

Landing the 1st Group on the icy planet was relatively easy, with the most challenging part being a slight storm we had to avoid as we closed in on the fuel plant. It was heading away from the plant, thankfully, as I had no desire to be anywhere near this place during a blizzard, but it was large and severe enough that we collectively chose to go around it, rather than through it.

Once we landed, each of our ships let out a few B2s to keep an eye around the surrounding area, before Ahsoka, Tatnia, Corvak, Nal, and I all piled into the *Brick*. We could have taken some speeders from the *Liberty Rush*, but the *Brick* was tough enough to survive if the people we were about to meet decided to turn on their defenses and ambush us. I didn't exactly think that was likely, but it was better safe than sorry.

As we approached the mostly dormant fuel production plant, we landed in a small cleared spot around the landing pads. I also got my first look at the [large fuel ships](#) that Tatnia had mentioned. Each transport was at least a hundred and fifty meters long and carried twelve massive tanks of fuel, stacked twice and held along the centerline of the ship. If I had to guess, each one was capable of nearly the same amount as our modified [GR-75 medium transport](#).

Those transports alone told me this facility was a big deal, as their size showed the amount of fuel the facility could produce. Just getting our hands on those ships would be a considerable boon, given that they were likely heavily automated.

The other four ships were there as well, but they were off-brand freighters and transports. They were bulky and clunky, basically boxes with thrusters and a turret or two strapped to them. While I didn't recognize their make or model, I could see that Tatnia had been right, there was no way these people were ready for combat. They were all the definition of civilian designs.

As we exited the *Brick*, wind whipping and tugging at us, we spotted someone waiting for us. They were bundled in heavy insulated clothing, their face covered in a breathing mask. The mask covered everything except the top half of their face, which in turn was protected by a pair of thick goggles. Altogether, their whole body was covered, making it impossible to identify them.

Rather than try to greet us in the cold, thin atmosphere, the completely covered person waved for us to follow them. They led us around the huge warehouse, further into the industrial space. Eventually, we reached one of the larger cleared buildings, where the greeter guided us into a low-level air lock, which sealed us in before opening up and letting us step into the building proper. As they did, they pulled off their mask and began unbuttoning their heavy coats.

Beyond them was a waiting group of people, all of them watching closely, looking tense. Many of them were armed, mostly with simple civilian models, but only a few seemed comfortable with them. I looked over at Ahsoka, and after she nodded, signaling that our hosts were not giving off overly hostile vibes, I reached up and popped off my helmet.

"Hello! Thank you all so much for agreeing to meet with us," I said with a smile. "My name is Deacon. Thank you for letting us into your homes."

After a moment, when no one responded, a woman with dark back hair and a scar along her cheek clicked her tongue, rolled her eyes, and stepped forward, holding out her hand.

"Name's Rosala Peron. Thank you for not openly threatening us," she said. "We have children here, and we would appreciate making it through... whatever this is without traumatizing them."

"I can assure you, on my honor, we are not here to threaten or endanger you," I said, reaching out to shake her hand. "We are a mercenary group called the Skyforged Vanguard."

"You claimed that, but can you prove it?" One of the older men from behind Rosala asked.

"I- wait, you've heard of us?" I asked, genuinely surprised. "How?"

"When we are short on supplies, we use the plant to make fuel, which we sell," Rosala explained. "We get news updates then. Can you prove that you're part of the Skyforged?"

"I... maybe?" I said with a wince, glancing at Ahsoka. "Sorry, I'm just a bit thrown off that you would recognize the name."

"Boss, we've spent the last few months hunting slavers and pirates across the Outer and Mid rim," Tatnia said, sounding a bit exasperated. "Of course, our name has spread. Half the time when we go recruiting, we have people waiting to apply."

"Sorry... guess I've been a bit focused on internal stuff," I admitted, rubbing the back of my head. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, the point was to make the Mid and Outer Rim a safer place..."

"... the reports say you can do impossible things," One of the younger members said. "Some called it magic. Could you show us?"

Most of the group rolled their eyes and shook their heads, clearly not believing that portion of the news. I smiled and nodded.

"I suppose that would work. Is anyone injured?"

It took a bit of cajoling and assurances, but eventually a man stepped forward and pulled up his shirt, revealing a large bruise around his side. He explained he had slipped and fallen off a low walkway, a pipe slamming into his side as he did.

"Yeah, that looks like it hurts," I said. "I can fix that up, but try not to jump, alright?"

I quickly fixed the man up, the bruise vanishing and his broken bones mending as I dumped healing magic into him. If the glowing, swirling golden magic wasn't enough of a show, the man taking his first full breath in a week and nearly crying was. The people, shocked as they

were about my ability, visibly sagged in relief, knowing that we weren't here to ruin or steal from them.

"Remind me to lead with who we are more often," I said to Ahsoka. "Apparently, it actually works."

"Not sure it would have the effect on Imperials or the pirate groups we hunt," she said back, shaking her head. "But you're welcome to try."

Once the group had settled down from the shock of seeing me heal someone, as well as learning we were who we claimed to be, we were brought to a dining room, where we sat around a large table. If you looked closely, you could tell that, once upon a time, the room had been some sort of meeting room, but had long been converted into something more useful to the large group. The older woman who had first responded to our hails was there waiting for us, watching all of us closely. She remained silent, but her glare did not let up for a second.

"We come from a few different worlds, a group of family connected by blood, marriage, and friendship," Rosala explained after we settled in. "We saw the way the wind was blowing. How the Empire was becoming more and more brutal, and how the Hutts were expanding and draining resources from outside their territories. We decided it was better to get out while we could, rather than wait until it was so bad we couldn't escape."

"How did you find this plant?"

"Old lady Simal knew of it from her time as a Separatist," Rosala explained, gesturing to the still glaring older woman. "We figured, if the Separatists just disappeared one day... did they leave their buildings behind? It took a few weeks to confirm the plant was shut down and the droids were deactivated, but once we did... we moved in and made it our home."

"How did *you* find it?" A grizzled old man asked. "Yer teh first people to show up uninvited."

"We found the plant's location on an old black box from a CIS warship," I explained. "We are in the process of hunting down old Separatist equipment, expanding our resources. We came here looking for... well, exactly this."

I gestured vaguely around and behind us, where most of the fuel production plant was. The people tensed at my admission, but I raised my hand in an attempt to calm them.

"We are not here to kick you out or anything outlandish," I assured them. "You found this place first, and you've done nothing wrong that I can see."

"Then what was the business you mentioned?" Rosala asked, crossing her arms. "You were clear you had something in mind."

"It honestly depends on what you guys want," I responded. "Would you consider moving for a hefty enough paycheck? Something probably around two or three million credits, depending on what sort of condition the plant is in?"

Commercially, judging by how much our already in place production systems cost, this plant probably contained more than eight or nine million credits worth of equipment. That number would only grow depending on the level of inherent automation, meaning any automation that didn't require the purchase of any separate droids. I was willing to pay a good chunk of credit to make this deal go through.

As I mentioned paying them to leave, several members of the party looked shocked at the number... but surprisingly, none of them looked tempted by it. That was far from a good sign.

"I'm afraid we've made this place our home," Rosala responded, shaking her head. "It is not for sale."

"What if we got the fuel production up and running, fully staffed and repaired?" Tatnia said before I could attempt to convince them. "We would keep most of the profits, but give you a percentage of the fuel to sell."

"We likely don't need that much money," one of the older members responded. "We're pretty self-sufficient."

"Besides, that amount of cargo coming in and out, the constant activity?" Rosala continued with a frown. "The whole reason we came here was to escape attention. Making this place a hub of fuel production ruins that entirely."

I frowned, leaning back in my chair, mentally organizing my thoughts. I didn't have that much of a problem inviting them to live at Nirn, as long as they passed my interview. But judging by how they reacted to the idea of moving at all, asking them to move to a heavily populated area, the home of a group the Empire hated and wanted desperately to destroy, would probably not interest them.

Before I could come up with another angle of attack, Corvak leaned forward and spoke up.

"How much of the plant are you using, exactly?" he asked. "And how often do you use it?"

"We only maintain one of the smaller production lanes," Rosala admitted. "And one of the gas collectors. As for how often... we fill up one of the large vessels once a year."

I looked over at Corvak, wondering exactly where he was going with his questioning.. He glanced at me, as if looking for permission, and after a small confirming gesture, he continued.

"What if we paid you a finder's fee, came in with our salvage crew, collected all of the transferable parts, which I imagine is a significant portion, and left you with one or two of the smaller lanes," Corvak suggested. "You get to keep your isolation, we get the equipment we need, and you get a nice chunk of credits for doing nothing but watching us collect salvaged goods."

Rosala stopped and considered his idea, leaning back in her seat. For perhaps the first time, the group seemed at least partially interested in one of our ideas.

"How much of a finder's fee?"

"Not as much as you would get for just moving," I responded with a frown. "It would depend on the quality of what we could get. On the high end... a million and a half. On the low end, a flat million, maybe less if the ice has really torn the place up."

"We could even offer some expertise or help in other areas," Tatnia offered. "I can't imagine this place is full of luxuries."

"I think... that we need to discuss your offer," Rosala responded after a moment of consideration. "There are fifteen families here, we can't just make a unilateral decision."

"Of course," I said with a nod. "Why don't we return to our ship so that you can discuss in peace. Feel free to contact us if you have any questions."

Rosala nodded, and the man who initially greeted us led us back to the simple airlock, where he quickly donned his outdoor clothes and mask. After leading us to the *Brick*, he waited until Nal lifted us off and directed us back to the *Chariot*. After landing back in the starship hangar, we immediately headed to the lounge to connect with the other ships and explain the situation.

"I was about to start trying to convince them to join us or even offer to find them somewhere even more remote," I explained, after filling them in about the nature of the group. "Luckily, Corvak had the idea to simply buy what they were using and cart it off, rather than working the actual site."

"That's going to be one hell of an undertaking," Julius pointed out. "Especially with the conditions the way they are."

"Oh, the salvage team would have several environmental shields to set up," I explained, shaking my head. "Working in these conditions without that sort of help is asking for trouble. Between that and labor droids... It's not going to be easy, but if it's an actual Separatist fuel plant, it should be almost entirely automated, making it worth its weight in gold."

"The fact that so few people were able to work the system as it is tells me that it is heavily automated," Corvak pointed out. "The only question is how well preserved it is under all that snow and ice."

"Do you think they will take the deal?" Julius asked. "A million credits for letting someone else do all the work would sure as hell tempt me."

"Hopefully, but then again, as much as they seemed willing to work with us, they also weren't particularly interested in our first two solutions," I pointed out. "The kind of people who live out like hermits, even in groups like these? It's hard to predict what they want or how they will interpret things. It's a miracle they aren't religious nutjobs or worse."

After answering everyone's questions, we settled down to wait. I had a feeling that we would have some time before they reached their conclusion. A small settlement like this, if it even counted as that, would absolutely function at its own speed, one considerably slower than I would like.

Still, the opportunity to gain such a large prize kept me hoping and patient.