

While the process of starting up the Starforged Consortium was in progress, handled mostly by the Jedi, a few Mandalorians, and two of the mages I had created, I was finally heading out on a mission, the first one since heading into wild space. It wasn't anything overly complicated, thankfully, just a request for help from an Outer Rim planet. Apparently, a smuggling ring based on the planet had gotten a bit big for its britches, and the outpost they were calling home couldn't compete with the level of firepower they had, which meant they were at its mercy. Worse, people had started going missing, so the Mayor of the outpost reached out to us. He was hoping that a group with a bit more firepower could deal with them.

We were happy to help, as the beginnings of a slave ring was more than enough reason to get us involved. I was also interested in forming a relationship with the outpost, as it was a mining post. I was hoping to get permission to tap into some of the ore hotspots, or buy material off them in bulk, maybe even with a slight discount. Some of those wants were more realistic than others, but starting off by saving them from slavers was a hell of a negotiating platform.

After receiving the request, we took a day to prepare before heading off with 1st Fleet, which was more than enough to counter the smugglers.

Of course, we did not just take the reports at face value, especially not with Palpy hanging around, more determined than ever to catch us in an ambush. We verified the reports of growing threats, even managed to get in contact with an ordinary citizen, who revealed it was likely significantly worse than the Mayor had explained.

First, people had been getting taken by the "smugglers" for nearly a year now, but because of a connection between A member of the ring and some government officials of the outpost, it was all being swept under the rug. People suspected that the Mayor was on the take as well, as he had gone out of his way to ignore complaints and accusations.

Why he would flip now was a mystery, but it was one we could solve on location, rather than making guesses based on tertiary sources.

We kept busy as usual as we traveled, switching between training, sparing, and preparing, all of which included Mara and Ahsoka whenever possible. Mara had some strong opinions about the conclusion of the Consortium meeting, which she was happy to express as we sparred. Some of those opinions seemed to come pretty heavily from her upbringing in the Empire.

"I'm sorry, but I think the best way to keep a group like that together is with a strong chain of command," Mara said, throwing a practice dagger at me before lunging forward and swinging at me with her practice sword.

"The Jedi don't function well in situations like that," I explained, swatting the dagger out of the air, before swinging through and trying to take out her leg. "They tend towards rigidity on their own, and encouraging it only pushes it too far."

"What's wrong with them being rigid?" Mara asked, blocking my strike. "It's better than the dark side."

"Except it leads to it," I explained, sliding my sword up along hers before spinning around her, trying to elbow her in the back.

"How? I thought passion and chaos were what led to the dark?"

She ducked under my elbow, but the move left her unbalanced, letting me destabilize her completely with a simple shove.

"Rigidity makes them strong, but it also makes them brittle," I explained, holding my sword at the ready while I waited for her to recover. "When hit hard enough, they shatter, unable to recover. Flexibility allows them to bend, which isn't always good, because bends can become permanent, but they can also flex back without breaking. Yes, it has its own complications, some of which make the metaphor break down, but it's better than shattering completely."

Mara paused, trying to parse out what I was saying, but eventually nodded in understanding.

"So you're saying that the Jedi being rigid and emotionless might have worked for some, but others just shattered and went dark?"

"Exactly," I agreed, raising my sword as Mara stepped forward to engage again. "Honestly... and this is pretty dark to think about, but if Order 66 hadn't happened, if Palpy and the Empire hadn't happened, we would have likely had a pandemic of Jedi falling to the dark side. War is-

Mara thrust forward, trying to use my talking as an opening, swinging her sword around in a whipping arc, trying to attack from the side. I stepped into the wide swing, blocked the blow early before punching her wrist, and disarming her with a twist. As her sword spun off to the ground, I gave her a shove back, flicking my sword to her neck.

"-War is tough for normal people to endure, and the Jedi might have advantages in some ways, but in others, they have it worse," I continued, eventually lowering my sword after a beat or two. "I have no doubt that some of them were broken and just didn't know it yet, and I am almost positive that a lot of the padawans that lived through it would have struggled to handle growing up with that trauma."

"Ahsoka did," Mara pointed out.

"And she is far from normal," I pointed out. "She is stronger than most."

Rather than continue our sparring, we put away our practice swords and went to the spot along the side that we had insulated and reinforced so we could practice lower levels of destruction magic without ruining anything. It would not withstand my level of magic, but it was still useful for Mara.

Mara cycled through some spells, showing off her dual casting, a new bit of magic she had picked up during our quarantine. She was the first out of all the new mages to learn it, putting her a step above the rest in terms of power, since casting dual spells significantly amped up the potency. It wasn't entirely surprising, considering she had been one for longer, but she had also been significantly busier than they were, running across the galaxy following me, while most of the others stayed behind to practice.

"How are your mana reserves doing?" I asked, watching her shoot Sparks out at a target.

"Good, they are growing," She said, switching up her spells and spewing fire. "I'm doing the cycling meditation every night for a few hours."

"How did the first time hit you?" I asked with a smirk.

"Like a transport at speed," she responded. "I'm glad I was already in my bed."

"Healing spells and Respite will help a lot with that," I responded. "You can actually function afterward if you can manage."

"When will I get access to that?"

I opened my mouth to respond, only to frown when I realized I wasn't actually sure. I quickly summoned my grimoire before scanning through the earlier chapters, vanishing the book when I was done.

"Apprentice level, so the next one," I said. "It comes in handy a lot, it's a good spell to learn after you get Fast Heal."

Mara continued to practice, while I advised her and discussed magic in general. It continually surprised me, ever since I accepted and started teaching her, that I had so much to pass on. When she first asked me to be her mentor, as a condition for her to give up her connection to the Force and gain magic, I had warned her that it wasn't the kind of thing that a mentor was needed for. Maybe it was because I didn't have one, or maybe it was because I was familiar with the setting the magic came from, but either way, I had assumed I would just be offering her advice occasionally. Instead, I was actually teaching her things, like how to best angle flame attack as they were affected by wind more, and they took the longest to reach their targets, or how she should focus her Frost spells.

In addition to our sword-fighting lessons, I was actually teaching her quite a bit. It made me wonder if I should take another apprentice after Mara was trained enough to work on her own. I might not be able to join the Consortium, but there wasn't anything saying I couldn't teach someone else.

Before we arrived at the planet, we paused in deep space to deploy our starfighters. Then we made one last jump directly over the planet, right above where the smuggler base was meant to be. The planet itself was mostly arid, with only a few large bodies of water spread

around the surface. There were some plants and vegetation around, but mostly it seemed to be sand and rock. It was nowhere near Tatooine, though, which was nice.

While the *Hope* stayed in orbit, along with its own starfighter squadrons, our smaller, more atmospherically inclined ships descended on the base. Their starfighter squadrons dived ahead of them, dipping down to catch the smugglers off guard.

As we descended, the base came into view. It was a spread-out structure, all made from the quick, cheap quickcrete structures that were popular in hot worlds. There were several landing pads, warehouses, living structures, and more. It was actually a pretty impressive setup, which made me wonder just where the Smugglers had gotten the money to build it.

As we descended lower, we were expecting to find a smuggling base in the throes of panic, scrambling to put up some sort of fight, or run and escape. What we actually found was the entire base on lockdown, with several dozen people lined up with restraints on. There were nearly double the number of ships we expected to see, but half of them were completely powered down.

Perhaps the most surprising thing was that nobody shot at us.

After our starfighters did a few passes, the data was pretty clear. Two groups were sitting on the base: one was the original smugglers, while the other was a separate group entirely. The second group was armed and watching us closely, but had yet to shoot at us, which was certainly encouraging.

After our initial blitz calmed down, not long after our scans came back, a message came through, one that was directed to me, inviting me to a meeting on the surface.

"Did the message happen to mention who sent it?" I asked, looking at the comms officer of the *Loyal Hound*, which was our ride to the surface.

"No, sir."

"... bring up the camera feeds, try and find me who is in charge."

It took a few minutes for our ships to locate them, but eventually we spotted one person walking around with an escort. One look at the images and I let out a long groan, shaking my head.

It was [Talon Karrde](#).

While generally considered a good guy, he was someone I really didn't want to get involved with. He was a smuggler and was likely a big name by now, especially since we already killed Jabba, and in the books, he took advantage of his death to massively increase his reach.

He also came off as a self-insert Gary Stu character for whatever author created him in the first place, as he was smart, generally good-leaning, as well as a handsome, powerful

smuggler, who generally came out on top and *somehow* tended to end up in the middle of things.

I had no idea how that would work in this galaxy, but I *really* didn't want to deal with plot armor. Taking down Vader was enough. Still, I couldn't exactly just leave. Well, actually...

"You know who he is?" Ahsoka asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, he is a big deal smuggler. Probably did a decent job picking up a good chunk of Jabba's less gross business network," I said with a frown. "Though I can't guarantee that. He's not a bad guy, but he also has an annoying habit of outsmarting his opponents and coming out on top in negotiations. I'm tempted to just leave."

"You can't."

"Bad idea."

Tatnia and Ahsoka spoke up at the same time, and after a moment, Tatnia went first.

"Leaving now looks like you ran from him," She said. "That rumor would spread pretty fast with how hard we have been coming down on Outer Rim criminals."

"Not to mention that we agreed here to investigate slavers," Ahsoka pointed out when tatnia was done. "We can't leave until we confirm that anyone they might have kidnapped has been released."

"He isn't the kind to deal with slaves," I said, letting out a breath of frustration. "But you're right, you both are. Alright, let's land. Bring the *Hope* a bit lower, I want the implied threat to be pretty obvious."

The crew confirmed the order, and *Loyal Hound* shifted, all of the starships descending. Meanwhile, we moved to the cargo bay, already armed and armored. Within a minute, we had landed, and within a few more, we were approaching the facility, walking in between two groups of restrained smugglers. Standing by the group were about eight men, all armed with blasters of various sizes and armored in various gear. Despite their mismatched nature, all of their gear was clean and well-maintained, giving them an unofficial but professional look. Talon Karrde was standing at the front of the group, looking confident and calm, wearing a white shirt with a deep neckline and a woven drawstring. He looked about my age, maybe a few years younger, with his long black hair lacking any grey.

"Admiral Deacon Roy, it's good to finally meet you," He said

"It's good to meet you as well, Talon Karrde," I said, speaking up before he could continue, showing him I already knew who he was.

He clearly hadn't been expecting to be recognized on sight, and had likely been looking to show off that he knew my name, but that I didn't know his. Still, he showed his skill by recovering in a split second, wiping his surprise off his face.

"It seems your habit for knowing things isn't nearly as overblown as most assumed," He said with a smile.

For a moment, I was tempted to push some of his buttons. I was pretty sure his background story was that he more or less stole his starting network from his mentor, who vanished or something, but the details were a bit faded in my brain. I also knew that I was probably overreacting at this point.

Not getting shot at was usually considered a win for us, so being overly aggressive for someone who greeted us politely was probably too much, even if I wasn't happy to be dealing with him.

"Of course, it's important to build the right sort of reputation," I said with a smile. "Something I'm sure you know very well."

"...This is becoming far more interesting than I anticipated," Talon admitted. "Shall we step inside to chat? My men can turn over these poor excuses for smugglers to your people while we do."

"Very well," I said, trying to cover my reluctance up as best I could. Karrde could likely see it, but with any luck, I could minimize it enough that it seemed like a distaste for talking to criminals rather than him specifically.

My crew followed us inside, as Talon and a few others led the way into the building. As we stepped inside, I could see my people accepting custody of the smugglers and spreading out to clear the area, starting with the nearby ships.