

I headed straight for the hangar once the *Whale* landed down on the ice and snow, specifically somewhere without any of the buried B2s.

I entered the large hangar and smiled, seeing the five V-wings landed and ready for combat. Toggle, the clone in charge of the pilots spotted me and waved me over, where he and another clone were checking over the ship. An astromech wheeled around under the starfighter as well, tilting back to scan the bottom of the relatively small combat vehicle.

"Toggle, good to see you," I said with a smile, shaking his hand, then the other clones. "You guys ready?"

"Of course, I've been itching to do some flying," Toggle said with a smirk. "Hoping for a bit of a dogfight!"

"Hate to break it to you, hotshot, but that's the opposite of what we are hoping for," I responded, shaking my head when his only reaction was a shrug. "I'm hoping we can get them to surrender without firing a shot."

"I know, sir, can't blame a clone for hoping for fun, though," He responded. "We are just running some final checks now, Sir."

"Any issues?"

"Not a single one," He said with a smile. "Miru does good work. I'll admit, I was skeptical at first, but she really knows her stuff. Good at directing people, too. I've seen Jedi have a harder time wrangling droids and crew. You made a good choice, putting her at the head of engineering."

"I was confident in her abilities," I said with a smile. "Plus, I don't think I could pick a hydrospanner out of a toolbox, so it wasn't like I could be in charge. I take it the shields are working good?"

"Incredibly well, even have a solid readout in the cockpit," He responded happily. "Sounds silly, but you don't always get that for aftermarket mods, especially not nonstandard ones."

"I'm glad you approve," I said with a nod. "I actually have a gift for you guys. Just have enough for you and your pilots, but everyone who joins our starfighter squadrons will have at least two, hopefully, three."

I pulled out a dexterity ring from my pocket, handing one to Toggle, who took it reluctantly.

"Uh... thank you, sir?" he said, clearly confused. "Not one for jewelry, I'm afraid, but-"

"Just put it on you dolt," I said, rolling my eyes. "It's enchanted to improve your dexterity. Should increase your reaction speed and reflexes."

His eyes went wide at my description, sliding it onto his ring finger. When it was on, he paused for a moment before looking back at me.

"I don't feel any-"

I threw some sort of screwdriver at him, which I had grabbed off a tool chest by the starfighter he and his buddy had been working on. He cursed, but reached out and snagged the tool out of the air, despite having no warning and me trying my best to really hit him.

"Impressive, right?" I said with a smirk before handing him a second ring. "Now imagine every one of you gets two, and they stack."

The clone pilot seemed giddy with the possibilities, a strange look for the usually serious-acting clones. Still, when I handed him a bag of amulets and rings, he immediately commed for all of the pilots to make their way down to the hangar, while I headed to the bridge to talk to Tatnia.

On the way, I passed by a few groups as they worked to unshuffle the previous crew exchange, specifically the naval droids.

I stepped into the [bridge](#), only to find Tatnia leaning heavily against a console, red-faced, while Julius stood beside her, looking like he had just got caught sneaking cookies from the cookie jar.

"Uh... everything alright?" I asked, looking at the two.

"Y-yeah, I just tripped," Tatnia said. "Julus was just helping me up."

"Oh, gotcha," I said with a nod, throwing out a Heal Other Tatnia. "Right, well, how did the trip go? Any news?"

"Nothing really worth reporting," she admitted, settling down slightly after my healing spell. "Definitely feeling the effects of being understaffed, even with the droids."

"Yeah, we were feeling it too," I agreed, wincing and shaking my head. "When we get back, that's going to be our first priority. I want to get our biological crew level above at least sixty-five percent. Any idea what we are at now?"

"I would have to count to know exactly, but I could guess and say thirty-five percent," my second-in-command responded, looking like she was recovering from her fall. "The *Loyal Hound* is almost a hundred percent, with a small complement of naval droids kept in storage just in case. But the *Intervention* is almost entirely run by naval droids, minus Vakim, Dazem, and Allum."

"We need to mix that up," I said with a shrug. "I don't want the clones, or anyone else for that matter, to think we are grouping them up together on purpose."

"We can make a note of that," Tatnia agreed with a nod. "But maybe we should focus on our current mission?"

"Yeah, fair enough. Anything else to note before I call a planning meeting?"

"No, Boss."

"Alright, we'll be meeting down in the hangar in an hour, probably," I said, turning to leave the bridge and stopping at the large door entrance. "Oh, and for future reference. Whether you guys are bumping uglies just to burn off stress, or actually in a relationship, I don't really care. Just keep it out of public spaces, alright? It's trashy, and I don't feel like dealing with it."

I turned and walked away, heading down and out of the ship to find the rest of my crew, leaving Tatnia and Julius alone, too shocked to say anything.

Still chuckling at their reaction, I started contacting everyone, getting the main command group back to the *Whale Shark's* hangar bay. Once we had gathered, we pulled out crates, boxes, and whatever else we could find to sit on before starting to discuss what our options were.

The meeting lasted for over an hour, and the result was a solid but flexible battle plan, with plenty of room for improvisation if the situation called for it. To start, as we mentioned before, the raindrops would be transferred to the *Shark*, as would the *Brick*. There was plenty of room for all of that, plus the already present V-wings. I was *really* looking forward to having the *Shark* on hand during missions, with two flights of V-wings ready to fly out and fight.

When the transfer was over, all of our starships would move to nearby valleys and chasms, which we had scouted out while waiting for the *Shark* to return. They were deep enough to hide our ships from most sensor scans... as long as they were on minimum power. The furthest away would be the *Loyal Hound*, due to its wider shape being more difficult to hide, while *Intervention* and *Talos Chariot* were both much closer, at the bottom of two separate ice canyons.

The basic plan was to wait for the slaver transport ship and its escort to arrive. The transport would have to land, but whether or not the escort did was up to the intelligence of their captain or leader. If it did land, then we would simply wait for our starships to arrive since once on the ground, it wouldn't be able to take off quickly enough to escape or put up a real fight.

If the escort did not land, we would immediately scramble fighters and threaten to take them down if they didn't land and surrender. The fighters would focus on being evasive and boxing them in, keeping them from running. Meanwhile, all our starships would burn atmosphere to position themselves above us and back up our starfighters. Once our starships arrived, which should only take around a minute and thirty seconds once we called them in, the

situation was more or less resolved unless the crew of both ships decided to commit suicide by mercenary.

We also made it clear that the plans could change depending on what the escort was. This mission would turn from an asset capture mission to a tactical retreat if I felt the escort was beyond us. We would lose the Braha'tok gunship if we did run, but I wasn't about to sacrifice what we came for and potentially more because we got overconfident.

Once the plan was set, we split back up, with everyone heading out to start moving the ships and preparing our positioning. Meanwhile, Tatnia and Ahsoka followed after me, heading to the bridge.

"We weren't really hiding it from you," Tatnia said, referring to her relationship with Julius. It was hard not to tease her with how nervous she was, but I somehow managed. "Well... we were, but not because we didn't want you to know... we just--"

"Tatnia, relax. I get it, shit happens," I said, waving her nervousness off. "You guys are adults, and I trust you to handle it. Just remember, if you can't..."

I turned and looked at her, stopping in the hallway, making sure she understood I was laying down the law, not just talking casually.

"If you can't, and it starts causing problems, I won't pick one of you to keep on board and one of you to ship off," I explained. "Both of you will get the boot. I've got no room for he said she said bullshit, and if you can't handle a relationship or, god forbid, a break up, maturely, you've got no place being on my team."

"I... Understood, Boss," She responded, giving me a serious nod. "We can handle it."

"Good," I responded before shifting from serious to a smile. "But really, I didn't think you would have a problem. And I'm glad you two found a connection."

I turned away and continued to the bridge, stopping once I was standing on the central platform to the large room. The *Whale Shark* was running with barely anyone on board. Almost all of the vital positions were filled with what Naval droids we could spare from other ships. While I wasn't ecstatic about the idea, it was a barely acceptable necessity since the only thing we really needed to be able to do was engage the shields, communicate with other ships, and run away if necessary. Everything else could wait.

The process of sending a message to the pirate's slaver contacts only took a few minutes. We sent out a secret hyperwave message, which contained a location, the number of people we were pretending to have to sell, and a rotating password. Thankfully, with the information we got from the pirate leader, we could pretty quickly formulate a believable fake message. After that, it was just a waiting game.

We received a response message within several hours, and according to what it said, they would arrive within three days. That left us a lot of time to do a whole lot of nothing, especially since we couldn't risk going out and around the exterior of the ship since our source of information came solely from the pirates. We knew what they knew, but the slavers could be hiding all sorts of information from them, like distant scans or stealthy scouts being sent down to check out the landing zone for ambushes. It was incredibly unlikely that it was anything so complex, but by now, everyone was used to my preference of assuming enemy competence so we could enjoy their incompetence.

That left us with two full days to kill. I spent some time with Ahsoka, sparring and training each other. We even did a little lightning training, where I would blast out lines of Sparks and she would catch them with her sabers. It was a bit nerve-wracking on my part, even if I trusted her to be skilled enough to block it, Pola's armor to be tough enough to stop the spell if she messed up, and my healing if both the first two things failed.

I just didn't like attacking her.

It wasn't until early the third day that the *Shark's* sensors picked up a cluster of ships approaching the planet. They were close together, which made long-range scans difficult, but the scans looked like a pair of ships.

As they slowly descended into the atmosphere, we got a good look at the transport and its escort.

The transport was obvious, and I actually recognized a ship, though Nal had to tell me its proper name. It was a [CSS-1 Corellian Star Shuttle](#), an old transport ship popular before and during the Clone Wars. Its back end look looked similar to the C70 Consular-class, while the front end was just a large, drawn-out dome built to carry the maximum number of people. No doubt its interior was heavily modified to transport slaves.

Slowly descending beside it was another [ship](#), one significantly larger than the transport. It was a design I recognized easily, though after watching it slowly land next to the transport, I realized it wasn't exactly the same.

"Is that a CR90?" I asked, looking over Nal, who was looking out the forward viewport with me. "It doesn't look quite right."

"No, I believe it is a CR70," The Duros corrected. "Older model. Still a well-made ship. As customizable as *Intervention*."

"Can we handle it?" I asked.

"Yes."

I nodded, watching as the ship's thruster and repulsors threw up snow and ice. Even as it was, I nodded to the clone manning the comms, who immediately sent the message out to our fleet.

"Alright. Put the starfighter on alert, but keep them inside. We have... a minute left until our starships get here."

"They are sending us a message," The clone on comms called out. "Asking us what the hold up is. They don't appreciate the delay and are threatening to take it out of our cut if we keep them waiting for too long."

"Send them a garbled message as if something is broken," I responded.

"Aye, Sir," The clone responded, tapping away at his console, talking into it as he recorded a fake message and sent it off.

We waited silently, our timer counting down until finally the *Intervention* and the *Talos Chariot* arrived. They flew around the ships, keeping a low to reduce their sensor profile.

"Comms, open the channel," I ordered, waiting several seconds before he gave me a thumbs up. "Slavers! This is Deacon Roy, leader of the Skyforged Vanguard. You are surrounded and outgunned. Surrender before I'm forced to prove how screwed you are."

For a long moment, the comms was silent, and I could see both of the starship's engines flare as they started to attempt to leave.

"Tell the *Intervention* to fire a quick barrage at the CR70. Not enough to pop their shields, but enough to let them know we can."

Suddenly, before my order could be sent out, the final nail in the slaver's coffin arrived in the form of the *Loyal Hound*. Between *another* ship arriving and the *Intervention* opening fire, both of the ships finally seemed to understand that they were outgunned. After a few more seconds, the ships started to descend, kicking up ice and snow once again. Before they could land completely, however, an alert sounded through the bridge.

"We are picking up something, Boss!" The droid behind the sensor console called out. "It's coming in hot!"

Before I could comment, another CR70 descended from the skies and immediately opened fire on us.