

For a long moment, we all stood there, all of us crammed together. The IPV was luckily built to hold a good amount of cargo, but between their normal load, over forty of us, and another thirty-three civilians, it was getting a bit cramped. Everyone was too tired or too shell-shocked to celebrate. After all, we had just barely escaped being buried alive underground, missing it all by the skin of our teeth.

After a few seconds of silence, Tatnia stood from her position by the environmental shield, shaking her head.

"I think I got the back half of the ship sealed off before anything could spread," she explained, gesturing to the shield generator. "Between that and the sealed doors, the crew should be safe."

"Good, one less thing to worry about," I said, before turning back to the cramped space. "Alright, everyone, let's get these people laid out so I can check them for injuries. Then... well, get comfortable, I doubt this is going to be a short process."

We cleared out a space in the corner, people climbing over crates and standing on equipment to make room. When it was ready, we closely laid each of the villagers, who had once been infected with whatever spore hell we had just escaped from, down along the edge of the cargo bay. I went over each of them with a fine-tooth comb, healing any of the injuries that occurred during our escape. There was a good amount of bruising, even some broken bones, that needed to be fixed, but by the time we were in orbit, floating alongside the fleet, I was just about finished.

"Okay, so we need to get off this ship," I said, talking to Tatnia and Ahsoka.

"We can clear out one of the side hangar bays," Tatnia suggested. "Just one of them should fit the *Hound* and give us some room to stretch out our legs."

"We can set up cots so these people can lie out on something comfortable," Ahsoka added with a nod, gesturing to the villagers. "At least until we can get a better idea of what's going on."

"Alright, that's a solid plan... but let's get the *Quiet Ark* in tight formation with the *Hope*," I added, noting Ahsoka's wince, even as Tatnia nodded. "If things start to spiral, we can have it fly into the hangar and knock out any of the survivors."

After a bit more discussion, I had the *Loyal Hound* connect me to the *Hope*, and I relayed the plan. When that was done, we basically sat around and waited for the crew of the *Hope* to set everything up. It took about two hours before they contacted us and gave us the all clear.

Slowly but surely, we landed inside the hangar, which was completely sealed and locked off. Even the controls on our side for the various doors and other aspects were disabled from our end, so that in the event the spores spread and started affecting the villagers or us, we wouldn't be able to infect the rest of the crew.

When we landed, we carefully left the ship and transported the villagers, who were still unconscious, to the already set-up cots. They had privacy screens set up, as well as medical monitoring equipment and several medical droids ready and waiting. Behind us, Commander Frost used the environmental shield, along with two more that were waiting for us in the hangar, to seal the *Loyal Hound* in a bubble. Its entire hull and cargo bay would need to be cleaned, the hull to remove the traces of the planet's hellish atmosphere, and the cargo bay to clean out the hellish spores we had no doubt carried back with us. Until we could do both of those, the ship would remain sealed, and the crew would remain inside the sealed-off forward section of their ship.

It wouldn't be fun for them, as they relied on the cargo bay to give them space to spread out, but they would have to suck it up until we had the all clear. Once we confirmed that the fungus responded to treatment, magical or mundane, we could let them out.

Well, technically, we already had proof that magic could remove the fungus on a large scale, but we needed to know whether it was also clearing it out as the spores from an infected person's system.

Once we started delivering the unconscious victims, the medical droids set to work, taking blood samples, hooking them up to the monitoring equipment, and performing general check-ups for everyone. They also took various samples from the cargo bay, our armor, basically anywhere they might be able to isolate the spores.

While they, unsurprisingly, had no idea what the fungus was, they had plenty to compare it to, ignoring the ability to infect and influence people so well. Within an hour, they had a solution to our issue in the form of a sterilizing spray and an antifungal treatment. They would cover us, our armor, the ship, and the whole hangar in the spray, while we all went on an antifungal treatment regimen. Eventually, after a few days of cleaning, they would test everything all over again. If they still detected spores, they would repeat the process. It wasn't until they couldn't pick up anything on us that we could finally leave.

When they said the process would likely take at least two weeks, I happily told them to take three. There was no way I was willing to risk even a single spore getting into anyone, or even worse, on Nirn.

For the first day, we kept busy by first cleaning the hull of the *Loyal Hound*. After that, we started pulling apart the smaller ship's cargo bay, spreading things out and making it easier for the antifungal spray to get in every nook and cranny. Considering it was also likely contaminated, we ensured the hull was ready for a deeper antifungal cleaning.

It wasn't until the afternoon of the second day that the villagers started waking up. As if by fate, the first to wake was Seva, or Jedi Master Sevarril Arraln. Thankfully, it was a slow, gradual process, so we had plenty of time to move everyone, especially the clones, away, as well as get the *Quiet Ark* into position, just in case. Meanwhile, Ahsoka, Cal, Merrin, Tatnia, and I all waited for her to fully regain consciousness.

When the older woman slowly opened her eyes, letting out a groan as she shifted, she looked around at each of us. A dozen expressions flashed over her face in just a few seconds, before finally settling on confusion.

"I... wh..." she barely said anything before closing her eyes again, raising her hands to rub her face. "What's going on?"

"Hello, my name is Deacon Roy," I said. "Do you know who you are?"

"Everything... Gods, everything is a mess," She said, sitting up on the hospital bed slowly. "My memories... I am... I am Jedi Master Arraln, but... what has happened? What have I done?"

"I'm sorry, but please, what do you remember?" I asked gently.

"I... I remember bits and pieces... I remember being so certain... But... everything is so foggy... The cavern, the village... the mushrooms-" She suddenly gasped, turning to look at her arm and shoulder, tearing at the medical gown to inspect. When it was clear her growth was gone, she calmed slightly. "It-! It's... gone. Thank god...How could I have just accepted it?"

"The fungus was likely inside you, affecting your brain long before it started showing up on your skin," I assured her. "There was likely nothing you could have done. By the time it started to grow through your skin, you were already too affected to care."

"We... gods, it's all a mess," she said, grinding her hands against her eye sockets, hard enough that I reached forward to gently pull them away before she hurt herself. "I... what about the others? Did they...?"

"We rescued thirty-three people in total," I explained softly. "Yourself included. As far as we could tell, that was everyone in the village."

"I... I can't remember but... I think that sounds right," She said, frowning as she tried to think past the fog that was no doubt plaguing her. "Where are we? Who are you people?"

"You and your people are on our ship," I explained. "A lot has happened since you went into hiding, but you're safe now."

"We didn't have any other choice," she said, shaking her head. "The Empire, it... It was swallowing everything. Every safe haven we went to, it was attacked or corrupted or... we had no choice but to run, run as far as we could."

"Absolutely no one blames you for that," I assure her. "You and your people are safe now, you have my word."

"Thank you," she said, still clearly upset and confused. "Everything is so jumbled, my mind feels like a mess..."

"Why don't you meditate?" Ahsoka suggested. "Maybe that will help your memories settle."

"I... I think that's a good idea," the Jedi Master said with a nod. "Please, wake me if my people need me, but... I need to rest and focus."

She slid into a meditative position, like she had to drag her body as she pulled her legs together and crossed them, before closing her eyes and focusing inward. Her face calmed in just a few seconds, and together we all let out a collective breath of relief. With a glance, I gestured for us to leave the woman's space.

"Do you think it will help?" Cal said softly once we had taken a few steps away.

"Deacon's healing means she is in perfect physical health," Ahsoka responded. "Meditating may well help her collate her memories. It's a miracle of the Force that they are getting any memories back at all... It's up to her and the Force if she can organize the chaos."

"Let's hope we can help the rest of them do that as well," I said, pausing for a moment before continuing. "And let's hope they don't all wake up at once."

By some blessing, the villagers waking up were pretty staggered. All of them were confused, but thankfully, very few of them needed real calming down. I probably should have seen it coming, but most of those who reacted poorly in some way recognized their surroundings as a Venator hangar, and considering a great many of them had been hunted mercilessly by clones and the Republic, that did not go over well.

Thankfully, those who did lose their calm reacted relatively well to me, paralyzing them so we could talk and explain the situation. Some of them required us to show them their neighbors, and a few more needed to get up and see close loved ones, to assure themselves that they had gotten out as well.

Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for the kids.

These poor children, ranging from around five to around ten, had only known living in the cavern. Not only were their memories a mess, but they had been torn from their homes, the only thing they knew, and thrust into a whole new world. To them, the memory loss and fungus had been their whole lives, and we had just torn them away from that. Worse, they didn't have any skill in the Force, meaning they couldn't meditate and use it to help stabilize themselves. We had tried to calm them down with gentle words and kind faces, but in the end, we were forced to sedate them at first.

Later, when the adults started waking from their meditations, their minds slightly better ordered, they were able to calm them down. On the plus side, everyone's returned memories meant families could reconnect, so we could get the right people comforting the right kids. It was a bright spot in a rotten situation that had gone on for all too long.

In a twist that would have been sitcom-worthy back home, a pair of lovers, who had a child, had regained memories of being rivals. They were Jedi, so it wasn't overly aggressive or hostile, but they definitely didn't associate socially, and now they woke up to nearly fifteen years of being in vague, hazy memory love.

Luckily, they were mature enough to recognize that their old rivalry was silly, especially since they had been together longer than they had been rivals.

By the end of our first week in quarantine, we had finally set up communications between the locked-down hangar and the rest of the ship, letting the many Jedi on board communicate with the ones recovering. As always, watching friends realize the people they had thought were dead were still alive was well worth the effort each rescue mission took.

By the second week, the villages had fully stabilized mentally, and we had introduced them to the ground teams that had rescued them. To do that, we had to explain the whole clone Order 66 mind-control situation, since Commander Frost's men made up a significant number of those saviors.

As with most introductions between the clones and the Jedi survivors, the introduction was tense at first, but slowly warmed over time. It was hard for a Jedi to argue that a person didn't feel regret and guilt, along with a deep sense of violation for the mind control, when they could sense it themselves.

Finally, about halfway through the third week, my people were finally certain that our ship and our people were completely clean. The vast majority of the stuff in the hangar would likely be sent out into a collapsing orbit around a star, as we could get more, and it wasn't worth even the non-existent chance that contaminants had somehow remained.

It was finally time to go home.

Thankfully, we didn't have that far to travel, as the *Hope* had already jumped to the security checkpoint, meaning we were very quickly back in orbit around Nirn. I got to watch quite a few of our new guest react to the planet from the bridge, their eyes going wide as they looked down.

"It's beautiful," Sevarril said, actual tears forming in her eyes. "A safe haven for us... with people, a whole population."

"There is already space for you and your people to settle in," I assured her. "The rest of the Jedi will help you. Take your time getting to know the people and the city, nobody is going to bother you for anything until you're ready."

"Thank you, Deacon," She said, still staring out the viewport at the planet below. "It feels like we have escaped hell, only to be delivered to heaven. Thank you."

"I'm happy to have helped to deliver you there," I said with a smile. "Now come on, let's get you and your people loaded into transports. Quite a few friends are waiting for you on the surface."

Sevarril nodded, and together Ahsoka and I guided her down to the central hangar, where everyone was already waiting. All of the combat crews would be joining us down to the surface for an extended break, which was non-negotiable after what we had gone through. The crew of the *Hope* was also looking to enjoy an extended shore leave rotation.

Everyone had earned it.