

A Christmas Tale

Mara Jade rarely felt insecure. But as she stood in the ball room of Imperial Palace she felt misplaced, bordering on the embarrassing.

It had started out so well. For once, she had really wished to come out and socialize. After months of travelling back and forth in *Jade's Fire* on business trips where she had to be rational and matter-of-fact all the time, she had desperately felt the need to go out and have a good time. So when she'd heard that a Fete Week ball would be arranged in the magnificent ballroom of her old home, she hadn't hesitated a second. She secured an invitation for herself immediately and didn't even bother to arrange to get a date. She had confidently counted on already knowing many people, and besides, she had never had any problems with contacting new people. Especially not on events like this.

Actually, Mara had looked forward so much to the ball, that she had ordered a brand new gown, and had done so without confirmation that she would actually be on-planet that night. In the end she almost fried the hyperdrive of the *Fire* in order to make it in time.

But she had made it and the dress was beyond expectation. It was made of black velvet and satin, with a spectacular cut at the back. The tailor had caught her ideas but had also added some refining details himself, and when she had left her home that evening, it had been in full expectation that she might be able to turn a head or two.

Almost instantly she had run into the couples Solo and Horn and had a talk with them. But they had many other guests to attend to, and so she had withdrawn to a smaller balustrade to better survey the crowd. And somehow, everything seemed to change after that.

She stood there like a queen for some time, lost in memories. But when she returned from her musings, she had begun to wonder why no one had approached her. On several occasions she almost made eye contact with someone she knew, but every time the others eyes had darted away in the last moment. The same seemed to be the case with every male she laid her eyes on. Only Mirax had once blinked, winked and smiled conspiratorially, something that puzzled Mara quite a lot.

Now, after about a half an hour alone and on full display by the balustrade, she cursed the moment she had set foot at the ball. She speculated if it would be a big defeat to withdraw. Mara didn't like to be defeated. Especially when she didn't know why. And such a defeat pushed many buttons. Why didn't anyone come near her? Was it her past that threw shadows over her?

"Hello Mara."

Mara almost jumped. He had appeared from behind so quietly that she hadn't noticed him at all. "Skywalker!"

It was him, all right. Dressed in black as usual, with the same smile, the same calm around him, and those same curious, pondering eyes that he had so often when looking

at her. Even the tickling in her stomach, that she felt every time she ran into him, was the same as usual.

“I didn’t expect to see you here!” Mara muttered a bit defensively. “Well, nice to see a familiar face.”

“Nice to see you!” Luke cocked his head and looked quizzically at her. “But you should know a lot of people here?”

Mara shrugged, a bit embarrassed that he had seen her predicament so quickly. “I guess you’re right. Well, and how are you doing? Sharply dressed as usual? Do you actually have anything but black in your wardrobe?”

And as usual, he wasn’t provoked by her attitude but just continued his friendly smile. “Oh, I do, but I rarely use it anymore. Black is so practical. Actually you’re wearing black yourself...”

Mara opened her mouth but had to close it again because she couldn’t think of a fitting answer. She had to admit that he had checkmated her nice and easily.

She tried to gather herself to a counterattack when he added, “But you, of course, look lovely in it.”

Mara, who had stiffened somewhat, gave him a sideways glance. His eyes were glittering but she knew he wasn’t trying to best her. Quite the contrary; Mr. Earnest was back in business. She wondered if he knew how charmingly clumsy he sounded when he said such things?

Luke smiled heartily and she couldn’t help smiling back. How was she supposed to keep the facade with such a man?

“I do? To tell the truth, I had started to doubt that”, she admitted reluctantly. “I’ve been standing here for what seems like ages, and the dancing started a long time ago, and yet no one has approached me, not even to talk.”

Luke nodded knowingly. “They want to. But they don’t dare.”

“Who? What are you talking about?”

He shrugged. “I’m talking of about every male on this entire ball.”

Mara stared at him. “They don’t dare? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re standing under the mistletoe.”

Luke pointed and Mara peered up. And there, right over her head, hung that little plant that invited one to break some of the rules that normally limits social behavior. Visible for everybody in the entire room, only not to her.

“Great.” Now she was really embarrassed. “And I’ve been standing here for half an hour...”

Luke touched her hand soothingly. "Don't you worry about it. Those who should be embarrassed are those who haven't been brave enough to come up to you for fear that you would turn them down - or worse! And they are many, I can tell you!"

He had his faults, Skywalker, but he was pretty cute anyway. She could feel her spirits return and favoured him with a teasing smile. "But you are brave?"

Luke grimaced. "I have many faults, and being reckless has always been one of them."

Mara took a good look at him and leaned herself slowly against a pillar. "So you didn't come here only to talk then?"

He stood his ground and looked her straight in the eye. "Nope. I came for a kiss."

Mara swallowed a lump. His eyes were very blue and intense. There was that little scar on his over lip. And others on his cheek. And her heart was suddenly beating very hard in her chest.

"Well", she said, as casually as she could. "You should come a bit closer then, so you can get in under the mistletoe yourself."

He braced himself visibly. But with a swift step he came close and laid his hand on her shoulder. Then she could feel his mouth covering hers. His lips were tender and refreshing, and before Mara could think she found herself returning his kiss. Their lips moved against each other, slow and searching, and a blissful lightness spread through her entire body. Everything else slide away. There was only Luke and her, his mouth, his touch and his musky scent around her.

She could feel his tongue caress her underlip and as if in trance, she opened her mouth to give him access. When their tongues met it sent a shock through her spine. At the same moment she realized how deeply affected she was. She also became painfully aware of that they were standing in full display in a ballroom full of guests, and that if she and Luke didn't want to make a scandal, it was high time to end the kiss.

She could sense the same recognition in Luke and as if by a given signal they slowly withdrew from each other.

Mara's heart was throbbing wildly and she fought like crazy to regain control. "Nice kiss", she managed.

"Yeah." Luke was slightly flushed from the kiss too. He threw a quick glance at the ballroom, then he looked at her again and grinned sheepishly. "And I'm still standing!"

Mara gave him a wry smile.

"One thing more, Mara, and I'd better hurry before they come running, all of them, now they see what I got away with." He collected himself and bowed a little. "Could I have the next dance?"

Mara cocked an eyebrow. "First a kiss and now a dance? Don't you fear that the holopress is going to hang us out as secretly engaged?"

“Maybe.” Luke grinned and shrugged his shoulders. “But it’s worth it! I have to admit that I have a sinister agenda, and it is to get you away from that thing.” He pointed at the innocent little plant above their heads. “I don’t want any of those who didn’t have the guts to come up and kiss you before, to get the chance again.”

Mara couldn’t help laughing. “The gods should favor the bold, huh?”

“Oh, I don’t know about the gods,” Luke teased. “As long as the goddess does...”

Mara rolled her eyes. “Farmboy! You have to work on those compliments of yours. That one about the dress was fine, but this...”

Luke let a whiny note creep into his voice. “I’m working on them all the time!”

“Not in my presence, if you please. There’s only so much I can handle from you in one evening!” She slipped her arm into his. “Shall we?”

Still grinning they headed for the dancing floor.