

After saying goodbye to General Syndulla, I had Calima connect us to 4th Group. It took a few minutes to get the leaders of the entire group connected on one message, even though they were all traveling through hyperspace, on their way back home from their mission to the suspected mining planet.

“So, with 3rd Group escorting the Salvage Fleet and 2nd Group on their own mission, I figured you would be a good match for this one,” I explained. “Once you get home, you have just under two days to unwind, pick up one of Commander Frost’s teams, and head out to Alpha Base.”

“Sounds like fun, and it will be good to see Hera again,” Ezra said, sitting next to Sabine in their projection. “Any more info beyond those numbers?”

“No, but you can reach out to General Syndulla for more information,” I suggested. “I don’t know how much she would share over hyperwave, though. Either way, you should arrive there with plenty of time to plan out your strategy with them. Remember how we work, don’t underestimate the Empire and don’t let the Rebellion push you around.”

“Hera wouldn’t do that to the Skyforged,” Ezra responded, shaking his head. “She will treat us right.”

“Assuming she is even in charge,” Sabine pointed out. “Feels like something the Rebellion would do, doesn’t it? Send out someone we like to butter us up and offer us work, only to have someone else run the mission so they can try to bully us into concessions.”

Sabine had been rather harsh on the Rebellion, even harsher than me, especially the higher-ups, ever since they refused to help beyond the absolute minimum in finding and saving Ezra. Whether her partner agreed, I didn’t know, but he never complained about following her to us when she joined.

“While I can’t really say they would or wouldn’t do that,” I said honestly, cutting the topic off before it could spiral. “I don’t know, but they are likely going to see me sending you guys, as opposed to coming myself, is some sort of dig, which is ridiculous considering how well you guys have been doing. Do your best, not that there was ever any doubt that you would, but don’t let them bully you into taking unneeded risks or into an unfair position.”

“And if they try to?”

“That depends. If it happens before, assure them you are happy to leave if they push. If they keep going, then leave,” I said with a shrug. “Should it happen during the mission, do whatever you have to do to keep yourselves safe, keep innocent people safe, and protect the people you are with, in that order. Forget about the success of the mission. When something fundamental like that falls apart, it’s not worth trying to make things work. If it happens after the mission, let me handle it. In fact, let me handle most of it, you just need to focus on getting out of the situation. If we are going to verbally throw down with the Rebellion leaders in a way that might lead to... permanent changes in policy, I want to be the one who fucks it up.”

That got a series of nods in agreement. Once I explained everything I knew about their mission, we spitballed some vague ideas, but there wasn't much we could do with what little we knew, unfortunately. When we were done, we disconnected the call, and I sat down along the lounge couch, letting out a long breath as I settled in. Ahsoka, who had been sitting on the couch and listening in, slid closer and leaned against me.

"Think they will do well?" She asked once we were both comfortable.

"Yeah, I think they can handle it. Their team is good, Ezra and Sabine are good leaders," I responded. "Plus, with a team of Frost's guys as backup up they have plenty of firepower."

"I don't disagree. They are competent people."

"They are also smart enough to back out if things are too crazy," I pointed out. "I trust them."

"Is there any reason you didn't want to take the mission?" She asked, turning her head to peek at me.

"There's a reason I wanted someone else to take the mission," I clarified, reaching out to take my partner's hand. "I want to work with the Rebellion, but I want them to see us as more than just our team, so, by passing the buck and still completing the mission they hired us for...?"

"You show off how good the other teams are," she explained. "Fair, though I'm not sure why you're so determined to work with the Rebellion."

"Because I still believe in the cause, and a lot of the people inside their ranks," I explained, shaking my head. "The more missions and work we do with them, the more our story spreads through the people. I want the Rebel soldiers, the people fighting on the ground floor, to know we support them, even if their bosses have driven us to stay at a distance."

"Then ... should we be working more with them?" Ahsoka suggested.

"Probably, but they are clearly a little gun-shy about calling us in," I said with a wince. "Not that I can blame them. We are an outside force, and we charge them for our services. It makes sense that they only call us when they need us."

We sat on the lounge for a while longer before eventually heading off to do some of our own work as we waited to arrive home. When we did, after having some dinner and an entire night's rest at our home, I went on my usual tour of progress. As always, it was exciting to see what our people were working on, and what they had accomplished while we were gone.

Once the tour was over, took a shuttle over to Ysalamiri Island, where I made my way through security and down to Mara's cell. Surprisingly, she was not alone when I arrived, but instead meeting with one of the counselors we hired and brought to Nirn. Seeing as they were busy, I made my way back through the prison, sitting at the entrance area, wanting to give the two privacy. About twenty minutes later, the counselor turned the corner, and stopped suddenly.

“Oh! Gosh, sorry, you startled- Admiral Deacon!” The Mon Calamari woman said, stumbling over her words a bit longer before she took a breath and started over. “Sorry, Admiral, I was lost wading in my own mind.”

“It’s alright, I didn’t mean to startle you,” I said while I stood. “How have you been settling in...?”

“Dr. Pisel, Vri Pisel,” she said, bowing slightly. “I have settled in well, I find this island to be a very welcome place to stay. Apologies, I was just meeting with Mara Jade.”

“I know, I stopped by to speak to her but saw she was busy, so I came back here to give you privacy,” I explained. “How is she doing?”

“Admiral Deacon, I’m not sure-“ She started, her expression flattening out in a way that even with her unfamiliar facial structure I could read.

“I’m not asking for case details or anything like that,” I said, holding off her ethical ire. “In fact, if anyone here asks for anything like that, I want you to come to me directly.”

She pulled back slightly, caught off guard by my assurances. When she fully digested what I said, she relaxed noticeably.

“That is good to hear,” she said with a nod, brushing her outfit flat with her webbed hands. “One of our concerns when we were hired was if our patients would actually be allowed privacy. Your guards turning off the sound for your cameras was a sign of steady currents, but this is even better. To answer your question, as much as I feel comfortable with, Mara is doing surprisingly well, I am... optimistic about her future.”

“That’s good to hear,” I said with a smile. “I’m going to see visit her now is doing, is she in a good place for that?”

“She should be.”

“Alright, thank you for your hard work, Dr. Pisel,” I said, holding my hand out. “Let me know if you and your colleagues need anything.”

“I will, Admiral.”

The Mon Calamari woman shook my hand with a firm grip before bowing slightly again and heading out of the secure underground facility. After watching her leave, I made my way back through the complex, which was still completely empty. When I reached Mara’s cell, I knocked on the bars before deactivating the energy barriers.

As I stepped inside the room, I could see that Mara was sitting at the table near her bed. She had a small datapad, which she was writing on with her finger, making notes or something. When she looked up to see me, she tilted her head with a slight frown.

“Admiral Deacon, I didn’t expect to see you again for a while,” the younger woman admitted with a curious look. “Is there something you need?”

“Not particularly,” I said with a shrug, making my way to sit opposite her at her table. “I mostly came to check up on you, see how you were doing.”

“And it has nothing to do with me just talking to the counselor you hired?” She asked, a single eyebrow raised.

“She was suspicious of me as well,” I responded with a smile, before giving her a more serious look. “I know it probably doesn’t count for much, but the counselors will never be required to share privileged information. In fact, I told her to come directly to me if anyone ever asks her or her colleagues to do so. Counselors are just another type of doctor, and I take doctor-patient confidentiality very seriously.”

She studied my face for a long moment before shrugging slightly, focusing back on her tablet. It was clear she didn’t completely believe me, and since I couldn’t really blame her, convincing her wasn’t likely possible. I would just have to prove to be trustworthy over time.

“How have you been feeling?” I asked, leaning forward in the chair. “I heard that you had a couple of visitors while I was gone.”

While I was away, her counselors had brought a few different people to talk to Mara, both because the once spy was interested in learning about Nirn from its people, and because the counselor thought that having her interact with a few people would help her unwind the tension keeping her from recovering and adapting to her new situation. I hadn’t exactly signed off on it, mostly because I didn’t know it was happening, but the security team and the counselor were smart about it.

All the people who visited were actually people with combat training, like a clone trooper turned chef, one of Corvak’s people, who despite not being one of his warriors was still a formidable fighter, and a retired bounty hunter currently working for us as a nurse of all things. They would, at the very least, survive long enough for people to arrive and sort the situation out if she attempted to be violent, which I doubted she would.

More than anything, it was a perfect example of what I wanted for this planet, smart people finding innovative solutions to issues without needing me to step in.

“It was nice to talk to people, even if they were all clearly cherry-picked,” she admitted, working hard to keep her feeling to herself. “I have to say, your people certainly hold you in high regard. Not fanatically, and not through fear, but through a seeming trust of your abilities.”

“I’ve worked hard to do right by my people,” I said with a shrug. “We’ve managed to make something special here, but that wasn’t something I did on my own. I wouldn’t have gotten nearly as far as I have without a lot of help.”

As she listened to my words, Mara chuckled to herself, shaking her head. When I was done, she fixed me with a look I couldn’t quite figure out.

“You know, the Emperor wouldn’t have been caught dead saying something like that,” she explained. “At least not without the holofeed rolling. Acknowledging others meant his power

is diminished. To him, every success was through his power, his handiwork. A general winning a battle meant he was the brilliant man who knew that general needed to be placed there.”

“Grandpa Palpy is the playbook definition of a narcissistic control freak,” I explained. “And this line of Sith has been plotting to take over the galaxy since the last Sith-Jedi war, when Darth Bane started the rule of two.”

“Rule of two?” Mara asked. “What is that?”

“Its... well, basically Darth Bane, a Sith from thousands of years ago, believed that the concept of a Sith Empire was self-defeating,” I explained. “Their core tenets directly clashed with the idea of working together towards common goals, and made Sith rule, as a group of people lording over the galaxy, impossible. So, after ensuring the last masters of the Sith would die, Bane picked an apprentice and started the Rule of Two.”

I paused, wondering just how deep I should get into the lore. I remember reading the book that showcased that moment, but that was years ago.

“Essentially, there would always be a master and an apprentice. When the apprentice became more powerful than the master, they would kill them and then pick their own apprentice, thus restarting the cycle,” I explained. “It ensures constant competition without inviting things like splinter groups, faction betrayals or other things Bane saw as weakening their order. Personally, I think it’s stupid, even from their perspective.”

“Why?” Mara asked.

“Because it doesn’t work, you can’t fight an army by yourself,” I explained, leaning back against the wall of Mara’s cell. “A Mandalorian might beat most other fighters one on one, but put them against ten? Twenty? Thirty? Thirty and an E-web? Five and a speeder? A powerful Sith Lord might beat one Jedi nine times out of ten, but what about ten Jedi? Fifteen? Thirty? Yes, the ‘modern’ Sith’s weapon might be words, deception and trickery, but that only gets you so far. When enough people rise up, one or two people can’t stand against the galaxy.”

“And yet he controls the galaxy,” she pointed out, raising an eyebrow.

“No, he doesn’t,” I said with a snort. “At best, he runs part of the galaxy. In reality, he really only patrols the galaxy, and only a chunk of it at that. If he ‘controlled’ the galaxy, then we wouldn’t exist. He might consider the Rebels to be some sort of a small cog in his greater plan, but we have Jedi, the one thing in that galaxy that he and Vader cannot abide. The Rebellion might only exist cause he hasn’t done anything about it, but trust me, if he really controlled the galaxy, we would already be dead. Or worse.”

That response seemed to shock Mara, as part of her likely considered the Emperor’s rule to be absolute and total. Being told quite clearly that, no, he wasn’t nearly that powerful was not something she would be used to.

“Don’t get me wrong, the Imperial Navy is impressive, and could wipe us out if he could find us,” I admitted easily. “But only if he could find us. This planet, something not on any records, hidden by a nebula and other space hazards, isn’t even the greatest level of hiding.”

“What do you mean?” Mara asked instinctively, still processing what I was saying.

“When we first got the Fury, one of my potential plans was to turn it into a self-sufficient moving space station,” I explained. “Hydroponics, a fuel production plant with a small fleet of gas collectors, the whole nine yards. Then we would disappear into deep space. How could anyone, never mind some wrinkly testicle with delusions of grandeur, ever find us then? Now I’m glad we ended up where we did, Vercopa is... more than I ever imagined I could help create. But you get the idea. He doesn’t control anything, he grasps at piles of sand, more and more of it slipping through his fingers the harder he grips at it.”

“The Force...?” Mara suggested weakly, and I shook my head.

“The Force fucking hates him, Mara. The dark side is one side of a coin, opposite the light, but still part of the Force,” I admitted with a shrug. “But the shit he does with his power is a perversion of even the dark side. Haven’t you ever felt that in his presence? The feeling of the darkness, slithering beneath your skin like a slime, like the essence of decay and corruption is covering you, staining your very essence?”

She shivered hard enough that I could see it, and I could tell from the look in her eyes she knew exactly what I was talking about.

We talked for a few more minutes, but I could tell that she was still struggling with her cracking worldview. So, rather than distract her, I left her in peace, informing her that if she wanted, she could have the guards contact me to talk more. She nodded absently as I left, heading to the surface.