

Once Ahsoka was sure Seva wasn't about to slide to the floor, she glanced over at me. For a moment, I thought she was going to say something, but before she could, Tatnia connected to me through comms.

"Uh... Boss?" She said, her voice decidedly unsettled. "You uh... might want to turn around."

A pit opened in my stomach at the tone in her voice, and I turned around slowly, locking up when I saw them. All around us, the stranded, mind-addled victims we had come to rescue were standing stock still, silently staring at us.

"Whatever the hell you just did... they felt it."

"Fuck," I said simply, immediately switching to connect to a wide band to everyone in range. "We may have a problem, everyone. Stand by for-"

Before I could finish my warning, the people of the village shifted their stances, lowering themselves like they were preparing to chase us down. Before any of us could react to their sudden aggressive shift, they screamed, jaws open almost unnaturally wide as they let out an unholy cacophony, which sounded like it came directly from the pits of hell. It wasn't just the survivors around us, either, the sound came from deeper in the cavern, thousands of maddened creatures shouting and screaming together. I nearly stumbled backward in horror before finally getting control of myself.

"Holy fuck, Mara, Corvak, Nal, prepare for combat!" I shouted. "Stun humanoids, everything else is fair game! Meet up and come to us!"

A rotation of confirmations came through, but I was already focusing back on the situation around us. The Jedi survivors had finally stopped shouting and were now openly attacking us, mostly trying to attack Ahsoka and I, while the rest of my team tried to stop them as gently as possible.

Two of the mushroom-covered victims charged up the slight hill that we were on top of, gnashing and snarling like animals as they did. I hit one with a Paralyze while Ahsoka forced pushed the other one back down the hill.

"We need to knock them out!" I said everyone. "Anything not lethal I can fix, so just be careful."

The violence escalated, with Ahsoka and Cal fighting with their fists and the Force, since they couldn't use their Sabers, while Merrin's hands glowed green with Nightsister magic as she teleported around. Unfortunately, it seemed that the fungus did more than just harm their memories, as any of the infected we knocked down would simply get back up after a few moments. Not even Tatnia, who had pulled a familiar-looking [holdout blaster](#) from one of her packs, could keep them down for long with stun bolts.

Then, as if mindless mushroom people who wouldn't stay down weren't enough, the creatures of the cavern began to enter the camp in droves, starting with groups of the blunt-nosed lizards, charging in and trying to chomp and slice us with their claws.

"Just kill the other threats," I ordered on long range. "Capture the infected victims, wipe out any attacking animals!"

With the ability to go lethal, Cal and Ahsoka moved to the entrances into the village, pulling their sabers out and going to town on whoever tried to push their way in. Meanwhile, Merrin, Tatnia, and I repeatedly knocked down the villagers, and while they were down, I would quickly work to heal them, guiding them into circles of healing. I conjured a permanent mage construct to help with the process, paralyzing and healing them one by one. Every time we succeeded, the villager would collapse, this time staying down.

Bigger creatures, some sort of burrowing tunnel rat began punching through the cavern floor outside the village, each the size of a small cow. They did their best to break through the wall of violence that Ahsoka and Cal were keeping up, and the two Jedi were slowly being worn down. Mentally, I ordered my mage construct to reinforce them, the construct casting Respite on them both, before casting bolts of lightning at the larger infected animals.

Finally, after nearly eight minutes of fighting and healing, we had managed to knock out and cure each of the infected villagers, all of them gathered in the center of the village, as close to the exit as we dared.

With the villagers down, we moved to reinforce the line and hold back the tide of creatures coming from outside the village. Suddenly, the cave rumbled, a vibration coming from the ground, violent enough to chatter my teeth through my armor.

"We need to move," Tatnia said, head twisting and turning, trying to find the source of the rumbling. "That was something big."

"We can't abandon them here," Cal said, gesturing to the unconscious villagers. "They didn't mean to do this, and we can save them!"

"It's coming here," Ahsoka said, worry in her voice. "I can feel it, it's-"

The back wall of the village exploded, casting boulders the size of cars in every direction. Merrin and Cal, both facing the wall when it detonated, both raised their hands and caught several of the massive chunks of rock before they could slam into us and the villagers, casting them to the side.

There, pushing through the dust and debris of the exploded cavern wall was a [monstrous worm](#), its head easily three times as tall as I was. Its jaws dripped with glowing blue slime, its head plated in some sort of red and blue chitin, like an armored helm. Despite that, I could still see the same purple tendrils growing through and around the plates protecting its head. Despite not having eyes, it still seemed to sense us, as it opened its maw and screamed loud enough to almost knock us back.

"Grab them!" I called out, pointing to the villagers. "Grab the kids and as many as you can and go!"

The moment we were no longer being buffeted by the scream, I quickly settled into a stance and cast Arc Cannon. The massive charge of shock energy fired off like a pale blue turbolaser, sparking and zapping off the side before slamming into the massive worm. The impact rocked the monster back, carving into the side of its head, snapping its exposed flesh. For a moment, it seemed to be weathering the worst of it, then it made the mistake of opening its mouth, and I poured the Arc Cannon inside.

The energy behind the blast tore into its soft interior meat, blowing chunks of it off and carving deep. Blood and chunks of flesh splattered away from it, doing serious damage before the worm could even react. When it finally did, it bellowed and pulled back, shying from the attack and doing its best to protect itself.

Behind me, my team was picking up the children, preparing to run, the worm breaking any hope we had of saving the whole village alone. Despite the damage I was doing to the creature, I knew it wouldn't last. I was running out of mana, and while the massive worm reeled, I prepared to retreat and help my team run.

Then, by some miracle, the rest of my people arrived, Mara and Corvak leading the charge. Upon seeing the massive worm, which had slammed itself into the side of the cavern, most of the soldiers skidded to a stop, unsurprisingly frozen in shock at the massive and unexpected beast.

"Grab the unconscious people and run!" I ordered loudly through the comms. "Go go go!"

That was enough to shock them free, but the worm was recovering as well. It swung its head back, trying to smash into me and kill the tiny thing that had hurt it. Despite its size, there was too little room to dodge, so I braced myself and shouted.

"FUS ROH DAH!"

The conjured concussive blast slammed over the monster in a wave, imparting enough force to skew its sideways sweep. I still dove and rolled, ignoring how hard the ground shook as the worm slammed into it, running towards the village opening, which was now ruined and in disarray.

By now, my people had rushed in and used their enhanced strength to grab the now-cured villagers. Cal, Merrin, Ahsoka, Mara, and Vaz were holding against the line of incoming animals, the latter sweeping her Z-6 rotary cannon back and forth, covering a huge portion of the cavern by herself.

"It's time to go!" I shouted, getting their attention as we followed the rest of my men, slowing down just long enough to snag my sword with Telekinesis as we did.

Together, as a large group, we ran, tearing across the mossy, fungus-filled cavern. I conjured a replacement mage, the other having been crushed during the worm's initial attack. Together we threw out Respites as fast as we could, doing our best to keep everyone going, those not carrying people running alongside those who were, shooting and throwing explosives backward to throw off the rampaging infected beasts.

More than once, I had to pause to punt a small animal away from the central group.

Unfortunately, we weren't out of the woods yet, as another deep rumbling filled the cavern, and the worm burst from the ground again, close enough that Ahsoka was barely able to stop a pair of boulders from rolling through the main column of my soldiers. While she did, I ran under them, charging directly at the worm, casting the highest level of my buffing spell that I could, pushing forward into the still falling rocks and dust.

The worm, which was still bleeding, somehow still sensed me despite the dust, focusing on me in seconds. It started to dive forward, aiming to slam its half-open jaw around me, either to crush me or eat me, I didn't know. Seeing it coming, I zigged right for a step, waiting until I saw it shift its aim slightly. Then, in a move that would have normally sent me tumbling, I put one foot left and shouted.

"WULD NAH KEST!"

In a blur, I juke away from the worm's landing spot, the massive infected creature slamming into the ground hard enough to shake the cavern, his face plates cracking and purple blood pouring out. I kept running along the exposed length before jumping up onto a boulder and scrambling onto its top, using its spiky, gripping grooves to pull myself up. It tried to roll, to buck me off, but I just barely compensated enough to stay on top, even as I pulled out my sword and started running back the other direction, now on top of the beast.

As I moved, I cut downwards, managing to sink the blade of my beskar sword deep into its flesh. Then I took another step forward.

"WULD NAH KEST!"

It was still too soon to be shouting again, and I could feel it tear at my throat, but it was nowhere near as bad as the first time I had damaged myself. Some time had passed, and considering I didn't see blood splattered on the inside of my helmet, I would likely be fine.

The worm, on the other hand, very likely wouldn't be.

My sword cut deep into its body, biting along a seam in its tough hide. Blood and gore poured from its body along the almost hundred-foot slice I had carved into it. Immediately, the worm bucked and screamed, but I was still moving, half jumping, half getting flung as I reached its armored head.

I impacted the ground hard, almost thirty feet away from the worm, rolling a few times before coming to a stop. The worm, which was still screaming and writhing, its tail end still in the

ground, was no longer focused on any of us. I don't know if it was dying, but it was certainly in too much pain to care what we were doing.

Being tossed around and slamming into the ground had left me dazed and the world spinning. Thankfully, Ahsoka and Mara were helping me to my feet in seconds, and my conjured mage washed away the spinning with a healing spell.

"We need to keep going!" Ahsoka said, and I nodded, shaking my head of any lingering cobwebs.

Together, the three of us ran, following after the rest of the group from a distance, as they had kept going when I stopped to fight the worm. On the plus side, as we ran, we made good time, the horde of infected, subterranean animals having slowed noticeably. Unfortunately, we had a new problem. The worms flailing and death throes could be felt even as we put more distance between us, and we could feel and see the cracks starting to form all around the cavern.

The cave was coming down around us.

"We need to go faster!" I shouted, casting another string of Respite. "We are almost to the tunnel!"

As we ran, it felt like the stone above us was physically pushing down on us, every crack and crumble feeling like it would all come crashing down. The collapse only got worse as we moved, the whole cavern coming apart around us.

Finally, as great swaths of the cavern were collapsing, we reached the exit, and rather than climb the wet, slippery tunnel, I led the charge into it, activating my repulsor pack and flying up along the winding, upward slope. Behind me, my people followed, one or two at once, taking off and flying after me.

At the halfway point, I stopped, cutting my thruster and landing. I grabbed one of the embedded metal poles for support.

"Go go go!" I shouted again, waving my people forward. "I can fix concussions, broken bones, and bruises, but I can't fix you or them if you've been crushed to a pulp!"

My people flew past at breakneck speed, occasionally scraping along stalactites and stalagmites. Finally, after what felt like hours, Ahsoka flew past me.

"I'm the last one!" She shouted, and I took off after her, dragging my shoulder along the ceiling in a spray of sparks before I could correct my course.

We popped out of the tunnel and into the scavenged and broken-down C70, immediately running towards the airlock. The cracking and rumbling weren't stopping, and in fact, it seemed to be getting louder.

When we finally made it to the *Loyal Hound*, we all poured into the cargo bay, where Tatnia was already standing by the environmental shield projector, tapping away at its controls. Before I could say anything, the rumbling spiked, and suddenly the ship started to tilt.

"Take off!" I shouted. "Seal off the cargo bay and take off now!"

The rumble of the thrusters overtook the rumbling of the ground as we lifted off from the planet's surface. As the cargo bay doors slammed shut and the boarding ramps slowly rose up, we finally lifted from the ground. As I turned to look back through the slowly closing ramp, my last view of the planet was the ground collapsing under the C70 retrofit, the cavern below swallowing the long-ruined starship.