

Mara Jade

There were very few people that Mara Jade was genuinely afraid of, either legitimately or instinctively.

Her direct service to the Emperor as his Hand meant that none of the Imperial officers who knew who she was would dare touch her. Further, her own lethal talents and skills meant that she was more than capable of defending herself from anyone who might... mistake her for someone else. She was well acquainted with pompous Moffs, greedy Admirals, and power-hungry generals, and none of them came close to inspiring fear. There were quite a few Imperial leaders whom she begrudgingly respected, and a handful she did so happily, either through their intelligence or their drive. But fear? That was a short list.

At the top of that list was Lord Vader.

Not because she believed he was superior, or that she could not beat him. No, she learned her craft from the Emperor himself, and while Vader might have the edge in pure power and intimidation, he was a blunt instrument. A hammer, when more often than not, a blade was needed. For all his power, all his might, he could not brute force his way through a sabotaged hyperspace jump into a black hole, or a bomb placed inside his starfighter.

No, what scared her about Lord Vader was his unpredictability, his refusal to adhere to the rules that were in place to protect her position as the Emperor's Hand. No Moff or Admiral would dare attempt to silence her, as the Emperor would see it as a move against himself. But Vader was known to push the limits of their mutual master. When angered, he rarely cared about the consequences, something that her master would usually approve of.

His rage made him unpredictable, and what she was about to do would make him very, very angry.

She had seen the reports from the failed ambush. She had even heard the censored version of the conversation between Vader and Deacon Roy. She had also seen the images of what the Executor's bridge looked like when Vader was done... expressing his distaste.

Granted, if she had lost three near priceless interdictors, as well as almost losing her own Super Star Destroyer flagship, she might throw a temper tantrum as well.

The *Executor's* bridge looked like it had been put through a food processor, with consoles crushed and smashed to bits. The monumental rage that Deacon Roy inspired in Darth Vader was undoubtedly a considerable reason why the Emperor no longer trusted him to bring the fugitive in alive. While Darth Vader wanted to crush the Rebel scum beneath his heel, the Emperor was very interested in finding out just how Deacon Roy knew some of what he had spouted at Darth Vader, which was apparently information that the Emperor had worked very hard to suppress.

The fact that nearly five hundred officers had been quietly added to the death toll, almost two days after the actual ambush, could attest to how seriously he considered that secret. Of course, that was on top of the three dozen who had died as Darth Vader had raged through the Force, a beacon of hate that she had felt on nearly the other side of the galaxy.

And now, she had to be the one to break the news that the Emperor was pulling him off the search for the man who had earned that rage. Instead, Vader was to once again focus on his primary mission, locating and converting Luke Skywalker to their cause, which he had dropped under the assumption that finding Deacon would eventually lead him to Skywalker as well. Mara was confident that Darth Vader would not be happy to hear the Emperor's new orders, but she would deliver them anyway. Of course, she wasn't an idiot either, as she had no intention of being on the same ship when she shared that particular bit of news with Darth Vader. With any luck, that would be enough for her to escape his fickle rage.

Of course, that was far from the only challenge she would face. Once she explained the change in plans, she also had to make actual progress in locating the Skyforged Vanguard's leader, as well as their base of operations, if they even had one. She was confident she could, of course, it was only a matter of time.

When the Emperor had first assigned her this task, she had spent some time pulling up connected files, including the records, briefings, and all other reports on the new, up-and-coming Rebel group. This included reports on their known crimes against the Empire. Unfortunately, even once she had gathered it all together, collating it all into a single file, there was shockingly little for her to work with.

Their armor was clearly beskar, but given how much of Deacon Roy's forces were *covered* in it, from head to toe, they had to have some sort of source, one that was continually being pulled from, since new groups of beskar-clad fighters kept appearing. A check of the situation on Mandalore said that, beyond a few pockets of hit-and-run resistance, the planet is broken. No one was stealing beskar. No one *had* stolen any beskar, especially not in the quantities being used.

Given their propensity for salvage, recovering shops and assets, it is possible that they found an old Mandalorian vessel that they could salvage for beskar hull plates. The ship would have to be very old to have that much beskar, but the Emperor insisted that they existed, so it was possible.

Then there was his "magic." The Emperor did not believe for a single moment that it was magic, and of course, she agreed. She had barely begun to dive through the depths of what was possible with the Force, with the Emperor as her guide, and already she knew that through the Force, all things were possible. No, it was much more likely that the mercenary had stumbled into an ancient holocron or some sort of artifact that was hiding his presence in the Force from his allies. The Emperor warned her that they could be dealing with a fledgling Sith, growing powerful off ancient teachings but with no real connection to their history, no reason to follow the rule of two.

In any case, it was now up to her to find the Skyforged Vanguards' location, and if she was lucky, deliver Deacon Roy to the Emperor herself. Of course, getting that required a plan, something beyond just smashing her equipment and trying to search the galaxy planet by planet, following feelings that were clearly leading nowhere.

Thankfully, she was more than up to the challenge.

As she studied the mercenary groups' files, it became clear that, even if the Skyforged did their best to randomize their missions, if Deacon and his people had one weakness, it was their determination to stick their noses in any business that isn't theirs. From the very beginning on Nar Shaddaa, where they made their money freeing slaves, to them stepping in to save Clan Galti by crashing a space station into a Star Destroyer, the Skyforged Vanguard has specialized in rescuing people.

They responded to rescue missions like a Tusken Raider to water, homing in and diving headfirst. This was especially true when there was an ally to make, such as Mandalorians or Jedi.

So, what if someone pretended to be a potential ally, looking for help? What if someone pretended to be a poor, pitiful Jedi, defenseless against the Empire's wrath, desperately trying to avoid being captured? With the right bit of slicing and perhaps a few sacrificed stormtroopers, convincing a group so obsessed with rescuing people in need that she needed to be rescued wouldn't be that hard at all.

All Mara needed to find was the perfect stage, then carefully make sure all the pieces were in place. Once everything was ready, she would finally be able to prove to the Emperor that a blade truly was better than a hammer.

Princess Leia

"Colors our perception, nostalgia does. Blinds us to what is broken, it can. Safe, we felt, in the days before the fall. Wrong we were, blind we were," The words of Jedi Master Yoda echoed in Leia's mind. "Mistakes we made, you must not repeat. Better you are, experienced what is wrong, you have. The opportunity to improve, you have in your hands."

Princess Leia knew the power of words better than most, even among her chosen profession. Raised in the courts of Alderaan, her mother and father went to great lengths to teach her that words could cut, soothe, rally, and disperse. Where most children would be bored, Leia thrived, although often not in the way her parents had hoped. She had always been perceptive, and before she learned prudence, she would often let her words, copied from the noble speeches she witnessed at her mother's side, cut and lay bare things most people would like to keep hidden.

She regretted quite a bit of that now, as one often did after receiving a taste of their own medicine.

It had been *months* since her short conversation with Master Jedi Yoda, and yet his words still rattled around in her head. He had cut to the quick of her rising insecurities with barely a thought, dragging them to the surface so she could no longer ignore them. Months of listening to Luke talk about how the Republic was a mess even before the war, of Han agreeing that the grand image that the Republic presented was a lie, that the rim worlds were suffering long before the Clone Wars, had created questions, doubts, thoughts she dismissed and tamped down, because she could not afford to doubt her mission, her path.

And then the little green... *Jedi Master* had dragged it all up and assured her it was true on his deathbed.

"Corrupted, the senate it was, riddled with the greedy and self-serving," he had said. "The final death, Palpatine may have caused, but dying, it was already. Corrupted, the Separatist movement was, but not unwarranted was its creation. Inevitable, the rise of the outer rims was."

Hearing that the man she saw as responsible for the fall of the Republic, of justice and equality, was in fact only hastening the fall, was not something she could easily accept. So, she didn't. Instead, she searched for other opinions, asking her fellow politicians and the many generals and soldiers she knew who had fought in the Clone Wars. It quickly became apparent that both groups had very different views.

The politicians, her colleagues, all assured her that, while things were rough at the end, it was all because of the Separatists, or Palpatine. Mon Mothma and a few others acknowledged that the Senate was undergoing a period of shifting and changing allegiances, as several major issues converged. Still, none of them seemed to think that anything particularly alarming was happening. Mon Mothma explained that, given time and the absence of Palpatine's corruption, they would have eventually worked through the issues.

It was about then that she realized that very few of the politicians she worked with came from planets in the Mid or Outer Rims.

Meanwhile, soldiers and officers she talked to painted a very different picture. Some saw the growing issues and assured her that, while dysfunctional, the Senate had endured for thousands of years, so it would surely have survived longer. She found this reasoning felt cold to her ears, as it dismissed just what 'dysfunctional' could mean to the people affected by the choices the Senate was making. She knew as well as anyone else that when political systems struggled, it was the people living under it that suffered.

Those who were less equitable, often those with significantly longer lists of accolades and more experience, complained that many of the problems that led to the Clone Wars were caused by the Senate. They complained that it was decisions from the Senate that extended the war, as they strangled the soldiers of resources. One slightly bitter clone trooper, missing an eye and working as a mechanic in one of the hangar bays of Alpha Base, pointed out that, even if

Palpatine had orchestrated everything, it wasn't quite a good sign that the political system running more than seventy five percent of the galaxy *could* be manipulated in such a way.

What she had hoped would be a quick search for information, which would ultimately reaffirm her belief in the Rebel Alliance's goals, had instead left her listless and lost. Jedi Master Yoda's words seemed to echo in her ears during every meeting and every conversation she had. She found herself noticing things, like how, as far as she could tell, Mon Mothma never ate the shelf-stable ration most of the Rebellion lived off of, or how she knew the caf brew that Yusil Bero requisitioned through the quartermaster was prohibitively expensive.

Thankfully, as much as she was beginning to question herself, the Rebellion's goals, and the people she called her friends and allies, the instincts she trusted so much did seem to tell her one thing. While Mon Mothma and others might be *missing* something, maybe even willfully, they were still trying to help. Mon Mothma, the woman who had taken her under her wing when Alderaan was destroyed, genuinely did think that the best way to fix what was wrong with the galaxy was to bring back the Republic.

Thank the gods that was true, as Leia was pretty sure she would have broken if it had turned out her friends and mentor were driven by ulterior motives.

Luke and Han had both already picked up that she was struggling with some sort of internal quandary, sparked by the words spoken to her by Luke's teacher. Luke insisted that talking to Deacon Roy would help, or at least confirm what she feared, so that she could adjust and start to accept her new understanding. And yet, she was hesitant.

Admiral Deacon was something of a complex topic among the higher members of the Rebellion. He provided an incredible service and allowed the Rebellion to postpone their debt until they could afford to pay it back. But he was still a wild card, the leader of a group that refused to fall in line and work directly with them. The idea had even been floated to offer him a high-ranking position, a member of the high command, if he joined them directly, but it was rejected when they realized he would never accept it. The man took the care of his people too seriously, and he would never compromise his ability to do so by burying his power under bureaucratic restrictions or political limitations.

Even the ambassadors that his group sent were a reflection of that, crude but effective politicians who, while lacking experience, still had an edge of passion and drive. They also clearly thought in the same vein that Leia's new fears and worries traveled, which only added fuel to the fire.

Part of her wished she could bury what her instincts were telling her. After all, they ran counter to a significant portion of what she had been fighting for for almost her entire adult life. But she couldn't, not really, not when the thoughts poked and prodded at her mind, at every thought.

Unfortunately, Leia was never one to hide from a truth, especially one she didn't like, preferring instead to rip the bacta patch off and deal with the subsequent pain all at once. So, months after Jedi Master Yoda had originally spoken the words to her, she discreetly asked

Luke to get in contact with Admiral Deacon. She had expected it to take weeks, but within a day, Luke, Han, Chewie, and herself had permission to travel to Nirn.

Maybe she could finally wrap her head around what her newfound fears meant for the future of the Rebellion.