

As one might imagine, the mood on the ship was tense as we finally escaped to lightspeed. I felt numb, my eyes still fixed on the battlescreen, which continued to display the planet and a small, blinking dot that represented our lost ship. Our lost crew.

Six lost members of the Skyforged Vanguard.

Silently, I rechecked the records, wanting to watch the entire battle unfold through the projector, from start to finish. I knew we lost some starfighters during the initial clash with the Imperial fleet, as well as with the two wings of TIE fighters, but as I watched, I could see that almost every pilot was recovered, with only minimal injuries. Only two pilots, flying the same Heavy ARC, didn't make it, killed in a collision with an enemy starfighter.

Part of me knew that, statistically, the Skyforged was an insane anomaly when it came to losses versus battles, both on the ground and in space. A combination of picking our battles specifically, innovative outside-the-box thinking, and the utmost dedication to acquiring the best equipment possible for my people meant that, when we committed to an attack, we were there to trounce our opponent, not cut it close on a gamble.

I knew most commanders would kill to have a major conflict like this end with only eight deaths in total. But despite that, I couldn't help but feel like even the loss of eight people was too much, an unacceptable cost.

Had I jumped the gun? Did I let my arrogance get the best of me? I had done my due diligence, checking with the Jedi, making sure they didn't feel anything off. Had the feeling of incoming combat hidden what was to come from them? Did I rely on them too much?

The risk of the attack becoming an ambush was a known factor, we had identified it in the planning process. We mitigated the risk by deploying with sufficient forces to overcome or at least hold off any additional Imperial forces until we could escape. It had been a risk, but to pull an ally's ass out of the fire, it had been a risk worth taking. We had no reason to believe that Vader would be the one to show up, considering that last we knew, the Emperor had ordered him to return to his hunt for Luke. We had anticipated problems, not an SSD and a whole imperial fleet full of problems.

"How many?" Vi asked me once people had spread out a bit.

"Eight," I answered simply. "Six on the Forward Charge and two in space, clearing out the TIE fighter wings."

She bowed her head for a long moment, before looking back at me.

"We are in your debt, Adm-"

"No. I don't want your debt," I responded, cutting her off. "I didn't do this for your debt. I didn't get eight of my people killed for your debt."

I pulled my helmet off and tossed it down on the table, turning to study Vi. It took a moment for me to find words that were vicious and cutting, grief fueling me.

"We came to save you because you are our allies. You messed up, got overzealous, and got your ass caught," I explained. "We didn't pull your ass out of the fire because we wanted you to owe us."

"Then why?" She asked. "Why put your people at risk to help us?"

"The same reason we put ourselves at risk for Corvak and his people," I explained with a shrug. "Your people got a bum deal, but I know you can do better. I know that Mandalorians are capable of being more than just vengeful, angry, brutes who throw everything away in the name of bloodlust. Violence may be in your blood, but I know you can be more than that. I wanted to give you a chance to realize that, and now I have to live with the cost of saving you from yourself."

Without another word, I left, leaving the lounge behind and stepping into my private quarters. A moment later, Ahsoka stepped in as well.

We dropped out of hyperspace after around an hour of traveling, safe and sound in deep space. The fleet was at high alert, waiting for us, with ships scouring the Gladiator and clearing it from top to bottom.

We had around five hundred imperial prisoners, a small amount compared to the usual two thousand four hundred crew and troops that were usually on board. Unfortunately, the clones were forced to disable life support and vent atmosphere to keep the four squads of dark troopers from detonating the starship's primary power core.

Their corpses would be sent off to a nearby star system, where they would be thrown into the sun.

The remaining forces were already being loaded up into the hangar bay of the *Hope*, to be stranded on a random inhabited planet in the outer rim. They could find a way to get back to the Empire if they really wanted to, but most of them seemed to understand that, at this point, all they had waiting for them was a court-martial and likely an execution.

We even had two dozen people looking to jump ship to our side. They were being kept separately for me to clear.

Both the Gladiator and the IPV were being looked over with a fine-tooth comb, even more so than usual, since this had been a planned ambush. I wasn't letting either ship anywhere near even the deep space security checkpoint until I knew it wasn't going to bite us in the ass. That would likely take some time for the Gladiator, since it was a rather large ship at six hundred meters, but we could be patient.

When we arrived at the gathering point, the rest of the fleet quickly caught on to the fact that we were down one ship. Without having to give a single command, everything slowly came to a halt, all ships slowing down until the entire area was devoid of all movement.

"Calima?"

"Patching you through now, Boss."

I nodded, and after a few moments, she waved me on, signaling that the feed was live and open. I stood on the bridge looking out at our fleet.

"Skyforged Vanguard, I must sadly report the destruction of the *Forward Charge*, with all hands on deck. Along with the pilots of Glacial Five from Glacial Squadron, we lost eight members of our family today," I explained, talking into the silence. "Soon there will be a time when we can talk of their sacrifice, celebrate their stories, and share their names. For now, however, I ask that you join the *Talos Chariot* for a minute of silence, in honor of their service."

I look down at Calima and motion to her, and with a nod, she taps her console. Suddenly, the ship was swallowed by darkness, with nothing but the emergency lights on, both in and out of the ship.

The rest of the fleet caught on pretty quickly, one by one going dark, only lit by small exterior lights and the magfield rings around their open hangars. A wave of darkness spread over the fleet, and for sixty seconds, it was like we blended into the stars. When the time was up, the *Fury*, *Hope*, and several other ships swiveled their guns around into space and fired off a final salute.

Once the moment of reverence was over, the fleet got back to work, quickly preparing everyone to jump back, first to the security point, then back to Nirn. The Gladiator and IPV would jump to a different point in space, and the scanners would move to their location, just as an added precaution.

After everything was ready, we jumped away from the temporary gathering point, starting the trip home. Before we jumped, Vi and her warriors were quickly picked up and taken away by the rest of her people, with promises to be in touch shortly, once she had settled her people and had time to talk with them.

When we eventually made it back to Nirn, the city had already heard of our loss, and the names had already been inscribed on the monument in our memorial park, which had been completed construction a week or so ago. Rather than go for anything fancy, the monument was a simple chunk of stone, taken from the base of the mesa, carved into a tall, polished pillar. Each name or group carved into the stone was inlaid with beskar, as the metal had become a cornerstone of our group, despite the lack of fanaticism around it. The inlay was done by smiths who worked on our armor, and it was a welcome addition.

After we landed, most of the ground teams, including the people involved in the battle, at least those who could make it, made their way to the platform, where we paid our respects before heading back home.

The mood of the city was grey and dour, but thankfully, that did not last long. The following day, we held a remembrance event, similar to what we did for Yoda. Rather than

mourning, it was a day to remember those who had passed, sharing stories about their life and triumphs. It was not nearly as big as Yodas had been, but several spots around the city were dedicated to the fallen crew and pilots.

Only two of the crew had family, with both of them fully integrated into the city. I visited them both, and among other things, offered my help for any troubles they might have in the future. Between that and the sizable insurance payout we gave them, they would be set for a while.

A few days pass, and eventually, I get the expected message from Clan Galti, asking if we could meet, which Vi said was to discuss the future. With a pretty good idea of what she was looking to talk about, I took the *Chariot* with Ahsoka, Tatnia, and Julius, and traveled to their temporary landing point, a barely inhabitable desert planet that was a hundred plus degrees during the day, and below zero at night.

We invited her and her people on board, and not long after, she arrived with a few of her warriors and two civilians. Surprisingly, she wasn't wearing any armor, nor was one of the warriors, who we had also saved from Gideon. After a brief greeting, we settled down to discuss what she had asked us to visit for.

"Deacon, you and your forces not only rescued my warriors and me from what was likely execution, but you also shed blood to do so," She said, looking into my eyes. "You aided and completed our quest for vengeance. You broke me from the mistake of choosing the past over the future, and then turned aside the debt. And then you taught me a lesson I did not even know I needed to learn. I believe that in doing all of that, you have proven yourself to be a better leader than myself."

"Sometimes, a little perspective is more than enough to show someone a better way," I responded. "Your whole life, all you have ever been is Mandalorian. The only way you know is the Mandalorian way, but that doesn't make it the only way."

"We agree," She responded with a nod. "We also agree that under you, as members of the Skyforged Vanguard, would be the best place to learn a new way. A better way."

I let out a long breath. I had seen this coming, sensed it from the way that Vi had been talking before she left to return to her people. It was clear that being captured and rescued had changed something in her, and while I doubted she had been broken, my words certainly found purchase in a way they hadn't before. I was glad she had waited to reveal all of this, as I don't know how I would have reacted closer to the loss of my people.

"I will tell you the same thing I told Corvak and his people," I said, looking at Vi and the others with her. "If you join us, there will be changes. You may honor your ancestor. You may honor some of your traditions, such as taking in younglings, and some of your honor code. But you would be leaving behind your mentality of might makes right. You will no longer be Clan Galti first. You would be one of us, a member of something larger. Can your people agree to that?"

"They already have," She responded with a nod. "Three warriors and one family refused, and they have already been given a ship and supplies. They left this morning for a more... conservative covert."

"Followers of The Way?" I asked with a raised eyebrow.

"No, but not far off," She admitted with a shrug. "The rest of Clan Galti has agreed. We are tired of the old cycle. Tired of repeating history with war, genocide, and power shifts. We want to join you, whatever shifts in tradition that requires."

I examine them for a moment, before nodding, reaching out with my hand.

"Then welcome, Clan Galti, to the Skyforged Vanguard," I said with a smile. "May we do great things together."

Vi took my hand and shook it, meeting my gaze easily and smiling at me.

"Thank you for giving us this opportunity, and for sticking with us, even when you had every right to leave us to our own devices," she said with a nod. "We have a lot to learn, and I am excited to see what we can achieve."

While the moment was important, we unfortunately did not have much time to emphasize the occasion with a celebration. Vi's people, my people, had been once again rapidly removed from their homes and sent off to hide from the Empire. They were cramped in their ships and rapidly running towards the limits of their current setup.

To alleviate their space issues, I called back home and had the *Hope*, which had considerably more room, fly to the security checkpoint with a skeleton crew of volunteers to act as a temporary home for Clan Galti while they went through the checkpoint for the first time. I would also be scanning them for infiltrators and traitors, which would also take time.

Within an hour of them agreeing to join, we were lifting off from the hellish desert planet and heading into space. When we arrived at the security checkpoint, we ferried a significant number of their people to the *Hope*, while I began interviewing people. Meanwhile, a thorough scan of all their ships was underway, which unfortunately took significantly longer than usual, as a substantial portion of our scanning teams were still working on the Gladiator.

In total, it took two days to inspect every inch of their ships and personal belongings, as well as conduct interviews with each person. Thankfully, they were patient with the process, seeing it as a plus that we took the security of their new home so seriously. By the time everything was ready, the Gladiator and IPV were also done, meaning we could all jump to Nirn together.