

The spontaneous feast had a very Saturday barbecue and block party feel to it, with people mingling and socializing around the food while doing their best to politely stuff their faces.

That familiarity was only enriched by the simple grilled fare we served, since we didn't have the right tools to cook more advanced dishes. Despite that, we didn't hear anyone complaining, especially since it was all cooked so well by a few of our crewmembers. Almost everything we served came directly from Nirn, from the two different types of meat, the grilled vegetables, and even the dessert, which was a variety of pastries made by a local bakery and stored in a sealed package.

I happily munched on a Nirn take on a cheese danish, topped with a jelly made with the large fruit I had fallen in love with when we first settled Vercopa. They were calling them Flower Cherries, partially because I had continuously referred to them as massive cherries when we first discovered them. They had become a rapid staple of our city, and when we eventually started exporting goods, I was almost certain their popularity would explode.

As we finally settled down, the many serving plates of food now mostly empty, we started to finally talk about Nirn and Vercopa, about the many Jedi that had joined us so far, and what we expected of them.

"Honestly, a significant amount of the Jedi are spending their time meditating, helping the community, and mitigating small disagreements," I explained. "They fell into that role naturally, without much input from me, and I couldn't be happier with it. We have a minor security force for domestic issues, but it's hard to beat some of the best negotiators and mediators in existence. Especially since they often feel the escalating issues before they become full-blown incidents."

"It has been... an interesting experience returning to such a role without the violence and conflict that often resulted from our intervention under the rule of the Republic," Amescoll admitted. "The people trust us, and that alone... It is difficult to describe how amazing that feels compared to the wariness and sometimes blatant distaste we were often met with before. Not that it wasn't deserved at the end."

"But what of your mercenary group?" Cere Junda asked, turning to focus on me. "Cal said some of the Jedi fight with you?"

"That is true. So far, we have one team that is a mix of Mandalorians and Jedi," I explained. "At this point, the group has seven of the latter and eight of the former, not including the two leaders."

"They have two leaders?" Merrin asked. "How could that work? Surely they butt heads?"

"Well, Sabine Wren and Ezra Bridger worked together for a long time when they were younger," I explained. "They were part of the same Rebel cell, which is where Ezra learned under Kanan Jarrus."

"Kanan is alive?" Cal asked, his eyes widening.

"No, I'm sorry," I said, shaking my head. "He survived Order 66, but later sacrificed himself to save his wife and team."

The rapid blossom of hope, before being dashed, sucked the wind out of the table for a long moment. It was harsh enough that several of the older Force-sensitive around us turned as they felt the harsh shift.

"Ezra has become a capable Jedi despite the loss, and despite his own trials," I continued. "He and Sabine are in a relationship and lead their ground team rather well together."

"Any beyond that?" Cere asked.

"Well, many of our large ships have Jedi advisors on board. Originally, I wanted every ship to have one, but we have been growing way too fast for that," I said, before shifting to explain what the advisor was. "Essentially, we designed a meditation platform for the bridge of our ships, where a Jedi can sit and focus on the Force, pushing their prescience to its maximum. This can, and has, given us an advantage in dealing with ambushed or unpredictable targets."

"There are also a few more of our people hoping to form another ground team," Amescoll reminded me. "They are waiting for a combat group to be formed."

"I might just assign them to 2nd Group," I said, catching his attention. "The second ground team for 2nd Group is a team of BX Commando droids. With Beskar armor, they-"

"You gave commando droids *beskar armor*? Are you insane?" Cal asked, half leaning over the table. "How did you even get that much beskar?"

"They are programmed and well maintained," I assured him. "And before you ask, they can't be hacked easily either. We separated their internal comms system from their control systems. And as for how we got it, my magic allows me to transmute between precious metals. It has its restrictions, but all our armor and uniforms are beskar."

"All of it?" Cal asked. "I knew your armor is... but all of it?"

"Anyone even remotely involved with combat at least has a beskar uniform, made from woven metal fibers and panels," I explained, tugging my own uniform. "Anyone facing direct combat has beskar armor, including our Jedi members."

"Why? That seems like a ludicrous expense," Cordova asked. "I understand arming those in direct combat, but even your crew?"

"My combat model is essentially the opposite of the CIS and Republics, where every pilot, crew member, and soldier has the best equipment and weapons I can provide," I explained. "Cost is not an object when it comes to arming my people, since we grow to fit

available assets. Well... we try to grow to fit our equipment. Lately, we seem to be stretching ourselves to include people we meet or groups we rescue that are particularly in need of help or a home."

"And you simply open your arms to anyone who needs a home?" Cordova asked.
"Forgive me, but how are you able to keep your planet secure?"

"With magic and trust," I explained. "I use magic to sift through any infiltrators or people looking to take advantage of us, and we build trust with our people to keep them from changing their minds later."

"Yes, this magic again. I would very much like to see this magic for myself," Cordova said, the doubt in his voice clear. "While I trust the words of Master Amescoll and others, I find it hard to believe that-"

I couldn't help but interrupt him by casting Conjure Familiar, my large tiger construct appearing beside him. It padded around the table, catching everyone off guard, quite a few people gasping and pointing. The purple construct moved around the table, towards a slight hill, where a large rock had a small flattened area. While acting like a real tiger, the construct jumped up and settled onto the flat area, as if it was about to take a nap. It disappeared in the usual cloud of energy as I dismissed him.

I showed off a few more spells, firing spikes of ice at the ground and spraying out fire into the air. I healed a scraped knee and a sore back, before finally settling in to answer the original question of how I prevented people from coming in who would sell us out.

"Alright, I'm going to cast a bit of magic on you," I explained as I took Cordova's hand. "There's no danger, nothing about it can hurt you. Normally, I would be concerned about you being too powerful for the spell to work on you, but if you relax and don't resist, the spell will go through anyway. You ready?"

The older man nodded, his attitude towards magic considerably different than just a few minutes ago. His doubt was gone, now replaced by a deep curiosity. He happily volunteered to be a test subject for something so harmless.

My hand glowed as I cast my custom Truth spell, the energy sinking and coiling around his body. The spell stuttered for a moment before finally latching on, the older man's body relaxing as I released his hand.

"What did you have for breakfast this morning?" I asked with a smile.

"Half a ration pack and a cup of tea," he responded simply, the spell going strong.

"What's your favorite book?"

"A Treatise on Ancient Civilization: The Zeffo and Their Peers," he responded easily, though Cal laughed and Cere face-palmed.

"What?" I asked. "Something I should know?"

"He wrote that," Cere explained, shaking her head in affectionate exasperation. "His favorite book is one he wrote."

I chuckled and waved my hand, cutting the spell short. Cordova perked up from his relaxed state, looking down at his hands.

"Fascinating. I could feel my body responding truthfully," he explained, before looking up at me in concern. "I felt I could stop it if I pushed."

"That's because your mind is so strong and organized," I explained. "Most normal people aren't capable of breaking out of its control. That said, I would have felt it if you broke free, so it works either way."

"An interesting ability, and it does make me feel considerably safer, knowing you can force someone to tell the truth," Cere agreed, while Cordova was still mentally analyzing what he had just gone through. "What sort of forces does your mercenary group have?"

"We are in the process of forming 5th Group," I explained, though I winced after a moment. "But that's not really informative to outsiders, now that I'm thinking of it... Alright, let's start with 1st group, which is this group of ships right here..."

I spent about fifteen minutes describing our forces in general terms, reviewing our ships, and discussing the types of ground teams and droid forces they had. It took a while to get through to 4th fleet, before shifting to what we had above Nirn, and what sort of defensive capabilities we had planetside. I didn't quite go into every little detail, and I did undersell how much most of our ships were upgraded, but for the most part, it was an accurate description.

When I was done, I couldn't help but chuckle at the faces of Cal's team. They were clearly shocked by the amount of hardware we had managed to acquire. Unfortunately, Cal's demeanor quickly shifted to one of frustration, primarily focused on himself.

"How?" Cal asked, a brittleness in his voice. "How have you managed to build something like this?"

"Well... there has been some luck involved," I started. "Our early find of the CIS data core provided us with several opportunities. But other than that, it's mostly just a way of approaching things. Your group has been predominantly focused on escape and evasion, which is more than fair. You have kids and a lot of emotional baggage on board, I'm not sure I would have done any differently in your shoes."

"And yet you have."

"Are situations aren't the same, Cal. We've been striking out specifically to achieve resources. We picked targets, focused on useful opportunities, and sought out situations for financial or material gains," I explained. "Before we were really stable, we didn't go anywhere

that didn't give us the opportunity to steal some sort of ship. And on the few occasions we did, I was always on the lookout for a little extra bang for our b- for our credits."

"Your responsibility was to keep your group safe, and to help those you found along the way," Ahsoka said, continuing from where I left off. "Your options were limited, but you managed to do it. Our responsibilities were different, but now we can join together and share the burden of each."

Ahsoka's words seemed to get through to Cal, as did his fiancé's hand on his shoulder. To move away from the topic and give Cal a minute to normalize, I answered questions about some of the missions we took. At some point, I mentioned one of the missions we worked on with the Rebellion, which caught Cal's attention.

"Do you work with the Rebellion a lot?" he asked. "I spent a lot of time working with them before making my way back to Jedha, before the whole Tanalorr debacle."

"The Rebellion is one of our primary buyers," I responded, just barely swallowing a wince. "To be honest... we had a better relationship before, but quite a few things happened to sour it. Previously, I had happily given them a large discount, as I didn't want to join, but I still believed in their cause. Now our relationship is a lot more... mercantile"

"What happened?"

"They were taking advantage of our generosity, had a poor attitude, and generally took our discount for granted," I explained. "Then a leak on their side almost got my team wiped out, and ruined what could have been a game-changing score."

I described the mission to the CIS repair site, explaining the situation as best as possible. I recounted the ships, as well as the fully staffed repair station that we had just within our grasp, before the Empire showed up.

"It was Vader, and his new flagship, the Super Star Destroyer *Executor*, along with three Interdictor-class Star Destroyers," I explained. "We were trapped in subspace, and the *Executor* was way too close for us to run and weather the reprisal."

"How the hell did you survive?" Cal asked, his voice low, as if there was a chance we hadn't, like talking loudly would cause us to vanish.

"Well... First, we needed Vader, and his whole bridge, really, of their game. Best way to do that was to piss him off," I explained with a shrug. "I made a few disparaging remarks-"

"Understatement of the year," Ahsoka muttered to herself.

"And managed to get him to throw a dark side tantrum," I continued, ignoring Ahsoka's contribution. "I'm pretty sure he went into a rage and ruined the bridge, which meant we had an opening. Since I had control over the entire CIS fleet, I ordered a large chunk of it to crash into the SSD, then managed to do the same to the Interdictors. Once the last one was destroyed, by

the sacrifice of Boxi and his team, we finally escaped. Managed to grab a few ships, but most of the fleet was spent smashing into the *Executor*."

"That... is perhaps one of the craziest things I have ever heard," Cere said. "You purposely pissed off Vader? That's a special kind of crazy, he is incredibly dangerous. I should know, I barely survived our encounter."

She shifted her shoulder, gesturing to her missing limb.

"The fact that you did says a lot about your ability and talent," I responded. "Not many people have survived facing him head-on."

"I had help," She admitted, closing her eyes for a moment. "Friends who helped but didn't survive his wrath."

I held back a long sigh, the table sinking into silence. The helmet-clad bastard had a lot to atone for. It made me worried about what would happen in this world, should Luke somehow succeed to a greater degree than he did in the canon one. How could anyone let Anakin walk free after all the innocent blood on his hands?

I turned to my left, sharing a look with Ahsoka, and put my hand on hers, giving it a gentle squeeze, knowing how conflicted she must feel whenever the topic came up. She leaned her head on my shoulder, and I could only hope that, no matter what happened, the people he hurt could get some sort of closure.