

I took a shuttle down to the surface of Nirn, landing on what we were already calling Ysalamiri Island. Vaz had elected to come with me, mostly because she was interested in seeing the facilities on the ocean island, and I was happy to have her company. As we approached the lonely island, it was easy to see that construction on the facility had progressed significantly over the last few days. Several large buildings had been completed, including a place to stay for the on-site security team.

After we landed on a platform not far from the *Quiet Ark*, we climbed out of the starship, almost stumbling into the artificially maintained biome. It was warm and damp, stifling enough that it felt like we were actually stepping out onto Myrkr. The host trees, still filled with ysalamiri, had been successfully transferred, as were the dozens of other plants we had brought along with them. The trees seemed to be thriving, and a quick cast of Detect Life showed that the ysalamir were going strong as well.

The head of the island's security team came out to meet us, led Vaz and me through the surface facility, and down into the security bunker underneath. That area was nearly complete as well, with most of the cells ready and waiting, along with the full breadth of security infrastructure. BX droid, armed with stun buttons and stun blasters, patrolled the halls, while two stood watch outside Mara's room, periodically checking inside. The head of security assured me that that would not be standard, that they were there to keep an eye on a high-priority prisoner.

Once arrived at Mara's cell, I sent the security officer away, though Vaz, who had come with me, remained just outside, along with the droid backup. Once we were alone, I tapped on the cell bars, catching the prisoner's attention before stepping inside, the energy barrier dropping as I did.

Mara was sitting on her bed, her back against the far wall. She had an actual book in her hands, a paperback of some kind. When she spotted me, I could see her fingers tense around it as she closed it.

"Admiral Deacon," She said simply, her eyes following my every movement. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I came to check up on you," I admitted, sitting down on the bolted-down chair opposite her bed. "How are you feeling?"

She narrowed her eyes and slid to the edge of her bed, hand still gripping the book. Anger flashed across her features, and I could see her desire to stand up, maybe even attack me.

"You know exactly how I feel," she said with a snarl. "Since you have your Jedi traitors blocking my connection to the Emperor, influencing my thoughts!"

I frowned, the vehemence and certainty in her statement making me pause, trying to crack her meaning. It took me a few seconds to realize she was confusing the influence of the

Ysalamri as a deliberate attack. And if she felt different, then whatever bond Paly might have had was starting to slip.

"We have no Jedi anywhere near this island," I assured her, ignoring her rolling eyes. "And if they were, they wouldn't be messing with your mind. That goes against a good chunk of their beliefs, as well as mine. They might do a little hand waving trick simple minds, sure, but outright invasion, without a first reason? No, that's not usually them."

"You lie, I know what the Jedi are capable of."

"Clearly not. The effect you are under isn't from a Jedi, it's caused by a small creature called a ysalamiri," I explained, leaning back in the simple chair. "Their primary predator hunts using the Force, so they evolved a way to block the Force in a bubble around themselves. With enough of the creatures in an area, that bubble can expand to hundreds of meters."

"A creature that can stop the Force?" She asked, scoffing and shaking her head. "You expect me to believe something like that?"

"Would you like to see them?" I asked, catching her off guard. "I can get you a copy of the preliminary reports. We are studying them for future use against other dangerous Force users. Personally, I'm hoping that using them will help clear out things like brainwashing and maybe even end the downward spiral typical of those who tap into the Dark side of the Force."

A wave of uncertainty washed over her face, showing off the young spy's age. She was barely past a teenager, and was being confronted with something beyond what she knew. Of course she would be thrown off.

"The one thing I do know is that they block Force connections rather well," I added with a frown. "Meaning that your connection Grandpa Palpy is now non-functional."

For a long moment, she stared at me silently, no doubt wondering just how much I said was true. Eventually, her expression shifted as she regained control of herself, but she stayed silent.

"Do you mind if I ask, just what made you think your thoughts were being influenced?" I asked. "Because nobody is affecting you. With the ysalamiri here, the Jedi wouldn't be able to influence you here even if I wanted them to."

"I thought... they were pushing me to question his orders," She admitted, looking away for a moment before focusing back on me. "Things like old mission parameters that seemed... too much. I never doubted them before, but..."

In all honesty, I did *not* expect her to answer, I was mostly asking to provoke her own thinking, so I was barely able to hold back my surprise. Mara Jade was not usually the kind of person to willingly share with a stranger, especially not before she had broken out from under the Emperor's thumb.

Unless, of course, she was trying to build up a rapport with me in order to pull the wool over my eyes.

"That very well could be something he did to you," I admitted with a shrug. "But honestly, I don't know. He could be affecting you through the Force, or it could have been good old-fashioned mental manipulation. He took you from your parents when you were pretty young after all."

"No different from the Jedi, then?" she pointed out with a smirk, as if she had managed to throw something back at me.

"True, but I wouldn't approve of that either," I responded, shaking my head. "The Jedi did it to brainwash their padawans into being a bit better at resisting the dark side, a darksider or sith would do it because it's easier to convince a child to sink into their baser desires than a more well-rounded individual."

"That's... I was under the impression you were supporting the Jedi."

"I support the individual Jedi. Most of them only wanted to do good, and were as much victims of those who came before them as you," I responded. "The Jedi Order as a whole, on the other hand? At best it was useless, at worst it was actively detrimental to the galaxy."

That got a surprised look, at least once she finished scowling at the direct implication that she had been a victim. Which was good, since that had been the intent of the oversimplification in the first place.

"Look, Mara, I'm not going to pretend to understand everything you've gone through. I may know a lot, but living through it is something else entirely," I admitted, standing up from the chair. "But what I can say is that looking at the galaxy from one direction means that you are by definition missing at least one side. Consider some of the things you were told by your Emperor. Consider if they make sense, if all of your missions were fair and just. If you're suddenly having an easier time seeing past face value, maybe take that as an opportunity to try looking at everything from a different angle."

I turned to leave, the security field activating once I was through, the physical bars sliding into place after. I looked back at the young spy, meeting her eyes for a moment before walking out of sight, heading up and out of the underground prison. As much as I wanted to push the young spy for more, letting her settle and think on what I said was probably a better idea. Pushing her too far now would only risk alienating her.

Once we left the island, Vaz and I rode the shuttle back up to the *Fury*. We had a lot of work to do, and I wanted to get cracking as soon as possible. Unfortunately, despite handing out orders and coming up with a game plan, we could not rush off to hop in our starships and blast off. There was a lot to get done before we could leave, and since all of our groups were waiting for their clone trainees, none of them could leave until they were ready.

But, before we could start working on that, it was time to move the clones down to the surface of Nirn. They had been stranded on board the Fury for long enough, it was time for them to get some solid ground beneath their feet. Luckily, we had several apartment buildings ready and waiting for their arrival, with another under construction already. These buildings were simple but sufficient, and the clones could move out to other homes being built around the growing city at their own pace. For now, however, they were happy to be free of space for a while.

Once everyone was moved in and settled, which took about two days, it was time to start getting them armed and armored. While giving them their service weapons was just a quick check and handout, their armor was a bit more of a process, and ended up being something of an unintentional ceremony. I even gave a speech, which was worth it because I got to watch firsthand when the clones realized they were getting specialized armor made from beskar.

From the look on some of their faces, I was a bit worried they might faint.

Of course, making armor and uniforms for all of our new people strained our beskar reserves considerably, forcing me to convert a significant portion of the precious metals we had been mining alongside the more useful metals. We had a decent portion of gold from one of the neighboring planets in our system, and one of the moons from a gas giant had a decent amount of platinum in its crust.

I also spent a lot of time enchanting gear for our new soldiers, pilots, and applicable crew. I had become somewhat proficient in the process by this point, and within the four days it took to get everyone settled, armed, and armored, I was able to get everyone's armor enchanted, as well as the Dex enhancements for our pilots and crew.

While all of this was going on, Commander Frost and his people continued to work on their lists of potential intel sources, expanding it to a significant length. Once the list was done and the clones couldn't think of anything else, it was handed off to Sheora and her people to review.

Not long after that, the 2nd and 4th Groups left for new missions, accompanied by their clone trainees. 2nd Group was targeting a pirate crew that had been harassing an Outer Rim world, while 4th Group had picked an Imperial patrol as their target. I trusted them both to handle their missions well, especially with the extra clone backup.

Finally, just over five days after we settled on a game plan involving the clones and our scheme to locate more automated assets, Sheora delivered the edited and curated list of potential targets.

"So, as you can imagine, a lot has happened to a lot of these places since the war ended," She explained, waving a datapad with the new list on it. "Scavengers, Imperial activity, even a few new settlements around the remains of battles. But, luckily, your new boys handed me on heck of a list, so we had plenty to work with."

She slid the datapad across my desk to me, and as I tapped the screen to read through the list, she continued.

"As far as we are able to tell, these locations are your best bets for finding the information you're looking for," She explained. "There are about thirty of them in total, and we put them in order of most likely first, though without going to each location, there is only so much we can glean."

"Understood, investigating them directly is our job," I said with a nod, tapping the screen until it went dark, putting the tablet down. "Well done, Sheora, we put a lot on your team the past few days, you managed to find good jobs and clear all this info. Anything I can help you with?"

"We could use a few data running droids," She said with a shrug. "Something to help us parse large amounts of data at once and look for outliers."

"Do your research and put in a request to Finder," I said with a nod. "Depending on how controlled they are, we might have to take a shot at building our own, or maybe even stealing some."

"Will do, Admiral."

With a list of destinations, I quickly reached out to Tatnia and Corvak, letting them know that we would be leaving sometime in the next few hours. After that, I spent a few hours meeting with several people, doing my usual goodbye tour to make sure everyone was ready and knew what was going on. I didn't always have time to do that, but I was lucky enough to work with people smart enough to handle working on their own for a while.

Once 1st group gathered together, I gave a brief, and probably unnecessary, update on what was going on, what our mission was, and what the next few missions would likely be like. News of what we were trying had spread through the ranks, but it was always a good idea to make sure everyone was on the same page.

Within three hours of receiving the list, the 1st group had gathered up in orbit around Nirn before jumping to lightspeed, our destination set to a small system on the border of Unknown Space and the Outer Rim. The planet itself didn't even have a name, save a long string of numbers and characters. The only reason it was even part of the war was a research station built on one of the more stable planets. During the late days of the war, a strike team of clones snuck through enemy territory specifically to target this location, wanting to stop the development of several reported weapons.

According to Commander Frost's men, three of whom were there, they cleared the base of personnel, captured a few scientists, and detonated several bombs to level the facility. However, their explosives were insufficient, and a good portion of the facility was intact. The war ended shortly after, so with any luck, the facility was abandoned without proper decommissioning.

The trip itself took three days, and I spent most of it enchanting uniforms with basic protection for the new clones. I did spend the last day relaxing to make sure I was in top form when we arrived.