

After some of the broader strokes of the large-scale shipyard had been decided, we settled in to plan some of the first official steps. Between the funding we would receive from selling the CIS shipyard and the scale at which it would allow us to grow, it seemed that this was actually happening, and it was important to set the proper foundation. The first step on a long list of things was to pick a location for the shipyard itself. We had a whole of Nirn to consider, and nearly a dozen different biomes to pick from.

"My first instinct is to build it in a desert, as it's land that would likely not be used for anything else," I said, directing the holoprojection of Nirn to its only real major desert area, which was more or less on the opposite side of the planet from Vercopa. "It's far away, no one is going to want to build homes there, and there is plenty of space."

"Nirn's only [large desert is filled with crags](#) and sand. While it would be efficient, it would also make building significantly more difficult," Zax countered, shaking his head. "It's possible, but it would likely add another week, probably more."

"It would also make working there significantly more difficult," Orbor Fakkiv, our head of repair facilities and second-in-command to Miru, pointed out in accented Basic. "The heat would slow down our workers, and the sandstorms would damage our ships. It would also limit our hiring pool, as several species would simply be incapable of working there, such as the Mon Calamari and Quarrens."

"That is... fair," I agreed reluctantly, letting out a sigh. "Just keep in mind I'm working really hard not to mar and scar Nirn as we expand. I want to work *with* the planet, not ruin it."

"There are any number of plains we could place it in," Zax said, pushing an image of a small, very basic-looking above-ground [shipyard](#) to the holoprojector. "Ours would be more advanced than this example, and it would need a much larger spot to match the scale we have in mind, but building it above ground would be cheaper and quicker. Not to mention less of an impact on the planet."

"It would also slow down production," Orbor pointed out, shaking her head. "Having to raise heavy parts upward, rather than lowering them down, will make many steps more difficult. Sunk shipyards are more efficient and faster."

"But digging a space large enough would be time-consuming and more expensive," Zax countered, though not with any hostility. "Almost as much as working in the desert. Especially with the size of yard we are looking to make."

"What if we already had a hole?" Zax's second in command asked. "One of our quarries is far away from Nirn, on a different continent, and it has had a large quantity of material already removed. Plus, as we expand it, we could save the stone for future use, killing two birds with one stone."

"If you are talking about the blackstone quarry... It would give us a jumpstart on the process... Zax admitted. "A lot of the infrastructure for clearing is already in place."

"And the ground around there is stable. We were carving into exposed bedrock, after all," the second in command added.

"I was going to go with a sunk shipyard anyway," I said, gesturing to Orbor. "I want this yard to be as efficient and fast as we can get it without lowering quality. If that means waiting an extra half month, or even a full one before we can start making starships, then so be it."

With a tentative concept and location selected, we brought up images of the aforementioned quarry, looking at the infrastructure and the quarry itself. After going over everything, Zax nodded in agreement.

"This will absolutely save us time. We will have to expand the buildings, bring in more equipment, and set up a larger space for storing the stones, at least if we want to keep any of it, but the depth of the quarry and the setup around it will make it more than worth it."

"Fantastic. When Miru returns, the engineering team will start planning out the design, along with the construction team, in the meantime-

"Admiral, I believe it might be a good idea to bring in two or three experts to help with that process," Orbor said, cutting me off from my instructions. "Miru will no doubt have a variety of interesting ideas for automation, but there is no reason to entirely reinvent the hyperdrive. Besides, experts will have insight we could easily miss."

"That is a fair point, we can find a handful of experts to help build it," I said with a nod. "Sheora can help with that, but I'll want your and Miru's input on the final selection."

"Happily, Admiral."

"In the meantime, I want the construction team to prepare. Finish the important projects you have around here before shifting focus on expanding the quarry," I said. "Since we don't have a duracrete plan yet, I want you to focus on infrastructure. Things like roads, starting holes, paths to haul material out of the pit, things like that."

"We will get to work right away," Zax said with a nod.

"Keep in mind our dimensions," I warned. "Unless our experts have some sort of hidden wisdom, I'm looking for a shipyard that can produce starships up to four hundred meters."

By that point, the meeting had passed over the two-hour mark, so after a few more minutes of discussion, I finally called it to an end. My people had their own things to do, especially since I had just handed them a whole massive project.

With the meeting over and the first steps of our plan set, Ahsoka and I grabbed a shuttle down to the surface, arriving home not ten minutes later. We had been traveling for a while, so having a night to ourselves was a refreshing change. We ended up spending the night cooking for each other, me making her favorite meal of mine, Pizza, while she made a dessert her people were famous for. It was a lot like candied bacon, but the chunks of meat were a bit bigger.

The Togruta were a very meat-heavy people, so most of their food was almost completely meat-focused. Despite the strangeness of a meat-based dessert, it was quite good, and Ahsoka was very happy that I enjoyed it. She had missed out on many of her people's traditions while living with the Jedi, so being able to cook a traditional dish and share it with me was obviously appreciated.

We ate our meal outside on our stone patio, overlooking the river that flowed from the Vercopa mesa's center. It was a calm, charming view, overlooking the path that ran along the river, while also having a great view of the waterfall that connected the two lakes, one on each of the Mesa's levels. We could hear the roar of the river, but it was far enough away that it wasn't overwhelming.

The following morning, I took an airspeeder ride out to Ysalamiri Island. While we had been busy, an idea had occurred to me, and I was interested to see if Mara was interested. I was just hoping that the young woman had continued to pull away from her connection with the Emperor between visits. It had been a while since I had seen her, but the last time I checked in on her progress had been encouraging.

Once I arrived on the island, I first made my way to the mind healer who was there. They had been working with Mara for a long time now, and although they still refused to share details, not that I asked for them, they did reveal that Mara had made a lot of progress mentally pulling from the Emperor and breaking through his lies. After hearing that encouraging news, I headed down to the cells. The structure had long been finished, with a dozen reinforced cells in total, with all but one of them empty. There wasn't even anyone else living underground, as most of the staff lived on the surface. It wasn't exactly an exciting post, but it was necessary, and they got to live on a climate-controlled tropical island.

As I approached her cell, I could see that Mara was watching some holo vid on a datapad while lying in her bed. When I stepped inside her cell, the young woman sat up, tossed the datapad back on her pillow, and slid to the edge of her bed.

"Admiral Deacon," She said, an actual smile on her face. "It's good to see you."

"Mara, how are you doing?"

"I... I'm doing well," She admitted, sounding a bit surprised to admit it. "Well, I'm going a bit stir crazy at this point, but... Without the Emperor's influence on my mind, I feel good. No constant flashes of anger, I can see the Emperor for what he is, a bastard who tried to twist me to his own uses."

"I'm very glad to hear that," I said with a smile, leaning back and sitting on the back rest of a chair, which was bolted to the ground. "I was hoping that being out of his influence would allow you to break free. Unfortunately, while I would really like to..."

"You can't just take my word for it," She finished, nodding in frustrated understanding. "Yeah, I figured. Can't exactly blame you for that."

As she talked, I noted her body language, the way she moved and gestured. It all seemed... less tense, more open, and most importantly, genuine. I wasn't some miracle body language reader, but my gut says she was telling the truth. On top of that, she seemed less intense than she had in the books I had read, which was possibly a byproduct of the fact that this was several years before she would have been freed from the Emperor's influence by his death. I could only hope we had saved her from further trauma by getting her out earlier than in canon.

"Luckily for you, I have a solid way of telling if you are lying or not," I explained. "Not some beatable scan or lie detector. But, since I no longer consider you an enemy, I want your permission to use it on you."

"What is it, [skirtopanol](#)?" She asked with a frown. "That stuff is not safe, and for the sake of openness, I've been trained to resist that, along with several other drugs."

"No, thankfully, it isn't a truth serum. I was able to create a spell that extracts the truth from someone," I explained, my hand glowing as I focused on my magic, using a Restoration spell just to demonstrate. "You have a lot of mental training, so you could likely resist, but you could also willingly let the spell work."

She stared at my hand, watching it sparkle with golden Restoration energy. When I let the spell fade, she looked back up at me.

"I thought you had the Force blocked here?" She asked, confusion filling her voice. "I haven't been able to reach for it at all."

"We do, but I did tell you that I don't use the Force," I commented with a raised eyebrow. "Perhaps now you believe me?"

"I... it doesn't matter, if you can prove that I'm sincere, you can cast your magic on me," she said, looking me in the eye. "I won't resist."

"Good, then just hold still, and when you feel a shift, don't pull away from it," I said, my hand charging the pale blue magic, before extending my hand and casting it on the young woman. "I will be able to tell if the spell doesn't connect."

I waited to feel the magic sink into her before asking my first question.

"Mara Jade, do you intend to betray us to the Emperor?" I asked, watching her dazed expression.

"No, I don't want anything to do with him," She responded. "Besides, he would likely torture me to find out why I was delayed, before killing me for disappointing him."

"Yeah, that tracks," I agreed, before continuing my questioning. "Are you loyal to the Empire?"

"Not as it stands," She said, continuing to let the spell guide her rather than resisting. "It is corrupt and cruel, but I don't know what could possibly replace it. A different Empire? A cleaner, better-controlled version, not ruled by Palpatine? Maybe."

"That's fair," I said with a nod. I didn't blame her for thinking that way, though I didn't agree that the same setup would work. "Would you reveal our location to an Empire you approve of? Do you plan on revealing our location at all?"

"No. You saved me from being mind-controlled," She responded, the barest of inflections making it through the spell's effects. "The least I could do is keep your secret."

"That's good."

I re-applied the spell, and for the next twenty minutes I asked her a battery of questions, doing my absolute best to cover any loophole I could think of. Eventually, I let the spell fade completely, the dazed look in the redhead's eyes fading with it.

"Thorough much?" She asked, rubbing her face.

"Do you blame me?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No, not really," She admitted, letting out a long breath. "Besides, much better than any interrogation I ever saw. So... what happens now?"

"Now we move you out of this cell and into some more comfortable quarters above ground," I said with a smile. "We have a whole island blanketed by the anti-Force bubble, so you can go anywhere on it."

"But not off it?" she asked, disappointment creeping into her voice. "But you just ran me through your lie detector, you said I passed!"

"I did, and you did," I agreed. "If it were up to me, I would let you go wherever you wanted, even help you get your feet under you somewhere else. If that's what you chose. But it's not up to me, not when the Emperor is still alive."

She was visibly building up steam for some very stern words when I eventually mentioned the Emperor, and she finally put it together. Her skin paled noticeably, and her eyes widened.

"You... you think he might still be connected to me?" She asked, sounding like she might be sick.

"Do you want to take that risk?" I asked. "Palpy is one of the most powerful Force users in history, *especially* when it comes to the more subtle, dangerous parts of the Dark side. I believe it is very likely that the moment you step outside a bubble, he could snare you up again, reading your mind like an open book."

"That... I can't... then."

"I do have a solution, however. Two, in fact," I said, not wanting to draw out her approaching spiral. "One, you stay here until the prick is dead. It might take some time, but it will happen eventually."

"And the other option?" She asked, the fact that she didn't sound convinced of his eventual death completely unsurprising. "How can you keep him away without stranding me here?"

"Well, Palpatine is connected to your presence in the Force," I explained with a smile. "So all we have to do is keep him from being able to sense you."

"And how would you do that?" Mara asked, clearly nervous about what my answer would be.

"Simple. I remove your connection to the Force," I said with a smile. "I convert you from a Force-sensitive into a Mage."