

As I entered the large room, both Cal and Mara spun towards the sound of our footsteps, Mara aiming her weapon in our direction while Cal whipped out his own blaster and saber. I could also see a [small droid](#) peaking over his shoulder, riding on his back. The droid looked from Mara to us, his eyes spinning slightly as they focused in on us.

"Woah, hold on, don't shoot," I said, holding my hands out to show they were empty. "This is a bit of an awkward meeting, but I think we are all friends here."

"Who are you?" Cal asked, his pistol trained on us with a surprisingly steady grip. "What are you... wait... Ahsoka Tano?"

Ahsoka tilted her head, her eyes focusing on who we assumed to be Cal Kestis, studying him closely.

"I'm sorry, I wish I could say I remembered you, but I'm afraid I don't."

"No, it's okay, I was young when you went to train with Knight Skywalker," Cal explained, watching her closely as she stepped forward. "But we all knew you. Ahsoka Tano, hero of the Clone Wars, inspiration to Padawans everywhere."

"Ah, right," She said with a wince. "I swear only the good stories are true."

By now, Cal had lowered his pistol and slid out of his combat stance. Mara did as well, as if following Cal's lead. The robot let out a long string of whistles and beeps, Cal nodding after a moment, clearly understanding the droidspeak.

"So...What are you doing here?" Cal asked, looking between us and Mara.

"I imagine the same thing you are, Mr...?" I pointed out with a smirk.

While I wasn't a fan of lying to allies, especially ones who hadn't done anything to deserve it, we couldn't give Mara any hints that we had special knowledge of the situation. Revealing that we saw him in a vision, that Amescoll recognized him and sent us here to help, might tip her off that we knew what was going on. So, for now, we played ignorant. Later, we could reveal what we knew.

"Kestis. Cal Kestis. I was Master Topal's Padawan," He explained, finally clipping his lightsaber to his belt. "He... didn't survive Order 66."

"Very few of you did," I said with a frown. "Which is why getting you guys out from the Empire's thumb and somewhere safe is so important."

"Wait... is that what you're here for as well?" Cal asked. "That's why I'm here. You have more survivors!?"

"Wait, wait, hold on," Mara asked, sounding confused. "You are *both* groups dedicated to rescuing people like me? But Adar said he was the last of his people..."

"Adar Thast?" Ashoka asked, Mara nodding. "I thought he died during the purge... is he still alive?"

"No... he sacrificed himself to let me escape an incident a few years ago," Mara said, her remorse and sadness almost catching me up in her story.

I could say a whole lot about her, but her acting skills were clearly top-notch. If I didn't know better, I would have thought she was genuinely morning, confused, and lost.

"But he taught you how to use the Force?" Cal asked.

"Yes. Or, at least he started to," she responded, shaking off her sadness. "I'm not sure we got very far... He found me on the streets and took me in..."

"That's alright," I assured her. "We have people who can continue your teaching, if you wish. Or you could find something else to do, that's up to you. What's your name, by the way?"

"My name is Kala Thyrr. And who exactly are you?" She asked, eyeing me up. "And what in the hells is going on?"

"My name is Deacon Roy, Leader of the Skyforged Vanguard," I explained. "We are an anti-Imperial mercenary force. We work with the Rebellion and have established a safe haven for those who survived Order 66, as well as other Force Sensitives."

"And you've done the same?" Mara asked, her eyes now fixed on Cal.

"Well... sort of. We have a convoy of ships that we use to roam the galaxy," He explained, a new tone of regret and sadness cutting in. "By becoming nomads, we've managed to stay off the Empire's radar for some time now. There are twenty-two of us, but only ten are survivors of Order 6."

There was clearly a story there, but he clearly didn't seem eager to discuss it. Despite my own curiosity, I held back. Poking sore subjects was not a good way to make a good first impression.

"That's still impressive, Cal," Ahsoka pointed out. "I'm sure you've worked hard. The fact that you've rescued any of our people is amazing."

"I'm kind of shocked you would be working to do that to," Cal pointed out. "After the way the Council treated you..."

"A lot of time has passed, and I've made peace with what happened," Ahsoka assured him. "We need to work together, to forge something new, if we wish to survive. Only together can we hope to stand up to the Empire."

"I'm sorry, I know that this... well, it all seems important," Mara said. "But Cal was just talking about how important it was that we move quickly..."

"Yes, he was right, the fact that the Empire hasn't descended on this planet like a swarm is a miracle," I agreed, Cal nodding and gesturing. "We need to get off planet ASAP, before Imperial Intelligence picks up what they missed and we have a few Star Destroyers hanging out upstairs."

"Do you have transport off the planet already lined up?" Cal asked. "My plan was to borrow something inconspicuous."

"You don't have a way off the planet?" Mara asked, sounding surprised. "But you said you had a convoy."

"And they took a big enough risk dropping me off on a different planet with a starport big enough for me to hitch a ride here," Cal responded, shaking his head. "Every time we come close to more populated areas, it's a huge risk. The wrong scan, the wrong look, and suddenly the Empire is hunting us down again."

Cal sounded bitter, but he quickly shook it off. He looked at Ahsoka and me, focusing on us.

"Do you have a way off planet? Something discreet?"

"We do, assuming we can get back to it without raising any alarms," I responded. "We also have an exfil plan, in case a larger force does show up before we can escape."

"Sounds like you guys have some resources to work with," Jade said, giving Cal a disappointed look.

Internally, I cursed, immediately picking up on what she was doing. She clearly thought she had an in and was now trying to sabotage or drive off Cal, or at least generate some ill will between us. Some of that could be brushed off when we finally revealed she was a spy, but... sometimes it was impossible to unhear things, even if the person who said them was a bitch.

"We've gotten lucky, and worked hard," I explained, shaking my head. "But we also have the benefit of not needing to rely nearly as much on secrecy. Plus, I've been able to leverage my own talents pretty well. Besides, even saving one person is a miracle worth celebrating, and it's certainly not a race."

I gave Mara a light disapproving look, something you might give a teen who is being overly sassy. Hopefully, she would hold back her manipulating crap out of fear of alienating me. When I was sure she got the message, I looked back at Cal, who at least looked slightly mollified.

"You are more than welcome to join us on the way out, and we can drop you off somewhere safer," I volunteered. "There are alternatives and other possibilities, but for now, we need to get moving. We've been in one place for far too long. I'm surprised we haven't already attracted the wrong sort of attention."

I stuck out my hand, and Cal considered my offer, looking at me with critical eyes, before shifting to look at Ahsoka. For a moment, I thought he was going to make a comment or refuse, before the droid on his shoulder gave a series of whistles. Cal rolled his eyes, muttered something about trusting people, before reaching out to shake my hand. I then looked at Mara, who had watched the moment with interest.

"I offer you the same deal," I said. "Let us get you off this planet, and you can figure out where you want to go later. But trust me, you do *not* want to stay here."

The young woman chewed her lip, as if she were conflicted about her options. She looked over, past us, and out the window, as if looking at the city with sad affection. It would have been more heart-stirring if it didn't contradict her already established story that she had already tried to escape the planet.

"...Okay, I'll come with you," she said with a nod. "I'll figure out what I want to do as we go."

"Good to hear," I said, before grabbing my helmet from my hip and pulling it down over my head, the seal letting out a subtle hiss. "Give me a moment to contact our friends, and we can be on our way."

As I called Tatnia, informing her that it was time to go, Cal spoke with Ahsoka, not quite interrogating her, but definitely trying to satisfy his curiosity about what was going on and what was happening. He also did a pretty good job dodging her own questions, only responding with half, not very informative answers. Of course, once I informed the group that our ride was on their way, Mara approached me. I could see Ahsoka clock the movement from the corner of her eye, just like I could see Mara put a little extra in her step in an attempt to catch mine.

"I appreciate you coming to rescue me," she said, looking up at me as if she could see through my helmet. "I've been so lost since Adar sacrificed himself... I've just been running and trying to stay one step ahead of the Empire."

"You should hold your head up high, the fact that you managed to survive this long is impressive," I assured her. "Adar Thast would be proud."

She sniffed and nodded, looking away as if she was about to break into tears. Inside my helmet, I rolled my eyes. Rather than engage in her attempt to garner sympathy, I instead pretended to be more focused on the mission, which I was anyway.

"Okay, so, if we see any action, I need you both to understand that Ahsoka and I don't need saving," I explained, knocking on my chestplate. "This armor is beskar, completely immune to anything short of heavy blaster cannons. Plus, we can handle ourselves. That means no heroic sacrifices to take save us, no jumping in front of blaster fire to spare us. We are here to rescue you, not the other way around."

"Why does that sound like you have that speech prepared?" Cal asked, Ahsoka chuckling beside him.

"Because he does," She responded. "This is not the first time we've pulled people off a planet under Imperial noses."

"There's a reason Grandpa Palpy hates me in particular," I said with a grin, turning toward him.

Mara, who had been listening curiously, nodding along with what I was saying, looked at me with wide eyes. I had openly mocked a man who brainwashed her into believing he was some sort of beleaguered saint, and for just a moment, I could see through her mask, even if she covered it up in seconds. I resisted the urge to stir the pot more, instead motioning for them to follow.

"Let's head down to the front. Our ride should be here any second."

"Wait, I need to grab my things," Mara said, producing two small duffel bags, hidden behind a piece of machinery.

"Here, let me carry them," I asked, holding out my hand. "We need to move fast, and this armor makes me stronger."

Mara looked at me for a long moment before letting out a breath and nodding, as if she had made some sort of painful concession.

"Fine, but please be careful," She said, hesitantly handing me her bags. "These two bags are my whole life now."

"I'll take care of them, Kala, I promise," I assured her, accepting the cargo readily.

As we led the way, Ahsoka and I shared a look, both of us confirming the same thought. Whatever was really in these bags, I highly doubted it was emotionally important to Mara, even if my instincts told me she needed them. If I had to guess, these bags held her backup plan, maybe a deconstructed beacon or comm system. Either way, I needed to keep a close eye on them.

As we made our way through the building, Ahsoka unclipped her helmet and sealed it around her head, the hiss just barely audible.

"What sort of armor is this?" Mara asked, following close to my left, while Cal walked beside Ahsoka. "I don't recognize it. You said beskar, but... isn't that Mandalorian?"

"It's custom-made," I explained. "All our ground teams wear armor like this. Save the Jedi, they wear variants of what Ahsoka wears."

"Mine is based on the armor of an Ancient Jedi, before even the time of Revan," Ahsoka explained. "Still made of beskar, but more suited for flexibility and lightsaber combat."

"It looks impressive," Cal admitted. "But I never liked the feel of armor, even during the war."

"To each their own," She responded, borrowing my own line. "We train to fight like we are not wearing it, but protecting our people is important, especially considering there are so few of us left."

Cal nodded in understanding, the group slowing as we reached the front entrance. I activated the door, which spread open with a low hum, revealing that Tatnia and Vaz had already pulled the A-A5s around, stopping right in front of the entrance.

"Alright, pile in," I said, gesturing to the vehicles. "There is plenty of room, I only got two in case we needed to split up."

I hung back as Ahsoka approached the speeder Vaz was driving, waiting for Mara to choose. When she climbed into the back of the speeder Tatnia was driving, I followed suit. There was no way I was leaving her alone with my crew. I trusted them to hold their own, but they were all blasters and basic CQC-type soldiers, and who knows what sort of martial arts bullshit she knew.

...Tatnia might have been right that I was being a bit paranoid about what Mara Jade was capable of. But still, it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Any sign of trouble?" I asked Tatnia, leaning on the doorway into the speeder's cockpit.

"None, but now we've jinxed it," She responded, looking over her shoulder. "Any requests?"

"Let's keep it calm," I responded. "No reason to spook anyone, just a bunch of traders heading back to their ship."

She nodded and I turned back to the cargo area, picking one of the available seats and claiming it. Once everyone was seated and the doors were sealed, Tatnia started the vehicle and we pulled away, Vaz following behind in the second speeder.

"Just a bit longer, then we will be free and clear," I assured Mara, who was doing a great job acting nervous. "Our ship is ready and waiting for us. We just need to get there."