

Despite the temptation to head off and follow the boy immediately, the first thing I did was send Cal and Merrin back up the tunnel to get in contact with the surface group. They needed to know what was going on, and I wanted to update them on the fungus that had been growing on the boy. It was understandably concerning, and I wanted to warn them not to unseal their helmets or armor. I also ordered them to start shipping down a bunch of equipment to set up a base camp by the entrance. No one was allowed anywhere near the area without a tried and tested full vacuum-rated seal, but setting up a staging area where we could pick up supplies and anything else we needed could come in handy.

Among the equipment requested was a pair of medical droids and a shit ton of air tanks to fill up ours, so that we wouldn't have to rely on air from the caves at all. After seeing that poor kid, I wasn't wasting any chances with anything in this cavern. Our air would come from our tanks, and we would do everything we could to avoid contamination.

Just the memory of the young Twilek boy's arm gave me the shivers.

When they arrived, I wanted the medical droids to run just about every air test they could get their hands on. It was a safe bet that the mushrooms were spreading themselves around via spores, and those tended to contaminate the air. I also wanted them to test anti-fungals on the mushrooms themselves. It probably wasn't strictly necessary, as Skyrim magic was more than capable of eradicating foreign bodies, including fungus and spores, but it was better to have different options.

Once Cal and Merrin returned, having successfully passed up the orders, we finally followed after the kid. Corvak had no trouble following his trail, and I was keeping track of where Clairvoyance was guiding us, specifically targeting our missing Jedi Master. Thankfully, they were both going to the same general area.

The further we walked into the cavern, the more bizarre and incredible it got. The variety of life was shocking, becoming more obvious as we walked through patches of plants, grasses, mosses, and more. We even spotted animals, all of them skittish and small, bolting from us the moment we approached. The largest we saw was a soft-skinned lizard, which looked shockingly like a komodo dragon, but with a more blunt head and an extra pair of legs. It was the size of a large Jack Russel Terrier, and they seemed to gather in groups.

We almost opened fire on a group of ten as they suddenly sprinted away, having popped up just a few feet from us. Their camouflage was pretty impressive, as we missed them completely before they revealed themselves.

The variety was not the only surprising thing, as the cavern's scale was also shocking. The mushrooms were noticeably larger than I had first realized, towering over us as we walked around them. I had misunderstood their size because my brain refused to grasp the cavern's size at first. In truth, it dwarfed my previous assumption, and with a better angle, I understood it was several times larger than I had thought.

Eventually, we turned a corner into a smaller cavern off to the side of the main one, following the trail and my Clairvoyance. Almost immediately, we were confronted by a group of people who were likely exactly who we were looking for. A group of eight adults of various ages, all wearing the same simple spun clothes as the kid, appeared out of a shadow cast by a cluster of purple mushrooms. They were armed with various tools, including several [knapped](#) knives attached to short, stumpy bones, as well as poles fashioned from scrap. Before we could say anything, they called out to us.

"Stop where you are," The leader, an adult human woman, just around my age, shouted. "Who are you? Why have you come here?"

As they asked their questions, I could see that everyone in the group was marked by the same fungus as the kid. Some had smaller clusters, some had several, but everyone had them.

"We aren't here to hurt anyone," I assured them, raising my hands to show they were empty. "We apologize for startling the poor kid. Is he alright?"

"... He is scared, as are many of us," She admitted, still holding her blade out ready. "Why have you come here? This is nowhere... What purpose could you have if not to hunt us?"

"Maybe we could introduce ourselves first?" I suggested, and when the woman said nothing, I continued. "My name is Deacon Roy. I am the leader of an anti-Empire mercenary team-"

"And what does that have to do with us?" She asked, though something about her response tickled my brain.

It took me a moment to realize it, but there was no weight to her words, no emphasis. I frowned, continuing to talk, now looking to test a theory growing in my mind.

"Well, we came here looking for you, but not to hunt you. My group has settled on a planet, somewhere safe and far from here. It is unknown to the Grand Hutt Empire, which threatens the whole galaxy."

This time, since I was watching, what I had barely noticed before was now much more obvious. There was no recognition on the woman's face, no reaction to the mention that the Hutts were in control. Any Jedi, or anyone connected to the Jedi, would have had *some* reaction to learning that the Hutts had formed an empire, grand or not.

Unless they didn't recognize what I was saying.

Of course, my allies knew what I was talking about, so I got more than a few looks, but I waved them away. If they didn't pick up what I was doing, I would explain it to them shortly.

"We have been slowly tracking a group of missing Jedi, to offer a safe haven," I explained. "Our planet is safe, and we already have a large group of them taking refuge, recovering, and even growing. It is the largest group of Jedi formed since Order 66."

Again, as I spoke, none of what I was saying seemed to click with them. Unless they were all the best actor in the entire galaxy, then they had no idea what I was talking about.

"Could I ask your name?" I said after a long silence.

"I am Calgri," She responded. "I... that is all I know."

She seemed to lessen slightly, embarrassed to admit she didn't know her name, but she confirmed my theory in the process. I put my hands down slowly, keeping them obvious and empty while I nodded.

"It's nice to meet you, Calgri," I said with a nod. "Do you think we could meet the rest of your group?"

"Only if you leave your weapons and armor behind, she said, suddenly regaining her conviction. "I will not bring armed guests to our village."

"We can disarm," I agreed. "But we cannot take off our armor. This planet is too dangerous, I cannot risk my people being contaminated. I'm sorry."

She chewed my statement for a while, before finally nodding. I gestured to the group, and slowly we stripped down from our weapons. I could tell that everyone hated it, especially Corvak, but it wasn't until Ahsoka unclipped her sabers that the Calgri and her people reacted.

"You are holders!" She said, staring at the sabers in her hands. "You see your hearts as weapons?"

"...You mean her lightsabers?" I asked, gesturing for Ahsoka to step forward, holding both her sabers forward so they could see. "Do you know what these are?"

"...No, we do not," she admitted. "We know they are important, and we can feel them, like a small part of us. They are our Hearts, and those who have them are holders."

"They are called lightabers," Ahsoka explained. "They are the weapons of Jedi, those who are connected to the Force."

Calgri and her group were now swinging from curious to cautious, unsure of what Ahsoka was saying, but sensing something was important. I was glad they still retained at least some of their memory, even if it wasn't much. After nearly half a minute, she shook her head,

"I would not have a holder drop their Hearts, even if they see them as weapons," She said. "But the others must disarm."

I nodded and quickly finished taking off my weapons. When all of our weapons, sans lightsabers, were laid out on the ground, Calgri started to guide us along the path toward where the Clairvoyance had been leading us. As we walked, I turned off my external feed so I could talk to the others without them knowing.

"Tatnia, Corvak, don't go anywhere without someone who is armed or can use magic," I said. "Do not under any circumstances take your helmet off. I have no idea how fast this effect happens, but I'm not willing to risk that it's fast or permanent."

"What do we do?" Ahsoka asked. "They... they barely remember anything."

"We need to find a way to let me cast magic on them," I said. "I can fix fungal infections, but I don't want to do it forcefully."

"Do... you think it's permanent?" Cal, who was walking just a few feet to my right, asked, his voice troubled.

"Hopefully not," I said, shaking my head slightly. "But even if it is, we can give them a better life on Nirn, where their memory is fixed so they can start forming new ones."

"Are you sure taking it slow is worth it?" Corvak asked, still grumpy about having to give up his weapons. "We could just call in the others, stun them all, and get them treatment."

"And if their memories stay gone?" I asked. "Then we would have just assaulted them, kidnapped them, and treated them without consent. Ignoring the fact that that is a terrible way to get them to like us, but remember, they are all Force sensitives. We scare or anger one of them enough, and they might instinctively reach for the Dark Side."

I could practically hear his frown and hear his muttering, but I didn't call him out. Mandalorians took their weapons very seriously. The fact that he disarmed without me forcing him to was a spectacular sign of trust and loyalty.

That said, if we did get into an actual fight, there was probably a good chance he would attack me, not whoever we were fighting.

It took a few minutes to walk through the underground mushroom cavern before we finally arrived. The village was built along the cavern wall, tucked between a pile of boulders. The small huts weren't much, but they provided cover from the constant rain coming down from the ceiling, and were made from the massive mushrooms, with their colorful, glowing insides scooped out, making bulbous domes. There were also hints of their salvage spread around. Chairs with their stuffing replaced by moss, metal plates used as cooking surfaces, hanging bits of plasteel that looked like buttons torn from a console.

It was an odd mix of tribal and stranded survivor.

As we entered the village proper, it was already silent. The sounds of scared whimpers and a few sobs just barely reached us, and I could see a few people standing guard by what looked like the most reinforced structure in the village. They looked ready for a fight, to defend what seemed to be their kids.

At the center of all this was a fire pit, which burned low. A spit was built over it, with one of the lizards we saw earlier hung over the flames. It was starting to burn on one side since no

one was spinning it anymore. The orange light of the fire competed with the blue light cast by the mushrooms growing around the village.

Including the ones growing on the people in it.

Every single person had signs of fungus growing on them. Some only had a few splotches, with some small stems growing through their flesh, but most had more. The worst was an older man with a massive chunk of mushroom growing from his head. He watched us as everyone did, but there was none of the same anxiety or fear, or even determination in his eyes.

They were empty, as if he couldn't even remember his emotions.

Calgri walked forward, leaving us with the other escorts, and headed to one of the older women who was standing between a few others. As she approached, the woman turned, and Calgur whispered to her for a few seconds, the older woman turning her head to look at us. After a minute, the woman nodded and slowly stepped forward.

As she got closer, the light of the fire combined with the ambient light was enough that I could finally recognize her. It was Sevarril Arraln, the Correllian Jedi Master I had been focusing on with Clairvoyance. The only difference was around twenty years of aging and a large mushroom growth on their shoulder and neck.

"Greetings," she said in a gravelly voice, her tone colored by age. "I am Seva, the leader of our people. We greet you, fellow holders."

She showed off the lightsaber on her hip, which was dented, scuffed, and missing a few parts, but still perfectly recognizable. Around her, at least fifteen people, though it was probably more, showed off theirs as well.

"Seva, we greet you as well," I said with a nod. "I apologize for coming unannounced, and for startling the child. We mean no harm to your people."

"You are strangers, coming from outside our haven," she responded. "You understand why we may be wary."

"Of course, that's an understandable reaction to strangers," I responded. "My name is Deacon Roy, and we have been searching for your group after learning about your survival."

The people around us tense when they hear we have come here specifically for them.

"We are not the ones you are hiding from," I assure them, looking around, "I assure them, or at least try to. "The ones you ran from are still in power, but we have found a secure home, someplace people like you have gathered. It is safe, and we are here to invite you to come live there with us."

"You want us to leave the safety of the darkness?" She asked, shaking her head in denial. "No, this is our home, we are safe here."

"We can help with your memories," I pointed out. "We could stop the memory loss, maybe even help you recover some of the things you have lost."

"Our memories are a small price to pay for our safety," Seva said, shaking her head. "They may fade, but we are safe from the horrors we escaped from. It will not find us here."