

Mara stared at me, silence filling the space around both of us. After a moment, her jaw opened, hanging low as she finally internalized what I had said. Even then, it took her a few attempts to find her voice, standing up quickly from her bed as she spoke, as if doing so would help her understand what I had said better.

"You... you can give other people magic?" she asked, her eyes going wide. "How... Why are you offering it to me? Why does it remove my connection to the Force?"

I couldn't help but chuckle at her energy, the disbelief and wonder somehow causing her to lose herself a bit. In response, I simply shrugged and did my best to answer her honestly.

"Yes, I can give other people magic. My people and I are planning on introducing the concept soon, working with the remaining Jedi to form a sort of symbiosis, though that's really not going to solidify until after we defeat Palpy," I admitted, brushing away the death of the Emperor as if it was inevitable. "But as for why I'm offering it to you... I see your potential, Mara. I see that you could do amazing things and help a lot of people. You could do all of that with the Force when we finally manage to pin down Palpy and kill him, but you could do it now with magic. The fact that giving you magic also lowers your sensitivity to the Force would just be icing on the cake."

She listened to my words, taking them in slowly. As I explained the why, she frowned, staying silent for a long while, eventually looking down at her hands.

"And there is no way to keep my connection to the Force?" She asked, looking back up at me.

"Well, first, it's not a total removal, just a massive reduction, down to almost none. But no, it seems to be the cost of the ritual," I responded. "I'll be honest with you, Mara, I don't plan on offering this to anyone else with even a fraction of the connection to the Force that you have. You *will* feel this, it will be a noticeable shift, and it will likely be very unpleasant until you get used to it. The fact that you can feel it missing now is proof of that, though the fact that it took you time to realize in the first place makes me think it won't be too severe. I also can't tell you what it will feel like, as you will be the first."

"...I appreciate your honesty, at least," she eventually responded, closing her eyes for a moment as she considered my offer. "The Force has been useful to me, but... it has always been a tool. If I could trade that tool for one that was better, I would."

"That's good, though I should point out that they both have their strong points. Yeah, magic has more direct effects on the world around us, but there is no danger sense, no esoteric empathic abilities," I pointed out. "You'll be able to conjure lightning and summon constructs, but you won't feel when something bad is about to happen, or when someone is suddenly focusing on you. It's a trade-off."

"Which would you rather have?"

"Oh, that's easy, no questions, magic all the way," I said with a snort and chuckle. "Power, flexibility, and no tightrope walk of morality that could end with you falling off and spiralling into anger-fueled darkness."

If she was shocked by my mini tirade about the dangers of the Force, she didn't show it. Then again, being who she was and who she had once worked for, she had likely felt exactly how seductive the dark side of the Force could be. How she managed to stay as clear as she was was impressive.

"Could... I see some of what you can do?" the ex-imperial spy asked eventually, tilting her head a bit. "To see what I might learn."

"Absolutely," I said with a nod and a smile. "Though I'll warn you, I have a natural connection to my magic. You will likely struggle to reach the level I have. Though honestly, even the lower-level spells are potent in their own way."

Rather than start casting immediately, I led Mara out of the cell, leaving the prison behind. She was rather hesitant to just follow me out, but I assured her it would be fine. I had to assure the guards as well, but eventually we stepped out onto the island's surface, which was still a miniature, artificially maintained jungle. Mara seemed to appreciate this, letting out a long breath as she stepped into the warmth, though being outside of her cell for the first time in a while was likely making her day already.

Once we arrived at a clear spot, I started showing off a bunch of my magic. I mostly stuck to some of the lower-level spells to demonstrate the stuff she could expect to reasonably learn without dedicating her entire life to continuous training and learning. I had a feeling Mara would end up being far up the higher end of the mages I could create in terms of talent and ability, but she would still be walking up hill, where I was practically sliding down one.

After I spent a while explaining my magic, demonstrating various spells, and showing her what she could be looking forward to, I gave her a few minutes to think about her options. She didn't need to make up her mind right this moment, as I wouldn't be ready to perform the ritual for at least a few days anyway. She would have plenty of time to change her mind on whatever she picked, but it would be nice to know we had at least one candidate already set. Eventually, she came to a decision, standing up straight and looking me dead in the eye.

"I want to be a mage," She said, sitting up straight and quickly continuing. "But I want to be your direct apprentice. Your only direct apprentice."

"My- what? I... I mean, learning magic isn't quite like that," I said, scratching my chin and tilting my head. "Sure, having me around to give you advice might be handy, but you would get your own grimoire to teach you. I wouldn't be able to speed that up by much... I think."

"I don't care, having you as a teacher will help me push myself, give me something to strive for, and assure that I'm not just another one of the Vanguard's mages," She explained. "I would officially join the Skyforged Vanguard, and learn with your help."

Now it was my turn to be silent, my brow furrowed as I considered her counteroffer. I didn't have any issues with it, per se, as long as she remained loyal and worked hard. Hell, it was a great way for me to keep an eye on her. I was curious about how my team would react to her following us, or even joining us, but I didn't think it would cause any issues I couldn't smooth over. It was also smart on her end, since as long as she worked with us and did her best, she would start off pretty high up on the scale of importance.

"Alright, I agree," I said with a nod, sticking out my hand. "I don't know how much I will be able to help you learn magic, but I will help as much as I can."

She smiled and stood up from the bench she had been sitting on, stepping closer and shaking my hand with a firm grip.

"I look forward to actually learning under someone willing to teach me properly," she said with a smile. "Not the drip-fed, actual bullshit crap Emperor... Grandpa Palpy fed me."

We discussed the apprenticeship a bit more, and Mara fully understood that she would have to travel and essentially join my crew if she wanted to be my apprentice in any meaningful way. She was also prepared to fight the Empire, even if she had once been a member. I could tell she was still sceptical of the Rebellion's effectiveness, as well as my confidence that we would someday defeat Palpatine, but I was sure we could work on that.

After we had been talking for a while, I assured her I would get to work on the spell and materials necessary for the mage ritual, and that she would be the first to receive it. After that, we went our separate ways. The young woman happily settled into one of the much more comfortable homes on the island's surface, rather than heading down to her cell. I trusted her not to try to escape, if for no other reason than her fear of what would happen if the Emperor got his hooks into her mind again.

With my offer made and accepted, it was time to get back to work on the Skyforge's current major project, our shipyard. At the moment, we had people looking for experts in shipyard building and running, Miru was still running and researching the CIS facility, and a significant portion of our construction teams were over at the new project site, clearing out the pit we would be putting the shipyard in. We even had people starting the search for supplies that we couldn't make ourselves, like duracrete and plasteel. We were hoping to use some of the armor plating we had gathered from various sites, including the space battlefield where we had stolen the *Hope* from, but we would still need a lot of materials beyond that.

What we didn't have, at the moment, were the starting funds we needed, which were going to come from selling the CIS shipyard to the Rebellion. That was a job for me.

The 1st Fleet left just a day after I made my offer to Mara, heading towards Alpha Base, where I would make my sales pitch. We had called ahead to warn them that we had something pretty big that they would probably be very interested in, so I was expecting a warm welcome. To be honest, I wasn't overly concerned about making the sale. The CIS facility basically had everything the Rebellion liked. It was in the outer rim, hidden and enclosed, and could build a fast, well-armed ship.

Better yet, Sorosuub Corporation, one of the few companies that still produced the Diamond-class cruiser, had aligned itself with the Rebellion, meaning they could likely get their hands on the parts they needed considerably cheaper than we could, and probably in a better quality too.

The only real issue was that, technically, it was on a well-known CIS world, which meant the Empire knew of the planet. But seeing as the Imperials had already cleared the planet, and anything not taken was bombed into oblivion, it should be the absolute last place they looked. It wasn't close to the level of security a place like Alpha Base or Nirn had, but the Rebellion had built bigger things with less confidence in their security.

While we were traveling through hyperspace, I started the process of learning all the spells necessary for the mage ritual. There were five spells in total, and four of them were adept level, with the final one being Expert. Technically, they all fell under the branch of Restoration magic, but none of them would have any effect outside of the active ritual circle I would need to make.

During the trip to Alpha Base, I was able to learn all four Adept spells, though that had certainly been pushing it. Still, I had just enough time to recover before we arrived. Unlike last time we had visited Alpha Base, there was no massive fleet awaiting us, just the usual defensive ships hovering in orbit.

After a short comms conversation, we headed down to the surface on the *Brick*, guarded by a squadron of MA-wings and a squadron of Heavy Arcs. We landed around the exterior landing pads, where a pair of shuttles were already waiting for us. Just ten minutes after we arrived, Tatnia, Ahsoka, Corvak, and I were announced in the same meeting hall we usually met in, with Julius, Vaz, and Corvak's second-in-command standing fully armored as guards. Nal had remained with the ship, acting as our pilot.

Waiting for us inside the meeting room was Mon Mothma, as well as Princess Leia and General Syndulla. Admiral Ackbar was there as a holoprojection, as were a few others I didn't recognize. I smiled and nodded as we took our seats.

"Greetings, everyone, it is good to see you all in good health," I said, meeting each of their eyes. "Admiral, how is your campaign going in the sector cleared from our mission?"

"Very well," He responded with a nod. "We have successfully raided several more facilities, further loosening the Empire's grip on those sectors. How have your missions gone?"

While the 1st and 2nd Fleets had been busy with finding and guarding the CIS shipyard, both the 3rd and 4th Fleets had made raids on Imperial targets, with another that would be underway by the time we made it back. I was looking forward to running more in the area, as taking resources from the Empire had a special charm to it.

"So far, they have gone well," I said with a smile. "We successfully raided a delivery of precious metals, which will fuel our Beskar production, and we also claimed a rather large supply delivery, including the ships making the delivery, which we of course sold to you."

"The ships and supplies are both being put to good use," Mon Mothma confirmed with a smile. "And it is good to hear your efforts have been going well."

"Thank you, Mon Mothma," I said with a nod. "We also were successful in another venture, which brings us to what we have come here for. Through our own intelligence gathering, we were able to discern the location of a CIS forge world. A barren planet, drained of resources to fuel the CIS war machine."

"Surely the Empire would have cleared a location like that," Admiral Ackbar said with a frown. "What could be left but rubble?"

"A functional CIS shipyard, hidden from their efforts by chance," I answered with a grin, catching them off guard. "It can produce an assault version of the Diamond-class cruiser. The facility is almost completely hidden underground and has its own life support, power systems, and living quarters. As we speak, it is putting the finishing touches on the aforementioned ship, and has the parts to partially build a second one."

"That... is impressive," Mon Mothma admitted, after she recovered from surprise. "And you are offering...?"

"The entire facility," I explained, catching them off guard again. "As well as the ship it is currently building, all of the droids inside save the naval droids, all of the parts, materials, and anything else. All for thirty-five million credits."