

Another spattering of blaster fire drove Cimozen to nearly plant his face in the dirt as he dove behind another structure. The fighting with the locals had grown even more difficult as the affair had drawn on. He had long lost track of the time he had spent acting as a distraction. He was beginning to run ragged with time.

At the end of this day, he was going to need a long rest and a hard drink. Or maybe he would be needing a synthwood box. If tides did not turn, the aged Force Disciple realized he might be delivered from the past which haunted him. At this rate, he might be reunited with his wife.

This thought revitalized him. He could not stand to face her again, just yet. He had sworn to show the greatest strength he could muster. He had sworn not to give in to the sorrow which had once threatened to overtake him. If he had to fight to his last breath, it would have to be in a flashy show of bravery.

He would not be able to show his face in the afterlife if he displayed anything other than the kind of honorable death that his own family had shown in years long past. They laid in forgotten graves, their bodies lost to the ravages of conflicts long past. The least he could do was to fight to his last.

"I will show you and your two-credit Security officers!" Spinning around by pivoting on one foot, he brandished his DE-21 slugthrower before popping a shot off into the air. No blaster fire answered the singular call of the slug, nor filled the area where Cimozen now practically hung. Instead of pushing his position, there were several Severian soldiers who were now withdrawing from the position.

"Come on you dogs!" One of the men pushed forward, aiming his blaster rifle at the Force Disciple. "Do you think that withdrawing will grant you a longer life? These beasts need to be put down!"

The withdrawal of the majority did not serve to quench the fire of all, it seemed. Taking the barest aim, Cimozen let out a wince as he pumped the trigger once, knocking the Severian soldier down.

Hopefully they will not get too angry about that. Cimozen felt a pang of conscience. The wound will bleed, but it shouldn't be fatal.

The man collapsed with a scream, clutching at the shoulder. "Do you see what they do!? Do you see what they are willing to stoop to?" Weapons came up in a sharp response to the question. This caused Cimozen Kurios to raise his hands up, allowing his weapon to drop to the ground.

It is not even like that is the only way that I have to kill, if necessary.

For several moments, no movement occurred. The Sorcerer cocked his head to one side as he considered the people who had pointed their weapons at him. Reaching into the Force, he felt a lot of things.

There is unease. There is uncertainty. There is even mistrust and fear. There was thing that he did not feel coming from most of these people. I do not sense a killing intent. Not close to my current position, anyway.

“Do not fire! That is a direct order!” One of the humans, a female with a fierce swagger and hair swept back into a single short braid, stepped forward. She motioned for weapons to be lowered. A few weapons remained upright, but the officer either did not care or did not notice as she sized up the Force Disciple standing before her.

It is not like I am about to lower my hands right now. All it takes is another hotshot trying to take a pot shot at me and a bit of luck.

“So you are of the Brotherhood?” The question was sharp.

“I am part of a Brotherhood, yes. I mostly run around with a group calling themselves an Empire, though. They are more focused on the sort of-”

“Are you part of **that** Brotherhood,” the woman jerked a thumb behind herself, “that staged that attack on us while we had our panties around our ankles?”

Cimozjen opened his mouth, but no words came out immediately. After several moments of looking like a fish in an aquarium, he finally managed to stutter out his thoughts. “I-I can n-n-not honestly say I would be part of any group who would do such a thing.”

“A split between the faithful of your little Empire then?” The woman chuckled, but there was no mirth in her eyes. “So you just end up gunning down the young ones who decide to brandish weapons against you? Before you answer though, I am gonna let you in on a little secret. I don’t like being called *lady* or *mam* or any of that nonsense. Sir will work just fine.”

Kurios considered the question before nodding slowly. It was not like it was untrue. He had no particular qualms against the Principate or its people. If you took away the manipulations of the Collective or the machinations of the Clan, he would have been far away from this system, floating in a large ship and dreaming of home. “I typically only fire upon those who endanger my life. Or the lives of those I treasure. Um, sir.”

This prompted a cold chuckle from the woman. “Your sort are the reason that Command does not want us firing on your Brotherhood types, cowboy?” She paused the briefest of moments, giving Cimozjen no chance to respond properly to the confusing address. “Reports have been

going up since Cirrus' orders went out to leave your lot alone. We were told to cease hostilities unless you fired back at us."

"Ah." Cimozen looked at the young man who had fired upon him. "I suppose that my act right there means that I am under arrest for assaulting one of your folks, then? Should I consider myself your captive? Sir?" He tacked the last word on after a moment of consideration.

"Well, an hour ago, I would have done that, if I were in a good mood. By the look of your actions here, it looks like the tables are turning. When Amara Cirrus tells us to disengage and all you do is put a bullet through the shoulder of someone threatening your life, it certainly sets things into a different light."

"Okay. I do have to ask one question though."

"Oh?"

"Can I put my arms down? Please? Errr, sir?"

This drew a genuine smile from the woman. "Tell you what. You seem like a decent sort, despite the misgivings we have been having about Brotherhood types since all this nonsense started. We have some upstarts who are trying to take advantage of the situation as it stands. If you help us with our little problem in our ranks, maybe we can just overlook your shooting of him." She said the last word with a motion of her head toward the offending soldier who had drawn the last blaster on the Force Disciple.

"So he isn't that much of an outlier, then?" Cimozen stared hard at the man, slipping into thought.

"Less likely that we would like. Though, again, it looks like you are more than capable of handling yourself. You did not seem quick to shed real blood here. So if you want to help us deal with these untimely rebellious elements, perhaps we can help you out too. And by the way, you forgot to say *sir*."

"Yes Mam." The Equite grimaced.

"Don't worry about it too much. There are bigger things to worry about for now. And thank you.

By the Force, this had better not be something I come to regret.

Cimozen Kurios just wanted two things out of today. If he was going to live, he was going to have to deal with the pain and the sorrow. He wanted to return home, and he wanted a stiff drink. Chances were almost certain he would only get one of those, and he hoped that this conflict would not drag on too long for him before he got to whet his thirst again.

