had yet to be revealed.

Pressing the release, he prepared himself for further disappointment in the revelation of his father’s
secrets.

The cover on the case retracted, and the lower lighting came up.

Luke stopped himself as he saw the precious treasure in front of him, filling him briefly with hope.

On perfect pedestals rested intricate boxes that would easily fit into the palm of his hand; all had an inner glow, some in blue, and some with pale green.

Mara’s eyes widened as she saw them. “Jedi Holocrons” she said under her breath, with wonder, as she remembered seeing the fragments of one at Dr. Massian’s home.

He looked over at her, and for the first time, she saw a hint of happiness in him.

Despite how Vader may have come in possession of them, they were saved from destruction. There must have been a dozen of them as she began to count them, starting at the top row.

On the bottom row, there sat six boxes that were exclusively triangular, and glowing red.

Out of curiosity, Luke reached to pick one of them up, as it looked like they had been moved recently.

Mara reached out and halted his hand, catching his wrist.

“Don’t.” She looked at him with worried eyes. “They are for meditation.” She relaxed her grip. “Sith Holocrons...The Emperor used them regularly.” She explained, knowing that they were only a source for Dark knowledge.

He nodded and reconsidered picking one of the little red pyramids. Instead, he chose to pick up one of the blue cubes.

Looking at the decorative frames surrounding each side, it looked fragile, but it also exuded strength and truth, soothing him from everything he had been feeling up until this point.

Luke let his eyes roll shut, and reached out in the Force. He could feel the energy transference between himself and the cube.

As he opened his eyes and without his will, the cube hovered over his palm. A projection from the top of the cube appeared, and an alien, whom he didn’t recognize, floated wearing Jedi robes.

The alien spoke its language in soothing trilling tones, like a song that was being sung. It was peaceful and sounded quite detailed.

Both Luke and Mara watched the glowing hologram as it seemed to perform for them.

She looked over to him, watching how this was the break that he needed, a slight reprieve from the Darkness that loomed in every room and every corner.

He actually grinned for what seemed like the first time since they had arrived.

Even she could admit that just watching this glimpse into the past calmed her too; she could feel herself relaxing.

Without disturbing the cube, with his opposite hand, he found her hand to hold while they watched together.
Mara clasped her other hand on top of his, and stepped closer to him, feeling the first tender physical contact with him in what seemed longer than it was possible.

The song completed, the image faded and the box seemed to close as it lowered back into Luke’s hand.

Gingerly, he placed it back in the display case.

Luke turned to her, seeing that she was so close to him, wanting and giving comfort. He squeezed her hand, and went to pull her closer, to savor the light that she brought to him.

For a reason unknown to her, Mara pulled back, dropping his hand, and removing herself from this moment. She looked back over at the lightsabers, then back at him and moved farther away.

This was not the place to be tender to each other. This was not the place to feel their love.

_Why would he want to love you?_ The voice in her mind taunted. _You're no different from the monster, his father. Don’t deny it. Don’t excuse it._

Luke’s eyes widened as she moved away from him, and he took it as nothing but a rejection of him and his father, letting his eyes darken with his anger.

Mara then turned away from him, and slowly started walking towards the door.

“We should take them with us.” She said over her shoulder. “I have extra transport cases on the Verpine.”

She didn’t look back, and her mind was on the words coming from her and nothing else; it was too hard to think of anything else, it was too hard to be there any longer, and it was too hard to think that any good could come from this.

If the space was smaller, she would have started pacing in it.

“These are the types of things that relic hunters will want. We can send them to the Doctors…to Yavin, for safe-keeping. They will appreciate them and want to see them.”

Luke could feel the under-currents of her emotions, not who they were directed at, but he could guess. He shook his head, not truly surprised that he had found the limit that she could love him; surprised, that it could tip so quickly.

He was ready to leave this room too, if only just be away from her.

He nodded as he came closer. “I agree.” He held his anger from her. “We should take them with us.” He said blankly as he walked past her to the door.

Mara followed in step beside him and summoned the lift.

When they stepped onto the lift, she cringed as the doors closed and the lift moved; they had one more place that they needed to go- the training room.

She didn’t know if it would be as dark as Vader’s meditation chamber, but it could, potentially be no different.

They kept quiet, shoulder to shoulder before the lift stopped.

Luke was the first to step out into the corridor.
He seemed to be leading the way, without knowing where he was supposed to be going.

Stopped in the hallway, now, he was just composing himself.

The journey must continue.

TBC
Long Shadow Cast- Part 3

Chapter Summary

Quote: Coruscant wasn’t built in a day- Mara isn’t going to change overnight.
Characters: Luke, Mara…and the past

Chapter Notes

**
It’s still dark…and getting darker yet…

Sorry for the delay… I had started writing this chapter, and then for some unknown reason, my updates didn’t save and I lost 6 pages of writing…but all and all, I think it came out better.

Also, as always SMUT-FEST…but a warning with this one, it’s a bit rough…and might seem non-consensual…so you all have been warned!!

Further explanation to follow at the end of the chapter—and please tell me what you think?

**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vader’s Castle, Mustafar

Mara shook her head, watching his blind determination. She brought up her shields, but just around her thoughts.

Luke had witnessed one of the levels of depravity that Vader was capable of, killing a child, yet he still wanted to push on.

Was this not enough? How much more must you observe in order to see that there is no Anakin here? She asked him, knowing that he couldn’t hear her, feeling her temper rise.

I love you, but putting yourself through this doesn’t make you a hero…

She exhaled with the only thought that was giving her some kind of comfort. At least this is just about the end of it.

Vader’s training room was final chamber that she knew about- there were probably other rooms, but it seemed most-likely that this would have been the next personal area to explore.

Luke had stopped himself down the hallway from her. He looked back over his shoulder, waiting for her to continue the tour.
He knew he didn’t know the way, but stepping back from her seemed to ease some of his feelings. 

He had calmed himself enough not to portray his growing animosity; towards her and towards his father. 

The last thing that he wanted to admit right now was that she might be right; there was no little spark of the man that he wanted his father to be. He was getting more of a picture of Darth Vader than just rumors and stories…he was getting proof. 

Mara was reluctant, but she headed in the adjacent direction of the lift. 

Through a doorway, led to what appeared to be a tunnel. Instead of going up or down, the path took several turns before reaching the outer door. 

Another code into the panel, and the door gave them permission to enter. 

Mara shivered, without knowing why, before she stepped inside. 

There was another type of aura here; of mixed feelings, and for the first time, she thought she could sense lingerings of the Emperor? - She questioned. 

The room was midnight black, like the others. 

“Lights!” Mara commanded, and the lighting came up, but the room was still hovered in a shroud; she assumed that Vader preferred that way. 

It was relatively empty, save for a particularly lit area and control box. 

She walked into the room, knowing that there were no guards on duty here. 

This was Vader’s training room- anyone who dared to enter without permission, was met with the Dark Lord himself, and he was prepared for battle. 

Like Vader’s meditation chamber, this room held two purposes too. 

The first purpose was for practice sparring: Mara had watched Vader train on Coruscant. He was supposed to be instructing her, but he blatantly refused to teach her anything. 

She was relegated to watching from the sidelines, sometimes hiding on the sidelines as to not anger him, and staying out of his way. 

The experience was probably better than if she had actually studied with him. 

From observing, she could watch his movements, his posturing, and as she became aware of what her purpose was to be, she could find his weaknesses, and learn to exploit them. 

She was reminded of the second purpose of this room as she saw the communication sensor circle on the floor. 

Luke paid no attention to it, but she knew differently. He walked right past it, and headed for the control box in what was the designated training area. 

Mara watched him ignore this equally interesting piece of technology. The control box might have programmed battles, but this was where Vader was doing a different type of battle; his struggle with the Emperor.
Mara looked up, towards the ceiling, and now that she was looking for them, she found them. The Hologram projectors were rightfully placed so that, when in use, the large imposing figure of the Emperor would appear.

She had seen this set up aboard the Executor, and had seen Vader use it.

She wondered if the last transmission would be available, and then she shivered with the thought to see the Emperor’s face so clearly before her again in titanic size.

Swallowing, she shook the idea away before it could gain any footing.

Her skin crawled, and she knew why she thought she had sensed the Emperor’s presence; it wasn’t His presence, but of Vader’s feelings towards Him.

Luke saw that she was inspecting an area, and went over to see what she had found. He was hesitant to be near her as it was apparent that she was starting to grow leery of him and his father, but curiosity won.

He came closer. “What is it?” He asked, his voice stern, underlining his growing annoyance with her.

“The communication station.” Mara said simply. “Only the Emperor contacted Vader this way.”

She looked over to him, sensing his rising irritation. “I thought the final recording might be around, but messages are usually erased after a period of time.” She suggested.

He nodded, looked down and stepped away, feeling that there was something else for him to see; not here, and not beside her.

Even though it was dark, with his eyes cast down, he noticed strange markings on the floor.

Then, he ducked down to touch the scorches, feeling them gouged into the floor. He ran his hand over the long slash, and now that he found one, he looked beyond and could see more.

Luke stood up and looked about the room. The dark walls and uneven surfaces hid them well, but now that he was looking for them, he could see hundreds, if not thousands of slash marks, with varying degrees of depths, all over the room.

His mind flashed on the Jedi Enclave on Dantooine- the training room for the younglings, covered in singe marks.

Knowing that this was his father’s training room, he looked around the room, but he couldn’t see the opponent that his father would have faced.

There wasn’t a training remote to be seen, only a control box; Luke doubted if the room was able to project Holograms, and that his father would have fought those. It would seem too easy, unsatisfying, and it wouldn’t have caused all the marks about the room.

Before he walked over to the control box, he glanced as to where Mara was at. It appeared that she had found the communication center, and was inspecting at it.

Sighing, Luke walked to the control box, and tried to see if he could make it operational.

With one touch, the screen came to life, and he could see several programing options.

He pushed the first option.
“Greetings Lord Vader” A mechanical voice announced. “You have selected level one. Your history shows that you were previously on ‘Customized Opponent’ Level. Do you prefer to stay on level one?”

Luke paused, unsure what to do or say, but it felt natural to respond. “Yes” he said loudly to the room.

He could feel the tingle in his senses before it happened.

The wall directly before him revealed a door, and a droid came through, with blaster in hand, aiming it at Luke.

But his response was faster; he dodged the first blast. Drawing his lightsaber, igniting it with a snap-whoosh, Luke cut down the droid in one swoop with ease.

He looked down at the droid, now that he could examine it; it was an older model, and simply designed. It had a longer facial construct, and the body was not meant for strength or programing. It looked like it was a mass-produced model.

Not a moment after he had a chance to closer examine it, another droid appeared, and then one behind it, and another one.

“I have orders to arrest and detain you.” The droid spoke in its curt voice.

Luke snorted; it was almost comical until he realized that they were advancing on him aggressively.

The first droid motioned to the one behind him. The second droid responded, “Roger-Roger.”

Luke stepped back, into his ready position, and before the droid could aim, he sliced the blaster that was levied at him, and then reverse him slash and sliced the droid in two.

There were more and more droids emerging from the alcove.

The first droid gave a signal, and the remaining droids opened fire with their blasters at him.

Luke dodged and parried the blasts with ease.

As a line of droids came towards him, he backed up until he had enough space to cut them down.

Behind them, another row of droids came forward, and with ease, they were dispatched too.

He lost track of the count, pulling on the Force, and making his way through the droids, one by one.

One last droid came towards him, and with a slash of the lightsaber through the blaster, and another slash through the midsection, the droid was done.

With little exertion, Luke stood, observing the littered pieces of droids around him.

The first level had sent maybe twelve droids to face him, and it wasn’t much of a challenge.

Mara watched him from the console; she smiled to herself, thinking of how much he enjoyed something like this.

Her smile faded quickly, and then another memory flashed in her mind.

Vader had found her once, watching him as he trained in such a room.
She was in her early teens; arrived back to the Capitol after taking her level ones at the Academy, and was sent for a training session with Lord Vader.

She knew why he hated any observers; it was clear that his shielding came down and his thoughts were revealed as he worked and practiced.

Although she wasn’t there to track his thoughts, he had felt it was an intrusion.

She remembered that the altercation was wordless, and upon finding her, he picked her up by the back of her shirt, and dropped her in the middle of the training circuit with a practice saber.

As he walked away, she saw him motion with his hand, reaching out with the Force, to set the programming, and then locked the door on her.

One by one droids came at her, and they kept coming.

She had lost track of time and numbers.

When the practice saber’s power cell drained, she took one of the damaged droid’s blasters in order to defend herself.

They kept coming and coming; one after another, until she couldn’t fight them from where she was in the open area of the small room.

As the droid parts piled up, a sensor must have detected the clutter, and a sweep would take them away- almost taking her too as she continued to fight.

She was sure that day had turned into night, and then to day again, and they still kept coming.

By the time the entry door to the room unlocked, exhausted and frantic, she had slumped herself into the corner of the room, parallel with the door from which the droids emerged, and sat just aiming at any target that entered the room.

She was close to passing out, and her limbs trembled, but she could sense when there were no more droids to defend herself from.

The room door opened, and as Vader entered, med droids were waiting behind him; not with a stasis pod to retrieve a living girl, but with a body bag, thinking that he was there to collect a corpse.

From the floor, she eyed him, feeling the anger wash over her, glaring at the helmet.

He stood tall, wordless, unapologetic, and watching as the med droids lifted her body onto a hover cart. He seemed almost proud that he had inflicted this upon her, and yet he also seemed pleased that she could withstand so much.

*Impressive*, she thought she heard him hiss to her through her brain-fog at the time, but the feeling was fleeting.

Mara shook herself out of the memory, and turned back to the console, if only to stop from watching Luke in his element.

These things called feelings and memories were coming too fast for her liking; it made more sense to her to live in a moment and not look back.

She watched Luke now, moving fluidity but not over-working. It was clear that he had advanced a level, or several since her mind had been pre-occupied.
He looked contented as he fought the droids; this, was what he knew he could fight, and knew how to handle.

Mara reasoned that maybe this was what he needed now; his mind in someplace else.

When the level stopped, and paused to update the settings, she reached out to him, getting his attention.

Luke turned to finally acknowledge that he wasn’t alone in the room.

Looking over to her, he frowned in question.

“I’m going to go back to the Cruiser and get the shipping container.” Mara called over to him; reminding him that they wanted to preserve the lightsabers and Holocrons from the other room.

He looked away, and then back at her, and nodded, agreeing to the job she had given herself, and accepting that they should maybe be apart from some time.

He watched her leave, and then turned his attention back to training settings.

Before the next round, a floor droid appeared and removed the debris from the battle droids. Luke took the chance to look back at the door after she had left.

He breathed deeply, relaxing into the Force, and waited for the next round to start.

Here, he could battle the droids and battle his feelings. Aside from his feelings for his father, it was Mara that was perplexing him.

She had removed herself from about every chance they had to grow closer.

The next series of droids emerged; they were slightly upgraded from the last batch and seemed to move faster, and they had two blasters instead of one, coming at him.

It’s an expensive way to train, Father. He chastised an invisible Anakin as if he was the parent and not the child. He came at the first row of droids, thinking of the cost to assemble and maintain such a small army.

His thoughts went back to Mara. She had begun to cloud her feelings again.

At least she didn’t block you out like she usually does. He thought resentfully.

The droids advanced, and he countered their attack.

She doesn’t do it on purpose, he reminded himself, having his own internal communication. It’s a reflex.

The next set of droids spread out, fanning their positions, making the targets farther apart.

She does it a little too often for it just to be reflex. He argued back with a bit a sarcasm.

These droids were faster, and seemed to find where there were gaps in his protection; he could see that they were trying to get behind him for their attack.

Now, he was going to have adjust his stance, and moved more to accommodate a counter-strategy.
She’s learning… she’s more-aware of it since you told her about it on the Wild Karrde…she knows it impacts you now. His mind still thought of her. *Coruscant wasn’t built in a day- Mara isn’t going to change overnight.*

Luke brought down the next row of droids; at this level the older models and the newer ones were intermingled.

He grinned tightly at playing with this toy. Then he frowned, reminding himself that this wasn’t a toy.

Quickly, he wondered if they were shooting with live blasts or stun settings; he didn’t want to find out.

His eyes flicked back at the door, thinking of her again.

She had seemed so vacant to him; backing away from him, lost in her own thoughts.

He sighed; she did warn him that she would be looking at a life that she used to have.

Maybe it just wasn’t one sided, but there had to be a direct reason that she hated his father so vehemently.

Luke shook his head, and concentrated on the droids before him; he briefly wondered what the ‘customized opponent settings’ were.

**

Mara walked across the steamy platform to the Verpine Cruiser; the sounds and the smell intruding on her senses.

There it sat, waiting for her, a reprieve, a sanctuary.

She may not have understood it, but she felt safer in there.

Passing Luke’s droid at the galley console, on her way to aft section, it twittered a greeting to her, and she responded by placing her hand on its dome before carrying on.

*Skywalker can banter to you all he likes, you’re still just a droid.* She thought, and she stopped at the door to the hull, and then grimaced, she looked back at the R2 unit as it sadly whistled at being dismissed.

She walked back to it and patted the dome again. “You’re good droid.” She grumbled; and the R2-unit seemed happy and twittered to her.

Sighing, she went back to her work.

In the hull, she found her priorities.

Checking the 44-8 Refractor, the heat signature was fine; she was afraid that given the heat and humidity of Mustafar might have made the sensors a bit more-sensitive. She checked the remote too; seeing that the range shouldn’t be affected by the dampening atmosphere…and if that failed, there was always the timer. She was satisfied.

Mara didn’t like having it on board, but it was a necessity for their end-goal here. Luke wanted to leave nothing behind of Vader, and nothing for anyone to find; she was agreeable to both reasons.
Walking past the charge, she took down one of the assembly crates from off the wall and began to join the sides together.

*We shouldn’t need more than one.* She thought. *Unless Vader is hiding more trophies somewhere.* She mentally growled and assumed that he was.

She didn’t like the idea of going back to his meditation room alone, and briefly considered taking the R2 unit along just for company, until she realized how crazy she was being.

Besides, of the two issues that irked her, leaving the refracting charge unattended bothered her more.

Mara placed the crate on a hover pallet, and stopped once to put some expand-packing and wrapping supplies inside the crate before heading to the hull lift that would allow her to leave through the back of the Cruiser.

The lift slowly descended to the platform and she pushed the crate in front of her, off the lift, and then sealed the lift again.

She pushed the crate around to the front of the Cruiser, then something tingled at the back of her mind.

Leaving the crate on the platform, she walked back up inside the Cruiser to find the R2 unit; doing its due diligence, and rocking back and forth, the droid swiveled its dome at her approach.

Mara picked up the small comlink unit, and looked back at the droid. “Just in case.” She muttered as she showed him the comlink in her hand, assumed that it understood what it was for.

The droid bleeped and then went back to its job as she left.

Coming back to the crate, she pushed it in front of her as she walked.

Her mind wandered back to Luke in the training room, and with just the slightest of touches, she sensed that he was still there, fighting what he could fight, and not what he couldn’t.

As she walked in the direction of the meditation room and the lift that would take her there, she thought about what she saw when she watched Luke fight the first few rounds of droids.

*He doesn’t move like Vader,* was her first thought. *He’s more-graceful…more-agile.*

Watching Luke train and move was like watching a thing of beauty to her; not just in how he moved, but in his aura.

He loved it; it gave him a focus, a tangible thing that he could fight in front of him.

Simplistic? - Yes. Rewarding?- most certainly.

As much as she tried to separate the idea that a Jedi shouldn’t be warrior first, it suited Luke better than being compliant to things that happened around him; his nature was to react.

She couldn’t see there being a time when he wouldn’t want to do *something* if he was called upon.

Walking off the lift, she was back in the meditation chamber again.

Alone in the room, she could almost hear the hiss of Vader’s breathing mask as an echo, but realized it was just the ambient rumbling of the lava flow from beneath the castle that she had failed to notice the first time that she was in the room.
The wall holding the lightsabers and Holocrons was still opened, as they had left it.

A recessed light illuminated the area; the metal from the different sabers shined eerily.

If they were displayed in any other place, they would be works of art, not trophies.

She thought of her own case and how she had displayed her prizes. It was not lovingly or as a matter of pride; she had left them on shelves, no light shined down on them, they were almost forgotten until she needed to open that case again.

And she knew why she had to do it; the Emperor had ordered her.

“Take no pity on them, girl.” He spat as she would show them to Him after she had returned from a mission.

Head down, and kneeling before Him, she would raise it up in both hands to present it to Him.

“Save it, and savor it, your victory over them, for them thinking so foolishly as to defy Me.” He would say, “…and the Empire.” He would add as an after-thought, before He dismissed her.

“Let your resentment grow, for they doubted your abilities. You have done well.” He would hiss, almost disappointedly as if He had wanted her to fail for some reason.

Then, she would feel His pride at her achievement and she would bow even deeper as He passed by.

Mara exhaled, washing away another unwelcomed memory that floated across her mind.

No doubt that Vader was either given the same instruction by the Emperor, but his collection felt more like he had wanted it, rather than ordered to keep it.

For him, it was personal.

For her, it wasn’t. She had no argument with her targets- they done nothing to her other than offend her Master.

For Vader, each one of these lightsabers represented someone and something; she could feel it.

He must have stood, where she was now, and looked at them, feeding off the anger and passion that drove him to collect each and every single one.

She took the one from the top row that seemed to affect Luke the most, and examined it in her hand, turning it over and observing the structure.

It wasn’t a piece or art; it was designed for necessity, and aged by time; the corrosion proved it.

The blade emitter was shaped like Luke’s own lightsaber, but the grip on the hilt was reminiscent of Anakin’s saber, the same one at her hip.

She had felt Luke’s pain at holding it, calling out to Ben, she presumed was Kenobi as she had heard him referred to.

She didn’t have to open up her senses very far to get the general feelings off of this saber; kindness… humbleness… honor.

This belonged to man that Luke looked up to and Vader hated.
This man, this Jedi, was someone that she could respect without truly knowing him, if Luke held him in such high esteem.

Sighing, she wrapped the saber gingerly before placing inside the crate.

By the time she started to wrap the third saber, she had changed her method, and picked each one up with her hand covered so that there was a barrier for her senses, refusing to feel more than she had to.

Mara thought about her own former saber, and where it must be now; so many of her belongings got lost in her mad escape from Coruscant after the fall of the Empire.

She did love that saber and its magenta blade.

Making the hilt cover had taken time, and she tried to be as precise as she could be; the hilt fit perfectly in her hand, or hands for either stance.

She had debating making it decorative, unique to her, but then chose not to, fearing that it would not please her Master.

He watched her as He presented her with the internal workings for her saber.

“Take heed, my child, this is a powerful weapon, once belonging to a Jedi Master.” He sneered. “So arrogant was he to think that the Jedi should be servants to the Force, and not command it.”

The memory eroded as she placed the sabers inside the crate.

She would make a new saber…one day.

As Mara finished with the sabers, she turned to the Holocrons, and regarded the blue cubes and red pyramids.

Although the blue Holocron that Luke held was soothing, she was done with being immersed in any more sensations, and placed each cube in the crate quickly, hand covered, without any thought to them.

Before she picked up any of the glowing red pyramids, she covered her hand with an extra layer of wrapping, trying not to let her skin have direct contact with them, and made sure that they were separated from the cubes with distinct interference.

Vaguely, she remembered something about *Jedi and Sith Holocrons should never come in contact with each other*....

After the last Sith artifact was placed away, and the crate was sealed, Mara paused, and thought about Luke.

She hadn’t felt him in some time, and reached out to find him.

Trying not to disturb him, she found him where she had left him; he was still in the training room, battling against another round of droids.

His mind was a work, but his feelings were more erratic than they had been before. He was tiring but contented to do so.

Mara frowned as she pulled back, still not wanting to interrupt whatever he was going through.

Luke was Luke, and he had his own ways of dealings with things; she was learning.
He may have liked to think that she didn’t feel enough, but he felt way too much.

She sighed, and pushed the crate in front of her, heading back to the Cruiser.

After the crate was secured, she looked around the hull, expecting that there was something else that she could do, feeling useless.

Mara shook her head and checked her chrono. By her recollection, it was passed what should have been midday meal, closer to evening meal.

In truth, she wasn’t hungry; she wasn’t anything. She was still mostly numb.

She rubbed her forehead, with the only thought that seemed appealing, and decided to head back the Ambassador’s Suite, and make arrangements for a meal.

Deciding to leave by the aft section, she only wanted to avoid the droid-pet that wanted more attention than she was prepared to give at the moment.

Mara walked back through the castle and made her way to the suite, ignoring the script on the wall that irritated her.

The suite was quiet – the whole castle was lifeless, except for a random MSE droid that ignored her as much as she ignored it.

This was life in a castle or palace; empty and fictitious. For such large residences, they never felt like homes or had any life to them.

Calling C-4 would make it appear as if there was some activity, some life around her.

As the protocol droid left to prepare a meal, she felt alone again.

It was strange to think of a time when feeling alone was accepted as ‘normal’ to her. She had spent most of her life being alone and had grown accustomed to it.

It was a stranger thought now, to think that she was around people again.

Mara had never considered it different, being alone, until people had started leaving her life at a young age.

She would feel the pain of losing someone, briefly, and then another person would replace them. Feeling the security of a new person, and slight euphoria at being cared for- the new person would then disappear.

Then, the cycle would repeat.

If she had become attached, that person or thing was suddenly gone with no explanation.

She had reached a point when she stopped questioning it; she didn’t even bother to learn a person’s name anymore, even those that were sent to care for her- there wasn’t a reason for it.

People were soon replaced with droids to look after her.

Without much reasoning, and accepting that she was not meant to have people around her, she grew to know that everyone was temporary; it seemed easier to accept and left her detached.

He stays, she repeated, assuring herself that he wasn’t going to be taken away.

The chime sounded, drawing her out of her thoughts.

Mara reached out to him, making her presence seem clearer.

<<Hungry?>> she asked simply to him, sensing that he was still distracted by the training equipment, wearing himself down.

<No> was all he sent back, rushed and without any further explanation on his part.

Pulling back her senses, she decided that she would prefer dine alone anyhow, and doubted that Luke wouldn’t be very good company in his current state.

The meal was small, and sitting alone in the dining room, everything echoed; the cutlery on the plates, the sound of her glass as she placed it back down, even the sound of her swallowing sounded hollow in the room.

Another unguarded memory came up; sitting around an empty table like this one, made to practice how to behave at a formal dinner, with only a droid to instruct her, correcting how she would address imaginary guests.

Mara blinked the image away, and put her cutlery down for the final time before leaving the table.

She shivered as she walked away, feeling a chill in this place, knowing that it was virtually impossible on a lava planet to feel such a thing.

It was growing in her again; the resentment and who it was directed at.

Only this time, it wasn’t just Vader that surged her bitterness.

She wasn’t comfortable with the parallel lines that she could draw between herself and the Dark Lord.

Mara left the suite, knowing that she needed to be somewhere that she could sense what Luke wanted her to feel all along; that Vader could change and that he was really a different person under it all.

She headed in to the only area where she thought that was possible.

Down the stairs, to the back corridor, she raced; her footsteps were hasty but not jogging to get there.

The door to the private hangar opened for her, and she descended down the grated stairs to walk among his TIE Fighters.

Looking around, she wanted to reach out in her senses and find that place where she could feel the human in him.

Stretching out her arm, Mara sent out her senses to find it again, anything to try and see Luke’s point of view for this trip.

She tried repeatedly, searching for the spot but the aura had faded, and she could only sense Luke’s frantic behavior from earlier on in the day.

Once last try, and she decided to pick up some of the tools and spare parts lying around.
She picked up a dusty wrench and dropped it, finding nothing.

She picked up a small pile plast-steel wire, and dropped remnants of that too.

Frustration now reigned in her senses and the aggravation did only one thing in her quest; it focused her to find more things that she shared, in common, with Vader.

She looked at the dismantled TIE in front of her.

*He was meticulous.* She thought. *I'm meticulous. Precise. That is the ways things should be.*

*He kept trophies of his kills… so I did I.*

*He took pride in those kills… I took pride in my kills.*

*He showed no mercy… I showed no mercy.*

Both our reputations preceded us… we were feared, in both rumor and truth.

*He basked in the power of the Emperor… I lived for every moment in my Master’s presence.*

*The Darkness was his friend, his aide… I felt the draw of the Darkness, and called on it for comfort and power.*

Is there anything to prove that we are human?-were human? She asked as her breathing had become heavy, and she quaked with her own self-hatred.

*Luke… her emotions were quicker with an explanation than she had thought was possible. Luke loves us… both of us.*

But then her mind twitched, and she blocked out a thought… blocked out another unwelcomed memory. Her mind persisted, and the memory came back; she shuddered, and clenched her eyes shut with remembering.

*Luke… it whispered. He will want to know… about Vader and… you.*

The items on an adjacent table rattled; shaking as her emotions soared.

Mara shook her head. “No” she growled to the empty room. “He doesn’t need to know about that... It was nothing… it was less than nothing.”

The trembling died away.

Slowly, she regained her composure, and then thought of Luke and where he must be.

It was time, and now he needed to know how she truly felt towards herself and Vader.

Once more she sensed where he was and was not surprised to know that he was still in the training room.

His energy was involved, engrossed and darker.

Mara left the hangar. She had to talk to him.

Now was the time to not let this go on.

She had to tell him how she felt about herself; seeing Vader in her own reflection, seeing herself for
the killer that she was and always will be.

Doors opened and closed for her along the way without any prompting.

The door to the training room slid open with no protestation.

Mara walked in with a determined stride, and watched as Luke battle a single combat droid armed with a lightsaber.

Luke’s feelings, despite all his activity, were heightened. Something was pushing him to continue his physical fight. Anyone else would have exhausted their body and their emotions by now.

Both Luke and the droid seemed to be matched both in height, speed and somewhat in skill.

She came closer still and watched, frowning yet, mesmerized at the odd battle.

Luke’s eyes flicked over to her, and registered that she was there.

He had stripped down his tunic and was bare-chested; beads of sweat rolled down from his forehead, down his neck to his chest.

*He was agonizingly beautiful.*

He was breathing hard, but still concentrated and seemed more determined than ever to beat the droid that he was facing.

The Force flowed around him, but his aura was so off-putting that Mara couldn’t tell which essence of the Force he was drawing on.

Luke looked over at her again before he turned back to lunge at the droid, blocking and parrying against it.

“Do you know that this system has a customized opponent level?” He asked loudly to her, over the buzz of the lightsabers.

Mara shook her head, and was about to answer but assumed that his question was rhetorical.

“Did you know that my father programmed it to behave and perform a specific person? Do you know who that might have been?” He asked, pushing the droid away from their locked sabers.

About to answer that she wasn’t aware of that information, Mara could sense that her answer wouldn’t be needed here either; he was asking out of spite.

“Me.” Luke just about yelled. “He set the *kriffing program* to respond as I did in our previous battles so that he could find a way to beat me… *To kill me.*” He now yelled; at her, at his father, at the galaxy.

A couple more throws and swipes, and he was done. Smoothly, cleanly, efficiently – as if it had all merely been a work up in order to have her witness it- Luke struck, in one swoop; the head of the droid came off.

The droid’s body waivered there, then dropped the saber, and the mechanical body crumpled to the floor.

Luke stood above it, panting, and watching the circuits die.
“Good thing he didn’t have the most recent programming… after Bespin.” He mumbled, just watching; his shoulders heaved with his breathing. “I had time to prepare, and practice… before Endor.”

Up to that point, Mara was prepared to admit that there had to be a light in Vader, reflecting Anakin; otherwise, she couldn’t be redeemable either.

Now though, she saw Luke, having witnessed the levels to which his father had gone; a Darkness in which he was prepared to kill his son to gain favor with his twisted Master, and increase his power; his son had begun to wallow in self-pity.

Luke didn’t need her pity either; he had his own.

He needed a wakeup call, at any cost.

Mara waited until his breathing slowed, and he closed down his lightsaber.

A droid came by to clean away the parts that littered the floor, but Luke didn’t move or reach over to the control board to start a new session; he stared at the ground where the combat droid had been.

In her mind, she decided to stop biting her tongue, and push this to the extreme.

Stepping closer, she summoned her courage and pushed it into her outrage.

“Well, it’s a good thing then that he only used his knowledge of your lightsaber skills against you…” She said curtly.

Luke turned his head slowly to glare at her.

“Because if he had read the Imperial dossier on you then he would have known that you were weaker in hand to hand combat.” She said, letting the sneer in her voice be heard; not the teasing kind, but the cruel one.

His eyes were already dark, but his brow lowered as he knew it was insult that she was levelling at him.

Mara walked closer, rolling up her sleeves as she did so.

“Your foot-work has improved, I’ll give you that… but you still can’t take a hit.” She said seriously, aimed at antagonizing him.

He followed her movements, leery of her behavior, trying to sense her intentions; everything, other than her presence, was cloudy.

Her eyes were dark, but controlled and showed some sort of intention.

“Your motions are clumsy and ill-prepared… and at best, it looks like you might have learned a few things in a wrestling ring out in the Rim, but not much beyond that… no skill, no style.” She snorted with distain as she finished talking.

Luke exhaled hard, and looked away to shake his head at her, wondering where did she get off talking to him like that. This was more like the ‘Mara’ he had first met on Myrkrr.

Mara took the opening, as he looked to the side.

Quicker than he thought was possible, out of nowhere her left fist connected with his jaw, pushing
him off his balance as he stepped over.

Luke held his chin and looked back at her in surprise, and then with anger.

Mara had assumed a defensive position, planting her body weight, ready to hold her ground, waiting for him to fight back.

Fighting droids might exhaust a body but they can’t argue with you and release emotions.

He just glared back at her, focusing.

From behind her, she heard some of the scraps of droid debris move.

Raising one eyebrow, she smiled mockingly at him, and nodded knowingly.

“Did you take that one out of Daddy’s playbook? Did Vader have it labeled ‘distractions for the gullible and weak’?” she spat at him, recognizing one the techniques that Vader was famous for.

“He taught me that one on the first day of training… so you’ll have to get a little more inventive, Junior.” She taunted him.

Luke’s eyes widened before he motioned towards her.

His approached wasn’t particularly aggressive, but Mara could find her ‘in’, and stepped faster.

Reaching for his weaker arm, she grabbed it, reversed back into him and flipped him over her shoulder.

He landed on his back with a heavy thud-clank against the metal floor.

She was about to feel satisfied with herself but, he neglected to do the natural reaction of releasing his hold. Instead, he levied his weight and pulled her forward with his momentum, yanking and flipping her over him to the floor beyond.

Mara grunted as she hit the deck; from an ounce of pain, but mostly because she didn’t anticipate his counter attack.

Luke scurried to find his feet, and turned to watch Mara’s lithe form vault to a standing position with ease.

He knew she was the more-experienced fighter; he had seen her take on a Kiffar who was much bigger and appeared stronger than her sleek form. She had come away with a few bruises but gave as good as she got.

If she wanted a fight, then he was prepared to give her one; no matter how much he loved her.

That love, was still at the forefront of his mind, and the question as to why she felt the need to do this.

It was fleeting as he recalled that she part of the mechanism that had wanted him dead; she had wanted him dead at one time; her and his father.

He lunged directly at her mid-section, grabbed it and hurled her over to the other side of the training area.

Luke was about to storm over to where she was; determined to finish this fight because, for no other
reason than she was the one who had started it.

As he approached, his anger started to die down, thinking that he loved her beyond most rational thought, and regretting his most-recent action as he watched her get up from the ground.

She was a different person now; not the killer sent for him.

He relaxed his stance, ready to end this amicably.

Mara turned to him, appearing to favor her shoulder, looking wounded.

Luke’s eyes wordlessly apologized, and he shook his head, coming closer.

Her shoulder dropped as she turned to look at it.

“Mara…I…” He opened his mouth and then shut it again as his senses flared.

This time with a right hook, she caught his cheekbone and the side of his nose; he heard the crunch of the cartilage.

She was reinvigorated, and her fists flew in a series that randomly went for his face or his gut as he let hits connect with his sternum or blocked them.

Luke observed that her body moved fluidly, gracefully…and yes, seductively. *So exquisite, yet so dangerous…*

He wasn’t fighting back which only made her attack seem more relentless, but it made him angry to see that she wasn’t willing to cease.

This time, he called on the Force

With speed unperceivable to a non-sensitive, he grabbed her arm as it came at him and pulled it back quickly that she didn’t have time to react, bringing him right in-line with her body, pressed close.

In her ear, she could hear his heavy breathing. She could feel his hot breath on her neck, making it dimple, enflaming it.

“Mara…” he said her name slowly with emphasis, and shuddered. “…I will never hit you…if I don’t have to…but I’m not above breaking your arm to stop you from hitting me.” He tightened his hold, tweaking her arm to remind her of how helpless he thought she was.

As his weight shifted, she could feel it, as he rubbed against her, trying to levy his weight.

His body was aroused; he liked her this way, fighting him.

She knew it, and had sensed his desire for her before they had become intimate, on many occasions when they had sparred, but didn’t think on it until she had started to desire him too.

Shifting her own weight, to relieve some of the stress in her backwardly-bent arm, she grazed against his aroused bulge, silently telling him that it didn’t escape her notice.

Mara exhaled huskily, letting him know that this session wasn’t just a battle of their wills to find out who was stronger or more-skilled.

*She wanted him too*; she always did.
She didn’t like him passive; she liked it when he took action, and she knew that liked the same from her; he couldn’t see himself with someone who wasn’t capable of fending for herself, by any manner.

Locked together, bodies pressed against each other, radiating heat. Anger was turning into lust, although misplaced over the rightful emotions.

Mara played the card that was her ‘Pure Sabaac’; her eyes cast down, and her tense muscles relaxed in his hold. Her lashes fluttered before rising up to meet him, knowing that he would be drawn in by her desirous emerald orbs looking at him.

And he was; relaxing his muscles too, exhaling slowly with yearning.

She licked her dry lips, watching him, and him, watching her tongue dart out and back inside her mouth; his eyes now focused on her mouth.

Luke leaned in, letting his eyes drift closed, ready to capture those lips possessively; hungering for them. He didn’t expect that she was leaning away, gaining distance and momentum.

He didn’t see the snarl on her face as she reared back and then cracked her skull against his forehead, with a sickening sound.

Sucking in air quickly, he released his hold and switching to hold his forehead, he backed away from her.

Mara regained her vision from the blurry stars that she knew she would experience after pulling that move, and tried to stumble her way over to the other side of the training area, gaining space and gaining ground.

She shook her head in time to see that he had recovered and was coming towards her.

Luke knocked her to the ground, on her back, fighting for control of her fists and open hands as she resumed her attack even though she was pinned down.

He felt her hips try to lift, but his weight shifted, holding her in place.

Catching one hand, he locked it down on the deck, removing it from her fighting advantage.

He caught the next hand, and slammed it down, declaring himself the winner in this battle.

Mara wasn’t done. She writhed still, trying to get her weight from off the floor, knowing that she had a better chance of winning if she was standing.

She had played most of her distraction techniques and didn’t want to use her most-cruel ones for him. So she relented somewhat, panting but jostled every so often to remind him that she hadn’t given up.

Luke’s chest heaved as he looked down at her. He had wanted something from her, and was determined to get it.

Again, his body betrayed him, and she felt his throbbing erection through his trousers, pressed against her, still wanting her.

Mara couldn’t deny that she felt the twitch in the core of her sex, her body wanted him too.

He licked his lips, watching her, and one more time he leaned in, wanting her mouth as his prize, hoping she would succumb.
Instead as he came close, she turned her head to the side, refusing him again.

Luke grunted as he tried one more time to capture her lips. A single gesture that would have de-
escalated it all, and soothed them both.

But she refused, and her knee came up between his legs and almost made contact with his groin.

If he couldn’t have her lips, he would take her body.

Mara’s shocked registered in waves as she felt him reach out in the Force, using it to keep her hands
pinned down.

She stretched in response to test the range of her available movements, exposing her neck.

_Her neck;_ his senses flared..._her delicate neck...how it would crush so easily;_ his mind moved on.

She felt his strong hands, stroke down the sides of her torso.

Then, she felt him struggle between their bodies, and suddenly he was tugging at her own trousers,
bringing them down and pushing her legs apart.

His arousal had finally caught up with him, and he wanted her in covetous fury; an outlet that she
couldn’t deny that she wanted from him too.

She fought back against him, not because she didn’t want him, but because she didn’t want to make
it easy for him.

_Gods, she wanted him._ She always wanted him more when he fought against her; nothing drove her
arousal more than when she had hated him.

Such a fine razor of emotions between love, lust and hate.

Her eyes flared and bore deeply into his own dark look as she fought back.

This wasn’t love. This wasn’t tender.

Her own shadow hunger had made her body engorged with heat.

Without warning, he thrust himself inside her deeply, and he growled as he did so, holding her there
as she arched her back off the mat; he allowed her that minimum range of movement.

“You hate me...don’t you?” He asked through clench teeth.

He thrusted into her again harshly.

“You hate that you see him in me, don’t you?” He asked.

And thrusted again, feeling her tight body encapsulate him, and her involuntary wetness; he began to
pant, his body was in dire need of this release.

Her eyes widen, still fighting that her body had betrayed her and allowed him inside her, and how he
acknowledged that she wanted him too.

“What do you see in me?” He asked, not requiring an answer, his haunted face hovered above her.

He now started pushing himself inside her, in deep, long, hard strokes, grunting with each
movement.

Holding her captive, she refused to answer him, knowing it egged him on, and drove his misplaced anger.

“What is it?” He asked as he increased his speed.

Only the sounding of his grunting and the bodies coming together echoed in the room.

She begun to bare her teeth at him, refusing to give in, and thrashed to fight him. She could feel her own climax unwillingly building inside her.

Sensing that he was close to erupting inside her walls, but fighting his own release, her defiant look taunted him even further.

“Tell me!” He yelled at her as he shook her hips, driving himself deeper. “What do you see in me?” He yelled as he asked again.

She had her limits and she was at the end of what she would tolerate from him, and his self-pity. She lifted her hips from off the mat, and ground them in his direction to meet his thrusts, showing him that she could match him in both fierceness of their attack against each other, and she could overpower him if she needed to.

Their bodies slammed against each other; if one pushed, then the other pushed back.

Finally, she was done; if he wanted an answer, then he was going to get one.

“I see…” Her breathlessly hissed, pushing back with her pelvis, “…Vader’s Son!” She snarled back at him; her eyes were aflame.

Still pushing, she lifted her back from off the mat, coming closer to his anguished face. “And I love him!” She said loudly, choking as if ready to cry.

His face twisted, disturbed by her answer, disturbed by his behavior to her, he released her from his hold with the Force and she saw her opportunity.

Mara levied her body weight and flipped him off of her, and onto his back. Now, she sat him astride, forcing her body weight down on him, taking him so deep inside her body, it was almost painful now.

He looked at her, surprised that she could do this to him; his eyes wide and dark. His hands pinned under her knees and not pushing her off of him as she rode, but allowing himself to be held in place by her.

From nowhere, and he was shocked as he felt it; in both her hands, she had suddenly produced a strip of plasti-steel wire, holding it across his throat.

He could feel the barbed edge of the thin wire dig into his skin as he tried to turn his neck away from it.

“And who am I to you, Luke?” She kept the snarl in her voice.

Her eyes were as dark as they were when she seduced him, but now they were also devoid of emotion which scared him.

“Who do you think I am at my core?” She asked, daring him to answer.
She thrusted her body weight down, kriiffing him hard.

“I’m no different than him...Vader...a killer...cold and methodical.” She said as her eyes flickered away and then back at her target as her pelvis crashed on him.

“Do you think that you've changed me? Did you think it would be that easy to wipe away my past and my training?” She snarled again, barreling as she rode him harder and harder against the floor; showing him a glimpse as to what her targets would have felt before she completed her missions.

She forced her body not to respond and refusing to allow it to climax.

“Who am I?” She hissed at him loudly, demanding her answer now.

Luke could feel the wire still pressed against his throat.

His loins burned as she had tightened her cunt around him; it felt glorious and agonizing at the same time.

He wanted it, his released, but denied it, vowing he would never respond to her that way with anything but love.

_She wants something and won’t relent until she’s given it, _he told himself.

“Who am I?” She yelled at him, coming down again, impaling herself on him.

His nostrils flared, and he turned his head so that she could see his eyes.

“The Emperor’s Hand” He hissed back at her, he shuddered as he spoke.

He searched her face as his words registered with her; he had no delusions of who she had been and who she was now, knowing that her past made up the present.

Her brow creased, and she frowned; he could feel the wire at his throat going slack, and her body stopped moving against him.

He forcibly softened his face, and swallowed and then spoke, trembling in his voice, “And I love her...with all my heart.”

Mara gasped and then shuddered, dropping the wire, shifting her weight to come off him, and releasing his hands.

She gave up the fight.

She half-crawled away, trying re-cloth herself as she did so.

Huddling away from him, her shoulders shook and trembled, realizing that she was very close to completing the final cut on his throat- if he hadn’t have said the right thing...if his eyes didn’t touch her heart... if she didn’t let her shame seep into her senses... if she didn’t hear his words...

Luke watched her, panting and collecting himself too. He had been so close, if she only knew, how easy it would have been to crush her wind pipe; he had thought about it. He could see her gasping for air as he did it too.

He swallowed, and shook his head to deny that he had ever felt that way about her, wrapping himself in his shame that he was a part of this.
He loved her…loved her more than anything in the galaxy…loved her more than he loved himself.

This wasn’t them…this was something else that had invaded them.

Luke looked up to see that Mara had regained herself and watched her start to lightly limp towards the door.

She stopped and looked over her shoulder to him, and paused, waiting for him to join her.

It surprised him that she still wanted him to be with her.

He shouldn’t be surprised by her now; he had thought that he had pushed through her limits of what she would tolerate from him, but clearly he hadn’t.

In his heart, he knew that she hadn’t crossed any limit from which he wouldn’t return his feeling for her either.

Luke sighed, still feeling his heaviness for his actions, he went to join her and depart this place.

She limped head, and he stayed a bit behind as they left the chamber.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

**
Let me introduce you to our friend, commonly known as “hate-fucking”…or “anger-fucking”…or in the Stars World, known as “hate-kriffing”…

The “hate-kriff” has nothing to do with love…it is not rape or sexual assault (two things that I take very seriously), it IS consensual.

Both parties are essentially trying to get out their negative emotions through no other means than sex. Whether they are angry with each other, or angry with the world- it is only an outlet.

Mara is not a victim –Luke is not a victim…they are co-conspirators in this.

It is meant to exhaust the body and feelings. Simple as that.

But if you want a reference, I have mentioned, in a previous chapter, that Mara had considered using Luke for this same purpose before, to hate-kriff as a way to deal with her emotions – but she didn’t. (I think that seriously, all of us would have loved there to be a hate-fuck scene between Luke and Mara in the Zahn trilogy…am I right?)

The reason that I put this scene in the story was to see if their relationship could recover from it. It is also used as measure for where they are in their relationship – hate-kriffing is such an immature thing to do…it really doesn’t advance anything, and its results are just temporary.
There is always an aftermath.
What are your thoughts?
**
Chapter Summary

Quote: She swallowed hard and went on. “And then, I saw you…I don’t know…you couldn’t fight him again, but you could fight me…and somehow it would be as if you were confronting him again.”

Characters: Luke, Mara…and the past

Chapter Notes

**
Apologies for this quick chapter... it's about half of what I normally write...so it needed to be done.

Ah...my dear readers, we are nearing the end of this story...and the beginning of a new one. Only a few more chapters left... I'm hoping to see you on the flip story of this... but for now, the conclusion of where we left our troubled couple...

bum-Bum-BUMMMMM!

**

Vader’s Castle, Mustafar

Mara could hear him walking behind her all the way back to the Ambassador’s Suite.

Luke intentionally kept his distance from her.

She could feel his shame radiating off him; he was broadcasting again, lost in his thoughts.

With effort, she decided that she would stop being so protective about her own thoughts, and shared the blame equally, if not more so, for what had just happened between them.

She was not proud of what they had done, and looked over, back at him, to see his head lift. His sad blue eyes were not brightening that she had silently shared her portion of the responsibility.

He nodded once and let his head go down again, still following.

Luke sighed to himself; he never believed that he could act this way, and towards her of all people, to the woman that he loved with his whole being.

Shame and sadness were breaking his heart at the thought that she would never return that love again. Mara had been so tentative about loving him in the first place. Something like this was bound to doom them.
He felt where she had placed the blame, and it didn’t make much of difference, or excuse anything.

From his advantage point, he could see the tear in her tunic, and the scuff mark on her skin, and he cringed.

A MSE droid came down the hall, and rushed passed them; Mara watched it go, and felt a tingle in her senses but dismissed for the more-immediate issue between her and Luke.

Along the way, now that they were spent, the animosity seemed to fade away too; gradually and shared equally.

The door to the Ambassador’s Suite opened, making the only sound that could be heard. Mara entered first, with Luke in tow.

He stopped just inside the door, and stayed there, watching as she went off to the ‘fresher.

He listened to hear the water running, and took the chance to reach out and sense her feelings.

Closing his eyes, he could feel her remorse at the same level as his. Surprised, she somehow still wanted him near.

When she returned, he noticed a bottle of salve in her hands, and a cloth. Strangely, she looked as sad as he felt, but not apprehensive.

Mara stopped outside the ‘fresher, and looked across the room at him.

She sighed. “So… do we talk about this?” Her voice was quiet and shaky; it cracked from the dryness in her mouth.

He dropped his head; thinking of all the possible outcomes of this conversation and assumed that nothing good could come from it. “I think it’s pretty clear what happened…” Luke said solemnly, feeling his senses tremble at facing the inevitable.

“Really?” Mara raised an eyebrow, but not amused. “I don’t think it is at all.” Her voice fluttered as she tried to gain some control on her emotions.

She looked down, and away from him. “But I know that I started it.” She said blankly.

Luke lifted his head as he sensed that she wasn’t angry with him, just disappointed, for both of them. He could feel her self-reproach, acknowledging where she went wrong.

Mara shook her head before she continued. “I came in there to tell you that I had figured out why I hate Vader…that we’re the same.” She sucked in air sharply, making a choking sound, holding onto her feelings.

She swallowed hard and went on. “And then, I saw you…I don’t know…you couldn’t fight him again, but you could fight me…and somehow it would be as if you were confronting him again.”

Blinking rapidly, she could feel herself start to shiver, but she knew she had to finish her thoughts. “Only this time, you would see the good in me…and it would be me that you saved.” Her eyes started to tear up, and she didn’t fight it.

“I still don’t feel clean, Luke…I don’t think I ever will.” She shuttered as tears rolled down her face.

Luke looked directly at her, his heart breaking for her. Not flinching away, he took a step in her direction.
Gently, he sent out his senses to her; telling her how much he cared.

He shook his head as he took another few steps closer. “Mara…” he called to her softly. “I have no delusions about who you were…or who you are…and possibly, who you are going to be.”

Luke kept his strong gaze, daring to come closer, and his voice was solid. “I know that your past hangs in the background…I know that if the surface is scratched, that it comes up.”

She shook her head pre-emptively, and held up a hand to stop him. “Don’t…don’t make excuses…” She stuttered uncharacteristically.

“Don’t make excuses for it?” He interrupted her. “I know you think you were responsible for everything you did… I don’t think so…but you do.”

He had resigned himself to not try and change her mind on the subject. If and when her opinion of her past changed, it would be on her terms alone.

Luke nodded. “I’ll let you live with that, but I won’t hold it against you.” He shook his head. “I never have, and I never will.”

He let her have a few more moments to let it sink in that he still had feelings for her; deep and strong feelings.

His senses ached for her. <i>I love you.</i> He sent over to her.

But he knew it was his turn to admit as to where he had gone wrong.

“You were right…you were right about coming here… I didn’t find what I wanted…I had hoped to find one little thing that said that he was Anakin under it all…” Luke shook his head.

She sniffed quietly, knowing that he was in pain too.

In the silence between them, she decided that she needed to take a step towards him.

“Maybe its better that you didn’t find anything…” Mara said quietly. She sighed quietly, gathering herself. “Kenobi referred to them as two different people, maybe you have to too.”

She mumbled. “You can keep your resentment of Vader, and still have your forgiveness for Anakin.”

Mara inhaled deeply, knowing that her perception greatly differed from his, and she didn’t know if could ever see his point of view. “Anakin was a good person, and Vader was evil incarnated- they will never be reconciled. And trying to make them so, will just drive you insane…or worse.” She reasoned.

She wanted to asked why it was so important to come here…he sensed it.

Turning away from her, Luke went to where his belongings were being stored and pulled out an old tattered book, showing it to her.

“I was reading Ben’s journal after we had read the estate documents…” He explained. “Mustafar was where Darth Vader was made, born into existence… I thought… I don’t know.” He shook his head, feeling foolish, and dropped the book on the chaise. “I thought if I could discover what made him turn that I can avoid the same fate.”

Luke dropped down on the chaise, beside the book. He rested his elbows on his knees and raked his
hands through his shortened hair; completely at a loss to explain himself.

Mara took another few tentative steps towards him.

Her mind searched for ways to unburden him; Luke could wrap his mind in knots faster than anyone else that she knew.

Now, she fought with herself before she was to speak. Mentally, she still held onto her feelings towards Vader…but Anakin…and what she knew about seeing others detained in the cell called the Darkside.

“It wouldn’t have been that easy…” Mara said quietly. “I don’t think there was just one thing that made him turn.” She paused. “It’s never just one thing…” She mumbled.

“I saw it.” She said with conviction.

“If Palpatine was playing Anakin from the beginning, then he was manipulated.” She said, taking several steps casually towards Luke. “Palpatine knew what buttons to press—He did it before…always squeezing someone, always bending them to His ways…”

She sighed. Within an arm’s reach of him, she went on, knowing it was the truth. “If you and Anakin are anything alike, then he probably wore his feelings out for everyone to see…it would have been like a star map for Palpatine.”

Luke stopped raking his head to see out of his peripheral view that she was beside the chaise, feeling safe to be near him.

Mara stayed silent.

He watched her form bend over and pick up Ben’s journal, but before it lifted into her hand, her fingers gently grazed over the texture of the cover. “You can’t go looking for a needle in a mountain of pins.” She murmured.

Luke snorted quietly. “That was a very Kenobi thing of you to say….” He mumbled without directly looking at her.

“It still doesn’t explain why we did what we just did.” His voice decreased in volume. “…why I did that to you.”

“I used your body.” He went back to raking his scalp.

“And I used you too.” She said quickly, pointing out that he wasn’t alone in what transpired.

Her eyes went distant, and she spoke solemnly, as if it all made sense. “We were angry…and we both wanted the other person to see our pain, but we were too involved with our own issues.” She swallowed with the realization. “I wanted you to hurt because I hurt.”

Luke nodded, agreeing that with precision, she was able to figure it out; he probably would have dwelt on it longer than he needed to. “We were.” He shook his head. “I wanted you to hurt too.” He mumbled.

He lifted his head and looked directly into her sad green eyes. “I’m sorry, Mara. I should have seen what you were going through. I asked a lot of you without thinking about the cost.” His words were as honest as his blue eyes. “I misdirected my anger for my father…at you.” His mouth formed a tight grin. “I love you and I’m sorry.”
He heard her voice in his head, accepting his apology.

Slowly, she lowered herself to sit beside him on the chaise.

Upturning the salve bottle into the cloth in her hand, she righted the container and came to his face; pressing gently against the welt on his cheek.

Without flinching, they were locked in each other’s eyes.

Mara watched her hand tend to the wounds that she had inflicted on him.

“I’m sorry Luke…” She said quietly. “I was angry at everything…myself… Vader….and I was angry with you.”

Mara was at a loss to fully explain her feelings; she gasped at feeling overwhelmed, and feeling too many things at once.

Luke reached over and took her trembling hand in his, and waited for her to say what she needed to.

She sat, trying to calm herself; if this had happened a year ago, she would have ran from the room, ran from him and never looked back.

A memory came into her mind, and this one she didn’t flinch at.

There was a time, when she had come to him, asking him if he could withstand everything that it meant to be with her and her past. And the words that he used floated in her memory.

“I can take it.” She said quietly.

The trembling in her, stopped.

“I can take it.” She repeated.

Luke looked at her with surprise, and remembered that he had said the same thing to her, right before the Bremen hearing.

She looked directly into his eyes, and into his soul. “I can take being your lover, and you being Vader’s…Anakin’s son.” She said with a quiet confidence.

She dipped the cloth again and went to press the wound again. “I love you…all of you.”

Luke’s brow crinkled and his eyes teared at her words.

He took her hand, gently, and brought it to his lips; letting his feelings slip over to her, his regret, his sorrow and his love for her…no matter what.

“I love you too.” He whispered back. <All of you.>>

There was no place to hide when they were being honest with each other. Now, they knew that they had the power to hurt the other; physically and emotionally.

He came in closer to her, wanting to take her in his arms, wanting to feel her beside him- if she would have him.

Mara responded by coming in to his chest, slipping her hands around his mid-section, allowing herself to be held, and relaxing as she felt his arms wrap around her and hold her.
Luke held her, just rocking, knowing that they now had passed the difference from ‘being in love’ to actually loving another person; this was not infatuation, or fluttering or fleeting – even though she was the one that could make his emotions soar. This was more.

It was quiet and soft, and the environment around them changed; they controlled it now, and not the other way around.

It would have been easy to blame their surroundings, but they had made the choice to behave the way they did, and they also made the decision to forgive and love each other.

Mara looked up to him; her eyes rounds and clear.

Luke’s mouth twitched to a grin. He reached up to caress her cheek, still wanting those lips.

She could sense what he still wanted, and she shook her head. “No…” she whispered, “…not until we leave here.”

He nodded, and knew that she was right; this was not a place for such a display of their love. He released her and moved back, still watching her face; her beautiful, perfect face.

Mara nodded, knowing that he understood, without malice. And oh, how she did want to kiss his lips and his face, his handsome face.

She touched his face again with the cloth. “Better?” She asked in a whisper.

Luke nodded, and took her hand that healed him, and kissed the top of it.

He released her hand, and motioned to stand, wanting to go clean himself up.

Mara let him go, and watched as he turned around to grin to her before going into the ‘fresher.

She sighed for a moment after the door closed, and then turned her head to look at the book on the chaise, that once belonged to Kenobi.

Picking it up, she could sense remnants of feelings on it.

Whoever Kenobi was, he wasn’t beyond feeling a sense of humbleness.

Mara ran her hand over the faded winged designed on the front, bearing some resemblance to the Rebel Alliance insignia.

She opened the cover, and one the first page, as she saw it, she gasped quietly.

A triquetra; the mark of the Kynthelig. She shivered, but, somehow, in a good way.

Closing the book, she placed it back down on the chaise, when she senses that Luke was about to return.

One day, she would ask Luke about all he knew about his former master.

In the ‘fresher, Luke examined his face as he washed his hands and tidied himself.

You know, she could have done worse. He said to himself. My girl sure has one hell of a right hook. Woe be the man who truly gets her angry. He grinned at his own reflection; it was a strange sort of pride for her, but he still had it.
He looked down at the sink and then back up at his face. *You know…it’s time now, right? It’s time to go.*

He knew this was it; there was nothing more for him to see or experience here.

It was over. Time to leave the ‘fresher and time to leave Mustafar.

Suddenly, Luke looked at the ‘fresher door and sensed it was time to see what was happening in the next room.

The door opened a little too slow for his senses; something needed his immediate attention.

Mara stood in the middle of the room, and Luke could hear the beeping of Artoo. He came closer to see that she was frowning at the comlink, her senses were tingling.

Artoo didn’t sound frantic or scared, speaking rapid on the other end, but Luke’s senses flared too.

“Wow…slow down Artoo…what’s happening?” He asked, as he took the comlink from her hand.

The bleeps came again and Luke looked over to Mara who was still at a loss to understand the droid.

“He says that there has been a series of outgoing communications recently…and received….and returned?” Luke explained to her.

Mara frowned, perplexed as who would be sending out transmissions.

Artoo twittered again through the comlink.

Luke listened, looked to Mara and then responded. “Yes, play the incoming message…”

There was a brief amount of static, and then they both heard it; the shortling, and dashes that sounded exactly like… an *Imperial code*.

Mara’s eyes widened, and she gasped as she took a step back. “Play it again.” She ordered statically, ice in her voice.

The noises came through again, and she sucked in a deep breath of air.

Her eyes blinked rapidly as she turned to Luke in disbelief. “*They know that we’re here*…” She hissed. “They’re on their way…We have to leave now.” Her voice sounded tight.

Luke didn’t need to feel her spike, and didn’t need to ask who ‘they’ were, but felt it just the same. “Artoo…prep the ship…take off in fifteen.” He ordered, and closed the comlink.

She didn’t need to hear his instructions and had started to collect their things, putting them into their travel cases, quickly.

He could hear her grumbling as she worked quickly.

Mara had figured it all out. “*Kriffing MSE droids…I should have known…feeding into any Imperial receiver in the area…probably looking for us after Ovanis*...”

Luke cringed as he worked, knowing that the amount of artillery on Ovanis and the Star Destroyer hovering in orbit were meant for him. At least, it felt like it was for him, and reminded him of his days on the run.
She grumbled still as they finished up. “…Probably my recognition codes that set them off…
tracking my whereabouts…”

He reached over for her hand and squeezed it. “They’re not after you.” He assured her.

Mara glared at the air, and knew that he was right.

Then, her eyes softened, worried for the man that she loved. She looked scared, and then determined, not willing to let the Imperials win on this one.

There wasn’t a moment to waste; there was a clock on the message, Mara knew, but who knew when it had started.

Her senses flared, and they told it was soon. She knew that the Imperials were hoping to still catch their prey.

She also knew that now any droid they encountered was a possible spy, sending out coding messages about where the humans were, and what they were doing.

If they were caught trying to leave, it would only speed up the Imperial countdown clock to their arrival.

Mara led the way back to the Verpine Cruiser, with the special instructions to blast any droid that they encountered before it could send out a message.

They stopped at the intersections of the hallways to see if any of the droids were in the halls. With their travelling cases on their backs, Luke kept the rear guard to make sure that they weren’t followed.

Stealthily, they made their way down the stairs, past the landing and out of the main foyer.

They made it back to the ship cleanly.

Without a word, dropping the cases in the galley, Mara went straight to the cockpit, and Luke headed for the hull.

She checked the ship’s settings, and pulled up the back-up coordinates in the nav computer, glad that she had saved them.

Then, she met him in the aft section as he was trying to figure out the Refracting charge.

“We don’t have much time.” She said succinctly. “How do you want to do this?” She asked tightly, knowing that he wanted to feel this.

Luke raised his eyebrows, unsure. “What’s the most-reliable way?” He asked, knowing that she probably had already thought this through.

“Timer.” She said blankly. “Not as satisfying as remote but definitely reliable.”

He nodded, and gave her a tight grin for her ‘satisfying’ comment; she knew the cathartic value that he wanted here.

Luke leaned against the container that held the Refractor, putting his shoulder into it as he helped her maneuver it onto the lift in the hull, taking it down to the platform.

They wedged it on to a hover pallet and pushed it toward the main foyer of the castle. Judging from
the size of the castle, and the size of the possible blast; this seemed like the best and central place to put it.

There was an element of haste, but also the desire to do this right.

The Refractor came off the hover pallet with a thud to the middle of the foyer.

Luke stood back, looking at it, and then at the Sith script on the wall behind it, that had greeted them when they first arrived.

Mara’s attention was at the immediate work at hand. She pried off the control panel and caught his attention. “How long?”

He turned to her, pulling his thoughts back to the moment, and shrugged.

“Right.” She grimaced. “Five minutes should do.” The control panel beeped accepting the time and starting the countdown clock.

She looked up to see what had caught his attention and came to stand beside him, following his gaze to look up at the script one more time.

“Anything else?” She whispered beside him.


His eyes rolled, and raised up his hands, making fists.

Mara could feel the pull of Force that he was calling on.

The room shivered, and then the slab that the script was carved into started to shiver, came loose and pulled from off the wall.

Before them, the granite crumbled to pieces, falling loudly to the landing.

The dust cloud started to diminish, and Mara gasped as Luke was opening his eyes.

With the slab gone, the wall revealed what was originally lurking behind it.

Luke exhaled, knowing that his time was limited but he could have stood there forever, happy to find what felt like proof. He seemed at peace…calm…satisfied.

The white marble was pure and regal, bearing the golden Royal Naboo insignia.

It still shined; large and carved with detail and care.

He smiled; he didn’t want to leave but he knew that he needed to.

“Come on…” She whispered as she gently tugged at his sleeve.

Reluctantly, he turned away and reluctantly followed her.

A light jog to the Cruiser and up the ramp, they raced to the cockpit.

Mara dropped into the pilot’s chair, and Luke took up the co-pilot position, watching the thrusters as she backed out of the hangar.

Luckily, the Cruiser was shift and agile; needing very little guidance to get it to move.
It backed out cleanly, and pulled away.

She did the right thing and pulled the Cruiser directly out from the platform, entering the stratosphere vertically, far enough away from the sonic blast that was sure to follow, but still able to witness its success.

Luke looked out the starboard side to pause, and he let out the breath he was holding as he saw the explosion; the cloud billowed, and he knew that it had destroyed what it needed to.

Even though they should have both felt relieved, there was something in the air that told them that this was not over; something itching in the their senses.

The nav computer sounded that it was ready for the jump, and he turned back to the console, reaching over to the levers to pull back on her mark.

Mara opened her mouth, just about to give the order, when at the same moment a victory-class Star Destroyer pulled out of hyperspace before them in opposite direction of their path.

The itch stopped.

Glad that they had out-smarted the current regime, she smiled over to him right before she said. “Now.”

He pulled back the levers; they were away.

As the star lines careened by, Luke sighed and slumped back in his chair, and looked over to her, and saw that she knew it too.

They had left Mustafar undetected and the black planet was behind them.

Despite the seriousness of the moment, she murmured, “By the way… remind me that if we get ever married, you are not allowed to pick the honeymoon spot.”

“We’re getting married?” He asked dryly, trying to be playful, given the nature of the moment, it seemed out of place.

She glared over at him.

“What?” he asked. “You don’t want to see scenic and lovely Hoth? It’s very cozy…being all snuggled together to keep warm… and clinging to life.” The tone of his sentence died away as the mirth left.

“Can it, Farmboy.” She grumbled, as a solemn veil set it. “I said ‘if’.”

It was a brief bit of banter, both they both knew the implications.

He was being hunted again.

TBC
Minuscules and Magnitudes – Part 1

Chapter Summary

Quote: “But he looks like you held him down and took a vibroblade to his head... you look like you haven’t slept in days... and both of you, look like you’ve been wrestling a Rancor... so spill it, and maybe I’ll talk the princess down when she gets a break...’cause, believe me, I’m not the only one who has noticed.” He followed up his comment with a wink.

Characters: Luke, Mara, Han, Leia, baby Jedi, and others

Chapter Notes

**

Ah, Darth Real Life has been at me again. I really try hard to get these out within days of the last chapter but for some reason that just doesn’t seem to happen.

Anyhow, I tried to finish up this one in time for Valentine’s Day with no luck. Just my opinion but sometimes there’s a different sort of love that goes beyond the romantic kind... family love.

I hope you enjoy this one.

**

Hyperspace- Destination: Classified

The Verpine Cruiser raced through space, on its way to its first stop.

Mara had planned one of her double-jumps, and the second leg would take them to their final destination.

There was still a delivery on board the Cruiser, and a customer waiting at the other end.

What lingered onboard, and had followed them, was a sense of tenseness; not because of their status of their relationship, but because of the Star Destroyer that would have surely found them unprepared.

It was a close call, and both Luke and Mara knew it.

The next set of hours, they went back to their regular schedule of sleeping in shifts because a sense of normalcy would relax their edginess.

Gradually, the awkwardness seemed to dissipate between them, and the cloud started to lift as they felt safer and farther away from Mustafar.

A strange sort of language emerged; one that was part apology and part shared commiseration.
As Luke would leave his cabin and enter the galley, Mara prepared a mug of caf, just the way he liked it, and have it waiting for him. He smiled at her over the rim as he took the first sip and savored the taste, and remembering how he valued having her close.

Likewise, when she walked into the galley after her shift, waiting for her would be a meal; warmed and prepared. Mara would be rubbing the sleep out her eyes, and inhale the scents appreciatively, and then smile to him as he went to go take his sleeping shift.

And slowly the intimacy returned too; gentle shoulder touches turned into longer hugs, and gave way to quick kisses with promise.

He could feel her relief that they were coming out of this, and he shared her sediment.

Luke knew that Mara must have been feeling better; on his last shift, he found a pair of dark blue knitted socks on his bunk.

Smirking to himself, he sent back the warmest Thank You that he could, over to her. He got back a warm, soft tendril on the corner of his mind; both socks and sensations helped lull him to sleep.

There were times when even the slightest rift would have kept them apart for longer. Now, they were learning to forgive each other quicker, and rebound without resentment.

However, it wasn’t lost that life and The Force had other things intended for them.

Luke woke quickly from this final sleeping shift, and tried to hide his presence. He knew that it would be Mara’s next turn at a sleeping shift, but he also knew that she would only be going if she felt that they were safe, and rest easier.

He dressed quickly and then snuck over to the cabin that she was occupying.

On Null, they had raced their departure from the luxury hotel, so he didn’t get a chance to truly pamper her like he had wanted. Although Mara could handle herself in just about any place, whether it was swamp, forest, jungle or palace…she preferred palace—even though she would never admit to it.

He entered her room, and placed some of the things that they didn’t get to use on Null.

After laying the fluffy bathrobe, that he bought for her, across the bunk, he turned and left the jasmine-scented talc powder on her night stand; he had seen her use something like that before.

Satisfied, Luke headed to the cockpit, knowing that he would find her there.

The door slid at his approach, and Luke dropped into the co-pilot’s chair.

Mara turned away from the console and gave him a grin, and then turned back, as it looked like she was in the middle of performing a task.

Luke returned the smile, and sat back just to watch her in her element. As much as he loved to pilot, he didn’t mind letting her have the full range of control of the ship. It gave him as much joy to know that it made her happy as if he was piloting.

“So Captain…” he said with a smirk, “Do I get to know where we are headed yet?” He snorted. “Do I get to play ‘smuggler’ on this one?”

Mara glanced over at him with thin eyes at the name he had called her, and then shared her own
“Confidential.” She muttered, still smirking. “But I think you’ll like it.”

“Oh?” Luke asked, leaning forward with interest.

He looked at the details on the nav computer and saw that the readouts were marked out, and frowned. “Confidential, huh?” He asked.

“Yes.” She answered simply, leaving no room for argument. “The client wants it that way. The less people who know the co-ordinates, then the less chance of disclosure.”

The nav computer beeped, indicating that they were ready to pull out of hyperspace.

Luke took her further silence on the matter as just an indication that she wasn’t about to budge on the subject.

He knew his job here and reached over to the levers, and looked over to her waiting for direction.

“You can cut the power.” Mara muttered, as the prepared the next set of co-ordinates.

Luke pulled back the levers and the star lines halted.

His senses immediately flared as he saw what was before them, but, strangely, not his senses in the Force, indicating danger.

Ahead of them, he couldn’t believe his eyes.

The planet before them was covered with floating ships in orbit.

“That’s a Dor’bulla warship!” He said with shock, pointing, as he recognized one of them, but Mara didn’t seem concerned.


“Uh-huh” she said absently, keying in the new co-ordinates. “That’s what happens when we’re in the Toydarian System.”

She looked up to see what all the fuss was about. “They’re not after us.” She said simply. “And at this distance, I doubt that we will even appear on their scopes.”

Luke exhaled hard and started to relax in the knowledge that she was probably right. His senses in the Force told him not to be alarmed.

It was just the distress of seeing Hutt warships that brought back some nasty childhood memories; if a Hutt warship was orbiting over Tatooine, then someone wasn’t going to be happy, least of all, a Hutt.

He eased back against his chair and swallowed.

“We’ll be out of here shortly.” Mara looked over to him, making sure that he was okay.

“They’re just out on patrol.” She explained. “Ever since the Imperial hit and fade attacks, most systems have developed their own perimeter patrol…we see it all the time.” She assured him. “We won’t even get close enough for them to hail us.”
Luke drew his attention away from the viewport to see that she was not agitated at all.

The nav computer came up, and he reached over at the controls, and got the nod for her, and pulled back on the levers, glad to be gone.

The star lines dashed by, and he felt relieved to leave there.

Mara snorted slightly. “Okay, now I know never to buy a Dor’bulla or an Azalus because of your aversion to them.”

He looked over to her. “Why would you ever want one of those anyway?”

He knew they shared a love of ships, and she could match him in knowledge of most crafts.

“Where do you want me to start?” She eyed him; happy that they usual familiarity was returning. “They have some of the best shields available…and most of the hulls are double plated…best engines…best hyper-drives…”

“Power-guzzling…loud…bulky…bad to maneuver…” He interrupted her.

“Spacious…huge capacity…large cabins…” She fired back. “…excellent stealth cloaking…”

“Large cabins to fit a Hutt.” He mumbled.

“No, you will never get a Hutt warship.” Luke said, slightly indignant. If I have anything to say about it, he thought mentally.

Mara slowly swiveled her chair to look at him. “Are you telling me that you won’t allow me to get a Hutt warship even if I wanted one?” She asked slowly, with one arched eyebrow, and crossing her arms against her chest.

He leaned back in his chair, and crossed his arms on his chest, matching her stance.

“I’m not telling you what you should do…” He said decidedly, “But I think…they wouldn’t look good on you anyhow.” He shook his head, and tried to change the mood. “They wouldn’t suit your flying style….That’s all.” He feigned his disinterest, knowing that she really didn’t have an interest in buying a Hutt warship.

Mara narrowed her eyes, giving him a not-too-serious glare. “Really Skywalker…you can be such a little boy sometimes.”

Luke looked back at her with eyes big and round; not even trying to look innocent but pulling it off. “If I got a new toy…I’d wouldn’t let you play with it either.” Mara’s snarky tone was playful and she stuck her tongue out just to prove a point.

He snorted at her. “Yes you would.” He shot back. “And you’d let me name it…because you wouldn’t trust Karrde to help.”

Mara snorted back, agreeing with him but she wasn’t going to say it.

He smiled satisfied as he looked at her.

Her eyes now rounded, pure Kelly green, glad that he was there. She smirked as she went to stand, headed to the galley.
Luke followed her out, knowing that he had won the round but wasn’t about to say it.

In the galley, Mara searched the cupboards for something to eat.

She yawned deeply as she found a ration bar to would satisfy her for the time being.

He dropped into the seat across from the console, assuming his responsibility for the next shift but was surprised as she sat down at the galley table, flipping open her data pad and started to read.

Luke glanced at the readout, hoping he would find a loophole in her co-ordinates, seeing where they were headed, but to no avail.

He looked back over his shoulder to see that she was still there.

“Not taking your sleeping shift?” He asked casually; a little disappointed that she wasn’t going to see the surprise he had prepared for her.

Mara stifled another yawn, thinking it might be a good idea to get in some sleep but then decided against it.

Where they were headed, if she was to sleep now, it would only pale in comparison. She knew that they were headed to a place of relative safety.

Sadly, she also knew that where they were headed would be a way to return him to active duty too, so she would value all the time that she could while they were together.

“No…” she said with a yawn. “Where we’re headed will have water showers and big beds.” She smiled at him, knowing he would appreciate both. “…and a few other things of interest.”

“Oh…” He said, slightly disappointed that he was being left-out of the secret.

“We will be there in less than two hours, so there’s not much of a point in taking a sleeping shift.” She said off-handed.

Luke looked back at her; she had intentionally let a detail slip.

She wasn’t about to tell him the destination, but she had just told him, in her own way, that they were probably staying inside Hutt space; still not his favorite place to be.

He tried to search his memory of what could be in Hutt space that would be asking for a delivery.

The Hutts had their hands in all sorts of businesses, including trading companies. Perhaps her clients didn’t trust the Hutts; they weren’t the first, they wouldn’t be the last to feel that way.

He turned the chair in her direction. “You’ll tell me when you want to.” He said casually.

“I won’t tell you.” She uttered from her data pad. “I’ll send you into the back when we land… just like I do with Dankin.” Mara looked up, to explain. “And if they give me permission to tell you, then I will.”

Luke could tell that she was playing by the rules, and not intentionally keeping anything from him, but it was still fun to interact with her like this.

“What if I guess where we’re going?...by asking questions.” He narrowed his gaze at her.

Mara didn’t flinch. “You won’t guess.” She said blankly, but then smiled; seeing the challenge that
he was giving himself.

Luke leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees, twiddling his thumbs between his hands as he stared her down.

“Okay. First question…is what we’re carrying illegal?” He asked, trying to portray savvy.

She snorted at him; amused that he was even trying to play this game. “Hardly.” She answered, but then tilted her head to reconsider. She nodded, agreeing with her first answer.

He frowned, knowing that if they were carrying contraband it might give him a better clue; but maybe not. They were in Hutt space, most everything here was illegal on other worlds.

“Next question… is it edible?” He asked, as he stalled to ask a truly relevant question.

Mara seemed amused and leaned back from her data pad to watch him. She considered his question before answering. “Some of it is.” She said, keeping her words to a minimum.

Luke had seen the pallets in the back and knew that they had no distinctive markings; this was going to be harder than he thought.

“I give up.” He announced as he slumped back into the chair. “It could be anything!” He declared. “But I know we’re staying in Hutt Space.”

Mara’s brow crinkled, surprised. “That was a quick surrender.” She snorted. “Okay, on that issue, you are correct. We are staying in Hutt space.”

“Well, given the average rate of speed of hyperspace and distance travelled…” His eyes squinted and he tried to work out the math inside his head as he spoke it out loud.

Mara rolled her eyes. “Okay Fine! It’s my turn to give up! I can’t take another moment of you bumbling through this… so I’ll tell you.” She said, too tired to play games.

“Besides, I got permission to tell you when we took this delivery on.” She grumbled. “But I wanted to surprise you.” She pouted.

Luke sat up, smiling.

“The delivery is for the Resistance Group… Leia and Han will be there.” She said as she glared. “And the twins will be there too.” Her glare dissolved into a smile, knowing that she was looking forward to this side trip too.

His eyes brightened; it has been months since he had seen his family in person.

“Really?” He asked.

Mara sighed. “Yes…but…” Her excitement faded rather quickly, possibly because she was tired, but also, now, she would have to explain it to him. “…it’s also your way back to the Liberty.”

The light in his eyes dimmed slightly, now understanding why she seemed reserved about it.

“I see.” He said quietly, and nodded, remembering he had another duty to the New Republic, no matter what sorts it was in now.

“It will be nice to see the twins again… and Leia and Han.” He agreed quietly. “I’ve missed them.” He mumbled.
And he did; Luke just didn’t relish the first of many conversations he could envision having with Leia… Hey sister, guess what I’ve been up to? - I ran off to go see Dad’s old place. By the way, we have three planets to split between us…oh, and before I forget, here’s your share of fifty million credits…

Luke cringed.

Mara must have heard him.

“It won’t be that bad.” She muttered, looking at her data pad, avoiding his eyes and the uncomfortable thoughts that were sure to resurface.

He sighed and sat back in the chair, hoping that she was right.

“Han will be there.” Mara suggested quietly.

Nodding, Luke understood what she meant; Han had the ability to soothe his sister. But on the odd day that he was having an off day, Han could also annoy her faster than anyone else.

He watched her, working at her data pad and a thought came to him. “How long will you be there?” He asked; his voice almost a whisper.

Mara looked up from her data pad; her eyes told him that she knew that they were on borrowed time.

“I told Karrde that I would contact him when arrangements could be made to get you back to the Liberty…” She said. “Or to your next mission.” She finished, matching his hushed tones.

There was a reality that couldn’t be avoided; he had signed up for a tour of duty with the Rogues, and that superseded regular life, at least until the tour was over or he was dismissed.


The Force had thrown them together for only a short time and he had better make good use of it.

<I’m not ready to start missing you yet.> He sent over to her as he sadly smiled.

<<Me neither.>> She replied with her own sad smile. <<We can save that for later…much later.>>

Mara looked back down at her data pad, and Luke turned back to the console.

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The approach to the mystery planet seemed like any other, but inside the atmosphere, the Verpine Cruiser shook from the turbulence as they fought to use the stabilizers to not get bounced around.

It was an easy feat, in bad weather, if there was ground below them, however, gravity fields didn’t work well against a surface that was water-based. Crafts tended to need manual overrides to keep level.

Mara regretted sending Luke in the back as they approached; she felt him reach out in the Force to keep his balance in the hull after she had warned him about the impending turbulence.

She could sense his grumbling as he locked himself into some safety strapping after the first bump.

Cringing, she sent back an apology in her senses. <<It will be over soon.>> She promised.
She only hoped that this weather wouldn’t cause issues getting into the hidden hanger; if the water levels were too high, they would have to pull up and make a second approach after the storm moved on.

The Verpine Cruiser locked onto the beacon, and Mara sent out her codes. The dot in the distance became clearer and she could make out the towering scape that housed the Resistance.

As she waited for a response, she felt a wave wash over her, and then leave. It felt like someone was searching her ship with the Force; if that was possible.

*It must be his sister,* she thought. It felt like a Force-user who didn’t have much skill, just reaching out randomly; like a big drunk baby waddling through her ship, searching for anything it could knock over.

She felt the spike in Luke’s emotions when the wave found him.

*Leia!* She heard his mind yell back, and the elation and relief roll off of him.

*So that is what it feels like to be part of family.* Mara thought to herself. *Not bad.*

Sure enough, the water level didn’t affect the secret opening to the hangar, and doors started to open with their approach.

<<You can come up front now.>> Mara sent to Luke, knowing that he was growing curious about where they were heading.

She had to remind him twice that it was he who had warned her that he hadn’t been cleared for that information yet. He may have been allowed to visit but he wasn’t privy to all the details. He knew the reasons for it, and preferred it that way.

The cockpit door open and Luke rushed in; dropping into the copilot’s seat before the hangar door had fully opened.

Mara kept her hands on the controls but turned her head to stare at him in wonder, at his speed.

The eagerness was written all over his face; she could sense the longing in him. Luke was very attached to his family; she had never noticed it being this intense before.

She turned her attention back to the controls, as the Cruiser entered the hanger.

The hangar was more-crowded than it was on her last trip; there was a set of ground’s crew directing her where to land.

“Did you warn Leia about your ‘haircut’?” She asked off-handed as she glanced over at him. It had grown on her, but she wasn’t sure his sister would be so thrilled about it.

“Huh?” Luke asked, pulling his gaze away from what was before him; a Rebel hangar shouldn’t be a new thing to him. “Ah…*no.*” He grimaced. “Do you think that I should?”

“She’ll want to know how it happened.” Mara said, paying attention to following the ground’s crewman directing her. “And you think that I know how to grill someone?…we both went to same Academy at one time.”

Luke’s lips twitched, and he knew that she was right. “Okay, I’ll tell her.” He inhaled deeply and let it out slowly.
Mara could sense him reaching out, and then she saw him cringed.

“She’s not happy.” He muttered under his breath.

Mara smirked, and then subdued it, hiding her amusement that he was about to get in trouble from his big sister.

She looked over at him and then back at the crewman. Having never had a family, she was still curious about what it was like to have one. “Did you miss her? Them?” She asked quietly.

Luke turned his attention to her, and smiled. “Yes” he said. <And I’ll miss you too…very much.>

She snorted softly; both happy and sad to hear that.

The Cruiser maneuvered into the spot assigned to them, and touched down.

Mara started the shutdown sequence, and Luke had unstrapped himself and already left the cockpit, preparing to disembark; his excitement was getting contagious although she didn’t know why.

She grabbed her data pad and a print-out of the manifest. Regardless, that this trip had a personal aspect, she still had a job to do.

Artoo was chirping happily in the galley—it must have caught on to where they were headed, or Luke told it.

Luke came from his cabin, pulling his travel case; his eyes were bright and he smiled broadly.

“Hey…” he said, leaving the case and coming closer to her. “There’s something that I’ve forgotten to do…”

Mara looked at him, perplexed, until she caught the gleam in his eye. In all the things they had experienced on this trip, she had almost forgotten it too.

She felt her heart race when she realized what was on his mind; but just let it happen.

He stepped in closer to her and cupped her cheeks, bringing her near.

Mara’s eyes fluttered closed and she pursed her lips to his; a real kiss. Not a casual peck, or a slight touch; a kiss with the passion that had been missing since Null; one that never happened since arriving and leaving Mustafar.

She could feel Luke’s warmth wash over her, and she reciprocated. Gods, she had missed his lips.

The data pad dropped to the galley table beside her, freeing her hands to wrap around his midsection, wanting him close.

He hummed between their lips, and his thumbs caressed her jawline.

She sighed as he pulled back, but rested his forehead against hers. “I love you.” He whispered.

Mara hummed, keeping her eyes closed and nodded, not wanting to move from this close contact, but she knew they needed to. “I love you too.” She managed to mumble back, still a little lightheaded from the kiss.

Luke snorted softly, and she could tell that he was happy at the state he could get her in, without even trying.
Slowly, she opened her eyes to see his smiling face.

His fingers curled into his hand to caress her cheekbone one more time, before he released her.

“Come on, we should get going.” Luke said as he stepped back.

“Oh-huh.” Mara nodded, coming to her senses.

She regained her composure and tried to go back to business, picking up her data pad. He garnered a quick glare at the back of his head for having the ability to make her forget herself; she followed him to the ramp.

Luke walked ahead of her, with his astromech following behind him.

A welcoming committee was approaching the ship, but Mara got the general sense that they weren’t here for her. Instead, a separate grounds crew was coming towards the ship.

She decided to let Luke have his time; she reminded herself that their relationship was still speculation in some parts of galaxy. No sense to holding on to him like a love-sick Falleen if she didn’t have to.

The ground’s crew seemed prepared this time and brought their hover pallets. The aft sections lowered to allow them access to the hull.

“So whacha hauling this time, Kid?” An unmistakable voice said from over her shoulder; it was unassuming and laced with the gruff tones that she had come to expect from the man. Inwardly, she smiled.

Mara turned to see briefly the lopsided smirk of the former smuggler; his face returned to its unimpressed stance after she caught the smirk.

“The usual.” She replied, knowing that he could appreciate her vagueness.

“Oh-huh.” Han Solo grunted.

He stood back, watching the pallets be loaded with his hands on his hips, as if he was the overseer, just watching the work being done.

Mara knew better; she knew he loved this stuff so she let him have his moment in peace.

Besides, past Solo, Luke was still receiving his welcoming party.

She looked up and then back down quickly, appearing not to be interested, but she took an assessment of the group around him; Madine, a very pregnant Leia, several other militia personnel, the aide to Mon Mothma, and Calrissian?

There was something there; not tangible, nothing immediate, but it made her leery just the same. The air around Luke was tense…and…desperate?

Solo cleared his throat before talking. “So what’s with The Kid?” He thumbed back at Luke as he spoke.

Mara kept her cool indifference and shook her head for an answer, and then paused, and looked back at Solo. “You just called me ‘Kid’…and now you called Skywalker ‘Kid’…how do you tell us apart?”
Solo snorted once. “You’re ‘Kid’, and he’s ‘The Kid’…that’s how.” He said blankly; but his eyes keenly watched those around them.

The ground’s crew moved away; and Mara handed the manifest off to the foreman of the team.

When they were alone, Solo spoke up again. “Are you going to tell me?” He asked quieter, but with no less importance in his voice.

The last time she was here, Leia had all but warned her, as they walked in an open area, that there was a chance at being overheard.

Mara turned in his direction. “Have you ever been on a Verpine Cruiser? – The handling is great. Why don’t you come on board and I’ll show you the console?” She asked casually.

“Yeah, alright.” The Corellian grumbled.

They walked around to the front of the craft, and Solo followed closely behind as Mara led the way up the ramp.

Once inside, he spared no time and walked over to the console in the galley, looking at the details.

Solo snorted sarcastically without saying anything. “Only gets up to nine parsecs.” He mumbled under his breath before he turned back to Mara. ‘Do I get to know now?’ He asked before dropping himself down into the console’s chair.

Mara leaned back on the galley’s table and crossed her arms on her chest.

This was a game, and she knew how to play, and play it well.

“What makes you think there’s anything wrong? Can’t Skywalker come for a visit?” She asked in monotone.

Solo seemed to pick up on the game, and tilted his head away from her; his cheek tugged. “He can…” The smuggler answered. “But he looks like you held him down and took a vibroblade to his head… you look like you haven’t slept in days…and both of you, look like you’ve been wrestling a Rancor…so spill it, and maybe I’ll talk the princess down when she gets a break…”cause, believe me, I’m not the only one who has noticed.” He followed up his comment with a wink.

Mara exhaled slowly as to not let on that she was sighing exasperatedly.

She raised her eyebrows quickly, giving him credit for being so observant. “How about a trade Solo? Are you still making runs out to Yavin?” She asked slyly.

He stretched back and put his hands behind his head, looking a little too comfortable on someone else’s ship. “It just so happens that I am…”

“Good.” She said blankly. “We have some cargo that has to get back there, and into the hands of Dr. Massian only.” She purposely dropped the last word so that he would understand her seriousness.

“Right, old guy with a limp…for him only.” Solo growled, waiting on her.

Now Mara visibly sighed. “Luke ran into trouble off Ovanis, and we just happened to be running shipment in the area…we…/found him and picked him up and the others.”

Solo just nodded, as if he already knew these details but let her carry on.
“We were able to figure a way to get the Jansen back to the Liberty but Skywalk-. . . Luke… wanted to go see something else.” She reminded herself to be more-familiar in front of… Han.

His eyes narrowed, knowing he was only getting half the story.

Mara knew that Solo had some history with Vader, and that was putting it lightly; being put into carbonite by someone seemed a little bit more than personal.

She knew that she had to break this sort of stoic-smuggler thing that they had developed between them; it was time to start trying to be a part of this family.

“Luke got Vader’s estate documents before leaving for Ovanis.” She said, dropping the act of keeping her cool. “After he read them, he wanted to make a side trip before returning to the Liberty.”

Solo unlaced his fingers from behind his head, and his mouth went slack as he sat upright in the chair.

“We went to Mustafar… Vader’s castle… Luke wanted to go.” She exhaled. “And I knew how to get in.” She finished quietly.

Solo sat quiet for longer than she thought was possible. He looked off to the side, and nodded.

“So that’s what Leia was mumbling about this morning before you arrived.” He grumbled. “… saying something about needing to talk to Luke… about Vader.” His eyes came up to meet hers.

He took some time to mull it over; it was Solo’s turn to exhale heavily. “Well, thanks for ‘head up’ Jade.” He said gruffly. “I think it’s safe to assume that we’re going to see a Skywalker Family Throw-down today.”

Mara frowned, surprised that they had such a thing; it just seemed they usually got along.

“Why don’t you get your kit and I’ll take you to your lodgings for while you’re here.” He grumbled, aware now that they had surpassed the ‘smuggler’ talk and delved into being family.

She nodded without an argument and turned to head towards her cabin.

She stopped before leaving the galley, and turned back to Han. “Solo…” she warned, “I think this goes without saying… stay away from my ship.”

His hand was hovering above the console when she had stopped him, and he turned and shrugged with a lopsided smile.

**

She had managed to pack quickly, and even had the chance to send a sweet thought over to Luke for the gifts he had left for her; no wonder he was so eager to see her take her final sleeping shift.

Han was uncharacteristically quiet as they walked and just glared over at the group still congregated around Luke.

Mara glanced over there once or twice herself, as there were more people in the group now and Luke seemed to be assuming his role as Lieutenant as he spoke with them.

She fell into step beside the other smuggler. “Not invited to the party?” She asked under her breath. “Nope.” Solo answered quickly, and threw another glare to the other side of the hangar. “It wasn’t
part of the deal.” He replied, mumbling his words.

Mara nodded somewhat; not entirely sure of which deal he was referring to; her senses told her that he resented it greatly, not just being left out but, clearly, there had been a discussion that went along with that decision.

She followed behind Han, walking passed the suites that she had recognized as their home while they were here.

Han slowed his pace and stopped at a door that was down the hall but adjacent to the family suite.

“It ain’t the palace, but it should do while you’re here.” He said as he tapped the keycard to the sensor, and the door opened. He walked in ahead of her.

“We got all the major conveniences…” He said with a tone in his voice.

Mara knew that tone; that was the sound of someone who was passed up. Here was another opportunity to find out just how much she was truly thought of as ‘part of the family’.

“So what was the ‘deal’?” She asked as she dropped her case with no preamble.

Solo took a moment to consider, knowing that he may have spoken out of turn, but then nodded. “Okay…you wanna know?” He asked without needing an answer. “The deal is pretty simple…since I’m on the outs with the New Republic, and since they want the Resistance to be their new little secret-stash army. I have to step back. No access- that’s the deal.” He grumbled.

Mara nodded; they wanted nothing to do with the man who helped save them from Empire after Wayland- a slap in the face without an apology.

“If it makes you feel better, they don’t trust me either.” She said, not taking pity but commiserating with him; she could still sense the side-glances whenever she walked on deck of any New Republic platform. Sometimes, she surprised that she wasn’t met with binders when she stepped off her ship.

Solo snorted. “We’re not quite on the same team.” He raised his eyebrows. “I turned them down for a rank…they’re not quite over that yet and then I go and blow up Thrawn without their permission.” He shook his head once. “You may have picked the wrong starting side, but they forgave you when you moved over… I refused them, and we all know what that’s worth.”

She nodded again; he was being further punished.

Sensing that he wanted to change the subject, she tried for another route. “See, I think we are on the same team, especially when it comes to the Skywalkers.” She said, lightening the tone.

“You think so?” Han sounded almost optimistic.

“Someone has to know how to handle each of them.” Mara said blankly.

He gruffed, and looked away for a moment. “How bad do you think it’s going to get between them?” He asked, “…about Vader?”

She could appreciate that he didn’t mince words, so she returned the favor. “Bad.” She said simply.

Watching Solo, she knew that his mind was starting to contemplate the forthcoming argument between the two siblings; he was wishing it was going to be avoidable, but knew better.

Han looked back to her, nodded, and then started to look uncomfortable with how familiar they were
“Well, if you check your chrono, we haven’t had midday meal yet… the day is still early… better get yourself situated.” He started to fidget awkwardly. “And I guess… Ah… Luke will be staying here too.” He mumbled, and then looked up to her to see if that was true.

She nodded once; hoping it was true. She wanted time alone with Luke, but knew his family came first.

“Help yourself to any of the amenities.” He said, in amusingly sarcastic tone. “And I guess that we’ll see you later.”

Han looked around the suite before handing over the keycard to her. “Maybe I’ll swing by after midday meal to come get you two.” He grumbled, heading for the door.

“See you later Solo.” She said quietly, watching him go.

Mara stood for a few moments looking at the door, and thought about what she had just seen in Solo; the man was mystery, much more so than most smugglers she had known.

She turned back to her case and pulled it towards the bedroom.

Most smugglers would eventually open their mouths, usually to brag, but also to get their life’s story out of them. Solo didn’t mind the bragging part, but he certainly didn’t open himself up enough for the life-story part, or to let you know what he was thinking.

She was the same way. Until Luke, no one ever heard any of her story. If this trip to Mustafar had revealed anything to her, it was that her story was bigger that she wanted it to be, and that Luke was possibly the only person that she could share it with.

Mara looked around the bedroom; blues and greens made up the mostly simple room; the bed looked welcoming but she had other things to do. She left her case there before returning to the living area to wait for Luke.

The sofa looked more than suitable to briefly relax, and she sat down and back into it, resting her head on her hand as she leaned over.

She was about to become part of family, truly now, if Solo was right and there was going to be a fight between Luke and Leia.

As much as she wanted to deny that it would happen, her second sense told her otherwise. Each sibling had different opinion as to their father, and neither of them knew how to back down.

Mara yawned, and closed her eyes to briefly think if there was a way to avoid it. She shook her head, wondering when did she get inducted.

A quietness overtook her as she tried to reason it out. In a strange place, she felt strangely calm here, which was a welcomed relief from most of her recent trip.

The images from over the past few days flipped in her mind. The oddity of it all, how it seemed so familiar; dining in the grand dining room, the regality that she found comforting, and the memories… all the memories that came back to her.

With her eyes closed, she frowned, and her mind poked her. *You didn’t tell Luke about your memories.*

She cringed. *You should tell him.*
Tell him what you remember. Her mind ordered; it could be relentless sometimes.

To tell him everything would be just too much. Tell him something.

Her mind tried to replay some of the things that she remembered; from the vague ideas to the vivid ones.

She could hear the sounds of her footsteps on the granite floors, on her way to the palace ballroom. The music in the distance playing lively; in an empty corridor, she practiced the dance steps as the sound carried.

In other moment, in another time, the same ballroom, empty and only the sound of her lightsaber, with the magenta blade, hummed. This was a dance of another kind as she moved to fight an invisible foe.

The purplish lightsaber clashed against a green blade; now she had a partner as she looked across at him with intense his blue eyes, smiling.

The sabers swung and locked again; she was panting now, tired from their workout. He was tired too, with sweat on his forehead as his bare chest glistened, and his shoulder muscles flexed as he pulled away to swing as they sparred.

His saber clashed against a blue blade; now she was just spectator, watching as blue and green fought against each other, playfully.

Watching, she swore that she saw Leia’s lithe form go up against her brother as sabers faded away and undetermined words fought themselves between the pair. The words became more complex as the distance between the two rivals varied.

She could swear that she had only closed her eyes for the briefest of moments; wasn’t she just figuring out the complex dynamics that was the Skywalker Family.

She was sure of it.

The gentle caress on her cheek told her otherwise.

The whispering call of her name confirmed it.

Mara blinked a few times, as it was clear that she had fallen asleep where she had sat down.

Luke’s face came into focus, and he smiled sweetly as he crouched in front of her. His hand came up again, his fingers curled inward and stroked her cheek again.

“Hi” he whispered, not wanting to fully wake her. He was quiet as he just watched her; his blue eyes were crystal clear and his handsome face still smiled serenely. <Hello Beautiful> he reached out to her.

She looked down to see that, although her opposite cheek still rested on her hand, her half-boots were removed and her legs had been brought up on the sofa with a blanket now covering them.

“Hi” Mara whispered back, feeling slightly uneasy that she allowed herself to fall asleep in a strange place, but Luke was there.

“You looked so peaceful that I didn’t want to disturb you.” He said, still whispering; his eyes searching her face. “I bought our midday meal here, instead of the mess hall.”
She hummed and nodded absently.

Mara’s mind fumbled, until her rational thought caught up with her; this may be the last few chances for them to be alone and loving with each other.

Before he pulled away, she reached out and touched the sides of his face. Bringing him closer to her, she closed her eyes and placed her lips against his, just savoring him.

She reached out to him, in her senses, still feeling the need to apologize for the difficult time they had on Mustafar, regretting every single moment.

He yielded without a fight, knowing that in the past few days they had been granted very little time to enjoy each other. The Force may have allowed her to find him, but it was up to them to find time for each other.

Luke pulled back, letting his eyes flutter open, still immersed in feeling her lips against his; he sighed, sending back his own regret again- they shared it.

“Are you hungry, sleepy-head?” He teased her, aware that he was one of the only few people to get away with it.

“Uh-huh.” Mara mumbled, and nodded. Her mind flashed on one of the last images of him from her slumber; hot, dew-glistened and shirtless pressed up against her. She was hungry.

Luke watched as her eyes darkened in front of him. The last of his restraint abandoned him and he wanted her lips again.

Soft little nips against his full bottom lip, she leaned back onto the sofa, inviting him to join her. It sounded like a very good proposition. Luke followed where she led, shifting his weight to come closer and kneeling onto the sofa cushion, about to lie down beside her.

Then, he felt it; the warning jolt went through him.

Mara must have felt it too; she cringed unexpectedly.

“Leia.” He half-grumbled between their lips, halting his movements. “She wants us to come over after our meal.” He sighed before retreating back to crouching in front of her.

She exhaled hard through her nostrils. “Figures.” She grumbled. <<You weren’t shielding again, were you?>> Mara opened her eyes to give him a withering glare, but relented because he was admittedly adorable when he was cringing.

Luke shook his head, and went to stand, offering his hand to her. <Don’t remind me.> he mentally growled without malice.

Mara gracefully got up from off the sofa and followed him to the kitchenette to see what he had procured for them.

She had to admit she was hungry, and the sampling looked appetizing considering that all they had eaten for the past few days was insta-packs and ration bars.

He removed the cover off the first tray and handed it over to her, looking slightly sheepish.

“We’ve been invited over this afternoon.” Luke said as he started to uncover his tray. “Family time.” He smiled to himself, knowing that he was looking forward to it.
Looking up, he checked to see what Mara had to say about it; he had unwittingly included her with his family, knowing that she might not be ready for it yet.

She smiled and nodded as she took the first spoonful of looked like soup, and better yet, tasted like soup.

Mara took the next spoonful, and blew on it. Pausing, she raised one eyebrow, and tried for casual. “Did you tell Leia about Mustafar?” She asked quietly, appearing to be engrossed in her food. “I told Han.” She warned him.

Luke avoided her gaze and nodded. “Not yet.” He answered without any real enthusiasm. “They didn’t give us a moment apart.”

“They seemed very interested in you.” Mara put the next spoonful into her mouth; perhaps he had the same sense that she had when they landed.

He knew who she was referring to, but didn’t want to give them a name.

“They are.” He agreed, feeding himself, letting it hang in the air.

“They’re calling me to duty tomorrow.” He said quietly. “At sixteen hundred hours, I depart.”

Luke exhaled, anticipating her next question. “* Classified.*” He whispered.

Mara nodded, and finished her soup in silence. They both knew they were on borrowed time.

He watched as she busied herself, putting away her tray when she was done, looking to tidy the small kitchenette; avoiding his eyes.

“Hey.” He called to her quietly, as he reached out for her hand, and stopping her.

She came to him and leaned into his shoulder, letting him hold her.

< I’m not leaving you…> His voice said softly, as he pet her hair. <…I’m just leaving here.>

Mara could feel how he was managing to put off his own heartbreak for the time being.

Nodding, she had come to accept this; it was unavoidable. They would have a little more than a day before he was to leave, and in reality she would be returning to her life shortly after he departed.

She could mope after he left.

“Family time?” She asked, trying to cheer herself.

Luke smiled as he rocked her, feeling that she was looking forward to seeing the twins again. “Yes, I hear that double-trouble has learned some new words.”

“Double-trouble?” Mara asked, smiling, acknowledging that was probably a good name for a set of toddlers learning to walk and talk.

He chuckled quietly, “And they’re run-walking now too. That’s what Leia had said in her last message to me.”

“Those Jedi reflexes are going to come in handy.” She snorted before she poked his ribs.

Luke took the chance to nuzzle a little closer to her. “Are you ready for that?” He held in his breath,
hoping for the answer he wanted to hear.

She pulled away and started to head for the bedroom to change into something that didn’t smell like she had been living on a Cruiser. “That depends…” She looked over her shoulder, back at him, wearing a mischievous grin. “Do I bring one set of stun cuffs, or two? – do you think one of them will get the hint if they see the other in a set?”

He snorted once until he saw her face dissolve into a perfectly serious stare.

She stepped inside the room without another word.

**

Mara dressed quickly, and went to go brush her hair while he got dressed separately, away from her. They wordlessly decided to avoid temptation when they were expected someplace else.

After outing on a fresh set of clothes, she growled at her reflection in the ‘fresher; her hair was refusing to stay straight due to the humidity on the water planet and curled in the most-awkward array around her face.

Luke managed to clean up quickly after he managed to get a full retraction from Mara that she would not put the twins into stun cuffs if they got out a of hand.

She merely relented after she figured that her current set probably wouldn’t fit; she would have to get a smaller set. Smirking with her final argument; it was fun to wind him up sometimes.

When he sensed that Leia was ready for them, Luke gathered the filmsy documents and data disks that he wanted to present to his sister before they exited their suite to cross the hall.

Mara could feel the obvious cloud as they neared the Solo’s suite, and turned to look at Luke.

<I have a feeling that Han told Leia about Mustafar.> He sent over to her; his eyes looked unsure.

She nodded, and followed him, supporting him.

They approached the door, and before Luke could press the chime, the door opened smoothly.

“Oh! Master Luke!” The golden droid jumped. “What a pleasure it is to see you again!”

“Hi Threepio…it’s good to see you too.” Luke smiled; there was something about this droid that could bring a smile to his face.

“Pardon my manners, but it is also good to see you too Mistress Jade.” The droid jolted as it raised its arms with greeting and stepped aside, letting the visitors in.

Mara simply nodded, acknowledging the greeting. It still irked her to treat droids as sentinels.

“Her Highness, Princess Leia, and Captain Solo have been expecting you.” Threepio motioned to the main living area, which wasn’t entirely necessary because the suite wasn’t big enough to have a grand reception.

“Thanks Threepio” Luke said smiling to person coming towards him.

“How ya doing Kid!” Han bellowed, before coming forward and taking his brother in-law, and friend, in for an embrace.
Luke did what came natural to him and embraced his brother in-law back with the same sediment. “Not bad, you old pirate!” He laughed broadly.

Out of the embrace, Solo smirked and gave Mara a nod; something that they were both comfortable with. She nodded back, appreciating the gesture, or lack thereof.

Han leaned in closer to Luke. “Leia will be out any minute now.” He mumbled cautiously. “Putting the twins down.” He eyed his brother in-law, warning him.

Luke’s cheek twitched, and then he shrugged, supposing whatever will be, will be.

“So…did you want to tell me who you lost the bet to?” Solo grinned, hooking his chin at Luke’s head.

The Jedi narrowed his eyes, as he went to rub his head. “You mean, you don’t like it? Everybody’s wearing it.” He grinned back. “I know why you won’t do it- you’re afraid it won’t grow back.” He teased, winking.

Han opened his mouth to refute such a falsehood, when he heard a noise from the hallway, and he stopped immediately.

Mara watched amused but sensed why they stopped their rivalry; the boss was approaching. The day would come when she would be able to do the same thing, but even the thought of an angry pregnant Leia made her think twice.

As per her usual regal air, Leia came from the hall, and waddled slightly due to her swollen belly; she looked to her husband, glared at her brother, and formed a smile for the other woman in the room.

“Mara!” The former princess exclaimed warmly, and walked over to the smuggler, holding her at a distance in a friendly manner by the forearms; it was an embrace of sorts. “So good to see you! -and to bring my brother to me, intact.” She growled her last word.

Luke watched as the two greeted each other, then hooked arms and headed in the direction of the living area without noticing him. He looked down and shook his head, knowing that he would be next to get a greeting, maybe.

The living area was well appointed, with two sofas, facing each other and low table in between them.

Mara seated herself on the sofa across from Han, while Luke sat opposite to where he thought he sister would be sitting, trying to smile to her.

Exchanging tight smiles, Han caught Mara’s look more than once; both of them waiting for the bomb to drop.

Playing the gracious host, Leia made sure that her guests had refreshments before she turned to Luke, and let her cordial façade fade.

The princess regarded him with an icy look. “I suppose there are things that you wanted to speak to me about?” Her voice sounded pleasant but her face told a different story.

Luke didn’t flinch, as most other men might. “Yes.” He said simply, “But maybe we should go discuss this in the other room?” He suggested coolly, meeting her eye-contact with a steady gaze of his own.
Mara knew the emotional weight that this subject carried, and she could still him her support from the sofa while she would try to make small-talk with Solo.

“Of course.” Leia said through a clenched mouth. She managed to bring herself up off the sofa with dignity, turned and headed for the kitchen.

Getting up from the sofa, Luke righted himself, tucked the packets of filmsy from both estates under his arm, and glanced at the other two bodies before following his sister.

Mara exhaled, and Han sat back as they watched the other set of twins leave the room.

“So…a Verpine Cruiser…what made you pick that?” Han said, pretending as if nothing was happening, as he helped himself to a few snacks on the table in front of him.

Mara watched the door cautiously, if nothing for the fact that she thought that Leia was going to throw Luke through it. She felt the first wave of emotion and tried to put up a shield to stop from feeling it.

Although Solo wasn’t known for being Force-sensitive, she thought that she saw him cringe just a little as they both heard voices from the room beyond.

Deciding that it was out of her power, what was between Luke and Leia, Mara leaned in and helped herself to a small sampling of the fruit that was offered.

“IT really wasn’t my choice.” She said before she took a bite, ignoring the sounds from the next room. “It was what Karrde had available.”

Han nodded, and tried to listen to her.

“I still prefer the Z-95 if given a choice.” She tried to carry on the conversation but the tension was building in the adjacent room.

On the opposite side of the suite, something caught her attention and she turned her head in the direction of the hallway. “I think the twins feel it.” She mumbled, looking in the direction of the nursery.

Han sat up, concerned. “Should we go to them?” He asked, with no bravado of any kind, having the concerns of a father.

“They’re not sleeping.” Mara said. “I don’t know…maybe I can do something.” She whispered, concentrating.

Getting up from the sofa, Han was the first to leave the room. “Come on Kid… you’re up.” He said over his shoulder.

Mara frowned before she joined him; this really wasn’t the way that she wanted to see the twins again.

She could feel the confusion coming from the room and from the two little minds inside; they were scared and upset about what they were feeling.

It was one thing to feel the general conflict going on in the galaxy; it was another to feel emotions from people without understanding it.

Han palmed the door release, and made hushing, soothing sounds as he entered the dim room.
The children briefly stopped crying as Mara sent her sense out before she entered the room, wrapping each child with the warmth of her presence, like she had done before.

Recognizing her, they stopped crying for a moment.

Han went to Jacen and took the boy in his arms. “Look who is here…it’s Auntie Mara.” He said in a cheerful tone, bouncing the boy at his hip.

Mara turned sharply at the name that she was just called, but didn’t hesitate to walk over, and touched the boy’s clenched hand, and then looked over to find his sister.

“Hi there.” She said sweetly, coming closer to Jaina.

The little girl’s eyes let one more tear fall before she stopped and stared at the visitor. Standing up in her crib, she reached with open arms waiting to be picked up too.

Mara picked the girl up, placing the toddler on her hip. “Oh, someone has gotten bigger since the last time I was here.” She said as she bounced and talked.

“Tata!” Jacen said loudly, wiggling away from his father. “Tata!”

Han ducked down to put his son on the ground.

Jaina started to wiggle in Mara’s arms, wanting to be free. “Baba!” The little girl was as excited as her brother.

Mara came down to the ground to let the little one go, but was soon crowded by two toddlers who stood wobbly beside her.

Jaina repeated “Baba!” several more times and Jacen joined her by adding in “Tata!”

Han sighed and came down to the ground. “They haven’t figured out M’s or R’s yet…even L’s are hard for them.” He grabbed one of the passing babies and tickled until he got a giggle out of them. “Luke is called ‘Boo’.” He explained.

Jacen came over to Mara, dropping the stuffed figra toy that she had previously played with them, before he turned back to get more things for her.

Jaina stood face to face with the sitting Mara, holding Mara’s shoulder for support, and was staring at her aunt’s hair while sucking on her other hand.

“That’s okay.” Mara smiled as she watched, lost in all the activity. “They can call me anything that they want to.”

She reached over, just as she sensed that Jaina was weakening at the knees, to scoop the girl up and place her in her lap.

Jacen decided that his father needed toys too, and was bringing them over one at a time.

“Thank you son.” Han said as he got the latest offering.

He looked over at Mara who was rocking Jaina in her lap. “See? -you’re a natural with this.”

Mara looked up and over to the other smuggler, giving him a glare, but then softened, knowing that she had just been found out.
Jacen stopped in the middle of the room and looked at the door; the new person forgotten, he began to wail.

Jaina started to sniffle before she joined him, crying.

Mara could sense it too; something was getting even more-heated between the other set of twins.

“What’s the matter?” She asked the two toddlers. “Uncle Luke and your mommy are just talking.”

The little heads turned in the direction of her voice, and halted their sobbing.

“What you are feeling from mommy is called ‘anger’,” Mara said in a gentle voice. “It may feel like a bad thing…”

Jacen turned, and waddled over, placing his hand on Mara’s shoulder like his sister had done.

“…but it’s only a bad thing if it’s used to hurt another person.” Mara said, taking turns looking between the two little faces.

Their eyes blinked at her, entranced.

“Right now, what your Uncle Luke is saying is making your mommy angry, but he doesn’t mean to make her angry. In fact, he is sad that he has to tell her.” Mara said, in the simplest language that she could think of, keeping her tone pleasant.

Jacen plopped himself down beside her, still watching Mara’s face. Jaina went back to chewing on her hand but looking up at Mara. They looked at her as if they understood every word she was saying.

“When they are done talking, your Uncle Luke is very excited to see both of you.” Mara said in a happier tone. “He thinks about you all of the time.” She smiled. “And so do I.”

Han sat back as he watched, amazed that she was having an actual conversation with the twins.

“Now, when you see your Uncle Luke, he is going to look different from the last time that you saw him.” She explained. “He had a very bad hair-cut.”

Mara closed her eyes and reached out to the twins.

Han watched as each toddler blinked heavy, and then started to get upset again.

Mara’s eyes opened, and she looked down. “Oh, I know… he looks different, doesn’t he?”

They stopped and still watched her.

“But it’s still your Uncle Luke, and he loves you very much.” She said sweetly. “But he looks funny too… I bet you didn’t know how big his ears were!” She smiled and laughed.

The toddlers paused, but then their expressions brightened.

Jacen crawled over to his father. Han gladly accepted the toddler in his lap, and picked up one of the toys to play with, in front of the boy.

“Good going with that, Jade… it seemed to work.” Han said, mimicking the type of voice she used to talk to the children. “You’re really good with them.” He mumbled.
Mara looked up from Jaina to see Han give her a grin.

The twins turned to look at the door again, and waited.

Han looked over to Mara for some sort of explanation, fearing that something else happened.

She had taken the figra toy, trying to distract Jaina, and bounced it along. “Luke is giving Leia a break.” She said in a sweet voice. “I think he’s headed this way.”

Han simply nodded before the door opened and Luke appeared.

Luke stopped inside the doorway to see the wide awake set of toddlers. His face broke into a grand smile before he came down to the floor too.

“Look at the two of you!” He exclaimed. “Who said that you could get bigger and cuter without me?”

Jaina wiggled free from Mara’s lap and waddled over to her uncle with the figra toy in her grasp. “Boo!” she managed to get out.

Jacen was not about to be out-done, and made his way over too. “Boo!” he said loudly. “Boo! Boo!”

Luke chuckled as it was apparent that his name was now “Boo”.

Picking up Jaina, he covered her in kisses all over her face until she giggled. Grabbing Jacen, Luke plastered snort-kisses over him too.

Mara watched him, picking up each toddler in turn, and diverting his attention between each one, making sure they got all his love.

She smiled watching him, her mind flashed on what a wonderful father he would be, and she wouldn’t want to deprive him of that.

Shaking herself from her brief daydream, she could sense something from Han as he sat back watching Luke play with the kids; his concern for his wife.

“I think I need a drink.” Mara said quietly, as she gave Han a look that meant she intended to go check on Leia.

Han simply nodded, and went back to watching Luke with the kids.

Even Luke gave her a quick tight-grin, knowing what she intended to do.

Mara slowly got up off the floor and touched the heads of each toddler, reassuring them that she would be back, before she left the room.

Luke watched her go before he looked over to his brother in-law, with raised eyebrows, to see the other man wearing a smirk.

“So…” Han said as he leaned back on his hands. His chin jilted in the direction of the twins. “When can we expect you to have one of these of your own?”

Luke blushed and looked back at the twins, ignoring the question.

**
On the other side of the door, Mara could feel a sense of embarrassment from Luke, and she assumed that Han had put it to him after witnessing that she had a surprising knack for children.

*Serves him right.* She thought as she walked down the hall and through the living room, towards the kitchen. He should feel the pinch instead of her; they were his family after all.

She could feel the wave of emotion coming from the next room, but ventured forth, regardless.

*Skywalkers need to learn how to stop broadcasting.* She mentally growled before placing her hand on the door release.

Inside the kitchen, Leia sat at the table with her hand on her head, and looked up as Mara walked in.

She smiled tightly before going back to keeping her head down.

“Can I get you anything?” Mara asked, slightly concerned. She had been afraid that Luke’s conversation wouldn’t be good for the heavily pregnant princess. But knowing very little about having a baby, she figured that Leia probably knew what she could and couldn’t handle.

Leia simply shook her head, looking away. “He told you about everything, didn’t he?” She asked, half-growling.

“Yes” Mara said quietly as she sat down. “I know it all.”

Their relationship had a social aspect to it, and so far, there had been a bit of distance between them; things were kept on a general need-to-know basis and very seldom got extremely personal, even if they had discussed Luke.

Mara never had friendships with any other women, so it was hard to tell what was, or wasn’t part of such interactions.

On her last visit, Mara had gotten the sense of just how much memories of Darth Vader bothered the princess, like never letting the wound heal.

“I guess I’m partially to blame.” Mara said quietly. “I mentioned to Luke the possibility of Vader’s estate on a visit but I didn’t think he would actually follow through with it.”

Leia looked up sharply at the other woman, and then her look softened as she sighed. “Luke has the habit of latching on to things and not letting them go until…until…” She let her thought fade; they both understood.

Mara swallowed hard; something in the back of her mind knew that there was something lingering in her feeling from her trip to Mustafar. Something that she hadn’t revealed to Luke, but maybe Leia would understand.

Carefully, she thought of which words to pick before she spoke. “I think I understand your feelings more than I do Luke’s.” Mara said respectfully.

Leia frowned and waited.

“I never knew Vader as Anakin.” Mara said simply. “Even though I’ve seen the holos and vids, I don’t think I can see him as anyone else.” She watched the other woman’s eyes. “To me, he will always be the dread in the black suit and hissing mask, and nothing more.”

“Luke wants me to feel something other than I do…and I can’t.” Mara said blankly.
“I tried to, on this trip to Mustafar…I wanted to see what Luke saw.” She said, reflecting. “But I think even he couldn’t avoid the truth.” Mara whispered.

Leia nodded and looked away with her own memories.

Mara got up from the table and went to search through the cabinets. She found two glasses and filled them with water, bringing them back to the table and placing one in front of the other woman.

Leia was still looking off in the distance.

Letting the silence hang, Mara took a sip of her water; she looked away, feeling that it would be wrong to force a response.

“Did you see the interrogation vid?” Leia’s voice cracked as she spoke, still looking away.

An explanation wasn’t needed; Mara knew that Leia had been interrogated aboard the first Death Star, and she knew what something like that would entail. The Dark Lord was known for his preference of pain-inducing psychotropic drugs; it could make even the strongest man fall to the floor, weeping.

She went through a similar sort of resistance training. Mara nodded. “I didn’t see the vid, but I heard the recording.” She swallowed again. “I know what he said and did.”

Leia’s eyes went dark before turning to look at the other woman. “Then you know that he claimed to be my father? He claimed to be Bail Organa…trying to get me to confess?” She said, her voice laced with anger.

“**He enjoyed it.**” Leia hissed. “Wanting me to break…enjoyed my pain.”

Mara listened, and not flinching either; she was part of the machine that allowed this sort of thing to happen.

“**He tortured Han and somehow he knew that I could feel it.**” She said. “I could hear Han screaming, in pain, in my head.” Leia brought her hands up to her ears. “I suppose Luke could hear it too.”

“It gave him some sort of sick glee.” Leia whispered. “**I knew it.**”

She looked away again. “How am I supposed to love a father like that?” Leia whispered. “…Luke wants me to.”

Mara reached across the table, and pushed the glass of water closer to Leia’s hand. It was easier than reaching over and actually touching the other woman’s hand. Although she was sure that was what she suspected would have been the right thing to do, but this was very new to her; comforting someone, so she tried her best.

Looking down, Mara cleared her throat. “**Vader once put me in a room full of combat droids, overnight, with only a practice saber.**” She whispered. “**He expected me to die.**”

Leia turned her head in the other woman’s direction, still holding her dark look.

“**He was disappointed that I survived.**” Mara said simply, without emotion. She inhaled and exhaled quickly before continuing. “**Vader threatened to kill me on several occasions and almost choked the life out of me once.**”

The princess still held her gaze as Mara made eye contact.
“There are a few other things that I can’t bring myself to tell Luke about.” Mara said.

“Like what?” Leia asked quickly, fearing the same thing that Luke did once; how far did her father’s depravity go? The rumors in court had abounded with details and perversities.

Mara sighed; retreating once again into the past. “When I was presented at court…” She looked up and Leia nodded, remembering the life in the palace involved. “…after my first dance performance in the palace, at the reception following it…” She paused, knowing that at the time it didn’t hold much weight. “I was introduced to Vader privately, as The Emperor’s Hand.”

“It was customary for performers to receive indulgences from patrons of the court.” Mara met Leia eyes; the word ‘indulgences’ had many different meanings depending on which side of the court you were on. “Vader sent me a request even after it was revealed that I was Palpatine’s servant.”

Mara looked away. “It wasn’t normal to receive such an offer if it was revealed that there was an agent in play.” She cleared her throat, uncomfortable now that she thought about it. “Besides, given my age and that Vader had a known mistress at the time, it seemed…out of place.” She whispered her last few words.

“How old were you?” Leia asked, almost gasping, knowing what Mara was implying what Vader was asking of her.

Mara shook her head. “I was about to go on my first mission…I don’t know…fourteen…maybe.”

Leia audibly gasped, knowing that was even young for court standards; the wave of anger rippled off of her again.


She looked back up to the other woman. “I didn’t tell you this to make you more-angry with him…and I didn’t say this to play a game of who was more hurt by Vader.” Mara said, reflectively responding to Leia’s anger with her own suppressed issues. “I told you this because I know what’s like to hate him.”

“And I know what it’s like to love someone who can’t see what I’ve seen.” Mara said, relaxing her anger. “Even though Vader took Luke’s hand, Luke didn’t hate him as thoroughly and still found a way to forgive him…something that I just can’t do.”

“I suppose it has something to do with the fact that Luke could feel it when Vader went back to the Light.” Mara looked away, shaking her head again. “But that’s Luke’s experience, not mine.”

Mara paused before looking over at Leia, seeing that the other woman’s face had softened. Now, she felt comfortable to reach across the table and touch the princess’s hand.

“Luke wants you to love Anakin Skywalker – he’s well aware that it’s impossible to forgive Darth Vader.” Mara said, not leaving her friend’s gaze. “For myself, I have to separated them…and accept the truth…otherwise, I don’t think that I’d be able to love Luke.”

She nodded, sure of herself. “Vader is a part of him, but he isn’t Vader.” Mara sighed. “And Anakin? —I’ve decided that I should get to know who he was…as a wholly different person.”

Leia simply sat and listened.

And at last she choked a bit before reaching for the water and drinking it down.
“Luke offered me the planet.” Leia said stoically. “Illia- and the money. He suggested that I should use it for the survivors of Alderaan.” She scoffed, blinking away for a moment. “He always knows how to get to me.” She mumbled.

Mara grimaced. “Sometimes that Jedi makes sense.” She murmured.

“Just don’t tell him that.” Leia murmured back.

They shared a brief smirk across that table.

Sitting back in her chair, Leia looked away. “I guess I should spend some time getting to know Anakin.” She said to herself, as much as she said to the other woman. “I’ve spent so much time hating Vader that I forgot about Anakin.”

“Luke knows him so much more than I do.” She whispered. “He wants to.”

Mara, wisely, said nothing, letting Leia come to her own conclusions.

The room was quiet and the air seemed to become more peaceful as time passed.

Watching from the corner of her eye, Mara waited until she saw that Leia’s breathing and countenance started to return to normal.

Leia finally turned her head, and sighed; her lips tightened to a flat grin. “So how much longer do you think we should let my brother sweat it out?” She said smoothly. “I bet he still thinks I’m sitting in here fuming.”

“You’re not?” Mara asked, raising one eyebrow, knowing she could get away with it.

“Not as much as I was before you got here.” Leia said grimly.

Snorting softly, Mara conceded that she could feel the difference. “Yes, but maybe we have one more glass of water, and let him teeter with Han and dueling babies before we go back.”

Leia smiled keenly. “To that, I can agree to.”

**

“Pass me the powder!” Han called over to the other man.

Luke frantically looked at all the options before him. “Which one is the powder?” He asked as he pinned down his wiggling nephew to the change table.

“The green container!” Han pointed, holding down a toddler of his own.

The twins had decided, in unison, that they needed to be changed, leaving the men having to deal with the consequences.

Looking back at his options, Luke turned to his brother in-law. “Which green container? Light or Dark?”

“Um… Dark!” Han said, the urgency in his voice.

Luke tossed the container over his shoulder at the other man, and waited for the container to come back to him as it was apparent that he needed it now.
Without much thought, Luke extended his hand and caught the container as it came back to him, and gently powdered the toddler before sealing up the diaper.

Han looked satisfied as he was putting the finishing touches on his daughter’s diaper.

“How do you plan to manage it when you and Mara have kids?” Han murmured over, picking his daughter up from the change table, only to put her down again, letting her walk around.

“Well…” Luke began to respond before placing his nephew down, mentally crossing his fingers that the diaper wouldn’t come off. “We aren’t planning to have a matching set simultaneously if it can be avoided.” He said absently, still watching the toddlers.

“Ah ha! So you are planning on having kids!” Han triumphantly smirked. “I knew that just wasn’t a trinket around her neck, and you sporting that ring!” He dusted the remnants of the powder off his tunic. “Things are getting pretty serious…you giving her a Tatooinean engagement ring and all.”

Luke sighed, trying to go back to playing with the twins. “It isn’t like that.” He grumbled.

He had almost forgotten that Han had spent time on his home planet, so if anyone knew what a pendant like that could represent than it would be him.

“It’s just a way to keep each other close.” He said quietly.

Han’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, you can try and tell me what you think it is but I knew the day that we picked you up on Myrkrr…twitter-pated, and all.” He teased.


Han nodded once at his assessment. “All Goo-goo eyed.” He added.

“Goo-goo eyed?” Luke asked; now he was offended. “I’ve never been goo-goo eyed!” He whined.

Jacen didn’t want to be held, but he did want out of the nursey and Luke followed behind him to the door, and watched as the toddler tapped at the door.

“Okay…” Han conceded. “Maybe only one ‘goo’…but you were pretty taken in by her.”

Luke looked over his shoulder, and frowned, admitting defeat. “Okay, maybe one ‘goo’.” He grumbled before looking back.

Jaina waddled over to the door now and slapped her hand on the obstacle and looked over to her father.

“You made the right choice, Kid.” Han mumbled under his breath, knowing that Luke was getting embarrassed again. “Don’t let her go.”

Luke snorted, and shook his head, knowing that Han read him better than anyone else, except for, maybe, Mara. Han had the ability to make him feel like the greenhorn, fresh off the farm sometimes.

“It looks like the kids are not going to go down for that nap.” Han said as he came closer to the door. “They are going to be a bunch of cranky-pants later.” He said as the toddlers watched with interest to see their father touch the door release.

Luke stayed close as they walked in wobbly succession down the hall towards the kitchen. They moved quicker than he expected, and no sooner did they get into the living room, Jaina was the first to topple over, and then Jacen.
He was about to pick his niece up, but it seemed that the little girl had things in hand and was pulling herself up, only to start moving again.

Jacen, however, had decided that the ground might be a better option and started pulling himself along the floor in the seated position, trying to head in the same direction as his sister.

Luke seemed split as one went in one direction, and the other twin went in the opposite.

Han chuckled from the side lines. “Can’t put them on a rope, Kid. They have minds of their own.” He said as he walked over to the sofa, and sat down, still keeping an eye on the children. “Bumps will happen.”

Realizing that he had been too concerned, and hovering over the twins, Luke backed away and just watched them, joining Han on the sofa.

Han was right, this was part of their exploration of their surroundings. He snorted, watching the new minds just give into the chaos around them.

Soon Jacen was back up again, and holding onto the sofa, walking from one side to the other between his father and his uncle.

“Come here, son.” Han gruffed in a comical way. “Come over with the men, and take a load off.” He scooped up the toddler who seemed to agree to sit beside his father, his head nodding up to look at the man. “If Chewie was here, he would hold you down and wrestle you.”

Luke snorted and then looked around for the other one.

Jaina was standing, albeit shakily, in front of the kitchen door, just waiting for it to open. She didn’t have to wait long before it opened and her mother walked through.

“There’s my angel!” Leia said lovingly as she came closer to the little girl.

Wavering, Jaina looked beyond her mother for the woman behind her, and when she caught sight of her, she let out, “Baba!” raising her arms in the air, wanting to be held.

Leia looked over her shoulder. “It looks like your presence is requested.”

Mara came into the room, and her eyes flashed over to Luke before she walked over to Jaina.

“Hello again.” She said as she bent down to pick up the little one. Looking over again, she could see the large grin on Luke’s face as he watched her cuddle the child.

Mara also witnessed a quick frown as Luke looked over at his sister to see that the princess seemed more receptive to him now.

Bouncing the toddler on her hip again, Mara walked over to the sofa.

<Did you talk to Leia?> Luke asked over to her.

Mara nodded while looking at Jaina. <<Yes…she’s not entirely happy, but she isn’t as angry anymore. Give her time.>> She answered back.

He nodded, watching his sister join her husband on the sofa.

Leia gave her brother a forgiving soft grin before accepting the arm of her husband around her shoulders after sitting down.
Jaina and Jacen must have sensed the communication between the two adults; Jacen started to shuffle himself off the sofa, wanting to go over to his uncle. “Boo!” he chirped.

The little boy made his way over to his uncle and held up his arms in an equally demanding manner as his sister.

Never one to refuse such cuteness Luke picked up the boy as he went to stand. He held him so that the boy faced outward, seated with his back against his uncle’s chest, feet dangling.

Jacen decided this was an acceptable way to be held and gave his approval by sucking on his hand.

Luke swayed and bounced as he walked over to Mara.

Mara shifted the weight of Jaina into a similar position, so that the twins could see each other. But she wasn’t watching the children; she was watching Luke’s face as he seemed to be enraptured that his family had accepted her so quickly.

He smiled with a dreamy look on his face.

His eyes were the brightest blue, and Mara was feeling a flush come on to her cheeks, sure that her own eyes were brightened in response to his.

They rocked the children back and forth, mesmerized with each other; peaceful in the moment.

From across the room, Han cleared his throat loudly.

Mara blinked quickly, and looked over to the sofa to see Leia’s eyes narrow, and Han smirking.

Luke changed direction and started walking back to the sofa.

Han looked over to wife, knowing they had just seen something that very few had gotten to see; Jedi in love.

“It looks like it’s time for me to prep some dinner.” Han said, still eying Luke. He eased himself off the sofa and gave one last look before he headed for the kitchen.

“Should have made a bet on that.” He growled under his breath as he pushed the release.

This, should make for an interesting night. The former smuggler thought to himself.

TBC
Chapter Summary

Quote: There was something about Luke’s voice, his deep tone and slight lisp, that when he said the right thing, in the right way, she would have instantaneously given into him, without question.

Characters: Luke, Mara, Han, Leia, baby Jedi, and others

Chapter Notes

**

OMG! I had a little bit of a panic attack when I got to 30 chapters, and now here I am with 51 CHAPTERS!!!

OVER 500,00 WORDS!

Who is the crazy woman who keeps writing this stuff?!?!

I’m still rounding the bend on this side of the story and headed into the final stretch before I move into the next round.

So this is just a ‘head-up’, but yeah, here is comes…. SMUT-Fest! A big one.

Oh, and some plot and character development too…that’s in there somewhere…and just a tad dark...just saying.

Luke and Mara- the king and queen of pillow talk. ~wink!

I know you’re not leaving comments…that’s okay…I’ll go pout over here, and maybe think up the next chapter.

**

Pinnacle Base- Da Soocha, Solo Residence

A strange air had set in for the evening at the Solo residence; it was part real-life, or rather, ‘real-life’ as they had wished it to be.

All of them knew that a war was beginning to rage in the galaxy. But for tonight, they had a reprieve.

Lando had come to join them shortly before the evening meal.

The dashing man was no less than his usual cavalier-self to both Mara and Leia.
Han just shook his head, but Luke kept a close eye on him when Lando went to greet Mara. Sighing, he relaxed, reminding himself that there was no jeopardy where Mara was concerned.

Mara looked over to Luke as Lando kissed her hand. <<I’ve told him about us.>> She sent over; Luke exhaled slowly, nodding and went back to his conversation.

To Mara, this was indeed a strange place to find herself in, where friends had morphed into family. She was no fool to see that beyond this evening, they were all trying to keep their insular world going.

Leia had checked her comm several times, and had excused herself during the course of the meal, returning with cautious eyes that flicked to both Calrissian and her brother.

Something was happening that they were trying to put off until tomorrow; Mara simply played along, wishing that she could use some of her questionable contacts right there and now to find out what was going on.

In the back of her mind, her senses told her that, after tonight, she wouldn’t be seeing Luke for some time. Unlike the other times that he had left to go into duty, she didn’t feel entirely put-off by it; the Force had told her that they would somehow see each other sooner than expected. But now, she could sense that it was beyond either their control, and a distance would separate them.

Luke squeezed her hand, keeping her present, whenever he could sense that she was becoming too concerned with what he knew he couldn’t hide from her.

Mara blinked and looked over to him, smiled gently, and brought herself back from her thoughts.

He smiled to her several times, catching her eye and holding her look; sending the love that he felt for her.

Throughout dinner, Luke watched intently as Mara fed Jaina and helped clean up Jacen.

There was something in her manner, so unguarded with the twins that only made him love her more; wanting to start their life together, and wanting her.

Mara had gone with Leia to put the twins down for the night, and now Luke sat across from Han and Lando on the opposite sofa.

After few more hours of playing with the guests, the toddler twins were utterly exhausted and went to bed easily, but they still protested a bit before Auntie Mara read them a story.

Luke yawned and stretched again; this time with an audience, indicating that, although the evening had been pleasant, it was probably time for them to leave.

As the evening began to break up, Luke placed his arm around Mara’s shoulder and led her to the door.

This little action warranted a few raised eyebrows as it seemed to be the first tender moment the pair had in front of their friends and family. Han mimicked his brother in-law and placed his arm around his wife, and winked. Leia smiled serenely looking at the pair.

Before leaving, Luke received a glare from his sister as she rubbed her belly in front of him. He got the message, loud and clear, if he was spending the night with his own smuggler.

Blushing, he nodded and went to leave.
In the hall, Mara looked over to him flirtatiously. “I caught that.” She murmured to his cheek.

With his arm still around her shoulders, Luke turned awkwardly to look at her. “Whatever do you mean?” He asked, trying to play innocent.

“Leia,” she said smugly, “warning you to start shielding.” She poked his ribs; a knowing grin on her face. “Like she is expecting something.” Mara delivered in a husky tone.

It couldn’t have been more than ten paces from one door to the next, but the couple was leisurely taking their time.

Luke sighed with a slight growl, before taking his arm off her shoulder, and wrapping his hands around her waist. Holding her from behind, they swayed as they took a few steps.

“Is she wrong?” He said in a deep voice into Mara’s ear. <I’ve been thinking about you all night.>

They stopped in the middle of the hall.

Not sensing anyone else around, Mara turned inside his embrace to face him, letting her arms drape around his neck.

“Hmm” She hummed as she looked at his lips. “I wouldn’t say that she was wrong.” She whispered before coming closer to him.

It started out slow, their lips touched casually, drawling of skin on skin.

Luke accepted the tenderness of her mouth, willingly.

Mara didn’t realize how much she had missed his lips, but throughout dinner, she had caught him watching her, his eyes full of love, and it gave her an unusual warming in the pit of her stomach.

That warming was now turning into a fluttering feeling, and building.

His lips tasted sweet. His hands were warm and heating up her body as they slowly drifted outside her clothing.

She didn’t want to this end. She didn’t want to rush this; just being with him.

Luke clearly had the same thing on his mind. He hummed appreciatively between their lips, keeping his pace from racing out of control, as he was apt to do with her sometimes as his passion spilled over.

<So…babies…> He thought over to her, with no haste. <What do you think of them?>

Mara tilted her head up and allowed him to find her jugular. He dragged his lips along the velvety skin.

<<Babies?>> She sighed, knowing that he wasn’t rushing her; he was merely curious. <<In general, and in one word, difficult.>>

Luke pulled back to look her in the eye. “Difficult?” he whispered in the hall, with a questioning look on his face.

Seeing her opportunity, Mara dropped her eyes, and fiddled with the corner flap on his tunic. “Sometimes…but, mostly enjoyable.” She said as she leaned towards his neck.
Nuzzling against his earlobe, she licked the patch of skin that presented itself. <<Further study will need to be done.>>

“Ahhhh” Luke sighed as he exhaled. Both the prospect that she wanted children and was willing to do the work to get there, intrigued him.

“We should probably do some research first…Don’t want to do this haphazardly.” He said in a low tone as he pressed himself against her.

There was something about Luke’s voice, his deep vibrato and slight lisp, that when he said the right thing, in the right way, she would have instantaneously given into him, without question.

Mara’s lips found his mouth and escalated their kiss as she let her tongue slip inside his mouth. Her hands drift down his chest; one of them stopped at his belt while the other one continued its descent and around to his backside.

<<I should probably check if you’re willing and able.>> Her hand rubbed over the round mound of his firm ass cheek, and squeezed slowly. <<You keep hurting yourself, that I need to make sure that you’re up for it.>>

He groaned, and responded by pressing himself against her.

<<Then, there’s the matter that it probably won’t happen on the first try. We will have to try…and try…and try again. You know, to get it right.>> Mara rocked her pelvis back at him.

Luke’s mouth broke away as he breathed heavily against her. “I think that I’m more than up for it.” He replied, before sucking on the skin of her earlobe; his senses were pounding.

He backed her towards the closest wall; sure that their bodies fit against each other.

Not to be undone, his hand had mysterious crept up the front of her tunic and he cupped the firm mound of her breast. A very astute nipple perked through the fabric, and his fingers grated over the surface as he squeezed.

“I think we should keep practicing until we’re ready for it.” Mara quivered as the words left her mouth. “Oh Gods!” She whispered breathlessly, feeling her senses race as he squeezed again.

She shifted her weight and rolled him over, his back up against the wall now, closer to the door of the suite that they had been given.

“Right. Practice makes perfect.” Luke mumbled before cupping her cheek with his unoccupied hand and bringing her mouth to his.

Mara’s hand came round to the front of his crotch. It was evident that he was as aroused as she. Rubbing her hand over his bulge, she stroked it up and down. <<Practice…we need a lot of practice.>>

Even with layers of fabric between them, she could feel the responsive throb from his body. “Good, better, best.” She gasped between their mouths. “Never Rest.” A few more lazy, deep purses at his lips. “Until good be better, and better be best.”

He growled again and let his tongue swirl inside her mouth. His mind was in a tailspin, wanting her, craving her without any rationalizing or reasoning.

Luke rolled her over so that she was up against the corridor wall now, one step away from the door.
His hand absently searched for the release, wanting to be alone with her even though the thrill of being caught would be amusing.

His mouth broke free. “Do or do not…there is not try.” He groaned as the door opened.

Mara looked at him, slightly dizzy and smiled sleekly. “I love it when you sexy Jedi-talk to me.” She hissed.

Luke raised an eyebrow, amused.

She grabbed the front of his tunic and pulling him closer, madly pressing her mouth back at him.

One last turn and they leisurely tumbled inside the suite, the door hissed closed behind them.

Without a world to come crashing down on them, Mara’s fingers found the clasps on his tunic and slowly started to undo each one.

“There is no emotion, there is peace.” Luke kissed her between each word, punctuating the syllables.

She brought a finger up to his mouth before he could say another word. “Shhhh…” She whispered. “You’re cute, but not that cute.”

He snorted before he worked around her delicate finger and resumed kissing her, running his hands over her back, holding her as close as he could. <Oh, I think I’m pretty cute.>

She chuckled as she slid her hands inside his tunic and slowly took it from off his shoulders, letting it fall to the floor, with his help. <<Of course you do, Farmboy.>> Her hands followed the contours of his muscles covered by his snug undershirt.

Her tunic wasn’t fancy or overly complicated, but Luke decided it needed to come off.

Mara whimpered as his hands directed her to turn around from him, leaving his lips; his chest pressing up against her back. But she didn’t mind so much when his lips came to her neck, and she could watch as his hands undid the fasteners of her tunic, taking their time.

She reached back with her hands and pulled his hips to her backside; feeling his solid bulge between her buttocks cheeks.

Luke growled into her neck. <Careful Kitten, I’m trying to take my time here.> He exhaled, letting his hot breath make her skin dimple.

“Yeah?” She asked, knowing that she was teasing him, and knew that he was right; if they truly wanted to enjoy each other, they would have to take it slow…painfully, achingly, slow.

Mara lulled her head back against his shoulder as she watched him undo the first bottom fastener. <<Do you think that we’ll last that long?>>

His nimble fingers popped open the next fastener. <I hope so…we’re practicing, remember?>

The next fastener gave way. <I care don’t how many times we have to do it, I’m willing to keep trying until we get this right.> Luke nuzzled against her neck.

With a flick, the fastener on her center chest came undone. Mara exhaled deeply so that the fabric would part with the heave of her chest. “It’s your dedication to excellence that I admire.” She murmured.
Luke chuckled into her ear.

She snorted as she started to sway her bottom against his crotch, knowing that it skyrocketed her arousal just as much as it did his. <<In the interest of science, what do you think should stage our first practice attempt?>>

The last fastener fully exposed her chest and she felt the distance between them as he took her tunic from off her.

Mara sulked a bit at losing contact from him; the cool air made her skin dimple and her nipples tighten even more.

Coming back, Luke knew where to go to next. He tugged at the bottom of her compression shirt that was tucked into her trousers.

He hummed at her neck. “I think we should make use of that water shower.”

Even though her compression shirt was free, his hand dipped down into her trousers, palming the front of her panties.

Luke groaned, almost panting, feeling the dampness in the material. “Stars!” He half-bit into her shoulder. “Someone is a dirty girl.”

His opposite hand slipped under the material of the tight shirt, freeing her chest, still holding her close to him. Expertly, he rolled a tight nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

Inside her trousers, his fingers slipped inside her panties. Finding her hooded jewel, his finger applied pressure and shook the nub feverishly.

Mara shivered and hissed. “Yes, make me your dirty girl.” She sputtered out the words, grinding back up against him. She moaned involuntarily to the room.

His hand, down the front of her panties, stopped. “Are you shielding?” He whispered into her ear.

Her short breaths heaved her chest, trying to get the words out. “You know that I am.” She growled, almost resentful that he was the one to be asking and definitely resentful that he stopped his attention to ask her. “Are you?”

“Of course.” He whispered quiet, breaking the tone of their intimacy. <I was just thinking about the twins…didn’t want them to feel us.>

<<As well as the rest of the galaxy ?>> She asked curtly, warning him not to reach out to her in the Force, and knowing that she felt very tempted to reach back, even more so than merely communicating with him. The thought of the raw power they had exuded on Null still bothered her.

“Yes.” Luke hissed at her earlobe. He sensed her apprehension, and paused, calming himself; he knew he had to, if he wanted to make this last.

He pressed the side of his face next to hers; waiting for both of their breathing to slow down.

Not wanting to let go of her just yet, he swayed with her in his arms; remembering how tenderly he loved her, and it was not always about the passion they had for each other.

“Yes, you go into the shower first, and then we meet up in the bedroom?” He whispered, before he kissed the side of her face.
Mara relaxed back against him, and nodded. Grimacing, she knew he was right.

Reluctantly, Luke let his hands slide away from her body; he felt her sigh before she stepped away.

Walking to the door of the bedroom, she stopped and turned back to him; his chin tilted down, but his dark eyes looked up to her, the feral look still on his face.

Quickly, she found the robe and talc that he had left in the cabin for her, and raced over to the shower before she could encounter him, and change her mind.

Normally, she would relish the feel of the water on her body, but now, she was in a haste to be back with him again.

As she rinsed her hair, she felt a warming in her body, like hands creeping over her skin. Mara rolled her eyes and exhaled hard; she could feel it, feel him.

She resisted. <<No Teasing! >> She growled at him, and the feeling slowly backed away.

Luke wasn’t shy about wanting her. He had waited outside the ‘fresher as the door opened.

Wrapped in the soft, velvety mink robe in the deepest hunter green, Mara still gave him a bit of a glare as she kissed him quickly and they exchanged places.

He was sure to hold her close to him as they passed, just so she could feel that his body was still ready to be with her.

Inside the ‘fresher, he inhaled appreciatively; the soft smell of the talc lingered, sweet jasmine and spice.

It would be agony until he could hold her and kiss her in the places where he longed to be.

Jedi speed was going to come in handy to rush through this shower.

The tepid water rained down on him. Luke washed quickly; his erection, which still remained, was painful to the touch. He silently promised his body relief shortly.

He was just about done when the lights in the ‘fresher dimmed. Through the foggy plasti-glass, he could see her form move in the room.

The shower still rained down as he moved the door pane aside to see her.

Leaning on the sink counter, Mara was still wrapped in the soft robe, watching him with transfixed emerald eyes; red-gold curls started to frame her face.

“I couldn’t wait any longer.” She said breathlessly. “I couldn’t be alone in the other room, wanting you.”

He shook his head, about to protest her tease.

“It’s not teasing if you intend to do something about it.” She said, reading his mind, as her eyes slanted, wickedly.

Slowly, she began to open the robe, exposing her body, just for him.

Luke swallowed, and clenched his eyes shut.
"No, don’t.>> she ordered. "I want you to watch every moment…I want you to remember every moment…to give you something to remember, when…>>

The words hung in the air; and he opened his eyes, knowing exactly why she wanted him to watch her. The memory of her would keep him going when they were apart, on his next mission, reminding him that she was in the galaxy, loving him.

His gaze started at her dainty feet, and he smirked, thinking of how much bigger they could feel when they were cold and she placed them against his legs.

She was perfect; skin so flawless, like the purest blush satin. The curve of her calve muscles, so lean and tight.

As she turned to remove the robe, he got sight of her alabaster thighs leading to her round bottom; as sweet as a peach, and the two little dents above her tailbone; “butt dimples” she had called them when they had first showered together on Dantooine. He chuckled, remembering.

His eyes fluttered, briefly wanting to close, remembering – but why remember when the real thing was in front of him?

She placed the robe on the counter, before looking over her shoulder, catching his eyes, as he anticipated the front view of her body.

Mara turned back, away from his glance, calming her desire, and caught partial look of herself in the mirror; her cheeks developed a rosy tone and she looked down to see the rise of the flush coming onto her skin, starting at her low belly.

She knew that he loved watching as her skin changed hue.

Slowly, she turned back to face him, entirely on view for him now.

Luke’s mouth had gone slack as he breathed heavily.

Opening the glass door fully, he stepped to the side in the shower, placing his hand on the wall to steady himself, and keep him from going over and ravishing her right there.

There, was his lover, the women that he hoped he would someday call his wife; his woman, absolutely flawless.

Soft golden curls covered her goddess crux; just one part that made up the divinity that he found between her thighs.

His eyes traveled up the slight groove in her lower abdomen that led to her navel. He could see the flush coming on her skin, on her upper stomach; he followed it as he traced the parallel indents that guided his gaze up further to the swell and under curve of her supple breasts.

Creamy and full, her rosy-brown areolas dimpled and perked, pointed upward even as her chest heaved with her heavy breaths.

At the fine line of her collarbone, the flush had caught up and he could see the darkening of her hidden freckles emerge.

He didn’t want to stop looking at her; his eyes were hungry for that face, that perfect face; petal lips, button nose, glorious eyes.
Mara smiled slyly; his lust feeding her own.

It would be wrong to think that he wasn’t on display for her either.

The steam filled the small room; the heated lovers rapt in the mist.

Since he had stepped into clearer view, she had been fed the vision of his body too, and he was just about as delectable to her as she was to him.

He could never compare with the images she had first been given of the skinny farm boy. Now, he was a man; sleek and toned.

Her eyes worked their way down from his handsome haunted face.

The strength in his shoulders and the curve of his biceps reminded her of how strong those arms felt as they held her; never letting her go, keeping her safe, loving her tenderly.

His chest flexed as if it knew it was under examination; hard, and held the large heart that was big enough to love her and show her how to love.

Long and lean abdominal muscles formed a grid in his mid-section; they would shake as he laughed heartily; she could hear the sound in her ears.

Winding and curved, the lip that formed his groin, angled perfectly; the perfect map, the perfect route.

Now thick and swollen, his erect manhood strained and screamed with rigidity.

She swallowed the saliva in her mouth, thinking of how incredible he felt inside her, how she could make him touch her in the deepest sense.

With the water still coming down on him, he raked his hand over his head, as if there was still hair there, and his body gleamed as droplets sped down his skin where her hands yearned to go.

Mara eased herself back onto the counter behind her, spreading her legs open so that he could witness her flower unfold for him. She knew that he would see how wet that she was already; she felt it in herself, her body responding to him.

Her hand went to her collarbone as she almost gasped with the beauty that was him. Feeling the fever on her chest, her fingers drifted up towards her face, touching the sensual skin. She rubbed the side of her face, going to stroke her hair, as she bit her lower lip.

Her opposite hand was more adventurous and slid lower to cup her own breast.

Luke, with no provocation whatsoever, let his hand wrap around his shaft, pulling the skin taunt, increasing his sensitivity. So many times, he thought of her like this, on view for just him.

As her ripe nipple perked, she plucked and rolled the bud, alternating cupping the mound; she tilted her head back, resting it against the mirror.

Envious now, and wanting more from herself, her other hand came down and started its path at her navel.

<<How bad do you want me, Farmboy?>> Her mind reached out. <<Do you want to be inside me, or do you want to see what you do to me?>>
He smiled hungrily, and nodded back, indicating that he would do anything for her and anything to her that she wanted.

Her fingers parted the red-gold curls of her womanhood, and exposed the glistening folds, already bright pink; engorged and hypersensitive.

At the junction, her thumb lifted the little hood and exposed her keen clit. Pressing against it, she began to roll it with her thumb, just as he had done earlier.

<<You’re really talented with that tongue of yours.>>

His eyes flashed back up to her face, to see that she smiled as she panted. <<I come so hard for you.>>

Her thumb still worked its wonders, but now she slid her index finger inside her luscious pussy.

As he watched, and began the slow strokes that would imitate how he wanted to move inside of her, matching the pace of her finger as it entered and drew out of her. Through gritted teeth, he hissed as he breathed.

Her single finger was joined by a second one, controlling her own desire and release, and increasing her speed.

Alternating between swirling her clit, and the gait of her fingers, she could feel the heat rising and building in her.

She also watched in awe as she affected him. His hand twisted as he stroked himself, speeding up, churning; he dropped his head.

<<You were right.>> Her mind said to him. <<You were so right…you’ve ruined me for other men.>>

On the edge now, teetering, she wanted to come, she wanted him to come.

Stars, he was so beautiful when he climaxed; his face beaded with sweat and perfect strain until the very moment when she knew that he was hers and hers alone, giving himself in an instant.

“Luke” she gasped for air as she called his name. “Come for me…please? I want to see you.” She begged.

His head came up, and looked to her. He nodded.

Braced against the wall of the shower, each stroke with a grunt, he suddenly clenched his eyes shut, and threw his head back. “Mara!” he moaned, and sputtered as his body expelled his seed in shots.

Swallowing hard, almost gasping for air, he looked over to her in time to her shoulders shake, and witnessed her holding her breath.

She exhaled hard and shuddered with her orgasm. “L-L-Luke” She stammered as she called for him.

One step into the shower to rinse himself and then he closed it down to be by her, in front of her, wanting to capture her mouth as it mumbled his name.

She was dizzy but smiled as he pressed his mouth to hers.

He stood between her legs as she sat on the counter, cupping her flushed cheeks and holding her lips
She snorted softly as he began to pat his body with the edges of her soft robe, drying him.

In a playful mood, she smiled craftily at him as he pulled away; that smile dissolved as she saw that he still wanted more.

“Come to bed with me.” He ordered in deep low tones, leaving no room for argument.

She was still shaky from reaching her own climax that she simply nodded. No fight; no need to.

He lifted her with the robe that she had been sitting on, feeling the soft fabric against her skin, and now feeling his skin on hers.

In the adjacent room, she had prepared it so that the lights were dimmed, bed was open, and quiet music played; their oasis from the rest of the galaxy.

He looked so deeply into her eyes, feeding of her soul. So dark were his eyes, that she wasn’t sure that she could see blue in them.

He laid her down, almost in the middle of the bed. Shifting his weight, he reached over for the little packet of filmsy that she left on the nightstand. He leaned in to kiss her as he covered his erection with the barrier.

<You planned this, Kitten.> His mind whispered.

As he pulled back to look at her, her eyes widened, trying to look innocent, but failing.

She reached out her hands to touch him.

He caught them easily; kissing them each in turn, he grinned, and tisked her. “Don’t make me go get the binders.” He said coyly.

A gleam came in her eyes that surprised him.

He released her hands when he saw that she wanted to wrap her arms around him and hold him close. Before he fulfilled her wish, his hot hand slid down her stomach and stopped at her lower belly.

Pulling back, still between her thighs, he started to kiss just below her navel.

Unlike the last time, he worshipped her body, thinking of child they would make together, now, he merely wanted to do this at her pleasure, and traipsed kisses up her mid-section.

She arched off the bed, turning her head to muffle the sounds of her moans as he took a protruding nipple into his mouth a swirled it with a sucking sensation.

Her legs rose, with knees bent, invited him in closer. She could feel the heat coming off his body.

The hands that had begged for him, wrapped, draping around his neck. With one hand clutching his shoulder, the other hand stroked his head.

She dug her nails into the skin of his shoulder when she felt his manual exploration of her; one digit, then two, pushing inside her, teasing her.

<I wanted to touch you so badly.> His voice sounded pained; he went to the other breast, devouring
her.

“Do you know how tight you are?” He spoke into the flesh of her breast; the hot air making it
dimple.

His tongue licked the tip. “Do you know how glorious it feels to be inside you?”

His fingers, dipped in and out of her, coaxing.

She moaned-gasped to the open air of the room, barely hearing his words, but hearing the sound of
his voice.

He hissed at her velvety skin, plucking at her buds with his mouth. “It’s like the galaxy explodes,
every time that I’m with you.”

His fingers turned, and curled, to taunt her front wall.

Panting quicker now, it was building in her, a wave of heat, burgeoning on chaos in her, threatening
to overtake her, and losing control to the man she loved.

Kissing her sternum and collarbone, he was determined to find her mouth again. “I’m consumed by
you.” His voice strained before he placed his mouth to hers.

“Anything” He said, “…anything you ask for, it’s yours.”

She arched her back as she felt him slide his girth inside her; the pressure caused her to stammer with
an exhalation.

He paused and looked at her; afraid that he sensed pain. She minutely shook her head.

“Mara…” he called to her. “I would give you the galaxy, if I could.”

His pelvis pushed into her, rocking gradually, and gaining speed.

The spectacular feel of him; his aura, his sense, his body joining with her, and his words. The most
powerful man in the galaxy, loving her.

She responded by holding his face and kissing him with his pace. “I want only one thing.” She
whispered between their lips.

“You.” She said between her breaths. “I just want you.” Finding air, she found the words. “Promise
me that I’ll always have you, and that’s all I want.”

He smiled as he exhaled by her face. “You have it.” He kissed the side of her face. “I’m yours…forever.” <There’s nothing you could do, nothing you can say, to change that.>

“I truly love you…with all my heart.” He strained to get the words out, feeling his body on the edge
again, driven by her pleasure and her words.

“Luke,” She quietly moaned his name, and although she tried, she let her sense in the Force slip and
reached out to him, just touching his senses and then retreated. “Gods, I love you too.” She uttered.

Turning her face into his neck, the words came out of her. “Please don’t stop loving me…please,
please don’t stop.” She whispered, and begged, against his skin.

“Never.” He replied, not faltering, finding her lips and soothed her with kisses.
Now, they chose to let their bodies speak for them.

He slowed his pace, sensing his impending apex, and hers, coming on again, until he almost stopped; feeling that she wanted something.

Shifting her weight, they rolled, and now she straddled him, on top, and looking down at his beaming face.

She smiled back at him, taking his hands and placing them at her hips as she began to rock atop his body.

Tilting her head back, she moved her pelvis to the place where she could feel him most-deeply, and moaned as the bundle of nerves felt tantalized.

She called his name into the air, again, and again, with her movements.

His hands conducted their velocity, bringing her body against him.

He could tell it was time; the wetness in her, and the quivered heat between them both.

Pumping, he was pushing into her with his might.

Building, cumulating, escalating, and then it happened; holding her breath, she exhaled as the pounding her core started, erupting, sending electric pulses over her body.

Feeling her climax, he release his restraint and felt the stagnated spasm shoot from him.

She collapsed to his chest, panting, pressed to him. She could hear his heart beating wildly in his chest; his breathing, rapid and strained.

They lay like that for some time; silent and sublime.

His hands began to stroke her back as he recovered.

“Mara?” he called to her affectionately.

When she didn’t respond, he called again.

With effort, she lifted her head, and raised her eyebrows, but her eyes were still lost, high on the euphoria of their love-making.

Finding his voice, it still cracked as he spoke. “I’m exhausted and you’re mute…I think it’s safe to say that our first ‘practice’ went well.”

He could hear her hard breathing, and could sense the rambling of her mind, trying to find words.

“Maybe we should back into the shower?...get cleaned up.” Luke said quietly, nestling against her.

Finding her voice, Mara gulped at the air before she spoke. “Why would we do that? You’re just going to make us dirty again.” She seductively grinned at him.

“You don’t know that.” He said quickly, trying to feebly refute that allegation.

Then, she gave him the look, doubting that he even thought that was true.

This time she pushed herself up, and he aided her to roll to her side, and cuddle up next to him.
“I know how much you like that shower…sonic just doesn’t cut it.” Luke murmured in her ear.

She snorted quietly, knowing he was right.

There was a mood between them; neither wanted to sleep, neither wanted to be separated in the coming days, and neither one wanted to mention it. So just talking was preferable to any of the options.

Mara shimmied her back against his chest, wrapped in his arms, trying to get as close as possible, looking out into the room.

She pulled the blankets over both of them as she adjusted to get comfortable.

The dim light cast a mellow glow about the room as the music played quietly.

Luke held her tighter to him, basking, just being with her. “Given the choice between a desert world and water world- I’d pick the water world.” He said absently; talking for the sake of talking.

Scoffing, she turned in his embrace, and looked at him incredulously. “How are you going to be an eccentric ‘desert hobo’ on a water world?” She asked skeptically, yet finding humor in him.

“Well, maybe I’ll be an eccentric fisherman hobo instead.” He suggested.

“A career change?” She mocked.

“It’s a step up, I think.” He thought about it. “Do I get to keep the beard?” he asked.

Frowning, Mara turned herself around, because it almost sounded as if he was half-serious about the whole thing and had given it some consideration.

It took her a moment to realize that a smile was threatening to overtake the pondering look on his face.

She shook her head, wondering why she bothers to play along with him, but then, no one had ever wanted to tease her like he did, and in truth, she enjoyed it, and so she nodded in agreement to the beard that he was periodically trying to grow.

“All right, eccentric fisherman hobo, it is.” Luke settled on the idea in jest. “Will you be there?- less likely a chance to get freckles on a water world.” He argued.

Mara decided to giggle and just go along with him. “Okay, I’ll be the crazy cat lady of the island.”

“Cat lady?”

“Someone has to eat all that fish.” She gave in and decided to play along with his ridiculousness. “I’ll have twenty cats, and name them all ‘Tav’.” She jutted out her chin, proud of her silly decision.

“And when one of them does something wrong, I’ll just say ‘Tav did it’.”

Luke laughed openly. “What a pair we’ll make; eccentric fisherman and crazy cat lady.”

Snorting, she took his hand in hers and started to play with it; she let his idea fall into the quiet of the room.

Mara laced her fingers between his, running her thumb over his knuckle, comparing the size against her, palm to palm. And watching as she did this; still amazed she found herself with him.
“You have big hands.” She declared quietly. “…for your size.”


“And big feet too.” She said as if not thinking of what to say next, as she continued to play with his hand.

He just watched her, lost in her own random thoughts.

“That’s how I could track you in the forest on Myrkrr…big feet and a shorter gait for your height.” She mumbled.

Mara inhaled quickly, as if realizing that she had spoken without thinking, and coughed lightly in an insecure manner.

Luke chuckled behind her. “That’s okay.” He whispered. “Aunt Beru told me the same thing… especially when I grew out of three sets of boots in one season.”

He pulled lower half of the covers aside, and looked down. “You, however, have tiny little feet.” He smiled down at her and put the covers back in place. “…that get very cold, very quickly.”

Mara chuckled. “Why do you think that I taught myself to knit, and make… what did you call them again?...Oh yes, my ‘ugly socks’.” She gave him a mock-glare.

“I stand by my word…they are ugly.” Luke said confidently. “Those ones are, at least….and itchy too. But the dark blue ones you left on my bunk, are very nice.” He confessed and kissed the top of her head. “Thank you for making them for me.” <You’re getting to a real expert at making them.>

She shrugged. “They’re easy to make after you finish the first pair. They keep my hands busy.” Shrugging again, she said quieter. “And I like doing it.”

“I like that you do it.” He squeezed her as he told her his secret.

She blushed. <<You do?>> She felt embarrassed that she did such a thing; making things were frowned on most Core worlds.

People bought, they didn’t make…peasants make. It was the way Core people thought.

“My aunt, used to weave.” Luke reminisced fondly. “She used to get the fibers from the plants that we grew, and husk them, dye them, spin them, and then weave with them.” He explained.

“I used to sit there and hold my hands up like this….,” He brought his hands, and held them apart in front of her. “I had to hold them steady as she wrapped the yarn around them. Then, she would put it on a spindle. I used to watch her as she worked…and we would talk…and we would talk…she would tell me stories or try to teach me something.” His voice sounded wistful.

He brought his hands down, and placed them around her again.

“I tried to weave once, but I had no talent for it.” Luke closed his eyes for a moment, wishing that he could have had one more day on the farm.

The quiet fell between them again. Mara felt slightly desperate to keep him talking, to keep him with her for longer.

She enjoyed it; just talking reminded her of the times before they were lovers, when they were just friends who had changed so much since they had first met. She felt safe with him.
“You know, it been seven months since we were first together.” She added as an afterthought.

Luke smiled peacefully. “Longer, if you count our first date.” He thought back out loud, and kissed her forehead. “…longer than that, if you count the first time we kissed…and longer still, if you consider that we were attracted to each other before we did anything about it.”

Tilting her chin up, he placed a soft kiss on her mouth.

He hugged her again, feeling comfortable with her. <I was just thinking about it the other day…The first time we slept beside each other.>

“We were practicing.” She said.

“Practicing.” He spoke into her hair. “And tonight, we were practicing at being a family….with Han, Leia and the twins.”

“Family.” Mara repeated quietly and blankly; still not sure how she felt about it.

The word didn’t mean much to her before she met him; she still didn’t know what it meant.

She could feel her melancholy setting in, as she thought about his impending departure. There was a hurt that she was starting to feel again and she knew it would turn into an ache once she was to leave too.

Luke shifted, taking her into his arms as he turned on his side to hold her beside her, wanting to see her face. “You mean that you didn’t like it? Tonight with my family?” He asked, disappointed.

“It’s not that at all.” Mara mumbled, settling in to him. Her thoughts drifted back to the time of how she had unwittingly become a part of that family.

“Then, what is it?” He asked; it concerned him that she was still wavering when it came to parts of his life.

“Sometimes it feels weird.” She murmured, her head resting on his chest as he began to pet her hair.

“How so?” He asked, listening, feeling that there was something more to her apprehension; his senses told him not to let this opportunity go, if she was in the mood to be open.

“That they include me.” Mara said quietly, shaking her head slightly. Her lost eyes looked up to him.


“I know.” She whispered, and swallowed hard as her emotions suddenly surprised her. “I just don’t understand why.”

“Why?” He repeated. He thought of the reasons. “You saved their children from Thrawn – that earned their trust. You helped save the galaxy- that earned their respect. You love me- that makes them love you too. They thought of you as family at the first part, everything else just fell into line.”

Mara exhaled, and he could feel the air against his chest. Her mind replayed that day; stopping the Imperial squad that had been sent to kidnap Leia’s children.

He must have sensed it.

“Why did you save their children?” He asked; it had been something that he wanted to ask her. She
had been a virtual stranger to them at the time and had declared that she would kill him.

To save Leia’s children seemed totally out of character for someone who was so dark in other areas.

She shook her head. “I don’t know.” Mumbling, she replied. “It felt wrong, Thrawn trying to take Leia’s children. So very wrong.”

Her eyes went out of focus, and the words just seemed to come out her. “I could see them, in a split second, as if it was years yet, growing up in the Empire…distant, remote, not knowing their parents, not knowing the love of a family…and I could see Leia and Han, grieving the loss of their children…if Thrawn wasn’t going to capture them successfully, he certainly wouldn’t think twice about eliminating them… I didn’t want that for them…I couldn’t let that happen.”

Luke could feel the icy chill of what could have happened. He found his voice and continued to ask, “Do you really think that they would have been taken to live under Imperial control?”

“Yes…as useful pawns, a bargaining tool, or worse.” Mara said blankly; staring out into the room.

She knew what ‘worse’ meant, and all the implications for a Force-strong child in the Empire.

“I was useful to them…..to Him.” She whispered.

The air in the room was now crisp, quiet and unsettling.

He knew she was right that Thrawn and C’Boath would have done anything to warp the children to their own purposes, maybe not a demented as Mara had been by Palpatine, but the twins would not have been themselves as they grew up.

She was silent and lost in her thoughts.

He let out several breaths slowly, feeling now that he could ask. “Mara,” he said her name tenderly, “What do you remember? About your home?”

She had once said that she had been stolen; not abandoned, not orphaned: stolen.

Her body tensed, and he stroke her hair again, sending out his senses, truly wanting to know, but also telling her that she didn’t have to share if she didn’t want to.

She was quiet, thinking if she should tell him; she had never told anyone before- no one cared to ask. She always figured that they assumed that she was a willing participant.

Her mind flashed. You were, it said to her cruelly. She tried to argue back. I was a child.

Shivering, she pulled the blanket up to her shoulders and swallowed; Luke had been so forthcoming about his past and now that he was asking, she had no right to refuse him.

Besides, she knew that one day he would ask, and she would tell him. If there was one person who she could trust…

“I don’t remember all of it.” Mara said tentatively, unsure; her eyes searching the dim light for something to focus on. “I knew that I would be leaving with Him, with Palpatine.”

She closed her eyes, and let her mind take her to a place that she tried to suppress as much as possible and let the words flow out.

“I remember that the day was warm… there were flowers and fruit blooming in the courtyard.”
Touching Luke’s hand, she reached out in the Force and shared the images with him.

Luke’s eyes rolled closed, knowing what she was doing. He knew that there might not be words that could explain what she had experienced and it would be easier to show him when words became too much.

The memories from a child’s mind were blurry, but he got the sense that the home was idyllic, stone walls with colour dotted everywhere; flowers, decorations, personal items.

Mara’s voice, in the background, narrated what she could recall.

“I remember being warned not to leave my room… but something was calling me. I had to go into the courtyard.” The images showed the point of view of a child, pushing the door that was the barrier, at a lower level.

Given the height of the image, Luke supposed that she was maybe three or four years old, not much older; her visions didn’t seem as finite as an older child might have had.

She was searching for something, and upturning what her little hands could find. “I think I was following our pet into the yard… chasing him, I wanted to pick him up and play…”

The images started to slow as she opened the last door, coming out into the courtyard.

In the distance, and a dark form resided.

He felt her sense of brief worry, but still kept going towards the form before her. “And then I saw Him; the cloaked old man, sitting on the bench under my favourite tooloo tree.”

“I used to pick the fruit with mother regularly.” Her mind flashed to another memory—a little girl dancing under the flowering tree as the blossoms fell, her arms raised upwards as the blooms rained down, giggling and laughing freely.

“I wasn’t scared of Him. I wasn’t shy.” Her visions went back, it showed her coming closer to the stranger who was in her home, a welcomed guest. It made sense to her little mind; if He was not welcomed, why would He be back here?- waiting alone?

“I remember thinking it was *game*, to try and look under His hood. He kept turning away from me, until I could see His smile inside… He was laughing… His eyes looked different…and He felt different… and I still wasn’t scared.” Her little self was giggling as she tried to peer under the hood, and tried, and tried again.

She gasped a bit before continuing, possibly remembering more details.

“He dropped a piece of fruit and it rolled away from him.”

Luke felt her body stir before she went on.

“I reached out, in the Force, to call it back to me.”

He felt her shake her head against his chest.

“No one had ever warned me not to do that, to hide what I could do.” She began to speak slower. “His smile grew when I went to hand it to Him. When He spoke, I didn’t understand Him. I don’t think I spoke Basic yet.”

As a side thought she added, “My name wasn’t ‘Mara’.”
Luke felt her body seize up.

“Then, *I felt something*; it didn’t feel like my parents, but suddenly, I could understand Him without knowing His words. He showed me that He could move the fruit too. It levitated in His hand. He asked me what else I could do. It was like a game.”

“I would do something, and then He would do it too. Then, He would do something and ask me to do it.” The images showed Luke what a child thought of as ‘play’ but clearly there was another reason behind it, a sinister one.

“It went back and forth like that for some time. When my parents came into the garden, I could feel the shock from my mother, and I think she began to cry…she was scared, so very scared…and my father…I felt his anger and his desire to protect me…I didn’t understand why they were so afraid of my new friend.”

The fear- the fear was real for her, not understanding what was going on around her, and the dread that parents felt. Even though they were faceless shadows in this memory, their feelings were very real, and their child could sense them, and know them for what they were.

“I don’t remember more than fragments after that.” Mara’s voice mumbled as she started to list the things she could remember. “…my mother singing to me, trying to keep me calm, as she cried and packed my case…the cold hand of the stranger…the attendant who led me away.”

The images were bits and pieces now, losing the detail; probably lost as her young mind was forced into a frantic state.

“The walk up the ramp of the shuttle, and looking at all the electronics, wanting to push the buttons… like I wanted to go with Him…that I thought I’d be coming back…like it was still part of the game…like He was showing me a toy.”

Mara broke away from recounting her memoires to chastise herself. “*A child’s mind.* If I only knew…I would have preferred death.” Her voice gasped.

Luke’s heart had been breaking since she had started speaking, but now he knew the extent of her injured soul.

“My father; I can’t remember him much…it’s all just shadows…I want to believe that he was still alive when I left, but I don’t think so. I felt his rage… and just because of his display towards Palpatine alone, he probably ...” She shook her head against his chest, not wanting to finish the thought.

Luke didn’t hear her crying, but he could feel wetness on his chest, and cradled her in his arms, rocking her slowly.

“I’ve always thought that my mother was alive…maybe…*it feels like it.* And now…I used to think about trying to find her…but then, I always think of how ashamed she’d be to know what I became. Who would want a murderer for a daughter?”

Mara wiped away the tears that had come down her face, and blotted Luke’s skin, picking up the moisture with the blanket from crying on him.

<You’re not a murderer.> He said; convinced, now more than ever that she had been stolen, manipulated and warped by Palpatine.

“I did it…it’s my fault...” She choked out. “If it wasn’t for me…he might be…*they might be*...”
Luke held her tighter.

His own tears escaped from his closed eyes, until he was ready to open them.

Looking down, she trembled in his arms, still holding back her feelings, afraid to unleash them.

He rocked her. <You’re safe now.>

“I love you.” He said, crushing her to him, because it was the truth and the only words he could think of.

He repeated it over and over again, feeling her emotions release, and her body shuddered in sobs against him.

Petting her hair and still rocking her, he let her cry it out, as he doubted she had ever allowed herself to do before.

Luke could feel Mara tiring in his arms; it had taken its toll on her.

Soon, he could feel that her senses were barely trembling into him.

After that, he felt that she had tired herself out, and looked down to see her eyes closed, cheeks tear-stained, but asleep in his arms, calmed by him.

Closing his eyes and resting his chin against her, he whispered to her mind. <You will never feel like that again. I promise.>

And quietly, he joined her.

**

His comm sounded in the distance.

With lightning reflexes, he stopped the sound, and then looked at the form asleep on his chest.

Mara had exhausted herself from crying, and probably due to the fact that she missed her last sleeping shift.

Feeling safe with him, she had allowed herself to doze off; her spirit felt like it was healing as she rested.

Luke picked up his comm and read the message, and grimaced.

When Madine called, Luke had to respond.

Looking down at her sleeping form, he wondered how he was going extradite her from him, and not wake her.

Regretfully, he reached out in the Force, and soothed her senses as he moved her body gently. To ensure that she kept resting, he lay beside her, and pet her hair, knowing that it was one way to keep her relaxed.

When it was clear that Mara was still in deep sleep, he felt safe to move.

Rising from the bed, he silently dressed in his fatigues, knowing it was required for the meeting that he was summoned to.
Watching her, Luke thought about the things she had divulged to him. Now, it made sense, without knowing more about her life in Palpatine’s court, as to why she couldn’t allow herself to connect with anyone before him.

Somehow, she felt she was to blame for it all, and kept pushing people away, afraid that she would be the cause of their pain.

She was stolen, and wounded from the very beginning, clinging to anything and anyone that would show her the kindness that she sot from a parent, and finding only the twisted guidance of Palpatine to fill that void.

Oh, how he hated what He had done to her.

Mara sniffled absently in her sleep, and Luke rushed to her side, stroking her hair again.

His mind touched the fringes of her dream world. <Mara> he called to her. <I have to go a meeting, but I'll be back as soon as possible…I promise.>

She hummed and shifted, seeming to be comfortable by herself, and agreeing to let him go.

Leaning over, he stroked a bit of errant curl to the side of her face and kissed her temple.

Getting up from the corner of the bed, and going to the door, Luke turned back to see his sleeping angel one more time before departing the room.

**

The bed dipped unexpectedly, and Mara’s eyes fluttered opened.

Somewhere, as he had comforted her, she had fallen asleep. And during that time, he had left and returned.

Mara sat up slightly, pulling the covers up on her chest; feeling partially vulnerable because of the things she remembered sharing with him, and partially because she suddenly felt alone to know that he had left.

She shook the sleep from her mind as he sat down beside her and stroked her face.

“Hi there.” Luke whispered, concern in his eyes; he didn’t want to leave her if she was troubled by her revelation to him earlier, but the world had found him.

Disoriented, she looked around, searching for a chrono; he was wearing his fatigues, with his insignia and rank clearly visible. “Is it sixteen hundred hours already?” Mara asked, fearing that she had missed the day with him.

He shook his head and smiled tightly. “No…” He said, leaning over to kiss her forehead. “It’s just after eleven hundred.” He kissed her again. “I got called into a meeting.” He said glumly.

Luke got up from the edge of the bed, and started to remove his jacket; folding it neatly before he started to remove his boots and trousers, intent on returning to bed with her.

He was avoiding her eyes, and Mara narrowed her gaze, watching him, scrutinizing him.

Reaching out, she could feel it. Cold…

But it wasn’t just him, something had happened. Something in the galaxy wasn’t right. She could
sense it all around them now; the base was awake and on high alert.

His back was to her, hiding from her, hiding his thoughts on the matter.

“What happened?” Mara asked; her voice strong, but her senses cracking from the tension around her.

Luke looked over his shoulder, back at her, and then turned away.

He sighed and was about to answer her with the regimented answer that he was taught.

She caught him to the quick. “Don’t tell me it’s classified.” She hissed quietly, unnerved that he would dare to keep it from her.

His shoulders slumped, knowing that it would be futile to do so; she would probably know before anyone else did, and there wasn’t the possibility that she would let anything slip.

He straightened his back, and set his shoulders before he turned around. Meeting her eyes, he didn’t flinch. “Yesterday, Fel’ya was outed with a vote of no confidence. The senate broke in an unresolved session with no provisional government formed.” He informed her.

Sighing first, he then continued. “We received the report that Imperial Star Destroyers are massing in the Core Worlds. They were headed to Coruscant before the vote. There’s reason to believe that a World Devastator is with them.”

Mara sat listening, and knew what it meant before he finished.

“At an attack on Coruscant is eminent now…probably within the next thirty hours, is what they estimate.” He said simply.

Luke came to the bed and sat down, across from her. “We leave for Coruscant today… on orders to evacuate the senate.”

“I’m teaming up with Lando, and a commando crew. We’re running escort to get senators to their transports.” He said, outlining what he knew, and what he knew he could tell her.

“And probably, engaging ground forces, if it came to that.” Mara gruffed after listening. She knew the reality of combat; nothing was as easy as it was explained in debriefing, or a mission outline, nothing went according to plan.

He dropped his head, and nodded; if nothing else, The Force told him that she was right. This was not going to be a simple extradition mission. It was going to be messy and a good chance of great loss of civilian lives.

There was a reality that they couldn’t argue or avoid.

Mara swallowed, and shifted, allowing him into the bed beside her.

Luke adjusted the pillows up against the headboard, so that he could rest while holding her for as long as possible. When he got into position, she quickly came to him, putting her head on his shoulder and assumed the position she found most comfortable.

Nuzzling his cheek against her head, he whispered, “I brought back morning meal.” He hoped he could raise her spirits with food.

“I’m not hungry.” She responded quietly as she possessively held onto him. Her stomach disagreed,
and grumbled slightly.

<Yes you are.> His mind said. “What if I bring the tray in here? Huh? Would you like that?- we can share.” He coaxed.

Luke knew that she had breaking point and he knew why she was resisting. He couldn’t blame her; he didn’t look forward to leaving either.

“They had fresh caf…I loaded it with sugar and cream, just for you…and, they had drizzle berry jam.” He murmured into her hair, trying to convince her.

Mara knew he was playing to her weaknesses, and when he put it like that, she couldn’t resist, and nodded; she lifted her shoulder up so that he could go get their meal.

Reluctantly, he got back off from the bed, and turned to gently pinch her cheek, smiling sweetly before he left to retrieve the tray.

Sitting in the bed, she looked under the sheets and realized that she was still in the state that he had left her in from the previous night.

She was sure that there were probably tear stains down her cheeks, her hair was in a state of disarray that she hated, and she was naked beneath the bedding.

Crumpled on the bed behind her was the hunter green robe that she wore when she seduced him. Reaching over, she pulled the soft and fuzzy fabric over to her, and slid her arms into it, wrapping it around her as best as she could.

Luke returned quickly, balancing the tray and a holder in his arms. He smiled as he saw that she was wearing the robe that he bought for her; her eyes were brightened by the dark colour.

He placed the tray on the stand beside the bed, and handed the holder to her to set up for them.

Sitting back into position, he turned to hand her the tray.

Without waiting for him, Mara reached over and poured a mug of caf, and then a glass of water. She gulped the water down without much thought, and then poured a second one.

Luke lifted the lid off the tray and the steam rose as the scent wafted.

Looking over the selection that he chose for the meal, he mentally admitted that he was thinking of her more than himself when he picked the food.

“I’m not a big fan of eggs.” He said as he grimaced, picking up a utensil.

Mara smiled as she looked over at him; she knew he was trying to resume ‘normal life’ while they were together.

“You don’t?” She asked over the rim of the mug of caf as she brought it to her mouth.

Luke shook his head. “Not really…but then, I usually just have them in mess halls, and I’m pretty sure that they are of the powdered variety.”

She decided that she would be the brave one and sample them first. The yellow-white mass hovered on the fork before she put it in her mouth. “Yup, these are powdered-kind.” She said as she chewed the rubbery eggs.
Spreading the jam on the cold toast, he watched her skeptically and cringed for her.

“They aren’t bad though.” She reasoned out loud. “It seems they were trying to mimic pollo eggs. Karrde got a shipment of powdered kee-shee eggs once, and they were blue and not good.”

Mara reached across him and took a small savory packet, tore off the edge and squeezed the red colored sauce all over the eggs. “This should help.” She said, and then speared another forkful and took a bite.

Nodding as she chewed, she took some more, placing her hand under the fork, she guided it to him.

Luke raised an eyebrow before he opened his mouth to allowed her to feed him. Chewing, he decided it wasn’t half bad, as he handed her the toast he had prepared.

She handed him the mug of caf in exchange, and bit into the toast.

He smiled as he watched her; they did this easily.

They had mastered breakfast and dining together. It wasn’t formal; it was just them.

“Leia and Han don’t eat in the mess hall?” Mara asked conversationally.

Luke snorted. “Nope, not with us grunts.” He said smiling. “She did on Hoth, but I don’t think she ever asks for special treatment – they just give it to her.” He reasoned.

“It probably has something to do with the title, I suppose.” Mara said absently before biting into the toast.

“You think so?” He asked. “I never could figure out how those sorts of things work.” Sipping more of the caf, he then offered her the last bit in the mug.

“Well, protocol would usually dictate, if she had a change in status, that it would have be declared and notarized in the Alderaanian Court.” She looked up and stare out into the room. “And probably anoint a successor if she was abdicating.”

Mara shook her head and looked back at Luke.

“How do you know all this?” He asked in wonder, and then wondered if he should regret asking if it bought up bad memories. <Sorry, I asked.> he thought over to her quickly.

Her face didn’t change, but she nodded. “I had to.” She replied and looked down. “You know, it wasn’t all bad- my life in court.” She said to herself out loud. “I found ways to escape.”

Luke reached over and held her hand.

Mara looked up and smiled at him. “I told you about how I would watch the chefs in the kitchen?” She asked; he nodded, remembering as he sensed the joy it had brought her. “You should have seen some of the things that they made- you wouldn’t want to eat it -it looked too good, like art instead of food.”

“I took dance lessons with some of the most talented dancers in the galaxy- I enjoyed that.” Her eyes softened, her mind going to the things that brought her pleasant memories. “I loved going to the Imperial Opera House, and all the performances that I saw there.”

“You would have looked beautiful in some of those gowns.” Luke said as he leaned back against the headboard. “Just like a princess.” His eyes drifted lovingly at her hair, and then to her face. “How did
"I get so lucky?" He whispered.

Mara knew he was referring to the gowns that she had donated, and she smiled back to him, knowing that he valued the gesture as much as he valued the thought of her in those gowns.

She nodded. "I liked the some of those dresses. They were like works of art. But the shoes? - not so much. They mostly pinched my feet." She frowned.

Looking up, she saw his face; blues eyes in all their glory, looking at her. And they just looked at each other.

"I would have liked to dance with you at the ball." Luke said in a dreamy voice, picking up her hand and kissing her knuckles.

Mara frowned until she realized that he was talking about the Corellian Ball that would have been on Coruscant, had the government not been sent into chaos.

"I’ve been to a few of those things, but I would have really liked to go with someone that I loved.” He said with his eyes big and round.

“You’re quite the romantic, Luke Skywalker.” She said as her eyes pinched as she teased, but in seriousness, she like it on him; other people it would have seemed manufactured.

His chin dipped, and he dared to say it, looking pointedly at her. “So are you, Miss Jade.”

She mock-glared at him. <<Bite your tongue.>>

He tugged gently on her hand, wanting her closer.

Mara couldn’t refuse him, and avoided the dining tray, and scrunched up beside him.

The ache started in her chest, and she knew what it was; the thought of missing him again.

She closed her eyes, lying beside him, and reached out in her senses, knowing that he would feel it.

Luke wrapped his arm around her, lulling his body against her, and sending his senses over to her too.

<I know.> His mind soothed her. <I can feel it too. It’s different this time… You know that, don’t you?>

There was no avoiding it. <<Yes.>> She answered him.

“Have you seen something?” He asked. <You were meditating on this past trip. I felt it.>

Mara opened her eyes, only to close them again. <<I was.>>

<Your Force-gift for visions is stronger than mine…you see everything…things feel real and stronger in your visions.> He conceded, recalling that they had meditated together aboard the Wild Karrde, seeing the chaotic images passed through her mind.

His visions felt distant and remote, not centered as to where he felt that he needed to be, but the Force willed it, so he didn’t question it.

<But you can tell me if you feel the same?> He asked, closing his eyes, he resisted the urge to sleep again.
She could feel her mind drifting to the place that she went to when she meditated; a place that used to scare her, but she was learning to rely on.

Breathing deeply, the images start to flip in her mind, and she could see an on-coming battle, not just in the Core Worlds, but all over the galaxy. But she couldn’t see Luke.

Mara gasped, forcing herself out of it.

“Yes,” she finally said, “It will be different. This war is different.”

Looking over to him, she closed her eyes again, not drawing on the Force this time. “At the end of it, we will be different.” She mumbled, feeling that they needed to take comfort in each other while they could.

Luke nodded; he knew it was the truth. He had sensed it all along.

Her body was growing heavy on him, and he knew that she still craved rest while she could get it.

“Kitten…” He whispered, feeling that he would indulge them both. “Where do you want to go?”

Mara smiled, nuzzling into him. “Show me the sunset again?” She asked in a sleepy voice.

<Anything for you.> He replied before reaching out.

TBC
Chapter Summary

Quote: Dreaming like this had just become a way to soothe themselves; finding protection from their separate thoughts and finding an intimacy that they couldn’t share with anyone else.

Characters: Luke, Mara, Han, Leia, baby Jedi, and others

Chapter Notes

**

~Sigh~…almost at the end…I know I keep threatening it…but yes… this story will end, and another one will takes its place.

Just enjoy for now…mostly mush, angst and plot.

**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Pinnacle Base- Da Soocha,**

They dozed; eyes closed and holding each other.

Luke could feel the weight of her body with the rise and fall of every breath of his chest; there was nothing that he would rather feel.

Mara’s head fit perfectly in the nook of his shoulder. Her hand lay in the middle of his chest, holding his hand.

In his mind, he shared the images with her that culminated in getting some shared rest. They had done this many times before and it had brought them closer, as friends, then as lovers, and in the Force.

The wind whipped by atop the ridge, over-looking the Tatooinian canyon, Beggar’s Canyon, as the suns started to dip off to the East.

The vision was bathed in the glowing hue with colours dancing across the sky.

Unlike the first time Luke had shown her this vision, Mara had changed her position.

No longer did she sit alone and away from him, in her own place, looking out.

Now, she sat beside him on the rock that he perched himself on; they shared the blanket that would keep off the encroaching cold.
The scent of the Night Lilies wafted up in their direction with the breeze.

<<When did you say that you used to come up here?>> Mara asked, still looking out; her eyes transfixed on the horizon.

The first sun, Tatoo 1, was about to descend.

Luke smiled, and nuzzled closer to her. <It was during the Sand Fire Festival… The Tuskens have their own celebration at this time of year, so it’s safe… otherwise, no one would dare be out here, alone.>

He settled in, holding her. <Usually, the bond fires would be starting soon.> He turned his head to look away from the suns, and squinted across the dunes. <Most homesteads burn one… some of the wealthier farmers would have fireworks… Biggs’s father loved to put on a show. I could see it from our farm.>

As if on command, dots of flares started to light up on the horizon.

Mara smiled as she watched his memories come to life. She settled back against him. <<So where’s Anchorhead from here?>>

Luke sat up straighter and tried to get his bearings. He shifted and craned his neck. <Well…the Dune Sea is behind us…that’s where Ben used to live…maybe five or six kilometers from here.>

<<Kenobi?>> She asked.

<Yes…> He answered. <I don’t know how his shelter was put there, but it was probably from the time of the first colonists.>

<<Still standing ?>>

Luke smiled and looked down at her. <Things can survive a long time in the desert.>

<<Really? That long ?>> She asked, but still watched the suns.

<I used to have a droid, Treadwell…he was old, and didn’t work very well…but he had one job – to watch the power cell on a vaporator and make sure that it turned on at the right time. I set his distance radius to two meters within of the vaporator. I left him there, and every few days, I would come out and there he’d be, just circling the vaporator… nothing touched him, nothing fazed him. He was so run-down that the Jawas didn’t even want him. Sometimes I wonder if he’s still out there.>

Mara snorted.

His arm came out of the blanket and pointed, just off, in the direction of the suns. <Anchorhead is in that direction…and Tosche Station.> He then pointed almost North of the cliff that they were on. <The farm is in that direction, about nineteen kilometers from here.>

The first sun was about to lower, and it caught their attention as it went down silently, and colours streaked across the sky; orange, gold and red danced vividly.

A gust of wind came by, and caught a tendril of her hair, crossing his face; it their vision, her hair was back to its longer length.

Luke smiled as he took the soft strand, put it back into place, tucking it behind her ear, and took the opportunity to stroke the side of her face.
<<You didn’t go back when you were last here, did you?>> Mara asked softly.

He shook his head as he sighed. <No…> he said regretfully. <It was hard enough seeing Biggs’s father again… I just couldn’t bring myself to go to the farm too.> He adjusted the blanket around them. <I wasn’t ready.>

<Do you think that I should have?> He asked her quietly, questioning his actions.

Inside the blanket, she shrugged. <<If you weren’t ready, then you weren’t ready…no point in forcing it on yourself when you aren’t prepared for it.>>

He squeezed her, knowing that she would understand. <Pragmatic as ever.> He said before he kissed the side of her head. <How do you figure that?>

Mara took a few deep breaths. <<After Wayland… Karrde was making the arrangements for my residence. I had a chance to move back into the palace…to the Palisade Apartments… and I just couldn’t do it…I couldn’t be there.>> She shook her head. <<Every hallway, every corridor, every sound brought back a memory.>>

Looking across the desert, she said unassumingly. <<I wish I had more time to prepare myself when I woke up there after the Katana Battle…though it was kind of forced on me.>> she conceded.

She turned her face towards him, so that he could see her sympathetic eyes. <<So, I understand.>>

Luke nodded, and came in to give her a consolatory kiss.

Tatoo 2 was racing to joined its counterpart as it dipped.

As the sky started to darkened and turn shades of purple and crimson, small explosions happened it the distance; she supposed it was the homesteads and their fireworks celebration.

<<What are they celebrating?> She asked, curious.

<The Sand Fire Festival is celebrated at the beginning of the cooler season.> He said.

<<Is this harvest time?>>

<No, actually, it’s the start of growing season…the cooler season means that the vaporators and condensers can collect the most amount of moisture.> He answered. <The farmers spend the hotter season planting their crops. Most of the seeds have hibernation period, so most of the work is done by now. Then when it turns cooler, the only thing we really have to do from here on out, is make sure that the vaporators and condensers are working and the crop doesn’t get fried.>

He snorted softly by her ear as a burst went off in the distance and the sparkling colors showered. <The rain will be coming on soon…it rains once every three years… and The Festival following that, is always the more-extravagant celebration… the crops are usually the best you can get, and make your money for the coming seasons on them.>

The second sun was almost fully descended, and the sky was deepening as the stars started to emerge.

<There’s going to be a lot of celebrating tomorrow though…> He added, and smirked.

<<How so?>> She wondered; there was something in his tone.

<Well…> he said lowly, <Tomorrow is the day that, traditionally, people have their Claiming
Ceremonies.> He smiled against her. <It’s supposed to be for good luck.>

Mara mouthed an ‘oh’, and grinned. <<Suns up until suns down, right?>>

<Rigt.>

She nodded, feeling that Luke wanted to add something but refrained from it, and he felt slightly sheepish discussing it further.

The sky was now as dark as black velvet, with the stars, and fires burning in the distance, as the only light.

He loosened his hold on her as Mara shifted inside the blanket, turning on her left side, to the West, and watching the spaceport on the distant ridge.

<<That’s Mos Eisley?>> Mara asked, relaxed against him again.

<The wretched hive of scum and villainy, itself.> Luke said, watching the after-burn of a freighter leaving the system.

She snorted. <<It’s not that bad…I’ve been in worse places.>>

<You’ve been to Mos Eisley?>

<<Yes…it was far enough away from Jabba’s not to be detected.>> She answered back quietly.

Luke simply nodded, knowing that she didn’t intend to start this line of discussion; six year ago seemed so far away, and in many ways, it didn’t.

Then, the vision started to shake. Then, a sound could be heard.

In the bedroom, Mara was the first respond and sat up, blinking, looking for the source of the noise. Frowning, she reached over to her comm on the night stand, and then sighed.

Luke stretched, waking himself, and watched her.

It was pleasant while it lasted, and it had been a while since they had shared a controlled dream. Dreaming like this had just become a way to soothe themselves; finding protection from their separate thoughts and finding an intimacy that they couldn’t share with anyone else.

After reading the message, she turned to him. “It’s from Leia.” Mara smiled weakly. “She’s invited us to come for a late midday meal.”

Checking his chrono, he saw that it was getting later in the day, inching towards when he would be leaving.

He dropped his head and exhaled hard, nodding. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to see his sister and family; he wasn’t ready to leave just yet.

“I guess I should go take a shower.” Mara mumbled, sliding off the bed from her side, and wrapped her robe around her.

She collected a few things from her travel case, and kept her head down as she passed him.

Luke watched her go. He wanted to stop her and hold her again but he knew that she was close to her tipping point.
He listened for the water to start running before he came off the bed and started getting re-dressed.

It was familiar to him, putting on a uniform. He remembered once, around the time that he resigned from the Rebellion, thinking that he had worn his uniform more that he wore civilian clothes.

But now, it had become routine.

Adjusting his insignia, Luke signed as he looked at himself in the mirror; still amazed that he found himself back here again.

Walking into the living-room, he started to transfer his things from his travel case to his ruck sack. They were about to go on a combat mission; don’t bring anything you can’t carry.

The sound of the water ended, and he closed his eyes, trying to get a sense of her feelings.

He suspected that he would feel the ‘slammed door’ soon, as she closed herself off from him. But he didn’t.

Instead, he felt a sort of numbness from her. It felt eerie, and just as much a coping mechanism as when she shielded herself off.

He knew he had asked her not to shield herself, but given a choice between shielding and numbness, he thought he would prefer shielding.

The ‘fresher door opened, Mara emerged, looked up at him, gave him a tight smile and headed back into the bedroom.

Luke just watched her, resisting again going to her and holding her.

Going back to his work at hand, he finished the transfer of his things, and looked at his case; wondering how he was going to get it back to The Liberty, or possibly wherever they were going to reassemble.

Mara came out of the bedroom, wearing a simple coverall and jacket. She carried her own case in her hand and placed it beside the door.

He could feel that she wasn’t as badly off as he feared; her aura was aching, but she still stood brave.

Walking over, something in his hands had caught her eye.

“What’s that you’ve got there?” Mara asked; her mind distracted.

Luke grinned for her. “This?” he asked. “I was wondering what to do with it.” He held up the round case.

It fit in the palm of his hand, but he seemed attached to it.

“It’s a compass…of sorts.” He told her. “I got it on Pillio, after Endor.”

“You were on Pillio? – the Emperor’s store house. What were you doing there?” she asked, now curious by the item.

“Running a mission.” He said quietly. “We were there to destroy the storehouse too, as well as the Imperial troops. This was the only thing I took before we detonated it.” He offered it over for her to see.
“That was a hard fight…from what I heard.” She murmured as she took the strange little case and opened it.

The needle on the compass wavered and couldn’t seem to find a home.

“I don’t know where it’s trying to right itself to…it seems to have a different magnetic pull than any other compass that I’ve seen.” Luke snorted and shook his head, wondering about his own behavior. “But I like it, and I feel that I should keep it.”

He looked at his ruck sack and his case. “But I don’t know where I should put it.” He chagrinned.

Mara handed it back to him.

“That don’t you package it up, and anything else that you want saved, and send it back to Yavin?” She murmured. “I’m sending the artifacts that we got from Mustafar there…with Han on his next trip.” She suggested quietly.

Luke sighed, appreciatively to her; she always had a plan. He nodded, and separated those things that he wanted to preserve but didn’t want to take with him, to wherever he was headed.

He stopped and turned to her. “I have something for you.”

She came closer, but still reserved.

“I made a copy of Kenobi’s journal for you.” He produced a data card, giving it to her. “He must have kept it going for some time. There are writings that date around the Clone Wars...oh, and several stories about this little sand-rat who caused him a few problems...you might know who he’s talking about.” He said with a wink. "And if you're so inclined, and have time on your hands, the instructions to make your own lightsaber are in there too."

Gingerly, Mara took the disk from him, and smiled.

Before she could say anything, they both felt the jolt.


“She’s not very subtle with her mind touches yet.” Mara murmured. “It feels like a ‘yell’.”

He snorted. “Like a motherly yell.” He agreed.

Mara nodded and headed over to the door. She towed her case behind her, and Luke followed behind her yet.

They crossed the hall, and over to the Solo’s residence.

There was no protocol droid this time, and the door opened for them.

Standing, staring at the door, was a wobbly toddler, with his hand in his mouth.

Mara entered first, but they both a heard “Boo!” greeting them.

Luke chuckled and dropped his things. He went directly over to pick up his nephew. “Well Hello Jacen.” He sang to the little boy.

From around the sofa, a loud “Baba!” was heard.
The pudgy half-walk, half-run of Jaina resulted in the little girl coming around. She almost fell on her way over, but caught herself, and righted her weight before she came over to her aunt. Almost falling again, she caught herself on Mara’s leg, and held on to it to hold herself up.

“Wow, you are getting fast, young lady.” Mara beamed before she picked up the toddler.

Jacen, in his uncle’s arms, stared into his face. Luke blew some air at the boy as the toddler giggled. Responding, the boy put his hand into Luke’s mouth, only to have it playfully chomped on.

Jaina seemed to be entranced by Mara’s hair, and reached out for a fist of it, as her own opposite hand went into her mouth.

Han came out from the kitchen. “I see the welcoming committee has found you.” He smirked as he watched the two toddlers tell the adults who were the bosses.

“They’re not a committee.” Leia said as she came from the hallway. “They’re babies…” She tilted her head, “with a lot of personality.”

Coming over to her guests, Leia squeezed each of their shoulders as she passed. “I hope you two are hungry? Han has been cooking all morning.”

Each with a baby on their hips, Luke and Mara walked over to the dining table.

Mara watched as Luke placed Jacen into his high-chair and strapped the boy in.

She had been there to feed them, last night, but didn’t see this portion of the meal ritual.

Both toddlers took turns, throughout the meal, being fed by mother, father, uncle and perspective aunt; not minding where the food or attention came from.

The conversation was light around the table. From Mara’s outside view, she could swear that it almost felt like a real family to her.

Luke smiled over to her several times and kept her in the conversation.

From her peripheral view, she could see the Han and Leia were also taking turns just observing her and Luke together.

It was strange to be on display for them, and feel their acceptance.

After the meal ended, Han casually asked Mara to help put the twins down for a nap; they were still a little cranky from staying up later from the night before.

Luke smiled as Mara took her role at aunt very seriously. This time she picked up Jacen, to share her attention.

He watched her and Han walk to the nursery, a twin on each of their shoulders; getting up to join them.

“Luke” his sister called.

Stopping, he turned back to her.

“I have something that I want to talk to you about.” Leia said, uncharacteristically timidly.

Something in her manner seemed nervous; he smiled, trying to put her back at ease as he sat back
down, ready to give her his full attention.

She seemed to relax when she saw that he wasn’t troubled by her thoughts and feelings.

“Of course, Leia.” He said sweetly to his sister, but at a loss for what she had in mind.

Losing some of her regal grace with her protruding belly, she lowered herself beside him, and then took his hand.

“I was wondering…” Leia spoke in a hushed tone, “…have you and Mara discussed children yet?”

Freezing, Luke began to slide his hand back, “Um…” He tried to think of an answer; yes, they had, but nothing had been decided, and the possibility seemed far off.

“The only reason I’m asking, is because Han and I were talking the other day about future baby names…” Leia rubbed her belly as if she was soothing the child inside.

“Han came up with one that he really likes, but was unsure to ask you.” She smiled sweetly.

Luke shook his head and smiled, but sensed this wasn’t the same conversation that she wanted to have.

“I’d be honored…” He started.

Leia sighed as she stopped him, knowing that she would love to name this baby after her brother. “So would we, but Han says it’s bad luck to name a child after someone who is living…its Corellian tradition, you see.”

Luke frowned, but not insulted.

“I didn’t realize it at the time, but Han insisted that this person had a profound impact on him…even if Han didn’t exactly show it.” Leia explained, shaking her head.

Looking into her brother’s eyes, she took his hand again before she spoke. “We’d like to name this baby ‘Obiwan’…if that’s okay with you.” She paused. “I told Han that I’d ask you first, just in case you and Mara have discussed having children…and maybe you had that name floating around…I wasn’t sure.” She rushed out of the words at once.

Luke exhaled hard and sighed; he shouldn’t question it when coincidences collided- he was just mentioning Obiwan to Mara this morning.

He smiled, squeezed his sister’s hand, and gave a quiet snort before he spoke. “We’ve talked about it.” His eyes flickered in the direction of the nursery and then back at the woman across from him. “But we haven’t come to any conclusions.”

He smiled tightly. ‘I’ll admit that I’ve considered the name, but ‘Obiwan Skywalker’ doesn’t quite fit.” He winked after he grimaced. “Besides, Mara doesn’t like it when I make decisions without her.”

Owen, his mind whispered, reminding him of the man that raised him.

“Smart woman.” Leia murmured.

“I think if you and Han wanted to name this baby ‘Obiwan’, then, you should.” Luke leaned forward and gave his sister a kiss to the forehead.
He could feel the warmth coming off her now as she relaxed.

“Thank you, Luke.” She whispered, receiving the kiss.

Leaning back Leia rubbed her belly. “So you hear that Ben? We have a name for you.” She chuckled, until she exhaled hard. “Ooof!”

Luke looked worried until he saw her smile.

“Just kicking.” She said, calming him, and rubbing her belly again.

Noise from down the hallway broke their moment, and Han came into the room.

He looked like he had just wrangled a wampa. “Okay Kid… get in there… Mara’s got them ready to go, but they sure are fussy… if you know any Jedi tricks, now is the time to use them.” Han said smugly.

Luke smiled one more time to his sister before he got up and made his way, passing his brother-in-law with a clap on the shoulder.

As the door opened to the nursery, the dim light told him that things weren’t so bad. The feeling of the room was even more inviting.

Mara was sitting cross-legged on the floor; it was clear that she was in some sort of meditation. Various toys were floating, and dancing above each of the twins’ cribs.

“They’re almost here.” Mara whispered absently, indicating that the toddlers were close to sleep. “Don’t wake them.” She warned.

“Han said that you were having trouble.” Luke whispered back as he took up the same position beside her.

“He was having trouble.” She growled slightly. “I’m doing just fine.”

<I see that.> He reached out to her. <Why was he having trouble?>

Luke reached out in the Force and made some other toys levitate towards the twin’s cribs, interacting with the toys that she was already playing with.

<<They sense it.>> She said back, with sadness in her voice. <<The uneasiness, the tension, the conflict… it’s all around them, and hard to comprehend or ignore for their minds.>>

He nodded and smiled that she was so perceptive to understand the children.

<It’s hard for adults too.> He added, knowing that their time together was coming to an end.

“I know.” She was whispering, but he still heard the sadness in her voice.

One by one, the toys floated away from over the cribs, back to their place in the room, when it became apparent that the twins were sleeping.

“So what did Leia want?” Mara asked quietly distant, keeping her mind on the task.

Luke bit the inside of his lip before he decided to tell her. “She wanted to know what we want to name our children.” He said in a quiet tone.
“What?!” She asked at normal volume and the toddlers stirred.

Mara’s eyes had widened and stared at him.

He held his hand up, and put a finger to his mouth, trying to keep from laughing at her. Motioning to the door, he suggested that they should take this outside the nursery.

They got up from the floor in silence, but the shock didn’t dissipate.

When the door closed, Mara turned to Luke; her eyes still in shock.

He smiled and came in close. “They were thinking of a name for the new baby, and she wanted to know if was okay if they used ‘Obiwan’. ” He explained, partially whispering, taking the chance that she was also alright with Han and Leia’s choice.

She sighed, relieved, that there wasn’t any extra expectation for them right now, and nodded; although she liked the idea, ‘Obiwan’ wasn’t on the top of the list of names that she would call her children. Suddenly, she thought it felt strange that she even had a list.

Relaxing, she looked up at him, seeing his eyes blues filled with love, knowing that this might be the last quiet moments they could have together; who knew if they would get another chance.

Mara stepped in and placed her lips to his. Soundlessly, they took a moment that they wanted to last forever.

Luke stroked her hair by her face, and savored her lips.

The noise from the living-room broke their moment, and Luke took her hand to go back in with his family.

Leia was standing by the dining table, holding her comm unit and looked at him with cautious eyes.

“Yes General, he’s here. I’ll send him over.” The princess closed her comm, and went from being a sister to being a leader.

Luke didn’t need for her to explain, and looked at Han, and then to Mara, and back at his sister. “I guess that means that I’ll be leaving now.” He said tightly.

Mara stood, firmly planted, not sure what to do in this case, and watched as he said goodbye to his family; getting hugs and well-wished from each one.

Her eyes blinked rapidly as he turned to her.

“I have to go into a meeting.” Luke said stoically. <I’ll see you in hangar?> He asked to her mind.

Mara simply nodded, without a word- she couldn’t think of any.

He nodded once, agreeing with her, and turned to pick up his ruck sack and make his way to the door.

Leia and Han followed him, but Mara just stood watching, frozen in place; her mind blank.

The door must have closed and moments passed.

Breaking her thoughts, or lack thereof, she heard her name being called.
She twitched and looked in direction of the curious faces. “I guess that means it’s time for me to go too.” She said, putting up an effort to keep her emotions in check, not allowing them to falter.

Mara quickly thanked them for their hospitality in a rather formal manner and then excused herself.

She returned to the residence that they had shared the previous night, and tried not to remember all the intimate moments; physical or otherwise.

Something had changed in her; she was starting to feel foolish for the things she had said, things she had told him. She had vowed that she would never tell anyone.

It had opened a floodgate in her, and she was pleading that she would be able to close it again. But her agitated state told her to get to her ship as quickly as possible before it all became too much.

Grabbing her case, Mara almost ran from the residence and made her way back to the hangar.

Luke, her mind said, You promised Luke that you would say ‘goodbye’…don’t run away like a coward.

I’m not a coward! She gruffed back at her own thoughts.

In hangar, the area was alive with activity. Grounds crew ran from area to area preparing each ship.

Flight crews assemble and she could head flight formations being discussed as she walked by on the way to her ship.

Mara kept her head down and tried to think of her own issues. She hoped that Karrde had sent her some directive as to what their next step would be if only to get her mind off the present issues.

The last time that there seemed to be war impending, he had wanted to ‘go to ground’ and hide their activity in a camp instead of flying on course. That choice had cost them dearly, and it wasn’t her favorite tactic.

She walked directly up the ramp of the Verpine Cruiser and stored her gear.

Walking into the cockpit, she called up the next point that she had set in the nav computer to check her destination.

Looking up, she could see now that crews were heading for the larger transports.

Not wanting to miss Luke, she headed back down to the platform.

Mara stood under the repulse-lifts of the Cruiser, pretending to be fixing something.

She could see the entire hangar from where she was.

Although Luke went to the pilots-ready room to report in, she knew that he would have to walk past the Cruiser in order to get to his transport- and she could see him again, if only just for a moment.

She could feel a fluttering in her stomach again, but this time she knew that there would be no warmth as it grew. All she’d be left with would be a dull ache.

The large hanger doors opened to the elements, and the pre-flight sequence begun on several smaller star-fighters.

*They’re probably going to flying a perimeter before the transports land.* She told herself; strategizing
their attack plan.

Looking at the Transporters now, she examined them and found them not to be the standard units that were used. These looked like they were equipped with heavy guns, and heavy guns usually meant heavy shields.

Mara crossed her arms against her chest and squeezed herself, still feeling a bit of a cold chill.

*At least they won’t be flying unprotected.* She reasoned with her mind.

From the opposite side of the hangar, the crew doors opened. Several grounds people went running in the direction of their assigned ships.

It amazed her to watch the Resistance, made up mostly of former Rebels, go into action.

Her Imperial nature wanted to mock them, but she knew that she couldn’t. Rebels wanted to fight, Imperials were trained to fight. A good deal of psychology could argue in favor of those who had better motivation.

Most of the crew looked like they were wearing relics from the previous Rebellion…or possibly later. It was a mix-matched bunch of uniforms, but they all seemed to know what they job was.

Mara craned her neck to try and see Luke among the pilots and teams that were coming out now.

She saw Calrissian emerge from the doors. Even he was looking serious.

Half way across the platform, he turned in her direction, smirked, and gave her a lazy saluted.

Without thinking, she raised her hand and a returned a wave to him.

Calrissian smiled before he disappeared under the transport, going up the ramp.

Now, she looked around with more vigor, trying to spy Luke’s face in the crowd.

*He’s supposed to be in Calrissian’s crew…Blast it! Where is he?* She was starting to get what other people nervous.

Just then, she could feel the tingle on the edge of her mind. *<I’m on my way, Kitten…I’ll be right there.>*

Mara sighed with a huff; now she felt foolish for being on edge.

The group, coming in her direction, split, heading off in two directions, and right behind them was Luke.

He looked anything but the way people knew him to look.

Wearing a faded blue flight suit over his fatigues, his ruck sack slung over his shoulder, he looked like any of the other crew with his thrown-together uniform.

But his eyes still sparkled as he came towards her and a tight grin on his face.

Luke was sure to look around before he came closer to her.

Shifting, Mara walked around to the aft section of the Cruiser, where they could have more privacy, such as it was in a public space.
Ducking under the struts, he came to find her.

“You didn’t think that I was going to leave without saying ‘goodbye’, did you?” He asked, trying to sound charming, but she could hear the pain in his words.

Mumbling, Mara shrugged, and turned away; she couldn’t look at him right then, the feelings choking in her throat.

Luke didn’t stop to come closer, and reached out for her shoulders, gently turning her to face him, holding her a distance but keeping her grounded.

With her head down, she began spewing things from off the top of her head. “Their aim will be better.” Mara mumbled. “They don’t have the order to miss you any longer…you’re target now.”

Luke raised an eyebrow, and frowned, not understanding.

She looked up to him, fear in her eyes. “The TK’s…the troopers…The order was given, if they suspected that you were in field, that they were to shoot to wound instead of kill.” She swallowed before continuing. “That order was rescinded at Endor…that’s probably why Leia got shot.”

Mara continued, rambling; if he wasn’t holding her shoulders, she’d probably be pacing. “They’re going to fight differently now… their positioning would have changed if they’ve been trained otherwise.”

“If you have access to heavy artillery, the best place to aim at an AT-AT, is the armored tunnel joint…it has no ray shielding or extra plating.” She motioned to her neck, wanting to show the placement would on an AT-AT.

<Stop.> He said kindly in her mind, in his distinctive Jedi-voice. <I need you to stop.>

“I’m going to miss you too.” Luke said, confidently.

“I love you.” He smiled sweetly, knowing that the fear he saw was just her love for him.

“You know that we’ll see each other soon.” He lied to her, and himself; they both knew there was little chance of that. “I know it.” He tried to sound confident.

“So stop fidgeting and come kiss me.” He said in those low tones that made her shiver.

Looking up at him, her eyes were wide at his audacity.

Smirking, he stepped even closer to her; closer then what would normally be socially acceptable, closer than ‘just friends’, just closer.

Her eyes flicked around to the area. “We shouldn’t.” She whispered, and then she thought that she should try and sense if anyone was around.

Before she could come to a conclusion, he stepped in to place an arm around her waist and pulled her in, placing his lips demandingly to her.

Mara resisted until she didn’t, couldn’t, and wouldn’t deny him. Yielding, she wrapped her arms around his neck and gave in, with all her might; her lips pursed passionately against him with no care who was, or might be, looking. <<Gods, I love you so much.>> Her heart broke with those words.

The sound of the engines reaching their full power, started to blare loudly around them in the hangar, telling them that the time was coming close when Luke needed to leave.
As the kiss broke, he leaned in a few more times, just to capture her lips until the last.

He placed his forehead against hers, and she felt his sense; full of his essence. <May the Force be with you, my love.> He gently kissed her one more time.

Keeping his eyes down, Luke turned and picked up his ruck sack, heading in the direction of the loaded transport carrier.

Stunned, Mara blinked herself back into reality, and panicked. “Luke!” she called to him, stepping out from under the Cruiser.

Stopping, he turned back to see her distraught face.

“May the Force be with you!” She called to him.

Serenely, he smiled.

Reflectively, Mara gasped in her chest, and then returned a smile to him.

He turned reluctantly and walked away.

Mara stepped back into the shadow of the Cruiser until he was completely out of sight, but she could still feel him. Closing her eyes, she rested her head against the repulse-lifts in the aft section.

She heard the shift in power again from the transport, and she knew it was the final surge. The platform floor shuddered, and she knew that meant that the carrier was lifting into the air.

Feeling the heat increase in the air, she knew that the afterburner was engaged, and with a thundering roar, she knew that the carrier had departed.

As the air cooled, Mara exhaled the breath that she didn’t know she was holding, feeling Luke’s presence fade away.

A new presence came into her periphery; one that she wasn’t sure that she was ready for.

Swallowing and controlling her emotions, she repressed her feelings, trying to assemble her stoic visage.

“You okay, Kid?” Han Solo’s normally gruff tone seemed to have gone missing.

Mara looked over her shoulder, and then away, still in the process of regaining her composure. “I’m fine.” She said confidently before turning back to the other smuggler.

Solo’s eyes narrowed, and his cheek twitched to the side. “Sure you are.” He grumbled.

He gave her a few more moments in silence, to let it sink in.

“Did you see that?” She mumbled under her breath.

“You and The Kid in a lip-lock? Not one bit.” He shook his head and mumbled back.

Mara snorted, and cast a side-eye to him, almost glaring but burgeoning on a smirk.

Solo could clearly sense that they were starting to get on personal terms now; she had seen the concern in his face as he estimated the scope of mission both Luke and Calrissian were headed into. His seasoned experience knew it was going to be trouble.
If he could see her concern, then clearly she could see his, and neither of them liked that.

Solo cleared his throat. “Well, I’ve been sent to fetch you.” He said, sounding unimpressed with the task that he had been given.

Mara raised an eyebrow. “Fetch?” she repeated, slightly annoyed at their choice of words.

“How about ‘playing nice’ and come along?” He asked.

She decided not to make it difficult for either of them, and simply nodded before she stepped away from her craft and followed him.

As they walked, she could sense that he was looking for a topic to avoid the silence. She could tell that he wanted to say something like, ‘Luke will be fine’; consoling both of them.

But Mara had decided that both her and Solo lived in a world of harsh truths, and there was no sugar-coating this one. Walking in silence was preferable to telling each other white-lies.

It was a short walk, and she was surprised that he was leading her away from the residences but towards what looked like command rooms.

He stopped at the nearest door. “Well, this is where I get off.” Solo said. He nodded in the direction of the doors. “They’re waiting for you.”

She got the feeling that was also to be their ‘goodbye’.

Mara nodded. “Clear Skies Solo.” She returned. Then, she watched him turn and saunter away.

She looked back at the doors in front of her, not sure to press the release or turn and head back to her ship.

None of her senses told her that she was in peril, nor did they prepare her.

Going with her gut, she pressed the release and the doors opened. Stepping inside, the room was nothing but a modified receiving room; a circular couch and low table in it.

It reminded her of the older style of Clone-War era furniture; the almost entirely white room gave her the opinion that this was more of a formality.

There were several people in the room, waiting.

Leia came towards her to greet her, looking like the senatorial princess and not like family.

“Mara” The princess said pleasantly. “Good. You’ve decided to come.”

In her tone and in her dress, Mara could tell that Leia was prepared for business and not the usual family-friendly encounter.

General Madine turned from his Mon-Cal aid to acknowledge the other presence that had arrived. He nodded politely to the smuggler but kept his distance on the other side of the room. Finishing his work, he dismissed his aid and came forward.

Leia gestured to offer Mara a seat on the couch.

Following the polite lead, Mara walked around to front of the couch, and sat down calmly; she would be open to what they want to say or ask, for the time being.
Madine eyed her carefully before speaking. “Miss Jade, we would like to take this opportunity to thank you, again, for your assistance to the New Republic, and to the Resistance, in providing aid to both Lieutenant Skywalker, and Major Jansen on their last mission.”

Mara gave him a simple nod that still allowed him to keep an air of preservation for needing her help again.

Leia had joined her on the couch, sitting a formal distance away. “The New Republic was pleased to have them recovered…even at the loss of the other fighter pilots.” She said quietly.

“It seems that you have the innate ability to anticipate where you needed.” Madine said.

Mara shook her head ever-so slightly, about to refute that claim.

“And you have a distinct knowledge in Imperial procedure, tactics, espionage, and coding.” Madine said blankly, stating everything that they all knew to be true.

She could feel it, that he was about to come to the apex of this meeting.

“We would like to offer you a position in the Resistance.” He said, looking like he regretted his decision. “As Director of Intelligence, you would be reporting to a provisional body and making suggestions as to the information that you were able to acquire.”

Madine took the chance to swallow. “You will be allowed to choose the method by which you obtain your information, but we would request that your methods fall within the New Republic code of conduct.”

Mara exhaled slowly, remembering that Madine would have known the last Imperial Director of Intelligence, and he was probably referencing her when he gave Mara the limits of her jurisdiction.

Inwardly, she smiled, but not a pleasant smile – a knowing one. Perhaps Madine had the misfortune of meeting Ysanne Isard too.

It was a tempting offer, she had to admit. It would put her in control of the vast information around the galaxy, but her mind focused on one thing; would she be able to know about Luke and his whereabouts?

Her mind flashed on Karrde and her obligations to him.

The river of loyalty ran deep and wide inside her.

And with that, Mara made up her mind quickly.

It would be just too much of a distraction without being able to help those she cared about – it was the very thing that kept her such a well-trained machine with the Empire; if she had no one who she cared for, and no one who cared about her, she could go about her business with little concern.

She went to stand, and she could feel Leia sensing her response.

“I’d like to thank you General, and you too, Your Highness, but I will have to decline your offer.” Mara said without reservation. “I have other responsibilities that I would be required to leave, and I just can’t do that right now.”

She knew that she couldn’t leave it like this. Something that Luke once said about burning bridges itched in her mind.
“I will, however, continue to be of assistance to the Resistance and New Republic whenever I’m allowed to do so.” She paused, but felt comfortable before making her next statement. “Also, I can safely say that Talon Karrde and his organization consider themselves friends to both the Resistance and New Republic.”

Madine stood quietly until his chin rose, and he nodded, accepting her answer.

“Well.” He said. “I appreciate your candor, Miss Jade and I wish you the best of luck in your future endeavours.” His eyes glanced over to Leia, and then back to Mara. “If you’ll excuse me, I must be on my way.”

“Of course, General.” Mara said in her best military voice.

Madine straightened as he heard it and nodded once before leaving.

Mara got the sense that he would have like to have had her no-nonsense, imperial training around him again.

The door closed behind him, and Leia let out a big sigh.

Turning, Mara saw the look on the other woman’s face; one of smugness.

“I told him that you wouldn’t join us.” The former princess said, breaking character. “You’re too smart for that.”

Mara let her shoulder’s slump, and she rubbed her forehead thinking that she may have made a big mistake. “But everything I told him was correct…about Karrde…”

“You wisely left out your feelings for my brother.” Leia said. “Let’s not pretend that it didn’t factor in to it as well.”

Dropping her head, Mara walked back to the sofa and sat beside the other woman.

“It shows doesn’t it?” The smuggler sighed.

Leia scrunched up her face before nodding. “But I don’t hold it against you. I had trouble separating my feelings from the orders that I had to give Han.” She added sympathetically.

“It’s hard when you care for them.” Leia mumbled.

She let the air hang as she could sense that the smuggler was reconsidering, so she decided to change the tone while she could.

“I hope Luke didn’t scare you when he asked you about the baby names?” Leia asked as she watched Mara come back from where her mind had gone.

Shaking her head rapidly, Mara found her voice. “Ah, no…I was just a little bit surprised.” She lied.

“You were a lot surprised.” Leia said blankly. “I sensed it.”

Mara nodded agreeing with her friend.

Leia leaned back on the sofa, in a most undignified way, knowing that she could. “This baby…” She said as she started to rub her belly. “This one is going to be strong in the Force. I can tell already.”

“With the twins, I knew they were going to strong…but this one?- more than ever!” Leia began to
talk. “When you’re having a Force-strong child, everything in you gets heightened…when I meditate, I see more… in meetings, I feel more… everything is just ‘more’.”

Mara was staring at the other woman’s rounded belly, now.

Leia’s hand went to her belly and rubbed. “Boy, is he kicking today…it must have been the Corellian burger that I had a craving for last night after you two left.”

Shaking her head, Mara looked dazed at Luke’s sister, and then back at the belly.

“Do you want to feel it?” Leia asked, smiling. “Everybody else does.” She grumbled.

Mara’s mouth went slack, unsure of what to say. Part of her was curious, the other part of her was revolted for some unknown reason- probably from her own lack of experience.

Without waiting for an answer, Leia reached over and took the smuggler by the wrist and guided her hand to the place where she had last felt the kicking. “Here…” She ordered.

Sure enough, Mara could feel the bumps and thuds; she smiled in wonder.

She was about to pull her hand away, until Leia said, “Feel…” and Mara could feel Leia’s Force aura around them.

“Tell me what you see?” Leia whispered with her eyes closed.

Mara let her eyes flutter shut and did as Luke had taught her, but this time, she tried to slow all the images that were threatening to past by her, centering her attention on the little life before her.

“He’ll be strong.” Mara mumbled. “Dark hair…dark eyes…looking more like Han, but sounding more like you.”

In her vision, it wasn’t distinct; she could see a happy child and the colours that surrounded him. Slowly, the colours morphed and she could see calming purples turning into intense reds enclose the boy; his future seemed volatile and chaotic.

Then, like a scream in the vision, Mara pulled out of it immediately and pulled back her hand.

Blinking, she looked over at Leia face to see that her eyes were still closed and she was peacefully unaware of what Mara had sensed.

She kept her cool and waited for Leia to open her eyes.

“He will look a lot like Han, won’t he?” The princess asked, grinning.

_The future is always in motion_, Mara heard Luke say in her mind. She simply nodded, not wanting to alarm the mother to-be.

Leia looked down and then looked back up. She grinned tightly; it was then that Mara could see the resemblance between her and Luke – they had the same look whenever the inevitable was about to happen.

“I should be going.” Mara said quietly. “Thank you for the visit and for all you’ve done.”

Reaching over, Leia took her hand again and squeezed. “Anything for family.” She said with a smile.
Mara knew that Leia had a knack for tact, and she also knew that Leia was resisting hugging her. Giving in, she leaned over and put her arms around the other woman.

Quickly, Mara backed up and got off the sofa, feeling almost as uncomfortable as when she said goodbye to Luke.

“Clear Skies Leia.” She sighed. “And…May the Force be with you.”

Leia grinned, but sat still. “And you too.”

One more nod and Mara left the room, heading back to her Cruiser.

As she walked, she tried to think of anything but how much she was really starting to feel like a family now.

She was almost at the ramp when she heard him.

“You turned them down, didn’t you Kid?” Han Solo was leaning on one of the repulse-lifts of her Cruiser.

A quick glare at him, and she sighed. “You knew…didn’t you?- that they were going to offer me a position.”

“Yep.” He said nonchalantly. “I didn’t know for sure, but you’ve been showing up too many times for them not to.” He raised his eyebrows as he pushed himself away off the strutting. “Not that they don’t appreciate it…even if they grumble while they’re thanking you.”

“If it makes a difference, Leia was trying to talk them out of it.” He said with a bit more promise. “She didn’t want to get you involved too…its bad enough that The Kid is tangled back up in this again.”

Mara took over her gloves from her side pocket and started to get them on, shaking her head. “I just have no idea what made them ask.”

“Madine is running out of options, and doesn’t want to show his hand or explain to the New Republic why he’s been stashing an army all these years.” Solo said. “It’s hard playing two sides.”

Mara rolled her eyes. “You’re telling me.” She grumbled.

“It’s just good to have you fighting the good fight.” Han said quietly.

She turned and looked at the ramp and then back at the other smuggler; he nodded.

“Don’t worry…” He smirked, “I won’t tell on you.”

Solo turned and started heading for the hangar door, back to the residences. “Clear Skies Jade” He waved as he walked.

Mara snorted, watching him go. Of all of Luke’s family, Solo understood her best; no show, just simple and outright.

She shook her head before she turned and headed back into the ship.

Without a co-pilot, she had to set the system on ‘automatic’ but the start-up sequence went smoothly.

No sooner than she was cleared for take-off, the Verpine Cruiser was out of the hangar, and leaving
the gravity well of the orbit, headed for hyperspace.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

**
A little musical inspiration for this chapter:

"Leaving On A Jet Plane" by John Denver

All my bags are packed, I'm ready to go, I'm standing here outside your door
I hate to wake you up to say good-bye
But the dawn is breaking, it's early morn, the taxi's waiting He's blowing his horn
Already I'm so lonesome I could die
So kiss me and smile for me, tell me that you'll wait for me
Hold me like you'll never let me go

'Cause I'm leaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again
Oh, babe, I hate to go

There's so many times I've let you down, so many times I've played around
I tell you now they don't mean a thing
Every place I go I'll think of you, every song I sing I'll sing for you
When I come back, I'll bring your wedding ring
So kiss me and smile for me, tell me that you'll wait for me
Hold me like you'll never let me go

'Cause I'm leaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again
Oh, babe, I hate to go

Now the time has come to leave you, one more time let me kiss you
Then close your eyes, I'll be on my way
Dream about the days to come when I won't have to leave alone
About the times I won't have to say
Kiss me and smile for me, tell me that you'll wait for me
Hold me like you'll never let me go

'Cause I'm leaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again
Oh, babe, I hate to go
I'm leaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again
Oh, babe, I hate to go
Chapter Summary

Quote: She wasn’t about to tell him that from her experience Force-sensitives didn’t always get along. It’s not a club, she thought over to him.

Characters: Mara, Karrde, Mirax Horn, Booster, and others

Chapter Notes

OMG! I love you all...for being so patient with me to get these last few chapters out... I'm just putting the finishing touches on the next two to come after this one...

It's "Con Season" and I am cosplaying like crazy... so after the glue fumes die down than I will write more-frequently.

Also, Facebook is not my friend lately... with all those things that pull my attention away... did you know that Shannon McRandle (the body model for Mara Jade) is doing an interview/podcast tonight on 'Get Your Geek On' ? I know what I'm going to listen to...

Anyhoo, please enjoy the start of the end of this story. ~wink!

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Tashtor Sector: Takodana

“This was not in my job description.” Mara muttered as she followed behind Talon Karrde, through the thicket on the tiny moon.

On the ground, she found herself marching through another forest.

At least it wasn’t a hot and humid jungle- for which she was thankful.

The trees were high and leafy, and although the path was well-worn, this was not what she was expecting when Karrde outlined the plan to her.

They were about a kilometer from the Z-95 that they had brought down, when Karrde said from over his shoulder, “Come now Mara…Skywalker gave me the impression that you liked forests.” He smirked and continued.

If they could, her eyes would have burrowed a hole in the back of his head.

It wasn’t that she minded going through a forest, but she just wasn’t prepared for it. And she liked being prepared.
She liked knowing her environment and all the things she could expect.

This was her first time on Takodana. If she was asked about her feelings on this trip, she would have been ambiguously vague because her feeling told her so. But from her personal feelings, this trip was a welcome distraction from the things that plagued her mind.

Karrde had helped initiate this meeting, selecting the location, and it was a long time overdue.

Traders, smugglers; legal or otherwise, were all experiencing the hardships over the war.

It had been three weeks since Luke had departed for Coruscant, and aside from the occasional news report, Mara had kept her ear to the ground, listening for any evidence that he was safe.

Recently, she had stopped using, and had dismantled some of her usual networks for intelligence; mostly out after embarrassment after she had told Luke about them, and now she was regretting that she had done so.

If he had been captured, she would have heard about it.

If he had been injured, or worse, she was sure that she would have felt it.

*Gods,* she missed him.

It wasn’t just she was feeling it emotionally, but something told her in her gut that this was different. And it gnawed at her, under her skin, a creeping that never got scratched.

Her sources that she was using now, as covert as they were, mentioned the progress of the siege of Coruscant but failed to mention any unusual weapons- which was what she used to look for when reading Imperial reports, to see if someone was using a lightsaber.

As it was, the Capital was under attack, and senate had been disbanded.

Those loyal to the New Republic were forced to flee the planet; Mara knew that Luke’s mission revolved around helping those people.

Those loyal to the Empire, however, were about to find out what their loyalty was really worth.

War affected everyone, even if you weren’t in the war zone… it still found you. If the Capital was in chaos then soon the galaxy would be too.

On Takodana, a different type of war was threatening to overtake the underbelly of the galaxy.

People still needed supplies, and trading routes were being closed off one by one, causing traders and smugglers to look for new routes. Those routes were crossing into areas and territories that were mostly controlled by the less-than-reputable type of criminals.

If the Smuggler’s Alliance was still functioning, most of the minor issues would have been addressed and resolved. But without that instrument in place, minor issues rolled into larger ones.

At a breaking point, something had to be done, before matters got worse- regardless of political opinions, smugglers always looked out for themselves first. And if business was bad for one, it was bad for all.

So Mara had no real issue being called to this meeting so long as it promised results instead of furthering conflicts.
Several of the larger syndicates were reluctant to come because, given their size, no hardships had really touched them. And true to his nature, Karrde, who never truly let on to the size of his ventures, was invited, probably out respect first, and then fear, second.

This was just the final leg of their trip… on the way to The Castle.

For three days they had hovered, resting on low power, in the orbit of the Mid-rim World of Takodana in the Tashtor Sector, until they were allowed to land.

While they waited for permission, other ships started to arrive and shared the same predicament as the Wild Karrde.

When the red Nantoon Cruiser arrived, it took Karrde several minutes to talk Mara down from aiming their guns at it. It was certainly a surprise to see that the Guavian Death Gang was invited.

She started to breathe a bit easier when Booster’s Pulsar Skate had arrived, and several other “friendly” faces.

Among the other invitees to attend were The Eeb, Kanjiklub, The Ba’naad, and, astonishingly, The Xin-tu-nix Group. But a party wouldn’t be complete until a Hutt warship showed up in orbit. Mara doubted that any Hutt would actually show up, but would probably send their Major Domo in their place.

Walking behind Karrde, she could see the clearing in the forest, and the light that was coming through. As far as forests go, it wasn’t a bad one, from her experiences.

This trek was just the beginning of her journey here. Karrde had prepared her for just about every other aspect of this trip.

He was quite specific, even though he reluctantly asked for “personae” to come along. *Look as dangerous as possible.* Karrde had asked, using more words than that as he danced around a way to ask her.

He waited even longer, and used more-lengthy terms when he tried to ask if she would be receptive to playing up a relationship between the two of them.

It wasn’t beneath them to do so; they had done it before. It wouldn’t take much more than using his first name when speaking to him, a gentle touch on the shoulder, and a closer proximity when talking.

It was speculation in the eyes of the observers, and, as Karrde had mentioned, would throw off the rumors about her and Luke.

Mara knew the rules to this game. Instinctively, she took out her leather jumpsuit and put it on for this meeting, making sure all of her weapons could be visible, including the lightsaber at her waist.

But she knew there also had a business element to this clandestine gathering, so the last thing she added to her ensemble was a sleeveless, dark green leather long vest.

Sweeping her hair up into a chignon at the back of her head, she could appreciate her final look; she made the ‘attractive-deadly’ fashion plate look good on her.

Before leaving the Wild Karrde, she knew she hit the mark when she got a few raised eyebrows; even Karrde suppressed a proud grin at seeing her.
But, tromping through a forest in this outfit was not what she intended.

Still, she wanted to make a good impression, especially when she had heard the final detail of this meeting.

She had to work extra hard not to let her face betray her excitement.

Myths, rumor, and curiosity had lit her imagination. For years now, and even during her time in service to the Empire, she had heard the stories… and she wondered if they were true.

On this small Rim World, hiding out in the open, was one of the last vestiges of sanctuary; the castle of the infamous Maz Kanata.

During the war, it was a protected retreat, honored by Rebel and Imperial alike; Mara had been given strict instructions not to disturb the peace on this moon, and so, she had never visited it.

There were only two rules; no fighting and no politics. In short, don’t bring your war here.

And reining court over it all, was the strong and tenacious Maz Kanata.

For over a thousand years, the Takodanian had kept this residence and had built it up. The Castle, as well as being a half-decent watering hole in the Rim, had become a refuge for all sorts. Nothing happened on Takodana without Kanata’s say so.

Pre-emptively, Karrde clued Mara in on a piece of knowledge about their host, and was probably rumor as well, but no harm in mentioning it.

“Just a warning…” Karrde said as he looked up from his console as he gave her the agenda. “The word is that Kanata might be Force-sensitive, and will be probably be curious about you.”

His eyes changed with a slight cautionary look. “Don’t try to hide it, if she does ask… it won’t go well if you do.” He said simply.

This was certainly getting interesting now. Mara had pondered it after she was told. Maz Kanata, Force-sensitive?

During her service to the Empire, she was under the delusion that many Force-sensitives had been eliminated, but then, she was under so many other delusions at the time that she had lost count of what was real, and what wasn’t.

The pathway from the landing site was clear and well-worn, showing that this was a common site. As they emerged from the woods, Mara could see that other groups had been set upon their own paths, all heading to the stone structure in the distance.

Another kilometer and they would be there.

The rules to the is meeting were simple too; one boss and one assistant, only; weapons allowed but must be checked when arriving. Random lawlessness was now outlawed under Maz’s command and protection.

On a wider path, Mara could now walk beside Karrde and not behind him.

“Do you really think we’ll accomplish anything here?” She asked, knowing that he had other motives.

They weren’t hurting yet, as business, but they could be.
Since the war had intensified, shipments had been boarded, confiscated, or impounded, and clients were not happy.

She saw Karrde’s cheek twitch. “I'm always optimistic.” He said in under tones, but his senses said otherwise.

“Of course you are.” She muttered sarcastically beside him.

“My goals may not be not entirely clear...” Karrde said, without his usual mirth. “But my problems are similar to everyone else coming here.”

Mara sighed quietly as they walked; there was just the sound of their footsteps on the path.

“I think those goals would be more-achievable if I knew what they were.” She said, without malice watching the path in front of her.

Karrde snorted beside her. “And what do you think my goals should be?”

She shot him a side glance. It never ceased to amuse her how many times he still questioned her perspective. He could keep his game to himself, but he still wanted her input.

If he wanted it, he was going to get it.

“I think you need to secure your lines.” She said succinctly. “I think you need to share more runners…and get more runners… smaller ones.”

He looked over to her, keeping a comfortable walking pace.

“No more large freighters…no more multi-client shipments. Large ships draw attention to our business.” Mara completed her first thought.

“And then…” She started her second point. “I think we should go to ground, and take the Wild Karrde down for a while. It’s time to make another base.”

This time she sensed his surprise.

“And why do you think that I should do that?” Karrde asked, keeping his cool tone.

Mara looked over to him when she sensed that now he was closing himself off without realizing that he was doing it; she smirked as it was one thing that she appreciated about him. Others were so easy to read, she liked that he wasn’t.

“The ship has a reputation…and your allegiance hasn’t gone unnoticed.” Pausing, she added. “Our allegiance.” She said quietly.

Mara had to inwardly cringe as she knew that it had been her actions too that had help perpetuate these stories.

It was becoming known that not only did Karrde run shipments for the New Republic but he, and his staff, had aided them on several occasions, not to mention, the rumors of the Jedi love-affair.

To sell the idea that he wanted to stay neutral was a tough buy, and he knew it.

Karrde might like the people in the New Republic, counted them as friends, but even she could not confirm his political leanings.
Without needing to sense him, a tingle in her mind started. She gave into the urge and flipped open her data pad, and checked the agenda, and smiled.

Then, *she knew*.

Closing the pad, she raised her head, and kept her pace beside him.

“You’re going to ask Maz for refuge for the *Wild Karrde*, aren’t you?” Her tone didn’t sound like she was asking; she was sure of it.

Karrde adjusted his shoulders, appearing to anyone else to that he was preparing to present himself as they neared the castle. But she could sense that he was ruffled by her directness.

“Are you sure of that?” His voice dropped, and he seemed even more-composed than usual.

Mara took the moment to pause; Karrde trusted her and her opinions. He was also learning to trust her abilities in the Force.

“I think you should.” She said blankly. “It makes the most sense.”

They walked closer.

“Takodana has been known to be hideaway for smugglers from time to time.” Mara looked back at the forest that they had just left, assessing it, then turned back. “*The Wild Karrde* would fit nicely inside that dried out ravine behind us. And Aves was impressed with communication array here.”

Karrde lifted his chin as he walked, appearing to consider her words. She felt his senses slip a bit.

“You don’t think it would be surrendering?” He asked as his tone dropped again.

She narrowed her eyes as he revealed his true motivation: he was trying to save his appearance.

“Surrendering?” Mara repeated, almost scoffing. “It’s self-preservation, if anything…it’s a smart move. We go to ground…we run smaller shipments and we wait out this war.”

Karrde raised his eyebrows but stayed silent.

“The only issue that I can see is that the profits will take longer to find us.” She said, finishing her argument.

With a snort, he tilted his head. “And there it is…*the profits*.” He said mercurially.

She sighed. *And there is was*… “Our margins will be smaller, but our operating costs will be smaller too.” She pointed out.

“We can do it.” She said quietly and confidently.

“We can.” Karrde said; his eyes narrowed as he spotted other colleagues in the distance, approaching at the same time they were, and he nodded in greeting. “But…” He spoke, knowing that the other party was too far away to hear their conversation.

“But what?” she asked intensely.

He snorted again, appreciating her passion. “We have to get Maz to *like us*…and to allow us set up here.”
Mara stopped in her tracks and watched him take a few more paces before she stepped up to join him.

It all made sense now; he had warned her about Maz because if Maz was indeed Force-sensitive, it might be a bargaining chip that would help land them a bit of a real estate for the time that they needed it.

He was assuming that they would find camaraderie in their shared knowledge of the Force; that it would be the “in” he needed.

She wasn’t about to tell him that, from her experience, Force-sensitives didn’t always get along. *It’s not a club,* she thought over to him.

She really had no idea what he expected to gain from this; sometimes his logic irked her, just as much as Luke’s naivety used to.

Mara simply nodded, telling him that she caught his meaning. This was not the place to disagree with him as she could sense that the population around them had grown, and were no doubt, being watched.

They were coming up to the ridge and until this point The Castle was just a stone structure in the distance. It would be a brief downward path to get to the plateau that the structure was placed on.

It was bigger than she thought it was; Karrde had described it as part lodging and part ancient palace. And it was.

From here, Mara could see that the structure was quite massive and several hundred flags waved from it spires.

It wasn’t as big as the palace on Coruscant, but it was impressive nonetheless.

A small stone rampage encircled the structure, closed with a frail-looking metal gate that was, at present, closed.

It was symbolic, if anything.

No one would move until those gates opened. It was Kanata’s way of giving permission for everyone to be there.

It wasn’t a long wait until a droid came from behind the gates, and unlatched the simplistic holding and opened each side.

Walking down the ridge, she could see that Karrde’s posture began to change. His shoulders were set back, and seeing the others were now descending from their side of the ridge, Mara could see why; her own senses told her to be on guard.

From this vantage point, she could see the blue plated armor that The Eeb chose to wear though their alien exoskeleton protected them.

The Hutt had sent Twi’lek representatives; it looked like there were two different sets of Hutt delegates; four of them clustered together.

Mara switched her hiss to a relaxed sighed as she tried to hide her disdain at the red and black uniforms of the Guavian Death Gang approached. Stranger still, from behind their boss, came a familiar face.
Namta Tik frowned as he saw Karrde and Mara walking together.

When last they had left him, Tik was floating away in his de-flunked cruiser, his plan to turn Karrde, and his organization, over to the Imperials, thwarted.

*Emperor’s black bones! The slimy little jigmit had gotten back into their good graces.* She thought.

She returned his glare with a smug tight mouth.

Her lips parted, appearing if she was relaxing her mouth. “Did you see that?” She asked without her lips moving.

Karrde inhaled deeply. “Yes, I did…*interesting.*” He hissed as he exhaled.

*It’s a good thing that we’re meeting under a banner of truce.* She nodded once over to Tik, indicating that she wouldn’t be the one to break the peace.

A holler from another hill brought her out of her thoughts. Mara turned her head in the direction of the sound.

She had never seen the Wrenwig aliens that had reputedly ran the Xin-tu-nix Group but here, two of them had certainly seen her, and they weren’t happy.

Clearly, they had heard that she had something to do with their removal from the Trader’s Guild and the enforcement of their organization being sent underground again.

Karrde didn’t seem phased by their expression of hostility. “I wouldn’t worry about it.” He said casually. “They have very few friends here…and they have only themselves, and their greed, to blame.”

He kept his head held high and looked out, and she saw almost a smirk forming and then hide itself again.

Mara relaxed, followed his gaze, and saw the reason for his composure other than his natural state.

Limping to the top of the ridge directly across from them, Booster appeared, walking on a cybernetic cane, with Mirax at his side.

She turned her attention back to her boss, not wanting to appear that she was glad to see someone who she was beginning to consider a friend.

Appearances and reputations were everything at a meeting like this; keeping their alliance a secret, Booster and Karrde still kept up the charade of indifference in public.

Mara could safely assume that more of her skills would be needed here as it would probably be expected for her to communicate wordlessly to the other party without anyone noticing.

One by one, each group came forward and entered through the gate and into the grounds of The Castle.

Mara had watched as Booster and Mirax had entered, and she wondered if Booster’s impairment was all an act. It wouldn’t be unlike him to do such a thing.

Karrde must have thought the same thing because she was sure that she saw his mouth twitched as he watched as daughter helped lead her elderly father down the ridge towards The Castle.
When it was their turn, Karrde took the first few steps and Mara followed a short distance behind him.

She made the effort to keep her eyes forward, force out the influence of those around her and put her energy in being Karrde’s second in command; an achievement that she prided herself on.

Inside The Castle’s gate, Mara tried to not let her attention get distracted by so many of the flags that hung down into the courtyard. She saw the colours of the Mandalorian’s nestled beside the flag belonging to the 501st Legion, and she inwardly gasped at the thought.

Karrde paused briefly before going up the few stairs in front of them, giving the group ahead of them time to be received.

Inside the fortress, Mara’s eyes took a moment to adjust to the dimness.

She wasn’t surprised by the surroundings; it was neither grand nor destitute. Kanata has clearly kept up the building. It was clean by most standards, and looked like a fine watering hole as if ever one was needed.

The set up was such that the groups could fine their own nook in the main room, while keeping any eyes on the room and the door.

The receiving droid quickly scanned each of them as them entered; the sensor beeped strangely as it hovered over Mara’s lightsaber but the droid let it pass.

After Karrde spoke with the receiving droid, he motioned Mara to follow him to their own corner of the room.

She slid into the booth behind the table and Karrde gave her a knowing smirk as he watched her.

From the corner of her eye, her gaze flicked over to him and then back at the door and room. “What?” She muttered as she caught his look.

“I’ve noticed something about you.” Karrde said calmly, signaling the service droid to come over to take their drink order.

She glanced over at him and frowned openly, but not waiting for him to explain, she turned her leery gaze back out at the crowd.

“You always sit with your back up against a wall.” He said blankly. “I assume it’s probably habit from some other training?”

Mara didn’t bother to react; she could tell when he just said things to see if he could try and get a rise out of her.

“It’s true.” She replied blankly.

The droid returned and delivered their drinks; Karrde pushed one of the glasses in front of her.

“This way I can see the door and possible escape routes.” Mara finished, not taking her eyes off the room, but taking the drink in front of her and bringing it to her lips. “Old habits die hard.” She snorted, and then her tone changed as she had just been found out.

“Why do you always look so calm?” She asked tartly, turning it around on him.
Karrde finished sipping his own drink. “Because I have you.” He said behind the rim of the glass before putting it down.

She snorted quietly before she took another sip, and watched as Booster and Mirax from across the room.

Mara’s eyes zeroed in on Mirax, and she watched her carefully. Her senses tingled, nudging her to go over and talk to the other woman.

*All in good time*, she told her senses. She knew it was just the Force being pushy again.

More and more frequently her Force senses had been flaring, and she didn’t like it.

Silently, she blamed Luke and his influence.

Sighing before taking another sip of her drink, she felt the ache that always followed after she thought about him.

Yes, it was his fault but she also knew that she had him to thank. Never-before in her life, did she feel comfortable using her Force abilities.

The power that she used to call on felt unnatural to her. Through force of habit, it did become natural; too natural for her liking.

It took years of separating herself for her former life to teach her to call on a different type of power.

For the most part, around others, she dared not display them. In seclusion in her room, she could practice her skills as she liked.

In Luke’s latest push towards Jedi training, he had given her a copy of Kenobi’s journal.

At first, she approached it as she did with the other readings until she realized that this journal wasn’t just the random thoughts of a wandering Jedi.

Kenobi had a different moral compass than she has suspected, and proving to be a slightly-more interesting read than she had intended.

Once she had heard Luke quote “a different point of view”, but now, she was starting to understand what it meant.

This Jedi had a fluid view of the galaxy and that the truth was what was presented and not always that which was directly in front of you.

The Sith seemed to be the rigid ones, speaking in direct terms; an article either was or wasn’t, and no in between.

Once again, both points of view could be accurate; a never-ending conundrum for her. Mara could appreciate seeing both sides, but in the end, she preferred a definitive answer.

Kenobi had written in his journal periodically, and it was lengthy in some parts. Mara preferred to read it aloud in her room; it seemed like the Jedi Master was there with her when she did, and it made her feel less alone.

There was something in his manner that did not always align with all the Jedi principles; writings were less formal than other Jedi, and he did question his purpose and direction.
These were things that Mara had never read in any other Jedi materials from the documents that the doctors had provided to her and Luke.

Even Luke seemed to follow the Jedi code and principles without question sometimes, so Kenobi’s approach was refreshing.

Kenobi had been quite a character, not what she expected out of a Jedi Master at all.

At the beginning of his journal, he was a young man, with aspirations, with eagerness. He wrote sporadically, and that showed he was possibly less dedicated or indoctrinated as she was lead to believe.

In his writing, she could feel his sense of frustration when his Master Qui’Gon Jinn, repeatedly told him to keep his mind in the ‘now and present’, and his reluctance to do just that, feeling his attention pulled in a million different directions all at once.

Mara could relate. So many times when she meditated, she could feel the pull to be in many places, feeling that they needed her. She wondered if Luke felt that way, and why he was always rushing off to solve some problem.

She could deny it all she wanted, but this was the first Jedi writing that was ringing true to her, not including the book of Kynthelig art that Dr. Massian had given her.

Now, she alternated between reading Kenobi’s journal and looking through the book of art before she meditated.

And in honesty, she found herself meditating more frequently than she used to; dedicating at least an hour to it before she went to bed, and waking early to do in the mornings.

Before bed, she would read from the journal, calming her mind. In the morning, the rapid visions still occurred and revived her the working day. It was a nice balance between the two.

Even Karrde had noticed a difference when she returned, and had called her “even keeled” over a week ago.

She still shot him a glare, but accepted it as a compliment.

It wasn’t just the meditation that she found fascinating in Kenobi’s book, but she found herself hunting through the journal for short stories about Luke, or she assumed that it was Luke in the journal.

Kenobi didn’t name him specifically, obviously, but he would call Luke “the child” or “the boy”, and a strange one, but she thought might have been a term of endearment, “the mouse”.

_The child had a mishap the other day, and is now recovering nicely; concerned that he doesn’t know his own limitations yet. He reaches beyond what is in front of him._

_The boy is getting bigger and more inquisitive; such a curious mind for one so young._

_The mouse eats like he’s starving, but he smiles a lot and is willing to share. So generous and conscious._

She found a short story about Luke, or she presumed was Luke; he had a severe heat fever. His aunt was quite afraid and very thankful that the Jedi had been around to apply his healing techniques. It sounded serious given his age.
But what stuck her was that Kenobi mentioned something about using a suppression over the boy, trying to hide his Force gifts.

He had briefly removed the block, put Luke in a healing trance, and then put the block back in place after Luke was out of jeopardy.

And it seems he stood watch over him, trying to hide Luke’s presence.

*He is not ready,* he wrote. *His aura would be too bright, and his awakening would be noticed. He’ll sleep for a few more years, until he is ready.*

No wonder Luke had started his training so late; his gifts were repressed from him.

Unlike her, he had no idea what the Force was, or even that he was gifted with it.

And Kenobi was right to do it too; he would have ‘burned too bright’ for anyone, the Emperor, to not notice him.

From what she knew, Luke had only discovered his gifts within a day of destroying the Death Star, and thwarting Darth Vader.

Strangely though, at the time, she wasn’t aware that another Force-user had been found when she felt so attune to her own gifts.

The other part of the journal that she found herself searching for, were the directions to make a lightsaber using either a natural Kaiburr crystal or making one.

Mara knew that Luke had made one himself with limited materials.

Kenobi had written several times of the different ways that he approached the construction. But he also relayed that a lightsaber wasn’t just a weapon, but a connection, a sign of dedication, and a projection of the self.

In every sense, each one was true.

She could remember the first time she had heard the hum of a lightsaber. It was a tone that called her, and mesmerized her. She could feel the pull of it, and felt that it was part of who she was.

Even though she was gifted the workings of her first lightsaber with the magenta blade, she knew it was mark of a commitment, regardless of who it was in the name of.

Reading and re-reading this section made her determined to one day make her own lightsaber whether or not she decided to become a Jedi.

In the margins of the scanned journal, she could see the hand-written notes beside each step. Smiling, she assumed that this was where Luke had made his own comments as to his success.

He had underlined several steps and noted, *Follow Precisely! No Fingerprints on the crystal!*

He had crossed out some of the comments and changed them to his own findings; he noted where he had to set the baker to a different temperature than Kenobi had indicated, and had updated the technology that he now had available, preferring a lithium power cell over the carbon switch.

She could see him, in her mind as she meditated after reading that section, as he crafted his weapon and his connection to the Force.
It was a strange vision to have; watching Luke from afar. She could watch him from every angle, walking around him, and she could sense what he was feeling as he did it; the weight of needing to save his friends, as he was on his way to Jabba’s, and feeling the constant oppression from sensing Vader.

Pulling out of the vision, she was still amazed that her visions seemed so real and vivid.

Luke had told her that her visions were different than his, differing in intensity and accuracy; her visions were not as obscure as his were.

In the main room of The Castle, she blinked quickly and took a sip from her drink, bringing her out of her haze; this was not the place to get distracted.

She took two long sips before she assessed the room again. This time, Mara looked around at the structure of the room.

Nooks and alcoves framed the outside walls, giving privacy. It was a contrast to the open gaming areas where anyone could see the action and activity.

In the far corner, Mara watched as a band of aliens set up their musical instruments; their host had thought enough to keep the mood congenial.

Glancing upwards, a quick movement caught her eye.

Watching from the balcony that encircled the room, Mara was sure that she had seen someone or something moving around up there, looking down.

“What is it?” Karrde asked; bringing her even-more into the present.

“Nothing.” She muttered quickly. She didn’t want him to think that she was slacking off her duties.

Looking around the room one more time, it was clear that all parties concerned, were present and accounted for.

“Is it time for me to go to work yet?” Mara asked, bring the glass to her lips one more time before polishing off her drink.

Karrde relaxed back into the booth, making himself comfortable, and pulling out his data pad and sliding it in her direction.

“I trust you.” He said quietly.

She knew it was a compliment but she still narrowed her eyes before she took the pad and opened it to read the itinerary of details that had to be sorted out.

Mara slid out from behind the booth and started to make her way through the crowd, keeping her sights and senses opened.

It wasn’t a hostile room – far from it. Karrde had friends in every corner, but not openly.

Smugglers were an odd bunch; secret alliances were born and destroyed almost every day. Relationships turned on a credit.

Secretly, Mara still suspected that the day would come when Booster would turn on Karrde, but she wasn’t about to admit that to him.
She came to the booth that housed the priority of the day.

The Yathons were running chromium lately, and the price had dropped to a price that Karrde had a client that was willing to pay.

With fifty thousand units purchased, the Yathons gladly celebrated, offering to send a drink over to Karrde; Mara accepted the drink on her boss’s behalf.

The traditional drink for Yathons was equally pungent and salty, and with a grimace, it went down, sealing the deal.

They seemed surprised that she could finish it all, and then celebrated again that someone survived their drink.

Finishing her business there, Mara went to her next task, while keeping her eyes on Karrde’s booth.

From her vantage point, she could see that a representative from the Guavian Death Gang was standing in front of Karrde. Her senses weren’t flaring, and Karrde didn’t look worried.

The conversation looked one-sided, with the Guavian gesturing, and Namta Tik looking penitent.

After Karrde nodded, the representative walked away, and Karrde looked satisfied.

Mara let out the breath that she didn’t know she was holding.

She went back to check her data pad, to see what her next duty required of her.

Feeling the tingle in her sense, her hand slid to the hilt of the lightsaber at her hip. But the tingle changed; it didn’t feel threatening, just inquisitive, like a stroking of her hair….and then, moved on.

Hidden in a corner, Mara reached out her feelings, just to touch back, searching for who might be looking for her too.

Was this the infamous Kanata sizing her up?

The other sense seemed amused and then in a flash, it was gone.

Mara frowned before she went back to her data pad.

If the other presence wanted to contact her, then it would have to be them who would do the venturing; she was not here to play games.

Although her next duty would play out very much like a game; the game of out-maneuvering someone.

Prav Kione was a small-time operator who was looking to move up in the galaxy. He recently had one of his largest ships impounded on Pherouz.

Karrde happened to “own” some of the docks on Pherouz.

Kione also had good relations with the Hutts.

Karrde needed some decoders that only the Hutts seemed to carry.

Mara sighed as she knew what she needed to do; he wasn’t he easiest man to find.
Spying him; he was lurking and watching the going-on of the room with a please smile on his face.

“Prav…” She smiled as she approached him at the end of the bar. “Why are you hiding so far from everyone else?”

She had only met him once before this, but in business she knew how to make it sound like everyone was a long-time friend.

To be truthful, she didn’t mind talking to Prav. He was a handsome human, or that’s what he appeared to be to everyone else.

Secretly, she had known of him since her days working for the Empire. “The Mirror” was what he was called.

Mara knew that Prav was a Changeling; a gifted one too. Rumor had it that he could change into anyone that he wanted.

He was called “The Mirror” because rumor had it that he would regularly change into the person that he had just met with to steal their identity.

However, she also knew that he was deep into the ethics of Changeling society; and there were many rules to navigating that road.

“Marrrrra” He drawled out, rolling his “r’s” as he did. “What a horrrrible place to find you in?”

She smirked obligingly, knowing that his snobbish nature hated being here. She would have given fifty credits to see him walking through a forest.

Sitting close to him at the bar, she leaned in close. “Prav…” she said his name just to get his attention. “For the record, you don’t have my permission to replicate me.” She said in hushed tones, making sure he heard.

He tisked loudly and then turned slightly away from her, pouting; annoyed that she clearly knew the rules to Changeling mimicking.

Most people didn’t know if they were talking to a Changeling or not, but the rule was that a Changeling was not allowed to replicate someone if that person strictly forbid it.

Most Changelings couldn’t replicate a specific person, but those who could were in high demand.

His eyes glanced over to see that she was looking at him flirtatiously.

Mara let her grin turn into a smile.

No harm done; Prav wasn’t bad to look at…Luke wouldn’t mind if she spent some time with a handsome young man. Besides, if the rumors were true, then Luke was probably more Prav’s type than she was.

Prav seemed to forgive her, and turned back in her direction.

“Alrrrrright.” He agreed but he still tried to attain the unattainable. “But what about…?”

“No replicating Karrde or Skywalker either.” She ordered quietly; mentioning the two men that were famous enough in the underworld that would garnish attention.

“If you promise not to replicate them, then I promise not to tell anyone that you’re… you.” She
winked, keeping it playful.

Changelings weren’t always a welcomed bunch, especially in a room full of anxious smugglers.

Prav frowned, but nodded.

“Now… I’m sure I can interest you in something else.” Mara purred over, while pressing the button on her data pad, showing an image of his freighter that was impound. “Do you feel like making friends?”

A sly look crossed Prav’s face; she also knew that he would much rather have a friend like Karrde then a group of Hutts as clients.

If body language could speak, it would have looked like she had found some company, but each of them was playing a game, and those who were watching were probably confused by the dynamics.

Speaking closely and feigning flirtation made for quick negotiation, and in the end Kione was easy to work with, even though he seemed put-out that Karrde wasn’t romantically available either.

Another deal resolved.

Mara checked her data pad to see her next goal.

She looked around for where her next quarry might be.

Again, there was a touch on her senses.

Looking at her bare arm, the fine hairs had stood straight up, and her skin dimpled. It used to do the same thing before Luke used to reach out to her.

The presence didn’t wisp by her; this time it lingered. It was curious, and wordlessly asking her to reach back.

Without knowing the presence, Mara held herself from returning the gesture.

*It's not a club.* She mentally said to herself and presence, repeating what she had expressed to Karrde; not in a cold manner but merely in a way to preserve herself.

The presence didn’t feel intrusive or malevolent, but there was no way of knowing that it wasn’t.

Pulling back, the presence was quickly gone again.

Mara took a cleansing breath in hopes that no one saw that she was pre-occupied; a moment’s hesitation could show a sign of weakness.

It took her a moment to navigate to her next meeting. A place like this was bound to have some sort of hidden stair well that would lead her to the top floor.

Sure enough, behind a large pillar, she found the steps leading up.

Mara glanced to Karrde one more time to see that he was joined in the booth by a Toosh that she didn’t recognize, but clearly, Karrde did as they laughed together.

From the over-hanging balcony, she would get a better look at what was going while she did what she needed to.
At the top of the stairs, she caught a glimpse of the party that she was destined to meet; and she genuinely grinned before suppressing it.

Mirax was leaning on the opposite side of a corner support, trying to look like she had nothing better to do.

Mara made sure that she wasn’t so hasty as to walk directly over to the other woman; there were eyes up here too.

There were a few others up here, but none of them seemed to be any threat.

It was early in the day, but there was one of the Eeb who was already drunk off his feet, slouched up against a wall; his armor was supposed to have a filtration system to remove intoxicants but clearly, his armor wasn’t working.

Quickly, she reached out to make sure that he was unconscious, and indeed, he was.

Stepping over the alien’s out-stretched legs, Mara casually made her way over to the corner support. She leaned on her side of the post. “Good view from up here.” She murmured, watching Karrde’s new Toosh friend leave the booth.

“Just of Karrde…Pops is hiding in his nook.” Mirax commented back.

Mara heard the sharp taps on the post and caught on immediately, hearing the words in her head as she translated them.

…good to see you… we weren’t sure that you would make it...

Tapping back, Mara sent her share of the message.

…almost didn’t…got side tracked… and you know how business is right now…. …. how was your trip on the Liberty? How’s Corsec?

Mara heard the snort.

… I didn’t know that you called him that…. Mirax sent back. …good…he was good…nervous… they sent him out… flying missions, I think…I haven’t heard from him in over two weeks…there’s been a communication blackout since Coruscant…. She paused … and you?

Mara felt the stab in her feelings, but breathed it out before answering.

… three weeks now… I haven’t heard… he was sent to Coruscant with the Resistance....

She could hear Mirax sharply inhale at the mention of the Capital; everyone knew what a messy war-zone it could become.

…no news is good news…. Mara sent over; trying to convince herself.

It was time to move; staying in one place for too long was not a good thing.

Mara decided to go walk the corner of the post and come face to face with the other woman.

Extending her hand, Mirax was ready with a small data card.

She couldn’t help but smile. At least they both knew that business came first.
Placing the data card into her pad, the credits uploaded nicely and Mara handed the card back after the transfer was complete.

Mirax nodded and smiled as she took the card back and slipped it inside her tunic. She moved away from the railing and flattened herself against the back wall, into the shadows.

Standing at the railing, Mara paused before she joined her.

“I didn’t expect *the Liberty* to be so big.” Mirax said, wearing a sad-grin.

Mara knew it wasn’t easy being with the one your loved-one, yet knowing that you had to leave almost immediately.

“The selenium drive is double ray shielded for efficiency.” Mara mumbled absently, at a loss to share her feelings; thinking about her time on the same ship, deflecting her own feelings on the matter.

“What?” Mirax asked, surprised at such an odd thing to say.

“Nothing.” Mara mumbled and shook her head, wanting to change topics. “You look good though.” *Too good.* Her mind thought back rapidly. Slowly, a different type of tingle started.

“Really?” Mirax asked as she went to rub her forehead. “I’ve been so tired lately.”

It wasn’t general nature for smugglers to admit where they had weaknesses, and Mara was surprised that she was hearing such a personal detail from the other woman.

There was a spike in her tingling senses, screaming for her to take some sort of action; a poking, an impatient nudging to search the other person.

Tilting her head to the side, Mara frowned before she decided that she would do it; she would reach out in her senses, even though she knew it would be like sending up a flag to any other Force-user in the area, including the one that had been following her.

Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly, fluttering her eyes and reaching out from her greater-self.

In an instant, she opened her eyes and smiled, and then closed her sense back down.

Mirax looked over to the other woman when she noticed that there was silence between them, only to be met with Mara’s knowing smirk.

“Well...Have you counted your days?” Mara asked quietly; silently smirking, knowing something that the other smuggler didn’t know.

The look on Mirax’s face said it all; fading from one expression to another until she came to the same realization of what she had just been told.

“No...” She gasped; Mirax held her abdomen. “I’m not evening late...*at least, I don’t think I am.*” She whispered surprised. “Do you think that I am?”

Leaning back against the wall, Mara watched as unchecked emotions seemed to come off a usually guarded person, amused. She waited until Mirax stopped and looked over to her.

She nodded and stayed silent.

From what she could sense, Mirax was indeed pregnant; not too far along, but there was a sense of life coming from her, other than just hers.
Mara watched as the other woman was still in shock as tears of happiness seemed to form in her eyes.

Watching, she felt envious, that something so small could make someone so happy. *One day, Mara told herself, this will be me.*

Lost in her own thoughts, Mara waited until Mirax began to compose herself, bringing back her usual stoic nature.

“Cor will be so happy…” Mirax whispered, still smiling. “He wants to be a father so badly… And Pops… he will be a *Poppa*…”

Mara reached over and touched her friend’s hand, thinking of the idea of Booster being called ‘Poppa’. She just couldn’t see it, not yet.

Mirax clasped her hand, and squeezed before she nodded and released it, in gratitude.

They both knew their time was limited, before they would be missed or their presence would be noticed as speaking to each other when their bosses were supposed to be rivals.

It was a pleasant reprieve, but it was time to get back to business.

It was Mirax who broke with the separation between their friendship and work. “Pops is going to wait out the war in the Tion Cluster.” She said quietly, knowing that this information wasn’t going to be widely known, but Karrde would want to know.

Mara nodded, aware of the cost of what was just offered, so she paid up with her share, “Karrde is going to ground the *Wild Karrde*, and going to ask Kanata for sanctuary until it’s over.” She replied with what she knew would be true soon enough.

From the corner of her eye, Mara saw Mirax nod with understanding.

Mirax shifted her shoulder from off the wall and turned in, so that her back was to the wall. “There’s something else.” She spoke in even lower tones; her face pinched with concern.

Keeping her expression neutral, Mara knew that Mirax was blocking her face from being read by anyone who might be watching.

“The Hutts…” Mirax said. “They’re going to start searching their sector -they’ve made a deal with the New Imperials to turn over the Rebels…. They know that there’s a base somewhere in their sector.”

Holding herself, Mara let nothing slip, but in her mind, she knew immediately that it would put the Resistance, as well as the Solos at risk.

Tampering down her immediate panic and concern, she conservatively whispered, “Thank you.”

Mirax looked down, then looked up, and paused before her lip twitched in a grin. “And, *thank you.*”

One more knowing glance, and she turned and walked away, disappearing back down the hidden staircase.

Mara stepped back up to the rail, and looked down in room, watching from her perch. She zeroed in over to her boss again, to see what he was up to without her.

Sitting back in the booth, Karrde was checking his data pad, when he looked up and started
searching the crowd. It was clear that he was looking for her; she should have been back by now.

Her mind was now racing with how she was going to achieve getting a message to Leia without alarming or notifying anyone else. But her practiced façade wasn’t going to crack that easily.

She pushed her weight off the rail and made her way to the staircase.

At the main level, she started to make her way through the crowd, and surprised that all the tension that was felt when they had first arrived seemed to have left the room, somewhat.

It was amazing with what a bit of alcohol could achieve. However, with too much intoxicants, all new grudges could be made just as easily.

Mara was half way through the room when she felt it again; the search, the inquisitive entity who refused to reveal themselves.

She was done with being flippant at being probed. Throwing up all her personal shields, shutting off her sense, she became instantly more-attentive and visually searched the room for the being who would have felt such a large push-back.

In the crowd, she saw it… them. The one who must have been trying to get her attention.

Her eyes narrowed, tracking her prey as the crowd parted and clearly made room for the being that was trying to get away.

She couldn’t see the alien, but she knew that they were diminutive in stature, compared to the rest of the gathering.

Following the direction left by the movement, Mara wasn’t about to let this go.

Karrde could wait.

The pursuit led to the area far back behind the bar, where two sets of stairs awaited her; one ascending, and one descending into the depths of the castle.

Her training her told her that those who were being pursued favored going down, but logic told her that going up was the best way to avoid being caught.

She looked both up and down, and chose the obvious route, slightly regretting how simple it had become; as if they wanted to be found out.

Mara shook her head, and gave in, walking down the stone steps in front of her.

The presence wasn’t evening trying to hide themselves now; she could sense it even though she had closed off her own energy.

It was daring her to find them.

Her footsteps made no noise, naturally, taking each movement cautiously; her eyes darted around her surroundings.

Whoever she was following was lucky that her senses told her not to pull out her blaster.

The lower level revealed a long alcove with rooms jettisoning off from the main hallway.

The movement of a shadow told her where to go.
Leerily, Mara followed, looking around as she walked; a strange aura was down here; voices and memories were alive down here.

A strange echo from all the activity on the upper level had drifted down the stairs too.

She was closer to the nook where the shadow had disappeared, but then, she stopped, and stood straight, and new feeling seeped in.

Mara felt foolish as she sensed it.

Her quarry was now behind her. Clearly, they knew the pathways of The Castle. And they were laughing at her.

She also sensed it, before she would turn to face them; they had come out of hiding, and was watching her now, still mockingly amused.

“And here I thought that you would never get around to finding me.” The voice snorted jovially at vanquishing Mara and her reputation.

Suppressing her embarrassment, Mara turned to meet her quarry.

TBC
Chapter Summary

Quote: Watch, when this one gets older, I’m sure he will be the same way…. grumbling his way around the galaxy.

Characters: Mara, Maz Kanata, Karrde

Chapter Notes

OMG! Sorry folks...cosplay is taking FOR-ever!

It's almost done... Con is in 3 days... and then, when I suffer with the 'wrath of con' (sorry for the Trekkie pun), I will write more...

And only 2 more chapters left to this story.... bum-Bum-BUM!!!!

So enjoy it while you can!

Hope you like this installment? Cheers!

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Tashtor Sector: Takodana

Turning in the direction of the voice, Mara squinted to see the form hiding in the shadows.

The odd echo from the noise and music above cascaded into the lower depths. A hazy dimness from lack of light and dust hovered in the air.

Irritated and losing her patience with the game that the other was playing, she was done with humoring them. It wasn’t common for someone to get the jump on her.

The tunnel under the castle was domed and had little in the way of showing what its purpose was. It was the perfect place for an ambush or a secret meeting.

According to the rules of The Castle, an ambush wouldn’t have been allowed.

It was clearly a restricted area; restricted by rumor and respect for the owner.

Mara’s hand hover over the lightsaber at her waist; ready, if this wasn’t going to be a friendly greeting.

The sensation at the back of her mind told her to relax her stance; there was no need for such action. But something drew Mara down here; the environment didn’t suit her feelings. She should be on
edge. She should be weary to be alone with someone who clearly could sense her presence.

An inevitable meeting wouldn’t have probably been out of the question either; Mara felt that she been invited down here, and not forbidden.

There was a minute amount of movement; the form shifted, but still hid in the shadows.

The figure was shorter than Mara; probably reaching below her shoulders. But their movement suggested a lack of threat.

“I’ve known your kind before.” The voice called out, sounding a little too contrived for Mara’s taste; proud and sure of themselves.

The voice was aware, with a slight foreign accent that allowed for words in Basic to be pronounced accurately, barely straining for the right tone.

It was the voice of someone who had seen a lot, too much almost, and was merely content to be there, in the now, knowing that they would exist far beyond what was happening in the present; a constant, a jabbing staccato that wasn’t malicious, just syntax.

Taking a step in the general direction, it was her turn to prove that she wasn’t a threat. “And what kind am I?” Mara called in the direction of the form.

“Imperial…” The form scoffed. Although it sounded like that title was more of joke to them. “…or a former one.” The form took a few steps, trusting the smuggler and now standing opposite to her. “They don’t like having their power taken away from them.”

Relaxing her stance, knowing that the form didn’t pose any threat, Mara ventured a few more steps closer.

“What makes you think that I gave you ‘my power’?” Mara asked, trying not to sound overly harsh.

Her annoyance at being probed was being replaced with curiosity as she listened. She was about to refute what she had just heard, but she knew it to be true so there was no point to argue it.

“Well, maybe not your power.” The figure conceded. “But you certainly don’t like it when someone has the upper hand… do you?”

It wasn’t uncommon for distrust to form in this part of the galaxy, and knowing the types that were in the upper levels, it wouldn’t be uncommon to expect some sort ruse; out of sight and out of the way.

The ambient voice agreed that game was over too; Mara could sense it. Before she could try and answer the rhetorical question, the other form came from out of the shadows.

Mara knew a little about Takodanians; shorter than humans, longer life spans, skin either gold or yellow-orange, but generally a docile group.

This Takodanian, in front of her, clearly female, shared most of that description. However, she didn’t look very docile. Even with her optical enhancing lenses, her small dark eyes looked sharp and scrutinizing.

This Takodanian was shrewd and exuded that perception.

The tiny eyes, behind the lenses, narrowed, judging the redhead in front of her. “You’re not the first Emperor’s Hand that I’ve met before.” She snorted; her accent was curt but not rude. “I don’t like
their kind either.” Her head shook.

Mara opened her mouth to remind the other that she no longer held that title. True to her nature, and true to her training, though, she kept her mouth shut until she was sure of what, or who she was dealing with.

“But you are different…. are you not?” The other said, catching the smuggler to the quick and off her guard. “You at least think that you are different.”

The little alien adjusted her posture, and came even closer to Mara, looking up at her, stopping within a few meters of the woman. “Yes, you are.” She hissed quietly.

Tilting her head to the side, Mara decided that this must be Maz Kanata; who else would be so bold as to approach her in this manner.

Walking to encircle her, the alien was sizing her up. “I have seen them… the other Hands…over the years.” She shrugged, talking to herself as she walked. “They come…they go…always the same… hunting, searching… was always at His bidding.”

“But dead inside.” She mumbled quietly, lost in her thoughts, stopping to consider her words.

Kanata looked pointed at the human in front of her. “I don’t like Him… never did.” She shook her head vigorously. “I tolerate Him and his politics.”

An itch in Mara’s sense started; she was about to correct the other for not using past-tense as she spoke about the Emperor, but it was evident that Mara wasn’t the one steering this conversation.

“Why don’t you come closer?” Maz said; her mouth forming a welcoming smile.

It wasn’t that her senses wouldn’t allow it, but Mara’s nature made her suspicious of everyone. And again, she opened her mouth, only to close it, unable to get a word in edgewise.

“I know why you don’t… or won’t.” Maz said coyly. “It feels like you are not allowed, doesn’t it?” She asked; the welcoming smile had changed into a smug grin.

Chuckling, the Pirate Queen stopped circling her and stood firm, defending her place. “Yes, your gifts might allow you to hide yourself in a crowd and still feel the Force. My gift is to push my presence beyond myself.” She huffed proudly at her ability. “If someone isn’t allowed in my Castle, then you have better believe that they will feel it.”

Maz’s beady eyes, behind those thick lenses, blinked mischievously. “I’ll bet that you have more gifts than the other Hands too… that is why you survived and they didn’t.” She pointed directly, gesturing as she spoke, and then crossed her arms on her chest.

“I have more gifts too… that’s why I survive when others don’t.” Maz mumbled under her breath.

The energy, that had so far been heightened, started to dwindle, and conversation slowed.

The game was over, and it was clear that Maz didn’t need to hammer it in that she knew that she had the advantage in her own castle.

“Well, let’s get this over with…come closer child.” Maz held out her hands as she stepped towards the smuggler, and asked for trust from some who should be un-trustable.

Now, it was like veil had been lifted and, strangely, like permission had been granted. Mara had
never felt such a thing before.

Resisting, Mara looked at the out-stretched hands of the other female. She didn’t like being called a child, but holding-back because she was given a moniker based on her age would have, in fact, been childish.

Apprehensively, she relaxed her body and slowly began to share her space with the stranger.

Maz’s eyes narrowed, and nodded before she took the other’s woman’s hands in her own, gently, getting familiar with her. “I can call anyone anything I want, especially when I’m considerably older than them.” She said, reading the other’s body language. “To me, you are a child. What are you? Standard twenty-seven? Twenty-eight, maybe?”

“Twenty-nine…maybe.” Mara mumbled quietly; feeling odd to state what might be her age, a simple detail that even she felt unsure in sharing.

Feeling a slight tickle on her neck, as if gossamer swept at her collar, Mara held in the snort as she felt the sensation. A touch through the Force by anyone other than Luke, irritated her.

It still felt like an intrusion; one that she wasn’t comfortable sharing with the galaxy. Like an extension of feelings, recognizing another Force-user.

*Maybe this is the ‘secret handshake’?* She asked herself; maybe it was a ‘club’ after all.

“Ha!” Max exclaimed. “You are a mere infant!” Chuckling at the other’s youth, Maz was amused. “When you have lived a millennial, then you will know the difference.”

“The only thing that makes one older is what they have seen.” Maz came closer and peered into Mara’s eyes.

She wanted tug back, just a little, on her hands, uncomfortable with such an intense contact.

“Oh, I see now…calling you an infant was not called for.” Maz hissed as she examined the human. “You are older. Much older.”

Pausing, the Pirate Queen seemed confident, and released her grip, and relaxed her posture, taking a step back.

“When I heard you were coming, I was surprised.” Maz said, without much consideration that Mara was listening. “You ‘Hands’ are unpredictable…”

Mara senses flared again at the use of her former title; she thought she had moved beyond this reputation, but clearly not.

“And running with Talon?” Maz’s voice took on a chiding tone. “This -a former Hand- I had to see with my own eyes.”

Maz started to walk away, and stopped only to gesture for Mara to follow her as she headed for a small bench butted up against a stone wall.

She spoke as she walked, knowing that Mara was listening and not far behind. “When I first met Talon, he was a short line runner. Skipping freighters and picking up shipments where, and when, he could.” Maz came to the bench and sat down, patting the seat beside her for Mara to join. “Then, he got his break.”
Eying the seat, Mara paused before she sat down beside the Takodanian, absorbing all that she heard.

“Oh, the number of times that I had to shuffle him into a corner somewhere, and put a blanket over his shoulders.” Maz turned in her direction and placed her hand on the smuggler’s knee as she spoke, as if they were old friends, and this was just some sort of common visit.

“So poor was he…” Maz chuckled, “…tears in his jackets, toes almost wearing through his boots.”

Sitting there, amused, Mara found it hard to imagine this version of Karrde. At least she had an answer as to why Karrde was partially unsure of how his meeting would go with Kanata; he was shy of his pauper’s past.

“But look at him now!” Smiling, Maz seemed almost proud of him, like Karrde was her child, and that she had some part in his success – she probably did. “He thinks he is still too smart to think that I don’t know about him…second largest organization, next to the Hutts.”

“He’s a good man.” Maz said thoughtfully, and quietly. “Not bad… shrewd though.” She argued his character openly. “I know good from bad.”

Her voice got louder, looking at the smuggler across from her. “And you?” Maz asked curtly. “When I heard about you, I was sure that he had finally found a woman. …but then, you are… well, you.” Her head tilted as she saw Mara’s back stiffen.

Reaching over, Maz patted the top of Mara’s hand. “Don’t worry…You’re not his type. You are, in some ways…but in essence? You are not.” She said decidedly.

Frowning, this was not what she was expecting when she estimated that she would be meeting Maz Katana, and all this familiarity was unnerving.

Mara supposed this was what it was like for Luke when he met Lor San Tekka, or at least, how he described it.

Reputations and rumors made others feel like they knew you and her notoriety was something that she had strongly wished that she could take back now.

“Was this your first real job since leaving the Empire?” Maz asked out of blue, breaking with Mara’s thoughts.

Shaking her head, Mara didn’t see any point in speaking just yet, and wondering at the same time why she allowed herself to feel intimidated by this relative stranger. She paused, thought about the question and then nodded.

Her life before she met Karrde, since leaving the Empire was a blur; shuffling around from one place to another, never fitting in, hiding from her past life, hiding from herself, hiding from The Voice.

“I see, so Talon took pity on you.” Maz assumed, out loud.

Swiftly, pulling her hand back from where the Pirate Queen had rested hers, it was clear that Mara was not amused by these assumptions about her life.

Maz, enjoying that she could flap the unflappable, leaned back on the bench, taking up her share of the space. “No? …so it must have been in gratitude, then. Talon only goes along for two reasons, and you don’t look like the type who would stand for pity.”
The alien hadn’t relented thus far from her scrutiny, and Mara could tell that this was just the beginning and not the end of such a crucible.

Adjusting her lenses again, her pupils expanding to the size of saucers, Maz seemed to understand that now Mara realized that this was not the general digging that was meant to put someone off guard; this was a litmus test of her personality.

This was the kind of test that she was either meant to pass or fail, and riding on those results would affect, not just her, but Karrde as well.

It would take some effort, but, she was determined not to fail.

“Yes, you are quite a bit older than you appear.” Maz mumbled thoughtfully for the other to hear. “That Jedi of yours… he’s older too. I see it in his eyes when I see him in the holos.”

Mara shifted her weight consciously, showing that she was uncomfortable. Whether she was playing the part or not, it would have been the natural reaction by anyone else—and that was what Maz was looking for. The Takodanian wanted to see her with her guard down; something that not everyone got to see.

That would be the price for what Karrde wanted; buying a safe harbor for him and his crew.

“Oh? You didn’t like that I know about you and him?” Maz adjusted her lenses, making her eyes smaller, and blinked amusingly. “I could pretend, like others do, that there is nothing between you, but I don’t like lying, if I can avoid it.”

Leaning in to Mara, Maz smiled. “He’s not one of us, is he? Your Jedi.” She whispered, like it was a secret. “He doesn’t know how to lie does he?”

Mara felt her lip uncontrollable twitch, almost forming a frown. Sighing, she nodded once.

“There’s nothing wrong with being able to hide, deceive… lie… as long as it’s used under the proper circumstances… so I don’t judge.” Maz waved it away, sitting upright.

“Your Jedi… he’s different too.” She continued, sounding nostalgic. “He’s cute. Yes, I like him… good eyes… nice smile.”

Without her guard to protect her, Mara found herself looking away and blushing at the thought of those eyes and that smile. Then, she felt the ache that always followed.

“But a Tatooanian?” Maz said loudly, stilling the woman beside her. “Ha! Tatooian men! What a handful they can be!” Her tone had changed, and she grunted out her words. “Crusty and as gritty as the sand that they thread on… even the young ones.”

Maz waved her finger in Mara’s general direction. “Watch, when this one gets older, I’m sure he will be the same way… grumbling his way around the galaxy.” Slapping her knees for emphasis, she went on. “And possessive? By the stars, they stake claims as soon as they can.”

“Has he given you something?… something to “remember him” by?” Maz asked, leaning in again. “Made of Japor Snippet by any chance?”

Unconsciously, Mara’s opposite hand touched the pocket where she knew she had placed Luke’s pendant, recalling that she had heard it called a “Tatooanian engagement ring”, and she frowned maliciously, starting to think of all the names she would call him for trying to past this off as anything but a token to keep him close. She should have known that it meant more.
Maz must have read her feelings that she let slip out because the Takodanian’s sense changed, backed to being gentle and not so direct.

“Not his fault, really… they are born with it.” Maz said with a shrug, excusing his behavior. “They are taught to protect home and family until they are unable. It’s in him to have that desire to protect and care for. But,” she paused, “...his, is fed by fear.”

She stopped, and grew serious. “And for him, fear… that will be his undoing.” She said quietly, sadly as she shook her head.

Mara could try to refute it, but in her heart, she knew that this was one of Luke’s weaknesses.

“I’ve known Jedi…” Maz started wistfully. “For a long time, they were all the same. Either they kept to the path or strayed from it.”

“Don’t believe what you hear from others – the Jedi of old weren’t always what they seemed.” She warned.

“What’s left is nothing more than rumor, stories and dreams… the Jedi were not as pure as they appeared to be.” She dropped her head and shook it just once.

“Your poor Jedi…so confused is he.” Maz continued. “So conflicted by what he thinks he has to do…by what he has to be.” She paused and considered Mara’s eyes with earnest. “I do not envy him.”

With a sigh, Maz got comfortable again. “And for what?” she asked into the air. “The idea of Jedi and Sith… it’s not real… I’ve seen it.”

“Light…” Maz paused. “Dark… they’re real.” She sighed. “But, so much death to keep it going. It doesn’t have to be that way. Only fools want to keep it that way.”

Siting there, Mara felt like she should open her mouth; everything in her wanted to add something to this conversation. But what should she say? - Everything that she was hearing was the truth.

Maz shook the thought away. “Light… Dark… the Force cares not. Life… Life is what matters… Life is what is worth caring for.” She stressed. “Beings of the galaxy don’t care between Light and Dark… Jedi or Sith- they only care to live.”

“The Force has everything to do with everyone.” Maz said in basic terms, simplifying the complex into one statement.

Mara could feel the air change around her with those words. As limited as Kanata’s skills might be, she could still call on the Force when she needed it.

“They used to come here often… Jedi… when they used to fly the sky.” She said, remembering. “Usually in pairs… teacher and student… but sometimes alone.”


She seemed conflicted; not entirely agreeing to The Order’s methods. “And then, before the Empire, they stopped. Closed themselves in, hid… hid themselves and their gifts. Like they were trying to save it for when they were needed.”

“The problem was, is that they were needed everywhere… and stayed so closed that they couldn’t
see what was right in front of them.” Maz looked out into the dimness of the hallway, looking at nothing as she spoke.

“They used to mean something...until...” Her voice drifted like her thoughts. “Until they became so distant that their meaning got lost too.”

Mara watched Maz, and moreover sensing her. From the way she spoke, the Takodanian had seen beyond herself, and into the galaxy. Years and years of observing had made her the perfect student to the whims of the present, and had given her an understanding that most beings wished for.

“So many things that we cling to because they mean something to us.” Maz blinked and then inhaled sharply, bringing herself back from where her mind had gone.

“What does ‘Jedi’ mean? What does ‘Sith’ mean?” She shook her head. “Means nothing...without the other.”

“Look at this thing on your hip...this lightsaber...it’s not yours...it doesn’t belong to you.” Maz quipped, proving her point. “Does it feel like it belongs to you?”

“No” Mara answered without pausing to think if she should; surprised that now an answer was required of her. Her voice cracked from lack of use, thus far.

It was a strange turn that the conversation had taken; going from speaking, in general about the Jedi of old, to being directed at Mara.

“No! – and it shouldn’t! Not made for you... not made for you!” Maz was now giving her permission to answer her questions. “But it means something to you, doesn’t it?”

“Yes” Meekly, Mara paused before she answered.

“Yes... of course it does.” Maz seemed contented with only one word. “What does it mean?” She asked, this time she wanted more than just one word.

“Luke gave it me.” Whispering, Mara felt obliged to respond. “It was his father’s.”

“So, not his either?” Maz asked directly. “His father’s...Jedi built their own weapons...and Sith does too...so what does it mean?”

Vader, the air whispered and gust blew through the basement corridor.

Waiting for no answer this time, Maz continued, proving that she did, indeed, know more. “It doesn’t belong to your Jedi.”

She didn’t yield. “It was a symbol of his calling.”

Sitting back, Maz focused on Mara’s face. “It was an idea that he’s moved beyond...he’s answered his call. Now, he felt it was your time to be called.”

“What does it mean to you?” Maz hissed her question. “Trust? Dedication? -is that what it means? What does being a Jedi mean to you?

Aghast, Mara shook her head, lost for reasoning. Luke hadn’t even asked her so pointedly these types of questions. Now, someone was demanding them of her.

Maz relaxed, and shook her head. “It’s just a thing; conduit for the Force...nothing more.” She said in softer tones.
“The Force doesn’t flow through it.” The Takodanian explained. “The Force flows through you…but you chose to use it...and how to use it.”

“It’s just a thing.” She repeated.

“But…” Maz was keen and observant, with the right words. “Is it a thing from your past? Or for your future?”

Mara’s hand went to the cylinder; touching the cool metal, remembering what it felt like to hold this particular lightsaber at the time that she received it.

“Does it feel like you?” Maz asked; her eyes locked on Mara’s unchecked face.

Looking down at the silver cylinder that hung from her waist, Mara considered it.

So many times, since Luke had given it to her on that night, on top of the palace, she had wondered what it truly meant.

The coolness of the metal felt foreign to her when she held it for the first time. The grip was odd and she still had trouble holding it when she sparred with Luke.

The hum was soothing but then, the sound always brought her comfort even when she knew that it was either to save her life or be her demise.

The history of this particular lightsaber gave her ill-ease.

Mara knew it had belonged to Vader…Anakin… She could feel an air of torment, conflict, on it. She wondered if Luke could too.

So maybe Kanata was right? - That, this lightsaber merely meant something different to Luke than it did to her.

Or maybe it meant the same thing – a calling – Luke had received it during a time in his life when it was his turn to take up the call of the Jedi.

And maybe it was time to give that calling a definitive answer.

Gods knew she had been avoiding it for over a year now.

The words were on the tip of her tongue, and she knew it would be hard to let the truth out to Luke, for fear of breaking his heart.

At last, she let it go to the stranger in front of her. “No…it doesn’t feel like me…it never has.” Mara confessed.

Another gust of wind came through the lower level; punctuating the conversation, cooling the air, clearing away the uncertainty.

Silence hung between the two of them until the time came

“It’s time to let it go...start new...become who you are supposed to become.” The words were slow and imbued with warmth. Maz’s voice took on a tone, showing her age and wisdom that came with it.

“I’ll make you a deal... smugglers love deals.” Maz said with a playful tone. “I will keep that saber safe for you, or your Jedi. And if you decide that you want it back, I will give it to you… or…I will
give it to someone who needs direction.”

It was a tempting offer, but the hairs on the back of Mara’s neck began to rise.

Maz’s eyes narrowed, and her face appeared to become serious when the woman didn’t jump at the chance for such a deal.

“Alright,” the alien said. “I can see that I’m going to have to make a counter offer with you.”

The Pirate Queen went to reach for something around her neck. Tugging on a thin leather cord, she produced a milky-white crystal held in place, wrapped with leather as a pendant.

“You know what this is? - Yes?” Maz asked, holding the pendant aloft for Mara to see.

To anyone else, it would look like just a simple decorative rock. But Mara knew what it was immediately.

A Kaibur Crystal; used in making a lightsaber, imbued with the Force.

She had found some and saved them from one of her missions when she was the Emperor’s Hand; kept them safe, never turning them over to her Master because she knew, knew, that someday she would want to give them to someone.

That someone was Luke; gifting them to him before she left Coruscant, heading for Dantooine, instructing him to use them when he started his Jedi Academy.

This one hung in front of her.

What light there was available, danced off the facets.

Reaching out, Mara concentrated her feelings coming from it; she knew that each one found its owner, and not the other way around.

This stone shone in her senses; it hummed. It sung her name. It called to her.

Mara’s eyes flashed a few times to bring her aware.

“Fair trade?” Maz asked again, still holding the crystal and pointing at the lightsaber. “A past exchanged for a future? Neh?”

Keeping her eyes on the crystal, Mara unhooked the lightsaber from her waist, and looked down at it again.

Her mind rapidly played images from Kenobi’s journal and the instructions she would need.

She closed her eyes, holding the saber again, bringing it to her chest, she let the images flip through her mind, unbidden as they did when she meditated.

…Anakin- Kenobi- Luke- Her- a dark haired girl – an angry man – and then… and then… the faces continued…

She was just one more face to hold this item…it had another story that started before Anakin, and that went beyond him, Luke or her.

Slowly, Mara opened her eyes, and knew what she had to do. Looking, she saw that Maz had closed her eyes too, savoring in the feeling of another Force-user.
Hesitantly, Mara extended her hand holding the lightsaber.

At the same speed, Max stretched out the hand holding the crystal.

With care and respect, the Takodanian took the saber gingerly and cherishing it as she relinquished the crystal.

“Good.” Maz quietly said, triumphantly satisfied, but not celebratory, simply contented to be aiding what seemed right for the galaxy and Force to be put on a path.

“Now, you can be true to yourself.” Getting up from the bench, Maz tucked the lightsaber under her tunic as she began to walk away.

Dazed, Mara looked down and opened her hand to reveal that the crystal already felt like it belonged to her.

But she wanted to stop the Takodanian, and asked for the lightsaber back; it was Luke’s after all.

He had given it to her. He refused to take it back when she felt undeserving of it. He trusted her with it.

Was it supposed to be like the pendant? – a thing to remember him?

Was it a promise of a different kind?

Mara began to feel a panic until her senses told her to reach out again and find her calm.

No, the lightsaber wasn’t a thing – it was a promise.

And now, with a new crystal, she was making a promise of a different kind. Mara was making a promise to herself, not just to Luke. She was promising that she would keep to her dedication, for her own reasons.

Looking over, she became aware that Maz had watched her inner struggler; fighting with herself to let go and begin anew.

She could do this; she had done it before. Time and time again, Mara had been forced to start new and fresh. Here, she was choosing to start again, and not have it force upon. Being able to make that choice for herself, calmed her resistance, but left her no-less shocked in herself.

Smiling knowingly, Maz simply nodded, seeing what she had said had rung true.

“Chan urrainn do dhuine ‘sambith seirbhis a dhéanamh do dhà mhaighstir.” Maz said with a smirk; the words falling easily from her mouth.

Mara gasped and took a step back at hearing the foreign language. “W-w-what?” She stuttered, wondering if she heard correctly.

The Takodanian laughed and took a step towards her. “Tell me child, what do those words mean...to you?”

With wide eyes, Mara searched her mind. She knew what they meant but had trouble putting into Basic what she knew them to mean. She looked over sharply at the other, feeling like she was being tricked.

“It’s been many years since I’ve been to Colstev…and few speak it outside the Stewjon System.”
Maz said sweetly, disarming Mara’s defensive demeanor.

Turning, the Pirate Queen started to walk away. “It means ‘no one can have two masters’.” She said as she walked.

Mara’s mind went blank. “No…” She mumbled.

Maz paused and looked over her shoulder, expecting great things.

“It means, ‘In the house of many, only one master dwells’.” Mara whispered, feeling that she had gotten the translation more-accurate than the one who had spoken it.

Chuckling, Maz turned back to continue her walk. “Yes…yes… and while you are here, you can practice your Goidelic… you’re going to need it someday.”

Mara barely heard the last words; so much had transpired since she had come down here. Not at all what she expected to find.

Slowly, Mara looked back, watching Maz make her way to the opposite end of the hall and disappear. Still, unsure that she had made the right decision; it felt like she was leaving a part of her behind.

But then again, it also felt like something new was about to begin; frightening and thrilling at the same time.

Walking up the stairs, she was lost in her thoughts.

The upper level seemed so much brighter that the space that she had just left. Although the brightest made her squint, she was lost in her own thoughts; processing what she had just heard, felt and did.

In a haze, she wandered through the crowd until she stopped, blinked and found herself at Karrde’s table.

His usual calm demeanor had dissolved and he looked annoyed that she had clearly missed one of their meetings.

His eyes narrowed briefly, only read by her, and knew of their meaning.

As Mara approached to sit down, still dazed, pulling out his data pad and handing it back to him.

“Do I want to know?” Karrde murmured as he pretended to study the pad.

Blinking, she had no other alternative but to turn to him. “I’m not sure.” She whispered, beleaguered by her own response.

Karrde sat for a moment, studying the readouts, and was content with the work that she was able to accomplish. He knew that if it was anyone else, they would have achieved less and taken longer to do it, so he didn’t hold any grudges against her. Mara was more than capable, in his eyes.

However, he kept glancing over to her, uneasy by her state, as he now observed it.

He also knew that they had more important tasks ahead of them; getting Maz Kanata to allow them to stay would be the next highest priority. The second next priority…

“I heard some troubling news about the Hutts.” Karrde mumbled over to her. “We need to find a secure encrypted comm as soon as possible.”
Mara seemed to snap herself out of it, and brought her attention back to where it needed to be. “Me too—I heard something of the same nature.” She muttered responsively; knowing that he was referring to the immanent search for the Resistance that was likely to occur, and sending a warning to those who needed it.

Leerily, Karrde watched her as he began to rise from his seat, and gestured her to lead the way out of the Castle and back to their ship, preparing for their later meeting with Kanata.

She stayed silent.

He began to wonder what truly happened to her during her missing time; it was not like her at all to be mute on a subject.

They walked through the courtyard and out the gate, towards the edge of the forest.

The buzzing of Karrde’s comm caught his attention.

He watched her as they walked in silence, as he pulled his comm from out his pocket and called the screen to life.

The sound broke her pace, and Mara slowed down to come beside him, just in case she was needed. She was there for work after all.

Looking down, Karrde began read the message; his eyes darted back up to show her that he was concerned that she had disappeared on him.

But then, his essence and face registered shock.

Mara felt it like a bolt in her feelings; she had never registered so much of change off of him before.

Looking up at her, he smiled, and then seemed relieved. His face went back to its placid resolve and he began to walk again.

“I don’t know what transpired while you were away…” He said, sounding slightly miffed but not entirely holding on to it. “…but Kanata has agreed to let us stay on Takodana…. Without needing to ask her.”

Karrde turned to face her. “Did you have anything to do with this?” He asked with curious eyes.


_The Force has everything to do with everyone._ Maz’s voice echoed in her head.

This, was where the Force wanted Karrde’ crew to be, and if Maz agreed to have a hand in it, then who was she to argue.

Mara’s hand slipped inside the pocket of her vest, as she rolled around the Kaiburr Crystal between her fingers, feeling more and more at ease.

She stepped away and headed for the bush.

TBC
Quote: His mind flashed on a memory of preparing for the rescue of Han from Jabba’s; a tight smile formed as he left the residence. That plan didn’t quite go as well as thought, but they managed to pull it off.

Characters: Luke, Lando and originals

**

Alright, alright… I am willing to admit that I stole the opening scene of this chapter from The Last Jedi novelization… just saying… now you’ll have to read the book too to see where this fit in… OR you could watch the deleted scenes, but they changed it when it was shot… so go back to the book…

So you may have noticed that I was able to write this one pretty quickly. … here’s the truth about that… I actually had this chapter written before I wrote the previous two, but it didn’t make sense to release this chapter before the others…

And while it is con season, I will be trying to write the last and final chapter on my down-time… hopefully…

Other than that, the show must go on….

**

Coruscant: Northeast of Manarai Mountain Range

Her hand fit into his, although she was timid.

This brunette girl… this girl from nowhere.

He looked into her face; reading that she was not timid, almost resentful of him- for some reason unknown to him, but he sensed that he might have deserved it.

The alien music played in the background. A celebratory fire raged in the center area.

He felt old… older… as he asked her to dance, this young stranger.

The other aliens were gayly reveling.

Her eyes didn’t trust him but she allowed herself to be moved to dance with him, stuttering and awkward, like a child who would dance with a parent.
“Where did you learn to dance?” She asked, looking down at her feet, trying to mimic his steps.

He was about to say it; the words wanting to leave his mouth. *My wife taught me…she was a wonderful dancer.*

But, instead, he said nothing, and the ache of loss lanced his heart.

With a start and a deep inhale, Luke sat up in the darkness, holding his chest with the emotional pain he had just experienced.

He blinked, looking around in the dim light, remembering that he was supposed to keep to silent.

*It was a dream…just a dream,* he told himself. He didn’t know why he was startled; maybe it was just the surge of emotion that surprised him as unwanted tears of sorrow felt that they were forming in his eyes.

He could repeat it as many times as he liked, but he knew what he just saw was not a dream. It was a vision, of sorts, just a random glimpse of his life to come…possibly.

After a few cleansing breaths, he relaxed back against the stone wall and adjusted his position.

There was no point in worrying about what may or may not come, but he hadn’t felt emotion like that before from a dream or a vision. He had felt pain like that before; the pain that came from losing someone he cared about deeply.

*My wife…* The words repeated and called out as he closed his eyes again.

It was his turn to sleep, so he had better take it. Morning would be here soon enough.

Now, though, his mind wouldn’t let him sleep.

It had almost been a standard month since they had touched down on Coruscant.

They had landed ahead of the Star Destroyers.

Transports dropped off the teams before the groups moved in to evacuate the senators and their families.

The first few days, things went smoothly. It seemed that people were ready to move; their belongings and family members were prepared.

Once, he ran past the outside Palisade apartments, keeping up with the moving convoy, wanting to go inside and inspect it, but he didn’t. He didn’t live there anymore. It wasn’t his.

The next wave of evacuees was those who held out hope that things would return to normal. They only started to move when reports of invading Imperial ground troops reached their ears. This group was in a panic; every instance of movement caused them to react irrationally.

The team had ran into the Ambassador Suite apartments, securing that last speeder of delegates, and in the turbolift, his eyes were locked in the number for her floor, wanting to get off the lift and walk in to her former apartment, hoping to find her there.

But she wasn’t there. Mara was away, safe, presumably.

Luke blinked, pulling himself out of that memory.
He looked across the dark room to the Saknig family huddling together in the corner of the dark room.

And then there was the last bunch of evacuees.

This family, through no fault of their own, could not leave with the rest of the senate.

The Saknig mother cradled their smallest youngling close to her; they had almost lost the little one to illness during the first initial fighting.

This family waited until the young one was healthy enough to move before they chose to leave.

The mother, the father, and two younglings weren’t from a wealthy world either— which made buying their way off the planet difficult too.

Their last chance waited for them on the other side of small mountain range. A shuttle was hidden there, waiting for them.

For two nights, the family, and what was left of the commando team, waited for the squads of stormtroopers to pass through the city.

Imperial troops had taken over just about every inch of the planet now. Areas that accepted them were left unscorned. Those that were resisted, were leveled.

This small city, at the foot of the mountains, had put on the facade of surrendering and giving in willingly.

Only, they didn’t.

Using their access, the local city dwellers were carefully shuttling people to the transports in the area.

Luke switched his gaze to the sensor disruptor in the middle of the room. The small disc with its blue glow was the only thing that was keeping them from being found out by the Imperial sensors; hiding their electronic equipment, and their life-signatures.

Another small light in the room caught his attention.

Lando sat in the opposite corner; the light on his data pad reflected back at his face. His eyes gone wide as he listened to the device at his ear, and marked down the movements of the Stormtroopers from the report he was getting.

Luke could sense that the trooper’s numbers would be soon dissipating as the Imperials gained confidence in securing the area.

Things had been so different since they first arrived back on the planet. It was organized then, and Lando fell back into his role as General very easily, leading the team and instructing the civilian forces that came to join them.

They only took on losses when someone stepped out of line. Unfortunately, it was those who were determined to fight who took the hits.

Luke knew that the goal was to get people to safety and not engage the Imperials unless they had to.

Local freedom fighters saw themselves as protectors and defending their homes.

Watching them charge needlessly and against orders, only saw them get slaughtered.
The Resistance commando team took their losses too, usually protecting the other freedom fighters. Those that made it, got transferred as their numbers thinned out, to cover and protect where they could.

He watched as people’s decisions cost them greatly.

At one time, it would have been Luke leading the team into the battle, fighting back, charging in.

Maybe age and experience had made him more-cautious but he put his faith in the Force that helped with his decision to stay on track with this mission. Until that was accomplished, after that, then he would start to fight back.

Luke turned his head to his left and saw the other commando who was supposed to be on a sleep-cycle.

Qui’vik was a Bothan who made a point to explain that his clan has been ousted by Fel’ya and the likes, so he was taking the opportunity to return the favor.

“We all have our own reasons to fight.” Luke had said to him when the Bothan found it necessary to explain.

As it turned out, Qui’vik’s clan was those who had provided the plans to the second Death Star, at a great cost to their family- a point of pride for him.

The other two members of their team were out on a scouting mission; two humans- one Resistance fighter, and one of the local freedom fighters.

They had left Da Soocha with twelve team members and now were whittled down to five, even when they had reinforcements from the locals.

Yawning, Luke looked across at the family in the corner again.

They had lost their translator droid the first day that they were on the move. Since then, the father had tried to communicate with the humans using rapid hands gestures and grunting in place of actually speaking.

Fortunately, they all understood Basic so they could take instructions well. Communicating back was an entirely different thing.

Their spirits lifted when they realized that a Jedi was among those that had come to protect them.

He was surprised when they recognized him; he didn’t look exactly himself since leaving Ovanis.

It was the littlest one that spotted his lightsaber hanging from his belt. The youngling had pointed at it, and then, in her language, made a *snap-purr* sound that almost sounded like a giggle. The family, after that, made sure to stick close to him. Luke could feel their appreciation for being protected by him and his team.

From across the room, the youngling had opened her eyes, and her vertical lids blinked heavily over her violet pupils.

Luke caught her look, and he smiled across to her; she blinked rapidly back at him, her fur raised and lowered in greeting.

She had awoken because she was hungry, he could sense it.
The ration of food they all had been given wasn’t quite enough for a human let alone a growing Saknig.

Stealthily, he turned to his duffle bag beside him and found his last ration bar that was supposed to be his breakfast. Reaching out, the bar floated across the room and hovered in front of the youngling.

He could hear the purring as she took the bar from the thin air and brought it to her snout/muzzle.

Luke dug into his bag once again, and found his canteen. He took one swig from it to wet his dry mouth, and then sent that across the room too.

By this point, the little one’s joyous sound had awoken her mother who saw her child contently fed.

The elder female Saknig made a slicing motion in the air in his direction; a signal that he took for thanks at his gesture.

The Saknig mother brought the bottle to her child’s mouth, and then took a sip for herself.

He smiled again, and sunk back against the wall.

Lando had closed down his data pad, and had watched the interaction. Luke turned his head in time to see his old friend smile.

“Softie.” The former smuggler whispered across at his friend.

Luke snorted quietly in response and then shrugged, gladly accepting the moniker.

It was hard to maintain such a tone, keeping his thoughts positive. Since the Star Destroyers arrived in orbit, a pressure had set in on his mind.

He had been looking up at the sky as he was escorting a group into a transport as he saw the massive space ship appear and halt suddenly; it was then that it started.

Reaching up, Luke rubbed his forehead as if he was feeling it again. He had been practicing Mara’s shielding techniques, which seemed to help, relieving the pressure.

It wasn’t a bombardment, but when he had time to think about it, it wasn’t pressure so much as it was a presence. A dark one.

At first, he thought it was the same presence that he had encountered outside Ord Mantell that had spoken to him; the one that he had convinced himself was Palpatine reborn.

Maybe Mara was sure that it wasn’t, but Luke had to yet decide for himself if it was a new Emperor.

On closure observation, this new presence wasn’t the same, but it was ruthless nonetheless.

The presence, this person, was looking for something, and then Luke determined, that no, they weren’t looking for something, they were looking for a someone. Him.

He knew this by the sensation he was getting; a manic hunger, searching for its prey like a ravenous animal without reason.

His mind reflected back to Mara for a moment.

Shaking his head, he began to miss her again, and he could hear her reprimand in his head. This must be what it feels like for her when I don’t shield my thoughts.
“Broadcasting”, he snorted, *that’s what she called it.*

The presence didn’t seem to have any control on his projection or his emotions.

Luke had started his shielding almost immediately, but he was sure that his quarry got a whiff of his Force “scent” and would not be satisfied until caught.

He decided that he would also use his blaster over his lightsaber, if given a choice, just to throw them off.

It came back to Mara again. She had alluded that he was being hunted and showing up with a lightsaber would be his calling-card, notifying those that were looking for him, of his whereabouts.

It still persisted oppressively, this presence, and each day it got angrier and angrier.

Looking up after massaging his temples, Lando had come to sit beside him.

“Hey…” The pirate spoke in hushed tones.

Presumably the disruptor would cover their sounds, but no taking chances over marshal law that was probably parading around in the outside streets.

Luke mouthed his reply and bumped his elbow against his friend in greeting.

Lando adjusted his position so that he could still watch the entrance. “I’m guessing that you really wish you were knee-deep in mud on your jungle moon right now, don’t you?”

Snorting, Luke let his mouth twitch to one side before he nodded. “And you wish that you were at the betting tables at one of your luxury resorts, don’t you?”

Casually Lando raised one eyebrow, and then looked out at room. “We all have our versions of fun.”

“That we do.” The Jedi agreed.

The smuggler nudged him, and he looked down to see a canteen that was being passed to him, in exchange for his offering to the Saknig youngling.

Luke nodded and took a swig from his friend’s canteen before handing it back.

“Maybe when this is all over, you and Jade can come visit my new venture on Cantonica?” Lando whispered. “I’m investing in a resort there…they want to start up a Casino destination. It’s going to have the best of everything.”

“If you’re involved than I’m sure it will.” He whispered back, giving a tight grin.

Since taking this mission, Lando had been dancing around Luke and Mara’s relationship; he had all but come out and asked Luke about it, and Luke could feel that this was just another way to look for an “in” to discuss it.

It could have been the exhaustion, but it was more-likely that he was missing her, and just wanted to talk.

“She’d like that…I’m sure.” Luke mumbled. “She likes being pampered, but won’t admit to it.”

“Yeah?” Lando asked, sounding truly interested.
“Likes to get her nails done...hair styled... had an esthetician on Dantooine...but doesn’t like anyone to know about it.” He let his eyes fluttered shut as he spoke. He could envision her brushing her golden-red locks, oblivious to him, looking like an angel as the morning light shone in from the window.

He sighed and opened his eyes.

“You are one lucky man.” Lando murmured. “You two can come out for the grand opening or your honeymoon...and she can get the full treatment...all the pampering she wants. You can get a mud bath.”

“Honeymoon?” Luke repeated. He knew that Lando had been fishing for details, but this the presuming too much.

“After the wedding... There’s going to be a wedding, right?” The smuggler asks.

He shrugged. “Don’t know...” He mumbled. Luke shrugged again. “I told that she has to ask me if she wants one.” He volunteered, surprised that he was even saying so, feeling like it was so far away to even think about it.

Lando nodded, and relaxed his head, tilting it back, considering.

Luke felt like he had rushed her into liking him, and then falling in love with him. He was determined to let this be set at her actual pace no matter how badly he wanted it.

Absently, he twirled the jade stone ring around his finger, just letting his mind wander.

Lando was whispering something, and Luke’s attention didn’t come back until he heard her name.

“...headed to Takodana. It’s going to be a big meeting from what I hear.” The former smuggler whispered. “Smugglers and traders are fighting for business. Karrde is probably going to hide it out until the war is over- if he’s smart.”

Instead of inquiring further, Luke just nodded, and thought with what little information that he had. At least she was safe.

Then he could feel something else in Lando’s senses; debating and unsure.

“What is it?” Luke asked without digging too far.

Out all his friends, Lando never rebuked it when he used his Force talents to know something. Lando just accepted it and just went with anything Luke ever had to say.

However, it didn’t mean that he wasn’t amused when it surfaced. Lando’s shoulders shifted and came closer to Luke. “I just got word that Pinnacle Base on Da Soocha has been evacuated.”

His words weren’t fast even though the information they contained would likely cause anyone else to panic.

“I keep track of Zorba the Hutt...” He paused and spoke to himself rather than his comrade. “Why? Probably because I hate that Hutt... turns out he was warlord of that sector and had left it abandoned until he heard that the Mon Cals were hiding there, and sheltering a Resistance.” Lando cleared his throat. “He thought he could get in good with the New Empire if he caught an entire branch and hand them over.”
The silence hung in the room.

“Han, Leia and the kids are safe.” Lando finished.

Luke nodded, and sighed, feeling relief.

The silence returned. The only sound was the deep breaths of the sleeping family in the corner.

He tried to imagine that somewhere in the galaxy, that Han and Leia were together holding their own children, protecting them from the chaos around them.

Closing his eyes, he then tried to imagine a time when there would be no war to rush off to; a time when only good things and good friends would reign to create memories. His eternal optimism could be just as relentless as the prevailing darkness that sometimes tried to overtake him.

“Tillies and Kaf should be back soon.” Lando said quietly.

Luke opened his eyes, and adjusted the blaster rifle on his lap, trying to pay attention.

“It was only a five kilometer perimeter that they supposed to be scouting.” Lando checked his chrono, and craned his neck to try and uselessly look out the only opening in the room.

It was night on the city planet with dawn approaching in the next few hours, and although it never went to sleep per se, most of the populace obeyed the solar cycle.

The Imperials were clearly informed of former Rebellion tactics and didn’t let their patrolling cease even throughout the night.

Under the cover of night, the Rebellion used to make some of their biggest tactical moves; “borrowing” speeders, infiltrating locations, relieving an outpost of weapons…

But the game plan for this mission saw to it that a transport was well-hidden. To complete their side of it, the commando team had to get this last set of evacuees to it in the next ten hours before, it was assumed, based on standard Imperial procedure, an orbital web would come into effect, restricting anything from leaving the planet.

If the transport missed the window, it could turn into a nasty fight to punch a hole in the web to escape, and probably impossible.

The scouts were to let them know if their path was clear and map out the best way over the small mountain range. It couldn’t have been more than a three kilometer walk, under the cover of the limited vegetation, to the transport.

Keeping out of the range of sensors and keeping attention off of themselves as they moved through the street was the key.

The path of least resistance and least peril was the goal here; to not put the family in harm’s way.

Luke’s mind drifted again; thinking about his next mission after this one.

Mostly likely, he would be reunited with the Rogues again- they were back to the old squadron name since it was determined that they operated legally, leaving the planet.

He didn’t know how Wedge had swung it, but the Commander had figured it out, and was cleared of the investigation.
Once back on the squad, he could see himself back in the cockpit of a trusty T-65 X-wing, being sent on attack missions, doing what he did best, flying and fighting to protect those that needed his help.

He sighed, bringing his mind back to the present.

Imperial procedure was so predictable that in six years it hadn’t changed…. Patrol the area for forty-eight hours, if no resistance, leave a quarter-squad to maintain the peace.

That forty-eight window was closing, and by dawn, it should come into effect. When it did, with diminished forces, that would be when they would move to get to the transport.

The transport would be small enough not to show up on any sensors, taking the ground team and the family away to safety.

It should be simple.

It should be easy with no issues whatsoever.

*Should be…. Never was.*

Exhaling, Luke could feel the tingle in the back of his mind that told him that it wouldn’t be, no matter how much planning and effort that went in to making it so.

He sat up abruptly; his mind sharp all of a sudden.

He sensed it before it happened; he followed the shadow at the opening, the doorway, but he didn’t flinch as Lando did.

Watching the movements, his senses tingled, telling him to reach for his own blaster. Instead, his hand dropped to his lightsaber, unsure if it was an enemy or not for only the briefest of seconds.

Dropping his hand onto his blaster, Luke moved to a crouching position beside Lando, wide awake and attentive.

Even Qui’vik was hunched down, awake and into position.

The Sagnik mother was aware, watching from the corner, holding her child against her, and reaching out with her other claw, holding back her husband and older child. She was a senator and her nature was to protect her world and her family.

A sound, *a scratch* came at the door, the signal that it was one of their own.

The door slid to the side, it’s servos disconnected to avoid the noise, and Kaf backed into the room, quickly pressing himself up against the interior wall as he manually closed the door behind him.

With the door closed, he turned around, wearing a tight smile, proud that he made it back.

Before anything else could happen, Lando hissed a question, “Tillies?”

Kaf shook his head and took to a lower position. “*Captured…for breaking curfew…claimed he needed water…drew their attention away.*” The local freedom fighter whispered back.

Taking off the extra gear he was carrying, Kaf looked regretful that he needed to leave one of his team behind.
Luke recognized a few of the items as belonging to Tillies; a blaster, two power packs, and a semi-intact kit. It was smart move to leave behind those things that might give away that he was part of a resistance team.

“Probably release him in the morning, after they try to make him sweat.” Kaf reasoned quietly. “They have nothing.” He miffed with malice.

Lando nodded, but Luke frowned.

The Sagnik family was now awake; father was tending to the older child while the mother rocked her youngling.

Kaf had come closer to Lando and was whispering his findings on the perimeter. Luke caught the occasional word. “…to the north… their transport… dismissing ticks…”

Luke had caught on the to the local lingo for Imperial Stormtroopers. Mara had called them ‘TK’s’; locals called them ‘tickers’ – they were allowed on account on having an Imperial presence for longer than they cared to.

“…maybe only six to eight tickers to deal with after the rest of them leave….not a problem.” Kaf seemed overly-confident.

Qui’vik came in closer too, and Kaf shot him a glare. The local didn’t particularly like the Bothan, blaming the whole lot of them for the actions of their leader and the most-recent downfall.

Lando nodded, and they all went back to their relaxed positions, knowing it was just a matter to wait it out.

Qui’vik settled himself against the same wall as Luke, keeping close to the Jedi, and started to move around his belongings inside his pack.

They agreed to leave nothing behind, but it wasn’t uncommon to offload those things that would just weigh you down if you were going to be hiking up hill. Anything that could give you an advantage was appreciated.

Sitting on the same wall, Lando pulled out his data pad, checking to see if any of his information had been updated. His face changed expressions several times.

Despite being a gambler, he wasn’t willing to take risks on other people lives; fortunes could be rebuilt.

Kaf situated himself on the other side of Lando and seemed restless and nervous. He made a strange ticking noise with his mouth and he watched the disruptor in the middle of the room. He stopped his noise when Lando gave him the look.

The disruptor was on its last power cells and the light that it emitted would wane without warning.

Kaf switched to watching Qui’vik instead, and then stopped when Luke caught him glaring at the Bothan.

Without closing his eyes, the Jedi could reach into his senses and find out why the agitated local was acting out.

It could be his age. Ten years ago, when Luke was approximately the same age Kaf now, after he joined the Rebel Alliance, he was eager too, to get into as many skirmishes that he could. Waiting
like they were now, would have drove him stir-crazy.

But there was an anger brewing in Kaf. He came from the lower sections of the Capital; an area that had been by-passed by those who lived above and he rarely saw the wealth that was promised to trickle down to his kind. Instead he had to scratch out a living and make his own way.

Too young to truly feel the effects of being under full Imperial rule at its highest, and too old not to remember what that was like.

This mission felt like some sort of revenge to him; a dark shroud. And darkness was always misleading.

Luke and Lando were the veterans here; experiencing more of war than either then would like.

Looking over to him, Luke couldn’t fathom what had made Lando come back into action. He was a business man now. Several investments had paid off for him after the war. However, the former smuggler would appear at the strangest of places.

Luke assumed that it was because Lando missed the action. Business meetings couldn’t be decided with a blaster.

But he also knew that Lando wasn’t as superficial as he liked to portray. Lando came back time and time again when he could be of service because he knew that it would mean something.

Luke knew why he was here; it was his duty since joining up with the Rogues again.

The special-forces unit just wasn’t a set of pilots. They came in where others couldn’t; got things done when others can’t. They did ‘difficult’ as if it was a breeze, mostly.

And now the Rogues had a Jedi in their midst, and at least another Force-sensitive that they kept under wraps.

Luke paused to think about Corran Horn; wondering where he was, and if he was still practicing his skills. The thoughts were fleeting.

Looking across the room, the Sagnik younglings were playing a quiet game and were mesmerized by the shadows they could cast against the disruptor’s glow.

He watched them.

They were good children; attentive and smart. They listened to instructions well. Although this must have been a scary time for them, Luke hoped that this wouldn’t scar them. In his mind’s eye, he could see them becoming adults – a thought that made him smile as he watched them play.

The sun was coming up, and the line of light on the floor had moved.

Luke started doing the math in his head of how far it would need to move before they could start moving.

Really, it didn’t matter how much daylight was available, Coruscant played by its own day-rules for activity.

They could start their journey as soon as there was enough population moving around them to cover them.

It would mean another change in appearance; putting away anything thig that looked like combat
Coruscant was a planet of lavish and lush appearances, but the general populace outside the Capitol didn’t necessarily adhere to those standards.

The Imperials would be looking for a team or group of people traveling together.

Luke doubted that they would be looking for a Sagnik family; he doubted that they would be looking for this one senator in particular.

Tucking his helmet inside his sack, Luke decided that it was time to start preparing himself for the trip.

He thought about Tillies and how they were going to eventually meet up with him.

Tillies was on his transport when it left Da Soocha, although assigned to a different group when this mission started. It was clear that the young man was ready to fight. He was green but willing.

There was a lot of innocence that was lost on missions like this. And this, this wasn’t even the thickest he had been in.

Luke rubbed his head again; the presence was back again. It was angry and had grown in hostility.

He let out a cleansing breath, wishing it away.

In the almost two years since encountering C’boath, Luke felt his ability to sense the Dark side had diminished, somewhat. And before that, the most severe of Dark presences was, of course, the Emperor.

The Emperor had been a looming presence; no matter where he went, no matter how much Luke trained to be a Jedi, he could feel the general animosity in the galaxy that emanated from his father, and the Emperor. With their deaths, it was like a cloud had lifted all over the galaxy.

Now, the Darkness was illusive and existed without having a beacon for it; Luke knew it was there, but it had no significant personification.

There was a time too, when Luke sensed darkness from Mara too.

He felt it the first time he sensed her, aboard the Wild Karrde, after they found him drifting in space. Karrde had suggested that his crew-member was able to sense him. It intrigued him, excited him that there was another Force user so close by.

He shivered as the surprise of her sense came to him; dark, and hatred the likes that he had never sense came off her.

Surprise came to him again when he woke to see her in front of him, on Myrkr, yet, she refused to let her hatred control her.

The Darkness; it called to her too.

Mara had lived it, and it was never so real as when he had gone with her to Vader’s Castle on Mustafar.

It was astounding that she had kept her wits about her; that her mind hadn’t been ripped apart by what she had lived through.
Luke rubbed his collar as he adjusted himself, remembering what it was to feel the plasti-steel wire at his throat. She had made it appear from nowhere, ready to slice his vein without another thought.

He shivered; thinking not just how close she had come. But, he had come close to almost crushing her throat with raw feelings- it had been tempting.

Still ashamed of his own actions, Luke clenched his eyes shut; fighting against the presence again, blaming them for bringing back these memories.

Relaxing, he breathed in deeply, thinking about the Force, and now feeling the Force.

*Mara had forgiven me.* He repeated in his mind. *I forgave her, too.*

Since they had left Mustafar, he hadn’t truly examined what had happened there. He had pushed it aside until he wanted to think about it.

It had meant so much at the time; he was filled with the unquenchable desire to see the home that belonged to his father, and was left ultimately dismayed with the whole event.

The only reprieve was seeing the Naboo emblem at the last minute before leaving. It gave him hope, but it also made him think.

One of the reasons that he wanted the trip was to prove that Anakin was lurking under Vader all the time. Sadly, it just seemed, like the emblem, Vader hammered away at covering up Anakin with every chance he got; obliterating the man that he used to be.

It left Luke feeling though his father was still an enigma; never truly able to answer who he was.

Now, the new dark presence tried to push his way and essence over anyone who could feel it.

*You’re no Vader. Try harder.* Luke wanted to reach out and taunt the presence, but he knew it would only fuel the hunger that was searching for him and place those in jeopardy that shouldn’t be here in the first place.

Sighing, Luke looked over to the family again; they had started to get their things ready to move.

Luckily, they still looked like a reasonably affluent group. The Imperials would not stop anyone who fit in.

Kaf had started to switch his clothing to a simple tunic and jacket.

Blending in was not a favorite tactic of Lando, however if the situation called for it, he would do it.

Qui’vik even arranged himself to look as low-key as possible.

They were just separate persons travelling in the same direction. No reason to stop them. No reason to suspect anything.

The disruptor sputtered, and the lights went dead; all the power was gone.

Lando was looking at his data pad and glanced up when the device died. He looked around the room and nodded to each, checking their understanding of their predicament. They were all to stay as silent as possible. He went back to his work.

Any sensors that the Imperials were likely to have would have been set to sense for lifeforms and for noise.
The group huddled in a residence wouldn’t have set off alarms; sounds of blasters powering up, would have.

Luke started to estimate what time it could be. He guessed, possibly 0-500, maybe 0-600, certainly early enough for people to move.

The sounds of speeders could be heard outside.

He further started to estimate the amount of time that they would need to reach their destination.

Three kilometers, for a grown man to walk would take less than forty-five standards minutes. He doubled that for a family of four with two younglings; he doubled that again, accounting for check-point stops, rocky terrain and anything else that might happen.

He stopped when he math put them at around three hours to reach their destination. Considering that they must have been held up in this residence for close to seven hours; it would put their ten-hour window very small.

Lando seemed satisfied and closed his data pad. Slowly, he got off the floor and dusted himself off, and levied his pack over one shoulder before turning to the door.

All in the room watched him with caution, knowing that this might signify that it was time to start moving.

Starting off by pushing open a crack in the door, Lando looked back to make eye contact with Luke.

The Jedi just nodded once, giving permission for them to continue on; his danger senses weren’t flaring.

The door pushed fully open without issue.

Lando pause before walking through.

The plan was to remain the same as it had to get here.

Both Lando and Kaf were to walk ahead of the family, appearing to be in conversation and serving as lookouts.

The family would walk slightly behind them, keeping their own pace. Qui’vik and Tillies were to keep distant but in-line with them.

With Tillies gone, Qui’vik was going to take that position by himself, probably left-flanking the group, or whichever side that they needed to be protected.

Luke watched as Lando and Kaf left the residence.

The family paused before leaving.

Lastly, Luke would come up behind, watching, and sensing if they needed to change their approach; he and Lando had worked out their signals long before this mission.

His mind flashed on a memory of preparing for the rescue of Han from Jabba’s; a tight smile formed as he left the residence. That plan didn’t quite go as well as thought, but they managed to pull it off.

Luke paused at the top of the stairs and then descended. It gave him a brief glimpse of the street and he could see two troopers patrolling on the opposite side of the street as people walked to and from.
It looks like Imperial procedure took place sooner than planned. There wasn’t a marching squadron in the middle of the street.

It was fortunate that the street was sufficiently populated that they could blend in well.

The family had quickened their pace today, knowing that they were close to safety and escape.

The youngest was shifted to her father, and the elder child held his mother’s hand, swinging it casually as they walked.

Exhaling deeply, Luke caught it before it happened; a trooper turned in the family’s direction, and watched them walk past, tracking them.

In his senses, he could determine that the trooper was merely watching them as a diversion from looking at the other trooper; nothing more. The white armor helmet turned watching them as they walked, and then turned away.

Qui’vik must have caught it too because he was watching the trooper; his emotions were riding high for what seemed to be an easy mission.

Luke walked with purpose, poising his body so that he wouldn’t look too casual as to set off alarms, but he would appear to be anyone else on the planet, with their mind on their own issues.

He breathed heavy, letting the Force flow through him.

They were headed just North of the town.

It wasn’t so much of a ‘town’, only a down-graded metropolis. Like the rest of planet, it was a layered city. Separated by distance, it wasn’t as populated as the Capitol and therefore, locals called it a ‘a town’ as a method of setting it apart.

If Luke was to look behind him now, he would have been able to see the Capitol and possibly the palace from here.

The town had a higher altitude and was higher up on the mountain that it appeared to be when walking the streets.

He kept his eyes forward; again, his senses flared.

They were almost passing the patrol outpost.

Keeping his stride, Luke looked down at his chrono and let his eyes look up to see what was occurring by the building.

He suppressed a smile; two troopers were man-handling a citizen, ushering from the building in the ruffian manner that the Imperials had perfected.

The citizen turned around, only to catch Luke’s eye, and then put his head down again.

Tillies had indeed been let go after a night of detention. He made the play of looking like he was the annoyed and victimized local, but let it go.

He limped along, heading in the same direction as the plan had deemed. Without a weapon, Tillies was nothing more than another set of eyes. His plan was to speed up his pace and then fall back in line with Qui’viks on the opposite side of the family.
Luke watched as everyone was behaving as they were supposed to. They might even get ahead of schedule.

Suddenly, Luke got the compulsion to look behind him.

Turning, he saw nothing, and then turned back, facing forward, he continued.

His mind went back to a detail that he had noticed; Mara had often mentioned that everything was done according to procedure, and nothing was done out of order or without a reason.

Luke was sure that the Imperial presence wasn’t supposed to dissipate for another few hours, by his calculations…by Lando’s calculations… just about everything said that there should be more Imperial around.

Yet, there wasn’t.

Others, he knew, would be celebrating the ease at which they moved, but not Luke. This thought was the harbinger that started the twitch in his skin, feeling uncomfortable.

He walked; paced himself, not alarming anyone else.

Reaching into his pocket right pocket on his long jacket, Luke clicked the small receiver in sequence, warning Lando up ahead.

It wouldn’t be immediate. Luke could feel it coming.

The Imperials weren’t ready…yet.

They had time. They could get the family to safety.

He had Qui’vik… he could get Tillies armed quickly if he needed to, giving him his blaster, as he used his lightsaber, if need be. They would have a fighting chance…the family would make a run for it, heading towards Lando… it was less than two kilometers to the drop sight… it was less than a kilometer to the cover of the brush.

With his hand on the receiver, he felt Lando’s response as the vibrations came back.

The uneasiness didn’t need to be expressed to Tillies or Qui’vik; they looked around more as they walked.

Lando and Kaf waited off to the side, appearing to be talking, absorbed in the conversation, but Luke knew that they were just closing ranks, keeping closer to the family, and the rest of the group.

After closing the gap, they turned and started to walk.

They were walking out of town, and it felt like it was uphill; Luke could feel the stress in his legs.

At least the family was oblivious to the subtle changes around them and they walked promptly. The youngest must have been feeling better, as she wanted to walk beside her mother and was let down briefly before she tired and was picked up again.

They were almost there. Another eight hundred meters and they would be at the clearing’s edge. They could sneak into it and then make it to the departure sight.

Luke looked around again and noticed that the population on the street had lessened.
There were larger gaps between people.

Looking ahead, he could see that even less people inhabited the street. As they would get closer to the perimeter, there would be virtually no one around, making their behavior suspicious.

It raised another set of warning bells for him. It was a classic technique, make your quarry reveal themselves. With no crowd to hide them, their actions were going to be out in the open.

Reaching out, he enhanced his other senses.

They know that you’re here. His mind said.

They know… His skin itched.

It was an odd sense that replied to the call. He sniffed the air. Closing his eyes, he looked for it specifically. It was useful. Few would recognize the smell of coolant, ozone and dura-steel plating as it floated on the air.

His other senses felt the lumbering labor of movement.

Luke dropped to the ground, pretending to retrieve something. On his knees, he touched the ground, just to be sure.

He felt it once…and then again…and then again.

Standing up, his eyes went wide. Reaching in to his pocket, he frantically sent the signal that an attack was impending.

As soon as the message was sent, the sound was heard in the distance, approaching from behind.

The distinct, ground-quaking thud trumpeted the arrival that could only be only thing.

The sound of the servos echoed in their direction, announcing its arrival before it was actually seen.

An All-Terrain Armored Transport was on its way.

The male Saknig looked back, meeting Luke’s face, seeing the horror, he went into action, lifting his other child and started to make a run in Lando’s direction.

An AT-AT could clear more distance than it would appear to be able. Travelling at sixty kilometers an hour, it would be upon them soon.

If you could feel it and hear it, it would be there sooner than expected.

Luke watched as the family struggler to increase their pace while holding their children. He had to stop the beast before it got there.

His mind flashed on Ovanis; he could call the power again to crush it where it stood, but that would be a direct summoning of the dark presence that hover above, in orbit.

Glancing over, he saw that the family had made it closer to Lando and Kaf. They were almost there when a graze of blaster fire came towards them, wanting to keep their party from escaping, delaying their getaway.

Luke tracked back to where the blast came from. A white helmet appeared over the parapet of a building across the street.
Ambush! His mind yelled as he pulled his blaster from its concealment and aimed in the direction of the trooper, tracking the movement.

Rapidly, he fired as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Aiming directly at the helmet, his blast hit true and the trooper fell over the edge of the building with a yell.

Chaos then ensued.

Blaster fire started to rain down from different directions.

Using the Force, Luke slowed his perception in order to respond.

Returning fire, he watched as Tillies ran toward the family, scooping up one of the younglings and making a run for it.

Qui’vik had taken cover and was returning fire in the direction above where Luke was standing.

Kaf followed behind the family, pegging off troopers that were now coming onto the street.

He could see Lando’s position, but he was sure that he was doing his job to guide them away.

All of this was happening as the thudding on the ground became stronger and each one followed quicker that the one before.

Caught in the fight, Luke watched civilians scatter, trying not to become a victim of the battle that they now found themselves in.

Suddenly, the pressure found Luke’s senses again; he fought against them as much as he was fighting back from the bombardment.

Qui’vik came out from where he was hiding, to avoid getting pinned down, but exposing himself to fire.

Luke knew it was the right move, but he also knew this battle wasn’t after Qui’vik, or any of the others.

The Imperials had used tactics like this before; overkill to get one Jedi.

The AT-AT’s heavy blast fired down the street, ripping a hole in the housing and buildings that stood in its path.

Kaf was knocked off his feet by the sonic blast, but soon got back on them, deciding that Qui’vik’s action of a retreat sounded like a clever idea.

The pressure in Luke’s head taunted him; laughing at the misfortunes of others.

Firing behind them, the two started running away from the scenes, and another blast hit sending debris into the air.

Troopers were now in the street, following the Qui’vik and Kaf. Luke could peg them off from his vantage point. He knew that somehow that he wasn’t going to make it out of this fight.

There was one way to draw them off the innocents.

As the troopers marched closer, Luke went for his lightsaber, and came out from his spot.
The green blade snapped to life, and the troopers that were in a few meters of him, back up upon it igniting.

The blade hummed with the quick swings that short work of the nearest troopers.

Luke could feel it again; the hungry presence was now fully celebrating that he had found what he was looking for.

The AT-AT fired again down the street, just past where Luke was standing; it was designed to separate Luke from the rest of his party.

He had suspected it, but until that very action, he knew for certain, that the Imperial would be satisfied if they had him and no one else.

The next wave of troopers had halted their position for a stand-off.

Blaster bolts deflected easily as they bounced off the blade of the lightsaber. At this close a range, and with the number of blasts coming in his direction, he should have been hit by now.

Mara had mentioned that trooper had been given the order to ‘shoot to wound- not kill’ when they suspected that he was in combat; this was another example of why he knew that he was the chosen target.

*Buy them time*, his mind said. *Just a while longer, they can make it to the transport if you give them time.*

*Then what?* He questioned back.

The ground now shook in syncopation and the AT-AT came in sight; another blast aimed behind him; his exit route was blocked off.

Reaching out with his feelings he could sense that Lando and the rest of the group were almost at the transport.

Luke kept fighting, but he knew what he needed to do.

He could feel the dark presence laughing and enjoying the show that the Jedi was putting on, but Luke decided that he would not make this worse than it needed to be. If the troopers weren’t going to actively attack him, then he wouldn’t make the effort to rebound the shots to kill either.

The battle was dying down. It was futile to keep it going.

One by one, the troopers stopped firing when it was apparent that all concerned knew of the eventual outcome.

In the distance, Luke saw the tiny shuttle lift off from out the wooded clearing and he knew that he could relent. It was what he wanted.

Calling out in his feelings, he reached out to the other presence.

*I am here.*

*I surrender.*

Do with me what you will.
Within seconds, all the troopers stopped firing.

Luke kept his lightsaber ignited and on guard, should any of them decide to act against orders.

Stepping into the middle of the street, he was prepared to meet whatever they had in store for him.

In formation, the remaining troopers parted, and a confinement pod was pushed forward.

With resignation, Luke knew that his fight was over. For now.

The pod hovered ten meters in front of him, and stopped. The door hissed open.

He took one long deep breath before he walked towards it. It didn’t feel like a surrendering, though; it felt like an invitation.

He closed down his lightsaber and expected to have it confiscated, only they didn’t make a motion towards him. The troopers allowed him to move how he chose.

Luke stepped into the pod without any ceremony; his senses clear, his mind at peace.

With the hiss of the pod’s door closing, with him inside, Luke felt relief that he refused to act out of anger like he had done on Ovanis.

Closing his eyes, he decided to meditate to wherever this pod, and the Force, was going to take him.

TBC
Chapter Summary

Quote: “And I did. I did not destroy their world…I spared it. See how merciful I can be?” It was a mocking joke that He could pretend that He had the ability not to be cruel.

Characters: Luke, Sedriss, and Other?

Chapter Notes

**

So, I'm going to guess that because there were no comments left on the last chapter, that either you are all holding your breath or you don't like this twist in the story.

I guess I will find out after you read this chapter.

This is the moment where I find out if I left any plot holes….buckle up…it’s about to get rough.

**

Unknown Location in the Deep Core

The containment pod was dark; a moving tomb, if they wanted it to be one.

The only light came from a small disk above him, just enough to allow him to see his surroundings. Luke looked up at the light and despite its dimness, he squinted. The only alternative that presented itself was staring at the blank wall across from him.

In solitude, he had the luxury to ponder his circumstance.

There was no fan fair to his incarceration. He had gone willingly to spare those that he was trying to rescue. To his knowledge, it had not been in vain and the transport had made its escape.

Luke sat on the low padded bench which encircled the inner pod, tilting his head back and looking into the top light again. He sighed and felt that, at least he was able to complete that side of his mission.

The pod was a general sort of thing, with nothing distinguishable about it. It wasn’t luxurious; it was probably a modified escape pod, he reasoned.

He could feel slight shifts in motion as he supposed it was being transferred from ground to shuttle, then probably from shuttle to Star Destroyer… then… to where?

Closing his eyes, he made note to pay close attention to his own breathing.
Breathe in… and sense those things around you.

Breathe out… release your fears and concerns.

Feel the Force…let it be your guide…

He wondered about his state; calm and introspective, just as Jedi should be. There was no need to panic or rush to conclusions about where he was being taken. He didn’t need to speculate; there was enough information to form a foregone conclusion.

Only, that for months, he had sensed the growing threat. He now assumed that he was on his way to meet that threat.

If it wasn’t for his Jedi abilities, he wouldn’t have been able to sense the dark presence’s jubilation at his captured prize.

The dark one walked around the pod prior to it being loaded, wanting to tease the passenger, or prisoner, inside; Luke could sense it. It was then that Luke felt the other presence was ordered not to disrupt anything.

He could feel the resentment from the other, and his withdrawal from his attention to the pod.

Luke thought it strange that they should be taking great care with him. Odder still, that he was also left with his lightsaber; there was no attempt to disarm him. If he wanted to escape, all he had to do was cut into the side of the pod, and be free.

Although the primary goal was freedom, he knew that it wasn’t the entire goal. There was much more at stake here than escaping – for if he did…what would happen next? This was, presumably, just another attempt to find him, they would try again and again, and at the cost of innocent lives.

Luke sighed and looked down at his boots. He had been preparing himself for the eventuality that the hatch would open and he would meet whoever had been chasing him.

And since being detained, he had been counting his time in the pod. The minutes made hours, and now, the hours had lapsed passed half a day – by his calculations.

Han had once tried to explain how to calculate your time in hyperspace to the distance travelled. Mara had her own way to do it too. But both methods implied knowing what type of vehicle you were in and the top speed.

He sighed again, and mentally did the calculations. Luke assumed that he was inside one of the Star Destroyers that had orbited the Coruscant; with a Class 2 hyperdrive, and just shy of fourteen hours travelled, they were most-likely still inside the Core worlds.

Given the sense and sounds from outside the pod, the sub-light engines had been cut, and the Star Destroyer was slowing down for its approach.

He closed his eyes and let his feelings, and the Force, dictate his actions. As the peace and calm washed over him, he knew that the best plan of action was to take none at all. A melancholy, somber spirit seeped into his meditations; he was on his way to meet another destiny, this time, unsure of the purpose or reasoning.

He was a Jedi; he had met his destiny to become one…or, at least, he thought. What did the Force have in mind for him now? What precipice waited for him this time?
In the back of his mind, the Darkness was coming closer. He could feel that the pinnacle, the epicenter, was approaching.

Only this time, it didn’t feel like the doom that he had felt in his heart on Endor, all those years ago.

Though, the Force had told him that this meeting would have repercussions nonetheless.

*Palpatine*, the voice at the back of his mind whispered. Reason and logic would disagree where the Force was certain.

Exhaling, Luke left his eyes flutter closed again; he reached out to try and see more than those images that he already been granted.

Leia, Han and the twins were safe. Leia would soon be giving birth to her next child.

Mara; he had sensed her reaching out to him several times. He knew she was there, but couldn’t be certain of her condition. Lando had mentioned that she would be safe, wherever she was.

Opening his eyes, he looked up at the light again and wondered what she would have to say about this. He could hear the chastising now but in the end, she would understand…*in time*.

He had little time to speculate more, feeling that the pod was moving. He could feel the hum of the repulse system engage through the floor, allowing the pod to hover and be directed.

The dark presence, from Coruscant, was outside the pod again, accompanying it to where he, and the pod, needed to be.

Luke centered on this dark presence; not quite a Sith, defiantly not a Jedi, the one who had been searching for him on Coruscant.

*Young*, his mind answered. *Male...untrained... angry... hostile... insecure... seeking approval... determined...ambitious...*

In his mind’s eye, the presence stepped back from the pod, at feeling probed and sensed; he didn’t like it.

Opening his eyes, Luke smiled, now knowing his immediate opponent would not be a threat; not because he wasn’t as well-trained, but because the other had orders not to act. But someone like that, with ambition and feeling that they needed to prove themselves, was often more-dangerous than those who possessed true power.

No, this presence was still a threat.

The presence was dwarfed by the real entity that emanated with the Dark Side. And that other presence was larger and clearer.

*Palpatine*, his senses whispered again.

Luke couldn’t deny it any longer; yes, it felt exactly like Palpatine did when he first encountered him on Endor. This grander presence wasn’t shying away from it; He wasn’t hiding anymore.

Shaking his head, it seemed futile to determine any reason for being brought before Palpatine, if it was him, but to insight Luke to turn to the Dark Side.

The circumstances pointed with all the wrong motives. Luke was still armed with his lightsaber, and if the desire was for Luke to succumb to the Dark Side, as a Jedi, those chances had dwindled since
their first encounter.

Anakin isn’t here to save you. The voice in the back of his mind broke his concentration.

Luke sighed. The voice was right. When he thought that Endor was his destiny, he was wrong. His true destiny would be on the other side of the hatch when it opened.

Since his encounter outside Ord Mantell, he had felt well of darkness that could only be one person…or maybe person was too strong a word for them…entity was a better suit. They had moved beyond being an actual physical being and had become something else; replaced flesh for power.

Mara could deny it all she wanted, but Luke couldn’t…not any longer.

Palpatine!

It could be none other.

Only He would have the power to revive himself. Only He would be so devious as to mount an insurrection. Only He could mask His presence all over the galaxy.

Luke had resigned himself that he would have to come face to face with the malevolent dictator again. What he thought was his destiny, was again coming to fruition; to face evil, and defeat it, without his father to aide him.

He felt the jarring of the pod, and the stir in the pit of his stomach told him that he was approaching his time to be released from the unit. Rolling his eyes shut, he could get a sense of what was being prepared for him.

Outside the pod, he could sense a squad of stormtroopers readying themselves for combat while a dark presence lurked.

The pod jostled again; Luke supposed it was the grav locks, securing it in place.

He dropped his head, preparing for the hatch to open. The hiss outside of the pod must have been louder than inside, as it was no surprise to Luke as the hatch disengaged and moved aside to open.

A beam of light entered the pod, and he squinted against it as he moved towards the light, stepping through.

Intentionally, he kept his eyes down as he walked out; it was a sign that he wasn’t going to attempt to fight. Never the less, with his head down, he still heard the sound of the quick movements, armor assuming the defensive position, blasters aimed in his direction.

Luke slowly lifted his head to look at his surroundings; he kept his arms dropped down as his sides but his hands sprayed open. It was a position that suggested that he had not fully surrendered – a slight reminder that he was an odd sort of guest, willing to be there.

The room was not a standard Imperial docking bay which surprised him. Green and gold abutments braced the walls as natural light streamed in from the large hovering windows; clearly of alien design.

It was a quick examination, as he ushered to walk around the pod. Luke came before the dark presence that he had been sensing. He stopped before the other man, not flinching.

The young man stared harshly at Luke. Wearing a smug smile of satisfaction, his green eyes were
seeped with yellow rims. The black cloak that hung from his shoulders looked heavy and burdensome. His sallow face showed every feeling that he was having; seething and simmering with vengeance for some reason that Luke was unaware.

Words weren’t needed as the other man stepped in front, pivoted and then led the way; the troopers fell in line behind them.

Relaxing further into the Force, Luke it flow through him, as a rebuke of the Darkness. He could feel it approaching, coming closer to its proximity.

The mass of Darkness was like a clouded shadow that danced in front of them as they walked; celebrating the capture of the Jedi, anticipating their meeting.

He was led down a corridor and he could observe, on his periphery, that he must be in a castle or palace of some sorts just by the finery that was around him.

Droids and servants stopped, then retreated as the progression went passed them.

The only sound in the hallway was the tight tympanic drum of the marching movement; distinct and with purpose.

They halted at a turbolift in the center of the hall; the troopers seemed more-nervous that they were stationary. The young man, ahead of Luke, wasn’t as concerned; he knew that his prisoner was not preparing for battle.

Luke was sure to project his intentions in his aura. The Darkness’s aura grew in intensity too; awaiting its captive audience.

The lift door opened and Luke entered behind the other man, and two stormtroopers entered behind him. The door closed, and the lift moved swiftly.

The silence of the short ride was deafening as was the active mind of the younger man. Luke could sense and feel every nuance. He was surprised that the other man hadn’t learned the suppression of his feelings, given that Mara had learned to hide almost all her feelings from everyone. He assumed that it was taught procedure, but perhaps not.

This man was a black hole, damaged and twisted, rooted and diseased by his own feelings. Again, much like Mara had been when he had met her.

Before he could examine the other further, the doors on the opposite side the lift opened into blackness only lit by shadow of eerie green windows.

The Darkness was now boundless, and filled the room.

The man stepped into the room first, with Luke behind him, however the troopers stayed behind as the lift door closed.

Red Imperial Guards, that had been flanking the lift, and came forward to assume the position of rear guard to the Jedi.

Much like the throne room on the Death Star, a lower platform led to a set of stairs where a higher dais rested. The large throne faced away from the party that had just arrived.

The younger man dropped to one knee with his head bowed.
Luke stood straight and resisted the memories that reminded him of what to expect.

Methodically, the throne turned in their direction.

All activity stopped and froze in place; it was as if the air was taken out of his lungs.

A pale hand emerged from the shadow at the throne, and gestured away.

“Leave us.” It echoed.

Luke suppressed a shudder, recalling the voice that haunted his dreams since Endor; the same demeanor, the same rasp.

The young man seemed surprised that he was ordered to leave, and Luke could see it in his eyes as he passed, joining the Red Guard to exit.

They were alone.

And then the silence….

For a long moment, the room was quiet, and Luke could only hear his own rhythmic breathing; slow and steady.

Unlike the first time he came before the Emperor, he didn’t feel his heart thudding in his throat. He was at peace and he partially wondered if Mara was correct in thinking this was not the Emperor at all.

At the top of the dais, he heard the contrived throaty laugh.

“So, you think that I am entirely a clone?” The voice spoke slowly, annunciating the words with a sharp Core accent. “Come now, I would have thought that we would be beyond such juvenile delusions.”

There was motion in the shadows as the figure came off from the throne; He moved faster than Luke would have thought the old Emperor to move.

“You are, of course, somewhat correct, Jedi Skywalker…” The voice lisped on the first syllable of his name. “…this body was created by cloning.”

“However, cloning has its limitations.” The figure moved in one of the few stands of light that pierced the darkness.

The face that stared down at him was clearly a younger version of Palpatine, looking every bit the egregious embodiment of evil; the yellow-rimmed red eyes glowed above the malicious grin.

Yes, younger than the Emperor that he had met at Endor, but still appearing older than Luke’s age.

If this is what a younger version of Palpatine looked like, then in His younger years, Palpatine would have had the look of a dignified gentleman; refined and polished. His black robe looked crisp on His stoic frame.

“I assure you that I am not the personification… a replication of a former person. This body may have been created without memory, but My essence, which inhabits it, retains all the memory of its former living shell.” The form lurked above, raising an eyebrow. “But you knew that already, didn’t you?”
Luke’s eyes narrowed, expecting some sort of retribution for the last time they had met. He refrained from answering a question that he knew to be rhetorical.

In an instant, involuntarily, he shuddered, feeling the veil drop; the cold wave swept over him as the reborn Emperor’s essence was released, hitting him like a wave.

His eyes went wide, and there left no doubt that the figure before him was, in fact, Palpatine reborn. Luke’s mind reeled; Mara was right…Palpatine had the ability to transfer his life-essence; to be reborn. The thought horrified him.

“Ahhhh yes…” The Emperor hissed as He took a step down from the dais, towards the Jedi. “My errant Hand…she would have informed you of My skills.” His face froze, darkening, if that was possible.

“She will be dealt with, in time.” He whispered ominously.

Luke swallowed as his hand went to hover over his lightsaber, feeling a threat; he took a step back, hesitating.

“We shall discuss her…later.” Palpatine spoke; His callous tone changed.

The Emperor stepped aside and gestured to the dais behind him, as another chair appeared on the upper level. “But for now, I hope you will indulge Me in conversation.” His face relaxed, mimicking a subdued emotion, sounding almost conversational. “I am unarmed, and as you may recall, only pose a threat if I choose to.”

The mental images caused his muscles to flex as he remember the first blast of electricity that surged through his body on that fateful meeting.

Luke’s voice cracked as he spoke in monotone. “No one is unarmed when they are prepared with the Force.”

Palpatine’s face contorted into a satisfied grin. “Quite right, Jedi Skywalker. I see that I am not encountering the naïve plebe that I met above Endor. You have seen and learned much in the six years hence.”

Turning, the reborn-Emperor returned to His throne, adjacent to the chair that was equal in size. Before sitting down, He gestured again; an offer for Luke to join Him cordially.

A mercurial air was in the room, constructed of ambivalence and animosity yet mutually agreeing to put their feelings aside, for the time being. It was rope of tension that now allowed each player to be on the same level, which neither participant relished.

It was all fictitious and each of them knew it; things could easily erupt into destruction and it teeter on the edge.

Leery, but curious, Luke searched his senses for any warning before he stepped forward and ascended the stairs.

If Palpatine wanted him destroyed, He would have done so before now- He had every chance. Pausing in front of the deep black chair, Luke stared down before he turned and lowered himself into it.

“I see you have met one of my students.” With all elegance, Palpatine gestured back in the direction of the turbolift.
As a token that he knew the Emperor would feed off of, Luke let a little of his disdain for the younger man slip from his senses. “No.” He replied curtly. “We haven’t been formally introduced.”

“Sedriss…” The Emperor hissed dismissively. “Force-strong, but what he lacks in training, he makes up for in eagerness.”


“I am sure,” Palpatine paused, “just as I have found those who are willing to learn, so have you.”

The Jedi nodded once again, not revealing anything.

“He is a student…nothing more… certainly not the quality for apprenticeship, and never will be. However, he is useful.” The Emperor volunteered that information, at no cost to Himself.

“You find many who are ‘useful’.” Luke murmured, his mind flashing on Mara before closing his thoughts off.

A sly smile crossed the face of the Emperor. “There are those who are ready and worthy to be become apprentices. There are those who should be elevated past students. There are those who will be nothing more than students… and then, there are special cases.”

Luke felt the quick twist in his mind as his thoughts flashed back to an image of Mara, given to him by the thing grinning across from him.

“You will soon learn the difference.” Palpatine spoke softly.

A small table arose between their two chairs, and automated arm syphoned out what appeared to be wine into two goblets.

Luke waited and watched as the goblet in front of the Emperor rose into His waiting hand. Leaning in, he picked up the glass that was meant for him and paused.

No toast was raised, and the older man took the first sip, watching His guest over the rim. It was a test of trust that gave and took between them.

It was a game; a sick, sadistic game to see who would break first. So long as Luke wasn’t the one to act first, he would keep the upper hand. It was only a matter of time to see which buttons would try to be pushed.

“Good.” The Emperor said as He adjusted His sleeves as He leaned back, watching the Jedi carefully. “I see you also have acquired that Jedi wisdom that they purported themselves to have.” He sneered.

Instead of being goaded into a war of words, Luke relaxed back into the seat, keeping his gaze on the man across from him.

In truth, curiosity was now fueling him; not fear, not doom.

Aside from all the questions he had regarding this immediate situation, the Emperor also held all the answers to the questions that Luke had been asking himself. My mother… my father- the reason for his fall… the nature of the Force – why does it allow You to exist?

No – his senses said – Be Alert! He wants something.

Luke narrowed his eyes as he looked across at the other man, and inhaled deeply, pushing the dark
away. “The Jedi are not the only ones who had wisdom.” He said solemnly. “It would be limiting to think that they were the only ones to possess the knowledge of the Force.”

Palpatine’s eyes widened ever-so slightly and then rested Their gaze. “So, you have moved beyond their philosophy?” He motioned outwardly.

“I’ve made the effort to not limit my way of thinking.” Luke responded coolly.

“Curious on how you were able to achieve this…” The Emperor asked without posing the question.

The air had turned in the room; the Jedi could sense that the Emperor was not expecting this sort of behavior. Perhaps, He was expecting the reckless youth that was bold and naïve enough to think that he could, and would, defeat evil so easily.

Luke mirrored the other man’s motions and took a sip from his glass before he answered; a symbol of limited trust. “I started reading several sources from The Guardians of the Whills.”

Luke’s senses registered surprise, only briefly, and then a flash of anger, not directed at him, but he could assume that the Emperor understood that He had missed something in His plan to remove all evidence of Force-users.

The Emperor hummed sardonically, as the goblet floated back to the table between them. He leaned back into his throne, resting His elbows on the sides, and bringing His hands together, fingers touching. “And what have you learned?” He asked as His eyes peered out.

Luke, still on guard for any punishment, sat still. “That Sith and Jedi aren’t so very different, both relying on the Unifying Force for the source of their power.”

“And that there’s more than just Jedi and Sith…there’s different types of Force-users.” Luke said securely. “And there’s more of them, then there are of us.”

“Correct you are again, Jedi Skywalker.” Palpatine’s lip twisted momentarily; unnaturally giving credit to an adversary.

The room grew silent.

In wasn’t intrusive, but Luke could feel the tendrils of the Emperor’s essence trying to permeate his thoughts.

“You are not the impulsive boy who was brought before me on Endor.” The Emperor spoke His thoughts out loud. “You told me that My over confidence was my weakness… I wonder, have you learned to control your own weaknesses since? Are you steered by your faith in your friends still?”


“So did your father.” Palpatine shot back. “Regardless of the side he served….unyielding…I doubt that you have been so persistent in your beliefs as to not have your moments of doubt.”

Inhaling and exhaling, Luke let the comment wash off him.

“You are not so unlike your father.” The Emperor announced, leaning forward slightly. “I see now that you possess the qualities of your mother in you, too. She was much more-refined than your
father ever was. Perhaps, you are a blend of both them.”

Luke held himself from flinching at the mention of his mother; at last the Emperor pushed his first button.

“And your sister…” The Emperor hissed.

“Very wise of Yoda and Kenobi to hide her in plain sight.” Palpatine’s face made a smile. “I should have seen it…like mother, like daughter, in many ways. And yet, Vader did not see it either.”

“I assume that she does not have your talents, nor the desire to study, the Jedi arts?” Palpatine poked again.

Sitting taller, Luke locked his eyes before he answered. “No, she does not.”

This time it was Palpatine’s turn to inhale and exhale before speaking, trying to grab hold in another place. “And you have learned much since our last encounter.” The Emperor assessed before took another sip from His goblet. “So unfortunate that we had to conduct our first introduction in such a manner. I would have preferred this type of a more-civilized exchange.”


“Indeed, it was done for your benefit. In truth, you did prove my estimations… you did defeat your father.” Clasping His hands in front of Him, it seemed that He was pleased to discuss such things.

Luke felt a touching on his mind, replaying those events that haunted him; the clash of sabers, the near-disastrous events of his battle with his father.

“That suit did not grant Vader any favors. It made him weak. I make no secret of it. That was my sole goal, to replace your father with you as my apprentice, and eventually, my equal.” The Emperor confessed.

Regretfully, Luke let some of his shock slip from his senses at hearing this.

“Yes, I said equal.” Palpatine said contritely. “This surprises you?”


Palpatine grinned and gave one scoff. “There you are wrong. I wanted an apprentice who was worthy. It was only a gambit between you and Vader, son versus father. A dilemma of conscience too.”

“A drama that could only have one winner… and that winner would be worthy of the teachings that I could bestow. Your father thought he had reached his potential… but you, a new mind, would have been receptive to what my training could offer. A grateful apprentice.” The hunger and following disappointment were evident in Palpatine’s tone.

“The galaxy is a strange thing, you will find… full of complexity and contradictions. The only thing that is a constant is the Force- on that, we can both agree.” Palpatine’s voice took on a sedate tone, relaxed and not imbued with threats.

Feeling somewhat aghast, Luke felt the need to answer to the contrary, out of spite, but what he was hearing was the truth that he couldn’t deny, so why refute it?
“We can also agree that a balance must be set…between Dark and Light… otherwise, both will perish.” Palpatine concluded with the Jedi watching him ubiquitously. “I am not so conceited as to not realize that, in the years since My departure, the failure of the Senate of the New Republic has proved My reasoning all along.”

“The galaxy needs us. The galaxy needs balance.” The Emperor announced quietly with little ceremony.

“Yes, but…” Luke tried to dispute it and found no reasoning. His resolve was slowly slipping away; he did not expect this contact to be so engaging, part of him wished for an open fight rather than this dance.

Palpatine thought outwardly. “Your father… yes, it was My goal to turn him to the Darkside, as it was for you… but you, and your father were to serve a higher goal… and a Jedi went and spoiled My plans for his greatness.”

Kenobi the air sizzled with vehement for the absent Jedi Master before dissolving.

“Due to your father’s limitations, physically and emotionally, he never ascended to the heights that he was supposed to… fulfilling the prophesy… fulfilling his potential.” Palpatine’s inner rage died away, somewhat; holding Kenobi and the entire Jedi Order to blame for His apprentice’s shortcomings.

“And now… now…” The Emperor’s eager nature betrayed Him; a wildness came into His eyes as He leaned closer from off His throne. “You are the galaxy’s second chance!” Calming Himself, He relaxed His stance again and whispered seductively, “…should you decide to take it.”

I won’t turn. Luke thought, sure of himself and his tenure. But he still swallowed at the implication. “I will not turn.” The Jedi said openly, defiantly to the Emperor, to The Darkness, and to all who might sense it.

“Ah, but it necessary for you to turn… as you will soon see.” The Emperor’s comment lacked malice, but it was sure to follow.

“Tell me,” The gleam in Palpatine’s eyes lowered to a simmer, returning to a calmer demeanor. “… In your readings, what is the step to attain the level of Jedi Master?”

Luke inhaled deeply; remembering the journals pointing that a Jedi Knight must turn to the Darkside before turning back to the Light and achieving the level of Jedi Master.

Yes, Palpatine was a master at playing this game, conniving His way in; He still wanted something, something beyond the here and now.

“You think that I am incapable of speaking the truth.” The Emperor reasoned. “Jedi speak in riddles… they always have. Sith only see two paths. From me, there will be nothing but truth…. No hidden meanings, no ‘point of view’ that needlessly wastes time and deceives… My motives will be My own, of that, I promise you they will always be My goals.”

Motioning to stand, Luke took several paces away from the chair and turned his back on the older man, hoping to clear his thoughts and break the spell that was starting to take hold. Yet he couldn’t deny what he was hearing.

“There is such a misleading guidance in the path of the Force. A Sith must study the path of the Jedi before diverging. A Jedi must turn to the Darkside before mastering the aspects of their beliefs.” The Emperor said in a calm voice.
“You father was never granted the title of ‘Master’ because he never completed the stage of returning to the Light.” Palpatine explained. “The Jedi feared that he would linger too long in the Dark. And he did.”

Luke looked over his shoulder in time to see the predatory smile on the older man, but he still felt compelled to listen, begging for answers that were at the back of his mind. He turned away, trying to break the tempo.

“Every Jedi Master had to turn, or be tempted at one time or another, in order to achieve their rank.” Palpatine reasoned. “Master Yoda had to feel the seductive pull…how else could he describe it so vividly to you?”

“Even your precious General Kenobi.” The Emperor inhaled vehemently against the name before continuing. “Even he turned, if briefly, feeling the passion and the feelings welling up inside him, and then unleashing them…using the Dark Power as his own.”

“Why should you be any different?” Palpatine asked. “If you don’t aspire to becoming a Jedi Master yourself?”

It shocked him to hear such truth from the Emperor. But this was not the conversation Luke had been anticipating; he had been expecting coercion and deception, not undeniable truth. And, this was not one of the reasons he became so obliging as to come along, allowing himself to be captured; he had his own goals.

Turning around to face his nemesis, “I will not turn.” Luke hissed quietly, strongly.

“Yes. Yes…you will… perhaps not at this very moment…but you will.” Palpatine replied casually, dismissing the other man’s reactions with flippancy. “I can see that you will resist my resolve until you feel that your intentions have been dealt with… Very well, I will humor you, just this once.”

The Emperor didn’t betray His disappointment. In fact, He seemed pleased that the Jedi was resisting Him and didn’t retaliate.

“Let us begin with your father, shall we? That is where most of your questions lie, is it not?” The red eyes blinked, relaxing their hard edge.

A slow itch, at the base of Luke’s spine started to draw upwards- it was a reaction to wanting to disengage, but the offer was too tempting not to take. Without wanting to, he took one step in the direction of the throne.

“Anakin Skywalker was already damaged when the Jedi rebuked him. He already had darkness in his heart long before the Jedi Master took him away from his mother.” The Emperor uttered; seemly exasperated that He was reliving history.

“Born a slave… he knew only a mother’s love that would have kept him in the Light. But the Jedi were too greedy to have it otherwise. They wanted his power. But, at what cost?” Palpatine spoke in a voice that was compelling to listen to, like a storyteller. “Others would have done the right thing and left him where he was, and not force fate.”

Luke took another step unconsciously towards the throne, inexplicably drawn in.

“And rebuke? -yes, they refused to train him. Only Obi wan disobeyed the direct order to not train Anakin.” The Emperor’s voice took on an unusual tone of pity, sympathy. “And train him they did; determined, slowly, and stagnated his potential and his life. Anakin was never meant to be caged, the way that they did.”
There was a pain in his chest, feeling his father’s emptiness; a feeling that Luke understood all too well.

“Your father was vacant vessel, clinging to anything and anyone he could find stability with.” Palpatine watched the young Jedi with intent.

<Would you like to see what he looked like?>

Luke stepped back, hearing the other man’s voice in his head. His eyes wide, and surprised, mostly, at himself, that he would have let his guard slip to allow Him in.

“He tried to fill the empty void with your mother…” Palpatine said before Luke could utter an objection.

<Would you like to see her? See them? They were astonishingly beautiful together.>

Taking several steps back, Luke knew that his face must have shown the inner struggle he was having. Yes, he so very badly wanted to see them together. But at the same time, he was repulsed that he would ever be made to ask such intimate thing from Palpatine.

Logic won out, and slowly, Luke nodded regretting his decision, knowing that Palpatine would have been one of the few who would have seen his father and mother together. He knows so much more than anyone else. Luke’s mind reasoned.

With a satisfied grin, the Emperor sat back, feeding off the sentimental ideals that the Jedi clung to, yet still providing what He had promised.

Fluttering his eyes, Luke didn’t resist the intrusion onto his mind. The Emperor was indeed powerful as to be able to share these thoughts.

The images started to collect, with hazy shapes and forms, like a living dream of days gone past. Images flashed one by one; watching his father, at work, in battle, in duty and service to the Jedi – a sense of pride started to fill his heart.

Then, new images appeared – the petite noble woman. Dressed in garments beyond compare and extravagance, her small form would have been swallowed by the weighty material if her presence hadn’t been so large and grand, projecting past her presentation.

Luke felt the magnetic draw between his father, and the dark-haired young woman…he wanted to say queen, to describe her.

“Your mother…she was too good for the likes of him. Her nobility would have frowned on any association between the two.” Palpatine’s snobbery showed Itself before the images pulled away.

Opening his eyes, forcing the image out of his mind, Luke knew that he had given-in somewhat to the will of the Emperor, swallowing his pride to ask for something, making him indebted.

But the Emperor wanted the Jedi to pay more, a price that would leave him even greater in debt; a debt that he would eventually have to pay.

“On Endor, all I could see in you was your father… emotions swinging like a pendulum from one extreme to the other. But now? Yes, I see your mother too.” Palpatine said for His own amusement.

“Anakin had all the makings of a great Sith in him… anger, resentment, aggression, and passion. All I needed to do was to put a catalyst in front of him.”
Luke looked into the red eyes of the other man, seeing why He had risked so much to get Anakin as His apprentice.

“The Jedi and their lack of action caused his anger and resentment… The Clone War and the lack of resolution drove his aggression… and your mother drove his passion and his fear. Having to hide their relationship only tightened the vice on all of it.”

“She was the tipping point that made his turn ever-more possible.” The Emperor said in a slow raspy voice, enunciating His words.

He could feel the anger start to grow, wanting to fight back, deny it all. Luke inwardly fought to control his feelings. He tried to inhale, to feel the calm of the Force; on the exhale, his released some of the tension that was building in his body.

“To achieve what I wanted, all I needed to do was reveal his other option… the Sith answered all of his yearnings…and to twist the screw a little tighter.” Palpatine tipped his ‘t’s’, contorting his voice yet again. “I revealed the hypocrisy of the Jedi for the traitors that they were… I showed him that his power could not be controlled, nor should it be.”

And He stopped. Palpatine paused, watching the young man standing across from Him, trying to control his anger.

For a moment, He, the Emperor wanted to congratulate the young Jedi at his control, taunt him further into anger. If Endor taught him anything, He had learned how to read this one better; a deeper gouge had to be made, one that would not heal so easily.

“And your mother; her love, when denied to him after his turn, was the final step to his indoctrination.”

Luke looked sharply at the Emperor; still reminding himself that He was a liar…He had to be.

“It was his love for your mother that was his undoing… the hurt and pain at her rejection made the slip so sublime. He only needed to believe that, she too, had betrayed him…just like the Jedi.”

Shaking his head, Luke took one step back; he wouldn’t give in, fall under the spell. A safe distance would allow him to take perspective.

“Kenobi should have killed him…but mercilessly, left him alive by that lava flow on Mustafar… to wallow in pain and agony for his coming days. It was the Jedi who did this to him.” Palpatine gestured from where he was sitting.

Luke shook his head vigorously as an image of a grotesquely charred man, with limbs severed, appeared in his mind, and the smell of burned flesh filled his nostrils.

Clenching his eyes against seeing such a things, feeling the emotions that his father felt; it was a bombardment.

And then, it was gone…faded away.

The pressure stopped and the chamber grew silent yet again. Only the sound of the Jedi’s intense breathing to be heard.

When Luke looked up, the Emperor sat waiting and watching him. Instead of an amused face, enjoying the pain he was inflicting, there was something else in Palpatine’s manner, one that Luke felt could have passed for pity.
“But I deject…” the older man said slowly.

“My reasons for wanting you to turn, will be entirely different, of course.” Palpatine said in a gentle tone; no threat or taunting, merely explaining.

“You, unlike your father, will have your own reasons for turning… necessary reasons, ones that will elevate you in the long-term which, of course; it will be so very altruistic of you.” The Emperor whispered his last words before raising the tone of his voice back up to normal volume. “However, like your father, I’m sure your pendulum swings as broad and as grand as your father’s ever did… with more satisfactory results, I should think.”

Feeling himself about to be drawn back in, Luke could also feel that he had gained some ground back. “I will not turn.” He repeated in a whisper.

“I need you to turn.” Palpatine exaggerated his words. “You, need to turn!” He paused, and held in his temper at the obstinate young Jedi. “If only for your growth, should you choose. I need you to turn to the Dark so that you can turn back… and become the Jedi Master that your father should have been, that you have the opportunity to become!”

“I need you to become my equal…” Palpatine rose from his throne and took one step in Luke’s direction. “…so that you and I can rule the galaxy together… Dark and Light in balance.”

Luke took another step back, not wanting to be so close. The Emperor’s motives were not what he suspected. It was hard to ration and argue against what he knew would eventually happen; he would need to turn to the Dark side if he was ever to become a Jedi Master… it would happen.

“No.” Luke shivered at he spoke, but inside he knew his confidence was waning.

“You don’t know, Jedi Skywalker, what lurks in the Regions Unknown to us.” Palpatine’s voice now took on an imploring tone. “But I do.”

“I’ve seen the reports and results of my searches.” Stepping around his throne, Palpatine turned away from the other man, in his own thoughts. “There is something out there… the Force is somehow different… it makes Force-users different… neither Dark nor Light… and threatens us all.”

Swallowing, Luke could sense it; Palpatine feared the possibility of what was out there – this was not a show for his sake.

“Surely, My Hand told you of the real intention of the Death Star? It was not to be used as a weapon to use against My enemies, but as protection for those things that would threaten the known galaxy.” Palpatine turned back to face the other man.

“And not just threats of harm, but those that would threaten the very balance of the Force, itself.” The Emperor’s eyes were vivid red, and wide. “The ultimate unbinding of the galaxy!”

<< Think of the lives lost and the destruction! …Chaos! >>

Luke shuffled his feet backwards, wanting to retreat but knew that he couldn’t; the act would imply that his opinion could be swayed.

“Oh a Jedi Master could be my equal… could be my counter-point… could be the balance….” Palpatine explained, soothing his voice, almost pleading.

“If a Master of the Dark, and a Master of the Light joined their might, all beings of the galaxy, and beyond, would fall in line… and we would finally have peace.” The Emperor’s words seemed like a
contradiction to His nature.

Again, silence interjected as the two men stared at each other down.

Palpatine steered the conversation once more. “Now, you, like your father, will never be a *true Sith*—for that is not what I want. If you were to become a full Sith, you would never come back.” He said, in a conversational tone, implying a leniency that few saw.

Feeling his emotions rise again, Luke stayed in place, diverting his eyes, feeling that he needed to hear this but also wanting to refute it, all of it.

“Did not the Dark Corridor at the Jedi Enclave, on Dantooine, tell you?” The Emperor asked. “Did their ambient voices not inform you that Vader was never really a true Sith?”

Thinking back, Luke replayed that visit in his mind. “They did.” He grumbled.

The Emperor huffed under his breath. “*They would.*” Palpatine turned in the direction of His throne and spoke as He moved. “Those disembodied voices are just the phantoms of energy that refused to move on, so they hide in a cluster. There is no *beyond* for a Sith.” He whispered, almost sadly.

“Oh, does that surprise you?” Palpatine asked, once He had returned to His throne. “Yes, Vader wasn’t a *true* Sith, not by the true path. He called himself ‘Darth’, and he fulfilled the depths of his darkness that harbored inside him, but he did not take that last step. Not fully.”

Frowning, the Jedi couldn’t believe what he was hearing; he stepped closer.

“Tell me, in all your readings, did you learn what the final step to becoming a Sith was?” Palpatine had returned to conversing with him. “It’s a closely guarded secret… one that your father knew well, and believed that he took.”

“No, I don’t know.” Luke whispered, and wanting, yet not wanting, to know.

“The final step is to destroy that which is closest to you…” The Emperor’s eyes were alive with some sort of sick glee. “…something that is so precious that only you can *choke* it out, and, utterly, kill it.”

The flame of red in His eyes died down, somewhat. “I will let you ponder on what he could have destroyed that would have made his fall complete.” He said as He relaxed back.

“Now, let’s discuss your current path.” Palpatine went back to conversing in a mild tone.

“I must admit that I’ve been surprised by your reluctance to advance your talents. Until very recently, I speculated that you had rejected the notion of ever increasing your knowledge, and power in the Force.” The Emperor folded His hands appraisingly on His lap, looking accepting.

“I can only surmise that it was the introduction of another Force-user, *My Hand*, who spurned you on and encouraged you to continue your studies.” Palpatine shared His thoughts. “She has been very successful in most of her tasks.”

Luke knew that He was looking for another way. “You sent her to kill me.” The Jedi hissed.

“Yes… but that was not directed at you, *personally*.” Palpatine dismissed the rhetoric, seeing it as miniscule. “It served two purposes.” He explained without caring of the sentiment. “If she had succeeded at Jabba’s—which, incidentally, I knew that she would not— it would have completed my revenge on my traitorous apprentice. Vader would have never turned on me if you had perished.”
“The second reasoning; it would have curbed her pride.” The Emperor’s voice took on a menacing tone.

“Over the years, she had proved to be the most-resourceful, most-trust worthy of all my servants. However, as her usefulness grew, so did her ego.” He paused, possibly remembering how truly valuable she was to Him. “It needed to be tamed. No doubt, that after killing you, she would have felt the schism in the Force that your void would have caused.”

“The years after Endor, and the residue that I purposefully left in her mind was merely a test of her resolve. And she failed again…proving me right. At her essence, she was weak.” The spite came back into Palpatine’s voice.

The Emperor’s eyes had drifted, but they came back to meet Luke’s glare.

“You see…as you have come to understand… she was designed for you.” There was no emotion in the Emperor’s voice as He explained. “The void of not knowing you, having killed you; she would have destroyed her only chance at happiness too.”

“When I found her, I did not know this. But when I saw Vader’s reaction to her, then, I had no doubt that I had made the correct decision to take her under my protection and tutelage.”

“Vader despised her when he was first introduced to her. As she was a child, he rejected her immediately…” Palpatine relived his thoughts. “I assumed that her presence reminded him of a Force-strong child that would have been his own.”

He couldn’t help but be drawn in; Mara was a mystery to Luke, as she was to herself. Any information that might close the gap on her past would prove useful. But Luke kept his scorn for the Emperor at bay until he could know more.

Shaking his head, Luke could feel the icy touch wanting to intrude his thoughts again.

“Ahhhh…My Mara… so perfect in so many ways… proud, productive and pliant.” Palpatine reminisced.

“As a child, she possessed aspects of both her parents that were admirable…much like you do.” The Emperor said without preamble. “I did not go looking for her… it was her mother that I was after.”

An image of a green courtyard entered Luke’s mind. He gasped as he saw almost the same images that Mara had shared with him, as she recalled her former home.

A woman, her features, lost to time, were hazy; one important detail… the colour and radiance of her hair, vivid and alive in red-gold sat atop a graceful body.

Luke blinked rapidly, trying to push the images out of his mind and finally succeeding.

“They called her ‘The Great Eye’… a hidden Force-user with the ability to see the entire galaxy, the past, the present... and beyond.” The Emperor’s eyes narrowed, recalling the treasure that he wanted. “And, as a boon… a reputed beauty who would fit nicely into my court as my secret Oracle.”

“Her father, a marvelous Force-warrior for their people. A protector with ferocity and without a match to compare. Not a Jedi.” Palpatine’s wistful tone started to dissolve.

“Her mother refused and her father riled up against me.” Palpatine said sharply, annoyed.
“For a father’s anger; he had to be destroyed. For a mother’s love, I pardoned her refusal, but she suffered the consequences.” Palpatine breathed hard, thinking that His generosity has been misplaced. “So a child, that had both of their combined talents and could be molded, was more than a tempting offer to spare their world.”

“And I did. I did not destroy their world…I spared it. See how merciful I can be?” It was a mocking joke that He could pretend that He had the ability not to be cruel.

“I took the child…renamed her…remolded her…made her into what she needed to be.” Palpatine let the words drift fluidly out of His mouth. “Named her with the curse of her people… she became embittered and hardened… like the stone that I named her for.”

“Jade was a slight disappointment, concerning her mother’s abilities, which she more than made up for with her warrior-like traits.” The Emperor was watching the Jedi for any little change, as He spoke. “Wouldn’t you agree? Have you ever met such a match for your own skills?”

With vengeance, images came into Luke’s mind and he staggered back as they came. *He and Mara locked in a sparring session...paring against each other with perfect timing and tempo...*

“She will never have your power, but she will always be your foil. And *your love*...” Palpatine’s voice started its saccharine drip. “And you do love her... don’t you?”

Disorientated, Luke tried to hear the Emperor’s words, but was bombarded with images of him and Mara making love...at their most-tender and most-intimate of moments.

“Stop it!” Luke ordered through clenched teeth, wrestling to gain control over his mind.

He could feel the touch of her skin on his. So badly, did he want to take refuge with her now.

She had warned him; warned him all along that others would be able to sense them, *feel them*, and see them together. She had asked, then begged, and then finally, with anger, accused him of not shielding when they were together.

“I’ve felt it... *the galaxy has felt it*... your joining on Null. Yes, you two will be powerful together. And before that, the Force knew that you two belonged together.”

The Emperor pulled back on His mental attack, favoring to fight with words. “*Sad*, that Mara didn’t initially feel that way.”

“You damaged her.” Luke growled, looking over at the other man, still holding back his feelings, and given time to recoup.

“No, I didn’t damage her.” Palpatine laughed at the idea. “I made her stronger...strong enough to keep her wits about her against the on-slough of Skywalkers invading and wanting her.” He pointed out.

Luke looked at Him sharply, knowing that there was something else behind the meaning of His words... something sinister...

“Ahhhh...you weren’t aware.” The Emperor smiled. “Now I must know... what did she tell you?”

“She told me that Vader never touched her.” Luke growled again; believing it, and believing her.

“Oh, that is correct, if we are to argue schematics.” Like a cat, the Emperor continued to smile. “But sometimes, just the want, *the lust*, can be considered a touch of a different kind, especially to Force-
“You know this because you’ve felt it.”

“I didn’t know about you until much later… neither did Vader… but there were stirrings in the Force, before your arrival. All my advisors spoke of it, vaguely, and in obscure language.” Palpatine was enjoying this; having knowledge when the other party did not. “Son of the Chosen, they called you.”

“Would it concern you to know that your father took special interest in her?” Palpatine stopped to see the young Jedi glowering at Him. “Oh, I see that it does.” He feigned concern, but carried on.

With a gesture of Palpatine’s hand, a servo-droid appeared, carrying a tray out in front it. On the tray, rested a slim square-shaped velvet box. “Do you remember this?” He asked with a hiss.

Everything halted, and for a moment, the room was still.

Gesturing again, the box rose from the tray and levitated over to the outstretched hand of the Emperor. Turning the box towards Luke, Palpatine slowly lifted the lid to reveal a jeweled choker.

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What light there was available in the room, made the facets of the Obaline Ruby Choker dance, sending droplets of light cascading on the adjacent walls.

Luke froze, seeing the ruby necklace that Mara had pointed out to him at the charity auction. Sith Rubies, his mind susurrated, reminding him.

“She donated it, secretly, to your benevolent society… so generous of her. I just had to repurchase it, reclaim it.” Palpatine leaned forward to place the box on the small table, leaving it open for the other to see.

“Did she tell you how she became in possession of this little trinket?” Palpatine asked smugly, enjoying the rise in the Jedi’s emotions now. “Let me tell you of the history of this particular style of choker…” He paused to chuckle at the irony of the name. “…or collar.”

“The ladies of my court had an affinity for the finer things. It was only natural that they would want their pretty necks adorned with gifts from their suitors. So, it became the custom to give such gifts.” The Emperor instructed the former farm boy of the regency life.

“The mistress of the Governor of Ipsos wore one, almost exactly like this but made with sapphires of the deepest blue from their mines. The courtesan of the Admiral from Venium wore opals that danced in the light, as it was the symbol of their system.” He watched the Jedi’s face, knowing that he was understanding what he was being told. “This style of collar only meant only thing; possession.”

Luke swayed as he felt his mind being touched again; images of elegance and opulence filled his senses.

“It was at this time, that My Mara was ready to be introduced into society… under her assumed personae, as my dancer, Liana.”

The vision appeared in Luke’s mind; watching the lithe and fluid movements of the golden-red haired dancer flow across his field of sight as the orchestral music bloomed in the background. She was captivating; small and fragile, yet so commanding as well.

“Now, upon her first performance and presentation at court, I would have naturally expected many offers for her favors. She was young, after all, and fresh… and to your father, she enthralled him with the Force.”
For once, Luke wanted to stay in that vision, beguiled by watching Mara dance, lost in her world that he knew she adored.

“She could not escape his attention nor his glare.” Palpatine’s voice and tone broke through the images.

Luke scowled over as the images were ripped away from him.

“Vader hated himself for wanting her- betraying his long-dead wife for another… and knowing that his new ingenue was designed for the sole purpose to serve His Master.”

Hearing those words, Luke lost his desire to see anymore of Mara’s past, knowing it elicited that sort of reaction from those who watched her, especially, his father. He pulled his thoughts away, and concentrated his resentment on the words of the other man.

“How humiliating to have his feelings contorted by a child.” The Emperor seized on the right tone to fan the flames. “How young she was…how powerful…”

Luke could feel his breath quickening.

“Vader extended the invitation to her.” The Emperor expounded and gestured to the open box on the table. The rubies seemed to respond by temptingly sparkle. “This, was his gift to her… his offer for her to come to his bed. His life may have been destroyed on Mustafar, but his lust wasn’t and neither fully was his body.”

Smiling, provoking; Palpatine slowed His next words, to be sure They hit the mark. “He would have ruined her for his own amusement; her virgin blood staining his leather gloves.”

Luke couldn’t control that his shoulders were now lifting with every breath; he thought of his lightsaber and then brushed the thought away. That is exactly what he wants. He wants you to get angry and react. Stay strong. His mind imperatively pleaded.

“She brought this to me after she received it, asking me for my guidance, the loyal servant that she was.” Palpatine watched as His words were having the intended effect on the Jedi. “I was tempted to give her to him as another means to control him, but I knew that she was meant for grander things.”

He could see that He was losing the Jedi to his own thoughts. With the right phrase, He could bring the Jedi back into the fold. “You can thank me for saving her for you.” Palpatine said with an open sneer.

Feeling the quiver in his neck, listening the audacity of those words, Luke snapped to attention; his eyes wide, and still holding himself with all his strength.

“Vader seethed for her… taking another mistress who resembled her, ravishing the inferior other in place for the thing that he truly wanted but was denied.” The fervor was building in the Emperor’s voice.

“When I touched his mind, I knew why he hungered for her so vehemently. He saw himself as his younger, undamaged self, taking her to his bed… loving her, as tenderly as he thought he was capable of. He thought that she would redeem him.” Palpatine explained with zeal.

“But…Low and behold, Vader has a son…the spitting image of his father.” The storyteller; the Emperor was back again, spinning His tale. “All his hopes dashed again. Those visions weren’t of him…but of you.”
“He would have taken revenge on her for making him feel again…but he didn’t get his chance.”

Again, Luke’s mind rushed to what Mara had told him of her encounter with Vader, the first vision she had shared with him; the glove at her throat… he will cherish and love you… the words that his father had used to her; telling her that his son would come to love her all while holding her life at his whim.

The Emperor was trying to invoke choler in the Jedi, letting it build. “Can you see it? In your mind? What would have happened if she did go to Vader’s bed?”

Luke shook his head; refusing to envision what could have happened there. He didn’t want to think about what his father would have done to the love of his life. He knew it would have been cruel. He knew that it pained him to even consider it. Simmering under it all, was the fervidness boiling to the surface, feelings that had long been repressed.

“Yes…you can… I can feel it growing in you… your anger… at him, for wanting her… your anger at her, for not telling you… Your own lust, knowing what her body feels like in your hands. Your possessiveness of her, craving her to your very essence.” Palpatine sucked in the air, feeding off the guile around Him.

Turning away, to steal his building emotions. Keeping the tempest under constraint, Luke breathed hard, regaining a bit of his composure. He was resolved to not fail; to not fall.

The air was tight in the room; a slow crescendo and stopping here…feeling not ready quite yet.

“She never accepted it. She never wore this choker.” Palpatine said in a mollified manner, dialing down the ambiance. “And now you know… I saved her for you. A gift, for you.”

As he tried again to bring peace into himself, Luke heard the words of the Dark Master. Something had told him that his destiny always included Mara. Since the day that he had met her, he had felt that no matter what path he would have selected, they would have eventually found each other.

“She was meant to be yours after Endor. If you had joined me, I would have gladly sent her to you.” The Emperor said in a dulcet timbre. “A beautiful consort to the Emperor of Light. By now, she would have given you several offspring and your dynasty would have been secure.”

“Both of you and your power, consolidated, would have healed the galaxy, in time.”

“So, your meeting was delayed.” The Emperor conceded. “And yet, the Force still wouldn’t let her kill you…even though I repeatedly reminded her of her failure since Endor….something that her precious ego would not let her live down either.”

“Such a fine line between love and hate, wouldn’t you agree? She took very little time to cross that line and entered your bed.”

“Sometimes we love the very thing that we hate.” Palpatine whispered those words, only to shield His own passion at knowing how true those words were.

Feeling back in control, Luke turned to face his nemesis again. “You’ve only loved power… so what would you know about loving another person?” The Jedi asked pointedly and accusingly with his eyes.

“Yes, again, you are correct Jedi Skywalker.” The Emperor shrugged without denying it. “I love power. It’s a very loyal lover and rewards like no other can.”
“You know this too… don’t you. I felt you, when you were on Ovanis. How easy was it for you to tap into that power that you refuse? Did your righteousness fuel it? - did that make it excusable?” Palpatine smiled watching the Jedi for more cracks in his countenance before continuing.

“How did it make you feel?” Palpatine whispered as if it was a secret. “Invincible? Did it leaving you wanting more?”

“Power raises you to the greatest heights…sees your wants accomplished with little effort over any other.” Now Palpatine mimicked the softness of a whisper on His mind. “Think of how much you could accomplish if you were to only give in to it?”

“We are not so unalike, you and I.” The Emperor said blatantly. “I am your dark reflection. And I see what you are… you need me to complete your training. You need to turn to the Dark Side in order to balance me.”

“And you need her to make it so!”

Vigorously, Luke shook his head; refusing the accusation, rebuffing the notion. “I don’t. I wouldn’t…. never use her like that.”

“Don’t play so high and mighty with your virtue.” Palpatine spat; His volume growing. “Little time has passed since you yourself thought of crushing her throat on a whim… what’s that worth of your love? How fickle it is!”

The Emperor got up from His throne, and like a child, Luke took a step back.

He could feel another intrusion on his mind; his senses trembling to fight it off.

“You’ve already used her for your own purposes!” Palpatine accused. “She lead you to your source of knowledge… you use her to boost your own learning… what do you give her back? Luke gritted his teeth, fighting back the vision.

“You take her body!”

Luke saw, in his mind’s eye, the night of the storm on Yavin; his hand clenched with a fistful of Mara’s hair, tugging as thrusted into her, in the heat of passion.

“You feed off her power!”

Luke raised his clenched fists to his forehead; hearing the berating words and reliving the night on Null where he experienced the surge in the raw power of the Force as he and Mara made love.

“And you love it!” The Emperor took another step in the Jedi’s direction; His voice loud without a change in volume.

“What would you do if it was taken from you? What would you do if she was taken from you?” Each word from the Emperor’s mouth, every syllable, was pronounced as cleanly and as sharply as if it was a blade.

“Why do you refuse to see that you must give in to your darker self only to transcend? Give in and be done with it, Boy!” Palpatine’s ire was rising with the pace of His words. “You have only to admit that you are your father’s son… completely capable of doing the things that he did, and with much more reward than he could have ever dreamed was possible.”
“No! I’m nothing like him!” Luke shouted back, finding it hard to keep up the fight. The rage was white hot, singing the edges of his will-power.

“You are…you so very much are.” Palpatine indicted back.

“When you rut with her, what are you thinking of? Are you thinking of how much you love her or are you thinking of how you can claim her, and take all that she has?” The words came swiftly from off Palpatine’s silver tongue. “Are you thinking of her supple flesh and how much you adore touching her? Do you hear her passionate moans of the agony between you and her, in your mind? Do you taste her skin and her intimate juices, declaring that none shall every take from you what is yours?”

Luke began panting in place, quivering, trying his best to hold himself. He stepped back again, knowing that he had no escape, nothing to save him but himself.

Palpatine refused to give up his tirade. “In that instant, when you saw her throat on Mustafar, so pure and clear it is in your mind… and you thought of destroying her, blighting her light from your world… you were willing to do it… admit it!”

Sputtering to find the words to deny it, Luke shook his head in condemnation.

“And now that you know the truth about her… that she was also sent to drive and manipulate you… to love you and to let that love destroy you… do you still not want to rip the air from her lungs?” The Emperor’s volume grew again.

Luke shook with fury and anguish but did not act.

“You hate her for making you feel this way… you hate me, for being aware of it… and you hate yourself for even thinking it!”

Palpatine smiled delightedly as He watched the Jedi struggle, trying to save his sanity.

“Do you feel that rush? The passion to act? Lash out at anything and everything around you?” It was rhetorical.

Luke recoiled, taking only a step back that the space would allow, bracing himself for the next verbal attack. He panted from the weariness of this fight.

The rigid air in the grand room stood waiting as well.

“One last thought, Jedi Skywalker…” Palpatine spoke at his normal volume, and pause until the Jedi made eye-contact.

He saw the pain in the younger man’s face. The Force told him that victory was near, so Palpatine went in for the kill. “What you are feeling right now… what rushes in your veins at this very moment… Is the same feeling that your father felt when he crushed the windpipe of your pregnant mother… thinking her dead but leaving her body half-alive only to give birth to his children, in confusion and misery, before perishing!”

“No!” Luke screamed. His mind swirling with pandemonium, swinging from one spectrum of emotion to the other, wrestling his desire to ignite his lightsaber and cut through the vile clone body housing the epitome of evil in one fell slash.

“Oh, he did… and it felt inexplicably satisfying!” At full volume Palpatine’s presence, now fully unleashed, hammered the Jedi, bringing him to his knees. “Making him feel powerful beyond the
galaxy, beyond himself, and in the name of blasphemy, *beyond the Force!*

On his knees with one hand clenched, and one hand resting atop his lightsaber, Luke rocked back and forth at hearing the news. Now, and only now, did he have the final answer as to what drove his father into the depths of Darkness.

*Why?* His soul cried out. *You killed love! You kriffing monster! You killed my mother!* These were the only words that Luke thought as he crumpled forward.

“Now, let your hatred for him reign…” Palpatine hissed His encouragement.

Rearing back, from his knees, Luke bellowed to the room, to his absent father, to the present Emperor, to himself from being conceived of the darkness. “*I HATE YOU!*”

The floor of the room shook. Objects around them, quaked. The panes of glass in the windows cracked. The unattended chair crumpled into shredded debris.

Luke collapsed forward, worn out and using what was left of his strength to breathe, hard and heavy.

It was strange just to hear his own breathing echoing in the room; until it slowed.

With effort, Luke raised his head gradually, capitulating. He saw the rapt gaze of the Emperor, still not satisfied.

Nodding, knowing that He had accomplished what He had set out to do, Palpatine still needed a solid commitment from His prospective apprentice. “Come and I will show you the nature of the other side of the Force…. And *when you are ready*, I will relinquish you, and you will be free to decide to return to the Light, should you decide that it is your path.”

Palpatine paused, making His intention positively clear. “And then you and I will be Masters, ready to guide the galaxy as it should be… and we will have peace.”

Sitting back down in his throne, comfortably. Palpatine wore a cheerful, serene grin. “*Now… What say you?*”

**

From across the galaxy, Mara sat up in bed with a scream from her lungs; startled, shaken…fear coursing through her.

*Kneeling and struggling against a tide of emotion…until he started to look up…Those eyes…Luke’s blue eyes… watching yellow, then orange, seep into them….*

Her face pale, and cold beads of sweat graced her brow; her eyes wide and her chest heaved, breathless in the night.

She could feel the Dark touch on her mind, leaving no doubt.

Shivering, she had no control over the tears that started to stream down her face.

“Luke!” She cried out openly. “…*NO!*”
FIN

Chapter End Notes

**
So this is it folks!...the end of this story…. BUT… the beginning of a new one!

I will be continuing the thread of this story in my new series, entitled “Dark Empress”. I will be posting the first chapter on June 3rd, 2018.

I wanted to get a few chapters ahead of that one and I hope to post on Sundays, in 2 week intervals…hopefully… setting goals for myself.

I hoped you liked ‘Defining Destiny’… please let me know what you thought in the comments… I really do cherish and read each and every comment.
And I have a thick skin, please tell me what you liked…didn’t like… and I don’t mind the suggestions for any of my writing style or plots. (It’s my secret dream to have someone gift me a plot or a challenge – maybe as a birthday gift ~wink!)

I’ve enjoyed telling this story and I hope you’ve enjoyed reading it.
With sincere thanks and appreciation,
Cheers, Phae <3 <3 <3
**
He woke up with a sudden start… listening to all around him, to get his bearings in this strange, barren place.

The wind howled and the sound of waves breaking on the rocks could be heard.

Luke shivered and pulled his tattered cloak around him; one of the few possessions he was able to retrieve before sinking his X-wing into the nearby lagoon.

He looked up at the hole in the ceiling of his stone hut, and understand why he was roused out of sleep; water was dripping into the small domicile off of one the shale tiles, right down to the platform that he had been sleeping on.

Someday soon he would have to find a way to communicate with the caretakers of this island and ask how to repair such things.

He had arrived only a few days ago, and so far, he was cold, thirsty, and hungry. If he didn’t learn how to survive on this island soon, he would most-likely perish.

In his heart of hearts; he knew that was what he really wanted. To die. But he also knew that the Force wouldn’t let him.

So many times, his life had been spared. He had been told that there were many reasons for this. To keep the Force in balance was his bane of existence.

The Force…The Jedi, he scoffed. If only he hadn’t been so foolish and conceited.

Sighing, he couldn’t help but feel the flow of the power through him. Although he was barely reaching out for it, he knew the only reason why he even dared to touch it now.

Her.

She was out there in the galaxy. Through their bond, he could still feel her, and feeling her meant that he wasn’t alone, and it brought him… peace.

And by sleeping, he could see her most-clearly.

Sleeping? He scoffed again. He hadn’t been sleeping.

The vision had awoken him; taunting him, forcing him to remember what had happened.

That fateful meeting, all those years ago.

The path that had set him upon the consequences of his actions.

If it hadn’t been for that one thing… that one wrong step, they all wouldn’t have found themselves in the situation that they now were in.

If he had just resisted, and not touched the Dark Side…
**

Let it be known that I have a little tinsy bit of Writer's OCD... I realized that after I corrected "Insomnia" and "A Friendly Word", and joined them into "Parallel Paradoxes" (the prequel to this story)... that I had 23 chapters there... and 56 chapters here... making 79 chapters in total.

I have a serious thing for even numbers, so I just had to add one more chapter...

I hope you like it... and remember that I'll be releasing "Dark Empress" soon.

Cheers, and thanks for reading! ~Phae

**

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!