

Star Wars

Judge's Call

by Timothy Zahn

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An original exclusive short story

The two small, potbellied aliens bowed low in front of Luke Skywalker. "I hear the Jedi and obey," one of them intoned, his nasal voice hitting three distinct notes at the same time.

"I also hear and obey," the second said, somewhat less enthusiastically. Bowing again, they backed away.

With a quiet sigh, Mara Jade Skywalker looked at her datapad. These two had been the twenty-ninth and thirtieth complainants since Luke had started this session at sunrise this morning. Thirty complainants down. Five billion to go.

She set the datapad aside, trying hard not to let her simmering annoyance get the better of her. No, of course the entire planet wasn't lining up to talk about their problems and get their share of Jedi wisdom and justice. But today, at least, it sure as Coruscant vermin felt like it.

The robed Presenter was approaching the platform now, his own datapad clutched reverently in his hand as he no doubt prepared to outline the situation and problem of complainants thirty-one and thirty-two. The last time Mara had looked out in the waiting chamber, there had been at least fifty of the aliens sitting in stony silence, either marshalling their thoughts or glaring across the room at their opposing complainant. Ten or more arguments yet to hear today, and the sun was already dipping low in the sky.

Mentally, Mara shook her head. Yes, she resented these people for demanding so much of her husband's time and energy. And to be honest, she had to admit she even resented Luke a little for his quick and unselfish willingness to give up that time for them.

But she could also see that his presence here was accomplishing more than the raw numbers would indicate. At least five of the controversies Luke had delivered judgment on today had been churning for ten years or more, with neither party willing to budge an inch. Two of those five had been multigenerational, in fact-stretching back some forty years to disputes between the complainants' fathers. And yet, despite the long histories, in every one of those cases both sides had accepted Luke's ruling and agreed to abide by it. Not necessarily happily, but they had agreed.

They would most likely stick to those settlements, too. The planet had a long history of honoring Jedi verdicts in such matters, dating back to the height of the Old Republic. How they'd managed during the dark days of the Empire she didn't know, but the number of generational disputes implied they hadn't done it very well.

She looked back at her datapad. And after all, she'd known what she was getting herself into when she'd agreed to marry Luke in the first place. Despite a decade of his equally dedicated work with the academy, there still weren't nearly enough Jedi to go around for this sort of duty.

The Presenter reached the platform. "Master Jedi, we have an unexpected but urgent request," the alien said. "Second Agricultural Coordinator Kei Ras Cirali requests your immediate presence at his Karrish Mountain retreat to discuss a problem he is unable to solve."

"I see," Luke said, his voice grave. "Even the powerful sometimes need the counsel of others, I suppose. Where is this retreat?"

"In a cave at the base of Karrish Prime," the Presenter said, twitching his ears to point at the range of snowcapped peaks visible in the distance out the wide window behind them. "If you are willing, we have an airspeeder and driver awaiting you."

"Thank you," Luke said, standing up. "I've spoken with Master Cirali before. If he needs us, we're more than willing to go to him."

"We of the city echo his thanks for your forbearance," the Presenter said, bowing. "I will send the complainants home, to gather again whenever you are free to return."

"Thank you." Luke looked at Mara. "Come on, we'd better get going."

Neither of them spoke again until they were well beyond the edge of the city, heading toward the row of mountains. "You say you know this Cirali?" Mara asked.

"Not really, but I've spoken to him once or twice," Luke told her. "He handles most of the coordination for the agricultural area east of the Karrish mountain range."

Mara pulled up a mental image of the maps she'd looked over on their way into the system. "Good-sized region."

"The second most important one on the planet," Luke agreed. "It's a partially hereditary position, dating back to the days of the old Sultaries."

The Presenter's use of the word retreat hadn't adequately prepared Mara for the elaborate and stunning hall carved into the rock at the base of the mountain. A handful of liveried aliens bowed low as Luke and Mara

passed between them down a high-ceilinged corridor and into a large office/conversation area.

Cirali was waiting for them on a large couch, nearly lost amid a dozen large and vibrantly colored cushions. "Ah-the Jedi," he called, lifting both hands in greeting as the attendants closed the doors behind them. "Welcome, Master Skywalker. And you must be his blushing bride."

Mara gave her husband a sideways look. "'Blushing bride'?" she echoed ominously.

"Just a figure of speech," Luke hastened to assure her. "We're here, Master Cirali, and prepared to deal with the problem."

"I am grateful," Cirali said. "The problem, Master Skywalker, is one of time. Tell me, what does one do when there seems to be no time for the important things of life?"

Mara felt something twinge within her. That was the precise problem she and Luke were having these days: too many responsibilities, too little time. If a being who coordinated operations in a major agricultural area like this couldn't solve it, it wasn't very likely Luke could.

To her mild surprise, though, Luke merely smiled. "There's always time for the important things," he told the alien. "The trick is to recognize the need, and to create the necessary time."

"You speak wisely," Cirali said, rising from his couch. "Come. The consulting room awaits."

He led the way to one of the hanging curtains behind his couch and pushed it aside, revealing a metal door built into the solid rock of the cavern. At a wave of his hand, it opened into a small turbolift car. "I will await your return," he said, bowing.

Luke led the way into the car, and a moment later he and Mara were moving upward through the mountain. "So who exactly are we seeing in this consulting room?" Mara asked as the car slowed to a stop. The door opened—She caught her breath. Beyond the door was a vast chamber, as beautifully and luxuriously appointed as the best palaces she'd ever seen across the galaxy. The room had the delicate scent of dew-sparkled velanie flowers, and one of her favorite kithra sonatas was playing softly in the background. At the far end of the room, a huge transparisteel window gave an awesome view of the mountains and the rivers and valleys beyond, all of it in sharp relief against the shadows thrown by the setting sun.

And aside from the two of them, the chamber was deserted.

"As I said," Luke murmured as he put his arm around her and led her out of the turbolift car onto the thick carpeting, "the trick is to create the time."

Mara blinked at him...and then, belatedly, she got it. "You set this whole thing up, didn't you?" she asked. "Coming to this system in the first place-Cirali's summons-this chamber..."

"Formerly the mountain retreat of the Third Sultara," Luke interrupted, waving a hand over it. "Finest accommodations in the sector. And of course, as long as we're officially in consultation with the Second Agricultural Coordinator, no one's going to come looking for us."

He took her hands and stepped close to her. "Happy second honeymoon, Mara."

For a long moment they kissed. Then, almost reluctantly, Mara thought, he pulled gently away. "Come on, let's take a look around," he said. "I gave Cirali a list of the things you especially like, and he promised to furnish as many of them as he could."

"Yes, I already noticed the flowers and music," Mara agreed, glancing around. "He laid in all my favorite foods, too, I suppose?"

"Enough to last us as long as we want to stay." Luke hesitated. "I hope this will help make up for my ignoring you so much lately."

"No problem," Mara assured him. And standing here, just the two of them, it suddenly wasn't a problem. "I understand that you also have commitments to the rest of the New Republic. I just need you to myself every once in awhile."

"I need it, too," Luke told her. "Please don't ever let me forget that."

"I won't," Mara promised softly. "And one other thing...?"

He leaned close. "Yes?"

She tapped him playfully on the tip of his nose. "You ever call me a blushing bride," she said, "and you're going to be in serious trouble."

He grinned. "I'll make a note."