

Setting: The Jedi Academy of Ossus, a day in the early spring.

Characters: Mara Jade, Saba Sebatyne

Timeframe: 36 ABY (after DN, before LotF)

*Author's note: This viggie rises from a short exchange between Mara and Ben in The Joiner King that always has fascinated me. * Not that I think Saba was Mara's best friend, that would've been Leia or Mirax. But I think Mara and Saba shared something special, maybe even reaching so deep in understanding of each other as Humans and Barabels could come. This is a take on that and on why.*

* "Gorog's no assassin!" Ben cried. "She's my best friend."
"She's an insect, Ben."
"So? Your best friend's a lizard."
"Don't be ridiculous." Mara rose and pushed him behind her. "Aunt Leia is my best friend."
"Doesn't count," Ben said. "She's family. Saba is a lizard."
"Okay, maybe my best friend is a lizard."
- *The Joiner King, p. 302*

My beast friend

Mara lay in the sunlit grass of the Jedi Academy's inner yard, eyes closed and head resting against one of the small, blueleaf budding trees that grew everywhere on Ossus.

She'd wrapped Luke's robe around her in order to keep the still-chilly spring breeze away from her skin, too exposed by the tunic she'd optimistically chosen this beautiful morning. Within a few hours the sun would warm the air and ground enough that she wouldn't need the robe, but she'd wanted to go out *now*, to enjoy the thin, virginal rays of light the season offered, along with the fresh smell of the humid ground, best perceived before noon or after rain.

It was rare for her to dwindle to such leisure as idling in the grass. Only a few years earlier it would have been an impossibility – but she was learning. She and Luke had tried to make a habit of lazing outside for a few hours at least once a week since Ben was tiny – if they were on planet, and if work allowed it, that was – and they tried to stick to it even now when Ben often preferred the company of those his own age. Right now he was at classes, of course. And Mara should have been preparing for her next class – but she'd already ignored too many fine days like this during her lifetime.

"The Grand Master sendz his apologiez and will not be able to accompany you for lunch."

Mara peeked up, one eye opening. Saba Sebatyne stood only a few steps away, and Mara hadn't noticed her. She must have dozed off.

"Thank you Saba. But since when did you run errands for the Grand Master?"

Saba let out a hoarse, hissing laughter, Mara's pert comment obviously funny to her hard-pinned, alien humor. "Since this one took a liking to the receiver of his messagez," she replied, unfolding her legs and sitting down beside Mara, using her thick, long tail as rest to sit comfortably. "He also asked me to tell you that he wouldn't need the robe you pinched from him, so you can keep it for the rest of the day if you like."

Mara grinned and closed her eyes again. "Uh-oh. That means he's been freezing without his robes. He'll make me pay later."

"He's a Grand Master. He can just use the Force to keep him warm."

Mara smiled indulgently. "That's not the point."

"I see." Saba fell silent and Mara noted she had used the sentence as a standard phrase for agreeing. Which meant she actually *didn't* see. And quite as she'd guessed, after a longer moment of silence the Barabel spoke up again. "Wha'z the point, then?"

"I tease him by snatching his robes instead of taking a warmer tunic, he makes me pay by finding something even more annoying, maybe hiding my hairbrush. I pay back, he takes revenge, it goes on."

"I see." Saba's tongue flickered out and Mara knew she still didn't see the point at all. After a while the Barabel inquired, "Who started it?"

"That's not the point either, Saba. The point is that no one finishes it."

"Aha. A kind of unyielding war, then?"

Mara pursed her lips. "Sort of. Except that it's called love."

Saba hissed a laugh again. "That'z the first time anyone has explained *that* in a way this one can understand. You make it almost sound agreeable."

Mara's thoughts wandered to activities just a few hours away. "Oh, it can be. Very agreeable."

They sat in comfortable silence for a while

"You Barabels don't have a concept of it, do you, of love?"

"Not really. Of mating, absolutely," Saba hissed again, "and certain ritualz around it. Also, we tend to our offspring more than to others of our speciez. Thiz' the same as with you humanz, right?"

"Yes." Most people would claim it wasn't the same at all. Mara, for her part, accepted the similarities and wrote the differences off as a mere matter of degree.

Another silence floated between them, like the murmur of the wind in the grass. They listened to the whisper for a while, both probably hearing different things. Saba, eventually, was the one to break the silence again.

"This one heard Master Cilghal claim something very interesting the other day. You humanz have a reptilian brain too, yez?"

“So it's called,” Mara admitted. “It’s supposed to be the part of the brain that controls the body’s vital functions, hoarding, dominance, preening, basic survival fight or flight functions and – brace yourself Saba – mating...”

Saba hissed again. “Hunting?”

Mara nodded. “So I've heard.”

Saba nodded solemnly. “Thiz one thinks that you, Mara, have a very fine and well developed reptilian brain.”

Mara’s lips twisted. “What makes you say that?”

The Barabel shrugged. “You are very skilled when comes to all these important thingz. You would make a fine Barabel, had your body have been constructed differently.”

Chewing on this for a moment, Mara decided it was the finest compliment she’d ever received. A smirk came to her face as she anticipated the look on Luke’s face when she informed him that he was less adept at flattering a woman than a Barabel.

Saba continued. “There is no Human or non-Barabel this one enjoyz to hunt with more than with you.”

“You’ve stayed too long with humans, Saba,” Mara smiled. ”You’re turning mushy.”

Saba nodded again, only her scales ruffling a little. “This one knows.”

After a while she added. "And in this too, Mara Jade, we are the same."

She bared her razor sharp teeth in a smile and Mara had to grin. "True. The trick is learning how to soften, but without losing your edge completely."

"There'z a saying among Barabel: you can lose your teeth, but never your jaws."

Mara considered the saying. The Barabels were predators, to an extent that the Jedi had for ages considered them unsuitable training material. But Saba and her kin had proved they could learn new morals; build up a revised set, where killing wasn't an option except in utmost juncture.

Much like Mara herself; a hunter who had built her life and morals up again from scratch.

The irony wasn't lost on her. She'd been raised to regard aliens as lower beings. Had accepted this absolutely, never questioning the assertions, even when meeting intelligent and cultivated individuals. Only after confronting Luke and his shared New Republic ideology, had she actually recognized how ridiculous and illogical such thinking was. Fortunately it had never been consistent with her behaviour; she had never treated other sentients badly. But she sometimes wondered how many unrevealed ideological scars she still carried around.

Then again, how much did everyone? How much was it a natural thing that it was Han and not Chewbacca who'd become Luke's best friend? Humans and alien alike, first connected to the familiar – that wasn't the same as bigotry. Cilghal was the first alien Mara wouldn't have hesitated to call her friend, Saba only the second. But then, she shared things with Saba that she shared with no one else...

"This one wonderz..."

"Yes?" Mara could sense Saba studying her but she still didn't open her eyes, the sun on her lids was far too wonderful for that. And now she was beginning to feel decidedly warm under Luke's robes. His scent teased her nose, immersed deep in the rough-spun cloth.

Saba hesitated a moment still, long enough to give Mara a hunch of the topic. Well, she didn't mind. Most people wondered; and she really had made peace with her past, a long time ago. "Forgive me, but this one has always wondered; you are strong in the Force and in the Light. Yet you served the Empire. How can this be?"

"Is it a contradiction?" For a moment Mara opened her eyes to meet her friend's wide-pupiled eyes.

Saba's tail twitched at the tip. "To a Barabel it iz."

It made sense. Barabels didn't shy from killing – but on all other matters ethical, they made up for that by being the fiercest of moralists. They had an instinctive tendency to view things in black and white and needed a lot of contradicting to see any traces of gray. Mara chewed on the question before she answered. "I believed in one, united galaxy – and I believed the only way to unite it was to have one firm fist holding it. I thought that was the only way to keep peace. As I grew older, I started to see the signs that this wasn't working. I blamed others for that. It was easy; they were all around me; corrupted, twisted and greedy. But the darkest mind, the heart of evil, I didn't see. Maybe because I needed light to see it and there was none in my life."

"How did this change?"

How indeed? It should have been a long tale - but instead, the answer was simple. "All it took was a long walk in the forest," Mara murmured thoughtfully.

"Pardonzz...?"

Mara expanded. "After I came to know Luke, it was easy to step into the light. I just opened my heart – and I saw."

"I see." And this time, Mara thought Saba *did* understand. She waited patiently as the Barabel chewed on the matter and wondered in passing when, on her long, winding road, she had learned patience. Finally Saba spoke again. "But it still took many years for you to mate, did it not? This one has heard rumours..."

"Oh, that was another matter, unfortunately." Once she had blamed Luke for the ten years it had taken them to reach over their dissimilarities. By now, she knew she was at least as guilty. Occasionally she even admitted this aloud. "Yes, that took time..."

“Perhapz your brain had to humanize?”

Mara let out an amused snort. “Perhaps.”

“Well, thia one is happy for Master Skywalker that you had the capability of that. You make a very convincing couple. He’z the dominant male, right?” She continued, ignoring Mara's sputter, "And you fill the role of his mate very well - even this Barabel can see that you’re...”

“Right...” Mara snorted again. “Saba...”

But Saba continued with an odd twist to her hoarse voice. “And even this one can see that you two are very...fond...” She turned to look at Mara. “. Showing your throat to the one beside you and lay down to sleep together night after night. Isn’t that what you humanz call love?”

With a sudden lump in her throat, Mara could only nodd. That was about it, wasn’t it? Unless her still developing, half-reptilian brain had missed something.

To think that she, Mara Jade, the Emperor’s former Hand, would sit here at the Jedi Academy and discuss... love? And with a lizard, Force help her.

A lizard who had somehow managed the same trick as Luke, though on a smaller scale; met and touched her emotions; turned from fellow being to friend. She’d had no friends as a girl. Only after Palpatine's death had she slowly earned them: Karrde, Aves, Chin, Tionne, Leia, Cilghal, Mirax... People that had accepted her as she was and where she had found support and understanding despite the veritable chasm of differences between the places they’d all come from.

Saba too, was her friend *despite* these differences... her friend because they liked each other, understood each other too, *at least as well as Barabels and humans can understand each other...but then what’s understanding? Isn’t this enough? Peaceful, friendly co-existence.*

And sharing a few jokes from time to time.

Perhaps she would one day learn why Saba thought such strange things funny.

Luke wouldn’t be here for lunch, well, today she didn’t mind. “Are you hungry?”

Saba’s fangs flashed again. “This one’s always hungry.”

Together, they rose and headed for lunch.